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Course of Brand Management & Topics in Digital Marketing

Exploring Generation Z's Perceptions of 'Made in Italy' Luxury Fashion: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

- Problem** Luxury fashion originating from Italy, collectively known as "Made in Italy," holds significant global recognition. To maintain profitability in the future, Italian luxury fashion brands must appeal to Generation Z, a key market segment with unique attitudes toward luxury products. However, no current literature on Gen Z and their perception of "Made in Italy" luxury fashion exists.
- Objective** The research objective is to investigate Generation Z's perceptions of "Made in Italy" in the context of luxury fashion. To support this objective, the following research question has been formulated:
R1: What associations are essential for Generation Z when considering "Made in Italy" in luxury fashion?
- Design** This study was conducted on Gen Z using a qualitative approach involving 14 one-hour in-depth interviews obtained via convenience sampling. The analysis technique used is thematic analysis.
- Findings** This research suggests that Gen Z primarily seeks and appreciates a personal connection with Italian luxury products. Within this context, the findings reveal four critical factors shaping their perceptions: (1) Alignment of personal values with brand values, particularly sustainability practices. (2) High perceived trust built on authentic brand narratives and strong ties to Italian culture. (3) Appreciation for quality, craftsmanship, and timeless design as perceived as synonymous with Italian fashion. (4) Importance of social media influence and celebrity endorsements, emphasizing inclusivity and diversity in marketing strategies.
- Contribution** This research contributes to the literature by uncovering evolving luxury market values, particularly among Generation Z. Ultimately, it provides four practical insights for brand positioning and marketing strategies within the Italian-made luxury fashion industry. Further research on a randomized sample of Gen Z is necessary to achieve broader generalization.
- Keywords** *Made in Italy, Luxury Fashion, Generation Z, Consumer Perceptions, Personal Connection, Brand Values, Authenticity, Brand Heritage, Social Media*

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1 Introduction

Imagine a consumer in their mid-twenties browsing through a luxury department store and a salesperson presenting a garment, describing it as “Made in Italy”. What does this phrase mean to the Generation Z consumer? What feelings, attitudes, and associations does it evoke? Italian luxury fashion, collectively known as carrying the prestigious label “Made in Italy”, has gained global admiration extending beyond an aesthetic appeal to embody a lifestyle of style and elegance. Drawing inspiration from the bustling streets of Milan to the sun-drenched shores of the Amalfi Coast, Italian luxury fashion evokes a sense of effortless elegance that transcends borders and cultures, resonating with consumers worldwide.

In 2024, it is estimated that the revenue from the luxury fashion market in Italy will reach approximately €7.26 billion (Statista, 2024). As described in a Deloitte Industry Report, Italy maintains a robust presence in the global luxury industry, with 23 Italian companies featured among the top 100 powers of luxury goods worldwide (Faccioli, Martin & Palombella, 2023). Based on this, Italy has been described as the leading country in the world for luxury (Maddalena, 2023). Given the magnitude of the Italian luxury fashion portfolio, maintaining relevance among the new generation is crucial for industry stakeholders. On that note, Generation Z is set to become the largest consumer demographic by 2026 and will, therefore, significantly shape the future of luxury consumption (Langer, 2023). However, empirical research on how Generation Z perceives "Made in Italy" luxury fashion brands is notably scarce despite their increasing influence in the market.

This research’s literature review connects six brand attributes previously discussed in the marketing literature to the “Made in Italy” label in luxury fashion. These attributes are; “authenticity”, “craftsmanship”, “heritage”, “Italianness”, “quality,” and “sustainability”. Previous literature specifically on “Made in Italy” has explored aspects like comparing different nationalities' perceptions of “Made in Italy” (De Nisco & Mainolfi, 2016; Cappelli, D’ascenzo, Ruggieri, Rossetti, & Scalingi, 2019) or various economic aspects of the brand, such as leveraging country image to improve sales performance (Minoia & Bellucci, 2022; Paulicelli, 2014) or consumers’ willingness to pay price premiums (Cappelli, et al., 2019). However, no previous literature has looked ahead to the upcoming generation and what they value with “Made in Italy” luxury fashion. The objective of this study is to fill the existing research gap by exploring Generation Z's perceptions of "Made in Italy" luxury fashion. Through a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews will be conducted to elicit Gen Z's perceptions based on six chosen attributes associated with "Made in Italy" luxury fashion. The research question is:

R1: What associations are essential for Generation Z when considering "Made in Italy" in luxury fashion?

This research aims to build on current research on brand perceptions, specifically by offering insights into Gen Zs thoughts on Italian-made luxury fashion. By advancing the understanding of the values shaping the Italian luxury market among younger consumers, this research provides actionable insights for brand positioning and marketing strategies within the Italian luxury fashion industry.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Defining “Made in Italy”

“Made in Italy” is more than just a label; it is the third most recognized brand globally, following Coca-Cola and Visa (KPMG, 2011). If it were a trademark, its estimated value would be approximately \$200 billion (KPMG, 2011). This remarkable recognition and value underscore the global prestige and economic significance of Italian-made products. “Made in Italy” has not only contributed to Italy's wealth and reputation through high-quality materials but also intangible elements like creativity and craftsmanship (Deloitte, 2019). It has evolved into a brand synonymous with upholding the highest standards of quality and excellence, ultimately signifying more than just the origin of a product (Be IT, 2023; Temperini et al., 2016).

Brands are considered valuable intangible assets for a business (Kapferer, 1992; Keller & Swaminathan, 2019), and the real value of a company only exists in the minds of consumers (Kapferer, 1992). “Made in Italy” evokes associations of tradition and heritage deeply rooted in Italian history (Lazzeretti & Oliva, 2022). This narrative does not only add to the perceived value of the products (Temperini, Gregori & Palanga, 2016) but also fosters an emotional connection with consumers who appreciate the authenticity and cultural richness within each item (Crespo, Ferreira & Cardoso, 2022). Studies indicate consumers' willingness to pay premium prices for “Made in Italy” products, often between 10% and 30% higher than comparable goods (Cappelli et al., 2019). In essence, the global recognition and premium pricing of the “Made in Italy” brand underscores its position as a dominant force in the global market landscape.

A notable aspect of the “Made in Italy” phenomenon is the “Beautiful and Well Made” (BBF) category, valued at 122 billion euros (Fontana, 2023). BBF products are defined by four key features: “quality materials”, “skilled craftsmanship”, “design”, and the “recognizability of Italian manufacturing”. While BBF products exist across various sectors of Made in Italy, they are particularly prominent in Fashion, Food, and Furniture (3F) categories (Fontana, 2023). In the fashion industry, Italy's reputation as a leader in high-end couture is exemplified by iconic fashion houses such as Prada, Gucci, Valentino, Dolce & Gabbana, and Versace (Britannica, u.d.). Italy ranks fourth globally in textile exports and second in apparel exports (Italian Trade Agency, 2022). In 2024, the luxury fashion market in Italy is projected to generate around US\$7.83 billion in revenue (Statista, 2024). The “Made in Italy” label signifies superior craftsmanship, elegance, and dedication to quality (Paulicelli, 2015; Dallabona, 2014), making Italy a strategic choice for maintaining production standards and upholding the quality associated with “Made in Italy” products (Marenzi, u.d.).

Leveraging the “country of origin effect” as a competitive advantage (Bertoli, Busacca, & Molteni, 2005; De Nisco & Mainolfi, 2016), the “Made in Italy” label capitalizes on consumer associations with the Italian country image (Cappelli et al., 2019). The country image encompasses the reputation and stereotypes consumers associate with products from a specific country (Cappelli et al., 2019). In this case, Italy is typically renowned for quality, aesthetics, beauty, fine arts, luxury, and passion (De Nisco, Napolitano, &

D'Avino, 2020; KPMG, 2011). At the same time, a study on foreign perception of the Italian country image suggested that people have different associations regarding affective vs. cognitive attributes. While foreigners admire Italy for its social culture, original taste, and lifestyle, they also perceive weaknesses in technological and industrial development and the political system (De Nisco et al., 2020). In summary, by utilizing the "Made in Italy" label in fashion and its association with quality and luxury, businesses effectively leverage the country-of-origin effect to gain a competitive edge in the global market.

2.2 “Made in Italy” Differentiation Factors

Based on a thorough review of the existing marketing literature, six key attributes emerge as elements of the competitive advantage of “Made in Italy” luxury fashion; “authenticity”, “craftsmanship”, “heritage”, “Italianness”, “quality”, and “sustainability”. The following sections serve as a theoretical framework for these select attributes, ultimately illustrating how these factors lay the foundation for the uniqueness of Italian-made luxury fashion.

2.2.1 Authenticity

According to a study dedicated to defining authenticity, it is described as a comprehensive evaluation of consumers based on accuracy, connectedness, integrity, legitimacy, originality, and proficiency (Nunes, Ordanini, & Giamba, 2021). These factors may vary in importance depending on the situation. For instance, consumers might prioritize accuracy and integrity in some situations, seeking transparent and reliable brands. In contrast, originality and connectedness might weigh more heavily in other contexts, driving consumers towards unique experiences and deeper emotional connections with brands (Nunes et al., 2021).

In the early 2000s, a notable shift emerged in consumer research, emphasizing authenticity as the new important consumer desire and a fundamental cornerstone of modern marketing (Nunes et al., 2021; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherr, 2003). Scholars link this importance of authenticity to changes in the economic landscape, transitioning from a service-oriented economy to one centered around experiences (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Lewis, 2000). Lewis (2000) describes this evolution as marking a shift from consumers previously leaning towards following the crowd for convenience to a growing trend of independence, information-seeking, and skepticism towards anything lacking authenticity. According to Gilmore and Pine (2007), consumers seeking authenticity wish to align their purchases with their self-image. They complement Lewis's research by positing that consumers are no longer solely motivated by price, availability, and quality (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Lewis, 2000). Instead, they prioritize products that resonate with their identity and aspirations. Consequently, consumers seek to buy something real from someone they believe is genuine, thereby evaluating the brands' authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

Iannilli (2014) argues that Italian-made fashion brands have made authenticity one of their most characteristic traits. “Made in Italy” fashion brands are known for their connection to history and local traditions, which helps them craft authentic stories expressed through fashion. Local handicrafts, often specified within a specific skill within different regions, serve as a guarantee of authenticity, showcasing the

rich culture, artistry, and traditions of Italy. Dolce & Gabbana (D&G) is a prime example of leveraging cultural authenticity, drawing inspiration from its birthplace, Sicily. Elements such as the island's daily life, traditions, and colors influence the brand, reflected in its use of lace, light, and patterns (Iannilli, 2014). D&G's Sicilian roots form a cohesive concept across clothing, accessories, and touchpoints like retail spaces and services (Iannilli, 2014). This commitment to authenticity not only adds genuineness to Italian-made fashion but also creates narratives that resonate with consumers worldwide.

2.2.2 Craftsmanship

Craftsmanship, as outlined in the literature (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2017; Riva & Valsecchi, 2020), is defined as the technique, style, and quality of handwork. Rooted in humanity's desire to do our best (Sennett, 2008), craftsmanship emphasizes skill refinement and a sole focus on the task itself. This commitment to precise performance and innovative design characterizes artisanal production extending beyond aesthetics, influencing product appeal and functionality. Ultimately, craftsmanship is fundamental to consumer valuation (Frater & Hawley, 2018; Papalambros, Gonzalez, & Aitken, 2004). Consumers require offerings that not only fulfill objective needs but also resonate with their subjective preferences and psychological desires (Papalambros et al., 2004). In today's luxury market landscape, craftsmanship, intertwined with product design, appears to be a critical concern.

