

# What bags tell about women

*"Every woman has an uneasy look if somebody glances into its sacred privacy. A decent man should always tactfully stare at the ceiling whenever his companion opens her bag." New York Times 1945.*

We shamelessly talked with women about the content of their bag. So did our partners around the world, from Shanghai to Stockholm. Bags from 16 countries tell the stories of their owners. Feminine insights based on one of the most intimate accessories in a woman's life: her handbag.

Getting curious?

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## How intimate can you get?

Our aim was to find out whether the handbag – being the ultimate feminine accessory- could be used as a tool for getting intimate with consumers. Female consumers. We talked with women about the content of their bag. And so did our partners, from Shanghai to Stockholm. We have collected more than 150 bag stories from 17 cities around the world. This paper will give you an international perspective on a universal female bond (me and my bag). We learned that a handbag is not only an object of love and frustration, but also an artefact that allows you to dig deeper in the functional and emotional needs of women. Sometimes plain and ordinary, sometimes touching and hilarious, but always real and fascinating.

**Absolutely feminine** It's a fact that the economic power of women is still on the rise. The labor participation of women around the world is increasing. The number of female entrepreneurs is growing fast. Female millionaires are on the rise (Britain's millionaires in 2020 will consist for 53% of women).<sup>1</sup>

Millionaire or not, women are responsible for over 80% of all purchases.<sup>2</sup> Also in those areas you might think are male dominated, like financial services, technical appliances, IT solutions and automotive.

Women of this century are the most powerful consumers ever. Female marketing is a hot topic. But marketing of products and services is hardly in line with the way women think, feel and act. Marketers better listen to them and understand what women want, get more intimate with female consumers.

In the past decades market researchers and marketers have done many attempts to get more intimate with their consumers. We stayed at their homes, we went shopping with them, we shared brand experiences, we co-created with consumers, but amazingly the female handbag has never been on the agenda.

The handbag is the most intimate female accessory carried by almost every woman in the world. Imagine how many handbags there are in the world living their lives on the shoulder – or in the hand of its owner.

The interesting thing about bags is that the inside as well as the outside tells something about its owner. A bag can reveal a woman's age, express her style, indicate her status, what she is doing in life and

what is important to her.

The aim of our study was exploring the handbag to find out whether it can be used as a tool for generating female insights. Help us understand what really make women tick by getting access to their handbag.

## Thanks for inviting me

**It's a fact** that we collected 150 bag stories in 17 cities around the world in 6 weeks time.

The idea of researching female handbags made people tick. Researchers as well as respondents. People just loved to participate. One of the most striking insights of this study is that handbags capture the imagination whether you are male or female. We all have stories, images, associations and memories connected to our own bags or the bags of the people we know. We are intrigued and curious to find out what's in there, whether you a researcher, a respondent or an expert.

17 Research companies participated. Small companies, flexible, highly professional, open to new ways of generating insights, new ways of working and new ways of organising, based on trust and respect. We talked with women about their bags in Auckland, Singapore, Delhi, Shanghai, Moscow, Istanbul, Cape Town, Rome, Paris, Hamburg, Amsterdam, Stockholm, London, New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico City. Staging 3 star players: The owner, the bag and its content.

The focus of this study has been on story creating and not on format. We had no strict methodology for generating insights. We developed a topic guide, but asked everyone to use a research- and reporting technique they felt was most appropriate from a personal and cultural perspective. So we ended up using a mixture of more traditional qualitative research techniques (groups, in-depths, observations, bag parties) but also on-line discussions, desk and internet (re) searches, or a combination of The deliverables were amazing and incredibly rich. We had weblogs ([ukbagstories.blogspot.com](http://ukbagstories.blogspot.com), [nzbagstories.blogspot.com](http://nzbagstories.blogspot.com), [nlbagstories.blogspot.com](http://nlbagstories.blogspot.com)), chat sessions, photo and video reports, audiotapes, transcripts, analysis in power point, a semiotic perspective chat sessions, photo and video reports, audiotapes, transcripts, analysis in power point, a semiotic perspective

The Kelly bag, to be ordered from Hermes Stores, assuming you get on the waitinglist.



“For the sweetest mum on earth, really the sweetest.” Card kept in July's bag from her daughter when she was 8 (she's 16 now)



sessions, photo and video reports, audiotapes, transcripts, analysis in power point, a semiotic perspective on women and their bags and even songs about handbags.

We firmly believe in cross discipline ways of working. Enriching the stories told, enriching the way of reporting results. We worked side by side with photographers, we talked with the director of the one and only Museum of Bags and Purses in Amsterdam, we had a copywriter involved, asked journalists to help us identify the best parts from a story telling perspective. We'll have an ad agency helping us presenting results in Istanbul going beyond the traditional PowerPoint slides.

Let's see what we found!

## The past of the Purse

**It's a fact** that the bag became the exclusive private sphere of women in the 16th century. <sup>3</sup>

Since earliest times, bags have been useful implements for both women and men. But at the end of the 16th century bags for men fell into disuse with the arrival of pockets in men's clothing. Since these days bags became the exclusive domain of women till today, carried around the waist or under their huge dresses.

Only at the beginning of the 20th century the handbag as we now know it became popular. Fashion changed, tie pockets could no longer be stuffed underneath dresses. And with the railway spreading its tracks around the globe women developed new needs because they were now on the go.

