ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Does user-generated content influence value co-creation in the context of luxury fashion brand communities? Matching inclusivity and exclusivity

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Abstract

Given the rise of digital technologies, brands must retain complete control and accountability for user content creation and diffusion. This paper investigates the influence of user-generated content on multiple luxury consumers' value perceptions that arise within brand communities. A type of non-participatory netnography is performed on three fashion brand communities to analyze the content published by community members non-intrusively. Findings show that brand-related content allows users to share their perceived experiential benefits with their networks, ultimately reinforcing the brand's experiential and symbolic dimensions. Moreover, user content influences one's perception of value and attitude. However, if the sense of social homophily and membership is evident, diminishing a brand's perceived value through brand dilution is unlikely. While previous studies revising the outcomes of online exposure for luxury firms have primarily focused on firm-controlled messages, this investigation acknowledges the importance of brand communities in creating and spreading brand-related content and their effect on luxury appeals. This study appears timely as the digital era empowers consumers to be proactive in Value Co-Creation dynamics and freely define the meaning of inclusivity in exclusive luxury.

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1 Introduction

The relevance of luxury brands highlights their longevity and ability to maintain their prestige after defining global events such as the two world wars, the coronavirus pandemic, and a severe economic depression. Thus, it becomes clear how fascinating luxury brands are and how valuable their management has become. Besides that, it has been confirmed that a significant demand 1 for the luxury lifestyle prompts the sector globally. Furthermore, the Luxury market is enormous thanks to e-commerce and digitalization trends. Since the expansion of digital channels, authors (Hennigs et al., 2012; Keller, 2009; Okonkwo, 2009) have debated how luxury brands should balance their desired exclusivity with the ubiquity nature of social media as such platforms broadly empower customers to produce numerous types of user-content and integrate brand communities to influence consumption choices (Liu et al., 2019). Prior research on social media marketing acknowledging positive effects on consumer behavior, brand equity (Godey et al., 2016), purchase intention (Kim & Ko, 2010, 2012), and influencer marketing (Li & Peng, 2021) focuses mainly on brand-generated content.

Nevertheless, it fails to address the co-creation phenomena that inevitably arise from the presence of online brand communities, where consumers and brand lovers can actively interact with each other, generating, distributing, and sharing UGC (Cao et al., 2022; Chapman & Dilmperi, 2022; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Ozuem et al., 2021; Wong, 2023). This paper answers the recent call advanced by Jain (2023) on future research by bibliographic coupling themes regarding digital interactions, online reviews, and complaint handling. The topics analyzed are Benefits of Social Media for Luxury Hospitality (tom Dieck et al., 2018); Ethical Automation in Luxury Hospitality (Wirtz et al., 2023); Resilience Strategies for Complaint Handling (Shi and Chen, 2021); Handling Consumer Complaints in the Digital Age (Wu and Zhao, 2023) and Value Co-Creation with Consumers (Smith & Colgate, 2007; Payne et al., 2008; Chapman & Dilmperi, 2022).

Recently, new forms of luxury have emerged, such as new luxury (Atkinson & Kang, 2022) or unconventional luxury (Diaz Ruiz and Cruz, 2023), which are accessible to many consumers at affordable prices.

However, more knowledge is needed about whether exposure to user-generated content (UGC) can influence the consumers' perception of value towards luxury brands (Dwyer, 2012; Okonkwo, 2009). This understanding should be of deep interest to luxury marketers because the mysticism of a luxury brand depends ultimately on consumers' perceptions of a brand (Ko et al., 2019). While online communities are widely available to the masses, they can compromise the desirable image of exclusivity and individuality built around a luxury brand by potentially leading to brand overexposure (Hennigs et al., 2012). On the one hand, "co-creation" or "story giving" allows community members to share their perceived experiential benefits with their peers, consequently contributing to the reinforcement of the brand's experiential and symbolic dimensions (Üçok Hughes et al., 2016), on the other hand, it shifts the power away from marketeers, possibly threatening the perceived exclusivity of the brand and arising concerns

about brand controllability (Jin and Seung, 2012; Rust et al., 2021). However, despite the proliferation and popularity of such communities, knowledge about their consequences on consumers' perceived brand values is still minimal and fragmented.

So, this investigation wants to bridge this GAP and answer the following research questions:

- *RQ1: In the context of brand communities, do the spontaneous creation and sharing of brand-related content express the fulfillment of consumers' material, experiential and symbolic perceptions?*
- *RQ2: Does user-generated content affect value perceptions and contribute to brand value co-creation?*
- *RQ3: Does the potential gain on consumers' symbolic/experiential value dimensions surpass the inclusion of widespread and inclusive brand communities, or do they show concerns about brand integrity?*

Considering the RQs insights, the exposure to User-Generated Content (UGC) can significantly influence consumers' perception of value towards luxury brands in several ways: *Authenticity and Trust, Engagement and Community, Enhanced Brand Narrative, Feedback and Improvement, Increased Visibility and Emotional Appeal*. In summary, exposure to UGC influences consumers' perception of value towards luxury brands by enhancing authenticity, providing social proof, fostering relatability, building community, enriching the brand narrative, enabling feedback-driven improvements, increasing visibility, and creating emotional connections (D'Arpizio et al., 2023; Gupta et al., 2023).

The added value of this study is three-fold. First, it answers the call for future research on luxury brand management, more precisely, about the paradox of exclusivity versus accessibility and inclusivity emerging from social media activities (Grassi et al., 2019; Ko et al., 2019). Regarding diversity and inclusion narratives, Rust et al. (2021) states that economists typically look at broad social trends, while marketers focus on how these trends affect different groups. Marketing is interested in how social issues, like discrimination and wealth inequality, influence individual consumers' decisions. These are two areas that deserve more attention from marketers. Second, it closes the gap between online exposure of luxury brands and its impact on consumers' value perceptions (Fazeli et al., 2020; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Park et al., 2018), i.e., as it remains unclear which value dimensions can be affected (Okonkwo, 2009). Regarding the latter, Díaz et al. (2016) consider luxury brand websites persuasive-based latent class segmentation. Third, user-generated content expands the understanding of luxury brands' value co-creation phenomena (Quach & Thaichon, 2017; Tynan et al., 2010) by considering the importance of the content produced and spread by the empowered and networked consumer (Ramaswamy, 2009).

