

The Co-creation of Luxury Brand Hedonic Experiences in Social Media: Luxury Brand Strategies from a Design Perspective

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Abstract

Background Social media (SM) is actively used to co-create online branding experiences. For luxury brands, consumer-brand relationships and brand equity are strongly driven by the online luxury hedonic experience, and to retain exclusivity online, they utilise brand-generated content (BGC) and influencer-generated content (IGC). However, because brands and influencers play different roles, they embed their characteristics in their content differently, influencing consumers' perceptions. Therefore, this study explores how luxury brands and influencers co-create a luxury hedonic experience in SM by looking at content characteristics.

Methods Considering BGC as functional/financial, symbolic art, and social content and IGC as product and event content, the luxury hedonic experience was examined through the content characteristics of visual attractiveness, information quality, and uniqueness and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) using surveys and in-depth interviews.

Results The findings reveal that for both BGC and IGC, uniqueness was the most important characteristic for the creation of the luxury hedonic experience. While influencers brought uniqueness through daily life and sincerity in information quality, brands brought uniqueness through artistry with visual attractiveness and craftsmanship with information quality. Furthermore, information quality was underscored in both content for the importance of the luxury hedonic experience in eWOM.

Conclusions This study highlights the influences of IGC and BGC and how they can contribute to the future digital design directions of luxury brands. The luxury hedonic experience of BGC can have positive impacts by showing why the brand is luxurious, not simply that they are luxurious. The luxury hedonic experience of IGC can benefit more candidness and sincerity.

Keywords Luxury Branding, Luxury Hedonic Experience, BGC, IGC, Social Media Co-creation

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1. Introduction

With the growing importance of digital channels and consumer roles, there is more traction and emphasis on online branding. In particular, social media (SM) is actively being used to co-create the brand experience through a variety of contents for brand building, including not only brand-generated content (BGC) but also user-generated content (UGC) and influencer-generated content (IGC) (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020). However, luxury brands initially showed resistance to using SM and engaging consumers in these co-creation activities, as doing so opens them up to the influence of others, thereby not only losing their supremacy and control in branding but also going against luxury codes, such as maintaining their exclusive nature (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). Nevertheless, they are opening up as they realise that through careful curation and selection, they can still maintain exclusivity and prestige (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020) and capitalise on the value that such stakeholders can provide, such as brand awareness and differentiation (Kennedy and Guzman, 2016).

Specifically, luxury brands' utilisation of SM focuses on building a personalised one-on-one relationship with young consumers (Martin-Consuegra et al., 2019; Xie & Lou, 2020) and reinforcing brand image through brand exclusivity and prestige (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020). However, as luxury is defined by its hedonic appeal and driving pleasure through showing the brand's depth and substance (Martin-Consuegra et al., 2019), both the consumer-brand relationship and brand equity are greatly driven by the online luxury hedonic experience in terms of unique and experiential value (Xie and Lou, 2020) and engagement (Jones and Lee, 2021). In particular, as the luxury hedonic experience differs from a traditional hedonic experience (Lin et al., 2018; Xie and Lou, 2020) in that it highlights social status, luxury brand managers actively focus on offering online hedonic exclusivity by shifting to a multi-actor view (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). Thus, luxury brands utilise SM to enhance this experience by not only generating self-content and BGC but also selectively co-creating content with influencers (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020). Specifically, unlike general UGC, with selective co-creation through IGC, luxury brands can maintain control, a characteristic that typifies traditional luxury branding (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). However, brands and influencers embed their characteristics in their content differently, influencing consumers' perception of the content (Ki et al., 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020). Thus, they play different roles in hedonic experiential messaging, which has been shown to affect engagement behaviour, such as positively affecting eWOM (electronic word of mouth) (Jones and Lee, 2021). As engagement behaviour ultimately affects brand equity and image (Kennedy and Guzman, 2016; Xie and Lou, 2020), research is needed on how luxury brands and influencers influence content characteristics, impacting the co-creation of the luxury hedonic experience. Therefore, this study examines the following research question: How is the luxury hedonic experience co-created with SM content through content characteristics?

Prior luxury brand research on SM branding content is generally situated in a marketing context, with previous studies focusing on co-creation with the consumer: brand and consumer actor characteristics and behaviours (Chapman and Dilmeri, 2022), consumer motivations (Martin-Consuegra et al., 2019), and consumer value acquisition from brand

content (Xie and Lou, 2020). However, with SM, the hedonic experience is highly tied to content characteristics where communication design takes crucial roles, including execution, message, visual, and experiential appeal, affecting how consumers perceive and make judgements about brands (Ashley and Tuten, 2014). Thus, this paper aims to explore the relationship of content characteristics in BGC and IGC with the co-creation of luxury hedonic experience on SM.

2. Literature Review

2. 1. Branding Content in SM

Owing to the nature of SM, SM branding content is generated in various ways. While most branding content is generated by the brand itself, it is also created by various actors, including consumers and influencers (Goh et al., 2013; Lou and Yuan, 2019).

