BACHELOR THESIS

How can the communication strategy of Belgian independent designers become more responsive towards the needs of our present-day fashion industry?

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Signature
Preface

This thesis is written to finalize my bachelor degree International Fashion & Management at the Amsterdam Fashion Institute. A chapter that started in 2013, and that ends with a thesis about the Belgian Fashion Industry. A topic that has always intrigued me, motivated me to start a career in fashion and hopefully something I can become part of, in the future.

Writing this thesis was a true challenge, being completely independently focused on a topic so specific yet variable caused many interesting distractions from the initial question. Before starting this research I could have never imagined the complex, unique and yet so successful state the Belgian designers survive in. Leading to even more dedication to support this industry.

I truly hope my research could mean something within the industry, but for now my thesis is the perfect basis for further specializing within digital media for the fashion industry during my Postgraduate at the School of Arts Gent – KASK in Digital Storytelling.

I would like to thank Rosemarijn Bolraap and Charlye Moratta, for always supporting my work and all the useful advice that was send to me.

I would also like to thank my current boss Hilde Francq, from Trend Studio Francq Colors, for always being supportive and understanding about my graduation while still trusting and challenging me professionally.

At last I want to thank my coaches Yolet Wefers Bettink and Charlotte Dwayers, for all the valuable advice and feedback despite the long distance and personal absence.

After four years of studying at AMFI, I hereby present you my bachelor thesis.

Mauranne Geenen

Antwerp, Belgium – June 2017
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1# Introduction

“Antwerp is a veritable Mecca and has all of the key elements of a thriving fashion ecosystem that helps to attract, educate, and train young fashion designers and incubate their new businesses.” - Imran Amed 2013, founder of The Business of Fashion

Antwerp is a city known for its vibrant fashion industry and gained its name due to ‘The Antwerp Six’ and the impeccable reputation of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts’ Fashion Department. The Belgian fashion industry and its independent designers were always able to set itself apart from the international fashion industry due to their avant-garde approach and creativity led business strategies. Large marketing strategies are avoided, so the main focus is on the creative process and its product. (T. Coppens, Fashion Whispers 2016)

Under present time many international fashion brands move to more digital presence, faster business models and collections based on sell-trough rather than the creative experiment. The current business strategy of the Belgian independent designer, where the main focus lies on the creative process, lacks on all these points when seen as the main opportunities of 2017 by the international industry. (McKinsey&Company 2016)
With the fourth-industrial revolution coming to place and the fast rise of e-commerce and social-media, many brands do not know which opportunities it holds (Abnett 2016). Same goes for the independent Belgian designer, who uses online platforms in a straightforward informative matter, instead of using it to enhance their brand story.

The primary focus of the Belgian independent designer will always be the clothing (Windels 2009). Being an independent Belgian designer, means to be creatively free rather than focusing on sales and generating a maximum exposure business (Scallon, 2015). Explaining their reasons for a minimal marketing strategy.

But with various industry insiders such as Imran Amed, Suzy Menkes and even the Belgian creative industry (Fashion Talks, 2013) admitting that Flemish designers often live in their own bubble, mostly unknown beyond Belgium's borders, need to gain more ground on the international scene in order to stay relevant.

During my internship at one of Antwerp's newest stars, Christian Wijnants, this need for global exposure also became visible. Although he was able to secure large investments in 2013 and 2017, and won several international prizes, to grow further the brand needs to stay relevant and visible on the global fashion platform to attract press and buyers. With no marketing strategy or runway show this becomes a daring challenge.

Fashion, pushed by the ecosystem of the independent Designer and worth 3% of the GDP, is of extreme importance for the Flemish economy (De Mol et al, 2013). Breakthrough designers and consolidation of new names stays necessary to feed Antwerp as a fashion city in the future.

1.1. Rationale

With the fourth-industrial revolution coming to place and the fast rise of e-commerce and social-media, many brands do not know which opportunities it holds (Abnett 2016). Same goes for the independent Belgian designer, who uses online platforms in a straightforward informative matter, instead of using it to enhance their brand story.

The primary focus of the Belgian independent designer will always be the clothing (Windels 2009). Being an independent Belgian designer, means to be creatively free rather than focusing on sales and generating a maximum exposure business (Scallon, 2015). Explaining their reasons for a minimal marketing strategy.

The outcome of this aim is a more developed marketing strategy helping new independent Designers adapt to the current zeitgeist. Which on its turn will boost the Belgian fashion industry and its ecosystem.

1.3. Questions

“How can the Business Strategy of Belgian Independent Designers become more responsive towards the needs of our present-day Fashion Industry?”

The following sub-questions will guide my investigation:

What is the business and marketing strategy of the independent Belgian designer? In order to fully understand the industry of the Belgian independent designer I need to know their core strategies. What are the reasons behind their choices? And do all independent designers operate in a similar way?

What does the present-day international fashion industry look like for the independent designer? To get an understanding of the challenges and opportunities for Independent designers I need to understand how the present-day landscape looks like. But more importantly, how did the industry and consumer change?

Case Study – Christian Wijnants. Christian Wijnants is a growing Belgian brand still looking to establish itself within the market. Making it a perfect object to analyze where they are excelling and where they are lacking within their communication strategy.

How effective is the communication strategy of the independent Belgian designer today? In order to find out how the independent Belgian designer can grow we need to find out how it is doing exactly within the industry. With a general summary and an outlook on Belgian brands I hope to find what the Belgian designer is missing in its communication strategy.

Which changes can the independent Belgian designer make at its communication strategy to strengthen their position within the international fashion industry? As a last, I will conclude all previous questions with a proper strategy for the independent Belgian designer to strengthen their position within the international fashion industry.
1.4. Structure

The general structure of my research method follows the funnel model. This model starts with the broader background knowledge and frameworks of the issues, working towards the more specific ones. These are included in chapters who give an answer to the sub-questions. Further on, the overall conclusion at the end answers to the main research question.

For the purpose of answering the research questions clearly and in-depth, the following methodologies are used. First of all, the database of Flanders DC, The university library of The Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp and Internet articles/websites will be consulted for research regarding the theoretical framework and for research regarding the history of “The Antwerp Six”, how it came to being, how it influenced the Belgian creative industry and the Independent Designers in Belgium. Secondly, interviews with industry professionals will be conducted to find out about the developments of Belgian fashion, as well as my own experiences / observations from my internship at Christian Wijnants.

The multi-disciplinary approach concerning the methodology of this research is key since Belgian fashion & the industry itself is far too complicated in nature to be understood from just one point of view. It demands to be approached from different angles for it concerns many different fields (aesthetics, sociology, economical) at the same time (Wilson, 2003 [1985]: 11). It is inevitable to use a mixture of literature research and qualitative research methods in order to map out and understand the multifaceted dynamics of the Belgian Fashion Industry and to what extent this is evolved or still can evolve in the future. The methodology as presented here will contribute to the reliability of the research and the usability of the proposed model.

1.5. Definitions

In order to progress & start my research, some concepts have to be defined, constituting a foundation for further discussions.

The Industry: In my research I will alternate between ‘Belgian’ & ‘Flemish’ fashion. The term ‘Belgian’ is used to communicate the Belgian fashion industry and its designers to the global industry. ‘Flemish fashion’ refers to where the designer originates from and ‘Antwerp fashion’ is used when we speak about the educational background of a designer of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp.

Several alumni from Belgian fashion schools – such as Demna Gvasalia, Peter Pilotto, Bernhard Willhelm, … – are still considered as ‘Antwerp designers’ even though their businesses are located somewhere else.

The Independent Designer: When I talk about the Belgian fashion industry, I refer to the Independent designer labels founded in Belgium. With the independent designer their talent and creativity within the designs & collection are central. Their main product focus is Ready-To-Wear clothing with occasionally shoes and accessories that make the collection and look of the season complete (Schrauwen, Schramme 2013). The price range of these collections lies at the highest segment of the consumer market (Delbeke 2012).

The trademark of independent designers is their creativity and this creativity is also highly perceived by the public and their customers, making the symbolic worth of their goods enormously important for designers (De Voldere et al 2007).

