Femvertising Practices on Social Media: A Comparison of Luxury and Nonluxury Brands

Nina Michaelidou, Nikoletta Theofania Siamagka, Leonidas Hatzithomas, Luciana Chaput

Abstract

Purpose: The study examines how luxury and nonluxury brands portray women in social media advertising shedding light on their femvertising practices.

Design/ methodology/ approach: Quantitative content analysis and multiple correspondence analysis are used to examine female representations in the advertising of personal care products on social media. The sample includes brand posts from fifteen brands on two social media platforms.

Findings: The results demonstrate that nonluxury brands use femvertising to a greater extent compared to luxury brands. In particular, the study shows that luxury brands rely more on stereotyped gender expressions and use more sexualisation in their advertising, relative to nonluxury brands.

Research implications: The study provides an analysis of luxury and nonluxury brands' femvertising practices on social media. In doing so, we extend the study of femvertising to the context of luxury and social media, which is currently underexplored. In terms of practical implications, the study sheds light on the extent of the application of femvertising across luxury and nonluxury brands on social media. The findings drive a number of suggestions for luxury marketers, including the use of more independent gender roles and more racial diversity in their social media advertising, and the lessening of unrelated sexuality.

Originality: The study is the first to compare femvertising practices of luxury and nonluxury brands on social media, delineating different facets of femvertising (e.g., gender roles, diversity, etc.), and extending scholarly understanding of the possible facets of this concept.

Keywords: Femvertising, Social media, Luxury brands, Nonluxury brands, Gender

1. Introduction

Biased representations of women have been a systematic problem in advertising (Eisend, 2010), where stereotyping is used to portray women in an inferior manner relative to their capabilities (Grau and Zotos, 2016). Stereotyping in advertising has been at the centre of scholarly inquiry for more than five decades (e.g., Plakoyiannaki *et al.*, 2008; Knoll *et al.*, 2011; Khalil and Dhanesh, 2020; Shinoba *et al.*, 2020). Interestingly, despite changes in women's roles in society, anecdotal evidence indicates that stereotypes are still prevalent in advertising, albeit their use is decreasing as a result of new rules (BBC, 2019; Walley, 2021). In the last decade, a new advertising practice has emerged, namely, femvertising, which has been treated as a manifestation of feminism (e.g., Sobande, 2019) or a form of brand activism (Varghese and Kumar, 2020; Yoon and Lee, 2021).

Femvertising, as an advertising practice, aims to challenge stereotypes that traditional advertising creates (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017), promoting positive self-views for women (Varghese and Kumar, 2020). Empirical evidence shows that femvertising lowers advertising reactance, and positively influences advertising purchase intentions (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017; Drake, 2017; Feng *et al.*, 2019). More specifically, Akestam *et al.* (2017) indicate that less stereotypical depictions of women are more favourable, while recent research by Lima and

Casais (2021) in the context of personal care brands identifies that femvertising facilitates emotional connections between the brand and the consumer.

Nevertheless, most of the extant research on femvertising addresses traditional media (e.g., Strebinger *et al.*, 2018; Sugiarto and de Barnier, 2019) with limited focus on social media platforms (Feng *et al.*, 2019), despite brands' increasing spending on social media advertising (Statista, 2022a) and the fact that femvertising campaigns' success is partially attributed to the viral nature of social media (Saxena and Khanna, 2013). Additionally, there is scarce evidence regarding the use and effectiveness of femvertising across different contexts. While studies show that the effectiveness of femvertising varies based on ad and product type (Abitbol and Sternadori, 2020; Plakoyiannaki and Zotos, 2009), limited research examines femvertising practices in different product categories and types of brands (e.g., Champlin *et al.*, 2019; Lima and Casais, 2021; Pankiw *et al.*, 2020), such as luxury brands. Yet, luxury brands present a valuable context of investigation due to the increasing value of the luxury brands market (Statista, 2022b). Notably, research which compares luxury and nonluxury brands in terms of their femvertising practices on social media is non-existent.

In view of the above gaps in the literature, the objective of this study is to compare luxury and nonluxury brands in terms of their femvertising practices on social media. This line of research is warranted for two reasons: First, more research is needed on the femvertising practices of luxury brands as they are built on the idea of perfectionism and self-esteem (Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010), suggesting that their creative strategies may contradict femvertising principles (Pankiw *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, the comparison between luxury and nonluxury brands is theoretically and managerially important in that extant feminist literature highlights the neo-liberalism view on white femininity as 'having it all' (Wilkes, 2015), suggesting that white women are entitled to privileges, wealth and status (Cole and Sabik, 2009). Therefore, it remains to be investigated whether such views of wealthy women are reflected in advertisements of luxury brands on social media, challenging the main principles of femvertising. Second, investigating femvertising practices of luxury brands in comparison to nonluxury brands will shed light on industry femvertising practices. As women are a critical segment of the luxury market (Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann, 2013), there is a need for advertising campaigns to be seen as more diverse and inclusive in terms of female representations.

In addressing the above objective, the study contributes to current literature as follows: To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to draw comparisons between luxury and nonluxury brands regarding their femvertising practices on social media. In doing so, the study extends the scholarly study of femvertising to the domain of luxury brands and social media, while drawing comparisons to their nonluxury counterparts. Compared to previous attempts (e.g., Pankiw *et al.*, 2020), this study delineates different facets of femvertising (e.g., gender roles, diversity, minimisation of objectification etc.), thus extending understanding of this concept. At the same time, this study highlights the issue of 'compatibility' of femvertising as a viable practice for luxury brands. In terms of practical implications, the study is in line with similar research that offers comparative accounts of industry advertising practices via content analysis (e.g., Michaelidou *et al.*, 2020). More specifically, the study has practical significance as it sheds light on the extent of the application of femvertising practices (e.g., in terms of specific facets) between luxury and nonluxury brands on social media. The study offers

recommendations for luxury brand managers so that they become more in line with the evolving female roles in contemporary societies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Femvertising

Åkestam *et al.*, (2017) define femvertising as "*advertising that challenges traditional female advertising stereotypes*" (p. 795), while Kapoor and Munjal (2019) argue that it makes ".. *an attempt to create awareness, breaking stereotypes surrounding the role of women in society*" (p.140). Femvertising is considered an advertising appeal and includes several female features and expressions (e.g., body size and attractiveness) simultaneously (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017). It questions widespread female stereotyping and confronts social stigma while promoting equality, inclusivity, and empowerment (Lucka *et al.*, 2021; Pankiw *et al.*, 2020; Sobande, 2020; Teng *et al.*, 2021; Tsai *et al.*, 2021). The idea behind femvertising is that brands can not only sell products or services, but also empower women (Ciambriello, 2014), thus breaking stereotypes and influencing society as a whole (Kapoor and Munjal, 2019).