Craftsmanship is recognized as a hallmark of luxury fashion brands (Pitt, Berthon, Parent, & Berthon 2009), a distinguishing attribute also evident in "Made in Italy" fashion. In the book "Luxury Brand Management", luxury goods are indeed characterized by craftsmanship, resulting in products that command higher prices and possess a unique quality, setting them apart from mass-produced items (Chevalier & Mazzalovo, 2008). Craftsmanship is a cornerstone of Italy's renowned reputation for quality and specialization, contributing to its competitive differentiation (Riva & Valsecchi, 2020). Research on the perceived value of products suggests that presenting luxury items as artisanal through product descriptor cues can enhance their perceived value (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2017). Putting theory into practice, researchers have also depicted that luxury fashion brands have centered their marketing campaigns around the art of craftsmanship. They employ cues such as "artisanal," "handcrafted," or "carefully curated" to position the product as exclusive in the minds of consumers (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2017). By leveraging the product attribute of artisanal craftsmanship, luxury brands ultimately justify premium pricing (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2017).

The Italian luxury fashion brand Gucci leverages craftsmanship by highlighting their artisanal traditions at their Florentine workshops (Gucci, 2010; Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2017). In their marketing communication, Gucci has, for example, showcased the process behind crafting the Bamboo purse, highlighting expert artisans meticulously executing each phase of production, from leather dyeing and cutting to stitching and finishing. Similarly, Brunello Cucinelli's story is deeply rooted in the tradition of craftsmanship in Umbria, a legacy they describe as having continued for centuries (LaRocca, 2014; Brunello

Cucinelli, 2024). They describe craftsmanship as a commitment to creating garments of exclusivity and individuality, making the wearer feel as if the product were crafted solely for the customer (LaRocca, 2014). In essence, Gucci and Brunello Cucinelli communicate their dedication to craftsmanship, which embodies the essence of Italian luxury fashion and evokes a heritage of artisanal excellence dating back to the Renaissance.

2.2.3 Heritage

Brand heritage has been described as a dimension of a brand's identity (Balmer, Urde, & Greyser, 2007; Hennigs, Wiedmann, & Schmidt, 2012). A brand heritage is thereby important as crafting a distinctive identity that sets it apart from competitors is at the core of branding (American Marketing Association, 2024). The brand heritage aspect of a brand's identity is evident in its history, values, symbolic representations, and the organizational acknowledgment of its past importance (Balmer, et al., 2007). Scholars agree that a heritage brand underscores the significance of acknowledging not just the past but also the present and future (Hennigs et al., 2012; Balmer, et al., 2007).

A heritage brand stands out through its value proposition deeply rooted in its historical legacy (Balmer et al., 2007), contributing to its relevance both presently and for generations to come (Hennigs et al., 2012). To appreciate the remarkable legacy of achievements linked to a long-standing brand heritage, one may consider contrasting it with the fact that Fortune 500 companies typically endure for only 40 to 50 years (Geus, 2002). This highlights the substantial presence of prominent organizations with corporate brands and identities that have persisted for centuries (Balmer et al., 2007).

Customers perceive heritage brands as possessing a profound advantage due to their rich history, fostering a deep emotional connection and trust (Bodo, 2023). This is supported by Aaker (1996), who states that heritage infuses a brand with authenticity, credibility, and trust, especially in global markets (Aaker, 1996). Studies have shown that consumers are often drawn to heritage brands because they associate them with values such as familiarity, identity meaning, and cultural significance. These positive associations underscore brand heritage's enduring relevance in consumer decision-making processes (Aaker, 1996; Bodo, 2023; Hennigs, Wiedmann, & Schmidt, 2012). By emphasizing their rich heritage and longstanding tradition, brands not only shape current perceptions but also establish expectations for future conduct, promising consistent delivery. Consequently, brand heritage enhances consumer perceived value and reduces purchasing risks (Hennigs et al., 2012).

Heritage is a distinct feature in Italian fashion, shaping the identity of renowned brands and their timeless designs (Bauzano et al., 2023). Rooted in heritage, Gucci advertises the story of the now 70-year-old Gucci Horsebit's 1953 loafer design. This story focuses on a customer who wears the loafer today, just like his father before him. The timeless loafer is described as handmade, using century-old techniques (Gucci, 2024). This advertisement is not only about the brand's heritage but also about the shared history between the brand and the customer. In essence, the Gucci Horsebit 1953 loafer is an example of an Italian

brand legacy and intimate connection with its loyal customers, ultimately symbolizing the timeless appeal of “Made in Italy” in luxury fashion.

2.2.4 Italianness

The "Italianness" attribute in this paper refers to the national culture, encompassing the perception of aspects such as language, sociability, creativity, and tradition, collectively shaping Italy's image (De Nisco et al., 2020). According to Anholt (1998), a leading expert in nation branding and measuring national identity (Georgescu & Botescu, 2004), the country a brand comes from greatly influences how consumers perceive it. Indeed, during the twentieth century, most highly successful international brands emerged from nations with solid global reputations (Anholt, 1998). These nations' reputations, often deeply rooted in cultural phenomena, prompt brands to utilize imagery closely aligned with their country's characteristics, leveraging positive associations with national products (Anholt, 1998). Consequently, there is a notable exchange of brand equity between the countries and their brands (Anholt, 1998).

The extent to which a product relies on its origin as part of its brand identity may vary based on product category. Anholt (1998) points out that fashion is a category that often emphasizes its provenance. The origin of clothing, such as Italian fashion, often holds significant importance, sometimes overshadowing the brand's name. For example, it is nearly as crucial for a suit or shoes to be Italian-made as for them to bear the label of a famous designer like Armani or Ferragamo (Anholt, 1998). In essence, countries renowned for specific items, such as Italian fashion, are expected to embody a particular style, evoking immediate and positive associations for brands in related categories (Anholt, 1998).

As a result of marketing, the connection between certain brands and their country of origin can be so strong that discerning whether a particular attribute is associated more with the brand or its provenance becomes challenging (Anholt, 1998). Italy, for example, is often associated with the "dolce vita" lifestyle, known for its attractiveness, style, relaxed atmosphere, and emphasis on lifestyle values (Anholt, 1998). These beliefs are reinforced by how Italian fashion and other products are marketed globally, making brands contribute to the perpetuation or creation of global cultural myths (Anholt, 1998). Essentially, the nation connected to a brand influences consumer perception about the brand and the nation, as they shape and reinforce perceptions of each other.

Dolce & Gabbana is an example of an Italian luxury fashion house that has launched several marketing campaigns utilizing “Italianness”. The #DGLovesNaples 2016 campaign featured, for example, scenes in the historic streets of Naples with models interacting with Neapolitan locals (De Nisco et al., 2020). For their Spring Summer 2020 ad campaign, D&G showcased typical Sicilian traits such as sociability, joy, love, religion, traditions, and generosity (Dolce&Gabbana, 2020). According to De Nisco et al. (2020), the success of these campaigns may underscore their effectiveness in portraying the cultural essence of “Made in Italy” products.

The Italian language has been used to tap into “Italianness”, serving as a differentiator, communicating the chic and sexy Italian way of living (Paulicelli, 2014). For instance, the term “sprezzatura” has become a common term in the realm of contemporary menswear as a way of being effortlessly stylish (Paulicelli, 2014). Using this Italian term in the global fashion industry may enhance the allure of Italian fashion and underline the essence of the “Made in Italy” brand. A case of using Italian in international marketing is Gucci's 2024 rebranding strategy, which seamlessly incorporates the Italian word “Ancora” (NSS Staff, 2024; Gucci, 2024). By integrating “Ancora”, Gucci communicates its dedication to Italian artistry, the timeless elegance, and innovation that have defined the brand's essence.

2.2.5 *Quality*

Scholars widely recognize the pivotal role of quality in consumer purchasing decisions for clothing (Aakko & Niinimäki, 2021; Salerno-Kochan & Turek, 2021; Saricam, Aksoy, & Kalaoglu 2012; Rayman, Burns & Nelson, 2011). According to Rayman et al. (2011), quality in apparel products is defined as the consumer's assessment of its performance standards. Consumers assess the quality of a product through quality cues, which are informational stimuli associated with product quality, often perceived through the senses (Aakko & Niinimäki, 2021; Davis, 1985).

Consumers evaluate quality through either “intrinsic cues” or “extrinsic cues” (Rayman et al., 2011). “Intrinsic cues” encompass inherent qualities of a product that remain unchanged regardless of external factors, such as the fabrics used, material type and structure, design, style, construction details, and artistry in sewing. Conversely, “extrinsic cues” include external aspects of the product, like the brand name, suitability to individual preference and trendiness, price, and store image. These cues significantly influence perceptions of clothing quality throughout the garment's lifecycle, from purchase to use and eventual disposal (Aakko & Niinimäki, 2021; Salerno-Kochan & Turek, 2021; Saricam et al., 2012; Rayman et al., 2011).

Established brands have a significant competitive advantage regarding the perception of quality (Davis, 1985). Research has shown that when consumers are aware of the product brand and product information, they tend to give higher ratings to quality features than when they assess products blindly (Salerno-Kochan & Turek, 2021). Davis (1985) also proposed that higher prices positively influence perceptions of product quality, the prestige associated with store image, and brand reputation. Ultimately, consumers are attracted to designer products because they offer quality assurance and status (Davis, 1985).

Quality is a hallmark of products labeled “Made in Italy” in the luxury fashion industry. Notably, one of the distinctive features of BBF products is the “quality of materials” (Fontana, 2023), emphasizing the attention to detail in sourcing premium materials. Research on the international debut of “Made in Italy” in the 1950s points out how the superior quality of Italian collections indeed was crucial for the success of the first Florentine fashion shows, which played a big part in the rise of Italian-made fashion (Reinach, 2015; Lazzarretti & Oliva, 2022). Balicco (2015) describes the “Made in Italy” label as representing beauty and

high quality, reinforcing its reputation for excellence. Moreover, other scholars argue that Italian quality and craftsmanship are deeply intertwined, reflecting the artistic heritage deeply rooted in Italian fashion traditions (Dallabona, 2014).

2.2.6 Sustainability

As depicted in academic literature, sustainability is often illustrated by the intersection of three pillars representing society, environment, and economy, with each element influencing the others (Pereira, Carvalho, Dias, Costa, & António 2021; Purvis, Mao, & Robinson, 2018). Sustainability encompasses many principles and practices; therefore, this research narrows the scope to focus specifically on environmentally responsible actions within the fashion industry's production, distribution, and consumption processes.

The fashion industry is one of the most environmentally damaging industries in the world (Pereira et al., 2021). It contributes approximately 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions, surpassing the combined emissions of shipping and aviation (Ruiz, 2024). Within this narrative, environmental sustainability is becoming a critical concern for today's and tomorrow's consumers in the fashion industry. According to previous literature, Gen Z is acknowledged as the "sustainability generation" (Kv, Kesavalu, & Deepak, 2023). In a 2020 cross-European survey, Gen Z stood out as the generation willing to pay the highest price premium, 50% more, for a sustainably made t-shirt, compared to prior generations (Arnett, 2020). This data underscores the growing importance of sustainability as a central factor influencing contemporary consumer behavior in the fashion industry.

