

# The Devil Wears (New) Prada

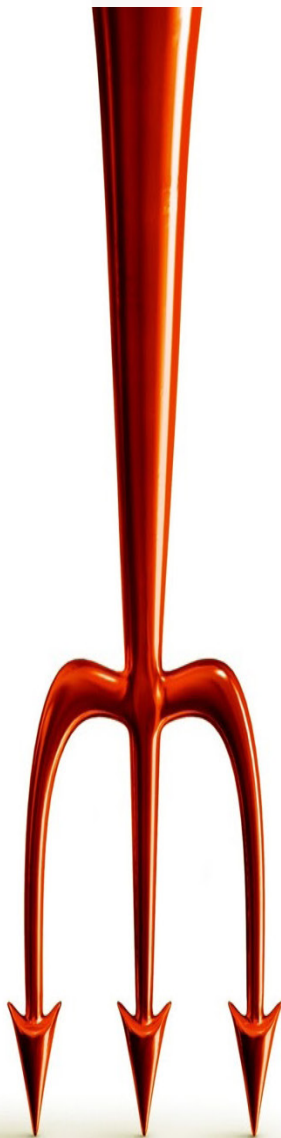
*A qualitative study on consumers' identity projects and self-presentation in relation to luxury fashion rental*

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Master's Thesis

MSc in International Marketing & Brand Management  
Lund University School of Economics and Management



May 2023

Supervisor: Annette Cerne

Examiner: Hossain Shahriar



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

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# Abstract

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## **“The Devil Wears (New) Prada”**

In contemporary society, it is emphasised that ownership of clothing plays a crucial role in construction- and presentation of personal identities. With the rise of sustainable consumerism and the sharing economy, access-based consumption has emerged as a notable trend, offering individuals temporary access to non-exclusively owned clothing. The shift in consumption habits and preferences challenges the traditional notion of viewing possessions as means to identity construction. In spite of this, the questions regarding how consumers navigate their identity projects and self-presentation when donning rented luxury arises and are further examined in this paper. From an empirical stance, the research originates in three semi-structured virtual focus groups, each consisting of six women ages 16-28 carrying previous experience of luxury rental. Drawing on the concepts of Russell Belk, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu, the field of study employs a Consumer Culture Theory perspective to explore identity projects and self-presentation. In this manner, this qualitative research aims to gain valuable insights to the broader field of identity construction in relation to luxury fashion rental, with the specific objective of investigating how consumers engage with non-exclusively owned luxury clothing and its implications for identity construction and self-presentation. The findings of our study reveals the possibility and desirability to temporarily identify with rented luxury fashion in multiple ways as non-exclusively owned clothing carries an equivalent amount of identification value, despite being shared outside the family realm. The derived discoveries from our research questions highlight rented luxury fashion as means to nurture identity projects in the following ways; (1) providing emotional value, (2) the ability to create multiple identities, (3) the possibility of fostering a sustainable identity, following in self-presentation; (4) conveying social belonging, (5) showcase a desired style, and (6) obeying contextual norms. Taking these findings into account, theoretical- and practical implications are provided.

**Keywords:** identity projects, self-presentation, luxury fashion rental, Consumer Culture Theory, access-based consumption, luxury fashion, Impression Management, Social Distinction, the extended self

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Lund, May 31, 2023

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# 1. Introduction

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*In this introductory chapter the topic of the thesis is introduced. Furtheron, the problematisation motivates the relevance of our study which is then followed by the aim and lastly the research questions are presented. The study's research questions and intended contribution is provided.*



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*I feel like the act of renting, like renting in itself and not the rented garment per se, says quite a lot too. I mean, it kind of shows that one is well-educated and has an understanding for how the environment is affected by society's constant consumption.*

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The emerging awareness and increasing global efforts to reduce current overconsumption and address climate change has introduced a new consumption pattern of renting goods (Lang & Armstrong, 2018a; Lang & Armstrong, 2018b). From a managerial perspective, the essence of the traditional business model is hence evolving and changing, where an increasing number of companies have begun offering circular options (Becker-Leifhold & Iran, 2018; Mukendi & Henninger, 2020). These new services play part of what is called a sharing economy, which is characterised by the shift from ownership to renting, bartering, or gifting rather than owning (Miguel, Martos-Carrión & Santa, 2022; Mishra, Jain & Jham, 2022; Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022; Christodoulides, Athwal, Boukis & Semaan, 2021). Other researchers view the sharing economy as a disruptive socio-economic system seeking to counteract hyper-consumption by promoting collaborative consumption where private ownership is diminished and resources are shared between individuals, as opposed to traditional economic business models (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Lawson, Gleim, Perren & Hwang, 2016; Amasawa, Brydges, Henninger & Kimita, 2023; Jain, Jain, Behl, Pereira, Del Guidice & Vrontis, 2022). Uber and Airbnb are prominent examples of corporations adapting to the new collaborative business models, however, there is a growing shift in several sectors, whereas the fashion sector is being one of them (Miguel et al., 2022; Lawson et al., 2016).



Within the fashion sector, this new business model is adopted through consumer-to-consumer swapping, rental options and reselling of goods, which all aim to combat poor utilisation and unsustainable consumption by encouraging people to make use of already existing products (Lawson et al., 2016; Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022; Bardhi & Eckhart, 2012; Mukendi & Henninger, 2020). The growing amount of rental services, also referred to as access-based consumption, enables consumers to access clothes and accessories on a temporary basis for a cheaper cost (Gong, Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Jain et al., 2022). Not least has this development enabled a major shift in the accessibility of the luxury market, which historically has been limited to the upper class, imposing certain status and power (Wang, 2022; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; Gao, Winterich & Zhang, 2016; Kim, Park & Dubois, 2018).

Neil and Riello (2016) claims that in today's postmodern society, luxury is viewed as the embodiment of increasing income inequality within societies and nations around the world, meanwhile historically, luxury ownership was seen as part of how the hierarchical society was structured, thus, something that was acknowledged rather than being considered an issue. A number of authors alleges that the heavy costs and exclusivity of luxury pieces has long deterred many consumers from engaging in such purchases which can force them into availing of the counterfeit market (Albers-Miller, 1999; Wilcox, Kim & Sen, 2009). The increased interest in obtaining luxury goods at a significantly lower cost has resulted in the growth of access-based consumption, thus following the possibility and attractiveness of acquiring luxury goods at a temporary basis (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould, 2012; Mishra et al., 2022). In this context, a shift in consumers engaging in alternative forms of consumption is present as individuals become more eager to access products instead of owning them (Lawson et al., 2016). The rental market has addressed the rather new need of the customer by allowing them access to temporarily obtain particular luxury products for a set period (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Mishra et al., 2022). As a result of this, global luxury companies have decided to adopt this trend and venture into the rental market, promoting economic- and sustainable options to consumption (Gong, Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Jain et al., 2022).

As the field of luxury fashion rental is under constant expansion, fashion rental services come in various forms, each providing unique offerings. Diverse variations in the offerings of luxury fashion rentals include distinct luxury items such as watches, bags, and dresses, among other high-end pieces, alongside customer preferences such as flexible payment

options and rental modalities, whether via in-app rentals or physical rental stores (Mukendi & Henninger, 2020; Wang, 2022). At present, luxury fashion rentals present several options, including subscription-based rental services that provide customers with monthly instalments to access a wide range of designer clothing items to pick freely from, an example of such a rental platform is Nuuly and Rent The Runway (Vogue, 2023; Bertoni, 2014). Other companies allowing for one time instalments are Klädoteket (2023) and Rent Club Paris (2023), offering consumers access to specific pieces of clothing and accessories temporarily. Following another alternative of rental is peer-to-peer rental platforms like Gemme Collective, enabling individuals to both rent- and lease their own luxury items, thus providing a more in-expensive path to access luxury goods (Gemme Collective, 2023). The aforementioned examples of alternatives to luxury rental are all fairly newly introduced to the business landscape brought about by the increasing interest of sustainability in consumer practices.

While society is prompting the need for sustainable alterations responding to challenges of today's climate crisis, researchers are simultaneously putting emphasis on the significant value of possessions in individuals' identity works (Belk, 1988; Belk, 2014; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Owing to this fact, appearance, translating to clothing and accessories, play a vital role in consumers' definitions of oneself and others (Joubert & Stern, 2005; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This notion implies that consumption is to a large extent motivated by consumers desire to construct one's identity, which further aligns with the postmodern view on identity being something constructable rather than something stable (Cova, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1995; Jensen Schau, 2018). More specifically, postmodern researchers argue that individuals employ certain brands and products that align with their envisioned identity to manage one's image and the accompanying social symbolism (Gong, Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Belk (1988) adds on to this analysis arguing that consumers view possessions as an extension of themselves. Despite varied historical meanings and symbolic values of luxury, ownership over luxuriousness is today argued to act as an extended desire of self and a way of constructing an identity (Dubois & Laurent, 1995; Hudders & Pandelaere, 2015; Wiedmann, Hennigs & Siebels, 2009; Christodoulides, Athwal, Boukis & Semaan, 2021). The desire to reconstruct oneself and one's image increases the aspiration to purchase luxury products (Christodoulides, et al., 2021; Wiedmann, Hennigs & Siebels, 2009). It is further emphasised that the experienced amount of control and power affects the extent to which a possession is

being incorporated to an individual's extended self (Belk, 1988). From this perspective, the absence of ownership, also implying decreased power and control, in the sharing economy challenges the use of rental objects in individuals' identity construction (Loussaïef, Ulrich & Damay, 2019; Lawson et al., 2016).

## 1.1 Problematisation

As touched upon in the previous section, it has long been emphasised that luxury fashion consumption is closely linked with social status, enabling the individual to show communality or differentiation to a certain crowd of people (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999; McNeill & Riello, 2016; Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, fashion plays a major role in identity construction and enhances individuals' ability of positioning oneself in society (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Joubert & Stern, 2005; Entwistle, 2015). However, as the global political discussion is raising sustainability concerns, the traditional model of luxury fashion consumption is being challenged and alternative consumption practices such as rental of luxury fashion is growing in popularity (Fowler, Reisenwitz & Chu, 2022; Lawson et al., 2016; Mishra et al., 2020). While luxury fashion is often associated with wealth and exclusivity (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996; Onu, Kessler & Smith, 2016), the rise of luxury fashion rental has made these products accessible to a wider range of consumers, which prompts curiosity as to how non-ownership affects self-identity. The academic field of fashion rental in relation to identity construction is a relatively new- and scarce area of investigation that continues to emerge in response to the growing attention and demand for sustainable and ethical fashion practices (Amasawa et al., 2023; Loussaïef et al., 2019; Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022). A study conducted by Mordor Intelligence (2023) shows that the clothing rental market is projected to register a Compound Annual Growth Rate of 8.89% over the upcoming five years, thus expanded knowledge of the new and emerging market is of high relevance. While acknowledging an increased interest towards access-based consumption, it still does not represent the normative consumption pattern of the general consumer (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Thus, with the prospect of clothing rental's growth in the upcoming years, we argue that it is crucial to gain a more comprehensive perspective on how consumers' identities are affected by non-ownership, in order to adapt businesses in the best possible way. This notion is further supported by Loussaïef et al. (2019), who stress the importance of further investigation.

A prominent stream of literature focusing on the formation of consumer identities is Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). This comprehensive field of research covers multiple dimensions of consumer behaviour and identity construction, where consumers engage with the marketplace to acquire resources to shape their identity and position themselves in relation to other social actors (Arnould & Thompson, 2018; Belk, 1988). Within this realm, clothing has long been emphasised to carry great symbolic- and cultural meaning, thus enabling social distinction in terms of conveying taste (Arsel & Bean, 2018). Since luxury fashion historically has been a crucial symbol of wealth, social status and class affiliation (Entwistle, 2015; Bourdieu, 1984), we argue that it is of great relevance to study how the broadened accessibility, which enables the wider mass to acquire luxury fashion by rental practices, has affected the role of luxury fashion in consumers' identity projects and self-presentations. In order to expand the current understanding, classical concepts and theories which are highly credited within CCT touching upon ownership (Belk, 1988; Belk, 2007; Belk, 2014), Social Distinction and taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 2018; Henry & Caldwell, 2018), and Self-Presentation (Goffman, 1959; Jensen Schau, 2018) will be employed, aiding us in understanding the growing consumer trend from a CCT-perspective. As such, by exploring how consumers use luxury fashion rental to construct and present their identities, it is possible to grasp the cultural and social influences behind the growing consumption practice. By doing this, we further seek to contribute to the theoretical field by placing the theories in a new cultural context.

As regards to the articles observed, the majority of research in the particular field focuses on general perceptions and attitudes towards fashion rental (Mukendi & Henninger, 2020; Becker-Leifhold & Iran, 2018; Ruan, Xu & Lee, 2022), as well as purchase intention to rent fashion (Mishra et al., 2022; Lawson et al., 2016; Lang & Armstrong, 2018a), thus excluding how fashion rental intersects with identity construction. The scarcity of literature exploring the effects of access-based consumption on identity provides inconsistent findings. To illustrate, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) claims that rental products, more specifically cars, where no joint ownership is involved, do not entail symbolism and personal attachment in the same manner as ownership does, whereas a study conducted by Loussaïef et al. (2019) concludes that access-based fashion items do in fact influence social symbolism while nourishing an individual's identity. As such, the absence of identification has been noted when exploring the linkage between access-based cars and identity, whereas Loussaïef et al.

(2019) promotes identification value in access-based fashion consumption, however mainly in borrowing and sharing practices. Due to the inconsistency of the studies observed, we suggest that further research is needed in the particular field. Our empirical research is designed to attend this area of deficiencies by contributing with extended research, fostering a more holistic view of the phenomenon.

Touching upon access-based practices, Belk (2007; Belk 2014) suggests that sharing generates a sense of ownership among family members, and accessing or sharing joint goods can nurture one's sense of self (Belk, 2010; Belk, 2014). However, it remains unclear how sharing luxury garments among other consumers, in other words; the issue of accessing objects from non-family members, is yet to be researched in depth. Additionally, the potential differences in the relationship between the self and object in shared purchase or borrowing situations have not been investigated comprehensively, and still calls for further studies (Loussaïef et al., 2019). Loussaïef et al. (2019) seeks to overcome the deficiencies of how identity construction is affected by access-based consumption, focusing on both sharing, borrowing and temporary access as different forms of practices. The authors' initial goal was to explore two different consumer segments, namely middle-age consumers of ages 40-59 and late adolescence of ages 16-25, due to their high relevance for the particular consumption practice. Middle-aged consumers were thus targeted since they are recognized to devote large spendings on luxury, in relation to late adolescents that were chosen due to being a customer segment of immense growth (Loussaïef et al., 2019). Hence, these two customer segments are emphasised to be of vital importance for the exploration of the field and further development (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Schade, Hegner, Horstmann & Brinkmann, 2015). While having the ambition of gaining a holistic understanding of aforementioned consumer segments, the authors fail to carry out their objective with the younger consumer segment due to the difficulty in enlisting young adults with familiarity of access-based consumption, constituting a fundamental area for further investigation. In addition, this segment lacked prior experience of access-based consumption, namely only 2 respondents under the age 27 carried the experience of rental practices (Loussaïef et al., 2019). Thus, our study endeavours to address the above-mentioned deficiencies by looking at whether or how rental of luxury garments with individuals outside their families results in a source of identity nurturing among young women aged 16-28.

To conclude, the significance of the problematisation lies in the growing popularity and demand of rental services within the luxury fashion industry, which has disturbed the traditional ownership-based consumption model. As luxury fashion consumers increasingly turn to rental services instead of prioritising ownership of luxury garments, it becomes crucial to comprehend how this alternative mode of consumption impacts their identity construction. By exploring how young women construct their identities through luxury fashion rental with individual's outside of their families, our research sheds light on the shifting nature of luxury consumption and the role of material possessions in shaping identity. This is further established by implementing highly appreciated theories of Goffman, Bourdieu and Belk, allowing us to gain richer knowledge in how identity is constructed and portrayed today. Likewise, our empirical research will provide insight into the motivations and values of luxury fashion consumers, which in turn can implement rather new influences on marketing strategies and potentially influence the future of the luxury fashion industry. Furthermore, this paper enhances comprehension of identity construction in contemporary consumer culture, as the consumption practice of luxury fashion is closely linked to social status, self-expression and personal identity (Han, Nunes & Drèze, 2010; McNeill & Riello, 2016). As such, this study can have implications beyond the luxury fashion industry and provide insights into the broader social- and cultural trends shaping identity construction in the present-day era.

## 1.2 Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to contribute to the field of identity construction in relation to luxury fashion by examining how consumers navigate their identity projects and self-presentation in relation to luxury fashion rental. In this manner, the study is positioned within the field of Consumer Culture Theory, where our chosen phenomenon will be looked at through the conceptual lenses of Belk, Goffman and Bourdieu. Hence, this study will yield valuable insights into the relationship between consumers' identity projects and self-presentation in relation to non-exclusively owned fashion items. In pursuit of the aim, the following research questions are posed:

- What role does rental- rather than ownership of luxury fashion have in consumers' identity projects?

- How do consumers reflect upon their self-presentation in relation to luxury fashion rental?

### 1.3 Intended Contribution

Concentrating on consumers' identity construction in relation to luxury fashion rental, this study aspires to enrich the field of literature on consumer identities (Belk, 1985; Belk, 1988; Belk, 2007; Belk, 2010; Belk, 2013; Belk, 2014; Schau & Gilly 2003; Bauman, 2007; Zhou, 2005) and luxury fashion rental (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Mishra et al., 2022; Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022; Mukendi & Henninger, 2020; Ruan et al., 2022). With our main focus being consumer identities, this research is further positioned within the broader realm of CCT. While Jensen Schau (2018) describes identity as a multifaceted phenomenon consisting of various dimensions, this study focuses on understanding consumers' experiences of identity projects and self-presentation in regards to renting luxury fashion (Contextually illustrated in *Figure 1. Research Domains and Context*). With luxury fashion rental being a rather novel phenomenon, it is of our best understanding that the existing literature focusing on the consumption practice in relation to consumer's identities is rather scarce (Loussaïef et al., 2019). To expand the current stream of literature and broaden the understanding of our chosen phenomenon, prominent concepts and theories by Belk (1988; 2014), Goffman (1959) and Bourdieu (2018) will be employed. By adapting these concepts and theoretical perspectives we hope to expand the understanding of a growing consumption trend, which thus is of great relevance for the field of CCT.

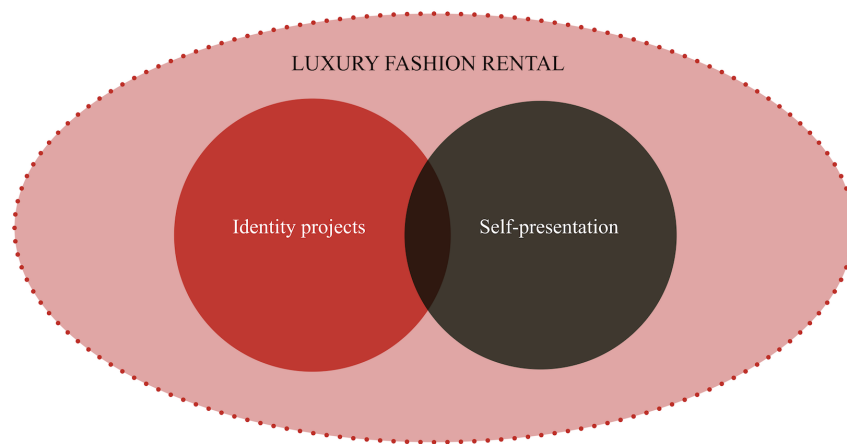


Figure 1. (own illustration): Research domains (identity projects and self-presentation) and context (luxury fashion rental).

## 1.4 Delimitations

In regards to what has been stated above, this study aims to understand the role of rental versus ownership of luxury fashion in relation to consumers' identity projects and self-presentations. To fulfil our aim, we look at luxury fashion rental from an individual perspective, thus focusing on the experiences and beliefs of the consumer aspiring to configure various symbols or objects to construct and perform a certain identity. Accordingly, to understand and reflect upon identity projects and self-presentation in an in-depth manner, our study does not take the receiver's perspective into account. This is of relevance to emphasise since respondents might claim how they are perceived when renting, while not being in a position to accurately judge external impressions.

Furthermore, the study is limited to understanding experiences of women ages 16-28. The decision of merely focusing on women was taken due to previous studies' difficulties in enlisting women of this age group, while emphasising that it is a crucial and growing consumer segment for luxury fashion rental (Loussaïef et al., 2019). As a result, this study does not provide insights to experiences held by men and non-binary individuals, nor other age-groups. By limiting our study to women of a certain age group, a certain level of homogeneity is ensured, which can further make the experiences more comparable and illustrative of the chosen consumer segment (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Thus, the purposive sampling utilised to enlist respondents to our study is justified and deliberated based on the aim of our research. As such, the sampling consisting of exclusively recruiting



women, ages 16-28, for our study is intentionally set and thus considered a methodological strength.

Lastly, we decided to not explicitly ask our respondents about their class affiliation, while discussing social class in regards to luxury fashion rental in the analysis. This could be seen as a limitation of our study since we can not as accurately make conclusions based on how the respondents' social class has affected their taste and view on rental versus ownership. However, this is a conscious decision based on the fact that social class could be seen as a sensitive part of one's identity, thus something private which not all respondents feel comfortable sharing. How social class is defined and discussed in this research is thus elaborated upon in section 3.5.3. While deciding to make this limitation for our study, we still perceived social class, where taste is rooted and varied, to be a valuable perspective in relation to the research topic. Mainly as it discloses how consumers' different views and experiences of financial assets and social- and cultural factors affect one's view on identity in relation to rental versus ownership of luxury fashion.

# Outline of Thesis

*The impact of luxury fashion rental on identity*

1

## **Introduction**

Offers an overview of the studied phenomenon and establishes its significance within the field of research. Moreover, it outlines the aim and research questions that guides the study.

2

## **Literature Review**

Provides a comprehensive summary of the current body of literature pertaining to identity construction and luxury fashion rental. This section further provides our theoretical lenses of traditional concepts in relation to our research phenomenon.

3

## **Methodology**

Expounds upon the methodological framework employed in data collection, elucidating the research- philosophy, approach, and design of focus groups. The section concludes by specifying the study's limitations and the ethical considerations regarded.

4

## **Analysis**

Unveils and investigates the empirical findings gathered from the focus groups, engaging in an in-depth analysis. Furthermore, expounds upon the pivotal findings in relation to the theoretical lenses and research questions.

