

Influencer Marketing and Luxury

Defining luxury branding through visuals on Instagram

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Abstract

Luxury has, conventionally, been an industry that targets privileged consumers in terms of wealth and social status. The growing importance of social media platforms have, however, caused luxury to become democratized. These platforms have made luxury more accessible to 'regular' consumers in the sense that the concept of luxury has become more reachable for a broader group of consumers, who may be potential buyers. Luxury brands are, therefore, slowly adopting social media marketing strategies, especially collaborating with social media influencers who serve as an important and trustworthy mediating party between high-end brands and 'common' consumers. This is essentially because the brand-consumer interaction can still be quite complex and therefore, influencers work to ameliorate the relationship between brands and their (expanded) target audiences. The fact that luxury products are expensive and mostly the wealthy consumer can afford to purchase them, though, means that luxury brands need to find ways to engage with and hold the attention of the less affluent consumer. This is important because the latter type of consumer has the potential to become future buyers if, for instance, their income increases. This means that luxury brands must design their marketing strategies in such a way that makes their products attractive for a diverse target audience by creating great brand experiences for them. The democratization of the luxury industry has also enabled consumers to newly define luxury through a visualization platform. As such, this research qualitatively explores how two luxury influencers, who serve as executors of luxury brands' progressive social media marketing strategies, define and communicate the concept of luxury branding through visualizations on Instagram to target and attract more, diverse consumers. This is done through content analysis of luxury cars and luxury jewelry (particularly watches) posts. The theoretical framework of this thesis consists of important theoretical concepts including two types of influence that influencers exert, cultural values such as individualism, collectivism, and gender, as well as values pertaining to the dichotomy between exclusivity and ubiquity. These concepts were helpful to analyze the practices of the influencers in terms of (re-)defining luxury branding by means of visual posts. This research found that the influencers, indeed, embed such values that can attract both the conventional type of consumer, namely those of the higher classes, and the progressive type of consumer, namely those of the lower classes. The findings of this research, then, add knowledge to Instagram influencer marketing in relation to luxury branding, which is a relatively new research topic.

Keywords: social media influencers, democratization, luxury branding, Instagram, influencer marketing

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1. Introduction

Luxury and luxury brands are currently becoming more democratized because of structural and cultural shifts in capitalist markets (Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013) that are partly caused by social media. This is essentially because social media embrace democracy and diversity, and allow for users to be treated on an equal footing (Sharma & Albus, 2017). This means that social media have made luxury less limited to an exclusive group of consumers, because an increased number of consumers are easily reached through online platforms. Thus, the cultural category of luxury that had conventionally been exclusive has been made more accessible to everybody (Roper et al., 2013). It is important to mention here that this does not immediately translate into an increased purchase intent of luxury products by these new consumers. Rather, it means that the concept of luxury has become more reachable for a broader target audience, who may be potential buyers.

Understandably, then, luxury brands must assess the changing dynamics of their market and adapt accordingly. This can be done by, for example, changing their marketing strategies and moving (more) to the digital sphere, specifically because their audience is expanding. Since the brand-consumer interaction can still be rather complex, however, luxury brands are cautious in implementing social media marketing strategies (Sharma & Albus, 2017), which includes collaborating with online influencers. Nevertheless, influencers, particularly on social media, have become important mediators between high-end brands and 'common' consumers. Several luxury beauty brands, for example, that embrace social media influencers have established fruitful collaborations and have shown that they did not lose their enigma and exclusivity (2017) in the process of becoming more democratized.

The French luxury cosmetics company L'Oréal, for instance, discovered YouTube beauty expert Michelle Phan, who regularly uploaded make-up video tutorials and consequently gained many online followers, and decided to collaborate with her by creating a co-created make-up line. One of the main reasons for L'Oréal to work together with Phan was to attract more consumers to their brand. Although this line did not sell as well as expected, probably due to the fact that the prices were too high for Phan's youthful audience (Naughton, 2015), L'Oréal was still able to attract and gain more followers, both online and offline, through this partnership. This was because Phan, as an influencer, made L'Oréal's brand more credible and trustworthy (Hesse, 2015), while it remained to be viewed as a luxury brand. The key factor behind Phan's effective influence is the fact that her voice was considered to be a genuine declaration of support of L'Oréal because she had no stake in recommending the brand (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). This will be further addressed in the next chapter.

1.1 Research problem

There is, thus, a shift in the luxury industry in terms of engaging with new and potential customers. The target audience of luxury brands is broadening in the sense that it is not restricted to the wealthy anymore. As the group of luxury consumers is expanding, luxury brands must adopt innovative marketing strategies to satisfy the needs of this new target audience. Given the fact that luxury goods are expensive and mostly the richest consumers are able to afford them, however, luxury brands need to find ways to not only attract but also hold the attention of less affluent consumers. This means that luxury brands have to design their marketing strategies in such a way that makes their products attractive even for those who may be more hesitant to purchase them due to their lower incomes. A key element here is to tap into the emotions of consumers and create great brand experiences (Castillan et al., 2017), which will be explained in more detail in the next chapter.

The fact that social media have accounted for luxury to become more accessible and attractive to everyday consumers (Gilliland, 2017), then, partly explains the reason why influencer marketing, in particular on social media, has become an imperative element of the business strategies of some of the largest luxury brands in the world (2017). The example of L'Oréal and Phan given above shows that by collaborating with online influencers, luxury brands can enhance their credibility to win over the trust of potentially new consumers through the digital sphere. The fact that this partnership did not result in a high volume of sales for L'Oréal does not mean that they suffered a massive loss. Rather, it can be said that the overall brand value increased because of Phan, since more awareness was created and spread for L'Oréal which, as previously mentioned, resulted in a higher number of online and offline followers. As luxury brands, in collaboration with influencers, are starting to move towards an extended target audience, though, they are also deviating from the conventional definition of luxury, making it possible to define luxury branding in new ways.

Naturally, there are several ways to perceive the notion of luxury in the context of a marketing strategy. It can on the one hand, for example, refer to highly prized products of high quality (Wiedmann & Hennigs, 2012) such as a thirteen million dollars Rolls-Royce car or a three million dollars Rolex watch. It can, on the other hand, also refer to intangible qualities such as experiences that are luxurious for some and common for others (2012). Getting an upgrade to and flying in business class, for instance, is a luxurious experience for the economy class passenger. For the frequent business class traveler, however, the experience is just like one of the many. In any case, it becomes clear that luxury can be greatly regarded as a highly

subjective phenomenon (2012). This subjectivity can, to a certain extent, also be found in the selection process of influencers on, for instance, the social media platform Instagram for which they must determine what visuals adequately represent luxury branding that can be used for advertising purposes.

It becomes interesting, then, to research how luxury influencers (re-)define the concept of luxury branding on a visual social media platform, through the way it is presented in their visualizations, to advertise or promote luxury brands to an extended group of consumers, especially since there is still a gap in research on this topic. This is not only significant because it can help consumers to better understand and identify the principle that determines what can be classified as luxurious (Roper et al., 2013) nowadays, but also because this (re-)definition of luxury branding might attract new potential customers. At the same time, it can help academics and practitioners to understand the contemporary essence of the luxury industry, as they are currently mostly able to describe and explain the concepts of luxury and luxury brands in the field and language of economics (2013) by, for example, defining luxury on the basis of high prices (2013). Thus, as it has not been established *how* influencers visualize luxury branding, it is a good starting point to further explore how it coincides with luxury brands adapting fresh, digital marketing strategies. The influencers' presentation of luxury branding is, then, also necessary to analyze to have a better understanding of how contemporary luxury can attract more diversified consumers and therefore, I propose the following research question:

How do influencers, as part of a progressive social media marketing strategy implemented by luxury brands, define and communicate the concept of luxury branding through their visual posts on Instagram?

Despite the fact that luxury is essentially an industry that is based on privilege in terms of wealth and social status, it is an important cultural phenomenon that is currently developing because of consumers' changing perceptions of it. Luxury brands must, therefore, present themselves progressively without losing their core values, which includes maintaining a sense of exclusivity. They also need to understand how cultural values, such as individualism, collectivism, and gender, play a role in shaping perceptions of the luxury industry. As such, it is necessary to study whether or not and how these cultural values are embedded in the influencers' Instagram posts. It becomes possible to assess, then, how luxury brands are adapting to the digital age. Thus, there are multiple (external) factors that determine the creation of a visual luxury brand post. Such factors are imperative to consider and examine, and

therefore, the following sub-questions will be addressed that are helpful in the process of answering the main research question:

- 1) How do individualism and collectivism play a role in defining luxury branding?
- 2) How does gender play a role in defining luxury branding?
- 3) How does the dichotomy between exclusivity and ubiquity play a role in defining luxury branding?

1.2 Social media marketing background

Nowadays, social media marketing is considered to be an indispensable component of contemporary business (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017). This seems to be a rational argument, especially since the rise of the Internet and social media platforms has allowed marketers to reach an increased number of consumers in a money and time saving manner. However, research has found that direct advertising on social media faces criticism. Van Dyck (2014), for example, states that consumers tend to be more critical about social media advertisements since they use social media platforms for entertainment purposes rather than to purchase goods. As such, the abundant presence of online advertisements on these platforms gives users a feeling that their privacy is being violated and invaded. If, for instance, a user is interacting with a friend online, it is quite probable that the occurrence of advertisements in a private conversation will cause disturbance and distraction for them. Naturally, consumers are then likely to become irritated by and tend to avoid digital advertising (2014).

This notion is supported by Zhu and Chen (2015) who address the ineffectiveness of social media marketing. A plausible reason for this is the fact that the essence of social media is inconsistent with the fundamental principle of marketing. As Zhu and Chen (2015) explain, consumers use social media to engage with other people, such as their relatives or friends, whereas marketers use social media to promote and sell their products. This inconsistency, again, causes social media users to easily disregard advertisements on social media platforms, which is in line with the observation made by Van Dyck (2014). Social media marketing strategies must, therefore, be congruent with satisfying the needs of social media users (Zhu & Chen, 2015). This means that social media marketers need to take the various needs of diverse social media users into careful consideration and find ways to engage with them in a meaningful and substantial manner.

A way for marketers to better understand the 'needs' of social media consumers is, therefore, not to directly approach them but, rather, they should search for loyal customers who

can serve as intermediaries, as they seem to fathom the wishes of both parties. Following the 2-step-flow of advertising model proposed by Van Dyck (2014), which is an advertising model that works with a mediating party, it can be argued that such loyal customers are beneficial for businesses. This is because loyal customers, who work as mediating promoters or influencers, can highly recommend businesses and their products to other (potential) customers through the digital sphere in the form of the word-of-mouth tactic (2014), which enhances the credibility of a company. This will also be further elaborated in the next chapter. Thus, as consumers are losing faith in advertising, such promoters or influencers are gaining more credibility and trust. This can also be substantiated by the fact that influencer marketing supports the notion of human-to-human contact, which is considered to be more targeted and effective compared to traditional marketing (Hesse, 2015). It can, therefore, be argued that social media influencers are also becoming more important for luxury brands that seek to meet the needs of their expanded target audience online.

1.3 Luxury industry background

Wiedmann and Hennigs (2012) observed that the luxury industry is constantly increasing with its growth relating to the societal trend that the *“rich get richer, and the poor get poorer”* (p. 5). This indicates that there is still a dominant notion that luxury is reserved for the wealthy and affluent. This is, according to Wiedmann and Hennigs (2012), tacitly supported by the fact that middle class consumers increasingly try to show that they belong to that upper-class, by for instance presenting themselves with luxury branded items, while, in fact, they are stuck in the middle part of the social hierarchy. Luxury is, in essence, defined by its prestigious nature that is elevated by the distance between a particular brand and its customers. As Sharma and Albus (2017) explain, consumers can perceive a brand as luxurious because it has established itself as a company that values their scarce and exclusive products. In the past years, however, this widely-held perception of luxury has been affected by the growing importance of social media.

Although quite a few luxury brands have already moved into the digital sphere to advertise and promote their products and services, they seem to struggle with balancing their integrity with the need to adapt a digitalized marketing strategy (Annie Jin, 2012). The necessity of luxury brands to incorporate themselves into mainstream online platforms is problematic because consumers have a general expectation of luxury brands to maintain and present their exclusivity and uniqueness in the form of their premium prized products of high quality that are delivered through controlled distribution (2012). The last aspect, in particular, becomes impaired due to social media platforms' ability to spread diverse types and forms of content, including

luxury branded content, like wildfire. This means that social media enable consumers to become more increasingly exposed to luxury, which seemingly reduces the distance between the two parties and as such, the prestige of luxury brands becomes less elevated.

Nonetheless, Godey et al. (2016) found that major luxury fashion brands such as the French and British fashion houses Louis Vuitton and Burberry, respectively, have used social media to raise more awareness about their respective brands and, given the fact that social media platforms can move beyond borders, were able to reach consumers from all around the world. Louis Vuitton, for example, uploads videos of their catwalk shows on their Facebook page as to allow their consumers and fans to witness and experience the events. Burberry, on the other hand, launched an online shopping website specifically for Chinese consumers, seeing that not all social media platforms are accessible in China. As such, the British luxury fashion brand additionally created accounts on the Chinese social media networking services Kaixin001 and Douban (2016). Both luxury brands have, thus, used social media to connect and engage more with an excessive number of consumers. Interestingly, though, both Louis Vuitton and Burberry are still considered to be and perceived as part of the list of the world's leading and most influential luxury fashion brands (Grant, 2017).

The fact that Louis Vuitton and Burberry were able to use social media in their marketing strategies while, at the same time, maintaining their high status can be partly explained by the way their strategies were designed. According to Kim and Ko (2012), social media marketing efforts of luxury brands are constructed by five aspects: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth. The examples given above show that these particular luxury brands have integrated the first four aspects (entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization). Although these aspects do not automatically guarantee successful outcomes for luxury brands, they are valuable in ameliorating the brand-consumer interaction and communication, which becomes more two-way (2012). The last aspect, word-of-mouth, is particularly interesting, and relevant for this research, because it is a strategical tool that can help to increase the credibility of a brand. This aspect is, thus, meaningful for luxury brands to maintain their prestigious and exclusive character and for this reason, luxury brands are progressively implementing influencers in their social media marketing strategies.

1.4 Social media as data

Currently, the use of social media data is a phenomenon with growing importance. The fact that social media platforms offer brands and businesses a channel where they can distribute particular messages of interest to a broad audience allows for meaningful and

responsive conversations and interactions between the parties, which is different from other, perhaps more traditional tools of advertising (Bright, Margetts, Hale, & Yasseri, 2014). By studying social media data, it can, for instance, be determined then how a brand or business portrays itself and how their respective audiences respond to it on a specific social media platform. This would also improve the communication between brands and their respective consumers. Moreover, since social media platforms themselves are exponentially growing in terms of popularity and number of users, they have become an indispensable part of media channels and it is, therefore, seemingly becoming unavoidable to regard them as research data.

Given the fact that this research has a clear focus on visualizations, the social media platform that was analyzed is Instagram, which is currently the most popular visual social media platform that has more than 400 million users (Rokka & Canniford, 2016) and allows users to capture and upload images and videos that they can share with their followers (Lavoie, 2015). Instagram, thus, primarily functions as a visual social media application. This is distinctly different from other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which are fundamentally based on verbal communication. Instagram is an interesting platform to explore because it has allowed businesses to reach their target audiences and, consequently, strengthen their brand in new and innovative ways (2015). This is, then, consistent with the notion of luxury brands adapting a progressive marketing strategy, by collaborating with influencers, as a way to reach and attract a larger and more varied group of consumers online.

1.5 Academic relevance

Social media marketing efforts by luxury brands have primarily been researched in relation to brand equity, customer equity, and consumer behavior (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016). The focus there was to explore marketing activities of luxury fashion brands, such as the previously mentioned Louis Vuitton and Burberry as well as the Italian luxury fashion brand Gucci, through their official accounts on social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. The studies were conducted to determine their (positive) effects on brand equity, customer equity, and consumer behavior. The researches, thus, focused on the brands themselves rather than influencers who promote them. On the other hand, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) researched what aspects influence the success of influencers on Instagram and found that it is primarily achieved by the way they present a brand. Such findings can help brands to choose the right influencers to collaborate with. These studies were all conducted quantitatively.

This research, then, examines social media marketing activities of luxury brands undertaken by influencers as a way to attract more consumers. It looks at qualitative aspects in

the influencers' presentation of luxury branding through content analysis. More specifically, it seeks to determine how luxury cars and luxury jewelry, particularly watches, brands are defined and communicated on Instagram (this will be further justified in chapter 3). This does not only explain the change in and (re-)definition of the luxury industry, but it also complements previous research by assessing the collaboration between luxury brands and social media influencers from a qualitative perspective. Thus, this research adds knowledge to Instagram influencer marketing in relation to luxury branding, which is a relatively new topic of research.

