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Should luxury brands allow reviews on e-commerce websites? Measuring the effect of user-generated reviews presence on consumers' appeal of luxury products.

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Preface

This paper represents the culmination of a challenging yet rewarding academic journey. Throughout the process of researching and writing, I have had the privilege of receiving invaluable support and guidance from numerous individuals, to whom I am deeply grateful.

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This paper is a reflection of the collective effort and support of all those mentioned above. I am truly grateful for their contributions, and I hope that this work will serve as a valuable contribution to the field of study.

Gabrielle Adler

Abstract

The increasing reliance on user-generated reviews (UGRs) for purchasing decisions highlights a significant trend towards electronic word-of-mouth and customer feedback. However, luxury brands are often reluctant to incorporate UGRs on their websites due to concerns about maintaining exclusivity and brand image. This study focuses solely on online reviews and measures the effect of user-generated reviews on consumer perceptions of luxury products, specifically in terms of quality, uniqueness, and prestige. Utilizing a deductive approach and an experimental design, the research tests several hypotheses regarding the effects of UGR presence on these perception dimensions. The study compares consumer perceptions of a luxury e-commerce product with and without UGRs to isolate the impact of consumer reviews.

The findings indicate that UGRs have a statistically significant negative effect on perceptions of quality and uniqueness, suggesting that UGRs may undermine the perceived exclusivity and craftsmanship associated with luxury products. However, UGRs do not significantly affect perceptions of prestige, indicating that the aspirational and social status elements of luxury products remain intact despite the presence of UGRs on luxury websites. These results contribute to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of the trade-offs associated with UGRs, emphasizing the need for luxury brands to balance transparency with exclusivity.

From a managerial perspective, the study offers insights into how luxury brands can strategically integrate UGRs on their e-commerce platforms. While UGRs may introduce challenges in maintaining perceived quality and uniqueness, their potential to enhance authenticity and transparency can outweigh negative impacts. The research highlights limitations, including a focus on luxury fashion accessories and the absence of user-generated ratings, suggesting further exploration of cultural variations and other luxury sectors in future studies.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of e-commerce websites has not only revolutionized the way businesses operate but also transformed how consumers make decisions. A significant factor driving this transformation is the widespread use of User-Generated Ratings and Reviews (UGRs), which have become an essential component of the virtual shopping experience (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). UGRs refer to consumers' evaluations, through ratings and reviews, of purchased products, providing a dynamic and interactive feedback mechanism (Shin & Darpy, 2020).

By allowing users to share their experiences, opinions, and evaluations on e-commerce websites, UGRs provide insightful performance indicators for businesses, such as customer satisfaction (CSAT) and net promoter score (NPS) (Chatterjee, 2019). Consumers, in turn, benefit from a wealth of information that extends beyond traditional advertising narratives, enabling them to make more informed decisions about their purchases (Shin & Darpy, 2020). This abundance of user-generated content has become especially vital in the era of over-information and increased competition driven by digital commerce, as consumers heavily rely on the experiences of others to influence their purchasing decisions.

However, in the context of luxury products characterized by exclusivity, craftsmanship, and aspirational value, one could question the added value of UGRs on ever-growing luxury e-commerce websites. Despite the growing number of consumers shopping for luxury products online, with online luxury sales projected to account for 33% of the market by 2030 (D'Arpizio et al., 2024), very few luxury brands allow UGRs on their official websites or on luxury e-retailers' platforms. Although previous studies have shown that UGRs of luxury products are as useful in guiding consumers' purchase decisions as they are for non-luxury fashion products (Shin & Darpy, 2020), none have yet explored the effect of UGRs presence of luxury products on consumers' perceptions of luxury products. Indeed, by allowing comparability between products, UGRs on luxury websites could clash with consumers' appeal to luxury products, such as uniqueness, quality, hedonism, extended self, and conspicuousness, which would be detrimental to luxury brands.

The primary objective of this thesis is to explore the relationship between User-Generated Reviews and the perceived allure of luxury products on luxury e-commerce platforms. Thus, this study will aim addressing the following research question:

What are the effects of user-generated reviews on consumer perceptions of luxury products on luxury e-commerce websites?

This study aims to understand how consumers interact with and interpret UGRs of luxury products through a quantitative method, to provide valuable managerial insights for luxury companies regarding the management of their e-commerce websites. At a bigger scale, this study could offer a nuanced approach of what makes luxury a luxury on the digital landscape, thus contributing to the success of luxury brands in an e-commerce driven world. From an academic point of view, this study aims to fill the existing knowledge gap of consumer behavior towards UGRs of luxury products in the age of e-commerce.

The paper is organized in three sections. Firstly, the theoretical review will present past literature concerning UGRs and the current factors influencing consumers' perception of luxury. After presenting some hypotheses regarding the possible effect of UGRs of luxury products on consumer's perception of luxury, the study presents statistical analyses and the main results. Finally, the third part will present the main implications, highlighting the limitations of this study and hypothesizing new research possibilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. User-generated Ratings and Reviews (UGRs)

2.1.1. Definition of UGRs

With the growing importance of e-commerce, User-Generated Ratings and Reviews (UGRs) have become an essential component of the virtual shopping experience (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). UGRs are a type of User-Generated Content (UGC) and refer to feedback, opinions, and evaluations provided by consumers who have purchased and experienced a product or service to other potential consumers (Shin & Darpy, 2020). UGRs are also often referred to as electronic word-of-mouth, as they consist of recommendations generated by individuals shared on online platforms, websites or social media to inform and guide other potential buyers in their decision-making process (Berger, 2014). Ratings and reviews serve distinct purposes in the realm of consumer feedback, thus the importance of separately defining those terms. Ratings offer a quantitative assessment that can help consumers make comparisons between different products based on a numerical value. These scores are often presented in the

form of stars, points, or a scale (e.g., 1 to 5 stars) and provide a quick, summarized evaluation of a product's overall quality or performance without detailed explanations. Unlike ratings, reviews offer qualitative insights and contextual information that can help potential buyers understand the nuances of a product beyond just a numerical score (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). Indeed, reviews often include personal opinions, specific details about the product's features, advantages, disadvantages, and overall user experience that give depth and context to the consumer's evaluation of the product. While ratings provide a concise numerical evaluation of a product and reviews offer a more in-depth and qualitative analysis, both ratings and reviews play complementary roles in helping consumers make informed purchasing decisions by providing different types of information and insights (Shin & Darpy, 2020).

2.1.2. Usefulness of UGRs

Multiple studies have previously explored the notion of consumer's perceived helpfulness of UGRs, which can be referred to as the extent to which a consumer perceives a product review to be useful in performing his/her shopping tasks (Pan & Zhang, 2011).

A large number of studies agree that from an information availability standpoint, UGRs serve as rich informational tools giving consumers insightful information to make informed decisions in the online marketplace. Indeed as traditional purchasing methods increasingly give way to online transactions, consumers now rely extensively on the vast array of information sources accessible via the internet (Sulthana & Vasantha, 2023). Within this digital landscape, UGRs are easily accessible and key sources of information for consumers as they help consumers to navigate through the multitude of available products, providing valuable insights and information directly from post-purchase experiences rather than relying solely on seller-provided data (Thomas et al., 2019).

Additionally, UGRs are useful sources of information for consumers as online shoppers tend to believe that product feedback provided by another consumer is more reliable than informational content provided by sellers (Jonas, 2010). Thus, UGRs appear as credible sources of information for consumers, as the given information is recognized by consumers as trustworthy, believable, and reliable (Hua & Wang, 2014), reflecting the identified two main components of credibility – trustworthiness and experience (Erdem & Swait, 2004)

Other studies suggest that UGRs perceived usefulness depends on multiple other variables such as the quantity and length of a review on a product or service (Pan & Zhang, 2011), perceived information quality (McKinney et al., 2002), and product type (Pan & Zhang, 2011), making

the measurement of UGRs usefulness a more complex task. Indeed for Pan and Zhang (2011), long reviews and numerous ratings tend to be more helpful for consumers as they likely contain more information on the product than shorter reviews and fewer ratings. However, the study also found that product type (utilitarian vs experimental) moderates the effect of review length. Indeed due to the nature of the product categories, long reviews on utilitarian products tend to include more concrete and product-based information than long experimental product reviews, which might relate more to personal motivations and feelings that are less generalizable to other consumers (Pan & Zhang, 2011).

2.1.3. Usefulness of UGRs for Luxury Consumers

If Pan and Zhang's study (2011) has explored the perceived usefulness of UGRs on experimental products, recent studies have specifically focused on the perceived usefulness of UGRs on luxury products, adding insightful literature for luxury e-commerce. For instance, a study led by (Shin & Darpy, 2020) through the use case from the hotel industry demonstrated that UGRs are important for luxury consumers in two aspects. Firstly, the study shows that UGRs are helpful tools for guiding luxury booking decisions, since luxury consumers intuitively incorporate UGRs into their decision-making process, just as they do for their non-luxury purchases (Shin & Darpy, 2020). Secondly, the study argues that user generated reviews might be useful for luxury purchases as there exists a disparity between the brand status (whether classified as luxury, premium, or affordable) and its pricing and perceived value, in relation to the official star rating system. Unlike other consumer sectors, the luxury industry lacks a standardized method for categorizing brands within an official rating scheme (Shin & Darpy, 2020). Consequently, luxury consumers may find detailed user reviews particularly informative, as they weigh factors such as product features and opinions to solidify their purchasing decisions (Shin & Darpy, 2020).

Additionally, the nature of luxury products itself can also explain the usefulness of UGRs of luxury products (Shin & Darpy, 2020). Indeed, as luxury products are typically associated with high involvement purchases due to their price tag and rarity, consumers are more inclined to conduct thorough research before making a purchase than for low-involvement products (Ghasemaghaei & Hassanein, 2015). This is consistent with Shin and Drapy's study (2020), which states that user reviews provide firsthand experiences, detailed descriptions, and feedback on product quality, performance and overall satisfaction, enabling consumers to assess whether a luxury product fully aligns with their expectations and preferences.

2.1.4. Benefits of UGRs for E-retailers

If allowing user-generated reviews and ratings is useful for consumers, some studies have also explored the benefits of UGRs for retailers. Indeed, allowing user-generated reviews and ratings on e-commerce websites can provide several advantages for luxury and non-luxury e-retailers such as increased consumer purchase intention (Sulthana & Vasantha, 2023), increased brand equity (Ho-Dac et al., 2013) or customer engagement (Mathur, 2021), which establish UGRs as a powerful marketing tool (Pruthi, 2021).

Sulthana and Vasantha (2023) have also shown that UGRs have positive influences on purchase intention. Indeed, the study proved that high numerical ratings and a larger quantity of ratings have a direct correlation with increased sales (Sulthana & Vasantha, 2023). Conversely, products with lower ratings and in fewer quantity are less favored by consumers, particularly when compared to other available alternatives (Sulthana & Vasantha, 2023). Additionally, ratings or star recommendations play a significant role in encouraging the purchase of higher priced products and/or newly launched products among online users compared to similar products (Sulthana & Vasantha, 2023). Finally, Sulthana and Vasantha (2023) demonstrated that consumers have a preference for higher-priced products when they are accompanied by a greater number of stars or a higher rating. Thus, these arguments support the idea that allowing UGRs on luxury e-commerce websites could have a direct positive impact on the purchase intention and the sales of luxury products.