A growing number of scholars view femvertising as a form of brand activism. Through the adoption of feminist ideals, brands are making a statement of support for a social issue, which, according to Bhagwat *et al.* (2020), can be seen as a manifestation of activism. Consumers are increasingly asking brands to take socio-political stances (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022), thus becoming the major driving force of the change observed in brands' marketing practices (Hsu, 2018). Their focus on socio-political issues can be explained by the fact that brands carry meanings that help consumers construct their identities and demonstrate their interest in broader values (Guzmán *et al.*, 2017; Schmidt *et al.*, 2022). As consumers are now more educated and empowered, they become very critical of activism that is not congruent with a brand's practices. This form of woke-washing (Mirzaei *et al.*, 2022; Sobande, 2019; Sterbenk *et al.*, 2021) can harm brands that only use female empowering messages as a promotional tool.

The theory on feminism provides the groundwork for the rise of femvertising (Becker-Herby, 2016) in a commercial context. More specifically, the rise of the fourth wave of feminism, coupled with the emergence and increased popularity of social media, has given fertile ground to this advertising appeal (Varghese and Kumar, 2020), where empowering messages are used in various media channels to promote equality and diversity. This new lens through which feminism is embraced, includes a more diverse range of models, such as older, plus size or transgender models (Windels *et al.*, 2020). The link with commodity femvertising has been discussed in various studies (e.g., Becker-Herby, 2016; Varghese and Kumar, 2020), which highlights an inherent conflict between the main principles of femvertising and its function as a carrier of individual consumption (Abitol and Sternadori, 2016). Feminist ideals are being used to brand, position or differentiate a product (Schmidt *et al.*, 2022; Windels *et al.*, 2020), thus making them a marketing tool.

2.2 Femvertising in luxury and nonluxury brands

Prior research indicates that femvertising is practiced differently for luxury and nonluxury brands. More specifically, Champlin *et al.* (2019) find that nonluxury brands in various product categories (e.g., personal care, food), reflect femvertising in varied ways (e.g., focusing on different aspects such as gender stereotypes, equality), while Pankiw *et al.* (2020) identify that luxury jewellery brands do not adopt femvertising in their printed advertising campaigns. The authors find that most of the luxury jewellery ads contain typical model-like depictions of women of mostly white ethnicity and minimal diversity. In a similar line, feminist literature (e.g., Hopkins, 2018; Wilkes, 2015) advocates that white women are depicted as symbols of wealth, while illustrating that this group are the typical customers of luxury brands (Wilkes, 2015). This suggests that luxury brands as symbols of wealth and

success are incompatible with the more diverse and inclusive depictions, which femvertising promotes.

Based on the above, it becomes evident that the distinction between luxury and nonluxury in terms of femvertising practices is a key one. It is underpinned by the particularities that distinguish luxury brands (e.g., luxury brand values/components- *see* Berthon *et al.*, 2009) from nonluxury ones, and shape the way luxury brands are advertised in terms of creative strategy (Kim *et al.*, 2016; Kim and Phua, 2020) on social media, and importantly the practice of femvertising. More specifically, Tynan *et al.*, (2010, p1158) posit that luxury brands are "*high quality, expensive and non-essential products, and services that appear to be rare, exclusive, prestigious, and authentic and offer high levels of symbolic and emotiona/hedonic values..*". Compared to nonluxury brands, luxury brands are also "*….desirable and more than is necessary and ordinary*" (Gutsatz and Heine 2018, p. 412), with price (or 'expensiveness') being a crucial feature of luxury brands (Boisvert and Ashill, 2021; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009).

A multitude of research on the consumption of luxury brands highlights the sources of luxury value, such as uniqueness, quality, elitism, and heritage (e.g., de Barnier *et al.*, 2012; Roux *et al.*, 2017; Stathopoulou and Balabanis, 2019; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), and which distinguish luxury brands from nonluxury counterparts. Additionally, compared to nonluxury brands, consumption of luxury brands is associated with social power and the need of consumers to signal that they are not 'one of many' (Stokburger-Sauer and Teichmann, 2013). The fact that consumers pay a higher price for luxury brands makes them feel superior and unique, as they are among the few that can afford to buy luxury brands (Roux *et al.*,

2017)- a characteristic that inherently contradicts one of the main principles of femvertising, that of inclusivity.

2.3 Theoretical Hypotheses

In line with past research (e.g., Akestam *et al.*, 2017; Becker-Herby, 2016), femvertising encompasses a set of ideals that challenge "*many of the gender stereotypes that both men and women have grown accustomed to seeing in advertising and real life*" (Kapoor and Munjal, 2019, p. 140). Importantly, these ideals are based on the premise of wider female intersectional portrayals that oppose traditional representations (Akestam *et al.*, 2017). As such, femvertising is delineated in terms of gender expressions (female/males vs. non-binary expressions), gender roles (e.g., portraying women as more autonomous and less dependent) (Eisend 2019), promotion of greater diversity and inclusivity (e.g., in body image and race) in women depictions in advertising, and attempts to minimise sexualisation in advertising to avoid the objectification of women (Becker-Herby, 2016). Based on these premises, a set of hypotheses are presented below.

2.3.1 Gender Expression

Advertisers use gender images to communicate the product or brand to the intended target market (Chu *et al.*, 2016). Gender expression denotes ways of communicating masculinity and/or femininity (Matsuno and Budge, 2017), and in the case of brand advertising, gender can be expressed in terms of the central figure's physical appearance (e.g., hairstyles, clothing, and/or makeup can be used as modes of gender expression). These gender expressions often conform to social and cultural norms, (e.g., stereotypical depictions of female or male identities), or they may reflect non-binary expressions that fall outside the male/female gender identity.

Luxury brands have symbolic value and are used by consumers as ways to signal to others high status, accomplishment, and perfection (Berthon *et al.*, 2009; McFerran *et al.*, 2011; Strebinger *et al.*, 2018). They rely on rich imagery and expressions (including gender expressions) that signal idealised beauty and hedonic values matching the lifestyle and attitudes of individuals associated with luxury (Kim *et al.*, 2016). As Strebinger *et al.* (2018) suggest, beauty is a trait that is associated with luxury. Recent evidence shows that femvertising approaches raise questions with regard to what constitutes beauty (Feng *et al.*, 2019), which might harm luxury brands that wish to represent a consistent image of beauty.