1.6 Social relevance

The identification of how luxury branding is currently defined and presented through visualizations on Instagram by luxury influencers can benefit both luxury brands and consumers. On the one hand, luxury brands are able to assess how their industry is being perceived while on the other hand, consumers are able to better understand what luxury entails nowadays, seeing as there is currently some ambiguity about its definition. Luxury influencers, then, have the ability to clear up the confusion about the contemporary essence of luxury. This is particularly relevant because the luxury industry has always been present in society, though as part of a high-class culture, and is becoming even more integrated due to luxury brands gradually allowing themselves to become modernized through moving to social media platforms.

This means that the concept of luxury is being spread more easily and widely. As such, more consumers can be reached and subsequently, greater exposure of the luxury industry is given to them. This would also allow those of lower classes to become potential consumers of an industry that has maintained a status of exclusivity for many years before. Seeing as luxury brands also need to live up to the expectation of being an exclusive industry, though, it is imperative that they preserve their fundamental values. Luxury influencers must, therefore, be able to raise and maintain luxury brands' prestige and status. This can be achieved by, for example, the way they present luxury branding through their nicely edited social media content (i.e. Instagram visual posts), which could evoke certain emotions such as envy and awe among their followers or viewers. This especially caters to consumers of lower classes such as middle-class individuals, who might be persuaded into making a(nother) luxury product purchase as to show that they belong to the upper-class. This way, sales figures get boosted in a cost-efficient way in terms of marketing efforts and thereby, greater profitability for luxury brands can be achieved.

1.7 Chapter overview

Chapter 2 provides pertinent theories and findings derived from previous research regarding influencer marketing and luxury branding, especially on social media platforms. Influencer marketing is defined and exemplified, and the growing importance of social media influencers for brands and businesses is explained. It is also addressed how influencers exert influence in the form of two practices: 'branding' and 'hustling'. Next, the gradual move of luxury branding from the traditional to the modern is assessed by means of multidimensional constructs and the 'brand as an assemblage' perspective, which allow luxury branding to become perceived more progressively. Values that play a role in (re-)defining luxury branding include, but are not limited to, individualism, collectivism, and gender, and are explored subsequently.

Chapter 3 gives an overview of how the research was designed and the (qualitative) research method that was employed. It describes the (purposive) sampling methods and processes of the influencers and their Instagram posts that are relevant for this research. The (thematic) method of analysis of the chosen data set is explained by means of a detailed description of the pertinent open, axial, and selective coding processes. The notions of validity and reliability are touched upon at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 4 presents the results of this research in the forms of selective codes, which can be translated into themes. These themes represent the underlying story that can be found within the data set and give answers to the three sub-questions which are, in turn, helpful to answer the main research question. For each theme, a definition, relevant examples from the data set, and links to the theories are given. The relationships between the themes are, then, explored.

Finally, chapter 5 provides a discussion of the obtained results. In this chapter, I give an answer to the main research question by using and interpreting the themes that were found in relation to the theories and findings gathered from previous research. This concluding chapter also addresses the limitations of this research as well as its potential to spur further research on Instagram influencer marketing and luxury branding.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter describes the theories and theoretical concepts that are relevant for this research. In Section 2.1, influencer marketing and influencers, in particular social media influencers, are defined and explained. The types of influence exerted by social media influencers on their followers are addressed subsequently. In Section 2.2, luxury branding is explored with theories from a traditional and, to a greater extent, digital point of view. The theories in these sections are essential to understand the context in which this research is set and are constructive to answering the main research question that explores how influencers, as part of a progressive social media marketing strategy implemented by luxury brands, define and communicate the concept of luxury branding through their visual posts on Instagram. In Section 2.3, then, cultural values such as individualism, collectivism, and gender as well as several other pertinent values that play a role in (re-)defining luxury branding are elucidated. The theories related to these values are valuable for answering the three sub-questions: 1) How do individualism and collectivism play a role in defining luxury branding? 2) How does gender play a role in defining luxury branding 3) How does the dichotomy between exclusivity and ubiquity play a role in defining luxury branding?

2.1 Influencer marketing

In this section, influencer marketing is defined and exemplified, after which social media influencers, who are pertinent to this research, will be addressed. Moreover, the types of influence that social media influencers exert are described. The fact that influencer marketing has not yet been properly defined by scholars indicates that it is a phenomenon that is still growing. One adequate definition of influencer marketing, given by Ranga and Sharma (2014), is:

a type of marketing that has emerged from a diversity of current practices and studies, in which center is placed on precise key individuals (or types of individual) rather than the target market as a whole. It identifies the individuals that have influence over prospective buyers, and orients marketing activities around these influencers” (p. 16).

This definition is in line with the conception of influencer marketing that businesses are searching for influential individuals because consumers are losing faith in traditional advertising (Carter, 2016) and therefore, for and throughout this research, this definition of influencer marketing will be used. An example of influencer marketing is the collaboration between the

German luxury car brand BMW and social media influencers Brian Sacawa and Sezgin Yilmaz. These influencers, who both have many followers online, were chosen to upload online posts. Such posts range from blog reviews to an Instagram photo to a YouTube video that promote a particular company or brand (2016), in this case BMW.

It is important to note here that influencer marketing is not a form of marketing that intends to spread promoted content. Promoted content is generally created and distributed by advertisers themselves. Instead, influencer marketing seeks to promote advertising content that is (re-)created by influential individuals, called influencers. Social media influencers are, then, individuals who actively operate on various social media platforms and exert influence on their followers to win over their support for a particular brand (Carter, 2016). This means that influencers have become a new group or type of promoters, who are believed to be more credible and reliable than traditional advertisers (Hesse, 2015). YouTube soccer influencer Harry Shaw, for example, created a video in which he collaborated with Nike and famous soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo to promote a pair of Nike's soccer cleats that are part of Ronaldo's collection within the brand. Moreover, in the video, he played soccer with Ronaldo, which was made possible by Nike and thus, Shaw's video also serves to present Nike as a brand that makes such seemingly impossible activities possible.

It can, therefore, be argued that influencer marketing is an extension of word-of-mouth marketing, which was a simple yet powerful technique that was actively employed by brand marketers during the 1980s and 1990s (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). In essence, word-of-mouth marketing seeks to encourage customers to recommend branded products and services they are positive about to relatives and friends, as was briefly mentioned in the Introduction. Similar to influencer marketing, word-of-mouth advertising is considered to be more credible than traditional advertising (2013). This is, again, due to the role of the mediating customer. With both types of marketing, the mediating customer or influencer is seen to have no stake in the product or service they are recommending and as such, their recommendation becomes a genuine declaration of support of the brand (2013) that holds authenticity and credibility. This was also briefly touched upon in the Introduction. This means that the use of influencers can offer brands the possibility to market their products in a more successful manner than by using traditional advertising strategies.

The idea behind word-of-mouth marketing and influencer marketing is direct communication between a brand and its customers through mediating customers or influencers. However, with the rise of the Internet and social media platforms, the direct communication has become disrupted. This is primarily due to the fact that social media have allowed consumers to

express and share their beliefs and opinions with the rest of the world. As a result, there is now a sheer abundance of different voices and sources of information that both brands and consumers need to consider, particularly in relation to the decision-making process of consumers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). This is, then, where influencer marketing plays a decisive role in identifying and choosing the right types of consumers who can effectively spread the messages of brands in and through the digital sphere in a credible manner.

2.1.1 Influencers on social media

Since this research is focused on social media influencers, it is the type of influencers that is relevant and will, therefore, be referred to throughout the thesis. In general, social media influencers have been described as people who have a large network and strong presence on social media and can, therefore, exert influence on behalf of marketers (Hesse, 2015). This is similar to the definition of social media influencers as given by Carter (2016), which was previously mentioned.¹

In discussing the comparatively new concept of influencer marketing, Ranga and Sharma (2014) present several types of influencers and the benefits that they, especially those on social media, can provide for brands. They identified four categorical types of influencers: traditional influencers, emerging (digital) influencers, influencers by connection, and influencers by topic.

Traditional influencers are considered to be celebrity figures or individuals hired by conventional PR agencies who have specific areas of expertise. Emerging (digital) influencers are, then, tech-savvy individuals who have a large number of followers and serve as leaders on social media platforms in the digital sphere. Influencers by connection are described as individuals who have many Facebook friends and/or Twitter followers, while influencers by topic are illustrated as individuals who are opinion leaders for specific topics. Given these descriptions, influencers by connection and influencers by topic can also be classified as subcategories of the first two types of influencers rather than as separate and distinctive categories. In that case, Ranga and Sharma (2014) made a distinction between traditional and digital influencers, with the latter type being the pertinent group for this research which is in accordance with the definition of social media influencers given by Hesse (2015) and Carter (2016).

¹ See page 15 of this thesis.

Correspondingly, the benefits that social media influencers can offer to brands can be addressed next. Ranga and Sharma (2014) mention three ways through which influencers can benefit brands: writing blog posts and/or articles, sharing information on their social media accounts, and persuading others to participate in online activities. It is important to keep in mind that the influencers themselves are able to choose the method they want to employ and that it is not necessarily decided by the brands, though the wishes of both parties have to be mutually consistent. The underlying factor that drives such actions is, accordingly, to advertise brand-related content in connection with influencers' positive perception of and experience with the brand. The opinion of influencers of a particular brand is a crucial aspect because it is, in essence, what convinces other consumers to opt for that brand as well.

Moreover, their opinion is an important foundation for influencers to become a trustworthy representative of a brand. This is also described by Hesse (2015) who explains that influential and trusted consumers can spread brand-related content, and, in turn, brands are able to build more direct and meaningful relationships with their target audiences, which is one of the most important benefits of influencer marketing. The fact that social media enable consumers to be easily influenced by different opinions from various sources in terms of shaping their own perception of a particular brand means that there is a lack of control in guaranteeing whether it will turn out positive or negative (2015). This further substantiates the importance of influencers, as they have the ability to persuade consumers to positively perceive a brand. Understandably, then, influencers' opinions of a brand are imperative in determining the success of a partnership between brands and influencers, and, therefore, lie at the root of this research.

2.1.2 Types of influence exerted

To ensure that influencer marketing is indeed an effective strategy, it is, thus, necessary to find and identify influencers who can serve as proper representatives, which is a significant challenge that brands are facing (Sharma & Albus, 2017; De Veirman et al., 2017). De Veirman et al. (2017), correspondingly, conducted two experimental (quantitative) studies that, to a certain extent, looked into which type of Instagram influencers could be suitable for the job by assessing their likeability and brand effects. Based on these studies, they, for instance, found that the follower-to-following ratio can impact influencer likeability and that

...the influencer's number of followers may change perceptions in the sense that when a product with a divergent design is endorsed by an influencer with a high number of

followers, perceptions of uniqueness and eventually attitudes towards the brand are lower compared to when it is endorsed by an influencer with a moderate number of followers” (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 813).

These findings are important because they support the notion that an influencer’s success is not guaranteed by a high number of followers. Rather, as previously mentioned, the success of an influencer is also based on their perception of a brand and the way they communicate it. The findings of De Veirman et al. (2017), therefore, serve as a solid basis for this thesis, which delves into the qualitative aspects of the influencers (e.g. their posts). Accordingly, this research adds knowledge to Instagram influencer marketing and, along with the research conducted by De Veirman et al. (2017), can potentially help to complement which Instagram influencers can be proper representatives for (luxury) brands.

For analyzing the ways influencers communicate their attitude towards brands, it is helpful to look at conceptions of influence. Whereas De Veirman et al. (2017) researched influencers’ popularity and success based on numeric aspects, though, Carter (2016) investigated the phenomenon by identifying two conceptions of influence.

The first conception is the influence exerted by celebrities and their practices of ‘branding’, while the second conception is the influence exerted by more ‘common’ social media users and their practices of ‘hustling’. As Carter (2016) describes, ‘branding’ refers to the idea that users somewhat manipulatively position their followers in an inferior rank because they understand the impact of their influence. ‘Hustling’, on the other hand, refers to the practice of users affiliating themselves with brands and popular hashtags which makes their influence more profound (2016). Both practices can, in other words, be adopted by influencers to attract more followers and gain more credibility which is, in turn, beneficial for the brands that the influencers advocate for. Although this research does not focus on celebrities as influencers, the two practices presented by Carter (2016) are useful to explore how the influencers that are chosen for this study exert influence by means of their Instagram posts, which would also be helpful to answer the main research question.

2.2 Luxury branding

This section explores theories related to luxury branding from a traditional perspective to a more digital perspective. These theories provide a context in which this research is placed. As mentioned in the Introduction, it becomes possible to define luxury branding in new ways, as luxury brands are starting to move towards an extended target audience. The traditional

definition of the luxury brand industry as given by Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2015), for example, refers to “an exclusive group of brands across different product segments that are distinguished from the rest by their ability to convey certain elements of consumer-perceived characteristics of luxuriousness, and thereby connote luxury in their respective product categories” (p. 83). However, this definition is starting to become unsatisfactory because an extended target audience of luxury brands would mean that their luxuriousness is based on more, subjective opinions, including that of influencers which is reflected in the way they portray luxury in their posts. This does not mean it is bad consequence, but it does raise the question of what can be perceived as luxury branding now.

Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2015) discussed several key approaches that are helpful to further understand luxury branding such as the perception of luxury brands as conspicuous goods that are consumed by ‘status-seeking individuals’, which partly explains the global presence of leading luxury brands and how they can continue to ask for price premiums without losing consumers. This way of understanding luxury brands seems to be in line with the more traditional definition of the luxury industry as, for instance, given by Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2015). Another approach is the perception of luxury brands as having multidimensional constructs as a result of the democratization of luxury. The latter approach, in particular, provides a good framework for this research, as it is in line with the conception of the shifts that are occurring in the luxury industry, especially in terms of new and diverse consumer perceptions of luxury branding.

The multidimensional constructs that luxury brands are starting to develop can, then, be further explored from the ‘brand as an assemblage’ perspective as proposed by Lury (2009). This perspective implies that branding consists of multiple layers of activity that exist in the development of a brand and thus, it is not a single process. This means that brands

...are the outcome of diverse professional activities, including marketing, graphic and product design, accountancy, media, retail, management, and the law, with each of these professions having multiple histories, being internally divided, in tension with each other, and sometimes being contradictory or opposed in their relation to specific instances of branding” (Lury, 2009, p. 67).

This perspective allows us to see branding as embodying multiple additional functions and possibilities and as a process of assembling culture (2009). In other words, brands are not simply raw materials anymore but, as they have become part of culture and society, have

gained more importance and value. For this reason, luxury branding can then also be shaped and defined by cultural values such as individualism, collectivism, and gender, which will be further addressed in Section 2.3. This is particularly interesting and pertinent because influencers, as well as other consumers, can, now, also give meaning and add value to the concept of luxury branding based on, for instance, their perception of the relationship between luxury and individualism.

2.2.1 Luxury branding on social media

At first glance, there seem to be many paradoxes between the digital world and luxury branding, which account for the reluctance of luxury brands to adapt social media marketing strategies. This reluctance is partly caused by the brand-consumer interaction which can still be complicated, as mentioned in the Introduction. It can also be explained by the fact that the luxury industry symbolizes exclusivity, whereas social media platforms are the epitome of ubiquity. There is, thus, a clear dichotomy between the two in terms of their essences and what they stand for. Nonetheless, scholars have increasingly researched the relation between luxury brands and social media marketing strategies, and there seems to be a gradual development in adapting digital-oriented strategies (Maman Larraufie & Kourdoughli, 2014). This suggests that luxury brands are actually starting to understand how marketing activities on social media can, in fact, benefit them.

Although social media marketing strategies are seemingly beneficial for luxury brands to reach a broader group of consumers that is not limited to the wealthy, it is important to mention again that this does not guarantee the purchase of luxury products by these new consumers. Despite the fact that luxury is becoming more accessible, luxury goods are characteristically expensive. Thus, as addressed in the Introduction, mostly the richest consumers account for the purchase of luxury items. Luxury brands must, therefore, design their social media marketing strategies in such a way that consumers with lower incomes also are and will remain attracted to their products, even though they may not be able to purchase them. It is important to also hold the attention of less wealthy consumers because they have the ability to climb from a lower class up to a higher class due to, for instance, a job promotion which provides them with a higher income. This means that they have the potential to become future buyers of luxury products and as such, luxury brands' social media marketing strategies should also consider the importance of this group of consumers.

Castillan et al. (2017) propose that luxury brands should create amazing brand experiences for consumers by, for instance, transferring the uniqueness that shapes a luxury

brand onto online platforms. The concept of brand experience can be defined as subjective and internal feelings and emotions that evoke certain behavioral responses that are caused by brand-related aspects, such as packaging and stores, which are part of a brand's identity (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). In other words, it refers to the emotional connection that consumers have with a particular brand. Rolex, for instance, set up an initiative to strengthen this connection by launching the World of Rolex Science and Exploration page on their website. This page seeks to appeal to consumers who are adventurous at heart and are fond of expeditions into the nature that range from the oceans to the mountains (Joy, 2017). This allows consumers to also experience the brand of Rolex in an audacious manner. This brand concept is, thus, valuable because it can serve as a tool for luxury brands to build meaningful relationships with all types of consumers.