A significant contributor to environmental pollution is low clothing utilization and insufficient rates of recycling clothes post-use (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). To tackle this challenge, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (2017) industry report recommends prioritizing strategies that extend the value of clothing, fabric, and fibers while increasing recycling efforts. This proposition is underscored by calculations indicating that by doubling the average number of times a garment is worn, greenhouse gas emissions could be slashed by 44% (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Opting for high-quality garments designed for longevity can significantly contribute to sustainability compared to items with shorter lifespans. In line with this, one could argue that "Made in Italy" quality is closely tied to sustainability. In essence, emphasizing quality over quantity and implementing effective recycling practices are crucial to fostering sustainability in the fashion industry.

The Green Carpet Fashion Awards (GCFA) exemplifies Italian luxury fashion's commitment to sustainability (Cardini, 2019). The GCFA recognizes fashion industry members dedicated to various aspects of sustainability, including climate action (Embassy of Italy in the UK, u.d.). Gucci is another example of sustainability initiatives within Italian luxury fashion, specifically as the brand launched its Equilibrium portal in 2019 (Musino, 2021; Gucci Equilibrium, 2024). This platform informs consumers about the brand's leading social and environmental practices. Such initiatives mark a new era of conscientious consumption in the fashion industry, emphasizing the importance of environmental responsibility. Thus, notable efforts

within the Italian fashion industry, a study on all “Made in Italy” sectors revealed that consumers do not associate sustainability with “Made in Italy” (Minoia & Bellucci, 2022). This may underscore the need for continued education and awareness initiatives to address this perception gap and foster a more sustainable future.

2.3 Generation Z Luxury Consumption Trends

By 2030, Generation Z, born between 1996-2010 (McKinsey&Company, 2023), will be the number one client group for luxury (Langer, 2023). According to Langer (2023), author of best-selling luxury management books, brands need to have about 20% of their revenue by Gen Z in 2023 to be sustainable in the future. Building on this, a report by BoF states that fashion emerges as the preferred entertainment category for spending among US Gen-Zers, surpassing other categories such as dining, video games, and music (Schneider & Lee, 2022). In essence, as Gen Z increasingly becomes the dominant consumer demographic, brands must appeal to this generation to secure their longevity and relevance in the ever-evolving fashion market.

The landscape of luxury consumption is changing, particularly concerning the attitudes of Generation Z (Langer, 2023; Pencarelli, Ali Taha, Škerháková, Valentiny, & Fedorko, 2019; Jain, Vatsa, & Jagani, 2014). In retrospect, previous generations perceived luxury as synonymous with brand heritage, which includes a brand's history, traditions, and craftsmanship. However, although Gen Z does respect a brand heritage as a symbol of timelessness, they value other attributes higher (Langer, 2023). Gen Z embraces cultural diversity, population groups, gender, and sexual orientation (Duffet, 2020). In consumption, this generation values uniqueness, individuality, and experiences that connect with them and are shareable (Langer, 2023). According to a study on the relationship between conspicuous consumption tendency and self-expression satisfaction for Gen Z, imported goods, famous brands, and high-priced articles are found to significantly influence the satisfaction of self-expression for this demographic (Shin, Jang, Cho & Kim, 2021). Pencarelli et al. (2019) found a notable positive influence of Corporate Social Responsibility on luxury goods purchases among Gen Z. For Gen Z, luxury consumption is less about material possessions and more about self-actualization, prioritizing "who I am" over "what I have" (Mabuni, 2017). Essentially, for Gen Z, fashion is less about being trendy or communicating status and more about boosting confidence and establishing their identities (Schneider & Lee, 2022).

In marketing, traditionally, luxury brands adhered to a rigid, top-down approach in shaping their stories and aesthetics. However, during a recent forum of executives from the Italian luxury fashion industry, it was emphasized that it is crucial to let go of some creative authority to better connect with Generation Z consumers (Bof Studio, 2022). Instead of imposing fixed ideas from the brands, there is widespread agreement on embracing the creativity of these consumers and using their perspectives to shape brand stories (Bof Studio, 2022). To reach Gen Z through marketing, it is therefore essential to communicate more about

how the brand can impact the life of the client, not about the brand itself (Langer, 2023). Therefore, communicating authentic and nuanced brand narratives is crucial for connecting with Gen Z (Solomon, n.d.).

2.4 Research Gaps in Previous Literature

The existing literature extensively explores and defines product attributes that can be associated with “Made in Italy” luxury fashion products. Specifically, the literature has conceptualized and defined the attributes; “authenticity”, “craftsmanship”, “heritage”, “Italianness”, “quality”, and “sustainability”. Previous literature on “Made in Italy” has explored aspects like different nationalities' perceptions (De Nisco & Mainolfi, 2016) or various economic aspects related to the brand (Minoia & Bellucci, 2022; Paulicelli, 2014; Cappelli et al., 2019). Notably, previous studies have also investigated Generation Z's luxury consumption patterns, highlighting their values (Langer, 2023; Matarazzo, Penco & Profumo, 2020). However, a significant gap exists in understanding how Generation Z consumers perceive “Made in Italy” luxury fashion. Despite their crucial role in shaping the future market, empirical research on their perception of Italian-made luxury fashion brands is lacking. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating what influences Generation Z's views on luxury fashion labeled "Made in Italy".

2.5 Research Objective and Research Question

The research objective is to investigate Generation Z's perceptions of "Made in Italy" in the context of luxury fashion. To support this objective, the following research question has been formulated:

R1: What associations are essential for Generation Z when considering "Made in Italy" in luxury fashion?

2.6 Contribution

The study aims to provide insights into Generation Z's perceptions of fashion brands bearing the prestigious “Made in Italy” label. Through an in-depth analysis, it seeks to gather insights into Generation Z's attitudes based on investigating six specific attributes, uncovering the overall appeal of Italian fashion brands. This research seeks to contribute to an understanding of what associations Gen Z value in “Made in Italy” luxury fashion. Brand managers can utilize these insights to develop strategies ensuring the sustained competitiveness of the “Made in Italy” brand in luxury fashion.

2.7 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework outlines the relationships between six brand attributes and the perceptions among Generation Z. The independent variables are six attributes associated with “Made in Italy” labeled fashion, as previously defined in section 2.2. These factors will make the foundation for exploring the perceptions of Generation Z consumers. The dependent variable is the perceptions of "Made in Italy" fashion among Generation Z. This represents the attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of Generation Z towards Italian-made luxury fashion.

2.7.1 Independent Variables

1. **Authenticity:** refers to the genuine and original representation of Italian culture and values in fashion, including elements like traditional craftsmanship, regional influences, and historical narratives.
2. **Craftsmanship:** reflects the skillful and detailed artistry of creating fashion products, emphasizing meticulous techniques, premium materials, and artisanal production processes.
3. **Heritage:** entails historical legacy and iconic designs associated with Italian fashion houses, highlighting their longstanding presence and influence in the industry.
4. **Italianness:** captures the essence of Italian culture, lifestyle, and identity, reflected in the creativity, elegance, and sense of “la dolce vita” embodied by luxury fashion brands carrying the "Made in Italy" label.
5. **Quality:** refers to the superior standards of craftsmanship, durability, materials, and design employed by Italian luxury brands, reflecting a commitment to excellence and durability.
6. **Sustainability:** involves environmentally responsible practices throughout the production, distribution, and consumption processes, aimed at minimizing environmental impact.

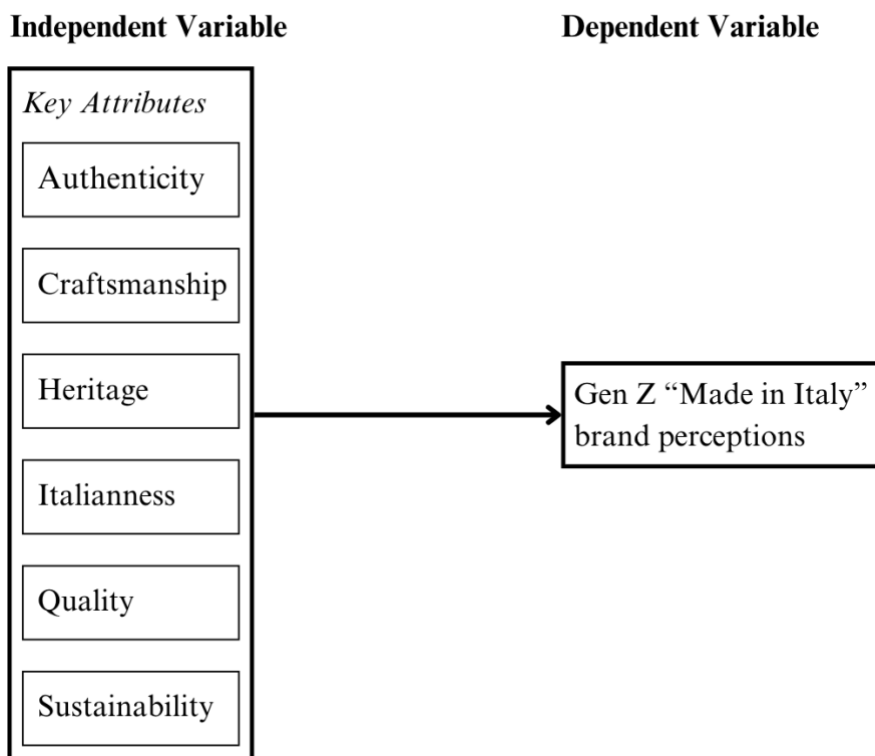
2.7.2 Dependent Variable

Gen Z “Made in Italy” brand perceptions: represents the collective attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of Generation Z consumers towards “Made in Italy” luxury fashion.

2.7.3 Conceptual Model

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



3 Research Methodology

3.1 Objective

The data collection objective was to understand better Generation Z's perceptions of “Made in Italy” luxury fashion. To achieve this goal, six identified brand attributes associated with “Made in Italy” from the existing literature laid the foundation for exploring insights from individuals of Gen Z. The data was analyzed by searching for patterns in perceptions to ultimately provide a basis for understanding the new generation and their values and beliefs regarding “Made in Italy” luxury consumption. The insights will be helpful for managers in navigating the new consumer segment in the Italian luxury fashion industry.

3.2 Research Design – Qualitative Method

The empirical data for this study were collected using a qualitative research approach in the form of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The qualitative method was chosen specifically for the ability to delve into Gen Z's mindset, providing a deep understanding of each individual's perceptions, attitudes, and emotions in the context of a complex phenomenon such as luxury consumption (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001; Maison, 2019). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allows for flexibility while ensuring that critical topics are systematically addressed across all participants. The aim was to uncover aspects beyond a surface level that cannot be discovered similarly through other research designs (Maison, 2019; Baum, 2021).

3.3 In-depth Interview Guide

The interview guide (appendix 1) for the semi-structured in-depth interviews was developed based on the conceptual framework derived from the literature review. The guide provided material for each interview to last approximately one hour. The interview guide mainly consisted of open-ended questions to explore the participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to "Made in Italy" luxury fashion. The guide is divided into five main sections, following the structure outlined in the book “Qualitative Marketing Research” (Maison, 2019), described in the following table.