In conclusion, inclusivity in luxury branding involves making the brand more accessible and relatable to a broader and more diverse audience (Morley and McMahon, (2011). This is increasingly important as consumers, particularly younger generations like Millennials and Gen Z, seek brands that align with their values, such as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) (Arsel et al., 2022). Social media has played

a pivotal role in this shift by increasing transparency and allowing brands to reach a wider audience more effectively. High price points, limited availability, and the perception of rarity and uniqueness characterize exclusivity. This sense of exclusivity is what traditionally defines luxury and creates its desirability.

However, brands are finding innovative ways to balance this exclusivity with the growing demand for inclusivity. Luxury brands are navigating the paradox of inclusivity and exclusivity by re-conceptualizing their approaches (Flanders et al., 2024). For example, while maintaining high price points and limited product availability, they leverage digital platforms to create inclusive narratives and engage a broader audience. The pandemic has accelerated this trend, pushing brands to enhance their online presence with sophisticated digital experiences, such as virtual try-ons and personalized customer service tools. For luxury brands, the challenge is to remain aspirational while evolving to meet the demands of a more diverse and inclusive consumer base. By maintaining the exclusivity that defines luxury but integrating inclusive practices and narratives, luxury brands can expand their appeal and remain relevant in a rapidly changing market. The successful luxury brand of the future will be one that can skillfully balance these two seemingly opposing concepts.

2 Literature review

Despite numerous attempts to establish a broad and timeless definition of a luxury brand, academics from different fields have yet to achieve a consensus (Ko et al., 2019). As Miller and Mills (2012) recognize, *"one of the areas of agreement in the brand luxury literature is the lack of agreement regarding what is a luxury brand."* In this study, we will define a luxury brand as a brand capable of consistently standing for customer perceptions of high price, superior quality, aesthetics, and paucity (Heine, 2012), as well as beliefs of symbolic and hedonic values (Tynan et al., 2010).

2.1 Implicit value perceptions

Even though some marketing strategies, such as high-class quality or premium pricing policies, might increase the chance of a brand being considered luxurious, they are not successful per se, depending ultimately on consumers' perceptions of a brand (Ko et al., 2019). The individually perceived value, defined as a *"consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product (or service) based on perceptions of what is received and what is given"* (Zeithaml, 1988), performs a significant influence in terms of price evaluation, consumption choices and recommendation behaviour (Behrens et al., 2015). Because consumers themselves aspire to multifaceted values and benefits through the purchase of luxury goods, it is not surprising that researchers have suggested distinct and multiple dimensions that shape value perceptions of luxury brands (Pitt et al., 2009; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2009)—Table 1. Nueno and Quelch (1998) explained that the ratio of functional value to the price of a luxury item should be insignificant when compared

with its ratio of immaterial value to price. Hence, the mystic of a luxury brand goes far beyond its objective and material attributes, which commonly incorporate exquisite material and craftmanship, impressive performance or design, being able, at the same time, to offer high levels of symbolic and hedonic value on both an individual and social level (Pitt et al., 2009).

2.2 Functional value

Customers expect luxury products to possess superior quality evidence and functional attributes than non-luxury products (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Linking luxury products to high-quality standards makes consumers perceive more value from their purchase (Shukla, 2012). Inevitably, the expectation for quality excellence leads consumers to assume that product-related features such as ultimate technology, engineering, sophisticated design, or crafted materials are incorporated (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Indeed, it would not be easy to maintain a perception of luxury without a specific leadership in quality as evaluations about extrinsic product attributes are more straightforward, therefore easily defrauding or exceeding consumers' expectations (Keller, 2009). Apart from fulfilling utilitarian or functional purposes, luxury products should be perceived as rare and unique. The uniqueness appeal is particularly relevant for differentiation-seekers, as it avoids consumption similarities with non-affluent groups and reinforces one's desire for non-compliance with the ordinary (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004).

2.3 Personal value

When clients evaluate their luxury possessions according to their expected emotional benefits and intrinsically pleasant properties rather than from their functional attributes, we enter the subjective realm of value (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Such intangible benefits can result from emotional responses triggered by sensory pleasure, profound enthusiasm, or impressions of personal gratification and reward (Wiedmann et al., 2009). As well as experiential benefits, luxury possessions hold symbolic meanings that can be assimilated into one's self-image—the extended self-dimension of luxury, which conveys the intentionality of enhancing one's identity, character, and personality to conform or differentiate oneself from peers or other social groups. Moreover, because we commonly regard possessions as part of our individuality, luxury brands can reinforce one's self-concept or develop and sustain the desired identity (Pitt et al., 2009; Wiedmann et al., 2009).

2.4 Social value

The social dimension stresses the value derived from a luxury possession incorporating symbolic attributes that enable the perception of association, disassociation or assimilation to various demographic, ethnic and economic influence groups (Shukla, 2012).

By consuming conspicuous luxury items, consumers aspire to achieve similarities with a particular reference group from whom they seek social approval, status and a sense of belonging (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Such conspicuous-driven behavior is expected in people with a high need for social status and affiliation (Wiedmann et al., 2009), who are more prone to consider reference groups' influence to guide the choice of publicly consuming luxury goods (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004).

