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From Elite to Everyone:
How User-Generated Content Democratizes Hermès and Challenges Its
Exclusivity

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Abstract

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Keywords: Luxury brand perceptions; Brand awareness; Commodity theory; Self-brand association; Brand attitudes; User-generated content; Luxury brand management.

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to add to existing research and create a deeper understanding regarding the influence of online narratives on luxury brand attitudes. The research aims to explore how luxury brands are portrayed by social media users, in order to gain a cohesive understanding of its effect on the attitudes that are formed towards the brand. This is conducted by analyzing expressions and behaviors in user-generated content on TikTok and Instagram, in regards to the luxury fashion brand of Hermès.

Theoretical framework: The social media content is analyzed and explained using a combined theoretical framework of brand awareness, commodity theory and self-brand associations. The primary joint component of the three theoretical perspectives are established as the interdependence between exposure to information and brand attitude alterations.

Methodology: The research is established in the paradigm of social constructivism and adopts a qualitative, abductive approach. The aim of the research is fulfilled through a sentiment- and content analysis of 10 social media posts, along with 50 corresponding comments collected from the social media platforms of TikTok and Instagram.

Conclusion: The findings display various potential implications on the brand attitudes towards Hermès, in relation to the visibility of the brand, amount of unveiled information and lack of control of the various associations in the user-generated content. To summarize, it is concluded that the accessibility of the user-generated content and the online portrayals of Hermès enables users' perceptions that compromise the existing image of the brand. These findings propose that the attitudes of luxury brands can be affected by the online narratives, confirming the relevance for the studied field. It is therefore suggested that brands should monitor and manage the risks and opportunities that social media exposure poses, in order to maintain the congruence of the brand.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Problematization

“If it wasn't Hermes - nobody would want these bags”

(Appendix A)

This initial quote was found in the comment section of a TikTok post, in which a Hermès consumer displays her long awaited Birkin bag. The post has been reached by 3.5 million individuals as of this point in time. This highlights the nature of the social media environment, where consumers and non-consumers of luxury brands are free to express themselves and construct their own realities in regards to the symbolic values of the brand.

At the heart of brands that rely on a high symbolic value, lies the perceptions, values and behaviors of its consumers (Rosenbaum-Elliot et al., 2018). Besides satisfying utilitarian needs, consumption is a crucial part of constructing and communicating identity in our post-modern society (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). This both individual and collective process is defined by the information and opinions we are faced with, day to day (Rosenbaum-Elliot et al., 2018). Consequently, social media has disrupted the way consumers form opinions and attitudes about brands (Quesenberry, 2021). Currently, brands are to a large extent exposed in social media, and not the least through user generated content (From here referred to as UGC) (Dennhardt, 2014). Social media has been established as an opportunity for brands, given that it has the potential to increase brand awareness, interactivity with consumers and establish strong relationships with consumers outside traditional marketing (Quesenberry, 2021). However, exposure on social media can be hazardous, since it allows individuals to freely express their perceptions and attitudes towards a brand and its products (Creevey et al., 2021). This phenomenon has shifted the dynamics of most markets, creating a new environment for marketers to adapt to (Kapferer &

Valette-Florence, 2018). From another perspective, it has shifted the perception, attitudes and behaviors of consumers and their relationship with brands (Creevey et al., 2021).

Luxury brands are not an exception of brands exposed to the emerging influence of social media. Generally, a resistance has been identified, where some luxury brands chose not to adapt to emerging online norms (Aydin, 2020). On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, one can see an increasing trend of UGC of luxury brands, where users share knowledge, experiences and opinions to help other consumers (Creevey et al., 2021). Globally, personal wealth is expanding and the desire to engage in materialism is increasing (Bain & Company, 2022). In those consumer groups, the symbolic value of luxurious products is deemed especially important for self presentation and communicating certain social status (Ko et al., 2019). These emerging consumer groups could clash with the established image and identity of luxury brands, decreasing their perceived feeling of prestige (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018). Hence, brands have been forced to adapt to the consequences of this phenomenon in order to keep their competitive advantages (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). In order to accomplish this, luxury brands must constantly differentiate themselves to maintain their sense of exclusivity (Kapferer et al., 2017). In a similar manner, luxury brands have to adapt to exposure on social media, as the awareness of the brand grows larger and consumers control the narratives that surround the brand online (Creevey et al., 2021).

The luxury brand of Hermès is considered to be one of the most exclusive brands in the world (Derval, 2018), with their iconic handbags such as the Birkin among the centerpieces of the brand. Besides the fact that the Birkin bag is a status- and wealth indicator and is considered timeless in terms of the design, the allure of the bag largely revolves around the fact that it is hard to get (Pennington, 2023). Given that a consumer would have at least \$9000 to spend on the bag, they would allegedly still have to create a hefty purchase history at Hermès in order to even be considered eligible (Hughes, 2023). There is no official known policy in regards to how Hermès selects their customers (Cary, 2022). Rather, this secretive, mysterious, elite brand seems to thrive on keeping their consumers constantly wanting and guessing. An increasing trend can

be observed on social media where Hermès enthusiasts use various platforms to inform each other about their purchasing experiences and share valuable tips. This raises questions regarding the impact of social media exposure, in particular UGC where individuals openly discuss the brand.

1.2 Aim and Objectives

Creevey et al. (2021) argues that the existing research of positive luxury brand perceptions related to social media can be concluded as extensive. However, it is argued that a further understanding is needed regarding the effects of social media in terms of negative luxury brand perceptions (Creevey et al., 2021). This expressed gap in the research suggests that the cohesive understanding of online luxury brand perceptions, requires further exploration. It is therefore argued that it is relevant to explore the contemporary phenomenon of UGC, in relation to its influence on brand attitudes. In the research of this thesis, we therefore aim to establish a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of luxury brand related UGC, by observing the online narratives related to Hermès. The research therefore aims to explore the way that social media users portray the brand and interact in regards to it, in order to draw conclusions regarding the potential influences on the brand attitudes of Hermès. This is to be conducted through an analysis of the UGC posts and their corresponding comments. Additionally, the application of a combined theoretical framework will provide deep insight into the general conclusions in regards to the brand as well as the implications for the individual attitudes towards it. This is aimed to provide an initial cohesive understanding of the practical phenomenon, in the hopes that it will inspire further, more extensive research on contemporary social media phenomena related to luxury brands.

1.3 Research Purpose

In summary, luxury brands are striving to maintain their positioning, while consumers are eager to utilize luxury consumption to establish and communicate a desired identity. Meanwhile, there are ongoing online narratives surrounding luxury brands in the form of UGC, that are likely to affect the attitudes of consumers. One can therefore assert the need for an in-depth understanding of the potential impact of social media exposure, particularly UGC, on consumer attitudes of luxury brands.

Considering the aforementioned, the following main research question have been formulated, supported by three sub-questions:

- *How does user-generated content affect brand attitudes of Hermès on social media?*
 - *In what ways does UGC affect the brand awareness of Hermès?*
 - *In what ways does UGC affect the perception of Hermès as an exclusive brand?*
 - *In what ways does UGC affect self-brand associations of Hermès?*

1.4 Delimitations

Considering the previously established research aims and objectives of the thesis, it is important to define the delimitations that they impose on the research. First of all, it is relevant to assert the fact that the analysis is conducted on social media posts and comments, from the social media platforms of TikTok and Instagram. Given that this thesis explores expressions made on social media, we naturally can not assert what the social media users actually think about the brand of Hermès. The conclusions that are made from the analysis will rather emphasize and synthesize the conclusions that can be made regarding how the expressions are likely to be perceived by consumers of the UGC. In other words, how the brand of Hermès is portrayed for social media users and how the users are likely to make sense of it. These interpretations constitute the foundation, from which we can derive the connections to the effects on brand attitudes from the

applied theoretical framework. Additionally, the research of this thesis is based on the use of the single case of Hermès, as opposed to exploring luxury UGC through the use of a multiple case study. It is also assumed that the outcomes of the research would have been different in the use of a luxury brand that is established outside the fashion industry. The determination of the contextual factors that constitute the empirical findings of the research are therefore significant to the expected outcomes of the research. These delimitations were established due to the limitations in time, and based on the previously established aims of the research.

1.5 Outline of Thesis

Chapter 1: The introduction. This chapter serves as an introduction to the phenomenon being studied. It includes a background and problematization of the research, as well as the research's aim and objectives. It also introduces the research purpose and questions, and demonstrates the scope and delimitations of the study.

Chapter 2: The literature review. It presents previous research about Hermès, luxury brand management, consumer motivations to luxury consumption, Luxury branding in a social media context and user generated content on TikTok and Instagram.

Chapter 3: The theoretical framework. It introduces the frameworks used for the research. Hence, the theoretical implications of brand awareness, commodity theory and self-brand association. It ends with a conclusion of the connections between the three phenomena.

Chapter 4: The methodology. It provides a discussion of different methodological choices in regards to research philosophy, research design, data collection, data analysis, limitations of the research and a discussion regarding the validity and reliability.

Chapter 5: The analysis. In this chapter, the findings on UGC on Hermès will be presented and described in relation to the theoretical framework and previous research on the phenomenon.

Chapter 6: The conclusion and discussion. The empirical findings will be explored and critically discussed in relation to the theoretical framework. The conclusions that will be drawn are presented and the research questions will be answered. Lastly, suggestions for future research are proposed.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to Literature Review

The following chapter will present relevant literature that contributes to the upcoming analysis. Firstly, an exploration of background to Hermès will provide insights into general knowledge and the brand's position in the luxury brand industry. Additionally, challenges and key aspects associated with luxury brand management will be discussed. Further, a brief review of motivations for luxury consumption and luxury branding in a social media context will be presented, highlighting the connection between luxury brands, consumers and social media platforms. Finally, an examination of the phenomenon of UGC on Instagram and Tiktok will be included, offering the necessary context for understanding the empirical data explained in the analysis.

2.2 Hermès

Originating in 1837 as saddle makers, Hermès is a French luxury fashion brand and family business that is considered one of the most high-end brands in the world (Hughes, 2023). Today, Hermès is widely recognized for their handbags, in particular the models Kelly and Birkin. Hermès bags have reached iconic status and are coveted to a large extent. They are described as “fashion's ultimate status symbol” and are established as investments due to their financial and symbolic value. The adored bag models are further seen as critical contributors to the overall success of the brand of Hermès (Foreman, 2015). Historically, the brand has gone from catering to aristocrats in equestrianism locally, to a global brand that is known for its heritage and craftsmanship (Roll, 2020). The brand has grown in an organic manner, while creating a loyal customer base and maintaining its high status This has enabled Hermès to “retain control of the

high value, integrity, and status of its brand, along with the loyalty of discerning customers who believe that its quality surpasses that of most others” (Taplin, 2019, p. 9).

The company is built upon three pillars, which are creation, craftsmanship and an exclusive distribution network. Moreover, their values are centered around freedom, demanding craftsmanship, savoir-faire, quality, authenticity and responsible growth. The brand is built upon a foundation of product quality, according to Hermès. Former CEO Jean-Louis Dumas famously highlighted this in a statement: "We don't have a policy of image, we have a policy of product" (Jacobs, 2007). The brand communicates responsabilization in social and environmental issues by highlighting the longevity of their products (Hermès, 2023). As described on their website: “Hermès moves with the times, but always respecting tradition, transmission and innovation” (Hermès, 2023).

Additionally, Hermès uses an in-house distribution model, meaning all production and distribution in stores and online are managed by the company itself. There are currently 303 physical stores worldwide, with different products personalized for each individual store which enables a variety in consumer experiences. The online store of Hermès consists of a limited selection of products which can be purchased and shipped directly to consumers' homes. Hermès has chosen to generally limit their presentation of leather bags online, and rarely offer bags for online purchasing. In other words, an online personalized shopping experience is not as prioritized as in physical stores, where a wider and specialized assortment is offered. Besides their initial assortment, Hermès are known to offer personalized goods in their bespoke assortment (Hermès, 2023) When it comes to social media presence, Hermès have active accounts on Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook (Hermès, 2023). However, the company currently has no official TikTok account.

2.3 Luxury Brand Management

Researchers describe luxury brands as brands which are exclusive, unique and unavailable (Ko et al., 2019; Aliyev et al., 2017; Gurzki & Woisetschläger, 2017; Stephen, 2020). Further, Ko et al. (2019) defines luxury brands by emphasizing high quality, the offering of functional and symbolic value and having a “prestigious image within the market built on qualities such as artisanship, craftsmanship, or service quality”. Moreover, luxury brands are considered worthy of charging higher prices and should be able to inspire a connection between the brand and the consumer. The aspect of symbolic value is said to be one of the main motivations for consumers of luxury goods. This symbolic value is deemed especially important for self presentation and communicating certain social status, in luxury consumers (Ko et al., 2019). This is a phenomenon that is growing in popularity globally, according to Bain and Company (2022), predicting that the personal luxury market will expand by 60 percent from 2022 until 2030, giving luxury brands positive predictions for the future.

Besides these existing definitions, is also the one that luxury is a concept (Kapferer & Michaut, 2014). Luxury as a concept however, relates to the other definitions and includes the fact that luxury brands should have a rarity other than brands which are not considered luxury. Further, this concept is something which regularly needs to be perpetuated by the management in order to maintain a position in the luxury market (Kapferer & Michaut, 2014). It is important to take into consideration that luxury brand consumers are different from consumers of other types of products (Kapferer et al., 2017). These consumers demand a certain approach in marketing as a common feature is that the products they consume should be considered exclusive (Kapferer et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Kapferer et al. (2017) discusses the advances in contemporary luxury brand management where an overall conclusion being drawn is that it is harder for managers to control all aspects of the marketing of a luxury brand. The difficulties in controlling the exposure of negative information is one of the main challenges (Han et al., 2020; Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2018). Overall, the digital technology environment, including social media, is a problem for managers to navigate through.

2.4 Consumer Motivations to Luxury Consumption

The attitudes and motivations that drive consumers to consume luxury are researched and explained from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Previous research establishes the connection between consumption and self-concept, social status and culture from a variety of perspectives (McCracken, 1986; Bourdieu, 1987; Belk, 1988). As discussed prior, a large emphasis has been placed on luxury consumption as a facilitator for self-identity and social expression (Ferraro et al., 2013). These concepts are covered in existing literature (Shukla, 2011; Mandel et al., 2006; Corneo & Jeanne, 1997) and later defined by Amatulli & Guido (2012) as “internalized” and “externalized” motivations for luxury consumption. Similarly, Kapferer & Bastien (2009) made the distinction between consuming luxury for ‘oneself’ and for ‘others’. These perspectives have similar rationales where external motivations are based upon the need for social status, elitism as well as the opinions and validation of others. Further, the internalized motivations are rooted in hedonism and individual attitudes to culture, quality and craftsmanship (Amatulli & Guido, 2012).