The emancipation of women had a huge influence on the handbag. Due to women's increasing participation in the labor force the number of practical demands on a bag grew. The differentiation of handbags started; briefcases for work, strolling and visiting bags for daytime, elegant evening bags

Besides being functional containers, bags have always been emotional carriers: The briefcase was designed to carry love letters and other valuable papers and messages from your (secret) lover. Bags used to be a gift or a souvenir reflecting what is important in the world around you (e.g. the arrival of the first giraffe 'Zarafa' in France in 1826, 'Sirius' the first steamship to cross the Atlantic Ocean in 1838), in your personal world (e.g. specialized wedding purses) and who is important.

A famous lady with a preference for a certain type of bag led to first baptism of a bag who later became one of the world's most coveted bags: The Kelly bag.

## Me and my bag

**It's a fact** that 95% of women in developed countries own a handbag, or 2, 3, 5, 20 or more.

The bag still is female territory: almost every woman in the world owns a handbag, or should we rather say: at least one bag. Almost all women in our study have a collection of bags: 2-6 bags actively in use and some more kept in reserve. Italian women seem to suffer from what others called 'bag fetishism' owning between 20 and 60 bags! The number of bags depends on your bag relationship: Either there is the 'one and only' bag for a certain period of time after which it is buried in the bag cemetery, -typically in your cupboard or underneath your bed. This 'sequential monogamy' results when you prefer a one-on-one fit with you. You might have one or maybe two bags that need to match every outfit and all the things you do. Not too colorful, most likely to be black, brown or another neutral color.

"It's the one-bag-fits-all style, the bag doesn't stand out and it fits with almost all outfits." (Chicago)

"I am not the type of woman who has a big bag collection. This one simply does it for me." (Hamburg)

The 'polygamist' bag relationship going along with a set of different bags for different occasions, contexts, and moods – open for new arrivals and dropouts. The frequent change of bag is more of an effort since the content needs to be transferred too. Maybe one of the reasons why there is always more than one lipstick ending up in your bag?

"My bag is an accessory enhancing my dress." (Rome)

"I love to have different bags with different sizes and styles although it's a bit of a mission to decant the content of my bag all the time." (San Francisco)

"If I wear an Indian outfit I will carry another bag than with my Western outfit" (Delhi)

Frances, NYC, 27.  
Most favourite bag is the one given to her by a friend. It is the perfect match – in size, color and stylishness. If her bag were a man she would definitely date it. Frances' bag is full of surprises; fake boobs, photo's of her ex-boyfriend and a single ring



You could argue that bags are unfortunate creatures: they are hardly taken care of, they have to accept and absorb everything and even when loved as a trustworthy companion they have a rather short life span:

“I think as a bag I’d be a bit worried about belonging to me – probably walking past all the old bags each day my bag thinks: ‘I’ll be like one of those bags, in 6 months time I’ll probably get dumped.’” (Auckland)

“The bag is a friend in a certain period of your life. When you change from that lifestyle or stage, you abandon it and get out of touch” (Mexico City)

But there are also lucky bags, lasting a lifetime – and longer- carefully looked after, and stored in soft bags. Bags like these have a true special meaning for their owner, have been hard to get, had to hard worked for or have special meaning attached to it.

“My handbags are very, very important to me. I love them. I keep them at the top of the closet in my daughter’s room. Most of them are designer bags. I keep them in their nice felt bags to keep them safe and protected. Each of them has a story.” (London)

## A ticket into womanhood

**It’s a fact** that 4 out of 5 women remember their first bag

Bags are a vehicle of transition and transformation in a woman’s life. They come and go with different life stages and passages in a woman’s lifeline, her locations and destinations.

The first bag is for many ‘a rite de passage’ from childhood into womanhood. But also different bags often mark the following stages in a woman’s journey.

For many respondents their first bag evokes strong memories. Of being that little girl you once was, fond of pink and glitter, fringes and fairies, daisies and Disney.

The first bag often is a present by mother or grandmother. Most of the times it is a special and valuable bag given the importance of the initiation into womanhood.

“Me and my cousin all got a Louis Vuitton purse

from grandma. As a little girl, of course I had no idea what a Louis was but I somehow knew that they were very important because when it rained, my grandma would hide them so daintily under her coat or umbrella and make the maddest dash to a car I’d ever seen.” (San Francisco)

The bag provides the girl with emotional security and replaces the teddy bear as externalized comfort zone when ‘going out’. The bag helps the school-girl find her way in the new social environment by signaling to whom she wants to belong to and whose company she is not thrilled of. When entering college or university, the university bag has to cater for different spheres in her life for the first time: the ‘professional sphere’ of the university and at the same time it’s the bag she wears when meeting her peers. Not an easy task!

“It is dangerous to wear the wrong satchel when coming to college because it needs to be the right one to be cool.” (Paris)

Several of our interview partners started their personal bag story with the notion of their critical relationship with their feminine side, which is reflected by their handbag virginity:

“It took me years to buy my first handbag, I just hated it. I was very much against the feminine side and didn’t know how to express it.” (Cape Town)

A new bag often marks a new journey in life. A new phase, with new social and psychological roles. Equipped with the handbag as reservoir of feminine appeal they start secondary school, the first ballet class, moving to the city, the first job, getting married, becoming a mother.

