

# The Paradox of Parisian luxury: Heritage or Relevance?

Unraveling contemporary cultural themes in visual campaign imagery of four Parisian luxury brands.

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*“Science progresses best when observations force us to alter our preconceptions”*

*Vera Rubin*

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### **Abstract**

*Background:* Luxury industry has faced a shift in the past few years with the changing consumer culture and increasing expectations for brands to uphold and reflect current cultural values. The brands Celine, Dior, Louis Vuitton and Saint Laurent are brands that have integrated different socially or culturally relevant statements in their digital campaigns. The brands are known for their long-standing heritage and their position as market leaders in the fashion luxury industry.

*Purpose:* The purpose of this research is to explore how Parisian heritage luxury brands integrate contemporary cultural themes into their digital campaigns to maintain their heritage and demonstrate their current relevance.

*Methodology and Research Design:* The research uses qualitative content analysis of digital campaign images, with an additional on-site observation of the heritage luxury brands in Paris to achieve a three dimensional analysis. The data collection was analyzed through the theories: the Theory of Semiotics by Roland Barthes, and theories of Vänskä & Gurova (2023) in relation to the empirical material of brand campaign images.

*Findings:* Integrating contemporary themes with heritage is a way for luxury brands to stay relevant. However, this research will highlight discrepancies between what brands state as well as the different strategic approaches the brands employ. The main findings suggest that the use of these themes within the visual campaigns of these luxury brands, seem to have specific parameters.

*Value:* The research aims to contribute to knowledge on visual brand management of heritage luxury brands by identifying key themes to provide a deeper understanding for campaign imaginary.

*Keywords:* Luxury Brand Communication, Visual Communication, Fashion Campaigns, Heritage Luxury Brands, Woke-washing, Semiotics.

# Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1. Research background	5
1.1.1 Problematization	6
1.2 Purpose	8
1.3 Research Questions	8
1.4 Delimitations	8
1.5 Presentation of the Heritage Luxury Brands	9
1.5.1 Celine	9
1.5.2 Dior	10
1.5.3 Louis Vuitton	10
1.5.4 Saint Laurent Paris	11
<b>2. Literature Review</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 Paris as Fashion Capital and The Fashion System	12
2.2 Heritage Luxury Brands	13
2.3 Luxury Branding and Brand Identity	14
2.4 Visual Brand Communication	16
2.5 Provocative Fashion Advertising	16
2.6 Women’s Representation in Luxury Advertising	17
2.7 Gender Expression in Luxury Advertising	18
2.8 Diversity in Luxury Advertising	18
<b>3. Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>21</b>
3.1 Semiotics	21
3.2 Woke-washing	22
3.3 Glamorization of Diversity	23
<b>4. Research Design and Methodology</b>	<b>24</b>
4.1 Method	24
4.1.1 Qualitative Content Analysis	24
4.1.2 Thematic Analysis	25
4.3 Sampling and Selection Criteria	26
4.3.1 Data Collection	27
4.3.2 Empirical Material	27
4.4 On-site Observations of Luxury Heritage Brands in Paris	27
4.5 Coding	28
4.6 Method Criticism and Limitations	30
4.6.1 Transparency	30
4.6.2 Trustworthiness	30
<b>5. Results and Analysis</b>	<b>32</b>
5.1 Social Statements	32
5.1.1 Feminism	32
5.1.2 Feminist Themes in Campaign Imagery	36
5.1.3 Gender	37

5.1.4 Gender Fluidity and Gender Binarism in Campaign Imagery	40
5.2 Inclusivity	41
5.2.1 Ethnic and Cultural Diversity	41
5.2.2 Inclusion of Ethnically Diverse Models	43
5.2.3 Body Ideals	44
5.2.4 Representation of Body Types in Campaign Imagery	46
5.2.5 Contemporary Themes in Campaign Imagery	47
5.3 Heritage	49
5.3.1 Motifs	49
5.3.2 Artistic References	52
5.4 Motifs as Contemporary Visual Elements	54
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>55</b>
6.1 Managerial Implications	57
6.2 Limitations and Future Research	57
<b>7. References</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>8. Appendix</b>	<b>68</b>

# 1. Introduction

*This chapter outlines the background of the research topic concerning Parisian heritage luxury brands and the changing dynamics of the luxury industry while highlighting the adaptation of brands' visual communication to it. Furthermore, the following section describes the current relevance and problematization of the explored topic.*

## 1.1. Research background

In 2020, Saint Laurent released a Winter campaign for the women's ready-to-wear line, which included models dressed in latex garments posing in exaggerated and sexually suggestive poses, which emphasized the bodies of the female models. The brand argues that how the campaign was constructed relates to the brand's Parisian heritage, and background, highlighting freedom and seduction (Moore 2020). In a 2020 Women's Wear Daily interview, the current creative director of the brand, Antonio Vaccarello, claims that the campaign portrays the brand's vision of empowered women who make their own decisions, rather than portraying women as submissive (Moore 2020). The statement was linked to a question about whether the campaign is in line with the recent Me Too movement, which addresses sexual harassment and discrimination against women (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). Given that the images depict women in objectified roles within quite provocative contexts (*Image 15* and *Image 23*). The campaign's portrayal of feminism and female representation was also compared by Moore (2020) to current creative director Maria Grazia Chiuri's feminist themed collection for Christian Dior, which highlighted women's strength and empowerment through visual communication in text and printed messages on a t-shirt that read "*We should all be feminists*" (Appendix 7) (La Galerie Dior 2024).

For the last decade, the luxury fashion industry has undergone an ideological shift. The focus of brand communication has moved away from the traditional values of luxury, which mostly reflect on aspiration and exclusivity. The rise of social media platforms and changes in consumer culture have been the driving forces behind this change. To connect with the current diverse and younger consumer base, brand communication has had to increasingly incorporate themes of inclusion and social statements of issues in their branding (Sobande 2019). Thus, present-day consumers expect brands to reflect current cultural values and ideas, especially regarding diversity, social issues, and sustainability, which heritage luxury brands have also had to adapt to remain relevant (Huggard, Lonergan & Overdiek 2023).

These contemporary cultural themes can be related to past and present social movements that highlight current societal issues (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). The previously mentioned Me Too movement started in 2006 and developed into a more global phenomenon in 2017, following an online campaign and the hashtag #MeToo, which emerged as a way to highlight this issue on social media (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). Other recent movements include the Black Lives Matter movement, which advocates against police brutality and discrimination of people of color, as well as the LGBTQ+ movement for equal rights for different gender identities and sexual orientations (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). These themes have been discussed from the perspective of political or gender studies by Vänskä & Gurova (2023), but in this research, these topics will be explored from a brand communication perspective to discover how they affect the brand communication of Parisian heritage luxury brands.

The explored primary interest is how Parisian heritage luxury brands adopt these contemporary themes as part of their brand campaigns. This is due to the challenge that heritage luxury brands face, as it is becoming harder to stand out in their segment due to the increased digitization. The digital space has emphasized the importance of digital campaigns as they have significant influence and capacity to reach a global audience through the use of social platforms. Thus this has become a critical way for heritage luxury brands to advertise (Werner 2018). The saturation of content in the digital space makes it difficult for heritage luxury brands to stand out and to separate themselves from competitors within the same market. One approach to dealing with the challenge is to use controversial elements in their brand communication to gain attention (Werner 2018) and integrate community debates in their brand communication to reflect discussions in society that can contribute to sustained relevance (Carrillat, Carrillat, O'Rourke & Plourde 2019).

Online platforms allow digital content in the form of campaigns to be viewed by a larger audience that does not only consist of brands' core customer groups (Werner 2018). The highly digital and connected current environment has emphasized the importance of visual communication for brands in general, but also for luxury brand advertising (Kohrs 2021). In the current digital landscape, and especially in social media, visual content has the most prominent presence compared to other forms. Thus, the visual language brands use to communicate with consumers is also very crucial to brand perceptions (Kohrs 2021). This dynamic change has affected heritage luxury brands as they also have to adapt to the digital shift and its impact on visual brand communication (Kantar 2023). Currently, it is not enough to only use associations and symbolism of brand heritage to show one's authority (Kim Lloyd, Adebshin & Kang 2019), the integration of contemporary themes is also a strategy to remain relevant.

This research explores four luxury brands with their heritage linked to the fashion capital of Paris. The city of Paris has a great influence on the fashion industry globally due to its history, as well as the current well-established textile and fashion industry (Kurkdjian 2020). The industry is also of great importance to France's economy and infrastructure (Ministère de la Culture n.d) which also contributes to the importance of managing the fashion industry and its heritage into the future.

The four explored brands are Celine, Christian Dior, Louis Vuitton, and Saint Laurent Paris. The selection of the brands has been made based on their strong heritage connected to the fashion metropolis of Paris (Kurkdjian 2020). The interest in exploring the visual campaigns of these brands also extends to their major influence on the industry as market leaders (Ou 2023). The brands are part of two French luxury conglomerates, Kering and LVMH. Saint Laurent is owned by Kering, and Celine, Dior, and Louis Vuitton are the top performing brands within the LVMH group as of 2023 (Williams 2024).

### **1.1.1 Problematization**

As competition in the digital space is high, luxury brands must rely on more than their heritage. There is a growing demand from customers for brands to contribute meaningful values (Steele 2019). Brands are also needing to use more emotional communication strategies by integrating deeper values and messaging to create stronger relationships with their customers (Massi, Vecco & Lin 2020). Furthermore, the reputation of luxury brands is

more susceptible to being associated with irrelevance if they are not adapting to evolving consumer cultures and preferences (Massi et al. 2020). One question that arose in this context was: How can these brands incorporate contemporary cultural themes with their heritage in their strategic visual communication to appear relevant?

Currently, many heritage luxury brands have already adopted this approach, and are using social and cultural statements in their brand communication. For example, the luxury brand Dior posted an image with a black background on their Instagram account, featuring a message supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. The caption of the post also included the statement #DiorStandsWithYou (Shukla & Khalifa 2021). However, this message was not well received by all of the brand's audience, with some questioning the tangible actions of the brand towards this cause. Combined at the time with the recent critique concerning a potential cultural appropriation with the brand's 2020 Cruise collection, which was done in collaboration with several African artists (Shukla & Khalifa 2021).

Thus, there is a risk for brands engaging in brand communication that involves using these types of current social and cultural issues. Especially if there is no history of previous support or genuine commitment to these causes, brands can be perceived as "opportunistic". Moreover, the operational practices, the brand's core values, or identity should also be in line with the brand messaging, or otherwise questions about authenticity can easily arise. Furthermore, consumers are continuously more aware of genuine brand messaging and are more prone to criticizing luxury brands that fail to align their brand with their messaging (Shukla & Khalifa 2021). This can lead to allegations of woke-washing, which refers to brands not taking genuine responsibility for social issues, but integrating them into their advertising to create a better brand image (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

How these themes are presented in the luxury brand sector is frequently done with a more ambiguous approach. These brands often craft narratives that incorporate contemporary issues or aesthetics, while constructing a storyline around them. To stand out, fashion campaign imagery can convey a hidden or overt message using paradoxes to emphasize an underlying meaning (Carig & Muller 2007). Expressing these statements in visual brand communication can be interpreted differently depending on the context and the audience, mainly if the content contains provocative elements that allude to ethics, morals, norms, or certain communities (Werner 2018). Similarly, contentious content used to display a brand's identity can have significant consequences for the reputation and image of the heritage luxury brand (Pentina, Guilloux & Micu 2018). Different contemporary themes can be used as aesthetic expressions in fashion campaigns to create associations with the brand's status, cultural capital, power, or value (Letonja 2023). The inclusion of these contemporary cultural themes that can affect the brand image negatively in case criticism about the actions may arise. Thus, brands should be prepared for this from a brand management perspective (Urde, Greyser, & Balmer 2007). By analyzing how current social and cultural themes are integrated into digital branding, an understanding of how conventional and more contemporary visual branding strategies can be applied (Newheiser, Lafrance, & Davido 2019).

## 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of the research is to explore how the selected Parisian heritage luxury brands integrate contemporary cultural themes into their digital campaigns to maintain their heritage and demonstrate their relevance. The brands studied and analyzed in the research are Celine, Dior, Louis Vuitton, and Saint Laurent.

The research uses qualitative content analysis to explore visual advertising campaign images from the four selected brands, with additional on-site observation of the heritage luxury brands in Paris to achieve a three dimensional interpretation. The aim of the research is to explore the existence of common discourses manifested through visual and thematic narratives by the Theory of Semiotics. This study aims to advance the field of textile management, mainly focusing on visual brand communication and brand management.

## 1.3 Research Questions

1. *Which contemporary themes are commonly incorporated by Parisian heritage luxury brands in their brand campaigns?*
2. *How do Parisian heritage luxury brands communicate their heritage through brand codes and symbolic messages in their visual communication, and how is this combined with contemporary visual elements?*

## 1.4 Delimitations

Research delimitations define the scope of the study, and highlight the aspects that the authors will include and exclude from the study. Thus, delimitations outline the boundaries for the research, while ensuring the manageability and relevance of the study (Calabrese 2012).

The research is limited to the time period between the years 2020-2024. Given the impact during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, particular emphasis is placed on how brands adjust their digital communication strategies to navigate effectively and visually connect with their online audience (Huggard et al. 2023). Furthermore, the critical interest of the research was to explore the contemporary and current moment visual communication of these brands, which established the focus for the period from 2020 to the present day. The campaigns considered for the present year encompass those that were released at the time of the study.

Furthermore, the research data only considers advertising and brand campaigns. Thus, excluding editorials and advertorials, from the scope of research, as the interest of the research is to explore campaigns with more commercial aims.

The research is focused on digital brand campaigns and excludes offline marketing channels and further marketing actions of the brands from the scope of the study. The research focus is also narrowed to visual brand communication through campaign images. Therefore, branding material in the form of video or text has not been considered in the research. Contextual factors related to the campaign images are taken into account, where they offer pertinent insights into the data.

The chosen industry of the study is also considered a delimitation for the research. The study focuses on the luxury fashion industry, specifically luxury brands with strong and identifiable heritage. Established with the definition of heritage luxury brands by Urde, Greyser, and Balmer (2007). This limitation was made due to more modern luxury brands having a less established brand identity and image, allowing them to adapt and take on contemporary elements in their branding initiatives (Gurzki, Schlatter & Woisetschläger 2019). Further delimitation was also made to only heritage luxury brands that have emerged from the city of Paris. This demarcation was made in connection with the city's long-standing history and identity as one of the major fashion metropolises (Kurkdhian 2020). Although this study focuses on Parisian heritage luxury brands, similar strategies are used by leading luxury brands in other markets. Thus, the use of contemporary trends and themes in campaign images are not explicit for Parisian heritage luxury brands.

## **1.5 Presentation of the Heritage Luxury Brands**

*This section introduces the four Parisian heritage luxury brands, briefly summarizing details about their heritage, brand identity, and brand symbols. This background of the brands is deepened through visits to the brands' establishments in Paris, and exploratory research into their museum exhibitions and archival collections.*

### **1.5.1 Celine**

The fashion house of Celine was founded in 1945 by Céline Vipiana. Initially, the company started out as a producer of children's shoes, but later evolved to the luxury brand it is today (Gandhi 2017). This development has been reflected in the brand logo as well. The first logo features a horse carriage which connects to the French aristocracy (Ou 2023). Whereas, the most contemporary logo is the Celine Triomphe, which features the two C's which mimic the shape of the landmark of Arc de Triomphe. This connects the brand's historical background as a Parisian brand (Appendix 9). This logo is visible in the brand's designs, but also clear as a symbolic element in the brand's visual communication.

Celine's evolution diverges from its past heritage, adapting to contemporary influences under different creative directors who have combined brand symbols with cultural aesthetics in their design and the brand's presentation (Ou 2023). Over the last decade, the brand has evolved into a more sophisticated minimalist luxury brand, focusing on ready-to-wear, leather goods, and handbags (Gandhi 2017). Celine's current visual campaigns mostly consist of monochrome portrait images with mainly a focus on singular models with the products as the less visible element.

This strategy has been criticized, as it has been seen as diluting the brand's heritage, and identity (Gandhi 2017). This is due to Celine's brand culture being based on the preferences

of the creative director, and each era of individual directors has reflected how the brand has been shaped during that time (Ou 2023). The most recent creative director of the brand is Hedi Slimane, who started the modern era of Celine in 2018, and held the position during the time of the research (Ou 2023).

