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The Allure of Luxury Brands' Social Media Activities: A Uses and Gratifications Perspective

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Abstract

Purpose: This study is guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) to explore the social media marketing activities of luxury brands. It examines the gratifications sought by millennials, a new core luxury consumer group, and the gratifications obtained when following and connecting with luxury brands.

Design/methodology: Online data were gathered from the Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts of five top luxury brands. In addition, thirty in-depth interviews with millennials, the new generation of luxury consumers, were conducted. Thematic analysis strategy followed to analyze the data and present the findings.

Findings: Luxury brands remain distant and aloof, which helps them to maintain a sense of exclusivity. User activity, ranging from observations to commenting on and liking luxury-brand content, leads to the gratification of two types of need: affective and cognitive. Two affective needs that are satisfied by luxury brands' social media marketing activities are aesthetic appreciation and entertainment. Cognitive needs are satisfied through the functional use of social media as an information source.

Originality/value: Several studies have investigated social media from the perspective of UGT, but this study is first to investigate the implications of luxury brands' social media usage through the lenses of UGT.

Key words: Uses and Gratifications Theory, social media marketing, luxury brands, millennials.

Article Classification: Research paper

1. Introduction

Social media has experienced a phenomenal growth in use, with more than a billion users worldwide (Facebook, 2017; Twitter, 2017). Individuals now spend the majority of their online time on social media platforms (Economist, 2015). This has led to the emergence of a new communication era for both interpersonal and commercial interactions (Kozinets *et al.*, 2010), presenting unparalleled opportunities for marketing activities (Zheng *et al.*, 2013). Successful marketing campaigns on social media are commended for their use of storytelling, real-time engagement, and interactive content (Agius, 2016; Kidd, 2011). This accessibility has resulted in various forms of brand engagement, from the fashion industry's use of user-generated content on Facebook and Instagram to create a buzz (Webby, 2016) to the financial sector's use of Twitter to respond to customer queries (Heine, 2016; Hobbs, 2016). However, critics of social media marketing assert that investment in viral content, buzz, memes, stickiness, and form factor have had "very little payoff" (Holt, 2016). Arguably, there is ample research to demonstrate the power of social media for brands and their consumers (Colliander and Dahlen, 2011).

Interestingly, the amount of care that brands take with crafting their social media content, and whether or not their posts are entertaining or informative, has no significant influence on consumer behavior (de Vries *et al.*, 2012). Rather, a common theme across work on social media marketing is the interaction between active consumers and brands (Gallaughner and Ransbotham, 2010; Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014). Positive online encounters between consumers and brands increase loyalty and commitment among consumers (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). According to Kim and Ko (2012a), not all brands consider social media to be an opportunity: until recently, luxury brands showed reluctance to engage with this technology. However, over a short period, luxury brands including Louis Vuitton, Burberry, and Gucci have amassed millions of followers on social media. Yet Soliday (2017) reports in the *Huffington Post* that such brands show signs of detachment: they claim their place on social media, but they do not make full use of the capabilities of this channel.

From a theoretical perspective, the diversity of social media usage is noted in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) research. The UGT framework has been used to explain how and why people actively seek specific types of media (Palmgreen *et al.*,

1980). However, very few studies have distinguished between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained (Bae, 2018; Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979). Much of the existing UGT research examines what gratifications individuals seek in a social media context, such as when connecting with others (Park *et al.*, 2009; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008) or when connecting with brands (Gao and Feng, 2016; Heinonen, 2011; Kim and Ko, 2012b). Moreover, despite the rise in luxury brands' usage of social media, empirical research on this is limited. Although the research is scant, a notable study carried out among Korean consumers of luxury goods shows that engaging in social media marketing can increase brand equity, which in turn enhances purchase intentions (Kim and Ko, 2012a; 2012b). A driving force behind the development of luxury brands' social media campaigns is the popularity of luxury among millennials. However, there is no clear understanding of what motivates this generation of digital natives to connect with luxury brands. Furthermore, Tesser (2015) argues that understanding how best to meet millennials' digital needs has been overlooked. To add to the complexity, social media is characterized by its accessibility (Akman and Mishra, 2017), but the appeal of luxury goods stems from their exclusivity and prestige (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Phau and Prendergast, 2000). Therefore, a brand's overexposure could threaten its perceived exclusivity and mystery, while underexposure could lead to perceptions of aloofness. Guided by UGT, the overarching objective of this paper is to examine luxury brands' social media marketing activities and investigate what user gratifications are sought and obtained when following luxury brands on social media.

2. Social media and uses and gratifications

UGT emphasizes that media users are active and goal-oriented because they satisfy their needs by making deliberate choices when selecting specific media (Katz *et al.*, 1974). The needs are considered to be the combined "product of psychological dispositions, sociological factors, and environmental conditions" (Katz, *et al.*, 1973, p. 516) that motivates media usage or exposure, while the gratifications are the "perceived fulfillment" of the needs through media use (Palmgreen, 1984).

In recent years UGT has been helpful for understanding social media behaviors, because it is based on the analysis of user-generated content that requires active users. A criticism of the UGT approach in media usage is that the approach is habitual and

unselective (LaRose and Eastin, 2004). However, its appropriateness as a theoretical lens through which to study social media usage is reflected in its wide-ranging application to social networking sites, instant messaging, and video chat (Gil de Zúniga, *et al.*, 2012; Ledbetter *et al.*, 2016; Quan-Haase and Young, 2010). A review of extant work reveals two strands of research (see Table 1). The first strand follows a similar trajectory to pre-existing UGT work (i.e. in settings predating social media) to investigate interpersonal and individual needs on social media. The second strand emerged in more recent times as brands developed their social media presence. This strand seeks to explore the needs of consumers when they interact with brands in this commercial setting.