“It makes me feel professional. Like I’m part of the working world living in a big city. I’m not a student anymore.” (New York)

“My handbags used to always be black. Now that I’m a mother I feel like it’s important not to wear black all the time. For her. I think she needs stimulation that comes from colour. So, this handbag is not black.” (London)

Woman might be ageing beauties, so are their bags. In contrast to other symbols of femininity, you will probably always have a bag on your side.

“The mid aged women care more about quality, materials and brands. They tend to use smaller bags which show their maturity and reliability.” (Shanghai)

Lou, Amsterdam, 47 .  
Lou’s bag is her only anchor in life. Lou is homeless, wandering the streets. Her bag is a ‘Prada’ – bought for 2 euro’s at a market. It fits her, it’s sturdy, It’s feminine,. She always carries in her bag a little key-found somewhere. Her hope for having a home some day



“I can’t figure myself wearing high heels when I am old, but I am sure I still will wear a good looking purse.” (London)

The relationship with bags ranges from flirtation to symbiosis. It might be stronger or weaker when compared to other passionate relationships – such as with shoes. You might appreciate what you have got or only value it when you have lost it. It can be at its promising beginning or disillusioned end, BUT it is always a very personal and emotional relationship reaching beyond functionality into your heart and soul.

## Control and comfort zone

**It’s a fact** that a good bag is in the Top 10 of the personal wish list of women.<sup>4</sup>

Bags, bags, bags. Why can’t women survive without them? What we have learnt about women through our bag stories is to cherish the importance of the increasing diversity of women’s roles. She is a professional, a mother, a commuter, a lover, a daughter, a golfer, a wife, a shopper, a friend. So is her bag. The female handbag is a metaphorical melting pot for the life of women.

From the research we distilled four basic roles a bag might fulfill for its owner.

### The bag as means of control

The ‘being prepared kit’ which helps to have control over things that will or might happen. A practical and multi-functional container. Making sure you’ve got everything you might need at hand. The mobile tool kit needed to transform from serious business woman to caring mother to party animal.

“My bag is my life organizer.” (Singapore)

“Without my bag, my world would tremble.” (Cape Town)

### The bag as comfort zone

The ‘feel good provider’ who can make you look and feel good. Bags give and exude self-confidence and can give you an attitude. There are bags you simply enjoy having close to you. Bags can provide protection and comfort. And some bags got the looks, so gorgeous they just make you feel happy.

“It makes me look like Jackie Kennedy, only my bag is bigger.” (Rome)

“I always make sure I take my best, most expensive handbag to important meetings. It’s like make-up, or a great outfit, it makes me feel confident.” (London)

“I was wearing my favorite handbag, so I knew nothing can go wrong.” (San Francisco)

### The bag to convey a message about you

Your bag can serve as ‘impression manager’ telling others how you want to be seen. It’s a social marker signaling where you want to fit in and where to stand out. A bag can show that you are a proud citizen of your hometown. It can be the proof that you have made it. Or that you just don’t care about making a statement.

“The first day I have this new bag, makes me feel wonderful. Having all the looks from others – look at her with this gorgeous and expensive bag.” (Moscow)

“For me a handbag is a woman’s status symbol. It communicates that we are successful and that we have money to spend on something we carry every day” (London)

### The bag to create your personal identity

Your bag can be the canvas for your self-portrait. She helps to shape your individuality, identity and style. The bag connects you with your feminine side, your maturity or your playfulness. It expresses your virtues and vices.

“Due to changes in my lifestyle, this bag is more feminine than others. I am happy that it helps me to realize a charming and feminine part of me.” (Shanghai)

“This bag has superpowers to morph into a sophisticated evening bag as well as a day bag when she gets rid of the strap. That’s the real expression of my personality.” (Auckland)

For some women one role will dominate most of the times, for others a bag has to fulfill all roles at the same time. Most women use a specific bag according to the predominant role. Others follow the one-bag-fits-all approach.

Roles are influenced by your life stage. When a woman becomes a mother her bags become mainly means of control and comfort. But some day they want to break away from it all and reinforce their self-image again.

“I still want my ‘freedom bag’ with which I can feel encumbered and light. I would also have my ‘mother me’ bag which would be for me and my

‘City Bags’ with the name of the city or the city arms printed on the cover are a trend in Germany. They are also used for advertising of the city’s places of interests.



daughter, but it would also be a bit more fun and not too serious.” (Auckland)

Roles are influenced by your culture. Female Londoners using the tube regularly will value control and protection more than the ladies from Auckland whose car is their second handbag. Bag stories from all continents reveal that different cultures have their typical centre of gravity in 1 or 2 roles. Women in Shanghai, Cape Town and Moscow use their bags more for demonstrating social status and success. Bags of women in Stockholm, Amsterdam, Hamburg or Rome make their owners rather feel good than important, they reflect more their individuality than social class. In Latin America, bags stage women’s strive for balancing their need for self-expression and indicating their position in the social ladder.

If you want to understand the needs resulting from women’s many roles, have a closer look at their bags. If you want to cater for women’s needs, get into their bags!

## Don’t touch my bag!

**It’s a fact** that Margaret Thatcher once described her bag as the only safe place in Downing Street. <sup>5</sup>

This mysterious thing called a ‘bag’. Each has its own, unique story. A bag tells the story of the bag and the story of its owner – and how they both have met. There is a bond between bag and owner – functional or emotional.