In the luxury industry, BGC has certain characteristics. Because luxury brands are characterised by craftsmanship, premium prices, exclusivity, hedonism, brand authenticity, and aesthetics (Chapman and Dilmeri, 2022; Holmqvist et al., 2019), luxury-brand-led online conversations usually consist of symbolic and functional/financial content (Chapman and Dilmeri, 2022). Symbolic content can be seen in content that narrates brand legacy, brand stories, and brand philosophy (Xie and Lou, 2020) and is usually part of art marketing, which includes content on fashion shows, exhibitions, designer activities, and exterior and interior store designs. Such art marketing content typically focuses on providing art-related knowledge and cultural information about luxury brands (Choi et al., 2016). Contrastingly, functional/financial content can be seen in showing products and craftsmanship (Xie and Lou, 2020). Additionally, luxury brands also post social content with celebrities and influencers to not only share experiences and connect to consumers but also show exclusivity (Cheung et al., 2022; Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020). Specifically, BGC showing celebrities and influencers targets consumers' social values as it plays a role in their psychological social desires, is often tied to aspects such as homophily (Bu et al., 2022) and wishful identification (Cheung et al., 2022), and can lead to choice imitation (Ki et al., 2022). Brands not only generate social content by themselves but also utilise influencers to create brand content. Because influencers are content creators with online personalities and large following (Lou and Yuan, 2019), they can create a more intimate emotional connection with their online audience (Ki et al., 2022) using their appeal leadership functions (Lin et al., 2018). Therefore, luxury brands use influencers to generate branding posts to create stronger consumer attachment to the brand. IGC generally consists of product and event content. When luxury brands use influencers to endorse branding product posts, they attach the influencer's social status and personal brand to that product, and this creates an appeal that increases the psychological experience and hedonic value of the product, creating stronger consumer product attachment (Lin et al., 2018). Additionally, luxury brands use influencers for event posts to create an exclusive brand experience, such as when influencers post about invitation-only events (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). Exclusivity is also emphasised by the influencer's popularity, as they can reach micro-celebrity status (Lin et al., 2018) with global influencers able to reach consumers from a multitude of countries (Bentley et al.,

2021). In addition, particularly for IGC, luxury brands can use such criteria to endorse select influencers, allowing luxury brands to maintain some form of superiority (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022).

In addition to IGC, SM branding content can also be generated by users, who not only upload content themselves but may also create and share content in response to brand posts and interactions. In particular, as luxury brands are about quality and establishing social status with hedonic and aesthetic values (Xie and Lou, 2020), UGC entails not only relationship-building and pleasurable/experiential content, but also symbolic/expressive and functional/informational content (Chapman and Dilmpieri, 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020). Such content can include consumers posting pictures of the luxury brand including logos, stores, and products, as well as featuring themselves alongside the brand. Relationship-building content includes saying thanks (Chapman and Dilmpieri, 2022), brand love (Bazi et al., 2020), and pleasurable/experiential content focused on hedonism and the experience of using the service or product (Chapman and Dilmpieri, 2022). Symbolic/expressive content is a form of self-interest, self-presentation, and status signalling, such as posting oneself with coffee and an LV purse (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2015; Chapman and Dilmpieri, 2022), and functional/informational content is about sharing brand-related information, such as brand news or events (Bazi et al., 2020; Xie and Lou, 2020). However, most consumer content creates free-style brand interpretations outside the luxury brand's control (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). Therefore, unlike UGC, with BGC and IGC, by befriending selected internal and external partners, luxury brands can more tightly manage such content (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022), particularly when IGC is endorsed. Therefore, in this study, the focus is on luxury BGC through symbolic art, functional/financial, and social content, and endorsed IGC through product and event content.

2. 2. Luxury Hedonic Experience

While hedonism generally refers to fun, enjoyment, and entertainment (Kennedy and Guzman, 2016; Martin-Consuegra et al., 2019), in luxury, the definition is not as simple. While consumers can derive hedonic sensory appeal and pleasure from luxury characteristics such as beauty and quality (Holmqvist et al., 2019; Xie and Lou, 2020), such subjective aspects do not constitute the entirety of luxury hedonism, as luxury hedonism is also symbolic (Lin et al., 2018). Being associated with luxury, the play of social authenticity and social status also crafts the luxury hedonic experience (Holmqvist et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2018). When perceived online, this symbolic aspect drives the hedonic exclusivity for which luxury brand managers vie (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). Therefore, the online luxury hedonic experience is not only enjoyment and sensory pleasure, but also symbolic with regard to exclusivity and prestige.

Both BGC and IGC play a role in providing luxury hedonic experiences and value (Bazi et al., 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021). Luxury brands create affective appeal through post quality, product design appeal, status signalling, brand love, and brand quality (Bazi et al., 2020), and such affective appeal helps brands to convey the hedonic and one-of-a-kind brand experience that is often stressed in luxury (Choi et al., 2016; Xie and Lou, 2020). Similarly, for influencers, content attributes include quality and hedonic value, and psychological-related influential factors such as closeness, inspiration, and enjoyability help craft the experience for users (Vrontis et al., 2021). However, users are attracted to IGC for various reasons. For

influencers, their affective appeal lies in personableness (Creevey et al., 2021) and physical attractiveness, not just design attractiveness (Weidmann and Von Mettenheim, 2021). In addition, aspects such as attractiveness drive inspiration in the sense of mimicking (Ki and Kim, 2019; Vrontis et al., 2021), and not brand ethereality (Bazi et al., 2020). Moreover, as luxury brand managers can use BGC to transmit hedonic experiences directly to consumers or embed luxury elements in IGC and have SM influencers indirectly influence consumers' hedonic experiences (Cheung et al., 2022), brands can signal status and exclusivity differently (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022). Therefore, although both BGC and IGC contribute hedonically, their underlying mechanisms and stimuli differ.

From the content, hedonic value and experience can influence involvement, interaction, and behavioural intention with luxury brands (Martin-Consuegra et al., 2019). In particular, for SM branding co-creation, as brand communities (Chapman and Dilmeri, 2022; Kamboja et al., 2018), brand publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2015; Rialti et al., 2018), and brand equity are formed through contributing posts and comments from users (Kamboja et al., 2018), an often-measured key performance indicator is engagement and customer participation (Carlson et al., 2019; Jones and Lee, 2021; Martin-Consuegra et al., 2019; Rashid et al., 2019). Therefore, we examine engagement in SM branding co-creation. Consumer engagement with brand posts can be considered liking, commenting, and sharing; however, as these actions are visible to friends, they have been considered eWOM (Erkan, 2015). In addition, as both brands and influencers have been shown to influence eWOM (Casaló et al., 2020; Vrontis et al., 2021), we focus on eWOM among the customer engagement metrics (Kamboja et al., 2018).

