

Material girls

Exploring the Black girl luxury movement through the lens of media reception theory

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1 Introduction

According to Kapferer & Michaut (2016), luxury can be defined as goods “whose consumption or possession prompt a sense of elevation in terms of social status, cultural superiority, or pleasure”. The concept has been found to imply a sense of exclusivity, both on an economic and a social level (Radón, 2012; Farmaki, 2006). This sense of exclusivity has been brought to light in recent discussions concerning the exclusion of black women in the realm of luxury (Kolade, 2021; Drinkard, 2018; Nittle, 2019). This exclusion has been challenged by the ‘Black women in Luxury’ and ‘Black Girl Luxury’ hashtags on TikTok, a movement that aims to portray black women indulging in luxury to defy negative stereotypes in the media (Hutchinson, 2021).

The black girl luxury movement combines the complexities of luxury and exclusion, othering and empowerment as well as social identity and identity negotiation. Before establishing the interconnectedness thereof, it is noteworthy to shed light onto the othered position of black women in society. As the colonial context birthed a racial hierarchy that declared non-white people as inferior, a racial identity was imposed on ‘the other’ (Said, 1978). The double marginalisation faced by black women for being both women and black entailed that they endured both sexualization and racial stereotyping (Nicholson, 1994). They were stereotyped as the promiscuous Jezebel, the angry black woman and as poor amongst other things (Nguyen & Anthony, 2014, p. 772; Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013; Jerald et al., 2017).

The normalisation of stereotypical ideas about black women were perpetuated in visual representations of black womanhood (Nguyen & Anthony, 2014; Collins, 2002; Schwalbe et al. 2000). As society defined black femininity as synonymous with poverty, sexualization and struggle, it created a social identity for black women that includes these characteristics. In spite of this negative portrayal, black women have found ways to empower themselves by using the digital space in order to redefine their identities and counter the stories that are told about them (Lee, 2015).

While the othered position of black women in the colonial context prohibited black women from accumulating wealth and restricted them from partaking in luxury, their current position as highly educated and financially independent has made it possible for them to indulge in luxury (Sinclair, 2020). Though they do partake in luxury consumption, there seems to be a lack of inclusion of black women portrayed in the realm of luxury.

While luxury consumption and its relation to gender have been studied extensively, little research has focused on the intersection between black womanhood and the consumption of luxurious goods (Gauvin, 2014; Emmanuel-Stephen & Gbadamosi, 2021). Studies have, however, shown that the consumption behaviour of black women tends to be intertwined with a desire for upward mobility (Gauvin, 2014). Other than consumption of luxurious goods being a way to feel part of the elite, it is often viewed as an escape from the racial stereotypes attached to black femininity (Flax, 1993; Nicholson, 1994).

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight how the black women in luxury movement creates a new social identity for black women by examining what the movement entails and to what extent it is adopted, challenged or adjusted by its audience. Two research objectives follow from this inquiry.

Firstly, 'how are visual elements on TikTok used to define Black Girl Luxury?'. Secondly, 'how does the audience on Twitter and YouTube respond to the black women in luxury movement?'. The concepts luxury and exclusion, othering and empowerment as well as social identity and identity negotiation will enable me to analyse how the movement and its audience combine these complexities (Ko et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2014; Halliday & Brown, 2018). Consequently, this thesis will provide a semiotic analysis of TikTok data to find the ways in which the movement utilises visuals to define itself and a thematic analysis to assess how the audience on Twitter and YouTube make sense of black girl luxury through the lens of media reception theory. The research objectives will provide a broader illustration on how the black girl luxury movement opposes narratives created about black womanhood through the use of visual imagery and a new social identity for black women.

This thesis will start with a literature review of luxury and exclusion, othering and empowerment as well as social identity and identity negotiation (Ko et al., 2019; Jiang et al., 2014; Gauvin, 2014; Said, 1978; Lee, 2015; Gammage, 2015; Hassan, 2018; Deaux & Ethier, 1998). Its relation to the visual representations and racial stereotypes of black women as well as the challenging thereof will be discussed. After an outline of the research design and method, the semiotic and thematic analyses will be conducted. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the findings and their implications on the black women in luxury movement's objective to endow black womanhood with positive connotations.

2 Literature Review

This thesis will firstly present a literature review that brings clarity to the following themes and theories and the academic debates concerning them: luxury and exclusion, media reception theory, othering and empowerment as well as social identity and identity negotiation. This theoretical framework will inform the methodological approach of this study and aid in the analysis of the results. Most importantly, this chapter aims to demonstrate how these themes and theories are related to or challenge the black girl luxury movement. Furthermore, it intends to shed light onto the gaps this study fills in recent academic literature.

2.1 Luxury and exclusion

In order to unpack the interrelation between luxury and exclusion, a discussion will be held about the academic debates concerning the two concepts and their interrelation. The complexity of 'luxury' as a concept lies in the fact that academic debates have shown a lack of consensus regarding the definition for the term (Heine & Phan, 2011; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2006; Gheisary, 2016). Research by Kapferer & Michaut (2016) turned to the consumers for a definition and found that they often define luxury goods as expensive, high quality and prestigious. In an attempt to bring more clarity to the definition of luxury, other authors identified six characteristics that can be used to define the term: "price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness and symbolism" (Ko et al., 2019, p. 92). Thus, products or services belong to the luxury segment if they are expensive, meet the requirements for superior quality, reflect the taste of the upper class, are exclusive, innovative in style and symbolise prestige. According to Ko et al. (2019), luxury is relative and in the eyes of the beholder. They state that the term "evokes a mental image in peoples' minds about what the corresponding set of real phenomena (designata) they have observed represents in general and what these phenomena have in common" (p. 39). In other words, what people see and what that visual represents to them determines how they label the phenomena. In relation to luxury, this implies that the image that comes to mind when one thinks of a premium good can differ amongst individuals. As this study aims to find how black women that participate in the black girl luxury movement define luxury in a manner that respects their individual perceptions of what 'luxury' entails, the definition by Ko et al. (2019) will be applied in this research.

Though the meaning of luxury is dependent on the individual, there is a common reason for indulging in luxurious consumption. According to Jiang et al. (2014), "the concept of luxury has an inherent social component" (p. 245). The motive behind purchasing luxury items is often found to be prestige and the feeling that one has achieved a high social status (Trommsdorff, 2009). Luxury brands are aware of this and thus aim to attract consumers who seek high stature through their consumption (Ko et al., 2019). Or as put by Kapferer and Bastien (2009), "the DNA of luxury is the symbolic desire to belong to a superior class" (p. 314). Phau & Prendergast (2000) state that "if everyone owns a particular brand, prestige is eroded and thus the luxury component is taken away," this is referred to as the rarity principle (p. 124). Many researchers echo this as they argue that social

exclusion is a key component to luxury (Farmaki, 2006; Jackson, 2004; Jiang et al., 2014). While it is purchased in order to feel connected to the higher class, it is simultaneously meant to solely be accessible to a select few affluent individuals who belong to the highest social class. It can therefore be said to exclude a greater portion of society.

Though high-end products may not be accessible to all, the consumers who cannot afford those items still want to participate in consumption that *feels* luxurious but fits within their financial means. The democratisation of luxurious products or brands is referred to as “masstige,” meaning “offering prestige to the masses” (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009, p. 312; Ko et al., 2019, p. 88). Masstige brands concentrate on creating symbolism and a sense of prestige that is attainable, affordable and mirrors luxury brands (Ko et al., 2019). For instance, “Zara exemplifies the idea of selling taste and style to the masses, which is accomplished by imitating the design of luxury brands for their clothing, stores and advertising” (p. 89). “A mass-prestige-business in the mass/middle-class market reduces the level of rarity and can only be achieved with reasonable prices, which, in turn, requires a compromise on quality, extraordinariness and aesthetics” (p. 89). That is to say that though masstige brands and products aim to imitate luxury, the difference in quality, pricing and accessibility keeps them from being high-end. The rise of masstige or premium brands can somewhat be related to the increased spending power of the lower and middle class (Hudders et al., 2014). As they want to experience and consume luxury goods as well, the rich no longer have a monopoly on experiencing a sense of luxury (Bilge, 2015). Masstige can therefore be read as a response to the financial exclusivity of luxurious goods. It counters this by providing a similar experience of premium goods at an affordable price range, thus by a more financially inclusive approach.

Just as differences among luxurious consumption exist between the lower, middle and upper class, there are also gendered differences in the consumption of lavish products. For the sake of this study, we will focus on habits demonstrated by women. Research conducted by Kaiser (1997) has found that women specifically consume luxury fashion in order to portray belonging to the upper class or their desire for upward mobility. This phenomenon, “the spending of money on and the purchasing of luxury brands and services with the intention to exhibit purchasing and economic power to the public,” is referred to as conspicuous consumption (Ahmad et al., 2014, p. 85). According to Mortelmans (2005) it is also done with the gaze of observers in mind, as the aim is to inspire them. This gaze is kept in mind as women who consume luxury goods do so to communicate to other females that their romantic partner splurges on them financially and gifts them valuable items (Hudders et al., 2014). This is especially true when it comes to high-end fashion or jewellery (Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). While consumption behaviour was traditionally found to be based on rational decisions, studies have shown that female consumers of luxury goods consume them based on feelings of pleasure and gratification after the purchase (Yeoman, 2011).

To summarise, while research concerning luxury has often defined it as luxury goods that are expensive, high quality and prestigious (Kapferer & Michaut, 2016), Ko et al. (2019) perceive it to be a relative term that depends on an individual’s conception thereof. Prestige is identified as the motive behind engaging in luxurious consumption (Trommsdorff, 2009), this is echoed by Kaiser (1997) who claims that women in particular partake in luxury consumption due to a desire for upward mobility.

Despite the fact that consuming premium goods can help the lower and middle class identify with the elite, social exclusion is still argued to be a key component to luxury (Farmaki, 2006; Jackson, 2004; Jiang et al., 2014). The reason being is that its inherent element of financial exclusivity solely makes luxury synonymous to the select few who can afford it (Farmaki, 2006; Jackson, 2004; Jiang et al., 2014).

In line with the aforementioned literature, this study approaches luxury as a term that should not be approached as a one-size-fits-all, but should rather be viewed from the context of social class, financial means and gender (Kapferer & Michaut, 2016; Ko et al., 2019; Trommsdorff, 2009; Kaiser, 1997). These factors do not only to a certain extent determine how luxury is perceived but also speak to how they influence the type of exclusion that is therefore faced within the realm of luxury. I additionally want to be mindful of how exclusion determined by social standing or spending power works as a stimulus for attaining an idealised prestigious position.

2.1.1 Marginalised groups and exclusion

Though research has focused on luxury, exclusion and luxury consumption behaviour demonstrated by women separately, little research has focused on combining these matters and applying them to the exclusion of marginalised groups such as black women within luxury. Instead, attention has solely been paid to the luxury consumption behaviour of black women. Research into the consumption of black women specifically has labelled them as “aspirational consumers,” consumers who are drawn to goods linked to “their aspirations of creating a brighter future for them and the society” (Gauvin, 2014, p. 1). Furthermore, a study conducted by Emmanuel-Stephen & Gbadamosi (2021) found that the motivation for black women to buy luxury goods are themes such as success, societal pressure, belongingness, and cultural connection. Buying into luxury not only enables them to manage societal expectations that are placed on them as women, they also serve as a way to move away from negative, racial stereotypes by ‘appearing’ to belong to the upper class. This is also related to the colonial history that erased the identities of black women and boxed them into centralising childcare and domesticity. This led to regressive stereotypes that are countered by using consumption as a way to redefine themselves (Flax, 1993; Nicholson, 1994).

The recent surge of the Black Women in Luxury movement has started an online conversation around the exclusion of black women in luxury spaces and representations (Ayoola, 2022; Bowen, 2020; Scott, 2022). This discussion is nuanced as the exclusion of black women can be read in four main ways. Firstly, black people historically belonged to the lower class and income level, as the average net worth of a black family was ten times less than their white counterpart and exclusionary laws prohibited the growth of wealth within black communities (McIntosh et al., 2020). While there have been improvements in the current financial state of the black community, their historical financial position during and post-colonialism withheld a majority of black people from buying into luxury as they did not have that opportunity (Chui et al., 2021).

Secondly, as whiteness and luxury were often visually represented as synonymous, the idea of living a carefree, luxurious lifestyle is often associated with whiteness and therefore black women are not seen or thought of as part of the discussion (Sinclair, 2020). Black women indulging in luxury

is a way for them to defy an imposed idea of what black womanhood is and to explore a side that is rarely represented in the media.

Thirdly, the historical lack of financial means in the black community caused psychological trauma responses of not feeling deserving of the same luxuries as others. When some financial restrictions were lifted, “this shift in narrative had not only started to heal this trauma but introduced the successful impact of black purchasing power” (Sinclair, 2020). This led to consumer behaviour of buying products that exude wealth with the aim of financial mobility, to state that black people can afford luxury too. In other words, the historic trauma around self-worth and self-value can still be seen in the consumption behaviour of the black community.

Finally, when prestigious items are available to black women they are said to decrease in value because of that accessibility. An example of this is the conversation around Hermès' Birkin bags which were promoted by female, African American rappers as a must-have in their music and on their social media platforms. As the luxury bags became readily available to them despite the accessibility barriers of the price and their exclusivity, they were critiqued for lowering the value of the luxury items (Jones, 2020). This implies the idea that black women are inferior and that their inferiority taints the product which is not the case (Oladele, 2020). In reality, however, the promotion of luxury items by black rappers increases the demand and value thereof.

The discussion shows the rhetoric around and reactions to black women indulging in luxury. Black women have countered exclusion in the realm of luxury in two main ways. Firstly, they have increased their financial position and hold positions such as CEO, director or investor that enable them to indulge as they please. Secondly, the problem of the accessibility of luxury is tackled through the use of personal shoppers as intermediaries and the power of luxury, black, female influencers such as ‘Melissa’s Wardrobe’ amongst others (Sinclair, 2020).

Oladele (2020) interestingly points out that luxury is not a monolith for black women. She states that while a Birkin bag may not be attainable for all, some might lean towards a Louis Vuitton clutch or a Telfar bag. She continues that luxury is not synonymous to materialism, “it can just be peace of mind, which can be difficult living in a world where the struggles and traumatic experiences of Black women are commodified”. Though luxury was never meant to be accessible for black women, they are now able to indulge in it and to define it in their own way; “whether it’s a designer bag, a therapy session or peace of mind” (Oladele, 2020).

