

LABELING LUXURY

THE EFFECTS OF CO-CREATION IN LUXURY FASHION

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Bachelor Thesis in Marketing

Stockholm School of Economics

2025



Labeling Luxury: The Effects of Co-creation in Luxury Fashion

Abstract:

This thesis investigates how attributing product design to an influencer compared to the company itself in social media shapes consumer responses in a luxury context. Drawing on research on luxury branding, influencer marketing, co-creation, and labelling, I examine whether a company labelled source enhances message credibility, brand credibility, perceived design quality, attitude towards the brand and purchase intention compared to an influencer label. These ideas are tested in a between-subjects online experiment using two versions of an Instagram post for Hermès' Garden Party handbag (N = 155), where the image and core caption are identical, and only the design-source line is varied. The findings show that crediting the brand leads to significantly higher message credibility than crediting a fashion influencer. No statistically significant differences arise for brand credibility, perceived design quality, brand attitude or purchase intention. This pattern suggests that, in a luxury context, creative authorship primarily serves as a message-level credibility cue, and that a single post exposure is insufficient to shift deeper brand evaluations or behavioural intentions. The thesis extends existing work on influencer roles, co-creation, and labelling effects in luxury marketing, and offers practical guidance on how and when co-creation is appropriate and effective to utilize.

Keywords:

Influencer, co-creation, luxury branding, social media, labelling

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Bachelor Thesis in Marketing

Business and Economics Program,

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Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
1.1 Background.....	5
1.1.1 The Rise of Influencer Marketing.....	5
1.1.2 Social Media Influencers (SMIs).....	6
1.1.3 Co-creation.....	7
1.1.4 Luxury Branding.....	8
1.2 Problem area and research gaps.....	9
1.3 Purpose.....	10
1.4 Overview.....	10
2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses.....	11
2.1 Luxury branding.....	11
2.1.1 Functional Value.....	12
2.1.2 Experiential Value.....	13
2.1.3 Symbolic Value.....	14
2.2 Co-creation.....	15
2.2.1 Benefits of co-creation.....	16
2.2.2 Downsides of co-creation.....	17
2.3 Labelling and framing effects.....	17
2.4 Literature Review.....	19
2.4.1 Influencers and purchase intention in fashion marketing.....	20
2.4.2 Influencers and luxury brands.....	20
2.4.3 Co-creation, user design, and luxury.....	21
2.5 Hypotheses creation.....	22
3. Methodology.....	28
3.1 Research design and overview.....	28
3.2 Study and stimuli design.....	29
3.3 Participants and recruitment and data collection.....	31
3.4 Questionnaire design and measures (see Appendix 2 for a specific and summarized table).....	32
3.4.1 Perceived design quality.....	32
3.4.2 Attitude towards the brand.....	32
3.4.3 Message credibility.....	33
3.4.4 Brand credibility.....	33
3.4.5 Purchase intention (PI).....	33
3.4.6 Demographic section and manipulation check.....	33
3.5 Data analysis tools and tests.....	34

3.6	Reliability and validity.....	34
3.7	Ethical considerations and GDPR.....	34
4.	Results.....	34
4.1	Manipulation check.....	35
4.2	Reliability analysis.....	35
4.3	Results.....	36
4.3.1	Message Credibility (H1).....	37
4.3.2	Brand Credibility (H2).....	37
4.3.3	Perceived Design Quality (H3).....	38
4.3.4	Attitude Towards the Brand (H4).....	38
4.3.5	Purchase Intention (H5).....	38
5.	Discussion.....	39
5.1	Summary of main findings.....	39
5.2	Theoretical implications.....	40
5.2.1	Significant results.....	40
5.2.2	Non-significant results.....	41
5.3	Contributions.....	41
5.4	Practical implications.....	42
5.5	Limitations and future research.....	43
6.	References.....	46
7.	Appendix.....	59
7.1.	Appendix 1 - Stimulus designs.....	59
7.2	Appendix 2 - Survey Design.....	60
7.3	Appendix 3 - Disclosure of AI tools use.....	63

1. Introduction

As we all know, social media has been on the rise in the past decade. What does this mean for us? Well, the rise of these platforms have given birth to loads of changes, and some of these have even begun crossing the boundaries of realms that were never entered before.

1.1 Background

To give a better understanding of the current landscape on social media, influencers, co-creation, and luxury branding, the information below describes each respectively.

1.1.1 The Rise of Influencer Marketing

In the past decade, influencer marketing has undergone a significant transformation. Once primarily experimental, it is now a standard component of marketing strategies. Brands increasingly integrate creators into their media mix through ongoing programs and dedicated budgets (Möller & Affroukh, 2022). Influencers are now central to brand discovery, persuasion, and conversion across social platforms (Migkos et al., 2025). The significance of influencer marketing in digital campaigns has grown rapidly, with the market reaching an estimated value of 33 billion U.S. dollars in 2025, a threefold increase since 2020 (Statista, 2025a). Instagram, which plays a central role in this industry, was valued at 79.9 billion U.S. dollars in the same year. (Statista, 2025d). The influence of social media personalities is especially apparent among younger consumers; in 2024, nearly half of Gen Z respondents had made purchases from brands endorsed by influencers or celebrities, while Millennials and Gen X reported rates of 33% and 23% , respectively (Statista, 2025c). Such trends illustrate the strong connection between influencer marketing and consumer behavior, especially within Generation Z. As mentioned, the large increase in social media has influenced firms to dedicate increasing portions of their budgets to influencer partnerships. In a global 2025 survey, 14.4% of marketing professionals stated they allocated 10-15% of their budgets to influencer marketing, 11.9% invested 15–20 percent, and another 11.9% committed over 50 percent (Statista, 2025b).

Brands typically sort influencers by follower count. This includes mega (1M+), macro (100k-1M), micro (1k-100k), and nano (<1k) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Conde & Casais, 2023). Influencers with larger followings are efficient for reach, while smaller accounts usually drive higher engagement and feel more peer-like/credible (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

As mentioned, Instagram has emerged as a central hub for influencer marketing. It has been particularly prevalent in fashion (Casaló et al., 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Fashion brands garner higher followings and greater interaction compared to other sectors (Casaló et al., 2020; Yesmail, 2015).

1.1.2 Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

Why exactly does this occur? The rise of social media has given rise to a distinct group of communicators known as social media influencers (SMIs), often called microcelebrities, who craft their own fame online (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Evans et al., 2017). SMIs are individuals who build large followings on social platforms through consistent niche high-salience content creation. Through that visibility, they shape how audiences perceive categories and what they purchase (Chetioui et al., 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019; McQuarrie et al., 2013). SMIs are also described as online personalities who communicate to audiences they have not met offline (for the most part). While some rise to fame via content creation on different platforms, others can originate as traditional celebrities that extend to social media (Lou & Yuan, 2019; McQuarrie et al., 2013). Unlike traditional celebrities, their status is rooted in digital spaces rather than traditional arenas such as sports or entertainment (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Schouten et al., 2020).

The transparency of influencers' daily lives allows followers to assess the authenticity and relevance of their endorsements, thereby increasing the perceived alignment between influencers and the brands they promote (Belanche et al., 2021). Influencers become opinion leaders within their communities. This has been particularly prevalent in the fashion industry (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). They are able to connect to niche audiences with whom they foster a sense of virtual friendship (Lou & Yuan, 2019). While the relationship is primarily one-sided, their relatable culture makes them feel like any other person rather than someone like a celebrity (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). It is also known as persona intimacy (Abidin & Thompson,

2012). This perceived closeness has been shown to increase both trust and credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

As a result, followers frequently rely on influencer recommendations, particularly for purchasing decisions (Casaló et al., 2020). Unlike mass media celebrity advertising, Instagram's features, such as immediacy and community-building, have made it the preferred space for influencers to engage with their audiences, a pattern expected to persist (Casaló et al., 2020).

1.1.3 Co-creation

As mentioned, influencer collaborations have increasingly begun to take shape beyond simple one-off interactions. Co-creation is one of those shifts. Creators are part of shaping what is being offered, not merely endorsing it. A netnographic study identified three overarching roles that fashion influencers take. This included spokesperson, co-creator, and co-owner. Within the cocreation branch, they found two sub-roles: consultant and codesigner (visible creative decisions credited to the influencer) (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). What distinguishes these roles is the degree of control the influencer appears to exert over (1) the product's creation and (2) the communication around it. Consultants provide ideas and advice for product creation without actively taking part in design decisions, while codesigners participate in the design process and are explicitly associated with specific creative choices (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). In codesigner collaborations, brands share authorship and signal it (such as a caption) (Rundin & Colliander, 2021).

Influencer co-creation has become an increasingly prominent practice, particularly evident in capsule collections where creators are actively involved in product development rather than merely serving as promotional figures. For instance, the online fashion retailer NA-KD has established a wide portfolio of influencer collaborations, granting named creators their own co-branded lines (e.g., "Josefine HJ x NA-KD") that span coats, dresses, and tailored garments reflective of each influencer's distinct aesthetic (Allard, 2025). Similarly, Jennifer Aniston's collaboration with Vital Proteins (and becoming CCO) represents a high-profile example of this co-creative approach (Smith, 2022). The activewear brand Gymshark has also established ongoing partnerships with fitness influencer Whitney Simmons, whose involvement extended to designing activewear in the "Gymshark x Whitney Simmons" series (Allard, 2025). Furthermore,

Dutch entrepreneur and content creator Anouk Yve's partnered with Swedish label By Malina, creating a capsule collection characterized by her elegance (Forsberg, 2023). Collectively, these cases illustrate how influencer co-creation serves as a form of joint authorship and brand storytelling, embedding the influencer's taste, identity, and name within the very fabric of the collection's design and narrative.