Indeed, the extant literature illustrates that luxury brands tend to employ more stereotypical expressions in their advertising campaigns (Pankiw *et al.*, 2020; Strebinger *et al.*, 2018; Wilkes, 2015), conforming to more traditional portrayals of feminine and masculine beauty. Luxury brands thus rely on culturally defined gender expressions and identities in their advertising, which are likely to match the stereotypical views of the wealthy luxury brand user. In addition, in contemporary, neo-liberal societies, wealth is depicted through the use of privileged whiteness, heterosexuality, and normative western ideals among others (Wilkes, 2015), a practice that illustrates the inherent link between luxury brands and the more stereotypical depictions of female beauty. Conversely, nonluxury brands are said to be more inclusive and diverse in their advertising (Champlin *et al.*, 2019; Pounders, 2018) hence, they are more likely to use non-stereotypical, i.e. non-binary expressions of gender. Thus:

H1: Luxury brands use more (less) stereotypical feminine (binary) expressions in their advertising, compared to nonluxury brands.

2.3.2 Gender Roles

Gender roles refer to the discernible role of the advertising's central figure in their everyday lives. Prior research suggests that stereotypical gender roles have been commonly used in advertising to promote products (Eisend, 2010), with research recording roles as either, independent or autonomous from others (e.g., professional, celebrity, interviewer/narrator) or dependent on others (e.g., parent, partner, decorative, girlfriend) (Grau and Zotos, 2016; Furnham and Mak, 1999; McArthur and Resko, 1975; Matthes *et al.*, 2016; Liljedal *et al.*, 2020).

In advertising luxury brands, marketers seek to portray a level of prestige, status, sophistication, and identity (Han *et al.*, 2010; Hung *et al.*, 2007; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Panwik, *et al.*, 2020). In doing so, gender portrayals focus on independent and autonomous roles (Wilkes, 2015), such as professional and/or celebrity, as opposed to interdependent roles of parent or partner. This approach is consistent with the underpinning motivations or sources of value that drive consumption of luxury brands, indicating that consumers use luxury brands to signal status, uniqueness and to boost self-esteem (e.g., Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996, Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010; Shukla *et al.*, 2015). As women aim to enhance their self-esteem through the consumption of luxury brands, they like to appear more independent and professional in their roles.

Thus, when it comes to luxury brands, advertisers will design advertisements that depict the female central figure in more autonomous roles, compared to nonluxury brands where the target market is wider and the intrinsic benefit of self-esteem is weaker. Notwithstanding evidence which demonstrates that hedonic products relate mostly to women portrayals in decorative roles, including luxury jewellery brands (Panwik, *et al.*, 2020; Plakoyannaki and

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Zotos, 2009), this study argues that for luxury brands and the nature of the aspirations they satisfy (Truong *et al.*, 2010), independent roles are more relevant. Hence:

H2: Luxury brands depict females as more (less) autonomous (dependent), compared to nonluxury brands.

2.3.3 Background

The background in which the central figure is portrayed in an advertisement provides valuable information about femvertising practices. Empirical studies offer mixed results in terms of the use of female or male backgrounds when women are the central figures (e.g., Furnham and Farragher, 2000; Kim and Lowry, 2005). A possible explanation for the inconsistency in the results pertains to the type of the advertised product (Eisend, 2010; Furnham and Thompson, 1999; Ibroscheva, 2007). For instance, if a cosmetic product is advertised, then the background could be a female one so that the advertisement addresses women's need to self-enhance and become more attractive (Plakoyiannaki *et al.*, 2008). This suggests that when brands are associated with physical appearance, (e.g., cosmetics or personal care products) female spokespeople will allow for the attribution of more feminine traits (Grohmann, 2009), hence communicating beauty in a more concise way.

A similar line of thought applies to luxury brands, that are used by consumers as means to come closer to their ideal selves (Kang and Park, 2016), highlighting the relationship between luxury consumption and vanity (e.g., Hung *et al.*, 2011; Sharda and Bhat, 2019). In trying to reach the ideal, looking 'perfect' and attractive, women will be depicted in advertising of luxury brands in more female backgrounds in order to emphasise beauty and self-concept aspirations. On the other hand, nonluxury brands, which are more functional in nature (Albrecht *et al.*, 2013), are less connected to the ideal self and hedonistic benefits, thus they

are likely to use more neutral backgrounds in their advertising campaigns. Indeed, Champlin *et al.* (2019) suggest that women are shown only against blank backdrops in the advertising of feminine nonluxury brands. Thus:

H3: Luxury brands use more (less) female (non-female) backgrounds in their advertising, compared to nonluxury brands.

2.3.4 Sexual Objectification

Sexual appeals and unrelated sexuality are a common practice in advertising across various product categories as it attracts attention and triggers audience emotions (Trivedi and Teichrt, 2021; Wirtz *et al.*, 2018). However, these practices have been criticised on ethical grounds, as they promote sexual objectification (Sugiarto and de Barnier, 2019), which involves "*valuing people primarily for their sex appeal, and setting sexiness as a standard of physical attractiveness*" (Nowatzki and Morry, 2009, p. 95).

Research indicates that women are often depicted as sex objects or sex symbols in advertising (e.g., Choi *et al.*, 2020; Furnham and Mak, 1999; Stankiewicz and Rosselli, 2008; Wirtz *et al.*, 2018). For luxury brands, in particular, past evidence shows that marketers often use sexual content in order to emphasise luxury attributes, such as elegance and exclusivity (Sugiarto and de Barnier, 2019), which reflect hedonic benefits that consumers aspire to attain from luxury purchases. This strategy appears to be unique to luxury brands that try to boost self-esteem by presenting women as sexier and more beautiful. In a similar line, Wilkes (2015) argues that contemporary women enhance their sexual appeal through the consumption of luxury products, supporting the link between sexual appeals in advertising and luxury ideals. On the contrary, for nonluxury brands, sexualised portrayals of women in advertising may be dependent on the product category (Champlin *et al.*, 2019), as opposed to

being a general advertising approach that seems to be the case with luxury brands (Gurzki *et al.*, 2019). Hence:

H4: Luxury brands will use more (less) sexual objectification (minimization) of in their advertising, compared to nonluxury brands.

