

The Cult of the Line: How streetwear products became status symbols

A qualitative research examining the value of cultural credibility
for enhancing reputation of streetwear brands

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Master's Thesis

June 2020

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the phenomenon of cultural credibility of streetwear brands and factors that contribute to its establishment, while also delving into existence of status symbols and their meaning within the field of fashion and contemporary society. The concept of cultural credibility presents a contemporary aspect to examine corporate brand's image and reputation as it predetermines that consumers play a major role in its establishment as well as its fostering and adaptation. This is a novel approach to look at monetization of popular culture within the fields of fashion and corporate branding and it emphasizes the co-dependence of organizations and consumers in establishing contemporary brand's ecosystem. Simultaneously, this research explores the correlation between modern streetwear brands and luxury brands in terms of their managerial approach that reflects in their communication and positioning, while discovering the emergence of status symbols and their meanings within societal context. These mentioned phenomena are examined through a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews that were conducted with consumers as well as brand experts from multiple countries. The main results present the first working definition of cultural credibility and explain the factors that contribute to its establishment in the realms of streetwear and fashion in general. It also offers an insight into the roles that consumers take in fostering cultural credibility and perception that they have of what forms a status symbol and what role it has within the contemporary society. Due to lack of theoretical resources, understanding of cultural credibility is still in the developing phase and this research is adjourned with aspirations to build upon the recent findings and furtherly examine monetarization of popular culture that is manifested through the phenomenon of cultural credibility.

KEYWORDS: *Cultural credibility, reputation, streetwear brands, status symbols, brand image, fashion, corporate branding*

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the limitless support and guidance of several individuals who each in their own way contributed and passed on their knowledge in the fulfillment of this study.

Firstly and foremostly, my unconditional gratitude to Assistant Professor dr. Yijing Wang, for the encouragement, guidance and feedback throughout the journey that this writing process was, while at the same time allowing me to explore the topics that were of my greatest personal interest.

Secondly, special thanks to Rike Döpp for both, writing an interlude to this study and opening the doors into the world of fashion for me and adopting me into the Agency V family during my interning in Stockholm, while sharing the most important tips and tricks of fashion business with me on a daily basis.

Thirdly, kudos to dr. Dejan Verčič and Herman & partnerji for providing me with a scholarship and an opportunity to study at one of the best universities in Europe, and letting me be my own kind of a spirit animal, even when it comes to education.

Fourthly, to my family, friends and colleagues for lending a shoulder to lean on and an ear to listen in times of need.

Last but not least, kudos to Highsnobiety, for creating online as well as offline platforms with everyday insights into the world of streetwear and driving the culture forward.

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Abstract and keywords

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Foreword

I remember reading a Renzo Rosso interview in Self Service in the early 2000s where he predicted comfort as fashion's main driving force of the next two decades. He could have not been more right. I truly believe that it was the wearability of street- and sportswear that paved its path to the upper echelons of LVMH. Because humans are creatures with comfort habits that are quickly built - once the customer waited only five minutes for an Uber, standing on the side walk for ten minutes until the taxi arrives seems like a colossal waste of time. The ease of sneakers, built-in body shaping of well-cut leggings, roominess of a hoodie, from-to promise of basketball shorts - once on, never off.

The strange aspect of streetwear is a silent agreement on a handful silhouettes with visually homeopathic adjustments, a code only insiders are able to decipher. Cool, iconic streetwear is a discipline that requires an abundance of - passionately guarded - knowledge and is like excellent chess: best performed within a narrow rule system. Virgil Abloh describes himself more so as a DJ than a designer.

In the first decade of the millennial I was asking myself how creative streetwear really could become? How many brand references could Supreme recontextualize albeit ever so entertaining? And then Shayne Oliver happened and with an grand statement beyond gender, art, race, culture - he singlehandedly invented luxury streetwear. Hood by Air was wild and disturbing yet vibrant and commercial, it was true fashion.

Today streetwear is a billion dollar business and rightfully so. Who will be its next star though? I have my eyes on Kerby Jean-Raymond, because he is a philosopher and unapologetically claims his space. Yet - the big streetwear names are predominantly male, maybe it's time for a fresh perspective.

By Rike Döpp - Marketing and Growth advisor at HON, ex-CEO of Agency V Scandinavia, and most importantly, a friend of fashion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sidney J. Levy dexterously noted the logic behind the consumerism by writing *“People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean”* (Brands, consumers, symbols and research, 1999, p. 205). This proves that the consumption process is much more than owning a tangibility, may it be a vehicle, real estate or a piece of clothing, but has a rather complex mechanism behind it. Products therefore have a value that defines not only the tangibility itself but the person owning it as well. Brand images and their identities have become crucial when determining a product’s success rate (Janonis, Dovaliene, & Virvilaite, 2007; Mindrut, Manolica, & Roman, 2015) and companies that are striving to achieve better market results by creating strong identities in order to present themselves to their consumers in the best light possible and enhance their position on the market that is full of intense competition. One of the industries where brand identity matters more than anything is the fashion industry, as it dictates a corporate story where product attributes and their value create an experience that comes with the ownership of the product (Tong, Su, & Xu, 2017). Hundreds (2017) thinks of streetwear as a two-fold concept. Design-wise it is defined by aesthetic sports apparel such as hoodies, baseball caps and sneakers, but it is also important to note the cultural aspect of it, where independence plays a great role. In contrast to high fashion brands, streetwear used to come from the outside of the traditional fashion system, with a purpose of expression rather than monetary gain. However, it is important to note that we are currently witnessing a fashion renaissance. Streetwear has gone through a transition of being promoted from a niche interest to a necessity of even high fashion houses. For the past few years, sneaker enthusiasts have been making shoe retailers roll out new sneakers faster than ever, consumers are hungry for information and the hustle to catch up on competitor brands has never been more intense (Rakestraw, 2019). Previously individual hobby of collecting sacred objects have expanded onto streetwear products and became a worldwide trend, where monogrammed hoodies and chunky sneakers are tramping over the popularity charts. Almost any miscellaneous object, launched within Supreme's or Palace's weekly Thursday's drop turns sold out in milliseconds and is being resold on sites such as StockX or GOAT for a triple price. And that is not the end of it. In order to stay relevant, offer more exclusive products and endure the hype, luxury fashion houses have been joining forces with streetwear brands and created a diverse range of products that manifest the so called New Luxury, that is an interplay of urban and high fashion (DeLeon & Klanten, 2019). The excitement about the collaboration between Californian iconic surf label Stussy and french luxury house Dior has broken the internet the

same moment it was announced in December 2020 even though it was months away from being released. It is safe to say that streetwear brands have become an omnipresent source of inspiration for luxury brands and products that have previously been marked as sportswear are now accepted as everyday clothes (Hoffower, 2019). However, having a one-hit wonder in the flood of products being released on a daily basis is not sufficient any longer. In order to reach the demanding audience mostly comprised of Millennials, brands needed to change their strategy in order to be aware of constant shifts in trends and infuse their products with authenticity. Today's consumers are defining the luxury on their own and realize that achieving snazzyness and coolness is a cost they are willing to pay (DeLeon & Klanten, 2019). They are like an independent ecosystem that uses the internet and social media not only as a tool to gather information, but to express themselves and to identify with the tangibilities they own. It is yet not entirely known what exactly are the factors that build up the cultural credibility amongst the streetwear brands and it is necessarily to furtherly investigate the attributes that contributed to this phenomenon. As cultural credibility presents a relatively new term and its definition has not yet been coined, it will also be conceptualized within this paper. In order to provide a scientific value to this research, we will research both - the consumer's and brand manager's perspective on what exactly are the factors that make a streetwear brand culturally credible by thoroughly examining various reputation related elements.

Research question: **What factors contribute to building cultural credibility and making streetwear brand a status symbol?**

Research sub-question 1: In what ways do streetwear brands follow a luxury-like approach?

Research sub-question 2: What are the factors that turn streetwear products into status symbols?

Research sub-question 3: How is cultural credibility fostered among consumers?

The scientific relevance of this paper is mainly seen in its expansion of the already existing theories on consumer behavior as well as creation of image and reputation of corporate brands. The idea of cultural credibility places consumers into an active role of co-creators of brand's image and presents a holistic approach to understanding the social impact that consumers have on corporate brands, with a focus on the field of fashion. The paper also provides the first working definition of cultural credibility and therefore creates a framework for future research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Consumer Culture Theory

The main consumer theory which is used for examining cultural credibility and transformation of streetwear brands into luxury items is Consumer Culture Theory (hereinafter referred to as CCT) developed by Arnould and Thompson (2005). CCT exists as a study of behavioral choices and practices of consumers as rather cultural and social phenomena instead of simply economic or psychologic phenomena. The theory emphasizes the social arrangement between consumer actions, culture that they cultivate and the marketplace that surrounds it, where different groups share beliefs that is reflected in symbolic meanings of material goods produced in the postmodern society (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). CCT in that sense helps exploring the ways consumers adapt symbolism and meanings they receive through advertisements, social media content and even retail settings as well as material items which are then translated into social situations that foster consumers' identity and lifestyle (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). It is important to note that there is also a correlation between brand aspiration and consumer behavior, where consumers are inclined toward purchasing luxury goods because of their symbolic status (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005; Truong, McColl & Kitchen, 2010). The goals of consumers can be identified as aspirations that are divided into intrinsic and external classes of goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1993,1996). Intrinsic aspirations are based on satisfying needs such as physical fitness, self-acceptance and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2017), while extrinsic aspirations include social recognition, financial success and appealing appearance that indirectly satisfy basic needs and are rather instrumental outcomes, manifested through power and social adherence and can interfere with physical well-being and intrinsic goals (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). Within this research and uncovering the motives behind consumption, we will examine both types of aspirations, as it would most likely happen that the motives behind consumer behavior would include elements of intrinsic as well as extrinsic aspirations.

2.2 Corporate branding

The process of corporate branding has been described as company's activity of creating positive image as well as reputation in the eyes of every possible stakeholder, by managing both – external and internal communication (Einwiller & Will, 2002). The main difference between product branding and corporate branding can be seen in its addressing, as corporate branding includes a much larger kaleidoscope of involved parties.

Instead of addressing just its consumers, corporate branding includes employees, partners, distributors, suppliers and for example investors (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). The targets of communication are therefore spread all over the enterprise. But in order to understand the process of corporate branding better, we must first break down what the terminology of brand stands for. The concept of brand represents a complex phenomenon that has been extensively discussed amongst academics that each have their own idea on what it is supposed to stand for, which makes it even complex to interpret. (Maurya & Mishra, 2012). American Marketing Association (1960) defines brand as *“a name, term, symbol, or design, or combination of these, which is intended to identify goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors.”* This however only depicts brand as a logo of a certain company where its definition is based on differentiation. When it comes to brands, it is necessary to emphasize that a word “brand” stands for more than just a tangible aspect of its meaning. It is not just its logo or its product that gives the brand its value, but rather the interpretation in the minds of consumers and its reputation (Schultz & Hatch, 2008). In their thematic classification overview of brand meaning, Maurya and Mishra (2012) note the importance of brand as an identity system. The identity system of a brand can be seen through the Vision-Culture-Image model (later referred to VCI model) created by Hatch and Schultz (2001). The organizational identity of the brand can be seen as an integrated alignment of strategic vision, organizational culture and stakeholder images. Hatch and Schultz (2008) note that the more coherent the pieces are, the stronger the corporate reputation is. Therefore, it is important that there are no gaps between the elements in the VCI model that would cause the commotion. The brands should have a clear understanding of their vision and differentiation from competitors, know their stakeholders and be aware of their influence, especially when it comes to images that they might associate with the company (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

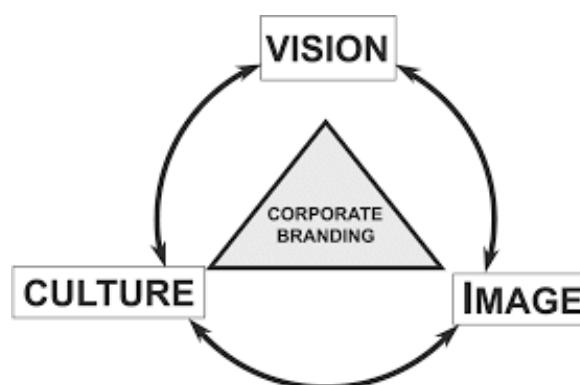


Figure 1: VCI model (Hatch & Schultz, 2008)

2.2.1 Brand Identity

Even though the concept of brand identity is relatively new, its necessity for establishing brand management was explored by various academics (Kapferer, 2002). When it comes to its definition, there are different approaches that were taken in order to describe what brand identity is at its essence. The most simple explanations on what brand identity is can be how an organization is being identified when it comes to its vision, personality, culture, relationships and other elements that influence the beliefs formed by consumers (Mindrut et al., 2015). Brand identity can therefore be seen as everything that makes the brand unique (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). In its holistic meaning, brand identity therefore includes corporate symbols and communications (Balmer, 2001; van Riel & Balmer, 1997), organizational culture (Baker & Balmer, 1997) and how an organization would like to be seen by others (Rosson & Brooks, 2004), as well as its values, mission and the essence of what the brand stands for (Aaker & Jochimstahler, 2012). According to Kapferer (2003, p. 107), there are six sources that determine brand identity: products, name, symbol, logotype, communication, personage and producers. Products and services represent the primary source of identity as they manifest the brand equity. A good product is crucial but not sufficient for creating a brand identity, consumers also need to identify with it. Secondly, name of a brand is used to render a specific meaning and gives an already existing word a completely different denotation, this can for example be seen in brands such as Nike, where the name of a Greek goddess got a completely different meaning. Another source is personage, which defines the brand and the culture of the corporation. Personage establishes the emotional link between a brand and a consumer (Janonis et al, 2007). It is also important to note brand developer, which is seen as the identity of the person that stands behind the brand. Within the world of fashion, Rihanna's identity is closely connected to her brand Fenty and brand Yeezy for example correlates with Kanye West's personal traits which is also seen in the culture of the brand. What binds together the form and the content is the communication, which is also one of the sources that determine brand identity and is also manifested through audio and visual content, not only the words that come from a brand and is tightly connected to the culture that a brand cultivates internally as well as externally (Janonis et al., 2007). Lastly, visual symbols and logotype are the tangible sources of brand identity. They apply the previously mentioned culture and personality into an image. The complete brand identity is then communicated through the content and the form (Janonis et al., 2007; Kapferer, 2003) and helps to distinguish brand within competition (Ghodeswar, 2008).

2.2.2 Brand value and status symbols within fashion branding

Schultz and Hatch (2008) note that the origin of brand value can be seen in its differentiation to other brands with regard to their consumers and shareholders who are a part of the brand and the community and get the sense of belonging. Successful corporations therefore juggle the strategy of belonging and differentiation in their brand equity management. Symbolism plays a great role in branding, however it usually only covers the tangible aspect of a brand. It therefore contributes to the brand by giving it an economic value. Symbols are working at its best while they are being linked to a meaning and they support and connect with each other (Atkin, 2005). This is why corporate brands create a large constellation of symbols that connect and supplement each other and are located through the entire enterprise while at the same time being interpreted by employers of the corporation and its stakeholders (Schultz & Hatch, 2008).