1.1.4 Luxury Branding

Following the rise of creator-led communication, it's useful to recall that luxury has long been built to create symbolic and experiential value first, functional value second. Houses utilize heritage, craftsmanship, aesthetic codes, and controlled access to signal distinction. Distribution and access are often constrained to signal aura and preserve high prices (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Okonkwo-Pézar, 2009). In other words, the managerial playbook is inverted (Berthon et al., 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). While luxury is centralized around status, this is not equivalent to being flashy. Research separates status seeking from conspicuousness. Unlike wide retail or mainstream brands, they do not follow pricing trends or mass-market strategies (Berthon et al., 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Many luxury consumers prefer quiet, insider cues, making mass-viral, algorithmic formats clash with the carefully maintained distance they strive to pursue (Berthon et al., 2009; Truong et al., 2009).

On the note of preservation, products are meant to remain timeless, once again ditching the external changes such as seasons or trends (Berthon et al., 2009). This helps ensure the timelessness and aesthetic that the brand aims to capture (Berthon et al., 2009). Luxury lies in selective exposure and the curation of insider knowledge (Berthon et al., 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

Despite these differences, creator-driven practices are increasingly entering the luxury sector. Brands are now involving creators and users as ambassadors, co-creators, and even designers, allowing them to participate in multiple aspects of creative strategy (Fuchs et al., 2013).

Recent research on influencer roles highlights this evolution: influencers are moving from mere endorsers to co-designers, consultants, and even co-owners. This shift represents a redistribution of creative authorship and control, which is often signaled directly in captions or campaign assets (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). However, evidence suggests that in status-sensitive luxury

contexts, these practices can have unintended consequences. When products are labeled as user-designed rather than company-designed, consumers may perceive lower quality, diminished status, and reduced exclusivity, ultimately leading to decreased demand (Fuchs et al., 2013).

This emerging tension between shared creative authorship and the traditional luxury practices raises a central question for this thesis. As co-creation becomes more common in communication strategies and in the social media landscape, how do these trends affect luxury brands' focus on prestige, exclusivity, and meaning?

1.2 Problem area and research gaps

Across the influencer literature, brand outcomes tend to fixate on who the influencer is and how well they fit the product. Follower magnitude, perceived credibility, and brand-influencer congruence routinely shape brand credibility and purchase responses (Bu et al., 2022). As summarized in a table by Bu et al, examples of this include using the source credibility model via measuring attractiveness/relatability, trustworthiness, expertise; fit with the endorsed category (Bu et al., 2022). In fashion in particular, influencers act as opinion leaders whose content and taste cues move shoppers and raise purchase intentions when the endorser-product match is strong (Chetioui et al., 2020). A large empirical stream documents these effects primarily through source focused measures rather than message-side cues of how the claim is framed (Bu et al., 2022).

At the same time, co-creation practices on social platforms increasingly credit authorship or some form of collaboration in public captions (Rundin & Colliander, 2021). In luxury contexts, that visible authorship cue may matter because consumers use design authorship to infer quality and status (Berthon et al., 2009). Prior work in luxury fashion shows an interesting result when co-creation is applied to the luxury context. A study by Fuchs et al. found that when collections are labeled as user-designed (vs company-designed), demand drops because consumers infer lower design quality and weaker status signaling, which undermines agentic feelings (Fuchs et al., 2013).

Despite extensive research linking influencer traits and fit to purchase outcomes, there is a notable gap in understanding how labeling affects consumer perceptions of products and brands, especially in luxury settings. (Bu et al., 2022; Chetioui et al., 2020).

Going back to Fuchs et. al. study on user vs company labelled products, it would be interesting to further this study into an influencer context in the luxury segment. That research focused primarily on user co-creation, which has been studied quite extensively. Applying these insights to influencer collaborations is slightly more complex, given that influencers occupy a space between celebrity and user. They can seem authentic and relatable, but do not possess an identical description or lifestyle as the typical user (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Furthermore, most influencer studies on PI benefit mass-market brands, however, luxury relies on expert authorship and cultivated distance. Whether an influencer-designed label undermines or maintains the prestige compared to house-designer labels in a luxury context remains an open empirical question. This thesis addresses that gap by experimentally comparing two otherwise identical luxury Instagram posts for a Hermès handbag that differ only in the authorship label and measuring effects on message credibility, brand credibility, perceived design quality, attitude towards the brand, and purchase intent.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to address the identified research gap by examining how the source of design attribution as a company-designed or influencer-designed product affects important outcome variables within the luxury fashion segment. Instead of broadly questioning the value of influencers for brands, the study specifically investigates the impact of design-source labelling.

1.4 Overview

This study adopts a theoretically grounded approach to examine how design-source labelling in luxury fashion influences consumer responses. The experiment uses an Instagram post featuring a real Hermès handbag campaign, keeping the visual content constant while varying only the caption attribution, which is either designed by the company (Hermès) or designed by a fashion influencer. By isolating this subtle change, the research provides a clear test of whether, in a luxury context, crediting the designer as the brand or an influencer affects factors such as credibility, brand perceptions, and purchase intention.

Participants are randomly assigned to view one of the two post versions and then assess message credibility, brand credibility, perceived design quality, attitude toward the brand, and purchase

intention using established measurement scales. This design allows the study to directly test the hypothesis that brand attribution, compared to influencer attribution, leads to higher purchase intentions for luxury goods.

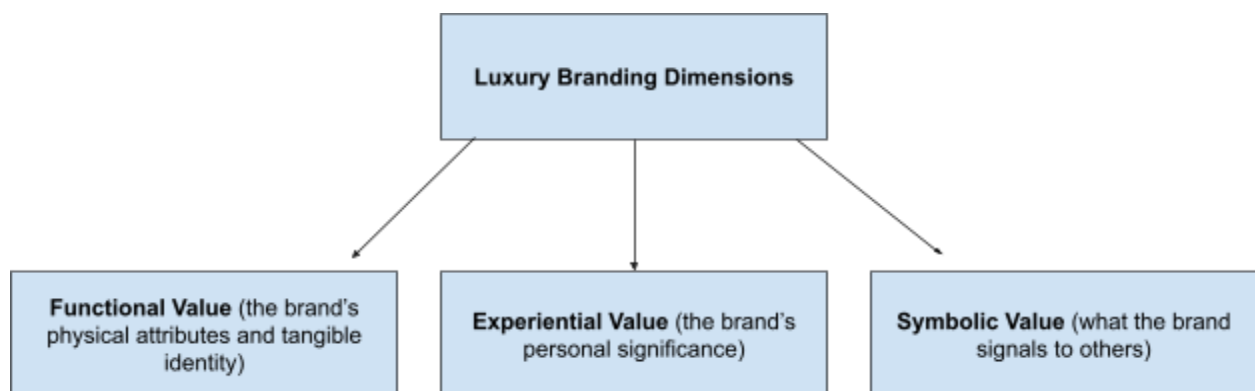
By focusing on the nuanced impact of design-source labelling, the study engages with existing debates in influencer marketing, co-creation, and luxury branding. It contrasts positive findings from broader fashion studies on influencer and user-generated content and co-creation with literature cautioning against the diminishment of brand authority in luxury contexts.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1 Luxury branding

As mentioned previously, luxury branding does not follow the standard marketing playbook. The real value is rather orchestrated through three dimensions: functional quality (what the product does), experiential quality (how ownership and purchase feel), and symbolic meaning (what the brand stands for and signals to others)(Berthon et al., 2009). These layers were adapted by Berthon et al. (2009), and taken from the 3 dimensions on Popper's three worlds hypothesis. He argues that managing these layers is exactly what helps luxury brands distinguish themselves and stand out from the rest (Berthon et al., 2009).

Figure 1: Luxury branding strategy in 3 dimensions (Berthon et al., 2009)



2.1.1 Functional Value

The first level of the luxury marketing strategy is the quality perceptions. Outside of the actual visible and functional layer of quality (such as workmanship, materials, longevity, and finish), less visible qualities play just as essential a role (Kapferer, 2016). Consumers take into account less obvious cues, which aid in assessing the overall quality. Kapferer defines these distinct inputs as time, space, and blood to explain how luxury brands achieve true distinctiveness. Time refers to heritage and tradition, where brands build stories and reputations over decades or even centuries, often highlighting the expertise required to create their products. Space emphasizes the importance of producing goods in specific, prestigious locations (he mentions France and Italy), which adds intangible value and authenticity that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Finally, blood relates to the human element, often signified by family ownership or a founder's legacy, which confers a sense of dynasty and personal authenticity. Together, these three elements form barriers to entry for newcomers and help establish the incomparability of luxury brands within the market (Kapferer et al., 2017). These signals lie within the atmosphere of boutiques, service rituals, waiting lists, and price levels. All together, these symbols help transmit an exclusivity and scarcity to the product and brand (Kapferer, 2016; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

It wasn't always this way. As time has passed, luxury has evolved from a purely functional promise to a blend of symbolic and experiential value, with craftsmanship (Berthon et al., 2009). While a handbag or watch remains well-made, its perceived quality is enhanced by the store's aura, the storytelling behind the product, and the subtle way in which the object fits into the brand's overall aesthetic (Berthon et al., 2009). This migration of value reflects a broader trend in consumer behavior, where emotional and experiential connections have become key players in shaping one's overall impression (Berthon et al., 2009).

Unlike other categories, luxury brands don't use competitive pricing to attract customers. Their prices are more a means to distance themselves and position their brand as a step above. Their goal is not to attract every customer. Instead, they preserve the aura by distributing rarity, making the product difficult to obtain while maintaining high brand visibility (Kapferer, 2016; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Taken together, these choices help consumers infer quality even before they touch the product. They understand the worth (Kapferer, 2016; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

As brands scale much faster nowadays due to greater accessibility, it becomes more challenging for luxury brands to maintain their exclusivity. Kapferer refers to this as the paradox of abundant rarity (Kapferer, 2012; Kapferer et al., 2017). Despite scaling causes from global retail expansion and popular travel spots, it is critical for luxury brands to maintain their exclusivity. The maintenance of this is contingent on ensuring that the rate of brand penetration does not exceed brand awareness. This differentiation, often conceptualized as the rarity principle, emerges from the dream equation. The dream equation model posits that the preservation of the luxury ideal is fundamentally dependent on maintaining a measurable gap in the rarity principle (brand awareness and penetration) (Kapferer et al., 2017). Brands address this principle by controlling their output volume, sticking to brand guidelines, and investing in high-quality experiences (Kapferer et al., 2017; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). The goal is to maintain the pace of growth so that it does not surpass the signals of luxury. Failing to achieve this places perceived quality at risk (Kapferer et al., 2017).

