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Master's Thesis

**CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF TRUST, EMOTIONAL
ATTACHMENT AND BRAND AUTHENTICITY: A
NETNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF HERMES**

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Limassol, April 2026

CYPRUS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES
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Approval Form

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ABSTRACT

Today, luxury consumption is viewed as a social phenomenon driven by consumers rather than as an exclusive domain of brand-oriented tactics. This study explores how consumers view and feel emotionally connected with Hermès across various digital platforms, stressing constructivist notions of trust, authenticity, emotional commitment, and perception. The paper employs a qualitative interpretive analysis to examine customers' online interactions with luxury brands. This study uses network analysis of 577 posts and comments from channels such as PurseForum, Reddit (r/handbags), Instagram, and six semi-structured interviews with women who self-identified themselves as Hermès customers. Data coding and analysis were performed in ATLAS.ti using themes identified in the literature. The results reveal that online communities of premium customers consistently promote brand trust and realness. Moreover, this research identifies the “Hermès game”, an informal pattern that consumers construct to organise their access to luxury brands. The results also reveal that emotional involvement with Hermès is limited and scarce, reflecting the ultra-luxury aura that pervades its brand image. The study thus advances our understanding of luxury brand–consumer interactions as dynamic, interpretative processes that emerge from collaborative consumer activity in online digital communities.

Keywords: Luxury Brand, Trust, Authenticity, Emotional Intelligence, Hermès Game

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1 Introduction

Historically, luxury consumption has been understood as a marker of status and social distinction (Dubois et al., 2021). However, contemporary consumers increasingly view luxury through the lens of identity, emotional experience, and self-expression (Bazi et al., 2020); thus, more recent research suggests that this perspective is somewhat narrow. Luxury brands have shifted from simply markers of external status to ones that constitute identity construction, affective involvement, and symbolic meaning-making for individuals. This view aligns with the broader thrust of Consumer Culture Theory, which holds that consumption is a social construction, a meaning-making process in turn. The meaning of digital spaces is no longer made solely through brand-mediated discourse, but rather in a continuous relation with the individual consumer. Online communities function as interpretive sites where brand messages are reiterated, negotiated, and sometimes disputed. This casts doubt on traditional, brand-centric models of meaning-making, given their distributive and emergent character. Hermès is the best setting for this investigation. As an ultra-luxury brand steeped in heritage and craftsmanship, and importantly grounded in controlled scarcity, it uses purposeful means to limit access and visibility. But within digital contexts, these mechanisms are interpreted, discussed and even decoded by consumers themselves.

This creates a distinctive tension between the brand-imposed exclusivity of the products sold and the meaning-making process at the consumer level, and it offers Hermès a rare opportunity to reflect on how luxury is negotiated in practice. While extensive literature exists on luxury consumption, many scholars have focused solely on brands. Trust, authenticity and emotional attachment have often been treated as elements of a brand strategy, as if meaning comes from the brand and is then absorbed by consumers. It is a theoretical limitation, though, because the assumption is that meaning begins with the brand; meaning cannot exist apart from the brand being used by the consumer, excluding the consumer from a role in story-making, negotiation, and resistance within the brand. Furthermore, despite growing awareness of online communities, there is an underdeveloped role in constructing the emotional and symbolic facets of luxury consumption from these communities. Consumers do not simply react to a brand's communication; they create their own interpretations and shared definitions. This would indicate that core relational constructs might be more flexible and situational than

implied by classic models. And luxury brands from the ultra-luxury space, like Hermès, are nowhere as easily represented in the digital space. Their focus on exclusivity, scarcity and curated dialogue adds a further layer of complexity to how relationships with consumers are established. This raises important questions about how consumers view these brands, especially in online contexts where everyone makes (and disseminates) information together. In the aggregate, these gaps suggest a need for research that prioritises customer interpretation and interaction over purely brand-driven processes.

1.1 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aims to investigate how consumers interpret and emotionally engage with Hermès, with reference to digital platforms and online communities.

To accomplish this objective, the study is designed to serve the following objectives:

- To examine how trust and emotional attachment are communicated within Hermès online communities
- To explore how consumers interpret the brand's emotional tone and authenticity
- To identify forms of engagement that reflect empathy-based relationships between the brand and its consumers
- To understand how online interaction shapes the construction of luxury brand meaning

1.2 Research Questions

In line with these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do consumers communicate emotional attachment and trust within Hermès online communities?
- **RQ2:** In what ways do consumers interpret Hermès' emotional tone and authenticity?
- **RQ3:** Which forms of engagement reflect empathy-based relationships between the brand and its consumers?

1.3 Methodological Approach

This analysis was carried out as a qualitative interpretivist study, enabling it to investigate how consumers make sense of their experiences. Netnography facilitates an understanding of online communities and how individuals articulate and negotiate meanings in digital spaces (Kozinets, 2010). The study adopts a qualitative interpretivist method, which permits users to define what meanings they produce in context and to examine how they do so. Taking consumer interpretation as a central theme, this research helps to contribute to the literature by reconsidering salient constructs, trust, authenticity, and emotional involvement as something that is developing and socially constructed rather than fixed attributes of the brand.

1.4 Importance of the Study

The findings of this study also contribute to the review literature by moving away from brand-driven explanations toward a consumer-focused interpretation. It indicates that some underlying constructs, such as trust, authenticity and emotional involvement, are not static indicators, but are constructed and recreated through interaction and context. Moreover, it is important to note that the study contributes to understanding online communities in luxury consumption. Far from being limited to information exchange communities, these communities function as sites where meanings are made, consolidated, and occasionally disputed. The results provide managerial insight into consumers' perceptions of brand communication and interaction strategies. This perspective can help increase the alignment of luxury brands' communication with consumer expectations by recognising that consumers do not simply passively receive information about but actively evaluate and discuss brand actions.

2 Literature Review

Previous perspectives treated luxury consumption as a kind of social distinction and status signalling (Dubois et al., 2021). Based on previous views, luxury consumers were often conceptualised in pre-existing literature as primarily engaged in consumerist discourse on luxury as a means of social distinction or status signalling (Dubois et al., 2021). Analysing previous research showed that consumption patterns can be interpreted as a form of social branding. Yet this view is increasingly viewed as a conceptual shortcoming, suggesting that it does not account for the experiential, affective and identity-based dimensions of today's luxury consumption. The luxury customer this day is concerned not just about outward signs of their wealth, but equally so with the extent to which what a luxury product or experience represents in the individual's soul (the interiorizedness of their character). Indeed, Batat (2022) argued that contemporary high-end consumption is experiential and identity-oriented, prioritising how brands 'make a consumer feel' rather than just appearing.

This view of consumption takes a long perspective, consistent with the Consumer Culture Theory, which regards it as a social construction situated within the context of making meanings into meaning. Such an evolution also suggests that luxury can be conceived not only as a social phenomenon but also as a construct shaped by psychological and affective factors. In this sense, luxury can be conceptualised as part social and part psychological (Dubois et al., 2021). Luxury spending isn't just about status; it's about satisfying more personal and emotional needs. The digital revolution of consumer culture accelerated this transition. Online media and social networking sites have provided consumers not only with the ability to share experiences in ways never seen before but also with the means to collectively co-construct meaning and bargaining power, as well as to negotiate the value of luxury. Kozinets (2010) holds that, in online communities, individuals actively discuss and understand brands rather than merely consume marketing. Equally, Husain, Paul, and Koles (2022) find that interactions within social media communities enable consumers to influence one another's perceptions of luxury brands. Nevertheless, much of the literature continues to lag in conceptualising luxury as a social construction, in which meanings emerge from consumer discussions and involvement. Therefore, more recent studies have focused less on rigid, brand-led models and more on fluid, living views. Dubois et al. (2021)

offer a tension-based interpretation of luxury consumption, in which consumers bargain over “what luxury signifies to the self,” rather than its status signal.