2.5 User-generated content as a co-creation phenomena

UGC is frequently described as *"any publicly disseminated, consumer-generated message whose subject is a collectively recognized brand"* (Berthon et al., 2008). While UGC cannot be considered an utterly brand-new concept, as word-of-mouth has always existed, it is undeniable that the spreading of social platforms has primarily facilitated the co-creation of brand content through customer empowerment (Hennigs et al., 2012; Üçok Hughes et al., 2016).

First, UGC allows users to express a new identity online or self-promote through interaction with other community members (Daugherty et al., 2008). Likewise, the self-concept dimension of UGC is understood as a means for consumers to communicate who they are and express themselves by sharing attitudes, behaviours and preferences that are agreeable to others (Daugherty et al., 2008; Li et al., 2021). Second, content creation is accompanied by a feeling of inherent gratitude for actively contributing to a community that shares common moral beliefs (Daugherty et al., 2008). The perceived collaboration within a community, in which concepts such as homophily and membership are evident, reinforces impressions of likenesses, connection, and belonging to a group, most likely stimulating a collective and dynamic generation of branded content (France et al., 2015; Muñiz & Schau, 2011). Third, when consumers take control of a brand's narrative story giving"- through the creation of UGC, several opportunities for co-creation of histories and meanings may arise (Arrigo, 2018; Üçok Hughes et al., 2016). Brands can ask customers to share online their brand-related content by posting pictures, photos, or submitting reviews, so then marketers can build a contextualized and proprietary site of experiential content produced by the community, which is an effective strategy to empower customers while protecting the brand's essence (Üçok Hughes et al., 2016). Instead, luxury brands might choose to take advantage of experiential marketing initiatives as appropriate occasions to encourage the sharing of user content throughout online communities: by inviting selected customers to attend exclusive brand-related events, firms guarantee that the value proposition of a brand is correctly diffused online and, ultimately, consumers are glad to collaborate as they are exhibiting conspicuous cues of self-presentation to their social networks (Koivisto & Mattila, 2018). Luxury brand managers who advertise luxury brands are interested in using social media marketing. Granata and Scozzese's (2019) study on Search Engine Marketing indicates that consumer satisfaction is positive when people use Facebook to search for luxury brands. Since luxury brands stand for implicit values of experiential and symbolic perceptions (Pitt et al., 2009), the

respective fulfilment of those dimensions can explain why co-creation may work: customers are both sharing their experiential benefits with others (enhancing one's self-presentation and extended conspicuousness) and contributing to the co-creation and reinforcement of the luxury brands' symbolism through user empowerment (Üçok Hughes et al., 2016).

2.6 User-generated content and value perceptions

Increasingly, UGC is an influential source for shaping consumers' brand attitudes since individuals disbelieve commercial-motivated statements from marketing executives and turn online to search for product recommendations (Ozuem et al., 2016). While traditional marketing is losing its efficacy, UGC emerges as a powerful tool to guide the consumer in the decision-making process (Ozuem et al., 2016), as research provides evidence that user-generated messages have a more significant effect on consumers' overall perception of brands than firm-proprietary content (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Several authors recognize the power of user content to influence consumers' value perceptions (Gruen et al., 2006; Ozuem et al., 2016; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

Our research suggests that e-wom through content marketing is, in fact, a proper new way of brand promotion (Strutton et al., 2011; Chu et al., 2020). Curiously, even when non-content producers ("lurkers") are exposed to online peer-to-peer communications, they infer a specific perceived value from a firm's offering, which directly affects their future purchase intentions (Gruen et al., 2006). Still, consumers' value perceptions and attitudes towards user content are mediated by the sense of homophily (or similarity) evolving among an online audience, ultimately affecting the perceived credibility of the exchanged know-how (Ayeh et al., 2013). Indeed, social media platforms have intensified the sharing of brand-related content in several visual and textual formats regardless of brand ownership (Hennigs et al., 2012), which might produce harmful impacts in terms of brand value, as luxury brands should continuously preserve a balanced sense of exclusivity and optimal awareness (Üçok Hughes et al., 2016). However, in the context of luxury marketing, research about the influence of user content on consumers' perceived luxury appeal is insufficient. Lee and Watkins (2016) investigated the impact of the content produced by YouTube vloggers on luxury brand perceptions and intentions. They revealed that it could positively impact both variables if favourable determinants of para-social interaction (PSI) theory—physical, social attractiveness and attitude homophily are visible and identified by individuals. Consequently, such findings advise luxury brand managers to carefully analyse their target customer's central values, principles, and aspirations before selecting any brand representative to disseminate brand content online, thus turning PSI into a valuable branding management tool to moderate consumers' value perceptions towards a luxury brand.

2.7 Luxury brand communities

Internet communications have motivated the proliferation of many collective networking sites facilitating the production, distribution and sharing of UGC about brands and, ultimately, the development of well-established brand communities. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) described a brand community as a *"specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand"* who reveal compatible opinions and a strong desire of belonging to the group. Prior research showed that brand communities can produce positive consequences by improving brand trust and loyalty and reinforcing the relationship between a brand, its offering and other customers (Laroche et al., 2013). It is consensual that social benefits act as the main drivers for community membership, as brand communities embody opportunities to experience a strong attachment with like-minded individuals or aspirational social groups (Park & Kim, 2015). Apart from the possibility of fostering meaningful social relationships, online communities allow consumers to search for entertaining and informational content (Park & Kim, 2015; Parrott et al., 2015), which is of great importance for luxury consumers. However, the online exposure of luxury brands might be regarded as an enormous paradox, as luxury's core values seem incongruent with the ubiquity of digital channels.

