An empirical analysis on the impact of online community engagement on the purchase intention of Generation Z customers: a focus on luxury skincare brands

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of requirements for the International MSc in Management – Major in Marketing, at Universidade Católica Portuguesa and for the MSc in Marketing Management at Bocconi University, 2024.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the dynamic intersection of social commerce, online communities, and luxury skincare products. Luxury skincare companies are using online communities more and more to increase customer engagement and boost sales as a result of the growth of digital platforms. In order to investigate this phenomenon, the research uses a mixed-method approach to examine how social commerce strategies affect young consumers' behavior and purchase intention in the luxury skincare market. It does this by thoroughly reviewing the body of extisting literature, and integrating both qualitative and quantitative analyses. To gather qualitative insights, individual interviews were conducted, focusing on consumers' interactions with brands through social media platforms and online communities. Moreover, a questionnaire was distributed among Generation Z consumers living in Italy and the data derived from this survey was rigorously analyzed to uncover patterns and correlations. Through this methodology, the research gathered key insights into how online communities are perceived and allow consumers to interact, particularly in the context of luxury skincare. The discussion section delves into the implications of these findings, emphasizing the role of digital engagement in shaping consumer preferences. As a result, the conclusion of this thesis highlights the critical role that online communities play, offering strategic insights for luxury skincare brands aiming to leverage these platforms for customer engagement and market growth. It points out the role of interaction by revealing that community-driven marketing influences consumer purchasing decisions, contributing to the academic understanding of online communities and providing practical recommendations for the luxury skincare industry.

Keywords: Social Commerce, Online Communities, Luxury Skincare, Consumer Behavior, Purchase Intention

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Resumo

Esta dissertação examina a interseção dinâmica do comércio social, comunidades online e produtos de cuidado da pele de luxo. As empresas de skincare de luxo estão utilizando cada vez mais as comunidades online para aumentar o envolvimento do cliente e impulsionar as vendas como resultado do crescimento das plataformas digitais. Para investigar este fenômeno, a pesquisa utiliza uma abordagem de método misto. Isso é feito por meio de uma revisão aprofundada da literatura existente e da integração de análises qualitativas e quantitativas. Para obter insights qualitativos, foram realizadas entrevistas individuais, focando nas interações dos consumidores com as marcas. Além disso, um questionário foi distribuído entre os consumidores da Geração Z que vivem na Itália e os dados derivados desta pesquisa foram rigorosamente analisados para descobrir padrões e correlações. Através desta metodologia, a pesquisa reuniu insights chave sobre como as comunidades online são percebidas e permitem aos consumidores interagir. A seção de discussão se aprofunda nas implicações dessas descobertas, enfatizando o papel do engajamento digital na formação das preferências dos consumidores. Como resultado, a conclusão desta tese destaca o papel crítico que as comunidades online desempenham, oferecendo insights estratégicos para as marcas de skincare de luxo que visam aproveitar dessas plataformas para o engajamento do cliente e crescimento do mercado. Aponta o papel da interação ao revelar que o marketing conduzido pela comunidade influencia as decisões de compra dos consumidores, contribuindo para o entendimento acadêmico das comunidades online e fornecendo recomendações práticas para a indústria de skincare de luxo.

Palavras-chave: Comércio Social, Comunidades Online, Skincare de Luxo, Comportamento do Consumidor, Intenção de Compra

Título: Uma análise empírica do impacto do engajamento em comunidades online na intenção de compra dos consumidores da Geração Z: um foco em marcas de skincare de luxo.

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1. Introduction

This thesis explores the relationship between luxury skincare brands and the digital world. It focuses on how these brands are adapting to digital platforms and what this means for their customers. The focus is on understanding the changing nature of marketing and customer engagement in the digital age. This research aims to give a view of how luxury skincare brands are using online tools to connect with their audience and what impact this is having on their business. The goal is to provide insights that are useful for both industry professionals and those studying marketing trends. Therefore, an analysis of current practices in the field, aiming to shed light on the evolving landscape of luxury skincare in a digital context has been conducted.

1.1 Contextualization

In recent years the luxury industry has been characterized by a significant growth led by a new customer composition as well as a new approach to shopping. The industry has grown mainly because of Millennials and Generation Z who have changed the way in which luxury companies should approach their customers. In fact, consumers are looking for experiences and one-to-one communication with brands, especially online. Moreover, due to the development of technologies and the increased usage of social media platforms consumers are more aware and they are able to confront themselves with others. They can thoroughly examine reviews and collect information before purchasing. Recent years have been characterized by the democratization of technology, which is now available to more people around the world. The global access to technology and information has made customers more informed and more demanding and markets are trying to increase the number of contact channels.

Customers are looking for more comfort and an easily accessible purchase. Therefore, companies are trying to develop a continuity in all touchpoints called omnichannel strategy. This strategy allows to create an interdependence between all sales channels, allowing customers to choose the channel they prefer according to their necessities. Luxury customers in particular, have higher requests and needs. They like to display their possessions and experiences on social media to draw attention to their wealth and status or make new friends (Sekhon et al., 2015). Therefore, they can be considered a group in which technologies can exercise a high influence. Luxury consumption is shared to increase engagement, elicit admiration or shape public opinion (Feng et al., 2023). These insights will assist in determining which factors contribute to purchase intention within online communities.

1.2 Dissertation structure

The following dissertation is organized in seven chapters. Chapter two includes an academic review of the current literature on social commerce and online communities. It gives a general understanding of how luxury brands create value through online communities and social media platforms. In addition, it introduces the new trends that are characterizing the luxury cosmetic and skincare industry. In chapter three a conceptual framework is provided covering the problem statement to investigate and the derived hypotheses, presenting the general theoretical foundation. Chapter four introduces the applied methodologies for qualitative and quantitative research, along with the corresponding findings. In chapter five, the analysis of the data and results are presented. This part includes descriptive statistics and statistical analysis of the research conducted with SPSS. Finally, chapters six and seven discuss the management contributions, limitations and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

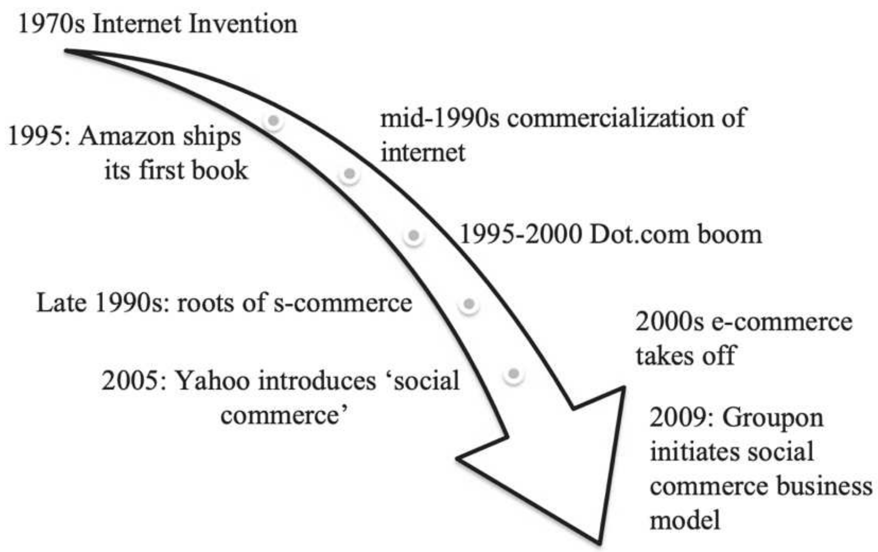
Social media and Web 2.0 applications have changed e-commerce into a new business model known as "social commerce". Because of this advancement, customers now play an influential role and have more power since they can advise other consumers and influence their purchases. In relation to these aspects, the literature review will focus firstly on the transformation of e-commerce into social commerce and the rise of online communities. The second section will center around how luxury brands are leveraging this new phenomenon and the last section on the luxury cosmetic industry and skincare products which is under increasing pressure to adapt to new trends.

2.1 From e-commerce to social commerce and online community engagement

The global economy is being significantly impacted by the rapid expansion of e-commerce and the popularity of online social networks. In particular, the way consumers shop has changed, and a new e-commerce category called "social commerce" is emerging (Li & Ku, 2018). The rapid development of social media and Web 2.0 has provided a great opportunity to transform e-commerce from a product-oriented environment to a social and customer-centered one (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). The term social commerce is used to identify all transactions of products and services that take place via social media and involve sharing the experience with other users. A business that is estimated to reach $1.2 trillion worldwide by 2025 (Volponi, 2022). Social commerce leverages social networking capabilities to offer features like user profiles, tags, reviews, and comments. These features are referred to as "user-generated content" since they enable customers to share their own experiences with the products they have purchased (Li & Ku, 2018). Through social commerce customers are able to take part in online communities that foster social interaction and conversation between customers. They are empowered and can benefit from a more social, interactive and collaborative online experience. The business goal is to focus on social activities rather than shopping efficiency and the website design is user and customer centered. On the contrary, when using e-commerce platforms customers act individually and independently from others. They have little or no control over the platform which provides them with one-way browsing, maximizing shopping efficiency and offering a product centered and catalog-based website design.

A visualization of the significant turning points and historical advancements that led to the social commerce concept can be found in Figure 1. The internet, or Web1.0, emerged in the 1970s and became commercialized in the 1990s, gaining importance in our daily lives and laying the groundwork for social commerce (Boardman et al., 2019). Growing investments on technology and its infrastructure have aided in the development of Web 2.0 and e-commerce opportunities allowing Amazon.com to ship its first book, which was purchased online, in 1995. Nevertheless, social commerce's rapid expansion only started in 2004, the year in which Facebook and many other social media sites were founded. In 2005 Yahoo firstly used the term "social commerce" when they created a feature on their online platform that allowed consumers to create, share and comment on product lists (Wang & Zhang, 2012). Since then, it has grown proportionally alongside social media research in terms of number of publications. In fact, research on social commerce is almost always related to social theories, indicating the importance of social aspects brought by the nature of this particular category of e-commerce (Boardman et al., 2019).

Figure 1: Major turning points in the growth of social commerce



Source: Boardman et al. (2019)

Authors have identified three trends that developed within e-commerce and led to the newer concept of social commerce: using social media for selling, for instance by posting promotional content on already existing social media channels, improving e-commerce websites (like ASOS, Net-a-Porter, and Boohoo.com) by incorporating extra social media elements and using social media to improve brick-and-mortar retailers' (offline) overall success (Boardman et al., 2019). As a result, sellers create a unique shopping experience which has also brought to the explosion of group-buying, a kind of social commerce integration (Lin & Wu, 2015). Its members have a common need thanks to which they can get certain price-related or other economic benefits from the seller if an order placed through group-buying is large enough. Therefore, online group buying behavior is characterized as a type of community commerce for the purposes of consumption and shopping.

The benefits and challenges of social commerce have also been widely discussed. In fact, its implementation might involve some potential risks and complex problems. Firstly, worldwide popular networks such as Facebook and Instagram have control over the data which plays a crucial role in customers' trust and their availability in sharing personal profiles and demographic information for business purposes. Moreover, social commerce depends on customers' reviews on products and their influence on others' decision-making processes. In fact, positive comments from consumers help the reputation of the company whilst complaints can have a negative impact on the brand's influence (Han et al., 2018). Finally, brands have to deal with an increasing fierce competition as well as the difficulties in measuring the financial benefits brought by social commerce as there is no guarantee that all visitors will convert into actual buyers. Nevertheless, social commerce is an opportunity for both businesses and consumers. It can increase brand awareness, bring more profit and create long lasting and deep customer relationships. Customers can benefit from lower prices as well as the companionship, approval and respect that they can find by participating in a social exchange. In fact, users are becoming more active in sharing commercial information which can also be a valuable input for businesses for new product development by interacting with consumers.

The amount of academic research on customer engagement has been steadily expanding recently (Algharabat & Rana, 2021). Current research generally agrees on the definition of customer engagement as a psychological state of interacting with an object (Hollebeek et al. 2016). Furthermore, prior research focuses on the primary components of customer engagement which include cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Algharabat & Rana, 2021).

According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media and online communities such as Instagram and Facebook, allow users to engage, exchange and create content. In fact, social media features make it easier for customers to engage with each other and with brands (online brand community) and thus facilitate customer engagement (Algharabat & Rana, 2021). Dessart (2017) defines social media engagement as users' attitudes toward communities and brands through varying degrees of emotive, cognitive, and behavioral displays. Moreover, Dessart states that social media engagement consists of two dimensions: community engagement and brand engagement. The former reflects consumer interaction with other consumers in a particular online community and the latter reflects consumer interaction with the focal brand. As a result, community engagement has a positive impact on brand engagement (Wirtz et al. 2013). This paper will focus on community engagement due to the lack of research.

2.2 Luxury brands and the creation of value through online brand communities

The adoption of digital strategies by luxury brands has been characterized by a slow process. Firstly, digital communication is a recent phenomenon whilst luxury brands are built on tradition and heritage. Secondly, whereas digital communication is dynamic and always evolving, luxury brand communication is typically constant and heavily relies on the brand’s identity. Thirdly, luxury brands are generally reserved for the elite while the internet is democratic especially when it comes to social media (Blanckaert & Som, 2015). In addition, the geo-economic shift from the United States, Europe and Japan to the emerging economies of China, Brazil, Russia, India, South Africa and other nations has observed the emergence of these regions' leading luxury consumers. The growth of new wealth centers is redefining the profile of the luxury consumer who happens to be increasingly Internet savvy. In fact, it is not surprising that brands would begin to take advantage of the opportunities emerging in places like South Korea, where smartphone saturation is at its highest (67 percent of the 50 million inhabitants own a smartphone), or Brazil, where luxury consumers have embraced social media at a rate that surpasses that of first-world countries (Blanckaert & Som, 2015). Among other emerging markets, the Chinese rank as the world’s largest Internet population and continue to adopt new technology rapidly. In fact, in the Chinese e-commerce market with the increasing number of mobile internet users and the growing proportion of online shopping, the level of competitiveness is rising. Moreover, the emergence and development of social media WeChat creates opportunities for innovative business models (Liang et al., 2011). As a result, luxury brands from France and Italy, who were once thought to be laggards when it came to web use, have now embraced the chance to interact with hundreds of millions of potential new customers through smartphones and tablets (Blanckaert & Som, 2015). The LVMH group pioneered in 2000 by launching a site that offered a wide selection of clothing and accessories from prestigious brands such as Dior, Versace, Dolce & Gabbana, and Louis Vuitton (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2021). Gucci, on the other hand, launched its online shop in 2010 when Ferragamo's had already been operational for some time. Nevertheless, one of the few brands that is still reluctant about the opportunity to use the web in commercial transactions is Chanel, which in late 2016 still decided to begin selling its perfumes, beauty products, and eyewear online and in 2018 announced a strategic partnership with the global e-commerce platform FarFetch. Over time, multi-brand commerce platforms have also taken a leading role in online sales of luxury products. In 2017, Alibaba founded Tmall Luxury Pavilion, dedicated to high-end brands. Since then, the number of luxury brands targeting the Chinese market and listed on the site has grown and as of February 2020 there were more than 150 including Burberry, Valentino, Versace, Ermenegildo Zegna, and LVMH brands (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2021). Meanwhile in Europe, the Richemont Group acquired Net-a-porter in 2010, a commercial website which opened in 2000 and merged with Yoox.