2. 3. Content Characteristics

Content characteristics highly dictate the online experience with branding content, which is positively associated with the actor's content creation ability (Lou and Yuan, 2019) as actor source characteristics are tied with the contents (Lin et al., 2018). Particularly for BGC and IGC, visual attractiveness, information quality, and uniqueness have been shown to influence consumer perceptions and engagement (Bazi et al., 2020; Casaló et al., 2020; Cheung et al., 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020).

Visual Attractiveness

Visual attractiveness is known to be an important factor in SM content, with both brands and influencers depending on design quality and aesthetics (Cheung et al., 2022; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Ki and Kim, 2019). In SM content, visual attractiveness refers to the degree to which the consumer perceives SM content as aesthetically appealing (Ki and Kim, 2019). This takes into consideration the presentation of content in terms of the coordination and unification of visual language, such as text, graphics, audio, and video. Additionally, this can be improved by visual elements such as text size, colour, shape, and labels, as well as appealing layouts (Cheung et al., 2022). For SM influencers, visual attractiveness has been considered a content-determined characteristic (Ki et al., 2022) that can make them more appealing to the public (Ki and Kim, 2019) such that it not only strengthens consumer loyalty (Cheung et al., 2022) and favourable attitude towards the influencer (Ki and Kim, 2019) but also drives

positive responses towards the post, strengthening the post's usefulness, as by increasing the intention to purchase endorsed products (Cheung et al., 2022) and SM WOM (Ki and Kim, 2019). For luxury brands, visual attractiveness impacts the creation and quality of aesthetic experiences (Bazi et al., 2020), which are core to luxury brand identity (Choi et al., 2016; Xie and Lou, 2020). In particular, as visual attractiveness plays a role in the curation of affective engagement in luxury, it can drive the luxury hedonic experience through sensory and design pleasure (Bazi et al., 2020; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Xie and Lou, 2020). Therefore, visual attractiveness can be considered even more important for luxury brands.

Information Quality

SM is an information source for consumers. Thus, providing quality information is important for both luxury brands and influencers (Cheung et al., 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020). For luxury brands, information quality deals not only with product and event information but also with information regarding the brand's heritage; therefore, it affects the authenticity of luxury brands (Athwal and Harris, 2018). For influencers, information quality not only affects their authenticity but also contributes to their perceived expertise and credibility (Cheung et al., 2022). In addition, information quality can contribute to the luxury hedonic experience through symbolism as a result of luxury authenticity (Holmqvist et al., 2019; Xie and Lou, 2020) and through affective engagement, such as receiving new brand news (Bazi et al., 2020). In SM content, information quality has been defined as the perceived usefulness of practical information that is relevant, new, and easy to understand. It can include reviews such as personal experiences, opinions, and the latest brand information, and is manifested in posts through captions, images, and videos (Cheung et al., 2022). However, as luxury experience is defined by authenticity and heritage (Holmqvist et al., 2019), not ease of understanding, the delivery and richness of information plays a more important role. Delivery of information refers to how the language is used (Öztamur, 2014), such as writing showing integrity and sincerity, which positively affects authenticity. In particular, if there is quality commitment and stylistic consistency in communication, it can further cultivate luxury authenticity (Athwal and Harris, 2018). The richness of information can be seen in the depth and detail of content (Öztamur, 2014), which contributes to luxury heritage (Athwal and Harris, 2018). Therefore, both the core information content and delivery quality are important in SM information quality for luxury brands.

Uniqueness

Uniqueness is a characteristic reflected in SM content, marking both luxury brands and influencers. For luxury brands, uniqueness gives them a high status (Xie and Lou, 2020). For influencers, uniqueness gives them opinion leadership (Casaló et al., 2020). In addition, uniqueness contributes to the luxury hedonic experience not only through the symbolic aspect by signalling prestige and exclusivity, but also through the enjoyment aspect through entertainment and pleasure (Cheung et al., 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020). Regarding SM content, uniqueness can be observed in creativity, which is considered novel content that is distinctive and meaningful (Cheung et al., 2022). For luxury, uniqueness can also refer to the sophistication of messages and content that highlights the relevance between the endorsed brand and consumer and strengthens the distinctiveness of the influencer and brand (Cheung et al., 2022). In particular, such uniqueness can show prestige, the extent to which the consumer perceives the post's content as high status and upscale. For example, when influencers post themselves in designer brands and at luxury fashion shows, they distinguish

themselves by displaying such a prestigious status (Ki and Kim, 2019). Therefore, in this study, uniqueness refers to content that is both creative and prestigious.

Thus, we derive a model for the study of the co-creation of the online luxury hedonic experience. It can be seen as a combination of both BGC and IGC, where BGC consists of functional/financial, symbolic art, and social content while IGC consists of product and event content. The luxury hedonic experience can be seen through the content characteristics of visual attractiveness, information quality, and uniqueness and the resulting engagement. With BGC and IGC consisting of different content types and serving different purposes, we split the study in two. The first study focuses on the luxury hedonic experience from BGC in relation to content characteristics and eWOM among BGC types. The second study focuses on the luxury hedonic experience from IGC in relation to content characteristics and eWOM among IGC types. In our final discussion, we examine them together to see how BGC and IGC co-create the luxury hedonic experience through content characteristics.