Nevertheless, this is not a consensual judgment in the literature that emphasizes both the positive and negative effects of online exposure to luxury brands. Quach and Thaichon (2017) refrain from considering both outcomes as separate events but as part of a complex phenomenon where the same interaction can be evaluated differently according to consumers' subjective perceptions and expectations. Most of the work contributing to the positive stream emphasizes that the integration and interactivity of luxury brand communities can produce positive effects on consumer-related variables such as willingness to pay a premium price, brand equity (awareness and brand image), brand loyalty and preferential purchase intentions (Godey et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012; Kim & Lee, 2019). Moreover, participants in luxury communities reveal clustered feelings and attitudes around brand love, involvement, engagement, attachment, self-construction and expression (Parrott et al., 2015). Contrariwise, and considering the particularities of luxury brand management, a high level of online brand-customer engagement can negatively influence consumer's brand value perceptions (i.e. social, uniqueness and quality) and, consequently, stimulate the dilution of brand image, given the perceived reduction of psychological distance (Park et al., 2018). Besides, another reason that could explain the phenomena of value co-destruction is the luxury brands' incapability to meet customers' prior expectations about the amount of love, status, information or services resources that will be exchanged during an online interaction (Quach & Thaichon, 2017).

3 Methodology

3.1 A netnographic approach

Netnography (or "virtual ethnography") is a qualitative research technique suitable for the interpretation and analysis of communities and cultural groups evolving through computer-based interfaces (Kozinets, 2002). The evolution of information technologies has turned the online environment into a precious and helpful source for researchers and practitioners to obtain consumer insights (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Cyber cultures and virtual communities have been objecting to netnographic analyses for years to explore behaviours, perceptions, and emotions by observing community members' dialogues and initiatives (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). While adopting a merely observational attitude, netnography reveals substantial advantages compared to other qualitative methods. It gives precious insights into consumer actions without being too intrusive or obtrusive since the information is derived from a context the researcher cannot manipulate (Kozinets, 2002). This investigation compasses a first research phase of pure observation of the communities better to understand their online activity and exchanges between members and verify if such communities match the selection criteria defined in the literature (Kozinets 2002, 2010, 2015). Afterwards, in a second phase and to execute data collection, we will perform a qualitative content analysis based on a non-participatory type of netnography. Along with the content analysis, the researcher will continue to gather reflective data from observing interactions among community members to enrich and contextualize conclusions. More precisely, and based on the literature reviewed, throughout our investigation, three questions will guide our empirical research:

- In the context of brand communities, do the spontaneous creation and sharing of brand-related content express the fulfilment of consumers' material, experiential and symbolic perceptions?
- Does user-generated content affect value perceptions? When community members are exposed to other users' negative messages, do they also experience a negative value brand perception?
- Can the potential gain on consumers' symbolic/experiential value dimensions surpass the inclusion of widespread and inclusive brand communities, or do they show concerns about brand integrity?

3.2 Object of the study

As we aim to analyse user content spread online without geographic or cultural restrictions, the conversations and discussions under investigation will imply four globally well-known luxury brands. Among all luxury brands, Louis Vuitton (#18), Chanel (#23), Hermès (#32) and Gucci (#39) are the ones with the highest-ranking position in the Interbrand's Best Global Brands Report of 2018 (Interbrand, 2018). Furthermore, these four luxury brands represent distinctive levels of luxury

perceptions and personalities, which can increase the pertinence and richness of our conclusions (Willett, 2015). Nowadays, countless online applications and interfaces have driven the rise of brand communities with distinct characteristics and specifications, thus offering numerous online social interactions for the *netnographer* to consider as possible research venues (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). The first step of a netnographic study is the identification of question-relevant online conversations and the subsequent choice of luxury communities. The brand communities under analysis must have a substantial and rich body of relevant data and an interactive, updated and regular stream of conversations among participants to maximise the potential for content creation and diffusion (Kozinets, 2015).

3.3 Brand communities: the online forums

In previous netnographic studies applied to luxury communities, blog texts and audience comments on forums dedicated to luxury purchases were revealed to be powerful platforms for consumer insights (Leban & Voyer, 2015; Parrott et al., 2015; Cuomo et al., 2020), as forums have been exposed to offer detailed and rich data, displaying a high degree of interactivity between participants. Apart from in-depth insights about the topics fostering consumers' comments and discussions, another great advantage of blog forums is their openness, meaning that even someone not registered in the community can still access the content without restrictions. Because community participants are aware of their posts' widespread and indiscriminative reach, and since these communities are open to the general public without any access invitation or screening, no ethical outlines are infringed (Kozinets, 2002). We successfully found three luxury forums—Table 2—that, after a period of observation, confirmed to meet all previous criteria and display an enormous potential to draw insights on luxury consumption and implicit value perceptions convenient to our analysis.

3.4 Data collection

We expect an overwhelming amount of data within those communities, so any message or post that exceeds the boundaries of our research questions will be regarded as irrelevant and disqualified for further analysis (Kozinets, 2002). In concrete terms, we intend to gather conversations highlighting value perceptions towards luxury brands and how they can affect others' opinions. To keep the pertinence of this investigation, only threads or posts that date from no back than the past two years (only posts from 2017 onwards) will be collected for further analysis since it is crucial to track recent activity (Kozinets, 2015). Data collection will be ongoing from March 2019 to June 2019 as new insights and content come almost daily within these communities. Furthermore, the data collection took place a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic, so the data cannot be considered contaminated by social isolation. While tracking brand perceptions, we heavily depend on the richness of the context under study, so data will be extracted manually at the first stage, followed by a computerised analysis using NVivo software to help code and link the extensive data collected. Following all the above procedures, we

gather 420 messages (TPF = 210; TBF = 155; TFS = 55) to perform content analysis. The distribution of the collected UGC among the three luxury forums was based on their stream of updated and regular activity and the presence of relevant conversation threads for our research topic.