5

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

Provides a concise overview of the principal findings derived from the study and conclusive insights aligned with the study's aim. Moreover, states the theoretical- and practical implications arising from the research. Lastly, outlining potential studies for future investigations.

Figure 2. *Outline of Thesis*

## 2. Literature Review

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*This chapter provides the theoretical groundwork necessary to grasp our research phenomenon and answer our research questions. The literature review provides a nuanced presentation of previous research conducted within the particular field of luxury fashion rental and identity construction. Further we discuss the relevance of three widely studied and appreciated sociological concepts within CCT: Belk, Goffman and Bourdieu, which will be used to analyse and discuss the empirical findings.*

### 2.1 Luxury Fashion & Interpersonal Motives Behind Purchases

Historically seen, luxury consumption has played a significant yet complex role in society serving as symbols for an individual's wealth, power and status (Simmel, 1950; Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1899; Entwistle, 2015). Despite the rather olden perspective on luxury ownership, many researchers continue to hold the view that luxury is primarily used to convey social rank and status while dissociate from other social groups and consumers (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; Gao, Winterich & Zhang, 2016; Kim, Park, Dubois, 2018). The authors Vigneron and Johnson (1999) concur with the aforementioned view on luxury goods as they argue the social value of luxury fashion remains pertinent for individuals' aspire to own. The primary motivators behind luxury purchases thereby lies within the desire for social status and the perception of luxury items as symbols of wealth and status, even in contemporary society (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Zhan & He, 2012). While the vast majority of researchers emphasise this prevailing view of luxury consumption, Wang (2022) and Kampferer (2015) highlights that the exclusivity of the luxury market and the elitist view of luxury goods is decreasing as the access is becoming more wide-spread in today's society.

Similarly discussed by multiple authors within this field, luxury consumption has predominantly been determined by factors such as availability and cost, resulting in its accessibility being restricted to a relatively narrow segment of individuals (Bourdieu, 2018; Simmel, 1950; Bilge, 2005; Husic & Cicic, 2009; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Truong, 2010). Other widely discussed interpersonal motivators for luxury purchases follows; the hedonism of luxury purchases, the longing to possess items that are rare and exclusive, the

desire for high-quality products and the perception of high value for the price paid (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008; Phau, Prendergast & Chuen, 2001). It is further emphasised that the desire for creating a sense of uniqueness and individuality when engaging in luxury purchases provides a sentiment of independence and challenge of the status quo (Godey, Manthiou, Pederzoli, Rokka, Aiello, Donvito & Singh, 2016; Griskevicius, Goldstein, Mortensen, Cialdini, & Kenrick, 2006). While the main motivation of luxury purchases has long been rooted in emotional attachment and psychological benefits associated with owning luxury in a way of signalling status and wealth, a strengthened confidence follows, which influences the motivation for purchase (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich & Iacobucci, 2010; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). As such, luxury items within one's possessions acts as extension of self, carrying emotional value encompassing elements such as enhanced self-esteem and the experience of hedonic feelings (Wu, Chen & Nguyen, 2015; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999; Wang, 2022; Belk, 1988). In summary, the various factors interact in complex ways as motivators for individuals when facing the cognitive decision-making process of purchasing luxury fashion. Comprehending these factors and the way they relate to the human psyche is essential for luxury fashion brands and marketers to more precisely target their audience (Mishra et al., 2020).

## 2.2 New Consumption Practices

In recent times, there has been a noticeable cultural shift towards sustainable practices as an increasing number of individuals view it as a moral and ethical obligation (Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022; Mukendi & Henninger, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020). Since fashion is deemed to be one of the most polluting industries in today's society, accounting for 5-8% of the emissions in 2022, increasing attention has been directed towards the industry's urgent need for change (Stand.earth, 2022). The long prevailing consumer culture of choosing excessive consumption ahead of durability and sustainability is emphasised to be one of the factors which has fueled the unsustainable and descending spiral of the climate (Lang & Armstrong, 2018a; Mishra et al., 2020; Jacometti, 2019). Following the increased public discussion on climate change and the crucial demand for alternative practices, consumers are becoming more conscious about their unsustainable behaviour and its negative implications on the environment (Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022; Mishra et al., 2020). The growing sense of responsibility has in turn called for public support to engage in sustainable practices such as

changed consumption patterns (Lawson, Gleim, Perren & Hwang, 2016). To address consumers' desire to alter their unsustainable relation to fashion and foster an alternative approach, companies have begun adapting their businesses by prioritising sustainability (Mukendi & Henninger, 2020).

### 2.2.1 Collaborative Consumption

In order to stay at the fore-front of today's sustainable consumption trends, Mukendi and Henninger (2020) acknowledge the importance of firms delivering disruptive technologies and innovative ideas. A counteracting business adaptation responding to society's urge for sustainable options is services promoting different forms of collaborative consumption practices (Mukendi & Henninger, 2020). In relation to fashion, collaborative consumption refers to sharing and renting of already produced items in return of payment or other forms of compensation, which thus enables increased usage of clothes and promotes counteraction of producing new ones (Lang & Armstrong, 2018a; Lang & Armstrong, 2018b; Belk, 2014). A similarity between these services is the reduced focus on private ownership (Belk, 2014). The act of non-ownership has enabled access-based consumption to introduce new markets such as rental services to blossom for casual-wear greater than before. Such rental services have recently entered the market where individuals can access material goods without requiring ownership, thus enabling more sustainable consumption for a lower cost (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022). The collaborative practice of sharing goods has further been established and facilitated by the internet, as it offers a large-scale interest by individuals and the rise of new peer-to-peer sharing/rental models (Belk, 2014).

### 2.2.2 Drivers and Barriers Towards Rental Practices

The growing trend of renting clothes has transformed into an interesting research field as several researchers have drawn attention towards understanding consumers' feelings and attitudes towards altering ownership with temporary access. Mukendi and Henninger (2020) explores barriers and drivers to engaging in fashion rental as a consumption practice and ascertain that consumers tend to participate in this form of consumption due to the perceived benefits such as sustainability aspects, the ability of accessing goods at a lower price, in addition to the possibility of exploring different styles without longer commitment. In similar

fashion, Becker-Leifhold and Iran (2018) explores drivers and barriers to collaborative fashion consumption and concludes that engaging in sustainable and ethical consumption is a key driver to why consumers engage in this form of practice. In addition, the possibility of finding rare clothing that is normally exclusively accessible and the economic benefits of accessing clothes for a reduced price are also recognised (Becker-Leifhold & Iran, 2018). In terms of barriers, Mukendi and Henninger (2020) identify multiple factors challenging consumers' willingness to engage in rental clothing practices. The acknowledged barriers are consumers questioning the trust towards the individual or company renting, hygiene factors of the products, as well as scepticism towards the required logistics of engaging in rental practices due to the need for increased planning (Mukendi & Henninger, 2020). Becker-Leifhold and Iran (2018) emphasises similar barriers when exploring the existing literature, yet also discover the lack of ownership to be one important barrier due to the reduced control and decreased sense of status following the non-ownership. The notion of losing control over non-exclusively owned items is widely discussed and stressed by Belk (1988; 2007; 2014).

## 2.3 Rental versus Ownership

The concept of ownership has been debated since the age of Aristotles and Plato (Floyd, 2016), formally rooted in the need for property and the latter arguments for the opposite is present, intending it should be avoided. Since the dawn of humanity, ownership and material possessions have played a central role in consumer society and are referred to as the normative ideal among consumption practices (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Belk (1988) supports this statement by arguing that developed societies have fueled individuals' desire to own material goods, making the concept of ownership crucial in consumer behaviour. In Belk's (1988) work, it is further emphasised that control and power are key aspects important for individuals' incorporation of possessions to the sense of self. This implies a greater sense of control and power calls for more substantial identification with a possession, which thus results in a more significant position in the individual's extended self (Belk, 1988). While Belk (2014) has prominently discussed the value of ownership in relation to identity, he has adapted his view on possessions due to the changing consumption patterns of today's consumers. While originally stating that "You are what you own", Belk (2014, p. 1599) has

moved towards understanding the concept of sharing, thus, the decreased focus on sole ownership in regards to possessions.

The concept of sharing has evolved from being an act performed within a family context, where joint ownership of possessions are naturally occurring, expanding to an act taking place outside the family circle with others in society (Belk, 2010). Belk (2010) further ascertains that the willingness to share possessions are directed by the individual relationship and sense of attachment to the object, suggesting that a higher level of attachment challenges the likelihood of sharing. In this regard, a vast majority of past studies also highlight the importance of possessions to consumers of luxury goods (Christodoulides et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2015; Wang, 2022; Dubois, 2020). Ownership has long been argued to generate value to individuals in numerous ways, such as defining status, wealth and portraying a desired image of oneself (Belk, 1988; Henry & Caldwell, 2018; Wang, 2022; Dubois, 2020). Due to the aforementioned reasons as to why ownership implies sufficient values, the shift towards adopting access-based forms of consumption makes it rather complex to overcome for some individuals (Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022). However, as an increasing frequency of consumers nourish the shift from traditional forms of ownership by engaging in alternatives to ownership, access-based consumption is introduced (Lawson et al., 2016; Mishra et al., 2020; Loussaïef et al., 2019). Thus, in the present-day context, consumers' preferences are leaning towards social connections and experiences rather than material possessions (Lawson et al., 2016; Belk, 2014).

Other authors have highlighted this shift in consumption habits, as they argue the main motive for consumption now lies within the possibility to access goods while preferring to fund for the experience of temporarily accessing them, making ownership no longer the ultimate expression of consumer desire (Chen, 2009; Marx, 2011; Lawson et al., 2016). Likewise agreed, the access-based consumption practices nowadays acts as an alternative mode of acquisition and consumption, and are now promptly emerging beside ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). As a consequence of this shift where a growing number of consumers engage in alternatives to ownership, allowing for individuals to access desired experiences, access-based consumption has expanded rapidly (Zhuo, 2015). By implementing these new consumption habits while moving away from traditional practices, forward-looking firms are seeking new opportunities to meet the demands of the consumers' sustainable urges (Zhuo, 2015; Belk, 2014). Lawson et al. (2016) agree with the above-mentioned authors'

allegations and argue that in order to justify the needs of the consumers, one needs to comprehend the motivations to participate in access-based consumption. Moeller and Wittkowski (2010) further consider the relevance and rapid surge in the demand for services that provide non-ownership options for consumption, particularly for everyday consumer goods.

## 2.4 Contrasting Views on Identity

While the earlier sections within the literature review have focused on the shift from traditional forms of consumption to collaborative- and access-based consumption, the following segments will connect the phenomenon to its effects on identity construction among consumers.

Seen from a historical perspective, there has been a great shift in the way consumption and identity is viewed. Modernist researchers originate from the standpoint that identity is stable and inherent, as opposed to something constructable (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1995; Easthope, 2006). In coherence with this view, the focal point and rationales for consumption is merely functional, addressing the individual's rational needs. This modernist outlook on consumption and identity has been criticised for dismissing the cultural implications and individuals' symbolic driving forces of consumption, thus having a deficient view of the human being and its desires (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Angus, 1989). Addressing the criticised flaws of this perspective, the postmodernist view opposes the notion of identity being something fixed, arguing for the individual's agency of constructing their own identity with means from the marketplace (Cova, 1997). This perspective on identity is widely discussed within CCT, which highlights identity as an intentional and dynamic process where the consumer turns to the marketplace to access means supporting their envisioned identity (Jensen Schau, 2018). This notion is supported by several researchers who state that identity projects are highly driven by consumers' specific goals (Bauman, 2007; Mick & Buhl 1992; Schau & Gilly 2003). As such, the CCT-perspective emphasises the individual's imagination to be at the centre of identity formation, whereas symbols and objects are employed to convey a certain meaning about oneself (Jensen Schau, 2018; Goffman, 1959). Consequently, consumers are viewed as constant identity seekers and makers (Hill 1991; Hill & Stamey 1990; Holt 2002; Levy 1981). This fluid perspective on identity allows for individuals to



create multiple identities for different occasions, which is supported by the social meaning of the products consumed (Bauman, 2007; Çağlar & Karababa, 2016; Jensen Schau, 2018; Belk, 2013). Accordingly, Jensen Schau (2018) proposes that consumers use different symbols, objects and practices aligning with the various identity projects that are being performed, as a way of ensuring that one's identity fits to the particular social context.

The process of identity being something fluid rather than fixed can be explained as liquid transformation which refers to the idea that one's identity changes over time depending on access to resources such as clothes (Bardhi et al., 2012), playing a significant role in facilitating this transformation (Bauman, 2007). Bauman (2007, p. 7) describes modernity as “a shift moving from a solid- to a liquid phase”, where social structures and forms that once restricted individual choices and behaviours can no longer remain unalterable. In other words, individual behaviours, achievements, goods and assets are no longer fixed and similarly, self-presentation thus transitions to a more fluid, flexible and transient process (Bauman, 2007). From this perspective, identity construction is a perpetual process and the meaning of objects are contingent on context, culture and time (Bardhi, et al., 2012; Jensen Schau, 2018). In this manner, objects lack meaning in their essence and thus need to be understood in relation to norms, aesthetics, language and symbolic meanings of where they exist (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In addition to this, Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould (2012) stresses that liquid phenomena lack the ability to hold their shape for long, in this sense, the value of everything, including material things remains dated. As such, material goods become useless as consumers adapt and move across different identity projects, thus, the anchoring purpose possessions once held is no longer present (Bardhi et al., 2012; Bauman, 2007).

#### 2.4.1 Clothing and its Relation to Identity Project

In relation to clothing, approaching identity as an ever-lasting construction process allows fashion pieces to be employed as expressive means to convey a certain impression of one's identity (Entwistle, 2015). Entwistle (2015) emphasises that in modern society, individuals intersect with numerous groups of unknown people on a daily basis, which puts pressure on the individual to make an instant favourable impression. The author stresses that when strangers meet, clothing automatically directs the initial impression of someone, in absence of other means and facilitates the process of self-presentation by signalling factors such as social class, status, mood and morality (Entwistle, 2015). In this manner, Entwistle (2015) claims

that clothing, styles and one's appearance remain reliable means of identity. As such, in addition to being a resource for identity construction, clothing also holds a critical role in terms of supporting individuals' desire to define and position oneself in relation to others (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Joubert & Stern, 2005; Belk, 2014, Goffman, 1959, Bourdieu, 2018). Material possessions can thus be seen as an important extension of the self as it helps to protect, transform and display a certain status or perpetuating an affluent lifestyle (Belk, 1988; Belk, 2014; Arnould & Thompson, 2018; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2017). In this sense, exclusively owned luxury apparel are commonly used to perform self-transformation (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2017). This notion is further supported by well-known theorists like Bourdieu (2018) who ascertain the symbolism and close linkage between clothing and social class. On the other hand, Arsel and Bean (2018) highlights that the historical view of taste being a marker for social classes is challenged due to digitalisation and globalisation.

Besides disclosing social class and status as parts of identity, consumption practices are highly symbolic and indicate values, beliefs and interests of the consumer (Wattanasuwan, 2005). As such, clothing is both a representation of individual interests and aspirations, as well as a carrier for structural norms and conventions, which further enables the individual to signal communality with a certain group of people. Simultaneously as consumption enables the individual to symbolically express connection with one group of people, it also enables differentiation towards another (Bourdieu, 1984; Entwistle, 2015; Jenkins, 2014). Thus, consumption and fashion carries important social and symbolic connotations, facilitating society to categorise and understand other individuals based on their appearance and consumption behaviour (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Arsel & Bean, 2018; Bourdieu, 1984).

Building on Belk's (1988) concept of the extended self, identity construction has long been influenced by the value of luxury items. Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1988, p. 141) means that "through an understanding of the dynamics of the process of identity construction, that opportunities can be identified for brands to play an important role in the symbolic projection of the self", making brands and material possessions to hold an integrated role in individuals' identity construction. Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy and Pervan (2018) and Jensen Schau (2018) describe identity as something we constantly create, partly through consumption. Thus, individuals manage themselves according to their imagined possibilities of the self (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018; Jensen Schau, 2018). Similarly, Markus and Nurius (1986) states that individuals are free to construct any version of themselves, previously entitled the

liquid transformation; following a variety of possible ideal selves, thus done by combinations of brands. Due to the symbolic meaning luxury brands carry, one is allowed to use the symbolic meanings to construct, maintain and express different identities (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018; Arsel & Bean, 2018). By offering a range of exclusive products and styles, luxury brands cater to consumers' self-expression, through different tastes and preferences, allowing their consumers to construct and express their individuality (Kuper, 1973; Perez, Castaño & Quintanilla, 2010; Amaral & Loken, 2016; Pandelaere & Shrum, 2020). In regards to luxury brands, the symbolic meaning plays a huge role in adapting a certain identity, thus, consumers buy into adopting the brand as being symbolic of themselves (Williams & Bendelow, 1998; Östberg, Bengtsson & Hartmann, 2018). The symbolic meaning shared between consumers can in turn generate a collective identity among individuals by creating a brand image that is exclusive and rare, thus, often by distinctive logos or designs (Östberg, Bengtsson & Hartmann, 2018). By enabling consumers to construct a social identity that is associated with a particular lifestyle or social group, luxury brands allow individuals to identify with their values, beliefs and aspirations associated with the brand, and in turn use it as means to communicate their social identity to others (Cătălin & Andreea, 2014; Jenkins, 2014). Put simply, individuals in contemporary society consume to produce their identities (Brewer, 1998).

#### 2.4.2 The Effects of Temporary Access on Identity Construction

As earlier noted, the scope of literature examining how temporary access to clothing affects identity construction is rather scarce, especially in regards to luxury fashion. However, we have come across two different studies, one written by Sörum and Gianneschi (2022) which focuses on how access-based apparel intersects with consumers' identity construction, and a study conducted by Loussaïef et al. (2019) which concentrates on understanding how access-based consumption of luxury fashion intersects with self-identity.

While Sörum and Gianneschi's (2022) study is not limited to the luxury segment, it contributes with insight to how the lack of ownership of clothing on a general note affects identity construction. Sörum and Gianneschi's (2022) findings suggest that the absence of ownership does not remove consumers' ability to use the clothing as means for identity expression and construction. On the contrary, the study concludes that the benefits of getting

hold of clothes for a lower price allows consumers to experiment more, which adds value to their identity construction. In addition, renting clothes as opposed to consuming new ones was shown to support consumers' desires of being sustainable individuals, which was identified as valuable for the identity formation (Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022). However, Sörum and Gianneschi (2022) also identified obstacles in regards to how consumers experienced their ability of forming an identity with rented objects. What they ascertained was that the social norm of what consumption traditionally looks like, referring to the expected close linkage between an individual and its clothes, impose barriers to renting fashion. Moreover, they also acknowledged that consumers experienced difficulties in incorporating pieces that they lacked ownership of in their day-to-day life and that it affected their sense of attachment in a negative way (Sörum & Gianneschi, 2022).

On the other hand, Loussaïef et al. (2019), focuses merely on identity construction in relation to three access-based consumption practices; borrowing, sharing and shared purchases. Their findings highlight the significance of the identification and ownership process involved in access-based consumption of the aforementioned practices. However, the findings retrieved from the research are mostly illustrative for sharing and borrowing practices within the family context since only seven participants had experience with access-based consumption, with only two being under the age of 28. Thus, the study reveals the ability to temporarily identify with non-exclusively owned luxury items to a certain extent, proving a fluid transformation of self-identity occurring in the specific practices of borrowing and sharing, and access to a partial degree. Furthermore, fluid transformation of shared purchases was not identified nor present. As such, their findings emphasises the capability to temporarily identify with non-exclusively owned items, which contradicts the findings of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2018) stressing that rental products, more specifically cars, lack symbolism and thus personal attachment to accurately identify with. Loussaïef et al. (2019) concludes the opposite, stating that non-exclusively owned items that fall within access-based consumption carries social symbolism and an individual image, thus becoming a useful tool in conducting a self-identity.

## 2.5 Theoretical Lenses

In this section, the theoretical lenses are presented and discussed in depth to accurately distinguish between theories and previous findings of various research. The purpose of assigning the three theories of Belk, Goffman and Bourdieu a separate segment is dependent on the intended focus to delve into the topic and mainly applying these theories in greater detail during the analysis accompanied by supporting research from previous studies. Our study is further positioned within the realm of CCT, thus an overview of the field will be presented before presenting a comprehensive elucidation of the theories.

### 2.5.1 Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory is an interdisciplinary field of study connecting literature focusing on consumer behaviour, more specifically how consumers engage with the marketplace to acquire products, symbols and practices to shape their identities. Furthermore, the CCT-stream sheds light on the cultural and social implications affecting consumer culture. Thus, the theory acknowledges that objects are contextually bound and that symbolic meanings vary across time and place (Arnould & Thompson, 2018). While CCT is a broad field encompassing influences from numerous disciplines, Arnould and Thompson (2018, p. 14) has divided the theory into four main categories: “(1) Consumer Identity Projects; (2) Marketplace Cultures; (3) The Socio-historic Patterning of Consumption; and (4) Mass-Mediated Marketplace Ideologies and Consumers’ Interpretive Strategies”. Since this study concentrates on understanding identity construction in relation to luxury fashion rental, the first category concerning consumer identity projects will guide our gaze in the manner of understanding consumers' identity construction and self-presentations.

### 2.5.2 Belk’s Concept of the Extended Self

To summarise what has been stated so far about the author and his work, Belk’s concept of the extended self has been refined according to the shift from an ownership-based- to an access-based consumption society, thus calling for in-depth understanding. Belk’s (1988) principal concept focuses on possessions playing a significant role in shaping and expressing one’s identity. In this manner, Belk (1988) stresses that individuals’ incorporate their possessions into their sense of self for identification purposes, in addition to communicating

information about their characteristics, including values, interests and social identities. In this manner, individuals' of certain possessions can connect, whereas accessing new experiences and perspectives are introduced (Belk, 2014). Seen from this perspective, Belk (1988) argues that possessions serves as an extension of the self, translating to his famous words "you are what you own" (Belk, 2014, p. 1599). Thus, sole possessions actively reflect and influence how individuals perceive themselves and others (Belk, 1988). When talking about possessions, Belk (1988) is not merely focusing on material possessions which can be purchased, such as clothes and cars. On the contrary, Belk (1988) acknowledges several other factors which can be seen as possessions, such as body parts, people and places, to name a few. Moreover, Belk (1988) draws connections to broader studies on self-concept, whereas factors such as abstract ideas, personal attributes and physical environments are seen to be extending one's self-identity (Prelinger, 1959). What Belk's (1988) concept suggests is that individuals incorporate possessions to their identity and experience a significant emotional connection towards these. As such, it is also emphasised that individuals experience a great loss when losing certain possessions, as it equals to losing a part of one's identity (Belk 1988).