This study aims to explore how black women conceptualise luxury in line with the idea by Ko et al. (2019) that the term invokes a certain image that differs per individual. With this in mind, a semiotic analysis of TikTok videos that are part of the black girl luxury movement will be conducted in order to find how it is conceptualised through imagery. This will be done by, firstly, describing who or what is depicted, followed by an assessment of the ideas and values that are communicated through the visual (Machin & Mayr, 2012). A semiotic analysis of the data set can shed light onto the “values, identities and actions” that are promoted within the movement (p. 52). Furthermore, the literature concerning the exclusion of marginalised groups within luxury can shed light onto how the movement uses visual imagery to challenge this. The analysis aims to illustrate how black women make sense of the concept and how they participate in luxury spaces despite the exclusion they face.

2.2 Media reception theory

The realm of luxury is one that is filled with exclusionary practices on the social and financial level for instance, yet one that creates the opportunity for those who do not belong to feel as part of the upper class through consumption. It is exclusive but is often indulged in to experience what inclusion and high status feels like. As race is often tied to perceived social standing as well, we have found that the motivations for marginalised groups such as black women include consumption with the aim to empower themselves and distance oneself from racial stereotypes. Though the relationship between luxury and exclusion has now been clarified, it is still unclear how this relates to media, empowerment and social media. This section will therefore discuss the correlation between luxury, exclusion and empowerment through social media. Before doing so, I will firstly discuss media reception theory in general.

2.2.1 Theory

Stuart Hall's (1973) model of the encoding and decoding of media texts holds that the production and circulation of messages in media rely on signs: producers encode intended messages that reflect their "frameworks of knowledge, values and socio-cultural repertoire" (Lomborg & Kapsch, 2020, p. 748). This message is intended to guide the recipient, however, viewers rely on their own framework of knowledge and values to decode it. These codes are messages about an object or person, associations that could derive from social convention (Murdock, 2017). This study approaches the TikTok content creators of black girl luxury video content as producers who employ visuals to encode a message of what luxury means and what that says about the black women in luxury movement. YouTube and Twitter content will be perceived as the decoding of the TikTok content, a reflection on the intended message from a certain context. In this way, the intended meaning of the black girl luxury movement pushed by the producers (TikTok content creators) will be explored as well as the reception and sense-making thereof by the audience (YouTube and Twitter content creators).

Media reception theory thus enables researchers to explore how audiences receive a message. Hall argues that audiences play an active role in the decoding of messages in media in three ways (Shaw, 2017). The first is referred to as dominant or preferred reading, which entails that the message is received as was initially intended by the producers. There is therefore no misunderstanding between the producer and the receiver of the message and the expectations of the encoders are met (Alasuutari, 1999). Secondly, oppositional reading is the rejection of the original message. The decoding of the message in a way that is contrary to what was intended by the encoders could be based on the personal experiences or background of the audience (Shaw, 2017; Hall, 1993; Mak, 2019). It is important to note that in this instance the audience has perfectly

understood “both the literal and connotative information,” but decoded the message contrarily or resisted (Shaw, 2017, p. 195). Finally, negotiated reading recognises both the originally intended encoding as well as the rejection thereof and is thus a blend of these two stances. In this position, the viewer’s understanding is a mixture of the meaning that is conveyed in media as well as their own personal views, influenced by their social background. They neither fully agree or disagree. Instead, they recognize the dominant ideology and accept it partly yet might disagree in a specific context or situation (Xie et al., 2022). In other words, the viewer draws meaning from the text “based upon their personal subjectivity” (Shaw, 2017, p. 195; Benshoff, 2015). Viewers are able to hold multiple decoding positions depending on various situations, which attests to audiences not being monoliths (Shaw, 2017). YouTube and Twitter content will be assessed through these three positions in order to find how those audiences receive the messaging that can be found on TikTok concerning black women in luxury.

The way this message is received is dependent on the social class and political views of the audience members. Through the encoding/decoding model Hall thus argues that social inequality, class position for instance, influences the reading position of the audience that is “relatively disempowered vis-a-vis those who control the media are the ones who tend to push back on the dominant meanings of texts” (Shaw, 2017, p. 594). It is important to note that the reading of the audience could also be dependent on the socio-cultural context or location. Differences in the audience’s education, cultural background, social status, ideologies, economic status, values or religion are other factors that influence the way a message is decoded (Shaw, 2017).

2.2.2 Media: Interpretation and representation

Hall’s theory holds that the receiver of the message plays an active role in media and cultural studies (Alasuutari, 1999). The media messages that are pushed in society contain “a complex assembly of visual and linguistic codes that generated multilayered representations open to a variety of responses” (Murdock, 2017, p. 1-2). The decoded message produces a certain meaning and effect (Shaw, 2017). This effect could be “influence, entertainment, guidance or persuasion, with a series of complicated perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences” (Xie et al., 2022, p. 191). Therefore, in order to effectively convey a message, the encoders have to consider how the “target information” would be decoded by the audience (Shaw, 2017, p. 191). This is crucial because Shaw (2017) states that the final phase is not decoding but the reproduction stage instead. The audience produces “new interpretations and feedback of meaning, or even creates new texts” (p. 193). In the context of this study, applying media reception theory to explore whether responses to the black girl luxury movement on YouTube and Twitter receive or challenge how it defines luxury and how it positions black women. Additionally, it leaves room for finding other interpretations of the encoded message found on TikTok.

It is important to note that beyond the fact that the encoding process entails “what the producers consciously want to say within their text,” Hall points to the fact that the technology that is used in order to convey a message can produce meaning as well (Benshoff, 2015, p. 16; Bao, 2015).

With this in mind, it is important to be critical of the message that using a social media platform such as TikTok conveys. For instance, the fact that the platform allows for videos with a limited length of 7 seconds, 15 seconds or 3 minutes possibly affects what is shown, how long it is shown or how audio and text are preferably used to communicate a message (Iqbal, 2021). This can also be applied to the encoding process. As Twitter and YouTube will be the social media platforms that will be used to explore the response of the audience, it is important to keep in mind whether Twitter's 140 character limit or YouTube's long-form video content approach might affect the reading position of the audience to a certain extent. This can be clarified by contrasting both audience responses.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model enables us to understand how media representation is produced, received and attached to meaning. This theory will be used to examine to what extent audiences take over or challenge the messaging found in Black Girl Luxury TikTok videos. This will be done as the theory entails the perspectives of "the people who make them," "the people who watch them," their discourse around and interaction with the movement as well as "the larger cultural context" at play here (Benshoff, 2015, p. 16).

2.3 Othering and empowerment

It is critical to state that the position of black women in Western society is complex due to their 'double marginalisation' for being women as well as being black (Nicholson, 1994). The former relates to the social intervention that dictates how women ought to behave while the latter is coupled with a racial hierarchy that labelled everything other than whiteness as inferior (Butler, 2011; Rubin, 1975; Diawara, 1990). Though media representations have often represented an idea of who black women are, black women have not taken this for face value. Instead, they have taken it upon themselves to use the media as a form of resistance and to reclaim their identities. Before conducting the semiotic analysis of the encoding and decoding process pertaining to the black girl luxury movement, it is crucial to understand the context of the visual representation of black women in Western media and the ways in which they have challenged these representations. Doing so will grant us a deeper understanding of whether the visuals of black women used within the movement perpetuate racial stereotypes and othering or should be read as a critique thereof. This section will firstly discuss the interplay between black women and their othered positioning in visual media. Hereafter, the ways in which these representations have been challenged through media will be addressed.

2.3.1 Othering

Othering, as coined by Said (1978), implies that the Western Occident contrasts its constructed self-perception with the non-Western other and thereby creates an identity for both (p. 40). A dominant group defines another group as morally or intellectually inferior, often through the use of racial ideologies (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Due to the racial hierarchy and views on black women in

the colonial context, this has resulted in the connotation of black femininity with exoticness, undesirability and poverty, imagery that has become repeated in their visual representation in media (Shabanirad & Marandi, 2015; Mgadmi, 2009; Clawson, 2002; Gammage, 2015; Adams-Bass et al., 2014). Other stereotypes include the promiscuous Jezebel, the asexual mammy, the welfare recipient, the angry black woman or the 'baby momma'; "each emphasize either over- or under-sexed derogatory stereo-types" (Nguyen & Anthony, 2014, p. 772; Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013; Jerald et al., 2017). These images become generally accepted and normalised, thereby popularising a limiting idea of black womanhood in society (Nguyen & Anthony, 2014; Collins, 2002; Schwalbe et al. 2000). Imagery of black women not only perpetuates racial stereotypes but prejudices against black people and women as well (Crenshaw, 1990). In this sense, they are discriminated against on two grounds. As women are often sexualized in visual media and black people are portrayed in stereotypical manners, both fall on the representation of black women in media (Ward, 2016; Gammage, 2015). With this in mind, this study aims to assess whether the visuals of black women used within the black girl luxury movement perpetuate these othering, discriminatory images or challenge them through a semiotic analysis.

As Othering was created by the West in the colonial context that made whiteness the standard, it is important to unpack how this relates to non-white women. The Western ideal of femininity was based upon a beauty standard, moral purity and innocence that was only applicable to and centred around white women (Collins, 2004; Slatton, 2018). Thus, to be feminine or beautiful meant to be as close to white as possible and excluded black femininity in its entirety (hooks, 1992; Collins, 2004; Slatton, 2015). Because of this, black women were deemed masculine, denied the luxury to be feminine as well as the option to be in need of help or compassion because of their masculinization (Gammage, 2015). As per Hairston (2008), "the image of the Black woman is the opposite of the coloniser. She is not male, she is not White, and she is generally not affluent" (p. 70). Because of this, the image of a black woman has often been made synonymous with promiscuity (a trait that is socially related to men), exoticness and poverty (Ponzanesi, 2005; Crosby, 2016). Simply put, the othering of black women through visual representations of them as opposite to 'whiteness' was a way to justify the oppression they faced based on their race, class and gender. However, the imposed representation has not just been taken for face value by black women but has been challenged through empowerment.

2.3.2 Empowerment

But what does empowerment entail in this context? While othering rid black women of the agency to represent themselves, in this sense empowerment is associated with them reclaiming their power to identify themselves and choose how they are represented. Their historical inferior position in society in the colonial context did not allow for taking their visual representation into their own hands. As put by Collins (1990) "the journey toward self-definition offers a powerful challenge to the externally defined" (p. 106). The power behind self-definition is that it gives black women the opportunity to explore two lives, "one for the dominant group and one for themselves" (Hairston, 2008,

p. 70). Meaning that though the media offers a representation of what black femininity is, black women do not have to limit themselves to that imposed identity but get to explore their unique sense of self through self-definition. Empowerment is a collective process that thus relates to power, it is about “bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it” (Rowlands, 1995, p. 102). It is about reclaiming the agency that was once out of reach.

Black women have collectively empowered themselves against being Othered through the creation of movements, music and visual media that positively center their experiences (Porter & Byrd, 2021; Halliday & Brown, 2018). “Black is beautiful,” for instance, exemplifies a movement in the 1960’s towards afrocentric pride. It is a phrase that aims to uplift black women, remind them that they are beautiful and that their African features are as well despite a world that tells them to ascribe to western beauty standards. Other expressions from this time period and consciousness are “I’m black and I’m proud” or “young, gifted and black”. Contemporary examples of challenged representations of black women can be found in pop music. Nicki Minaj’s song ‘Feeling myself’ or Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj’s ‘Black girl magic’ are songs that inspire black women to be confident in their appearance, knowledge and selves and empower them against anti-blackness and misogyny (Halliday & Brown, 2018).

Another noteworthy tool that has been used by black women to empower themselves is the digital space, referred to by Lee (2015) as a safe environment that provides them shelter and the freedom to (re)define themselves. According to Kelly Macias (2015), black women “experience social media as an affirming, safe space for counter storytelling, education and transformation, negotiating identity and for connection to a larger, African diasporic identity”. This is echoed by Hassan’s (2018) research that pointed out that black women mostly use social media for affirmation, as a site of community or healing amongst other things. “Black women also use social media to celebrate their experiences, building narratives of love, support, and happiness alongside those of pain, abuse, and oppression” (Halliday & Brown, 2018, p. 226). This research aims to illustrate how the black girl luxury movement redefines black femininity and to what extent it empowers them through the analysis of the imagery that is used to portray black women as well as assessing the audience’s reception thereof.

For marginalised groups, social media thus function as a site of empowerment and resistance where various experiences can be voiced, dominant ideologies can be challenged and counter narratives can be suggested (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Khazraee & Novak, 2018). In this way social media truly serves as a safe place that allows black women to “re(create) and re(define)” their identities by “challenging dominant ideologies of racial bias” (Hassan, 2018, p. 16; Lee, 2015).

An example of the way social media is used by black women to empower themselves is the term ‘black girl magic’. It was popularised on Twitter and embodies the celebration of the lives of black women as magical despite the oppressions they face (Arastoopour Irgens, 2022). This positive representation is echoed by Parris’ (2020) research on how black women combined the hashtag ‘black girl magic’ and visuals to defy Western beauty ideals. She found that they used imagery of their hair textures, bodies and complexion on Instagram in order to inspire black women to love themselves. When it comes to hair textures in particular, the increase of natural hair vloggers on YouTube who showcase different hairstyles and how coily hair should be taken care of increased the

visibility thereof and encouraged black women to love their natural hair despite being told otherwise by society (Meyerson, 2019). These examples not only show the power of social media, they also demonstrate how the affordances of social networking sites can prompt different empowering movements. As Twitter is a platform that focuses on words through their 140 word character limit and YouTube is a video sharing platform, the examples show how words and visual media have been employed by black women through social media to close a gap of representation.

The research by Parris (2020) points to the impact visual imagery can have in representing a marginalised group that is often misrepresented, and how social media is a space that allows black women to take back their agency in defining who they are. Furthermore, it is important to note that besides providing a safe space for black women, social media also allows for the creation of identities and the presentation of the ideal version of one's self (Harris, 2015). According to Hassan (2018), Instagram and Twitter are examples of social media platforms that are mostly used by black women for this reason. Harris (2015) points to the importance of the use of hashtags by black women to build online communities and spread collective messages. As put by Hassan, "social media allows users to create their own reality, one that challenges the scripts that have been historically presented" (p. 18; Nicholson, 2014). As I aim to intersect visual representation, the discussion around othering and empowerment as well as social media, this research aims to examine whether the Black Girl Luxury movement is perceived as empowering or as another poor representation, thus as the birth of a new stereotype. By examining how social media is used to present and perhaps challenge the notion of 'black girl luxury,' this research aims to demonstrate how black women create new identities in digital spaces.