Most luxury studies approach the psychological and / or motivational behavior of in-store luxury shoppers and little research focuses on online luxury consumer behavior. Moreover, despite the continuous growth of luxury e-commerce and the rising number of luxury brands that sell their goods on their own online sites, few research has been focused on luxury brands' e-performance (Kim, 2019). In the current multi-channel world, it is inevitable for luxury brands to embrace the Internet as an additional selling channel. Moreover, potential research should focus on the differences among generations in terms of key e-service components that affect overall satisfaction. This paper will focus on the Generation Z luxury consumers. In fact, it has been stated that for Generation Z consumers the perceived benefits of social networking platforms correlate positively with the perceived benefits of luxury brands (Dobre et al., 2021). Brand engagement is the result of an interaction through social networking sites, blogs, content communities, discussion boards and chatrooms used to share content, leading to a stronger relationship with the brand. Pentina et al. (2018) identified 11 behaviors displayed by luxury brand followers in social media, based on exploratory research with 30 semi-structured interviews. These behaviors included liking or following the brand, commenting on posts and advertisements, liking, tagging, and sharing, mentioning friends in comments, starting and maintaining brand-related conversations in personal social networking and publishing photos of brands' products.

Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit's COBRA (2011) (consumers' online brand-related activities) model allows for the examination of social media consumer engagement with brands using three continuous levels: consuming content on social media, such as watching videos and pictures, reading product reviews, and downloading brand widgets; contributing to the content on social media pages by answering questions on Facebook, participating in wall post conversations, and leaving comments on the videos or pictures; and creating user-generated content (UGC), such as publishing and sharing videos and pictures on brands' pages for other consumers to consume and contribute to. This paper will look at how consumers' perceptions of the value of luxury brands on social media affect their intentions to engage with those brands specifically and potentially purchase from them.

Brand communities are social groups with a common culture where the brand identity is co-created, negotiated, or enacted (Kozinets, 2001). Members of online brand communities can actively participate as providers and beneficiaries, creating value for each person as well as the community and business (Chapman & Dilmperi, 2022). Finding the factors that influence customer engagement is crucial for research since many businesses are actively investing in developing their brand communities to involve consumers in the value co-creation process (Chapman & Dilmperi, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how a brand might support value co-creation through its online brand communities. It is also critical to emphasize that consuming luxury goods has been found to be a highly communicative act and is frequently associated with status and power (Leban & Voyer, 2015). This aspect of consuming luxury goods has a big impact on how members of luxury communities behave and are motivated. Without having to purchase an expensive object, customers can use online networks to create a sense of belonging in the luxury sector, improving their perceived power and self-worth at a lesser financial cost (Chapman & Dilmperi, 2022).

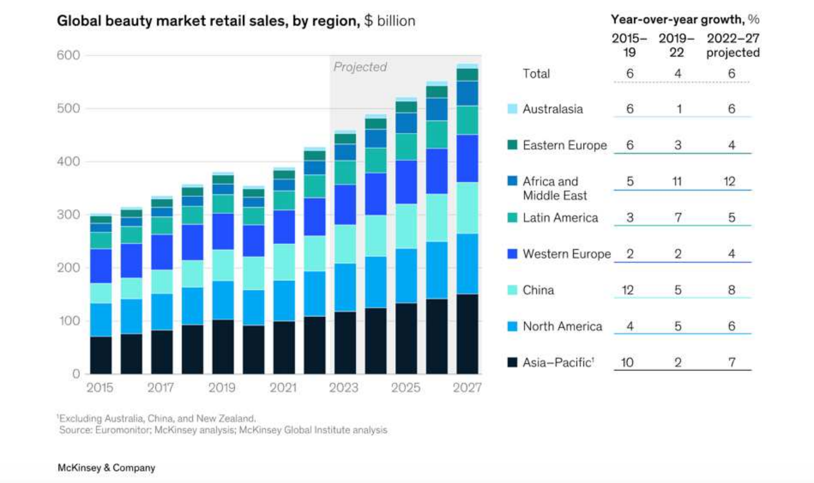
2.3 A focus on luxury cosmetic industry and skincare products in sales through online brand communities

The beauty and cosmetics sector is under increasing pressure to adapt to new trends as changes in consumer behavior on social media and in demographics occur (Warschun et al., 2017). Prior studies have provided a consensus definition about consumers' perceptions of luxury. Moreover, a review of the literature reveals that numerous research has been focused on luxury brands and has attempted to identify different aspects of luxury value dimensions across different nations (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2017). Numerous luxury product categories, including watches, sunglasses, clothing, purses, fragrances, fashion items, and other luxury goods, have been subject of research. However, these results cannot be applied to each country in general because the perception towards luxury products can be different across countries and cultures (Ajitha & Sivakumar, 2017). As Wong and Ahuvia (1998) stated: “Just because many of the products are the same in Asia and western societies does not mean that consumers buy them for the same reasons”. While the combined values of luxury as viewed by customers from various nations are comparable, the sub-dimensions of different countries may have different standards for luxury (Wiedmann et al., 2009).

The wide variety of subjects covered by research in the field of cosmetics indicates that there may be a positive relationship between cosmetics and consumers' cognition and emotions associated with psychosocial activities that manifest as attitudes, values, and usage patterns. Numerous studies have demonstrated the connection between women's cosmetics and status and ostentatious consumption (Chao & Schor, 1998). The purchase behavior of cosmetics has been studied using a variety of theories and models (Yeh et al., 2010), such as the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and the theory of reasoned action (TRA) with a value system (Hansen et al., 2012; Yeon Kim & Chung, 2011). Nevertheless, there aren't many, if any, research that look at how usage patterns and attitude relate to the luxury value of cosmetic products. While research has been done on other aspects of luxury goods and brands, not as much has been carried out on cosmetic brands.

Value perception can strongly differ with respect to customers’ involvement in which social media marketing and social commerce play a crucial role. In fact, the luxury market is a perfect example of high involvement products for which it is fundamental to create a connection to the brand and reach consumers. This paper focuses on social commerce and the blending of online social activity with marketing, distribution and advertising. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology and has led to an increase in online interactions and to the further development of social commerce (Păuceanu et al., 2023). This phenomenon has been particularly evident in countries such as the US and China, which are at the forefront of technological innovation. Nevertheless, the European Union (EU) has lagged behind as a result of its disjointed political and administrative structure as well as its more traditional social and corporate cultures (Păuceanu et al., 2023). According to a study by Mckinsey & Company conducted in 2023, Asia and North America are forecast to stay the two biggest beauty markets, while other countries and regions such as Europe are ready to offer distinct potential for specific categories and price tiers such as in the luxury sector. In fact, across geographies, another growth opportunity will be products and services in the top tier of the pricing pyramid. According to the study, the true luxury and ultraluxury beauty market has the potential to double from around $20 billion today to around $40 billion by 2027.

Figure 2: Asia and North America are forecast to stay the two biggest beauty markets



Source: Berg et al. (2023)

For the beauty sector, the upcoming years will be filled with opportunities. With EBITDA margins of up to 30%, its exceptional profitability will keep drawing in new investors and entrepreneurs. Brands that are successful will have to change with the times to establish a value proposition that stands out in the face of a crowded market and consumers who are becoming more and more involved and demanding. The key dynamics which have already been defined by recent research include the rise of wellness and the influence of Generation Z (Berg et al., 2023). As consumers increasingly engage with beauty products not only to look good but also feel good the demand for high quality and premium price wellness inspired products will grow quickly. Moreover, according to McKinsey & Company (2023), Generation Z thoroughly scrutinizes brands as part of their search for value. They value brands with a compelling narrative that extends beyond products and draws customers into a larger community. Therefore, it will be progressively required for brands with a strong identity such as luxury brands to allow customers to engage with their beauty products and with other customers through a business model such as social commerce and especially through online communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a strong impact on the cosmetics sector; customers do not visit anymore physical stores to try on newly launched cosmetic products when they wish to purchase them (Chen & Huang, 2022). As a result, the cosmetics industry must rethink how to reach customers. Nowadays, social media and online communities help to establish diverse connections and transmit information providing brands with opportunities to build stronger relationships with consumers and promote their business and products (Chen & Huang, 2022). Moreover, although social media is largely used for entertainment, recently, there has been a shift in the tendency toward using it as an education platform (Joshi et al., 2022). Beauty influencers and medical specialists, such as dermatologists, use social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat to counsel consumers on appropriate cosmetic procedures and product purchases (Joshi et al., 2022). As a result, social media plays a crucial role on skincare in particular. Consumers seek more authentic and relatable experiences and forming bonds with like-minded individuals, especially when considering skincare products. Consumers strongly rely on others' comments and on the experiences of influencers and beauty bloggers who provide reviews and tutorials that can influence purchasing decisions. Moreover, online communities provide a space for consumers to share their experiences, offer advice and provide feedback directly to brands (Allen, 2023).

In the luxury skincare industry, there is an increasing emphasis on community-led marketing strategies and brands are finding community-driven user-generated content (UGC) to be an important tool to increase engagement and trust (Allen, 2023). Luxury brands especially in skincare are finding it to be powerful to open conversations between themselves and their consumers and building an engaged community. Online communities are particularly important in the luxury skincare industry for several reasons: authenticity and trust, personal connection and engagement and diverse perspectives. In fact, consumers look for trustworthy advice when it comes to skincare, which is closely related to health and wellness and they want to build deep connections with the brand through shared experiences and discussions, fostering a sense of belonging and loyalty (Allen, 2023).

3. Conceptual framework

Online communities have become an increasingly important tool for the luxury skincare industry, which is growing in terms of building genuine connections with consumers. The purpose of this study is to create an empirical framework to evaluate how brand perception and, ultimately, the intention to buy luxury skincare products can be influenced by interactions within these groups. In fact, according to Bishnoi and Singh (2022), brands of luxury goods can leverage emotional branding to engage with customers and capitalize on the growing trend of emotional connections with brands to gain a competitive edge. Although brand technology, like product features and attributes, is distinctive, consumers' assessments of brands are more influenced by their own feelings and experiences when considering luxury products (Bishnoi & Singh, 2022).

3.1 Problem statement

In the luxury skincare industry, online community engagement has become a key tactic for building genuine relationships. However, little study has been done on how brands may use online brand communities to facilitate value co-creation and build customer confidence. Given that consumers increasingly seek reliable guidance and deep connections with brands, and because the consumption of luxury goods is frequently associated with power and status, it is imperative to investigate the ways in which luxury skincare brands can foster a sense of loyalty and belonging within their online communities. Moreover, even though online brand communities have grown in popularity over the past ten years due to social media, few studies have investigated the impact of consumer engagement in online brand communities on purchase intentions for skincare luxury products among Generation Z consumers in Italy. Therefore, this study addresses the above problems and proposes a framework that empirically examines how consumer engagement in online brand communities influences brand awareness, brand attitudes and purchase intention through like-minded discussion and up-to-date information.

3.2 Research hypotheses

To answer the research question, “Does online community engagement have ultimate effect on the purchase intention of Generation Z consumers towards luxury skincare products?” Four main hypotheses have been developed.

Social identity dynamics and purchase intention

Luxury consumption is often related to status and power. From the works of early academics like Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) to more recent research on the evolutionary aspects of luxury consumption (Han et al., 2010), it has been determined that luxury consumption is a highly communicative act that can be used to convey signals about social class, wealth, status, and ultimately, economic and social power. Power and status can be obtained through conspicuous consumption, such as public displays and acquisitions of luxury products, which enhance one’s social status (Leban & Voyer, 2015). Members of luxury brand communities are likely to behave differently and have different incentives due to two distinct aspects of luxury consumption. First, according to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), interactions between members of online brand communities are usually very structured and hierarchical, and the status aspect of luxury purchase may serve to further strengthen this structure. Second, because luxury consumption is exclusive, some customers can still boost their perceived power and self-worth at a lower cost by using online communities to simply create a sense of belonging to the luxury world (Belk, 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In fact, the general public now find luxury brands accessible due to the progress of the media and globalization. According to Bishnoi and Singh (2022) retailers in the luxury industry can leverage emotional branding to involve their customers and capitalize on the growing trend of emotional connections with brands in order to get a competitive edge. Moreover, according to their study consumers buy luxury products under the influence of emotional needs. When a brand aligns more closely with consumer expectations and emotions, there is a greater likelihood of it being purchased (Consoli, 2009). As a result, emotional factors are predominant in the case of luxury goods and brand loyalty is directly correlated with emotional attachment (Khan et al., 2016).

H1: A luxury skincare brand that resonates with consumers' emotions within luxury skincare online brand communities, positively influences purchase intentions.

H2: The pursuit of social status through luxury skincare online brand communities positively influences purchase intentions.

User-generated content and purchase intention

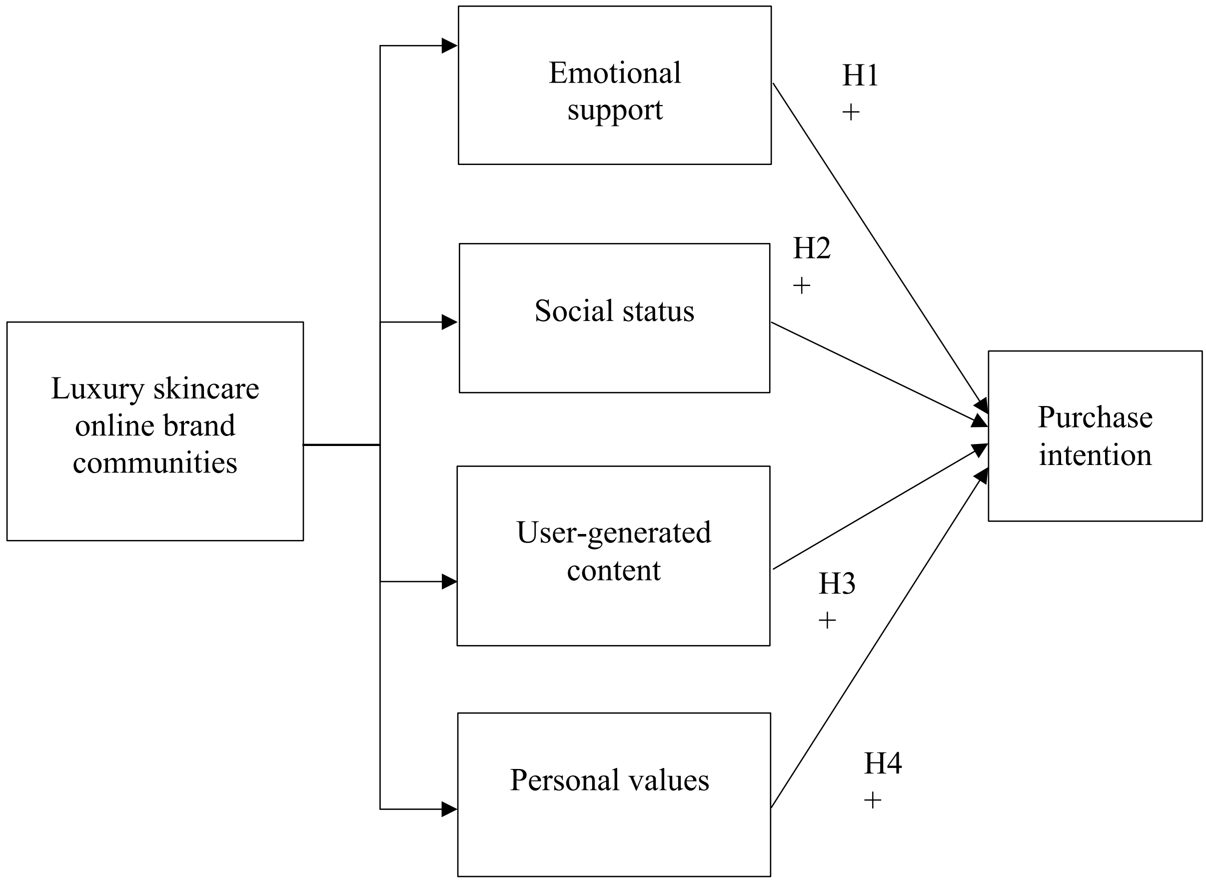
Social media marketing greatly increases consumers' involvement and gives them a stronger psychological sense of control over their relationships with luxury brands (Dobre et al., 2021). Compared to consumers who do not use social media for this purpose, those who use it to remain in touch with brands typically bond with them more strongly. The way customers communicate with brands and with one another through digital media is a clear example of how their behavior has changed. Moreover, for Millennials and Generation Z, luxury brands are compatible with social media apps as marketing channels. In fact, according to Dobre et al. (2021) there is a positive correlation between the chance of discussing luxury brands on social media and the possibility of making a purchase. Social media users' involvement during the browsing process affects their desire to share product information with reference groups and their intention to make a purchase. Customers can instantly share their brand-related experiences with other people who share their interests using rich media content like photos and videos (Koivisto & Mattila, 2020). Moreover, direct communication allows businesses to promptly gather and monitor customer feedback. Bahtar and Muda (2016) state that consumers prefer UGC rather than company-created ads for gathering information and they consider UGC more reliable than a brand's direct communication with consumers. As a result, Dobre et al. (2021) confirm that there is a favorable correlation between user-generated content (UGC) like submitting product reviews and uploading images and videos for other consumers and the possibility of making a purchase.