2.3.5 Diversity

Prior research has addressed the issue of diversity in body (e.g., shape and size) and race in advertising (Pounders, 2018; Yang *et al.*, 2016), focusing mostly on nonluxury brands and fuelling the assertion that such brands are likely to be more diverse in their choices of models in advertising, compared to luxury brands. Notably, the tradition and heritage of luxury brands are likely to influence the way they are communicated in their advertising, shaping creative strategy and the choice of cues (e.g., models/spokespeople). Scholars suggest that luxury brands rely on their origin to create advertising images, portraying westernised or often stereotypical female beauty (Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013; Kim *et al.*, 2016; Wilkes, 2015).

More specifically, luxury brands are found to use more white models (as opposed to models with diverse physical appearances and interracial/black ethnic/racial origin) in their ads (e.g., Pankiw *et al.*, 2020), as they signal key and desirable attributes of luxury brands such as idealised beauty, hedonism, status, and sophistication (Gram, 2007; Hung *et al.*, 2007; Martin, 2012; Sternadori and Abitbol, 2019). Pankiw *et al.*, (2020) indicate that luxury jewellery brands predominantly use white, typical model-like depictions in their ads (e.g., young, thin, and highly attractive), and with a very small level of diversity. According to Strebinger *et al.* (2018), white models are seen as more suitable when it comes to luxury

brand advertising in eastern countries, providing some preliminary support as to the alignment of luxury values with less diversity.

This, however, contradicts the main principles of femvertising, which suggest that female portrayals are intersectional, and thus, more diverse female talent is depicted in the ads (Becker-Herby, 2016). On the contrary, nonluxury brands are more diverse in their creative strategies, using more inclusive physical (e.g., in terms of body shape and size) and racial representations in their advertising (Strebinger *et al.*, 2018). Thus:

H5(a): Luxury brands use less (more) diversity in their advertising in terms of body shape, compared to nonluxury brands.

H5(b): Luxury brands use more (less) white (non-white) models in their advertising, compared to nonluxury brands.

Table 1 summarises the hypotheses and draws links with the existing theory in the field.

Insert Table 1 Here

3. Methodology

Quantitative content analysis was used to address the aims of the current study, in line with previous research (e.g., Eisend, 2010; Plakoyiannaki and Zotos, 2009). As a method, content analysis involves placing data into coding categories; it specifically entails a structured analysis of media content, including text and images, which find replicable valid interrelations from the documents analysed (Weber, 1985). Content was collected from global pages¹ of brands (with over 60K followers and frequent activity/posts) on Instagram

¹ In the case where the brand did not have a global page, the American page was included in the study as it is often the page with the most followers and English-written posts.

and Twitter. Instagram and Twitter were chosen for two main reasons; a) Instagram users represent a wide range of age groups, while as a platform Instagram focuses primarily on visual content (Hong *et al.*, 2020), which is central to the objective of this study, and b) Twitter's usage seems to be relatively the same across ethnic groups (Auxier and Anderson, 2021).

In terms of sampling, the study focuses on personal care brands, which appeal to women and cover different product categories (e.g., cosmetics, shampoo, etc.) from Forbes's (2019) top 5 companies. The choice of this product category is grounded on the rationale that it includes multiple brands representing both luxury and nonluxury, which is important for allowing variance in our sample. In identifying luxury and nonluxury brands for the purpose of this study, the researchers adhere to the theoretical distinction between luxury and nonluxury brands (e.g., De Barnier *et al.*, 2012; Gutsatz and Heine, 2018).

However, as per Vigneron and Johnson (2004), there is variation between luxury brands, whereby luxury brands may be deemed 'upper range' or 'lower range'. At the same time research indicates that practically luxury brands segment markets by income, resulting in multiple submarkets (e.g., true luxury, premium, hyper luxe, or affordable luxury) (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2018). As such, brands such as Lancôme are considered upper luxury, as they entail the characteristics of brand luxury by being aspirational, and/or expensive (Statista, 2020). On the contrary, brands such as Vichy can be considered lower-end luxury/premium brands (Statista, 2020), because they are generally lower priced compared to Lancôme, but higher priced compared to nonluxury brands such as Maybelline and Dove that are more affordable.

Moreover, personal care brands were chosen because they are highly active on social media, enabling the researchers to collect brand posts. Additionally, personal care brands exhibit consistent annual market growth (expected to amount to \$317.958m by 2025) (Statista, 2021), rendering this category managerially interesting. In total, eight hundred and fifty-one social media posts from fifteen brands (both luxury/high end and nonluxury/lower-priced) were collected on Instagram (N=616) and Twitter (N=235) within a 4-week period in 2019 (Table 2). The sample consists of brands that can be placed at different levels of luxury, thus capturing the variation that exists in the notion of brand luxury (Kim *et al.*, 2018).

Insert Table 2 Here

Of the 851 posts collected, 267 displayed a female or non-binary central figure, thus they were selected for further analysis (Table 3). The remaining posts did not meet the criteria for inclusion in the coding categories as they included mainly product displays or they were posts with male characters. Given that sampling approaches used for content analysis of traditional media are not suitable for social media, (as data on social media do not display a daily/weekly cycle) no differentiation was made in the data collection in terms of the day/time of publication (Kim *et al.*, 2018). Video and text-only (on Twitter), as well as promotional posts, were excluded from the analysis.

Insert Table 3 Here

4. Analysis and Results

The analysis involved the development of an 'a priori' coding framework on the basis of existing literature in this domain (Akestam *et al.*, 2017; Eisend, 2010; Furnham and Mak,

1999; McArthur and Resko, 1975; Pankiw *et al.*, 2020), albeit considering the elements of femvertising (Becker-Herby, 2016) and the objective of the study (see table 4 for the coding scheme). Given the specificities of social media (e.g., the format of the posts collected containing one or several pictures, descriptions, and hashtags) each advertisement was subjected to a two-level analysis (Berg, 1998). Specifically, during the analytical procedure, the researchers analysed both the visual and textual part of the post, systematically identifying occurrences of codes, categorising them, and contextualising their occurrences in product categories (luxury and nonluxury) and social media platforms².

To ensure the reliability of the coding process, inter-coder reliability was tested with a random sample of posts (N=50) analysed by two researchers independently. Inter-coder agreement was assessed via Krippendorf's Alpha, which shows acceptable reliability for a > 0.66 (Hayes and Krippendorff, 2007; Luyt, 2011).

Insert Table 4 Here

The results show that stereotypical gender expressions are still prevalent in the advertising of personal care products (91.01%), with only 8.99% in favour of non-binary gender depictions (Table 5). However, non-diverse depictions are decreasing (64.04%) in favour of more diverse and inclusive portrayals of women (35.96%). The analysis also shows that the majority of female central figures are shown against neutral backgrounds in social media advertising (83.90%), while the level of sexual objectification is rather low (3.37%). Interestingly, the results also show that female advertising portrayals are similar between

² Though formal comparisons on the basis of social media platforms are beyond the scope of this study.