Influencers, then, operate as a mediating party that tries to establish an emotional connection between consumers and luxury brands by creating posts that show what luxury branding is or what it can be for them. Especially for consumers whose incomes clash with the price tags of luxurious goods, visualizations of luxury branding allow them to experience luxury without having to purchase the products in the sense that they can picture themselves with luxury goods through these visuals. For consumers who can afford to purchase luxury goods, such visualizations also allow them to experience luxury but more importantly, these visuals can potentially lead to them actually buying the products. The studies conducted by Gentina, Shrum, and Lowrey (2016) and Lim, Kim, and Cheong (2016) showed that positive attitudes, which can be adopted following positive experiences, toward luxury brands have a positive effect on buying behavior. Although both studies focused on experiences and buying behavior regarding luxury clothing brands, their findings can be used to further substantiate that good experiences with a brand can increase the brand's popularity and the likelihood of consumers to purchase their products.

In their research, Kim and Ko (2012) established five constructs that are found in the social media marketing efforts of luxury brands: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth, which were briefly touched upon in the Introduction. Entertainment represents the fun of visiting the social media pages of a luxury brand because of, for instance, interesting content that are presented. Interaction is the ability to share information and opinions as well as to hold conversations with other consumers via the social media pages. Trendiness, then, is the presence of the latest information of a luxury brand on its social media pages. Customization refers to the social media pages' provision of customized information search and customized service. Finally, word-of-mouth enables consumers to

disseminate information or content obtained from a luxury brand's social media pages to other consumers. Although this research does not analyze the official social media pages of luxury brands, these constructs are useful in analyzing the pages of the influencers to see whether or not they implement the same strategies and, thus, appropriately represent the brands.

The findings of their research reveal that social media marketing efforts of luxury brands that hold the previously described constructs have a positive effect on value equity, relationship equity, brand equity, and purchase intention (Kim & Ko, 2012). Notwithstanding the fact that the study was conducted quantitatively, it provides a good framework to further research the qualitative aspects that play an equally prominent role in luxury brands' social media marketing strategies. Given that luxury brands are searching for strong and convincing reasons to move their strategies to the digital world, the findings conclusively demonstrate that social media are appropriate to attract luxury consumers. Naturally, it seems fitting, then, to qualitatively research the social media pages of influencers, who serve as both tools and representatives of luxury brands that are progressively moving away from traditional strategies.

Similar to Kim and Ko (2012), Godey et al. (2016) researched the correlation between social media marketing strategies of luxury brands and their impact on brand equity, consumer behavior and, additionally, two dimensions of brand equity, namely brand awareness and brand image. Their study was also conducted using the five constructs set by Kim and Ko (2012) to measure the luxury brands' social media marketing efforts in a conceptual model. They also found that these efforts had a positive effect on brand equity, including brand awareness and brand image, and consumer behavior, which are caused by the presence of the five constructs. Accordingly, these findings, along with the findings of Kim and Ko (2012), substantiate the idea that social media marketing strategies are more beneficial rather than disadvantageous for luxury brands. Both studies did not, however, delve into social media marketing strategies in relation to influencers. This research, then, explores how influencers serve as executioners of the word-of-mouth construct with their Instagram posts.

2.3 Cultural values associated with luxury branding

Here, three cultural values – individualism, collectivism, and gender – will be explored in relation to luxury branding. Several other values that play a significant role in the (re-)definition of luxury branding are also addressed.

2.3.1 Individualist vs. collectivist perceptions

To understand consumer behavior regarding luxury brands, it is necessary to explore consumers' perception of luxury and how it is shaped. This perception can be divided into two categories: individualist luxury perception and collectivist luxury perception. The perception of luxury is reflected in the Brand Luxury Index (BLI), which is a scale that seeks to measure the luxury of a brand (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). According to Vigneron and Johnson (2004), luxury is constructed by two perceptual categories, namely personal perceptions and non-personal perceptions, which can be translated into cultural individualist perceptions and collectivist perceptions, respectively. Personal or individualist perceptions of luxury are shaped by values such as hedonism and the extended self, while non-personal or collectivist perceptions of luxury are shaped by values such as conspicuousness, uniqueness, and quality.

Aliyev and Wagner (2017) studied the differences between the two types of cultural luxury perceptions using these values in relation to purchase intentions of individualists and collectivists. Although their study was conducted quantitatively to explore the effects of the five values on consumers' luxury purchase behavior, they present interesting findings that are relevant for this research. They namely found that hedonism and, more surprisingly, uniqueness have a more significant impact on individualists' purchase intentions. They also found that the extended self is a universal value for both individualists and collectivists. Lastly, they found that both conspicuousness and quality have a more positive impact on purchase intentions of collectivists than of individualists. These findings are, then, useful for the analysis of the influencers' Instagram posts to see if and how the influencers have embedded individualist or collectivist perceptions in their visualization of luxury branding. Thus, the findings of Aliyev and Wagner (2017) are helpful in answering the first sub-question: How do individualism and collectivism play a role in defining luxury branding?

2.3.2 The role of gender

The consumption of luxury brands can also be partly explained by the cultural value gender. Conventionally, the luxury industry is more closely associated with women than men, with women consuming more luxury goods (Roux, Tafani, & Vigneron, 2017). Roux et al. (2017) mention, however, that the traditional gender gap is steadily narrowing because of the growth in men's consumption of luxury, even though women's consumption of luxury in general is still higher. This seems to suggest that the luxury industry is more focused on and targeted at women, though it appears that this rather gender-biased perception of luxury is changing.

Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann (2013) researched the role of gender in luxury brand consumption in relation to individualist and collectivist values. A more general finding is that women have a more positive attitude toward luxury brands than men, particularly in terms of luxury clothing, perfumes, and wristwatches. Moreover, they found that luxury brands pay more attention to hedonism, uniqueness, and status, which can be translated into the extended self, for female consumers, as women are more responsive to these values. In this regard, women seem to hold a more individualist perception of luxury, while men seem to hold a more collectivist perception of luxury. As such, Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann (2013) posit that luxury branding should take into account the difference in luxury perception between men and women, and differentiate in the way they present themselves to their male and female audiences. The analysis of the influencers' Instagram posts will, then, also explore if and how the influencers perceive and define luxury branding in relation to gender, which will help to answer the second sub-question: How does gender play a role in defining luxury branding?

2.3.3 Exclusivity vs. ubiquity

As mentioned in the Introduction, luxury brands seem to struggle with balancing their exclusivity with ubiquity, which is a result of their understanding of the growing importance of social media marketing strategies. It is, therefore, important for luxury brands to assess how they can successfully digitalize their marketing activities without losing their core values in the process. To help luxury brands with a smooth transition to the digital world, Hennigs, Wiedmann, and Klarmann (2012) touch upon and address four key values that these brands should take into consideration and display in their online environment: financial value, functional value, individual value, and social value.

Financial value refers to the relationship between price and value, or quality, of luxury goods. This is an essential aspect because consumers expect luxury products or services to be of high quality, especially since they are willing to accept high prices for them. Luxury brands must, therefore, present themselves online as having and offering unique and exclusive products of superb quality and handmade craftsmanship, and impeccable service via limited distribution (Hennigs et al., 2012).

Functional value refers to the usability, quality, and uniqueness of the online environment of luxury brands. Given the fact that the Internet diminishes consumers' ability to touch or smell products, luxury brands should transfer their character to the digital space in the sense that their online persona is equivalent to their offline persona. The factor that plays a

prominent role here is engagement with consumers in the form of, for instance, entertainment, education, or utility (Hennigs et al., 2012).

Individual value is, then, an extension of functional value. Since luxury goods are a part of consumers' self-identity, luxury brands have to ensure that their engagement with consumers permits two-way communication. By, for example, asking consumers for their opinion regarding products and services, luxury brands would allow them to become involved with the brand at a deeper level (Hennigs et al., 2012).

Lastly, social value reflects luxury brands' cognition of their consumers' online social circles and networks. Although luxury brands have to maintain some degree of exclusivity, even online, they should allow themselves to also become a part of the online identities of consumers' social networks and vice versa (Hennigs et al., 2012). This is, then, beneficial for luxury brands to attract new and potential consumers as well as to demonstrate that they are adapting accordingly to the digital era.

These values are, thus, fundamental aspects that luxury brands must take into account in the way they present themselves online. By analyzing the Instagram posts of the influencers, it can be determined if and how they recognize the importance of these values and embed them their online presentation of luxury branding, which is useful for answering the third and last sub-question: How does the dichotomy between exclusivity and ubiquity play a role in defining luxury branding?

The theories and theoretical concepts presented in this chapter are, as shown, valuable for conducting this research. Accordingly, they were considered during the analysis of the data in relation to the main research question and the three sub-questions. This will be further addressed in the next chapter, in which the methodology of this research is described.

3. Methodology

This chapter explains what research approach was adopted in the process of answering the main research question which is focused on understanding how influencers, as part of a progressive social media marketing strategy implemented by luxury brands, define and communicate the concept of luxury branding through their visual posts on Instagram. Section 3.1 describes the research design of this thesis. Section 3.2 explains the methods that were used for the sampling of the luxury brand influencers and their Instagram posts. Section 3.3 addresses the operationalization of this research, along with an essential step that was taken during the analysis of the data, which was helpful for answering the three sub-questions: 1) How do individualism and collectivism play a role in defining luxury branding? 2) How does gender play a role in defining luxury branding? 3) How does the dichotomy between exclusivity and ubiquity play a role in defining luxury branding? Section 3.4, then, explains the collection and analysis of the data, including the processes that the data set was subjected to, though the actual analysis and the obtained results will be presented in the next chapter. Finally, Section 3.5 touches upon the notions of validity and reliability.

3.1 Research design

This section further discusses the construction of this research. It explains and defines the chosen research method. Subsequently, it also elaborates on the rationale behind choosing the adopted method. This research tries to answer the main research question of how influencers, as part of a progressive social media marketing strategy implemented by luxury brands, define and communicate the concept of luxury branding through their visual posts on Instagram. It is, thus, focused on answering the 'how' and therefore, a qualitative method or, more specifically, qualitative content analysis was used. As mentioned in the previous chapter, social media marketing strategies of luxury brands have particularly been researched using quantitative methods (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016). This research, therefore, delved into exploring qualitative aspects, such as how influencers define luxury branding. Qualitative research is, then, focused on taking an interpretative or naturalistic approach to phenomena in the form of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

From a qualitative standpoint, it is possible to empirically study the change in marketing strategy of luxury brands, as it allows an interpretative analysis of the perspective of the influencers and their practices on Instagram in relation to the concept of luxury branding. This would, then, agree with the notion of influencers (re-)defining the concept of luxury branding. As the purpose of qualitative content analysis is to decipher meaning and draw realistic conclusions

from the collected data (Bengtsson, 2016), this method allows the practice of meaning-making or making sense of the way influencers understand, define, and communicate luxury branding by qualitatively analyzing their visual posts. Subsequently, it can be determined how luxury brands can achieve progressive social media marketing objectives in relation to qualitative aspects.

3.2 Sampling

This section explains how the luxury brand influencers as well as their Instagram posts were sampled. It provides justifications for choosing the influencers and their posts. Furthermore, it clarifies which sampling methods were used.

3.2.1 Sampling of influencers

The research units for this study are the Instagram posts of two luxury brand influencers: @luxury (<https://www.instagram.com/luxury/?hl=en>) and @inspirations_luxury (https://www.instagram.com/inspirations_luxury/?hl=en), who currently have 1.1 million and 401.000 followers, respectively. In the process of choosing the luxury brand influencers to be examined, I did some initial research by looking at the pages of the most popular influencers to get an idea of what is central in their posts. The four main topics that are mostly present are cars, real estate, destinations, and jewelry. As this research is focused on luxury branding, real estate and destinations are topics that cannot be addressed in this thesis since the branding of these topics are not reflected in the influencers' visualizations. The luxury brands that were, therefore, analyzed were reduced to car brands and jewelry brands. The sampling method that was, thus, used for choosing the posts, as well as the influencers, is purposive sampling. This type of sampling can be defined as a form of nonprobability sampling that uses the judgment of the researcher in the selection process of the research units to determine which units are the most useful for the research (Babbie, 2010).

The rationale for choosing @luxury and @inspirations_luxury, then, is the fact that these influencers upload posts containing cars and jewelry in a more balanced way alongside posts containing real estate and destinations, whereas other influencers focus more on conceptualizing luxury through real estate and destinations. Appropriately, I chose these particular luxury influencers based on their consistency with posting cars and jewelry visuals, which is, in turn, in line with the focus of this research, as well as on the number of followers and posts they have. By looking at and comparing influencers that do not have the same number of followers, though they have approximately the same amount of posts, it is interesting to see the

similarities and differences between an influencer with over a million followers and an influencer who has 'only' approximately a third of that number of followers. Furthermore, these influencers also share images posted and/or created by other Instagram users which means that (some of) their posts compile multiple perceptions of luxury branding. This, then, had to be taken into consideration in the process of answering the main research question.

3.2.2 Sampling of Instagram posts

To allow for a feasible research within the given scope, the sample size was set within realistic boundaries and had, therefore, been limited to 100 visual posts, with 50 images from the @luxury account and 50 images from the @inspirations_luxury account. The current number of images on both influencers' pages (4,034 posts from @luxury and 3,404 posts from @inspirations_luxury) did not permit a detailed visual analysis and therefore, the data set was also sampled purposively. The type of purposive sampling that was used is maximum variation sampling. This form of sampling focuses on units that are relevant for the research yet derived from a broad spectrum (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). This type of purposive sampling permits to observe and document unique or diverse variations or patterns that run in the data set (Palinkas et al., 2015). Posts that portray car brands and jewelry brands, which share the same characteristic of luxury but are represented in diverse ways to see which patterns emerge, were, therefore, sampled.

Since some posts are short videos, the program DownloadGram was also used to download the data set, in addition to taking screenshots. The sampling of the data set was done in the period from December 1, 2017 up until April 1, 2018. The posts that were sampled in this period are more recent and can show a more contemporary approach of how the chosen influencers visualize luxury branding.

3.3 Operationalization

Here, the operationalization of this research is presented. An important step that was useful for answering the three sub-questions and, therefore, taken during the analysis is addressed. A key step that was taken during this research is the comprehensive analysis of the data set. This analysis, which includes all relevant data in relation to the theories, was necessary in order to identify how a particular post depicts a luxury brand in regard to, for instance, the cultural value individualism. Similarly, this step allowed for a comprehensive treatment of the data to examine how other cultural values such as collectivism and gender as well as additional values pertaining to concepts of exclusivity and ubiquity are embedded in the

visualizations of luxury branding. In other words, the comprehensive analysis of the data set was essential to analyze how such values play a role in defining luxury branding and was, thus, useful for answering the three sub-questions.

To explore the two practices of influence identified by Carter (2016), it was imperative to include all aspects of a luxury post in the analysis. This means that the data analysis was not limited to the images only. Other aspects such as the caption, tags, hashtags, and comments were also analyzed. By including hashtags in the analysis, for example, it was possible to explore the practice of 'hustling', which is a type of influence exerted by influencers by repetitively using and affiliating themselves with popular hashtags (2016). The identification of influence conceptions can, then, explain how these practices are used as tools that could lead to the success of the influencers in terms of engaging with and attracting new luxury consumers.

The inclusion of all aspects of a luxury post in the data analysis was also important for exploring the concept of brand experience. It allowed for a detailed analysis of all the elements present in a particular luxury post that could stir positive emotions regarding luxury branding. As mentioned in chapter 2, brand experience refers to emotional responses evoked by brand-related stimuli (Brakus et al., 2009). This, thus, means that there is not only a single aspect that can be accounted for a positive brand experience. Rather, it is generated by multiple factors and therefore, all the elements that constitute a luxury branding post needed to be taken into account. The analysis of all the features that comprise a luxury post, then, helped to construct the miscellaneous code trees (see Appendices), for which patterns were identified.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

This section provides information regarding the collection and analysis of the data. The processes pertaining to the method of analysis are described in detail.

3.4.1 *Thematic analysis*

The method that was used for examining the data is thematic analysis, which is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by means of initial open, axial, and selective coding processes. These patterns or themes were essential to establish because they are at the core of the main research question so, appropriately, I looked for the elements, or visual cues, that are consistently central in the posts. This also included the analysis of the captions. Naturally, the research followed a data-driven approach, as this strategy largely corresponds to summative and structural types of analysis (Schreier, 2013).

The analysis was carried out in six phases as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase revolved around becoming familiarized with the data set primarily by means of reading and re-reading the data, and noting down initial thoughts and ideas (2006). Since I sampled the data purposively with a clear focus on luxury car brands and luxury jewelry brands, I already gained some prior knowledge and thoughts of the data. This helped the guiding step of analytic induction which is a valuable tool for validating qualitative researches, along with constant comparison and theoretical sensitivity which will be addressed in Sections 3.4.3 and 3.4.4, respectively. Analytic induction refers to the process of trying to find the best fitting theoretical structure for the research material (Boeije, 2010). It allowed for making assumptions of the data which were then tested with a small sample of the data set from which new assumptions could be derived, which were, in turn, again tested with a small sample of the data set. Thus, it was the first step in sensitizing concepts.

