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Luxury Fashion Brands' Co-branding Alliances with Fast-fashion Brands
A study on brand communication on Instagram

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Abstract

This study explores how luxury fashion followers on Instagram perceive co-branding campaigns with fast fashion brands. It highlights the challenges of balancing brand image with the potential benefits of such collaboration. Co-branding between fast fashion and luxury brands has become increasingly popular, especially on the key Social Networking Site, Instagram, a platform for fashion marketing. However, the contrasting brand identities and communication styles raise questions about how luxury fashion brand followers perceive these collaborations.

This study opted for an exploratory approach driven by inductive approach designed to answer research question focusing on the consumer perspective. A single case study examined the co-branding between H&M (fast fashion) and Balmain (luxury) on Instagram using qualitative methods. In-depth interviews with semi-structured questions with Balmain followers and Semiotic Analysis of Balmain's Instagram content from the co-branding were performed.

The results reveal that brand followers generally perceived the content as luxurious and aligning with their expectations. However, there were various reactions. The respondents associated Balmain with traits incongruent with its regular image. Some of the respondents expressed a lack of self-identification with Balmain as portrayed in the analyzed visuals, though this did not entirely correlate with their willingness to engage. There were also differing opinions emerged by the Balmain followers, some tended to evaluate the content negatively, and some responses were generally positive.

In conclusion, the brand followers' perceptions and reactions were primarily influenced by the luxury aspect of the co-branded content, with aesthetics being a significant factor in the evaluation and engagement. The findings suggest that while Instagram is an effective tool for co-branding communication, luxury fashion managers should be mindful of the meanings conveyed and the expectations of the brand followers.

1.0 Introduction

The evolution of marketing practices, transitioning from conventional methods to contemporary ones, has led to an intensification of market competition. The escalating rivalry and market saturation have rendered traditional marketing strategies ineffective in capturing consumer interest and fostering a desire for products. Companies are now compelled to rethink their marketing approaches to stay relevant (Aghdaie et al., 2012). Co-branding has emerged as a significant business strategy in response to these developments. It involves a partnership between two or more brands, with the aim of mutually enhancing their products through double branding. This strategy effectively capitalizes on the strengths of each brand involved (Blackett & Russell, 1999). This approach has been adopted across different markets, including the fashion industry. It led to the emergence of fast fashion co-branding, a strategy that brings together fast fashion and luxury brands in a collaborative alliance (Shen et al., 2014). Numerous collaborations were established in the fashion industry, the most popular of which are those between H&M and a number of designer luxury brands (Shen et al., 2017). The collaboration between H&M and Karl Lagerfeld is recognized as a landmark event in the fashion industry, as it was the first luxury brand that partnered up with a fast fashion brand (Shen et al., 2014). Inspired by this, other luxury brands like Gucci, Prada and Balmain have adopted this strategy, making it an increasingly common practice (Mroz-Gorgon, 2016). The positive implications of fashion co-branding serve as a compelling case study. It is particularly noteworthy because the participating brands in such collaborations are typically distinguished by their unique traits, principles, target demographics, and administrative tactics, including the methods of brand communication.

The rise of Social Networking Sites (SNS) has seen a surge in its use by brands for their branding strategies, responding to the increasing consumer demand. Out of the numerous social media platforms available, Instagram is regarded by marketers as the most potent tool for fashion brands – almost 90% of platform users follow at least one business account (Zote, 2024). A recent study indicated that Instagram is already being utilized by 98% of fashion brands (Social Pilot, 2024). The platform hosts a broad array of brands within the fashion industry, ranging from fast fashion brands like Shein to luxury brands such as Dior. Instagram's emphasis on visual content aligns seamlessly with the needs of the fashion industry, as well as it gives brand the opportunity to communicate their identities through brand-centered content (Yoo, 2023). This content is uniformly disturbed across the SNS brand profile, forming a company-owned virtual brand community (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). The content disseminated by luxury fashion brands can be characterized as more sophisticated, aiming to evoke a sense of exclusivity. In contrast, fast fashion brands tend to focus on the straightforward, product-related posts that emphasize values like affordability.

Given the increasing trend of fast fashion co-branding and the rise of SNSs in the fashion industry, it is intriguing to examine how a luxury fashion brand (the alliance host) communicates and promotes its collaboration with a fast fashion brand within its community. Owing to the interactive nature of Instagram, it

is crucial to adopt the consumers' viewpoint and explore how members of the community perceive and respond to such event within their community. To offer a comprehensive perspective on this phenomenon, this thesis will consider potential brand intensions that arise from co-branding objectives.

1.1 Problem delimitation

Co-branding can yield substantial benefits for both the luxury brand involved and the fast-fashion primary brand. Such partnerships can favorably influence consumer attitudes towards one of the collaborating brands, shaping their perception of the involved brand and eliciting positive consumer reactions (Quamina et al., 2023). From a luxury brand perspective, the alliance with a fast fashion brand can be seen as an opportunity to expand its reach and influence (Shen et al., 2014). This partnership can help the luxury brand to penetrate new markets and demographics, particularly those that are traditionally difficult for luxury brands to access. However, it is crucial to maintain the brand's exclusivity and prestige (Mase & Cedrola, 2017). Stankeviciute (2012) supports this by suggesting that in order to safeguard the luxury brand's image from dilution and to sustain audience interest, the marketing strategies with the alliance must adhere to the principles of luxury. This involves incorporating the luxury brand's values and the most favorable association of the host brand into the marketing effort. Keller's exploration of the multidimensionality of brand knowledge elucidates how positive associations from one brand can migrate to the other through collaboration in co-branding, thereby reinforcing the brand images of both partners (Keller, 2003). Homburg & Pflesser (2000) states that the effectiveness of advertisements in conveying product functionality, quality, and value, are crucial aspects in co-branding initiatives. As far as I am aware, there has been no research conducted specifically on examining co-branding communication strategies targeting the aforementioned objectives through Instagram (or other SNSs) and assessing consumer perceptions toward them.

When crafting brand communication strategies across channels, brand owners often aim to enhance brand equity by establishing and maintaining desired brand associations (Kapferer, 2008). Those references pertain to set of information associated with the brand, residing in the minds of consumers, and demonstrating how the brand is perceived by them (Biel & Bridgwater, 1990). A study by Hajili (2014) revealed that social media platforms influence consumers' perceptions and behaviors, including their relationships with brands. This underscores the significance of SNSs in shaping brand image and reinforces the notion that brand communication on these platforms can enhance brand equity. The variability in message content and execution across different social networking sites and brand categories can significantly impact communication effectiveness (Wang et al., 2018). Considering the necessity for fast fashion co-branding marketing activities to adhere to luxury guidelines and integrate the values of both collaborating brands, the influence on the associations conveyed through communication could be substantial. Investigating the effects of such anomalies could offer valuable insights, particularly considering Holt's (2002) proposition that brands can evoke varied interpretations and responses from consumers due to the complexities of consumer culture and branding. This suggest that consumers may interpret intended meanings differently

based on their established brand perceptions, highlighting the importance of understanding how co-branding communication strategies are received in consumer culture.

Mandler's Incongruity Theory (1982) suggests that people's reactions to information can be positive or negative depending on how well it matches their expectations. Studies on consumers' responses to brand communication incongruity have shown mixed results, influenced by factors like brand familiarity and the incorporation of new brand values in ads. Sjödin & Törn (2006) introduced the concept of Brand Image Incongruity, which posits that consumers evaluate brand communication based on their existing brand beliefs and associations. In the context of Social Networking Sites (SNSs), it's crucial that brand communication aligns with the brand itself. Incongruity between a brand and its Facebook posts, for example, can affect consumers' interaction intentions and brand attitudes (Wang et al., 2018). However, no studies have explored this in the context of fast fashion co-branding communication on Instagram.

Brands use Social Networking Sites to communicate with its customers – creating online brand communities through brand fan pages (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). These communities can positively influence members' relationships with the brand and their perceptions, attitudes, and opinions (Ansarin & Ozuem, 2014). However, if a brand doesn't align with a person identity, they may unfollow the brand's page. Using the Consumer-Brand Identification concept (CBI), brand can serve as a means for self-expression, reinforcing the consumer-brand relationship and potentially enhancing engagement with the brand on SNSs (Tuskej & Podnar, 2018). This thesis is interested in whether this identification and engagement might be affected by co-branding communication that differs from the brand's regular image.

In summary, this thesis explores the relatively uncharted territory of fast fashion co-branding communication on Instagram. It aims to understand the content, the brand association it may evoke, and how these correspond to consumers' recalled associations. It is also interested in how this unusual communication impacts followers' willingness to engage with the brand on its Instagram profile. The objective of this thesis is to explore the phenomena from the viewpoint of the consumer, applying existing theories to a new context. To achieve this, a main research question and several sub-questions are formulated:

How do followers of luxury fashion brands interpret and respond to the brand's co-branding communication with a fast-fashion brand on Instagram?

1. *What are the brand associations that followers of luxury fashion brands remember based on the co-branding content they see on Instagram?*
2. *What do followers of luxury fashion brands think about the consistency between the brand they follow, and the co-branded content presented on Instagram?*

3. *How do followers of luxury brands perceive their self-identification and their readiness to interact with the luxury brand they follow, in light of its co-branding content with a fast-fashion brand on Instagram?*

1.2 Delimitation

First, this thesis looks into one single case study of fast fashion co-branding, Balmain x H&M. Investigating a subject through the lens of a single fast fashion brand collaboration can constrain the breadth of the research findings. Furthermore, this approach is solely applicable to the fashion industry, which has unique attributes compared to other sectors, thereby restricting the generalizability of the study.

Second, this study on brand communication has been confined to the realm of Instagram. Despite the fact that fashion brands utilize various platforms for communication, Instagram was selected for its relevance and appropriateness to both luxury and fast fashion brands, as well as its increasing popularity among consumers. This study focuses on a select number of Instagram posts that was identified as representative of the phenomenon under investigation, rather than encompassing the entire co-branding campaign. Despite the efforts to include a diverse range of posts, the research is inherently limited by the subjective selection of these elements. Consequently, there may be potential findings that are inadvertently overlooked.

Third, the sample size for this study was intentionally kept small due to the intricate nature of the research, its preliminary status, and the observed patterns in the data collected. The demographic scope was also limited, focusing on a specific group of Millennials of similar age and gender – specifically, European women. As a result, the sample consisted of the female consumer base of Balmain, the company in center for this case study. Given the online nature of this research, the sample was further narrowed down to those who are part of Balmain's Instagram community. However, it is important to acknowledge that a different sample could potentially yield different results from those observed in the study.

1.3 Structure of thesis

The thesis is composed of six primary chapters, each with its own sub-chapters, providing a structured reading experience.

Table 1. *Structure of the thesis*

CHAPTER	CONTENT
CHAPTER 1	Presents and defines the scope of the research topic, along with the guiding research question.

CHAPTER 2	An overview of the literature pertinent to this thesis, which is utilized in this research design and data analysis. This includes literature on co-branding, brand communication within Social Networking Sites, and both luxury and fast fashion brands. Additionally, the theoretical frameworks that steer the research.
CHAPTER 3	Delineates the selection of methodologies, buttressed by justifications for their adoption. Provides an overview of the employed data gathering techniques, encompassing secondary sources, in addition to the methods utilized for data interpretation.
CHAPTER 4	Presents findings from the two analytical procedures used in this research, Semiotic Analysis, and In-depth interviews, considering the theoretical breadth of the study.
CHAPTER 5	Encompasses a discussion of the results in relation to the studies and theories references in the literature review, all guided by the research question. Additionally, it draws out the managerial implications from the thesis, and points out future research.
CHAPTER 6	It articulates the conclusion and offers the definitive response to the research questions posed in the thesis.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Co-Branding

2.1.1 Definition

In recent years the study of branding strategies has become increasingly important to both marketing academics and practitioners (Washburn et al., 2000). Consumer product manufacturers are increasingly interested in co-branding strategies as a mean to gain more marketplace exposure, fend off the threat of private label brands, and share expensive promotional costs with a partner (Washburn et al., 2000). Co-branding has become a widely used business strategy in industries like food and drinks, retailing, air travel and the financial services (Blackett & Russell, 1999). Partnerships incorporating a brand with a luxury positioning have gained popularity. Extensions is a popular growth strategy for both fast moving consumer goods and luxury brands (Washburn et al., 2000).

In the realm for co-branding, scholars have offered varying definitions. However, a commonly accepted understanding emerges from the work of Blackett and Russell (1999), which have defined co-branding, also known as a brand alliance, as ‘’a form of co-operation between two or more brands with significant

customer recognition, in which all the participants' brand names are retained''. Typically, this partnership endures for an extended period, as the net value generated may not suffice to launch an entirely new brand. The authors' definition hinges on two key principles: the nature of collaboration and the specific arrangements, including expected duration and the potential shared value that can be cultivated (Blackett & Russell, 1999).

Furthermore, many different types of co-branding strategies exist (Washburn et al., 2000). It may involve simultaneous presentation of multiple brands in a single advertisement or the collaborative introduction of joint product by two brands (Geylani et al., 2008). This study is specifically focused on the latter type of co-branding cooperation, where to brands come together to introduce shared products. In this study, the focus is on a specific type of alliance, fast fashion co-branding.

2.1.2 Effects of Co-Branding

Having defined co-branding and its various strategies, the attention turns to the effects of these strategies. The impact of co-branding can be observed across various dimensions of both brands and consumers. First, the effects of co-branding are initially examined in relation to the co-branded product. A successful co-branding alliance can enhance the perceived value of the co-branded product, leading to increased consumer interest and sales. The unique combination of the two brands can create a differentiated product offering that stands out in the market (Turan, 2021). According to Zhang et al. (2013), co-branded products released by moderate quality brands are evaluated more positively when it comes to perceived quality and product evaluations compared with regular offerings. Turan (2021) states that a co-branding alliance is beneficial for both parties (a luxury fashion brand and a fast fashion brand): both can increase customers' brand loyalties and expand their consumer base with profit maximation. This aligns with the findings of McCarthy and Norris (1999), who showed that branded ingredients could improve the competitive position of host brands with moderate quality. However, co-branding can either strengthen or weak the image of the partner brands. While co-branding may enhance the anticipated values of the brands attributes, the uncertainty associated with the brands may increase under certain circumstances due to the alliance (Uelstchy, 2011). This is supported by Geylani et al. (2008) in their empirical study where they demonstrated that this could particularly occur when a host brand, perceived as highly reliable by the consumer, forms a partnership with an unfamiliar brand. The uncertainty associated with the unfamiliar brand could be transferred to both the host brand and the co-branded product.

The influence of co-branding can be seen on the participating brands following the alliance, a phenomenon known as the spillover effect (Helmig et al., 2008). One of the primary motivations for entering co-branding alliances is the reinforcement of brand image (Geylani et al., 2008), making it a potential outcome of spillover. A study by Schnittka et al. (2017) separated spillover effects into the effects of the alliance product on the partner brands (brand alliance effects) and the effects between partner brands (brand contrast effects).

They found that the partner brand's attitude-based fit reduces undesired brand contrast effects and positively moderates spillover effects in brand alliances. Simonin and Ruth (1998) indicate that consumer attitudes towards co-branding can positively influence the subsequent consumers' attitudes towards the individual brands that comprise the alliance. According to Reufeisen et al. (2019) factors that facilitates positive spillover effects in co-branding include the similarity of the product of the partnering brands to the co-branded product and the congruity of the co-branded product with brand concepts. Less-known brands often engage in co-branding with well-known brands to benefit from their awareness and positive associations. However, for familiar and preferred brands, the spillover effect of co-branding may be weaker due to their stronger pre-existing associations (Cunha et al., 2014). Decker & Baade (2016) found that high partner dissimilarity may reduce overall co-branding alliance performance. This suggests that the process of possible associations transfer in consumers' minds could be weaker when the brands are too distanced, aligning with the findings of Geylani et al. (2008).

Co-branding is part of marketing strategy and influence the brand values and organizational culture of the organization. Co-existing of two different brands as co-partners (co-brands) influences the marketing communication of the brand and image of this brands (Kenton, 2022). This assertion is supported by Mroz-Gorgon (2016), who emphasizes the potential impact of co-branding on communication strategies. However, the author also highlights significant gap in the current literature on this subject, suggesting a pressing need for further research to enhance the effectiveness of achieving alliance goals. In the context of co-branding, Helmig et al. (2008) propose that promotional activities should emphasize the superior functionality of the new product. They further argue that these activities should clearly demonstrate a match between the brands involved. The authors also suggest that spillover effects on partnering brands is more likely to occur after advertising, which reassures the audience about the premium status of the joint offering. Grossman (1997) provides additional insights into co-branded advertising. If the alliance involves two well-known but different brands, a strategy to facilitate the transfer of associations could be to present them in different context. Despite these insights, it is important to note that no previous research has investigated the accuracy of these theories in the context of Social Networking Sites, where audience expectations and communication processes may differ.

2.1.3 Fast Fashion Co-Branding

One industry that co-branding has significantly impacted is the fashion industry. The fashion sector has seen numerous partnerships between fast fashion and designer fashion brands launching a special co-branded line. This study examines a partnership in the fashion industry, known as fast fashion co-branding. To grasp its effect on brand communication through Social Networking Sites (SNSs), it is essential to comprehend the nature of this phenomenon and its underlying objectives. Shen et al. (2014) definition of fast-fashion cobranding is a ''strategic partnership between fast fashion and designer brands to introduce a unique co-branded product line''. In 2004 a collaboration was established between the Swedish fast-fashion retailer

H&M and Karl Lagerfeld, which is recognized as significant milestone within fast fashion co-branding due to its enormous interest (Lidbury, 2016).

The aim of the alliance aligns with the co-branding motivations described in chapter 2.1.2. One of the primary objectives for both brand is to enhance their image through the migration of brand associations (Oeppen & Jamal, 2014). The goal of the collaboration is to leverage exclusivity, unique consumption patterns, and loyal customer base associated with the luxury sector (Kapferer, 2014). Oeppen and Jamal (2014) highlighted strategies to enhance the success of these collaborations and reduce the risk of image dilution, particularly concerning luxury brands:

- precise selection of partners – ensuring alignment between brand images and alliance expectations, as well as compatibility between the values and cultures of the participating brands.
- limited distribution – such as offering products exclusively at premium stores, major outlets or solely online.
- restricted availability – controlling both the timeframe and quantity of products offered.

Additionally, Luck et al. (2014) states that luxury brands should only enter these types of partnership if a luxury communication can be adopted in order to prevent unfavorable associations or weaken the already existed ones. According to Stankeviciute (2012), the fundamental values and characteristics of the luxury brand should be evident, and the partner brand (fast-fashion brand), should hold a positive reputation among the luxury brand's clientele.

A study by Oeppen & Jamal (2014) shows that co-branding between a luxury brand and a fast-fashion brand influences the way that both brands are perceived by consumers. While the fast-fashion brand might gain stronger spillover effects, the luxury brand might benefit in other ways, such as image reinforcement. The impact on the image of a fast-fashion brand tends to be more immediate and noticeable, particularly in relation to consumer quality perceptions and subsequent buying intentions. In terms of the effects of fast-fashion co-branding on a luxury brand, they are likely to be more subtle (Mroz-Gorgon, 2016). In addition to financial gains, they receive extra advertising (due to the diverse channels used by fast-fashion brands) and tap into new, broad audiences, providing them with the change to market the brand beyond their target audience helps prevent potential value loss – the number of people familiar with the brand should significantly surpass those who can actually afford it (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, pp. 69-70). A study by Quamina et al. (2023) shows that masstige via co-branding assumes relatively low risk in terms of harming the luxury brands desirability and prestige.

2.2 Social Networking Sites and Fashion Industry

2.2.1 Brand Communication

After seeing what is meant by co-branding, and the relationship there is with the fast fashion, it comes to the merits of the importance of social media for the fashion industry. Marketing communications, a fundamental aspect of strategic marketing, has been crucial in this context. It refers to the techniques by which information about goods, services, or brands reach the final users (Adeola et al., 2022). It also represents the voice by which companies can dialogue with customers and other stakeholders about their product/service offerings and other company-related issues (Adeola et al., 2022a). Keller (2009) described marketing communication as the process through which firms inform, persuade, and remind consumers, either directly or indirectly about their products and brands, creating awareness about their product characteristics in a way that will stimulate purchases (Adeola et al., 2022a). The goal of marketing communication is to create a strong link with customers in order to establish well-known and valued brands (Adeola et al., 2022).

The world of social media has emerged during recent decades as a whole new online communication venue where individuals can express themselves, bookmark, share, and form social connection rapidly (Asur & Huberman, 2010). For brands, social media networks offer an unparalleled opportunity to connect to customers directly in a faster and more effectively way. The process can be carried out via three primary types of om media: paid (indirectly managed by the brand), earned (beyond the company's control) and owned (part of the company's assets) (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 21).

Social Networking Site (SNS) are ''online communities of people who share interests and activities or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others'' (Sri et al., 2011). People tend to interact with the brand and also get awareness about the brand and its service in an interesting way (Sri et al., 2014).

Considering the source of social media conversation, we can distinguish content from consumers (user-generated content, i.e., UGC) and firm (firm-created content, i.e., FCC) (Ceballos et al., 2016). UGC is beyond the company's direct influence and is not commercially driven, whereas the latter refers to all the company's communication endeavors (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Brands have full control on the firm-created social media, and they use this medium positively for developing brand equity, brand trust and brand loyalty. The firms created contents also facts customers' attitude and behavior significantly. Social media marketing activities positively affect brand equity in a shorter time period (Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016). Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) finds that the firms generated social media communication have positive effects on perceived brand quality, brand association and brand awareness, while UGC was recognized to directly stimulate entire consumer-based brand equity. Therefore, based on these studies, both types of branded content on SNSs can serve as effective tool in improving brand value.

Social media outlets constitute vehicles for fostering relationships with customers. One specific way to do this is to create brand fan pages on SNSs (Vries et al., 2012), which are created by the company and support interactions with existing and potential customers (Jahn & Kunz, 2014). A brand community is a ''specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand'' (Laroche et al., 2012). The material shared by these brand-related pages must be captivating, thrilling, and inventive to draw in and engage its audience (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Tsimonis and Dimitradis (2014) found that companies primarily use their brand-owned communities on SNSs for activities such as introducing and promoting new products, facilitating communication that includes both knowledge and relationship building through regular conversations, organizing contests, and providing basic customer service. Lin & Lu (2011) shows that the presence on different SNSs helps brands to enhance brand attractiveness. SNS-based brand communities bring several benefits for brands such as the formulation of positive purchase intentions, the development of brand loyalty, connection with a large customer base in a fast and cost-efficient manner, possibilities of contact with potential customers, customer feedback on existing offerings, ideas for potential future offerings, and evaluation of existing services, practicing co-creation and user-centric innovation (Kaur et al., 2016).

