

The Construction of Masculinities in the Fashion Industry
A Qualitative Analysis of European and Chinese Brands

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Abstract

The growing participation of men in activities stereotypically associated with women and femininity has been testified over the years by both statistical and qualitative studies in the field of gender studies. Specifically, fashion brands are increasingly opening towards the menswear market, which is consequently targeted through advertising images that, thanks to the socializing power of the media, are able to build and adapt specific constructions of masculinities based on brand identity, target customer segment, and cultural context. Furthermore, views on gender and gender roles are undergoing continuous societal shifts and reconceptualisations, especially in light of globalisation processes and increasing public awareness. In order to address the relevance of the topic and the gap caused by a scarcity of literature on masculinities and social media fashion advertising, this study aimed to shed light onto contemporary masculinity constructions in the fashion industry by formulating the following research question: “How are masculinities constructed by European and Chinese high-end fashion brands on Instagram?” A thematic analysis of 160 still Instagram posts by two European and two Chinese high-end fashion brands – respectively, Salvatore Ferragamo and Balmain, and Atelier Rouge Pékin and Fabric Porn – was conducted to answer the main question, following an intersectional approach between gender roles and social class. Relative results show a prevalence of four recurrent themes, which were observed in both European and Chinese brands. The themes were categorised as: “Models’ appearance”, “Predominance, independence, and authority”, “Emotional distance”, and “(De)contextualisation”. In general, findings indicated the presence of different physical and behavioural characteristics common to male models represented in the Instagram posts of the four brands, which could confirm a probable influence on a socio-cultural level between the two areas considered for this study. Moreover, a construction of masculinity that detaches itself from hegemonic criteria was identified in posts by both European and Chinese brands, while differences were highlighted when intersecting gender roles and social class, whereby European brands seemed to be more connected to an elitist tradition despite their progressive approach to lower- and middle-class consumers.

KEYWORDS: *masculinities, gender roles, social media, advertising, fashion*

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, the stereotypical association of fashion and beauty products with femininity (McNeill & Douglas, 2011) has sensibly evolved to progressively include different and diverse men and masculinities. Reasons therefrom can be traced back to significant shifts in societies' conceptualisations of masculinities due to political, economic, and socio-cultural shifts, and particularly to the rise of consumer capitalism, whereby profit is created by encouraging and thriving off individuals' insecurities and consumer choices, in order to offer the product or service able to provide them with the correct answer. (Alexander, 2003; McNeill & Douglas, 2011). The phenomenon of "branded masculinity" derived from such a consumeristic standpoint creates in men a commodified view of masculinity, which can thus be attained by purchasing or following certain products, styles, and looks (Alexander, 2003). Following this line of reasoning, the creation and performance of gender identities can also be attained by acquiring specific relevant or renowned products, thus exposing a critical facet of contemporary masculine constructions which seems strategically designed by companies to maximise profits (Alexander, 2003). The recently gained relevance of matters of appearance to men and the increasing target towards male individuals are to be viewed as two events or factors mutually reinforcing each other. In fact, as looks gained relevance within the male sphere, beauty and fashion brands started to increasingly target men (Del Saz-Rubio, 2019; Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019); it is also true, however, that broader inclusion of men in the fields of fashion and beauty by advertising led to a greater male interest towards said industries. Indeed, the global menswear market size was valued at USD 580.16 billion in 2021, while in 2018, it was valued at USD 483 billion (Statista, 2022). The current value is expected to rise to USD 740.76 billion by 2025, forecasting an increase in fashion consumption among millennial men mainly fostered by higher exposure to e-commerce stores and other online distribution channels (Grand View Research, 2019) such as Zalando, ASOS, and VIP Shop, which figured as leading fashion e-commerce platforms worldwide in 2021 (Statista, 2021c). Despite men being such a profitable target customer segment, beauty and fashion advertising have struggled to appeal to men, as they must face the historically feminine connotations and stereotypes of particularly the beauty market (Hermans, 2021; MacKinnon, 2003).

Research identified advertising as a powerful means to reflect and define societal values and expectations of individuals' behaviours and appearances (Connell, 2005; McNeill & Douglas, 2011). For instance, it has been shown how grooming advertising tends to give a

white, heterosexual, and muscular representation of men, thus determining a clear standard for them to follow. In contrast, portrayals that deviate from these standards are to be excluded and avoided, as they do not embody what is considered socially acceptable and predominant (Waling et al., 2018). It is therefore legitimised the interest of academia in studying the representation of masculinities in advertising and how said representations affect individuals' perceptions of the self and others (McNeill & Douglas, 2011). For instance, several studies have investigated constructions of masculinities in fashion and grooming advertising commercials and magazines (Shaw & Tan, 2014; Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019; Waling et al., 2018). Further studies drew attention to purchase intention and consumption to understand men's fashion interests (Barry, 2015; Holt & Thompson, 2004). However, there is a scarcity of literature on fashion brands' social media advertising, especially on Instagram, even though this platform provides a valuable contemporary marketing resource for brands (Dwivedi et al., 2015; Huey & Yazdanifard, 2014). Indeed, there exist little research on gender roles representation on social media (Jiang et al., 2020), despite the presence of numerous social networking sites (SNS) and personal blogs which have the potential to reach vast audiences and disrupt "the limited depictions of femininity and masculinity that scholars have argued are endemic to fashion magazines" (Draper & McDonnell, 2017, p. 646). Moreover, the constant shifts in the understanding of masculinities and changing societal roles of individuals add relevance to the research. Indeed, as current male roles in society are increasingly diverging from traditional hegemonic conceptualisations such as the breadwinner (Eisend, 2019), there is a need to investigate how advertising adapts to the representation of male roles within society. Research has already shown how individuals often feel the need to relate with brands to construct a specific image of themselves (Bourdieu, 1984); specifically, fashion is utilised as a means to communicate the self (Evans, 1989), which reinforces the role of advertising as a mould for societal values and appearances via the communication of particular conceptualisations (Pollay, 1986, 1987). Additionally, as previously discussed, masculinities have become a commodity that can be branded, exported, and consumed worldwide especially thanks to globalisation, enabling easy interactions among individuals and countries (Darling-Wolf, 2004). Given how cultural trends greatly influence each other, to assess said socio-cultural influences on gender role portrayals it was deemed necessary and useful to perform a cross-cultural analysis to understand how diverse types of masculinity are constructed in diverse cultural environments. In fact, masculinity constructions differ among societies and cultures (Fischer & Good, 1998).

In order to address the aforementioned relevance and gap of masculinities studies, this research aimed to address the narratives utilised by fashion brands in visually constructing masculinities by formulating the following research question: “How are masculinities constructed by European and Chinese high-end fashion brands on Instagram?” The geographical areas of Europe and China were chosen considering their prominent historical, societal, and cultural differences such as religion, philosophy, and politics, which determine important discrepancies in the conceptualisation of gender identities that will be discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. On the other hand, the frequent political and economic relations resulting from and fostering globalisation between the “East” and the “West” in general and between China and Europe in particular (European Commission, 2017) represent a valid point to justify such comparison. It is necessary to specify that Europe as a continent was chosen for the analysis to address the otherwise unbalanced geographic and demographic size of the two areas. This study thus delved into the cross-cultural comparison of masculinity constructions in Europe and China by exploring Instagram advertising content of two European high-end fashion brands, Balmain and Salvatore Ferragamo, and two Chinese high-end fashion brands, Atelier Rouge Pékin and Fabric Porn. In investigating constructions of masculinities, the research focused on the representation of – particularly male – gender roles, which relate mainly to the behaviours men are more likely to engage in (Fischer & Anderson, 2012). Furthermore, by focusing on high-end brands, an intersectional approach between masculinities and class could be provided to acknowledge the composite nature of gender identities, which indeed need to be analysed considering multiple socio-cultural aspects, such as social class (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

1.1. Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into four chapters, namely a Theoretical Framework, a Methodology, a Results and Discussion chapter, and a Conclusion and Limitations chapter. The following paragraphs will provide a brief overview of each chapter.

This study will start with a discussion of relevant literature on masculinities studies, included in the Theoretical Framework. Furthermore, concepts and terms linked to sexual and gender identities and different conceptualisations of masculinities will be defined. In addition, past and current representations of men and masculinities in advertising will be discussed in light of the research question.

Successively, the Methodology chapter will detail the dataset and sampling method utilised for the study and the operationalisation of sensitising concepts. A sub-section will also include an explanation of the research method, namely thematic analysis, by explaining the motives behind this choice and providing a detailed step-by-step description of the method.

The third chapter Results and Discussion will offer a presentation and discussion of the findings by connecting them to their theoretical and societal context. The analysis yielded a total of four themes: “Models’ appearance”, “Predominance, authority, and independence”, “Emotional distance”, and “(De)contextualisation”, which will be explored in relation to European and Chinese constructions. Related sub-themes will also be included within the discussion, when applicable.

Finally, the Conclusion and Limitations chapter will summarise and conclude the thesis.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter addresses extant literature related to the construction of masculinities in advertising to analyse European and Chinese constructions of masculinities in social media advertisements. Within the first section of this chapter, key terminology on the topic of gender and clarification on the term gender roles is provided and discussed, also considering the role of media in contributing to their construction. Successively, a dedicated section reviews different sociological conceptualisations of masculinity, such as hegemonic masculinity, hypermasculinity, metrosexuality and laddism, and provides an overview of the understanding of masculinities within the “Western” and “Eastern” cultural environments. Here, the portrayal of masculinities in advertising is investigated to analyse prior research and provide a framework for the current study. Lastly, relevant insights into fashion advertising and masculinities are discussed.

Considering the cross-cultural approach of the research question, it is important to introduce how masculinities are understood across cultural environments outside of “the West” – particularly in China – as that is where the majority of research on masculinities and their constructions focuses. Indeed, it is essential to note that hegemonic masculinity, hypermasculinity, metrosexuality and laddism are typically “Western” conceptualisations, meaning derived from European and North American contexts (Appiah, 2016). However, the notion of “Western” is to be understood with a critical lens, due to its intrinsic generalisation of diverse cultures while implying the superiority of “the West” over the rest of the countries (Hall, 1992). Such is thus the connotation implied by the present study when discussing “the West” or “Western” topics, meaning they were used to indicate European and North American countries. This was done to maintain continuity among this study and part of the literature analysed herein.

2.1. Sex, Gender, and Gender Roles

In order to explore the diverse facets of masculinity, it is first useful to understand the difference between sex and gender. Sex refers to the generally binary biological categorisation of an individual into maleness or femaleness, meaning the differences in the genetics and sexual characteristics between men and women (e.g., the presence of either two X chromosomes or an X and a Y chromosome) (Wienclaw, 2011). Gender is instead defined as a social construct that reflects socio-cultural expectations usually included between the binary of femininity and masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Lips, 2020). Wharton

(2011) identifies gender as being constructed through social interactions and strictly dependent on social contexts, thereby relating the concept of gender to the performance of certain behaviours, choices, norms, and values that one society associates with being a man or a woman (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It is indeed crucial to note that gender is mainly understood as a spectrum, where individuals may or may not identify inside the female-male binary (Rivas, 2015, as cited in Lips, 2020). Despite the general assumption that masculinities are solely represented by men and femininities by women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), these notions are also to be considered unrelated to sex, as both men and women can enact masculine or feminine behaviours (Risman, 2018). West and Zimmerman (1987) highlight the necessary distinction between sex and gender, where the latter should be understood as socially constructed identities that individuals constantly exercise within a society. According to this viewpoint, society, not biology, determines what is feminine and what is masculine. In this sense, scholars identified masculinities as a social construct of “masculine” behaviours and personality traits rather than as male sex or a natural biological state (Connell, 2005; Risman, 2018). The essence of masculinities indicates that there is no single reality or definition and that masculinities are contextually contingent (Anderson & Magrath, 2010). As a result, masculinities are constructed differently among societies, cultures, and periods.

It is true, however, that current terminology does not always reflect the discrepancies between sex and gender. According to widespread belief, gender is indeed intrinsically tied to sex, which serves as the foundation for the gender categorisation into the binary of male and female. These two groups are formed based on their respective reproductive function, resulting in a biological distinction viewed as natural. West and Fenstermaker (1995) coined the term “biological determinism” to indicate this perspective. Biological determinism has influenced a plethora of “Western” dominant ideologies, values, and norms (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). However, this biological perspective does not consider the effect of cultural differences on gender (West & Zimmermann, 1987).

With such knowledge in mind, it is useful to now explore what is meant by gender roles, as this defines the focus of the present study. Given the previous definition of gender as a cluster of behaviours, traits and beliefs greatly influenced by socio-cultural interaction, gender roles can be described as the socially constructed functions and positions derived therefrom, which consequently shape individuals’ perceptions about themselves and others and their respective role within society (Deux & Lewis, 1984; Goffman, 1979). More

specifically, among their different definitions, gender roles can be described as the behaviours and occupations one gender is more expected to engage in (Fischer & Anderson, 2012). Gender roles and gender stereotypes are two terms commonly used as synonyms to describe the same notion, namely the association of specific attributes to men and women, masculinity and femininity (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981), and that will also be implied interchangeably within this research. Each of these attributes bears, in fact, two counterparts that are more easily related to either masculine or feminine behaviour and are often differentiated by scholars into trait descriptors, physical characteristics, role behaviours, and occupational statuses (Deaux and Lewis, 1984).

