

# Analyzing Web 2.0 Internet users in order to drive innovation in distribution strategy of luxury watches

## A netnography analysis

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### **Summary**

While luxury watch industry is discussing whether to allow some distributors selling on the WEB 1.0, Internet users are gathering into communities on the WEB 2.0. Watch companies do not really believe in the necessity of being on the Internet in order to meet their customers. On the contrary, we assumed that luxury watches customers are heavy Internet users and are prone to buy over the Net. In order to confirm our hypothesis, we analyzed WEB 2.0 messages according to the netnography methodology (1). We identified and selected specific blogs dealing with luxury watches with the aim of revealing the actual Internet users thinking about luxury watches. The results give some insights about the attitudes of WEB 2.0 users toward luxury watches that can be used in order to innovate and launch new distribution and service web offerings for the luxury watch industry. Watch customers are playing and living in the WEB 2.0 era whereas luxury watches are vacillating about selling or not selling through authorized intermediaries. This industry could be a good case illustrating a market driven innovation process.

### **Keywords**

Netnography; luxury watches; e-commerce; web services

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays nearly no luxury watch company is using the internet as a distribution channel. Some luxury fashion brands, like LVMH are already using e-commerce solutions, either through a brand operated site (for instance, [www.dior.com](http://www.dior.com) or [www.louisvuitton.com](http://www.louisvuitton.com)) or through a e-commerce portal such as [www.eluxury.com](http://www.eluxury.com). Most of the luxury watch brands are opting for a corporate communication website and for a “virtual collection showroom”. Watches are still sold through a network of authorized and carefully selected brick-and-mortar dealers as in the “old times”. Watch companies maintain strong relationships with them as they also assure the first step after-sale service that might be the final step in case of simple repair. They fear going and selling on the Internet as this might engender a situation of channel conflict and damage intermediaries’ loyalty.

## 2. Innovation in the retailing process of luxury watch brands

The luxury industry feels a lot of apprehension about the Internet, especially when considering the opportunity of selling their products on the web as it is often associated with price discounts. It still underestimates the prospect of targeting internet users. Is it right or wrong? Is it missing customers as it is not delivering right to them through the web? Are Internet users wealthy enough and enthusiast enough to buy expensive watches over the Internet? Would they be more willing to buy them because they can get the way they prefer: without leaving their computer screen?

Internet users are well ahead of luxury watch manufacturers and distributors in terms of dealing with web technologies and approaches. They are completely accustomed to using and discussing within their WEB 2.0 communities. Nonetheless watch brands do not offer that kind of experience.

The literature discussed the different types of risks related to e-commerce. Lee (2006) observed that virtual shops increase the financial risk for the consumer; especially he/she has concern about security aspects when paying with a credit card, and about the fact it has to pay in advance and wait for the delivery. This type of risk was also heavily discussed at the time that online banking services were launched. We all know that banking services are safe and are part of our everyday life, so why having such apprehensions when dealing with luxury products?

The consumer is even more worried as he/she cannot rely on a brand name as a guarantee in case something wrong happens as the luxury watches are not sold by authorized well known companies, i.e. neither distributors nor manufacturers. Moreover, the customer has to stand uncertainties about the final real price because of the various legal aspects (such as additional charges due to customs and duties) and exchange rates. For instance, a client who would like to acquire a watch through an online auction by the US-based [www.portero.com](http://www.portero.com) does not know how much he/she is going to pay because of the additional charges (customs taxes and shipping fees from US to Europe) and exchange rates. In order to avoid these aspects, the online distributor should set up a regional headquarters that could handle all the European transactions for European customers.

The consumer also would have to take on the risk the online purchased watch does not really meet his/her expectations as he/she cannot see, touch and feel the product before buying on the Internet if he/she does not go to a “physical dealer” (Lee, 2006; Olmo Riley and Lacroix, 2003). In this case, brick-and-mortar points of selling could complement the online solution in a way of mitigating this risk. Furthermore, by integrating traditional distributors and by rewarding them for this role, it might avoid channel conflict.

Lee (2006) has also shown that an online purchase may also include a risk of a wrong perception of product functionalities. In order to mitigating this kind of risk, Chaumet a luxury jewel brand, is offering a consulting service via mail or over the phone (<http://www.chaumet.com/default.html>). The consumer just needs to click on “contact us” and answers to a few questions, such as phone number and the best time to call you back. Chaumet will reach you immediately or within 1- to 3- minute time lag.