What luxury means, in other words, is the intersection of the individual and the social, and thus a sense of personal aspiration (identity, emotion) with social interaction (prestige, recognition) and hence the meanings of luxury. Luxury spending, therefore, seems to be a performance in which a balance is achieved between internal and external factors. In general, luxury consumption during this time seems to emerge from interactions around a continuous experience rather than a static set of values. However, the digital transformation of consumer culture has radically altered how these meanings are made. For instance, online platforms and communities offer new venues where consumers interact with brands and each other, sharing experiences, validating opinions, and negotiating meanings (Kozinets, 2010; Husain, Paul, and Koles, 2022). However, even with this transition, the literature largely focuses on brand-oriented narratives rather than consumer-led meaning-making (Seo and Leban, 2021). As the digital landscape broadens, users are increasingly interacting with brands and with each other, continuously reinterpreting and reassessing what is luxury. It draws attention to the need to shift from static models to ones that capture the changing, context-dependent nature of luxury meaning.

2.1 From status to experience: Redefining luxury value

Traditionally, luxury was understood primarily in terms of status signalling: consumers purchased luxury goods to signal both wealth and social position. Indeed, basic theories of luxury posit that conspicuous consumption is fuelled by admiration and deference. Some studies have found that more contemporary luxury does not revolve around status motives. Batat (2022) and Shahid and Paul (2021) further underline that luxury is becoming increasingly experiential and identity-driven: consumers are attracted to emotional fulfilment and unique experiences that they self-cultivate and grow. Current luxury consumers are driven by intrinsic urges and self-fulfilment; in their sample, consumers “seek luxury consumption to enhance their 'self' through enriched experiences.” However, some recent research warns us against exaggerating the erosion of social signalling. Dubois et al. (2021) contend that status motivations are still firmly rooted in luxury behaviour. For example, Dubois et al. (2021) observe that even

identity-driven motivations often coexist with less explicit social desires. Similarly, Husain et al. (2022) and social validation. Internal (identity) and external (status) motivations are, therefore, seldom in tension; rather, they are a mirror system. Luxury consumption is both self-expression and social signalling, which often live and work together, not alone. The interaction undermines a simple binary between “status vs experience.” Dubois, Jung, and Ordabayeva (2021) show that status motivations remain deeply embedded in luxury consumption, even when consumers present their actions as identity driven. Internal and external motivations are not antithetical; they are interrelated parts of the equation. In that way, the body of literature might be drawing a false contrast between social and experiential consumption. Furthermore, frameworks such as Amin and Tarun (2021), which conceptualise consumption values as stable drivers of behaviour, become problematic in digital environments. The definition of meaning is always in continuous negotiation, also affected by the interactions of one’s own (Kozinets, 2010), implying that the luxury value is not maintained by a static reality but by a dynamic one that evolves through interaction in a process of life. What remains underdeveloped is not only how these meanings evolve, but also whether existing frameworks can grasp this fluidity.

2.2 Consumer-brand relationships: Stability vs Fluidity

Classic luxury research highlights the role that strong consumer-brand relationships play in emotional attachment, brand love and trust are considered key drivers of loyalty and premium behaviour (Bazi et al., 2023; Shmul, 2022). For instance, brand-attached consumers are more willing to pay higher prices and to spread the word. Trust is a common foundation: Seo and Leban (2021) describe it as a key factor in long-term luxury brand strategy: the brand creates value, and consumers respond in a predictable manner. In a digital context, however, this assumption is called into question. Most recent studies highlight the role of interaction in connection. Hyun et al. (2024) and Lee & Wu (2025) state that brand relationships in the “phygital” era are consistently co-created through engagement across channels. Husain et al. (2022) explicitly found that luxury brand trust is often shaped by communities that mirror their echo chambers and sounding boards, in which collective storytelling builds or erodes trust and attachment.

Even these newer frameworks fail to capture interaction as a central impetus. The majority still regard consumer dialogue as a secondary mechanism. The upshot is that multiple models overstate the stability of luxury relationships. Consumer–brand relationships are prone to instability due to exposure to various, often contradictory opinions, messages, and meanings that shape interactions. If a conversation in a community or an influencer’s post goes viral, or if a community discussion exposes shortcomings, the meaning of a brand change overnight. Thus, it is even more relevant for Hermès, where access to products is often negotiated through connections with sales associates. Such mechanisms create even more avenues for negotiation as consumers respond to and negotiate implicit expectations, which in turn help shape trust and attachment.

This literature is often based on a one-sided logic, where brands are supposed to create value, and consumers react. This paradigm ignores consumers’ active responsibility in constructing and, indeed, resisting brand meanings—especially amid digital practices. And yet that assumption is more difficult in a digital world where consumers communicate with each other and reimagine the meaning of their brand. Although both Hyun et al. (2024) and Lee and Wu (2025) recognize interaction as a significant mechanism, neither makes it an absolute consideration. Therefore, current models may overemphasize the stability of consumer-brand relationships, underestimate the degree to which they are always in negotiation, and often underestimate the adequacy of current frameworks for capturing the fluid and emergent dimension of luxury consumption.

2.3 Authenticity: A stable attribute or a negotiated meaning?

In particular, authenticity as a luxury brand attribute is commonly associated with heritage and craftsmanship (Wiedmann et al., 2021). From this perspective, authenticity is part of the brand: a luxury label is authentic due to its history and provenance. Sharma (2024) discusses the influence of brand commitment, brand reliability, and brand attitude on brand relationships, emphasising that the three attributes of brand trust and brand equity are strongly influenced by the brand itself, but has been criticised for its lack of explanation regarding the fact that authenticity is a strictly brand-driven concept (Sharma, 2024, pp. 2289-2305). Zniva et al. (2023) show that perceptions of

influencer authenticity are influenced by features such as uniqueness and consistency, which, in turn, shape consumer purchase intentions and how authenticity is conceptualised in online spaces. Consistent with this stance, a recent study found that consumers view brands endorsed by virtual endorsers as less genuine than those endorsed by human beings, emphasising the subjective and perceptual dimensions of brand authenticity (The negative effect of virtual endorsers on brand authenticity and potential remedies, 2024). It creates an apparent tension between their definitions of authenticity. If authenticity is the same as heritage, then it needs to be stable.

However, it is inherently unstable if defined by a consumer belief. These two definitions cannot be entirely reconciled, suggesting that authenticity is inherently a negotiated meaning. Brand signals, tone, visual style, and storytelling for authenticity. In the context of Hermes, this is particularly harsh: for some people, the brand's extraordinary secrecy ensures authenticity, it is absolute (thought of as dignified and rare), but for those who don't, it may mean inaccessibility or elitism. For example, Liu, Ko, and Shun (2024) point out that how luxury brands perceive their own authenticity (and subsequent trustworthiness) is always affected by the consistency of their behaviour across touchpoints. One consumer might take Hermes's little presence on Instagram as "it's real, it doesn't have to yell"; another might find it alienating. Sun et al. (2024) provide an experimental basis: they found that consumers assess authenticity based on various sub-factors, including consistency, reliability, and, particularly, originality. According to their research on Korean cosmetics, originality influence was greatest for perception of authenticity, which, in turn, significantly positively affected brand attachment and loyalty. Similarly, if Hermes's messaging or products fall short of consumer expectations for originality, trust and loyalty might fall.