H3: Exposure to user-generated content within luxury skincare online brand communities positively influences purchase intentions.

Personal values and purchase intention

Generations use social media differently; while older generations may find it difficult to disclose information on social networks, younger users do not (Dobre et al., 2021). The models now in use to describe the consumption of luxury goods must be updated, and the introduction of new market groups has changed how luxury brands are regarded in value analysis. Millenials have shown a higher propensity to search for information online, often check for reviews for products and are more willing to leave reviews and provide consumer-generated product information. Moreover, luxury appeals to Millennials and members of Generation Z, which is a good incentive for luxury firms to interact on social media (Dobre et al., 2021). Ajitha and Sivakumar (2017) looked at how consumers' attitudes toward luxury cosmetic brands are influenced by their personal and social values. They discovered that conspicuous consumption was negatively correlated with consumers' attitudes towards luxury cosmetic brands, while status values, hedonism, and self-identity were positively correlated. These values are particularly important to younger generations. The group of customers born between 1997 and the late 2000, also known as Generation Z, includes the digital natives who are strongly influenced by others when buying a product or a service and 60% buy only from brands they trust. These consumers prefer more expensive or higher-quality products and are drawn to brands that offer novel or uncommon experiences (Dobre et al., 2021). In fact, Generation Z is characterized by consumers with strong personal values compared to previous generations. They are passionate about endorsing brands that uphold their shared ideals and mirror their own principles in order to improve their worldview. Moreover, according to the McKinsey's State of Fashion Report (2021), around 90% of Generation Z consumers believe that brands should take a stance on social issues. As a result, they tend to buy from brands that align with their personal values (Monteros, 2022). The most important value is authenticity which includes several key aspects. In fact, nowadays most consumers expect luxury brands to be transparent and honest about their products and they value engagement over promotion. According to Shin et al. (2023), authenticity means that brands should engage in meaningful and genuine interactions with consumers responding to feedback and creating a community around the brand.

H4: A luxury skincare brand that resonates with consumers' personal values within luxury skincare online brand communities positively influences purchase intentions.



(Figure 3: Conceptual Framework)

4. Research Methodology and Data Collection

The aim of this section is to apply a methodical and scientifically rigorous approach to answer the research question. The objective of this research is to investigate the drivers among luxury skincare online brand communities that contribute to purchase intention, specifically emotional support, social status, user-generated content and personal values within these communities. Furthermore, the goal is to define the typical user, passionate about skincare, that observes or engages in content related to luxury skincare brands on social media platforms. Finally, the aim is to establish the effect of online community engagement on the purchase intention of Generation Z consumers towards luxury skincare products.

The research employed a mixed methods approach, collecting data using both qualitative and quantitative techniques, to guarantee the validity and representativeness of the results. Although combining the two approaches was once thought to be incompatible with ontology and epistemology, it is now recognized as a valid research method in social and behavioral sciences for answering research questions (Bazeley, 2003). The first part of the research involves the qualitative testing of the initial hypotheses through semi-structured consumer interviews. Moreover, a quantitative research approach was developed through the administration of an online questionnaire (Appendix III), allowing for a deeper examination of the information gathered.

4.1 Qualitative research

Although generalizations, subjective nature, and challenges with replication are common criticisms pointed at qualitative research (Bazeley, 2003), it does offer a number of benefits, including the ability to test theories and obtain new insights (Mayring, 2000). Exploratory qualitative research using semi-structured interviews was considered necessary in order to collect more empirical data, validate the small amount of existing literature on online community engagement among luxury skincare brands, and reduce the potential risks associated with depending only on literature reviews. Consequently, twelve consumer interviews were conducted for this study.

4.1.1 Research design

In this study, the qualitative pre-testing of the hypotheses was conducted using guideline-based interviews. To facilitate an exploratory approach, this method uses semi-structured, less structured, or problem-centered interviews. In-depth information about participants' experiences and opinions on a specific subject is provided through semi-structured interviews (Turner, 2010). The use of an interview guide and open-ended questions are characteristics of semi-structured interviews. The predetermined topics in the interview guide came from prior studies and the literature. Moreover, qualitative interviews have the advantage of being more interactive than written surveys, which allows the researcher to address unexpected topics that may come up (Busetto et al., 2020). They can lead to interviewees' openness and subjective opinions, which can offer detailed insights into the actions of customers (Flick, 2009).

After an in-depth study on the literature review related to this topic, twelve interviews were conducted. The standardized procedure described by Bogner & Menz, which included an opening, introduction, consent recording, questionnaire with open-ended and follow-up questions, and a closing, was followed for every interview (Bogner & Menz, 2009). A total of twelve interviews were conducted, with a duration of around 20 to 30 minutes per interview. The selection of interviewees was aimed to capture the main aspects of community engagement within luxury skincare brands among Generation Z in Italy. Therefore, the sample was designed to include individuals born between 1997 and 2012, with equal representation of both genders and currently residing in Italy. All interviews were conducted online via video call. Moreover, in compliance with Bryman and Bell's (2015) recommendations, all interviews were recorded using a sound recording application on a smartphone to ensure thorough content analysis.

4.1.2 Results

The Appendices I and II contain an in-depth description of the individuals who were interviewed, which includes whether they use social media platforms and take part in online communities and if they buy skincare products. Based on the results of the interviews, it was confirmed that all of the interviewees use social media platforms or at least they have for a period of time. Moreover, it emerged that they tend to mostly read or look at content posted by other users on online communities as demonstrated by the following quotes: “Yes I read reviews regarding favorite and least favorite products from influencers or comments from others" and "I often see videos on TikTok or Instagram of girls reviewing the products they use, and I rely on that". In fact, they have all confirmed that before making a purchase they prefer to check the reviews made by other customers online, especially on the website where they are going to make the purchase, such as Sephora. According to the interviewees, reviews made by other customers online were always considered reliable and even more when they were made by their friends or family. Some interviewees also considered reviews made by influencers to be trustworthy especially if they followed them for a long time. In fact, they said that they appreciated the online influences that can often be created around skincare products. Moreover, most of them stated that they took into consideration numerous reviews online before having an opinion on a specific product while some of them thought that even only one negative review would have made them doubtful.

In relation to skincare products usage, all interviewees confirmed using at least one skincare product and most of them give importance to a regular skincare routine. There was no major difference in relation to gender and some interviewees started a skincare routine due to acne problems. As a result, skincare is an essential ritual in people's daily lives. In fact, most interviewees talked about the high importance that they attribute to it. They specified that it is a very personal and delicate moment especially because it is related to a sensitive part such as the face. For this reason they tend to thoroughly scrutinize content online related to skincare products, posted by other users or by influencers. Some of them prefer to follow the advices of a dermatologist. As a result, it can be stated that user-generated content within online communities related to skincare products deeply influences customers' perceptions leading them to purchase or not.

All interviewees talked about the importance of applying a quality product on their skin since it is a sensitive area. In fact, it has emerged that they already use products with high quality ingredients and in a moderate to high price range. They indicated a focus on efficient products regardless of their price. Therefore, they said that they would be willing to buy high price products for their skin. Another important insight is that they tend to know more, brands that are only specialised in skincare rather than brands that specilize in different areas including skincare. In addition, they came to know these specilized brands mostly online and decided to later purchase the product after a continous engagement with their online content. Some of them also said that they came to know luxury brands specilized esclusively on skincare, online and they would like to possibily purchase from them in the future. In fact, they said that by continously accessing content related to such brands online they would feel like being part of an exclusive community of experts as demonstrated by the following quotes: “The need to belong to a community makes me feel that I have a higher status” and “A luxury community reminds me of exclusivity”. An interesting insight is that consumers believe that by being part of an online community they can gather the opinions of other people who have become experts on the topic. As a result, it was confirmed that being part of an online luxury skincare community leads to a feeling of exclusivity as well as the intention to build brand loyalty and potentially to a future purchase.

Finally, most of the emotions that they linked to being part of a luxury skincare online community were related to a feeling of inclusion and belonging, happiness and the possibility of communicating with others remotely but feeling close at the same time as showcased by the following quote: “If I see a lot of content and videos I feel included in the brand”. As a result, they stated that they would develop a sense of fidelity towards the brand that could possibly lead to a future purchase. This continuous relation with the brand would make them be sure that the products could be ideal for meeting their needs so that they would have the guarantee of putting something trustworthy on their face. Moreover, all of the interviewees confirmed that they would most likely purchase from a brand that resonates with their personal values. In fact, they cited the importance of inclusion especially related to skin colour and of corporate social responsibility as demonstrated by the following quotes: “The skincare world needs to focus on inclusivity” and “I have used cruelty free and vegan lines”. They also gave a valuable insight by stating that it would be ideal for brands to talk more about their corporate social responsibility initatives as it would be an input for customers among Generation Z to purchase more. Moreover, they also mentioned the importance of using environmentally sustainable, natural and cruelty free products. In fact, if these characteristics were to be described more on social media, it would positively influence them to purchase from the brand.

4.2 Quantitative Research

This study uses the quantitative research approach to collect data from a sample of significant size. Quantitative research allows to develop a solid foundation in statistics to ensure that the study has statistical validity (Fallon, 2016). This analysis attempts to accomplish three important goals. Firstly, describe the data. Second, determine the likelihood that the variables examined in the sample are likely related in the population. Third, determine if the relationships or effects are important. Furthermore, by conducting an internal statistical analysis it was possible to review the quantitative properties of variables and summarize the data using descriptive statistics. As a result, this research has enabled the identification of the drivers that lead Generation Z consumers to take part in online luxury skincare communities and potentially purchase from them. Nevertheless, quantitative research has limitations too. In fact, it fails to understand the deeper underlying meanings and explanations, it measures variables at a specific moment in time giving an overall picture and it doesn't allow a direct connection between researchers and participants when collecting data (Rahman, 2020).

4.2.1 Research Design

In the context of the current research project, conducting a survey is an appropriate way to gather data and assess hypotheses. A self-designed, methodical survey was developed to ensure the anonymity of participants. Moreover, the study focuses on the purchase intention for skincare luxury products among Generation Z consumers living in Italy within online communities. Therefore, the questionnaire was spread among respondents, in Italian. The survey framework can be found in the Appendix III.

The questionnaire was addressed to the demographic cohort of Generation Z. In fact, it is a generational cohort that has received limited research attention in relation to consumer-brand relationships and luxury branding, despite its growing size and purchasing power. Generation Z is the young generation born between the mid-1990s and 2010s. Some sources give the specific age range of 1997-2012 (Eldridge, 2024). They are now entering the market and starting their first jobs. As a result, the survey was addressed to individuals between 18 and 24 years of age in order to take into consideration Gen Z representatives who are more aware of their purchases. According to the literature, the priorities of Gen Z are being global, social, visual and technological (Niemczynowicz et al., 2023). Therefore, the survey relies on the usage of social media platforms and the consequent activity in online communities. It was distributed through social media platforms and through skincare online communities in order to take into consideration both people using social media as well as passionate about skincare.

In total, 429 responses were collected of which 280 usable responses of individuals belonging to the age range 18 to 24. The survey was divided into six sections to obtain precise data on multiple aspects. Firstly, it was necessary to determine the demographic characteristics of respondents. They were able to continue the survey only if they were currently living in Italy and between 18 and 24 years of age. Moreover, they were also asked to indicate their family's monthly net income to better assess their purchasing power. Secondly, the survey focused on the usage of social media platforms. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they used any social media platforms and if yes, which ones. The ones that didn't use social networks were not able to continue the survey since it is a fundamental aspect to study online communities' engagement. In addition, they were asked how much time they spent on average every day on each of the social media platforms that they used.

The third section of the questionnaire was focused on specific luxury brands that sell skincare products. The brands that the respondents were able to choose from were already mentioned in the qualitative interviews and they are classified as luxury brands because of their heritage, high-quality ingredients and mostly their luxury pricing strategy. Their prices are aligned with luxury market standards, positioning the brands within the luxury segment (Ahn, 2015). Respondents were asked which brands among the ones presented to them, they knew. This was necessary in order to not consider individuals that didn't know these brands and therefore wouldn't be the main focus of the research. They were also asked if they had ever purchased in the past or purchase now from these brands to understand whether they could actually be potential customers. Finally, they were asked if they followed any of the brands that they knew and if yes, if they participated in online discussions, shared content online or interacted with others when considering these brands and how often. The last two questions of this section were mainly focused on the reasons that lead and/or would lead consumers to follow these kinds of brands online and in which way, such as by being an observer or rather an active participant. In order to present to the participants a set of reasons to choose from, two scales were taken from the literature. The former is an adapted scale from Yilmaz and Enginkaya (2015) focusing on what motivates users to follow brands online whilst the latter is adapted from Tuck and Thompson (2023) and focuses on the way in which users interact with content online.

The main objective of the fourth section of the survey was to study more in depth the hypotheses to later test them. The participants were introduced to the concept of online communities, so on what motivates them and/or would motivate them to follow the previously mentioned brands online and interact with them by looking at their posts, commenting and liking them, sharing content with other users, and tagging. When explaining to participants the concept of online communities a distinction was made between brands' official pages and non-official pages where users can comment and confront themselves on products. Participants were requested to assess their agreement with various statements related to four different scales taken from the literature and concerning the four main hypotheses. An additional distinction was made by relating the statements once to only following the brands' contents online (fourth section of the survey) and the second time to interacting with their contents online (fifth section of the survey). Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1: "it isn't/it wouldn't be important" to 7: "it is/it would be extremely important". As in the hypotheses, the first scale was about the emotional attachment to the brand. It is a scale adapted from Thomson et al. (2005) and including five items. The second scale was about the social status, so how important it is/it would be to feel that being part of online communities enhances social relationships and potentially social status. This scale is adapted from Wiedmann et al. (2009) and includes five items. Moving on to the third hypothesis and scale, the main focus was on social-interactive engagement (SIE), so how important it is to interact with other users who regularly take part in online communities. Also in this case, the scale is adapted from Pagani and Mirabello (2011) and includes four items. Finally, the last question of the fourth section was about personal values and how important are them when following and interacting with a brand online. The scale is adapted from Atkinson and Kang (2022) and includes four main items to test on the Likert scale.

The fifth section of the survey was aimed at studying not only the reasons why Gen Z consumers follow/would follow skincare luxury brands online but also why they decide and/or would decide to interact with them and possibly purchase from them. In this section the responses were always rated on a 7-point Likert scale and participants were requested to assess their agreement with the same statements as before, related to four different scales taken from the literature and concerning the four main hypotheses. Nevertheless, the items of the third scale and hypothesis, concerning social-interactive engagement (SIE) differ from the previous section. In fact, since the fifth section is about interaction within luxury skincare online communities and not only following, the items were also more focused on active engagement. The scale is always adapted from Pagani and Mirabello (2011) but it includes six items so two more items. The items that differ from the previous section are related to socializing actively in online communities and contributing to the conversation in these communities by providing and receiving feedback.