2.1.2 Experiential Value

A second component to maintaining the luxury brand prestige is status signalling. While often tied to conspicuousness, research confirms they are distinct constructs. O'Cass and Frost (2002) define status consumption as the personal nature of owning status-laden goods, which may happen privately, whereas conspicuous consumption is the overt public display of wealth (O'Cass & Frost, 2002). In a multi-category study of cars, fashion, and watches, Truong et al. (2008) confirmed that status and conspicuousness are distinct factors. A brand can thus attain high status while remaining subtle (e.g., Audi), or be highly conspicuous but lower in status perception among certain groups (e.g., BMW in specific contexts). They specifically represent independent dimensions that shape consumer evaluations. A brand can convey a high-status perception while remaining subtle. On the other hand, the brand can be overly flashy and conspicuous, lowering the high regard and status amongst certain customers (Kapferer, 2010; Truong et al., 2008).

The distinction becomes important as luxury markets become increasingly more accessible. Consumer motivations begin to go in different directions. Some become prominently interested in being affiliated with the brand (showing off its logo, wearing trendy pieces), while others are

more focused on the heritage cultural value that being associated with the brand means. This can be a material preference, or even design quality (Kapferer, 2010; Truong et al., 2008).

Here, one can see that a brand's strategy status is intricately linked to its visibility and presentation. While increased visibility can generate attention, it often risks drifting into conspicuousness, which may ultimately undermine the sense of exclusivity essential to luxury brands. Excessive reliance on ostentatious symbols or flashy branding can erode high-status perceptions among discerning consumers. Conversely, strategies that foreground subtlety, craftsmanship, and a compelling brand narrative are more likely to strengthen long-term prestige by emphasizing the intangible qualities that define luxury. Managing visibility is a delicate balance. While patrician consumers may reject flashy branding, Kapferer (2010) argues that conspicuousness is here to stay because new wealth segments in emerging markets explicitly demand visible status to prove their social elevation. Thus, a brand must manage the logo strategy carefully. While visibility can initially suggest high status, it is the nuanced approach that ultimately preserves and enhances brand prestige (Kapferer, 2010).

2.1.3 Symbolic Value

The third layer is symbolic meaning, which refers to the shared language that renders a brand instantly recognizable and culturally significant. Within the symbolic realm, heritage, aesthetic codes, and cultural references (such as equestrianism, couture, or architecture) are distilled into recognizable signs: motifs, silhouettes, materials, and color palettes. These visual cues are learned and performed by consumers, forming a sophisticated code of identity and taste. Here, symbolism is not mere ornamentation. It is, in fact, the very foundation that enables subtle details that communicate belonging and discernment at a glance (Berthon et al., 2009).

Yet, symbolic meaning is inherently fragile because it is context-dependent. When access to the brand becomes too broad or its codes are diluted, the power of these symbols to distinguish insiders from outsiders weakens. Berthon et al. (2009) claims that when ubiquity dilutes the cachet that ubiquity, licensing, and imitation can erode meaning, prompting brands to re-establish discipline through selective distribution, curated experiences, and high-touch retail to preserve and rejuvenate their symbolic codes. Symbols must circulate to remain relevant, but must not become so commonplace that they lose their exclusivity or depth (Berthon et al., 2009).

Kapferer and Bastien echo this from a brand governance perspective: luxury leaders must pursue growth without allowing the brand to slip into mere premium fashion. This means resisting mass-market tendencies like frequent promotions or excessive distribution, and fiercely protecting creative authority. In the truest luxury tradition, the house creates for itself first and foremost, inviting clients to join on its terms (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

When this creative authority is preserved, the brand's symbols remain coherent and potent; when it is compromised, symbolic meaning begins to fragment (Berthon et al., 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

2.2 Co-creation

Co-creation is often mixed up with co-production. However, co-production differs in the sense that it is a part of co-creation. It involves participation in the firm's production task. Co-creation is much broader than this (Terblanche, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). It is defined as “an active, creative, and social process based on collaboration between organisations and participants that generates benefits for all and creates value for stakeholders” (Ind et al., 2013). It provides the ability for firms to work with others to create benefit for many, not just themselves (Ind et al., 2013).

There are several types and layers to co-creation . De Koning et al. (2016) analyzed and grouped 50 existing models of co-creation to develop their own meta-model (De Koning et al., 2016). They reduced it into 5 types of co-creation:

1. Personal offering
2. Real-time self service
3. Mass-customization
4. Co-design
5. Community design

These types are distinguished by three key criteria: the phase in which co-creation occurs (design, innovation, or use), the direct value created for the user, and the level or depth of collaboration involved (De Koning et al., 2016).

Research consistently shows that social media co-creation often relies on influencers. These are often creators with their own audiences, bringing not only reach, but also credibility and a unique perspective (Örnheim & Navarrete Lindez, 2022). Influencers are trusted by their followers, and when they collaborate with brands, they help translate brand messages in ways that feel authentic and relevant. As mentioned, Instagram is especially popular for this kind of work, since it combines high engagement with features that make it easy to connect content to commerce (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

2.2.1 Benefits of co-creation

As mentioned, generates benefits and value for all stakeholders (Ind et al., 2013). In a social media context, this means consumers actively contribute to brand-related content, products and services, shifting their role from passive recipients to engaged partners in value creation (Ilakkiya et al., 2024). Such collaboration allows brands to tap into consumers' creativity and perspectives, which strengthens emotional bonds, boosts satisfaction and stimulates innovation (Ilakkiya et al., 2024; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Prior research shows that involving consumers in design and development can lead to more suitable or innovative solutions because consumer perspectives are incorporated into the process (Kristensson et al., 2008). Social media platforms further enhance these benefits by providing interactive spaces where consumers can share ideas, provide feedback and collaborate with brands and other users, and where user-generated content can spread widely and amplify the brand message (Berthon et al., 2012; Ilakkiya et al., 2024; Piller et al., 2010). In the specific case of brand co-creation with influencers, brand managers in Örnheim and Navarrete Lindez's (2022) study highlight versatility, brand activation, awareness, engagement and trust as core advantages, noting that influencer collaborations can increase brand engagement and spur user-generated content and positive electronic word-of-mouth when influencers communicate the brand in ways their followers perceive as authentic (Örnheim & Navarrete Lindez, 2022).

2.2.2 Downsides of co-creation

Alongside these benefits, the texts also stress several risks and challenges. When brands invite consumers into co-creation, part of the control over brand messaging and image shifts from the company to users, which can lead to conflicting messages, inconsistent brand identity and reputational harm if user content does not align with brand values or standards (Ilakkiya et al., 2024). The same article notes that large variation in the quality and relevance of user-generated content makes it difficult to maintain a high-quality brand image and requires brands to implement curation, feedback and content management protocols (Ilakkiya et al., 2024). Intellectual-property questions (who owns co-created content, how it may be used and whether contributors should be compensated) add another layer of complexity and need to be handled through clear terms and conditions (Ilakkiya et al., 2024; Vargo & Lusch, 2008). Sustaining participation is also not straightforward: enthusiasm may decline if contributors do not feel recognised or rewarded, so brands must actively support motivation through feedback, incentives and community-building (Ilakkiya et al., 2024; Ind et al., 2013). At a more fundamental level, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argue that in co-creation the firm and consumer become both collaborators and competitors in value extraction, which raises governance and capability challenges for firms that can no longer fully control the experience environment (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Örnheim and Navarrete Lindez (2022) show that these issues become particularly acute in co-creation with influencers: brand managers must “let go” of some control over brand narratives, giving influencers creative freedom to speak in their own voice, which can strengthen trust but also risks defective co-creation or even co-destruction if the brand is presented unclearly or in ways that damage brand meaning (Örnheim & Navarrete Lindez, 2022). They also point to practical concerns such as difficulties in measuring return on influencer collaborations, pricing and payment dilemmas, communication problems and fraud (for example fake followers), which can further undermine the outcomes of co-creation with influencers (Örnheim & Navarrete Lindez, 2022).

2.3 Labelling and framing effects

Including a section on labels is useful as lots of consumer research demonstrates that how information is labelled or framed can largely alter how product claims are perceived.

Understanding these effects provides better insight into how certain decisions or wordings may shape consumers' responses and actions to commercial messages (such as an Instagram Post).

In theoretical terms, labels in consumer markets can be understood as extrinsic cues used in quality perception. Cue-utilization theory views products as bundles of intrinsic and extrinsic cues (e.g., brand name, price, packaging, labels) that consumers rely on when intrinsic attributes cannot be directly inspected at the point of choice (Buob & Franzén, 2023). Ethical labels are one specific extrinsic cue: sustainability-related product attributes, which are credence attributes, "can be made visible to consumers by the extrinsic product cue of ethical labelling" (Van Dam & De Jonge, 2015). Experiments where only the presence and type of logo vary, while the product remains identical, show that such labels systematically affect preferences for more or less sustainable alternatives (Van Dam & De Jonge, 2015). Packaging and labelling studies reviewed by Ashok & Chiranth (2023) likewise indicate that small visual and textual elements on packs (including quality marks and front-of-pack labels) attract attention, shape perceptions of quality and trust, and influence purchase decisions (Ashok & Chiranth, 2023).

