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Performing Status: The Old Money Aesthetic on Social Media

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Abstract

Title: Performing Status: The *Old Money* Aesthetic on Social Media

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Keywords: Social class, identity performance, *Old Money* aesthetic, Instagram

Research question: *How is social class performed through the Old Money aesthetic in social media culture?*

Purpose: The aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of how the *Old Money* aesthetic is used on Instagram to perform social class, particularly focusing on the role of creators as active producers of this class performance.

Theoretical perspective: Three theoretical perspectives are integrated into a conceptual framework, including socialization, taste & status, identity performance, and semiotics & myths. This theoretical combination enables the analysis of how social class is staged, naturalized, and consumed on Instagram as a digital front stage.

Research Method: Based on the researchers social-constructionist perspective a qualitative method was applied, including a visual content analysis and an abductive research approach. The data material for the analysis consists of 1,158 Instagram posts published by six selected creators between January 2025 and April 2026.

Empirical results: The analysis identified three key themes. Firstly, social class is performed through the aestheticization of the past and the representation of aristocratic leisure activities and exclusive locations. Secondly, class belonging is communicated through embodied practices such as body language, posture, and relational identity construction. Thirdly, creators signal social distinction through the deliberate integration of high-quality materials, craftsmanship, and heritage brands that require cultural insider knowledge.

Conclusion: The study shows that social class on Instagram is not simply reflected but actively performed through the translation of historically rooted class codes into a coherent visual script. In this way, creators naturalize class privileges as self-evident and reinforce structural inequalities while simultaneously conveying the impression of accessibility. Once other classes are able to participate in the existing forms of distinction, elites shift their status signaling to other practices such as physical experiences and places.

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What began as a research on an Instagram trend quickly evolved into an intensive exploration of fundamental questions about social class, identity, and how we present and perceive ourselves in an increasingly digital world. The fact that an aesthetic on social media can reveal so much about our society surprised even us, and that is precisely what made this project one of the most exciting experiences of our studies.

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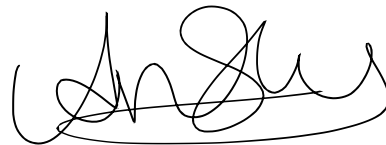
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1. Introduction

The following chapter introduces the research topic and lays the foundation for this study. It starts by providing an overview of the historical roots and the digital development of the Old Money aesthetic, followed by the explanation of the research problematization. Building on this, the research question is formulated and discusses its purpose, research contributions, and delimitations. The chapter concludes with a short outline of the thesis, highlighting what can be expected in the following chapters.

1.1 Background

In contemporary digital consumer culture, social media profiles have become an important mechanism to display social class (Yates & Lockley, 2018). Internet aesthetics like the *Old Money* aesthetic function as a suitable tool for that, as they refer to a heterogeneous collection of materials and activities that are constructed primarily online and communicate a subjectively defined atmosphere (Giolo & Berghman, 2023). Within this context, status is no longer signaled through conspicuous commercial markers, but rather conveyed through cultural familiarity with understated upper-class codes, where value is decoded through insider-oriented knowledge and refined taste (Makkar & Yap, 2018).

To better understand the contemporary interpretation of the *Old Money* term, it is helpful to consider its historical roots in the European aristocracy and the American upper class of the early 20th century (Sjoelind, 2024). Traditionally, *Old Money* refers to inherited wealth that had been passed down within families over several generations (Gobler, 2025). Beyond the source of wealth, it describes a certain social class that is often perceived as more educated and respected than others (Gobler, 2025). The class is characterized by typical habits such as restraint and a preference for quality (Almendral, 2025), which is also incorporated in their style of understated elegance and timeless design (Li, 2025).

This embodiment stands in strong contrast to the concept of *New Money*, which is associated with recently earned wealth (Gobler, 2025). It is stereotypically linked to conspicuous spending and flashy logos (Gobler, 2025), which is driven by a psychological need to validate success through

visible markers (Almendral, 2025). While *New Money* tends to view wealth as personal capital to be spent, *Old Money* families treat their fortune as a collective heritage and, consequently, feel a responsibility to preserve it for future generations (Almendral, 2025; Gobler, 2025).

The ongoing digitalization has played a major role in the resurgence of this aesthetic on social media in the early 2020s (Google Trends, 2026). Beyond shaping how upper-class codes are distributed and perceived, the revival has started to romanticize elite life and a form of privilege that remains out of reach for many people (Hoffower, 2021). This is also partly motivated by what Li (2025) calls “low-key nobility”, referring to the desire of consumers to distance themselves from mainstream consumption. Simultaneously, popular culture reinforced this resurgence through media display. Not only movies like *Saltburn*, but even series such as *Ripley* can be seen as a reflection of public interest in aristocratic lifestyles (Berlinger, 2025).

Beyond media influences, the social and economic uncertainty during the Covid-19 pandemic also played a key role as it revived the desire to dress with intention after periods of casual wear (Berlinger, 2025). This post-pandemic craving for structure marks a deeper shift, as the resurgence of the *Old Money* aesthetic extends beyond mere fashion trends and can be linked to a broader return of traditional and conservative values within contemporary culture. Recent discussions in fashion media reveal that conservative styles are often associated with stability, tradition, and continuity (Goertz, 2025). On social media, in particular, these values are then not simply reflected but actively presented as desirable markers of a certain social class. This suggests that conservative fashion has increasingly become a reliable way for expressing traditional values and social orientations (Habtemariam, 2025).

The aesthetics’ increasing popularity is also attributed to its wide dissemination on digital platforms such as Instagram. The platform’s algorithmic systems actively amplify and normalize such content, shaping lifestyle representations and consumption choices within digital consumer culture (Airoldi & Rokka, 2022). In that way, the *Old Money* aesthetic has evolved into a desirable lifestyle that is performed through digital storytelling. This staging on Instagram furthermore connects to what Rosida et al. (2023) describe as “flexing culture”. While this culture is typically associated with conspicuous displays of wealth (Rosida et al., 2023), the *Old Money* aesthetic can be understood as a more sophisticated form of flexing that signals a certain social class.

Consequently, the *Old Money* phenomenon has transformed from an exclusive socioeconomic class position rooted in physical, generational inheritance to a highly visible and digitally mediated internet aesthetic. While this evolution highlights the changing dynamics of status display within contemporary media environments, it simultaneously introduces a central tension. When its defining visual signs become broadly accessible through digital platforms, questions arise about how social class is performed, negotiated, and maintained.

1.2 Problematization

Today, digital platforms have turned this class-based reality into an internet aesthetic (Giolo & Berghman, 2023) that can be adopted and reproduced by anyone. In this sense, the contemporary *Old Money* aesthetic, as it appears on social media, can be understood as a performative reconstruction of social class through symbolic consumption practices. The aesthetic becomes increasingly detached from its original social context and aligns with what Baudrillard (1994) describes as a “simulacrum”, in which signs of elite class no longer represent a real social background, but instead simulate one. Building on this theoretical perspective, the *Old Money* aesthetic can be interpreted as a “hyperreality” (Baudrillard, 1994), where representations construct their own version of reality rather than referring to a real origin.

This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the context of the *Old Money* aesthetic, where creators reshape elite symbols by framing them as desirable and attainable for a wider audience, including non-elites. Through this shift, inherited wealth is translated into a collection of accessible visual codes such as classic tailoring, heritage brands, or leisure activities. This creates the impression that the aesthetic of *Old Money* can be approximated through specific consumption choices. In this sense, such framing may create an illusion of accessibility, where *Quiet Luxury* that was once reserved for the top of society is now presented to Generation Z and Millennials as a way to evoke a sense of heritage and security in times of rapid social change (Li, 2025).

This democratization of elite aesthetics reveals a critical theoretical paradox. While social media helps to make the elite lifestyle highly visible and seemingly accessible, consumption practices continue to reproduce existing class hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998). Even if creators can post images and videos associated with the *Old Money* lifestyle, the fundamental resources such

as elite education, healthcare, or generational security remain unaffordable and exclusive (Currid-Halkett, 2017). In this way, digital culture creates a **tension between an accessible appearance and structural inequality**. Consequently, the enactment of social class through aesthetic consumption does little to challenge the actual social hierarchy.

Beyond structural inequality, this paradox also manifests itself on a more embodied level. Within contemporary digital environments, visual markers have become endlessly replicable and easily manipulated to the extent that anything can be staged or imitated. In this context, the *Old Money* aesthetic can be understood as a curated playbook, a set of accessible rules, and visual toolkits that **creators can utilize to project elite lifestyles**. However, this raises a fundamental question about **whether social class can be truly and entirely imitated in a digital sphere**. This premise directly challenges Bourdieu's (1984) concept of "habitus", according to which class dispositions are deeply ingrained through socialization and manifest themselves through gestures, postures, and ways of moving that appear entirely natural. **Consequently, a critical tension emerges between the theoretical assumption that everything can be staged in online contexts and the rigid, embodied reality of class-bound physical expressions.**

In this context, platform visibility on Instagram functions as **"attention capital"** (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020), referring to a quantifiable form of **social capital** that is gained through likes, shares, and followers. It not only influences access to networks and social recognition but also enables creators to act as **active agents who curate the *Old Money* aesthetic on Instagram**. As curators, they **strategically construct and maintain a coherent visual identity** (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022), conferring legitimacy on certain codes such as dress codes or leisure activities. These performances are not necessarily tied to actual ownership, as creators can portray an elite-associated lifestyle without physically possessing the objects or spaces they display (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This shift highlights how the *Old Money* aesthetic **is no longer tied to inherited status but increasingly operates as a flexible and widely reproducible form of class performance in digital environments.**

However, despite the central role of creators, existing research has predominantly focused on consumer trends and general platform engagement, while largely overlooking them as active producers of this aesthetic. As a result, **it remains underexplored how exactly this aesthetic is performed by creators within the constraints of algorithmic platform logic**. The study therefore

seeks to address this gap by examining how creators on Instagram use the *Old Money* aesthetic to perform social class. In particular, the analysis shifts the focus away from the actual embodiment of a traditional *Old Money* lifestyle toward the performance of desirable class positions, conveyed through consumption-based representations, aesthetic staging, and embodied practices.

1.2.1 Research Question

Based on the problematization, the study therefore examines:

“How is social class performed through the Old Money aesthetic in social media culture?”

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how social class in the digital age is no longer simply represented but actively constructed and performed through aesthetic practices. The focus lies on the *Old Money* aesthetic on Instagram, a phenomenon that shows how historically rooted class codes are reinterpreted in contemporary consumer culture and how they become reproducible through digital staging. This study specifically analyzes how creators stage and maintain social class positions through visual and symbolic consumption practices, irrespective of their actual socio-economic background. In this context, consumption is not only understood as a material act, but as an aesthetic and embodied means of expression that unfolds within visually curated digital environments.

1.4 Research Contributions

The study aims to contribute to the growing research on digital identity performance and the representation of social class in contemporary consumption cultures. It expands existing theoretical perspectives by showing that social class on social media is increasingly detached from its material foundation. Rather than reflecting actual socioeconomic positions, it functions as an aesthetic project constructed through cultural insider knowledge and visual competence. By

analyzing the *Old Money* aesthetic, this study helps to understand how historical class codes appear democratized by algorithmically optimized platforms like Instagram, while in reality reproducing and naturalizing structural inequalities. Furthermore, the study also highlights the role of creators as active producers of collective class narratives, introducing a perspective that has been largely neglected in previous research.

1.5 Delimitations

This study deliberately includes several limitations in order to ensure a precise and consistent research focus. The focus is entirely placed on the **perspective of content creators** and how they stage the *Old Money* aesthetic on social media platforms. The perception or interpretation by their **followers will therefore not be taken** into account. Besides that, the analysis is limited to the **specific *Old Money* aesthetic** and does not consider any other aesthetic trends or comparative phenomena circulating in digital spaces. Further, the study does not refer to the historical re-evaluation or change in the meaning of the *Old Money* lifestyle, but to the **contemporary form of this aesthetic** and its performative presentation on social media. It is also not examined whether the selected creators are part of the social elite or whether they really come from a traditional *Old Money* family with the necessary economic capital. Instead, the focus is on **how creators use the *Old Money* aesthetic to perform social class** and how these representations are staged and communicated through online content. The topic is therefore approached from a consumer culture perspective, with managerial aspects falling outside the scope of this study.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

Chapter 1 - Introduction: This chapter introduces the research topic and builds the foundation for this study. It starts with an overview of the historical roots and the digital development of the *Old Money* aesthetic, followed by the problematization that highlights the key tensions and contradictions emerging when class codes become accessible through social media. Based on that, the research question is formed: “*How is social class performed through the Old Money aesthetic*

in social media culture?” The chapter then closes with an overview of the study’s purpose, research contributions and delimitations.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review: The second chapter analyzes and discusses prior research focusing on two central literature streams, that refer to social class, taste & aesthetics and online identity performance. By critically examining these research areas, the key theoretical concepts and research gaps in the existing literature are revealed. The chapter concludes with a critical reflection of these two streams and highlights how this study contributes to the extension of existing theoretical perspectives.

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Framework: The third chapter aims to develop an integrated conceptual framework that connects three theoretical perspectives, relating to socialization, taste & status, identity performance, and semiotics & myths. Each perspective is introduced individually and described before it is demonstrated how their interplay enables a thorough analysis of our research topic.

Chapter 4 - Research Method: This chapter argues for the methodological framework of this study. At first the philosophical positioning is explained and then the choice of an abductive research approach is justified. This is followed by the description of the chosen research method, namely a qualitative visual content analysis, as well as an explanation of the data sampling and data analysis procedures. The chapter ends with a reflection of the study’s research quality and ethical considerations.

Chapter 5 - Empirical Analysis: In the fifth chapter the empirical findings are analyzed and presented through the lens of the theoretical framework. Based on the data analysis process, three key themes are identified: *Aestheticized Heritage and Elite Space*, *Embodied Social Class Performance*, and *Symbolic Distinction and Quiet Luxury*. Each theme is illustrated using concrete examples from the analyzed Instagram posts and embedded theoretically.

Chapter 6 - Discussion: Within the discussion chapter a summary of the key findings is presented. This is then followed by the presentation of the study’s theoretical contributions, particularly referring to the new insights that were gained compared to existing literature. The chapter closes with a reflection on the societal implications on a higher level.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion: The last section aims to answer the research question based on the study results and reflects on three central paradoxes that characterize the *Old Money* aesthetic. In the final step, the limitations and directions for future research such as platform comparisons or the role of AI-generated content are presented.

2. Literature Review

The following literature review analyzes and discusses prior research studies across two key literature streams that are considered most relevant for this study. These streams focus on social class, taste & aesthetic, and online identity performance, addressing how social class and status are expressed and how identity performance functions as a mechanism within this process. By reviewing existing research, an overview of prior research is provided and the key gaps in current literature are identified. In doing so, it draws attention to underexplored topics and critically engages with dominant assumptions. Ultimately, this chapter addresses these gaps, expands on current theoretical perspectives, and lays the foundation for the theoretical framework applied in this study.

2.1 Social class, taste & aesthetics

From a classical sociological perspective, early foundational work by Veblen (1899) shows how consumption is a way to display wealth and maintain social status through conspicuous consumption. Building on this traditional approach, Bourdieu (1984) shows that distinction does not only come from what people own but rather how people consume and interpret cultural goods. Therefore, he introduced the concept of cultural capital. Trigg (2001) connects these two perspectives and demonstrates that status signaling extends beyond visible displays of wealth and increasingly operates through subtle forms of taste and cultural competence. He further proposes that tastes circulate dynamically between social groups, extending Veblen's (1899) "trickle-down" model of consumption. While these foundational frameworks show the structural origins of distinction, they remain socio-historically anchored in physical spaces. By looking at status mostly as a fixed social position, existing theory fails to explain how these subtle taste markers are visually constructed and performed in modern digital environments.

More recent consumer research addresses this shift by documenting a transition from conspicuous to inconspicuous consumption. Rooted in postmodern consumer culture theories, a study by Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson (2015) argues that luxury signaling has moved away from visible logos toward subtle, insider-oriented markers. Furthermore, Makkar and Yap (2018) show that

consumers use inconspicuous luxury to position themselves as culturally sophisticated insiders. This shift toward immateriality and less visible forms of luxury signaling is further reinforced by Currid-Halkett (2017), who notes that the contemporary “aspirational class” reproduces privilege through investments in education and lifestyle practices rather than material goods.

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that digitalization, global mobility, and social acceleration have made liquid consumption increasingly important. However, they show that it does not replace solid forms. Solid consumption is increasingly becoming a luxury, as it requires greater resources. Building on that, the authors conceptualize status in liquid consumption as a dynamic practice tied to flexibility, attention capital, and experiences (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Collectively, these studies offer a robust explanation of the elements of contemporary status signals. However, because they primarily operate at a conceptual or macro-level, they offer only a limited understanding of how these forms of distinction are reflected in specific everyday practices. Furthermore, they leave a conceptual gap regarding how these abstract, liquid forms of status are translated into concrete visual representations. To fully understand concepts like attention capital, it is necessary to empirically investigate the visual formats used to make these immaterial resources legible within an online audience.