It’s a private space of women where she stores the things she needs and wants to have with her wherever she goes. Her wallet, phone(s), make-up, reminders, vouchers, paraphernalia, talismans and memories. Every item inside represents a small piece of the kaleidoscope of its owner’s personality. And that’s maybe why a bag is such a private territory.

It’s a universal feeling; women around the world don’t like to be peeped in their bag. Is it because they have anything to hide? No. What we found in their bags wasn’t that special, provocative or mysterious. And the content of bags is more or less the same, no matter where you are, Shanghai or Stockholm. There’s no big difference in what women carry around all day.

For the majority of women their bag is a private zone, it’s theirs and theirs alone. There’s no secret but you can’t get in!

And they feel strongly about that. Talking your bag being peeped in brings out the bitchy side in women. It evokes fierce reactions.

“The bag maybe is the only thing a woman can have to herself. The privacy where men do not get to look into” (Cape Town).

“I hate it when someone is sticking fingers in my bag, its mine” (Amsterdam)

“I’m not nearly as together as I try to appear; I’m neither Super Mom or Super Prof. That’s another reason I don’t want anyone else looking in there – I prefer my disorganization to remain under wraps. I certainly don’t want my husband in there, as I don’t want his opinions on its contents.” (Chicago)

And don’t ever peep in a bag of a Chinese woman. It’s signals bad socialization.

“I will feel uncomfortable if somebody peep in my bag. It is weird. My bag is more like my own territory. Other people can’t just come in without asking for permission. At least it shows that guy is not well educated.” (Shanghai)

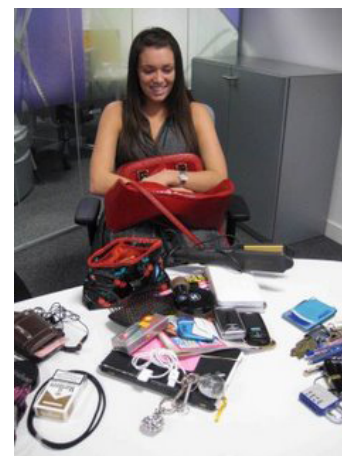
“I will not let my daughter to get in my bag because it is not a good behaviour. It is not good for her grow-up.” (Shanghai)

Bags are a protected, intimate, feminine space. One of the last taboos – at least in the Western world. That’s why it arouses curiosity. Did our bag digging didn’t reveal any secrets at all? Yes a few. Some bags proved to be a hiding place for money to spent in the casino, cigarettes and cigarette butts, small luxury items bought, secret dreams and fake boobs. The biggest secret revealed was: there are no secrets but its mine!

## How a phone can hide behind a lipstick

**It’s a fact** that women spend on average 76 days of their lives looking for stuff in their bags. <sup>6</sup>

What’s in those bags that arouse curiosity, that women protect being their ‘materialized privacy’, that is not very special but can’t be looked at, that eats precious time just to find something. Women turned their bags upside down, for the cause of research. Thank you women! It proved that the



## No wonder you can't find your keys! This is what we found.

Healthcare insurances	Wallets	GPS	Pepper spray	Eye shadow
Business cards	Coins	Compass	Coin purses	Appointment slips
Electric toothbrush	Books	Theatre program	To do lists	Articles
Toothpaste	UV Blocks	Coupons	Barbie wallet	Magazines
Deodorants	Money	3 weeks old Apple	Basketball schedule	Lottery tickets
MP3- players	ID cards	Nicorette gum	Cigarette butts	Matches
Orange Fan	Driving licences	Scissors	VIP cards	Cleaning tissues
Dental floss Dental sticks	Debit cards	Wristband	Letters to Edgar	Tweezers
Candy papers	Credit cards	Old visa bill	String	Hair foams
Body lotions	Pictures	Hairbrushes	Safety pins	Playing cards
Herbal towel	Name boyfriend	Shampoo tester	Phone chargers	Newspaper tear outs
Evian spray	Single ring	PDA's	Postcards	Picture frame hook
Tampons	(Broken) jewellery	Router 's	Mints	Bicycle keys
Calendars	Love letters	Stamps	Buttons	Ballet school schedule
Contact lenses	Passports	Pens	Nougat	Tax return forms
Listerine	Student cards	Pencils	Old boarding card	Visa statement
Wig	Loyalty cards	Water bottles	Tampon holders	AA card
Contact lenses liquid	Gift cards	Chewing gum	Helicopter ride flyer	Shag
Band-aids	Subway cards	Rubber bands	Nintendo	Maria amulet
Painkillers	Bus tickets	Paper clips	Fork	Extra headscarf
Wet tissues	Metro tickets	Highlighters	Slips	Hair straightener
Pillboxes	Breathe products	Jump drive for computer	Antihistamines	Asthma inhaler
Lipsticks	Cell phones	Receipts	GOLD Casino card	Umbrellas
Blush ons	I-pods	Paper cups	Grandma's passport	Half eaten chocolate bar
Sewing bags	Library cards	Snacks	Sticky sweets	Toilet role
Recycling bags	Bandages	Swiss army knife	Quotation China works	Petrol card
Rosary	Biscuits	City Maps	Don't forget notes	Eye drops
Bag of medals	Isothermal mug	Tube maps	Car radio	Bills to pay
Cigarettes	USB-sticks	Notebooks	Keys of spare house	Voice recorders
Lighters	CD's	Address books	Keys of parents house	Salt
Concert tickets	Spare tights	Japanese Van's	Keys of cleaning houses	Sugar bags
Fake boobs	Underwear	Hand creams	Receipt therapy session	Dreams
Grocery bags	Scarves	Make-up bags	Microphone	Zovirax
Reading glasses	Gloves	Children's toys	Bio-enzymes	Nintendo games
Handicapped sign	Laptops	Chinese herbal medicine	Vitamin pills	Tax refund
High heels	Barrettes	Travel plans	Needle box	Thermometers
Tri-fold rosary	Shopping lists	Sex & City DVD	Office access	Migraine pills
Tissues	Jewels	Gas bills	Shopping vouchers	Lucky purse
Sanitary napkins	Medicine prescriptions	Hospital records	Inhalers	Tea bags
Puppy	Used matches	Lip pencils	Work files	cheque
Lip-gloss	Recharge for Mont Blanc	Tums	Bottle openers	Hormone pills
Concealers	Batteries	Frequent flyer cards	Pencil sharpeners	Socks
Mascara's	Demake-up	Hand sanitizers		
House keys	Apple			
Car keys	Old train tickets			
Hairpins	Post-it notes			
Teaspoon	Caps			
Kitchen knives	Sweaters			
Hair bands	Vest			
Planners	Calculators			
Cuddles	(mini) Perfume			
Notebooks	Sunglasses			
Throat pastilles	Check-books			
Office badges	Wipes			
Earphones	Mirrors			
E-dictionary	Gift cards			
Powders				