Table 1

Interview Guide Structure

1 Introduction	The purpose of the data collection and the overall aim of the study were explained. The participant was informed about their rights.
2 Warm-up	General insights about the participants were collected, such as demographic information, their level of fashion interest, and their relationship with “Made in Italy” luxury fashion.

3 Fundamental questions	The most critical research areas were explored, including questions diving into the six attributes of the conceptual model (Figure 1). This section also included visual stimuli (Appendix 2), complementing the verbal interview questions.
4 Follow up	Exploring topics the interviewee had more opinions on. This section also included open questions like “strengths and weaknesses with “Made in Italy” in fashion”.
5 Conclusion	The interviewee was given a final opportunity to add any additional information related to the conversation themes and was then thanked for their time and participation.

The use of visual stimuli aimed to elicit richer insights into participants' perceptions and preferences, making the interview more engaging (Olmo-Extremera et al., 2023). The visual elements were marketing material inspired by the Italian luxury fashion brands Brunello Cucinelli, Dolce&Gabbana, and Gucci. An example of the visual stimuli used to assess the perceptions of "heritage", involved presenting participants with two photos. They were asked to indicate the most appealing advertisement depicting the company's origins. One photo showcased a black-and-white image of an Italian town from 1913, while the other depicted a modern atelier from 2013. Both images were sourced from Brunello Cucinelli's website to maintain consistency in quality and style across conditions (see Appendix 2, No. 3). Multiple interviewees reported that the visual part was the most fun during the interview. In addition, some participants thought it was easier to answer compared to questions on often hard-to-grasp terms like “quality”, “heritage”, and “authenticity”.

3.4 Participants

Participants were recruited using a convenient sampling method, selecting people from the researcher's social network and contacts. This approach facilitates access to participants who meet the criteria while ensuring diversity in perspectives and experiences within the target demographic (J. Stratton, 2021). Another positive aspect of knowing the interviewee is that the atmosphere is naturally more relaxed, as both parties feel comfortable in each other's presence. The criteria set to be a participant were to have some knowledge or interest in “Made in Italy” luxury fashion and belong to Generation Z (ages 14-28 in 2024).

Participants in this study consist of 14 individuals belonging to Generation Z. The original intention was to involve 15 individuals in selecting participants for in-depth interviews. However, aligning with the theory of saturation in qualitative research (Dworkin, 2012; Maison, 2019), the data collection ended with 14 participants, as the last few interviews did not contribute new data, and the process reached a point where no further new or relevant insights emerged. Thus, the principle of saturation guided the decision-making process in finalizing the participant count (Dworkin, 2012; Maison, 2019).

The demographic details for all participants are summarized in the table below. Diversity in participants was considered as they belong to different nationalities, live in a wide range of cities, have

different levels of fashion interest, are both males and females, and vary in employment status. Fashion enthusiasts quickly emerged as the ones able to provide more nuanced and detailed opinions; therefore, more enthusiasts were chosen than the two other levels of fashion engagement. As it might have been ideal to reach a 50/50 gender ratio, it ended up being more skewed toward females as more females in the research network had some preliminary knowledge of “Made in Italy” fashion compared to males. Regarding the participants' economic situation, some diversity was aimed at as participants ranged from full-time students to full-time employees. However, suppose economic ability was a specter, ranging from being unexposed to luxury to being regular luxury customers. In that case, all participants can be described as belonging in the middle of this specter. Economically, they have all been exposed to luxury items and seem to be able to invest in occasional luxury items. Even though it would have been interesting to reach a broader variety of different income and spending abilities among the participants, it was not possible due to the sampling method. Note that all participants belong to the upper segment of Gen Z (21-27), chosen as they are likely to have more experience with luxury fashion and were available in the researcher’s network.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Ages of Participants	21-27 (upper segment of Gen Z)	23.5 (mean)
Gender	Female	71.4%
	Male	28.6%
Nationality	Norwegian	57.2 %
	Italian	28.6 %
	British	7.1%
	Vietnamese	7.1%
Location (City)	Rome	4
	Milan	1
	Florence	1
	New York City	1
	Oslo	2
	Trondheim	1
	Barcelona	1
	Lisboa	1
	Amsterdam	1
	Austria	1

Employment	Full-time employed	5
	Full-time student	7
	Full-time student & part-time employed	2
Level of Fashion Interest	Little	2
	Moderate	4
	Enthusiast	8

A limitation of convenience sampling is that it may introduce bias, as participants recruited through the researcher's social network will not fully represent the broader population of Generation Z individuals (Baxter, Courage, & Caine, 2015). Thus, drawing participants from the researcher's network can result in a sample that predominantly consists of similar individuals despite potential geographical differences, as people often attract friends who share similar characteristics. Additionally, the choice of participants is limited to the upper segment of Gen Z (21-27), and all participants seem to belong to the same economic segment with a similar level of familiarity with luxury consumption. Because this is a non-probability sampling, one can only generalize the results to the participants in the study without being able to conclude a general population or assess causation beyond the study group (Stratton, 2021).

3.5 Procedures & Materials

Before conducting interviews, potential participants are approached and provided with information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview (University of Oxford, 2021).

Interviews were conducted both in person and online. The in-person interviews were conducted in a comfortable and private setting, either at the interviewer's apartment or a Luiss campus, allowing participants to express themselves freely. Some interviews had to be conducted digitally to reach a diverse sample of participants regarding the current location. The online interviews were conducted through a video call to maximize personal connection. The material used in data collection was a semi-structured interview guide (attachment 1), which the interviewer used to guide the conversation while allowing the participants to elaborate on relevant topics freely.

Interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants to ensure accurate data capture. The audio recording made reviewing and analyzing the interview content easier, ensuring no valuable insights or details were overlooked during the data analysis process (Foster, Clark, Sloan, & Bryman, 2021).

3.6 Data Analysis Technique – Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to identify, organize, and comprehend patterns of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Rather than focusing on individual meanings, TA seeks to uncover common themes across a wide range of opinions from the in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility

and broad applicability across diverse research questions (Nina Lester, Cho, & Lochmiller, 2020; Qualtrics, 2024). This was a fit analysis technique as the analysis aimed to discern patterns across the data to create a narrative regarding Generation Z's perceptions of “Made in Italy” luxury fashion. The approach to the six-step TA method is described in the following table (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2020). Although it may look like a linear process, it is essential to note that it is non-linear, allowing for going back and forth between phases as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 3

Thematic Analysis Process

1 Data Familiarization	The data from the voice recordings were transcribed, followed by reading and re-reading the data while taking notes of initial thoughts. The goal was to become immersed in the dataset to gain insight into potential themes within the Gen Z perceptions of Italian luxury fashion.
2 Coding	Manual coding was employed, which involved meticulously coding line by line with equal attention given to each data section. The codes were then organized in a table format (appendix 3), with one column containing the codes and the other containing excerpts of data corresponding to each code.
3 Generating Themes	The coded segments were examined to discover overarching themes that capture patterns and meanings. An “initial thematic map” (appendix 4) was developed in this stage.
4 Reviewing Themes	Themes were aligned with the coded data and refined to fit together. A “candidate thematic map” (appendix 5) was created, reflecting the meanings evident in the data set. This phase also included re-reading the original data set to ascertain whether the themes align with the data set and to code any additional data within themes that may have been missed in earlier coding stages. This stage resulted in a “satisfactory thematic map” (see Figure 2 in Section 4 Analysis and Results) with fully worked-out themes.
5 Defining and Naming Themes	The themes were precisely defined and named to distinguish them from mere topics. Additionally, sub-themes were developed, serving as themes within a theme to organize large and complex themes.
6 Write Up	The findings were documented in the following main section, “4 Analysis and Results”, presenting a thorough analysis supported by data extracts.

3.7 Measures for Validity

Qualitative analysis can be challenging, as it is not uncommon for two researchers to draw different conclusions from the same data collection (Maison, 2019). In-depth interview data often allows for various interpretations, which means the conclusions drawn from transcripts can vary depending on the individual researcher, making the process complex (Maison, 2019). Therefore, measures were taken to enhance the validity of the research.

During the interview, construct validity was pursued by ensuring clarity and alignment on the discussed attributes (Middleton, 2019; Bhandari, 2022). Concepts like "quality" and "authenticity" are often described as challenging to define in the literature and may therefore lead to various interpretations by the participants. Hence, concepts were explained in line with the theoretical background to establish a shared understanding between the interviewer and interviewee. This approach aimed to establish a solid foundation for the conversation and ensure that both parties were on the same page.

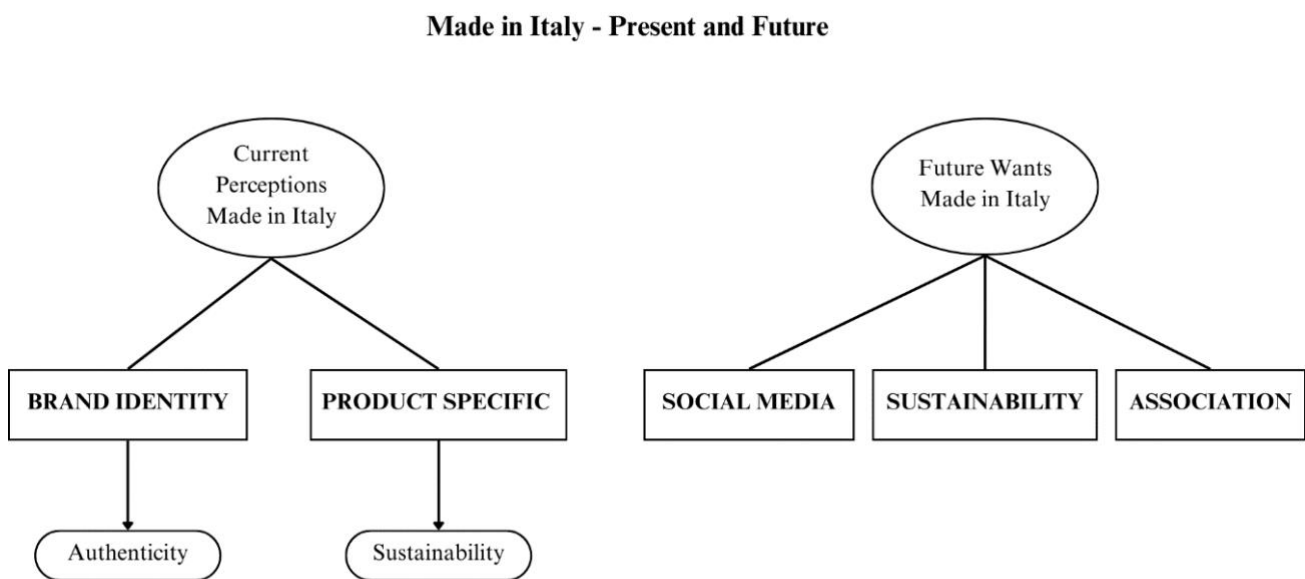
In this study, member checking (McKim, 2023) also enhances the trustworthiness of the findings. This process involved sharing preliminary findings with participants to validate interpretations and ensure accuracy, ultimately adding credibility to the data. However, it is essential to note that a limitation of member checking is that participants may not always provide extensive feedback (McKim, 2023). Nevertheless, because the members were friends of the researcher, they were proactive in ensuring the accuracy of the information.