Twitter and Instagram, except indicating that advertising posts on Twitter depict more diverse women in terms of appearance.

Insert Table 5 Here

In comparing between luxury and nonluxury brands (Table 6), the results show that luxury brands use less femvertising; on the contrary, they portray women in a more stereotypical manner in line with past research (Strebinger *et al.*, 2018; Sternadori and Abitbol, 2019). Specifically, the results show that 92.19% of the social media posts analysed display less-diverse females, hence reinforcing stereotyped beauty standards. This suggests that advertising promotes biased beauty standards (Espinar-Ruiz and González-Diaz, 2012; McBride *et al.*, 2019), via the use of less diverse, and more physically attractive female figures (Zotos *et al.*, 1996); though its prevalence might be also due to the category of products studied. On the other hand, nonluxury brands provide a more diverse range of female depictions (44.83%).

The findings also indicate that nonluxury brands stereotype less in terms of the background. Specifically, 88.18% of the posts display women against a neutral background (compared to 70.31% which applies to luxury brands), while 91.13% of the posts portray women in autonomous roles, indicating stronger practice of femvertising compared to luxury brands. Finally, in terms of racial diversity, the findings indicate that luxury brands tend to use more white models (48.44%) compared to other racial groups, while the same applies to nonluxury brands, which are found to use white females even more extensively (57.14%).

Insert Table 6 Here

4.1 Hypotheses Testing

To test the hypotheses a series of chi-square tests were conducted in line with prior content analysis approaches (e.g., Hatzithomas *et al.*, 2016; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2020; Zeugner-Roth and Bartsch, 2019). Chi-square analysis is the most appropriate statistical tool to apply when the variables are categorical. Moreover, Cramer's V post hoc tests were used to calculate the effect size, and Adjusted Standardised Residuals to determine which cell contributed to significance on chi-square tests. Cramer's V gives a value between 0 and +1 approaching 1 for large effects and 0 for no effect. If the standardized residual is greater than +2, a cell is a major contributor to the overall chi-square value; if it is lower than -2, the cell is a very weak contributor.

The results provide support for H1 (χ^2 (1) = 8.314, Cramer's V = .176, p < .01) indicating that luxury brands use more stereotypical gender expressions in their advertising of personal care products (Adj. std. resid. = 2.9), compared to nonluxury brands. This finding corroborates the idea that luxury brands rely strongly on stereotypical feminine gender expressions, which match the characteristics of brand luxury (e.g., idealised feminine beauty) and somewhat reflect the typical luxury brand consumer (Kim *et al.*, 2016).

In terms of gender roles and background, the findings provide support only for H3 (χ^2 (2) = 19.85, Cramer's V = .273, p < .001). Specifically, the results show that luxury brands use more female backgrounds in their advertising (Adj. std. resid. = 4.4) compared to nonluxury brands as a way of reinforcing the ideals embedded in the concept of luxury about physical appearance and attractiveness (Plakoyiannaki *et al.*, 2008). On the contrary, nonluxury brands use more neutral backgrounds (Adj. std. resid. = 3.4) than luxury brands. At the same time, the results indicate no statistically significant differences in the advertising of luxury and

nonluxury brands, with respect to gender roles (χ^2 (1) = .246, Cramer's V = .03, p < .62). Notably, both luxury (89%) and nonluxury brands (91%) portray females as autonomous, as opposed to being dependent on others (e.g., partners) in their advertising, and hence H2 is not supported. This may reflect the type of product category studied, whereby often personal care brands aim to empower women through creative cues and appeals such as storytelling and slogans (e.g., Dove's, 'Real Beauty'; L'Oréal's 'You are worth it') (Kim and Phua, 2020).

Finally, the analysis reveals interesting results about the sexualisation and diversity in the advertising of luxury and nonluxury brands. Hypotheses H4 (Cramer's V = .235, p < .001, Fisher's exact test) and H5a (χ^2 (1) = 28.952, Cramer's V = .329, p < .001) are supported indicating that relative to nonluxury: luxury personal care brands objectify women to a greater extent by using more unrelated sex in their brand posts (Adj. std. resid. = 3.8), and that they are less diverse in their advertising in terms of body shape (Adj. std. resid. = 5.4). On the contrary, H5b is not supported since it appears that there is no statistically significant difference between luxury and nonluxury brands in the use of white female models (χ^2 (1) = 7.316, Cramer's V = .166, p < .12) (Adj. std. resid. = -1.2).

4.2 Multiple Correspondence Analysis

We also applied multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) to identify similarities and differences between luxury and nonluxury brands regarding the use of femvertising practices. MCA allows the examination of patterns of relationships among several nominal variables (Abdi and Valentin, 2007). It is considered a type of principal component analysis that is appropriate for cases where the variables are categorical rather than continuous (Abdi and Valentin, 2007, p1). MCA provides a visual representation of the information and simplifies the complex network of the relationships (Greenacre and Blasius, 2006).

MCA was performed using R version 4.0.5 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria) and the R packages FactoMineR (Le *et al.*, 2008) and Factoshiny (Vaissie *et al.*, 2015). The MCA results are displayed in the form of biplots (Husson and Pagès, 2011), which are two-dimensional maps that depict the geographical interpretation of proximity between femvertising practices and product categories. The resulting figures depict associations between codes and product categories, with the femvertising practices close to a product category being used more frequently to advertise that product category (Le Roux and Rouanet, 2010). In terms of dimensionality reduction, the first three eigenvalues were greater than 0.2, which, according to Hair *et al.* (2010), is a threshold value in multiple correspondence analysis for retaining a dimension in the final solution. The first three dimensions of the MCA account for 62.02% of the data variance (Table 7).