3.5 Data coding and analyses

User content was first coded using an open coding approach, during which the researcher focused on "label" portions of data without considering any theoretical framework, only by reflecting on which keywords/expressions would best describe the attributes and meaning emerging inductively from the content (Kozinets, 2010). Afterward, an axial coding scheme was applied to group the keywords into categories that express the theoretical hypotheses under investigation (Parrott et al., 2015). Kozinets (2010) noted the effectiveness of axial coding as it transforms "*coded data into theory by noting the contexts, conditions, strategies, and outcomes that tend to cluster together.*" Considering our investigation, and because consumers' expectations about functional, personal, and social benefits obtained through a luxury purchase are the most consensual in the literature, we will define those three value dimensions as higher-construct levels of brand value categories. Using the following categorization of luxury brands' appeals as grounded theory, we will perform a coding scheme like the one suggested by Krepapa et al. (2016), who defined suitable keywords and meanings for each sub-category of luxury value perceptions when undergoing a content analysis study. Table 3 shows the structure of the axial coding scheme we applied in this investigation. Table 4 shows the final distribution of absolute frequencies for each brand and implicit value appeals according to the content reviewed. This table gives detailed insight into the number of nodes crossing each luxury appeal category (and sub-category) and the respective brand mentioned. Because a single message can contain multiple implicit value perceptions, more than one node was sometimes attributed to each comment.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Functional value appeals

Concerning quality appeals, our sample validates that consumers expect luxury products to stand for superior quality standards (Shukla, 2012), a perception of value which is closely linked to the presence of product-related characteristics such as exquisite design and craftmanship (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Because of that, when showcasing their expensive acquisitions, community participants focus their description on the extraordinary design and precious and crafted details.

> "I have one classic bag—the Trevi PM—that I don't think I will ever tire of. There is so much craftsmanship in it, with details that I don't see much of in the newer models." (Passerine12, 7th April 2019).

While it is straightforward that the impression of superior quality and craftsmanship enhances a brand's functional appeal, our content analysis provides evidence that such material attributes seem an essential precondition for other symbolic and social values. Greater attention to quality properties enhances the perception of the brand's symbolism, including its power to convey a superior status and prestigious image:

"I agree that Hermes' quality and perceived status are much higher than LV's. Every Hermes item, including every small accessory, is handmade by a specific artisan. Some artisans have worked with Hermes for over 30 years, and their experience is immense." (frbspa, 19th February 2019).

Additionally, our analysis confirms the importance of perceived uniqueness to enhance a brand's perceived value as long as consumers seek luxury consumption as a way to escape from the ordinary and to differentiate one's self-concept from non-affluent groups (Wiedmann et al., 2009), hence, several community members also admit that if a brand is widely available then is not desirable:

For me, as long as I keep seeing them (Chanel Bags) everywhere I go, I know I'll never want to purchase one myself, regardless of the price. (roxta, 18th January 2018).

4.2 Personal value appeals

Consumers looking for personal fulfillment do not evaluate their luxurious purchases merely based on the expected functional value but sincerely appreciate the offered experiential and emotional benefits (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). In the context of brand communities, users commonly declare their unconditional love towards their adored luxury brands since many messages disclose sentiments of profound attachment and self-connection (Parrott et al., 2015). It is possible to find a substantial amount of content that includes the expression *"love",* like in the following examples: *"I honestly love LV to death! I would choose LV over Hermès any day" (LovingLV8, 21st August 2017)* and *"Gucci Zumi Reveal Story-Love at First Hold" (Kitsune711, 6th April 2019).*

Such a profound affection level frequently leads consumers to incorporate brand values into their characters and personalities. Because consumers deem luxury possessions as part of their individuality (Pitt et al., 2009; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2009), through the sharing of conspicuous brand-related content, users aim to reinforce one's self-concept or develop the desired identity (Daugherty et al., 2008):

Yes. I am a true Chanel girl at heart. (Bentley1, 13th January 2018).

In the selected communities, many members are even more apparent and include brand names as part of their usernames, such as "PassionChanel," "GucciLover21", "Cocogirl," "lilyhermes," "Lvaddict84", and *"LVLoveaffair."* Aside from self-referencing, community members also exhibit cues of personal value appeals when their content provides evidence of self-actualization and excitement about their luxury

purchases. Several community members describe their first luxury purchase as an actual personal achievement, stating a notorious excitement that they proudly share with other users:

> My dream bag reveal… OMG! So, this is my dream-come-true Hermes bag."
> (RBoricua, 15th March 2019).

They often describe their luxurious consumption as a challenging endeavor in which they must sacrifice a lot to finally feel part of the "club." This provides evidence that a subjective utility can emerge from the activation of hedonic emotional states resulting from the impression of personal gratification and deserved reward (Wiedmann et al., 2009):

> "I didn't get my first Chanel until much later in life, and after I raised four babies. (…) There is so much more satisfaction in working hard for your bags" (Mustwork4bag, 13 August 2018).

4.3 Social value appeals

Because the community audience is composed mainly of devoted enthusiasts of different luxury brands with deep knowledge about brand heritage, values, and product range, members recognize that the content shared within such *communities* powerfully influences participants' brand value perceptions and, ultimately, their purchase choices (Gruen et al., 2006; Ozuem et al., 2016; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016):

> This is my first post here, but I have been reading and researching here in the past couple of months to find a trustworthy luxury brand, and Hermes was the one that stands out. I originally wanted to go with Chanel. (Celestial RDH, 26th September 2018).

As grounded in theory, the social value of a luxury brand can be enhanced through interaction with other customers and aspirational social groups (Hennigs et al., 2012), and the selected brand communities are revealed to be great facilitators of such connections. In such an online context, a brand's perceived social and symbolic dimensions are reinforced. At the same time, users share content revealing their wide-ranging luxury collections or recent purchases, as members recurrently start discussion threads expressing conspicuous cues such as *"20 years of collecting LV- my modest collection"* (TBF), *"My very first LV" (PF)* and *"Presenting my first H beauty!" (PF)*. While revealing their acquisitions, participants get direct feedback and reactions from other users, who either congratulate, encourage, or express profound admiration, getting the chance to easily interact with aspirational social groups and obtain their appreciation, inspiring a strong sense of social achievement:

> I finally joined the Hermes family (MeNiNaDoc, 20th August 2018).