### **1.5.2 Dior**

Christian Dior founded his brand in 1947 as a haute couture house that later turned into an international luxury brand with offshoots of his brand, such as ready-to-wear and menswear (Donzé and Wubs 2019). Christian Dior was born in Normandy and was intensely interested in design, women's clothing, and flowers (La Galerie Dior 2024). Inspiration from the garden can be seen in various motifs integrated as brand codes. Dior uses multiple brand codes such as illustrations of a bee, the monogram "CD," or the star. The star is considered a good luck charm that is often attached to the garments or shown in the brand's imagery to bring luck as shown in Appendix 1 (La Galerie Dior 2024). Dior himself was superstitious and integrated brand symbols and iconic accessories that still influence current designs and brand visuals (La Galerie Dior 2024).

Throughout history, femininity, and elegance have been essential elements of the Dior brand image (Donzé and Wubs 2019). The brand also draws inspiration from its Parisian heritage, with timelessness and a focus on garments that fit well (La Galerie Dior 2024). Christian Dior worked a lot on highlighting feminine silhouettes and well-fitting clothing (Traversing Appearance 2024). This type of silhouette is reflected in his later work, and the silhouette symbolizes Dior's craftsmanship in creating tailored garments. Christian Dior was showcasing feminine silhouettes, a signature of his designs. The "New Look" (appendix 2), as it is commonly referred to, indicates a return to tailored fashion and the ideal of women's body shapes as hourglasses (Traversing Appearance 2024). The current creative director of the brand is Maria Grazia Chiuri, who has brought a focus on the feminist movement, with her collections, this is seen in the designs which include feminist motifs embroidered (Appendix 8).

### **1.5.3 Louis Vuitton**

The luxury brand Louis Vuitton has a long heritage dating back to 1845. The Parisian luxury house was first established as a brand for travel trunks (Appendix 4). Later developing into the luxury house of today, the inclusion of the travel trunks continue to symbolize exploration and discovery of the world and the imagination (Jin & Cedrola 2017). This part of the brand's heritage is also widely used in the brand's visual communication in collections, stores, campaign imagery, and brand extensions such as resorts and restaurants. The main brand codes used by Louis Vuitton are the LV digits, and the monogram flowers which are seen prominently in both designs and visual communication (LV DREAM 2024).

An essential aspect of Louis Vuitton's brand strategy is "artification" which refers to their continuous collaborations with contemporary artists and performers to highlight the brand's connection to the art world and modern culture. This strategy has established an image of cultural relevance and forward-thinkingness for the brand (Jin & Cedrola 2017).

One of the strategic decisions implemented is to open an exhibition in Paris at their Louis Vuitton headquarters that presents the brand's collaboration between heritage and

contemporary (Appendix 3). The brand's emphasis on craftsmanship and its strategic positioning around the theme of travel extends the brand to the "LV dream" which represents its ability to fuse the present with its historical roots. This extension of the brand's identity demonstrates how it navigates the tension between modernity and heritage in its design, concept development, and establishment (LV DREAM 2024).

#### **1.5.4 Saint Laurent Paris**

The luxury house Saint Laurent Paris, formerly known as Yves Saint Laurent, was founded in 1960 in Paris, France. Originally from Algeria, the founder of the brand, Yves Saint Laurent, had a deep fascination with Marrakech, where the culture, people, fabrics, colors, and silhouettes were important sources of inspiration for his Haute Couture creations. Saint Laurent's artistic influence was shaped by his interest in different cultures, reflecting his inclusive approach to his designs (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris 2024). Saint Laurent also opened a ready-to-wear department in 1966 as an addition to the Haute Couture line (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris n.d).

The brand today seeks to continue creating the brand following Yves Saint Laurent's vision of a brand that liberates and empowers women by integrating elements of sexual ownership. Saint Laurent includes elements of nudity to counter taboos around showing a naked body (Traversing Appearance 2024), as seen in past and current design and campaign photography (Appendix 12 & Appendix 9). The female body, and visible skin is central to the visual communication of the brand both then as now. Furthermore, Saint Laurent has used androgyny to break the normative dress codes for gender (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris 2024). Androgyny involves using cross-gender components in designs. An example of this is Saint Laurent's 'Le Smoking,' one of the first female tuxedos created in 1966. Yves Saint Laurent designed this tuxedo to liberate women's rights and increase their power by creating a female garment from a male attribute (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris 2024). An older brand symbol is a heart symbolizing free love (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris 2024).

The current creative director of the brand, Anthony Vaccarello, emphasizes emotional elements in the visual campaigns to strengthen the brand's identity, which encourages independence and power (Vidalon 2017). The visual communication of the brand follows elements and an aesthetic that is more ambiguous and mysterious (Vaccarello n.d). The brand intends to combine contemporary themes with the past, to strengthen the importance of the modern (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris 2024).

## 2. Literature Review

*This chapter will present existing literature relating to the sector of heritage luxury fashion, specifically underlying previous research in branding and visual communication. The chapter will also discuss representation and strategies in fashion advertising from a brand communication perspective. Finally, the chapter includes the outline of the theoretical framework used in the research.*

### 2.1 Paris as Fashion Capital and The Fashion System

Paris has an important role for fashion innovation and recurring historical references. As a fashion city it has had a significant importance for industry since the nineteenth century, and it is often considered the capital of fashion, symbolizing both tradition and trends (Kurkdjian 2020). The fashion industry in the city has an influence on consumption patterns, trends, and advertising (Kurkdjian 2020). The central focus on the textile and fashion industry is also significant to France's history and economy as it contributes to a large part of the country's GDP (Ministère de la Culture n.d).

To preserve the city's fashion heritage by organizing museum exhibitions highlighting the relationship between the city and the fashion houses, which also serves as a brand extension of the fashion houses' communication. Fashion museums and exhibitions are an important part of passing on cultural heritage, attracting new visitors, which can increase revenue. This marketing strategy is a way for fashion houses to act more commercially in the cultural field (Ekström 2023).

These historical design collections are crucial to conveying the symbolic meaning of the city's brands. In addition, heritage brands play a central role during fashion weeks, attracting much attention and reinforcing the symbolic power of fashion (Steele 2019). As a fashion capital, Paris is an integral part of a fashion system composed of different industries that greatly influence market trends (Reilly 2020). How brands communicate through visual discourse and themes can vary with new ideas and societal issues that affect the fashion system (Reilly 2020).

According to Reilly (2020), the theory of spatial diffusion implies that fashion trends in visual aesthetics and style first take shape and spread in selected major cities such as Paris, Milan, London, New York, and Tokyo, where the majority of prominent brands also originate. After a fashion trend or discourse has been exposed in these metropolises, it spreads to nearby areas where a process of observation and reproduction takes place (Reilly 2020). These metropolises have an authority that is crucial for trend diffusion, building its relevance, and controlling the influences from these areas (Reilly 2020). This theory can be compared to how fashion capitals establish norms, like a discourse, around how luxury brands integrate visual and provocative elements into their brand profile and then showcase this profile in a way that is then used by other fashion brands.

The importance of Paris in the communication of luxury heritage underlines the influence in advertising, which often includes identity elements that highlight Parisian heritage (Evans 2019). Paris has a symbolic value due to its authority based on spatial diffusion, and elements exhibited by the Parisian heritage influence the culture of what is considered fashionable

(Evans 2019). In this way, the city has an important role in what is considered luxury and fashionable globally. One way that brands work to show their affiliation and authority is by using famous landmarks that create associations between the brand and the value of the city, such as the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe (Rocamora 2009).

Defining the city of Paris in the contexts as a cultural discourse and in terms of its symbolic value, this influences contemporary trends and cultural heritage as a competitive strategy. This means that the elements connected to Paris can be applied to fictional personas in the advertising industry to highlight a stereotypical French superiority and to increase a sense of value (Evans 2019).

## **2.2 Heritage Luxury Brands**

Luxury is a social phenomenon that arises from expectations and experiences (Kapferer & Bastien 2009). Luxury brands aim to be perceived as unique rather than commercially competitive. Luxury represents taste, identity, and purpose. It has a profound psychological meaning regarding self-actualization and can be identified with the brand's background history (Kapferer & Bastien 2009).

What sets luxury brands apart from premium brands is their central point of generating an experience and emotional connection with clients through experiential elements (Kapferer & Bastien 2009). Luxury brands are defined by their authentic and functional value, fostering an emotional connection and occupying a prestigious market position in their brand category. Furthermore, Reilly (2020) suggests that luxury brands are defined by brand strength, exclusivity, craftsmanship, high quality, and differentiation. This links to a perceived brand of superior quality and craftsmanship (Ko, Costello & Taylor 2019). Luxury fashion can also be an attribute to achieve a lifestyle or ideal that satisfies emotional and psychological needs (Reilly 2020).

To define a brand as having cultural heritage, one or more attributes should be included; brand history, craftsmanship, or country of origin. These attributes recognize brand authenticity and heritage (DeFanti, Bird & Caldwell 2014). Another definition by Urde, Greyser, and Balmer (2007), suggests that heritage brands are identified by longevity, symbol usage, merit, and core principles. Brand heritage is positioned to have substantial value depending on its heritage, contributing to a strong belief that the brand's history has relevance and is an essential leading guide for existing operations within a specific industry. Thus, brand heritage is an integral part of brand identity and positioning that is further managed as a strategic decision (Urde et al. 2007). Furthermore, heritage luxury brands often operate with the understanding that heritage broadly only equates to the brand's history. Brand heritage is also strongly linked to the emotional connection that consumers initially had with the brand (Urde et al. 2007). Brand equity, which refers to the value of the brand, and brand identity management are closely linked to the brand's visual communication, which can be examined through semiotics (Oswald 2016). Furthermore, semiotics is crucial for interpreting luxury visual communication and its strategies and how brand building integrates into brand equity and influences consumers' identity management (Oswald 2016).

However, the opposite action can also contribute to negative effects for the brand, not aligning with contemporary themes, can instead contribute to the brand being perceived as outdated (Oswald 2016). Balancing this can be difficult; as luxury brands use ambiguous

visual messages to stand in between, but also to create a distancing in the customer segment for those who can understand the underlying meaning in aesthetics and society (Newheiser et al. 2019). From a brand management perspective, certain types of content may not be suitable for all audiences and may be perceived as provocative in specific contexts. It is therefore important to understand the parts and the whole in context to understand how a campaign can be perceived and influence brand image (Kinsella 2006). Furthermore, if the message is mismanaged or indicates an overstep to contribute to aesthetic appeal, the brand's heritage can be neglected, which can have a negative impact (Oswald 2016).

## **2.3 Luxury Branding and Brand Identity**

According to Branham (2008), brand communication is a process in which consumers understand the significance associated with a brand. It encompasses interaction with the brand's visual and verbal expressions and communication initiatives. The three main dimensions of communication for luxury brands in advertising campaigns are enrichment, distancing, and abstraction (Gurzki et al. 2019). Enrichment is a rhetorical form that communicates value and meaning through different signs and symbol systems in brand communication. These signs are used as recognition mechanisms without visualizing the actual logo of the brand. This creates strong associations between a certain color and a brand, which links to the brand's heritage (Gurzki et al. 2019).

Distancing involves positioning and creating a distance between brands through brand image. Distancing can be implemented hypothetically, temporally, spatially, or socially (Gurzki et al. 2019). This means that the value is emphasized by offering a certain social status to the brand's products. This creates a desire for the brand, and what the brand can emotionally offer for the consumer's self-fulfillment (Gurzki et al. 2019). In luxury brand campaign images, the logo is not constantly visible, but luxury brands reinforce brand associations and maintain their brand identity by delivering high-quality visual content, which promotes creative consumer interactions in online brand integration (Pentina et al. 2018).

Abstraction is the third central dimension specific to luxury brands and refers to how luxury brands often use visual elements that allow for individual interpretation. This means that the campaign images are intentionally created to be perceived differently (Gurzki et al. 2019). These aspects differ from the brand communication of mass and premium brands. Non-luxury brands often use more simplified and direct images that cannot be interpreted in a multifaceted way. In addition, mass and premium brands rarely want to distance themselves from averageness, but rather appear relatable to consumers. Non-luxury brands also use signs in their brand communication, but they are considered less complex compared to luxury brands, and logos are seen concerning the visual material (Gurzki et al. 2019).

Certain complex themes are recurring within fashion campaigns to spark discussion that allows the brands to maintain their relevance. This is something noted as a strategic practice used for decades in the fashion industry (Vänskä & Gurova 2022). These visual aesthetic expressions may contain complex elements to convey a heightened sense of the product, or brand identity (An, Lee, Kim & Youn 2020).

To maintain a brand heritage that is the foundation and identity of the brand, indications of authenticity, heritage and modernity are exposed in brand management to align with ongoing consumer culture (DeFanti, Bird & Caldwell 2014). These elements can thus strengthen the

brand's position in the industry and status in society. Luxury brands still use classic luxury attributes in their visual campaigns to convey a sense of traditional status and the essential values of luxury (Langer 2023). These elements can be classified as cultural, economic or social capital, which are assets that show the brand's value in relation to the various circles of society, which also shapes how the brand alludes to achieve prestige and value for consumers (Huggard et al. 2023).

By applying brand codes and bringing these together with connotations in the form of symbolic objects can contribute to creating an association (Barthes 2002), which can help consumers more easily identify the brands without having to see the visible brand name. For example, the French heritage luxury brand Hermès, is strongly associated with a specific color of orange, and the motif of the horse saddle. These symbols that are highly recognizable and can in that in the right context, create an instant connection to the brand. By having strong brand codes and well-known symbols that also draw connections to luxurious lifestyle, can increase the value that the brand has (Kepferrer & Bastien 2009). By working with symbolism and connotations, a brand's DNA can be strengthened, and also influence how the viewer sees the brand (Kepferer & Bastien 2009). This can also mean that if the brand wants to be identified with a specific culture, specific cultural codes can be applied (Kepferer & Bastien 2009).

Clear and strong brand codes that contribute to a brand have an essential whole, it is easier for consumers to understand the value and the visual communication (Kepferer & Bastien 2009). When branding, an identity is created by the brand, and an over-clarity in what the brand can offer, or convey. Personas that are created in campaign environments in the form of models are a social interaction with consumers and the audience of the brand. Creating an easier association to the idea that the brand goes beyond the products (Reilly 2020).

A brand is a value created for a product, an object, or a service that influences how people perceive it (Eshuis & Klijn 2012). Brand increases the value of a product and contributes to its positioning and differentiation in the market. Branding gives a brand a symbolic value in the social and psychological lives of the recipients (Eshuis & Klijn 2012). Symbols are visual elements that distinguish the brand from others in the same segment. The branding concept articulates the vision of a brand and involves creating a brand identity that consumers can relate to (Reilly 2020). Branding of the brand extends beyond the products and serves to visualize the brand's values and commitment to create a desire to be identified with the brand.

Furthermore, Reilly (2020) explains that branding helps brands position and differentiate themselves in the market, which can also mean that brands create narratives around the founding story of the brand to create an authentic feel. By telling and creating fictional or real stories around the brand, the brand's image is built to strengthen its value (Reilly 2020). It is important for luxury brands to use storytelling in their branding because it contributes to an emotional connection, which can also be used as a reinforcement for the brands' higher price ranges (Kapferer & Bastien 2009). This allows consumers to integrate the brand into their own identity and continue associating with the brand. By having vital brand authenticity, consumers are also more inclined to forgive mistakes that arise in commercial contexts (DeFanti et al. 2014).

## 2.4 Visual Brand Communication

Fashion is considered first and foremost a visually constructed experience, which is why fashion advertisements are also mainly image-focused compared to text-based content. Taylor & Costello (2017), underline that fashion advertisements often include a minimal amount of text, and the constructed image mostly features the model as the main focus. Frequently, the brand name is featured as one of the only textual elements in visual campaigns, thus placing the largest emphasis on the imagery. Moreover, visuals are not only for catching the attention of consumers, but they can also instill fashion advertisements with deeper cultural meanings. Thus, imagery can convey different ideals that text alone might not be able to articulate (Taylor & Costello 2017).

Lee, Hur, and Watkins (2018) describe visual brand communication as encompassing the visual communication signals brands use to engage with customers at different contact points in the brand journey. The visual cues can include logos or other trademarks associated with the brand, and they also range from visual promotional material to the visual exteriors of retail locations. The visual elements are intentionally employed to construct a consistent and alluring brand image for the brand's audience.