Finally, authenticity cannot be considered an unchanging brand attribute. It is a socially constructed belief, shaped by how consumers make sense of brand signals in context. However, most of the literature still considers authenticity as something innate to the brand rather than as something consumers establish. It creates a conceptual tension: authenticity rooted in heritage should be permanent, stable and timeless; but it can only emerge when recognised. Yet authenticity must also be seen as fluid, an attribute not hard and fast but malleable and reinterpretable. These are not two positions that can be easily read as one way or the other: authenticity must be seen as both objective and

subjective. This tension is especially acute concerning Hermès. If the brand's emphasis on exclusivity and little communication might lend authenticity to some and exclusivity or elitism to others, it could be a good thing. Authenticity is not presented the same way across consumers but is differently perceived and interpreted by consumers and their contexts. As such, it best translates at most as a contested, socially negotiated meaning. Within Hermès, this tension is particularly pronounced, as it pertains to the brand's emphasis on exclusivity and control over how things are communicated, and how this reinforces notions of authenticity while creating perceptions of elitism or distance.

2.4 Emotional Intelligence and Empathy in Luxury branding

Emotional intelligence (EI) and empathy are becoming more significant in building brand/consumer relationships. Di Fabio and Saklofske (2021) define emotional intelligence as “the ability to comprehend and manage emotions”, and Sharma et al. (2022) associate it with the effectiveness of communication. In marketing, high EI means customising messages to consumer emotions. A large part of current studies views EI as a firm-level expertise: brands are depicted as structuring emotionally intelligent strategies that consumers adopt. This ignores the essential point that consumers themselves interpret and assign emotional intelligence.

Chowdhury (2017) suggests a positive link between EI and perceived value, but EI is inferred from subtle cues, tones, imagery, and responsiveness. In luxury, communication is often between the lines. For instance, Schneider et al. (2023) argue that emotional intelligence supports sound reasoning and that consumers will closely analyse emotional signals. In luxury, the elegant message that one consumer might find elegant may sound cold to another. By this, I mean that emotional intelligence is a comparatively subjective and interpretive construct that can be shaped largely by how consumers interpret and reflect on brand communications. Furthermore, it reveals that emotional intelligence and empathy are not intrinsic features of brand design but are also read more interpretively through consumer reactions and social interaction.

Lehnert and Kühnl (2024) argue that empathy is central to customer experience; brands that convey empathy can foster warmth and connection. As per Lehnert and Kühnl (2024), empathy is an element of customer experience; empathy-based brands foster warmth and connection. Lee and Wu (2025) caution that luxury brands are often rated

high on competence but low on warmth and that efforts to ‘humanise’ them can be counterproductive if poorly executed. Meanwhile, Husain et al. (2022) and Salcuviene et al. (2025) find consumers often develop empathy as they interact with others in online communities. In practice, emotional connection manifests through common stories and consumer support. In fact, EI and empathy for luxury brands are emergent, interpretive constructs rather than intrinsic features of the brand. A brand may want a warm and understanding face with consumers, but consumers must judge that against the context. Some consumers may see a Hermès post that is “touching” by one as “contrived” by another. Thus, emotional signals in luxury risk tread a fine line: too little empathy can come across as coldness; too much, or just too clear, risks sounding inauthentic.

2.5 Online communities as spaces of meaning construction

Brand online communities have generally been defined as spaces for sharing information and value creation. Kozinets (2010) describes their contributions as enabling communal cultural exchange, and Chaparro and Dilmeri (2022) explain their role in value co-creation. Luxury marketers tend to see these things in transactional terms: places where consumers discover product knowledge or empower one another to make purchase decisions. Newer work paints a more nuanced picture. Lehnert and Kühnl (2024) describe online communities as emotional contexts in which people perform and express their identities and empathy. Rochefort and Ndlovu (2024) also highlight communities’ active role in constructing brand meaning, and the literature often divides the role of communities into informational and emotional roles.

It has recently been found that emotional sharing in internet communities is greatly strengthened by peer interactions rather than by original content sharing (Luo et al., 2025). Emotion and social context have profound influences on knowledge sharing. If, for example, a user shares what they are excited to share about owning a Birkin bag, isn’t she transmitting more than just product information, but affirming the aspirational and symbolic nature of Hermès instead? In this way, online communities are not just media but a site for the meaning of interaction. When a user calls attention to an unpleasant experience with customer service, that negative emotion spreads and alters

how the entire community views the brand. Emotional resonance, in other words, shifts how information is received.

Online communities should, thus, be conceived not exclusively as spaces for value co-creation, but as sites of interpretation within which meanings are always being produced, negotiated, and contested. Such dynamics become most pronounced in Hermès-associated communities, where consumers, as a cluster, make sense of purchasing, exchange experiences, and develop shared understandings of how a brand acts in practice. These communities do more than amplify brand messages; they co-create meanings, including tension and critique. Consumers validate each other's emotional response just as much as facts do. It's an opportunity for luxury brands or a threat. The impact of positive community interactions on trust and love can therefore be profound in the long run, but at the same time, critical discourse can erode the brand's reputation from the grassroots level (Wong, 2023).

Luxury brands should thus acknowledge that their "audience" is not merely a cast of passive targets, but a web of meaning-makers. Simultaneously, the literature is fragmented, with functional and emotional views of online communities being frequently treated as distinct entities. This leads to a partial understanding of the way these spaces work. Here, information and emotional exchanges are inextricably linked. These dialogues are rarely just informational; instead, knowledge-sharing is part of emotional expression, personal stories and social affirmation. What emerges repeatedly is that you cannot regard online communities simply as places of value co-creation – they are interpretive spaces in which meanings are constructed, reiterated and contested.

Hermès represents a distinctive form of ultra-luxury branding, characterised by controlled scarcity, limited accessibility, and a strong emphasis on heritage and craftsmanship. Unlike most high-end brands, Hermès appeals to the relational mechanism of access, where product availability is typically handled indirectly through sales representatives rather than through open purchase. This establishes a system in which consumers need to negotiate inherent rules and expectations that are not only present in purchase behaviour but also in conceptions of fair play, trust, and authenticity. In these digital environments, consumers are interpreting, discussing and negotiating these mechanisms much more, bringing these to life as shared narratives and joint experiences. Therefore, Hermès is much more than a product whose ownership

leads to engagement and exchange; it's also about negotiations and the meanings and social placement of consumers. Hermès, therefore, is a particularly telling context through which to explore how luxury meanings are situated, constructed, and experienced in action.

2.6 Conceptual framework and key variables

According to the said perspective, the key perceptual variables influencing this study include authenticity, trust, emotional attachment, empathy and emotional intelligence. These are not fixed traits of Hermès, per se, but socially constructed perceptions that emerge through dialogue. For example, authenticity is defined as the congruence between brand heritage and communication and is assessed in the context. Trust is the confidence consumers have in a brand's consistency and is often formed through social validation (Husain et al., 2022). Emotional attachment is a symbolic expression of and social reinforcement of the affective bond (Shimul, 2022; Li et al., 2025). Empathy is the perception of emotional understanding derived from brand cues and/or through peer support. Emotional intelligence is consumer-rated sensitivity and appropriateness of communication, inferred from subtle cues (Chowdhury, 2017).

