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# Luxury consumption practices in the digital age : prosumers and lurkers on visual social media

Marina Leban

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Luxury Consumption Practices in the Digital Age: Prosumers and Lurkers on Visual Social Media

Pratiques de consommation du luxe à l'ère du numérique: Prosommateurs et lurkers sur les réseaux sociaux visuels

Thèse de Doctorat présentée en vue de l'obtention  
du grade de docteur en sciences de gestion  
par

**« Marina LEBAN »**

dirigée par  
Benjamin G. VOYER, Professeur, ESCP Business School

Soutenance le 8 juillet 2020

Devant un jury composé de :

Rapporteurs :

Mme Delphine DION  
Professeur, ESSEC Business School

Mme Margherita PAGANI  
Professeur, EMLyon Business School

Suffragants :

M. Yuri SEO  
Professeur Associé, The University of Auckland

M. Luca M. VISCONTI  
Professeur, Università della Svizzera Italiana





L'Université n'entend donner aucune approbation ou improbation aux opinions émises dans les thèses. Ces opinions doivent être considérées comme propres à leurs auteurs.



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With my PhD is coming to an end, I can now finally sit down and reflect on my whole academic journey. Fun fact: I initially wanted to become a psychologist, and that is why I decided to do a Bachelors, and later on, a Masters in Psychology. However, once I set foot at the London School of Economics, my entire future career prospects changed. Never had I been in an academic environment that pushed me to my limits in terms of building my critical thinking, working long and hard hours, as well as making me become a real, trained social scientist. I immediately fell in love with research, and felt an urge to become an academic. There, I met incredible scholars that have shaped my way of thinking; most notably I would like to thank Dr. Lucia Garcia-Lorenzo for challenging me to go above and beyond my comfort zone in my studies. I am also eternally grateful for having met Dr. Frederic Basso who not only introduced me to the field of consumer psychology and consumer research – and sold me on the idea that Burning Man was the best festival in the world – but who also opened my eyes on the hardships, as well as the best parts of academic life.

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Copenhagen, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2020

Marina Leban



“ Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand. They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves. Even when they enter deep into our world or sink below us, they still think that they are better than we are. They are different. ”

*Rich Boy*, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

## **Pratiques de consommation du luxe à l'ère du numérique: Prosommateurs et lurkers sur les réseaux sociaux visuels**

### Résumé

La transition vers la modernité liquide et l'accélération de la société liées à la production et la consommation de nouveaux contenus via les nouvelles technologies des médias tels que les réseaux sociaux, entraînent des hiérarchies sociales de plus en plus fragmentées, instables, éphémères et changeantes. La 'liquidation' de la société permet de nouvelles formes de jeux de statut social et de distinctions qui ne sont pas plus nécessairement liés à l'histoire familiale ou au niveau d'éducation de l'individu. En effet, cela se perçoit dans la montée d'une 'nouvelle élite' qui, contrairement à l'ancienne élite principalement définie par son capital économique, se caractérise par l'acquisition de connaissances et de cultures. Des recherches doivent encore être menées pour discerner les nouvelles formes de pratiques de consommation de luxe qui se déroulent sur les plateformes de réseaux sociaux. Pour combler cette lacune, cette thèse examine donc les pratiques de consommation de luxe liées au segment des consommateurs de luxe de haut de gamme (prosommateurs), ainsi que leurs admirateurs (lurkers) pour voir comment ils sont affectés par la médiatisation de ces pratiques sur les réseaux sociaux visuels. Plus précisément, cette thèse étudie comment ils définissent, affichent et consomment le luxe sur le réseau social visuel appelé Instagram. L'article 1 explore, à travers une analyse de contenu et une netnographie, comment les riches micro-célébrités utilisent des stratégies de 'personal branding' pour créer et afficher une nouvelle notion du luxe sur Instagram. L'article 2 explore plus en détail les conclusions de l'article 1, en interrogeant et en analysant des données de profils des riches influenceurs des réseaux sociaux sur Instagram, pour comprendre comment ils considèrent désormais la notion du luxe et quel type de stratégies ils utilisent pour justifier leur style de vie luxueux comme étant 'éthique' - contrairement à d'autres influenceurs qui affichent un comportement de consommation indépendant de l'éthique en affichant une forme de luxe trop ostentatoire et gaspilleuse. L'article 3 adopte une approche différente en enquêtant sur la façon dont les lurkers, par opposition aux prosommateurs (articles 1 et 2), consomment numériquement et virtuellement du contenu lié au luxe sur Instagram. Cette thèse contribue à la littérature car elle : (1) approfondit la compréhension théorique des nouvelles stratégies de consommation ostentatoire des consommateurs de la classe supérieure (ou élite), en affirmant leur statut social et leur distinction en ligne, (2) intègre davantage la notion de dématérialisation du luxe en soulignant comment les expériences de consommation, plutôt que la propriété des produits, sont donc considérées comme des symboles de statut social, (3) souligne la contribution à la littérature sur la moralité dans la consommation de luxe, montrant que les anciens élites poursuivent à la fois la recherche de distinction, et, en même temps, sont à la recherche d'authenticité lorsqu'ils se présentent publiquement.

**Mots-clés:** *prosommateurs; lurkers; consommation de luxe; médias sociaux*

## **Luxury Consumption Practices in the Digital Age: Prosumers and Lurkers on Visual Social Media**

### Abstract

With the transition to liquid modernity, and the acceleration of society due to the high production and consumption of new content through new media technologies such as social media, social hierarchies seem to be more fragmented, unstable, ephemeral and changing. The liquidification of society thus allows for new forms of status games and distinction that are not necessarily tied to family history or level of education. Indeed, this can be seen in the rise of a ‘new elite’, who, contrary to the old elite that was primarily defined by their economic capital, is defined by the acquisition of knowledge and culture. To this end, research still needs to be done to uncover new forms of luxury consumption practices in a digitalized and liquid society, taking place on social media platforms. To address this gap, this thesis therefore looks at the luxury consumption practices of the specific segment of high-end luxury consumers (prosumers), as well as their admirers (lurkers) to see how these are affected by the mediatization of these practices on visual social media. Specifically, it looks at how these define, display and consume luxury on the visual social media platform called Instagram. Article 1 explores, through a content analysis and netnography, how wealthy micro-celebrities use personal branding strategies to create and display luxury meaning on Instagram. Article 2 further explores findings from Article 1, by interviewing and analyzing Instagram data of wealthy social media influencers, to understand how they now view luxury and what kind of strategies they use on Instagram to justify their luxurious lifestyle as being ‘ethical’ – as opposed to other influencers who exhibit unethical consumer behavior by displaying an overly conspicuous, wasteful form of luxury. Article 3 takes a different approach by investigating how lurkers, as opposed to prosumers (Article 1 & 2), digitally and virtually consume luxury related content on Instagram. This thesis by articles has a threefold contribution to the literature: (1) to expand theoretical understanding of new conspicuous consumption strategies of upper-class (or elite) consumers in asserting their social status and distinction online, (2) to better understand the dematerialization of luxury and stressing how consumption experiences, rather than the ownership of products, are thus considered to be status symbols, (3) to highlight the contribution to growing literature on morality in luxury consumption, showing that old elite individuals pursue both distinction-seeking, and at the same time authenticity-seeking when portraying themselves publicly.

**Keywords:** *prosumers; lurkers; luxury consumption; visual social media*



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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The global luxury market has grown to €1.2 trillion in 2018, and is predicted to keep growing steadily annually by 5% in the next coming years (Bain & Company, 2017). This drastic financial increase also means that luxury brands have had to innovate in terms of their position, so as to keep up with the ever so salient competition among luxury brands. Indeed, luxury brands have tried to appeal to more consumers by making their products more accessible. This phenomenon is seen as the democratization of luxury (Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013). Consequently, it has changed the way consumers view luxury, as luxury goods have become more accessible, and thus disposable and ephemeral (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, 2017). This goes in contradiction with the very definition of luxury goods, that of it being of high price, of high quality, prestigious, and exclusive (Dubois & Paternault, 1995; Kapferer, 1998; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). This traditional view of luxury - one which involved the elite being the only ones able to consume luxury goods - is no longer accurate. Instead, there has been a rise in a ‘new elite’ that engages in status signaling and distinction through new forms of conspicuous consumption (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020), such as the acquisition of knowledge and culture (e.g. through traveling and other experiential consumption practices) (e.g. Weinberger et al., 2017).

This poses new challenges for the old elite, who until recently could simply maintain their status in the hierarchy through economic capital (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). These old elites were used to publicizing their status and distinction by engaging in philanthropic acts via the media (e.g. Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Hirschman, 1990). However, with the proliferation of social media platforms, anyone can engage in new status and distinction games that allow them to be recognized by the public through online fame – and to rise in a more malleable form of hierarchy, one that is based on attention and visibility (Marwick, 2013). These individuals, often called social media influencers, are said to be a type of prosumers (consumers and producers) of online content (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). This seems to be especially the case for newer social media platforms called visual social media platforms, such as Instagram or Snapchat, due to their heavy imagery content, which feature brand content images and videos, compared to more text-based platforms (e.g. Twitter) (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Prosumers, whether old or ‘new elites’, widely use this kind of platform to

create content, and acquire popularity through social capital (e.g. number of followers, likes, etc.) (Marwick, 2013; 2015). However, research in this area is still at its infancy.

As users – not companies – primarily dominate social media platforms, companies should seek to understand consumers' social media practices (Heinonen, 2011). However, consumer research has focused on business-to-consumer research, but not so much on consumer-to-consumer research (Heinonen, Jaakkola & Neganova, 2018). This also applies to the luxury consumption stream, which has taken a well-established traditional, luxury brand service perspective (e.g. Ko et al., 2019) or has extensively looked at marketing strategies in branding and pricing (e.g. Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Nevertheless, regardless of how marketers position their brand, consumers have been shown to have their own interpretations of what is luxury and engage in specific consumption practices (Bauer et al., 2011; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, Thomsen, & Belk, 2020). Accordingly, as luxury can also be a social construct, this thesis takes a consumer perspective in exploring the overarching main problematic of this thesis: that of understanding luxury consumption practices of prosumers and lurkers on visual social media. To shed light on the problem, the following main research questions are addressed in this thesis:

1. How do consumers define luxury?
2. How do consumers display luxury on Instagram?
3. How do consumers consume luxury on Instagram?

To address these questions, I conducted three sets of empirical investigations, exploring key aspects of luxury consumption practices on Instagram – a prime visual social media platform – detailed below.

Using visual and textual data extracted from Instagram and a content analysis combined with netnography, the first paper explores the personal branding strategies that wealthy micro-celebrities use in attaining, maintaining, or enhancing their online secular immortality on Instagram. These personal brandings strategies elucidate how wealthy micro-celebrities (prosumers) define and display luxury on Instagram (Research question 1 & 2). Findings show that wealthy micro-celebrities use four personal branding strategies to develop their personal brand and attain, maintain, or enhance their online secular immortality on Instagram: exclusivity, immateriality, performativity, and carnality. We discuss that in the specific online context, wealthy micro-celebrities portray luxury in a more experiential form (e.g. luxury lifestyle, travelling and leisure activities) in order to distinguish themselves from more mainstream micro-celebrities, as well as previous generations of and mediatized self-made millionaires.

This article was written under the supervision of Benjamin Voyer, of which he is the co-author. I collected, analyzed the data and wrote the article. Throughout the analysis and write-up, I received regular input and guidance from Benjamin Voyer.

Following paper one, with the creation of a personal brand, wealthy micro-celebrities expose their life on social media, and as a consequence are mediatized. This can work to their advantage or backfire - especially in their specific case as they display their luxury lifestyle on Instagram. As followers or other consumers could be resentful, envious or might point out a particular criticism high-end social media influencers get: that of being unethical. Thus the second paper explores how high-net-worth (HNW) social media influencers reconcile ethicality and living a luxury lifestyle through the enactment of three types of personas on Instagram. This paper further answers the thesis' research questions on how prosumers define and display luxury on Instagram (Research question 1 & 2). This paper is based on a multi-sourced data corpus (in-depth interviews and Instagram posts) of these HNW social media influencers. The main findings show that HNW social media influencers conspicuously display morality both online and offline as a self-serving motive to retain legitimacy in the field of luxury consumption, through the enactment of three personas: (1) Ambassador of 'True' Luxury, (2) Altruist, and (3) 'Good' Role Model. This paper is co-authored with Thyra Uth Thomsen, Sylvia von Wallpach and Benjamin Voyer. The focus of this paper was initially elaborated with Sylvia von Wallpach and Benjamin Voyer. This paper was written during my PhD visiting at Copenhagen Business School. I collected data collection, analyzed the data, and wrote the first full version of the manuscript. All co-authors subsequently contributed to editing and revising the manuscript, from the first to final revisions.

In the third article of this thesis, looks at the other side of the coin: the followers' perspective in following HNW social media influencers' Instagram profiles, which contain luxury related content. The scope is therefore to explore how consumers (lurkers) consume luxury on Instagram (Research question 3). More specifically, we look at how the practices of lurking transform luxury consumption on visual social media. Using 16 semi-structure interviews, we investigate two research questions: (1) What are the constituent digital virtual practices of luxury brand lurking on social media? and (2) How do these practices augment luxury consumption through the properties of digital virtual consumption? Findings showed that lurkers engage in four lurking practices related to luxury brand content on social media: compassing, curating, collecting, and conversing. On the one hand, these practices facilitate the de-materialization of luxury consumption by idealizing the properties of luxury brands; on the opposite hand, they re-materialize luxury consumption into new digital virtual actualizations. Taken together, lurking transforms luxury consumption within the ways lurkers consume intangible luxuries on visual social media. This paper is co-authored with Yuri Seo and Benjamin Voyer. I collected and

analyzed all the data, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Both co-authors contributed to the editing and revisions of the manuscript throughout the publication process.

This thesis is structured as follows. In the second chapter of this thesis, I introduce and extensively discuss luxury consumption conceptualizations from traditional to new forms of luxury consumption practices, and social media behavior literature, in the context of visual social media. More specifically, I make the case that old elites as well as ‘new elites’, as well as their followers (lurkers) spend a considerable amount of time on visual social media, engaging with prosumption and lurking practices. This is used as a theoretical grounding for the three papers. In chapter three, I explain the methodological reasoning that was undertaken for all three papers. The three papers will then be included in the main body of this thesis. Finally, in the discussion section, I discuss the overall theoretical and managerial contributions and conclude the thesis. A summary in French of this first chapter is included at the end of this thesis.



## Chapter 2

# Luxury on social media

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore luxury consumption practices on visual social media. Specifically, this thesis seeks to understand how consumers define, display, and consume luxury on Instagram. Consequently, this literature review explores the interconnectedness of visual social media behavior with luxury consumption. Considering this, two major areas of literature were critically reviewed: (a) luxury consumption, and (b) social media behavior. This chapter first examines the shift from traditional luxury consumption to new forms of luxury consumption and in doing so, discusses previous conceptualizations of luxury consumption. It will then examine social media behavior, specifically looking at a new type of social media: visual social media platforms, such as Instagram. Finally, the chapter will explore the visual social media behavior of two types of luxury consumers: micro-celebrities (prosumers) and their followers (lurkers). The consumption behavior of these two types of luxury consumers will then be thoroughly examined in the three papers included in this thesis.

### 2.2 Traditional luxury consumption

#### 2.2.1 *Defining the concept of luxury*

It is challenging to determine an appropriate definition of luxury as the term has evolved greatly throughout human history and remains unclear until this day. Historically, famous philosophers such as Plato first introduced the term of luxury in Ancient Greece, stating that there are three basic human needs: food, clothing, housing. Accordingly, a perfect society is one in which there is no poverty or wealth and that follows a natural ‘needs-satisfaction’ dynamism. He explains that luxury is an unnecessary desire that emasculates warriors. He describes luxurious men as being ‘soft’, or in other words, living such a comfortable life that they have nothing left to fight for (Berry, 1994). Moreover, Plato notes that fashion, an element derived from luxury itself, is detrimental to society. To obtain luxurious products, one must seek to acquire rare or limited resources (e.g. different types of textile).

This brings war as citizens fight to obtain these resources. He recommends citizens to wear minimal attire that is mainly functional and therefore non luxurious (Godart, 2011).

Aristotle does not explicitly mention luxury in his works, however he tackles notions such as ethicality in individuals with high economic capital. Indeed for Aristotle, good actions are not pre-determined by moral law but by an individual's own judgment of what is good or bad in a given situation. By engaging in what he or she assumes to be 'good actions', the individual is able to reach a stable equilibrium of the soul. Consequently, actions considered ethical, that is virtuous, usually fall 'mid-way' on a spectrum between two vices (e.g., vulgarity or tastelessness and pettiness). In sum, a person is good if she does good deeds, is just and has good intentions (Aristotle trans. 2009). Specifically, for wealthy individuals to be considered ethical, they need to be 'generous' (i.e. able to give to people in need) (Aristotle trans. 2009). Another notion Aristotle notes is that of 'magnificence', which occurs when a wealthy individual is able to spend money on the right things; thus, the individual is neither tasteless nor stingy (Aristotle trans. 2009). This approach to ethics is what wealthy individuals uphold to achieve 'eudemonia' or a 'life well lived' (Arvidsson 2011, p. 268), which involves living a self-fulfilling life by being what they perceive as a good person that virtuously coexists with relevant others (Arvidsson 2011). Thus, contrary to Plato, Aristotle believed that living a luxurious life was acceptable as long as individuals were not conspicuous, and were decent enough to redistribute their wealth to society (Godart, 2011). In accordance with Plato's views, in Ancient Rome the fear for corruption was even greater. Luxury was thought to bring political disorder and therefore needed to be controlled. Berry summarizes the roman view of luxury as: "The more selfish pleasures are indulged, the less responsibility and commitment to the public good will be exhibited" (Berry, 1994, p. 86).

Christianity in the middle ages only reinforced this by associating luxury (or *luxuria*, *luxus* = *excess*) to be one of the deadly sins, and firmly condemned the rich for living such comfortable and lustful lives. Although the Roman Catholic Church condemned conspicuous consumption and the accumulation of wealth altogether, the Lutheran movement was founded under the premise that the Pope himself engaged in conspicuous consumption and thus denounced the church's hypocrisy. Instead, the Lutheran movement condemned conspicuousness but accepted wealth as an inherent part of society, and stipulated that earning money was not a sin as it required individuals to work hard (Moran, 2004).

It is not until the 17th century that western society started accepting luxury consumption, by acknowledging that it is to satisfy our needs and live a good life. However, some specificities of luxury such as fashion are still seen as a form of vanity. The modern view of luxury emerges through demoralistic authors, such as Adam Smith, who state, "a commercial society is thus a 'natural' society"

(Berry, 1994, p. 153). Luxury, and commercialization, do not signify corruption anymore, but is seen to belong to human necessity in a modern society.

The Oxford Dictionary currently defines luxury as “An inessential, desirable item, which is expensive or difficult to obtain.” Most dictionaries still have vague definitions of what luxury means. Cristini, Kauppinen-Räsänen, Barthod-Prothade, and Woodside (2017) for instance, make a critical overview of the definition of luxury by borrowing perspectives from anthropology, history, and philosophy. They state that traditional luxury serves an individual type of behavior rather than a collective one and exhibits a desire of ownership and display of luxury goods. However, the authors acknowledge that the concept of luxury is still unclear.

Nevertheless, when researchers investigate the concept of luxury, the focus of luxury goods is ominous. In line with this, three main dimensions are identified when qualifying a luxury product: prestige, desirability/ exclusivity, and quality. First, an underlining criterion that some authors seem to associate with luxury is ‘prestige’. The definition of the term itself has evolved from the 90s until now, scrutinized by Vigneron and Johnson (1999), who explain that prestige products require a high level of knowledge, interest, and awareness, are very desirable but rarely purchased. The authors argue that prestigious brands can be upmarket, premium or luxury brands in which luxury brands are stipulated to be most prestigious. Status-seeking behavior and prestige are intimately linked as one increases the other (Ivanic, 2015).

Second, luxury brands are successful at building a desirable brand image. This only works when the levels of awareness and of desire are high. Consumers are more likely to purchase luxury goods when both levels are aligned. This explains why many brands that could be considered part of the luxury realm perish every year due to either low levels of awareness or desirability or a combination of both. It is this high level of desire and awareness that create the feeling of exclusivity in a luxury brand (Dubois & Paternault, 1995). Moreover, desirability in consumption is what drives consumers to feel passionate about a brand, and to build a relationship with the brand (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003). This desire only emerges if there is a perception of scarcity when the brand seems hard to obtain. It is precisely this feeling or urge that luxury brands manage to create and maintain. Luxury brands have established a ‘rarity principle’ in which prestige is achieved through increased level of awareness of the brand by creating a scarcity of the products that are available. This maintains exclusivity of the luxury brand (Phau & Prendergast, 2000), such as practiced by luxury automobile brands, such as Mercedes, who use this scarcity strategy to enhance their luxury brand image (Kapferer, 1998). Moreover, luxury brands

seem to opt for a more time-limited exclusivity that can wear off easily in the interest of the ‘happy few’ (Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2016).

Third, luxury products need to be of excellent quality thanks to good craftsmanship that mainstream brands cannot acquire (Kapferer, 1998; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). Luxury brands have inherited the right ‘savoir-faire’ in terms of designing their products. The products are sophisticated and individually crafted as opposed to mass produced (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Hermès, for instance, proclaims excellent craftsmanship (Kapferer, 1998) by informing potential consumers on how they source leather and publicizes how the company’s craftsmen create leather goods in their ateliers. For this reason, luxury brands see the need to keep their prices high as no other mainstream brand could possibly offer good quality products.

Finally, Dion & Arnould (2011) show that the peculiarity that luxury brands have in differentiating themselves from more mainstream brands is that they have been able to create charismatic ‘personas’ around creative directors. Through charismatic leaders (e.g. Lagerfeld at Chanel or Yves Saint Laurent), luxury brands legitimize and maintain the ‘aura’ of the brand. This reinforces followers – customers’ – devotion to the brand, and it also contributes to the longevity of the brand.

### 2.2.2 *Conspicuous luxury consumption*

Another concept that is often associated with traditional luxury consumption is conspicuous consumption. The concept of conspicuous consumption was first coined by Veblen (1899), in which he states, “since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit” (1899, p. 53). In essence, during the industrial revolution, the concept of luxury shifts from characterizing a lifestyle (‘maniere de vivre’) to a produced object (commodity) (Remaury, 2005). With the rise of a new upper class commonly known as ‘nouveau riche’, showing off one’s goods was a sign of wealth, prestige and above all conspicuousness, as a means to signal their social status. Veblen believed that it was not the ‘master’ that needed to consume the goods, but rather it was the ‘vicarious consumers’ (e.g. children, servants, and wives). The more conspicuous the wife appeared to be (e.g. through fashion), the wealthier the husband. This need to conspicuously showcase goods, through exuberant parties can also be tied to Mauss’ (1925/2012) study on the ritual practice of *potlatch*: a traditional native American ritual in which, during winter, tribal chieftains engaged in rivalry through the destruction of luxurious items (e.g. food, copper items, garments). These items were destroyed

through consumption, to humiliate the rival. This element of destruction, also linked to wastefulness, is a form of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899). This can be seen nowadays in the luxury industry, where luxury brands have extensively developed packaging that is not functional per se, but rather embellishes the product (Quemin, 2005). Luxury consumption can therefore often be viewed as an unethical form of consumption.

Nevertheless, this need for status is achieved by the use of certain goods that are deemed to be luxurious (Berthon et al., 2009; Han et al., 2010; Phau & Prendergast, 2000; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999, 2004; Wiedemann et al., 2009; Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). These goods are called status symbols (Goffman, 1951), and are displayed publicly as a tacit way to indicate how one must treat the owner of the good. The choice of the good, as well as the style and manners that the consumer exhibits is crucial as it signals to the public if they in fact belong to the upper class. However, Goffman (1951) believed that someone who climbed from a lower social class to an upper class could not exhibit the appropriate behavior. In fact, Veblen (1899) stipulated that conspicuous consumption had to also be achieved through intellectual cultivation. In sum, it is not only through the display of goods that one exhibits conspicuous consumption, but also through being well mannered - and this can be achieved regardless of one's previous status.

Bourdieu (1984)'s analysis of social distinction follows Veblen (1899)'s views on conspicuous consumption in that consumption is a function of culture and a marker of social class. However, Veblen specifically discussed how upper classes, that were not economically 'productive', engaged with conspicuous consumption practices and were emulated by lower social classes. Bourdieu (1984) did not explicitly look at conspicuous consumption per se, but addressed different consumption practices as a way to reinforce class position. He stipulated that taste depends on the social class one belongs to. Consumers tend to choose and develop their tastes in opposition to lower social classes. Those who belong in lower social classes are unable to acquire enough cultural capital to acquire the same tastes as those belonging to the upper classes. Also, if a consumer does not understand the symbolic meaning of the good they are wearing, they will never truly own the good (McCracken, 1986). Moreover, Bourdieu (1984) showed that tastes and preferences manifest one's habitus. Habitus is a function of one's social class, it is formed by one's personal cultural inheritance and cannot be acquired through social mobility. This cultural inheritance is what the author designates as 'cultural capital', which refers to accumulated knowledge of artistic and intellectual works that is usually acquired from one's social background (e.g. family or school system). In essence, Bourdieu's theory could be seen as being more complex than Veblen (1899)'s as it comprehends a wider range of consumption practices, and is not restricted to Veblen's mere display of luxurious goods.

However, Bourdieu (1984)'s cultural capital theory has recently been questioned, especially in the context of today's fast evolving society. In fact, with the emergence and now intense use of the Internet, consumers can acquire privileged knowledge that only the upper class had access to, by simply searching online (Eckhardt, Belk, & Wilson, 2015). Moreover, recent research has shown that 'taste regimes' (Arsel & Bean, 2012) differ greatly from previous class-bound theory (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984) in that taste should be considered a narrative construct. Thus, what is deemed tasteful for some may not be considered tasteful for others. Social class could therefore be irrelevant in the acquisition of taste (in luxury consumption).

In accordance, social hierarchies are now ephemeral and continuously changing (Berger & Ward, 2010; Eckhardt et al., 2015). Owning luxury goods and living a more comfortable style is not exclusive to the upper class anymore, but also to the middle class (Belk & Pollay, 1985). In fact, Veblen's approach to conspicuous consumption is currently debatable as some authors suggest that there has been a shift between the modern consumer and the post-modern consumer. The latter can move from one social class to the other by adopting different lifestyles, and have an increase, as well as a decrease of economic capital at different moments in life (Trigg, 2001).

Furthermore, with the rise of the number of brands available, owning myriad luxury goods is not necessarily a sign of living a comfortable life anymore. Rather, it is the ownership of visible brand logos that make conspicuous consumption possible. As such, wearing products that have a salient label gives consumers the feeling of prestige. The utility and function are only secondary when it comes to conspicuous consumption (Grossman & Shapiro, 1988). It is therefore possible to have conspicuous consumption when owning mainstream brands - provided the logo is displayed. However, most research has linked conspicuous consumption with luxury goods because luxury goods have certain symbols, traits and values that mainstream brands cannot equal (Trigg, 2001).

More recently, Han, Nunes, and Drèze (2010) identified four different categories of consumers. The upper-class aristocrats are called the patricians and possess subtle products with no logo for display (no brand prominence) and do not seem to have a big need for status. Patricians purchase inconspicuous (Eckhardt et al., 2015), non-salient brands such as Bottega Venetta. The parvenus - or new rich - have a bigger need to signal status and display luxury goods that have salient logos. They wish to be associated with the upper class and dissociated from the lower classes. A notable example of purchased products by parvenus would be Louis Vuitton handbags, displaying a visible 'LV' logo and a monogram. The poseurs mirror this behavior. However, having no economic means, they tend to own counterfeit

products to compensate. Finally, the proletarians do not feel the need for status signaling and considered non-luxury consumers.

Moreover, wearing products with subtle signals are a way for the upper class – individuals who possess enough cultural capital - to differentiate themselves from the new rich and everyone else. The new rich and lower classes have a lack of connoisseurship in subtle luxury brands as they can associate non-salient brands as being similar to low-end brands (Berger & Ward, 2010). Sometimes the need for aristocrats to dissociate themselves, especially from the new rich, can be even more extreme. Schimpfoss (2014) showed that aristocratic Russians do not display their wealth anymore through apparel and furniture. Instead they down-dress themselves to appear unrecognizable. Russian aristocrats signal their wealth through their intellectual capital, cultivating a more refined self-image of themselves - only recognizable amongst their own.

These new luxury consumption practices signal a shift from traditional luxury consumption to a more 'liquid', experiential form of luxury consumption. In essence, as seen in this first section, up until now traditional luxury has been conceptualized as marketers' way of controlling consumers' way of consumption, through the purchase of luxury goods (Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013). However, new research has started investigating how luxury is becoming more subjective and personal (Roper et al., 2013). To this end, understanding consumers' experience in luxury consumption is needed in order to further advance our understanding of new forms of luxury consumption practices, introduced in the following section.

## **2.3 A shift in luxury consumption practices**

### *2.3.1 Inconspicuous consumption*

With the growth of luxury consumers, brand signaling might not appeal to certain consumers anymore. Indeed, Eckhardt et al. (2015) state that there is a rise of inconspicuous consumption. Some consumers wish to purchase more sophisticated goods to dissociate themselves from the rest. The authors do not discard conspicuous consumption but note that luxury consumption has always only been explored as a form of conspicuous consumption. Research has overlooked the use of and motivation for subtle brands with low signaling. Berger and Ward (2010) and Han et al. (2010) mention this trend, however only the upper class are said to consume subtle brands. Nevertheless, Eckhardt et al. (2015) suggest that inconspicuous consumption behavior is not only limited to the upper class. With the rise of luxury

consumers, the ‘new luxury’ is one that attracts the masses. For instance, the masses are now able to access high priced luxury items by renting them (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Consequently, some luxury consumers want to dissociate themselves even more from the masses through consuming more sophisticated, inconspicuous brands (Eckhardt et al., 2015). This limits accessibility and imitation of lower classes, as it requires subtle tastes and connoisseurship (Hebdige, 1979). This inconspicuous consumption behavior is a way for the ‘few’ luxury consumers to revive the traditional exclusivity of luxury consumption.

### 2.3.2 *Transformation in luxury meaning*

As mentioned, researchers have not yet agreed on a clear explanation of what luxury entails (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). As a result, most luxury consumption research has been focusing on our understanding of ‘traditional’ luxury consumption (Veblen, 1899). However, the concept of luxury itself is continuously unstable, dynamic and changes shape over time (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015). This emerging transformation of luxury consumption is twofold. First, with the democratization of luxury (Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013), there has been a rise of categories such as ‘affordable luxury’. Consumers are now able to buy, own and dispose more frequently of luxury products. Owning a luxury product does not seem to be as exclusive and prestigious anymore (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). This new branding strategy of creating affordable luxury has perhaps changed how consumers view luxury.

Second, luxury is now associated with experience rather than possession of goods. In fact, Hemetsberger, von Wallpach, and Bauer (2012) argue that luxury consumption is not only about possessing luxury objects. They explain that for some people the concept of luxury can be rare and purchased and experienced on rare occasions (Bauer, von Wallpach, & Hemetsberger, 2011). For instance, luxury can be defined as space, time, silence, a wine bottle, a private romantic dinner, etc. This is because these ‘moments’ of luxury are associated with rarity, quality, tradition, sensuality, dream, creation – characteristics that are also associated to the more traditional sense of luxury (Charon, 2004). Consequently, the meaning of luxury has shifted into a non-materialistic, experiential dimension (Cristini et al., 2017), in which consumers prefer experience over acquiring and owning tangible luxuries. Experiential luxury is a relatively new concept that indicates experiential and hedonic value in luxury brands (Berthon, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2009) or ‘luxury moments’ – all personal moments considered to be ‘luxurious’ (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Thus, experiences and travel are seen as acts of



consumption that allow consumers to signal their status (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020) and in doing so, to acquire cultural capital (Weinberger, Zavisca, & Silva, 2017).

Moreover, the meaning of luxury is not universal and can vary according to different consumers (Berthon et al., 2009; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2017). This causes a challenge for luxury consumption research in understanding differences in consumers' luxury brand meanings. This is especially true for categories of luxury consumers such as new 'elite' that engages with new forms of conspicuous consumption. The following section discusses these alternative forms in more detail.

### *2.3.3 New forms of conspicuous consumption*

Although conspicuous consumption has originally been linked with status signaling, other research trends have been emerging. In some situations, acting in non-conform ways can be seen as conspicuous behavior. For instance, Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan (2014) explain that consumers who wear clothes that are deemed inappropriate (e.g. sneakers) for certain situations (e.g. going to a luxury store) can heighten their status. This can however backfire and is only applicable if the non-conform consumer is perceived as having prior knowledge on norms and conduct of the situation and is doing it unintentionally.

Another study showed that 'busyness' – defined as being overworked resulting in a lack of leisure – has become a new status symbol (Bellezza, Paharia, & Keinan, 2017). Contrary to Veblen's (1899) theory of leisure class, the state of busyness is a type of conspicuous consumption that centers on the preciousness and scarcity of individuals. This is due to individuals being perceived as very busy, in demand, and therefore being highly desirable due to their exceptional characteristics. This is perhaps because in a highly socially mobile society, individuals who are deemed ambitious and busy display a drive in achieving greater status (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Although the media portrays nouveau riche's vacations as being exuberant, it has been stipulated that they have to work hard to earn the total economic capital they amass, and are said to spend a big part of their earnings on travelling and leisure activities (Frank, 2012).

More recently, conspicuous consumption has been linked paradoxically with inconspicuousness, as well as non-ownership, experiences, knowledge, and craftsmanship (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). This type of consumption is characterized as being 'liquid', which means it is dematerialized, ephemeral and often access based (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Indeed, in solid modernity (Bauman, 2000) conspicuous ownership and possession through brands, products, and property were ways to maintain status

(Veblen, 1899). Indeed, social status and distinction are said to emanate from social hierarchies (Eckhard & Bardhi, 2020), and are markers of one's position in a hierarchy (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

However, with the transition to liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), and the acceleration of society due to the high production and consumption of new content through new media technologies (Rosa, 2013), social hierarchies are now fragmented, unstable, ephemeral and changing (Eckhard & Bardhi, 2020). The liquidification of society thus allows for new forms of status games and distinction that are not necessarily tied to family history or level of education (Eckhard & Bardhi, 2020). For instance, Dion & Borraz (2017) show that brands can shape status through daily interactions in the servicescape, thus brands reinforce consumers' behavior and understanding of their position in the social hierarchy.