The first research strand reveals that platforms such as Facebook assist with the search for entertainment gratifications (Karnik *et al.*, 2013), which is considered to be a basic motivation for any media use (Griffin *et al.*, 2015). Both Park *et al.* (2009) and Phua *et al.* (2017) have found that social media users are motivated by online socializing and that they view these platforms as a source of peer support. However, existing research demonstrates a clear bias toward studying the gratifications sought; in other words, the needs that individuals wish to satisfy by using social media (Bae, 2018). Further work is needed to address the relationship between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. “Gratifications obtained” refers to gratifications that individuals actually experience through the use of the medium (Katz, *et al.*, 1973). This conceptual discrepancy is important: when gratifications are initially obtained, this leads to repeat use of the medium, which is of significance for brands engaging in social media activities. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) argue that in instances when a user is disappointed (i.e. their gratifications are not obtained), their use of the medium in question will cease. From the perspective of social media marketing, this would result in unproductive marketing efforts for the brand. According to Gao and Feng (2016), understanding what gratifications users of social media are seeking is critical if brands are to be able to direct consumers to appropriate content and ensure that consumers engage actively with them through these channels. Effective social media marketing can stimulate sales and increase brand awareness (Felix *et al.*, 2016). In particular, this is pertinent to organizations that monitor and analyze conversations on social media to understand how consumers view their organization (Schweidel and Moe, 2014).

This paper contributes to the second research strand, which explores how consumers behave in relation to how they use social media (Gao and Feng, 2016). See Table 1 for a summary of how UGT has been applied across social media platforms. As brands develop their presence on social media, individuals seek out marketing content that interests them and satisfies their needs, which is opposite to the way in which “pull” marketing strategies work (Heinonen, 2011). With its emphasis on interactivity and its ability to facilitate mass, interpersonal, and commercial (consumer–organization) communication, UGT is regarded as a natural theoretical lens through which to understand social media exposure and behavior (Phua *et al.*, 2017).

<Insert Table 1 here>

A major driver of consumers connecting with brands on social media is entertainment (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Furthermore, consumers increasingly see social media as a primary source of information (Shao, 2009) and self-education motivates them to use it (Paparcharissi and Rubin, 2000). This could explain why “open” brands, which people can relate to, are favored over those that are inaccessible (Aggarwal, 2004; Grétry *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, an informal communication style is preferred on social media, as this helps to build brand trust (Grétry *et al.*, 2017). Van Doorn *et al.* (2010) and Hanna *et al.* (2011) have both found that giving consumers a voice enables conversation, sharing, collaboration, and engagement, and that Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are ideal environments for fostering relationships between consumers and brands.

2.1 Luxury marketing on social media

Contradictory to the key tenets of social media, luxury brands are characterized by scarcity, exclusivity of sales, and a distance between a brand and its customers (Athwal and Harris, 2018; Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). Work by Ameldoss and Jain (2005) shows that luxury brands are valued for their perceived rarity and that consumers are allured by the secretive nature of the sector. By fulfilling the need for hedonism (feelings related to pleasure and excitement), luxury products stimulate emotions and fantasies (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Such characteristics of emotion and fantasy lend themselves to online marketing, but social media is synonymous with inclusivity and embracing diversity (Stewart and Pavlou, 2002). This creates a conceptual paradox.

Despite the increase in the popularity of social media among luxury brands, research into social media luxury marketing is limited. Extant studies by Kim and Ko (2012a; 2012b) show that luxury organizations' usage of social media increases brand equity and enhances purchase intentions. However, their work focuses solely on Korean consumers and its limited scope may not be representative of consumers from the West. A commonly held and long-standing view is that Asian consumers of luxury goods have different perceptions of luxury brands (Phau and Prendergast, 2000) and different motives and behaviors relating to luxury consumption (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). The findings from Kim and Ko (2012a; 2012b) are consistent with those of Jahn *et al.* (2013), who found that usage of a brand's Facebook pages develops into brand commitment. However, Jahn *et al.* (2013) neglected the social media activities of luxury brands on two central marketing platforms: Instagram and Twitter (Aliferis, 2017; Shaoolian, 2017).

The primary motive for luxury brands' engagement with social media is the appeal of luxury among a younger demographic: millennials. Millennials are people who were born between 1982 and 2004 (Strauss and Howe, 2000). They are considered to be the new core luxury consumers (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015) and they are viewed as a disruptive force in the luxury sector (Ko *et al.*, 2016). These consumers make higher demands for the online customization of luxury goods (Yoo and Park, 2016), drive luxury purchases online (Deloitte, 2016), and are strongly influenced by video bloggers, known as vloggers (Lee and Walkins, 2016). This shortens product lifecycles and leads to the emergence of sub-categories in the luxury sector (e.g. affordable luxury and prestige luxury). D'Aprizio *et al.* (2017) highlight the importance of millennials and generation Z (also referred to as the iGeneration or post-millennials), as by 2025 these demographics will represent 45% of the global personal luxury goods market.

This study addresses such conceptual shortcomings of extant social media luxury marketing research. The study also examines how millennials, a new core consumer group, are responding to marketing communications. According to research by Mintel (2015), millennials are increasingly "turned off" and disengaged by marketing communications that they do not perceive as authentic. Moreover, D'Aprizio *et al.* (2017) state that the success of luxury brands is determined by their ability to better anticipate and cater for millennials' needs. Through a UGT lens, this study explores

what gratifications millennials seek and whether their needs are fulfilled when they are exposed to luxury marketing activities on social media. Through this exploration, the study will reveal how luxury brands can make a positive difference to their social media marketing activities.

3. Methodology

Qualitative methods of inquiry were adopted for this research. Quantitative methods allow for an investigation of participants' experiences and behaviors through the use of in-depth data. These methods are preferred when the main aim is to explain and understand, rather than measure, behavior or activities (Carson *et al.*, 2001). Our methodological approach responds to calls for further qualitative UGT research (Dunne *et al.*, 2010). Despite the conceptual usefulness of extant quantitative UGT work, this study aims to offer rich, deep insights into user behavior and the influence of luxury-brand activities on social media. To pursue the research objectives, a two-stage data-collection method was used: online observations and in-depth interviews.