As the shift in society has resulted in an intense popularity within access-based consumption practices such as rentals and borrowing, Belk's (1988) original concept of possessions being equivalent to one's identity has thus been outdated. Accordingly, Belk's (2014) definition of possessions and identity has been refined and updated to better fit the prevailing consumer culture. Given this, his concept has moved towards a more accepting view on non-exclusively owned items as means of identity, thus allowing for the actual consumption practice to perceive and construct a sense of self (Belk, 2014). His traditional notions of identity being tied to ownership and material accumulation is challenged as he stresses the derived experience of access-based consumption to play an important role in identity construction today (Belk, 2014). In this sense, Belk (2014) suggests that this new form of consumption allows individuals to construct their identities or various aspects of their identities through experiences, flexibility and access to items without the burden of having to commit to them financially. Thus, letting go of his former wisdom, Belk now refers to identity and possessions as "you are what you share", which proves the entrance of a post-ownership society (Belk, 2013, p. 1599). Within his refined definition of identity construction in postmodern society, he discusses two forms of sharing practices namely: "sharing in" and "sharing out". "Sharing in" refers to the sharing practice within a close social circle such as

the family, where possessions are shared among individuals whom one has a pre-existing relationship with (Belk, 2014). Consequently, higher levels of trust, following familiarity and reciprocity is present within the close “sharing in” network, enabling facilitated identity construction. An example of “sharing in” includes sharing a luxury garment with one’s mother. On the contrary, “sharing out” involves the sharing process with strangers, more specifically people outside of your network, where no pre-existing relationship is found (Belk, 2014). The sharing practice among these individuals often occurs within digital sharing platforms or rental services, for example ZipCar (Belk, 2014). Although Belk does not necessarily explicitly state whether identity construction is more challenging in “sharing out” compared to the “sharing in” joint practices, he lightly touches upon that there are potential challenges in projecting one’s desired identity when sharing items with strangers (Belk, 2014). In line with these sharing practices, Loussaïef et al. (2019) acknowledges that there is a lack of studies investigating how “sharing out” affects identity construction, alluding to Belk’s (2013) work. Since rental means temporarily accessing clothes which strangers might have worn beforehand, we assert that rental can be seen as another way of “sharing out”.

### 2.5.3 Goffman’s Impression Management

The sociologist Erving Goffman also touches upon identity construction in relation to the social life. He means that individuals engage in a continuous process of presenting themselves to others through their behaviour, appearance and interactions (Goffman, 1959). This concept of his is also known as Impression Management, which falls within his dramaturgical theory. The central principle of the concept of Impression Management, is the notion of self-presentation being the fundamental aspect of social life where individuals actively work to manage the impressions they leave on others (Goffman, 1959). In turn, this translates to that the self-presentation is the intentional, tangible component of identity. This makes Goffman’s (1959) theory applicable to identity construction in relation to clothing as it remains one of the dominant ways in which individuals present themselves to others and ensures certain impressions towards them.

Goffman (1959) asserts three ways in which attire relates to identity construction, first, clothing can be used to signal one’s identity to others in ways in which language is not

needed, thus providing information regarding gender, occupation, social class or cultural background. For instance, someone who wears traditional cultural attire could conceivably be perceived as a member of a certain culture. The second way in which Goffman (1959) argues clothing intersects with identity is that apparel plays a major part in self-expression as our clothing choices can be used to convey our individuality and personal style. Thus, individuals' attire often reflects personality, values and personal interests (Jensen Schau, 2018). An example of this would be if an individual intentionally wears a band t-shirt in a way of portraying their interest and personality through material possessions (Jensen Schau, 2018). Lastly, in relation to Impression Management by Goffman (1959), clothing can act as means to manage impressions by choosing certain clothing that creates a desired image or impression. In turn, clothing can give off impressions of an individual being fashionable, professional or casual. Thus, individuals engage in social actions that require them to consume signs, symbols, brands and practices to present themselves to others, in this way they communicate the desired impressions to others (Goffman, 1959; Williams & Bendelow, 1998; Jensen Schau, 2018). Consequently, Goffman asserts that consumption remains closely linked to self-presentation as the art of the practice lies in the manipulation of meaningful signs and experiences (Goffman, 1959; Jensen Schau, 2018). In other words, self-presentation requires a balance between shaping external impressions and expressing internal identity (Goffman, 1959).

Given today's context of a digitalised society, this balance between external impressions and expressing internal identity is challenged (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003; Hollenabaugh, 2021; Vogel & Rose, 2016). Social media is dominating new ways in which individuals present themselves and form multiple identities, whereas impressions take place 24 hours a day beyond one's contextual position which strongly contradicts face-to-face presentations (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003; Jensen Schau, 2018). Thus, Goffman's Impression Management is not comprehensively adapted to the ways in which self-presentation can occur today (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003). While social media has established significant importance in daily life, individuals are placing greater emphasis on their strategic self-disclosure acts within self-presentation and Impression Management on digital platforms (Yang & Liu, 2022; Zhoa, 2005). Following the conscious and strategic self-disclosure acts, individuals can today facilitate the ability to control how they present themselves to their audience, thus social media remains a powerful tool in creating multiple desired identities (Zhoa, 2005; Zani, Norman & Ghani, 2022).



#### 2.5.4 Bourdieu's Concept of Taste and Social Distinction

Furthermore, another eminent sociologist within the field of CCT is Pierre Bourdieu whose theory concentrates on taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Henry & Caldwell, 2018). The theory on Social Distinction, brings attention to the positioning of different social classes and the three dimensions of capital, namely economic-, social- and cultural capital, which determines which social class one belongs to (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 2018). Firstly, the economical capital refers to individuals' financial assets, which directs consumption patterns in terms of what one is financially able to consume (Bourdieu, 2005; Bourdieu, 2018; Jenkins, 2014). Secondly, Bourdieu's concept of social capital accounts for possibilities that arise due to access to certain social networks and connections. What Bourdieu suggests is that access to powerful networks often results in financial opportunities, thus, there is a close interplay between these two forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2005; Henry & Caldwell, 2018). Lastly, the third form of capital, cultural capital, refers to an individuals' acquired expertise and knowledge, which is formed during one's early socialisation process and upbringing (Jenkins, 2014). For this form of capital, there are numerous institutions and social contexts which may play an important role, such as school, family and friends.

The cultural capital is conveyed through different forms of knowledge, such as everyday behaviour and manners, as well as particular skills like being able to play a violin, speak different languages, or knowing prominent philosophers, which all signal high cultural understanding (Bourdieu, 2018). Moreover, the cultural capital is displayed through personal taste of things such as clothing, interior or art (Jenkins, 2014; Bourdieu, 1984). As such, cultural capital can both be displayed through certain consumption practices, which not seldom requires a high level of economic capital, as well as through practices absent from economic restraints, such as possessing skills in chemistry or maths (Henry & Caldwell, 2018; Bourdieu, 2005). It is yet of value to highlight that objects are not signalling high cultural capital nor social distinction in its essence, rather these factors are conveyed in the manner of how an object, practice or symbol is being used (Arsel & Bean, 2018; Holt, 1998). Bourdieu further claims that different forms of capital are convertible, which means that attaining a certain form of capital can broaden the opportunity of gaining another form of capital (Henry & Caldwell, 2018; Jenkins, 2014). To exemplify, having a high economic capital can enable a person to apply for a prestigious ballet academy, which thus strengthens

the opportunity of meeting prominent ballet dancers and teachers, and as such, it is possible to gain social capital in terms of increasing the social network.

In addition to the above-mentioned forms of capitals, Bourdieu introduces his well-known concept habitus. Bourdieu suggests that there is a close relationship between individuals' routinized habits and socialisation processes, referring to that behavioural patterns are formed by social structures which have been internalised (Henry & Caldwell, 2018). It is further emphasised that the internalised dispositions lead to certain behaviours and thoughts, which is referred to as habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 2018). Bourdieu (1977) stresses that individuals tend to act in a given way or direction based on their social belonging, which is explained through the distinguished pressures and opportunities of different social classes. In line with this notion, Bourdieu moreover suggests that individual preferences are contingent on social class, which in turn enables others to socially differentiate and categorise people based on what they consume and how they behave (Henry & Caldwell, 2018).

#### 2.5.4.1 Belk, Goffman and Bourdieu's Significance to the Study

While Belk's (1988; 2014) concept of the extended self is a given concept for this study's focus of research due to the evident connection between possessions and identity construction in his work, we have chosen to apply Goffman and Bourdieu's concepts as a way of understanding self-presentations and identity projects further. While Goffman's (1959) approach to identity assert that individuals have agency to perform an act that determines how others perceive their identity through clothing, Bourdieu's take on identity is different in terms of emphasising the individual's inability of escaping their social class, indicating that your social class is constantly revealed through your taste and the choices you make (Henry & Caldwell, 2018; Jenkins, 2014). Including Bourdieu's concept of habitus and capitals is thus a suitable complement to Goffman's concept of Impression Management as it enables us to explore how certain restraints and experiences direct attitudes towards the role of rental versus ownership of luxury goods in identity projects (Jenkins, 2014).

## 2.6 Chapter Summary

Chapter two of this paper highlights the major fields within luxury fashion rental and identity construction. This segment provides fundamental theoretical understanding to grasp the area of research presented in this study. Firstmost, the interpersonal motives as to why individuals purchase luxury clothing is discussed whereas the most prominent motives lay within the emotional-, cultural- and historical value. Secondly, new consumption practices are widely discussed, ranging from consumers' increased need of sustainable consumption options, firms adapting disruptive technologies to stay in the forefront of the trend, to how these actions all together have formed a collaborative consumption society. In the realm of fashion, this includes sharing and renting pre-worn items, while promoting the reuse and reduction of new production. Thirdly, ownership versus non-ownership is reviewed, discussing the shift of desire within consumers today to access goods and temporarily experience them rather than owning them. Fourthly, clothing and its relation to identity is covered, touching upon the modern view on clothing as symbolic means to identity construction. Lastly, the theoretical lenses which will be adapted thoroughly in our analysis is presented, followed by an explanation of their significance to the study.

## 3. Methodology

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*This section covers a detailed description of the research design including the research approach, data collection methods consisting of three focus groups and data analysis. Credibility, Transferability and Trustworthiness will be discussed to assess the academic quality of our paper, followed by ethical considerations. A table of respondents is present here. This section further holds definitions of frequently used terms that will shape the study and its empirical findings.*

### 3.1 Research Approach

#### 3.1.2 Philosophical Assumptions

To foster reflexive thinking throughout the process of conducting a study, it is crucial for the researcher to consider and be aware of the philosophical assumptions held, since these assumptions direct the gaze of the researcher and have implications for which methodological choices that are deemed suitable (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). The philosophical position is both referring to the researcher's assumptions about reality, where questions in regards to if there being one single or multiple realities are encountered, in addition to assumptions concerning how knowledge is best acquired. The first dimension, focusing on the researcher's view on reality, is defined as ontology (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The latter focus on knowledge refers to the researcher's epistemological stance and plays a major role in deciding which method is fitting for the chosen phenomenon of exploration (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Accordingly, by being reflexive and aware of philosophical beliefs, the researcher has the possibility of evaluating and clarifying the chosen research design in relation to the underlying philosophy, ensuring complete coherence (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Following these arguments, the ontological and epistemological assumptions held by us as researchers will be presented and discussed in the forthcoming chapters.

### 3.1.3 Ontological Position

For this research, we take on a relativist ontological position, assuming that multiple truths coexist and that truths are contingent on individual experiences and lifeworlds (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This ontological position further recognizes and declares that people experience the world differently and that factors such as social class, country and culture have major implications on how realities are viewed (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). In this manner, truths can only be understood by grasping numerous individuals' lived experiences. Originating from this position, we assume that consumers experience the world differently, which influences their way of thinking about rental fashion and its potential to be a part of their identity. This philosophical stance requires us to explore and interpret different individuals' experiences, a requirement addressed by running three focus groups allowing us to take part in numerous worldviews (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Using this method to gather information further enables us to mix respondents, ensuring that various ages and cultural backgrounds are represented, which thus contribute to our aim of disclosing various perspectives to our chosen phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, Kvale & Brinkman, 2014).

### 3.1.4 Epistemological Position

As noted, the epistemological position of a study refers to the researchers' philosophical assumption about knowledge, covering essential questions in regards to what knowledge is and in what manner it is best obtained (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In this research we take on a social constructionist perspective, a position which opposes the view of the world being external, instead suggesting that the world is a social construction where meanings are shaped and elaborated in interaction between people (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Thus, to acquire knowledge from this standpoint, it is crucial to understand experiences, thoughts and the way in which meanings are constructed and maintained (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). To fully grasp the experiences and meanings of the respondents enlisted for a study, Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) suggest that a smaller sample of individuals generates more fruitful insights since the researchers are enabled to go more in-depth and uncover more nuanced elements of an interaction. Aligning with our aim of understanding what role rental rather than ownership of luxury goods plays in identity construction, we need to capture and make sense of individual perceptions to understand the experiences and meanings individuals place on ownership

versus non ownership. We assume that meanings are elaborated and shaped between individuals on a daily basis, thus, using focus groups as a method for gathering insights allows us to take part in a discussion where our chosen area of subject is discussed in-depth by a smaller number of respondents. As such, the social constructionist epistemological position has guided our decision in how to acquire knowledge.

## 3.2 Research Design

### 3.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative methodology is well-suited to studying identity construction in relation to luxury fashion rental as it allows for a rich comprehensive and nuanced perspective of the rather complex and multifaceted nature of this phenomenon (Silverman, 2022). As such, applying a qualitative approach is further considered particularly effective at capturing lived experiences, meanings as well as perspectives of individuals (Ekström & Johansson, 2019), which is essential when examining in which ways luxury rental contributes to the construction of identity. Identity construction in itself is a dynamic process shaped by personal experiences and interpretations which are found in social- and cultural contexts, in an interplay between social actors (Jensen Schau, 2018; Jenkins, 2014). Thus, a qualitative approach assures rich answers in non-numeric form while guaranteeing detailed descriptions and interpretations of identity construction in relation to luxury fashion rental. Moreover, we assert that a quantitative method would limit both insights, exploration and interpretations of the chosen phenomenon, thus restricting a nuanced understanding of the complex cultural- and social contexts in which identity construction occurs (Jensen Schau, 2018; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This claim is based on the fact that quantitative studies merely provides statistical data, thus, the ability of exploring and understanding personal experiences are vastly limited. In contrast to quantitative studies, using a qualitative method, such as focus groups, allows for rich exploration and profound insights of unexpected findings since respondents themselves have the possibility of voicing and explaining thoughts and experiences freely (Silverman, 2022; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

### 3.2.2 Interpretive Research

Positioned within an interpretivist research approach, this study recognises language as a means of accessing insight into the culturally shared and individually constructed realities of consumers, namely: social constructions are based on representations and meanings that are constructed through the individual's use of the discursive practices available within their context (Valtonen & Moisander, 2006; Buzzanelle, 2017). Previous studies on identity construction in relation to clothing have successfully used the interpretive approach when examining possessions of attire in consumer identity works (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Murray, 2002). Using interpretive research provides insights into the meanings and values that individuals attach to rented luxury clothing, which in turn ensures a rich and acute perspective on the complex social and cultural dynamics at play in identity construction in relation to luxury rental clothing.

### 3.2.3 Abductive Approach

While carrying characteristics from both inductive- and deductive reasoning, the abductive approach moves beyond existing theories and pledges plausible explanations of a phenomenon which in turn might contribute to developing, modifying or refining an existing theory (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Gabbay & Woods, 2005). As such, an abductive approach allows for thorough comprehension by concentrating on the discovery of focus within the empirical data. When applying an abductive approach, close examination of the research phenomenon following the gathered data is required, in this manner, the findings may lead to new insights to the chosen phenomenon or even development of theories (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018; Gabbay & Woods, 2005). Gabbay and Woods (2005) further claim that an abductive approach is particularly suitable when analysing a phenomenon that is incomplete or uncertain, as the approach allows for production of new insights to be generated. Since identity construction pertaining to luxury fashion rental is generally poorly studied and thereby understood, we concluded that employing an abductive approach was thus favourable. By collecting data on consumer behaviour and analysing it abductively from the perspective of Belk (1988; 2014), Goffman (1959) and Bourdieu (1984), we can generate new insight as to how consumers construct and present their identities through rental of luxury fashion following the influences of such behaviour. In this manner, the application of theories to a rather novel consumption practice allows for in-depth exploration of the

potential adaptations while generating additional comprehensive theoretical insights to the phenomenon studied (Gabbay & Woods, 2005). Thus, employing an abductive approach is the apparent choice for the aim of the research. By such, we intend to develop plausible explanations to the rather novel and insufficiently studied phenomenon.

### 3.3 Data Collection Method

#### 3.3.1 Focus Groups

As earlier presented, our aspiration was to gain a nuanced understanding of our respondents' experiences and further to allow exploration of how various thoughts and experiences are discussed between individuals. Thus, focus groups were chosen as a suitable method for data collection, whereas three virtual semi-structured focus groups were held, each consisting of six respondents. In practice, running focus groups means moderating group discussions, where the researcher is responsible for providing relevant questions fueling the discussion, as well as ensuring that the conversation is heading in an appropriate direction for the aim of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Using focus groups as a method for data collection is emphasised to be beneficial when aspiring to understand a certain phenomena from various perspectives. The reason behind this lies within the group dynamic, which encourages the respondents to discuss and explain their thoughts and opinions so that other respondents understand their view of the matter. As such, explanations to why one thinks in a certain way is often elaborated upon, providing the researchers with valuable insights to how experiences and feelings are affected by different factors (Carson et al., 2001). Thus, the ongoing comparison of participants within the focus groups regarding their experiences and opinions offer valuable insights into the complex behaviours and motivations behind luxury fashion rental (Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Morgan, 1997) Another strength of focus groups is the method's potential of bringing novel perspectives to the table since respondents have the ability of influencing the direction of the conversation (Liamputtong, 2011). The method is accordingly in ideal alignment with the social constructionist approach in terms of allowing us as researchers to take part in an ongoing interaction, which according to the epistemological position is the best approach to accessing knowledge about a phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).



Since the body of literature in regards to rental fashion and identity construction is rather scarce and deficient, we made the decision that semi-structured focus groups were best suited. The semi-structured approach refers to the moderate level of structure and navigation characterising the interaction (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). During the focus groups, we guided the conversation with questions from our interview guide, which helped us ensure relevance of the topics discussed, while we also encouraged the respondents to raise their own ideas to not limit the discussion to our preconceived biases of the subject. The questions in our interview guide were based on the understanding gained while carrying out the literature review, a process supported by Carson et al. (2001) who asserts the importance of establishing a broad understanding of the field before formulating relevant questions. Another recommendation which we have taken into account is Alvehus (2019) proposal to initiate the discussion with broad and simple questions, which aids fostering an interactive climate where tensions and nervousness are minimised. Hence, “*Describe your relationship with fashion, what does it mean to you?*” and “*What is your view on luxury fashion?*” (see [heading Appendix](#)) were questions that initiated our focus group discussions and eased the potential of anxiousness of our respondents.

### 3.3.1.2 Mediated Focus Groups

Since renting luxury fashion is a rather novel consumption practice, accessing a worthy amount of participants in the chosen age span was rather demanding. As such, we had to decide whether to include a smaller sample of participants, or open up the possibility of getting in contact with individuals geographically out of reach, thus having virtual focus groups as an alternative to physical ones.

Despite the fact that our epistemological stance allows us to focus on a smaller number of individuals to access their experiences on a deeper level (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015), it is still our priority to ensure that our sampling is large enough to be an accurate representation of the age span in reality. Thus, while carefully considering the two options, we came to the conclusion that virtual focus groups with a worthy amount of respondents were more favourable since it enabled us to conduct a more thorough analysis of numerous individuals. Moreover, by not being geographically bound, it was possible to include individuals residing in different countries, thus, with diverse cultural perspectives, which aligns well with our social constructionist stance (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller &

O’Conner, 1993; Morgan, 1997). More specifically, social constructionists perceive culture and context as vital elements affecting experiences and thoughts, thus gaining several individuals’ perspectives rooted in different cultures is a major strength (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015), making synchronous mediated focus groups beneficial in our situation. Due to the aforementioned reasons of the difficulty of recruiting respondents, all focus groups were conducted using the Google Meet platform as the designated forum for our interviews. The platform was deemed suitable as it facilitated dynamic and collaborative communication between all actors, enabling all parties to engage in the conversation simultaneously (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). In this manner, the possibility of conversing at the same time; in real-time, O’Connor, Madge Shaw and Wellens (2008) stresses that synchronous mediated focus groups resemble face-to-face interviews as it enables immediate back-and-forth communication. In this sense, our virtual focus groups allowed for immediate exchange of ideas, reactions and insights, thus, enabling us to gather rich and in-depth data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

### 3.3.2 Sampling

As noted earlier, Easterby-Smith et al. (2015) stress that social constructionists prefer to use a smaller sample of individuals when gathering information to broaden the understanding of a phenomenon in-depth. Since our aim is to generate a deep analysis in regards to the role of rental versus ownership in identity construction, as opposed to generating statistically representative data, our main focus was accessing individuals matching our sampling criterion rather than getting a large population to participate in our study. The total number of respondents were critically evaluated, where we concluded that 18 respondents were a suitable number for our research, allowing us to take part in multiple perspectives and ideas, while also enabling us to conduct three focus groups with six respondents each. The appropriate number of respondents per focus group has long been debated upon by researchers, whereas recently, the debate has proceeded towards recommending including a smaller sample (Carson et al., 2001). By including a smaller size of respondents in each focus group, more detailed discussions are facilitated where every respondent has the possibility of making their perspective heard. Thus, we minimise the risk of missing out on valuable insights, which could have gone unnoticed in larger groups.

