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The Influencer Fever: The Psychological Role of social
media in Luxury Fashion Consumption

Dissertation submitted to the Portuguese Catholic
University to obtain the master's degree in Psychology in
Business and Economics

by

Inês Sousa Pontes

Faculty of Human Sciences

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The conclusion of this work and my academic path are something I must thank my parents and siblings for. Without their support and trust in my skills, it would have been impossible for me to have the courage and strength to achieve this Master's degree.

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Abstract

Nowadays, brands are forwarding their online efforts to social media and are investing in several advertising campaigns such as influencer marketing. Marketers are recognising the value of these campaigns and reporting an 11 times higher revenue from working with influencers. Understanding how brands communicate and which psychological processes underlay the reported effectiveness of these online efforts will help brands direct their budget to the right campaigns. This research analyses the role that brand communication and source (influencer vs. brand) of posts play on engagement and purchase intention. Furthermore, it explores how social-adjustive functions moderate the relationship between the source, type of brand (luxury vs. non-luxury) and the engagement with a post. An online survey that exposed participants to different types of content and types of brands was carried out. Results from this thesis help understand how people online interact with influencers and brands on social media platforms. Overall, it was concluded influencers have more engagement on their endorsed posts than brands.

Keywords: Brands, Social Media, Fashion, Luxury Fashion, Influencers, Social-Adjustive Functions of Attitudes.

Resumo

Hoje em dia, as marcas estão a direcionar os seus esforços para as redes sociais ao investir em várias campanhas de publicidade tais como o marketing de influencers. Os especialistas na área do marketing estão a reportar um retorno 11 vezes maior que o habitual, oriundo deste trabalho com influencers. Ao perceber como as marcas comunicam, e quais os processos psicológicos que explicam esta referida eficácia, irá a ajudar as marcas a diregir os seus orçamentos para as campanhas certas. Esta pesquisa analisa o papel que a comunicação das marcas e a fonte (influencer vs. marca) dos posts tem na interação e intenção de compra. Além disso, explora como as funções sociais das atitudes moderam a relação entre a fonte, tipo de marca (luxo vs. não-luxo) e a interação com um post. Foi realizado um questionário online que expôs os participantes a diferentes tipos de conteúdo (fonte e marca). Os resultados desta tese ajudam a compreender como as pessoas interagem com influencers e marcas nas redes sociais. Em suma, foi concluído que os influencers conseguem mais interações dos seus espectadores nos seus posts patrocinados do que marcas.

Palavras-Chave: Marcas, Redes Sociais, Moda, Moda de Luxo, Influencers, Funções Sociais das Atitudes.

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Introduction

Social Media has been an increasingly used tool for brands to communicate their products to the market. Such platforms offer marketers and brands new strategies and a wide number of tools to engage with consumers and communicate their messages. In other words, online publicity communicates messages to consumers in several ways. Therefore, the presence of marketing campaigns such as networking, influencers marketing and online discount codes are just some examples of forms of advertising and communication with customers that have been widely effective across markets. Moreover, the growth of the audience makes platforms such as Instagram increase the potential for growing brand awareness and converting views into sales, transforming consumer behaviour.

By communicating with a larger than ever audience, brands are closer to the consumer and communication strategies gain a larger impact. Understanding how communication is more effective – through brands or influencers – in converting views into new customers is, therefore, a means to boost brands' efforts. For brands to choose how to communicate their products to their online audience, it is necessary to assess what tools and marketing strategies are worth investing in – this specific research focuses on exploring influencers' impact on consumers' purchase intentions and this is a pin-point of reflection to understand whether it is worth investing on marketing campaigns.

The main aim of this research was to understand influencers' impact in the purchase intentions, with a specific focus on luxury brands. Comprehending if and how these “emerging celebrities” shape consumer behaviour can help marketers in deciding where to invest their resources on the social media context. All in all, this study focuses on answering the following questions – will influencer content generate more purchase intentions than brand content? And is this applicable in both the luxury and non-luxury brands market? More specifically, this research focuses on the fashion industry market.

This digital influence, mainly led by Instagram – which has the lead in the number of luxury followers – can indicate that Influencers on online platforms have the power to promote consumer engagement (interaction and intention to purchase) with luxury fashion brands. The overall aim of this thesis is to empirically test this phenomenon on users across Instagram.

The Uses & Gratifications theory (U&G) has been widely relevant across research to explain social media uses and has been proven to be useful for social media research. Not only that, but this theory can help understand how individuals decide to follow certain content online such as social media influencers. Therefore, the messages communicated online through such campaigns get another value given that users choose the social media channels they want to follow for their own personal uses and gratifications.

Brands are present and communicating their products online to a larger than ever audience, meaning their communication strategies are pursued to be effective in bringing them closer to their customers.

With the rise of social media as a tool for marketing campaigns and brands' evermore interest in these platforms, social media content creators have been playing a significant role in creating product awareness in their followers (Jansom & Pongsakornrungrungsilp, 2021). The relationship built between influencers and their followers has emotional value, potentiating consumers' attitudes, and behaviours, making them a strong marketing tool for brands. Influencers have an appealing platform for adding visual and personal value to the products they endorse. Additionally, in this context, the fashion industry represents at least a quarter of all sponsored posts from content creators (Lee, Sudorshan, Bright et al., 2022).

Researchers across the marketing field have stated the clear impact of influencer marketing for brands online growth (AlFarraj, Alalwan, Obeidat, et al., 2020). Some state a 11 times higher revenue after investing in these micro-celebrities. Influencers can advertise all types of products, and more recently, luxury brands are closing deals with several social media personalities expecting the same impact others have reported. According to the PMX Agency report from 2020, it is expected that by 2025 the global sales of personal luxury goods will reach values between \$380 and 390 billion dollars and that 80% of these will be digitally influenced.

Luxury consumption is extended to the general consumer and is not limited to those with higher status. There has been a positive switch regarding both the perceptions and consumption of luxury products that have helped the steady growth of the luxury segment ((Dhaliwal, Singh & Paul, 2020)).