The positive influence of UGRs of luxury products on purchase intention can also be explained through the concept of social proof (Cialdini, 2009) by which UGRs can increase consumer's validation of a product (Shin & Darpy, 2020). As a matter of fact, shoppers tend to see positive reviews and ratings from other consumers as social proof for the quality and reliability of products, which in turn validates their decision to make a purchase, leading to increased conversion rates (Amblee & Bui, 2011). In the context of the luxury goods industry, reviews providing social proof and validation are particularly important since brand image and reputation are significant factors in consumer decision-making (Shin & Darpy, 2020). According to Ho-Dac et al (2013), positive UGRs are particularly beneficial for weak brands which have lower levels of brand equity, market recognition, and consumer loyalty. Indeed, positive UGRs could help in building brand credibility and brand trust among consumers, which in turn increases the brand's equity (Ho-Dac et al., 2013).

Additionally by allowing customers to leave transparent and authentic reviews and ratings on e-commerce websites, e-retailers can generate customer engagement (Mathur, 2021), which has been a pivotal topic in the field of relationship marketing (Gambetti et al., 2015; Vivek et al., 2012). Customer engagement refers to the emotional connection and interaction between consumers and a brand (Kozinets, 2014). It occurs when consumers actively participate with a brand, share their experiences, and form a relationship that goes beyond a transactional level, which can lead to increased brand loyalty, advocacy, and positive brand perceptions (Brodie et al., 2011;Cheng et al., 2020). Thus, by allowing consumers to freely share their personal views and product experience through ratings and reviews, luxury e-retailers have the ability to create additional consumer-brand interactions, possibly reinforcing positive brand perceptions.

UGRs also provide insightful performance indicators for businesses such as customer satisfaction (CSAT) and consumer promoter score (NPS) (Chatterjee, 2019), which can in turn help understand customer preferences and needs, identify areas for improvement and make informed business decisions. Thus, UGRs can help in a brand's product development as they provide information not only about their own products but also about competitive products which can also be used in one's product improvement (Pruthi, 2021). UGRs also play a crucial role in SEO strategies by providing valuable and frequently updated information which enhance businesses' search engine rankings and search optimization (Manosevitch & Tenenboim, 2016). Indeed, consumer's questions, reviews, ratings, and comments are prioritized by search engines for their relevance and recency (Manosevitch & Tenenboim, 2016).

2.1.5. Possible Negative Impact of UGRs on Consumer's Luxury Appeal

However in the context of luxury products characterized by exclusivity, craftsmanship, and aspirational value, one could question the added value of UGRs on luxury e-commerce websites, since as of today, very few luxury brands allow UGRs on their official website nor on luxury e-retailers' websites (Shin & Darpy, 2020). Indeed, some studies have explored the effect of UGRs valence (negative versus positive) on consumer's appeal of a luxury brand through the description of product-related negative or positive experiences (Ferreira, 2019). However, no study has yet studied the mere effect of UGRs presence on consumer's appeal of luxury. Indeed, by simply allowing comparability between luxury goods, UGRs on luxury e-commerce websites could clash with consumer's appeal of luxury products such as uniqueness,

quality, hedonism, extended self, and conspicuousness, which would be detrimental for the luxury brands. This stresses the importance of closer examining the effect of UGRs presence on consumer's luxury value perceptions.

2.2. Consumers' Luxury Value Perceptions

2.2.1. Definition of Luxury Value Perceptions

Luxury value perceptions refer to consumers' subjective evaluations and interpretations of the benefits and attributes associated with luxury products or services (Phau & Prendergast, 2000; Wiedmann et al., 2007). Past literature has extensively studied consumer's luxury value perception to identify a correlation between a specific group's purchase intentions and certain luxury values (Liu et al., 2023). Indeed, consumer values have been considered key in understanding and predicting consumers' purchase behaviors because they influence consumers at every stage of the buying process, from determining what they buy to how they use a product (Choo et al., 2012). Identifying consumers' luxury value perceptions is a complex task, as consumer's decisions to purchase luxury fashion items are driven by a combination of functional and psychological benefits, reflecting the subjective nature of luxury as a concept (Fernández & Bonillo, 2006). For instance, customers decide to purchase a luxury fashion product to obtain psychological benefits such as hedonism, prestige, and others, or functional benefits such as quality products, usability, and others (Wiedmann et al., 2007).

The table below summarizes main findings on consumers' luxury value perceptions:

Luxury Values	Key Attributes	References
Quality	Craftsmanship Material	Wiedmann et al., (2007); Tynan et al., (2010); Shukla, (2011)
Uniqueness	Exclusivity Difference	Vigneron and Johnson (2004); Wiedmann et al., (2007); Tian et al., (2001); Bian and Forsythe (2012);

		Shao et al., (2019)
Prestige	Social-identity Conspicuousness	Wiedmann et al., (2007); Smith and Colgate, (2007); Tynan et al., (2010)

2.2.2. Effect of UGRs on Quality Value

According to Agyekum et al. (2015), quality value is a consumer's subjective assessment of a luxury good's physical attributes, which affects the consumer's intention to purchase (Saleem & Ellahi, 2017). According to research by Wiedmann et al. (2007), customers often believe luxury goods provide better quality and performance than non-luxury brands. Its craftsmanship and material typically reflect this perceived high quality and performance (Shukla, 2011; Tynan et al., 2010). The quality value was also a prevalent value in Zhang and Zhao's (2019) study, where superior quality of materials and craftsmanship of luxury products had a direct positive effect on Chinese luxury consumers' buying intentions. However, by merely allowing comparison between luxury goods, UGRs on luxury products could convey the idea that some luxury products are less qualitative than others, thus undermining consumers' quality value of luxury products. Following this idea, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

- H_A1: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's quality perception of luxury products;
- H_01: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has no effect or a positive effect on consumer's quality perception of luxury products.

2.2.3 Effect of UGRs on Uniqueness Value

The uniqueness value is the property of a product that allows consumers to differentiate themselves from others (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). According to Vigneron and Johnson's (2004) study on consumer's value perceptions of luxury, the concept of uniqueness encourages people to purchase luxury products, as luxury products are inherently exclusive by nature. Indeed, some luxury consumers believe that luxury goods can help to convey uniqueness because they are expensive and limited in availability (Bian & Forsythe, 2012), which in turn

emphasizes their individuality and improves their self-image and social images (Tian et al. 2001). However, by merely allowing comparison between luxury goods, UGRs on luxury products could clash with the idea that luxury products are unique or make their purchaser unique. Indeed, UGRs on luxury websites are the proof that a product has been purchased by a number of other consumers in the past, thus undermining the exclusivity perception of a luxury good. Following this idea, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

- H_A2: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's uniqueness perception of luxury products;
- $H_0 2$: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has no effect or a positive effect on consumer's uniqueness perception of luxury products.

2.2.4. Effect of UGRs on Prestige Value

Prestige value refers to consumer's perceived assessment that a luxury good will provide social status and esteem from others (Wiedmann et al., 2007). Indeed, when acquiring luxury products, some buyers evaluate how others perceive them in terms of social identity (Smith & Colgate, 2007; Tynan et al., 2010). Consumers may participate in conspicuous consumerism to acquire recognition of prestige (Tynan et al., 2010), which is the purchase and use of a premium product that others can easily identify. Liang et al. (2017) showed that ostentatious (e.g., show off) and social status values are highly essential to Chinese customers when acquiring luxury goods. However, by allowing comparison between luxury goods, UGR on luxury products could reduce the exclusivity and perceived social status associated with luxury products, thus diminishing consumers' perceived prestige value of luxury products. Following this idea, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

- H_A3: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's prestige perception of luxury products.
- $H_0 3$: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has no effect or a positive effect on consumer's prestige perception of luxury products.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The planned procedure for this paper is to conduct quantitative research through a deductive approach, meaning to go from general theory to empirical data. Indeed in the literature review part, relevant secondary data have been collected to get a better understanding of the benefits of UGRs for both consumers and retailers, and the components of consumer's luxury value perception. Through the secondary data of existing theory gathered, four hypotheses have been formulated on the potential effect of UGRs presence on consumer's luxury value perceptions of luxury products:

- H_A1: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's quality perception of luxury products;
- $H_0 1$: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has no effect or a positive effect on consumer's quality perception of luxury products.

- H_A2: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's uniqueness perception of luxury products;
- $H_0 2$: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has no effect or a positive effect on consumer's uniqueness perception of luxury products.

- H_A3: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's prestige perception of luxury products.
- $H_0 3$: UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has no effect or a positive effect on consumer's prestige perception of luxury products.

To test these formulated hypotheses, this study employs an experimental approach to compare the effect of presence versus absence of UGRs of luxury products on luxury brand's websites on the four luxury value perceptions stated in the hypothesis (namely quality, uniqueness and prestige perceptions). This study focuses solely on the effect of user-generated reviews and does not measure the combined effect of user-generated ratings on consumer's luxury perceptions. Since this study aims to measure the mere effect of online reviews presence

on consumers' perceived value towards luxury products, one essential step is to exclude the effect of online review valence, quantity or length on consumer's appeal of luxury. Indeed, as mentioned in the literature review, the evaluative nature of UGRs depend largely on the tone and language used in the review which can influence its perceived positivity or negativity (Pan & Zhang, 2011). Thus, a manipulation check was conducted prior to the main experiment to ensure that respondents are able to discriminate different types of fictive user reviews of luxury products: positive, negative, and neutral. After making sure that fictive neutral user reviews are perceived as so by the respondents, these same neutral reviews were used in the main experiment, which aims to measure the possible effect of neutral UGRs presence on consumer's appeal of luxury, leading to the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses. The detailed processes of data collection, data analysis, and discussions for both the manipulation check and the main experiment is presented in two separate chapters below, each addressing these aspects individually for each step.

3.2. Target Group

The chosen target group for the main experiment is mainly based upon e-commerce behavior and luxury consumption. Indeed, since the research question evaluates if the presence of UGRs affects the consumer's appeal of luxury, focusing on Gen X and Millennials might be valuable as they are more prone to using eWOM than previous generations (Ruiz-Equihua et al., 2021). Including Gen Z might also be of interest since they usually are more enthusiastic about online shopping than their Millennial counterparts do (Thangavel et al., 2021). Thus by including these generations in the target group of this study, the research could reflect international current market dynamics and provide insights that are all the more relevant to luxury brand marketers and retailers. On the other hand, narrowing the scope to luxury consumers in the target group ensures a focused analysis of individuals who are actively engaged in the luxury market. This would allow for a more specialized examination of how UGRs influence luxury consumers' perceptions of luxury products. Therefore, the target group for this study encompasses individuals aged 18 to 59 years old who are discerning consumers of luxury goods and regularly utilize e-commerce platforms for their purchases.

4. Manipulation Check

The following segments present the research design, results, and discussions of the manipulation check.