The first stage of the data collection demonstrates the aloofness of prestige brands, which is the foundation for this research. However, this does not explain why so many luxury brands have substantial followings. Hence, to investigate what motivates users to follow luxury brands, in-depth interviews and a thematic analysis were conducted to explore which needs and gratifications are sought by users.

3.1 First stage: online observations

To understand how luxury brands use social media, online observations of the social media accounts of five luxury fashion brands were conducted. Analysis of company-created content is beneficial for exploring how luxury brands use social media. Moreover, it provides data on how luxury brands interact, or do not interact, with their consumers. Furthermore, online observations provide naturalistic data, which can be used to understand the phenomenon under study in detail without the direct influence of the researcher (Kozinets, 2010). The five brands for data collection were selected from the Best Global Brands 2016 report compiled by the brand consultancy Interbrand (2015a). This report lists global brands that have successfully transcended geographic and cultural boundaries. All the brands listed in the report have a significant presence in Asia, Europe, and North America (Interbrand, 2015b).

Therefore, the selected brands were suitable for the purposes of this research. The top five fashion brands according to brand value (Interbrand, 2015b) were selected: Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Hermès, Cartier, and Tiffany & Co.

Previous research has shown that three social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram and Twitter—are commonly used by luxury brands for social media marketing activities (e.g. Godey *et al.*, 2016; Kim and Ko 2012). These three platforms are also commonly used by millennials¹ (Alhabash and Ma, 2017). Therefore, the official accounts of the five brands in our sample were identified by searching these three platforms. This search resulted in five Facebook, five Instagram, and fifteen Twitter accounts that belonged to the selected brands (see Table 2 for the full list). Initial observations were conducted on these twenty-five accounts to establish whether they were eligible for online observations. This was done in accordance with Kozinets' (2010) criteria for eligible online observations, which suggest that appropriate social media accounts must be active, relevant, interactive, heterogeneous, and data-rich. These observations found that one of the identified Twitter accounts, Tiffany & Co. Brasil (a Twitter account specific to Brazil), had been inactive for more than one year at the time of collecting the data. Therefore, this account was not included in the dataset.

<Insert Table 2 here>

The twenty-four accounts were observed for six months, between July and December 2016 (inclusive), to cover the 2016 Fall/Winter² fashion season. First the lead and second authors familiarized themselves with the selected accounts. Then the second author led the observations by visiting all the selected accounts once a week. For the purposes of this study, a social media post was defined as a piece of simple text, an image, a photo, a video, a link, a hashtag, or a combination of these elements, which was published on a social media platform. Each time an account was visited, all the social media posts published on the account were read. This made it possible to identify posts that were published since the last visit. The same two authors then copied each full post, including any visuals, into NVivo software. Table 2 shows the

¹ Another commonly used platform by millennials is Snapchat. However, this platform was not included because luxury brands currently do not use this platform to interact with their customers.

² There are two major seasons in fashion: Spring/Summer, which starts in January and runs until June, and Fall/Winter, which runs between July and December.

total number of posts observed during this period. This first stage of the data collection informed the development of the interview questions to be used in the second stage.

3.2 Second stage: in-depth interviews

In the second stage of the data collection, in-depth interviews were conducted with millennial consumers to investigate which of their needs were being satisfied through visiting luxury brands' social media accounts. Seven pilot interviews were conducted at the beginning of the project; this helped to guide and refine the interview questions for the second stage of the data collection. Interviews are useful research instruments for examining underlying needs, because users are aware of their own reality and they can communicate information about their media usage (Katz *et al.*, 1973). Moreover, in-depth interviews help to explore user behaviors in naturalistic settings (Kozinets, 2010).

A total of thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted during the pilot study and the second stage of the data collection. The interviews lasted for an average of forty-five minutes. A purposive sampling approach was adopted to identify insights that provided as much evidence as possible and to focus on the specifics of the research topic (Hackley, 2003). To ensure that the selection of participants was systematic and theoretically informed, the following selection criteria were used:

1. Participants should be active social media users who are active at least once a day on one of the major social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.
2. Participants should be followers of at least three luxury fashion brands on social media, at least one of which must be on our list of five luxury brands from the first stage.
3. Participants should be millennials.

To recruit the participants, the lead and second author first identified followers of the observed social media accounts who were also their "friends" on social media. These potential participants were then sent an information sheet to explain the study and were invited to take part in a face-to-face interview. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked to provide the names of any of their friends who matched the

criteria and would like to participate in the research. As a result of this snowballing, the final sample consisted of twenty-two females and eight males (see the appendix for more information on participant demographics). The interviews were audio recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Table 3 summarizes the data corpus used to inform the findings of the study.

<Insert Table 3 here>

3.3 Data analysis

The thematic analysis strategy suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) was implemented for the data analysis. The lead and second authors acted as independent coders. The analysis began with the data that had been collected through the online observations. First, both coders read the posts and familiarized themselves with the data. The posts were then coded according to their content; this was done by following the UGT classification system discussed by Katz *et al.* (1973). Then, the themes were identified. At this stage, the coders sorted the codes into possible themes and grouped together all the relevant data under each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the second stage of the data analysis, the interview data were coded. Similar to the procedure for the first stage, the codes within the data were identified first. Next, the codes were scrutinized further by identifying themes. For example, discussions regarding “enjoyment,” “habitual diversion and pastime” and “admiration for branded content” were given the respective codes and then collated under the theme of “entertainment.”

Before finalizing the selection of themes and the theme names, the coders met to discuss and clarify the codes and themes. This discussion helped to ensure that coherent, consistent, and distinctive themes were generated. It aimed to evaluate the appropriateness of the themes and the interpretation of the data. The aim of assessing the coding process was to ensure that the coding was done consistently. Finally, the discussion aimed to resolve any discrepancies that could have resulted from using two coders. At this stage, the inter-rater reliability score was calculated and a score of 93.6% was achieved (Rust and Cooil, 1994).