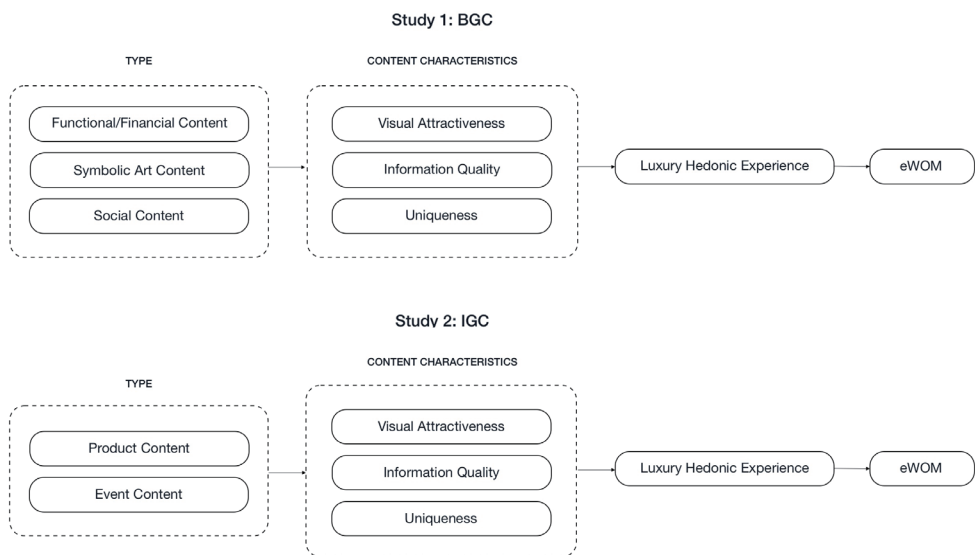


Figure 1 Figure 1 Co-creation of the Online Luxury Hedonic Experience Research Model

3. Method

To explore how luxury brands and influencers co-create the luxury brand hedonic experience through their content characteristics, we conducted online surveys for both studies. Each one evaluated luxury BGC or endorsed IGC through visual attractiveness, information quality, and uniqueness on the hedonic experience and eWOM, followed by an in-depth semi-structured interview. The studies were conducted at the same time, and since both survey studies followed a similar procedure, the process is detailed below together.

3. 1. Survey

Of the different SM platforms, Instagram has been considered one of the most popular and essential platforms for luxury brand digital marketing (Castillo-Abdul, 2022) and influencer marketing (Vrontis et al., 2021), as well as for being more effective in conveying hedonic

value due to an optimised format of a picture with minimal additional text (Lin et al., 2018). In addition, as fashion is the largest sector in the luxury industry, and fashion, luxury, and beauty products are the main categories in influencer marketing (Ye et al., 2021), the survey focused on photo posts of luxury fashion brands on Instagram.

Stimuli

Previous luxury research on SM and co-creation has utilised case studies and taken content directly from SM to ensure ecological validity (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2016; Xie and Lou, 2020). Accordingly, we adopted stimuli directly from SM for luxury BGC and IGC. Therefore, following a previous study of the effect of fashion communicators on Instagram (Naderer et al., 2021), we considered the communicators as separate Instagram accounts. However, for a more holistic approach, we examined two fashion luxury brands and two fashion influencer accounts. The luxury brands were held constant in both studies.

For study 1 for BGC content, Louis Vuitton and Dior were selected as the top two ranks in the 2022 Vogue Business Index, including digital strategies of luxury brands. Each luxury brand account consisted of 18 posts (3 BGC types × 6 posts per type), with the BGC types of functional/financial, symbolic, and social. Six posts were chosen to best represent the BGC type from each luxury brand. The order of the selected posts for each BGC type was then randomised.

For study 2 for IGC content, we first define influencers as micro-celebrities who have over 1 million followers and have their personal brands fully integrated with their role/profession on SM (Jones and Lee, 2021; Lin et al., 2018). Then, we looked at influencers who have been driving the luxury fashion and beauty industries and have partnered with luxury brands based on Launchmetrics' media impact value (MIV), an algorithm that takes into account an influencer's online and social channels (Nicolaizeau, 2021). Among the top influencers listed, we specifically focus on female influencers, as they are more effective with both female and male users (Von Mettenheim and Wiedmann, 2022). Cross-checking on Instagram, we chose the top two influencers in numbers of followers who have often collaborated with the Louis Vuitton and Dior brands. Accordingly, Chiara Ferragni, with 27.7 million followers, and Leonie Hanne, with 4.4 million followers, were selected with the numbers extracted as of August 15, 2022. Each influencer account consisted of 12 posts (2 IGC types × 2 luxury brands × 3 posts per brand per type), with each IGC type product and event involving 6 posts. Each of the six posts consisted of three endorsed posts from each luxury brand that best represented the IGC type from each influencer. The order of the selected posts for each IGC type was then randomised.

Any potentially confounding variables, such as number of likes and comments, were eliminated from both BGC and IGC posts. The content was then presented in a way that re-enacts a natural Instagram experience, such that the post was presented as if the participant had clicked on the Instagram account page.

The questions for information quality (Athwal and Harris, 2018; Cheung et al., 2022; Öztamur and Karakadılar, 2014), visual attractiveness (Ki and Kim, 2019), and uniqueness (Cheung et al., 2022; Xie and Lou, 2020) were adapted from studies that had investigated these qualities in an SM context. For information quality, a measure of sincerity was included to reflect authenticity (Athwal and Harris, 2018). Questions for hedonic experience were adapted from luxury literature, where they looked at online luxury experiences (Xie and Lou, 2020). The eWOM questions were adapted from studies of consumers' online brand activities

in terms of consumption, contribution, and creation. According to the definition of eWOM, we specifically adapted the contribution questions regarding likes, comments, and shares (Cheung et al., 2022). The content characteristics, luxury hedonic experience, and eWOM questions were evaluated on a 7-point Likert Scale. An open-ended question regarding thoughts about the content was also added.