Wienclaw (2011) identifies three main determinants of gender roles, namely biology, culture, and society. The biological differences between male and female influence gender – and consequently gender roles – by assigning certain functions or occupations to males rather than females and vice versa, thereby facilitating the assumption that men and women must occupy specific positions in a society (e.g., women as housewives and nurturers due to their reproductive role and men as rulers and providers due to their relative size and strength, which are indeed categorisations based on biological factors). However, biology has only a small influence on gender roles, as the latter are witnessed to reflect differences and changes over time and cultures; Witt (1997) confirms this perspective by illustrating how norms and beliefs of one culture come to shape gender roles expectations within that same culture, thus limiting the extent to which biological factors impact on gender roles. Moreover, socialisation is regarded as another paramount determinant of gender roles, whereby “individuals learn to differentiate between what the society regards as acceptable versus unacceptable behaviour.” (Wienclaw, 2011, p. 112) According to Miller et al. (2009) and Wienclaw (2011), the effects of socialisation begin during infancy, as children are almost immediately confronted with societal patterns and value systems about the sorts of attitudes and appearances each gender is supposed to portray. Indeed, in their research, they discovered how when describing girls, children mentioned physical stereotypes such as wearing dresses, skirts, make-up, or having long hair, whereas when describing boys, activity and trait stereotypes such as practising sports, fighting, or being rough were more readily mentioned (Miller et al., 2009). This relates to the socialisation process as boys and girls are introduced from a young age – particularly by family and school – to different value systems, which shape their different approaches, behaviours, and mindsets (Wienclaw, 2011).

2.2. The Media and Gender Portrayals

In line with previous insights, one dominant approach to the development of sexuality is the social constructionist perspective, which has been widely discussed among academics (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Despite not rejecting biological factors as determinants of sexuality, the social constructionist perspective also considers the effect of socio-cultural influences and personal attributes (Baber & Murray, 2001; Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). DeLamater and Hyde (1998) suggest that language plays an essential part in defining and interpreting the connotations attributed to sexuality, thereby giving space to public discourse in constructing social reality (Brennen, 2021; Flick, 2007). Within this context, the media has a considerable impact on the creation of public discourse, as it adds to the construction of sexual identities by giving specific interpretations to identities that are consequently transmitted to the public, thus altering perceptions of individuals' self- and public image (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015).

Given the socialising role of the media and particularly of advertising, it is clear how it perpetuates gender roles within society (Eisend 2010; Gentry & Harrison 2010). Primarily, the very purpose of advertising is to influence consumer behaviour by offering product information (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). However, advertising also serves as an embodiment of societal values and expectations, which is illustrated by the “mirror” and the “mould” argument put forward by Holbrook (1987) and Pollay (1986, 1987) respectively. According to the “mirror” theory, advertisements reflect elements that already exist in society and may even be predominant in a social environment (Eisend, 2009; Holbrook, 1987); thus, the representation of gender roles in advertising mirrors the socio-cultural assumptions and expectations about gender, and advertisers have thus the need to adapt to changes in the socio-cultural environment (Eisend, 2009). The “mould” theory instead posits how advertisements can shape values, attitudes, and beliefs (Pollay, 1986, 1987). The underlying assumption is that behaviours and beliefs change in response to media exposure, which consequently translates into gender roles being moulded and reinforced within one society by their representation in advertising, therefore highlighting how transformative power lies within advertising (Eisend, 2009; Ganahl et al., 2003). Research confirms the role of media in shaping individuals' understanding of sexuality by affecting physical appearance and gender role expectations (e.g., Grabe et al., 2008; Gentry & Harrison, 2010).

Building on the “mould” theory, advertising further contributes to the construction of gender roles by helping – or undermining – individuals in developing their self-concept,

whereby media portrayals are utilised to better understand one's normative role within society (Jagger, 2001). Within such context, Holt and Thompson (2004) bring about the example of the cigarette brand Marlboro, which marketing efforts were directed towards their association with the image of the adventurous and tough cowboy, thereby offering an idealised image of masculinity that men could relate to and drive inspiration from (Elliot & Elliot, 2005). Nonetheless, current representations of gender roles in advertising are adapting to societal changes (Eisend, 2019). Indeed, a study carried out by Fischer and Anderson (2012) in the U.S.A. found no difference in the perception of masculine and feminine traits between working fathers and stay-at-home fathers, thereby confirming an evolution in the understanding of (local) gender roles. In light of the globalising power of particularly "Western" cultures, it would be reasonable to hypothesise that contemporary advertising might follow more unbiased trends regarding gender roles, at least in North American and European countries.

2.3. Hegemonic Masculinity, Hypermasculinity, Metrosexuality, and Laddism

Before proceeding with the literature review, it is important to note that this section provides an in-depth discussion of the characteristics taken into consideration for the development of the study's framework of analysis when identifying constructions of masculinities. Indeed, as different conceptualisations came to inform the analysis of masculinities on Instagram branding, such elements must be discussed first.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity constitutes a pillar in men and masculinities studies (Howson & Hearn, 2019). It is described by Connell (2005) as the dominant masculinity present during a specific period, associated with male authority and social power over women and subordinated masculinities. Indeed, the term hegemony defines a form of dominance that justifies and supports the position of superiority of one class over the subordinated one, and which is generally seen as natural and thus accepted as the normative pattern of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Howson & Hearn, 2019). Therefore, it implies that multiple forms of masculinity coexist, which, however, do not hold the same magnitude (Beasley, 2008). The acceptance of hegemonic masculinity by subordinated groups is often a result of persuasion and cultural customs and traditions (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hearn, 2004). Indeed, hegemonic masculinity is determined by socioeconomic and cultural aspects, such as race, class, and sexual orientation, as heterosexual white men are often better positioned in society (Connell, 2005; Hearn, 2004).

Scholars have long debated the precise definition of hegemonic masculinity, which indeed differs within academia. For instance, hegemonic masculinity is often paired with concepts of dominance, assertiveness, authority, and traditional male roles such as the breadwinner of a family (Chu et al., 2005; Donaldson, 1993), which are frequently translated into representations of tough, disciplined, competitive, and emotionally distant men (Chu et al., 2005; Eisen & Yamashita, 2019; Moss, 2012). Demetriou (2001) defined it as being “essentially white, western, rational, calculative, individualist, violent, and heterosexual” (p. 327), whereas Donaldson (1993) stated that hegemonic masculinity represents the “culturally idealised form of masculine character”, arguing how although it might not embody the most performed masculinity type, it represents the most generally celebrated and accepted one

Representations of hegemonic masculinity in the media generally include the depiction of violence, anger and aggressiveness ranging from military to sports imagery, which is conveyed mainly by the film, television, videogames, and advertising industries (Kareithi, 2014). Concepts such as leadership, respect and pride are found to heavily permeate these hegemonic representations, which in turn provide a specific perspective on masculinity that acts as a helpful benchmark to measure and eventually align the manliness of the male public (Kareithi, 2014). Nonetheless, hegemonic masculinity possesses in no way a static nature, as it is strictly dependent on the context it is embedded into, and as such, multiple types of hegemonic masculinity can coexist (Beasley, 2008). Moss (2012) argues, for instance, how media representations of masculinities currently include a more comprehensive range of clothing selections and cosmetic goods and how particular clothing items such as the suit are no longer tied to dominant expressions of hegemonic masculinity. In light of such fluidity rests the power of hegemonic masculinity to persist through time, as it is able to continuously change and adapt to different environments by appropriating performances of subordinated masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Demetriou, 2001).

It is mainly due to these inevitable changes within society and the criticisms derived therefrom that Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) improved their model of hegemonic masculinity by suggesting its reformulation in four distinct areas, namely the nature of gender hierarchy, the geography of masculinities, the pattern of social embodiment, and the dynamics of masculinities. For the purpose of this study, the geography of masculinities was considered to be the most relevant point to discuss by illustrating how hegemonic masculinity is present and thus can be analysed at a local, regional, and global level (Connell and

Messerschmidt, 2005). The local level represents the closest proximity of family and community circles; the regional level considers the construction of hegemonic masculinity within a cultural or nation-state context; and the global level considers the wider worldwide area such as international business and media. These three levels are found to be intertwined: in building gender order, global institutions affect regional and local levels, while regional levels adjust global patterns of masculinity that consequently influence local ones. Furthermore, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue how regional patterns seem to have a more significant impact on local patterns given their close connection; nonetheless, global-level hegemonic masculinities are projected to become increasingly crucial for future studies in light of current globalised societies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Therefore, it is acknowledged the power of globalisation to shape existing forms of masculinities.

Considering the ability of hegemonic masculinity to redefine itself, it might also assume an exaggerated form, known as hypermasculinity or by the Spanish term “machismo” (Gilmore, 1987; Horowitz, 2020). Hypermasculinity is “a system of ideas forming a world view that chauvinistically exalts male dominance by assuming masculinity, virility, and physicality to be the ideal essence of real men” (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988, p. 64). Indeed, the conceptualisation of hypermasculinity emphasises typically hegemonic male roles and attitudes (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988; Zaitchik & Mosher, 1993) and shares with hegemonic masculinity the dependence on socio-cultural factors, such as social inequalities and socialisation dynamics, which are often contextually dependent (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988; Spencer et al., 2004). For instance, ethnic minorities such as Black and Latinx people tend to experience societal biases and traditional cultural heritage, which inherently label them as perpetrators of “machismo” (Saez et al., 2009). However, it is also possible that, when approached from a “Western” standpoint, elements of cultural masculinities might be defined as perpetrating machismo and/or hypermasculinity. In such instances, hypermasculinity can also bear a hegemonic character in some societies in that it becomes the embodiment of the ideal of manhood in a given time and space (Ricciardelli, 2013).

Generally, hypermasculine behaviour is defined by four main characteristics, namely the view of violence as manly, the view of danger as exciting, calloused attitudes towards sex and women, and toughness as self-control (Mosher and Sirkin, 1984; Hall, 1992, as cited in Zaitchik & Mosher, 1993). These behaviours are thus observed in order to identify possible constructions of hypermasculinity. These four psychological components embody the desire of a man to overpower and dominate not only women but also other men and the surrounding

environment, therefore incarnating a conqueror and patriarchal figure (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988). Hypermasculinity values toughness and anger as the most viable emotions, and as such, feelings and thoughts typically associated with femininity (e.g., being sensitive and emotional) are promptly rejected and viewed as signs of weakness (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988). In this context, masculinity is embodied through the suppression of fear, sadness, and shame and by achieving a complete degree of self-control (Vokey et al., 2013). Another similarity with hegemonic masculinity is the association of masculinity with violence and aggressiveness, which Bosson et al. (2009) identify as a sort of self-defence mechanism against anything or anyone that might threaten manhood. Additionally, engaging with dangerous scenarios is another tool used by hypermasculine men to demonstrate their masculinity and virility (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984)

In light of the advertising focus of this study, extant research on media representation has confirmed the widespread depiction of hypermasculinity across “Western” countries (Scharrer, 2001; Vokey et al., 2013). Indeed, a study from Vokey et al. (2013) highlighted the critical role of media in perpetrating hypermasculine behaviours by conducting a quantitative content analysis on magazine advertisements and finding how 56% of the total dataset portrayed at least one hypermasculine trait, such as toughness, dangerous contexts, violence, and calloused attitudes towards sex and women. Sports imagery is again widely utilised to perpetrate hypermasculine ideologies; in particular, the display of male muscular bodies has been found to symbolise strength, violence, and power (Katz, 1995). Representations of hypermasculine traits are also carried out by the film and television industry. Scharrer (2001) investigated the presence of hypermasculinity in crime television series, whereby characters were portrayed as aggressive, stoic, and engaging in the normalisation of violence by viewing it as exciting or justifiable by the context. Indeed, the role of media in normalising these types of attitudes is undeniable, to the point that their representation is currently restricted by related policies and legislations (Knoll et al., 2011); this, paired with a more reasonable and appropriate presentation of masculinity due to socio-cultural developments (Demetriou, 2001), explains the decrease of hypermasculine depictions in the media.

On the opposite side of the spectrum with respect to hypermasculinity is metrosexuality, which is a conceptualisation of masculinity that entails behaviours and interests historically linked to women such as beauty and fashion (Ricciardelli et al., 2010), thus blurring to an extent the binary of masculinity and femininity. As such, it is relevant to discuss metrosexuality, given the study’s focus on fashion brands. Gill (2003) identifies

metrosexuality as emotional and soft, while Carniel (2008) highlights the consumeristic element of the metrosexual man who engages in fashion, aesthetics, and personal care. According to Gill (2007) and Shugart (2008), metrosexuality stems from the 1980s gay liberation movement and from sociological and economic circumstances, whereby normative gender roles were being questioned, and the traditional family structure was consequently subverted to embrace the fact of being single. The increased disposable funds allowed men to purchase and consume a broader range of products, especially since investing in the beauty and fashion industry was becoming increasingly accepted (Ricciardelli et al., 2010).

In a similar fashion to metrosexuality, laddism has consumerism at its core foundation, in the sense that it overvalues the purchase and consumption of fashion and beauty products. Laddism emerged during the 1990s in middle-class Britain as a new conceptualisation of masculinity, which, however, also provided several distinctions from metrosexuality. Indeed, men who perform laddism, known as “lads”, do not bear any emotional or soft traits but rather engage in frequently sexist or misogynistic behaviour and are heavily interested in stereotypically masculine activities, such as nice cars and sports (Gill, 2003; Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Furthermore, Ricciardelli et al. (2010) add how the laddish ethos criticises the conventional familial structure and the idea of commitment by promoting excessive promiscuity, reckless drinking, and drug use instead. Scholars argue how laddism seems to be a reactionary ideology to the feminist and the gay liberation movement since it seeks to retain male hegemony and traditional gender norms within society (Gill, 2003; Ricciardelli et al., 2010).

Metrosexuality and laddism are identified by Shugart (2008) as forms of “commercial masculinity” (p. 281), thereby characterised by an evident focus on consumerism. As a response to the emergence of such new conceptualisations of masculinity, magazines and fashion brands began to increasingly target the male audience while also fostering the propagation of this new type of masculinity. Indeed, research showed how men’s lifestyle magazines displayed features of metrosexuality and laddism by focusing on high-end fashion, designer accessories, and polished looks (Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Moreover, consumption was incentivised by providing an idealised representation of men and masculinity via discourses of self-improvement (Ricciardelli et al., 2010), which will be addressed within the following sections.

