

AVANT-GARDE FASHION FOR THE MASSES

a study of consumer perception of avant-gardist designer
brands after collaborating with mainstream fashion



Image1; (Rick Owens, 2013)

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ABSTRACT

The use of intra-industrial co-branding within fashion has increased dramatically over the last decades, with a wide range of partner combinations including even avant-garde fashion designers. These brands are often licensing collaborations with mainstream mass-market brands, but with uncertain effects for their brands.

This study explores potential effects brand collaborations between high-end avant-garde fashion designers and low-end mass-market fashion brands have on consumer perception of the former. The applied research model combines general co-branding theory with theories on fashion in order to get an industry specific understanding of the consequences and effects of the brand collaborations. The study examines effects on consumer perception based on qualitative interviews with consumers and experts.

The findings, in line with co-branding theory, show that the level of fit between the partnering brands in a collaboration influences the consumer perception of the avant-garde designer, where a higher degree of fit results in more positive attitudes. The avant-garde brand's identity is shown to alter after a collaboration due to negative spillover effects from the mainstream ally. Further, the findings show the extended spread of the collaboration to have unanimous effects on the avant-garde brand and consumer perception.

In conclusion, the study finds support for that the contradictive nature of the partner brands affect the perception of the high-end avant-garde designer. The findings indicate that the avant-garde designer is exposed to risks of impaired consumer perception, which need to be further explored in order to strengthen the grounds for avant-garde designers' decision-making when considering collaboration with mainstream mass-market brands.

Keywords: fashion, co-branding, brand alliances, avant-garde, design collaborations

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for enduring us during the last months

"Fashion is about what you look like, which translates

to what you would like to be like."

Jean Paul Gaultier

GLOSSARY

Fashion Designers

Avant-Garde – The Older Generation:

Antwerp 6

A Belgian fashion collective from the Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts all graduating between 1980-1981 (Ledema, 2013). The designers referred to as the Antwerp 6 are Anne Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene, Dirk Bikkembergs & Marina Yee; later with the joining of Martin Margiela also referred to as Antwerp 6+. They shared a radical vision of fashion and are said to have defined the style of the 1990s, after their breakthrough in London in 1986 (Ledema, 2013). (For images, see Appendix 2)

Maison Martin Margiela

A Belgian highly respected avant-gardist fashion house and graduate from Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Known and respected for ground-breaking and politically inspired collections. Similar to some of his co-students of the Antwerp 6 he indulges in deconstructions and conceptual fashion (Wilson, 2008) (For images, see Appendix 2)

Rei Kawakubo – Comme des Garçons

A Japanese fashion designer, born in Tokyo 1942 and founder of Comme des Garçons. With a background in fine arts and literature she founded her own company in Tokyo in 1978. Rei Kawakubo is most famous for her anti-fashion, deconstructed garments sometimes lacking certain components such as arms. She has functioned as an inspiration for many other avant-garde designers such as Martin Margiela and Anne Demeulemeester (Lynne 2014). (For images, see Appendix 2)

Issey Miyake

A Japanese fashion designer known for technology-driven designs having a long tradition of innovative designs and dominant position in fashion avant-garde (Marie Claire, 2014). (For images, see Appendix 2)

Avant-Garde – The Newer Generation:

Rick Owens

A designer and known for his progressivism and innovative take on fashion. His designs are by himself described as *glunge* – a combination of glamour and grunge – and luxurious materials and a dark colour scale characterize his pieces. Since the designer's breakthrough, he has earned hard-core followers and a numerous brands have tried to imitate his collections (Colapinto, 2008) (For images, see Appendix 2)

Rad Hourani

Jordanian fashion designer known for his unisex clothing lines, even having gained permission to show unisex Haute Couture collections at Paris Fashion show (Sidell, 2013) (For images, see Appendix 2)

Iris van Herpen

Dutch fashion designer experimenting with technology and particularly known for her progressive collections created with 3D print (Tudor, 2013).

Other younger avant-garde designers (*with a similar take on fashion/style often referred to within the same context*):

Raf Simons, Kris van Assche, Haider Ackermann, Damir Doma

Mass-Market Fashion Companies

H&M

Swedish major player with a long tradition of design collaborations both mainstream and avant-garde (H&M, 2014)

Target

American fashion and department store with an equal tradition of design collaborations

Adidas

German sports brand with temporary collaborations for sports shoes like Rick Owens and Jeremy Scott, and continuous collaborations for clothing sports lines like Stella McCartney

1 INTRODUCTION

"You are only as good as the people you dress" the norm-breaking designer Roy Halston Frowick once said (Zoysa 2001). He was also the first high-end fashion designer to take mainstream fashion to another level by designing a co-branded collection for the American mid-range department store JC Penney in the early 80s. This unusual and daring collaboration between a respected fashion designer known for surrounding himself with the likes of Andy Warhol, Liza Minnelli & Bianca Jagger (Kirby, 1998) and a Texan provincial department store would eventually turn into the designer's own undoing. As an immediate response to the news the renowned New Yorker department store Bergdorf-Goodman decided to ban his celebrated brand and collections with the reasoning that one simply cannot please a high-end market and serve the masses at the same time; one has to pick a side (Weir, 1983).

1.1 Problematization

Similarly to many fashion houses, Halston was owned by an investor and did not own the rights to his own brand, many times. That resulted in licensing agreements that were financially beneficial but where the issue of fashionability and consistency with the brand identity was being ignored. Several high-end fashion designers such as Halston but also Pierre Cardin and Calvin Klein have suffered under extreme fluctuation of their brand image due to inconsistent brand collaborations or of licensing agreements along the years (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

1.1.1 Today

The dated mind-set, that high-end fashion brands cannot target the masses as well, is completely unthinkable today, given the amount of entry-level luxury goods like perfume and cosmetics that can be found in every department store or the Swedish retail-giant H&M announcing its 14th design collaboration in the media (H&M, 2013). In fact, not only fashion retailers like H&M or the American equivalent, Target, have been engaging in collaborations, but everything from the car industry to the art scene have been cross-fertilizing each other aiming to explore the effects the brands can have on each other (Uggla & Åsberg, 2010). The collaborating partners are often very different in their nature: Some fashion brands are very commercially oriented and mainstream, whereas others are extremely progressive and artistic. The following grid visualizes an example set of partner combinations on two dimensions: high-end vs. low-end fashion as well

as mainstream vs. avant-gardist fashion. The definition of avant-garde is to some extent subjective and will be elaborated on in the following chapter. For the comprehension of this model, avant-garde is the most progressive and experimental kind of fashion design for a narrow target group whereas mainstream is the opposite, being designed for the broad taste of the masses and an easily accessible design expression. Low- and high-end solely concern the price range of the items.

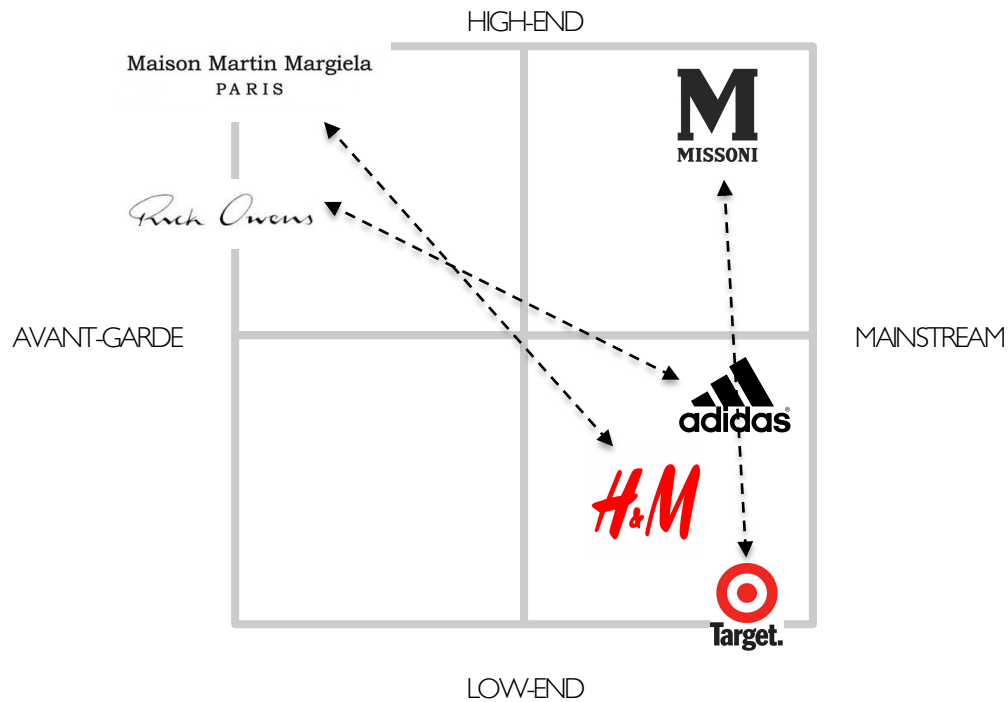


Figure 1; Design Collaboration Grid

The visualized examples consist of American mass-market retail company Target who similar to H&M has a long tradition of design collaborations, with both less established young designers as well as well-known fashion brands such as Missoni (Petro, 2013). Missoni could be placed in the upper right corner being high-end and targeting a broader market with their characteristic zig-zag-pattern integrated in most of their collaborative collections (Forsnor 2012). In contrast, Rick Owens counts as a rather progressive fashion brand within the industry engaging in both norm-breaking concepts of his fashion shows (Arnell, 2013) as well as gender roles-challenging fashion and looks (Vogue, 2014) (for images, see Appendix 2). Rick Owens just launched a collaboration with sports brand Adidas, a rather generic and mainstream brand placing in the lower right hand corner of the grid. Thirdly, the recent collaboration between Swedish mainstream fashion retailer H&M and the Belgian highly respected avant-gardist

fashion house Maison Martin Margiela, known and prized for ground-breaking and politically inspired collections, taking place in 2012 (H&M, 2012).

The most remarkable combination in the presented grid is considered to be the one of low-end mainstream with high-end avant-garde, in this case H&M with Maison Martin Margiela. The reason for it being remarkable is that they are completely contradictory in nature - H&M producing fast fashion for the masses with a low degree of originality whereas the Belgian fashion house Maison Martin Margiela has a long tradition of a conceptual, avant-gardist and innovative take on fashion (Kawamura, 2005). Given their nature, it could be questioned if they are suitable partners for a design collaboration, particularly with regards to the questionable financial success of the campaign (Misener, 2012). Both fashion bloggers and consumers challenged the *difficult* look of Margiela's re-editions that H&M was selling under the name H&M x Margiela (Flinkenberg, 2012; Flytström, 2012). Despite this questionable combination of collaboration partners, the case of a mainstream and avant-garde brand collaborating is not unique. Eastpak has been collaborating with the Belgian designers Kris van Assche and Raf Simons, and similarly the sports brand Adidas has initiated collaborations with a variety of different designers from the same genre (e.g. Rick Owens as seen in *Figure 1*).

1.1.2 Previous Collaborations and Current Knowledge

As mentioned previously, the use of co-branding in the fashion industry, and especially through designer collaborations, has increased dramatically over the last decades. Even though avant-garde design targets a narrow consumer group, numerous avant-garde designers collaborate with mass fashion brands, and not seldom on a recurring basis. Collaborations between avant-garde designers and mass-fashion brands are more common than ever, and the last seasons show that a wide range of prestigious avant-gardist designers have engaged in this type of co-branding. Both Martin Margiela and Comme des Garçons have designed full collections for H&M, Rick Owens and Raf Simons have done consecutive shoe collections for Adidas, and Kris Van Assche has collaborated repetitively with brands such as Lee and Eastpak.

This type of collaborations is often mainly marketed by the mass fashion brand, while the avant-garde designer has a role of a design licensor. The collaboration collections further vary in size, some avant-garde designers create full size collections, like Comme des Garçons for H&M, while other collaborate on a limited part of the assortment, such as Rick Owens designing

shoes for Adidas. The design approach and expression of the collaboration collections are also diverse; contrasting examples are Martin Margiela who in his collaboration with H&M created re-editions of old collections and Rick Owens who in his most recent collaboration with Adidas created a progressive design very much in line with his current collections (for images of both collaborations, see Appendix 2).

Avant-gardist designers collaborating with mass fashion brands are not a surprising phenomenon today. But what is actually known about the effects on the avant-garde designer? The limited research conducted in the area focuses mainly on the mass fashion brand (Uggla, 2004; Uggla & Åsberg, 2010) and research on avant-garde fashion collaborations is particularly underdeveloped. What further makes this perspective, the one of the avant-garde designer, interesting are the varying results media reports regarding this type of collaborations. Neither Martin Margiela's nor Comme des Garçons' collection for H&M were subject to the collection being instantly sold out, associated to many of H&M's other full-scale collaborations (Misener, 2012; Torgander, 2014). Similarly it could be debated how the collections and collaborations were perceived among consumers, since sceptic opinions about this type of collaborations pervade the articles written as well as social media (Misener, 2012; Flinkenberg 2014; Flytström, 2014).

Could these opinions of the collaborations expose the avant-garde designer brands to risks? Is the avant-garde fashion line, due to its distinct nature, at particular risk? The conducted research aims to strengthen the decision support for avant-garde designers considering collaborations with mass-fashion brands through exploring these effects.

1.1.3 Win-Win?

As this contradicting union evidently is happening, Maison Martin Margiela for H&M being only one of many, the question of whom gaining the most from this alliance needs to be asked. According to Simonin and Ruth (1998), the company one chooses to enter a liaison which can rub off in terms of brand identity to the other; Adidas for instance collaborating with a designer like Rick Owens, evidently gives rise to an increased perception of fashionability for the sports brand. Clearly, a retail chain engages in the described collaborations for an image upswing and in exchange compensating their partner brand financially (Uggla, 2013). Despite monetary compensation, to what extent does this alliance affect the image of the avant-gardist brand? Usually a progressive brand's

value is based on the fact that it is progressive. If it changes in nature, one could ask what is left. Does the popularistic aura of the mainstream retail brand rub off on the avant-gardist designer to their disadvantage or can they get away with it simply sharing a slice of their unique design to the mass-market brand for a limited amount of time? Or, is the resulting expansion of the target group beneficial for the both brands?

1.2 Purpose & Research Question

To conclude, the main purpose of the study is to investigate the effects of design collaborations between high-end avant-garde fashion designer brands and low-end mainstream mass-market brands. Naturally, there are many zones along the spectrum of fashion in between avant-garde and mainstream as well that could be studied; the focus will in this study lie on the two extremes, as they are the most contradictive. We want to look at what factors impact the consumer's image of the avant-gardist designer brand as a result of a collaboration. According to branding theory the expected effects from this strategy are most probably beneficial for both brands. In order to explain the complex consequences of an avant-garde fashion brand collaboration a sociological perspective will be added. Thus, the questions being explored in this study are the following:

- *If at all, how does the contradictive nature of the partner brands affect the image of the high-end avant-garde designer brand?*
- *Furthermore, how does the consumer perceive the high-end avant-garde designer brand after such a collaboration?*

1.3 Relevance

There has been an increasing amount of collaborations within fashion and design in the last years. Some have even started building business models around collaborations, such as H&M-owned brand Other Stories, where continuous collections are launched being collaborations with designers, models and celebrities within the fashion world (Other Stories, 2014).

Most research on the area has been carried out from the perspective of the modified brand, in this case the mainstream mass-market brand, while the effects on the modifying brand, the designer who lends its brand and design to the other brand, are less explored (Ugglå, 2013). As mentioned above, an increasing amount of high-end fashion designers are acquired by investors, where Kering and LVMH are leading examples (Kering, 2014; LVMH, 2014). Key performance indicators such

as profit, revenue and market share drive these investors who thus are attracted to the short-term financial benefits that often come with licensing contracts or collaborations with established mainstream retail-clothing companies. The consequences these collaborations may have on the brand perception need to be explored in order to evaluate the long-term effects for the designer brand. Our research is relevant, since it contributes to understanding those effects and may improve decision support for avant-gardist designers facing collaboration prospects.

1.4 Delimitations

The study focuses only on the consumer perspective, and will be limited to solely include empirics describing the consumer perception about avant-garde designers after collaborating with mainstream retail-clothing companies from actual consumers and experts in the industry. Another delimiting factor concerns the dimensions of fashion designer brands used to create the study's *Design Collaboration Grid* (Figure 1); the dimensions taken into account are avant-garde versus mainstream distinction within fashion, and high-end versus low-end. Hence, factors such as countries, markets, or sales channels are not considered. Moreover, the research will not consider collaborations between any other combinations than high-end avant-garde designers and low-end mainstream mass-market brands (see Figure 1 for other combination types). Hence, everything in between the two extreme distinctions within fashion has been neglected. Besides delimiting the scope of the study, this choice will hopefully deliver depth to the findings and analysis. Similarly, the study focuses on only one country, which may result in that the findings and analysis are not completely accurate for determining effects on consumer perception within other countries or markets. This is an important delimitation, particularly due to the different status of avant-garde fashion; for instance fashion in Britain is popular culture while it in France is high culture (Rocamora, 2012). Furthermore, the study only takes the collaboration into account although other marketing activities, such as sales channels and communication, could have impacted the opinion of people and consumers.

1.5 Thesis Outline

The disposition of the study will from this point be as follows. In the next chapter, the study's second, avant-garde and mainstream fashion are defined and compared. These concepts are important to the research and this chapter frames the purpose of the study. Following, the third chapter summarizes the pre-study,

its findings, and contributions to the main study. Furthermore, the fourth chapter provides an overview of the used theoretical framework as well as develops the research model used for the analysis. The following chapter presents the methodology and important choices related to the research approach. In chapter six, the empirical findings from the interviews with consumers and experts are presented and these are subsequently analysed in the seventh chapter according to the developed research model. Chapter eight consists of conclusions and the final chapter includes suggestions for further research as well as implications based on the study's results.

2 AVANT-GARDE VS. MAINSTREAM

For the study of avant-garde fashion consumers it is important to define what avant-garde means in the fashion industry. The term is widely used in the artistic field, but the meaning can be very subjective, particularly in fashion. Fashion is closely related to trends and continuous renewal in order to come up with the next thing that everybody should wear. Thus, what one needs to be careful with is not to mistake avant-garde for merely a new fashion or a trend, but as a game-changing take on the notion of fashion as a whole. In the following, the general definition of avant-garde and how it relates to mainstream will be discussed as well as how the two terms are specified for the purpose of this study.

The definition of avant-garde in general is very debated, hence the categorization of designers being avant-gardist or not is a challenge. One definition that is in line with our understanding of the term is *"the advance group in any field, especially the visual, literary, or musical arts, whose works are characterized chiefly by unorthodox and experimental methods"* (Dictionary.com, 2014). Rocamora (2002) quotes Bourdieu who describes it as an *"autonomous field where high cultural goods such as art, literature or high fashion are produced by and for producers, and addressed to a limited audience."* The focus is not financial profitability but *"'art for art's sake' is the dominant value"*. Furthermore, Bishop (2007) states in his study that the avant-garde is many times referred to as a period of time within different cultural genres such as the 20s in film and 50s in French theatre.

Within fashion the avant-garde is often associated with the period of the ground-breaking group of avant-gardists called the Antwerp 6¹ - a Belgian fashion collective from the Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts; later with the joining of Martin Margiela also referred to as Antwerp 6+ (Fashion In Antwerp, 2014). They shared a radical vision of fashion and are said to have defined the style of the 1990s, after their breakthrough in London in 1986 (Ledesma, 2013). The progressive Belgian fashion designers as well as their inspiration Rei Kawakubo, founder and head designer of the Japanese fashion brand Comme des Garçons (for more information, see Glossary & Appendix 2), all shared the vision of

¹ Antwerp 6 were originally consisting of Anne Demeulemeester, Dirk Bikkembergh, Walter von Bierendonck, Dries van Noten, Marina Yee & Dirk van Saene (visitantwerpen.be, 2014, for images see appendix 2).

deconstructing fashion in order to explore new ways of looking at clothing (Wilson, 2008).