Roots of the terms luxury good and status symbol can be found within Thorstein Veblen's theory on conspicuous consumption, where public display of wealth in form of clothing has been noted even back in the 19th century (Greathouse, 2018). According to Veblen (1994), a price of a luxury good is not solely dependent on its function but rather by its desirability and popularity. So called "*Veblen goods*" whose higher price results in a lower demand therefore don't comply within traditional laws of economy and are noted to be quickly sold out. Greathouse (2018) notes that such products also drive human behavior as they represent a social currency and therefore set a certain standard of ownership. In the everchanging field of fashion, values and cultural knowledge have become key terms. The values of consumers and coincidentally values of brands have changed during the recent years. Arnault (2019, p. 8) notes that brands have turned the conversation into a dialogue where cultural relevance represents a currency and is established through a compilation of ideas and values. The Old vs New luxury comparison chart created by Highsnobiety (see Figure 2 below) suggests, that the products people buy therefore manifest more than just their visual aestheticism but are rather indicators of a set of values. This shows how the relationship between brands and consumers relies on more than just transactions between money and goods. Nowadays, brands do not just symbolize the product that they sell but are rather an indicator of a lifestyle and value system (Trunzo, 2019).

Old Luxury:	New Luxury:
Defined by price points.	Defined by knowledge.
Aspiration is about price.	Aspiration is about cultural value.
Items are special because they're exclusive to a certain set of people.	Items are special because they're unique to the individual.
Status is demonstrated by ownership of luxury items.	Status is demonstrated by access to the cultures represented by luxury items.
Luxury is something that can be bought.	Luxury is a dynamic lifestyle that requires participation.
Physical stores are the truest manifestation of a luxury brand.	A brand's identity and values must be felt in digital and physical platforms.
Value is tied solely to artisanal manufacturing and brand's provenance.	Value is tied to artful ideas executed at a high level.
Pieces customized to a client's tastes.	Pieces personalized to a client's identity.

Figure 2: *Old Luxury vs. New Luxury according to Highsnobiety (DeLeon & Klanten, 2019)*

2.3 Collaborations between streetwear and luxury brands

The origins of streetwear date back to the 1980s, when “do it yourself” culture of punk and new wave emerged, but it is important to note that the original carriers of streetwear fashion were surfers and skateboarders from California (Simpson, 2019). Californian surfer Shawn Stüssy has been acknowledged as the pioneer of streetwear as he started a movement by selling printed T-shirts that matched his iconic surfboard designs (Hundreds, 2017). Stüssy’s integration of art, surfing lifestyle and hip hop music became a platform where the streetwear of West Coast began to thrive. However, it is important to note that the streetwear culture of the Eastern part of the United States carries an even thicker connection to the hip hop music. The streets of Bronx and Harlem are often acknowledged as the birthplace of hip hop music, that started with MCs and breakdance where authenticity played a great role (DeLeon, 2018). Genuineness is indisputably the connecting link between streetwear and hip hop. Besides representing a musical movement, hip hop played a great deal of influence on the development of streetwear (DeLeon, 2018). It completely changed the landscape of the fashion industry and opened new dimensions to the culture of remixing and reusing (Cochrane, 2017; Tyler 2018). Mentzer (n.d.) notes that hip hop fashion was impacted by sneakers from start to finish. Historically speaking, some of the most famous brands such as Nike and Adidas were a part of hip hop since its beginnings

and as the music evolved, so did the sneaker culture. The confirmation that sneakers were all the rage can be seen. Run-DMC produced a song called “My Adidas” in the mid 80s, as well as in Nelly’s “Air Force Ones”, which even increased the sneakers’ popularity within the hip hop community (Mentzer, n.d.).

2.3.1 Collaboration type I: Hip-hop culture and luxury goods

For urban artists, buying known luxury goods was a cherry on top of showing off. It was a way to show that they’ve made it and that they are living the American Dream. Hip hop artists in the 80s started wearing waspy brands such as Tommy Hilfiger, Timberland and Ralph Lauren that screamed the American lifestyle and became even more popular during the next decade. Fashion designers were initially not keen on their newest consumers, but after realizing their purchasing power, they have started to embrace the new urban wave and started including hip hop artists in their advertising campaigns (Lieber, 2019).

When it comes to the culture of reworks that were the link between streetwear and luxury, the go-to person was Dapper Dan - the king of bootleg, who has been known to making the luxury even more luxurious (DeLeon, 2019). Adding unique and over the top details is what made this Harlem based artist famous in the eighties, when his first store was opened (Banham, n.d.). One of his most famous creations was the “Don’t Believe the Hype” jacket that was commissioned by Mike Tyson back in 1988. Needless to say that was quickly sued, but that did not make the hype stop. Now, his Harlem atelier that was re-opened in 2018, even collaborates with Gucci (Rosen, 2019).

2.3.2 Collaboration type II: Fast fashion and luxury

Even though T-shirts and hats may seem as the pieces that are easily accessible and can be easily compensated, brands are finding new ways of remaking and reviving their clothing lines (Fischer, 2019). Collaborations with relevant artists represent the fastest way for luxury house to connect with contemporary consumers Trunzo (2019). Commercial retailers such as H&M and Uniqlo both host multiple collaboration with artists and luxury houses on a yearly basis. Uniqlo is for example known for their successful collaborations with KAWS, Alexander Wang and JW Anderson, which opened the doors to three completely different segments of consumers, and on the other hand H&M tries to bring low priced high fashion, collaborating with Martin Maison Margiela, Kenzo, Versace, Balmain and more. Today, a whole new ode to streetwear market is also represented by collaborations between formerly luxury brands that found a new niche and the re-work brands, such as Frankie Collective, Ancuta Sarca, ALCH and Concolour (Tesema, 2019). These are not

linked to any streetwear brands in terms of being a direct extension of the branded clothes that are being repurposed, but have their own way of manifesting the luxury of uniqueness and art through their status of being even more exclusive and one-of-a-kind, while still containing elements of corporate brands such as Nike, Adidas, Supreme and more.

2.3.3 Collaboration type III: Celebrity endorsements

In their interview with Fashionbeans (Banham, n.d.), Cristopher Morency (previously editorial associate at The Business of Fashion, now editor at Highsnobiety) and Jian DeLeon (editorial director at Highsnobiety) note that luxury brands have realized that hip hop artists such as Pharell, A\$AP Rocky, Kanye West and Travis Scott are now key players when it comes to breaking barriers between streetwear and high fashion. Morency (2018) notes that hip hop musicians have been named fashion's royalty as they seem to be dictating the popularity and success of clothing brands. As hip hop is the current most popular genre on the musical charts, it seems to drive the consumption culture. There has also been a rise of collaborations between hip hop musicians and fashion houses, where musicians have been featured in advertising campaigns or in actual product collaborations. This shows a shift in the strategies of reaching the Generations Y and Z, which are the major consumers of said products (Morency, 2019). In addition to that, it is important to note that one of the biggest cultural shifts in perception of streetwear as luxury occurred in 2018, when Virgil Abloh was appointed as Artistic director of menswear at Louis Vuitton, making him a first black designer to secure such spot at one of the most luxurious brands. (Cochrane, 2018.) Abloh, who was an industrial engineer that became DJ and later on a designer is a prime example of the diversity that is changing the fashion game of the 21st century.

2.4 Cultural credibility and communicating fashion

Before the dawn of mediatization and social media's impact on retail, brands were not as pressured to develop their strategic communication and were even a bit reluctant to expand their communication strategy online (Kim & Ko, 2012). Digitalization completely changed the way brands are connecting with its audiences, how they communicate with consumers and maintain a digital presence while at the same time integrate their ideas within the ever-evolving cultural terrain (Easey, 2009). Kim and Ko (2010) note that social media has conspicuous impact on a reputation of a brand, as consumers make purchase decisions that are based on information they receive from social media, as well as spread information and give feedback to other users online. As social media increasingly impacts a corporate

brand's reputation through online engagement of stakeholders, it's important for brands to use the opportunities to proactively manage its online image. (Pownal, 2015). Praprotnik (2016) acknowledges that social media offer the possibility to fashion brands to enhance the aesthetic story which means, that the brands can offer a more personalized experience that would contribute to a higher engagement and likeability. It has become crucial for fashion brands to share their values, beliefs and storytelling in order to stand out of the crowd. It is also important to note that the online communities have become educated and are able to dissect the news they are receiving from brands on a daily basis in most influential ways possible (Trunzo, 2019). Social media platforms, such as Instagram, brought power into the fingertips of consumers and allowed them to share and co-create the values of the New Luxury. Websites such as Highsnobiety, Hypebeast and Complex with their supporting social media ecosystem can be seen as decision makers on what branded content sees the light of the world. Identification of hype worthy products nowadays partly depends on websites and social media that report news on releases of new brands and predict the likeliness of the items that are going to be sold out, but it is also important to note the consumer culture, word of mouth and reputation, especially in the form of cultural credibility. Cultural credibility represents an intangible ingredient of successful brands and it is thought to be made of several components, such as its communication tone, values and authenticity that give the brand a resonance and build up its reputation (Morency, 2019). Cultural credibility can also be seen as brand's communication, especially in the ways brands connect with their already existing customers and new, potential ones. Morency (2019) notes that cultural credibility is an ever-evolving process, that is created by various groups across the world and involves more than just selling authenticity, but is rather a mixture of perceptions, feelings and positioning that a brand takes in the minds of consumers. Due to the fact that it has redefined the way fashion brands interact with society and is the reason why products of some brands, such as Supreme or Palace are being sold out instantly and constantly, it presents an important social phenomenon to observe and examine in order to define its impact on the field of fashion as well as Creative Industries in general.

3 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to understand what cultural credibility in connection to brand identity means, it was necessary to firstly thoroughly explore the elements of brand identity and its characteristics that served as a base to build the empirical research upon. This presented valuable insights into what forms the identity of the corporate brand as well as established grounds on the perception of fashion brands. In order to answer the research question and the sub-questions related to it, this research took on a qualitative approach, composed of semi-structured interviews with an average length of fifty minutes. The interviews were conducted with engaged consumers who have been a part of the fashion world by following the trends and consuming fashion products, as well as brand managers whose expertise lies in their everyday job and are a part of the fashion world due to their profession and therefore understand the impact of communication, values and reputation on the brand they work for.

3.1. Research Design

As a result of under researched role of cultural credibility in terms of its influence on the reputation of streetwear brands as well as its connection to status symbols, qualitative approach represented the most suitable research method since symbols, meanings and structures that construct social realities were observed within this research (Boeije, 2010). To find out in what ways brands form cultural credibility and what factors contribute to building it, it was necessary to explore what brands they trust and why and how they engage with them. Moreover, it was also essential to understand the ways of consumers contributing to cultural credibility and their perceptions on what they deem to be a status symbol and how they see streetwear brands in comparison to luxury brands. Accordingly, this research took up an interpretive approach to help gather data that allowed to explore this social phenomenon, through exploration of themes and patterns (Boeije, 2010; Tehrani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa, & Varpio, 2015) that help understand the ways in which these factors that contribute to cultural credibility and thus create a streetwear product a status symbol. Qualitative method was of utmost importance as it allows to understand the problem from the “inside” (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2014) and explores the phenomenon of cultural credibility in relation to streetwear brands, where the research question and sub-questions were answered with insights gained by conducting semi-structured interviews with consumers as well as selected brand representatives (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2010). Adopting a qualitative research method therefore meant choosing an approach that enabled this research with a holistic understanding of how cultural credibility is built, fostered and perceived.

The main used method was an in-depth semi structured interview. Hermanowicz (2002) notes that in-depth interview provides an opportunity to gather insights and therefore represents a major impetus for this research since they offer in-depth analysis of the researched topic, while at the same time giving enough flexibility to maneuver and is of an open nature. Semi-structured interview specifically enables a throughout examination of thoughts and viewpoints of a certain topic and can therefore contribute to obtaining new knowledge of the researched themes (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The general topic list for the interviews was based on the theoretical framework with an emphasis on aspirations, brand image, luxury goods, streetwear brands and their transition into status symbols. Across the interviews, we observed the perceptions of people on cultural credibility of streetwear brands and tried to identify the factors that turn a streetwear product into status symbol.

3.2 Operationalisation

The method of data gathering for this research were semi-structured interviews, as they offered an in-depth analysis of the researched topic while at the same time allowed enough flexibility of the procedure (Babbie, 2013). The goal of a semi-structured interview was to create a framework for the conversation that would stay the same for both groups – consumers and brand representatives, but the sub question slightly deferred based on the background of the participant. The interview questions were therefore related to the concepts from the theoretical framework and were steered with a topic guide. The openness and the format of the interview helped with the application of the interviewee's knowledge onto the topic and helped participants not feeling limited when it comes to depth of their answers (Edwards & Holland, 2013). With the purpose to cover all the necessary topics within the interview, a topic list with probes and already decided questions was prepared also to help the researcher structure the flow of the interview and to systematically approach the topics that need to be covered in order for them to be able to contribute to answering the research question and sub- questions. Nonetheless, it is essential to note, that the questions served merely as a guide as it was foreseen that they will provide an appropriate platform for interviewees to encourage them conduct more knowledge on the topic (Edwards & Holland, 2013). With regards to the presented theoretical framework, the topic guides were divided in several sections that covered the behavioral aspects of consumers and their attitudes towards the field of fashion and consumption habits, as well as perception of brands, both streetwear and luxury as well as perception of status symbols.

The predetermined interview guides (see Appendix A for consumer guides and B for brand representative guides) were used to conduct all of the interviews, whereas the order of questions slightly differed for each participants, depending on follow up techniques, that were open and could not be as predicted due to the nature of the conversation (Edwards & Holland, 2013). All of the interviews started with an introduction to the research and an oral consent given by the interviewee to record the conversation as that eased the transcription process. The interviewees were also able to sign consent request for participating in the research and were informed of their rights as interviewees. The recording started afterwards and the interviews proceeded with warm-up questions and ended with cooling down questions (Hermanowicz, 2002). Participants in were interviewed as brand managers have received more questions related to the brand they work for in the sense of describing how they think cultural credibility is being built in their brand, what roles the consumers play in the process and how did they see the future of communicating authenticity whereas participants that were interviewed as consumers received more questions related to their consumption habits and how does a brand's communication influence them, what brands they perceive as culturally credible and why, as well as how does the brand's image influence their consumption patterns and brand loyalty. In both cases, the concept of cultural credibility will also be researched through their trust in brands they engage with, authenticity that they perceive from brand's communication offline as well as online in order to define the factors that in their opinion contribute to building cultural credibility. More detailed ideas about interview probes can be found in the Appendices A and B. During the interview, notes were being taken on concepts that stood out as well as "social cues" (Hermanowitz, 2002), as this enabled the transcription to be as precise as possible in terms of portrayal of the movements and mimics that could not be directly seen from the transcribed words of this conversation (Mikecz, 2012).