An important theoretical dimension is who stands behind the label. Boström's analysis of Swedish eco-labelling organisations such as KRAV and FSC shows that credibility and authority depend on the governance of the labelling scheme: inclusive multi-stakeholder memberships that bring together NGOs, firms, retailers and public actors help produce regulatory credibility, understood as perceptions that operations are trustworthy, responsible, desirable and appropriate (Boström, 2006). This credibility is grounded in a mix of symbolic resources (recognised logos, moral authority) and expert resources (technical expertise, auditing capacity). It can erode if particular high-status member groups dominate or if state support is withdrawn, while balanced representation and visible endorsement by public authorities reinforce trust (Boström, 2006).

Although my study does not examine eco-labels as such, this literature is conceptually relevant. It shows that labels are interpreted as social signals whose persuasive weight depends on the perceived independence and expertise of the organisations that issue and oversee them. In other words, the same type of claim may be judged differently when it appears as a certified eco-label backed by a multi-stakeholder body compared with when it appears as a retailer or brand claim, a pattern echoed in research on private labels where trust in the retailer, packaging design and perceived quality strongly condition how consumers respond to labelled products.

Related work on the labelling effect in combination with social media marketing further supports the idea that short verbal labels can shift perceptions and choices. Fahmi et al. (2025) define the labelling effect as changes in consumer perception arising from labels such as “organic” or “sugar-free”, and find that both the labelling effect and social media marketing significantly and positively affect purchase decisions and loyalty in their survey of Indonesian consumers (Fahmi et al., 2025). Combined with packaging and labelling studies showing that front-of-pack logos and short quality labels influence perceived quality, healthiness and purchase intentions, this suggests that brief textual claims, whether on physical packaging or in digital marketing content, can act as powerful cues that guide evaluation, especially when consumers rely on simplified heuristics in complex choice environments.

Lewallen’s Instagram experiment explicitly applies framing theory to user-generated captions: holding the fitness images constant, she manipulated body-positive, body-negative, or no captions and found that the caption frame alone changed how women evaluated themselves (Lewallen, 2016). Women exposed to body-positive captions reported significantly higher self-esteem than those in the body-negative condition, while negative captions led to higher state social comparison and more extensive thoughts about their own bodies and weight-loss behaviours. These results illustrate a classic framing effect: short text frames attached to the same image make different aspects of fitness salient (appearance vs health), activating different schemas and social comparison processes, which supports the idea that brief labels in social media captions can meaningfully shape interpretation and self-evaluation.

2.4 Literature Review

Consumer purchase intentions are shaped by the source of marketing communication, as demonstrated across a spectrum of studies. Early work in the mass-market context shows that user-generated and influencer-created posts often have a stronger effect on purchase intention than content disseminated by brands themselves. For instance, Mayrhofer et al. (2020) found that user-generated brand posts on Facebook led to significantly higher purchase intentions among young adults compared to identical brand-published posts, attributing this to lower activation of persuasion knowledge (specifically, lower perceived manipulative intent) (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Similarly, Djafarova & Rushworth (2017) reported that Instagram influencers, perceived as credible and relatable, generate greater purchase intentions for beauty and fashion products

than traditional celebrity advertisements (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). Real-world sales data support these findings: Goh et al. (2013) showed that user-generated content within a brand's Facebook community drove higher purchase expenditures than firm-generated content, likely due to the perceived authenticity and informational richness of peer communications (Goh et al., 2012).

2.4.1 Influencers and purchase intention in fashion marketing

Extending these insights, a substantial body of research in fashion and beauty confirms that influencer-generated content increases purchase intentions through mechanisms of trust, credibility, and parasocial interaction. Lou and Yuan (2019) highlight that influencer trustworthiness, attractiveness, and similarity enhance followers' trust in branded posts, which subsequently leads to greater brand awareness and purchase intentions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Garg and Bakshi (2024) demonstrate that credible beauty vloggers foster parasocial relationships and trust, which subsequently heighten purchase intention (Garg & Bakshi, 2024). Liu and Zheng (2024) further underline that perceived similarity and wishful identification in influencer content strengthen parasocial bonds, which in turn elevate brand credibility and purchase intentions (Liu & Zheng, 2024).

Fashion-specific studies reveal that positive attitudes toward influencers can spill over to improve brand attitudes and purchase behaviors. Handranata and Kalila (2025) show that favorable perceptions of fashion influencers enhance brand attitudes and drive purchase intentions, which serve as crucial intermediaries toward actual purchase behavior (Handranata & Kalila, 2025). Kilumile and Zuo (2024) find that influencer marketing's effect on purchase intention can be further strengthened when consumers actively co-create with brands online (Kilumile & Zuo, 2024). Collectively, these findings reinforce that, in mass-market fashion and beauty, influencer collaborations increase product interest and purchase intention by enhancing credibility, fostering parasocial relationships, and improving brand attitudes.

2.4.2 Influencers and luxury brands

The picture becomes more complex in luxury contexts, where authenticity, exclusivity, and brand meaning are central to consumers' value perceptions. Al-Meshal et al. (2020) show that perceived luxury brand authenticity has a strong positive effect on purchase intention among

Saudi luxury customers, underscoring that feeling the brand is “genuinely” luxurious, true to its heritage, and consistent over time is a direct driver of willingness to buy (Al-Meshal & ALdrees, 2020). At the same time, scholars warn that certain types of social-media activity can undermine the very value luxury brands rely on. Park et al. (2020) find that highly “friendly” and intensive social-media interactions by luxury fashion brands can reduce perceived luxury value (e.g., exclusivity and prestige), because they lower psychological distance and make the brand feel too ordinary (Park et al., 2020). In a similar vein, Quach and Thaichon (2017) show that online interactions between luxury brands and consumers can lead not only to value co-creation (e.g., enhanced status and emotional connection) but also to value co-destruction when interactions violate expectations, over-expose the brand, or dilute its elite positioning (Quach & Thaichon, 2017).

This creates a tension in luxury influencer collaborations: while credible influencers may boost brand credibility and purchase intentions, increased accessibility, casualness, or co-creation risk dilutes the perceived exclusivity and authenticity central to luxury brands. This tension is particularly salient when influencers are framed not merely as endorsers but as designers or co-creators of luxury products, potentially shifting creative authorship away from the brand itself.

2.4.3 Co-creation, user design, and luxury

Research on co-creation and user design in luxury offers more direct evidence that shifting design authorship can harm purchase intentions. Fuchs et al. (2013) find that labeling luxury fashion items as “user-designed” reduces perceptions of design quality and fails to signal high status (agentic feelings) relative to company-designed products, ultimately lowering consumer demand. Their findings indicate that, in luxury, the brand’s symbolic authority and creative responsibility are vital. Consumers expect the brand and its designers, rather than users or external collaborators, to serve as the creative force. Once again, Quach and Thaichon (2017) similarly highlight that online co-creation around luxury brands can produce both value co-creation and value co-destruction.

In the collaboration space, Bragatte et al. (2022) show that collaborations between streetwear and luxury brands significantly shape consumer attitudes and purchase intentions; their findings

illustrate how partnerships can markedly shift brand meaning, sometimes bringing luxury closer to mass and youth culture (Bragatte et al., 2022). Kilumile and Zuo (2024) also indicate that co-creation behaviours interact with influencer effects on purchase intention, although their work is not focused on luxury per se (Kilumile & Zuo, 2024).

Collectively, this literature suggests that, in luxury contexts, transferring design responsibility or creative authorship away from the brand (whether it's users, collaborators, or influencers) can undermine perceptions of authenticity, exclusivity, and luxury value. Thus, while influencer marketing tends to raise purchase intentions in general fashion contexts, there is reason to expect that, for luxury products, purchase intention may be higher when the design is attributed to the brand itself, rather than to an influencer or external collaborator, due to the importance of maintaining core brand symbolism and exclusivity.

2.5 Hypotheses creation

Design Source → Message credibility

As discussed, influencers are often seen as relatable, whose content feels more authentic (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). In mass-market categories, studies consistently show that consumer-generated content is perceived as having higher credibility than firm-generated content.

Message credibility refers to the perceived trustworthiness and believability of the content of a message. It is someone's "judgment of the veracity of the content" in the message, separate from perceptions of the message source or medium (Appelman & Sundar, 2016).

Research distinguishes between the credibility of the source and the credibility of the message. An online experiment by Lee et al. (2017) labeled a YouTube ad as either consumer-generated or firm-generated. The consumer source was rated significantly more credible than the firm source, suggesting audiences view non-corporate creators as more knowledgeable and trustworthy (Lee et al., 2017).

Building on this, a multi-method inquiry by Lawrence et al. (2012) found that this trust extends to the message itself. Viewers specifically valued that an ad "came from a consumer instead of the company," which significantly boosted the perceived trustworthiness of the ad and the belief

that the claims made in the ad were credible. This confirms that when the design source appears to be an ordinary consumer, audiences are inclined to find the specific claims within the message more believable (Lawrence et al., 2012).

However, while all these studies show that influencer-designed labeling is more likely to maximize message credibility than company-designed, luxury and co-creation theory suggests that this pattern may reverse in high-end fashion. The previously mentioned study by Fuchs et al. (2013) showed that labelling luxury products as “user-designed” rather than “company-designed” undermines exclusivity and brand consistency, leading to less favourable evaluations (Fuchs et al., 2013). In luxury, creative authority is expected to remain with the house and its designers (Berthon et al., 2009; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Labelling a Hermès handbag as influencer-designed may therefore clash with these expectations and signal weaker professional authorship than a company-designed label. Combining these perspectives, design-source labels in an Instagram caption can be seen as competing cues. In mainstream settings “influencer-designed” suggests authenticity, while in luxury it might signal a loss of expert control. Given the centrality of brand-controlled design in luxury, it is expected for the latter mechanism to dominate.

H1: Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to higher (or lower) message credibility.