Non authorized distribution and WEB 2.0 approaches are adding more risks for watch brands. For instance, a commercial website used brands such as Raymond Weil as a special offer (“Free Raymond Weil watch or 80 % off with purchase” [www.thewatchery.com](http://www.thewatchery.com) ). The same brand can be found on the Wiesmann website ([www.wiesmann-mf.com](http://www.wiesmann-mf.com)) as an accessory product with the “Gecko” logo of the luxury car brand. So what is the coherence in terms of brand strategy in the case for this luxury watch brand? Is a luxury watch brand still able to control the “off-marketing” side of communication? For instance, a luxury watch brand which is participating in 2<sup>nd</sup> life is losing control on its brand image, but is increasing its visibility by communicating in a different way.

### 3. The Web 2.0 and the selling stimulation

O'Reilly (2005) was the first to define the Web 2.0 as an interactive platform, offering dynamic solutions and to fasten B2C communication. Later on, the literature is showing two axes, the original one, which is based on the social networking aspect and the other one which is focusing on the development of the RIA (rich interface application).

We prefer the social networking definition (O'Reilly, 2005) because it is focusing on people participation instead of putting forward technical aspects enabling people participation. Therefore, WEB 2.0 offers opportunities to companies to build better relationships with their customers (Olmo Riley and Lacroix, 2003) and may engender an increased customer loyalty to the brand. That would be a new position for luxury watch companies as they are presently relying exclusively on intermediaries and then, they are rarely dealing directly with their customers.

A study has shown that 76 % of Americans earning more than 150.000 dollars per year is spending very regularly their time reading blogs (Mc Kinnon, 2007). So, can the luxury watch industry still continue to ignore the e-commerce, and WEB 2.0?

The main hindrance with selling luxury watches through the Internet is the lack of face-to-face human contact. Different studies have shown that about 2 % of Internet users buy online. But, 40 % of them would do so, if they had the opportunity to get in touch with an expert. So what are the solutions for "rehumanizing" the online experience?

For the time being, some solutions are offered:

- Intelligent robots, for instance a virtual person that can be activated to become a helper or a guide for the internet user, (like a virtual woman called Mona which is assisting the user on a French media website, [www.france5.fr](http://www.france5.fr))
- Co-browsing and, or chat, that can assist the user via a human assistant (like [http://www.crm.webhelp.fr/fiches/chat\\_co-browsing.html](http://www.crm.webhelp.fr/fiches/chat_co-browsing.html))
- Skype connections which enable the user to contact vocally a help desk without leaving his computer (like <http://www.getax.ch/pm/Contact.html> )
- Telephone service via a website address.

We have tested "the live chat" on the [www.lussori.com](http://www.lussori.com) website which is an US e-commerce site for luxury watches. After having typed the first question, we had to wait 2 minutes to get the following message, "*All operators are currently assisting others. Thanks for your patience. An operator will be with you shortly.*" After an additional minute, we received an invitation for starting a conversation. We have got replies to simple questions concerning the website after 1 minute, in average. Answers to specific questions like shipment conditions on an international level, such as a delivery from the United States to Europe, lasted about 4 minutes. For those who are frequently using online chats, waiting a few minutes is far too long and is not acceptable.

Might intelligent robots be a solution for an online service? We do believe that an intelligent robot has to be used in connection with a human who is able to answer to specific questions. Otherwise a company has to assume the risk to lose a consumer and to damage the image of its brand.

Web 2.0 allows an interface customization of an e-commerce platform. The luxury client may choose himself his own visual representation of the company. This concept is already well known by MyGoogle, Mymarque, or you may see it on my Tag Heuer or on the French labor party site ([www.partisocialiste.fr](http://www.partisocialiste.fr) ). Some e-commerce websites offer the possibility of saving its own shopping lists or consumer preferences. The next time, the customer will return to the same website, he/she arrives directly to specific WebPages (like [www.leshop.ch](http://www.leshop.ch), or <http://www.dvdfly.com/> ).

### 4. Research method

For a better understanding of the behavior and the attitudes of Internet users interested in watches, we analyzed what they were saying and writing on the different blogs. The analyses of their postings gave us an idea of their most stated opinions and their perception of luxury watch brand.

Therefore we were using Netnography (Kozinets, 2002), a qualitative research which is covering the textual output of internet-related field work (Kozinets, 1997, 1998). This kind of research permits to observe the Internet communities without participating actively and in an anonymous way.