Finally, the sixth and last section of the questionnaire was focused on the purchase intention of Gen Z consumers. In fact, the first question tried to investigate which factors would cause respondents to purchase or purchase more often luxury skincare products. Respondents could choose maximum two options in order to later make a ranking of the most important drivers when analyzing the results. Moreover, in the second question it was possible to further investigate which brands among the ones presented to them previously they considered to be luxury brands. Respondents were asked to rate how much they considered the brands to be luxury on a four points scale. Finally, an open-ended question allowed respondents to openly express their point of view on what makes a brand, a luxury brand for them. This was made to better understand how luxury is perceived by Gen Z.

5. Data Analysis and Research Results

A thorough analysis of the survey-derived quantitative data is provided in the following section. Appendix IV contains a summary of the dataset, descriptive statistics and the SPSS output. Firstly a descriptive statistics was conducted in order to have a general understanding of the sample and its characteristics. Secondly, to address the research question and the four main hypotheses, the statistical software SPSS was used to evaluate the associations between variables, either supporting or rejecting the hypotheses.

5.1 Descriptives of the data set

As stated before, among the 429 respondents, 280 were between the ages of 18 and 24. Therefore, the descriptive statistics was conducted among the 280 respondents who all resided in Italy. In the table below, the age distribution of participants in the study is presented. The table delineates the frequency and the corresponding percentage of respondents for each age. A minority, representing 3% of the total cohort (N=280), reported being 18 years old, with an absolute frequency of 7 individuals. The highest percentage of respondents is 20 years old, constituting 23% with 65 individuals. Moreover, out of the total of 280 respondents 71 (25%) identify as male, 202 (72%) as female, 3 (1%) as non-binary and 4 (1%) preferred not to answer. As a result, most of the respondents were female.

Table 1: Age distribution of Survey Respondents

What is your age? Indicate the value in number. For example: 24	**18**	3%	7
	19	19%	53
	20	23%	65
	21	15%	42
	22	14%	39
	23	16%	46
	24	10%	28
	Total	100%	280

An additional question was done to understand in which area of Italy most of the respondents resided. 133 (48%) of the respondents were from the North-West Italy, the Lombardy region, followed by Emilia-Romagna in the North-East with 69 (25%) respondents. Moreover, 249 (89%) of respondents are students and most of them have a household's net monthly income from 3501€ to 4000€, as it can be noticed in Table 2. In addition, 185 (66%) are still living at home with their parents while 59 (21%) are sharing an apartment with others. As a result, their spending power strongly relies on their parents.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents' Household Net Monthly Income

Which of the following options best describes your household's net monthly income? Consider the monthly sum of all salaries. If you don't know the exact figure make an estimate.	**Less than 500€**	0%	1
	From 501€ to 1000€	3%	8
	From 1001€ to 1500€	5%	14
	From 1501€ to 2000€	10%	28
	From 2001€ to 2500€	13%	37
	From 2501€ to 3000€	13%	37
	From 3001€ to 3500€	12%	34
	From 3501€ to 4000€	18%	50
	From 4001€ to 4500€	5%	13
	From 4501€ to 5000€	6%	18
	More than 5000€	14%	40
	Total	100%	280

In the second section of the survey, the most used social media platforms appeared to be Instagram, used by 253 (90%) respondents, TikTok, 157 (56%) respondents and YouTube, 152 (54%) respondents. Moreover, only two respondents do not use social media platforms which confirms the Gen Z tendency to be social and technological and represents a significant starting point for brands to leverage on social media platforms to reach this generation. In relation to the most used platforms, by doing an average of the time spent on these platforms it appears that the one on which they spend more time is TikTok, with an average of 89 minutes, that is confirmed by the video format which tends to take more time to watch. Instagram is another platform on which respondents tend to spend a lot of time, with an average of 80 minutes. It can be noticed that respondents tend to spend a lot of time also on Twitch (81 minutes on average) and it is confirmed by the fact that it primarily focuses on video game streaming. Finally, the average time spent on YouTube is 64 minutes.

Taking into consideration brands that the respondents knew, even only by name, around 93% knew the brands and only 19 (7%) didn't. These respondents couldn't continue the survey since they wouldn't have been able to answer the following questions which were more specific about luxury skincare brands. As it can be noticed in Table 3, the most known luxury skincare brands are Dior Beauty (74%), Yves Saint Laurent (73%), Lancôme (72%), Chanel Beauty (64%) and Giorgio Armani Beauty (62%). Another very well known brand which is not considered to be in the luxury segment but is very used because of its skincare products is VeraLab which is known by 63% of respondents. This brand has actually been able to leverage on social media and influencers, continously creating new trends and online personalised consultations to suggest the best beauty routine. As a result, VeraLab has become very popular in Italy creating a community around the brand ("La storia di VeraLab", n.d.).

Table 3: Recognition of Beauty and Skincare Brands Among Survey Participants

Which of these brands do you know, even by name only. Multiple answers are possible.	**Dior Beauty**	74%	205
	Chanel Beauty	64%	178
	Giorgio Armani Beauty	62%	171
	Yves Saint Laurent	73%	202
	Estée Lauder	50%	139
	Guerlain	39%	108
	Lancôme	72%	200
	Sisley Paris	28%	79
	La Mer	26%	73
	La Prairie	20%	55
	Barbara Sturm	10%	27
	Rhode Skincare	30%	84
	Shiseido	50%	140
	VeraLab	63%	176
	Caudalie	37%	103
	I don't know any of these skincare brands	7%	19
	Total	100%	278

By analyzing more in depth, the number of platforms used, and the number of brands known, it can be noticed that the mean value for the former is 3.21, indicating that on average, respondents reported using slightly more than three platforms. The minimum number of platforms is 0 and the maximum is 7, and the standard deviation is 1.34, which suggests some variability in the number of platforms used among respondents. For “Number of known brands”, the mean value is 6.98, which suggests that on average, respondents are familiar with nearly seven brands. The data range from 0 to 15 brands known, with a larger standard deviation of 3.87, indicating a more considerable spread in the number of brands known among participants.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Used Platforms and Brand Recognition

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard Deviation
Number of used platforms	3.21	0.00	7.00	1.34
Number of known brands	6.98	0.00	15.00	3.87

The following questions of the survey focused on the purchase distribution across various beauty brands. Respondents were asked to indicate which of the listed brands they had previously purchased from. Lancôme leads with 22% of the total brand purchases, corresponding to 58 individuals. This is followed by Dior Beauty and VeraLab each with a 20% share. Notably, a significant portion of respondents, 40% indicated that they have not purchased from the brands. Nevertheless, 60% of the respondents have purchased at least one product. Moreover, it can be noticed that there is a relationship between purchasing at least one product from a beauty brand and following that brand on social media. For example, Lancôme has a ratio of 3.1, suggesting that respondents are 3.1 times more likely to have bought Lancôme products than just follow the brand on social media. This aspect means that there should be improvement on the presence on social media platforms. This also applies to Caudalie with a ratio of 3.8, and Shiseido with 2.5. In contrast, some brands like Rhode Skincare, Barbara Sturm and Sisley Paris have lower ratios which means that they have more people following them rather than buying from them. In addition, when considering which brands they followed on social media, 39% of respondents followed at least one brand, with a 21% discrepancy between those who purchase and those who follow on social media, meaning that more respondents purchased rather than followed the brands.

There is a gap between those that don't follow any of the mentioned brands (158) and those that follow at least one brand (101). If the two groups are compared, educational content is the top reason for following brands for both groups, with 51% of followers of at least one brand and 47% of non-followers finding it motivating. The reputation of the brand and liking the creative content proposed by brands are also significant motivators, especially for those following at least one brand. Moreover, there is a notable discrepancy in the influence of influencers and celebrities with 30% of those who follow brands being motivated by this compared to only 8% among those who do not follow any brands. A significant portion (30%) of those who do not follow any brand claim that no factor motivates them to follow brands online. This data can be useful to understand how to potentially motivate consumers to follow brands on social media.

Finally, it was possible to compare the ways in which respondents interact/would interact with brands on social media by comparing those that follow at least one brand and those who do not follow any of the brands. The majority of those who follow at least one brand have interacted by liking posts (65%) and watching other users' stories about the brand (45%). On the other hand, the most common way participants who do not follow any of the brands would interact with the brand is also by liking posts (49%), but a substantial 32% reported no motivation to interact with brand content. A significant difference can be noticed in the sharing of brand content on one's profile: 32% of those who follow brands do so, compared to only 2% of those who do not follow any brands. Additionally, 94% of those who follow at least one brand cited at least one interaction method, while only 68% of those who do not follow any of the brands did the same.

5.2 SPSS Analysis

Data preparation was required in order to carry out statistical analysis and validate the hypotheses based on the survey results. An essential first step in statistical analysis is data preparation, which includes organizing, cleaning, and transforming raw data into a format that is appropriate for statistical analysis. This procedure ensures that any errors or missing values are found and fixed, and that the data is accurate, complete, and consistent. As a result, the first step was to clean the data, and the second was to code it. As part of the coding process, numerical values were assigned to categorical data.

The first step of the SPSS analysis was to study more in depth the two parts of the survey related to following and interacting with luxury skincare brands on social media. The objective of this analysis is to understand the main differences between a passive and an active engagement with a brand online and the factors that lead Gen Z individuals to gain interest and possibly purchase from them. First, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to measure the direction of the linear relationship between the number of used platforms and of known brands. As it can be noticed in Table 5, there is a positive correlation between the number of used platforms and of known brands.

Table 5: Correlation Between Number of Platforms Used and Number of Brands Known

Correlations			
		Number of Platforms Used	**Number of Brands Known**
Number of Platforms Used	**Pearson Correlation**	1	.221**
	Significance (two-tailed)		0.000
	N	280	278
Number of Brands Known	**Pearson Correlation**	.221**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0.000	
	N	278	278
**Note: The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).			

The factors that are important to participants when following luxury skincare brands online were tested. As stated before, each item in the scales is evaluated on a 7 points Likert scale and the results are grouped into different areas: emotional aspect, social aspect, interaction with other users and personal values. The average score, standard deviation and the range of responses was computed for each factor. Higher average scores indicate a greater importance for respondents. Moreover, the Cronbach's Alpha is provided for different areas, indicating the internal consistency or reliability of the scales. The values found are high, suggesting a good reliability of the used scales. For emotional aspects, being emotionally captured by the brand scored highest on average (4.4). Social aspects scored lower, with the highest average being the importance of others having a high opinion of the participant (3.5). Thirdly, interacting with other users received varied importance, with learning from others and interest in other users' suggestions both scoring 4.5. Finally, personal values related to the brand's sustainability, animal welfare, inclusivity and employee well-being scored the highest, indicating these are more important to respondents, with averages ranging from 4.9 to 5.4.

When investigating the factors influencing user interactions within online skincare communities, respondents were asked to rate the importance of various aspects like before, related to the emotional aspect, social aspect, interaction with other users and personal values. Also in this case, the Cronbach's Alpha is provided for different areas and the values found are high, indicating the internal consistency or reliability of the scales. Personal values appear to be the most crucial factors influencing interaction with skincare brand communities, with all aspects rated above 5.0. The emotional aspect section reveals that users place moderate importance on emotional connections with brands and the highest-rated emotional aspect was "being captivated" (mean=4.2). Moreover, the interaction with other users holds varied importance, with "receiving input from other users" and "learning from knowledgeable users" rated as relatively important (mean=3.8 and 4.0 respectively). Finally, in terms of social aspects, the responses indicate that being part of a brand's online community is perceived as less important for social standing or impression on others (mean range=3.0-3.2).

Subsequently, a correlation matrix was developed. It includes the number of skincare brands consumers have purchased and follow, along with the mean scores of the four key dimensions previously mentioned, both in following and interaction contexts. As it can be seen in Table 6 there is a robust correlation between the number of brands consumers have purchased from and the number of brands they follow ($r=.600^{**}$, $p<.01$) indicating that the act of purchasing might be closely tied to the act of following a brand, indicating that consumers who are engaged enough to follow a brand are also more likely to purchase from it. Conversely, this also implies that consumers might tend to follow brands from which they have purchased, possibly to stay informed about new products and offers. As a result, effort to increase brand following on social media could have a direct positive impact on purchasing behavior. Similarly, a strong association is observed between social engagement in following brands and interactional engagement ($r=.899^{**}$, $p<.01$), suggesting that consumers who value social aspects of online communities are also highly engaged in interactions within them. Overall, the matrix shows that each dimension does not exist in isolation, but it relates to others, creating a complex network of consumer-brand relationships and suggesting a need for a holistic approach.

Table 6: Correlation Table for Number of Brands Purchased and Number of Brands Followed

		Number of Brands Purchased	Number of Brands Followed
Number of Brands Purchased	Pearson Correlation	1	**.600****
	Significance (two-tailed)		**0.000**
	N	259	**259**
Number of Brands Followed	Pearson Correlation	.600**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0.000	
	N	259	259

A stepwise regression analysis, represented in Table 7 was conducted to identify which variables best predict the number of brands followed by respondents. The regression model included various predictors related to emotional, social, interaction and personal values dimensions of brand following and interaction. The stepwise method was chosen due to its efficiency in identifying a model by entering and removing predictors based on their statistical significance, with thresholds for inclusion set at $p \leq .05$ and for exclusion at $p \geq .10$. The first model revealed that the average score for social aspects related to following the brands was a significant predictor of the number of brands followed, accounting for 20.7% of the variance (R-squared=.207, Adjusted R-squared=.204). This model was statistically significant suggesting that social factors play an important role in influencing consumer's decisions in following brands. An additional step introduced the average score for interaction into the model. This variable provided a slight improvement to the model, increasing the R-squared value to .224 and the Adjusted R-squared to .218, indicating that it accounted for an additional 1.7% of the variance in the number of brands followed. This change was significant, $F = 5.668$, $p = .018$, pointing to the relevance of interaction in understanding brand following behavior. The final model, including both predictors, achieved a statistically significant fit, indicating that both social aspects of following and the interaction level within brand communities are a crucial component driving the number of brands consumers follow. This underlines the multifaceted nature of brand engagement and suggests that strategies aimed at increasing brand following should not only foster social engagement but also encourage interactive experiences.

Table 7: Regression Analysis Summary - Predictors of Brand Following on Social Media

Model Summary									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					Modified R-square	Modified F	gl1	gl2	Sign. Modified F
1	.455[a]	0.207	**0.204**	1.38694	0.207	67.190	1	257	0.000
2	.474[b]	0.224	**0.218**	1.37452	0.017	5.668	1	256	0.018
a. Predictors: (constant), Average_Q18_Follow_Social									
b. Predictors: (constant), Average_Q18_Follow_Social, Average_Q24_Int_Interaction									
c. Dependent Variable: NUMBER_BRANDS_FOLLOWED									

The ANOVA table, Table 8, from the stepwise regression analysis which assesses the overall significance of the regression models was computed. In model 1, the predictor, which is the mean score of the factors related to the social aspect of following brands online is included. The regression line's sum of squares, which measures the total variation explained by the model, is 129.247. The degree freedom for the regression is 1, indicating one predictor variable. The mean square, which is the sum of squares divided by its df, is also 129.247, and this value is used to calculate the F statistic. The F value of 67.190 is highly significant ($p<.001$), indicating that the model significantly predicts the number of brands followed. Model 2 adds another predictor which is the mean score of the factors related to the social aspect of interacting with brands online. The sum of squares for this model's regression is 139.955, which is higher than that of model 1, suggesting that the addition of this predictor explains more variance in the number of brands followed. This model has 2 df for regression, as it includes two predictors. The mean square for this regression is 69.978, leading to an F value of 37.039. The p-value is again less than .001, confirming that the additional predictor also significantly improves the model's predictive power. The ANOVA results support that both social factors related to brand following and the interaction within brand communities significantly contribute to understanding the behavior of following brands. These findings suggest that to increase the number of followers and potentially of buyers, strategies should not only engage users on a social level but also encourage active interaction.