According to Butcher & Pecot (2022), luxury brands use different visual codes as part of their brand communication to reinforce their legacy and differentiate from mass brands, and competitors in the same market. The research recognized several strategies luxury brands use to visualize their brand heritage. A frequent approach is to emphasize the origin place of the brand, which might include highlighting the founding place or the specific year. Furthermore, different motifs or symbols are used to connect the heritage with different visual cues, such as monograms or distinct design practices. Furthermore, products that hold some iconic status within the brand are also used to communicate the longevity and recognizability of the brand (Butcher & Pecot 2022).

The visual communication of luxury brands extends beyond the inclusion of overt symbols connected to the brand identity. Lee, Hur, and Watkins (2018) further suggest that luxury brands use various levels of visual complexity in their visual brand communication. The term refers to the level of intricacy of the elements included in the visual content. By including these elements in their visual communication, luxury brands can create more complex experiences for consumers while adding to the brand's appeal and distinction in the market.

## 2.5 Provocative Fashion Advertising

Provocative tactics have been used in fashion advertisements for decades as an approach to visual campaigns, as a stimulus that creates associations for the viewer and a more lasting impression of the brand (Vézina & Paul 1997). This approach is described as using elements that can be considered offensive, or upsetting in a brand's communication strategy with the aim to catch the attention of the viewer (Vézina & Paul 1997). The main concepts of provocative advertising are distinctiveness, ambiguity and violations of societal norms (Vézina & Paul 1997).

This communication strategy can be used to increase awareness of a topic, but it can also lead to discomfort and low acceptance of the advertised content. The existence of ambiguity can also be applied to highlight a product or a brand, which also affects associations,

interpretation, and understanding of the advertising content. This can further create emotional confusion but also curiosity in the viewer (Vézina & Paul 1997). Distinctiveness is the essence of provocation, and the concept is used by fashion brands as they seek recognition. The difficulty with distinctiveness is that the audience becomes increasingly accustomed to more shocking elements in visual advertising, which means that brands need to renew their distinctiveness in order to maintain the originality of their marketing instead of resembling other brands on the market (Vézina & Paul 1997). According to Waller (2004) elements considered controversial in branding and marketing can include references to political or social groups based on movements, or religion.

Provocative content often contains allusions to sexual behavior, fear or humor to trigger an emotional response in the viewer (Vézina & Paul 1997). Provocative advertising techniques aim to act as a trigger that has a shocking effect, which can leave the viewer with a sense of discomfort and ambiguity about the content (Vézina & Paul 1997). Therefore, this communication strategy should aim to attract attention while not causing an adverse reaction towards the brand. The outcome of using provocative advertising techniques as a branding strategy is unpredictable, and there are risks associated with this type of advertising (Carrillat et al. 2019).

Through provocative fashion advertising, the promotion of controversial topics and norm-breaking values can contribute to increasing desire for this type of content (Freitas Freitas, Jordan & Hughes 2018). Furthermore, provocative imagery can also expose phenomena that can be indirectly harmful to society and contribute to unhealthy behaviors, which both men and women are exposed to. For example, body image and fashion are topics that are obtained simultaneously in different contexts, with usually a negative aspect based on the romanticization of unhealthy ideals, which is also noted by Vänskä and Gurova (2023). Furthermore, aesthetics of visualizing mental problems or mental disorders contributes to the discussion, which, like appropriation, can in some cases be used to highlight a subject but has a harmful effect because it comes at the expense of others. Other issues that belong to contemporary culture are pressures on women to achieve different beauty ideals which the fashion industry has repeatedly contributed to (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

## **2.6 Women's Representation in Luxury Advertising**

The inclusion of women's empowerment and feminist ideologies as part of advertising has existed a long time. The concept referring to this is "femvertising" which Michaelidou, Siamagka, Hatzithomas & Chaput (2022), defines as a advertising strategy that involves messaging related to feminism, and portrayal of women in an empowering way. These campaigns often include some kind of breaking of the social expectations that are put on women.

According to Michaelidou et al. (2022). Luxury brands employ femvertising in their brand communication less than mass brands, due to the aspirational nature and the focus on exclusivity in their advertising strategies. The portrayal of women is often done in a more stereotypical way, which highlights conventional feminine beauty ideals. How men are represented in luxury advertising also often follows the traditional attributes of masculinity, and what is considered attractive for men (Michaelidou et al. 2022). The scenography of fashion advertisements contributes to the portrayal of women in an idealized and objectified way (Michaelidou et al. 2022). Luxury advertisements have long portrayed women in a

highly sexual way or as sex objects to sell luxury items, thus using women as objects to create a desire (Adomaitis and Saiki 2018). Specifically, the objectification of women portrays them as commodities rather than authoritative individuals (Newheiser et al. 2019).

Although femvertising attempts to counter these outdated portrayals, the use of femvertising as a strategy in branding is not considered completely unproblematic. Criticism against femvertising as an advertising approach, highlights that brands can appear superficial in their endorsement of the actual movement of feminism. Especially, if there is no contribution towards the cause while the brand benefits from this strategy financially (Michaelidou et al. 2022).

## **2.7 Gender Expression in Luxury Advertising**

Societal norms have long governed what symbolizes masculinity and femininity in fashion advertising (Vänskä 2017) Furthermore, through advertising, fashion as a social phenomenon has been guiding consumers with the inclusion of traditional elements of gender to communicate to consumers whether the certain products or marketing is aimed at men or women (Vänskä 2017). Different elements and symbolic things are used to communicate this, often including external attributes such as hair, make-up, clothes, colors, or models' body shape (Michaelidou et al. 2022).

Dominique and Child's (2021) argue that there has been a change in how brands currently integrate broader gender identities in campaigns to create connections with their target groups, and to appeal to a broader, more progressive consumer base. Furthermore, this approach aligns with the destruction of more traditional and binary ideas of female and male gender to instead contribute to a greater inclusion of a gender spectrum (Dominique & Child's 2021).

The nuanced approach to consumer cultures contributes to gender expressions that are stereotypical and binary, either being reinforced or blurred, contributing to more gender fluidity. The concept of androgyny has been seen in fashion advertising for a long time, but the inclusion of more non-binary gender expression has emerged as a contemporary approach to gender expression. This shift also follows a trend in the fashion industry, which has turned towards gender neutrality not only in the design and presented collections, but also in the selection of models and how the collections are presented (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

## **2.8 Diversity in Luxury Advertising**

Integration of diversity has long been a complex and an ongoing discussion in the fashion industry. This is because the representation of diversity has especially in the past been quite narrow, or overall lacks presence in advertising contexts. Vänskä and Gurova (2023) state that representation of diversity extends beyond ethnicity, encompassing aspects like beauty ideals, body shapes and sizes, and also differently abled bodies (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). According to Vänskä and Gurova (2023) most of the featured models in luxury advertising are still white, while other ethnicities are being underrepresented. The inclusion of models from different ethnic backgrounds or races is more prominent with mass fashion brands. On

the other hand, the luxury fashion industry has been found to often use models, and imagery that follow the Western standards of beauty and the ideals considered attractive in Western countries (Michaelidou et al. 2022).

Another ongoing contentious issue in the luxury fashion industry connected to more marginalized groups or people is cultural appropriation. According to Dominique and Childs (2021), cultural appropriation in the fashion industry refers to the failure to credit or acknowledge marginalized cultures from which elements are taken and used for profit. The fashion industry is significantly influenced by cultures and surrounding society. It can also involve one group taking a symbol, artifact, or object from a minority group without permission and transforming it into their representation (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

Both fashion advertising and design take inspiration from various cultural references, and how inspiration is derived is highly important. When elements of other cultures are used exploitatively without much regard to the original culture or approval from members of that cultural group, the actions can be deemed as cultural appropriation (Dominique & Childs 2021).

Cultural appropriation can lead to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, and preconceived notions about other cultures, objects, or people that then contribute to a misrepresentation of primarily minority cultures. On the contrary, when inspiration is drawn correctly and instead in a way that pays tribute to other cultures, it can be considered cultural appreciation (Dominique & Childs 2021).

Further elements of diversity, also consider different types of representation in visual advertising. The types of models used in advertising campaigns are closely linked to brand image and the brand's perceived ideal customers, as brands want to appear aspirational and desirable to their target consumers. Thus, the inclusion, or lack thereof, of diverse body sizes and shapes in ad campaigns is strategic, reflecting the message brands want to convey to their audience (Aagerup & Scharf 2018). Historically, the fashion industry has been known for its favoring of thinness and very narrow body ideals. Specifically, the luxury fashion sector has faced criticism for the promotion of unhealthy and unrealistic body ideals with its selection of models (Record & Austin 2016). According to Record and Austin (2016), "Paris thin" is a dangerous measure for models who fall below the international threshold for dangerous thinness set by the World Health Organization (WHO n.d). In 2015, France passed a law making it illegal for fashion houses, and modeling agencies to hire unhealthily thin models, with a body mass index that is too low (Record & Austin 2016). A further example of this is the phenomenon of "Heroin Chic" that emerged in the 1990s, where the fashion industry glamorized unhealthy lifestyles to achieve harmful ideals of beauty. This trend is seen making a return along the side of the opposing movement of body acceptance (Reilly 2020).

However, there has been a shift towards the inclusion of more diverse body ideals in the fashion industry. This change has been in response to a demand for increased diversity, not only in terms of brand management, but also in the forms of representation in fashion advertising. The increased demand from current consumers for more diverse representations of body sizes, but also different bodies in general. This can include visible disabilities and other physical characteristics. The body positivity movement, which focuses on advocating for broader acceptance and visibility of all types of bodies, has had a great influence on the shift towards inclusion. This has also helped promote greater acceptance and visibility of different body types to keep up with the evolution of society, This change has been in response to a demand for increased diversity, and reflects further changes behind the brands,

such as brand management, but is also visible in the form of advertising (Aagerup & Scharf 2018).

However, according to Dominique and Childs (2021) this integration is less visible among luxury brands, in comparison to mass fashion and premium fashion brands. This suggests that the luxury industry is still more focused on a narrow selection of body types, and sizes. This contributes to the limited representation in this industry. This can be connected to the long existing and very specific beauty standards in the luxury industry, which are associated with exclusivity and wealth, and reflect the aesthetic and lifestyle portrayed by luxury brands.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

*This chapter outlines the theoretical tools that are later used to conduct the analysis. The theories presented in this chapter include Barthes' Theory on Semiotics, Woke Washing, and the Glamorization of Diversity by Vänskä and Gurova (2023).*

#### 3.1 Semiotics

The discipline of semiotics is derived from the Theory of Signs, which examines the correlation between an object, sign, and interpreter based on a theoretical framework originally developed by Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce & Buchler 1902). This theory serves as the foundation for semiotic study, with subsequent theories developing from the analysis of signs (Kim et al. 2019). The Theory of Signs can also be used to understand how art symbolizes status and heritage in luxury brand imagery (Kim et al. 2019). References to art, often from different cultural spheres, are still relevant, especially when conveying complexity. Surrealism, which is prevalent in luxury marketing, embraces realism and abstractionism that appeals to an elite audience that understands its cultural capital (Kim et al. 2019). This theory helps to analyze campaign imagery and decipher symbolism, especially when visible logos are absent and replaced by brand codes that refer to underlying values associated with luxury.

Thus, Roland Barthes' Theory of Semiotics is considered an essential analytical tool, as the empirical data of the research consists of images. The theory assumes that an object has no meaning without its context, and meaning is created through social interactions and relationships to understand what the object represents (Kim et al. 2019). Barthes' Theory of Semiotics identifies three levels of semiotics in his article "The Photographic Message" (Barthes 2002). The first level refers to the concept of denotation, which involves the description of the image at the surface level, which looks at the basic meanings of the elements in the image. With denotation, an image depicting a flower is seen through descriptive and literal meanings, whereas connotation examines the cultural connotations and the deeper meanings embedded in the image, while analyzing the broader discourse or narrative context in which the image exists (Barthes 2002). Connotation is the significant meaning of the message; for example, a pearl necklace representing wealth (Barthes 2002). These connotations are used to construct an underlying message that causes the viewer to associate the narrative in the image with a specific meaning. Connotation is navigated by universal associations that enable messages to be conveyed without text, relying instead on cultural and social perceptions linked to specific objects (Barthes 2002). So, the more complex the connection is in an image, the more it is perceived as ambiguous when the viewer does not understand what the elements mean. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the symbolism or significance of the object within the context of the image and its social and cultural environment. The third level of semiotics focuses on myth, which Barthes (2002) describes as the meaning given to an object. This means that a myth is some kind of symbolic element that has a deeper narrative, an interpretation that enhances some type of historical or societal ideologies.

Semiotics is primarily used in analyzing photographs or campaign images to understand the complex symbolic systems that brands use to communicate identity and messages to consumers. Moreover, advertising semiotics analyzes images within the context of current

cultural trends (Oswald 2016). Advertising images can contain different types of symbolism, including iconic, indexical, and symbolic. Iconic symbols are directly linked to the object, while indexical symbols show traces of the object without depicting it directly. Symbols can include, for example, the brand logo (Kim et al. 2019). These symbols represent the brand directly or indirectly, depending on the context in which the advertising image is displayed.

Symbols alter interpretations of discourse in images or text, a concept highlighted by Foucault's discourse theory. This theory explores how language or imagery categorizes objects, shaping viewer interpretations based on their understanding (Foucault 2002). Foucault explains that knowledge paradigm shifts prompt truth reevaluations, necessitating new interpretive approaches. Thus, analyzing discourse involves scrutinizing an object's structures, properties, and symbols to grasp its message (Foucault 2002).

### **3.2 Woke-washing**

When brands use allusion to social issues, problems or movements in their advertising without genuinely engaging in the issue from a brand management perspective, it can be considered as woke-washing. The definition relates a strategy that involves contemporary knowledge of the current society (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). This can become clear if integration is done in an overly obvious way or when it does not align with the brand's image which would indicate that the social issues are not always integrated into the brand's standard (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

On the other hand, proactive actions towards a social, political, or environmental cause can be considered as genuine brand activism. Brands that contribute with a brand message or actions to meaningful change in society. However, this may mean that the action is not in line with the brand's identity or heritage, but only contributes to the cultural, social, or economic status of the brand (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

Fashion brands have to innovate and conform to contemporary culture and consumer demands. This can include demonstrating social commitment, or typical values aligning with current political or These messages can be made visible in ambiguous ways in advertising campaigns to be indirectly associated with a stance or commitment and is a phenomenon identified across both luxury, premium, and mass fashion brands (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

Brands address social issues and include them in their marketing. Examples include racism and feminism, as discussed by Sobande (2019). Thus, this is the element of how social issues are visible in brands' marketing and how these issues are misused by brands for business-oriented performances (Sobande 2019). It is common for brands to commercialize concepts in their marketing that allude to social justice, activism, and the appropriation of oppression of, for example, vulnerable groups that experience discrimination to show the opposite, which is inclusion, in their marketing (Sobande 2019). Solely because brands are aware of these issues and present a contrary commercial image that refutes norm-based cultures in the fashion industry, this does not indicate that the brand operates according to these guidelines in practice (Sobande 2019).