What designer belongs to what cultural group is nevertheless a matter of interpretation, which is why the designers relevant for this study are grouped by looking at shared attributes. The designers that are included in the study and categorizing as avant-garde share the attributes of having political ambitions or rather conceptual view on fashion and for instance challenging norms; the Jordanian designer Rad Hourani (Rad Hourani, 2014) is challenging gender roles in fashion with his unisex collections and shows whereas Dutch Iris van Herpen is exploring material and technology with her 3D printed creations (Iris Van Herpen, 2014). Other designer brands that are referred to as avant-garde in this study and often mentioned are Maison Martin Margiela, Rick Owens and Kris van Asche (see Glossary and Appendix 2).

Opposing the avant-garde we have mainstream fashion comprising low-end retail clothing companies producing fast fashion for the masses; Adorno & Horkheimer are quoted by Wilson (1985) in her work *Adorned in Dreams* describing it as a *cultural nightmare*. There are also high-end designers that could classify as mainstream, targeting a broader affluent fashion crowd like Burberry or Marc Jacobs for instance. What unites them is their focus on large-scale production for a wide audience and targeting a market that is structured "by its producers' quest for commercial success!" (Rocamora, 2002).

For the purpose of clarification, the low-end mainstream brand will also be referred to as mass-market fashion brand in the following, whereas the high-end avant-garde designer brand also will be referred to as avant-garde brand.

3 PRE-STUDY AND ITS FINDINGS

This chapter presents the pre-study, its findings, and describes how the pre-study has assisted in developing the theoretical approach and theory building. The objectives and subjects of the study are first presented briefly, followed by the findings.

The purpose of the pre-study was to acquire an improved understanding of the studied area. The pre-study had two main objectives which were to gain knowledge about the theories and research within branding, and subsequently with help from these findings develop preliminary moderators and factors, which affects consumer perception about avant-garde fashion designers post collaborating with mainstream clothing retailers. The study is based on two in-depth interviews with a researcher within branding and branding alliances and a practitioner within branding strategy, accompanied by a review of secondary sources of published material.

The interviewees consist of Henrik Ugglå, a renowned researcher within branding and brand alliances at the Royal Institute of Technology, and Åsa Myrdal Bratt, a senior brand strategist and lecturer within the field. Ugglå has no direct impact on fashion discussions but has through his deep knowledge about business and branding strategy a competent industry perspective, which is valuable for the study. Myrdal Bratt's experience from the branding industry complements Ugglå's academic view and provides an understanding of the implementation of branding strategy. In-depth interviews with Ugglå and Myrdal Bratt were conducted and the findings are presented below. The findings are divided into three categories, a brand's incentives to ally, co-branding synergies and side effects, and co-branding within the fashion industry.

3.1 Incentives to Ally

Ugglå argues that a brand has four categories of incentives to ally with an external partner brand. First, the brand can achieve to reach beyond, to reach a larger or different target market. Secondly, co-branding is a commonly used tactic and can be looked upon as a point of parity, which could motivate brands to engage in the same kind of activity in order to match the competition. Thirdly, it can vitalize and energize a product line and as Ugglå puts it, brand alliances can be *"more like a campaign for really large corporations such as H&M, which could be part of a portfolio strategy and cause spillover effects on other products"*. Fourthly, companies can motivate co-branding with potential

increased revenue streams through incomes from licensing and a broadened target market.

3.2 Co-Branding Synergies and Side Effects

3.2.1 Synergies

Myrdal Bratt argues that effective co-branding is characterized by the fit between the brands, and the fit of co-branding and the brand's strategy. A modest degree of complementarity is, based on her experience, essential in order for the co-branding's value creation. *"One should look for partner brands that have some similarities or that can spice up the brand's profile. In successful co-branding cross-fertilization is key"* (Myrdal Bratt). Uggle further stresses that the creation of synergy effects defines an effective co-branding. The partner brands' core values should reflect or complement each other in the brand alliance. However, partnering brands can be dissimilar and still create successful alliances as long as their core values do not collide (Myrdal Bratt). *"(About the collaboration between Maison Martin Margiela and H&M) Margiela and H&M are different, but as long as their values don't clash it doesn't matter too much"* (Myrdal Bratt). Besides complementarity, brand alliances have stronger effects if one of the partners is relatively weak compared the other, than in the case when the partnering brands are equally strong (Uggle).

3.2.2 Side Effects

Apart from synergies, co-branding bears the risk of creating negative side effects. Negative effects can occur when a brand too frequently allies, as in the Pierre Cardin case exemplified by Myrdal Bratt. *"Pierre Cardin licensed his brand to each and every one, and by this the brand went from being a fashionable quality brand to losing all trustworthiness and in the end, the Pierre Cardin brand didn't stand for anything."* Similar side effects occur when brands with completely different values partner; Myrdal Bratt argues that this kind of co-branding signals that the brand sells its soul and all credibility vanishes. Following, these effects may cause the brand identity to change from a consumer standpoint. Another risk associated to this is when only one or a few markets have been exposed to the brand alliance; in these cases the brand runs the risk of having different identities on different markets. *"The collaboration between Rolling Stones and Dressman consists of two brands with completely different values which have nothing in common. It was all about money and Rolling Stones loses all their credibility. What's further is the great risk of parallel images; that Rolling Stones image potentially changes on the Swedish market,*

while it is maintained on other markets." (Myrdal Bratt). However, the negative side effects can be mitigated by the fact that co-branding can be temporary. A temporary alliance makes the side effects milder since consumers forgive and forget, especially if the brand is well known and established (Myrdal Bratt).

3.3 Co-Branding Within the Fashion Industry

Collaborations within the fashion industry have over the last decades become increasingly popular and the partner brand combinations are manifold and different. What started out as collaborations where a low-end mainstream retailer partnered with a high-end designer has expanded and today the collaborations includes various partner combinations. *"Fashion still believes strongly in the power of two, with more collaborations than ever in the works. Next season alone includes everything from the launch of Yohji Yamamoto shoes by Salvatore Ferragamo to Ruby helmets by Karl Lagerfeld to J Brand jeans by Hussein Chalayan"* (Foreman & Groves, 2009). Collaborations between low-end mainstream retailers and high-end designers within the fashion industry have historically gained a lot of media publicity. The low-end mainstream retailer Payless states that these collaborations are successful and help attracting other customer segments to their stores. *"What they [the collaborations] represent is our vision to democratize fashion and design and bring it to the world,"* Matt Rubel, chief executive officer of Collective Brands, which owns Payless, says. *"It is all about the customer, especially during these times. When they need to make a choice, they don't have to choose price over style"* (Poggi, 2008). Many of the co-branding collections have created hypes and sold out in a short time, not seldom in as quickly as a few hours, and this is partly due to the often large exposure of this type of collaborations in media (Misener, 2012).

More recently, avant-garde fashion designers have started joining collaborations with low-end mainstream retailers. Examples of recent collaborations of this type are Rick Owens for Eastpak, and Martin Margiela for H&M (Foreman & Groves, 2009). According to Uggle, it is important for avant-garde designers, when collaborating with mainstream clothing retailers, to find and maintain the right balance of lending its designer expression in order to protect the brand identity. *"One must still be able to distinguish between the real brand and the brand in the collaboration. The designer can't provide the same quality as in the real brand, but neither deliver a design of too low quality."* (Uggle). One interesting feature of these collaborations is that media reports ambiguous

attitudes. The Martin Margiela for H&M collection did not sell out, and many pieces were left on sale weeks after the launch (Misener, 2012), and papers, magazines, and social media expressed ambivalent opinions about the collaboration. On one end there was a highly fashion interested group who loved the pieces and the collection, but on the other end strong feelings towards the unwearable avant-garde design were expressed. *"[Regarding reasons why the collection did not sell out] Too avant-garde for the average shopper. Margiela is the label that brought us the famous glove top -- and its H&M line, while toned down, stuck to the same aesthetic. For a consumer looking for pieces to wear to the office, lucite shoes and flowing blouses might have been a little too out there for the average boardroom."* (Misener, 2012)

Not only opinions regarding the avant-garde design being unwearable were expressed, but also the comments focused on subjective taste stating that the difficult design was in fact very unappealing. *"Well, we're just glad THIS Margiela top never caught on."* (Misener, 2012) (see Appendix, Image 4 - Margiela Bra Top). Similarly, Flinkenberg states *"I am wondering if it is me or you others that haven't understood what's going on? I get that you are supposed to admire that kind of difficult (read: uncommercial) designers like Margiela. That it is kind of ugly but terribly trendy and then you just try to join the choir of admirers fast as hell before somebody understands how uncool you actually are not really understanding why it would be so extremely cool and right to walk around in an oversized blazer in which every participator in Biggest Loser America (including family and caravan) could fit without problem on their way to the weigh-in."* (Flinkenberg, 2012)

To conclude, opinions seem to differ regarding collaborations of that kind within the fashion industry. The various attitudes expressed by media and consumers are not in line with the forecast that branding theory makes of a co-branding strategy's supposed outcome. In contrast, there seem to be many layers that the research within co-branding have not covered, as its main purpose until now seem to have been not to be industry specific. The fashion industry is based on trends and taste that can be steered to some extent but not as easily as other industries such as FMCG for instance. *"What I have a hard time believing is that all branding theories are directly applicable irrespective of industry. The fashion industry seems special and not as straight forward and unemotional as for example FMCG."* (Ugla)

3.4 Key Takeaways from Pre-Study

The findings from the pre-study support the proposed trends regarding the increased popularity of including co-branding in firms' marketing activities. In addition to the increased usage of co-branding, considering intra-industrial co-branding within the fashion industry the different partner brand combinations appear to have grown both in terms of numbers and in complexity. In order to analyse the outcome and effects from fashion designer collaborations, complementarity seems to be an important factor. The findings support that the varying degree of complementarity assist in predicting the outcome and effects of co-branding. It is further indicated in the study that the characteristics of the fashion industry, being more complex and affective compared to other industries, makes a research approach solely based on general branding theory insufficient. This has caused the development of the research model to apart from general branding theory on co-branding include sociological research on the development and consumption of fashion. The aim with this combined approach is for the research to gain a more complete understanding of the effects on consumer perception from the complex type of collaborations that are studied.

4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework serves as a structure to combine theory from research in co-branding as well as sociological theory on fashion, which we aim to combine in this study to be able to answer the research questions of how or if at all the contradictive nature of the partner brands affect the image of the high-end avant-garde designer brand. The pre-study as well as the review of literature has resulted in the identification of several areas that partly depend on each other all influencing the consumer perception of a brand after a brand collaboration. In the first part, the relevant and presently existing literature on co-branding will be summarized and combined with complementary theories from fashion studies. The focus will lie on partner choices, complementarity and fit, extensions of the target market as well as spill over effects and a little presentation of research that has been conducted in the field of fashion. Subsequently, a summary of relevant research on the concept of fashion will be presented. In the second part of the theoretical framework, the two theories have been combined into a research model, which will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections.

4.1 Branding Theory

4.1.1 Co-Branding

The use of co-branding has increased dramatically during the last decades (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005), and has, in case of a good match, a good potential through capitalizing on the strengths of each of the partnering brand (Washburn et al, 2000). As a result of this, brand portfolio management has since the beginning of the 21st century shifted orientation from vertical to horizontal, meaning that the previous focus on solely building market positions has been replaced with a focus on building and buying market positions (Uggla, 2013). Aaker (2004) argues that alliances with external partners should be seen as a natural part of the brand portfolio of the initiating brand. Park et al (1996), a pioneer within the research field of co-branding, has contributed to the understanding of the area concluding that brand alliances with complementary brand profiles have the possibility to create stronger differentiation compared to what brand extensions may accomplish. This implies that buying market positions through allying with an external partner may create stronger differentiation effects than what the brand can achieve on its own. The different relevant factors, moderators and effects that influence the collaborations outcome will be expanded in the following section.

4.1.2 Choice of a Partner

The choice of a co-branding partner needs to be actively managed in order to be able to leverage off the brand (Hill, Ettenson & Tyson, 2005). Leuthesser et al (2003) state about co-branding that: *"Used properly, it is an effective way to leverage strong brands"*. The authors describe the mainstream clothing retailers' strategy of partnering with high-end fashion designers as an image enhancing strategy in which the partner brand mainly is chosen for what is associated with it, rather than for specific product attributes integrated into the co-brand (Leuthesser et al, 2003). Consequently, mainstream clothing retailers such as H&M, Target, and Adidas may succeed to bring their brands to an attractive environment and a more exciting market segment, at the same time as enabling a change in company and brand perception (Aaker, 1997).

It is furthermore important to evaluate what motivates the partner brand to engage in a brand alliance. According to research conducted by Ugglå (2013), there are at least three reasons for a partner brand to involve in the described type of co-branding: Firstly, the partner can enjoy awareness and associations within another market segment. Secondly, the partner often receives significant income from the partnership. Thirdly, the partner can experience pressure from investors to generate increased cash flows. Therefore, Aaker (2004) points out the importance for the partner brand to evaluate what impact the alliance as well as the other brand will have for the partner brand, especially in terms of image. He states *"... in any brand alliance, it is not only what I can do for you, but what our association will do to me and my image"*. To conclude, the selection of the partner plays a major role to steer the aspired outcome of the collaboration as well as evaluating the partner's contribution to and motives to engage in the brand alliance.

4.1.3 Moderators & Effects

A limited range of literature focuses on the effects of co-branding, especially from a partner brand perspective. In this research there are different moderators and effects of brand collaboration that influence and are relevant for the consumer perception of a brand after a brand alliance. One factor that impacts the consumer perception is the kind of awareness and the associations the brands generate (Ugglå, 2013). The positioning and associations connected to both partner brands as well as to the alliance impact these effects, and consequently an analysis of these moderators assist in predicting the outcome for the partner brand (see for instance Aaker & Keller, 1990; Simonin & Ruth,

1998; Washburn et al, 2000). In the following sections three moderators that are relevant for exploring effects on consumer perception will be presented followed by a review of the effects. The three moderators are complementarity, fit and potential extension of customer market.

4.1.4 Complementarity & Fit

In research on brand alliances, fit is a central factor when evaluating the effects of the alliances, and decisive for the resulting consumer perception of the alliance (Park et al, 1996). Complementarity is one of the components of fit, besides substitutability and transferability, in Aaker & Keller's (1990) commonly used model for determining the co-branding fit, where a high degree of fit subsequently has a positive impact on consumer evaluations of brand extensions. In a recent study, Keller (2008) stresses the role of a logical fit between the partnering brands as a necessity for a successful brand alliance. In determining a logical fit, there exists no unanimous definition but studies have pointed to two key dimensions being image and product category fit. Park et al. (1996) found in their study product category fit to be the most important factor for a high degree of fit, whereas other studies support image fit to be more important (Baumgarth, 2004; Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Pruppers et al, 2007). Overall, the fit of the partnering brands can be determined on different levels, where the fit between the product categories and images of the partnering brands seem to be crucial for determining the co-branding fit and the following consumer perception of the collaboration.

For determining the level of fit, which as mentioned has a positive impact on consumer perception, it is not necessarily similarities between the partnering brands that generate a high degree of fit. Instead, complementarity plays an important role in both product category as well as in brand image fit (Park et al, 1996; Baumgarth, 2004). An example of co-branding with a high degree of product category fit between the partnering brands would be Porsche and LaCie - complementing each other through Porsche standing for unique design and LaCie coming with the technology (Uggla, 2013). A high degree of complementarity can also be achieved without the presence of product category complementarity, as in the case of Rick Owens partnering with Adidas, where instead image fit is the decisive factor. The partnering brands complement each other through their different market positions where Rick Owens has an avant-gardist take on fashion contrasting to Adidas mainstream focus. The brands' complementary images support a high degree of co-branding fit.

Even though it has been found that complementary partnering brands improve the effects of co-branding through improving the co-branding fit (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Mandler, 1982), brands with too complementary profiles and which therefore are extremely incongruent, may impair consumer attitude when partnering in a brand alliance (Sreejesh, 2012). This could imply that partnering brands with very diverse product categories or images have a lower degree of co-branding fit, as they are too far from each other and thus are not moderately complementary, leading to a negative impact on consumer perception of the brand alliance.

4.1.5 Potential Extension of Target Market

Each of the partnering brands brings their customer base to the co-branding endeavour, and as a consequence each of the brands will be able to reach the other's customer segment. The potential extension in reach could result in increased awareness and thus be advantageous for the partnering brands (Blackett & Boad, 1998). According to Leuthesser et al. (2003), successful co-branding is strongly linked to the potential customer bases, since it is dependent on both partner brands adding value to the alliance, where the potential of value-adding can be assessed partly on how well each of the brands' potential customer bases complement each other.

4.1.6 Spillover Effects

Brand complementarity and the potential extension of customer market can add value to the many alliances between mass-market brands and high-end fashion designers. In this category of brand alliances the alliance has been a successful way to ensure quality through a trustworthy partner brand, where the high-end fashion designer consequently is the secondary partnering brand (Leuthesser, 2003). The quality of a co-branded product based on an alliance between a low-status and a high-status brand will in these cases be licensed by the more reputable high-status brand. Simonin & Ruth (1998) have found support for that brand alliances may have significant effects and modify post attitudes towards the partnering brands, known as *spillover effects*. These spillover effects are crucial to evaluate when selecting an allying partner, since central issues concern how and to what extent the partner brand and the alliance will affect the brand and its image (Aaker, 2004).

Furthermore, spillover effects from brand alliances are according to Simonin & Ruth (1998) found to be dependent on the familiarity of the partnering brands and on consumer attitudes towards the brand alliance. The authors find support

for that the spillover effects not necessarily affect the partnering brands equally. The familiarity and strength of the partnering brands impact the extent to which they contribute to the brand alliance. Well-known and strong brands tend to contribute more to the alliance compared to less known and weaker partner brands. The familiarity of the partnering brands further moderate how affected each of the partnering brands are from the spillover effects; lesser-known and more disputed brands tend to be more affected compared to well-known and strong brands (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). This finding is further supported by Washburn et al (2000) whose study support that low equity brands have more to gain, and experience stronger spillover effects, from co-branding, compared to high equity brands. The weaker brands' increased gain and stronger spillover effects originates from that they do not have as established association sets among consumers as stronger brands have, and these more fragile associations are more likely to change (Washburn et al, 2000). Washburn et al (2000) further convey that a co-branding where one of the partners is a low equity brand and the other a high equity is not detrimental to the stronger brand, a finding that supports Simonin & Ruth's (1998) study demonstrating that well-known and strong brands are less affected by spillover effects. The weaker impact from spillover effects on well-respected and well-known partner brands is further in line with the long history of research on attitudes, which demonstrates that established attitudes are very resistant to change (Leuthesser et al, 2003).

Moreover the spillover effects of co-branding, and the potential risks they pose, are dependent on the partnering brands' positions in the alliance. When an alliance consists of a primary and secondary partnering brand, the primary brand typically is primarily responsible for the marketing, whereas the secondary brand has the role of licensor or supplier (Leuthesser et al, 2003). In this type of alliances, the secondary brand stands less risk, since consumers seem to be able to distinguish between the brands and discern the primary brand as chiefly responsible for the quality of the co-branded product (Washburn et al, 2000). Washburn et al (2000) further found support for that the spillover effects, apart from the brands' positions, are dependent on the partnering brands' relative status. Well-respected and well-known brands experience weaker spillover effects, since this category of high equity brands have such rich association sets among consumers that it appears to insulate them from less advantageous associations (Washburn et al, 2000). Overall, secondary brands do not risk brand confusion and dilution to the same degree as primary brands do,

and particularly not if they are well reputed and established (Washburn et al, 2000).