Participants

As the social media audiences of the selected brands and influencers on Instagram are international, we targeted an international luxury audience who knows of the luxury brands and/or influencers. This includes followers as well as people who simply know the influencer and brands through exposure to their content. In particular, for audience selection, multiple aspects were considered. First, the innate functions of Instagram allow users to see and engage with posts as long as there is interest, even if the account is not followed. This emphasises the different levels of social media engagement, where it has also previously been found that although followers can be considered the most obvious engagement metric, this measure is fairly superficial, with commenting taking more effort to engage than simply following (Devereux et al., 2019). Additionally, Instagram and social media in general have issues with shadow banning (Fowler-Dawson, 2016; Instagram, 2021), which has led to a 'visibility game' (Cotter, 2019, p. 895) that people need to play, and follower engagement has been shown to be negatively correlated with follower count in the case of influencers (Tassee and Wood, 2021). Thus, we considered a more accurate representation to include a more general luxury population. From this, we further target millennials, as they are the main drivers of social engagement (Kennedy and Guzman, 2016) but we expand coverage to Generation Z, as previous literature has shown that teens have distinct strong materialistic motives for desiring luxury brands (Ko et al., 2019).

Procedure

The survey was conducted online in a between-subjects format, where each account was a separate survey. Along with the snowball method, the survey was seeded on various social media platforms in fashion/luxury related topics and groups. As there were 2 luxury brands and 2 luxury influencers, there were a total of 4 independent surveys. For each survey, the participants first completed demographic and Instagram SM usage questions and whether they followed luxury fashion brands, luxury fashion influencers, or both. For study 1 (BGC), they were presented with a description of the specific brand and questions regarding awareness and attitude towards that luxury brand. Functional/financial, symbolic art, and then social content was then presented with the respective survey questions. For study 2 (IGC), they were presented with a description of both luxury brands and the specific influencer and questions regarding awareness and attitude towards the luxury brands and the influencer. Product and then event content was presented with the respective survey questions.

3. 2. Interview

The in-depth semi-structured interview followed a similar format for both studies. Interviewees were chosen from the survey participants with two interviewees per brand and per influencer. Therefore, four participants from the BGC survey, with two for each luxury brand account, and four participants from the IGC survey, with two for each influencer account, were contacted for a Zoom interview. Thus, the studies together had a total of

eight participants. The interview participants were chosen to maximise the highest possible exposure to the brand and influencer posts. Therefore, they had to satisfy three criteria: having high luxury fashion interest by following both luxury brands and luxury fashion influencers, having high Instagram usage either being signed in all the time or checking 6–10 times a day, and having above average attitude towards the brand/influencer, thus, an attitude score greater than 3 out of 5 towards the brand, or an average attitude score greater than 3 out of 5 towards both the influencer and brands. The interviews lasted one hour on average and delved more deeply into the responses of the consumers from the survey and the contributing content characteristics. As the focus of the research is on the co-creation of the luxury hedonic experience, interviewees were asked general questions about both luxury brands and influencers such as why they follow luxury brands/influencers and what content they enjoy. Interview questions then focused on their reasons for their answer to the survey question and ended with a comparison between and within BGC and IGC.

4. Results and Discussion

4. 1. Study 1: BGC

There were 127 participants; however, only 100 responses matching the specified criteria of being a social media user and aware of the specific brand were retained, with 50 for each brand. Participants included every continent with 66% female and 34% male, 3% age 18-19, 64% age 20–29, and 33% age 30–39. SPSS version 26 was used for the data analysis. For all measures, both Cronbach's α and composite reliability (CR) passed the .70 threshold, and average variance extracted (AVE) passed the .50 threshold, suggesting both scale reliability and validity.

Table 1 Measurement Model Results for BGC

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	AVE	CR	α
Visual Attractiveness	Good-looking	.854	.724	.913	.919
	Attractive	.844			
	High quality	.851			
	Visually appealing	.855			
Information Quality	New	.820	.622	.868	.898
	Relevant	.783			
	Sincere	.798			
	Rich in detail	.754			
Uniqueness	Unique	.841	.680	.895	.912
	Valuable	.844			
	Intriguing	.832			
	Upscale	.781			
Luxury Hedonic Experience	Pleasure	.826	.651	.903	.933
	Sensory appeal	.811			
	Enhances mood	.814			
	Exclusive	.793			
	Prestigious	.790			

eWOM	Like	.752	.736	.892	.943
	Comment	.900			
	Share	.912			

α = Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted

Table 2 Correlations among Constructs for BGC

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Visual Attractiveness	.851				
2. Information Quality	.805	.787			
3. Uniqueness	.787	.864	.825		
4. Luxury Hedonic Experience	.667	.732	.824	.807	
5. eWOM	.189	.484	.513	.696	.858

Note. Diagonal elements are the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct.

Using brand attitude and luxury fashion interest as covariates, a partial correlation analysis of content characteristics and eWOM with the luxury hedonic experience was conducted. Luxury fashion interest was defined as whether they followed luxury fashion brands (+1), luxury fashion influencers (+1), or both (+2). Significant relationships were found for all BGC types as seen in Table 1. The statistical outcomes were then supplemented with a more detailed qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses in the survey and follow-up interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis to identify patterns and insights emerging from the qualitative data. Data familiarity, coding, and theme development were undertaken sequentially. As the interviews primarily concerned the participants' experiences with luxury BGC and perceptions of content characteristics, codes and themes were first extracted within those contexts. The themes were further refined by reviewing and comparing the data to existing themes and separating unrelated items.

Table 3 Partial Correlations w. Luxury Hedonic Experience for BGC Types

	Func./Fin.	Symbolic Art	Social
Visual Attractiveness	.261*	.464***	.608***
Information Quality	.459***	.303**	.615***
Uniqueness	.682***	.646***	.790***
eWOM	.545***	.290**	.604***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

All BGC types stressed uniqueness as the most important factor in the luxury hedonic experience. However, there were differences in other content characteristics and eWOM. For functional/financial content, information quality was more significant than visual attractiveness, while for symbolic art content, visual attractiveness was more significant than information quality. For social content, both visual attractiveness and information quality were of similar significance, but the importance of uniqueness was highlighted. The luxury hedonic experience was most important for social content and least important for symbolic art content. Through qualitative analysis, the characteristics of these correlations can be further explained.