For the sampling, three particular criteria have guided the process of choosing participants, namely gender, age and previous experience of renting luxury fashion. Gender wise, we have decided to focus merely on women, a choice based on a couple of arguments. One vital factor is that women are known to be more prone to consume luxury goods and have a more favourable perception towards luxury, in contrast to men (Loussaïef et al., 2019). Moreover, Loussaïef et al. (2019) recognises that women have a more dominant position in engaging in rental practices of fashion today, while the consumption behaviour is still more rare among men. It is also acknowledged that the view and perceived importance of possessions and the motivations for consuming luxury differ between men and women, as femininity stereotypes indicate that women prioritise their physical appearance according to their seductive desire (Loussaïef et al., 2019). In relation to femininity stereotypes, this translates directly to the increased interest in luxury fashion, due to the values high-end carries to aid individuals enhance their attractiveness, which in turn makes them suitable for the objectives of this study (Gould & Stern, 1989; Singh, 1993; Bian & Forsythe, 2012; Schade et al., 2015). Accordingly, since our aim is to provide an in-depth analysis with nuanced findings, we concluded that by merely focusing on women, we are enabled to provide a richer analysis of the gender which is currently more inclined to engage in luxury fashion rental as well as compare the experiences of our respondents more accurately. Our choice is further strengthened by the fact that previous studies have failed to explore how late adolescent women experience the role of luxury fashion rental to their identity construction (Loussaïef et al., 2019), making it relevant for further exploration.

In regards to the chosen age criteria, the study endeavours attend the areas of insufficiency by exploring how young women of ages between 16 to 28 (born between the years 1994-2007) experience luxury fashion rental in relation to their identity construction. This is done as one key period of identity development takes place within the late adolescence (ages 16-25), whereas individuals carry a great sense of identity and the need to express it to other social actors (Erikson, 1963). As such, our study aims to target women within these ages, but expanding the age span to 28 year olds, which is further an age proven to value perceptions other's form of them (Erikson, 1963). While Loussaïef et al. (2019) sought to explore the experience of late adolescent women between 16 to 25, we decided to expand the age span to 28, due to difficulties in enlisting a worthy amount of participants of the aforementioned age group and having seven participants of ages 25 to 28, with earlier experience of renting luxury fashion, reaching out to us on social media. By broadening the age span to 28, we

were able to reach a total of 18 participants, which was our initial aim, with four participants being older than 25. Our third criteria, previous experience with renting luxury fashion, was further vital for providing accurate information of our chosen phenomenon on how the role of luxury fashion rental intersects with identity construction.

To connect with individuals matching our sampling criterias, we initiated the process by publishing posts on our social media pages, both Facebook and Instagram, where we briefly explained the aim of our project and asked if anyone matching the criterias were interested to participate. From this strategy, 13 individuals contacted us and expressed their willingness to participate. To connect with more individuals, we began searching for pages offering luxury fashion rental and found Gemme Collective and Rentclubparis, both established in Europe and targeting women. Looking at the company’s tagged pictures on Instagram, we proceeded to contact women wearing rented luxury fashion, asking if they were willing to participate in a focus group. When receiving a response, we further ensured that the woman matched our age criteria to be of relevance for the study. From this strategy, we managed to get five women to participate. As such, we have used a purposive sampling strategy, where individuals are targeted and asked to participate based on possessing certain attributes or having experience matching the aim of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

### 3.3.3 Table of Respondents

*Table of the three focus groups including the respondents, their ages, occupation and country of residence.*

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<b>Focus group 1 (age)</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Country of residence</b>
Respondent 1 (25)	Mechanical Engineering master student	Sweden
Respondent 2 (24)	Music & Business Management bachelor student	England
Respondent 3 (26)	Influencer Marketing specialist	Sweden

Respondent 4 (18)	High school student	Sweden
Respondent 5 (24)	Marketing master student & part-time associate specialist	Denmark
Respondent 6 (25)	CEO of clothing company	France
<b>Focus group 2 (age)</b>		
Respondent 7 (24)	Journalist bachelor student	Sweden
Respondent 8 (25)	Engineering Physics master student	Sweden
Respondent 9 (23)	Event Manager	England
Respondent 10 (20)	Language student	Switzerland
Respondent 11 (28)	Marketing master student	Denmark
Respondent 12 (22)	Medical student	Sweden
<b>Focus Group 3 (age)</b>		
Respondent 13 (27)	Sales associate	Sweden
Respondent 14 (16)	Middle school student	Sweden
Respondent 15 (26)	HR specialist	Sweden
Respondent 16 (17)	High school student	Sweden
Respondent 17 (23)	Urban- & regional planning bachelor student	Sweden
Respondent 18 (20)	Finance bachelor student	Denmark

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*Table 1. Focus group participants*

### 3.4 Data Analysis

To analyse the crafted data accurately and thoroughly, recommendations provided by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) have been followed. What they suggest is that analysing data is not a linear process, rather, analytics needs to devote time to carefully go back and forth in the material to understand and make sense of the data, and finally generating suitable themes for the analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). To carry out the analysis in a careful manner, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) highlights sorting, reducing and arguing as three vital steps in the process of data analysis, steps which have thus been accommodated and applied in this research.

Firstly, sorting refers to the process of structuring and categorising the empirical data in order to make sense of the material. An initial step which is carefully emphasised is the significance of spending time with the crafted material to identify recurring patterns of the discussed subject (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). To address this guideline, the transcribed material was processed and read several times individually by us both, where recurring content, expressions and patterns were highlighted. In addition, small notes were taken when having certain reflections in regards to how the content could be interpreted or connected to theory. This part reflects how the statements voiced by the respondents are limited to their self-understanding and where interpretation of us as researchers allows for theoretical connections to be added. Further, this notion is supported by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018, p. 77) who state “The transition from sorting based on the local vocabulary to sorting by means of creating theoretical labels illustrate a creative moment in the analytical process.”, suggesting that the researchers play an important role in interpreting the data in relation to theory. After having spent time with the collected data individually, we began the process of comparing our material and highlighted parts, discussing what was found to be recurring, if there were any contrasting experiences, and further how this could be crafted into valuable themes. At the initial coding phase, multiple broad categories were constructed based on the recurring theme within the empirical data. We identified patterns such as discussions concerning sustainability, creativity and the desire to maintain multiple identities, to name a few. Based on these recurring themes, we created temporary labels and connected these to our two research questions focusing on either identity projects or self-presentation. At this point, the second step recommended by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), which is referred to as reducing, was initiated. This phase is focused on reducing categories or extensive information

to select the most valuable or insightful parts to be presented in the final work (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). At this stage, we reduced a few temporary labels, such as “motives” and “barriers” for renting, as we concluded that these subheadings did not contribute to the study’s aim. As such, excessive information was removed, enabling a more nuanced analysis of certain insightful findings. When the temporary labels were reduced to the ones seen in the table below (*see Table 2. The coding process*), the data connected to each category were once again examined and the most representative and expressive parts of a certain theme was highlighted and included in the final analysis. Finally, after having grasped a comprehensive understanding of the material and our numerous temporary labels, we started to interpret the material from a theoretical perspective and constructed six final headings which are now seen in the analysis.

Lastly, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasise arguing to be an important final step for the analysis. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasise the significance of providing argumentations for each finding and connecting it to theory and previous literature to illustrate the points of your study. Since an abductive approach is adopted in this research, Rennstam and Wästerfors’s (2018) recommendation of arguing is carefully embraced since the objective is to provide reasoning between the empirical data and theory to understand how classical theories fits to the novel consumption practice of renting luxury fashion. Hence, each finding is carefully discussed in relation to theoretical concepts throughout the analysis, addressing Rennstam and Wästerfors’s (2018) guideline of arguing.

Research question	<i>Phase 1</i> : Temporary labels during coding phase.	<i>Phase 2</i> : Finished labels (seen in analysis).
RQ1	Positive experience with renting	The Loss of Ownership of Luxury does not Affect Identity
	Negative experience with renting	
	Environmental sustainability	The Desire to Maintain a Sustainable Consumer Identity
	Economic sustainability	
	Experimenting with identity	Enhanced Possibility of Adapting Multiple Identities Through Attire
	Creativity	
RQ2	Desire to fit certain context or norm	Fluid Transformation of Self-Presentation
	Different ways to present identity	Portraying Multiple Identities on Social Media
	Social media	
	Knowledge of fashion	Conveying Social and Cultural Capital Through Rented Luxury
	Group belonging	
	Importance of having financial assets to perform an identity	

Table 2. The coding process



## 3.5 Definitions of Frequently Used Terms

In order to ensure clarity and increased understanding of our study, definitions of the key terms are provided. Including these definitions are of significance for the reader and helps to avoid ambiguity throughout the reading. Thus, we have provided a solid foundation for our upcoming analysis and the arguments within. The definition of social class is merely brought up due the term and its assigned connotation being used thoroughly within our analysis to investigate our empirical data through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of Social Distinction. By establishing a common understanding for the terms and their usage, we aim to prevent misinterpretation of our material.

### 3.5.1 Definition of Identity Project and Self-Presentation

As 'identity project' and 'self-presentation' are fundamental terms in this study, we find it of high relevance to define the two. While identity is known for being a multifaceted phenomenon as it incorporates four main elements including personality (Jensen Schau, 2018; Jenkins, 2014), self-concept, identity project and self-presentation, whereas we will focus on the latter two. Jensen Schau (2018, p. 19) defines identity project as "the strategic configuration of objects, symbols, scripts, and practices to claim particular identity position", which contrasts the definition of self-presentation explained as "the performance of an identity project within a social context". Goffman's (1959) view on self-presentation, which will also permeate the analysis is rather similar, suggesting that individuals are goal-driven and strategic in their efforts of shaping and influencing impressions, which is conducted by various means such as talking, behaviour and appearance. Furtheron, in this study, we will use 'identity construction' as a synonym to identity project, to ensure variety in the study. Despite the closely linked terms, they carry slightly different connotations, whereas identity project emphasises the proactive nature of individuals actively constructing an identity. Meanwhile, identity construction acts on broader terms that encompasses the actual identity formation process. As such, we use the term 'construction' in a manner of constructing identity based on the objects, symbols, scripts and practices that Jensen Schau (2018) emphasises in identity projects.

To further emphasise, at times during the analysis, we use the term "authentic self-identity". This is due to the respondents occasionally expressing that renting certain pieces contradicts

their perception of their “true” identity. Thus, we use the word “authentic self-identity”, while this definition somewhat contradicts the CCT’s definition of identity.

### 3.5.2 Definition of Luxury

Furtheron, the definition of ‘luxury’ that we propose and follow in this study is merely influenced by a social constructionist perspective. As such, luxury remains unfixed and thus defined as products that are socially constructed as representing a certain level of exclusivity, status or prestige within a certain society or culture (Han et al., 2010; Christodoulides et al., 2021). In other words, luxury goods are not inherently luxurious, but rather, their value and meaning are constructed through social and cultural principles that vary across different contexts and historically, different periods of time (Östberg & Bengtsson, 2011; McNeil & Riello, 2016; Gong, Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). While luxury is unfixed, shaped by social and cultural factors such as norms, values and consumer preferences, sociologist Yves Michaud means in recent studies of contemporary luxury that it remains difficult to generalise the term (McNeil & Riello, 2016). Although researchers today have come to the conclusion to characterise luxury by rarity, high quality, uniqueness, high pricing and lastly exclusivity (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Christodoulides et al., 2021). Wang (2021) further elaborates on this definition of luxury by stressing what distinguishes luxury goods from non-luxury “based on their exquisite design and craftsmanship, sensory appeal, and distinct socio-cultural narratives” (p. 788). Thus, our study follows this definition of luxury as products of sensory appeal, rarity, refined design, high quality, heavy price and exclusivity and can be exemplified by brands such as Prada, Gucci, Vetements, Acne Studios, Ganni etc. Consequently, in this study, we will employ the term ‘high-end’ as a synonym to luxury, thus, to guarantee variety in the study.

### 3.5.3 Social Class

Throughout the analysis, renting luxury fashion has been investigated in relation to social class. This is done merely due to luxury consumption historically being exclusive to the upper class, hence being a cultural practice carrying symbolic meaning, experienced differently based on factors such as background and class affiliation (Bourdieu, 1984). By incorporating Bourdieu’s theory on Social Distinction (2018), it is possible to shed light on

how the changing dynamics and broadened accessibility of luxury fashion affects identity construction and self-presentation of individuals with potentially different backgrounds, experiences and beliefs. For this research, social class has not been used as a sample criteria due to the already demanding process of connecting with women carrying previous rental engagement within the chosen age span. Rather, social class has been interpreted through the analysis based on statements expressed in the focus groups, where the respondents' experiences and thoughts have been interpreted and discussed in relation to how these may be affected by social class and previous experiences of luxury consumption. To exemplify, some respondents expressed that they had more experience with consuming luxury fashion beforehand, while others viewed rental of luxury fashion as a service enabling them to access luxury attire which was previously not within financial reach. Statements of such character illustrate experiences rooted in different social classes, thus, despite not having asked our respondents to explicitly provide information about their social class, we have interpreted their expressions carefully to disclose how certain backgrounds may shape different experiences of renting versus ownership. The decision to not ask the respondents about their social class was due to the sensitive character of the subject.

### 3.6 Credibility, Transferability and Trustworthiness

In order to ensure high quality of a qualitative research it is of major significance to be reflexive about factors such as credibility, transferability and trustworthiness. These factors are of particular relevance in regards to qualitative studies since qualitative data requires interpretation of the researchers, which thus challenges the level of objectivity (Shufutinsky, 2020; Cope, 2014). In qualitative research, ensuring credibility translates to providing research which truthfully reflects the experiences and views held by the respondents. Accordingly, the interpretations and findings should not be characterised by personal biases of the researchers. One way of fulfilling this requirement is to engage the respondents in the process and ensure that the interpretation of data is in alignment with the respondents' views (Cope, 2014). This suggestion was taken into account as we shared our analysis with the respondents, questioning if something was misinterpreted or if their experiences were accurately presented. Transferability on the other hand refers to the fact that the research should be transferable and applicable to other groups of people and settings (Cope, 2014). Cope (2014) suggests that one manner in which this is accounted for is providing description

about the respondents, as well as the context in which the study is conducted. Attempting to attain transferability, we have provided a detailed table of respondents (*see subheading 3.3.3 Table of Respondents*), which includes age, occupation and country of residence of the respondents. Moreover we have aimed at providing full transparency throughout the research, ensuring that the reader can easily follow the decisions that have been made and how conclusions have been drawn. By including theories throughout the analysis, our interpretations are largely guided by theoretical lenses, which our arguments and conclusions are based on or elaborated upon. Accordingly, we provide the reader with thorough insights, facilitating transferability. Lastly, trustworthiness refers to the level in which the respondents' experiences have authentically been presented (Cope, 2014). Cope (2014) recommends including the respondents' quotes as a way of providing truthful insights to their experiences. This requirement is thus addressed since multiple quotes have been presented throughout the analysis.

### 3.7 Limitations

While the findings of this study provides valuable insights into the role of luxury fashion rental in relation to identity construction, it remains crucial to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, a limitation worth emphasising when conducting qualitative research is the risk of the researchers imposing certain preconceived bias in the process of collecting and analysing data (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). This is a crucial challenge qualitative researchers must be aware of as their involvement is of significance for the results of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To address this limitation, we have engaged in reflexive and critical thinking towards our role and potential biases throughout the research process to ensure that subjectivity is reduced. At the initial phase of data collection, we consciously spent time designing an interview guide containing open-ended questions. By excluding directed questions which guide the respondents in a certain direction, we reduced the risk of our preconceived biases affecting the discussion of the focus groups (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). While being conscious about our potential impact, it is still relevant to acknowledge that full subjectivity is not attainable within qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), which imposes a limitation to this present study. However, due to aspiring a nuanced understanding of consumers' experiences, we concluded that qualitative research was best suited for the aim of this research.

Secondly, another methodological limitation is the use of mediated focus groups for data collection, which implies that the data has been collected remotely through a digital device as opposed to in person (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) ascertain that mediated interviews, which is similar to mediated focus groups in regards to this specific limitation, impose certain barriers to capturing non-verbal cues such as body language, certain emotional cues or the energy of the respondents. Accordingly, since these cues might be less perceptible through a digital screen, the richness of the study might suffer. Despite the limitation, we concluded that by requiring the respondents to have their camera on, we would still be able to capture body language to an adequate extent, while opening up for the opportunity of enlisting a worthy amount of respondents with greater diversity (O'Connor, Madge Shaw and Wellens, 2008; Morgan, 1997). More precisely, the increased geographical flexibility of mediated focus groups enabled us to connect with a couple of respondents with residence outside of Sweden, such as France, England, Switzerland and Denmark. As such, our choice of not having physical focus groups enabled us to enrich the final focus groups discussion with other cultural experiences in relation to luxury fashion rental, which is encouraged within the social constructionist perspective (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

Lastly, while viewing focus groups as a suitable method for gathering rich insights to the role of luxury fashion rental in consumers' identity projects and self-presentations, there are other methodological limitations in regards to this method that should be highlighted. Namely, the collected data is merely narratives of the consumers' experiences, as opposed to a guaranteed reflection of how identity projects and self-presentations are managed in reality. This limitation is voiced by Atkinson (2006) who acknowledged that acquiring respondents' descriptions of a phenomenon is not sufficient since respondents are placed in a staged setting to provide accounts of a phenomenon existing outside the interview. Subsequently, the narratives might be influenced by the respondents' desire of positioning- or presenting themselves and their identity in a compelling way to conform to social norms, in addition to communicating what they perceive to be of relevance for the study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Thus, some factors of their accurate experience might be neglected in their descriptions, which could have been of relevance for the study's final conclusions. To address this limitation, Atkinson (2006) suggests that the researcher should complement their study with fieldwork to fully grasp the reality of a phenomenon. Due to the limited time frame and scope of the study, it was not possible to complement our methodological choice with

fieldwork and can thus be seen as a limitation of this study. Thus, it is beyond our control within the scope of the study and its objectives.

### 3.8 Ethical Consideration

Considering the ethical implications of our study is essential for ensuring that the collected empirical data is conducted in a responsible and ethical manner, thus enhancing the credibility and quality of the research (Arifin, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). There are several ethical considerations that must be taken into account, particularly when conducting virtual focus groups of unknown individuals. Firstly, as researchers we assured consent from all participants, ensuring complete understanding and purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement and the potential risks and benefits of participating (Arifin, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Additionally, to guarantee respondents' confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study, this study will exclude all identifying information (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Furtheron, we ensured that the participants were treated with respect and that they are not coerced or pressured into sharing information.

As discussing luxury fashion can lead to a conversation about money, it is rather important to not pressure participants to provide more information. This is especially important when discussing a topic related to luxury and money, which is often considered a rather controversial topic that is linked to individuals' senses of self-worth, success and social status. Ensuring a respectful tone within the focus groups is crucial for us as moderators, thus to decrease and even prevent discomfort, embarrassment and tension when the topic arises.

Lastly, it is important to adhere to ethical guidelines in a transparent manner and that participants have a coherent right to withdraw from the study at any time (Gustafsson, 2014; Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Gustafsson (2014) implies that virtual focus groups risk a higher chance of threat of confidentiality as one can remain unsure if the digital platform or participants store and use the information shared within the focus groups. Despite this, we argue that the information shared between the parties is not in any way considered essential for the additional participants involved, and thus the risk of the spread and use of information being unethical is minimal. By taking these ethical considerations into account, we ensure

that the study is conducted in an ethical and responsible manner, protecting the rights of all participants involved, following demonstrating academic integrity (Arifin, 2018; Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001; Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

### 3.9 Chapter Summary

In summary, the study takes on the epistemological position of a social constructionist approach, indicating that meanings are shaped and elaborated in interactions between social actors. Aligning with this stance, our study is carried out in a qualitative manner, whereas experiences and attitudes are gathered as empirical data from three different focus groups, consisting of 18 people in total. A purposive sampling strategy was adapted based on age, gender and prior experience of engaging in the access-based consumption, luxury rental. Focus groups were conducted merely due to the vast advantage of group interactions and dynamics, whereas the social interaction of the topic investigated is beneficial for a rich understanding of the attitudes. The findings were processed through the lens of an interpretive approach, thus ensuring insights into the meanings and values the respondents connect to luxury fashion. Furtheron, we made the methodological choice of analysing the gathered empirical data abductively, yielding close examination of our chosen research phenomenon by the use theory while ensuring new insights to the field of examination. Thus, analysis was completed by moving between empiric data and theory and concept of choice; Goffman's Impression Management, Bourdieu's Social Distinction and Belk's the extended self. Further, definitions of fundamental terms are provided for an easier and comprehensive understanding of the study. Lastly, we covered how we relate to crucial factors such as credibility, transferability and trustworthiness, following the limitations of the study and ethical considerations to ensure the ethical integrity of the focus group participants.

## 4. Analysis

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*This section provides a detailed examination of our gathered empirical material which is analysed through the lens of our chosen theories following researchers mentioned in the chapter ‘Literature Review’.*

### 4.1 Overview of Focus Groups

Presented below is a table of the three focus groups including each respondents and their corresponding ages to easier follow the analysis. In the analysis, respondents will be referred to as “R” combined with their number and their age within brackets, for example: R1(25).

<b>Focus group 1 (age)</b>	<b>Focus group 2 (age)</b>	<b>Focus group 3 (age)</b>
Respondent 1 (25)	Respondent 7 (24)	Respondent 13 (27)
Respondent 2 (24)	Respondent 8 (25)	Respondent 14 (16)
Respondent 3 (26)	Respondent 9 (23)	Respondent 15 (26)
Respondent 4 (18)	Respondent 10 (20)	Respondent 16 (17)
Respondent 5 (24)	Respondent 11 (28)	Respondent 17 (23)
Respondent 6 (25)	Respondent 12 (22)	Respondent 18 (20)

*Table 3. Overview of focus group participants*

### 4.2 The Role of Rental- Rather Than Ownership of Luxury Fashion in Consumers’ Identity Projects

In the following segment we will provide a detailed examination of the empirical data collected through our focus groups, with the motivation of providing comprehensive insights that effectively address this study’s research question 1 (RQ1), presented in the “Discussion and Conclusion” chapter. The first research question follows:



RQ1: What role does rental- rather than ownership of luxury fashion have in consumers' identity projects?

#### 4.2.1 The Loss of Ownership of Luxury does not Affect Identity

Within the three focus groups we successfully identified a joint belief between the ages that ownership is considered relatively insignificant in relation to identity construction. A vast majority of the respondents reasoned in the sense that ownership is not solely defined by the possessions one owns today but also by what one has access to. This was demonstrated by the narrative by R7 (24):

The actual ownership per se is not according to me that important when it comes to my identity [...]. I think that I can either way, by renting high-end clothes, express my personal taste and style, especially since I make sure to rent clothing by certain brands that I want to be associated with.

This quote underlines that whether the luxury garment is rented or owned, it can still convey a certain taste and style, thus, the respondent assures that rented luxury still reflects one's identity in a way. As such, the discussion proves the individual's ability of combining certain garments that in turn results in identity construction and not the possessions per se. In a similar manner, another respondent stated:

In my view, I agree with what has previously been stated, that individuals rent clothing that goes in line with the identity one wishes to keep, so it does not matter if it is owned or rented as the identity is kept consistent (R9, 23).