3.3 Data collection and sampling

This research included a sample of twelve interviewees (N=12), where ten (N=10) of them were invited to participate as consumers and two (N=2) of them participated as brand representatives. The interviewees were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their fit to the research, since it was important to find those that would contribute to gathering thorough and specific information that would contribute to the value of the research (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). As one group of the interviewees represented experts within the field, the research took on expert sampling procedure, where the goal was to gain the deeper and overall holistic understanding of cultural credibility from the "insider"

perspective (Libakova & Sertakova, 2015; Triandis & Gerardo, 1993) of brands as well, in order to compare it to the consumer's perspective and see if they are matching in any ways (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009). Experts in case of this research were managers or equally positioned employees of fashion brands or outlets that work with clothing or accessories in form of either physical objects (e.g. brand managers) or topics of their writing (e.g. fashion reporters or bloggers). Therefore, participants were selected as the sample due to either their social media presence that shows the potential of streetwear knowledge or were an acquaintances of people whom the researcher knows personally. They were contacted either via e-mail, Instagram or LinkedIn in attempt to invite them for a face-to-face interview, which were supposed to happen in the Netherlands, Slovenia, Germany and UK, but due to the unforeseen circumstances that came with Covid-19 measurements, seven (N=8) of them had to be done through online videoconference platforms such as Skype, FaceTime and Google Meet. All of the interviewees received a short description of the research and the request to record the conversation that was also sent with the consent permission to record the conversation (see Appendix C). All of the participants orally agreed to record the conversation and some of them did not feel the need to sign any kind of non-disclosure agreements or consent requests. Some of them even pointed out that signing anything is even more traceable than just orally agreeing. The data collection started on the 9th of March and ended on the 17th of May. The first two (N=2) interviews were conducted face-to-face as they were held before the covid-19 measurements started and two (N=2) of the interviews that took place in May were also performed face-to-face as the measurements in Slovenia allowed that to happen, while maintaining a safe distance. The first face-to-face interview was conducted at EUR campus, as the participant's cousin was a student there so it was a convenient location to also drop by and perform an interview there. The second face-to-face interview was conducted at the office of the brand manager in Amsterdam, which provided a comfortable environment for the interviewee and also spared the time he would have to take to travel to Rotterdam, which was very convenient. Respectively, the following seven (N=7) interviews were held on online videoconferencing platforms that were Skype, FaceTime and Google Meet, due to Covid-19 lockdowns and measurements that lasted until mid-May, when two (N=2) of the interviewees agreed to have a face-to-face interview in the cafés in Ljubljana. The last interview with an expert was performed through FaceTime, due to the fact that he lives in the UK. Initially, it was easier to conduct the face-to-face interviews, but online videoconferencing platforms also presented a suitable substitute, as they resembled a face-to-face interplay and still granted the possibility to identify social cues and non-verbal

signs (Hermanowicz 2002; Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). As Hamilton (2014) points out, the main disadvantage of online videoconferencing platforms was however their connectivity, as the internet connection in times of Covid-19 was overwhelmed and there were certain moments when the connection froze and the question or answer had to be repeated.

As previously mentioned, interviewees that participated as consumers were chosen based on their knowledge of streetwear and its consumption and were living in six different countries – Slovenia, Croatia, UK, Netherlands, Sweden and Mexico. Their interviews were focused on exploring their interest in fashion, their consumption habits and adoption of social media in regard to follow fashion brands. Moreover, the conversation switched to their perception and favorability of brands they engage with, to point out the values and that they deem as important when it comes to their likeability of a brand. This was also connected to their perception of how they see streetwear brands in comparison to luxury brands and what they would describe as a status symbol and why. Cultural credibility was added onto the discussion through talks of reputation and trust, which later on identified as two of the factors that contribute to building cultural credibility of streetwear brands. In addition to that, two Dutch brand representatives participated, who both identified as male and were chosen as appropriate interviewees based on the brand they work for or with, which needed to fall into the category of a streetwear brand i.e. apparel that includes sportswear products, such as hoodies, sneakers and baseball caps. One of them was a brand manager of an event specialized in sneakers and the other one was a fashion buyer working at a Forbes 500 company. They have been contacted via LinkedIn as they matched the description of a candidate. They were asked the same core questions on cultural credibility as the interviewees that participated as consumers, but as they were the experts and therefore providing insights. Even though this research did not initially aim at exploring the differences between consumer's and manager's perspective on cultural credibility, it was expected that the depth of their answers and knowledge on the field of fashion would bring additional value to this research. It is however necessary to emphasize, that this did not influence the formation of definition of cultural credibility as they provided similar insights as the consumers and were in general agreement with what was said in the consumer interviews. Overall, the gender ratio of the interviewees was also well balanced as six of interviewees identified as males, and six of them identified as females. The interviewees were aged between twenty and forty-five years of age which provided a broad palette of opinions and experiences. In order to facilitate a full list of participants, please refer to the

Appendix D.

After collecting the data, the transcripts of the interviews were done (verbatim included) in order to later inductively group the answers on the same topic into categories by doing thematic analysis which helped with the process of identifying patterns (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The categories and subcategories achieved by doing so helped to answer the research question and sub-questions.

3.4 Analysis and coding process

With a purpose of analyzing the data while also gathering them, the first step of the analysis was done while transcribing the interviews with verbatims and systematically organizing the data by marking concepts that stood out as they were repeated multiple times. In total, there was 293 transcribed pages of the interviews, where the transcription itself played a great role in providing a foundation of logical themes and key concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Tuckett, 2005). Within the transcripts, no names of the interviewees were revealed in order to keep them anonymous and for the purpose of that, each of them received a letter (in alphabetical order) in order to synchronize their names into codes, for instance: Interviewee A, Interviewee B, Interviewee C, and so on.

The main tool of the analysis was the thematic analysis, which was obtained as an inducted approach of the data analysis after the data set was being systematically organized (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis deemed to be an appropriate tool as its flexibility is seen in the description as well as reporting of data within the qualitative frameworks with the main purpose to identify the topics and patterns of the obtained data and filter out the key topics of the research (Galvin, Suominen, Morgan, O'Connell & Smith, 2015). As previously mentioned, the analysis started while the interviews were being performed and was guided by open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) where text was being broken into smaller units of open codes first in order to filter out the patterns and summaries (Sparker, 2005; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Within the process, different parts of the data were put into categories of a broader theme through an inductive approach, where the data was consistently reviewed until the codes reached a saturation that marked the end of the analysis as no new topics would arise from the transcriptions (Saunders et al., 2017).

Data coding has been guided by the steps that Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as necessary in order to perform a thematic analysis. Firstly, open coding was performed while the research was familiarizing with data and providing initial codes. Initial codes were consisted of chunks of data that stood out and deemed to be valuable to the researcher. The codes were systematically organized into an overarching review of the topics that appeared. The data was coded manually using Microsoft Excel, that offered a clear overview of the patterns that were being repeated and later on named into diverse codes. The next step of the analysis was axial coding which connected the codes and combined them into overarching themes of the research, and provided a clear overview of themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During axial coding, it was necessary for the researcher to take a look at the research question as well as sub-questions in order to determine the main categories of the themes. In order to properly access and visualize the coding tree, the main categories were each assigned a different colors with a purpose to be more visible and the quotations and segments of data would be distributed to them easily. Braun & Clarke's (2006, p. 91) third step of the analysis was the selective coding, where the purpose was to reexamine the themes and form a sensible patterns. This ultimate step of the analysis stands in need of establishing accurate distillation of themes and sub-themes that were previously identified and ensures that the data set is representative (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91).

The final outcome of the thematic analysis was seen as the framework of themes and sub-themes with detailed names, which correlate to the previously presented theoretical framework. The themes that were discovered within the analysis were directly related to the concepts that were also found within the research question and sub-questions and therefore provided a foundation for reporting the key findings and results of this research.

3.5 Validity and reliability

As qualitative research is known for its interpretative nature, its rapport can sometimes prejudice the stability and austerity of the data and therefore has special emphasis on obtaining the validity and reliability of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In order to ensure the highest possible level of both, reliability and validity, the process of sampling as well as gathering and analyzing the data, diverse tactics were being taken into the consideration. Reliability of the data is related to the coherence of the research design, and ensures that the results of the research can be the same if the research would be repeated (Crescentini & Mainardi, 2009). This has been contributed through a pre-test of the

interview, which was made in order to test the order of the potential questions and see the flow of the probes that were predetermined, as well as combining probes from already existing similar researches that would ensure that the topics that need to be covered are being answered. Neuman (2014) describes the role of validity as the confirmation found within the research that is connecting it with reality. Crescentini and Mainardi (2009, p. 436) emphasize that validity of the data is seen within ensuring the honesty of the insights and the ideas, that are being established as the measurement instruments. Silverman (2015) notes that there are several techniques that can ensure the validity of the research. Within this research, source triangulation was being taken into consideration, especially while choosing a broad and diverse palette of interviewees while at the same time providing a candid research design (Baxter & Eyles, 1997) which results could have also been seen through content analysis of user comments on social media or online articles.

4 RESULTS

Aforementioned, the thematic analysis of the concepts and patterns was being performed on the data that this research yielded. Within the analysis, several themes stood out. Within this chapter, these themes will be explained and presented in an orderly manner.

4.1 Streetwear brands following a luxury like approach

In order to properly place the role of streetwear into the fashion industry, the first research sub-question was focused on its management when it comes to strategies that include pricing, positioning and communications in comparison to luxury brands. The main categories and notions that surfaced from the data and were related to how streetwear brands follow a luxury like approach can be found in Figure 4.1. The main ideas and concepts of the interviewees, including their perceptions on how these concepts are related. The perception of positioning of streetwear brands in comparison to luxury brands has been comprehensively examined through distinctive questions that were addressed in the interview, which also provided a coherent overview of similarities between streetwear brands and luxury brands.

Main categories	Related topics
Luxury brands	Premium price Inaccessibility Quality Showrooms and fashion weeks Heritage
Streetwear brands	Shifts in fashion Social media and influencers Collaborations New Luxury

Figure 3: Categories and concepts related to SRQ1

4.1.1 Characteristics of luxury brands

In order to provide a clear understanding of concepts, all of the participants were asked to describe the term of luxury brands in their words, in order to draw out characteristics that would later on be compared to those of streetwear brands in order to find similarities and differences. First thing that stood out was the non-essentialness of luxury

brands. They were perceived as a value added or an add-on to the everyday life, rather than necessity. For example, interviewees K, L and E stated:

“ [...] a luxury brand is a brand that produces products that are not necessarily consumed for like surviving or living. [...] we don't need the products, but it's like rather connected to the status and [...] pleasure. [...] you don't need the products, but it does make you feel happier in some way and it has that extra value of like the good life ” (Interviewee K)

“ [...] it's a brand that, uh, it's not like an essential brand [...]. (Interviewee L)

“ [...] something that's not every day, [...] that a majority of items are not every day. ”]. (Interviewee E)

This was furtherly even more confirmed within the topic that followed which was related to price. The price tag seemed to be something that was mentioned in every interview, occasionally even with examples that would explicitly show the connection between luxury brands and high prices that their products entail. Interviewees C and J acknowledged the important role of the price when it comes to differentiation between everyday goods and luxury goods:

“ [...] not many people can have something that is luxury just because of its price”. Of the prices were lower, more people could afford it and it wouldn't be luxury. ” (Interviewee C)

“ [...] price obviously plays a big role because if you create a product that everyone can afford, then it's more easy for people to get it. So I think the price is a big part of it as well [...] ” (Interviewee J)

Price tag was found as one of the key entrance guards into the world of luxury goods as the majority of people are not able to afford to have their closet full of luxury items, which was something that Interviewees D and F emphasized:

“ [...] luxury is very unattainable to most people [...] ”. (Interviewee D)

“ [...] a normal person cannot have every piece of a collection of that brand. ” (Interviewee

F)

In addition to the price, interviewees found parallels between the quality of luxury goods and their price. In their opinion, price is also dictated by impeccable condition that the products of luxury brands are in and the fact that they are handmade and consequently not necessarily produced in larger quantities. This was expressed in the following way:

“ [...] luxurious items would be those that may be separated from the others by their design, by their, uh, quality. By their means of production and so on and so on.” (Interviewee E)

“ [...] it's impeccably made, um, maybe even handmade. [...] you don't get a lot of pieces.” (Interviewee G)

This lead out to the further digging as price was of course not the only characteristic of a luxury brand that made the products inaccessible to the majority of consumers. It is important to note that price was also mentioned in relation to two further characteristics that were and inaccessibility that was caused by limited editions and geographical inequalities in terms of supplies, and quality. When it comes to accessibility, all of the interviews agreed that brands that are considered as luxury, might not be easily accessible. Either due to the geolocational issues or limited editions. On the general note on inaccessibility of the luxury goods, interviewee B expressed the following:

“I think it's that element of hype and luxury and just like this whole fuss around a product, you know, like it comes, a luxury product is never just a product that everyone can have. And I think the, the limited amount of it, and the, the almost this aura around it is what makes in luxurious.” (Interviewee B)

Limited amounts of luxury brands are dictated by the basic laws of supply and demand, where increasingly high demand with an unchanged supply of a good leads to higher equilibrium prices (Gans, King, & Mankiw, 2011). Desirability of luxury goods that are by default produced in smaller quantities therefore follows the common logic of supply and demand which is seen in the prices as well as accessibility. Interviewee A that participated as an expert confirms:

“ [...] the accessibility has always been limited and that obviously has to do with pricing

strategy. It's not for everyone. [...] making stuff even more limited makes it sometimes even harder even if you have the money for it." (Interviewee A)

Geographical inaccessibility is something that was often mentioned from participants that came from Slovenia, Croatia and Mexico in relation to the fact that some luxury brands don't even have physical stores in these countries which leads to the products being unattainable also due to the fact that they only can be purchased in a physical stores, which are sometimes but not always, located in neighbor countries. Interviewee D for example stated:

"Cause as we are all from Ljubljana, it's pretty hard to, to gain knowledge about, um luxury brands cause we don't have that. [...] even in 2020 we don't have the access to [...] the biggest um companies right now, um besides online [...]." (Interviewee D)

Interviewee F also exposed the intertwining of price and accessibility and also opened a new factor that is showrooms and fashion weeks.

"A luxury brand is a brand that uses high end materials [...] has like a showroom or represent its collection in one of the fashion weeks. It's accessible but it's still pricey." (Interviewee F)

One third of the participants had somehow connected luxury brands to their participation in fashion weeks and showrooms which also has a lot to do with their history and heritage that are connected to reveal of new season and lines as a part of a fashion week. Interviewees a and H also explicitly confirmed this.

"I would say that most of the luxury brands existed already for a very long time. So they have big history. I would say that the cities have always played an important role like Milam, Paris London and that's still the case." (Interviewee A)

"It's definitely the involvement in the fashion weeks and the fashion world [...] but it's also about heritage. [...] a lot of what I think, uh, [...] are brands that have been around for decades and kind of built up their, their presence." (Interviewee H)

It is clear that luxury brands maintain a reputation that is built out of five characteristics, that

stood out and were repeated throughout the interviews multiple times. Those were: premium price, quality, inaccessibility, showrooms and fashion weeks, and heritage. Characteristics that are quality, inaccessibility, heritage and premium prices match with the description of luxury brand's characteristics discovered by Nueno and Quelch (1998) and Fionda and Moore (2008), whereas showrooms and fashion weeks seem to be a newer characteristic that separates luxury brands from fast fashion brands, as they represent a contemporary trend that has been popularized in the past two decades.