We did not find: guns, drugs, dildos and condoms. This might be due to the target we interviewed. Most amazing: the puppy in a Gucci bag, a huge kitchen knife, a GPS and compass in the same bag.

outside doesn't say anything about the inside. The outside may look professionally organised, the inside may be a mess. The outside may look businesslike, the inside very soft and feminine. So don't judge a bag by the outside only!

The sorts of things living in a bag are interacting with each other in amazing (dis) harmony. There's the old apple lying on the Chanel sunglasses. There's the lipstick on top of the earrings. There's the toy scratching the phone. There are the keys bumping the reading glasses. And the reading glasses bumping the water bottle. Many items live outside the cases or pouches meant to protect them while these cases and pouches live in the bag as well. Among lots of vouchers, bills, receipts, little notes, sweets, mints and chewing gum. Most handbags we saw are unorganized – even although there are special compartments meant to make (bag)life easier. Many women don't use them while being on the go, getting on with life. No wonder we spent lots of time searching for stuff in our bags, your best friend becoming your worst enemy. And the bigger the bags the bigger the problems. Items most looked for are keys, phones, wallets and make-up.

"It really can drive me crazy if I can not find what I need" (Amsterdam)

"An orderly bag signals a clear uncluttered mind. A messy bag means that things can be forgotten and something could go wrong" (Moscow)

"What can I say? My bag tells that I have many roles, that I am very disorganised, but coated in a presentable fashion statement. There are some signals that I will never be able to get on top of the past, but happy to be always planning for the future". (Auckland)

Bag management seems to be hard work, and having enough trouble of keeping control on your own stuff in your bag, plenty of women also carry stuff on behalf of their kids or partners. A funny finding of our research was that good things seem to come in three-fold. We found lots of bags containing 3 lipsticks or 3 mascara's or 3 pairs of sunglasses, 3 pairs of reading glasses

## It's all in the bag

Some bags looked like Mary Poppins' bag of medicine and magical furniture – with an endless list of 'good to have', 'you never know' and 'in case of' items, whereas others look like a logistic centre, clean and well organised and everything

can be found within a split second. Other bags can be best described as \$800 trash bins.

We found bags to be a:

### Financial centre

Nearly everyone carries some items of financial nature. It allows you to turn you private self into a consumer. Mostly in the form of a wallet, containing (too) many bank- and credit cards, cash, loyalty cards, travels cards, coins, coins, coins and coins.

### Beauty parlour

An amazing amount of lipsticks, mascaras, mirrors, nail clippers, tweezers as free floating objects in the bag. Ready for instant use. But interestingly enough many women carry in addition a separate make-up bag containing similar stuff for different usage. No wonder phones hide behind lipsticks!

### Emergency kit

In 'the you never know what might happen' section we found sewing kits, extra pairs of socks, clean underwear, toilet rolls, inhalers, lozenges and loads of painkillers. A headache can hit you at any time and you better be prepared.

### Protection centre

All sorts of products to protect yourself from smell, bacteria's, rain, UV radiation, sun attacks. Toothbrushes, toothpaste, deodorants, hand creams, tampons, sanitary napkins, reading glasses, UV blocks umbrella's, sunglasses, pepper sprays.

### House of spirits

Bags are also hosting esotherical and religious objects like rosaries, church membership cards, medals and images, amulets, tarot cards, talismans, the virgin Mary and dreams – written on pieces of paper or the back of an envelope.

### Connection centre

All the stuff you need to be connected to your private and professional life. By technical gear like notebooks, pda's, laptops and second (or third) phones. Or emotionally by letters, photographs, the name of your boyfriend.

### Snackbar

We are on the go so we have to eat, drink. Bags are filled with bottles of water, chewing gum, something to still your first hunger or your craving for sweet. And of course for mothers, a bribery set in case their little angels turn into screaming monsters.

### Entertainment centre

MP3 players, books, magazines, digital games, especially important for commuters. Toys for the kids. They creep in the bag unnoticed.