From an earlier stage of research, Bourdieu (1984) coined the capital theory, synthesizing how individuals obtain “symbolic capital” (status) through economic, cultural and social capital. This sociological perspective has laid the foundation for more recent consumer culture theory, according to Holt (1998). Holt (1998) added to the ideas of Bourdieu, highlighting the firm connection between materialism, social identity and class distinction. From this perspective, individuals who have a high level of cultural capital are more likely to consume in an elite manner. In other words, it requires knowledge, information and social connections that are commonly rooted in higher social classes in order to consume and appreciate highbrow cultural products (Holt, 1998).

Taking these theoretical perspectives into consideration, one can conclude that the connection between luxury consumption and the construction of the perceived self and social status is

multi-faceted. Self-brand association and self-brand connection are similar terms that ultimately illustrate how brands directly relate to our own senses of identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). This process is based on individual as well as collective aspects of communicating our desired self-concepts (Kirmani, 2009). This consequently means that behaviors such as choices of brands are motivated by our desire to “assimilate with the reference group that they consider compatible with the identity” (Li et al., 2020, p.1217). Moreover, this also means that individuals are likely to use consumption as a vessel to distinguish themselves from those that are not aligned with their perceived identity (Berger & Heath, 2007). In conclusion, the symbolic value of consumption also relies on avoiding consuming in a way that could reflect badly on oneself, e.g by choosing the wrong brand (Berger & Heath, 2007). In a similar manner, the individual desire to consume is influenced by the perceived availability of the product (Derval, 2018). Originally stated by Brock (1968), a perceived rarity or scarcity of a product, brand or even information (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992) psychologically makes us more inclined to want it. Put in other words, individuals enjoy the feeling of obtaining something that others can not (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). Ultimately, this relates to the concept of exclusivity, which the luxury industry is reliant on (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018).

2.5 Luxury Branding in a Social Media Context

Existing literature concludes that social media has created a paradigm shift for luxury brands (Creevey et al., 2022). As opposed to the historically elitist and mysterious phenomenon of luxury, consumers are now more informed and empowered due to an increased presence online (Creevey et al., 2022). Chen and Wang (2017) argue that existing research has distinguished what constitutes luxury, without properly taking the impact of social media into account. Moreover, a discrepancy between luxury brands and its consumers has been identified, indicating that further research must be conducted in order to help brands translate luxury strategies to a social media context (Creevey et al., 2022). An existing body of literature demonstrates the various beneficial outcomes of social media in luxury brand management (Creevey et al., 2022; Goodey et al., 2016).

Contradictory, many luxury brands have been hesitant to make full use of social media, to the extent that some have chosen to be completely inactive (Aydin, 2020, Oliveira & Fernandes, 2020). Park et al. (2021) however encourage a social media presence that creates engagement, given that consumers that engage in word of mouth online are more likely to purchase from the luxury brand in question. Moreover, luxury brands have a way of communicating through social media to a greater extent through emotional than informational ways (Okonkwo, 2010). This strategy is primarily useful since it attracts those who are outside the common group of consumers and creates a desire which is otherwise unlikely to reach (Liu et al., 2019; We Are Social, 2021). Kapferer (1998) explains that this emotional approach is a contributing factor that enables luxury brands to maintain their exclusivity. Although luxury brands focus on creating emotional content on social media, they typically avoid being too interactive with consumers (Okonkwo, 2010). According to researchers, this creates a sense of mystique around the brand and is a part of the emotional communication as the awareness increases at the same time as the accessibility remains unchanged (Liu et al., 2019; We Are Social, 2021).

However, a motivation for consumers' purchase intent is when the brand gives a symbolic meaning on social media which connects to the consumer's self expression. According to Wang and Chen (2021), connecting to self expression and creating a positive brand image results in an increase of brand penetration. The aforementioned creates a contradiction between different theories on the success rate for luxury brands in social media.

2.6 User Generated Content on TikTok and Instagram

Although increasingly popular (Garlin, 2023), UGC is not a new phenomenon (Wagner, 2023). UGC is a general term for online content that has been individually or collaboratively created around a certain phenomenon (OECD, 2007). The term was redefined by Santos (2022, p. 108) stating that UGC is “...any kind of text, data or action performed by online digital systems users, published and disseminated by the same user through independent channels, that incur an expressive or communicative effect...”. UGC has been described as democratizing, given that it allows individuals to participate in public sharing of information and opinions (Simatzkin-Ohana

& Frosh, 2022). The format of UGC varies from images, video, reviews and even audio, such as podcasts. In practice, UGC can therefore range from adding information to a Wikipedia post, posting a comment on an online article or publishing a blog post on a specific topic (Naab & Sehl, 2017). The lack of consistency in its format makes it challenging to universally define UGC as a concept. However, there are several defining characteristics of UGC. These are concluded by Naab and Sehl (2017), emphasizing that UGC is created outside of a professional context. This means that it is created solely by amateurs without supervision or assistance of professionals. Smith et al. (2012) confirms this perspective, stating that UGC is created without a commercial objective for the user. Moreover, UGC must be published in an available, unrestricted manner e.g. on a website or social media platform (Naab & Sehl, 2017). Finally, UGC contains personal contribution, meaning that it must contain a creative effort, which can not be obtained by reposting or replicating the content of others (OECD, 2007). The benefits of partaking in UGC creation are extensive, according to Schmidt (2011). These can be summarized as managing one's identity and establishing relationships to others, as well as sharing or expanding information around a specific topic. Smith et al (2012) further argue that one of the primary motivations for UGC creation is self-promotion to establish identity, similarly as one does through possessions, brands and symbols both online and offline.

The fast growth of TikTok has been eye-catching, with it outnumbering Google in terms of hits, making it the most popular online space during 2021 (BBC, 2021). The app, which is currently the most downloaded app worldwide (Statista, 2023), has become a popular space for UGC publication. The convenient and personalized user experience of TikTok has enabled UGC that engages both creators and users (Wagner, 2023). Moreover, the social media of Instagram is the second most downloaded app worldwide (Statista, 2023). In recent years, Instagram has adapted in order to compete with the popularity of TikTok, by increasing the focus on video-style content in the form of 'Reels'. TikTok is built upon a system of algorithms that enable personalized preferences and hyper-localized content to fit each individual user (Wagner, 2023). The two social media platforms have both grown to become widely used for sharing UGC (Garlin, 2023). Consequently, the two apps have grown to have similar advantages for users that create and/or consume UGC (Garlin, 2023).

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction to Theoretical Framework

To be able to answer the research questions for this thesis, a framework of the three theories of brand awareness, commodity theory and SBA are combined. These different theories, with various origins in brand management research and consumer culture theory, provide varying perspectives of contributing elements to brand attitudes. Each theoretical perspective is later connected to a corresponding research question. In combination with each other, each theoretical foundation constitutes a different perspective of the main research question. Through the exploration of the UGC and its implications on the brand awareness, perceptions of its availability and self-brand associations connected to Hermès, a cohesive understanding is anticipated. This combined framework will thus create enough theoretical context to conclude the effects of the UGC on brand attitudes towards Hermès. The interconnections between the three theoretical perspectives will be concluded at the end of this chapter.

3.1.1 Brand Awareness

Brand awareness refers to how well customers recognize a brand, and increases when the brand is exposed in different situations. The exposure of a brand might be information being spread on social media, reviews and news which increases recognition amongst potential consumers (Han et al., 2020). A large amount of research exists about brand awareness and its impact on brands and brand attitudes. Brand attitudes are affected by brand awareness, since the opportunity to gain an attitude towards a brand increases when consumers are aware of the brand. According to Singh et al. (2022), social media presence increases brand awareness, and in turn brand attitudes. Moreover, there are both positive and negative effects of shared information with an impact on

the awareness (Han et al., 2020; Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2018). The most frequent view however, is the positive side effects, as the phenomenon has shown to increase brand penetration, which is to what extent customers purchase from a brand (Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2018). However, the type of information being spread is of importance, as researchers state that only positive information which results in brand awareness will increase brand penetration. Further, Han et al. (2020) have contributed another angle of the phenomenon, and conclude that even negative knowledge spread about a brand through e.g. word of mouth increases brand awareness. In turn, the brand awareness which rises from negative information will have a negative effect on brand penetration and overall attitudes towards a brand (Han et al., 2020).

Consumers' presence on social media has shown to be an important part in the process of developing attitudes towards brands (Singh et al., 2022). As brand awareness increases when information is being spread about a brand, social media where information spreads rapidly has a large impact (Aula, 2010; Hanna et al., 2011). Further, it is proven by Singh et al. (2022) that there are established connections between increased attitudes and brand promotion on social media. This is due to the fact that the desired associations of the brand increases when brands market themselves on social media, as it facilitates the process of forming connections between consumers and brands (Singh et al., 2022). Hence, consumers' attitudes towards Hermès are assumed to be affected by the UGC, given that it is being exposed on social media. It is however still seen as an important theoretical perspective, which provides context in the marketing literature when observing the UGC.

Although negative information might be a danger, the overall view of brand awareness indicates a positive impact. Moreover, when brand penetration increases due to brand awareness, the consequences have shown to be almost exclusively positive (Han et al, 2020; Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2018). Consumers have a tendency to trust in reviews, information on social media and news about a brand, which increases word of mouth and in turn the brand awareness. A common goal for brands is therefore to increase brand awareness, to be able to increase business growth and profits (Valette-Florence, 2018). Further, Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2018) concludes that there is a sensitivity for luxury brands when it comes to the relation

between brand awareness and brand penetration. While negative information might be harmful towards the brand, positive information resulting in a higher brand awareness will increase brand penetration which might also be harmful (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018). Moreover, the enlargement of UGC as a form of value co-creation between luxury brands and consumers is a phenomenon which expands brand awareness, and in turn the amount of purchases (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018; Han et al., 2020). An increasing demand for luxury brand products as a result of UGC might thus be what lies ahead for the luxury brand industry.

More precisely, brand attitude refers to to what extent consumers consider a brand to fulfill their demands (Liu et al., 2021). This corresponds to other research which implies that brand attitude is emotions towards advantages of a brand. Moreover, brand attitudes are seen as an indicating factor when determining the brand image, which refers to the general perception of a brand (Keller, 2003). Additionally, increased visibility on social media is known to promote the brand identity, which makes consumers more prone to create a connection with a brand. When consumers form connections with brands, they identify with the brand identity which in turn increases the brand equity (Singh et al., 2022). Brand equity is the overall value determined by consumers (Sardashti & Calantone, 2022). In other words, communicating a brand identity on social media will affect the general brand attitudes which exist among consumers. In addition, Arghashi et al. (2021) implies that brand identity and brand image are important factors in raising brand attitudes, yet that brand identity has the largest impact. Hence, it is of importance to be aware of how the brand's identity takes form from a management perspective, to be able to monitor and potentially shape consumers' attitudes (Ansary & Hashim, 2018; Song & Kim, 2020).

In relation, brand attitude has a positive correlation with brand penetration, hence the amount of purchases of a product. The reason for the positive correlation is claimed to be an increased brand equity for consumers (Singh et al., 2022). The connections between increased brand attitudes and brand penetration is supported by other researchers (Machi et al., 2022; Carissa et al., 2021; Awasthi & Mehta, 2022). Machi et al. (2022) also concludes the importance of brand

awareness and a strong brand identity, given that they constitute the fundamental factors that are known to increase the brand penetration.

3.1.2 Commodity Theory

Drawing from the commodity theory, introduced by Brock (1968), the value of a product is positively influenced by a perceived scarcity or unavailability of it. This belief is not singular, but has rather been established in multiple theoretical contexts. Bozkurt and Gligor (2019) state that an item's value is directly linked to how rare it is. In simple terms, individuals are more likely to be attracted to products when made to believe that not everyone can have it (Brock, 1968). Brock and Brannon (1992) however state that the idea of scarcity can also have a negative impact on the attitudes of individuals. It is therefore concluded that scarcity is likely to create polarization, where one is either attracted to or repelled by a commodity (Brock & Brannon, 1992). The core of the theory is defined by Brock (1968, p. 246): "any commodity will be valued to the extent that it is unavailable". Given that 'value' is defined as the commodity's potential to impact consumer attitudes and behaviors (Lynn, 1991), this definition serves a substantial purpose in the analysis of UGC and luxury brands. The commodity theory is applicable to multiple contexts, but considered particularly relevant for luxury brands, given that rarity and exclusivity are often tied to their attractiveness (Rosendo-Rios & Shukla, 2023).

This concept is however not exclusive to consumer goods, it is in fact applicable to anything that can be seen as possessed, transferable and of significance (Rosendo-Rios & Shukla, 2023), meaning that an experience, informational stimuli or a service could also act as a commodity. The psychological notion of scarcity is the foundation of several brand strategies, where a low supply and a high demand creates perceived exclusivity (Derval, 2018). The commodity theory inherently relates to social media exposure in the form of UGC, in the sense that it imposes an increased availability of information concerning a brand. Given that UGC often takes the form of buyer experiences and product reviews (Santos, 2022), it could also alter the perceived availability of the products, thus affecting the assigned value.

Bozzolo and Brock (1992) concludes the theoretical phenomenon and illuminates the various factors that impact consumer attitudes, motivations and behaviors. One of the circumstances that create a perceived scarcity is when individuals are given the impression that a product or service has a relatively low number of owners (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). In other words, a restricted supply of the commodity (Lynn, 1991). In practice, the effects of this strategy is evident when considering the use of terms such as “limited edition” or “last item in stock” in marketing and sales strategies (Lynn, 1991). The second pillar of the commodity theory’s practical implications, is the cost required for obtaining and keeping a product (Lynn, 1991). Commodities of higher prices are to be seen as drivers for value in consumer minds (Lynn, 1991), and are therefore deemed likely to have a positive effect on the attitudes for the brand. In addition to this, consumers are affected by the potential efforts needed to obtain a product or service. Brock (1968) highlights that consumers are more interested in products that lack availability, meaning that there are limited sources of the product and that it requires effort and resources from the individual to purchase it. Brock and Brannon (1992) extends this idea, arguing that a higher restriction or effort needed to withhold the commodity positively affects value. When consumers are motivated to support the restriction of the commodity, meaning that there are a high number of reasons to restrict it, the value increases (Brock & Brannon, 1992). The aspect of time can have an impact on the perceived value as well. Lynn (1991) concludes that delays in obtaining the commodity makes the individual more likely to desire the product. These different elements of the theory can be illustrated by multiple practical examples, such as brands limiting the availability of certain products to certain markets or stores. These discussed elements of the commodity theory, can be concluded as ‘unavailability’, which is the term that will be used in the proceedings of the analysis.