Brands try to align themselves with ideas of social justice, as this is important to the financial value of the brand (Sobande 2019). Common social issues visualized commercially are issues of inclusion or social statements about racism, gender, feminism, or disability (Sobande

2019) that become inclusive as part of the brand's values in marketing. Showcasing an image of inclusion and awareness of social issues can help strengthen the brand's position and legacy. Moreover, sometimes, issues relating to the inclusion of women, feminism, and social justice for people of color can be simply used for commercial purposes to increase the brand's relevance and profitability (Sobande 2019). According to Vänskä and Gurova (2023), the lack of commitment can also lead to the authenticity of the campaign being questioned. However, to determine the authenticity of these actions more accurately, the analysis would need to be done also on an organizational level. Although, Vänskä and Gurova (2023) suggest that neither LVMH and Kering meet their commitment to promoting equality and diversity standards internally, this leads to contradictions and ambiguities in their brand communication (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

### **3.3 Glamorization of Diversity**

Noted themes by Vänskä and Gurova (2023) used in the fashion industry by global luxury brands since 2010 that led to fashion scandals in advertisements have used content alluding to cultural appropriation, disability, mental health disorders, suicide, body image, and eating disorders. Furthermore, Vänskä and Gurova (2023) argue that these themes are recurrent and allude to an emotional advertising where various brands capitalize on these emotions to gain recognition from the audience. This type of narrative in the form of personal trauma (Vänskä & Gurova 2023) is reused by other groups in the form of brands to create a discourse related to societal issues. This can mean highlighting the problem and, through the glamorization of tragedies, or arousing contradictory emotions (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). The contradictory emotions evoked by campaign advertisements indicate that the content may be discriminatory or may be based on the offense of a group and the exploitation of other societal issues for the benefit of luxury fashion (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

Through the glamorization of body ideals and eating disorders, Vänskä and Gurova (2023) explain that a current fashionable body ideal is an androgynous person who has the silhouette of an adult boy or girl before puberty, this includes body types with very narrow hips, flat torso, and flawless skin. Furthermore, criticism is also directed at how these models appear in positions in the campaigns, which, when this body ideal has become a norm, has also reinforced for the viewer as a normalized appearance, which can lead to eating disorders or low self-esteem (Vänskrä & Gurova 2023). The luxury industry has a strong connection to aspiration and perfection, and a counteract to imperfection (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). This is thus applied to physicality, thinness, appearance, and fixation that promote mental disorders and eating disorders (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). Fashion brands that propagate these ideals in their marketing contribute to embodying this ideal more and increase indirect pressure and encouragement to strive for these unattainable goals (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

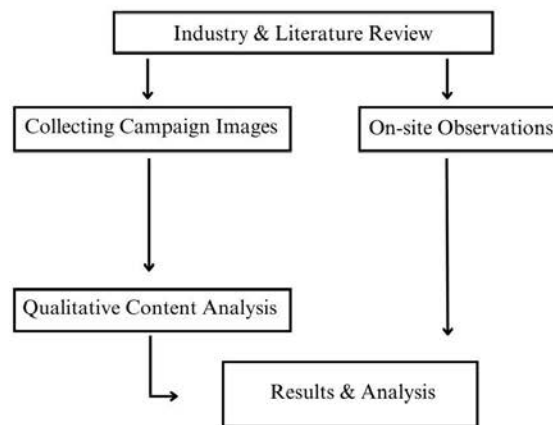
Further, luxury brands capitalize on the social health of others because it is not visible in all cases, but through symbolism in advertisements linked to problems, it creates an emotional connection. Furthermore, Vänskä and Gurova (2023) suggest that it is also not acceptable to exploit disability in terms of creating sales and an emotional connection with customers by using people with visible disabilities in a tokenistic way. Additionally, appropriating other people's cultural artifacts in fashion campaigns to connect or show that the brand is part of or stands up for other cultural contexts can also be a glamorization of diversity (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

## 4. Research Design and Methodology

*This chapter describes the study's methodological approach, outlining the method and reasoning approach for the research. The section also presents the criteria and the created model for the empirical data collection. Finally, criticisms and limitations of the chosen method based on previous research are also presented.*

### 4.1 Method

This study adopts a qualitative research approach based on concepts in social science and sociology. A qualitative research approach is based on qualitative visual content analysis, which is desired to contribute to a broader understanding of the visual elements under investigation (Rose 2016). The abductive method is applied to facilitate understanding between data and theory, conducting a qualitative content analysis, according to Bryman (2016). This approach follows a parallel framework between data, theory, and analysis (Vespestad & Clancy 2021). The analysis focuses on campaign images, and the decoding of the different elements involved in the to build on the thematic commonalities between them.



*Model 1: Research design (Authors' own model)*

#### 4.1.1 Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is based on a thematic approach. This means that categories are developed from the data to draw conclusions and gain a deeper understanding of the analyzed material. The method is based on a systematic coding of the data that contributes to the identification of themes (Vespestad & Clancy 2021). Furthermore, qualitative content analysis enables a more dynamic research process through the continuous development of the themes and categories in the research process (Vespestad & Clancy 2021). This method is often used by researchers who want to investigate different types of visual communication strategies in the form of advertisements or campaigns, which include both visual and textual formats (Rose 2016). This research concentrates on visual content to explore and analyze campaign images. This approach provides a more profound knowledge of the selected context combined with the resources of different contemporary advertising campaigns in the form of empirical social science research data (Kolbe & Burnett 1991). The method is

considered suitable for analyzing visual material as it explores deeper understandings and cultural meanings within the data. Previous research has used qualitative content analysis to examine verbal and non-verbal messages in campaign images, advertising, and consumer behavior (Elo & Kyngnäs 2008).

The advantage of conducting qualitative content analysis lies in its systematic and flexible nature, which reduces the amount of material compared to quantitative content analysis, which aims to find patterns and relationships in the data (Schreier 2012). Thus, qualitative content analysis allows the possibility to concentrate and explore the deeper underlying meanings in the collected data (Schreier 2012).

#### 4.1.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis can be considered a more specific approach within the method of qualitative content analysis (Thompson 2022). As this research adopts an abductive reasoning approach, the Thematic Analysis Framework by Thompson (2022) is applied, with some modifications that align with the research purpose. This framework identifies specific steps to be followed when conducting abductive thematic analysis. The framework also offers a way to distinguish this specific approach from inductive and deductive reasoning methods. The challenge with qualitative thematic analysis can be considered to be transparency, and a lack of rigor in the process. The use of a method guide or framework can therefore be beneficial for the consistency and clarity of the process (Thompson 2022).

Framework steps	Description
Familiarization of the data	Refers to the first stage where the researchers review and make initial notes and observations about the data.
Coding	The second step in the framework process is coding in which all the obtained data is categorized based on commonalities. The process includes several layers of coding which helps to refine the code names and the used descriptions.
Coding sheet	Coding sheet establishes a more structured view of the coded data, where the researchers organize the data in separate coding sheets to ensure consistency of the process.
Identifying of themes	The process of identifying the themes is done based on the codes. The researchers develop the themes according to the larger meanings and narratives behind the codes by trying to find commonalities. This is also done with the support of previous literature.
Theorizing	The theorizing phase is where the data is related to the themes while finding support in the previous literature, which closely relates to the abductive approach of the research. The data and themes should not be forced to conform to existing research, nor should they be entirely detached from it.

*Model 2: Adapted table of Thematic Analysis Framework by Thompson (2022).*

## 4.2 Abductive Approach

An abductive approach in research entails that data collection is organized based on the purpose of the study, and previously established theories, which combines inductive and deductive reasoning methods and is often used in sociological fields (Dubois & Gadde 2002). This means that there is a systematic combination as the content of the study is conducted in parallel with data collection, analysis, and the theoretical framework (Dubois & Gadde 2002). Following Dubois and Gadde's (2002) framework of the abductive approach, it clarified the possibility of matching material to previous theories and exploring and developing selected themes. This also facilitated the possibility of developing new themes to the existing material.

The development of theories is often rooted in empirical phenomena and contextual exploration, although it is criticized for being dependent on preconceptions (Dubois & Gadde 2002). The validity of the approach is strengthened by the discovery of insights in empirical data, thorough analysis, and interpretation, leading to new perspectives (Dubois & Gadde 2002). The approach also involves continuous comparison of categories to discover different meanings and dimensions between them. Data will be collected as a continuous process, distinguishing different levels of categories until the analysis reaches theoretical saturation, and no new data will be collected, leading to the emergence of new theoretical dimensions of the categories (Vespestad & Clancy 2021). Thus, the data is divided into main categories and subcategories, allowing for a parallel analysis based on the sub-themes identified.

This reasoning approach thus allows for direction and redirection, which Dubois and Gadde (2002) argue are necessary analytical steps to achieve a connection between theory and data collection. The combination of theory, data sources, and analysis makes it possible to find a fit for all three without forcing the material to match the theory. Moreover, it allows the development of new themes through this approach, as previously mentioned in the context of the parallel work of theory, material, and analysis. Finally, the abductive approach enables a systematic process between reality and theoretical frameworks to develop as a result (Dubois & Gadde 2002).

## 4.3 Sampling and Selection Criteria

Sampling refers to selecting data from a large pool or population (Krippendorff 2018). Using sampling plans reduces bias in the research by establishing a systematic method to choose data points. The sampling technique used in this study is relevance sampling, which is used to deliberately select data units that can provide insights to address the research questions (Krippendorff 2018). The intended data for the research should be sampled from a pool pertinent to the research. The data used in qualitative content analysis is considered relevant when there is a clear connection to the research purpose (Krippendorff 2018). The selection criteria were based on this foundation.

The criteria established for the data selection of the brand campaigns include several points that aid the selection of data that provides value and is relevant to the research purpose and questions (Kim et al. 2019). The overall research delimitations outline that the campaigns must originate from the chosen four Parisian heritage luxury brands.

Furthermore, the selected images must contain at least one human model, ensuring that the images are not illustrations, or made with artificial intelligence (Freitas, Jordan & Hughes

2018). Images considered for selection may include typographic elements such as logo campaigns with prominently featured brand logos. Collection campaigns include more than one model, while atmospheric images depict models in lifestyle-evoking environments, typically without direct logo placement (Kim et al. 2019).

#### **4.3.1 Data Collection**

Various methods are available for collecting data suitable for qualitative content analysis, including various types of interviews, observations and questionnaires (Weber 1990). The use of various forms of visual data is also a common form of data for qualitative content analysis. This may include photographs, advertisements or visual content on social media or online (Rose 2016).

Digital campaign images are considered as the main data for this research. The campaign images are collected from the brands' official channels, and from well-established and industry-recognized digital fashion magazines; Tag-Walk, Fashion Gone Rouge and The Impression Magazine. The trustworthiness of the sources was of high consideration, to ensure that the images were original, and not edited or altered from the brands' original campaigns.

#### **4.3.2 Empirical Material**

The empirical material consists of visual campaign images from the selected Parisian heritage luxury brands. The images are selected from both Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter seasons, during the time period of 2020–2024. The images include both women's and men's collections. The types of campaign analyzed consist of ready-to-wear, accessories and haute couture. Women's campaigns are expected to be more prevalent in the data set, resulting from the fashion industry's larger focus on women's wear in general.

The empirical material consists of an uneven number of campaign images per brand. This selection has been carried out based on the specific criteria that the analyzed data needs align with the purpose of the research. This more organic selection method has been used to ensure that the data has significance for the research and is consistent with the research questions (Bryman 2016). The final data collection consists of a total of 32 campaign images, which was considered an appropriate sample size for the used method. Qualitative content analysis focuses on in-depth discoveries and deeper understandings of the data. This allows for a smaller data collection, in contrast to a quantitative content analysis, which looks for patterns and relationships within the data, thus requiring a larger sample size (Bryman 2016).

### **4.4 On-site Observations of Luxury Heritage Brands in Paris**

The visual material has been collected through observation of the museums La Galerie Dior, Musée Yves Saint Laurent, and the exhibitions 'Traversing Appearance' at Center Pompidou and LV DREAM at Louis Vuitton. The content in the museums and exhibitions, includes archived photographs and design objects. Observations through on-site visits to the brands' stores in Paris have also been documented to further explore the brands' heritage in relation to

contemporary themes. The observations include brand symbols, visual art and presentation of collections and stores. This material is used to strengthen the analysis of the digital campaign images to see how the brands' heritage and brand identity are presented.

To see the contemporaneity of the brands, the selected luxury stores were also visited to investigate how brand communication and the developed themes reflect brand identity through visual photographs of in-store environments. Conducting the observations in Paris provides an excellent opportunity to visit fashion photography archives which are relevant to this part of the research. This offers additional information to the already developed themes. Experiencing the brand communications in physical and three-dimensional contexts adds another dimension to the visual analysis, otherwise existing in a purely two dimensional form of communication.

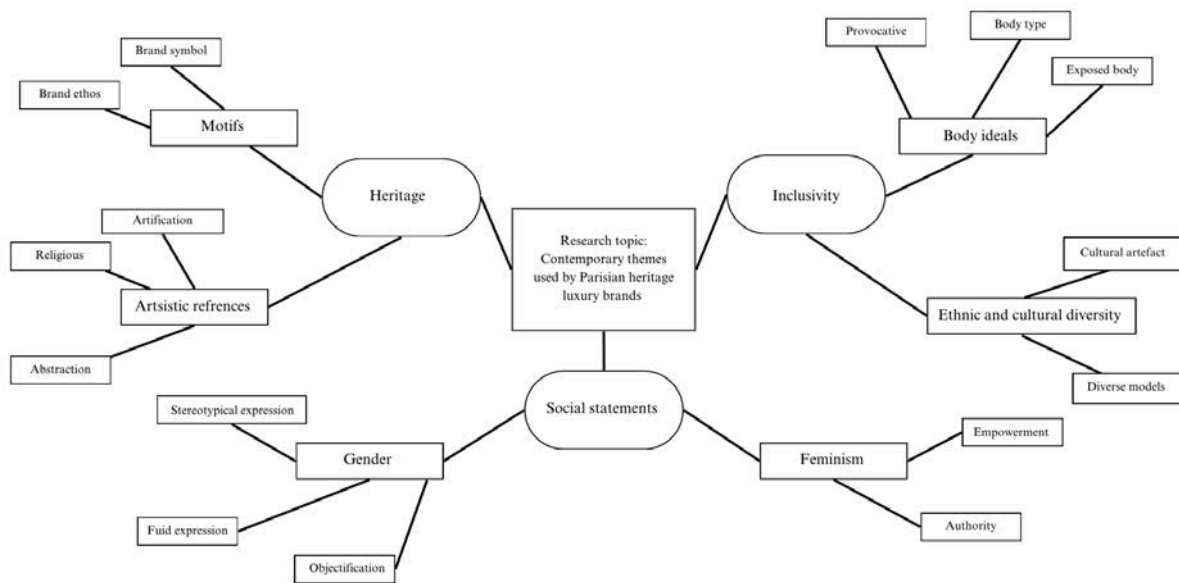
## 4.5 Coding

In thematic analysis, coding is a central step for identifying common themes and elements in the visual data (Vespestad & Clancy 2021). The process of coding was carried out separately by the two researchers and then combined and compiled into a collective coding sheet. This process is referred to as analyst triangulation, in which the aim is to evaluate the obtained data and the consistency of the findings (Patton 2015) This is primary to the outcome of the study, as it reduces bias, and increases the validity of the findings (Lloyd 2011).

The coding frame for the research includes main categories, which describe or represent the key concepts in the data, as well as subcategories, which provide further details or information about the main category. Each image is coded under one main and sub- category only once (Schreier 2012). The process of coding, and identifying common themes and patterns from the data is done through an iterative process, which refers to a proceeding where the researchers go back and forth between the existing literature, and the obtained data. The themes are therefore identified, and titled by the researchers, with the influence of previous research as a foundation. Thus, the identified themes are not directly found through exciting literature or theoretical models (Thompson 2022).

This means that the coding defines which initial codes are primary to categorize and is used as a guide to select relevant data to analyze (Bryman 2016). The criticism of this type of coding is that it develops concepts rather than theories and that the researcher selects parts of a concept to be studied (Bryman 2016). This step has been determined to be necessary to specifically answer the research questions being investigated to limit the research to the specific topic being investigated in visual communication.

The process of identifying the common themes from the data begins with the assigned codes, which then progress toward the more prominent themes and the primary research purpose as Model 2, illustrates. The three different levels in the model represent the codes, the sub-themes, and finally, the three main themes (Attride-Stirling 2001). This model has been constructed during the processes of coding and identifying themes as a visual guide to present the process of managing the data.



Model 3: adapted from Attride-Stirling's (2001), Thematic Network Analysis model.

Subcategories	Description
Feminism	Conveys female model in an empowered manner
Gender	Conveys model's gender expression in a stereotypical or gender fluid manner
Ethnic and Cultural Diversity	Conveys model's race/ethnicity or cultural background as a key element
Body Ideals	Conveys model's body as a key element, with exposed skin or body figure
Motifs	Conveys brand symbols/ codes or distinctive thematic elements to the brand
Artistic References	Conveys creative atmosphere in combination with staging and storytelling

Model 4: Table of subcategory descriptions (Authors' own model)

## **4.6 Method Criticism and Limitations**

Content analysis as a method has been criticized for being interpretive when dealing with visual content (Weber 1990). A considered criticism towards content analysis as a method that analyzes visuals is the subjectivity of the made interpretations (Rose 2016). This means that how the visual content is interpreted can be dependent on the researchers, the various perspectives that are applied, as well as different frameworks which through the process of interpretation, is seen. This means that the same images can offer different interpretations under different circumstances (Rose 2016).

Further, the difficulty with campaign images is that they are representative of the analysis of images, as the images were taken during different eras and thus are difficult to recreate (Rose 2016). According to Bryman (2016), a large part of the data is, therefore, content based on the aesthetics of different photographers, and how the image has been shot. Making it difficult to know what is visible in the image, and what has been left out. A further criticism of images as the analyzed content is that they can be interpreted and perceived differently depending on the context. However, In the context of social studies, this connection to images might also provide valuable insight and reflect on the contemporary zeitgeist, trends in fashion photography, and the specific contextual environment.