To connect these abstract status concepts with concrete visual representation, taste must therefore be conceptualized as an ongoing, lived practice. Drawing on practice-based perspectives, Holt (1998) demonstrates that class boundaries and differences are maintained by how taste is enacted through everyday consumer styles and cultural competencies within specific social contexts. In addition, Arsel and Bean (2013) show how aesthetic norms are systematically reproduced through structured “taste regimes”, defined as structured sets of practices and discourses within which individuals orient themselves. Giolo and Berghman (2023) further argue that online aesthetics are strategic digital toolkits for identity construction. Together, these perspectives shift the view of taste from a passive concept to an active, performative practice. In current literature, these taste regimes and toolkits are discussed in very general terms, and the influence of digital platforms in shaping them is often overlooked.

This platform-specific formatting is directly addressed by Manovich (2017) through his concept of “Instagramism”. He argues that digital status is generated by maintaining a profile feed that aligns with a particular aesthetic. This visual curation requires a specific form of digital cultural

capital, leading to the emergence of what he terms an “Instagram Class”, defined by visual literacy and technical skills. While Manovich (2017) provides a useful framework to analyze digital image curation, his approach remains largely media-theoretical and detached from concrete social class performances. Meanwhile, empirical studies that do connect platforms to class either treat social media capital broadly (Yates & Lockley, 2018) or remain descriptive when mapping highly specific trends like the *Old Money* aesthetic (Li, 2025).

Overall, existing research shows that status is increasingly expressed through subtle, immaterial markers of taste. Digital platforms provide new visual arenas for such distinctions to be performed. Nevertheless, the literature has not yet systematically investigated how these processes interact in practice. Therefore, it is particularly relevant to examine how social class is performed on social media and manifests itself in a specific aesthetic.

2.2 Online identity performance

In previous studies, identity in digital environments was understood as an active process of self-construction rather than a reflection of offline reality. Foundational work by Belk (2013) and Schau & Gilly (2003) highlights how individuals use cultural artifacts, symbols, and consumption objects to shape and express their identities online. The research introduced by Belk (2013) is rooted in a postmodern consumer culture perspective. Within that context, he views the self as a continuous construction that is achieved through symbolic consumption and its expression in digital spaces. This strongly highlights the fluid and fragmented nature of online identity.

Building on this research, the study of Zhao et al. (2008) expand the picture by introducing the concept of “nonymous” (non-anonymous) environments, exploring how users primarily construct their “hoped-for possible selves” on social media platforms. These represent socially desirable identities that individuals do not yet fully embody in their offline life but presented credibly online due to the reduction of physical barriers (“gating features”). A key limitation, however, is the study’s grounding in early Facebook environments, where offline relationships and accountability heavily shape identity construction. On visually driven platforms like Instagram, these constraints are far less present. Similar to the work of Schau & Gilly (2003), both studies draw primarily on

social-psychological literature and emphasizes self-presentation and meaning-making as individual acts.

Based on this constructivist perspective, identity can be understood as a performative process. Identity is not simply possessed online but actively created through various actions. Pearson (2009) discusses in her study *All the World Wide Web's a Stage* that online environments take social interaction to a new level of self-consciousness. Drawing on Goffman (1959), she describes identity as a self-conscious performance that moves between “frontstage” (public presentation) and “backstage” (private retreat). Particularly relevant in this context is Pearson’s (2009) metaphor of a “glass bedroom”. This refers to spaces where private and intimate interactions take place, with the awareness of being observed by a large, often unknown audience. Online performance is therefore a discursive activity in which users manipulate communicative codes and signs in order to constantly reshape and adapt their online identity. Pearson (2009) framework is valuable for understanding identity as performance, yet it prioritizes social interaction over visual and aesthetic elements through which identity is expressed on image-based platforms such as Instagram.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, Instagram can be seen as a platform that transforms self-presentation into a carefully managed form of impression management. According to Tewatia & Majumdar (2022), influencers construct an *aesthetic identity* by selecting and amplifying their most favorable offline characteristics. Privacy thus becomes a commodity that is strategically used to suggest authenticity and relatability to their audience (Abidin, 2016). Furthermore, Casaló et al. (2020) demonstrate that originality and uniqueness are crucial to being perceived as an opinion leader on Instagram. Users are more likely to follow advice from profiles that closely align with their own personality. However, most research focuses on influencers as individuals and mainly examines identity as a form of self-branding. Less attention has been given to how broader trends, such as the *Old Money* aesthetic, shape or diversify identity performance across various creators, particularly as shared visual frameworks that guide how identity is presented. In contrast to the social-psychological and consumer culture approaches mentioned before, these studies adopt a more platform-specific lens. They specifically examine the strategic management of online presences and how this drives engagement.

Looking more closely, identity itself is not an isolated project, but can be viewed as an interactive process of self-verification. Cheung & Choi (2022) find that fashion designers use Instagram to

validate their identity through the interaction with followers, where likes and comments serve as confirmation of a person's self-image. In this sense, the relationship between designers and followers functions as a two-way process. Designers create value for their followers, who in turn strengthen the designers' identity and market value through their engagement. Nevertheless, the authors mainly focus on measurable engagement outcomes and content types (e.g., selfies or body images) within their study. They pay limited attention to the symbolic meaning of these images and how they are used to express one's identity on platforms such as Instagram. Further, their reliance on quantitative engagement metrics may overlook the contextual and culturally embedded nature of identity performance. This suggests the need for a more in-depth approach such as a visual content analysis, which allows our study to analyze the way of identity performance within its natural online environment.

The review of prior research shows that current studies do not discuss how identity performance is shaped by broader aesthetic frameworks and shared cultural meanings. It is therefore necessary to address this gap and examine how these frameworks are tied to social class and how they operate as collective systems that guide creators' behavior.

2.3 Critical lens on prior research

The two literature streams identified in this review offer valuable insights but rarely interact with each other. As part of the literature review, it becomes clear that existing research only offers limited insights into how identity, class, and aesthetics overlap in digital contexts. The analysis of the first literature stream demonstrates that taste can reflect a social class (Bourdieu, 1984) but that taste can also be seen as a performative everyday practice (Arsel & Bean, 2013). While these studies provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which status and taste are produced and reproduced, they primarily focus on broader social structures and conceptual forms of distinction. Although some studies acknowledge digital environments as emerging spaces for the expression of taste, they provide only limited insight into how social distinction is actively made visible online. The second stream, dealing with online performances and self-presentation, addresses this and examines how individuals construct and manage their identities in digital spaces (Cheung & Choi, 2022; Pearson, 2009; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Yet this kind of research tends to

treat identity as an individual project, which leaves identity largely disconnected from broader class dynamics or shared aesthetics. In particular, little is known about how culturally embedded aesthetic styles such as the *Old Money* aesthetic function as systems through which social class is performed.

Therefore, this gap highlights the need for a more integrated perspective that moves beyond isolated views of identity or class. To address this, this study adopts a semiotic perspective into account, drawing on the work of Barthes (1972) and Baudrillard (1994). This perspective enables the analysis of how meaning is constructed and conveyed through aesthetic forms, particularly through signs, symbols, and culturally embedded narratives. In this way, these elements become tools for performing social class in digital environments.

3. Theoretical framework

The following chapter presents the theoretical foundations of this study by introducing three complementary perspectives, including socialization, taste & status, identity performance, and semiotics & myths. The integration of these three perspectives aims to open up a new way of understanding and examining how social class is performed and communicated. Building on that, an own conceptual framework is introduced, highlighting which theories are necessary to thoroughly analyze social class performance on social media.

3.1 Socialization, Taste & Status

The early foundational work by Veblen (1899) on “conspicuous consumption” establishes consumption as a central mechanism of status display. He argues that social status is expressed through the visible display of wealth, with the public demonstration of economic resources serving as a marker of social superiority. Closely related to this is the concept of “conspicuous leisure”, which highlights the visible ability to spend time on non-productive activities as a signal of status. Furthermore, Veblen (1899) describes how the standards of leisure class function as normative benchmarks, which are used as guidelines and gradually adopted by lower social classes. In this way, the upper class establishes the normative standard, which lower classes subsequently seek to emulate.

Building on Veblen (1899), Bourdieu (1984) shifts the focus from economic to cultural capital and argues that distinction is not only achieved based on what people possess, but through how they consume and interpret those cultural objects. As a foundation the concept of “double objectivity” introduced by Bourdieu & Wacquant (2013) serves as a useful starting point. Within the paper, the authors argue that social classes exist in first-order objectivity and second-order objectivity. On the one hand, they exist in the objective distribution of material resources, and on the other hand in the perceptions and classifications that people develop based on this distribution and which are expressed in their lifestyles (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013).

The central concept of Bourdieu’s (1984) framework is the habitus, referring to a system of enduring dispositions that includes perceptions, thoughts, and actions shaped by past social

experiences (Bourdieu, 1984). The habitus simultaneously refers to a “structured structure”, shaped by objective living conditions, and a “structuring structure” that actively generates practices and perceptions (Bourdieu, 1984). In this way, habitus translates the social position into a coherent lifestyle that appears natural and self-evident without deliberately perceiving the social conditions that produced it.

The position is determined by different forms of capital, including economic capital (material resources), social capital (networks and group membership), symbolic capital (recognized forms of prestige derived from the other forms of capital), and cultural capital (education, knowledge, and competencies) (Bourdieu, 1984). Within the context of cultural capital, three different forms can be distinguished. The embodied state as permanent dispositions of mind and body, the objectified state in the form of cultural goods, and the institutionalized state in the form of educational qualifications and certificates (Bourdieu, 1986).

Within this framework, taste is not an individual or natural preference, but closely connected to social origin and education, as empirical observations show that cultural preferences systematically correlate with educational level and social background (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu (1984) argues that taste fulfills a double function, social actors classify not just objects through their judgment of taste, but at the same time reveal their social position. Taste therefore functions as a central mechanism of distinction, rendering social class hierarchies visible and reproducible. Aesthetic preferences are never neutral but always reflect an individual’s social position and appear as an inherent attribute of “natural distinction” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). In this sense, symbolic capital exerts symbolic violence, as it is perceived as a natural authority by being recognized as legitimate because its underlying power relations remain concealed (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013).

While Bourdieu (1984) conceptualizes taste primarily as a product of social structure and socialization, Arsel & Bean (2013) emphasize the role of market processes and everyday practices in shaping aesthetic preferences. They expand on the existing perspective as they understand taste not only as the result of social origin, but also as an activity that is actively produced and constantly maintained through repeated engagement (Arsel & Bean, 2013). The central concept of their framework is the taste regime, referring to a normative system based on discursive processes that structure and organize aesthetic consumption practices (Arsel & Bean, 2013). Such regimes are

maintained through market institutions like websites, magazines, and transmedia brands and provide guidelines for individuals in today's complex consumer environments. Originally developed in the context of home design, this concept is equally applicable to the *Old Money* aesthetic, where similar normative systems structure aesthetic practices. In this context, taste regimes function through continuous engagement and regulate practices through three interconnected processes. These include the **problematization of objects in relation to aesthetic norms**, the **ritualization of recurring routines**, and the **instrumentalization of objects to produce certain meanings** (Arsel & Bean, 2013). In this way, **taste regimes shape preferences for specific objects** as well as associated actions and meanings associated with them.

This development toward practice-based taste regimes portrays a broader social change within consumer culture. Since Veblen (1899), luxury has been a **synonym for conspicuous consumption**, but this logic has fundamentally changed. Eckhardt, Belk and Wilson (2015) describe the rise of **"inconspicuous consumption"** and show that status signaling of traditional luxury goods increasingly blurs, particularly as luxury products have become more accessible to a wider audience due to dupes and mass imitation. Consequently, status is communicated through more subtle and **less visible forms of distinction**, primarily aimed at a small group of like-minded individuals. Three factors are driving this development. **The declining signaling effect of traditional luxury goods**, the **preference to not display offensive status symbols** in uncertain economic times, and the **growing desire for sophistication and subtlety** (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Distinction signals are deliberately kept subtle, making it hard to be identified by the general public, but immediately recognized by insiders (Eckhardt et al., 2015).

Building on this, Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020) examine the changing dynamics of social status and distinction in the context of **liquid consumption**, a concept that was originally introduced by Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017), which describes consumption as dematerialized, ephemeral, and access-based. This new logic of distinction consists of **two central resources, flexibility and attention**. While **flexibility** refers to the ability to **adopt and adapt to new identity positions**, attention relates **to the ability to gain visibility and recognition in social contexts** (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Beyond that, the authors show that **status signaling** increasingly relies on **inconspicuousness**, **non-ownership**, and **authenticity** based on knowledge and craftsmanship, forms of distinction that are all difficult to imitate (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). At the same time, the focus is shifting from

permanent possessions toward **experience-based consumption**, as younger people increasingly collect experiences instead of material goods (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020).

This theoretical categorization shows that the mechanisms of **social distinction have evolved from relatively stable, class-based structures toward more flexible, market-mediated, and practice-oriented forms of consumption**. The transformation does not imply the disappearance of social inequalities but rather their reconfiguration into new forms of visibility, evaluation, and consumption practices.

3.2 Identity Performance

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective conceptualizes social interaction as a form of performance. When individuals enter the presence of others, those people immediately try to gather information about them, including their socio-economic status, their self-image, and competences. To **control this impression**, individuals resort to so-called “sign vehicles”, that is, behaviours, appearances, and objects through which they deliberately communicate certain information about **themselves (Goffman, 1959)**. This process is also referred to as **“impression management”** and describes the attempt by individuals to control the impression that others form of them.

The central concept within Goffman's (1959) framework is the distinction between **“front stage”** and **“back stage”**. Front stage refers to a space in which **individuals perform in front of an audience**, consciously shaping the impression they wish to convey (Goffman, 1959). **Back stage, in contrast**, is the space where the created impression is deliberately abandoned, **where individuals step out of their role**, and where their behavior contradicts their front stage performance (Goffman, 1959). A further distinction Goffman (1959) draws is between **sincere and cynical performances**. While **sincere people believe in the impression they convey**, **cynical performers are aware that they are playing a certain role and deceive their audience**. This differentiation is particularly relevant when asking whether someone performs an identity that matches their actual social position or not. Besides that, Goffman (1959) emphasizes in his study that people do not only perform those identities on their own but **also in teams**. In this sense, **people work together to collectively create a certain impression** and conceal information that might contradict their desired image.

Extending Goffman's (1959) performative perspective, subsequent research highlights the role of consumption in the construction and expression of identity. Belk (1988) introduces the concept of the "extended self" and argues that possessions are central components of self-image. They are not just material objects but contribute to and reflect a person's identity. In this context, Belk (1988) distinguishes between the "me" (the self), and the "mine" (the possession) and shows that the boundary between the two is fluid. What people possess becomes a part of who they are. Moreover, the extended self is not limited to material objects and personal possessions but also includes people, places, and group possessions (Belk, 1988).

Building on this, Belk (2013) expands this concept to the context of digital technologies and demonstrates that these digital environments fundamentally changed the way individuals construct and express their identity. He identifies five key areas of change, of which three are particularly relevant for our study. The first is the "dematerialization of possessions", referring to the fact that many aspects of consumption such as music, images, and communication have become digital and immaterial without losing their functions as a part of the extended self. The second is "the sharing" of digital content with others as a new form of identity expression. The third is the "co-construction of self" through interactions with others in digital spaces, meaning that one's identity is increasingly shaped through the reactions and contributions of others (Belk, 2013). Together, these developments show that the digital world opens up new possibilities for self-expansion and makes it possible to reach a wider audience (Belk, 2013).

The development toward a digitally mediated identity construction is further investigated by Schau & Gilly (2003), who examine how individuals use personal web spaces for their self-presentation. The authors highlight that digital environments enable consumers to construct an identity by associating themselves with signs, symbols, and places in a way that is not limited by physical constraints (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Within their study, a key finding is that consumers primarily present their ideal self on personal web spaces, meaning the version of their identity that they want to show to others and not necessarily their actual self from real life (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Therefore, they employ four different strategies of digital self-representation. The first overarching strategy is the "construction of a digital self", referring to the conscious selection and compilation of content intended to represent one's own identity to the outside world. Closely linked to that is the second strategy of "projecting a digital likeness", where individuals aim to create a visually

and conceptually coherent image of themselves. The third strategy, “digital associations” as a new form of possession, describes how individuals can associate themselves with objects, symbols, and cultural meanings without physically owning them. Finally, as a fourth strategy, digital environments enable the “recognition of linear narrative structures”, meaning that individuals can digitally retell and shape their own life story (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Together, these four strategies show that digital identity construction is not a passive process, but an active and strategic form of self-representation.