Given that the brand of Hermès is reliant on limiting their supply of their most coveted products, one can visualize the alignment between this theoretical perspective and the luxury brand. Not only does scarcity and rarity increase the desire of consumers, so does withholding information regarding the product. Bozzolo and Brock (1992) states that scarcity motivates the consumer to elaborate on the value of the product, by searching for information about the product. Individuals

that are faced with information that is perceived as rare, are then more motivated to keep elaborating on it. It is likely that the sentiment of the original information will make the individual choose a polar, either positive or negative, rather than form a relatively neutral opinion about the commodity (Brock & Brannon, 1992). This process relates to psychological needs, where we attempt to regain freedom rather than accept that our access to information is limited (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). When forming a positive opinion based on a message, recipients are typically influenced by the source's level of expertise and trustworthiness. Moreover, individuals are more likely to assign value when the message has a level of personal relevance to them (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). A message containing information can therefore be seen as a commodity in itself, where restricted information positively affects perceived value (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). Drawing from this, one can imagine that UGC could impact the perceptions of a luxury brand in a positive as well as negative manner. When the available information about a product is limited or non-existent, individuals are also likely to form opinions based on their own presumptions. In this process, consumers are generally prone to create favorable attitudes towards the product when they imagine a high social demand for the product (Brock & Brannon, 1992). Similarly, Bozzolo and Brock (1992) argue that consumers are likely to assign value and resonate with information that is not available to the larger mass. This sensation of information being withheld, makes individuals believe that the message of the information is valuable and important (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). This also relates to the human need for uniqueness, where restricted information helps us differentiate ourselves and makes us feel special (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992).

3.1.3 Self-brand Association

The universal strive to differentiate ourselves from others using consumption, is fundamentally set in the need for internal and external identity expression (Berger & Heath, 2007). The utilization of consumption for establishing a desired sense of identity or social status, has been found to be particularly significant for luxury goods (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). The theoretical notion of self-brand associations is highly similar to the concept of self-brand connections, and is thus used interchangeably in this thesis. In order to establish clarity, it is

referred to as SBA in the following chapters of the theses. SBA can be defined as “the extent of overlap between the brand and the self” (Ferraro et al., 2013, p. 477). In other words, a phenomenon where consumption is motivated by the individual needs to align their self image with a brand's image or culture (Sirgy, 1982). Not only do senses of identity affect consumption choices, our consumption choices also impact self-concepts (Kirmani, 2009). Thus, we do not consume exclusively to confirm our own identities, but also to accustom ourselves to consumer groups that we wish to belong to. The relationships between consumers and brands are manifested in different manners depending on the objectives of the consumer. While some consume independently in order to determine identity, others choose to consume in a group context to co-create and communicate self-concepts (Li et al., 2020). Consumers with high SBA are known to feel a strong sense of connection to the brand and are therefore resilient to change their attitudes towards a brand (Ferraro et al., 2013). Those with a lower SBA are however sensitive to subjectively negative brand associations that can interfere with their intended self-concept. This is concluded by Ferraro et al. (2013), stating that high SBA consumers are less likely to change their brand attitudes, in contrast to low SBA consumers.

Li et al. (2020) argues that high social class individuals are motivated by personal connections to the brand when consuming from luxury products. They are therefore highly motivated by their needs for self-accomplishment and internal self perceptions. Consequently, their motivations and behaviors are less sensitive to external perceptions and opinions, which means that they are characterized by their loyalty for the brand (Li et al., 2020). However, consumers with a high SBA are also likely to avoid engaging in public forms of word-of-mouth, in order to avoid “outsiders” consuming from the brand (Berger & Heath, 2007). This perspective proposes that high SBA-consumers might not even partake in the online discussion surrounding luxury brands. Consumers with high SBA are also likely to engage in brand pursuit, meaning that they subconsciously and consciously become more attached and committed to the brand when their SBA is threatened (Angle & Forehand, 2016). This means that their preference of the brand increases as a sort of defense mechanism, in order to protect the bond between their own personal image and the brand. While high social class consumers are generally more reliant on their own attitudes and affiliations towards a brand, they are still negatively influenced by

conspicuous behaviors when it comes to luxury brands. This is manifested in their needs to protect their personal images from conflicting associations (Li et al., 2019). Berger and Heath (2007), draws corresponding conclusions regarding social class and different levels of SBA, which are relevant to discuss in the context of luxury consumption. These also conclude that lower social class consumers are more prone to engage in conspicuous exhibitions of consumption, in order to establish perceived wealth.

These conspicuous behaviors are typically indicated by consuming products that are well known to the masses and indicate wealth and social status in a way that does not go unnoticed to others (Ferraro et al., 2013). Conspicuous consumption has been proven to impact brand perceptions and brand attitudes in varying effects, depending on the level of SBA of the observers of the conspicuous behavior. Those of lower SBA, who lack loyalty and connection to the brand, tend to write off conspicuous consumption as ungenue, status seeking behavior, which negatively affects brand attitudes (Ferraro et al., 2013). In the context of luxury brands such as Hermès, where the elements of prestige and status are fundamental, it is however more complex. Li et al. (2019), found that lower class consumers' attitudes towards luxury brands are less affected by conspicuous behaviors. Existing research concerning SBA, socioeconomic status and eye catching consumption therefore have somewhat varying perspectives and conclusions. However, Li et al. (2019) confirms the ideas of Ferraro et al. (2013), stating that there is a risk of brands detaching its symbolic attributes when being associated with the wrong consumer groups. When led to believe that someone is consuming in a deceptive manner, with an apparent lack of consistency between the personal image and the brand image, the brand loses its meaning to the low SBA consumer (Ferraro et al., 2013). Berger and Heath (2007) further conclude that attracting a mass majority or even consumers that do not assimilate with the image of the brand can cause the brand to dilute in terms of meaning, risking brand abandonment from potential consumers.

3.2 A Combined Theoretical Framework

The primary joint component of the three theoretical perspectives of brand awareness, commodity theory and SBA is that they define the interdependence between exposure to information and brand attitude alterations. The concepts of a strong brand identity and brand image go hand in hand with the level of awareness of the brand, and ultimately constitute the foundation of the consumer attitudes towards a luxury brand (Singh et al., 2022). Although having a high brand awareness is vital, it subsequently causes an increase in the purchase demand, which is potentially harmful for brands that rely on rarity and exclusivity (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018; Han et al., 2020; Creevey et al., 2022). Brock (1984) refined this principle and established that perceived unavailability generally makes consumers desire products more. The allure of luxury brands can therefore be explained by the high efforts required to obtain their products (Rosendo-Rios & Shukla, 2023). According to Sardashti and Calantone (2022), creating and maintaining positive attitudes towards luxury brands is a multifaceted process that relies on the assigned value by the consumers, it is thus conclusively co-created.

A consumer's level of SBA directly affects their loyalty and attitude towards the brand, this is however potentially influenced by elements such as social class and the observance of other consumers of the brand (Li et al., 2019). Conspicuous consumption holds risks for luxury brands, but brands also partially rely on it in order to create prestige and status (Ferraro et al., 2013). Given that many luxury brands rely on a high brand awareness, there must be some visible elements of noticeable consumption for them to hold their positioning. It is rather the aspect of inconsistency between the symbolic values of the brand and its consumers that hold the power of altering general brand attitudes (Berger & Heath, 2007). When potential consumers are exposed to a luxury brand that is saturated, contradictory and too available, it therefore risks losing its value. Managing this risk requires control from the brand, which consumer social media presence paradoxically decreases (Creevey et al., 2022). In conclusion, luxury brands like Hermès rely on maintaining consistency in order to manage the quality of the brand, which arguably could be disrupted by UGC.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction to Methodology

The research objectives of this thesis are established from the previously discussed research gap and the argued relevance of exploring a contemporary online phenomenon, which is deemed to have importance for future marketing research. The limited prior knowledge of UGC relating to luxury brands and its potential effects on brand attitudes, consequently makes this study explorative by nature. The aim of the research is to gain deep insight into this contemporary phenomenon through the use of the case of Hermès, in hopes of increasing the future understanding of online conversations surrounding luxury brands. In the following chapter, the methodology and method of the analysis will be presented and critically discussed. The logic of the chapter is inspired by *the research onion*, presented by Saunders et al. (2012). With this approach, the methodology will be explained by narrowing it down from abstract ideas of research philosophies and research approaches, to the presentation of the data collection and data analysis methods that were used. Finally, the reliability and validity of the research will be addressed and limitations will be acknowledged.

4.2 Research Philosophy

When determining which research philosophy to make use of, it is important to firstly distinguish which assumptions are made. This is showcased from which ontologist view and which epistemological stance the research was built upon. These assumptions decide which types of contributions to already existing research are made. Moreover, there are four types of paradigms: positivism, postpositivism, critical theory and constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The

applied paradigm of this thesis is social constructivism, which acted as the foundation for the epistemological stance and the ontologist view. Research philosophy assumptions are divided into objectivism or subjectivism according to Saunders et al. (2019). Social constructivism belongs in the subjectivist approach, which epistemologically means that there is no such thing as an objective truth. Accordingly, objective knowledge can not be obtained, given that knowledge is created based on the perceptions of the researcher (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). The ontologist view of the researchers was related to the constructivist paradigm and therefore based on the assumption that reality is a social construction and that social realities are results of human intellects. These constructs are not static, they are rather constantly redefined over time both independently and collectively. This means the researchers used the constructivism's relativism, where social realities might be multiple and conflicting at times (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Morgan and Smircich (1980) describes the ontological assumptions of constructivism as understanding humans as individuals who impose themselves with the world and constantly learning through symbolic actions. This means that the researchers understand that realities can be shared and are multiple. In practical terms, this means that the findings of the research are not to be seen as an objective truth, given that an objective truth does not exist according to the applied research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Relating to the chosen epistemological stance, a social constructivists perspective reflects to be transactional and a subjectivist, and knowledge is obtained in an interaction between the researcher and what is investigated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Moreover, it is about understanding how social reality is constructed (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). In relation to the thesis, the researchers do not aim to reflect reality, the findings are rather to be seen as a reconstruction of a specific observed phenomenon, from specific theoretical angles. This knowledge was obtained through a hermeneutical methodology, based on the aforementioned theory from Guba and Lincoln (1994), Morgan and Smircich (1980) and Saunders et al. (2019). In accordance with the theory of social constructivism, hermeneutics is an interpretation of reasons and deeper meanings behind a phenomenon (Bleicher, 2017). Therefore, knowledge is obtained through the interdependence between analyzing the parts and the entirety of the data, and in constant

affiliation with the researcher (Gadamer, 2004). This methodological stance was applied throughout the analysis, in order to gain deep insight of the studied phenomenon.

4.3 Research Design

In accordance with the previously established ontological paradigm of social constructivism, the thesis used a qualitative research approach. This is supported by the fact that the objective of the research is to explore and gain insight into a rather new phenomenon in a specific context, as previously accounted for (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Moreover, the aim of the research is to create analytical generalizability, meaning that the findings are bound to their theoretical context (Yin, 2003). Potential future research where the same theoretical framework is applied to similar empirical phenomena, would therefore generate comparable findings as those presented in this thesis. Yin (2003) also explains that for analyzing real life events, qualitative research is useful as it enables the ability to analyze in-depth, which was important when attitudes and behaviors on social media were analyzed. The existing research gap makes it suitable to primarily gain initial insights into the phenomenon, which could potentially act as a foundation for hypothesis development in future quantitative research.

The general research approach of this thesis was an abductive method, making it a flexible interaction between empirical observations and existing theory (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Further, an abductive method aims to develop existing theories or discover new ones through application on various empirical phenomenons. The method is beneficial when the goal is to identify patterns and discover themes in a phenomenon, in accordance with the primary aim of the research. When the chosen phenomenon was analyzed, it was deemed necessary to make use of the flexible theoretical approach that an abductive approach creates (Saunders et al., 2019). The researchers therefore further went back and forth between the gathered material and theoretical framework, which enabled our findings. Moreover, an abductive approach allowed us to generate new observations on the limited research area of social media's influence on luxury brand attitudes (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

The goal for the thesis was analyzing in-depth how UGC affects the attitudes of Hermès, making it a single case study. To have actual context to a phenomenon, a case study has the ability to bring real examples to an otherwise abstract subject (Easterby-smith et al., 2021). Yin (2003) argues that research questions that aim to answer how- or why something is, and when the research is related to contemporary events and requires control of behavioral events, a case study is the most advantageous strategy. Furthermore, as this thesis combined a case study and an abductive approach, the process was systematically combined. In systematic combining, theories, empirical material and one or several cases are processed simultaneously. This process is complex in nature but enables an ability for in-depth analysis, given that it allows the interconnections between data, theory and context to be constant throughout the research (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). A single case study is prioritized over a multiple case study when the phenomenon being studied is of unique manner, and only when the uniqueness of the case can be clearly motivated (Yin, 2003). The history of difficulties in buying Hermès products, not the least their famous and coveted bag models Birkin and Kelly, are prominent (Hughes, 2023) . The previously established desire for- and exclusivity of the brand, as well as its long heritage of maintaining a strong brand identity (Roll, 2020), is therefore what motivated the choice of case.

4.4 Data Collection Method

The process of qualitatively analyzing data from social media is complex and bound to its context, and therefore it is necessary to transparently disclose specific steps in the data collection (Lai & To, 2015). One of the general challenges of analyzing social media posts is the scope of the available data. The large quantity of data makes it difficult, if not impossible to gain a cohesive understanding of the entirety of the available data (Piña-García et al., 2016). Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017) confirms this statement and states that social media research is yet to be established as a defined discipline. Thus, social media research demands caution and deliberation from the researchers, to ensure the quality of the research (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). The collected empirical data of the research consisted of UGC posts along with a number of their

corresponding comments, collected from the social media platforms of TikTok and Instagram. The data was collected using a purposive criterion data collection approach. Thus, the data was gathered based on a thorough, systematic structure based on previously established criteria, which will be concluded below.

Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017) proposes a system of steps to take when collecting data from social media. The first step of the system is to consider and motivate the choice of social media platform, to ensure the relevance for the research objectives. The assessment was made that TikTok and Instagram would ultimately provide a rich understanding of the phenomenon, in comparison to other social media platforms. Conducting a multi-platform study has the benefit of allowing the research to be focused around the phenomenon, rather than the qualities of one specific platform. It also has the benefit of disclosing how different platforms differentiate from- or complement each other (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). Although UGC related to Hermès exists in various content formats and in various online spaces e.g Facebook and Twitter, these were excluded from the thesis. Considering the global popularity of TikTok and Instagram (Statista, 2023), and their similarities in terms of amateur content creation and format of content (Garlin, 2023), it was concluded that the two platforms would reflect sufficient representative knowledge to explore the phenomenon.