Investigating what drives and influences people to purchase luxury and non-luxury products they see online can provide marketers insights on how to target their

intended audience with the most effective social media campaigns. In other words, knowing if consumers on social media are more persuaded by brand or influencer communication is of core importance to make campaigns on said platforms effective. Furthermore, there is a social utility in this matter as luxury products have been linked to status-seeking which can impact how consumers view/ wear goods (Cannon & Rucker, 2019). *Higher price, exclusivity, and aspiration* are just some of the associated characteristics of luxury products (Kapferer, 1997 as cited in Goor, Ordabayeva, Keinon et al., 2020).

The focus of this thesis is to understand the role that brand communication (e.g., the brand vs. an influencer) and type of brand (luxury vs. non-luxury brand) play on engagement with posts and purchase intentions, and if social-adjustive functions (the ability to facilitate social interactions) of attitude moderate this relationship. The focus is also to understand whether there is more interaction with endorsed posts (from influencers) or with posts from brands, as well as, if people engage more with posts containing luxury and non-luxury products.

Chapter one contains the Introduction to the current thesis. Chapter two concerns a literature review that led to the formulation of the research question. Chapter three addresses the methodology used to collect and analyse the data. Chapter four explains the results and main findings, with all the exploratory analysis conducted. Lastly, Chapter five closes the dissertation with discussion of the results according to the state of the art, limitations and implications of the current research.

Theoretical Background

Theories of Communication

Communication with the consumer is an essential tool for brands to interact and be close to clients. Online platforms and social media platforms allow brands to communicate with their customers with a higher capacity and evermore active manner. For this reason, brands engage in the digital world where there is the possibility to spread the message to a worldwide audience (Angelova, 2013 as cited in Platon, 2014).

The U&G theory imposes that those who use media do so according to their needs and individual meaning. It classifies users as those who held the power to actively choose what content they want to watch. This theory initially suggested four functions to explain media usage – surveillance, personal identity, personal relationships, and diversion.

The perspective of the U&G theory proposes that people engage with content on social media platforms that facilitates access to knowledge, rewards and has benefits for their personal interest - such as “entertainment and social interaction” (Scheiner, Kol, & Levy, 2021).

Surveillance in the social media context can help understand how people follow Influencers – there is the need to see content from a social environment – either the one the follower is part of or aspires to be. Satisfying the need for surveillance can result in the observation of influencers and brands with which one identifies whilst being aware of others' impressions of those same influencers and brands (Mutinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011).

Personal identity is related to the need to seek similar behaviours and events in media content. Personal relationships are linked to the use of the media as a substitute of interaction with others; Finally, diversion is the use of the media as a form of escapism from the daily routine (Ruggiero, 2009).

This theory sees media users as agents of action, selection, and motivation. Social media use has been linked with “pleasure, fun, relaxation, socialising and self-status seeking, affection, convenience, social sharing, exposure, information seeking, creating and managing online self-presentation, and even escaping from real-life problems” (Kaur, Dhir, Chen, et Al., 2020).

Over the years of development and research on this theory, more motives besides the initial four were suggested; similarly, this theory was also adapted to new forms of media.

Froget, Baghestan and Asfaranjan (2013) conducted a study on the perspective of the U&G theory on Facebook use and found that income level has a significant impact on time spent on Facebook. Furthermore, the researchers concluded that social media marketing strategies should consider the uses and gratification motives that lead people to interact and use platforms.

Brands on social media

In the last few years, online platforms have grown considerably in the number of users, intensifying the need of brands to apply marketing and communication strategies to reach a larger audience and, consequently, to increase sales (Lim & Ting, 2012). Brands are increasingly engaging and investing in social media marketing campaigns, considering this a tool for persuading motivation (Kujur & Singh, 2017).

By 2013, 86% of marketing professionals considered social media platforms as an important asset and 89% reported positive results from investing in the online realm (2013 social media marketing report as cited in Platon, 2014).

Benefits from the presence on social media can go from monetary to awareness: “with the help of social media, the branding campaigns can benefit from other important and unique advantages such as an increased interactivity and creativity, a large audience and rapid feedback” (Platon, 2014). Hence, social media platforms should be a part of the communication strategy of brands to create a trustful and enduring relationship with the consumer.

Those who are present on Instagram have several motives for using it – including *‘social interaction, the need to belong, and self-expression’*.

A customer’s probability of purchasing a certain product is classified as the purchase intention. Research relating the U&G theory and purchase intention is scarce, however, results from a few studies report an effect of the U&G theory on purchase intention (Kaur, et Al., 2020).

Harum and Husin (2019) explored how the behaviour of millennial consumers is affected by marketing campaigns on social media. Their research found that online shopping is affected by “online communities, entertainment, and perceived trust”. Not only that, but time spent online is understood as an element that impacts consumers

attitudes towards certain products/ brands. Finally, the authors concluded that marketing campaigns are important to form a strong communication relationship between the brands and their customers. This is because the authors believe that online marketing has four different dimensions - “online communities, interaction, entertainment, and perceived trust”.

Moreover, the authors distinguished purchase intention from purchase behaviour. In their analysis, purchase intention is related to the intentions a consumer has towards a brand or a product (Harshen, 2015 as cited in Harum et Al., 2019), whilst purchase behaviour is the choice and use of the products acquired (Ramya & All, 2016 as cited in Harum et Al., 2019). This is a distinction that complements the U&G application to social media - consumers have different purchase intentions and behaviours, therefore, different uses and gratifications for social media use.

Lim and colleagues (2012) found Entertainment Gratification (EG) and Informativeness Gratification (IG) shape consumers’ attitudes when shopping online; this is closely related with the entertainment and information uses of the U&G theory. Investing in these gratifications will establish a “favourable shopping environment”. This means that consumers need to have access to a shopping experience that is both entertaining and informative.