2.4 Social identity and identity negotiation

While we have already established that the digital space can be utilised for the creation of new identities, it is essential to take a step back by acknowledging the role that social identity plays within the audience. While society has already dictated what it means to be a black woman, the black women in luxury movement creates an opportunity to not only challenge this idea through identity enhancement but also to adopt a new social identity through the creation of a collective. This section will firstly unpack the meaning of social identity and its relation to the black women in luxury movement. This will be followed by how identity negotiation takes place within the movement through the identity enhancement strategy of social change.

Deaux & Ethier (1998), describe social identity as the "constructions of self that relate the person to some collective group or category" (p. 304). Examples of social identity are demographic categories such as ethnicity, age, gender or class (Frable, 1997). In the case of the black women in luxury movement, the social identities that are most prominent are 'black' as an ethnicity, 'woman' to inform the gender of the ingroup members and 'upper-class' as the class identity that they aim to be identified with.

According to Deaux & Ethier (1998), social identification is about membership of a particular group that has sets of meanings, behaviours and attributes attached to it (Deaux & Ethier, 1998; Reid & Deaux, 1996). In this study, the black women in luxury movement is viewed as a newly created social identity by black women on TikTok. A semiotic analysis is employed to uncover how meaning is attached to it through the use of visual imagery. The meanings, behaviours and attributes attached to a social identity are socially defined by the experiences and agenda of the collective group as well as society at large (Deaux & Ethier, 1998). Individual experiences with an identity can shape or add meaning associated with the group, leading to addition or substitution of the intended cultural message with their own, individual meaning. This research will look at how meaning is given to the black women in luxury movement by assessing how the audience on YouTube and Twitter respond to the movement.

Society at large shapes the meaning attached to an identity through social representations of the culture. What it entails to be an African American, pediatrician or feminist for instance is thus informed through media representations, stereotypes and communications provided by society (Deaux & Ethier, 1998). When these representations or stereotypes are not satisfactory to the group, identity negotiation can take place. Identity negotiation implies the dissociation of oneself from a social identity that is aversive (Deaux & Ethier, 1998). Deaux & Ethier (1998) highlight that the aversion towards a particular representation of a group can lead to identity negation through the elimination of one's identity, denial thereof or the decreasing of the importance of one's identity. In the case of the black women in luxury movement, though the women are against the stereotypical portrayals of black women in media they do not employ any identity negation strategies to show their dissatisfaction. They have rather channelled their discontent through the creation of a new social identity that aims to portray black women in a different light, the black women in luxury movement.

However, dissatisfaction with the portrayal of one's social category could also lead to identity enhancement through reaffirmation, reemerging, intensified social contact or social change. Social change is the identity enhancement strategy employed by black women through the black women in luxury movement. The goal of this enhancement strategy is to either change the beliefs held by others about your social category or to change the social system in a way that helps facilitate your identity. This strategy is used to maintain a positive self concept (Harris, 1995). It is utilised by the black girl luxury movement as its aim is to challenge negative, stereotypical portrayals of black women by depicting them in a positive, luxurious and glamorous way.

The lens of social identity and identity negotiation enables us to unpack the multiplicity of identities and complexities that are at play within the black women in luxury movement. The concepts allow us to explore how individual meaning and social meaning work cooperate in shaping the black women in luxury movement and to see how the movement challenges, adds to or substitutes new and old social categories.

3 Methodology

The following chapter will firstly discuss semiotic analysis and thematic analysis as well as how the methods will be applied in the research. This will be followed by a section concerning how the data collection was conducted. The third section will elaborate on how the data will be analysed. Finally, the ethical considerations of this research will be considered.

3.1 Qualitative Methods

As previously stated, the aim of this thesis is to examine how audiences on YouTube and Twitter make sense of the idea of Black Girl Luxury as presented on TikTok. This will be done by employing qualitative methods, namely semiotic analysis and thematic analysis (Hall & Nixon, 2013; Machin & Mayr, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2006). As presented in figure 1, a semiotic analysis of selected TikTok videos will be used for the encoding process of media reception while the thematic analysis will shed light on how audiences decode messages. A semiotic analysis of selected TikTok videos will be used to understand the messages that are spread on the platform about black women in luxury in depth (the encoding process). Hence, the sub-question 'how are visual elements on TikTok used to define 'Black Girl Luxury?'

This will be followed by a thematic analysis of responses to these TikTok messages by the audience on YouTube and Twitter to understand how messages on TikTok are critically assessed by these spectators (the decoding process). The analysis will be guided by the following sub-question: 'How does the audience on Twitter and YouTube respond to the black women in luxury movement?'. By approaching YouTube and Twitter as an audience that responds to the idea of luxury that is presented on TikTok we get an insight into how black women on those platforms make sense of the black girl luxury movement.

The reason for employing qualitative methods is that qualitative research is often applied to gain a better understanding of phenomena that are complex, sensitive and haven't been deeply investigated, which is the case when looking at the Black women in Luxury movement (Flick, 2008). It can additionally produce a detailed description of the experiences, opinions and feelings of the object of study and interpret the meaning thereof (Denzin, 1989). It is for instance said to have the "abilities to understand different people's voices, meanings and events," which is of utmost importance in the case of a movement that was birthed from the lack of representation of a marginalised group in the realm of luxury (Rahman, 2020, p. 104). This relates to the fact that qualitative methods are said to shed light on the inner experience of a participant and can help the researcher explore how certain meanings are shaped by culture (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the case of this study, applying qualitative methods will thus give us an insight into how the idea of luxury within the black girl luxury movement is a result of cultural meanings and will help us understand how the audience on YouTube and Twitter experience this meaning.

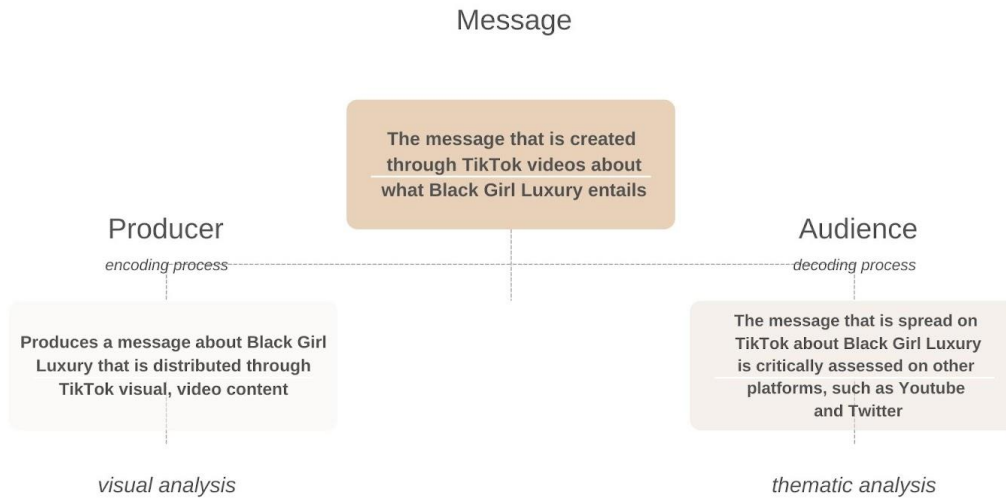


Figure 1

Visual representation of the methodology

3.1.1 Semiotic analysis

The selected TikTok videos will be assessed using semiotic analysis as a method. Semiotics is a qualitative method concerned with “the study or doctrine of signs” (Colapietro 1993, p. 179). These signs can either take the form of a signifier or the signified. The first is what Saussure called the form, meaning “the actual word, image” or photo for instance (Hall & Nixon, 2013, p. 16). The latter concerns the idea or concept that the form evokes or is associated with. Both the signifier and the signified are necessary for the production of meaning. Semioticians argue that signs are related to the signifieds that are taught through social conventions (Chandler, 1994). We become accustomed to these conventions in our use of media which makes them seem natural. Because of this, the conventional nature of these signifiers becomes difficult to detect.

In a modern world full of technological advancements, we are exposed to visual media more than ever before (magazines, billboards, advertising) (Njirić, 2016). As per Njirić (2016) “visual impact, as the most convincing form of attracting attention, affects the formation of opinions and attitudes, encouraging consumption and serves in many other commercial or political purposes”. The semiotic method is a bridge between society and the images it uses. This imagery gives us a glimpse into popular culture and the information it aims to pass onto the audience. In the context of this study,

semiotics provides the opportunity to assess the visual idea that comes to mind when black women who partake in the black girl luxury movement think of luxury. The image is a visual representation that communicates something about this discussion and how luxury is defined in it. This approach is also compatible with TikTok's affordances to reach an audience through video content, as the message about the black women in luxury movement is spread through visual media. Employing a method such as surveys or interviewing, for instance, would therefore not give complete insights into how luxury is defined in this context. It would get lost in translation. As TikTok is the platform where the black girl luxury movement originated and it focuses on visual media, applying semiotic analysis seems to be a good fit.

This qualitative research method enables researchers to reveal the implicit meanings that can be found in imagery and extract the broader discourses and ideologies they communicate by paying attention to visual details (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In order to achieve this underlying meaning, certain steps have to be undertaken. The first step in doing so is describing who or what is depicted. This is referred to as denotation. This is followed by connotation, which prompts the researcher to ask: "What ideas and values are communicated through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?" (p. 50). With this in mind, the researcher has to pay attention to "important connotators of meaning," namely, objects, setting and salience (p. 51). When conducting a semiotic analysis of the objects present in an image, we are concerned with how they are presented and the discourses, ideas and values that they communicate (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This can also be applied to the setting, which can additionally raise questions about the connoted "values, identities and actions" (p. 52). Salience can, lastly, be described as features in a composition that are made with the intention to stand out and foreground certain key messages.

I will focus on seven ways salience can be seen in a composition. Beforehand, it is important to note that not all elements will be of importance to each image and that certain elements might "work together in different ways to create hierarchies of salience" (p. 54). The first element, potential cultural symbols, refers to the cultural symbolism that can be found in the data. Secondly, size can be another indicator of meaning as it can be interpreted in relation to importance for instance. Colour is a third element of salience as contrasts or the saturation of colours can draw our attention to something or has the intention to deviate it. This can also be said about the fourth element, tone, since "brightness attracts the eye" (p. 55). Focus is the fifth indicator of salience, as a heightened focus can exaggerate details to draw attention to something important or be reduced for inessential details. Foregrounding is the sixth element that additionally points out significance in visual media. This is because, as put by Machin & Mayr (2012), "elements that are further back may become subordinate" (p. 56). Finally, overlapping is about placing certain elements in front of others and could be interpreted as referring to a hierarchy or ranking of importance as well.

To summarise, this study aims to go beyond the surface of the visual imagery that is demonstrated as part of the black girl luxury movement on TikTok by conducting a semiotic analysis on selected videos. Doing this uncovers what luxury implies to black women that are part of this movement. Furthermore, the results can be linked to the historical positioning of black women as othered and thereby poses the question 'to what extent black women challenge historical narratives

through this movement'. In order to explore that further, it is crucial to take the audience's response to the intended message of the TikTok videos into account. By employing a thematic analysis of responses to the movement as shared on YouTube and Twitter, we gain deeper insights into how the movement is embraced or challenged by its audience.

3.1.2 Thematic analysis

Selected YouTube videos and Tweets will be processed with the use of the thematic analysis method. This method is used to look for patterns within the data and categorise them into different themes. This particular content analysis has an inductive starting point, which Kyngäs (2020) calls an "inductive content analysis" (p.14), which means that most of the concepts or categories will be established during the analysis, rather than before. The analysis itself will collect raw data and categories, subcategories or themes can be established by means of data reduction afterwards (Kyngäs, 2020, p.15).

To examine the data, the thematic analysis framework from Braun and Clarke (2006) will be used. The first phase of this framework suggests that the researcher will immerse himself in the data. After this, the framework focuses on a second phase, where initial codes are generated. The third step is to examine these codes and identify the overlapping categories, and eventually group these into broader themes. The final phase is the reviewing and further refinement of these themes, ultimately resulting in the report. Though thematic analysis is a particular method, it is similar to other qualitative research approaches in that the researcher starts the analysis with the aim to find meaning and an interest in particular data (Azmi & Razak, 2006). The endpoint thereof is the reporting of the found patterns of meaning (themes) in the data.

The process of coding is needed in order to implement the thematic analysis. "A code is a word or brief phrase that captures the essence of why you think a particular bit of data may be useful" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 207). In practice, coding is the categorising, labelling or "coding" certain information that are useful to the research objectives (Azmi & Razak, 2006).

The data collected on YouTube and Twitter was organised and assessed through the use of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). This software leaves room for the researcher to critically assess and make sense of complex data, while facilitating "the organisation and processing of data" in order to "enhance the dialogue between researcher and data". In practical terms, the software expedites and simplifies the process of analysing a large set of data. The software used for the thematic analysis of this study is ATLAS.ti. This software was used to apply the aforementioned phases of performing a thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Before the analysis took place, it was necessary to prepare the data so it could be used within the software for the research project. The preparation entailed the transcribing of the collected YouTube videos and tweets, which were eventually transferred into digital formats. Afterwards, it was ready to be imported in the software's document manager. The coding process began as soon as the documents were imported into the document manager. Table 1 exemplifies this process. As mentioned prior, the first phase outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) is familiarising oneself with the

data. This was done by reading the entire data set, after which memos were created in ATLAS.ti that outlined interesting theory, literature or findings that relate to the information in question. The initial codes and categories were generated in the second phase. These codes were imported in the software's code manager and were based on the research question that aims to understand how the audiences on YouTube and Twitter respond to the black women in luxury movement. The initial codes needed to be renamed a few times in order to fully capture their meaning and were therefore combined to form a new overlapping code. These steps were also taken in order to form a category in the third phase, as this is when the themes that can be found within the codes are discerned. The codes and categories were thus reassessed in order to find suitable themes. Data saturation was reached after categorisation and interpretation no longer led to new insights (Azmi & Razak, 2006). In the final phase, the common themes were refined and a report was produced.