The second step of the process is to determine the criteria for the data collection. This step is of importance in the social media context, given that it defines delimitations that are significant for the outcomes of the research (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). The prior mentioned defining characteristics of UGC was applied. Thus, the collected data had to be published in an unrestricted manner, containing personal contributions and without apparent commercial interests (Naab & Sehl, 2017). The second primary criterion for the collected data was that the UGC posts and comments related to the case of Hermès. In order to provide deep insights into the researched phenomenon, posts that did not include some kind of sentiment towards the brand of Hermès were excluded. For example, social media posts and comments that did not contain any text, audio or contextual indicators relating to the case were deemed irrelevant. It is however important to mention that the collection was conducted without previously accounting for the type of sentiment, to avoid bias in the data. Moreover, posts that related to multiple brands were

excluded to avoid confusion in the sentiments. The primary goal of the data collection was to identify posts that were likely to elicit thick data, which would provide a deep contextual understanding of the phenomenon (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017).

Practical criterias were then defined, e.g excluding data that contained text expressed in languages other than english. The data was also delimited to posts that were in a video format, to ensure similarities in the formats from both of the platforms. An initial time frame of the posts was established, allowing the researchers to collect posts published within the time frame of november 2022 to may 2023. This delimitation was established to ensure that the data would be accurate for exploring a contemporary phenomenon. Before establishing the keywords for the data collection, several different alternatives were considered. This ensured that the context for the data collection was unbiased and relevant to the research (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). Later, the hashtag ”#Hermes” was deemed most suitable for the data collection, on both Instagram and TikTok. The data was observed and collected solely using social media apps with previously unused accounts, to avoid algorithmic bias. This strategy restricted the influence of user interaction metrics, meaning algorithmic, unintentional alterations due to personal preferences of the researchers (Baker, 2022). It is however important to note that the presentation of content on TikTok and Instagram is based on algorithms that prioritize content that has been proven to be engaging (Siles et al., 2022). In other terms, the content is placed in a strategic, hierarchical order. This implies that the data collection of the research is based on similar content that individuals would face when using the apps, which further confirms the relevance of the collected data. The same logic was applied when collecting the comments from the UGC posts. The comments were therefore collected from the top of the comment sections, however excluding comments that did not relate the case of Hermès.

The final step of the data collection was to determine the volume of the data (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). It is seldom possible for researchers that collect data from social media to know what quantities of data will be needed, before initiating the data collection. This requires researchers to maintain a dynamic approach throughout the process (Piña-García et al., 2016). The quantity of data was therefore asserted with the objective of reaching theoretical saturation, meaning that the conclusions would not be significantly altered by increasing the volume of data

(Creswell, 2012). This strategy, as well as the predetermined criteria for the data, was implemented and resulted in a data collection of 5 Instagram-posts and 5 TikTok-posts, along with 5 comments from each post. Concludingly, 10 UGC posts and 50 comments served as the empirical data of this thesis (see Appendix A).

Lastly, it is vital for the researchers to maintain an ethical point of view throughout the process, by reflecting on concerns regarding the integrity of the users that have published the content (Piña-García et al., 2016). It was therefore determined that names and online usernames will be excluded in the presentation of the analysis. However, as with all data collected from social media, it is easy to follow the digital trace back to the original publisher. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to maintain anonymity of the social media users (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). Given that contextual elements of the data were included in the analysis, as well as the fact that the raw data can not be described fully without taking visual aspects into account, it was decided that the links to the collected data would be displayed in the presentation of the data (see Appendix B). The collected data was saved and archived, to be stored by the researchers, in the case of interference when accessing the data in its original context (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017).

4.5 Data Analysis

The interpretation of the collected data was made using a combined approach in terms of method. Sloan and Quan-Haase (2017) confirms the relevance of a sentiment analysis when analyzing consumer attitudes to specific brands in a social media context. The initial process of the data analysis hence consisted of a manual sentiment analysis, where the data was assessed and categorized after the expressed attitudes in the post (Mejova, 2009). The analysis was based on hermeneutics, where the spoken and/or written text of the content was processed based on the underlying beliefs and opinions that were expressed. This first step is defined as opinion detection, where an initial assessment was made to detect potential subjective opinions in the data (Mejova, 2009). The expressed words that indicated sentiment were then manually evaluated through the use of Collins online dictionary, to establish the semantic orientation. The use of lexicons ensured that the sentiment was determined based on unbiased interpretations

(Mejova, 2009), rather than predetermined, personal views of the researchers. The data was then categorized as either negative, neutral or positive in order to determine the emotional tone of the content (Mejova, 2009). Given that the core of the researched phenomenon is based on expressions in relation to Hermès, the assertion of sentiments and opinions was deemed a vital supporting part of the analysis. The sentiment analysis therefore constitutes an anchoring of the expressions and impressions in the data, prior to the application of the theoretical framework. The implementation of this approach was also considered necessary in order to transparently account for the types of data that the analysis was later built upon, and avoid a data collection strategy that was based on subconscious bias in the researchers. The results of this introductory analysis, thus, do not constitute the findings that are presented in the analysis. The results of the sentiment analysis are instead presented in combination with the presented data in Appendix A.

After concluding the sentiment analysis, the same data was interpreted using a content analysis. The content analysis allowed the researchers to gain understanding of the explicit and implicit expressions and attitudes that the UGC contained, thus complementing the previous sentiment analysis. This choice of method was argued most suitable, due to the nature of the method and its alignment with the research objectives of this thesis. A qualitative content analysis allows for a deep, thick understanding of a particular phenomena and its social reality. This is accomplished through the identification of thematic patterns in the data, which creates a general as well as particular understanding of large bodies of text (Krippendorff, 2019). In accordance with the chosen method, non-textual aspects of the data were taken into account when deemed appropriate. Hence, aspects such as visual observations in the videos of the posts, were allowed to be taken into account. This further facilitated the process of understanding each unit of data, in order to identify deeper meaning in it according to Krippendorff (2019).

The process of deriving deeper meanings from the empirical data was initiated with a first round of manual coding. During this process, the raw data was transcribed and translated into 149 preliminary codes, which were later reduced into final codes and subcodes. In accordance with Saldana (2013), these final codes were then revised and reflected upon, both individually and collaboratively by the researchers. Throughout the analysis process, the data was re-coded on multiple occasions, which resulted in the identification of new codes as well as an improved

holistic interpretation of the data (Saldana, 2013). This process signified the methodological stance of the researchers, which was based on the ideas of the hermeneutic circle. This means that the findings of this research were based on a constant synergy and interdependence between the individual units of data and the comprehensive, larger understanding of it (Gadamer, 2004). Similarly, the analysis process was defined by the abductive approach, where the researchers went back and forth between empirical data and theoretical perspectives. Given that the research objectives of this thesis were to create a deeper understanding for a specific, new phenomenon, the abductive approach allowed for a dynamic, agile analysis process (Saunders et al., 2019). In practical terms, this meant that the data analysis was initiated without a predetermined theoretical foundation. The second round of coding was conducted using pattern coding, where the individual codes were arranged based on identifiable, salient patterns of their interpreted meanings. Pattern coding allows dissimilar codes with similar meanings to be converted into substantial units of analysis and are thus appropriate for gaining insight into social networks, according to Saldana (2013). The coding process resulted in 54 final codes that were systematically codified into 17 categories. Finally, these categories were organized into general themes that were derived from the analytical construct of the chosen theories (Krippendorff, 2019), which later served as the basis for the analysis chapter (see Appendix C).

4.6 Reliability and Validity

As Yin (2003) describes, the quality of research can be assessed using four tests: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability. Yin (2003) further argues for the applicability of the different tests in various research contexts, which served as the guidelines when the research of this thesis was evaluated. Internal validity will be excluded from this chapter, since Yin (2003) states that this test is not applicable to exploratory studies. Firstly, the test of construct validity is applicable, to ensure that the data collection and composition of sources have sufficient relevance for the research. In accordance with Yin (2003), appropriate tactics were therefore applied to avoid the potential risk of inaccurate methodological choices. The variations in theory and method legitimizes the research and makes it supported by multiple sources of evidence, thus increasing the construct validity (Yin, 2003). Moreover, the writing and

research process was consistently supervised, which relates to Yin (2003)'s tactic of having other points of views to evaluate the methodological procedure.

Secondly, external validity refers to problems in making general conclusions. This issue was addressed by the implementation of analytic generalizability in the research, as suggested by Yin (2003). This logic, in combination with detailed reports on the utilized data collection- and data analysis methods, ensured that the analysis would have enough applicability to confirm the external validity. Creswell (2013), confirms the recommendations of Yin (2003) and argues that incorporating rich descriptions in the analysis increases the external validity. Therefore, the analysis was formulated using detail and including contextual information, allowing the readers to further understand and assess the quality of the research context. Another tactic for assessing external validity is the use of replication logic (Yin, 2003). This was tested by conducting a small pilot study, prior to the analysis, which made it possible to assess the direct replication. Another beneficial aspect of the research, was the multi-platform analysis, which can be seen as multisite replication. Similarly, the variety in data and the fact that the collected posts were unaffiliated to each other, increased the external validity of the research (Yin, 2003). Lastly is the reliability test, which aims to make sure that the data collection- and analysis choices would result in similar findings, when conducted by another researcher. The reliability of the research was addressed by the incorporation of detailed reports in the method chapter and the complementing coding framework (see Appendix C) (Yin, 2003).

4.5 Limitations

Throughout the writing process, limitations were encountered which were realized to have a possible effect on the outcome of the research. As a first reflection, there were differences between the social media platforms TikTok and Instagram regarding the amount of users reached, and the ability to find posts which fulfill the criterias for data collection. This caused the researchers to evaluate the different options for data collection, which resulted in the implementation of the same data collection strategy for both platforms. Moreover, it is important to address the fact that this thesis does not take demographic aspects into consideration. Thus,

the gender, age, nationality etc. of the social media users have not been regarded, due to its estimated irrelevance to the research objectives. The research design and methodological choices of this thesis was based on the objective to ensure the research quality. However, the analysis was conducted by two researchers with partial prior insight into the researched phenomenon. The researchers also had knowledge of the brand of Hermès. Personal biases, morals and values of the researchers were consciously navigated according to the recommendations of Saunders et al. (2019), but can not be disregarded due to the hermeneutical stance of the research (Gadamer, 2004). Moreover, throughout the research process, the researchers discussed different kinds of methodological choices. The perception that interviews would have been valuable to apply to the research occurred, since adding interviews to the empirical material could have provided more direct observations of brand attitudes. These deliberations were however not implemented, due to the limitations in time.

4.6 Chapter Summary

In the research of this thesis, the aim was to explore the potential effects of online conversations surrounding luxury brands, by analyzing the phenomenon of UGC related to Hermès. The researchers adopted a social constructivist research philosophy, which is ontologically and epistemologically based on relativism and subjectivism. The research design of the thesis was concluded as a qualitative, abductive, single case study. The explorative research design was developed with the intended purpose of creating analytic generalizability in the findings of the research. The analyzed data consisted of UGC posts and corresponding comments, which were collected from TikTok and Instagram using a purposive criterion strategy. The data collection approach allowed the researchers to gather thick data that included sentiments in a systematic manner. The volume of the data was determined by the aim of reaching theoretical saturation, which resulted in a collection of 10 UGC posts and 50 comments. This data was analyzed through a combined approach, using a sentiment analysis and a content analysis. The sentiment analysis was manually conducted with the use of lexicons, in order to systematically detect expressed attitudes in the data. The coding process of the content analysis consisted of multiple rounds, and were conducted with the intent of identifying thematic patterns in the data. These

thematic patterns were interpreted using the theoretical framework, which laid the foundation of the upcoming analysis. Before, during and after the analysis process, the validity and reliability of the research was ensured through the implementation of appropriate tactics. While conducting the research, limitations were identified and addressed, which were accounted for in the last part of this chapter.

5 Analysis

5.1 Introduction to Analysis

In the following section, the findings of the analysis will be presented and discussed. The application of the combined theoretical framework, on the 10 collected UGC posts and 50 corresponding comments, accumulated a cohesive understanding of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives. The central themes that were identified, will hence be presented and explained. For further clarity, the final codes and corresponding coding categories, from which the themes were concluded can be found in Appendix C.

First, the implications of UGC on the awareness of Hermès will be discussed, in order to determine how the online presence might alter the general recognition of the brand. The conclusions regarding the observed availability of the brand will then be presented, to illustrate how the UGC can affect the exclusivity that historically signifies the brand. Lastly, the individual- and social symbolic effects of the UGC will be explored, to make sense of the figurative associations and connections to Hermès in an online context. The chapter will be concluded with a presentation of the various identified sentiments towards Hermès in the content. The disposition of the analysis is designed to go from a more general macro perspective to a symbolic, micro perspective. This wide variety of angles in how the phenomenon is observed, ensures that the analysis will provide a broad, yet insightful answer to the predominant research question: *How does user generated content affect brand attitudes of Hermès on social media?*

5.2 An Increased Recognition of Hermès

In consonance with theory on brand awareness, the phenomenon of UGC has been analyzed in relation to how it affects brand awareness of Hermès. Since shifts in brand awareness can be seen as potential facilitators for an increase in brand attitudes, it is relevant to discuss the visibility of Hermès, which will enable further conclusions regarding the influence on brand attitudes towards the brand. These conclusions will be illustrated below, through examples and observations in the UGC. Hence, this first part of the analysis constitutes the empirical observations that in regards to the first sub- research question: *In what ways does UGC affect the brand awareness of Hermès?*

5.2.1 Widening Visibility

The findings of the analysis concluded that there are several observable contributors to the brand awareness of Hermès in the UGC. These findings established the theme of increased visibility. This was illustrated through various patterns in the content which will be presented below. However, in order to get a comprehensive understanding for the visibility of the analyzed UGC, it is relevant to conclude the amount of views, likes and comments of the posts. As of the current point in time the least viewed post has 7 222 views, while the post with the highest amount has 3.5 million views, indicating a virality in the content. In comprehension, the posts which are analyzed have over seven million views, approximately 3500 comments and 574 000 likes (see Appendix B). Moreover, expressions that portrayed Hermès as commonly talked about online were noticed when observing the UGC posts.

“I’ve seen so many videos of birkin unboxing. It's really not so rare anymore”

(TT comment 5)

The comment above shows an occurrence of Hermès being frequently exposed. It is probable that if the users of TikTok and Instagram notice the rise in visibility of the brand, the overall brand awareness increases over time due to UGC on these social media platforms. The above mentioned comment from the UGC, is significant for the overall awareness of the brand of

Hermès. This is explained by the fact that the user expresses that there is an oversaturation of the displays of the products on social media. Additionally, it is concluded that the user finds this to be negative in relation to the Hermès. An interpretation of the deeper meanings of this comment, implies that the significance of the brand might be weakened by the wide reach of social media posts. This is not only illustrated by the prior mentioned example, but rather evident from observing the entirety of the material. Given that the UGC posts cohesively display various visible and intangible elements of the brand, an increased visibility is concluded. Consequently, the awareness of the brand is likely to increase.