At both stages of the data analysis, the identified themes were characterized by a pattern in the responses whereby at least a description of a phenomenon emerged

(Boyatzis, 1998). This aided the process of identifying and analyzing the core discussions about uses and gratifications in relation to luxury brands on social media. Adopting such an approach highlighted predominant content and presented an accurate representation of the entire dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4. Results

This section presents the interpretation of the key data. It aims to further our understanding of how luxury brands use social media, what gratifications consumers seek when connecting with a luxury brand, and whether those gratifications are obtained. To address the research objectives in full, the results from the two data-collection methods (online observations and interviews) are presented together in the following sections.

4.1 Luxury brands' social media marketing activities

The analysis revealed that luxury brands adapted their use of social media to protect their exclusive image. Luxury brands refrained from using the full set of channel functions, such as real-time facilities (i.e. Facebook Live and Instagram Live) as well as functions to temporarily share content such as Instagram Stories. Neither did they engage in communication with individuals. Gamboa and Goncalves (2014) argue that both fast-fashion retailers and luxury brands, such as Dolce and Gabbana, can use social media to achieve customer loyalty by frequently posting, responding to user criticisms, and promoting campaigns. Most of the posts by luxury brands that were analyzed had the characteristics of marketing in the traditional press; they were akin to publishing photos of products in magazines. This mirroring of offline advertising activity resembled art exhibitions by emphasizing aesthetics and artisanal connotations. In this way, luxury brands are continuing to protect their reserved and exclusive image and maintain a sense of distance:

Facebook photo post by Tiffany & Co. on 17 August 2016:

A Tiffany love that lasts forever.

Discover Tiffany ring pairings: <http://tco.nyc/vnik5p>

However, one exception to this was Louis Vuitton, which was the only brand among the five selected that had multiple Twitter accounts. These accounts were dedicated to specific geographic areas (e.g. @LouisVuitton_US for the United States and

@LouisVuitton_JP for Japan, as detailed in Table 2). Although the separate accounts broadcasted the same content, each account used the local language:

Twitter photo post by Louis Vuitton on 30 December 2016:

Find the perfect gift to celebrate at <http://vuitton.lv/2gcHfH6> #LVGiftWorkshop
<https://t.co/611BSLyyHM>

Twitter photo post by Louis Vuitton DE (Germany) on 30 December 2016:

Finden Sie im #LVGiftWorkshop einzigartige Geschenke zu Weihnachten
<http://vuitton.lv/2gyvjPO> <https://t.co/zE1WbEjFZF>

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that occasionally, the content of Louis Vuitton posts was tailored to the geographic location. For instance, posts showing an Italian actress wearing a Louis Vuitton dress to the Academy Awards Gala were posted only on the Italian account (@LouisVuitton_IT), whereas photos of international Hollywood celebrities attending the same event were shared on all the Louis Vuitton Twitter accounts. In addition, Louis Vuitton was the only brand with a Twitter feed that was dedicated to answering consumer queries and dealing with complaints: @LouisVuittonServices. This account did not share any news content; instead, it was used solely to reply to consumer tweets directed at the company. This has similarities with the use of Twitter by some of the non-luxury sectors of other industries, such as finance and hospitality:

Twitter text post by Louis Vuitton Services on 5 October 2016:

We're sorry to hear this, Mr. Horne, and that your e-mail might is unanswered. Can you please follow us and DM your e-mail?

However, despite showing signs of interactiveness and tailoring content, Louis Vuitton utilized its main social media accounts in a similar way to that of other luxury brands in order to protect its exclusive image.

4.2 Satisfaction of consumers' needs

The data analysis revealed that social media users who follow and connect with luxury brands adopted active and passive roles and that these roles were interchangeable. The existing literature points out a variety of needs relating to social media (Whiting and Williams, 2013). In the present study, two overarching needs

were found to be sought by participants: affective (emotional) needs and cognitive needs. Our analysis uncovered that the social media marketing activities of luxury brands satisfied two primary types of affective needs: aesthetic appreciation and entertainment. Users were also able to satisfy their cognitive needs as they acquired, processes, and shared information. Interestingly, despite the limited scope of gratifications sought, the findings showed that in addition to affective and cognitive gratifications, users obtained interrelated gratifications, such as escapism and passing the time.

4.2.1 Affective needs: aesthetic appreciation

In a traditional sense, voyeurism maintains unsavory connotations, as it is the practice of seeking gratification by looking at things in a secretive way (i.e. through a hole, a camera, or another hidden medium). Parallels can be drawn with the behavior of social media users who follow luxury brands. The findings from the interviews conducted in this study imply that aesthetic appreciation is a form of non-sexual voyeurism, where following luxury brands results in a heady, hedonic pleasure—as one of the participants put it, “being somewhat nosey” (#2, female). In the context of the behavior referred to as “lurking” by Gao and Feng (2016), participants of this study reported making covert observations that were driven by the desire for pleasure. This can be perceived as an opportunity for luxury brands to “reveal” themselves through their social media accounts (#29, female) in a way that they have never done before. Some examples from the observations include a series of Instagram images and videos of Louis Vuitton ateliers crafting leather goods:

Instagram photo post by Louis Vuitton on 26 July 2016

An exclusive look from the #LouisVuitton Ateliers.

Traditionally, luxury brands maintained a sense of mystery and aloofness with regard to their production practices (Kapferer, 2012). However, their social media activities gave followers a “glimpse of the magic” (#18, female). As followers scrolled through the posted content as a means of satisfying their need for hedonism and pleasure, they could observe previously inaccessible “behind the scenes” images of workshops and campaigns:

Facebook photo post by Gucci on 5 September 2016:

Accessories and decorative pieces by Alessandro Michele—behind the scenes with the Gucci Fall Winter 2016 collection.

It seemed that these posts were appreciated by our participants. It was also evident that they created high levels of engagement in the form of “Likes” and comments based on observations from the first stage of data collection. Luxury companies can boost such content to stimulate more engagement. Followers can “stalk” (#16, female) their favorite brands to gain new insights. Here, aesthetic appreciation is coupled with fascination, which was described by one of the participants as “see[ing] what’s going on, how it’s made. It engages you more, because you know more about the brand. You appreciate it more” (#16, female). Meanwhile, users’ cognitive and aesthetic needs were satisfied as they browsed and read content, such users are referred to as “information digesters” by Gao and Feng (2016).