4.1.7 Intra-Industrial Co-Branding Within Fashion

A limited range of studies focus on co-branding with fashion brands, one recent study carried out is Wu & Chalip's (2013) focusing on the effects of co-branding between sports brands and fashion brands. Even less research has been conducted on intra-industrial brand alliances within the fashion industry. Ahn et al (2009) stress, in their study of complementarity in fashion co-branding, the importance on focusing on the fit of product classes instead of limiting the partner brand to the fashion industry. The authors further imply that intra-industrial co-branding within fashion may complicate the alliance due to the unique characteristics of fashion brands (Ahn et al, 2009).

Fashion is an industry different from many others, and as the findings from the pre-study indicate general co-branding theory may not always be directly applicable on this affective industry. This motivates the inclusion of other theories besides general co-branding theory, which is why the following sections introduce the philosophy of fashion and how this relates to the area of research.

4.2 The Philosophy of Fashion

When applying branding strategy to the fashion industry this study aims to highlight the sociological perspective as well, where the phenomenon of fashion and fashionability will be explained in order to in the second part (*Research Model*) create a model suitable for the particular industry. Thus, in this section there will be given a short overview on the basic philosophy behind fashion and consumption patterns in terms of identity creation.

4.2.1 What Is Fashion?

To begin with, fashion can be defined in many different ways, reaching from lifestyle to something rather material. In this study fashion is however looked upon "not as a material but a symbolic product which has no content substance by/in itself" (Kawamura, 2005). The phenomenon of fashion is also often referred to in the context of modernity and the continuous strive for something new and different (Breward, 2005; Evans, 1967). What is more, it is closely linked to conspicuous consumption and the creation of the identity one aspires to communicate to society (Veblen, 1899), although having evolved dramatically through the invention of the sewing machine and industrial revolution (Wilson,

1985). Today fashion is not as closely linked with luxury and the upper class as it used to be, but rather tells us about a person's identity on a horizontal level, telling us about different subcultures and groupings in society (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

When it comes to how fashion works in and affects society, Georg Simmel laid a solid ground from a sociological perspective in his work "The Philosophy of Fashion" already in 1905 that is still being referred to today. He is a pioneer within his field and regarded as the founder of modern sociology (Abel, 1959). His theory about fashion is being discussed and agreed with to a larger extent until today, with many prominent sociologists referring to his dissection of the phenomenon (Kawamura, 2005). The sociologist builds his argument on the *psychological tendency towards imitation* and the paradox of people aspiring individuality resulting in a collective shared identity by individuals seeking to separate himself or herself from everyone else (Simmel, 1905). What is important to keep in mind is that the theory is conceptualized in a time where class distinction was of a different nature than today. Luxury consumption and fashion were not democratized and widely accessible as today (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009) Nevertheless, the authors also state that "*What has not disappeared, on the other hand, is man's need for some form of social stratification, which is vital to him; he needs to know his place in society*". Thus, one can say that fashion as well as the concept of luxury are still applicable although our class society has changed from being divided into aristocracy, bourgeoisie and lower classes too a much more complex societal structure based on merits, social and economic capital as well as cultural heritage (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009, Bourdieu 1984).

4.2.2 Distinction vs. Imitation

As mentioned earlier in this section, Simmel (1905) defines the nature of fashion being the individual's need for distinguishing herself in a constant tango with people's tendency to imitate. Veblen argues that this is particularly the case with the wealthy being able to distinguish themselves from the less wealthy (1899). Furthermore, this creates different layers in society as the individuals seeking for distinction unconsciously form a group based due to their shared way of thinking and visually communicating their aspired role in society/the context (Simmel, 1905; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Berger & Hamit (2006) agree with Simmel's theory that the group however only acquires its desired status if other individuals approve both within the group as well as

vertically, downwards. Those show their approval by imitation and thus the transfer of responsibility to their role model, who they communicate aspiring to be. Consequently, that gives that initial group power and control over the others (Simmel, 1905; Bourdieu, 1984). When individuals have reached the most superior position and others are starting to imitate them, they subsequently need to move forward to a new direction in order to be able to communicate their position as individuals striving for being unique and superior (Simmel, 1905). This behaviour is often referred to as "trickle-down" in more recent fashion literature (Evans, 1967). Thus, the function of fashion is on the one hand to forming a group but on the other hand to demarcate this group from others in society - or more precisely classes from each other. "*... the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them.*" (Simmel, 1905). However, if there is no need for distinction or the isolation of social groups "*fashion will not be formed*" (Simmel, 1905) and the concept is not valid. Many modern fashion scholars support Simmel's theories to be as applicable nowadays, high-end fashion brands setting the tone and the low-end mainstream mass-market brands are following (Entwistle, 2000).

Simmel (1905) further affirms the conspicuousness to increase, the closer the different sets of classes are to each other as there is a need for stating and accentuating the differences in standards of life. The accessibility of this powerful position on the top of the social spectrum can however not be reached by striving for individuality alone, but through approval by both in-group members and the imitating classes (Veblen, 1899).

4.2.3 Time Dimension

One important aspect to include is the notion of time since fashion is subject to constant change. Fashion moves forward with the continuous re-invention of individuality by the leading class provoked by the assimilation of the lower social groups (Simmel, 1905). Distinctiveness dies as the style and manner is copied killing the fashion. This makes fashion a visual expression of the Zeitgeist (Wilson, 1985) or as Simmel (1905) says about what fashion constitutes, "*the dividing line between the past and the future*" and consequently conveys "*a stronger feeling of the present*". These behavioural patterns are not necessarily limited to clothing and manners today but lifestyle products in general and comparable to the marketing theories about early

adapters and followers in the development and spread of trends in society (Vejlgaard, 2008).

Furthermore, the pace of fashion has increased due to the democratization and the shift of power in society (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). The control of historical change and variability therewith social and cultural movement has been taken from the highest class, conservative and hostile to change, to the middle class, liberal and forward-striving (Simmel, 1905). The change in power and therewith more open-minded mentality is coined by ephemeral leaders and trendsetters in order to secure the continuous development of society, reflected in the increased pace and broadness of fashions. The ambition of individuals and classes to have a rapid development and to be socially advanced is favourable as it gives them power, being imitated by both higher and lower classes with the progress of time. A higher pace however also means higher costs for the consumers as more investments into the newest fashions need to be placed resulting in the decrease of prices as neither the middle nor the upper class have the means to maintain the high pace at high costs. Consequently, this lowers the barrier for lower classes to being able to keep up with fashion as they can afford it to a larger extent than before. It pushes the need for new fashions with increasing speed, as the imitation process is not slowed down by the lack of financial means anymore (Simmel, 1905). Thus, out of the democratization of fashion the restless version, fast fashion, is born.

4.2.4 Consumption & Identity

This study takes a social constructivist approach to consumption and identity, where the self is considered as being created and not just true (Ahuvia 2005). Belk (1988) sets the grounds for the study of how possessions and consumptions relate to our identities; the main findings in his research "Possessions & the Extended Self" were on the one hand the categorization of the extended self to the body - internal processes, ideas and experiences - and on the other hand those persons, places and things to which one feels attached. The self-extension is particularly dependent on power and control of the objects, which is in line with Simmel's (1905) assumption that some people who dress aesthetically impossibly have a style that still is artistically tolerable and extravagantly elegant as it is carried out to the extreme and with utmost attention to details. Thus the individual is mastering and in control of the objects extending his/her self, also referred to as *connoisseurship* by Ahuvia (2005). Furthermore, Belk (1988) states that there are multiple layers of self such as

the individual, family, community and group. Thus, the individual is able to communicate its position and group belonging as well as distinguish him- or herself through the way he/she dresses or consumes. This links Simmel's (1905) sociological theory of how people behave in order to distinguish themselves to the tools they use to communicate their distinctiveness. Simmel (1905) however limits it to material property, where Belk (1988) looks at additional layers of the self and also possessions. Newholm & Hopkinson (2009) confirm the theory on the constructed self and adds Baudrillard's concept of consumption as a language to the debate. The question of power and control is in this case referred to as mastering a visual *language* (Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009).

Rocamora (2002) discusses identity creation with respect to fashion in her study. Rocamora (2002) agrees with Bourdieu's idea that there is a homology between the producer, the consumers and the products that are united through their shared *constituted taste* that the producer materializes in his design. This is why Bourdieu (1975) argues that high-end fashion consequently is consumed by the high bourgeoisie whereas avant-garde is consumed by the new bourgeoisie. Rocamora (2002) challenges this theory by stating that Bourdieu neglects the possibility of consumer becoming creative agents as well as agents that can act as mediators between consumption and production, such as advertisers and other visual representation. Due to entry-level luxury products and reduced prices of fashion (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Bourdieu, 1975) mass-market fashion consumers can enter the field of high fashion easier and the borders become more flowing as well as less distinctive (Rocamora, 2002).

4.3 Research Gap

The use of co-branding has increased dramatically during the last decades and research conducted on the area emphasizes the strong differential advantages that can be achieved through allying with an external partner brand. Moreover, studies have found the fit between the partnering brands' products and images to be decisive factors for determining the effects of co-branding. Assessing co-branding within the fashion industry and the effects from it is problematical due to the complex nature of the industry. Fashion consumption, and especially consumption of avant-garde fashion, is characterized by an emotional involvement highly affected by social factors. The emotional and social consumption of fashion makes a prediction of the consumer perception effects from co-branding within this industry based on general co-branding theory difficult.

The limited research conducted on co-branding and brand alliances within the fashion industry does not emphasize the social and emotional aspects characterizing fashion and fashion consumption. The authors argue that research on co-branding within the fashion industry, and particularly co-branding with avant-garde designers, would benefit from adding social and cultural theories to the analysis. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the current research gap through exploring how consumer perception of avant-garde fashion designers is impacted by the designers collaborating with mainstream mass-market fashion brands.

4.4 Research Model

This section presents the extended theoretical framework, where the different theories are inter-related and grouped in order to develop the following framework. Here, the fit between an avant-garde and a mainstream fashion brand, in what way the collaboration alters the products' identity, and the effect the increased reach has on consumer perception will be investigated.

First, the model relating the different areas to each other and to the research questions is presented. Following, the relations between the areas and how they apply to the study is elaborated upon. Last, questions and gaps to be explored are identified. Those questions are subsequently to be answered in the analysis with help of the data collection and further theory.

4.4.1 The Model

The model (*Figure 2*) was developed based on previous research within the areas of fashion and co-branding, presented in the previous sections. The model assists in explaining to what extent and how design collaborations between avant-garde brands and mass-market fashion brands might impact the avant-garde brand's image from the individual consumer's perspective. In other words, the model intends to explain how avant-garde fashion consumers perceive the avant-garde brand after a collaboration with a mass-market fashion brand, and to explore the consequences in terms of brand identity and subsequent consumption of the brand. The design collaboration does however not impact the consumer's perception of the brand directly, but is moderated by certain factors that based on our research we define to be the fit between the two brands on a brand and product category level in terms of complementarity as discussed earlier. The level of fit between the brands will then affect the identity (*Effect Z*) of the collaborating partner and account for the size of the increased target market (*Effect Y*). Those two effects in turn influence the avant-garde fashion

consumer's perception of the avant-garde brand after the collaboration. The model is visualized in the figure below (Figure 2) and explained thereafter:

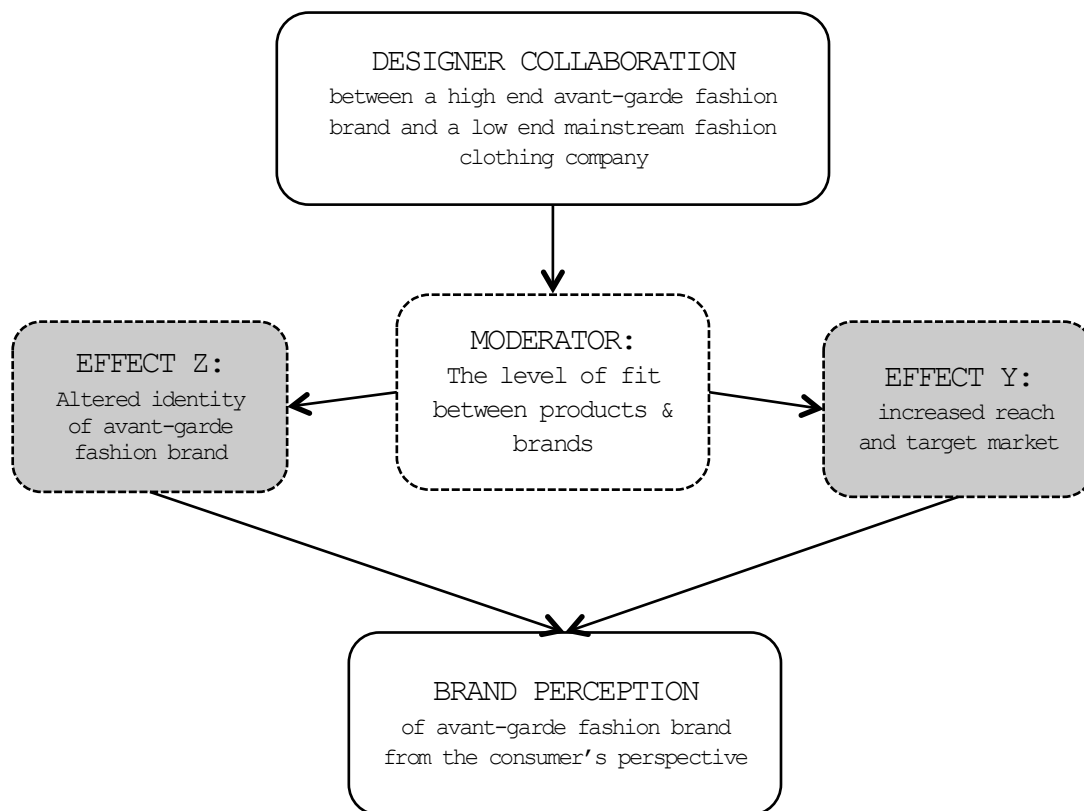


Figure 2; The three areas influencing consumers perception of the brand

4.4.2 Moderator: The Level of Fit Between Products & Brands

To start with, theories on co-branding suggest that fit is a decisive factor for a successful fashion design collaboration and that a high degree of fit between partner brands in a brand alliance improves consumer perception of the respective brands. If the mainstream clothing retailer brand fits well with the avant-garde designer brand, one could expect positive effects of the individual consumer perception for the latter. According to research, fit can be looked at along two different dimensions: Firstly, looking at the fit between brands, a moderate level of complementarity generates an increased degree of fit and positively impacts attitudes among consumers (Aaker & Keller, 1990). The level of complementarity is considered with respect to the positioning of the brands. The mainstream clothing retailer's position on the market is focused on offering a low price, while the avant-garde designer's competitive advantage lies in its artistic and progressive expression. Secondly, there are the product categories, which in our case are the same, however designed from different designers with different design philosophies. Nevertheless, the opposing attributes of the products can according to branding literature be seen as complementary design

profiles and imply a positive outcome as well. Furthermore, the fit is dependent on the positioning of the brands in the alliance. Since the avant-garde designer has the role of a licensor, the brand has a secondary position and thus stands less risk, and only risk associated to its reputation (Washburn et al, 2000).

Nevertheless, if one would argue that the two brands are too incongruent in their nature, this may impair consumer perception and the value created from the brand alliance (Sreejesh, 2012). Looking at branding theory alone, this is not the case as collaborations between luxury and low-end fashion brands, being similarly distant and opposing on a brand positioning map, have shown to be of great success (Uggla & Åsberg, 2010). Looking at the nature of fashion and consumer culture theory, there are other parameters that could alter the outcome.

Furthermore, Bourdieu quoted by Rocamora (2002) states that the avant-garde and the mainstream are the opposite of each other. One is produced for the producer and for art's sake and the other has a goal of financial profitability. Given the opposing characters of the two zones on the fashion spectrum they would be a good match. However, the author also refers to Bourdieu claiming that they are subject to a *dualist structure* where they cannot exist without each other. Bourdieu's division between the avant-garde and the mainstream is not limited to the production itself but also involves the customers, which are distinctly separated (Rocamora, 2002). He has however not looked at what happens if these two areas are blurred, hence no empirical data confirms that the merge necessarily has a bad outcome and the merge between an avant-garde and a mainstream fashion brand are a bad fit.

4.4.3 Effect Z: Altered Identity of Avant-Garde Fashion Brand

The identity of the product, more specifically the associations the consumer links to the product, is affected by the fit and complementarity of the brands and products. On the basis of our research, the identity of the product is said to be important, due to the fact that consumers create their identity through fashion consumption. In that case a product or brand is substituted by a new one if it loses its status and meaning. Theories on co-branding suggest that the image of and the attitude towards the avant-garde designer, as the partner brand, may be affected by the mass-market brand as well as the co-brand (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). This could possibly alter the identity of the avant-garde brand. However, due to its secondary position in the brand alliance, the avant-garde designer brand should be almost immune to risks, and principally only exposed to

risks regarding its reputation (Washburn et al, 2000). Hence, even if the level of fit would be disadvantageous for the latter, the risks of it being contaminated by and associated with the contradicting attributes of the mainstream brand are relatively low. The degree of spillover effects further depend on how well-known and how well reputed the avant-garde designer is, less known and less established designers may experience stronger spillover effects compared to what more known and established designers would do (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Consequently, according to branding theory the risk of being subject to contradictory spillover altering the identity of the avant-garde brand from the perspective of the consumer should be moderately low.

For avant-garde designers, who often use emotional branding strategies, even weak spillover effects could have possibly detrimental effects to the brand. Emotional branding strategies are very relevant and commonly used in the fashion industry (Power & Hauge, 2008) and make branding consumer-oriented, relational, and create affective ties between the brand and its consumers (Roberts, 2004). Advocates of this strategy state that these highly relational bonds are cultivated through brand tactics that produce a feeling of community among consumers (Atkin 2004, Cova & Cova, 2002). Because of this, the brand image is closely connected to the consumer group, and therefore not always controlled by the brand (Thompson et al, 2006). According to Thompson et al (2006), a risk of this strategy is that a doppelgänger effect may occur, which is defined as a group of derogatory images and implications about the brands circulate. The presence of a doppelgänger image for the avant-garde designer would, despite the relatively weak spillover effects, potentially undermine the perceived authenticity of the brand which can be very damaging for the avant-garde designer founding its brand on affective bonds between itself and its consumers.

Looking at further studies within fashion there are some factors that could be taken into consideration as well, such as the identity creation of fashion consumers. Fashion consumers are very sensitive to the change of consumption object's identity. If the fit of the collaboration influences the identity of the avant-garde fashion design negatively, in the way that the design seems more mainstream, the fashion consumer might associate that with the collaborating fashion brand as well. Due to *mainstreaming* and spread, the fashion moves down the status ladder to a mass product influencing consumer perception (Simmel, 1905; Entwistle, 2000). As it is more difficult to express the individuals' distinguished identity by using a mainstream product, they have to move on to something different, as they do not want to express consumption identity

communicating belongingness to a mainstream group. Consequently, the perception of the avant-garde brand by the consumer is affected negatively.

4.4.4 Effect Y: Increased Reach & Target Market

Research on co-branding show that the increased reach to the extended target market is advantageous for both partnering brands, since the alliance results in an increased awareness among more potential consumers (Blackett & Boad, 1998). The avant-garde brand could then possibly benefit from the alliance with the mass-market fashion brand since it gains access to and spreads awareness amongst the target market of the mass-market brand. The extent to which the avant-garde brand benefits with respect to the extended reach can be assessed based on how well the mass-market fashion brand's customer base complements the avant-garde brand's (Leuthesser et al, 2003). It is however hard to say based on co-branding theory, if this has a positive impact on the image of the brand among the customers or not. Looking at fashion theory this could have fatal consequences however.