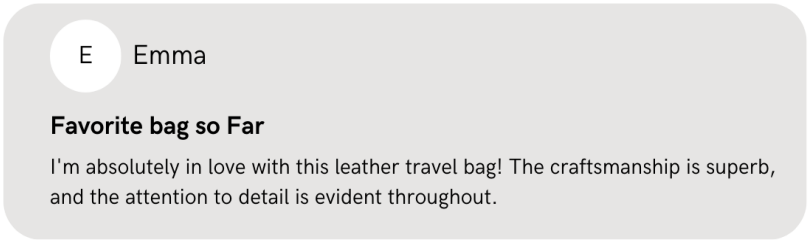
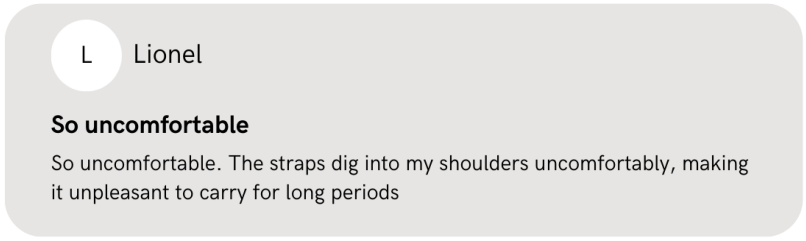
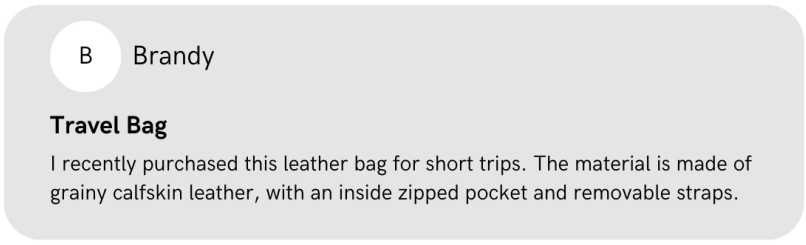
4.1. Research Design of the Manipulation Check

4.1.1. Process and Data Collection

As mentioned in the experimental design part, the first step of this research involved creating a manipulation check on a reduced number of individuals such as 100, to evaluate respondent's ability to distinguish neutral user-generated reviews from positive and negative ones. The objective here is to ensure that the reviews used in the main experiment do not contain positive or negative language and tone of voice that could bias participants' perceptions. Thus, ratings were voluntarily discarded in the manipulation check, as their assessive nature could influence the respondents' perception of the valence of a review. Indeed, by focusing solely on the language and content of the reviews, independent of any accompanying ratings, the manipulation check aims to isolate the effect of tone and ensure the neutrality of the user-generated content. Respondents to the manipulation check survey were not required to be discerning consumers of luxury goods, since no apparent familiarity with luxury products is required to discriminate the tone of voice of various user-generated reviews. Furthermore, gathering the responses of both luxury and non-luxury consumers for the manipulation check allowed for a more comprehensive evaluation of the reviews' neutrality across different consumer segments, enhancing the robustness of the study's findings.

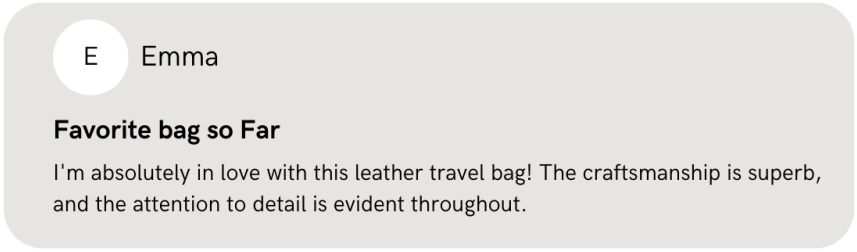
For the manipulation check, a structured online survey using standardized questions and closed-ended answers was conducted to collect valuable quantitative data. The structured survey was made available through Qualtrics and was active from May 26th to June 8th, 2024. To ensure that respondents understood the structure of the survey, the survey began with a situational introduction, followed by demographic questions, and ended with questions focusing on the perceived valence of fictive user reviews. The questions asked consisted of closed questions in combination with Likert-scale based questions with a balanced set of response alternatives.

For the purpose of the manipulation check, three types of fictive user-generated reviews with different levels of valences were created and presented to respondents. To exclude the possible effect of review length on consumer's perception of luxury, all fictive reviews had more or less the same number of words. An example of the three types of fictive user reviews (positive, negative and neutral) used in the manipulation check survey is presented in the table below, with the corresponding past literature and observations that led to their elaboration.

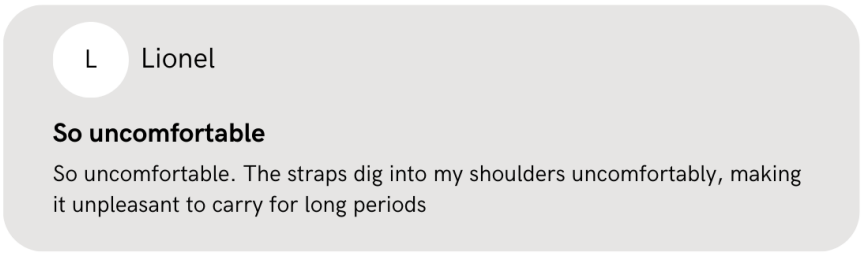
Valence Type	Tone of voice & language	Example of fictive review presented in the manipulation check survey
Positive Review	Positive reviews may use enthusiastic language, praise, and positive adjectives (Pan & Zhang, 2011).	
Negative Review	Negative reviews may use critical language, complaints, and negative adjectives (Pan & Zhang, 2011).	
Neutral Review	Neutral reviews might focus on the objective aspects such as color, appearance, and description, and use a reduced number of adjectives.	

The ability of respondents to correctly discriminate such positive, negative and neutral fictive reviews was then tested through multiple-choice questions such as:
Q1: According to you, which review is the most positive? Select one answer

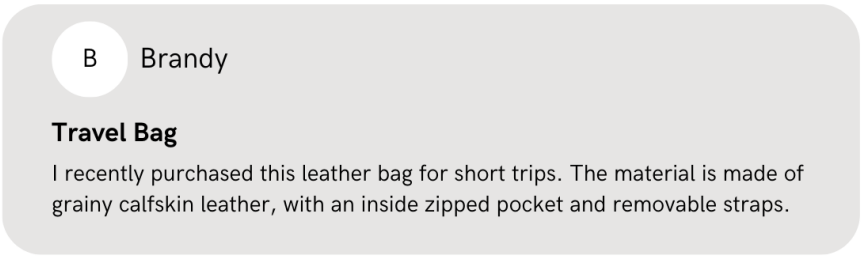
- Review 1:



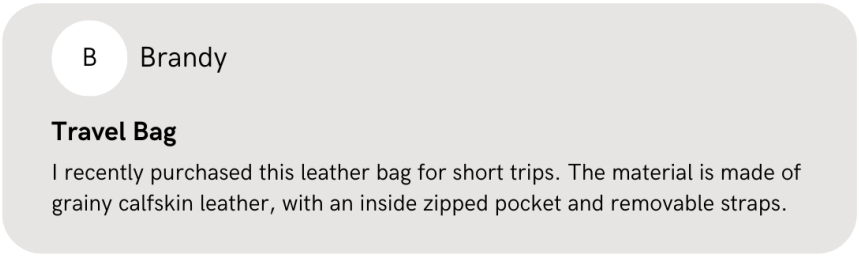
- Review 2:



- Review 3:



Moreover, questions as Q2 measured the effectiveness of fictive neutral reviews, that is that the neutral reviews are perceived as neutral by respondents through or Likert-scale rating questions:
Q2: To what extent do you perceive this review as neutral? Select one scale



1- Strongly disagree
2- Somewhat disagree
3- Neither agree nor disagree
4- Somewhat Agree
5- Strongly Agree

4.1.2. Data analysis

For the data analysis of the manipulation check, descriptive statistics were analyzed to examine the respondents' ability to correctly discriminate between positive, negative, and neutral fictive user-generated reviews. Since the focus was on measuring mean responses and analyzing statistical distributions rather than establishing statistical significance, inferential statistical tests such as t-tests or ANOVA were not necessary.

For the multiple-choice questions such as in Q1 “According to you, which review is the most positive?”, a distribution analysis was be computed. This involved calculating the percentage of respondents who identified each review as positive, negative, or neutral. The aim was to illustrate the overall pattern of responses and the effectiveness of the manipulation in presenting distinct review tones. Additionally, the mean scores for the Likert-scale questions assessing the perceived neutrality of the reviews such as in Q2 “To what extent do you perceive this review as neutral?” were also analyzed. This involved calculating the average rating given by respondents for the perceived neutrality of each review. Indeed, the analysis of the mean scores of linkert-based answers helped gauge the general degree of agreement or disagreement regarding the neutrality of the reviews.

Any discrepancies or patterns in respondents' ability to distinguish between positive, negative, and neutral reviews was examined. Neutral reviews that were least perceived as neutral by the majority of the respondents were not used in the main experiment.

4.2. Results of the Manipulation Check

4.2.1. Data overview

The researcher was able to collect 85 finished anonymous responses through the online survey. In the survey, 78 percent of respondents identified as female while 22 percent identified as male. The following tables and comments present an overview of the data collected that is relevant to the manipulation check.

Table 1. Age among respondents shown as percentage.

Age among respondents	Percentage
Under 18	1%
18-24 years old	48%
25-34 years old	18%
35-44 years old	16%
45-54 years old	13%
55-64 years old	2%
65+ years old	2%

Table 1 shows that almost half of the respondents in the survey (48%) were between 18-24 years old, 18% of respondents were between 25 and 34 years old, and 16% of respondents were between 45 and 54 years old. 13% of respondents were between 45 and 54 years old, while only 4% of respondents were aged 55+ years old.

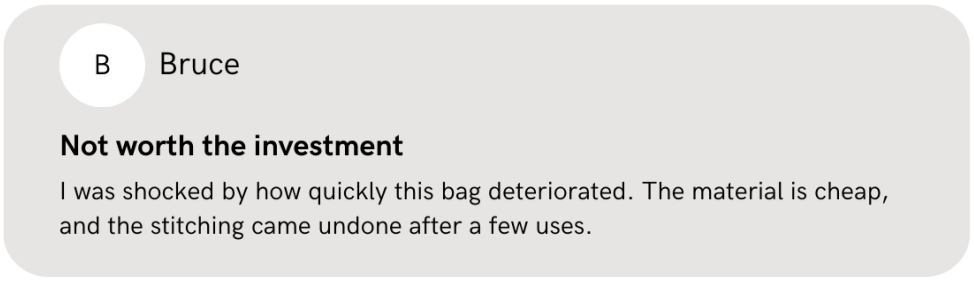
Table 2. Answers to the question: “How often (on average) do you shop online?” shown as a percentage.

How often (on average) do you shop online?	Percentage

More than once a week	14%
About once per week	7%
Several times a month	27%
About once a month	20%
Once in a few months or longer	32%
Never	0%

Table 2 shows that no respondents to the survey never shop online. However, 32% of the respondents shop online once in a few months or longer and 20% of the respondents answered that they shop about once a month online. 27% of respondents shop online several times a month, 7% shop about one a week and 14% of respondents shop online more than once a week.

Table 3. Answers to the question: "According to you, which review is the most positive?" shown as a percentage.