2.4. Masculinities in Diverse Cultural Contexts

It is now useful to discuss masculinities and their construction by implying a cross-cultural approach due to the purpose of this study. Therefore, this section focuses on the conceptualisation of masculinities within the Chinese cultural context.

According to a historical-sociological analysis by Louie and Edwards (1994), the conceptualisation of traditional idealised Chinese masculinity takes on two distinct forms: the *wen* ('literary, civil'), which is typically associated with scholars, and the *wu* ('martial, physical'), which is more oriented towards physical strength, force, and power. These components, however, should not be intended as mutually exclusive opposites, as they share common characteristics such as reticence in expressing emotions and the praise of self-control (Jankowiak & Li, 2014). In this sense, the highest ideal of masculinity would be to incorporate a balance of both *wen* and *wu*, where scholar and soldier are considered equally masculine (Louie, 2002). The *wen-wu* paradigm represents an attempt to acknowledge the discrepancies between "Western" and Chinese conceptualisations of masculinity, which can also easily be utilised to describe other East-Asian cultures (Louie, 2002, 2015). The *wen* construct is commonly described as bearing the courteous and refined attributes linked with ancient scholars' intellectual and artistic occupations and may therefore be understood as more of an upper- and middle-class masculinity archetype (Louie, 2002). The *wen* masculinity ideal is embodied by the figure of Confucius, "the *wen* god" (Louie, 2015, p. 25), whose philosophy intensely focused on the virtues of morality, justice, and kindness and who highly influenced the customs and ethics of East Asian cultures (Tan, 2015). *Wu* instead invokes the physical aspect of masculinity, manifested through battles, wars, and martial arts, as well as through restraint and self-containment intended both in military and sexual terms (Louie, 2002, 2015). The *wu* construct finds an icon in the figure of Guan Yu, "the *wu* god" (Louie, 2002, p. 14), a Chinese military leader praised for his impeccable self-control and dominance over his emotions (Louie, 2002, 2015).

While the notion of masculinities in "Western" societies is frequently constructed through images of toughness, aggressiveness, and other behaviours that can more easily be associated with the Chinese *wu*, the degree to which these elements can be extended to the Chinese cultural context is far less in comparison to "Western" countries for two main reasons (Louie, 2002). First, the Chinese translation of predominantly "Western" ideals of masculinity such as the *yingxiong* ('outstanding male') or the *haohan* ('good fellow') is effectively mitigated by the presence of a softer and more erudite type of masculinity,

embodied by the *caizi* ('talented scholar') and the *wenren* ('cultured man') (Louie, 2002). Second, the *wen* tends to be preferred and dominant over the *wu* (Louie, 2002, 2015), thus indicating a predominance of intellectual power over physical power. The overruling of *wen* in constructing Chinese ideal masculinities produces important differences between the Chinese and the "Western" understanding of sexuality. For instance, Wu (2004) illustrates how homosexual relationships were not condemned throughout Chinese history but somewhat encouraged and thus frequent among the highest societal ranks. This might indeed represent an interesting point when analysing media advertisements, as the expression of hypermasculinity is also utilised to highlight the heterosexuality or non-homosexuality of products. The previously mentioned notion of self-control, which permeates the *wen-wu* dyad, represents another point of discontinuity between Chinese and "Western" constructions of sexuality. Indeed, control over and even suppression of sexual instincts by Chinese men clashes with the will to dominate and overpower other individuals characterising "Western" hegemonic masculinities (Louie, 2015). In this sense, the opposing concept of masculinity is a lack of control over one's sexual urges rather than femininity (Louie, 2015). Furthermore, in contrast with the "Western" hegemonic figure of the macho, the Chinese tradition celebrates and regards as appealing both *wen* and *wu* masculinities (Louie, 2015). This is also the case in contemporary China, where images of softer and sensitive men – who would instead be considered weak and effeminate by "Western" cultures (Hirose & Pih, 2010) – are promoted within society, primarily via books and television. An example might be the *caizi jiaren* romance, a Chinese fiction genre whose typical plot centres around the love between a scholar and a beautiful girl who come from upper-class families and share intellectual interests such as poetry (Louie, 2015; Song, 2004). The social status of the protagonists offers an important point for discussion regarding intersectionality between masculinities and class. Indeed, socio-cultural factors such as race, sexuality and class contribute to the definition of particular masculinity performances, which thus vary among identity groups (Collins & Bilge, 2016). For instance, manifestations of violence as a means to assert masculinity seem more frequent among lower-class individuals, who might feel inferior or undermined by their privileged counterparts (Pfeffer et al., 2016; Pyke, 1996). On the other hand, upper-class men might contrast such displays by emphasising features such as civility and intellect to strengthen their (financial) superiority (Pyke, 1996).

Additionally, the influence of the communist ideology further influenced the construction of Chinese masculinity. The Chinese Communist Party's preferred gender image

was, in fact, that of simple, ordinary, and casually styled individuals, who indeed were supposed to primarily engage in working activities (Luo & Hao, 2007). In complete opposition to the capitalist ideology shared by “Western” countries, communism refutes the ideal of the bourgeois lifestyle promoted by overconsumption and luxury (Song & Lee, 2010). However, during the 1980s, China was introduced to the capitalist economy, thus determining an increasing level of consumption, including appearance and fashion products and services mainly promoted through lifestyle magazines highly inspired by European and U.S. examples (Luo & Hao, 2007; Song & Lee, 2010). Such magazines promoted images of built bodies and fashionable clothing in clear contrast with the Chinese *wen*, the scholar (Louie, 2015); moreover, “Western” magazines were mainly addressed to the upper-middle-class able to afford their high price and interested in pursuing a luxurious lifestyle (Louie, 2015). Men pertaining to such classes were defined as *bailing li’ nan* (‘white-collar beautiful man’) or *dushi li’ nan* (‘street beautiful man’), both terms referring to “one who looks after his appearance and has healthy habits and all of the qualities usually attributed to the metrosexual” (Louie, 2015, p. 124).

Nonetheless, a cross-cultural angle is needed in light of globalisation to critically engage with Chinese constructions of masculinities, whereby both “Western” and other Asian cultures came to define and redefine a new understanding of the *wen-wu* paradigm in time. It is evident the importance of understanding the interactions between cultures in the construction of diverse masculinities, not on a “West” versus “East” plane only, but also considering the influence of East Asian cultures among themselves. Furthermore, the technological advancements of mass media and the diffusion of youth culture contributed to the creation of modern Chinese masculinity, which both follows and detaches itself from tradition by retaining fundamental aspects of the *wen-wu* while also developing a previously low sensitivity towards women (Louie, 2015). It is interesting to note how the modern Chinese globalised ideal of masculinity has come to include women and non-Chinese men in defining masculine qualities. These two groups were traditionally excluded from the *wen-wu* paradigm: the increase in women and youth consumer power due to more accessible and faster Internet access grants them the opportunity to mould and re-evaluate what is now deemed socially desirable in men and women (Louie, 2015).

2.5. Fashion Advertising and Masculinities

The introduction of fashion as a legitimate male interest can be seen as both cause and consequence of a significant change in men's social roles and masculinities, whereby the evolution in the understanding of gender and gender roles within society fostered the approach of an increasing number of men to fashion, and the use of fashion to express particular masculinities aided in pushing towards a more open perception of male roles. Sturrock and Pioch (1998) argue how post-modern consumption, with its shift from families to single individuals as primary consumers, contributed to amplifying the focus of grooming and fashion products to the male public. Indeed, in the past, beauty and fashion advertisements were mainly addressed to women (Edwards, 2003; McNeill & Douglas, 2011), as they were identified as the consumers, while men were viewed more as producers of goods and services (Kacen, 2000). It follows how the widespread distribution of men's fashion and lifestyle magazines during the 1980s caused male bodies to be increasingly displayed in the promotion of products that had historically been directed to the female public (Ricciardelli et al., 2010), thereby reinforcing the idea of fashion as a token of masculinity. Discourses that emphasised the achievement of a healthy body by exercising and dieting added to the association of a particular body type to desirability, thus identifying self-care and appearance as a means to approach such an idealised image (Featherstone, 2007).

It becomes clear how the role of advertising, combined with a progressive redefinition of gender roles, contributed to men's involvement in the performance of traditionally feminine activities such as fashion (Bakewell et al., 2006). Advertising implies different systems of meaning to communicate with the public, including social knowledge and cultural factors expressed via gender ideologies that include the display of imagery, words, and signifiers which can bear explicit or implicit meaning (Kervin, 1990). By understanding gender and gender roles as *doing* rather than *being* (see 'Sex, Gender and Gender Roles'), it can be said that fashion encourages specific views on how individuals should perform masculinities and femininities. Hancock II and Karaminas (2014) explain how fashion advertising imagery promotes and sells particular constructions of masculinities by implying gender stereotypes, especially regarding men's appearance. In this way, masculinities become commodified or branded (Alexander, 2003), meaning they are utilised by brands to create a "perceived image" (Hancock II & Karaminas, 2014, p. 271) able to connect the consumer to both a given cultural context and the brand's target market. Thus, fashion advertising uses idealised models that push consumers to attain specific styles and looks. These idealised

models differ not only among cultures but also in time periods and brands' target segments. Indeed, conceptualisations of ("Western") masculinities in fashion advertising have changed considerably throughout the decades. During the 1950s, for instance, depictions of men followed the hegemonic view of males as breadwinners and primary money holders by linking it to images of "slim, toned and well defined [men], dressed in paired down suits, slim ties and sweaters" (Hancock II & Karaminas, 2014, p. 275) representative of a more egotistical construction of masculinity. However, by the 1980s, representations of the "New Man" became predominant, whereby men were depicted as objectified and sexualised, showing naked body parts, thus providing a construction of masculinity which was highly intersected with new understandings of men's sensitivity and sexuality (Hancock II & Karaminas, 2014). Nonetheless, it can be said that both these past ideals and current fashion advertising imagery tend to represent homogeneous physical features, as models are mostly White, young, and either muscular or slender (Barry, 2014). Moreover, extant research also highlighted objectification and sexualisation of the male body in contemporary magazine advertising, enacted through fragmentation, nudity, and body improvement discourses (Del Saz-Rubio, 2018). The binary of muscular and thin men exists in fashion advertising but not within the same target segments. Muscular models, also defined as commercial models, mainly appear in mass brands' advertisements, while thin models or editorial models are mostly implied by designer and luxury brands (Mears, 2011). As a result, it is highlighted a trend in fashion advertising of representing specific categories of men in terms of physical and behavioural characteristics, which consequently inform how consumers should and might perform gender roles.

3. Methodology

The following section provides a description of the research design utilised to answer the research question “How are masculinities constructed by European and Chinese high-end fashion brands on Instagram?” The first section ‘Sampling and Data Collection’ includes an illustration of the dataset taken into analysis and an explanation of the sampling method utilised to identify the brands considered for the present research. Following this, the second section ‘Research Method and Data Analysis’ outlines the research method chosen for the study and how data analysis was carried out; the methodology of the chosen method is explained by providing a step-by-step approach to how thematic analysis was implemented for this study. Finally, the third section ‘Operationalisation’ concerns how the concepts addressed by the research question and reviewed in the Theoretical Framework were operationalised for the present study.

3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The global popularity of Instagram among individuals and businesses highlights its crucial marketing potential, which is second only to that of Facebook (Huey & Yazdanifard, 2014; Statista, 2021a, 2021b). Indeed, the possibility for businesses to directly interact with a massive user base via direct messages, images, videos, live streams, and a dedicated shopping section for customers has made Instagram a key platform for large, medium, and small brands (Huey & Yazdanifard, 2014). Research from Ashraf (2017) and Buckle (2015) argues that individuals prefer to shop via Instagram rather than via other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, as the former provides a higher level of engagement between brands and consumers. Furthermore, Instagram proves to be a valuable tool for companies to build and increase brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty (Bilgin, 2018). A study from Ordabayeva et al. (2016) illustrates the advantages for luxury brands – including fashion brands – to leverage (visual) digital channels such as Instagram; for instance, the possibility to gather reasonable amounts of data from and connect with their prospective customer segment, the potential to foster creativity by receiving direct feedback from users, and the numerous opportunities for brands to differentiate and enhance the luxury experience (Ordabayeva et al., 2016). Furthermore, research from Kim and Ko (2012) confirmed the efficacy of social media marketing in increasing luxury fashion brands’ profitability through entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and word-of-mouth activities; social

media marketing also positively affects customer equity and brand equity mainly by strengthening business-to-consumer relationships (Kim & Ko, 2012).

In light of this information, the present study focused on four fashion brands' social media posts on Instagram. The research addressed fashion brands that offer a menswear line. The selected brands share some similarities in price, product range, and target customer segment; all four brands sell worldwide and are high-end fashion brands. A focus on high-end fashion brands allows for exploring the intersection between masculinities and class, which as an identity category, constitutes an important agent in the gendered practices and representations (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Indeed, masculinities do not exist in a vacuum but are constructed in relation to other socio-cultural identities such as race, sexuality, and social class (see Theoretical Framework).

The terms high-end and luxury are often used interchangeably, as they both come to indicate:

“a branded product or service that consumers perceive to be high quality, offer authentic value via desired benefits, whether functional or emotional, have a prestigious image within the market built on qualities such as artisanship, craftsmanship, or service quality, be worthy of commanding a premium price, and be capable of inspiring a deep connection, or resonance, with the consumer.” (Ko et al., 2017)

The notion of high-end, in fact, encompasses the use of high-quality raw materials and manufacturing, marketing and branding as a luxury symbol, and a high selling price point (Donovan, 2019). Furthermore, Fionda and Moore (2009) argue how luxury brands psychologically impact consumers for reasons that surpass functionality, as values of status symbol and prestige also inform luxury products consumption. Given such ability of luxury brands to communicate psychologically and emotionally to the public thanks to exclusivity, symbolism, stylistic quality and appeal, and in most cases, heritage (Okonkwo, 2009; Pentina et al., 2018), it can be said that the consumption of luxury products contributes to the development or reinforcement of an individual's self-concept (Fionda & Moore, 2009), which also concerns the perception of one's social and gender role (Bailey, 2003; Larson, 1981). This process can thus be translated into the specific context of luxury fashion brands and how they foster constructions of masculinities, which legitimates the choice of investigating high-end fashion brands for the present study.