Electronic word of mouth (e-WoM) is becoming an important marketing tool in the social media era. Consumers are accustomed to sharing information with others on SNSs (Park et al., 2019). E-WoM is defined as ''Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet'' (Park et al., 2019; Henning-Thurau et al., 2004, p.39). Word of mouth on SNSs can efficiently and economically reach both current and potential target audience (Majlesirad & Shoushtari, 2020). This can shape their attitudes towards the brand and influence their purchasing decision. The effectiveness of this communication is enhanced by the perceived authenticity of the message, which is built on trust and relationships among the members of the discussion (Siguaw et al., 2021). However, if the message is negative, it could potentially damage the brand and affect the aforementioned factors (Bhatia et al, 2023).

2.2.2 Instagram

One platform that has been significant for both luxury and fast-fashion brands to communicate with their customers, is Instagram. (Cheema, 2018). This sub-chapter will provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between the social media platform, Instagram, and the brand communication.

Instagram, a Social Networking Site, is designed primarily for the creation and sharing of visual content, including both photos and videos (Krepapa et al., 2016). It allows brands to enhance their online presence, identity and build a grater connection with their audience (Krepapa et al., 2016). Instagram ranks among the five largest social networks worldwide, with more than 2 billion users browsing the app each day. People between the ages of 18 and 24 are the app's most avid users, making 30,8% of its total user base. Secondly,

30.3% of users were aged between 25 and 34 years old, showing that this is a social media platform with which Millennials and older Generation Z connects with (Statista, 2024). Given these demographics, it's not surprising that many global brands, particularity those in dynamic industries, have recognized Instagram as an effective tool for engaging with their audience. The platforms immediacy and visually oriented nature make it especially engaging, which is particularly beneficial in the luxury market (Krepapa et al., 2016).

Instagram is the most popular social media platform used by marketers outside of Facebook. Given the inherently visual nature of social media, Instagram has emerged as the ideal platform for fashion brands, encompassing both fast-fashion and luxury segments, which heavily rely on aesthetics and visual appeal (Yoo, 2023). Unlike other Social Networking Sites, Instagram offers a plethora of visual content forms such as images, videos, reels, stories, live streams, and boomerangs, where you can add text, music, stickers, and GIFs (Instagram, n.d). More than 1 in 3 (39%) said that they have become more interested in a brand or product after seeing it in Instagram Stories (Business Instagram, 2018). As a feature, stories can be saved permanently as a highlighted story on your page. The main page of an Instagram profile, known as the feed, contains all the user's permanent posts, including every photo or video they've uploaded. Instagram also offers special filters that can enhance the visuals, making them more appealing and adding an element of fun (Instagram, n.d). A study from Instagram explains that people associate both Instagram Stories and Instagram Feed with visual beauty and creativity (Instagram business, 2018). Alongside the visual content, Instagram posts can also include a brief caption and a few hashtags (Instagram, n.d). These serve to categorize the content based on its topic, thereby increasing its visibility among the audience, and facilitating engagement (Helal & Ozuem, 2018). Given the highly visual nature of Instagram, it's worth noting that visual elements in advertisements have been found to have a greater impact on consumers as they are processed much faster than text (Negm & Tantawi, 2015).

According to Krepapa et al. (2016), maintaining consistency in content, character, and posting frequency is crucial for fashion brands, especially luxury ones. This assertion aligns with Statista's research, where in the first half on 2023, Dior stood out as the fashion, lifestyle, and beauty brand with the highest Media Impact Value (MIV) on Instagram, amassing over 782 million U.S. dollars. Louis Vuitton was a close second, with nearly 55 million, while Chanel completed the top three with 515 million (Statista, 2023). Luxury brand marketers focus on brand communication rather than promoting and selling their products (Yoo, 2023). Additionally, Krepapa et al. (2016) highlights the significance of Instagram for fashion brands, emphasizing its role in communication brand personality, strengthening brand image, and evoking emotions. Instagram is a highly effective platform for the fashion industry due to its ability to facilitate immediate communication. This feature is particularly beneficial for promoting the ever-evolving trends in fashion, ensuring that brands remain relevant. Moreover, it provides a channel for customers to provide direct feedback, further enhancing its effectiveness (Helal & Ozuem, 2018).

2.3 Luxury Fashion Brands

2.3.1 Characteristics

As fast fashion co-branding consists of a collaboration between a luxury brand and a fast fashion brand, it is relevant to delve deeper into what a luxury fashion brand is and its characteristics. Given that luxury brands typically transcend single products or product categories, relying more on authority and ethos than on specific expertise within a narrow domain (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, p.145), this section examines both luxury and luxury fashion brand attributes to provide a comprehensive depiction of branding practices.

While luxury brands strive for uniqueness through diverse brand concepts, they all inherently embody a sense of prestige. This is a common characteristic that unifies them (Van Gorp, 2012). Luxury brands are distinguished by their excellent quality, high price, scarcity and uniqueness, aesthetics and polysexuality, ancestral heritage and personal history, and superfluousness (Dubois et al., 2001). Jackson proposes the following as the core characteristics of the luxury product: 'exclusivity, premium prices, image, and status, which combine to make them more desirable for reasons other than function' (Fionda & Moore, 2009). In the luxury industry, brands play a crucial role because beyond the functional characteristics, they also merchandise intangible values with their products (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). Most of luxury brands comprise numerous points of reference in regard to context and subject, such as people (designer), symbols (logo), organization (mission, culture) and products (quality, attributes) (Som & Blanckaert, 2015). Motives for luxury brands are linked to consumers' need to use them as symbols of social status and power (Mrad et al., 2020). Luxury brand consumer experience feelings of pride that denote success and achievement, and these brands are also linked to prestige, wealth, exclusion, and ego enhancement (Yoo, 2023). Luxury brands are often described as those "brands that no one really needs, but everyone desires" (Hameide, 2011, p. 110).

Luxury brands often emphasize the consistency of their identities over time, rather than striving a competitive edge or positioning themselves relative to other brands (Aliyev et al., 2019). They frequently employ various contrasts in their identities to project a sense of uniqueness and power, such as the simultaneous representation of both masculine and feminine attributes by brands like Chanel (Gupta et al., 2024). An essential aspect of understanding luxury brands is their affinity for art and their incorporation of artistic elements into their products (Aliyev et al., 2019).

In terms of stratification, a luxury brand distinguishes its owner from the rest of society and from users of premium brands, hence marketing efforts extend beyond the target group. Unlike mass or premium brands that are simply launched to market, luxury brands are gradually built over time and strengthened by an increasing number of captivated admirers (Aliyev et al., 2019). To better understand luxury branding, a framework by Fionda & Moore (2009) can be a useful tool. The proposed themes are identified as the principal dimensions of a luxury fashion brand:

- *Clear brand identity* – a unique set of brand associates that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. What the brand stand for.
- *Marketing communications* – the transmission of a message about the brand to the consumer. Advertising, sales promotions, public relations, and direct marketing.
- *Product integrity* – the quality and value of the product. It involves aspects such as craftmanship, design, and material which contribute to the product's performance.
- *Brand signature* – the unique, distinguish features or elements that are associated with a brand in its recognition. E.g. logo, a tagline, a specific color scheme, etc.
- *Premium price* – luxury brands often command a price premium. They are expensive due to their quality, aesthetics, and desirability.
- *Exclusivity* – about rarity and uniqueness of the product. Luxury brands often limit their distribution to maintain a sense of exclusivity.
- *Heritage* – the brand's history and legacy. Many luxury brands have a rich heritage that adds to their appeal.
- *Luxury environment and experience* – creating a luxurious shopping environment and customer experience. E.g. store design, customer service and packaging.
- *Culture* – the set of shared values, attitudes, goals, and practices that characterizes an organization. Often about sophistication, elegance, and a high standard of living.

It is also important to understand the underlying motivations of consumers when choosing luxury brands. One factor is that consumers often feel accomplished due to the symbolic value of consumption of luxury brands. This value is viewed as an expression of individuality or social standing through differentiation or group affiliation (Cho et al., 2022). Luxury brands' exclusiveness can meet consumers' need for uniqueness by creating distance from others. Hence, the demonstration of achievement strengthens the importance of consuming luxury fashion brands (Cho et al., 2023). The concept of luxury is a highly complicated one that is highly subjective and built primarily on consumer perceptions (Kaya, 2021) and found in attributes like scarcity, craftmanship, quality and expertise delivered through products, services, and experiences (Hoffmann & Coste-Maniere, 2012). A study by Vigneron and Johnson (2004) proposed a framework on how luxury brands are perceived by consumers through following traits:

- *Conspicuous value* – the consumption of luxury brands that serves as a signal and symbol of status also wealth.
- *Uniqueness value* – the consumption of luxury brands that symbolize exclusivity and rareness of a limited product that enhances consumers' desire.
- *Social value* – the consumption of luxury brands that based on the role-playing aspects that affects the decision to buy.

- *Hedonic value* – the consumption of luxury brands that look at the product's subjective intangible benefits that fulfill emotional value and provide intrinsic enjoyment.
- *Quality value* – the consumption of luxury brands that is partly derived from technical superiority.

2.3.2 Communication practices

Now, as we know what a luxury brand is, it is also crucial to understand how they communicate to its customers. Luxury brands employ a variety of communication strategies to establish and maintain their brand image. These strategies are designed to create a unique brand identity and to differentiate the brand from its competitors (Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2023). In particularly, characteristics such as exclusivity, limited distribution, and even ''being out of reach'' are frequently emphasized in marketing efforts for luxury brands (Mrad et al., 2020).

A study by Jin and Cedrola (2017) explored the communication strategies employed by luxury fashion brands, combining traditional practices with emerging media. One of the communication practices they highlighted was the use of visual media. These image-based print media continues to play a significant role through billboards and in fashion magazines (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). These visuals are carefully crafted to reflect the brand's identity and to appeal to the brand's target audience (Bonilla-Quijada et al., 2023). Moreover, Jin and Cedrola (2017) emphasized the widespread use of celebrity endorsement by luxury fashion due to their ability to attract the attention of consumers and evoke positive associations. The success of this strategy largely depends on the alignment between the brand's image and the chosen individual, who must maintain consistent commitment to the brand (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). When selecting an endorser, luxury fashion creators often opt for models, although in recent time, recognizable actors and athletes have also become popular choices (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). The authors also address public relations in terms of fashion shows (fashion weeks), store openings and sponsorships as a communication strategy along with personal selling through sales specialists who are familiar with the brands characteristics (Jin & Cedrola, 2017).

Luxury fashion brands have been adapting their communication strategies to the digital age, focusing on creating a dream and enhancing the brand's value rather than direct sales (Hemzo, 2023). This approach is often artistic, socially coded, allusive, and indirect (Wenyun, 2023). The communication practices of luxury fashion brands can be categorized into three main aspects: enrichment, distancing, and abstraction (Velar, 2021). Enrichment involves the use of sign systems, rhetoric, and storytelling to imbue the brand with meaning. Luxury fashion brands construct intricate sign systems to enrich their communication with cultural meaning associated with the brand values (Wenyun, 2023). They employ a multitude of signs related to the brand, such as travel symbols for Louis Vuitton, as well as luxury symbols like craftmanship and arts (Velar, 2021). The rhetorical structure of luxury brands is more complex and frequently applied than for other types of brands, often utilizing metaphors based on an excess of contracts (Hemzo, 2023). Storytelling is a key

factor in creating the dream aspect of the brand, which is based on its ethos or the brand's myth-history (Wenyun, 2023). Distancing, the second characteristics of luxury communication are heavily relied upon by luxury fashion brands. These techniques are divided based on different aspects: temporal (mentioning tradition, time, and history), spatial (featuring outstanding locations), social (remarks about people's status concerning both appearance and behavior), and hypothetical (very unusual and artistic representation). These serve to distance the luxury brands from the ordinary and differentiate them from other types of brands by developing more sensual and emotional communication. The last characteristics is abstraction. It includes a larger combination of themes that allow multiple ways of interpretation. This approach provides a unique perspective that enhances the brand's image and appeal (Gurzki et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Communication within Social Networking Sites

Luxury brands are heavily users of Social Networking Sites to communicate to the rest of the world. The digital transformation of luxury brands has been a significant trend in recent years. This shift has been driven by a variety of factors, including changing consumers behavior and the rise of e-commerce (Kumar, 2019). The digital era has ushered in a new wave of opportunities for luxury fashion brands. These brands have turned to SNSs as a platform to engage with their audience and promote their products (Jin & Ryu, 2020). However, this transition also presents a unique challenge for these brands, particularly in terms of maintaining their exclusivity and allure (Krepapa et al., 2016). Luxury fashion brands have traditionally relied on a sense of exclusivity to attract customers. The shift to digital platforms, which are inherently more accessible, can potentially dilute this sense of exclusivity (Kumar et al., 2022). To navigate this challenge, luxury brands have adopted strategies centered on highlighting the brand ethos and its associated imagery. They present new products through artistic creation, rather than simply promoting a product (Krepapa et al., 2016). Brands often create narratives around their products and their brand history to engage their audience and to add depth to their brand image (Jin & Ryu, 2020). This approach helps to maintain the unique lifestyle associated with luxury brands. A study by Lee et al. (2014) 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 share content such as Instagram stories. Luxury brands are continuing to protect their reserved and exclusive image and maintain a sense of distance. The purpose of communication among luxury brands is not just to sell but also to inspire the consumer to identify with the brand (Athwal et al., 2019). The digital domain enables luxury brands to establish an atmosphere of desire by seducing consumers to their unique offering. They present the brand as aspirational dreams, which can maintain its exclusive nature (Hennigs et al., 2012).

Instead of traditional way of single-sided promotion selling strategy, luxury fashion consumer demands a more interactive marketing approach. The primary motive for luxury brands' engagement with social media is the appeal of luxury among a younger demographic, expanding their exposure to a wider audience

(Athwal et al., 2019). According to Okonkwo (2010), using social media is a great way for luxury brands to gain more information about their needs from the consumers, due to their interactive nature (p.12). SNSs serve as an effective tool for gaining comprehensive knowledge on brand effectiveness and consumers' responses to the brand through likes, comments, shares, etc. (Kumar et al., 2022). Extant studies by Kim and Ko (2012) shows that luxury organizations' usage of social media increases brand equity and enhances purchase intentions. They have identified five attributes of perceived social media activities: ''customization, interaction, trend, word of mouth, and entertainment''. The researchers suggested that 'entertainment' had a positive effect on more variables, including consumer relationship and purchase intention, compared to other SNSs properties. Therefore, it should be the main focus for luxury brands. This can be achieved by creating a 360-degree experience, based on visuals such as videos, music tracks, pictures, etc that refer to the brands and support their multi-sensory luxury experience (Hennigs et al., 2012).

2.4 Fast Fashion Brands

2.4.1 Characteristics

As fast fashion significantly differs from luxury brands; it is essential to delve deeper into the unique characteristics associated with. Fast fashion is a business model that offers (the perception of) fashionable clothes at affordable prices (Caro & Albeniz, 2015). Fast fashion can be defined as a business model that combines three elements: (a) quick response; (b) frequent assortment changes; and (c) fashionable designs at affordable prices (Caro & Albeniz, 2015). Supported by the results of a study by Gabrielli et al. (2013) who acknowledge that the success of this new fashion scheme is attributed to its ability to adapt to changes in buyers' attitudes and consumption habits through shorter lead-times, accessibility, and trendiness. Unlike luxury fashion brands, the fast fashion model does not hinge on the personality of its designer or the country of origin as its defining features. Instead, it seamlessly integrates into the global fashion culture (Gabrielli et al., 2013).

H&M and Zara have become the most iconic brands of fast fashion with fashion-led styles that attract media attention (Barnes & Greenwood, 2006). Zara and H&M have undertaken a radical change to the design cycle in order to provide fashion almost on demand (Caro & Albeniz, 2015). They have reacted to the customers' needs by frequently updating their product selection while keeping them affordable for consumers who desire to keep up with the latest trends (Gabrielli et al., 2013). In the fashion marketplace, they are increasingly associated with fast fashion rather than being categorized solely ass mass retailers (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Another aspect that characterizes fast fashion brands is that they only produce their products in smaller volumes that usually are not replenished, in order to minimize the risk of inaccuracy and being out of date (Hines & Bruce, 2007, p.44). Cheema (2018) asserts that the business strategy of global retailers in the fast fashion industry is built on three main pillars: product pricing, speed and method of production, and the trendiness and disposability of clothing. The shift towards rapid response production and

global business has enabled fast fashion companies to quickly adapt to the latest trends at provide up-to-date ready-to-wear products to meet consumers demand in the shortest possible time (Barnes & Greenwood, 2006). The term 'fast' in fast fashion refers to the speed at which these brands translate high fashion runway trends into their own design (Brooks, 2015). It has been stated that fast fashion brands take their cue from luxury fashion brands when deciding what to produce (Hines & Bruce, 2007, p.44). This allows them to adapt the latest luxury designs into more affordable versions produced by mass-market retailers at a discount (Joy et al., 2015).

The phrase 'fast fashion' refers to clothing collections that imitate current luxury fashion trends but are offered at low prices (Barnes & Greenwood, 2006). According to Atwal et al. (2010, cited in Cheema, 2018), fast fashion brands primarily target lower-income consumers, emphasizing cost-related factors. As a result, the fast fashion market size surpasses that of luxury fashion, which typically caters to wealthier clientele (Shen et al., 2017). Furthermore, the fast fashion industry has captivated young women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. These fashion enthusiasts are drawn to celebrity culture and high-end fashion, aspiring to acquire similar clothing items. However, a challenge arises because these consumers desire the latest trends seen on public figures or emerging from high-fashion runways, yet they often lack the financial means to afford such items (Barnes & Greenwood, 2006). This delicate balance between affordability and style drives the popularity of fast fashion among informed young consumers, allowing them to create their individual looks while compromising on the quality of fashionable clothing (Joy et al., 2015). Fast fashion allows consumers to make choices, with little economic or psychosocial investment, whilst expressing their lifestyle through consumption and possession (Gabrielli et al., 2013). Despite sustainability concerns, fast fashion remains an attractive alternative for those who seek stylish options without the luxury price tag (Joy et al., 2015).

2.4.2 Communication Practices

It is just not the characteristics that sets luxury and fast fashion brands apart. They do not only differ in characteristics, but also the way they communicate to their customers. Gabrielli et al. (2013) suggests that Word of Mouth (WoM) could be a significant communication strategy for fast fashion brands, as it facilitates the hunt for the best deals and promotes the exchange of advice, which are fundamental for these brands. They also propose that sharing meanings is a thriving approach, where brands can shape customer perceptions through narratives in both online and physical stores. Physical stores themselves serve as a powerful communication medium for fast fashion brands, with the environment and ambiance acting as a crucial point of contact (Barnes & Greenwood, 2010). A key tactic in fast fashion's in-store communication is the use of ''hero pieces''. These are standout products that embody essential brand identity elements like trendiness or timeliness (Barnes & Greenwood, 2010).

Fast fashion brands often adopt communication strategies similar to those used by luxury brands to elevate their image. This includes advertising in upscale fashion magazines like Vogue, where they emulate the aesthetic of luxury advertisements (Okonkwo, 2007, p.229). Another strategy they use is the use of celebrity endorsement. For mainstream fashion brands, these celebrities are typically fashion icons who are well-known to their target audience, regardless of their actual expertise. This is a tactic frequently used in luxury brand communication (Okonkwo, 2007, p.230).

According to Han et al. (2017), the messaging of fast fashion brands is typically creative, straightforward, and disseminated through various engaging media platforms, setting them apart from other categories. These messages often encourage consumers to keep up with the latest trends through increase consumption, in line with the rapid product turnover characteristic of fast fashion (Han et al., 2017). In a study on fast fashion consumption practices, Gabrielli et al. (2013) underscore the importance of functional values in fast fashion brand communication. This includes efficiency, represented by the price-to-quality ratio, and transparency in setting clear expectations, which can guide consumers in their search for bargains. The authors also suggest that the experiential aspect of fast fashion brands, which are tied to the emotional and hedonic values associated with bargain hunting (such as enjoyment and satisfaction), should be emphasized. This can help create narratives that counteract the perception of being a low-cost provider, although this practice is not you widespread.

In terms of visual content in promotional materials, fast fashion brands, which are part of the mass market, tend to employ relatively uncomplicated sign system and rhetoric. They often reflect real-life scenarios, with less emphasis on consistency conveying meaning in a regular and repetitive manner, as pointed out by Gurzki et al. (2019). The authors note that these brands most commonly use basic product/object templates (example, a model against a neutral studio backdrop) or enhance it with a setting composed of single symbols (like water). They seldom employ simple storytelling techniques. The concept of distancing is generally overlooked, with occasional use of spatial (realistic, familiar locations) or social techniques (such as slightly rebellious model behavior) (Gurzki et al., 2019). Finally, Gurzki et al. (2019) mention that temporal distancing is avoided due to the fast fashion's emphasis on contemporaneity, where hypothetical distancing contradicts its realistic aspect.

2.4.3 Communications within Social Networking Sites

Fast fashion brands have increasingly leveraged Social Networking Sites as a key part of their communication and marketing strategies, in line with the luxury brands. Social media content created by firms offers an optimal platform for brand value co-creation because of its reach and interactiveness (Rashid et al., 2019). Fast fashion brands, such as H&M, have generated 39 million Instagram engagements from just 486 posts, and received 20 times the engagement of its peers, demonstrating the reach social media can achieve (Sweeney, 2018). In fashion, brands use social media primarily to introduce their products, services,

and the brand (Kim & Ko, 2012). In fast fashion's social media, pictures and videos are particularly important since customers thrive to see the newest designs and get inspiration.

A key strategy employed by these brands is the use of product-related posts (Cheema, 2018). According to a study by Bonilla et al. (2024), these posts serve to highlight the functionalities of fashion items, thereby providing consumers with valuable insights into the product's features. Moreover, these posts often include links to online shops, facilitating a seamless transition from product discovery to purchase. Brands social media engagement performs as a marketing activity to build a relationship with customers, as they engage in direct dialogues with the audience, both in private messages and published content (Kim & Ko, 2012). A case study on Primark's Instagram strategy revealed that the brand effectively uses a combination of message content, communication strategy, and formal and product category aspect in their posts to generate engagement. The study also found that these interactions on Instagram can significantly influence brand image and consumer loyalty (Bonilla et al., 2024).

Social influencers, including celebrities are considered the most powerful force in the fashion marketplace (Sudha & Sheena, 2017). Fast fashion companies have realized the importance of this marketing strategy and have decided to contract celebrities on Instagram, such as bloggers and singers to generate increased interest and increase brand credibility (Loureiro et al., 2018). Fast fashion collaborations can have important social motivations, which purports to prioritize inclusivity at its core (Jain, 2023).

A study by Escobar-Rodriguez and Bonson-Fernandez (2017) concluded that fast fashion brands on Facebook effectively engage and interact with their audience through simple, short posts featuring visual elements like photos or videos. They also frequently use call-to-action buttons like ''buy now'', ''more information'', or ''contact us'' to facilitate customer-brand interaction.

Fast fashion companies implement robust communication strategies on social media. They publish multiple posts daily across various SNSs, each conveying a unique message tailored to the platform's characteristics. These messages can be informational, such as event announcements, or promotional, such as product-related messages. Brands stimulate community member activity through contests or celebrity interactions. User-generated content is crucial for fast fashion brands as it provides direct feedback and sparks consumer discussion (Cheema, 2018). Brands often create dedicated hashtags for campaigns to link viral audience content to the fast fashion brand, thereby enhancing its credibility and forming emotional bonds (Escobar-Rodriguez & Bonson-Fernandez, 2017).