The perspective of brands is shaped by social media communication and is strongly believed to shape consumer behaviour (Giranda & Korgoonkar, 2014 as cited in Azar, Machado, Vacas-de-Carvalho, et al., 2016). Consumers spend considerable amounts of time on social media platforms and interact with brands; understanding how these interactions affect consumers behaviour will give marketers a wider understand of how to influence viewers motivation to interact and engage in purchasing actions.

One example is from Azar and colleagues (2016), who distinguished four types of Facebook users relating to the time they spend online and interaction with content from brands, namely: 1) *Brand detached consumer* - who consumes about an hour of Facebook brand-related content and do not usually interact with content; 2) *Brand profifiers* – consumers who spend around 30 minutes to several hours of content and have a medium level of interaction; these consumers are motivated by sales and deals; 3) *Brand companions* - these consumers devote more than two hours of time to exploring content and use this for their personal interest. They are emotionally

motivated to interact with brands; and 4) *Brand reliant* - these are the consumers that have higher levels of interaction with brand-related marketing campaigns.

Overall, '*marketing managers routinely use purchase intentions to predict sales*' (Morwitz, Steckel & Gupta, 2007). Purchase intention is analysed for both new and existing products. These tests are useful to understand the effectiveness of a product before launching; this assesses if the customers' attention is held, and which characteristics might benefit from improvement. Not only that, but marketing specialists can use purchase intentions to better understand their target audiences. As for existing products, consumers' intentions may help understand the quantities and number of times a product will possibly be acquired. Finally, even academic researchers have used purchase intention analysis tools to understand the behaviour of consumers (Morwitz et al., 2007).

Adding to this, the e-commerce platforms will attribute new features to consumers and their purchase intention and purchase behaviours. Understanding the online consumer and the differences it has from the traditional consumers, concerns not only the consumers' characteristics as well as the "environment, and technological trends" (Akar & Nasir, 2015). Consumers find many facilitations in the online environment as this is a field with high convenience, available at all times and where more options are available in a shorter amount of time. Taking this into account, companies are increasingly forecasting the online world as a new sales channel to attract a wider audience (Akar et al., 2015).

All in all, purchase intentions are extremely useful for brands and marketing experts to get closer to consumers and understand better their needs and markets (Morwitz, et al., 2007 as cited in Peña-García, Gil-Saura, Rodriguez-Orejuela, et al., 2020).

Luxury Fashion Brands on social media

Over the last 20 years, it is unarguable the steady and significant growth of luxury products and brands, with over \$1.2 trillion spent on high-end products in 2017. The significant amount of money spent on luxury brands means a wide range of consumers and motives behind luxury consumption and many feelings and expected outcomes from purchasing this type of product (Dubois, Jung & Ordabayeva, 2021). Furthermore, consumers have diverse levels of wealth, which is another potential explanation for the variety of motives behind why people purchase luxury (Becker, Lee & Nobre, 2018).

Seventy-five percent of luxury shoppers are social media users. For that reason, luxury brands invest in digital marketing on these platforms, to improve engagement with their customers and potential buyers (Goodey, et Al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2017; Talkwallet, 2017 as cited in Choi, Seo, Wagner, et al., 2020).

Marketing professionals in the luxury industry have an important role in shaping the consumers' perceptions of luxury – consumer psychological characteristics are derived from the consumer perceptions of the luxury product physical characteristics and for a basic level of consumers develop a perception of quality (Becker, et al., 2018).

Moreover, young adults consider luxury brands valuable, and their purchasing intentions are influenced by social media, making this a relentless territory for luxury brands to engage with potential consumers (Jansom et al., 2021). Not only that but, fashion content on social media affects consumers' opinions and behaviours (Holdbrook, 2006 as cited in Jansom et al., 2021).

By managing the psychological needs of their customers, luxury brands carry an important meaning; furthermore, the increasing economic relevance of these brands results in more effective communication activities and conferred them with higher status (Becker et al., 2018).

Different research findings on the topic have focused on the reasons why individuals feel the urge to consume luxury and how these vary across age groups, cultures, and income levels. Overall, the motives to engage in luxury consumption have been extensively explored (Dhaliwal et al., 2020). Previous studies found functional, personal, financial, and social explanations for why individuals desire and purchase luxury (Dubois et al., 2021). As consumers get more diverse it seems plausible to conclude that so do the reasons to purchase luxury.

Fashion content on social media affects customers' opinions and behaviours. Armstrong, and colleagues (2016) stated that '*customers are becoming more fashion-sensitive and buying behaviours are especially affected by fashion trends*' (as cited in Jansom et al. 2021).

Dubois et al., 2021- suggested that reasons for consuming luxury are a combination of intrinsic motives as well as external influences. The authors describe several motivations to engage in the consumption of such products, amongst, *biological, socio-psychological, and structural factors*.

Becker and colleagues, (2018), developed some research to understand the relationships of consumers with the luxury brand they interact with and found three dimensions of luxury motives: “luxury products characteristics, consumer’s psychological characteristics, and consumer’s psychological association with the luxury product”.

All in all, the consumption of luxury goods and luxury fashion has grown in the last few years. Luxury brands are investing in social media marketing campaigns to attract new audiences and influencer marketing is suggested across research as a potential tool to shape buying decisions towards these kind of products (Haenlein, et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020; Hudders and Lou, 2022 as cited in Pangarkar & Rather, 2022). In fact, well-established luxury brands such as Miu Miu and Chanel have made efforts to style and work with social media influencers to reach new audiences. Several studies were conducted to understand how and why influencer marketing works and in fact, increases purchase intentions of both luxury and non-luxury goods (Pangarkar et al., 2022).

Influencers

Social media influencers are characterised by having a wider audience than other Instagram users and therefore have one or more platforms that allow these personas to promote pieces of information and products to those who follow their content. Furthermore, due to the proximity in viewers’ lifestyle, influencers facilitate the promotion of the products from the brands they work with. Not only that, but the credibility followers attribute to these online celebrity channels, an idea of ‘knowledge and expertise’ that leads to engagement, and also the acquisition of the products featured on the influencers’ content (Su, Wu, Chang & Hong, 2021).