The dataset was gathered from the official Instagram accounts of two European fashion brands, Balmain and Salvatore Ferragamo, and two Chinese fashion brands, Atelier Rouge Pékin and Fabric Porn. Purposive sampling was used to select the fashion brands for this research, which is described as a non-probability sampling method where data is collected in line with the researcher's judgement regarding its representativeness and usefulness (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Atelier Rouge Pékin, also known as ARP, "is a fashion brand launched in Beijing in 2013 inspired by China's modern-day creativity and traditional craftsmanship." (Atelier Rouge Pékin, n.d.-a) The brand engages in designing and producing clothing and jewellery made in Beijing, thus stressing their important link with Chinese culture and tradition (Atelier Rouge Pékin, n.d.-a). The items offered range in price from about USD 400 to USD 1400 (Atelier Rouge Pékin, n.d.-b). ARP's take on fashion combines a love for its roots and traditional heritage with contemporary culture, thus positioning itself as "one of China's most innovative brands" (Atelier Rouge Pékin, n.d.-a). Neat, avant-garde design and high-quality manufacturing are the strongest defining points of the brand (Atelier Rouge Pékin, n.d.-a). Similarly, Fabric Porn is also a brand which takes pride in its Chinese roots. Founded in 2019 in Shanghai, Fabric Porn blends traditional Chinese design with modern urban elements, interestingly mixing "East" and "West" both in terms of silhouettes and prints and by incorporating cultural nuances from both sides, such as their iconic "Make China Lit Again" hat inspired by the 2016 "Make America Great Again" hat worn by former U.S. President Donald Trump (Jain, 2020; van Paridon, 2020). The inclusion of two brands that openly highlight their modern and contemporary edge might provide conceptualisations of masculinities in line with the current socio-cultural context and offer a nuanced standpoint in light of their explicitly globalised brand identities, despite the ever-present reference to traditional Chinese elements.

Concerning the European sample, Balmain is a fashion brand founded in 1945 in Paris, traditionally characterised by striking opulence of designs and a strong focus on female silhouettes (Balmain, n.d.-a). The brand is currently renowned for its rich couture mastery, representing French haute couture history, and a sophisticated style, which currently includes more casual and even streetwear pieces as well (Hill et al., 2021). Balmain's offer comprises clothing and accessories, ranging in price from around USD 200 to USD 10000 (Balmain, n.d.-c, n.d.-d). Finally, Salvatore Ferragamo is an Italian fashion brand founded in 1938 in Florence, initially focused on manufacturing men's and women's footwear (Salvatore Ferragamo, n.d.-c). The brand currently sells fragrances, clothing, footwear, and accessory

pieces catered to men and women, ranging from around USD 100 to USD 25000 (Salvatore Ferragamo, n.d.-b) and characterised by the superb quality of materials and a handcrafting tradition, which make the brand an essential representative of the made-in-Italy culture (Made-In-Italy.com, 2017). The two European brands share common signifiers of classic traditional couture, which has long shaped sartorial approaches within the continent, despite offering up-to-date and even avant-garde garments that appeal to the modern consumer base. Conceptualisations of masculinities deriving therefrom are thus expected to reflect such viewpoint, where representations might emphasise brand heritage to an extent whilst adhering to more fluid gender expressions (i.e., associating stereotypically feminine connotations with masculinities), especially in the case of Balmain. Differences and similarities between the four brands are thus acknowledged, whereby their cultural and technical backgrounds determine diverse and unique perspectives on fashion which might influence respective conceptualisations of masculinities. In light of the research purpose to investigate present-day masculinity constructions among different cultural contexts, it was deemed valuable and crucial to select brands that share a link with tradition and a contemporary outlook towards fashion and society. Indeed, this could provide interesting outcomes for the analysis, as it would shed light on the effects of the current globalised world by accounting for the individual, context-dependent character of masculinities and gender roles.

With regards to the sampling choice for the present study, a dataset consisting of 160 still Instagram posts in total was analysed, equally divided among the four brands taken into analysis. The dataset was selected based on precise inclusion and exclusion criteria. First, the posts must include one or more male models, as the research focus is the construction of masculinities as performed by men; posts portraying women or products alone were therefore excluded from the selection, whereas posts portraying both male and female models were included. Second, the posts must be recent, meaning they had to be released within a three-year time; if more than 40 posts per brand met such criteria, only the most recent ones were considered. Therefore, posts were selected from the brands' accounts from newest to oldest. Doing so could ensure a contemporary representation of masculinities in social media advertisements.

3.2. Research Method and Data Analysis

A social constructionist approach was utilised to explore the construction of masculinities in social media advertising. As briefly outlined in the Introduction, the research followed a qualitative approach to answer the research question “How are masculinities constructed by European and Chinese high-end fashion brands on Instagram?” Two main reasons guided the choice of performing qualitative analysis. First, the aim of qualitative methods is, in fact, not to quantify data but to find and understand meaningful relationships among and within the data; as such, the data contributes to the understanding of society from a constructionist perspective, namely, the view that social reality is shaped by the interactions between individuals – represented in this study by brands and consumers – and the language that they use in order to do so (Brennen, 2021; Flick, 2007). These interactions actively contribute to constructing unique styles and social identities (Holmes, 2001). In this sense, within the scope of the present research, the data added to the identification and understanding of underlying meanings and patterns related to constructions of masculinities. Second, existing research made use of qualitative approaches to explore the field of masculinities and gender studies to identify recurrent themes and patterns related to the embodiment of particular types of masculinity (e.g., Scheibling and Lafrance, 2019; Shaw & Tan, 2014; Waling et al., 2018). Considering the high significance of related findings, the present study followed a similar methodological choice, allowing for and facilitating comparative studies.

Within this context, thematic analysis was considered the best method of analysis to carry out the research. Thematic analysis is defined as “a method for identifying, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning” (p. 297) through the creation of codes and themes from extant literature and the data (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The analysis is thus carried out by coding pieces of data, which are consequently assigned to categories or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis approaches the data in a systematic and iterative manner, where the researcher is continuously prompted to return to the data to extract more insights. Thematic analysis provides a degree of flexibility when describing and interpreting data, as research can be conducted from an inductive or deductive perspective. For the analysis to be deductive, the creation of themes is guided by a theoretical framework presented in previous research. In contrast, inductive analysis is performed when themes are identified within the data and, as such, they do not necessarily follow existent theories or frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A mixed procedure of inductive and deductive methods is also possible,

whereby the coding process is both data-driven and theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A mixed procedure also allows the researcher to refer to existent theories when identifying and interpreting themes and is particularly useful – and thus recommended – in analysing data from a social constructionist perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the research implied a mixed approach, whereby the analysis was guided by previous literature (see Theoretical Framework) and also open to the unfolding of codes from the data throughout the process.

The study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. The first step concerns familiarising oneself with the data, whereby the sampled materials are collected and reviewed several times to gain initial ideas about the dataset, which will later translate to a preliminary identification of broader themes. Successively, the coding of materials takes place, during which the researcher codes pieces of data by identifying features and characteristics relevant to answering the research question. For this study, features such as touch, poses, and gazes which might capture elements of hegemonic masculinity, hypermasculinity, and metrosexuality will be explored in light of previous research (e.g., Chu et al., 2005; Ricciardelli et al., 2010; Zaitchik & Mosher, 1993). To carry out the coding process, the researcher made use of the qualitative research software Atlas.ti, which allows for structured analysis and greater data management without jeopardising the role of the researcher as a primary critical analyst throughout the entire process of analysis (Soratto et al., 2020). Features can be determined on a semantic or latent level. On the former case, the features are only described without interpretation; on a latent level, the researcher aims to investigate meanings and assumptions underpinning the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The present study involved the identification of themes on a latent level, whereby codes were described and interpreted in light of the research question. The third step concerns grouping similar codes into broader themes by identifying common patterns; for this research, the themes "Models' appearance", "Predominance, authority, and independence", "Emotional distance", and "(De)contextualisation" were created (see Appendix A). During the fourth step, the researcher reviews the identified themes considering potential relationships between the codes, sub-themes and other themes, and the research question; to do so, a thematic map is developed. The complete thematic map can be found in Appendix A, where a list of the main themes and sub-themes is provided together with their relative description. The establishment of the thematic map followed the code groups developed via Atlas.ti, which were successively reorganised to create broader themes by considering meaningful

connections between them. The fifth step concerns the redefinition of themes to determine the essence of each theme, meaning which characteristic of the data is captured by the themes; here, the definition and description of each theme are provided in the thematic map. The last step concerns the translation of the analysis into a clear report, in which results are presented and discussed by incorporating selected evidence.

3.3. Operationalisation

Given how the concepts guiding the analysis – namely hegemonic and hypermasculinity, metrosexuality and laddism, and wen-wu masculinities – might be perceived as considerably abstract, it is necessary to clearly define such concepts and how they were observed during the analytical process. The concepts considered for the present research are related to the conceptualisations of masculinity explored within the Theoretical Framework, namely hegemonic masculinity, hypermasculinity, metrosexuality and laddism, and the Chinese wen-wu dyadic masculinity. The use of concepts abstracted from extant literature and the Instagram data sample taken into analysis aimed at identifying and defining particular constructions when analysing the four brands' social media posts. The elements considered from literature in order to operationalise constructions of masculinities were the following: posts denoting characteristics such as strength, assertiveness, confidence, or emotional stoicism were both linked to hegemonic masculinity and the Chinese wu construct; representations of aggressiveness, violence, or callousness towards women were categorised as hypermasculinity traits; emotionality, softness, and stereotypically feminine attributes were associated with both metrosexuality and the Chinese wen construct. In order to have a more detailed overlook of the operationalisation, see Appendix A). Therefore, the analytical process included the observation of such patterns to answer the research question. The thematic analysis also included an evaluation of men's appearance, which explored their body type, age, and race, to provide further insights and reflections related to the literature discussed in the Theoretical Framework and offer a complete overview of masculinity constructions portrayed by each brand. Physical characteristics were assigned to different categories. Body types were classified based on Stunkard et al.'s (1983) Figure Rating Scale (FRS), illustrated in *Figure 1* below.

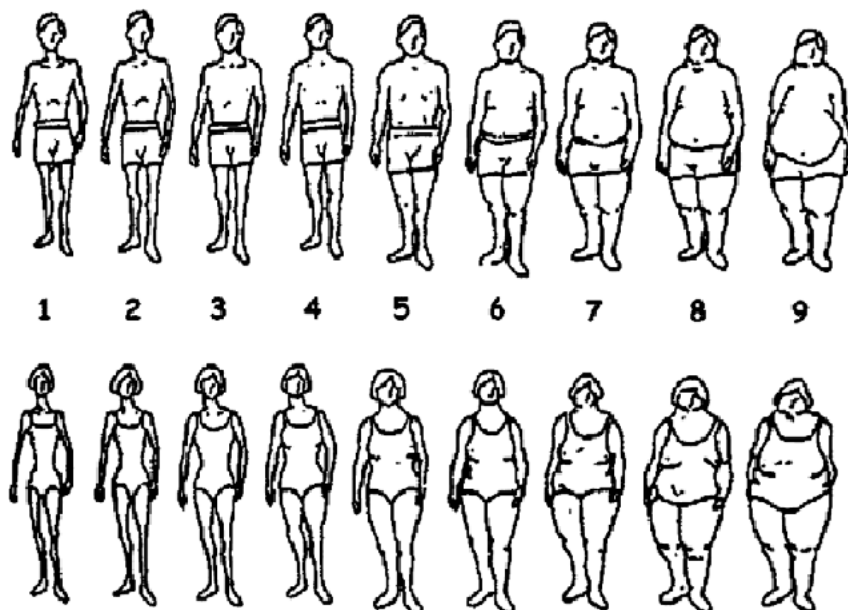


Figure 1. Male and female silhouettes of the Stunkard Figure Rating Scale

The FRS consists of nine silhouettes ranging from very thin (1) to very obese (9) (Stunkard et al., 1983). Initially developed to investigate women's body types, the scale has been applied to men for this study. The validity and reliability of the scale have been tested by previous studies (Cardinal et al., 2006; Sherman et al., 1995). Additionally, the analysis considered the age of the portrayed men by defining them as children, teenagers, young adults, or middle-aged, as men of different ages might be associated with different masculinity types. To determine the age of the models, specific physical traits such as signs of ageing were recorded. However, the assessment of an individual's age through the observation of physical characteristics might be complex as the two do not always correspond; therefore, vague categories that included a wide selection of ages were created to prevent said complexity. Furthermore, skin colour and facial features were observed to determine race, which was then grouped into White, Black, and Asian, following a simplified version of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) standards on race and ethnicity (1997, as cited in Jensen et al., 2021). Similar to age, determining race by analysing only said characteristics might be challenging, thus leading to the creation of an undetermined race category; when a model's race was deemed unclear, it was then categorised as undetermined. It is also acknowledged the overly simplistic nature of such a method, which was implied solely for the purpose of this study and does not in any way reflect reality. For this research, hair colour, hair length, and the presence of facial hair and make-up were observed to assess the degree of stereotyped gender portrayals; moreover, accessories such as eyeglasses and

jewellery worn by male models were also coded. Following Kolbe and Albanese (1997), visible tattoos were considered a form of physical adornment and thus regarded as accessories during the coding process. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged how tattoos differ from other previously mentioned accessories, as the former are (relatively) permanent. Moreover, a distinction is made between wearable accessories (e.g., jewellery, make-up) and hairstyles. Further information about the codes developed during the analytical process can be found in the thematic map (see Appendix A).