According to you, which review is the most positive?	Percentage
Review 1 	5%
Review 2	95%

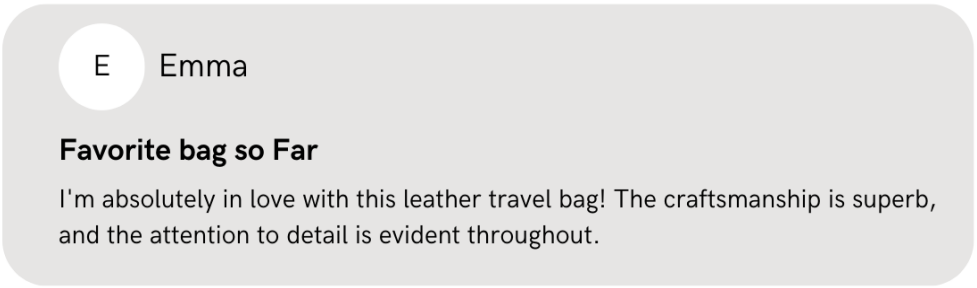
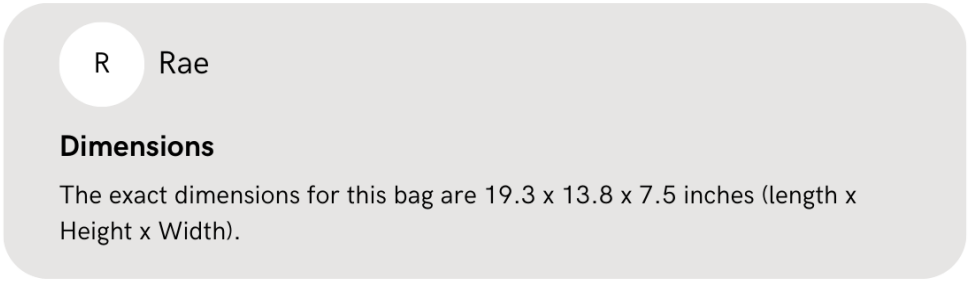
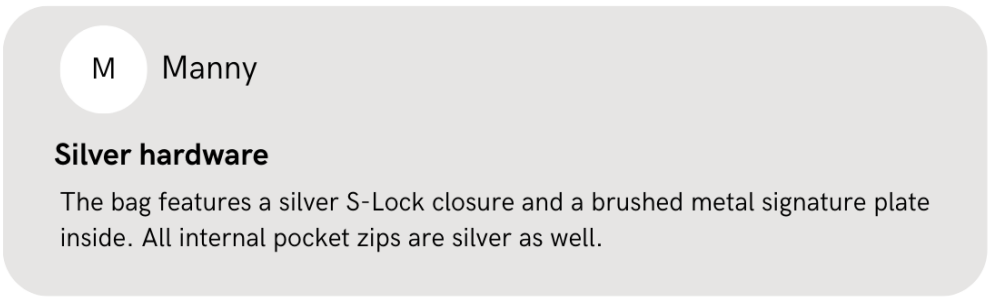
	
Review 3 	0%

Table 3 shows that 95% of respondents chose Review 2 as the most positive review, while 5% of respondents chose Review 1 as the most positive review out of the 3 options. No respondents opted for Review 3 as the most positive review in this question.

Table 4. Answers to the question: “According to you, which review is the most negative?” shown as a percentage.

According to you, which review is the most negative?	Percentage
Review 4 	2%
Review 5	95%

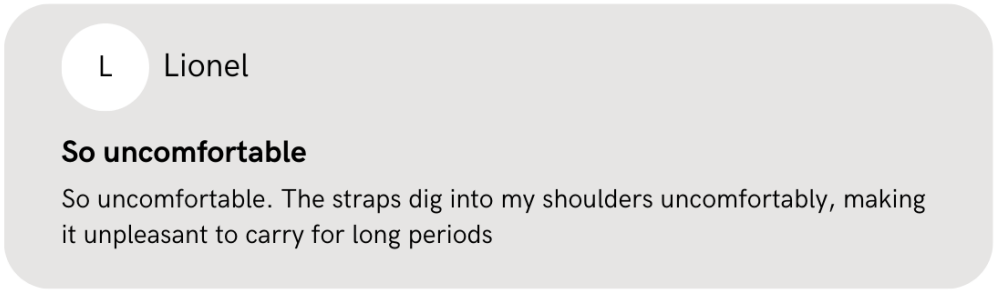
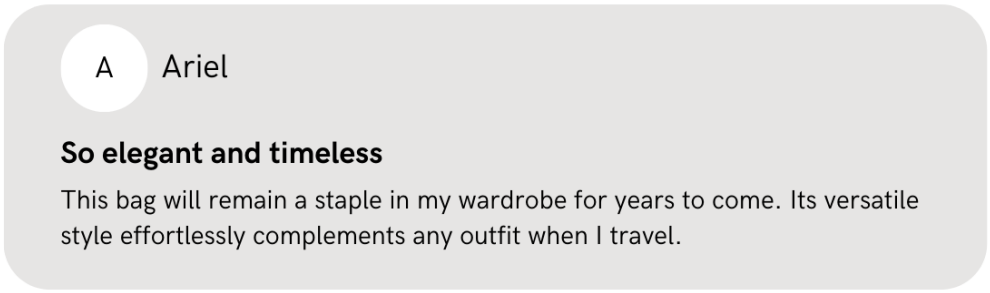
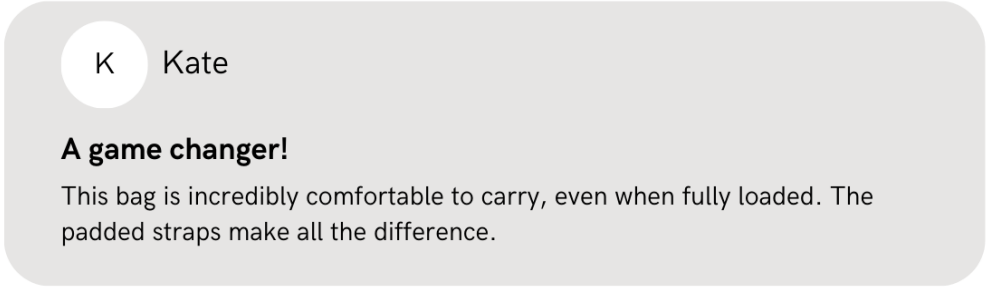
	
Review 6 	3%

Table 4 shows that 95% of respondents chose Review 5 as the most negative review, while 2% of respondents chose Review 4 as the most negative review out of the 3 options. 3% of respondents opted for Review 6 as the most negative review in this question.

Table 5. Answers to the question: “According to you, which review is the most neutral?” shown as a percentage.

According to you, which review is the most neutral?	Percentage
Review 7 	3%
Review 8	92%

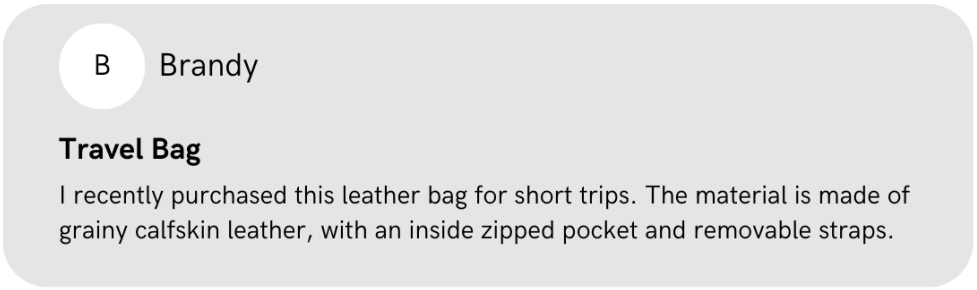
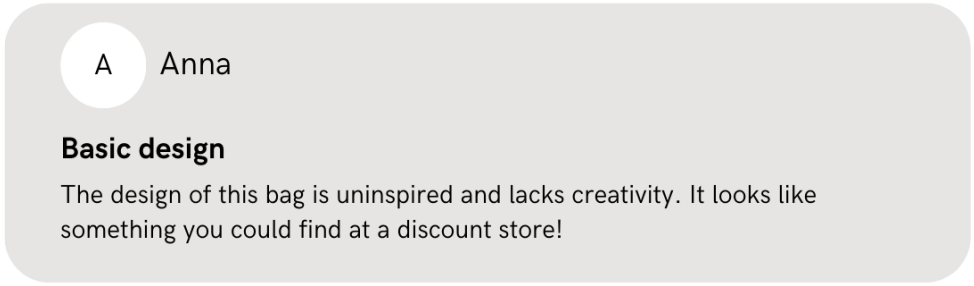
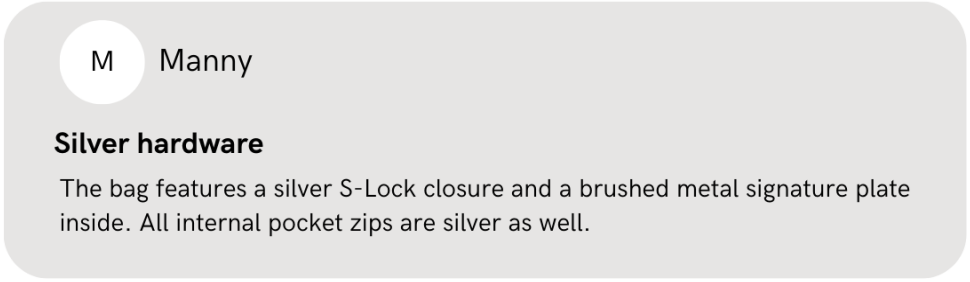
	
Review 9 	5%

Table 5 shows that 92% of respondents chose Review 8 as the most neutral review, while 3% of respondents chose Review 7 as the most neutral review out of the 3 options. 5% of respondents opted for Review 9 as the most negative review in this question.

Table 6. Answers to the question: “To what extent do you perceive Review 4 as neutral?” shown as a percentage.

To what extent do you perceive Review 4 as neutral? Review 4: 	Percentage
Strongly agree	63%
Somewhat agree	23%

Neither agree nor disagree	12%
Somewhat disagree	1%
Strongly disagree	0%

Table 6 shows that 63% of respondents strongly agree with the statement that Review 4 is perceived as neutral, whereas 23% of respondents somewhat agree with this statement. 1% of respondents somewhat disagree and no respondents with the statement that Review 4 is perceived as neutral. Finally, no respondents disagrees with the latter statement.

Table 7. Answers to the question: "To what extent do you perceive Review 8 as neutral?" shown as a percentage.

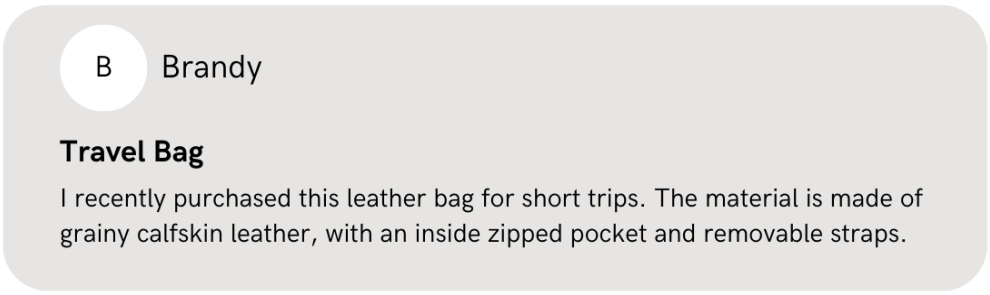
To what extent do you perceive Review 8 as neutral? Review 8: 	Percentage
Strongly agree	64%
Somewhat agree	26%
Neither agree nor disagree	9%
Somewhat disagree	0%
Strongly disagree	0%

Table 7 shows that 64 percent of respondents strongly agree with the statement that Review 8 is perceived as neutral, whereas 26% of respondents somewhat agree to this statement. No respondents somewhat disagree or disagree with the statement that Review 8 is

perceived as neutral, and 9 percent of respondents neither agree nor disagree with this statement.

Table 8. Answers to the question: “To what extent do you perceive Review 3 as neutral?” shown as a percentage.

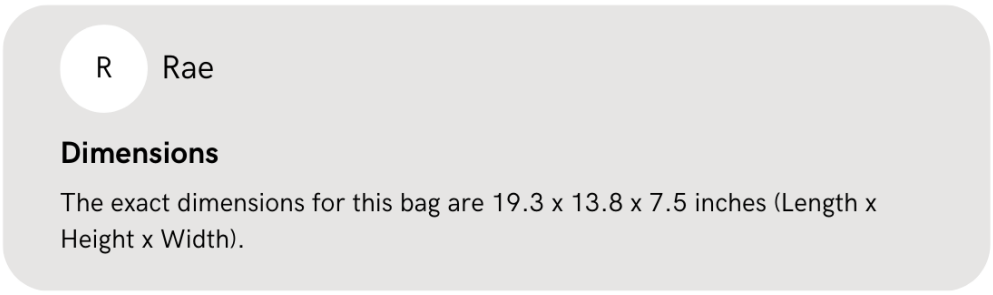
To what extent do you perceive Review 3 as neutral? Review 3: 	Percentage
Strongly agree	69%
Somewhat agree	13%
Neither agree nor disagree	10%
Somewhat disagree	6%
Strongly disagree	1%

Table 8 shows that 69% of respondents strongly agree with the statement that Review 3 is perceived as neutral, whereas 13% of respondents somewhat agree with this statement. 7% of respondents somewhat disagree or disagree with the statement that Review 8 is perceived as neutral, and 10% of respondents neither agree nor disagree with this statement.