Table 8: ANOVA Summary for Regression Models Predicting Number of Brands Followed

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df (Degrees of Freedom)	Mean Square	F Statistic	Sign.
1	Regression	129.247	1	129.247	**67.190**	**<.001[b]**
	Residue	494.367	257	1.924		
	Total	623.614	258			
2	Regression	139.955	2	69.978	**37.039**	**<.001[c]**
	Residue	483.659	256	1.889		
	Total	623.614	258			
a. Dependent Variable: NUMBER_BRANDS_FOLLOWED						
b. Predictors for Model 1: (constant), Average_Q18_Follow_Social						
c. Predictors for Model 2: (constant), Average_Q18_Follow_Social, Average_Q24_Int_Interaction						

If the coefficients in Table 9 from the regression analysis are considered, in model 1, the regression coefficient (B) for the predictor "Average_Q18_Follow_Social" is 0.377 with a standard error of 0.046. The standardized coefficient (Beta) is 0.455, indicating a strong positive relationship between the social factors influencing following brands online. The t-value of 8.197 is significant ($p<0.000$), confirming that this predictor is a statistically significant contributor to the model. For model 2, "Average_Q18_Follow_Social" remains a predictor, and "Average_Q24_Int_Interaction" is added. Both predictors are statistically significant, with the former having a B coefficient of 0.252 (Beta=0.304, $p<0.000$) and the latter a B coefficient of 0.188 (Beta=0.200, $p=0.018$). This suggests that both social following and interaction contribute to the number of brands followed, with the second model indicating that adding interaction as a factor provides additional predictive value to the number of brands followed. The constant for model 1 is -0.258 and for model 2 is -0.516 which are expected mean values of the dependent variable when all predictors are zero. The 95% confidence interval for B indicates the range within which we can be 95% confident that the population's true regression coefficient lies. For "Average_Q18_Follow_Social" in model 1, it ranges from 0.287 to 0.468. Moreover, collinearity statistics (Tolerance and VIF) suggest that there is no multicollinearity issue for model 1 (both values are ideal), but in model 2, the VIF values for both predictors exceed 2, which can be a sign of moderate multicollinearity, although it's generally not concerning until VIF exceeds 5 or 10.

Table 9: Regression Coefficients for Predicting the Number of Brands Followed

Coefficients								
		Coefficients Unstandardized		Standardized			Collinearity Statistics	
Model		B	Standard Error	Beta	t	Sign.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	-0.258	0.172		-1.501	0.135		
	Average_Q18_Follow_Social	**0.377**	**0.046**	**0.455**	**8.197**	**0.000**	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	-0.516	0.202		-2.556	0.011		
	Average_Q18_Follow_Social	**0.252**	0.070	**0.304**	3.621	**0.000**	0.429	**2.329**
	Average_Q24_Int_Interaction	**0.188**	0.079	**0.200**	2.381	**0.018**	0.429	**2.329**

From the analysis it has been determined that social factors related to brand following and the interaction factors within brand communities significantly contribute to understanding the behavior of following brands, in particular the former. Nevertheless, when computing the mean of the social and interaction factors related to following and interacting with the brand respectively, it can be noticed that respondents gave lower scores on the Likert scale. The reason for this can be explained by comparing the average scores between two groups: those who follow and those who do not follow the luxury skincare brands online. The scores shown in Table 10 represent respondents' rating of emotional, social, interaction and personal value aspects of brand engagement both for following and interacting. Notably, significant discrepancies were found between the two groups, particularly in social following and interaction aspects, where the mean scores were significantly higher for those who follow brands (4.48 and 4.58, respectively) as compared to those who do not (2.43 and 2.85, respectively). This suggests a strong association between brand following and perceived social benefits. Emotional aspects and personal values also showed a pattern of higher ratings among followers, although to a lesser extent, meaning that both for followers and non followers the emotional and personal values aspects are important. The same trend can be noticed when considering the factors from an interacting with the brand point of view so from Q22 to Q25. These findings suggest that the pronounced differences in social aspects underscore the potential role of social factors as motivators for brand following behavior. The minimal discrepancies in personal value rating indicate a more uniform perception across followers and non-followers, suggesting that personal values might serve as a baseline in brand engagement. This data underscores the importance of nurturing social and interaction connections between the brand and its consumers, as they appear to significantly influence whether an individual chooses to engage with a brand and possibly purchase from it.

Table 10: Differences in Brand Engagement Dimensions Between Followers and Non-Followers

		Follows vs doesn't follow			
		Overall	**Doesn't follow**	**Follows**	
		Average	**Average**	**Average**	**Difference**
Q17	Average_Q17_Follow_Emotional	4.1	3.79	4.70	0.91
Q18	**Average_Q18_Follow_Social**	**3.2**	**2.43**	**4.48**	**2.05**
Q19	Average_Q19_Follow_Interaction	4.1	3.66	4.81	1.15
Q20	**Average_Q20_Follow_Personal Values**	**5.2**	**5.04**	**5.45**	**0.41**
Q22	Average_Q22_Int_Emotional	3.9	3.50	4.65	1.16
Q23	Average_Q23_Int_Social	3.1	2.29	4.35	2.06
Q24	**Average_Q24_Int_Interaction**	**3.5**	**2.85**	**4.58**	**1.73**
Q25	**Average_Q25_Int_Personal Values**	**5.2**	**4.96**	**5.54**	**0.58**

Table 11 instead presents comparative data on consumer responses measured on a Likert scale, with the mean scores of individuals who have purchased versus those who have not purchased one of the listed brands' products. The table shows that respondents who have purchased a brand's product report higher engagement level across all dimensions compared to those who have not made a purchase. The greatest difference is observed in the social following dimension, suggesting that brand purchasing, just like brand following, might be significantly influenced by social factors. Conversely, the smallest difference is in the personal values following dimension, indicating a more consistent level of importance placed on personal values irrespective of purchasing behavior. The differences observed might imply that purchasing a brand's product is associated with stronger social engagement as well as more active interaction with the brand.

Table 11: Differences in Brand Engagement Dimensions Between Buyers and Non-Buyers

		Purchases vs doesn't purchase			
		Overall	**Doesn't purchase**	**Purchases**	
		Average	**Average**	**Average**	**Difference**
Q17	Average_Q17_Follow_Emotional	4.1	3.69	4.44	0.75
Q18	**Average_Q18_Follow_Social**	**3.2**	**2.47**	**3.74**	**1.27**
Q19	Average_Q19_Follow_Interaction	4.1	3.63	4.43	0.81
Q20	**Average_Q20_Follow_Personal Values**	**5.2**	**4.94**	**5.38**	**0.44**
Q22	Average_Q22_Int_Emotional	3.9	3.37	4.33	0.96
Q23	Average_Q23_Int_Social	3.1	2.38	3.56	1.18
Q24	**Average_Q24_Int_Interaction**	**3.5**	**2.86**	**3.97**	**1.11**
Q25	**Average_Q25_Int_Personal Values**	**5.2**	**4.88**	**5.39**	**0.51**

The last section of the questionnaire was dedicated to understanding which factors might cause to purchase or purchase more of the previously listed skincare brands. Table 12 delineates the distribution of consumer perceptions across five distinct engagement criteria: alignment with personal values, emotional attachment, feeling part of an expert community, having a higher social status, and interaction with other users. The sample is divided into two groups: those who have purchased the brands' products and those who have not. The data indicate that seeing personal values reflected by the brand is the most commonly reported perception, with 63% of the total sample acknowledging it. Interestingly, this perception is slightly higher among those who have not purchased (67%) compared to those who have (61%), suggesting that alignment with personal values in an important factor for all consumers, regardless of purchase behavior. Emotional attachment to the brand is reported by 30% of the total sample, with a higher percentage among purchasers (32%) than non-purchasers (26%). This might indicate that purchasing a brand's product is associated with a stronger emotional connection. Moreover, feeling part of an expert group and the sensation of elevated social status are less frequently reported overall but show a marked increase among those who have purchased the brands' products. Notably, 26% of purchasers report both feeling part of an expert group and experiencing enhanced social status, compared to just 15% and 12% of non-purchasers, respectively. Lastly, interaction with other users is nearly equal between the groups, suggesting that active engagement with brand communities is a consistent behavior among all consumers surveyed.

Table 12: Consumer Engagement Factors by Brand Purchase Behavior

		Purchases vs doesn't purchase					
		Total		**Doesn't purchase**		**Purchases**	
		Percentage	**Count**	**Percentage**	**Count**	**Percentage**	**Count**
Q26	**Seeing My Personal Values Reflected**	**63%**	164	**67%**	69	**61%**	95
	Emotional Attachment to the Brand	30%	77	26%	27	32%	50
	Feeling Part of an Expert Group	21%	55	15%	15	**26%**	40
	Sensation of Having a Higher Social Status	20%	53	12%	12	**26%**	41
	Interaction with Other Users	19%	48	17%	17	20%	31
	Total	100%	259	100%	103	100%	156

Table 13 provides an insight into consumer engagement segmented by those who follow and those who do not follow the previously mentioned brands. The data reveals that a substantial majority (63% of the total sample) identifies with their personal values being represented by the brands, with non-followers (68%) slightly more likely than followers (56%) to report this perception. This could suggest that while personal values are important across all consumer segments, the act of following a brand does not necessarily enhance this particular perception. Emotional attachment to the brand is another significant factor, reported by 30% of the total sample. Interestingly, the non-followers report a marginally higher percentage (32%) compared to the followers (27%). This could indicate that emotional attachment is not solely linked to brand following. Feeling part of an expert group is more commonly reported among followers (29%) than non-followers (16%), suggesting that brand following might foster a sense of expertise or belonging to a knowledge community. The perception of having an elevated social status due to brand following is notably higher among followers (32%) than non-followers (13%), indicating that social standing is a considerable incentive for following brands. Interaction with other users is recognized by 19% of the total sample, with followers more actively engaging (25%) compared to non-followers (15%). This underscores the role of social interaction in the brand-following experience. Certainly, some dimensions like expertise and social status are more distinctly experienced by those who actively follow brands.

Table 13: Consumer Engagement Factors by Brand Following Behavior

		Follows vs doesn't follow					
		Total		Doesn't follow		Follows	
		Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count
Q26	Seeing My Personal Values Reflected	63%	164	68%	107	56%	57
	Emotional Attachment to the Brand	30%	77	32%	50	27%	27
	Feeling Part of an Expert Group	21%	55	16%	26	**29%**	29
	Sensation of Having a Higher Social Status	20%	53	13%	21	**32%**	32
	Interaction with Other Users	19%	48	15%	23	**25%**	25
	Total	100%	259	100%	158	100%	101

Finally, in the last section of the survey a question was aimed at collecting data regarding the perceived luxury level of various beauty brands. Respondents have rated their perception of each brand's luxury status across four categories: "Very Luxurious", "Quite Luxurious", "Not Very Luxurious", and "Not at All Luxurious", with the percentage of responses given for each category. Table 14 presents the findings related to each brand. Chanel Beauty, with 77% of participants rating it as "Very Luxurious", leads the list, indicative of its strong positioning within the luxury segment. This is followed closely by Dior Beauty and Barbara Sturm, with 75% and 74% in the same category, respectively, underscoring their esteemed reputation for luxury. Yves Saint Laurent and La Mer are also highly regarded, with more than 70% of respondents associating them with luxury. La Prairie, while still considered luxury by a majority, begins to show a more divided perception, with 65% rating it as “Very Luxurious” and a combined 34% rating it as “Quite” or “Not Very Luxurious”. Further down the list, brands like Sisley Paris, Estée Lauder, and Lancôme receive more varied responses, indicating a broader perception of their luxury status among respondents. Guerlain and Shiseido receive a notable balance between “Quite Luxurious” and “Not Very Luxurious”, while a smaller percentage view them as “Very Luxurious”, suggesting a more moderate luxury perception. The table concludes with Rhode Skincare, Caudalie and VeraLab, which shows a significant shift in perception. A small percentage of respondents consider these brands as “Very Luxurious”, while the majority rate them as “Quite” or “Not Very Luxurious”. In particular, VeraLab has the highest percentage of respondents, 53%, rating it as “Not Very Luxurious”, reflecting a potentially challenging position in the luxury market.

Table 14: Perceptions of Luxury Among Skincare Brands

	Very Luxurious	**Quite Luxurious**	**Not Very Luxurious**	**Not at All Luxurious**
	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
Chanel Beauty	77%	18%	3%	2%
Dior Beauty	75%	20%	3%	2%
Barbara Sturm	74%	19%	7%	0%
Yves Saint Laurent	73%	20%	5%	2%
La Mer	71%	23%	4%	1%
La Prairie	65%	25%	7%	2%
Giorgio Armani Beauty	58%	32%	6%	3%
Sisley Paris	43%	34%	18%	5%
Estée Lauder	37%	55%	9%	0%
Lancôme	31%	54%	15%	2%
Guerlain	29%	56%	14%	1%
Shiseido	26%	47%	24%	3%
Rhode Skincare	20%	46%	30%	4%
Caudalie	13%	50%	31%	7%
VeraLab	5%	30%	53%	12%

6. Discussion

This section is dedicated to validating the results and gather concrete, useful information for the luxury skincare industry, focusing on the potential of online communities. The purpose of the following suggestions is to better understand Gen Z consumers and their attitude towards online communities, especially when related to luxury brands. Therefore, the aim of these recommendations is to offer strategic insights to luxury brands, emphasizing the potential of leveraging social media platforms, online communities, and the Gen Z demographic. The focus is on the unique characteristics and preferences within these platforms and audiences to increase the efficacy of efforts aimed at acquiring new customers and to carry out more tailored marketing activities for existing customers by making use of the identified key drivers.

6.1 Management contributions

As it has emerged from the analysis and descriptive statistics, personal values are an important factor for following a brand online and engage with content associated to it. In fact, all related items received high levels of importance. Sustainability, cruelty-free practices, and inclusivity are essential attributes for modern brands, nearly equal in significance, although sustainability and inclusivity slightly edge out as priorities, with employee well-being ranking a bit lower. Emotional connection and interactivity are critical factors; following a brand is a strong personal driver influenced by individual values and the emotional proximity one feels. Moreover, regarding interaction within online communities, the discourse tends to be between experts and individuals who are passionate about the subject and knowledgeable. Finally, among the social aspects what is more significant is the perception that others hold a high opinion of oneself.

It is essential for luxury skincare brands to harness the power of personal values by ensuring that they focus on sustainability, cruelty-free practices, and inclusivity, as they resonate profoundly with consumers. By knowing what personal values are driving consumers to follow and interact with brands online, luxury brands can strategically plan to create communities and offer products and services that can fulfill those personal values. To engage with Gen Z consumers within online communities, luxury skincare brands could host live streams demonstrating sustainable practices, from ingredient sourcing to packaging. They could run campaigns that feature real stories, highlighting different skin types and beauty rituals, celebrating diversity. Moreover, since an important driver for following and interacting with these communities is the presence of experts, brands could offer webinars or interactive content that educates on skincare ingredients and the science behind product efficacy.