Luxury Brands: Brands such as Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Dior, Prada, … are considered as Luxury brands within this research. Ready-to-wear is a part of their product categories and might be advertised frequently and excessively, but it is not their main source of income. Selling ‘accessible’ Luxury products – perfume, make-up, leather goods, accessories, shoes, sunglasses – is what made them global companies. They create strong financial results by creating iconic goods at high price points, combined with a strong marketing campaign and lower priced products made to sell in high volumes to aspiring consumers. (Pike, H. 2016)

To understand the difference is important as luxury brands have a far larger financial budget that the independent designer can not even dream of. It possesses tools and resources that are not accessible for small designers.
The Ready – to – Wear designer: Not all ready-to-wear designer operate independently, many international brands such as JW Anderson, Stella McCartney, Céline, … are all financed by a large fashion conglomerate such as Kering or LVMH. These ready-to-wear brands lay their main focus on apparel often extended with small shoes and accessories lines to add to the collection concept.

1.6. Designer Glossary

In this report several designers are mentioned or referred to. In this chapter I will describe the brands briefly to give the reader a better understanding and context about my findings.

Ann DeMeulemeester. Graduate from the Royal Academy of Antwerp, Fashion Department and part of “The Antwerp Six”. She started her namesake business in 1985 and was the creative director until 2014. Until today the brand is known for their dark, glamorous and avant-garde approach towards design in both the menswear and womenswear collections.

Bernard Wilhellm. Wilhellm is a fashion designer who graduated from the Antwerp Academy in 1998. After graduating he established his own namesake fashion house, which gained internationally attention for its high craftsmanship, irony and eclecticism inspired by different cultures, perception of reality, the human condition in its diversities. The label is well-known for its unconventional approach towards collection presentations, preferring installations, performances and ‘tableaux vivants’, in contrary to the fashion runway.

Capara. The twins Vera and Olivera Capara graduated from the Antwerp Academy in 2000. After working for reputable designers such as Dries Van Noten, Maison Martin Margiela, Delvaux and Jil Sander they started their own brand in 2009. Their design signature is innovative and elegant with an avant-garde touch, inspired by a coexistence of words, stories and statements next to a strong visual world.

Christian Wijnants. Frequently referred to as the next generation of ‘the Antwerp six’ Christian Wijnants is a designer strongly focused on innovative knitwear and prints. With winning the woolmark price in 2014 and a large financial investment the label was able to put a foot in the door of the international fashion industry.

Dries Van Noten. Graduated from the Royal Academy of Antwerp, Fashion Department and part of “The Antwerp Six”, Dries Van Noten started his namesake business in the early 80s. In March 2017, Dries Van Noten celebrated its hundred-runway collection and is, arguably, one of the biggest names within the Belgian Fashion Industry.

Jacquemus. Naïve and French, is what describes Jacquemus best. The designer, Simon Porte, calls himself innocent and wishes for fashion to be more innocent (Marshall 2016). The brand avoids the classical concept of fashion and creates stories instead of collections (Nylander 2016). These stories are visible from the show and clothing all the way to his online presence and e-commerce site. His patriotism for France and especially the South of France is seen through the use of blue, white and red in his collections and subtle but clear references to French classics and archetypal French concepts. Jacquemus is a storyteller, with strong concepts and narratives such as the terracotta figures of “Les Santos de Provence” or the girl who visits the coast, eats icecream, and falls in love in “La Grande Motte”

Peter Pilotto. Peter Pilotto and Christopher de Vos form the duo behind designer label Peter Pilotto. After graduating from the Antwerp Academy in 2004/2005 and gaining experiences within the industry they started their own label in London. Their inventive use of prints and bright colors together with a more commercial approach towards fashion gained them a long list of celebrity fans and a strong reputation within the International fashion industry.

Stephan Schneider. After graduating from the Antwerp Academy in 1994 Schneider started his own label based in Antwerp. The foundation of his collection lays with subtle, soft fabrics and colors combined with minimal silhouettes, all approached with a strong gender blur. Inspired by the daily life, his style can be described as realistic and functional, but always with a strong focus on detail. While avoiding international press, by choosing not to have extensive runway shows or exhibitions, the designer managed to gain the interest of several high-end buyers including Dover Street Market and Opening Ceremony.

The Antwerp Six. A group of Graduates – Dirk Bikkembergs, Ann Demeulemeester, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Van Saene and Marina Yee - from the Antwerp Academy in the early 80’s that started the international success of Antwerp Fashion. All being so completely different from each other and uninfluenced by the then current fashion industry made them so outstanding within the industry.

Tim Coppens. After graduating from the Antwerp Academy in 1998 Coppens gained much noted experience at Adidas, Ralph Lauren before launching his own label in 2011 in London.
Immediately after the launch buyers and press supported the label massively and eventually gained him much-desired awards such as Ecco domain, WWD most promising new menswear designer and the Fashion Group international rising star award. His collections are a mix of craftsmanship and innovation that challenges the modern vision of manhood - athletic with an elegant and complicated touch.

**Vetements.** Demna Gvasalia, graduate of the Antwerp Academy and creative director of both Vetements and Balenciaga, was named ‘Person of the year 2016’ by the Business of Fashion for his contribution to the current fashion industry. His label Vetements is a statement against our fast fashion industry and the overload on marketing that comes with it. In only 2 years Vetements was able to grow itself into one of today’s most popular brands.
2# The Independent Belgian Fashion Designer

To fully understand the concept of the independent Belgian designer I will start with examining towards the 4 building block that defines a business model in the fashion industry (Corbellini, Saviolo 2012): 1. The value proposition of what is offered to the market 2. The segments of clients that are targeted by the value proposition 3. The communication and distribution channels to reach clients and offer them the value proposition 4. The way the value chain is organized.

2.1 The value proposition of what is offered to the market

With the independent designer, the talent of the designer and the creativity of the product and collection are most important. Belgian fashion is known for its avant-garde approach, the ways a product is constructed and love for the garment. Most Belgian designer are alumni from one of Belgium’s notable fashion schools such as The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp or La Cambre in Brussels. Because creativity and artistry were the building blocks of these educations, Belgian designers do not shy away from experimentation and are less influenced by trends (Van Beirendonck, 2016). Nevertheless, most designers do have their own signature style across all collections to distinct themselves from others (De Voldere et al 2007).

This creativity translates into complicated and unusual designs that are also technically complex to produce. On top of that, the market is rather small, resulting in limited production amounts of a collection (Schrauwen, Schramme 2013). The combination of technical complex designs and small quantities means that the fixed costs of the label and the high production costs need to be earned back with the sales of a relatively small collection. Meaning that the collections of the independent designer are in the highest segment of the consumer market (Delbeke 2013). The price of pieces in the collection usually ranges between 3 to 4 digits (Figure 1).
2.2 The segments of clients that are targeted by the value proposition

Since creativity is the trademark of the independent Designer and the consumer also values this creativity, the symbolic worth of the garment is what drives sales. (De Voldere et al 2007). Consumers do not only see the garments as clothing but also as art or a unique investment in their wardrobe. The brand of a label is less visible within clothing compared to other luxury goods such as leather goods or accessories, making pieces of independent designers not necessarily a signifier of status (Solca, 2015).

The consumer of independent Belgian designers is either an avant-garde fashion enthusiast, who is willing to spend more money on well designed, technically advanced clothing. Or people from the highest class, who can easily afford designer fashion.

Due to their high price and rather specific target group, most brands are not sold in more than 2 stores per city. This limited availability within one specific area makes a wide range of International points of sales necessary to survive and to generate enough income. Often the Belgian designer is called a ‘born-global’ since they need to gain international success from the start of their career to stay profitable. (De voldere, et al. 2007)

2.3 The communication and distribution channels to reach clients and offer them the value proposition

Worldwide advertising campaigns with supermodels, paid editorials in magazines or elaborate runway shows on unique locations generate much attention towards a brand, but these strategies are not used by the independent Belgian designer. What at the start of their business was a matter of not having enough budget for excessive advertising, gradually turned into a very unique marketing strategy (Scallon 2015). Instead of asking for media attention, the Belgian designer wants the clothes to generate all attention. And thus give press something to talk about without making much external noise or diffusion from the product.