3.4.2 Open coding process

The second phase was to generate initial open codes by coding compelling features of the data in a systematic manner across the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is also known as the initial open coding process. As Boeije (2010) describes it, the initial open coding process is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data. Thus, initial thoughts and ideas were transformed into codes. Codes identify interesting features or elements of the data that can be assessed in a meaningful way in relation to the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, codes are meaningful groups in which the data is divided and categorized. The initial open codes, in particular, represent the active patterns in the data set, which were based on their relevance to the main research question.

3.4.3 Axial coding process

The third phase of the analysis was done by conducting a search for themes by collating the initial open codes, that constitute all relevant data, into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It refers to the process of analyzing and organizing the initial open codes in terms of how certain codes can be combined and assembled into an overarching theme. This was done by means of a thematic map. The initial (partial) thematic map that was generated and used can be seen in Figure 1, which shows four main themes (circled) that were derived from an analysis of the initial open codes. A visualization like a thematic map was helpful to look at how a certain initial open code fits or does not fit into particular themes.

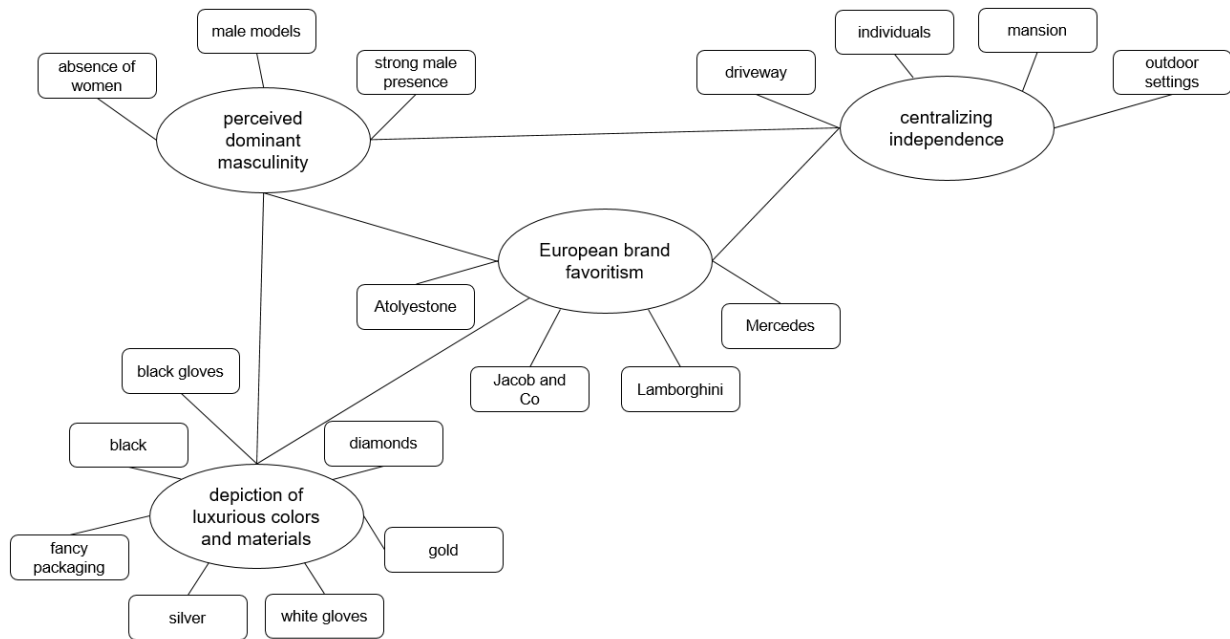


Figure 1

The search for themes was done in an interrelated manner with the fourth phase of the analysis, which was to review the themes by checking and testing if they were consistent with the initial open codes as well as the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is also known as the axial coding process. As Boeije (2010) describes it, the axial coding process is the process of determining which elements, in the form of codes, are the dominant ones and which are the less important ones. It allowed for a constant comparison of the codes. Constant comparison makes use of the different cycles of the data set and compares the findings from each new cycle with the findings of the previous cycle, as a means to find and describe a variation that can be found within the data set (2010). This method permitted a double-coding process, which is the process of using the initial open codes to re-analyze the data set. The initial open codes could, in turn, be reconsidered critically in terms of which codes adequately represent the patterns or themes of the data set. To make the axial codes more concise, active descriptors were added.

3.4.4 Selective coding process

The fifth phase of the analysis was to further define and name the themes by identifying the essence and refining the specifics of each theme, and generating names and definitions for

each theme so that the overall story of the data set could be determined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is also known as the selective coding process, which is the final coding process of thematic analysis. This process allowed to identify the key themes and reflect on the relationship between the most dominant themes (Boeije, 2010). The most dominant themes could, then, be turned into selective codes that represent the most prominent themes that occur in the data set. The selective codes were established in connection with theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is a method that enables the creation of creative ideas from the data set by analyzing the data with a certain theoretical lens (2010). In other words, it permitted the viewing of the data set with the relevant theories kept in mind, from which ideas, in the form of selective codes, about the data set could be derived. An analysis of each selective code or theme as well as the relationship between the selective codes or themes as a collective will be given in the next chapter.

This is, then, also in accordance with the sixth and final phase of the analysis, which refers to producing the report of the analysis. This process is referred to as the final opportunity for analysis and included the selection of compelling examples and their respective analyses as well as theoretical connections, which relate back to the main research question, for each selective code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This also includes analytical narratives of the selective codes, which reveal and demonstrate the underlying message that can be found in the data set of how influencers define and communicate luxury branding through their Instagram posts.

3.5 Validity and reliability

Since this research used a qualitative method, the data set was, as previously mentioned, analyzed interpretatively to find the patterns or themes that allowed for the practice of meaning-making or making sense of the way influencers understand and define luxury branding. A qualitative method was, thus, the appropriate method to answer the main research question. Given the fact that there is still a gap in research on how luxury influencers present luxury branding in their visual posts and, subsequently, (re-)define the concept, this research could add knowledge to the progressive influencer marketing strategy, in particular on Instagram. Moreover, it could, together with the research conducted by De Veirman et al. (2017), potentially help to complement which Instagram influencers can be proper representatives for luxury brands. It should be noted then, though, that this research is limited in terms of measurements.

4. Data analysis and results

This chapter presents the results that were obtained from the analysis of the data set. It focuses on the selective codes, or themes, that were established, which represent the underlying story of the data set. Each selective code, or theme, is presented in-depth with definitions and examples from the data set, and further elaborations in relation to the theories as well as the pertinent sub-question it belongs to. Also, it is briefly mentioned how the selective codes were created from the axial codes and the initial open codes.

4.1 Selective codes as themes

In this section, the selective codes are defined and accompanied with appropriate visual examples from the data set. Each selective code is explored as a theme, in relation to the theoretical concepts, that runs through the data set. The selective codes are sub-divided into three categories, which represent the sub-questions of this research: 1) How do individualism and collectivism play a role in defining luxury branding? 2) How does gender play a role in defining luxury branding 3) How does the dichotomy between exclusivity and ubiquity play a role in defining luxury branding?

4.1.1 Themes sub-question one: How do individualism and collectivism play a role in defining luxury branding?

4.1.1.1 Theme 1: luxury branding and individualism

The first selective code or theme that was established is “Celebrating individualism”. This selective code centralizes the individual within the luxury industry. Although it was previously mentioned that the luxury industry is gaining a wider audience, which means that luxury brands are obliged to engage with more consumers, it appears that luxury branding is seemingly also presented as praising the individual. This became clear after analyzing the posts by simply focusing on what is presented visually and, thus, leaving out the tags, the hashtags, and the comments. This method permitted to look at luxury branding from a different, slightly simplified, angle. The first selective code was, subsequently, derived from the axial codes “centralizing independence” and “depiction of single products”. These codes were established by open codes such as “driveway”, “exclusive jewelry”, “individuals”, “personal customizations”, “spotlight”, and “two-door sports cars” (Appendix A).

Apart from a few posts, each post of the data set revolves around portraying single products, i.e. one luxury car or one luxury jewelry item. This already hints at some form of individualism, though further analysis was needed to validly conclude this. It was, therefore,

necessary here to analyze whether both influencers present the types of luxury goods relevant to this research in an equivalent manner. From Figure 2, 3, 4, and 5, it can be seen that this is, indeed, the case. Figure 2 and 3 are examples that show how the @luxury account presents luxury branding in relation to individualism and Figure 4 and 5 are examples that show how the @inspirations_luxury account does this.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

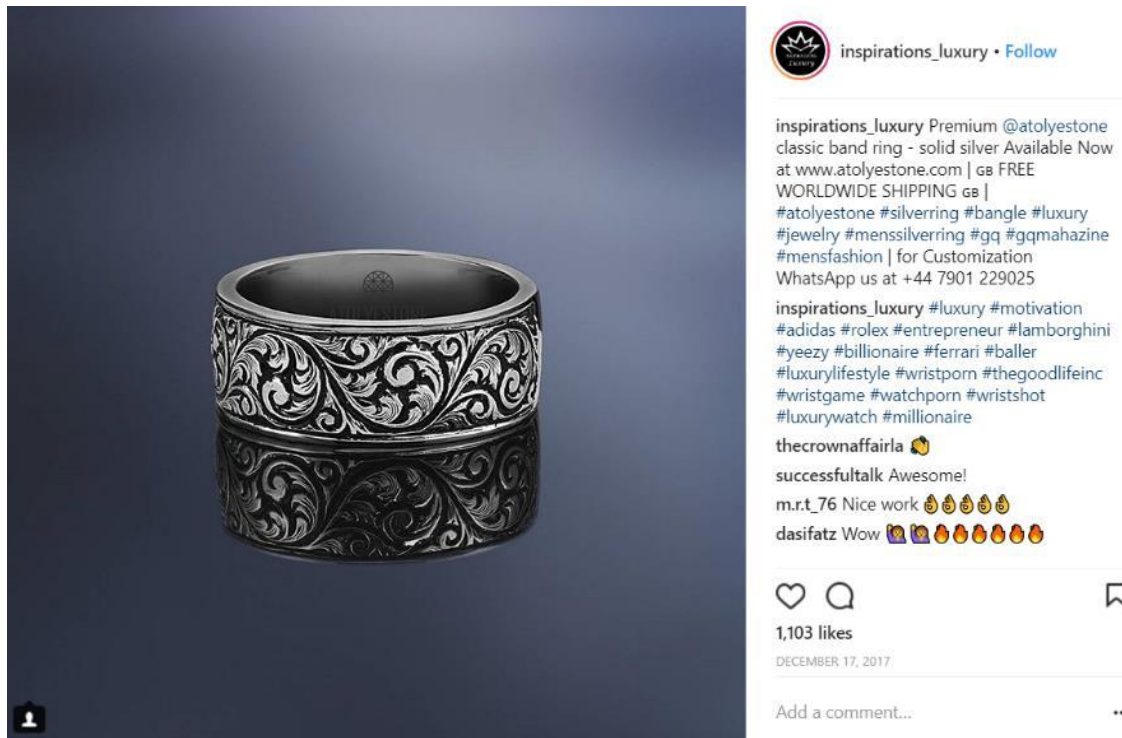


Figure 5

In Figure 2 and 3, one Lamborghini car and one Jacob and Co watch are presented, respectively. The setting of Figure 2 is the driveway of a luxury mansion, though the mansion is placed in the background which directs the attention of the viewer to the luxury car in the foreground. Given the fact that a mansion is a very large house, it is easy to assume that it is the home of multiple people, which would dismiss the idea of individuality. However, the placement of a two-doors sports car on its driveway reduces the number of residents to a maximum of two. This can be further supported by the fact that it is the only car present. It is possible to make the assumption that both the mansion and the car are jointly owned. Seeing as both goods are luxurious and thus expensive, though, it would be rather atypical for a presumably rich consumer, who can well afford to purchase luxury products, to have a shared ownership of their goods. It becomes possible, then, to assume that the owner of both the luxury mansion and luxury car is one individual. In this regard, this post observes and demonstrates the luxurious achievements of a single person, who can be characterized as independent.

This is also the case in Figure 3, in which the focus is on the Jacob and Co watch. Although the background has been blurred, it is still possible to perceive that the setting of this post is the front seat of a car. The steering wheel and gearshift, for example, are sufficiently

noticeable. More specifically, from this angle, the passenger seat is visible as well, though it can be seen that it is empty. Assuming that, similar to the one in Figure 2, this car is a two-doors sports car as well, this shows that the driver of the car is alone, which centralizes them in relation to the luxury watch. It can be visually perceived that the individual here is, presumably, the owner of the luxury watch. Taking into account the fact that there is no other person present, then, it is possible to argue that they are the owner of the car as well. The car can also be thought of as a luxury car, especially since the color of the interior has a golden glow, which is similar to the color of the luxury watch. As such, it appears that there is a clear focus again here on the individual, who can enjoy having luxury products.

The emphasis of the individual can also be found in Figure 4 and 5, in which, again, one Lamborghini car and one piece of luxury jewelry item, though in this case an Atolyestone ring, are depicted. Contrary to Figure 2, however, the luxury car here is visualized with a male model rather than a mansion. Together with Figure 12 and 13, which can be found and will be addressed later in Section [4.1.2.1](#), this post is one of the three posts that includes models posing with a luxury car. Despite the fact that the setting here is different than in Figure 2, the model plays a decisive role in making this post about the individual. From the way he is leaning against the car, it can be argued that he is its rightful owner. What is more striking here, though, is the fact that he is holding a rifle. This seems to insinuate that he is able to protect both himself and his luxury car from harm, without having to rely on others. In that sense, this post is also marked by independence and individualism.

Figure 5, then, further expresses the notion of individualism by illustrating a single piece of luxury jewelry item, which is similar to Figure 3. Here, however, the Atolyestone ring is not situated in a particular setting. Rather, it is placed on a mirror-like surface and in the middle of the post, making it both the literal focus and center of attention. Contrary to the previously analyzed examples, though, there are no other visual cues in this post such as a setting or a model that clearly hint at individualism. Therefore, to further explore how individualism is embedded here, I included the analysis of the caption for this post, which is notably relevant for this theme. The caption namely mentions that this luxury ring can be customized, which means that it can be modified to an individual's preference. This indicates that the ring has the ability to become a distinctive and unique item after every customization, which is based on personal specifications. This post, thus, also seems to focus on the individual consumer and as such, it can be argued that it symbolizes how luxury branding can be related to the celebration of individualism.

As shown above, there is a consistency in the posts of both influencers in terms of connoting individualism, primarily by reserving every post for one luxury car or one luxury jewelry item. Although some posts include other aspects such as a setting or a model, it can be seen that there is a clear focus on the luxury items which signify the importance of the individual consumer. As mentioned in Section 2.3.1, there are two cultural perceptions of luxury, namely individualist perceptions and collectivist perceptions. Individualist perceptions of luxury are shaped by values such as hedonism and the extended self, while collectivist perceptions of luxury are shaped by values such as conspicuousness, uniqueness, and quality (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). It appears here, then, that both influencers seem to have embedded individualist perceptions in these visualizations of luxury branding.

4.1.1.2 Theme 2: luxury branding and collectivism

The second selective code is “Representing a collective community”. This selective code refers to the perception of the influencers of luxury branding as encouraging cooperation within the luxury industry. This might seem to be somewhat contradictory to the previous selective code or theme, in which the individual is centralized. However, it should be taken into consideration that the individual is part of a community that exists within the luxury industry. This was already hinted at in the previous sections, though it will be further elaborated here. It was, for instance, briefly mentioned that tags, or mentions of other Instagram accounts, occur within the data set. These tags or mentions can be perceived as promotional, which will be explored more in Section 4.1.3.2, but it can also be viewed as cooperative and collective, which is the focus here. Correspondingly, the second selective code was established from the axial codes “allowing follower-interactions” and “partnerships with other accounts”, which were created by open codes such as “guessing the city”, “guessing the price”, “naming the car”, “photo credits”, “reposts”, and “which one?” (Appendix A).

Despite the fact that both influencers mention other luxury branding-related accounts, they do not tag each other. This can mean, for instance, that they do not know each other or that they have already established close and working partnerships with other accounts. In any case, it became clear that they do share a couple of the same posts, though each influencer uses different captions and tags different accounts. The fact that they do not caption those posts as reposts does not mean that they cannot still be viewed and considered as such. Figure 6, 7, 8, and 9, for instance, are examples of shared posts.