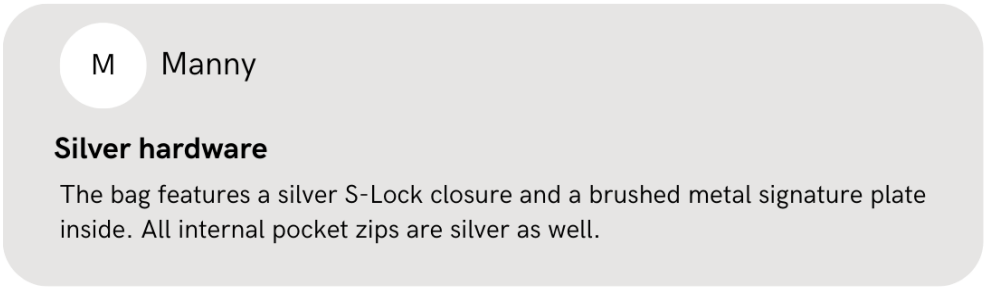
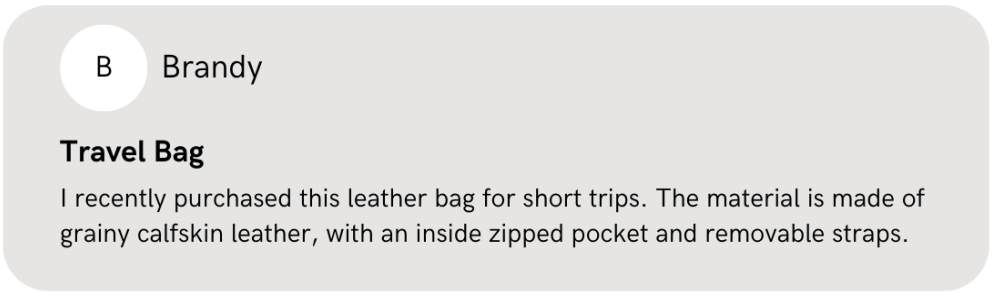
4.2.2. Data Analysis through Descriptive Statistics

As explained in the methodology part, descriptive statistics were analyzed for the data analysis of the manipulation check, more particularly by focusing on the distribution of responses and the mean scores for each category on the Likert scale. The following table presents a summary of the mean scores for the three Likert scale-based questions “To what

extent do you perceive this review as neutral?", allowing for a comparison of the average neutrality perceptions across reviews 4, 8 and 3. The detailed calculation of the mean neutrality perception score of each review can be found in the appendix. For the calculation of mean scores, the following numerical values have been attributed to the elements of the likert scale:

- Strongly agree: 5
- Somewhat agree: 4
- Neither agree nor disagree: 3
- Somewhat disagree: 2
- Strongly disagree: 1

Table 9. Table presenting the mean neutrality perception scores for fictive reviews 4, 8 and 3.

Tested review	Mean neutrality perception score
Review 4 	4.49
Review 8 	4.55
Review 3	4.44

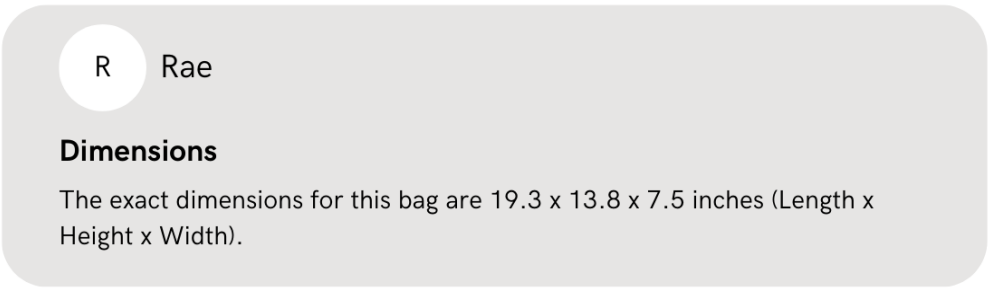
	

Table 9 shows that the fictive neutral review that is most perceived as neutral by respondents between Review 4, 8 and 3 is Reveiw 8, with a mean neutrality perception score of 4.55 out of 5. The second most neutral perceived fictive review is Review 4, with a perceived neutrality score of 4.49 out of 5. Finally, the review with the relatively lowest neutrality perception score is Review 3, with a perceived neutrality score of 4.44 out of 5.

4.3. Discussions of the Manipulation Check

4.3.1. Discusssions

As presented in Table 1, nearly half of the respondents (48%) were aged between 18 and 24 years old, falling into the Gen Z category. This high representation of Gen Z is valuable for this study, as Thangavel et al. (2021) found that Gen Z demonstrates greater enthusiasm for online shopping than other generations. Additionally, 34% of respondents were aged 25 to 44, representing Millennials, and just under 15% of respondents were aged 45 to 54, representing Gen X. As stated in the literature review, the relative representation of Millennials and Gen X is satisfying, as these groups are more inclined to use electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) than previous generations (Ruiz-Equihua et al., 2021). Although the low representation of those aged 55+ (4%) limits the generalizability to older consumers, this aligns with the trend of lower digital engagement in this demographic. Overall, the sample effectively supports the study's aim to understand how User-Generated Reviews (UGRs) influence luxury product appeal among younger, digitally savvy consumers.

Table 2 reveals further insights into the online shopping behaviors of the respondents. Notably, none of the respondents reported that they never shopped online. A significant portion, 32%, shop online once every few months or longer, and 20% shop about once a month. More frequent online shopping habits were observed in 27% of respondents who shop several times a month, 7% who shop about once a week, and 14% who shop more than once a week. This frequent online shopping behavior among respondents is pertinent as it enhances the relevance of studying the impact of UGRs on these consumers. The data indicate that the majority of respondents engage regularly with ecommerce platforms, supporting the study's objective to explore how UGRs affect their perceptions of luxury products.

Moving on to the assessment of respondents ability to discriminate between positive, negative, and neutral reviews, the results of the survey are satisfying since the study reveals a correctness rate exceeding 90% in responses. Indeed, Table 3 shows that an overwhelming majority of respondents (95%) correctly identified Review 2 as the most positive review. Similarly, Table 4 indicates that 95% of respondents correctly identified Review 5 as the most negative review among other alternatives with positive and neutral valence. As discussed in the literature review, the respondents' ability to identify positive and negative UGR among other options confirm Pan & Zang's (2011) observations about tone of voice variations between valenced UGR. Finally for neutral reviews, Table 5 reveals that 92% of respondents correctly identified Review 8 as the most neutral review, while only 8% incorrectly identified positive or negative reviews as neutral.

Regarding Tables 6, 7 and 8 the majority of respondents strongly agree that fictive neutral reviews are perceived as neutral (63% for Review 4, 64% for Review 8, and 69% for Review 3). Additionally, a significant portion of respondents somewhat agree (23% for Review 4, 26% for Review 8, and 13% for Review 3). In terms of neutral responses, 12% of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that Review 4 was neutral, 9% neither agreed nor disagreed for Review 8, and 10% neither agreed nor disagreed for Review 3. Furthermore, a lower level of respondents do not perceive the fictive neutral reviews as neutral. Indeed, Review 4 had only 1% of respondents somewhat disagreeing and none disagreeing, while for Review 8, no respondents somewhat disagreed or disagreed. Review 3 had a higher rate of somewhat disagreement or disagreement at 7%, but no respondents disagreed outright. Given that the vast majority of respondents either strongly agree or somewhat agree that the reviews are perceived as neutral, it is reasonable to infer that respondents do perceive Reviews 3, 4, and 8 as neutral. However, the slight variation in the level disagreement in Table 8, suggests that Review 3 might be slightly less convincingly neutral compared to Reviews 4 and 8.

The results from Table 9 provide additional quantitative support to the earlier findings that respondent's perceive Reviews 4, 8 as slightly more neutral then Review 3. Indeed, the table shows that the fictive neutral review most perceived as neutral by respondents is Review 8, with a mean neutrality perception score of 4.55 out of 5. This high score corroborates the strong agreement seen in Table 7, where 90% of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that Review 8 was neutral. The second most neutral perceived fictive review is Review 4, with a perceived neutrality score of 4.49 out of 5, aligning with the 86% agreement rate found in Table 6. Finally, Review 3 has the relatively lowest neutrality perception score of 4.44 out of 5, which is consistent with the slightly lower agreement rate of 82% noted in Table 8.

4.3.2. Implications for Main Experiment

As stated above, the results of the manipulation check confirm that fictive Reviews 4 and 8 are neutral and most perceived as such by respondents relatively to Review 3. Thus, only Review 4 and 8 will be used in the main experiment, as they will be part of the picture of the mock luxury brand's website sent to the experimental group.

5. Main Experiment

With confirmed neutral reviews, the second step of this research involves creating an experiment to assess the impact of the neutral UGR presence on consumers' appeal of luxury products, leading to the rejection or acceptance of the hypotheses. In this experiment, participants assigned to the experimental group were presented with a luxury website containing neutral reviews on products. Their perceptions were compared with those of participants assigned to a control group, who viewed the same website without any reviews. Hypotheses were tested regarding the effects on quality perception, uniqueness perception and prestige perception. The following segments present the research design, results and discussions of the main experiment.

5.1. Research Design of the Main Experiment

5.1.1. Process and Data Collection

The experiment was conducted on a reduced number of participants such as 70 belonging to the target group (luxury consumers and e-commerce users) between June 29th and July 1st 2024. Similar to the manipulation check, Qualtrics was used for conducting the experiment through a structured online survey using standardized questions and closed-ended answers to collect valuable quantitative data. To ensure a diverse and representative sample of our target group, participants were recruited through the Prolific platform, which facilitates the recruitment of participants for online research. Thus, participants to the main experiment were previously selected (or screened) on the Prolific website based on their online shopping frequency (more than once a week, about once per week, several times a month, about once a month) and luxury consumption (ownership of more than two fashion items costing over £200). 47,979 Prolific users were eligible to this experiment after applying these screen requirements. The details of the screening process for the recruitment of participants can be found in the appendix. In total, 72 anonymous participants were recruited and randomly assigned to either a control group or an experimental group, so that both the control group and experimental group were composed of 36 individuals each. To avoid any kind of bias in responses, participants could only take part in the main experiment once, and could not belong to both the control group and the experimental group. The control group was sent a survey with a picture of a luxury website selling a product without any reviews, while the experimental group was sent a survey with the same luxury website selling the same product, the only element changing being the presence of neutral user-generated reviews on the product. The picture of the luxury website used in the survey consisted of a real luxury brand's website featuring an existing product. All distinguishable elements such as logos, monograms or other trademarks were removed to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and legal requirements. Additionally, the description, price and all other non-trademarked elements present on the initial luxury brand's website was not changed to avoid any legal issues. Pictures of the luxury website mockup used in the experiment without and with UGRs are provided below.