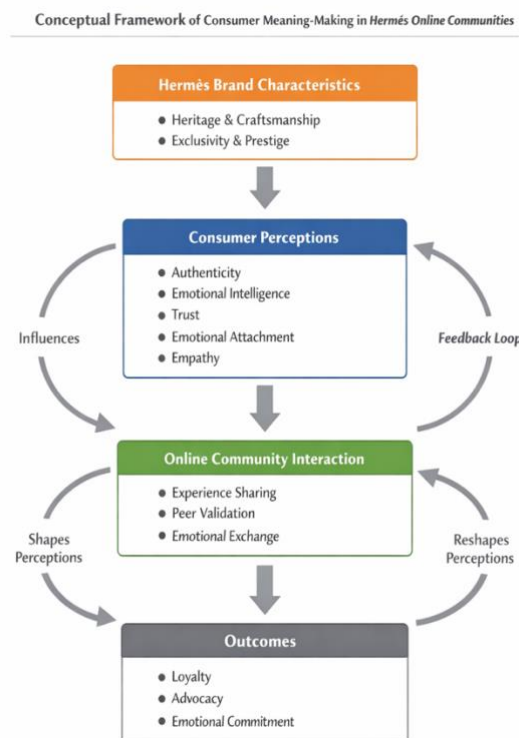


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of consumer meaning-making in luxury brand communities

Figure 1 illustrates how these perceptions are formed. Hermes's core attributes (heritage, craftsmanship, exclusivity, prestige) shape consumers' initial perceptions. These feed into perceptions of authenticity, trust, attachment, empathy, and EI. Crucially, each is continuously modulated by interaction within online communities. In these forums, consumers share experiences, critique brand actions, and negotiate meaning. The consumer–brand relationship thus emerges as a dynamic, socially negotiated process rather than a fixed outcome of brand strategy.

2.7 Research gap

Despite all scientific research, major gaps still exist. First, luxury literature largely remains firm-centric, focusing on how manufacturers and brands design to add value while paying little attention to consumer perception. Emotional intelligence and empathy are typically presented as brand functions rather than consumer perceptions. Second, we have studied online communities but not studied them in the context of their emotional dynamics. Consumer-to-consumer empathy and collective sense-making have been recognised (Husain et al., 2022; Salciuvienė et al., 2025), although less studied in luxury contexts. Third, ultra-luxury brands such as Hermès remain underrepresented in online research, even as they emphasise their distinct focus on exclusivity and secrecy. Fourth, a few methodologies, such as netnography, have been utilised in the luxury context to examine emotional constructs. These gaps indicate that current frameworks may be structurally limited by assumptions of stability and brand control, which hamper their ability to capture the malleable, interaction-driven character of luxury consumption. This study responds by adopting an interpretivist, netnographic orientation to foreground consumer meaning-making. We propose a framework (Fig. 2.1) that locates the luxury experience in consumer interpretation and community interaction. We'll be able to do this by looking not just at what authenticity, trust, and attachment are, but also at how consumers within Hermès communities build them. Beyond this, it suggests that contemporary luxury research frameworks may be theoretically limited by assumptions of stability and brand control. Although earlier studies have identified what luxury means, they seldom explore how these meanings are dynamically negotiated through consumer interaction. Consequently, we remain

unfamiliar with the fluid, socially constituted nature of luxury consumption, especially in digitally mediated environments or in ultra-luxury contexts such as Hermès.

2.8 Summary

As such, the current chapter discussed the literature on luxury consumption, including the shift from status to experience and the importance of viewing luxury as socially constructed and emotionally rich. It found a few key dimensions—authenticity, trust, attachment, empathy and emotional intelligence and showed how each has been theorised. Even more importantly, it spotlighted tensions: between brand-driven and consumer-driven perspectives, between fixed attributes and negotiated meanings, and between informational and emotional roles of online communities. It helps us to see that consumer-brand relationships in luxury are dynamic processes rather than static outcomes. In conclusion, these findings support an inquiry into consumer activity in the construction of luxury meanings within online communities, as practised specifically by Hermès.

3 Methodology

The study uses a qualitative, interpretivist research design that explores how consumers perceive and affectively relate to luxury brands, mainly Hermès. Qualitative methodologies are used to explore how people interpret their experiences and give meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). More broadly, the study seeks to uncover consumers' understanding of brand communication and how emotional connections are formed and expressed in internet-based contexts. A mixed-methods design combining netnography and semi-structured interviews has been used. This method allowed for exploration of both natural interaction and in-depth personal experiences from interviews. A qualitative variety of methods promotes the study of complex phenomena from different standpoints. Through these approaches, the research goes beyond traditional, fixed, brand-centric, static descriptions that focus on brand-related meanings and instead considers how meanings are constantly constructed through shared experiences rather than being fixed.

This is grounded in the fundamental principle that consumer–brand relationships are not fixed but are gradually created and transformed as individuals interact more socially over time. Qualitative methods can be effective for capturing subjective meaning and interpretations of the findings, though careful interpretation is necessary because the findings depend on both participants' responses and the researcher's perspective. In this vein, the research is not attempting to develop objective truths but, instead, to nurture a situated conception of the production of luxury meanings in the context/setting. All quotations include descriptions of sources (PurseForum, Reddit, etc.), the thread context, and the interview participants' traits to demonstrate transparency and traceability, with the source material tagged by method.

3.1 Research Approach

An abductive research methodology was employed, enabling the study to iteratively shift between theory and data (Saunders et al., 2019). The literature on trust, emotional attachment, empathy, and emotional intelligence provided a theoretical framework for early conceptualisations of these constructs. The research remained flexible in the face of new findings arising from the data. Qualitative inquiry must therefore be flexible and

responsive to participants' meanings, rather than enforcing rigid theoretical constructs (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In response to this, inductive intuitions around the "Hermès game" and community-specific norms materialised during analysis. This is particularly helpful in exploratory research, where the researcher incorporates existing theory at the time but also adapts and refines it as new information is gleaned from the data. Tracy (2020) also points out that high-quality qualitative research is an iterative process that evolves rather than a fixed understanding over time, as emphasised throughout the field. The abductive method provides flexibility and receptiveness to new information and ideas (e.g., learning new things), yet it also encounters interpretive bias. The researcher also becomes influential in the analysis, thereby shaping the findings.

Still, this is compatible with interpretivist analysis, in which meaning is co-constructed rather than objectively found. This meant that, although one could argue that the iterative process between theory and data was not bad for this work (it was just going to get better from a theoretical perspective), it ultimately was viewed more as an appropriate way to understand the complexities of consumer meaning-making in a luxury context (to the extent that it is possible to explain that this is true). Hermès was chosen for its distinctive positioning in luxury, defined by exclusivity, controlled access and strong symbolic value. Hermès operates through practices we might describe as opaque, relationship-based purchasing and limited product availability, to name a few, unlike more accessible luxury brands. Hence, it is appropriate to investigate how luxury brand meaning is constituted through brand communication and consumer experience, as this establishes an environment in which consumers actively negotiate their purchases and interactions.

Qualitative analysis is inherently interpretive as a researcher. The exposure to luxury consumption and digital worlds has greatly influenced how patterns are recognised and made sense of. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), reflexivity was upheld in the research process through re-reviewing data, challenging initial interpretations and allowing findings to emerge from participant narratives rather than preconceived views. To capture these dynamics, this study uses netnographic data from various online platforms (PurseForum, Reddit, and Instagram).

These networks were chosen as suitable sites for various forms of consumer interaction. PurseForum and Reddit, on the other hand, are discussion-based arenas where users share their personal experiences, offer advice, and provide detailed interpretations of Hermès. Here, we can explore in depth which consumers have collectively come to terms with the Hermès theme. In contrast, Instagram is a more brand-mediated environment where interactions tend to be shorter and visual, providing immediate reactions and expressions of admiration. While more data comes from PurseForum and Reddit than from Instagram, the imbalance in this dataset across platforms adds to the analysis.

In this way, it aims not to guarantee equal representation for all voices, but rather to ensure that the more people, perspectives, and insights are considered in terms of depth and relevance, the more the overall distribution will reflect that. The discussion-based structure of forums yields higher-level interpretive data, whereas Instagram offers a contextual view of brand perception in a more public and curated environment. Both platforms provide complementary perspectives on how consumers engage with content across different digital settings.