First of all, the concept of distinction by Simmel (1905) confirms that the spread of a particular fashion evidently forces the inventor to move on to a new fashion. This might be combinable with a design collaboration if the style of the design was based on the latest trends and made into a version suitable for the masses in line with the collaboration. In this case however, the main attribute of the brand is not its sensitivity to trends but progressive take on fashion. According to Bishop (2007), avant-garde is not simply traded for something better, but can only be replaced by something new revolutionary. Rarely this comes from the same producer. Instead he/she dominates an era and develops until many years after something new comes along. Thus, engaging in a collaboration will risk both the uniqueness of the design as well as the brand position in the market to fade away. For instance Margiela's collaboration with H&M comprised a set of deconstructed fashion pieces to be sold to the masses. If they get used to the *deconstruction of fashion* (for more info see Glossary) that pioneers such as Rei Kawakobu and Martin Margiela are basing their designs on, that will not be desirable by the fashion avant-garde anymore. Thus, the collaboration risks a negative impact on the consumer perception of the avant-garde fashion brands.

Another factor in this case is the pace of fashion that is accelerated by the mass-market fashion brands. Fast fashion already at this point drives the industry to the state where it is almost impossible to keep up with the pace of

creating new collections if one is not a multinational fashion retailer such as H&M or Topshop. The time aspect described by Simmel (1905) earlier, is hence an important factor, as now avant-garde fashion is dragged into this machinery, not being able to produce new collections as their fashion is not based on a trend as referred to in the previous paragraph. Thus, a collaboration with this type of actor would have a negative outcome on the future of the brand's position in the market as avant-garde as well as the consumer's perception of it.

4.4.5 Further Questions:

The research model fails to answer if the framework, combining general branding and fashion theory, explains the studied type of collaborations' effects on consumers. Thus, the research is conducted to answer the following questions:

- *If at all, how does complementarity and fit between the partnering brands influence the consumer perception of the avant-garde brand after a collaboration?*
- *If at all, how does the association with the mass-market brand alter the avant-garde fashion brand's identity and how is the consumer perception impacted?*
- *Does the increased spread of the avant-garde brand affect the brand's status from a consumer perspective?*

5 METHODOLOGY

Given our interest for exploring the consumer perceptions and reactions to brand collaborations between mass-market fashion companies and avant-garde designers, we consider the following research methods to be applicable in order to reach our aim of creating more knowledge to base co-branding strategy decisions upon. The selected research design consists of an explorative abductive study, which will be based on qualitative data collected by semi-structured interviews with consumers as well as with experts. In the following chapter, the different areas are explained in-depth followed by an evaluation of the research quality.

5.1 Research Approach & Strategy

5.1.1 Abductive Reasoning

In order to design the research and its approach, an initial step was to characterize the relationship between theory and research. This relationship is a decisive factor for the purpose of the research, since it determines in what ways the study can contribute. The connection between research and theory can be expressed in terms of deductive and inductive ways of reasoning. If the process of reasoning starts with theory and leads to logical conclusions the strategy follows a deductive logic, contrasting against an inductive logic which reasoning starts with empirical observations and then results in generalizations and theoretical conclusions. However, neither of these strategies should be thought of as exact definitions and mutually exclusive strategies, and since the study is based on an interchangeably iterative process between the two ways of reasoning the approach is recognized as abductive. (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

The abductive approach made the research process effective through combining the deductive and inductive logic when continuously relating the study's empirical findings to its theoretical framework and allowing for modifications of the framework according to the findings. Hence, the abductive way of reasoning has enabled our research to take advantage of the systematic character of both the theoretical and the empirical domain, which has improved the understanding of this underexplored area of research. (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

5.1.2 Explorative Research Based on a Qualitative Strategy

Since limited research has been conducted in the area of study, the problem is yet lacking a clear definition. The research problem, being underexplored and poorly understood, makes an explorative approach most suitable since this method aims to collect preliminary information and assists in the definition of

problems and suggestion of hypotheses (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). This approach contrasts against descriptive and causal, explanatory methods, which would be more appropriate if the area of research was further explored and the problem was clearly defined, since these approaches require an increased familiarity with the problem (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). Since the conducted research aims to result in a better understanding of collaborations between avant-garde designers and mainstream clothing retailers and the effects on consumer perception, the explorative approach is used since it will help in gaining insights into the subject (Ghuri & Grønhaug, 2010).

The explorative approach in combination with the aim of the research helps select the most appropriate research strategy (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The purpose of the research is to result in an improved understanding of the studied phenomenon and its effects on consumer perception. It therefore should result in an improved understanding of human behaviour and reasoning within the domain. The explorative approach in combination with the aim to gain an in-depth understanding of consumer behaviour helps determine qualitative research to be the most suitable research strategy to employ (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). The selection of a qualitative strategy is supported by the qualitative research focusing on gaining in-depth understanding and deep insights through emphasizing on words and text in the data collection and analysis (Ghuri & Grønhaug, 2010). Bryman & Bell (2011) further motivates the appropriateness of the strategy when arguing that it is useful in order to acquire a detailed and thorough examination of a phenomenon at the same time as an understanding for the overall context is provided. Due to that the study aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of effects on consumer perception, the research will be designed based on a qualitative strategy.

5.2 Research Design and Method

5.2.1 Case Study

In addition to the employment of a qualitative research strategy, two other key decisions have to be made, which regard research design and method. Again, the explorative approach in combination with the study's purpose assists in these selections (Bryman & Bell, 2011). According to several authors (Yin, 2013; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010), a recommended research design for an exploratory study is a case study. Moreover, Ghauri & Grønhaug (2010) argue that case study designs often are beneficial when the phenomenon should be studied in its natural environment and the possibilities to control for behavioural events are

limited, which is the situation of the conducted research. This in combination with that the area of study is underexplored and lacks a clear problem definition makes a case study design a suitable approach (Yin, 2013). A case study design is consequently employed, and what is further motivating this selection of research design are the advantages of conducting a case study; one being the numerous types of evidence that may be used and combined, from articles and documentation to interviews and observations (Yin, 2013).

The research is based on several case studies, instead of one single. This strengthens the research by providing a broader and richer context and according to Yin (2013) the theory building is improved since the analysis and conclusion will be considerably more substantial. Case studies are however according to Yin (2013) associated to questions regarding objectivity and the possibility to generalize study results. By following the recommendations from case study literature, referred to later, objectivity issues have been mitigated and these mitigating considerations together with the possibilities to generalize the study's results are more thoroughly discussed in the research quality section.

5.2.2 Case Selection

The case study design is, because of the study's purpose to explore effects on consumer perception, based on consumers. Each of the selected consumers will be a subject of study, and a single case in the identification of effects and attitudes. The case selection was based on several criteria and prerequisites regarding location, accessibility, consumer profile and behaviour. The selected consumers are located in Sweden, preferably consume avant-garde fashion and have established attitudes towards avant-garde brands and experience from fashion. Moreover, opinion-making experts within the area were also studied, since this group indirectly impact consumers' individual perceptions. What lead to the criteria definition of the case selection and the inclusion of experts, as subjects of study, was both an analysis of the feasibility as well as discussions with the supervisor about improving the effectiveness of the study.

The actual feasibility of the study is important in order to ensure research quality (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). Thus we aimed to design a study that we could execute realistically to its full extent, which we considered when composing the research design as well as the criteria defined for selecting the cases. A critical feasibility criterion for the design of the case study was the accessibility, since the research was in need of valid qualitative data (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). Because of this, the selected consumers are located within

Sweden and the Stockholm area. The research has its focus effects on consumer perception about avant-garde fashion designers, and to improve the results the study was in need consumers of avant-garde fashion. Based on discussions with the supervisor, consumers of avant-garde fashion were assessed to be highly valuable for the data collection and the in-depth interviews, since this group of consumers has a better understanding of and insights within the area of research. Further, consumers are in many cases affected by strong opinion-makers, why an expert group was included in the study to improve our understanding of these indirect effects on consumer perception.

5.2.3 Data Collection

The data collection process had several phases; a pre-study was conducted focusing on academic and industry insights regarding the area of study in order to improve the main study's research method. Interviews with a researcher within branding and with a practitioner within branding strategy were performed.

Due to the abductive approach, the subsequent main study has during the data collection process allowed for modifications of the framework according to empirical findings. This has caused the data collection process to be iterative and two-sided, with one part being the study of theory and documentation focusing on the area of study and the other part being the conduction of in-depth interviews. The interviews were held in Swedish and later translated by the authors. The interviews were translated by both authors and later compared to decrease subjective interpretations.

5.2.4 Pre-Study

The pre-study focused on gaining an improved understanding of the studied area and phenomenon and it was conducted based on mainly two reasons. The first purpose was to acquire an overview of knowledge about the theories and research within branding an alliances as well as about branding strategy. The second aims to with help from the findings develop initial suggestions of moderators and factors that come into play in affecting consumer perception about the avant-garde fashion designers after collaborating with mainstream clothing retailers. Fulfilling these objectives would enable an enhanced theoretical approach and theory building as well as improving the case study selection and design. Moreover, the gained knowledge improved the interview strategy.

The former objective was achieved by the study of newspaper articles, blog posts, and relevant documentation regarding designer collaborations, accompanied

by in-depth interviews with Henrik Ugglå, a renowned brand researcher at the Royal Institute of Technology, and Åsa Myrdal Bratt, a senior brand strategist and lecturer within the field. The review of the secondary sources of published material was made in order to identify sales patterns, public reactions, etc. which could be expressed as proxies for effects on consumer perception, while the interviews aimed to obtain information about branding strategy both from an academic and from a practitioner perspective.

5.2.5 Interviews

The main study's data collection was based on in-depth semi structured interviews with experts from the fashion industry, both in forms of fashion designers and opinion-making researchers, and consumers of avant-garde fashion as well as of mainstream mass fashion.

5.2.6 Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and this decision was made after careful discussions with the supervisor and based on several important factors aiming to improve the outcome. Since the interviewees, issues, and questions had been planned beforehand, semi-structured interviews are recommended (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). Moreover, it was because of the study's aim to identify unexplored effects essential to include open questions since these allow for unusual and unexpected responses and reveal the interviewees' subjective understanding of the issue (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The inclusion of open questions allowed the participants to speak freely without the constraint of fixed answer alternatives (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). However, closed questions with fixed alternatives come with the benefits of being easy to process for all parties, the answers are more comparable, and the answers may even make the meaning of the question clearer to the interviewee (Bryman & Bell, 2011). These insights led to the selection of semi-structured interviews as the most suitable interview design for the study.

All interviews were conducted based on an interview guide customized for each of the study's interviewee types. Designing diverse guides for the different interview types made certain that the results contained as much relevant information as possible (Yin, 2013), as well as improved the comfort and ease of the interviewee since the language and terms were adapted. The interview guides were based on the pre-study's findings in combination with relevant theory. An overview of the guides is provided in *Appendix 1*.

All interviews were conducted face to face in order to easier allow for observation of reactions and for collection of additional data. Effort was put into making the interviewee feel comfortable since it improves the probability of the interviewees being able to think and reason relaxed and freely. This way of conducting the interviews was determined to be the most efficient one based on experience from the pre-study. In the pre-study one of the interviewees had firstly been interviewed over phone, however it become clear that this way of interviewing lead to an impaired contact with the interviewee, made the interviewee less relaxed and caused the answers to be less elaborating and rich. Hence, the following interviews were held face to face. The average interview was held at the interviewee's workplace and lasted for 50 minutes, see *Table 1* for complete information.

The risk of individual biases in the interview interpretation and analysis was mitigated by both authors attending each interview (Voss et al, 2002). The attendance of both authors is especially beneficial for semi-structured interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2011), partly since it allows for each interviewer filling in with relevant questions when touching an interesting topic. After every interview, the authors made individual interpretations and analyses of the findings before communicating with each other; this process did not only work to further mitigate the risk of individual biases but also made it easier to identify nuances in the answers and reasoning (Eisenhardt, 1989). In order to enable a more thorough evaluation and analysis of the answers, the interviews were recorded and transcribed shortly after (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In line with Bryman & Bell (2011), recording comes with the benefit for the interviewer of being able to be more focused on the interview and provide subsequent questions on interesting topics while not having concerns regarding memory limitations.

5.2.7 Interviewees

The interview participants are categorized into two major types: opinion-making experts, and consumers. In total, three experts and eight consumers were interviewed. The selection of interviewees was based on the information needs. According to Yin (2013), we determined the information needs and identified people who could provide the information from analysing the research question. In order to acquire a deep understanding, an initial selection of interviewees contained people with different backgrounds and roles (Holme & Solvang, 1997). The experts were chosen and approached beforehand based on this process. They were mainly selected based on their previous knowledge in the field both on an

academic and professional level. Some experts were added due to being referred to us by the others. The experts are not the main subjects of the study, which is why we limited them to a smaller amount in contrast to the consumers, our main focus. The selection of consumers was made gradually by using our personal networks of consumers as well as contacting people that were working in the industry or frequenting events associated with the target group. Some were also referred to us when talking about the thesis' aim with external parties. The adding of further interviewees was delimited gradually, once the probability of collecting new findings was assessed as very small.

INTERVIEWEE	INTERVIEWEE CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	PLACE	DURATION	DATE
Åsa Myrdal Bratt	Pre-Study: Expert	Lecturer at Bergths School of Communications & professional brand consultant with experience with collaborations in the fashion industry (Indiska)	Bröd och Salt, Rådmansgatan 43, Stockholm	45:41 min	2014-03-08
Henrik Ugglå	Pre-Study: Expert	Docent of branding strategy at Royal School of Technology with research background & publications the area of brand collaborations	Telefon/Expresso House Sthlm	30 min	2014-03-14
Anna	Consumer	Marketing consultant and consumer of relevant fashion brands.	Kungsgatan 6, Stockholm	43:50 min	2014-04-07
Louise	Consumer	Holds a position at Swedish fashion brand Acne. Consumer of relevant fashion brands.	Kungsgatan 6, Stockholm	48:12 min	2014-03-25
Carl	Consumer	Creative Director at advertising agency and regular consumer of relevant brands.	Sankt Eriksgatan 92, Stockholm	37:25 min	2014-04-05
Henrik	Consumer	Owner of fashion store Les Market and regular consumer of relevant brands.	Les Market office, Karlbergsvägen 82, Stockholm	51:22 min	2014-03-22
Sofia	Consumer	Architecture student, regular consumer of relevant fashion brands and sales assistant at fashion store JUS.	Karla Café, Stockholm	40:00 min	2014-03-20
Elin	Consumer	Sales assistant at fashion store Les Market and occasional consumer of relevant brands.	Les Market, Vikingagatan 18, Stockholm	39:30 min	2014-03-28
Max	Consumer	Senior Manager position with innovation and concept development at Fazer, regular consumer of relevant brands for an extended period of time (more than 12 years)	Snickarbacken 7, Stockholm	34:33 min	2014-04-17

<p>Ubi Sunt, Aidin Sanati and Moa Wikmans</p>	<p>Designer /Consumer /Expert</p>	<p>Swedish modern fashion brand based on the designer duo Aidin Sanati and Moa Wikmans. The designers impact fashion discussions through press, media, and through their membership in Association of Swedish Fashion Brands (ASFB), an association that holds seminars and <i>fashion talks</i>. The designers are further able to affect consumers through Ubi Sunt and its brand values. Apart from their impact on fashion opinion, Moa Wikmans has previous experience from designer collaborations from her former position at H&M.</p>	<p>Snickarbacken 7, Stockholm</p>	<p>01:02:42</p>	<p>2014-03-24</p>
<p>Jacob Östberg</p>	<p>Expert</p>	<p>Professor in Advertising & PR at Stockholm University with research background in fashion studies and CCT. He has been participating in a TV-series about fashion in Swedish television talking about consumption (Von Svensson's Kläder) and has lectured classes within Fashion Studies, where he holds discussions about relevant topics with students.</p>	<p>Albano, Stockholms Universitet</p>	<p>42:55 min</p>	<p>2014-03-14</p>
<p>Paula von Wachenfeldt</p>	<p>Expert</p>	<p>Docent and researcher in the area cultural and literary studies of French society & luxury and fashion, during the early modern era. She is regularly being asked to participate in media to give her opinion on fashion & luxury.</p>	<p>Filmhuset, Stockholms Universitet</p>	<p>28:14 min</p>	<p>2014-03-05</p>

Table 1; Overview of Interviewees of Pre-Study & Main Study²

5.2.8 Documentation

In order to complement the primary sources in the pre- and main study, public documentation was used as an information source. The documentation collected consists of newspaper and magazine articles, fashion reviews, blog posts, and similar. This complementary source provided valuable information for both the design of the interview guides and the theory building.

5.2.9 Data Analysis

Due to the selection of a case study design; there exist no clearly defined strategies or techniques to analyse the findings of the study (Yin, 2013). Instead, the collection and analysis of data used features of a grounded theory framework, which according to Bryman & Bell (2011) represents one of the most influential strategies for conducting qualitative data analysis. The process took advantage of closely relating the data collection, data analysis, and theory building, and was based on an iterative flow.

² The consumer's names haven been changed in order to keep them anonymous. They were given new names, in order for the reader to be able to grasp their different personalities and identities.

The analysis process was initiated by coding the collected data, which enabled identification of different concepts. Data and concepts were constantly compared in order to maintain a close relation between the data collection and the conceptualization, and from this elaboration the concepts were grouped into a higher abstraction level, into categories. As a result of analysis of the connections between the categories, hypotheses were developed about the relationships. The iterative process resulted in identification of new concepts until theoretical saturation was reached; new data was no longer illuminating new concepts and developed hypotheses had been tested. More specifically, we continuously re-evaluated our interview guide and were able to add more relevant questions as we improved our understanding of the consumers and the process. When additional interviews did not shed light on new and unexplored effects on consumer perception, the interview guide was not further changed and the state was recognized as theoretically saturated. This was the phase when the decision to not select more consumer interviewees was made. (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

Apart from using features of a grounded theory framework in the design of the analysis process, substantial effort was put into how the collected data was interpreted and decomposed into the described concepts. This interpretation was a crucial component in the data analysis because of the research focus being on consumer perception within fashion, an area closely connected to consumer culture (Geertz, 1973). In line with Geertz's (1973) model of interpreting cultures, an ethnographical research model focusing on thick descriptions was employed in the analysis of the collected data. This model emphasized gaining an understanding of the data's context, rather than particular attributes. In the study's case this meant that the focus during the in-depth interviews was to gain an understanding of the intentions, the social understanding, and the meaning of the interviewees words, while less consideration was paid to particular words that were expressed (Geertz, 1973). By carefully considering the context of the data, we captured deeper cultural meanings in the data and by this improved the quality of the developed concepts and categories in the analysis framework. More specifically with our own experience and knowledge of the field we tried to visualize the context and meaning of the interviewees' statements by adding images (see appendix) and asking supplementary questions regarding their influences, experiences of past collaborations and their information sources. Furthermore, it was considered important to understand each interviewee's personality and social values to capture the essence of their answers. It became evident when different consumers expressed the same opinions;

they rarely meant the exact same thing, as their reasoning behind it came from different places.

5.3 Quality of Research

Evaluation of the research quality and whether the research has used appropriate information can be done in different ways, where validity and reliability are two central factors (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, it is known that the relevance of using these criteria for evaluating qualitative research is constantly discussed, and there exist several variants and less established alternatives (see for example Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The following analysis of the quality is based on the recognized criteria validity and reliability, since they offer a more well-defined framework and provide improved possibilities to compare the quality of the research. In order to provide a comprehensive and accurate thesis it is essential that both reliability and validity is high, therefore this has been priority in the research design.