Moreover, Currid-Halkett (2017) state that contrary to the old elite that was primarily defined by their economic capital, the new elite is defined by their knowledge and culture. Eckhard and Bardhi (2020) propose two new forms of social status and distinction strategies: flexibility and attention. Flexibility entails that the individual can change resources, identity projects, places and things, such as professional expatriates who do not seem to mind to often relocate to another country. In accordance with Bellezza, Paharia, & Keinan (2017)'s concept of busyness detailed above, individuals who use this strategy are regarded as having fluid and mobile lifestyles, allowing them to move up in the social hierarchy. Individuals that assume a highly mobile lifestyle signals that they possess enough knowledge and cultural capital that allows them to adapt to new geographical and social environments (Eckhard & Bardhi, 2020). Attention entails that the individual can gain social status and distinction by attracting attention in the digital space, such as social media, and is seen as a strategy to accumulate social capital. In sum, since flexibility and attention are said to be new forms of conspicuous consumption this thesis will aim to explore further how these practices can be enacted on social media.

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<sup>1</sup> Social hierarchies are defined as the classification of individuals or groups within a population according to explicit and material dimensions (e.g. brand prominent behavior), or implicit and immaterial dimensions (e.g. inconspicuous consumption behaviour) (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015).

## 2.4 Luxury consumers

### 2.4.1 *Upper-class segmentation*

Luxury consumption practices are said to vary across different social classes (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). However, upper-class consumers remain the main target for luxury brands as they are considered to be the ‘face’ of luxury itself. Yet, consumer researchers keep categorising luxury consumers in many different ways and have not yet agreed on what exactly demarcates this particular segment. Vigneron and Johnson (1999), for instance, originally identified three types of luxury consumers: the snobs, the bandwagons, and the hedonists. (1) Snob consumers are price-driven, they believe that the higher the price the more exclusive the brand. Snob consumers tend to purchase rare non-mainstream brands. (2) Bandwagon consumers are less price-driven. They purchase conspicuous brands, with an aim at impressing the public. (3) Hedonist consumers are also less price sensitive, however their purchases are emotionally orientated and based only on their feelings towards a brand. Thus, they do not privilege conspicuous brands. In these three luxury consumer profiles, prestige is one of the main criteria when purchasing luxury goods however each segment values the level of prestige in different ways: through price value, conspicuousness value and hedonic value. However, there are many other values that can be attributed to luxury consumer behavior in purchasing situations such as: functional value (including usability, quality and uniqueness), individual value (including self-identity, hedonic and materialistic) and social value (including conspicuousness, and prestige) (Wiedmann, Hennigs, & Siebels, 2009).

Other authors have also discussed luxury consumption behavior similar to Vigneron and Johnson (1999). In particular, Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012, 2014), through SEM surveys, were able to distinguish between two luxury consumption behaviors. Both behaviors aimed at impressing the public and being conspicuous. The bandwagon behavior is when the individual wants to be positively associated to the upper class and to dissociate from the lower class. These individuals gain their status through assimilation. On the other hand, the snob behavior wants to be completely dissociated from luxury consumers, as they want to stand out and be unique. They gain their status through contrast (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014).

Further, other possible luxury consumer segmentations have emerged. Dubois et al. (2005) conducted a study in twenty western countries and mention three recurring segments such as: elitist, democratic and distant. (1) Elitists, also called the ‘happy few’, believe that luxury is directed only to those who possess enough cultural capital to be able to appreciate luxury goods. (2) Democrats, also called the ‘happy many’, believe that luxury is not very exclusive and can be easily accessible. (3) Distant are not very

interested in luxury goods and believe that they do not belong to the luxury cast. However, research on these segments is outdated and focuses only on the purchase of luxury goods.

Luxury consumers have changed drastically in the last decade, and luxury brands have had to follow this change. A recent report has given more depth to the current situation of the high-end luxury consumer segments (Chandon et al., 2016). It appears that globally, society has increased in millionaires (denominated in USD) with an average increase of 2.6 million new millionaires per year, in the last couple of years (BCG & Altagamma, 2014). This millionaire segment is called ‘new money’ representing over 7 million people and those called ‘old money’ representing over 2 million people (Bellaiche, 2013). This segment has been linked with exhibiting bandwagon behavior (Han et al., 2010; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012, 2014;).

BCG and Altagamma (2014) identify two main segments that count for over 50% of the luxury market. The ‘absolute luxurer’ joins Dubois et al. (2005)’s category of elitist: the consumer is a connoisseur and has always been part of the luxury world. According to BCG and Altagamma (2014), absolute luxuries are mainly European and North Americans. The second biggest segment is called ‘Megacitiers’: these consumers are young adults (aged 25 to 35) and live in the biggest leading capitals such as New York City, Paris, or London. The low end of the spectrum includes almost 50% of the masses that consume luxury brands on an annual basis. Luxury brands are therefore now torn between appealing to an umbrella of different luxury consumer segments. It is becoming increasingly hard for luxury brands to appeal to both ends of the spectrum, and new luxury brand strategies have been aiming at creating more of a “masstige” abandoning the traditional luxury prestige value (Chandon et al., 2016).

These reports are informative and allow for efficient short-term strategies to target each segment appropriately. However, these reports lack an in-depth understanding of luxury consumers, especially those on the high-end spectrum, in terms of luxury consumption practices. Indeed, due to their high economic and cultural capital background, high-end luxury consumers define, display and consume luxury in very different ways than the masses. Moreover, these reports and studies accentuate the purchase – and to some extent – the consumption of luxury goods but neglects in taking into account all the elements of consumption of the upper class. Upper class consumers do not only consume material goods but also engage in leisure and cultural activities. Thus, upper-class consumers’ luxury lifestyle must be taken into account when investigating luxury consumption practices as a whole. This particular research gap is addressed in this thesis and is further discussed in the section below.

2.4.2 *Luxury lifestyle segmentation*

In sociology, the term ‘lifestyle’ refers to the style of life of certain status groups (Featherstone, 1987; Weber, 1968). This thesis focuses on the luxury lifestyle of the ‘elite’. Bourdieu (1984) for instance, notes that upper-class lifestyle is composed of different ‘high’ cultural and consumption practices such as going to the museum, concerts, preferences for clothes, food, drink, holidays, sports, and other leisure activities. Luxury lifestyle thus gives the ‘elite’ a way to distinguish themselves from the masses as these tastes, preferences in consumption and cultural practices are said to be scarce due to exclusive and economic barriers (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Indeed, elite distinction is defined as “the necessity for dominant social groups to display cultural signs of superiority to signal their upper social position” (Daloz 2009, p. 28).

It is particularly relevant to study this segment, as they are an extreme case in displaying luxury consumption practices; influencing the masses in their consumption practices (e.g. Simmel, 1957). Indeed, previous research has shown that consumers from lower classes often seek to emulate consumption practices from the elite, through the adoption of cultural tastes and leisure activities (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). This in turn triggers the elite to create ‘invidious distinction’ (Veblen, 1899) – a way for them to continuously develop more expensive and elaborate tastes. Elite tastes are highly valued as they are culturally legitimized thanks to their high-end positions in society (Accominotti et al. 2018).

However, as Friedman and Reeves (2020) note, there is a lack in research on elite consumption practices. The authors explore how the elite tastes have evolved in the last 120 years in the UK by analyzing magazines that portray elites. However, it can be argued that magazines are an archaic form of archival data. Therefore, research still needs to be done to uncover new forms of luxury consumption practices in a digitalized and liquid society, taking place on social media platforms (Eckhard & Bardhi, 2020). Accordingly, this thesis will therefore look at the luxury consumption practices of the specific segment of high-end luxury consumers, as well as their admirers – or followers – to see how these are affected by the mediatization of these practices on social media.

## 2.5 Social media consumer behavior

### 2.5.1 *What is social media?*

In the beginning of the millennium, boyd and Ellison (2007) were first examined the nature and rise of Social Networking Sites (SNS) usage. They explain that SNSs are used not for networking but for maintaining existing (real life) relationships. They speculate that the main difference between online communities (e.g. on forums and other websites) and SNSs is that the former gathers people that share the same interests, whereas the latter focuses on people. This however is debatable, as nowadays people follow brands even on social media platforms, thus people can also follow interests and not necessarily people.

The first website considered to be a social network site (SNS) was introduced in 1997 and was called ‘SixDegrees’. It allowed users to create profiles, have a list of their friends and surf the lists of friends. The website lasted until 2001, then perished. It is not until the beginning of the millennium that Internet usage increased drastically to over 100 million people. MySpace emerged in 2003 and was one of the most used SNS platforms at the time. It allowed unknown musicians to promote their music and to have followers. The platform was a success as it was more innovative than previous platforms. However, the biggest change in social media began with the creation of Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard student at the time, developed an online platform in which one could create a profile containing personal information. At first, only Harvard students could access this platform. It was so successful that the founder opened its doors to the wider public a few years down the line. Today we can count thousands of social networks on the World Wide Web. These sites have been set up so that individuals can create their own professional profile (e.g. LinkedIn), their blog (e.g. LiveJournal, WordPress), to share photos (e.g. Instagram), or simply to maintain contact with friends and family, to follow strangers or publish personal updates online (e.g. Twitter or Facebook).

Currently, an array of terms and definitions are used to define social media, such as social networking sites (boyd & Ellison, 2007), user-generated content (Shao, 2009) and social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Walker, 2009), thus showing that a consensus on what is social media has not yet been reached. For instance, a common misconception that researchers make is using boyd and Ellison (2007)’s term ‘social networking sites’ (SNS) and ‘social media’ interchangeably. However, SNSs are considered a subset of social media (Carr & Hayes, 2015). To avoid any further confusion, this thesis will hereafter use the term ‘social media’ as it is the most widely cited term in current consumer research literature. In line with this, for the purpose of this thesis, social media is defined as “a group of internet-based

applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

Following Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)’s definition of social media, they also categorized the different types of social media platforms available at the time. The platforms are classified depending on self-presentation and social presence (high or low). As the article was published in 2010, many social media platforms were emerging and consequently the authors had to amend their classification and add ‘micro-blogs’ such as Twitter (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Their classification can be seen in the table below.

**Table 1. Classification of Social Media**

		Social presence/Media richness		
		Low	Medium	High
Self-presentation/ Self-disclosure	High	Blogs and micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter)	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook)	Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life)
	Low	Collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia)	Content communities (e.g., YouTube)	Virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft)

*Adapted from (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, 2011)*

Although the table is succinct and accurately shows the main differences amongst social media platforms, this classification has been outdated by the rapid evolution of social media. A further layer of distinction among platforms needs to be noted. More specifically, with the myriad of social media platforms there are now to date, the table does not discriminate between textual (such as forums), hybrid platforms containing text and visual data (Facebook and Twitter) and non-textual (or visual) social media platforms. These platforms are called ‘visual social media’ and include Instagram, Vine, Pinterest, etc. (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). The specificities of each type of platform are discussed in the following sections.

### 2.5.2 Textual and hybrid social media

Consumer-to-brand or brand-to-consumer online relationships have entered, with the arrival of the Internet, into most western consumers’ homes (Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2005; McWilliam, 2000). According to McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002), brand managers created online consumer communities to interact with consumers (McWilliam, 2000), to harvest brand loyalty and

reinforce brand-consumer relationships (Fournier, 1998). This was a way for brands to maintain their brand image and influence ‘brand tribes’ – consumers who are loyal and passionate about a certain brand (Cova & Cova, 2002; Solomon, 2003), a marketing strategy also called ‘cult branding’ (Cova & Pace, 2006).

More recent research has showed that online brand communities help consumers and brands co-create brand meaning (Grönroos, 2006), and are used to spread word-of-mouth marketing strategies (Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008). However, these communities were used by mainstream brands (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). Indeed, luxury brands only joined the online world around 2009 (Kim & Ko, 2010, 2012) and have remained reserved by keeping a tight grip on one-way interactions between brand and consumers. The use of social media has proven to contribute greatly to luxury brands’ success, with Burberry being one of the first brands to witness the benefits of social media marketing efforts (Phan, Thomas & Heine, 2011). For instance, a recent study on brand-to-consumer co-creation, showed that during a Louis Vuitton exhibition event, the luxury brand encouraged visitors to create content related to the event on social media. This allowed Louis Vuitton, as part of their marketing campaign, to disseminate the brand value proposition (Koivisto & Mattila, 2018).

In line with this, Kim and Ko (2010, 2012) identified the five dimensions most influential for Korean Louis Vuitton consumers in terms of customer equity: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and word of mouth (WOM). In another study, Kamal, Chu & Pedram (2013) showed that the use of social media attracts materialistic consumers to purchase luxury products. Finally, Godey et al. (2016) also found that luxury brands’ social marketing efforts helped increase brand awareness and brand image. The authors urge luxury brands to use social media as a cost-effective marketing tool and as a way of reaching luxury brand consumers. However, the main limitation of this stream of research is that they are mainly one-directional (brand-to-consumer) and do not offer insights on the other side of the veil: what consumers do on social media, when companies are not necessarily actively involved (Heinonen, Jaakkola, & Neganova, 2018).

As suggested by Heinonen (2011), researchers looking at new social media strategies should seek to better understand a consumer perspective on social media practices. Contrary to consumer-to-brand research, this particular stream of consumer research looks at consumer-to-consumer behavior and interactions on social media platforms. Research has indeed shown that consumer-to-consumer interaction has a major impact in terms of value creation as they are crucial ‘market actors’ (Heinonen,



Jaakkola, & Neganova, 2018). In line with this, this thesis adopts a consumer perspective on luxury consumption practices on social media.

Social media research has looked at how consumers create online profiles as a way to entertain an audience (Papacharissi, 2002), a way of self-realization (Hemetsberger, 2005), or a place in which one is free to create multiple selves (Belk, 2013; Schroeder, 2013; Turkle, 2011). Social media platforms can be a place where consumers can produce user generated content, participate by commenting or consume by simply observing or ‘lurking’ (Heinonen, 2011). Depending on the platform, the purposes of consumer usage can vary, for instance personal websites such as blogs are used to present oneself and communicate with friends and strangers (Arsel & Bean, 2012; McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012; Schau & Gilly, 2003).

For instance, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011) look at how perceived social capital is obtained through Facebook. This study was one of the first to introduce how online friendship emerges through three strategies. (1) ‘Initiating’ is the act of becoming friends on Facebook with strangers. (2) ‘Maintaining’ as its name indicates, is the act of maintaining an offline friendship by also communicating online. (3) ‘Social information-seeking’ is the act of gathering information online, mostly personal, on an acquaintance that we know offline. Johnstone, Todd, and Chua (2009) use Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explain how individuals nurture a positive social identity on platforms such as Facebook by being part of Facebook groups. In particular, for college students in the US, Facebook can be used as a narcissistic platform where students can curate their content and showcase their social life through posting pictures with friends and parties (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010).

Heinonen (2011) introduces the notion of a dichotomous behavior on social media: (1) posting and (2) lurking - or ‘consuming’ data. She defines lurkers as individuals who do not participate frequently on social media but instead prefer to view (consume) content. The main consumer motivations are to seek information, to connect with others and to be entertained. However, this study was based on consumers’ diary entries and lacks in further empirical data. Moreover, Pagani, Hofacker, & Goldsmith (2011) showed that personality traits (consumer innovativeness and expressiveness) could also matter in determining active and passive social media usage. Research should explore more on principal activities and motivations of lurkers on social media platforms. In particular, this thesis will investigate how luxury consumers – considered lurkers – ‘consume’ luxury related content on social media.

Going back to Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011)’s enlightening study in terms of how people used social media platforms to maintain or create new friendships online, Facebook used to be a place where

people would mostly communicate with people they knew offline already. New research has been looking at another case in which people follow complete strangers. These strangers can be bloggers; individuals who are considered to be celebrities online due to their high number of followers. There are different types of bloggers but the most prevalent are those who work with brands and wear their brands as a form of advertisement (Kretz & Voyer, 2012). Xin Zhao and Belk (2007) observe that blogs containing consumption content could be of a form to create envy for the followers or readers through conspicuous consumption. They also claim that nurturing the blog by posting consumption information means that the consumers need to regularly purchase goods and give them away once they are done writing about them. The act of writing about the product gives symbolic meaning to the product and is a way for the consumer (and the reader) to incorporate the meaning (e.g. McCracken, 1986).

On a more specific note, research on social media behavior has explored online brand communities in forums. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) are the first to introduce the concept of 'brand community', by exploring through an online ethnography how individuals behave in online brand communities. They deduce that "a brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structure set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (2001, p. 421). They observe individuals complying to a set of rituals and traditions within the forum, unwritten rules as to how they need to behave with each forum member. They explain that the rise of online brand communities signifies the beginning of a two-way conversation in which the consumers can communicate directly with the brand. In some cases, brand communities do not have to involve brand communication. For instance, recent research has looked at how, in consumer-to-consumer luxury brand forums, consumers interact with each other and how the absence of companies involved affects the perception and narrative of the luxury products (Leban & Voyer, 2015). However, brand communities could be seen as an archaic type of social media platforms.

With continuous innovation of social media, consumer researchers are increasingly interested in exploring new social media platforms such as micro-blogs (e.g. Twitter) and other mobile related applications. As seen in this first part of the chapter, social media research has mainly looked at consumer-to-brand (e.g. Godey et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2010, 2012; Phan, Thomas & Heine, 2011) and consumer-to-consumer textual interactions (e.g. Arsel & Bean, 2012; McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012; Schau & Gilly, 2003). There is therefore a gap in the consumer research literature in non-textual consumer interactions on visual social media platforms (Rokka & Canniford, 2016).

### 2.5.3 *Visual social media*

As the number of social media platforms have been increasing in number in the last decade (Fader & Winer, 2012), the content created, shared, and consumed has been primarily visual (Marwick, 2015), rather than textual. Thus, it is relevant to explore visual imagery in the context of social media platforms, such as Instagram. Instagram, a mobile photo and video sharing social media platform (Lim, 2016), is the most used visual social media platform to this date (Pew Research Center, 2016), with more than 800 million monthly active users (Statista, 2017). Recently, Instagram merged with Facebook, increasing the use of photo sharing on both platforms (Li & Agarwal, 2014). Some research has started to look at what individuals post on Instagram (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014) but there is still a lot to discern in terms of the micro-communities that exist on this platform. This shift is particularly important in terms of exploring the content and motivators as to why people prefer to show themselves publicly now instead of hiding behind a ‘fake’ virtual avatar (see Hemp, 2006; Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2009 for more information on the use of avatars in Second Life).

Research on Instagram has only just begun; it was not until early 2015 that researchers started looking more closely at possible motivators for- and antecedents to Instagram usage. Lee, Lee, Moon, and Sung (2015), for instance, conducted a survey to uncover the reason behind a bigger usage of Instagram than Twitter. According to the authors, people have started using Instagram more frequently, as posting pictures seems to matter more to them than writing words. They found that individuals use Instagram to document their own life events in a cyberspace platform. Other motives emerged such as ‘peeking’ and ‘escapism’ and collecting as many followers as possible. However, the survey was conducted amongst a Korean sample, and thus has a limited external validity. Due to the lack of other research of this nature using a Western sample, we cannot conclude that those motivators are shared by the majority of westerners.

Moreover, consumers might be drawn to visual social media platforms as consumer research shows that consumers are now living in an ‘image economy’ and are constantly flooded with visual brand imagery (Schroeder, 2002, 2004). They are said to be viewers and producers of visual brand imagery (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016). On visual social media such as Instagram, users are therefore consumers and producers (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) of the content on the platform. Furthermore, as noted by Avery (2012), online communities bridge the gap between liquid and solid consumption: participants acquire material possessions offline but participate and create an online consumer community. Liquid consumption is defined as “ephemeral, access based, and dematerialized, and solid consumption is that

which is enduring, ownership-based, and material form of consumption” (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017, p. 4).

This particular form of consumption practice can be the display of material possessions or brands online (e.g. a person posing on the street with a conspicuous Louis Vuitton bag), as a way to promote brands and enhance the brand’s authenticity by making the image seem less ‘professional’ (Schroeder, 2013). Another way to display visual content on Instagram can be done through ‘brand publics’ (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Brand publics are not traditional online brand communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). They are more liquid and ephemeral (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) in the sense that consumers do not necessarily interact with each other on the platforms, are mainly viewers and come and go as they please. Consumers produce content to self-promote (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). In this sense, the bridge between liquid and solid consumption is not only about displaying material goods or brands on visual social media platforms, but also as a way of displaying a specific side of the self (e.g. Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Visual social media can also be called ‘hybrid space’ (De Souza e Silva, 2006) or a platform for ‘digital virtual consumption’, in which consumers display and embellish their daily life by carefully crafting visual content. Instagram blurs the imagination, virtual and material (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010). In the case of luxury, viewing ‘idealized’ luxury goods on Instagram, or other visual imagery related to luxury is pleasurable for the consumer. By consuming ‘idealized’ luxury related images on Instagram, consumers might daydream of possessing a luxurious life, or simply being an aspirational luxury consumer. Since mobile-device applications such as Instagram allow for consumers to take snapshots whenever and wherever they are, consumers have been sharing more private content to strangers (Presi, Maehle, & Kleppe, 2016). In fact, most content on Instagram is public and neatly categorized through hashtags and other tags that anyone can find (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016). Thus, the boundary between private and public is now ambiguous on such platforms (Presi et al., 2016).

## 2.6 Discrepancies between private and public behavior

### 2.6.1 *Impression management in the consumption of goods*

Public behavior has been characterized as a way people create their ideal selves and present it to the public (see Higgins, 1987; Sirgy 1982). This process is called ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959), and has been widely studied since then. Goffman stipulates that there are two types of

performances: the front stage (or front region) performance in which the individual acts in a certain way depending on the people with whom he or she is surrounded with, and the back stage (or back region) performance, which in many cases occurs when the individual is in the private setting and does not need to perform publicly anymore (Goffman, 1959). This theory has not yet been fully explored in consumer research, especially regarding what consumers do once they are in a private space, how they interact and consume their products privately. Most research has mainly focused on the public display of goods, especially in luxury research (e.g. as seen in section 2.2-2.3).

Research however suggests that reference groups have a strong influence in terms of how luxury goods are either privately or publicly consumed (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). It appears that when an individual buys a product in public, the brand image attached to the product is important. The contrary is the case when the product is consumed privately. This last point indicates that consumers might have alternative motives when purchasing or even consuming products in private. In fact, Goodwin (1992) shows why consumers seek privacy sometimes when consuming. Private consumption allows for a better quality of the consumption experience, mainly because the reference group is not involved and consequently their peers do not judge their consumption choices. For instance, a *Days of Our Lives* fan can decide to peacefully consume an entire season and truly enjoy the consumption experience alone, as he knows that he might be judged and mocked by his peers who might disapprove of soap operas in general. However, Goodwin states that consumers tend to consume more in public, with their reference group, than in private. The limitation of this study is that it only looks at private and public consumption in the general sense and does not look at differences amongst types of products. For example, there could be room for research in categorizing different products with different levels of privacy. Also, because the study used only quantitative research methods, one cannot fully understand why consumers react that way, and if there are any other motivations in consuming publicly versus privately. Qualitative research seems more suitable when seeking to understand consumption experience when interacting with a product and its meaning (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997).

### 2.6.2 *Self-presentation on visual social media*

As seen in the previous section (2.6.1), impression management has been widely used by consumers. However, since the rise of social media platforms, consumer researchers have looked at how impression management practices of public versus private behavior have mutated to the online world. At the beginning of the millennium, whilst there were no social media platforms available, the possibility of existing online seemed to attract many individuals as the boundaries between real and

virtual were blurred (Schau & Gilly, 2003). These authors were one of the first to explore the difference between the self-presentation in real life (RL) and online. They showed that the use of personal websites was a form of conspicuous behavior in the presentation of the self.

Ten years later, Xuan Zhao et al. (2013), following Goffman (1959)'s front and backstage behavior theory, showed that social media platforms such as Facebook also had different regions. The performance region is a region equivalent to the front region, in which the individual can nit-pick what pictures and text he or she will display online by using impression management. The exhibition region is used to build on one's long-term online self-presentation. The personal region, in turn, is what the authors qualify as the act of classifying important moment of one's life - almost like categorizing pictures in a photo album in real life.

Whilst most researchers link impression management to social media behavior, Hogan (2010) is the first Internet researcher to adapt the use of Goffman (1959)'s theory of impression management to explain social media behavior. Hogan (2010) introduces the concept of exhibitionism. He stipulates that performances are adjusted in every situation through self-monitoring and getting continuous feedback from observers. Exhibition entails that the individual decides on specific inputs and is not entirely able to control the content. In fact, Hogan (2010) mentions a third party - in the case of social media, these could be called 'the viewers' - who are able to curate the content they wish to see and ignore the rest. Whilst an individual wants to put on a show, this does not necessarily mean that the viewer will be exposed to it. Instead, it is a two-way interaction between the individual posting pictures and text, and the viewer. This means that if the individual wants to appear interesting, the posts need to always appeal to the followers. Unfortunately, most research has only looked at one side of the coin: both what and why individuals post things on social media, or followers' motivations. In this vein, this thesis will explore how producers display luxury content, and how followers, or 'lurkers', consume this type of luxury on Instagram.

Hogan (2010)'s research primarily looked at how people present themselves in their unique profile space on social media platforms. However other studies have explored how consumers publicly interact with brands, as another form of self-presentation on social media (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). Consumers can affiliate themselves to brands without the need to consume their products in real life. "Liking" a Facebook page of a brand allows the individual to belong to the brand's specific network. Because most of the individual's actions are reported and visible online, the individual can create his or her own online self (Gosling et al., 2011; Seidman, 2013). It is therefore easier for consumers to create their ideal self on social media without the need to purchase any goods.

Here we see that social media platforms allow for the construction of alternative identities, usually aspirational identities with the aim of attracting followers. Belk (2013) explains this shift as being a re-embodiment: being able to leave our real life (RL) or offline identity through disembodiment, and to re-embody a new version of us. This is mainly possible with the use of usernames (we can be called whatever we like) and avatars (we can put any profile picture we want). We can be whomever we want for as long as we want online and to be able to change our online extended self through the ownership of avatars. Individuals find ways to belong to certain groups - aspirational groups such as luxury consumers - through the creation of avatars (Leban & Voyer, 2015). Social media platforms allow individuals to behave in ways that differ from offline behavior and to create their ideal selves (Belk, 2013).

With the proliferation of social media platforms over forums and other websites, platforms such as Facebook appear to have shifted to a 'fake' avatar identity. In fact, existing research is already out-of-date in terms of comprehending identity and the way it is displayed on social media. For instance, Hogan (2012) shows that pseudonyms do not constitute a trend anymore, as Facebook, among other platforms, has 'forced' individuals to use their real names. Hogan calls this trend the 'real name web' and explains that in such platforms, it has become a social norm. This does not mean that people now display their real selves, it is still possible to construct their ideal selves through real name social media platforms, however it can be argued that researchers should drop the notion of 'avatars' as it may not be an accurate concept anymore.

Finally, self-presentation can also be explained through the concept of the synoptic gaze. Foucault (1977)'s panopticon structure describes how, when only a few guards observe many prisoners, individuals can self-monitor their behavior. The synoptic gaze (Mathiesen, 1997), on the contrary, implies how having a large number of viewers can influence and control the few individuals observed. These two dynamic structures of control work interchangeably and occur in our modern era of mass media, in which viewers – or in the case of this thesis, consumers – monitor and influence self-presentation on social media (e.g. adopting approved selfie practices by posing 'the right way', and as a consequence using these practices as a way to attract attention) (Kedzior & Allen, 2016). In this particular case, another form of control structure is the concept of the 'spectacle', which stipulates that consumer culture is using spectacle tactics to dazzle viewers (Debord, 2012). To dazzle viewers, one must provoke curiosity or admiration. A good example of application of the synoptic gaze and the spectacle is best exemplified in a new form of social media celebrity – called 'micro-celebrities' (Khamis, 2017) – described in the following section.

## 2.7 The rise of micro-celebrities on visual social media

### 2.7.1 *Personal branding on social media*

The term personal branding, coined by Peters (1997), is used to refer to individuals, who create their own brand and become their own marketer to be noticed on the labor market. Doing so, they are reinventing themselves into someone they would like to publicly display, while being in total control of their branded self (Kaputa, 2005). To develop a personal brand, consumers need to constantly grow and promote themselves to get noticed (Peters, 1997). In sum, personal branding, also sometimes called ‘human branding’ (Thomson, 2006) or ‘self-branding’ (Gandini, 2016) is often defined as being “product, producer, and consumer (...) captive to and conditioned by the controlling interests of global flexible capital” (Hearn, 2008).

The concept of personal branding has been explored both in an offline context (e.g. Close, Moulard & Monroe 2011; Fournier 2010; Thomson 2006) and in an online context (e.g. Centeno and Wang 2017; Labrecque, Markos & Milne 2011). Specifically, in an online context the proliferation of social media platforms has given new possibilities to apply and develop personal branding practices. In fact, social media platforms are so user-friendly that anyone can upload and share content, and thus promote themselves easily (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). It is a way of participating in the ‘attention economy’ by staying on top of a crowded marketplace (Shepherd, 2005).

As noted by Page (2012), personal branding is the act of developing a specific identity and to have that identity consumed by others. In the case of social media, this would be through visualizing content created of a distinctive human brand (e.g. selfies, Eagar & Dann, 2016), and to interact with it. Furthermore, researchers agree that successful personal brands are often strategic (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Nolan, 2015; Lee and Cavanaugh, 2016). Thus, a personal brand needs to target a specific audience and interact or ‘feed’ the audience, sometimes called ‘fan base’ (Page, 2012). Successful personal brands need to be consistent in the content that they post on social media, to be willing to disclose personal information to their audience (Labrecque et al., 2011), as well as to adjust their content to please their audience. Thus, there is a strong element of co-creation involved in the creation and management of a personal brand (Centeno, 2017). Other strategies employed in personal branding include i) *fitting into* a specific field through signaling one’s social and cultural capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1993) and at the same time ii) *standing out* from within that field (Parmentier et al., 2013).



2.7.2 ‘Ordinary’ consumers creating their personal brand online

As discussed in section 2.3.3, alternative luxury consumption practices are emerging due to the liquidification of society, which in turn lead to new forms of status games and distinction: flexibility and attention (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Specifically, in the context of visual social media, attention capital is linked with the rise of micro-celebrities (Marwick, 2015). Research on personal branding strategies has mainly focused on celebrities (e.g. Holbrook, 2001; Keel & Natarajan, 2012). Thomson (2006) defines human brands – specifically celebrities – as “any well known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (p. 104). However, these studies do not cover the emergence of a new type of celebrity phenomenon on social media: that of micro-celebrities. The concept of micro-celebrities was first introduced by Senft (2008) who observed how people online were able to increase their popularity through blogs and social networking sites. Table X below briefly includes a typology of different types of celebrities.

**Table 2. A brief classification of different types of celebrities**

<i>Type of celebrity</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Reference</i>
Traditional celebrities	‘A’ list celebrities, Hollywood celebrities who are well established offline and who participate in brand endorsement.	(McCracken, 1989; Thompson, 1978),
Micro-celebrities	‘Hobbyists’ who were able to gain popularity through blogs and social networking sites, posting content for a niche group of people.	(Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008)
Social Media Influencers	Sub-category of micro-celebrities. They are professionals who either post their own content or sponsored content.	(Abidin, 2016; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015)

Contrary to established and more mainstream celebrities (e.g. actors), anyone ‘ordinary’ can become a micro-celebrity, without necessarily having any ties with brands, or belonging to a specific industry. The primary motive therefore is to gain attention and popularity. Micro-celebrities gain attention through followers, shares, and likes (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Attention and popularity are valued almost as much as class or wealth offline (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). This phenomenon is called ‘Instafame’ as it is prevalent on Instagram. Micro-celebrities are comparable to Hollywood celebrities in the sense that they both publicly display their lives in order to create what the author calls “aspirational consumption”, and have therefore become themselves status symbols

(Marwick, 2015). Overall, the rise of micro-celebrities has given opportunities to consumers – regardless of their offline social position - to conspicuously portray luxurious lifestyles (Rettberg, 2017; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). However, there is a lack of understanding in Marwick (2015)’s research as to the different levels of micro-celebrities, what they actually post on social media, and what their ‘fans’ or followers seek in following them. For instance, not much is known about where these micro-celebrities come from, what their economic background is, which luxury products and brands they display and how they display these online. As existing research is based on an online ethnography, it remains unknown what the micro-celebrities’ main motivation is in posting content online.

According to Kozinets and Cerone (2014), the number of micro-celebrities is booming on Instagram. However, the authors note that there now seems to be a ‘celebrity threshold’, in which being a micro-celebrity on Instagram does not automatically give you a stable popularity anymore. In fact, to maintain popularity, micro-celebrities need to start using new tactics to attract followers. Some strategies include drifting the brand image into something more dreamlike or utopian rather than something aspirational. However, strategies of this sort may backfire, as followers cannot identify themselves anymore to the micro-celebrities. This thesis addresses this gap by investigating what followers (who in this case happen to be luxury consumers) seek in following micro-celebrities on Instagram.

Research in marketing has focused on how celebrities can influence consumers, mainly through celebrity endorsement (e.g. Amos et al., 2008; Bergkvist & Zhou, 2016; Erdogan, 1999; Keel & Nataraajan, 2012; McCracken, 1989; Saldanha et al., 2018). However, most research until now has sought to either i) find models that ‘manage’ celebrities in order to make maximum profit or ii) use examples of already established and generic (Hollywood) celebrities (Moraes, Gountas, Gountas & Sharma, 2019). Therefore, there is a gap in the literature in exploring the complexities of personal branding of lesser-known celebrities, such as micro-celebrities or ‘influencers’<sup>2</sup>. Micro-celebrities have almost as much influence on consumers as celebrities or bloggers (McQuarrie et al., 2012), and have been shown to drive potentially better eWOM compared to more established celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Therefore, understanding personal branding strategies of micro-celebrities seems to be a step forward in linking marketing managerial benefits and micro-celebrity collaborations. As there are probably different types and levels and sub-cultures (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) of micro-celebrities on Instagram, further research should identify those and see how they influence specific

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<sup>2</sup> Micro-celebrities are ‘ordinary’ consumers that have (only) gained online attention and popularity. They are often qualified as ‘hobbyists’ as they do not necessarily earn money posting content, but rather do it as a way to entertain their audience. Social media influencers belong to a sub-category of micro-celebrities. Their personal brand is co-created not only through interacting with their followers, but also in direct collaboration with brands. Contrary to original micro-celebrities, they are considered to be professionals, monetizing the content they produce (Abidin, 2016; Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015).

consumer segments. In this vein, this thesis will look at the specific case of upper-class micro-celebrities on Instagram.

## **2.8 Chapter summary**

This chapter reviews the literature of luxury consumption and social media research. It is argued that the traditional view of luxury consumption, which is product-centric, offers top-down marketing strategies that impose what luxury should be to potential consumers. This traditional view is compromised with the avenue of new forms of luxury consumption, which does not take a marketers' perspective on luxury, but rather focuses on the consumers' lived experiences in engaging with luxury. It is then argued that the upper-class is involved with this new form of luxury consumption, as they prefer experiences over ownership of luxury goods, and conspicuously engage in status and distinction strategies such as attention and flexibility. As this particular segment now seems to engage on other media related platforms such as visual social media, the second part of the literature review makes the case that it is crucial to explore further luxury consumption practices of the upper class on Instagram. Specifically, it is argued that since these have different interests when it comes to luxury, this thesis will investigate how they define luxury, how they display luxury (e.g. through creating personal branding strategies) and how they – and their followers – consume luxury on Instagram. The next chapter discusses the methodological approach used to answer the research questions of this thesis.