Message Credibility → Brand Credibility

Brand credibility is the extent to which a brand as a whole is perceived as believable, reliable, and trustworthy in its claims and product information. Erdem and Swait (2004) define brand credibility as “the believability of the product position information contained in a brand,” which hinges on two core dimensions: trustworthiness (the brand’s perceived willingness to deliver on its promises) and expertise (the brand’s perceived ability or competence to fulfill its promises) (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

Literature suggests a positive link between the credibility of a message and the credibility of the brand itself. Research indicates that when consumers perceive an advertisement as credible, these

perceptions can transfer to the brand. For example, Hussain et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study involving interviews and focus groups to explore this relationship. Their findings suggest that advertising credibility (defined by participants as accurate, honest, and convincing) has a positive effect on brand credibility. Participants noted that credible advertising creates a positive first impression, suggesting that if the advertising is trustworthy, the corporation is likely credible as well (Hussain et al., 2020).

Similarly, Spry et al. (2011) empirically examined the impact of celebrity endorsers on brand credibility. Using structural equation modeling, they found a significant positive relationship between Endorser Credibility and Brand Credibility ($b = 0.29, p < 0.001$). Their research demonstrates that the credibility of a human source (the endorser) can transfer directly to the brand, enhancing consumers' perceptions of the brand's expertise and trustworthiness (Spry et al., 2011).

Taken together, the literature establishes a robust, positive relationship between message credibility and brand credibility: when a message is perceived as more credible, the brand itself is also seen as more credible. Therefore, if the design source label significantly alters message credibility, it should also affect brand credibility through this pathway. In the context of luxury branding, where authenticity and relatability are weighed differently, the impact of the label may be amplified or reversed compared to general consumer goods. Thus, the effect of the label on brand credibility is theorized to be impacted by its effect on message credibility, explicitly linking these two constructs in the hypothesized model.

H2: Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to higher (or lower) brand credibility.

Brand credibility → Perceived design quality

A substantial body of marketing theory identifies brand credibility as a critical determinant of perceived product quality. Perceived design quality refers to a consumer's subjective judgment of how high-quality a product's design is (Fuchs et al., 2013). It is essentially an assessment of the product's design from the customer's perspective. Erdem and Swait (2004) argue that brand

credibility functions as a market signal, particularly in contexts of asymmetric information where consumers cannot directly assess quality prior to purchase. A highly credible brand, characterized by trustworthiness and expertise, serves as an assurance mechanism, prompting consumers to infer greater product quality. Thus, greater brand credibility typically results in higher perceived quality.

Empirical research across markets substantiates this relationship. For instance, Park et al. (2022) demonstrated that consumers who trust a brand rate its perceived quality more favorably. In studies involving Chinese consumers, perceptions of brand credibility translated directly into positive evaluations of overall product quality, illustrating how a strong brand reputation biases consumers to perceive greater superiority in the brand's offerings.

However, important boundary conditions emerge in luxury markets regarding the source of that design. Fuchs et al. (2013) explored the “negative user-design effect” in luxury fashion and found that products labeled as “user-designed” were systematically rated as having lower perceived design quality than those labeled “company-designed”. Their findings suggest that in luxury contexts, the credibility conferred by established brands is closely tied to expectations of professional expertise; consumers perceive users as lacking the artistic skill and authority to create high-quality luxury fashion compared to company professionals.

Given the established link between brand credibility and perceived quality (Park et al., 2022), and empirical findings from luxury branding that user-designed labels can diminish design quality perceptions (Fuchs et al., 2013), it is reasonable to anticipate a similar effect in influencer contexts. Since influencers are often conceptualized as “super-users,” their association with luxury product design may trigger the same skepticism regarding professional expertise as user-designed labels.

H3: Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to higher (or lower) perceived design quality of the product.

Perceived design quality → Attitude towards the brand

Attitude toward the brand is defined as an individual's overall evaluative disposition toward a brand. In other words, it is the person's internal summary evaluation of the brand, ranging from positive to negative (Mitchel & Olson, 1981). Spears and Singh (2004) build on this definition, noting that brand attitudes are relatively enduring and can energize behavior toward the brand (Spears & Singh, 2004).

When consumers perceive a product as high-quality, it evokes positive affective responses that predispose them toward the brand. Research by Jung and Seock (2016) confirms that perceived quality significantly influences brand attitude ($b = .72$, $p < .001$) and subsequent purchase intentions. This aligns with the Hierarchy of Effects model, where cognitive evaluations of quality boost affective satisfaction and confidence (Jung & Seock, 2016).

In the specific context of Product Design, Homburg et al. (2015) provide robust empirical evidence that favorable perceptions of design dimensions (aesthetics, functionality, and symbolism) directly enhance Brand Attitude. Their structural equation model confirmed that all three design dimensions positively influence brand attitude, which in turn acts as a partial mediator affecting purchase intention and word-of-mouth. Ideally, high-quality design signals excellence, reinforcing the consumer's positive evaluation of the brand (Homburg et al., 2015).

Once again, in luxury contexts, the source of that design can alter these perceptions (Fuchs et al., 2013). Since luxury brands compete on a deeper more symbolic level than objective utility, a reduction in perceived design quality is likely to negatively impact the overall attitude toward the luxury brand. Taken together, the literature suggests a clear pathway: the label (company vs. influencer) influences perceived design quality (Fuchs et al., 2013), and perceived design quality is a strong driver of brand attitude (Homburg et al., 2015; Jung & Seock, 2016).

H4: Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to a more (or less) positive attitude toward the brand.

Attitude towards the brand → Purchase Intention

Spears and Singh (2004) concisely define purchase intention as “an individual's conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand”(Spears & Singh, 2004). A core finding in consumer

behavior research is the clear, positive link between brand attitude and purchase intention. Consumers with more favorable brand attitudes are much more likely to express intent to purchase.

Spears & Singh (2004) developed standardized scales for brand attitude and purchase intention, finding strong positive correlations. Their work showed that improved brand attitude reliably translates into greater intent to buy (Spears & Singh, 2004).

Nuzula & Wahyudi (2022) confirmed this effect using structural equation modeling, reporting that brand attitude strongly predicts purchase intention (path coefficient = 0.53, $t = 8.786$, $p < .001$). In their study, consumers with favorable attitudes toward a camera brand were much more likely to intend to purchase, thus reinforcing the finding that positive attitudes drive purchase intentions (Nuzula & Wahyudi, 2022).

Brown & Stayman (1992) analyzed multiple advertising studies, finding strong correlations between attitude constructs and purchase intention. This reinforces that brand attitude is one of the strongest predictors of purchase intention, and that marketing efforts improving attitudes reliably boost purchase likelihood (Brown & Stayman, 1992).

Decades of research confirm this link: whether in traditional or social media, favorable brand attitudes consistently lead to stronger purchase intentions. Thus, brand attitude is a crucial driver for marketers aiming to increase consumer purchase behavior.

H5: Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to a higher (or lower) purchase intention for the product.

2.6 Summary of hypotheses

H1: *Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to higher (or lower) message credibility.*

H2: *Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to higher (or lower) brand credibility.*

H3: *Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to higher (or lower) perceived design quality of the product.*

H4: *Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to a more (or less) positive attitude toward the brand.*

H5: *Attributing creator identity in the Instagram post to the company (vs. to an influencer) will lead to a higher (or lower) purchase intention for the product.*

Figure 2: Overview of hypotheses



3. Methodology

3.1 Research design and overview

In my study, I conducted a single-factor, between-subjects online experiment to test how labeling who designed a luxury fashion product (ie. “designed by [influencer]” versus “designed by [brand designer]”) affects consumer responses. Following Fuchs et al. (2013) experiment, I found it interesting to extend the study, keeping everything in my stimulus constant except for the label that expressed the source of design (Fuchs et al., 2013). As an established link between the variables has been made, I will run a t-test comparing them within the two groups (influencer vs. company).

The study I conducted was however quite different from Fuchs et al. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two Instagram-style posts that were visually identical in every aspect except for the designer source line. The primary measures were message credibility, brand credibility, perceived design quality, attitude toward the brand, and purchase intention. Scale choices and item wordings were taken from established measures adapted to fit this context (Söderlund, 2018).

3.2 Study and stimuli design

An experimental method was used to test the causal claims of dependent variables on independent variables. This is typically done this way (Söderlund, 2018). It was conducted as a two-group between-subjects design, meaning that the individual was only exposed to one of the two posts. In this case, one was the influencer post (where respondents only saw that the product design was done by an influencer) or the company post (where respondents only saw that the product design was done by a company in-house designer).

I created two Instagram posts for the Hermès Garden Party handbag, as Instagram has been shown to be widely used amongst fashion brands and influencers. To maximise realism and validity, the image of the product, as well as the Instagram caption describing it, was adapted from Hermès' official product story page for the Garden Party handbag (Söderlund, 2018) The Hermès page describes Garden Party as “all-round elegance”, “the perfect everyday holdall” with “a countryside look with a city feel” and notes multiple sizes. Using this exact language in the caption ensured the post read like content that came from Hermes.

The product category (handbags) and brand choice (Hermès) were selected for two strategic reasons. Firstly, in the study by Fuchs et al. (2013), it was found that Hermès (among other brands) scored highly on the luxury perception. It was also found to have had the highest difference for consumers when it came to user vs. company-designed. I worked in a product category that their study identified as highly status-relevant. Secondly, in their Study 4, handbags were shown in the highest gap on status relevance (alongside dress shirts and leather shoes). The preference skewed heavily toward company-designed over user-designed items in high-status categories (Fuchs et al., 2013). This result motivated my choice of using a handbag for my

product selection in my experiment. I also decided to go with a campaign visual featuring both a male and a female model to minimize gender-typing of the product and increase generalizability.

To isolate the causal effect of authorship labelling, I mentioned that all visual elements (the post, logo, layout) and textual elements (headline, caption, like count, share count) were held constant across both influencer and company designed conditions. The only element that differed was the final line of the caption, which credited the designer to either a Hermès artistic director (company condition) or a fashion influencer (influencer condition). Once again, like Fuchs et al. (2013) mention, changing perceived design source without altering objective design quality will enable me to investigate those effects alone (Fuchs et al., 2013).