5.3.1 *Internal and External Validity*

According to Bryman & Bell (2011), validity has to do with the generated conclusions and their integrity; internal validity regards to what extent the findings make sense and truthfully represent reality while external validity refers to the degree to which the conclusions can be generalized.

The degree of objectivity in the study, which intends to investigate how much personal values bias the final result, poses an internal validity risk (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To secure high validity during the interviews, it was ensured that the interview questions had been understood correctly by providing the interviewees with examples and further guidance when necessary. Great emphasis was placed on the design of the questions so that neither ambiguity nor several interpretations were made possible. The interview questions were also tested on several people to make sure that they did not interpret the questions differently, which strengthen the internal validity of the survey. The interview questions have also been reviewed by the supervisor, which further strengthens the validity. However, the interviewees were not asked to review their statements, as this would require them to spend a considerable amount of time, which could potentially decrease the internal validity.

The analysis approach, based on grounded theory, is sometimes criticized for a loss of a sense of context and the narrative flow as a result of coding and categorizing the collected data. It has also been questioned whether developed

concepts, categories, and theories come from the collected data or from the researcher's interaction within the field. In order to minimize the internal validity risks these criticisms pose, each of the thesis authors individually coded and categorized the collected data before discussing and together analysing the data in order to strengthen the explanatory power of the formulated concepts and categories.

During the literature review, the interpretation and application of the theories are based on the thesis authors' knowledge, which may cause a slight difference from the author's original thought. To reduce the influence on the end result, only original articles have been used with the intent to minimize the risk of yet another interpretation. In addition, the authors have discussed the theories, both between each other and with the supervisor, causing misinterpretation risk to decrease.

The external validity of the research is a central factor and refers to the extent to which the conclusions can be generalized. Results and conclusions from research based on a case study do not depend on statistical generalization, and high external validity is hard to achieve (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Because of this, the conventional view is that qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research, does not result in generalizable findings. Yin (2013) however argues on the contrary that research based on a case study does rely on analytical generalization, which implies that the conclusions from the research can be generalized for avant-garde fashion designers, especially for designer with a Swedish consumer group, facing an option to collaborate with a mainstream clothing retailer. However, it should be stressed that the aim of this exploratory research is not to result in generalizable findings, but to explore an underdeveloped area of study and identify effects which could motivate subsequent studies.

5.3.2 Internal and External Reliability

Reliability concerns, according to Bryman & Bell (2011), the stability of the research method, internal reliability refers to consensus among researchers, while external reliability is to the extent to which a research can be replicated.

Since all the work is done by the two authors, with help and support from the supervisor, the final outcome is affected by their knowledge and experience, which means that there is a possibility that the conclusions could have been

different if someone else performed the study. To mitigate this risk, the authors have ensured that all claims are substantiated by the literature review, which should increase the reliability of the survey. The internal reliability was further increased by both authors attending every interview and by each author interpreting and evaluating the results before discussing them between themselves. The external reliability is decreased due to the study being qualitative which is based on interviews with living material, people. Thus it is almost impossible to replicate the moments and discussions that the interview consisted of. However, it might be possible to approximate a higher external reliability in further studies, where a quantitative approach can be utilized additionally to this qualitative research.

6 CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS ABOUT AVANT-GARDE FASHION & CO-BRANDING

In this chapter our findings from the qualitative research are presented, which serves to give an idea of the avant-garde consumer, what distinguishes the consumption of the individuals and how collaborations between avant-garde brands and mass-market fashion brands are perceived. As explained earlier, the empirical findings are based on in-depth interviews with opinion-making experts and consumers of avant-garde fashion. The consumers' attitudes and opinions are organized according to themes, concepts, where four main themes were identified some sub-categories aiming to capture and summarize the essence of all the interviews.

The first theme is the consumer behaviour in order to get an idea of who avant-garde consumers are and how they consume. Secondly, we have the overall theme collaboration collections with the sub-groups of the consumers' general attitude towards collaboration, complementarity between brands in terms of what combination they perceive as suitable as well as personal preferences summarizing the consumers consumption of co-branded collections. The third theme deals with the consumers' identity, what and who influences them as well as the group they look up to. This is an important theme in order to understand the reasoning behind their fashion consumption choices. Last, the theme contains their individual views and definition of mainstream and avant-garde fashion.

6.1 Consumer Behaviour

Avant-garde consumers are no homogenous group but many times consist of people working in more creative industries due to a certain social capital needed to be able to acquire the taste. Our interviewee Sofia, a sales assistant at a Stockholm avant-garde clothing shop described the main customer being "artists, architects, actors or the like". The selection of consumers has not been done according to their professional background, but only to their consumption choices. Nevertheless, they are often in line with the indicated professions stated by Sofia, namely working within the fashion industry or other creative areas.

In terms of consumer behaviour, one could see clear patterns between the different consumers. For reasons of clarification they were sorted into three groups to facilitate the analysis later on. The first group contains consumers dedicating themselves to avant-garde design without compromise (Max & Sofia),

whereas the second group has a similar level of awareness and opponent to mass fashion consumption, but a more personal view on style and fashion brands (Henrik & Carl). The third group contains consumers that are mixing mass with avant-garde fashion with aspirations to belong to a different group than they currently do (Anna, Louise & Elin). The statements of the consumers are being complemented by those of the experts.

Group 1:

Max and Sofia are both uncompromisingly consumers of avant-garde fashion, where both have dedicated themselves to one designer only. Both would not consider themselves interested in fashion, do not read any fashion media and see their style as independent from regular fashion trends. Whereas Max is a loyal Maison Martin Margiela customer since over 10 years, Sofia dedicates herself to designers for certain periods until she moves on, currently mainly being Rick Owens. Max said during the interview that *"I am completely caught up in Margiela and am not buying anything else. Once I tried on a Rick Owens leather jacket but ended up buying the one from Margiela anyhow!"* The main reasons for his commitment to this particular brand is foremost the cut and the quality of the clothes fitting his body type, but the contemporary design expression as well as the small little details that almost only he as a wearer is aware of are almost as important. Some exceptions have been made with occasional purchases of items for instance, by the Japanese avant-garde fashion designer Issey Miyake with the motivation of his highly intriguing designs and level of constant renewal of design.

Although Sofia shares the devotion to one designer only, she does this in periods, where the current choice, Rick Owens, has been preceded by Haider Ackermann, Anne Demeulemeester, and before that Martin Margiela. *"I still have some few items left of some designers I used to wear, but they are part of the same genre - avant-garde!"* She motivates her consumption choices with explaining that it makes things easier. *"It is simple and practical to combine clothes from one designer only in order to stay within the style I want to have. I am not interested in a personal style. I used to, but not anymore!"*

For both consumers the financial aspect is a factor that plays a role but which they circumvent by dedicating a lot of time to buy on sale and find special deals on E-bay (Sofia & 8).

Group 2:

Furthermore, Henrik and Carl are consumers of avant-garde fashion but combine it with other high-end designer's items for a personalized style. They both state that they have an interest in fashion and keep up to date through reading fashion media or in Henrik's case by visiting fashion shows and show rooms.

Henrik describes his wardrobe as a mixture between street- & avant-garde fashion where he wears brands such as "*... Rick Owens, Kris van Assche, Billion Dollar Boys Club, Mastermind & Bathing Ape!*". He chooses these mainly due to their high quality, good materials as well as their level of uniqueness. Similar to the consumers of group 1, he would also categorize the designers Rick Owens & Kris van Assche as avant-garde.

In contrast to this, Carl consumes a selection of various brands that serve as tools to create different styles he can switch between. One of them is "*... a rather sophisticated style with modern style with a tight modern fit from brands such as Yves Saint Laurent, Tom Ford, Balenciaga & Dior Hommes among others. Another style I like for instance is Japanese preppy where I buy Beams, Oliver Spencer, Tom Browne & Nikolai de Etoaille.*" Carl finds the avant-garde in fashion brands like Balenciaga, which he combines with the other more elegant and classic fashion brands.

Group 3:

These three interviewees share the mutual habit of combining mass fashion like H&M, Zara and Weekday with centrepieces from high-end brands. They also share a high level of interest in fashion, that they practice by staying informed through blogs, magazines and occasional show room visits (Anna). Anna defines her style as being "*... black and simple. I buy mass fashion and combine it with avant-garde brands like Rick Owens & Alexander Wang!*"

In contrast to the former two consumer groups, who are very refined with their choice of fashion brands, these three candidates share the attitude of actually preferring to wear other brands than they currently do (more high-end and more avant-garde) if they had the financial measures. Anna states that she "*... would buy more exclusive clothes than the ones she owns now like Celine, Balenciaga & Prada, only due to the fact that the ones I want to buy are so expensive. I would buy them if I could!*"

Similarly, Louise defines her style as black and minimalistic with a silhouette that is not very feminine, where she combines brands from the mass fashion

brands with Acne & Whyred. *"If I had the means, I would wear Alexander Wang, Stella McCartney, Chloe & Celine."*

Lastly, Elin's favourite brand is the H&M owned brand Other Stories, which she chooses due to its high level of fashionability for a lower price than many of the aspired brands. *"Right now I wear a quite minimalist style. Other Stories is my favourite brand momentarily, but I am completely hooked on Rodarte, that I would wear if I had the money, as well as Alexander Wang & Comme des Garçons!"*

Concluding, what unites them is that their current styles are a compromise - a style that tries to cover up the fact that they consume mass fashion by a basic style with the uniqueness being added through the extravagant nature of selected avant-garde fashion items.

6.2 Collaboration Collections

This theme is aiming to depict the consumer's attitudes towards the design collaborations as well as the interviewees' opinion of how well the brands and products fit and complement each other. We will not look at them from the perspective of groups in this category as before as there is no need to identify group patterns in the same way.

6.2.1 General Attitude:

The general attitude towards collaborations between avant-garde designers and mainstream mass market fashion brands are very diverse. Some were positive about it in the beginning and changed their opinion after seeing the actual result of the collaboration, some thought it was a good idea all the way through, others think it does not make sense at all.

Max holds quite a positive view towards collaborations and thinks it can be a valuable tactic particularly mentioning the collaboration between his favourite designer Martin Margiela and H&M. *"I thought it was a fun thing that they collaborated with H&M, I liked the previous collaborations as well and kept track of the different collections, but never bought anything. I have always said that a collaboration with Margiela would be a dream-come-true. And then it happened. I would just go there and buy a bunch of clothes for no money at all. When it started, I was in the line in front of the store with all the others first thing in the morning. When I got in and browsed through the clothes I was disappointed. Both due to the quality and the re-editioned designs that I had already seen in store many years ago and partly even owned (like the sheep-skin coat). I ended up buying a shirt for the fun of it, but actually never really*

wore it." He also mentioned some of their earlier collaborations with shoes by Converse among others and a current with glasses by Mykita, where he concluded that it is somewhat tiring to see another collaboration (see images in Appendix 2).

Henrik has partially a different attitude towards the collaborations. He likes the idea of collaborations even if they involve avant-garde brands in general but thinks that it might be damaging for the brand if one collaborates with the core business. *"It could work if one collaborates for some products like shoes, glasses or like the Eastpak collaborations. But to create a complete collection together I think is hurtful. If Rick Owens would make his best selling leather jacket with a low-end fashion brand, that would hurt the trust of his initial clients. I therefore specifically believe Rick Owens collaboration with Adidas is bad for its brand. I think Margiela did something good by re-launching old collections, its not as damaging."* He concludes with stating that he believes collaborations and particularly their frequency nowadays are not particularly beneficial for neither sales nor awareness of the brand.

Carl is quite positive towards the collaboration, but argues that if they get to one-sided like the collaboration with Raf Simons and Eastpak (see Appendix 2), where the actual product is the same as usual but altered through a new fabric or pattern adding a touch of the designer's aesthetics, it becomes boring. Nevertheless, he thinks that *"...the collaborations are good not only for the mainstream brand but for both partners. The mass market brand compensates the designer brand financially and come a little bit closer to reaching their dream of becoming more premium as well as they might learn a thing or two from the design process. In return, the avant-garde brand strengthens its position in the market as avant-garde in relation to mass market fashion brands."* Moreover he believes that it is a good entry-level strategy for avant-garde designers to attract future customers within a younger crowd holding great purchasing power. Although he questions some collaborations like the one between Comme des Garçons and H&M due to the designer brand's already accredited status in the fashion industry, he doesn't believe that it would affect their initial customers and be hurtful for them.

Also, Elin is not too negative as she finds it interesting what they do. *"I see collaborations more as a summary of their signature items. I never buy those things though as I think it becomes boring. I f someone sees someone with a*

Margiela for H&M jacket then nobody says "Oh what a nice jacket!" but more "Look at the Margiela for H&M jacket!".

This confirms our second expert Jacob Östberg's opinion to some extent, as he argues that it doesn't need to affect the avant-garde brand very much. Out of his experience media does a great job to spread the news and the hype about the collections. He compares a brand's image to a figure ground image – such an image where you can see two different things depending on how you look at it. *"If one talks to the mass market consumers standing in line, they do not wait there to buy an H&M item, but a Lagerfeld/V&R item. If somebody would say it is H&M they would say 'No, it's a designer item!'", but for people that are customers to the real stores (Lagerfeld and V&R consumers), this is simply a marketing campaign that has nothing to do with the real brand."* Furthermore, he argues that even if the latter would consider buying a piece from the collection, they would not choose it as an alternative to the real brand, as it is not comparable. It remains a low-end mainstream item that they buy very aware of what it communicates. He furthermore believes, that the collection might not attract more customers to buy the avant-garde collections from the brand's own stores, but rather their entry-level luxury products like perfume and small things, that designers nowadays make their money from and does not damage their brand too much.

Likewise, the designers from Ubi Sunt argue that a collaboration promotes the purchasing of perfumes and likes. Nevertheless, they stress the danger and risk of losing the initial customers and the collaboration having a problematic impact on their brand perception. This is in line with the consumer Sofia's opinion of a collaboration not being too smart a move if one wants to keep the initial customers happy: *"I am not completely surprised though. After that Margiela left the brand in 2008 it has only gone downhill for them. Everything thereafter has not felt too authentic. They remained a high degree of fashionability but sold themselves out. I already stopped consuming Margiela at the time of the collaboration, but if I would still have been a customer I would have been quite irritated particularly with regards to the -re-editions. I had one of necklaces for instance. It would not have been too much fun to see others with the same one even if it sounds pretentious."* She believes Comme des Garçons did a better job at collaborating, as they designed a special collection for H&M that stood out from H&M regular collections but did not threaten the designer's own design either. The expert Åsa Myrdal Bratt agrees to Comme Des Garçons being a good example finding a successful middle course emphasizing their identity and

not adapting too much with their polka-dotted key pieces (see appendix, Image 8).

Max, being a similar experienced avant-garde consumer as Sofia, personally does not agree with this opinion, but observed two Frenchmen in the store of Maison Martin Margiela in Paris shortly after the collaboration who were discussing the outrageousness of the collaboration and how appalled they were by such a sell out, agreeing with Sofia.

Equally, Louise & Anna share this opinion. Louise states that she does not think that type of collaboration is a good idea and doesn't understand why they do it. *"I don't think they have anything to do with each other. I understand that they are reaching out to a broader target market but they share too much of their exclusivity. I also think the brands original target group will mind. I wouldn't have wanted to have bought an exclusive designer item and then see a cheap copy on a mass market consumer. I think it feels like someone poking me in the eye"* (Louise). She adds that she particularly emphasizes that the later collection feel desperate. *"A comparison is when artists join the "Melodifestivalen"³ and try to be popular but instead they just become uncool. I don't know any people that have worn the designer's items after the collaboration that didn't do it before or the other way around. But, I think the kind of people that only buy the collaboration collections do that because they would like to pretend that they were the real designer items. Another reason is the hype created around the collections."*

The luxury expert Paula agrees with this and says: *"If one wants to keep its status I have a hard time seeing that one should collaborate with mass market fashion. Then one has taken a step in another direction. I don't say that it is the wrong direction, just that it is a different direction, but one needs to be aware that one will lose the glory that surrounds a luxury piece"*. She also states that the luxury consumer that knows - the worldly luxury consumer, not the *"nouveau-riche"* one - will not want to compare himself with these consumers. *"He will move on to something else eventually for sure"*.

6.2.2 Complementarity (Small Scale vs. Big Scale)

Furthermore, all kind of collaborations are not seen in the same way by the consumers and it seems that this could be dependent on the size of the

³ *Melodifestivalen* is an annual popular and very mainstream music competition in Sweden where the winner performs at the Eurovision Song Contest

collections. There are smaller ones where only one item is being developed together or bigger ones where a complete collection is created. The avant-garde consumer Henrik is of the opinion that small collaborations like with (sun-) glasses or shoes are acceptable as long as they do not touch the designer's core business. So the co-branding strategy is only a good decision by the avant-garde brand if they do not share their expertise on those products that are crucial for their design expression and their own brand. The consumer Max agrees with this, finding the collaboration between Martin Margiela and the sunglass brand Mykita better than the big ones, as the latter category of collaborations wears out the brand.

In addition, not only the size of the collection but also the weight of the designers brand should be considered according to Ubi Sunt state: *"Co-branding with a mass market chain would definitely be more harmful for a less established avant-garde designer, mainly because they have not had the time to build up enough necessary trust capital"*.

In contrast to some consumers preferring small-scale collaborations, consumer Carl thinks as already mentioned above that big scale with avant-garde is the better choice, as it strengthens its position as avant-garde. However, it is not necessary to collaborate for already heavily established and accredited avant-garde brands like for instance Comme des Garçons whose customers are undoubtedly aware of the material differences. Nonetheless, it would not be terribly harmful for them to do it either. This theory is supported by expert Jacob maintaining that the distinction between "real" avant-garde consumers and the ones that wear co-branded H&M collections will become even bigger after design collaborations. They are faithful to their design choices and do not combine them with any others anyhow, unlike H&M collaboration consumers, who mix collections and mass market fashion brands without limits, their identity not being as easily harmed and less likely to suffer from inconsistent consumption choices. At the same time, he argues, it is also a matter of legitimizing one's price and quality. *"Brands are many time probed for the high prices they demand. Does one only pay for name on the label or is the actual product this valuable? A collaboration strengthens a brand's credibility, as the brand consequently can claim that it normally produces very high quality that really costs a lot. But actually they would love spreading their fantastic design and fashion to the world if only they could. The only way to do this though is by a collaboration with somebody that knows how to produce for a lower price. Sadly, this results in a lower*

quality as the real design is so complicated and advanced and thus if you want the real quality and high fashionability, the high price needs to be paid."

In contrast to this, our experienced consumer Sofia thinks that big collaborations mean they are selling themselves out, but is more accepting towards collaborations with sports brands for instance. *"I think it is ok to collaborate with sports brand though, it is not the same as other mass market fashion brands. Sport shoes you don't through away immediately."* Also, she thinks that *"... it is more ok to collaborate with something ugly or less well known than a super brand like H&M that markets the collection a lot. It is better as it might just be odd and thus not mainstream."* This is in line with Max's judgment that small-scale collaborations are more acceptable. He also shares Sofia's opinion that particularly sports brand collaborations do not damage the brand and are more tolerable. *"I usually check them out as they in most cases are being shown in the online stores I usually look at. Nevertheless, I never end up buying them."*

In terms of complementarity the expert Jacob argues that it is the difference in positioning that gives the brand a certain level of dynamics. They are placed far enough away from each other. *"H&M could not have made the same collaborations with Dressman (another low-end mass market fashion brand). It is interesting because they are so different!"*

Lastly, the experts & designers from Ubi Sunt argue that it all depends on the positioning of the avant-garde designer. *"If they have built their brand and identity to be excluding, it will be damaging to collaborate with mass market fashion brands, but if the designer has built his/her brand on something else, that collaborations don't necessarily need to be bad."* What could be considered here is that all consumers think about different brands or types of mass market fashion companies when they discuss complementarity. However, one should not neglect the outcome of the design in the collaboration, something our experts were very keen on discussing. Both Ubi Sunt, Jacob Östberg as well as Henrik Ugglå are of the opinion that not giving to much of one's own design is the safest. Thus, they believe the move of Margiela to offer re-editions was a smart move: *"I think it is bad to give too much from one's brand. I believe it is important with a recognition factor. I think it was smart by Margiela to re-launch old designs. In that way they do not compete with their own collections."* (Designer from Ubi Sunt)"

Similarly, Jacob states that it is a smart move to use iconic key pieces with familiar design elements, otherwise the designer brand won't be recognizable. It is not supposed to be a collaboration that is the latest trend, but a collection that is supposed to express the aesthetic core values of the designer brand. He adds that he finds the radical move of launching re-editions smart but also perceives it as a bit of a mockery. *"Now the mob gets access to the high design that the chosen ones [the avant-garde fashion consumers] is not interested in anymore."* The behaviour of consumer Max supports this, initially being positive to the collaborations but when seeing the result not too enthusiastic anymore due to frequent previous exposure of the design and partially owning some of the real pieces already.