## Chapter 3

# Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter covered the theoretical framework that guided this thesis. The aim of this thesis is to understand luxury consumption practices on Instagram. Consequently, we chose to conduct empirical work with wealthy social media influencers as well as their followers to understand both perspectives. All three papers contain different data samples, as well as diverse qualitative methods. The first paper involved only online data with 27 wealthy micro-celebrity accounts, and used content analysis combined with netnography. The second paper combined online data as well as offline data, such as interviews with 5 wealthy social media influencers, and used hermeneutical analysis. The third paper involved 16 interviews with followers, and used hermeneutical analysis (see the table below for the structure of the thesis). The use of multiple methods was employed in order to obtain richer and more in-depth answers to the research questions. This chapter addresses the methodology of this thesis and looks at the following areas: (a) rationale for research approach and research design, (c) description of the research sample, (d) methods of data collection, (e) ethical considerations, and (f) issues of trustworthiness. The chapter ends with a concluding summary.

**Table 3. Overview of research design for the three papers of this thesis**

	<b>First paper</b>	<b>Second paper</b>	<b>Third paper</b>
Title	The affluent on Instagram: How wealthy micro-celebrities maintain online secular immortality through personal branding strategies	Constructing Personas: How High-Net-Worth Social Media Influencers Reconcile Ethicality and Living a Luxury Lifestyle	Transformational Effects of Social Media Lurking Practices on Luxury Consumption
Research questions	What personal branding strategies do wealthy micro-celebrities use in attaining, maintaining, or enhancing their online secular	How do HNW social media influencers reconcile potential tensions between ethicality and living luxurious lifestyles?	What are the constituent digital virtual practices of luxury brand lurking on social media?  How do these

	immortality on Instagram?	What types of personas allow HNW social media influencers to maintain their legitimacy in their field by conspicuously displaying morality and luxury lifestyles?	practices augment luxury consumption through the properties of digital virtual consumption?
Research sample	27 wealthy Instagram micro-celebrity accounts	5 wealthy Instagram micro-celebrities	16 lurkers, Instagram users
Dates for data collection process	March 2017; content analysis March – August 2017; netnography	May 2018 – October 2018 (interviews) December 2018 (archival data)	January 2018 – February 2018 (interviews)
Type of data collected	Visual content analysis (n=492 posts) and netnography (n=810 posts, 612 pages (over 110,000 words))	Semi-structured interviews (n=5) and Instagram archival data (n=862 posts)	Semi-structured interviews (n=16)
Method of analysis	Thematic Analysis and Content Analysis	Hermeneutic analysis	Hermeneutic Analysis

### 3.2 Complementarity and consistency of the three research designs

The three papers included in this thesis are not presented in chronological order. Rather, they have been rearranged to show a better coherence, flow and complementarity between the three research designs.

Paper one was the first study that we conducted and was exploratory. The focus was to look at what wealthy micro-celebrities included in their Instagram posts, especially in terms of luxury content, and to that end, what kind of personal branding strategies they used in order to build their online image. As with any paper, a specific angle was chosen to uncover the motivations as to why these wealthy micro-celebrities exposed themselves on Instagram: that of achieving online secular immortality. Online archival data analyzed through content analysis and netnography has its limitations in terms of extending and deepening the research further. These limitations are extensively discussions in section 3.3

Paper two emanates from paper one by taking a step further in understanding why and how wealthy social media influencers showcase their luxurious lifestyle on Instagram. In this paper we take a different angle arguing that living a luxurious lifestyle could be considered adopting unethical consumer behavior – as it involves wastefulness and over-consumption. This paper aims at better understanding the difference between the wealthy social media influencers perspective on their role as influencers in portraying luxury online, and comparing it with their actual behavior online.

Paper three takes an upside down turn and explores the other side of the story. Indeed, instead of looking at producers of luxury content on Instagram, we explore what followers, in other words consumers-only or ‘lurkers’, do on Instagram. More specifically we investigate what kind of practices they engage in when consuming luxury on Instagram and why they do so.

Multiple methods allow the researcher to gather more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, as it captures a wider range of data, and supports the evidence of the data obtained (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). For these reasons, this thesis employed various data collection methods, such as content analysis, netnography and semi-structure interviews. The rationale for sampling strategy was the same across all three papers, and is detailed in the following section (3.2.1). The data analysis for paper two and three involved applying a hermeneutical analysis approach (3.2.2), whereas paper one uses content analysis and thematic analysis.

### *3.2.1 Rationale for sampling strategy*

Following the scope of this entire thesis, we used purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) to recruit participants. Random sampling would have not been possible as we did not have access to an exhaustive list of upper-class social media influencers on Instagram, and it would not have been appropriate in answering the research questions. Moreover, the purposive sampling technique is in accordance with social media research recommendations (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). Accordingly, this thesis looks at specific user accounts on Instagram, in this case wealthy micro-celebrities. Once the specific population that will be studied is determined, all users that belong to the group should be considered in the final sample (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017).

### 3.2.2 *Data analysis*

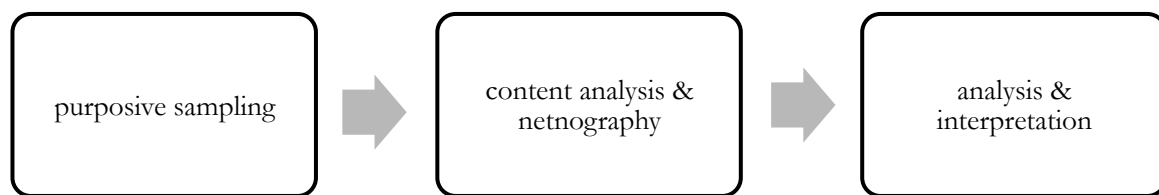
As mentioned before, paper two and three adopt a hermeneutical analysis approach (Thompson, 1997) to analyze the data. As phenomenological interviews were conducted, and Instagram posts were collected, a hermeneutical analysis was deemed suitable in interpreting and contextualizing consumers' narratives, values, beliefs and experiences (Thompson, 1997). Hermeneutical analysis is particularly relevant when interpreting meaning from a text or image linked with consumption related texts. Moreover, hermeneutical analysis not only uncovers identity issues, but also allows the researcher to link the consumers' identity conflicts with socio-cultural influences (Thompson, 1997). In the case of paper two, our sample and data allowed us to not only interpret personal identity conflicts, but also to make parallels with other upper-class consumers. Finally, following hermeneutical guidelines in interpreting data through a 'hermeneutic circle' (Klein & Myers, 1999), the data was interpreted in an iterative process, in which all authors would compare and contrast the interviews and the Instagram posts.

In the following sections, methodological differences are discussed for each paper specifically.

### 3.3 **Research design for paper one**

For the first paper the aim was to answer the main research question: *What personal branding strategies do wealthy micro-celebrities use in attaining, maintaining, or enhancing their online secular immortality on Instagram?* The research design was exploratory and only involved data online. Research on luxury consumption practices on social media, especially visual social media, is relatively new and challenging to collect data. Consumer researchers have just recently started to use different methods to collect visual, non-textual data on social media (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). Most notable methods that consumer researchers have used include: visual semiotic analysis to interpret selfies on Instagram (Eagar & Dann, 2016), polytextual thematic analysis (Presi, Maehle, & Kleppe, 2016), practice theory (Gannon & Prothero, 2016), phenomenological interviews (Pounders et al., 2016), netnography and textual content analysis on Twitter and Instagram (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015) and visual content analysis on Instagram (Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Therefore, to this date, there is no pre-defined direction as to which methods should be used in visual social media research. Multiple methods were employed in order to answer the research question. The research methods used were: visual content analysis and netnography.

The research was conducted across two simultaneous phases. Phase 1 & 2 encompassed two different methods: visual content analysis and netnography of wealthy micro-celebrities on Instagram, inspired by previous research (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2015; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). These methods were applied simultaneously and were analyzed in parallel. The implementation of the overall research design of this study is summarized in figure below:



**Figure 1. Research design process for paper one**

### 3.3.1 *Research setting and context*

A recent phenomenon emerged on Instagram called Rich Kids of Instagram. The platform, originally created in 2012 on Tumblr (<http://therkoi.com>) and Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/richkidsofinstagram/>), was a space in which account curators identified pictures posted on Instagram from users who presented themselves as millionaires and re-posted the pictures on the Rich Kids of Instagram platform. As the name of the platform indicates, the content is of young adults luxurious life, such as traveling on private jets or partying in exclusive nightclubs. Their slogan summarizes it by stating: *“They have more money than you and this is what they do”*. Currently it is still a successful platform with 420k followers (as of November 2017). The success of the platform can also be seen in the fact that most of the content has been featured in magazines such as The New York Times, Forbes and The Guardian. Moreover, the TV channel E! launched in 2014 the show “Rich Kids of Beverly Hills” featuring similar content. Other notable non-American shows that seem to still be popular in the media include “Made in Chelsea” (a British reality TV show). Similar to previous research on Instagram micro-celebrities (Marwick, 2015), Rich Kids of Instagram was the platform that I used to source all the accounts of upper-class luxury consumers.



3.3.2 *Sampling and criteria for inclusion*

Participants were selected according to the following initial criteria: a) to use Instagram and b) to be upper-class luxury consumers. Initially, 221 Instagram accounts were identified. These accounts were linked to re-posts on the Rich Kids of Instagram platform. Information on the Instagram users and accounts were then collected through their Instagram profile description. Supplementary information on the users was gathered through Google search. The data was then collected and classified in a spreadsheet containing the following information:

**Table 4. Raw data spreadsheet**

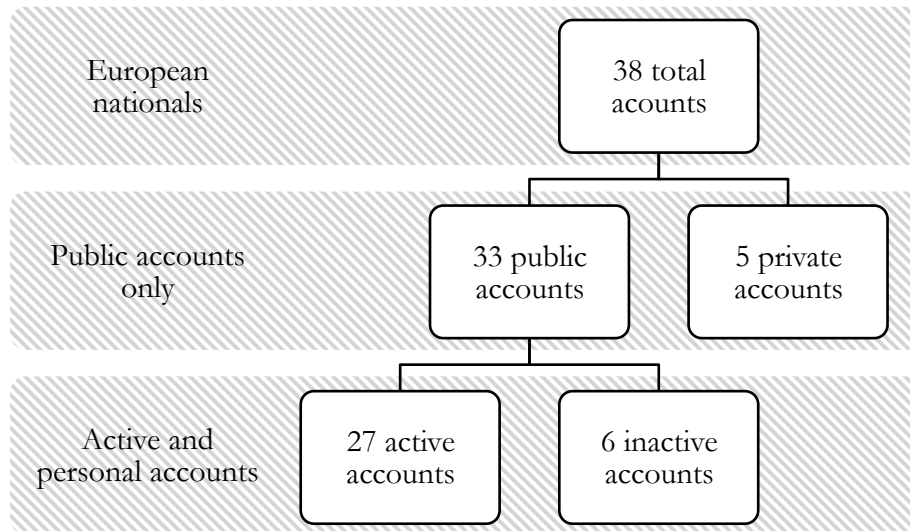
username	full name	# posts	# followers	following	# likes	# comments	location	nationality	account type	contact	DOB	comments
...	...	...	...	...	...	...		...	public	...		...

Once all the raw data was collected and classified, the data was filtered to determine the final sample. In line with this, a few criteria for inclusion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) were taken into account when selecting accounts. First, accounts had to be discriminated depending on the owner’s nationality. As most research on conspicuous consumption has mainly used American-based samples (e.g. Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010), I chose to focus on European accounts to avoid introducing potential cross-cultural biases (see Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). In addition, North American consumer culture has been noted as more extreme and conspicuous than other western societies (Holt, 1998).

Second, for ethical and practical reasons, the accounts were then discarded if the account was not public (Buchanan, 2012). Accounts were continuously checked throughout the data collection to ensure that Instagram users kept their account public. In the case that users changed the status of their account to private, the account would then be discarded from the final sample.

Third, since the Rich Kids of Instagram is a new and growing phenomena on social media, it seemed more relevant to be able to collect data that was recent and engaging. Therefore, following Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015)’s methodological guidelines, I choose to only select accounts that were active (users posted monthly on their accounts, or had a very high amount of followers). This criterion ensures rich data collection as users post regularly and followers interact with new content (Kozinets, 2002, 2010, 2015).

Finally, the accounts had to be personal accounts – as in non-commercial. The nature of my research is to take a consumer-only viewpoint of luxury consumption practices. Therefore, company or brand specific activity on social media was not of interest. The different stages of the sampling process can be seen in the figure below:



**Figure 2. Sampling process of Instagram accounts**

A total of 27 accounts were selected and used for the final sample. The sampling procedure took place during the whole of March 2017. The final sample consisted of 9 women and 18 men and all participants were between 18 to 28 years old. The participant information is presented in the table below.

**Table 5. Participant information**

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Age	Posts	Followers	Likes	Comments
Adam	French	M	20s	142	11000	15000	135
Bradley	Italian	M	20s	910	209000	72000	1000
Camilla	Russian	F	20s	293	288000	256000	912
Christopher	Italian	M	20s	118	27000	31000	61
Carol	Russian	F	28	918	28000	28000	509

Diana	German	F	27	156	613	1000	84
Douglas	Italian/Russian	M	24	692	145000	89000	598
Fred	French	M	20s	100	8523	14000	601
Gabrielle	Russian	F	26	855	107000	47000	478
Grayson	Italian	M	24	2,017	163000	155000	2000
Harley	Finnish	M	28	2041	6457	4000	44
Jean	Russian	F	20s	1313	17000	9000	225
Jack	Italian	M	20s	600	14900	8000	173
Joe	Italian	M	20	265	9418	4000	183
John	UK	M	20s	193	4,000	7000	205
Lewis	Russian	M	20s	371	11000	9000	144
Mary	Balkan	F	20s	315	107000	88000	567
Mason	Italian	M	20s	1,624	6222	18000	98
Matt	Danish	M	18	1000	3551	4000	102
Nancy	Russian	F	20	1584	503000	282000	781
Scott	UK	M	20s	304	1200	2000	37
Stanley	Danish	M	20s	178	6380	6000	81
Stephanie	French	F	20s	510	18000	9000	134
Tom	UK	M	20s	236	5840	14000	297
Warren	Norwegian	M	27	748	61000	84000	2000
Will	English/Russia	M	26	2081	388000	58000	430
	n						
Zoe	French	F	20s	236	145000	150000	2000

\* Data was retrieved and last updated in May 2017

The aim of this research is to observe an atypical group of people on Instagram – in this case wealthy micro-celebrities. All of these accounts were verified to be qualified as micro-celebrities in that 1) the users gained popularity (mostly online), 2) they are primarily ‘hobbyists’: they do not necessarily collaborate with brands, 3) they do not fulfill traditional celebrity criteria such as being well established professionals from the entertainment industry. Therefore, the final sample was not altered in any way. Although having a disproportionate amount of men could be seen as a potential bias, this is actually in line with previous research on conspicuous consumption, stating that men are more likely to exhibit conspicuous behavior (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010; Sundie et al., 2011).

### 3.3.3 *Qualitative content analysis*

To reiterate, paper one explores personal branding strategies wealthy micro-celebrities use in attaining, maintaining or enhance online secular immortality on Instagram. Since personal branding strategies often involve looking at how individuals present themselves - in this case in an online context – the method of analysis should allow the researcher to look at elements posted on Instagram accounts. For this reason, a qualitative content analysis was used as data analysis approach. Content analysis (CA) is “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). There are two types of content analysis methods that are widely used in qualitative research: quantitative and qualitative content analysis. The former quantifies elements of text or visual data (Bell, 2001) and looks at frequencies of those elements, whereas the latter categorizes data using hermeneutics (Krippendorff, 2004). Although researchers have argued that ‘quantitative’ content analysis is a quantitative method (e.g. Berelson, 1952; Neuendorf, 2016), Krippendorff (2004) states that ‘quantitative’ content analysis is qualitative as it usually involves categorizing and analyzing text - even if numbers are used in the process. Content analysis is a method that allows thorough examination of text or visual communication found in magazines, newspapers, blogs, etc.

However, in the context of non-textual data, such as images, the delimitation between quantitative and qualitative is dimmer. Although big data researchers are trying to extract and process quantitative analysis for non-textual data from social media platforms (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017) visual content analysis cannot be categorized under the ‘quantitative’ methodological school. This is primarily due to the complexity of the visual data extracted, in which much qualitative interpretation is needed (Berger, 2008). Images are a new way of communication that does not involve language (Bauer, 2000). As the main data of this thesis being visual content on social media, this thesis thus subscribes to the argument that (visual) content analysis belongs to qualitative methodology. This goes in line with previous research conducted on Instagram, which uses primarily qualitative content analysis (e.g. Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Rose, 2016).

As prescribed by Krippendorff (2004), the first step in creating a codebook is to establish the unit of analysis. Consequently, the unit of analysis was the Instagram posts from European millionaires accounts. It is important to note that because the unit is the post as a whole, this means that it involves the picture as well as the description text attached to the picture. Indeed, when conducting visual analysis – especially on visual social media such as Instagram – it is the norm to analyze the entire

Instagram post, as separating the different features and elements of the post will decontextualize the picture itself (Rose, 2016).

A systematic sampling approach (Krippendorff, 2004) was used. As mentioned before, the posts were taken from the selected 27 accounts of European young adult millionaires. As there were big discrepancies between the frequency of posts between members, 20 most recent pictures were taken for each account (as these micro-celebrities appeared to usually post on average 10 posts per month). This allowed me to collect at least two month’s worth of Instagram activity. Two months was deemed suitable enough as it encompassed most activities that these micro-celebrities we engage in (e.g. going on holidays, going to university, staying at home, etc.). Posts dated from January 2017 to April 2017. A total of 492 Instagram posts were used for the content analysis. Data collection lasted from the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April to the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 2017. The posts were downloaded as screenshots (JPEG format) and were numbered. Alterations were then made to the pictures in order to avoid potential biases by deleting the usernames.

Once the unit of analysis is decided and the sample is collected, the next step for a researcher is to decide how the data will be coded (Krippendorff, 2004). Two types of coding are available: human coding or computer/software coding (Neuendorf, 2016). Trade-offs as to which approach is undertaken for content analysis are summarized in the table below:

**Table 6. Differences between human coding and computer/software coding in content analysis**

<i>Feature</i>	<i>Human coding</i>	<i>Computer/software coding</i>
Coding process	Human “coders” manually analyze the content by counting elements and reporting them in specific categories	A software such as CAQDAS or WordStat analyses the content automatically, counts words or text frequencies
Format	Paper support, audio recordings, videotapes, photos or computer files (Word, JPEG, etc.). Textual data and non-textual data.	All support needs to be digitalized, textual data only
Categorization	Low reliability can occur if coders disagree on categories	High reliability
Coding time	Many coders needed in order to code large samples of data; slow coding time	Software can run automatically on its own; rapid coding time
Validity	Human coding works well when sample is ambiguous	Text can contain misspelling and other errors; software cannot detect this

As shown in the table, human coding can be very labor-intensive and less reliable compared to the computer/software coding. However, since visual social media has only emerged recently in the Internet sphere, software for content analysis was not suitable for coding. In fact, most software available is useful for computer-aided text analysis only, and cannot detect the visual content of Instagram posts (i.e. what type of consumption activities the micro-celebrities engage with, what objects are displayed in the posts, the specificities of how micro-celebrities self-present on Instagram). Therefore human coding (Neuendorf, 2016) was a more appropriate technique for this study in order to analyze pictures and text of Instagram posts. Human coding requires the creation of a codebook (Krippendorff, 2004). The content of the codebook is detailed below.

Visual content analysis needs to be exhaustive and exclusive (Rose, 2016). This means that categories need to include every element of the Instagram post. Following this, two obvious main categories emerged: photograph and text/description. Overall, the codebook contained 13 different variables. Regarding the photograph category, variables were selected based on two theories: impression management (Goffman, 1959) and brand prominence (Han et al., 2010).

As Instagram offers a multitude of features that allow for the presentation of self, variables included the following:

- Photo/persons: Instagram picture depicts person(s), not objects
- Person Count: The amount of people in the Instagram picture
- Photo effects: Instagram picture effects like black and white, sepia, altered photographs, filters
- Shot type: The way the person took the Instagram picture
- Setting: The Instagram picture depicts a private or public setting
- Location: The Instagram picture has been geotagged when the location is indicated at the top of the picture

Furthermore, in order to see if wealthy micro-celebrities were prone to display conspicuous consumption on Instagram through the use of brand prominent goods (Han et al., 2010), three extra variables were selected: product count, product category and brand logo.

As with the previous category, the text/description category also included exhaustive variables related to the features offered on Instagram. Variables were: hashtag count, likes count and comments count (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Also, conspicuous consumption through loud branding (Han et al., 2010) was again measured through the variable 'brand name' - whether the name of a brand(s) is/are

mentioned in the text. A pilot study was then conducted in order to determine the coding frame and to elaborate the codebook by checking the first 100 Instagram posts. Below is a coding example:

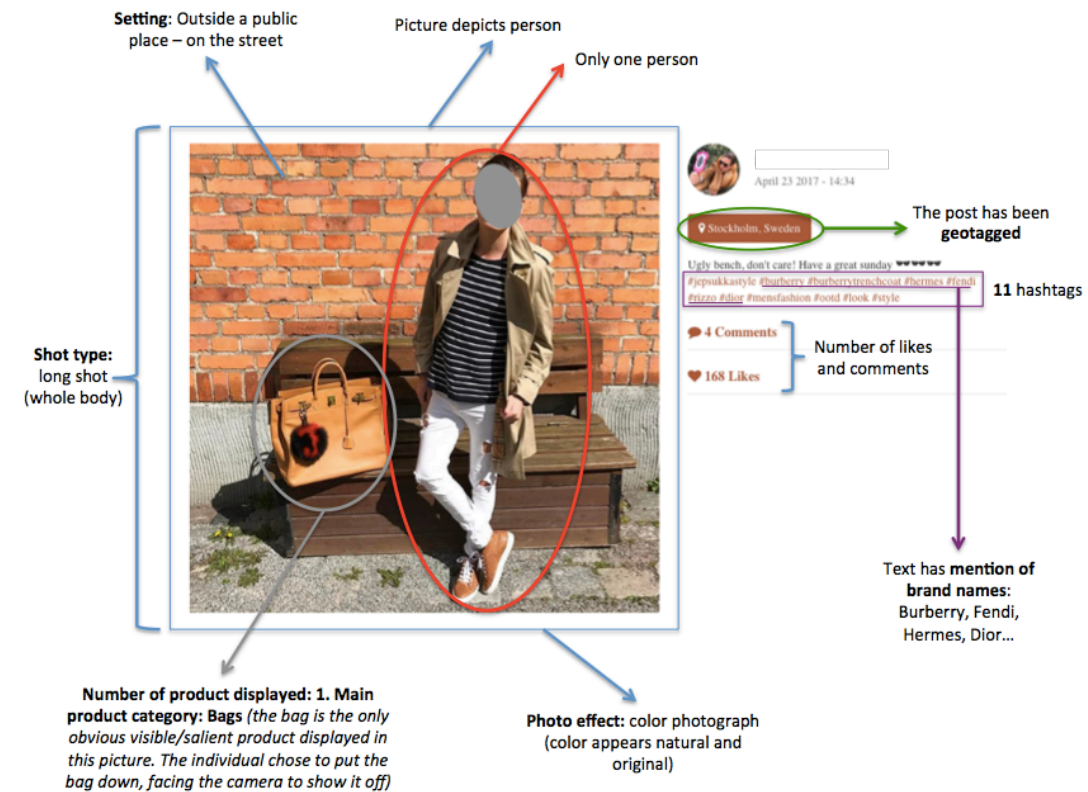


Figure 3. Coding example guideline for coders

Moreover, Krippendorff (2004) recommends to establish a list of qualifications that coders should have in order for them to be suitable for the study. Accordingly, the following list was made containing coders' qualifications:

- Has used in the past, or is familiar with quantitative research
- Has at least an MSc degree in social sciences
- Has an instagram account and is a regular user
- Is familiar with luxury brands (name and logos desirable)
- Is familiar with fashion products (especially accessories)
- Has conducted a content analysis before (desirable)
- Speaks fluent English

Coders, who were ex-course mates from the first author’s Masters degree, were recruited on the basis of this list. As a result, three researchers blind-coded separately in order to assure the internal validity of the coding process (Weber, 1990). Each coder received a one-hour long session training in which the codebook was extensively discussed and examples were shown. These sessions took place at the beginning on May and lasted one hour each. The codebook was read out loud once, then 5 Instagram posts that were not part of the final sample were shown to the coders. Coders were invited to explain how they would approach each of the sample posts, and detail the reasoning they would use in order to code the material. Discrepancies were resolved upon discussion. The sample was split into three parts at random and assigned to each coder to code. Each coder was given an Excel sheet with the coding form for them to fill out while coding, as shown below:

file number	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5	Variable 6	...
1							
2							
...							

Coding started on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 2017 and ended on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2017. During this time, coders were advised to interact with me if they were uncertain about a picture or if they had further questions, of which only two interactions occurred. For instance, issues were discussed such as how to code posts that did not have clear backgrounds (i.e. the picture was a close up of the micro-celebrity’s face, hands, or feet). The issue was resolved by agreeing that these particular posts should be coded as “99 – unable to determine”. Finally, one of the coders was not a luxury consumer, thus there could have been potential biases when coding. However, to counter this, the coder was provided with a list of brands and their logos for the coder to refer to, when in doubt. The code did not report any issue.

10% of the results were compared to test the inter-coder reliability, measured with an overall Krippendorff’s alpha of 0.914, considered acceptable (Krippendorff, 2004). The percentage agreement was not calculated as it does not measure appropriately reliability (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002). Below are the details for each variable.



**Table 7. Inter-coder reliability and level of measurement for all variables**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>#</i>	<i>Level of Measurement</i>	<i>Krippendorff's alpha</i>
Photo /persons	1	Nominal/binomial	1.000
Person Count	2	Ratio	0.995
Photo effects	3	Nominal	0.790
Shot type	4	Nominal	0.809
Setting	5	Nominal	0.841
Location	6	Nominal	0.943
Product Count	7	Ratio	0.884
Product Category	8	Nominal	1.000
Brand logo	9	Nominal	0.859
Hashtag Count	10	Ratio	0.901
Likes Count	11	Ratio	1.000
Comments Count	12	Ratio	1.000
Brand Name	13	Nominal/Binomial	0.857

As shown in the table above, with the exception of the variable “photo effects”, all variables reached well above Krippendorff (2004)’s  $\alpha \geq 0,80$ . Nevertheless, the variable “photo effects” reached above Krippendorff (2004)’s minimum coefficient of  $\alpha < 0.667$ , with 0.790. Therefore, all variables are considered acceptable.

### 3.3.4 Netnography

As mentioned in the previous section, visual content analysis was used as a complementary mode of collection and analyzing data in addition to netnography. Indeed, in order to explore personal branding strategies, analyzing the visual content of posts is not sufficient enough, as other qualitative elements are necessary to be looked at. For instance, it is interesting to look at how these micro-celebrities interact with their followers, or how the followers react to the content. These two methods have been used in parallel in consumer research (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015; Kozinets, 2015). As recommended by previous research, verbal data must be analyzed in combination with visual data (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010).

Ethnography is a method that aims to collect rich data through observation and participation of a given group of consumers (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2001). By having an insider’s perspective, the researcher can understand social and cultural phenomena (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001). Other methods used by ethnographers include focus groups or interviews. While ethnography was originally developed and used by anthropologists to study niche tribes (Bryman,

2015), it is now a widespread method used in social sciences (Fielding, Lee, & Blank, 2008). With the development and rise of the Internet in the last two decades, the study of online real-life/offline communities is yet incomplete. Ethnographic research has therefore developed into sub-branches that explore the online world (Miller & Slater, 2001). Although it has been contested that online can deprive the researcher of physical, instant and non-communicative data, the online world has proven to possess rich data (James & Busher, 2009) and is now widely accepted (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009).

Many terms have emerged to qualify online ethnography, such as virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), digital ethnography (Pink, 2016) or netnography (Kozinets, 2002, 2010, 2015). These sub-branches of ethnography have over the years developed different procedures to collect and analyze data, as pure ethnography cannot be directly applied when looking at computer-mediated communication data. This thesis follows Kozinets (2002)'s netnography, as it is an established method that has been applied and developed over the years in consumer research. Kozinets (2010) describes 6 steps to be followed when adopting a netnographic approach: research planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation. However, nature of new social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram does not necessarily allow for interactions amongst participants. Therefore this thesis follows a modified version of the method that looks at general communication factors such as hashtags, emojis, and text that has already been used when studying Brand Publics (see Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015).

One of Kozinets (2015)'s first recommendations before starting the data collection is to publicly inform the audience / community of my status of a researcher and what kind of research I am doing at that moment. This was done through my Instagram profile as seen in the picture below:



Figure 4. Description of research on my Instagram profile

Next, I copied and pasted the text description of each post as well as the comments associated with it. As with the data collection for the content analysis (section 3.3.1), I only downloaded recent data as Rich Kids of Instagram is a recent social media phenomenon. This resulted in 810 Instagram posts and comments downloaded of the 27 accounts. The text was saved in a word document with a word count of over 110,000 words. Text included English mainly, but also at times Italian, French, Russian, Norwegian and Danish. I was able to code most of it but asked for help in translating Russian and Norwegian. The choice in keeping posts with foreign language was primarily due to the fact that a lot of micro-celebrities chose to write in their native language, and since my sample was European, I chose not to exclude potential relevant data. Furthermore, a screenshot of each picture was taken to accompany the text. The text was then added to *NVivo* for Mac 11 in order to code, check word frequencies and create word clouds. The archival data was collected from April to May 2017.

Overall, immersion on the different accounts started in March 2017 and ended in August 2017. During those 6 months, I took field notes of every new post that was available and of recent comments that were added. The typical content of my notes included observations on the setting of each post, the overall feeling I had of each account user, the tone and communication styles that each micro-celebrity used, as well as the type of conversation the micro-celebrities had – or did not have – with their followers. Notes were also taken during the coding process.

16/05/17 [Instagram account username removed]:

People love the fact that he posts aesthetic pictures/fairy-tale like. Someone even commented saying that whenever they see his pictures it looks like a fairy-tale. The content of his posts looks like it is a perfect “mis-en-scene”.

He is probably the only one who thanks everyone in the comments, so he seems very engaged with his audience. He nurtures his relationship with his admirers.

I’m wondering if he is not selling the dream of going to these magical places and people follow him to be part of it, part of the adventure. It feels like this platform is kind of like a virtual experience of luxury.

Overall, the pictures need to be pretty and professional, the main character needs to be handsome.

**Figure 5. Sample of field notes**

The data was analyzed through Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that identifies themes contained in the data. It is used when analyzing rich qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since the aim of this paper was of exploratory nature, the coding process was done through an inductive approach (Patton, 2002) – as opposed to a deductive process (e.g. Boyatzis, 1998). Inductive reasoning implies that the themes emerge from the data (Patton, 2002) and finalized through a form of back and forth process. Themes were then organized in three hierarchical layers: basic themes, organizing themes and global themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

### 3.4 Research design paper two

The research question for the second paper of this thesis was built on the exploratory research of the first paper. In particular, the findings highlighted the relevance in interviewing these wealthy micro-celebrities to better understand how and why they are on Instagram. Specifically, we were interested in understand how these wealthy micro-celebrities are able to reconcile potential tensions between ethicality and exposing their luxurious lifestyles online. We investigate the following two research questions: *(1) How do HNW social media influencers reconcile potential tensions between ethicality and living luxurious lifestyles? and (2) What types of personas allow HNW social media influencers to maintain their legitimacy in their field by conspicuously displaying morality and luxury lifestyles?* In order to answer our research question we used qualitative methods, collected and analyzed simultaneously. The analysis involved: HNW social media influencers' Instagram posts, and semi-structured phenomenological interviews (McCracken, 1988). These two methods allowed us to answer the research questions by comparing and contrasting HNW social media influencers intentions with their actual behavior on their Instagram accounts.

#### 3.4.1 *Sampling and criteria for inclusion*

As our target sample was the same as for paper one, we reached out to the final sample of 27 HNW social media influencers. For paper two, the criteria for inclusion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) were therefor threefold, participants had to be: 1) millennials, 2) social media influencers – thus who had previously collaborated with brands, 3) millionaire heirs.

All 27 HNW social media influencers were contacted either directly through direct messaging on Instagram, Facebook or via e-mail. Of those 27 influencers, only 5 replied back and only 2 were willing to take part in the interview. Because the sample was therefore more challenging than expected, we

decided to search for other influencers that fit the criteria for inclusion but that were not initially part of the 27 accounts. We then contacted 15 more influencers, of which 3 were willing to take part in the interview. Moreover, we used snowballing technique (Patton, 2002) in order to extend our sample. This was primarily done by asking HNW social media influencers at the end of the interview if they could refer us to someone else they knew who fulfilled our sample criteria. We would then double-check that the referred individual indeed fulfilled our sample criteria. This was done through checking their online presence in the media, their family background, as well as their Instagram account (see information on screening in paper 2 methodology section). Overall, out of 42 influencers, we managed to interview 5 participants. The sampling procedure took place from May 2018 until December 2018. The participant information is presented in table below.

**Table 8. Overview of informants for paper two**

<b>Informant #</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Family/wealth background</b>	<b># Followers</b>	<b># of Instagram posts gathered</b>
1	Male	25	Noble, aristocratic heir	202k	288
2	Male	21	Son of a self-made millionaire	52k	97
3	Female	21	Daughter of a billionaire and former politician	174k	117
4	Male	26	Son of a self-made millionaire	94k	85
5	Female	24	Daughter of a self-made billionaire	110k	275

*3.4.2 Data collection*

Paper two is interested in strategies used by influencers in reconciling ethicality with living a luxury lifestyle through the enactment of personas on Instagram. Therefore, two types of datasets (interviews and Instagram posts) were used in order to observe and interpret consumers’ narratives with their actual behavior online. The goal of a phenomenological interview is to uncover meanings from a consumer-only perspective (McCracken, 1988). In essence, the phenomenological interview process is suitable for investigating in-depth understanding of a consumer’s personal experience (Thompson, 1997; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). This type of interview seemed appropriate as the aim of paper two was to understand the personal consumption experiences that HNW influencers had with luxury, as well as ethical consumption.

The interviews were conducted from May 2018 to October 2018. Due to participants' diverse geographical locations, interviews were held remotely either through Skype, Whatsapp or FaceTime. The participants were first briefed on the nature of the study and then sent an informed consent to sign digitally. After every participant gave his or her consent, each interview was recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted between 30 to 90 minutes (372 minutes in total). We kept in touch with participants after the interviews were over in case we needed to clarify certain points.