While Schau & Gilly (2003) primarily focus on how individuals express their identities within their bounded personal web spaces, the dynamics of digital self-presentation have transformed with the rise of modern social media platforms. Arvidsson & Caliandro (2015) advance this discussion by introducing the concept of the “brand public”. They argue that contemporary digital self-presentation increasingly takes place within fluid, hashtag-organized spaces of attention rather than tightly-knit communities. Within these brand publics, consumers do not form a collective identity around a brand but instead use the brand as a vehicle to gain visibility and communicate their own lifestyles to others (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). By using visible brand markers or hashtags (e.g., on Twitter), individuals participate in brand publics driven by personal affects and the desire for visibility rather than by discussion or deliberation. Consequently, brand publics represent spaces where being seen and gaining attention matters more than belonging to a community (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015).

The literature suggests that identity performance evolved from an interactional process in face-to-face settings, to consumption-based self-expression, toward digitally mediated and distributed forms of identity construction. Yet even as contexts and tools of identity performance have evolved, individuals continue to draw on the symbolic and material resources available to them to construct and communicate both their actual and aspirational identities.

3.3 Semiotics & Myths

In his theoretical conclusion to *Mythologies*, Barthes (1972) establishes a semiotic framework that treats pop cultural and mass media as forms of communication. He defines myth as a “type of speech”, referring to it not as a traditional narrative but as a system that arises wherever things

carry meaning. Every photograph, every consumer good, or every advertisement becomes a myth as soon as it starts to convey a message.

Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, Barthes (1972) conceptualizes language as a three-dimensional system. Within that, he distinguishes between a "signifier" (the physical form), a "signified" (the mental concept), and the "sign" (the unified meaning that emerges from their associations).



Figure 1: Second-order semiological system; own illustration based on Barthes (1972, p. 113)

As shown in Figure 1, myth operates on two overlapping levels. On the first level, the language, the sign emerges through the connection of the signifier and the signified. The myth takes this complete sign and uses it as a mere signifier for the second level of meaning. At this stage, it is combined with a new signified, such as an ideological message, thereby creating a new overarching sign. Barthes (1972) describes the emerging myth as a "second-order semiological system", a system that takes existing signs and imbues them with ideological meanings. In this way, myth can fulfill its ideological function, which Barthes (1972) defines as "naturalization". A myth transforms a historically developed and politically motivated reality into a seemingly eternal and self-evident fact. It functions like a permanent game of hide-and-seek between literal meaning and ideological form, where consumers receive social or political messages as self-evident truths rather than as constructed statements. Barthes (1972) ultimately describes myth as "depoliticized speech" because it empties political realities and fills them with a false sense of naturalness.

While *Mythologies* (1972) lays the overarching philosophical foundation, Barthes' later essay *Rhetoric of the Image* (1977) provides the concrete methodological tools to examine this process

in visual media. Through a detailed analysis of an advertisement, which he calls “spectral analysis”, Barthes (1977) shows that **each image contains three layered messages**. These are the **linguistic message** (accompanying texts such as captions), the directly **denoted image** (what the picture actually shows), and the **symbolically connoted image** (the cultural and ideological meanings that the picture conveys). Particularly relevant here is the specific **role of photography**. Unlike a drawing or painting, which are created and interpreted by humans, a photograph appears as a mechanical and therefore objective record of reality. Barthes (1977) describes this as a **“message without a code”**, referring to a message that seemingly contains no human interpretation and in that way is perceived as a direct representation of reality. This apparent objectivity is strategically used by the media to make their symbolic and ideological messages appear natural and self-evident. **Linguistic elements like captions further anchor the meaning of an image and direct its interpretation, a process Barthes (1977) refers to as “anchorage”**.

While Barthes (1972) views cultural signs as a mechanism that masks an underlying socio-political reality, Baudrillard (1994) extends this in his work *Simulacra and Simulation* and examines what happens when signs completely replace reality. According to **Baudrillard (1994)**, **contemporary society is characterized by simulation**, which means that representations are no longer mere reflections of an underlying reality, but **rather precede and actively construct reality**.

Baudrillard (1994) uses the term “image” broadly, referring not only to visual images but to all mediated forms of meaning. Building in this, he identifies four distinct evolutionary phases of the image in its relationship to reality. In the first phase, the image reflects a profound reality and functions as a faithful representation of it. In the second phase, the image masks and distorts this reality, thereby altering its original meaning. In the third phase, the image conceals the absence of a profound reality, which creates the illusion that such a reality still exists. Finally, in the fourth phase, the image bears no relation to any reality but instead exists as its own pure simulacrum. **This key term is also described by the author as a copy for which there is no actual original left. Baudrillard (1994) calls this state hyperreality**, a form of reality generated by models that have no origin or grounding in the real world. Within hyperreality, signs no longer refer to an underlying reality but instead circulate in relation to one another. As a result, reality itself is produced through systems of representation and can be endlessly reproduced.

Both theories show the central role of signs in shaping our perceptions. While myths, as introduced by Barthes (1972), naturalize cultural meanings and obscure their constructed nature, Baudrillard (1994) argues that the relationship between signs and reality collapses. As our world becomes increasingly saturated by media, the line between the real and the constructed becomes increasingly blurred. Objects and images are consumed less for their function and more as a part of an endless system of signs, in which the hyperreal replaces actual experiences.

3.4 Conceptual Framework

To provide a comprehensive tool for analyzing how social class is performed through the *Old Money* aesthetic on Instagram, the study synthesizes the **three theoretical streams into one integrated conceptual framework**. While each perspective provides valuable insights, the examination of contemporary digital distinction requires a **holistic approach in which taste structures, identity performances, and semiotic constructions interact**.

The traditional sociological view of social class, as introduced by Bourdieu (1984) and Veblen (1899), often relies on the stability of physical structures, material possessions, and institutionalized socialization. In contemporary consumer culture and particularly on digital platforms such as Instagram, social class, however, becomes increasingly detached from its economic foundation and operationalized as a fluid aesthetic project. To capture this change, this study **positions Instagram as a digital front stage on which structural cultural capital is translated into a hyperreal semiotic system that allows creators to simulate class performance**.

These three perspectives complement each other and highlight different aspects of elite social class performance:

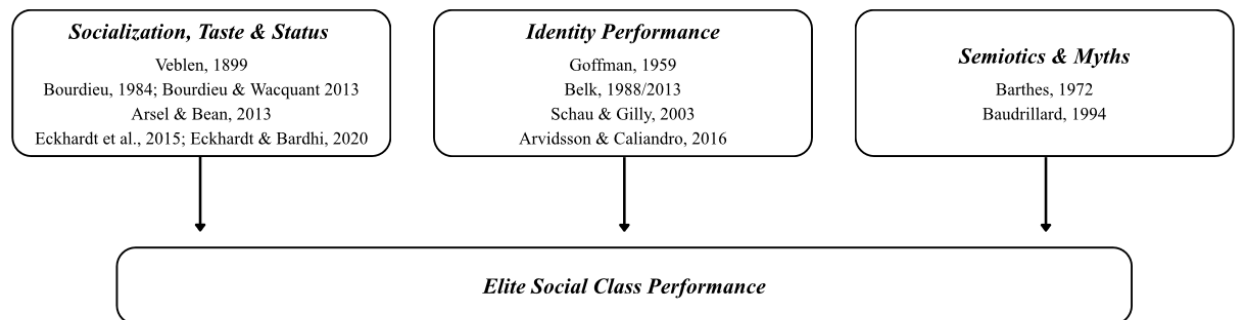


Figure 2: Conceptual framework (own illustration)

First, the perspective on socialization, taste & status (3.1) highlights social class and its normative codes. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus and cultural capital serve to identify those aesthetic markers that traditionally belonged to the elite social class. However, since contemporary consumers operate in a more commercialized market environment, Arsel & Bean's (2013) taste

regimes explain how these historical class codes are transformed into accessible consumption guidelines. In an environment where consumption is increasingly access-oriented rather than possession-oriented, as described by Eckhardt & Bardhi (2020), the *Old Money* aesthetic relies on inconspicuousness and subtle status signals that require deep cultural knowledge to decode (Eckhardt et al., 2015).

Secondly, the theoretical stream on identity performance (3.2) describes how these codes are updated and negotiated by individual creators. Instagram functions as a curated front stage (Goffman, 1959) that requires impression management. On this digital stage, creators do not simply document wealth but stage a highly stylized lifestyle. Here, Belk's (2013) digital extended self, Schau & Gilly's (2003) concept of digital associations, and Arvidsson & Caliandro's (2015) brand publics become central. As digital spaces allow individuals to associate themselves with symbols, brands, and exclusive places without actual ownership, social class performance becomes more flexible and accessible. A creator's digital extended self is therefore not determined by their actual economic position, but by the visual associations and symbols with which they connect.

Thirdly, the semiotic & myths perspective (3.3) shows how digital platforms help to conceal class inequalities and portray them as self-evident. When structural class codes are performed on a digital front stage through mere associations, they enter the space of the hyperreal. Following Baudrillard (1994), the performance of the *Old Money* aesthetic on Instagram no longer represents an actual socio-economic reality, but instead replaces that reality entirely, functioning as a simulacrum. At the same time, Barthes' (1972) myth theory explains how this visual performance naturalizes class inequalities, by transforming historically developed social privileges into timeless symbols of taste and elegance and thereby making their social origins invisible.

In conclusion, this integrated conceptual framework allows this study to move beyond traditional and static views of social class. By linking taste structure, identity performance, and semiotics, the *Old Money* aesthetic can be analyzed as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon where the boundaries between actual social position and its digital representation become increasingly blurred. It provides the necessary tools to investigate not just what objects are displayed, but how a highly exclusive, historicized class identity is simulated, naturalized, and consumed in a liquid, media-saturated world.

4. Research Method

To answer the research question systematically, this chapter presents the methodological framework of this study. First, it is explained why a qualitative visual content analysis is best suited to examine the performance of social class on Instagram and then described how the data was collected and coded into various themes. The chapter ends with a reflection on the study's research quality and ethical considerations that arise from the use of publicly available online material. In that way, it provides a detailed foundation for the following analysis section.

4.1 Philosophical Positioning

The researchers philosophical positioning is based on a **relativist ontological perspective** that assumes that reality is not singular. Instead, they view **reality as consisting of multiple interpretations that are shaped by individual experiences, cultural contexts, and negotiated differently across situations** (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This also aligns with their social **constructionist view of epistemology**, where they see social reality as continuously constructed through social interactions, mediated performances, and shared cultural meanings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Given this position, a qualitative research approach is most appropriate for examining how meaning is constructed and communicated through visual and symbolic practices.

Within this framework, the *Old Money* aesthetic is interpreted as a **socially constructed representation of elite social class** that is expressed through aesthetic practices and digital forms of self-presentation. Accordingly, concepts such as social class, taste, and consumption practices are considered as symbolic constructs that are culturally shaped (Bourdieu, 1984). Consistent with the epistemological stance, identity is viewed not as a fixed attribute, but as something that is situationally and performatively enacted (Goffman, 1959), serving as a mechanism through which social class is communicated online. In digital contexts, this primarily occurs through processes of aesthetic staging and the visual articulation of consumption practices. As a result, the analysis does not aim to determine whether creators actually belong to elite social groups, to reconstruct their personal backgrounds, or to uncover their personal motivations. **Instead, the focus lies on how elite social class is represented visually and discursively through the *Old Money* aesthetic.** Therefore,

particular attention is given to recurring narrative patterns, aesthetic norms, and visual elements that are framed as desirable markers of social class and distinction.

4.2 Abductive Approach

The study adopts an abductive research approach, which involves an ongoing interplay between empirical data and theoretical frameworks (Bell et al., 2022). The purpose of this approach is to link empirical observations with theoretical concepts through interpretative reasoning and to develop the most plausible explanations for the observed phenomena (Bell et al., 2022). This enables a flexible yet structured analysis of how social class is performed through the consumption-related *Old Money* aesthetic on Instagram. The empirical findings are therefore interpreted through the theoretical framework that draws on perspectives from social class theory, identity performance, and semiotics. Following an iterative logic, theoretical assumptions are continuously revisited and adjusted in response to the empirical material (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The use of an abductive approach is particularly appropriate for this study, as aesthetic trends on social media are highly dynamic and their meanings are constantly reshaped through ongoing processes of aesthetic articulation, repetition, and audience interaction that shape the visibility of social class.

4.3 Research Design

4.3.1 Visual Content Analysis

To provide a systematic analytical foundation, this study draws on a content analysis, following Krippendorff (2004). A content analysis is understood as a method for making meaningful and context-sensitive inferences from symbolic material, including visual data such as images and videos (Krippendorff, 2004). While the *Old Money* aesthetic also exists in offline contexts, such as events and lifestyle practices, its predominantly visual and performative expression on social media makes Instagram content particularly suitable for a visual analysis. Importantly, media content is conceptualized as a constructed representation of reality rather than a direct reflection

of it. This aligns with the assumption that Instagram posts are curated representations rather than depictions of “real life” (Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022). In addition to the visual content itself, accompanying captions and audio elements (e.g. background music) are selectively incorporated. In this way, the intended meaning of posts can further be contextualized and contribute to the construction of aesthetic narratives or the performance of social class. Applied qualitatively, the content analysis enables the study to identify recurring patterns and systematically organize visual elements into categories (Krippendorff, 2004). Rather than quantifying elements, the analysis focuses on interpretative depth, examining how visual cues contribute to the performance of elite social class. In this way, the complex and visually dense dataset can be structured and compared with recurring patterns, without neglecting analytical rigor.

Although Krippendorff’s (2004) framework provides a solid methodological foundation, it does not offer sufficiently detailed tools for analyzing the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of visual material. For the study, it is therefore necessary to also include a more refined approach to visual style, composition, and cultural symbolism, as the *Old Money* aesthetic is primarily communicated through visual cues. To address this limitation, this study incorporates a critical visual analysis, following Schroeder (2006). This approach focuses on analyzing how images construct meaning within cultural contexts. It emphasizes that visual representations are culturally embedded and follow aesthetic conventions through which cultural values and social distinction are expressed and reinforced. Drawing on Schroeder (2006) enables the analysis to move beyond description, and examine how meaning is created, how visual codes operate and how social class is expressed through imagery, mediated by identity performances, and consumption-related visual cues.

Although the study draws on netnographic principles (Kozinets, 2002), a qualitative content analysis is adopted and complemented by a critical visual analysis in order to account for the specifically visual and symbolic nature of Instagram content. While a content analysis is used to structure and organize the data by identifying recurring patterns, the critical visual analysis allows for the interpretation of their symbolic meaning. This results in a multi-layered analysis in which patterns are systematically identified and then interpret in relation to broader cultural and theoretical frameworks.

This combined approach is particularly suitable for analyzing the *Old Money* aesthetic, as it captures both the repetition of visual codes and their symbolic function. In this way, Instagram

content can be understood as staged visual articulations of elite social class, linking recurring patterns to processes of social class performance, distinction, and status signaling.

4.3.2 Data Collection & Sampling Method

Inspired by a “cultural entrée” (Kozinets, 2002), the research process started with an initial familiarization with the *Old Money* aesthetic to develop a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. Given the study’s focus, the attention centered on the characteristics, symbols, and visual codes that define the aesthetic. The data collection process therefore began with a review of academic and journalistic sources, an exploration of Reddit discussions, and an examination of various online conversations. This exploratory phase made it possible to establish a clearer understanding of how the *Old Money* aesthetic is culturally defined and how it is expressed both visually and discursively in online environments.

Following Krippendorff (2004), the data collection was guided by the research question. Individual Instagram posts served as the primary recording units, while the overall creator profiles functioned as the broader context units. The constructed persona was treated as the central unit of analysis through which the performance of social class was examined. To further ensure alignment with the research objectives, a purposive sampling strategy was applied (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Accordingly, creators were deliberately selected based on their relevance to the research question rather than through random selection. By reviewing Instagram accounts that explicitly curated the aesthetic such as “@gentlemansgram,” “@oldmoneyhigh,” and “@oldmoney_italian”, both female and male creators were identified, which served as an inspiration for the subsequent sampling process.

Building on this initial familiarization, a set of inclusion criteria was applied to guide the final selection of creators (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). (1) Creators had to reflect core elements of the *Old Money* aesthetic, including elite-coded environments, timeless styles, and refined leisure practices. (2) Instagram profiles were required to have a minimum of 150 posts, ensuring sufficient content to identify recurring aesthetic patterns and stable forms of expression. (3) The selected creators needed to engage with the aesthetic through their own content, presenting it as part of their social positioning rather than merely explaining or commenting on it.

These criteria made it possible to concentrate on clearly articulated and prototypical representations of the *Old Money* aesthetic. Rather than aiming to capture the full diversity of the trend, the focus was on stable and consistently expressed forms in order to analyze dominant patterns of class performance. Selecting creators who consistently reproduce recognizable aesthetic codes ensured that the dataset was coherent and analytically comparable. More ambiguous or alternative representations of the aesthetic were therefore not considered in the study.