### **4.6.1 Transparency**

Transparency is considered a highly important part of any qualitative research. As a concept, it relates to the open and diligent description of the research process by the researchers (Tuval-Mashiach 2016). Transparency in research applies to all aspects of the study, from the used literature to the method, the collected data, and the analysis (Tuval-Mashiach 2016).

In this research, transparency has been considered through the acknowledgment of pre-existing knowledge, and the possible biases of the researchers involved. This better ensures an honest representation of the influence these elements can have on the research (Sinkovics & Alfoldi 2012). The authors of the research have diverse prior educational backgrounds, with one author having a background in International Business, and the other author in Luxury Communication and Art studies. The varied backgrounds can reflect on the perspectives of the research, and the lens through which data and interpretations are seen.

Furthermore, transparency applies to the data used and obtained for the research (Tuval-Mashiach 2016). The main data of this research consists of campaign images, therefore, the copyrights and ownership of this material are essential to acknowledge (Rose 2016) The sources from which the data has been obtained are cited under the images when they are first presented in the chapter Results and Analysis. Additionally, the detailed source and ownership of the images are further specified in the reference list.

### **4.6.2 Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of qualitative research requires transparency of the research process, and that the researchers are aware of their own biases, and how their perceptions can influence the analysis (Sinkovics & Alfoldi 2012). Moreover, reliability is part of the developing part

between theory and data that provides a combination of method, data analysis and results formulation. Sinkovics and Alfoldi (2012) describe that credibility arises when there is a connection between theory and empirical data, and the results.

Qualitative content analysis relies heavily on the researchers who are in charge of interpreting the data and identifying the themes. This can enable the presence of possible bias in the research process. Specifically, confirmation bias in qualitative research refers to seeking to confirm a certain outcome, finding, or message in the considered data, to validate a pre-existing notion (McSweeney 2021). This can apply to ideas that align with researchers' thoughts or with previous research. On the other hand, confirmation bias can also lead to researchers ignoring or placing less emphasis on the opposing data or findings for the same reasons (McSweeney 2021).

Within this study, the researchers have addressed the confirmation bias by closely documenting the process of coding and the identification of the themes. This can increase the trustworthiness of the study, while providing a way for the researchers to review the research process at any point in the study, to identify possible instances of bias (McSweeney 2021). Furthermore, as previously stated, the coding process was done through researcher triangulation, which can help to eliminate the biases that the individual researcher might hold (Lloyd 2011).

## 5. Results and Analysis

This chapter focuses on the analysis and discussion of the empirical data. The subsequent analysis is guided by identified themes derived from the qualitative content analysis, which follows after the theorizing step of the Thematic Framework by Thompson (2022). The other layer of the analysis employs the Theory of Semiotics to analyze the different layers of meaning in these images (Barthes 2002).

The results and analysis chapter is separated into two sub-chapters for answering the research questions separately. The first sub-chapter will answer research question one:

**Which contemporary themes are commonly incorporated by Parisian heritage luxury brands in their brand campaigns?**

### 5.1 Social Statements

A theme of social statements refers to how the selected brands address relevant societal topics in their campaign images, through the visual elements and narrative choices made in the images (Sobande 2019). This chapter will identify how the brand campaigns utilize social statements specifically relating to feminism and different forms of gender expression.

#### 5.1.1 Feminism

The theme of feminism can be described by the definitions connected to Michaelidou et al. (2022) explanation of femvertising as a concept in advertising. This refers to the way that women are portrayed in advertising visuals as authoritative and powerful while avoiding the negative stereotypical depictions of women.



*Image 1: Dior Fall 2022 Campaign (Niedermair 2022)*

*Image 2: Dior Vibe Spring 2022 Campaign (Niedermair 2022)*

*Image 3: Saint Laurent Fall 2022 Campaign (Sorrenti 2022)*

The theme of feminism is included in campaigns through representing women as empowered, and as having authority and power. This portrayal is recognized through the poses and elements featured in the images (Michaelidou et al. 2022). *Image 1*, Dior Fall 2022 campaign, draws inspiration from different powerful women throughout history, while also claiming to address the “social conditioning” that is imposed on women (Dior n.d). This refers to the expectation that women are meant to conform to certain social stereotypes (Dior n.d). The image shows the model in a statuesque pose with a red background, giving the illusion of a frame around her. The model is also wearing a harness-inspired garment, which further illustrates aspects of power and dominance identified in the image. Therefore, the visual elements can be seen to communicate the importance and high consideration of the woman in the image (Michaelidou et al. 2022). Furthermore, this portrayal goes against certain social stereotypes which typically convey women more softly and submissively, rather than in a strong manner or in a leadership position.

Moreover, *image 2*, the Dior Vibe Spring 2022 campaign, features a woman holding a fencing mask and blade. The overall campaign features several female athletes from different fields of sports. While this image specifically highlights the fencer Sum Yiwen (Dior n.d). The conveyal of the feminist theme is evident in the campaign, as it focuses on highlighting women’s abilities in sports, and especially in a field, which can be stereotypically considered more masculine or male-dominated. The campaign reflects on a quite common portrayal of femvertising, which connects women and sports, emphasizing the capabilities of women (Michaelidou et al. 2022).

This aspect is further illustrated in *image 3*, the Saint Laurent Fall 2022 campaign, which features a woman in a dynamic pose, sitting on a chair with her legs spread open while looking directly at the camera. This way of constructing the image is often used to communicate the authority and power that the subject of the image holds. The interpretation of the feminist theme connects to the previous *image 2*, with the similar lower angle of the image.

As previously discussed, Saint Laurent’s brand identity closely connects to the values of independence and femininity. Combining these two elements with a feminist aura of "self-empowerment" gives the brand's image a quality of self-assurance. This is particularly evident when the woman in question is seen wearing a Saint Laurent garment without a male figure present (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

The portrayal of the model connects to a powerful way of showcasing women. This contributes to the model being perceived as in control and as an authority in the image, primarily due to the positioning of the model's body and face towards the camera (Kim et al. 2018). These elements in the advertising campaigns allow the brand to present a more feminist image, enhancing its profile (Michaelidou et al. 2022). This type of marketing is common in contemporary fashion society, as seen in other campaign images, as the symbolism associated with it represents a shift from the traditional emphasis on material acquisition to a focus on women's self-sufficiency and independence.



*Image 4: Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer 2024 Campaign (Kitajima 2023)*

*Image 5: Saint Laurent Winter 2020 Campaign (Teller 2020)*

*Image 6: Saint Laurent Winter 2022 Campaign (Teller 2022)*

The theme of feminism is also shown in the campaign images through the portrayal of women's independence and freedom of expression (Michaelidou et al. 2022) *Image 4*, the Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer 2024 Men's campaign, showcases the artist Rihanna during her pregnancy, with visibly highlighting her stomach. The campaign can be linked to a recently re-emerged trend in fashion, in which women embrace their pregnancy through accentuating the pregnancy bump with clothing or by fully revealing it with outfits (Vieira 2024). In the past, pregnancy has been viewed in different ways, and at times, women showing their bodies during pregnancy has not always been done in such a visible way (Vieira 2024). Thus, the image can be seen as aligning with feminist ideals, as it brings the experiences of women more apparent, while also highlighting the strength of women's bodies.

However, as a brand Louis Vuitton seems to be highly aware about the current trends, and Rihanna's influence as the recent initiator of this trend. Thus, the inclusion of her in the campaign can rather be seen as a way to link the brand to relevant trends in current culture. Furthermore, a noted aspect in the image is also the fashion industry's trend of gender blurring (Vänskä & Gurova 2023), which could possibly be what Louis Vuitton wants to convey by placing pregnant Rihanna as the face of the men's campaign.

*Image 5*, Saint Laurent Winter 2020 campaign, shows a woman in a highly sensual display, with her eyes closed, biting into a rose. The image highlights a more complex visual approach to brand campaign images. Referring to Lee, Hur, and Watkins (2018) findings regarding visual ambiguity in luxury brand advertising imagery. Meaning that the campaign images can include elements which lead to different interpretations. One interpretation of this campaign image could reflect female liberty, through the visualization of the sensual expression of the flower as a metaphor for a woman (Lindqvist 2006). According to Lindqvist (2006). The flower symbolizes femininity, and the rose specifically denotes the female gender (Mier-Cruz 2021). The action of eating the rose can also symbolize a woman who exceeds the normative expectations of society. Indeed, she wears pink which is traditionally a feminine color associated with innocence, while conveying a sexual message.

*Image 6*, Saint Laurent Winter 2022 campaign, shows a woman in a sheer dress that exposes her breasts. The image could also be interpreted in very contrasting ways. One perspective could view the image as highlighting female nudity in a more empowering manner. This

interpretation aligns with the brand identity of Saint Laurent, and the perspective from which the brand often portrays women in its advertising. As the brand ethos focuses on women owning their bodies and their power, women's nudity is framed as something empowering (Foreman 2017). Furthermore, the highlighting of the bare breasts in the image, can be connected to the double standard of the media's censorship of women's breasts, while the bare male chest is considered as socially acceptable. Therefore, the visual elements of the campaign can be considered to challenge certain traditional narratives of women's nudity in advertisements. (Michaelidou et al. 2022). This campaign can therefore connect to the theme of feminism by highlighting the rejection of the usual societal image of women and their bodies.

The campaign images could also be seen from a different perspective, relating the nudity of the model to women's objectification. Especially with the long history of luxury advertisements using women's nudity as a direct selling point for sexual allure (Michaelidou et al. 2022). Thus, featuring female models in this manner can be a continuation of this practice that prioritizes the commodification of women's bodies. However, nudity does not always have to equal sexual attractiveness, but can instead be seen as a means of empowerment and ownership. The campaign also builds on Saint Laurent's connection to the women's sexual revolution in 1968 (Musee Saint Laurent et al. 2024), when sheer fabrics allowed the female body to become more visible. Saint Laurent created the nude look to celebrate the female body and encourage women to own their sexuality (Appendix 12).



*Image 7: Dior Fall 2020 Campaign (Mattoli 2020)*

Dior Fall 2020 campaign *Image 7*, makes a direct statement about feminism with the t-shirt slogan "I Say I", which can be interpreted to communicate women's autonomy over their choices and their voice in society (Fem & Waller 2003). The image communicates a visual message through the printed quote on the t-shirt. This element in the image simplifies the interpretation of the message conveyed in the campaign. The presented statement can be seen as a direct strategy for femvertising. Referring to the advertising strategy in which the campaign intends to convey a message of women's empowerment (Michaelidou et al. 2022).

Furthermore, as Waller (2004) describes, socially active moments like the Dior feminism can be a direct stimulus to provoke an observer. However, with Dior's positioning, this strategy

can contribute to the awareness of feminism, and generate interest and commitment from new customers, leading to a new positioning for the brand.

The inclusion of feminist themes or statements in the campaign images can be seen as sending a positive message, and a step for luxury heritage brands to be socially progressive in their advertising. The campaigns could also be viewed as the opposite of what the movement of feminism stands for, with the construction of a very narrow picture of feminism and women in general. Specifically, the Dior Fall 2020 campaign, claims to take a stance against stereotypes of women and embrace diversity (Dior n.d). However, the imagery of what kind of women are included in these campaign images still follows traditional beauty standards, featuring skinny and objectively beautiful women (Michaelidou et al. 2022). Thus, Dior's claim that the campaign fights stereotypes and showcases diversity shows the very narrow perspective that the brand has towards this definition. As feminism as a movement focuses on the empowerment of all types of women, the limited portrayal can be viewed as counterproductive and superficial.

### 5.1.2 Feminist Themes in Campaign Imagery

Based on the analysis of the campaign images, the use of feminist statements and themes can be observed to differ between the brands. More specifically, Dior uses the theme of feminism quite prominently in their campaigns. Thus, relying on the strategy of femvertising with both direct and indirect messaging about the empowerment of women (Michaelidou et al. 2022). Therefore, the theme of feminism can be seen as a very intentional branding strategy for Dior. This is implemented in the form feminist statements in their embroidery on their designs, which is further exposed as visual communication in La Galerie Dior exposition The Ateliers (Appendix 5 & Appendix 6). Feminism is an identified theme that can be linked to, among others, the Me Too movement that gained widespread attention in 2017 (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). Since the appointment of Maria Grazia Chiuri in 2016 as Dior's creative director, the inclusion of the feminist social statements has been very prominent in the imagery of the campaigns (La Galerie Dior 2024). The same theme can be seen from the analysis of the data, where evidently different elements relating to women's rights and empowerment are included.

One key aspect that speaks for a more genuine inclusion of the feminist statements, is the continuous inclusion of the theme in multiple Dior campaigns, since the appointment of Maria Grazia Chiuri. Thus, including this theme might not come across as a one-time opportunity to capture attention. A contrary view reflects on the financial motivations behind the campaigns, which can be questioned based on Vänskä and Gurova's (2023) definitions of woke-washing. For instance, a similar t-shirt to the one featured in *image 7*, with the printed quote "*We should all be feminists*" retailed at the time of the campaign for around 600 US dollars. Part of the profits from the shirt was donated to a climate charity, but not to a cause supporting women specifically (Peoples 2017). Moreover, the amount of profit donated was not disclosed by Dior, thus creating a more inauthentic image of the entire campaign.

Contrasting Dior's interpretation of the feminist theme, as a brand Saint Laurent adopts a different approach to the incorporation of this theme in their campaigns. Saint Laurent's aesthetic focuses on modernity, and freedom, with the aim to connect the visuals to the essence of Parisian style (La Parisienne, Gellerie Dior 2024). Thus, the brand's interpretation focuses more on the ideas of liberation, as opposed to Dior's bold and often more

stereotypical campaigns. The more provocative approach used by Saint Laurent, can often be an intentional technique used by luxury brands, as Vézina and Paul (1997) suggest. The intention being to shock the viewer and create memorability for the brand, while also shaping the way that the viewer remembers the campaign (Vézina & Paul 1997). This approach has, however, been a criticism towards the brand, as they frequently publish campaigns with a lot of nudity and objectifying poses (Moore 2020). What arises in this discussion is whether Saint Laurent uses such a strategy to adapt to the rapidly changing digital market to keep their relevance, or if this approach is a continuation of their brand heritage?

### 5.1.3 Gender

The theme of gender is identified through different perspectives of visual gender expression in advertising. The images under this theme, reflect various representations of gender, from stereotypical to more fluid expressions of gender (Domenique & Childs 2021).



*Image 8: Saint Laurent Fall 2022 Campaign (Sorrenti 2022)*  
*Image 9: Saint Laurent Denim 2021 Campaign (Sorrenti 2021)*



*Image 10: Louis Vuitton LV Arclight 2.0 2023 Campaign (Jacobs 2023).*

Elements of gender fluidity are found to be depicted in several campaign images. Specifically, the identified campaigns highlight more expansive ideals of masculinity and gender norms (Domenique & Childs 2021). *Image 8*, the Saint Laurent Fall 2022 campaign, showcases a male model in heels and with painted nails. The type of shoes the model is wearing reflects the theme of gender fluidity by blurring the line of what garments or accessories are considered ideal for men or women (Michaelidou et al. 2022). Väncke and Gurova (2023) further explore how elements of gender fluidity are used in fashion to emphasize their segment as more authoritative and fashionable.

In general, the traditional identifiers of gender have become less relevant. The campaigns thus align with this societal shift towards a more neutral and not as-divided definition of gender, as illustrated in *image 9*, Saint Laurent's Denim 2021 campaign. In other cases, men are presented as objects of desire in a way that is not as pronounced, as shown in *image 9*. In this way, various attributes are combined to contextualize a stereotypical image of gender fluidity, which is then objectified to generate sales by showing the brand's relationship to the discussion about gender.

Saint Laurent (*image 8*) and (*image 9*), which both exclude a logo that can link the campaign to the brand. The accessibility of the image allows for the construction of a message that can connect to the brand's DNA in the form of its distinctive visual elements in the campaign images, which align with characteristics of the brand. This is only the case if the consumer is aware that the aesthetic elements of the image are related to the brand.