3.2 Material and selection

As the analysis of this study consists of a semiotic analysis of selected TikTok videos and a thematic analysis of YouTube videos and Twitter comments concerning the black girl luxury movement, these various sets of analysis and platforms influence the material that will be assessed. In this section, the procedure behind selecting data for each unit of analysis and how the material was analysed will briefly be discussed. This will be done following the order of assessment, meaning that I will firstly draw on how the material for TikTok was selected and will conclude with the data used for analysing the response of the audience on YouTube and Twitter.

3.2.1 TikTok (Semiotic Analysis)

The material of analysis has its base in the search results of 'Black women in Luxury,' 'Black girl Luxury,' #blackwomeninluxury and #blackgirlluxury. This data set would be used to conduct a semiotic analysis, answering the research question 'how are visual elements on TikTok used to define Black Girl Luxury?,' and was collected using a non-probability sampling approach (Vehovar et al., 2016). For each category, the first ten videos that were listed as a result of the search were analysed making it a data set of 40 videos. This was done because the videos that are presented on TikTok after a search result are the most viewed and liked videos, meaning that they were impactful and are thus interesting for further research. The data belonging to the categories was searched in the aforementioned order. As the search keywords are similar, some of the categories had similar video content in the search results. In the selection, videos were excluded if they were already included in one of the categories. In that case, another video would be chosen to replace it in order to avoid repetition.

After collecting the data, the videos were watched and the content was described as part of the denotation process. Then, screenshots were taken of the material in order to capture how specific

visual elements were used to define black girl luxury. In other words, the cultural symbols and signs present in the data were recorded (connotation) (Machin & Mayr, 2012). This meaning was analysed following the seven ways of salience, including and not limited to assessing how colour, size and cultural symbols can be used to form certain messages within visuals. The meaning thereof was interpreted, leading to overarching categories that capture how visual elements were used to define black girl luxury. The process of the semiotic analysis is simplified in Appendix A.

Keeping in mind that the black women in luxury movement originated on this platform is crucial as it not only speaks on how social media can be used to spread a message but, more specifically, how it is employed by black women to take back their agency in self-representation. The videos will be used to explore how black women use visual media to define luxury.

3.2.2 YouTube & Twitter (Thematic Analysis)

The thematic analysis of this study was guided by the following research question: “How does the audience on Twitter and YouTube respond to the black women in luxury movement?”. I will firstly discuss the data collection process on Twitter and YouTube, followed by the analytical procedure of the material for the thematic analysis of these audiences.

To collect a sample relevant to the case study, tweets were collected based on the search results of ‘Black women in Luxury,’ ‘Black girl Luxury,’ #blackwomeninluxury and #blackgirlluxury. Data was collected until data saturation was reached, leading to a total data set of 179 tweets. Tweets refer to the messages that are posted on the platform, consisting of the content of the message, a time and date stamp as well as the username of the creator (Parsons et al., 2015).

In order to analyse YouTube content, the first eleven videos that were listed under ‘Black women in Luxury’ or ‘Black girl Luxury’ were included for thematic analysis in that order. It is important to note that the video content that already belonged to one category was excluded from the second and replaced with another video instead. In order to select videos that touched on the ‘Black girl luxury’ movement, non-probability purposive sampling was employed to judge the content and include those that fit the criteria.

The data was analysed using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) called ATLAS.TI, which required for it to be transferred into digital documents. This was done by writing out the tweets as well as transcribing the YouTube videos in order for them to be analysed within the software. After the preparation of the data and extensive reading thereof, initial codes were generated for the material of both Twitter and YouTube. These initial codes were then turned into overlapping categories and themes, which would eventually be redefined. The redefinition is important as it enables for the research objective as well as the findings to be captured effectively and turned into a report.

4 Results

This section will provide a semiotic analysis of selected data that represents the black women in luxury movement on TikTok as well as a thematic analysis of its audience on YouTube and Twitter. As discussed in the literature review, the analysis will extract meanings which are derived from the visuals as well as the response of the audience to assess the intended messages of the movement, the reception of the audience and the extent to which the audience adopts the messages. This meaning will additionally be connected to the concepts of luxury and exclusion, othering, empowerment, social identity and identity negotiation.

4.1 Semiotic Analysis of TikTok findings

This section will illustrate the semiotic analysis of the data set representing the black women in luxury movement on TikTok. It will present the cultural meanings that were extracted thereof and its presented analyses will be representative of the most insightful findings of the analysis. The findings will be discussed in relation to the concepts outlined in the methodology. This section aims to highlight the visual elements the black girl luxury movement employs to define itself.

4.1.1 Luxury is about experiences

The visual analysis has pointed out that the black women in luxury movement defines luxury as related to having certain experiences in three main ways, namely by experiencing exclusive travel destinations and hotels, receiving or purchasing high-end goods and expensive champagne. As partaking in these activities is exclusively available to the wealthy due to their price point, the movement uses visual imagery of exclusive travel, products or bottles of champagne to visually identify themselves with the upper class. Doing so simultaneously replaces racial stereotypes of poverty and struggle and portrays black women as partaking in leisure, celebrating and as glamorous instead.

4.1.1.1 Luxury as exclusive destinations and hotels

At both the denotative and connotative level, many visuals showcase that the choice to depict specific destinations and hotels is telling of the manner in which the black women in luxury movement defines opulence. Luxury is namely defined as experiencing travel through destinations and hotels that are known to be exclusively available to the wealthy.

In essence, visual elements are used that could be interpreted as defining luxury as exclusive travel destinations and experiences, the possession of high-end brands and the drinking of champagne. These definitions demonstrate how luxury is defined within the black women in luxury movement but, most importantly, purposely erase negative media portrayals of black women in

poverty or struggling and portray them as enjoying themselves instead. In doing so, the black women in luxury movement endows black women with a new social identity of celebration, luxury and leisure.

One of the figures that exemplifies this draws attention to a centralised text in white and purple that reads “Hôtel de Paris Monte-carlo” (see figure 2). Colour and foregrounding are hereby used to hint at the name and location of the 5-star hotel in question. The location of the hotel, Monte Carlo, is famously coined as “Billionaire’s playground” due to its ultra wealthy population (Rosa, 2020). The infamous Hôtel de Paris, built in the centre of Monte Carlo in 1864, is known for its extravagance and iconic secrecy surrounding its well-known guests and royal parties.

By depicting a hotel that is known for receiving prestigious guests and is located in an area famous for its wealthy population, luxury is defined as getting to experience a hotel stay that has been exclusive to the upper class and wealthy for decades. In doing so, a message is encoded that emphasises rarity and exclusivity as a value within the black women in luxury movement (Ko et al., 2019). More importantly, the fact that the Hôtel de Paris is known for exclusive clientele and has only been experienced by the upper class due to their ability to afford it implies that the attributes of prestige and high social status are ascribed to the black women in luxury movement. This suggests that the movement consists of black women that embody these attributes and whose identification with prestige and high social status was caused through the purchase of a hotel stay at Hôtel de Paris. The same can be said about the location of the hotel. As it is known to be popular among the wealthy, being surrounded by wealthy people by visiting the area is another way for the black women in luxury movement to identify with the upper class.

In other words, while luxury is hereby visually defined as experiencing an exclusive hotel in a location that is known for its wealth, consumption is used as a way to be identified with the upper class. This is in line with literature that states the motive behind consuming luxury goods or services is often found to be prestige and the feeling that one has achieved a high social status (Trommsdorff 2009; Ko et al. 2019). In this case, the use of consumption to identify with the upper class can be examined from two different angles.

Firstly, purchasing a luxury hotel stay as a member of the black women in luxury movement can be used to defy visual stereotypes of poverty that are placed on black women. By relating a visual of a luxury hotel and premium location to the black women in luxury movement, the movement challenges stereotypical imagery of black women in poverty by visually portraying them experiencing an environment that exudes wealth (Shabanirad & Marandi, 2015; Mgadmi, 2009; Clawson, 2002; Gammage, 2015; Adams-Bass et al., 2014). With that in mind figure 2 becomes more than just a visual representation of a hotel and a location; it becomes a representation of a movement that uses visual imagery to challenge a limiting social identity that represents black women as poor. This is achieved by illustrating that they too can experience luxurious services as well as by creating a new social identity that allows for this.

Secondly, partaking in leisure in the same way the wealthy do is a way for the ‘nouveau riche’ to identify with the upper class. Higuera (2022) suggests that while travel is accessible to the wider population, only the wealthy can afford to travel in style. Meaning, the ability to afford “the cost of high-end accommodations, first-class travel, excursions and food, and a round-trip excursion around

the world might cost as much as \$1 million". In experiencing exclusive destinations and luxurious hotels, the black women who identify as part of the movement position themselves as belonging to the upper class. According to Veblen (1899), leisure is a way in which the 'leisure class' demonstrates their wealth through lavish consumption. The rich continuously seek out luxury accommodations and unique experiences (Liu & Li, 2020). These novel experiences are introduced to and adopted by the rich first before they are taken on by the remainder of society (Simmel, 1975). It is important to note that the black girl luxury movement most likely consists of nouveau riche, those who have accumulated great amounts of wealth but not through inheritance (Gürhan, 2017). Veblen (1899) pointed out two ways in which the nouveau riche aim to establish themselves as part of the upper class:

"To transform personal wealth into social elitism, the leisure class needed to put wealth on display for other members of society to see. Veblen named two approaches the leisure class leveraged to conspicuously signal their wealth: partaking in exclusive leisure activities by wasting time and partaking in ostentatious consumption by wasting money" (Liu & Li, 2020, p. 2).

Not only does the ability to experience opulence through travel make those part of the black women in luxury movement feel as members of the wealthy few, the fact that these visuals are shared on a platform where most users will most likely not identify with this lavish way of travelling additionally perpetuates the feeling of being part of an exclusive group.



Figure 2

TikTok video depicting Hôtel de Paris in Monte-Carlo

4.1.1.2 Luxury as receiving or purchasing high-end goods

The visual analysis has thus far shown that receiving or purchasing high-end goods is another way in which the black women in luxury movement visually represents luxury. This is done as a way to visually be identified with the upper class. Figure 3, for instance, illustrates a bed that is covered in rose petals, balloons and boxes of various shapes, sizes and colours. Figure 4 shows a woman who is sat in the corner of a room and is wearing a floral dress. She is happily looking down at a bag as she takes it out of its protective cover. Our cultural symbolism, connotation, enables us to recognize that the boxes belong to the luxury brands 'Bottega Veneta,' 'Balenciaga,' 'Gucci,' 'Yves Saint Laurent' and 'Chanel'. The infamous Birkin bag shown in figure 4 is an iconic design that belongs to the french luxury design house Hermès.

The aforementioned brands belong to the world's top luxury design houses and by showcasing this, luxury within the black women in luxury movement is defined as experiencing the possession of high-end items (Beauloye, 2021). Nelissen & Meijers (2011) argue that "luxury labels may act as costly signs that enhance status" (p. 344). That is to say that the visual of the black woman in figure 4 holding a luxury bag that is worth up to three hundred thousand US dollars,

ascribes the attributes of wealth and high class to her. A product qualifies as a costly signal when it is easily recognizable and hard to fake due to its costs (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). When applied to the visual portrayal of high-end brands within the black women in luxury movement, we see that a simple product such as a bag or box can become a marker of opulence that is transferred from the product's brand to the person showcasing it. The fact that she has the bag in her possession signals that she has the financial means to afford it. As it is something only the wealthy and upper class can afford to splurge on, it sends the message that she must belong to that realm. In other words, luxury is defined as the possession of premium goods because they say something about the level of wealth and status held by the person showing it. This is yet another way in which the black women in luxury movement associates itself with the upper class.

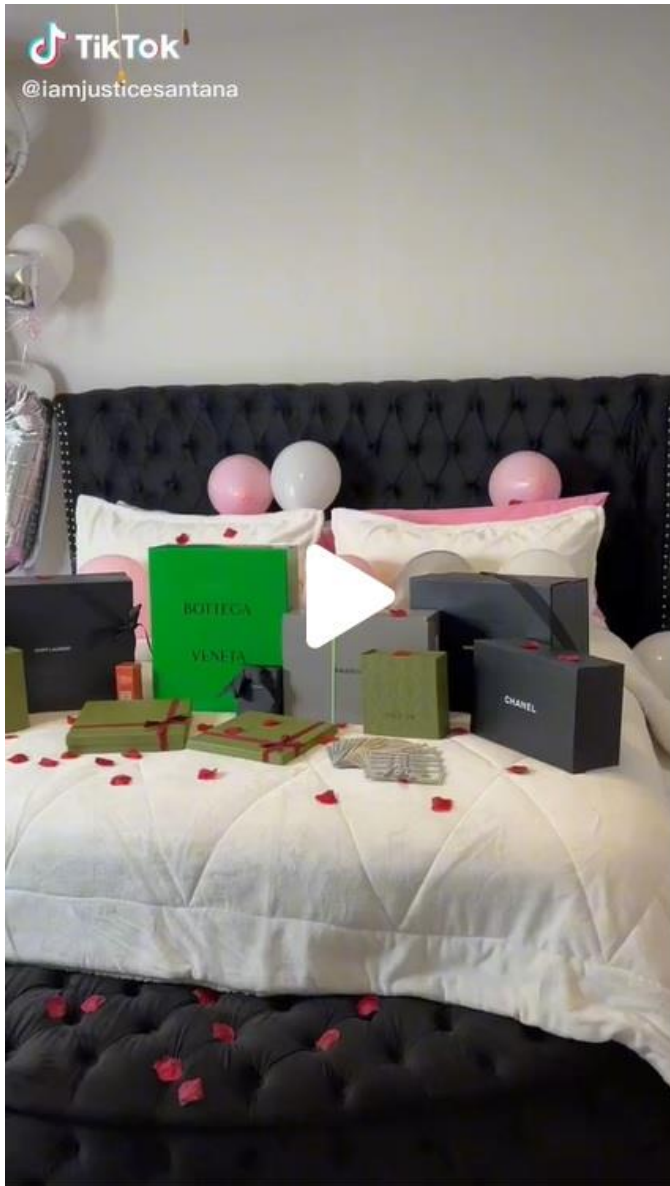


Figure 3

TikTok video depicting bed filled with lavish presents



Figure 4

TikTok video depicting the unboxing of an Hermès bag

4.1.1.3 Luxury as having expensive champagne

Another marker of extravagance that could be traced in the data set was filled champagne glasses (see figure 5 and 6). According to Champkin (2014) champagne is a signifier of wealth, the flaunting thereof, conspicuous consumption and hedonism. It represents excess and signals that money that could be spent on necessities can rather be spent on bubbly (Champkin, 2014). What was firstly known as a premium drink favoured among the French nobility during celebrations is to this day still viewed as a drink that symbolises prosperity by high society (Alexander, 2021). Champagne thus symbolizes quality, prestige, status but also celebration (Alexander, 2021).