2.5 Theoretical Considerations

2.5.1. Brand Associations

Levy's research (1959) suggests that consumers are driven not just by the functionality of products, but also their symbolic meanings. Brands aim to create a unique personality through advertising, which involves both functional and symbolic associations (Meenaghan, 1995). Keller further elaborates on this concept, defining brand associations as the various thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs linked to the brand in the consumer's mind (Kotler & Keller, 2012). These associations shape the consumer's perception and image of the brand (Keller, 1993). Advertising plays a pivotal role in building this brand image by communicating the brand's advantages and positioning it in the consumers mind (Doyle, 1989, cited in Meenaghan, 1995). Brand associations also serve as a measure of consumer-based brand equity, reflecting how consumers respond to marketing efforts based on their knowledge of the brand (Keller, 1993).

Keller categorized brand associations into three types: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Attributes are the descriptive characteristics of a product, which can be product-related or more abstract and non-product-related. Attributes related to the typical user or usage situation can create brand personality attributes, including its character and the feelings it evokes. Benefits are the value that the product delivers to the consumer, which can be functional, experiential, or symbolic. Attitudes reflect how consumer generally perceive the brand, which often influences their behavior. Brand associations can be characterized by their uniqueness, strength, and favorability (Keller, 1993). Unique associations differentiate brand from its competitors. The strength of brand association refers to their connection to the brand, based on the quantity and quality of the associations. The favorability of the associations is based on how well the brand can meet the consumer's wants and needs (Keller, 2003).

In terms of brand communication, Sjödin & Törn (2006) suggest that the degree to which a piece of brand communication aligns with the previously formed associations about the brand can vary. Each piece of brand communication can create, reinforce, and influence consumers' brand associations. In the context of social media, brand communication can significantly impact the creation of brand association, increase brand awareness, and foster a sense of belonging to the brand (Mahajan & Khajuria, 2017).

Co-branding initiatives can leverage the brand associations of a well-established brand or a brand with niche-specific associations to help other brands expand into new markets. However, these associations can also potentially harm the brand image by weakening brand associations or creating undesirable ones. Therefore, brand managers need to analyze the fit between the brands in co-branding arrangements to avoid these risks (Helmig et al., 2008).

In this thesis, the focus is to investigate the types of brand associations as a form of meaning-making. The aim is to obtain consumers' opinions on brand communication related to co-branding, which may not align with the regular brand image. Keller's (1993) brand associations scale is used for its holistic approach, and it also fits with other the theories selected for this thesis.

2.5.2 Schema Incongruity and Brand Image Incongruity

The concept of a schema, as defined by Fiske & Linville (1980), is a cognitive framework that is developed around a specific stimulus based on past experiences. This framework, stored in an individual's mind, guides future interactions. When a piece of information is encountered, the knowledge stored in schemas is activated and compared to it, resulting in either congruity (a successful match) or incongruity (an unsuccessful match). Mandler's (1982) Theory of Schema Incongruity refers to situations where a piece of information (or evidence) does not align with the expectations (based on the established schema) of the recipient regarding a particular scenario. According to Mandler (1982), schema incongruity can be seen as a disruption of expectations caused by evidence, where congruity refers to alignment with expectations. This theory suggests that the emotional responses to incongruities are influenced by cognitive effort needed to resolve them (Mandler, 1982):

- Congruity with a schema should lead to positive responses as it requires little cognitive effort and does not disturb or require changes within established schemas.
- Incongruity is seen as having a dual effect on recipients' responses, depending on its degree. Moderate incongruity, which Mandler described as being able to be assimilated within a related schema or an alternative one (delayed congruity) without major changes to them, may elicit positive and more significant responses than congruent information. This is due to the increased cognitive effort triggered by the novelty of the stimuli, the interest it generates, and the sense of reward after its resolution. Extreme incongruity, which may either be resolved through accommodation involving structural changes within the relevant schema or remain unresolved despite cognitive effort, may results in positive evaluations but can also trigger frustration and negative responses due to the effort involved in its processing.

In the marketing context, schemas can refer to various knowledge structures such as products, brands, or advertising (Halkias & Kokkinaki, 2013). This study focuses on consumer brand schemas and the incongruities between them and brand communication on Instagram. Social media communication created by firms can be an advertising tool aimed at achieving marketing goals (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

Heckler and Childers (1992) studied the phenomenon of incongruity across incompatible verbal and visual ad elements. They suggest that schema incongruity is composed of two factors that steer consumers evaluations: one is relevancy, which pertains to the efficacy of message transmission and the creation of

meaning, and the other is expectancy, which is associated with how well that meaning aligns with pertinent schemas. They found that incongruent ads are more memorable and lead to enhanced recall. Halkias and Kokkinaki (2013) applied this reasoning to the branding context, investigating responses to chocolate bar ads of varying incongruity levels. They found that moderately incongruent brand communication had the most favorable impact on consumer reactions.

Dahlen & Lange (2004) studied the influence of ad-brand incongruity between familiar and unfamiliar chocolate bar brands. They found that incongruent promotional material of a familiar brand led to increased brand salience and memorability. However, incongruent ads for those brands were harder to remember as they did not match consumers' brand schemas. Torn & Dahlen (2007) focused on well-known brands and found that ad incongruity positively influenced attention, recall, and ad attitudes. They noted that for familiar brands, incongruent ads and their messages are processed more thoroughly as brand schemas are examined more deeply for potential matches. However, they found that such incongruity didn't affect brand attitudes in the long term, as consumers reverted to their established brand perceptions.

Sjödin & Törn (2006) provided a narrower view on schema incongruity with their paper on Brand Image Incongruity. They defined it as a phenomenon occurring when a piece of brand communication does not align with the image of the brand stored in the recipients' brand schemas. Incongruent brand communication can have a dual impact on consumers, affecting both consumer processing and consumer evaluations.

In conclusion, this study focuses on perceived congruity and incongruity between brand schemas of luxury fashion brand followers and its co-branding communication on Instagram in case of an alliance with a fast fashion brand. The study is also interested in perceptions and reactions toward Brand Image Incongruity directly linked to Brand Associations behind the analyzed content. Consumer reactions in this study will refer to brand attitudes as well as ad attitudes, where in this case the ''ad'' refers to co-branding content on the brand's Instagram page.

2.5.3 Social Identity Theory and Consumer-Brand Identification

Social Identity Theory (SIT), proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), posits that our self-concepts are significantly influenced by the social groups we associate with (in-groups) and those we don't (out-groups). This theory outlines three key processes related to group membership:

- *Social Categorization:* Individuals categorize entities into relevant social groups to comprehend and interact with their environment. They classify themselves into groups that align with their identities based on comparisons of prominent group characteristics.
- *Social Identification:* Individuals adopt the identities of groups that are most beneficial and suitable to them, forming their social identity. The social identity affects their self-esteem and is evaluated based on the values associated with the groups it included.

- *Social Comparison:* Individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity through evaluations of their in-group and comparisons with relevant out-groups. If these comparisons don't yield positive results, individuals may either leave the in-group or attempt to enhance its status.

Building on SIT, Bhattacharaya & Sen (2003) introduced the concept of Customer-Company Identification. They suggested that consumers who willingly incorporate a company into their social identity engage in both positive and negative events related to the company. They also posited that consumers who identify with a company's identity form the most committed relationships with the organization as it aids them in realizing their self-projections.

In the context of branding, Bagozzi & Dholakia (2006) defined brand identification as the perceived unity between a consumer's self-image and the brand's image. Lam et al. (2010) conceptualized Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI) as a customer's physiological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuating their association with a brand. This concept is based on SIT and also considers Identity Theory by Stryker (1968), which relates to the social roles of individuals. According to Stryker (1968), an individual's self is made up of multiple identities that are organized in a hierarchical manner and are dependent on the situation. This means that the identity (or identities) that come into play are determined by their appropriateness to the given circumstances.

Lam et al. (2010) applied the CBI concept, supported by SIT, to online brand communities on Social Networking Sites (SNSs). These platforms enable users to create and display personal identities and engage in public consumption activities that satisfy their social identities. Research has shown that consumer-brand identification can significantly influence the level of engagement in these communities.

3.0 Methodology

This part of the thesis elaborates on the methodology followed in the research in order to answer the research question. Initially, it introduces the research philosophy that forms the foundation of this study. Following this, it delves into the approach to theory development, which subsequently guides out methodological choices. With these elements in place, it then outlines the strategy, culminating in the selection of specific techniques and procedures to address the research question.

3.1 Methodological choice

Following Saunders et al. (2019) the research onion pertains to the selection between quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. As per the authors, research can adopt a mono-method (one data collection technique) or multi-method approach (more than one data collection technique) for quantitative and

qualitative studies, or it can be simple or complex for mixed studies. The choice of methods is contingent upon the chosen hypothesis or research questions, as well as the subject of study, which necessitates a specific approach (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

This study, guided by its aim and underlying philosophy, employs a multi-method qualitative approach. The research question seeks a deeper comprehension of the various interpretations and responses elicited by fast fashion co-branding content. These responses are qualitative in nature, relating to individuals' self-projections, their mental image of the brand, and prior preconceptions. Therefore, quantitative methods, which are more suited to addressing question about measurable events and generalizations (Hassan, 2024), would not be effective in this context, as they are focused on numerical data and exploring relationship between variables (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Qualitative methods are significant as it allows to offer a valuable means of exploring the intricate nuances of human experiences and perception through collecting and using non-numerical data like images or words to recognize the meanings behind them (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It allows to acquire deeper insights on consumer attitudes and opinions, and thus their ensuing behavior (Saunders et al., 2012). Considering that online communities, like those on Instagram, contain substantial qualitative data, including text and visuals (Saunders et al., 2019), this could facilitate an effective examination of co-branding communication pieces. This serves as a supplementary method in addressing the research question. The use of multiple data collection techniques should enable to holistically tackle the researched problem.

3.2 Research strategy

Once the research method is selected, the subsequent step involves determining the research strategy, which serves as a tactic for the study to address the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). The authors suggest that this decision should be influenced by several factors including the aim of the study, the research question, the selected approach, as well as practical consideration such as existing knowledge.

3.2.1 Exploratory research

The purpose of the research design must be determined before deciding on it, and it could be exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, or evaluative (Saunders et al., 2019). This thesis is identified as being exploratory in nature.

Exploratory research, as the name suggest, is conducted to explore a research area where the problem is not clearly defined. It is a valuable method of research design when the researcher does not have a clear understanding of the problem and needs (Hassan, 2024). Exploratory research is centered around probing the current situation and acquiring insights about the subject under study. This is typically achieved by posing open-ended questions that often begin with ''What'' or ''How'' (Saunders et al., 2019). This thesis is

intended for exploratory purposes, as the topic, to the best of knowledge, is not clearly defined in the current body of literature. The objective is to investigate the diverse perspectives of the communication of co-branding in luxury fashion on Instagram. The research goal is to identify trends in the responses of a fairly uniform consumer group and potential influencers of their views. These are initial paths that this study intends to explore, paving the way for future research and initiating discourse on the subject. Therefore, explanatory research, which centers on examining relationships with predefined variables, was not suitable for this thesis. Similarly, a descriptive study, which profiles specific events after their discovery, was not applicable. Lastly, it did not opt for an evaluate study as it assesses the effectiveness of events (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.2.2 Case Study

Case studies are renowned for their ability to provide in-depth insights into specific social settings or aspects. This method allows for a detailed examination of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts, offering rich and contextualized data (Yin, 2018). Reflecting the subjectivist and interpretivist perspectives inherent in this thesis, it will emphasize the importance of centering the investigation within real-life settings. It maintains that individuals' motivations for belonging and engaging within online brand communities, as well as their expectations regarding communication efforts, are highly nuanced. This variability exists even within a single community, posing challenges to generalizing results across different brands. Additionally, each brand involved in a co-branding alliance possesses distinct characteristics that may elicit diverse reactions from audiences. Therefore, conducting an in-depth investigation of these brands in practice appears warranted.

Flybjerg (2006) emphasizes the importance of aligning case studies with research question to ensure the production of satisfactory data. In this thesis, the research question is oriented towards exploring the phenomenon rather than testing specific constructs within it. As such, the case study methodology emerges as the most appropriate choice, as it has the potential to generate sufficient qualitative data to address the research question through the process of meaning making.

The strategy in question offers a comprehensive understanding of the nature, impacts, and origins of a phenomenon at the same time (Saunders et al., 2019). This research encompasses this approach as it adopts a holistic perspective. The objective is not merely to investigate the phenomenon, but also to comprehend its contributing factors and its formation (identify brand association through co-branding content). Furthermore, it aims to discern how it was perceived (brand associations related to the parent brand that created the content) and the subsequent effects (participate and become part of the community).

The decision to focus on a single case study was influenced by its capacity for detailed investigation, as suggested by Yin (2018). This approach appeared to be the most suitable for this research, as studying

multiple cases could potentially dilute the depth of exploration. Furthermore, the chosen case exemplifies a phenomenon that, to the best of knowledge, has not been explored in existing literature.

3.2.2.1 Balmain x H&M

The case chosen for this thesis is the collaboration between one of the leading fast fashion retailers, H&M (Shen et al., 2014) and its co-branding alliance with the French high-end luxury brand, Balmain. Balmain is originally famous for using bold ways to dress women in a ‘’way of embracing woman’s form and charm with their signature styles’’ (Balmain, n.d). Its aesthetic is influenced by the couture tradition of Paris, combining classic elegance with a modern sensibility. The clothing is all about high-octane glamour, lavish embellishments, intricate embroidery, and figure-flattering silhouettes (Brand Hopper, 2023). The signature elements are the strict tailoring, cinched waists, strong shoulders, perfect pleating, and elaborate volumes (Balmain, n.d). H&M, on the other side have the passion for making great and more sustainable fashion and design available to everyone. The Swedish company provides apparel for all family members, beauty products, and accessories. These are distributed globally via a network of physical stores and digital platforms. The brand consists of sustainability, quality, and affordability (H&M Group, n.d). The collaboration between Balmain and H&M was announced in November 2015 and was met with great excitement and anticipation. The collection was available in around 250 stores worldwide and online (H&M Group, 2015). The rapid sell-out of the entire collection helped prove that the historic Parisian house’s new style and attitude was something that young consumers across the world were hungry for (Balmain, 2015). The collaboration was a unique blend of H&M commitment to sustainability, quality and affordability, and Balmain’s high-end luxury aesthetics (Brand Hopper, 2023). Balmain’s womenswear and menswear collections for H&M were rich in details and craftmanship, encapsulating the themes and signatures that have made Balmain one of the most important luxury brands of the 21st century. Olivier Rousteing has brought his passion for design to every piece in the collection (Balmain, 2015). However, the collaboration was not just about creating a collection, but also about creating a movement of togetherness, fueled on a hashtag: #HMBalmaination. This movement invited fans of both brands to come together and celebrate the unique blend of luxury and affordability that the collaboration represented (H&M Group, 2015).

Since the co-branding strategy between fast-fashion and luxury brands has so far been mostly implemented by H&M (Shen et al., 2017), the collaborations established with Balmain were chosen as the basis of this study. As H&M is known for its success in such co-branding alliances, and due to the enormous interest and desire among consumers (Shen et al., 2019), this study find it particularly relevant to explore this specific partnership. The H&M and Balmain collaboration serves as an exemplary case to understand the consumer perceptions of co-branding between fast fashion and luxury. The widespread attention and reaction it garnered make it an ideal subject for investigating how luxury fashion followers on Instagram perceive this collaboration, providing valuable insights into the effectiveness and challenges of such marketing strategies.

3.3 Data collection

As articulated by Saunders et al. (2012), the process of data collection is a systematic activity that is influenced by factors such as location, timing, and resources. It involves the careful selection of suitable research instruments to accumulate the necessary data for addressing the research question. In this study, it incorporates primary data.

3.3.1 Primary data

Given the investigate character of this study and the scarcity of existing literature on the topic of co-branding communication in luxury fashion on Instagram from a consumer's viewpoint, this thesis have chosen to gather and utilize primary data to address the research question. Primary data, as defined by Bryman & Bell (2015), are specific pieces of information that researchers gather using methods tailored to their research context. These data are then analyzed by the researchers themselves to answer the research question at hand. In this research, it is utilized both the co-branding content disseminated by Balmain on Instagram and the viewpoints of its brand community members. It adopts the consumer's perspective, aiming to comprehend the interpretations of the messages conveyed by the brand. It will apply two distinct methods for the collection and analysis of primary data.

3.3.2.1 Content selection

To analyze the research question, screenshots from Instagram posts shared by Balmain on their public profile during their partnership with H&M was utilized. Those materials were part of the Instagram promotional campaign for the Balmain x H&M collection, which took place in November 2015. In order to conduct a comprehensive analysis of posts, both in terms of Semiotics and during the interview process, this thesis opted for a reflective purposive sampling technique (Saunders et al., 2019). Three pieces of content that were found most insightful were handpicked. These pieces were diverse in visual appeal and delivery format, encompassing both photo and video content from the feed and highlighted stories. To prevent repetition and to gain a broader perspective, it was conducted a preliminary search, examining all the pieces to select three unique ones. The hypothesis was that different formats might elicit varied responses and could be more or less effective in conveying intended associations. Furthermore, due to the differences in content design and duration constraints, it was speculated that different types of communication content might differ in the number of encoded associations. Additionally, it was considered that Instagram followers might have preferences towards the type of content they expect on the brand profile they interact with. Therefore, the use of various formats could potentially reveal which pieces are more likely to be processed. Since all the communication pieces are part of a single campaign, the same frames might be used in different videos or longer formats. To avoid redundancy and overlapping content, materials published through for example Instagram TV were excluded. The chosen pieces of Instagram co-branding communication will be presented and analyzed throughout the Semiotics chapter.

3.3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

3.3.2.2.1 Type

In this research, qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen as the secondary method for gathering primary data. This decision was influenced by the exploratory nature of this study, the desire for a wide range of responses, and the interest in specific theoretical perspectives. This type of interview is commonly employed to collect data on individuals' interpretations, experiences, and comprehension of the social world (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 221). Attention is paid to both the meaning and the language used in the responses (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 222).

In this study, it was concluded with that structured interviews were not applicable. This is in line with the findings of Saunders et al. (2019) who argue that such interviews are primarily concerned with data that can be quantified, and they do not permit supplementary inquiries or personal biases.

Semi-structured interviews are typically grounded in a pre-established set of themes, which include key questions that help steer the interview in the desired direction (Saunders et al., 2019). The interviewer's use of these themes is influenced by the chosen research philosophy. As a result, the interview question was modified during the process based on the responses received. Each interviewee offered unique interpretations or information, which introduced new aspects to each discussion and ultimately yielded viable insights that we had not initially considered.

3.3.2.2.2 Sampling

The chosen sampling method is non-probability sampling, as the focus is on the subjective, comprehensive exploration of meanings generated within the area of interest, rather than statistical interpretations typically associated with a probability approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2016, p. 231). Purposive sampling was selected, which Yin (2018) argues is appropriate for case studies because it enables researchers to uncover and comprehend the emotions and judgments of specific social actors involved in the phenomena under study (p. 98). Homogeneous purposive sampling was utilized, where cases from a group within the population share the same characteristics (Nikolopoulou, 2022). This approach is particularly effective for this study. Furthermore, this is reinforced by the concept that each individual may harbor different brand associations in their mind (Aaker, 1991). Consequently, limiting the sample to relatively similar entities will yield more reliable and in-depth observation of the given group within the population.
Six semi-structured interviews were conducted until it reached data saturation, a point where new data no linger brings fresh insights to the research question (Saunders et al., 2018). The focus was on Balmain consumers who follow the brand on Instagram and meet certain criteria. The people selected was Balmain followers who have been part of the brand community for at least six months and engage with its content through likes, comments, and shares. This group was further narrowed down women born 1980 - 19999 often referred to as ''Millennials''. These individuals typically have an average income and represent a

significant clientele for both luxury brands and fast fashion, as well as a major share of Instagram users (Statista, 2023). The majority of the respondents were French, as this study did not consider cross-national comparisons at this stage of the research. Lastly, this study is limited to followers who has made a purchase from Balmain within the last three months. This ensured the strength of brand schemas and confirmed that the brand still forms part of their self-concepts. In Table 1, information about the six interviewees is noted.

Interviewee	Age of interviewee	Gender	Last purchase	Followed since
Camille	24	Female	2 months ago	2020
Mary	26	Female	3 months ago	2018
Charlotte	27	Female	1 month ago	2015
Jane	30	Female	3 months ago	2015
Elizabeth	32	Female	1 month ago	2014
Frances	34	Female	2 months ago	2019

Table 1. Basic information interviewees

3.3.2.2.3 Interviewing Process

Interviews were carried out individually, with each session involving a single researcher and one participant, as described by Saunders et al. (2019, p. 442). Due to the geographical distance, all the interviews were held via Zoom, which allowed for a face-to-face dialogue, fostering a more open discussion. This approach inevitably influenced the setting of the interviews, which was out of the control. However, participants were requested to choose a quiet location with a stable internet connection to ensure uninterrupted audio and video communication. The participants, as suggested, selected a space where they felt at ease to create a comfortable atmosphere. The interviews took place over a week in the beginning of May, with each session between 35 – 45 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in English.

Given the personal nature of semi-structured interviews, which aim to collect personal views, emotions, interpretations, and experiences, certain ethical considerations were necessary (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 442). Prior to the interviews, participants were asked for their consent to use their first names and their words, as well as to record the conversation. The recording commenced only after these confirmations were received. All participants consented to the recording, resulting in all interviews being audio-recorded and later transcribed. In addition, it was made notes of key points and potential minor modifications to the predetermined interview themes that emerged during each conversation.

3.3.2.2.4 Interview Guide

The interview guide, as suggested by Saunders et al. (2019, p. 437), was structured like a roadmap, encompassing pre-established topics along with supplementary annotations to aid in the progression of the interview. This ensured a systematic and comprehensive exploration of the themes during each interview

session. Inquiries were formulated based on the principal notions derived from the literature review, all within the framework of the selected case study. The objective was to garner essential understanding pertinent to each sub-question of the thesis. The focus was to uncover the perceptions of luxury fashion brand followers regarding the co-branding communication of luxury fashion on Instagram. This also included their subsequent responses, such as their attitudes towards the brand and the content, as well as their readiness to engage with the brand. See Appendix 1 for interview guide.

In the interviews, it was primarily used open-ended questions, supplemented by closed questions and probing questions to gain a more profound understanding of the participants' responses and their implications, as suggested by Saunders et al. (2019, p. 458). Two techniques were implemented for identifying brand associations. The first technique was a free association task, which helped to discover the initial brand associations that come to mind for the participants. This was supported by follow-up question to ensure the responses were relevant aligned with the typology of associations (Keller, 2013, p. 326 – 328). The second technique was the use of projective methods, which can reveal personal opinions motivations of the interviewees that might be difficult to access otherwise (Keller, 2013, p. 328). Specifically, a comparisons task was employed where respondents were asked to compare the brand to a person and explain their choices. This tool can be useful in understanding associations related to brand imagery (Keller, 2013, p. 330).