This statement does not only support the first quote by R7 (24), but further elaborates upon the thought that ownership does not solely construct identities as individuals still manage to keep their identities consistent through rented luxury. Belk (2014) touches upon identity construction and non-exclusively owned items in relation to sharing and borrowing practices, which rental falls within as it is defined as an exchange of resources among individuals. Through these practices, individuals can connect with different groups and gain access to new experiences and perspectives, thus adapting or strengthening a sense of identity (Belk, 2014). The supporting quotes included above proves of correlance to Belk's (2014) view of the

rental practice, as the respondents argue for identity being able to stay consistent if the individual chooses to rent clothing associated with their values, personality and prior experiences. The general tone within the focus groups led us to spot a pattern in the view of identity, merely it being unchanged by rental clothing rather than owned clothing. In fact, this tone can be concluded to cover the view of luxury rental in relation to identity construction limited to Sweden, which R6 highlighted:

I think it is very interesting for many reasons, as I think the view in France differs a lot, it is rather less 'we share everything' [...]. When it comes to clothing, some will think it is shameful, they would not say 'I have rented this dress'. But for me, it really does not matter, as it is still as connected to your identity as you have decided to rent that specific piece, despite not owning it. It does not matter to me [...]. It is rather what you dare to wear that defines the 'coolness', not what you have enough money to purchase (R6, 25).

In contrast to the other focus group participants, Respondent 6's (25) situation differs due to her current residence in France where she states the view of ownership varies drastically from the one discussed above. The passage above supports the authors Chen (2009) and Marx (2011) idea of the shift in consumption habits moving from sole ownership to the opposite whereas the motivation lies within the possibility to temporarily access items while experiencing them rather than owning them permanently. As such, R6 (25) even highlights the difference of her current country of residence from her own beliefs, originating in Sweden. Further, Bardhi & Eckhardt (2012) further acknowledge the current consumption patterns are merely focusing on accessing goods without owning them, which is supported throughout the respondents answers stated above. R6 (25) continues to argue for the strengthened identity construction possibilities in rental fashion as rented clothing is carefully selected by individuals in order to portray a desired image of themselves. As Belk (1988) states, possessions, including clothing, extends the sense of self beyond their physical body which is clearly illustrated in the quotation above as she states "it really does not matter, as it is still as connected to your identity as you have decided to rent that specific piece, despite not owning it" (R6, 25). Thus, the statement once again reflects this concept as she claims rented luxury to be viewed as an extension of her identity. Despite Belk's (2014) initial argument of possession being an extended part of self, the sociologist himself has expanded

his theory to include sharing and borrowing practices as sources to identification, which is further strengthened by R6 (25) in her answer.

An alternative perspective on this matter emerged when R13 (27) conveyed her yearning to courageously experiment with particular fashion choices:

I believe that it is [renting luxury clothing] for my own sake, so when I rent clothing, I tend to go outside of my comfort zone and I reason as such, it is fun to try this dress because I would not purchase it myself.

This expression by R13 (27) illustrates an awareness of her “authentic self-identity”, whereas when she rents clothes, the certain luxury pieces do not necessarily have to go in line with her perception of self, either way, it can enhance her self-esteem by wearing clothing she yearns to don. In this manner, luxury fashion can be considered valuable means to express identities one does not normally portray, which in this sense can boost confidence in our respondents. As such, the loss of ownership does not necessarily impact her sense of self, rather it strengthens her ability to boost her “authentic self-identity” or even dress contrary to it by daring to dress in a certain way.

Although a small portion of respondents had contrasting views on this matter whereas ownership carried greater emotional significance and consequently, a stronger sense of identity. Despite being a minority, some expressed disadvantage of the easy access to luxury fashion rental, stating that the thought process behind renting luxury fashion as low involvement meant low impact for identity construction. In this manner, while rented luxury clothing can be incorporated in consumers’ identity projects, it does not carry the same identification value as possessions for some, aligning with Belk’s (1988) initial work proposing that ownership is vital for the sense of identity. The narratives illustrating this follows:

[...] I think that it is very important that, when you buy a luxury piece, a jacket or statement piece or accessory, one tends to think about it for so long and even after you have purchased it, you know that it is yours and you will keep it for many years ahead. I think it differs once you know that it is a personal investment that you will treasure for many years to come (R8, 25).

This statement is further elaborated on by R11 (28) below.

[...] I mean if I want to have a nice dress that is pricier, it will show more that I have put thought into it. I see it as a long-term garment that I will be wearing for a longer time so I do not necessarily see that I would prefer renting over owning (R11, 28).

And lastly, R17 (23) acknowledging the statements above by highlighting:

Yes, and I think that if I were to buy something that is this expensive or high-end, I would still want it to be something that I really like or feel that it's something I can have for several years. It could be a garment or a bag that holds meaning. And perhaps that's what can be somewhat lost when you rent [...] (R17, 23).

When examining these narratives, the loss of ownership does in fact for R8 (25), R11 (28) and R17 (23) result in a sense of loss of self as the actual thought process of selecting and going as far as purchasing shows a stronger sense of identity rather than the low involvement act as renting luxury garments. Thus, we conclude that the process of purchasing is of greater importance for these three respondents in relation to their identity construction as the rental process includes less involvement, emotional significance and thought behind rental processes, thus does not inherently nurture identity. As such, the feeling of ownership of luxury pieces might for these three respondents be seen as a crucial aspect in the feeling of “self”. Connecting these three passages by R8 (25), R11 (28) and R17 (23) looking at the underlying motives as to why they would rather own items than rent in some cases is supported by Sörum & Gianneschi (2022) asserting that ownership implies greater values which makes the shift in consumption habit difficult for some to overcome. In turn, Belk (1988) contends that possessions play a crucial role in an individual's extended self by providing a higher sense of control and power which results in a greater identification with these possessions, is further applicable to the three assertions made by R8, R11 & R17. Thus, as they prove their desire to control and maintain ownership over certain or even most items they yearn. An additional viewpoint on this matter was provided by R16 (17), as she stated:

I think it can also be about experiencing the feeling oneself, especially if one were to occasionally purchase a luxury item or something more high-end. I know that many

people use the expression of “treating themselves” or feeling like they have achieved something [...].

Despite most respondents being able to successfully identify themselves with rented luxury, additional respondents illustrated some barriers to do so with dispossession. As such, luxury fashion, historically known to permeate ‘success’ and ‘status’ (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; Gao, Winterich & Zhang, 2016), is still present in R16 (17) view. The desire to own luxury can thus be discerned in this passage as it signals ‘success’ and money, as opposed to non-exclusively owned items. In this sense, the respondent (R16, 17) illustrates difficulties meeting the desired feeling of ‘achievement’, thus emotional attachment is absent in rented luxury fashion.

Following these statements, R6 (25) agrees with purchases being a more extensive act of investment. As some respondents above expressed the desire to still purchase certain pieces, not solely for the extended wear-span but rather we observe the distinct emotional attachment of purchasing certain pieces. Despite being positive towards rental garments in relation to identity construction, R6 (25) still utters a sense of longing for ownership:

[...] There are certain things I want to own. Like a Chanel bag, which I then would keep my entire life and be able to say “it is mine”. And even if that means that I will still rent other things which I will not use as much, such as a ‘crazy’ luxury bag. But I really want a classic piece that I can use all the time [...].

It is of our interpretation that R6’s (25) statement goes in line with the quotations by R8 and R11 included earlier on, thus, illustrating purchase of luxury pieces as a sense of achievement. As R6 (25) emphasises the longing to buy a classic Chanel bag and consequently, the yearning to be able to say “it is mine” shows that such investment and sole ownership of a special luxury bag can contribute to her sense of self, which the feeling of ‘achievement’ might contribute to. As such, it is possible to assert that while the majority of respondents experienced equivalent emotional value in rented luxury fashion, some individuals do experience a sense of lost emotional attachment when giving up ownership of luxury items. Despite varied experience of emotional attachment, it is evident that rented luxury fashion carries an important role in supporting consumers’ identity projects.

#### 4.2.2 The Desire to Maintain a Sustainable Consumer Identity

Another key pattern identified within the different focus groups is the shared aspiration of constructing a sustainable consumer identity, where both environmental-, social- and economical concerns are discovered to be of matters for the respondents' identity projects. Among other driving forces, sustainability was identified as one of the foremost motivating factors to why the respondents' felt positive or prone towards engaging in rental consumption practices. While concerns in regards to ethical production were voiced by one respondent, the majority of respondents concentrated their worries on the environmental challenges prompted by the fashion industry. By altering traditional consumption habits, referring to consumption of newly produced garments, with rental practices, numerous participants expressed that they feel enabled to adhere to their fashion interests, while simultaneously being more environmentally sustainable. To illustrate, expressions like the following quotes display participants' sustainable consumption aspirations, uttered when asked about their motivations to rent luxury fashion and their relation to luxury fashion:

[...] I would not either buy completely new for a lot of different reasons. Partly because I like when it is a bit used, it often makes it more good-looking, but also price, and just the whole sustainability aspect of it all, that you can reuse (R3, 26).

Following another quote:

[...] I think more from a sustainability perspective and feel that I like it better if knowing that something has been produced ethically by slow fashion, rather than it being fast fashion [...] and then I am a student and can not afford to buy everything, but then often when you buy second hand or vintage, then I like to look for more expensive brands, just because, not always but often, it means that it is better quality and more sustainable [...] (R7, 24).

These quotes illustrate how the respondents' cherish their sustainable values, further that these values are experienced to be an important dimension of their envisioned consumer identity. Another respondent, R12 (22), humorously expressed “[...] I guess it is a bit the spirit of the time's children to think a little bit more sustainable [...]”, signalling that the joint belief of carrying sustainable aspirations and values are normative among young adults today.

The possibility of renting luxury fashion accordingly enables today's consumers to minimise their negative impact on the environment while continuing to access new fashion pieces, simply by giving up ownership as a vital part of their consumption experience. As such, they are able to consume in a way that supports their commitment of being a sustainable individual. Accordingly, we interpret that the identification value is not limited to the rented garment piece per se. Rather, we suggest that the consumption practice in itself is nourishing the participants' sense of selves in terms of enabling them to feel like they are responsible and sustainable individuals. This aligns with the CCT-perspective's view on identity which suggests that in addition to objects, individuals engage in certain practices that nourish and align with their identity projects (Jansen Schau, 2018). Seen from another perspective, while possessions such as clothes are stated to be a part of our respondents' extended self (Belk, 1988), Belk (1988) does not explicitly elaborate upon whether values can be seen as an extension of the self. However, he refers to a study conducted by Prelinger (1959), in which abstract ideas are identified to be experienced as a part of individuals' extended self (Belk, 1988). In accordance with the aforementioned focus on sustainability, we interpret that numerous individuals experience their sustainable commitment to be a crucial part of their consumer identity. The idea of being a moral and ethical consumer, as seen in the passages above, is guiding numerous respondents' consumption decisions, whereby luxury fashion rental aligns with their ambitions. The ethical and sustainable compass can thus be seen as a non tangible possession which extends the participants' identity by helping them define who they are as consumers (Belk, 1988). As such, the act of renting can be seen as a practice aiding the consumers to position themselves in their identity project. The perceived importance of sustainability can also be connected to consumer's self-presentation, referring to the idea that individuals perform certain identity projects to fit in in certain social contexts (Jensen Schau, 2018).

Taking a different approach, the participants' preference towards renting as a sustainable counteract to buying newly produced garments, can be seen to signal a high cultural capital as shown below:

I probably feel like the act of renting, like renting in itself and not the rented garment per se, says quite a lot too. I mean, it kind of shows that one is well-educated and has an understanding for how the environment is affected by society's constant consumption [...] (R7, 24).

Bourdieu (1984; 2018) emphasises that taste is contingent on social class and the various forms of capital, which all play a vital role in influencing individuals' lifeworlds and outlooks. The fact that R7, as well as most other participants, motivated their decision to rent with sustainable concerns illustrate that a vast amount of knowledge in regards to the topic have been acquired. In that sense, the role of renting in identity projects can be seen to indicate a certain level of education and apprehension for societal challenges, which amount to a rather high cultural capital. The act of sustainable consumption can further be discussed in regards to Bourdieu's concept habitus. Habitus embodies characteristics and behaviours of individuals and is dynamically created through one's lived experiences (Bourdieu, 2018). Seen from this holistic perspective, sustainable consumption practices, such as renting, may illustrate how the participants have roots in a social class or society which view responsible consumption as prestigious and aspirational. This notion is moreover supported by the earlier illustrated quote stated by R12 (22), "[...] I guess it is a bit the spirit of the time's children to think a little bit more sustainable [...]", where the expression implies that the participant takes for granted that sustainability is something normative that everyone supports and has passion for.

[...] only having it for that occasion just because the dress was extremely extremely extremely pretty, but if I would have put my own money on it then I do not know how many times I would have used it. It would have cost very much more and I would most likely not wear it again, because of that I thought that it was smooth to rent [...] (R7, 24).

In addition to being environmentally sustainable, several respondents expressed economic sustainability as an important aspect influencing their decision to rent as opposed to buying luxury fashion, illustrated in the above-mentioned quote by R7 (24). The economic dimension was not merely expressed in terms of economic restraints, such as not having the financial assets to consume newly produced luxury fashion. On the contrary, economic sustainability was expressed in terms of caring about not overspending if the investment was merely going to be used sporadically or on a few occasions. From this perspective, renting as an alternative to buying luxury fashion is discovered to enable the participants to identify as economically responsible and sustainable, reducing both environmental and economic



wastefulness. Respondents' care for being economically sustainable is further demonstrated in the following quote:

I have also rented a dress once, a while ago [...], you could rent a piece for two weeks so that is what I did for a party and it is a bit like you said "R7", that it is too expensive to buy new things and especially buying new things for only one occasion [...] (R12, 22).

From R7 and R12's statements, it is possible to discern that there is shared anxiousness connected to the thought of purchasing a piece for such a high cost, as well as for having limited occasions wearing it. As such, it is interpretable that both respondents' care about not being wasteful individuals. On the contrary, both respondents seem to value putting increased thought into their purchases and consumption habits, whereas renting luxury pieces enables the respondents to live out their envisioned identity with luxurious attire, while feeling both environmentally and economically sustainable. These values can possibly both be traced to the respondents' relationship with money, referred to as economic capital by Bourdieu (1984; 2018), as well as their experience of what is normative and considered lavish and unsustainable among friends, family or other social groups in their surroundings.

On another note, R1 (25), emphasised another perspective on sustainability which she believes is of importance in regards to renting and selecting a company to rent from, as highlighted below:

But I also think that there is a big difference in renting like we talked about now, to a specific event or occasion [...], but there are some that offer the option of renting three pieces of, I do not know, in a month or something, instead. And that does not feel sustainable because [...] then it is just so that you can continue keeping up with trends. And I think that, that also fosters fast trends, rather than renting a piece because it is nice for an event.

With an overall positive attitude towards renting and constructing an identity with non owned luxury pieces, R1 (25) expressed a concern that some renting companies offer the possibility of monthly subscription, where one gets access to a couple of different pieces for one month to later on get it exchanged for other pieces. According to R1 (25), this form of rental

services encourages consumers to continue keeping up with trends, which consequently do not disrupt the unsustainable consumer behaviour in society. Further, this statement signals that there are differences in individuals' motivations to rent, whereas R1 (25) has a broader societal perspective on what is perceived to be sustainable long-term, interpreted as she stressed the thought of consuming to fit certain trends. This is illustrated when she utters "And I think that, that also fosters fast trends" (R1, 25). Accordingly, rental in itself does not foster a sustainable identity for this individual. Rather, there are certain requirements that need to be fulfilled in relation to how one is renting and the characteristics of a particular rental company in order for R1 (25) to use rental as a sustainable consumption practice nourishing her sustainable identity aspirations. This nuanced reflection signals that R1 (25) is well informed and educated in the subject, displaying a high cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu 2018). While the other respondents simply viewed renting as a sustainable consumption act in itself, they did not reflect as much upon how their frequency of renting would affect other people's desire to consume more. This illustrates that R1 (25) has broader knowledge and is well aware of how her actions affect the rest of society, signalling a greater cultural capital in terms of awareness.

#### 4.2.3 Enhanced Possibility of Adapting Multiple Identities Through Attire

Individuals use and combine attire, including accessories to successfully adapt different identities with the objective to be creative with their clothing. In line with this, individuals tend to consciously create multiple identities, often for different occasions or moods, aligning with the CCT-perspective on individuals juggling multiple identity projects simultaneously (Jensen Schau, 2018). As such, a quote by R6 (25) indicates that she would prefer to rent noticeable 'crazy' pieces, which might signal a desire to play with one's identity and try multiple combinations of pieces.

[...] I will still rent other things which I will not use as much, such as a 'crazy' luxury bag. But I really want a classic piece that I can use all the time [...] (R6, 25).

In this manner, R6 (25) states that the ownership of material goods is rather irrelevant, instead she contends that the combination of clothing, following what one has rented is what encourages her to create multiple identities. Thus, the process of creating and experimenting with multiple identities through the combination of attire is facilitated by the option of rental

services. As illustrated in the passage by R6 (25), she stresses that she would rather allocate her financial assets on luxury items ensuring a prolonged duration, thus items not outside her current comfort zone. As such, it can be interpreted that she engages with rental options to experiment with “crazy” luxury pieces in order to adapt a temporary identity of her choice at the given time. Moreover the temporary nature of rental luxury and the non-restraints of a particular style, enables individuals to step out of their comfort zones and discover new aspects of themselves. In this manner, R13 (27) highlights this freedom of expression that is fostered by luxury fashion rentals:

[...] When I rent, I go a bit more out of my comfort zone and feel like, [...] it would be fun to try that dress, because I would not buy it myself, and I know that I do not want to spend that money on having it untouched in my wardrobe. But when you rent, then you can take the opportunity to go a little bit outside your box in your own style, and then it can be fun to go for something else.

R13 (27) proves a desire to rent for the above-mentioned reason to step out of her comfort zone without the financial commitments of doing so. She discusses the temporary nature of rental fashion, as means to adapt multiple styles, thus identities or personas. Connected to Belk (2014), this respondent views the non-exclusive ownership as something preferable, as it enhances her ability to incorporate more playful attire in her temporary extended self. Another respondent, more specifically R8 (25), also discussed the opportunity to experiment with different styles and identities without committing to a long-term investment in clothing when it comes to fashion rental:

[...] I know people in London who rent luxury bags on a monthly basis, not only because they do not have the money but because it allows them to feel if they like the bag or not. Since it is a huge investment to buy a new designer bag, renting them once a month is very practical.

The statement by R8 (25) highlights the desire and active practice of creating a more fluid and adaptable sense of self through accessories and clothing while still having the desire to partly consume and own certain pieces, which goes in line with what R6 (25) voiced in another focus group, as seen above. In this sense, women within the age span interviewed agreed to have a wider range of clothing options that are considered ‘affordable’ to rent

outright which allows them to switch up their style, and thus, identity frequently. Accordingly, renting practices seem to have a strong connection to the influence on one's identity and creativity to construct different versions of oneself. The desire to combine attire to portray some sort of creativity is further discussed by R3 (26):

[...] For me it has a lot to do with creativity. The fact that you can be, as I am not very creative in other practices, but through colour and form and different combinations be able to be creative, just given the fact that I can be creative with and through my clothing.

What has been emphasised above is once again the constant desire to play around with clothing and the relationship between attire and identity, whereas clothing serves as creative means to build a specific identity. R3 (26) thus conveys the message about fashion as an explorative act, whereas fashion rental opens up the possibility of creating multiple identities. Subsequently, from a Bourdieuan perspective, we argue that R3 (26) shows higher level of cultural capital as she demonstrates understanding of the fashion market, further elaborating on certain strategic choices about what pieces to combine with her creativity, in order to adapt multiple identities.

In line with what has previously been stated, R4 (18) further supports what has been stated about experimenting with different personas and identities depending on what context one will be found in as highlighted below:

As I said, being a third year high school student, I am soon to graduate and I have looked at renting something for the graduation parties and so on. Because you want to be more dressed up then, especially since a lot of pictures will be taken and so on, so my thought is that I might not want to wear the same dress for all occasions, and on top of that I do not really have the economy to purchase a lot [...].

R4 (18) does through this quote support what has previously been argued; clothing helps adapt different personas and identities whereas the rental option opens up an additional possibility to do so. By looking at this respondents answer, we can conclude that even younger women in our study lends weight to the assertion provided above. As such, luxury fashion rental enables our respondents to adapt their attire to foster a desired sophisticated

identity in various social settings. Through this perspective, adapting attire to social settings can nurture her identity due to the ability to access pieces normally out of her financial reach. In this manner, it is more of a question regarding financial assets, given that she is currently in high school unemployed, than obeying social norms. This is underscored clearly by the above-mentioned passage indicating that she (R4, 18) may rent a luxury dress for the different special occasions such as graduation to embody a more glamorous, fun and sophisticated identity, different from her everyday wear. This is proven in the passage where she states “[...] Because you want to be more dressed up then, especially since a lot of pictures will be taken and so on” (R4,18), which once again illustrates an eagerness to actively create a more fluid and adaptable identity through clothing choices such as rental options. R13 (27) views rental luxury fashion alike the passage above by highlighting the possibility of easily and smoothly adapt multiple identities or aspects of identities through rental attire:

[...] I think it [her view of rental fashion] has a lot to do with the fact that I have been active within the fashion industry for a long time. But I think that it is very fun to follow trends, follow them in the sense of dressing and also changing accordingly, to different years and seasons. And in this way, successfully transfer an identity for myself and to show who I am as a person and so on.

This being the case, R13 (27) expresses an increased desire for flexible identities, more specifically, being able to change it according to different external factors. The passage serves as an ideal illustration of the cognitive decision-making behind consumers’ rental consumption, namely the ability to adapt identities through clothing according to current trends. In this manner, the respondent corresponds with previously illustrated citations, by highlighting the capability to adapt multiple identities through rental luxury. This attitude towards luxury fashion rental is further demonstrated by R16 (17) “it is fun to discover different combinations and, as mentioned, to follow trends and get inspiration”, building onto what R13 stated, R16 (17) demonstrates of the ability to construct different identities or aspects of self through the various combinations of luxury fashion rental. Moreover, the consistent founding within our focus groups illustrates the adaptation of different identities through rental options which allows for multiple identities depending on what piece is rented and for what occasion. This process can further be described as the fluid perspective on identity which Çağlar & Karababa (2016) argues is supported by the social meaning of the

products consumed, in this sense the rental options, and is further discussed in a later segment (see *4.3.1 Fluid Transformation of Self-Presentation*). Bauman (2007) means that adapting multiple identities is easier done by the access to essential resources such as clothing, which is revealed by the majority of respondents' passages included above.