As mentioned in the 'Research Method and Data Analysis' sub-section, the present research implemented a mixed approach of inductive and deductive coding. In this sense, themes not necessarily derived from extant literature were also analysed, as additional elements relating to conceptualisations of masculinity that are not exclusively related to those discussed in the Theoretical Framework could emerge from the data. It is necessary to mention the influence of the Goffmanian framework on the analysis process of this research, whereby codes were partially deducted from Goffman's (1979) work on gender display. Four out of the six existing Goffmanian categories were analysed, namely 1) relative size, which refers to the physical size of portrayed characters, usually in terms of height, and the consequent power dynamics derived therefrom; 2) touch, in terms of how hands and fingers are touching or holding an object, which is defined as feminine/decorative or functional; 3) licensed withdrawal, which deals with the physical and emotional presence of the character in the portrayed situation and mainly focuses on the character's gaze; and lastly, 4) the ritualisation of subordination, which takes into consideration body posture and poses that emphasise dominance, superiority, or submissiveness of the portrayed character. The remaining two categories of function ranking and the family were not included in the study because they were not deemed useful or applicable within the analysis. Additionally, the research used Kolbe and Albanese's (1996) framework for the classification of body portions and objectification in male image advertisements, after which the presence of male objectification was determined through the coding of the models' body portions shown in the posts. Episodes of objectification were considered important for the research question, as they might have provided further insights into the evolution of masculinity conceptualisations and their construction in modern-day social media advertisement posts. Objectification was thus acknowledged in cases of cropping – especially when the model's head was missing from the picture – and body-revealing poses. Lastly, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) work on visual design was also considered during the analysis process, whereby representation,

interaction, modality, and validity were assessed in terms of body framing, point of gaze, and setting of each post. In this sense, the relations between represented participants, image settings, and the viewer were acknowledged and discussed in light of masculinity performances.

4. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the 160 Instagram posts for the brands Ferragamo, Balmain, Fabric Porn and ARP provided different results, which are discussed in this chapter. As mentioned in the Methodology, the study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, whereby the data was coded and assigned to second- and first-order themes. The analysis yielded a total of four first-order themes, namely "Models' appearance", "Predominance, authority and independence", "Emotional distance", and "(De)contextualisation", which share some common characteristics that were coded and categorised during the analytical process. These central themes are found to answer the research question "How are masculinities constructed by European and Chinese fashion brands on Instagram?" by highlighting meaningful patterns among the Instagram posts that come together to identify different constructions of masculinity offered by the two clusters of brands. All the analysed posts featured codes pertaining to at least one of these central themes. The themes were assessed considering the conceptualisations of masculinity discussed in the Theoretical Framework, which functioned as sensitising concepts during the analytical process.

The current chapter is divided into two sections, namely 'European construction of masculinities' and 'Chinese construction of masculinities', to discuss the results and answer the research question by explaining the constructions of masculinity enacted by the four fashion brands. Overall, the thematic analysis highlighted differences and similarities between European and Chinese constructions of masculinity, both of which show features that can be reconnected to previously discussed conceptualisations of masculinities (see Theoretical Framework). However, male models from the European brands are more likely to be presented as more assertive and authoritarian than models from Chinese brands, especially compared to female models; however, a high degree of male objectification was recorded in a balanced way among all four brands. Interesting to note is a trend towards the blurring of gender boundaries and a conceptualisation of gender as more fluid, whereby European brands are shown to represent men as more stereotypically feminine, delicate, and sexualised while maintaining some hegemonic traits such as dominance and authority. Chinese brands are incorporating these typically "Western" hegemonic characteristics without sacrificing traditional idealised conceptualisations such as the *wen fragile scholar*, therefore designing an almost tangible meeting point between the two cultures. The present research thus confirms the significant effect of globalisation from "Western" to "Eastern" cultures and vice versa, in

line with discussions presented in the Theoretical Framework, which would entail a reconceptualisation of the binary concept of gender as femininity vs masculinity.

4.1. European Construction of Masculinities

This section presents findings related to the construction of masculinities by the European fashion brands Ferragamo and Balmain, categorised by the four main themes mentioned above and discussed within the following paragraphs.

4.1.1. Models' appearance

This sub-section presents findings related to the male models' appearance in the analysed Instagram posts. This theme comprises three second-order themes: bodily and demographic characteristics, dressing and grooming, and framing of the depicted models. In general, the characteristics considered for the development of this theme included physical traits such as race, age, body type, and hair, as well as the presence or absence of apparel, accessories, and make-up on the male models. Hair was considered an important element to analyse, as it is often utilised as a means of self-expression and might thus signify particular gender identities and performances (Manning, 2010; Synnott, 1987). It is important to note that the results presented in this paragraph are in relation to the number of male models [n=41] depicted in the Instagram posts rather than the number of analysed posts unless otherwise specified.

Bodily and demographic characteristics

Among posts from the European brands Ferragamo and Balmain, the most represented race is Black [n=25, 61% and n=18, 44% respectively], followed by White [n=10, 24%] and Asian [n=8, 20%] for Ferragamo, and by White [n=16, 39%], Latino [n=4], undefined race [n=2], and Asian [n=1] for Balmain. Such findings demonstrate an extent of diversity among representations from the two brands, especially considering the higher awareness of the public on aspects of diversity and inclusion in media representation concerning beauty and fashion brands. Moreover, results become more encouraging in light of the limited understanding of diversity in fashion, which has usually utilised a white versus black approach in measuring ethnic inclusiveness via skin colour (Mears, 2010; Tai, 2017). However, the underrepresentation of Asian models is still present, following a general trend in fashion (Persad, 2021). For instance, issues of discrimination, stereotyping, and cultural

appropriation are highly reported by Asian models in the U.S.A. (Persad, 2021), which can both cause and derive from the low number thereof within the fashion and modelling industry. Concerning fashion advertisements, Mitchell et al. (2022) investigated the representation of women of colour on fashion magazines' covers, finding how only one Asian model was portrayed within a sample of 481 magazine covers. It is also worth noting how the totality of the European posts [n=80, 100%] focuses on portraying models within the young adult age group. The lack of facial hair might also emphasise the young age of the models. However, it is acknowledged that a lack of facial hair does not always signify young age, but rather a relationship between the presence of facial hair and age has been recorded by multiple empirical studies (e.g., Dixson & Vasey, 2012; Neave & Shields, 2008).

Moreover, facial hair might signify a specific type of rugged and tough masculinity, which can be perceived as desirable and attractive by both men and women; however, it is important to acknowledge that such conceptualisation might not wholly be aligned with Ferragamo and Balmain's brand identities. While Ferragamo favours values of refinement and sensitivity among others (Ferragamo, n.d.-), the works of Balmain – despite being openly bold in their design - exalt fluidity between the masculine and the feminine (Balmain, n.d.-); both visions seem thus relatively detached from the conception of rugged masculinity as signified by facial hair. This finding could most probably relate to the widespread belief that youth symbolises beauty at its core and, as such, might seem more appealing to some, especially within the field of beauty and fashion products (Twigg, 2013). Twigg (2013), in fact, confirms such a hypothesis by positing how fashion is a field which is inherently youth-oriented, as the concept of ageing is not considered attractive, fashionable, or erotic, nor it is a means to portray an idealised reality – which is the exact purpose of fashion. Representations of older men are thus generally avoided in favour of individuals who can embody the core values of the fashion world. This assumption is further sustained by investigating the brands' target audience, which has recently included younger generations (Lectra, 2021; Valentine, 2021). However, the perception concerning beauty and appeal can vary depending on gender and personal taste, among others, and as such equating youth to beauty does not represent absolute truth.

Dressing and grooming

Models' grooming and styling are considered essential elements when analysing visual advertising content, especially regarding fashion, as they represent critical features in categorising the appearance of models (Cunningham et al., 1986).

Ferragamo is one of the brands having the most "adorned" models, with 45% of its posts representing male models wearing accessories [n=18]. None of the European brands depicted tattooed models, despite the normalisation of such practice in recent years (Hotson, 2020); tattoos, many of which were formerly classified as illegal, are indeed now common practice within society (Adams, 2009). Moreover, a tattooed male body might signify not only a symbol of one's identity but a broader feeling of "rebellious masculinity" (Mascia-Lees & Sharpe, 1992, p. 192). This finding is not surprising considering the high-end focus of the analysed brands; indeed, the casting of tattooed models is still a growing trend in the high fashion industry, although brands such as Moschino, Chanel, and Dior have already employed tattooed models to showcase their collections (Kollektive, 2022). Furthermore, not portraying tattooed models might also indicate coherence with the brands' values and identities. For instance, Ferragamo favours elements strongly connected to the brand's heritage, namely class, elegance, and refinement, which the depiction of tattoos might not sufficiently represent.

In terms of hair characteristics, longer head hair is more widely present within posts from Balmain [n=11, 28%], which could be related to the brand's identity defined as highly focused on femininity and boldness. Indeed, as a prominent and influential identity element, hair is often used as a tool to express gender and ideological cues (Synnott, 1987). In "Western" societies, long hair has historically been linked to women and femininity due to a symbolical matter (Synnott, 1987). Indeed, hairstyle and particularly hair length have a considerable influence on how men and women, masculinities and femininities are perceived both by the self and by others and can thus be implied to differentiate between such identities (Manning, 2010). For instance, numerous psychological studies explored different perceptions of hair length, which linked longer hair with youth, recklessness (for both men and women), and femininity, while shorter hair was more often associated with masculinity, maturity, and intelligence (Hirschman & Brunswick, 2002). In the case of European brands, the portrayal of male models wearing longer hair might therefore signify an attempt of subversion of historical or normative standards of masculinity by associating a culturally traditional symbol of women and femininity with men.

On the other hand, facial hair was quite rarely depicted among the European brands, with barely 16% of bearded models [n=13]; more precisely, Ferragamo is the brand portraying more male models wearing a beard and moustache compared to Balmain, with 18% [n=7) against 15% (n=6] of models. Facial hair in men has long been a widespread symbol of “masculinity, virility, and attractiveness” for the opposite sex (Boroughs et al., 2005, p. 637) and has thus since been typically regarded as a male characteristic (Frank, 2014). In contrast, a lack thereof has historically been linked to women and femininity, especially considering women’s temporally and culturally pervasive hair removal practice (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2003). However, this does not mean that women do not or cannot have facial hair or that a clean-shaven face always signifies femininity; indeed, facial (and body) hair growth is not exclusively associated with males. Hope (1982) explains how a lack of hair seems more linked to age than gender, whereby hairlessness equates to a childlike, immature status (Brownmiller, 1984). Such findings might thus be in line with the previous discussion about young age and the fashion industry.

Framing of bodies

Among the two European brands, Balmain represents the most models showing skin or wearing body-revealing clothing [n=7, 18%], especially the torso and abdomen. In this case, clothes were either purposely worn to expose a particular body part or were designed to be revealing, as exemplified in *Figure 2*. Such finding might easily relate to the brand’s identity as well, following a similar discussion as the one presented in the previous paragraphs (see ‘Dressing and grooming’); indeed, it could be inferred how posts featuring instances of body exposure convey a sense of confidence and boldness which are characteristic of Balmain’s vision. The proportion concerning the whole dataset is shown to be relatively low; nonetheless, the presence of exposed body parts is in line with male objectification and sexualisation in fashion advertisements which presents a construction of masculinity and male identity that, in fact, destabilises the normative binary of gender by creating feelings of appreciation and fantasy in the viewer. Showing skin is also found to be consistent with Balmain’s brand identity, silhouette, and style, defined as dramatic, extremely confident, and strongly feminine (Balmain, n.d.-b). Therefore, the conceptualisation of masculinity deriving therefrom suggests a departure from representations of typically “Western” hegemonic masculinities and a consequent blur of the binary gender construction between male and female. Such a process is similar to the hybridisation of masculinity,

thereby integrating signifiers linked to different and sometimes opposing gender roles to construct masculinities that do not fully conform to (stereotypical) notions of femininity or masculinity (Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019).



BALMAIN
PARIS

Figure 2. Balmain, 17 February 2022

In terms of body parts, both brands represent the most models at full body or full upper body and half lower body shots, with Balmain having 70% [n=28] and Ferragamo having 83% [n=33] of their respective datasets falling into said categories. This finding could be explained by a willingness to showcase all products through the post, a choice that seems highly justified from a marketing viewpoint.

4.1.2. Predominance, authority, and independence

This theme concerns elements that might relate to the construction of masculinities as dominant and predominant when put in relation to women and as an inherently independent gender role. Indeed, findings suggested that the brands favour portrayals emphasising masculinity traits which could be associated with the “Western” hegemonic conceptualisation of men as authorities holding physical and hierarchical power, although presented in a rather subtle manner. Indeed, male models in the European dataset generally appeared taller than or as tall as other models included in the same picture, particularly women, which could be an indicator of unbalanced power relations and predominance. Additionally, men are visibly taller than women even in cases where they are in the background; only one instance was recorded among Ferragamo’s posts in which the male model is presented as slightly shorter than the female model, an example presented in *Figure 3*.



Figure 3. Ferragamo, 16 January 2022

According to Goffman (1979), the relative size of the portrayed characters is frequently utilised in pictures to indicate one's dominance or importance within a social situation, as the display of physical size is often utilised to highlight power and higher ranking with respect to the other portrayed characters. Thus, in this case, the representation of men as taller and occupying more space in the picture than women could signal social predominance or higher importance. However, such findings are not surprising as biologically, men tend to be taller than women. Furthermore, when intersected with framing, there is no instance of relative position highlighting any power relation among models, therefore challenging Goffman's assumption. Moreover, most male models appear standing in both Ferragamo's and Balmain's posts [n=28, 70% and n=25, 63%, respectively]; female models are mainly represented standing as well when included in the posts [n=31, 19%]. This finding might suggest an overall balance in authority and power between men and women, although in some cases, women are seen performing actions which would be considered submissive following Goffman (1979), such as leaning onto the male model or looking at him from a distance or from a relatively lower position, which could indicate a feeling of admiration or adoration towards the male model (*Figure 4*).