When considering the scores related to strengthening relationships when interacting within online communities, it has emerged that consumers value a more personal relationship with brands rather than with other consumers. Communication should be one-to-one, and brands should provide personalized, virtual consultations that focus on individual skincare needs and product recommendations. Another interesting proposal would be to use computer vision technologies to give facial skincare products' recommendations (Lin et al., 2022). Moreover, since there is a strong association between brand following and perceived social benefits, luxury skincare brands should create more exclusive communities for loyal customers, providing them with a space to share experiences, receive tailored content, and access to early product releases or exclusive items.

Given the strong correlation between purchase behavior and social media following, brands should design strategies that link the shopping experience with social media engagement. They could encourage purchases by offering exclusive content to their social media followers and implementing campaigns that drive consumers to follow the brand in exchange for early access to products, insider information, or participation in community events, such as online masterclasses. To leverage on the correlation between following and purchasing, luxury skincare brands could encourage buyers to share their purchases on social media, potentially offering rewards for doing so such as the possibility to take part in virtual beauty events where customers can join live sessions, explore new products and engage in live Q&A sessions with skincare experts.

Finally, from the stepwise regression analysis it has emerged that social factors are strongly related to brand following within online communities. This result is justified by the luxury component. In fact, for people already following luxury skincare brands online it is important to enhance status and obtain benefits in social interactions. Luxury consumption can be a profitable social strategy because conspicuous displays of luxury qualify as an expensive signaling trait that elicits status-dependent favorable treatment in social interactions (Meijers & Nelissen, 2011). As a result, luxury skincare brands should consider the importance for consumers to feel part of exclusive communities online where they can interact more closely with the brand as well as with skincare experts and keep updated on the latest products and skincare trends. As there is a positive relation between following and purchasing, this could be an important channel for luxury brands especially to reach the younger generations such as Gen Z.

6.2 Limitations

The results of this study provide useful insights into the characteristics of Gen Z consumers and their preferences towards luxury skincare brands within online communities. It offers insightful information on younger generations' traits and habits, supporting luxury skincare brands in obtaining a better comprehension on how to reach Gen Z consumers and leverage on the continous improvements of social media platforms. These insights can provide a useful guide for the development of successful marketing strategies and increase the effectiveness of such strategies online. On the other hand, caution is advised because results should be verified using larger and more varied samples and possible data biases might exist. Despite a relatively high sample of 429 respondents, 280 were usable responses of people between 18 and 24 years old, living in Italy. In fact, the main drawbacks of using this methodology are a potentially low response rate and possible issues of sample bias or sampling error, as the sample might not be representative of all the population taken into consideration.

Furthemore, this study's methodology includes statistical analysis of the questionnaire data, which raises the possibility of sample bias. A Likert scale might not adequately capture the subjective experiences of individuals, which could lead to potential measurement errors for all independent variables when used to assess motivations. This could be due to a number of aspects, like social desirability bias, which could lead to some people witholding their true opinions. Additionally, the study has been limited by the lack of academic literature on skincare brands in particular. The Likert scales' items were adapted from the literature regarding in general the drivers of consumers' personal attachments to brands.

Finally, to obtain a more in-depth understanding of the factors influencing social media usage and active participation among young generations, as well as their tendency to buy luxury skincare products, there are other variables that could be explored beyond the scope of this paper. Further research could be benefical in examining the obstacles that consumers face when attempting to interact online directly with brands or with other users, as well as the effects of additional demographic and psychographic information like cultural and ethnic background. In fact, cross-cultural variations in consumer behavior within online communities and the skincare industry could be better understood by carrying out comparable studies in other nations and comparing the findings with those from Italy. Extending the study's conclusions and expanding the understanding of this developing industry are two benefits of investigating these extra variables.

7. Conclusion

Concluding this study, the investigation into the dynamics of social commerce in the context of luxury skincare brands has yielded insightful observations. This research set out with the objective of understanding the intricate relationship between social media platforms and luxury skincare potential purchasing behaviors. The findings have revealed critical aspects of how social media influences consumer choices and the strategic positioning of luxury brands in the digital marketplace. As this study concludes, it is pertinent to consolidate these insights, aligning them with the research objectives, and to ponder their implications for both the commercial sector and future academic research in this rapidly evolving domain.

7.1 Summary

This study examined the drivers that lead Gen Z consumers to follow luxury skincare brands and interact with them on social media platforms. The research findings suggest that there is a positive correlation between the number of respondents following luxury skincare brands on social media and purchasing from them. As a result, brands should thorougly consider the importance of developing a strong social media presence. In fact, it is found that future purchases are affected by brand knowledge due to a brand relationship that includes brand satisfaction, brand trust, and attachment to the brand (Esch et al., 2006). Moreover, brand relationship factors need to be taken into account in addition to brand knowledge in order to develop strong brands over the long term.

This research has identified some key drivers that are important for both followers and non-followers of luxury skincare brands online, demonstrating that these drivers are important for all members of the target group: Gen Z. Personal values such as sustainability, cruelty-free products and inclusivity should be of primary importance for brands. In fact, it has been confirmed that young generations show a concern about social and environmental problems and the important role they have in influencing society's purchasing decisions and encouraging ethical consumption (Bonera et al., 2023).

Emotional connection and interactivity are also critical factors; adhering to a brand is a powerful personal motivator impacted by one's personal values and sense of emotional closeness. In addition, when it comes to communication in online communities, the conversations typically involve specialists and people who are informed and enthusiastic about the topic. This relates to what has been confirmed in academic literature that a brand has a higher chance of being purchased when it more closely matches the expectations and feelings of the consumer (Consoli, 2009). Therefore, in the case of luxury goods, emotional factors predominate, and brand loyalty and emotional attachment are directly correlated (Khan et al., 2016).

What has mostly emerged from the study is that social factors are strongly related to brand following within online communities and the result is justified by the fact that the brands taken into consideration are luxury brands. Customers can boost their perceived power and self-worth at a lower cost by using online communities to simply create a sense of belonging to the luxury world (Belk, 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, it has been determined that luxury consumption is a highly communicative act that can be used to convey signals about social class, wealth, status, and ultimately, economic and social power (Han et al., 2010). As a result, the main challenges for luxury brands are related to digital platforms and new generations. If they want to create more channels and reach important customer segments they should engage with them. Digital channels offer luxury brands unique opportunities to interact with and understand their consumers through social media, online communities, and customer feedback mechanisms. This engagement is crucial for building brand loyalty and understanding consumer preferences.

7.2 Future research

Based on the insights obtained in this research, several potential areas for future exploration emerge. Firstly, it would be very helpful to compare the patterns of online community engagement and interaction between luxury skincare brands in diverse cultural and geographical contexts. This could show whether and how regional and cultural differences affect consumer behavior and brand perception online. This type of study would contribute to a broader and more sophisticated understanding of global luxury skincare communities, as well as their influence on consumer preferences and brand narratives.

Additionally, it would be helpful to investigate more in-depth the effects of particular features of online communities, like user-generated content, brand-consumer interactions, and peer-to-peer discussions, on consumer loyalty and purchasing behavior in the luxury skincare industry. This would allow to pinpoint the elements of online communities that have the greatest influence over engagement and revenue for high-end skincare brands.

The long-term impacts of online community participation on brand reputation and customer retention in the luxury skincare sector are a further topic worth investigating. For luxury skincare brands, finding out if consistent engagement in these communities results in increased brand loyalty and recurring purchases would provide insightful information for creating more successful digital marketing and community management campaigns.

Finally, evaluating how emerging technologies like augmented reality and artificial intelligence can improve the online community experience for customers of luxury skincare products could offer a forward-looking point of view. This research could uncover innovative ways to foster more engaging and personalized online environments, further driving the appeal and success of luxury skincare brands in the digital arena.

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Appendix

Appendix I. Consumer Interview Descriptive Statistics

Customer	Gender	Age	Location	Takes part in online communities	Buys skincare products
C1	Female	23	Milan	Yes	Yes
C2	Male	26	Brescia	Yes	Yes
C3	Female	23	Turin	Yes	Yes
C4	Male	20	Brescia	No	No
C5	Female	23	Milan	Yes	Yes
C6	Female	23	Milan	Yes	Yes
C7	Female	22	Brescia	Yes	Yes
C8	Male	22	Turin	Yes	No
C9	Male	20	Milan	Yes	Yes
C10	Male	20	Monza	Yes	Yes
C11	Female	24	Milan	Yes	Yes
C12	Male	19	Milan	Yes	Yes

Appendix II. Interview Analysis

Hypotheses	**Reference - Consumer Interview Statements (citations)**
H1 (Emotional support)	C1: The fact that over time I began to follow the brand on Instagram and then decided to buy the serum, which I wouldn't have done before, led me to attach myself to the brand, to trust Esteé Lauder. C3: If I see a lot of content and videos I feel included in the brand.
H2 (Social status)	C6: Exclusivity, dealing with an exclusive product, better quality so feeling of being part of something unique. C11: Being part of an online luxury skincare community would make me feel more loyal to the brand, more satisfied and content and to belong to an elite. C10: A luxury community reminds me of exclusivity. C9: The need to belong to a community it makes me feel that I have a higher status.
H3 (User-generated content)	C7: I often see videos on TikTok or Instagram of girls reviewing the products they use, and I rely on that, and I often look at reviews when I buy something, if my friends have used it there is a high probability that I will buy it. C10: If the community is active maybe they are more passionate and can introduce me to new brands.

	C6: I often share content, sure once a week because I happen to repost other people's videos. I share Korean skincare products. C3: Yes I read reviews regarding favorite and least favorite products from influencers or comments from others. C1: I often share videos and posts to remind myself of the product.
H4 (Personal values)	C10: I would like transparency, I would like the brand to avoid green washing and from a luxury brand I expect inclusivity so for different skins and not just white. The skincare world needs to focus on inclusivity. C11: I have used cruelty free and vegan lines. C1: I prefer lines dedicated to the needs of people with different skins.

Appendix III. Survey outline

Introduction

Thank you for deciding to participate in this survey in which we will discuss some brands. There are no right or wrong answers. What we are interested in is your opinion. All answers will be treated anonymously and aggregated, in compliance with regulations related to GDPR: *Italian legislative Decree no. 196 dated 30/06/2003 and Art.13 GDPR 679/16.*

The questionnaire will take about 10 minutes, click on the button at the bottom right to answer the questions.

Section one - Demographic characteristics

Q1) Where do you currently reside?

Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany,

Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom.
+ option: In none of these countries
- QUESTION TYPE: DROP-DOWN MENU
- LOGIC: EXCLUDE IF THEY DON'T ANSWER ITALY => DISQUALIFIED

Q2) What is your age? Indicate the value in number. For example 24.
- QUESTION TYPE: OPEN FIELD
- VALIDATION: POSITIVE NUMBER ONLY and WHOLE NUMBER ONLY
- LOGIC: EXCLUDE IF AGE < 18
- LOGIC: EXCLUDE IF AGE >24

Q3) Which gender do you identify with?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- I prefer not to answer

Q4) Indicate the region where you reside.

Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardy, Marche, Molise, Piedmont, Apulia (Puglia), Sardinia (Sardegna), Sicily (Sicilia), Tuscany, Trentino-Alto Adige, Umbria, Aosta Valley (Valle d'Aosta), and Veneto.
- QUESTION TYPE: DROP-DOWN MENU

Q5) What is your current employment status?

- Student
- Self-employed
- Employee
- Businessman
- Unemployed
- Other (specify which one)

Q6) Which of the following options best describes your household's net monthly income? Consider the monthly sum of all salaries. If you don't know the exact figure make an estimate.

- Less than 500€
- From 501€ to 1000€
- From 1001€ to 1500€
- From 1501€ to 2000€
- From 2001€ to 2500€
- From 2501€ to 3000€
- From 3001€ to 3500€
- From 3501€ to 4000€
- From 4001€ to 4500€
- From 4501€ to 5000€
- More than 5000€

Q7) Indicate among these items the one that best describes your family/housing situation.

- I live at home with my parents
- I share my apartment with other roommates
- I live alone
- I live with a partner

Section two - Usage of social media platforms

Q8) Which of the following social media platforms do you use on a regular basis (at least a couple of times a week or more). Multiple answers are possible.

- Instagram
- Facebook
- TikTok
- Twitter (X)
- Snapchat
- Twitch
- YouTube

- BeReal
- Pinterest
- LinkedIn
- None of the above

- OPTIONS: MULTIPLE RESPONSE
- RANDOMIZING ITEM excluded "None of the above"
- None of the above "excludes all previous options"

Q9) How much time do you normally spend per day on the social media platforms that you use on a regular basis. Indicate the time for each social media platform.

- Less than 30 minutes
- 30 to 60 minutes
- 1 to 2 hours
- 2 to 3 hours
- More than 3 hours

- QUESTION TYPE: QUESTION GRID WITH SINGLE CHOICE PER LINE
- PIPING SELECTED ITEM FROM QUESTION Q8
- Column response options

Section three – Skincare Brands

Q10) Now we are going to talk about a number of brands in the skincare sector, that is, brands that have products inherent to face and skincare in their line.

Q11) Which of these brands do you know, even by name only. Multiple answers are possible.

- Dior Beauty
- Chanel Beauty
- Giorgio Armani Beauty
- Yves Saint Laurent
- Estée Lauder
- Guerlain
- Lancôme

- Sisley Paris
- La Mer
- La Prairie
- Barbara Sturm
- Rhode Skincare
- Shiseido
- VeraLab
- Caudalie
- I don't know any of these skincare brands [EXCLUSIVE]

- OPTIONS: MULTIPLE RESPONSE
- RANDOMIZATION ITEM excluded "I don't know...."
- LOGIC: skip to the next section if you know at least 1 of them

DISQUALIFY IF Is one of the following answers, "I don't know any of these..."

Q12) Among the brands you know, which ones have you purchased in the past or purchase on a more or less regular basis [PIPING ANSWERS from question Q11]. Multiple answers are possible.

- PIPING SELECTED ITEMS by Q11
- I do not / have never bought skincare products from these brands
- OPTIONS: MULTIPLE RESPONSE
- RANDOMIZING ITEM excluding "I do not...."

Q13) Among the brands you know, which ones do you follow on the social media platforms that you use most regularly [PIPING ANSWERS from question Q8]. Multiple answers are possible.

- PIPING SELECTED ITEMS from Q11.
- I do not follow any of these brands on social media platforms [EXCLUSIVE].
- OPTIONS: MULTIPLE RESPONSE
- RANDOMIZING ITEM excluding "I do not follow...."
- LOGIC: moves to next section if at least follows one brand

IF Is one of the following answers: "I do not follow..." = > Q14

Q13bis) (IF THEY FOLLOW AT LEAST ONE BRAND). How often do you engage in online discussions, share content, or interact with others on social media, thinking about the brands you follow on social media platforms [PIPING ITEM SELECTED Q13]?