Belk's (1988) concept of the extended self is applicable to the notion stated above, as he asserts clothing in itself is not primarily a physical object but becomes part of one's self. In this sense, rental fashion allows for a more flexible self whereas individuals are proven to adapt multiple identities without having to commit economically to owning the attire. As discussed above, rental fashion allows our respondents to apply their creativity to successfully experiment with different versions and aspects of themselves and their identities.

### 4.3 Reflection of Self-Presentation

In this section we will thoroughly review our gathered empirical findings and provide insights to successfully address the study's research question 2 (RQ2) in the upcoming discussion, which follows:

RQ2: How do consumers reflect upon their self-presentation in relation to luxury fashion rental?

#### 4.3.1 Fluid Transformation of Self-Presentation

This segment is closely linked to the topic 'Adapting multiple identities through attire' (see *subheading 4.2.3*), although it primarily focuses on the identity projects which is the actual process of forming an identity by acquiring different forms of objects, symbols or practices, supported by the marketplace (Jensen Schau, 2018). The constant process of identity construction is the work of defining and redefining a sense of self, focused on the internal sense of oneself. Meanwhile, self-presentation in this chapter focuses on the process of deliberately expressing oneself in relation to other individuals in order to create a desired image of themselves (Jensen Schau, 2018; Goffman, 1959). Due to the significant connection between the two concepts, some formerly used illustrations of respondents' answers might recur in this segment again although with the perspective of self-presentation solely.

As concluded, clothing does not only act as an important role in identity projects but is further considered an essential tool for individuals to express themselves and convey their identities to others. Thus, self-presentation has been a prevalent subject of discussion among all focus groups recorded, where respondents expressed their active practice of image management when encountering others. In such manner we have identified a desire to change their appearance temporarily through non-exclusively owned luxury clothing:

When I actually think about wanting to rent or the times I have rented, I realise that it is dependent on the fact that I want to appear in a certain way in relation to the context. I make sure to think about colour, form, style and even brand (R9, 23).

Respondent 9 (23) explains that rented attire can aid her temporary transformation of self-presentation in order to better suit certain situations. As such, the fluid transformation of self is considered ‘controlled’ as the respondent purposely considers certain attributes of the rental piece before committing, even before and after the actual renting-process. Respondent R10 (20) further elaborates on the desire to project a certain image of themselves in a given context, without it being completely at odds with their identity.

For me it is very important that I fit in when I rent clothing, because I am otherwise pretty cautious around new people and dressing in a certain way can help me soothe my anxiety when entering a new room with new people [...]. Because of this, I change the way I dress and the way I want to project myself to different situations (R10, 20).

In line with Bauman (2007) who describes the shift from fixed to liquid identities as a process influenced by social structures whereas individual choices are restricted, the respondents R10 (20) and R9 (23) display conscious choices of attire when attending certain social situations. In other words, the cautious choice of certain pieces such as luxury, will give off different impressions depending on the context which benefits the individual in feeling confident (R10, 20). This piece of information can be translated to that the responses captured above indicate comfort in adapting to societal norms without actually identifying themselves with a temporary adapted, preferably rented piece of clothing. A respondent currently in her third year of high school confirmed the idea of comfort in social context by stating “Fashion for

me plays a vital role, of course I want to feel beautiful. I am currently a high school student, so it is naturally pressure and so on [...] (R4, 18). Whereas the same respondent also uttered:

As I said, being a third year high school student, I am soon to graduate and I have looked at renting something for the graduation parties and so on. Because you want to be more dressed up then, especially since a lot of pictures will be taken and so on, so my thought is that I might not want to wear the same dress for all occasions, and on top of that I do not really have the economy to purchase a lot [...] (R4, 18).

R4 (18) expresses her consciousness regarding the pressure present in high school, which gives off the indication that she dresses to fit in. In such a way, she addresses and conforms to fit in with these societal norms in high school. In these situations explained, such as graduation proms and parties, there is a noticeable desire to project an expected image that corresponds to the societal expectations at those events. Entwistle (2015) emphasises this pressure of individuals in modern society as a consequence of a desire to be perceived in certain ways, whereas clothing eases this process by signalling certain values. This is directly applicable on the citation by R4 (18) seen above, as she explains the desire to rent for different occasions in order to obey societal norms of ‘not wearing the same dress’, which is further strengthened by the thought of pictures being taken. The main assumption at events like those mentioned, the image conveyed by luxury is often respected (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). By obeying these dress codes, R4 (18) along with R10 (20) (*see page 64*) allows rental options to fulfil the societal expectations in their self-presentation but without modifying their actual identities to look presentable, neat and stylish. Both respondents thus argue that luxury rental becomes an option preferred when certain pieces do not fully correspond to their actual identities, such as for graduation or weddings. This process of conveying a certain image can be further looked through the lens of Goffman’s Impressions Management, whereas managing impressions varies depending on the social context (Goffman, 1959). As such, the respondents in our focus groups demonstrate a desire to adapt their identities according to the expectations of each social setting, thus supporting the argument of fluid transformation of identities (Bauman, 2007). Furthermore, this process is referred to as the ongoing process that aids individuals to navigate various social contexts while proving they have the goal of presenting themselves in the most beneficial way in order to achieve their desired impressions. Another citation corresponding to this matter of fitting the purpose follows below:



That is if there is a specific situation and I want to dress a bit fancier or convey a certain image, to match the purpose [...] or I do not think that I have rented a specific garment to wear casually for two weeks, I do not know, what motivates me is special occasion when I want to look a little extra (R7, 24).

This passage by R7 (24) proves yet once again of a desire to rent luxury pieces that are inconsistent to her casual wear which allows for an easier modification of her self-presentation to a more fluid expression (Bauman, 2007). Additionally, this means that R7 (24) along with R4 (18) aims to dress without changing their self-concept permanently.

Contrary to the idea that rental options facilitate a fluid identity, there are several events and contexts where our respondents are expected to fit in and thus obligated to wear certain attire such as at school or at work. Our respondents decided to comment on this to voice their thoughts of those situations not being included into their many identities:

I think that it is important to see that, in some contexts, we wear clothes that we do not associate with 100%, for me that is work. I work part-time at a hotel where I need to wear a specific outfit and so, I have rented a high-end blazer to respect those rules (R8, 25).

Followed by another passage by R15:

I would say that my wardrobe is not really suited for an office-work, which has resulted in a desire to fit in and I have decided to, yeah, test different styles to better see what I would specify as my style at work. And for me, renting has been an obvious choice, especially for suits and so on (R15, 26).

As we have identified the different combinations of clothing to carry identification value in paragraphs prior to this one, there is a difference in the self-presentation aspect when it comes to this. While some may dress to transform their appearance according to one specific context such as school or work (R8, 25; R15, 26), where the specific clothing is required, it is important to remember that they might not include such style in their personal possessions, thus in their extended self. This illustrates that the respondents do not incorporate some

temporary possessions in their extended self as it does not align with their “authentic self-identity” and taste (Belk, 2014). Meanwhile this finding supports Goffman’s (1959) concept of intentional strategic choices of self-presentation within a certain social setting, such as changing attire accordingly to fit the preconceived norms. Consequently, this translates to the general idea by Belk (2014), implying that shared practices are fully integrated in one’s self, however the specific luxury piece R8 (25) rented might not be incorporated in the woman’s actual identity, which they prove of. As contexts such as work expects one to wear certain clothing, individuals still convey an image that goes in line with the social setting, thus as R8 (25) states (*see page 66*), it does not fully transform her identity. Accordingly, respondent 9 decided to touch upon this as well:

It is not necessarily only ‘I have a bag, I am rich’, but I feel the same way about myself, except I see it as something nice. And I do not think it affects my identity that much, although I think that it really can. People can become a little delusional about nicer things, because then they may think better of themselves, which I interpret to be in a negative way. It can also shine a negative light (R9, 23).

What can be interpreted from this passage is her awareness of what has previously been discussed, luxury rental does not always fully transcend one’s identity. Although the respondent holds a generally positive outlook towards rental options, she proves consciousness regarding to what extent rented luxury fashion can be incorporated in her identity, while acknowledging the fact that it can express different identities, thus enabling fluid identities (Bauman, 2007). Overall, one notable feature of identity that seems to be consistent across our focus groups, by all women wearing rented luxury fashion, and one that differs from wearing non-exclusive pieces, is the expectation of looking polished and refined. In addition to the citations included so far, R11 (28) decided to touch upon rented luxury fashion in the same sense:

I chose rental fashion most times because of that reason too [dress for a specific social setting] but mostly it is for me, I want to look presentable and in that setting, like a school dance or work, I want people to view me as such as well.

Another passage that illustrates a younger women’s desire to look refined and polished in regards to a specific social setting follows:

[...] I really wanted a luxury bag when I went to high school and did not have any money, because it was a lot of social status and such things at my high school. I wanted to fit in and that's why I rented a luxury bag. It might sound a bit weird now afterwards, but it felt like the best option at the time (R18, 20).

As such, both respondents (R18, 20; R11, 28) illustrate how it is crucial for them to obey social norms and context while leaving an impression on others that she dresses accordingly and presentable. In this manner, our respondents proved a desire to adapt multiple identities due to personal reasons such as an underlying desire to fit in and dress according to a special social context where certain clothing is expected, thus a fluid transformation of identity projects is accurately visible in some respondents' experiences.

#### 4.3.2 Portraying Multiple Identities on Social Media

With social media becoming an integral aspect of everyday life, new ways to present oneself have been introduced, allowing for multiple identities to be expressed (Yang & Liu, 2022). With the help of rented luxury, respondents provide understanding for the possibility to adapt multiple identities through their non-exclusively owned attire. In line with the subheading 'Enhanced Possibility of Adapting Multiple Identities Through Attire' (see *subheading 4.2.3*) individuals have shown to carry a more intense desire to adapt multiple identities online, in order to fit the different trends or even demonstrate a more individual style to gain attention.

[...] to rent luxury clothing does not necessarily show who someone truly is, if you understand, like as R11 said, it can come across as faking it but for me it is more about the possibility to dress for who I want to be in the moment and show it off in a creative way. Social media enables me to play around and present myself in ways I do not normally do (R12, 22).

The illustration above provides a deepened comprehension of the respondent's motivations behind adapting multiple identities online, stating that social media gives her a platform to fully utilise and play with styles and thus adapt different identities to present. Belk (2013) stresses this by stating that with the development of the internet, individuals can now express

their identities in multiple ways without ownership, thus supporting the citation of constructing identities by wearing non-exclusively owned items uttered by R12 (22). Along her argumentation in regards to presenting multiple identities online, R9 (23) commented upon the matter in a similar way:

I would say, just what I said before, that you are free to try out things through renting that you otherwise do not have the money for. You have the possibility to express yourself in different ways by renting designer clothing, although it is just for the moment, temporarily done, even on like Instagram.

In line with Bauman (2007), who stresses the shift from a fixed- to fluid identities, whereas nowadays similarly, self-presentation has made the same shift and become more a fluid, flexible and transient process. This process is illustrated through the respondents' passages found above as they provide an understanding for the temporary image they seek to give off through rented luxury fashion on social media platforms. R9 (23) argues that rented luxury eases this transient process of self-presentation as she can adapt different images on the internet while accessing garments she does not necessarily have the budget to purchase first hand.

I think it varies how people portray me when I wear luxury on Instagram for example, especially rented luxury. Even if they know that I wear it just for the post, they might know that I do not have the money for it and think that it is faking, or they might think I wear it in a cool way and think renting is cool, and so on, it is depending on their view of it, their interpretation and background (R11, 28).

An awareness that different presentations of self may be dependent on the social context and online platform, norms and symbolic meaning the piece of clothing carries is further presented by R11. This can be connected to the discussion by Firat & Venkatesh (1995) about the material object itself lacking meaning unless applied to a context such as social media, where meanings will be applied according to the presentation, norms and symbolic meaning on the specific platform. As such, rented luxury clothing gives off different impressions depending on who is the receiver, its context, whether it is online or in-person, and may thus fluctuate, not necessarily all dependent on the image of the carrier. The transient process of self-presentations thus varies depending on social factors and the receiver

while still being simplified by the use of social media whereas individuals actively shape and manage their images.

[...] Wearing rented luxury can be associated with a certain group of people, even online, these could be influencers or celebrities, and if I wear and publish a photo of myself in different high-end brands, I think many will believe I am part of a specific group or, even like a community, which I do not see an issue with doing (R8, 25).

This passage by R8 (25) illustrates the way in which fashion and consumption choices carry important social- and symbolic connotations in society, which makes it possible to categorise and understand individuals based on their appearances and consumption behaviour (Wattanasuwan 2005; Arsel & Bean, 2018). Thus, the respondent (R8, 25) acknowledging luxury fashion as associated to a specific group, such as the influencers or celebrities displays what value luxury fashion carries in the contemporary consumer society. Referring to the combinations of luxury fashion rentals as means to present oneself as belonging to a group or community, proves a desire to manage perceptions of oneself. Hence, the process of managing self-presentation can be further linked to Goffman's Impression Management with the primary focusing on such self-presentation in various social interactions, in order to form a desired impression on other social actors (Goffman, 1959). However, through the citation of R8 (25) we have identified a manner in which self-presentation can be performed today. While Goffman (1959) asserts that presentation of self is contextual, meaning that it is based on a specific setting and facing a definable audience. Social media, on the other hand, allows consumers to constantly self-present different personas under various platforms where profiles are created, thus changing the way in which individuals identify- and portray themselves beyond localised context to the digital realm. In this manner, our respondents illustrate that social media enable increased ability to create and present multiple identities or aspects of identities that are contradicting to their 'true' identities, such as portraying an image of having the money to wear certain exclusive luxury pieces while it does not correspond with the individual's limited finances nor the specific style in question. Despite the ability to do so, there is a loss of control over managing their self-presentation within the digital realm, due to factors beyond individuals' control, such as limited bodied communication, an unspecified audience, the content persists indefinitely while allowing for an audience outside of one's intention.

A respondent that had reflected upon this exact matter, voiced her thought on it by emphasising the following “I also think that I have had a hard time transferring my identity to social media, so for me” (R2, 24), which proves of her desire to maintain an “authentic” image of herself which corresponds to her actual identity. Another respondent, in a different focus group, commented upon this matter too as demonstrated below:

[...] I feel like that too [a pressure to post on social media], but for me it also depends on the type of post I am sharing, but if it is a post you intend to keep permanently on your page, it can feel very uncomfortable, if you on top of that, are unsure of how to express yourself in a certain way, through your style [...] (R16, 17).

As indicated through this passage is the desire to selectively self present, meaning that R16 (17) views social media as a place of pressure where emotional vulnerability is at stake due to content being available to all. In this manner, she is worried of how she will be perceived by others on the platform. As such, she shows awareness how the combination of attire, rental in this case, is displayed in order to leave a desired image, which can be connected to Goffman (1959), proving intentional, strategic strategies in order to generate a favourable impression of oneself. Another individual agreeing with the concern of content being visible to many states:

I believe that it is difficult too [showing one’s real identity]. Especially with clothing, I would say that most clothes I purchase I think of my feed, will it look good? Will I get likes? Is it trendy? You know, so if I rent, It would most likely be for a picture so sometimes I do not post for the reason of anxiety (R7, 24).

In this sense, R7 proves the added concern of posting on social media, mainly for fitting in. Thus, the yearning to leave a certain impression is further visible and proven facilitated by the use of rental luxury. The respondent means that clothing can give off certain impressions, whereas it is crucial for the items worn to go in line with societal norms, such as trends. In this manner, the respondents R2, R16 and R7 display the concern of not transferring one’s “authentic self-identity” to social media platforms. On the contrary, adding on to what has been stated above, the general positive outlook on successfully transferring one’s identity to a social media platform is further underlined in this citation:

Yes, both that [displaying what rental luxury pieces have been rented and by what company], and also, as we have touched on before, I often rent for specific occasions and therefore wear garments that I would not typically purchase myself. It can be fun to showcase [on Instagram] something that I would not normally dress in (R13, 27).

Following another statement provided by the same respondent covering the thought of showcasing rented luxury on social media through stories or posts, “[...] you are included in the movement, you are contributing to a more sustainable consumption of fashion by following trends” (R13, 27). R13 illustrates a desire to adapt certain identities depending on the crowd, such as giving off the impression of being sustainably concerned on her platforms when wearing rented luxury garments. As such proving an aspiration to maintain a certain image on her social media channels mainly for the crowd. This could eventually mean, as she states, that the identity she is assigned or portraying, does not necessarily be in accordance with her “true” identity of herself. In another manner, R12 (22) discusses social media as means to communicate an image of herself that goes in line with her “authentic self-identity”:

[...] for me it is more about the possibility to dress for who I want to be in the moment and show it off in a creative way. Social media enables me to play around and present myself in ways I do not normally do.

Although as seen in the passage above by R12, she means that the temporary identities are seen as an ability to express her creative side through rental luxury which is enabled by social media, which translates to that it does not have to be aligned with her ‘true’ identity. Instead, she views social media as means to portray certain aspects of her identity through specific clothing. As such, we conclude that social media is an alternative tool to showcase intentional images of oneself, whereas portraying oneself in a flavorful way is preferred by most respondents within our focus groups.

#### 4.3.3 Conveying Social & Cultural Capital Through Rented Luxury

In line with Bourdieu’s Social Distinction (2018), the act of renting luxury may possess high levels of cultural capital within the individual, such as a deep understanding of luxury fashion, following the ability to distinguish between high- and low-end brands, may be more

inclined to utilise rental fashion services. Hence, it is their knowledge that aids them in accessing and selecting appropriate rented luxury pieces. In other words, individuals engaging with rental fashion can impact one's perception and engagement towards the practice (Bourdieu, 2018). As such, it can provide them with the tools and knowledge necessary to navigate the rental market and make informed decisions about certain rental pieces. Connecting to this view, respondent R6 (25) elaborated upon the matter by stating:

[...] I rent, because some, well, for me there's this DIOR dress, it is not available to purchase. It is one of a kind, even though I would have the money, which I do not have. But If I would have, it is still not available.

This passage by R6 (25) further illustrates her ability to identify and select specific high-end brands or pieces that are particularly rare or in-demand, which in turn would result in recognisable and valued items by others in their social circle, thus conveying high cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018). As such, she carries a strong cultural capital while being more inclined to seek the specific dress that is culturally associated with certain symbols of status, taste and distinction. The drive of increased knowledge for the dress of the specific brand only being available to rent due to its absence from the current market of newly produced goods, signals a high level of understanding for the high-end market. Her statement thus signals that she carries a deep understanding of the cultural significance of the specific luxury piece and that the service of luxury rental allows her to purchase luxury items aligning with her fashion sense and interest for high-end attire.

When discussing the act of renting luxury fashion and accessing clothes which were earlier not within financial reach to incorporate into one's identity projects, we identified contrasting thoughts on the importance of being authentic about one's financial assets. Numerous respondents were in agreement that in relation to fashion and self-presentation, it is the understanding of certain pieces or brands that are of importance and not one's socio-economic background. This narrative is illustrated in the following quote:

I still think that the choice of brand you rent also says something about what you want to express or identify with, so if I rent a bag, say a high-end bag and walk in the city and see a lot of different people, they do not know that I have rented it but they will see that I wear it, and that [...] sends signals that I wear that particular brand. That will



be interpreted by society in a certain way and I will be given an identity indirectly, like I belong to a certain group for example. So I still think that the choice of what you rent somewhere is a reflection of how you identify yourself or how you want to identify yourself (R7, 24).

This quote illustrates that despite not having sole ownership of a luxury bag, it still carries the possibility of conveying a part of one's identity and playing an important role in identity projects and self-presentation. Goffman (1959) argues that clothes are an important source for self-expression, suggesting that the clothes one chooses to wear enables expression of individuality and fashion sense, which aligns with R7's statement that different brands carry distinguished values and associations. By wearing a brand, one also embraces the values and associations it conveys and as such, R7 (24) argues that luxury brands can be seen as an extension of the self despite lack of ownership.

Further, by stressing "[...] they do not know that I have rented it but they will see that I wear it, and that [...] sends signals that I wear that particular brand.", R7 argues that from an external perspective, the absence of ownership is not evident. Thus, the external impression will still be equivalent, which illustrates that renting luxury is not perceived to limit the possibility of constructing and managing social identity and positioning oneself in relation to others. Rather, renting provides the respondent with the opportunity of realising an aspirational identity with luxury fashion, which further enables connection and external associations to a desired social class or group of people. As such, it is interpretable that R7 (24) experiences that conveying a certain cultural capital, in terms of choosing a certain brand over another, translates to broader opportunities of gaining further social capital, as she externally will be perceived to belong to a higher social class. This belief were similarly experienced by several respondents, illustrated in the following quotes:

[...] you have something that you in reality can not afford, but you are still a part of the social group who would want that kind of bag and the group that thinks it is pretty. In that way you are not faking anything, maybe you are faking it from the economical perspective, but not from the social- or fashion perspective (R8, 25).

Likewise seen in this quote:

[...] But first impressions, what people think of you and such things, I think that has a lot to do with clothes, interests and such things, if you are interested in the same brands... Seen from a social perspective, I think that has a major impact (R6, 25).

The latter three quotes by R7 (24), R8 (25) and R6 (25) illustrate that the respondents perceive fashion sense and understanding of various brands to have social implications, which can be translated to Bourdieu's (2018) notion regarding different forms of capital being convertible. From this perspective, it is interpretable that the respondents experience that a high cultural capital connected to fashion brands can contribute to an increased level of social capital, where people will associate you with a certain crowd based on your choice of clothing. While both Goffman (1959) and Bourdieu (2018) argue that clothing is a crucial carrier for identity and symbolises factors such as taste or social class, the above-mentioned quotes by R7, R8, R6 shed light on respondents' ability of signalling connection to others who admire the same brands while not having to be from the same social class. In relation to rented luxury clothing, this signals that while respondents are enabled to access luxury clothing and attain a more luxurious appearance, they are no longer fully as limited to the taste prevailing in their initial social class since rental services diminish the economical restraints to some degree. Thus, by accepting the absence of sole ownership, renting luxury fashion enables a new crowd to access luxury fashion and convey their understanding and sense for high-end attire, something that historically has been limited to the upper class. As such, seen from Goffman's perspective on Impression Management (1959), these quotes signal that rented luxury pieces carry an important role in self-presentation and allow individuals from different social classes to access and make use of high-end goods in their efforts to manage impressions and fit into different social contexts.