This strategy of ‘earned media’ is most frequently used (Schramme, Schramme 2013). To stimulate media attention PR-agencies are acquired to spread collection information to press, media and online influencers who fit the labels target consumer. A good PR-strategy is necessary as a positive appreciation from the media influences buyers vastly. (Schramme 2014)

Within a one week period, the new collection is presented during a fashion week, for the Belgian designer mostly Paris Fashion Week (exhibit 1). During this week, established designers hold a fashion show, while new brands mostly do a small presentation so press and potential buyers can view the collection (Delbeke, 2014). Fashion week is a crucial moment for a designer as not only buyers need to be convinced but also press, stylists and media so the brand will be positively portrayed within the media. Because Fashion week is of such an importance for many designers, the biggest part of the marketing budget will be spent on it, almost leaving nothing left for in-between projects (Schrauwen, Schramme 2013). By doing so a brand can create a very strong show, but what if this runway show did not get received well by the buyers and press? In a situation like this not much budget is left over for other initiatives to strengthen their collection. With such a strong focus on the shows the independent Designer tends to forget that other promotional platforms such as social media could also be used to enhance a collection.

Now social media is mainly used to visualize the collection, the story, and the brand. It is more seen as a medium to portray the label instead of promoting the product (Scallon, 2015). All independent Belgian designers use a similar method of not following others on social media – to have an opinion free brand – showing the latest runway images, collection campaigns or other important events (Exhibit 1). Leaving out personal or emotional content, giving it a very corporate & plain feeling.

A coherent brand image is another important element in the communication of the independent designer. The collection image needs to be visible across the entire chain of the flagship store, website, house style and social media (Schrauwen, Schramme 2013). And since there is only a single runway show to promote the new collection, all products related to the show are of extreme importance. Press, invitations, catalogs, lookbooks,… As it is an important way of collection promotion, many designers work together with known graphic designers such as Jelle Jespers to create a strong branded story next to their collection. (Pecarari, M, 2015) The image below portrays the invitation of the SS15 collection of Dries Van Noten, the moss within the plastic clutch gives a small hint about the decoration and collection mood, leaving the audience curious and guessing with what is still to come.
2.4 The communication and distribution channels to reach clients and offer them the value proposition

The independent designer has a value network that is completely focused on creative input. Contributors are mainly appointed to serve the creative department. The main goal of these subcontractors is to deliver a high-quality product that is a complete translation of the designer’s collection vision. (Schrauwen, Schramme 2013)

The company around the designer is mostly arranged as a head-tail company². The head-tail company keeps supervision on all aspects within the process, but works with subcontractors to manage all work as the head-tail company does not have the resources and knowledge to fulfill these tasks. (Figure 2) (Schrauwen, Schramme 2013)

Due to the weak cash flow position the independent designer is often found in a weak position towards their multinational competition. Regularly the revenue gained from the collection is not enough to cover all fixed costs, and other sources of income need to be sought. This is often done by creative directing luxury fashion concerns; Raf Simons as creative director of previously Dior and now Calvin Klein. Or Walter Van Beirendonck who, next to his own label, also operates as the Head of Design at the Antwerp Academy. Or partnerships with brands/artists like Martin Margiela did with his H&M collaboration. Or partnerships with accessories, shoe or jewelry brands to add an extra dimension to your brand. Projects like these don’t only generate income but also a global presence that in its turn can contribute to the brand’s symbolic value and credibility. (Schrauwen, Schramme 2013).
The love & passion for clothing always takes first place for the Belgian independent designer (Windels 2009). Being an independent Belgian designer, means to be creatively free rather than focusing on sales and generating a maximum exposure business. (Scallon, 2015).

This creativity on the first place and business on the second place strategy makes the business model of the independent Belgian designer somewhat risky due to the weak cash flow position. On the other hand, the creativity led business model is what drives sales and the emotional value clothing creates is a Belgian designers biggest strength. The strong product does not only create desire but is equally gained by the label’s strong values.

The purpose of the Belgian designer is clearly creating avant-garde clothing. But this creativity led business model is not the most profitable. When brands take on ‘side-jobs’ to support their own business, the label is not doing particularly well. To stimulate sales, more brand awareness needs to be achieved and a stronger marketing strategy – either commercial or artistically focused - will bring you that.

For a designer to survive on the long run, both the commercial and artistic elements should be balanced out equally (Wilson & Stokes, 2006). The industries’ creativity praised by its niche-level approach and incubator for new design (Martinez, 2007), operates under a traditional business model, instead of creating an innovative yet commercial approach, is unbalancing the entire model.

2.5 Conclusion

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1 Earned Media. Publicity and media attention that is earned by the creativity and eccentricity of a Designer and the collection, rather than the label paying for publicity.

2 Head–tail Company. A company that outsources its production to specialized manufactures in (mostly) low wage countries. Only the design process (head) and sales and marketing (tail) are kept in-house. The label is then the chain director, responsible for the creative process and trade, while keeping control on all contractors.

2 Micro Company. A micro-company is defined as a small business employing less then 10 people.
The International Fashion Industry

To properly understand how effective the communication strategy of the Belgian independent designer is within the current fashion industry, a detailed image and reflection on the international industry concerning communication, its tools and resources is necessary. I will start with analyzing communication in the global economy and assess how this changed the consumer, to finally see how this influenced the fashion industry.

3.1 The Global Economy

The fourth industrial revolution, created by the development of new technologies, Internet as a lifestyle and mainly the combination of cyber-physical systems is taking over our entire world (Marr, B. 2016). From our social network, to our work environment and our daily routine, we use the technology and Internet on a daily basis, making it impossible to live without.

Compared to previous hi-tech changes we are currently facing a new range of technologies that combine the physical, digital and biological worlds. E.g. cars that drive themselves, smartphones that replace face-to-face interaction, immediate access to the internet and all the resources it contains,... All these innovations impact our industry and economy, but more importantly challenge the idea of what it means to be human. (Marr, B. 2016)

All these technologies have great potential to improve the efficiency of businesses and organizations, to understand and react better towards its consumers and to simply enhance a brand identity in ways that weren’t possible before.

But our current political, business and social structures might not be ready for such a big change as the fourth industry revolution would bring. To fully integrate changes to our current society’s structure are inevitable. Schwab said:

“The changes are so profound that, from the perspective of human history, there has never been a time of greater promise or potential peril. My concern, however, is that decision makers are too often caught in traditional, linear (and non-disruptive) thinking or too absorbed by immediate concerns to think strategically about the forces of disruption and innovation shaping our future.” — (Prof. Klaus Schwab. 2016. Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum)
All these changes within our digital landscape are highly influencing offline businesses or services. Journalists are losing territory to online bloggers and print media has been drastically reduced within the last few years. For example the New-York Times now has a business model that focuses for 60% on online readers and only 40% on offline readers. Television has 40% less young viewers (20-30 Years) compared to 10 years ago, all due online sites such as Netflix, offering on demand and a flexible approach to watching movies or series (Roussanov, B. 2016).

On top of that businesses that offer online services are likely to generate 40% more in-store sales compared to its competition not offering online e-commerce services (Bof, 2016).

### 3.2 The Consumer Shift

The digital age or the fourth industrial revolution is making the consumer more demanding than ever before. Also called the “screwyed shopper” (Figure 4), is defined by being better informed, better connected to others, more demanding and more conscious of values and authenticity.

The motives of their behavioral changes are the availability of information on products and brands worldwide as well as a higher need for personalization or strong brand values. With consumers being able to shop globally and across all markets instantly, the brands that deeply rely on their loyal customers will be hit the hardest.

Instead, brands should engage more with their customers. A complete brand experience, from store to online, creates a seamless consumer experience tapping into their previously unmet needs. With technology developing daily and consumers being more engaged online, it is extremely easy for a brand to leverage information and use this to their advantage.

With more retail channels, more brands and worldwide accessibility, competition increases and consumers become more demanding, to keep the customer interested constant adaptation to the current zeitgeist is necessary.

### 3.3 The Fashion Industry

Due to the fourth industrial revolution coming to place, the fashion industry is gradually feeling the need to adapt (Abnett, 2016). This new digital era made consumers more aware, more demanding and less predictable in their buying behavior. Which is drastically reshaping the rhythm of the industry (McKinsey, BoF, 2016). Many labels are skipping the tradition model of 2 collections/year and going for smaller and more collections to adapt quicker to the industry demands or even opting for a see-now-buy-now model to immediately satisfy its consumers (Sherman 2016). A model such as see-now-buy-now creates enormous opportunities for global brands like Burberry and Tommy Hilfiger since they have the infrastructure and resources to do so, but for a small designer label, like the Belgian independent designer, who does not have these resources, it becomes extremely hard to adapt or work around it (Tim Coppens, Fashion Whispers 2016).