Figure 1.Website without UGRs

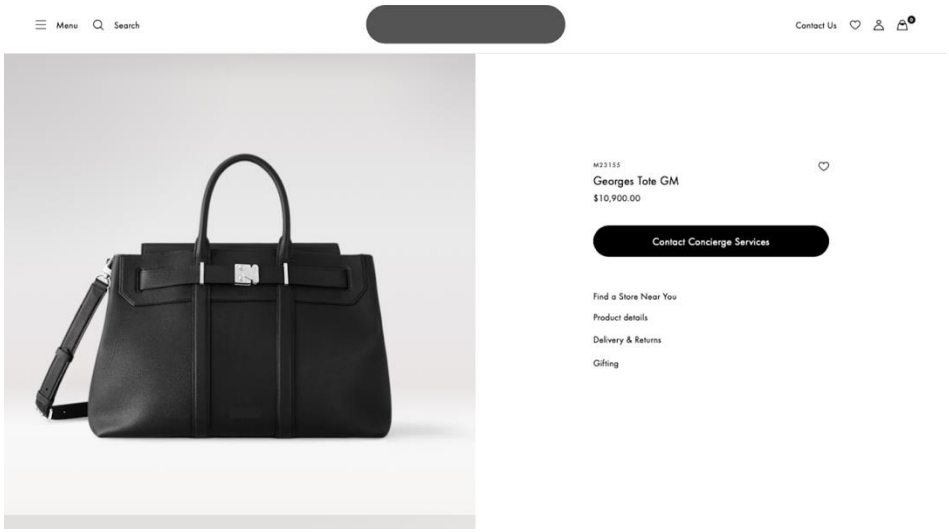
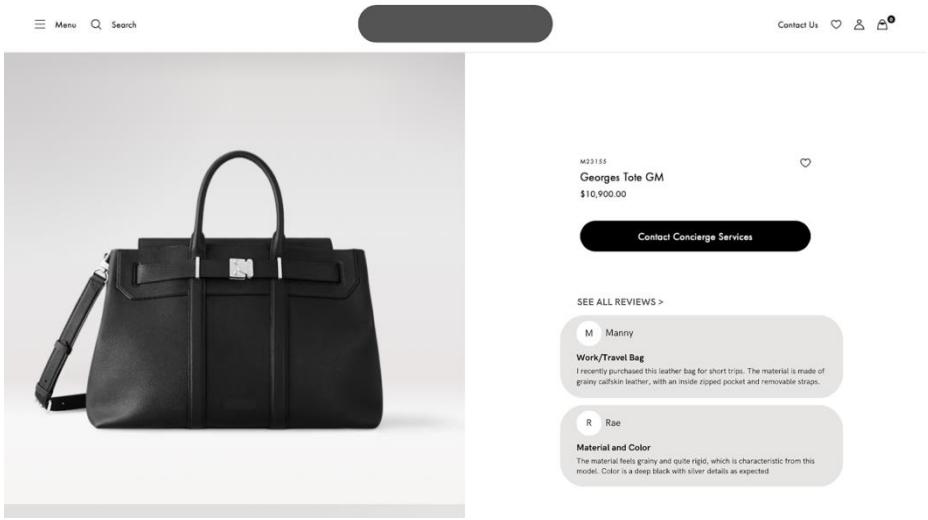


Figure 2.Website with UGRs



To ensure that respondents understood the structure of the survey, the survey began with a situational introduction, moved on to demographic questions, and ended up with questions focusing on participants' luxury value appeal when exposed or unexposed to UGRs. The survey consisted of closed questions in combination with questions answered by Likert-scales with a balanced set of response alternatives. The questions asked in the survey were identical, whether the participant belongs to the experiment group or the control group, to solely focus on the measure of UGR presence and UGR absence on respondents' luxury appeal. For example to

test H_A1 (UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's quality perception of luxury products), participants belonging to the control group were asked to rate their perceived quality of the luxury product presented on the website without UGRs using a Likert scale by answering the question:
Q3: Please rate the perceived quality of the luxury products presented on the website.

1- Very Poor
2- Poor
3- Neutral
4- Good
5- Excellent

The same question was asked to respondents belonging to the experimental group when presented with the website containing UGRs. Additionally, the same question type was asked to respondents to try to evaluate uniqueness and prestige perceptions.

5.1.2. Data Analysis

After gathering the data about respondents' answers in the experiment, a data analysis model was elaborated to test whether the hypotheses were supported or rejected. The statistical tool SPSS was used to analyze the data, and an independent t-test method was employed to test the hypotheses. Indeed, each hypothesis focuses on examining the direct relationship between an independent variable (the presence of user-generated reviews on a website) and one dependent variable (e.g., consumer's quality perception). Since the hypotheses are not examining the combined or interactive effects of multiple independent variables on a single dependent variable, a multiple regression analysis was discarded. Additionally, a t-test was performed as it allows for the comparison of means between two independent groups (the control group and the experimental group) for a single dependent variable (e.g., quality perception). By comparing the mean scores of perception variables between these groups, it was possible to determine if there were significant differences in the two groups' luxury value perceptions attributable to the presence of UGR. Thus, the independent t-test was chosen as an accurate statistical test for this research.

The collected data for the experimental group and the control group was imported into SPSS software. Before conducting the t-test, the homogeneity of variances was tested using the F-test or Levene's Test. Next, independent sample t-tests were conducted using the Compare Means function in SPSS. This allowed to analyze the mean scores of quality, uniqueness, and prestige perception variables between the two groups. The t-test statistics generated by SPSS, including the t-value and associated p-value, provided insights into the significance of the differences in means observed between the control and experimental groups. More specifically, the results were interpreted based on the significance level (typically set at $\alpha = 0.05$): when the p-value was less than 0.05, it was considered that there was enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis. Conversely, if the p-value was greater than 0.05, there was not enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis, suggesting no statistically significant difference between the groups. For example, a significant difference in means could lead to the following conclusions regarding H_A1 (UGRs presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's quality perception of luxury products) :

- If the group exposed to UGRs had a significantly lower mean quality perception score compared to the group not exposed to UGRs (p-value < 0.05), it suggested that UGR presence negatively affected consumers' perception of quality. This would lead to the acceptance of H_A1.
- Conversely, if the group exposed to UGRs had a significantly higher mean quality perception score compared to the group not exposed to UGRs (p-value < 0.05), it suggested that UGR presence positively affected consumers' perception of quality. This would lead to the rejection of H_A1.
- If there was no significant difference in mean scores for quality perception between the two groups, it would suggested that the presence of UGRs didn't affect how consumers perceived luxury products in terms of self-expression. This would lead to the rejection of H_A1.

5.2. Results of the Main Experiment

The following segments will present the data overview and data analysis of the main experiment.

5.2.1. Data Overview

The researcher was able to collect 36 completed responses for the control group as well as 36 completed responses for the experimental group, resulting in a total of 72 respondents. Concerning female representation in both groups, 64% of respondents identified as female in the control group while 47% of respondents identified as female in the experimental group. Moving on to male representation in the two groups, 36% of respondents identified as male in the control group while 50% of respondents identified as male in the experimental group. 3% of respondents identified as non-binary or third gender in the experimental group while no respondent identified as so in the control group. The following tables and comments present an overview of the data collected that is relevant to the main experiment.

Table 10. Age among respondents in the two groups shown as a percentage.

Age among respondents	Percentage in Control Group	Percentage in Experimental Group
Under 18	0%	0%
18-24 years old	39%	19%
25-34 years old	44%	47%
35-44 years old	8%	17%
45-54 years old	6%	14%
55-64 years old	3%	3%
65+ years old	0%	0%

Table 10 shows the age distribution among participants in the control and experimental groups. In the control group, 39% of respondents were between 18-24 years old, while this age group represents 19% in the experimental group. Respondents aged 25-34 years old make up 44% of the control group and 47% of the experimental group. In the control group, 8% of respondents were between 35-44 years old, compared to 17% in the experimental group. Participants aged 45-54 years old account for 6% of the control group and 14% of the experimental group. Both groups have 3% of respondents aged 55-64 years old. There are no respondents under 18 or over 65 years old in either group.

Table 11. Answers to the question: “How often (on average) do you shop online?” in both groups shown as a percentage.

How often (on average) do you shop online?	Percentage in Control Group	Percentage in Experimental Group
More than once a week	25%	17%
About once per week	28%	19%
Several times a month	33%	36%
About once a month	8%	14%
Once in a few months or longer	6%	14%
Never	0%	0%

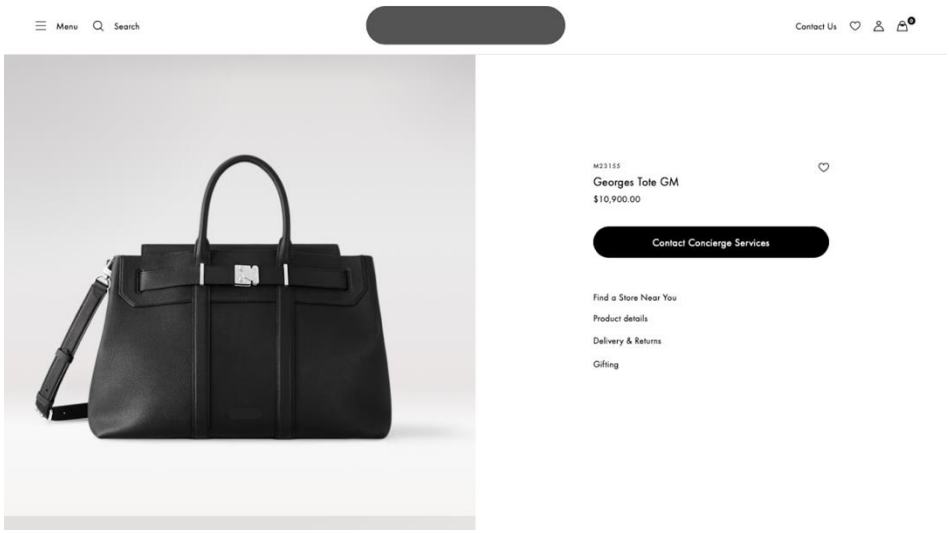
Table 11 shows the frequency of online shopping among participants in the control and experimental groups. In the control group, 25% of respondents shop online more than once a week, while this frequency represents 17% in the experimental group. Respondents who shop online about once per week make up 28% of the control group and 19% of the experimental group. Those who shop online several times a month account for 33% of the control group and 36% of the experimental group. In the control group, 8% of respondents shop online about once a month, compared to 14% in the experimental group. Participants who shop online once in a few months or longer represent 6% of the control group and 14% of the experimental group. There are no respondents who never shop online in either group.

Table 12. Answers to the question: “Do you own more than two fashion items that cost over $300?” in both groups shown as a percentage.

Do you own more than two fashion items that cost over $300?	Percentage in Control Group	Percentage in Experimental Group
Yes	92%	81%
No	8%	19%

Table 12 shows the ownership of more than two fashion items costing over $300 among participants in the control and experimental groups. In the control group, 92% of respondents own more than two such items, while this percentage is 81% in the experimental group. Conversely, 8% of respondents in the control group do not own more than two fashion items costing over $300, compared to 19% in the experimental group.