Mo, London, 39.  
Her Furla bag is her 'get-my-life-back' handbag. Big enough to carry all her stuff, cute enough for the rare occasion of a night off.



#### Trash-bin

Old sticky candies, candy papers, old receipts, travel tickets, long paid bills, dirty underwear, tampons and cigarette butts. And this all flavoured with a bit of dust, tobacco and crumps. Who said women aren't dirty!

#### Reminder list

We have to do so many things, we might forget. So we stuff appointment notes, unpaid bills, receipts that need to be reclaimed, airplane sick bags with some ideas for a new business brochure in our bags to make sure that we don't forget.

#### The non-negotiable minimums

Fortunately the fashion is big bags. Lots of things fit in. But suppose small bags become the dominant trend. We asked women what their key essentials are. And across cultures women mention the same items:

- Wallet (cash + cards +ID)
- Cell phone
- Tissues
- Keys
- Pen
- Agenda / note book
- Make-up

If you want to drill it down even further we end up with wallet, phone, keys and lipstick, or another make-up item such as gloss, face powder or mascara to keep up femininity and self-confidence.

For some this minimalistic bag gives a sense of freedom, a relief of not being tied down by possessions and weighed down by superfluous items.

Others perceive it as a serious deprivation being disconnected from the items they see as their must haves, stuff that you always should be able to draw from when necessary.

"An envelope purse makes you look more elegant and not like a packed mule. You really can make a statement - look at me this is all I need - my body and this little extension (lipstick, 30 Euros' and perhaps a condom). But, it doesn't work for me. I just want to bring a warm sweater and a couple of flat shoes in case my feet start hurting. I need my reading glasses and make-up bag, because even the most expensive make-up doesn't last a whole night. Just like I want my mobile phone (you never know what might happen), a deodorant, my keys, some painkillers and my business cards. So no envelope bags for me" (Amsterdam)

#### Local flavours

One of the key findings of this study is that we

found more similarities than differences between the bags across markets. Life stage and roles you fulfil in life seem to be a better predictor of the content than culture. However, we can make a couple of interesting cultural observations (it's qualitative of course).

New Zealand women hardly have books, magazines, and spare shoes in their handbags. Traveling and commuting is done by car not public transport. The car is their second handbag.

Dutch women carry 'bicycle keys' and some of them 'roll your own' tobacco.

Italian women own the highest number of handbags. Some even start the day with a bag and choose the rest of what they are going to wear accordingly.

Turkish bags are filled with deodorants, fragrances and perfumed wipes.

In France we found check-books, underwear and cigarette butts.

South African women inherit bags that go from one generation to another.

Latin women have more spiritual (religious) stuff in their bag.

Chinese bags overall look more organised than elsewhere in the world

## Chicks on a Mission

**It's a fact** that British women own on average 111 bags in a lifetime. <sup>7</sup>

Some got many. Some got few. Some got very expensive ones. Some go for the looks of it. Some go for their functionality.

How do bags come into our lives? Mainly by buying probably - apart from those bags being a gift - a very personal gift.

Buying a bag is not standard routine. Buying a bag might be a mission, a love affair or bringing home a trophy.

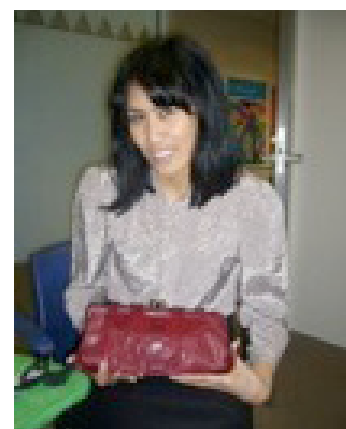
Buying a bag as a mission:

Women driven by the need to buy this specific bag. You know what you want, you know how it looks like, but you don't know where it is waiting for you.

It might take some time to find it.

If your mission is getting a Birkin by Hermes - the most coveted bag in the world- you'll have to have lots of patience (and lots of money). The waiting list is minimal 2 years. Michael Tonella wrote a whole book on this mission: 'Bringing home the

Nina, Auckland, 32.  
Nina's ME-bag was purchased in LA, during a holiday. Its has superpowers to morph from daily bag into a sophisticated evening bag by removing the strap. For Nina this bag is a real expression of personality; playful, sleek and feminine.



Birkin'. He cracked the code making waiting lists obsolete. Michael earned a good deal of money and fame with his efforts.

Buying a bag is a love affair:

There it is. You see it. You want it. You buy it. It just happens. You see the bag, the bag sees you and you know you're just meant for each other. Lots of women will identify on this love-affair kind of purchase.

"We had chemistry from the first day that we met each other. I only would change its functionality; it is beautiful from the outside and very little functional from the inside." (Mexico City)

"I just loved it. Bought it on a whim and then realized I'm not sure how to use it. It's this fabulous lilac suede. But what goes with lilac suede? (Chicago)

"I bought this bag from a village tour near Shanghai. The reason I bought it is because in a way I feel somewhere it looks like me. For example, this pattern seems no rules. But if you look it carefully you will find there are some rules and well designed patterns there." (Shanghai)

Buying a bag as a trophy:

You discover it. It has this special look or quality you cannot buy where you normally shop. It says something about where you have been. Bought for its uniqueness, show that you're a woman of the world, or just to remember good times you've had somewhere

"For New Zealander's travel is a real passion and the associated tales that go with the bag create a mythology all of its own. A bag from overseas that looks different / unique is also a badge showing that you can travel." (Auckland)

"When I was in New York I bought 4 bags. Just because they were special. No one else would have them at home." (Amsterdam)

And then – most dangerous- you even have those women having an ongoing love affair with bags.