This need for instant gratification was also visible when digitalization and e-commerce were seen as the biggest opportunities for 2017 within the fashion industry (BoF-Mckinsey Global Fashion Survey 2016). With Generation Y and Generation Z becoming the new consumer, either having grown up or spend their youth on phones, social media is as important as their social lives. Making these platforms the ideal methodology for building a brand, garnering following and generating sales (Frisch 2017). According to McKinsey, based on a research of 7000 shoppers, three out of four luxury purchases, even if still taken place in a shop, are influenced by what they saw online. Making online platforms more essential and effective than any shop, billboard or offline campaign than ever before.

Jacquemus is one of the brands that realized this importance, by creating an online strategy that seamlessly fits the offline strategy. With creating an online store (image) that fits the collections and brand value and an Instagram account that both taps into the designer’s personal life and working life, the label was able to further extend its brand vision and storytelling while generating more sales. (Bjork, D. 2016)

Under the helm of younger creative directors many international luxury brands were also able to attract the more demanding, online shopper. Olivier Rousteing, Demna Gvasalia and Alessandro Michele almost instantly changed the successes of Balmain, Balenciaga and Gucci. These changes were not only focused on the creative design process but instead they focused on the whole
brand and its online presence. Gucci underwent a complete metamorphosis in style, launched an interactive e-commerce site and shifted its social media strategy from the product towards the desires of the customers. They created a story and brand image, consumers can merge into and which connected over all brand aspects. (Pithers, E. 2016)

3.4 Conclusion

It is clearly visible that both the consumer and the industry are looking for a change; digitalization and the speed of the industry are the biggest creators of this cause. For the independent designer who is so deeply focused on the product this might produce some complications. Almost none of the Belgian designers operate with an online shop or have an active digital presence. And when the ‘Digital Age’ is causing brands to go online, either for social media purposes or for e-commerce, the independent designer should stand open for these developments. The consumer is expecting this online presence and other brands are adapting. Countless startup brands are relying on social media to grow their brand exposure and gain new clients, especially those targeting younger consumers (Georgiou, K. 2016).

Many international brands are already extending their focus from the product to instead cover their entire branding strategy. Proving that the minimal strategy of ‘earned media’ – where many Belgian designers rely on – is not extremely effective anymore in an industry so saturated and widely available to anybody from anywhere. In order for a brand to stand out, they need to create outstanding content, which surprise the customer and so gradually develops an interest for the brand.

When looking at all these changes it becomes visible that the independent Belgian designer is still using a rather traditional model, not using the opportunities of today’s technologies or innovations. The consumer is expecting much more than just apparel; they want to experience the brand and how it comes alive apart from the clothing.

“The consumer is expecting much more than just apparel; they want to experience the brand and how it comes alive apart from the clothing.”

For the independent Belgian designer there are many possibilities to update their strategy in order to stay relevant in today’s fast changing fashion industry. It is just a matter of finding the right one, both enhancing their own values and those of our fashion industry today.

1 The Fourth Industrial Revolution. The fourth major industrial era since the initial Industrial Revolution of the 18th century. The Fourth Industrial Revolution started around 2010 and can be described as a range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, and impacting all disciplines, economies and industries.

2 See-now-buy-now Model. Shoppable runway show, enabling customers to buy their collections immediately after they debut on the catwalk, with the aim to translate the interest and excitement generated by runway shows into sales. (Abnett 2016)

3 Generation Y. Consumers born between 1977-1994. Born between the advent of the Walkman and the founding of Google, the members of Gen Y are unsurprisingly shaped by technology.

4 Generation Z. Consumers born between 1995-present. Too young to remember 9/11, they have grown up in a world in political and financial turmoil. Being educated in a highly sophisticated media and computer environment made them more Internet savvy and experts than any generation before.
To get a better perspective on the internal workings and structure of a Belgian independent designer, I will analyze the marketing strategy of Antwerp based designer Christian Wijnants.

Both with my own experience from my Internship in 2015 and interviews with Charlye Marotta, former marketing assistant, and Rosemarijn Bolraap, former sales intern (Exhibit 2). With these sources combined and extensive research I will try to portray an as real image of the communication strategy of Christian Wijnants.

As a designer Christian Wijnants forms an interesting pick. The brand is not yet as established as designers such as Dries Van Noten, Ann Demeulemeester or Raf Simons, who were able to create their following in the 80’s and 90’s, before the rise of 'The Digital Age'. Wijnants started his business in 2003, right at the start of the digital revolution, being confronted with a totally different consumer than the Antwerp six. Currently, the Belgian designer is surviving - due to financial injection - within the industry but still needs to expand into becoming an established, self-providing designer (De Roo, M. 2017). Making the label perfect for this case study, where I can explore the label’s communication strategy and find out if the communication strategy of the established Belgian independent designer is still relevant in present day.

Christian Wijnants started his business in 2003, after winning several awards on his graduation collection and having gained experience at Dries Van Noten. Innovative and refreshing knitwear constructions, colorful digital prints and his perfect use of draped delicate fabrics made him noteworthy among international press and buyers (www.christianwijnants.be).

The label is an exact example of the independent designer described in chapter 1. 4 collections a year are shown during Paris Fashion week, whereof 2 – Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter – during a runway show. Afterwards the collection is sold to around 100 high-end clients spread across America, Europe and Asia. Though the brand has a rather large international reach, the company has only 10 people working fulltime, with around 9 interns constantly supporting the team. 6 of them support the design and pattern team, while production, sales and marketing each have one intern.

Both in 2013 and 2017 the company received a financial injection of 1 million euro by Christian Cigrang. Who also owns the majority of the company, while Christian Wijnants continues to have complete creative independence. This freedom ranges from the collection creation, choice
of freelancers and creative employees and the sales and communication strategy. (De Roo, M, 2017) Although Christian Wijnants does not make any profit yet and needs financial injection to stay viable, it does seem that demand is increasing. In 2016 the label was able to cut back loss by half (De Roo, M. 2017). All due to a gain in stockists at various high-end boutiques and the recent opening of their own flagship store in Antwerp, strengthening their brand exposure and connection with various international press and buyers. Positive traffic and financial growth is making the brand move from a start-up face towards more established ground on the market, while still - due to the need of financial support - having a strong emphasis on survival.

4.1 Communication

Christian Wijnants mostly relies on the strategy of earned media. While Belgian press continues to be extremely positive and trustful about the label, reputable international journalists such as Vogue Runway come across much more skeptical. With a strong emphasis on earned media, leaning to the negative side reviews from international press on several collections might not give the most effective result (Exhibit 3). From the runway show and collection to the presentation, international press is often not convinced by the rather minimal approach towards the communication of Christian Wijnants. Press prefers to see something new; something interesting and worth talking about and this is exactly what Wijnants does not offer to the media. While press often might not be convinced, buyers are always extremely satisfied with the products offered by Christian Wijnants and customers keep coming back for the quality and designs they know and can rely on. (Marotta, C. 2017).

Because the product is so highly desired, Christian Wijnants also tends to generate all attention towards the collection and product within the communication strategy. Therefore campaigns, runway shows and events are kept simple with studio shoots, moderate decorations on events or shows, minimal showrooms, … While events like these give a label the chance to further explain a concept or let the visitor emerge into the world of the designer. Similarly, the concept of a backdrop, each season in a different color suits the collection, enhances the brand identity and creates a coherent story that is easily recognizable (image). It simultaneously is not surprising in content, similar for Wijnants his events. While a collection shoot could be a perfect way to create intriguing images, strong statements or a loud voice. Hundreds of collection campaigns populate magazines, social media platforms and Internet forums, so creating surprising content is the only way to stand out (Wang, L, 2013).