The posts which are analyzed in this thesis all include several visual elements which connect the user to associate the posts with the brand of Hermès. This is supported by the fact that Hermès is greatly associated with the color orange, which is the color of several of their products and all of their shopping bags and boxes. In unboxing posts and posts where Hermès stores are visible, the orange color is in the center of attention. Additionally, tiny orange details such as the displayed bag charms (*IG post 3*) are to be seen as minor yet important details where the recognition of Hermès might be increased. Moreover, the visibility of Hermès shopping bags and boxes frequently appears in the posts, which further illustrates the increased visibility that the UGC imposes. Being able to detect the brand in an undemanding way, makes the posts excellent tools in showing up the brand. Additionally, there are other elements usually characterized in UGC associated with Hermès rather than just the orange color and their shopping bags and boxes. The UGC contains a display of products such as the Birkin or Kelly bag, which are known to be associated with the brand (Hughes, 2023). This indicates that the familiarity with the brand might not only be increased by the UGC, but also the general product knowledge. In conclusion, all of the analyzed UGC contained a clear pattern, where the brand is at the core of UGC by creators who consume products from Hermès. This central role of the brand in the UGC, thus makes the brand visible to a large extent on Instagram and TikTok.

In general it is noticeable that there is both favorable and unfavorable information about Hermès found in the UGC. The word information includes pure knowledge shared, but also opinions and sharing of thoughts and experiences. An example of negative information can be illustrated by *TT post 4* where a woman gets the opportunity to buy a coveted Birkin bag model with crocodile

leather, receiving comments which might put Hermès in a bad position. An expression that illustrates this is "That poor crocodile that had to die for a stupid, overpriced bag" (*TT comment 19*), This might lead to questionings and changed attitudes towards the brands' traditions and their ability to be sustainable. In addition, an example of positive information about Hermès is illustrated below.

"Craie is soooo gorgeous. Just love the specs of this bag"

(*IG comment 1*)

Positive information is as illustrated occurring in the posts, and becomes a part of the visibility of the brand. All of the aforementioned is evidence for the visibility of the brand amongst users, and by connecting the former to the theoretical framework, it confirms the findings by Aula, (2010) and Hanna et al. (2011). Hence, the increased visibility of Hermès on social media, where both positive and negative information are shared, results in an increase in brand awareness. The sharing of information amongst consumers of Hermès and users on Tiktok and Instagram, might lead to the impression that Hermès products are consumed to a larger extent. Concludingly, it is not important whether the actual brand penetration has increased, but rather the visibility of the consumption.

5.2.2 Brand Penetration - Increased or Enhanced?

It is evident that all of the analyzed UGC posts are created and published by consumers of Hermès products, and are made by displaying their purchases from the brand. This general finding inevitably supports the fact that displaying various elements of Hermès is of importance for the creators. The conclusions that can be drawn in relation to the brand penetration of Hermès in the analysis, was ascribed the theme of observable consumption. In addition to this, it is visible in comments that multiple users have a purchase intent. It is noticeable that to be able to buy products from Hermès, and especially their famous bags, is a goal for many individuals. Some of the users share purchase intentions in the comment sections of the UGC posts, while

other users share that they have already purchased Hermès bags. This is made visible through the examples presented below.

“one day” (*TT comment 25*)

“I’m also waiting for my Mini Kelly II! It’s super chic! Congratulations” (*IG comment 7*)

The pattern of sharing prior and future consumption from Hermès can be explained by the fact that luxury consumers generally want to display their purchases to others. This is concluded by Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2018;) and Han et al. (2020), who both argue that individuals are motivated to co-create value. This theoretical notion explains why users feel the need to comment and share their own purchases, after observing the UGC related to Hermès. The visibility of this online phenomenon of value co-creation between luxury consumers evidently makes the brand penetration more visible. There are reasons to believe that brand penetration might be harmful against Hermès, since the goal for luxury brands is to maintain a demand without increasing brand penetration (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018). This notion is also manifested through the previous example of *TT comment 5*, where the user implicitly states that it is perceived as negative that the consumption of the brand appears to be increased.

Apart from the prior mentioned comments, brand penetration is made visible through the creators of the UGC. Recurring patterns in the UGC illustrates how the UGC creators show previous purchases of Hermès products in their posts. In *IG post 2*, a man gets invited by his sales associate to buy a Kelly bag. In the UGC video, the creator displays his visit to an Hermès store. Before entering the store, in his hands is a Birkin bag which he happily wears as he makes his special order behind the scenes in an Hermès store. Showing of previous purchases shows a higher brand penetration for the brand. In other words, the fact that the creator of *IG post 2* is holding a Birkin bag for his Hermès store entrance strengthens brand penetration since it is an evaluation of purchases of a specific brand over a specific time. To conclude, the brand penetration of Hermès is made visible in various ways in the UGC, which suggests that the brand

penetration might be enhanced rather than increased. This finding can be seen as positive or negative for the attitudes against Hermès, depending on different factors. These factors are further explored in the discussion chapter below.

5.3 Perceptions of Exclusivity

In this part of the analysis, the perceived exclusivity of Hermès and its products are explored through the application of commodity theory. The central argument of the applied theoretical concept is that value is inherently linked to the perceived availability of a product. When individuals perceive that something is not easily obtained, they are likely to assert a higher value to it. Logically, the value thus decreases as the object gets more attainable to more people. As this phenomenon can be illustrated through various terms, it is important to clarify that the use of the terms unavailability, scarcity and exclusivity are used to explain similar concepts in this part of the analysis. This process of assigning value is bound to the individuals who perceive the product, and the assessment is consequently done in the minds of the individual (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). The collected UGC and comments are hence interpreted based on the factors that amplifies, as well as hinders the perceived unavailability. From this standpoint, the analyzed content will help answer the sub- research question of: *In what ways does UGC affect the perception of Hermès as an exclusive brand?*

5.3.1 The Pursuit of Hermès Products - Unavailability & Effort

The analysis revealed multiple aspects related to unavailability, in both explicit and implicit expressions. The previously established essence of exclusivity that surrounds the brand of Hermès, is hence also evident in the context of UGC on TikTok and Instagram. One of the general identified themes was concluded as unavailability and effort. This definition of the theme can be explained as a widespread acceptance of the scarcity of Hermès products, and a pattern of expressions in the UGC, that illustrated a willingness to dedicate personal efforts in order to obtain Hermès products. This culture of devotion for Hermès was evident across both social media platforms, in various shapes and formats. The indicators of this theme will be presented

and explained below.

One of the most obvious indicators of required effort are the price tags of Hermès products, more specifically of their leather handbags. Although there is variety in the content of the collected UGC, all of them included Hermès consumers, showing and discussing their past, present and future Hermès purchases. As previously mentioned, Hermès bags vary in price, but generally have price tags of thousands of dollars. However, none of the UGC were found to include information regarding the premium prices of the bags. Similarly, the creators did not express any personal perspectives or opinions regarding the amount of money that were spent on Hermès products. The recurring theme of high efforts, was therefore partially highlighted by the pattern of users that showed compliance in spending large amounts of money. Aside from this rather straightforward observation, another phenomenon was identified in the UGC: Birkin bait. Several creators referred to this term, when discussing their experiences of shopping at Hermès. The term lacks a properly established definition, but can be explained as Hermès purchases that are primarily motivated by the desire to establish loyalty and a good relationship with the brand (etc.Posted, 2022). In practice, this term is visible in the content when users showcase purchases that are apparently motivated by their desire to be offered bags from Hermès. This is manifested in one of the UGC videos from TikTok (*TT post 5*), when the user shares that she bought a pair of Hermès jeans with a price tag of 2100\$, in hopes of increasing her possibilities of being offered a bag.

“POV: You bought these \$2,100 (...) jeans as Birkin Bait”

(*TT post 5*)

A similar phenomenon is observed in *TT post 2* when the creator shares a video of herself wandering an Hermès store, looking at different products. In the voiceover, the creator talks about her pursuit of a Birkin bag, while stating that she might need to buy a horse saddle in order to be offered a Birkin. A lot can be said about this observed phenomenon, but the primary significance of it is that it communicates a sense of urgency to the observers. Brock (1984) established high prices as a driver of value, on which idea Lynn (1992) later stated that high prices makes individuals inherently assume that the product is of high quality and will increase

social status.

Another pattern that was identified in the UGC, was an inconsistency in the time spent waiting for Hermès products. Additionally, this was interpreted as general patience of Hermès consumers. Several UGC posts, as well as comments, related to the time that they had to wait in order to be offered an Hermès bag. The posts lacked coherence, given that some users shared that they had received an offer to buy a bag on the first ever visit to an Hermès store, while others claimed to have waited multiple years. This is illustrated by expressions such as “three months later” (*IG post 4*) and “now it’s time to wait” (*TT post 5*). In one of the analyzed TikTok posts (*TT post 1*), the user writes that her Birkin bag “took 9 years to arrive”. Although it is unknown why it took 9 years, this highlights a general acceptance towards the fact that it usually requires time to obtain an Hermès bag. According to Brock (1984), this information would likely affect the consumers of the UGC, since time delay indicates that the product is of high value.

This UGC post also highlighted an interconnection to another element of commodity theory; The withholding or restriction of a product. When a product is restricted and/or has a large number of reasons as to why it should be restricted, the assigned value is likely to increase (Brock & Brannon, 1992). This UGC post therefore leaves it to the consumer of the UGC, to make sense of why the bag had to be withheld for 9 years. This process where the users receive incomplete information that indicates that the Hermès bags are highly restricted, makes them assign value and importance to the product in a somewhat unintentional manner (Brock & Brannon, 1992; Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). The inconsistency in the required time to receive an Hermès bag stood out, while conducting the analysis. In a comment to *TT post 4* (see Appendix A), the creator appears to be over the moon over the fact that she received an offer to buy a Birkin while visiting an Hermès store for the very first time. The collected comments reveal stunned reactions from other users.

"Holy lord!!! A beautiful croc for a first timer!!!! That's amazing!!!!!!! Believing in dreams"

(*TT comment 16*)

The tonality of this comment suggests that there is an established compliance among Hermès consumers, meaning that they expect to have to wait in order to receive an offer. This UGC post illustrates an interesting example, given that the creator's lack of wait to receive the bag expresses a relatively low amount of effort. This can be understood as a contributing factor to the perceived availability of the products, which decreases the perceived value (Lynn, 1992).

The analyzed UGC posts, along with their corresponding comments, all somehow related to the amount of work that had to be done for the user to receive an offer. In order to conclude these examples, some of the posts revolved around the fact that the user had spent effort, money, time or other resources while the other posts were centered around the fact that they were surprised to *not* have to put in a large amount of effort. This visible, consistent element illuminates an online culture where the users interact regarding the pursuit of Hermès bags.

“ Yep! I jumped on the bag-charm bandwagon (...)”. (*IG post 3*)

““I just do not get how perfectly sane people are tricked into getting onto the Hermes bandwagon (...)” (*TT comment 13*)

Moreover, the use of the term ‘bandwagon’ was observed in both UGC posts and comments. These examples signify a consensus in the online community of Hermès consumers, where one can assume that high effort behaviors are inspired and rationalized by the visible behaviors of others. There are posts like *IG post 3*, where the creator displays a new Hermès bag accessory. The corresponding comments of the post showed a light hearted dialogue where the users discuss their aesthetic preferences in bag charms (see Appendix A). On the other hand, *TT comment 13* illustrates a disapproving perspective. This comment is a response to *TT post 3*, where the user who published the comment questions the creator's devotion to Hermès in the corresponding post.

The aforementioned quotes signify that there is a common willingness to submit to the difficulties that come with obtaining an Hermès bag, in the creators of the UGC. Additionally, a similar pattern is recognized in the various expressions of gratitude and the perceived low expectations of the UGC creators. This pattern highlights a willing dependence in the creators

and is partially illustrated by the common phrasing of being “offered” or “invited” to purchase an Hermès bag (see Appendix A). These frequently occurring phrases referred to the fact that Hermès are known not to allow their users to purchase a bag, without being formally offered one (Hughes, 2023). The collected comments revealed reactions, where users both congratulated the creators for their achievements and questioned the phenomenon. The comment below is one of the examples where the creator of the UGC is questioned.

"I just don't understand this? They invite you to spend more money in their store"
(*TT comment 21*)

In the corresponding post (*TT post 5*), the creator expresses that she was invited to make a special order bag, as a “reward” for her prior Hermès purchases. The prior comment is hence interpreted as a critique against the UGC creator, for being controlled by the conditions determined by the brand. Similarly, the collected data showed multiple expressions of gratitude towards Hermès, in different forms. This is observed in *IG post 4* (see Appendix A) when the creator thanks the sales associate and the store where the bag was purchased. Additionally, a pattern was observed where the UGC creators expressed surprise at being allowed to purchase an Hermès bag. In *TT post 2* the creator tells the story of how she was offered a Birkin bag, to her “complete surprise”. These prior examples can be understood as a signifiers of unavailability related to the brand of Hermès. Moreover, they signify a pattern of submission in their behavior as consumers, which can be explained by the scarcity of the products. These noticeable behaviors are connected to the psychological motivations that are induced by perceived unavailability (Lynn, 1992). The combined identified patterns in the UGC posts and comments are hence to be seen as contributors of value, given that they extend the notions of unavailability and exclusivity of Hermès

“Please tell us the story of how you scored this beauty” (*TT comment 18*)

“Oh how special!!! Thank you for sharing!” (*IG comment 5*)

These quotes illustrate the last pattern that constitutes the theme, which is the search for information in the comments of the analyzed posts. This observation has theoretical importance, given that unavailability motivates the individual search for knowledge. When there is limited available information about a product, individuals are naturally inclined to strive towards finding more information. Similar to the last example, perceived scarcity creates a demand for more information, as the individual is trying to regain control in the form of knowledge of the scarce product. It is then probable that the individual will assign high value to the product, based on psychological rather than informational justification (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992; Lynn, 1992). The observed search for information therefore indicates assigned value to the Hermès product in question.

5.3.2 Demystifying Hermès

There are several interconnections between informational stimuli and the assessment of value, with varying effects on the creation of attitudes. This was made evident when analyzing the UGC, where a contrasting theme was identified. This following part of the analysis constitutes an additional identified theme, that proposes an alternative effect of the analyzed UGC. This theme is concluded as the demystification of Hermès. This theme is concluded from different patterns that were identified in the UGC posts and comments, which impose risks on the exclusive, secretive nature of the brand of Hermès. The first observed pattern in the UGC was the unveiling of information. Across both platforms, it is evident that the UGC creates insight into the world of Hermès that would not exist without the possibilities of online content distribution. Across TikTok and Instagram, several UGC posts involved personal experiences, strategies and tips surrounding Hermès bags.