- Daily
- 2-3 times a week
- At least once a week
- Once every 2-3 weeks
- Once per month
- Less often
- Never

- OPTIONS: SINGLE ANSWER

Q14) Among the brands you know [PIPING ANSWERS FROM Q11], what motivates you and/or would motivate you to follow them online? Multiple answers are possible.
(Yılmaz & Enginkaya, 2015)

- I believe that the product related information which can be gathered is reliable
- The fact that the brand has a good reputation
- The presence of influencers or celebrities who sponsor the brand
- Educational content (e.g., skincare tips)
- To follow brands that I fancy to buy in the future, although I cannot afford buying right now
- I like the influential and creative contents which are generated by the brands
- I like if there are videos created by brands which provide opportunity for me to have fun
- Other reasons (specify)
- None of these reasons [EXCLUSIVE]

- OPTIONS: MULTIPLE RESPONSE
- RANDOMIZATION ITEM excluded "None of these reasons"

Q15) Among the brands you know [PIPING ANSWERS FROM Q11] how do you interact and/or you would interact with their content? Multiple answers are possible.
(Tuck & Thompson, 2023)

- Liking posts
- Sharing their content on my profile
- Commenting on posts
- Interacting on livestreams (e.g. Instagram)
- Suggesting how to improve the brand and its products
- Looking at other users' stories regarding the brand
- Navigating to other users' profiles (e.g. influencers or other famous people) that talk about the brand
- Other reasons (specify)
- There is no reason that leads me / would lead me to interact with their content [EXCLUSIVE]

- OPTIONS: MULTIPLE RESPONSE
- RANDOMIZING ITEM excluded "There is no reason…"

Section four – Following skincare brands

Q16) Thinking about all the brands we talked about at the beginning (Dior Beauty, Chanel Beauty, Giorgio Armani Beauty, Yves Saint Laurent, Estée Lauder, Guerlain, Lancôme, Sisley Paris, La Mer, La Prairie, Barbara Sturm, Rhode Skincare, Shiseido, VeraLab, Caudalie), we will now focus on the phenomenon of online communities, so what drives you or could drive you to follow these brands' content and interact with them on social networks:
- On the brands' proprietary pages, by looking at their posts, commenting on their posts, putting likes, sharing their page content with others, tagging the official pages in your own posts
- On the brands' non-proprietary pages, where you talk and engage with others about these skincare brands

Q17) How important is/it would be each of these aspects to you in following the content of these skincare brands?

Give a rating from 1 to 7, where:

1 means this factor isn't/would not be important

7 means is/would be extremely important

Regarding the emotional aspect (Thomson et al., 2005):

Being attached to the brand

Being delighted

Feeling affectionate

Feeling passionate

Being Captivated

Q18) How important is/it would be each of these aspects to you in following the content of these skincare brands?

Give a rating from 1 to 7, where:

1 means this factor isn't/would not be important

7 means is/would be extremely important

Regarding the social aspect (Wiedmann et al., 2009):

Being part of these communities makes a good impression on others

It is important that others have a high opinion of me

Being part of these communities enhances my social relationships

Social standing is an important motivator for my participation

Being part of these communities improves the way I am perceived

Q19) How important is/it would be each of these aspects to you in following the content of these skincare brands?

Give a rating from 1 to 7, where:

1 means this factor isn't/would not be important

7 means is/would be extremely important

Regarding interaction with other users (Pagani & Mirabello, 2011):
I am interested in other people who regularly visit these communities
I am interested in input from other users
I've gotten interested in things I otherwise wouldn't have because of others on these communities
The other users are knowledgeable about the topics so you can learn from them

Q20) How important is/it would be each of these aspects to you in following the content of these skincare brands?
Give a rating from 1 to 7, where:
1 means this factor isn't/would not be important
7 means is/would be extremely important
Regarding personal values (Atkinson & Kang, 2022):
Providing deeper understanding of how sustainable the brand is
Providing deeper understanding of how the brand is concerned about animal welfare
Providing deeper understanding of how inclusive is the brand in relation to different skin types (e.g. age and color)
Providing deeper understanding of employee engagement and well-being within the enterprise

Section five – Interaction with skincare brands
Q21) We will now discuss the interaction with these brands

Q22) How important is/it would be each of these aspects in interacting with these skincare brands on social media platforms.
Give a rating from 1 to 7, where:
1 means this factor isn't/would not be important
7 means is/would be extremely important.

Regarding the emotional aspect (Thomson et al., 2005):
Being attached to the brand
Being delighted
Feeling affectionate
Feeling passionate
Being Captivated

Q23) How important is/it would be each of these aspects in interacting with these skincare brands on social media platforms.

Give a rating from 1 to 7, where:

1 means this factor isn't/would not be important

7 means is/would be extremely important.

Regarding the social aspect (Wiedmann et al., 2009):

Being part of these communities makes a good impression on others

It is important that others have a high opinion of me

Being part of these communities enhances my social relationships

Social standing is an important motivator for my participation

Being part of these communities improves the way I am perceived

Q24) How important is/it would be each of these aspects in interacting with these skincare brands on social media platforms.

Give a rating from 1 to 7, where:

1 means this factor isn't/would not be important

7 means is/would be extremely important.

Regarding interaction with other users (Pagani & Mirabello, 2011):

I socialize on these communities

I contribute to the conversation on these communities receiving and providing feedback

I'm interested in input from other users

I'd like to meet other people who regularly visit these communities

I've gotten interested in things I otherwise wouldn't have because of others on these communities

The other users are knowledgeable about the topics so you can learn from them

Q25) How important is/it would be each of these aspects in interacting with these skincare brands on social media platforms.

Give a rating from 1 to 7, where:

1 means this factor isn't/would not be important

7 means is/would be extremely important.

Regarding personal values (Atkinson & Kang, 2022):
Providing deeper understanding of how sustainable is the brand
Providing deeper understanding of how the brand is concerned about animal welfare
Providing deeper understanding of how inclusive is the brand in relation to different skin types (e.g. age and color)
Providing deeper understanding of employee engagement and well-being within the enterprise

Section six – follow-up questions

Q26) Thinking about the brands we have discussed, which of these factors might cause you to purchase or purchase more of their skincare products. Select only those that are relevant to you. You can pick up to two. Multiple responses are possible.
Feeling part of a group of experts
Emotional attachment to the brand
Feeling of having a higher social status
Interaction with other users
Seeing my personal values represented by the brand

-MULTIPLE CHOICE: at least one choice

Q27) Of the brands you know, how much do you consider them luxury? [PIPING ANSWERS FROM Q11]
Very Luxurious

Quite Luxurious

Not Very Luxurious

Not at All Luxurious

Q28) What makes a brand, a luxury skincare brand for you?

Open-ended question

Appendix IV. Survey Results and SPSS Analysis

		Percentage	Count
Q1) Where do you currently reside?	Albania	0%	0
	Andorra	0%	0
	Armenia	0%	0
	Austria	0%	0
	Azerbaijan	0%	0
	Belgium	0%	0
	Belarus	0%	0
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	0%	0
	Bulgaria	0%	0
	Cyprus	0%	0
	Croatia	0%	0
	Denmark	0%	0
	Estonia	0%	0
	Finland	0%	0
	France	0%	0
	Georgia	0%	0
	Germany	0%	0
	Greece	0%	0
	Ireland	0%	0
	Iceland	0%	0
	Italy	100%	280
	Kazakistan	0%	0
	Kosovo	0%	0
	Latvia	0%	0
	Liechtenstein	0%	0
	Lithuania	0%	0
	Luxembourg	0%	0
	North Macedonia	0%	0
	Malta	0%	0
	Moldova	0%	0
	Monaco	0%	0
	Montenegro	0%	0
	Norway	0%	0
	Netherlands	0%	0
	Poland	0%	0
	Portugal	0%	0
	United Kingdom	0%	0
	Czech Republic	0%	0

	Romania	0%	0
	Russia	0%	0
	San Marino	0%	0
	Serbia	0%	0
	Slovakia	0%	0
	Slovenia	0%	0
	Spain	0%	0
	Sweden	0%	0
	Switzerland	0%	0
	Turkey	0%	0
	Ukraine	0%	0
	Hungary	0%	0
	Vaticano	0%	0
	In none of these countries	0%	0
	Total	100%	280

Q2) What is your age? Indicate the value in number. (For example: 24)	18	3%	7
	19	19%	53
	20	23%	65
	21	15%	42
	22	14%	39
	23	16%	46
	24	10%	28
	Total	100%	280

Q3) Which gender do you identify with?	Male	25%	71
	Female	72%	202
	Non-binary	1%	3
	I prefer not to answer	1%	4
	Total	100%	280

Q4) Indicate the region where you reside.	Liguria	3%	7
	Lombardia	48%	133
	Piemonte	3%	8
	Valle d'Aosta	0%	0
	NORTH-WEST	53%	148
	Emilia-Romagna	25%	69

	Friuli-Venezia Giulia	5%	13
	Trentino Alto Adige	1%	4
	Veneto	4%	10
	NORTH-EAST	34%	96
	Lazio	2%	5
	Marche	2%	6
	Toscana	1%	4
	Umbria	0%	1
	CENTER	6%	16
	Abruzzo	1%	3
	Basilicata	0%	1
	Calabria	0%	0
	Campania	3%	8
	Molise	1%	2
	Puglia	1%	2
	Sardegna	1%	4
	Sicilia	0%	0
	SOUTH AND ISLANDS	7%	20
	Total	100%	280

Q5) What is your current employment status?	Student	89%	249
	Employee	5%	13
	Self-employed	3%	7
	Businessman	1%	4
	Unemployed	0%	1
	Other (specify which one)	2%	6
	Total	100%	280

Q6) Which of the following options best describes your household's net monthly income? Consider the monthly sum of all salaries. If you don't know the exact figure make an estimate.	Less than 500€	0%	1
	From 501€ to 1000€	3%	8
	From 1001€ to 1500€	5%	14
	From 1501€ to 2000€	10%	28
	From 2001€ to 2500€	13%	37
	From 2501€ to 3000€	13%	37
	From 3001€ to 3500€	12%	34
	From 3501€ to 4000€	18%	50
	From 4001€ to 4500€	5%	13
	From 4501€ to 5000€	6%	18
	More than 5000€	14%	40
	Total	100%	280

Q7) Indicate among these items the one that best describes your family/housing situation.	I live at home with my parents	66%	185
	I share my apartment with other roommates	21%	59
	I live alone	10%	29
	I live with a partner	3%	7
	Total	100%	280

Q8) Which of the following social media platforms do you use on a regular basis (at least a couple of times a week or more). Multiple answers are possible.	Instagram	90%	253
	Facebook	20%	56
	TikTok	56%	157
	Twitter (X)	19%	53
	Snapchat	8%	23
	Twitch	6%	17
	YouTube	54%	152
	BeReal	25%	71
	Pinterest	25%	70
	LinkedIn	17%	47
	None of the above	1%	2
	Total	100%	280

Q9) How much time do you normally spend per day on the social media platforms that you use on a regular basis. Indicate the time for each social media platform.			
Instagram	Less than 30 minutes	14%	36
	30 to 60 minutes	33%	83
	1 to 2 hours	33%	84

	2 to 3 hours	13%	33
	+ 3 hours	7%	17
	Total	100%	253
Facebook	Less than 30 minutes	54%	30
	30 to 60 minutes	21%	12
	1 to 2 hours	18%	10
	2 to 3 hours	7%	4
	+ 3 hours	0%	0
	Total	100%	56
TikTok	Less than 30 minutes	13%	21
	30 to 60 minutes	27%	43
	1 to 2 hours	33%	52
	2 to 3 hours	17%	27
	+ 3 hours	9%	14
	Total	100%	157
Twitter (X)	Less than 30 minutes	45%	24
	30 to 60 minutes	25%	13
	1 to 2 hours	17%	9
	2 to 3 hours	9%	5
	+ 3 hours	4%	2
	Total	100%	53
Snapchat	Less than 30 minutes	61%	14
	30 to 60 minutes	13%	3
	1 to 2 hours	17%	4
	2 to 3 hours	9%	2
	+ 3 hours	0%	0
	Total	100%	23
Twitch	Less than 30 minutes	18%	3
	30 to 60 minutes	29%	5
	1 to 2 hours	24%	4
	2 to 3 hours	29%	5
	+ 3 hours	0%	0
	Total	100%	17
YouTube	Less than 30 minutes	26%	39
	30 to 60 minutes	38%	57
	1 to 2 hours	24%	37
	2 to 3 hours	8%	12
	+ 3 hours	5%	7
	Total	100%	152
BeReal	Less than 30 minutes	83%	59
	30 to 60 minutes	6%	4
	1 to 2 hours	10%	7

	2 to 3 hours	1%	1
	+ 3 hours	0%	0
	Total	100%	71
Pinterest	Less than 30 minutes	66%	46
	30 to 60 minutes	17%	12
	1 to 2 hours	13%	9
	2 to 3 hours	1%	1
	+ 3 hours	3%	2
	Total	100%	70
LinkedIn	Less than 30 minutes	64%	30
	30 to 60 minutes	19%	9
	1 to 2 hours	4%	2
	2 to 3 hours	6%	3
	+ 3 hours	6%	3
	Total	100%	47

Q11) Which of these brands do you know, even by name only. Multiple answers are possible.	Dior Beauty	74%	205
	Chanel Beauty	64%	178
	Giorgio Armani Beauty	62%	171
	Yves Saint Laurent	73%	202
	Estée Lauder	50%	139
	Guerlain	39%	108
	Lancôme	72%	200
	Sisley Paris	28%	79
	La Mer	26%	73
	La Prairie	20%	55
	Barbara Sturm	10%	27
	Rhode Skincare	30%	84
	Shiseido	50%	140
	VeraLab	63%	176
	Caudalie	37%	103
	I don't know any of these skincare brands	7%	19
	Total	100%	278

Q12) Among the brands you know, which ones have you purchased in the past or purchase on a more or less regular basis. Multiple answers are possible.	Dior Beauty	20%	53
	Chanel Beauty	12%	30
	Giorgio Armani Beauty	5%	14
	Yves Saint Laurent	14%	36
	Estée Lauder	13%	34
	Guerlain	3%	7
	Lancôme	22%	58
	Sisley Paris	3%	9
	La Mer	4%	11
	La Prairie	3%	9
	Barbara Sturm	4%	11
	Rhode Skincare	5%	12
	Shiseido	10%	27
	VeraLab	20%	53
	Caudalie	15%	38
	I do not / have never bought skincare products from these brands	40%	103
	Total	100%	259

Q13) Among the brands you know, which ones do you follow on the social media platforms that you use most regularly. Multiple answers are possible.	Dior Beauty	10%	25
	Chanel Beauty	10%	26
	Giorgio Armani Beauty	4%	10
	Yves Saint Laurent	9%	23
	Estée Lauder	8%	20
	Guerlain	2%	6
	Lancôme	7%	19
	Sisley Paris	5%	12

	La Mer	4%	10
	La Prairie	3%	8
	Barbara Sturm	5%	12
	Rhode Skincare	7%	17
	Shiseido	4%	11
	VeraLab	15%	40
	Caudalie	4%	10
	I do not follow any of these brands on social media platforms	61%	158
	Total	100%	259

Q13bis) How often do you engage in online discussions, share content, or interact with others on social media, thinking about the brands you follow on social media platforms?	Daily	3%	3
	2-3 times a week	20%	20
	At least once a week	24%	24
	Once every 2-3 weeks	10%	10
	Once per month	8%	8
	Less often	16%	16
	Never	20%	20
	Total	100%	101

		Follows at least 1 brand		Doesn't follow any of the brands		Total	
Q14) Among the brands you know, what motivates you and/or would motivate	I believe that the product related information which can be gathered is reliable	31%	31	14%	22	20%	53
	The fact that the brand has a good reputation	42%	42	22%	35	30%	77
	The presence of influencers or celebrities who sponsor the brand	30%	30	8%	12	16%	42