In terms of the data collection of Instagram posts, since during our interviews we discussed with our participants their journey as social media influencers on Instagram, we decided to collect all the Instagram posts that dated since these influencers officially became social media influencers. A total of 862 Instagram posts were used for hermeneutical analysis. Data collection took place in December 2018. The posts were downloaded, saved and altered in the same way as with paper one.

We created a codebook was used to code both content from online Instagram data as well as from the interviews. The codebook was used to conduct hermeneutical analysis of the data. Overall, the codebook contained 6 different themes, with 45 sub-themes. Final coding started in January 2019 and ended in February 2019. During this time, all four authors discussed the codes and findings through a back and forth process until theoretical saturation was reached (Patton, 2002; Spiggle, 1994). We would code and keep notes about the ways our informants narratively constructed their view on luxury and ethicality, and reflect of which relevant literature fit our emerging themes. Coding of both interviews and Instagram was done through NVivo 12 for Mac.

### **3.5 Research design for paper three**

Since paper one and two already cover how and what micro-celebrities do on their Instagram accounts, paper three seeks to understand why these micro-celebrities have so many followers on Instagram and why these followers actively seek to consume luxury on Instagram through following these micro-celebrities. More specifically, we explore the following two research questions: *(1) What are the constituent digital virtual practices of luxury brand lurking on social media? and (2) How do these practices augment luxury consumption through the properties of digital virtual consumption?* Further, although most research on lurking has used quantitative methods to collect data such as online surveys (e.g. Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Kefi & Maar, 2018) and experiments (e.g. Schlosser, 2005), we propose to use qualitative, interpretative approach to collecting and analyzing data, as this is also an exploratory research. Moreover, the aim of this paper is to uncover online practices, thus in line with previous studies of practices in consumer

research (e.g. Arsel & Bean, 2013; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth; 2010), we decided to conduct 16 phenomenological interviews to understand consumers’ viewpoint. Furthermore, due to the nature of ‘lurking’, in other words consuming online content without creating any, we were not able to collect any archival data.

3.5.1 *Sampling and criteria for inclusion*

The criteria for inclusion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) were the following: 1) they needed to be millennials, 2) following luxury related content on Instagram. Participants were recruited either on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, but also through the ESCP Europe university student network. The following table summarizes the final sample:

**Table 9. Overview of participants for paper three**

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Country of current residence</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
<b>Lena</b>	29	German	Germany	Germany	Management consultant
<b>Tibby</b>	21	German	England	Germany	Undergraduate student
<b>Bridget</b>	27	Danish	Denmark	Faroe Islands	Graduated/unemployed
<b>Amber</b>	27	British	England	British	Postgraduate student
<b>Alexis</b>	20	German	England	Germany	Undergraduate student
<b>George</b>	20	Luxemburgish	Luxemburg	Luxemburg	Undergraduate student
<b>Zach</b>	21	French/German/Swiss	England	France	Undergraduate student
<b>Bradley</b>	21	Croatian	England	Croatia	Undergraduate student
<b>Erica</b>	27	Belgian	Belgium	Belgium	Head of human resources
<b>Jenna</b>	34	Finnish	Finland	Finland	Forensics manager
<b>Maria</b>	32	Spanish	Germany	Spain	Postgraduate student
<b>Mike</b>	32	Danish	Denmark	Faroe Islands	Travel retail manager
<b>Blake</b>	26	British	England	United Kingdom	Marketing assistant
<b>Nancy</b>	27	Kazakhstan	France	Kazakhstan	Postgraduate student
<b>Emily</b>	26	French	England	France	Market researcher
<b>Carmen</b>	27	Greek	France	Greece	Postgraduate student

\* All names were changed to insure anonymity.

### 3.5.2 *Data collection*

Participants were briefed at the beginning, and given a consent form to complete and sign. Interviews were recorded, after each participant gave his consent to do so, lasted between 30 and 90 minutes (total of 14 ½ hours) and were transcribed verbatim. The interview was conducted in a discussion form, using a loose interview guide, which tackled information such as why and how participants initially joined Instagram, why they followed luxury content on Instagram, experiences in viewing and collecting luxury content on Instagram.

## 3.6 **Ethical considerations**

Ethical issues regarding Internet research can be quite ambiguous as questions related to privacy are still unclear. This thesis therefore respected ethical guidelines from the Association of Internet Researchers (Buchanan, 2012) as well as Kozinets (2010) recommendations in terms of the following:

*Public/Private accounts.* All Instagram accounts that were used in the samples were ‘public’. This means that users allow anyone to view the contents of their account, to like and to write comments. This was checked on a weekly basis in case the user changed the settings to ‘private’, in which case the user would have been deleted from the sample.

*Transparency.* As shown in section 3.3.4, the research topic and position of the lead researcher was explicitly and clearly written and left throughout the entire duration of the data collection and interaction process.

*Anonymity.* With anyone having access to the Internet, it is now easy to retrace data deriving from social media as most of it is archived on the web. All usernames, locations and text were removed from the Instagram data, from this thesis or any future publication deriving from the data. Furthermore, all pictures shown in this thesis or publications have been blurred or altered, and the text has been paraphrased in order to preserve total anonymity.



### 3.7 Issues of trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this thesis was verified through triangulation. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods of data gathering in order to explore a research question and increase credibility and persuasiveness in the research findings (Bryman, 1988). This study employed three methods, which are content analysis, netnography and semi-structured interviews. Findings from these methods were corroborated during the analysis to ensure that topics matched. Moreover, researcher-researcher triangulation was employed in this thesis (Denzin, 2017). Researcher-researcher triangulation implies that more than one researcher needs to double-check the dataset. This research was consistently reviewed by the thesis supervisor, other co-authors and by other peer-review means such as papers submitted and accepted in renowned international conferences, as well as in scientific journals. The papers were presented in marketing and inter-disciplinary contexts to obtain comprehensive feedback. Lastly, emerging themes were crosschecked with the current literature during the analysis and interpretation phase in order to ensure theory triangulation (Patton, 2002).

### 3.8 Chapter summary

To conclude, this chapter provided a detailed description of this thesis' research methodology. A multi-method approach was employed in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of participants' experiences with luxury consumption. Specifically, qualitative methodology was employed to illustrate the main research questions of this thesis on how consumers define, display and consume luxury on Instagram. The participant samples were made up of purposefully selected Instagram accounts of upper-class consumers, as well as Instagram 'followers'. Three data collection methods were employed, including visual content analysis, netnography and semi-structured interviews. The data was reviewed against literature as well as emergent themes. Data analysis followed three procedures: frequencies (Krippendorff, 2004) for visual content analysis, thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) for netnography and hermeneutical analysis (Thompson, 1997) for interviews and Instagram posts. The issue of trustworthiness was ensured through the use of various triangulation methods. Main challenges of this research included labor-intensive data due to manually extracting data, approaching participants as well as retrieving socio-demographic information of Instagram users. In the present section, we presented the overall research designs of the three papers. The following three sections will include the three different papers above mentioned.

## Chapter 4

# The affluent on Instagram: How wealthy micro-celebrities maintain online secular immortality through personal branding strategies<sup>34</sup>

### Abstract

Traditional self-made millionaires often build their personal brand by engaging in public acts of consumption, such as the naming of a museum. However, little is known about the public behavior of their wealthy heirs, especially given the prominent usage of social media among this generation. This research adopts an interpretive framework to explore the personal branding strategies of wealthy millennials heirs on Instagram, using visual and textual data extracted from Instagram and a content analysis combined with netnography. We identify four personal branding strategies that millennials use to develop their personal brand and attain, maintain, or enhance their online secular immortality on Instagram: (1) exclusivity, (2) immateriality, (3) performativity, and (4) carnality. We discuss the implications of this research in terms of personal branding theory and for collaborating with wealthy micro-celebrity endorsers.

*Keywords: luxury consumption, visual social media, millennials, personal branding, secular immortality*

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<sup>3</sup> Leban, M., & Voyer, B. (2019). The affluent on Instagram: How wealthy micro-celebrities maintain online secular immortality through personal branding strategies. Paper under review at *Journal of Business Research* since November 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Parts of this paper were presented at the Global Marketing Conference 2018 (Tokyo), Association for Consumer Research 2018 (Dallas), European Marketing Association Conference 2018 (Hamburg) and Global Fashion Management Conference 2019 (Paris). The authors received the Best Conference Paper Excellence Award at GMFC 2019, for outstanding research.

## 4.1 Introduction

Consumer research suggests that ordinary consumers, through the display of acts of consumption online, are gaining notoriety (Turner, 2010). These ‘ordinary’ consumers can turn themselves into micro-celebrities, becoming ‘famous’ online (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008), after reaching a large number of social media followers – usually in the tens of thousands. The literature has mostly investigated this new phenomenon in the case of ordinary consumers (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012); however, less ordinary consumers such as upper-class, affluent individuals can also use such techniques. Millionaire heirs have been developing their online personal brand and gaining notoriety in the last five years. Motivations in terms of what these wealthy micro-celebrities want to achieve in obtaining online notoriety remain unclear (Marwick, 2015). For example, research on traditional celebrities has long believed that individuals who seek to become famous only do so to satisfy their narcissist self (Wohlfeil, Patterson, & Gould, 2019). Similarly, the literature on online celebrities suggests that narcissistic tendencies explain the motivations of individuals to become famous online (Turner, 2010). The current research highlights a paradox – wealthy heirs who have already achieved high status and notoriety in society through their family legacy (Hirschman, 1990) are also motivated to use social media to further enhance their social status.

More specifically, we investigate the context of millionaire heirs, whom we refer to as wealthy micro-celebrities, and evaluate the way they use personal branding strategies to attain, maintain, or enhance online secular immortality on Instagram (Hirschman, 1990). Traditional self-made millionaires become celebrities through public acts of consumption, such as acquiring monuments associated with their family name, something that their heirs are unable to replicate. Thus, this research explores the following question: What personal branding strategies do wealthy micro-celebrities use in attaining, maintaining, or enhancing their online secular immortality on Instagram? We address this question using visual and textual data extracted from Instagram and content analysis combined with netnography, thus adopting an interpretive framework.

Together, this research builds on previous research on secular immortality and personal branding to make a threefold theoretical contribution. First, we contribute to the literature on personal branding strategies by identifying the branding strategies specific to young, wealthy micro-celebrities. Second, we contribute to the literature on luxury consumption by identifying novel forms of luxury consumption among wealthy micro-celebrities that are more experiential and unconventional in nature, such as travelling and leisure, rather than more material, traditional forms of tangible luxury. Third, we extend the concept of secular immortality (Hirschman, 1990) by applying it to an online context. This

research also carries important managerial implications, in terms of distinguishing wealthy micro-celebrities from traditional online celebrities, especially in the context of brand collaboration.

## 4.2 Literature review

### 4.2.1 *The rise of the ultra-rich and their growing visibility in media*

The number of individuals considered ‘ultra-rich’ (i.e. with a net worth above US\$30; Wealth-X, 2017) has increased in the past two decades. The rise of wealthy individuals is now a global phenomenon, with numbers showing marked increases in Asia (Featherstone, 2014b). Recent research has provided more insight into the current situation of the high-end luxury consumer segments (Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2016). Globally, the number of new millionaires increases at an average pace of 2.6 million every year (Boston Consulting Group & Altagamma, 2014). The higher end of luxury consumers comes from two distinct segments: a ‘new-money’ segment representing more than seven million individuals worldwide and an ‘old-money’ segment representing more than two million individuals worldwide.

Boston Consulting Group and Altagamma (2014) also identify two main segments that account for more than 50% of the high end of the luxury market. First is the ‘absolute luxurer’ segment, which is similar to what Dubois, Czellar, and Laurent (2005) call ‘elitist luxury’ consumers. Consumers in this segment are connoisseurs and have always been part of the luxury world. Absolute luxurers, who are mostly European and North Americans, spend an average of €30,000 per year on luxury items. Second is the ‘Megacitiers’ segment, which includes consumers who are young adults (aged 25–35 years) living in the largest capitals in the developed world, including New York, Paris, and London. However, most studies on luxury consumers focus on casual consumers, not on those located at the high end of the spectrum (e.g. Cristini et al., 2017; Bian & Forsythe, 2012). Thus, understanding of the consumer behaviors of individuals belonging to this category is somewhat lacking.

The phenomenon of the ultra-rich and their visibility began after World War II, and they became even more visible in the 1980s. In the United States, for example, the ultra-rich were celebrated as investors in the development and rebuilding of the country (Featherstone, 2014b). Also contributing to the visibility of the ultra-rich segment was the growing publicizing and glamourizing of the luxury lifestyle of Hollywood celebrities. Through Hollywood media and the press, the general public discovered the kind of luxuries a self-made individual could own. Finally, within the last 20 years, the

Internet has further glamorized the luxury lifestyle and contributed to a growing obsession with this type of lifestyle (Featherstone, 2014a).

Over the last decade, a new generation of younger, wealthy individuals has emerged. In contrast with previous generations, these wealthy millennials have inherited capital from their parents, rather than generating wealth themselves. Previous work on upper-class consumers has however mainly examined the case of self-made millionaires (Packard, 1989) and how they have achieved secular immortality by publicly showing their achievement, donating capital, and claiming and even branding properties. According to Hirschman (1990), the upper class, with nowhere left to rise, turned to documenting their secular achievements through popular media as a way to immortalize themselves in society. They thus achieved secular immortality through public acquisition (e.g. monuments, art collections, museums) and displays of wealth or through acts of philanthropy. These possessions and acts served to extend the family name and legacy.

To date, however, wealth display strategies and motivations of younger generations to do so remain elusive. Indeed, past secular immortality strategies constituted a means to achieve secular immortality for family founders, rather than to maintain it for future generations. Given that heirs of wealthy individuals are already born associated with their parents' secular immortality (Aldrich, 1988), it is unclear whether heirs would want to (1) maintain the legacy of their parents by publicly displaying philanthropic acts, (2) increase and further glorify their secular immortality, or (3) detach themselves from their public wealthy lineage and adopt a lower profile. In addition, the past decade has witnessed a rise in the use of visual social media and the emergence of online celebrities (Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008). The extent to which the use of (visual) social media, which makes documenting luxury consumption easy, and the ability to create online personal brands contribute to the development and maintenance of online secular immortality remains unknown.

#### 4.2.2 *Personal branding and micro-celebrities on visual social media*

According to Peters (1997), individuals can use traditional marketing techniques to create their own personal brands and be their own marketer, to gain more notice on the labor market. In doing so, they reinvent themselves into a publicly displayed brand, while being in total control of their branded self (Kaputa, 2005). To develop a personal brand, individuals then need to constantly grow and promote themselves to increase their visibility (Peters, 1997). Further, Page (2012), defines personal branding as the act of developing a specific identity to be consumed by others. In the case of social media, this would be through others visualizing content created of a distinctive human brand (Berger, 2011) and interacting with it.

Although the concept of personal branding emerged before and outside the social media context, the proliferation of social media platforms in the last decade has given individuals additional opportunities to develop personal branding strategies. Indeed, social media platforms have made it easy for individuals to engage in practices that contribute to the development of their personal brand, such as sharing content online, uploading photos, and documenting activities, all of which serve as self-promotion techniques (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). In addition, social media platforms facilitate the participation in a competitive attention-seeking media society, in which individuals try to stay on top in a crowded marketplace (Shepherd, 2005). To maintain a personal brand, individuals need to interact and ‘feed’ their audience to keep and gain fans (Page, 2012). Successful personal brands also need to show consistency in terms of the content posted on social media, to be willing to disclose personal information to their audience (Labrecque et al., 2011), and to be skilled at performing front-stage behavior online (Goffman, 1959).

To date, however, personal branding research has mostly focused on either celebrities (Holbrook, 2001; Holmes & Redmond, 2014) or professionals in the workplace (Shepherd, 2005). Yet social media has enabled the emergence of a new type of celebrities—namely, micro-celebrities, a term first introduced by Senft (2008), who researched the strategies individuals use to increase their online popularity through blogs and social networking sites. Micro-celebrities such as Miranda Sings and Chiara Ferragni are prime examples of personal brands developed through social media. According to Senft, popularity can only be maintained by nurturing a steady relationship with audiences, through constant active communication and interaction. The popularity of micro-celebrities is typically measured by the number of followers, likes, and comments (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Social media platforms such as Instagram, which hosts more than one billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018), offer micro-celebrities a large number of easy-to-reach potential followers. According to Marwick (2015), micro-celebrities, much like traditional ‘Hollywood’ celebrities, publicly display various aspects of their personal lives to create aspirational consumption. Other types of personal branding strategies are horizontal signaling (adopting similarities to and connecting with peers) and vertical signaling (differentiating oneself from others). Parmentier, Fischer, and Reuber (2013) argue that micro-celebrities need to ‘stand out’ and differentiate themselves from other potential competitors, while reinforcing their status by showing that they fit in within their organizational field (e.g. professional bloggers). For wealthy micro-celebrities, this may mean displaying cultural and social capital on their profiles to adhere to upper-social-class practices (Bourdieu, 1984). Such displays can take the form of, for example, attending formal and selective social events, such as polo games.

Finally, the influence of micro-celebrities on the behaviors of their followers is a growing research field. Traditionally, the literature on persuasion and social influence has focused mostly on

how celebrities can influence consumers, such as through celebrity endorsements (McCracken, 1989) or the use of brand ambassadors (Erdogan, 1999). According to McQuarrie et al. (2012), micro-celebrities are almost as influential as celebrities when it comes to consumers. However, as noted previously, little research has examined whether and how micro-celebrities (vs. Hollywood-type celebrities) can influence consumers on social media. Other than Wohlfeil et al. (2019), marketing literature has failed to investigate celebrities or human brands on their own; instead, research has focused merely on how human brands can successfully endorse a brand or serve marketing purposes in other ways (Erdogan, 1999; McCracken, 1989). Wohlfeil et al. conclude that there is a need to rehumanize celebrities and to explore the practices through which they appeal to fans. With the growing influence of micro-celebrities on social media, the extent to which their influence, personal branding strategies, and practices are similar to or different from traditional celebrities is an important question to address. Given that the number of millionaire heirs is on the rise, some of whom are creating their personal brand on social media platforms and amassing a wealth of followers, in this paper we focus on the personal branding strategies wealthy micro-celebrities use on Instagram in an effort to attain or maintain online secular immortality (Hirschman, 1990).

### 4.3 Methodology

To explore micro-celebrities' personal branding strategies to attain immortal secularity on Instagram, we draw on the Instagram phenomenon of the Rich Kids of Instagram, renamed Rich Kids of the Internet in 2019 (RKOI). This account was created in 2012 and is anonymously curated by a team of people who identify pictures posted on Instagram by users who pose as millionaires and re-post the pictures on the RKOI account. The typical content posted on the account represents young adult luxury lifestyles, such as travelling on private jets or partying in exclusive nightclubs. As of June 2019, the account had 400,000 followers. The account has grown in popularity and has been featured in the press, including the New York Times, Forbes, and The Guardian. The topic has also entered television, with channel E! launching the show Rich Kids of Beverly Hills in 2014 and channel 4 in the United Kingdom producing the show Made in Chelsea, featuring similar content.

The resonance of the topic on the RKOI account, as well as in other media, makes it a suitable platform to explore the personal branding strategies of millionaire millennials. Previous milestone work in consumer research has explored ideals and luxurious consumption through the lens of television programs such as Dallas and Dynasty (Hirschman, 1988). In addition, previous research on Instagram micro-celebrities has used RKOI to source accounts for upper-class millennial luxury consumers

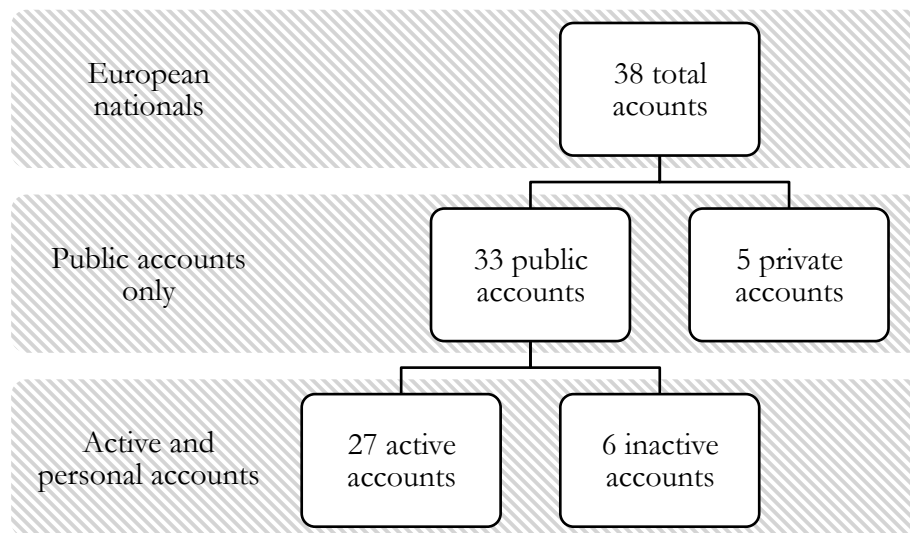
(Marwick, 2015). The RKOI account also offers a good context for identifying personal branding strategies of the affluent on visual social media platforms. Instagram is a type of visual social media platform (similar to YouTube and Snapchat) as opposed to a textual social media platform (e.g. Twitter). Visual social media platforms favor visual imagery over text (Marwick, 2015) and, as such, offer different insights into behaviors than text-based platforms. Furthermore, Instagram is one of the most popular platforms in which micro-celebrities promote themselves (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). We employ two methods to collect and analyze data: visual content analysis and netnography. Previous consumer research has also used these two methods in parallel (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015; Kozinets, 2015). Finally, previous research argues that verbal data must be analyzed in conjunction with visual data (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010) and that Instagram data should not be decontextualized (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

#### 4.3.1 *Data Sample*

In line with guidelines from social media research (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017), we adopted a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). In contrast with traditional qualitative research methods, in which participants are recruited and data are collected until theoretical saturation is reached (Patton, 2002; Spiggle, 1994), we purposely focused on specific user accounts linked to the aggregated RKOI account on Instagram. Given the specific nature of the research, we included all users who belonged to the target group in the final sample (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017).

We identified 221 Instagram accounts that were linked to content re-posted on the RKOI account. As the RKOI account is a curated account, it reposts content created by other users, which makes it possible to identify the original creators of the content. We then collected details on the Instagram users and accounts through their Instagram profile description. In addition, we gathered supplementary information on the users, including nationality, year of birth, and occupation, through Google search. After collecting and classifying all the primary raw data, we filtered the data corpus using four criteria for inclusion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) (see Fig. 6).





**Figure 6. Sampling process of Instagram accounts**

First, we classified and selected accounts on the basis of their owners' nationality, with the aim to retain European account holders. Among the Western consumption world, Holt (1998) characterizes the North American consumer culture as more extreme and conspicuous than the European consumer culture. Second, for ethical and practical reasons, we discarded accounts that were not public (Buchanan, 2012). We regularly monitored accounts throughout the data collection process to ensure that Instagram users kept their account public. If users changed the status of their account to private at any time during data collection, we removed the account from the sample (this occurred only for three accounts). Third, as RKOI is a new and growing phenomenon on social media, we searched for relevant accounts that were both recent and engaging. Therefore, following Arvidsson and Caliendo's (2015) methodological guidelines, we only selected accounts that were active (e.g. users posted at least once a month on their accounts). This criterion is quintessential to ensure a rich data corpus, as regular posting tends to trigger interaction with followers (Kozinets, 2002, 2015). Fourth, the accounts needed to be personal accounts (i.e. non-commercial). As such, we discarded corporate accounts promoting luxury products and professional photographer accounts. Given the aim of this research to capture consumer viewpoints of the meaning of luxury, a company or brand-specific activity on social media was of no interest. The sampling procedure occurred in March 2017, and we selected 27 accounts for use as the final sample. The final sample consisted of nine women and 18 men, and all participants were between the ages of 18 and 28 years, according to their profiles. Table 9 presents the participant information.

**Table 10. Participant information<sup>56</sup>**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Nationality</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Posts</i>	<i>Followers</i>	<i>Likes</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Adam	French	M	21	142	11000	15000	135
Bradley	Italian	M	20	910	209000	72000	1000
Camilla	Russian	F	20	293	288000	256000	912
Christopher	Italian	M	20	118	27000	31000	61
Carol	Russian	F	28	918	28000	28000	509
Diana	German	F	27	156	613	1000	84
Douglas	Italian/Russian	M	24	692	145000	89000	598
Fred	French	M	20	100	8523	14000	601
Gabrielle	Russian	F	26	855	107000	47000	478
Grayson	Italian	M	24	2,017	163000	155000	2000
Harley	Finnish	M	28	2041	6457	4000	44
Jean	Russian	F	20	1313	17000	9000	225
Jack	Italian	M	20	600	14900	8000	173
Joe	Italian	M	20	265	9418	4000	183
John	UK	M	20	193	4,000	7000	205
Lewis	Russian	M	23	371	11000	9000	144
Mary	Balkan	F	20	315	107000	88000	567
Mason	Italian	M	20	1,624	6222	18000	98
Matt	Danish	M	18	1000	3551	4000	102
Nancy	Russian	F	20	1584	503000	282000	781
Scott	UK	M	24	304	1200	2000	37
Stanley	Danish	M	22	178	6380	6000	81
Stephanie	French	F	20	510	18000	9000	134
Tom	UK	M	20	236	5840	14000	297
Warren	Norwegian	M	27	748	61000	84000	2000
Will	English/Russian	M	26	2081	388000	58000	430
Zoe	French	F	20	236	145000	150000	2000

<sup>5</sup> All names have been changed to assure the anonymity of the participants.

<sup>6</sup> Data was retrieved and last updated in May 2017

#### 4.3.2 *Visual Content Analysis on Instagram*

Given the nature of Instagram (a visual social media platform), we deemed visual analysis the most adequate method to analyze the data corpus and obtain rich insights into the strategies wealthy micro-celebrities use (Casaló et al., 2018; Marwick, 2015) to achieve online secular immortality. Again, the unit of analysis chosen was Instagram posts from European millionaire accounts. Choosing a post (vs. an account) as the unit of analysis meant that we treated both the picture included in the post and the descriptive text attached to the picture as content; we further analyzed these as part of netnography (Krippendorff, 2004).

We adopted a systematic sampling approach (Krippendorff, 2004) to select posts for content analysis. As there were some discrepancies between the frequency of posts in our sample, ranging from three posts per month to seven posts per week, with an average of 10 posts per month, we took the 20 most recent pictures for each account. This represented at least two months' worth of Instagram activity per account, spanning across a period from January 2017 to April 2017. The final data corpus comprised 492 Instagram posts, collected from April 22 to April 28, 2017. Each post was downloaded as a screenshot (JPEG format) and numbered. We made minor alterations to the pictures, such as removing usernames, to avoid potential biases, such as anonymity.

As visual social media is a relatively recent phenomenon, existing qualitative data analysis software for content analysis was not suitable for coding, as software designed for computer-aided text analysis cannot analyze pictures. We therefore relied on human coding (Neuendorf, 2016) to conjointly analyze pictures and text of the Instagram posts. We then conducted a pilot analysis of 135 posts (five randomly selected posts per account) to elaborate a coding frame and codebook. Because visual content analysis should be exhaustive and exclusive (Rose, 2016), we created a codebook to include every element of the Instagram post: photographs and any accompanying descriptive text. When coding the photographs, we looked for behaviors related to both impression management (Goffman, 1959) and brand prominence (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010).

To ensure comparability and consistency in the coding process and to increase internal validity of the coding process, we invited three researchers to blind-code sample material separately (Krippendorff, 2004). Each coder took part in a one-hour, one-to-one training session in which the codebook was introduced and discussed, with examples shown. During this session, we read the codebook out loud and then showed five Instagram posts from the pilot study, which were not part of the final sample, to the coders. We randomly split the final sample data of 492 Instagram posts into three parts and assigned them to each coder to code separately. We compared 10% of the results to

determine the inter-coder reliability, measured with an overall Krippendorff's alpha of 0.914, which is considered acceptable (Krippendorff, 2004).

#### 4.3.3 *Netnography on Instagram*

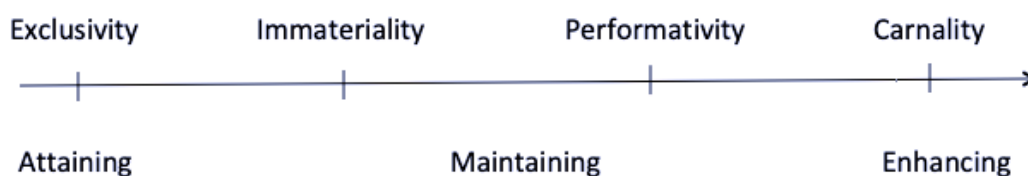
In addition to performing visual content analysis, we conducted netnography. Kozinets (2015) suggests six steps when adopting a netnographic approach: research planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation. The nature of visual social media platforms such as Instagram does not necessarily allow for intense interactions among participants, as a comment has 32 characters on average (Manikonda, Hu, & Kambhampati, 2014). We thus followed a modified version of the method, which research has also used to examine brand publics (see Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015), and assessed general communication factors such as hashtags, emojis, and text. As with the visual content analysis, we only downloaded recent data. This resulted in 810 Instagram posts and comments from the 27 accounts downloaded, collected from April to May 2017. The data corpus consisted of a text document of 110,000 words. Finally, to contextualize the data collected, we took a screenshot of each picture to accompany the text (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Overall, immersion in the different accounts lasted for six months, during which we took field notes of every new post that was available and recent comments that were added. We also took notes during the coding process.

Finally, we added the text to NVivo for Mac 11 and analyzed the data corpus using thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic analysis allows for the identification of emerging themes contained in the data and is used to evaluate rich qualitative data. The coding process followed an inductive approach (Patton, 2002), and we then organized themes in three hierarchical layers: basic, organizing, and global (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

## 4.4 Findings

We identified four personal branding strategies that wealthy micro-celebrities use to attain, maintain, or enhance online secular immortality: (1) exclusivity, (2) immateriality, (3) performativity, and (4) carnality. Each personal branding strategy is related to different stages of online secular immortality, from attaining, to maintaining, to enhancing it (see Fig. 7). For example, exclusivity is a personal branding strategy that contributes to establishing wealthy individuals as luxury oriented micro-celebrities on Instagram. By adopting exclusive branding strategies, individuals can begin developing their personal branding image and fan base. This is a first and necessary step to attain or establish

online secular immortality. The second personal branding strategy, immateriality, provides a way for wealthy micro-celebrities to anchor themselves as luxury lifestyle connoisseurs. To do so, they display their cultural capital, to indicate that they legitimately belong to the upper social class. This step is linked to maintaining online secular immortality. The third personal branding strategy, performativity, is another step towards maintaining but also enhancing online secular immortality. That is, performativity is a specific strategy for wealthy micro-celebrities to further develop their brand image on Instagram; they do so by emphasizing aspects of their personal brand, such as dream-like luxury content (e.g. inaccessible luxury destinations), to keep their personal brand mystical or magical. The fourth personal branding strategy wealthy micro-celebrities adopt is carnality. Carnality serves to enhance online secular immortality through the idealization of the body. By portraying themselves as aesthetically ‘perfect’, wealthy micro-celebrities further establish themselves as divinities and, thus, immortal online.



**Figure 7. Personal branding strategies used by wealthy micro-celebrities in attaining, maintaining and enhancing secular immortality**

#### 4.4.1 *Exclusivity*

Exclusivity involves careful curation of the type of content being posted, as well as the frequency of posts. Micro-celebrities adopt this strategy to ensure that content remains of quality and limited. Exclusivity is also reflected in the display of their sole persona to emphasize their human brand – that is, informants do not usually post pictures with other people. This personal branding strategy seems to diverge from those identified in previous research on more commercial/standard celebrities. According to Wohlfeil et al. (2019), consumers are generally interested in gleaning insights into micro-celebrities’ lives, whether private or public. By contrast, wealthy micro-celebrities tend to prefer remaining distant by displaying more crafted content over raw or ‘private’ content and by monitoring the frequency of posts. Although research on micro-celebrities suggests that they constantly create content and are easily accessible (Turner, 2016), we show that in the specific case of wealthy micro-

celebrities, they use this personal branding strategy to differentiate themselves from mainstream micro-celebrities and to transform themselves into legitimate, exclusive, and difficult-to-access affluent online celebrities.

Wealthy micro-celebrities further reinforce exclusivity by engaging in a low level of interaction with their audiences (e.g. occasional replies or ‘likes’ of follower comments). Again, we find that these micro-celebrities differ from traditional micro-celebrities or established influencers, who use perceived interconnectedness, or one-to-one communication strategies, to establish more intimacy and accessibility with their followers (Abidin, 2015), in an effort to keep their fandom. In the case of wealthy micro-celebrities, however, they adopt a more traditional parasocial type of interaction with their followers (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). In other words, they foster the illusion of intimacy among their followers but tend to favor a one-to-many communication strategy with little or no interaction with them. This type of exclusive interaction seems to work well for wealthy micro-celebrities, and this is reflected in the ingratiation techniques audiences frequently adopt to capture the attention of micro-celebrities with whom they interact (Leban & Voyer, 2015). For example, followers often use complementary other-enhancement ingratiation tactics such as flattery (Jones, 1964) when interacting with micro-celebrities (e.g. “I love you!” or “you are so handsome!”).

Thus, by building their online persona on Instagram, while minimizing the type of content, frequency of posting, and interaction with followers, wealthy micro-celebrities develop an exclusive personal branding strategy as a first step to establish themselves in the online world of wealthy micro-celebrities. As these individuals become recognized as specifically wealthy micro-celebrities, their personae become known online, and each post contributes to the creation of an online legacy, with the aim to produce content that cannot be erased or disappear over time. Thus, exclusivity enables wealthy micro-celebrities to attain (online) secular immortality bequeathed to them by their parents (Hirschman, 1990).

#### 4.4.2 *Immateriality*

Despite previous research’s findings on affluent individuals’ consumption of conspicuous and inconspicuous luxury goods (Han et al., 2010), wealthy micro-celebrities do not display material luxury goods on Instagram. Of the pictures reviewed, 67.9% displayed no products at all, and only 24.8% displayed only one product. Furthermore, the majority of pictures did not display any conspicuously branded goods (86.6%). Finally, most of the texts accompanying the pictures did not mention any brand names (85.2%). In the case of wealthy micro-celebrities, compared with previous generations (e.g. traditional self-made millionaires), immateriality related to leisure-related content, rather than

material possessions and conspicuously branded products (e.g. Han et al., 2010), is a means to reflect one's worth and achieve secular immortality (Hirschman, 1990).