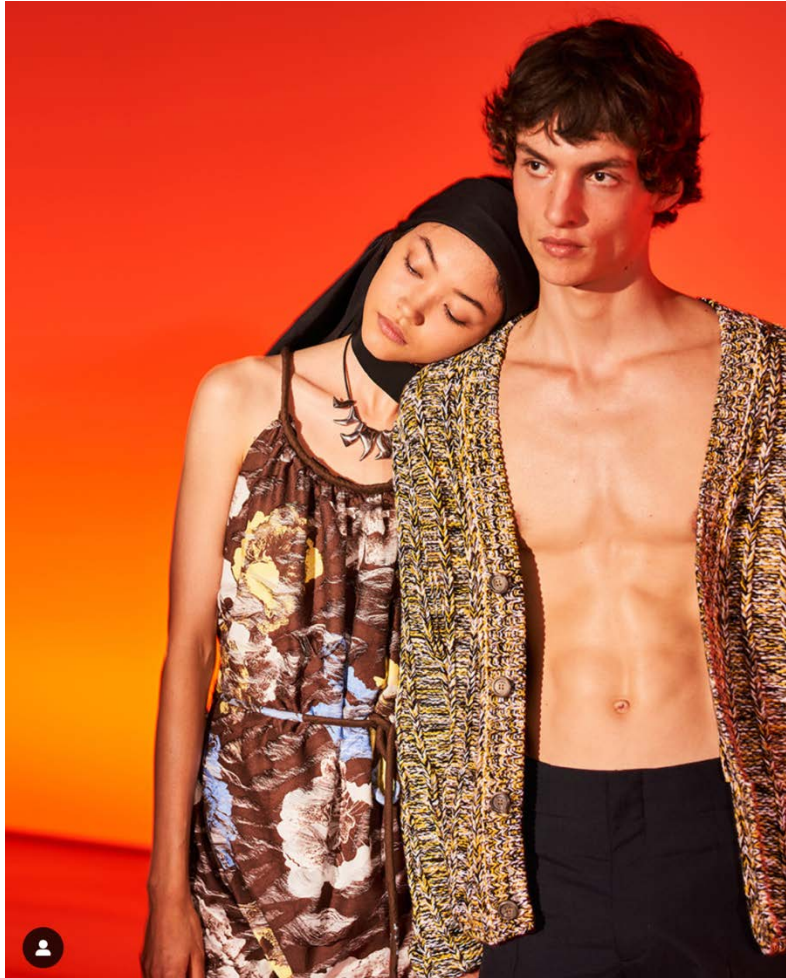


Figure 4. Ferragamo, 26 September 2021

Another interesting finding is that men are never portrayed as lying down; this might emphasise the idea of men as superior – in literal and ideological terms – individuals, who are seldom overshadowed by women, nor shown in submissive instances. Baker (2005) and Hatton and Trautner (2011, 2013) link lying down to submissiveness and often with sexual availability because of the lowering of the body with respect to the viewer and/or other models, which could be linked to vulnerability as well. However, it is also worth noting how only one female model out of 31 was portrayed (partly) lying down within the datasets, namely in a Ferragamo's Instagram post, as shown in *Figure 5*.



Figure 5. Ferragamo, 11 February 2022

Equally interesting to note is how both Ferragamo and Balmain's datasets include posts where the male model is often portrayed alone rather than accompanied by peers. This finding might indicate that men are portrayed in more autonomous and independent roles and positions, which could be explained by a need not to overcrowd the image or by a desire for the audience to focus on all elements of the portrayed models. This finding becomes more relevant when intersected with other coded characteristics, such as the Goffmanian touch described in the 'Operationalisation' sub-section and actions performed by the male models presented in the pictures. Here, autonomy and independence are constructed through the representation of active, dynamic men, in contrast with the disengagement conveyed by some still poses and, more so, of most depicted women. Indeed, male models were found to perform various activities, including engaging with a product (e.g., clothes, a briefcase), engaging with another model present on the scene, and engaging with the viewer both through touch and gaze. Furthermore, although concerning only 6% of the European dataset [n=5], it is interesting to note how male models tend to be presented as subjects of the action, whereas female models are, on the contrary, always portrayed as objects in static, decorative roles, such as the example in *Figure 6*. It can be said that the main feature of decorative objectification is the passiveness and dullness of models, who are not seen performing any other activity besides posing for the camera. The concept of decorative objectification is also linked to the previously discussed posture and pose of models (i.e., the more they resemble

casual or everyday-life poses, the more the model is seen as a person), as well as the settings of the image, which will be discussed in the last sub-section “(De)contextualisation of masculinity”.



Figure 6. Ferragamo, 22 January 2022

In terms of touch, functionality and steady grips were the most frequent, constituting 26% [n=21] of the European dataset, whereas feminine or ritualistic touch was present in only 6% [n=5] of analysed posts from Ferragamo and Balmain. Male models were most frequently shown engaging with their clothes and accessories through touch, such as handling the collar of their coat or holding a bag. The functionality of touch, in this case, might signify a “Western” hegemonic conceptualisation of masculinity, whereby men are viewed as performing functional and utilitarian actions, which are juxtaposed to the decorative, backgrounded roles of women. This is further highlighted by the posts showing men firmly

holding objects and garments. A point that, on the contrary, suggests a shift from the “Western” hegemonic conceptualisation is provided in *Figure 7*, which illustrates a post from Balmain where the male model is holding a homemade pie, carrying it towards the kitchen table. Indeed, although representing the previously mentioned engagement of male models in activities which might signify an extent of independence, this specific activity, however, does not relate to stereotypical masculinity but rather femininity, as actions pertaining to housekeeping and particularly cooking are frequently associated with women (Tsichla & Zotos, 2016). In this sense, masculinity takes on a character which is shifted from the “Western” hegemonic towards a more fluid conceptualisation that encompasses activities stereotypically relegated to the female role; such representation perfectly aligns with Balmain’s identity as a brand, as discussed in previous sections.



Figure 7. Balmain, 12 January 2022

Nonetheless, it is essential to specify that some posts were not coded for touch in both Ferragamo and Balmain datasets [n=13, 33% and n=10, 25%, respectively], as male models could be seen hiding their hands from sight, either putting them inside their pockets or behind their back. In fashion advertising, keeping the model's hands inside one or both pockets is a frequently implied pose. In addition to conveying a sense of comfort from the model, it can signal relaxedness (Maloney & Moore, 2020). Keeping one's hands in pockets is a body language cue that usually signifies defensiveness, lack of confidence, and distrust; however, it can also be perceived as a casual pose, depending on the context. By referring to the European brands' identities, it can be said that the notion of comfort is highly descriptive of Ferragamo, as it is considered one of the sets of elements composing the brand's narrative (Salvatore Ferragamo, n.d.-a).

4.1.3. Emotional distance

This theme discusses how masculinity is constructed as physically and emotionally disconnected or detached, both from the viewer and other actors involved. Literature has suggested that the manifestation of emotions other than anger or aggressiveness in men is not contemplated by "Western" hegemonic and hypermasculinities but can be instead associated with forms of hybrid masculinities and metrosexuality (see Theoretical Framework). Therefore, in this sense, the theme of physical and emotional distance might be an indicator of hegemonic influences on the brands' masculinity conceptualisations, despite the lack of implicit and explicit references to violence, aggressiveness, and callousness typical of hypermasculinity. In general, the male models tend to show a neutral expression whereby their expression does not signal any sign of emotional response. Extant literature has already discussed the lack of emotionality related to masculinity, which agreed on categorising the display of such emotional distance as a sign of toughness, power, and control typical of "Western" hegemonic and hypermasculinities (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017). Inexpressiveness in men can be viewed as an element of control over oneself, whereby a man feels the want or need to physically contain and hide visible emotions (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017). Connell (1995) and Eisen and Yamashita (2017) posit how such behaviour is closely linked to forms of hegemonic masculinities, meaning the proliferation and glorification of violence, unreachability, and other hypermasculine values by the media, sports, and the military shaped the ("Western") conceptualisation of masculinity, as discussed in the Theoretical Framework.

However, it is also important to note that a characteristic of high fashion shoots is portraying models looking away and presenting the kind of neutral expression discussed above (van der Laan, 2015). The general trend of non-smiling models relates to a common visual preference of high fashion towards aspects and appeals diverging from real-life attractiveness but embodying fierceness and power (van der Laan, 2015). A neutral expression, therefore, becomes a signifier of the latter, whereby the lack of discernible emotion and the consequent distance and absence deriving therefrom is a means to represent a particular aesthetic which does not align with the conventional equation of beauty to smiling or laughing faces (van der Laan, 2015). However, despite not conveying identifiable emotions, the models' expression could be categorised as demand or offer gaze. Demand gaze would be more often observed in men; in this case, men would be more likely to be represented as the active part versus the passive femininity (Bell & Milic, 2002). However, contextual contingency is also needed to determine the role of power relations within an image, meaning that the type of demand needs to be addressed. In the case of the two brands, male models were mainly looking at the viewer, who thus becomes active participant, and requesting them to engage with the image directly, despite providing no further indication on the type of demand being made. This finding is not surprising since, in the case of magazine image advertisements – where a connection is deliberately sought between viewers and role models – demand gaze is preferred, as the advertisement demands the viewer to respond and react to the product (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021); therefore, the same could be inferred for social media advertising posts. In cases of offer gaze, the model invites the viewer to admire them, avoiding direct contact in favour of objectifying the self. In such instances, models remove themselves from the scene by turning away from other models or the viewer or averting their head and eyes. This licensed withdrawal can also be accentuated by using the hands or fingers to hide portions of the face, mouth, and eyes, as recorded in *Figure 8*; in addition, hands can also be implied for aesthetic or artistic reasons, which would be justified especially in the case of high fashion shoots.



Figure 8. Ferragamo, 18 October 2021

In other cases, mainly when the model is looking further in the distance, looking away might signify something other than a withdrawal from the scene, such as, for example, a gaze into a distant and unknown horizon. This interpretation could be reconnected to the figure of the cowboy mentioned in the Theoretical Framework, offering an idealised image of masculinity as seeking adventure and new challenges. In this case, the head of the model can also be often seen turned with respect to the rest of the body, which according to Kolbe and Albanese's (1996) study, would emphasise a sense of detachment from the model. More specifically, when the torso is facing the viewer and the head is not, the association with "Western" hegemonic male figures such as the cowboy or the rebel becomes stronger (Kolbe & Albanese, 1996). The brand seen the most in representing male models looking into the distance was Ferragamo [n=10, 25%].

4.1.4. (De)contextualisation

This last theme relates to the analysis of settings of the brands' Instagram posts, meaning the scenery (i.e., indoors, outdoors, or indefinite) and the presence of objects and props with which the models interact in the scene. The classification of settings helped understand how masculinities are contextualised by the fashion brands taken into analysis, namely how the brands construct masculinities through the placement of male models into specific sceneries and contexts. Indeed, context might provide further insights into the understanding of gender roles and performances by the brands, as settings might come to describe specific role behaviours and occupational statuses related to the portrayed models (see Theoretical Framework).

The analysis of the European brands showed that the majority of posts were set in indefinite sceneries, consisting of a plain-coloured background which usually ranges from black to white or bright and highly saturated hues. Such findings were prominent in Balmain, where 40% [n=16] of the dataset was coded for indefinite scenery. Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) identify this phenomenon as a tool to decontextualise the object or individual being portrayed in the image, in that they “become generic, a ‘typical example’, rather than connected with a particular location, a specific moment in time, a specific point of view and so on” (p. 156). As such, decontextualisation eliminates context in favour of product representation. Indeed, replacing the settings of a picture with a plain background puts more emphasis on the model and the products being advertised therein, which does not come as a surprise when dealing with branded and advertising content (Machin, 2004), given its primary purpose of selling something to the viewer. Further relations of indefinite sceneries to standard advertising features are highlighted by how plain studio backgrounds inherently mark the picture as being designed for a specific purpose (e.g., advertising a product) rather than being the result of spontaneity (Hansen & Machin, 2008). Thus, the image does not represent a real-life situation but an artificially recreated one with little to do with reality. In this sense, posts might be perceived as anonymous, as they fail to represent the brand's identity through setting; however, brand identity can also be translated or conveyed by other means, such as the models' appearance as seen in a previous sub-section, or the use of props, which is discussed within the next paragraph. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that brand identity can also be communicated via the decontextualisation of images. The lack of settings, in fact, foregrounds the subjects being represented, thereby implicitly centring the attention – both the brand's and the viewer's – towards them. For instance, *Figure 9* shows

how, despite not being contextualised, the post successfully conveys Balmain's identity by highlighting the model's fierceness and confidence.