Online, the product also grabs the attention. On social media runway looks, campaign shoot and inspiration are posted. Visualizing the brand in a corporate way avoiding personal or emotional elements. Charlye Marotta mentioned that there is no strategy concerning social media, on an irregularly basis content is posted about current developments. And, when marketing and communication need to be approved by the creative director – who often did not have time for this or it simply was not a priority at the time – delays on important content or cancellations were a regularity (Bolraap, R. 2017). For Charlye Instagram – the most frequently used - and all other social platforms felt more as a side job. It was never seen as a priority to keep social media up-to-date, and without diverse content a feed easily gets expected and unsurprising (Exhibit 4). The website offers an ecommerce site, brand news, stockists and a collection archive (www.christianwijnants.be). Visually the website is appealing but small errors such as the news page not being updated since 2015 or missing pre-collections in the archive gives a careless impression towards their online approach. Especially when the majority of people visit websites to get more information on a specific brand. The ecommerce site is visually simple but the strong interface and product display make it a well-developed site and online shop experience (Baldwin, 2016).

Similar to the online strategy Charlye Marotta mentioned that a marketing strategy is also nonexistent. No plan or clear tone of voice is used within communication. Important events such as shows, collaborations or new collections are communicated and presented in a straightforward
manner and other press is taken over by a PR agency. Furthermore, interns handle most of the in-house communication so the tone of voice constantly changes when a new intern arrives, leading to an inconsistent image. (Marotta, C. 2017)

The main purpose of the communication of Christian Wijnants is to promote the product. Creating a well-developed garment, the essence of the independent Belgian designer, and likewise also the essence of Christian Wijnants. Although the brand focus is mostly product related, their focus on generating more sales is relatively low. The client base they already established is loyal and keeps returning, but they do not actively try to grow their stockists (Marotta, C. 2017). The main reason behind this passive approach is that there is not enough time and when the majority of employees do not work full time, it remains hard to create a solid and lasting relationship when acquiring new clients. (Marotta, C. 2017).

But for a reasonably new designer, who needs to gain more sales in order to carry a positive cash flow, brand exposure and more sales points are extremely important. With only 1 person managing both marketing and sales, assisted by 1 intern for each department, 2 of the most important aspects of the business are kept to an all minimum. Giving the impression that either there is not enough budget for expansion of the communication team or the importance of good communication is disvalued.

### 4.2 SWOT Analysis

The following SWOT analysis summarizes my research of both the international industry and Christian Wijnants and determines which changes need to be made and where the opportunities lie for their communication strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Antwerp Reference</td>
<td>- No corporate marketing strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Strong Product &amp; High Quality</td>
<td>- Small Staff, frequent changes of both staff &amp; interns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- International Accounts and growing stockists</td>
<td>- Communication team structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Website &amp; Social media profiles</td>
<td>- Website &amp; Social media profiles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
<th>THREADS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Targeting the ‘Screwder’ shopper</td>
<td>- International luxury brands’ large marketing campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Digitalisation &amp; E-commerce</td>
<td>- Speed of the fashion Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Omnichannel Integration</td>
<td>- Competition from online players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Consumer engagement and improvement of channel experiences</td>
<td>- Speed of changing consumer preferences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.3 Conclusion

Christian Wijnants seems to have what it takes to become a thriving business. Their product is desired and their visible design signature differentiates the label from their competition. While their product is highly import, generating more sales stands rather low on their priority list.

With a weak social media presence and no advertising campaigns, earned media stays their most relevant communication strategy. But if you use the strategy of earned media, you also need to give the media something interesting to write about. Just like Walter Van Beirendonck when he questioned the art of fashion by creating the exhibition ‘Believe’ in the Boijmans Van Beuningen museum, where he set up an installation that was nothing more than a shop where visitors could buy his newest collection (Windels, V. 2010). Or Martin Margiela who deliberately stayed hidden from press and media, that in return made people so much more intrigued by the brand and its heritage (Lucian, J. 2009). These are 2 examples were a label was able to provoke the media in a way that it more than ever will write about you, giving the strategy of earned media exactly what it needs to be effective.
Compared to other Belgian independent designers - who managed to create strong brand identities over the years with surprising shows, relevant branding and strong storytelling - Christian Wijnants has not much to offer when it comes to his online and offline communication.

The main reason Wijnants does not want to focus too much on a marketing campaign is because they do not want to be seen as 'a commercial brand' (Bolraap, R. 2017). But having a thought-out marketing and communication approach does not make a brand commercial instantly. The problem with Christian Wijnants is that they don't have a brand identity except from its functional purpose - creating quality clothing. For a brand the higher purpose is often more important, what are the emotional, social benefits from choosing that brand (Aecker, D. 2014). Christian Wijnants is known for its quality knits and expressive prints together with a sustainable mind-set, but this is expressed or highlighted nowhere, besides in the product.

There are numerous ways of communicating a brand story in a new, innovative and surprising way before becoming a complete commercial brand. Following today's changes does not mean following the mainstream. It simply gives you much more opportunities to enhance ones brand identity and subsequently create more content and awareness.

For Christian Wijnants a majority of the problem lies with the workload. When one employee is responsible for both managing Sales and marketing and needs to supervise 2 interns, many important details within communication get lost. Investing in extra employment for the communication department will not only strengthen the identity but will also give Christian Wijnants the time and expertise to properly work out ideas and events to a higher, more concept focused, level. An immediate return on this investment might not be visible but it will definitely help on the long turn with creating a proper and coherent communication strategy for Christian Wijnants.
How effective is the communication strategy of the Belgian Independent Designer today?

The earned media marketing strategy and minimal communication strategy used by the Belgian independent designer originated from the Antwerp Six, who created clothing that was so new and avant-garde that it instantly gained attention from all over the world. (M. Pecorari, 2015)

Today, Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Walter Van Beirendonck, Martin Margiela are still household names within the industry and mainly responsible for putting Belgium on the Fashion industry radar. Later on, Raf Simons, Haider Ackermann and A.F. Vandevorst expanded this group of notable Belgian designers.

On an international scale many recent Belgian educated designers are growing into a strong status. Designers such as Demna Gvasalia (Creative director of both Vetements and Balenciaga), Peter Pilotto, Bernhard Willhelm, Anthony Vaccarello (Creative director of Saint Laurent), Veronique Leroy, Tim Coppens and Glenn Martens (Creative director at Y/Project) are all doing well and living up the Belgian principles abroad. (D. Vervaeren, 2015)

Antwerp located brands such as Christian Wijnants, Capara and Stefan Schneider who all followed the footsteps of ‘The Antwerp Six’, and by many seen as ‘The Next Generation’, have not yet managed to generate the same status as their predecessors. Throughout the years they survived but they have not achieved to become the next big designers inside Antwerp.

One big difference between these ‘new’ International designers and the ‘new’ Belgian located designers is their approach towards marketing and communication. Peter Pilotto has a far more active and commercial media presence (Fury, A. 2014), Vetements rearranged its complete fashion cycle resulting in a new and surprising approach towards fashion (Amed, I. 2016), Tim Coppens collaborates with notable brands to gain more brand awareness and Bernhard Willhelm opted for a more art focuss, out-of-the-box approach towards fashion.

All Belgian designers use the earned media strategy, relying on press and media to generate positive content. An extremely fruitful approach when the audience reacts positively towards your work, but it can also turn out rather negatively when no press picks up or when even negative press is written. An earned media strategy is effective when something new is told that the audience wants to talk about, but unsuccessful when nothing exciting is happening. 89% of people world wide trust earned media, making it an incredibly valuable channel, but getting
publishers to feature your work is becoming increasingly more challenging (Nielsen, 2015). The current fashion industry is oversaturated with new exiting brands all offering unique clothing, for international journalists only the most exiting ones are worth talking about. According to a 2014 Harvard Business review up to 40% of highly praised journalist get around 100 pitches send in by mail every day, to even be considered your content has to stand out. (Liberd. K, 2014)

For the established designers such as Dries Van Noten or Martin Margiela, arguably the most successful Belgian designers, earned media works extremely well. Over the last 30 years they were able to create an extremely strong brand identity and almost unconditional respect from the industry and consumers. Because of their strong reputation and ‘earned’ trust, press will practically generate itself.