*Image 10*, the Louis Vuitton LV Arclight 2.0 2023 campaign shows the artist Jaden Smith as the celebrity face of the campaign for the women's sneaker collection. The image presents Jaden styled in women's clothing, with another female model. The campaign received some negative reactions from the audience. Some critics focused on the perceived emasculation of men, as Jaden Smith was featured wearing women's clothes, opposed to being portrayed in a more masculine look (Silbert 2023). However, restrictions around a certain portrayal of masculinity have changed. Thus, allowing and normalizing the representation of a broader representation of men and masculinity. This also seems to be what Louis Vuitton wants to reflect in their campaigns, aiming to show that their garments are not gender specific. However, this approach to following this shift in society does not necessarily appeal to the entirety of the brand's audience, as seen from the reaction to the campaign (Silbert 2023).



LOUIS VUITTON

*Image 11: Louis Vuitton Capucines 2021 Campaign (Meisel 2021)*

*Image 12: Louis Vuitton x Yayoi Kusama 2023 Campaign (Meisel 2023)*

The gender theme can also be viewed from an alternative perspective, highlighting campaign images that stereotypically portray gender. Specifically, women are often portrayed as highly idealized, emphasizing traits of traditional femininity. This portrayal may also refer to, for example, the objectification of women to create a desire for the brand or the products (Michaelidou et al. 2022).

*Image 11*, Louis Vuitton Capucines 2021 campaign, and *image 12*, Louis Vuitton 2023 Collaboration campaign with Yayoi Kusama, both feature the female models lying down in poses that exaggerate the figure of the body. Additionally, the sensual expressions and depiction of conventional beauty standards reflect the theme of stereotypical gender representation of women (Fem & Waller 2003). The expression of the both models looking toward the viewer in a pose that may indicate an invitation (Kim et al. 2018).

Both *image 11* and *image 12* serve as part of product campaigns for bags. The portrayed women are visually linked to the bags to evoke passion, which is a strategy commonly used in luxury sales to evoke emotion, as Adomaitis and Saiki (2018) suggest. Furthermore, in these campaigns, the women are depicted as objects specifically for the purpose of luxury items (Adomaitis & Saiki 2018). Meaning that the models are portrayed in a way that creates an association between the more sexually toned pose, and the aimed desire created for the bag in the image (Kim et al. 2018). This type of imagery can be linked to a very traditional way of portraying women in fashion advertising (Michaelidou et al. 2022). What the images have in common is that the narrative in the image alludes to a form of temptation, and the women are stereotypically objectified to convey a sense of desire and emotional involvement. Similarly, the products are in secondary focus as the attention is drawn to the product placement in relation to the model's behavior.



*Image 13: Saint Laurent Winter 2020 Campaign (Teller 2020)*

*Image 14: Saint Laurent Summer 2022 AD Campaign (Teller 2022)*

The theme of gender is further identified in *image 13* of Saint Laurent's Winter 2020 campaign, which shows a female model dressed in latex, posing with her face hidden. This arrangement allows the viewer to look at the image without being confronted with the model's expression, which can be interpreted as an objective depiction, a common approach in portraits of women (Newheiser, Lafrance & Dovidio, 2019). Through a Semiotic analysis

of the meaning and connotation of latex (Barthes 2002), connections arise to more explicit clothing that influence the interpretation. The exposed pose can also be a provocative tactic to stimulate associations that influence the viewer's impression (Vézina & Paul 1997). Objectification of women is considered a common practice in fashion advertising; the approach aims to attract consumers through the use of sex appeal to promote an attractiveness associated with the brand (Newheiser, Lafrance & Dovidio 2019) The approach involves portraying the model as an object rather than a person (Newheiser, Lafrance & Dovidio 2019).

In contrast, *image 14*, Saint Laurent's Summer 2022 Ad campaign, shows a woman with her legs apart in a pose that can be interpreted as objectifying, which is reinforced by the red color symbolizing attraction or prohibition (Elliot & Maier 2014). When alluding to the color red as a prohibition, the message also becomes stronger as models stare straight into the camera, which can symbolize control and ownership (Elliot & Maier 2014). This element of the image expresses an ambiguity between ownership and sensuality. The message is distorted by reclaiming an objectifying pose, generating ambiguity in what the image represents. For *image 14*, the image can convey a sense of strength and clarity as the woman combines a more objectifying position based on her position on her legs but also indicates that the choice is hers through the direct gaze.

Similarities between *image 3*, *image 9*, and *image 14* all from Saint Laurent's campaigns are that the models pose almost the same despite the perceived different genders. This means that objectified poses can apply to both genders but with different interpretations. Saint Laurent is known for using androgyny, and gender ambiguity to possibly neutralize and remove the focus from male or female, as the men also adopt poses that mimic those of the women. This is also found to be part of Saint Laurent's visual communication, which is highlighted in the Musée Yves Saint Laurent, where visual focus is placed on the body, and its silhouettes, that go beyond the model's gender identifications (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris 2024). Which can also mean reinforcing certain gender attributes to pursue pride and empowerment.

#### **5.1.4 Gender Fluidity and Gender Binarism in Campaign Imagery**

Parisian heritage brands use various contemporary elements to reflect different gender dynamics, as illustrated in the campaign images. Normalizing the objectification of women is considered a problematic phenomenon, as exhibited in these campaign images. The consequences of conveying models in this way contribute to the continued normalization of it. The model being portrayed in this way can be considered a societal myth (Barthes 2002) which reinforces negative and stereotypical portrayals of women.

From the campaign images, it is evident that women are still sometimes being portrayed as objects for visualizing the brand identity in campaign images to the clients through storytelling. In this portrayal, women are still stripped of ownership of their exposure as an effort to use her as persona for the brand's in visual communication and aesthetic. The woman as a model is also there because she fits the brand's ideals. This goes against the more empowered portrayal of women.

The campaign images also reflect a more gender fluid portrayal of men. This is done mostly through the fashion and styling elements in the images, but also with posing and the narratives reflected in the visuals. There is a clear focus with Saint Laurent and also Louis Vuitton as the brands that employ this approach more vividly in their campaigns. This

approach initiates a discourse that challenges viewers' preconceptions and changes conventional perspectives (Foucault 2002), as this portrayal of men can, to some, appear as controversial or provocative. Interpreting these campaign images provides new perspectives on how brands navigate between more contemporary and more binary approaches to the representations of gender.

## 5.2 Inclusivity

Inclusivity encompassed many aspects within fashion advertising (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). Within the analyzed images, the theme is conceptualized through the presence of ethnic diversity and body diversity in their campaign images. The importance of the theme relates to the issues regarding equality and representation in society, which is a problem also reflected within fashion advertising campaigns (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

### 5.2.1 Ethnic and Cultural Diversity

The sub-theme of ethnic and cultural diversity is recognized in the campaign images through the featuring of diverse models from varied ethnic backgrounds, and with campaigns using elements of different cultural influences.



*Image 15: Saint Laurent Winter 2023 Campaign (Luchford 2023)*  
*Image 16: Louis Vuitton Fall 2021 Ad Campaign (Walker 2021)*

The inclusion of ethnic diversity in campaign images can be seen as elements or choices of models that are represented in the images. *Image 15*, Saint Laurent's Winter 2023 campaign, features two models who appear to have different ethnic backgrounds (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). The campaign image shows that Saint Laurent as a brand embraces beauty ideals that extend beyond the traditional Euro-centric standards, which have long prioritized whiteness and certain hair types. For example, Saint Laurent drew inspiration for his collections from different countries' cultures, such as Africa, Mali, Morocco, India, and Spain. While also including models representative of these cultures (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris 2024).

These standards have also been long associated with luxury brands, and which kind of look is considered as aspirational for these brands (Michaelidou et al. 2022). The hairstyle of the model featured on the left can be seen to connect to the brand's aim to include cultural inclusivity, where the hair symbolizes an artifact or object in the form of a hairstyle.

*Image 16*, Louis Vuitton Fall 2021 Ad campaign, also features a diverse group of models from different ethnic backgrounds, prominently in the campaign image. Analyzing Louis Vuitton's campaign images, it is prevalent to see that the brand features a diverse selection of models in their campaigns. Thus, conveying with their visual communication a more inclusive appearance as a brand. Kim et al. (2018) argue that luxury brands indicate maturity and work with an emotional connection to the images. When the brands want to symbolize inclusiveness, models of different backgrounds are applied together to strengthen the brand's image as an inclusive brand.



*Image 17: Louis Vuitton Fall 2022 Ad Campaign 2022 (Lebon 2022)*  
*Image 18: Dior Cruise 2020 Campaign (Niedermair 2020)*

*Image 18*, from Louis Vuitton's Fall 2022 Ad campaign, shows a close-up of two children holding hands, conveying a message of unity and togetherness to promote inclusion and community. Furthermore, Louis Vuitton's perceived aim to be connected to the statement of inclusion and the discourse of equal values shown in the image requires greater engagement at the connotation level to understand the underlying meaning in its context (Barthes 2002). While the image communicates a message, there is an unclear connection to Louis Vuitton without other references to the brand, and the image relying on only the text logo communicating the connection to the brand. The traditional heritage codes are not visible.

For example, the depiction of two children of different ethnicities holding hands in *image 17* may raise doubts about the authenticity of Louis Vuitton's commitment to inclusion. Critically interpreting visual images discourages viewers from imposing a single interpretation and promotes receptivity to developing understandings (Foucault 2002).

The contextual background of the campaign is a tribute to Louis Vuitton's former creative director, Virgil Abloh (Johnson 2022). It highlights the themes of inclusion and diversity, which are central aspects of Louis Vuitton's visual brand communication (Johnson 2022).

These themes have been very prominently displayed in recent men's collections led by Abloh and current creative director Pharrell Williams, who are both one of the few black creative directors in the heritage luxury sector. However, the examination of the campaign image raises questions about Louis Vuitton's genuine commitment to inclusivity and whether the inclusive statement is consistent with the brand's core values (Shukla & Khalifa 2021). While the creative directors may align with this message, there is still uncertainty about the brand's overall embodiment of these values. Considering the factors mentioned above in the analysis of context and connotations, the image thus symbolizes a transitional phase for the brand, bridging its historical heritage with its contemporary identity. Criticism directed at the LVMH conglomerate, of which Louis Vuitton is a significant part, regarding internal diversity and operational practices further complicates the issue (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). This suggests that external brand messages do not necessarily reflect internal practices.

*Image 18*, Dior Cruise 2020 campaign, includes two women wearing dresses resembling culturally traditional garments. The campaign image showcases the cultural influences of African artists and suppliers, in combination with Dior's iconic patterns and brand heritage. The campaign, therefore takes strong influence from another culture, which can be deemed problematic if it is done without proper acknowledgment of the original culture or source (Domenique & Childs 2021). While the campaign has been presented as a collaboration, the campaign images received mixed reactions (Friedman 2019). Critics and parts of the brand's audience raised concerns about the exploitation of the artists and the authenticity of the collaboration. Furthermore, questions were expressed regarding the true benefit of the collaboration to the local artists, in comparison to the value that Dior as a global luxury brand can extract from it (Friedman 2019).

In combination with the campaign images, the featured garments were presented at the Dior Cruise 2020 runway show, which was held in Marrakech, Morocco. The show was described as very extravagant, with celebrity guests flying to attend it from all over the world. (Friedman 2019). This can be seen as a way of using other cultures as a spectacle and a strategy to gain attraction for the brand. Further arguments also acknowledge the historical background of France as a colonizer of Morocco (Friedman 2019). Thus, the location of the show can be perceived as quite problematic, further adding to the discussion of possible exploitative actions by Dior. This campaign is consistent with the findings of Dominique and Childs (2021) which suggest that the fashion industry frequently takes inspiration or elements from other cultures, but the line between appropriation and appreciation can be very easily crossed.

### **5.2.2 Inclusion of Ethnically Diverse Models**

Michaelidou et al. (2022) argue that luxury fashion brands are still lacking in the representation of different ethnicities and races in their campaigns, but this might not be the case currently. Upon analyzing the campaign visuals, it seems evident that the majority of these brands continuously feature models from various ethnic backgrounds with quite equal representation in their imagery.

However, certain brands appear more prominent with this representation than others. Louis Vuitton seems to be very consistent in the inclusion of ethnically diverse models, and also in including clear statements through the images about inclusion and diversity. The brand seems to want to strongly appear as inclusive. Especially the campaign *image 21* makes quite the

statement of the diversity very clear. The message is in a way pushed as a statement to the viewer of the image. This can be seen due to the symbolism of the hand holding, which is such a prominent and universally recognized symbol of unity. Furthermore, the image does not feature any products or logos, thus only focusing on the message that the brand wants to push forward.

Furthermore, Saint Laurent and Dior are also very prominent in their inclusion of diverse models. On the other hand, Celine appears to show inclusive imagery with the least consistency, and from an overall perspective of the brand's campaign images, there seems to be a more visible preference for white models. This reflects on the more narrow ideals that the brand seems to perpetuate, while also communicating about who they see as the brand's ideal target demographic (Aagerup & Scharf 2018). By consistently showcasing predominantly white models, Celine creates an image of exclusion for a large part of the population.

### 5.2.3 Body Ideals

The sub-theme of body ideals exposed is quite clearly identifiable in Parisian heritage luxury brands' campaign images. Historically, the luxury industry has striven for a certain type of beauty and body standards (Vänskä & Gurova 2023) which are identified in the images. The importance of the theme is to reflect the different types of ideals conveyed by the brands.



*Image 19: Saint Laurent Spring/Summer 2024 campaign (Mitchell 2024)*

*Image 20: Saint Laurent Winter 2020 Campaign (Teller 2020)*

*Image 21: Dior "Vibe" Spring 2022 Ad Campaign (Beleiu 2022)*

Body ideals as a theme can be analyzed in a variety of campaign images, however, images with a distinct focus on the models' bodies further highlight the ideals conveyed by the brands. Both *image 19*, the Saint Laurent Spring/Summer 2024 campaign, and *image 20*, the Saint Laurent Winter 2020 campaign, depict the models' torsos without seeing their faces, thus highlighting the bodies of the models. The framing of only the models' bodies prominently, may reinforce specific body ideals, or the desirability associated with specific body types. A similar image with a focus on the bare body with visible ribs is also exhibited

in the Saint Laurent Babylone store as a motif on the wall (Appendix 14). Moreover, the choice to leave out the models' faces points the viewer's attention solely to their physique, suggesting an objectification of the body, and in a way idealizing “perfect” bodies. On the other hand, the images can be seen as an artistic choice, and, more bluntly, as a part of the essence of fashion brands, which is to sell the brand and the products. The perspective reflects the fact that models are sometimes considered the canvas for the garments. In neither of the images, the garments are fully visible.

*Image 21*, the Dior Vibe Spring 2022 Ad campaign, features a different representation of body ideals, showcasing the visible disability of the featured model, and highlighting the diversity of bodies that are not typically depicted in luxury fashion campaigns (Aagerup & Scharf 2018). The campaign image portrays the paralympic athlete Veronica Yoko Plebani (Dior n.d) This campaign starkly contrasts the bodies usually represented in heritage luxury imagery. The campaign image, rather, could be seen as leaning closer to the trends of broad body diversity currently featured in the advertising of mass fashion brands (Domenique & Childs 2021). The campaign thus signifies a shift from the idealized and narrow body ideals associated with luxury fashion brands (Record & Austin 2016). The campaign can also be viewed from a different perspective, which questions the intention of using someone with a visible disability for advertising. Vänskä and Gurova (2023) argue that the use of a person’s disorder or disability to market fashion is an offensive practice due to possible exploitation that can be an underlying purpose.



*Image 22: Saint Laurent Summer 2022 AD Campaign (Teller 2022)*

*Image 23: Celine Summer 2023 Ad Campaign (Slimane 2023)*

*Image 24: Celine Homme Summer 2023 Ad Campaign (Slimane 2023)*

The theme of body ideals is further observed through the limited diversity in body sizes represented in brand campaigns (Aagerup & Scharf 2018). *Image 22*, Saint Laurent Summer 2022 Ad campaign; *image 23*, Celine Summer 2023 Ad campaign; and *image 24*, Celine Homme Summer 2023 Ad campaign, all feature models with very slender or thin appearances. *Image 22* shows a side view of the model's slender waist. *Image 23* and *image 24* illustrate the exposed bodies of the models with visible ribs and narrow waists, which also results in Celine using similar body types for both men and women. Both campaigns from 2023 present the male and female models similarly, and despite the gender difference,

slimness and similar positioning are emphasized for both. Which indicates similar findings to Dominique and Child's (2021) suggestions that luxury brands rarely use a wide range of body types. However, this is also applied across gender lines and that men and women are portrayed with similar ideals. What is evident here is that the focus is removed from traditional attributes and behaviors of men and women, respectively, and the line between the genders is blurred.