6.2.3 Personal Preferences in Collaborations

Something that we consider important to portray is how people consume besides their opinions about it. Some of the consumers, although referring to collaborations as *sell-outs* or *irritating* are still not revolting against the brand in case it is their favourite who is collaborating. This is why we try to depict the consumers' personal preferences in collaborations in this section to nuance the partially very crass opinions that have been expressed in the previous parts.

Max never consumed any other collaborations but saw the "H&M x Margiela" collaborations as his dream-come-true. Although not as enthusiastic when seeing the final result, he still decided to buy an item or two just for the sake of it. Also, Sofia, being very negative towards collaborations made an exception when her favourite Rick Owens collaborated with sports brand Adidas. *"I can't be objective to him though. I actually own the sport shoes that he designed for them."*

Similarly, Louise bought a piece during the Stella McCartney collaborations with H&M. She is generally a big supporter of her design and did not buy anything of the other collaborations, as she does not find the idea good at all as stated above. *"I did not buy any of her clothes before the collaborations due to their high price; and neither afterwards for the same reason. But I would if I could!"*

6.3 Identity

The motivation for dressing in a certain way was discussed with the interviewees in order to explore the relation to identity. As Sofia expressed, many of the clients of these kinds of garments out of her experience are artists, architects

or other players in the creative industry. There one could see a pattern of the customers wanting to consolidate their position in society belonging to a certain social group. Moreover, this section covers the interviewees' consumption influencers and who they aspire to look like in order to depict their frame of reference to the reader.

Louise wears certain brands and a certain type of fashion to express her identity she says. Her look is very thought-out and inspired by fashion portrayed in media. She is also very concerned with other people's fashion choices and adds, that her consumption choices are many times inspired by the people around her. Similarly, Anna states: *"People around me influence my choices of consumption and people whose style I respect. I know both family members and friends that really influence me. I get inspiration from people I see when I am travelling and fashion shows."*

Contrarily, Elin gets inspiration from all kind of things. *"It can be from vintage pictures I have seen, or shops, magazines or celebrities I follow on Instagram. I also get inspiration from things around me. I follow Alexandra Spencer on Instagram. She has probably affected me. She is very sophisticated and sexy, like I would like to look like."* She aspires certain celebrities' taste, style and identity. The use of social media as a tool to distribute style and identity is a topic the expert Paula von Wachenfeldt researches a lot about momentarily. She emphasizes that *"social media, ... , has a big roll today as an agent communicating luxury to the individual."*

Carl does not explicitly mention social media like Instagram, but explains that he gets inspiration from movies and fashion magazines, as well as blogs and from browsing stores. He is not aspiring to belong to a certain group as much as he is trying to express his different states of being. *"Yes, I am wearing clothes to express my personality. The different styles are for the different moods I am in. It's a lot about mood."* He also talks about the easy accessibility to reach a high level of fashionability. *"Everybody can reach that status. There is so much to choose from nowadays. Especially for guys something is starting to happen at the moment. Then of course some people are more interested than others, which influences it as well."*

In contrast to the other consumers, Henrik assures that he does not experience that he is influenced by anyone in his consumption choices. *"I just wear what I like. I get inspiration from travelling, and how people dress themselves in*

different places. Sometimes also magazines and social media." In a way, this consumer claims that he aims to create an identity independently from others to be unique. Nonetheless, the places he frequents and looks up for inspiration most likely still influence his consumption choices whether it is subconsciously or not. The avant-garde consumer Sofia has a similar attitude when it comes to feeling that she tries to distance herself from trends and her surroundings choices although, although she does not mix designers. Her consumption choices are in the end not affected by media or her surrounding, but only by the one designer she has chosen to wear. *"I also get affected by trends today and get an ephemeral idea of what is nice. I think a lot of things are nice. But, I have to constrain myself sometimes though because I have chosen to only wear Rick Owens. It would be so much more complicated otherwise. Like this I cannot do too much wrong and think about how I dress. I am not too interested in a personal style."*

Lastly, Max's approach to his clothing is much more pragmatic than conceptual as some other avant-garde wearers. He also thinks *".. it is fun to wear something that only I know about and has little hidden details. I have found confidence in more expensive clothes and it feels easier somehow and as I developed in wage I also had the financial means to buy the ones I wanted. I don't have any friends with the same kind of interest for fashion, so mostly people don't know the brands that I wear. Of course I tell them when they ask me."* He knows the difference between regular high-end fashion and the kind of fashion he has committed to like the concept of deconstruction. Nevertheless, he does not see Margiela as very extreme, at least not the men's collection. It is not necessarily to be avant-garde that he consumes Maison Martin Margiela; he just happens to like the style.

6.4 Avant-Garde vs. Mainstream

The aim of this section is to depict how the interviewees reason around avant-garde and mainstream. Their associations with the avant-garde range from everything such as materials to the conceptual idea behind the garment.

Some consumers associate avant-garde with uniqueness and high quality the opposite being mainstream. Louise for instance says that what she associates with the fashion avant-garde is *"..a conscious wearer. I also associate it with better quality, expensive and exclusive - more daring."* Similarly, Elin associates it with people wanting to express something specific and original with their fashion. *"The people want to communicate something with their clothes."* Also Anna and Henrik share this mind set to some extent. Anna

associates "... a more daring and distinguished style with avant-garde and a higher consciousness. Sometimes avant-garde consumers even seem pretentious, like they do not understand "normal" fashion." Henrik says: "I associate avant-garde with high quality, uniqueness and better materials."

In contrast to this, Carl stresses the importance of a certain kind of style and consequence in one's look: "For me avant-garde demands that one wears clothes of one particular style. It is not really possible to combine Rick Owens with cigarette-pants [a tight fit model of pants] from Gucci. It requires that one combines them with the same brand. You can often see it in the shop windows. They combine and style looks with a limited number of designers (mostly the same). "

What is noticeable is that these consumers all seem to associate avant-garde with the wearer rather than the designer in contrast to Sofia who refers to the designers and brands instead. She stresses the importance of the avant-garde era in the 90's and the movement that started in Antwerp during that time: "Avant-garde is not what it used to be. The most important era was the 90's with the Antwerp 6 and it was inspired by politics a lot. Today it is not as extreme anymore. The development in the future is probably that male and female are more flowing and less divided. Gender neutral clothes are even starting to spread among celebrities (Kanye West!)"

The designers from Ubi Sunt are also aware of the avant-garde era in the 90s but contrary to the other consumers feel that there is no actual avant-garde as such today. "Avant-garde today is more the trend of a certain style that a small group of designers have caught on to like Rick Owens, Damir Doma etc."

The avant-garde seem to be subject to different definitions among the consumers in contrast to mainstream, which is unanimously associated with seasonal trends and short durability of both the materials as well as the fashions. Carl for instance states that, "I associate with mainstream fashion that there is not so much personal identity involved. They just follow others. They want to follow trends that fashion magazines are filled with, trends that Lanvin & Prada have created." Similarly, Sofia associates mainstream fashion with certain brands and followers of trends: "Mass fashion is H&M, Zara, Uniqlo & Target - big companies with a certain level of price. Also mass fashion often has a high level of fashionability/connected to trends." Henrik particularly emphasizes the limited assortment of original clothing within mainstream fashion, particularly

male fashion. Anna in turn stresses the bad quality and durability she associates with the mainstream. *"Many times already after wearing them for a short time the material of the clothes seems worn out. I associate it to fast fashion and sales."* Furthermore, Louise stresses the fact that the mainstream style is easily replicable: *"I associate it with the risk of running into people that wear the same stuff. Also that the clothes have a really short life cycle. I wear them for a really short period of time. That leads to a high flow of things and they have to renew themselves much faster than high fashion needs to do. All this triggers consumption and decreases focus on quality."*

Concluding, the understanding of mainstream does not seem to be as difficult and is from these consumers perspective mostly associated with the actual garments and their characteristics, not like the avant-garde where its meaning seems to be considered a lot more.

7 ANALYSIS

To find out if the consumers' and experts' statements are in line with the proposed model, the following chapter will deal with the matching and comparison of our findings and the theoretical framework. The complementarity and the fit between the brands will be looked upon in order to determine the direct or indirect effects on consumer perception of the avant-garde fashion brand. The second part considers whether the identity of the avant-garde fashion brand is intact or altered, how this effect is moderated by the level of fit, and what impact it has on consumer perception. With those effects we aim to explore the indirect effects the fit of the two contradictive brands have on the consumer's perception. Lastly, consumer perception effects originating from increased reach and an extended target market are discussed, as well to what extent and how this is related to the degree of fit. Finally, this chapter aims to answer the questions posed after the theoretical framework, in order to evaluate the strength of the theoretical framework.

7.1 Moderator: The Level of Fit Between Products and Brands

Theories on co-branding suggest that a higher level of fit between the partnering brands and their products improves the probability for a successful co-branding (Aaker & Keller, 1990). This in turn results in enhanced consumer perception of both the brand alliance and the partnering brands (Park et al, 1996). Similarly, theories find support for a modest degree of complementarity increasing this level of fit, indicating that collaborations between avant-garde designers and mainstream clothing retailers would result in positive consumer reactions since the brands complement each other (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Mandler, 1982). However, this study's empirical findings indicate ambiguous effects on consumer perception. One part of the interviewed consumers had a positive attitude towards collaborations between the two categories of brands, while another part had an initial positive attitude towards them that changed after the collection launched. There was also a third part that did not believe that the collaborations made any sense at all. Could the level of fit between the products and brands despite the ambiguous outcome still have explanatory power?

7.1.1 Simply a Style or a Fundamental Concept of Fashion?

According to our interviewees, consumers that were more positive towards collaborations had a different perception of what defined and characterized avant-garde fashion, compared to what consumers with a more negative attitude

had. Consumers with a negative posture many times thought of avant-garde to be conceptual and ground-breaking, where the designers' philosophy behind their design is a fundamental. This differs from more positive consumers who associate avant-garde fashion with unique style, high quality and extravagant design rather than an underlying ground-breaking concept. These diverse definitions and views of avant-garde fashion could cause the different perceptions of complementarity and fit between the products and brands in a collaboration. The empirics show that the less conceptual and more style related perception the consumer has of avant-garde the more likely the consumer agrees with a higher level of complementarity between the two brands. The expert Åsa Myrdal Bratt supports this view by explaining that this is actually not too different from the process of combining brands when choosing a daily outfit, where they are put together to one unified look. In contrast, the more radical and conceptual perception on avant-garde the less do they find the two brands to be complementary as for them it is not simply a question of style but of a fundamental approach to the concept of fashion. Sreejesh (2012) argues that extremely incongruent partner brands may decrease the fit between the partnering brands and by this impair consumer perception of the co-branding. If the consumers with a more radical perception of avant-garde find the avant-garde designer and the mass-market fashion brand to be extremely incongruent it could therefore decrease the level of fit, which might assist in explaining their negative perception of the collaborations. This may imply that the consumers with a negative attitude towards the collaboration believe the partnering brands to be too different, whereas the positive consumers perceive them as moderately complementary.

7.1.2 Niched Product Co-Branding vs. Sizable Collaborative Collections

When determining the level of complementarity and fit, one key dimension is how the partnering brands fit together on a brand image level (Keller, 2008). The empirics indicate that the mass-market partner brand and its respective characteristics impact the consumer perception of and attitude towards both the collaboration and the avant-garde designer brand, where brand image according to the interviewed consumers very often it seems to be connected with the size and selected niche of the brand. As stated, consumers with a more negative attitude towards the studied type of collaborations generally thought of avant-garde to be a ground-breaking philosophy on fashion. Following, the findings illustrate that some of these consumers had a more positive outlook on avant-garde designers collaborating with mainstream clothing brands when the partner brand

was smaller or more niched. As one consumer stated: *"I think it is ok to collaborate with sports brand though, it is not the same as other mass market fashion brands. Also, sport shoes you don't throw away immediately like other mainstream fashion items."* Furthermore the consumer argues that *".. it is more ok to collaborate with something ugly or less well known than a super brand like H&M that markets the collection a lot. It is better as it might just be odd and thus not mainstream."* Thus the findings indicate that a niched mainstream partner brand seemed to generate more positive attitudes among parts of the consumers. A niched mainstream partner has a limited size of product ranges and also a smaller target group, which is a decisive characteristic for an avant-garde fashion brand to maintain as argued in previous section. Consumers valuing the conceptual attribute of avant-garde fashion may believe the avant-garde designer's image to be less compatible with a broad mass market brand's than with a smaller more niched one's. Thus, the choice of a collaboration partner subject matching these criteria might be a safer choice, given the avant-garde brand shares those values and aims to maintain its status among the avant-garde consumers.

7.1.3 A Matter of Design

Besides fit on a brand level, the second key dimension in determining an overall fit is argued to be fit on a product level (Keller, 2008). In the conducted study, some consumers stressed that they believed that smaller collaborations, for example based on only accessories or shoes, would not impact the consumer attitude negatively, while larger ones tended to wear out the avant-garde designer brand and impair consumer perception. Furthermore, results support that the design of the collaboration collection impacts consumer perception. Several experts stress that the avant-garde designer should not give too much of its design's expression to the collaboration, and a consumer similarly argues that giving away the designer's core design harms consumer perception. *"If Rick Owens would make his best selling leather jacket with a low-end fashion brand, that would hurt the trust of his initial clients."* . The design execution of the collaboration was also referred to when discussing product category fit. It seems to be linked with how the consumer's perceive the complementarity and fit of the products and consequently their attitude towards the collaboration. However, there is a fine line between the right level of the avant-garde designer's core design elements and too little or too much. Empirics show that if the avant-garde designer gives away too little of his design's expression, consumers may believe the collaboration to be boring, as in the case when a

designer solely lends the mass market brand its pattern or fabric. Ubi Sunt's statement summarizes these findings, stating it to be "bad to lend too much of one's design expression to the other brand. I [Ubi Sunt's founder] believe it is of importance to keep a recognition factor. I think it was smart by Margiela to re-launch old designs. In that way they do not compete with their own collections." The most positive effect on consumer perception would thus come from a smaller collaboration collection with a recognizable, but not exhaustive, level of design expression within a product category that doesn't necessarily compete with one's own. However, among consumers with a more conceptual definition of avant-garde fashion the level of compatibility between avant-garde design and mass market design seemed to be very small making it hard to merge the respective design expressions. Only few designers, where a popular example is the collaboration of Comme des Garçons for H&M (Åsa Myrdal Bratt) actually managed without it becoming boring as in the case of Eastpak according to Ubi Sunt. This indicates that on a product level the avant-garde and mainstream design might not be very complementary nor do they fit together as they are almost impossible to fuse without the one or the other dominating either threatening to make one's own design less distinct or outwear one's brand name. Margiela tried to solve it with a re-edition of old designs, others lend their names and a pattern.

7.1.4 Can You Forgive Your Favourite Designer for a Temporary Escapade?

Overall, the empirics support that complementarity on both brand and product level is important for the resulting consumer perception, and that important factors to consider is the size and design expression of the collaboration collection as well as the type of mainstream partner brand. Moreover, the findings indicate that how consumers perceive the complementarity and fit between the partner brands is highly subjective, and dependent on their relation to and definition of fashion and avant-garde. What is left to be explained is the personal bias that the empirics find support for. Personal preferences seem to have a superior impact on the consumer perception, and especially on their purchasing decision. A consumer whose outlook on collaborations was very negative made an exception when her favourite avant-garde designer collaborated with Adidas: "I can't be objective to him though. I actually own the sport shoes that he designed for them." These findings indicate that the consumer perception is not always aligned with the purchasing decision and subject to a personal preference bias.

7.2 Effect: Altered Identity of Avant-Garde Fashion Brand

7.2.1 *The Dangers of Spillover Effects*

Research on co-branding indicates that a consequence of collaborations is the spillover effect influencing the brands' perceived identities (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). Each of the partnering brands is affected by spillover effects from the other brand as well as from the alliance itself. However, the strength of these effects are dependent on how well-known and reputed the brand is (Simonin & Ruth, 1998). The spillover effects are further dependent on the brands' positions in the alliance. Secondary brands take on the role as a licensor, while the primary brand is mainly responsible for the marketing (Leuthesser et al, 2003). Theory on the area suggests that secondary brands experience weaker spillover effects since consumers are able to distinguish between the partner brands and identify the primary brand as principally responsible for the co-branding (Washburn et al, 2000). The conducted study finds support for the varying power and impact of the spillover effects. As Ubi Sunt states: "*Co-branding with a mass market chain would definitely be more harmful for a less established avant-garde designer, mainly because they have not had the time to build up enough necessary trust capital*". As for the effects on more accredited avant-garde designers, several consumers declare that they do not believe collaborations with mainstream clothing brands to cause major negative spillover on the brand that impact the percept of the avant-garde designer's original customers. These results do not clarify whether the avant-garde designer's position as a secondary partner dampen the spillover effects, but are in line with theory regarding the strength and familiarity of the brand being decisive factors in steering the direction of the spillover effects. Thus the empirics indicate that avant-garde newcomers with low brand equity expose themselves to greater risks when collaborating with mainstream clothing brands, compared to what high equity avant-garde brands do. These risks plausibly consist of stronger spillover effects from an alliance with a low end mainstream fashion brand than less established brands are likely to face.

7.2.2 *Emotional Branding & the Doppelgänger Effect*

Although the risks of negative spillover effects are smaller for reputed and established avant-garde designers, also weak spillover effects could potentially harm the designer brands given, as fashion brands usually are, they are relying on emotional branding strategies. These risks are based on the nature of emotional branding which causes the brand image to be closely connected with a

certain consumer group (Roberts, 2004), and partly not under control by the brand itself (Thomson et al, 2006). The potential harm could arise due to the emergence of a Doppelgänger effect, where several derogatory images about the brand circulate simultaneously (Thomson et al, 2006). The result of the study point to the presence of the coexistence of several brand images. As Östberg explains: *"If one talks to the mass market consumers standing in line, they do not wait there to buy an H&M item, but a Lagerfeld/V&R item. If somebody would say it is H&M they would say 'No!', but for people that are customers to their real stores (Lagerfeld and V&R consumers), this is simply a campaign that has nothing to do with the real brand."* This could imply that different consumer groups have non-matching ideas of the avant-garde designer's image and meaning. It could further suggest that disparaging images of the designer circulates within one or several consumer groups. The avant-garde designer's original consumer group appears to have a different view of the designer compared to what the consumer group queuing for the collaboration collection has. Could the original consumer group be offended by and think differently about the avant-garde designer offering its design to the masses? Or will the collaboration not result in changed perceptions? Dependent on the type of images circulating in any of the other consumer groups, a Doppelgänger effect can challenge a brand's perceived authenticity. As one previous consumer of Martin Margiela states about the designer's collaboration with H&M: *"I am not completely surprised though. After that Margiela left the brand in 2008 it has only gone downhill for them. Everything thereafter has not felt too authentic. They remained a high degree of fashionability but sold themselves out."* The lost authenticity may be a result of a present Doppelgänger effect in Martin Margiela's case. Whether it is caused from the designer's collaboration with mass market H&M alone, or if it is a result of this in combination with other marketing activities is not clarified by the empirics. However, the study finds some support for that collaborations with a mainstream clothing brand exposes the avant-garde designer to risks related to authenticity and thus the perceived identity of the brand, even if they are established avant-garde fashion brands recognised as such by the market.