4 Analysis and Results

The overarching theme "Made in Italy Luxury Fashion: Present and Future" emerged from the third thematic map (Figure 2 Satisfactory Thematic Map), which illustrates the patterns in Gen Z participants' perceptions of "Made in Italy" luxury fashion. The thematic map encompassed two main themes, each representing perceptions of "Made in Italy" luxury fashion. These two themes are current perceptions of the label and future expectations, with two and three subcategories outlined below. Note that the "Future Wants" theme includes aspects that participants do associate with "Made in Italy," but they specifically highlighted these aspects as ones they want to see more of in the future.

Figure 2

Satisfactory Thematic Map



The analysis also explored potential differences in perceptions among participants, for example, across nationalities (e.g., Italians vs. Norwegians), employment (students vs. full-time employment), or locations (Southern vs. Northern Europe). However, no discernible patterns emerged from the analysis.

Elements of participants' perspectives intersect and sometimes overlap within these patterns of data. However, this may suggest a robust representation of overall understanding and attitudes, fundamentally interconnected rather than existing independently. The different perceptions underpinning each theme will be demonstrated in the following sections, described following the data patterns outlined in Figure 2, through evidence from the transcripts with relevant codes in brackets.

4.1 Current Perceptions of "Made in Italy"

This theme describes what participants value about "Made in Italy" luxury fashion as of today, which is divided into two categories: intangible assets, "brand identity", and tangible assets, "product specific".

4.1.1 Brand Identity

The “brand identity” sub-theme captures patterns of consumer perceptions related to intangible assets, such as reputation, brand image, and emotional associations with the brand. When the participants heard "Made in Italy" in the context of luxury fashion, they expressed a variety of positive associations related to (1) Italian culture and (2) brand heritage, which ultimately led to a sense of (3) authenticity. The brand's identity is built upon all the qualities associated with products from Italy.

(1) Italian culture was described with a variety of codes like: “family”, “dolce vita”, “expressive”, “loud”, “classy”, “stylish”, “laidback”, “enjoying life”, “slow living”, “il dolce far niente”, “indulging”, “art”, “good food, wine, and coffee”, “espresso”, “chic”, “etiquette”, “Raphael”, “roman empire” and “the renaissance”. These codes are not only descriptive of the Italian culture, but most participants also closely associate these with Italian fashion. Ultimately, a pattern in the data reveals that associations with Italian culture affect associations with Italian fashion, which is a key ingredient in building a solid brand identity. Specifically, for some participants, the “materials”, “Italian lifestyle”, “comfort”, and “time fluency” was the focus in terms of culture and fashion:

"I feel like the materials in clothing have been influenced by how Italians live and their traditions. I know that in terms of suits, they are at the forefront of using linen, which makes it more useable, especially during summer (materials). Italians are making good quality and stylish clothing for everyday enjoyment" (P2). (Italian lifestyle)

"Italian culture and lifestyle are 'Dolce far niente' live in the present moment, take it chill. Clothes with good quality and material so it's comfortable in their lifestyle, everyday wear" (P8). (comfort)

"Italians make time for what they care about, they always have time to sit down for an espresso... I think Italians use more time to design products carefully because it's so important to them" (P7). (time fluency)

Other participants focused on the “bold” and the “daring” aspects of Italian culture and fashion:

"Italian fashion is known for being bold and making a statement. It kind of reflects the Italian people, who were also loud and bold, with strong emotions!" (P14). (bold)

"For fashion specifically, if you go to London, New York City, Paris, Milano – for me, Milano is the most daring within the fashion, they are the most fashion, in terms of the colors and the combinations. Italy is full glam, they all want to look good" (P9). (daring)

Some participants agreed with both the ones who highlighted the “chill lifestyle” and the “bold” nature. These participants specifically highlighted the contrasting values at play in Italian fashion:

"Italy has contrasts. I think of being natural, lively, free, chic yet effortless versus traditional,

family values, serious history, and religion. Related to fashion one can also see it, contrasts in different places in Italy. Italian summer is long skirts, shades of red, sunsets, natural hair, versus cities, like Roma and Milan, with high fashion, more rules, etiquette, older women in leather goods, suits, elegance" (P3). (contrasts, free vs. rules)

"Italians are expressive, we talk fast and like to complain, but we are also slow, accepting, social and a lot of fun!" (P6). (fast vs. slow)

Many participants highlighted that they think Italians have a good sense of style:

"The concept of 'fare una bella figura' literally means 'making a beautiful figure' and refers to making a good impression on people through your style – fashion, behavior, makeup, manners" (P1). (style etiquette)

"Italians are elegant they care about looking good" (P4). (stylish)

Some participants highlighted regional styles, specifically perceptions of Italians from Milan, Sardinia, and Rome.

"In Milan, you can, in fact, see these old ladies on their Sunday stroll, they are so well dressed up, the colors, the matching, their hair is always on point" (P14). (Milanese style)

"... there is this culture of always going out well dressed, fashion brands want to keep this culture in every style (culture of style). All clothes are made to fit in the best way and to show off craftsmanship, show that you care about yourself. My grandpa is the same, always dressed with the typical Sardinian hat, it has always been like this" (P5). (regional styles, Sardinian style)

"In Rome, I learned that the Italians dress according to the season, not the weather; this must be rooted in traditions of etiquette. You can only wear open-toed shoes in the summer months, for example- and even if it's like 30 degrees in January, they won't leave the house without a jacket" (P11). (Roman style)

(2) Brand heritage was commonly described with codes like: "history", "family", "tradition", "Italian culture", "success", "story", "old" and "artisanal". A rich heritage emerged as an appreciated asset to a luxury brand, ultimately contributing as a building block for the identity of Italian brands.

"... for luxury brands, I think it's important to have a heritage. Heritage equals money, tradition, and success, they know what they're doing, been there for a while" (P10). (heritage is success)

"...it feels more authentic and exclusive, seen the movies, heard the stories, really adds character to the brand and clothes" (P7). (heritage builds identity)

Additional positives with a strong brand identity were reported to be that a brand heritage tells a story “...started because of a skill or because someone loves it” (P6). Complementing this, another participant reported that a rich heritage feels like “...it started with something else than just making a profit” (P7), ultimately leveraging “something more” (P6) than newer businesses.

Two participants highlighted appreciation for specific brands such as “Loro Piana, their material, consistency of brand story, the way they are very attached to the heritage” (P12). Gucci was described as “a heritage brand, good craftsmanship, pride in production, its timeless” (P3).

At the same time, a few participants did not put as much weight on the value of heritage, reporting specifically that they “wouldn’t put so much contribution to it” (P6) and that it is “not important when I buy something, but fun if I learn about it later” (P14).

(3) Authenticity, as reported by participants, became apparent as a result of leveraging the Italian culture and brand heritage. Authenticity is pivotal in shaping a brand's identity and narrative communicated to consumers, setting it apart from competitors. This attribute was for many participants rooted in cultural values and heritage, as explained by one participant:

“...Made in Italy, the first that comes to mind is heritage, a long line of tradition present in culture, each region has their own method, production, and sense of fashion. These traditions are so deep rooted, it feels very real to me” (P13).

Brand examples of authenticity from culture and heritage were drawn from Valentino and Gucci.

“Think specific brands, Valentino, Pier Paolo Piccioli, he invented the studs on Valentino; inspired by the studs on the doors of Rome (Roman culture). This is Italian, this is authenticity.” (P9) (Italian architecture in fashion)

“Gucci craftsmanship has a long history, it feels authentic (brand heritage). When you spend money on a product, you have to like the brand, value the brand not just the product, buy it because you respect the fashion house; it's authentic to their art” (P3).

Authenticity resonates with participants, built on a brand history, authenticity fosters a deeper connection and personal touch with the brand.

“When you know stuff about the fashion houses, like the history or the family, it feels closer and enhances authenticity” (P8).

“...it gives the brand an identity, to know its history, do you become more connected, so you want to go back to the brand” (P11).

Ultimately, these authentic connections lead to trust in the brand:

“An authentic brand ... is a brand you trust, that you know. It’s the same with a person you have known forever, compared to meeting someone new – I trust the person I know the history of, and it’s the same with brands for me” (P3).

“Believing the brand is authentic is important, for me, it goes over on the trust in the quality” (P6).

However, some challenges with authenticity were also mentioned, as exemplified by the following statement:

“I think the brand might lose its prestige due to the fact that anyone can buy a cheap fake product. It is no longer something exclusive or impressive” (P14).

4.1.2 Product Specific

The product specific perceptions that emerged from the data mainly revolve around three, often intertwined, patterns of attributes: (1) quality, (2) craftsmanship, and (3) design. Because of this durability and timeless styles, the product-specific attributes often resulted in perceptions of (4) sustainable fashion usage.

(1) Quality was mentioned by all participants as the top or one of their top priorities when investing in luxury fashion items. Within describing Italian quality, codes such as “durability”, “excellence”, “material”, and “long-lasting” became evident. The importance and high expectations of quality were expressed in opinions like:

“The quality is very important. It’s advertised as high quality, “Made in Italy”, it’s perceived as good quality; it’s the first thing the salespeople say” (P4). (high quality is important)

“I expect Italian fashion products to be of the best quality, with high-quality details” (P1). (high expectations to quality)

Participants also highlighted expectations of quality in relation to price, as one participant put it:

“High price equals high expectations for quality. It is made of good material, produced in an ethical way, with good design” (P8).

Quality was frequently mentioned in the same context as durability. Participants simply explained they wanted good quality because it lasts longer. Italian luxury was associated with lifetime quality and beyond.

“Luxury, you pay for them not to be worn out, but to become better as you use it more. I have one expensive Italian purse, I use it every day, and it becomes cooler as I use it. I use it now in my 20s and I will use it when I am 80 years old” (P10). (lifetime quality)

“I want the stuff to last my entire life- bags and clothes I want to last for a lifetime. I appreciate hand down, it’s so special with pieced that has lived a little” (P9). (quality through generations)

Participants also mentioned materials, such as cashmere, no mixed materials, and production when talking about quality:

"Touching Brunello Cucinelli cashmere for the first time in the store in Rome, I really understood the quality difference between cashmere" (P2). (cashmere)

"It's supposed to be good quality, in terms of material, clean products, not polyester, not mixed materials. " (P11). (no mixed materials)

"Quality is also about where the material is produced, where it is from, you have to be able to trace all steps" (P9). (material production)

(2) Italian craftsmanship was often mentioned in the same context as quality. Associated codes for craftsmanship were: "attention to detail", "high quality", "well made", "handmade tailor-made", "precision", "quality", "detailed", and "well-executed". Specifically, many participants used Italian craftsmanship as synonymous with high quality.

"I feel craftsmanship is super important, you know when you buy something "Made in Italy", it's supposed to last, because of the craftsmanship, the way it's put together" (P10).

Gucci was mentioned as an example when discussing craftsmanship.

"Gucci has a long history of quality leather goods, with the horse bit shoe. Good craftsmanship, pride in production" (P3).