Insert Table 7 Here

Dimension 1 is a combination of the variables gender role ($R^2 = .821$; p < .001), diversity of race ($R^2 = .816$; p < .001), background ($R^2 = .772$; p < .001), gender expression ($R^2 = .637$; p < .001), diversity of appearance ($R^2 = .317$; p < .001), and sexualisation ($R^2 = .298$; p < .001). Dimension 1 is best explained by the variable gender role. The variable product category has no effect on the first dimension. In line with Chi-square analysis, MCA indicates that neither luxury nor nonluxury brands portray females as dependent; they both portray females as autonomous. Dimension 2 is a combination of the variables diversity of appearance ($R^2 = .398$; p < .001), background ($R^2 = .387$; p < .001), product category ($R^2 = .371$; p < .001), diversity of race ($R^2 = .308$; p < .001), sexualisation ($R^2 = .298$; p < .001), gender expression ($R^2 = .001$), and gender role ($R^2 = .035$; p < .01). The variable diversity of appearance best explains Dimension 2. The category 'model-like' is on the positive side of the dimension, while the category 'diverse' is on the negative (Figure 1). Luxury brands are near

to the category 'model-like', while nonluxury brands are near to the category 'diverse', as H5a predicts.

Insert Figure 1 Here

Given that the variable product category significantly explains Dimension 2, we will focus on the categories that are on the positive or negative side of the dimension. Except for the categories model-like (estimate = .33, p < .001) and luxury brands (estimate = .36, p < .001), objectification (estimate = .65, p < .001), mostly female background (estimate = .8, p < .001), white central figure (estimate = .22, p < .001), stereotypically feminine expression (estimate = .25, p < .001), other central figure (estimate = .52, p < .001) and dependent on others (estimate = .16, p < .01) are on the positive side as well. On the contrary, apart from the categories diverse (estimate = -.33, p < .001) and nonluxury brands (estimate = -.36, p < .001), mostly male background (estimate = -1.03, p < .001), minimisation (estimate = -.65, p < .001), black central figure (estimate = -.49, p < .001), non-binary expression (estimate = -.25, p < .001), autonomous from others (estimate = -.16, p < .01) and mixed-race central figure (estimate = -.16, p < .01) and mixed-race central figure (estimate = -.14, p < .01) are on the negative side. Most of these findings are consistent with the research hypotheses. Interestingly, the categories autonomous from others and mostly male background appear to be relatively closer to the category of nonluxury brands rather than to that of luxury brands (Figure 2).

Dimension 3 is a combination of the variables diversity of race ($R^2 = .656$; p < .001), background ($R^2 = .416$; p < .001), diversity of appearance ($R^2 = .147$; p < .001), gender expression ($R^2 = .08$; p < .001), sexualisation ($R^2 = .046$; p < .001), and product category ($R^2 = .021$; p < .05). The variable diversity of race best explains Dimension 3. The categories black (estimate = .44, p < .001), Asian (estimate = .15, p < .01) and other central figure (estimate = .35, p < .001) are on the positive side of the dimension, while the categories white central figure (estimate = -.34, p < .001) and mixed-race central figure (estimate = -.61, p < .001) are on the negative (Figure 2). Luxury brands (estimate = -.07, p < .05) are on the negative side, while nonluxury brands (estimate = .07, p < .05) are on the positive side. Dimension 2 and Dimension 3 both place the category white central figure near the luxury brands, a result that is consistent with H5b.

Insert Figure 2 Here

5. Discussion, Contributions and Implications

The findings of this study show interesting variations in the practice of femvertising between luxury and nonluxury brands. Specifically, the results show that luxury personal care brands practice less femvertising, relying more on stereotyped gender expressions (e.g., feminine), and using more sexualisation in their advertising. The use of more feminine expressions is grounded on culturally defined and socially constructed views about perfection in self/body image that represent integral attributes of luxury (Strebinger *et al.*, 2018).

Additionally, luxury personal care brands are found to use less diversity in terms of physical appearance (e.g., body size/shape) in their social media advertising, indicating that luxury brands tend to conform to specific ideals that may derive from what generally characterises brand luxury (Kim, *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, the fact that luxury personal care brands (relative to nonluxury) use less femvertising could be explained through the values that are inherent in the luxury brand category, and which seem to be incompatible with what femvertising advocates (Pankiw *et al.*, 2020). Luxury brands signal status (McFerran *et al.*, 2011), they are used to enhance self-esteem and to embrace a 'perfect' self-image (Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010), while relying more on westernised beauty ideals (e.g., Cervellin and Coudriet, 2013).

It is therefore not surprising that luxury brands seem to be reluctant to adopt many of the femvertising principles.

On the contrary, nonluxury personal care brands apply more femvertising principles, including diversity, less sexual objectification, and more non-binary gender expressions. This finding corroborates past studies that find nonluxury brands to be more open and willing to apply femvertising in their advertising campaigns, staying relevant with current market trends that highlight the changing role of women in contemporary societies. Indeed, existing research illustrates that nonluxury brands are generally inclusive and diverse (Pounders, 2018), are considered as more functional in nature (Albrecht *et al.*, 2013) aiming to attract a wider market, thus using more pro-female messages that embrace physical and racial diversity (Strebinger *et al.*, 2018).

Overall, the findings of this research contradict academic literature indicating that women are generally depicted as sexual objects (Eisend, 2010; Kapoor and Munjal, 2017), while confirming prior evidence in other media that shows stereotyping is decreasing in advertising (Eisend, 2010). The analysis of the social media posts shows that only a very small percentage of social media advertising (3.37%) portrays women with an emphasis on unrelated sex to the product advertised, while women are largely portrayed in advertising as autonomous. This divergence in the results may be explained by the fact that this study only analysed advertisements of personal care products targeting women on social media. Indeed, Taylor *et al.* (2005) indicate that women are featured in more decorative roles in magazine advertisements and are sexually objectified in male audience magazines. Hence, female sexual objectification might still be prominent or acceptable in advertising of other product

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categories in traditional media, while femvertising seems to be preferred for advertisements on social media.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

This study investigates femvertising practices on social media, drawing comparisons between luxury and nonluxury personal care brands. This line of research is topical and contributes to the literature by extending scholarly study of femvertising to the domains of brand luxury and social media, which remain largely unexplored. Another novelty of the study is that it delineates different facets of femvertising (e.g., gender roles, expressions, objectification, etc.) to uncover differences in its practice between luxury and nonluxury brands. Importantly, the results of the study provide novel knowledge in terms of how diverse and inclusive luxury brands are in their social media advertising, compared to nonluxury brands; thus stirring further reflection and scholarly debate on the issues of diversity and inclusivity and their compatibility with the values and characteristics of luxury brands.

In addition to the theoretical contributions, the study's findings lead to a number of implications for advertisers. Notably, the results show that luxury brands are still relying on culturally defined gender expressions on social media, and use less diverse women in terms of appearance and race. On the contrary, nonluxury brands are doing an encouraging job in being more diverse and inclusive in their advertising on social media. The modest practice of femvertising and reliance on stereotyped depictions, that seem to define luxury brand efforts on social media, suggests that luxury brands are 'underperforming' in terms of diversity and inclusivity in their social media advertising practices. However, given current calls for more inclusivity and diversity in advertising, luxury brands should strive to achieve better representation in their campaigns.