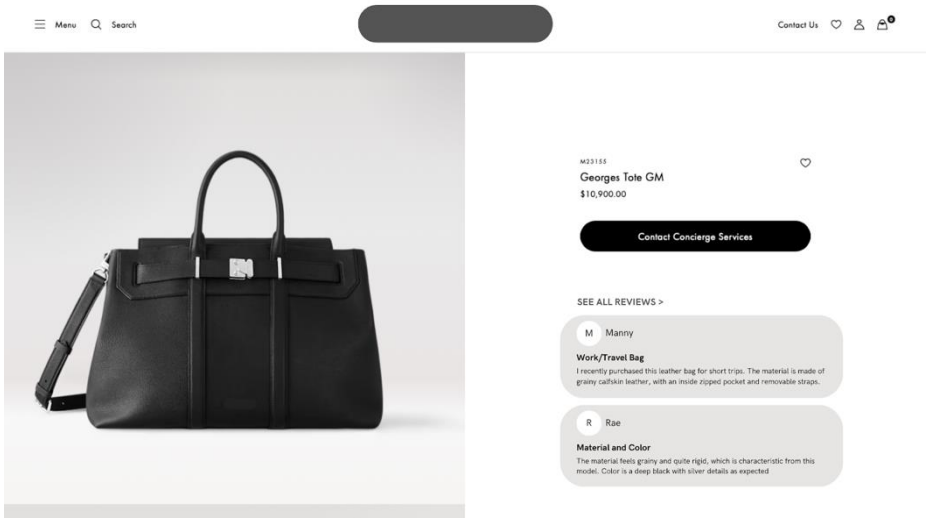
Table 13. Answers to the questions 5/6/7/8 in the Control group: “Please rate your perceived Quality/Uniqueness/Prestige of the luxury travel bag presented below” (website without UGR as seen in Figure 1.).



Luxury-value perceptions of the website without UGR as seen in Figure 1.	Perceived Quality	Perceived Uniqueness	Perceived Prestige
Extremely good	44%	39%	36%
Somewhat good	36%	22%	36%
Neither agree nor disagree	11%	22%	14%
Somewhat poor	8%	17%	11%
Extremely poor	0%	0%	3%

Table 13 shows the luxury-value perceptions of the website without UGR as seen in Figure 1 among participants in the control group. For perceived quality, 44% of respondents rated it as extremely good, 36% as somewhat good, 11% neither agree nor disagree, 8% as somewhat poor, and 0% as extremely poor. For perceived uniqueness, 39% of respondents rated it as extremely good, 22% as somewhat good, 22% neither agree nor disagree, 17% as somewhat poor, and 0% as extremely poor. For perceived prestige, 36% of respondents rated it as extremely good, 36% as somewhat good, 14% neither agree nor disagree, 11% as somewhat poor, and 3% as extremely poor.

Table 14. Answers to the questions 5/6/7/8 in the Experimental group: "Please rate your perceived Quality/Uniqueness/Prestige of the luxury travel bag presented below" (website with UGR as seen in Figure 2.).



Luxury-value perceptions of the website with UGR as seen in Figure 2.	Perceived Quality	Perceived Uniqueness	Perceived Prestige
Extremely good	22%	14%	25%
Somewhat good	47%	28%	36%
Neither agree nor disagree	14%	28%	19%
Somewhat poor	17%	17%	17%

Extremely poor	0%	14%	3%

Table 14 shows the luxury-value perceptions of the website with UGR as seen in Figure 2 among participants in the experimental group. For perceived quality, 22% of respondents rated it as extremely good, 47% as somewhat good, 14% neither agree nor disagree, 17% as somewhat poor, and 0% as extremely poor. For perceived uniqueness, 14% of respondents rated it as extremely good, 28% as somewhat good, 28% neither agree nor disagree, 17% as somewhat poor, and 14% as extremely poor. For perceived prestige, 25% of respondents rated it as extremely good, 36% as somewhat good, 19% neither agree nor disagree, 17% as somewhat poor, and 3% as extremely poor.

5.2.2. Data Analaysis through Independent T-test

As stated in the methodology part, an independent t-test was performed to evaluate whether the means for the two independent groups (control group and experimental group) are significantly different from each other, leading to the acceptance or rejection of the hypotheses. The level of significance used is 5% (= 0.05). This test was done by comparing the t-value or t-count with t-table. A t count greater than the t-table value and a p-value less than 0.05 indicates a significant difference, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. A count less than the t table value and a p-value greater than 0.05 indicates no significant difference, leading to the acceptance of the null hypothesis. Additionally, since hypotheses H_A1, H_A2, and H_A3 are directional ("UGR presence on luxury brand's websites has a negative effect on consumer's uniqueness perception of luxury products"), only the one-sided p-value was kept and interpreted. Detailed tables presenting the results of four independent t-tests (one for each hypothesis tested) are shown and described below.

Table 15.a Group statistics for "Quality Perception"

Group Statistics

	Website type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Quality Perception	Control group (without UGR)	36	4.17	.941	.157
	Experimental group (with UGR)	36	3.75	.996	.166

Table 15.a above shows the difference in mean quality perception scores between the control group (without UGR) and the experimental group (with UGR). Indeed, the control group (without UGR) has a mean quality perception score of 4.17 (SD = 0.941), while the experimental group (with UGR) has a mean score of 3.75 (SD = 0.996).

Table 15.b Independent Samples T-test for "Quality Perception"

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Quality Perception	Equal variances assumed	.139	.710	1.824	70	.036	.417	.228	-.039	.872
	Equal variances not assumed			1.824	69.77	.036	.417	.228	-.039	.872

Table 15.b shows that the result of the homogeneity test is 0.710, which implies that the variance between the samples is homogeneous. Because the data is homogeneous, this research assumes equal variances for the interpretation of this table. Additionally, Table 15.b shows that the value of t count > t table (1.824 > 1.667) with a significance of one-sided $p < 0.05$ (0.036 < 0.05), which indicates that there is enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis (H01). This means that there is a statistically significant difference in the perceived quality of luxury products between the website without UGR and the website with UGR. Specifically, the mean perceived quality score is higher for the website without UGR (M = 4.17, SD = 0.941) compared to the website with UGR (M = 3.75, SD = 0.996). This supports Hypothesis H_A1, indicating that the presence of UGR on luxury brand websites has a negative effect on consumers' perception of the quality of luxury products.

Table 15.c Independent Samples Effect Size for "Quality Perception"

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer[a]	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval Lower	Upper
Quality Perception	Cohen's d	.969	.430	-.039	.896
	Hedges' correction	.980	.425	-.039	.886
	Glass's delta	.996	.418	-.057	.887

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

As the Hypothesis H_A1 is supported, analyzing the effect size statistics is of interest. Table 15.c shows that Cohen's d, Hedges' correction, and Glass's delta all indicate a small effect size, with point estimates of 0.430, 0.425, and 0.418, respectively. These effect sizes suggest a small difference in perceived uniqueness between the two groups.

Table 16.a Group statistics for “Uniqueness Perception”

Group Statistics

	Website type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Uniqueness Perception	Control group (without UGR)	36	3.83	1.134	.189
	Experimental group (with UGR)	36	3.11	1.260	.210

Table 16.a above shows the difference in mean uniqueness perception scores between the control group (without UGR) and the experimental group (with UGR). Indeed, the control group (without UGR) has a mean uniqueness perception score of 3.83 (SD = 1.134), while the experimental group (with UGR) has a mean score of 3.11 (SD = 1.260).

Table 16.b Independent Samples T-test for “Uniqueness Perception”

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Uniqueness Perception	Equal variances assumed	.061	.806	2.557	70	.006	.722	.282	.159	1.286
	Equal variances not assumed			2.557	69.237	.006	.722	.282	.159	1.286

Table 16.b shows that the result of homogeneity is 0.806, which implies that the variance between the samples is homogeneous. Because the data is homogeneous, this research assumes equal variances for the interpretation of this table. Additionally, table 16.b shows that the value of t count > t table (2.557 >1.667) with a significance of $p < 0.05$ ($0.013 < 0.05$), which indicates that there is enough evidence to reject the null hypothesis ($H_0 2$). This means that there is a statistically significant difference in the perceived uniqueness of luxury products between the website without UGR and the website with UGR. Specifically, the mean perceived uniqueness score is higher for the website without UGR (M = 3.83, SD = 1.134) compared to the website with UGR (M = 3.11, SD = 1.260). This supports Hypothesis $H_A 2$, indicating that the presence of UGR on luxury brand websites has a negative effect on consumers' perception of the uniqueness of luxury products.

Table 16.c Independent Samples Effect Size for “Uniqueness Perception”

Independent Samples Effect Sizes

		Standardizer[a]	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval Lower	Upper
Uniqueness Perception	Cohen's d	1.199	.603	.128	1.073
	Hedges' correction	1.212	.596	.127	1.062
	Glass's delta	1.260	.573	.089	1.050

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the pooled standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the pooled standard deviation, plus a correction factor.
Glass's delta uses the sample standard deviation of the control (i.e., the second) group.

As the Hypothesis $H_A 2$ is supported, analyzing the effect size statistics is of interest. Table 16.c shows that Cohen's d, Hedges' correction, and Glass's delta all indicate a medium effect size, with point estimates of 0.603, 0.596, and 0.573, respectively. These effect sizes suggest a medium difference in perceived uniqueness between the two groups.

Table 17.a Group statistics for “Prestige Perception”

Group Statistics

	Website type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Prestige Perception	Control group (without UGR)	36	3.92	1.105	.184
	Experimental group (with UGR)	36	3.64	1.125	.188

Table 17.a above shows the difference in mean prestige perception scores between the control group (without UGR) and the experimental group (with UGR). Indeed, the control group (without UGR) has a mean prestige perception score of 3.92 (SD = 1.105), while the experimental group (with UGR) has a mean score of 3.64 (SD = 1.125).

Table 17.b Independent Samples T-test for “Prestige Perception”

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance One-Sided p	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Prestige Perception	Equal variances assumed	.415	.521	1.057	70	.147	.278	.263	-.246	.802
	Equal variances not assumed			1.057	69.978	.147	.278	.263	-.246	.802

Table 17.b shows that the result of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances is 0.521, which implies that the variance between the samples is homogeneous. Because the data is homogeneous, this research assumes equal variances for the interpretation of this table. Additionally, Table 18.b shows that the value of t count < t table (1.057 < 1.667) with a significance of one-sided p > 0.05 (0.147 > 0.05), which indicates that there is not enough evidence to accept hypothesis H_A3. This means that there is no statistically significant difference in the perceived prestige of luxury products between the website without UGR and

the website with UGR. Thus, hypothesis $H_0$3 is accepted, meaning that the presence of UGR on luxury brand websites does not have a significant negative effect on consumers' prestige perception of luxury products.

5.3. Discussions of the Main Experiment

5.3.1. Discussions

The age distribution data in Table 10 effectively reflects the target demographic of Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z as stated in the methodology. Indeed, the control group and the experimental group are strongly composed of Millennials, with over 40% of respondents aged 25-34 in both groups. However, the control group is slightly more composed of Gen Z respondents, while the experimental group is composed of a larger proportion of the Gen X respondents. Furthermore, Table 11 shows that both the control and experimental groups have significant online shopping activity, with respectively 33% and 36% of participants shopping online at least several times a month. Those statistics are consistent with Ruiz-Equihua's (2021) and Thangavel's (2021) study by which Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X are more prone to using online shopping and eWOM than previous generations. Lastly, Table 12 indicates that a substantial majority of participants in both the control (92%) and experimental (81%) groups own more than two fashion items costing over $300, highlighting their active engagement in the luxury market. This is consistent with the study's recruitment criteria via Prolific, where participants were pre-screened based on their luxury consumption. Thus, as the respondents of the control and experimental group fit the target population requirements, the results of the t-tests in the following paragraph allow for an effective examination of how UGRs influence luxury consumers' perceptions of luxury products when shopping online.