4.4 Negative attitudes towards a luxury brand

Negative value perceptions can occur indirectly through the description of other members' brand-related negative experiences or troubles, who use their communities to seek the guidance and suggestions of their knowledgeable peers on how to solve an unpleasant situation or, instead, to alert them to be careful. These findings emphasize the work of Quach and Thaichon (2017), who regarded exposure to others' negative experiences in the online environment as a cause for the co-destruction of a brand value. Considering our sample, a luxury brand's incapacity of meeting quality expectations seems by far the one generating the more harmful buzz. Consumers, feeling shocked and dissatisfied with the brand, promptly share with the community photos or detailed comments describing the visible damages or fabric defects in their luxurious acquisitions:

> I am fanatical about my (Chanel) jewelry. Both pairs have been in their boxes undisturbed. I opened them yesterday, and both pairs have missing stones. The darkened limited-edition CCs are blackish now. They oxidized terribly. I am furious… (…).
> This is disgusting—disgusting service and disgusting quality. It is not acceptable. Do they expect us to pay exorbitant fees for a costume jewel that just breaks within a few times of wearing it? (Valentinegirl, 28th April 2019).

This type of testimonial acts as decisive evidence. The fact that a luxury brand reveals imperfections in terms of its expected functionality or does not stand for values of superior quality, craftsmanship, and design leads to severe disappointment for the individual reporting the situation and the overall community. So, the brand love and admiration that bound the participants' online relationship in the first place quickly turned into a "loud" non-supportive movement, in which members even started questioning themselves if the money invested in past luxury branded purchases was worthy. On the other hand, other members who have already faced similar negative experiences in the past, not being surprised about the decrease in quality level, immediately express their brand-related troubles or dissatisfactions to reinforce how the brand cannot meet certain value expectations and, therefore, should not be classified as luxurious anymore:

> That is why I sold all my Chanel costume jewelry. The quality is sub-par and disappointing. And just saving a bit more money, I could buy a real piece of gold jewelry at Van Cleef, Tiffany and Cartier (Kristinlorraine, 28th April 2019).
> I'm sorry but not surprised at the poor quality (…). I am not a fan of Chanel jewelry or any other fashion house jewelry for the exact reason you have stated. They are often overpriced junk with their logo (PenelopePursula, 28th April 2019).

Furthermore, our results confirm that one's perceived value from a firm's offering can be influenced through peer-to-peer exchanges, ultimately affecting purchase intentions (Gruen et al., 2006). In some circumstances, users are so negatively

impacted by other users' posts and comments that they openly state refraining from buying a particular brand:

> I am seeing many posts in the LV forum about melting straps, chipping hardware, and other problems. It scares me away from the brand (MyAwesome-Find, 13 June 2018).

Our results validate previous work acknowledging that the evaluation of perceived quality is the main predictor of brand loyalty and attitude towards a luxury brand (Esmaeilpour, 2015). Therefore, luxury houses must implement high-quality standards in their design and production processes. Mainly because one's content revealing negative attitudes towards a brand, in a community context, can have a detrimental effect on the value perceptions of other members, even if they are not directly affected. Because community members experience a high sense of homophily and similarity, they will most likely evaluate other users' content as credible and adopt a similar attitude (Ayeh et al., 2013). Overall, luxury brands elicit higher expectations, and failure to deliver the required quality results in consumer dissatisfaction, as recently described in the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory (Hosany et al., 2022; Rathee et al., 2023).

4.5 Brand integrity and luxury communities

Our ethnographic study revealed that some consumers express concerns regarding the amount of brand-related content they find online. This perception stems from something other than the content produced within the community but from other brand-related conversations and content to which they are exposed across social media platforms and online applications. Meeting the outlines for what should constitute a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), the three forums disclosed an intricate body of communication about members' feelings, thoughts, and opinions, fostering a profound social connection between like-minded individuals (France et al., 2015; Muñiz & Schau, 2011). Given the participants' similarity and the sharing of shared beliefs and values, the perceived social homophily is positively influencing consumers' evaluations of other community participants' content (Lee & Watkins, 2016), not raising concerns about brand dilution. Nevertheless, outside of the safeness of such brand communities, amplified by the interconnectivity offered by the cyber world, the chance of indiscriminate sharing of brand-related content by arbitrary users can incite a feeling of discouragement about buying luxury brands or specific brand models because have seen it too many times before, thus, damaging the desirable perception of scarcity and rarity:

> The Marmont line (a Gucci bag) feels over-saturated, which usually means trendy and that people will tire of it. Social media and YouTube are the downfalls of many nice bags these days. It is like you are tired of the bag before owning it. I keep wanting to get one, but I know it will not last, and I'm just being encouraged by hype. For me, that means it's too popular and not a good buy. (daisy chain, 19th June 2018).

I, too, felt bored of over-exposed luxury such as Hermes and Chanel a couple of years ago. Maybe this is because Instagrammers post their newly acquired Birkin every five seconds or unboxing sessions on YouTube. (splurgetothema, 2nd January 2018).

If, on the one hand, the inclusivity of the online environment can dissuade clients from shopping for luxurious items as the unique appeal is damaged, on the other hand, an adverse effect arises from the excessive and unrealistic expectations of other users' content creators. This is particularly evident because luxury consumers tend to share their sublime and glamorous purchase experiences with their network to fulfill their own need for recognition and superior status, unconsciously building specific "dreams" and aspirations in other customers' minds:

"Someone shared their perfect shopping experiences because it's for blog/You-Tube; the SA gives out freebies, i.e., perfume samples, coffee table books, gift wrapping with ribbons, just to impress. Suddenly, everyone thinks when they walk into a boutique there would be champagne, books, free samples and a super helpful SA that would call 35 different stores to track your dream bag down" (honey peach, 11th of April 2019).