According to Aagerup and Scharf (2018), featuring a range of different body sizes in fashion advertising communicates to consumers whom the brand considers to be its ideal clientele. The term "Paris thin", as referenced by Aagerup & Scharf (2018) relates to France's 2015 ban on models with excessively low body mass indexes and is not evident in the imagery from Saint Laurent (*image 22*) and Celine (*images 23; images 24*). Emerging from the analysis, thinness can be recognized as a recurring body type for the models. Although the current cultural trends highlight body positivity and broader inclusion (Aagerup & Scharf 2018), it becomes clear that heritage luxury brands are still using only certain body types in their imagery.

Continuing, parallels can also be drawn to the 1990's "Heroin Chic" phenomenon, which idealized a very thin and almost malnourished body ideal (Rielly 2002). In relation to Vänskä and Gurova's (2023) findings that current body types of models in the luxury industry imitate young teenagers, also aligns with the analysis of these images. This has also been identified as a common aesthetic embraced by these Parisian heritage luxury brands, but especially by Saint Laurent and Celine.

These observations are also made between *image 19* and *image 24*, where these elements become clear. What is also worth noting is the significance of a visible rib cage which connects to a body ideal beyond thinness. Could the symbolic meaning of visible ribs and bones be an indication that the luxury industry still resists inclusion, despite incorporating certain elements that make the brand more attractive? The visible ribs can be a way of distancing from a more body-inclusive society, which is contradicted within the luxury industry. The male models of these brands are also subject to similar pressures to be accepted by the prestigious luxury brands. The argument parallels Vänskä and Gurova's (2023) discussion of the physical and psychological strain of striving toward a specific type of body ideal. By putting this discussion in parallel with the luxury industry, the slimness ideal can thus be seen as a symbol of luxury, as it is an ideal to always strive for more and demonstrate one's wealth in the form of the selected heritage luxury brands in this study only using a particular type of body ideal for their models. They linked parallels between the notion that thinness is unreachable and that the perfect body represents an unattainable luxury.

#### **5.2.4 Representation of Body Types in Campaign Imagery**

When analyzing body ideals as a common theme in the campaign images, Céline and Saint Laurent appear to place greater emphasis on the display of exposed skin and the ideals of slender bodies. Inside the Saint Laurent concept store Babylone, are featured photographs and magazines by Vaccarello, there are photographs on the walls of naked and skinny bodies. These images are used to create an artistic atmosphere, but also indicate high provocation in the form of highlighting photographs portraying unhealthy body standards (Appendix 13). These brands still stand for an unattainable ideal that contributes to unrealistic physicality (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). Both men and women are exposed to unrealistic body ideals

(Rielly 2020), which can be encouraged through provocative marketing techniques that indicate risk in the form of physicality (Carrillat et al. 2019).

On the other hand, Louis Vuitton and Dior portray their models with less exposed bodies and more clothed, while seemingly including slightly more diverse body types. For example, Dior showcases a model with a visible disability, and Louis Vuitton features Rihanna during her pregnancy in one of the campaigns. As discussed, including these models with more diverse bodies is a rarity rather than a rule among the four Parisian heritage brands. Thus, these instances of slight diversity can most likely be attributed to the shift in consumer culture and the pressure on luxury brands to appear at least slightly more inclusive to maintain their relevance or their brand image (Sobande 2019; Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

Moreover, as Michaelidou et al. (2022) point out, it is an undeniable fact that beauty ideals reflect what is considered attractive in the Western world, and what is evident in the results is that 'Paris thin' (Record & Austin 2016) is still a term that exists based on the fact that body size diversity is not visible in any of the campaign images. An interesting finding that emerged in the analysis was the focus on visible ribs among some models, which, in a further observation, can be connoted for unattainability.

### **5.2.5 Contemporary Themes in Campaign Imagery**

According to the research question it is clear that the components in the images contribute to themes that require commitment to interpretation. These subtle yet nuanced messages are integrated with elements that bring the viewer back to brand heritage. By constantly drawing the viewer between contemporary themes and references to brand heritage in the images, a narrative is created that can be experienced as strengthening, provocative, or inclusive. As Gurzki et al. (2019) explain, luxury fashion houses work with complex imagery that is identified for Celine, Dior, Louis Vuitton, and Saint Laurent.

To address this investigation of how the brands use contemporary themes in their brand campaign, the symbolism of different elements has been dissected and examined in different contexts. This conclusion is formulated as a comparison between brand segments to identify the different expressions of contemporary themes to be consistent with the luxury brand's brand heritage. The examples from the content analysis highlighted below are the most notable based on the findings from the literature review, on-site visits, and archival visits in Paris of the Parisian heritage luxury brands and theories of signs, and discourse analysis to interpret the themes. For this investigation, the symbolism of different elements has been dissected and analyzed in different contexts.

In the earlier case of a luxury brand with Parisian heritage, it became evident that in the rapidly changing market dynamics, luxury brands must maintain their relevance and capture the attention of contemporary and current customers. Examples of contemporary themes that may be unclear to interpret, and help provoke discussion are themes related to social movements, issues, or societal statements. How brands raise these issues varies depending on their position and heritage. Based on the data collected, it is clear that Parisian heritage luxury brands work with aesthetics in their campaign images, which can help to raise discussion and thus position the brands in a central role for the discussion based on their visual communication in the design of campaigns.

The analysis prompts discussions on how luxury brands exploit societal sentiments surrounding individual struggles for their own gain. It is essential to highlight this critical argumentation, even if the meaning of exhibiting a homogeneous integration is positive. As Dominique and Childs (2021) suggest, there has been a noticeable shift in how traditional luxury brands clarify the integration of, for example, ethnicities and gender identities in their marketing to promote inclusion and diversity. However, there are clear limitations in how this inclusion and diversity are presented, as diversity is not always clearly represented among the selected.

## 5.3 Heritage

The following sub-chapter continues with the results and analysis, proceeding to answer research question two:

**How do Parisian heritage luxury brands communicate their heritage through brand codes, and symbolic messages in their visual communication, and how is this combined with the contemporary visual elements?**

The theme of heritage was identified to include the sub-themes of motifs and artistic references, which were recognized as elements of visual codes that luxury brands use in their visual brand communication, to demonstrate their heritage, cultural capital, or social status (Butcher & Pecot 2022). Identifiable symbols and brand codes are ways for brands to differentiate from others while communicating their heritage and identity (Urde et al. 2007).

### 5.3.1 Motifs

Motifs as a sub-theme are recognized in campaign images as the symbols of heritage and the brand DNA. The significance of motifs is connected to the context of the images, thus, the analysis is conducted with the use of Semiotics theory to understand the layered meanings (Kim et al. 2019).



*Image 25: Louis Vuitton 2022 Brand Campaign (Sassen 2022)  
Image 26: Louis Vuitton Spring 2024 Ad Campaign (Perez 2024)*

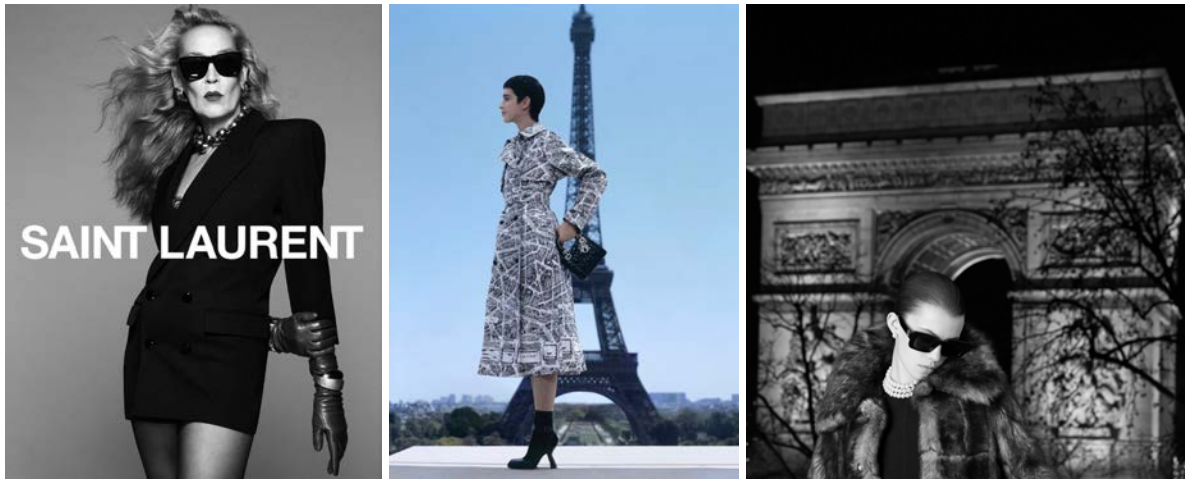


*Image 27: Dior Summer 2021 Campaign (Kechicheva 2021)*

Campaign images showing motifs in the form of strong brand symbols, such as *image 25*, Louis Vuitton 2022 Brand campaign, feature references to the brand identity of Louis Vuitton with elements of exploration and inclusion of their travel trunks (Jin & Cedrola 2017). Iconic and recognizable products of the brand can also be considered symbols of brand heritage (Butcher & Pecot 2022). The Louis Vuitton trunks hold this type of symbolic value for the brand identity, due to their constant inclusion in the brand's visual communication. Thus, Louis Vuitton has established a strong connection from the origin story of the brand to the current day, with the employment of the travel trunk.

Monograms are also recognized as strong brand motifs (Butcher & Pecot 2022). *Image 26*, Louis Vuitton Spring 2024 Ad Campaign in collaboration with Tyler the Creator, the "LV" monogram is integrated into the model's haircut. Furthermore, the LV monogram flower is printed on the bag, jacket and jeans. However, the way the LV monogram is included in the image connects to Louis Vuitton's brand communication, which focuses on a contemporary and innovative approach (Jin & Cedrola 2017). This can further be seen as the brand's way to attract a more diverse audience, while demonstrating their understanding of the cultural trends of today. These elements in the image can also be seen as Louis Vuitton attempting to link their more prestigious Parisian heritage to contemporary culture and fashion trends. For example, featuring styling and elements that highlight a street-style aesthetic. This can be further seen as a way to try and tie the brand into the hip-hop world as the campaign is in collaboration with the rapper Tyler the Creator (LVMH 2024). This approach by Louis Vuitton can be a way for the brand to build cultural capital for the brand (Butcher & Pecot 2022). Which in turn is a way to boost their relevance in the eyes of their current, and especially younger consumers.

In *image 27*, the Dior Summer 2021 campaign, the Dior monogram is featured in the model's garment, while the model holds a flower in their hand. The symbolism of the flower connects to the brand heritage story of Dior, specifically to the Dior garden, the home of the founder of the brand Christian Dior (La galerie Dior 2024). The flower is a more subtle brand motif featured in the campaign image. To further decode the brand motifs in the image, a commitment to the history of the brand is required for the viewer to connect the flower directly to Dior as a brand. The image symbols can be seen as more sophisticated storytelling, where the logos are a little more hidden than other campaign images from Dior.



*Image 28: Saint Laurent Summer 2022 Campaign (Sims (2022)*

*Image 29: Lady Dior Handbag Fall 2023 Campaign (Niedermair 2023)*

*Image 30: Celine Winter 2024 Ad Campaign (Slimane 2024)*

Brand motifs are also highlighted in more subtle ways in campaign images, referencing the brand origin, or an attitude and essence of the brand. *Image 28*, Saint Laurent Summer 2022 campaign, captures the spirit of the brand with a strongly portrayed woman wearing in black tuxedo blazer and leather gloves. The tuxedo blazer on a woman can be considered an essential part of Saint Laurent's heritage as a brand and their brand DNA (Musée Yves Saint Laurent Paris 2024). In combination, these elements can be seen as strong motifs for the brand, with the portrayal of the ideal woman of Saint Laurent. The model in the *image 28* is Jerry Hall, who has been a muse for the brand during the 1970s (Praveena 2021). In this campaign for summer 2022, the timelessness of the brand is symbolized by Hall's presence in the image. The model can also be seen as synonymous with a part of the brand's past, which connects with contemporary themes in the form of women's empowerment and contemporary fashion. Kim et al. (2018) suggests that heritage brands showcase the longevity of their brand by highlighting different nostalgic or iconic elements. In this campaign it has been done with featuring a model from previous decades.

*Image 29*, Lady Dior Handbag Fall 2023 campaign visualizes a clear statement for the brand's heritage both by integrating an iconic product of the brand the "Lady Dior Bag" but also by including the Eiffel Tower as the background for the image, which highlights the brand's Parisian roots (Butcher & Pecot 2022). The coat in the picture has the pattern motif "Plan de Paris", which is an old map of Paris discovered in Dior's archives (Dior n.d). By making these monuments and motifs visible, Dior connects to associations that draw connections to their rich past in Paris, and relevance in the present globally. This symbolic connotation is consistent with Rocamora's (2009) findings that brands use landmarks connected to their founding places to reinforce their positioning as brands with an extensive history and heritage that still maintains relevance in contemporary times.

*Image 30*, Celine Winter 2024 Ad campaign, shows an image of a woman in front of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, which, similarly to Dior, indicates the ensuring heritage and prestige of the brands. In similar manner the logo is also exposed in connection with the monument to convince the viewer of its value (Kiatong 2023). In recent years, Celine's visual communication has typically followed a minimalist aesthetic, linking the brand with quiet luxury as a contemporary trend to its historical roots. The black-and-white color palette is

also regarded as a quintessential element of the timelessness brand image of Celine (Kim et al. 2018). Using monochrome images indicates authenticity and class (Kim et al. 2018), which could also mean that Celine only exposes the model and logo to visualize the credibility of its brand without material products being visible.

The model in *image 30*, dressed in a fur jacket and pearl necklace, has historic significance and connotations of privilege, wealth and status (Barthes 2002), intimately associated with notions of authenticity and power (Kim et al. 2018). Through these symbols, the brand wants to communicate values such as superiority (Kim et al. 2018) and iconic status, which is expected to indicate its historical longevity and timelessness (Butcher & Pecot 2022). This discourse delineates the boundaries between those who are and those not considered to be associated with the brand. It establishes a hierarchy of power based on possession and is associated with particular symbols linked to an outdated view of privilege. In this way, the brand distances itself by possibly not being as inclusive or strongly linked to belonging, but as Evens (2019) highlights a more stereotypical superiority of the luxury consumer.

Furthermore, this image has a lack of social statements, diversity and inclusion, which contrasts with the lack of contemporary cultural themes and has a focus on older views of heritage and the symbolic myth of luxury. In this way, Celine alludes to a more traditional heritage, which can also be linked to class society, thus contradicting the other brands' visual communication of blurring a fictional boundary of inclusion. By using symbols that indicate traditional places like Paris in *image 30* and *image 31*, the monuments symbolize authenticity, heritage, and class (Kim et al. 2018). The images in this section are thus limited to explicit visual communication of heritage and history rather than including contemporary discussions.

### **5.3.2 Artistic References**

The sub-theme of artistic references features images that blend abstract or unconventional elements inspired by traditional art, diverging from typical commercial aesthetics. Artistic references are also related to artification, which means that objects, such as fashion images, are portrayed to look like art, or to become art (Ekström 2023). The identified images create ambiguous connotations by combining elements from different contexts, and challenging conventional or social interpretations (Barthes 2002). The Theory of Signs explores the subtle meaning behind the composition of elements, icons, and symbols (Kim et al. 2018) to explore how the artistic references refer to the different types of symbolism present in the image to understand the underlying meaning (Kim et al. 2018).



*Image 31: Celine Winter 2022 Campaign (Teller 2022)*

*Image 32: Dior Spring/Summer 2021 Campaign (Niedermair 2021)*

*Image 31*, Celine Winter 2022 "Boy Doll" campaign, shows an undressed male model with white doves hovering over his shoulders. The image contains elements such as birds, nudity, and a black background. The viewer is invited to form their perception of what is shown through its perceived context. Vänskä and Gurova (2023), suggest that there is a current trend of romanticization of mental health problems, and in some cases, the emphasis on having a disorder can mean that you are part of the fashion. Moreover, mental health issues are not always apparent on the surface (Vänskä & Gurova 2023). Symbols such as doves can convey that a significant emotional or psychological challenge burdens the individual. The doves' melancholic demeanor can metaphorize the individual's emotional state. Placing an object in a new context challenges established norms and can create confusion due to conflicting historical symbolism (Foucault 2002). Furthermore, the myth of the dove (Barthes 2002) can signify very different things in various cultures, such as death, peace, freedom and love. The aesthetic representations of fashion photography shift the focus from products to the essence of the brand and reduce the number of explicit logos (Rielly 2020). This underlines the intricate dynamics within brand communities, where shared interpretations of symbolism symbolize belonging and exclusion. Similarly, the connotation of what symbols or elements mean (Barthes 2002) and how the context contributes to the interpretation process is examined through different perspectives. If the connotations become too challenging to interpret, the brand may be neglected, leading to potential misunderstandings (Oswald 2016).