3.1.1 Research Reflexivity

Because qualitative research involves interpreting data, reflexivity is a core aspect of the research process (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Instead of assuming neutrality, this research acknowledges that positionality and methodological choice directly influence the interpretation and presentation of information. The research brings experience in luxury consumption and digital spaces, as well as knowledge of Hermès, an ultra-luxury brand of cultural significance. The familiarity lent itself more strongly to a subtle understanding of community norms, language and practices, particularly in interpreting insider concepts such as the “Hermès game.” And yet, the process required constant, active reflection to ensure that interpretations were firmly rooted in participants' stories rather than in prior assumptions. Reflexivity was thus considered an active, continuous exercise throughout the study. This meant re-evaluating the data at several junctures in the research, calling into question the initial interpretation and remaining receptive to alternative meanings that challenged preliminary assumptions. Consistent with Braun

and Clarke (2006), themes were not viewed as objective findings but rather as interpretive constructions developed through interaction with the data.

Reflexive considerations are also present in the study's netnographic design. In choosing platforms: PurseForum, Reddit, and Instagram, they were influenced (for the purposes of this piece) by the nature of what was relevant to Hermès-related discourse. Yet this decision also inevitably positions certain types of consumers – those who are digitally active, use English, and are sufficiently engaged with the brand to participate in online communities. Therefore, the dataset highlights the viewpoints of the most active consumers, while the voices of less active or less involved consumers remain underrepresented. The same applies to the purposive choice of the discussion threads, focused on providing depth and interaction - we preferred richer detail over broader but shallower content. Data collection occurred between October and December 2022, not during major product launches or seasonal peaks.

This means the data we collected is more likely to reflect day-to-day consumer sentiment than a surge driven by specific brand events. Social media data was similarly uneven, with one platform seeing as much content on PurseForum and Reddit as on Instagram. This is due to the researcher's academic mindset, alongside structural contrasts between platforms such as the forum-based environment, which has better facilitated long, detailed discussions than the shorter, more reactive discussions on Instagram. Taken together, these aspects inform the extent of the results. The study offers an in-depth analysis that situates meaning-making within Hermès-based online communities, even though the views presented can only be partially understood as such. This is not just a limitation that needs to be addressed in qualitative research; it captures the situated and interpretive nature of the work, which demands transparency of the conditions of knowledge production.

3.2 Data collection methods

3.2.1 Netnography

Using netnography, a consumer interaction analysis across online communities on Reddit, Purseforum, and Instagram was conducted. According to Kozinets (2010; 2020), netnography is a qualitative method based on ethnography that examines online cultures

through digital interactions. These platforms were used to cover a range of interactions, from in-depth discussion (Purseforum) to informal exchange (Reddit) to brand-mediated discourse (Instagram). One, non-participant observation: this was a period for the researcher to take a passive role in the process to understand community norms and other communication styles. At this stage, we ensured that subsequent interpretations were situated contextually. After this, discussion threads were purposively selected for their relevance to Hermès, levels of engagement, and for their detailed, experience-driven content. This helped ensure that rich, meaningful data was included. Data were manually added by copying posts and comments into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. By employing this research method, we were able to pay close attention to the data during the collection process to better understand it in context and prevent misunderstanding.

The tags for each entry were branded by platform and thread to ensure transparency and traceability in the analysis. Data pre-cleaning was then performed to remove low-content entries (e.g., isolated emojis or minimal responses), resulting in a dataset centred on analytically valuable information. The selection of these platforms was based on a variety of consumers' interaction modes: deep interactions (Purseforum), casual, and opinion-based discussions (Reddit) and brand-controlled communication sites (Instagram, to name one example), that would enable the researchers to learn more about consumers' consumer meaning-making in multiple contexts.

A total of 577 data types were analyzed, spanning October through December 2025, yielding a comprehensive dataset that reflects various consumer attitudes, ranging from positive experiences and critical reflections to everyday conversations. Due to the scale of the dataset, which is relatively larger from PurseForum and Reddit than from Instagram, there is an imbalance across platforms; however, to the best of our knowledge, there is an imbalance across both platforms. Interactions through discussion on community platforms, such as PurseForum and Reddit, enable richer analysis of consumer experiences and shared interpretations.

On the other hand, due to Instagram's limited scale, there are fewer opportunities for brand-mediated communication and for instant consumer responses. More than striving for equal distribution, this research prioritizes depth and relevance in the data, each platform providing complementary insights into how luxury brand meaning is created across various digital environments.

To provide transparency in the netnographic data collection process, Table 1 presents an overview of the PurseForum threads included in the analysis. These threads were selected purposively based on their relevance to Hermès-related discussions and their level of engagement, allowing for in-depth exploration of consumer perspectives across different contexts.

Table 1: Overview of Purseforum Threads Used in Netnographic analysis

Thread No.	Thread Title	Platform	Type of Discussion	Key Themes Identified
Thread 1	“Hermès 2026 Wishlist”	PurseForum	Aspirational / Future-oriented discussions	Desire, anticipation, emotional attachment, symbolic value
Thread 2	“New Magic Alhambra Collection”	PurseForum	Information-seeking and product discussion	Knowledge sharing, peer advice, community interaction
Thread 3	“What is your latest purchase?”	PurseForum	Experience sharing	Emotional reactions, ownership, validation, service experience
Thread 4	“Unpopular Hermès Opinions”	PurseForum	Critical discussion	Trust, skepticism, exclusivity, fairness, brand critique
Thread 5	“Influencers and Hermès”	PurseForum	Reflective / evaluative discussion	Authenticity, visibility, brand image, social media influence

In addition, Reddit (r/ Hermès) was selected as a complementary platform to offer more depth and less moderate discussions. Table 2 provides an overview of the Reddit threads including also in the analysis of the data.

Table 2: Overview of Reddit Threads used in Netnographic analysis

Thread No.	Thread Title	Platform	Type of Discussion	Key Themes Identified	Role in Analysis
Thread 1	“Best way to start 2026”	Reddit (r/Hermes)	Advice-seeking / entry-level discussion	Access, uncertainty, trust, learning process	Illustrates how new consumers navigate entry into the brand and interpret access
Thread 2	“Grateful for my H fairies”	Reddit (r/Hermes)	Experience sharing / success stories	Emotional attachment, community validation, excitement	Highlights collective emotional reinforcement and celebration of acquisition
Thread 3	“Scored Birkin 30 Rouge H in Paris”	Reddit (r/Hermes)	Purchase experience	Exclusivity, luck, timing, system ambiguity	Demonstrates unpredictability and perceived randomness of access

Instagram was included to capture brand communication and consumer reactions, unlike forum platforms. Thus, the interaction on Instagram tends to be more fragmented and less discussion based. Table 3 provides an overview of how Instagram data contributed to the analysis.

Table 3: Overview of Instagram Data Used in Netnographic Analysis

Thread No.	Title	Content Type	Platform	Nature of Interaction	Key Themes Identified
Thread 1	SS26 Collection	Brand campaign post	Instagram	Brand-generated content with user comments	Admiration, aesthetic appreciation, brand prestige
Thread 2	Tabler Sellier Bag	Product-focused post	Instagram	Short-form user reactions	Desire, evaluation, timelessness
Thread 3	Drawing on Your Mind Campaign	Artistic campaign	Instagram	Interpretive and reactive comments	Creativity, ambiguity, brand storytelling
Thread 4	General Instagram Engagement	Mixed posts/comments	Instagram	Fragmented, short interactions	Admiration, symbolic value, emotional reaction

Instagram provided valuable insight into brand communication and surface-level engagement, the relatively small volume of comments compared to the forum platforms mentioned above and as such, Instagram data was used primarily to complement, rather than dominate the analysis.