Concerning respondents' quality perception of the luxury product in the experiment, Table 15.a reveals that both the control and experimental groups have relatively high perception of the luxury product's quality (with mean scores of 4.17 and 3.75, respectively). This finding aligns with the literature review part, which suggests that luxury goods are often perceived as having superior quality and craftsmanship compared to non-luxury brands (Wiedmann et al., 2007; Shukla, 2011). The table also shows that the perceived quality of the

control group is higher than that of the experimental group, which supports the literature's suggestion that UGR presence can potentially undermine consumer's perceived quality value. The results of the t-test in Table 15.b show that the difference in mean scores between the two groups is statistically significant, confirming that UGR presence on luxury e-commerce websites negatively affects consumer's quality perceptions of the product. However, the effect size analysis in Table 15.c indicates that while UGRs have a statistically significant impact, the practical difference between the two groups is modest. Thus, the combined results highlight the nuanced role of UGRs in diminishing consumers' quality perceptions of luxury products. From a managerial point of view, the benefits of UGR in terms of authenticity and transparency, could overpower the nuanced negative effect of UGR on consumer's quality perception. This would validate Mathur's (2021) conclusions by which e-retailers can generate customer engagement by allowing customers to freely share their personal views and product experience through ratings and reviews.

Moving on to respondents' uniqueness perception of the luxury product in the experiment, Table 16.a reveals that the perceived quality of the control group is higher than that of the experimental group (with means scores of 3.83 and 3.11 respectively) which supports the literature's suggestion that UGR presence can potentially undermine consumer's perceived uniqueness value. The results of the t-test in Table 16.b show that the difference in mean scores between the two groups is statistically significant, confirming that UGR presence on luxury e-commerce websites negatively affects consumer's uniqueness perceptions of the product. Furthermore, the effect size analysis in Table 16.c indicates that the uniqueness perception difference between the two groups is moderate. These results highlight the important role of UGRs in diminishing consumers' quality perceptions of luxury products. From a managerial point of view, this insight suggests that allowing UGRs on a luxury brand's website may not be desirable for the uniqueness value of luxury products. This conclusion seems to support Shin & Darpy's (2020) observation by which UGR can contradict with luxury products characterized by uniqueness, craftsmanship, and aspirational value.

Finally, concerning respondents' prestige perception of the luxury product in the experiment, Table 18.a reveals that the perceived prestige of the control group is slightly higher than that of the experimental group, with a mean score difference of 0.24 points. This slight difference supports the literature's suggestion that UGR presence can potentially undermine consumer's perceived uniqueness value. However, the results of the t-test in Table 18.b show

that the difference in mean scores between the two groups is not statistically significant, thus confirming that UGR presence on luxury e-commerce websites does not negatively affect consumer's uniqueness perceptions of the product. From a managerial point of view, this result can accelerate UGR adoption by luxury brands, as results suggest that UGR do not reduce the exclusivity and perceived social status associated with luxury products.

5.3.2. Limitations and Further research

Despite the insights gained from this study, some limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, this study is limited to the fashion sector, specifically focusing on accessories such as bags. Other product categories, such as jewelry, cosmetics or home decor might yield different insights regarding the impact of UGRs presence on consumer's luxury value perceptions. Thus, the conclusions of this study are limited and cannot be significant across different types of luxury goods. Secondly, the research design does not consider the potential combined effects of user-generated ratings alongside reviews. Ratings and reviews often appear together on e-commerce platforms and may collectively influence consumer perceptions more than either element individually. The study's exclusive focus on reviews limits the understanding of how UGR presence could further shape consumer attitudes and behaviors towards luxury products.

Building on the limitations of this study, future research could address the following areas to deepen our understanding of UGRs' impact on luxury consumer perceptions. Future studies could explore how factors such as cultural background, income level and geographic location might influence perceptions and behaviors towards UGRs in the luxury market. Indeed, cross-cultural comparisons could provide a more comprehensive understanding of UGRs' global impact. Secondly, while this study focuses on the fashion accessories segment, specifically bags, future research could compare the impact of UGRs across various luxury product sectors. Indeed, some luxury companies allow UGRs on their beauty e-commerce websites but not on pages for other product segments such as ready-to-wear. Understanding these discrepancies could provide valuable insights into strategic UGR deployment across product lines. Finally, future research should consider the potential combined effects of user-generated ratings alongside reviews. Investigating how ratings and reviews interact to shape consumer perceptions could provide a more holistic understanding of consumer decision-making processes on e-commerce platforms.

6. Conclusions

This study explores the impact of user-generated reviews (UGRs) on consumer perceptions of luxury products, focusing on quality, uniqueness and prestige. Utilizing a deductive approach, the research tested four hypotheses to examine the effects of UGR presence on luxury brand websites. By employing an experimental design with a focus on neutral reviews, the study aimed to isolate the impact of UGRs from other influential factors, such as review valence and quantity.

The findings reveal that UGR presence has a statistically significant negative impact on consumers' perceptions of quality and uniqueness, confirming that UGRs can potentially undermine these aspects of luxury value. Interestingly, the results regarding prestige perception show that UGR presence on luxury websites does not have any significant negative effect on consumers' prestige perception of products. This outcome suggests that while UGRs may detract from perceived uniqueness and quality, they might not necessarily diminish the social status and prestige aspects that consumers associate with luxury brands.

From a managerial perspective, these findings offer important insights for luxury brands considering the integration of UGRs on their e-commerce platforms. While UGRs may introduce some challenges in maintaining perceived quality and uniqueness, they do not seem to undermine the prestige aspect of luxury products. The results of this study contribute to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence of the tradeoffs associated with UGRs, highlighting the balance between authenticity and exclusivity that luxury brands must navigate.

For future research, several avenues could be explored. Studies that consider cultural and regional variations may offer a more comprehensive understanding of how UGRs affect consumer perceptions globally. Additionally, research could examine other luxury sectors, such as cosmetics or jewelry, to determine if the findings are consistent across product categories. Integrating user-generated ratings alongside reviews could also provide a more holistic view of their combined effects on consumer perceptions and decision-making processes.

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8. Appendix

Figure 3. Screening parameters for the recruitement of Prolific participants to the Main Experiment.

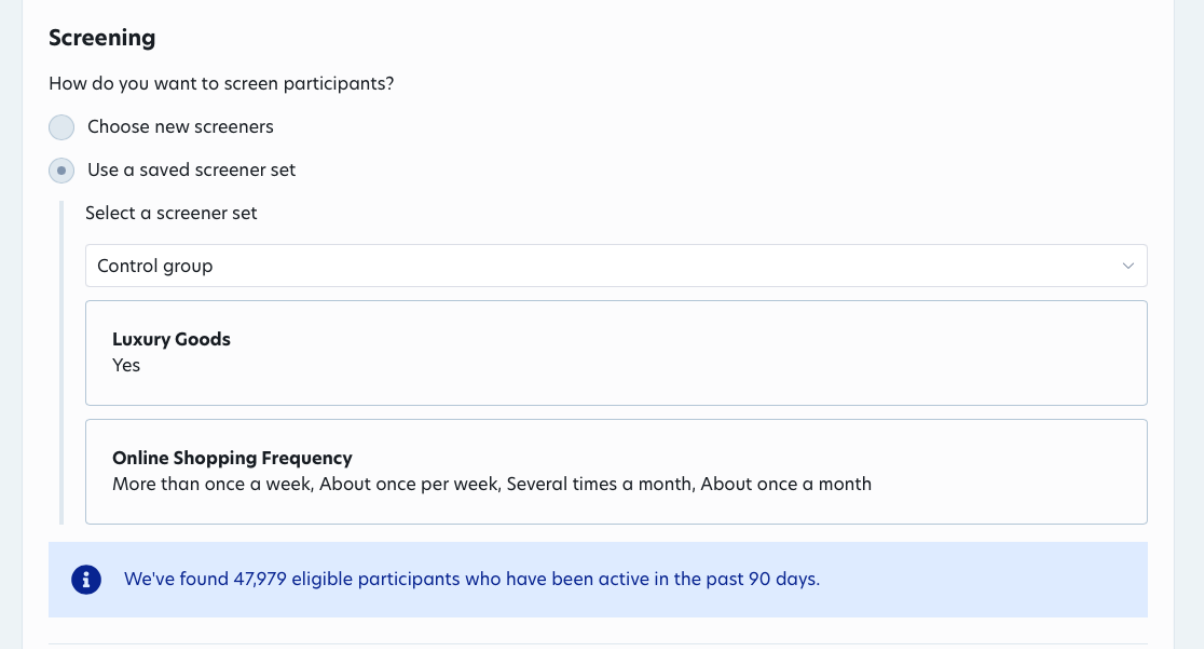


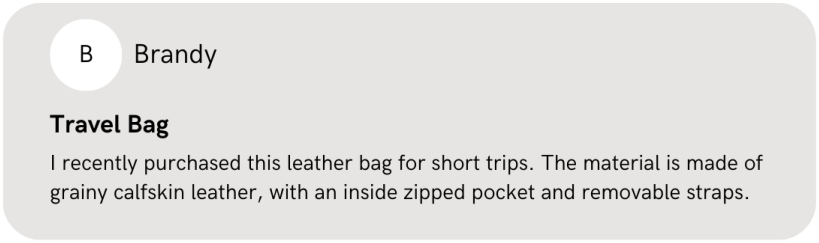
Table 18. Mean score of the likert-based question: "To what extent do you perceive Review 4 as neutral?"

To what extent do you perceive Review 4 as neutral? Review 4: M Manny **Silver hardware** The bag features a silver S-Lock closure and a brushed metal signature plate inside. All internal pocket zips are silver as well.	Numerical value	Count	Contribution to total score (Count * numerical value)
Strongly agree	5	54	270

Somewhat agree	4	20	80
Neither agree nor disagree	3	10	30
Somewhat disagree	2	1	2
Strongly disagree	1	0	0
Total	-	85	382
Mean score Review 4 (total score / total count)	-	-	**4.49**

Table 18 shows that Review 4 has a mean perceived neutrality score of 4.49 out of 5 according to respondents.

Table 19. Mean score of the likert-based question: "To what extent do you perceive Review 8 as neutral?"

To what extent do you perceive Review 8 as neutral? Review 8: 	Numerical value	Count	Contribution to total score (count * numerical value)
Strongly agree	5	55	275
Somewhat agree	4	22	88
Neither agree nor disagree	3	8	24
Somewhat disagree	2	0	0

Strongly disagree	1	0	0
Total	-	85	387
Mean score Review 8 (total score / total count)	**-**	**-**	**4.55**

Table 19 shows that Review 8 has a mean perceived neutrality score of 4.55 out of 5 according to respondents.

Table 20. Mean score of the likert-based question: "To what extent do you perceive Review 3 as neutral?"

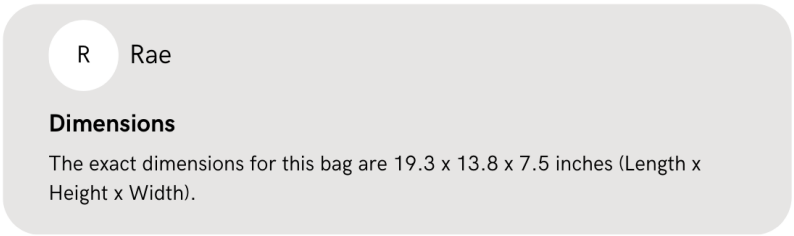
To what extent do you perceive Review 3 as neutral? Review 3: 	Numerical value	Count	Contribution to total score (Count * numerical value)
Strongly agree	5	59	295
Somewhat agree	4	11	44
Neither agree nor disagree	3	9	27
Somewhat disagree	2	5	10
Strongly disagree	1	1	1
Total	-	85	377
Mean score Review 3 (total score / total count)	**-**	**-**	**4,44**

Table 20 shows that Review 3 has a mean perceived neutrality score of 4.44 out of 5 according to respondents.