I used fictitious names in both conditions to avoid pre-existing bias or opinions and to keep the focus on the labelling rather than on any real person. I referred to “influencer” condition as the influencer labelled text, and “company” condition as the company designed caption. The names were picked from a random list of names. Sofia Bennet was taken from a list of English American names, while Éloise Marceau was chosen from a random list of French names, as Hermès is a French company, and luxury brands tend to keep functional value (Kapferer et al., 2017).

Stimulus captions:

Influencer-label condition

“All-round elegance. The Hermès Garden Party has a countryside look with a city feel. Available in several sizes, this sleek bag is the perfect companion for your daily adventures. Designed by fashion influencer Sofia Bennett.”

Company-label condition

“All-round elegance. The Hermès Garden Party has a countryside look with a city feel. Available in several sizes, this bag is the perfect companion for your daily adventures. Designed by Hermès Artistic Director, Éloise Marceau.”

Full-size screenshots of both posts are found in Appendix 1.

Experimental manipulation:

The independent variable was a binary label indicating the design source. As previously addressed, it was stated via the caption line at the end of the post:

- Company condition: “Designed by [Éloise Marceau].”
- Influencer condition: “Designed by [Sofia Bennett].”

A one-item manipulation check asked, “Who designed the bag?” with response options matching the two label roles. Failing the manipulation check was pre-specified as an exclusion criterion, as not knowing who designed the bag defeats the whole purpose of the study.

3.3 Participants and recruitment and data collection

I used convenience and snowball sampling as my main techniques to gather participants. The survey was hosted in Qualtrics and targeted individuals aged 18 or older. I first distributed the survey link in several SSE class group chats and to my personal network (friends and classmates). In these channels, I sent the following recruitment message:

“Hi everyone! I am currently writing my thesis and need your support in answering my survey: (survey link was given here). I will randomly give a 500 SEK Amazon gift card to one of the respondents! It only takes 2–3 min :)”

The message briefly explained the purpose of the study, gave an estimate of the time required to participate, and highlighted the incentive: a 500 SEK Amazon gift card randomly awarded to one respondent. I also explicitly told participants that they were welcome to share the link further with others over 18 which created an element of snowball sampling.

To reach students beyond my immediate contacts, I designed a simple poster that included the title “Hanna’s Thesis Survey!! (takes only 2–3 min!)” and a QR code linking directly to the survey. These posters were placed in the SASSE corridor and other high-traffic areas at the school. In addition, I approached students in person in these spaces and asked them to participate using wording similar to the digital message, again emphasizing that the survey was short, voluntary, and included a chance to win the gift card. In addition to this, I promoted the survey to Instagram and Reddit, however, this was not as effective as the other techniques.

Overall, recruitment relied on a mix of digital sharing (class chats, direct messages) and on-site promotion through QR-code posters and brief face-to-face requests. This approach was chosen to gather responses quickly within the available time frame and resources, while still allowing the survey to spread beyond my immediate circle. Participation was voluntary, and this was emphasized. I also recorded Instagram use frequency and luxury fashion purchase frequency to see if this could be further investigated.

3.4 Questionnaire design and measures (see Appendix 2 for a specific and summarized table)

All items used 7-point (Likert) response formats. Furthermore, each question was adapted and taken directly from previously validated scales, and items were changed only minimally to fit the context. The changes were as minimal as utilizing Hermès instead of brand for instance. This procedure strengthens both content validity and comparability with prior research (Söderlund, 2018).

3.4.1 Perceived design quality

In my survey, this construct was operationalized with a single item asking participants to rate the statement: “The product design is of high quality” (Fuchs et al., 2013). Using a single-item measure is appropriate here because design quality is a concrete, unidimensional attribute that consumers can directly evaluate (Fuchs et al., 2013; Rossiter, 2002). In other words, perceived design quality captures how well the product’s design meets the customer’s idea of quality, with higher ratings indicating that the design is seen as more expertly executed and of superior quality.

3.4.2 Attitude towards the brand

In my thesis, I conceptualize attitude toward the brand as the respondent’s overall positive or negative impression of the brand, using Spears & Singh (2004)’s five-item measures. According to them, a higher score indicates a more positive brand attitude (Spears & Singh, 2004).

3.4.3 Message credibility

In my study, message credibility will reflect how accurate, authentic, and believable the post's content is perceived to be, using Appelman and Sundar's scale. They found that those three adjectives properly reflect an individual's message credibility (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). This construct is conceptually distinct from source credibility (which is about the communicator's credibility) and media credibility (the channel's credibility). Here I focus exclusively on the content. A highly credible message is one that consumers find believable, authentic, and accurate, whereas low message credibility means the content is met with skepticism (Appelman & Sundar, 2016).

3.4.4 Brand credibility

This concept is rooted in the source credibility framework from communications research. Much like a credible speaker is seen as honest and knowledgeable, a credible brand is seen as dependable and skilled (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). In my experiment, brand credibility was interpreted as users' confidence in Hermès.

3.4.5 Purchase intention (PI)

In practical terms, this construct in my survey reflects how likely or willing respondents are to buy the product featured in the post. I asked respondents to indicate their purchase intentions with three items, including, for example, "I would consider purchasing this product" and "The likelihood of purchasing this product is high," (Dodds et al., 1991; Grewal et al., 1998). It is important to differentiate purchase intention from other metrics in the sense that it is instead focused on a future action (the planned buying behavior) rather than intrinsic evaluation. In summary, a strong purchase intention signifies that the consumer actively intends to purchase it in the foreseeable future (Spears & Singh, 2004).

3.4.6 Demographic section and manipulation check

Age, gender, Instagram use frequency, and luxury fashion purchase frequency (7-point frequency scales) were used to get a better understanding of users. Asking who designed the bag at the end was set as a manipulation check, as mentioned previously as this is an essential understanding one needs to have when responding to the survey (Söderlund, 2018).

3.5 Data analysis tools and tests

After providing consent, participants were randomly assigned (via the Qualtrics randomizer) to one of the two caption conditions (company vs. influencer designed). They viewed the Instagram post first (to avoid priming from scale content), and then completed the measures I was assessing. The manipulation check and demographics appeared at the end of the survey. This sequencing reduces hypothesis-guessing and any bias (Söderlund, 2018).

Exclusions were applied after data stripping: Firstly, an under-18 check ended the survey for respondents. Next, the uncompleted survey's results were removed. Lastly, a failed manipulation check ("Who designed the bag?") was taken away from the data.

3.6 Reliability and validity

Scale reliability was assessed with Cronbach's alpha, following Söderlund's (2018) recommendations that values above approximately 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability for multi-item scales. For multi-item constructs (purchase intention, attitude toward brand, message credibility, brand credibility), internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's α (threshold $\geq .70$) (Söderlund, 2018).

3.7 Ethical considerations and GDPR

The study collected only anonymized survey responses (no direct identifiers). Participants were clearly informed of the study purpose, their right to withdraw, and data handling practices are consistent with GDPR. No deception beyond role labels was used, and risks were minimal.

4. Results

In total, $N = 155$ valid responses were analysed after applying the pre-registered exclusions. The final sample comprised of 73 males (~47.1%) and 82 females (~52.9%), with a mean age of $M = 32$. The mean luxury purchase frequency was around 3 (from a scale of 1-7), and the mean Instagram usage frequency was 6 (with the same scale).

4.1 Manipulation check

Before conducting the main analysis, the data set was screened to ensuring the validity of the responses. A total of 5 respondents were excluded from the study because they did not meet the age requirement (under 18). Subsequently, a manipulation check (as mentioned previously) was created to ensure that participants correctly identified the design source presented in their assigned condition. Participants were asked "Who designed the bag?" and provided with four options:

1. Sofia Bennett, Fashion influencer
2. Éloise Marceau, Hermès Artistic Director
3. Zlatan Ibrahimović, Football player
4. PewDiePie (Felix Kjellberg), Swedish gamer

Respondents who failed to correctly identify the designer in their respective condition were excluded from further analysis. In total, 15 participants failed this check: 12 participants in the Influencer-label condition failed to identify Sofia Bennett, and 3 participants in the Company-label condition failed to identify Éloise Marceau.

4.2 Reliability analysis

Prior to testing the hypotheses, the internal consistency of the multi-item constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (α). This analysis ensures that the survey items for each variable consistently measure the same underlying construct. As noted in the methodology, Perceived Design Quality (PDQ) was operationalized using a concrete, unidimensional single-item scale ("The product design is of high quality") (Diamantopoulos et al., 2012; Rossiter, 2002).

Following the precedent set by Fuchs et al. (2013) single-item measures are deemed appropriate for such concrete attributes that consumers can directly evaluate. Consequently, reliability testing was not applicable for this variable. For the remaining latent constructs, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated for each group. Brand Credibility was assessed across its two theoretical dimensions: trustworthiness and expertise. As presented in Table 1, all multi-item constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, exceeding the recommended threshold

of 0.70 (Söderlund, 2018). These results confirm that the measures are reliable for subsequent hypothesis testing.