4.1.2 Similarities in the management of streetwear brands and luxury brands

The rise of streetwear brands and their collaborations with luxury brands and prominent couture fashion houses is identified as a key trend through the interviews. In general, streetwear brands are perceived as younger brands, that needed to work more for their reputation, however it is important to note its development in the recent years which the interviewees mostly contribute to two factors – influencers and social media, and collaborations with luxury brands.

When it comes to impact of online platforms on a brand's reputation, Interviewee E emphasizes the importance of social media and influencers as the carriers of the reputation and goodwill of streetwear brands. This is also connected to fashion weeks, where more and more streetwear was present first by participants and later on the runways as well.

"[...] influential people like you know, if you see a cool rapper or you see a celebrity or someone wearing all these brands, like you know how Kanye turned around Champion for example, like this is also a big role and I think social media is like the one big impact that changes everything." (Interviewee B)

"[...] more people that attend fashion weeks are dressing more streetwear-ish than high fashion." (Interviewee C)

The reasons of popularity of streetwear brands also include the change of social context, where popular culture plays a great role in terms of dictating the trends. Interviewees D, E and K acknowledge that in the following way:

"[...] I feel like they started to dive into, um, the subcultures. So a lot of skateboarding and hip hop subcultures." (Interviewee D)

“[...] diversion of the couture scene, the high fashion and [...] runway fashion comes with the emergence of streetwear as one of the main factors.[...] there was definitely merging. [...] Same thing happened with street art, performances, theater and maybe street art, graffiti murals and things like that. The idea behind it was that art is not only for the, uh, top part of the community.” (Interviewee E)

“[...] streetwear has basically, you know, made an appearance in the fashion industry. Um it's literally collided [...] to so many different cultures, so many different people. [...]they can now express themselves and still be considered like high fashion and like all authority. ” (Interviewee K)

Streetwear is therefore perceived as the piece of popular culture that can be easily related to and concerns the masses which consequentially means that it has a broader reach and is enriched by the culture, that includes sports such as skateboarding and surfing and arts in forms of graffiti and street performances.

The similarities between the management of luxury and streetwear brands is predominantly seen in pricing strategies and limited editions. These two factors are intertwined as they also follow the previously mentioned classical economic theory of demand and supply. Interviewee A, that participated as an expert, notes, that limited editions are *modus operandi* of streetwear brands these days:

“[...] obviously there has always been a bigger interest slash demand on a limited edition stuff but I would say the streetwear brands really took it to the next level.” (Interviewee A)

Which is also something that interviewees F and L confirmed with their comments on prices and pricing tactics:

“[...] the lower quantities that you give, uh, the higher the value of the item is. [...] I would say that one of the main tactics that streetwear brands use [...] to make the value higher or the demand bigger.” (Interviewee F)

“ [...] I think that they are following the luxury like approach with the prices on their [...]

products. They are not as high priced as like other, um, luxurious brands, but they are definitely, in my opinion becoming more and more expensive” (Interviewee L)

Interviewee D found same similarities as Interviewees F and L, but took another step in terms of comparison of luxury and streetwear brand where she mentioned that streetwear brands have the same factors as luxury brands, but are seen as a different level of luxury:

“[...], that is showing the prices in the, um, limited collections they offer. Um, it shows how difficult it is to attain them. It's the same thing with the tee shirts they have cause they're very limited. Um, and in that sense they're all have the same factors, but they're on different levels of luxury. There's not one level to luxury.” (Interviewee D)

Just like luxury brands, streetwear brands are also aware of geolocational releases where they limit their collections to specific geographical locations, which is something that creates an even higher desirability and consequently makes the demand higher. Interviewees I, K and L described that in the following paragraphs:

“[...]Supreme, for example, they're building, they're building their portfolio and their philosophy is philosophy on limited releases. And, um, you have also brands from, from luxury business doing the same. Let's say Hermes, you cannot, you cannot go to Hermes store and buy, uh, uh, a bag off the shelf.” (Interviewee I)

“[...], also what brands sometimes do is release a different version of the product in different areas of the world. So making it very geographically exclusive. So for example, Kanye releases like one shoe, but in three different colors in like America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. [...], that's also a way to create exclusivity and, you know, make people maybe feel like connected to the product more because they are in that geographical location. [...], like how the hell, the other people who are not here can't get it, you know, so it makes people feel special, which I think is such a smart, you know, strategy of selling your products. Like, Oh, we're only going to sell this shoe in Asia. It's like, why? Like that's so weird. But I mean, I guess it works cause you know, everyone wants it.” (Interviewee K)

“[...] he's collaborating with Supreme to make like a classic Supreme box logo, but with, uh, his signature flowers and that's only gonna be available to US and Canada. So that, that

frustrates me a lot because it's like, I'm willing to give you my money you know. Like, how hard is it? How hard is it for you guys? Like, I know it's a little hard now, but like, I wish I wish they would have considered Europe as well. ” (Interviewee L)

At this point, it is more than crucial to mention collaborations, that is one of the factors that made the reputation and value of streetwear brands higher. All of the participants mentioned the iconic collaboration between a luxury Parisian fashion house Louis Vuitton and Supreme, a New York based streetwear brand that embraces the skateboarding culture. This was deemed to be a collaboration that changed the perception of streetwear brands forever and placed them next to streetwear brands instead of below them. Some examples on how participants recall this quintessential collaboration are the following:

“ [...] obviously let's not forget the biggest collab up to date, Louis Vuitton and Supreme. Two of the biggest companies ever I think. ” (Interviewee B)

“ [...] it was probably Supreme and LV collab, because for me, this set like the base for streetstyle and high fashion collaborations and it gave like a different voice to fashion in general because people saw two things that are really different, can go together and become one thing. ” (Interviewee C)

This collaboration also presented a shift in perception of streetwear brands, as well as accessibility of luxury brands as collaboration made them more approachable. Interviewees also note that it increased the affordability and make the collaborations more approachable amongst the consumers:

“The biggest shift in the fashion industry in the past 10 years must have been when, uh, streetstyle came into fashion and gained this relevance [...] and brought such a big change in fashion, which is making fashion accessible to the everyday consumer. [...] It made the brands more affordable and also more in reach. (Interviewee J)

“[...] I have noticed that a lot of um, high fashion brands, uh, use their accessories [...] like sneakers, with the Balenciaga. Um they're quite close to [...] streetwear [...] and there was quite a few fashion brands that, um, do collaborations with stores like H&M and also Fiorucci with, uh, Adidas. ” (Interviewee H)

Moreover, another important question began to stand out within this research which is related to the luxury approach that streetwear brands are supposedly taking. At this point, a necessary question to ask was if rather luxury brands are the ones that are learning from streetwear brands and copying their approach when it comes to communication, positioning and pricing? Interviewees pointed out, that this is the case within the recent years, where according to Interviewee C, luxury brands are approaching streetwear brands as they realize how much influence they have on a contemporary consumer:

“[...] I think that like four years ago it was streetwear approaching high fashion and now I think it kind of changed, um, and it is the opposite because streetwear has a much bigger impact on people than high fashion.” (Interviewee C).

Interviewee A, that was participating as an expert and Interviewee D, who participated as a consumer also pointed out the fact, that luxury brands are learning from streetwear brands:

“[...] I would say that nowadays it's the other way around. [...] I think the fashion brands are taking a lot of, uh, examples from the streetwear books, I would say.” (Interviewee A)

“ I feel like the luxury brands who have already been established are following the streetwear. Um, streetwear brand approaches.” (Interviewee D).

That is something that would seem as a provoking thought at first, but the more the interviewees were explaining their perceptions of it, the more visible it became, that at this point, it is hard to determine who is actually following whom, as the lines are getting blurrier and blurrier, which makes it hard to track the differences and blurs the line even more. Interviewee E even described it as an existential dilemma, but he acknowledged that luxury brands are the ones who jumped aboard the train, that was taking a different, almost neo-classicist approach of management in the following words:

“Chicken and egg dilemma. Um, so there was a turn in 2017 when two really famous brands on, on each area collapsed together. So it was, it was Supreme and LV and after it, I would say all streetwear, all luxury brands jumped on the, on the streetwear train, uh, and they

changed the, they adjusted the communication.” (Interviewee I)

“[...]luxury brands are trying to learn from the small scale brands but then it also goes vice versa. It’s kind of an interesting mix.” (Interviewee B)

Moreover, interviewees agree that fashion today is an interesting mix, which they deem to be a two way process, where symbiosis between luxury brands and streetwear brand is seen. Participants are talking about the collision that is best seen in the so called New Luxury, where luxury brands gained new audiences and types of products and streetwear brands strengthened their reputation as well as penetrated the market of high fashion. This is shown in the prices of plain luxury T shirts:

“ [...]500 euros for a plain black tee shirt that’s like oversized. It’s considered like a luxury good now.” (Interviewee L)

As well as in the positioning, where the notion of the new kind of luxury is being observed.

“ [...], let’s say the traditional luxury brands, we named them a couple of times today, they are positioning themselves as streetwear brands “[...] let’s say that there is a huge pop up of luxury streetwear brands.” (Interviewee I)

To answer the first sub-research question – *In what ways do streetwear brands follow a luxury-like approach?*, we can conclude that the pricing strategies of streetwear brands as well as their availability in terms of supplies are equal to those of luxury goods, but note the shift of the New Luxury, where luxury brands are also considering the streetwear brands as equivalent and tend to learn from them and collaborate with them rather than perceive them as inferior. It is important to acknowledge the findings of the interview, where thought-provoking ideas were brought up on the impact that streetwear has on a contemporary consumer, as it is much larger than that of high fashion brands. The peak of its impact can be seen in the anticipation that consumers experience as the streetwear brands bypass traditional offline sales and create an exciting shopping experience as well as create a close-knit community where the brands are being praised by their consumers in almost a cult-like way. This kind of impact has been observed by luxury brands which have been taking notes on streetwear brands and tried to replicate the atmosphere with collaborations that would bring them closer to new marketplaces and help them become as human-like as streetwear is.

4.2 Streetwear products as a status symbol

With the intention to furtherly explore the shift that the New Luxury caused within the fashion industry, the second research sub-question was concerned with the concept of status symbols and their role in consumer's lives, where the questions also included perceptions of streetwear brands as status symbols.

The main categories and concepts that emerged from the data and were related to status symbols and their connection to streetwear brands can be found in Figure 4.2. The perception of streetwear brands and factors that turn them into a status symbols has been comprehensively researched through clearly directed questions that were presented within the interview and provided a descriptive correlation between streetwear brands and status symbols.

Main categories	Related topics
Status symbol characteristics	Money Monograms Scarcity Self-expression / Differentiation Showing off
Streetwear brand characteristics	Social context Price Recognizability Limited edition

Figure 4 : Categories and concepts related to SRQ2

4.2.1 Defining a status symbol

The first step of exploring status symbols was establishing their definition and perception of interviewees. At first, interviewees were connecting status symbols to luxury brands as in expensive products that are scarce due to their uncommonness that also results in a higher price as well as their design, which includes significant and recognizable prints in form of monograms and logotypes. Interviewee J, that participated as an expert, stated the following:

“ Well, I definitely see luxury brands as status symbol. People obviously used to showcase them [...], as cliché as it sounds, I believe the more mainstream the buyer, is the more they’re going to showcase that.” (Interviewee J)

When the interviewees that participated as consumers were asked, how they would describe status symbols, interviewees mostly pointed out the following, which also correlates to the characteristics of luxury brands.

“Status symbol is a Rolex watch. [...] it’s been around for a long, long time has a history heritage and it’s still expensive and you can’t..... a person with a normal paycheck cannot buy it. [...] you kinda reflect where you belong.” (Interviewee F)

“ [...] most of the history or modern history so to say even the older history status symbols [...] the emperors and the pharaohs, they would dress the best fabrics. Wouldn’t be a brand, but they would have the best fabrics. Um, so it’s pretty much the same thing, but the easiest way to show your status symbol is [...] connected to a financial, uh, status.” (Interviewee E)

Interviewees also found a direct correlation between money and social status.

“I mean, there is obviously a direct connection between, you know, money and status.” (Interviewee K)

When trying to define a status symbol, mainly its social context emerged as the participants believed that status symbol is related to societal class, which would be directly connected with luxury and wealth. Interviewee J for example directly mentioned the envision of status symbols as positioning tools of the society:

“A status symbol is something that positions you within the society through visual perception.” (Interviewee J)

Form of expression as a correlational asset of positioning was also mentioned as one of the key mechanisms of status symbols, by interviewee I:

“Majority of people, I think use it to just express their self, uh, in society.” (Interviewee I)

Status symbols as a form of self-expression that also leads into differentiation has been sensed in opinions of both, consumers as well as experts. Interviewee A, that participated as an expert for example stated that the differentiation factor that status symbols bring is shown already in the adolescent phase of human development, where status symbols already play a big role:

“[...] when I was in my [...] teenage years, it was a big thing and this is what you wanted. [...] you wanted to be, uh different than the others. And this is one of the things you could do and set yourself apart from the others.” (Interviewee A)

Interviewees B and C, that participated as consumers, shared the same thoughts on connecting status symbols to social classes.

“[...] I think it's just an object that instantly communicates a brand or [...] like a certain type of class. It's something that differentiates you from the other people and like it's instantly very transparent what this product is.” (Interviewee B)

“[...] if people say something that is supposed to be expensive they're automatically going to put you in a box that says rich and that will express some sort of a status [...]” (Interviewee C)

Another form of expression was mentioned as a more specific way of expressing social status that status symbols manifest, which was mentioned as a way to directly show off your social background by wearing a specific products. Interviewees B and D mentioned the public portrayal of wealth in connection of status symbols in quotations below:

“[...] you're trying to prove a point and when your status symbol is an expensive product I think that what you're trying to communicate is that you are wealthy” (Interviewee B)

“ [...] people nowadays use the same brands or other brands as status symbols to show off their wealth and to portray themselves in public and on social media as well.” (Interviewee D)

Interviewee G took a step further in perception of status symbols in terms of showing off and mentioned the belonging aspect, that also connects people and serves as a common ground of interests as seen below.

“ [...] it's like a badge you get when you join a club you know and if you see another one with the same badge you kind of see that you're like in the same club and it kind of connects people.” (Interviewee G)

As it was already established, visual awareness plays a great role in the perception of status symbols. That is also directly linked to status symbols and their integration of monograms that also serve as an important distinction when it comes to recognizability of those. Participants mentioned that status symbols are generally easy to recognize and adds value to the product as it marks it with supposed perception of greatness.

“[...] if it has like a huge flash your name on it or like if it's really eye-catching that's also what makes it.” (Interviewee B)

“[...] it adds some value and it's like the monogram is so worldwide known it's basically like the logo for like richness or something like that.” (Interviewee C)

Interviewee L, that participated as a consumer explicitly pointed out the importance of monograms on a status symbol, as they seem a crucial value mechanism.