Based on these criteria, twelve creators were initially selected. To ensure a balanced sample, an equal number of male and female creators was included, reflecting the aesthetic's presence across genders. After becoming familiar with their profiles and conducting an initial qualitative screening, the researchers independently assessed the sample, thereby applying investigator triangulation to enhance the credibility of the selection process (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). From this group, six creators, who most strongly embodied the *Old Money* aesthetic, were then selected. The decision for six creators was based on the principle of theoretical saturation. Across the analyzed profiles, recurring patterns in visual codes and aesthetic decisions became increasingly consistent, so no significantly new analytical insights were expected. The smaller sample size allowed for a deeper and more nuanced analysis, which corresponds to the qualitative and interpretive nature of this study.

During this selection process, creators who incorporated family representations into their content, especially through the inclusion of children, were noted. These cases were considered analytically relevant, as they reflect how the *Old Money* aesthetic extends beyond individual self-presentation. Even though *Old Money* transformed in recent years, it is still embedded within narratives of family and tradition when performed in contemporary digital consumer culture. The inclusion of such representations allows the study to capture how elite social class is not only expressed through individual consumption practices but also communicated through the visual staging of family structures and intergenerational lifestyles.

This selection enabled a more detailed and in-depth analysis of how desirable forms of elite social class are performed through consumption. The selected creators, seen in Table 1, consistently display key markers of the aesthetic, including elite settings, timeless fashion, and curated leisure practices. To address our research question comprehensively, an initial overview of all posts

available on the selected creators' profiles was developed. Given the temporal scope of this study, the analysis then focused on content published between January 1, 2025 and April 26, 2026. The period seen as most suitable as the *Old Money* aesthetic experienced renewed prominence (Google Trends, 2026). In the end, the final dataset consisted of 1,158 Instagram posts, collected from the six selected creators and including both images and short-form video content such as Instagram Reels. On average, approximately 193 posts per creator were analyzed.

Creator	Reference Name	Observing Time	Followers (26/4/26)	Link to Profile
@paola_cossentino	Paola	1/1/25 - 26/4/26	1,5 Mio.	https://www.instagram.com/paola_cossentino/
@darinagritsenko	Darina	1/1/25 - 26/4/26	290k	https://www.instagram.com/darinagritsenko/
@withrosalind	Rosalind	1/1/25 - 26/4/26	211k	https://www.instagram.com/withrosalind/
@moranofilippo	Filippo	1/1/25 - 26/4/26	663k	https://www.instagram.com/moranofilippo/
@lifeasbarker	Hakon	1/1/25 - 26/4/26	163k	https://www.instagram.com/lifeasbarker/
@jamesology_	Giacomo	1/1/25 - 26/4/26	185k	https://www.instagram.com/jamesology_ /

Table 1: Sample overview of the selected creators

4.3.3 The Instagram Platform

As noted earlier, the data for this study was collected on Instagram. The platform can be understood as a visually curated environment in which users create aestheticized representations through images and videos (Harris & Bardey, 2019). As the *Old Money* aesthetic is based on elegance and consistency, Instagram is very well suited as a visually orientated platform to investigate the research phenomenon. Posts on Instagram are rarely perceived in isolation as its grid-based layout encourages creators to maintain a consistent aesthetic across their profiles. In this sense, profiles

function as **narrative platforms** (Kozharinova & Manovich, 2024) on which coherent visual identities emerge and aesthetic trends are stabilized. Media theorist Manovich (2017) describes Instagram in this context as a platform that is fundamentally geared toward aesthetic visual communication. In the app's early years, Instagram's success was based on the introduction of filters (Manovich, 2017), enabling users to **edit photos in a retro look** (Leaver et al., 2020). This reliance on visual filters makes Instagram particularly well-suited to the *Old Money* aesthetic, which similarity draws on retro editing styles. While platforms such as **TikTok** often drive the rapid emergence and diffusion of trends, **Instagram tends to transform these into more refined and strategically curated expressions** (Verdieva, 2026). In the context of this study, these representations can be understood as performances of social class, which are shaped through aesthetic and embodied forms of expression. Accordingly, Instagram serves not only as a site of observation but also as a central space in which the *Old Money* aesthetic is shaped, circulated, and stabilized through **visually curated expressions of social class**.

4.3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis is based on a **qualitative visual content analysis that draws on Schroeder's (2006)** approach of understanding and contextualizing images through their cultural codes. The analytical procedure follows the logic of a **qualitative content analysis as outlined by Krippendorff (2004)**, particularly in terms of coding, data reduction and abductive inference. To operationalize this process, iterative **three-stage approach of sorting, reducing, and arguing was adopted (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018)**.

During the **sorting phase**, the data was systematically reviewed to **get familiar with the material and to record early observations, patterns, and emerging contradictions** (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). To gain a comprehensive overview of the creators' content, their individual profiles were carefully examined in order to identify the posts that were most relevant to the research focus. These posts were then analyzed in detail and initial observations were recorded, to capture recurring visual elements and emerging patterns, particularly in relation to elite-coded imagery.

The aim of the subsequent **reducing phase** was to **develop and refine codes** in order to identify categories and themes that reduce the complexity of data and **highlight meaningful patterns**

(Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In this stage, an open coding process was applied in which categories emerged from the data itself rather than from predefined frameworks, following an open or first-cycle coding approach in qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The coding process itself was interpretative rather than purely descriptive, as visual elements were understood as creating meaning within cultural contexts (Krippendorff, 2004; Schroeder, 2006). Early codes that emerged from the analysis included observations such as “timeless color palettes” or “restrained body language”. Throughout the analysis process, codes were continuously compared across posts and creators, which helped to clarify similarities and distinctions and supported the further development of individual codes. This approach ensured that the coding process remained flexible and responsive to the data, reflecting the iterative nature of a qualitative analysis (Krippendorff, 2004).

Once the initial codes were identified, they were systematically organized and condensed by grouping similar observations into broader categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). For example, codes related to cinematic editing and nostalgic music were clustered into the category “cinematic nostalgia and aesthetic control”, while observations related to elite leisure practices and exclusive locations were grouped under “conspicuous leisure and spatialized cultural capital”. The emerging categories were then grouped into broader themes, representing higher-level analytical constructs and aligning with established coding procedures in qualitative research (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The development of the themes was guided not only by the frequency of recurring codes, but also by their symbolic meaning and cultural prevalence (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). This allowed the analysis to move beyond mere description and provide a deeper interpretation of how elite social class is performed through visual and consumption-based practices. The entire process, in which codes were transformed into categories and then into themes, was not linear but iterative, as it involved multiple rounds of revisiting and refining the data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

This resulted in three main themes (see Table 2), including *Aestheticized Heritage and Elite Space*, *Embodied Social Class Performance*, and *Symbolic Distinction and Quiet Luxury*. Crucially, these themes not only reflect recurring visual patterns, but also their symbolic function in performing elite social class. The final thematic structure emerged through a multi-stage abstraction process, progressing from raw observations to initial codes, then to categories, and finally to overarching themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

In the **final arguing phase**, the empirically derived themes were **connected to the study's theoretical framework** (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This **enabled a deeper understanding of the research object and move beyond simple description**. Throughout this phase, the analysis repeatedly moved back and forth between the empirical material, emerging codes, and theoretical concepts. In line with the abductive approach (Bell et al., 2022), patterns were interpreted through a theoretical lens while remaining grounded in the data. The theoretical concepts applied in the analysis were, for example, based on theories from Barthes (1972), Bourdieu (1984), and Goffman (1959) and served as overall guiding frameworks. Specifically, expressions of taste were linked to Bourdieu's (1984) notion of distinction and cultural capital, while the symbolic meaning embedded in these visual codes were further examined through Barthes' (1972) semiotic framework. Identity performance, as described by Goffman (1959), served as an underlying mechanism through which these expressions of social class are enacted.

Code	Category	Theme
Dark cinematic editing; nostalgic music; absence of speech; film-inspired composition; timeless color palette	Cinematic nostalgia and aesthetic control	Aestheticized Heritage and Elite Space
Elite leisure activities (tennis, polo, hunting, boating, gala dinners, golf); exclusive European locations (Tuscany, St. Moritz, Venice, Lake Como); luxury accommodations; seasonal elegance	Elite leisure and spatialized cultural capital	
Polished natural beauty; performed femininity & masculinity; restrained body language	Controlled elite embodiment	Embodied Social Class Performance
Elite couple dynamics; complementary positioning; family representation; subtle hierarchy cues; elite social interactions (e.g. networking scenes, private clubs)	Relational elite identity and social positioning	
Craftsmanship emphasis; recurring “quiet luxury” items; tailored suits, classic watches; high-quality materials; tailored silhouettes	Craftsmanship and Material distinction	Symbolic Distinction and Quiet Luxury
Minimal logos; subtle brand visibility; iconic heritage brands (e.g. Hermès, Ralph Lauren, Brioni, Church's Dior, Gucci)	Heritage brands and symbolic capital	

Table 2: Overview of developed codes, categories, and themes

4.4 Research Quality

In this study, trustworthiness is accomplished through a set of interrelated research practices. This includes triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with the material and continuous reflexive evaluation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) of interpretations. In line with this approach, the researchers critically reflect on the nature of their data and the implications this has for the analysis.

This is particularly relevant as online observations capture mediated representations that require careful and critical interpretation (Bertilsson, 2009). The study treats the central unit of analysis not as the person behind the account, but as the online identity constructed through posts and visible on the creator's Instagram profile. This may be a presentation that significantly differs from their offline reality. It is recognized that Instagram content does not simply reflect an individual's "real" life, but is deliberately constructed, which requires a critical and interpretive approach to the analysis. Therefore, the content itself is treated as relevant observational data for analyzing how elite social class is expressed through consumption-related visual practices.

Throughout the research, the researchers remain aware of their own potential biases and engage in continuous self-reflection, particularly by critically examining our positionality, which refers to the researcher's position in relation to the study and its context (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). As researchers, they are outsiders to the *Old Money* elite, yet they are familiar with the trend due to their engagement with social media and their belonging to Generation Z, the age group most exposed to the aesthetic. Interpreting aesthetic performances also requires familiarity with cultural codes and techniques through which visual meaning is constructed (Schroeder, 2006). The researchers are aware that this dual position both facilitates understanding and risks influencing interpretations and therefore acknowledge that their background inevitably shapes the analysis.

To systematically address these methodological considerations, trustworthiness is evaluated based on established qualitative research criteria. Following Belk & Wallendorf (1989), who built on the framework of Lincoln & Guba (1985), these include credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity.

Credibility and analytical depth are particularly strengthened by various triangulation approaches (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One of these is referred to as investigator triangulation, whereby both

researchers are involved in the data collection and analysis process, allowing interpretations to be compared and critically evaluated (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To strengthen the theoretical grounding of this study and develop a more nuanced understanding of the *Old Money* aesthetic, the researchers also employed **theory triangulation** by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Trustworthiness is further enhanced through a **prolonged engagement** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in the *Old Money* online community, which helped to deepen the understanding of recurring symbols and aesthetic codes. The ongoing engagement in this environment also adds to the **credibility criteria** as it ensures that interpretations are grounded in an iterative interaction with the visual material.

This continuous, reflexive evaluation with the data also makes sure that the research process aligns with the **principle of confirmability** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To comply with this criterion and critically examine potential biases, the researchers maintained a **reflective journal** throughout the study and documented assumptions and analytical developments (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This systematic documentation made it possible to track interpretations back to the visual material and provided transparency and consistency throughout the analysis, which also aligns with the criteria of **dependability** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through clearly defined coding steps, iterative comparison of visual material, and the development of analytical categories, the research process could be systematically followed and evaluated.

To make sure that the study meets the **requirement of transferability** (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), rich, contextualized descriptions of the visual characteristics, symbols and narratives that appeared during the analysis were provided. This includes, for example, recurring stylistic elements and enables readers to assess whether the findings may apply to other digital cultures or aesthetic communities.

Finally, following Belk & Wallendorf (1989), integrity was considered by acknowledging the constructed nature of visual documents on Instagram, which may involve strategic representations or misrepresentation. Instead of treating this as a distortion, such curated representations were interpreted as integral to the phenomenon of upper-class expression itself. Those five research criteria and the practices that were applied to fulfill them, ensured that the analysis was conducted in a **transparent and reflective manner**, which strengthens the overall trustworthiness of this study.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The process of online research raises a number of ethical considerations, particularly in regard to questions that address informed consent and the public or private nature of online spaces (Kozinets, 2002). As the analysis focused on the examination of visual content that is naturally produced and shared in online environments, different ethical considerations have to be taken into account. A key ethical concern relates to the fact that the **selected creators did not necessarily intend or anticipate that their content would be used as research data (Kozinets, 2002)**. To approach this aspect of the study, the focus was exclusively on creators with public Instagram accounts. Following Kozinets (2002), publicly available online content can be ethically analyzed in a research context because it is intentionally shared by the creators for a broader audience. It is assumed that they are therefore aware that their content is accessible to everyone and may be subject to closer examination in certain contexts. Throughout the research process, the researchers took on the **role of a complete observer** (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), where they maintained distance to the object of study and did not directly interact with them. The study relied on archival data, meaning that it only included **Instagram posts which already existed prior to the study** and were not influenced by the research process. By restricting the analysis to **publicly accessible material and approaching interpretations** with caution, the study aimed to respect ethical boundaries and avoid misattributing intentions to the visual data.

4.6 Method Limitations

Based on the limited resources and limited timeframe of this study several limitations need to be acknowledged. As the research **only focuses on the analysis of content on Instagram**, it limits the insights into **how social class may be performed on other platforms**. Content relating to the *Old Money* aesthetic may be presented differently on TikTok, as the platform prioritizes authentic self-expression and entertainment over visually idealized content that characterizes Instagram (Verdieva, 2026). The **sample size also limits the scope of the analysis**, as the inclusion of only six creators restricts the diversity of this work. The use of a larger sample size in further research could be useful to enhance the credibility criteria. Taking a look at the analyzed data, the **focus was on the visual expression** and **not on investigating deeper motivations** behind it. To gain insights and

get an answer to why creators actually participate in this aesthetic, it may be necessary to conduct in-depth interviews. As the study also only considers the creator's perspective it leaves room for other viewpoints. No consideration is given to why, exactly, audiences perceive the aesthetic as appealing and how they interact with the creator's content through comments. The use of methodological triangulation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), including a netnography research design as introduced by Kozinets (2002) could have therefore been beneficial for this work.

5. Empirical Analysis

In the following section key findings of the analysis are presented based on the theoretical framework. The analysis demonstrates that creators perform social class within the Old Money aesthetic through three interconnected practices. The first key finding shows that they draw on nostalgic references like classical movie scenes, aristocratic leisure activities, and culturally loaded places. The second finding is that effortlessness and social superiority are conveyed through a carefully staged display of their body, including relational representations such as couple and family dynamics. Lastly, the third finding indicates that creators signal status through their deliberate use of material, craftsmanship, and heritage brands. Taken together, these practices show that social class on Instagram is not simply reflected but actively performed.

5.1 Aestheticized Heritage and Elite Space

The first theme presents how social class is performed through the combined use of nostalgic aesthetics and elite leisure practices within the *Old Money* aesthetic. Distinction does not emerge through overt displays of wealth but through culturally coded references, visual presentation, and access to exclusive spaces and activities. Creators systematically draw on historical symbols and aristocratic leisure to construct a romanticized version of elite life. In this way, they demonstrate familiarity with historically privileged environments and signal class through participation in culturally exclusive practices, which become a key resource of distinction in digital environments.

5.1.1 Cinematic nostalgia and aesthetic control

The posts analyzed under this category show that the *Old Money* aesthetic is not only communicated through luxury goods or exclusive locations, but also through a carefully staged sense of nostalgia. Across all creators, the past is repeatedly presented as desirable and visually appealing. Instead of portraying the present as modern or spontaneous, many posts construct scenes that appear timeless, cinematic, and removed from everyday life. This aligns with Baudrillard's (1994) concept of hyperreality, where representations do not reflect reality but

construct idealized versions of it that appear more real and desirable than everyday experience. In this context, nostalgia functions as a symbolic strategy through which privilege is naturalized and made to appear culturally legitimate.

A recurring pattern is the use of film references. Darina's content is particularly illustrative here. In one post (see Figure 3a), she captions an evening scene in formalwear as *"An iconic burlesque night, lifted straight from a Gatsby movie scene"*. *The Great Gatsby* is widely associated with images of glamour and extravagant social life in contemporary popular culture (Churchwell, 2013). The reference functions as a myth (Barthes, 1972) reducing wealth and social hierarchy into a simplified and desirable image. What is consumed here is therefore not only the dress or the event itself, but the fantasy of belonging to an exclusive social world.

A similar logic can be observed in Darina's reel (see Figure 3b), in which she sits in a vintage cabriolet while her hair moves in the wind. The composition is similar to a classic European film scene. Darina's black-and-white Budapest post (see Figure 3c), captioned *"Budapest doesn't need color to feel iconic - it already moves like a film"*, evokes classic cinema and historical narratives, reflecting a nostalgic aesthetic. It transforms the city into a timeless cultural symbol rather than a contemporary urban space. This visual strategy functions as a myth (Barthes, 1972) that aestheticizes history and makes it look harmonious.