The participants felt that the social media marketing of luxury brands keeps a distance between brand and consumer by denying two-way conversation and maintaining a sense of exclusivity. A reoccurring notion is that followers are discreet outsiders looking in. Often withholding from commenting or clicking the Like button, they simply observe, continuing the metaphor of voyeurism, until they decide to purchase luxury goods. Observing what luxury brands are doing helps consumers to satisfy their aesthetic needs while being entertained by the online content. Interestingly, the term “follower” has been related to submissive and passive individuals (Zaleznik, 1965). Similar to the luxury retail environment, that is are designed to do more than encourage sales of goods (Dion and Arnould, 2011); they aim to sell “the experience” or “the dream” (Martineau, 1958). When talking about purchasing luxury goods, participants alluded to “joining the ranks of privileged individuals living the dream” (#26, female).

Joy *et al.* (2014) assert that luxury-brand retail spaces are like art institutions. Similarly, the online data revealed that social media accounts, especially on Instagram, are reminiscent of gallery exhibitions (#11, female) In other words, the content uploaded to social media accounts are more like gallery exhibitions, also reflected in the content published in magazine visuals. Image-centric content with minimal text in the form of captions or quotes resonated with participants, who considered it to be “aesthetically pleasing [with] perfect yet completely staged images [... that] appeal to all types of luxury buyers” (#21, female). Evidenced across all

observations of luxury-brand marketing on social media was the central theme of creating an artistic identity through high-quality curated images and video uploads. This makes a significant contribution to the use of social media as a source of aesthetic pleasure:

Instagram video post by Tiffany & Co. on 14 September 2016

| |
|--|
| We're proud to have partnered with @Vogue creative director at large @therealgracecoddington on our #LegendaryStyle campaign. A true visionary, Grace talks to us about her creative process. #Tiffany #TiffanyAndCo |
|--|

It was clear that participants acknowledged the aesthetic value of the content created by luxury brands on social media. They equated luxury with art, as evidenced in the following statements: “After all, if they weren’t perceived as equal to art they wouldn’t have gotten into V&A” (#2, female), and “Dior wouldn’t have its museum in France, if they weren’t creating art” (#13, female). The participants perceived the aesthetic experience of and continued exposure to luxury content across the integrated platforms to be “integral to our daily lives” (#12, female). It became an immersive experience: “I’ll scroll through Vogue’s Instagram page, click through to their website to watch Gucci’s catwalk show, read the article, then go back onto Gucci’s Instagram” (#20, female).

Despite the fact that the integration and consistency of the multiple platforms allows for a “360-degree view of the brand” (#26, female), the participants did not believe that luxury brands display what is “real.” Ideas of illusion and distance were expressed by one of the participants, who stated that “I like following and looking but I feel like it’s not in my world” (#25, female). Here, parallels can be drawn with the “dream” element of luxury marketing. Its ability to drive desire and create exclusivity is well documented in extant research (Dion and Arnould, 2011; Joy *et al.*, 2014; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). The social media marketing of luxury brands provides access to beauty and depth, as depicted through references to culture, art, and creativity. The participants were aware of the gap between reality and the “unattainable luxury lifestyle” (#2, female). Playing an observational role led to followers of luxury brands evaluating the brands’ social media content (e.g. product-related posts, lifestyle images). Through this evaluation, they were able to judge whether they “agree with that sort of style or not” (#7, male). Interestingly, despite the

perceived distance between brand and followers, the observed content was viewed as “inspirational” (#5, female), “aspirational” (#6, male), and “a holy grail” (#2, female).

4.2.2 Affective needs: entertainment

Luxury possesses long-standing associations with hedonism (Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2009). Social media has become a way to showcase luxury as an art form, as brands upload images and videos that combine haute couture with popular culture. Examples from observations included Instagram images of Dakota Johnson in Gucci haute couture:

Instagram photo post by Gucci on 17 October 2016

| |
|---|
| Seen out in New York City, @dakotajohnson in a #GucciDIY leather studded and embroidered motorcycle jacket with leopard print collar and a #GGMarmont belt. |
|---|

Similar to the findings of Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000) in their study on hedonic products, this study reveals that hedonic desires are triggered by luxury social media marketing. Participant 26 (female) discussed images uploaded to Tag Heuer’s social media accounts:

The way they [Tag Heuer] use their social media accounts and it’s association with sporting events and the links with F1 and football, makes you feel like if you buy the watch you’ll be apart of this exclusive club. I think it’s so engaging how the associations with lots of top end sports men makes the brand feel more masculine and macho. The short videos on Instagram with the fast cars from F1 all feed into that image

The use of high-quality visuals contributes to satisfying users’ need for entertainment. In this instance, enjoyment is attributed to the content, as opposed to being related to an experience or consumption (see Nabi and Krmar, 2004). Such behaviors share similarities with the findings of existing UGT work which demonstrates that individuals use social media as a form of entertainment (Krause *et al.*, 2014). The above quote from Participant 26 shows that social media marketing meets her entertainment needs as she browses through the content. There are also some loose links with habitual diversion (Krause *et al.*, 2014); in other words, using social media to pass the time and as a distraction (Karnik *et al.*, 2013). This demonstrates the interconnectedness of the gratifications sought and obtained.

Luxury brands develop their social media “persona” (#25, female) in accordance with their existing brand image. In keeping with this hedonic perspective, participants

often sought to satisfy their affective needs through being entertained by “the latest campaigns, collections, and on-trend fashion” (#25, female). Similarly, Muntinga *et al.* (2011) found that individuals use social media to retrieve brand-related content for enjoyment and amusement. The interlinked nature of the gratifications was also observed in the interviews when the participants discussed their admiration for social media content posted by luxury brands. In the following interview extract, the participant expresses his preference for Instagram over Facebook and Twitter when following luxury brands:

[I]nstant gratification ... these pictures make [you] lust after the latest watch or shoes or even belt, they [luxury brands] help you visual[ize] what things go with what and how you can copy the style without having everything designer. I think of Instagram like my own little style book, I know it’s strange, but I get so much inspo [inspiration] from it. I go back to it time and time again for inspo. (#22, male).