Kvale (2007) suggests that while there are no set rules for conducting an interview, researchers should adopt certain standard methods for different parts of the process (p. 33) As per Saunders et al. (2019), each interview began with a welcome, an overview of the format and duration, and obtaining the necessary consents (p. 455 – 456). Once the recording started, participants were asked demographic questions and warm-up questions. The interviews were structured into three sections.

The first part was focused on common perceptions about Balmain and its presence on Instagram. It commenced with a free association task (Keller, 2013), related to the brand. Subsequently, participants were queried about their perception of Balmain's Instagram communication style and what motivates them to interact with it. Through this approach, it aimed to identify fundamental brand association and stimulate established brand schemas.

The second segment of this study introduced the participants to three instances of Balmain's co-branding Instagram content, a result of their partnership with fast fashion brand, H&M. This content was also selected for a Semiotic Analysis, as detailed later on. Participants were given time to familiarize themselves with the content and were asked to signal when they were ready to move forward. The first task, based on Keller's (2013) free association method, involved asking the participants about their initial impression of Balmain based on the presented content. Then several follow-up questions were asked about their perception of

Balmain, focusing on potential users, usage scenarios, and possible benefits of using the showcased products. These questions were in accordance with Keller's (2013) guidelines and typology of associations (p. 327-328). Next, Keller's (2013) projective technique were employed, asking participants to personify Balmain based on the content they had seen and describe its personality traits. These tasks aimed to uncover the brand associations triggered by the analyzed content and reasoning behind them, addressing the first research sub-question.

The third segment of the interview initiated with a broad inquiry about the content. The participants were asked for their views on how well the content aligns with Balmain's brand image and what they anticipate as members of the brand community. This was done with the intention of identifying any potential discrepancies between the pre-existing brand image of Balmain and the co-branding content. This study aimed to understand the reasoning behind these discrepancies and the attitudes they evoke, addressing the second sub-question of this research. Participants were also queried about their interest in seeing more of such content and how it would affect their engagement levels. Additionally, an effort was made to understand if participants still identify with Balmain when it communicates using this type of content. These latter inquire pertain to the third sub-question of this research, focusing on the concept of Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI) and the resulting engagement levels, as discussed in studies by Lam et al., 2010, and Tuskej & Podnar, 2018.

The interviews concluded with a recapitulation of key points. Participants were given the opportunity to share any final remarks or reflections. In accordance with ethical guidelines, it was made sure to inform the participants that they could access the outcomes of their interviews.

3.4 Data Analysis

Scrutiny of data is the concluding stage of the ''research framework'' as delineated by Saunders et al. (2019). Abadie & L'hour (2021) emphasize the importance of data analysis in research, stating that it aids in identifying trends, simplifying complex information, and ultimately answering research questions. The next sections will provide a detailed explanation of the two techniques used – Semiotic Analysis and in-depth interviews.

3.4.1 Semiotic Analysis

In the initial phrase of this research, the aim was to decipher the brand associations that could be identified within the co-branding content of Balmain. This involved merging the values of two significantly different brands to comprehend the perceptions of brands followers. Consequently, the attention was centered on the interpretations of visuals, which are fundamental to Instagram communication. It eas discovered that semiotics, defined as the ''study of signs'' where signs are elements of communication that convey non-

literal meanings, was the most appropriate methods of analysis (Plowright, 2015). An alternative approach, content analysis, is typically employed for identifying patterns in communications, leaning more towards quantitative considerations (Lou, 2019). However, this method does not align with the objectives of this thesis. Semiotics, on the other hand, is frequently utilized by researchers in the field of communications, as evidenced by Freire (2014) and Kim et al. (2019). For instance, Kim et al. (2019) dissected the promotional visuals content of prestige mass-market fashion brands, extracting their identities from messages constructed on signs.

From the perspective of Semiotics, signs are made up of two components: the signifier, which is a detectable element of communication like a phrase or image, and the signified, which represents the meaning conveyed by the signifier (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 683). Each sign can be categorized as either denotative, implying that its significance is clear to the interpreter, or connotative, indicating an indirect meaning (p.685). For instance, consider the image of a rose. The signifier here is the rose itself, while the signified can vary: denotatively, it signifies a type of flower; connotatively, it might symbolize love, passion, or even secrecy, depending on the content (Saunders et al., 2019, p.686). It is suggested that since signs can hold multiple meanings or alter them when combined with others, Semiotics should be employed within a specific context, such as a cultural one, to limit meanings (Iskanderova, 2024). This is applicable to this situation as it is part of the young adult demographic targeted by luxury fashion, and the entire sample selected for the second part of the study is include by European culture (Lyons, 2012).

Kommentert [ADM1]: Adding a brief example of a signifier and its possible signified meanings could further illustrate the point. You can use the example present in the book.

Kommentert [ADM2R1]: Or slides on Luiss Learn

This research was chosen to adopt the Barthesian methodology for the Semiotic Analysis of images, as detailed in his work ‘’The photographic Message’’ (Barthes, 1961/1977) and ‘’Rhetoric of the Image’ (Barthes, 1964/1977). These works explore how photographs convey significance to viewers and dissect the underlying meanings in advertising imagery. Previous research has validated the versatility of Barthes’ approach across various forms of contemporary communication and research contexts. For instance, Ardhianto and Son (2019) utilized Barthes’ semiotics to interpret the meanings in televisions advertisements for dairy products, while Frandsen & Jensen (2012) employed it to scrutinize luxury branding on Facebook. Barthes’ methodology is apt for this thesis for several reasons. First, it is applicable to commercial contexts (in this case, the Balmain co-branding campaign), as demonstrated by Barthes’ (1964/1977) analysis of the Panzani advertisement. Secondly, Barthes emphasizes the importance of examining the meanings conveyed by photographs in conjunction with their accompanying textual elements, arguing that one cannot fully comprehend the former without the latter (Barthes, 1964/1977). This is particularly relevant for this thesis, as Instagram content is fundamentally composed of visual and textual elements. Lastly, Barthes (1964/1977) views photographs as analytical subjects that are open to a range of social and cultural interpretations, which aligns with this thesis analysis context and the subsequent examination of brand followers’ reactions to the content.

In line with Barthes' (1964/1977) framework, commercial photographs convey three distinct types of messages from the originator:

- *Linguistic messages* – meaning derived from the text that accompanies the image. This meaning can manifest as anchorage, where the text directs the interpretations of the photograph, or as relay, where both the text and image work together to form meaning.
- *Coded iconic messages* – represent the denotative, or literal, interpretation of the image.
- *Non-coded iconic messages* – refer to the connotative or symbolic message embedded in the image, which often varies according to cultural context.

Given this framework, the analysis of Balmain's Instagram content (originating from Balmain) will concentrate on the captions that accompany the images, the literal meanings conveyed by the content, and the symbolic meanings.

Given that co-branded attire is an integral part of the content under analysis, the focus was on the meanings that arise from the juxtaposition within the visuals and their impact on the message, rather than critiquing the design itself. As the subjects of this analysis varied in form, they were standardized for efficient application of the chosen analytical method – the video was segmented into sequences of unique frames. To uncover potential connotations within the analyzed content, the process was enriched by employing the six connotation procedures outlined in ''The Photographic Message'' (Barthes, 1961/1977) as techniques to convey meaning through visuals. This approach mirrors previous research exploring media content, such as the work by Frandsen & Jensen (2012) on luxury brands. The connotates include (Barthes, 1961/1977):

- Trick effects – efforts to manipulate the denotation of the photograph.
- Pose – the positioning of bodies and objects.
- Objects – entities that carry mental associations such as ideas or beliefs.
- Photogenia – editorial interventions like exposure techniques.
- Aestheticism – artistic influences.
- Syntax – meaning derived from the aggregation of visuals.

In accordance with this list, the focus was on Balmain's interventions in the reality presented in the visuals, the message behind the composition and poses of objects, prominent elements conveying clear meanings, the choice of lightning and colors, artistic inspirations within the composition of the visuals, and meaning arising from sequences of frames within the videos, respectively. By employing this semiotic analysis approach, this thesis aims to uncover deeper insights into how Balmain's Instagram content constructs and communicates its brand identity and values. This analysis will provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between visual and textual elements in shaping consumer perceptions and cultural meanings associated with luxury fashion.

Kommentert [ADM3]: A concluding sentence or two summarizing the importance of using this semiotic analysis approach and what insights you hope to gain from it would provide a strong closure to the section.

3.4.2 In-Depth Interviews

In this study in-depth interviews were conducted to gather information into consumer reactions to fast fashion co-branding. Through this qualitative research method, that involves interviewing a small number of respondents, can be used to explore perspectives on a particular idea or situation (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Unlike other forms of qualitative research, researchers using an in-depth interviewing approach dedicate considerable time to each participant, utilizing a conversational format (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). The purpose of qualitative interviews is to collect in-depth information about the experiences of participants by asking open-ended questions (Flick, 2018). This method is useful when you want detailed information about an individual's behaviors and thoughts or want to explore new issues in a deeper sense (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

Qualitative interviewing, in contrast to quantitative research interviewing, is distinct in several dimensions. For example, it is generally less structured (Bryman & Bell, 2007). It is often viewed as flexible, with the interviewer adapting and reacting to the interviewee. There is a significant emphasis on understanding the perspective of the respondent, the goals are to elicit detailed and rich responses. The interviewer has the freedom to deviate from any pre-established schedule, new inquiries may emerge as a result of the respondent's responses, and the sequence of questions may be altered (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This research used semi-structured interviews to attain data, which is in line with Kvale (2012), outlined in 3.3.2.2. This is a frequently used method for investigating ''the daily lived world from the viewpoints of the subjects themselves'' (p.11).

There are multiple reasons to defend the use of in-depth interviews in this study. Firstly, the primary objective of this study is to investigate how luxury fashion brand followers perceive and react to luxury fashion brand communication of co-branding alliance with fast fashion brand on Instagram. This is done by interacting directly with Balmain customers, as it can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2014). Secondly, Ritchie & Lewis (2013) have highlighted that in-depth interviews are often seen as a fundamental method for data collection in qualitative research. Furthermore, Yin (2014) suggest that in-depth interviews are one of the most crucial sources of evidence in case studies, as used in this thesis, as it focuses on human behaviors or actions. In other words, the author underscores the significance of conducting in-depth interviews in qualitative research, stating that they offer personal perspectives and insights (E.g. opinions, meanings, and attitudes), and are directly linked to the case study topic (Yin, 2014).

4.0 Results

4.1 Semiotic Analysis

This section conducts a Semiotic Analysis of Balmain's Instagram content, which was disseminated as a result of a co-branding initiative with H&M. The goal was to identify meanings and brand associations that

could be formed through these communication pieces. The findings will be compared with the outcomes of the in-depth interviews and the literature review in the discussion chapter, addressing the first sub-question of the thesis. The entire analytical process follows Barthes' connotates (1961/1977) and types of meanings (Barthes, 1964/1977). Brand associations will be categorized using Keller's (1993) Brand Association typology.

4.1.1 Visual 1

Figure 1

Balmain x H&M Instagram Highlight Photo

The linguistic component serves an anchor, guiding the interpretation of the visual elements. Initially, one might notice a tag featuring the designer's name (@Oliver_Rusting) and H&M (@hm). This could lead to the understanding that this is a collaboration between H&M and Balmain created by Oliver Rusting, which is the designer of Balmain. Hence, the mention of the designer might trigger associations related to the product. The references to the creator behind the brand could be connected to luxury brands, as it is a common strategy in their branding to use designers as a point of reference (Som & Blanckaert, 2015). Secondly, the interpretation is that the term ''sneak peak'' could imply that the provided photograph is a glimpse into something confidential, intended to stir up a sense of privilege and curiosity, making the audience feel privileged to have this insight. Thirdly, one might link the expression ''into the life'' with a deeper, more intimate look at something. It is not just about the products or the brand, but about the lifestyle and experience associated with it. Hence, it concludes that a 'positive' attitude towards the brand, driven by a sense of 'desire', could potentially be cultivated. Both can be interpreted as allusions to luxury brands and the lifestyle they aim to cultivate, as noted by Kapferer & Bastian (2009, p. 210). Finally, the hashtag

‘#HMBALMAINATION’’ provides a sneak peak into the lifestyle associated with the H&M and Balmain collaboration. The hashtag not only promotes the brand, but also invites consumers to experience the unique lifestyle that this collaboration represent. The hashtag invites fans of both brands to join a movement of togetherness. It is a way to bring everyone into the world of Balmain and get a piece of the dream. This could be seen as a natural fit with H&M, as it is a brand that everyone connects to. The use of glitter emoji in the text could be seen as enhancing the sense of luxury, exclusivity, and excitement surrounding the Balmain and H&M collaboration. It adds a touch of sparkle to the conversation, further emphasizing the glamour and allure of the collection. The use of emojis in branding could be seen as innovative and modern, appealing to a younger, more digital-savvy audience. This could potentially from association of a dynamic, modern, and innovation brand personality.

From a denotative standpoint, the image captures a quartet of individuals – three females and one male – striking poses on a poster on a futuristic subway. This poster is suspended in an area that gives the impression of being in a state of construction or preparation. A ladder leans against the right side of the frame, while a red ‘EXIT’ sign punctuates the left side.

Moving to the connotated meaning of the photograph, the contrast between the glamorous clothing and the raw, industrial setting suggests a behind-the-scenes look at high fashion, making it accessible through a fast-fashion retailer like H&M. This could be part of the brand’s strategy to position itself as a bridge between high-end fashion and affordable streetwear. The state of construction or preparation could symbolize the ongoing work and creativity in fashion production, emphasizing the narrative that each piece of clothing has a unique story. The unfinished room with its exposed beams and the conspicuous ‘EXIT’ sign could be seen as symbols of rebellion against traditional norms, suggesting a brand personality that is not afraid to break the mold. This can give the brand personality associations of ‘’confident’’, ‘’bold’’ and ‘’unafraid’’. I think that these modern elements may aim at creating impressions of relative availability and diversity of collection, in line with fast fashion values (Cheema, 2018).

Numerous *objects* might shape the connotations. The presence of the ladder and the ‘EXIT’ signs on different sides of the poster, can create an optical illusion and as a *trick effect* might pursue a sense of transition or escape. These *photogenic* interventions of the ladder could symbolize a climb or ascent towards a higher state or goals, perhaps a metaphor for progress or advancement. This imagery may evoke notions of progress, growth, or personal development, suggesting that the individuals depicted on the poster are on a journey of self-discovery or transformation. The ‘EXIT’ sign, on the other hand, might suggest an escape route or a way out, possibly indicating a desire for change, liberation, or freedom from constraints. The presence of the ‘EXIT’ sign adds a sense of urgency and possibility to the scene, hinting at the potential for new beginnings or opportunities. Furthermore, the combination of the ladder and the ‘EXIT’ sign underscores the theme of transition and transformation present in the image. Together, these elements create

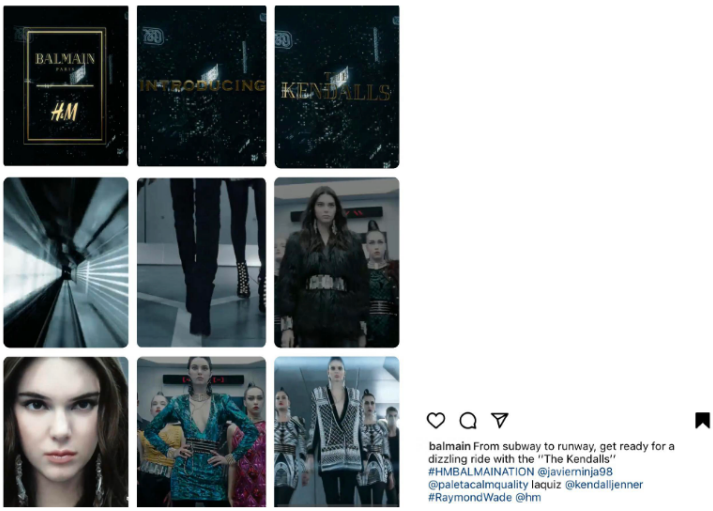
a sense of movement and dynamism, reinforcing the idea that change is imminent and necessary for growth. The elements visible in the image, through the pose connotator, could suggest the unveiling of a fresh innovative concept. This might create a sense of peeking into a hidden world, as if witnessing a revelation of a secret. As per my understating, this could aim to stir feelings of privilege and anticipation towards the brand. This sense of discovery and the allure of the 'new' could foster a positive brand attitude, kindled by the excitement of innovation and change.

The attire showcased in the image could be perceived as works of art, merging top-notch quality with distinctive design, and becoming objects of desire. This could be suggested through the various poses struck by the models. Consequently, product associations such as superior quality, individuality and attention to detail might be invoked. The unique colors of the dresses of the photo can indeed captivate the viewer's gaze, emphasizing its significance. This can shift the viewer's focus towards it, thereby creating a strong connection with the product, known as salience. Furthermore, it can also convey the experiential advantages of being the center of attention and feeling superior. This is achieved by strategically making the girls wear colorful clothes, while the surroundings are dark and not colorful. The fact that the dresses are consists of sequin or a good material, could be interpreted as a sign of its significant worth, importance, and delicacy, akin to a work of art. As a result, it might evoke product associations of value, fragility, and artistic qualities. Furthermore, it could suggest an expensive price bracket and associations with a wealthy user demographic. Mentions of art, superior design, and quality repeatedly underscore the values of luxury brands (Som & Blackaert, 2015). It might evoke symbolic benefits of high class and privilege.

4.1.2 Visual 2

Figure 2

Balmain x H&M Instagram Feed Video



The linguistic component once more serves as a foundation for the visual aspect, steering the process of meaning creation. These components influence brand perception by shaping how consumers perceive and interact with brands. Whether it's through font choices, brand names, or communication style, language plays a pivotal role in creating a favorable brand image (Liebrecht et al., 2021).The phrase ''From subway to runway'' uses two contrasting elements – the subway, which is a symbol of everyday life and commute, and the runway, which represents the glamorous world of high fashion. This contrast creates a powerful image of transformation, suggesting that the Balmain and H&M collaboration is about making high fashion accessible and wearable in everyday life. The phrase ''get ready for a dazzling ride with ''the Kendalls'' further emphasizes this transformation. The word ''dazzling'' suggest excitement, glamour, and the allure of high fashion. The term ''ride'' implies a journey or an experience, suggesting that fashion is not just about the clothes we wear, but also about the experiences and emotions they evoke. Finally, the reference to ''The Kendalls'' brings in the element of celebrity culture. 'The Kendalls'' serves as brand association strategy, leveraging the popularity and influence of Kendall Jenner to promote the collaboration. Kendall Jenner, as one of the faces of the campaign, represent the blend of high fashion with popular culture. Her presence suggests that the collection is not just for the elite, but for anyone who appreciates style and wants to express themselves through fashion. The hashtag #HMBALMAINATION combines the name of the two collaborating brands, Balmain, and H&M. The addition of the suffix ''-nation'' suggests a sense of community, belonging and togetherness, implying that the consumers of this collaboration are not just individuals, but part of a lager nation united by their love for fashion. This serves to create a sense of inclusivity and accessibility. It positions the collaboration not as an exclusive high fashion event, but as a movement that everyone can be a part of. This is reinforced by the subway in the campaign's visuals, which is a common mode of transport used by people from all walks of life. Moreover, the term nation also implies

a sense of identity. By associating themselves with the #HMBALMAINATION, consumers are not just buying clothes, but also buying into a certain lifestyle or identity. Tagging influencers such as @javierninja84, @plaetcalmquality, @laquiz, as well as the renowned model @kendalljenner could foster a sense of prestige and trendiness. Given the diverse backgrounds of the tagged individuals (model, actor, movement alchemist), it might evoke a sense of the brand's diversity and the variety within the presented collection. Hence, the brand may potentially project associations of a spectacular personality and a celebrity-like aura, symbolizing the benefits it offers.

In terms of visual denotation, it commences with an unveiling of the Balmain x H&M collaboration. This swiftly followed by the introduction of 'The Kendalls'. As the video progresses, it transitions into a dynamic showcase of the collection. The narrative features five individuals, with Kendall Jenner taking center stage. Interwoven within this narrative are scenes featuring 'The Kendalls' on a futuristic subway, donned in pieces from the collection. In these scenes, 'The Kendalls' behave as if they are on a runway, bringing a fashion show vibe to the subway. Throughout the video, there are intermittent, fast-paced clips of a futuristic subway speeding through a tunnel.

In terms of connotation, one could perceive allusions to a future world. The fleeting views of a rapidly moving, futuristic subway within a tunnel could generate a visual deception. This might create an optical illusion and as a trick effect might incite a sense of adventure and novelty into extraordinary settings where items from co-branded collection makes their appearance. Further, this could establish product associations of cutting-edge design, exclusivity, forward-thinking, innovative and exclusivity. *Photogenic* interventions of the bright lightning and framing may also connote a sense of sophistication, elegance, and history. Furthermore, the use of a futuristic subway as a metaphor for journey into the future underscores the brands' commitment to innovation and sustainability, key aspect that are increasingly becoming integral to the concept of luxury in the fashion industry (Janmark et al., 2024). As the video progresses, it transitions seamlessly into a dynamic showcase reminiscent of a fashion runway. The inclusion of other models, referred to as 'The Kendalls', adds to the runway aesthetic, creating a sense of fashion show within the subway environment. The connotator *pose,* which primary involves the positioning of the girls, with Kendall Jenner in front and the other girls behind her, may suggest a center-of-attention and attention seeker attitude. The runaway scenes exude an aura of elegance, sophistication, and excitement, mirroring the atmosphere of a high-profile fashion event. The models showcase the collection with poise and confidence, capturing the attention of viewers and highlighting the beauty and craftsmanship of the garments.

Selection of the clothing is a narrative in itself, telling a story of unity, individuality, and transformation. The first outfit features Kendall Jenner in a black and white patterned V-neck jacket, with two girls on the side wearing matching dresses with print. This monochromatic ensemble, complemented by high ponytails, symbolizes a sense of sophistication, elegance, and order. The boys, in their black jeans and white blazers,

add to this narrative of classic, timeless style. This can give associations like individuality, sophistication and elegance. The narrative evolves with the second outfit. Kendall transitions into a fur jacket closed with a belt, a symbol of luxury and opulence. Fur has come to symbolize more than just a piece of clothing. It's often associated with special occasions and luxury (Ting, 2020). The girls behind her, in matching dresses and open fur jackets, strike a balance between extravagance and restraint. Their continued ponytail hairstyle suggests consistency, while Kendall Jenner's hair being down introduces an element of individuality and freedom. In addition, one might consider the brand personality a trait of contrasting, which aligns with the often-observed nonconformity in luxury brands (Som & Blanckaert, 2015). The third outfit marks a shift in the narrative. Kendall, now in a blue dress with a belt, exudes confidence and authority. The girls on the side, no longer matching and wearing vibrant colors, represent individuality and diversity.