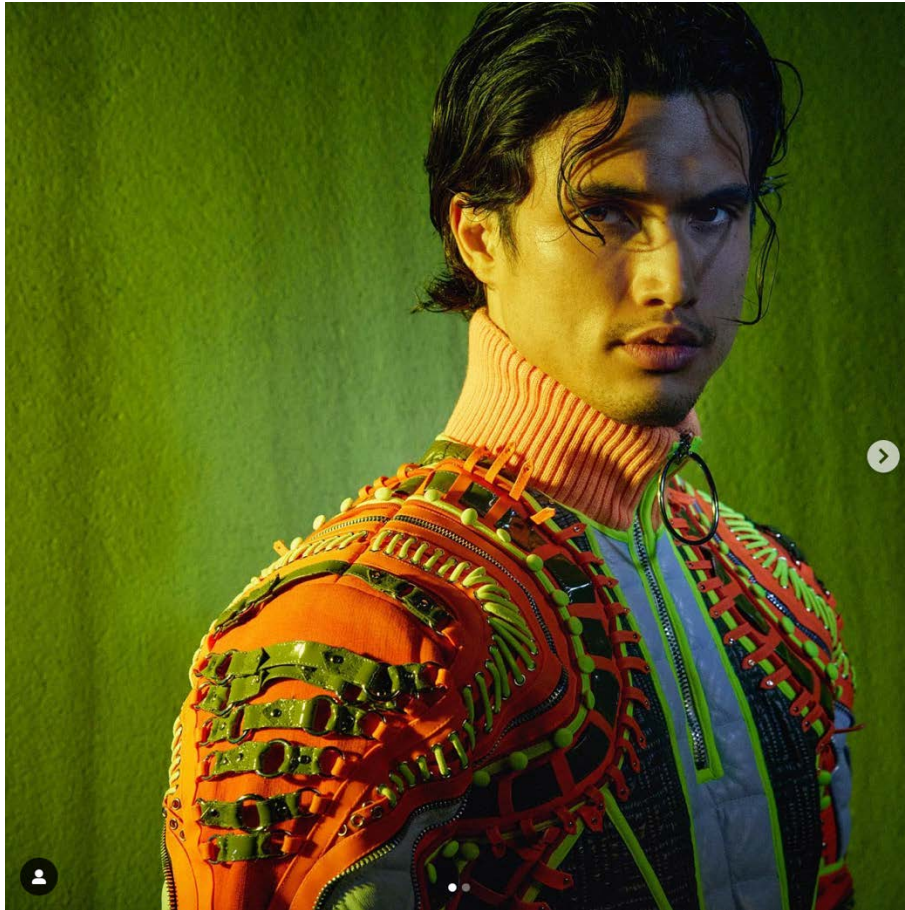


Figure 9. Balmain, 12 November 2021

In cases where scenes are not decontextualised, Ferragamo shows a preference for indoors [n=12, 30%], while Balmain for outdoors [n=11, 28%]. However, it is clear the attempt by both brands to infuse their posts with their respective brand identities, as Ferragamo tends to favour more elegant sets such as vintage interiors and sophisticated terraces, able to represent their refined elitist tradition and which thus translate into the choice of a so-called upper-class atmosphere such as the one depicted in *Figure 10*. Balmain instead sets more of its posts on streets or squares, such as the example in *Figure 11*, thereby conveying the sense of intensity and fierceness characteristic of the brand's identity. It is therefore acknowledged how, in terms of contextualisation of the Instagram posts, both brands construct masculinity in a manner which is able to embody the specific values and atmospheres associated with each respective brand.



Figure 10. Ferragamo, 23 December 2021



Figure 11. Balmain, 6 September 2021

The objects represented in the Instagram posts were analysed as well to gather insights into how masculinities are conceptualised by the two brands. These mostly included branded products such as bags advertised via the post. It is important to specify that only 11% [n=8] of the European dataset included pictures featuring props on the scene. Props that appeared more than once were kitchen utensils in the Balmain dataset, which might be related to stereotypical femininity (see “Predominance, authority, and independence”). It is also true, however, that men are seen interacting with said objects in one instance only, where the male model is in the act of serving a pie on a kitchen table, previously shown in *Figure 7*. Such representations are not coherent with the stereotypical gender portrayal of men as breadwinners (Chu et al., 2005; Donaldson, 1993; Eisend, 2019) but rather subvert this image of masculinity by associating men with stereotypically female gender roles. Nonetheless, objects such as piles of books, posters, and sports equipment were also recorded more than

once within the dataset. Books and posters are commonly associated with culture and literacy; the representation of such objects might construct an image of masculinity as intellectual and intelligent, which is exacerbated when paired with a vintage living room or reading room setting like the one by Ferragamo in *Figure 12*; such construction would be considered in line with the brand's identity, as previously discussed. Another interesting finding is that in one post from Ferragamo, books and a baseball ball are presented together, which might translate a signifier of physicality into a context of elegance and intellect (*Figure 12*).



Figure 12. Ferragamo, 24 December 2021

4.2.Chinese Constructions of Masculinities

This section presents findings related to the construction of masculinities represented by the Chinese fashion brands Fabric Porn and ARP, which are categorised by the main themes mentioned above and discussed within the following paragraphs.

4.2.1. Models' appearance

Similarly to the European datasets, the discussed results relate to the number of male models presented in the posts, unless otherwise specified, namely $n=41$ for ARP and $n=46$ for Fabric Porn.

Bodily and demographic characteristics

Concerning the Chinese fashion brands ARP and Fabric Porn, more than half of the respective datasets depicted models coded as Asian [$n=34$, 83% and $n=37$, 80%, respectively]; the remainder was mainly constituted by White [$n=4$, 10%] and undefined [$n=2$, 5%] race models in the case of ARP, and by Black models in the case of Fabric Porn [$n=6$, 13%]. It can be inferred that to the extent of the present study, the Chinese fashion brands present themselves as the least diverse in terms of race representation. Such findings could be explained by discussing the role of national identity and patriotism in developing Chinese fashion. Indeed, patriotism has represented a focal point in Chinese culture since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, to the point that it is actively implemented into the educational system, and as such, it has become a naturally embedded state of mind in Chinese citizens (Tsui, 2015). Tsui (2015) also brings about the relevance of the difference in the meaning that is attached to the idea of nationalism in China and in "Western" countries, whereby ethnicity for Chinese designers becomes a means to emphasise their patriotic sentiments and differentiate themselves from their "Western" counterparts by representing their nationality in the most immediate way, as well as to gain international recognition at a fast rate and to act as a countermovement to the underrepresentation of Asian models by other ("Western") fashion brands (Persad, 2021). Furthermore, it is essential to note that although the Chinese brands analysed for this study explicitly state an international outlook on the fashion market (Atelier Rouge Pékin, n.d.-a; Jain, 2020), their primary operations are based in China, where the luxury fashion market is a leading one worldwide (Daxueconsulting, 2021; Statista, n.d.), thus encouraging brands to focus on domestic consumers. In addition, ARP and Fabric Porn are two high-end fashion brands that do not hold as much exposure as their established European counterparts. In fact, they both advertise and sell their products mainly through the Chinese online platforms WeChat and Weibo, making them a niche option more viable to Chinese consumers.

The assessment of body type representation showed how the most coded is 3 on the FRS for ARP [n=24, 60%], whereas Fabric Porn shows a preference for men coded as 2 on the FRS, with 73% of its posts portraying thin and slender models [n=29]. Generally, male models representing the Chinese fashion brands can be defined as more petit in shape, having little to no muscularity. This finding is consistent with the discussion on the Chinese ideal of man presented in the Theoretical Framework, particularly with the wen construct, according to which the idealised male figure would resemble that of a (stereotyped) scholar, both physically and intellectually. Indeed, it has been previously explored how Chinese tradition elevates character rather than physical traits and body ideals, particularly emphasising erudition, love, and gentleness. The portrayal of tall, slightly muscular men is exemplified by a plethora of said representations, which do not only concern China but also countries that share the same Confucian idealisation of masculinity, such as Japan and Korea (Lee, 2010). According to Kong (2006), the elevation of the Chinese wen over wu has long been utilised by Asian men to challenge the “Western” stereotypical view of Asians as effeminate by refuting the equation of muscularity to masculinity, which this study’s findings might thus confirm.

Lastly, it is worth noting how Fabric Porn constitutes an exception when considering the models’ age groups, as the brand’s posts include a majority of young adult men [n=38, 95%], but also middle-aged men [n=3] and children [n=2]. Despite the minor relevance, this finding provides an interesting point regarding masculinities, as different constructions might be associated with different ages. In addition to demonstrating a greater degree of inclusiveness in terms of age groups, some differences were observed compared to young adult models. Indeed, children were portrayed with stereotypical signifiers such as children’s books and colourful drawings on their faces (*Figure 13*), while middle-aged men’s most prominent feature was their expressivity, represented through frowning faces (*Figure 14*). Furthermore, children and middle-aged men were the only age groups among the entire dataset to be ranked higher than 3 on the FRS, which could indicate their consideration as “anomalous” and independent constructions of masculinities that do not adequately fit in with the remainder of the dataset.



Figure 13. Fabric Porn, 5 March 2021



Figure 14. Fabric Porn, 5 March 2021

Dressing and grooming

Regarding the styling of models, Fabric Porn figures as one of the brands having the most “adorned” models, constituting 45% of the brand’s dataset [n=18]. Fabric porn is also the only brand featuring visibly tattooed models in their Instagram posts, which is slightly surprising in light of the traditionally controversial status of tattoos in China as they have been associated with crime and prostitution (Reed, 2000; Kte’pi, 2006; Holoka, 2018). The choice of showing a tattoo might also be related to Fabric Porn’s brand identity, which incorporates modern and urban lifestyle elements such as tattoos into their vision. Fabric Porn is indeed a fashion brand that aims to merge the traditional Chinese with a more “Western” and globalised viewpoint, thereby creating the feeling of a counterculture that purposefully disrupts a traditional vision. As tattoos are historically linked to hypermasculinity (Horne et al., 2007; Scott, 2018), the depiction thereof might suggest a

construction of masculinity that follows the same conceptualisation; however, it is also important to examine the type – and size – of the tattoo that is being portrayed, as different drawings and symbols provide different signifiers of masculinity. In the case of Fabric Porn, the model is shown with two visible tattoos, one on the neck and one covering the whole arm length. The neck tattoo represents some Chinese ideograms, while the arm tattoo, although not wholly recognisable, seems to be of abstract nature and is mostly black. It can be said that both the size and the ink prevalence of the tattoo convey the idea of strong, powerful masculinities, somewhat in line with previous observations on tattoos and hypermasculinity. However, it can be inferred that tattoos no longer necessarily denote hypermasculinity due to the contemporary diffusion of the practice.

The prevalence of short head hair in the Chinese dataset presents instead a common point with European brands, whereby in these terms, masculinity seems to be constructed similarly. Short hair is indeed perceived as normatively associated with men and masculinities, as previously discussed, and as such comes to signify a hegemonic, socially accepted gender performance. Nonetheless, among the two Chinese brands, longer head hair is more widely present within Fabric Porn's dataset [n=9, 23%]. In the Chinese cultural context, long hair was used in the past to symbolise the wen identity, thus representing the artistic and scholarly attitude associated with the wen masculinity construct (Miao, 2018). More recently, however, the emerging hybrid masculinity referred to by Chinese individuals as "Little Fresh Meat" (LFM) has incorporated longer hair to give an androgynous aspect to masculinity, which becomes a combination of masculine and feminine cultural beauty standards (Jiang et al., 2019). Regarding facial hair, Chinese brands' datasets include only 11% [n=9] of posts portraying models with a beard and/or a moustache. The lower frequency of models with facial hair in the Chinese brands' datasets could result again from the wen conceptualisation of masculinity. Indeed, as Jiang et al. (2019) illustrate, "modern-day wen are scholars, writers, professors, scientists, conscientious businessmen, creative artists or other males with substantial educational, intellectual or cultural achievements" (p. 724), and as such, their face must be clean-shaven (Jiang et al., 2019). The lack of facial hair in Chinese models is a characteristic feature of LFM masculinity, whereby men must appear young, innocent, and androgynous, in addition to being appearance and fashion-conscious (Jiang et al., 2019).

Framing of bodies

General findings regarding body framing for the Chinese brands are similar to those of the European brands, whereby both Fabric Porn and ARP show a preference for full body and full upper body and half lower body shots. One post from ARP included a model's sole body with no head showing, which can be the strongest example of sexual objectification in this instance, albeit being the only one within the entire examined corpus (*Figure 15*). That is because the post presents the male model's bare upper body positioned in a canting, S-curved pose, which can be perceived as sexually suggestive and submissive by the viewer (Goffman, 1979). This phenomenon could frequently be observed in cases of male models showing exposed skin, thus emphasising the bare body part by engaging in bent, curved, or suggestive poses. Cropping was also identified with objectification, whereby the models' bodies appeared fragmented so that only a specific part, such as the torso, was shown (Gill, 2007). In this case, men's bodies were presented more as decorative and somewhat objectified.



Figure 15. Atelier Rouge Pékin, 7 June 2019

4.2.2. Predominance, authority, and independence

The analysis of posts from the two Chinese brands yielded similar results to that of European brands in terms of relative size and poses of male models. Men often appeared taller than or as tall as other models, including women, finding that can be explained by the same biological reason provided previously. One finding that diverged from the European dataset's observation is the presence of two posts from ARP and Fabric Porn, respectively, where the male model is portrayed lying down (*Figure 16, 17*). ARP's post might thus imply a degree of sexualisation in that the man can be seen posing in such a way that highlights and almost offers his body to the viewer by stretching his arms behind him and driving attention to his upper body, albeit being completely clothed. The post from Fabric Porn does not suggest the same construction, as the male model is portrayed in a sleeping, foetal position, which does not relate to sexualisation. Nonetheless, the submissiveness of the pose is acknowledged, so much so that the eyes are closed, and the model is positioned lower with respect to the viewer.



Figure 16. Fabric Porn, 9 February 2021



Figure 17. Atelier Rouge Pékin, 23 May 2019

Men were also seen engaging in canting or in not completely straight positions, as in *Figure 15* above, finding which contrasts Goffman's claim that curved and tilted poses are inherently connected to women as opposed to men's straighter poses. In this sense, posts portraying head or body cants defy the typical association of men with power and superiority, which are consolidated by straight postures. It is now acknowledged the presence of visual challenges to the Goffmanian (stereotyped) expectation of men as dominant, despite them constituting only a small fraction of the datasets.