“This special order is called “a la carte” and only a few selected clients get invited to do this every year. Imagine being able to choose your favorite Hermès bag, specially made for you, in your favorite colour combination, and choose other elements (...)”

(IG post 2)

This theme can be illustrated through this example (*IG post 2*) where the user shared multiple videos from his bespoke Hermès appointment. In the caption of the post, from which the previous example is collected, the user discusses his process of creating a personalized Kelly bag at Hermès, going into detail about the specific circumstances and the overall experience. Another post (*TT post 5*), contains the text “HERMES SPECIAL ORDER TIPS”, in a large font that covers the thumbnail of the video. In this video, the creator shares the strategic efforts which allegedly made her receive an invitation to create a special order bag. These examples illustrate the fact that the UGC is largely revolved around sharing expertise, insights and tips related to Hermès. In other words, insider information from which most individuals have been excluded from, prior to social media.

Apart from the specific examples that illustrate this theme, it is important to define the general, contextual and visual contributors to the demystification of Hermès. As discussed in 6.1, the UGC displays brand related elements that are said to increase the awareness of Hermès. Similarly, the UGC displays the interior of multiple Hermès stores, the way that the bags are carefully packed in the signature orange Hermès boxes and even point of view-shot videos from special order appointments. Although the UGC has wide variety in terms of format, content and amount of views, all of the visual elements allow some sort of insight into the touchpoints and perspectives that are otherwise reserved for Hermès consumers. This element of the UGC is relevant to mention, given that the informational stimuli of it is assumed to have an effect on the perception of the availability. Therefore, the mere observation of the UGC can affect the way an individual forms attitudes towards Hermès.

In accordance with Bozzolo and Brock (1992), the informational stimuli of this insight can be interpreted in two ways. When individuals are faced with small amounts of information that they find important, which is somehow restricted to the larger mass, they are likely to assign value to the information. The original notion of unavailability as a driver of value in the context of Hermès products (Brock, 1984), is thus applicable to information as well. This perspective confirms that the consumers of the UGC are expected to feel desire for Hermès products when faced with the opportunity to observe glimpses of consumption of them. When an individual is hypothetically faced with large amounts of informational stimuli, it is possible that the sense of

urgency and value could decrease. This is supported by the fact that the value of a message is estimated based on its availability to other individuals (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992). The aforementioned pattern of unveiling information and increasing visibility can therefore be seen as an indicator of perceived availability of Hermès products.

This perceived availability was also made apparent through other theoretical conclusions. Perceived unavailability is not only determined by scarcity, restriction and efforts needed to obtain the product, it is also determined by the visible amount of sources and owners of the product (Brock & Brannon, 1992). Although this concept has been briefly touched upon in the prior parts of the analysis, it is worth emphasizing due to its central role in commodity theory. It has been concluded that the UGC is centered around consumer experiences. Correspondingly, the sharing of information and experiences is visible in the analyzed comments of the UGC posts. The strategies, stores and sales associates that are mentioned in the content can therefore be seen as parts of the product that are made visible by the UGC. In general terms, one can therefore conclude that the collected UGC brings light on the sources and owners of the products and makes them visible to a large group of people, in comparison to a non-digital context. This concluded perceived availability can be seen as a negative influence on the perceived value.

The last pattern that relates to the demystification of Hermès in the UGC, is concluded as an observed polarization in opinions. Bozzolo and Brock (1992) states that the emotional stimuli of unavailability makes individuals prone to either desire the product or distance themselves completely from it. The notion of this theoretical perspective is manifested in the UGC comments, where the comments more often than not express either intense positive emotions or negative emotions towards the brand in question. Aside from the prior examples of appraisal and devotion for the brand, there was an opposing sentiment observed in the UGC. This is illustrated by the users who interact with the UGC to express their skepticism and critique for the brand and their products (see Appendix A). This can be explained as a pattern where users question the value of Hermès and their products, as well as the consumers of them. This finding in the UGC will be further explored in the upcoming parts of the analysis, given that it also relates to other perspectives.

5.4 The Brand and the Self

The objective of this final part of the analysis is to make sense of the symbolic relationship between the individual social media user and the brand of Hermès, based on the conclusions drawn from the analyzed UGC. The theoretical foundation of SBA was applied to the posts and comments, with the ambition of illuminating patterns related to self concepts, collective identities and social status. Moreover, this part of the analysis is intended to explain different associative images that might affect the brand of Hermès and their existing and potential consumers. When analyzing the posts and comments gathered in the data collection, different levels of SBA with Hermès were observed. Further, with a basis in the theme of SBA, patterns were found which gave descriptions of how creators and users formed identities with the brand. The various patterns in the UGC were then observed to conclude the associative images that are connected to the UGC. This last part of the analysis will help answer the final sub- research question: *In what ways does UGC affect self-brand associations of Hermès?*

5.4.1 Idolization and Linkage

As a starting point, the first identified theme in relation to SBA is concluded as loyalty and linkage to Hermès. This theme concludes the various patterns of connection between Hermès and the social media users. In other words, various levels of SBA that were identifiable in the collected posts and comments. One of the assemblies that indicate a sense of connection between the user and the brand, was concluded as the display of admiration for the brand. As the creators of the UGC shared their new purchases, there was noticeably heavy support from multiple users (see Appendix A). In the comments relating to this, the admiration for Hermès and/or Hermès products were evident. This is illustrated as seen in the examples below:

“She's absolutely gorgeous, huge congratulations babe”

(IG comment 2)

"She is a dream combo for many of us! Huge congratulations babe! Wear her always in good health"

(IG comment 20)

The latter example is not only a signifier of admiration for the brand, but also for the fact that there are visible patterns of common identities in the way that the social media users interact. In this comment, there is not only visible support for the UGC creator, but also a detectable alignment of identities between creators and users. The identified admiration towards the brand of Hermès is relevant to mention, given that it highlights a desirable image of the brand of Hermès, which the users wish to align themselves with. However, the prior examples do not only signify an alignment of identity to the brand, but also a wish to communicate their brand connections to other individuals. Relating to the theoretical framework, individuals do not only consume in order to go along with one's own identity, but also to adapt to the desire of belonging to other groups (Kirmani, 2009). Moreover, individuals might consume in a group context or communicate self-concepts for the purposes of showing their high SBA (Li et al., 2020), and the former examples illustrated communications of self-concepts when sharing admiration of Hermès. This pattern of admiration thus indicates visible connections between Hermès and the social media users. Consequently, this theme also shows that the UGC on TikTok and Instagram can be seen as a platform for the collective consumption of high SBA consumers. Given that this consumer group is known to be loyal, appreciative and driven by their need for alignment with the brand, they thus do not impose a substantial risk towards the associative images of Hermès (Berger & Heath, 2007).

Although the observed admiration of the users indicates general connections to Hermès, patterns were identified that illustrated noticeable, higher associations with the brand from both creators and users. Expressions of obsession, desire and excitement for Hermès were observed in posts and comments, which indicates a strong connection to the brand. This is explained in accordance with the theoretical perspective, where deep emotional connection is a sign of deep emotional connection to the brand. This was observed in examples such as the one illustrated below.

“I am so glad I was able to experience such an amazing moment”

(TT post 4)

As illustrated, the posts above are examples of showing emotional connections to the brand, as the user is talking about the experience of shopping at Hermès. Moreover, these types of consumers are known to constitute an important role for the brand. This is motivated by the fact that their behaviors and personal images typically align with the image of the brand, which creates a cohesive perception for observers. Furthermore, other identified patterns were concluded as an idolization of the brand of Hermès. This was portrayed through examples where users expressed envy and personal ambitions to obtain Hermès products. Drawing from the theoretical perspective, this pattern was interpreted as a wish to deepen the personal connections to the brand, and to be associated with the symbolic values of Hermès. This can be illustrated with the examples below:

"How does it feel to live my dream? Manifesting" (*IG comment 6*)

"Omg congratulations, can't wait to meet her" (*IG comment 20*)

The first comment above can be interpreted as an indication of envy towards the creators, and the fact that they are displaying the dreams of the user that commented on the post being able to buy products from Hermès. The second comment indicates that an Hermès bag is more than just a bag, given that the user assigns human characteristics to it. This is seen as an indicator of connection to Hermès. The comment also shows that there is expressed excitement over the fact that the creator of the UGC post has made a purchase. Which was seen as a manifestation of collective identity through the brand. However, even though this expresses association to some extent there is a difficulty of recognizing whether the reaction is based on an actual identity for Hermès or a wish to belong to the group which identifies with the brand.

"I had the color Craie on the top of my wishlist and my adorable SA somehow knew it and surely delivered"

(*IG post 1*)

Additionally, the UGC and the corresponding comments contained a pattern of expressions which were analyzed as establishing their close relationship with Hermès. This was manifested

through expressed linkages between the individual and the brand. This was evident in examples that emphasized a particularly good relationship with Hermès, as well as the sales associates in Hermès stores. Further illustrations of this pattern in the UGC can be seen in examples such as *IG post 2*, where the creator writes in the caption that he was invited to buy a bag, together with *TT post 2* where the creator announced that her SA came through and offered her a bag. As mentioned in chapter 6.2, these types of posts indicate the advantage of having a close relationship with a sales associate, as it increases the possibility of receiving special invitations. Additionally, the mentionings of the sales associates can be seen as an attempt to showcase the connections between the brand and the individual. These are more striking examples of high connections to Hermès than the prior mentioned, as it shows a visible connection with the brand through the video which is posted. Hence, there is a larger difficulty in observing high SBA in the comments than in posts where the creators get the ability to show the relationship in a video context. Further was another type of expression high SBA of connections where creators referred to themselves as ‘collectors’. An example is illustrated below where the creator of the post submitted a statement of her adding up to her collection of products from the brand.

“Unboxing my newest Birkin to my ever growing collection”

(*IG post 1*)

This pattern of collectors in the UGC hence constitute expressions of connections to the brand. This can be concluded through various indications in the aforementioned example. As concluded in other parts of the analysis, this post can be seen as an expression of prior purchases at Hermès. Additionally, it can be seen as an attempt to showcase oneself as loyal to the brand. The fact that the consumer calls it an ‘ever growing collection’ signifies that the individual is planning on consuming in the future as well. The consumers who refer to themselves as collectors, might be concluded to afford a larger consumption of Hermès products. This means that there are reasons to believe that they belong to a higher social class than non collectors. Moreover, consumers in a higher social class are according to Li et al. (2020) to a larger extent consuming for their needs for self accomplishment. This is also related to how a high social class consumer relates to information about the brand, where there are reasons to believe, based on the theory from Li et

al. (2020) and Berger and Heath (2007), are to be less bothered by external beliefs. The aforementioned example also relates to an observed pattern in the UGC and the corresponding comments where users attempted to distinguish themselves from other Hermès consumers. This is visible in certain phrases, such as "only a few selected clients every year" (see Appendix A). This example can be explained as an attempt to indicate superiority in relation to others. Ultimately, this is to be seen as an indicator of high levels of SBA, since it illustrates an attempt to align their personal images to the images of Hermès. This was also made evident through the identified pattern of expressed expertise and knowledge towards the brand of Hermès.

"Which sister are you?...A B25 Togo Trench with Bougainville on the inside OR a B30 Gold Grizzly Suede?"
(IG post 5)

A pattern was recognized where individuals made use of the UGC to establish and communicate their competences and commitment to the brand of Hermès. This is illustrated above, with the caption of an UGC post where the creator shows two Birkin bags. This example is significant to the understanding of expressed brand connections in the UGC, given that the creator establishes associations to Hermès through her level of expertise. This is to be seen as a tendency of high SBA, where the individuals assign great value to the specifics and products of the brand, as opposed to those with lower levels of connections (Aaker, 1999).

5.4.2 Status and Contrasting Associations

In the previous part of the analysis, the identified indicators of high SBA users were presented. These high SBA online behaviors can be seen as promoters of the brand, given that they tend to uphold, defend and extend the existing brand image (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). However, the analysis of the UGC further identified patterns that demonstrate potential low SBA behaviors. These patterns are established in the following part, along with other examples that were recognized to be potentially harmful for Hermès, the consumers of Hermès and both of their

corresponding associations. These patterns were concluded as the theme of status seeking behavior & conflicting associations.

As previously discussed in the theoretical framework, perceived consumer behaviors and its effects on brand associations can be explained from contrasting perspectives. To establish clarity in the concept of conspicuous behavior, it refers to when an individual displays herself in relation to luxury products and brands in a highly noticeable manner. This can also be explained as “showing off” to position herself in a desired way. According to Berger and Heath (2007), conspicuous behaviors are hence typically motivated by external needs, such as trying to achieve an increased perceived status and obtain power. This ambiguity of the concept concludingly makes it difficult to draw precise conclusions from the collected UGC. As previously accounted for, conclusions can not be made regarding the individual motivations of the social media user who created and interacted with the UGC. All of the collected UGC posts and multiple corresponding comments however contained elements that can be understood as flaunting for status driven purposes. This is exemplified by recurring visual observations such as proudly showing the bag or careful unboxings in aesthetically pleasing environments (*e.g TT post 1, IG post 1 & 4*) (see Appendix A). Additionally, it can be concluded that the sole participation in the online conversation regarding the high status brand of Hermès indicates an ambition to be associated with the symbolic values of the brand. It is therefore assumed that an active participation in UGC related to Hermès indicates external motives, such as increasing status (Berger & Heath, 2007). With this being said, noticeable patterns were identified that stood out in relation to other posts and comments, that indicate a noticeable status driven behavior in the users.

“Part 2 of Hermès shopping! So I went in to get a few gifts for some people”

(TT post 2)

The first pattern that was observed regarding external, symbolic motifs was expressions of regular or accustomed luxury shopping. This is exemplified by the example above, where the creator shares a video of her “shopping date at Hermès”. In the video, the creator wanders around an Hermès store, while narrating the video in a voiceover. The significance of this example is

based on the fact that the user discusses her luxury shopping habits in a noticeably accustomed manner. The tonality of the expression, even makes it sound as if the user finds it mundane to be shopping at Hermès. Given that the user portrays the luxury shopping experience as a recurring “chore” in her life, it implies that she is accustomed to a luxurious way of living and does not assign particular importance to the luxury shopping experience. Thus, this behavior can be seen as a noticeable way of trying to increase her perceived wealth and status through the associations of Hermès and the. Aside from this fact, this example also highlighted low emotional attachment to the brand. The prior mentioned tonality of the post implies that the user does not assign deep emotional value to the shopping experience, which is known to signify conspicuous luxury consumption (Li et al., 2019).