4.1.3 Visual 3

Figure 3

Balmain x H&M Instagram Feed Photo

In the examination of the photograph's linguistic message, the focus is on the text and language associated with the image. In this case, the linguistic message includes the caption of the post, the hashtags, and the mentions of other accounts. The main body of the caption starts with the phrase ''next stop #HMBALMAINATION'', which can be linked to the picture, showing that they are on a journey or moving towards a new destination. This phrase, ''next stop'', especially when considered in the context of the subway setting in the image, could suggest a sense of progression of forward movement. It might imply that the brand is continually evolving or advancing to the 'next stop' in their fashion journey. This could be a

new collection or a new collaboration, as hinted by the mentions in the caption. The phrase thus adds a dynamic element to the image, enhancing the narrative of the photograph and contributing to its overall meaning. The fact that these people it on a subway shows that the rich and famous people take public transportation too, showing that even individuals who are wealthy and well-known can appreciate and utilize transportation. This could be a strategic move to make the brand more accessible and appealing to a broader audience, by showing that it is not just for the elite, but everyone who appreciates fashion. It's a clever use of language that ties in well with the visual elements of the post. The next significant elements in the caption are the ''#HMBALMAINATION'', indicating that this could be a collaboration between Balmain and the fast-fashion brand H&M. Furthermore, this hashtag function as a mechanism to foster interaction among the audience and amplify the reach of this collection's communication. This is in line with its role as outlined in scholarly studies, such as those conducted by Helal & Ozuem (2018). Here, it not only hints at a collaboration between Balmain and H&M, but also creates anticipation for the new collection. It serves as a digital breadcrumb, leading the audience to more content related to this collaboration. It also creates a digital community where users can explore and contribute. Followed by the hashtag, Balmain comes with information about their launch event online. The mentions of other accounts, specifically @hm and @oliver_rousteing, serve as another layer of signification. @Hm refer to H&M, indicating their involvement in this collaboration. @Oliver_Rousteing is likely a reference to Olivier Rousteing, the creative director of Balmain, further associating this post with high fashion. The use of hashtags (#Balmain, #twitter, #periscope) broaden their audience and also refers to the platforms on which the event will be broadcasted. The fact that the event will be broadcasted live indicates the accessibility of the event, allowing a global audience to participate virtually. This could be seen as a democratization of high fashion, traditionally associated with exclusivity. The mention of the event's time ''7:30PM EST'' adds another dimension to the narrative. It creates sense of urgency and anticipation, inviting the audience to participate in a specific moment.

At the denotative level, which refers to the literal, face-value interpretation, this photograph presents six individuals in an urban setting, possibly on the subway or the metro. The central figure, which is a girl, is wearing a black and white patterned jacket. In the background, two other girls are placed by her side, followed by two men. They are all dressed in lighter color, matching the front girl's dress.

Finally, the symbolic interpretation of this photograph has been examined to uncover its underlying significance. The central girl's posture exudes an aura of confidence and poise, suggesting a readiness to embrace the challenges of the modern world. With shoulders squared and chin held high, she commands attention and exerts a magnetic pull on the viewer's gaze. This sense of assurance extends beyond the mere physical stands; it embodies a mindset characterized by resilience, adaptability, and a willingness to push boundaries. In the context of the fashion industry, this posture reflects a brand ethos steeped in innovation and forward-thinking. It signals a departure from convention and a bold embrace of the future. By

positioning the central figure as the focal point, the photograph communicates a narrative of leadership and influence, implying that the brand she represents is at the forefront of trends.

Additionally, connotator *pose* including mainly the position of the girl, standing in front with two people behind her on both sides. This positioning could suggest that she is the main focus or subject of the image, which may suggest a brand that is bold and unafraid to stand out. Her pose speaks volumes about her character. It's not just her physical stance, but the attitude it represents – a blend of determination and nonchalance that suggests a cool, collected mind. She is the epitome of the cool vibe, her demeanor causal yet charismatic. Her black and white patterned outfit with geometric design and a deep V-neckline, along with the high-top knot hairstyle, adds to the overall impression of a strong, confident individual. The geometric design of her outfit might suggest a brand that is modern and forward-thinking. Based on that, the brand personality could be possibly associated with someone confident and assertive. It is giving the brand personality: Rich yet effortless with a cool vibe.

The main *object* connotator is the outfit in which the girls and the boys wearing, suggesting a more formal usage for formal occasions or special events, while creating following associations to usage imagery: sophistication, elegance, and style. The geometric black and white pattern of dress, along with its deep V-neckline and long sleeves, gives it a distinctive and elegant look. This could suggest that the dress is suitable for high fashion events or could be a piece of designer wear. The bold design and intricate pattern make it visually striking, which could draw attention and make the wearer stand out in a crowd. The piece is crafted with the distinctive style typical of Balmain, which underscores the luxurious aspect of the collection. The luxury features, including key design elements, serve as brand signatures, further enhancing its exclusivity (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Therefore, the presented product on the visual can be possibly associated with its brand unique aesthetic and identity. The timeless black and white color scheme further enhances the dress's allure, evoking associations of elegance and sophistication. This classic palette has long been synonymous with luxury, as noted in studies evaluating the impact of color in luxury brand advertisement (Wang et al., 2022). It speaks to a sense of timelessness and refinement, transcending fleeting trends to embody enduring style and grace. The young woman in the dress is a renowned model in her twenties, specifically Kendall Jenner, who is particularly popular among the younger demographic. Her presence can evoke feelings of celebrity glamour and high-end fashion, suggesting that using the featured product is a mark of approval from the fashion elite. Jenner's active and popular presence on Instagram could be a strategic choice for this co-branding imitative, aiming to increase visibility among millennials, the primary target for fast fashion (Cheema, 2018). This could also symbolize the brand's youthful and fashionable nature. Therefore, the brand's personality might be perceived as youthful, and the product style could be associated with trendy design.

4.1.4 Conclusion

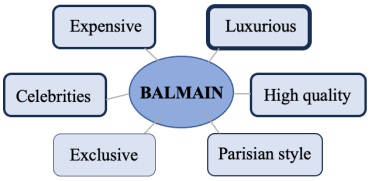
The analysis reveals that the Balmain x H&M collaboration merges luxury with accessibility, creating a brand identity that appeals to a wide audience. The linguistic and visual elements create associations of exclusivity, innovation, and sophistication, while simultaneously appealing to everyday consumers. The analysis highlights a personality that is confident, bold, and unafraid to break the mold. The imagery and language convey a sense of progress, transformation, and modernity. The use of hashtags and social media strategies fosters a sense of community and inclusivity. The campaign positions the collaboration as a movement that invites everyone to participate, enhancing the brands' appeal to a diverse, global audience.

4.2 In-depth interviews

4.2.1 Free Associations

Figure 4

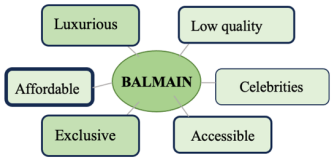
Balmain Free Associations



Source: Own depiction

Figure 5

Balmain Free Associations Co-Branding Content



Source: Own depiction

This section showcases the main brand connections identified through a free association task, suggested by Keller (2013). This method was employed on two occasions – initially to gather general brand associations related to Balmain, and subsequently to collect brand associations triggered by the brand's co-branded content on Instagram. Given the range of responses, only associations mentioned by at least two participants were considered for analysis.

Guided by Keller's (2013) suggestions, free associations gathered from interviews (Appendix 2) were utilized to construct mental maps that encapsulate the key characteristics by the consumer group under study (p. 296). The thickest boarders represent brand associations mentioned by the majority of interviewees, less thick boarders represent fewer common associations, and associations without boarders were motioned by two or one respondent. Figure 1 displays the spontaneous associations of participants, when asked about Balmain without any prompts, which will be referred to as ''regular Balmain'' for simplicity. Therefore, the most frequently mentioned brand association towards Balmain among the interviews was ''luxurious'', followed by associations like ''high quality'' and ''expensive''. The other elicited brand associations included ''Parisian style'' and ''exclusive''. Figure 5 encompasses the free associations elicited from respondents in relation to co-branding content with H&M, following their exposure to presented stimuli. In

this scenario, the majority of respondents linked Balmain with the perception of being ‘’affordable’’ and ‘’luxurious’’. Less common free associations comprise ‘‘low quality’’ and ‘’accessible’’. Moreover, two interviewees shared associations of ‘’celebrities’’ and ‘’exclusive’’.

While looking at both mind maps, it is evident that in some cases respondents associated Balmain with contradictory things depending on the situation. The most opposed associations between regular Balmain and Balmain behind the co-branding content were those of ‘’expensive’’ & ‘’affordable’’ and ‘’high quality’’ and ‘low quality’’. As well as ‘’exclusive’’ and ‘’accessible’’.

To sum up, Balmain and Balmain seen through co-branding related content has been association by participants with different traits. Co-branding communication of Balmain evoked more of the brand in consumers’ mind.

4.2.2 Perceptions Toward Regular Balmain Content on Instagram

This section is aimed to understanding brand followers’ perception towards Balmain’s regular communication on Instagram, as well as identifying the factors that contribute to their engagement with these posts. The first sub-chapter, ‘’Regular Content Perceptions’’ refers to the part of followers’ brand schemas which is related to the regular Balmain Instagram communication. The next section, ‘’Regular Engagement Factor’’ shows the traits leading to engagement with Balmain. This allows to understand the expectations and responses to co-branding content from a customer perspective. All the interviews can be found in Appendix 3.

4.2.2.1 Regular Content Perceptions

Four different perceptions towards Balmain’s regular content are highlighted by the six respondents. The perceptions cover aspects raging for visual appeal, to the portrayal of luxury and exclusivity, as well as the strategic use of endorser. These elements together shape the overall impression and engagement levels of the audience with Balmain’s content.

All six interviewees highlighted the visual appeal of Balmain’s posts. One thing they all mentioned was the high-quality imagery, that they all claimed to be ‘’eye-catching’’. Different reasons were given as basis for understanding. One of the reasons where that Balmain maintains a cohesive aesthetic across its Instagram feed. This includes a consistent color palette, thematic elements and high-quality images which makes the brand instantly recognizable.

> ‘*’Balmain’s Instagram feed is perfect in terms of visual consistency. They maintain such a cohesive aesthetic – it is fantastic! The color palette is always rich, luxurious tones that reflect their brand identity. The thematic elements, like the opulent settings, the lightnings and shadows is always there.*

Every shot is professionally done and polished. All of this visual signature sets them apart from other brands.'' Elizabeth.

Another explanation from three of the respondents was their focus on the sophisticated styling. They say that each posts features meticulously styled outfits that showcase Balmain's clothing and accessories collection.

'*'Each post feels like a carefully curated fashion editorial, where every piece is thoughtfully chosen and styled to perfection. The attention to detail is remarkable, everything is just so highlighted.'' Camille.*

''(...) When you see a Balmain posts, you are getting a glimpse into the cutting-edge of fashion.'' Elizabeth

The second notion are related to the focus on luxury and exclusivity. All six respondents mentioned that the regular Balmain communication fronted a form of luxurious and exclusivity image, fronting their brand identity.

''(...) It makes me feel like I am a part of something exclusive, something special. When I see a Balmain post on my feed, it's like being invited into this glamorous world that's reserved for the elite.'' Mary.

''Balmain's Instagram oozes luxury and exclusivity in every post. From the lavish settings to the impeccable styling, everything about their feed scream luxury.'' Jane

The third perceptions toward Balmain's communication are related to the use of various endorsers, including models, celebrities, and influencers. These endorsements add glamour and credibility, as well as they are reinforcing Balmain's status in the fashion world.

''(*...) It adds so much credibility and appeal to their posts. Seeing a top model or a celebrity in Balmain makes me believe in the brand's value even more.* ''Camille

Lastly, three of the six respondents mentioned Balmain's ability to create an aspirational lifestyle through their posts as a last perception of the communication from Balmain. All are mentioning that Balmain is more than just clothes, it is about the whole lifestyle, the place, the people, and the vibe. They are all referring to a luxury world that many wants to be a part of, including exclusive parties, fashion galas, and events with celebrities.

'*'The brand's content often features high-profile events, exclusive parties, and luxurious settings. It's like they're offering a glimpse into a world that many want to be a part of, and that's a powerful draw.''* Frances

Based on these six respondents, followers were found to perceive the communication from Balmain on their Instagram as visual appealing, in terms of eye-catching content, as well as sophisticated styling, all giving an

impression of luxurious and exclusivity. Other features mentioned was their use of various endorsers and aspirational lifestyle. Based on the traits described above, followers' expectations for brand communication are established.

4.2.2.2 Regular Engagement Factor

All the respondents explained that they would engage with something that is out of the ordinary. Five out of six respondents mentioned that one factor they all would respond to is the innovative idea behind the content that Balmain share.

> *''I would love to engage with the content if it is interesting and different from other brands, with a unique idea behind it. I think it is boring to see a simple picture of clothes; it should be something out of the ordinary''*. Camille.
>
> *''For me, a truly engaging Balmain posts would be a creative explosion! I love how they push boundaries with their design, and I want to see that reflected in their content''.* Frances

Another factor that four out of six respondents mentioned identified was ''product in use'', which they all related to both product-oriented and people-oriented content, as well as setting. All the respondents express a wish for seeing the products being worn by individuals in real-life situations, as it showcases the setting it can be worn in, as well as it provides inspiration and guidance on how to style the showcased products.

> '*'Definitely a video! I love seeing the clothes come alive in motion. It would be even better if it wasn't just model on a runway, but shoed how people style the clothes on the street. Maybe a compilation of different celebrities or models wearing Balmain in unique ways. That would be super inspiring and give me ideas for how to incorporate Balmain pieces into my wardrobe.*'' Jane

Followed by three of the respondents – ''appealing product'' is mentioned. They explain that they would interact with a post from Balmain if is presented a product that was in the respondents' style, in terms of design and aesthetics. They are all highlighting their desire for a product that complements their own individual style and can be integrated into their existing wardrobe.

> '*'I will interact with Balmain's post on Instagram if they post anything that is my style, I mean like the colors, suiting and maybe just something I find nice. I enjoy aesthetic content.*'' Elizabeth
>
> '*'I might share it if it fits with my taste or recommend it to someone who might like it. I would send it to them on Instagram as a recommendation to a friend or family*''. Mary

Lastly, two out of six respondents mentioned that they would engage in content related to behind-the-scenes glimpses, storytelling, etc. They explained how such content provides a deeper look into the creative process and the inspiration behind the designs, making them feel more connected to the brand. One of the respondents highlighted the behind-the-scenes content from the MET gala, relishing the sense of exclusivity it conveyed.

''I find the behind-the-scenes content very engaging. It allows me to feel like I'm part of an exclusive club, getting a sneak peek at the magic that happens before the final product hits the runway.'' Charlotte

'Have you seen the Met Gala content? That's a whole other level! Seeing the hustle and bustle backstage right before the biggest fashion event of the year is exhilarating. It gives me a sense of the pressure and excitement surrounding the event, making the final red-carpet appearances even more glamorous. I get to join the gala from my living room!'' Camille

The least mentioned engaging factors was behind-the-scenes or storytelling, listed by two respondents. Furthermore, members of the Balmain online brand community expressed willingness to engage with the content due to visual presenting products in use or content out of the ordinary.

4.2.3 Brand Associations Evoked by Balmain Co-Branding Content

As a part of in-depth interviews directly linked to co-branding content, this section first examines brand associations reflected by Balmain followers based on the analyzed content. The themes within this section were derived from Keller's Association Scale (1993), which includes attributes, benefits, and attitudes along with their sub-categories. Only the brand associations shared by at least two respondents are presented.

4.2.3.1 Product-Related Attributes

In-depth interviews revealed that nearly every respondent, five out of six, associated product of the co-branding content with attributes such as ''Medium quality'' and ''Luxurious'', placing the brand products outside fast fashion category, highlighting a distinct positioning in the minds of consumers. Second most common attribute identified were ''extraordinary design'' and ''high fashion'' reflecting exclusivity of products. These attributes were highlighted by four interviewees.

''To co-branded products seem to be of... hmm... not bad quality, but not the same quality as the regular Balmain products, I will say medium quality. Not fast fashion quality, but not luxury quality either, something in-between. But the clothing definitely looks luxurious.'' Jane

''I would call it high fashion, not fast fashion. The quality looks higher than the fast fashion, and there's a luxurious feel to the design. It is something extraordinary, not what you regularly would get from H&M. It feels like you're getting more value for what you pay.'' Elizabeth

Three respondents mentioned traits such as ''piece of art'', ''fancy design'' and ''designer'', which position the Balmain x H&M co-branded items beyond the fast fashion category. These attributes highlight the high fashion class and emphasize the craftsmanship involved in the collection.

''... It was clear that a lot of thought and craftmanship went into the collection, even though it was more affordable. It looks just like something Balmain would offer outside of the collaboration from H&M''. Camille

‘’I was initially skeptical of the Balmain x H&M collaboration, but I have to admit, I was very surprised. The collection captured the signature style with its bold colors, sharp tailoring, and statement embellishments. It wasn’t watered-down fast fashion – it felt like a designer collection made accessible for a wider audience’’. Frances

The last product attributes mentioned by two respondents is ‘’Parisian style’’, ‘’elaborate style’’ and ‘’attention to details’’, highlighting the excellence of smallest details and the products salience. Furthermore, ‘’eye-catching’’ design was also mentioned by two respondents.

‘’*(...) The clothes aren’t just trendy; they have this chic Parisian style Balmain is known for. Like, the way they have incorporated details like sequins and pearls – it showed a real attention to detail you usually don’t find to that price point. And of course, everything is super eye-catching!’’* Mary

‘’(...) The pieces were actually quite elaborate. The tailoring looks sharp, the fabric seems nice, and there are these little details like the statement colors, embellishments and the different shapes that shows a real thoughtfulness in the design.’’ Charlotte

4.2.3.2 Non-Product Related Attributes

For non-product related attributes, five respondents shared associations linked to the pricing, perceiving the collaboration as less expensive than the regular Balmain product. Five respondents mentioned ‘’affordable’’ and two users mentioned ‘’accessible’’ and ‘’exclusive’’.

‘’This collaboration is a perfect example on how fashion can be both accessible and aspirational. This collection has a lower price range than I usually has to pay when I go to a Balmain store, but at the same time they manage to keep the exclusivity by having a limited quantity. I also think the collaboration is more accessible, as I see H&M stores everywhere.’’ Mary

4.2.3.3 User Imagery

Every respondent linked the typical user of Balmain, as depicted in the co-branding content with someone ‘’popular/influencer’’. They elaborated that this individual would likely be a renowned figure in the fashion world or on Instagram, enjoying wearing such clothing on a daily basis or having frequent occasions to wear them as they are something extraordinary.

‘’I think it has to be someone who are living an influencer life, where they have events or parties to wear this extra clothing collection. Or just wear them on photos/videos for their social media.’’ Frances

‘’Maybe a fashion influencer, who express themselves through their clothing style.’’ Camille

Three respondents explained that their association connected to the user imagery personality, interest and demographics was ‘’daring’’, ‘’extraordinary’’, as well as ‘’fashion conscious’’ and ‘’fashion-forward’’.

Followers described this person as someone who likes to look different, knows and follows recent trend and into the fashion world, as well as they do not care about others opinion.

> *''When I think of a typical user of this co-branding collection, I envision someone daring and fashion-conscious. They're not afraid to stand out and follow the latest trends''*. Mary
>
> *''(...) It is someone extraordinary and fashion-forward. They're always ahead of the curve and unapologetically themselves''*. Charlotte

Lastly, two respondents associated the collection with trait of ''confident'', complementing daring and the non-caring spirit of the person.

> *''I think the person that buys this collection has to be confident and not caring about what other says, as it has this bold look over it. Someone who likes to stand out in the crowd and be the center of the attention.''* Jane

4.2.3.4 Usage Imagery

The analysis of user responses reveals a clear association between the Balmain x H&M co-branding content and ''special occasion'' wear. They are all associating this collection with ''formal wear'', ''events'' or ''party''. The imagery and overall presentation of the Balmain x H&M co-branding content strongly associated the products with special occasions and a non-casual aesthetic.

> *''The clothes are in my opinion formal wear or for special occasion where you have to dress up.''* Camille
>
> *''I am thinking something fancy, like a cool event with some luxury elements, or maybe a runway show.''* Charlotte
>
> *''Like I said earlier, I think this is for some special occasion, not a casual situation. Maybe a fancy dinner or a gala?''*. Frances

4.2.3.5 Personality

This section is belonging to the sub-category of non-product related attributes, brand personality of Balmain evoked by the co-branded content. Half of the respondents mentioned two traits, comprised associations of ''sophisticated'' and ''bold''. Respondents agreed that Balmain align with the brand image they have, because their clothing in this collaboration is pretty much in line with their own collection regardless of the co-branding.

> *''(...) There was a kind of edge to them, a boldness that made them stand out. She would not be understated, and maybe have a bold personality''*. Jane
>
> *''I would say it is a girl that is not afraid to express herself through her clothing. She is someone who appreciates the finer things in life and isn't afraid to stand out from the crowd. She values sophistication, and boldness.''* Elizabeth

In regard of Elizabeth's statement, two other respondents mentioned the ''stand out from the crowd'' and ''self-assured''. The respondents explain the character of the brand to be a person with confident and someone who is not afraid to go her own way and be separated from the rest. Another personality trait that was mentioned by the two respondents were ''strong personality'' and ''expressive'', bringing the luxury part of the content forward.

> *''I would describe them as someone who it not afraid to stand out. It is someone who's confident and self-assured, but also has a touch of rebelliousness.''* Mary
>
> *''I think it has to be someone who appreciates luxury but doesn't need to shout about it. They let their clothes do the talking, and they're strong enough to pull of anything. They are not afraid to go their own way''.* Frances

Balmain was also perceived, by four respondents as being ''glamorous'' , as well as ''confident'', creating an aura of authority and unwavering commitment to fashion (resoluteness). At the same time, more down-to-earth trait such as ''crazy'' were mentioned. Also, more fashion related traits were highlighted by the respondents, as they pointed out ''trendy'', emphasizing the modernity of the brand.

> *''I would say someone who is confident, crazy modern, (...), following the trends. Trendy would be the appropriate world, I think. A girl living in the city.''* Camille
>
> *''(...) I think it will be a person who is a little bit ''out there'', a little bit glamorous and like to show off. She is a girl that is confident and crazy''.* Charlotte

4.2.3.6 Experiential Benefits

Five out of six respondents, related to ''standing out'', stemming from the extraordinariness of the products. This was followed by the benefit of ''heightened self-esteem'', as listed by three out of six respondents, who claim that these products may evoke feelings of confidence.

> *''These clothing pieces are statement pieces. I feel like you wear those when you want to stand out in the crowd.''* Jane
>
> *''Maybe the collection can give people more confidence, and that by wearing something so bold and well-made can give a sense of empowerment, heightening the self-esteem of the individual wearing it.''* Charlotte

Moreover, two respondents mentioned usage such as being in the ''center of attention'' and also ''feeling special''.