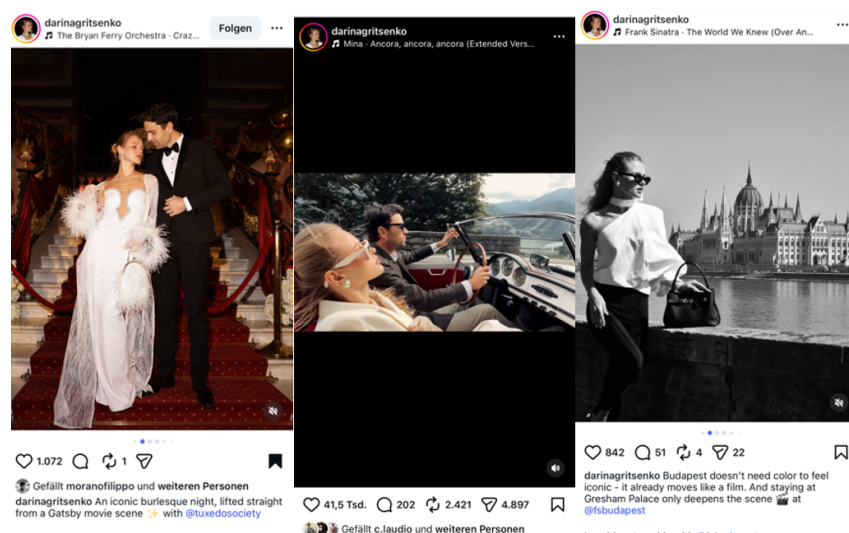


Figure 3: Selected Instagram posts a - c (left to right)

Another notable pattern is that creators use music to create a specific atmosphere. In one reel on Hakon's profile (see Figure 4a), a grey private aircraft departs from a snowy landscape while the soundtrack *Aston Montenegro* from *Casino Royale* (James Bond movie) is used. On a literal level, the scene shows a plane taking off. However, through soundtrack, pacing, and muted color palette, it becomes associated with power and global mobility. The James Bond reference is particularly relevant, as Bond represents modern masculinity (Hoxha, 2011) and gets associated with luxury brands (Cooper et al., 2010). Therefore, James Bond can be seen as a cultural myth which stands for cosmopolitan sophistication, elite social identity, and power. The use of the soundtrack further contributes to identity construction, because immaterial objects such as music functions as an extension of the self (Belk, 2013). Adding background music to their posts allows creators to communicate taste and cultural positioning beyond the visual level. This dematerialization of possession and sharing it to a broad audience on Instagram demonstrates new forms of identity expression (Belk, 2013).

Across several creators, muted color palettes, grain effects, and cinematic compositions create the impression of old postcards or analog films. For example, Hakon's boat scene in the South of France (see Figure 4b) appears like a Mediterranean memory. These recurring visual elements can be understood as part of a taste regime (Arsel & Bean, 2013), which stabilizes and reproduces shared aesthetic norms of elite taste. At the same time, their widespread use reflects the conditions described by the theory of liquid consumption, as digital platforms enable the reproduction of such aesthetic styles with relatively low material barriers (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Through editing tools, filters, and easily accessible visual references, creators are able to adopt and perform elite-coded aesthetics without requiring equivalent economic resources. Even the use of background music can create a certain atmosphere without the creator owning it. This demonstrates that there are no physical limitations in online environments, allowing creators to construct their identities through associations with specific symbols and building a consistent visual story (Schau & Gilly, 2003). However, this apparent accessibility remains structured by inequalities in cultural knowledge and digital competencies.

Giacomo also repeatedly draws on images of the past. In one reel (see Figure 4c), he rides in a horse-drawn carriage toward a castle with the caption "*Went back in time*". The caption explicitly articulates what many posts imply visually, the symbolic return to an aristocratic past. The

carriage, castle, and winter setting evoke nobility and exclusivity. These elements function as myths (Barthes, 1972) that transform historical class structures into aestheticized and desirable images. Similarly, his Christmas post (see Figure 4d) featuring live musicians and falling snow romanticizes winter as intimate and refined.

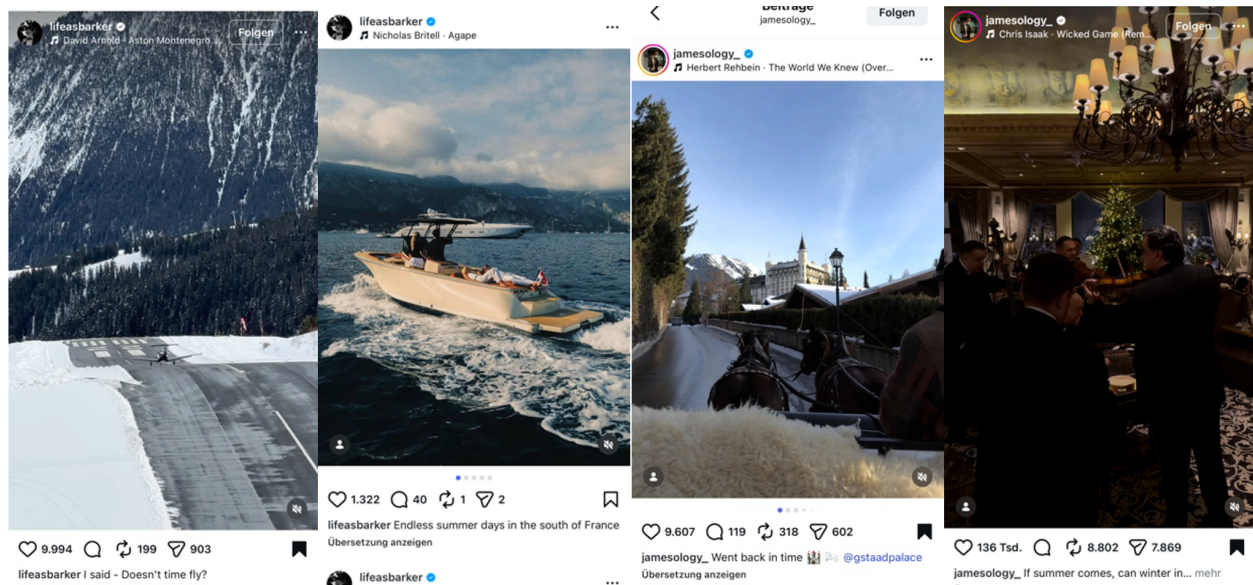


Figure 4: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

Filippo's content follows a similar logic. One post (see Figure 5a), where Filippo is wearing formal wear in front of Lake Como, shows how elegance and mystique are created through low clouds. In another post (see Figure 5b), Filippo sits calmly on a balcony while smoking a cigar. The cigar is highly symbolically charged and historically associated with masculine leisure (LaTour et al., 2003). Rather than being framed as an everyday habit, smoking is aestheticized as ritualized stillness. Within this context, the cigar operates as a myth (Barthes, 1972) of cultivated masculinity. Smoking a cigar is an act of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899) and projects elite status. At the same time, this practice reflects Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, as the embodied ease with which it is performed signals familiarity with elite codes of conduct.

Paola's content also transforms everyday moments into cinematic experiences. Her boat scene (see Figure 5c) converts water and wind into visual calm. In many posts, Paola avoids direct eye contact, which creates emotional distance and reinforces the impression that the viewer is observing a self-contained world. This distance is central to the nostalgic logic of the aesthetic, as elite life is portrayed as peaceful and detached from the stresses of everyday life. In one reel (see Figure 5d), Paola says to her partner, *"We are living the part people get nostalgic about later"*, followed by a montage of cinematic scenes. This statement reveals that nostalgia is not only retrospective, but actively produced in the present. In this sense, the aesthetic aligns with Baudrillard's (1994) notion of hyperreality. Everyday life is staged as an already idealized memory, blurring the distinction between lived experience and mediated representation.



Figure 5: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

Taken together, the findings show that the *Old Money* aesthetic operates as a symbolic system in which nostalgia and cinematic staging transform privilege into something that appears self-evident. This suggests that nostalgia is not only an aesthetic device, but a mechanism through which inequality is obscured and transformed into cultural desirability.

5.1.2 Elite leisure and spatialized cultural capital

The posts grouped in this category show that the *Old Money* aesthetic is strongly performed through the display of leisure activities and exclusive locations. In these posts, social class is communicated through access to specific spaces, seasonal routines, and activities traditionally linked to elite social groups. From a perspective of taste and distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), leisure does not appear as free time. Instead, it becomes a culturally coded practice, through which privilege becomes visible and recognizable.

A central pattern is the repeated attendance of elite sport events as markers of class belonging. Rosalind's post from Stoke Park (see Figure 6a), in which she poses with her family at a tennis event, directly connects the *Old Money* aesthetic to the symbolic world of tennis. The caption "*Money talks and diamonds do the rest*" immediately sets the interpretive frame. It connects the scene to wealth and exclusivity, functioning as what Barthes (1977) calls an anchorage, where accompanying text directs the interpretation of an image. The tennis event itself is not presented as a sporting occasion but as a space for cultivated social interactions, long associated with private clubs and controlled etiquette. The grass court setting further evokes Wimbledon, referring to a cultural institution whose carefully constructed traditions serve to legitimize its high status and reinforce values associated with British high society (Lake, 2018). In this sense, participation goes beyond sport. Following Veblen (1899), it becomes a form of conspicuous consumption, capturing a visual demonstration that one has both the time and the social access to be there. This positions participation as a marker of access to socially refined environments. Moreover, it can be understood as a form of conspicuous leisure (Veblen, 1899), a sub-concept of conspicuous consumption. It highlights the ability to devote time to leisure activities and experience no need to work, which further reinforces social status.

This logic becomes even clearer in the polo-related posts by Rosalind (see Figure 6b and 6c). Polo is an activity historically associated with aristocracy and military elites, serving as a marker of status and social distinction (Elsaesser, 2024). It requires horses, extensive spaces, and access to exclusive social networks. The caption, which says "*exactly where you are supposed to be*", is particularly revealing, as it frames the space as a place one naturally inhabits. By positioning herself within this setting, Rosalind does not simply show participation in a sport, but signals symbolic closeness to a historically elite lifestyle. Her chosen caption reinforces this, as it

naturalizes class belonging, reflecting both Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus and Barthes' (1972) notion of myth, which transforms socially constructed positions into seemingly timeless facts.



Figure 6: Selected Instagram posts a - c (left to right)

Additionally, water-based leisure plays a central role in the representation of elite identity. Paola's Venice post (see Figure 7a) frames the city as an intimate and aesthetic environment instead of a conventional tourist destination. The boat further functions as a symbol of controlled mobility and suggests private access to landscape and experience, framing the location itself as a curated extension of identity (Belk, 1988). Another post by Darina (see Figure 7b), relating to the French Riviera, follows a similar logic. According to (Gade, 1982), this elitist space is defined by wealth and refined taste. In this sense, he argues that access to such places is deliberately designed to remain exclusive.

Other exclusive European destinations also function as an elite vacation setting and require cultural knowledge. Filippo's Tuscany post (see Figure 7c), showing a long dinner table at sunset, combines landscape and social gathering into an image of cultivated leisure. The caption "*How Tuscany feels*" frames the destination as a sensory experience and suggests that these locations are not simply visited but culturally interpreted. Within broader taste regimes (Arsel & Bean, 2013),

such spaces gain meaning as socially recognized markers of refinement. Leisure is turned into a collective performance of social belonging that requires familiarity with appropriate forms of etiquette.

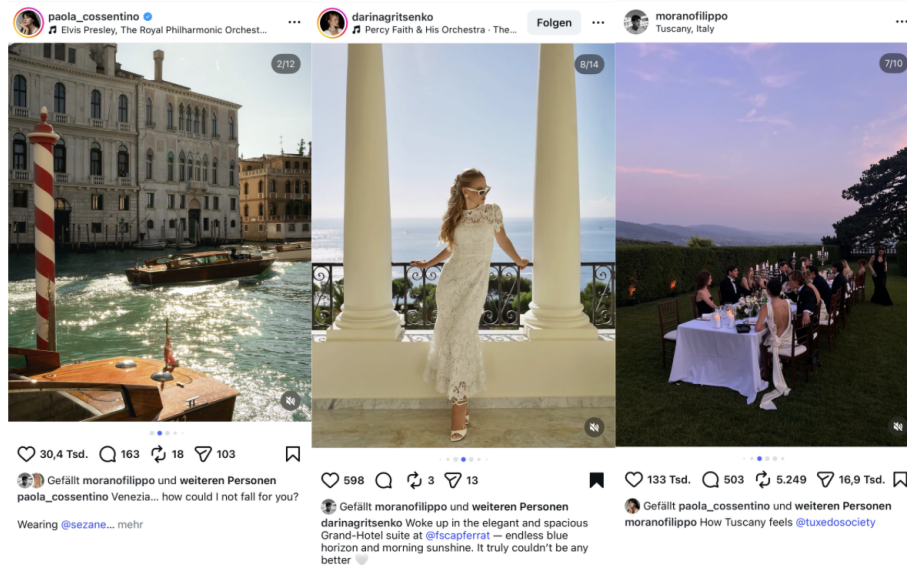


Figure 7: Selected Instagram posts a - c (left to right)

Winter destinations further reinforce this logic. Filippo’s St. Moritz post (see Figure 8a) with its caption “*A ritual on ice*”, frames the setting as an established cultural location rather than a casual getaway trip. The use of the word “*ritual*” makes it look even more like an attempt to signal repetition and familiarity with specific social codes. Across all these posts, mobility appears effortless and natural. Movement is presented as an ordinary part of life, concealing the financial resources and time that it actually requires. As a result, mobility itself becomes a form of consumption, as it is access-oriented and tied to experiences rather than possession-based, reflecting what Eckhardt & Bardhi (2020) describe as liquid consumption.

Vintage cars also play a crucial role within the *Old Money* aesthetic. In Darina’s and Paola’s posts, (see Figure 8b and 8c) the car is positioned within a carefully staged environment of greenery and elegant architecture. The vintage car is not simply a vehicle, but a symbolic object that connects mobility with history. Unlike contemporary luxury cars that signal speed and visible economic success, vintage cars communicate continuity and cultivated taste. Besides that, automobile

ownership was historically restricted to wealthier social groups, and requires considerable resources to acquire and maintain. In this way, vintage cars reflect a more subtle form of distinction, which positions them as an example of inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015). At the same time, posts including such cars display a curated front stage performance (Goffman, 1959), where objects and spaces construct a coherent elite identity.

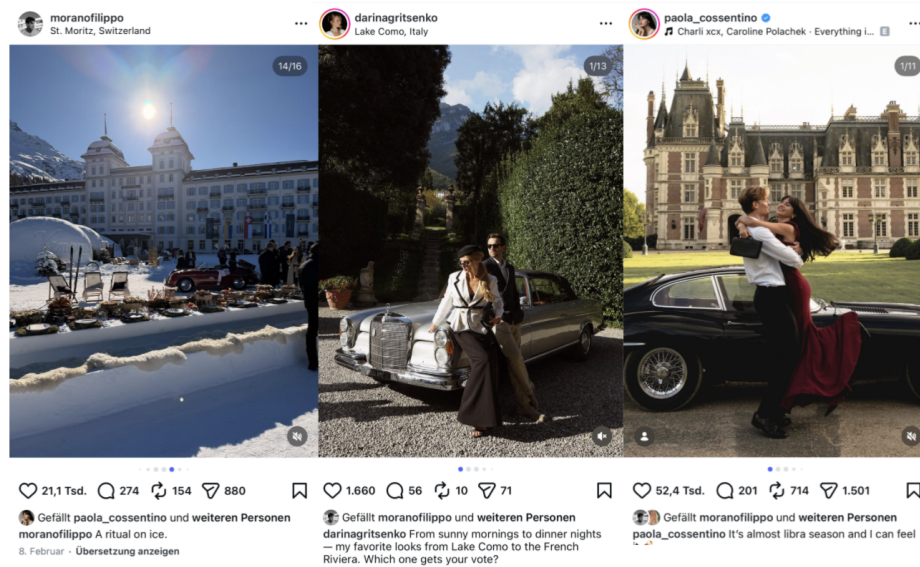


Figure 8: Selected Instagram posts a - c (left to right)

The findings indicate that leisure within the *Old Money* aesthetic operates as a multidimensional form of status signaling. It combines the display of time and resources, the subtle communication of distinction as well as the structuring role of taste, and the strategic presentation of identity in digital environments. Through this interplay, social class is not only represented but actively performed and stabilized through the controlled use of time, space, and lifestyle practices. What is displayed is therefore not leisure itself, but the ability to navigate these spaces appropriately. In that way, social class is performed as a lifestyle of mobility, refinement, and inherited ease.