However, this type of content is only sometimes trustworthy or representative. Once clients realize they do not have the same high-class purchase experience as other customers, their origins are a feeling of irritation and deception towards the brand, as their previous value expectations were defrauded. Even though luxury brands have always been a synonym for "*big promises*" (Keller, 2009, p. 297) for consumers, social platforms are now pressing brands to consistently deliver such promises as some clients are highly persuaded and motivated by what their peers share online. UGC has a more significant effect on consumers' overall perception of brands than firm-generated content. This is supported by research showing that UGC can significantly shape consumer value perceptions and attitudes towards a brand. While UGC can enhance brand value by allowing consumers to share positive experiential benefits, it can also lead to negative perceptions if the content highlights poor experiences or unmet expectations. UGC's dual nature means it can reinforce and erode brand value. The paper applies the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory to the luxury brand context, suggesting that negative online experiences shared by peers can gradually erode a brand's perceived value. This highlights the significant impact of negative UGC on consumer reactions, which differs from other stimuli that may not directly engage consumers' expectations and experiences to the same extent. In luxury brand communities, the sense of social homophily and membership plays a crucial role in how UGC is perceived. Positive content from community members can enhance brand value by reinforcing shared values and lifestyles. However, the harmful content within these communities can still diminish brand value if it contradicts the community's perceived exclusivity and quality. The findings underscore the importance of luxury brands managing UGC carefully. While UGC can facilitate value co-creation and enhance brand appeal, it also poses risks that must be mitigated through strategic content management and community engagement efforts. Lastly, the paper argues that UGC has a uniquely powerful impact on consumer perceptions of luxury brands, necessitating careful differentiation from

other stimuli due to its potential to positively and negatively influence brand value based on consumer interactions and shared experiences.

5 Conclusions and theoretical implications

First, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this research advances the idea that exposure to negative online experiences from peers in social media can contribute to a gradual erosion of a luxury brand's value. Moreover, when the product quality fails to meet consumer expectations, an urgent volunteer needs to spread this negative experience freely through eWOM, which is emerging in the luxury industry. Second, this investigation extends the Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory in the context of conspicuous luxury brands.

Besides the novelty, our results also confirmed previous conceptual frameworks proposed by luxury marketing researchers (Pitt et al., 2009; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2009), in which those three value dimensions were found to reinforce the perceived brand value as they convey essential benefits customers aspire while consuming luxury goods. However, we found evidence that participation in well-established brand communities fosters interaction with other fellows and aspirational social groups, ultimately strengthening the customer-brand relationship by enhancing a brand's social value (Hennigs et al., 2012). Besides fulfilling social aspirations, communities enable consumers to reinforce their self-concept or sustain a desirable identity by sharing conspicuous brand-related content (Daugherty et al., 2008). So, we extend previous work by confirming that "co-creation" allows community members to share their perceived experiential benefits with their networks, therefore contributing to the reinforcement of the brand's experiential (individual) and symbolic (social) dimensions (Üçok Hughes et al., 2016). The brand communities we selected were revealed to be powerful sources of user content, in which consumers not only share brand-related content but also engage with fellow members to guide their decision-making process. So, our results support that user content shapes value perceptions towards a brand, consequently influencing purchase intentions (Gruen et al., 2006; Ozuem et al., 2016; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

On the one hand, it can be positive for a brand's value if the conversations around a brand mention positive attributes appreciated by consumers; on the other hand, exposure to harmful content leads to diminishing value perceptions towards a brand. Finally, as the brand communities, we selected to exhibit a high level of similarity among members, with the collective interest in luxury promoting the awareness of similar lifestyles, values, and beliefs (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), the perceived social homophily is positively influencing consumers' evaluations about other community participants' content, so we found no evidence of members questioning brand integrity after the exposure to other community members' content. Such a conclusion supports the work of Lee and Watkins (2016), who acknowledged the importance of social comparison theory, a measure of the relationship between content producer and viewer, to moderate the viewer's value perceptions towards a luxury brand. Still, analyzing members' conversations, it is noteworthy that consumers might react differently outside the "safeness" of such brand communities. Some members admit to

refraining from buying certain luxury brands because of their overexposure across social media platforms, as their sense of exclusivity and uniqueness is damaged. Another adverse effect may arise from the fact that online content produces certain expectations in consumers' minds, but because, under some circumstances, users are exposed to fictitious brand-related content, consumers may expect high service standards further on. Increasing consumers' expectations that a luxury brand can barely attain increases the likelihood of spreading negative word-of-mouth online.

6 Managerial implications

Our study raises implications in social media marketing, emphasizing that a brand's online communications must convey a trustworthy and reliable message consistent with the overall brand promise, and, most importantly, practitioners should be capable of consistently delivering such promise throughout every consumer touchpoint. Besides, luxury marketers must fully understand their target audience's values and principles to select content regarded as relevant and accurately representative of a brand's image so brand integrity is not compromised. An essential takeaway for choosing personalities and individuals to endorse their brands online is that the sense of likeness and social homophily appears crucial to positively influencing consumers' value perceptions (Lee & Watkins, 2016) regarding assuring brand-customer inter. Our results advise luxury marketers to ensure that direct-evaluation indicators such as exquisite design, high-level quality standards, and experiential and symbolic dimensions are explicitly stressed (Behrens et al., 2015).

7 Limitations and future research

Although this investigation is novel, it is not without limitations.