3.2.2 Semi structured interviews

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted to supplement the netnographic data. This approach enables participants to express their experiences in their own words while being guided by a clear focus on the research topic (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were directed face-to-face or via Zoom, based on participants' preferences and availability. Four interviews took place in person, and two were conducted remotely. Participants were shown a Hermès social media post and asked to reflect on

their immediate reactions, interpretations and emotional responses. The interview guide used an open-ended, flexible format rather than a rigid, highly structured one. This method allowed participants to express their experiences openly while also allowing for the exploration of relevant aspects of the research. Those elements included participants' responses to brand content, their emotional responses, perceptions of whether the content felt authentic or contrived, and their connection or disconnection with luxury brands. Other prompts addressed how participants interpret brand communications during sensitive or meaningful moments, as well as potential influences from interacting with other consumers.

For context, Table 4 presents a summary of the interviewees' demographic and experience characteristics. The sample consists of six women aged 27-45 and living in Cyprus (Nicosia and Limassol). The people were selected to represent different types of luxury involvement roles: resellers, long-standing customers, and aspirational buyers. This diversity enables a thorough understanding of how emotional reactions and attitudes towards brand messaging vary by degrees of engagement with luxury consumption.

Table 4: Interview Participant Overview

Interview	Gender	Age	Location	Role	Relationship with Luxury
Interview 1	Female	34	Nicosia	Reseller	Professional (Resale Business)
Interview 2	Female	29	Limassol	Reseller	Professional (Resale Market)
Interview 3	Female	38	Nicosia	Private School Teacher	Aspirational / Appreciative
Interview 4	Female	45	Limassol	Private School Teacher	Intellectual / Observational
Interview 5	Female	43	Limassol	Luxury Buyer	Long-term Client (10+ years)

The questions were formulated in simple, non-scholarly language, in a way that would not influence participants' responses and would allow them to answer naturally. Then

follow-up probes (e.g. “Can you tell me more about that?” and “How did that make you feel?”) were leveraged to dig deeper into responses and prompt contemplation.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and verbatim transcribed.

Transcripts for this work were repeatedly reviewed to ensure accuracy and to facilitate familiarity with the data before coding. The interview guide consists of thematic sections that focus on participants’ backgrounds, reactions to brand communication, emotional responses, perceptions of authenticity, and experiences of connection and community. The full interview guide is included in Appendix B.

3.3 Sampling and dataset description

This research followed a purposive sampling approach to select both online and interview samples (Patton, 2022). This focus on information-rich cases aligns with the research objective. Netnography included 426 posts across 5 threads on Purseforum, 149 posts/comments across 3 threads on Reddit, and 35 comments from the official Hermès Instagram account. Six interviews were conducted. This yielded 103 coded segments. This study analysed 577 data units that included online content and interview data. The dataset was considered adequate for achieving analytical depth and for identifying recurring patterns—the primary goal of qualitative research. Whilst the number of participants in an interview is small, qualitative research values depth over breadth. The sample size was adequate to identify recurring patterns and meaningful insights, especially when intersected with the netnographic dataset (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The findings were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006). A hybrid coding strategy was used, incorporating deductive codes from the existing literature and inductive codes generated from the data. This reflects Creswell and Poth’s (2018) understanding that qualitative analysis needs to be guided by theory, but receptive to new understanding. Though predefined constructs such as trust, empathy, and emotional attachment provided a rough initial framework, the analysis was less rigid, allowing the emergence of themes. Data were analysed in Microsoft Excel for data organisation and in ATLAS.ti for coding and it went through stages,

including becoming familiar with the data through repeated reading, coding key segments, grouping codes into higher-order themes, iteratively refining themes, and interpreting relationships between themes. Significantly, the analysis did not approach themes as separated-in-a-box categories. Instead, it looked at how they interact and contradict each other at times. Tracy (2020) stresses that qualitative research must encompass complexity and nuance. Trust, scepticism, attachment, and exclusivity were found to be frequently intertwined in such research, revealing multifaceted concepts of consumer beliefs.

3.5 Codebook Development

The codebook was developed through an evolving process that improved as the analysis progressed. A set of deductive codes was developed based on existing literature, including concepts such as trust, emotional attachment, empathy, and emotional intelligence. These codes provided both structure for the start stage of analysis and orientation toward initial coding work (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the analysis, inductive codes started to emerge explicitly from the data. Code was broadly applied in the early stages in order to cover as many relevant meanings as possible. Then, a narrower stage took place, in which duplicate but overlapping codes were merged, clarified, or remodelled and simplified. At this stage, the relationships between codes were also examined to identify broadened themes. The codebook was thus not fixed but evolved as the analysis progressed. According to Tracy (2020), high-quality qualitative research involves this sort of iterative refinement; these codes are subsequently used to align with the data. The coding definitions were clearly documented for consistency, and examples were provided for each code. Doing this ensured transparency and clarity during analysis.

3.6 Coding process and use of ATLAS.ti

ATLAS.ti facilitated a structured, orderly process for examining the data. In this research, the cleaned data was imported (i.e., forum posts, social media comments, and interview transcripts) and then appended initial codes to meaningful passages. Coding was conducted using a hybrid approach. The analysis is also organised in six primary themes, with an overarching category which reflects general luxury perceptions.

Subcodes were developed to capture specific patterns and nuances in the data within each theme. The first coding stage involved broad coding of the text with both deductive and inductive labels. As the analysis was developing, these codes were refined and organised into six themes: trust and relationship formation; emotional attachment; perceived emotional intelligence and authenticity; empathy and service experience; exclusivity and social meaning; and social influence and contemporary consumption. The analysis examined how they are interconnected and how they affect one another, rather than assigning themes to separate categories. Trust was heavily driven by perceptions of authenticity, and emotional attachment was mediated through empathy and service experience.

4 Findings

This chapter reports evidence from both netnographic data from Purseforum, Reddit, Instagram and semi-structured interviews to analyse how consumers make sense of Hermès as a luxury brand. The study examines how trust, authenticity, emotional attachment, and engagement are forged through interaction and experience within online communities. Instead of being fixed or well-defined, they appeared fluid and interconnected. Consumers didn't just buy into the brand; they constantly reflected on, critiqued, discussed, and re-appropriated it via collective transactions. For this reason, findings are described in a dynamic, process-oriented way, anchored in participants' stories and in the everyday online interactions that naturally follow. Some themes surfaced quite frequently in the data (see Figure 2) because depth and resonance are given greater weight in the analysis than numerical prominence. Trust and authenticity emerged as recurring themes in the data, indicating their importance to consumer perception, while less common themes contributed salient context. The frequency patterns of coded themes analysed with ATLAS.ti were summarised in Figure 2. Trust is the most frequently coded theme, followed by authenticity and empathy, indicating that this aspect is key to how consumers perceive and interact with Hermès. Consumers are focused on a relational dimension of the brand, including consistency, emotional understanding, and perceived genuineness.

Emotional Intelligence appeared as a prominent dimension in the dataset with 237 coded instances in ATLAS. It primarily functioned as an interpretive lens, framing trust, authenticity, and consumer engagement in service. For this, perceived EI is not treated as an individual category but rather considered as an integrating topic across categories, and it is examined further in the context of service interactions in paragraph 4.4.3 and in the larger discussion in paragraph 5.3. Other themes, however, notably in the coding, such as exclusivity, or broad, general themes of luxury and general luxury perception, occur less frequently. That doesn't just mean they no longer mean as much as they once did. Rather, these themes operate more quietly throughout the dataset, shaping how trust and affective reactions unfold. As per qualitative research guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2006), frequency serves as a descriptive reference point for the study, whereas the meaning and interpretive significance of each theme is defined through depth of meaning.