Luckily, many young Belgian designers have the advantage that ‘Belgian Fashion’ or ‘Antwerp Fashion’ is such an established term within the industry and thus more likely trigger the interest of reporters. The term is generally associated with the success of the Antwerp Academy and all the reputable designers coming from Belgium. Tim Coppens admitted that using ‘Antwerp’ within his press releases help to gain trust from international journalists or buyers, as they knew that the city stood for avant-garde and quality fashion. (Coppens, T. 2015)

Relying on the success of your predecessors can be extremely helpful to spark your audiences’ attention, however your own work still has to be worth the feature. This is what makes first impressions so important. To grab the full attention of your audience everything needs to fit together, not only the clothing but also how it is presented and how it fits within the brand’s vision. Many independent Belgian designers are too focused on developing a new collection that other business elements quickly get lost in the process. Christian Wijnants, for example, does not have a strong tone of voice, exiting runway show, surprising collection campaigns or a refreshing social media presence. All being elements, that for a designer might seem as distractions from the collection, but in reality it are all missed opportunities for journalists to write about.

While, due to the Internet, traditional media – magazines, newspapers and reputable journalists – are loosing ground; digital and social media are becoming increasingly important (Risi. J, Et al. 2015). These channels do not only cover content but also show you what the ‘real’ consumer is looking for, all by the amount of shares, likes and comments certain posts generate. This is an ultimate source of real-time information that the Belgian designers left highly unexploited in their communication strategy.

Storytelling is an active part within a designer’s creative process. They have their own muses or sources of inspiration that gradually develop into a collection, augmented with apt details, fabrics and shapes. The story is ultimately told in a runway show where every look defines certain elements of inspiration. Unfortunately, far too often the story stops there, while it can still offer a much larger storyline over the complete spectrum of communication channels available nowadays, merging the audience into the world of the brand. Moving away from sending a message and instead creating an experience for the consumer is exactly what the ‘screwder’ shopper needs today.

“While, due to the Internet, traditional media – magazines, newspapers and reputable journalists – are loosing ground; digital and social media are becoming increasingly important”
Which changes can the Independent Belgian designer make to their communication strategy to strengthen their position within the international fashion industry?

6.1 Owned, Paid and Earned media strategy

Currently the Belgian independent designer uses earned media in a singular way. Owned media – content created by the label itself – is reduced to a minimum to prevent distraction from the product and Paid Media – paying for advertisement, editorials – is avoided due to the low budget of independent designers.

In order to get the most out of an earned media strategy it needs to be implemented alongside paid and owned media (Newman, D. 2014). The Belgian independent designer needs to create a more holistic strategy comprised of all three elements – Owned, Paid and Earned Media – to be able to engage with its audience successfully.

By doing so you create your own excellent, engaging and interesting content. This you get in front of your target audience with carefully planned paid advertisements, which on its turn earns the trust and awareness of the relevant audience and media, generating the needed earned media to move towards full brand awareness.

Owned media is content that the brand generates and distributes on its own, apart from the main product. Websites, social media, runways shows, press releases, branding, all contribute to the general image a label wants to convey and are of high essence for a clear brand image and vision. (Edelman, D. Salsberg, B. 2010)

Paid media is content that is produced by the label but its distribution needs to be paid for. Paid Editorials or advertisements in magazines but also online sponsored posts on social media gives
you the opportunity to distribute your content to the appropriate target audience at the right time. (Edelman, D. Salsberg, B. 2010)

Earned media still stays the most important asset of all three. Here you do not only attract press and media, you also earn the trust or approval from a third-party, which is the most credible form of media available (Risi, J, Et al. 2015). While traditional media outlets such as reputable journalists and magazines are most trusted, everybody linked to your label can become a potential source of earned media. Every review, share, like, comment on your paid and owned media slowly generates earned media. (Edelman, D. Salsberg, B. 2010)

6.2 Omni-Channel Communication

Digitalization, technological innovations and the global use of Internet gave brands the possibility to engage in a variety of ways with the consumer, ranging from physical stores, online through websites, mobile apps, e-commerce stores and through social media. The audience can now also interact with labels by face-to-face contact or smartphones, tablets, computers, landlines, … Making it vital for brands to interact with the consumer through a high variety of communication channels. In proper terms, Omni Channel mixes both digital and physical channels to develop a modern and cohesive consumer experience (Wright, T. Snook, C, Et al 2016). The largest challenge for organizations is to incorporate all these mediums and platforms in a seamless, consistent and effective way for the consumer.

The Belgian independent designer sees its collection as the only way to interact with both media and consumers. But great content, a unique website and other brand assets such as social media activity, can all be about turning owned media into earned media. Earned media becomes most successful when earned, owned and paid media are so closely linked together, that the audience can no longer tell the difference. For example, Martin Margiela earned its reputation by producing and promoting unique contents people wanted to talk about, generating earned media that created a momentum no amount of paid media could.

While Martin Margiela only had traditional media outlets to focus on, the Internet nowadays provides valuable new methods to develop, promote and establish a brands image. Offline sales are influenced by over 90% through what people see online (Kansara, V. 2016) and according to Imran Amed, Instagram is the most powerful marketing tool within the fashion Industry. Yet, many Belgian independent designers are ignoring these possibilities. While other labels, such as Jacquemus, are using these tools to further enhance their brand. Jacquemus, an artistic yet marketable brand that extends beyond his runway, also called “the child of the digital age”, managed to create an extremely large and loyal Instagram following, a visually advanced e-commerce site and the full respect and admiration of top journalists within the industry just at the age of 27 (Bjork, D. 2016). According to Kiki Georgiou from The independent UK it is the glimpse into a designer’s mind that makes Instagram possibly the most popular social media tool within the industry. Successful brands are not only posting cold, hard products, but are also giving insights into their working methods, their mind-sets and the inspirations behind their work. This method, a more personal approach of selling a story and connecting with the consumer, is what the screwed shopper needs to gain full interest in a label (Georgiou, K. 2016).
Implementing this shift from an earned media focused strategy to a combined media strategy will most likely cause budget shifts. The majority of these costs are in the time and efforts spend to create well developed owned media. If, for example, Christian Wijnants changes to the combined media method, at least 1 employee needs to supervise the media outlets daily, to connect with consumers, create surprising content and eventually attract the earned media audience. Paid media can become costly when advertisements are placed in exclusive magazines such as Vogue, but can also be extremely useful when used at the correct time, for example at the launch of a new collection or when a collection hits the stores, triggering the audience's interest at the most relevant time within the fashion cycle.

Important to note is that people trust people. Look at the success of Trip advisor, where people share their experiences online with others. When the audience is satisfied others will follow. Reputable journalists are still seen as most credible but a label cannot forget to engage with the ordinary consumer as word-of-mouth continues to be one of the most effective marketing strategies for decades. Now more than ever, people have the ability to speak up, share their thoughts or simply show their appreciation through digital platforms, becoming a valued, low-cost tool for consumer engagement and evaluation for the Belgian independent designer.

This ‘power-of-the-people’ approach cannot be controlled by the brand, making it extremely important to constantly monitor what is happening online. Every move a brand makes is watched on various social media outlets and thus are ‘uncontrollable arenas of participation’ that can pose a risk of reputation damages for brands (Aula, P. 2010). Making it key for brands to understand their audiences and analyze the contexts in which people may perceive shared content. The online world is known as:

“... a risky environment and corporations need to be creative as well as transparent and honest in order to captivate and communicate effectively with their various publics” – Jones, B. Et al. 2010

Shifting to an engaging and more present communication strategy holds its challenges but is also extremely prosperous when executed accurately. Currently Belgian designers are losing the online consumer which is the 3rd largest luxury market after China and the United States and could possibly become the largest luxury market by 2025 (McKinsey &Company. 2016) Not tapping into this industry will be an extremely large missed opportunity for the Belgian independent designer.

6.4 4P’s Marketing Mix

To illustrate how the independent designer can implement these changes I created a Marketing mix to show where alterations or implementations (italic text) need to be made.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High-end ready-to-wear, avant-garde yet wearable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not trend focused: Likely to make the trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A complete brand experience: create a desired world the consumers wants to be part of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 to 4 Digit pricing, easily affordable for the higher classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen as exclusive investments that age nicely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLACE. Omnichannel integration to attract a global market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive multibrand stores: Target Audience, generate global sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department stores: Large audience, creates brand awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flagship stores: Brand vision and creates brand awareness (no middle man involved)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online store: Large reach and brand vision (no middle man involved)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROMOTION. Combination of owned, paid and earned media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corporate identity: Visible in all aspect from collection to consumer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhibitions: Runway shows, Museum exhibitions, in store installations: tactical experience for the audience, ideal brand representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct marketing: Strong Online presence, engage directly with consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising: Able to attract new audience, not yet aware of the label</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR &amp; Publicity: Generate strong and loyal press relationships: key to earned media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION. How can the communication strategy of Belgian independent designers become more responsive towards the needs of our present-day fashion industry?