Regarding the implemented methodology, even though our ethnographic approach revealed the vast potential to explore value perceptions and behavior of luxury community members in a non-obtrusive manner, it is impossible to generalize our findings according to demographic or cultural variables. Researchers might choose to implement complementary research methods such as interviews, surveys, or focus groups with community members to allow for the triangulation of findings (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, 2015). Additionally, our study focuses only on

Table 1 Review of significant definitions of luxury brands and their implicit value perceptions *Source*: own elaboration

Authors(date)	Definition of luxury brands	Implicit value dimensions of luxury brands
Heine (2012)	Brands can sustain associations of "*high level of price, aesthetics, quality, rarity, extraordinariness, and symbolic meaning*" (p. 46) in consumers' minds	It includes core functional benefits and many abstracted associations, comprising extraordinariness and other symbolic values
Tynan et al. (2010)	Luxury brands are associated with "*high-quality, expensive, and non-essential products and services that appear to be rare, exclusive, prestigious, and authentic and offer high levels of symbolic and emotional/hedonic values through customer experience*" (p.1158)	Consumers expect experiential benefits and brand-related symbolic values besides unique and high-quality material attributes
Wiedmann et al. (2009)	Because luxury is a subjective construct, researchers and marketers should use an integrated approach to define it by considering distinct value dimensions. However, the authors claim that the most prestigious and top-tier luxury brands encompass physical and psychological values	The determinants of consumers' luxury perceptions are the **social realm** (i.e., conspicuousness and prestige value), the **individual sphere** (i.e., self-identity, materialistic and hedonic value), the **functional perspective** (i.e., usability, quality, and uniqueness value), and, ultimately, the expected financial value (i.e., price value)
Pitt et al. (2009)	A luxury brand is not defined in terms of its attributes but instead through the analysis of its impact on three dimensions: the material (functional), the individual (experiential), and the social (symbolic)	The **material dimension** refers to delicate material and craftsmanship and the need to exceed expectations regarding impressive performance and high functionality The **individual perspective** includes the portion of a brand's hedonic and experiential value expressed personally The **social sphere** relates to the value proposition of a brand signal to others and the appropriation of that signaling into the owner's self-concept
Vigneron and Johnson (2004)	There is no general definition because not all brands possess the same degree of perceived luxuriousness. Each luxury brand might measure and monitor its position within the luxury spectrum according to five value dimensions, reflecting a non-personal and personal-oriented perception	Derived from previous studies, each dimension can be explained by considering distinct value perceptions: Non-personal perceptions: perceived **conspicuousness, uniqueness, and quality** Personal-oriented perceptions: perceived **extended self and hedonism**
Nueno and Quelch (1998)	Luxury brands are characterized by a low ratio of functional utility to price and, in contrast, by a high ratio of intangible utility to price	Apart from objective attributes, this definition stresses the importance of maintaining immaterial value associations

Table 2 Statistics about the brand communities integrating the study's sample *Source*: own elaboration (statistics retrieved from the respective forums in March 2019)

Forum's name	Description	Gucci	Louis Vuitton	Chanel	Hermès
The Purse Forum (TPF)	Discussions about luxury accessories, such as handbags and shoes from premium designers and fashion houses	1.54 K Threads Threads 323 K Posts	118 K Threads 4.75 M Posts	60.5 K Threads 2.31 M Posts	36.3 K Threads 2.9 M Posts
The Bag Forum (TBG)	Community about designer handbags and purses	207 Threads 1842 Posts	1527 Threads 26,694 Posts	322 Threads 4111 Posts	148 Threads 1830 Posts
The Fashion Spot (TFS)	Conversations about style, beauty, and luxury accessories	183 Posts 1098 Comments	190 Posts 2800 Comments	199 Posts 1995 Comments	200 Posts 1053 Comments

Table 3 Axial coding scheme *Source*: adapted from Krepapa, Regkoukou, and Beratis (2016) study according to the unanimous dimensions of "luxury value perceptions" cited in the literature (Pitt et al., 2009; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Wiedmann et al., 2009)

Luxury appeals categories	Luxury appeals sub-categories	Content expressing the following keywords (or other similar expressions) and implicit meaning (Krepapa et al., 2016)
Functional	Uniqueness	Unique personal image, exclusivity, sense of scarcity and rarity
	Quality	Superior quality, craftsmanship, higher performance or design, sophistication, superiority
Personal	Hedonism	Glamour, sensory pleasure, personal gratification and excitement, materialism
	Extended-self	Influence, power, success, and rewards
Social	Conspicuousness	Wealth, prestige, elitism, achievement, social status

Table 4 Content analysis frequencies *Source*: own elaboration

	Gucci	Louis Vuitton	Chanel	Hermès	Total
Functional					224
Design	10	11	8	9	38
Durability	14	10	6	7	37
Craftsmanship	9	9	7	13	38
Quality	15	18	9	16	58
Uniqueness	12	15	9	17	53
Personal					117
Extended-Self					
Rewards	7	6	5	10	28
Influence	2	2	4	4	12
Power	0	0	0	0	0
Hedonism					
Excitement	6	7	0	6	19
Personal Pleasure/Taste	5	11	9	10	35
Materialism	8	6	6	3	23
Social					135
Conspicuousness					
Achievement	6	10	9	19	44
Prestige	4	5	3	8	20
Wealth	5	6	10	17	38
Social Status	7	8	7	11	33

three forums dedicated to ready-to-wear and accessories; thus, our sample is representative of only one of the various sub-sectors within the luxury industry. Further research might explore the behavior of consumers who prefer to invest in luxurious experiences instead of material possessions. Since inconspicuous consumers have distinct perceptions of value regarding luxury to reach self-fulfillment and to primarily satisfy their need for uniqueness and non-conformity (Makkar & Yap, 2018), a comparative analysis with our final results appears fruitful in deepening the knowledge about the main differences between the attitudes of those two distinct consumers' profiles groups towards other users' online content.

Appendix

Declarations

Conflicts of interest The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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