> '*'If you really like to be the center of attention, I will wear these clothing pieces. Everyone would look at you because it is something different.*'' Elizabeth

4.2.3.7 Attitudes

Co-branding content was also observed to evoke certain attitudes toward the brand behind it. Two major attitudes were distinguished, each linked to different emotions as their source. Four out of six respondents shared their positive attitudes toward this collaboration, mostly linked to being impressed or surprised by the brand and its personality. The sense of approachable luxury generated feelings of admiration and excitement, while the trendsetting innovation fostered respect and inspiration.

> *''I am quite surprised. It is something different and unexpected for me. I never thought that Balmain would collaborate with H&M, but I like the unexpected!'' Mary*
>
> *''It is unlike regular Balmain; this collection was actually accessible! It was exciting to see Balmain collaborating with a brand like H&M – it felt like a way to democratize luxury fashion and make it more attainable for everyone.''* Elizabeth

There were not only positive attitudes towards this collaboration. Some negative attitudes through feelings and confusion evoked, questioning the fit between the two brands or the perceived dilution of Balmain's luxury image.

> ''H&M is not an expensive brand. It is not a luxury brand. I don't want to wear the same clothing as a fast fashion customer.'' Jane
>
> ''I am just confused, how can Balmain, as a luxury retailer sell so affordable clothing? I associate expensive with good quality.'' Frances

4.2.4 Perceptions Toward Balmain Co-Branding Content on Instagram

The next part of the in-depth interviews describes how Balmain followers perceived the Balmain co-branding content on Instagram. It focuses on how well the content aligns with Balmain's brand image (second sub-question of this thesis). I will explore four key themes: Content perceptions, perceived inconsistencies, perceived consistencies, and evoked feelings.

4.2.4.1 Content Perceptions

All the respondents mentioned ''luxurious aesthesis'' when they talked about their perception of the co-branded Instagram content. They all connected the content with luxury, in terms of their expensive setting, their visuals and the aesthetic of the content.

> *''In the video, you can see high heels, dresses, New York, and a very fancy subway, which makes it all looks so luxurious''.* Elizabeth
>
> *''The background, the futuristic subway and the general atmosphere of the content feels like something unique, something luxurious.''* Jane
>
> *''The way they transformed an everyday setting like a subway into a high-fashion runway was truly remarkable. The models, the clothing, the ambiance, everything screamed luxury. They even make the subway look luxurious.''* Mary

Five out of six respondents describe the piece of co-branding communication as ‘’extraordinary’’, which corresponds to its look, creativity of composition, as well as the selection and designs of the products presented on it. All the five respondents agreed to that the co-branded content was very creative and something that you can associate with Balmain’s brand image.

> *‘’Using Kendall Jenner as a front person, as well as the futuristic subway, makes it look very extraordinary. It would have been so much different if they used a normal subway instead.’’* Charlotte
>
> *‘’I would say that it is something extraordinary because of the uniqueness of the designs. It is not something you can see everywhere. If they were to show a basic jean for example, it could be any brand, but the dress used, you can see it is from Balmain and nowhere else.’’* Frances

Half of the respondents also perceived the co-branding related Balmain content as ‘’professional’’, referring the visual quality, the quality of the made-up surroundings, the good lightning, and the general professionalism.

> ‘*’It is really professional, even the subway that is made-up looks reel. Everything is there, at right place.’’* Jane
>
> *‘’They pay attention to make a high-quality video, with good lightning and well thought out visuals. It looks expensive’’.* Mary

Two out of six also shared their meanings about the campaign inconsistency, which refers to their opinion that the highlighted story does not fit with the rest of the branding content from Balmain. However, these seems like a very individual perception as one of the individuals says:

> *‘’The highlighted story looks different compared to the video and the feed content because it is not futuristic. The other content has some elements of the future and the luxurious aesthetic.’’* Jane

The composition was mentioned by two respondents. They think that the composition of the visuals has a consistent composition, while referring to the elements on both the video and highlighted story. They highlighted that all the details have a meaning, suggesting that it is not random that they are in the photos.

> *‘’All the details are there for a reason. They do the job, for example the interior, light, colors, and the surroundings. It is not random that the exit sign in the highlighted story is there, for example.’’* Camille
>
> *‘’I think the outfits are matching very well to each other. For example, in the video, everyone is wearing colors in the last clip.’’* Charlotte

The meanings behind the content were mentioned by five out of six respondents. This was based on the focus of diversity, that this collection can suit everyone, and the use of clothing in more 'normal' circumstances. It is not in line with Balmain's luxurious lifestyle.

> *''One thing I don't like is the use of the subway in their campaign. I don't think Balmain clothing is something you can wear on the subway; it does not match it brand image. It is all about that luxury lifestyle''.* Frances
>
> *''The highlighted story, with the EXIT sign and the ladder, makes me loose the luxurious feeling. It could have been a regular highlight for normal H&M party collection. There is nothing about that who shows the luxurious lifestyle of Balmain, in my view''.* Camille

Four out of six respondents talked about the celebrity-related use in the content when they explained about their perceptions. All of this four mentioned the models name, Kendall Jenner, or general appearance, what for some of theme was an indicator of luxury and exclusivity.

> *''Kendall makes everything look chic and expensive. I associate Balmain with celebrities as they use them all the time in their Instagram pictures.''* Charlotte
>
> *''Having Kendall Jenner in the campaign instantly elevated the whole thing for me. She's a top fashion model associated with high-end brands, and that association definitely rubbed off on the clothes. It made the collection feel more luxurious and exclusive.''* Camille

4.2.4.2 Perceived Inconsistencies

The interviews of Balmain x H&M co-branding content on Instagram revealed a key inconsistency: a sort of mismatch in communication style between the campaign and Balmain's usual brand image. Five out of six respondents experienced conflicts between image of the brand created through the visuals (message behind the content) and Balmain's brand image stored in their memory. Five respondents expressed concern about a potential brand image conflict. They perceived the Balmain x H&M co-branding content as suggesting that Balmain was abandoning its core values, adapting to a fast fashion image.

> *''The element of fast fashion is devastating for Balmain's trust. I don't think Balmain should have any elements of fast fashion at all. It is not what they stand for''.* Jane
>
> *''I would say that the collaboration does not fit with Balmain because in my mind Balmain is not for everyone. It is for people who wants a certain lifestyle. This collaboration tries to make Balmain a clothing piece everyone can wear as they offer it at H&M, which I look at as a place everyone buy their clothing.''* Frances

Two respondents expressed their concerns about the product-related attributes as a source of incongruity. These two respondents claimed that the image of the brand created through the co-branding content contradicts with Balmain's core values of high quality and expensive.

> *''In my mind, Balmain is something expensive that not everyone can afford''* Jane.

''...The high price of Balmain isn't just about the brand name, it's a testament to the craftsmanship and the design expertise that goes into each piece. I worry that these elements, which are fundamental for Balmain's identity, might be compromised to meet a lower price point''. Charlotte

Three out of six respondents worried about the quality of the co-branding. The three respondents highlighted that due to the lower prices, they think that the quality is not in line with Balmain's reputation.

'' The focus on affordability in the campaign worried me. While the design was in line with Balmain, I wondered if the quality would match the Balmain name.'' Camille

''I feel like the products that now have the Balmain logo would have to be of a much poorer quality than Balmain's other products because of their collaboration with H&M. This is mainly because H&M's has its own image as a fast fashion retailer with low quality''. Jane

Lastly, the respondents revealed concerns regarding a potential inconsistency in target audience. Four out of six respondents worry that collaborating with H&M, known for its younger and trend-driven audience, could dilute Balmain's brand image.

''I think the campaign has widely focused on Balmain, but at the same time I think the message behind the content – that this collection is for everyone, it something unusual for Balmain, which I think can hurt their brand image.'' Charlotte

''I shop at Balmain because I feel a certain connection to the people who shop there. They were like me. Now everyone can walk around with a piece of Balmain on them. I don't want to meet an 18-year-old girl wearing the same jacket as me.'' Jane

4.2.4.3 Perceived Consistencies

All the respondents perceived some kind of consistency with the Balmain co-branded content. They expressed the luxurious aspect of the content, aligning with their perceived brand image. They all explained that they sense the content as luxurious and a part of Balmain's regular content. They perceived a fit between the presented co-branding related pieces of Balmain communication and their stored knowledge of the brand.

''I think that the content looks just like something Balmain could have posted on their own Instagram! Everything looks so luxurious.'' Jane

''The Balmain collab with H&M felt seamless to me. The whole campaign had this luxurious vibe that's exactly what I expect from Balmain.'' Mary

The next factor was the use of celebrity as an endorser. Four out of six respondents explained that they think of a celebrity when they think about Balmain, and the use of Kendall Jenner as a front person in this campaign aligns with their brand image of Balmain.

‘’The way they use Kendall Jenner to symbolize sophistication, confident and elegance is exactly the way I think of Balmain’’. Frances

‘’(…) It definitely felt like Balmain to me. They always seem to have big names modeling their clothes, and Kendall Jenner just fit perfectly. She has that whole confident, powerful energy that goes along with the Balmain brand.’’ Camille

The last constancy the respondents mentioned were the aesthetics of looks. Four out of six explained that the design of the clothing is exactly like the regular Balmain collection. The way they use the colors, patterns and materials are in line with how they think of the regular clothing line from Balmain.

‘’The whole collection had that signature style – bold colors, interesting patterns and it looks like the quality is okey. It felt just like something straight off their runway.’’ Mary

‘’I wouldn’t have known it was a collaboration if they hadn’t said anything. The designs were pure Balmain! The way they used color and those intricate patterns – it was all so recognizable.’’ Elizabeth

4.2.4.4 Evoked Feelings

This section explores the emotional responses respondents’ experiences when exposed to the co-branding content. Four out of six experienced ‘’Enthusiasm’’. This is related to the positive feelings as the visually pleasing of the posts and the creativity. The way they have combined all the character of visuals, combining the normal world with the luxurious world.

‘’ I like the vibe of this, like they have connected the luxurious with the more down-to-earth elements, like the subway. I think the combination actually are pretty nice!’’ Camille

‘’I love how they have created a new world, that is both luxurious and relatable at the same time!’’ Charlotte

Moreover, the respondents felt excitement since they were able to feel sympathy for the celebrity recognized within the content, as well as they were positively surprised by the elements incorporated. They liked seeing something new and more intriguing than regularly content shared by Balmain.

‘*’(…) The way they have used Kendall Jenner makes me excited about the collaboration! If she accepted to be a part of this campaign, it has to have some luxurious elements’’.* Mary

‘’I was surprised by the content, but in a good way! I like that Balmain has done something new, I would never have thought of a futuristic subway. (Laugh)!’’ Elizabeth

Additionally, two respondents mentioned that they feel a sense of empowerment. The campaign’s portrayal of high fashion being accessible within a more affordable collection have instilled a sense of empowerment in two of the respondents. The also mentioned that the aesthetics of the looks are just in line with Balmain and how they view the brand.

''(...) The aesthetic of the looks is exactly what I expect from Balmain – chic, sophisticated and empowering! It's like buying Balmain for a cheaper price'' Frances.

''I feel a sense of empowerment when I see the campaign. The aesthetics are on point – they're exactly how I envision Balmain!'' Elizabeth

Moving to the more negative feelings evoked. Three respondents experienced a dislike caused by the inconsistency within the campaign as they feel there is a mismatch between their perception towards Balmain. They liked the luxurious feeling you get from the campaign, but even though there are elements, which is not in line but how they perceive Balmain.

''I don't think they would have used public transportation in their content outside of this co-branding. I have never seen they used anything like this. It is too normal for being Balmain.'' Frances

''The subway setting felt ...hm... off. For me, I would associate Balmain more with limousines, red carpets and exclusive events, not exclusive events''. Jane

Furthermore, two respondents mentioned that they were confused. Respondents linked it to mixed feelings about the hashtag #HMBALMAINATION, as they don't feel any connection to H&M. They feel sort of an inconsistencies when it comes to the communication style.

''I am confused about the nation they are trying to create. I don't want to be associated with customers from H&M. I don't feel like we belong together.'' Camille

Four respondents experienced a feeling of doubt, as they found the content engaging and visually aesthetics, but they did not perceive it to be convincing enough. They don't believe the collaboration stays true to what they already think the brand stands for. They have concerns about the lifestyle and the status that comes with the brand.

''It feels like the brand is trying to portray a lifestyle that don't align with what I've come to associate Balmain with. It's all about the glam, no everyday fashion'' Jane.

''Balmain for me is some kind of status. I feel they lost it when they collaborated with H&M. It is like going from driving a G-Wagen to a Volvo. You don't want to be associated with Volvo when you can afford a G-Wagen''. Frances

4.2.5 Consumer-Brand Identification

The final segment of the in-depth interviews revolves around how brand followers identify with the brand in the context of co-branding communication on Instagram, and their subsequent readiness to interact with it. I have established two themes – Self-Identification and Willingness to Engage.

4.2.5.1 Self-Identification

In terms of identifying with Balmain through the content under scrutiny, respondents provided both positive and negative feedback. Three followers of the brand felt that Balmain's unique communication style still aligned with their self-image. The reasons for identification were found in perceived similarities between the brand's personality traits and those of the followers, specifically shared passion for fashion and confident self-expression.

> *''I have always been passionate about fashion and expressing myself confidently. I have always thought of Balmain as elegance, confident, passionate, and sophisticated. I see a lot of myself in that, and I think that these traits were well express in the collaboration, even though it is a collaboration with a fast fashion brand''.* Camille
>
> *''I am a confident person and I like to stand out. I admire the confidence and the don't be afraid of standing out image the campaign gives. Kendall Jenner is obviously standing out wearing that dress on the subway.''* Jane

On the other hand, lack of self-identification was noted by the three remaining followers. They explained that the aspirational status was not in line with their portrayed picture of this. As they mentioned that the co-branding had a luxurious feeling to it, they feel like the lifestyle connected to it do not fit with their self-identification. Two interviewees emphasized their strong identification with the lifestyle the brand fronted, mismatched with the everyday life setting in the campaign.

> *''I like to live a luxurious lifestyle. I strive for the things people cannot afford. I like fancy cars, expensive dinners, and so on. I would never wear anything from Balmain on the subway. I don't think Balmain is for everyone as they try to express''* Jane.
>
> *''For me Balmain is fancy events, red carpets, expensive and glamourous. Celebrities and models. That is the lifestyle I want to show when I am wearing a Balmain dress. I want people to think I am a part of that. By adding the everyday setting into the campaign, it does not appeal to me anymore. I don't think it fits the description of who I want to be. I don't want to be that normal person on the subway''*. Frances

4.2.5.2 Willingness to Engage

The next factor revealed contrasting answers among the respondents regarding their engagement with the brand through co-branding content. All the three respondents who identified with the brand behind the visual said they were willing to engage. This was rooted in the similarities with luxury content, the extraordinariness, and the aesthetic of visuals. Additionally, one respondent who did not identify with the co-branded communication style, expressed a willingness to engage with the content due to the visual pleasure it provided.

> *''I would engage because I think the creativity in this campaign is huge, and I think it is something noteworthy.''* Charlotte.

''The visuals are so striking and well-crafted that I find myself drawn to them. It is definitely something I would like to interact with.'' Elizabeth.

Contrasting, two respondent who did not identify themselves with Balmain seen through the co-branded content with H&M was unwilling to engage with the content. This is all crafted down to the same explanation as in self-identification. They are true to the loyalty and self-identification with the regular Balmain image.

''I would not like or share anything, because for me it is not in line for what I think Balmain stands for. Yes, the collaboration looks luxurious, but the meaning behind the content is not true to the real Balmain image''. Jane

''No, I would never risk that. I have a lot of followers with the same taste and lifestyle as me, so I would never show them that I am nothing else that extra.'' Frances

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Brand Associations

This following section will address the first research sub-question, which explores luxury brand followers' perceptions of co-branded content on Instagram, with a focus on brand associations. The findings from both part of this study will be discussed collectively, drawing on the Brand Image Incongruity concept (Sjödin & Törn, 2006), as well as relevant literature mentioned in the literature review.

Product-related attributes (Keller, 1993), specifically brand associations related to Balmain products in this study, showed significant overlap between the responses of the brand followers and the associations identified through the Semiotic Analysis. The Semiotic Analysis revealed that the co-branded content tried to create associations related to the luxurious and exclusivity, as well as the extraordinary and fashion-forward, corresponding to key luxury traits such as sophistication and exclusivity (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). However, there were associations explained by the respondents like affordable and accessible, which is typical for fast fashion brands (Cheema, 2018).

When it comes to the non-product-related attributes (Keller, 1993), brand association related to the price was noticed through the interviewees. In the analyzed content (Semiotic Analysis) suggested that this collection could be more affordable and yet exclusive for its customers. In line with this, the respondents explained that the content may be seen as more affordable as it is a collaboration with H&M, but still seems to be exclusive for its customers. They associated the brand with affordable prices, exclusivity and more accessible. This is in line with the fast fashion traits of affordability and accessibility (Caro & Martinez-de-Albeniz, 2014), as well as the luxurious brand characteristics of exclusive (Fionda & Moore, 2009). From the observation of the

co-branded content, it appears that the typical brand user may exhibit traits of individualism and a strong personality. This seems to align well with the young customer base of fashion brands, a sentiment echoed by the Semiotic Analysis (Cheema, 2018). Moreover, the typical Balmain user, as perceived through co-branding related content, seems to be associated with confident and high status. The perception is also mirrored by the brand's followers, further linking the brand's associations with characteristics of luxury. The co-branding content has fostered strong connections to special events, which is seen as the typical usage scenario from both the researcher's viewpoint and that of the respondents. This once again aligns with the perceptions of Balmain followers with those who typically associated with luxury brands, particularly their prestige and sophistication (Van Gorp, 2012). The brand personality is perceived as self-assured, center of attention and elegant, which aligns with the unconventionality and strength often associated with luxury brands (Van Gorp, 2012).

The experiential advantages (Keller, 1993), that is discovered based on the interpretations within various communications aligned with the sentiments expressed by interviewed Balmain followers. These sentiments included a sense of being the center of attention, feeling special, and attractive. It noticed an emphasis on femininity and allure as potential experiential benefits within the brand's posts, while brand followers highlighted the advantages of standing out and enhanced self-esteem resulting from using the brand. Generally, these experientials found benefits to be in sync with the perceptions of luxury brands, which are associated with uniqueness, pleasure, and conspicuousness, providing their consumers with emotional rewards, social status, and interest (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). These benefits also align with the advantages derived from consuming symbolic fashion brands, which are used to construct consumers' ideal self-images (Jin & Cedrola, 2017).

Finally, in terms of attitudes (Keller, 1993), the communication related to co-branding could stimulate positive attitudes, a notion that was somewhat validated by the reactions of the respondents. Depending on the consumer, there were observed positive attitudes accompanied by feelings of surprise and impression, as well as negative attitudes triggered by feelings of confusion and deception. The following section will delve deeper into this.

It can be noted that brand associations characteristics of luxury brands were more prevalent than those typical for fast fashion brands in the analyzed Balmain content. This can be attributed to the goals of fast fashion co-branding, to prevent image dilution from the perspective of luxury brands (Stankeviciute, 2012). The achievement of the aforementioned was validated by brand followers at the moment of exposure. When analyzing the free associations task, it was observed contradictions between the usual Balmain association and those that emerged when exposed to the analyzed content. In accordance with the luxurious offered by luxury fashion brand (Cheema, 2018), the regular Balmain image was strongly associated with being expensive, high quality and exclusive. However, when viewed through the lens of co-branded content, it

aligned with the accessibility, low quality and affordable, which is often associated with fast fashion brands (Cheema, 2018). Based on the co-branding content, it appears that Balmain's followers primarily displayed brand association that align with the brand. This resulted in a Brand Image Congruity (Sjödin & Torn, 2006), as the perceived image of the brand match the actual brand image. However, some of the associations are not in line with the Balmain's brand image, reflecting an inconsistency. The hypothesis of Sjödin & Törn (2006) suggest that for well-established brands, consumers tend to overlook inconsistencies and do not alter their existing perceptions about the brand. The participants in this study, who voluntarily became part of the brand community several years ago, are believed to have a solid understanding of the brand.

5.2 Congruity Perceptions

This section looks at how people felt about Balmain's collaborations with H&M on Instagram. This relates to the second question for the thesis, which asks about how well these collaborations fit with people's image of Balmain.

Some of the respondents perceived some of the collaboration content on Balmain's Instagram page as different from their idea of what Balmain is about, schema incongruity (Mandler, 1982). However, most of the collaboration did seem to fit. Overall, this suggest that the collaboration cause a moderate level of incongruity. In other words, they surprised people a bit, but not overwhelmingly so. This is consistent with Schema Incongruity Theory, which suggest that people can handle some surprises as long as they can eventually figure things out.

Some Balmain followers who were interviewed said that the co-branded content is viewed as congruent with Balmain concerning few aspects. The most mentioned reasoning was the brand followers' perception of the luxury image they have managed to front in the co-branded content. Generally, the perceptions of Balmain followers indicate that co-branded communication, which carry the values and associations of both brands (as revealed through Semiotics), are predominantly viewed as luxurious. This perception points toward image reinforcement, which, according to Geylani et al. (2008), is one of the objectives of co-branding collaborations. However, even though followers noted some fast fashion elements in the communication, the overall expression was perceived as consistency in the campaign. At the same time, the majority described the co-branding content as having a luxurious aesthetic, coupled with impressions of professionalism and the visual aesthetic. This could be associated with the luxury signifiers embedded within the intricate sign system used by luxury brands (Gurzki et al., 2019). However, the contrasts with the accessibility and affordability traits of the communication are characteristics of fast fashion promotional materials (Gurzki et al., 2019).

The clothing in the Balmain co-branded content was another area where the Balmain brand image was clearly reflected. Balmain is renowned for its bold, edgy designs, intricate detailing, and good materials.

These characteristics were evident in the co-branded collection. By including these signature features, Balmain ensured that the collaboration felt authentic and true to the brand. This consistency helped maintain a sense of congruity for followers who already associated Balmain with these design elements.

One factor that directly met the expectations of Balmain brand followers was the use of a celebrity as an endorser. One reason the celebrity collaboration felt like a good fit for Balmain is because it aligned with what people already expected from luxury brands. Research shows that using celebrities to promote fashion is a tactic for these brands, both in general advertising (Okonkwo, 2007) and on platforms like Instagram (Loureiro et al., 2018). This means that the collaboration didn't surprise Balmain followers or force them to change their existing ideas about the brand. It fit neatly with their existing mental schema of how luxury brands typically operate (Mandler, 1982). Another reason the celebrity collaboration worked well was the choice of Kendall Jenner. Millennials, the main target group for luxury brands (Cheema, 2018), tend to be familiar with Jenner. Since Balmain has a history of using celebrity endorsements (Balmain, n.d.), this choice fits well with what Balmain's online followers expected. Because the celebrity endorsement strategy and the specific celebrity chosen were relevant to their existing ideas about Balmain, followers viewed the collaboration favorably.