Uniqueness in BGC

Uniqueness was the most crucial characteristic regardless of content type due to the current overload of content on SM, and it factored in the other content characteristics. For example,

participants would say 'if something really interesting like the other brands are not doing that, I feel it's something that actually makes me want to read it'. Similarly, if the brand content was different than their typical brand content they posted, participants would also find it more interesting. Such interest played a role in the luxury hedonic experience as participants found more enjoyment from uniqueness stating 'it enhances my mood a little bit more because I can take more away from it'. However, it seems that uniqueness is impacted by visual attractiveness and information quality. Since uniqueness is seen as intriguing, information quality played an important role in terms of newness with participants saying 'new especially new like I've never seen this before' would make them find the post more interesting. Visual attractiveness could affect uniqueness as quality of the photo was tied to being upscale and presentation of the photo could make it more intriguing. For example, participants mentioned 'I want them to spend a lot of money on photography and studio for better quality because I want this perfectionist [sic] from them because they are a luxury brand after all' and 'I prefer it [photo presentation] when it's something more interesting like more artistic or conceptual'. Therefore, on top of enjoyment, uniqueness also contributed to the luxury aspect of the luxury hedonic experience as being upscale affects perceptions of exclusivity and prestigiousness (Ki and Kim, 2019).

Functional/Financial Content

The higher significance of information quality than visual attractiveness for the luxury hedonic experience in functional/financial content appeared to be attributed to the utilitarian aspects associated with products. One of the main reasons users are interested in various brand activities is their great interest in the brands' products (Ramadan et al., 2018). Therefore, participants expected posts highlighting the product with rich details. However, sincerity, such as artistry and craftsmanship, was required, as participants considered functional/financial content to be more obvious advertisements ('products need to be attached to some concept for me to be actually interested in'; 'they actually showed people who work behind the scene and it seems quite genuine to me like they care a lot about the quality'; 'there is also a little bit of respect for the person that is making it'). In particular, this sincerity affects the luxury hedonic experience by bringing prestige and exclusivity in a non-shallow way. If luxury brands only focus on visual appeal, thereby showing the symbolic aspect, it can create a distance described as 'one dimensional there is not much to dig in' by participants. However, showing sincerity not only improves information quality but also uniqueness, creating more depth with participants mentioning 'because it's artistic, it's giving something new so I can learn something from it' and 'focusing on being eco-friendly and having social responsibility can reach more people than simply being pretty'.

Symbolic Art Content

For symbolic art content, the stronger emphasis on visual attractiveness than information quality for the luxury hedonic experience was attributed to the emphasis on brand artistry in showing brand identity and heritage while providing less relatedness. Participants regarded symbolic art content as building a luxury brand image with its historical and artistic aspects, anticipating a higher level of visual presentation ('I think this attention to detail shows respect for their own history and gives a lot of depth besides visual attraction'; 'content's also interesting because they'll do a lot of storytelling'; 'most visually attractive is definitely the symbolic because of the effort'). In particular, this visual attractiveness with its artistry simultaneously created uniqueness, positively affecting the luxury hedonic experience.

It created pleasure from sensory appeal and enjoyment while showing off brand depth, contributing to the symbolic aspect. However, symbolic art content lacked a relevant aspect for participants, as the items seen in fashion shows are not items they usually sell; therefore, it had lower information quality characteristics and the least significant correlation for eWOM with the luxury hedonic experience. Nonetheless, participants said that it contributes more to brand image, which would be considered when buying a product.

Social Content

For social content, both visual attractiveness and information quality were of equal importance as participants mainly stressed uniqueness in the luxury hedonic experience. This appeared to be due to their perception of social content as the most exclusive, being that which celebrities and red-carpet events provide ('these kinds of garments we cannot have access to'; 'when a celebrity wears it, it just makes it visually appealing'). Therefore, the upscale factor of uniqueness greatly contributes to the symbolic aspect of the luxury hedonic experience by highlighting social status and exclusivity. However, unless the users feel related to the celebrities, they felt it to be common and repetitive, with only the outfit styling and celebrities as takeaways, as social content mostly consists of celebrities participating in the events ('it was quite repetitive'). Nevertheless, if the users are interested in the celebrities and feel them relatable, or if the outfits, events, and situations seem unique, they enjoy the content, enhancing the luxury hedonic experience. These aspects, particularly the connection to a celebrity, could provide a reason to engage, leading to the higher correlation for eWOM than for functional/financial and symbolic art content with the luxury hedonic experience.

4. 2. Study 2: IGC

There were 176 participants; however, only 100 responses matching the specified criteria of being a social media user and aware of the specific brands and influencer were retained, with 50 for each influencer. Participants included every continent with 76% female and 24% male, 1% age 18-19, 74% age 20-29, 23% age 30-39, and 2% age 40-49. SPSS version 26 was used for the data analysis. For all measures, both Cronbach's α and composite reliability (CR) passed the .70 threshold, and average variance extracted (AVE) passed the .50 threshold, suggesting both scale reliability and validity.