“Cartier, like the love bracelets. It's definitely a status symbol in my opinion because like it's so easy to like, it's not easy, but in a sense it's like very easy to get the, to make a like gold 14 karat gold bracelet, you know? But suddenly when you put the circle with like the line across it, it becomes like Cartier and it's like, it becomes like, you know, the status symbol of I own Cartier, you know.” (Interviewee L)

Whereas Interviewee C expressed same perception of monograms on items, that are consequently perceived as more expensive than same priced products that are discreetly branded, but also added the notion of counterfeits that people tend to buy in order to take a higher place within a societal context.

“I mean, for example, if you go to the airport, um, you can see one person, uh, with like Louis Vuitton suitcase for \$700, and then the next person's standing there with black suitcase that was like, Rimowa that has the same price. But you will think that the first

person is wealthier just because it has like, like he has, um, suitcase with LV monogram on, because we associate that with richness. So I think it shows your status, but, um, not in all cases because in these times there's so many fakes out there and people are judged too quickly. [...] and also like some meanwhile, there's so many fakes like on Croatia's market stands" (Interviewee C)

To sum up, the factors that foster a status symbol are mostly made out of social context and can be intangible, as they are linked to the role that a certain object represents within a society. In the eyes of the interviewees, status symbols are linked with social classes, that's why the attributes are connected to self-expression and differentiation, that can result in showing off. Status symbols can be scarce, which means that they are not easily accessible and may cost a lot of money, due to their uncommonness, however interviewees attributed high level of recognizability that is manifested through monograms or logos as a characteristic of a status symbol and claim, that this also builds up their recognizability as the products are covered in memorable prints and words.

4.2.2 What makes a streetwear product a status symbol

In the previous sub-chapter we have also already established a correlation in the management of streetwear and luxury brands, which interviewees were also relating them to status symbols. When asked on the correlation between streetwear brands and status symbols, they have observed multiple similarities. In general, they have noted a societal switch which happened in the recent years, as streetwear brands gained a brand new reputation and are slowly but surely blending in with luxury. Interviewee L noted the following:

"I think a streetwear brands are kind of like this, it's kind of like this like gray area where at first it was kind of like something that only like people on the streets obviously would wear and it's not something that would be considered like high-end or high fashion. But I feel like lately there's like a blend between like a luxury and street wear and it's kind of like merging as one." (Interviewee L)

Interviewee C even more explicitly noted the existence of New Luxury and referred to it as a new version of wealth which is manifested through objects that may or may not directly look expensive due to their nature – e.g. sneakers, but they still are highly valuable.

“I think that like in the past three years or two years maybe actually streetwear became like the new luxury just that in most cases it’s not everything about gold and shiny and it doesn’t look expensive but it is.” (Interviewee C)

In perception of the so called New Luxury, another societal factor of coolness played a great role, as Interviewee G observed:

“It’s the psychological thing. Oh, the people who wear streetwear brands are really cool. Those used to be skaters, surfers, etcetera, the cool crowd, the cool people that you always wanted to hang out with.” (Interviewee G)

Sportswear and athleisure have traditionally been reserved and worn by those who needed those products due to their functionality rather than design, but such products are now also treated as commodities, since they also reflect a social status as Interviewee H notes below:

“[...] they project a certain type of person either that someone who is interested in sports or someone who is interested in fashion which is much more common in this last few years because these brands also, um, grew to be quite more expensive [...] and are now probably regarded more as a commodity, not, not in the sports kid of sense, but more like fashion.” (Interviewee H)

The approval of sportswear and athleisure is also seen in debut of the new aesthetics that changed the perception of what expresses richness or previously mentioned coolness which is also something that Interviewee C mentions in relation to streetwear products that also include objects that exist as furniture.

“[...]we kind of adopted this new aesthetics into our lives that’s not everything has to look like 10 years ago [...]. I mean sometimes a big room with just like Bape rug can make the room more expensive like the Baroque themed space or something.” (Interviewee C)

Just as within luxury brands, status symbols in terms of streetwear include the specific characteristics which are similar amongst luxury brands and streetwear brands. First one being differentiation, where the idea of belonging into a specific social context plays a

great role. Interviewee K explicitly pointed out the phenomenon of Hype beasts, where streetwear products play a role in a perception of a social class.

“Um, people started to, you know, differentiate themselves from others by calling yourself a Hype beast and it was kind of also like a status symbol to be a Hype beast. And if you were not, then you were kind of not very cool cause you know.” (Interviewee K)

Hype beasts represent a layer of society that is able to get their hands on products that are hyped and wear them in order to impress others, even though they might not belong to the upper class (Urban Dictionary, 2006). Just like with luxury brands, that are perceived as status symbols, streetwear products that are deemed as status symbol are determined by price and accessibility. When it comes to price, such products are priced above usual streetwear products and have a direct connotation of richness, as it is expressed by Interviewee E below:

“[...] when you walk around and somebody sees that you’re wearing Travis dunks then they feel like oh this guy has money that’s the first thing.” (Interviewee E)

Interviewee F adds that consumers of streetwear brands today are those that also have a lot of money and also acknowledges that the consumer base of streetwear brands have expanded upon those, who would traditionally buy luxury brands:

“ I think, um, people who wear streetwear are people who also have a lot of money. It usually wasn’t like, like that. Usually people who had money were wearing luxury brands and, you know, streetwear was just for people [...]with normal paychecks. Um, um, and yeah, I think that like, people like people who have money now started mixing luxury with streetwear brands[...]” (Interviewee F)

Next to the price, inaccessibility is also perceived as one of the characteristics of a status symbol, as it manifests the social power that the consumer has besides their economic efforts. As consumer C acknowledges, rare sneakers have become not only a product that should be worn, but also displayed as they manifest their power also as a silent object.

“[...] I mean you can have, like in my case, I rather have like some rare sneaker that has cost a lot on the shelf than Versace plates or something, it’s actually like this is like a new status symbol, I think.” (Interviewee C)

The clearest example of a streetwear brand that is seen as a prototype of a brand that produces status symbols was Yeezy, the brand owned by American hip-hop artist Kanye West, who based the idea of his brand on limited editions, which Interviewees K and F both perceive as not easily accessible. In her opinion below, Interviewee K also states the importance of social capital in the process of obtaining such products. This also supports the idea, that price is not the only factor in the acquisition of streetwear products that are perceived as status symbol, but availability plays a big role.

“I think definitely, you know, Yeezy is a very status symbol. That's also what Kanye is aiming for.[...] I don't know what he said, but um, right now I think it is status because you know, also street wear fashion usually has to do with like limited editions, which doesn't necessarily mean that only people with economic power can purchase those things. But also people, you have to have like connections, you have to have knowledge about where to purchase these products. Um, so that also sets apart people from others. So it's not just, um, economic, uh, value that, you know, separates those who can and those who can't buy them” (Interviewee K)

“[...] but then you have Yeezy clothes that are not accessible and could be perceived as a status symbol.” (Interviewee F)

It is however important to note, that this perception may differ from consumer to consumer. Interviewee I vigorously notes that the perception of a status symbol might differ from one generation to another, whereas price of a product is also different and there might be different levels of status symbols.

“It depends on the customers. So talking about Millennials, Gen Z today, for them even, uh, I don’t know, [...]50 eur T-Shirt is perceived as a status symbol.” (Interviewee I)

Interviewee L also points out the multi-layered structure of perception of status symbols, where streetwear brands should be perceived as status symbol, but due to their

nature of not being as sophisticated, he thinks of them as symbols that should be respected, but puts them in a different box.

“I wouldn't necessarily consider them like high status symbols, but I would definitely consider them as like symbols that should be respected” (Interviewee L)

To answer the second sub-research question – *What are the factors that turn streetwear products into a status symbol?*, we first have to acknowledge that contemporary streetwear brands and luxury brands follow similar guidelines when it comes to brand communication and strategic management. This results in both kinds of brands having the potential to become status symbols. The factors that turn a luxury brands into a status symbol as well as streetwear brand into a status symbols are mostly of social context, which include the idea of self-expression of consumer through products, that exists due to the recognizability of those said products. Status symbols, may they be streetwear brands or luxury brands have a high price, which also results in short supply, as most of them belong to limited editions. This shows that streetwear adopting a luxury like pricing or retail strategy can lead into formation of a status symbol, however it is important to acknowledge the social context where the desirability of the product is dictated by the consumers as well. The social context plays a great role in the formation of a status symbol, which is seen in the fact that not every expensive and scarce item can be seen as a desired, but also has to consist of values or some kind of a story that consumers buy into. The interviews show that consumers of streetwear are more finicky when it comes to perception of status symbols in term of streetwear brands as not every streetwear product can become a status symbol, but is rather highly dependent on a social value that is co-created by the consumers.

4.3 Building cultural credibility among consumers

With the purpose to discover what culture credibility means in terms of streetwear brands and how consumers foster it, the third research sub-question was related to defining cultural credibility and its connection with consumers. The main categories and concepts that emerged from the data and were related cultural credibility and the role of consumers can be found in Figure 4.3. The concept of cultural credibility has been assiduously examined by coherent questions throughout the interview and contributed a description of cultural credibility as a concept and provided overview of the actions of consumers that contribute to it.

Main categories	Related topics
Cultural credibility factors	Image Values and storytelling Quality Authenticity Trust Community Transparency and sustainability Collaborations
Role of consumers in cultural credibility	Word of mouth Social media Thoughtful consumption Loyalty

Figure 5 : Categories and concepts related to SRQ3

4.3.1 Conceptualizing cultural credibility

In order to provide a coherent understanding of cultural credibility, interviewees were asked to describe cultural credibility in their own words in order to examine what factors they contribute to it. When thinking about it, consumers as well as experts realized that cultural credibility is a concept, that makes sense but is not easy to describe, as it includes multiple factors and is perceived as somewhat fluid, as Interviewees A and E are stating above:

“A tough one cause that's for, for everyone, it's different obviously. Yeah, if we define such a thing. Difficult one.” (Interviewee A)

“Mmm, see, that's a tricky one because it's, it's, there's multiple factors and I don't think you have, you can have a set definition. I think it would be more of a fluid definition where, um, some of the factors that it would, uh, that would be part of the definition.” (Interviewee E)

Interviewees B and J identified the aspects of relatability and trust, that also revolve around a storyline that a brand is building, which signifies that their purpose of existence goes beyond just selling a product.

“For me, cultural credibility is when I find a brand relatable or I trust them because of a story they built or because I believe in their product, but just also because of them not necessarily creating something for a crowd that a crowd doesn't need, you know what I mean?” (Interviewee B)

“[...]there's history behind it, that they're working on larger problems that they're involved in what's going on in the world, so they're actively participating in making something better and contributing to something better.” (Interviewee J)

Besides that, cultural credibility is perceived as a dialogue between the consumers and the brand, where the brands are conscious of social context and societal issues, as interviewee D states below:

“[...] in fashion sense, culturally credible, um, brands are those who, um, are aware of the current subcultures, aware of the current society and try to dive into that.” (Interviewee D)

Interviewee H thinks of cultural credibility as a holistic approach, where the codependence of brands and consumers is highly noted, also in terms of social media that plays a great role in opinion making.

“I think cultural credibility is probably a sum of everything that I just mentioned. Um, in a, in a whole, I think it's, uh, a holistic approach of a brand. Mmm. It has to do with how the brand influences, uh, people, how it influences social media, but also how the people in the social media influence the brand itself.” (Interviewee H)

Cultural credibility is also perceived as something, that maximizes the value of a brand and puts its worth above the brands that do not contain it, as Interviewee C mentions below:

“I would say that, um, it's, this is something that adds the, like the maximum value to the brand. Like you can't go above this if like a brand has this cultural credibility.” (Interviewee C)

Multiple factors that create cultural credibility within a brand were identified throughout this research, which confirm the complexity of the meaning of the concept. In majority, the following attributes were identified: image, values and storytelling, quality, authenticity, trust, community, transparency and sustainability, and collaborations.

Firstly, it is important that we acknowledge the social context, where cultural background has to exist in order for a brand to base the story upon. Culturally credible brands are those, that are connected with people in a way that goes beyond the consumer-seller relationship, but take a step further and connect with people, where the brands play an almost personified role and therefore possess humanly characteristics, as Interviewee F acknowledges:

“I understand the term cultural credibility as yes, as a holistic way of looking at things. And maybe because we're talking about culture and culture is connected with, um, people. It's of course the component of, um, the personal touch of being a human, not being a brand, you know?” (Interviewee F)

Interviewee I took a step further and contributed cultural credibility to brands that have a broader impact than just staying in their own lane, but are rather also able expand their reach beyond their area of expertise and consequentially influence people that might not be their typical consumers, which is explained below:

“Let's start from the personal perspective, who is credible into the culture would be the right expression. Um, he's the one who, who gives kind of, uh, will give the influence on the wider area, not just on the fashion, uh, perspective or area, but has a mixture of music area and, uh, fashion area and uh, somehow influenced multifunctionally.” (Interviewee I)

When it comes to cultural credibility, having a reach and impact counts, but it also matters what kind of a message the brand is sharing and what kind of reputation it maintains. Interviewee B explicitly mentioned, that not every kind of reputation counts and cultivating a positive reputation is key in becoming culturally credible.

“I think it is related with reputation, but also it has to be the right kind of reputation. You know, so not all reputation is always good reputation and can always obviously take away

from the brand.” (Interviewee B)

Interviewee J, that participated as an expert, mentioned that brand’s image is also their entrance into the world in the form of introduction to the broader public and

“[...] how a brand is prominent on the scene and how they're presenting themselves to the public is going to help themselves and their story. It's essentially the medium for it.”

(Interviewee J)

All of the interviewees sooner or later contributed their opinion on brand’s image and reputation which seems to be key and also influences the perception of cultural credibility in the eyes of consumers. Interviewee C, for example, is sure that image plays a role when it comes to perception:

“[...] image plays a big role because it shows what the brand is about and the like the lifestyle and if the brand doesn't follow their image is just like fake and it's, I guess not real and it's cat fishing people.” (Interviewee C)

Interviewee D pointed out that brands are aware of the importance of good reputation and image and are constantly trying to adapt and work on it, because they realize the impact that inclusion brought into the world of fashion:

“I think the brands are more aware that because of the, um, social media profiles like Diet Prada, which they call out people. And I think they are aware of that. Um, one of the best examples was Dolce & Gabbana controversy and everything connected to that. And I feel like brands are adapting to our mentality and our trying to, to, um, include every race, every gender, um, and different about into their own, um, images.” (Interviewee D)

Brand’s image and reputation are also connected to their values and storytelling, which play a great role in the flood of products that are easily interchangeable if they don’t include something more than just a piece of fabric. Interviewee C again brings out the humanly side that brands are required to have in order to be treated as culturally credible and compares their characteristics to people, as building relationship with brands is as equally important.