The prior mentioned example of *TT post 2*, signifies other mentionable aspects regarding the external motifs of the creator. In the same post, the creator displays videos of when she receives an offer to purchase a Birkin bag. The video includes snippets of the creator dancing, bouncing and gasping out of excitement as she holds the Hermès bag. In the last snippet of the post, the creator walks out of the store, proudly showing off the Hermès shopping bag. While the same can be said for multiple other of the collected posts, this way of portraying oneself in relation to the brand indicates a desire to establish status in relation to the brand. The conspicuous behaviors portrayed in the video are further supported through the analysis of the corresponding comments of the post. In *TT comment 7*, the user writes “(...) how shallow!!”. This indicates that the users perceive the creator as driven by the status that comes with owning a Birkin bag. Another user (*TT comment 9*) writes “Outfit 250... Birkin 20k makes sense (...)”, insinuating that the creator is portraying herself as more high status than she actually is. The deeper connotations of this aforementioned comment, can be assumed to be that the Birkin acts as a false signifier of wealth for the creator.

These aforementioned patterns that constitute the findings relating to the theme, all exemplify behaviors that are associated with consumers with low SBA. It concludes that these types of individuals are visible in the context of UGC, However, the significant conclusion from these themes is the fact that they also indicate the display of dissociative images in relation to the brand of Hermès in the UGC. As previously established from existing theory and evidence from

the data, luxury brands are heavily reliant on their symbolic value and consumer perceptions. Hence, it can be harmful for the brand to be associated with e.g individuals, behaviors or values that contradict the established perception. This theoretical notion created an understanding for the pattern of dissociative images that were identified during the analysis. The primary illustrating expressions of this theme that were found will hence be presented below.

“You went to Hermès dressed like that (..) In Miami they give a Birkin to anyone”

(TT comment 8)

This comment displays a user who is questioning the creator of the UGC, for the way she is exhibiting herself in relation to Hermès. In other words, this indicates that the UGC communicated a personal image that is conflicting in relation to the image of Hermès. Implicitly, the user expresses that she does not approve of the fact that the UGC creator was offered a bag, and rationalizes this by implying that the creator was lucky to be shopping at a certain location. This can be seen as a way of treating the creator of the UGC as a deviation from the users prior associative images to the brand. Additionally, this comment signifies that the user attempts to remove the responsibility from the brand and instead engages in brand pursuit (Angle & Forehand, 2016). Thus, the user indicates that she is motivated to defend the image of the brand and create distance to associations that might harm her perceptions of Hermès.

The aforementioned illustrations of dissociative images of consumers relates to a more general finding in relation to SBA. As demonstrated, the UGC highlights various patterns of conflicting associations between Hermès and the social media users, such as the most recent examples. This pattern was additionally identified in multiple posts and comments, but was made significant when put in relation to each other. To illustrate this, it was evident that the high SBA consumers expressed themselves to establish loyalty and superiority as consumers. In contrast, other findings highlighted UGC creators that could be seen as conspicuous or status seeking (see Appendix A). These contrasting exhibitions were explained as expressions and behaviors that constitute contrasting associative identities and images in relation to the brand of Hermès.

"If it wasn't Hermes - nobody would want these bags"

(TT comment 2)

This comment can be seen as an illustrative example, which shows that there are visible patterns of users that not only express negative sentiments towards Hermès, but also insinuates that its sole value is manifested through its associations. This can thus be seen as an example of a comment that criticizes the consumers of the brand as well. This public expression of disbelief towards the brand is also significant for the formulation of attitudes, since it implies that the products lack value without the symbolic values that are attached to them. This can be seen as an attempt to bring light to the irrational behaviors and high efforts of the Hermès consumers that are portrayed in the UGC. In order to conclude this final part of the analysis chapter, one can see varying levels of SBA in the different groups that are present on the social media platforms. Moreover, the UGC posts and comments highlighted patterns that indicate that these groups are in conflict and being questioned through the interaction the UGC facilitates.

5.5 Summary of Findings

The analysis chapter presented the various empirical findings in relation to the studied phenomenon of luxury brands in the context of UGC. The findings of the first part of the analysis highlighted a connection between brand awareness and the analyzed UGC. This was supported by the concluded increased visibility of the brand, in regards to the high exposure of the social media posts and the informational and visual elements that they contained. Additionally, it was concluded that the UGC posts displayed the consumption of Hermès to a high degree, thus indicating an increase in the perceived brand penetration. The findings therefore suggest that the awareness of the brand of Hermès is likely to be affected by the contents of the analyzed UGC. This in turn, enables an increase in brand awareness for Hermès.

The second part of the analysis presented varying results in regards to the exclusivity of the brand of Hermès. By observing the UGC, it was concluded that the existing perceived exclusivity of the brand is manifested through the social media posts. This was asserted based on

the fact that the content upheld the apparent unavailability of the brand. Moreover, patterns were identified that displayed effort and devotion in the pursuit of Hermès products. These patterns were interpreted as attributors of value, which contribute to the general desirability of the brand. Contrasting findings were identified, where the magnitude and information of the UGC might interfere with the perceived exclusivity. These were concluded as factors that could facilitate a demystification of the brand, by making information more available and the products appear less scarce.

Finally, the last part of the analysis introduced findings of SBA in the UGC. An occurrence of both high and low associations were observed, as indicators of creators and users identifying with the brand are made visible through it. It was detectable that associations were established based on connections between creators and users, and connections between the individuals and Hermès. The UGC displayed behaviors and expressions that indicate higher levels of associations between the social media users and Hermès. These were interpreted as contributors and extensions of the image of the brand. Additionally, the findings displayed exhibitions of behaviors that characterize lower levels of SBA. These behaviors, in combination with evidence of dissociative images in the UGC, indicate effects on the perceived image of Hermès.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Discussion and Theoretical Contributions

As previously established, brand awareness constitutes the foundation of any brand's success. It is the facilitator of establishing a desired image, in a desired group of consumers in order to enable positive brand attitudes. Brand awareness lies as the foundation for a constructed brand image for different stakeholders, which contributes to an increased brand equity. In turn, brand equity enables the shaping of brand attitudes (Singh et al., 2022; Arghashi et al., 2021). The UGC analyzed in this thesis contained several elements which contributed to the visibility of Hermès. Moreover, the posts reach a large audience in terms of the number of views of the posts, which is generated based on the construction of the platforms analyzed (see Appendix B). Nevertheless, Brand awareness can be considered a crucial element in order for Hermès to position themselves and is essential in order to be able to exist in the minds of consumers, hence to enable brand equity. As brand awareness strengthens the brand, this suggests that the high brand awareness visible for Hermès is beneficial for the brand. Further, since demand is of importance for all luxury brands, brand awareness becomes critical in the possibility of enhancing positive attitudes for these brands (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018).

Nonetheless, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, besides shaping attitudes, increased awareness also increases brand penetration (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2018). Although there already is evidence of a positive correlation between brand penetration and brand attitudes (Machi et al., 2022; Carissa et al., 2021; Awasthi & Mehta, 2022), the findings indicate other interesting circumstances in regards to UGC. Hermès has a limited supply and inconsistent strategies in allowing individuals to consume. This was shown by posts which highlighted the long waiting period for Hermès products. Hence, brand penetration will not increase if not Hermès allows it to, but the purchase demand increases due to the visibility of information

regarding being able to buy their products. The difficulty of being able to purchase implies that Hermès products might be perceived as more exclusive. In conclusion, the findings of this thesis does not indicate an actual brand penetration, but rather showcased the visibility of the phenomenon, which leads to the interpretation that consumption is more visible in UGC.

This visible brand penetration also constitutes an important conclusion that can be made from the findings - the increased perceptions of availability. As concluded prior, the display of Hermès on social media allows any individual into the world of Hermès. The UGC shows insight into the experiences of luxury consumers and contains various informational stimuli that affect the general perceptions of the brand. It is hence concluded that the non-luxury consumer now has access to valuable information that relates to the brand, to a degree they have never had before. Given that the amount of exposed owners, sources and information of a product inhibits the scarcity (Brock & Brannon, 1992), it is argued that the UGC interferes with Hermès restrictive and arbitrary supply strategies. Additionally, the UGC was found to contain explicit and contextual expressions that makes information more accessible to individuals.

The unveiling of luxury brands through UGC can hence be understood as a compromised perceived exclusivity, which is bound to have an influence on the attitudes that are created towards the brand. The determination of UGC as a potential inhibitor of exclusivity is however significant from other perspectives as well. The concluded accessibility of information and insider information through the UGC suggests that the public, online conversations can be seen as a democratizing factor to the concept of luxury. Hence, the UGC contributes to a more equitable distribution of information about Hermès. Given that individuals assign value when met with information that is limited, hard to access and unavailable to others (Bozzolo & Brock, 1992), this implies that the social media users are empowered by the UGC, while the sense of exclusivity surrounding Hermès might be threatened by it. This suggested implication raises the questions of how it might alter the landscape on which luxury brands operate, over a longer period of time.

In somewhat of a paradox to the aforementioned, the findings simultaneously concluded that elements of the UGC can be seen as contributors to the perceptions of exclusivity. It was

concluded that the expressions and behaviors in the UGC were centered around the devoted efforts to obtain the luxury product. Hence, the contents in the UGC re-created the existing myths that surround the brand, which concludingly makes the brand appear as unavailable and less approachable to the common consumer. There are multiple explanations as to why these drivers of perceived unavailability relate to attributed value. Combining a psychological, sociological and economic perspective, several connections can be drawn between the UGC and its effect on attitudes towards Hermès. These can be established as the general sense of desire and excitement in the individual, who is thought to be motivated by the need to reestablish her freedom by obtaining the unavailable product in question (Lynn, 1992) In order to conclude the relationship between UGC and its influence on brand attitudes, this thesis provides a varying perspective on the effects of perceived availability in a highly contemporary luxury brand-related context.

The findings of the analysis displayed various levels of connections to Hermès in the UGC creators and social media users. The pinpointing of these consumers have contributed valuable insight into the various types of consumer characteristics of those that partake in the online conversations regarding luxury brands. It can be concluded that these individuals of varying characteristics contribute to existing and new narratives surrounding the brand, by visibly positioning themselves in relation to the brand. Consequently, the social media users have the power to alter the associative images attached with the brand. It is however important to conclude that this thesis does not assert the specific ways that the brand image is actually altered, given that it is bound to the subjective minds of each individual that observes it (Escalas, 2004). It is however relevant to discuss the connections between the findings of the research, in relation to the idea of reference groups. It is argued that consumers are more likely to establish a high association with a brand when they perceive that the image of the brand is aligned with an ingroup (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Although conflicting images in consumer groups is an extensively established phenomenon, it can be argued that the luxury UGC makes different reference groups visible to one another. This notion concludes that the luxury UGC might create a conflict between various groups of consumers, in an online context that is signified by large volumes of content that are in constant distribution (Wagner, 2023).

Moreover, the analysis illustrated various online phenomena in relation to the social media posts, which may affect the SBA of the social media users that observe it. Thus, not only the general understanding of luxury SBA in an online context has been developed. Rather, the findings also illustrate online behaviors, expressions and associations that can affect the perception of the luxury brand for those that are observing it. As previously mentioned, UGC has influenced the way awareness is formed around a brand. This awareness is created from the concluded large distribution of information in the UGC. In the context of the research, this partially happened on a platform where Hermès lacks presence and control over the narrative. The findings further indicated that the UGC can be seen as a platform where various explicit and implicit expressions of negative sentiments towards the luxury brand were expressed. The nature of these expressions varied, ranging from the questioning of luxury consumers to explicit expressions of dislike towards the products.

It is arguable that this general finding is relevant to further explore in relation to the social media users that display high levels of associations with the brand. High SBA consumers are characterized by their loyalty for the brand, and are prone to engage in brand pursuit. This means that they are likely to defend the image of the brand when it is threatened, in order to protect their own personal images. Given that high SBA consumers utilize the brand as a symbolic resource, they perceive the image of the brand as closely related to the image of themselves. The brand pursuit of these consumers is hence not only motivated by their loyalty to the brand, but also of themselves (Angle & Forehand, 2016). This theoretical perspective provides importance to the high SBA consumers, and their role in the online conversations. As earlier established, the dissociative images in the UGC were met with reactions from other users that distanced the brand from the negative associations. The participation of high SBA consumers that engage in brand pursuit, therefore can be seen as safeguards of the brand in the online context.

The behaviors of the consumers that displayed strong connections to the brand, are concluded as valuable assets for the brand in question, given that they are known to act as associative extensions of the brand image (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Thus, these consumers are likely to act in accordance with the image of the brand and can therefore provide genuine consistency in the otherwise conflicting, even anarchic environment of social media. These high SBA

consumers are hence argued to be vital for the survival of the luxury brand overtime, since they counteract the risks of brand dilution. This means that the luxury brand is upheld and strengthened by the high SBA consumers, which makes conflicting associations less influential on the symbolic meaning of the brand (Li et al., 2019).

6.2 Practical Implications

Given that the purpose of the research was to explore luxury brands in the context of UGC, multiple established findings and conclusions can be argued to suggest practical implications for the field. In order to make final conclusions of this from the managerial perspective of our findings, the practical implications deriving from the discussion of findings and theoretical contributions will be discussed in relation to its relevance for the field of luxury brand management. Connecting to the high brand visibility that was concluded from the UGC on TikTok and Instagram, this phenomenon is as aforementioned only controlled by the creators of the posts and comments. This indicates that UGC is existing without the premises of the brand itself, making it hard if not possible for luxury brands to control. This visibility in the context of a high paced, online environment concludes that sentiments, expressions and information relating to the brand has a wide reach. This conclusion, in combination with the wide variety of associative risks that were identified in the UGC, suggests that it is of significance for luxury brands. This is motivated by the fact that the UGC can impose short term risks for the image of the brand, due to its virality. Moreover, it also suggests that the online narratives of luxury brands and the potential effects on perceived exclusivity, might impose long term risks. This is supported by the previously concluded risk of brand dilution and alterations in the symbolic value of the brand. This suggests that luxury brands who chose to refrain from a social media presence, should consider monitoring the UGC in order to manage reputational and symbolic risks. Thus, the findings of this thesis highlight important arguments for the managerial implications. To conclude these, it is not possible for brands to obtain control over the individual attitudes that are altered by the UGC. It is however important to monitor it in order to manage risks and stay present in its effects on the brand congruence and brand image, in order to maintain their competitive advantage.