Figure 3: Reliability test results

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Perceived Design Quality (PDQ)	1	N/A
Purchase Intention (PI)	3	$\alpha = 0.88$
Attitude Towards the Brand (BA)	5	$\alpha = 0.94$
Message Credibility (MC)	3	$\alpha = 0.78$
Brand Credibility (BC) (Total)	5	$\alpha = 0.92$
— <i>Trustworthiness</i>	3	$\alpha = 0.90$
— <i>Expertise</i>	2	$\alpha = 0.78$

4.3 Results

Figure 4: Numerical results (mean, t-value, and p-value)

Variable (Hypothesis)	Company Mean (M)	Influencer Mean (M)	t-value	Two-Sided p-value

Message Credibility (H1)	4.45	4.02	-2.53	0.01
Brand Credibility (H2)	4.77	4.60	-0.85	0.40
Perceived Design Quality (H3)	5.10	4.81	-1.40	0.16
Attitude Towards the Brand (H4)	4.57	4.25	-1.61	0.11
Purchase Intention (H5)	2.54	2.47	-0.32	0.75

4.3.1 Message Credibility (H1)

Hypothesis 1 (H1) focused on the effect of the design source on Message Credibility. The Company-label condition ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.04$) showed a higher mean score compared to the Influencer-label condition ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.09$). Using the "Equal variances assumed" row, the analysis yielded a significant t-value of -2.53 with a two-sided significance level of $p = 0.01$. Since $p < 0.05$, the result is statistically significant. I can thus reject the null hypothesis (H_0) and conclude that attributing the design source to the brand designer significantly increases the perceived message credibility compared to an influencer.

4.3.2 Brand Credibility (H2)

Hypothesis 2 (H2) tested the effect of the source label on the brand's overall Brand Credibility (BC). The mean score for Brand Credibility was marginally higher in the Company-label

condition ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 1.17$) than in the Influencer-label condition ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.37$). The t-test result was $t = -0.85$, with a two-sided p-value of 0.40. As $p > 0.05$, the result is not statistically significant. I fail to reject the null hypothesis (H_0). The experimental manipulation did not yield a measurable difference in consumers' perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the luxury brand (Hermès).

4.3.3 Perceived Design Quality (H3)

Hypothesis 3 (H3) assessed the effect of the design source label on Perceived Design Quality (PDQ). The mean for Perceived Design Quality was slightly higher in the Company-label condition ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.24$) compared to the Influencer-label condition ($M = 4.81$, $SD = 1.33$). The t-test result was $t = -1.40$, with a two-sided p-value of 0.16. Since $p > 0.05$, the result is not statistically significant. I fail to reject the null hypothesis. The data do not support the claim that the design source label significantly alters users' assessments of the product's design quality.

4.3.4 Attitude Towards the Brand (H4)

Hypothesis 4 (H4) examined the influence of the design source on the Attitude Towards the Brand (BA). The mean score for Brand Attitude was directionally higher in the Company-label condition ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.12$) than in the Influencer-label condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.30$). For the t-test, the result showed $t = -1.61$, with a two-sided p-value of 0.11. From this, from can conclude that as $p > 0.05$, the result is not statistically significant. I thus fail to reject the null hypothesis. There is insufficient evidence to conclude that the design source label significantly affects the attitude toward the brand.

4.3.5 Purchase Intention (H5)

Hypothesis 5 (H5) looked at whether the design source label would affect Purchase Intention (PI). The Company-label condition reported a higher mean Purchase Intention ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.27$) compared to the Influencer-label condition ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.29$). The t-test result was $t = -0.32$ with a non-significant p-value of $p = 0.75$. Once again, I fail to reject the null hypothesis as the evidence is not strong enough to conclude that the design source label significantly influenced the respondents' intention to purchase the product.

Figure 5: Hypotheses rule decisions

Hypothesis	Relationship Predicted (Company vs. Influencer)	Key Statistical Result	Conclusion ($\alpha < 0.05$)
H1	Company-label leads to higher Message Credibility.	$t = -2.53$; $p = 0.01$	Supported
H2	Company-label leads to higher Brand Credibility.	$t = -0.85$; $p = 0.40$	Not Supported
H3	Company-label leads to higher Perceived Design Quality.	$t = -1.40$; $p = 0.16$	Not Supported
H4	Company-label leads to a more positive Attitude Toward the Brand.	$t = -1.61$; $p = 0.11$	Not Supported
H5	Company-label leads to higher Purchase Intention.	$t = -0.32$; $p = 0.75$	Not Supported

5. Discussion

5.1 Summary of main findings

Overall, the empirical results provide strong statistical support for only Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that attributing creative authorship to the brand's in-house designer in a luxury

context significantly enhances the perceived credibility of the message ($p < 0.05$). In other words, when holding all other visual and textual elements constant, the Brand Designer label led to a significantly higher perception of the message's credibility than the Influencer label. While the other means were higher in the compant group compared to the influencer group, they were still not supported, as the observed differences in group means did not reach the established level of statistical significance.

5.2 Theoretical implications

To understand why design-source labelling has a significant effect on message credibility but not on the other variables, it is useful to revisit the theoretical perspectives outlined in the framework.

5.2.1 Significant results

To help understand why design-source labelling significantly affects message credibility but not other variables, it is necessary to reconsider the theoretical framework.

The significant effect on message credibility supports the idea that, in luxury contexts, creative authorship is a credibility cue. Luxury brands rely on symbolic and expert resources such as heritage and craftsmanship (Berthon et al., 2009; Kapferer, 2016). Therefore, citing a Hermès artistic director, rather than an influencer, reinforces that design decisions are grounded in professional expertise. In contrast, the influencer label shifts creative control to an external actor whose primary resources are relatability and follower engagement, not technical skill (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Rundin & Colliander, 2021). The finding that the “designed by Hermès Artistic Director” caption is more credible than the influencer-designed caption suggests that, for luxury handbags, consumers view brand creative authority as more credible than influencers. This finding nuances the broader influencer and user-generated content literature, which typically shows that posts framed as user or influencer-created are perceived as more credible than brand-created communication (Lawrence et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2017; Mayrhofer et al., 2020).

5.2.2 Non-significant results

The non-significant effects on brand credibility, perceived design quality, brand attitude, and purchase intention have key theoretical implications. This thesis assumed a sequential model where design-source labelling would first shift message credibility, then lead to changes in brand evaluations and behavioural intentions (e.g., message credibility → brand credibility → perceived design quality → brand attitude → purchase intention). The results show only message credibility responds to subtle textual cues; downstream constructs remain stable. This implies that message-level judgments are more susceptible to micro-framing in a single Instagram exposure than deeper brand beliefs or purchase intentions, which are rooted in accumulated experiences and brand equity (Kapferer, 2016; Jung & Seock, 2016).

Thus, the data show a decoupling between message-level and brand-level constructs. While message credibility rises in the company condition, this does not translate into detectable shifts in brand credibility or attitudes after one exposure. This challenges the assumption that improving message credibility in a single ad will influence brand-level outcomes for high-equity brands (Hussain et al., 2020; Spry et al., 2011). For luxury goods—where prices are high, purchase frequency low, and brand meanings develop over time—the link between message credibility and purchase intention may be weaker or require repeated signals.

The non-significant results also relate to the negative user-design effect (Fuchs et al., 2013), which finds that luxury products labelled as user-designed are seen as lower in quality and status, reducing demand (Fuchs et al., 2013). In this thesis, company-labelled posts on average scored higher on perceived design quality, brand credibility, brand attitude, and purchase intention, but not significantly so. This suggests the negative user-design effect is weaker when the creator is an influencer rather than an ordinary consumer, and authorship is conveyed only through a single Instagram caption line, not extensive co-creation narratives.

5.3 Contributions

This thesis makes several contributions to existing literature across luxury branding, influencer marketing, co-creation, and labelling effects.

First, this thesis broadens influencer marketing research to luxury and labelling contexts by isolating the impact of design-source labelling in a realistic social-media context. This study demonstrates that simply attributing creative authorship to the brand, rather than an influencer, can significantly shift message credibility. These findings suggest that influencer roles are more nuanced than previously recognized, with implications for campaign strategy in both luxury and mainstream sectors. It also adds on to luxury branding, as it demonstrates that influencers and social media are becoming more and more adapted. Having no significance on product or brand evaluations (which are central to a luxury brand) counters what luxury stands for and has been represented as all these years. It highlights that a modern shift (perhaps towards more conspicuousness) is happening (Kapferer, 2010).

Second, this thesis expands co-creation and user-design research by applying it to influencer-driven branding, with implications for luxury and broader consumer categories. While Fuchs et al. (2013a, 2013b) show user-designed labels can harm perceptions of quality and status, this research finds that influencer-designed labels affect message credibility but do not consistently undermine product or brand evaluations. This nuanced understanding of co-creation signalling offers guidance for brands navigating collaborative design and communication strategies across sectors.

Another contribution involves extending labelling theory into digital contexts. While most labelling studies examine functional or ethical attributes (Boström, 2006; Fahmi et al., 2025), and recent work has explored Instagram captions (Lewallen, 2016), this thesis adds onto this via experimenting with authorship labels in digital captions. These findings further develop labelling theory, showing that micro-textual cues in digital content can both influence and not influence perceptions and evaluations.

5.4 Practical implications

These results add to a new wave of research showing that luxury is no longer defined by a strict line between exclusivity and accessibility. Previously, user-designed labels produced a clear negative gap in perceptions and evaluations for luxury products. Now, the distinction is more nuanced: while brand-designer attributions still score higher on credibility, simply crediting an influencer as a designer in a single Instagram post does not significantly harm key brand

outcomes. This suggests luxury and mainstream influences are increasingly able to co-exist, raising important strategic questions for managers.

Rather than adopting a rigid stance against collaborations or influencer media presence, managers should recognize that occasional influencer co-designs do not erode luxury value. However, they should also be aware that use of influencers could still pose long-term risks to perceptions of consumers as this has not been studied yet.

Practically, this means brands can benefit from influencer partnerships and broaden their reach, but should be intentional about role framing. As seen, small wording changes in captions matter to a certain extent.

These findings also prompt further questions: if such collaborations become pervasive, or if this experiment were repeated in different contexts or over time, would the effects become more pronounced? The evolving interplay between luxury and mainstream suggests future research should explore where to draw the line in protecting luxury brand distinctiveness, as well as how consumer expectations continue to shift.