As it is known as the luxury drink of choice, the visual image of filled champagne glasses signifies that luxury within the black girl luxury movement entails getting to experience an expensive bottle of champagne. The price and quality of the premium drink are telling about the person drinking it, attributing celebration and wealth to the person in question. Furthermore, by demonstrating this the message the movement brings across is that they are living a life of celebration. Whereas black women have faced stereotypes that often make them synonymous to struggle, the demonstration of champagne aims to paint a more positive picture of the experiences of black women. The movement

thereby consciously illustrates black women as living and not surviving, unapologetically living a life that is free of struggle.

In essence, visual elements are used that could be interpreted as defining luxury as exclusive travel destinations and experiences, the possession of high-end brands and the drinking of champagne. These definitions demonstrate how luxury is defined within the black women in luxury movement but, most importantly, purposely erase negative media portrayals of black women in poverty or struggling and portray them as enjoying themselves instead. In doing so, the black women in luxury movement endows black women with a new social identity of celebration, luxury and leisure.



Figure 5

TikTok video depicting a filled champagne glass



Figure 6

TikTok video depicting four filled champagne glasses and a bottle of champagne

4.1.2 Luxury is a certain aesthetic

The analysis suggests that the black women in luxury movement defines prosperity as a specific look or aesthetic in two ways: attire is used to make black femininity synonymous with elegance and femininity and, finally, straight or wavy hair textures are deemed as a symbol of status. By using clothing to endow black women with elegance and femininity, characteristics are attached to black femininity that were historically reserved for white women alone. The use of straight or wavy hair textures as a signifier of having obtained high social status or having the financial means to

achieve that look sparks a conversation about the extent to which the movement includes black women of all hair textures.

4.1.2.1 Luxury as elegance and femininity

Figure 7 uses the colours red and white to draw attention to the text which reads “Elegant black women: you need to follow”. A picture of a black woman is used for the background, wearing a tweed blazer and matching skirt, pointy high heels, a turtle neck and a Chanel bag. When pairing both the message on the text with the visual of the woman in the background, the image could be read as suggesting that the way in which the woman is dressed embodies elegance.

It is important to note that the tweed ensemble could be interpreted as a cultural symbol referring to Coco Chanel’s signature tweed jacket and knee-length pencil skirt (Pike, 2021). It was created by the designer after World War Two as a way to defy the return to corseted fashion, which she found constraining and not adapted to the lives of women. It has ever since become a style that is famously associated with Chanel. In the words of Gabrielle Chanel: “I really care about women, and I wanted to dress them in clothes that make them feel at ease, clothes they can wear to drive a car, but that still emphasise femininity” (Prodhon, 2014). As put by Prodhon (2014), “It was immediately successful, and the suit along with its jacket became essential items in women's wardrobes, the synonym of freedom and casual elegance”.

Femininity and elegance are not just attributes related to the iconic jacket but are a reflection of the luxury House of Chanel. The fact that the woman in figure 7 is wearing an ensemble that can be traced back to Chanel and a bag from the luxury brand, reflects the attributes of femininity and elegance to the woman in the picture. Luxury within the black women in luxury movement is thus defined as a specific look that is perceived to be elegant because of its style and the brand associated with it. As discussed in the literature review, the motive behind purchasing luxurious items is often the aim to achieve a high social status or feeling prestigious (Trommsdorff, 2009).

As the movement is inherently about marginalised women creating a space in a realm of luxury they were traditionally not part of or represented in, adhering to a certain aesthetic that they deem luxurious can be interpreted as a way to be identified with and belong to the upper class. Their marginalised status as black women, additionally, did not allow them the privilege of being perceived as feminine (hooks, 1992; Collins, 2004; Slatton, 2014). While this was historically reserved for white women, the movement uses clothing that is culturally symbolised as reflecting femininity to endow black women with that same privilege. Dressing in a feminine way challenges societal representations that tend to masculinize black women and demonstrates that the movement has created a new social identity and literal image of black women.



Figure 7

TikTok video depicting an 'elegant black woman'

4.1.2.2 Luxury as straight or wavy hair textures

While the black women in luxury movement seems to have an aesthetic that concerns elegant and feminine attire, the conversation also includes hair. In particular, straight or wavy hair is deemed as a signifier of wealth, high class and stature. This is due to the historical significance of hair textures within the black community as well as the financial means necessary for black women to obtain straight or wavy hair.

A visual aspect that is noteworthy to mention is the fact that the TikTok video in figure 7, which aims to portray elegant black women, only shows women with wavy hair textures. Figure 8 demonstrates a black woman with a coily hair texture. Shades of pink are used in the video to hint at a text which says "luxury black girl tiktok needs some natural hair... I'll be the first". This implies that the creator felt as though there was a lack of natural hair textures being shown within the movement and wanted to become a pioneer in making a difference.

Black women have a complex relationship with their hair that dates back to colonialism. The colonial context birthed the term 'good hair,' which means "that one's hair is closer in texture to that of people of European descent or that the nose is straight and resembles that of a European ideal" (Robinson, 2011, p. 90). In other words, physical features deemed African such as natural hair textures were devalued in a society where whiteness was the ideal (Randle, 2015). As these are beauty standards that have been set by the West, they did not favour black women. With femininity being defined as having pale skin, long hair, not working and beauty standards being ascribed to white women, black women attempted to fit into the ideal of white beauty by adhering to whitening practices such as straightening their hair (Weathers, 1991). This is typically achieved through the

application of chemicals or thermal tools to the natural hair texture, by wearing weaves, wigs or extensions (Koval & Rosette, 2021).

In that sense having straight hair is not simply a hairstyle to black women. Whereas in colonial times black women with straight or wavy hair textures were more likely to receive an education, clothing and food, contemporary research has found that straight hair is often still necessary to obtain job opportunities and professional success (Donahoo, 2022; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Koval & Rosette, 2021; Patton, 2006). As black women in professional spaces have to conform to white beauty standards and professional success is often paired with an increase of financial means, luxury within the black women in luxury movement can be interpreted as having wavy or straight hair because it is a signifier of having achieved a certain social status.

Because of this, however, black women who do not resemble this ideal and have natural hair textures might not feel included nor represented within the movement. This begs the question whether the movement truly creates a space for black women in the realm of luxury or still manages to exclude certain black women. Whilst the movement aims to help black women feel seen, those with natural hair textures might feel othered due to their lack of representation (Said, 1978; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Another view on the matter is the fact that the long hair which is shown within the movement as a result of wearing extensions is simply a marker of having the financial means to buy expensive hair pieces (Forbes, 2022). In that sense, luxury would be defined not only as an aesthetic for cultural reasons but rather as the ability to afford expensive hair treatments.

In sum, the aforementioned imagery of portraying 'elegant black women' reflects that luxury within the movement is viewed as a specific aesthetic. Wearing clothes or brands that are deemed elegant and feminine, as well as having wavy or straight hair. This is a view that only allows for a specific type of black woman to feel included within the movement, which challenges the extent to which it includes black women or has ended up alienating some.

Figure 8

TikTok video depicting a black woman with a coily hair texture



Figure 8

TikTok video depicting a black woman with a coily hair texture

4.1.3 Luxury is about behaviour

The black women in luxury movement defines luxury as a form of conduct that is linked to bougie behaviour as well as the practice of self care habits. All three contexts in which the term 'being bougie' can be applied, an attitude of superiority, the flaunting of one's wealth or assimilation to whiteness, are applicable to the way in which the movement uses or perceives behaviour as a way to identify with the wealthy. The same can be said about self care, as engaging in self care habits demonstrates that the movement prioritises maintaining their health and partaking in relaxing activities as much as the wealthy do. In doing so, the movement additionally challenges the 'strong black woman' trope and creates a safe space for black women to validate their own needs, actions and experiences.

4.1.3.1 Luxury as 'bougie' behaviour

Many visuals demonstrated the use of the word 'bougie'. This is exemplified by figures 12 and 13. The first centralises a black and white text that reads "another afternoon as: a bougie black girl," while the other states "life of a bougie 21 year old" in white and pink. In the background, scenes of the daily lives of these women are displayed. According to Neal-Barnett (2001), being bougie entails thinking you are better than others and appears "to stem from a materialistic-economic base" (p. 82). It is, however, a layered term that is used to indicate the intersections between race and class through several behaviours such as feeling superior to others, flaunting wealth or assimilation to whiteness

(Steele, 2018). As the interpretation of the term leaves room for speculation, all three behaviours will be explored in this analysis.

Neal-Barnett (2001) claims that being bougie is a behaviour that implies both feeling superior to others and showing off material possessions. A study has shown that those who have obtained great amounts of wealth or are born into it tend to view themselves as superior and more capable than others (Warren, 2019). Piff & Robinson (2016) maintain that the upper class' comparison to the social positioning of others causes the belief that they are better, more important and more deserving than those in less favourable positions. With that in mind, the black women in luxury movement conveys the message that luxury is related to carrying yourself in a way that some might say is arrogant. Hereby, a sense of superiority that is often embodied by the wealthy due to their favourable social position is used as a way to identify with the elite.

The sense of superiority is heightened through the acquisition of material possessions and status that might not be accessible to others of the same race or community. The materialistic aspect to the term derives from 'being bougie' signifying the way in which black people "distance themselves from others by taste, class access, and opportunity" and flaunt this (Steele, 2018, p. 117). In relation to figure 9 and 10 promising to give the viewers a peek into the lives of a 'bougie' black girl, the members of the black women in luxury movement seem to use visuals as a way to give 'regular people' a sense of what being wealthy or upper class is like by publicly displaying their wealth on TikTok. Luxury thus becomes the portrayal of ostentatious behaviour, or flaunting one's wealth. This behaviour is often portrayed by the nouveau riche who use conspicuous consumption as a way to signal their success (Bronsert et al., 2014). By showing off an affluent lifestyle, the black women in luxury movement signals that they belong to the upper class.

In colloquial language 'being bougie' indicates the notion of 'acting white,' the phrase is used within the black community and refers to speaking proper English instead of slang, excelling academically or wearing brands that are 'deemed white' such as the Gap or Abercrombie and Fitch (Neal-Barnett, 2001). Generally, obtaining certain achievements, success or amounts of wealth is related to whiteness. The message conveyed by the black women in luxury movement using the term 'bougie' in this context becomes that luxury is interconnected with 'acting white' or behaviour that is as close to whiteness as possible. If the movement views forms of excellence or affluence as being equal to resembling whiteness, it also implies that blackness or 'behaving black' is not synonymous to that and thus indirectly asks its members to partially deny their blackness to reach that status. As the notion of 'acting white' is something that is prevalent within the black community, the task of the black women in luxury movement might not just be to challenge stereotypes imposed on black people by society but might also be changing the perception of what luxury and achievement is connoted with within the black community itself.



Figure 9

TikTok video depicting 'another afternoon as a bougie black girl'

Figure 10



Figure 10

TikTok video depicting 'the life of a bougie 21 year old'

4.1.3.2 Luxury as self care

Another way in which the black women in luxury seemingly views luxury is as taking good care of yourself. Figure 11 shows a snippet of a TikTok video labelled "2022 goals" that focuses on the objectives set by a member of the black women in luxury movement for the current year. In the background, a visual of pouring soap into one's hand is used to signify taking good care of one's body. Other goals that are mentioned in the video include self care, healthy living, personal growth and pampering yourself. The text displayed on figure 12 states 'how I pour back into myself' and showcases a bright, clean living space in the background.

The phrase 'pouring back into oneself' derives from the self-love movement which encourages performing acts of self-love (Gibson, 2019). In the video in question, a clean apartment, looking put together, getting a pedicure and buying flowers are acts done in the name of self care (see figure 12). As put by Gibson (2019), learning to love oneself through acts of self love enables us to position ourselves for success by adopting healthy habits and surrounding ourselves with the right people. While studying the habits of the wealthy, Badziag (2019) found that they prioritise maintaining their health and partaking in relaxing activities. Self care then becomes yet another symbol that

enables the black women in luxury movement to identify with the elite by showcasing that they prioritise the same things as the wealthy do.

By displaying self care practices, however, the black women in luxury movement is not simply saying that luxury is about self care. As black and marginalised women are often positioned as the caretakers or backbone of society, deliberately opting to put their mental health and overall well being first is an act of resilience (Scott, 2017; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). This can be traced to the stereotype of having to be a 'strong black woman,' which entails not admitting to any imperfections, neediness or displaying vulnerability (Wyatt, 2008). It is a socially constructed identity that was put in place in order to attribute vulnerability to white femininity while making black womanhood synonymous to dominance and independence, which were seen as masculine traits (Gammage, 2015). The stereotype was internalised within the black community, which consequently created the belief among black women that they ought to be self sufficient in handling crises and are destined to be the one everyone relies on (Morgan, 2017).

As put by the late Audre Lorde (2017), "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 130). While society has policed and limited black women's experiences, self care becomes a way to challenge that by validating one's existence, needs and actions (Mantsebo, 2020). It enables black women to be released from the 'strong black woman' trope by creating a space for their emotional, physical and mental wellbeing (Nelson et al, 2016; Donovan & West, 2015). The message conveyed by the black women in luxury movement is that black women deserve to put their needs first and take care of themselves. In that sense the movement not only challenges the 'strong black woman' stereotype but also beliefs that many black women may have internalised about deserving self care.

To summarise, the visual evidence presented in this section suggests that the black women in luxury movement views luxury in relation to various forms of 'bougie' conduct; an attitude of superiority, the flaunting of one's wealth, assimilation to whiteness and the practice of self care habits. Behaving superior, flaunting wealth and prioritising self care are behaviours that are portrayed by the wealthy and can therefore be interpreted as ways to identify with the upper class. Defining luxury as associated with whiteness begs the question whether the black women in luxury movement is still approaching black femininity from a limiting, racialized perspective that does not connote success with blackness instead of freeing black women from a restrictive social identity. The visual promotion of self care habits is a way to challenge former, internalised notions of the position of black women and has created a space in which their vulnerability and well being is celebrated.