Table 4 Measurement Model Results for IGC

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	AVE	CR	α
Visual Attractiveness	Good-looking	.862	.755	.925	.917
	Attractive	.879			
	High quality	.853			
	Visually appealing	.881			
Information Quality	New	.816	.671	.891	.898
	Relevant	.818			
	Sincere	.879			
	Rich in detail	.759			
Uniqueness	Unique	.846	.639	.875	.874
	Valuable	.842			
	Intriguing	.831			
	Upscale	.664			
Luxury Hedonic Experience	Pleasure	.867	.654	.904	.929
	Sensory appeal	.876			
	Enhances mood	.817			
	Exclusive	.732			
	Prestigious	.740			
eWOM	Like	.752	.771	.909	.928
	Comment	.936			
	Share	.933			

α = Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted

Table 5 Correlations among Constructs for IGC

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Visual Attractiveness	.869				
2. Information Quality	.625	.819			
3. Uniqueness	.596	.816	.799		
4. Luxury Hedonic Experience	.614	.816	.887	.809	
5. eWOM	.362	.784	.690	.770	.878

Note. Diagonal elements are the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct.

Using brand attitude, influencer attitude, and luxury fashion interest as covariates, a partial correlation analysis of content characteristics and eWOM with the luxury hedonic experience was conducted. Significant relationships were found for all IGC types as seen in Table 1. The statistical outcomes were then supplemented with a more detailed qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses in the survey and follow-up interviews. IGC interview analysis followed the same process as Study 1.

Table 6 Partial Correlations w. Luxury Hedonic Experience for IGC Types

	Product	Event
Visual Attractiveness	.342**	.470***
Information Quality	.431***	.629***
Uniqueness	.733***	.736***
eWOM	.652***	.576***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Uniqueness in IGC

Both types of IGC showed the highest to lowest correlation from, in order, uniqueness, information quality, and visual attractiveness with the luxury hedonic experience. Uniqueness, in a similar fashion to BGC, was impacted by the other characteristics, and was a way of standing out in SM as participants mentioned ‘They [influencers] just post hundreds of stuff so I prefer something different that catches my attention’. In IGC, uniqueness was seen through a mundane context that differentiated from the luxury brand style with participants saying, ‘brands usually have their own style, so it’s usually the same things when they post stuff. But when other people post it, it seems a bit more creative because they post their own style’, which they enjoyed. In the IGC types, there were more specific differences in communicating these characteristics, as well as differences in the importance of the luxury hedonic experience for eWOM.

Product Content

Uniqueness and information quality showed a higher correlation than visual attractiveness in both IGC because of the intrinsic attributes of IGC. IGC, particularly the product content, consists mainly of the influencer showing off or using products within a daily life context, which induces a relatable feeling. This has led to a preference among users for candid pictures over staged ones, such as street-style photos. Participants preferred snapshots of everyday life, such as walking on the street or engaging in other daily events while wearing the brand products (‘where they’re just walking in the street with their everyday purse’; ‘actually I do like [a post where] they don’t do a lot of eye contact – you look to the side, look down, look up, or look at the food’). Even though these ‘in the moment’ or ‘in action’ shots could be staged, they were still preferred over obviously staged photos such as standing and posing. Due to the more daily aspect of product content, there appeared to be lower expectations for visual attractiveness than event content of IGC, where due to their behind-the-scenes production and nature, they were more staged. Especially as participants mainly expected IGC to be relatable, candidness played a major role in the uniqueness and sincerity of the information quality, which explains why uniqueness and information quality showed a higher correlation than visual attractiveness. In particular, with visual attractiveness, although users have a minimum visual expectation, if it feels overly produced, it can in fact hurt relatability and sincerity. Specifically, there were comments that the content can be ‘visually stunning [but] superficial if one is looking for connection from a content creator’ and ‘gorgeous but the imagery is something people aspire towards rather than being ‘relatable’. For product content, this further impacts the luxury hedonic experience as relatability is one of the main reasons why users enjoy IGC, and relatability ultimately affects eWOM, with participants mentioning that for product content, ‘if I relate to it, I would probably interact with it versus if it [the post] is only pretty’.

Event Content

The event content, on the other hand, mainly showed influencers participating in brand events, such as fashion shows, exhibitions, or opening parties, inducing exclusivity and prestige and creating a distance from daily life. Participants mentioned event posts as ‘walking from the ordinary to the extraordinary...a very interesting contrast’, ‘the setting shows uniqueness and exclusivity’, and ‘from the outfits you can just tell’. Due to the naturally high production value, there were also higher expectations for visual attractiveness, as can be seen in the event content’s higher correlation of visual attractiveness with the luxury

hedonic experience than product content. Like social BGC, event content greatly drove the luxury aspect of the luxury hedonic experience due to the association with exclusive events. However, in the case of IGC, even if the user feels more relatable to the influencer, the event content can also trigger negative emotions, creating distance with influencers because the events are not attainable ('when would I ever be invited to an event like this'; 'the overall procedure feels exclusive like getting packages and gifts'). Therefore, participants showed a preference for street-style posts over event posts, which they followed for daily style inspiration. This less relatable factor also explains the weaker correlation between the luxury hedonic experience of event content and eWOM, where the luxury part of the experience could negatively impact engagement. Furthermore, although event content does naturally have more visual information due to being richer in details, as seen in the higher correlation of information quality with the luxury hedonic experience, participants felt that it was less unique in outfit styling. Specifically, participants felt that in event posts brands controlled the outfits more so they are not able to see the influencers' unique style, with one participant trying to highlight the difference by saying 'like I said in event you need to make things in a certain way and you cannot style it the way you want but product content you can just even throw the bag in the trash'. However, this can be offset a little by showing sincerity and candidness, such as talking about their experience in the caption and showing behind-the-scenes pictures of events, with participants mentioning 'why they went to the fashion show and how their specific outfit made them feel' and stating that 'being able to see a part of the experience like them interacting with the designer or other influencers' made them enjoy the post more. These different perspectives can also further contribute to the information quality and uniqueness of the post.