Earned media is one of the most successful and credible communication strategies within the fashion industry when used accordingly. Especially for the Belgian independent designer who does not own large marketing budgets and needs international exposure to mean something within the fashion industry. Simultaneously it is also the least controlled and predictable strategy for a designer label. The audience is the judge, thus a label is in charge of convincing these audiences they are worth investing time, efforts or money in.

Currently, the Belgian designer is doing more than satisfactory. Many have earned the respect from reputable industry professionals and generate plenteous earned media on a frequent basis keeping their businesses visible within the industry. While all Belgian designers rely on earned media, arguably, the most successful ones are those that have a strong corporate identity and brand vision. Dries Van Noten stands for romanticized exoticness that looks elegant on all woman, Martin Margiela created a cult of impersonality that spreads throughout the entire brand persona and Raf Simons, whose obsessions with rebellious youth cultures is clearly visible within his brand identity. They all give the consumer a certain image they can connect and relate to.

While all designers rely on earned media almost none of the Belgian designers uses digital media to create earned digital media. At the start of the successes of the first group of notable Belgian independent designers, almost 30 years ago, offline earned media was the only way of reaching the international market, besides investing in large advertisement campaigns, which was unattainable within the small budget of an independent fashion house.

Today, the potential of earned media reaches far wider than only the approval of renowned journalists. Third-party endorsements are still highly valuable, but the landscape designers operate in has drastically changed. The speed of the fashion industry and the fourth industrial revolution have significantly changed our consumption habits, brand perceptions and expectations. Social
media has allowed us to immediately interact, connect and share with brands from the moment a collection is launched. Providing brands a tremendous source of real-time information and possibilities that unfortunately have been left mainly untapped by the Belgian independent designer.

Many high-end names have been skeptical about embracing digital. Some feel they will lose a connection with the audience, as their label is about high touch, high involvement purchasing (Timms, M. 2015). But a recent study from boutique marketing consultancy Unity Marketing proved differently:

“Millennials don’t want their mother’s or their grandmother’s luxury brands. They want brands that make a meaningful connection with them, and today many of those connections are made online. Being relevant to the customer is key and any luxury brands ignoring the needs, wants and desires of their customers risk making themselves irrelevant.” – Pam Danziger, author of Putting the Luxe Back in Luxury: How New Consumer Values are Redefining the Way We Market Luxury.

Exactly as Li Edelkoort expressed in her Anti Fashion Manifesto, the Belgian designer is stuck in the past instead of looking to the future for change and creativity. A label cannot ignore technology if it wants to stay innovative and avant-garde, especially not if these elements are so deeply rooted into our daily lives. Future-oriented brands no longer make distinctions between offline and online, but incorporate digital into the center of all their major marketing initiatives (Kansara, V. 2016).

Combining earned media with owned and paid media offers much more security and effectiveness within the industry. Digitalization and consequently the power of social media even give these 3 media elements the possibilities of stretching much further than only offline promotion. The success of all these elements relies on balance. The balance between all 3 elements – earned, paid and owned, the balance between offline and online but also the balance between avant-garde and marketable. The Belgian designer has always focused on a creativity lead business model creating avant-garde yet wearable products. This focus on the need of the consumer has always been important in the creation of new, ‘never-seen-before’ products, and now that the consumer is going online the labels should follow:

The following graph visualizes how the independent Belgian designer can implement the Owned, Paid, Earned media strategy in a way that it influences and attracts both online and offline consumers.

Similarly like the clothing of Belgian designers has often dazed or sparked the audiences’ attention, the content a collection surrounds itself with, also needs to blow the viewers mind. Only then, an earned media strategy becomes fully prosperous.

Up till today the Belgian designer has managed to secure a large part within the International fashion landscape. Both international press and buyers are keen to find out what is happening within the Belgian fashion industry and frequently a Belgian name wins an international award or

Figure 7. The complete Owned, Paid, Earned media strategy (source: Forrester Research)
People within the fashion industry know the successes of Belgian fashion, but far too often this reputation is left unknown outside the industry. With no active marketing strategy and only earned media featured on industry specific media outlets, no new audience is gained. The Belgian independent designer is set with its current consumers but with time evolving and the Internet gaining more power, adaptation is necessary to stay relevant within the industry and hold the interests of the newly evolved ‘screwder’ shopper.
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Video's / Documentaries


Books


K. Van Godtsenhoven (2013) De wonderjaren van de Antwerpse mode 6+1. in Fashion Antwerp Academy 50. Lannoo, Tielt


S. Menkens (2013) A sense of Place (p. 41 – 46) in Fashion Antwerp Academy 50. Lannoo, Tielt


V. Windels (2010). This is Belgium, Dit is Belgisch. P. 13, 29, 45. Davidfonds. Leuven

Websites

A. F. Vandevorst: www.afvandevorst.be
Ann Demeulemeester: www.anndemeulemeester.com


Bernard Willhelm: www.bernhardwillhelm.com
Capara: www.capara.be

Christian Wijnants: www.christianwijnants.be

Dries Van Noten: www.driesvannoten.be
Haider Ackermann: www.haiderrackermann.com

Honest By: www.honestby.com
Jacquemus: www.jacquemus.com
Tim Coppens: www.timcoppens.com

Raf Simons: www.rafsimons.com

Veronique Branquino: www.veroniquebranquinho.com

Vetements: www.vetementswebsite.com

Walter van Beirendenck: www.waltervanbeirendenck.com
Images

      SS15 Dries Van Noten. Credits: Dries Van Noten


P. 23  Resort 17 Christian Wijnants – Credits: Christian Wijnants
       Summer 17 Christian Wijnants - Credits: Christian Wijnants
       Fall Winter 17-18 Christian Wijnants - Credits: Christian Wijnants
## Exhibit 1 - Overview Most known designers linked to Belgium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designer</th>
<th>Founding Date</th>
<th>Creative Director</th>
<th>Menswear / Womenswear</th>
<th>Education Location</th>
<th>Side Job</th>
<th>Fashion Week</th>
<th>Online Stores</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Social Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann Demeulemeester</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Sebastien Meunier</td>
<td>Menswear &amp; Womenswear</td>
<td>Antwerp Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dries Van Noten</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Dries Van Noten</td>
<td>Menswear &amp; Womenswear</td>
<td>Antwerp Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter Van Beirendooik</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Walter Van Beirendooik</td>
<td>Menswear</td>
<td>Antwerp Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raf Simons</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Raf Simons</td>
<td>Menswear</td>
<td>Antwerp Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.F. Vandevorst</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>An Vandevorst and Filip Arickx</td>
<td>Menswear</td>
<td>Antwerp Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter Van Beirendooik</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Walter Van Beirendooik</td>
<td>Menswear</td>
<td>Antwerp Academy</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Wijnants</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Christian Wijnants</td>
<td>Menswear</td>
<td>Antwerp Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronique Branquinho</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Veronique Branquinho</td>
<td>Menswear</td>
<td>Antwerp Academy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[9# Appendix]
Mr. Marc Jacobs 1998 John Galliano  
Womenswear & Menswear  
Antwerp Academy  
Paris  
paris x  
Paris - show + showroom  
Yes  
1.7 Million  
402,608  
Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations, inspiration, seasonal posts  

Tim Coppens 2011 Tim Coppens  
Menswear  
Antwerp Academy  
New York  
New York - show + showroom  
No  
29 300  
6972  
Collection shoots, personal pictures, inspiration, collaborations  

Bernard Willhelm 1998  
Bernard Willhelm  
Womenswear & Menswear  
Antwerp Academy  
Los Angeles  
x  
Fazes  
No  
23 000  
4608  
Personal pictures, Collections overview, inspiration  

Peter Pilotto 2006  
Peter Pilotto  
Womenswear & Menswear  
Antwerp Academy  
London  
x  
London - show + showroom  
No  
192 000  
35127  
Collection overview, collaborations, editorial, inspiration  

Vivienne 2009  
Vivienne  
Womenswear & Menswear  
Antwerp Academy  
Zurich  
Creative director of Balenciaga  
Paris - show + showroom  
No  
1.8 Million  
13346  
Collections overview, store openings, important collaborations, inspiration, seasonal posts  

Exhibit 2 - Personal Interviews 1  
Name: Charlye Marotta    
Function: Press & Marketing Assistant  

How would you describe your role as Press & Marketing at Christian Wijnants? Think of responsibilities, management style, main focus,...  