Figure 11

TikTok video depicting goals for 2022



Figure 12

TikTok video depicting a self-care routine

4.2 Thematic analysis findings: YouTube and Twitter similarities

The thematic analysis of the data sets for the audiences on YouTube and Twitter resulted in four themes that were present in both audiences. Twitter demonstrated a discussion on the platform concerning black women in luxury that was unique to the social networking site and will also be explored. These findings will be discussed in this section in relation with the concepts outlined in the methodology. Furthermore, the findings aim to reflect the audience's response to the black women in luxury movement. The thematic analysis will assess to what extent the findings of the semiotic analysis overlap.

4.2.1 The movement is a lifestyle

The data set revealed that the audience on Twitter and YouTube found the black women in luxury movement to be a lifestyle in a variety of ways. It is, firstly, a way of life with a subjective definition, that favours a certain aesthetic and involves manifestation. Its subjectivity concerns differing views regarding brands and self care that is considered part of the luxurious lifestyle portrayed by the movement. Secondly, aesthetics is used by both those who desire to be wealthy and those who have reached a high status as a way to identify with the upper class. Finally, those who are currently not in a position to live the 'black girl luxury lifestyle' respond by manifesting that desire. All three ways of perceiving the movement as a lifestyle demonstrate a partial dominant and negotiated reading of the audience; the audience receives the message the movement conveys through its use of visual imagery but also makes it their own.

4.2.1.1 The lifestyle is subjective: brands

As black women are not a monolith, the manner in which the audience on Twitter and YouTube defined the black girl luxury lifestyle varied tremendously. Two sub-categories found to define a luxurious lifestyle for the members of the movement were brands and self care. The semiotic analysis found that visual imagery of black women receiving or owning premium brands was often shown as a way to challenge media portrayals of black women in poverty. The admiration for and possession of high-end brands was also found to be a marker of the black women in luxury lifestyle according to the findings of the thematic analysis. Tweets such as "Gucci girl #blackgirlluxury" and the use of the black girl luxury hashtag to share the possession of a high-end car reveal that brands that are deemed premium are often viewed as part of the lifestyle (see figures 13 & 14). In that sense, the intended reading of the cultural message shared by the black women in luxury movement about the importance of premium brands was received and was therefore interpreted from the position of a dominant reading by the audience (Alasuutari, 1999).

Interestingly enough, it is not always the price tag that makes the audience label something as part of the black women in luxury movement. The quoted tweet "About to secure myself a telfar bag. In my black girl luxury era" exemplifies this, as Telfar is a fresh luxury brand known for purposely selling its popular bags at affordable price ranges (Cohn, 2020). Apart from the accessible price point,

the company’s slogan “not for you, for everyone” highlights its mission to be an inclusive high profile brand (Stessman, 2021). Another quote that does so states “whenever I drink Starbucks it just gives Black Girl Luxury” (see figure 15). The fact that non-high profile brands are perceived as belonging to the black women in luxury lifestyle by certain audience members turns the audience’s response from a dominant into a negotiated reading of the intended message to solely view high-end brands as belonging to the black girl luxury movement (Zhao, 2014). It is an understanding of the intended message while adapting it to the personal convictions of the audience members.

The examples of promoting high-end brands such as Gucci as part of the black women in luxury lifestyle while others view Telfar bags or Starbucks coffee as such, demonstrates that the audience on Twitter and YouTube is a diverse collective of black women who have different perceptions of what the luxury lifestyle within the movement looks like. As the black women within the movement are not a monolith, it is natural that their ideas of a luxurious lifestyle might differ. This is in line with Ko et al. (2019) who claim that luxury is relative and in the eyes of the beholder. It could also be read as a testament of the differing income brackets the members of the black women in luxury movement might find themselves in. Whether a good or service is classified as a luxury or a necessity highly depends on their income level (Wagemann, 2021). In relation to the black girl luxury movement, while one member might be able to afford to splurge on an expensive handbag another might only have the financial means to buy a quality cup of coffee every now and then. Regardless of the differing incomes, both women would still feel part of the movement while participating in the luxury lifestyle to the extent that they can. In that sense, the audience responds to the black women in luxury movement by either adopting its view on what consists of a luxurious lifestyle or adding their personal definition to it in order to participate in accordance with their financial means.

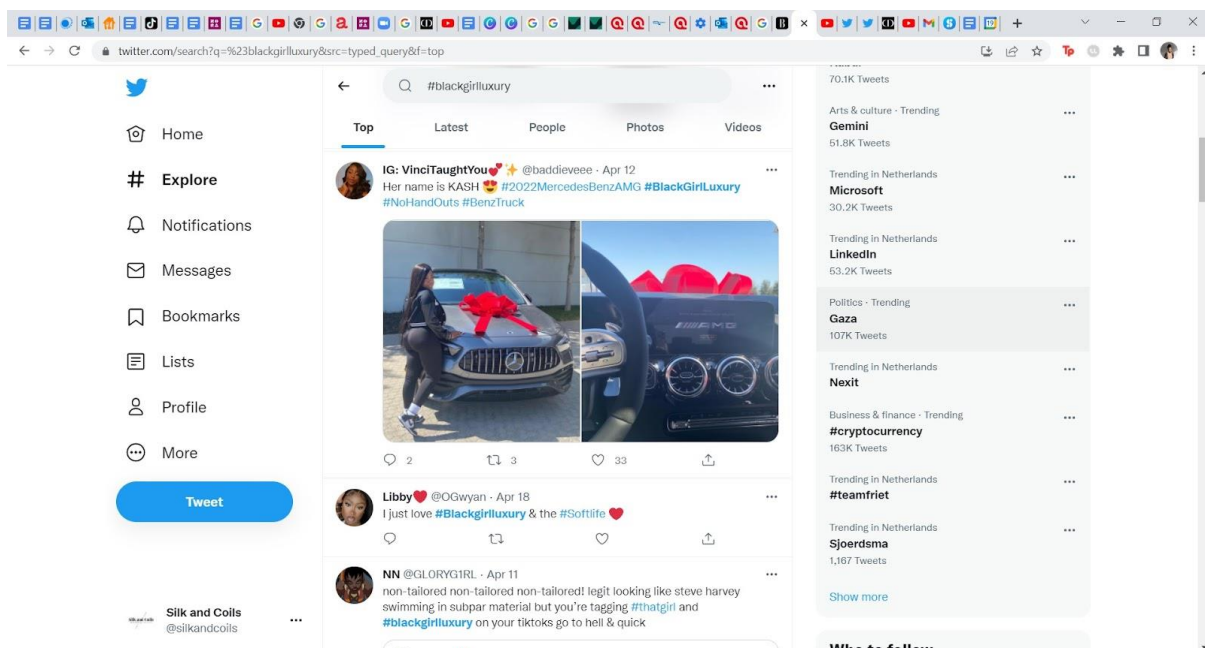


Figure 13

Twitter feed depicting results of the #blackgirlluxury hashtag

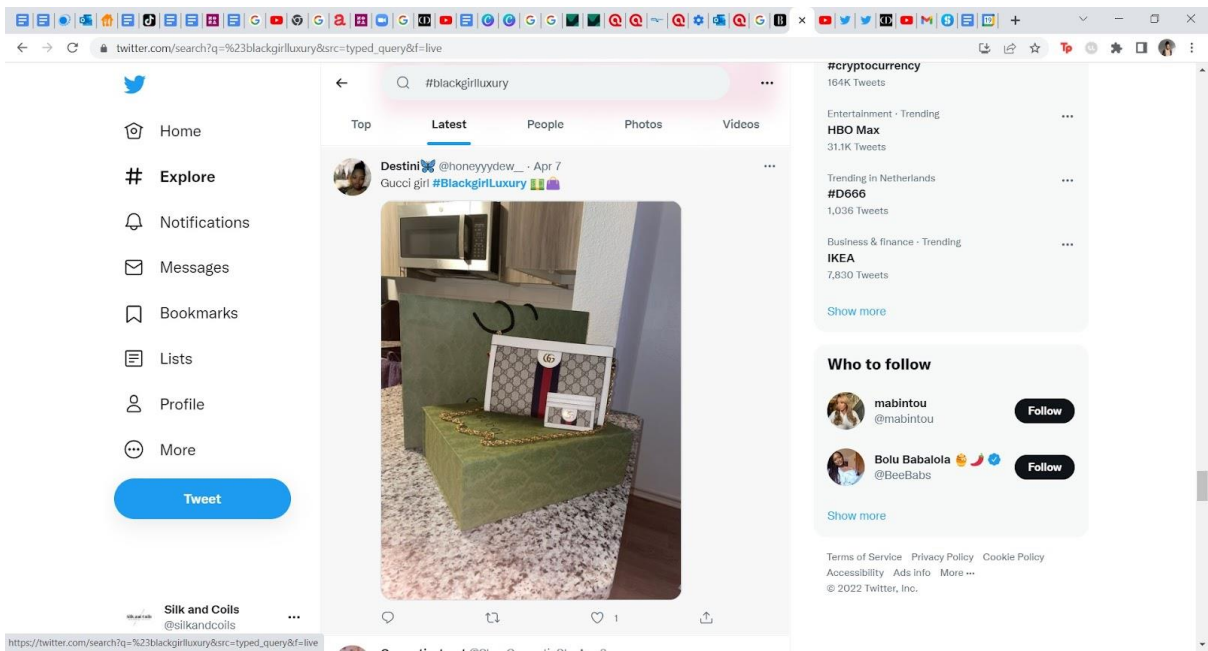


Figure 14

Tweet depicting a Gucci purse and its matching couture set

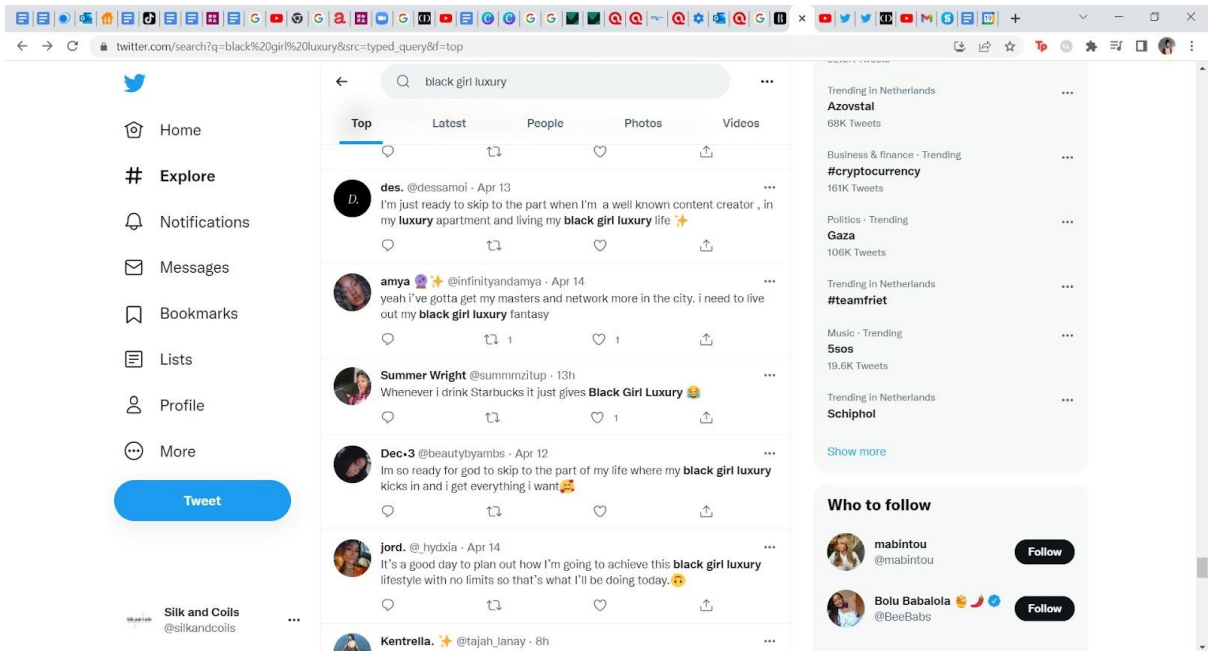


Figure 15

Tweet depicting a result of the 'Black Girl Luxury' keyword

4.2.1.2 The lifestyle is subjective: self care

Just as what is meant by a brand that represents the black women in luxury lifestyle differs, what is classified as self care as part of this lifestyle looks different according to the audience as well. Figure 16 depicts a tweet that states the following: “What is black girl luxury to YOU? For me, it’s delving into experiences that were never available to me as a kid”. Here, self care is interpreted as having new experiences as well as ‘healing your inner child’ and has been made available because of the black women in luxury movement. ‘Healing your inner child’, along with inner child healing, is a phrase that is used within therapy to refer to addressing the needs that were not met as a child and have resulted in subconscious beliefs or coping mechanisms (Trieu, 2020). According to Trieu (2020) healing our inner child helps us create the safe space we always needed but did not receive.

Self care is also classified as a relaxing activity. One audience member tweeted the following: “Scheduled my first facial.. We living luxurious ova here #blackgirlluxury”. This shows that despite emotional self care, physical self care is viewed as part of living the black girl luxury lifestyle as well (Scott, 2022). Finally, mental self care is practised through acts that help members free up their minds, as exemplified by figure 17.

The semiotic analysis revealed that the black women in luxury movement used visual imagery to denote the message that black women should prioritise self care as a way to defy notions of having to be a ‘strong black woman’ who puts the physical, mental and overall well being of others above her own. The thematic analysis has shown that the audience has interpreted this message from a dominant reading position, meaning that they have grasped the importance of self care for black women (Alasuutari, 1999). The movement has helped black women realise that they are deserving of self care and this message has resulted in its members partaking in practices that encourage their emotional, physical and mental well being (see figure 28). The audience has thus not only received the message, it has adopted and implemented it and is thus actively challenging the ‘strong black woman’ stereotype by choosing to put their needs first.