Wealthy micro-celebrities prefer the display of a more experiential, unconventional form of luxury (Cristini, Kauppinen-Räsänen, Barthod-Prothade, & Woodside, 2017) to the display of conspicuous items and loud, prominent brand logos. In the data corpus, we can trace the experiential aspect of the posts to the sharing of content related to luxury lifestyles and travelling and the extensive use of geo-location tags (78.9% of posts) to indicate exact locations (see Fig. 8). Thus, wealthy micro-celebrities exhibit a certain type of luxury lifestyle that primarily focuses on leisure (Hirschman, 1988) rather than material possessions. This is in line with what Parmentier et al. (2013, p. 378) call 'portfolio crafting and cultivating upward affiliations'. By displaying a form of cultural capital that typically belongs to the upper-class segment (Bourdieu, 1984), wealthy micro-celebrities are able to claim and re-establish themselves as members of this particular socio-economic group.



**Figure 8. Wealthy micro-celebrity posing in a secluded Saharan area**

The display of immaterial luxury, which takes the form of leisure activities (e.g. travelling), helps wealthy micro-celebrities connect with upper-class individuals from previous generations, who displayed similar types of behaviors offline. In other words, through acts of immaterial luxury consumption, these micro-celebrities signal that they belong to the upper class (Berger & Ward, 2010) while differentiating themselves from the masses (Simmel, 1957). They enjoy a luxury lifestyle not by acquiring and collecting myriad luxury goods but by discovering the world, cultivating themselves, and exploring what they then portray as inaccessible locations (Hirschman, 1988). This personal branding strategy may be generation-specific, as research suggests that previous generations of upper-class

millionaires showcased a large number of material possessions as a way to signal the legacy and empire-type nature of their accomplishments (Hirschman, 1990). By contrast, wealthy micro-celebrities maintain their online secular immortality through the frequent creation and curation of immaterial luxury lifestyle content.

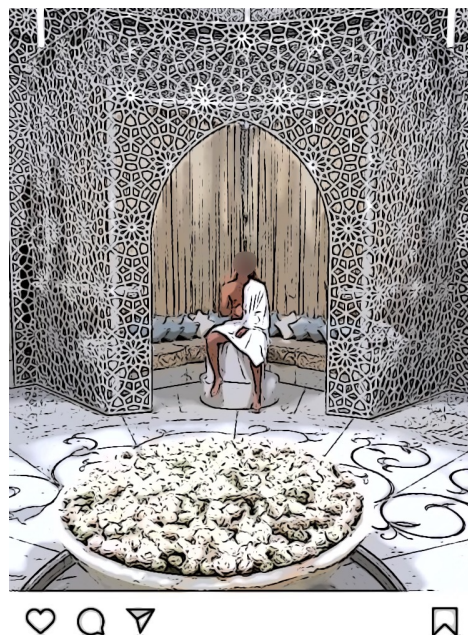
#### 4.4.3 *Performativity*

Performativity is a common type of strategy wealthy individuals use to display their online secular immortality (Hirschman, 1990). It includes documenting one's life through the media (e.g. television documentaries, literary biographies, magazine articles) and celebrating the family name through ownership of properties (Hirschman, 1990). In the context of visual social media, wealthy micro-celebrities tend to carefully craft Instagram posts, using staging and performance techniques, such as posing or props (e.g. wearing an elaborate robe and turban when visiting the Sahara Desert) (Goffman, 1959). This strategy ties in with a long tradition of the upper class to cultivate the art of the portrait, in which artists are invited to reflect wealthy commissioners and their families in an idyllic setting, incorporating symbolic elements of their wealth in the background (Berger, 2008). In the era of visual social media, performativity practices have evolved as a personal branding strategy for wealthy micro-celebrities.

In the data corpus, the performative nature of posts is illustrated by the frequent use of a professional photographer to take pictures when posting touring pictures from around the world (67.1% of posts). This again is a display of cultural capital and taste (McQuarrie et al., 2012). In addition, the creation of a personal brand requires authenticity and consistency across platforms, including offline activities (Shepherd, 2005). Wealthy micro-celebrities may use professional photographers to appear and remain 'authentic' online as they do offline, rather than altering pictures themselves with Instagram filters, a feature that many of their followers use. Although posts appear driven by authenticity, the content of posts is, paradoxically, often dream-like and inauthentic (Kretz & de Valck, 2010). Wealthy micro-celebrities know how to craft Instagram posts to receive more 'likes', an imperative that often takes precedence over the urge to appear genuine or 'authentic' (Marwick, 2015). This appears to contradict previous research on personal branding. For example, Labrecque et al. (2011) argue that individuals should not explicitly promote themselves online and should avoid using staged photos to appear authentic to their brand image. According to Goffman (1959), front-stage performance may be considered inauthentic anyway, as one can only be true to oneself in a back-stage, offline context. Fashion bloggers (McQuarrie et al., 2012) also confirm this notion.



When wealthy micro-celebrities display luxury consumption practices online, authenticity may be less valued and sought after, as these people aim to exhibit an ‘out-of-the-ordinary’ luxury lifestyle. Instagram, as a visual platform, allows them to portray a luxury lifestyle that is performed, desired, and prestigious (Hirschman, 1990). For example, Fig. 9 illustrates how wealthy micro-celebrities use out-of-the-ordinary, dream-like content to display a luxury lifestyle that is unique and only accessible by a selected few. As such, by indicating marked aesthetic features in their posts and never explicitly referring to the materiality of luxury goods, wealthy micro-celebrities maintain the magical or mystical aspect of their Instagram profiles (Kretz & de Valck, 2010).



**Figure 9. Wealthy micro-celebrity performing in a dream-like luxury consumption context**

Overall, performativity is a personal branding strategy (Wohlfeil et al., 2019) that wealthy micro-celebrities use to maintain online secular immortality, as it helps them publicly build their persona, one that is linked to living an inaccessible luxurious lifestyle. As Hirschman (1990) noted two decades ago, traditional millionaires often engaged in performativity during interviews for magazines or books. Magazine editors would then embellish their personae and achievements through narratives. Now, decades later, wealthy micro-celebrities, who are in complete control of their online personal brand, can perform without the need for third-party intervention. Followers, in turn, can enjoy and better engage with content of established micro-celebrities who act as creative performers (Wohlfeil et al., 2019). This strategy allows wealthy micro-celebrities not only to entertain their followers but also to act in ways that

constantly remind their followers of who they are: wealthy heirs living a luxurious and extravagant lifestyle.

#### 4.4.4 Carnality

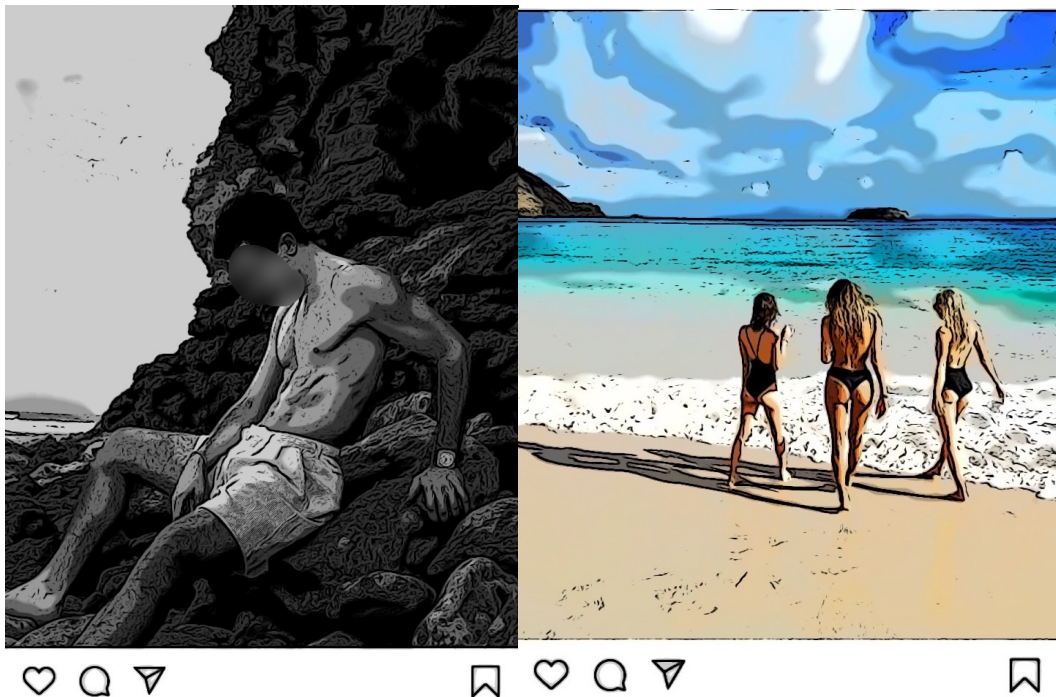
Through carnality, wealthy micro-celebrities portray their bodies as an integral part of their personal brand. By intentionally displaying their bodies and using playful, flirtatious poses and language in their posts (see Fig. 10), they use carnality as a powerful communication tool to attract and provoke their viewers. For micro-celebrities, distinctiveness is achieved not only through the display of particular talents but also by portraying themselves as beautiful and sensual. Followers enjoy consuming content from these micro-celebrities, who represent an idealized person whom they would like to meet one day (Wohlfeil et al., 2019).



**Figure 10. Wealthy micro-celebrities using flirtatious language and physical communication**

Furthermore, wealthy micro-celebrities often include carnality as the heart of their performative display of luxury, thus combining two sinful concepts (Berry, 1994). This combination is further reinforced through the portrayal of the body as idealized and perfect, in line with Greek aesthetics (Reid, 2012). In a similar vein, previous research shows that when the Hollywood film industry portrays

the luxury world of the ultra-rich, it does so not only by selling the dream of owning luxurious goods or living a luxurious lifestyle but also by showing that luxurious people are stylish and beautiful (see Fig. 11). Thus, people basking in the life of luxury are considered glamorous (Featherstone, 1982). By adopting a strategy of carnality, wealthy micro-celebrities become themselves sensual objects of consumption that incarnate the very essence of luxury.



**Figure 11. Wealth micro-celebrities emphasizing their idealized bodies in a sensual way**

In summary, the personal branding strategy of carnality, by portraying the body as something to be idealized (e.g. lean athletic body shapes, partial nudity, thinness), contributes to establishing divinity-like status (Simmel, 1957) to wealthy micro-celebrities on social media. By appearing sensual and luxurious, these micro-celebrities enhance their online status, foster follower admiration, and generate veneration. In other words, by showing their followers that they are above the masses not only in terms of living a luxury lifestyle but also by their “dominating nature” (i.e. being beautiful and youthful) (Hirschman, 1990, p. 39), they exude the idea of being untouchable, which further enhances their online secular immortality (Hirschman, 1990).

## 4.5 Discussion

This research introduces four personal branding strategies - exclusivity, immateriality, performativity, and carnality - that wealthy micro-celebrities use on Instagram to achieve online secular immortality. These findings carry implications both in terms of social media research and the management of online marketing strategies.

### 4.5.1 *Theoretical contributions*

This theoretical contributions of this research threefold. First, it contributes to the personal branding literature by offering insights into the strategies young, wealthy micro-celebrities adopt. In doing so, we address Wohlfeil et al.'s (2019) call for research to humanise and to better understand personal branding strategies of wealthy micro-celebrities. Previous research on this topic has de-humanized celebrities by considering them constructed marketing tools crafted by companies. In contrast with previous research, the current research shows that wealthy micro-celebrities are not brand endorsers (Erdogan, 1999; McCracken, 1989) because displaying products or brands is not the main focus – or an integral part – of their personal branding strategies. Another contribution to the personal branding literature lies in the role of followers in the achievement of micro-celebrity status and eventually the attainment, maintenance, or enhancement of online secular immortality. We show that young, wealthy micro-celebrities need to create and curate content and build a personal brand that directly appeals to their followers. Previous research on micro-celebrities suggests that they are niche content producers, given that they display specific content for specific viewers (Marwick, 2013). As the Internet has led to a sharp increase in the number of micro-celebrities (Turner, 2010), it is becoming more difficult for them to further distinguish themselves and increase their popularity (McQuarrie et al., 2012). In this context, this finding suggests that for young, wealthy micro-celebrities, portraying luxury in a less materialistic and more experiential form constitutes an element of distinction from the more mainstream micro-celebrities.

Second, this research extends current understanding of luxury consumption and its display on social media. Although visual social media offers an ideal platform to conspicuously display luxury possessions, especially luxury items carrying loud branding elements (Han et al., 2010), wealthy micro-celebrities tend to adopt strategies that do not put conspicuous material possessions at the heart of their narratives; rather, they display a more unconventional, experiential form of luxury content (Cristini et al., 2017) – an everyday luxury lifestyle that takes the form of travelling and leisure activities. This way of portraying luxury differs from the way previous generations of acclaimed and mediatized

millionaires showcased their wealth (Hirschman, 1990).

Third, this research extends Hirschman's (1990) concept of secular immortality, which has been overlooked in consumer research, to an online context. Previous research argues that micro-celebrities join visual social media platforms such as Instagram with the mere goal of becoming famous online (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015; Marwick, 2015). Drawing on Hirschman's (1990) theorization of secular immortality among the affluent and combining it with literature on personal branding, we argue that wealthy micro-celebrities use personal branding strategies on visual social media to attain, maintain, or enhance their online secular immortality. For wealthy micro-celebrities, who, unlike their parents, have no major personal achievements to display, becoming famous on social media is a way to appear in the media and attain public recognition. For these micro-celebrities to achieve enduring fame, they need to gain online secular immortality, which they attain by adopting specific personal branding strategies. In summary, these micro-celebrities share or give up cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) to achieve online secular immortality.

#### 4.5.2 *Managerial contributions*

This research carries important managerial implications in terms of brand collaborations with wealthy micro-celebrities. With their large base of followers, which represent a quality, curated, niche audience, wealthy micro-celebrities have the power to influence the behavior of their followers (McQuarrie et al., 2012). However, this research suggests that the immateriality of luxury consumption matters more for these micro-celebrities than the material aspects of consumption. This means that brands wishing to collaborate with wealthy micro-celebrities will need to focus on the experiential nature of their products rather than on traditional features (e.g. product design features). Thus, for luxury brands, establishing ways their products and services contribute to luxury moments is important to fit with the personal brands of their young, wealthy micro-celebrity collaborators.

#### 4.5.3 *Limitations and future research*

This study adopted a netnographic approach, and, as such, lacks insights into the personal representations of micro-celebrities' behaviors on social media and their awareness of personal online brand development or lack thereof. Research should explore this aspect further and address the following questions: what drives the initial search for fame of wealthy micro-celebrities? How do wealthy micro-celebrities reconcile online fame and offline behaviors? Why do some wealthy heirs decide not to pursue online secular immortality? Further research should thus explore other possible

motivations for young, wealthy millennial micro-celebrities to share and give up cultural capital online, such as the desire to engage in serious luxury leisure activities (Stebbins, 2001).

Research could also investigate cultural differences in personal branding strategies among wealthy micro-celebrities. This research purposely examined wealthy micro-celebrities in the European context. Given existing cultural differences, strategies adopted in Asia or North America may differ, as behaviors related to fame, notoriety, or simply conspicuous consumption are usually considered more extreme than in Europe (Holt, 1988).

Finally, further understanding of the complex nature of personal branding strategies may lead to the development of typologies of micro-celebrities over the Internet. Previous research suggests that individuals have different motivations when connecting with others online (Kretz & Voyer, 2013). Further research should thus identify the different types and levels of sub-cultures (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) of micro-celebrities on Instagram. This could, in turn, improve the types of collaborations between commercial brands and the personal brands developed by micro-celebrities.

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## Chapter 5

# Constructing Personas: How High-Net-Worth Social Media Influencers Reconcile Ethicality and Living a Luxury Lifestyle<sup>7</sup>

### Abstract

Drawing from a multi-sourced data corpus (in-depth interviews and Instagram posts) gathered from high-net-worth (HNW) social media influencers, this article explores how these individuals reconcile ethicality and living a luxury lifestyle through the enactment of three types of personas on Instagram: (1) Ambassador of ‘True’ Luxury, (2) Altruist, and (3) ‘Good’ Role Model. By applying the concepts of taste regimes and social moral licensing, we find that HNW social media influencers conspicuously enact and display ethicality, thereby retaining legitimacy in the field of luxury consumption. As these individuals are highly influential, they could leave a potentially significant mark on public discourse and, consequently, on their audiences’ construction of ethically responsible luxury consumption. In this vein, this article offers significant managerial insights into professional influencers and discusses ethical managerial practices to ensure ethical collaborations between influencers and managers.

*Keywords: Ethicality, Luxury lifestyle, Social media influencer*

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## 5.1 Introduction

Many consumers seem fascinated with viewing and virtually participating in the lives of the wealthy (Hay and Muller 2012). This interest has increased in the past decade, as ‘Internet celebrities’ have become widely popular on social media platforms (Senft 2013). Some of these celebrities now act as social media influencers; they have created a personal brand on social media that has the potential to influence an audience as, in many cases, they are considered content creators or opinion leaders (Casaló et al. 2018). Many companies and marketers have attempted to collaborate with social media influencers to reach more consumers (Khamis et al. 2017), especially targeting influencers with large audiences.

One type of social media influencers is high-net-worth (HNW) individuals (Hay 2013), such as the billionaire Kylie Jenner, who has become famous for her extraordinarily luxurious lifestyle on social media (McClain 2013). Other notable HNW influencers include Roberto Cavalli and Barron Hilton, both heirs of wealthy and renowned families. We focus on this rare group of HNW individuals who come from rich families and share their luxurious lifestyle on Instagram and other social media platforms and, as such, attract a great deal of attention (Marwick 2015). Their large audiences and the speed of social media leave HNW social media influencers exposed to both positive and negative attention, and consequently they face a narrow path for ethical behaviour. HNW individuals are therefore an ideal ‘extreme’ case to assess the tensions between ethicality and luxury consumption. Scandals related to unethical, eventually illegal conduct appear in the media every so often and can have tremendous repercussions for HNW social media influencers who are being judged not only by the legal system but also by their millions of followers. Recently, Olivia Jade, an HNW social media influencer with two million followers on YouTube, was accused of unethical conduct when it was discovered that her parents, celebrities Lori Loughlin and Mossimo Giannulli, had allegedly bribed a top-rated university for her admittance (Greenspan 2019).

Moreover, today, social hierarchy and status are ephemeral and changing. In this vein, some social media influencers displaying luxury online are able to obtain status and distinction by acquiring specific knowledge about the field (e.g. living a geographically mobile and luxurious lifestyle) (Eckhardt and Bardhi 2019) and by co-constructing and enacting specific taste regimes (Arsel and Bean 2012). In contrast with a class-bound understanding of taste (Bourdieu 1984), a taste regime is a ‘discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates the aesthetics of practice in a culture of consumption’ (Arsel and Bean 2012, p. 899), which ‘may be articulated by a singular, centralized authority such as an influential magazine or blog’ (p. 900). This has two implications: First, if taste is a narrative construct, what is considered truly luxurious in one taste regime may be considered untrue in others. Taste regimes are context specific and can be in opposition to one another. This also means that they will

differ in terms of the social hierarchies linked to the enactment of taste. What brings high-status (e.g. what is preferred or valued) in one taste regime may differ from what brings high-status in another taste regime. Second, as taste regimes are narrative constructions, their co-creators may still narratively draw on legitimacy from the cultural capital of their ‘class’ to have the ‘right’ taste, but they may also achieve legitimacy through the loyalty, size, and influence of the audiences in which the taste regimes are shared. Consequently, although social media influencers may draw on family heritage and expertise in their narrative constructions of an authoritative luxury taste, they do not necessarily need to be born into a wealthy family to be a luxury influencer. Thus, HNW social media influencers might feel threatened by the thought of losing legitimacy in the ‘field’ (Bourdieu 1984) they belong to—the world of high-status luxury consumption.

In this vein, HNW social media influencers’ portrayal of the self is suspended between the need to remain on moral high ground and the need to keep their legitimacy and aspirational influence within luxury lifestyles. While such tensions might also arise for less influential social media agents, the extraordinarily luxurious lifestyle that HNW social media influencers usually display magnifies the inherent tensions between ethicality and lavishness (Davies et al. 2012; Khan and Dhar 2006). Furthermore, these tensions should be of great concern to HNW social media influencers because the sheer magnitude of their audiences allows even subtle tensions to spread quickly. Many HNW social media influencers also come from influential backgrounds (e.g. old families with renowned businesses), which are sensitive to tensions between ethicality and luxury. Finally, as influencers of influencers, their reconciliation strategies of ethicality and living a luxury lifestyle can spread and affect how their audiences and the audiences of their audiences reconcile potential tensions between ethicality and living a luxurious lifestyle. Therefore, much can be learned from the way HNW social media influencers navigate the at-times bumpy waters of being ethical while living a luxury lifestyle.

To this end, this study investigates how HNW social media influencers frame and display their luxury lifestyles on Instagram as a way to defend their status and to maintain legitimacy in the field of luxury consumption. Specifically, we focus on how luxury lifestyles are staged, performed (Marwick 2015), and intertwined with social constructions of taste regimes (Arsel and Bean 2012), ethicality (Moraes et al. 2012), and narrative threads of social moral licensing (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018). We show how this allows for the presentation of the self through specific personas (Jung 1966)—that is, staged abstractions of identity—in which tensions between ethicality and luxury are reconciled. This article builds on previous research on ethics and luxury consumption and, in doing so, makes several contributions. First, we contribute to the literature by empirically applying the concepts of taste regimes (Arsel and Bean 2012) and ‘personas’ (Jung 1966) to the field of ethics. Second, we illustrate the relevance of the recent conceptual framework of social moral licensing (Lasarov and Hoffmann

2018) to narrative threads of ethicality and luxury consumption. From this, we identify and critically discuss HNW social media influencers' reconciliation strategies pertaining to three different personas. Finally, at a managerial level, we discuss the potential repercussions of the identified personas and reconciliation strategies of HNW social media influencers and offer guidance on how to better manage collaborations to promote more ethical behaviour online.

## 5.2 Theoretical Background

### 5.2.1 *Tensions between Ethicality and Living a Luxury Lifestyle*

William Lazer (1964, p. 130) introduced the lifestyle concept to business research, defining it as “a distinctive or characteristic mode of living, in its aggregate and broadest sense, of a whole society or segment thereof”, including “consumer purchases and the manner in which they are consumed”. In addition to material resources and their consumption, more current research includes ideological and social resources in conceptualizations of lifestyle (Thompson et al. 2018). Today, the lifestyle concept is applied to a variety of consumption contexts, including ‘sustainable lifestyles’ (Longo et al. 2019), ‘environmentally friendly lifestyles’ (Maxwell-Smith et al. 2018), and ‘middle-class lifestyles’ (Thompson et al. 2018). Furthermore, living in luxury is a fundamental part of high-status lifestyles, not only in terms of luxury goods ownership but also in terms of luxurious leisure activities (Hemetsberger et al. 2012). Today, the concept of luxury consumption is more experiential, non-materialistic, and intangible, and the luxury lifestyle many display, though still lavish, may no longer be linked only to traditional luxury goods (Thomsen et al. 2020).

Nevertheless, there are grounds for tension between being ethical or moral and living a luxury lifestyle. Prior research has mostly used the terms ‘ethics’, ‘ethicality’, or ‘morality’ interchangeably (e.g. Carrington et al. 2014; Newholm 2007), possibly because of these terms’ close relationships. To acknowledge their closeness but also their difference, we define ethicality as abidance to a set of community norms or rules (Moraes et al. 2012) and morality as a sub-category of ethicality that is grounded on personal and cultural beliefs (Luedicke 2009). Consequently, ethicality and morality are closely connected, with morality being more prone to personal interpretations of ethical standards. Today, such standards suggest that being ethical means living a life that is just and marked by good deeds, such as preserving the environment (Auger et al. 2003), while a luxury lifestyle is often associated with lavishness and wastefulness (Veblen 1899) or status-seeking over-consumption (Sheth et al. 2011) and, consequently, is deemed as unethical (McDonald et al. 2015). Even so, the media tends to ‘glamourize’ hyper-mobility and hyper-consumption (Urry 2010), especially linked to the lavish lifestyles

of HNW individuals. Hay and Muller (2012) coin this glamorization effect as ‘luxury fever’. By contrast, Striet and Davies (2013) note that ethics is not ‘sexy’ or ‘aspirational’ enough for luxury consumers to adopt, and thus luxury and ethical consumption can be incompatible concepts (Davies et al. 2012; Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau 2014).

However, possible tensions between the two concepts are highly dependent on how ethicality and luxury are defined. If lavishness linked to a luxury lifestyle is deemed wasteful and unethical only in some contexts (e.g. when ignited by selfish rather than altruistic motives), a luxury lifestyle is not necessarily always in opposition to ethicality. Consequently, narratively constructed taste regimes (Arsel and Bean 2012) may dictate whether something is perceived as ethical or unethical. Furthermore, following a dissonance theory approach towards ethicality (Carrington et al. 2014), even when consumers perceive tensions between being ethical and living a luxury lifestyle, they may either change their behaviour or try to reduce the dissonance by reinterpreting the lack of fit between their ethical beliefs and luxury consumption. To this end, they may apply moral licensing as a ‘moral balancing mechanism’, in which good and bad deeds cancel each other out (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018). Notably, according to Lasarov and Hoffmann’s (2018) framework on social moral licensing, the social environment can have an impact on the balancing effect of moral licensing practices. The framework distinguishes mainly between two approaches: conspicuous moral licensing and relative moral licensing. The former involves increasing the effect of ethical deeds through their conspicuous display, while the latter involves increasing the effect of ethical deeds through inter-group comparisons with less ethical groups or individuals. In this study, we further divide the concept of conspicuous moral licensing into ‘continuous’ and ‘occasional’ conspicuous moral licensing.

In this vein, while ethical consumption behaviour is fuelled primarily by personal and moral beliefs (Auger and Devinney 2007; Bucic et al. 2012), the social environment has a significant impact on whether it is perceived as ethical. Consequently, not only are the narrative threads of what constitutes ethical behaviour co-constructed and negotiated in social media, but their potential congruence with luxury lifestyles is also affected by the gaze of ‘others’.

### *5.2.2 Conspicuous Display of Ethicality and Enactment of Personae on Social Media*

HNW social media influencers’ portrayal of ethicality and the self is constantly exposed to the gaze of others and, as argued previously, it is suspended between the need to remain on the moral high ground and the need to maintain legitimacy and aspirational influence within luxury lifestyles. To this end, HNW social media influencers may build a narrative that distinguishes them from other influencers and even mainstream consumers (Luedicke et al. 2009) by, for example, portraying a more

ethical lifestyle than other luxury influencers. Thus, in contrast with Holbrook's (1994) position that ethical consumption behaviours only serve genuine altruistic purposes, Lundblad and Davies (2016) propose that such behaviours serve primarily self-interest purposes. Research has coined this type of behaviour as 'moral hypocrisy' (Batson et al. 1999) or the act of appearing ethical without necessarily engaging in ethical behaviour. Scholars have also tied moral hypocrisy to the concept of 'moral self-licensing', or the act of occasionally engaging in good deeds, such as pro-social behaviour (Monin and Miller 2001), only to counter-balance all the other immoral or unethical behaviours in which an individual engages (Merritt et al. 2010). As with moral hypocrisy, the end goal is the self-serving motive to appear ethical in the eyes of the public, but also to feel 'better' in the private sphere.

To address this public construction of the self, we adopt Goffman's (1959) theatrical metaphors in our theoretical framework and distinguish between stage-related and performance-related consumption practices. Stage-related consumption practices include the choice of props (consumption objects) and scenery (consumption venues). They support the symbolic construction of the self through the integration of more or less idiosyncratic symbolic meanings pertaining to the current surroundings (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2012) or through the classification of the self to others by displaying shared consumption symbolism (Belk 2013). To appear ethical, for example, social media influencers may purchase certain 'green' cars to enhance their public status and reputation (Griskevicius et al. 2010). By doing so, they employ certain impression management strategies to present themselves positively to their viewers (Leary and Allen 2011) and to align certain luxury consumption practices with more ethical consumption practices (McDonald et al. 2015). Performance-related consumption practices include the choice and enactment of scripts (consumption roles and behaviours) and discursive acts that facilitate a trustworthy staging of the self and interaction with others (Dion and Arnould 2016; Goffman 1959). Although they are analytically separate constructs, stage- and performance-related consumption practices are intertwined, as essentially consumption objects and venues guide the performance of social roles on the stage of everyday life.

Connecting this framework with the hyper-public setting of social media influencers, we argue that the presented self needs to be reconciled not only on the individual level but also in the public eye. Consequently, we propose the concept of persona (Jung 1966) to denote the public face of these largely co-constructed identities (Belk 2013). This concept draws on the masks used in ancient drama, 'designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual' (Jung 1966, para. 305). Prior applications of the concept in marketing include celebrity endorsers' stage personas (McCracken 1988) and brand personas (Dion and Arnould 2016), designed to evoke societal longing and approval. Inherent in the concept of persona is the staged abstraction of identity, in which tensions are negotiated, 'masked', and/or reconciled (Dion and

Arnould 2016; McCracken 1988). In this vein, personas include an abstraction of identity that is attractive not only to the audience but also to the beholder, and therefore they can serve as positive vehicles for reconciling identity conflicts through stage- and performance-related consumption practices.

In summary, this article addresses the question of how HNW social media influencers reconcile potential tensions between ethicality and living luxurious lifestyles by investigating how they interpret and enact ethicality and luxury consumption. More specifically, we explore their specific taste regimes for luxury consumption and how these are enacted in three different personas displayed on Instagram in a way that creates moral balance. Finally, we discuss the potential repercussions on the reconciliation practices of HNW social media influencers, as they constitute narrative threads that can inspire the ethicality of their audiences' consumption practices.

### 5.3 Methodology

Examining the relationship between ethicality and luxury is a notoriously difficult task (Beckham and Voyer 2014; Davies et al. 2012) because these concepts are in many respects conflicting and may be subject to social desirability bias. Luxury lifestyles are often associated with wastefulness and conspicuousness, whereas ethical lifestyles are associated with being mindful, moral, and altruistic (Amatulli et al. 2017). Little is known about high-end consumer experiences related to a luxurious and ethical lifestyle (Creswell and Poth 2017), and thus we employ an exploratory qualitative approach to glean insights into consumers' lived experiences and related meanings they derive (Spiggle 1994). We also use a narrative approach to explore luxury and ethical consumption practices and their role in the expression and transformation of the self (Ahuvia 2005) to gain idiosyncratic insight into consumers' sense making through consumption stories (Thompson 1997).

#### 5.3.1 Data Collection

Investigating HNW individuals can be subject to methodological limitations (Aguar and Schneider 2016) because they constitute an exclusive, niche, and difficult-to-access target group (Donaldson and Poynting 2007; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010). Adding to this difficulty, our target sample needed to fulfil three cumulative screening criteria: informants needed to be (1) HNW individuals, (2) social media influencers (Khamis et al. 2017), and (3) millennials born between 1981 and 1996, as this generation is the most active on social media platforms and on Instagram in particular

(Pew Research Center 2019). We chose Instagram for our study because in recent years, social media influencers have adopted this platform rather than other platforms (e.g. YouTube, Facebook) (Marwick 2015). This is primarily due to Instagram's higher engagement rate, as the platform facilitates more intimate relationships between social media influencers and their followers (Casaló et al. 2018). Moreover, the platform offers more aesthetic visual content than other social media platforms (Highfield and Leaver 2016).

We undertook a purposive sampling procedure (Patton 2002) and first identified possible HNW informants who might fit the criteria through articles in *Forbes* and Rich Kids of the Internet. We ensured that their age corresponded to the millennial age range using an Internet celebrity database (<https://www.famousbirthdays.com/>). We further investigated their Instagram profiles to confirm that they were indeed social media influencers (e.g. had high notoriety on social media platforms, collaborated with brands) (Khamis et al. 2017). These social media influencers are in line with industry practice standards: macro-influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers and mega-influencers with more than 100,000 followers (Sandoval 2018). Accordingly, we contacted only influencers who had as a minimum 10,000 followers. We contacted 42 potential candidates through email, website contact pages, or Instagram Direct Message. We also applied snowball-sampling techniques (Patton 2002), asking potential candidates to suggest other candidates. Not surprisingly, most inquiries remained unanswered, but despite these challenges, we recruited five European informants (three men and two women) for in-depth interviews (see Table 11). The recruitment message stated only that we were interested in their experiences in posting luxury content on Instagram as social media influencers. Therefore, our informants were initially unaware that we were studying ethicality. During the interviews, however, the aim of the study to explore ethicality and luxury was made apparent, and informants had the option of opting out at any time.

**Table 11. Overview of informants**

<b>Informant #</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Family/wealth background</b>	<b># Followers</b>	<b># of Instagram posts gathered</b>
1	Male	25	Noble, aristocratic heir	202k	288
2	Male	21	Son of a self-made millionaire	52k	97
3	Female	21	Daughter of a billionaire and former politician	174k	117
4	Male	26	Son of a self-made millionaire	94k	85
5	Female	24	Daughter of a self-made billionaire	110k	275



Although the number of informants is low, Kozinets (2015) maintains that a final sample should encompass the specific group researchers are investigating, regardless of size. Moreover, previous researchers interested in consumption and brand experiences have reported meaningful findings with similar sample sizes (Coupland 2005; McGrath and Otnes 1995; Schembri et al. 2010). Finally, the informants' social media posts supplemented the interview data, for a rich data corpus that aided in our ability to answer our research questions.

We manually extracted archival social media data (Rose 2016) from the informants' Instagram accounts. Data collection took place in January 2019. We collected 862 archived Instagram posts in total from January 2017 to January 2019. We deemed two years' worth of posts suitable, as most informants officially began becoming social media influencers in 2016–2017. To conform to Internet ethical guidelines (Markham and Buchanan 2012) in the usage of online content as illustrative examples for research, we altered all Instagram posts using ToonCamera application, blurring informants' faces and deleting the associated text to ensure informant anonymity.

The five semi-structured interviews occurred remotely, on Skype, WhatsApp, or FaceTime. Interviews, which took 372 minutes in total, were recorded and then transcribed verbatim (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). The interviews were of an inductive and explorative nature, with the aim to collect informant-centred narratives about luxury and ethicality. The interviews began with grand-tour questions (McCracken 1988) about informants' background and hobbies, to place the conversation in the context of each informant's lived experiences. Then, we prompted topics such as their luxury consumption experiences, personal views on luxury, and views on ethical behaviour in general. Sample questions included 'What is ethical behaviour for you?' and 'What does it mean for you to behave ethically?' We also invited the informants to describe and reflect on their Instagram practices, asking, for example, 'Could you tell [us] about the time you started using Instagram?' and 'How has your Instagram use changed since you first joined/since you became a social media influencer?' Overall, we encouraged the informants to elaborate on what they typically posted on Instagram, as well as posts they deemed ethical versus unethical. Throughout the interviews, the role of the researcher was to encourage the interviewees to give deep insights into their lived consumption experiences (McCracken 1988).