Influencers’ techniques to attract audiences relies on “*self-presentation*”, this means presenting their day-to-day activities. Consequently, this creates a sense of closeness to those who view the content. (Ki & Kim, 2019 as cited in Kim, 2021).

Influencers have strong relationships with their followers which has significant implications when it comes to the performance of marketing campaigns carried by influencers on social media platforms (Aw & Chuah, 2021). In parallel, communication channel influencers have with their followers created an effective tool to achieve the goals of marketers when investing in influencer marketing initiatives (Booth and Matic, 2011 as cited in Yuan Lou., 2020).

For all these reasons, influencers are gaining more impact for marketers and advertisers. Data indicate that 84% of marketing experts believe influencer marketing to be a concise tool, and 87% of consumers purchased products advertised/promoted by influencers (Kim, 2021).

Bazi, Filieri and Gorton, 2020 explored the motives that underlie customers' interactions with luxury brands on social media and have found significant influence from "celebrity endorsement". Influencers stand out in these channels for their wide number of followers and post content from brands in exchange for remuneration – essentially, these are the social media celebrities. Furthermore, brands look at influencers as potential trendsetters with the ability to change the consumer's buying options across different topics in their lives (Lee et al., 2022).

Jansom and colleagues (2021) researched the impact of Instagram influencers' interactions with their Thai millennial followers and how these media personalities motivate the consumption of luxury products by young adults. They found that there is a positive reaction to influencers – whether this is related to feelings of trust, loyalty or relatedness; perhaps because there is a tendency for people to follow those whom they identify with and through parasocial interactions there is a sense of value attributed to luxury products.

The theoretical perspective of parasocial interactions claims that viewers see or want to see influencers as a friend or mentor - this created a parasocial relationship with the influencer, leading to increased trust (Brand, 2016; Yuksel & Labreque, 2016; as cited in Lin, Crowe, Pierre, et al., 2021). This relationship lead to more trust towards the products and brands influencers endorse, consequently, increasing purchase intention (Reinikainen et al., 2020 as cited in Lin et al., 2020). Moreover, these relationships are of great value for brands as they "*carry a great marketing potential*" (Yuan et al., 2020).

There has been an extensive number of studies that connect a sense of belongingness to reference groups - an influencer is a person with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media - these groups of people represent content creators for social media who showcase their lifestyles and interests with audiences - meaning they have appealing content and opinions to their followers. Several studies have proposed that there are psychological processes associated with interacting with content from social media Influencers –

whether this is forming emotional bonds, need for belongingness and parasocial interactions (Ki, et Al., 2020; Shan et al., 2020 as cited in Lee et al., 2022). In fact, this illusion of an interpersonal bond between the follower and the influencer is posed across research as a key factor for the effectiveness of influencer marketing.

Yuan and colleagues (2020), conducted research to understand how influencers strengthen the relationships they have with their followers. Through an online survey they found that attractiveness, similarity, and fairness will lead to a more powerful parasocial interaction, mediating the effect of the factors mentioned before on products influencers promote (Yuan et al., 2020).

Studies and data collected demonstrated that a large percentage of the online audience (almost half) will rely on recommendations from influencers when it comes to make a decision about acquiring a product. In other words, the trust in influencers' opinions will change the purchase behaviour and, in the right circumstances, increase the intention to purchase. Furthermore, 69% of companies direct, or will direct, most of their online efforts and budget on influencers as they believe this will increase the acceptance of their products (Su, et al., 2021).

Lee and colleagues (2021) explored the motivations for following influencers on Instagram and concluded that authenticity, consumerism, creative inspiration, and envy were the main reasons found. Through a qualitative analysis of such motives, the researchers suggested that authenticity and consumerism were key determinants for trust toward brand-related posts and that consumerism and envy were the motivations with a closer link to a higher frequency of purchasing products and brands recommended by Influencers.

Bazi and colleagues (2020), explored the motives that underlie customers' interactions with luxury brands on social media and have found significant influence from "celebrity endorsement". Influencers stand out in these channels for their wide number of followers and post content from brands in exchange for remuneration – essentially, these are the social media celebrities. Furthermore, brands look at Influencers as potential trendsetters with the ability to change the consumer's buying options across different topics in their lives (Lee et al., 2021).

Social-Adjustive Functions of Attitudes

The theory of the Functions of Attitudes proposes that people engage in certain behaviours/ attitudes that will serve certain functions or help them achieve certain

intentions. Across research, Functional Theories of Attitudes are described as relevant for explaining consumers' behaviour toward luxury brands. They suggest that attitudes have basic functions and that is why individuals hold them (DeBono, 1987; Mehta & Kardes, 2004; Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1989 as cited in Bian & Forsythe, 2012).

Accordingly, attitudes are a variable that can explain motivation and, therefore, classify consumer behaviour with the psychological function it serves. People will purchase the same item and have different functional values to explain their behaviour (Pilelienė, 2012).

Attitude functions can explain the engagement in luxury brand consumption and the willingness to buy luxury brands can be explained by two social reasons. In this context, Schade, Hegner, Horstman, and colleagues, (2016) found that the social-adjustive and value-expressive functions were strong motivators for young adults to engage with luxury brands. They concluded that popularizing products through idols and role models becomes a strong tool for brands to reach young adults as they will perceive these as “identity supporting”. Consequently, these influence customers on social media (Jim, 2012 as cited Choi et al., 2020).

Luxury goods are considered by many consumers as determinants of ‘self-worth’ and as a ‘key component to defining themselves’ socially (Zhang & Kim, 2013). Furthermore, those who purchase luxury tend to have an interest in specific brands that communicate how they want to be perceived by others and to which social groups one wants to belong to (Husic and Cicis, 2009 as cited in Zhang et al., 2013).

Zhang and colleagues (2013) developed an online survey on Chinese consumers where they measured several factors that determine the intent to purchase luxury and found that “brand consciousness, social comparison and fashion innovativeness have an impact on attitudes for purchasing fashion products from luxury brands.