While the latter quotes have focused on respondents' enhanced ability of temporarily accessing luxury pieces which aligns with their fashion sense and cultural capital, there were some contrasting thoughts on the importance of having financial assets to truthfully incorporate the luxury pieces to one's identity. The following quote demonstrates this contrasting perspective:

But does it come across then that you are kind of faking it? You know, because you are trying to send off the signal that you have this Balenciaga bag and I belong to this social class, group, or whatever, even though you are not because you are renting? I

do agree with you but it still comes to my mind that you are putting a facade of something and you are trying to signal it to other people that you have a luxury bag, like a statement thing (R11, 28).

This quote illustrates a more negative attitude towards the broadened accessibility of luxury fashion in society. Respondent 11 (28) is in general more hesitant towards fashion rental than the other respondents in her focus group and from this counter argument, it is evident that she is slightly bothered by the fact that people utilise rented luxury fashion in their identity projects to manage impressions. While having rented once herself, she argues that if the objective is to show communality with a certain social class or increase belonging to a social class which one does not belong to, it is comparable to putting up a facade. As such, R11 (28) seems slightly bothered by the thought of mixing practices and consumption habits of different social classes, while the majority of other respondents seem to view it as an opportunity of expressing taste and showing belonging to a group of people with similar fashion sense and interest. To connect this statement with Bourdieu's (2018) concept of economic capital, it is possible to discern that R11 (28) believes that having enough financial assets to be able to purchase a luxury good is crucial if wanting to be ascribed the same social status as when owning luxury fashion. This attitude may be influenced by the respondent's own social class, as she was one out of few that uttered exclusive ownership of luxury fashion to be financially possible, while others voiced economic restraints. However, since the majority of respondents did not agree with this concern, this might be a personal opinion of R11. Yet, it sheds light on the fact that some individuals might perceive the financial dimension to be crucial for creating an authentic identity in relation to luxury fashion.

A contrasting theme, in comparison to R7 (24) and R8's (25) opinion on being connected to a different social class, was a few participants' anxiousness of not wanting to be interpreted as boastful and lavish, nor faking their social class, when purchasing luxury pieces and incorporating them into their identity projects. In regards to this attitude, the part of having sole ownership was identified as something negative, whereas renting on the other hand enabled the participants to consume luxury pieces without having to spend as much money on it. The following quote illustrates this narrative:

[...] that I would be ashamed to have spent that much money on a garment, if you understand what I mean. And feeling that it feels better to rent, better economically

and for a lot of different reasons, than to spend that much money on a piece that I might not even know if I will like in five years or so (R5, 24).

Following another quote:

I would much rather want to show that it is rented, because everyone knows that I am a student and that I do not have the economic abilities, so in terms of identity I do not want to come across in that way (R12, 22).

These statements disclose that having sole ownership is not always aspirational, rather there are negative sides, such as respondents' fear of being interpreted as wasteful and not being economically conscious, which make rental services more favourable in relation to identity projects for some individuals. While discussing individuals' desire of being economically sustainable in segment 'The Desire to Maintain a Sustainable Consumer Identity' (*see subheading 4.2.2*), these quotes are more linked to self-presentation as they address the shame of being interpreted in a certain way in a social context. Thus, from the lens of Goffman's Impression Management (1959) and Bourdieu's notion of Social Distinction (2018), renting as opposed to purchasing luxury fashion enables the respondents to wear luxury pieces, signalling a high cultural capital in terms of valuing quality pieces and having an exclusive sense for fashion, while not having to be interpreted as economically lavish. Accordingly, it is interpretable that both respondents seem to aspire a rather ascetic image, in contrast to having hedonistic objectives, whereas they do not long for status or social recognition in relation to luxury consumption. Since both R5 (24) and R12 (22) express a certain anxiousness of how they will be perceived, they seem to find comfort in being able to communicate that the pieces are rented. While both find joy in being able to rent luxury pieces, it is evident that they seek to manage external impressions both through appearance and interactions to achieve their desired identity and influence their image. This aligns with Goffman's (1959) notion that there are numerous ways in which Impression Management can take form, whereas behaviour, appearance and interactions are a few approaches.

R12's statement further discloses that she would rather not want to flaunt with luxury attire she lacks ownership of, due to not having the economic abilities of purchasing, which confirms Bourdieu's (2018) theory that individuals feel more comfortable within their own social class. It is interpretable that consuming luxury fashion does not belong to R12's

normalities and therefore she experiences a certain discomfort by the thought of people in her surroundings interpreting her to invest a substantial amount of money in a garment. Purchasing luxury goods can accordingly be seen as a cultural practice, whereas the barrier to engage in the consumption practice is not merely affected by financial restraints and accessibility. Rather, values and beliefs, which according to Bourdieu (2018) is connected to one's habitus and internalised dispositions, is also identified as playing a vital part in how individuals experience luxury- consumption and rental and further how it is being incorporated to their identity projects and self-presentations.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

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*In this segment a holistic discussion on identity construction and self-presentation is provided, aiming to interpret the findings and situate these with the broader context of existing literature and knowledge. Our findings will relate back to our aims, which will be presented in the established answers to our two research questions. Additionally, contributions and achieved aims will be discussed. Furtheron, theoretical- and practical implications will be stated to demonstrate the significance and impact of our research. Lastly, a section providing suggestions for future research is presented.*

### 5.1 Research Aim and Restating the Research Questions

To recap, the provided analysis prior to this chapter carefully examines the role of luxury fashion rental in relation to consumers' identity projects as well as how they reflect upon their self-presentation when donning rented luxury. The aim of the study was to contribute to the field of identity construction in relation to luxury fashion by examining how consumers navigate their identity projects and self-presentation in relation to luxury fashion rental. As such we intend to contribute to the broad stream of literature on CCT covering consumers' identity construction in relation to the more narrowed concept of access-based practices, luxury fashion rental. To prompt recollection prior to delving into the following discussion, the study's two research questions follows:

RQ1: What role does rental- rather than ownership of luxury fashion have in consumers' identity projects?

RQ2: How do consumers reflect upon their self-presentation in relation to luxury fashion rental?

## 5.2 Discussion of the Findings

The following discussion will establish a foundation of the various findings contributing to the presented answer to our two research questions in the subsequent segment (*see subheading 5.3 Addressing the Research Questions*). To emphasise, the two concepts will be discussed intermittently combined, since identity projects are performed within certain social contexts, translating to self-presentation. Thus, the terms are in close connection and have implication on one another. To accentuate further, this research presents empirical findings that shed light on aspects that might not have been otherwise evident or accurately comprehensive through various ways demonstrated below:

### 5.2.1 Luxury Fashion Rental Nurtures Identity Projects

A highly acclaimed study within the field of identity construction and access-based consumption by Bhardi and Eckhardt (2012) states that sharing processes do not necessarily nourish consumers' identity projects as access vehicles are shown to lack an equivalent level of emotional attachment compared to possessions, meanwhile our study slightly contradicts. The respondents of our study display varied feelings in regards to the emotional attachment found in rented luxury items. While some individuals expressed a lack of emotional attachment in terms of rented luxury pieces not entailing the same form of cognitive associations with personal achievement. Other respondents described significant emotional value in being able to experiment with one's identity projects, experiencing a sense of pride when selecting or combining certain luxury pieces, as well as choosing a consumption practice which nourishes their sustainable morals. As such, our study is partly illustrating in accordance with Bhardi and Eckhardt's (2012) findings, while acknowledging novel ways in which consumers' identify emotional attachment, thus accurately incorporating access-based items in their identity projects.

In this manner, our findings prove an overall high identification value in relation to non-exclusively owned luxury fashion, whereas the loss of ownership does not contribute to a loss of identity construction ability. Therefore, our findings indicate that respondents have an enhanced capacity, within the given rental period, to temporarily identify with the item. This holds true for women of all ages examined within our focus groups. Meanwhile the authors Barhdi and Eckhardt (2012) asserts the role of ownership as crucial in identity projects as an

individual's possessions are often associated with self-image, status and personal identity. Although, our findings prove that rented luxury fashion can offer the same opportunities for identification and self-expression, as our respondents state that specifically chosen rented pieces contribute to the same identification value as something one purchases, due to the time and effort of choosing a certain piece to further combine, define and express oneself. In other words, rented luxury fashion can successfully convey who you are while portraying a certain image to others as it plays the role of a second skin. Subsequently akin to a second skin, clothing and accessories intimately interact with the consumer (Joubert & Stern, 2005), which carries the characteristics of inherently nurture the self and exhibit a closer and more interconnected relationship compared to cars. In this manner, in the realm of the extended self, our empirical findings prove that luxury attire and accessories hold a closer connection to the intimate self-concept than cars (Belk, 2014), which generally have less significance in identity projects, particularly among younger adults whom we examined.

While Belk (2014) suggests that sharing, borrowing and accessing clothes within the family realm nurture identity, our study contributes to this field of study with valuable insights as to how consumer's successfully identify with dispossessions among other unfamiliar consumers. Our respondents proved this, as rental luxury fashion was used as a source of self-expression and communication as even rented items reflected personal styles, values, cultural influences, moods, and social identities. Individuals were rather specific in choosing rented attire that aligned with their desired image, personality and even desired group affiliations, as previously merely seen in possessions and shared items within the family (Belk, 2014). In this manner, our respondents highlighted the value rented luxury carries, which aid them to convey aspects of their identity accordingly by carefully choosing certain items to wear. Accordingly, by drawing conclusions from our empirical findings, we can identify that individuals of all ages recorded, can in fact nurture identities by temporarily accessing luxury items through rental services. As such, we have seen a similarity in Belk's (1988) view on possessions in relation to identity, by proving that individuals ages 16-28 can incorporate rented luxury clothing to their identity and temporary extended self despite non-exclusively owned goods. Our findings effectively address the limitations identified in the research by Loussaïef et al. (2019) whereas a difficulty in investigating this subject in relation to this age span arose followed by applying Belk's (2014) view on sharing practices outside of the family. Thus, our findings support the conclusions by several researchers proving that in the present-day context, consumers' ultimate desire lies within temporary



access to goods merely for social connections and experiences rather than sole ownership of material items (Belk, 2014; Lawson et al, 2016; Chen, 2009; Marx, 2011).

### 5.2.2 Liquid Transformation of Identity is Facilitated by Luxury Fashion Rental

Our research highlights the possibility of liquid transformation of consumers' identity in their self-presentation, whereas rented luxury fashion facilitates this process. Our findings illustrate the dynamic nature of individual self-presentation, reflecting the sociological concept of liquidity as described by Bauman (2007); the increasing fluidity of society as a whole, where identity and projects are no longer stable nor consistent. A majority of respondents discussed the facilitated ability to portray a creative identity of oneself through rented luxury fashion and others enjoyed the idea of dressing in alternative styles contrary to their everyday attire, thus both statements supporting our findings of fluid transformation of identities. A few respondents demonstrated a high desire to adapt their identities according to the presumptions of social settings, which is later discussed as a form of exception when applying fluid identities. In other words, in the context of access consumption, more specifically rented luxury fashion, the process is shown to establish a unique connection with attire that diverges from exclusive ownership discussed in previous studies, such as Bardhi & Eckhardt (2012). This observed emotional attachment and connection between individuals and non-exclusively owned goods can be characterised by its rapid, flexibility, practicality, financial non-involvement, lack of constraints and most importantly, its limited influence on long-term self-image (Lawson et al., 2016).

Consequently, accessibility to rented luxury fashion enables a more fluid and flexible identification process compared to the self-transformation promoted by luxury fashion possessions, as echoed in the study by Seo & Buchanan-Oliver (2017). As such, our study illustrates liquid modification of identity and self-presentation as it is present when our respondents play with attire for creative motives, dress for different social contexts to better conform to cultural and social norms where luxurious attire is expected or simply when adapting new styles on a daily basis. These findings go in line with Rosenbaum et al. (2018) statement underlining the symbolic meaning luxury brands carry, enabling individuals to construct, maintain and express multiple identities. Thereby, as our respondents demonstrated the desire to adapt various identities through fashion in the sense of creativity and mainly

possibility to do so through rented luxury fashion, our findings underline that the rented garments adapted by our respondents is incorporated in their extended self (Belk, 1988), whereas their sense of self may follow and undergo a shift. In this manner, the respondents' choice of rental clothes, despite portraying creativity and accessing products they would not necessarily consume, they argued that the clothing is still selected personally by them, thus carrying identification value. In this sense, there is a noticeable connection between rental luxury fashion and identity which in turn can be understood through Goffman's (1959) view on self-presentation, described as a delicate balance between shaping external impressions while expressing one's identity accordingly. In view of this, respondents highlighted that in the context of luxury fashion rental, they have an increased opportunity to curate their desired outward image by selecting specific luxury items. Consequently, clothing aids individuals to adapt different personas and identities whereas the rental option facilitates the process. Thus, the act of rental luxury fashion allows them to shape and manage external impressions of them while simultaneously expressing various facets of their internal identity by experimenting with different styles, trends and brands (Arnould & Thompson, 2018). As such, despite non-exclusively owned attire that is previously known to carry intense identification value due to becoming an extension of self (Belk, 1988), the balance between external impression and internal expression is still present in rental practices.

In relation to our respondents dressing in rented luxury primarily for the occasion, such as complying mandatory dress codes at work, to better obey the preconceived societal norms, we argue by the aid of respondents' answers that the luxury item rented is not fully incorporated into their extended self as it aligns more with social expectations rather than their "authentic self-identity". These empirical outcomes go in line with Belk's (2013) view of non-fixed identities, as some respondents adapted their identities according to dynamic social- and cultural practices. In this manner, we identified that some consumers' obey social norms by dressing accordingly to better fit the context, thus without actually identifying themselves with the temporarily worn rented luxury item. As such, the self-concept of some respondents remains consistent and unaltered in these situations, thus a fluid transformation of identity is not applicable in these contexts. These findings of self-presentation and liquid identities echoes some of the findings of previous research on the topic of possessions (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Bauman, 2007; Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould, 2012), however we noted a connection between liquid identities and an anxiousness within the younger respondents analysed, as they carry an increased pressure to fit into societal norms and

preconceived notions of status. Meanwhile the older respondents illustrated an increased desire to adapt multiple identities through rental luxury fashion primarily for the joy of expressing creativity and different styles that are not otherwise in reach.

### 5.2.3 Luxury Fashion Rental Enhances Identity Formation Through Social Media

In regards to self-presentation our findings promote the process of forming multiple identities to be facilitated by the use of social media as users have increased ability in forming and portraying multiple identities at once on different social media platforms, especially seen when applying rental clothing to the field. Social media has enabled new complex ways in which individuals' control and manage their image, allowing them greater ability over managing their multiple identities (Zhoa, 2005; Zani, Norman & Ghani, 2022), which our respondents prove. Our empirical findings, drawing on the conducted analysis illustrates that the respondents are positive toward forming different identities depending on the social media platform and trends. In this manner, we observed the desirability to constant adaptation of different personas and identities, further facilitated by rental clothing, which has caused self-presentation to become a more complex and multifaceted phenomenon. We can conclude that most respondents show a desire or understanding of the possibility to express oneself in different ways which is eased by the ability to rent luxury fashion, thus, expression is dependent on context and platform.

Further, it was acknowledged by respondents that there is a possibility of being assigned an identity within a community for displaying photos of oneself wearing rented luxury, such as influencers or celebrities. As such, respondents acknowledge that by publishing photos wearing certain pieces or brands, no matter if they are rented or owned, you are entitled to some form of social status from the identity and social group you are being associated with. In fact, one respondent decided to comment upon this matter to illustrate understanding of the receiver's interpretation of one's identity, stating that it may vary depending on the symbolic meaning of the garment displayed, the social context and the preconceived perceptions of the receiver of self-expression. With our respondents' reflections upon the matter, it is possible to grasp new ways in which consumers can continually manage their self-presentations despite not actively controlling them, which Goffman's Impression Management does not fully

capture due to being established in another time. While Goffman views identity as an ongoing performance and accordingly something fluid (1959), we argue that the temporary and fluid aspect of identity is even strengthened by social media, where impression management can take form through multiple identities across various social media platforms at once, while exceeding beyond an individual's control (Zhoa, 2005), during every hour of the day which Goffman does not capture (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003). Our respondents illustrated a dynamic and ongoing desire to adapt multiple identities online, or at times selectively present various aspects of one or more identities through the use of rented luxury fashion. Goffman's Impression Management thus remains a useful framework to comprehend the specific conscious and unconscious actions to leave a desired impression on other social actors, although the essence of the theory is not adapted to today's digital landscape. Hence, in line with the development of social media and rental of luxury attire, our findings illustrate an even larger fluidity in contemporary self-presentation projects.

Through our conclusions drawn from our research, we successfully recognise the constant adaptation of different personas portrayed differently on various digital platforms, whereas small fragments of one's identity can be intentionally conveyed while neglecting other crucial aspects of one's identity. As such, individuals have increased abilities in forming an identity on social media, however, there are increased difficulties in managing impressions since the audience is not as definable as in a real life setting. In Goffman's theory (1959), it is argued that self-presentations are contextual, thus identities can be modified and adapted to various social settings. Our findings suggest that social media poses a challenge of this matter in regards to a broader and not always definable audience. To conclude, our study highlights that consumers' of rented luxury fashion are highly enthusiastic to explore different styles, adapt identities unlike their offline identity and showcase their creativity through various personas, which allows them an increased ability of regulating their online identity. Thus, our study proves that digital technologies allows for individuals portraying certain possessions and dispossessions to identify with online communities and form collective identities which transcends traditional boundaries of time and space, something in which Goffman's Impression Management does not fully encompass only considering contextual, face-to-face self-presentation.

#### 5.2.4 Luxury Fashion Rental as a Way of Conveying Cultural Capital

The findings covering self-presentation in relation to rented luxury fashion demonstrates the ability to convey a specific desired image through attire. By looking at taste through the lens of Bourdieu (2018) in relation to self-presentation, we employed a novel theoretical outlook on the practice of luxury fashion rental, enabling us to examine how individuals seek to manage impressions by temporarily accessing luxury attire and engaging in consumption practices which historically has been limited to the upper class. Our findings illustrate that consumers experience an increased ability of influencing the perception of their class affiliation, since luxury fashion rental have enabled them to wear attire that they previously lacked the possibility of exclusively owning. This experience was argued for in relation to the external crowd's inability of detecting whether the luxury attire is rented or owned, thus, consumers experience it to convey the same form of social status as possessions effectively do. This is a novel finding within our study, since previous studies do not touch upon how social status is experienced by consumers in regards to luxury fashion rental (Loussaïef et al., 2019). Further, the desire to attain social status through rented luxury is foremost seen in regards to the younger consumers (ages 16-20) within our focus groups, who expressed an increased anxiousness connected to obeying social norms. Thus, incorporating rented luxury attire in their identity projects and self-presentations was shown to help them fit into a social context characterised with pressure on social status. As such, it is further possible to argue that even rented pieces can be seen as an extension of the self, aiding in transforming and displaying status and an affluent lifestyle (Belk, 1998). Subsequently, while the traditional notions of luxury fashion ownership have been closely linked to hedonism (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008), we have identified the possibility of individuals experiencing the same pleasure through rented services, thus, allowing consumers' to experience the status and enjoyment associated with the luxury item. Consumers' belief of being ascribed an exclusive group belonging based on rented luxury attire moreover indicate consumers' experience of diminishing class boundaries, which somewhat challenges Bourdieu's theory on Social Distinction which suggest that practices and taste are distinctly tied to different social classes (Bourdieu, 1984; Henry & Caldwell, 2018). This development is likewise proclaimed by Arsel and Bean (2018), who states that forces such as globalisation and digitalisation are decreasing traditional class markers, and that the historical view of social class is thus challenged. As such, rented luxury enables connections between different groups of people

across different social classes and access to new experiences, which strengthens the sense of identity (Belk, 2014).

Since some respondents voiced that their experience with renting is rooted in not having financial abilities of purchasing luxury, our findings show that luxury consumption is now transcending social classes due to not being as economically restrained. Thus, we are critical towards Bourdieu's theory on luxury fashion being a distinction of taste for the upper class. Instead, our findings support Arsel and Bean's (2018) argument that taste is becoming more fluid, and not as bound to social classes as in history. In line with this concern, we did record some discussion regarding wearing rented luxury fashion indicating fakeness as one does not own it personally. As a result, we observed a conflicting perspective regarding the role of identity projects in access-based consumption practices, as a manner of faking social class or financial assets. Thus, some respondents deliberated the fakeness of financial aspects, which can be seen as a false signalling of economic capital (Bourdieu, 2018). While our findings portray that luxury attire might no longer be seen as an authentic symbol for high economic capital, the historical connotation of luxury signalling wealth is further challenged (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996; Onu, Kessler & Smith, 2016). This aligns with Wang (2022) and Kampferer's (2015) claim that the practice of consuming luxury goods is no longer as exclusive, thus, the social status which was once associated with luxury consumption is slowly reducing. However, while being critical towards luxury fashion being an authentic symbol for wealth, we do not argue that social classes are eliminated in relation to renting luxury fashion since it can still be considered expensive for some consumers.

On another note, our findings demonstrates that renting luxury attire enables consumers to present their authentic fashion sense and convey their understanding of the symbolic and cultural meanings of various brands, which thus can be regarded as signalling cultural capital. It also aligns with consumers' non-hedonistic objectives of being seen as sustainable individuals, where renting as opposed to exclusively owning portrays them as environmentally conscious consumers. This aligns with Sörum and Gianneschi's (2022) study suggesting that rental services support consumers' sustainable aims and is a major contributor to why consumers indulge in fashion rental, as well as Enwistle's (2015) notion that clothes can be acquired to signal morality. The practice of renting is accordingly identified to be an important part of consumers' self-presentations, where the practice is seen to support consumers' sustainable aspirations and positioning them as woke individuals in a

contemporary social context. It is of our interpretation that the joint appreciation of the environment can possibly be explained by the prevailing norms of contemporary society where individuals are expected to take stances in various societal questions, such as the climate crisis. Our findings further suggest that possessing sustainable values and engaging in practices supporting those beliefs is seen to entail social status and signalling a high cultural capital in terms of being educated and well-informed about societal issues, illustrating the relevance of luxury rental services in consumers' identity projects and self-presentation. However, since one respondent with French residence, who is further well-educated within the area due to being owner of a luxury rental company in France, voiced a contrasting view on renting clothes in France where there is a lower motivation to share clothes with strangers. Thus, it is of relevance to highlight that these values and engaging in fashion rental to convey cultural capital and social status can differ between countries and social context, supporting Bourdieu's (1984; 2018) idea of values and behaviour differing between contexts and groups of people. As a result, we conclude that sustainable beliefs and having a positive outlook on renting luxury attire is highly individual, thus, it constitutes an important role in individuals' identity projects if they have sustainable aspirations and beliefs.