### 5.3.2 *Data Analysis*

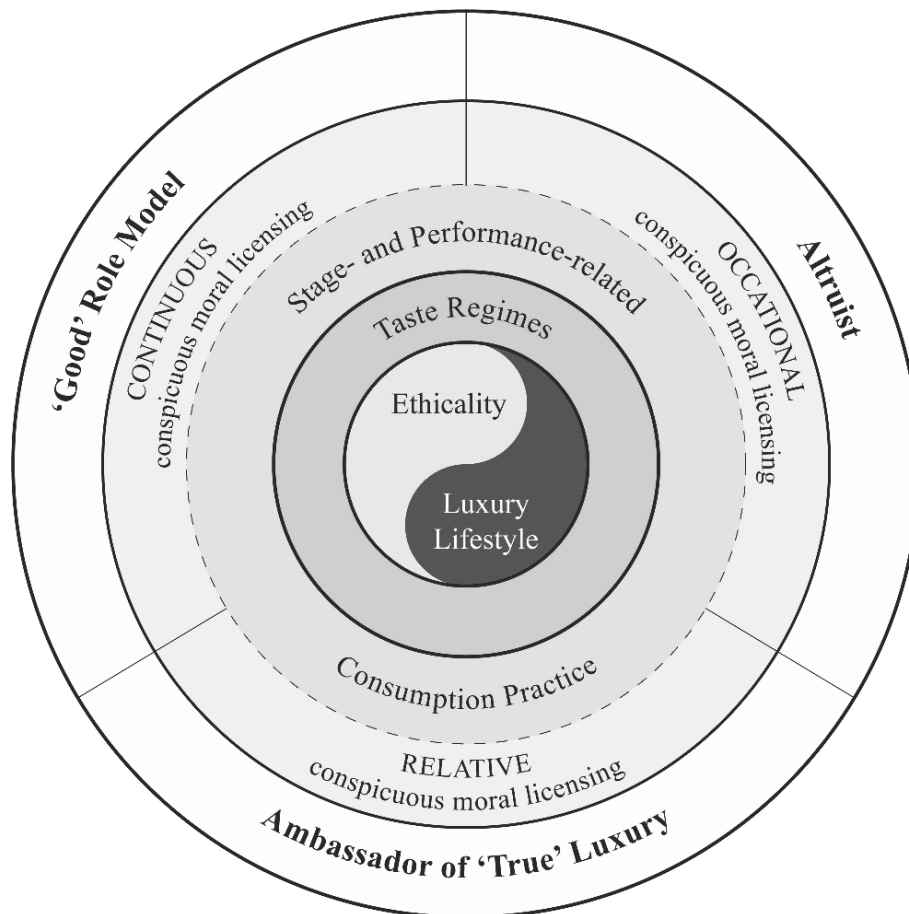
We analysed the interviews and Instagram posts by means of the 'hermeneutic circle' (Thompson 1997), moving back and forth both intra-textually (i.e. within one interview and associated social media posts) and inter-textually (i.e. comparing themes from one interview with those from other

interviews and their associated social media posts). We did this to identify common themes across interviews and Instagram posts, while maintaining a close connection with informants' lived experiences and unique perspectives. This process, performed by all co-authors independently, yielded an exhaustive list of themes for the coding scheme (Spiggle 1994). The themes best capturing informants' everyday lived experiences echoed theoretical constructs and yet-to-be-theorized constructions of how they made sense of the topics at hand. Analyses converged to six major themes, covering 45 sub-themes: (1) consumption and sharing of (ethical) luxurious lifestyles, (2) creation of congruence between luxury and ethics, (3) ethical behaviours, (4) identity outcomes, (5) luxury lifestyle, and (6) speech acts. After finalising the coding scheme, we uploaded the data from both sets (i.e. interviews and Instagram posts) to NVivo 12 to code the data. We first entered all themes into NVivo as coding categories (called nodes) and then manually coded all relevant text sections, pictures, and Instagram comments into these nodes or emerging sub-categories. This allowed for systematic qualitative content coding (Rose 2016) of the substantial dataset and enabled us to link and compare both interview and Instagram data. Next, through NVivo we used 'double coding', which pinpoints the overlap between different analytical categories, such as 'ethical behaviours' and 'identity outcomes'.

## 5.4 Findings

HNW social media influencers reconcile ethicality and living a luxury lifestyle through identity work in terms of constructing different personas. In the following paragraphs, we present how our informants narratively construct ethical behaviour through their Instagram profiles and during the interviews when juxtaposed with a luxury lifestyle. Then, we present how these narrative threads are intertwined with stage- and performance-related consumption practices that allow for the construction of three personas that act as public masks that can both display and conceal (Jung 1966), especially by means of social moral licensing (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018). The three personas are (1) Ambassador of 'True' Luxury, (2) Altruist, and (3) 'Good' Role Model (see Fig 12.).

Figure 12. Personas emanating from consumption-based practices



#### 5.4.1 Narrative Threads of Ethicality

Reiterating that ethicality is defined as abidance to a set of community norms and rules (Moraes et al. 2012), the question is what our informants perceived these norms and rules to be. When we discussed the meaning of ethical behaviours with them, mainly two types of narratives of ethicality emerged. The first, which is the most intuitive and well-researched narrative, involved being an ‘ethical consumer’ in the sense that they were aware of social, environmental, and production issues before purchasing luxury goods or services (Auger et al. 2003; Newholm and Shaw 2007):

I would consider the environment, production, animal testing for some of them. So mainly the really important things like that because I know there were issues with Nike having child labour and other problems which is quite a bad thing and not ethical actually. I'll definitely ask about that. Well maybe not ask, but I'll try to find information about that. (Informant 2)

In the second type of narrative, which informants put more emphasis on, inherent tensions between ethicality and luxury were negotiated through their own taste regime and related viewpoint of ethical behaviour, luxury consumption, and their role as social media influencers. For example, Informant 1 noted:

Well, I would say that, it would be behaving in the right way. Especially if you're an influencer. You need to have a sort of ethic in what you're doing, so not only showing off your, I don't know, your clothing, the places you go, even though you're paid for it, but you also need to consider about society, and individuals. So I would typically try to show also good values in what I'm doing. So, demonstrating as well, like moral principles, something about awareness of the world that you have around quality, dignity, honesty, diversity, the individual rights.

As Informant's 1 narrative reveals, ethicality means not only 'doing the right thing' but also showcasing or displaying ethicality online. As Informant 1 argues, and consistent with prior research (Luedicke et al. 2009), displaying ethicality, such as ethical principles, on his Instagram profile is a way to create distinction from other social media influencers and mainstream consumers. This distinction is based on the enacted taste regime (Arsel and Bean 2012) that opposes 'untrue' luxury, lavishness, and non-exemplary bearing. The enactment of this specific taste regime helps our informants navigate towards ethical behaviour. For example, Informant 4 explained:

It's unethical, especially when [others] post loads of money on the table, they don't need to show that, no one really cares first of all. I think it's just rude. You can have a nice bag, a nice car or something and yeah, if you are wearing that bag the day where you take the picture, well that's okay. Good for you. That's a nice bag. But just don't put lots of money on the table, lots of expensive bottles of alcohol just to prove your point and say 'Oh, I'm rich'. You're just trying to show you are rich and you might not even be rich.

Here, Informant 4 distances herself from other social media influencers who fall outside the taste regimes enacted by our respondents. A taste different from what is traditionally linked to the conspicuous behaviours and tacky tastes of the 'nouveaux riche' (Bourdieu 1984) can help informants stay 'classy' and, at the same time, ethical.

In summary, in contrast with more mainstream consumer viewpoints of what behaving ethically means, typically behaviours that take into consideration social, environmental, and production issues before purchasing goods or services (Auger et al. 2003; Newholm and Shaw 2007), our HNW social media influencers link ethicality to a specific taste regime that is enacted both offline and online. This

taste regime is threefold: it depicts that true luxury is more ethical than untrue luxury, it presents altruistic lavishness as more ethical than self-centred lavishness, and it deems luxury consumption accompanied by exemplary bearing as more ethical than consumption without exemplary bearing. As we explain subsequently, the different aspects of this taste regime surface in different presentations of the self (i.e. the different personas enacted).

#### 5.4.2 *Personas Enacted through Stage- and Performance-related Consumption Practices*

The personas identified on Instagram were enacted by almost all informants (see Table 12) and thus are not idiosyncratic. In this section, we present each persona separately, including the specific taste regime and moral licensing approach that guide the consumption—and thus self-presentation—practices through which each persona is enacted.

**Table 12. Overview of personas addressed by our informants**

<b>Informant</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Persona:</b>					
Ambassador of ‘True’ Luxury	X	X	X	X	X
Altruist	X	X		X	X
‘Good’ Role Model	X	X	X	X	X

#### *Ambassador of ‘True’ Luxury*

This persona projects informants as educators or ambassadors of ‘true’ luxury. The term ‘true’ luxury is context specific, and the opposite of ‘true’ luxury or being a ‘true luxury influencer’ has nothing to do with counterfeit products or having a fake social media account; rather, the opposite means non-compliance with the specific taste regime advocated by our informants. According to our informants, true luxury is classy and inconspicuous, which is in line with studies on luxury consumers that conceptualise luxury as discreet and inconspicuous (Berger and Ward 2010; Bourdieu 1984). This notion of luxury allows them to pursue a luxury lifestyle while avoiding careless, meaningless over-consumption and other unethical behaviors; thus, it allows them to synthesise luxury consumption and appear ethical by emphasising the meaningfulness, tastefulness, durability, and sustainability of luxury activities, goods, and settings. Furthermore, this persona enables HNW social media influencers to walk

the talk and offer a vicarious experience of ‘true’ luxury to their audiences. In defining ‘true’ luxury as more ethical than ‘untrue’ luxury, this persona creates moral balance and reduces tensions between ethicality and luxury by couching luxury consumption within the narrative threads of relative moral licensing (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018); this means that these people can deem their luxury consumption ethical merely by comparing it with others’ less ethical consumption of luxury.

Regarding stage-related consumption practices, our informants indicated that living a ‘proper’ (ethical) luxury lifestyle is not only about purchasing ‘true’ or ‘real’ luxury products but also about singling out luxurious settings because of the joy they provide rather than because they are expensive. This projects them as being less unethical than others (Gruber and Schlegelmilch 2014), thus allowing them to enhance the self (Luedicke et al. 2009). True luxury settings are valued not for their price but for their pricelessness, whether a public beach or a five-star hotel. Here, the informants adopt an experiential rather than materialistic approach to the meaning of luxury (Cristini et al. 2017). For them, luxury is not just about the mere possession of luxury products; luxury also means being free from life constraints, enjoying life, and discovering the world through appropriate leisure experiences:

I think luxury is more like being comfortable without having to worry about anything. People usually think that it's just buying expensive things and I don't think luxury is really that. (Informant 4)

This informant adopts an experiential luxury perspective and, at the same time, distances himself from ‘people’ who over-consume. An example of experiential luxury is portrayed in the joyful scenery of Fig. 13.

Figure 13. Example of HNW social media influencer projecting ‘true’ luxury



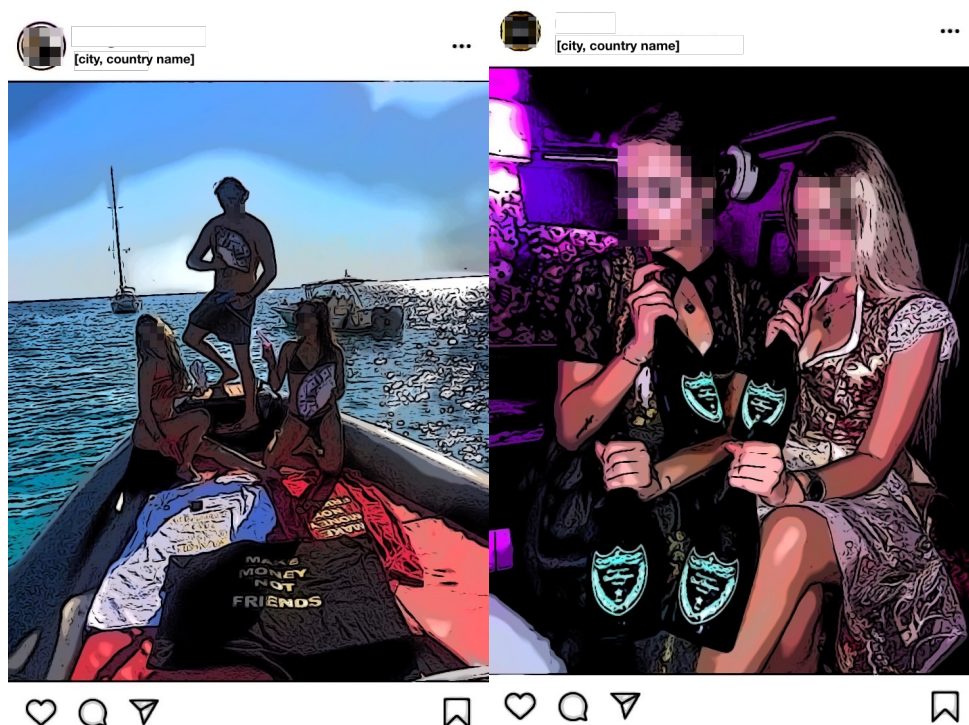
As social media influencers, the informants are able to continuously showcase such experiential luxury-related content on their profiles. They enact and share an experiential luxury lifestyle, which allows their followers to be vicariously involved—if only virtually (Belk 2013)—in their luxury experiences. In this vein, informants claim that they are giving followers the opportunity to experience luxury, an experience that some may never have beyond Instagram. Previous research illustrates how followers of HNW social media influencers value the content they post because it gives them virtual access to the luxury world (Leban et al. 2020). For example, informant 2 stated:

At first I had no idea about [how others felt about me posting luxury content on my Instagram]. But then when my Instagram became quite famous, I received so many nice messages saying, ‘Wow, I love your life. Like that's amazing. Like keep sharing what you're doing. It's so cool to see that. Like I feel like I'm traveling with you’, and I thought that was really nice. People like seeing that because they might not necessarily be able to do that.

Regarding performance-related aspects of their consumption, by carefully crafting their content on Instagram, not only do our HNW social media influencers display luxury lifestyle or products, but they also claim to do so in a ‘classy’, inconspicuous, and, thus, ethical way:

It's like the page they have, called 'Rich Kids of Instagram', I know that for my Instagram account I got many followers thanks to them, because they reposted my pictures. But some used to keep class in their pictures compared to now, now if you see what they're sharing, it's more like money all over, yeah, it's sort of disgusting, they show money and they will put guns and 12 cars with diamonds and I'm like no don't do that. Or you can see people pouring champagne in their bath and I'm like, no that's just rude. (Informant 4)

**Figure 14. Example of what HNW social media influencers consider 'immoral' content**



By giving examples of what she considers unethical (see Fig. 14), this informant expresses strong opposition to luxury consumers who are overly conspicuous. The critique is not about champagne being consumed in these pictures; it is about *how* the champagne is being consumed and wasted. Consequently, the informant describes these luxury consumers as being 'vulgar' and 'classless' and therefore regards it as his duty to promote a taste regime that can show what 'true luxury' is about. Here, not only are these HNW social media influencers differentiating themselves from lower classes, but they are also differentiating themselves from the 'vulgar', conspicuous upper classes (Han et al. 2010) and portraying themselves as promoters of ethical luxury consumption behaviour. For example, Informant 1 projects intellectual cultivation on his Instagram profile by actively informing his viewers on matters such as history, culture, and architecture (see Fig. 15).



Figure 15. Example of an HNW social media influencer’s projection of intellectual cultivation



Overall, HNW social media influencers stage and perform aspects of the Ambassador of ‘True’ Luxury persona online by pursuing, sharing, and enforcing a taste regime that outlines ‘true’ luxury. Through this persona, they present themselves and luxury consumption in an ethical way by engaging in codes of conduct that only pertain to their field (Bourdieu 1984). In turn, they benefit from the relative moral licensing effect (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018) by comparing a ‘true’ luxury lifestyle with the ‘untrue’ luxury lifestyle of other social media influencers. In other words, although HNW social media influencers may be fully aware of unethical aspects of consuming luxury, they view the out-group as being more unethical and thereby improve the perceived moral balance within their own luxury lifestyle.

#### *The Altruist*

The second prominent persona that emerged from the interviews was the Altruist. This persona creates moral balance by couching luxury consumption within the narrative threads of conspicuous moral licensing (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018), enabling the public display of altruistic acts to outweigh an otherwise lavish luxury lifestyle. According to previous research, philanthropy is a way for HNW individuals to maintain their status and appear ‘ethical’ (Liu and Baker 2016). Furthermore, in line with

their enacted taste regime, our informants deem lavishness as more or less ethical, depending on the specific context and motives for lavishness. They consider lavishness more ethical if it serves an altruistic motive, such as planning and participating in lavish but charitable events. Consequently, lavishness can be paired with altruism to decrease its potential tensions with ethicality. The public display of altruism carried out by our informants is occasional (not necessarily ongoing), but because affluence is also a means to engage in philanthropic or other altruistic work, the ‘good’ may outweigh the ‘bad’ overall (Merritt et al. 2010).

The Altruist is enacted through different stage-related consumption practices that are preceded by the construction of scenery and props through which this persona is best performed (e.g. the production of charitable brands that can subsequently be consumed). For example, Informant 5 recalled how she created a jewellery luxury company with conflict-free diamonds from Africa:

I started this jewellery company and I thought it's really cool. And then I thought, you know, what, I don't want to promote gun violence and what can I do to turn this around [...] into something which [is] actually going to help people, maybe even change people's lives. So I thought that if I'm making money from this brand, then why not also help other people? Every product I sell donates to war funds. So like war child. So every piece I sell, a percentage is donated to a charity.

As this quote illustrates, in addition to being based on conflict-free production, the brand serves as a source for philanthropic donations. Thus, informants can pursue the Altruist persona by adding philanthropic, quality, craftsmanship, and durability aspects while co-constructing the physical stage and props with which they are associated.

Through performance-related consumption practices, such as contributing to society through philanthropy, informants integrate ethical values and adapt to the lifestyle of famous philanthropists such as Bill Gates (Liu and Baker 2016). Our informants also reconcile ethicality and living a luxurious lifestyle by volunteering. Examples of such activities include hosting charitable galas, creating companies with the aim to help a social cause, and helping building schools in impoverished areas of the world. These activities, which mainly occur offline but are also displayed sometimes online (see Fig. 5), support HNW social media influencers in reconciling the identity conflicts within their constructed self by sharing part of their wealth with those in need. Informant 1 described a feeling of self-fulfilment and satisfaction from such acts:

Well, I think it's [volunteering/giving money] something amazing because you not only help people in terms of sharing awareness, but you actually help them by fundraising money and bringing them clothes,

bringing them food.... I've been twice in [country destination], the way that they look at you, when you're just there spending time with them. Not necessarily giving them food or money. Well of course that comes with it because you can't just go there and hang out, you have to go there and bring something to them. But the way they look at you, the smile on their face is something that, you know, is crazy.

**Figure 16. Example of an HNW social media influencer appearing moral online, through philanthropic acts**



Engaging in acts of philanthropy, albeit occasionally, can serve as a gateway to abide a moral lifestyle (McDonald et al. 2015) as a form of trade-off or justification (Gruber and Schlegelmilch 2014) for living a luxury lifestyle. Khan and Dhar (2006) show that acting ethically reduces the negative attributions associated with consuming luxury. Moreover, showcasing these occasional altruistic acts online can leverage the conspicuous moral licensing effect (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018), as the compensatory influences of altruism may increase the social gaze. We coin this effect as occasional conspicuous moral licensing, in which occasional good deeds become ‘moral credits’ (Merritt et al. 2010) that HNW social media influencers accumulate and may use to outweigh less ethical behaviour (i.e. lavish lifestyles).

*A 'Good' Role Model*

Similar to the second persona, the 'Good' Role Model enables HNW social media influencers to create moral balance through conspicuous moral licensing, though in this case they harness moral credits (Merritt et al. 2010) through the ongoing projection of exemplary bearing. So, rather than engaging in occasional activities such as altruistic acts, this persona continuously displays exemplary bearing online, thus reducing tensions between ethicality and luxury. This is in line with the informants' taste regime, according to which luxury consumption is rendered less unethical if it is coupled with exemplary bearing (e.g. being kind, helpful, relatable). This is similar to previous research linking intellectual cultivation (i.e. being well mannered) to positive recognition (i.e. social status) (Bourdieu 1984).

Regarding stage-related consumption practices, HNW social media influencers consciously manage and modify their Instagram presence to offer content they expect their followers to consider 'ethical':

I obviously deleted every photo that I thought was bad. So just for my career and for everyone else's sake and just to be a good role model for other people. (Informant 5)

I post [ethical content] all the time.... If you look at my pictures, there is no rude content and I'm always trying to stay classy as well. I live in a classy way. Well maybe it's ... because I'm [nationality mentioned], but I like classy things and nice things and I don't see the [point of] being rude and putting everything I can in one picture. (Informant 4)

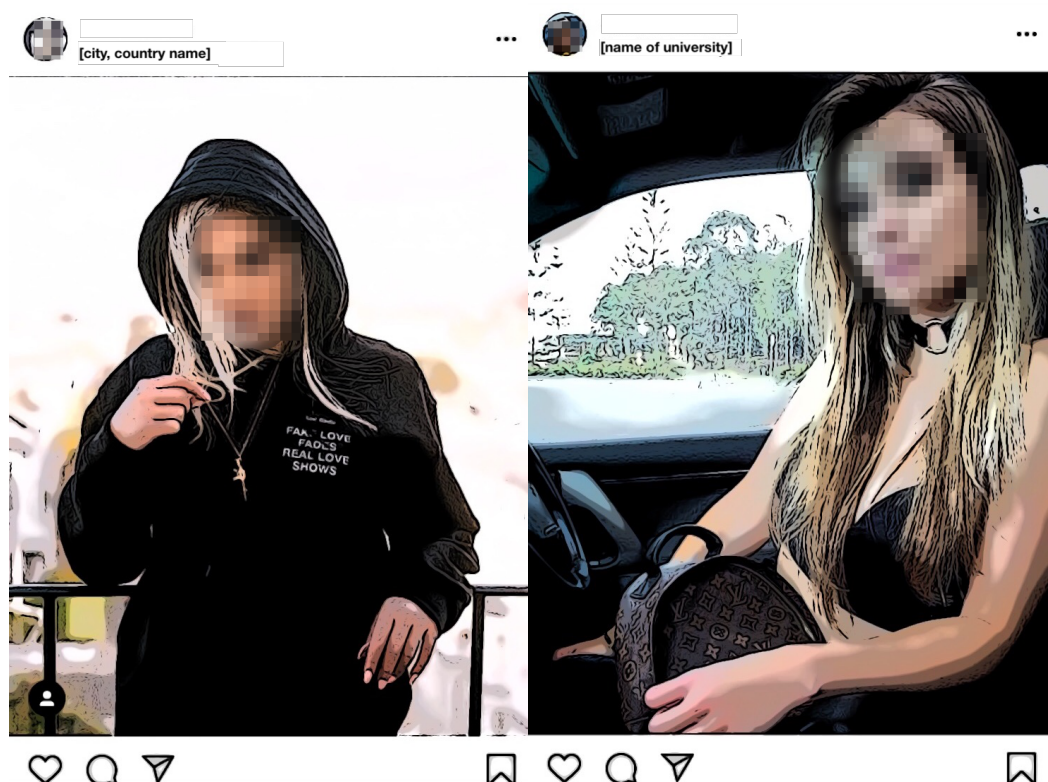
In addition to purposefully including content aligned with their taste regime, informants curate their accounts by deleting what their followers or the media might describe as falling outside this taste regime. Through these practices, they construct a stage or platform on which to enact a trustworthy performance of being a 'Good' Role Model.

Informants mentioned performance-related consumption practices as a result of previous backlashes in which they were portrayed in the media as spoiled 'rich kids', which generated a strong desire to be viewed as 'good' overall. Therefore, they employ performance-related consumption practices from scripts that align with this taste regime. For example, Informant 5 explained why she tries to present herself as being nice and helpful after being negatively portrayed in the media:

I did this documentary a couple years ago.... They would ask me questions and then I would respond, but they would cut stuff so it would sound like a complete brat.... So now on Instagram I'm just trying to be nice to everyone and I'm always open to helping people.

The informants explained how they continuously try to engage in high levels of netiquette (Sharf 1999) and use social media as a way to reinforce a taste regime and present themselves as ethical (Wallace et al. 2018). Informants also harness moral credits by adopting a relatable persona, so that followers will believe they are trustworthy.

**Figure 17. HNW social media influencers using relatability techniques to appear to be living similar lives as followers**



In addition to occasionally down-dressing, informants try to be relatable by initiating conversations with their Instagram followers about mundane topics, such as feeling ‘lost’ or being in the middle of a university exam week (see Fig. 6). These techniques are similar to what McQuarrie et al. (2012) define as ‘feigning similarities’, in which bloggers emphasise mundane aspects of their lives to downplay their status of having certain privileges unobtainable by their followers. Doing so makes them appear as if they are living ‘good’ lives, similar to those of their followers. For example, Informant 2 explained:

For me it is important in the sense that, as a future leader, if I don't act ethical, my subordinates won't act ethically, because I need to show the example. So if I have bad value and bad behaviours, they will

act the same because they will follow me. I don't want to change the mind of people. I want to give the best example and I can't expect ... them to be ethical if I'm not.

This informant expects his projected ethicality to influence the ethicality of his social media audience. This is a central aspect of how this persona leverages conspicuous social moral licensing through the continuous portrayal of being 'Good' Role Models. Furthermore, compared with the Altruist persona, this portrayal is based on continuous exceptional bearing in the public gaze rather than on occasional good deeds. Thus, we coin this type of moral balancing as continuous conspicuous moral licensing, in which the on-going portrayal of being a 'Good' Role Model in itself is deemed ethical and, at the same time, able to outbalance less ethical behaviour that falls outside the enacted taste regime (i.e. self-centred lavish lifestyles).

## 5.5 Concluding Discussion

This article addresses relevant knowledge gaps by building on previous research in the area of ethics and luxury consumption and explores how HNW social media influencers reconcile ethicality and living a luxury lifestyle through the enactment of three personas on Instagram. Drawing on Arsel and Bean's (2012) concept of taste regimes and Lasarov and Hoffmann's (2018) framework on social moral licensing, we examine moral balance in the context of luxury consumption and discuss our findings with a specific focus on selected narratives of HNW social media influencers.

Our study makes three contributions. First, we apply central aspects of the conceptual framework on social moral licensing (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018) to a relevant ethics context (i.e. luxury consumption). Second, we identify two sub-categories of conspicuous moral licensing: continuous and occasional. Only a few scholars have treated persona as an impression management strategy to appear ethical (Rozuel 2011). This concept is particularly relevant in the field of ethics, especially in the context of social media and high-end luxury. Third, by adopting the notion of taste regimes (Arsel and Bean 2012), we show how tensions between ethicality and luxury are context dependent and particular to those who have authoritative narrative power (e.g. HNW social media influencers). Our research has social implications, as HNW social media influencers are considered role models from whom reconciliation strategies can be vicariously learned. Thus, followers of these influencers could adopt their narratives in their own balancing act between being ethical and having a luxury lifestyle.

Our findings show how HNW social media influencers conspicuously display ethicality online and offline and thereby retain legitimacy in the field of luxury consumption. We identify three personas these influencers enact to reconcile ethicality and living a luxury lifestyle. First, HNW social media influencers enact the Ambassador of ‘True’ Luxury through their portrayal of what they view as ‘true’ luxury according to their taste regime. We discuss these practices as a form of relative conspicuous moral licensing (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018). By framing narratives about how the out-group (i.e. social media influencers pursuing ‘untrue’ luxury) engages in unethical activities, HNW social media influencers are able to build their moral licensing and elevate their sense of self online and offline. The end goal with this type of moral licensing behaviour is public audience recognition (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018).

Second, HNW social media influencers enact the Altruist persona by occasionally engaging in altruistic activities (e.g. philanthropy), which, according to their taste regime, render luxury consumption more ethical. We discuss these altruistic practices as a form of occasional conspicuous moral licensing. Lasarov and Hoffmann (2018) identify this practice as a strategic type of conspicuous moral licensing, as HNW social media influencers also occasionally portray their commitment to ethical activities online. This helps these influencers build moral credit (Merritt et al. 2010) which may outbalance less ethical behaviours.

Third, HNW social media influencers enact the ‘Good’ Role Model persona through the different practices they use to appear generally ‘good’. We discuss this as a form of continuous conspicuous moral licensing, in which they engage in small deeds and exemplary bearing to appear ‘good’ and, thus, ethical, according to their taste regime. A particularity of this persona is that these influencers need to continuously curate the self through impression management strategies to maintain their ethical image online. Not doing so can harm their image as a generally good person and role model and might result in media backlashes.

Overall, enactment of these personas on the grounds of moral licensing is fragile because HNW social media influencers could be judged as suffering from moral hypocrisy. For example, their audiences may believe they enact the personas only to create balance, not because of an inherent desire to do ‘good’ (Batson et al. 1999; Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018). Furthermore, in line with Goffman’s (1959) front-stage and backstage theatre metaphors, the enactment of these personas is, by definition, ‘front-stage’ and public and may not be aligned with ‘back-stage’ and more hidden behaviours, thus also leading to moral hypocrisy and backlashes in the media. This is unfortunate, as HNW social media influencers leave a potentially significant mark on public discourse (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017) and, consequently, on their audiences’ construction of ethically responsible luxury consumption. These

influencers could therefore unintentionally endorse moral hypocrisy as an inevitable aspect of luxury lifestyles.

From a managerial perspective, luxury brands could draw inspiration from our informants' taste regime (Arsel and Bean 2012) by linking it to the notions of 'true' luxury, altruistic features, and fit with exemplary behaviour. Doing so will render the consumption of luxury brands less in conflict with ethicality. To date, research on influencer marketing has explored only a few unethical behaviours of social media influencers, such as promoting sponsored products with no disclosure (e.g. Audrezet et al. 2018). However, as social media influencers are considered role models and, consequently, opinion leaders (Casaló et al. 2018), managers need to seriously regard them as 'informal leaders' (Pielstick 2000); in other words, they are responsible for any ethical or unethical behaviour they exhibit on their social media platforms. Moreover, social media influencers have a high impact on their followers, who also regard them as having ethical responsibility (Archer et al. 2014). As social media influencers are prosumers (consumers and producers) (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) themselves, it can sometimes be difficult for them to produce content while acting in ethical ways. Thus, when deciding to collaborate with HNW social media influencers, managers should ensure that the taste regime of these influencers is aligned with what the company deems as ethical and unethical online behaviour and that they are aware of their leadership role.

## 5.6 Limitations and future research

Given the difficulties in sourcing people with a millennial, HNW, and social media influencer profile, the corpus of data collected and analysed represents a valuable window into the world of this population. The findings provide new insights into the lived experiences of relevant representatives of this critical consumer group (Thompson 1997). These insights, however, come at the expense of external validity, which is clearly limited. Thus, although we used a multi-data corpus to extract and analyse valuable information on how informants construct coherent identity narratives, the findings may not be exhaustive of all taste regimes, moral balancing practices or personas enacted to reconcile tensions between ethicality and luxury lifestyles. Future research could address this limitation by using our findings as basis for developing a larger-scale study with a similar group of people—for example, millennial influencers of lower HNW—to determine whether similar or additional reconciliation practices are at play in these contexts.

Furthermore, drawing on cross-cultural psychology (Kastanakis and Voyer 2014; Markus and Kitayama 1991), our results may differ in the extent to which they apply to different cultural contexts, especially outside a Western, individualist cultural context. In addition, as moral licensing may differ



depending on cultural values (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018), future research could investigate the nature and relationship between appearing ethical and pursuing luxury lifestyles in collectivist versus individualist societies. Cultures vary in the extent to which people signal status through conspicuous consumption; in turn, this could affect the type of strategy HNW social media influencers adopt in these cultural environments.

Last, social desirability bias may have played a role and shaped responses to an explicit display of care for ethics within the narratives. Previous research (Auger et al. 2003) indeed suggests that the sensitive nature of ethics as a research topic makes it susceptible to this bias.

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## Chapter 6

# Transformational Effects of Social Media Lurking Practices on Luxury Consumption<sup>8</sup>

### Abstract

Contemporary luxury brands have fully embraced social media as a quintessential channel for improving brand perceptions and developing customer relationships. However, what consumers actually do when engaging with luxury brands online has received limited attention to date. In this study, we theorize and investigate how the practices of lurking transform luxury consumption on visual social media. Specifically, we uncover four lurking practices related to luxury brand content on social media: compassing, curating, collecting, and conversing. On the one hand, these practices facilitate the de-materialization of luxury consumption by idealizing the properties of luxury brands; on the other hand, they re-materialize luxury consumption into new digital virtual actualizations. Taken together, lurking has a transformational effect on luxury consumption as evident in the ways lurkers consume intangible luxuries on visual social media. The article concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications arising from these findings.

*Keywords: Lurking; Digital virtual consumption; Unconventional luxury consumption; Visual social media*

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## 6.1 Introduction

In the past decade, luxury brands have increasingly adopted social media as the quintessential channel for improving brand perceptions and developing customer relationships (Godey et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012). Burberry was the first luxury brand to realize the potential of social media to engage consumers, which resulted in a transformation of its brand image (Phan, Thomas, & Heine, 2011). Many other luxury brands, including Dior, Prada, and Louis Vuitton, have since followed suit and proactively increased their social media presence. As of May 2018, Louis Vuitton was the most followed luxury brand on Facebook, with 22.89 million users, followed by Chanel with 21.38 million followers and Michael Kors with 17.85 million followers (Statista, 2018).

The influence of social media proliferation on luxury branding has received extensive attention from marketing scholars (Choi, Seo, Wagner, & Yoon, 2018; Godey et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012). Although early studies raised concerns that online presence might dilute the exclusivity of luxury brands (Heine & Berghaus, 2014), subsequent research indicates that social media activities can increase (rather than decrease) the favorability of and purchase intention toward luxury goods and services (Godey et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012). Most notably, Kim and Ko (2012) identify five dimensions of social media marketing efforts that are positively correlated with consumer-perceived luxury brand equity: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customization, and word of mouth.

These pioneering studies on the managerial effects of social media provide useful insights. However, they also impart a limited, broad-brush sense of what consumers actually do with luxury brands on social media, and what implications these digital practices (Reckwitz, 2002) have for postmodern luxury brand consumption (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). In particular, insights are limited into whether social media represents merely another, albeit very effective, channel for marketing communications or whether it has a more fundamental transformational effect on the field of luxury consumption. Consumer researchers have most recently argued for the latter. That is, the technological affordances of social media have engendered new forms of digital virtual practices that alter consumer performances of luxury consumption (e.g., through luxury “prosumption” entrepreneurship [Zhang, 2017] and destabilizing “heterotopian selfie” practices [Rokka & Canniford, 2016]). This nascent research has been largely informed by the concept of digital presumption, defined as the blurring of production and consumption activities enabled by the explosion of online user-generated content (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Consequently, the focus has been on how social media empowers individual consumers to enact the roles previously performed exclusively by luxury marketers, such as producing new cultural artefacts of (e.g., Koivisto & Mattila, 2018) and democratizing access to luxury brands (e.g., Zhang, 2017).