Clearly, participant 22 shows an appreciation and enjoyment of high-quality visuals. In a subtle way, the luxury brands on Instagram provided more gratification than he sought. This finding is somewhat consistent with Bae (2017), who states that when using a medium exceeds the gratification sought, this results in repeated use of that medium. Similarly, participant 7 sought and obtained entertainment and aesthetic gratifications through Instagram browsing, which led to repeated browsing of content.

4.2.3 Cognitive needs

Participants valued luxury brands’ social media marketing for two key reasons: accessibility and, ironically, exclusivity. For followers, social media offers low barriers to obtaining, processing, and sharing information about luxury brands. This was evidenced by one participant, who stated that “social media is already there, it has no restraints” (#27, male). A preference for social media as a channel for “bringing the brands to life” (#5, female) was emphasized by participants who drew comparisons with print advertisements. The print advertisements were deemed “overly staged, stiff, and undifferentiated” (#6, female). Observations of Cartier’s activity on Facebook evidenced that social media increases accessibility and facilitates richer expression than is possible through print advertising:

Facebook video post by Cartier on 4 September 2016

Originally created in New York in the 1970s, the Love bracelet has since become an icon.

Discover the other designs that come from New York.

Participants considered this form of accessibility to be “beautifully crafted” (#2, female) and to provide an opportunity for “online window shopping” (#29, female). In some cases, social media provided an important alternative to shopping in a physical store. Participant 9 offers the following insight:

luxury is associated with older generations who have the larger disposable income [...] young Asians are often overlooked as actual buying customers, and I think this can make the in-store experience cold and staff can come across as standoffish, and not really take you seriously (#9, female)

Mintel (2015) reports that millennials utilize technology throughout the entire customer journey. In the present study, browsing luxury brands’ profiles on social media led to “click through” to websites. Participants also pointed to their heightened exposure to products on social media, which increased the likelihood of in-store purchases. This is highlighted in the following interview extract:

it’s subconsciously done. I think that if you saw a handbag in a store that you’ve already seen on social media you would be more likely to want to buy it because you’ve already entertained the idea of buying and owning it in your head (#26, female)

This level of accessibility satisfies cognitive needs through the functional use of social media. However, it has been noted that the satisfaction of cognitive needs is limited because of the low number of functions the brands make available. Louis Vuitton has a Twitter account dedicated to answering consumer queries, providing a channel for consumers to communicate with the company about any problems or complaints. In the following extract, the interviewee explains how such a facility exceeds her cognitive gratification:

I wouldn’t really think of taking to Twitter to ask about an online LV order, it’s something you’d do if you’ve got a problem with an ASOS order or something, but I was getting kind of impatient, so I tweeted them and surprisingly they tweeted me back, I meant they weren’t prompt like ASOS let’s say, but they did respond – though that was pretty cool! (#24, female)

While the other luxury brands selected for observation opted out of embracing such functions on social media, Louis Vuitton was one of the few that engaged in this two-

way communication with consumers. Seeking information is considered to be a basic motivation for social media usage (Whiting and Williams, 2013). Our analysis reveals that individuals expect to be able to find information on social media, thus motivating them to use the platform, however they do not expect luxury brands to respond, although luxury brands are responsive it exceeds their expectations. However, for luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton, their responsiveness exceeded participants' expectations. A more generic benefit of social media is the option to filter information. Participants highlighted the ability to choose which brands to follow and what type of content to browse, which enabled them to be selective about what kind of information they wanted to receive. This is in stark contrast to traditional media, which broadcasts the same content to everyone.

Accessibility is also linked to cognitive needs (Whiting and Williams, 2013), as social media is an increasingly important information hub. Observations of the brands' Facebook pages revealed that users have access to the following information: store locations and opening times (Louis Vuitton, Tiffany & Co.); job vacancies (Louis Vuitton); user reviews and ratings (Cartier, Tiffany & Co.); contact details, such as Twitter handles and websites (Gucci); and a company overview (Gucci, Hermès, Louis Vuitton). Even though this information can be obtained from static media, such as the companies' websites, millennials, who are in the habit of using social media to find information, prefer to access it through luxury brands' social media accounts. The participants considered this to be convenient, or "handy" (#2, female), illustrating another function of social media that luxury brands are exploiting.

Participants also reported increasing their knowledge and understanding of luxury brands through imagery on social media. For example, they referred to being made to "feel like one of [...the brand's] friends" (#12, female), "part of the exclusive club" (#16, female), and an "insider, gaining special knowledge" (#12, female). This reference to insider information, combined with an emphasis on luxury brands' artisanal imagery in their social media posts, demonstrates the artification of luxury goods. This contributes to work by Kapferer (2014) that asserts that 'luxury brands are actually engaging in a subtle process of 'artification,' the transformation of nonart into art. The luxury industry aims to be perceived as a creative industry' (p. 372). Previous research points to the fulfillment of emotive (affective) needs as the "most basic motivation to consume any media" (Griffin *et al.*, 2015, p. 357). The

intertwined nature of cognitive and affective gratifications also emerged, as participants referred to the connection between themselves and the brand. They also referred to gaining brand-related knowledge. One example of such activity is the *Savoir-Faire* advertising campaign by Louis Vuitton, which was conducted by uploading Instagram images of the work of the firm's craftspeople. By making previously inaccessible content available, this type of activity generates positive responses and meets affective gratifications.