Observational research in internet contexts where already discussed (Metha and Sivadas, 1995; Bergadaà and Hebali, 2001; Caterall and Maclaran, 2001; Koontz and Gibson, 2002; Harris and Cohen, 2003; Moatti, 2003; Olmo Riley and Lacroix, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Miller, 2006; Lee and Broderick, 2007; Knight 2007; Weltevreden, 2007) in the literature. The netnography studies pure cybercultures and virtual communities, which are inspired by techniques of cultural anthropology (Kozinets, 1997, 1998). The virtual communities are understood as "...a social group that has a "real" existence for its participants, and thus has consequential effects on many aspects on behavior, including consumer behavior (Turkle, 1995; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998).

As the virtual communities are not accessible by now via the official websites, we concentrated on different types of the Web 2.0 technology. We identified two kinds of Web 2.0 communication bases:

- 1) "Chats" which treated specifically the subject of luxury watches (like Watch Talk Forum, l'horlogerie-suisse.com, forums.timezone.com, watchparadise.com/blog, forums.watchuseek.com or the proper section about watches in Small World).
- 2) Selling platforms for luxury watches, including an interactive blog (like portero.com, thewatchery.com, Vialuxe)

The selection of different Web 2.0 platforms was done through the "Google blog search" tool. After having visited a certain number of them, we selected 10 blogs which fitted to our selection criteria. An intense flow of opinions and a big community of Netsurfers which are organizing the different blogs belonged to our selection criteria. Single opinion or coordination by few bloggers on Web 2.0 platforms, were excluded from our Database. After an observation period of 3 months, we finally collected 355 pages and about 43.000 words, treating the discourse about luxury watch brands from bloggers. Contents analyses were done through the application of specific software. It counted the frequency of the words. The highest frequencies represent the words which were used most often on the selected blogs and compiled in categories. Those categories went through a perception control process of all research members of this project. We have compared our results and kept only the significant ones. Finally we have focused especially on blogger discourses about distribution.

## 5. Discussion of major results

The category which is including the highest frequencies stands for the words which are describing the opinion of a person and the way in which the blogger conceive the world of luxury watches. There is a difference between the communication messages sent by the luxury watch companies and the point of view of the bloggers (see appendix I for details).

**The watch as a subject of an opinion and future visions** (like *"I would prefer something else as Rolex are everywhere these days...I would like to get something a bit different... I'd like to have something younger than a Rolex... I never considered Chopard as a watch...more like jewelry"...*)

**The watch considered as a property**, bloggers wear them, wore or would like to wear them (like *"Which makes me happy to part ways with my flawless "Chopard Ice Cube with diamonds" all over paved diamonds in 18K white gold, a brilliant quartz time keeper which just appraised for \$19,210. I have the original box, certificates and 3 additional leather wrist bands"...*)

**Experts in luxury watch brands**, bloggers discuss about details and they are really important for them, emotions are related to the name of the brand, not to the watch itself (like *"today a gorgeous Franck Muller Curvex White Gold...why?It make me happy and positive!... Omega Marine 1932 mint... I must wait 2 days before being able to see the salesman. Too much long: collector of watch is a disease .")*

**Emotional discourse about the watch itself** (like *"the greatest luxury in life, is time.... Savour every second... I really think it's a great idea also some of my designer colleges will be enthusiastic. I'll love to design the front face for a watch "the time to have time for people who has not time... You guys are the best and I love the watch..."*)

**Announcement of tendencies and latest models**, it's like a new form of the "buzz- marketing", consumers include experiences of other luxury watch consumers in their own decision process of buying (like *"A week or so ago, I got the Concord Saratoga rubber-and-steel bracelet diamond watch that I ordered from you, and I'm just following up again to say I LOVE IT! The diamonds pop so beautifully off the black. I'd never be able to get a watch like this at the retail, and the fact that I can buy it at such a good price, with confidence, is great. You have me hooked! I'll be writing again soon*

*about buying another great Concord (I'm eyeing the Saratoga diamond strap versions now... Blancpain 50 fathoms, I love the latest Breitling Super Ocean (probably the most beautiful Breitling in 20 years), or even the eternal Seamaster...")*

Other categories are including **price** (“... noticed your query!!! It's around 250 pp I believe...”), the **ages** (“I collect vintage Rolex since 20 years and very well known by the community...”) of watch models, **colors, material, technical information** and **design**. A whole **distribution** category showed us different discussion about physical and virtual (“As you can see in the ad's copy, Portero has been getting great reviews from respected publications like The Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post. With all the lawsuits over fake paintings and eBay scams, it's good to know that there's a trusted source to go to for authentic luxury merchandise...”) selling places and preferences (USA, Europe or Dubai). The discourses about the perception of the different types of risk which we found in the literature were absent. The results showed us, that an e-commerce platform does not need to come with an physical shop.