In comparison, *image 32* of Dior's Spring/Summer 2021 campaign shows a dynamic portrayal of a group of women. This campaign has a stronger reference to Baroque and Renaissance paintings and is inspired by the artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, to mimic the construction of the mystique with different scenographies and lightning (Dior n.d). This type of construction is consistent with Kim et al. (2019) argument that luxury brands use a more complicated visual expression in their campaign photography, targeting specific customers who understand the value of art references or heritage, and therefore, creating a differentiation among the various customers of the brand. Through this artification the brand also can grow the cultural capital, and using an image that resembles an oil painting, that could be in an exhibition in a museum, can also elevate the brand image to appear as high culture. The models in the image are also wearing a variety of clothes inspired by different eras, such as the transparent dress where the underwear is visible, in contrast to the white Renaissance dress.

## 5.4 Motifs as Contemporary Visual Elements

The analysis shows that brand symbols and representations of brand codes synonymous with its heritage differ in brand communication. For example, Louis Vuitton (*image 25*; *image 26*) exposes the monogram of its initials with precise product placement in the images. For *image 28*, the model and how they are represented in the campaign are considered the contemporary motif for Saint Laurent. Furthermore, clear narratives are visualized in the images to clarify different messages and create a clear connection between then and now through a contemporary visual construction of the campaign images.

Critical aspects of findings from visits to stores and museums unveil a biased perspective on how these establishments aim to inspire and bolster brands. The contradicted bias in comparison to prior research indicates that brands' authentic dedication is governed by identifying historical symbols and linking them to contemporary themes. In this way, the brands use their DNA to build a narrative and emphasize that they have always had a relationship with the discussed topics.

In connection to the images, and how the brands use motifs as contemporary visual elements it is clear that the brands work with this on different levels depending on how they want to be perceived.

Saint Laurent's campaigns stand out in this segment since the brand is more complex in that they work with visual constructions that present the models as an integral part of the brand. Unlike other campaigns, where the models are used as props for the products, in Saint Laurent's campaigns, the models can dominate the image with control and androgyny, where the products are a secondary focus, which is a consistent aspect of their visual communication. This campaign uses brand motifs as contemporary visual elements to highlight age diversity, female empowerment and inclusivity.

Celine, on the other hand, relies more on using traditional motifs associated with status and timelessness. Their communication consists of portrait photography in black and white as part of their visual identity to differentiate themselves from other brands. Likewise, this can be linked as a correlation between the past and present. Thus, Celine also constructs the image around the myth of the representation of luxury, instead of integrating new aspects of luxury such as inclusion. Like Celine, Dior uses a traditional and abstract approach to show a clear connection to Paris and the actress of the brand through clear brand codes and logos.

Additionally, the segment of artistic references mirrors contemporary themes in a more narrative way, where the viewer is taken by the story in the image and its narrative. This interpretation occurs before the image can be linked to the brand because in *image 31* the Celine logo is missing, and in *image 32* the Dior CD logo is only placed on a bag.

*Image 31* and *image 32* are constructed in a more melancholic spirit with connotations in symbols that draw the attention to allow the viewer to interpret the meaning of the images themselves. In this case, the meaning of these images reflects the context in which the viewer finds themselves in the present. Which means that the myth of the symbols, and the meanings of the campaign photographs' change depending on contemporary issues in the society that influence the interpretation. As a result, the contemporary themes determine how the symbols in the fashion campaign will be interpreted, and also reflect the context in which the viewer is to perceive its meaning.

## 6. Conclusion

*This chapter presents the main findings of the study, which are connected to the research purpose outlined in the Introduction chapter. Finally, managerial implications and possible suggestions for future research are proposed at the end of this section.*

The research purpose of the study is to explore how Parisian heritage luxury brands use contemporary cultural themes in their campaign imagery, to maintain their heritage and demonstrate their relevance.

The findings of the research suggest that Parisian heritage luxury brands include several themes and visual elements linking to contemporary culture in their campaign images. These brands can be seen following current social and cultural trends such as gender fluidity, feminist ideals and ethnic and cultural diversity. However, further findings suggest that the use of these themes within the visual campaigns of these brands, seem to have specific parameters. These limits appear to extend to the inclusion of different ethnicities of models, as well as a more varied spectrum of gender expression, and femvertising. The themes that are mostly excluded from the campaign imagery are the broader inclusion of different body types and sizes, as well as the representation of non-traditional beauty ideals in general. Specifically, thinness as a body ideal in the heritage luxury brand sector is recognized as a very prevalent aspect. This does not align with the shifts in increased representation of body diversity in other fashion segments like the mass- and premium sectors (Aagerup & Scharf 2018).

These boundaries can be seen as a way for heritage luxury brands to hold on to their historical brand essence while integrating some aspects of diversity in campaign images when it can be potentially beneficial for the brand, or the visual image that the brand is portraying. The themes that are incorporated by each of these four brands appear to differ, according to what the brands deem as fitting for their brand identity as heritage luxury brands.

Dior appears to use a more international visual communication strategy that incorporates different societal and cultural themes in a very prominent way. The campaign visuals are seen as more statement-driven compared to the other brands. Especially the theme of feminism is strongly reinforced by Dior in their recent campaigns. Celine, on the other hand, employs a different strategy in their visual campaigns. The brand stays away from more direct statements relating to social and cultural themes, but rather uses a more ambiguous approach when communicating their contemporary relevance. This aligns with previous research that suggests luxury brands use more complex visual strategies in their advertising (Newheiser et al. 2019). This relates to Celine campaign images having the smallest presence in the data collection. The brand's campaign imagery follows a very consistent aesthetic and elements, which is why including similar images would not offer as much value for the research.

The campaign images of Louis Vuitton use an approach that ties together the brand heritage symbols and contemporary cultural trends and personas. The imagery used by the brand has a clear connection to the theme of diversity, which reflects the brand's attempt to appear as current and inclusive as a luxury brand. Saint Laurent campaign visuals also follow a very consistent strategy that aligns the brand's visual communication strongly with the brand's identity and heritage. The way that the brand tries to align with current cultural trends is through a more provocative approach to these themes with very exposed body parts or by creating contexts that can be questionable.

Based on the findings, it is evident that Parisian heritage luxury brands use aesthetics and elements in their campaign images that can help to connect them to social discussion and thus position the brands as having more cultural relevance. In some cases, the contemporary themes are in line with the overall brand, but in other instances, the incorporation of these themes could be seen as possible woke-washing, or cultural appropriation (Vänskä & Gurova 2023).

Moreover, the contemporary themes used by these brands can also glamorize problematic aspects in society, which aligns with previous research by Vänskä and Gurova (2023). This is evident for example, with the reinforcing of unrealistic, and potentially unhealthy body standards. Thinness can be considered a symbol of luxury that goes beyond tangible brand codes. Even with the inclusion of diversity their heritage is still represented in the standard of thinness in luxury. This reflects on the status and aspiration to be related to a more diverse body standards than the traditional one for luxury heritage brands. Furthermore, brands still maintain traditional standards for models, which relates to the relevance of the concept of "Paris thin". One of Dior's campaigns features the model with a disability, and prosthetic legs. However, beyond the disability the model's body type still follows similar measurements and ideals referred to as "Paris thin" as the remaining models in other campaign images have. This standard is similarly reflected with images representing gender blurring, where the thinness appears as a tool to blur out the female and male attributes.

The significance of the findings may reflect on the future challenges of visual brand communication within the heritage luxury sector. Since the insights of the study are linked to present-day campaigns, the findings can offer current relevance. In parallel, luxury brands are maintaining their heritage by building up visual stories or persona linked to their past, or expanding their corporate activities by organizing exhibitions, collaborations and concept stores to generate a greater emotional experience to the customer. This can help to understand how luxury brands with historical heritage are adapting to the current culture. Based on site visits to these exhibitions and stores, this has contributed to a greater understanding of the complexity of heritage brands, but at the same time the controversial element used in staying relevant by integrating cultural themes into its visual communication. Through this three-dimensional study, on-site visits and integration into the environment by the researcher contributed to the semiotic interpretation of the campaigns being more layered.

Furthermore, the connection between heritage luxury brands and inclusivity in general can be considered a paradox, as existing research also outlines (Carig & Muller 2007). As the foundation of these brands lies in a certain exclusivity and prestige. This basis also relates to the way that luxury products are priced. This high price-point alone excludes the majority of the population from accessing these brands, thus creating a gap between the brands and large parts of consumers. This is at the core of the problem, with the aim of fitting luxury brands and inclusivity together. However, as societal values continue to shift towards greater inclusivity and diversity, luxury brands are increasingly facing pressure to evolve and conform to this change. Thus, the balance between exclusivity and inclusivity is likely going to persist as a central challenge for Parisian heritage luxury brands, as the fashion industry is in symbiosis with society.

## **6.1 Managerial Implications**

Based on the results of the research, the authors have considered the implications of the findings for the field of textile management, and specifically managers working in the luxury industry. The proposals highlight the importance of awareness and understanding of the responsibility to highlight diversity and social themes, while being engaged and genuinely as a brand.

The aspect of integrating contemporary themes with heritage is a concept that indicates more involvement in contemporary issues, as well as a way of staying relevant. The four Parisian luxury brands taken into consideration underline that diversity needs to be reflected in the brand image and in their campaign imaginary. However, the findings of this research convey that this appears to be done in a narrow way which is reflected in the advertising campaigns. This is an important point of reasoning for managers, who should be aware of the gap that is created between what brands state, and what they visually communicate. This could lead to more consistent visual communication, and thus to the reduction of woke-washing, and therefore a more authentic brand image.

## **6.2 Limitations and Future Research**

As the purpose of the study is not to find general patterns of the visual material, the research instead follows a qualitative content analysis to find the contemporary themes used by heritage luxury brands, but on a deeper level through the Theory of Semiotics. Semiotics has certain limitations because of its foundation as an interpretive method, so continued research in the field could reveal new interpretations. Thus, the authors invite other perspectives or researchers to make interpretations of the same campaign images to further validate the findings, or potentially discover additional or contrasting ones. As the developed themes are found through coding by the two researchers, further coding can offer the opportunity for an even broader analysis. Upon this finding, Kim et al. (2018) suggest that greater research triangulation unlocks a broader analysis with possibly further identifiable themes that are consistent with contemporary trends.

The number of images analyzed in the study does not cover all campaigns throughout the timeline of the research, and therefore might not provide extensive conclusions about the entire campaign catalogs of the brands. Furthermore, the findings are associated with the specific four heritage luxury brands. This limited selection made for the research means that the insights and outcomes may not necessarily carry over to the entire sector of heritage luxury. Future research could contribute to new interpretations and perspectives, and to the greater development of identified themes and sub-themes. Suggestions to implement in the future could include adding consumer perceptions as part of a similar study, or as an added level to this existing research. Conducting interviews with the brands' consumers could provide an added perspective that highlights consumer behavior and insights. Another research direction could be to conduct a similar study, analyzing campaign images from the premium fashion, or affordable luxury sectors, to compare the findings with this study that focuses on heritage luxury brands. This could provide insights into the differences between market segments and how visual communication strategies are applied. Additionally, a research interest could further explore the inclusion of similar themes in these segments.

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## 8. Appendix

*The images in the Appendices are taken by the authors in the locations by themselves, therefore they are not mentioned in the reference list.*



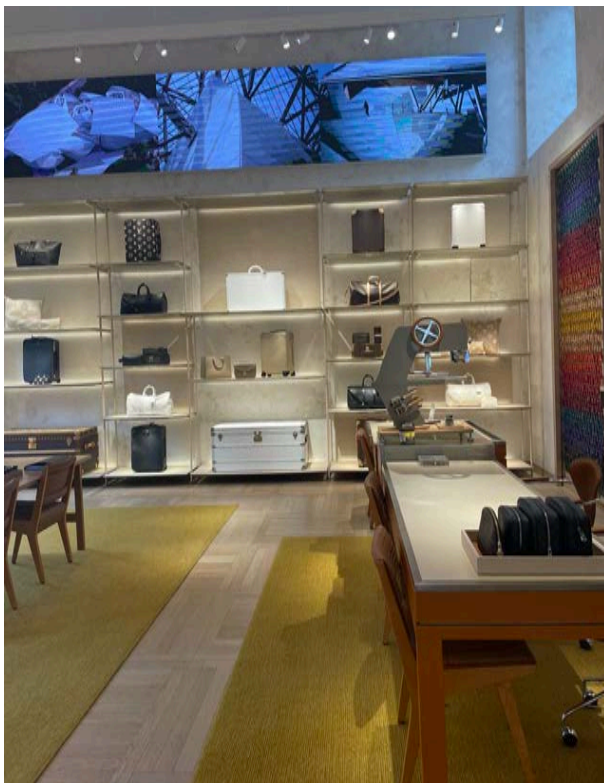
*Appendix 1. Dior Paris 30 Montaigne, 75016 Paris, 17-04-2024.*



*Appendix 2. The Dior Style, La Galerie Dior, 11 Rue François 1er, 75008 Paris, 05-04-2024.*



*Appendix 3. LV DREAM, Louis Vuitton Malletier 2 Rue du Pont Neuf, 75001 Paris, 14-04-2024*



*Appendix 4. Louis Vuitton Vendôme, 75001 Paris, 02-05-2024*



*Appendix 5. The Ateliers, La Galerie Dior, 11 Rue François 1er, 75008 Paris, 05-04-2024.*



*Appendix 6. The Ateliers, La Galerie Dior, 11 Rue François 1er, 75008 Paris, 05-04-2024.*



*Appendix 7. La Parisienne, La Galerie Dior, 11 Rue François 1er, 75008 Paris, 05-04-2024.*



*Appendix 8. The Ateliers, La Galerie Dior, 11 Rue François 1er, 75008 Paris, 05-04-2024.*



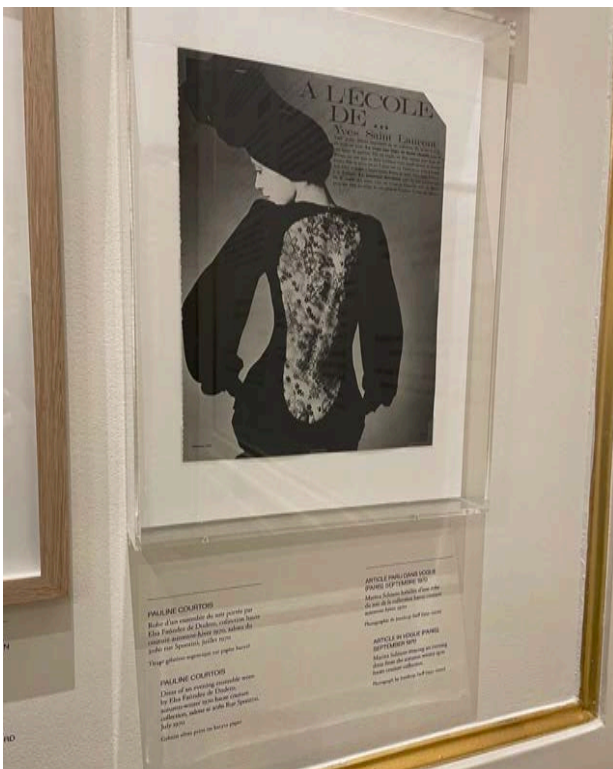
*Appendix 9. Traversing appearance Saint Laurent, Place Georges-Pompidou, 75004 Paris, 07-04-2024.*



*Appendix 10. Celine store 384 Rue Saint-Honoré, 75001 Paris, 13-05-2024.*



Appendix 11. Dior Paris 30 Montaigne, 75016 Paris, 17-04-2024.



Appendix 12. Musée Yves Saint Laurent: Transparences. 5 Av. Marceau, 75116 Paris, 19-04-2024.



*Appendix 13. Molitor (Rigoulet 1985). Saint Laurent Babylone 9 rue Grenelle, 75007 Paris, 10-05-2024.*