Schade and colleagues (2016) developed a research study where they understood the relevance of attitude functions in determining how motivation to purchase luxury can shift across age groups and found that young adults represent the population that has the biggest influence from social-adjustive functions of attitudes toward luxury goods consumption.

Social-Adjustive functions when it comes to purchasing luxury goods seem particularly relevant. This part of the theory proposes that an attitude can play an active role in facilitating the social relationships individuals have with their social group or the

social group they want to belong to. In other words, it proposes that people engage in certain behaviours/ attitudes as a means to getting acceptance by their social circle or desired social circle (Schade et al., 2016). All in all, purchase intentions for luxury brands can be determined by these social-adjustive functions as one may have the intention to purchase or engage in the purchase of certain luxury goods or luxury brands if they associate this with the social group they belong to or want to belong to (Wilcox, Kim & Sen, 2009).

Overview

Overall, the growth of both luxury fashion consumer profiles and the impact of social media influencers marketing campaigns, increases the importance for brands to understand how to allocate their efforts and money when it comes to advertising and reaching consumers. Similarly, the impact research suggests that influencers have on purchase intention is somehow connected to underlying psychological processes that, if understood can help make these campaigns even more effective.

Firstly, testing if there is differences in engagement with posts whether it is posted by an influencer or a brand, and whether the post is about a luxury or non-luxury good can help brands understand which type of posts will create more impact and are worth investing in.

Secondly, if engagement with posts predicts purchase intention (Onofrei, Filieri & Kennedy, 2022) understanding what source creates more engagement is relevant for marketers to decide whether to invest on influencer marketing. Further, the social-adjustive functions of attitude may moderate this relationship as a potential explanation to why individuals follow and engage with influencers content.

The overall goal of this study is to understand whether consumers engage more with influencer or brand posts from luxury or non-luxury brands on social media, and if this impacts purchase intentions and how the social-adjustive functions of attitudes might moderate this direct effect between engagement and purchase intentions.

Study Aims and Hypothesis

By focusing on Instagram Influencers and users as this is a very effective network for luxury brands to persuade and appeal to purchase through different marketing strategies, this study looks at one of the most popular social networks currently (Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Moreover, there is a scarce number of studies exploring the impact of influencers sharing luxury fashion products on purchase intentions.

Whilst testing for the phenomenon of how influencers' impact consumers' interaction with luxury brands, there is the intent to understand the effects of the content source and the social-adjustive functions of attitudes on engagement with Instagram posts with luxury products; and to assess the differences between non-luxury and luxury brands' interaction with the two different content sources (brand and influencer).

The different content sources play an important role in this research as brands can use such information to allocate their online efforts to create content that will have a higher return on revenue. If engagement with posts in fact predicts purchase intention, understanding with which content source engagement is higher, then this will inform which source will generate higher purchase intent. Seeing a post from an influencer or a brand advertising a product will have different effects on consumers: if viewers have positive feelings of trust and loyalty to influencers then the products endorsed by these media celebrities will have more purchase intention behaviours associated to them.

Therefore, the study tests the following hypothesis:

H1 – There is a main effect type of source (influencer vs. brand) on post engagement.

H2 – There is a main effect of type of brand (luxury vs. non-luxury brands) on post engagement.

H3 – There is an interaction effect between type of source and type of brand on post engagement.

H4 – Social-Adjustive Functions of Attitudes moderate the effect of type of source (influencer vs. brand) on post engagement.

Method

Participants

Before the data collection, an a priori power analysis was carried out using the G*Power 3.1.9.6 program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) to better understand the number of participants necessary to test a significant effect in a Two-Way Univariate ANOVA with 4 distinct groups. To detect a medium effect size, with a power value of 80% and alpha value of 0.05 with a critical F value of 3.92, a sample of 128 participants was needed and therefore an attempt to reach to a corresponding sample size was made using Social Media platforms.

A total of 119 participants, between the ages of 18 and 78, answered the questionnaire. All the participants were considered for the analysis. From this sample of the population 51 participants (42.9%) were male, 62 female (52.1%) and 5 non-binary/3rd gender (4.2%). A total of 111 were Instagram users and the distribution for time spent on social media was – 21.8% spent from 0 to 2 hours on such platforms, 35.3% spent from 2 to 4 hours, 25.2% were on the 4 to 6 hours range, 12.6% on the 6 to 8 hours a day and, finally, 5% spent 8 hours or more on social media websites.

Design

An experimental online survey was built to analyze the levels of engagement and willingness to purchase products, social media users have when exposed to Instagram content depending on the source of the post (influencer vs. brand) and type of brand (luxury vs. non-luxury). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (content source, type of brand: brand, non-luxury; brand, luxury; influencer, non-luxury; influencer, luxury) and the distribution of participants per condition were as follows: 26 participants exposed to the luxury/ influencer type of content, 32 to the non-luxury/ influencer post, 32 to the luxury/ brand and 20 to the non-luxury/ brand post (see Appendix 1 for exact images and wording of each condition).

For each experimental condition, participants were instructed with the following:

Luxury/ brand condition - *“LCB is a luxury brand that sells high fashion items. This is a bag they just released”.*

Luxury/ influencer condition - *“This is @ANA01, she has more than 500K followers on Instagram. Here’s a picture of her with a luxury bag from a high fashion brand LCB”.*

Non-luxury/ brand condition - “*LCB is a fast-fashion brand with average prices. This is a bag they just released*”.

Non-luxury/ influencer condition - “*This is @ANA01, she has more than 500K followers on Instagram. Here’s a picture of her with a bag from LCB*”.

Instruments

An online survey was created with six validated questionnaires on the online platform Qualtrics to test the variables from this study. Socio-demographic data was incorporated into the set of questions. Below is a presentation of the scales selected to conduct this study,

Moderator variable

Social-Adjustive Functions of Attitudes Scale. The Social-Adjustive Functions Scale (SAFS) was retrieved from a questionnaire developed by Schade and colleagues (2016) to measure the role of attitude functions on how consumers purchase from luxury brands. The initial tool was formed by carrying out an extensive literature review and related both the value-expressive functions of attitudes and the social-adjustive functions of attitudes, however, only the latter was relevant to this study. The SAFS scale for this study was composed of 6 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree; 5 – strongly agree), with a higher score indicating a stronger likelihood of purchasing and wearing brands to obtain social recognition and conserve relationships with peers. An example of an item from this scale was: ‘*It is important for my friends to know the luxury brands I possess*’. Reliability was proven with a .81 Cronbach alpha ($M = 13.84$, $SD = 5.41$, $\alpha = 0.81$, see Appendix 2 for the full scale).