As noted earlier, the way consumers perceive the co-branded content of Balmain is slightly different from their perception of the standard Balmain brand. This observation aligns with the concept of Brand Image Incongruity proposed by Sjödin & Törn (2006), which suggest that the brand associations triggered by this content did not match the pre-existing brand image of Balmain held by its community members. A number of Balmain followers pinpointed this discrepancy as a primary cause for the perceived incongruity. In addition to the general conflict in brand image perception, followers also noticed significant inconsistencies in the communication and its perceived price and quality. As discussed in the previous section on brand associations, these inconsistencies highlight their importance to consumers and their strength within the Balmain brand schemas.

Fast fashion elements were noticed some of the brand followers sees this campaign as inconsistency. Moreover, the conveyed elements of Balmain's communication have been seen as contradictory, where they highlighted the communication that Balmain should be a brand for everyone, even the people who can wear their clothing in everyday life, which following Mandler (1982) could be an alternative schema assimilating the incongruity. In essence, a handful of Balmain enthusiast explicitly stated that the showcased content did not align with their expectations as members of the Balmain community. The way Balmain communicated about the co-branding campaigns was a major reason why some followers felt it clashed with the brand's image (Brand Image Incongruity, Sjödin & Torn, 2006). The incorporated elements in the co-branded content also made the followers see the campaign as inconsistency. The way they used a subway in the feed and the hashtag ''#HMBALMAINATION'', made them feel not connected to the brand anymore. People

were familiar with Balmain's usual style on Instagram, and the co-branding content seemed different from what they expected. Balmain's co-branding campaign on Instagram generated mixed reactions from followers. Some followers were pleasantly surprised and impressed by the brand communication. This positive response aligns with Sjödin & Törn's (2006) idea that some level of incongruity can be positive if consumers can resolve it favorably. However, other felt confused and deceived by the co-branding content. This suggests a stronger level of incongruity that created a negative brand attitude. The findings about negative reactions to the Balmain co-branding campaign partially contradict Sjödin & Törn (2006). While their theory suggests more incongruity can be positive, this study shows that if the surprise isn't resolved and lead to feelings of deception, negative brand attitudes can arise.

5.3 Consumer-Brand Identification

The final part of the discussion addresses the third sub-question of the thesis, focusing on how co-branding content influences luxury fashion brand followers' identification with the brand and their willingness to engage with it. The interview results will be examined in the context of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the Customer-Brand Identification (CBI) (Lam et al., 2010), along with related studies presented in the literature view.

Almost half of the respondents expressed a lack of identification with the brand when it came to the incongruent communication style of Balmain's co-branding content. They noted that the content and the brand portrayed through it did not align with their content preferences or core values. Consequently, the brand as depicted in the co-branding content failed to meet their expectations within the dimension of private self and lifestyle, which is a component of consumers' self-projections (Lam et al., 2010). Moreover, considering the cognitive component of group identification (Tajfel, 1982) as the basis for consumers' perceptions of belongingness with the brand (Lam et al., 2010), results were negative, as respondents consciously did not perceive the changed image of Balmain as fitting their self-concepts. Some of the interviewed followers not only failed to identify with the brand itself as seen through co-branding content due to a mismatch with its core traits, but also perceived dissimilarities with its potential clientele. Additionally, there was a mismatch within the social dimension of selves, particularly related to belongingness (Lam et al., 2010). Drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), it can be inferred that these consumers perceived the clientele of co-branding items as an out-group that did not correspond to their identities. It is worth noting that when expressing a lack of identification with the 'unusual' Balmain portrayed in the co-branding content, brand followers emphasized the regular Balmain is the brand they associate themselves with, highlighting the lifestyle and the uniqueness of the brand.

The other half of the respondents positively assessed their sense of belonging with the brand despite perceiving incongruities between the co-branding related content and the brand itself. This was supported by

the follower's personality traits such fashion-forward and their love for luxury. People connected with the brand's new image, even if it differed from the usual Balmain. This connection happened because the brand's message aligned with their personal aspirations (Lam et al., 2010). Social Identity Theory (1986) helps explain this. This theory says people categorize themselves into groups based on shared traits and values. In this case, the brand's focus on personality and luxury created a group that people identified with. Since people felt connected to the brand and its values, both familiar (luxury, exclusive, fashion-forward) and unfamiliar (affordable, accessible, low quality), the brand triggered positive feelings. This aligns with the idea that identification with a group involves both thinking about it positively (cognitive) and feeling good about being part of it (evaluative) (Tajfel, 1982). These positive feelings underlie how people perceive and value their relationship with the brand (Lam et al., 2010).

According to a study by Tuskej & Podnar (2018), consumer identification with a brand can lead to increased engagement with the brand and its social media activities. The findings of this study support this hypothesis. However, inconsistent results were observed when considering the reverse situation, where there was a lack of self-identification. All of the Balmain followers who identified themselves with the brand based on co-branding content, were willing to engage with the brand in its Instagram online community. This supports and complements the study by Tuskej & Podnar (2018), as their focus was not limited to brand community members. However, it's still important to note that the respondents did not directly attribute their engagement with the brand to self-identification. Instead, they cited perceived similarity to luxurious communication, with other focusing on aesthetics and creativity of content.

Noteworthy, one brand follower who did not identify herself with Balmain as portrayed through co-branding related content still expressed a willingness to engage with it. She explained that this willingness was due to the visual pleasure it provided. However, one other respondent who did not identify with the brand, were unwilling to engage with the Balmain co-branded content. She cites that it did not meet their expectations toward Balmain profile. She is true to the loyalty and self-identification with the regular Balmain image. This finding corresponds to a study by Tang et al. (2019), in which a lack of perceived congruity between the consumer and the brand may lead to discontinuance of engagement with the brand fan page.

5.4 Managerial Implication

This study's findings could provide insights for managers of luxury fashion brands. However, it is important to remember that this study is qualitative and subjective in nature. As such, the implications outlined should not be seen as universally applicable truths, but rather a suggestion based on this specific case study.

The study suggests a way for luxury fashion brands to create successful co-branding campaigns with fast fashion brands. Many respondents found that familiar elements from luxury fashion advertising helped them

understand the unfamiliar ones. This familiarity led to positive evaluations of the collaboration. This suggest that luxury fashion brands should consider incorporating a mix of elements in their co-branding campaigns. They have to maintain elements that resonate with their existing audience (e.g. using celebrities). They also have to incorporate some aspects of fast fashion communication (as identified by the respondents) to elevate the perception of the collaboration. Following this, luxury fashion brand can increase the chances of their co-branding messages being well-received and understood by their followers.

The study also highlights the importance of visual elements in co-branding campaigns for luxury fashion brands. In addition to using celebrities (as mentioned), the overall aesthetics of the co-branded content on Instagram significantly impacted how followers evaluated the campaign. Aesthetics that resonated with followers led to a greater willingness to engage with the brand. When planning co-branding campaigns on Instagram, luxury fashion brands should focus on creating visually appealing content that goes beyond just including celebrities. This well help ensure the content is engaging and satisfying for their followers.

Lastly, the study identified some complexities in how luxury fashion followers react to co-branding campaigns on Instagram. They way followers perceive and respond to the campaign depends on their personal preferences. Using luxurious communication can attract new customers who aspire to luxury brand, but it may not convince existing luxury customer to buy (since they already know the core brand). For the luxury fashion customer, this communication might not resonate as well because it clashes with their expectations of the brand. Luxury fashion brands should be aware that even if fashion customer is intrigued, a purchase isn't guaranteed. The brand's core communication style should still be recognizable to maintain positive engagement with the loyal customers. A compromise might be to use a blend of luxurious and typical fast fashion elements within the co-branding campaign. This could be a way to satisfy both existing customers and attract new ones who ae curious about luxury.

5.5 Future Research

Additional comprehensive inquiries could be carried out within the boundaries of each sub-question in this thesis. In terms of brand associations, this investigation examined the typology based on Keller's (1993) classification to gain an initial understanding of follower perceptions. The participants concentrated on luxury characteristics inherent in co-branding content, largely overlooking those associated with the fast fashion brand. Future research could employ quantitative methods to assess the strength, uniqueness, and favorability of brand associations (Keller, 1993) related to the traits we identified. This could help depict the brand image formed through co-branding content and comprehend the hierarchy of their significance. Quantitative methods would enhance the reliability of research results, reduce the likelihood of individual participant biases, and offer a more comprehensive perspective on consumer behavior. As this research involved a subjective analysis of content aimed at discerning potential brand intentions, subsequent studies

could incorporate interviews with brand managers to validate analytical forecasts and facilitate campaign assessments.

Regarding the examination of brand schemas, this study utilized content already familiar to participants, which could potentially influence their responses and reactions. Future research could employ experimental methods using fictitious content bearing luxury associations unknown to participants to determine if opinions about incongruities would vary. Given that participants exhibited diverse emotional responses to incongruent communication, the inclusion of neuroscientific methods to verify affective responses could be advantageous (Belk et al., 2012). Despite the fact that the majority of our participants enjoyed the co-branding related content, no purchase intention was noted. Therefore, subsequent studies could explore the factors driving purchase intention within this context.

Future research could utilize netnography, an online form of ethnography, to examine the online brand community as a social construct (Belk et al., 2012). Researchers could explore how interactions and relationships with other brand community members might potentially influence brand follower behaviors. As my focus was on engagement as an interaction between the brand and followers, the results of a netnographic study could provide complementary findings and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of follower behavior.

Considering the limitations of this paper, future research could expand the sample studied. Subsequent studies could primarily validate the findings on a larger sample. As this thesis was confined to the perceptions of Instagram brand followers, future research could include individuals outside the brand community and conduct a comparative study. Additionally, given the international nature of luxury fashion brands, future research could examine a geographically diverse sample, providing a cross-national perspective on the topic. As this paper disclosed differing opinions between highly loyal luxury fashion consumers and those who are also clients of fast fashion brands, further research could investigate various patterns of views among brand followers. These perspectives could provide a wider view on the researched topic and identify new patterns of related consumer behavior.

6.0 Conclusion

The concluding chapter of this thesis comprises final reflections and conclusions in order to provide the answer for the main research question:

How do followers of luxury fashion brands interpret and respond to the brand's co-branding communication with a fast-fashion brand on Instagram?

The objective of this dissertation was to scrutinize the content related to co-branding in luxury fashion on Instagram, specifically from the viewpoint of the followers of these luxury fashion brands. The motivation for this exploration stemmed from the noticeable disparities in the communication strategies of luxury brands and fast fashion. It was intriguing to understand how consumers interpret the combined endeavors of these brands in a co-branding partnership, a strategy that has been gaining traction in recent times. Instagram was selected as the platform for this study because of its widespread use among both brands and consumers. To the best of the author's understanding, no prior research has been conducted on this type of alliance communication on Instagram, which is unique in terms of brand communication and user characteristics. This study aims to fill that gap.

In order to fulfill the primary goal, this thesis employed qualitative methodologies, such as semiotics and in-depth interviews, all within the framework of the selected case study. As a result, given the relative subjectivity of this paper's approach, it offers initial understanding on potential viewpoints and responses of luxury fashion consumers.

The findings indicate that followers of luxury fashion brands interpret and respond to the brand's co-branding communication with a fast fashion brand on Instagram in a multifaceted manner. The co-branding content on Instagram was perceived as a blend of both fast fashion and luxury brand traits. However, this did not necessarily lead to associating the luxury brand more with fast fashion features forming their brand perceptions. The brand followers associated the meanings regarding luxurious, exclusive, and quality, which was found included in this type of communication to possibly elicit the brand associations familiar for luxury brands. In addition to this, association characterized by fast fashion brand, such as accessible and affordable was mentioned. This co-branding strategy allowed them to engage with the luxury brand in a more approachable and affordable way, which in turn, enhanced their connection and loyalty to the luxury brand. The consumer paid more attention associating the co-branded content with a mix of both luxury and fast fashion characteristics, they perceived more affordable pricing, and low quality, but at the same time the design and exclusivity were mentioned. However, some followers expressed concerns about the potential dilution of the luxury brand's image and prestige due to its associations with a fast fashion brand. They feared that the luxury brand might lose its unique lifestyle and become something that everyone can wear.

The luxury brand followers evaluated the co-branding content as moderately congruent with the luxury brand. The elements and meanings included in this content were perceived as more luxury fashion, this congruent with their regular image of the luxury brand. As a results, it was seen that the amount of the incongruent aspects included in this brand communication were not enough to change their established brand schemas. The followers had mixed reactions to the co-branding content, with both positive and negative feelings.

The study identified key differences in how follower reacted to the co-branding campaign. Some of the respondents find the fast fashion elements in the campaign intriguing, e.g. the subway setting or the ladder in the highlighted photo. This again led to dislike caused by the incongruity. Some respondents were also concerned about the hidden meaning of a collaboration that fits all. On the other hand, some positive reaction was recalled due to the co-branded content. Some of the respondents still enjoyed the Balmain co-branded content. It was found that co-branding content of luxury brand had an effect on both ad and brand attitude.

The study found that followers did not necessarily see themselves reflected in the co-branding content on Instagram. There was not a strong sense of self-identification with the brand for some of the respondents. Some people did not feel the co-branding content aligned with their own personal image (self-projections). Other did not feel the content reflected the image of being the typical luxury fashion customer (their social group identification). This mismatch led to both positive and negative reactions to the co-branding campaign. The study found an interesting disconnect between how followers identified with the brand and their willingness to engage with it on Instagram. Those followers who felt the co-branding content reflected their self-image (high brand identification) were likely to want to engage with the brand. However, surprisingly some of the respondents who did not identify with the brand based on the co-branding content still showed a willingness to engage. This suggest that other factors besides self-identification might be driving engagement for these followers. Perhaps the content itself was visually interesting, or the celebrity element was appealing, even if it did not necessarily align with their overall brand image.

Overall, carelessly using co-branding on Instagram can damage relationship with existing customers. If the co-branding content strays too far from the brand's established image (brand schema) for followers, it can create a sense of incongruity and confusion. This can harm brand loyalty. However, a well-executed co-branding campaign can attract new customer who aspire luxury brands. The key to success is finding the right balance.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE	
Part 1. Information about the participants	
Question	
What is your name, age, and gender? When did you start to follow Balmain on Instagram? When was your last purchase from Balmain?	
Part 1. Background question about Balmain	
Question	*Theoretical setting*
What comes to your mind when thinking about a luxury brand like Balmain? How would you characterize the content on Balmain's Instagram? Can you describe a post on Balmain's profile that would prompt you to engage, share, comment, or like?	Free associations task (Keller, 2013) to identify schemas (Mandler, 1982) for Balmain. Schemas (Mandler, 1982) developed around the Instagram profile of Balmain. Engagement (Tuskej & Podnar, 2018) factors for followers in regular Balmain communication efforts.
Part 2. Brand associations evoked by Balmain co-branding content	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
When you contemplate the brand (Balmain) responsible for this content, what thoughts come to mind? • Could you list 10-15 characteristics that pertain to any aspect? • Can you briefly justify your thoughts? Upon viewing this content, how would you portray the individual who would opt for these products? • Why?	Free associations task (Keller, 2013) revealing the immediate brand associations triggered by Balmain's co-branding content. In accordance with Keller (2013), subsequent categories of brand associations elicited by co-branding content are revealed through follow-up questions.

Can you envision a scenario where the product could be utilized, based on these visuals? • Why? What do you believe could be the benefits of using these products? • Why? If the brand responsible for this content were personified, how would you describe them?	The projective technique by Keller (2012) illustrates the perception of Balmain's brand personality through its co-branding content
Part 3. Balmain co-branding content perceptions	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
What is your assessment of the content and why?	Ad attitude (Solomen et al., 2013)
Do you believe this content aligns with Balmain's brand identity? Does it fulfill your expectations for content? Would you be interested in seeing more content of this nature?	Occurrence of Brand Image Incongrity (Sjödin & Törn, 2006) and Schema Incongruity (Mandler, 1982) between Balmain's co-branding content and the brand schemas.
Would you interact with this content? Could you explain your reasons and the degree to which you would do so?	Engagement (Tuskej & Podnar, 2018) with Balmain's co-branding content.
Do you feel a connection with the brand that produces this type of content? Could you explain why or why not?	Consumer-brand Identification (Lam et al., 2010) influenced by Balmain's co-branding content.

Appendix 2: Free Associations Overview

FREE ASSOCIATIONS FOR REGULAR BALMAIN	
Free Association	*Interviewee*
Expensive, high quality, exclusive, luxury, sophisticated design, trendy	Camille
Luxurious, high-end, celebrities, high quality, Parisian style, diverse style	Mary
High quality, luxurious, high price, innovative, slow fashion, unique	Charlotte
Parisian style, expensive, luxury, high-end, limited availability, timeless	Jane
Pricy, high-end designs, French, luxury, expensive, high quality, celebrities	Elizabeth
Exclusive, luxurious, modern design, celebrities, iconic logo, practical	Frances

FREE ASSOCIATIONS EVOKED BY CO-BRANDING CONTENT	
Free Association	*Interviewee*
Accessible, trendy, high fashion, affordable, low quality, iconic, stylish	Camille
Luxury, chic, accessible, sophisticated, limited, trendy, affordable	Mary
Affordable, accessible, low quality, celebrities, elegance, edgy, limited	Charlotte
High-end, affordable, fashion-forward, exclusive, low quality	Jane
Limited edition, celebrities, affordable, modern, medium quality, accessible	Elizabeth
Low quality, affordable, youthful, limited, accessible, sparkly	Frances

Appendix 3: Interviews

INTERVIEW GUIDE	
Part 1. Information about the participants	
Question	
What is your name and age? When did you start to follow Balmain on Instagram? When was your last purchase from Balmain?	My name is Camille, and I am 24 years old. I started to follow Balmain on Instagram in around 2020, I think. It was when I was 19 years old. Actually, it is 2 months ago! I bought a new t-shirt, which I love and have worn quite a lot already.
Part 1. Background question about Balmain	
Question	*Theoretical setting*
What comes to your mind when thinking about a luxury brand like Balmain? How would you characterize the content on Balmain's Instagram?	Hmm, expensive (laugh). I think about that they are like you said, a luxury brand which is quite exclusive. I also think they have sophisticated design with high quality, or I know that they have good quality. I would also say that they are quite trendy and fashion-forward. Good question. I think they have sophisticated styling. They always have cool dresses or cool accessories that are pretty good looking in all their photo. Each post feels like a carefully curated fashion editorial, where every piece is thoughtfully

Can you describe a post on Balmain's profile that would prompt you to engage, share, comment, or like?	chosen and styled to perfection. The attention to detail is remarkable, everything is just so highlighted. They also use a lot of endorsers, like celebrities or models, e.g. Kendall Jenner or Gigi Hadid. It adds so much credibility and appeal to their posts. Seeing a top model or a celebrity in Balmain makes me believe in the brand's value even more. I would love to engage with the content if it is interesting and different from other brands, with a unique idea behind it. I think it is boring to see a simple picture of clothes; it should be something out of the ordinary. Maybe something that gives me insight to something I wouldn't have seen otherwise. Have you seen the Met Gala content? That's a whole other level! Seeing the hustle and bustle backstage right before the biggest fashion event of the year is exhilarating. It gives me a sense of the pressure and excitement surrounding the event, making the final red-carpet appearances even more glamorous. I get to join the gala from my living room!
Part 2. Brand associations evoked by Balmain co-branding content	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
When you contemplate the brand (Balmain) responsible for this content, what thoughts come to mind? • Could you list 10-15 characteristics that pertain to any aspect? • Can you briefly justify your thoughts?	I think that they still are high fashion, but maybe a little more affordable and accessible than the regular Balmain. I also characterize it as trendy and stylish. The clothing look really good. It still has this iconic look. One thing I think of is that the quality has to be low, due to the price.
Upon viewing this content, how would you portray the individual who would opt for these products? • Why?	I don't know. Maybe a fashion influencer, who express themselves through their clothing style. This was a hard question.

Can you envision a scenario where the product could be utilized, based on these visuals? • Why? What do you believe could be the benefits of using these products? • Why? If the brand responsible for this content were personified, how would you describe them?	The clothes are in my opinion formal wear or for special occasion where you have to dress up. Like the video shows, maybe on a fashion show or catwalk. The benefits would be more affordable Balmain. I would say someone who is confident, crazy modern, unique, and stubborn, following the trends. Trendy would be the appropriate world, I think. A girl living in the city, living her influencer life (ha-ha). They go to a lot of events and fashion shows, which I think will be suitable for the brand.
Part 3. Balmain co-branding content perceptions	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
What is your assessment of the content and why? Do you believe this content aligns with Balmain's brand identity? Does it fulfill your expectations for content? Would you be interested in seeing more content of this nature?	I think the content is great! All the details are there for a reason. They do the job, for example the interior, light, colors, and the surroundings. It is not random that the exit sign in the highlighted story is there, for example. Looking at the pictures, it definitely felt like Balmain to me. They always seem to have big names modeling their clothes, and Kendall Jenner just fit perfectly. She has that whole confident, powerful energy that goes along with the Balmain brand. Yes, because they are using Kendall Jenner, but at the same time something is off. The highlighted story, with the EXIT sign and the ladder, makes me loose the luxurious feeling. It could have been a regular highlight for normal H&M party collection. There is nothing about that who shows the luxurious lifestyle of Balmain, in my view. However, having Kendall Jenner in the campaign instantly elevated the whole thing for me. She's a top fashion model associated with high-end brands, and that association definitely rubbed off on the

	clothes. It made the collection feel more luxurious and exclusive. I like the vibe of this (points at the video), like they have connected the luxurious with the more down-to-earth elements, like the subway. I think the combination actually are pretty nice!
Would you interact with this content? Could you explain your reasons and the degree to which you would do so?	Both yes and no. I am a little bit confused, even though I am impressed. I am confused about the nation they are trying to create. I don't want to be associated with customers from H&M. I don't feel like we belong together. Also, the focus on affordability in the campaign worried me. While the design was in line with Balmain, I wondered if the quality would match the Balmain name. However, I think the campaign is cool and extraordinary, so it is engaging after all!
Do you feel a connection with the brand that produces this type of content? Could you explain why or why not?	I have always been passionate about fashion and expressing myself confidently. I have always thought of Balmain as elegance, confident, passionate, and sophisticated. I see a lot of myself in that, and I think that these traits were well express in the collaboration, even though it is a collaboration with a fast fashion brand. So, the answer is yes, I still feel a connection with Balmain.

INTERVIEW GUIDE	
Part 1. Information about the participants	
Question	
What is your name and age?	Mary and I am 26 years old.
When did you start to follow Balmain on Instagram?	I am pretty sure it was around 2018. That's when I discover them.
When was your last purchase from Balmain?	Let me check. It was in February, so 3 months ago.
Part 1. Background question about Balmain	

Question	*Theoretical setting*
What comes to your mind when thinking about a luxury brand like Balmain?	Balmain, hm, many things! But first of all, I think of them as luxurious or maybe high-end fashion with a good quality. I have clothing from them myself, and the quality is amazing! I would also say they are quite trendy with this Parisian style. And of course – how can I forget! I think of celebrities. The celebrity world. Everything that has to do with them. Fashion shows, events, etc. Yes.
How would you characterize the content on Balmain's Instagram?	Luxurious is the first thing that comes to my mind. It makes me feel like I am a part of something exclusive, something special. When I see a Balmain post on my feed, it's like being invited into this glamorous world that's reserved for the elite.
Can you describe a post on Balmain's profile that would prompt you to engage, share, comment, or like?	I am very into fashion, so when it is something that is nice. I might share it if it fits with my taste or recommend it to someone who might like it. I would send it to them on Instagram as a recommendation to a friend or family.
Part 2. Brand associations evoked by Balmain co-branding content	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
When you contemplate the brand (Balmain) responsible for this content, what thoughts come to mind? • Could you list 10-15 characteristics that pertain to any aspect? • Can you briefly justify your thoughts? Upon viewing this content, how would you portray the individual who would opt for these products? • Why?	One of the first things I think of is that it still seems very luxury to me, but at the same time affordable. And I also think that it is more accessible maybe, but at the same time limited due to the limited edition. I also think of characteristics like chic and trendy. Sophisticated, maybe! When I think of a typical user of this co-branding collection, I envision someone daring and fashion-conscious. They're not afraid to stand out and follow the latest trends because the collection is so bold and extra.