7.2.3 Associations with the Mainstream – Fatal or Not That Bad?

Looking from an identity consumption perspective, the study shows some support for risks due to associating the avant-garde brand with the mainstream. These risks are related to the previously discussed spillover effects; however the identity consumption perspective complements general co-branding theory. Some

consumers believe that the combination of avant-garde and mainstream having a low level of fit will change the avant-garde brand's identity by associating it with the mainstream, the opposite of avant-garde (Bourdieu, 1975). From a fashion theory perspective the process of a brand becoming more mainstream means that the design becomes more accessible not only in terms of distribution and lower price, but by what the brand communicates as well as the level of design complexity it expresses. This is a decisive factor that influences the choice to continue the consumption of a fashion brand. The empirics support this where a consumer states that he has found his favorite avant-garde brand to become less innovative and that it seems to have started copying itself. *"Maybe I should look around a little bit more and look at some other things. I might be a little obsessed and stuck."* Thus, the study finds support for spillover effects consisting of mainstream associations, which are harmful for the avant-garde brand.

7.2.4 The Influence of Increased Awareness

Based on the findings, it is likely that it is not only the accessibility of the fashion through reduced design complexity but foremost the spread of the design to an increased amount of people that has an effect on the identity of the brand. The interviewees explicitly expressed that they condemn the fashion when being worn by many people, being offered for a lower price and thus losing its status of uniqueness. One interviewed consumer shows a clear consumption pattern of moving on when the brand does not hold its status anymore, replacing her entire wardrobe with a new designer. Particularly in the case of Margiela she feels that she would be very annoyed to see somebody wearing a copy of the necklace she owns and paid a lot for when she was still wearing Margiela. It would not communicate the avant-garde factor it used to when being reproduced so many times and sold co-branded by a mass market fashion brand. Similarly, one consumer would feel like *"somebody poked her in the eye"* when wearing something somebody else got for a tenth of the price she paid. What seems to be the main issue here is that the distinction, which is crucial in order to communicate belonging to a certain kind of group (the avant-garde group), is eliminated if the brand inherits a rather mainstream and accessible identity. Consequently, the high level of status can be reduced by the increased accessibility and thus the brand loses in value and position in the eyes of the consumers.

7.2.5 Complementarity Is Key

Overall, the empirics find support for that there are several risks exposed to the avant-garde designer originating from that its brand identity is affected by the collaboration and the fit between the partnering brands in several ways. The study's findings indicate that spillover effects cause the avant-garde brand to be associated to mainstream fashion, negatively influencing the perceived brand identity of the avant-garde designer. Moreover, the study finds support for that the avant-garde designer's changed brand identity is dependent on the increased accessibility of the designs, lowering the avant-garde designer's high level of status. Regarding the strength of the effects on brand identity, support is found for that more established and reputed avant-garde designers are less impacted by the spillover effects, and the risks these brands are exposed to are thus weaker. Nevertheless, even weak spillover effects could give rise to a destructive Doppelgänger effect, however the empirics do not shed light on whether the reason for this is limited to collaborations or under the impact of other marketing activities.

In line with the research model, one may argue that the effects regarding how and to what extent spillover effects impact the avant-garde designer is moderated by the fit between products and brands. When there is a high perceived level of fit, the collaboration is not likely to weaken the avant-garde brand's identity. As discussed previously, the consumers' subjective view and definition of avant-garde fashion seem to impact the level of fit between the partnering brands, as well as the size and design expression of the collaboration collection and how niched the mass-market partner brand is. Following, in cases where consumers perceive the fit between the collaboration partners to be high, the expected effects on brand identity are found to be more positive compared to for consumers perceiving the fit to be low. When there is a lower degree of fit, the empirics indicate negative spillover effects to be probable, harming the avant-garde designer's brand identity and possibly contributing to the risk of a Doppelgänger brand image.

7.3 Effect: Increased Reach and Target Market

7.3.1 The Benefits of Complementary Target Markets

Designer collaborations have the potential to extend each of the partnering brand's reach and their target market. Following, researchers within the field argue that co-branding may be advantageous for the allying brands since it can result in an increased awareness among potential consumers (Blackett & Boad,

1998). The effects are further dependent on the complementarity of the partnering brands customer bases (Leuthesser et al, 2003). If both brands' current target market could be attractive for the other brand as either future potential customers or a new market that has not been targeted yet for different reasons, they would qualify as being complementary. The interviewee's expressed unanimous opinions regarding the effects of the increased awareness. Part of the empirical findings among both experts and consumers indicate that the avant-garde fashion brand's positioning is strengthened from a collaboration with a mainstream clothing retailer as more consumers become aware of its existence. These interviewees' reasoning is based on that the avant-garde designer's position becomes further distinguished and the brand more reputable. One consumer argues that *"In return [from the collaboration] the avant-garde brand strengthens its positioning on the market in relation to mass market fashion brands."* The findings suggest that the extended target market results in increased awareness about the avant-garde brand among consumers, and subsequently a clarified positioning on the market. This part of the results consequently supports the theories pointing to the possible gains from increased awareness in terms of consumer perception.

Other consumers argued that the collaborations were of no value in terms of increased awareness since *"Those people that are interested after a collaboration do not have enough money anyways."* (Sofia) The experts suggest on the contrary that the collaborations are a good entry-level strategy for avant-garde designers to market themselves. Consumers with less purchasing power are still able to consume entry-level products such as perfumes and accessories, which are of great value to the avant-garde designer since these product categories many times constitute their main source of income. The designers from Ubi Sunt agree with this, further adding that a collaboration might attract buyers that in the future will hold sufficient purchasing power to consume the brand's main collection. Thus, the findings support the research conducted within co-branding indicating that increased awareness as a result of a collaboration potentially leads to positive results in terms of attracting new potential customers.

7.3.2 *The End of the Avant-Garde?*

Although the findings and theory discussed above would indicate positive consequences of brand collaborations in terms of awareness, several consumers argue for the opposite. The spread and increased awareness could have fatal

consequences for an avant-garde fashion brand, given the fact that their status to some extent is built on their exclusive and pioneering position in the market. The combination of brands in terms of complementarity is critical for the outcome, where a niched mass-market fashion brand could reduce the risks that the avant-garde brand is exposed to. If an avant-garde brand were to collaborate with a mass-market fashion brand with an extensive target market the brand might risk losing its status due to the increased accessibility, which according to Simmel (1905) can result in the consumers subsequently moving on to new brands that are more exciting and exclusive. According to the findings one of the more dedicated consumers have a tendency to do this periodically, moving on to a new designer brand whom she commits to as long as the design qualifies for the aspired identity she wants to communicate with her dressing - "avant-garde". The behaviour can be explained by Simmel's (1905) theory of distinction and imitation in fashion, where the constant movement is a way to keep one's distinct position when being copied by others. Some do this faster than others. In the case of Margiela one consumer stated that he perceived the brand, after a long time as an avant-garde designer, to have started copying itself and stagnated both in its design expression as well as in other levels of innovation. These behavioural patterns are naturally applicable also for other kinds of high-end fashion brands that are trying to distinguish themselves from the masses and communicate exclusivity, not only the avant-garde. This behaviour is however particularly problematic for a brand whose image is built on their position as avant-garde - cutting-edge and pioneering. According to Bishop (2007), as soon as the avant-garde is successful and becomes the new establishment "*... it engenders its own opposition: another avant-garde which, in turn, seeks to destroy and replace it.*". In other words, once the avant-garde reaches a broader group and establishes itself within it, there is no way to return to the status of avant-garde. As the concept is fundamental to the brand identity a displacement towards a broader target group along the positioning map will have consequences. Our findings are also in line with Bourdieu's (1984) supposition that the avant-garde and mainstream co-exist, and do not exist without each other (Rocamora, 2002). Fusing the two opposites will thus eliminate both sides, which might be an advantage for the mainstream fashion brand getting more credibility as a player in the field, but less of an advantage for the avant-garde brand.

Overall, collaborations with mass-market fashion brands could come with benefits for the avant-garde brand from increased awareness in terms of a strengthened

positioning as well as an extended customer base. Nevertheless, findings also support fashion theory on the fact that mass-market fashion brand partners with large customer bases will jeopardise the avant-garde brand's position as avant-garde possibly leading to the extinction of the brand as it is today; in case the collaboration is not conducted with a partner brand smaller in size. Regardless of their stated opinions, the actual consumption behaviour of the consumers - rejecting Margiela's collaboration with the mainstream brand H&M and accepting Rick Owens one-product-project with sports brand Adidas - support these findings. The niched mass-market fashion brand reaches a more limited group of consumers and thus does not cause the discussed negative consequences to the same extent as a less niched collaboration partner. The complementarity and fit further moderate the effects of the extended reach, since a less established and reputed avant-garde brand is likely to experience stronger effects.

7.4 Evaluation of Model and Potential Alterations/Extensions

This section serves as final discussion and an evaluation of how well the research model explained the empirics. The aim of the research model was to answer the questions posed subsequent to the theoretical framework, which will be commented on as well by a short summary of the above and a suggestion of a potential alteration of the model will be presented.

Firstly, the study aimed to find out whether complementarity and fit between the partnering brands influence the consumer perception of the avant-garde brand after a collaboration with a mass-market brand. As general branding theory suggests, complementarity and fit are critical factors in brand alliances, particularly in the fashion industry. The perception of good fit between the two brands seems to be highly subjective according to the findings. Fit can be looked at both on brand level as well as on product level, where the different perception of the meaning of avant-garde fashion influenced the way the consumers experienced a good fit on the two levels. On a brand level, consumers associating avant-garde fashion with ground-breaking innovation had a harder time seeing a mainstream partner brand as a good fit in contrast to consumers associating with eccentric style, where a collaborative collection would not be as problematic. Some consumers even questioned the existence of fashion avant-garde today in the same sense as in its beginning during the 80s. The designers from Ubi Sunt, suggested that *"Avant-garde today is more the trend of a certain style that a small group of designers have caught on to like Rick Owens, Damir*

Doma etc.” Complementarity was also related to size of the partnering brands, where the risks associated to a collaboration with a niched mass-market fashion brand were perceived as being reduced. The extent also matters on a product level, where the findings indicate the importance of what the design expression and scope of the collaboration collection. The research model assists in explaining the empirics although one could argue that the perceived fit of the two partnering brands could have a direct impact on consumer perception, besides indirectly influencing the consumer perception through the brand identity and the increased reach.

The research model further intended to explore in what way the association with the mass-market fashion brand will alter the high-end avant-garde brand’s identity and the resulting consumer perception. The study finds support, in line with the research model, for the fit between the brands being an influence on the avant-garde brand’s identity and the resulting consumer perception. The opinions on in what way the identity is changed indicate different strengths of the effects, but pointing to that collaborations have a mainstreaming effect to the avant-garde brand with negative effects on it in terms of continued consumption. Furthermore the discussed theory of spillover effects, also moderating the strength of the effects on brand identity, seems applicable as well as the potential consequences of a Doppelgänger effect. What the model did not take into account earlier was the possible influence of the increased reach on identity, which is a factor that should be considered to be added to the framework.

Lastly, the model meant to find out to whether the increased spread of the avant-garde brand affects the brand’s status from a consumer perspective. The findings can be explained by the research model to some extent, where particularly the fatal consequences depicted by fashion theory were in line with what the empirics found support for. Increased awareness does not necessarily lead to more customers but can be beneficial in terms of attracting consumers for entry-level products. Some also agree with that a collaboration might strengthen the position. Nevertheless, the empirics mainly supported theories on increased awareness and accessibility making consumers moving on to new brands, continuously striving for distinction. The increased awareness and accessibility of the avant-garde design therefore influences the identity of the brand becoming more mainstream due to the easier and more spread access of the design. This is both problematic for the brand in terms of losing its brand position but also a threat to avant-garde being eliminated. The empirics give reason to

believe that the two fields of fashion cannot be fused, only co-exist. Based on this, some alterations could be suggested for the theoretical model, namely adding the impact the increased reach has on identity as well as consumer perception as can be seen in the revised model below:

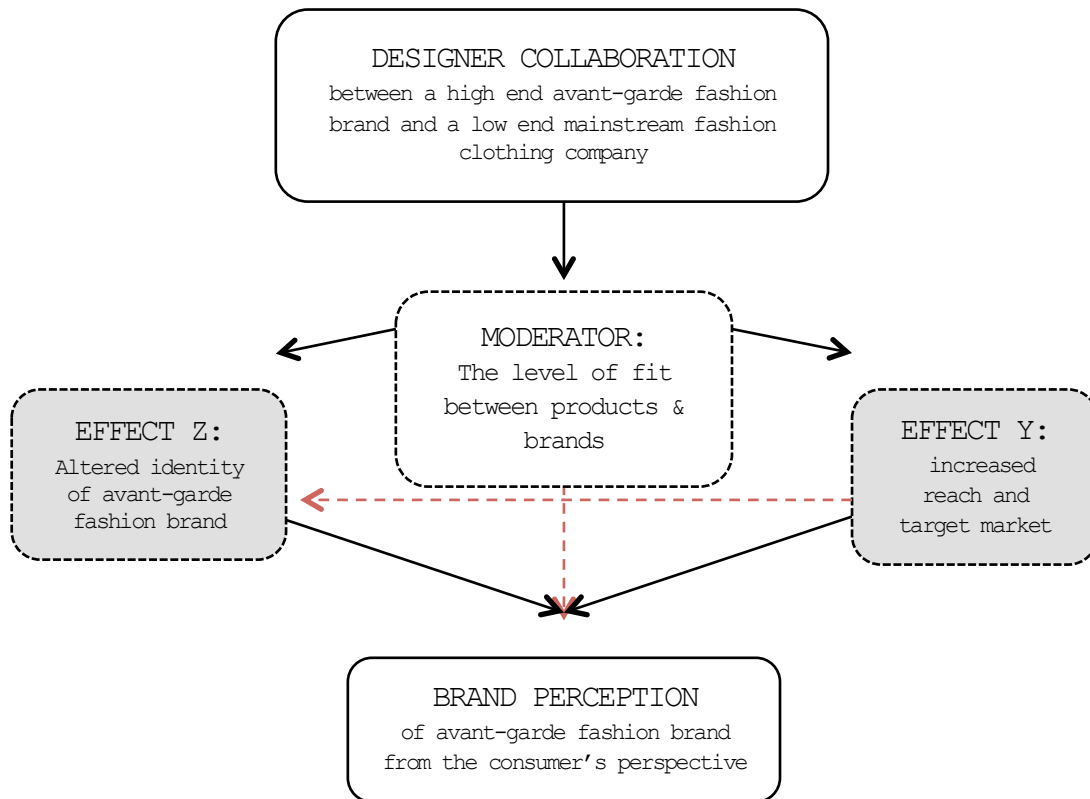


Figure 3; *The theoretical framework revised*

All in all, the findings support the study's assumption of that fashion theory is a useful addition to branding theory when creating strategies such as brand collaborations for avant-garde designers. Although our findings are not explicitly unsupportive for potential collaborations between avant-garde brands and low-end mass-market fashion brands, the findings indicate that there are several things that could be useful to consider in order to control the outcome and hedge against insecurities and risks.

8 CONCLUSION

30 years ago a collaboration between a high-end fashion brand and a low-end mainstream fashion company was unthinkable, today collaborations seem like an essential tool in order to brand one's creative expression in the jungle of fashion designers and spread the word to the masses. Everyone along the spectrum of fashion - from avant-garde to mainstream - are jumping on the train, however with uncertain consequences for the designers.

This study explores whether the contradictory nature of the partner brands affects the image of the avant-gardist designer brand, and more specifically, how the avant-garde fashion consumers perceive the brand after the collaboration. The study is relevant, as previous research has mostly been conducted from the perspective of the low-end mass-market brand, whose aspirations are to reach-up and gain credibility as a fashion brand. Furthermore, research that has been conducted so far mainly takes into account general branding theory, not specifically theory regarding the fashion industry. This is why this study complemented branding theory by incorporating sociological research on the development of fashion in order to explore and understand the ambiguous results the different collaborations have had.

The theoretical model has been built on combining the two research areas where, with the help of a pre-study, different important areas were defined such as the fit between the brands, the sensitivity of the identity of the brand and products as well as the effects of an increased reach. These factors were explored through a multiple case study with consumers and experts to find out more about the consumer perception of the different fashion brands they consume after collaborations.

The study is not limited to shed light on effects on consumer perception of avant-garde brands after collaboration with mass-market brands, but also relevant in a broader sense of understanding how fashion consumption impacts branding strategy. The empirics are built on a constrained set of cases, why caution should be taken when generalizing beyond this set. With these regards, the study offers support for the following findings:

1. The level of fit between the partnering brands in a collaboration influences consumer perception of the avant-garde designer, where a higher degree of fit results in more positive attitudes. The perceived level of fit is affected by consumers' subjective perception and definition of

avant-garde fashion, as well as by the scope and design expression of the collaboration collection, and how niched the mass-market partner brand is.

2. The avant-garde brand's identity is exposed to risks related to spillover effects when collaborating with mainstream mass-market fashion brands. The association to mainstream causes in some cases the avant-garde brand to be subject for a mainstreaming effect, harming the avant-garde brand's status. The strength of the spillover effects is likely to, in line with general co-branding theory, be dependent on how established and well-reputed the avant-garde brand is, where a well-known and well-reputed brand is exposed to weaker effects.
3. The extended spread, as a consequence of a collaboration, has unanimous effects on the avant-garde brand and its status. The increased awareness has significant potential to enlarge the customer base, even though the extension may lead to new consumers of entry-level products. Risks with the increased accessibility of the avant-garde design concern the fashion brand's status as avant-garde, risking to lose its pioneering position as a very established avant-garde brand will sooner or later be replaced by a new avant-garde.

To conclude, support is found for that the contradictive nature of the partner brands affect the perception of the high-end avant-garde designer. The study indicates that there are risks concerning consumer perception of the avant-garde brand, which according to the study's findings should be considered in the case of a collaboration between an avant-garde designer and a mass-market fashion brand. In any case, the risks might not add up to compete with the high monetary compensation the avant-garde brand often is offered. However, on the other hand - although the worth of a brand is hard to put in numbers - what *is* a piece of clothing without a brand?

9 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The conducted study, its results and conclusions have been presented in the previous chapters. The question remains how and to what extent these results and conclusions could be relevant to practitioners and future research? These questions are discussed in this chapter, together with managerial implications and suggestions for how the results are applicable to managers and researchers.

9.1 Managerial Implications

The study's results might have some implications for managers of avant-garde designer brands who are involved in setting and implementing marketing strategies and activities. These managers are most likely to encounter situations where the avant-garde designer brand is offered or planning to engage in a design collaboration with a mass market brand, and here the research may assist in strengthening the grounds for their decision-making. More explicitly, the research has explored effects on consumer perception originating from this type of collaborations, which are important for the avant-garde designer brand to take into account when considering a collaboration. It might be useful to not only consider the avant-garde brand as any fashion brand but actually take into account its unique status and position that might be at risk to change in case of a unsuitable collaboration according to our findings. The identified effects on consumer perception are critical for managers to regard, especially since the significant financial compensation that often comes with the collaboration could decrease the avant-garde designer brand's incentive to thoroughly evaluate the expected outcome of a collaboration. The study can be used by these managers in order to identify this type of collaboration's potential effects on consumer perception, which in some cases may expose the avant-garde designer brand to risk.