Control variables

Social Media Usage Social Media Usage data were collected to understand how much time participants spend on social media daily, if they are Instagram users as we are exposing them to Instagram content, how often they use Instagram and for how long ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 2.59$ see Appendix 3). Finally, they were asked if they followed any type of Instagram Influencer, defined as a person with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media. If the answer was yes, they were asked to report how many influencers they follow.

Dependent variables

Post Engagement Scale The Post Engagement Scale (Giakoumaku, et Al., 2019) measured the levels of engagement with the posts participants were exposed to. This scale was composed of 4 items on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 - strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree). This scale with items such as ‘*I would press the like button if I saw this post on Instagram*’, a higher score indicates a higher chance of engagement with the post participants were exposed to. Values of Cronbach’s alpha of .78 (M = 7.98, SD = 3.73, see Appendix 4 for the full scale).

Purchase Intention Purchase Intention was measured with a combination of a question assessing willingness to buy a luxury item assuming money is no object, and a 3-item 5-point Likert Scale adapted from and developed by Jansom et al. (2021), and concerning the literature research carried out. The 3-items assessed were: (a) ‘*If I see a luxury fashion product when I go shopping, I will buy it*’; ‘*In the coming years, I hope to buy luxury fashion products*’; ‘*I wish to purchase luxury fashion product in the near future*’. The closer to 5 indicates higher purchase intention of luxury fashion products. Good values with Cronbach’s alpha of .83 (M = 8.13, SD = 3.59, see Appendix 5 for the full scale with instructions).

Socio-demographics

For demographic purposes, participants’ age and gender were initially requested on the questionnaire.

Procedure

An online survey was created on the online platform Qualtrics to test the hypotheses of the current research program. Participants were part of a convenience sample recruited on Social Media platforms, where they were invited to answer a survey about their social media usage and purchase intentions. After reading and giving their consent to participate, participants proceeded to the survey. First, they were asked to report their socio-demographic data and answer the questions for the control variables - social media usage data. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions, crossing type of content with a type of brand (ad posted by a luxury brand vs. ad posted by a non-luxury brand vs. ad posted by an Influencer about a luxury brand vs. ad posted by an Influencer about a non-luxury brand).

After the experimental manipulations, participants filled out the dependent measures – engagement with a post, willingness to pay and purchase intention. To finish, the social-adjustive functions of attitudes scale was measured.

Results

Hypotheses were tested through data analysis on SPSS 26.0. Basic descriptive statistics were carried out to report means and standard deviations for central variables. Reliability analyses were performed to illustrate the internal consistency of the scales by obtaining the Cronbach's alpha (α). Lastly, to identify the predictive effects of each hypothesis Two-way Univariate ANOVA and moderation analyses were carried out.

The basic descriptive statistics showed that engagement with post is positively and moderately correlated with purchase intention. Social adjustive functions of attitudes was also positively and moderately correlated with purchase intention.

Table 1- Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between all the central constructs/variables.

Variable	Descriptives		Correlations		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Engagement with post	1.99	0.93	—		
2. Purchase Intention	2.71	1.97	.44**	—	
3. Social-Adjustive Functions of Attitudes	2.30	0.90	.17	.43**	—

*Note: ** $p < .01$*

The first three hypothesis were as follows:

H1 – There is a main effect of type of source (influencers vs. brand) on post engagement.

H2 – There is a main effect of type of brand (luxury vs. non-luxury brands) on post engagement.

H3 – There is an interaction effect between type of source and type of brand on post engagement.

In order to test the first hypothesis, a two-way univariate ANOVA that examined the main effect of the source (influencer vs. brand), the main effect of type of brand (luxury brands or non-luxury brands), and the interaction effect of source \times type of brand on the level of engagement with the Instagram posts.

Results revealed that there was no statistically significant main effect of the source on engagement, $F(1,115) = 1.65, p = .201$. This means, that whether participants had been exposed to an Instagram post by an influencer ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.58$) or by the brand ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.31$) these differences were not statistically significant from each other when it comes to the post engagement indices (likes, comments, etc.). The main effect of type of brands was also not statistically significant, $F < 1, p = .504$. This means the levels of engagement were not altered whether the participant saw a post from a luxury brand ($M = 2.51, SD = 1.44$) or a non-luxury brand ($M = 2.77, SD = 1.58$).

Finally, the interaction testing the H_3 was also not statistically significant, $F < 1, p = .547$. Meaning there were no effects on engagement from the source and type of brand participants got exposed to on the Instagram post (Influencer post of a luxury brand: ($M = 2.10, SD = 0.18$); influencer post of a non-luxury brand: ($M = 2.11, SD = 0.16$), brand post of a luxury brand: ($M = 1.78, SD = 0.16$), brand post of a non-luxury brands: ($M = 2.00, SD = 0.17$)).

Using Model 1 of PROCESS (Hayes, Montoya & Rockwood, 2017), hypothesis four (H_4 - Social-Adjustive Functions of Attitudes moderate the effect of the post source (influencer and brand) on engagement) was investigated through a moderation analysis. This test showed a non-significant moderation effect, $b = -0.13, 95\% CI [-0.51, 0.23], t = -0.72, p = .46$. Meaning social-adjustive functions of attitudes do not moderate the effect of the post of the source (influencer or brand) on engagement with the Instagram Post.

Exploratory Analysis

To make a deep delve analysis on engagement, I decided to focus on the single item measuring interaction with posts through liking. Liking is the most common form of engagement, with the least effort from the user side (Ferreira, Zambaldi & Guerra, 2020). Therefore, it is a good proxy for a general engagement behavior.