5.2 Embodied Social Class Performance

The following section demonstrates how social class is performed through the body and social relationships within the *Old Money* aesthetic. Distinction here emerges through subtle, embodied practices such as appearance, posture, and interaction. Across the analyzed posts, the body becomes a central medium through which elite identity is expressed as something that appears effortless and taken for granted. However, class is not only constructed through individual embodiment but also through social relationships that emerge through couple dynamics, family structures, and exclusive social networks. This reveals how embodiment and social positioning are closely intertwined, as both rely on culturally learned dispositions that make class appear natural.

5.2.1 *Controlled elite embodiment*

A central element across the analyzed posts is the construction of what can be described as “polished natural beauty,” where appearance is carefully curated to appear effortless. Female creators show themselves most of the time with a barely visible makeup, which consists of an even skin tone and soft contouring. In Rosalind's post (see Figure 9a) captioned „*Slow Sunday mornings*“, she has glowy skin, minimal makeup and slightly tousled hair. While her bathrobe creates intimacy and naturalness, the overall aesthetic is highly controlled. Rosalind presents an ideal self by producing the impression of natural beauty (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This apparent naturalness reflects distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), as it requires culturally learned forms of taste and access to resources.

The creator's hair also highlights this polished natural beauty. The hair appears loose, soft, and slightly tousled, yet remains visibly cared for and shiny. In one post (see Figure 9b), Darina's flowing hair looks very natural yet well-maintained. Her hair is shiny and voluminous, reflecting a high level of care. A similar pattern can also be observed among male creators. Hairstyles that are slightly tousled by the wind or appear loose, as seen in Hakon's or Giacomo's posts (see Figure 9c and 9d), still retain a sense of precision and a well-groomed appearance. The effortless look is therefore not the absence of effort, but rather its successful concealment, which reflects embodied cultural capital, where effort is masked as ease (Bourdieu, 1984).



Figure 9: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

Furthermore, the creators' fashion, characterized by classic cuts and muted tones, reflects understated elegance. In Paola's content (see Figure 10a), femininity is constructed through a balance of elegance and restraint. Similarly, Filippo's representation of masculinity (see Figure 10b) relies on darker tones, which reflects seriousness and confidence. Across both cases, style functions less as self-expression and more as a gender-specific and socially regulated performance of social class. This reflects Bourdieu's (1984) understanding of taste as a socially structured practice rather than an individual preference. The consistency of these elements further suggests the presence of shared aesthetic norms that are collectively reproduced within a broader taste regime (Arsel & Bean, 2013).



Figure 10: Selected Instagram posts a - b (left to right)

This controlled aesthetic is also visible in the body language of the different creators. Across the analyzed content, poses are mostly calm and composed. Movements appear slow in reels and expressive gestures are largely avoided. The body becomes a site where status is not overtly displayed, but subtly performed through control and discipline. This reflects habitus, as class position is expressed through embodied dispositions that render socially acquired forms of behavior as natural and self-evident (Bourdieu, 1984). In some of her posts (see Figure 11a and 11b), Paola reclines or rests her body in relaxed positions. These poses communicate stillness and create a sense of detachment, which positions her as an aesthetic subject to be observed. In this context, she seems like a source of aesthetic inspiration, a muse-like figure. At the same time, this can be understood as a form of front-stage performance (Goffman, 1959), in which the body becomes a visual object of observation.

Facial expressions are similarly restrained, as creators only smile or display exaggerated emotions in a minority of their posts. Instead, they often adopt neutral or slightly serious expressions, contributing to an overall impression of emotional control. Darina partially obscures her face through large hats or adopts downward or sideward gazes in several posts (see Figure 11c and 11d). These gestures reduce direct visibility and introduce a sense of distance and mystery. Rather

than actively seeking attention, she appears withdrawn and composed, which increases her perceived exclusivity.

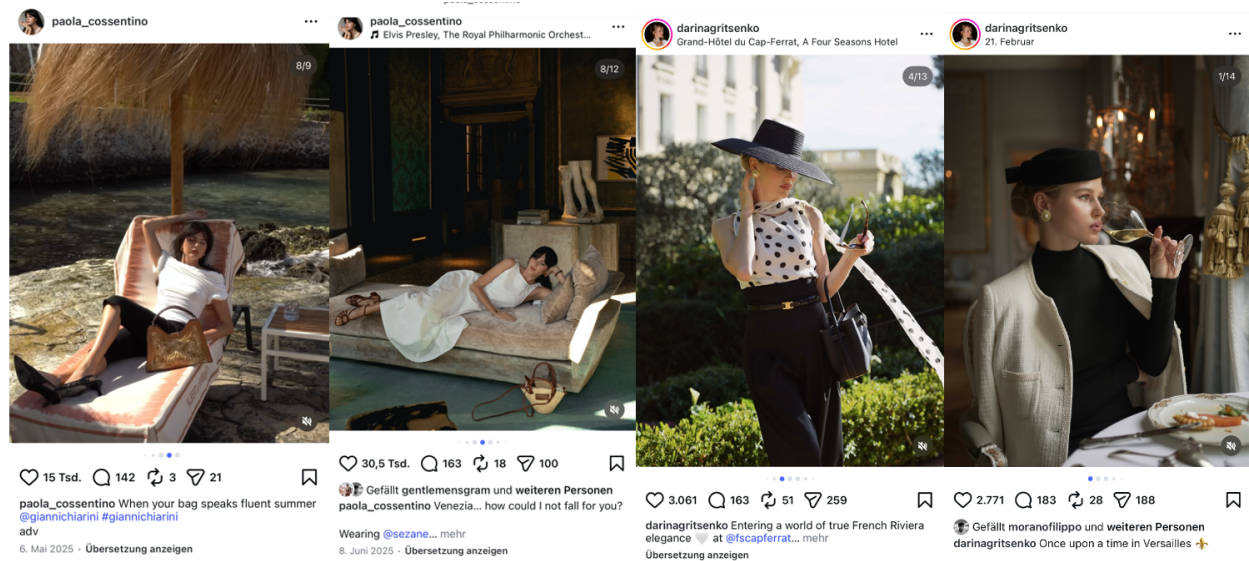


Figure 11: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

This principle of controlled restraint is also evident among male creators. In his posts, Filippo is often standing upright with his hands in his pockets (see Figure 12a), which displays a posture that exudes sovereignty without appearing strained. In addition, he also likes to position himself as a silent observer (see Figure 12b), standing on a balcony overlooking his surroundings. This perspective from above conveys the impression of distance and control. Looking at posts by Hakon (see Figure 12c), the way he leans against his car conveys a similar relaxed position. In other moments (see Figure 12d), he sits with a sideward gaze while drinking coffee, as if he is entirely unaware of the camera. This apparent non-performance can itself be understood as a performance (Goffman, 1959), as it reinforces the illusion of effortlessness.

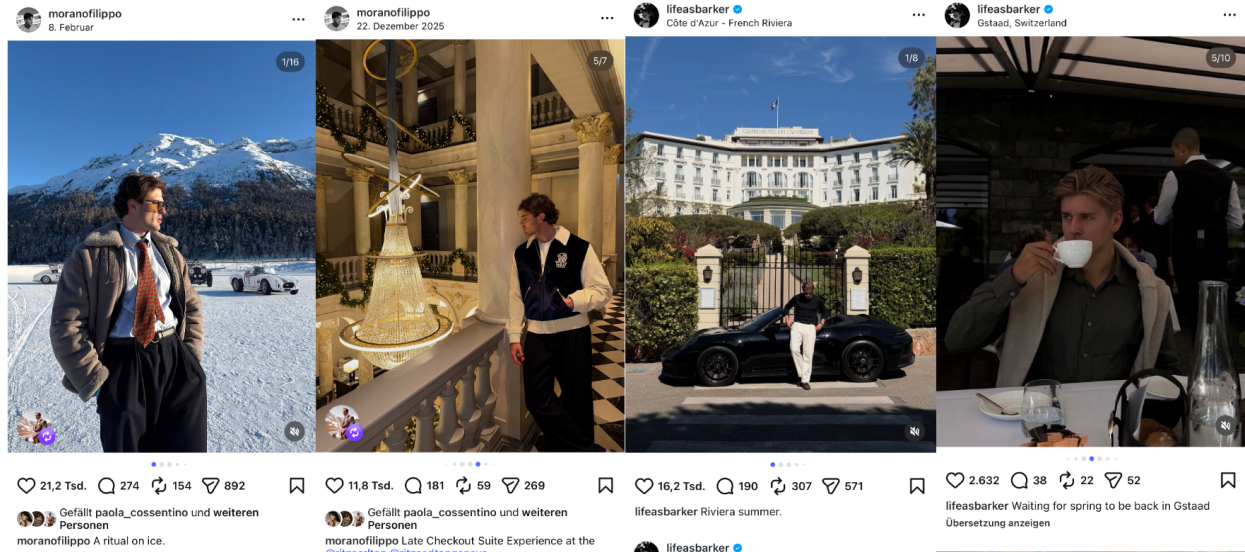


Figure 12: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

This overall representation of cultivated natural beauty and understated body language within their posts forms a coherent aesthetic that can be described as a controlled elite embodiment. The creator's appearance conveys an impression of perfection where nothing seems accidental, which suggests a conscious adherence to the unwritten codes of the *Old Money* aesthetic. As a result, the aesthetic conceals the labor, resources, and social relationships that are required to perform it and transforms structurally determined privilege into something that appears self-evident. In this sense, the performance operates within what Bourdieu & Wacquant (2013) describe as the second order of objectivity, referring to symbolic representations and classifications expressed through lifestyles. While the creator's actual social belonging and economic resources remain invisible to their audience, the second order is carefully staged through appearance and body language, creating the impression of natural class belonging.

5.2.2 Relational elite identity and social positioning

Across the analyzed posts, elite identity is not only constructed individually but also relationally, particularly through the recurring representation of heterosexual couple dynamics. A notable pattern is that female creators are consistently depicted within a stable romantic relationship. In

contrast, male creators tend to appear independently. This creates the image that femininity is more strongly embedded in relational identity, while masculinity retains a sense of autonomy.

In Paola's content, femininity is explicitly framed within a couple narrative. Within that, visual compositions frequently show coordinated styling and physical closeness. In some posts (see Figure 13a and 13b), Paola rests her head on her partner's lap, staging intimacy and trust for an audience (Goffman, 1959). In this front stage performance, the male partner occupies a protective role, while the female figure appears relaxed. The couples also appear as complementary units in Darina's posts. The woman takes on a passive role, while the man is active. For example, he rides a scooter and she leans against him (see Figure 13c), or he opens the car door for her (see Figure 13d). These complementary gender roles are deeply rooted in *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984), in which class-related dispositions are internalized and reproduced through everyday interactions. These examples reflect traditional gender roles within the *Old Money* aesthetic.



Figure 13: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

This relational construction of elite identity extends beyond romantic partnerships to the representation of the family as a cohesive social unit, as particularly evident in Rosalind's content. She frequently presents herself together with her partner and child, emphasizing intergenerational

continuity. Visual elements such as coordinated or matching outfits reinforce the impression of unity (see Figures 14 a-d). These family portrayals often take place in contexts associated with traditional elite practices, such as hunting (see Figure 14c). Those scenes are significant, as they suggest that elite lifestyles are not only performed in the present but also transmitted across generations. The child is actively integrated into these environments, symbolizing early exposure to elite values. In this sense, elite identity appears as something that is inherited, rather than individually achieved. The family thus functions as a key site of socialization where taste is reproduced through the transmission of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This reinforces the idea that belonging to an elite social class is not only about access to resources, but about growing into a specific cultural setting over time.



Figure 14: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

Another recurring element is the representation of well-dressed men in formal settings that evoke exclusive networks or gentlemen's clubs. These images convey a sense of cohesion and suggest that the elite's identity is expressed through social belonging and networking. In that way, this highlights the role of social capital (Bourdieu, 1984), as status is validated through membership in exclusive social circles.

This is particularly evident in Giacomo's post, captioned "*Gentlemanly aspirations with @secretcircle.*" (see Figure 15a). The phrase is highly symbolic, as it suggests that elite identity is not only material but embodied through a certain behavior. The use of the term "aspirations" positions this lifestyle as something desirable, without compromising its exclusivity. At the same time, the reference to a private members' club (@secretcircle) reinforces the idea that access to elite status is mediated through closed social groups. A similar dynamic can be observed in Filippo's posts (see Figure 15b and 15c), one captioned "*A weekend with the chaps*". The term "chaps" is particularly significant, as it conveys a sense of camaraderie and informal bonding within a male group. Unlike more formal terminology, it suggests that these relationships are unforced. However, within the visual context of tailored suits, candlelit dinners, and carefully curated environments, this "casual" language contrasts with the highly structured setting. This apparent casualness can itself be interpreted as a performance (Goffman, 1959), because his caption emphasizes that the people within those social circles are the ones he consistently surrounds himself with. Hakon's post (see Figure 15d), captioned "*a season for more layers, a gentleman's dream,*" further extends this construction of elite masculinity through social interaction. The term "gentleman" refers to a man characterized by his manners, his education, and his moral integrity (Terci, 2013). If considered a myth in the sense of Barthes (1972), the term naturalizes these qualities and presents them as natural personality traits rather than recognizing them as socially constructed behaviors.

All of these examples show that social interaction is consistently portrayed as both exclusive and effortless. The groups represented appear self-contained, giving the impression that the audience is observing a closed social world rather than being invited into it. The images suggest that social capital plays a significant role in the display of status (Bourdieu, 1984). Elite status is maintained through access to specific social networks historically linked to institutions such as aristocratic circles or old-money communities. The repeated depiction of homogeneous groups signals shared taste and mutual recognition within the group. In this sense, elite identity becomes relational. It is validated and reproduced through interaction with others who embody the same aesthetic and social codes, including family relations. Privilege is not only economic, but also social and cultural, which reinforces the structural inequalities that regulate access to such networks.

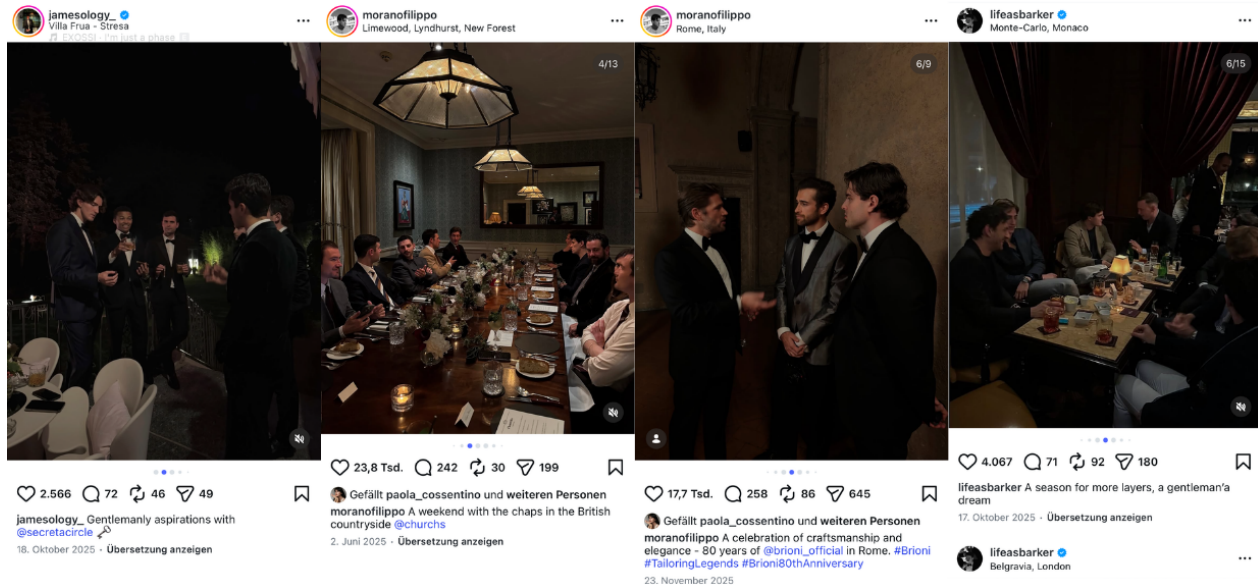


Figure 15: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

5.3 Symbolic Distinction and Quiet Luxury

The last theme shows how social class is performed through subtle and culturally coded forms of consumption within the *Old Money* aesthetic. Distinction is achieved through restraint, material quality, and symbolic references that require cultural knowledge to be recognized. Creators use clothing, accessories, and heritage brands as a coherent system of signs through which elite belonging is communicated. In this context, *Quiet Luxury* operates as a central mechanism of class performance, where status is encoded in the details that are only readable for those who possess the necessary cultural knowledge.

5.3.1 Craftsmanship and material distinction

The posts categorized within this category demonstrate that the *Old Money* aesthetic is constructed through a visual language of materiality and tailoring. Across all selected creators, clothing and accessories are not presented as trend-driven fashion items, but as objects that signal durability. Instead of simply wearing expensive things, social class is expressed through the controlled display

of quality and restraint. From a perspective of taste and distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), this transforms consumption into a culturally coded practice.