“I have to like really get to know the brand before I actually buy the products or show my support for them. Um, because there's so many brands that you, it's the same. It's like with people, like I could say that the brands are the new people I guess, because they have to make some kind of relationship with them and actually step in the shoes of their lifestyle.”
(Interviewee C)

Interviewee B complements the opinion above by emphasizing how values are deemed as principal aspect of communication and presentation of a brand.

“[...] I think we live in an era where values are becoming more and more important because we're so fast paced when everything, and there's so much of everything and we have, we have so many options to choose from. So I think communicating to the values of your consumer is going to become one of the more important if not already, but for sure getting relevance over the years.” (Interviewee B)

Values of a brand are also intertwined with the trust that consumers put into a brand, which is seen more as a long term process, that is built through persistence and longevity, that can only be achieved through time. This is something that Interviewee G considered as an important part of a brand's journey to becoming culturally credible.

“You cannot establish trust right away. Trust is built through years and years. Um, I mean, you know, you don't trust someone instantly. You don't trust the stranger when you meet them. You don't trust someone when you see them three times, you trust your mom because you've known her for your whole life. What I mean, and it's the same with brands. You need years and years to stay in the game and say on your target group and then people will start trusting you.” (Interviewee G)

Interviewee H complemented the opinion on building trust by adding that relationships also need to be evolved in order for people to perceive a brand as culturally credible, which brings us back to the humanly side that a brand needs to have in order to evolve its cultural credibility.

“I think in the times that we live in where social media plays such a big role, I think the brands need to build a relationship with their consumer in order for them to actually buy new things. Uh, it's also because there are so many more brands available, um, maybe

because of the internet maybe because of just, um, society evolving this way.” (Interviewee H)

As time is of the essence in terms of longevity and persistence, Interviewee G also presented a great example, which shows that every brand has to first find a niche and establish trust within a smaller circle of people and then build upon that, as it allows it to establish stronger and more personal ties with its consumers. This is an important when planning a long term strategy and involvement as your starting base of consumers will always be there for you.

“[...] when you're building a brand, as I said, you have to have a really small circle of people in mind, uh, for which you are doing this brand. And Adidas focused on, more on street culture and maybe on dancers or on hip hop, something like that. And Nike focused on athletes and basketball and it's like maybe you think that there's not a lot, like there's not much of a difference, but there is, because of course I don't follow basketball, but I do follow dance and street culture, et cetera. So you have to pick one. And then if you succeed and that small circle, the small circle will become bigger and bigger and bigger. And once you have a brand on the market, or I don't know, 10 or 15 years, it becomes so big that even if a small brand comes and tries to be competitive, it's really hard for them to compete with you because you have already established trust.” (Interviewee G)

Trust of a brand is as mentioned also related to the story that a brand creates around it, which needs to stay authentic and genuine, in terms of communication and manufacturing process. Interviewee G and I for example mention the authenticity that needs to be seen in both.

“[...] authenticity in terms of how they communicate things but also authenticity in terms of uh, the products that they do because you can see if they are doing products, uh, just because they want to sell them or if they are doing products because they are really passionate about it and they don't care if anyone buys them or not.” (Interviewee G)

“The authenticity is perceived as a product not being fake or being original, being innovative. Of course it moves the full, the whole industry forward. And so moving also culture forward.” (Interviewee I)

Authenticity is also seen in the *modus operandi* of a brand, where culturally credible brands are those that are passionate about a cause and authenticity therefore comes naturally, as Interviewee A says:

“I would say authenticity is key for me. Uh yeah, like keeping it real. Cause sometimes you can see that a brand is trying too hard or they’re trying to buy their authenticity.”

(Interviewee A)

In relation to how authenticity works for their own brand, Interviewee A also notes that authenticity comes with guidelines on actions that a brand takes.

“[...] hopefully people, uh, perceive us as, uh, authentic. We’ve been doing it for quite a while now. Our brand is almost 11 years old, we are quite protective of our, how our brand is being used. Uh, so we have very, very strict guidelines on, uh, how our corporate identity is being used. And we’re also very strict on the people and the brands we collaborate with.”

(Interviewee A)

Interviewee H also acknowledges that authenticity is something, that builds cultural credibility on a long-term level and is key in that process.

“I think if, if they want to be cultural credible and also stay that way for a longer period of time, then yes, I think they have to be quite authentic.” (Interviewee H)

Besides establishing trust and authenticity, culturally credible brands are also those that have a greater purpose than just manufacturing products that they can monetize, but are also there to listen to their consumers and enable them with a better life and help them, to become more equipped in order to handle everyday situations. Establishing a community and giving back to it in other forms than simply offering them a product is crucial in developing cultural credibility as a brand. Interviewee E for example directly expressed that culturally credible brands are those, who give back to the community:

“[...] when it comes to brands, they have cultural credibility if they are not only producing for, uh, selling. And if along the way with the earnings and the production process and the selling process, if they’re contributing to the community or the people that they’re selling

to.” (Interviewee E)

The expert opinion on giving back to the community was formed in a similar way, where Interviewee J expressed that giving the members of the community a platform to raise their voice and be heard is important, as well as stated the importance of multi disciplinarity in terms of aiming further than just within the field of fashion.

“[...] we're trying to give a lot of relevance to young designers because it's a really big industry and people really like that. And also it should be like that, young people should be given a piece of the cake as well. I think knowing your audience and knowing what they would like to see, but while keeping your integrity push out new content, that's really good quality. And staying multidisciplinary has been really crucial for us. So it's not necessarily just fashion.” (Interviewee J)

In terms of interaction, culturally credible brands also value transparency and are always trying to speak out the truth and deal with crises and bricks being thrown at them by remaining true to themselves and stand firm behind what they argue.

“I would say transparency is, is key. Uh ,if there is, emergency thing or something backfiring, for me that's the only way to go be 100% transparent. Uh, and try to explain the best way you can, how you came to this point or whatever and then yeah. And um, that in my opinion, that's the best way to sort of solve the crisis and actually showing that you're doing something.” (Interviewee A)

Besides that, Interviewee G also pointed out the importance of consumer’s opinion and environmental aspect, which has a more and more prominent role within the contemporary society. In opinion of Interviewee G, listening to the consumer is also key, as taking their wants and needs into consideration is what brings to more transparency.

“[...] you have to see a balance, which I think these companies are doing, um, between listening to the people and actually doing the things that the people like want to have. You know, people want something. Um, but it's maybe impossible for you to do right now because you cannot burn a million of fur coats because that is quite environmentally unfriendly, for example. And it's not, it's not the solution, you know? Uh, so you have to, you know, pick like a middle way to go. Um, so yeah, it's not just listening to the customer is

doing this directly what they want, but yeah, like having them on the board, for example.”
(Interviewee G)

While previously briefly touching the environmental aspect, role of corporate social responsibility and sustainability within the contemporary society have also been emphasized. As Interviewee I pointed out, a mixture of everything is needed but cultural credibility is also strongly connected to CSR.

“There is a mixture of everything. Um, for me personally, it's a combination of product execution, uh, for sure not the price, um, their marketing execution and let's say corporate or social responsibility.” (Interviewee I)

Cultural credibility is therefore also linked to brands, that take care of the planet in terms of making sure that there is a sustainable future for both – them and their consumers, who are becoming aware that sustainability is important.

“[...] speaking from personal experience, but for me, making sustainability right now or just in the future, making sustainability a staple rather than an exception is key to grow in the future. Um, Make a product almost that can like grow on its own. You know, a product that's going to be so good that it can sell itself. So you don't have to, you don't have to, you obviously you market it also, but you know also create a product that's reliable and that you don't have to just be cool but it's essentially you're selling something that is good.”
(Interviewee B)

Interviewee I continues to note that people are willing to pay a higher price for a sustainable product as it shows that a brand cares.

“The people are now willing to pay more for the forms of a sustainable product. It is becoming a trend. It's becoming a trend but for sure it will not be a mainstream one. Adidas is trying to introduce it for a couple of years now[...] sustainability is one of the, one of the areas when a brand can be more credible.” (Interviewee I)

Right next to sustainability, quality also plays a role in cultural credibility in terms of a product as well as message projection, where selling a reliable product, that excuses the

price of its manufacture is important.

“Uh, and is that, first of all, you need to believe that the brand is producing not only for selling, but that they are actually producing to maybe, um, project a message or maybe to, um, make their consumers, um, you know, make them equipped to handle everyday life better. Meaning that they would have a good product that will not tear apart in two month-time, that they will feel good in physically.” (Interviewee E)

Last but not least, collaborations present a factor that creates awareness of a brand and can contribute to its cultural credibility. Interviewee D and I think of collaborations as a tool that also opens new doors for brands as it provides them a bigger exposure.

“[...] I feel like, yeah, cause it, the thing with collaborations is always bringing two different demographics together and making both of the parties even more, more trustworthy. And more influential. So it's always a good thing, but it always has to, their interests have to overlap and then they have to feel authentic.” (Interviewee D)

“They are building the brand awareness for all parties included in collaboration. Uh, also they have possibility influence on price and yeah, they're widening the perspective of fashion industry, laying new areas.” (Interviewee I)

However, interviewees note that not all of the collaborations can lead to cultural credibility, but that there has to be some kind of a foundation or logic followed when collaborating, as there has to be a mechanism that makes sense when deciding for collaborations. Interviewee B and C point out that a lot of collaboration were forced just so brands could gain the attention and awareness that come with them, but consumers have become well aware of what collaboration was done for financial reasons and which one has a higher cultural purpose:

“ I recently read that a lot of collaborations are honestly just a money grab and easy money. But I think the one key thing is that the brands that collaborate with each other, not, they don't even have to be similar to each other, but the collab has to be logical. The collab can't just be like, Oh, um, McDonald's and Louis Vuitton. Why would that happen? But you know, if there's like a, there has to be a click. [...] would you eat vanilla ice cream with ketchup

sauce? It's possible, but it shouldn't be done.” (Interviewee B)

“I think that a lot of collaborations in past year were forced just because collaboration was a thing because it's kind of easier to get to the other audience through like other brands and especially like some collaborations that happened so quickly, you can tell like immediately that they are forced and that's there.” (Interviewee C)

When thinking about the logic of collaborations, Interviewee E stumbled upon a thought, that some collaborations that would not make sense at first, could be perceived as a disruptive message as their confusing logic would cause people to think what actually is going on, while at the same time pointing out collaborations, that make sense due to their common cultural grounds.

“actually I was about to say that you can't have Taylor Swift as a model for Supreme, but actually there, there would be some kind of suburban subversive message and uh, that you can send out to that, that type of thing. But what I'm trying to say, you're not cultural, culturally credible if you just do a collaboration with somebody that's hard or famous or popular right now. For example, uh, with Jordan brand, it was easy. Nike and Jordan that was, that's the thing that could not go wrong. Uh, for example, if you have Adidas and Run DMC, that's it. That's something that cannot go wrong.” (Interviewee E)

In relation to collaborations, celebrity endorsements were also mentioned, as those can also be a way of collaborations that bring awareness to a specific brand. It was especially noted that when it comes to streetwear brands, appropriation of hip-hop artists and collaborations with them were noted, as Interviewee D for example states, that such alliances also contribute to cultural credibility.

“[...] streetwear brands who use certain famous hip hop artists, um, they will bring more buyers, more consumers, and more cultural credibility in that subculture.” (Interviewee D)

However, Interviewee K noted an important difference between collaborations and endorsements, where co-operation in term of not only selling but also developing the product is required from a brand or a person that is the collaborator. This brings a more personal value and contributes to the awareness that the collaboration is actually not just a PR stunt, but rather a two-way process of value exchange.

“Um, I think now, you know, collaborations is literally become the new like, what is it like everyone is just talking about collaborations. Every brand is collaborating. But if we look at like before really brands started advertising on social media, there were still so many collaborations, but we didn't call it collaborations. We called it endorsements and you know, celebrity endorsements. But I feel like now that it's called collaborations, it even has maybe a higher, even a higher value than endorsements. Because when I think of endorsements, I just think of, you know, a brand pays someone to use their products or be an ambassador of the products. But when I think of collaborations, it's when they're actually working together on not only selling the product but also maybe producing the product.” (Interviewee K)

4.3.2 How cultural credibility is fostered amongst consumers

In general, it was identified that there are four ways that consumers foster cultural credibility, which are the word of mouth, social media, thoughtful consumption and loyalty. When it comes to building cultural credibility, it is important to note that it is a two-way process where consumers also play a great role in its establishment. Interviewees E and F note, that support of the consumers is necessary in order to become culturally credible, as consumers are the ones who make a decision on what is credible or not.

“You cannot have a cultural, credible brand if you don't have, uh, the support and satisfaction of consumers.” (Interviewee E)

“[...] the people are the ones who decide what is in, what is out, what is credible, what is not.” (Interviewee F)

It is especially interesting to observe, that when it comes to streetwear, consumers play a much bigger role than when it comes to high fashion brands, where Interviewee G acknowledges that streetwear brands are very much dependent on the opinion of the consumer, whereas high fashion brands are less inclusive and have their own word in deciding what is important and what is not.

“I think, um, the consumer doesn't have that much of an impact on high fashion. I think that's, um, just a very close circle of people who decide, uh, what's good or not. And all of those brands have enough money to support themselves, no matter whether they're really popular or not. Uh, but for streetwear, I think the consumer is really important. I think, uh,

the consumers help them build a brand.” (Interviewee G)

Word of mouth have been identified as the most important aspect of fostering cultural credibility amongst consumers, as they are the ones who approve the brand and their products as well as promote them by wearing them, which was acknowledged by Interviewees E and F.

“If everybody's talking good about a product, uh, everybody will have a mindset, Oh, everybody has good reviews, good experience with this brand. Must be good. So it's, it's up there.” (Interviewee E)

“I think lots of people had, have to approve it, like wear it, or even talk about it. It's all about wearing it and talking about it.” (Interviewee F)

Importance of word of mouth has also been noted by Interviewee A, that participated as expert as word of mouth has also been considered as a jumpstart platform in many different occasions.

“People do have to start talking about it. Like did, did you see those? I mean, yeah, I grew up in the 90s and when the Air Max 90 came out, everybody was talking about it. And in the Netherlands, I don't remember that there was like any TV advertisement or anything. No. You saw the shoes in the store and from there people started talking about it. And in a way I think that's still the case.” (Interviewee A)

Interviewee F also added that especially within the hip hop culture, music plays a great role as brands are often explicitly and repeatedly mentioned either in the lyrics of the song or can be seen in the music videos.

“[...]someone mentioned it, they mentioned it through a song. Yeah. It could be word of mouth in that sense. Yeah. I don't find any other appropriate phrase for that. Uh, but, uh, what I wanted to say was that it was transmitted through some kind of, talks, you know, they were like in the shape of a song let's say, but that's why I thought of it.” (Interviewee F)

Besides that, Interviewee K expressed her thoughts on human nature, where people

need to be guided with reviews and opinions in order to get a confirmation:

“People live for confirmation, people don't like to be uncertain. So if people have the confirmation for something being good, even though it's just because you know, they know it from the whole culture around it, then people are more likely to believe whatever, um, is, you know, being portrayed or, I just think people won't necessarily do things because they've never, you know, people, people only do things when they have some sort, some sort of confirmation that it's going to be good.” (Interviewee K)

This also relates to the opinion of Interviewees J and L, who sees the importance of conversation and honest communication between consumers in order to provide a satisfactory experience and plays a factor in decision making of either a purchase or just interest in a brand.