As discussed for the European datasets, touch and actions were coded to identify the level of authority and independence conveyed by the posts. Within this context, episodes of feminine touch performed by male models were found to be relatively more frequent among the Chinese brands ARP [n=5, 13%] and Fabric Porn [n=9, 23%]. Touch, and more specifically, the position and function of hands figure as one of the supporting elements of the Chinese wen construct (Miao, 2018), especially when opposed to the fierce and martial wu. Indeed, delicate hands constitute a marker of the wen identity, whereby they come to symbolise a scholarly, literate attitude which collides quite abruptly with the image of a warrior or a manual worker (Miao, 2018). Fragility and delicacy, mostly signalled by a feminised or effeminate – compared to the “Western” gender discourse – physical

presentation, as well as the presence of creative and literary activities, are considered desirable features for men to have, as they are inherently associated with “knowledge and civility” (Song, 2004, p. 16), which constitute paramount values for the traditional wen masculinity. As such, the modern Chinese conceptualisation of masculinity came to include these same features, which are hereby communicated through contemporary representations of “the fragile scholar” (Song, 2004, p. 16) and include, among others, the Goffmanian feminine touch. The appropriation of such stereotypically feminine features thus challenges not only the “Western” hegemonic conceptualisations of masculinities but also the binary of masculinity and femininity itself, which represents a pivotal point of discussion throughout this study. However, a post by ARP provides an interesting intersection between functionality and decorative roles (*Figure 18*). The solid grip of the model, in fact, contrasts with the suggestive act of exposing his naked chest, which constructs an image of masculinity that suggests without necessarily aligning with the “Western” hegemonic view, but rather objectifies and sexualises the male body in such a way that maintains the stereotypically male characters of strength and power.



Figure 18. Atelier Rouge Pékin, 26 January 2018

4.2.3. Emotional distance

The discussion held on the European brands regarding gaze and framing can be extended to the Chinese brands since more than half of Fabric Porn and ARP's posts were coded for neutral expressions [n=29, 73% and n=27, 68%, respectively] and framed at full body [n=25, 63% and n=16, 40% respectively]. More precisely, on average, direct looks are more frequent in posts from ARP and Fabric Porn, where 60% [n=24] and 50% [n=20] of the respective datasets were coded as such. The remainder of models was coded as looking away with respect to the viewer, where 13% of posts from ARP [n=5] and 18% of posts from Fabric Porn [n=7] portrayed models not engaging in direct contact with the viewer. In this sense, the brands construct masculinity as detached and distant, which suggests a connection to forms of hegemonic masculinities discussed concerning the European construction of masculinities. The concept of aloofness and emotional containment is not exclusively present in "Western" conceptualisations but also defines a critical element of the Chinese wen-wu paradigm (see Theoretical Framework). Therefore, by depicting male models' neutral expressions, the posts might embody such traditional Chinese notions, as well as follow the previously mentioned high fashion preference toward non-smiling, fierce-looking faces (van der Laan, 2015). Similarly, when analysing away looks, similar conclusions to the European dataset were inferred, whereby most models averting their eyes from the viewer were gazing in the distance. An example is shown in *Figure 19*, where the male model deliberately looks away, instead directing the gaze towards something or somewhere not disclosed in the picture. The presence of a space rocket model and the man holding an open book as if he was reading it shortly before the shot seem to suggest a construction of masculinity that shares with the "Western" cowboy masculinity the adventure-seeking element, which is, however, portrayed in a much more dreamlike, meditative light that contrasts with the often stern and unsentimental looks of the cowboy (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Moss, 2012). Thus, in general, masculinities are constructed around feelings of distance, although represented in a somewhat softer fashion which could strongly relate to features of "the fragile scholar" (Song, 2004, p. 16) described in the "Predominance, authority, and independence" theme.



Figure 19. Fabric Porn, 2 May 2021

4.2.4. (De)contextualisation

Analysis of settings for the two Chinese brands highlighted a notable presence of decontextualised posts [n=38, 48%], similarly to European brands. The brand presenting indefinite sceneries the most is Fabric Porn, where 60% [n=24] of posts were coded as such. The discussion on image contextualisation carried out for Ferragamo and Balmain can also be applied in this instance. When scenes are not decontextualised, 26% are set indoors [n=21], while 24% [n=19] are set outdoors. In this case, ARP favours indoor sceneries, particularly set inside a house. In general, the brand's choice revolves around settings that communicate a strong link to their heritage and identity; for instance, *Figure 20* shows the model in a room decorated with a flower painting and incense, which can be easily related to Chinese culture and a minimal however refined atmosphere. Indeed, specific flowers are considered

representative, such as peonies and chrysanthemums, similar to those depicted in the painting, as they come to symbolise traditional attributes and values dear to Chinese culture (China Collection, n.d.). Fabric Porn was instead described in the Methodology as a brand rooted in traditional Chinese but also pop culture, thus leading to it focusing on more everyday contexts, such as the one presented in *Figure 21*. It thus emerged from the findings a different approach to image contextualisation between the two brands, which is found to reflect their respective identities coherently.



Figure 20. Atelier Rouge Pékin, 18 February 2022



Figure 21. Fabric Porn, 18 July 2021

The inclusion of props for the Chinese brands mostly referred to house-cleaning supplies, recorded within Fabric Porn's dataset. As previously noted, the presence of objects linked to traditionally female gender roles suggests a shift towards a different conceptualisation of masculinity, which comes to entail behaviours and occupations stereotypical to women. Further identified objects were piles of books, posters, and liquor bottles. As already mentioned for the European brands, books and posters might provide a construction of masculinity that would be in line with previous discussions on the wen conceptualisation, whereby the figure of the scholar is used to symbolise the highest idealisation of masculinity. Liquor bottles can, on the contrary, be viewed as more representative of "Western" hegemonic or hypermasculinities, whereby they might be tokenised to construct an image of masculinity as tough, reckless, and physical (Peralta,

2007). Indeed, alcohol consumption is widely associated with men and masculinity, as it is conceived as the embodiment of strength, toughness, and control over oneself through participation and endurance of risky activities (Mullen et al., 2009; Peralta, 2007).

5. Conclusions and Limitations

The present study investigated how masculinities are constructed in Instagram advertising posts published by European and Chinese fashion brands. For this reason, the research question “How are masculinities constructed by European and Chinese high-end fashion brands on Instagram?” was formulated and is hereby answered by summarising the main findings of the analysis.

The study contributed to existing research on masculinities by undertaking a thematic analysis of 160 Instagram posts from four high-fashion brands, which findings suggest that representations and constructions of masculinities in Europe and China are reflective of general trends in fashion advertising. These trends are related to male appearance and behaviour and show similarities and subtle differences between the two geographical areas. The study might thus indicate a possible impact of globalisation on the four analysed brands and the shifting nature of gender identity on the conceptualisation of masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Eisend, 2019), which are constantly evolving and incorporating features of other regional masculinities and/or femininities in order to gradually detach from the binary of gender roles.

In addition, the research suggests a uniform pattern of features that were incorporated by both European and Chinese brands, which could relate to the high-fashion aspect of the sample. More precisely, a majority of young and thin men was recorded, in line with claims by Mears (2011), which highlight a preference by luxury and designer brands towards said characteristics when choosing their models. The element of social class also intersects with gender in a way that provides two different conceptualisations between European and Chinese brands. In fact, it emerged from the data how, while European brands preserved a degree of elitist and upper-class heritage in their constructions, especially in the case of Ferragamo, the Chinese brands offered representations of masculinities in casual, everyday contexts, which do not necessarily correspond to their target segment. This might further suggest the incorporation of elements characteristic of different masculinity constructions, which is a typical feature of hybrid masculinities (Eisen & Yamashita, 2017; Scheibling & Lafrance, 2019).

This research, therefore, showed how physical characteristics of men in social media advertising reflect and reinforce national ideal beauty standards for men, as well as including characteristics that deviate from the expected idealised representation of masculinity. Indeed, the analysis highlighted continuity between European and Chinese brands with regards to the

physical traits of the male models, such as the preference for particular age groups and body types. In fact, the Instagram posts showed an overrepresentation of young men with tall and slim bodies, thereby portraying an image which does not account for the reality of society and does not allow due space for diversity – contrary to contemporary body positivity efforts and their effect on women’s fashion (e.g., Hakeem, 2020) – as men who do not reflect the portrayed ideal are excluded from representation. This finding contrasts with the “Western” hegemonic and hypermasculine idealisation of men as physically strong and muscular (Waling et al., 2018; Vokey et al., 2013), suggesting a clear shift towards a different conceptualisation. Further notes on similarities between European and Chinese constructions can be made regarding the depiction of the body, where similar to past research (Hatton & Trautner, 2011, 2013), male bodies were objectified to an extent. For instance, male body parts such as the chest, abdomen, and face were occasionally either cropped and presented as decorative objects in the images or emphasised by revealing apparel.

On the other hand, the findings also highlighted differences in the portrayal of masculinities among the brands, whereby models from the Chinese brands were depicted in ritualistic and submissive poses more frequently than their European counterparts; nonetheless, constructions of masculinities as functional and/or independent were predominant throughout the whole analysed corpus. Indeed, the intersection between touch, action, and poses of the male models indicated an overarching construction of masculinity as an active gender role, especially when portrayed alongside women. These findings relate to the hegemonic idealisation of men as doers, performers, and engaged individuals who act rather than observe (Goffman, 1971). Findings related to gaze seem to confirm this link to “Western” hegemonic masculinity by highlighting a shared emotional distance among the brands’ representations, which, however, additionally suggests an implicit withdrawal of male models from the scene that might correlate with instances of (self-) objectification and/or submissiveness. It can finally be inferred that the most notable difference lies in the contextualisation of the Instagram posts, whereby settings followed specific expedients which reflected each brand’s identity and thus shaped and visualised recognisable constructions of masculinities.

5.1.Limitations and Future Research

To conclude this thesis, the following paragraphs are dedicated to the limitations of this study and possible directions for future research on the topic of masculinities and fashion.

It is important to note how the choice of this study to consider Europe as a continent for the analysis inherently generalises a variety of distinct countries, thereby raising the possibility for findings not to reflect the reality of all cultures included in this study. Future research could therefore replicate this study with more consideration towards the geographical selection of advertisements, focusing on the comparative study of individual countries and cultures. Moreover, as this research focused on the construction of masculinities by high-end fashion brands only, findings cannot be generalised to the entire fashion industry; in addition, considering the intersectional nature of the study, relative findings are also lacking in terms of class representativeness, as the brands' target segment currently includes high- and middle-class consumers. Such limitation can be used as a baseline for future research, which might compare gender role portrayals of high-end/luxury fashion and low-end/fast fashion brands. As an additional remark, it is worth noting that the present research did not perform a thematic analysis of captions of the Instagram posts, as they were deemed non-descriptive and thus negligible for the purpose of the study.

Furthermore, the scope of this study did not encompass the investigation of intersectionality between masculinity and other relevant aspects. Gender identities are, in fact, determined by multiple factors that interact and impact one another, generating significant repercussions on everyday life (Collins & Bilge, 2016), thus making an intersectional analysis of elements such as gender and race useful and necessary. On this note, future research might focus on the construction of masculinities, and its intersection with race and even sexuality understood as sexual preference, particularly related to fashion, in light of their influence on individuals' gender understanding and performance (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Karioris & Allan, 2018; Ozturk et al., 2020).

Additionally, an investigation of men's perception of the analysed posts could be undertaken to explore consumers' viewpoints since this study only delved into the production rather than the reception side; in this sense, interviews might provide a different and insightful contribution to the present research. Indeed, it has been previously discussed the socialising role of media, whereby they are able to determine not only public discourse but also shape individuals' self-perception and that of others (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015).

When discussing masculinities and gender roles, this results in the possibility of media influencing men's public opinion and masculinity performance, as well as their perception of themselves.

Finally, the shifting nature intrinsic to the concepts of gender and gender roles was previously acknowledged via the presentation of different conceptualisations of masculinity in the Theoretical Framework and a summary of this study's findings. Therefore, a recommendation for future research on this topic would be to compare past and current studies in order to reach a better understanding of the evolving societal perspective toward gender by accounting for possible reconceptualisations.

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7. Appendices

7.1. Appendix A – Thematic Map

Theme	Sub-theme	Main code	Sub-code	Definition
Models' appearance	Bodily and demographic characteristics	Race	White	The race of the model is described based on skin colour and facial features
			Black	
			Latino	
			Asian	
			Undefined	
		Age	Child	The age of the model is described based on physical characteristics
			Young adult	
			Middle-aged	
		Body type	FRS 2	The body type of the model is described based on the FRS (Stunkard et al., 1993)
			FRS 3	
	FRS 4			
	FRS 5			
	Framing of bodies	Apparel	Showing skin	The amount of clothing worn by the model is described
			Fully dressed	
	Dressing and grooming	Make-up		The presence or absence of make-up on the model is described
Hair		Facial hair	The presence or absence of facial hair on the model is described	
		Hair length	The model's hair length is described	
Accessories		Earrings		
		Glasses		

			Bracelets	The jewellery and accessories worn by the model are described
			Rings	
Predominance, authority, and independence	Relative position	Alone	The position of the model is described with respect to other models	
		Foregrounded		
		Backgrounded		
	Pose	Standing	The pose of the model is described, considering Kolbe and Albanese's (1996) coding frame for nudity and suggestive poses (i.e., poses suggesting or implying sexual desire, arousal, or exposing more skin than usual)	
		Sitting		
		Laying down		
	Touch	Feminine/decorative (e.g., lightly stroking cheek, self-touching)	The model's hands were described based on Goffman's (1979) coding frame	
		Functional (e.g., firmly holding bag)		
	Action	Engaging with product	The interactions between the model and objects or people are described	
		Engaging with other models		
Engaging with viewer				
Emotional distance	Gaze	Eyes	The model's eyes were described in terms of open or closed eyelids	

		Head	The position and facing of the model's head were described	
		Expression	The emotions conveyed by the model's face and gaze were described	
		Look	The model's look was described in terms of direction of the gaze based on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) definition of demand (i.e., direct look, seeking contact) and offer (i.e., looking away, avoiding contact)	
(De)contextualisation	Setting	Objects	Sports	The type of props present on the scene was described
			Housekeeping	
			Office	
		Scenery	Indoors (e.g., house, museum)	The type of setting was described in terms of closed, open, or undefined spaces
Outdoors (e.g., street, nature)				
Indefinite (i.e., plain coloured background)				