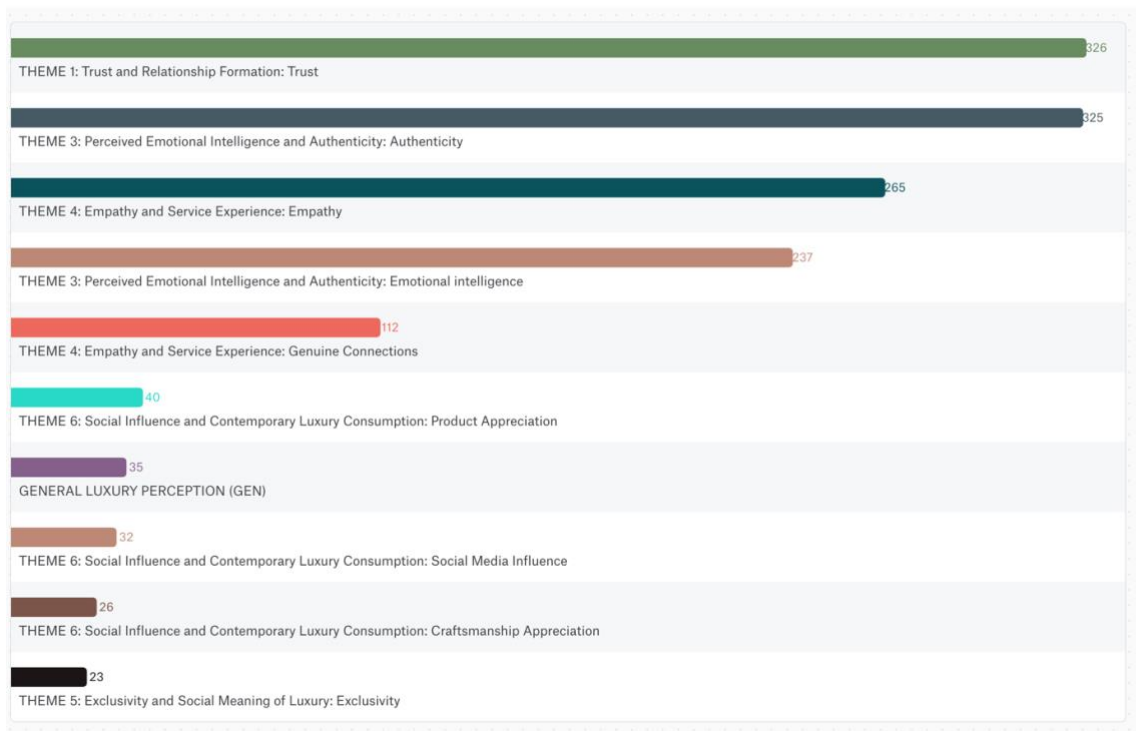


Figure 2: Frequency of coded themes (ATLAS.ti analysis)

On Figure 2 illustrates that trust, authenticity, and empathy are the most frequently observed themes, indicating their central role in shaping consumer perceptions.

4.1 Trust

This part examines how consumers build trust and value authenticity in relation to Hermès (RQ1 and RQ2). Trust did not appear to be an automatic reaction to the brand's reputation, as evidenced by both interviews and online discussions.

4.1.1 Trust through consistency and restraint

Consumers shared the consistent, if not frequent, impression that trust was more stable than it is visible. Participants appreciated the perceived consistency of Hermès' approach, which was not readily available in other brands that may tend to pivot with trends or social media. As a participant who was interviewed remarked, *"It didn't try to capitalise on the moment ... it just stayed consistent with its identity"* (Interview 2, Female, 29, Reseller). The perception that restraint was positive led to considerable confidence. Instead of having to continuously communicate or pitch itself, Hermès was

perceived as sustaining a foothold, bolstering its credibility. The same notion even surfaces in online discussions, where users argue that the brand works through its own logic: *“No matter how much you spend, Hermès does not owe you a bag... there is no ‘magic’ prepend formula”* (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”). On Reddit, an individual said, *“They don’t need to prove anything... the brand speaks for itself”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Best way to start 2026”). The perception of this stability did not remove uncertainty. Consumers understood that outcomes remained uncertain, particularly regarding product access. As one user put it, *“I’ve been waiting months ... it really depends on the relationship you build”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Best way to start 2026”) trust, in this approach, was not built on promise of results, but on the belief that the brand behaves in an ongoing way over time, regardless of uncertainty around results.

4.1.2 Authenticity as alignment and coherence

Authenticity was inextricably linked to both how consumers viewed the brand’s tone and communication style and to their understanding of it. Respondents acknowledged that Hermès engages in marketing yet were still prompted to assess whether it was a suitable communication. As one interviewee put it, *“It is marketing, clearly... but it feels intelligent... it does not feel aggressive”* (Interview 4, Male, 45, Luxury Consumer). This means authenticity is about not shying away from marketing while maintaining subtlety and coherence. Communication that matches expectations of refinement reinforces perceptions of authenticity. Consistency across touchpoints only further reinforced this, as an interview participant stated, *“What I see on Instagram matches what I experience in the boutique”* (Interview 5, Female, 43, Luxury Buyer). Yet, there was disagreement over authenticity. Discussions surrounding visibility and influencer culture added a more cynical dimension. Increased exposure may well have watered down the exclusivity of the brand, some consumers argued in a post, with one reader suggesting, *“it used to feel exclusive... now it’s everywhere”* (PurseForum, Thread 5: “Influencers and Hermès”), and another that *“influencers have made Hermès feel less special”* (PurseForum, Thread 5: “Influencers and Hermès”). These responses show that authenticity is not static but rather is always interpreted. Visibility to several consumers is seen as an evolution, but not for all, and some find it a challenge to the brand’s identity. That, in turn, makes for a very delicate, situationally specific

perception of authenticity, forged by the congruence among communication, expectations, and broader cultural transitions.

4.1.3 Trust as an ongoing evaluation

Equally important, trust did not seem to be an independent variable or fixed state, but one that was constantly being re-examined. Even customers who were highly proactive remained critical of the brand. As one participant said, *“When a luxury brand tries too hard to be relatable... it feels desperate”* (Interview 2, Female, 29, Reseller). Another participant also said, *“Sometimes I question if it’s worth it... but I still admire the brand”* (Interview 5, Female, 43, Luxury Buyer). This was evident in online discussions, where consumers critiqued pricing, fairness, and access and instead of taking the brand on board or rejecting it, they had to walk a line between admiration and scepticism. This suggests that, in luxury situations, trust is built not as a belief but as a negotiation between expectation and reality, with consumers continually revisiting the brand rather than adopting a preconceived idea.

4.2 Emotional Connection and Authenticity

This theme examines how consumers demonstrate emotional attachment and react to Hermès emotional tone (RQ1 and RQ3). The results shows that brand express their emotions in a measured, controlled way. This may suggest that emotional engagement with luxury is not just constructed within the brand's identity but rises from social interaction, where meanings are experienced. The Instagram interactions, shows that there is emotional engagement and it is often expressed through short responses. Comments such as *“I need this bag in my life”* and *“this is such a timeless piece”* (Instagram, Thread 2: “Tabler Sellier Bag”) highlight how desire is spoken in immediate and aspirational terms. Similarly, responses to collection posts such as *“absolutely stunning”* and *“so elegant... Hermès never disappoints”* (Instagram, Thread 1: “SS26 Collection”) reflect admiration that is emotionally present, yet not deeply personal. This suggests that emotional attachment on Instagram is expressed through instant admiration and aspirational desire, rather than through sustained or intimate engagement.