We focus on the behavior and attitude of the blogger which demonstrated clearly that the Web 2.0 techniques belong to their daily live which is confirming our research question, namely that luxury watch brands cannot ignore the Web 2.0 any longer as a communication and/or distribution channel.

## **6. Implications**

### **Implications for research**

There is still a real lack in the Web 2.0 literature, nothing do exist in the luxury marketing sector. Attitude of the blogger might be compared to the attitude of the consumer who is only using the physical wholesaler network. What are the different variables describing the typical Netsurfer using Web 2.0 techniques?

Netnography should be tested in a wider application range, by now, it was used only for marketing proposes.

### **Implications for managers**

The consumer target which is using regularly Web 2.0 techniques cannot be longer ignored by luxury watch brands. They are experts in luxury watch branding, are well informed, do consume luxury watches, are interested in buying other models in the future. This population is very interested in the luxury watch world and is seeking for specific model. Internet is used as real research tool for obtaining the latest news via other bloggers, they do not talk at all about their physical shopping experiences.

The results about the behavior and the attitudes of bloggers may be integrated in the planning process of global distribution and global communication strategy for luxury watch brands on line.

Netnography represents à real observation (none participating) tool for analyzing tendencies on different blogs which are about luxury watch brands. This method does not introduce any biais in the results via the process of research. It enables a luxury watch company to be up to date concerning the changes in attitude and behavior of the e-commerce consumer.

Our outcomes about the virtual attitudes and virtual behavior of Netsurfers allow considerations in integrating those aspects in navigation in future e-commerce platforms for luxury watch brands. As it is not possible by now to analyze attitude and behavior on official virtual shops of luxury watch companies, our results stand for a better understanding of attitude and behavior in regard to existing distribution channels and intelligibility for the creation of a new distribution channel on line.

## **Conclusion**

The discourse of the blogger who is using Web 2.0 techniques is not clear about the necessity of having or not a physical platform beside the e-commerce of luxury watch brands. But he is very concerned about everything which goes with the luxury watch, meaning the service from the very beginning to the after sales one.

### Appendix I (Summary of the discourses results of bloggers using Web 2.0 techniques)

Key-words	Connotations	Type of discourse	Frequencies
I,i,m,you, be, like, would, your, me, am, should	Society being and desires	Social	3261
To, for, that, this t, as, 2	Watch as a subject	Ideological	1939
The, this, hours	For the watch	Relational	1454
Watch, it, watches, one, 1, its, them, clock	Watch itself and subject	Relational Ideological	1304
At, in from, there	Place of distribution (selling points)	Functional	1049
My, have, may, has, get, wearing, got, war, had, own, getting, mine	Property or would like to have one	Relational	998
Omega, Rolex, IWC, tag,heurer, cartier, tank, Paneira, piguet, audemars, oak, royal, pate, hublot, breitling	Name of the brand (context is unknown)	Relational Ideological Social	639
Great, good, very, love, well, best, nice, special, beautiful, happy, favorite	Emotions and subject	Relational Ideological	525
Views, think, view	Opinions or referring to watch views, subject	Ideological	517
About, new, know, most, actually	Tendencies	Relational social	327
Looking, how, who, where, want, ask, tell, interested, interest, need, wanted	Research for special information – communication channel	Functional	278
More, much, price, cheap, expensive	Pricing	Functional	239
Time, ago, years, old, year	Subject	ideological et historical	238
They, we, brand, their, company	Brands	Relational Ideological social	233
Gold, steel, diamonds, leather, diamond	Materials	Technical	189
Master, vintage, collection, model, classic, edition, seamaster, models, submariner	Model in general, Subject	Relational ideological	166
Dial, chronograph, chrono, long, automatic, small	Technical information	Technical	132
Black, white, pink, yellow	Colors	Relational Social	113
First, original, next, originally, choice	First, current, original or next watch	Relational	113
Strap, case, bracelet	Parts of the watch	Technical	86
Buy, bought	Intention to buy... or already done	Functional	59
Way, back	Delivery	Functional	47
Diving, dive	For what for... (you should wear this watch for...9	Social	40
Service, help	Service	Functional	39
Dubai	Distribution place or better price ?	Functional	38
Design		Functional Relational	16

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