“[...] if there's good words spreading, more people are going to buy it, but they're also going to help you spread, help and spread your story. And if you share that you're excited about a brand, you don't usually just say, Oh I'm excited about this brand. But you also kind of let the person, you try to sell the brand to the person as well and help them see what you like about it.” (Interviewee J)

“You know, like if you see someone wearing it, you, you, you are able to ask like, you know, like as a, from consumer to a user, Hey, like, you know, how does it fit? Is it a good size? Um, how do they feel? What do you think about them? You know, definitely word of mouth comes into play as well.” (Interviewee L)

Besides the traditional offline form of word of mouth, social media have become an omnipresent source of information where visuals play a great role. Online presence has been noted as an important factor on the brand side as well as consumer side, as Interviewee A mentions.

“Well, we are in the age of a visual representation, so people do make a lot of pictures, create a lot of videos, yeah. Using the brands and yet this definitely adds to it. Yeah. Also their online presence.” (Interviewee A)

Interviewee G agrees with the thought and emphasizes the reach of social media that has a broader extent than the traditional word of mouth, where every opinion counts and contributes to cultural credibility.

“If there weren't social media, you know, you would tell like something about it to your friend and your friend would maybe tell another person. And that would be like three person, three people that would know, like if you said something, but if you say it on social media, I don't know or on a platform that has 1 million followers and your comment[...] boosted [...], um, like, that's kind of a big deal.” (Interviewee G)

Interviewee A also concludes, that social media represents a new level of development of street wear as it contributed to its reach and development in the online as well as offline world which contributed to its consumption and prominence.

“If you ask me, social media took the whole thing to new level. I'm really convinced with this. If social media, uh, wasn't there, the whole street wear sneaker thing would not have been as big as it is right now.” (Interviewee A)

When it comes to consumption, buying thoughtfully is also a role of consumers in establishing cultural credibility, as they need to be aware of buying the products for the right reasons, since they need to calculate which product is really worth to be purchased in social as well as financial aspect, and be selective when they do so, as Interviewee B states:

“I think the problem that we started facing a few years ago was that people were not buying things because they believed in the brand or something. And I think now that we're getting more and more used to this, people are becoming more and more selective. So I think cultural credibility is becoming more and more relevant because people are raising their standard. This is not something brand new and only hyped anymore. This has been around for a while. So as soon as something kind of loses its hype, the quality has to come through.” (Interviewee B)

Interviewee J agrees that being critical when it comes to consumption also benefits brands as it helps them grow and develop and raises awareness.

“Well they have to be very critical. They have to, they have, they show the shouldn't buy just anything a brand sells them. They should be critical and they should push brands to come ,to the grow bigger and become more aware of things that are going on. And they should always, but then they should always also be aware of other factors. But in the essence they should bring this critical essence that makes the brand grow. And also help them grow.”

(Interviewee J)

Not supporting conspicuous consumption and focusing on values as well as supporting credibility go hand in hand and are also deemed as dream state of consumers, where research of brands is also included, especially when it comes to their transparency of production, as Interviewee L states.

“Um, the role of consumers, I guess it's, it's, it's better to be active and aware about what brands you buy it from, where their stuff gets manufactured and you know, like what type of materials they use if they do, if they like a manufacture it, like in a third world countries or in first of all countries, for example, I know it's something that's kind of like a very dream, like goal to say, because, you know, people sometimes don't really care, they just buy whatever, but I think it is good to do even the smallest research.” (Interviewee L)

Last but not least, loyalty also presents a way to cultivate cultural credibility amongst consumers and is a process that comes from a consumer's self-awareness and their interaction with brands. Loyalty can be shown in recommendations, that are also connected to word of mouth, as Interviewee B states below:

“[...] if I like the brand and I'll go shopping with a friend and they don't know what to buy, obviously rage on about how much I love this brand and like how much they need this brand and how good it is because I believe in the brand and I love their products. And then if that relationship is not there, that's not happening. And this translates to the always of how a consumer almost promotes or communicates. They're there through that the products that they buy.” (Interviewee B)

Interviewee C for example also thinks of loyalty as more than just a purchase, but more like a mindset, that is repeated also in other actions such as raising awareness of a brand and helping them build an even stronger community which results in growth, may it

be financial or as a form of recognition on a higher scale.

“Like buying is the thing that like makes profit for the brand and, um, ensure them to have enough budget to do like new clothes and stuff, but also like spreading the message and like talking about the brands and, um, raising awareness of like some brands that are maybe still a little low key or something. Um, helps brands of course, because I mean there's probably, I mean there is not a lot of people that will buy every product from one brand to kind of stay loyal to it. But like I for example, own one piece from Palace now, but I'm talking about Palace as my favorite brand for the last five years. Um, so I think that's kind of helps like just talking about it also.” (Interviewee C)

Same thought is also shared by Interviewee I, who supports the idea of loyalty as a mindset and not necessarily a transactional aspect of support, where the thought counts and awareness that can be also spread otherwise.

“So it started from, I think it was, it started from the first love. It's like falling in love with, I fell in love with Adidas in seventh grade when I got Source magazine. It's one of the, I don't know if it's still available. So it was a hip hop magazine and on the front cover there were at that time still Puff Daddy. So that was seventh grade, still in 90s. Um, he was wearing Adidas superstars, pure white, so white stripes. It's also impossible first to get Adidas Superstar in Slovenia. And second of all, it was not, it was impossible together in white. And I, I got them Austria. For me it was The Holy grail. Um, and that product kind of started building my loyalty towards Adidas. I'm not, I'm not buying Adidas anymore, but it doesn't mean I'm not loyal. Well, I bought, I bought a pair of sneakers this year in January, but it presents, it presents 2% of my sneaker collection.” (Interviewee I)

4.3.3 Future of cultural credibility

In general, possessing cultural credibility as a brand was deemed to be crucial also in the future. Interviewees agreed that cultural credibility will decide the future of fashion in different ways.

Interviewee C for example, stated that time is what needs to be put in perspective again, as in a decade or more, brands with cultural credibility will grow even more,

“I think it is because it's, this is like the, as I said that I think that cultural, cultural credibility is some kind of maximum value of the brand and the brand can only get this with

like in a long term time or something like in 10 years..” (Interviewee C)

Interviewee D added, that in a flood of brands and products, those who will stay on top will be the ones true to their image and it is important for brands to continue to stay culturally credible as this will be crucial for their future existence.

“I feel like culture, credibility will be one of the main factors for the brands to stay on top of their game and stay true to their image, their portraying and maintaining the target audience that they have. [...]Because we have options all around us. If we don't like online a certain style, we can go to another. If we don't like a certain brand, the other brand is gonna offer us what we're looking for.” (Interviewee D)

Interviewee H pointed out, that cultural credibility is already deciding the future of fashion and is not as futuristic as we make it seem, as there was not that much attention paid to its effects in the past few years, but it will definitely have an even higher influence as years go by, whereas interviewee E stated, that some brands are doing okay without being culturally credible at the moment, but in the long play, this is something that will decide their existence.

“I would think so. I think it's not only something that would decide, um, the future of fashion in, in like a couple of years, but it's something that decided the future, like the future of fashion in this past few decades. Maybe we just haven't really, um, noticed it as much because it was more involved with, um, high fashion brands and maybe just a few of streetwear brands. But I think it's definitely going to go in that way in the future.” (Interviewee H)

“I think there's a lot of streetwear brands nowadays that don't have the cultural credibility but they're doing really, really good. But I do think in the end that they, they will go out of business because they don't have it. They just don't have it, uh, I think they will have a short lifespan. I, if you ask me personally, think that's an important part of a brand.” (Interviewee E)

Besides being culturally credible, sustainability has once again been brought out as a concept, that plays a great role within cultural credibility as it also goes hand in hand with fashion and will co-decide the future that needs to be environmentally friendly in order to

even exist.

“I think that's one big aspect for sure. Um, maybe I see that a bigger aspects than that is the environmental credibility. Maybe if we put it like that.” (Interviewee G)

“Cultural credibility is narrating fashion but in its essence, fashion still has to, it's almost like something that makes a product richer and it helps you bring the product to a more, it helps you build a brand that's more relatable and reliable and more sustainable as well. Not in the sense of sustainable for the environment, but sustainable as a, as a brand. Um, because um, cultural credibility, builds this trust with an audience that keeps coming back and that keeps reaching for. So I believe that they go very hand in hand with each other and fashion. They obviously you can't have a very good credible brand, that put out bad products and you can have really good products without a story.” (Interviewee J)

In conclusion, and to answer the third sub-research question – *How is cultural credibility fostered amongst consumers?*, we note that consumers represent a second pole of the brand universe, as one could not exist without the other. Consumers foster cultural credibility on multiple levels, most explicitly this can be seen within the word of mouth, which is deemed as an offline activity where consumers support the brand by recommending it to other consumers. Social media also play a big role within the contemporary society, as they present an omnipresent source of information and an online platform where the opinions are shared and consequentially the fate of every brand can be decided by opinions and that consumers put up, which can also inspire brands to the point that they develop new products because of the received feedback (Wolny & Mueller, 2013). Besides, thoughtful consumption of products also builds up cultural credibility amongst consumers, as it differentiates between consumption worthy and unworthy products that also correlate to the values of the consumers and are related to the quality of an actual product, which is also seen in disapproval of fast fashion and conscious purchases that contribute to the wellbeing of environment as well. Loyalty is one of the key factors in customer value creation process (Tournois, 2015) and also plays a significant role in adopting cultural credibility, since it can be seen in the support of brands which is seen through monetary lenses as an act of consumption or in support that is then manifested as positive word of mouth or recommendation and helps build awareness of a brand and strengthens its image and reputation in the eyes of other consumers.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Theoretical implications

Within this constant emphasis on the role of cultural credibility and its connection to Creative Industries and Social Sciences in general, it is essential for future studies to proceed with examination of cultural credibility and come up with additional insights and supplemental knowledge into the processes of creating as well as establishing cultural credibility within different fields of Creative Industries. As contemporary society becoming more and more conscious and aware of their consumption and its effects, it is necessary to proceed with gathering and improving the knowledge plus furtherly exploring this social phenomenon as an omnipresent concept related to brand as well as consumer behavior.

Firstly, this research adds value to understanding of brand image and reputation within the field of fashion. The study presents a new aspect to look at in order to understand the ways fashion brands are being perceived in the eyes of consumers and how that influences their decision making as well as consumption habits. In general, the research enriches the Consumer Culture Theory, developed by Arnould and Thompson (2005), where symbolic meanings and consumer's behavior are connected to the marketplace (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). The research also complements the existing research on corporate branding by Einwiller and Will (2002) by offering a new perspective on creation of positive image and reputation in the eyes of stakeholders, as well as supplements the Vision-Culture-Image model by Hatch and Schultz (2001) and offers a new insight into the perception of corporate brand's symbols and communication, that Balmer (2001), van Riel and Balmer (1997) explored, while also including the impact of organizational culture (Baker & Balmer, 1997) and perceptions of ideal ways on how organizations would like to be seen in the eyes of consumers by Rosson and Brooks (2004), while also keeping in mind the aspect of values and storytelling that Aaker and Jochimstahler (2012) explored as part of brand's identity. The notion of cultural credibility puts consumers into a more active role, while allowing a thought of brand's ecosystem being co-created by their stakeholders who also contribute to its image and reputation as active participants rather than just shoppers. The thought of consumers taking an active role rather than just being silent observers is a recent phenomenon that has exponentially developed in the last two decades and is something that should be explored furtherly in order to provide new knowledge and insights into the consumer culture and monetarization of culture through products.

Secondly, this research provides a first working definition of cultural credibility, which has not been properly researched and consequentially coined beforehand. In this study we have established the following working definition that can serve as a platform to build additional knowledge upon:

Cultural credibility represents a holistic approach to understanding the social impact on a brand's image and reputation and is consisted of multiple factors that influence its maintenance. The factors that contribute to building cultural credibility are brand's image in the eyes of consumers, which is linked to the core values that brand stands for and its ability to create with an impact that goes beyond monetarization, establishment of community where the role of a brand transcends the costumer-salesperson relationship and includes elements that contribute to build a sustainable future that is transparent in terms of production as well as labor force. Trust and authenticity are built through transparent production of quality items where quality excuses the potential higher price of the product as it includes environmentally friendly production and limited releases that do not harm the ecosystem. Las but not least, cultural credibility can also be built through collaborations with either brands or individuals that share the same values and want to make the same positive impact.

The lack of theory on cultural credibility was initially problematic for creating a framework for its definition and is therefore still in the development phase, as it is perceived as a new phenomenon. The definition of cultural credibility would benefit the already existing theories on both – brands, as it would enrich the understanding of reputation in corporate branding, and consumers as it relates to Consumer Culture Theory. This implies that further exploration of its establishment as well as adaptation is needed in order to provide a better and more insightful overview of the impact of cultural credibility in the contemporary society.

5.2 Managerial implications

Within this research, multiple practical implications can be evoked in regard to fostering cultural credibility and its establishment. As it is important for fashion brands as well as other brands to have an intact reputation that helps them grow awareness as well as contribute monetarily, it is necessary for them to be aware of cultural credibility as a factor of their success in the future, as well as in present. The following suggestions explain practical and managerial implications that could present fashion brands with guidelines as

well as reflective ideas on how to move towards creating and harnessing cultural credibility.

Firstly, it is important to reconsider the role of consumers and think of establishing stronger, long-term ties with them, that go beyond the classical customer-salesperson relationship. In order to understand consumer's wants and needs, it is essential to research the social context where a product is more than just an object, but rather has a practical value and serves as a solution to a specific problem. It is necessary to understand that in order to stand out from the flood of competitors, brands need to offer more than just a good product that serves a simple purpose of either being worn or displayed. Offering objects that are made of high quality materials is mandatory, but at the same time, it is not the only thing that matters to consumers. It is crucial to aim for the long-term development of a brand's ecosystem and act accordingly, also in terms of strategies and planning. As much as short term victories present an opportunity to celebrate, they should not create limits and prevent the brands from taking a step further. Going fully sustainable might sound futuristic, but it presents a necessary value in which consumers are willing to invest. Being transparent about the origin of ingredients and having a traceable supply chain raises trust in consumers as they have a feeling that they are a part of the process and can track down the necessary information. Aiming to go sustainable and trying to engage the consumers to be a part of healthy initiatives is what strengthens the brand's core and raises the reputation of a brand on a below average level of favorability.