Figure 6

luxury • Follow

luxury Guess the Car?
Follow @sir @sir for more

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ruben_samuel_rodrigues Mercedes
hugomorim.ofc Mercedes / Vulcan
evgeniikrasin Vaz 2110
luxury.bulls Very nice
luxury_name_artin Mercedes bens
quick.cut ❤️❤️❤️
_matthias_olsen_ mercedes benz vision gran turismo
soreoluwa Alfa romeo
giannhs_pnk 🍷
ecesanin1 BMW
jackconley42 Merc
valentijnov Mercedes

41,430 likes

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Figure 7

inspirations_luxury • Follow
New York, New York

inspirations_luxury Guess the Car?
Follow @inspirations_style
@inspirations_streetwear

View all 27 comments

deez.ead Benz
fredkhaz Grand trismo MB
luxury2k Tesla
bq78 More like Benz style
paradiseoskar Ich mag den Stuff den du postet 😊👍
m.rt_76 Great Man 🍷🍷🍷
marksuhren Nice
ej_dboss Maybach
dog_boy_12345 Porche
mikeseymour31 Be looking like a spaceship 🚀 Car fit for a boss of the future 😊👍
absolut Boss

4,377 likes

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inspirations_luxury • Follow
Paris, France

inspirations_luxury Guess the beast 🐼
Photo: @zedsly
Follow 📌
@inspirations_style
@inspirations_streetwear

inspirations_luxury #luxury #motivation #adidas #rolex #entrepreneur #lamborghini #yeezy #billionaire #ferrari #baller #luxurylifestyle #wristporn #thegoodlifeinc #wristgame #watchporn #wristshot #luxurywatch #millionaire #mansion #exoticcar #panerai #essentials #yachtlife #richlife #luxurycars #boss #inspirationsstyle #inspirationsstreetwear #inspirationsstyle

rokas_skyrius 👍

postognvgasdobrasil Já conhece o único lava car robotizado da região? Venha e tenha tratamento VIP para você e seu carro! 🍷

5,240 likes
DECEMBER 15, 2017

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Figure 8



luxury • Follow

luxury Guess the city?
Follow @millionaire for more

@zedsly

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jackbenham15 Paris
samiksr Bucharest @zedsly
the_michaelanderson 🤔🤔🤔
lukaatorovic Its Arcul de Triumf in Bucharest,Romania.
omarrmusleh Paris
_sam_senior64_ Paris
aytul779 🐼
emad_rahmatian hosok tere,budapest
disdier.lv 🤔🤔🤔🤔
theloballush Black beast. not sure! 🐼

37,034 likes
MARCH 12

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Figure 9

As can be seen, Figure 6 was posted by the @luxury account on February 27. It was, subsequently, posted by the @inspirations_luxury account the following day, namely February 28, which can be seen in Figure 7. The caption of Figure 6 does not only mention the @sir account, but it also asks followers to guess the car that is depicted. The caption of Figure 7, on the other hand, mentions two other accounts, namely the @inspirations_style account and the @inspirations_streetwear account. Similar to the @sir account, though, this influencer also asks followers to guess the car that is displayed. An interesting difference between the way the influencers mention other accounts is not necessarily only the fact that they tag different accounts. It is perhaps more striking that the @sir account is consecutively tagged twice, whereas the @inspirations_style account and the @inspirations_streetwear account are each tagged once. Moreover, the @luxury account spurs viewers to follow the @sir account 'for more'. This seems to suggest that the @luxury influencer has a close partnership with the @sir account, which offers more luxury branding-related content.

The caption of Figure 8, then, mentions the @inspirations_style account and the @inspirations_streetwear account, and asks followers to guess the car in the post again, though this influencer refers to the car as 'the beast'. The photographer of this post is also referred to here, which is contrary to both Figure 6 and 7 but similar to Figure 9. Interestingly, Figure 8 was posted by the @inspirations_luxury account on December 15, 2017, and it was not posted by the @luxury account until March 12, as can be seen in Figure 9. Considering the fact that the @luxury account mentions a different account here, namely the @millionaire account, it is possible to assume that this post was used to introduce a new collaboration that was not yet established. Another difference between the shared post is the fact that the @luxury account asks followers to guess the city rather than the car. Nonetheless, it is more or less the same guessing game, which also occurs consistently in the data set and allows for a higher level of interactions with the influencers' respective followers.

Given the fact that both influencers consistently mention other accounts throughout the posts in the data set, such tagging practices can be perceived as active collaborations between them and other luxury-related accounts for the purpose of, for instance, creating and spreading more awareness for the different luxury brands that they promote. It is, then, also possible to assume that other luxury branding influencers share posts and work collectively with each other, which makes the luxury brands even more conspicuous. Furthermore, by asking followers to guess the car or the city that is presented, both influencers seem to strengthen the interaction

with consumers and can be seen as an invitation to become a part of the luxury industry community, in which cooperation is encouraged.

Like word-of-mouth, interaction is also one of the five aspects that constructs luxury brands' social media marketing efforts, which enables the sharing of information and opinions as well as conversations with and between consumers to take place online (Kim & Ko, 2012). Given the fact that brand-consumer interactions in the luxury industry can still be complex, it is imperative for luxury brands to give their target audience the opportunity to communicate with them. The role of the influencers becomes an important one, then, since they now serve as mediators between the brands and their respective consumers, and give the brands more credibility and trustworthiness (Hesse, 2015). Moreover, it appears here that both influencers have embedded a more collectivist perception in these visualizations of luxury branding. This is, interestingly, contrary to the individualist perception that is embedded in the posts of the previous theme.

4.1.2 Theme sub-question two: How does gender play a role in defining luxury branding?

4.1.2.1 Theme 3: luxury branding as male-centered

The third selective code that was established is "Expressly reserved for men". As the code itself already implies, it denotes both influencers' opinions of luxury branding as targeted at men. It was mentioned in Section 2.3.2 that traditionally, the female gender accounts for a higher consumption of luxury products and as such, the luxury industry has been largely related to women. This means that this theme contradicts the conventional association between the luxury industry and women. During the initial open coding and axial coding processes, this became increasingly evident, since the data set does not include women or jewelry for women, with the exception of one single post which presents a diamond ring. Accordingly, the third selective code was established from the axial codes "favoring male perceptions" and "perceived dominant masculinity". These axial codes were, in turn, created by organizing open codes such as "absence of women", "male models", "promoting male accounts", "strong male presence", "@sir account", "#mensfashion" (Appendix B).

From the data set, it seems clear that both influencers take a male-centered stance on defining luxury. In general, there is a lack of models used or present in the posts, particularly those that visualize cars. Some of the posts that capture jewelry, however, do include models, albeit only their wrists are shown. More strikingly, judging from the wrists, it seems apparent that these models are men. This can, for example, be seen in Figure 10 and 11, which are posts

capturing luxury watches sampled from the @luxury account and the @inspirations_luxury account, respectively.



Figure 10



Figure 11

In Figure 10, the model is clearly wearing a formal shirt, which is a garment that is traditionally known as made for and worn by men, in particular businessmen. Since nowadays women are also seen wearing formal shirts, though, it would be inappropriate, and perhaps even discriminating, to conclude that the model is male based solely on the type of garment. Moreover, in Figure 11, the type of garment worn is less clearly visible, which disqualifies it as a determining factor for gender. The key aspect that renders the models to be male is the abundant arm hair, which is extended over both wrists and hands. Given the fact that abundant arm hair is a male characteristic, it respectfully suggests that the models are men. Furthermore, in Figure 11, several hashtags are posted in a subsequent caption or comment, including #mensfashion. Although this hashtag does not pertain to the model or the gender of the model, it does, along with other male-based hashtags, present the post as explicitly aimed at men. It can, therefore, be argued that by presenting the watches in this fashion, there seems to be an appeal to masculinity.

This is further substantiated by the scanty cars posts that do include models. As mentioned in Section 4.1.1.1, only three posts of the entire data set depict models that pose with luxury cars, with Figure 4 being one of the three. Figure 12 and 13 show the other two posts that combine luxury cars with models, in which there is, again, an absence of women.



Figure 12



Figure 13

Both Figures position the male figure as the gender that luxury branding attracts. In Figure 12, the doors of the luxury car are open and seem rather inviting to both men in the sense that they are welcome to enter the vehicle, even though the left model is dressed less stylishly and luxuriously than the right model. Thus, although there appears to be some sort of a hierarchy between the two men, which is based on the way they are dressed, the luxury car does not reject either one of them by holding both doors open. The fact that two male models are used here instead of, for instance, one male and one female model also signifies a contradiction to the traditional notion of the relationship between the luxury industry and women.

After further analysis of the comment section of this post, it became clear that this image was derived from the movie *Justice League*. This superhero movie does not only focus on male superheroes such as Batman and Spiderman, but it also includes the female superhero Wonder Woman. It is interesting, then, that this influencer chose to use this specific image to visualize luxury branding instead of, for instance, an image in which a luxury car is depicted with the female superhero character, or any other female character for that matter. The movie itself already represents a form of male domination, since it revolves around five male superheroes and only one female superhero. The fact that this dominance is transmitted to the visualization

of luxury branding gives this particular post an even more masculine tone, which makes the appeal to men even stronger. This might suggest that men are, indeed, starting to become greater and more important consumers of luxury products.

In Figure 13, then, the male model is positioned as the driver of the luxury car. The fact that the passenger seat here is taken by a stuffed toy rather than, for example, another male model or even a female model draws more attention to the driver. This can, then, be seen as an implication, in a respectful manner, that the person who drives and is in control of a luxury car should be a man. Additionally, as mentioned before, both influencers consistently tag and promote other Instagram accounts in the captions of their posts, with the @luxury account mentioning mostly the @sir account and the @inspirations_luxury account mentioning mainly the @inspirations_style account and the @inspirations_streetwear account. It became clear that, after further analysis, these accounts also focus on men, though in terms of luxury fashion. Both influencers, thus, seem to further contribute to the idea that luxurious goods are becoming more inspiring for men.

Defining luxury branding with this approach is, then, in line with the extension of the target audience of luxury brands, which is the result of the democratization of luxury. In this sense, it can be argued that these influencers present a new and different perception of luxury branding than the traditional definition of the luxury brand industry, which revolves around so-called 'status-seeking individuals' as its consumers (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015). As mentioned in Section 2.2, the traditional definition given by Seo and Buchanan-Oliver refers to consumers of luxurious goods simply as individuals and thus, does not make a distinction between men or women. By exclusively focusing on men as the target audience of luxury branding, both influencers, from a 'brand as an assemblage' perspective as proposed by Lury (2009), construct a layer of activity that functions as an opposition to that of the traditional luxury brand industry, in which women consume more luxury goods (Roux et al., 2017). This, then, creates and shows an opportunity for luxury branding to become more integrated in a more male-centered culture.

4.1.3 Themes sub-question three: How does the dichotomy between exclusivity and ubiquity play a role in defining luxury branding?

4.1.3.1 Theme 4: luxury branding and millionaires

The fourth selective code is "Appropriate for millionaires". This selective code represents the influencers' depiction of luxury branding as centered around millionaires. Although it can be expected that the main target audience of the luxury industry should have more wealth than the

'average' consumer, it is interesting that this is vividly depicted by the influencers, though only to a certain extent, especially because the target audience is expanding. This way of presenting luxury branding can perhaps also be seen as an eloquent method to allow both the richest and the less wealthy consumers to experience luxury. It could, then, serve as an incentive for them to purchase luxury products or to be persuaded into some day buying luxury branded goods, respectively. This selective code was derived from the axial codes "depiction of luxurious colors and materials" and "mentions of 7-figure price tags", which were constructed by open codes such as "diamonds", "fancy packaging", "gold", "high-end clockworks", "one million dollars", and "white gloves" (Appendix C).

Even though the luxury industry is expanding in terms of broadening its target audience, this selective code or theme shows that the essence of the luxury industry has not, or only slightly, changed. It is, and should, still be perceived and presented as extravagant and prestigious. This can be seen in Figure 14, 15, and 16, in which distinct types of Jacob and Co watches are presented.



Figure 14



luxury • Follow

luxury The @Jacobandco Millionaire is the ultimate statement piece. Took over two years to make and is set with 276 Square, Emerald-cut Yellow Diamonds. 💎: \$6,000,000

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- lubamyalo 😊
- vadala99 @floydmayweather
- ryanhooseman Excessive
- amir.besharat ❤️
- amir.besharat ❤️
- amados_fashion Unbelievable watch 🤩🤩🤩
- junissova_officall Неужели вышло такая 🤩🤩🤩🙏
- junissova_officall Когданибудь ты будешь МОИМ 🙏

♡ 💬 📌

24,425 likes

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Figure 15



inspirations_luxury • Follow

inspirations_luxury When your @jacobandco costs as much as your ride #Jacobandco Follow 🙌 @inspirations_streetwear @inspirations_style

inspirations_luxury #luxury #motivation #adidas #rolex #entrepreneur #lamborghini #yeezy #billionaire #ferrari #baller #luxurylifestyle #wristporn #thegoodlifeinc #wristgame #watchporn #wristshot #luxurywatch #millionaire #mansion #exoticcar #panerai #essentials #yachtlife #richlife #luxurycars #boss #inspirationsstyle #inspirationsstreetwear #inspirationsstyle

rob_fini @emanuele.fiorini.908

m.r.t_76 Nice watch 🤩🤩🤩

emanuele.fiorini.908 Spettacolo cazzo

♡ 💬 📌

4,079 likes

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Figure 16

Figure 14 is a screenshot taken from a luxury jewelry video post of the @luxury account and presents a Jacob and Co watch in a meteorite packaging. Figure 15, on the other hand, portrays another, diamond Jacob and Co watch, though without a fancy packaging but with a direct reference to its price in the caption. Figure 16, then, shows yet another Jacob and Co watch without neither a fancy packaging nor a direct reference to its price. Instead, an indirect reference is made to the price in the caption via the sports car that can be seen in the background.

The packaging of the Jacob and Co watch shown in Figure 14 is in the form of a meteorite with an integrated display, which is a high-end and extraordinary type of packaging, particularly because it is rather rare in terms of form and material. It is radically different from most ordinary watch packaging which is usually in the form of a box, even that of, for instance, Rolex watches. Moreover, the Jacob and Co watch is shown to be unpacked by a person wearing a white glove, which refers to the watch being treated meticulously, most probably because it is expensive and precious. The fact that this post does not give any hints about the pricing of this watch might perhaps leave viewers doubtful about its true value. All things considered, though, it should be safe to assume that it carries a rather high price tag.

The caption of Figure 15, on the other hand, does make a direct reference to the price of this particular Jacob and Co watch. It can be seen from the caption that the price of this luxury watch, which ironically is named 'Millionaire', is six million dollars. Given the fact that the watch is made from emerald-cut yellow diamonds during a production period of at least two years, which is also addressed in the caption, such a price may not be very surprising. Interestingly, this luxury watch is not presented or displayed on a fancy packaging, which is contrary to Figure 14. It is, instead, placed on a piece of cloth that might perhaps be a scarf. As such, the watch becomes the sole focus of the image and it compels the viewer to direct their attention to the watch only. Considering the fact that this Jacob and Co watch costs more than a million dollars, it can be argued that the watch in Figure 14 also belongs to the million dollars category.

The Jacob and Co watch in Figure 16 is, contrary to the watch in Figure 15, not made from diamonds. Similar to Figure 14, this post does not give any direct indications regarding the value or the price of this luxury watch. It can be derived from the caption, however, that it is as expensive as the car that is placed on the blurred background of the image. Although it is not clear which brand this car belongs to, it appears to be a sports car, which means that a rather high price tag is attached to it. The fact that this watch can be compared to a sports car in terms of its price already elevates it to a higher class than regular watches. This would, then, mean

that this Jacob and Co watch also has a high price, presumably in the million dollars category as well, which is similar to the luxury watches presented in Figure 14 and 15.

In this regard, both influencers perceive and present luxury branding in relation to its authentic original essence, namely as an industry for the wealthy, which is in line with financial value (Hennigs et al., 2012). Notwithstanding the fact that the luxury industry is becoming more democratized, this allows luxury brands to hold their prestigious and, to a certain extent, elevated nature, even if they are gaining potential, though less rich, consumers. This may also seem to suggest that luxury brands are somewhat still reluctant in fully adapting social media marketing strategies, because they do not want to lose the authenticity of being luxurious. Nonetheless, by implementing influencers in their social media marketing strategies, luxury brands have already reduced the distance between them and their consumers and as a result, the elevated level of perception of luxury has somewhat decreased. Be that as it may, though, the democratization of luxury has enabled luxury brands to have multidimensional constructs that have created new perceptions of the luxury industry.

4.1.3.2 Theme 5: luxury branding and the exclusivity challenge

The fifth selective code is “Challenging its exclusivity”. This selective code refers to the luxury industry changing the perception that it pertains to an exclusive community, which is a direct contradiction of the previous theme. Shifting the traditional viewpoint to a more progressive understanding of the luxury industry is primarily done through the influencers’ more unconventional way of promoting the pertinent luxury brands. As explained in the Introduction, the luxury industry is becoming more available to people outside the prestigious circles partly because of social media. This means that the influencers’ Instagram posts are, in themselves, already a tool for making luxury less exclusionary. By presenting luxury branding in a rather atypical fashion, then, challenges the exclusivity bias even further. This selective code was created by the axial codes “creating more awareness” and “encouraging to follow other accounts”, which were formed by open codes such as “international songs”, “popular hashtags”, “promotional posts”, “sales promotion”, “tags”, and “watching audience” (Appendix C).