- Coordinate the sample traffic  
- Liaison with press  
- Archive all press clipping  
- Prepare social media: Facebook & Instagram  
- Create website and e-commerce platform  
- Support with event planning  
- Inputting data to database  
- Liaison with press  
- Coordinate the sample traffic  

What do you define as the main focus of Christian Wijnants? (sales, product, design, marketing, production)? And on which place comes communication and marketing?  

I think the main focus is sales and product.  

What, in your opinion, is the main struggle for Christian Wijnants concerning growth? And which changes do you feel could positively affect the label?  

They focus on sales but didn’t try to grow their client base. Because not enough people work full time at the company that can follow up a project from beginning to end. Having more people work full time is hard to create solid and lasting relationships with client.  

Which communication strategy does Christian Wijnants use? And do you feel it relevant in our current time?  

I don’t really think there is a set strategy. They communicate the show and new collections to existing clients and the rest is done by a PR agency. The newsletter is sent out once in a while, but there is not an actual schedule.  

How about Social Media? Is Christian Wijnants using their online presence to the fullest?
extend?
Social Media is done by the marketing intern, and is to be approved by the Creative Director. What is not really efficient, as social media is not always his priority it often happens that the content doesn’t get posted. Interns usually stay between 3” to 6 months what means that overtime someone new joins the tone of voice and social media plan change strategy completely.

What is your advice concerning the marketing strategy of Christian Wijnants?
I think they should make an actually plan that is followed up by a person that works full-time so everything is coordinated.

- Make sure that website and all social media platforms are updates when anything happens (events, press coverage, new collection, show, designer interviews, special project)
- Monthly newsletter to drive the engagement and e-commerce sales and gain brand awareness. When creating the newsletter think of certain events that cater to your demographic (Christmas shopping, new outfit for new years, mothers day, …).
- Making sure you create engagement on social media with relevant industry members (stylist, photographers, bloggers,…) but also show interest to people posting about your clothing.
- To drive online sales have a competition on social media, or free shipping for first 15 clients, by creating these incentives your outreach keeps going up.

What is your advice concerning the general strategy of Christian Wijnants?
I think it would be in their benefit that employees stay longer with the company. Because of the workload and stress a lot of people change jobs. If they would have an incentive/ goal to work toward I think that would help to keep people motivated.

Exhibit 2 - Personal Interview 2
Name: Rosemarijn Bolraap
Function: Sales & Marketing Intern

How would you describe your role as Press & Marketing intern at Christian Wijnants?
Think of responsibilities, management style, main focus,…

- Coordinate the sample traffic
- Liaison with press
- Archive all press clipping
- Prepare social media: Facebook & Instagram
- Prepare communication tools: sales books, fabric books, press kits
- Analyze sales and implement new orders
- Assist with event-planning

What do you define as the main focus of Christian Wijnants? (sales, product, design, marketing, production) And on which place comes communication and marketing?
Design comes in at the first place, sales comes in quite high when looking at the commerciality of the collection, but not much attention is spend on finding new clients or improving current.

What, in your opinion, is the main struggle for Christian Wijnants concerning growth? And which changes do you feel could positively affect the label?
Over the last few years CW didn’t get many good reviews from international press, really limiting their growth concerning stockist. Many interested buyers cancel appointments when a bad review is linked to that certain collection, especially if it comes from important press such as Vogue.
Another important aspect is the lack of employees, being replaced by a cheaper less qualities option, interns. When a new intern arrives, work is lost and needs to be regained completely, changing the tone of voice and efficiency of a brand. Investing in an extra marketing employee could drastically enhance the brands communication and professionalism.

Which communication strategy does Christian Wijnants use? And do you feel it is relevant in our current time?
They don’t use a certain communication strategy. They mostly rely on press to write about them
and further have runway shows to communicate the collection.

How about Social Media? Is Christian Wijnants using their online presence to the fullest extending?
Social Media Consist out of Instagram and Facebook. Since the creative director believes that the target consumer is not active on social media, not much attention is put into it. Interns are responsible and create the content, while the creative director wants to approve all content. Similar to the communication strategy there also is no plan concerning social media. Runway shows are posted in combination with inspiration and other news. In busy periods nothing is done with social media as it is not seen as a priority.

What is your advice concerning the marketing strategy of Christian Wijnants?
Creating 1 tone of voice and identity would already help the brand communication. Christian Wijnants should also be more pro-active towards branding, now not much thought is put into the presentation of collections, invitations, events, … while there are so much creative opportunities to make the label stand out.

Use social media in a more creative way, instead of doing the obvious runway looks. Jacquemus is a good example of a designer that embraced online media and gave it their own recognizable signature.

What is your advice concerning the general strategy of Christian Wijnants?
I felt that the constant departure and arrival of new employees and interns really lowered efficiency and team spirit within the company.
Christian Wijnants wants control over all parts off the business, which is good. But also extremely inefficient as time is constantly lost when we have to disturb him to ask for approval. He should learn to trust his employees with certain tasks that aren’t so important to constantly ask approval for.

Exhibit 3 - Vogue Runway reviews of Christian Wijnants.
"I wanted something very airy, very light, very easy—and quite minimal as well,” said Christian Wijnants at his presentation today. Well, consider that job done. But . . . hold on . . . presentation? Wijnants has stepped off the runway. He said this was a result of the opening of his first flagship store, in Antwerp, a project that has been dominating his time. Hmmmm. Hmmm. Well, whatever the reason, the absence of a runway proved no greatly significant obstruction to the delivery of this collection. Wijnants said he had been thinking about Brancusi, and there was some correlation to that evident in the irregular lumpen-ness, hinting at distorted symmetry, in his fil coupe applications. More broadly though, this was an efficient but not especially uplifting compilation of contemporary fashion tropes. The strongest pieces included a tightly fringed kicky jumpsuit, and a blouse fronted with frayed panels of clothes that transformed the canvas pants obscured beneath them into the viable foundation of an evening look. Fil coupe suiting printed with a tonal monkey relief motif, frayed panel cotton viscose knit tees, some linen-lined scuba-foam hot pants, and fringing galore on denim-chambray separates were all fine and dandy. It was interesting, though, how the transplantation of this collection from runway to showroom rather sucked the oomph out of it. This collection was full of solidly tasteful left-field pieces, but there was not a great deal to get properly excited about here.
- Luke Leitch about the SS 16 Collection of Christian Wijnants

Christian Wijnants thinks that, subconsciously, the artist—the much-Instagrammed buoyant sculpture installed on Italy’s Lake Iseo this past summer— influenced his thinking for Spring. “I like the idea of nylon and creating a bit of a parachute,” said the designer, further interpreting Christo and his late wife, Jeanne-Claude, with their famous earlier works of billowing, fabric-wrapped buildings. With scale and graphic impact as his mandate, he ended up delivering a collection that paraded a panoply of aesthetic motifs, from monochrome to polka-dotted to floral printed. Wijnants’s best parts were long, curving-around-the-back windbreakers, which achieved his parachute-channeling goal and added an athleisurely kick. A caftan in resilient orange, similar to the color often used by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, was also a standout. Wijnants chose the song “Opus” by electronic musician Eric Prydz for his soundtrack. The
track’s buildup is slow, but the drop is highly satisfying. When that crescendo broke over the runway, the tempo shift wasn’t quite as fulfilling; hyper-saturated prints of flora on silk tops, pleated knit skirts, and high-waisted trousers felt less convincing and a bit frenetic. But then again, each model had little lines of neon paint applied as makeup. Maybe she was going from art-world day job to nighttime rave. It wouldn’t be the first time.

- Nick Remsen about the SS17 Collection of Christian Wijnants

Exhibit 4 - Screenshots of the Facebook and Instagram page of Christian Wijnants