One way to achieve this is to focus more on those principles of femvertising that support the image and ideals of luxury brands. It is therefore recommended that advertisers of luxury brands focus even more on gender roles in their advertising, depicting women as more independent such as professionals, businesswomen, and independent personalities, while leveraging the use of celebrities in their advertising to a greater extent. At the same time, it is suggested that luxury brands aim to minimise unrelated product sexuality (that reinforces luxury values), by highlighting alternative cues and images to promote luxury attributes. For example, luxury brands can focus more on exclusivity and elegance reflected through the use of brand elements, associations, rhetorical images (Freire, 2014), as well as emotional appeals, such as pride (e.g., Septianto *et al.*, 2020) that embrace brand identity.

Finally, grounded on the results of the study that indicate low instances of depictions of black and Asian models in social media advertising of personal care brands, it is recommended that both luxury and nonluxury brands use more racially diverse representations in their social media advertising. Luxury brands should use more black models and/or celebrities in their social media advertising, while nonluxury brands should use more Asian female talent to promote greater racial diversity.

5.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

On reflection, there are some limitations in this study which need to be acknowledged. A first limitation of this study is the exclusive focus on the personal care industry. While the rationale for focusing on this product category is valid, as it represents a managerially interesting product category with continuous market growth and considerable and frequent activity on social media, future research could examine other product categories, taking into

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consideration different levels of luxury (e.g., inaccessible luxury) (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009).

Furthermore, although beyond the scope of this study, another limitation is that the study does not draw comparisons between different social media platforms. Future research could therefore focus on comparing femvertising approaches of luxury brands and nonluxury brands on different social media, shedding light on any variations across platforms. Finally, the study examines the femvertising practices of brands on social media using quantitative content analysis and multiple correspondence analysis. It is beyond the scope of this study to capture consumers' perceptions of femvertising practices, and their impact on consumer or marketing outcomes. Although this line of enquiry has been somewhat addressed in the current literature (Sterbenk *et al.*, 2021), future research can focus on the examination of specific facets of femvertising (stemming from femvertising appeals) and their impact on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions.

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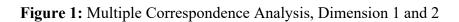
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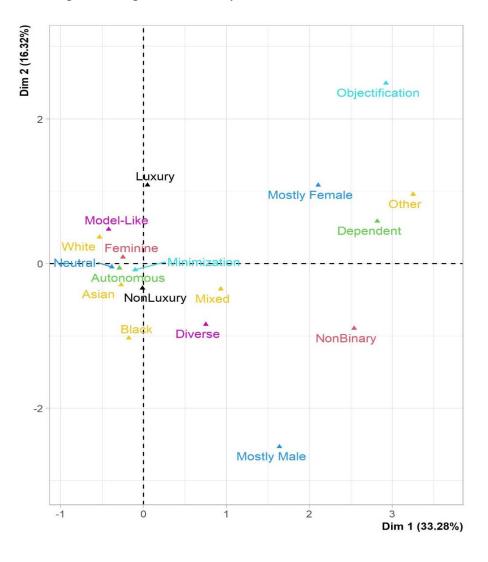
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Figures





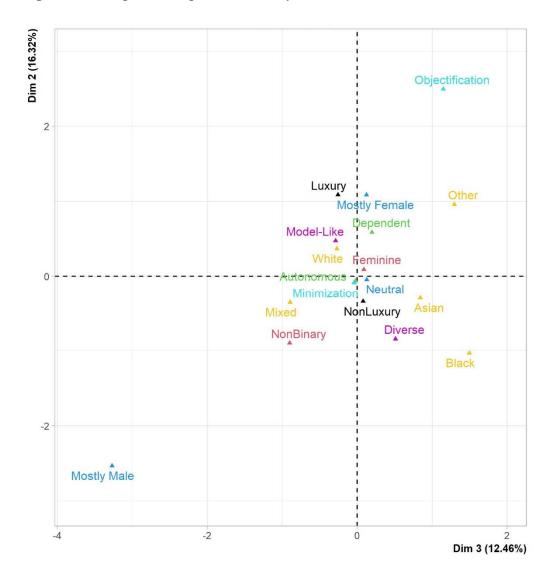


Figure 2: Multiple Correspondence Analysis, Dimensions 2 and 3

Hypotheses	Studies	Media	Main Findings
H1: Luxury brands will use more stereotypical feminine	Pankiw, Phillips and Williams, 2020	Print	Femvertising (empowering messages) is less used by luxury brands.
<u>expressions</u> in their advertising compared to non-luxury brands.	Strebinger et al., 2018	Print	Luxury brands tend to use less diversity (in terms of body size and shape) in their advertising campaigns.
H2: Luxury brands will depict females as more <u>autonomous</u> compared to non-	Hung et al., 2007	Print	Luxury brands are associated with more sophistication.
luxury brands.	Plakoyannaki and Zotos, 2009	Print	Hedonic products are mostly related to women portrayals in decorative roles.
H3: Luxury brands will use more <u>female</u> <u>backgrounds</u> in their advertising, compared to non-luxury brands.	Grohmann, 2009	Print	Spokespeople in advertisements influence the perception of brand personality, thus attributing more feminine or masculine traits to the brands.
	Furnham and Thompson, 1999;	Radio	The central figure's gender in an ad
	Ibroscheva, 2007	TV	is affected by the product type.
	Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels & Poteet, 2019	TV/YouTube	Women are shown only against blank backdrops in the advertising of feminine nonluxury brands.
H4: Luxury brands will use more <u>unrelated sexuality</u> in their advertising, compared to non-	Johansson, 2001	Print	Users of luxury brands are depicted using more Westernised cultural values, such as sex appeal.
luxury brands.	Choi <i>et al.</i> , 2020; Furnham and Mak, 1999	Print TV	Women are often depicted as sex objects in advertising.
	Stankiewicz and Rosselli, 2008	Print	

 Table 1: Hypotheses and Literature Support

	Wirtz et al., 2018	Not reported	
	Knobloch- Westerwick <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Online news	Beauty-related content is relevant not only to women who are more dependent and depicted in traditional roles but also to feminist women in professional roles.
	Sugiarto and de Barnier, 2019	Print	Luxury brands frequently use unrelated sexuality to reinforce exclusivity and elegance.
H5: Luxury brands will use less <u>diversity</u> in their advertising in terms of (a) body- shape/size and (b) <u>race</u> , compared to non-luxury brands.	Strebinger et al., 2018	Print	All-Caucasian models are more suitable when luxury brands are advertised in Eastern countries. In the same countries, non-luxury brands tend to be more diverse in their creative strategies, using physical (e.g., in terms of body shape and size) and racial representation in their advertising.
	Gram, 2007	Print	Global advertisements of luxury brands use western-looking white models and rely mostly on western values, such as modernity, hedonism, sex appeal, romance and individuality.