Secondly, core values of a brand and its storytelling matter. We live in an era, where the contemporary society relates with objects and social situations more than ever. This is why every brand needs to offer something beyond just a good and reliable product. Having a story to tell and a platform that shares brand's opinions and stance matter in the offline as well as online world. Social media have become crucial for a brand's existence, especially from what we witnessed during the Covid-19 crisis, where any kind of physical contact was impossible. As we live in turbulent and unpredictable times, creating a stable digital platform to communicate is more than crucial, also due to its reach that can go beyond traditional kinds of offline communication. However, it is important to note, that every word and every click matter in the online world. As many as there are opportunities to build up the awareness, it is essential to remember that there is also as many opportunities to bury a brand online, as 21st century is known for its "cancel culture" where reputations of many brands have already been ruined online. Staying authentic and supportive even in the hardest

of times and offering followers more than just a platform to shop is essential in order to build cultural credibility. This means that social media should not only be used in order to promote the brand's products but also to build a platform for consumers, for their voices to be heard and to offer support to those who need it, may those be people who have been stuck in unfortunate situations such as refugees, environmental activists who try to make a sustainable future or even young creatives who are struggling to show their talent due to lack of resources. Lending a hand can also be in a form of a collaboration, where yet unknown talents gain a medium to grow, alongside with the brand itself. Sharing is caring, and this also applies to brands as they are the ones who have the power to make this world a better place.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has been performed with a goal to examine how cultural credibility is being built and what is the connection between streetwear brands and status symbols. With a purpose to examine this social phenomenon, a main research question was formulated, that asked what factors contribute to building cultural credibility and making streetwear brands a status symbol. In order to address the depth of the concept of cultural credibility, three additional sub-research questions were created that explored the connection between streetwear and luxury-like approach, factors that turn a product in status symbol and the ways cultural credibility is fostered amongst the consumer. To answer those questions, a qualitative approach manifested within in-depth interviews with ten consumers and two experts took place between March and May 2020. A purposive sample of participants of multiple social demographics was chosen, where six participants identified themselves as females and six participants identified as males. This study provided an opportunity to discover the meaning of cultural credibility within the field of fashion and delve into the factors that contribute to its existence, while also discovering the meaning of New Luxury and explaining the contemporary status symbols. Firstly, the data have shown, that there is a correlation between approach in communications and positioning between contemporary luxury brands and streetwear brands, where at first, streetwear brands have been using a luxury-like approach but with time, the tables have turned and there seems to be a symbiosis when it comes to management of both. Secondly, connection between streetwear brands and status symbols have been found, where a shift has happened in the perception of consumers that started to perceive streetwear products as status symbols as well. And thirdly, a working definition of cultural credibility have been coined, which can also serve in the further research of this topic. Moreover, factors of cultural credibility have been identified and role of consumers in fostering cultural credibility has been thoroughly explained. While taking the current lack of research into account, it can be argued that this study added significant value to the cultural credibility theory and its development within the Creative Industries as well as Social Sciences as it presented a pioneering approach of contemporary perception of corporate brands, while also touching the topic of monetarization of culture, which provided further suggestions on how to develop these theories and provide new knowledge on topics of corporate branding, brand reputation and brand image, where consumers play an active role in its formation.

In general, a conclusion can be made that consumers have a much higher impact on brand's image or reputation than it was previously discovered. In the previous research, consumers are seen as actively involved when selecting the products they engage with also based on their quality and aesthetic experience (De Klerk & Lubbe, 2008; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000), which contribute to the perception of the brand by consumers, but are not treated as co-creators of it. Co-creation of brands by consumers is also strongly connected to attributes that the brands present and communicate as their values and story, as they are consequentially seen as more sincere and authentic (Van Dijk, Antonides, & Schillewaert, 2014). Previous research has also shown, that co-creation by consumers is also seen in higher levels of trust, positive word of mouth and a stronger brand image (Füller, 2010). Brands can achieve cultural credibility by doing more than simply producing a quality product, but rather build a story and community around it and engage in activities that go beyond just sale, while keeping in mind that authenticity and transparency are highly appreciated and that sustainability has become a core value of contemporary consumers. Collaborating with young creatives and other brands in order to make an even bigger positive impact is highly welcome, as they contribute to creating a story and bring more awareness to all included parties. However, further research of cultural credibility is highly recommended as theoretical concepts are not yet developed and there are still many possibilities to furtherly expand the examination of this phenomenon.

6.1 Limitations of the study

Fundamentally, this research was directed to analyze the data in a form of thematic analysis and methodical identification of patterns and themes, but there have been some limits in terms of developing a theory even though it had an inductive approach (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

Firstly, for the purpose of understanding the phenomenon cultural credibility, own working theory had to be developed from the dataset while also taking into consideration already existing concepts related to reputation and image of corporate branding. The gathered data provided enough information to form a working theory, however it has been a challenge to properly form the definition in order to keep it as brief and informative as possible.

Secondly, one of the limitations was also seen in the scope of participants that were interviewed as experts. As the interviews were in majority done during the covid-19 crisis, it was not easy to gather a lot of experts who initially agreed to participate, but were later

concerned with other issues that is why the emphasis was on the consumer perspective, but also provided some brief insights from experts, which quite matched the views of consumers and served as a supplement rather than own entity in terms of aspects.

Thirdly, majority of the interviews have been conducted through online video-conferencing platforms, also due to covid-19 measurements, which did not allow for the interviews to be performed in person, where the interviewees would be less pressured. Due to the fact, that the majority of the interviews was performed online, it was harder to keep the focus on all of the social cues that would otherwise be visible in real life and the transcription process has also been a bit harder, as the internet connection sometimes wasn't completely stable and some of the questions needed to be repeated. However in order to lessen the pressure, interviewees received probes and topic lists in advance, so that they could go through the questions in peace which also gave them more time to delve into the topic. However, despite the stated limitations, this study provides valuable comprehension of cultural credibility as well as guidelines for future research of the topic.

6.2 Possibilities for further research

Guidelines and suggestions on future research are concerned with extension of the research and depth of the information for providing an even more comprehensive understanding. It is strongly recommended that future research provides a clear description on cultural credibility which could be at used for all of the areas that Creative Industries involve. This would benefit the deeper understanding of this contemporary phenomenon and would enrich the academic research as well as business practices. The current research only covers cultural credibility in the field of fashion, but it would certainly be interesting to see its development in media and advertising sectors, as well as literature and arts. The goal could be to create a unified definition with possible sub-definitions or remarks that could refer to each of the fields. Creating a comprehensive framework of the concept of cultural credibility would benefit towards a greater understanding of consumer behavior in terms of consumption as well as decision making processes.

Secondly, as we live in the digital age, it would make sense to look into social media and their representation of corporate brands and analyze the reactions of consumers on brand messages in order to gain insights into their perception and online behavior when it comes to engaging with corporate brands, from whichever area of Creative Industries. As online engagement is also one of the ways that brands are presenting themselves, especially in these post-covid-19 times, where we learnt and felt the importance of digital connectivity and

were engaged in disengaged times, it would be wise to delve into the consumer culture online and explore cultural credibility inside the digital world and see how it matches or differs from the offline actions that consumers take in order to foster cultural credibility.

Lastly, another suggestion would be to expand the research of cultural credibility and look into monetarization of popular culture, which is what cultural credibility is concerned with. While classic definitions and research on reputation as well as brand's image are concerned with mostly brand's point of view, the idea of cultural credibility acknowledges the role of consumers as co-creators of brand's success in terms of its image and reputation as well as monetary income, and thus emphasizes the social context that is being sold besides the product itself. As cultural credibility seems like a holistic approach to look at corporate brand's reputation from the side of consumers, it would be necessary to furtherly develop how brands monetarize the popular culture in order to build their own identity and use it in order to provide a social context for their brand's ecosystem. This provides a novel point of view in terms of research, as monetarization of popular culture has not yet been explored and could be applied to multiple areas within the Creative Industries, fashion included. It is important to note the integration of different fields of social sciences that co-create the contemporary society on a theoretical as well as practical level. Researching this phenomenon would provide beneficial knowledge on cultural credibility as well and serve as the extensive study that would gain even deeper insight into the factors that contribute to building cultural credibility.

In conclusion, this study provided an insight into the concepts of cultural credibility and status symbols in terms of streetwear brands and thus suggests that future studies and research in Creative Industries as well as popular culture are taken into consideration.

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8 APPENDICES

Appendix A - List of potential interview questions for consumers

Behavioral questions

1. What was your latest fashion-related purchase?
 - What do you like about this brand?
 - Was it made online or offline?
2. Where does your interest in fashion come from?
 - How long have you been interested in the fashion?
 - Would you characterize yourself as highly involved in the fashion industry?
3. Is there a difference for you between your interest and involvement in fashion online and offline?
4. For how long have you been using social media to follow brands?
 - What is your favourite fashion brand on this platform and why?
 - Which fashion brands do you follow on your favorite platform?
 - What do you expect from your favorite fashion brand on your favorite platform?
5. Have you followed fashion brands already before social media?
 - In what ways?
 - Why?
6. Why would you say it is important for a brand to establish its online presence?
 - Do you perceive the brand as more tangible and touchable because of its presence online?
 - Do you rather feel more connected to the brand by seeing it online?
7. Why would you say is it important for a brand to establish its online presence?
8. Could you describe the role of social media platforms on communication of brands?

Streetwear and luxury brands questions:

9. Did you notice any shifts in the fashion industry within the last decade?
 - What were the biggest shifts in your opinion?
10. How would you describe a luxury brand?
 - What does in your opinion make a brand a luxury brand?
11. Do you see luxury brands as status symbols?
 - How would you describe a status symbol in your own words?

- What do you think about the reputation of streetwear brands?
- 12. Do you think that today's streetwear brands should be perceived as status symbols?
 - In what ways?
- 13. Would you say that street wear brands nowadays are following a luxury like approach?
 - In what ways can that be seen?
 - Can you give some examples?
- 14. Why do you think this is happening?
- 15. Would you say that you consume more luxury or streetwear brands?
 - What's the reason behind it?

Cultural credibility and future of fashion questions:

- 16. How is your relationship with a fashion brand built?
 - What influences it?
 - Is this related to its image on social media?
 - Are there any values that a brand has to manifest in order for you to engage with it?
- 17. What exactly adds value to your favorability of a brand?
 - How does this perception online differ to offline?
 - (if so) how does the experience factor differ online?
- 18. What makes you trust a brand?
- 19. How would you describe cultural credibility in your own words?
- 20. What makes a brand culturally credible?
 - How do brands ensure that they stay culturally credible?
 - Are collaborations a way to do that?
- 21. What is the role of consumers in cultural credibility?
 - How do they contribute to it?
 - In what ways is it fostered amongst them?
- 22. Do you think trust of the consumers is related to cultural credibility of a brand?
- 23. How do brands build loyalty amongst their consumers?
 - Would you say that brand's image plays a role in it?
- 24. What would you say makes a brand authentic?
 - How do you think brands build authenticity?
- 25. Do you think that cultural credibility is something that will decide the future of

fashion?

26. What do you think is the future of streetwear and luxury brands?

Appendix B - List of potential interview questions for brand representatives

1. Would you characterize yourself as highly involved in the fashion industry?
 - What does fashion mean to you?
2. What is your current job position?
3. Where does your interest in fashion come from?
 - How long have you been interested in the field of fashion?
4. Is there a difference for you between your interest and involvement in fashion online and offline?
5. For how long have you been using social media to communicate your brand?
 - What is your favourite platform and why?
 - What do you think consumers expect from your platforms ?
6. Have you followed fashion brands already before social media?
 - In what ways?
 - Why?
7. Do you perceive the brand as more tangible and touchable because of its presence online?
 - Do you rather feel more connected to the brand's universe by seeing it online?
 - Does the omnipresence of the brand on social media influence your relationship on a daily basis?
8. Why would you say is it important for a brand to establish its online presence?
9. Could you describe the role of social media platforms on communication of brands?

Streetwear and luxury brands questions:

10. Did you notice any shifts in the fashion industry within the last decade?
 - What were the biggest shifts in your opinion?
 - Did that also affect the brand you work for?
11. How would you describe a luxury brand?
 - What does in your opinion make a brand a luxury brand?
12. Do you perceive luxury brands as status symbols?
 - How would you describe a status symbol in your own words?

13. In contrast to luxury brands, what do you think about the reputation of streetwear brands?
14. Do you think that today's streetwear brands should be perceived as status symbols?
 - In what ways?
15. Would you say that street wear brands nowadays are following a luxury like approach?
 - In what ways can that be seen?
 - Can you give some examples?
 - Why do you think this is happening?

Cultural credibility and future of fashion questions:

16. How is your relationship with a fashion brand built?
17. What does cultural credibility stand for when it comes to a brand?
 - How does your brand build relationships with consumers?
18. How would you describe cultural credibility in your own words?
19. What makes a brand culturally credible?
 - How do brands ensure that they stay culturally credible?
 - Are collaborations a way to do that?
20. What is the role of consumers in cultural credibility?
 - How do they contribute to it?
 - In what ways is it fostered amongst them?
21. Do you think trust of the consumers is related to cultural credibility of a brand?
22. How do brands build loyalty amongst their consumers?
 - Would you say that brand's image plays a role in it?
23. What would you say makes a brand authentic?
 - How do you think brands build authenticity?
24. Do you think that cultural credibility is something that will decide the future of fashion?
25. What do you think is the future of streetwear and luxury brands?

Appendix C - Consent request for participating in research

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Pia Kraševc, 539603pk@student.eur.nl, +386 30 657 287

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research **The Cult of the Line: How streetwear products became status symbols** -A qualitative research examining the value of cultural credibility for enhancing reputation of streetwear brands . The purpose of the study is to understand *What factors contribute to building cultural credibility and making streetwear brand a status symbol?*

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, the questions of the interview will be related to your involvement in fashion industry, your perception of luxury and streetwear products and how you see cultural credibility when it comes to fashion goods.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will use a tape recorder for the interview in order to be able to create a transcript afterwards.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. Yet, you are free to decide whether I should use your name or other identifying information, such as brand names or situations the study. If you prefer, I will make sure that you cannot be identified by creating pseudonyms and remove personal data such as age and gender. I will not keep any information that may lead to the identification of those involved in the study. I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – Pia Kraševac, who will carry out this research, either via 539603pk@student.eur.nl or by calling +38630657287.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you do not need to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be audiotaped during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.

Appendix D – Overview of interviewees

Interviewee' codename	Origin	Age and gender	Background	Type of interview
Interviewee A	Dutch, lives in the Netherlands	45, male	Brand manager	Face-to-face
Interviewee B	Slovenian, lives in the Netherlands	21, male	Consumer	FaceTime
Interviewee C	Slovenian, lives in Slovenia	21, female	Consumer	Zoom
Interviewee D	Slovenian, lives in the UK	25, female	Consumer	Skype
Interviewee E	Croatian, lives in Croatia	33, male	Consumer	Skype
Interviewee F	Slovenian, lives in Slovenia	31, female	Consumer	FaceTime
Interviewee G	Slovenian, lives in Sweden	33, female	Consumer	Google Meet
Interviewee H	Slovenian, lives in Poland	26, female	Consumer	Face-to-face
Interviewee I	Slovenian, lives in Slovenia	37, male	Consumer	Face-to-face
Interviewee J	Dutch, lives in the UK	32, male	Brand manager	FaceTime
Interviewee K	Swiss, lives in the Netherlands	23, female	Consumer	Face-to-face
Interviewee L	Mexican, lives in the Netherlands	22, male	Consumer	FaceTime