Firstly, a two-way univariate ANOVA that examined the main effects of the source (influencer vs. brand) and the type of brand (luxury brand vs. non-luxury brand) and the interaction effect of source \times type of brand on liking the post. The main effect of source was statistically significant, $F(1,115) = 10.57, p = .002$. When exposed to a post by an influencer, participants were more willing to press the 'like' button ($M = 3.10, SD = 1.59$) than when exposed to the same post by a brand ($M = 2.21, SD = 1.32$). The main effect of type of brand was not statistically significant, $F < 1, p = .490$, where luxury brands had the same likelihood of getting likes ($M = 2.12, SD = 1.54$) than non-luxury brands ($M = 2.31, SD = 1.41$). The interaction effect was also not statistically significant, $F < 1, p = .997$). Meaning there were no effects on liking from the source and type of brand participants got exposed to on the Instagram post (Influencer post of a luxury brand: $M = 3.00, SD = 1.54$; influencer post of a non-luxury brand: $M = 3.18, SD = 1.63$, brand post of a luxury brand: $M = 2.12, SD = 1.23$, brand post of a non-luxury brands: $M = 2.31, SD = 1.41$).

To investigate whether post engagement (measured only by the likes variable) mediated the effect of the source of the post on purchase intention, a simple mediation analysis was conducted using *PROCESS* (Hayes, 2017). The outcome variable for this analysis was purchase intention, the predictor variable of the analysis was the source of the post (influencer vs. brand) and the mediator variable was the single item of liking (“*I would press the like button if I saw this post on Instagram*”). The dependent variable was the purchasing behavior. The indirect effect of the source on purchase intention via liking the post was statistically significant (*Indirect Effect* = -0.27, *BootSE* = 0.11, 95% *Boot CI* = [-0.52, -0.08], $p < .05$). A post by an influencer (vs. brand) made participants more likely to press the 'like' button ($b = -0.89, SE = 0.27, t(118) = -3.34, p = .001, 95\% CI [-1.42, -0.36]$). Consequently, the more likely participants were to like a post, the higher the purchase intention ($b = 0.30, SE = 0.71, t(118) = 4.26, p < .001, 95\% CI [0.16, 0.45]$).

Discussion

Understanding how brands make profit on social media platforms is an ever more pressing concern for companies that desire a global market presence. Therefore, marketers must invest in campaigns that allow new and existing customers to be in contact with their products; influencer marketing is one of these campaigns, and, as stated before, one of the most effective in bringing profit.

In the current dissertation, the main findings contribute to understand how users interact with influencers and brands on social media platforms: The main findings show that although this feeling of engagement can be perceived as an investment in a platonic interpersonal relationship, it was possible to test that social-adjustive functions do not moderate the relationship between type of source and engagement. One explanation may be related to the fact that the brand used was a fictitious brand. It may be that this relationship was too artificial to produce a high level of closeness and belongingness with the influencer. Nevertheless, the social-adjustive functions of attitude propose that consumers use certain luxury brands to improve their social statuses (Becker, et al., 2018) and integrate the social groups they want to be associated with (Cannon, et al., 2019). Some researchers also proposed that there may be changes in social adjustive functions of attitude from age group to age-group, which could influence the results from this research (Schade, et al., 2016).

This concept of parasocial interaction plays a role when trying to understand why people will engage more with influencers content than content from brands. Parasocial interactions are used across research to describe the relationships formed between viewers and influencers. It proposes a parallel relationship between the two groups, that results in consumers to look at posts from these endorsers as more credible, trustworthy. Similarly, social media users will look at the products advertised on influencers profiles as more useful to their day-to-day activities. This is because, influencers share their routines and life in a mundane manner and like the viewers (Giles, 2022). Finally, this can help explain why social media users engage (like) more influencers posts than brands, making the first more effective (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019).

Results also showed that neither type of source nor type of brand had an effect on post engagement. One reason why may be related to how engagement was measured. Although the scale selected was previously successfully used by other researchers (Jansom, et al., 2021) not all the indicators comprising the engagement construct have

the same weight. For example, hitting a liking button involves less cognitive effort than commenting a post. Also, liking a post involves less social exposure than writing a comment. Measuring engagement varies according to the subject and context that is analysed (Ferreira, et Al., 2020; Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). As mentioned previously, engagement is a good tool for marketers to understand interactions consumers have with their online efforts. Consumers, brands, type of ads and context all influence the concept of engagement and, therefore, how it should be measured (Jakkola and Alexander, 2014; Vivek et al, 2014; Brodie et al., 2013; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeedk, 2011; as cited in Ferreira et al., 2020).

Engagement with posts from influencers is a measure for companies to understand if consumers are viewing their adverts and interested in them. Since influencers bring a “return on investment” (ROI) 11 times higher than other marketing efforts made by brands (Nielsen et Al., 2016) this means consumers engage and recognize brands and their products when they see influencers endorsed posts (Lim, Radzol, Cheah, et Al., 2017). Data such as the one mentioned previously, and other like the Media Mix marketing report on Forbes 2017, 80% of online marketers claimed influencers boost their products and brands with their social media posts, and that 50% of brands reported higher levels of sales when they invest in these types of campaigns, showcase the effectiveness that influencers have invigorate purchase intentions (Lim, et al., 2017). Influencer marketing, engagement with posts and purchase intention are three concepts that come hand in hand when exploring the effectiveness of endorsed posts (AlFarraj, et al., 2020).

For all stated above, it is agreed amongst professionals that influencers add value to marketing efforts from brands. This can help in many directions when it comes to the positive effects of marketing strategies – it brings awareness to the consumer, whilst, helps create a strong brand image (Godey, Manthiou, Pederzoli, et al., 2016). Although, influencer marketing research is still scarce and recent, researchers agree that these efforts have an effect on consumers behaviours, intentions, and other important aspects such as satisfaction. Many benefits have been associated with influencer marketing, namely, Nielsen and Tapinfluence (2016) have reported this strategy to be eleven times more effective than digital marketing in producing revenue. This research also found that those who were exposed to influencer marketing campaigns bought significantly more products than those who were exposed to other traditional online marketing

strategies. These researchers suggested that influencer marketing creates positive feelings towards brands – a halo effect. Lastly, they pointed out that consumers will look for social media information about products over other online data when they start considering purchasing a new product.