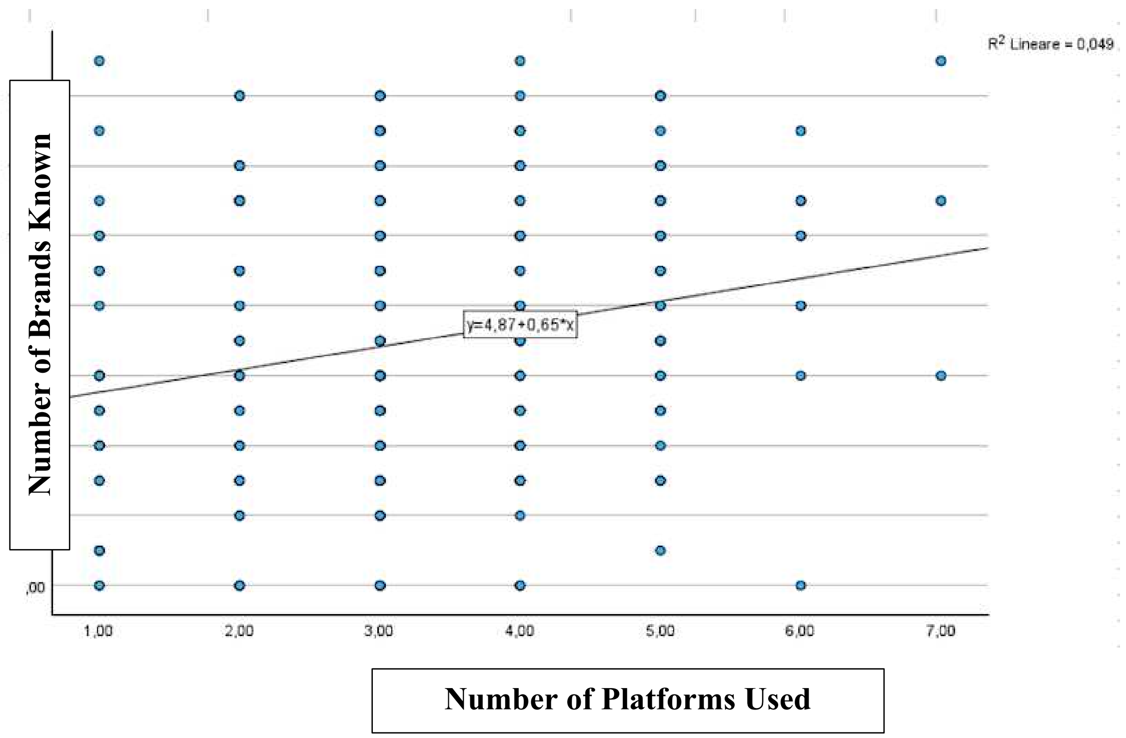
you to follow them online? Multiple answers are possible.	Educational content (e.g., skincare tips)	51%	52	47%	74	49%	126
	To follow brands that I fancy to buy in the future, although I cannot afford buying right now	33%	33	19%	30	24%	63
	I like the influential and creative contents which are generated by the brands	41%	41	15%	23	25%	64
	I like if there are videos created by brands which provide opportunity for me to have fun	29%	29	6%	10	15%	39
	Other reasons (specify)	0%	0	1%	1	0%	1
	None of these reasons	5%	5	30%	47	20%	52
	Total	100%	101	100%	158	100%	259

		Follows at least 1 brand		Doesn't follow any of the brands		Total	
Q15) Among the brands you know, how do you interact and/or you would interact with their content? Multiple answers are possible.	Liking posts	65%	66	49%	77	55%	143
	Sharing their content on my profile	32%	32	2%	3	14%	35
	Commenting on posts	37%	37	1%	2	15%	39
	Interacting on livestreams (e.g. Instagram)	32%	32	2%	3	14%	35
	Suggesting how to improve the brand and its products	17%	17	3%	4	8%	21
	Looking at other users' stories regarding the brand	45%	45	26%	41	33%	86
	Navigating to other users' profiles (e.g. influencers or other famous people) that talk about the brand	43%	43	28%	44	34%	87
	Other reasons (specify)	0%	0	1%	1	0%	1
	There is no reason that	6%	6	32%	50	22%	56

	leads me / would lead me to interact with their content						
	Cites at least 1 reason	94%	95	68%	108	78%	203
	Total	100%	101	100%	158	100%	259

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard Deviation
Number of used platforms	3.21	0.00	7.00	1.34
Number of known brands	6.98	0.00	15.00	3.87

Correlations			
		Number of Platforms Used	Number of Brands Known
Number of Platforms Used	Pearson Correlation	1	.221**
	Significance (two-tailed)		0.000
	N	280	278
Number of Brands Known	Pearson Correlation	.221**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0.000	
	N	278	278
**Note: The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).			



		Number of Brands Purchased	Number of Brands Followed
Number of Brands Purchased	Pearson Correlation	1	.600**
	Significance (two-tailed)		0.000
	N	259	259
Number of Brands Followed	Pearson Correlation	.600**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0.000	
	N	259	259

Model Summary									
					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Modified R-square	Modified F	gl1	gl2	Sign. Modified F
1	.455[a]	0.207	**0.204**	1.38694	0.207	67.190	1	257	0.000
2	.474[b]	0.224	**0.218**	1.37452	0.017	5.668	1	256	0.018
a. Predictors: (constant), Average_Q18_Follow_Social									
b. Predictors: (constant), Average_Q18_Follow_Social, Average_Q24_Int_Interaction									
c. Dependent Variable: NUMBER_BRANDS_FOLLOWED									

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	df (Degrees of Freedom)	Mean Square	F Statistic	Sign.
1	Regression	129.247	1	129.247	**67.190**	**<.001**[b]
	Residue	494.367	257	1.924		
	Total	623.614	258			
2	Regression	139.955	2	69.978	**37.039**	**<.001**[c]
	Residue	483.659	256	1.889		
	Total	623.614	258			
a. Dependent Variable: NUMBER_BRANDS_FOLLOWED						
b. Predictors for Model 1: (constant), Average_Q18_Follow_Social						
c. Predictors for Model 2: (constant), Average_Q18_Follow_Social, Average_Q24_Int_Interaction						

Coefficients								
Model		Coefficients Unstandardized		Standardized	t	Sign.	Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Standard Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	-0.258	0.172		-1.501	0.135		
	Average_Q18_Follow_Social	**0.377**	**0.046**	**0.455**	**8.197**	**0.000**	1.000	1.000
2	(Constant)	-0.516	0.202		-2.556	0.011		
	Average_Q18_Follow_Social	**0.252**	0.070	**0.304**	3.621	**0.000**	0.429	**2.329**
	Average_Q24_Int_Interaction	**0.188**	0.079	**0.200**	2.381	**0.018**	0.429	**2.329**

		Follows vs doesn't follow			
		Overall	Doesn't follow	Follows	
		Average	Average	Average	Difference
Q17	Average_Q17_Follow_Emotional	4.1	3.79	4.70	0.91
Q18	**Average_Q18_Follow_Social**	**3.2**	**2.43**	**4.48**	**2.05**
Q19	Average_Q19_Follow_Interaction	4.1	3.66	4.81	1.15
Q20	**Average_Q20_Follow_Personal Values**	**5.2**	**5.04**	**5.45**	**0.41**
Q22	Average_Q22_Int_Emotional	3.9	3.50	4.65	1.16
Q23	Average_Q23_Int_Social	3.1	2.29	4.35	2.06
Q24	**Average_Q24_Int_Interaction**	**3.5**	**2.85**	**4.58**	**1.73**
Q25	**Average_Q25_Int_Personal Values**	**5.2**	**4.96**	**5.54**	**0.58**

		Purchases vs doesn't purchase			
		Overall	Doesn't purchase	Purchases	
		Average	Average	Average	Difference
Q17	Average_Q17_Follow_Emotional	4.1	3.69	4.44	0.75
Q18	**Average_Q18_Follow_Social**	**3.2**	**2.47**	**3.74**	**1.27**
Q19	Average_Q19_Follow_Interaction	4.1	3.63	4.43	0.81
Q20	**Average_Q20_Follow_Personal Values**	**5.2**	**4.94**	**5.38**	**0.44**
Q22	Average_Q22_Int_Emotional	3.9	3.37	4.33	0.96
Q23	Average_Q23_Int_Social	3.1	2.38	3.56	1.18
Q24	**Average_Q24_Int_Interaction**	**3.5**	**2.86**	**3.97**	**1.11**
Q25	**Average_Q25_Int_Personal Values**	**5.2**	**4.88**	**5.39**	**0.51**

		Purchases vs doesn't purchase					
		Total		Doesn't purchase		Purchases	
		Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count
Q26	**Seeing My Personal Values Reflected**	**63%**	164	**67%**	69	**61%**	95
	Emotional Attachment to the Brand	30%	77	26%	27	32%	50
	Feeling Part of an Expert Group	21%	55	15%	15	**26%**	40
	Sensation of Having a Higher Social Status	20%	53	12%	12	**26%**	41
	Interaction with Other Users	19%	48	17%	17	20%	31
	Total	100%	259	100%	103	100%	156

		Follows vs doesn't follow					
		Total		Doesn't follow		Follows	
		Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count
Q26	Seeing My Personal Values Reflected	63%	164	68%	107	56%	57
	Emotional Attachment to the Brand	30%	77	32%	50	27%	27
	Feeling Part of an Expert Group	21%	55	16%	26	**29%**	29
	Sensation of Having a Higher Social Status	20%	53	13%	21	**32%**	32
	Interaction with Other Users	19%	48	15%	23	**25%**	25
	Total	100%	259	100%	158	100%	101

	Very Luxurious	Quite Luxurious	Not Very Luxurious	Not at All Luxurious
	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
Chanel Beauty	77%	18%	3%	2%
Dior Beauty	75%	20%	3%	2%
Barbara Sturm	74%	19%	7%	0%
Yves Saint Laurent	73%	20%	5%	2%
La Mer	71%	23%	4%	1%
La Prairie	65%	25%	7%	2%
Giorgio Armani Beauty	58%	32%	6%	3%
Sisley Paris	43%	34%	18%	5%
Estée Lauder	37%	55%	9%	0%
Lancôme	31%	54%	15%	2%
Guerlain	29%	56%	14%	1%
Shiseido	26%	47%	24%	3%
Rhode Skincare	20%	46%	30%	4%
Caudalie	13%	50%	31%	7%
VeraLab	5%	30%	53%	12%

Correlations

		Number of Brands Purchased	Number of Brands Followed	Average Q17 Following Emotional	Average Q18 Following Social	Average Q19 Following Interaction	Average Q20 Following Personal Values	Average Q22 Interaction Emotional	Average Q23 Interaction Social	Average Q24 Interaction	Average Q25 Interaction Personal Values
Number of Brands Purchased	Pearson Correlation	1	**,600****	,219**	**,346****	,284**	,165**	,264**	,325**	,348**	,172**
	Significance (two-tailed)		**0,000**	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,008	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,005
	N	259	**259**	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Number of Brands Followed	Pearson Correlation	,600**	1	,232**	**,455****	,346**	,126*	,264**	,429**	**,430****	,142*
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000	0,044	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,022
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Average Q17 Following Emotional	Pearson Correlation	,219**	,232**	1	,542**	,618**	,352**	**,842****	,563**	,647**	,394**
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Average Q18 Following Social	Pearson Correlation	,346**	,455**	,542**	1	,584**	,256**	,619**	**,899****	,755**	,286**
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Average Q19 Following Interaction	Pearson Correlation	,284**	,346**	,618**	,584**	1	,403**	,629**	,559**	**,726****	,452**
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Average Q20 Following Personal Values	Pearson Correlation	,165**	,126*	,352**	,256**	,403**	1	,299**	,254**	,334**	**,876****
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,008	0,044	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Average Q22 Interaction Emotional	Pearson Correlation	,264**	,264**	,842**	,619**	,629**	,299**	1	,653**	,722**	,366**
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Average Q23 Interaction Social	Pearson Correlation	,325**	,429**	,563**	,899**	,559**	,254**	,653**	1	,793**	,280**
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000	0,000
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Average Q24 Interaction	Pearson Correlation	,348**	,430**	,647**	,755**	,726**	,334**	,722**	,793**	1	,367**
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000		0,000
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259
Average Q25 Interaction Personal Values	Pearson Correlation	,172**	,142*	,394**	,286**	,452**	,876**	,366**	,280**	,367**	1
	Significance (two-tailed)	0,005	0,022	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000	
	N	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259	259

**Note: The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

**Note: The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

	Crobach's Alpha in parenthesis	**How important is/it would be each of these aspects to you in following/ interacting with the content of these skincare brands? Give a rating from 1 to 7**	Average	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
		Average area (0.881)	**4.1**	1.8		
Q17	Follow	Being attached to the brand	3.9	1.8	1	7
	Follow	Being delighted	**4.0**	1.8	1	7
	Follow	Feeling affectionate	**4.1**	1.8	1	7
	Follow	Feeling passionate	**4.3**	1.7	1	7
	Follow	Being Captivated	**4.4**	1.7	1	7
		Average area (0.950)	3.2	2.1		
Q18	Follow	Being part of these communities makes a good impression on others	3.2	2.1	1	7
	Follow	It is important that others have a high opinion of me	3.5	2.1	1	7
	Follow	Being part of these communities enhances my social relationships	3.1	2.0	1	7
	Follow	Social standing is an important motivator for my participation	3.3	2.1	1	7
	Follow	Being part of these communities improves the way I am perceived	3.1	2.0	1	7
		Average area (0.866)	**4.1**	1.8		
Q19	Follow	I am interested in other people who regularly visit these communities	3.4	1.8	1	7
	Follow	I am interested in input from other users	**4.5**	1.7	1	7
	Follow	I've gotten interested in things I otherwise wouldn't have because of others on these communities	4.1	1.8	1	7
	Follow	The other users are knowledgeable about the topics so you can learn from them	**4.5**	1.8	1	7
		Average area (0.859)	**5.2**	1.7		
Q20	Follow	Providing deeper understanding of how sustainable the brand is	**5.4**	1.7	1	7
	Follow	Providing deeper understanding of how the brand is concerned about animal welfare	**5.2**	1.8	1	7

	Follow	Providing deeper understanding of how inclusive is the brand in relation to different skin types (e.g. age and color)	**5.3**	1.7	1	7
	Follow	Providing deeper understanding of employee engagement and well-being within the enterprise	4.9	1.8	1	7
		We will now discuss the interaction with these brands				
		Average area (0.933)	**3.9**	1.9		
Q22	Interaction	Being attached to the brand	3.9	1.8	1	7
	Interaction	Being delighted	3.7	1.9	1	7
	Interaction	Feeling affectionate	3.9	1.9	1	7
	Interaction	Feeling passionate	**4.1**	1.9	1	7
	Interaction	Being Captivated	**4.2**	1.8	1	7
		Average area (0.962)	**3.1**	2.1		
Q23	Interaction	Being part of these communities makes a good impression on others	3.0	2.2	1	7
	Interaction	It is important that others have a high opinion of me	3.2	2.1	1	7
	Interaction	Being part of these communities enhances my social relationships	3.0	2.1	1	7
	Interaction	Social standing is an important motivator for my participation	3.1	2.1	1	7
	Interaction	Being part of these communities improves the way I am perceived	3.1	2.1	1	7
		Average area (0.921)	**3.5**	1.9		
Q24	Interaction	I socialize on these communities	3.1	2.1	1	7
	Interaction	I contribute to the conversation on these communities receiving and providing feedback	3.1	2.1	1	7
	Interaction	I'm interested in input from other users	3.8	1.9	1	7
	Interaction	I'd like to meet other people who regularly visit these communities	3.2	2.0	1	7
	Interaction	I've gotten interested in things I otherwise wouldn't have because of others on these communities	3.9	1.9	1	7
	Interaction	The other users are knowledgeable about the topics so you can learn from them	**4.0**	1.8	1	7
		Average area (0.897)	**5.2**	1.8		
Q25	Interaction	Providing deeper understanding of how sustainable the brand is	**5.3**	1.7	1	7
	Interaction	Providing deeper understanding of how the brand is concerned about animal welfare	**5.3**	1.8	1	7
	Interaction	Providing deeper understanding of how inclusive is the brand in relation to different skin types (e.g. age and color)	5.1	1.8	1	7
	Interaction	Providing deeper understanding of employee engagement and well-being within the enterprise	5.0	1.7	1	7