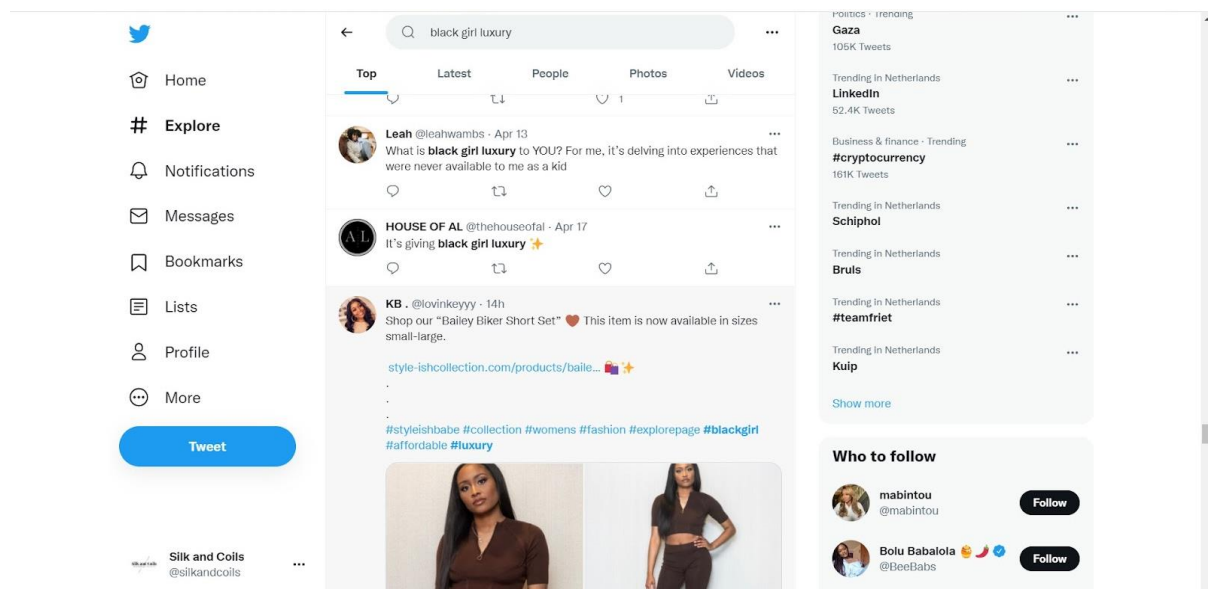


Figure 16
 Tweet depicting a result of the ‘Black Girl Luxury’ keyword

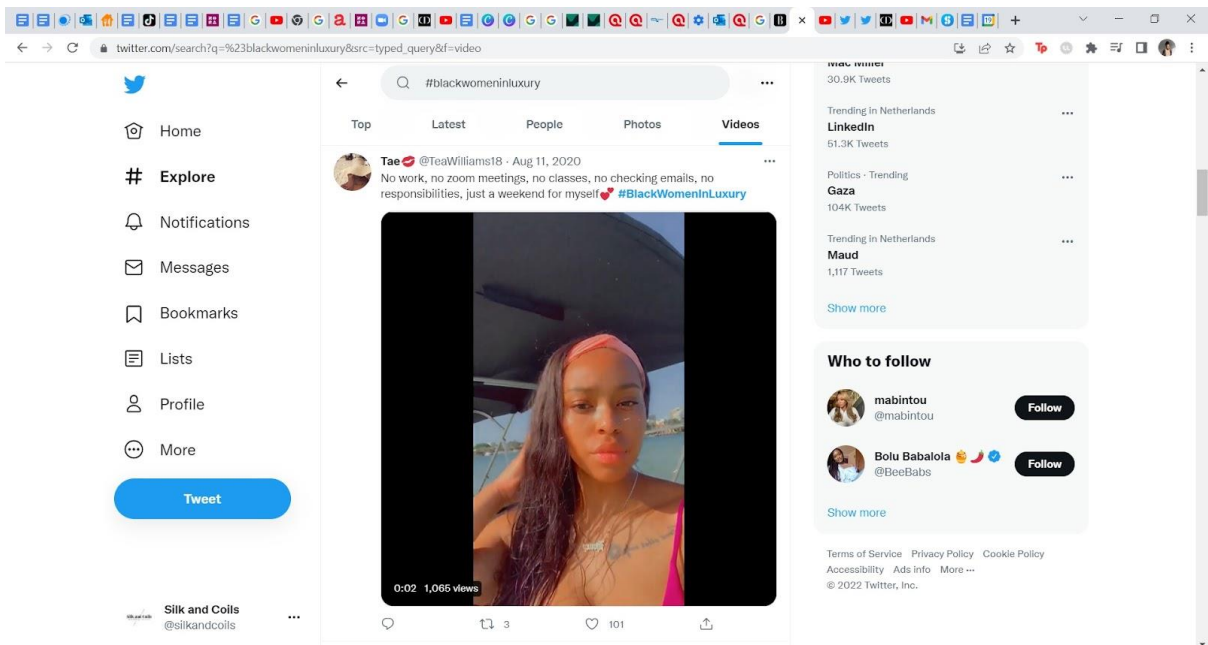


Figure 17

Tweet depicting a result of the 'Black women in luxury' keyword

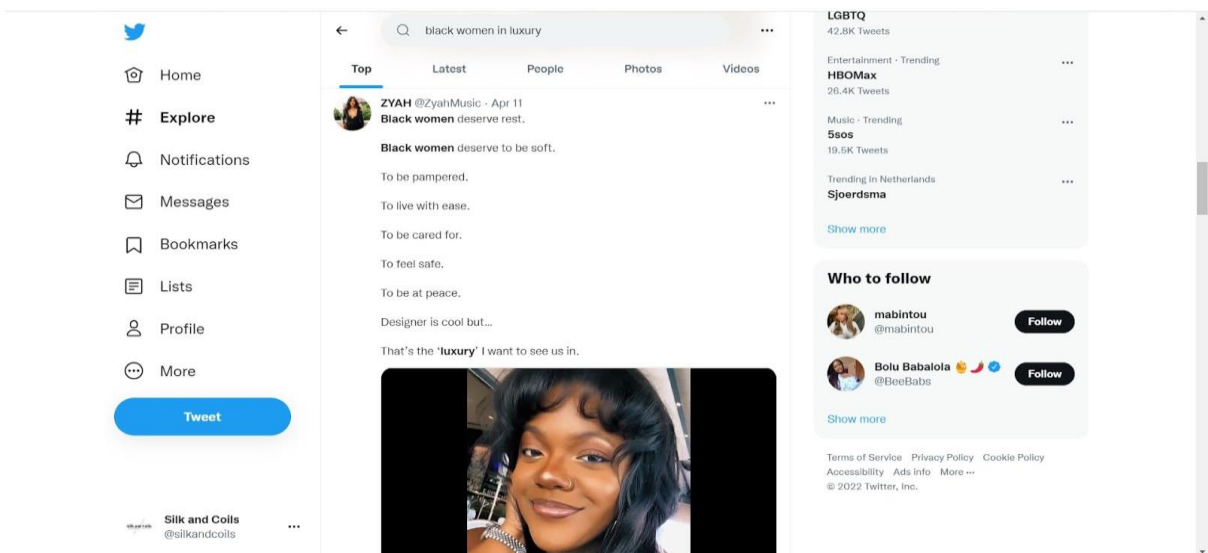


Figure 18

Tweet depicting a result of the 'Black women in luxury' keyword

4.2.1.3 The lifestyle is an aesthetic

While some say the definition of a luxurious lifestyle is subjective, others argue that the movement requires a specific way of dressing that is achieved as follows:

“...I decided that for me what was best and what was going to be best is to invest more money in higher-end pieces that will last longer, instead of buying so many things from lower end stores like forever 21” (Partee, 2019, 7:13).

This quote states that In order to ‘look like money’ or be perceived as elegant, one must only buy clothing from higher end stores. This idea is in line with the findings of the semiotic analysis. What makes this finding unique to the thematic analysis is the notion of ‘looking like money,’ also known as the ‘old money aesthetic.’ It started on social media as a trend that refers to the manner in which those who have inherited their wealth tend to dress (Falekos & Morgan, 2022). The old money aesthetic entails wearing handmade loafers, heirloom jewellery, cashmere or discreet designer labels such as Chanel or Hermès (White, 2022). It is, in essence, about wearing high quality and long-lasting clothes which is also mirrored by the quote.

The ‘old money’ aesthetic is interesting for two reasons; it is juxtaposed with ‘nouveau riche’ forms of dressing and is a style that is often deliberately adopted by those who aim to look as if they come from generational wealth (White, 2022). Firstly, ‘old money’ is often made to juxtapose the nouveau riche in the way they dress and in their values. While those who were born into wealth are said to be classy, discreet and wear family heirlooms, the nouveau riche are viewed as blatant, flashy and drenched in visible brand names (White, 2022). Secondly, while it is a trend that represents the elite’s class-consciousness and a sense of exclusivity that is reserved for those who are born into wealth, dressing like the upper class is used by the lower and middle class to identify with them.

The message conveyed by the black women in luxury movement through the visual analysis suggested that luxury is about experiencing receiving and possessing high-end brands, sharing that you have these possessions on social media and adhering to an aesthetic that is deemed elegant. This can be read as a mixture of ‘old money’ and ‘new money’ values, as both flashiness and elegance are promoted. When interpreting the data set of the semiotic analysis as a visual representation of what belonging to the movement looks like, the response of the audience is dressing in a way that ‘looks like money’ in order to feel part of the movement. Elegant dressing then becomes a costume of the black girl luxury movement and is used by those who have reached upper class status as well as those who are aiming to do so as a form of identification with the elite. The message of the visual aesthetic of the black women in luxury movement is thus interpreted from a dominant reading by the audience.

4.2.1.4 The lifestyle is about manifestation

The data revealed that the black women in luxury movement is described as a lifestyle that should be aspired if not yet obtained:

“Don't feel bad if you can't afford luxury right now. If you know that that's where you want your life to go, you want to have like one day a bunch of Chanel 20 bags and Hermès and a bunch of designer items, speak it into existence” (black women in luxury keyword, video 4)

In essence, the quote reveals that those who are not in the position to acquire premium goods such as luxury bags at the moment could simply manifest it through speaking it into existence. The phrase ‘speak it into existence’ is related to the law of attraction and simply entails that speaking out the things you want to happen will make them your reality over time (Hicks & Hicks, 2008). This aspirational aspect is not just tied to the lifestyle itself but also to choices in romantic relationships:

“These images are supposed to be decidedly aspirational. They're meant to show us what we could achieve if we just reject self-sacrifice and struggle love” (Foster, 2021, 1:02)

The visuals as portrayed by the black women in luxury movement thus invite a desire to live the illustrated lifestyle of luxury. The audience adopts this message from a dominant reading position, however might not have reached a place where it is their reality yet. It responds by viewing it as an aspirational way of living and speaks the desire to live the black girl luxury lifestyle into existence with the hope for it to soon become their reality.

Additionally, the quote above demonstrates that the audience reads the visualization of the black women in luxury lifestyle as a consequence of rejecting self-sacrifice and struggle love. As illustrated by the ‘strong black woman’ stereotype, black women have often been taught that self-sacrifice is noble and that their vulnerability should remain hidden (Scott, 2017; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). The term ‘struggle love’ is often used in the black community and in media representations of black women’s relationships to allude to turbulent relationships whereby the black woman in question endures many hardships due to or with her black romantic partner but still decides to stick by their side (Gaines, 2021). It is part of the ‘ride or die’ trope that promotes dysfunctional relationships and insists black women should endure whatever hardship comes with the relationship, including unfaithfulness, abuse, abject poverty or forms of neglect (Gaines, 2021). The quote reveals that the movement demonstrates the life black women can lead as a result of better choices in romantic partners. The audience not only responds to the black girl luxury lifestyle as aspirational but also as liberating due to the fact that it shows a positive image of what black women’s love lives could look like. As the quote invites the audience to reject self-sacrifice and struggle love, the audience accepts the message pushed by the movement that black women should love themselves, not settle for

dysfunction and prioritise their needs.

To summarise, the data set demonstrated that the black women in luxury movement is a lifestyle that is subjective, concerned with an aesthetic and is aspirational. The audience has responded to the visual representation of the black women in luxury lifestyle by partly negotiating the denoted messages in order to add in their personal convictions when it comes to which brands belong to the lifestyle. The message that black women are deserving of self care has fully been embraced and implemented by the collective audience of black women. Finally, while not all women might be living the luxurious lifestyle they aspire to, manifesting and aesthetics are used as a way to still identify with or feel connected to the movement. The latter could be said to exemplify the democratisation of luxury.

4.2.2 The movement is political

A recurrent theme in the data set amongst the audience was that the black girl luxury movement is political in two ways: it is related to class politics and is interpreted as a political stance against an imposed social identity for black women. It is, firstly, related to class politics in the sense that the movement has created a space for those who have obtained a higher social status whilst having lower socio-economic backgrounds to experience a sense of freedom and luxury that was historically not available to black women. The movement is, secondly, related to class politics as it levelled the playing field of luxury. While it has often been made exclusive to the rich, the movement enables both the lower and upper class to engage in luxury to their own ability. Finally, its use of positive imagery of black women is a way to challenge socio-political views about black women.

4.2.2.1 The movement concerns class politics

According to the audience, those who publicly display their wealth do so because they were not born into it and are proud to show that they have reached status:

“The main girls who are sharing the luxury lifestyle are most likely from poor backgrounds, honestly, and that’s the reality. They’re from, you know, little means or humble beginnings and sharing it off is kind of like a reaction to ‘oh my gosh i can finally have these things’” (Ambrose, 2022, 8:10)

The findings of the semiotic analysis mirror the idea that the portrayal of ostentatious behaviour is often done by the nouveau riche to symbolise their attained wealth (Bronsert et al., 2014). The quote indicates, however, that the public distribution of their wealth is not done from a place of arrogance but rather pride. While the semiotic analysis hinted at the possibility that ‘bougie’ behaviour can be read as the movement promoting ostentatious behaviour from a place of arrogance, the quote illustrates that wealth is displayed due to a sense of pride about being able to live a luxurious lifestyle while having a lower or middle class socio-economic background. The movement

can hereby be interpreted as political because it creates a space for black women who derive from lower socio-economic backgrounds to share their upward mobility while they experience a sense of freedom and luxury that was once not available to black women due to their race and social positioning. Furthermore, as the movement enables both the members of the lower and upper class to engage in luxury to their own ability and according to their own definition, it levels the playing field of luxury. In doing so, luxury is not solely tied to the upper class but becomes inclusive to all members of society.