A brand that is present on social media can take many advantages from the commodities such platforms bring. Users can have interactions with brands campaigns, products, and news at any time, consequently, this allows marketing relationships to be created (Braojos-Gomez et al., 2015 as cited in Li & Peng, 2021). Social media influencers have an important role in this field, with their growing audiences, these micro-celebrities have the power to attract and appeal to their viewers any product they advertise. By showcasing these products in a routinely, mundane manner, viewers get easily attracted. Social media influencers have a closer life-routine to those who engage with them on social media websites, which adds a sense of effectiveness to the products they endorse (Giokoumaki and Krepapa, 2020 as cited in Li et al., 2021).

All in all, the objective of marketers is to influence consumers, in other words, the main goal is to shape the purchase intentions of spectators. Similarly, these intentions are an effective tool for marketing departments to measure the success and failure of their campaigns (Morwitz, 2014). This thesis not only focused on fashion luxury brands but also in understanding how influencer marketing may or may not affect purchase intention and how social media plays a role in the wide spectrum of new consumers for such type of brands.

When it comes to purchase intention, like any other human behaviour, there are psychological processes that need to be understood in order to help brands increase the effectiveness of their investments in the social media realm.

When it comes to luxury brands, with the rise of social media, consumers for the type of products these brands sell have different levels of incomes and motives for purchasing or intending to purchase. For these brands it can be argued that brand consciousness - the “psychological preference towards famous brand-name goods” (Sproles & Kendall, 1986, as cited in Zhang et al., 2013) - is important. This is because customers can associate price to quality (Husic and Cicis, 2009, as cited in Zhang et al., 2013).

Limitations

When it comes to the limitations of this study, firstly, it is important to understand that the content used to test was not from a well-established luxury brand which may have influenced how participants reported their engagement/ interactions with posts as there were no previous social value attributed to the item/ brands presented. Secondly, the engagement scale used was a possible problem in getting significant results, perhaps because this scale was developed in 2014 with the intent of measuring engagement on Facebook in this research. Since then, a lot of research has been conducted and new scales developed (Ferreira, et al., 2020). Moreover, Instagram is a different social media from Facebook, content is more visual and most of the engagement is done through likes, whereas on Facebook the interaction and type of content are different. This means, the scale used could be adapted to Instagram activities. Finally, the fact that this was not tested on Instagram itself and there was no opportunity to test if viewers would actually purchase the item may have altered the reports and differences found/ not found.

Conclusion

People are exposed to advertising in almost every context of their lives and as brands are fighting to capture the attention of those who view their ads, people become resistant to paying attention to such "noise". This creates a harder challenge for marketers as these experts try to reach consumers; the techniques most used currently are product placement, content and influencer marketing. According to Talaverna (2015), influencers know their audiences and these usually have similar interests, which amplifies the impact of the products endorsed by these micro-celebrities.

Besides the actual acquisition of products, consumers' engagement with the endorsed social media posts can help marketers to understand the effect of influencer campaigns. This dissertation shows that influencers are more likely than brands to promote engagement with posts via likes. Additionally, likes seem an effective tool to increase purchase intentions. Millions of people are online every day and are social media users which consequently exposes them to an array of online advertising and how they respond/ engage with such content is important for brands to understand where to allocate their efforts to (Onofrei, et al., 2022).

Becker and colleagues (2018) proposed that without the existence of a more consistent and worldwide definition for what a luxury brand is the results from research will result in the examination of different categories for luxury products. Therefore, future researchers should establish a definition for luxury products in order to uniformly analyse the evolution of these for all topics, namely, marketing and psychological processes that lead to purchase (such as, purchase intention). Finally, future research could use well-established luxury brands (Gucci, Prada, etc) and test whether, in this context, social-adjustive relationships moderate the relationship between engagement and purchase intention.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Influencer + Luxury Brands - “This is @ANA01, she has more than 500k followers on Instagram. Here's a picture of her with a luxury bag from a luxury fashion brand - LCB.”



Brand + Luxury: “@LCB is a Luxury brand that sells high-fashion items. This is a bag they just released.”



Influencer + Non-Luxury –“This is @ANA01, she has more than 500k followers on Instagram. Here's a picture of her with a bag from a fast fashion clothing brand - LCB.”



Brand + Non-Luxury –“@LCB is a fast-fashion clothing brand with average prices. This is a bag they just released.”



Appendix 2

Social-Adjustive Functions of Attitudes Scale:

1. It is important for my friends to know the luxury brands I possess.
2. Luxury brands are a symbol of social status.
3. Luxury brands help me in fitting into important social situations.
4. I like to be seen with my luxury brands.
5. The luxury brands that a person owns, tells me a lot about that person.
6. The luxury brands I wear indicate to others the kind of person I am.

Appendix 3

Social Media Usage Scale:

1. How many hours a day do you spend on Social Media?
2. Are you an Instagram user?
3. How often do you use Instagram?
4. On average how many hours a day do you spend on Instagram?
5. An influencer is a "person with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending the items on social media".
Do you follow any influencers on Instagram?
6. On average, how many influencers do you follow on Instagram?

Appendix 4

Post-Engagement Scale:

1. I would press the 'like' button if I saw this post on Instagram.
2. I would make a comment about this post on Instagram.
3. I would share this post on Instagram with a friend.
4. I would like to see more content from this user on Instagram.

Appendix 5

Purchase Intention Scale:

1. If I see a luxury fashion product when I go shopping, I will buy it.
2. In the coming years, I hope to buy a luxury fashion product.
3. I wish to purchase luxury fashion products in the near future.
4. Assuming money is no object how likely is that you purchase a luxury brand's fashion product within the next two months?