### 5.2.5 The Consistent Link Between Self-Presentation and Luxury Fashion Rental as Means to Constructing Desired Impressions

Our empirical evidence confirms previous studies by suggesting that consumers' seek neatness and elegance in rented luxury fashion, something that they argue is not easily done without luxury pieces (Loussaïef et al., 2019; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999; Wang, 2022). These findings arose specifically when respondents commented upon renting certain luxury attire for special social occasions, such as school proms, work, wedding and parties. We find that the desire to dress in luxury garments of that nature indicates the ongoing attempt to reach an ideal self-image in terms of self-presentation, which in this sense can be applied to Goffman's Impression Management. Consumers of rented luxury fashion recognise the significance of wearing luxury attire for occasions of social norms, as we draw the conclusion that it enhances their self-presentation and contributes to their ideal self-image. This argument aligns with Goffman's (1959) concept of Impression Management which emphasises the strategic, conscious construction of a desired image other social actors will form. Therefore, in line with Goffman's theory of Impression Management, our findings

suggest that individuals intentionally employ specific and conscious self-presentation strategies by carrying luxury attire to specific social events. Thus, with the aim of leaving a desired impression and shaping their identity in the perception of others, according to their personal self-presentation strategies. From these findings, identity construction is shown to be a perpetual process and the meaning of objects are contingent on context, culture and time (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). As such, respondents stated that they would dress in luxury garments according to a certain context, thus letting the social setting add meaning to the attire worn, which aligns with Firat and Venkatesh (1995) research. Accordingly, it is proven by our respondents that objects lack meaning in their essence due to the uninterest of luxury garments if not wanting to leave a desired impression, thus the items need to be understood in relation to norms, aesthetics, language and symbolic meanings of where they exist (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Wang, 2022). Hence, according to Goffman's (1959) concept, our findings capture individuals' manipulation of the experience of luxury fashion rental as means to communicate neatness, refinement and creativity through managing their choice of attire, which is concluded to be easier done by rental clothing.

The outcomes demonstrating that consumers' carry an increased passion to experiment with luxury fashion rental to more efficiently show off their creativity, is further strengthened by the findings of Sörum and Gianneschi (2022) stressing that absence of ownership does not remove consumers' ability to utilise clothes as means for identity expression and construction. In this manner, luxury fashion rental offers luxury clothing and accessories for lower costs which facilitates the consumers' desire to experiment more, thus increasing value to their identity projects. Furthermore, the outcomes of our study suggest that the desire to manipulate signs and leave a favoured image on others is more visible in the younger segment of respondents interviewed, which translates to their self-presentations (Goffman, 1959). Hence, consumers' of luxury fashion attending middle- and high school proved to have an increased pressure to convey to other social actors' opinions when choosing attire for specific social events. In other words, the younger individuals' school peers prove to have an immense influence in how consumers of rented luxury fashion orientate within their cognitive decision-making process of choosing what to wear. While we argue that this is rather predictable, our findings prove the lengths young women can go to more accurately fit trends and obey their surroundings' taste and preferences. The younger segment (aged 16-20) primarily use rented luxury as means for status but disallows for cultural capital to be present in their choices of rental luxury as they simply motivate their choices based on fitting social



norms. On the contrary, the young adults (aged 20-28) demonstrated an increased desire to choose certain brands or pieces with particular cultural meaning, such as having an understanding or familiarity with a certain luxury brand or wanting to engage in sustainable luxury consumption, which signals a higher cultural capital from a Bourdieun perspective. This finding illustrates Arsel and Bean's (2018) point, suggesting that similar objects are acquired in different manners, which thus conveys different levels of cultural capital.

### 5.3 Addressing the Research Questions

To assess the role of rented luxury fashion in relation to identity projects and self-presentation, gathered empirical data has been analysed and discussed in order to accurately answer the study's two research questions in the following section.

#### 5.3.1 RQ1: What Role Does Rental- Rather Than Ownership of Luxury Fashion Have in Consumers' Identity Projects?

The conclusions pertaining to RQ1 demonstrate that, in contrast to ownership, non-exclusively owned luxury plays a role as means to; (1) provide emotional value, (2) increase ability to create multiple identities, and (3) foster a sustainable identity.

Corresponding to our first finding, consumers' experience the emotional value found in rented luxury fashion in varying ways. As such, some find the emotional attachment to be lacking in non-exclusively owned items as the feeling of personal achievement when purchasing luxury items is considered lost, following the loss of cognitive- and emotional investment into rental products. Contrary to these statements, a majority of consumers consider rental luxury to carry high emotional significance due to the process of personally selecting specific pieces which in turn acts as extensions of the self, thus nurturing an identity despite being non-exclusively owned. Emotional value was further found in: consumers increased ability to experiment with rented luxury and their capacity to fulfil a sustainable identity.

Drawing upon the second concluded outcome, non-ownership contributes to the possibility of fulfilling creative aspects. In this manner, luxury fashion rental allows the process of creating

multiple identities to be facilitated as financial commitment is not required. By temporarily acquiring certain pieces and styles, consumers' underscore the enhanced capacity, within the given rental period, to temporarily identify with items. This is not as effectively done when having to conform to financial investments of purchasing new luxury, thus, rental luxury allows for increased ability to create multiple identities. Consumers prove to adapt multiple identities through rental fashion to accurately display creativity with luxury clothing, normally out of their reach. In this manner, rented luxury increases consumers' opportunity of constructing- and experimenting with multiple identities for different occasions. As such, consumers are able to identify with non-exclusively owned luxury items, despite being shared with strangers outside of one's family. Thus "sharing out" enables identification value, which has merely been seen in possessions before.

Pertaining to our third finding, we recognise that luxury fashion rental plays an important role in consumers identity projects in terms of supporting their sustainable beliefs and offering a service which aligns with these. Being able to alter exclusive ownership with rental items is significant in numerous consumers' aim of being sustainable individuals since renting is perceived to be an environmentally-, economically- and socially sustainable practice. Thus, rented luxury pieces carry an important role in enabling consumers to fulfil their sustainably conscious consumer identities, which is considered more difficult when purchasing newly produced luxury goods. In this manner, our results present an increased understanding as to how rented luxury fashion is for the majority, equally rich in emotional- and identification value as possessions in consumers' identity projects.

To conclude, the results of RQ1 shows that the role of luxury fashion rental is equivalent to ownership in consumers' identity projects. Our empirical findings assert that luxury fashion rental plays a crucial role in supporting consumers' identity projects. In this manner, we argue that non-exclusively owned luxury items carry a comparable amount of identification value as possessions in individuals' identity construction, despite being shared with individuals outside of one's family. As opposed to luxury possessions which are widely discussed as means for evoking a significant degree of emotional attachment, the emotional attachment in rented luxury exhibits variability among consumers. Consequently, the value is not limited to the acquired objects per se, rather, our findings illustrate that the actual practice of renting as opposed to consuming is also seen to play a significant part in numerous identity projects. As demonstrated, the loss of ownership of luxury goods does not necessarily affect consumers'

ability to form one or multiple identities. Moving beyond the prior assertion that individual's are what they own, access-based consumption has resulted in means to identity construction, converting to the new view namely, you are what you share (Belk, 2014).

### 5.3.2 RQ2: How do Consumers Reflect Upon Their Self-Presentation in Relation to Luxury Fashion Rental?

Following the findings for RQ2 we can conclude that consumers use rented luxury fashion as means to; (4) convey social belonging (5) showcase a desired style, and (6) obey contextual norms.

Corresponding to the fourth highlighted finding, many respondents voiced that despite not having financial assets to exclusively own the luxury pieces, rental options enabled them to convey parts of their identity in terms of signalling fashion sense of cultural- and symbolic understanding of different brands and pieces. As a result, numerous respondents believed that by renting luxury pieces they were enabled to be associated or ascribed belonging to a certain crowd of people. Accordingly, it can be inferred that luxury fashion is experienced to provide social status and equal symbolism even when being rented as owned, hence it plays an important role in consumers' self-presentations.

With respect to our fifth concluded finding, consumers utilise luxury fashion rental to portray a desired style. By combining luxury items, consumers actively seek neatness through clothing, which is not as easily done by donning non-luxury items. As such, the desire to dress in rented luxury is rooted in the ongoing attempt to showcase an ideal style considered presentable, such as when present at a social event. In this manner, consumers of luxury fashion rental do in fact recognise the significance of wearing rented luxury clothing to portray a desired individuality and impression of neatness, which in turn nurture a sense of self and assists the self-presentation process.

Lastly, relating to our sixth finding, we asserted that consumers engage in luxury fashion rental to obey certain contextual norms. In various social settings, such as work, school and social events, consumers view rented luxury items to be a great option enabling them to fit social norms and address the social pressure of wearing luxury items. In addition to these

contexts, social media was recognised as a digital setting containing norms for users to obey. As such, consumers' intentionally utilise rented luxury to publish on social media, where a desire of performing a certain self-presentation in relation to trends is identified and obeyed. By being able to temporarily access luxury items, consumers are able to wear clothes which do not fully align with their normal personality or identity, which on the other hand fits the contextual norm. Hence, consumers actively recognise the value found in luxury items in certain social settings which contributes to their ideal self-image at times where certain impressions are wanted. Thus, luxury fashion rental enables the consumers to construct and perform a temporary identity that reduces the social anxiousness of not obeying social norms.

To conclude, the findings for RQ2 illustrate various ways in which consumers reflect upon their self-presentation in relation to luxury fashion rental. The empirical conclusions drawn shows that rented luxury items are employed to signal a sense of self to others and fit the prevailing social context. By acquiring certain pieces, the consumers are accordingly enabled to convey a particular social belonging as they are ascribed a group identity based on their self-presentation. Furthermore, rented luxury fashion facilitates the process of consumers' aspiration to showcase a desired style, given the non-financial participation. Lastly, luxury fashion rental is seen to be a major resource in aiding consumers desire to obey certain contextual norms of social events.

## 5.4 Contributions and Achieved Aims

While the aim of the study was to contribute with meaningful insights to the field of identity construction in relation to luxury fashion rental while addressing deficiencies within pre-existing literature, our study certainly met its aim which is provided in the segment covering the answers to our research questions (*see subheading 5.3 Addressing the Research Questions*) and the following implications found in this chapter (*see subheading 5.5 Theoretical Implications and 5.6 Practical Implications*). Through extensive literature review and carefully examined focus group interviews, our research has successfully provided rich insights into the role of luxury fashion rental in consumer's identity projects and self-presentation. Our empirical findings demonstrated significant insights into the motivations and experiences behind the strategies of self-presentation and identity projects when engaging in access-based consumption, more specifically rental consumption.

Therefore, the analysis specifically reveals how luxury fashion rental plays a crucial role in consumers' identity projects and self-presentation, despite not being exclusively owned, thus successfully expanding the knowledge and comprehension within this field of study. In addition, this study has proficiently addressed deficiencies found in prior literature by examining a rather new consumption practice among the younger consumers, aged 16-28. Previous studies have thus predominantly merely studied luxury possessions and identity construction, overlooking the unique dynamics and complex relationship to rented luxury.

Furtheron, our study successfully examined the relationship between identity construction and luxury fashion rental by applying three appreciated concepts within the field of CCT, proving that olden theories remain applicable to the new consumption practice. In this sense, we have spotted an additional way in which consumers' manage self-presentation in relation to rented luxury on social media today, confirming prior literature covering Goffman's Impressions Management on this matter. Along the same line, we contributed to classical theories additionally by showing that luxury consumption is now accessible to the larger mass which challenges Bourdieu's concept of social classes, where the consumption practice has been tied to the upper class. In relation to Belk's concept, the extended self, our study illustrated that "sharing out" with individuals outside of your connections evidently nurtures identity as "sharing in" practices. As such, we successfully contributed to prior studies upon the matter, the prominent one being Loussaïef et al. (2019) whose findings merely touched on "sharing in" practices of sharing- and borrowing from one's closest circle. As such, our empirical findings highlight various perspectives on luxury consumption while enriching the understanding within the field of identity construction. Thereby, this study extends previous research while paving the way for future research within the realm as it contributes with valuable knowledge to a rather novel and overlooked phenomenon.

## 5.5 Theoretical Implications

In regards to the articles found discussing the matter of access-based consumption in relation to consumers' identity construction, our study has contributed theoretically by highlighting that consumers in fact can experience great emotional attachment toward rented luxury fashion, due to its support in their identity projects. This finding contributes to the field of access-based consumption as Bhardi and Eckhardt (2012) emphasise consumers' lack of

emotional attachment in these practices, by illustrating that emotional value can be found in numerous ways despite the non-ownership. Furthermore, our study expands the current theoretical understanding of the role of rented luxury fashion in late adolescent women's (ages 16-28) identity projects and self-presentations, a segment which has not been successfully investigated beforehand (Loussaïef et al., 2019). In correlation with the findings illustrated in Loussaïef et al. (2016) study, our empirical findings underscore that access-based luxury fashion do carry great value in consumers' identity projects, opposing Bhardi and Eckhardt's (2012) finding that self-identity is not equally supported by access-based items. In addition to this, the findings in Loussaïef et al. (2019) study reveals that adult women sharing garments outside of the family must identify a certain consistency in the rented luxury and their "authentic self-identity". In the case of our findings, women ages 16-28 express a desire and joy to incorporate pieces which are not always consistent with their "authentic self-identity" to foster temporary identities in relation to their creative or experimental desires. Further, we contribute to the current understanding by identifying that younger consumers (ages 16-20) carry increased consciousness regarding societal pressure and social status, which is not identified within the study carried out by Loussaïef et al. (2019). In addition, our findings echoes both Loussaïef et al. (2019) and Bhardi and Eckhardt (2012) observations of access-based items facilitating the process of liquid transformation of identity, which is further identified among the younger consumers in our study.

By applying Goffman's concept of Impression Management, our study highlights the significance of self-presentation online as well as offline, following the process of identity construction in the realm of non-exclusively owned luxury items. Furthermore, our study underscores the intentional strategies of Impression Management to successfully create and manage desired impressions and shape their identities accordingly when engaging with rented luxury fashion. Consequently, our research invites exploration into the interplay between rented luxury fashion, Impression Management and the fluidity of identity construction in a digital age, whereas individuals navigate complexities of projecting multiple identities through rented attire.

In relation to Belk's concept of the extended self, further theoretical implications derived from our findings proving that non-exclusively owned items, within the "sharing out" practice of renting, contributes to a strong sense of self, resulting in aiding identity construction. This finding concluding that "sharing out" practices nurtures identities whereas

rented items successfully act as an extension of self has not yet been emphasised by Belk (2014). In this manner, our findings provide possible extensions of highly appreciated and utilised concepts for studies within the field of identity construction and possession in contemporary society. As such, we contribute to the theoretical realm by displaying the evolving nature of identity construction in the context of an access-based consumption practice, indicating the fluid transformation of identities and dispossessions is of emotional identification value for many consumers. Thus, our findings contribute to a broader understanding of the dynamic interplay between material dispossessions and the identity construction.

Having applied Bourdieu's Social Distinction to the context of rented luxury fashion and identity construction have significant contributions to theoretical implications. Meanwhile Bourdieu argues for the existence of distinctive social markers, our findings challenge this notion and suggest that class boundaries are becoming more fluid with the shift towards a collaborative society. The result of the study reveals that the traditional markers between various social classes have somewhat faded due to new access-based consumption practices such as luxury fashion rental. Consumers can nowadays access luxury fashion through rental services without originally belonging to a certain social class. Thus, our study offers valuable insights for theoretical implications of Bourdieu's Social Distinction theory.

Lastly, as the different theories were employed to understand consumers' identity projects and self-presentations, as a field within Consumer Culture Theory, we would like to highlight our contribution to this realm of research. While CCT seeks to understand consumer culture in relation to various social- and cultural influences, we argue that our research expands the current understanding of the implications of rented luxury fashion in young female consumers' identity projects and self-presentations. Our findings show that the sustainable norm of contemporary society is motivating consumers to engage in the practice, further that the practice in itself nourishes consumers' identity projects and enables them to wear luxury items while simultaneously maintaining a sustainable identity, corresponding to the prevailing norms in their social context. Further, while possessions have long been debated to be utilised as crucial means in consumers' identity projects, this research highlights the possibility and even desirability to identify with non-exclusively owned items such as rented luxury.

## 5.6 Practical Implications

In practical terms, this research also provides several implications to highlight. Firstmost, many respondents of all ages expressed a positive attitude towards renting luxury fashion and were prone to go through the process of renting clothing again. Although, indicating the desire to be a sustainable consumer, the scarcity and inconsistency of available rental services makes it rather difficult to participate in the access-based consumption practice. As such, knowing the demand of the ages 16-28, in practical terms, it can be viewed as an avenue to explore entrepreneurial ventures of new business within the field.

Secondly, through our empirical findings we recognised the difficulty of locating women of the ages 16-19 who have previously participated in the emerging practice of rental services despite the genuine interest to do so. Thus, we see the possibility to broaden the market and target the consumers of these ages more accurately by adapting business models to draw attention from this age group. Therefore, we argue for access models to better suit and develop their approach to the given targeted customer group. As such, communication needs to be regulated accordingly, preferably through mobile phone apps and social media where the age groups mostly interact. In this manner, practical implications have been refined through the findings of this study.

Finally, another finding of the study reveals that consumers within this particular age group display a great desirability of renting rare and fun pieces to accurately experiment with several identities. Several respondents voiced that they would rather rent pieces which they would not normally consume, as they would rather invest in those items and own them exclusively. This is a finding of managerial relevance if targeting late adolescent women for luxury fashion rental.

## 5.7 Future Research

Although our findings provide valuable insights into the relationship between rented luxury fashion and identity construction, there remain several avenues for future research to further investigate. In order to deepen the understanding within the field, it is suggested to delve into the following three areas of inquiry:



First, this study examines a majority of participants holding Swedish citizenship and merely gathering information from a certain cultural background. Consequently, one respondent discussed the differences in attitudes towards ownership in her current country of residence compared to her homeland Sweden, thus opening up for interesting insights. As such, we propose examining different demographics, more specifically including respondents of even more varied nationalities which can contribute to different attitudes towards sharing practices.

Secondly, we suggest examining the discussion of self-presentation that is actively constructed and maintained on social media in relation to rented luxury fashion. Thus, delving into the role of social media in shaping and influencing the construction of identity, following the desired self-representation communicated when wearing rented luxury fashion. In this sense, research can examine how individuals present and curate their rented luxury fashion items on various social media platforms. In order to do so, a netnography crossed with in-depth interviews can be deemed useful to cover the comprehension of motives behind online visibility and identity formation in relation to rented luxury fashion.

Lastly, by looking at the old concept ‘Purity and Dirt’ by Mary Douglas in relation to rented luxury fashion, and its effects on identity construction can provide valuable insights into social structures and individual behaviour. By applying the concept to a rather new phenomenon like rental services, researchers can provide explanations of how consumers navigate the perceived purity or dirtiness associated with owning versus renting luxury fashion. As such, researchers may look into the positive or negative affective contamination of rented luxury fashion when examining whether or not individuals view pre-worn rented clothing as identity confusion.

## 5.8 Chapter Summary

In the final segment of this study, a recap of the research aims and objectives were provided. The objective of the study followed: carefully examine the role of luxury fashion rental in relation to identity projects of consumers and how they reflect upon their self-presentation when owning rented luxury. The aim of the study was to generate valuable insights to the field of identity construction in relation to the emerging access-based consumption practice of

rental services, while addressing deficiencies found in pre-existing studies within the area. In this section we successfully provided answers to the study's two research questions to accurately ensure the reader how we contributed to the field of study. This was discussed under the subheadings of theoretical- and practical implications, where examples of such contributions were highlighted. Lastly, three suggestions for future research were raised.

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<sup>1</sup> Gemme Collective has ceased its operations, if required access to source, check: Gemme Collective. (n.d.). Instagram. Available online: <https://www.instagram.com/gemme.collective/>

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## Image Reference

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# Appendix

## Focus Group Interview Guide

Hi, our names are Hanna & Elsa and we are so happy that you wanted to participate in this focus group discussion to aid us in our thesis writing process. As we have briefly informed you, we will be discussing rental of luxury goods today, as opposed to buying, and ask you some questions in regards to how that affects your identity and sense of self.

When we talk about identity in relation to fashion, we refer to the value of clothing for our sense of who we are and how we want others to perceive us, which leaves us to view fashion as an important factor in creating one or multiple identities.

We want this to be a relaxed discussion, where everyone feels comfortable and free to speak, so please feel free to share your ideas and experiences however you like.

Also, this discussion is recorded only for the use of transcription of your answers and will not be stored after our study is done. In this way we ensure confidentiality and won't enclose any personal information in our paper!

The primary concept of a focus group is open discussions, please lead the discussion as you would like and encourage others to participate! We will direct some questions to guide the conversations and might participate with follow-up questions at some points!

### Opening Questions

1. Describe your relationship with fashion, what does it mean to you?
2. What is your view on luxury fashion?
  - a. And do you purchase luxury goods?



### ***Renting***

1. Describe your experience with renting high-end fashion?
2. What are your motivations for renting high-end fashion?
  - a. What factors influence your decisions?
3. Do you see any barriers to renting high-end fashion, as opposed to buying it?
4. How important is ownership of clothing for you?
  - a. Does the view on ownership change when it comes to luxury clothing?

### ***Identity***

1. How big part of your identity do you assign to your clothing?
2. How do you think renting luxury fashion items affects your sense of identity compared to owning high-end fashion?
3. How do you think that luxury influences your sense of identity?

### ***Self-presentation***

1. Do you think that renting luxury fashion items can change the way you perceive yourself? If so, how?
2. Do you think that your clothing choices have an impact on how others perceive you? Why or why not?
3. When and where do you experience that you present- or convey your identity/identities?

### ***Social Media***

1. Given the ways in which you present yourselves. How do you view your self-presentation on social media?
2. Have you posted anything on social media in your rented clothing?
  - a. If yes, did you in any way show that the clothes were rented?
3. Have you ever rented luxury fashion items specifically for a social media post or event? If so, can you describe your experience?