It was mentioned in Section 4.1.2.1 that both influencers promote other Instagram accounts that focus on luxury branding, though in terms of luxury fashion, in relation to men. Here, the inclusion of other accounts reflects the move away from exclusion because the concept of luxury branding is being easily spread among diversified people, making it more popular. This is done in diverse ways, however. Although both influencers tag other Instagram

accounts, they take alternative approaches to popularize the notion of luxury. Figure 17 shows a post by the @luxury account that can be seen as a notable example for this purpose.



Figure 17

The first thing that is noticeable about this post is the fact that there is an audience present. It is the only post in the entire data set that visualizes people watching the luxury good rather than interacting directly with it, as is the case in Figure 4, 12, and 13. At first glance, this may seem as if the post actually does elevate luxury by positioning the audience behind the luxury car and in the background. Moreover, they are separated from the car by a retractable railing stand, which denotes that they have to keep a certain distance from it. This ostensibly reinforces the luxury car's prestige as it is separated from its audience, which might include consumers from different classes. Focusing on and analyzing solely the image, thus, seems to lead to the conclusion that the luxury car here is lifted to a higher rank.

Be that as it may, this post also incorporates a promotional aspect, namely generating publicity for the @sir account, again, and the @alan_bale_lamborghini account which are both mentioned twice. The @alan_bale_lamborghini account is even promoted once within the image itself, in front of the luxury car, while the other three tags appear in the caption. This draws the attention of the viewer to this particular account even further. Judging from this account's name

which includes 'lamborghini', it is possible to conclude that, similar to the @sir account, it is related to luxury branding. It is also worth mentioning that this post occurs twice on the influencer's page. This could potentially serve as some sort of a reminder to followers or viewers to have a look at, and perhaps even follow, the mentioned accounts. This means, in other words, that this influencer directs their (potentially new) followers to other accounts that are associated with luxury branding, which was also briefly addressed in Section 4.1.1.2. This can, then, again be translated into the idea that more awareness is being created for luxury branding, which allows for a broader audience of the luxury industry.

This is done in a slightly different manner by the @inspirations_luxury account. In terms of visualizing the luxury brand, however, there is a rather striking difference between the influencers' methods. Figure 18 shows a post by the @inspirations_luxury influencer that further exemplifies how the conventional exclusivity of luxury branding is targeted.



Figure 18

The most significant difference between Figure 17 and 18 is the fact that Figure 18 does not include an audience. It is, therefore, less tempting to presume that the luxury car is positioned in some sort of a superior rank. Instead, the setting of this post is the parking lot of

McDonald's. The depiction of a luxury car at a fast food company, which is more accessible to the public, rather than, for instance, a fancy Michelin-starred restaurant puts forward the idea that the hierarchical structure that exists within the luxury industry is, to a certain extent, being defied. On the one hand, this post claims, with its caption, that the luxury car is, indeed, positioned higher than McDonald's, as driving this car is stylish. It also seems to imply, then, that McDonald's is not a place where such luxury cars are often found. In this regard, the luxury car here is, similar to the one in Figure 17, seemingly elevated in terms of its prestige.

On the other hand, however, this post also suggests that luxury branding is becoming more open and inviting towards people other than those of the upper-class. Similar to Figure 17, this post also attracts attention to other Instagram accounts that are affiliated with the luxury industry. The @inspirations_luxury influencer promotes different accounts than the @luxury account, though. Here, the @inspirations_style account and the @inspirations_streetwear account are mentioned again as well as the @zedsly account. It became clear, after further analysis, that the @zedsly account uploads posts of luxury car and is, thus, also affiliated with the luxury industry. Furthermore, this post uses popular hashtags such as #luxury and #lamborghini. Hashtags are known for popularizing a particular post and making it easy for Instagram users to find a specific post in which popular hashtags are used. The use of hashtags means both that influence is exerted through the practice of 'hustling' and that more awareness for luxury branding is being created.

This, then, seems to be in accordance with the idea that luxury brands' social media marketing strategies (i.e. the use of influencers) have a positive influence on brand awareness and, in turn, brand equity or value, which has been previously researched (Kim & Ko, 2012; Godey et al., 2016). However, since this research focuses on qualitative aspects, it can now be determined that such aspects include mentioning other luxury-related Instagram accounts, using popular hashtags, and depicting a luxury good in a rather unconventional manner or setting, which seems to reflect both functional value and social value. Assembling these aspects into a luxury post would then, as exemplified, allow for increased awareness of luxury branding among a broader audience, which also makes the luxury industry less exclusive. In this regard, the notion that social media marketing strategies are beneficial for luxury brands can be further validated.

4.1.3.3 Theme 6: luxury branding and popularized European brands

The sixth and final selective code is "Pertinent to popularized European manufacturing". This last selective code represents both influencers' perception of popularized European brands

as playing an important, if not the most important, role in shaping luxury branding. This immediately became clear during an early stage of the analysis of the luxury cars, since all the sampled cars posts vividly demonstrate European car brands that have been made universal. It became clear that this is also the case for the jewelry posts, though further analysis was needed to determine this. The influencers' choice to use popular European brands as leading representatives of luxury branding also signifies that the exclusivity of the luxury industry is, indeed, being challenged, which is similar to the previous theme but contrary to the fourth theme. Correspondingly, this selective code was formed by the axial codes "advocating for popular European products and services" and "European brand favoritism", which were based on open codes such as "Audi", "Aston Martin", "Atolyestone", "Jacob and Co", "Lamborghini", and "Mercedes" (Appendix C).

The fact that the entire data set revolves around popular European brands indicates that both influencers strongly associate luxury branding with such brands. More specifically, in visualizing luxury cars, these influencers have predominantly opted for European sports cars, of which the logos are presented distinctly, instead of, for instance, European sport utility vehicles (SUVs). The brands that were chosen to represent luxury jewelry were, however, slightly less apparent. This is particularly due to the fact that the logos of these brands are not visible or shown in a subtle manner and therefore, further analysis was needed to determine which brands are presented. A majority of the cars posts are dedicated to the renowned German car brand Mercedes and Italian car brand Lamborghini. Figure 19, 20, 21, and 22 are, then, examples of how these brands are visualized as luxury cars on the pages of the influencers.



luxury • Follow

luxury Name the Mercedes!
Follow @sir @sir for more

-

@rokenr

Load more comments

jessicaubilla4 Nice

lior_ff245 Sls

shoaibbjilani 🌟🔥

seanthompson14 Sls

_antucci_ger_ Sls

oltersdorfmaz Sls amg

oltersdorfmaz AMG

velvor What a beauty

okonta_christos ❤️❤️❤️

casparlaschet Good one 🍷

👍🗨️🔖

29,523 likes

FEBRUARY 11

Add a comment...

Figure 19



inspirations_luxury • Follow
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

inspirations_luxury Beast

📌📌📌 #mercedes #amggt

Follow 📌

@inspirations_style

@inspirations_streetwear

inspirations_luxury #luxury #motivation #rolex #entrepreneur #lamborghini #billionaire #ferrari #baller #luxurylifestyle #wristporn #thegoodlifeinc #wristgame #watchporn #wristshot #luxurywatch #millionaire #mansion #exoticcar #panerai #essentials #yachtlife #richlife #luxurycars #boss #inspirationsstyle #inspirationsstreetwear #inspirationsluxury

m.r.t_76 Great car 🍷🍷🍷

m.jaku Perfection ✅👍

hamzazlifestyle The Batman's car
Gorgeous and sexy 🍷🍷

👍🗨️🔖

5,333 likes

MARCH 4

Add a comment...

Figure 20



Figure 21

luxury • Follow

luxury Name the Lamborghini model?
Follow @sir @sir for more

-

@mateo.r.photography

Load more comments

tom__112 Centenario

theplatinumtie The Centenario is a BEAST 🐘🐘

inaki_pasini @iker.jaimez ahhhhh 😍😍😍😍

shahii_rp iran ❤️🇮🇷

thatonweirdo_ @justin_sona nah 😏

nicholas.sylvestre Centenario 🍑

jamie_mtb_group Centenario

nike_adidas_pics Lamborghini centenario

jackhunt2005 Centenario

32,799 likes

MARCH 10

Add a comment...



Figure 22

inspirations_luxury • Follow
New York, New York

inspirations_luxury Name the Car?
Follow @inspirations_style
@inspirations_streetwear

inspirations_luxury #luxury #motivation #adidas #rolex #entrepreneur #lamborghini #yeezy #billionaire #ferrari #baller #luxurylifestyle #wristporn #thegoodlifeinc #wristgame #watchporn #wristshot #luxurywatch #millionaire #mansion #exoticcar #panerai #essentials #yachtlife #richlife #luxurycars #boss #inspirationsstyle #inspirationsstreetwear #inspirationsstyle

stevenkj Cool!

maximilian_71 Rarri

loorayx Lamborghini centario

christopherrehov Mine

irongent_ Great shot

4,436 likes

DECEMBER 21, 2017

Add a comment...

In Figure 19 and 20, the famous Mercedes logo – the three-pointed star in a circle – is plainly visible. This is particularly due to the fact that the photos are taken from the front of both cars. From this perspective, the logo becomes rather big and allows for an instant recognition of the brand. For those who might not recognize the logo, though, both influencers refer to Mercedes in the caption of the posts. A difference between the way the influencers refer to the brand, however, is the fact that the @luxury influencer tells the viewer to name the model of the Mercedes car. Thus, this influencer explicitly mentions the brand in the form of some sort of a game, which is similar to the guessing game that was addressed in Section 4.1.1.2. The @inspirations_luxury influencer, on the other hand, gives the Mercedes car the nickname 'Beast' and refers to both the brand and the model by using hashtags. In any case, the influencers seem to both use a method to ensure that viewers know which luxury car brand is being shown.

The visualization of the brand logo is also clear for the Lamborghini car in Figure 21 but less so for the one in Figure 22. In Figure 21, the Lamborghini logo - the black shield with a golden bull and outline – can also be recognized from the angle from which the photo was taken. Additionally, a reference to Lamborghini is also made in the caption and the livery, which uses the colors of the Italian flag, signifies it as an Italian car. Given the fact that Lamborghini is an Italian brand, this also makes it easier to visually comprehend what brand is presented in this post, especially if the logo is not immediately recognized. In Figure 22, however, the Lamborghini logo is less visible, though its golden color can still be perceived. Although there is no direct reference to Lamborghini in the caption, it is referred to in a subsequent caption or comment with the hashtag #lamborghini. These examples, then, also show how the influencers clearly designate this particular luxury car brand.

Out of the entire data set, nineteen posts are dedicated to Mercedes and thirteen posts are dedicated to Lamborghini. Comparatively, only a small amount of posts visualizes other European car brands with, for example, three posts depicting another German car brand Audi and three posts depicting the British car brand Aston Martin. This would, then, mean that both influencers have a strong preference for Mercedes and Lamborghini and see these brands as the leading representatives of luxury cars. The fact that car brands such as Audi and Aston Martin are presented as well, though to a smaller degree, would mean that they see luxury cars as being established by European producers in general.

In terms luxury jewelry, the influencers have a different perception of which brand adequately symbolizes it and, correspondingly, take a different approach to visualize it. Nonetheless, the brands that they chose are, similar to the car brands, European brands,

though this was slightly less obvious. Figure 23 is another example of a luxury jewelry post of the @luxury account, in which the brand Jacob and Co is central, whereas Figure 24 and 25 are screenshots taken from a luxury jewelry video post of the @inspirations_luxury account, in which the brand Atolyestone is presented.



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

In Figure 23, there are no direct references to Jacob and Co in the watch or the picture itself in the form of, for instance, the brand logo or name, which is similar to Figure 3, 10, 15, and 16. For those who are not familiar with this brand, it only becomes clear that it is a Jacob and Co watch after reading the caption, in which their Instagram account, along with the type of watch, is mentioned. Interestingly, Jacob and Co is presented as an American brand on their Instagram page, with their store location set in New York, United States. On their official website, however, it becomes clear that the brand's origins can be traced back to Switzerland. Although it is mentioned that its flagship boutique is located in the United States, the manufacturing of its products takes place in Geneva, Switzerland (<https://www.jacobandco.com/>). This may lead to some ambiguity about the brand's true origin but, also taking into consideration the fact that the brand's founder Jacob Arabo is European, it is reasonably plausible to label it as a European brand. Thus, after additional analysis of the brand itself, it can be concluded that the visualization of luxury jewelry is also done through a European brand, which is central in all the sampled jewelry posts of the @luxury account.

This is, on the contrary, not the case for the @inspirations_luxury account, which depicts luxury jewelry by means of other, yet European, brands as well. Nonetheless, there seems to be a preference for the British brand Atolyestone, since almost half of the posts sampled from this influencer's account is dedicated to this jewelry brand. Figure 24 is a screenshot that depicts the introduction of the video post, which immediately shows the name of the brand and indicates its origins as it shows 'London' directly below the brand's name. Figure 25 is, then, a subsequent

screenshot which, again, shows the brand's name engraved in the product. Thus, there are multiple references made to the brand within the video itself. This is different from the way Jacob and Co is presented as a luxury jewelry brand, though in both cases the fact remains that European brands are chosen to visually represent luxury jewelry.

Accordingly, the fact that these influencers opted to advocate for popularized European products and services serves as a powerful word-of-mouth tool for these respective brands. Since word-of-mouth is one of the five constructs that luxury brands attempt to include in their social media marketing efforts (Kim & Ko, 2012), it would appear that the influencers reliably operate as representatives of the brands. Although it cannot be directly derived from the posts whether they have a positive or negative influence on (potentially new) followers of both influencers, they do entail the influencers' judgments and perceptions of the brands' values. From Figure 19 until 25, for instance, it seems that an important value of these brands is their ability to function as the top brands that are culturally and socially embedded in the luxury industry. Through the influencers, these brands are then able to attract more awareness among a broader, and perhaps also more diverse, audience. This would, then, have a positive influence of the value of the brands in terms of cultural, social, and potentially monetary, value (Lury, 2009).

4.2 Relationships between the themes

In this section, the relationships between the themes are explored. It will be explained how the themes are, in one way or another, connected to each other. By sub-dividing the themes into three categories, it shows how each theme pertains to and can help answer a specific sub-question. They are, however, also interrelated, though some themes connect more to a particular theme than others. The first two themes – luxury branding and individualism and luxury branding and collectivism – clearly reflect on the cultural values individualism and collectivism. More specifically, the themes represent the two different types of perceptions, namely personal (individualist) and non-personal (collectivist), of luxury branding. This means that these themes are a juxtaposition of luxury perceptions and are, thus, connected by stark contrast.

The third theme – luxury branding as male-centered – refers to the role of the third cultural value of gender in defining luxury branding and can be linked to both individualism and collectivism. This is particularly because the chosen luxury brand influencers depict men in both an individualist and collectivist setting, along with a European branded luxury product. The findings of Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann (2013), however, seem to support the notion that women hold a more personal and individualist perception, while men hold a more non-personal

and collectivist perception of luxury. Taking this into account, it is possible to say that the second and third theme have a closer connection than the first and third theme.

The given examples above, however, do not seem to represent a male perspective as strongly in the fourth, fifth, and last theme – luxury branding and millionaires, luxury branding and the exclusivity challenge, and luxury branding and popularized European brands, respectively. Instead, the last three themes focus on the struggle of luxury branding to balance their exclusivity with ubiquity. As explained in Sections 2.3.2 and 4.1.2.1, the luxury industry has conventionally been more related to women. This would mean that in the traditional sense individualism plays a more dominant role, whereas in a modernized sense collectivism becomes more important in defining luxury. The last three themes can, then, also be seen as extensions of the first two themes, in relation to the third theme, in continuing the discussion whether luxury branding is shaped through individualist or collectivist perceptions. Accordingly, a more detailed discussion of the obtained results will be given in the next chapter.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This research focused on giving an answer to the main research question which looked into how influencers, as part of a progressive social media marketing strategy implemented by luxury brands, define and communicate the concept of luxury branding through their visual posts on Instagram. Correspondingly, in this chapter, I provide an answer to this question by means of answering the sub-questions, which were helpful throughout this research.

The results that were obtained from the data analysis presented in the previous chapter can, as mentioned before, serve as answers to a specific sub-question. The first theme “Celebrating individualism” shows that both influencers embed individualist perceptions regarding luxury branding. There seems to be a consistent emphasis on the individual since a substantial majority of the posts depict single luxury items, with many posts visualizing either one luxury car or one luxury jewelry item. As explained in Section 2.3.1, luxury is constructed by two cultural perceptions; individualist perceptions and collectivist perceptions. Individualist perceptions of luxury are shaped by values such as hedonism and the extended self (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). By embedding individualist perceptions, then, both influencers seem to define and communicate luxury branding as inviting consumers who wish to find their own pleasure and seek to extend themselves, which luxury products can contribute to.

The first post that was presented as an example (Figure 2), for instance, visualizes a luxury car in front of a luxury mansion, in which the former luxury product is the focus. As mentioned in Section 4.1.1.1, it is possible to assume that these luxury goods belong to one individual, which demonstrates the luxurious achievements of a single person. In this sense and due to the fact that this post does not depict the owner of these luxury products, the viewer is able to picture themselves as being or perhaps, ultimately, becoming the owner. This would allow affluent consumers to experience what luxury is which could spur them to buy a luxury car, or perhaps even a luxury mansion. It also allows less wealthy consumers to experience the concept of luxury and this could perhaps persuade them into purchasing luxury goods if their emotions are triggered in a positive manner.