Nearly all participants agreed that they appreciate and are willing to pay extra for Italian craftsmanship, explaining that *"I think it worth my money" (P6)* and they are willing to *"invest in craftsmanship that requires a lot of work, effort, and passion"* ultimately because *"it feels better" (P6).*

Participants also reported they appreciate craftsmanship because of human involvement that makes the product more personal:

"I like the idea that there has been human involvement when it comes to production. It's more special and unique. In a way, you can say that 'Made in Italy' humanizes the production a little bit" (P2). (human craftsmanship)

"It's about more than just a piece of clothing, it's about well-being, it feels better, more personal, to wear a brand where everything is ethically produced with love" (P8). (personal connection)

For some participants, craftsmanship was associated with the production process. The art of craftsmanship was described as meaningful, and the process was associated with hand stitching.

"I have seen clips and documentaries where you see the whole atelier work on one garment, you see all the work that's put into it, everyone working together towards a common goal, the love and effort put into the process. It's meaningful for the workers, which makes it meaningful for me as a consumer" (P10). (meaningful process)

"... everything is nicely stitched, quality craftsmanship- I imagine artisans in lab coats working on clothes and bags that are stitched by hand" (P7). (hand stitching)

A few participants highlighted craftsmanship evident in the finished product. They stressed the importance of luxury items as providing a better fit and a superior feel compared to lower-end clothing. One participant described it as:

"Luxury items fit better on the body, it's a better feel, I feel the best in a well-designed dress or a piece of pants, the model fits my body differently. The seams and the fit is just correct; it is better" (P9).

(3) Design was frequently mentioned both when describing "Made in Italy", and as an essential attribute when purchasing luxury. The design related to codes such as: "unique", "classic", "timeless", "recognizable" and "iconic". One participant emphasized that brand-specific design elements hold as much importance as a brand label:

"Missoni, the design is unique, you can recognize the brand without labels. Also, Valentino studs or Gucci stripes " (P13).

Participants highlighted the importance of investing in enduring designs they love, ensuring long-lasting satisfaction. They noted the importance of combining high quality with timeless design, specifying a classic design:

"I see no point in having a lifetime quality if you get tired of the design" (P14). (timeless design)

"When I invest in luxury, I first consider design, that it is something I love, this is often what you would call timeless design, classic design. I also expect it to be good quality" (P8). (classic design, quality)

(4) Sustainable fashion usage was a deeper aspect that emerged, based on an appreciation for the three previously discussed attributes "quality", "craftsmanship" and "design. Participants emphasized the value of vintage and durability, explaining how it aligns with sustainable principles.

"Made in Italy" gives me a vintage feel, which is about sustainability, the long life of a product, and the potential for multiple owners. You could buy "Made in Italy" vintage because of its high quality" (P3). (Vintage)

"It's sustainable because of its durability. Buying a few quality pieces instead of a lot of fast fashion" (P4). (buying less, investing in durability)

Several participants also expressed an emotional connection with long-lasting pieces they have owned for an extended period. This aspect covers codes like: "borrow it", "hand it down", "vintage", "love", "care for", "special", "connection", "for life", "generations" and "lifetime quality". The idea of possessing something enduring resonated strongly with them, as one participant put it:

"People who buy luxury, with high durability, will not throw away their clothes, they will resell them or hand them down because you are more connected to them. If I have a piece of clothing for many years, even if you don't use it anymore, you still care for it, you will never throw it away" (P10).

Several participants shared personal stories, appreciating hand-me-downs from their moms and even grandmas, as well as the aspiration to hand down items to future children.

"My mom has a lot of old high-end clothes and old Italian leather belts that she hands down to me. This is very special, that stuff can be passed down generations. I just realized now how much I care about them and how connected one may become with quality products that last long " (P4). (mom's vintage items)

"In grandma's closet, I found an old Gucci blazer also a Prada bag, they are still so cool and good Italian quality lasts" (P11). (grandma's vintage items)

"When you invest in a piece, you want to have it for life, when I buy something, I find myself sometimes thinking that this will be special to give to my future kids" (P6). (investing in pieces for future generations)

4.2 Future Wishes for "Made in Italy"

Participants described their perceptions of Italian-made fashion across multiple aspects, which often led to values that participants saw as apparent in "Made in Italy" luxury fashion but ultimately wanted more of. These patterns of opinions make up this section on future wishes for "Made in Italy". Patterns of perceptions are divided into three categories: (1) social media, (2) sustainability, and (3) association.

4.2.1 Social Media

Gen Z stressed the importance of social media when choosing brands. When asked what they think about "Made in Italy" in marketing, several answers evolved around social media and codes like: "influencer", "brand ambassador", "media", "publicity" and "viral". Gen Z tend to follow their favorite brands on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, and they are influenced by celebrities who are brand ambassadors for big fashion houses. Specifically, some participants stressed that for people to feel connected to the brand, they need to see someone they admire representing it. For Italian-made fashion, the social media presence of specific celebrities, Italian brands, and Italy-related content was mentioned.

"If you follow an influencer (social media), let's say, Hailey Bieber (celebrity endorsement), I immediately think of her in the Miu Miu skirt, it is more relatable to see it like that, see how she styles it. The big influencers are high-end. Zendaya (brand ambassador) was the face for Valentino, this is the way to go" (P9).

"One thing that really stood out for me is Kourtney Kardashians (celebrity social media content) wedding. For me, she reinvented Italy, bringing back La Dolce Vita and having Andrea Bocelli sing at her wedding. It was iconic, and I will never forget it" (P3). (Italy-related social media content)

Other participants mentioned the importance of being evident in pop culture, specifically through events and the influence of TV series.

"...I will never forget Gucci at the Met Gala a few years back. Jared Leto and Alessandro Michele, the creative director of Gucci, dressed identically, it was iconic. Everyone is talking about the Met every year on TikTok, it's always some looks that go viral" (P11). (pop culture)

Another participant tapped into the influence of TV series and related Instagram content.

"I just bought a D&G vintage top for the sole reason that it looks like something from "Sex and the City". I follow this account on Instagram that posts old looks from the series, and the unique design really spoke Carrie Bradshaw to me" (P9). (TV series characters, celebrities, Instagram)

4.2.2 Sustainability

Most participants thought of "Made in Italy" fashion as more sustainable than fast fashion due to perceived less mass production and less waste of materials. They believed that Italian-made luxury fashion contrasted fast fashion and family-owned, small-scale, local businesses, which they perceived as contributing to sustainability.

"I think that "Made in Italy" brands are more sustainably produced than other brands. I don't associate them with fast fashion" (P8). (slow fashion)

"I'm prone to believe they are sustainable because they are often family-owned businesses or smaller businesses, which are easier to keep sustainable compared to big corporations" (P2). (family-owned, small scale vs. big scale)

"I think about creating things in a little village in Italy, it feels sustainable" (P5). (local production)

Another participant noted the environmental benefits of producing in Italy, specifically that *"materials are sourced locally from specific cities" (P12)*, further highlighting that there are fewer imported goods because *"we have all we need in the country" (P12)*.

The specific process around last season's clothes in Italy compared to other countries was also mentioned when discussing sustainability:

"Environment, in Italy, outlet stores with luxury brands, compared to some big corporations do not sell on an outlet, they burn clothes instead - LVMH Luis Vuitton, Hermes, they do not sell outlet" (P2).

Several participants also associate luxury in general with sustainability. They highlighted that they *"feel all luxury is sustainable"* and some *"expect all luxury to be sustainable, if high-profile brands are discovered to*

conduct unsustainable practices, they will suffer..." (P2). Thereby, not associating sustainability specifically to "Made in Italy" products, but a point of parity to be in the luxury fashion product category as it is described as "a must" (P3).

The majority of the participants highlighted the need for sustainability in fashion. They stressed the importance of brands prioritizing sustainability in their practices and *"expect them to be responsible" (P3)*. Many expressed their reluctance to support brands that do not uphold sustainable practices:

"Well, if I see if they're not sustainable I would be very upset, in the price range, in terms of quality and everything I expect them to prioritize sustainability" (P2). (expect sustainability)

"I do not want to support brands that do unsustainable practices. I care about sustainability; I believe it is super important" (P9). (do not support unsustainable fashion)

Sustainability sparked diverse opinions among the interviewed Gen Z. While many expressed the importance of sustainability, some participants were indifferent to sustainability concerns in luxury fashion brands. They explicitly expressed the belief that sustainability practices did not significantly influence their perception, as they do not believe it has an impact, other sectors are worse and prioritizing other ways to be environmentally conscious:

"I know the clothing industry is not sustainable, so I don't think sustainable practices have any impact. The sustainable thing would be to stop all production, and they can't do that" (P4). (no impact)

"When it comes to clothes, I don't think it matters. The visual things are worse, like CO2 from cars" (P6). (car industry is worse)

"Every day, I try to be sustainable by recycling food waste, but I don't in fashion purchases because I don't think of it" (P10). (sustainable by recycling food)

There was also skepticism towards products made from recycled materials, with some participants admitting that *"including recycled material in products makes me not want to buy it."* (P14). This statement was backed up by the following: *"I feel it loses a lot of value as the recycled material is not as cool and not as clean as a new material" (P14)*, feeling that it detracted from the brand's value and quality.

Additionally, some participants were critical of big corporations, including influential fashion houses, for their sustainability practices. Some believed financial incentives were necessary, and others were skeptical of greenwashing.

"It's not publicly listed, so there's no pressure from stakeholders. Then you have to report on everything. When there are no requirements, no one cares about it" (P6). (financial incentives)

"It's hard for me to know how sustainable a corporation is. I want to be sustainable, but I don't know if big corps are greenwashing or not. I want to think "Made in Italy" is sustainable, but I don't really know" (P10). (greenwashing)

4.2.3 Association

Luxury clothing and accessories emerged as more than just items; they symbolize the brand behind them. Codes on the theme association were typical; "fit in", "reflect", "diversity", "lifestyle I want", "belonging", "community", "connection", "identity", "unity", and "shared values". This connection between clothing, brand, and identity runs deep, as individuals often see themselves and others through the lens of the brands they choose to invest in.

"...you are tied to the brand, not just the product, you have to get a product you fit in from a brand you respect, the brand reflects you" (P11) (brand values reflect personal values)

Thus, feeling represented in fashion advertising becomes crucial for individuals to establish a meaningful association with brands, solidifying their identity through their choices.

"I would like to see Italian brands market themselves in a more international way, like in advertising, diversity, not only Italian models. Because you want to associate yourself with the people in the ads, for that its important with diversity in the ads" (P8).

Additionally, participants underscored the importance of portraying lifestyles in ads to make brands more accessible to associate with, further strengthening the connection between consumers and the brands they choose to embrace.

"Italian brands should use younger girls in the ads. Dolce displays very established ladies at the end of their 30s. This style is also cool for younger girls, so let us see it. When I buy clothes, I buy a lifestyle I want, they must be easy to associate with, show a lifestyle I can buy" (P6).

On the note of association, one participant highlighted the potential for building a brand community.

"Community is very important, our generation, everyone is looking for a sense of belonging. I have seen car brands are very good at this, I would like to see this in fashion as well" (P2)

A brand identity built on a heritage may also be a way to be personal and invite the consumer to associate with the brand. One participant described it as "so authentic" (P13) when getting closer to the people behind the brand. As one participant described:

"I bought a pair of shoes... the brand was 'Antonio in Forte dei Marmi'. The saleswoman ordered my size directly from Antonio himself... I think it is an amazing detail to tell people, I want to be associated with the brand of such care, and transparent production" (P13).