5. Implications

An emerging strand of UGT research examines the gratifications obtained in a social media context (e.g. Karnik *et al.*, 2013; Ledbetter *et al.*, 2016; Phua *et al.*, 2017). A key contribution of this study is the exploration of gratifications sought and obtained. Much of the extant theorizing has neglected what is sought and obtained by individuals (Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1979), especially in the context of using social media (Bae, 2018). It can be argued that a match between gratifications expected and gratifications obtained will encourage individuals to continue to use the medium in question. By investigating the gratifications sought by millennial social media users, this study has found that millennials seek both accessibility and interactivity from luxury brands. Unlike older generations (such as baby boomers, who are considered to be the traditional consumers of luxury goods), millennials are the first generation to use technology at every stage of the customer journey (Intel, 2015). Appealing to these consumers is the driving motivation for luxury brands to adopt social media (Ko *et al.*, 2016). Evidence points to the importance of accessibility and interaction between the brand and millennial users (D'Aprizio *et al.*, 2017; Intel, 2015). However, this study somewhat challenges assumptions regarding millennials' desire for interaction from luxury brands on social media. Despite the predominant lack of interaction with brands, the sense of accessibility achieved through the brands' presence on social media fulfills both the affective and the cognitive needs of millennial users. In other words, millennials are widely accepting of luxury brands' aloofness and the distance they maintain.

Importantly, to achieve a holistic understanding of the context, this study explored the social media activities of luxury brands. Thus, the study has explored social media usage from the perspective of individual users and the brands. The study also

contributes to extant work on luxury branding, as the analysis has revealed the online artification of luxury, a practice previously associated with offline activities (Kapferer, 2004). Coined in this study as “virtual art exhibitions,” similarities can be drawn with work by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) on experiential consumption, which fulfills consumers’ desires for fantasy and fun. A core social media activity of the observed brands is broadcasting: uploading content without interacting with consumers. Here, luxury brands employ artistry, as evidenced in highly curated imagery and videos, to communicate an aspirational dream. Parallels can be drawn with the imagery and content used in magazine campaigns; however, the luxury brands observed in this study have gone one step further by uploading “behind the scenes” content from their campaigns and workshops.

This study has practical implications for those involved in the social media marketing of luxury brands. The gratifications sought by individuals should be a key consideration for the development of social media marketing campaigns. Such considerations will encourage users to follow brand accounts, to comment on content, and to share that content with their networks. Although Mangold and Smith (2012) assert that millennials demand engagement from brands, the findings from this study suggest that in the case of luxury goods, brands must also remain true to themselves. For luxury brands, engagement creates a dilemma between online interactivity on the one hand and the tradition of exclusivity and mystery on the other. Thus, it is recommended that luxury brands continue to use their aesthetic appeal and entertaining content at the same time as embracing the real-time features of social media, such as Facebook Live, Instagram Stories and SnapChat. One suggestion would be to use such real-time technology to broadcast fashion shows. This would offer millennials a further glimpse of luxury brands, sustaining their cognitive and affective needs.

6. Limitations and avenues for future research

This study reveals two interrelated needs— affective and cognitive—that are satisfied as millennials’ connect with luxury brands on social media. This could be explored further by conducting a quantitative investigation, such as a survey, into these two needs and their relationship to specific luxury sectors, such as cars, handbags, or travel.

Beyond the remit of this study, it may also be useful to conduct a content analysis of users' posts and comments on luxury brands' social media accounts in order to answer questions regarding the extent of the needs using a dataset that is naturalistic and does not depend on self-reporting. However, careful consideration of ethics would be required when collecting such data (Kozinets, 2010). In addition, this research focused solely on millennials and users of three social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). Consequently, further research should be conducted to explore other demographic groups or popular social media. For example, the platforms Weibo and Line are particularly popular in Asia, which is an important region for the luxury market (Deloitte, 2016).

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Table 1. Application of UGT across social media platforms

| Context | Author + Year + Social Media Platform | Focus | Uses and gratifications (Katz <i>et al.</i> , 1973) | | | |
|---|--|--|--|---|--|---|
| | | | Emotive needs <i>- aesthetic, pleasurable, and emotional experience</i> | Cognitive needs <i>- information, knowledge, and understanding</i> | Social needs <i>- contact with family, friends, and the world</i> | Habitual needs <i>- ritualized media use driven by needs such as background noise, releasing tension and diversion</i> |
| Individuals and interpersonal relationships | Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) Facebook and MySpace | Establishing and maintaining friends across social media | | - Informational dimension | - Friendship | |
| | Park <i>et al.</i> (2009) Facebook | Interpersonal communications in Facebook groups | - Entertainment | - Information - Self-status seeking | - Socializing | |
| | Courtois (2009) Web 2.0 | Adolescents' Internet behavior | - Entertainment | - Identity signaling | - Social relations | - Surveillance - Escapism |
| | Quan- Haase and Young (2010) Facebook | Interpersonal communication comparisons between Facebook and instant messaging | | - Following fashion - Improving social knowledge | - Showing affection - Sociability - Sharing problems | - Passing time |
| | Baek <i>et al.</i> (2011) Facebook | Sharing links | - Entertainment | - Information Sharing - Promoting own work | - Interpersonal utility | |
| | Hunt <i>et al.</i> (2012) Facebook | Computer mediated communication apprehension on motives for Facebook use | - Entertainment | - Self- expression | - Interpersonal communication | |
| | Pai and Arnott (2013) Facebook | Users motives for adopting and using social networking sites | - Hedonism | - Self-esteem | - Belonging and reciprocity | |
| | Karnik <i>et al.</i> (2013) Facebook | Music video sharing | - Leisure needs - Amusement needs | | - Receiving appreciation (Likes) | |
| | Leung (2013) Facebook, blogs and forums | Generational differences in content creation | - Entertainment - Narcissism (exhibitionism, vanity) | - Cognitive needs | - Social needs - Need for affection | - Venting negative feelings |
| | Kim (2014) Facebook | Uses and gratifications of Facebook Likes | - Entertainment purpose | - Information and expression | - Socialization | |
| Krause <i>et al.</i> (2014) Facebook | Facebook music listening application | - Entertainment | | - Communication | - Habitual | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|--|--------------------------------|--|--|---------------------------------|
| | Orchard <i>et al.</i> (2014) Social Networking Sites (SNSs) | Individual differences for developing interpersonal relationships | | - Information exchange - Freedom of expression | - Social maintenance and recreation - Conformity | |
| | Ledbetter <i>et al.</i> (2016) Social networking site communications | User's enjoyment of a communication medium | - Enjoyment | | | |
| | Malik <i>et al.</i> (2016) Facebook | Educational gratifications driving adolescent Facebook usage | | - Information seeking - Career opportunities - Education | - Social relationships | - Escapism |
| | Phua <i>et al.</i> (2017) Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat | Comparison analysis of four social media platforms of interpersonal relationships | | | - Social bridging - Social bonding | |
| | Bae (2018) Social network sites | Whether the difference between gratifications obtained and gratifications sought affects users' satisfaction and continuance intention | - Entertainment | - Information | - Socialization | - Escapism |
| | Gan and Li (2018) WeChat | Effects of gratifications on Chinese WeChat users' continuance intention | | - Utilitarian - Technology gratification | - Hedonic | |
| Commercial: brand - consumer relationships | Shao (2009) YouTube, MySpace and Wikipedia | Appeal of user-generated content | - Entertainment | - Consuming: information - Producing: self-expression | - Participating: social interaction - Community development | - Producing: self-actualization |
| | Heinonen (2011) YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and Wikipedia | Consumer activities and contributions to marketing content | - Entertainment activities | - Information-processing | - Social connection | |
| | Whiting and Williams (2013) General social media usage | Consumer motives for using social media | - Pass time - Entertainment | - Knowledge about others - Expression of opinion | - Social interaction - Communicatory utility | - Relaxation |
| | Gao and Feng (2016) Renren and Weibo | Brand- consumer communication: comparison between a social network sites and micro blogs | | - Information-gathering - Self- enhancement | - Social interaction | |