The notion of individualism can also be found, perhaps more clearly, in the example of Figure 3. This post visualizes a luxury watch worn by a person who is driving. As mentioned in Section 4.1.1.1, the angle from which the picture was taken reveals that the setting is the front seat of a car, as the steering wheel and gearshift are visible. It also shows that the passenger seat is empty, which, on the assumption that the car is a two-doors sports car, makes it possible to posit that the driver is centralized in relation to the luxury watch as well as the, presumably,

luxury car. As such, this post also focuses on the individual who is able to find pleasure through luxury products. It is, then, possible to argue that this post can attract both wealthy and the less affluent consumers who hold an individualist perception of luxury branding, as it offers individualists to imagine how luxury products can contribute to hedonism and the extended self.

The study of Aliyev and Wagner (2017) established that hedonism and the extended self, indeed, have a positive influence on the purchase intentions of individualist consumers. Moreover, the uniqueness value, which Vigneron and Johnson (2004) connected to collectivist perceptions of luxury, has been proven to also play a significant role for individualists' buying behavior. Accordingly, the @inspirations_luxury influencer, for instance, tapped into this value by, for example, promoting the luxury jewelry brand Atolyestone that provides customization services. As such, their luxury products can be modified to personal expectations, which would make them unique items. This seems to suggest that the influencers are aware of what, currently, are the drivers that could lead consumers, even the less rich, to the purchase of luxury goods. By embedding values pertaining to individualist perceptions, then, the influencers seem to target and attract luxury consumers who hold this type of perception.

Interestingly, though, the second theme "Representing a collective community" appears to focus on collectivist consumers, which is a contradiction of the previous theme. This theme shows that the influencers also embed collectivist perceptions regarding luxury branding. This can be found in their practice of tagging other luxury-related Instagram accounts, although they do not tag each other, and sharing the same posts, though they do not explicitly caption them as reposts. Such activities can be regarded as encouraging cooperation and collectivity within the luxury industry, which could give a sense of coherence for luxury consumers. According to Vigneron and Johnson (2004), collectivist perceptions are shaped by values such as conspicuousness, uniqueness, and quality. However, as mentioned above, Aliyev and Wagner (2017) found that uniqueness has a more considerable influence on the purchase intentions of individualists. This finding is supported by the second theme that was found in this research because a post that is shared, for instance, cannot be considered to be a unique post because it is not 'owned' by one person.

By tagging other luxury-related accounts and sharing the same posts, then, the influencers seem to primarily focus on the value of conspicuousness. These practices allow the concept of luxury to be distributed more throughout Instagram, which creates and spreads more awareness. The examples given in Section [4.1.1.2](#) (Figure 6, 7, 8, and 9) show that the influencers consistently mention other accounts that are related to luxury branding and uploaded the same luxury posts. This does not only attract collectivist consumers to luxury

branding, but it also allows them to share their perceptions of and experiences with luxury. The fact that these influencers tag and share luxury-related accounts and content namely means that consumers have the ability to do the same. This means that both the influencers and consumers can contribute to the luxury industry's development of becoming more conspicuous and as such, they show that luxury branding is not only attractive for individualist consumers.

The same examples pertaining to the second theme also present the guessing game. As addressed in Section [4.1.1.2](#), this game asks followers or viewers to guess the car that is visualized in the posts. This can, on the one hand, be seen as a method to invite consumers to become part of the cooperative luxury industry community, through which the interaction with consumers can become more invigorated. It is, on the other hand, also possible to mark the guessing game as a strategical marketing effort to, again, create and spread more awareness of the brands that are depicted in the posts. For those who do not recognize the luxury brands, this game presents an exciting challenge and for those who are familiar with the particular brands, the game gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of the brands in a fun and interactive manner. Either way, the game allows for a higher conspicuousness of the luxury brands and, in turn, the notion of luxury because it leads to the comment sections of the posts to become flooded with the various brand names that users provide as an answer. The second theme, thus, shows that the influencers seem to tap into the value of conspicuousness to attract luxury consumers that hold the other type of luxury perception, namely collectivists.

The first two themes appear to make a distinction between consumers in terms of the perceptions that they hold regarding luxury and seem to target consumers from both cultures. This means that luxury branding is, to a certain extent, shaped by both individualist and collectivist perceptions and answers the first sub-question: How do individualism and collectivism play a role in defining luxury branding? The third theme "Expressly reserved for men", then, makes a distinction between consumers in terms of gender and shows how it focuses more on the male consumer. This theme demonstrates how the influencers define and communicate luxury branding that is strongly relatable to men. This cannot only be found through the examples presented in [4.1.2.1](#) (Figure 10, 11, 12, and 13), but also in the examples given in Sections [4.1.1](#) and [4.1.3](#). This is due to the fact that the entire data set does not include any women, as shown in the previous chapter.

Although, overall, there is a lack of models used in the presentation of luxury branding, those that are included are men. It is possible to argue that it is logical to use male models for the luxury jewelry posts, since the items depicted in these posts, with the exception of one post, are clearly meant for men. It is even possible to assert that the only post that appears to target

women, which depicts a diamond ring, is directed at men. This can be further substantiated by the fact that it is the only post in the entire data set that visualizes a luxury jewelry item for the female consumer. As such, this post can be seen as a source of inspiration for men to muse on luxury gifts for, for instance, their mothers, wives, or girlfriends. Seeing as a diamond ring is expensive, though, it is important to remember that the post might have a significant influence on the purchase intention of wealthier (male) consumers.

Despite the fact that the luxury jewelry posts in the data set appear to predominantly concentrate on items specifically for men, the same argument cannot be made for the luxury car posts. To say that cars, or luxury cars, are masculine products or products that only attract men would be a rather offensive statement to female consumers. Assuming that the influencers did not intend to offend female consumers by relating luxury branding to men, it can be argued, instead, that they seek to attract more male luxury consumers. This can be further supported by the notion that the luxury industry carries connotations of female domination in terms of consumption, meaning that men account for a smaller percentage of luxury consumption than women. The third theme, then, also seems to show that the luxury industry is, indeed, becoming democratized in the sense that its target audience is broadening in terms of gender as well.

The example of Figure 12, for instance, which was presented in Section [4.1.2.1](#) depicts a luxury car with two male models. It can be observed from the way they are dressed that there seems to be some sort of a hierarchy between the two male models. One of them is clearly dressed in a more stylish and luxurious fashion. Despite this, the two doors of the luxury car are open and seem to invite both men to enter the vehicle. Moreover, this post presents an image that was taken from the superhero movie *Justice League* which signifies a form of male domination. This is because it focuses on five male superheroes and only one female superhero. The fact that the @luxury influencer chose to use this particular image from the movie instead of, for example, an image in which a luxury car is visualized with the female superhero, or another female character, illustrates that the male dominance is transmitted to the post. This shows a great appeal to men and the post can, therefore, be seen as a representation of the fact that luxury branding is seemingly shifting the focus to the male consumer.

It was explained in Section 2.3.2 that, in a traditional sense, the luxury industry is more closely associated with women than men, with women consuming more luxury goods (Roux et al., 2017). This would mean that in the context of the conventional definition of the luxury industry as given by Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2015), the so-called 'status-seeking individuals' mostly consist of female consumers. It was also addressed in Section 2.3.2, though, that Roux

et al. (2017) found that this gender gap in the luxury industry is narrowing due to men consuming more luxury, albeit still less than women. Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann (2013), then, found that women seem to hold individualist perceptions of luxury, whereas men seem to hold collectivist perceptions of luxury. The results obtained in Section 4.1.2, however, show that this is not entirely true.

Figure 10, for instance, presents a luxury watch worn by a seemingly male model. This post shares great similarities with Figure 3 that was given as an example in relation to individualism in Section 4.1.1.1. Certain aspects such as the type of garment, the luxury watch, and the setting of the post appear to be the same in both examples, though the image in Figure 10 seems to be taken from the opposite angle. If the images are, indeed, the same, it is possible to propound that masculinity can also be found in Figure 3 and that individualism is embedded in Figure 10 as well. In this regard, both posts relate masculinity to individualist perceptions of luxury. Furthermore, in Figure 13, a male model is positioned as the driver of a luxury car, with a stuffed toy placed in the passenger seat instead of, for instance, another male model or even a female model. As such, it can be observed again that this post, similar to Figure 3 and 10, seems to focus on the (male) individual who seeks their own pleasure which can be gained from the luxury product.

These posts, however, do not immediately signify that men are, in fact, consuming more luxury goods, as they only show that the chosen influencers present luxury for men. A plausible reason for this is that, perhaps, the influencers themselves are men. If that is indeed the case, it is feasible to claim that the luxury branding-related experiences of the influencers are incorporated within the posts. The posts, as such, serve as a tool to transmit the various possibilities of experiencing both luxury jewelry and luxury cars for men. This might indicate that the influencers are aware of the fact that women still account for a higher consumption of luxury branded products and solicit more awareness and, potentially, consumption of luxury by men. It is possible to argue, then, that the influencers seek to create an opportunity for luxury branding to become more integrated in a male-centered culture or society, which gives an answer to the second sub-question: How does gender play a role in defining luxury branding?

Notwithstanding the fact that luxury brands are trying to reach a broader audience, the fourth theme "Appropriate for millionaires" demonstrates that the exclusivity of luxury is still an important aspect that needs to be transmitted, even in the digital sphere. Although there is a chance that this gives counterproductive results in terms of engaging with and attracting less wealthy consumers, especially those who are not able to afford such expensive products, it also gives those consumers a chance to perceive and experience the true essence of luxury. This is

particularly due to the presentation of luxury branding-related aspects such as fancy packaging and high prices, which are part of luxury brands' identity, that could function as stimuli that evoke positive emotions of consumers (Brakus et al., 2009). This could, in turn, lead to consumers developing meaningful and lasting relationships with the luxury brands that are presented and promoted on the influencers' pages. Whether this has a positive effect on the consumers' buying behavior or not, it is still crucial for brands to build and have such close relationships with (potential) consumers.

At the same time, the graphic visualization of luxurious aspects could intrigue consumers who can afford to purchase the luxury products depicted and it, then, serves as a powerful incentive to purchase intent. The example of Figure 14, for instance, demonstrates an extraordinary form of packaging for a Jacob and Co watch, which is designed in the form of a meteorite with a built-in display. It is safe to say that this type of packaging is truly unique and very dissimilar to commonly established forms of watch packaging, which are known to be shaped in the form of a box. This is even the case for the luxury watch brand Rolex. This makes Jacob and Co's meteorite packaging exceptionally rare, which also reflects on the exclusivity of the luxury industry because it is not publicly accessible or available. It could, therefore, stir up the emotions of wealthy consumers in such a way that they want to and will buy the watch, perhaps only to receive and own such a special packaging. As research has shown that positive attitudes toward luxury brands, which are the result of positive experiences, positively affect luxury consumers' buying behavior (Gentina et al., 2016; Lim et al., 2016), it is possible to argue that the exclusivity of luxury can, in fact, function as a tool to attract more consumers.

From the analysis of the data set, it became clear that, in general, luxury is still depicted as prestigious and elevated by, for example, the references to million-dollar prices. This, then, seems to suggest that the influencers have embedded financial value in their presentation of luxury branding. It was explained in Section 2.3.3 that financial value is one of the four key values that luxury brands need to consider and display in their online environment, as these values can help them to transition more easily to the digital sphere (Hennigs et al., 2012). Hennigs et al. (2012) established that luxury brands must show that they have and offer unique and exclusive products of exceptional quality as well as excellent service in their online presentations. It can, therefore, not only be argued that financial value is more associated with the exclusivity of luxury, but also that it embodies the values of uniqueness and quality. Considering the fact that uniqueness and quality have been found to have a significant impact on the purchase intentions of individualists and collectivists, respectively (Aliyev & Wagner,

2017), it is then feasible to posit that the exclusivity of luxury can attract consumers of both cultures.

The fifth theme “Challenging its exclusivity”, however, somewhat denounces the exclusivity of the luxury industry. This was already addressed a bit in the second theme, which reflects on the practices of tagging other luxury branding-related Instagram accounts and sharing the same posts. The practice of tagging, particularly, can also be found in the examples presented in Section [4.1.3.2](#) (Figure 17 and 18). Whereas tags or mentions present the luxury industry as cooperative and collective in the second theme, they hold a more promotional function in this theme. This is because such tags direct the influencers’ followers, both current and potential, to other luxury branding-related accounts and as such, they generate more publicity for them. In turn, this can create more awareness about luxury in general as well as the luxury brands that are promoted on the mentioned accounts which include, but are not limited to, luxury fashion brands. This means that luxury has the ability to move through different pages or accounts of Instagram, which makes it more accessible and, thus, less exclusive.

More strikingly, in Figure 18, for instance, the luxury car is placed in a setting that is rather unconventional for a luxury good, namely the parking lot of McDonald’s. This seems to imply, to a certain extent, that the luxury car is somewhat stripped of its superior rank. It was explained in the Introduction that luxury is, essentially, defined by its prestigious nature that is elevated by the distance between a particular brand and its consumers (Sharma & Albus, 2017). In this example, however, the distance between the luxury brand, Lamborghini, and the consumer is reduced, because the luxury car is positioned at a location that can be visited and accessed very easily and abundantly by consumers, primarily those of lower classes. This also makes it easier for them to associate themselves with the luxury brand, because it is not situated in a higher, completely unreachable position anymore.

Moreover, the fifth theme also explored the practice of using popular hashtags such as #luxury and #lamborghini. By using popular hashtags, it becomes easier for other Instagram users to find the influencers’ posts that include them. This also means that such posts popularize the luxury goods that are presented there, since more awareness is created for them then. In Section [2.1.2](#), two types of influence that influencers exert are addressed; ‘branding’ and ‘hustling’. ‘Branding’ is the practice of users (celebrities) positioning their followers to exert influence, whereas ‘hustling’ is the practice of users (‘common’ social media users) affiliating themselves with brands and topical hashtags (Carter, 2016). This research, then, found that the influencers, despite the fact that they are not celebrities, do not practice ‘branding’. They do, however, practice ‘hustling’. This demonstrates that the influencers have embedded social value

in posts in which they 'hustle'. Social value refers to luxury brands allowing themselves to become a part of the online identities of consumers' social networks and vice versa (Hennigs et al., 2012) and via hashtags, they can circulate through these networks. Thus, this theme seems to somewhat de-elevate luxury branding by making it more ubiquitous, as a means to also reach out to and engage with consumers from lower classes.

This can also be perceived through the sixth and final theme "Pertinent to popularized European manufacturing". As mentioned in Section [4.1.3.3](#), it became clear in an early stage of the data analysis that both influencers seemingly perceive popularized European brands as playing an important, perhaps even the most important, role in defining luxury branding. This is particularly due to the fact that all sampled cars posts are limited to universal European car brands, in particular Mercedes and Lamborghini, which seem to hold their preference. By analyzing the visualizations, it appears as if Mercedes is considered to be the leading luxury car brand, especially since nineteen posts are dedicated to this brand, rather than, for instance, the French-Italian luxury car brand Bugatti, which is depicted in only three posts. This is interesting because currently, the most expensive Mercedes car, which has a price tag of 2.5 million dollars, is still cheaper than the most expensive Bugatti car, which has a price tag of 3.4 million dollars (Glon, 2018). This implies that the financial value of luxury branding in terms of high prices is somewhat reduced.

This also shows that luxury is not solely defined by high prices anymore, which was done in a more traditional sense. What is also interesting is the fact that the cars manufactured by these brands have sporty looks. This is different from, for instance, Rolls-Royce cars which display class and elegance. Moreover, Rolls-Royce have been known to be used by royalty such as the British royal family, with a Rolls-Royce car being used in their latest event, namely the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex (Davidson, 2018). The redefinition of luxury cars, then, means that consumers either already have a luxury car (i.e. owners of Mercedes cars) or that they have a lower threshold to cross in terms of buying a luxury car (i.e. lower prices). Either way, it becomes clear here that luxury cars are seemingly defined by cultural rather than monetary perceptions nowadays which, from the 'brand as an assemblage' perspective of Lury (2009), adds more value to their respective brands.

The fact that less expensive brands are becoming considered as luxury brands can also be seen in the visualizations of luxury jewelry. The influencers primarily juxtapose Jacob and Co and Atolyestone. Jacob and Co appears to define luxury branding in a more conventional manner, since its price tags are considerably high, whereas Atolyestone seems to define luxury branding in a more progressive manner, because its price tags are substantially lower than

Jacob and Co's. From the examples given in Section 4.1.3.1 (Figure 14, 15, and 16), it can be concluded that a Jacob and Co watch generally costs approximately a million dollars. After analyzing the website of Atolyestone (<https://atolyestone.com/>), then, it can be observed that the most expensive Atolyestone jewelry item currently costs 1,634 British pounds, which is roughly 2,180 dollars. This immediately signifies a profound difference between the two luxury jewelry brands. On the basis of financial value in terms of pricing, Atolyestone holds an inferior rank to Jacob and Co. The fact that the former brand is presented as the same type of luxury branding as well, however, insinuates that the borders of the luxury brand classification have become wider. This shows that luxury brands are, indeed, being redefined.