"My husband says; 'walk, walk' ... But there's this love affair with handbags." (Istanbul)

Once the bag is bought, it's new but it's not really you yet. All items you carry will have to find their place, the new smell has to come off, you'll have to find the right way of carrying it, the little signs of usage appearing on your bag. Then it's yours,

really yours. Bags have to grow on you. New bags don't have that yet. It takes some time.

And after time, one day, all over sudden you will realize it has lost its shine or sparkle, the nice leather smell has gone, there are too many stains and scratches or it no longer meets the need it was purchased for. Bags don't last a lifetime; love is getting lost over time. Bye Bye Bag! Sometimes it hurts, sometimes it's a relief. There's a lag time between realising it's not the bag it once was and replacing it. But there always is this promise of a new bag relationship entering your life.

'Bags gone by' live in various locations. Some hang with coats, hats or scarves not used anymore. Others are shoved in drawers or cupboards. The graveyard of bags. Some end up in charity. Margaret Thatcher's bag didn't end up too bad. It was sold in 2000 for 120.000 Euros' for Breast Cancer Care.

The funny things with bags is, the hunt never stops.

It's a lifetime embarkement, searching for the ideal bag and mourning for the bags you once had or the ones you never bought.

## Auw, my bag hurts

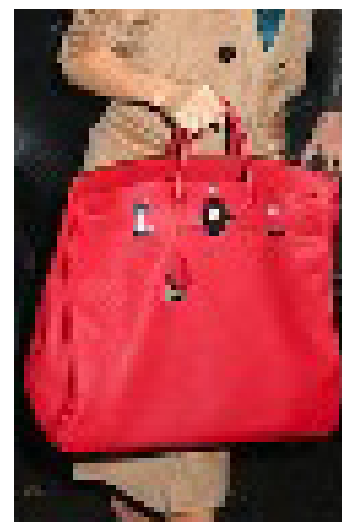
**It's a fact** that the weight of the bag increased by 38% the last 5 years. <sup>8</sup>

The weight of a woman's bag has increased dramatically. Simply because we carry more stuff. So we need bigger bags, and because we have bigger bags we carry more things.

Worst villain in driving up the load is our reliance on technological equipment. Who can live without at least two mobiles? Since we do not trust our technical gear completely lots of women also carry the old fashioned agenda. For you never know what might happen.

"I have a double agenda, my PDA and my trusted planner on paper. I just feel more secure also writing it down. In case it all stops working." (Amsterdam)

Being on the go all day also has its impact on women's physical burden. We carry books, magazines, laptops, notebooks, I-pods, food. And water, never go anywhere without a bottle of water. In



nearly all countries women are carrying water in their bag. Half a kilo at least.

We can't do with one lipstick and mascara anymore. We carry lots of make-up. Some women have up to eight lipsticks in their bag. Lots of women also carry a make-up bag in their handbag. Because we want to look good 24 hours a day.

"Yeah, 8 lipsticks, that's indeed a lot. I don't know how they all got in there" (Hamburg)

Modern life becoming a physical burden. Today's women are carrying an average of 2,3 kilo's in their bag. And it's expected to become even heavier in the next decade. Weight is expected to increase up to 3,1 kilo's.<sup>8</sup>

And we do feel the burden. Physical complaints regarding shoulders and back seem to be increasing dramatically. Health experts have expressed their concern about the damaging effect a ladies bag might have, leading to severe long-term skeletal and muscular damage.

The fashionability of the XL bag is not much of a help for the health of the female body. But it does to something else. Big bags make you look smaller and slimmer, sexier. Will there be a future for small bags?

## It's worth a fortune

**It's a fact** that the most expensive bag nowadays is Louis Vuitton's Tribute Patchwork bag.<sup>9</sup>

It's sold for 32.242 euro. You won't be buying Porsche Carrera for this kind of money, but it is still a considerable pile of cash.

Bags nowadays are the hottest fashion item. If women could choose one designer item, 22% of women would splurge on a bag. Only 9% would choose shoes.<sup>10</sup> The bag wins the battle between Bags and Shoes.

The handbag is a fashion statement. Women's glossy's are reporting on the bags celebrities wear, seasonal bag trends, and of course the must have bag (if you could afford it), the IT bag. There are an infinite number of sites dedicated to the handbag.

Bags are the fastest growing sector in the high fashion market. The British Telegraph reports

that an average British woman of 30 years old has 21 bags and every 3 months buys a new one.<sup>7</sup> Women spent on average 11.000 euros on bags in a lifetime.<sup>7</sup>

This amount will increase because women around the world are spending more and more on their bags. Sales of designer bags increased with 55% from 2005 to 2007. And the average price of designer bags was up 55% since 2005 to an average of 1067 Euros' according to research done by Selfridges (2007).

But even if you do not spend a fortune on a bag, it's likely your bag has increased in value. And that's because of the content; we simply carry more – and more expensive- things in our bags.