Table 2. Social media accounts observed and number of posts

| Brand | Social media | Account name (as shown on social media profile) | Total number of posts by the brand in 6 months (July–December 2016) |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|--|--|
| Louis Vuitton | Facebook | 1. Louis Vuitton | 84 |
| | Instagram | 2. Louisvuitton | 221 |
| | Twitter | 3. @LouisVuitton | 289 |
| | | 4. @LouisVuitton_US | 211 |
| | | 5. @LouisVuitton_AU | 170 |
| | | 6. @LouisVuitton_UK | 165 |
| | | 7. @LouisVuitton_ZA | 178 |
| | | 8. @LouisVuitton_FR | 183 |
| | | 9. @LouisVuitton_DE | 82 |
| | | 10. @LouisVuitton_IT | 185 |
| | | 11. @LouisVuitton_JP | 162 |
| | | 12. @LouisVuittonServices | 2,059 |
| Gucci | Facebook | 13. Gucci | 381 |
| | Instagram | 14. Gucci | 642 |
| | Twitter | 15. @gucci | 678 |
| Hermès | Facebook | 16. Hermès | 21 |
| | Instagram | 17. Hermès | 208 |
| | Twitter | 18. @Hermes_Paris | 27 |
| Cartier | Facebook | 19. Cartier | 115 |
| | Instagram | 20. Cartier | 226 |
| | Twitter | 21. @Cartier | 129 |
| Tiffany & Co. | Facebook | 22. Tiffany & Co. | 203 |
| | Instagram | 23. Tiffanyandco | 340 |
| | Twitter | 24. @TiffanyAndCo | 279 |
| | | 25. @ TiffanyAndCo_BR* | – |
| *Not included in the dataset. | | | |

Table 3. Data Corpus

| <i>Data source</i> | <i>Number of instances</i> | <i>Collected data</i> |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Facebook observations | 5 brand pages by Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Hermès, Cartier, and Tiffany & Co. | - Posts from the brands - Comments from followers - Photos & Videos |
| Instagram observations | 5 brand accounts by Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Hermès, Cartier, and Tiffany & Co. | - Uploads from the brands - Comments from followers - Photos & Videos |
| Twitter observations | 14 brand accounts by Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Hermès, Cartier, and Tiffany & Co. | - Tweets and retweets from the brands - Photos & Videos - Interactions/mentions from followers |
| In-depth Interviews | 30 interviews Average duration of 45 minutes | Interview transcripts |

Appendix

Table 4. Demographic Information of the Interview Participants

| <i>No.</i> | <i>Gender</i> | <i>Occupation</i> | <i>Most frequently used social media</i> | <i>Nationality</i> |
|------------|---------------|--------------------------|--|--------------------|
| 1 | Female | Student | Instagram | British |
| 2 | Female | Student | Facebook | British |
| 3 | Male | Student | Facebook | British |
| 4 | Male | Systems Engineer | Instagram | Turkish |
| 5 | Female | Account Manager | Instagram | Indian |
| 6 | Female | Student | Instagram | Chinese |
| 7 | Female | Student | Instagram | Greek |
| 8 | Female | Student | Twitter | Chinese |
| 9 | Female | Student | Instagram | Chinese |
| 10 | Female | Software Engineer | Facebook | British |
| 11 | Female | Sales Representative | Facebook | Indian |
| 12 | Female | Student | Facebook | British |
| 13 | Female | Policy and Data Analyst | Instagram | British |
| 14 | Female | Research Fellow | Twitter | British |
| 15 | Female | Administrative Manager | Facebook | British |
| 16 | Female | Student | Instagram | British |
| 17 | Male | Civil Engineer | Facebook | British |
| 18 | Female | Student | Instagram | Chinese |
| 19 | Male | Audit Associate | Instagram | Indian |
| 20 | Female | Credit Analyst | Instagram | British |
| 21 | Female | Student | Facebook | Turkish |
| 22 | Male | Student | Twitter | Turkish |
| 23 | Female | Sales Representative | Instagram | British |
| 24 | Female | HR Intern | Twitter | Polish |
| 25 | Female | Student | Instagram | Indian |
| 26 | Female | Student | Instagram | British |
| 27 | Male | Assistant Agency Manager | Instagram | British |
| 28 | Male | Student | Facebook | Greek |
| 29 | Female | Account Manager | Twitter | British |
| 30 | Male | Software Engineer | Instagram | Cypriot |