5 Discussion

5.1 Key Findings - Gen Z Value Personal Connection

The present research objective aimed to investigate Generation Z's perceptions of "Made in Italy" in the context of luxury fashion. The following research question was formulated to support this objective: "What associations are essential for Generation Z when considering "Made in Italy" in luxury fashion?".

The main discovery highlights that Gen Z values personal connections with Italian luxury fashion brands. This key finding is supported by four aspects of "Made in Italy" perceptions, which are crucial for Gen Z when considering luxury purchases. These findings are grouped and formulated as questions Gen Z may ask themselves before purchasing luxury, and their answers with perceptions of "Made in Italy" luxury fashion. This approach not only clarifies the key findings but also provides actionable insights for brand managers in the industry. Note that aspects may naturally overlap, and some appreciated attributes will influence several aspects of Gen Z's perceptions of Italian-made luxury fashion.

5.1.1 Does it Align with My Values?

The current research confirms that Gen Z is attracted to brands that align with their values and beliefs (Langer, 2023; Mabuni, 2017; Schneider & Lee, 2022), ultimately building a personal connection. Particularly in luxury goods, their purchase evaluation extends beyond the tangible product. The current research confirms that Gen Z use luxury fashion to express personal style and values (Schneider & Lee, 2022), making brand values alignment important. The current research highlights that Gen Z is prone to support a "Made in Italy" luxury brand if it complements their personality and values, which the participants often seem to do.

This alignment became evident as an underlying motif discovered through perceptions across various aspects discussed regarding the "Made in Italy" label. Specifically, "Made in Italy" luxury fashion was recognized for authenticity, which emerged as an appreciated value for the Gen Z participants. This value supports previous research, highlighting the importance of authenticity in the experience-centered economy (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Lewis, 2000). Another related aspect is the allure of "Italianness". Gen Z associates Italian-made fashion products with respected values of Italian culture, perceived as family-centric, and enjoying life's pleasures. Another aspect that emerged from patterns in the data was related to Italian brands collaborating with celebrities. Gen Z participants who already appreciate specific celebrities will automatically believe their values align with brands and connect to the influencer. Thereby, through brand narratives leveraging authenticity and cultural values, in addition to celebrity endorsements, Italian-made fashion brands have built a reputation that Gen Z perceive align with their values.

Sustainability also emerged as a significant personal value for many participants, complementing previous research highlighting Gen Z valuing sustainability in fashion (Arnett, 2020). Many participants closely associate "Made in Italy" fashion with sustainability, associating it with factors such as family businesses and smaller-scale production. Another aspect Gen Z highlighted in terms of sustainability was

durability. Gen Z appreciates “Made in Italy”, quality, craftsmanship, and design, which they argued ultimately results in sustainable fashion usage because of the longevity of the products. Sustainability practices were so important for some participants, that they reported refusing to support unsustainable businesses because it does not align with their values. At the same time, it is essential to note the variety of responses regarding sustainability. While “Made in Italy” luxury fashion was generally perceived positively in terms of sustainability, many individuals also expressed uncertainty and skepticism regarding fashion brands and their sustainability practices. Interestingly, despite its importance for most of the participants, at the same time sustainability emerged as one of the most challenging values for Gen Z to evaluate when assessing brands.

5.1.2 Do I Trust the Brand?

The current research suggests that Gen Z appreciates Italian culture and brand heritage, which lead to authenticity and trust, ultimately building a personal connection between consumer and brand. Previous research shows that perceptions of Italian culture hold a unique appeal (De Nisco & Mainolfi, 2016), and this current research extends these findings to Gen Z consumers. Italy and Italians evoked positive associations, often relating to cultural history and acknowledging skill, expertise, and style in fashion. Specifically, Italy was associated with “the Renaissance”, “art”, and “Raphael”, while Italians were described as “stylish” and “chic”. Buying “Made in Italy” automatically fosters a sense of connection, as consumers allow these associations of “Italianness” to manifest in the products and brands.

The current research presents a slightly contradictory perspective to a previous study, which suggested that Gen Z does not value heritage as much as other attributes, merely appreciating it as a symbol of timelessness (Langer, 2023). The Gen Z participants especially value heritage when it comes to a brand’s identity. In contrast, the new data indicates that Gen Z indeed places significant value on brand heritage. In line with previous research, emphasizing a genuine brand heritage is an effective strategy for building personal connections between brands and the individual consumer (Bodo, 2023; Crespo et al., 2022; Nunes et al., 2021). Participants associated “Made in Italy” with a brand heritage of small Italian towns where local traditions of sewing are passed down through generations. Leveraging a brand heritage helps create a personal connection between the brand and the customer, which is particularly important to this generation. Brand heritage was also described as an essential aspect of luxury fashion. Ultimately, brand heritage is valued for instilling brands with authenticity, which fosters personal bonds.

Authenticity emerged as a central element in building trust and brand loyalty. Various factors build authenticity for Italian-made luxury brands, including brand heritage, providing transparency in production, and a strong brand identity. Another source of authenticity for “Made in Italy” brands was their association with Italian culture. Specifically, one participant admired Valentino's authenticity as the Roman studs were inspired by Roman street architecture, which builds authenticity and trust. However, discussions about authenticity face challenges, especially from counterfeit goods, which undermine the uniqueness and

trustworthiness of genuine brands. Still, authenticity was positively related to “Made in Italy”, ultimately fostering trust. Italian brands have built a robust and authentic identity in consumers' minds, ultimately building trust in the culture and heritage of the products and enhancing their appeal to consumers.

5.1.3 Is it Good Quality and Design?

All participants agreed that quality was one of the highest-valued attributes associated with Italian fashion. This finding extends the research by Davis (1985), who states that consumers are attracted to designer products because they offer quality assurance and status. The present study confirms that Gen Z participants perceived Italian-made fashion as synonymous with high quality, particularly in terms of durability. Participants emphasized the importance of longevity, wanting items to last a lifetime and beyond. Quality fashion items, with long durability were often handed down through generations. Gen Z individuals tend to value these items inherited from their older family members, fostering a personal connection to the item because it has been owned by a loved one. When these brands become familiar to participants through validation from family members, it results in Gen Z being more likely to trust the brands. Thus, these high-quality items are infused with sentimental value, serving as a quality certification for Italian brands. Gen Z seeks to invest in quality pieces, appreciating items that can be passed down through generations and envisioning their children using them. It seemed like many Gen Z participants could justify investing in a “Made in Italy” labeled luxury fashion item because of the perceived high quality and, thus, high usage utilization.

Gen Z participants expressed a strong connection between quality and the art of craftsmanship and design. Italian craftsmanship, renowned for its attention to detail and unique design, emerged as an essential factor influencing brand preference. “Made in Italy” design was associated with terms like "unique", "classic", "timeless", "recognizable", and "iconic". In an era of fast fashion and mass production, handmade items in limited quantities feel more personal as experts pour love and effort into each product. The craftsmanship process was seen as more intimate, with values aligning as Gen Z appreciated the specialist's hand-stitching fashion, preferably passed down through traditional methods. Handcrafted pieces resonate deeply with the Gen Z participants, as they appreciate both the artistry of fashion and the alignment of values between the craftsman and the customer. Participants highlighted their associations with Italian classic designs, envisioning them to ensure a lifetime of product satisfaction. The combination of high-quality craftsmanship and timeless design was an essential aspect of “Made in Italy” fashion for participants, ultimately playing a part in building a personal connection to the brands.

5.1.4 How is it Perceived by Others?

For Gen Z, it is not enough that they approve of a brand, they also care about how others perceive it. This finding extends previous research highlighting Gen Z purchasing luxury aiming at self-actualization, using it to build their image of “who I am” (Mabuni, 2017). This current research points out the aspect of others' approval for Gen Z building their identity. Specifically on social media, which stands out as a critical

platform for brand-consumer relationships. Gen Z spend a lot of their attention on social media and actively follows their favorite Italian fashion brands on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Notably, participants underscore the effectiveness of collaborations with influential public figures. Specifically, Zendaya and Hailey Bieber were recognized as brand ambassadors for luxury labels. Seeing how these popular figures style these designer pieces greatly inspire Gen Z, and some participants connect specific Italian brands to celebrities. Such partnerships resonate with Gen Z consumers, facilitating a stronger personal connection with the brand. For Gen Z, acceptance of a brand by a trusted social media figure will ultimately reinforce the previously discussed aspects, such as trust and alignment of values. Other appreciated events in pop culture, like the yearly “Met Gala”. This event was highlighted as brands often go viral on social media platforms for a specific design, ultimately gaining recognition and connection to Gen Z.

However, Italian-made brands need to ensure that consumers identify with the brand. In line with previous research, the current research confirms that Gen Z embraces diversity (Duffet, 2020; Langer, 2023). This is particularly evident in marketing campaigns, where participants noted lacking diversity in personalities, ages, and ethnicities, which also relates to aligning with Gen Z values. In advertising, Gen Z participants recalled Italian brands using models that are 30-year-old ladies, which may fail to relate to a younger age segment. While everyone desires a piece of "Made in Italy," inclusivity is key. Participants ultimately expressed that they believe Italian-made brands should maintain their cultural essence and style while embracing diversity to be relatable on a personal level.

5.2 Limitations and Future Opportunities for Research

The main limitation of this study is regarding the sampling method. The convenient sampling method, sourced from the researcher's network, introduces bias and restricts generalizability. The choice of participants is limited to the upper segment of Gen Z (21-27), and all participants seem to belong to the same economic segment with a similar level of familiarity with luxury consumption. Future research could benefit from a more diverse sample to seek more variations in perceptions. Additionally, relying on a single researcher in a qualitative study may limit the depth of analysis and objectivity. In qualitative research, the analysis of transcribed interview data may differ from researcher to researcher, leading to more objectivity by employing multiple researchers. Future studies could benefit from randomized sampling and diverse research teams to enhance validity and provide richer insights into luxury consumption behaviors.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Summary

The study highlights the appeal of Italian-made luxury fashion among Gen Z. Key findings highlight the essential role of personal connections, fostered through four identified elements:

1. **Value Alignment:** The interviewed Gen Z participants appreciate brands that mirror their beliefs and values, seeking connections beyond aesthetics. Gen Z participants expressed that Italian-made brands align with their values specifically as they are perceived as authentic and associated with Italianness. Italian-made brands are also tapping into value alignment by collaborating with celebrities and taking action on sustainability. In fact, most Gen Z participants were particularly concerned with sustainability, making it a determining factor when evaluating brands. “Made in Italy” fashion was often perceived as sustainable due to associations with family businesses, smaller-scale production, and high durability.
2. **Italian Brand Heritage:** The current research suggests that Gen Z seeks to learn to know and trust luxury fashion brands before making an investment. Gen Z values Italian culture and brand heritage, which leads to authenticity and trust. Perceptions of Italian culture was expressed through associations such as Italy's historical heritage, and chic Italians. Gen Z value a genuine brand heritage, associated with traditions from small Italian towns, which strengthens personal connections. Authenticity is apparent through leveraging Italian culture and heritage. Thus, “Made in Italy” labeled luxury fashion has built a strong identity, which is crucial for building a relationship of trust. Despite counterfeit challenges, “Made in Italy” brands maintain a robust and authentic identity, appealing to Gen Z.
3. **Italian Quality and Craftsmanship:** The study reveals that Gen Z associates Italian luxury fashion as synonymous with high quality and craftsmanship. Italian-made luxury products are seen as durable and are often passed down through generations, imbuing them with sentimental value. They appreciate Italian craftsmanship crafted in limited quantities, which aligns with their values and stands out in contrast to fast fashion. Handcrafted items resonate deeply due to the personal touch and aligning values of craftsmanship and customer appreciation. This connection fosters trust and brand loyalty among Gen Z, who value investing in long-lasting pieces. Ultimately, Italian fashion's combination of quality, craftsmanship, and timeless design is highly appreciated by Gen Z consumers.
4. **Social Influence:** Social media plays a crucial role in brand-consumer relationships, both to reach Gen Z where they put their attention, and to validate social acceptance of the brand. According to the current research, Gen Z actively follow Italian brands and engage with influencer marketing. Collaborations with celebrities enhance social acceptance and value alignment. Gen Z participants also expressed that they want to be able to picture themselves as “Italian-chic” in social media brand content, which makes diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, and personality in marketing essential to resonate with Gen Z.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Gen Z participants expressed positive perceptions of “Made in Italy”, making it a valuable asset to luxury fashion brands. However, the current research may suggest that simply marketing “Made in Italy” is not sufficient to truly connect with Gen Z. Italian luxury fashion brands targeting Gen Z should prioritize aligning brand values with consumer values, leveraging their Italian heritage, and emphasizing quality craftsmanship while focusing on digital marketing strategies. Firstly, aligning brand values with those of Gen Z, particularly regarding sustainability, is crucial. When Gen Z resonates with luxury brands, it becomes accepted and makes the brand relevant. Secondly, leveraging authentic Italian heritage makes luxury brands stand out for Gen Z, fostering trust and exclusiveness. Thirdly, emphasizing the art of craftsmanship associated with Italian fashion further enhances the brand appeal, leveraging Gen Z's appreciation for quality and authenticity. Moreover, investing in digital marketing efforts, mainly through influencer collaborations and social media, makes brands relevant for Gen Z. Notably, Gen Z participants highlighted that it is important for “Made in Italy” brands to ensure diversity and inclusion in marketing, making it relatable to Gen Z. On the one hand, this may be a risk, as switching Italian-looking models to a diversity of models may make the Italian appeal less apparent. On the other hand, according to this research, it may be crucial to invite Gen Z to gain a personal connection with “Made in Italy” brands. By incorporating these four strategies, brands can effectively tap into the affinity Gen Z holds for “Made in Italy” luxury fashion, which by 2030, will be the number one client group for luxury.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Guide

In-Depth Interview Guide - Italian Luxury Fashion Consumption Gen Z

Introduction

Greetings – Thank you for participating in this study. I am researching Generation Z's perceptions of luxury fashion of 'Made in Italy'. Before we begin, I would like to remind you that your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw from the study at any time. I ask your permission to audio-record the interview and ensure the data will be stored safely. Your responses will be kept confidential, and I will not use your name or identifying information. The data will be used for research purposes only.

I Introduction | Background Information

- 1a) Age / Gender / Nationality / Location
- 1b) Level of interest in fashion (little, moderate, enthusiast)

II Warm Up | General Perceptions of Made in Italy Fashion

- 2a) When you hear the term "Made in Italy" concerning fashion, what comes to your mind?
- 2b) How familiar are you with Italian luxury fashion brands? Can you name a few?
- 2c) Do you currently own luxury fashion items labeled "Made in Italy"? If yes, what influenced your decision to purchase them?
- 2d) Are there any specific "Made in Italy" fashion brands or products you admire?

III Fundamental Questions | Perceptions of "Made in Italy" Fashion Attributes

Heritage

- 3a) What do you think of the historical legacy and tradition associated with “Made in Italy” fashion brands? (Easier: What comes to mind when you think of Italian fashion heritage?)
- 3b) Do you believe that heritage plays a role in influencing your perception of "Made in Italy" fashion?

Italianness

- 4a) In your opinion, what is Italian culture and lifestyle? How do you relate this Italian lifestyle in the context of fashion?
- 4b) How important is it for "Made in Italy" fashion brands to embody Italian culture and identity?

Craftsmanship

- 5a) How would you characterize the level of skill, expertise, and artistry involved in producing "Made in Italy" fashion items? (Easier: What comes to mind when you think of Italian craftsmanship?)
- 5b) Do you think craftsmanship influences your decision to purchase/wish for "Made in Italy" fashion products?

Quality

- 6a) What are your expectations regarding the standard of excellence and durability of "Made in Italy" fashion products? (Easier: What comes to mind when you think Italian quality?)
- 6b) How important is quality when considering purchasing luxury fashion items?

Authenticity

- 7a) What does authenticity mean to you in the context of "Made in Italy" fashion brands?
- 7b) Do you believe that authenticity is a significant factor in differentiating "Made in Italy" brands from others?

Sustainability

- 8a) To what extent do you consider environmental friendliness when evaluating "Made in Italy" fashion brands?
- 8b) Do sustainability practices influence your perception of luxury fashion brands?

Visual Stimuli

A session discussing opinions on visual stimuli (Appendix 2) related to the six key attributes:

Questions: What is your opinion on A vs. B? Why?

- No 1 (measuring authenticity)
- No 2 (measuring craftsmanship)
- No 3 (measuring heritage)
- No 4 (measuring authenticity)
- No 5 (measuring Italianness)
- No 6 (measuring Italianness)
- No 7 (measuring Italianness)
- No 8 (measuring quality)
- No 9 (measuring sustainability)

IV Follow-Up | Personal Experiences and Preferences

- 9) What attributes do you prioritize when selecting/wishing for luxury fashion brands?
- 10) Can you highlight the strengths and weaknesses of "Made in Italy" fashion brands?
- 11) Can you share personal experiences with "Made in Italy" fashion brands or products? This can be walking into a store, a product you have or a friend has, or an ad campaign/marketing stunt you remember.
- 12) What do you think about "Made in Italy" in marketing?
- 13) How do you think "Made in Italy" brands could appeal to our generation? What would you do if you were the CMO of an Italian luxury fashion brand?

V Conclusion

13) Lastly, is there anything else you would like to add or discuss regarding "Made in Italy" fashion brands or your perceptions of luxury fashion in general?

Thank you once again for your participation. Your insights are valuable and will contribute to the advancement of understanding of Generation Z's perceptions of "Made in Italy" luxury fashion.

Appendix 2 – Visual Stimuli for Interview Guide

No. 1



No. 2

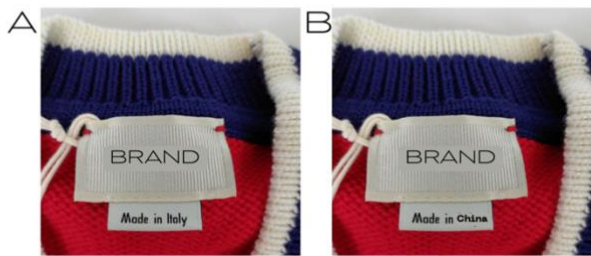


No. 3

A The Origins of the Company B The Origins of the Company



No. 4



No. 5



No. 6

A Today the history of cashmere passes through our local workshops in Solomeo, Italy. B Today the history of cashmere passes through our local workshops.

No. 7



No. 8



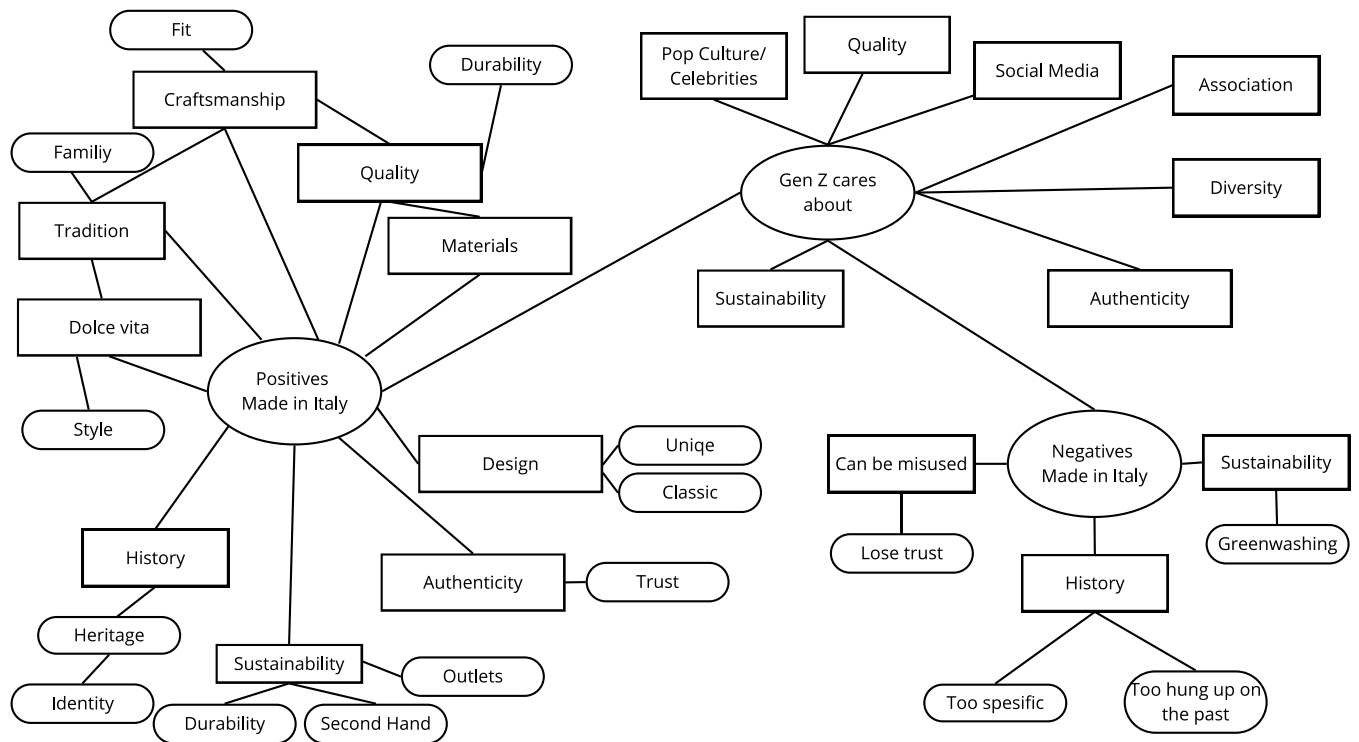
Appendix 3 – Codes Example for Thematic Analysis

Table 4

Example of one applied code with data extracts (from Clarke, Burns, & Burgoyne, 2005)

Code	Data Extract
Personal Connection (to the brand)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• P3: Human craftsmanship feels more time-consuming, done with care, precise, and thought through, it is more personal.• P4: It feels more special and personal knowing the specific city or town they (shoes) are from and imagining a man sitting there in the sun making my shoes.• P6: ...think about family businesses, the brand more credible and more personal.• P8: ... it's personal, and about wellbeing, I feel better wearing a brand where everything is ethically produced with love• P11: ...more history when they connect it to a place, more personal• 14: I like it when they make the history interesting, tell brand history, and feel more personal.

Appendix 4 – Initial Thematic Map



Appendix 5 – Candidate Thematic Map