6.3 General Conclusions

As stated in the introductory chapter of the thesis, the purpose of the research was to explore the effect of UGC on attitudes towards the luxury brand of Hermès. This purpose was motivated by the gap in research where existing investigations suggest that the understanding of luxury brand perceptions requires further exploration. Based on the aim of accomplishing a comprehensive understanding of perceptions of Hermès in the context of UGC, one comprehensive research question was formulated along with three related sub- research questions.

- *How does user-generated content affect brand attitudes of Hermès on social media?*
 - *In what ways does UGC affect the brand awareness of Hermès?*
 - *In what ways does UGC affect the perception of Hermès as an exclusive brand?*
 - *In what ways does UGC affect self-brand associations of Hermès?*

In accordance with the previously established aims of the research, a cohesive understanding of the various implications of UGC have been established in relation to the perceptions of Hermès. This was concluded on multiple levels, ranging from the overall general recognition of the brand to the individual on value creation. The findings related to the three sub- research questions have been presented and motivated in the analysis chapter, which has established the connections between the awareness, exclusivity and associations of Hermès. The first part of the analysis presented a connection between the UGC and its effects on brand awareness, where the UGC posts facilitated increased visibility and exposure for the brand. The observable consumption of Hermès products in the UGC further enhanced the perceived brand penetration. This finding indicates that the UGC can have negative effects on the brand attitudes towards Hermès. However, the general conclusion of an increased brand awareness, proposes that it is a facilitator of future positive brand attitudes. In the second part of the analysis, the exclusivity of Hermès was explored through the perceived availability of the brand. This presented contrasting conclusions in regards to the possible effects on brand attitudes. It was concluded that the sense

of unavailability was established through the UGC, given that the high levels of efforts and specific behaviors of the consumers were made visible. On the other hand, a demystification of the brand was concluded, which was explained by the perceived visibility of the brand and its consumers. Thus, varying suggested effects on the brand attitudes are concluded, indicating a need for further research. Finally, the analysis concluded that the UGC creators were of varying levels of SBA. Consequently, both high and low levels were observed in the social media users. This indicated that various associative images of Hermès are portrayed in the UGC. The high SBA consumers that are made visible through the UGC, indicate that the UGC can act as a platform where positive attitudes are formed against the brand of Hermès. However, it is suggested that the ambiguity of the UGC might cause conflicting associations to Hermès and its consumers, which is seen as a risk for the brand image, due to its visibility. In relation to the consequential brand attitudes of Hermès, this indicated that the UGC can be seen as a facilitator and inhibitor of the attitudes that are formed towards Hermès.

In accordance with the previously established aims of the research, a cohesive understanding of the various implications of UGC have been established in relation to the perceptions of Hermès. This was concluded on multiple levels, ranging from the overall general recognition of the brand to the individual on value creation. The explorative approach to the research, created a foundation for future developments of the findings through added research.

6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

In this thesis, we have explored how luxury brands can be affected by the phenomenon of UGC. The findings, that were of general nature due to the exploratory approach of the research, created a cohesive initial understanding of the nature of the social media conversations surrounding Hermès. The findings of this thesis highlighted that the UGC was met with reactions of varying nature. It is therefore suggested that the portrayal of luxury brands is further investigated, by studying the dialogue and interaction between users in the comment sections. It has been concluded that the accessibility, visibility and reach of the UGC was deemed important for the

implications on the perception of the brand. This is partially connected to the algorithmic nature of various social media platforms. We therefore suggest further quantitative research, where the reach of the luxury UGC is measured in relation to the sentiments that they contain. Finally, we propose that the findings of this research, and its incomplete implications on brand attitudes, is developed through interviews with social media users with varying levels of connection to luxury brands.

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Appendix A

Sentiment analysis and description of data.

Reference	Sentiment	Text in caption / comment	Visual context of post
TT post 1	Positive	took 9 years to get my dream bag and i'm obsessed	Unboxing video of a Hermès Birkin bag.
TT comment 1	Neutral	For me it takes 2 weeks with dhgate	
TT comment 2	Neutral	If it wasnt Hermes - nobody would want these bags	
TT comment 3	Negative	I rly don't understand the hype with the birkin	
TT comment 4	Negative	This is crazy.. hermes is taking all those customers for a ride... there is a lot ither bags as good and available	
TT comment 5	Negative	Ive seen so many videos of birkin unboxing. Its really not so rare anymore	
TT post 2	Positive	Part 2 of my Hermès shopping date! My outfit is from @divaboutique	Shopping experience filmed inside an Hermès store. Showing purchased Hermès Birkin bag.
TT comment 6	Negative	I don't make sense how people act about these basic bags	
TT comment 7	Negative	Really that's your dream... how shallow!!	
TT comment 8	Negative	You went to Hermès dressed like that. In Miami they give a Birkin to anyone	
TT comment 9	Negative	Outfit 250... Birkin 20k makes sense. Welcome to Miami	
TT comment 10	Negative	Hermes acts like you're trying to buy a kidney in the black market for a damn purse	
TT post 3	Positive	Hermes fairytale	Videos of special order bag appointment at Hermès store and unboxing of the Kelly Hermès bag.
TT comment 11	Negative	It's call being fooled by brand	
TT comment 12	Negative	It's just a bag....	
TT comment 13	Negative	I just do not get how perfectly sane people are tricked into getting onto the Hermes bandwagon...marketing mastery at its best	
TT comment 14	Negative	But is it really worth that money? if i were a billionaire i still would not buy it, out of protest most probably	
TT comment 15	Positive	Not just a bag... it's the bag	
TT post 4	Positive	The story is wild behind this one, I am so glad that I was able to experience such an amazing moment with my husband (seen in reflection). It was our first time ever inside an Hermès store, we were so lucky to have an SA that was so willing to teach me about the brand. But above all an opportunity to take this beautiful Kelly sellier home with me. Blessed.	Unboxing video of an Hermès Kelly bag.

TT comment 16		Holy lord!!! A beautiful croc for a first timer!!!! That's amazing!!!!!! Believing in dreams	
TT comment 17		so much untruths. husband definitely was not excited about this experience	
TT comment 18		Please tell us the story how you scored this beauty on the very first trip to the big H!	
TT comment 19		That poor crocodile that had to die for a stupid, overpriced bag	
TT comment 20		I love the Kelly bag!! Prefer it over the birkin honestly!	
TT post 5		Build-A-B(ear)KIN	Shopping experience from an Hermès store and videos of a special order Hermès bag appointment.
TT comment 21		I just don't understand this? They invite you to spend more money in their store	
TT comment 22		Love it	
TT comment 23		Congratulations!	
TT comment 24		I just ordered the gator leather birkin from dhgate luv	
TT comment 25		One day	
IG post 1		Happy Mother's Day friends! Though i do not have a child i surely became a Birkin mom yet again. Unboxing my newest Birkin to my ever growing collection. I had the color Craie on the top of my wishlist and my adorable SA somehow knew it and surely delivered. I am over the moon. Thank you my H. Miss Craie is so gorgeous and I cannot wait to enjoy her all summer long with all my light colored outfits	Unboxing video of a Hermès Birkin bag and Hermès bag charm.
IG comment 1		Craie is soooo gorgeous. Just love the specs of this bag	
IG comment 2		She's absolutely gorgeous. huge congratulations babe	
IG comment 3		I am in love with the blue and white. Give it to me now!!! It's screaming French summer!!!	
IG comment 4		so Gorgeous! congrats on your baby B! Happy Birkin Day	
IG comment 5		Oh how special!!!! Thank you for sharing!	
IG post 2		The excitement is real after being invited by my sales associate at Hermès to come in and create my own personalized bag! This special order is called "a la carte" and only a few selected clients get invited to do this every year. Imagine being able to choose your favorite Hermès bag, specifically made for you in your favorite colour combination, and choose other elements such as the leather type, stitching, hardware or even strap length. It was a lovely afternoon at the Madrid Canalejas store, drinking champagne chatting about the savoir fair of the maison and choosing one by one the different features for my new Mini Kelly II. Now it's time to wait for it to be made and stamped with the iconic horseshoe emblem, a small yet very	Videos of special order bag appointment at Hermès store

		significant detail for Hermès collectors like myself.	
IG comment 6		How does it feel to live my dream? manifesting. happy 4 u	
IG comment 7		I'm also waiting for my Mini Kelly III! It's super chic! Congratulations	
IG comment 8		Iconic	
IG comment 9		Omg congratulations, can't wait to meet her	
IG comment 10		A dream come true	
IG post 3		Yep! I jumped on the bag charm bandwagon! This one is my favorite. Because it's so iconic! I'm hoping it's the only one I ever buy! What's your favorite bag charm???	Video showing an Hermès Picotin bag with a Hermès bag charm.
IG comment 11		My fave bag charm is def my kelly doll charm haha	
IG comment 12		Love the color of your Picotin. Is it potiron?	
IG comment 13		The horse hair tassel! They dont do them no more!	
IG comment 14		I have a huge adoration for the Birkin but I also love the biggest Evelyn	
IG comment 15		The one & only charm I ever buy too	
IG post 4		And just like that my birthday gift comes 3 months later! Mini Kelly Vert Criquet it is! Thank you (...) and team Lisbon for this dream bag	Unboxing video of an Hermès Kelly bag.
IG comment 16		Dreaaaam	
IG comment 17		Amazing	
IG comment 18		Swooning	
IG comment 19		What a dream	
IG comment 20		She is a dream combo for many of us! Huge congratulations babe! Wear her always in good health	
IG post 5		Which sister are you?...A B25 Togo Trench with Bougainville on the inside OR a B30 Gold Grizzly Suede?	Video showing two Hermès Birkin bags.
IG comment 21		Neither....I'm a Goodwill kinda chic	
IG comment 22		The poor one	
IG comment 23		Both obvi	
IG comment 24		Materialistic much	
IG comment 25		Togo trench	

Appendix B

Presentation of data collection.

Reference	Publishing date	Likes	Views	Comments	Link to post
TT post 1	2/1/2023	281,9 K	3,5 M	1241	Link to post
TT comment 1	4/1/2023	676			
TT comment 2	5/1/2023	9634			
TT comment 3	20/1/2023	522			
TT comment 4	3/1/2023	2309			
TT comment 5	4/1/2023	1744			
TT post 2	26/2/2023	49,8 K	652,6 K	723	Link to post
TT comment 6	27/2/2023	433			
TT comment 7	18/3/2023	54			
TT comment 8	26/2/2023	666			
TT comment 9	26/2/2023	195			
TT comment 10	27/2/2023	100			
TT post 3	6/3/2023	101,1 K	1,2 M	429	Link to post
TT comment 11	9/3/2023	1833			
TT comment 12	11/3/2023	940			
TT comment 13	9/4/2023	253			
TT comment 14	27/3/2023	16			
TT comment 15	11/3/2023	73			
TT post 4	8/2/2023	72,2 K	816,5 K	544	Link to post
TT comment 16	12/2/2023	1388			
TT comment 17	12/2/2023	219			
TT comment 18	11/2/2023	459			
TT comment 19	12/2/2023	118			
TT comment 20	12/2/2023	83			
TT post 5	28/4/2023	57,4 K	786,6 K	141	Link to post
TT comment 21	29/4/2023	713			
TT comment 22	28/4/2023	282			
TT comment 23	28/4/2023	351			
TT comment 24	5/5/2023	5			
TT comment 25	28/4/2023	25			
IG post 1	14/5/2023	523	7222	177	Link to post
IG comment 1	14/5/2023	0			

IG comment 2	15/5/2023	0			
IG comment 3	14/5/2023	0			
IG comment 4	14/5/2023	0			
IG comment 5	15/5/2023	0			
IG post 2	9/5/2023	7611	93,1 K	90	Link to post
IG comment 6	9/5/2023	0			
IG comment 7	9/5/2023	4			
IG comment 8	9/5/2023	1			
IG comment 9	9/5/2023	0			
IG comment 10	9/5/2023	0			
IG post 3	12/5-2023	705	14,2 K	111	Link to post
IG comment 11	12/5/2023	3			
IG comment 12	12/5/2023	1			
IG comment 13	12/5/2023	1			
IG comment 14	14/5/2023	1			
IG comment 15	12/5/2023	2			
IG post 4	4/5/2023	802	13,6 K	23	Link to post
IG comment 16	4/5/2023	2			
IG comment 17	4/5/2023	2			
IG comment 18	4/5/2023	2			
IG comment 19	4/5/2023	1			
IG comment 20	4/5/2023	1			
IG post 5	11/5/2023	2390	76,9 K	39	Link to post
IG comment 21	11/5/2023	28			
IG comment 22	11/5/2023	12			
IG comment 23	11/5/2023	9			
IG comment 24	12/5/2023	0			
IG comment 25	12/5/2023	0			

Appendix C

Presentation of coding scheme.

Final codes	Categories	Themes
Unfavorable information	Increased visibility of Hermès	Increased visibility
Favorable information		
Expressed oversaturation of Hermès online		
Showing Hermès stores		
Showing Hermès products		
Displaying bag unboxing	Showing off visual brand elements	
Showing shopping bag		
Expressing purchase intent	Portrayed brand penetration	Visible consumption
Mentioning previous purchase		
Suggesting that the bags are rare/unavailable	Perceived unavailability	Unavailability and high efforts
Willing to wait for Hermès bag	High efforts & resources	
Willing to spend a large amount of money		
Effort to receive offer		
"Hermès bandwagon"		
Invited to purchase	Dependant on Hermès	
Grateful to be offered bag		
Shocked/surprised to be offered bag		
Appreciation for user for for sharing	Seeking information	
Searching for information		
Oversaturation of Hermès online	Perceived availability	Demystifying Hermès
Suggesting that the bags are not rare/available		
The bags used to be rare		
Expressed low effort to receive offer		
Displaying Hermès store	Unveiling information	
Helping others/Sharing information		
Mentioning purchase history		
Sharing buying experience		
The bags are not unique	Questioning value	
Unwilling to spend large amounts of money		
Expressed admiration	Liking Hermès	Loyalty and linkage to Hermès
Expressed obsession	Idolising Hermès	
Expressed desire		

Unimaginable to receive bag		
Hermes creating excitement		
Envy of consumer		
Referring to bag as human	Connection to Hermès	
Collector/Collection		
Devotion to Hermès		
Relationship with Hermès/sales associate		
Expressing brand expertise/knowledge	Distinguishing from other consumers	Conflicting associations
Indicating superiority		
Hypocrisy	Dissociative image	
Criticizing taste of Hermès consumer		
Expressed dissonance between brand and consumer		
Seeking status	Dissociative image & Status driven	
Materialism		
Conspicuous behavior	Status driven	
Accustomed luxury shopper		
The value lies in the brand, not the products	Questioning value	
Differentiating from luxury consumers		
Ridiculing Hermès consumers		
Calling Hermès consumers irrational		
Hermès is fooling their consumers		
Questioning price/worth		