It also shows that the @luxury influencer and the @inspirations_luxury influencer can be seen as advocates for Jacob and Co and Atolyestone, respectively. In terms of visualizing luxury car brands, both influencers appear to have a preference for and, accordingly, promote Mercedes. The fact that there is a difference between the influencers regarding their promotional posts of Jacob and Co and Atolyestone could mean that they are targeting different luxury jewelry consumers. As mentioned above, the two luxury jewelry brands are markedly different in terms of their financial value. The fact that the @luxury influencer promotes the more expensive brand indicates that they are focusing on the wealthy consumer, whereas the @inspirations_luxury influencer seems to be targeting the less affluent consumer. This is interesting because, as mentioned in Section 3.2.1, the former influencer has approximately three times more followers than the latter. As such, one might expect that their target audiences are the other way around since the wealthy pertains to a smaller group of consumers, whereas the less affluent belongs to a bigger group of consumers. Either way, both influencers serve as important executioners of the word-of-mouth construct for the respective brands, which enhances the credibility of the brands.

The analysis of the data set reveals and illustrates that the influencers, as shown, define luxury branding through less expensive and, thus, more ubiquitous rather than exclusive brands. This redefinition of luxury branding could be beneficial for both brands and consumers. On the one hand, luxury brands can achieve a higher volume of sales because their target audience is not limited to an exclusive group anymore, which could result in an increased profit. On the other hand, those who were excluded from the group of luxury consumers can now become part of that community and are able to purchase luxury products. The last three themes, thus, show that both exclusivity and ubiquity are incorporated in the influencers' visualizations of luxury branding. Seeing as one theme appears to pertain to the exclusivity notion while two themes seem to put forward the ubiquity concept, though, it is possible to assert that the chosen data

set presents luxury branding as slightly more ubiquitous. This could potentially mean that luxury brands are increasingly adopting digital marketing strategies. This provides an answer to the third and last sub-question: How does the dichotomy between exclusivity and ubiquity play a role in defining luxury branding?

Thus, to conclude, this research has shown that luxury branding is, indeed, becoming democratized. The influencers seem to balance important values for different types of cultural consumers, namely individualists and collectivists, through embedding the values hedonism, the extended self, uniqueness, conspicuousness, and quality in their visualizations of luxury branding. It also appears that they define luxury branding in a way that is attractive for both millionaires and non-millionaires, or consumers of lower classes, by presenting aspects of exclusivity and ubiquity. This does not only support the notion that the luxury industry is becoming more democratized, but it also shows how luxury brands can strategically design their social media marketing activities that is appealing to a broader target audience. However, the chosen influencers seem to have a preference for targeting and attracting male consumers. This could, then, imply that they want luxury brands to become more integrated in the male world, since luxury has conventionally focused more on female consumers.

This research has also shown that the Instagram posts of the influencers themselves can be seen as a tool for making the luxury industry less exclusive. This is not only due to the fact that Instagram is a social media platform but also because it allows for the practice of 'hustling', which can create more awareness for luxury branding. This, then, situates luxury goods in a rather unconventional setting, which further supports the democratization of luxury and as such, the influencers can spread the concept of luxury to a higher degree. Seeing as consumers consider the voice of influencers to be more credible and trustworthy than that of brands themselves, the possibility that both the wealthy and less affluent consumer will (ultimately) purchase luxury products becomes greater. It can now be argued that the chosen influencers define and communicate luxury branding as an industry that is undergoing both a cultural and social change while, simultaneously, its essence of being exclusive and prestigious has not, or only to a certain extent, been impaired, as to engage with and attract consumers from different classes.

5.1 Limitations and further research

Given the fact that influencer marketing is a rather new phenomenon, little research has been done about this type of marketing, particularly in relation to the luxury industry. Moreover, the studies concerning the social media marketing strategies of luxury brands have been

conducted quantitatively. It was, therefore, difficult to find empirical material to relate to, especially for the analysis of social media data. A limitation of this research is, then, its interpretative nature regarding the data, which made it easier to view the data from a biased perspective. Furthermore, the purposive sampling method is based on the researcher's judgment and as such, subjectivity needed to be turned into objectivity during the analysis of the data set. By including a double-coding process, though, I attempted to transcend this limitation, as this process allowed for a critical re-analysis of the data set until saturation was reached.

This research, then, confirms the findings of Kim and Ko (2012) and Godey et al. (2016) regarding social media marketing strategies of luxury brands and the benefits that they offer for them in terms of attracting a broader, and perhaps more diverse, target audience, from a qualitative perspective. This research analyzed influencers as executioners of the word-of-mouth construct with their Instagram posts to promote luxury branding to a broader audience. Thus, it complements and contributes to the studies of Kim and Ko (2012) and Godey et al. (2016), which did not explore the role of social media influencers in luxury brands' social media marketing strategies. It integrated the findings of Vigneron and Johnson (2004) and Aliyev and Wagner (2017) in terms of exploring the role of cultural values in defining luxury branding. It also analyzed the role of gender in the visualization of luxury, which is an extension of the works of Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann (2013) and Roux et al. (2017). Contrary to the findings of Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann (2013), though, this research found that men seem to hold individualist rather than collectivist perceptions of luxury. Moreover, this research shows how luxury brands are currently adapting to the democratization of its industry, for which it considered the findings of Hennigs et al. (2012).

This research, thus, delved into how luxury influencers visualize luxury branding on Instagram and redefine the concept from a qualitative angle. In other words, it adds knowledge to Instagram influencer marketing in relation to luxury branding. Instagram influencer marketing has been studied before by De Veirman et al. (2017), though they adopted a quantitative approach. Whereas their research focused on analyzing the success and popularity of an influencer by means of numeric factors, this research explored, to a certain extent, how an influencer can successfully create more awareness for luxury brands by means of qualitative aspects such as the use of popular hashtags or the practice of 'hustling'. A main difference between the study conducted by De Veirman et al. (2017) and this research is the fact that De Veirman et al. (2017) researched the activities of Instagram influencers in general, while this research focused on the activities of Instagram influencers in relation to luxury branding. Since this is a relatively new research topic, more research can be conducted regarding influential

aspects of social media influencers that promote luxury brands.

It is, for instance, possible to further explore if and how Instagram can guarantee successful outcomes for luxury brands that decide to use this platform for their social media marketing strategies. This can be done by also analyzing the pages of other luxury influencers or even the pages of celebrities who operate as influencers to research the role of the practice of 'branding', since this research found a more significant role of the 'hustling' practice. It can also be examined how cultural values such as individualism, collectivism, and gender that are embedded in the presentations of luxury branding affect consumers' brand experience. In turn, it is possible to study the impact of positive or negative experiences of luxury on consumers' purchase intention or buying behavior. Moreover, since this research focused on luxury cars and luxury jewelry brands, it is possible to conduct studies that look into brands of other types of luxury products such as luxury food and beverages brands. This research, thus, offers the possibility to further delve into various aspects surrounding Instagram influencer marketing and luxury branding from either a qualitative or quantitative perspective.

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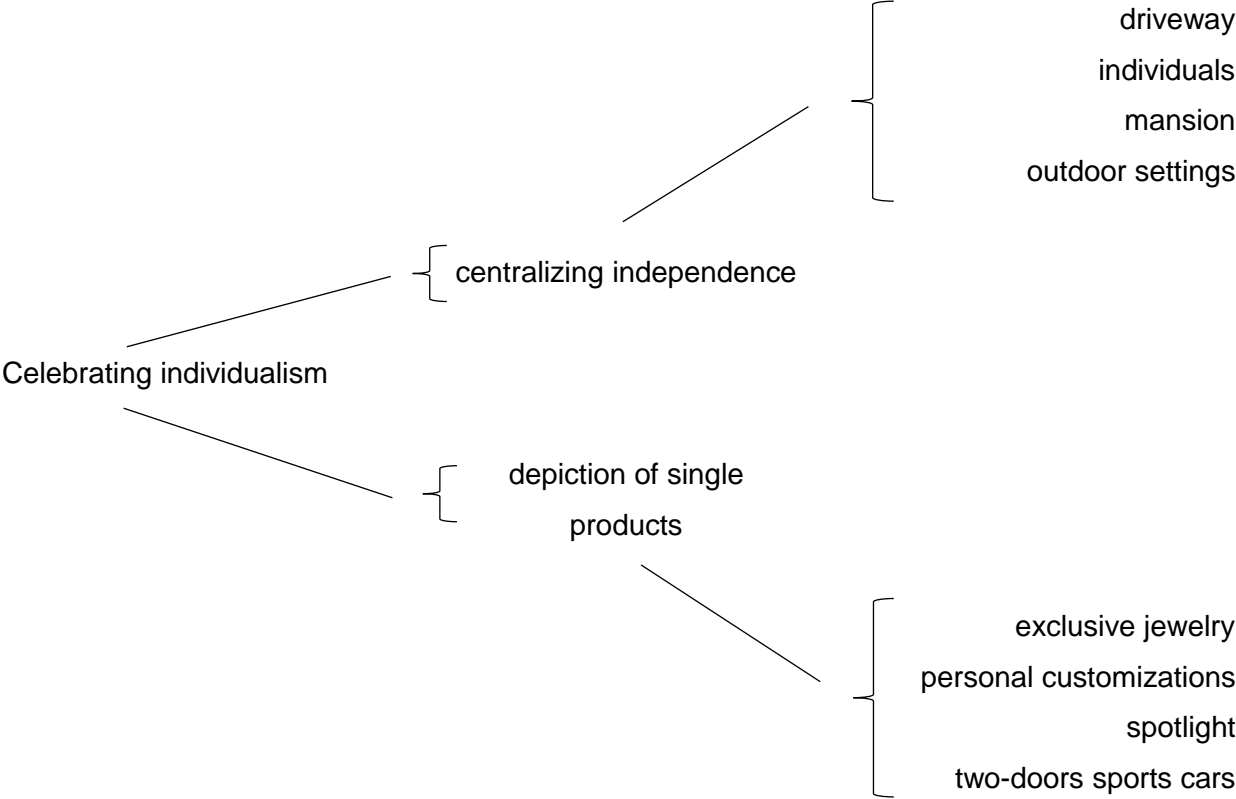
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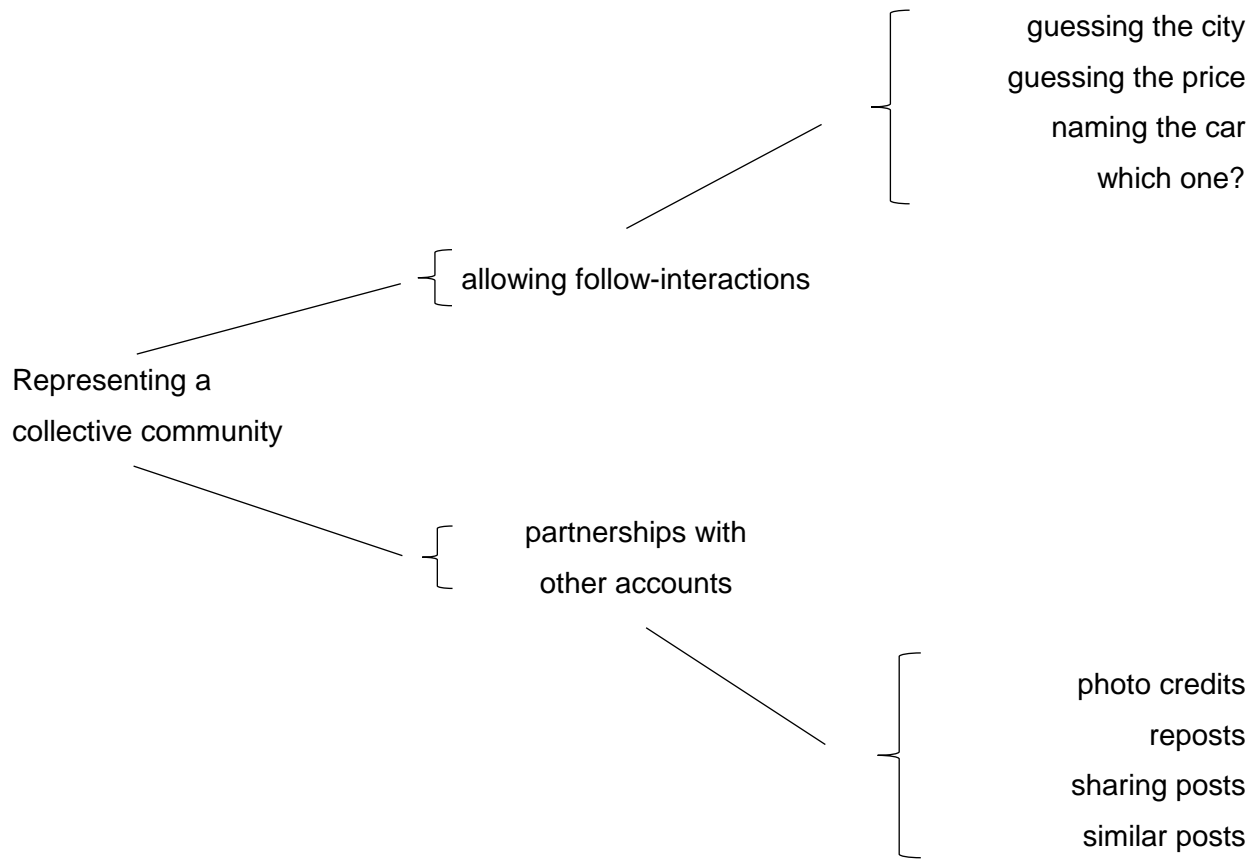
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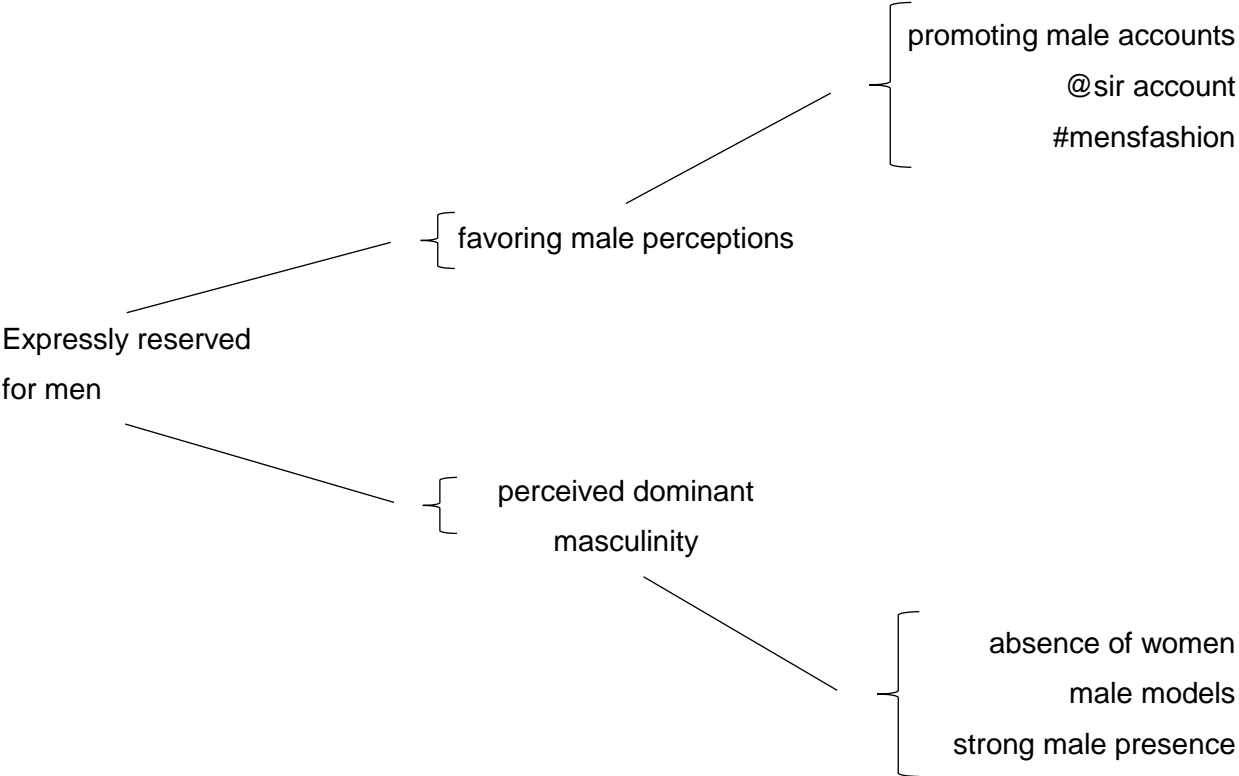
Appendices

Appendix A: individualism and collectivism code trees





Appendix B: gender code tree



Appendix C: exclusivity vs. ubiquity code trees