Brand	Number	Post	Number	Post Frequency
	of	Frequency	of	Twitter
	Followers	Instagram	Followers	
	Instagram		Twitter	_
Non-luxury	140K	Once a day	1150	Twice a week
Luxury	83K	Every 2 days	7162	Less than once a week
Non-luxury	454K	Once a day	34343	Once a day
Luxury	795K	Once a day	88456	Once a day
Non-luxury	1.5M	Once a day	507745	Once a day
Luxury	4M	3 times a day	380775	Once a day
Non- Luxury	9.5M	4 times a day	710549	4 times a day
Non-luxury	14.1M	3 times a day	1140952	Twice a day
Non- Luxury	11.1M	3 times a day	1309180	Twice a day
Luxury	207K	Once a day	4323	Once a day
Non-luxury	69.4K	Once a day	61024	Once a day
Non-luxury	91.3K	3 times a week	48918	3 times a week
Non-luxury	208K	Twice a week	148953	Less than once a week
Non-luxury	626K	Once a day	187986	Less than once a week
Non-luxury	471K	Every 2 days	194102	Twice a week

 Table 2: Sample of Brands

Brand	Ins	tagram	Tw	itter	Total	
	Ν	%	Ν	%	Ν	%
Non-luxury	17	8.25	5	8.19	22	8.23
Luxury	7	3.39	1	1.63	8	2.99
Non-luxury	7	3.39	0	0	7	2.62
Luxury	6	2.91	3	4.91	9	3.37
Non-luxury	7	3.39	7	11.47	14	5.24
Luxury	34	16.5	3	4.91	37	13.85
Non-Luxury	26	12.62	12	19.67	38	14.23
Non-luxury	33	16.01	10	16.39	43	16.10
Non-Luxury	25	12.13	10	16.39	35	13.10
Luxury	5	2.42	6	9.83	11	4.11
Non-luxury	9	4.36	1	1.63	10	3.74
Non-luxury	2	0.97	1	1.63	3	1.12
Non-luxury	7	3.39	0	0	7	2.62
Non-luxury	13	6.31	0	0	13	4.86
Non-luxury	8	3.88	2	3.27	10	3.74
Total	206	77.15	61	22.84	267	100

Table 3: Portrayal of Main Figure (female and non-binary) in the Sample

Table 4:	Coding	Scheme
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Variable	Description	Coding Value	Intercoder Reliability (Krippendorff's Alpha)	
Gender	Captures the central figure's	0=stereotypically feminine; 1=	.82	
Expression	gender expression	non-binary expression		
Gender Role	Describes the central's	0=dependent/relative to	.78	
	figure role (For example, 'dependent' indicates roles such as parent, partner, homemaker)	others;1=autonomous/independent from others		
Background	Describes the background against which the central figure is portrayed	0=mostly female; 1= mostly male; 2= neutral	.79	
Product	Refers to the product	0=luxury; 1=non-luxury	.98	
Туре	category			
Sexualisation	Defines if the sex is related to product (minimisation) or unrelated (objectification) to the product	0=related; 1=unrelated	.80	
Diversity	Describes the central	0=model-like (less diverse); 1=	.94	
	figure's appearance (e.g. body shape/size)	diverse appearance		
	Describes the central	0=White; 1=Black; 2=Asian;	.98	
	figure's race	3=Mixed; 4=Other		

Depiction Variable	Schema	Instagram		Twitter		Total	
		Ν	%	Ν	%	Ν	%
Gender	Female	186	90.29	57	93.44	243	91.01
Expression	Non-binary	20	9.71	4	6.56	24	8.99
Gender Role	Dependent	15	7.28	4	6.56	19	7.12
	Autonomous	191	92.72	57	93.44	248	92.88
Background	Mostly female	28	13.59	5	8.20	33	12.36
-	Mostly male	9	4.37	1	1.64	10	3.75
	Neutral	169	82.04	55	90.16	224	83.90
Sexualisation	Minimisation	197	95.63	61	100	258	96.65
	Objectification	9	3.37	0	0	9	3.37
Diversity	Model-like	137	66.50	35	57.38	172	64.42
·	Diverse	69	33.50	26	42.62	95	35.58
	White	115	55.83	32	52.46	147	55.06
	Black	31	15.05	10	16.39	41	15.36
	Asian	12	5.83	1	1.64	13	4.87
	Mixed	38	18.45	16	26.23	54	20.22
	Other	10	4.85	2	3.28	12	4.49

 Table 5. Female Portrayals on Social Media

Depiction Variable	Schema	Luxury		Non-Luxury		Total	
		Ν	%	Ν	%	Ν	%
Gender	Female	64	100	179	88.18	243	91.01
Expression	Non-binary	0	0	24	11.82	24	8.99
Gender Role	Dependent	7	10.94	18	8.87	72	26.97
	Autonomous	57	89.06	185	91.13	196	73.41
Background	Mostly female	18	28.13	15	7.39	29	10.86
-	Mostly male	1	1.56	9	4.43	64	23.97
	Neutral	45	70.31	179	88.18	181	96.63
Sexualisation	Minimisation	57	89.06	201	99.01	258	96.63
	Objectification	7	10.94	2	0.99	9	3.37
Diversity	Model-like	59	92.19	112	55.17	172	64.42
·	Diverse appearance	5	7.81	91	44.83	95	35.58
	White	31	48.44	116	57.14	147	55.06
	Black	7	10.94	34	16.75	41	15.36
	Asian	5	7.81	8	3.94	13	4.87
	Mixed	19	29.69	35	17.24	54	20.22
	Other	2	3.13	10	4.93	12	4.49

Table 6. Female Portrayal Across Luxury and Non-Luxury Product Categories

Table 7. Variance and Eigenvalues of Dimensions

	Dim. 1	Dim. 2	Dim. 3
Eigenvalues	0.52	0.26	0.20
% of var.	33.28	16.32	12.46
Cumulative % of var.	33.28	49.60	62.06