4.2.2.2 The movement is a political statement

The audience finds that the black girl luxury movement is not just a collective of black women, it is a political statement;

“But it is political, it's very obviously political you guys, that's why people are calling it a movement. That's why people are saying that these images are revolutionary because we understand that our bodies, our beings, the way that we show up; it's political” (black women in luxury, video 3)

The movement's objective to purposely visualise black women as enjoying themselves, indulging in luxury and living a life of ease is a direct way to defy stereotypes and media portrayals of black women struggling, battling abject poverty and not prioritising their needs (Hutchinson, 2021):

“Black women deserve rest. Black women deserve to be soft. To be pampered. To live with ease. To be cared for. To feel safe. To be at peace. Designer is cool but...That's the 'luxury' I want to see us in”

The creation of a new social identity that creates room for the positive portrayal of black women is interpreted as a political act that is adopted from a dominant reading position. The audience embraces the movement's mission to defy the negative connotations around black femininity. One way in which the audience does this is by adopting the intended message that black women are deserving of a life of ease and self care.

The audience believes that the movement is political. The movement offers black women from lower socio-economic backgrounds that have achieved upward mobility the space to openly share it and experience a sense of freedom and luxury. The movement also affords both those from lower and upper class backgrounds the ability to experience luxury to their own ability, thereby moving away from the notion that luxury is reserved for the upper class. Moreover, the creation of a new, positive social identity for black women is the conscious challenging of their imposed socio-political identity.

4.2.3 The movement is positive

The power of representation and positively adding to the self esteem of black women were revealed to be the main reasons why the audience on Twitter and YouTube embraced the portrayals as pushed by the black women in luxury movement.

Representation was found to be a source of inspiration:

“The representation in this space is definitely needed and therefore I personally, i’m excited to go and TikTok and see a, you know, a black girl in a yacht or, you know, showing her Hermes bag or, you know, um going into the chanel store and ordering everything. Whatever, you know, eating lobster... It’s just so inspiring! That excites me personally and that representation is so needed” (Ambrose, 2022, 19:08)

Representation has often been attributed to enabling marginalised groups to feel seen, heard and important (Elbaba, 2019). More specifically, visual media representations are crucial in shaping our self perception and perpetuating social norms (Gerwin, 2021). Media representations are the way in which societal categories such as race and gender are presented to audiences (Green, 2017). The quote above mirrors the importance of visualising black women receiving or purchasing high-end goods as found in the semiotic analysis to a certain extent. While the semiotic analysis interprets the portrayal of black women with luxury products as a way to associate black femininity with wealth, the audience interprets these visuals as necessary representation. The newly created social identity by the black girl luxury movement thus not only attempts to portray black women in a positive light, the audience of black women actually interpret it as such as well.

In other words, the black women in luxury movement has empowered black women by reclaiming the agency of black women to define themselves instead of settling for society’s notion thereof. It has used the digital space as a site of negotiating this identity and visual media as a way to disassociate from the social identity of black women. The audience on Twitter and YouTube celebrates this.

The black women in luxury movement is found to be positive for the self esteem of black women, according to its audience. The intended message found in the semiotic analysis that black women are deserving of a life of luxury has been adopted as a mindset. The audience has now internalised the belief that black women deserve a life of ease, luxury, indulgence and pampering:

“Black girl luxury, black girl softness, black girl nurturing is all I’m here for this Year and beyond. I really deserve the VERY best” (Yemeya, 2022)

The movement has enabled a collective of black women to esteem themselves as deserving of a luxurious lifestyle and is thus helping them to heal from the psychological trauma of feeling inferior that was caused by the colonial positioning of black women. While the movement aims for social change, it has also caused intrinsic change within its community.

Black girl luxury has thereby done more than created positive imagery of black

women, it has created positive representation that inspires its community and has helped black women believe that they are deserving of a luxurious lifestyle.

4.2.4 Criticism about the movement

Those who made sense of the black girl luxury movement from an oppositional standpoint had mainly two critiques; the movement was said to lack inclusivity and centred around hyper consumption instead of providing freedom for black women.

4.2.4.1 The movement is not inclusive

The intended message of the black women in luxury movement was the creation of a collective that celebrated black women, their indulgence in luxury and conveyed that black women deserve luxury too (Scott, 2022). The audience on Twitter and YouTube finds that this mission has, however, not been fulfilled successfully as they claim that it is not fully inclusive. They argue this on two grounds; the lack of inclusivity of natural hair textures and disabilities.

The analysis has shown an overlap with the semiotic analysis in the concerns raised about the lack of natural hair textures represented within the black women in luxury movement: “I want to bridge the black girl being natural and in luxury gap lol. This new trend of feminism is heavily based on y’all’s approximately to whiteness and its ugly” (Kelly, 2022). This tweet implies that the reason for the lack thereof is due to the movement’s proximity to whiteness, meaning that only hair textures that are close to whiteness are viewed as belonging within the movement. The historical othering of African features, including hair textures, had implications on black women in the colonial context (Robinson, 2011). Their features were deemed inferior while whiteness became the standard of beauty (Randle, 2015). With straighter and wavier hair textures being deemed as beautiful or a marker of success, marginalised women internalised this message. While the black girl luxury movement aims to convey the message that it celebrates black women, by only representing those with straight and wavy hair textures it still participates in creating a limiting social identity for black women instead of an inclusive one. The audience responds to this by taking it upon themselves to close the gap in the movement of representing glamorous black women with natural hair textures. It begs the question to what extent blackness is celebrated in the newly created realm of luxury that is meant to celebrate all black women and whether the movement is inclusive at all.

Those with disabilities did not feel as though they could participate in the movement: “Crying bc I can’t travel anywhere and be the luxury black girl I wanna be all bc of a fucking disability” (Empress, 2022). As the movement promotes luxurious travel and having unique experiences, it subconsciously might alienate those who are not able-bodied. Luxury being defined within the movement as having these experiences excludes those who are not able to participate and represents a limited idea of who gets to be a member.

4.2.4.2 The movement promotes hyper consumption

Except for critiquing the lack of inclusivity portrayed by the black women in luxury movement, the audience stated that the movement mainly promoted hyper consumption: “The Black Women in luxury movement on social media is dangerous for the community. When you leave out appreciating assets, investments for your family, but sensationalise a bag and shoes, you find yourself working for THINGS. Live. Thrive. (KC, 2022)” This tweet warns that the black girl luxury movement pushes a message about prioritising the consumption of symbols of luxury instead of ways to obtain generational wealth. Bearing in mind the historical, disadvantaged financial position of black people creates an understanding for the importance of the black community to accumulate wealth that can be passed down (McIntosh et al., 2020; Chui et al., 2021).

Studies have shown that the purchasing power of black people is tied to the psychological trauma of not feeling deserving of the same luxuries of others (Sinclair, 2020). This behaviour is channelled through the purchase of products that are said to exude wealth. The audience argues that while the movement aims to liberate black women from regressive stereotypes by promoting them in relation to luxury, its message that freedom is found through the consumption of luxurious goods is false and actually reinforces hyper consumption. Instead of being freed, the message conveyed by black girl luxury makes black women dependent on purchasing premium goods to feel a sense of belonging to the movement as well as self esteem. As this codependency requires the use of their financial means it also limits their financial ability to truly create generational wealth.

Overall, it may be said that the audience has taken the oppositional stance against the black women in luxury movement to argue that it is not inclusive and does not truly liberate black women but promotes hyperconsumerism instead. The message that the movement represents all black women and frees them from regressive stereotypes through the promotion of luxury is hereby challenged.

4.3 Thematic analysis findings: Twitter

While four overlapping themes emerged from the Twitter and YouTube data, only one finding was unique to the discussions about black women in luxury as held on Twitter. This section will shed light on the discussion and how it relates to the concepts as outlined in the literature review.

4.3.1 Used to sell ‘affordable luxury’

The analysis suggests that the audience on Twitter responded to the black girl luxury movement by using it as a way to sell affordable luxury products or experiences to its members. The hashtag 'black girl luxury' would often be employed by black, female entrepreneurs to promote their luxury services (see figure 19 and 20). Whereas figure 19 claims to offer high-quality wigs, figure 20 provides luxurious travel targeted at black women.

The use of this hashtag in combination with the promotion of 'luxury' could be interpreted as an attempt to capitalise on the movement's appreciation for high-end services. Furthermore, it illustrates the attempt of the business owners to provide 'masstige' to those who feel part of the black women in luxury movement, meaning "offering prestige to the masses" or creating symbolism and a sense of prestige that is attainable, affordable and mirrors luxury brands (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009, p. 312; Ko et al., 2019, p. 88). They are inclusive in providing the opportunity for luxury to be experienced by those with smaller budgets as well. The black women in luxury movement has thus not only unified a collective of black women who enjoy or desire indulging in luxury, it has simultaneously created a demographic and business opportunity for affordable luxury brands.

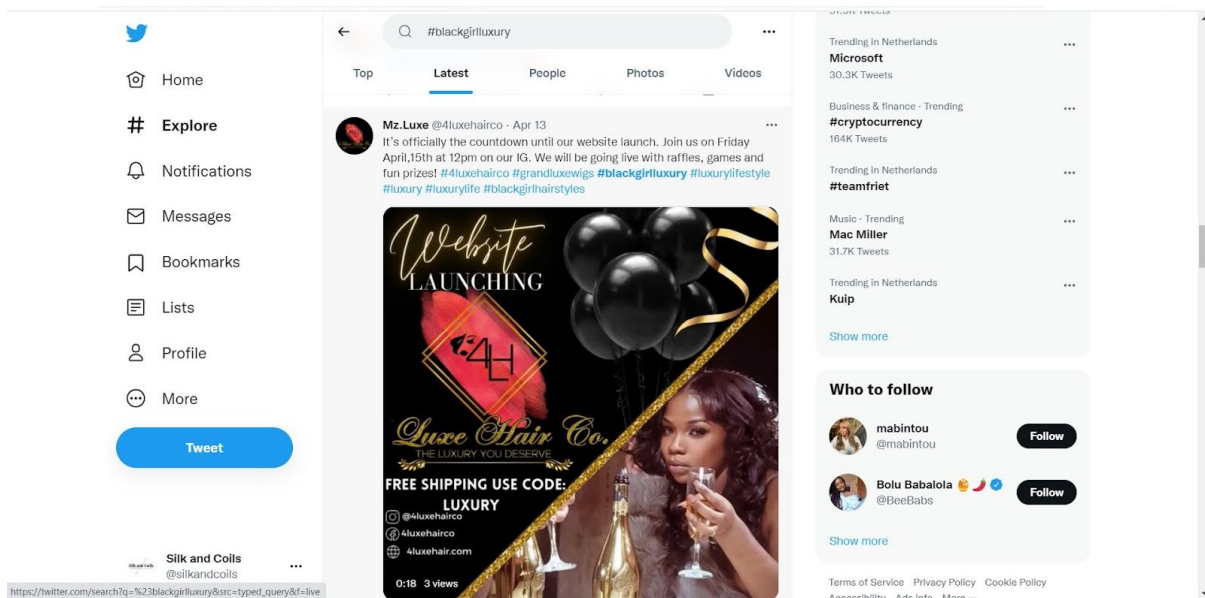


Figure 19

Tweet depicting a result of the '#blackgirlluxury' hashtag

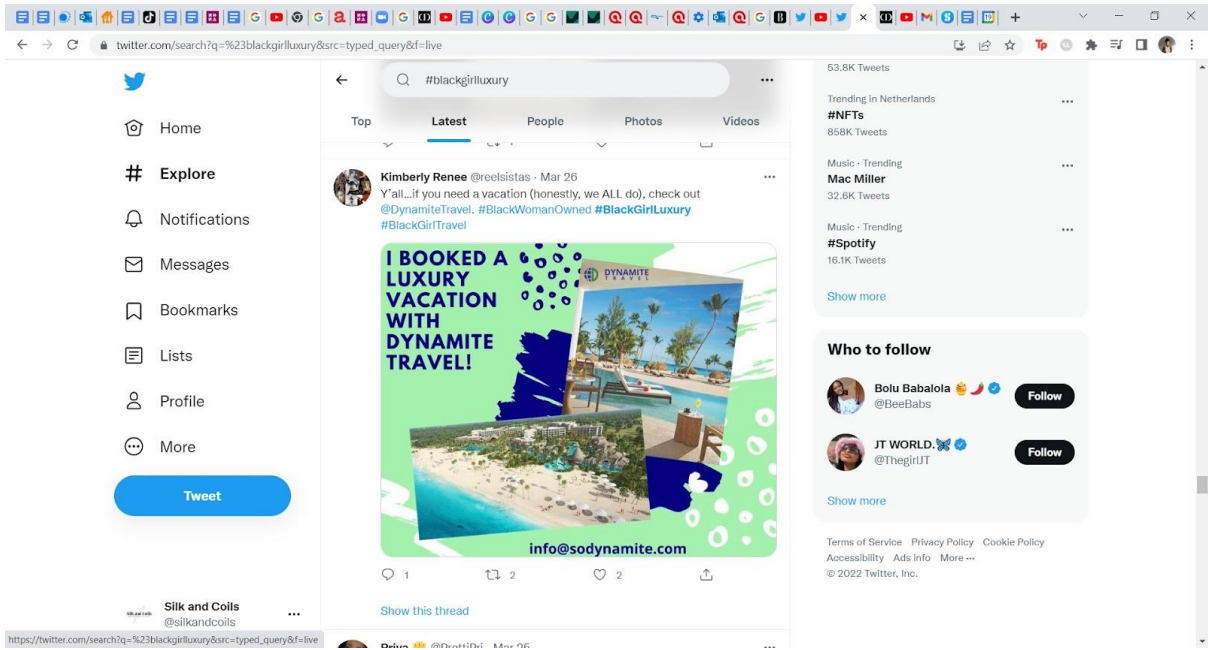


Figure 20

Tweet depicting a result of the '#blackgirlluxury' hashtag

5 Conclusion

In essence, the analysis of this thesis dealt with a semiotic investigation of the visual elements used by the black girl luxury movement to define itself as well as a thematic analysis of its audience on Twitter and YouTube to assess how they make sense of it. The latter was carried out through the lens of media reception theory.

The black women in luxury movement not only shapes representations of black women, it has additionally, positively redefined black femininity. By depicting luxury as experiences, an aesthetic and behaviour, the movement tells a new story about black women. One that aims to endow them with glamour, wealth and a high social standing. This new narrative counters and responds to former exclusion and stereotypes that became synonymous with black womanhood. The audience reveals that the narrative about black women from the past can be rewritten but still needs room for improvement so all feel included. The movement has thus successfully sparked a new, online dialogue about the black female identity.

The black girl luxury movement demonstrates a nuanced and layered attempt to create a new social identity for black women that is accepted, challenged and adapted by black women. While the arguments for each stance differ, what unites them is that they all agree that black women have always been enough.

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