The study might also be relevant for practitioners outside the fashion industry, where similar notions and behavioural patterns compose the driving forces of the market, although this can be discussed. Industries with similar values and beliefs, such as the interior design branch are mostly adapting to the developments of fashion with a slight delay. Also, fashion is not only limited to clothes, but can be extended to many lifestyle brands, making this study relevant for a wider set of markets as long as they the main question is how to

combine a brand based on an artistry and progressiveness with the mainstream. Lastly, the problematic between avant-garde and mainstream could be transferred to "old money" versus the "new bourgeoisie" (Paula von Wachenfeldt, luxury expert). Similar to the avant-garde, the classic way of consuming luxury depended a lot on knowledge and instinctive feeling for what is right in contrast to the newer consumption, where conspicuousness and profit are in the foreground.

9.2 Suggestions for Future Research

The conducted research was based on qualitative research strategy. The qualitative research, known for its limitations in terms of generalizability, would benefit from being complemented with quantitative research aiming to quantify the suggested effects on consumer perception. Quantitative studies would, apart from defining the generalizability of the findings, also assist in making the results more robust.

Furthermore, the theoretical framework, being based on two extensive research areas, was well suited for the exploratory orientation of the study. However, the study's revealed and identified findings shed light on various more narrow research areas, which all could benefit from further research. For example, there exists no unanimous definition of avant-garde and it would be interesting to look further into this subject since it highly affects the studied phenomenon. Moreover, it would be of interest to explore if and how consumer perception is affected by the studied collaborations on markets apart from the Swedish. Other markets and cultures are associated with fashion and particularly avant-garde fashion having a different status, why it would be relevant for studies to focus on this.

What is more, the study's findings call for future research focusing on how the potentially changed consumer perception actually impacts the consumer purchasing intention and moreover the avant-garde designer brand's equity. The empirical findings suggest that even though consumers' general attitude towards avant-garde designers collaborating with mainstream fashion brands was mainly negative, their actual behaviour was biased from personal preferences in the cases when the avant-garde designer was a personal favourite of theirs. This subject would be very interesting for further studies and might have very relevant implications for practitioners.

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10.3 Interviews

INTERVIEWEE	INTERVIEWEE CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	PLACE	DURATION	DATE
Åsa Myrdal Bratt	Pre-Study: Expert	Lecturer at Berghts School of Communications & professional brand consultant with experience with collaborations in the fashion industry (Indiska)	Bröd och Salt, Rådmanngatan 43, Stockholm	45:41 min	2014-03-08
Henrik Ugglå	Pre-Study: Expert	Docent of branding strategy at Royal School of Technology with research background & publications the area of brand collaborations	Telefon/Expresso House Sthlm	30 min	2014-03-14
Anna	Consumer	Marketing consultant and consumer of relevant fashion brands.	Kungsgatan 6, Stockholm	43:50 min	2014-04-07
Louise	Consumer	Holds a position at Swedish fashion brand Acne. Consumer of relevant fashion brands.	Kungsgatan 6, Stockholm	48:12 min	2014-03-25
Carl	Consumer	Creative Director at advertising agency and regular consumer of relevant brands.	Sankt Eriksgatan 92, Stockholm	37:25 min	2014-04-05
Henrik	Consumer	Owner of fashion store Les Market and regular consumer of relevant brands.	Les Market office, Karlbergsvägen 82, Stockholm	51:22 min	2014-03-22
Sofia	Consumer	Architecture student, regular consumer of relevant fashion brands and sales assistant at fashion store JUS.	Karla Café, Stockholm	40:00 min	2014-03-20
Elin	Consumer	Sales assistant at fashion store Les Market and occasional consumer of relevant brands.	Les Market, Vikingagatan 18, Stockholm	39:30 min	2014-03-28
Max	Consumer	Senior Manager position with innovation and concept development at Fazer, regular consumer of relevant brands for an extended period of time (more than 12 years)	Snickarbacken 7, Stockholm	34:33 min	2014-04-17

<p>Ubi Sunt, Aidin Sanati and Moa Wikmans</p>	<p>Designer /Consumer /Expert</p>	<p>Swedish modern fashion brand based on the designer duo Aidin Sanati and Moa Wikmans. The designers impact fashion discussions through press, media, and through their membership in Association of Swedish Fashion Brands (ASFB), an association that holds seminars and <i>fashion talks</i>. The designers are further able to affect consumers through Ubi Sunt and its brand values. Apart from their impact on fashion opinion, Moa Wikmans has previous experience from designer collaborations from her former position at H&M.</p>	<p>Snickarbacken 7, Stockholm</p>	<p>01:02:42</p>	<p>2014-03-24</p>
<p>Jacob Östberg</p>	<p>Expert</p>	<p>Professor in Advertising & PR at Stockholm University with research background in fashion studies and CCT. He has been participating in a TV-series about fashion in Swedish television talking about consumption (Von Svensson's Kläder) and has lectured classes within Fashion Studies, where he holds discussions about relevant topics with students.</p>	<p>Albano, Stockholms Universitet</p>	<p>42:55 min</p>	<p>2014-03-14</p>
<p>Paula von Wachenfeldt</p>	<p>Expert</p>	<p>Docent and researcher in the area cultural and literary studies of French society & luxury and fashion, during the early modern era. She is regularly being asked to participate in media to give her opinion on fashion & luxury.</p>	<p>Filmhuset, Stockholms Universitet</p>	<p>28:14 min</p>	<p>2014-03-05</p>

Table 1; Overview of Interviewees of Pre-Study & Main Study

11 APPENDIX 1

1. Consumer Interview Guide

Consumer behaviour

- What distinguishes a good style? (Does it cost money?)
- What clothes do you wear (brands, style)?
- Are you interested in fashion? If so, how is this interest expressed?
- Where do you get your inspiration from for what you are wearing?
- Who do you think is at the forefront of fashion? (Why?)
- Where do you inform yourself about fashions and trends (blogs, media)?
- Who impacts your consumption choices?
- Can anyone who wants to be fashionable (what do you put in this concept?) become it?
- Are you a consumer of mass-fashion brands? What do you associate with mass fashion?
- Are you a consumer of avant-garde brands? What do you associate with avant-garde?

Identity

- Which brands collections do you follow? Which brands do you consume? Which would you like to wear?
- If you buy other brands than the ones you would like to wear, what is the reason?
- Do you wear clothes in order to express your personality?

Designer collaborations

- Do you know of designer collaborations between avant-garde designers and mainstream mass fashion brands? (Connections/Effects on their collaboration?)
- What do you think of this kind of designer collaborations?
- Did you buy anything from these collections?
- Did you wear clothes from the designer before the collaboration? Have you worn clothes from the designer after the collaboration? (Why?)
- What did and do you think of the designer? (Why?)
- Do you know people who have worn clothes after but not before one of the described designer collaborations? What kind of clothes do these people otherwise wear?

2. Expert Interview Guide

- Do you feel that you are part of and impact fashion discussions and opinions in general?
- Have you been involved in designer collaborations? In what way?

The level of fit between products & brands

- What do you think of designer collaborations between avant-garde designers and mainstream mass fashion brands?
 - Compatibility of avant-garde and mainstream mass fashion?
- Do the product classes fit for a successful collaboration?
- How do the brands complement each other in the collaboration? How do you think it should be in order to produce beneficial effects?
- Does it matter for the avant-garde designer to maintain its design expression in the collaboration collection?

Altered identity of avant-garde fashion brand

- Do you think the avant-garde designer's brand identity is affected by the collaboration? How?
 - If yes, since consumers express their identity through fashion consumption, how is this affected by the change in brand identity?

Increased reach and target market

- Is this a good strategy for the avant-garde designer to reach a larger market? Are there any risks with this strategy?
- Can avant-garde designers have an unlimited large customer group without losing its exclusivity and creativity? Is exclusivity important today for a brand (increase of "masstige")? Is it positive for avant-garde designers that a larger group of customer knows about them? Does it affect the perception of exclusivity or creativity?

12 APPENDIX 2

Rick Owens



Image 1; Rick Owens Fall Collection Men 2014 (Style.com, 2014a)



Image 2; Rick Owens Fall Collection Ready to Wear 2014 (Style.com, 2014b)



Image 3; Rick Owens Spring Collection Ready to Wear 2014 that was highly commented on due to a new way of showing the fashion - not typical models but stomping women (Vogue.com, 2014)



Image 4; Rick Owens collaboration with adidas spring 2014 (Dunne, B 2013)

Maison Martin Margiela



Image 5; Maison Martin Margiela for H&M (MMM x HM), keypieces from the collection in 2012 (Arnell, 2013)

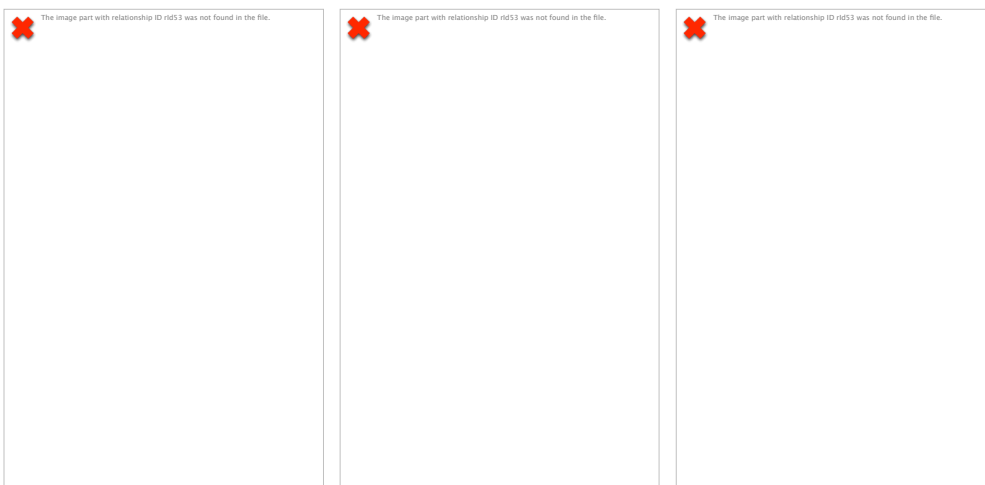


Image 6; Maison Martin Margiela various seasons (Showstudio, 2014)



Image 7; Margiela for Mykita (Mykita, 2014)

Antwerp 6

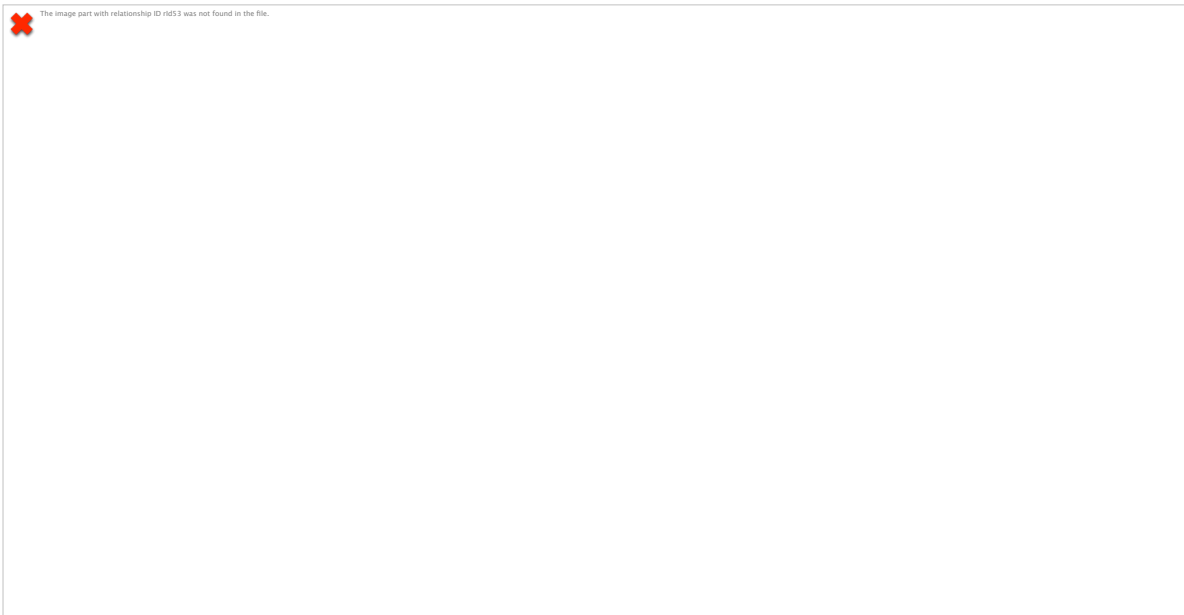


Image 8; Antwerp 6 Collection (Ward, 2011)

Comme des Garçons

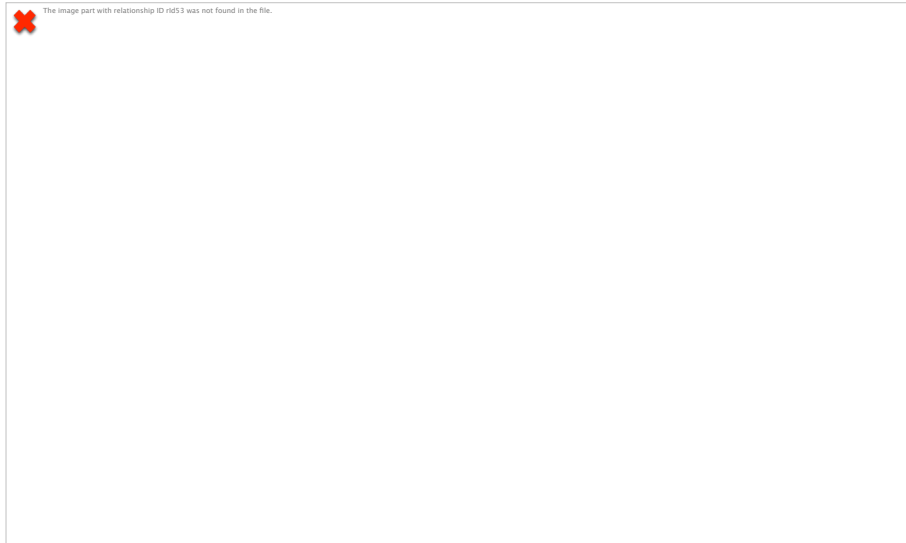


Image 9; Comme des Garçons for H&M, 2008 (Linda, 2008)

Issey Miyake

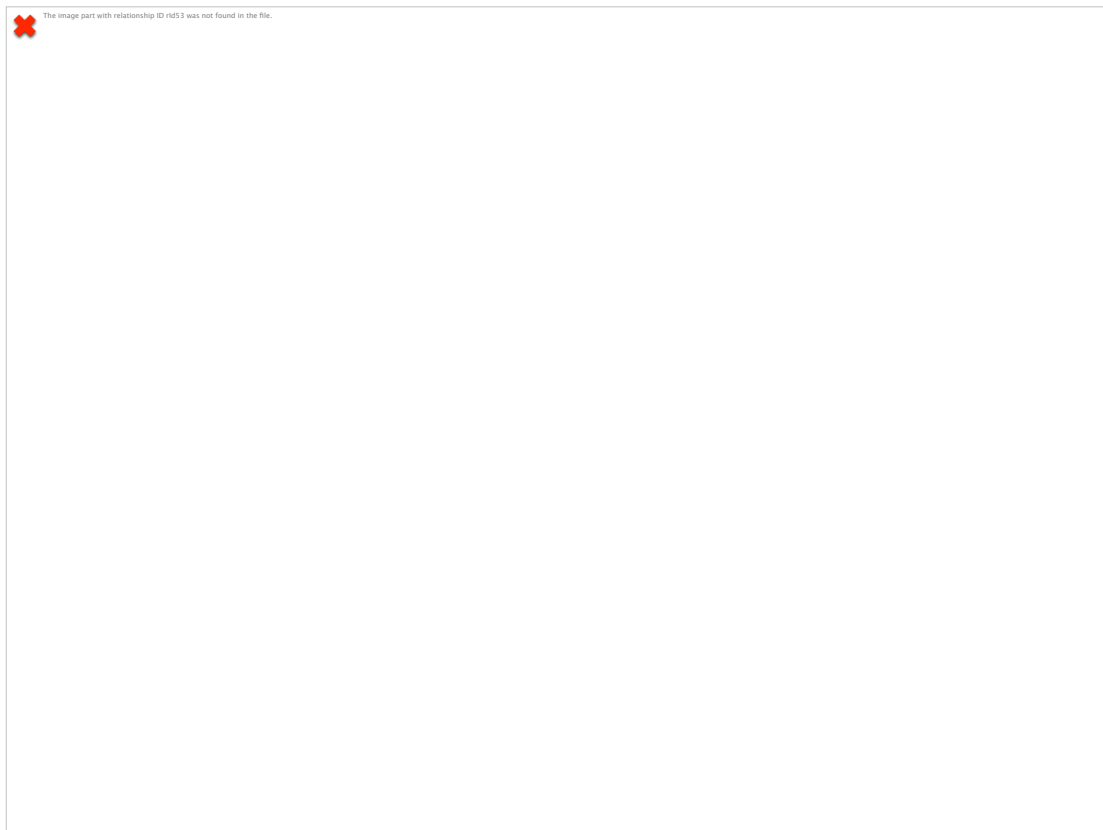


Image 10; Issey Miyake Fall/Winter 2014 (Edelkoort, 2014)

Kris van Assche

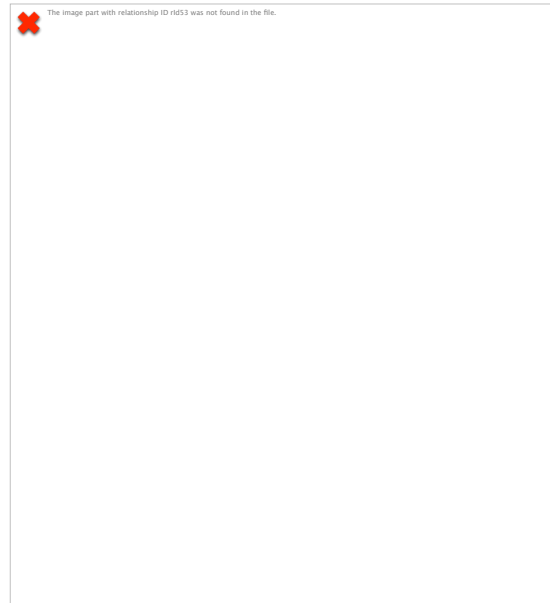
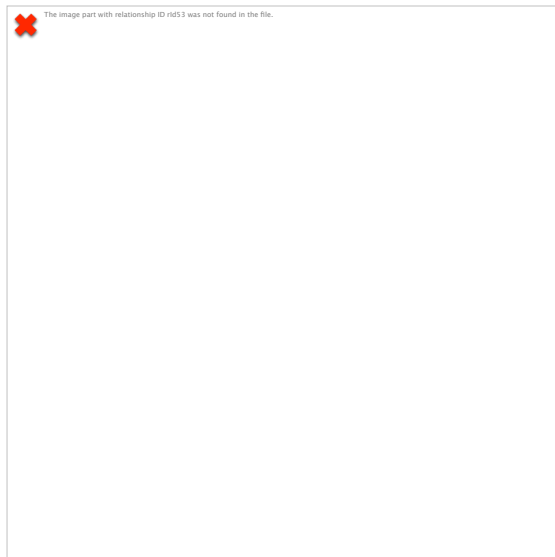


Image 11; Kris van Assche for Eastpak (Fischer, 2011)