Can you envision a scenario where the product could be utilized, based on these visuals? • Why? What do you believe could be the benefits of using these products? • Why? If the brand responsible for this content were personified, how would you describe them?	I think it can be used on a party, or a dinner, or maybe some fashion shows/events. It is because of the glamorous design! The sequins and so on. Oh, this I don't know. Hmm (pauses for 2 minutes). I can come up with something that is beneficial. Maybe that is more affordable and accessible. Good question. I would describe them as someone who it not afraid to stand out. It is someone who's confident and self-assured, but also has a touch of rebelliousness. Maybe. Yes, that has to be my answer to that question.
Part 3. Balmain co-branding content perceptions	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
What is your assessment of the content and why? Do you believe this content aligns with Balmain's brand identity? Does it fulfill your expectations for content? Would you be interested in seeing more content of this nature?	I like the content. They pay attention to make a high-quality video, with good lightning and well thought out visuals. It looks expensive. The way they transformed an everyday setting like a subway into a high-fashion runway was truly remarkable. The models, the clothing, the ambiance, everything screamed luxury. They even make the subway look luxurious. That's why I follow them in the first place, the touch of luxuriousness to everything. I like that. Yes, I actually think it does. *I am quite surprised. It is something different and unexpected for me. I never thought that Balmain would collaborate with H&M, but I like the unexpected.* The Balmain collab with H&M felt seamless to me. The whole campaign had this luxurious vibe that's exactly what I expect from Balmain. They make everything look expensive and luxurious. The whole collection had that signature style – bold colors, interesting patterns and it looks like the quality is okey. It felt

	just like something straight off their runway. The clothes aren't just trendy, they have this chic Parisian style Balmain is known for. Like, the way they have incorporated details like sequins and pearls – it showed a real attention to detail you usually don't find to that price point. And of course, everything is super eye-catching! This collaboration is a perfect example on how fashion can be both accessible and aspirational. This collection has a lower price range than I usually has to pay when I go to a Balmain store, but at the same time they manage to keep the exclusivity by having a limited quantity. I also think the collaboration is more accessible, as I see H&M stores everywhere. It seems like they have focused a lot on the Balmain side of the collaboration and not so much on the H&M characteristics. And yes, I would love to see more.
Would you interact with this content? Could you explain your reasons and the degree to which you would do so?	Yes! I am a huge fan of The Kardashians. I have watched the tv show thousand times! The way they have used Kendall Jenner makes me excited about the collaboration! If she accepted to be a part of this campaign, it has to have some luxurious elements. I love her and I love luxury, perfect for me.
Do you feel a connection with the brand that produces this type of content? Could you explain why or why not?	Yes, I do. I am a huge fashionista, so for me it is important that they keep the luxurious element of Balmain in their content, which they successfully did in this campaign. And also, the style of the clothing is recognizable for me to be a part of Balmain's collection, which is a big plus!

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Part 1. Information about the participants	
Question	

What is your name and age? When did you start to follow Balmain on Instagram? When was your last purchase from Balmain?	My name is Charlotte, and I am 27. Oh, when I was a lot younger! Maybe 2015. Yes, I think so, 2015. I recently purchased a dress. 1 month ago, maybe. Or maybe less, I don't remember. Recently.
Part 1. Background question about Balmain	
Question	*Theoretical setting*
What comes to your mind when thinking about a luxury brand like Balmain? How would you characterize the content on Balmain's Instagram? Can you describe a post on Balmain's profile that would prompt you to engage, share, comment, or like?	High quality and high price, luxurious, slow fashion, unique, innovative. Yes, I think that is it. Cool and unique. They have quite interesting content, both style wise, but also in terms of other random things they can post. I like that everything looks so expensive and luxurious. I find the behind-the-scenes content very engaging. It allows me to feel like I'm part of an exclusive club, getting a sneak peek at the magic that happens before the final product hits the runway. That's absolute something I would like or share with my friends who are also Balmain lovers!
Part 2. Brand associations evoked by Balmain co-branding content	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
When you contemplate the brand (Balmain) responsible for this content, what thoughts come to mind? • Could you list 10-15 characteristics that pertain to any aspect? • Can you briefly justify your thoughts? Upon viewing this content, how would you portray the individual who would opt for these products? • Why?	I think that it is more affordable and accessible. I also think of celebrities and elegance as they are using Kendall Jenner. Maybe edgy as well. Since they are collaborating with H&M I think that maybe the quality is lower. And lastly, hm... limited! I think it will be a person who is a little bit ''out there'', a little bit glamorous and like to show off. She is a girl that is confident and crazy. She likes attention and is maybe an influencer or a fashionista in some way. Someone who can use these products.

Can you envision a scenario where the product could be utilized, based on these visuals? • Why?	I am thinking something fancy, like a cool event with some luxury elements, or maybe a runway show. Something big, like a big birthday party maybe. The pieces were actually quite elaborate. The tailoring looks sharp, the fabric seems nice, and there are these little details like the statement colors, embellishments and the different shapes that shows a real thoughtfulness in the design, which makes it suitable for something extraordinary.
What do you believe could be the benefits of using these products? • Why?	Maybe the collection can give people more confidence, and that by wearing something so bold and well-made can give a sense of empowerment, heightening the self-esteem of the individual wearing it.
If the brand responsible for this content were personified, how would you describe them?	I would describe them as someone who likes to stand out. It is someone extraordinary and fashion-forward. They're always ahead of the curve and unapologetically themselves.
Part 3. Balmain co-branding content perceptions	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
What is your assessment of the content and why?	I found it quite cool and interesting. I like how they have used elements of both luxury and 'fast fashion. I personally love how they have created a new world, that is both luxurious and relatable at the same time! Using Kendall Jenner as a front person makes it look very extraordinary. Kendall makes everything look chic and expensive. I associate Balmain with celebrities as they use them all the time in their Instagram pictures. I also like the way they have used the futuristic subway. It would have been so much different if they used a normal subway instead, it makes it more extraordinary. I think it is quite cool and big of them to include

	everyone. I think the outfits are matching very well to each other. For example, in the video, everyone is wearing colors in the last clip.
Do you believe this content aligns with Balmain's brand identity? Does it fulfill your expectations for content? Would you be interested in seeing more content of this nature?	Hmm, I don't know. I am mixed between two feelings here. I personally like that this collaboration is more affordable, because of my own wallet (laugh). But at the same time the high price of Balmain isn't just about the brand name, it's a testament to the craftsmanship and the design expertise that goes into each piece. I worry that these elements, which are fundamental for Balmain's identity, might be compromised to meet a lower price point. I think the campaign has widely focused on Balmain, but at the same time I think the message behind the content – that this collection is for everyone, it something unusual for Balmain, which I think can hurt their brand image.
Would you interact with this content? Could you explain your reasons and the degree to which you would do so?	I would engage because I think the creativity in this campaign is huge, and I think it is something noteworthy. It is not every day you see a Balmain x HM collection. Both yes and no to be honest. I like the content because I like the creativity and the luxurious elements, like Kendall Jenner and the outfits. But at the same time, like I said earlier, I don't know that affordable is something I associate with Balmain. And also, I think Balmain is something for some type of people, not everyone.
Do you feel a connection with the brand that produces this type of content? Could you explain why or why not?	

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Part 1. Information about the participants	
Question	
What is your name and age?	Jane and I am 30 years old.

When did you start to follow Balmain on Instagram?	I started to follow Balmain in 2015. I got a present to my birthday, and I started following them some months later because I loved them.
When was your last purchase from Balmain?	It was 3 months ago. I bought a new dress for my boyfriend's birthday, actually!
Part 1. Background question about Balmain	
Question	*Theoretical setting*
What comes to your mind when thinking about a luxury brand like Balmain?	When I think of Balmain, I think of an amazing luxury brand. They have high-end products that are timeless and in a sort of Parisian style, which I adore, by the way. I also think about the limited availability they have; you cannot buy it everywhere. And also, that they are quite expensive (laugh).
How would you characterize the content on Balmain's Instagram?	I would characterize it as creative. Balmain's Instagram oozes luxury and exclusivity in every post. From the lavish settings to the impeccable styling, everything about their feed scream luxury. They also use a lot of celebrities and famous people to make it even more luxurious.
Can you describe a post on Balmain's profile that would prompt you to engage, share, comment, or like?	Definitely a video! I love seeing the clothes come alive in motion. It would be even better if it wasn't just model on a runway, but shoed how people style the clothes on the street. Maybe a compilation of different celebrities or models wearing Balmain in unique ways. That would be super inspiring and give me ideas for how to incorporate Balmain pieces into my wardrobe.
Part 2. Brand associations evoked by Balmain co-branding content	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
When you contemplate the brand (Balmain) responsible for this content, what thoughts come to mind?	When it comes to the content of Balmain and H&M, I think that it still looks quite high-end and exclusive. I also think that the quality of the

• Could you list 10-15 characteristics that pertain to any aspect? • Can you briefly justify your thoughts?	products has to be low due to the collaboration with H&M, and also more affordable. However, I still think Balmain look quite fashion-forward with their designs.
Upon viewing this content, how would you portray the individual who would opt for these products? • Why?	I would portray them as a middle income-person who wants to look fashion-forward and more luxurious than they can afford. Maybe they want to have a higher profile and want to live a lifestyle that does not align with their real life.
Can you envision a scenario where the product could be utilized, based on these visuals? • Why?	I think this collaboration is perfect to a party or a day you want to feel more glam, maybe to a fancy dinner or event, or maybe a birthday!
What do you believe could be the benefits of using these products? • Why?	These clothing pieces are statement pieces. I feel like you wear those when you want to stand out in the crowd. Maybe the benefit is more attention and that people look at you as a fashion enthusiast.
If the brand responsible for this content were personified, how would you describe them?	I think the person that buys this collection has to be confident and not caring about what other says, as it has this bold look over it. Someone who likes to stand out in the crowd and be the center of the attention. There was a kind of edge to them, a boldness that made them stand out. She would not be understated, and maybe have a bold personality.
Part 3. Balmain co-branding content perceptions	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
What is your assessment of the content and why?	Hmm.. I am quite double sided. I really like the elements in the content. The background, the futuristic subway and the general atmosphere of the content feels like something unique, something luxurious. It is really professional, even the subway that is made-up looks reel. Everything is there, at right place. I think that the content looks just like something Balmain could have posted on their own

	Instagram! Everything looks so luxurious. But even though I like the elements, the subway setting felt ...hm... off. For me, I would associate Balmain more with limousines, red carpets and exclusive events, not exclusive events. The meaning by the subway does not appeal to me. The highlighted story looks different compared to the video and the feed content because it is not futuristic. The other content has some elements of the future and the luxurious aesthetic, I believe. However, on the other side, due to the collaboration with H&M I feel like the products that now have the Balmain logo would have to be of a much poorer quality than Balmain's other products… because of their collaboration with H&M. This is mainly because H&M's has its own image as a fast fashion retailer with low quality.
Do you believe this content aligns with Balmain's brand identity? Does it fulfill your expectations for content? Would you be interested in seeing more content of this nature?	No, I don't. In my mind, Balmain is something expensive that not everyone can afford. The element of fast fashion is devastating for Balmain's trust. I don't think Balmain should have any elements of fast fashion at all. It is not what they stand for. It feels like the brand is trying to portray a lifestyle that don't align with what I've come to associate Balmain with. It's all about the glam, no everyday fashion. However, on the other side I like that the image of Kendall Jenner is confidence. 'I am a confident person and I like to stand out. I admire the confidence and the don't be afraid of standing out image the campaign gives. Kendall Jenner is obviously standing out wearing that dress on the subway, so I believe some of the content aligns with Balmain's brand identity, while some other elements don't.

Would you interact with this content? Could you explain your reasons and the degree to which you would do so? Do you feel a connection with the brand that produces this type of content? Could you explain why or why not?	I would not like or share anything, because for me it is not in line for what I think Balmain stands for. Yes, the collaboration looks luxurious, but the meaning behind the content is not true to the real Balmain image. I shop at Balmain because I feel a certain connection to the people who shop there. They were like me. Now everyone can walk around with a piece of Balmain on them. I don't want to meet an 18-year-old girl wearing the same jacket as me. H&M is not an expensive brand. It is not a luxury brand. I don't want to wear the same clothing as a fast fashion customer. I like to live a luxurious lifestyle. I strive for the things people cannot afford. I like fancy cars, expensive dinners, and so on. I would never wear anything from Balmain on the subway. I don't think Balmain is for everyone as they try to express.

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Question	
What is your name and age? When did you start to follow Balmain on Instagram? When was your last purchase from Balmain?	I am Elizabeth and I am 32 years old. I started to follow Balmain in... Let me check! 2014. It was one month ago when I was in Spain.
Part 1. Background question about Balmain	
Question	*Theoretical setting*
What comes to your mind when thinking about a luxury brand like Balmain?	Balmain for me is typical French, high-end design with high quality. I think of an expensive and pricy luxury brand that is nothing like other luxury brands. Celebrities are also something I associate with Balmain as they use a lot of celebrities in their social media.

How would you characterize the content on Balmain's Instagram?	I love it! Balmain's Instagram feed is perfect in terms of visual consistency. They maintain such a cohesive aesthetic – it is fantastic! The color palette is always rich, luxurious tones that reflect their brand identity. The thematic elements, like the opulent settings, the lightnings and shadows is always there. Every shot is professionally done and polished. All of this visual signature sets them apart from other brands. When you see a Balmain posts, you are getting a glimpse into the cutting-edge of fashion. That is what I love about their content! I always feel like a get to look into the future of the fashion world.
Can you describe a post on Balmain's profile that would prompt you to engage, share, comment, or like?	I will interact with Balmain's post on Instagram if they post anything that is my style, I mean like the colors, suiting and maybe just something I find nice. I enjoy aesthetic content. Like for example if they introduce a new t-shirt that I find likeable I would probably like and even maybe comment a heart emoji or something.
Part 2. Brand associations evoked by Balmain co-branding content	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
When you contemplate the brand (Balmain) responsible for this content, what thoughts come to mind? • Could you list 10-15 characteristics that pertain to any aspect? • Can you briefly justify your thoughts?	I think that this collaboration is more affordable and accessible as they are coupled up with H&M. I also think that this is a limited-edition campaign which makes it somehow more limited than regular H&M clothing items suitable with Balmain's image. However, I think that the quality is hmm... maybe medium. Something in-between. Other words that come to my mind is: modern, celebrities and powerful!
Upon viewing this content, how would you portray the individual who would opt for these products?	It has to be a fashion interested girl who likes to express herself through clothing! Maybe an

• Why?	influencer or someone who goes to fancy events or fashion shows!
Can you envision a scenario where the product could be utilized, based on these visuals? • Why?	I still think of exclusive events or fashion shows. Maybe a gala or a special party. I think that the collaboration still looks quite expensive. I would call it high fashion, not fast fashion. The quality looks higher than the fast fashion, and there's a luxurious feel to the design. It is something extraordinary, not what you regularly would get from H&M. It feels like you're getting more value for what you pay. As that said, I would not have worn these products on a regular basis, so the products need to be utilized on something special.
What do you believe could be the benefits of using these products? • Why?	Hm, maybe attention! If you really like to be the center of attention, I will wear these clothing pieces. Everyone would look at you because it is something different. The benefits would probably be people staring at you, thinking that you are very into fashion (laugh).
If the brand responsible for this content were personified, how would you describe them?	I would say it is a girl that is not afraid to express herself through her clothing. She is someone who appreciates the finer things in life and isn't afraid to stand out from the crowd. She values sophistication, and boldness.
Part 3. Balmain co-branding content perceptions	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
What is your assessment of the content and why?	I was surprised by the content, but in a good way! I like that Balmain has done something new, I would never have thought of a futuristic subway. (Laugh)! In the video, you can see high heels, dresses, New York, and a very fancy subway, which makes it all looks so luxurious. They are very creative when it comes to the content. Everything seems so thought

	through. I wouldn't have known it was a collaboration if they hadn't said anything. The designs were pure Balmain! The way they used color and those intricate patterns – it was all so recognizable.
Do you believe this content aligns with Balmain's brand identity? Does it fulfill your expectations for content? Would you be interested in seeing more content of this nature?	Yes! It is unlike regular Balmain; this collection was actually accessible! It was exciting to see Balmain collaborating with a brand like H&M – it felt like a way to democratize luxury fashion and make it more attainable for everyone. I don't see any problem with making it more affordable, because I still feel that the brand identity is there. I feel a sense of empowerment when I see the campaign. The aesthetics are on point – they're exactly how I envision Balmain.
Would you interact with this content? Could you explain your reasons and the degree to which you would do so?	Yes, I would. The visuals are so striking and well-crafted that I find myself drawn to them. It is definitely something I would like to interact with. I like things that are well-made and new, I find that exiting! I would probably comment just to make people comment back so I could get other people's viewpoint!
Do you feel a connection with the brand that produces this type of content? Could you explain why or why not?	Yes, I do. I think the luxurious image of Balmain is still consistent with their regular image. The only difference I can tell is that they are more affordable and accessible, and I don't complain about that (laugh).

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Part 1. Information about the participants	
Question	
What is your name and age?	My name is Frances and I am years old.

When did you start to follow Balmain on Instagram? When was your last purchase from Balmain?	I started following them on Instagram in 2019. Two months ago, pretty sure about that. Yes.
Part 1. Background question about Balmain	
Question	*Theoretical setting*
What comes to your mind when thinking about a luxury brand like Balmain?	Good question, girl! I luxurious and exclusive right away. I love their modern designs and also, it strange to say, but I find it quite practical. It just works with everything in my wardrobe. And their logo is iconic, I would pay a lot of money for just their logo (laugh). And of course, I think of celebrities! That is in the heart of me and Balmain.
How would you characterize the content on Balmain's Instagram?	I would say that it has this quite luxurious and expensive feeling. The brand's content often features high-profile events, exclusive parties, and luxurious settings. It's like they're offering a glimpse into a world that many want to be a part of, and that's a powerful draw.
Can you describe a post on Balmain's profile that would prompt you to engage, share, comment, or like?	For me, a truly engaging Balmain posts would be a creative explosion! I love how they push boundaries with their design, and I want to see that reflected in their content. Balmain's creative spirit is like a kaleidoscope of imaginations, and their content should mirror that vibrant energy. If they do – I promise you that you see my name in their comment section (laugh). I love how they push boundaries with their design, and I want to see that reflected in their content.
Part 2. Brand associations evoked by Balmain co-branding content	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
When you contemplate the brand (Balmain) responsible for this content, what thoughts come to mind?	Hmm, the content in regards of the collaboration, I would characterize as more youthful maybe. I would say that is limited, but at the same more

• Could you list 10-15 characteristics that pertain to any aspect? • Can you briefly justify your thoughts?	accessible since you can buy it at regular H&M stores, which I by the way hates. I also think that they have low quality, H&M has bad quality so due to the affordable price it has to be lower. I also think of the content as sparkly. Love the designs.
Upon viewing this content, how would you portray the individual who would opt for these products? • Why?	I think it has to be someone who are living an influencer life, where they have events or parties to wear this extra clothing collection. Or just wear them on photos/videos for their social media. Their clothing is nothing like everyday use, so it has to be someone special who have a lot of occasions to wear them.
Can you envision a scenario where the product could be utilized, based on these visuals? • Why?	Like I said earlier, I think this is for some special occasion, not a casual situation. Maybe a fancy dinner or a gala.
What do you believe could be the benefits of using these products? • Why?	Hm, I don't know. I am just confused, how can Balmain, as a luxury retailer sell so affordable clothing? I associate expensive with good quality. The benefits have to be affordable clothing that looks luxurious, I think would be my best answer.
If the brand responsible for this content were personified, how would you describe them?	I think it has to be someone who appreciates luxury but doesn't need to shout about it. They let their clothes do the talking, and they're strong enough to pull of anything. They are not afraid to go their own way.
Part 3. Balmain co-branding content perceptions	
Questions	*Theoretical setting*
What is your assessment of the content and why?	I was initially skeptical of the Balmain x H&M collaboration, but I have to admit, I was very surprised. The collection captured the signature style with its bold colors, sharp tailoring, and statement embellishments. It wasn't watered-down

	fast fashion – it felt like a designer collection made accessible for a wider audience. 'I would say that it is something extraordinary because of the uniqueness of the designs. It is not something you can see everywhere. If they were to show a basic jean for example, it could be any brand, but the dress used, you can see it is from Balmain and nowhere else. One thing I don't like is the use of the subway in their campaign. I don't think Balmain clothing is something you can wear on the subway; it does not match it brand image. It is all about that luxury lifestyle. The only thing that I do like is the way they use Kendall Jenner to symbolize sophistication, confident and elegance, that is exactly the way I think of Balmain.
Do you believe this content aligns with Balmain's brand identity? Does it fulfill your expectations for content? Would you be interested in seeing more content of this nature?	I would say that the collaboration does not fit with Balmain because in my mind Balmain is not for everyone. It is for people who wants a certain lifestyle. This collaboration tries to make Balmain a clothing piece everyone can wear as they offer it at H&M, which I look at as a place everyone buy their clothing. However, if you do not think about the hidden message in this content, the aesthetic of the looks is exactly what I expect from Balmain – chic, sophisticated and empowering! It's like buying Balmain for a cheaper price. And also, I think they have used some elements they never would have used if there wasn't for this campaign. I don't think they would have used public transportation in their content outside of this co-branding. I have never seen they used anything like this. It is too normal for being Balmain. No, I would never risk that. I have a lot of followers with the same taste and lifestyle as me, so I would

Would you interact with this content? Could you explain your reasons and the degree to which you would do so? Do you feel a connection with the brand that produces this type of content? Could you explain why or why not?	never show them that I am nothing else that extra and a true Balmain lover. Hmm, no. Balmain for me is some kind of status. I feel they lost it when they collaborated with H&M. It is like going from driving a G-Wagen to a Volvo. You don't want to be associated with Volvo when you can afford a G-Wagen. For me Balmain is fancy events, red carpets, expensive and glamourous. Celebrities and models. That is the lifestyle I want to show when I am wearing a Balmain dress. I want people to think I am a part of that. By adding the everyday setting into the campaign, it does not appeal to me anymore. I don't think it fits the description of who I want to be. I don't want to be that normal person on the subway.