This study aims to contribute to these emerging debates about how social media transforms luxury consumption in the digital virtual age. In contrast with these studies, however, we focus on the passive practices of luxury brand “lurking” (Kefi & Maar, 2018). Specifically, we conceptualize and empirically investigate how passive social media practices of lurking (i.e., practices not involving active participation in the production of content) transform the field of luxury consumption. The rationale for such an approach is twofold. First, as Kefi and Maar (2018) note, both scholars and luxury managers have largely neglected the value of lurking; yet lurking is an important activity because consumers who choose merely to follow, rather than contribute to, the content of luxury brands could be some of these brands’ most loyal customers (Kefi & Maar, 2018). Previous studies also suggest that more consumers lurk on social media than actively contribute to its content (Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014), especially in the case of luxury brands (Quach & Thaichon, 2017). Second, although research underscores the importance of lurking for luxury brand consumption (Kefi & Maar, 2018), it neither sufficiently details nor theorizes about whether and how lurking may have a transformational effect on the field of luxury consumption (e.g., how consumers develop a taste for luxury brands).

To address these important issues, we draw on the ontological properties of digital virtual consumption (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Shields, 2002) and investigate two research questions: (1) What are the constituent digital virtual practices of luxury brand lurking on social media? and (2) How do these practices augment luxury consumption through the properties of digital virtual consumption? To answer these questions, we conducted a situated investigation of luxury brand lurking on the image-based social media platform Instagram, which involved 16 in-depth interviews with self-identified lurkers of luxury brand content. The findings elicit the 4Cs of luxury brand lurking practices: (1) compassing, (2) curating, (3) collecting, and (4) conversing.

A critical analysis of these lurking practices reveals that, on the one hand, lurking transforms luxury content consumption on social media through the process of de-materialization. That is, lurking practices destabilize luxury consumption on social media by rendering the physical properties of luxury brands secondary to the idealized, often imagined, properties. On the other hand, lurking also re-materializes luxury brands into new digital virtual actualizations. That is, they engender luxury consumption to acquire new “digital” materialities, thereby changing how luxury brand ideals are actualized. This creates a juxtaposition between how consumers make sense of and use luxury brands in the digital and physical worlds. Overall, we argue that lurking practices have an important transformative effect on how consumers make sense of and perform luxury consumption within and beyond social media.

## 6.2 Conceptual Background

### 6.2.1 *Luxury consumption and social media*

Early studies on the adoption of social media marketing in the field of luxury branding raised concerns about damaging exclusivity, which, at first, made luxury brands reluctant to join social media (Heine & Berghaus, 2014). Subsequent research, however, has refuted this position, showing that luxury brands incorporating social media as part of their marketing strategy tend to do better than brands that do not. In particular, Kim and Ko (2012) find that using social media marketing increases consumer-perceived luxury brand equity.

One explanation for this positive effect of social media is that the socio-cultural meanings of luxury concept, itself, have been shifting away from the traditional materialistic (i.e., signaling one's wealth and status) connotations toward more postmodern (experiential) ones (Cristini, Kauppinen-Räsänen, Barthod-Prothade, & Woodside, 2017; Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). That is, postmodern consumers prefer experiencing intangible luxuries more than engaging in material conspicuous consumption, because indulging in personal “luxury moments” (Hemetsberger, von Wallpach, & Bauer, 2012) offers consumers opportunities to transform their personal identities (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019) and even change the lives of other people (Llamas & Thomsen, 2016). Within this perspective, social media offers a platform that can satisfy the need for such experiential, unconventional, luxury consumption. Thus, it emerges as the key medium of transformational luxury consumption practices. However, with research in this area still in its infancy, scholars have called for increased understanding of how social media shapes luxury consumption (e.g., Godey et al., 2016).

### 6.2.2 *Transformational effects of social media on luxury consumption: prosumption versus lurking*

The transformational effects of social media on luxury consumption have been largely explored from the perspective of prosumption practices. For example, studies have explored how consumers create content within online brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), “prosume” as a means of self-presentation (Schau & Gilly, 2003), and use prosumption as spectacle tactics to dazzle viewers by creating content that provokes curiosity or admiration (Debord, 2012). These latter properties of prosumption are especially important for luxury consumption, given its focus on self-actualization (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). More recently, researchers have also explored prosumption practices on visual social media, such as Instagram, on which “micro-celebrities” and “normal users” create their own personal brands and publicize themselves by continuously creating content that viewers like (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015; Iqani & Schroeder, 2016; Marwick, 2015). These prosumption practices



contribute to the democratization of luxury consumption on social media. For instance, Rokka and Canniford (2016) show how, by posting heterogeneous selfie images featuring famous luxury brands on social media, consumers are able to destabilize the spatial, temporal, symbolic, and material properties of luxury brand assemblages.

Although research on luxury prosumption practices is flourishing, a gap remains in the literature in terms of understanding luxury “lurking” practices on social media. This stems partially from the fact that, as summarized in Table 13, there is no formal consensus on what constitutes the practice of lurking. While some maintain that the practice implies that consumers do not participate or post online (Schlosser, 2005), others argue that lurking occasionally involves posting online (Golder & Donath, 2004). Research also describes lurking as simply the act of seeking product information online (Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006); thus, lurking reflects a form of content consumption. There is, however, a consensus that lurkers are considerably more prevalent on social media than prosumers (Heinonen, 2011; Sun et al., 2014) and, therefore, are the main audience of visual social media content.

**Table 13. Lurking conceptualizations**

<b>Key insights</b>	<b>Concepts, themes, and sources</b>
Lurkers as visitors	Lurkers only occasionally go online to browse content (Salmon, 2002), obtain product information (Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006), and learn something specific (Lee & McKendree, 1999).
Lurkers as passive participants	Lurkers often visit a community without posting any messages (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2006) and are considered “silent members” (Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka, 2004; Sun, Rau, & Ma, 2014) or “reader-only” members (Schlosser, 2005)
Lurkers as distinct from prosumers	Lurkers post less frequently than prosumers (Ridings et al., 2006), post messages only once in a long while (Golder & Donath, 2004), engage in a consumptive form of community participation (Hartmann, Wiertz, & Arnould, 2015), and undertake “silent” engagement or passive advocacy (Kefi & Maar, 2018)

Extending these studies, we define lurking as social media practices that involve the consumption of online content. Compared with prosumption, we view lurking as not necessarily creating traditional user-generated content and make the case that lurkers take part in discussions on

social media but keep their participation private. For example, lurkers can communicate via private messaging with other online users but not create new posts for public viewing.

### 6.2.3 *Lurking as a digital virtual consumption practice*

To offer a more nuanced perspective of lurking and its transformational effects on luxury consumption, we draw on the concept of digital virtual consumption (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Shields, 2002). Underpinning this concept is an ontological view that consumption in computer-mediated environments takes place somewhere in between the properties of “material” and “virtual” (Shields, 2002). At the broadest level, material denotes the aspects of physical reality that Shields (2002) refers to as “actual real,” whereas virtual refers to the aspects of consumer imagination or “ideal real.” Building on these ontological properties, Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (2010) note that digital virtual consumption (e.g., consumption practices on social media) is neither strictly virtual nor material. On the one hand, seeing or using a product on social media is not merely imagined and thus is not merely virtual; on the other hand, this experience is also not strictly material, as digital virtual objects lack physical properties, such as weight, and cease to exist outside the boundaries of cyberspace. Thus, Denegri-Knott and Molesworth argue that digital virtual consumption constitutes a form of material actualization of the virtual idealization, in which consumers are less constrained by the boundaries and laws of the material that underpins their consumption in the physical world. This conceptualization of digital virtual consumption as occurring in an in-between space between the material and the virtual has important implications for conceiving how lurking on social media can transform luxury consumption.

First, the inherent properties of digital virtual consumption (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) imply that lurking could play a role in the process of de-materialization. This happens when what is material (e.g., tangible luxury goods) is treated as virtual or representational (e.g., photos, posts) in a digital space. In this perspective, social media acts as a simulation in which the physical world’s objects and activities are represented in an idealized, more-than-perfect way (De Souza e Silva, 2006). Here, the material aspects of consumption are thus ideally portrayed (Shields, 2002), resulting in the de-materialization of tangible possessions (Belk, 2013b) and experiences (Eckhardt, Belk, & Wilson, 2015). Social media platforms also represent a liminal space that merges the liquid (a de-materialized, ephemeral type of consumption) and the solid (a more enduring, material type of consumption) (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). A consequence of this process is that social media platforms enable consumers to “unleash their desires” (Shields, 2002) through lurking. Accordingly, we can explore how lurking transforms luxury consumption through the processes of de-materialization, whereby the physical material properties of luxury brands are rendered secondary to their virtual representations.

Second, digital virtual consumption offers new forms of consuming and possessing (Belk, 2013b) that imbue real-world objects and activities with additional digital properties unavailable in the physical world, such as allowing simulated ownership (e.g., collecting digital content in the form of wish lists) and digitally enhanced properties of consumption (e.g., creating shared pages or posts). Considering that these digital materialities are routinized within lurking practices, we consider how lurking transforms luxury consumption through the process of re-materialization, whereby luxury brands and experiences acquire digital material properties. Thus, informed by the concepts of digital virtual consumption (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010), we aim to (1) identify the key constituting practices of luxury brand lurking and (2) explore how these practices shape luxury consumption through the processes of de-materialization and re-materialization.

### 6.3 Methodology

To examine lurking practices of luxury consumption on visual social media, we chose Instagram for this study (Highfield & Leaver, 2016). Instagram constitutes a prime choice for fieldwork on this topic for two reasons. First, it is currently the most used visual social media platform, with more than one billion monthly active users (Statista, 2017), and has become widely popular, especially among generations Y and Z (Pew Research Center, 2018). Second, Instagram is a visual social media platform, as opposed to other platforms, such as Twitter, which is text-based. The nature of a social media platform (i.e., photo-, video-, or text-based) can influence the way consumers use it and the type of audiences with whom they engage. For example, Instagram allows users to self-express by sharing personal pictures, but it also allows lurking on other people's Instagram profiles (Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015).

#### 6.3.1 Data Collection

Lurkers are passive users of social media platforms. However, while they do not create content by posting about their luxury purchases, they still consume content by following accounts or searching for information, which in turn affects how they perceive, think about, and represent luxury consumption. To understand lurking practices, we adopt a qualitative, interpretative approach. Qualitative methods are especially well suited to discover, describe, and interpret individuals' personalized meanings and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Previous research has investigated social media phenomena by examining collective archival data (e.g., McQuarrie et al., 2012). However, in the context of Instagram, lurkers do not create content and, therefore, reviewing archival data was not possible. In addition, previous research on lurking mainly uses interviews (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000), online surveys (Kefi & Maar, 2018), or experiments (Schlosser, 2005) to understand lurkers and their behaviors. To this end, the first author (a millennial and Instagram user) conducted 16 semi-structured interviews (McCracken, 1988) with aspirational luxury millennial consumers who have never or seldomly purchased a luxury product/service in the past. Respondents were European citizens, aged 20–34 years, and were selected according to two criteria: (1) they followed luxury brands or other luxury-related content (e.g., created by wealthy social media influencers [SMIs]) on Instagram, and (2) their behavior on Instagram corresponded to a lurker (i.e., seldom post content, if at all, or create content). We recruited respondents through snowball sampling via social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Facebook). We conducted the interviews from January to September 2018, face-to-face or remotely via video link. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, were recorded (totaling 14 ½ hours), and were transcribed verbatim. Table 2 provides a summary of the respondent profiles. Data collection ended when saturation was achieved with no new themes emerging from the interviews (McCracken, 1988).

Interviews began by asking respondents general questions about their background, experience with social media in general, and how their usage had evolved over time, to initiate a conversation (McCracken, 1988). Then, the interviews moved to the topic of personal experience with Instagram as a platform and the extent to which the respondents followed luxury content. Questions included why they initially joined Instagram, how they began following luxury content, and why they believed this type of content was relevant for them. Respondents were then prompted to recall experiences they had while viewing luxury content on Instagram and to further discuss their thoughts related to those examples. Throughout the interview process, respondents were also encouraged to look at their Instagram account as a form of elicitation technique, to prompt them to elaborate more on their habits and experiences on the platform. All interviews were conducted in a conversational and open-ended format (McCracken, 1988). This format encouraged respondents to talk freely about their experiences and habits on Instagram and perceptions of lurking in particular and of luxury in general.

**Table 14. Respondent profiles**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Country of current residence</b>	<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
<b>Lena</b>	29	German	Germany	Germany	Management consultant
<b>Tibby</b>	21	German	England	Germany	Undergraduate student
<b>Bridget</b>	27	Danish	Denmark	Faroe Islands	Graduated/unemployed
<b>Amber</b>	27	British	England	British	Postgraduate student
<b>Alexis</b>	20	German	England	Germany	Undergraduate student
<b>George</b>	20	Luxemburgish	Luxemburg	Luxemburg	Undergraduate student
<b>Zach</b>	21	French/German/Swiss	England	France	Undergraduate student
<b>Bradley</b>	21	Croatian	England	Croatia	Undergraduate student
<b>Erica</b>	27	Belgian	Belgium	Belgium	Head of human resources
<b>Jenna</b>	34	Finnish	Finland	Finland	Forensics manager
<b>Maria</b>	32	Spanish	Germany	Spain	Postgraduate student
<b>Mike</b>	32	Danish	Denmark	Faroe Islands	Travel retail manager
<b>Blake</b>	26	British	England	United Kingdom	Marketing assistant
<b>Nancy</b>	27	Kazakhstan	France	Kazakhstan	Postgraduate student
<b>Emily</b>	26	French	England	France	Market researcher
<b>Carmen</b>	27	Greek	France	Greece	Postgraduate student

Note: All respondent names are pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

### 6.3.2 Analysis

We used a hermeneutical analysis to interpret emerging themes in the data (Thompson, 1997). According to prior research, this approach is particularly useful in understanding luxury consumption practices (e.g., Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). Hermeneutic analysis evaluates consumer stories in relation to brand or life events (Thompson, 1997). The coding was carried out by the first author and then analyzed jointly with the second and third authors, who checked the initial coding. The coded data were then subjected to sorting according to the codes that had been assigned, and abstracted to the findings presented for each category of lurking practices. This process contained two parts. First, we read individual interviews to gain a deep understanding of consumers' journeys through Instagram, their motivations for lurking, and their personal views on luxury and luxury consumption practices online. Second, we analyzed the interviews to identify preliminary emergent elements of practices (Shove & Pantzar, 2005), through an iterative process. We then categorized preliminary codes through

an inductive coding process. After that, four more interviews were conducted and then analyzed in light of the previous findings to reach saturation (McCracken, 1988). After coding all interviews once, we then used digital virtual consumption (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) as our enabling theory to further interpret and categorize our data corpus and codes. Ultimately, four main themes emerged from the data, based on theoretical interpretation: compassing, curating, collecting, and conversing. We then uploaded and coded the full interview data using NVivo 12 software. To ensure trustworthiness of the analysis (Denzin, 2017), all authors discussed the hermeneutical interpretations of the findings and altered them through a back-and-forth process.

## 6.4 Findings

We elicit four practices related to how lurking transforms luxury consumption on visual social media that vary in the degree to which they reflect de-materialization (i.e., idealization of the physical properties of luxury brands) and re-materialization (i.e., offering new digital virtual actualizations of luxury brands): (1) compassing, (2) curating, (3) collecting, and (4) conversing. Importantly, rather than representing a sequence of practices, these practices can occur in varying order. Table 3 summarizes each practice and its associated aspects.

**Table 15. Summary of the 4Cs of social media lurking practices**

<b>Practice</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>De-materialization/ re-materialization</b>
Compassing	Lurking practice of exploring the digital virtual world of luxury consumption by researching content related to experiential luxury	<i>De-materialization</i> (by searching for idealized luxury content)
Curating	Lurking practice of being more selective in the kind of luxury content lurkers want to consume, by curating and personalizing luxury content	<i>De-materialization</i> (by being more selective)  <i>Re-materialization</i> (by personalizing luxury content)
Collecting	Lurking practice of collecting luxury content	<i>Re-materialization</i> (by simulating ownership of luxury through wish lists)
Conversing	Lurking practice that contributes to augmenting experiential luxury consumption as sharing and thus engaging in private conversations with close friends	<i>Re-materialization</i> (by co-creating new luxury brand meanings)

6.4.1 *Compassing*

Our findings suggest that Instagram, a digital virtual space, acts as the first gateway to the world of luxury consumption. We define compassing as the practice that allows users to navigate the space they are in and, thus, to get a sense of their environment. We use this term to explain the lurking practice of exploring the digital virtual world of luxury consumption on Instagram. In the physical world, aspirational luxury consumers encounter materialities that constrain them (e.g., access to luxury retail stores, ability to purchase luxury products) (Bourdieu, 1984). In the digital virtual space of Instagram, luxury content is ubiquitous. Therefore, the practice of lurking compasses luxury beyond material constraints. The process of de-materialization for this practice occurs as consumers begin to idealize the physical properties of luxury brands. Consumers are thus in search of “virtualized” luxury by viewing luxury-related content on Instagram. Here, lurkers typically research for content about experiential luxury (e.g., luxury lifestyle posts).

For me it's more like window-shopping, having experiences on your phone. So I use a lot of hashtags. When I go really deep on Instagram that I do from time to time it's when I click on hashtags a lot. I like hashtags that refer to places, because sometimes I use Instagram to look for things to do, places that I don't know. (Maria)

This respondent discusses over-consumption as a way to find and identify virtual luxury experiences on Instagram. Respondents also described a feeling of being able to choose what they want to consume on Instagram:

I think I open the app maybe 30 times per day ... maybe even more. Who knows? I'm addicted. I think I can't get enough of finding content on Instagram. The search button is good and bad at the same time. You can basically search anything that you like. I find myself navigating on the platform, searching for luxury stuff, extraordinary travelling stuff, lifestyle posts for maybe an hour or so when I'm in bed. (Carmen)

It gives me access to the kind of luxury I would probably never experience in real life. And because I can keep searching for new content, it's endless. It's hard to stop searching, because every time I find new content that I have never seen before. (Emily)

In summary, the practice of compassing is a fundamental step toward de-materializing luxury consumption from its physical properties and re-materializing it as an online consumption experience.

Notably, unlike in the physical world, in the digital virtual world, lurkers can (over-)consume idealized luxury content as much as they want, as online content is infinite.

#### 6.4.2 *Curating*

Through the practice of curating, lurkers begin following accounts or hashtags displaying the luxury content they like. This practice transforms luxury content into something that feels almost owned and personalized. Personalization creates a new type of digital materiality, though it remains to be more idealized than the physical materiality. The practice of curating reflects both de-materialization and re-materialization of luxury consumption. Through de-materialization, curating allows lurkers to further idealize or re-create their “ideal” luxury consumption on social media, by being more selective about the kind of content they consume. Through re-materialization, lurkers actualize luxury consumption by personalizing their main feed. Indeed, lurkers carefully curate experiential luxury-related content by following specific Instagram accounts, thus ensuring that they will see a steady flow of luxury content. As one respondent said:

What I like looking at are the different luxury places, I can't remember the name of this guy but he always posts pictures. It's one of those Rich Kids of Instagram guys but he specifically posts about houses.... I mainly follow beautiful places and views. Not so much some products, I mean I do, but they don't really come on my feed I guess because I never like them. (Jenna)

In this example, Jenna stresses that her preferred luxury-related content is mainly locations, houses, or luxurious lifestyles. Here, the material and more traditional role of luxury brands is not acknowledged. It is through the digital virtual consumption of experiences, rather than the display of products, that lurkers seem to find satisfaction. Furthermore, in fulfilling their daily rituals of regularly checking luxury-curated content on Instagram, lurkers can daydream and fantasize about possible experiential luxury consumption, which is in sharp contrast to their offline, physical life that does not contain luxury experiences. As two respondents explained:

I follow either things that make me feel good when I look at them or I follow things that I would like to have in my life. Like ideas. I like to follow places or nice houses, it gives me ideas of what's out there and what I could have maybe later in the future. I also follow people that I feel like that is a kind of life I would be interested in. So there has to be something for me in it. (Bradley)



I like that I can curate luxury content on Instagram. I get to pick and choose what I want to see every day on my feed. That way I won't ever see content that I'm not interested in. And Instagram has so much content that I know I'll never run dry. (Alexis)

The practice of curating helps further idealize luxury consumption, converting luxury consumption from material to digital virtual consumption. Instagram's primarily visual nature (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016) increases the consumption of luxury-related content, as aspects of luxury consumption are de-materialized online through idealization (Schroeder, 2002). On the other hand, curating also re-materializes luxury with new digital material properties, such as enabling consumers to personalize their main social media feed on luxury consumption.

#### 6.4.3 *Collecting*

Lurkers also consume luxury content on Instagram through the practice of collecting (Belk, 1995, 2013a). For example, when lurkers encounter luxury content that satisfies them, they incorporate it into their luxury consumption "wish list", bringing new meaning to their collections (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010). Thus, the process of re-materialization of luxury consumption is further reinforced through collecting, by incorporating digital virtual material properties, such as simulated ownership of luxury. Wish lists can be physical (e.g., written in a notebook), mental (e.g., imaginary), or digital (e.g., screenshots saved on Instagram). A respondent discussed how she uses her physical wish list:

I also use Instagram to look for luxury places I would like to travel to. I follow a couple of users that travel a lot and if I see a place I like I do the same as with the clothing, I write it in my notebook. (Maria)

In Maria's case, these luxury experiences become materialized, as she is, on some occasions, able to experience luxury offline; however, of all the respondents, she was the only one to do so. Other respondents noted that Instagram's recent feature allowing them to save or collect content has enabled them to preserve wishful, dream-like luxurious content. Some respondents also argued that these luxury experiences remained virtual for them, as they are not able to materialize their wishes. The following respondent discussed his digital wish list:

Sometimes instead of going through my feed I go through my list of saved Instagram posts. It's like a compilation of everything I would wish to have or own. Dunno if I'll actually end up having it or

owning it, but at least I have my secret box of wants and wishes. A bit like an unreal genie in the lamp, except the genie won't grant my wishes. (Emily)

Finally, this feature of collecting digital luxury content gives lurkers a feeling of power and ownership over luxury content they would like to experience. However, this feature also reflects the ambivalence of digital virtual possession, as such possession of luxury content is not fully owned but is also not experienced as being completely virtual. In summary, the practice of collecting is the first point of re-materializing luxury consumption.

#### *6.4.4 Conversing*

Often, lurkers also engage in the practice of conversing. Unlike prosumers, who publicly share content, lurkers privately share luxury content to other lurkers via direct message or other messaging devices. Moreover, in contrast with prosumption practices, conversing is a practice that is particularly invisible to brands and other viewers, and thus it remains within the broader practices of lurking. In this case, re-materialization occurs as lurkers co-create new luxury brand meanings by conversing with fellow lurkers on Instagram. This practice of conversing is highly prominent, as two respondents noted:

I usually send Direct Messages to my friend every week. We never comment or post anything on Instagram you know, so that's probably the only thing I often do - send messages. My messages contain luxury content I forward to my friend like luxurious places I wish I could go to. (Zach)

This last practice seems to contribute to augmenting the experiential nature of luxury consumption. Sharing, and thus engaging in a private conversation with close friends, can help enhance the overall online luxury consumption experience and serve as an alternative way to further idealize luxurious content on Instagram.

I usually send posts that I find on Instagram to my boyfriend. I really like that you can share on Instagram. My boyfriend sees the post in his messages and either likes it or writes something back. We often talk about the post once we see each other. It's like this feeling of being able to share your dreams. Yeah, we share our future luxurious dreams with each other. It sounds stupid ... because we'll probably never have that kind of lifestyle, but it's nice to be able to dream together about it, to imagine what it would be. (Emily)

The feeling of ownership that emerges from the practice of collecting is further reinforced by the practice of conversing. This is because the sense of ownership, which is now mutually shared with another consumer, is enhanced. Through a series of interactive narratives, consumers acknowledge the luxury content being shared, create new luxury meaning through narratives, and, in doing so, re-materialize it. By conversing, lurkers actualize luxury consumption (Shields, 2002).

Taken together, these four practices, by mutually reinforcing one another, de-materialize, augment, and re-materialize online luxury consumption and thus serve as a gateway for consumers to experience extraordinary luxury consumption. Moreover, these practices help to democratize luxury experiences even further. That is, as lurkers consume intangible luxuries on visual social media, they gain a ‘simulated’ ownership of luxury brands that they cannot afford in the physical world. This democratization of luxury experiences is further reinforced by the stories and narratives luxury consumers create for one another.

## 6.5 Discussion

Informed by the theory of digital virtual consumption (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010), and through an in-depth analysis of 16 interviews with lurking luxury consumers on Instagram, we identified four lurking practices of luxury consumption on visual social media. These practices are enabled by the very nature of visual social media, which allows users to receive and create content at the same time. Compared with traditional, text-based social media, visual social media enables the creation of idealized luxury content, not only through pictures but also through archiving and lurking of this type of content. Overall, this article uncovers an unconventional form of luxury content consumption by examining digital virtual consumption in the form of compassing, curating, collecting, and conversing of luxury content. Each practice contributes to shaping the social media users’ performativity of virtual luxury consumption.

### 6.5.1 *Theoretical implications*

Building on previous research on recent cultural shifts in luxury consumption (Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013), this article’s theoretical contribution is threefold. First, we show that, in contrast with previous research (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010), luxury content consumption practices on Instagram are different from traditional luxury practices of tangible luxury goods. Specifically, lurkers use Instagram to consume intangible luxuries; that is, the representations of brand artefacts, in the form

of pictures, become the object of consumption and discussion, rather than the items themselves. In the context of visual social media, consumers are interested in the online display of luxury content rather than in simply following a specific luxury brand per se (Leban & Voyer, 2015). Whereas traditional luxury consumption knowledge and expertise are tied to actual physical consumption, digital virtual consumption allows lurkers to develop knowledge and expertise about a specific product or brand in a way that is not connected with physical ownership of branded products. This unconventional form of expertise develops through the transformational effect of digital virtual luxury consumption through lurking. This contribution is in line with recent research suggesting that luxury is undergoing a series of transformations (Cristini et al., 2017). Traditional luxury meaning is shifting from owning tangible luxuries to experiencing intangible, unconventional luxuries.

Second, this study advances the emerging literature on lurking practices (see Kefi & Maar, 2018). Despite receiving more attention in the literature, however, lurking practices and lurkers themselves are not yet fully understood, especially in the context of visual social media. We show that lurking practices do not simply entail browsing or accessing online content and that lurkers are not merely visitors on social media platforms. We delineate a set of practices that differ from but complement those reported in previous research (Kefi & Maar, 2018; Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Schlosser, 2005; Sun et al., 2014). Indeed, we find that lurking practices on visual social media can also be a way to digitally over-indulge luxury consumption, something that cannot happen in the physical world.

Third, the findings contribute to and extend research on daydreaming practices. Stevens and Maclaran (2005) suggest that consumers can daydream about content in magazines and that, in doing so, they can re-enact past shopping experiences. In a similar vein, we show that Instagram offers a new and unconventional way to consume luxury content. In this case, lurkers are not seeking to re-experience past shopping experiences, as they have never purchased luxury, and may never have an access to the tangible counterparts of their intangible luxuries that they enjoy viewing. Moreover, editors and other people belonging to the fashion industry frame the content of magazines (Stevens & Maclaran, 2005), whereas our research investigates a form of luxury content that is less restrictive and not curated by editors. That is, lurkers on visual social media platforms, such as Instagram, consume luxury content that is created by anyone, picking and choosing what they want to see. Overall, this research suggests that the endless possibilities of content consultation, engagement, and curation offered by visual social media platforms further enhance imaginary rather than actual real-life consumption.

6.5.2 *Managerial implications*

Prosumption practices have been around for more than a decade, with brands increasingly engaging with consumers by asking them to re-post brand-related content on social media (thus creating new content) or simply to participate in discussions on brand pages (Jin, 2012; Kim & Ko, 2012). According to Kefi and Maar (2018), managers tend to ignore lurkers, even though they constitute a wide audience on social media. This research argues that managers should consider lurkers as an important secondary audience that nurtures a strong desire for luxury products, and which can, indirectly, increase the desirability of their products and services. Lurkers, even though they do not contribute to the creation of content online, may translate their online practices into more traditional, offline behaviors, such as window shopping, engaging in conversations with peers, or even in-store visits.

To engage with lurkers, managers can design branded social media content in a way that facilitates lurkers' engagement in the four practices discussed above. For instance, advertising and content development that puts products and services at the center-stage – e.g. a close up on a perfume bottle – will incite lurkers to engage in collecting practices. Platforms that allow lurkers to engage in multiple practices, such as Instagram, may offer a better channel for companies looking to reach out to a large audience of lurkers. Alternatively, when favoring other platforms, such as Pinterest or Tumblr, brands should emphasize the practices that may be more predominant on these platforms, such as curating and collecting. This could take the form of official accounts offering easy to 'pin' / save content, to encourage lurkers to curate and collect the items they like.

In addition, luxury brands should pay special attention to the first two types of luxury consumption practices identified. Both compassing and curating are crucial for luxury brands because they help lurkers to fulfill a desire to over-indulge in luxury experiences in a non-material way. This form of unconventional luxury consumption is, for most people, the main or only way they can consume luxury. Thus, luxury brand managers should try to better understand what exactly lurkers search for on social media, when trying to curate intangible luxury experiences. Features such as hashtags and geo-tags are powerful tools that can lure consumers into following—a precursor to lurking—luxury brand content. In addition, professional social media accounts offer search functions to explore trending content, detailed statistics on views, likes and other forms of passive and active audience engagement, which may help managers to provide lurkers with the type of content they look for. For instance, the number of views of specific posts may reveal the type of picture layout that should be adopted to best capture the attention of viewers.

Finally, when collaborating with social media influencers (SMIs), luxury companies need to take into consideration the role of lurkers, as they are an indirect force driving what SMIs may post or share. Lurkers gradually develop expertise, and some regular lurkers may become more knowledgeable about luxury products than occasional luxury consumers. In other words, expert lurkers may find themselves paradoxically more knowledgeable than some SMIs, simply because lurking practices give them a structured and solid approach to generating knowledge. As lurkers engage in offline discussions about the type of content they see online, they may play a powerful role in shaping the preferences of other luxury consumers.

### *6.5.3 Limitations and future research*

This research has several limitations, which may lead to future research. First, the respondents were European millennials who came from an upper-middle-class background. This homogeneous target population was also well-versed in using social media. Future research could thus investigate whether any cross-cultural or generational differences exist in luxury consumption lurking practices. For example, previous research suggests that luxury consumption practices in East Asian countries differ from those in Western countries (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). More specifically, East Asian consumers tend to adopt a bandwagon type of luxury consumption (Kastanakis & Voyer, 2014), which could mean that lurking practices are of even greater importance to them, as these practices likely shape their understanding of what constitutes common consumption trends. Cultural differences may also affect the type of lurking practices these consumers adopt on social media. Similarly, future research could explore whether generation Z (people born in the late 1990s) exhibit different types of lurking practices than the generation Y respondents interviewed in this study.

Second, this research focuses solely on the Instagram platform, on the grounds that it is currently the most widely used visual social media platform (Pew Research Center, 2018). Further research could explore differences and similarities in practices across other visual social media platforms, such as Tumblr and Pinterest. Doing so could lead to an updated typology of practices across platforms, enabled by different or novel functionalities. For example, the weblog-type functionalities of Tumblr may lead consumers to favor a curating practice over other practices. Furthermore, the dashboard functionality of Pinterest, which allows users to “pin” or curate content into digital “pinboards,” may put more emphasis on collecting. Given that no functionalities on either Tumblr or Pinterest allow interaction between members, the lurking practice of conversing would not be applicable in this case.

Third, with the rapid evolution of visual social media platforms (e.g., the introduction of Instagram Stories, similar to features introduced by Snapchat, another visual social media platform in which posts are available for only 24 hours), the role of luxury content idealization through pictures might evolve, and new practices may emerge. Future research could explore how such additional features may affect luxury consumption practices on Instagram and other platforms.

Altogether, this research advances the understanding of unconventional luxury consumption practices. As it uncovers new online practices that contribute to luxury consumption, one of the key takeaways is that further research is needed to better understand the way online and offline practices interact. That is, more research is required to understand how lurking practices can translate into real-world consumer behaviors, for instance by looking at how preferences can be shaped by lurking and the enhanced imaginary triggered by social media usage. Similarly, real-world consumer behavior practices (e.g. window shopping) may translate in online lurking practices (curating a list of pictures of an item seen worn by a friend). Understanding the interaction and complementarity between online and offline consumption practices is therefore important to fully capture the meaning of lurking.

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## Chapter 7

### Discussion and conclusion

#### 7.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this thesis has been to examine millennials' luxury consumption on visual social media. Three main research questions have guided this thesis: 1) How do consumers define luxury? 2) How do consumers display luxury on Instagram? 3) How do consumers consume luxury on Instagram? I have addressed these questions with three distinct datasets, each exploring a different facet of the links between luxury consumption and social media behavior. Each paper contained herein examines a different aspect of luxury consumption on visual social media: personal branding (Chapter 4), luxury lifestyle and ethicality (Chapter 5), and lurking (Chapter 6). The analyses in these three papers have been conducted using varied data types (e.g., Instagram data, upper-class social media influencers), methods (e.g., netnography, content analysis, phenomenological interviews), and types of consumers (e.g., wealthy micro-celebrities, lurkers). The final discussion chapter reviews some implications for theory and practice (Section 7.2) and elaborates on some limitations and suggestions for further research in the domains of luxury and social media behavior (Section 7.3).

#### 7.2 Implications

In addition to the specific theoretical and managerial contributions detailed at the end of each paper (Chapters 4–6), as well as an overview of the findings and contributions shown in Table 16 (below), the following sections provide an overarching view of how this thesis contributes to extant literature on luxury and social media.