An average handbag was worth 733 Euro's in 2004.<sup>10</sup> That will have increased dramatically we presume. We carry a fortune with us each and every single day. Our bags are a goldmine of goodies. Count the actual worth and the emotional worth of the bag - being the 'materialized privacy' of women - its no wonder that women are highly vulnerable when it comes of their bag. That's why lots of women stated that their bag goes with them to the bedroom, a 24/7 relationship with your handbag.

Being stolen of your bag hits hard, in terms of worth lost and emotionally – an offense against one's intimacy.

"Its as if they've stolen my memories, from that moment on I compulsively use to check my bag every time" (Rome)

"I don't want the strap too long because my purse hangs too low. I can't hold it tightly to prevent anyone from reaching in. I just want to feel secure and not to worry about pick-pocketing." (Chicago)

"In crowded places in Delhi women will avoid to wear a big bag." (Delhi)

Being stolen of your handbag can have severe consequences as happened to a Dutch woman in 2005. She killed the guy who robbed her by driving into him with her car. She was not convicted to jail but got sentenced to labour for 180 hours.

Bagtheftblog.com most important advice is: carry as little as possible (If you can!)

## Louis Vuitton's Tribute Patchwork bag



## The Power of the Purse

**It's a fact** that the handbag is a powerful tool to get intimate with female consumers.

The Power of the Purse for research  
Handbags capture the imagination and generate mutual interest of consumers and researchers. Women love talking about their bags. - and hear others talk about theirs.  
Handbags enable a quick rapport and emotionally connect with consumers straight from the beginning. In groups it creates an intimate atmosphere - a bit strange but excited at the same time. Peeping in the handbag is a bit of a taboo - as we have learned not because of hidden secrets - but about sharing intimacy (and personal mess). There is fun and laughter. Body language and facial expression show full engagement. It is simply a topic women like to talk about.

Interviews and (online) discussions become almost 'self-moderating' once the handbag is brought forward. There is no need for the 'researcher trick box'.  
Respondents easily switch between topics, move from big themes to small details. Research through the bag is storytelling all the way and generates insights about their lifestyle, the different roles they fulfil in life, their attitude on health, shopping, travelling, and so on. It allows you to learn more about your respondents and dig deeper than what you would get with more traditional qualitative research techniques.

The handbag did a great job in offline research, and performed even better in an online environment. Confirming what is happening on internet on large scale; women sharing their bag content through sites like Flickr and numerous weblogs.  
The online results were comparable to what we found offline, but it was perhaps for women even easier to disclose. Blogs offer the opportunity to reveal the self without being obviously observed. There's a reason why the priest is screened off in the confessional!

The Power of the Purse for marketing  
As an object, the handbag clearly has a remarkable ability to perform many roles: pragmatic and magical, intensely private and very public. A handbag is a true ally that accompanies women through their journey in life. Marking transitions from one life stage to another, facilitating transi-

tions from one role to another, a 24/7 companion and the only object that sits between the private self and the consuming self.

The handbag has huge potential for marketers. Not only because they have the power to generate insights in women and reveal hidden and unarticulated needs, but also because the bag itself offers fertile ground for marketing activities.  
We have identified four platforms – control, convey, create, comfort - each of them offering a springboard to make meaningful connections with women. Help multi-tasking women to be in control of their lives, ease transitions from one role to another, make a statement about themselves, create a likeable self and to offer comfort in a pressured life.

Bags are getting bigger and heavier, women have more and more difficulties finding stuff in their bags, bags carry our lives and are worth a fortune. The bag offers lots of marketing potential. Some thoughts:

Help women to reduce the content of their bags. Whether that is by offering technology they can trust, so they can finally get rid of paper diaries, or finding smart, integrated solutions.  
Help women find things in their bags that go beyond separate sections, pouches or cases – e.g. stuff that lights up when you talk it.  
Help women to protect their most intimate accessory. Anti-theft solutions, bag protection features, insurances tailored to women and their bags, restaurants/pubs offering safe solutions for the bag.  
Help women organize their day, don't forget signals, built in technology for paying bills  
Smart technology bags – recharge all your technical gear, built in pepperspray  
Mood enhancers, bags changing colour, sending messages or fragrances

Handbags are condensed containers where the worlds of finance, beauty, food, mobility and technology – literally – fall together. And where lots of things are waiting to be improved.

## The power of Passion

Our most valuable lesson we learned from Bag-Stories is not related to the bags. It's the way we've been working. With like-minded partners around the world we have created a community of professionals around a topic, handbags. But it could have been any other.

Dallas Handbags,  
United States,  
1980-1990



Small, stand alone, highly professional research companies, not carrying the burden of a corporate structure, able to act freely, fast and with an enormous power.

Going beyond traditional research structures. We set a common goal and each of our partner was free to choose methods and ways of reporting according to their own individual and cultural strengths.

It provided a wealth of input, a wealth of interpretation and refreshing new insights. We crossed traditional research boundaries by involving other disciplines – photographers, a museum director, an ad agency, journalists – joined by enthusiasm about the subject, adding new perspectives.

We branded BagStories – as could be done with more commercial research topics as well, temporary or more permanent – to bring it alive for each and every person involved. A meeting place, exposing all of our partners, highlighting their contribution to BagStories. A platform for exchanging thoughts and experiences.

We believe the future of qualitative research - and beyond - is in organic networking. Joining forces based on trust, sharing and passion.

Connecting to the theme of the conference “in a world that celebrates individuality and autonomy a deep-rooted sense of belonging is drawing people together to find new ways to work, play and act together.”

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