A central pattern identified within the content created by female creators is the consistent emphasis on tailored silhouettes, where garments appear carefully proportioned. This is for example visible in Darina's post (see Figure 16a). Her overall ensemble, including a silk headscarf and sunglasses, can be interpreted as a classic reference to a Riviera aesthetic, where chic simplicity and feminine silhouettes dominate. The image of Paola conveys a similar meaning (see Figure 16b), as her black, clean-cut outfit emphasizes the elegance of her garments. But these types of outfits may also convey a deeper meaning, as they are, for example, reminiscent of a Chanel-inspired jacket. The reference to Chanel is particularly interesting, as Karl Lagerfeld himself described this classical piece as a symbol of effortless feminine elegance over the past few decades (The Jacket, 2013). In that way, their perfectly styled outfits not only signal mastery, but also function as a marker of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984).

Taking a look at male creators, this principle is equally evident in their style. Filippo, for instance, repeatedly appears in tailored suits (see Figure 16c). Within these contexts, the precision of fit and proportion takes precedence. Likewise, Giacomo draws on similar dress codes (see Figure 16d). With his caption "*Gold standard*", he frames the suit as a benchmark of elegance aligned with established forms of elite appearance. This highlights how taste is reproduced through consistent practices, as emphasized within taste regimes (Arsel & Bean, 2013). Across these examples, tailoring functions as a shared visual code that stabilizes a unified language of class that transcends gender while maintaining exclusivity through precision.



Figure 16: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

The emphasis on tailoring is also tied to the representation of high-quality materials, as clothes consist of fabrics such as silk or cashmere. They can be identified by their texture and communicate softness and durability even in static images. This becomes, for example, visible in Paola's post, where she wears a silk blouse combined with silk shorts (see in Figure 17a). Silk is often regarded as the "queen of fibers", which reinforces a sense of luxury (Babu, 2019) and makes these subtle, visual cues significant. However, these visual cues restrict the readability of value to those who possess the necessary cultural capital to recognize them (Bourdieu, 1984). This reinforces distinction and shows consumption as a coded practice, where visibility is not synonymous with accessibility.

Accessories further intensify this logic of material distinction, particularly through the recurring presence of classic watches, including models from heritage brands such as Cartier. Watches are not highlighted as key luxury items, but presented as integral elements of a person's overall appearance. Rosalind, for example, (see Figure 17b and 17c) incorporates a minimal, classic wristwatch in everyday settings, such as having lunch or when visiting an animal farm. This makes the watch look like a natural everyday piece, aligning with the principle of quiet luxury. Eckhardt & Bardhi (2020), also describe this as the concept of inconspicuous consumption, where values are communicated through less visible signs.



Figure 17: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

In addition, the logic of material distinction is reinforced through accessories such as silk headscarves and classic hats. In Darina's post (see Figure 17d), the silk headscarf is not merely decorative but carries strong historical associations with aristocratic leisure. As Sindjelic (2021) shows, the headscarf has long functioned as a marker of status and social distinction among the upper classes. Hats similarly function as markers of familiarity with established dress codes, as seen in Paola's and Darina's post (see Figure 18a and 18b). Depending on the context, they signal either a relaxed or more controlled form of elite elegance, indicating knowledge of socially appropriate appearance within elite contexts. These ways of including accessories reflect broader taste regimes (Arsel & Bean, 2013) that define what counts as culturally appropriate within elite contexts.

Another important accessory that should be mentioned is fur (see Darina in Figure 18c). Historically linked to exclusivity, it reflects Veblen's (1899) notion of conspicuous consumption. In line with Bourdieu (1984), it also marks taste and social positioning. These days, fur is often associated with negative connotations, as anti-fur movements have heavily stigmatized its use in fashion (Shin & Jin, 2021). But perhaps this is precisely what makes its continued use a deliberate

form of distinction, as people not only signal wealth, but the freedom to stand above prevailing social norms (Veblen, 1899).

Beyond that, the aesthetic can be more deeply understood through its connection to the Italian concept of “sprezzatura”. Originating in Renaissance court culture, sprezzatura describes a carefully cultivated form of effortlessness in which refinement must appear natural rather than constructed (Castiglione, 1901). This principle is highly visible across the analyzed posts, as outfits are highly coordinated without ever appearing overloaded (see Figure 18d). This concealment of effort reflects a form of distinction in which refinement must appear inherent, pointing to an embodied form of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). This process can also be understood as a form of naturalization, in which socially constructed forms of privilege appear as self-evident (Barthes, 1972). This is further reinforced through Italian sartorial culture, where clothing is not merely a commodity, but a form of cultural heritage rooted in craftsmanship and local tradition (Paulicelli, 2015; Segre Reinach, 2015). Objects presented in their posts appear as if they have always belonged to them and thereby frame consumption as a process of continuity. The continuous embodiment of certain consumption practices reflects how class identity is reproduced and stabilized over time.

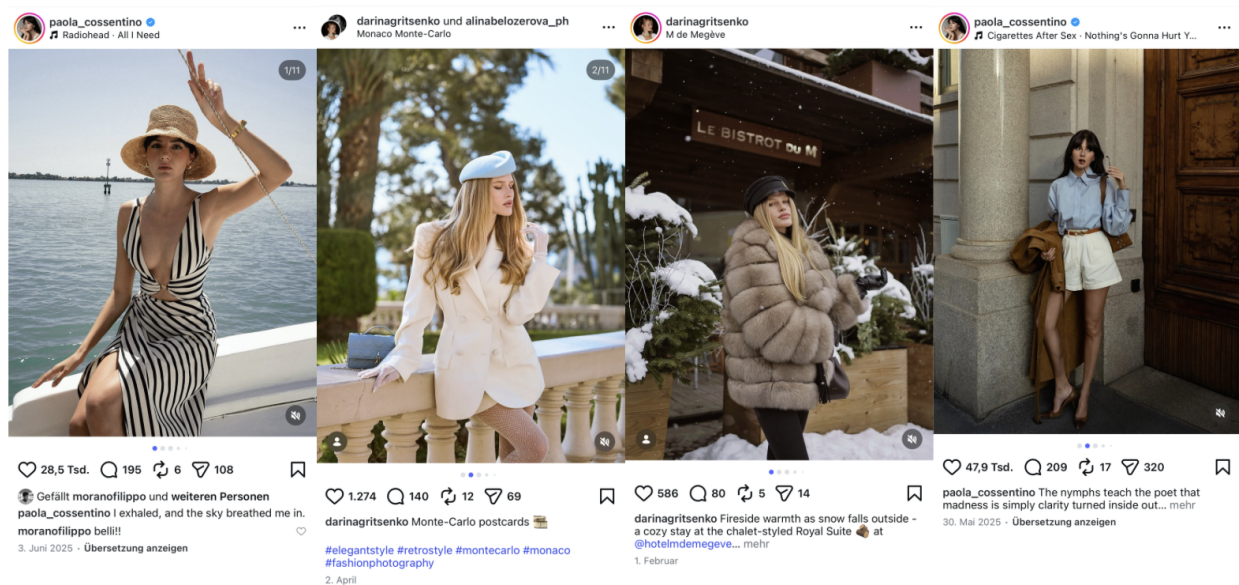


Figure 18: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

The theme can not only be analyzed through selected images but also through the captions accompanying certain posts. In Darina's post (see Figure 17d), her visual composition and the caption "*Say that Grace Kelly is her source of inspiration without saying it*" fit each other perfectly. Through the use of Grace Kelly as a reference, she signals cultural knowledge and evokes associations with timeless elegance and refined femininity, constructing what Schau & Gilly (2003) describe as an ideal self. A look that, as (Menkes, 2010) notes, continues to be seen as a symbol of a refined and ladylike style. Particularly the phrasing "*without saying it*" captures exactly how refinement operates in this aesthetic, as it is not announced but encoded in the styling itself. This shows that captions function as interpretive cues within social media contexts and highlight that social class distinction is performed through both visual and linguistic representations. Through captions, the meanings suggested by the garments are stabilized, operating as semiotic signs that guide interpretation (Barthes, 1977). In that way class performance remains legible to insiders, while it appears effortless and implicit to a broader online audience.

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) framework of identity performance, this coordinated presentation of clothing can be understood as a frontstage performance. The constant representation of high-quality materials and craftsmanship functions as a symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) that signals social class through embodied familiarity with elite aesthetic code.

5.3.2 Heritage brands and symbolic capital

Social class is also performed through the inclusion of brands that place a strong emphasis on heritage luxury. In particular, the importance of tradition and long-established status within the *Old Money* aesthetic is highlighted. Heritage brands, in this sense, refer to historically established luxury houses that do not merely possess a long history, but actively incorporate their past into their brand positioning. This emphasizes heritage as a central component of a brand's value proposition and cultural meaning (Urde et al., 2007). As a result, these brands form a coherent system of cultural references through which values such as legitimacy and elite positioning are communicated. The key aspect is not the material value of individual products but their symbolic function within a historically charged framework of meaning. In that way, a heritage brand can be

seen as a carrier of symbolic capital through which social class is legitimized (Bourdieu, 1984) and recognized as an image of social hierarchy.

Hermès, for example, derives its status not from visible logos but from the cultural weight it carries, which extends the brand's significance into notions of exclusivity (see Rosalind in Figure 19a). As Wang (2021) notes, Hermès has become a synonym for social status and serves as an indicator by which consumers define themselves and are defined by others. The brand's long waiting lists and limited distribution (Wang, 2021) further contribute to the impression that access is not solely based on financial means but requires proximity to specific social circles. From a semiotic perspective (Barthes, 1972), such brands function as second-order signs or myths. They transform fashion items into cultural symbols that naturalize class and social order. In this way, Hermès operates as an indicator of embedded privilege.

This logic of controlled visibility and implicit belonging extends beyond accessories and is equally reflected in the choice of classic menswear brands such as Brioni or Canali (see Filippo in Figures 19b and 19c). Their designs can be perceived as timeless and characterized by formal discipline, which constructs an image of masculinity that is based on stability. The way they display their taste, makes it look like a socially learned system that privileges continuity (Bourdieu, 1984). This also reflects a broader understanding of status that is grounded in tradition and closely tied to Italian sartorial culture, where social position is communicated through adherence and established dress codes. As a result, class is framed as something stable, disciplined, and socially regulated rather than individually expressive.



Figure 19: Selected Instagram posts a - d (left to right)

Brands such as Church's or Tod's (see Filippo and Darina in Figure 19d and 20a) do not rely on eye-catching logos, but target an audience that understands the underlying codes. Their recognition relies on selective readability, aligning with inconspicuous consumption, where status is communicated through less immediately visible signals (Eckhardt et al., 2015). This indicates that brands such as Church's are not designed to be instantly identifiable to a broad audience and reinforce the boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

Another interesting observation occurs between Hermès and Ralph Lauren, as Hermès derives from an established aristocratic lineage (Hermès, 2026), whereas Ralph Lauren strategically constructs its heritage. This means that the brand originally did not possess aristocratic legacy, but deliberately built it through the reproduction of visual narratives. To create this image of an elite lifestyle, the brand links itself to preppy clothing styles, countryside settings, and leisure-oriented activities such as equestrian sports (see Rosalind in Figure 20b and 20c). This indicates that a brand's heritage can be aesthetically constructed and aligns with Baudrillard's (1994) notion of simulation, where signs produce their own reality. Besides that, the performance of such constructed heritage can also be understood as what Goffman (1959) describes as a cynical performance, where creators consciously adopt visual codes without necessarily belonging to the social class they represent.



Figure 20: Selected Instagram posts a - c (left to right)

Brands such as Gucci or Dior also illustrate how visible forms of luxury are adapted to fit the understated logic of the *Old Money* aesthetic. This is particularly evident in Paola and Darina's posts (see Figures 21a and 21b), in which Gucci and Dior bags are clearly visible but are not presented as dominant status symbols. Instead, they blend into an overall understated visual style. Their presence is therefore moderate, ensuring alignment with the broader aesthetic logic of subtlety. Potentially conspicuous elements are thus integrated into a framework of restraint, which neutralizes overt status signals and aligns with the concept of inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015). In addition, other brands such as Celine (see Darina in Figure 21c) can be seen as an interface that combines modern minimalism and traditional notions of understatement. This allows contemporary aesthetics to be integrated into established forms of class-based distinction.



Figure 21: Selected Instagram posts a - c (left to right)

The analysis has shown that the combination of these brands aims to create a consistent image of status and belonging. Not the individual item matters, but the coherence of the overall composition and the ability to connect different references within a shared aesthetic. In this context, heritage brands function not as markers of community belonging, but as what Arvidsson & Caliandro (2015) describe as a medium for gaining visibility and communicating a desired lifestyle to others. Creators do not use these brands to signal membership in a brand community, but to construct and broadcast their own class identity to a broader audience. This highlights how the use of heritage brands operates as a structured practice and reinforces shared norms within a broader taste regime (Arsel & Bean, 2013).

6. Discussion

This chapter aims to summarize the key findings of this study and place them into a broader theoretical and societal context. The presentation of the identified themes is followed by the discussion of the study's theoretical contributions and highlights the extent to which the findings provide new insights compared to existing literature on social class and digital self-presentation. The chapter is then followed by an interpretation of the findings at a higher level to discuss and consider their societal implications. This demonstrates what the performance of social class on social media means for society and culture.

6.1 Key findings

The analysis of the study identified three interlinked themes that shape how creators perform social class through the *Old Money* aesthetic on Instagram. The first key finding relates to the **aestheticization of the past** and the **representation of elite leisure**, which is portrayed through **references to classic films, music, and aristocratic leisure activities**. Through the **visual editing** of images, the creators further contribute to establishing a vintage look and evoking associations with the past. In addition, **captions** such as “*went back in time*” help to frame visual content and **aim to romanticize old life**. The **portrayal of leisure and locations** intensifies this view, as it is strongly **associated with aristocratic culture** and requires **access to economic and cultural resources**. Leisure activities and travel are not just presented as mere hobbies, but as **participation in social settings that signal status and require mobility**. The depiction of travel across Europe therefore conveys the impression that **geographic mobility** is a natural condition of upper-class life. Knowing where the elite gathers and participating in all these activities is not a matter of conscious choice but an embedded class condition.

The second key finding relates to the **embodied performance of social class through body language** and the **construction of relational identity**. As postures and gestures can say a lot about a person’s social class (Bourdieu, 1984), it becomes possible for creators to signal upper class belonging and convey the idea of perfection and ease. What is evident here is that **despite the hard work** that is necessary to maintain this perfect image, **creators appear natural and effortless**. Their appearance

and personal staging on Instagram also contributes to the reproduction of gender-specific role models. Throughout the posts, women seem reserved and controlled, whereas men are portrayed as self-confident and dominant. This actively reflects historical class hierarchies, which also extended to a relational level. While all female creators appear alongside their partners in several posts, men, in contrast, often present themselves in homogeneous groups of like-minded individuals. This gives the impression of exclusive social circles and private clubs that are not accessible for everyone. The identified patterns suggest that embodied class performance on Instagram is not only an individual act, but also represented through gendered and relational practices that reinforce broader social hierarchies.

The third finding indicates that creators also rely on clothing, craftsmanship, and the use of heritage brands to express social belonging. The way they carefully assemble their outfits using neutral colors and high-quality materials, demonstrates their sense of longevity and timelessness. Accessories and outfits not only create references to aristocratic dress codes, but also reflect a shared conformity to these codes, as styling choices are consistently reproduced. To align with this idea of an upper-class presentation the possession of knowledge about what is considered appropriate within the aesthetic, is even more important than financial resources. Within their styling, heritage brands continuously function as subtle objects that signal status. They are discreetly incorporated into their posts and also require cultural insider knowledge to be recognized, aligning with Makkar & Yap's (2018) concept of inconspicuous consumption. Therefore, the brand itself becomes the ultimate marker of distinction, communicating that we do not need to show off, but we still do.

6.2 Elaboration on key findings

Viewed on a more abstract level, the three identified themes together show how fundamentally the logic of social class has changed in contemporary digital culture. These themes are not connected through certain objects or concrete places, but through a specific form of competence, referring to the ability to know the right codes, to embody them convincingly, and to deploy them in the appropriate context. The right choice of leisure activities and travel destinations, the controlled and seemingly effortless body language, and the subtle integration of heritage brands all

communicate the same message in every theme. Namely, that **social class belonging** is not something that is achieved but as **something that is taken for granted**. What the three themes collectively demonstrate is that social class on social media is no longer communicated directly, but rather through an **aestheticized representation**, referring to a carefully constructed visual language in which class belonging is encoded in style, atmosphere, and cultural references. The overarching goal is to **make it look beautiful**.