**Table 16. The main findings and contributions of the papers**

	<b>First paper</b>	<b>Second paper</b>	<b>Third paper</b>
<b>Title</b>	The affluent on Instagram: How wealthy micro-celebrities maintain online secular immortality through personal branding strategies	Constructing Personas: How High-Net-Worth Social Media Influencers Reconcile Ethicality and Living a Luxury Lifestyle	Transformational effects of social media lurking practices on luxury consumption
<b>Main findings</b>	Wealthy micro-celebrities use four personal branding strategies to attain, maintain, or enhance their online secular immortality on Instagram: (1) exclusivity, (2) immateriality, (3) performativity, and (4) carnality. These personal branding strategies allows them to differentiate themselves from mainstream micro-celebrities.	HNW social media influencers reconcile ethicality and living a luxury lifestyle through the enactment of three types of personas on Instagram: (1) Ambassador of ‘True’ Luxury, (2) Altruist, and (3) ‘Good’ Role Model. They conspicuously enact and display ethicality, as a way to retain legitimacy in the field of luxury consumption.	Followers (lurkers) use four lurking practices related to luxury brand content on social media: (1) compassing, (2) curating, (3) collecting, and (4) conversing. These practices allow for the de-materialization of luxury consumption (through the idealization the properties of luxury brands); as well as the re-materialization of luxury consumption into new digital virtual actualizations.  Overall, lurking has a transformational effect on luxury consumption as evident in the ways lurkers consume intangible luxuries on visual social media.
<b>Main contributions</b>	First, it contributes to the personal branding literature by offering insights into the strategies young, wealthy micro-celebrities adopt, as well as showing how the co-creation of their personal brand with followers is important for their brand to be successful.  Second, the study extends current understanding of luxury consumption and its display on social media. Wealthy micro-celebrities display a more unconventional, experiential form of luxury content (e.g. travelling and leisure activities).  Third, this research extends the concept of secular immortality to an online context. For wealthy micro-celebrities, becoming famous on social media is a way to be mediatized and attain public recognition. These micro-celebrities give up cultural capital to achieve online secular immortality.	First, aspects of the conceptual framework on social moral licensing (Lasarov and Hoffmann 2018) are applied to the context of luxury consumption.  Second, two sub-categories of conspicuous moral licensing are identified: continuous and occasional. This extends the concept of persona as an impression management strategy to appear ethical.  Third, through the notion of taste regimes, the paper shows how tensions between ethicality and luxury are context dependent and particular to those who have authoritative narrative power (e.g. HNW social media influencers).	First, we show that luxury content consumption practices on Instagram are unconventional, in the sense that digital virtual consumption allows lurkers to develop knowledge and expertise about a specific product or brand in a way that is not connected with physical ownership of branded products.  Second, this study advances the emerging literature on lurking practices by showing that lurkers are not merely online visitors, but that that lurking practices on visual social media can also be a way to digitally over-indulge luxury consumption, something that cannot happen in the physical world.  Third, the findings contribute to and extend research on daydreaming practices. Contrary to magazine consumption daydreaming, visual social media platforms further enhance imaginery rather than actual real-life consumption.

### 7.2.1 *Theoretical implications*

The contribution of this thesis to the literature is threefold. First, it extends literature in consumer research by exploring how upper-class (or elite) consumers engage with new conspicuous consumption strategies in asserting their social status and distinction online. Until recently, research on conspicuous consumption has mainly been product centric assuming that status and wealth were signaled through conspicuous consumption by showcasing visible elements such as luxury brand logos, or the ownership of other noticeable luxury products (e.g. Dubois et al., 2005; Han et al., 2010; Hirschman, 1990; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012, 2014; Veblen, 1899; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). However, with the liquidification of society – due to globalization and digitalization – status markers are not necessarily tied to class indicators anymore (e.g. family history or level of education). Consequently, although elites are still prevalent, a new ‘elite’ is emerging who claims status through knowledge, flexibility and attention (Currid-Halkett, 2017; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). For instance, this new elite diverts from traditional conspicuous consumption behavior (compared to the leisure class) by signaling they are scarce, overworked and ‘busy’ individuals (Bellezza, Paharia, & Keinan, 2017). The emergence of this new elite poses major threats to old elites who, until recently, did not need to continuously reinstate their position in the social hierarchy as they were seen as patrons of culture and society (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Consumers, such as social media influencers, are able to portray living successful and luxurious lifestyles through creating luxury related content online, regardless of their position in the social hierarchy offline (Rettberg, 2017; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Thus, old elites feel threatened of losing legitimacy within the ‘field’ (Bourdieu, 1984) they belong to – the world of high-status luxury consumption.

As suggested by Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020), this thesis shows how elites engage with two social status and distinction strategies: flexibility and attention. Regarding flexibility, elites conspicuously portray online fluid and mobile (luxury) lifestyles. This can be seen in how they engage in leisure and travelling activities across the globe, adopting albeit momentarily, different identity positions (e.g. student, globe trotter, ambassador of luxury, professional influencer). Elites use attention as a form of social capital in heightening their status online (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; Marwick, 2015). This is done through gaining popularity through shares, followers, likes on visual social media (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Marwick, 2015; Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Attention-seeking can also be seen as form of conspicuous consumption practice as elites use personal branding strategies that signal not only their social capital, but also their economic and cultural capital. Thus, this ‘new’ strategy to gain status is not new per se, but can be seen as the evolution of Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption in a digital and virtual environment (Faucher, 2014). Attention can also be linked to previous research on elite public status signaling, such as Hirschman (1990)’s work on how the affluent immortalize or preserve their

name and family legacy by acquiring or donating to public institutions such as monuments, art collections and museums – displaying their family name next to the cause they have donated to (Abélès, 2002).

In order for elites to successfully gain notoriety on visual social media they must be flexible in performing different identities close to what they would deem to be the ideal self (Belk, 2013; Pitcan et al., 2018), and showcasing content that their followers would like to consume. Attention is a social capital strategy that developed with the rise of micro-celebrities on social media platforms (Rokka & Canniford, 2016; Marwick, 2015). In paper one, we show that these prosumption practices (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) are specific to elites or wealthy micro-celebrities: exclusivity, immateriality, performativity and carnality. These findings answer Eckhardt & Bardhi (2020)’s call for research in exploring how personal branding strategies are enacted using flexibility and attention. Moreover, as discussed in paper one and two, we look at a specific segment on luxury social media influencers called high-net-worth social media influencers, as they are an ideal and extreme case of luxury consumers. These differ, as they do not have the monetary or the need for status to broadcast their lives online. Most research in prosumption has looked at more mainstream social media influencers who seek to make a name for themselves online by proclaiming to be opinion leaders of fashion wear, for instance (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012). This thesis makes a point that there are many types of social media influencers, some perhaps more relevant in portraying luxury online. These differences can be reflected in their prosumption/personal branding practices, as certain types of social media influencers have different motivations as to being visible online. A suggested typology is reflected in the table below:

**Table 17. A typology of social media influencers portraying luxury online**

<b>Types of SMIs</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Possible motivations for being visible online</b>
<b>Traditional celebrities</b>	Penelope Cruz/Chanel Rihanna/Dior	To continue to build their offline personal brand; to become luxury brand ambassadors
<b>High-Net-Worth Individuals</b>	Millionaire heirs, socialites (as seen in this thesis)	To retain legitimacy within their luxury consumption field; to achieve online secular immortality
<b>Mainstream</b>	Fashionistas, bloggers, foodies	To be recognized as opinion leaders; to become experts within their organizational field

Second, this thesis extends recent research on the dematerialization or liquidification of luxury (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Previous research focused on luxury product consumption such as conspicuous consumption behavior (see Grossman & Shapiro, 1988), for instance the purchase of luxury goods with salient brand logos (Han et al, 2010), good quality and craftsmanship (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Overall, the traditional stream of luxury research investigated the motivations to buy ‘typical’ luxury products or services (e.g. Han et al., 2010), from brands to expensive cars or hotels (e.g. Wang & Griskevicius, 2014). However, contrary to previous traditional luxury research, this thesis investigated how consumers are not only interested in the ownership of such products, but are also seeking experiences, or ‘moments’ of luxury (Bauer, von Wallpach, & Hemetsberger, 2011; Hemetsberger, von Wallpach, & Bauer, 2012) through the use of visual social media. Luxury is characterized by some consumers as travelling experiences that serve as a way to gain knowledge and cultural capital (Weinberger et al., 2017), and thus making the consumer more ‘flexible’ (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Weinberger et al. (2017) show how young adults have the urge to engage in exploratory experiential consumption as a way to collect cultural capital, fearing this opportunity will be unavailable once they have settled in adulthood. Indeed, young adults’ primary motives in consuming luxury have been linked to self-expansion and novelty seeking, as a way to build their ideal selves (de Kerviler & Rodriguez, 2019).

Since the democratization of luxury (Roper, Caruana, Medway, & Murphy, 2013), luxury goods have become more accessible to the masses. Consequently, the accumulation of experiences can be seen as a way for consumers to distinguish themselves through identity work (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Consumption experiences are thus considered to be status symbols (Marwick, 2013). This thesis showed in all three papers that experiential luxury is what elite social media influencers are primarily displaying to appeal to their followers. Similar to Simmel (1957)’s trickle-down effect in which the upper-class sets cultural preferences and trends (e.g. fashion), and admirers or lower-classes seek to adopt these cultural preferences, paper three specifically shows that followers of elite social media influencers – also known as lurkers - daydream that they will one day emulate these luxury consumption practices.

Third, it contributes to growing literature on morality in luxury consumption. As discussed in paper two, as elites become public (online) figures, they are faced with criticism from wider public in that they engage with immoral behavior and lack authenticity (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Therefore, high-net-worth social media influencers must be strategic on how they brand themselves online. As many types of social media influencers conspicuously show luxurious lifestyles on visual social media, high-net-worth social media influencers not only feel threatened that they are losing legitimacy within their

field, but they are also keen in distancing themselves from what they consider tasteless showcasing of luxury consumption by portraying a more discreet and inconspicuous side of luxury (Berger and Ward 2010; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015). Indeed, conspicuous consumption is often linked with wastefulness (Veblen, 1899) and wealth is often linked with ascribed advantage and thus a lack in prosocial motives (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Therefore, when high-net-worth social media influencers portray themselves online they tactfully show elements of ‘ordinariness’ (Jarness and Friedman 2017; Khan 2012a; Savage, Bagnall, and Longhurst 2001; Sherman 2018) in their everyday lives. Adopting mundane, casual element in their lifestyle is said to be due to high-net-worth individuals feeling insecure of their moral legitimacy (Hahl, Zuckerman, & Kim, 2017). High-net-worth individuals counter-act this insecurity by borrowing what they consider ‘authentic’ tastes from the masses (Reeves 2019). Thus, we show that high-net-worth individuals pursue both distinction-seeking, and at the same time authenticity-seeking when portraying themselves publicly (Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Hahl, Zuckerman, & Kim, 2017). These ‘ordinary’ and mundane activities that they engage with online can range from spending time with family, friends, pets, or show that they have a very ‘busy’ lifestyle with academic or corporate demands (e.g. Bellezza, Paharia, & Keinan, 2017). This again shows how these individuals have ‘flexible’ selves: from showing that they live an exclusive, luxurious lifestyle with many societal responsibilities (e.g. philanthropy), to having mundane constraints that the wider population endures (e.g. graduating from university).

This strategy of appearing ‘ordinary’, and thus relatable to their audience is called the ‘relatability technique’ often used by successful social media influencers (e.g. McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2012). This technique helps influencers keep a close relationship with their audience, and receive sympathy from the wider public. Contrary to Bourdieu (1984)’s notion of distinction-seeking through highbrow cultural activities that only the elites had access to (e.g. going to the opera), we show that these high-net-worth social media influencers engage with authenticity and ordinariness to distance themselves from assumptions from the wider public that they are immoral, power hungry, snobbish and status-seeking. In essence, we investigate how these high-net-worth social media influencers, by engaging with social moral licensing activities (i.e. continuous, occasional and relative conspicuous social moral licensing) enact personas related to their ideal selves (Belk, 2013; Higgins, 1987; Pitcan et al., 2018; Sirgy 1982). This is a way for elites to attain ‘moral credits’, or to show that they were capable of doing good deeds – acting as a way to counter-balance previous bad deeds (Abélès, 2002).

7.2.2 *Managerial implications*

This thesis provides several managerial implications. First, it proposes ways in which digital virtual consumption insights can be applied in a practical manner. Indeed, findings showed that through digital virtual consumption practices, consumers idealize luxury consumption. This is particularly relevant for luxury brands as it could fuel consumers' desire to consume luxury. Visual social media augments consumers' desire of luxury by augmenting the number of things that can be wished for (e.g. through lurking practices of compassing, curating, collecting and conversing). Research on consumer desire (e.g. Belk, 2001; Belk et al., 2003; Stevens & MacLaran, 2005) has often portrayed consumers as having their own agency, who independently daydream about an idealized kind of luxury through external market resources such as advertising. However the increase use of visual social media gathers different ways of consumers' practicing desire. Therefore, the findings give practitioners insights as to what kind of marketing strategies they might implement in order to co-produce desire (Belk, 2001; Belk et al., 2003; Stevens & MacLaran, 2005) on visual social media platforms. As Ko, Costello & Taylor (2019) point out; luxury brands face a dilemma in their need to remain exclusive and desirable, with their need to appeal to new emerging consumers. These emerging consumers have different definitions of what luxury is for them. Marketers should take into consideration that prosumers and lurkers view luxury in an unconventional, experiential way rather than in a more traditional, materialistic way (i.e. ownership of luxury products). Accordingly, marketers could focus on the experiential aspect of luxury when creating social media marketing campaigns. For instance, they could emphasize elements such as travelling and lifestyle, more so than showcasing their luxury products in abstract settings (e.g. a picture of a luxury handbag against a plain pink background).

Moreover, the sample used in paper three constituted mainly young adults whom exhibited certain resistance to actualizing their consumption desires through the purchasing of luxury goods. Nevertheless, these young consumers could diffuse this idealization or desire through either creating content (e.g. prosumption practice) or through interacting with others (lurkers on private messages). Although this thesis did not look at consumers' different life phases in (virtually) consuming luxury, it could be a possibility that in the case of lurkers, they could eventually purchase luxurious products or services as they become older and earn a higher income. Further, this idealized type of luxury could be a standard that these consumers, albeit unconsciously, strive to achieve or own in their near future lives (see Price al., 2017).

Further, the co-production of consumer desirability is transferable to 'static' visual social media platforms other than Instagram, such as Pinterest or Tumblr, as these platforms offer similar features



that enable lurking practices (e.g. collecting or ‘pinning’ luxury related content). However, these may not be applicable to ‘non-static’ visual social media platforms, such as Snapchat or TikTok, as the content is ephemeral lasting only a few hours making it difficult for users to collect, and to that end, develop ‘digital virtual ownership’ (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010). Research has indeed shown that consumers desire is not fostered when goods are only accessed-based and temporary (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

The second managerial contribution is a better understanding of prosumers and lurkers on visual social media. Marketing scholars as well as practitioners have become increasingly interested in observing consumer networks and communities (Cova and Cova 2002; Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001). Lurkers, although publicly passive users of social media, can also be seen as active co-producers in the creation of value and meaning (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010) through interacting with other lurkers albeit privately. In essence, social media influencers and their followers co-create content online through a reciprocal interaction loop: social media influencers produce content, followers like the content or spread eWOM to other social media users, thus increasing the value of the social media influencers (Auh, Bell, McLeod, & Shih, 2007; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). This type of co-creation interaction enables eWOM (Kozinets et al., 2010). Previous research has look at ways to ‘measure’ effective eWOM by looking at the volume of online WOM mentions (Liu, 2006). However, this only gives part of the picture as to how the marketing communication message is received by the wider audience – in this case, the followers. Moreover, researchers have shown that public online interaction does not necessarily indicate real consumer intention as often social media users have routinized online interaction in their daily lives (e.g. Roldán, Sánchez-Franco, & Real, 2017). Thus, it is also relevant for marketers to look at what kind of practices followers (lurkers) that do not participate actively publicly online have.

Social media influencers must upload specific content in order to distinguish themselves and be viewed as original and unique by their followers (Casaló et al., 2018). SMIs are seen as being genuine and trustworthy (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017), they thus have a bigger influence towards their followers in terms of emulating consumption practices (Casaló et al., 2018). Previous research has shown that often marketers use top-down eWOM communication strategies (Kozinets et al., 2010), for instance luxury brands that collaborate with influencers may tell them to promote their brand in a very specific way by giving them guidelines on how and what to post on Instagram. Some more daring luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, who have recently collaborated with influencers (other than Hollywood celebrities or models), have strategically asked these influencers to wear their fashion wear and pose at Fashion Weeks around the globe (Socially Powerful Media, 2018). Whilst this approach can be a

successful one in generating high engagement on social media, it does not really differ from Louis Vuitton's usual tactics they have with traditional celebrities and models. In fact, this kind of strategy attracts the masses and reinforces 'massage' more so than preserves the brand's exclusivity. However, this type of eWOM strategy can backfire as it is not necessarily in line with the type of personal brand these influencers have created. In line with Wohlfeil et al. (2019)'s research on why consumers are drawn to celebrities, we show that it is essential to also adopt a bottom-up approach in looking at how social media influencers create their online brand - without the intervention of luxury brands - and how consumers respond to it. Marketers need to adapt their eWOM narrative strategies to be in line with the 'character type' of these influencers (Kozinets et al., 2010). This thesis identified personal branding strategies that wealthy social media influencers use, in displaying luxury on Instagram (see Table 16). These personal brand strategies are specific to the 'character type' that these influencers have. If luxury brands wish to collaborate with these wealthy social media influencers, they must find ways to align their brand image with their personal brand strategies (De Veirman et al., 2017): exclusivity, immateriality, performativity and carnality. Indeed, when companies do not adjust their marketing campaigns when collaborating with SMIs, followers perceive product-sponsored posts as being non genuine (Evans et al., 2017). Other more conservative luxury brands such as Chanel and Dior, receive very low engagement on social media (Socially Powerful Media, 2018). This is primarily due to their campaigns involving only traditional celebrities and models, and their reluctance in collaborating with social media influencers. However, this thesis investigated personal branding strategies of wealthy social media influencers - a type that has been undercooked by luxury brands in their marketing campaigns. Chanel and Dior could potentially collaborate with this specific type of wealthy social media influencer, as they would ensure, through such a collaboration, to maintain their brand image as being exclusive and highly desirable. In essence, instead of creating an extension of their already well-established marketing campaigns portrayed in magazines, they could align their brand image to fit better with these wealthy micro-celebrities (e.g. by introducing more luxury lifestyle, leisure and travel elements) on visual social media.

The third managerial implication raised by this thesis highlights how managers can ensure promoting ethical consumption behavior online – as well as offline. Wallace et al (2017) found that when consumers conspicuously donate on social media, they do not necessarily adopt offline donation behavior. This also goes in line with Kristofferson et al. (2014)'s study showing that consumers that 'like' a Facebook page that supports a cause as a public performative strategy do not actually support the cause offline. In accordance, this thesis found that high-net-worth social media influencers display ethicality, along with luxury lifestyle on Instagram through the enactment of personas, as a way to not

only shield themselves from possible public attacks, but also as a way to accumulate attention capital (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). This can be considered as moral hypocrisy (Batson et al., 1999) since it might not translate to offline behavior. Therefore, as previous research on ethicality have shown there is a discrepancy between online and offline behavior, brands need to ensure when collaborating with social media influencers that these enforce or stay true to their ethical commitment also offline (e.g. in red carpet or other PR events). Moreover, managers must ensure that when they promote philanthropic acts (e.g. support of a social cause), they must make sure that their brand mission as well as their brand image and the cause they are supporting are aligned. Such interventions are especially necessary if brands want to avoid their followers perceiving the brand to only have commercial or strategic motives in supporting the cause (Nan & Heo, 2007), further damaging brand loyalty and brand trust. One way of avoiding this could be that when these high-net-worth social media influencers post on Instagram that they are engaging with acts of philanthropy, it follows the following three step strategy in communicating their genuine intentions: 1) they host a Instagram Live Stream in which they explain to their followers why they are engaging in acts of philanthropy for a certain cause and what their plan in helping the cause, 2) to post several pictures showing that they are indeed active in helping out (e.g. a picture of them building a school), 3) ensuring they have a follow-up Instagram Live Stream where they discuss their experience, what they have learned and what their future goals are in helping the cause in the long-run.

### **7.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

Although this thesis extends existing knowledge about luxury consumption on visual social media, much remains to be done to advance theoretical and practical understanding of luxury consumption practices on visual social media platforms such as Instagram. This section is devoted to limitations and suggestions for future research.

This thesis only looked at the generation Y/millennial cohort. I have argued throughout this thesis that they are a relevant generation to study, as they are the new and upcoming luxury consumers. However, younger generations such as generation Z are becoming luxury consumers themselves and exhibit different consumption behavior than previous generations. Since they are considered to be the first generation to be born into the digital world, they are said to engage with their favorite brands online, more so than previous generations (Bernstein, 2015). Moreover, consumers from Gen Z are heavier tech users (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016). They have also been shown to be more prone to escapism

(Wood, 2013). Gen Zers could then potential spend considerably more time lurking on Instagram as a form of escapism, but also as a way to research on unconventional luxury content, such as travel destinations or leisure. Indeed, reports have shown that Gen Z are the generation that spends the most time on social media to do product searches, compared to previous generations who have a tendency to prioritize search engines (Viens, 2019). Thus content created and shared on Instagram by social media influencers is deemed more valuable and trustworthy to Gen Zers than previous generations. Therefore it would be interesting for future research to look at how this younger generation consumes luxury on visual social media.

In line with this last point, my research solely focuses on a platform that is ‘static’ called Instagram – which to this date is still one of the most used visual social media platforms. Specifically, the data that was used in this thesis emanates from Instagram posts. This thesis has therefore only investigated permanent content, and does not include other features, and actively used by Instagram users, such as Instagram Stories (ephemeral video snapshots similar to Snapchat). Further research could also look at up and coming visual social media platforms that younger generations use, such as Tik Tok. This ‘non-static’ visual social media platform, launched in 2017, also contains a mix of video-based features inspired from Instagram and Snapchat. Consumers and brands, often with the purpose of sharing consumer experiences through digital storytelling practices, use these features. It could be interesting to explore how these video-based features affect luxury consumption practices amongst generation Z consumers. Gen Zers are more susceptible to social media influencer content on visual social media (Viens, 2019). A recent study on YouTube vlogs has also shown that viewing vlogs increases luxury brand perception and purchase intentions (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Thus, storytelling techniques on Instagram could have an impact on luxury consumers and generate better eWOM. Indeed, storytelling practices have indeed been shown to have an impact on the listeners, through narrative transportation effect (e.g. Escalas, 2004; Van Laer, Feiereisen, & Visconti, 2019; Van Laer, Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014).

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Introduction (en Français)

Le marché mondial du luxe a atteint 1,2 billion d'euros en 2018 et devrait continuer de croître de 5% par an au cours des prochaines années (Bain & Company, 2017). Cette forte augmentation financière signifie également que les marques de luxe ont dû innover en termes de positionnement, afin de faire face à la concurrence toujours plus forte des autres marques de luxe. En effet, les marques de luxe ont tenté de séduire davantage de consommateurs en rendant leurs produits plus accessibles. Il s'agit du phénomène de démocratisation du luxe (Roper, Caruana, Medway et Murphy, 2013). Par conséquent, cela a affecté la façon dont les consommateurs perçoivent le luxe ; les produits de luxe devenant plus accessibles, et donc plus jetables et éphémères (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, 2017). Cela va à l'encontre de la définition même du luxe : produits ou services à prix élevé, de haute qualité, prestigieux et exclusif (Dubois & Paternault, 1995; Kapferer, 1998; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). Cette vision traditionnelle du luxe - qui impliquait que l'élite est le seul à pouvoir consommer des produits de luxe – est maintenant contestable. En effet, une ‘nouvelle élite’ apparaît et s’engage dans la signalisation et la distinction de statut à travers de nouvelles formes de consommation ostentatoires (Eckhardt et Bardhi, 2020), telles que l'acquisition de connaissances et de la culture (par exemple, à travers des voyages et d'autres consommations de type expérientielles) (e.g. Weinberger et al., 2017).

Cela pose de nouveaux défis pour (à?) la vieille élite, qui jusqu'à récemment pouvait simplement maintenir son statut dans la hiérarchie grâce à (à) son capital économique (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). Cette vieille élite était habituée à faire connaître son statut et distinction en s'engageant dans des actes philanthropiques, souvent présentés dans les médias (e.g. Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Hirschman, 1990). Cependant, avec la prolifération des plateformes de réseaux sociaux, n'importe qui peut se lancer dans de nouveaux jeux de statut et de distinction permettant d'être reconnu par le public grâce à la popularité en ligne - et de s'élever dans une forme de hiérarchie qui est de plus en plus malléable, basée sur l'attention et la visibilité (Marwick, 2013). Ces individus, souvent appelés influenceurs des réseaux sociaux, seraient un type de prosommateurs (consommateurs et producteurs) de contenu en ligne (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Cela semble être particulièrement le cas pour les plates-formes de réseaux sociaux plus récentes appelées plates-formes de réseaux sociaux visuelles, telles que Instagram ou Snapchat, en raison de leur contenu d'imagerie lourde, par rapport à des plateformes plus textuelles (par exemple Twitter) (Highfield et Leaver, 2016). Ces prosommateurs, qu'ils soient de l'ancienne ou de la ‘nouvelle élite’, utilisent largement ce type de plate-forme pour créer

du contenu et gagner en popularité grâce à leur capital social (par exemple, le nombre de followers, de likes, etc.) (Marwick, 2013; 2015). Cependant, la recherche dans ce domaine en est encore à ses débuts.

Étant donné que les utilisateurs - et non les entreprises - dominent principalement les plates-formes de réseaux sociaux, les entreprises devraient chercher à comprendre les pratiques des consommateurs sur les réseaux sociaux (Heinonen, 2011). Cependant, jusqu'à présent la recherche sur les consommateurs s'est concentrée sur la recherche 'business-to-consumer', mais (et?) pas tant sur la recherche des échanges inter-consommateur (Heinonen, Jaakkola & Neganova, 2018). Ce manque de recherche s'applique également à la recherche en consommation de luxe, qui a adopté une perspective de service de marque de luxe traditionnelle (par exemple, Ko et al., 2019) ou a largement examiné les stratégies de marketing en matière de marque et de prix (e.g. Kapferer et Bastien, 2009). Néanmoins, quelle que soit la façon dont les spécialistes du marketing positionnent leur marque, il a été démontré que les consommateurs ont leurs propres interprétations de ce qu'est le luxe et s'engagent dans des pratiques de consommation spécifiques (Bauer et al., 2011; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, Thomsen et Belk, 2020). Par conséquent, comme le luxe peut également être considéré comme une construction sociale, cette thèse adopte une perspective de consommateur en explorant la principale problématique de cette thèse : celle de comprendre les pratiques de consommation de luxe des prosommateurs et des 'lurkers' sur les réseaux sociaux visuels. Pour éclairer le problème, les principales sous-questions de recherche suivantes sont abordées dans cette thèse :

1. Comment les consommateurs définissent-ils le luxe ?
2. Comment les consommateurs affichent-ils le luxe sur Instagram ?
3. Comment les consommateurs consomment-ils le luxe sur Instagram ?

Pour répondre à ces questions, j'ai mené trois séries d'enquêtes empiriques, explorant les aspects clés des pratiques de consommation de luxe sur Instagram détaillée(s) ci-dessous.

En utilisant des données visuelles et textuelles extraites de Instagram et une analyse de contenu combinée à une netnographie, le premier article explore les stratégies de 'personal branding' que les micro-célébrités aisées utilisent pour atteindre, maintenir ou améliorer leur 'secular immortality' en ligne sur Instagram. Ces stratégies de 'personal branding' expliquent comment les micro-célébrités aisées

définissent et affichent le luxe sur Instagram (cf. questions de recherche 1 et 2). Les résultats montrent que les micro-célébrités aisées utilisent quatre stratégies de ‘personal branding’ pour développer leur marque personnelle et atteindre, maintenir ou améliorer leur ‘secular immortality’ en ligne sur Instagram : exclusivité, immatérialité, performativité et charnelité. Nous déduisons que dans le contexte du numérique, les micro-célébrités aisées dépeignent le luxe sous une forme plus expérientielle (e.g. mode de vie de luxe, voyages et activités de loisirs) afin de se distinguer des micro-célébrités plus traditionnelles, ainsi que des générations précédentes lourdement médiatisées (e.g. millionnaires ‘self-made’). Cet article a été écrit sous la direction de Benjamin Voyer, dont il est le co-auteur. J’ai collecté, analysé les données et rédigé l’article. Tout au long de l’analyse et de la rédaction, j’ai reçu régulièrement des commentaires et des conseils de Benjamin Voyer.

Selon le premier article, avec la création d’une marque personnelle, les micro-célébrités aisées exposent leur vie sur les réseaux sociaux et sont par conséquent aussi lourdement médiatisées. Cela peut fonctionner à leur avantage ou se retourner contre eux - dans leur cas spécifique, car ils affichent leur style de vie de luxe sur Instagram. En effet, les followers ou d’autres consommateurs peuvent être envieux ou peuvent vivement critiquer les ‘High-Net-Worth social media influencers’ comme étant des consommateurs immoraux. Ainsi, le deuxième article explore comment les ‘High-Net-Worth social media influencers’ concilient paraître à la fois éthique et avoir un mode de vie luxueux, à travers la mise en scène de trois types de ‘personas’ sur Instagram. Cet article répond en outre aux questions de recherche de la thèse sur la façon dont les consommateurs définissent et affichent le luxe sur Instagram (questions de recherche 1 et 2). Cet article est basé sur un corpus de données multi-sources (entretien semi-structurés et posts Instagram) de ces ‘High-Net-Worth social media influencers’. Les principales conclusions montrent que afin de conserver leur légitimité dans le domaine de la consommation de luxe, les ‘High-Net-Worth social media influencers’ affichent un type de moralité ostentatoire en ligne et hors ligne, à travers l’adoption de trois ‘personas’ : (1) Ambassadeur du ‘vrai’ luxe, (2) Altruiste et (3) ‘Bon’ rôle modèle. Cet article a été co-écrit avec Thyra Uth Thomsen, Sylvia von Wallpach et Benjamin Voyer. L’objectif de cet article a été initialement élaboré avec Sylvia von Wallpach et Benjamin Voyer. Le manuscrit a été rédigé lors de mon visiting à la Copenhagen Business School. J’ai collecté des données, analysé les données et rédigé la première version complète du manuscrit. Tous les co-auteurs ont ensuite contribué à l’édition et à la révision du manuscrit, de la première à la dernière révision.

Dans le troisième article de cette thèse, j’examine la perspective des followers (lurkers) qui suivent les profils Instagram des ‘High-Net-Worth social media influencers’. Il s’agit donc d’explorer comment les consommateurs (lurkers) consomment du luxe sur Instagram (question de recherche 3). Plus précisément, nous examinons comment les pratiques de ‘lurking’ transforment la consommation de

luxe sur les réseaux sociaux visuels. À l'aide de 16 entretiens semi-structurés, nous examinons deux questions de recherche(espace): (1) quelles sont les pratiques virtuelles numériques constitutives des marques de luxe sur les médias sociaux? et (2) comment ces pratiques augmentent-elles la consommation de luxe grâce aux propriétés de la consommation virtuelle numérique(espace)? Les résultats montrent que les 'lurkers' s'engagent dans quatre pratiques liées au contenu des marques de luxe sur les réseaux sociaux : 'compassing', 'curating', 'collecting', 'conversing'. D'une part, ces pratiques facilitent la dématérialisation de la consommation de luxe en idéalisant les propriétés des marques de luxe ; d'autre part, ces pratiques re-matérialisent la consommation de luxe en de nouvelles actualisations virtuelles numériques. Vu d'ensemble, le 'lurking' transforme la consommation de luxe dans la façon dont les 'lurkers' consomment le luxe intangible sur les réseaux sociaux visuels. Cet article a été co-écrit avec Yuri Seo et Benjamin Voyer. J'ai collecté et analysé toutes les données et rédigé la première ébauche du manuscrit. Les deux co-auteurs ont contribué à l'édition et aux révisions du manuscrit tout au long du processus de publication.

Cette thèse est structurée de la manière suivante. Dans le deuxième chapitre de cette thèse, j'introduis et j'examine en détail les conceptualisations de la consommation de luxe, allant des traditionnelles aux nouvelles formes de pratiques de consommation de luxe. Ensuite, j'explore la littérature sur le comportement des réseaux sociaux, plus précisément les réseaux sociaux visuels. Je soutiens que la vieille élite et 'nouvelle élite', ainsi que leurs 'followers' (lurkers) passent beaucoup de temps sur les médias sociaux visuels, s'engageant dans des pratiques de prosommation et de 'lurking'. J'utilise cela comme base théorique pour les trois articles. Dans le troisième chapitre, j'explique le raisonnement méthodologique qui a été entrepris pour les trois articles. Ces trois articles sont ensuite inclus dans le corps principal de cette thèse. Enfin, dans le chapitre de discussion, je précise quelles sont les contributions théoriques et managériales de cette thèse.

**Appendix B: Codebook for paper two**

Code(s)	Description
<p>Consuming-sharing (ethical) luxurious lifestyle (CCT)</p> <p>Differentiating (Classifying)</p> <p>Integrating certain values (ethics)</p> <p>Performing (staging, playing)</p> <p>Relating (Experiencing)</p>	<p>Following Holt’s (1995) “How Consumers Consume” framework</p> <p>SMI differentiate themselves from other social classes or groups, through consumption objects or actions</p> <p>SMI perceive consumption object as a constitutive element of their identity (self-concept); symbolic use of the consumption object. Either they self-extend or define their identity.</p> <p>Holt mentions consuming as play (sharing how they experience consumption with others – interaction -, and performing/entertaining others on their experience with consumption)</p> <p>Holt mentions consuming as experience (sensemaking of consumption practices etc): accounting, evaluating, appreciating</p>
<p>Creating congruence between luxury and ethicality</p> <p>No behavior change</p> <p>Justifications related to luxury product</p> <p>Justifications related to luxury context</p> <p>Justifications related to personal identity</p> <p>Behavior change</p> <p>Reducing or restricting consumption/social moral licensing</p> <p>Changing other behaviors/social moral licensing</p> <p>Not consuming luxury</p>	<p>Following McDonald et al. (2015)’s “Why green consumers continue to fly” framework</p> <p>The reasons stated for not taking up other options included price, duration of journey, comfort and convenience an other product features (consonant elements to counter unethical dissonant elements)</p> <p>the desire to travel or consume luxury in order to be with, enjoy consumption object or to visit, family or friends, or attend specific events such as professional events (consonant elements to counter unethical dissonant elements)</p> <p>For example, being ‘well-travelled’, being a connoisseur (in luxury terms?), perhaps being a high achiever</p> <p>SMI decide to reduce their luxury consumption or to restrict their consumption (less frequent consumption habits)</p> <p>SMI change other behaviors such as give more money, philanthropic acts, start an ethically oriented company, raise awareness through Instagram</p> <p>SMI stop consuming luxury</p>
<p>Identity outcomes/Personas</p> <p>Caring</p> <p>Family collective identity</p> <p>Good person</p> <p>Savior</p> <p>Influential</p>	



Luxury lifestyle Apparel Beverages Food Leisure Residence Services Transportation Busyness	Hirschman (1988)         Bellezza et al. (2016)
Speech acts (semantic) Accuse Advise Correct Criticize Empathize Explain Instruct Justify Praise	Von Wallpach et al. (2013)