5.5 Limitations and future research

While this study provides valuable insights into the potential influence of design-source labelling on responses to a luxury fashion post, several limitations warrant consideration. To begin with, the experiment was carried out in a controlled and somewhat artificial environment. Participants viewed a single, static Instagram-style post and were then immediately surveyed. In everyday use, however, individuals rapidly scroll through a diverse array of sponsored and organic content, follow multiple influencers and brands simultaneously, and encounter numerous posts over time. This contrast between the study's set-up and the complexities of real social media engagement suggests that the external validity of these findings may be limited.

Furthermore, the information in this study came from people who answered questions in a single survey, right after seeing the Instagram-style post. The questions were all after one another, and likely risked survey fatigue, which may mean that people just pressed similar answers to all questions. Also, the study only looked at people's initial reactions, not how their opinions might change over time or how they would act in real life. Because the survey only used numbers and

scales, it does not show in detail what people thought about the labels. Furthermore, one cannot know if the effects may have been significant if this was studied in the long-term.

The study focused exclusively on a single luxury brand (Hermès) and product type (a handbag). Respondents' reactions may have been shaped by their particular preferences for this design, or by pre-existing attitudes toward the brand, regardless of the design-source label. Consequently, the results should not be assumed to generalise to other luxury brands, non-luxury brands, or product categories without further investigation.

The sample for my experiment was recruited through convenience and snowball sampling at the Stockholm School of Economics and within my personal network, complemented by QR-code posters and some messages to large class group chats. While this was an understandable solution given time and budget limitations, it has inevitably introduced sampling bias. This was prevalent in my data. The mean age was 32, the mean luxury purchase frequency was 3 (from a scale of 1-7), and the mean Instagram usage frequency was 6 (with the same scale). Most individuals spend a lot of time on Instagram, and do not purchase luxury very often.

Taken together, these limitations mean that the findings should be interpreted as an initial, context-specific indication of how design-source labelling may affect message credibility and related outcomes, rather than as definitive evidence applicable to all brands, platforms, and consumer groups.

Future research can address these limitations in several ways. A first step would be to broaden the study by including multiple brands and product categories, both luxury and mainstream. Comparing several brands in one study would help us better understand whether effects are driven by the design-source label itself or by pre-existing attitudes toward a specific brand or product. It would also be valuable to explicitly measure and control for brand familiarity and brand attachment. The current experiment manipulated design-source labelling only through short text cues. It would also be interesting to explore several forms of co-creation communication where the influencer's role in the design process is more detailed or significant.

Another note to mention would be the inclusion of more diverse samples for experimentation. It would be interesting to see how the results would differ from a group of individuals who don't

use Instagram, or very frequently purchase luxury products. It could extend the research to understanding if labelling effects are more significant or moderated by particular groups.

Future research could combine both qualitative and quantitative measures to help deepen the understanding behind certain choices and evaluations.

In this study, I kept it limited to a fashion influencer. Another avenue for future research would be to vary the type of influencer involved in the design-source manipulation. Future studies could compare influencers with different follower sizes (e.g. micro vs. mega influencers) and different content domains (e.g. beauty, lifestyle, fitness, tech) to see whether perceived fit with the product or perceived celebrity status via following value changes how influencer-designed labels are received. These groups could then be compared with each other to see which harvests the most significant effects.

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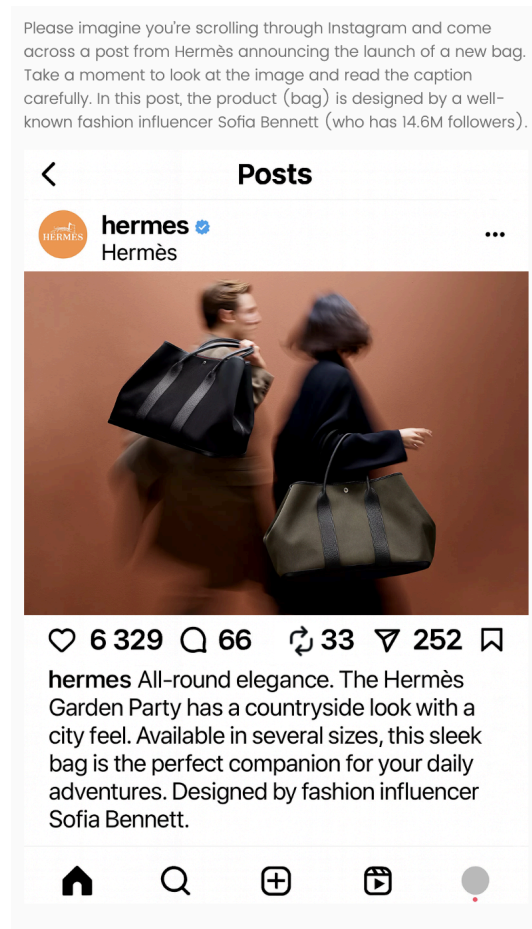
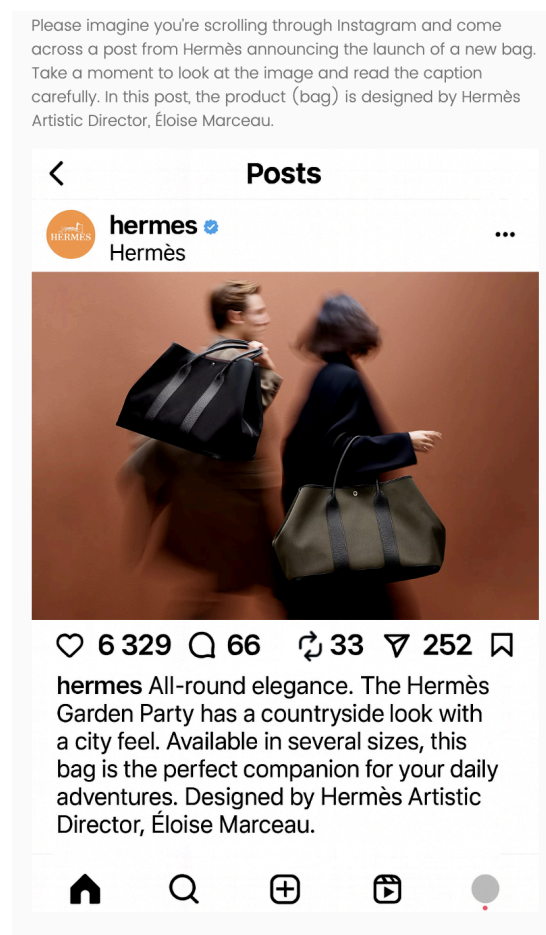
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7. Appendix

7.1. Appendix 1 - Stimulus designs

(Instagram screenshot and introduction to stimulus text above it)



7.2 Appendix 2 - Survey Design

**All multiple-choice responses consisted of a 7-point Likert scale*

(everything was from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 7 except for attitude towards brand which used those adjectives instead; instagram/luxury purchase frequency used never to very frequently on a Likert scale; the demographic questions were numeric or selected by drop down)

Construct	Item Description	Source (adapted from)
Perceived design quality	The product design in this post is of high quality.	<i>Fuchs et al., 2013</i>
Purchase intent	I would consider purchasing the product.	Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal, 1991
	The likelihood of purchasing the product is high.	
	I would purchase this product.	
Attitude towards the brand	My overall evaluation of this brand is bad/good	Spears & Singh (2004)
	My overall evaluation of this	

	brand is unfavorable/favorable	
	My overall evaluation of this brand is unpleasant/pleasant	
	My overall evaluation of this brand is unlikeable/likeable	
	My overall evaluation of this brand is unappealing/appealing	
Message credibility	How well do these adjectives describe the information about the product in this post:	Appelman, A. and Sundar, S.S. (2016)
	Accurate	
	Authentic	
	Believable	
Brand credibility	This brand (Hermes) delivers what it promises.	<i>Erdem & Swait (2004)</i>

		Trustworthiness
	This brand (Hermes)'s product claims are believable.	
	This brand (Hermes) has the ability to deliver what it promises.	
	This brand (Hermes), from my experiences, has led me to expect it to keep its promises.	<i>Erdem & Swait (2004)</i>
	This brand (Hermes) reminds me of someone who's competent and knows what they're doing.	Expertise
Demographic questions	What is your age?	
	What is your gender? (select one)	
	How frequently do you purchase luxury fashion	

	products?	
	How frequently do you use Instagram?	
Manipulation check	Who designed the bag?	

7.3 Appendix 3 - Disclosure of AI tools use

This appendix describes how AI tools were used in this thesis. This was in line with the Stockholm School of Economics:

(1) What AI tools have been used and how?

Throughout the entire thesis process, AI was only used as a support tool. It was not used to generate or synthesize any arguments, text, material, or sections. Everything with that regard was done by myself. OpenAI ChatGPT and Grammarly were the tools I used to help me with grammar and language. Small comments regarding incorrect grammar, spelling, or vocabulary use for better clarity was suggested. These were given as suggestions, not rewrites. An example of how this was used is inserted below:

“Please read the paragraph below and provide any spelling, grammar, or unclear sentence comments that hinder comprehension. Do not add or remove anything. Do not change sentences, meaning, arguments, or claims.”

(2) In what ways have these tools contributed to increasing the quality of the thesis?

These two tools have mainly helped with improving the clarity, reducing grammar and spelling mistakes, and maintain a consistent academic tone throughout the paper. The tools have in no way altered my claims, structure, or arguments.

(3) What potential risks were found using AI and what measures were taken to reduce these risks?

The largest potential risk was the loss of author control. This would entail that the AI would create its own text, or change mine in a way that does not accurately reflect my initial claims and statements.

(4) What are the insights gained from using AI tools in the thesis writing process?

I learned that AI can be incredibly helpful as a tool that corrects small mistakes or errors. I also further understood the difference it makes when prompting, and how specific you need to be when formulating prompts, so that it does not misinterpret and replace your own work. For example, only asking for grammar and clarity comments, and not rewriting or structuring any of my work or claims was super important to mention. I also ensured to review every suggestion carefully.