Instagram, as a visually optimized platform, further reinforces this logic, as it is not the biographical reality that counts, but the **quality of the staged surface**. In this context, **social class** is experienced less as a structural position in that context and more as **an aesthetic project** that is constructed and communicated through consistent visual codes. The three themes demonstrate that the staging is not an individual act, but follows a **collectively shared and recognizable script** that requires **cultural insider knowledge**. In this way, a carefully curated Instagram profile itself becomes a form of personal capital, functioning as a social currency that signals class belonging and opens access to specific social circles, even if the underlying socio-economic position of the creator remains invisible.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

As introduced in the theory chapter, the study proposes an integrated conceptual framework that brings together three theoretical perspectives. The performance of social class was therefore examined through a unified analytical approach, connecting the perspectives of semiotic & myths, socialization, taste & status, and identity performance. While each of these lenses has been applied individually in previous research, **this study is among the first to systematically combine them and gave us the possibility to analyze how elite social class is performed and naturalized on image-based social media platforms such as Instagram**. By positioning Instagram as a digital stage that translates structural cultural capital into a hyperreal semiotic system, the study provided a **new analytical tool**. Consequently, the analysis goes beyond traditional views of social class, taking the fluid and performative nature of class distinction in contemporary digital culture into account.

Perhaps the most fundamental insight emerging from this study concerns the relationship between digital fluidity and physical anchoring in the performance of social class, extending the framework

of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) and its implications for status signaling in digital environments (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). While Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) conceptualizes liquid and solid consumption as a spectrum, their subsequent research shows that status signaling increasingly relies on inconspicuousness, non-ownership, and authenticity (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Based on these insights, the findings of this study add two new dimensions to this framework.

First, the results indicate that the imitation of material objects becomes easier through digital manipulation and visual staging. This in turn reinforces the value of exclusive, physical spaces and leisure activities as important status signals, as they require both physical attendance and substantial economic resources. The strategic use of these physical spaces and experiences as anchors of authenticity relates to the second identified dimension and legitimizes the otherwise hyperreal digital performance. In this sense, the findings demonstrate that within highly fluid digital environments, physical permanence and culturally charged spaces become indispensable resources for constructing credible status signals. A dynamic that is neither Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) nor Eckhardt and Bardhi (2020) considered in the specific context of digital self-presentation and class performance on social media.

Furthermore, this study extends recent research on social media platform dynamics and self-branding. Existing literature primarily views social media users as self-branding individuals (Casaló et al., 2020; Tewatia & Majumdar, 2022) or as part of unstructured brand publics without a shared identity (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Therefore, these papers do not uncover the role of creators as structured producers of collective class narratives. The study provides new insights by demonstrating that creators do not merely stage their identities in isolation, but act as active curators of taste regimes (Arsel & Bean, 2013). The way they collectively draw on nostalgic elements and culturally coded references constructs an aesthetic framework that appears to democratize visual access to the elite, while simultaneously reinforcing structural boundaries of exclusion.

Based on the findings, new insights are contributed to the traditional views of identity performance. Authors such as Belk (1988; 2013) and Schau & Gilly (2003) already introduced that individuals expand their identities through digital associations with signs and symbols, without the need for physical possessions. Similarly, Zhao et al. (2008) conceptualized the construction of

“hoped-for possible selves” in digital environments. This study extends their work, showing how these hoped-for selves are legitimized through a controlled and stylized form of embodiment. The conducted visual content analysis reveals that the effortless looking *Old Money* representations consist of an extremely labor-intensive concealment of effort.

While Bourdieu (1984) describes embodied cultural capital as something that is internalized through education and class background, this study shows that creators transform this capital into a visual practice on Instagram, where restraint and controlled aesthetic replace real cultural capital. One does not really need to own this form of capital anymore, but just need to portray it convincingly, also changing the way of identity performance. While Pearson (2009) describes online identity as a discursive interaction, this study demonstrates that the *Old Money* aesthetic is a one-sided and highly strategic performance without real interaction, aligning with Baudrillard’s (1994) argument that the representation of social class replaces its material reality. These theoretical contributions collectively advance the understanding of how social class is performed in contemporary digital environments. Therefore, they provide a foundation for examining the broader societal and practical implications of the *Old Money* aesthetic on Instagram.

6.4 Societal Implications

The *Old Money* aesthetic presents itself as accessible and inspiring, but in reality, it merely reproduces existing class structures. Creators generate desire and social media reach by showing luxury and elegance, without the intention of actually encouraging others to participate. In this sense, they democratize elite codes only on a superficial level, while structural boundaries remain intact. The role of creators is thereby shifting from passive consumers to active producers and curators of class narratives, functioning as what Arsel & Bean (2013) would describe as curators of taste regimes. Creators utilize the Instagram platform logic to translate inherited privileges into an aesthetic script that appears accessible to a broader audience, staging an exclusive and self-contained social world that deliberately excludes the observer. In this way, they do not undermine class hierarchies, but rather reproduce and normalize the structure of inequality, confirming Bourdieu’s (1984) argument that taste and consumption practices perpetuate social distinction.

This inequality is further reinforced through the concealment of structural conditions. Wealth, origin, and geopolitical privileges are not openly displayed, but are naturalized through the aesthetic and its controlled staging, making them appear self-evident (Barthes, 1972). In addition, the *Old Money* aesthetic is characterized by a highly homogeneous visual representation, depicting almost exclusively white, slim, and heterosexual people, thereby reproducing Eurocentric and colonial ideals of beauty and status. This also reflects a broader pattern on Instagram, where Eurocentric beauty standards are systematically reinforced through the platform's visual culture (Miller, 2026), leading to a cosmopolitan monoculture in which the same aesthetic, no matter the location, is considered the quintessence of class and elegance.

Taking a closer look at the aesthetic, it becomes clear that it is not just another fashion trend, but also an ideological statement. The conscious romanticization of behaviors criticized by society, such as wearing fur or excessive traveling, can be read as counter-movements to contemporary social norms. In the framework of consumer culture theory, the *Old Money* aesthetic partially overlaps with aspects of what Ulver (2022) conceptualizes as the “neobrown consumer ideoscape”. This ideological space emerges as a direct reactive resistance against the ecologically conscious “neogreen” consumer norms, transforming status symbols into tools of cultural polarization. Through this, the upper class and its followers signal that it is perfectly acceptable to enjoy privilege without feeling the need to apologize for it.

Furthermore, the *Old Money* aesthetic reflects a deep desire for stability. In times of economic uncertainty and social change, the illusion of an unchanging aristocratic order functions like an emotional anchor (Goertz, 2025; Li, 2025), portraying the return to traditions as the response to a destabilized world. Closely linked to this is the resurgence of traditional gender roles, as the rediscovery of the gentlemen ideal and the return to conventional role models, with parallels to the “tradewife” movement, can be seen as an anti-feminist backlash. By packaging an era in which women were entirely dependent on patriarchal structures as “timeless elegance”, the aesthetic glorifies a regressive gender binary. The performance frames the retreat of women into passive, decorative roles not as a loss of agency, but as the ultimate sign of high-class sophistication. Consequently, the trend obscures the oppressive realities of pre-feminist history, transforming the return to patriarchy into a desirable lifestyle aspiration for contemporary women. Ultimately, this trend reflects a broader sociopolitical shift in Europe (Becker et al., 2025) and America (Campani

et al., 2022), where conservatism has risen in recent years and nostalgic aesthetics have become the visual expression of a broader political zeitgeist.

Crucially, the *Old Money* aesthetic illustrates how contemporary digital culture increasingly transforms social and economic anxieties into aestheticized lifestyle aspirations. Rather than encouraging critical engagement with structural inequality, economic insecurity, or social fragmentation, these tensions are reframed as matters of personal identity, taste, and consumption. As a result, digital culture may normalize and commodify exclusionary class ideals, thereby reinforcing existing socio-economic hierarchies.

Following Baudrillard's (1994) theory, the *Old Money* aesthetic blurs the line between actual class position and its digital representation, enabling creators to construct a reality that does not need to relate to their actual living conditions. Through practices such as borrowing luxury goods, making use of AI-generated backgrounds, or strategically incorporating filters and music into their posts, class becomes a mere simulation. As social mobility is increasingly constrained by family background and structural inequality (Fehr et al., 2024), consumers turn to luxury aesthetics as a form of digital escapism. This is motivated by the desire to mentally detach from an oppressive reality and use the consumption of aspirational content to imagine an alternative lifestyle (Petrescu et al., 2025). At the same time, the continuous exposure to idealized representations of wealth and exclusivity may intensify feelings of inadequacy, aspirational anxiety, and constant social comparison among users.

Behind all this lies a fundamental tension between the past and the present, meaning that social media is used to reinvent the historical upper-class lifestyle for the digital present. In this way, creators construct a romanticized version of an elite social class that can never be fully replicated by their followers.

7. Conclusion

The following chapter presents the conclusion of this study and provides directions for future research. It highlights the overarching insights gained from the analysis and addresses future questions arising from the increasing complexity of digital identity performance and social class in digital environments.

The aim of this study was to examine the research question: “*How is social class performed through the Old Money aesthetic in social media culture?*”

The findings of the analysis reveal that social class is not simply reflected on social media, but actively performed through the translation of historically rooted class codes into a coherent visual script that prioritizes the competence to enact elite belonging over actual class membership. Through the three identified themes, it becomes evident that creators use the Instagram platform to construct a hyperreal simulation of elite life. In doing so, they naturalize class privileges as something self-evident and inherited rather than achieved, while simultaneously reproducing structural inequalities in digital environments.

However, taking a closer look at the way social class is presented on Instagram, a number of paradoxes can be revealed that go beyond the simple staging of an elite aesthetic. Perhaps the most striking paradox of the *Old Money* aesthetic lies in its fundamental self-contradiction. Traditional *Old Money* is defined by privacy and the deliberate absence of any form of status display. The principle of silence can therefore be viewed as a sign of power, which is turned into its opposite on social media. Here, status becomes visible through the constant documentation and public display of one’s own life, making it not just about owning expensive things, but about documenting them. This reveals the *Old Money* aesthetic as a paradoxical performance that imitates discretion through maximum visibility. Ultimately, this performance commercializes the very aesthetics of understatement, creators commodify the historical elite’s discretion, turning *Quiet Luxury* into a loud marketing instrument designed to generate algorithmic attention and digital capital.

Another identified contradiction is that, although creators probably strive for maximum digital visibility, they simultaneously create an artificial distance from their audience. The analysis

demonstrates that creators do not personally interact with their followers. The fact that they do not talk into the camera or do not answer any questions makes it seem as if they present themselves as an aesthetic object that can be admired but not reached. This combination of being visible and unapproachable at the same time is probably not a coincidence, but contributes to the reproduction of class hierarchies in digital spaces. In this way, the viewer is invited to watch, but never invited to participate.

The viral spread of the *Old Money* aesthetic on social media also has physical consequences. As luxury becomes democratized, meaning material goods become affordable and easily replicable for a wider audience due to fast fashion and dupes, the focus of distinction is increasingly shifting towards experiences. This means people now express class privilege through visiting exclusive travel destinations, private retreats or participating in aristocratic leisure activities. These practices suggest that only those whose material needs are already secured can afford such forms of distinction. At the same time, the constant presentation of certain locations on social media leads to crowded spaces and forces the true elite to find even more exclusive and less well-known destinations. This reflects a well-known dynamic in social theory, which was first described by (Simmel, 1957) in the context of fashion, but is equally applicable to spaces and experiences. In this context, the upper class continually seeks new forms of distinction as their preferred practices are adopted by a wider audience.

In the end, it is irrelevant whether the analyzed creators actually come from an *Old Money* family or if they really possess the necessary economic capital. What counts is the cultural impact of their performance. Social media has reinvented the traditional definition of social class and replaced it with a lifestyle simulation that is based on algorithmic optimization and hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994). Therefore, social class is no longer seen as something people simply have, but as something they perform and consume. In this sense, the boundary between reality and appearance is blurred and the question of who belongs to the elite is becoming increasingly irrelevant. What remains is the image people produce.

7.1 Limitations & Future Research

Although the study provides useful insights into the hyperreal performance of social class on social media, the study needs to acknowledge several limitations. Firstly, the methodological approach relies **exclusively on the visual content and semiotic analysis of final Instagram posts**. This means that only the surface of their performance and not the production side was examined. Without direct empirical access to the actual socio-economic backgrounds or conscious motivations of the creators, the study can **show how social class is staged, but cannot verify which subjective intentions lie behind it**. Secondly, the study faces a **geographical and cultural limitation**. The *Old Money* aesthetic is deeply rooted in Eurocentric and Western histories of aristocracy and privilege. The results are therefore not simply transferable to non-Western contexts, as markers of distinction may follow a different cultural logic there. Lastly, the focus was only placed on the **perspectives of the creators and neglected the followers' side**. Although theoretical assumptions were made about how the *Old Money* aesthetic reinforces societal inequalities and functions as a form of digital escapism, no empirical investigation was conducted into how followers actually perceive or interpret the content.

These limitations simultaneously point to promising directions for future research. To gain a deeper understanding, the use of **qualitative interviews** or reception analyses could be insightful. This would allow researchers not only to capture the **perceptions and interpretations of followers**, but also to understand the actual motivations of creators behind their participation in the aesthetic. In addition, a systematic **platform comparison between TikTok and Instagram** could reveal whether and how the performance of social class changes when it is transferred to a platform that follows different aesthetic and algorithmic norms. To address aforementioned geographical limitation, future research could also **adopt an intersectional and transcultural perspective**. In this way, it can be examined how the *Old Money* aesthetic operates in non-Western cultures and whether different class narratives and ideals of beauty emerge in those contexts.

Another interesting direction would be to explore the **increasing prevalence of AI-generated content**. Future studies could examine whether AI-generated *Old Money* content is considered credible by followers and what this means for our understanding of social class when the connection to social reality disappears. Finally, as the viral spread of the *Old Money* aesthetic

began in the early 2020s, a longitudinal perspective could also be revealing. Fashion trends typically follow a life cycle in which they lose their distinctiveness through mass distribution, a process also described by Simmel (1957). In this sense, additional studies could examine whether the *Old Money* aesthetic undergoes the same cycle and what new forms of distinction emerge when it loses its exclusive character.

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Declaration of AI use

Tools:

AI-based tools we used in the completion of this master thesis were ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini.

Degree of Use:

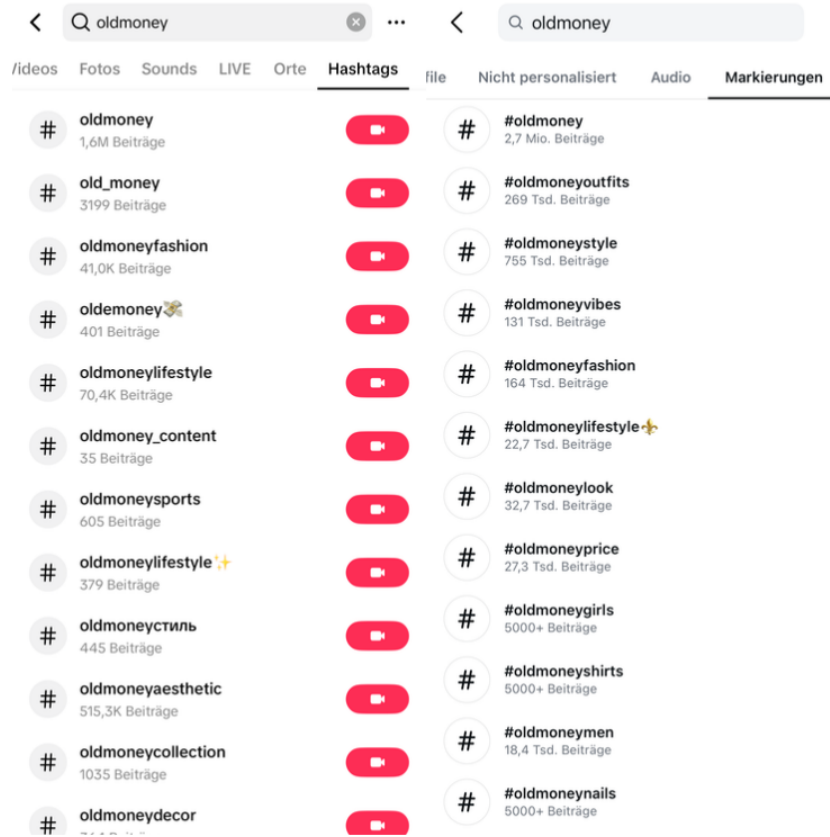
We declare that we used AI in a limited and supportive capacity throughout some stages of our research process. AI was primarily used to support language refinement, specifically to improve spelling, grammar, and clarity of expression in parts of our study. However, all final texts were carefully written by us.

Additionally, we used AI on a limited basis during our literature review. It supported our initial screening of academic sources in order to make an informed decision about what articles are best suited for our research topic. Nevertheless, all incorporated sources were carefully read and critically evaluated by us before citing them in our thesis.

At no stage of the research process did we use AI to generate substantive academic content, perform data analysis, or substitute independent critical thinking.

Appendix

Appendix A



TikTok vs. Instagram: Comparison of Hashtags related to the Old Money aesthetic
(Screenshot taken on May 29th, 2026)

Appendix B



The *Old Money* trend over the last 5 years
(Screenshot taken on May 29th, 2026)