4. 3. Co-creation of the Luxury Hedonic Experience

While it is obvious that BGC and IGC play different roles in the luxury hedonic experience with IGC providing the relatable factor, both highlight uniqueness as the most important content characteristic in the creation of the luxury hedonic experience. This can also be seen in the respective partial correlations calculated for BGC and IGC as a whole in Table 3. Uniqueness specifically highlighted differentiation and depth which participants enjoyed. However, in both cases, uniqueness was impacted by the other characteristics, and influencers and brand brought different types of uniqueness. Influencers bring uniqueness through daily life and mainly sincerity in information quality while brands show uniqueness in artistry and craftsmanship impacting uniqueness through both visual attractiveness and information quality. However, the luxury hedonic experience of IGC was more important as it had a higher correlation with eWOM, which also underscores the role of relatability in the experience.

Table 7 Partial Correlations w. Luxury Hedonic Experience for BGC and IGC

	BGC	IGC
Visual Attractiveness	.449***	.456***
Information Quality	.539***	.679***
Uniqueness	.722***	.823***
eWOM	.560***	.638***

When looking at the more specific BGC and IGC types in the co-creation of the luxury hedonic experience, there were more specific insights. Among content types where the luxury hedonic experience was extremely significant for social media engagement (BGC: functional/financial, social; IGC: product, event), information quality was more important than visual attractiveness. First, this shows the value users place on having some type of takeaway such as learning something new, getting creative inspiration, or identifying leading trends, which could be through either photos or captions. While with influencers, participants mainly wanted styling information, with brands, participants not only wanted product related information but also creative inspiration. Participants greatly enjoyed when brands would show their artistry saying ‘especially I am interested about the aesthetics that they are doing to promote what they are working on right now’ and ‘see how they also market it. I found the marketing to be quite interesting.’ This value was mainly obtained in more relevant content such as functional/financial and social than symbolic art. Second, the greater importance of information quality shows the perception users have towards advertisements and highlights the importance of sincerity. For influencers, there is a natural relatability that builds sincerity. Even though posts are endorsed, participants would say ‘at least they try to make it more relatable’ and ‘it’s more relatable than regular advertisement’. For brands, this sincerity is seen in posts that showed behind the scenes and insight into the creation of products. The sincerity aspect made the post more enjoyable even though it was advertisement.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how luxury brands and influencers co-create a luxury hedonic experience in SM. Specifically, it examined BGC as functional/financial, symbolic art, and social content and IGC as product and event content, and examined the importance of content characteristics including visual attractiveness, information quality, and uniqueness in the luxury hedonic experience and eWOM through surveys and in-depth interviews. Thus, the research findings have several practical implications for luxury brands.

For BGC, luxury brands need to focus on showing differentiation through uniqueness, authenticity, and sincerity by focusing on not simply showing the luxurious aspect of exclusivity and expensiveness but why the brand is luxurious. In particular, the results highlighted uniqueness as a strongly influential characteristic in luxury hedonic experience, and the interviews revealed that uniqueness is tied to artistry and insight into the creation process. Thus, luxury brands should not only create creative concept-driven content but also show images behind the scenes, such as product creation or fashion shows. In particular, these methods of adding depth into the content were well received with others, including storytelling highlighted in symbolic art content and amplifying artistic presentation of pieces and content with artification being a point of differentiation and uniqueness within the luxury world (Masè et al., 2020). Lastly, to maintain luxury brand exclusivity, maintaining actor appearance, such as celebrities and influencers, is necessary to create the symbolic associations present in the luxury hedonic experience. These elements may particularly make a difference in functional/financial and social content, where the luxury hedonic experience was shown to be more important in social media engagement.

For IGC, luxury brands can use the characteristics of uniqueness, visual attractiveness, and information quality in not only evaluating the content of different influencers to select an appropriate influencer to collaborate with, but also stressing these aspects in guidelines given to the influencer. In particular, as there is a delicate balance between visual attractiveness and sincerity, luxury brands can, according to their brand image, select the characteristics they would like to emphasise more. For example, because the perceived nature of the luxury brand dictates the openness and closeness of the brand (Riedmeier and Kreuzer, 2022), open luxury brands that prefer a closer connection to consumers may want to emphasise sincerity, while closed luxury brands that want to keep a strong hold on their exclusivity and high status may want to emphasise visual attractiveness. Such characteristics may also be apparent with regard to the brand's luxury level, such as more affordable luxury being more attainable by the public, rather than the more exclusive super premium luxury (Paul, 2015). Additionally, in the creation of IGC, luxury brands need to stress candidness in the post and ensure that influencers have the freedom to achieve this candidness and show off their unique style, which participants emphasised as one of their most important qualities. Such candidness can be seen in shots that capture the moment as opposed to staged shots and in outfit selection such as for fashion shows; by not simply showing the final outfit but also the process in choosing the outfit, influencers could better connect with their audience and contribute to the luxury hedonic experience.

A limitation of this study was the examination of only singular photo posts. In particular, Instagram allows luxury brands to interact with consumers not only through photo posts but also through videos and stories. Additionally, carousel posts with multiple photos have shown to achieve higher 'like' engagement (Cuevas-Molano et al., 2021); therefore, effects may be different depending on communication method. Another aspect that was not investigated in this study was the overlap of types of content, for example, using a celebrity to replace a model creating endorsed, functional/financial, social BGC. Additionally, based on the limited number of interviews, the generalisability of the data is also limited in that more explanations and individual differences should be considered when interpreting the interview findings. Finally, this study examined the luxury industry only in terms of luxury fashion and only considered Instagram as a social media platform. Therefore, future research can more deeply examine content characteristics and the luxury hedonic experience in integrated content types, as well as different social media communication methods and other luxury industries. Additionally, as the current statistical method only considers relationships, future studies should shed light on specific effects and influences to confirm these findings. However, this study is meaningful in that it looked at how luxury brands can use SM while maintaining their exclusivity in this digital age, and further examined luxury content creation by exploring luxury SM content characteristics, this study also contributes to future digital design directions that luxury brands can take.

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