4.2.1 Controlled emotional attachment

Participants often described their feelings of admiration and aspiration. But such feelings were articulated in a more measured sense, a kind of symbolic connection. For instance, a respondent noted that: *“It makes me feel inspired... but not emotionally attached”* (Interview 6, Female, 27, Aspirational Buyer); and another wrote that they had a *“more respect than love”* (Interview 4, Male, 45, Luxury Consumer). This trend was apparent in digital exchanges as well, where yearning also collided with emotional isolation. As one user put it, *“I don’t feel connected... but I still want it”* (Reddit, r/Hermes), others spoke of aspiration through forward-looking narratives such as *“This is on my wishlist for 2026... hoping I can get it this year”* (PurseForum, Thread 1: “Hermès 2026 Wishlist”) and *“My dream bag... I’ve been thinking about it for so long”* (PurseForum, Thread 1: “Hermès 2026 Wishlist”). It’s a feeling that aligns with the idea that investment in luxury is part prediction, part ownership. Instead of personal connections, consumers interact with the brand in ways that maintain distance and uphold its exclusivity.

4.2.2 Community-based emotional expression

Equally important, trust did not seem to be an independent variable or fixed state, but one that was constantly being re-examined. Even customers who were highly proactive remained critical of the brand. As one participant said, *“When a luxury brand tries too hard to be relatable... it feels desperate”* (Interview 2, Female, 29, Reseller). Another participant also said, *“Sometimes I question if it’s worth it... but I still admire the brand”* (Interview 5, Female, 43, Luxury Buyer). This suggests that, in luxury situations, trust is built not as a belief but as a negotiation between expectation and reality, with consumers continually revisiting the brand rather than adopting a preconceived idea.

4.2.3 Emotional Connection and Authenticity

This theme examines how consumers demonstrate emotional attachment and react to Hermès emotional tone (RQ1 and RQ3). The results indicate that they have emotional resonance, but they control their emotions. The emotional engagement with luxury is

not just constructed within the brand's identity but arises from social interaction, where meanings are experienced and reinforced collectively.

4.2.4 Controlled emotional attachment

Participants often described their feelings of admiration and aspiration. But such feelings were articulated in a more measured sense, a kind of symbolic connection. For instance, a respondent noted that: *"It makes me feel inspired... but not emotionally attached"* (Interview 6, Female, 27, Aspirational Buyer); and another wrote that they had a *"more respect than love"* (Interview 4, Male, 45, Luxury Consumer). This trend was apparent in digital exchanges as well, where yearning also collided with emotional isolation. As one user put it, *"I don't feel connected... but I still want it"* (Reddit, r/Hermes), others spoke of aspiration through forward-looking narratives such as *"This is on my wishlist for 2026... hoping I can get it this year"* (PurseForum, Thread 1: "Hermès 2026 Wishlist") and *"My dream bag... I've been thinking about it for so long"* (PurseForum, Thread 1: "Hermès 2026 Wishlist"). It's a feeling that aligns with the idea that investment in luxury is part prediction, part ownership. Instead of personal connections, consumers interact with the brand in ways that maintain distance and uphold its exclusivity.

4.2.5 Community-based emotional expression

The emotional involvement didn't rest on one person. But emotions themselves were often shared, reinforced, and amplified through interaction within Internet communities. For example, during a discussion about the many successful bag offers and purchase experiences users used to share, a user said something like *"So happy for you!! You deserve it"* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: "Grateful for my H fairies") and *"We all understand how special this is... congratulations!"* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: "Grateful for my H fairies") show that emotional understanding coalesces at a communal level. Meanwhile, some users had strong, passionate reactions to their own interactions, including one individual who said, *"I was literally shaking when I got the call"* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: "Grateful for my H fairies"). These positive surprises were not unique but were shared and validated by the community. Thus, emotional attachment is both external to the brand itself at large and internalised in shared

narratives and social interaction: this means that the brand is not simply the object of desire, but rather the focal point of our collective emotional experience.

4.3 The Hermes game and negotiated exclusivity

This theme captures one of the most distinctive and conceptually significant findings of the study, capturing how consumers interpret and navigate access to Hermès products. Access was described as something that must be learned through experience, observation, and interaction with others rather than a formal or clearly defined system. While trust and emotional connection shape how consumers relate to the brand, exclusivity plays a central role in structuring how these relationships are experienced in practice. ‘Hermès game’ is not simply a brand-imposed system, but a socially constructed process that is continuously shaped, interpreted, and reinforced through consumer interaction.

4.3.1 Navigating access and implicit rules

Consumers consistently referred to the purchasing process as complex and unclear in interviews and online conversations. Not following explicit guidelines but relying on a cocktail of relationships, timing, and situational factors. As one described: *“It’s like a game... you have to build a relationship first”* (Interview 4, Male, 45, Luxury Consumer). Even within online communities, this view was heavily influenced and corroborated. On PurseForum, one user stated that *“there is no formula... you just have to play along”* (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”), and Reddit threads reflected similar frustration in agreement with such doubt, claiming you *“don’t just walk in and buy a Birkin... it doesn’t work like that”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Best way to start 2026”). Others, meanwhile, suggested that access might also be capricious, imprecise, or even random. For instance, one user noted that they *“just walked in and got offered one... I couldn’t believe it”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Scored Birkin 30 Rouge H in Paris”), and another said, *“it really depends on timing and luck”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Scored Birkin 30 Rouge H in Paris”). So, all considered, it seems exclusivity is a malleable and uncertain experience, not something inherent to an existing system. Consumers must interpret and navigate implicit rules, using knowledge shared in communities to interpret the process.

4.3.2 Desire and frustration

Although exclusivity made the brand a desirable product, it also raised tension and, in some instances, unhappiness. Participants discussed how hope and dedication were not always to their advantage. *“I felt so excited about this... and now I have no interest at all”* (Interview 3, Female, 38, Teacher). Similar frustrations were evident in online discussions. Some users expressed disappointment with the perceived loss of exclusivity, noting that *“too many people now... it doesn’t feel special anymore”* (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”), while others lamented how hard it is to access products and said, *“I spent so much and still nothing... it’s frustrating”* (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”). But not all consumers were, at the same time, prepared to let these expectations take the form of open-book style, interactive discussions. One user even refused to follow a process at all, stating, *“I’m not playing any games and buying things I don’t want”* (PurseForum, Thread 3: “What is your latest purchase?”). These responses highlight a primary contradiction in luxury consumption. Consumers seem to find themselves balancing acceptance and resistance: accepting the value of exclusivity while challenging its fairness.

4.3.3 Community decoding of the system

The online community, one of the most decisive factors in the construction of this system, shaped much of the interpretation. By sharing, we as consumers jointly analyse and explain the brand’s behaviours, transforming personal experience into shared knowledge. For instance, users often cited moments of success, such as *“my dream bag... finally got offered after months!”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Grateful for my H fairies”) and *“finally getting offered one feels like winning”* (PurseForum, Thread 3: “What is your latest purchase?”). These stories underscore the idea that access is seldom, and meaningfully, realised. Simultaneously, these conversations constitute an open learning space where consumers talk to each other and share advice. Questions like *“can anyone provide more intel?”* (PurseForum, Thread 2: “New Magic Alhambra Collection”) show how knowledge is collectively assembled. In this respect, exclusivity is not only enforced by the brand but is also co-constructed and negotiated with

consumer communities. So, the “Hermès game” reveals itself as socially constructed, through relationship rather than the mere design of the brand.

4.4 Customer Experience and Service Interactions

This section examines how online communities shape consumers' interpretations and sense-making of Hermès (RQ3). Rather than forming opinions in isolation, consumers continuously engage with others, reinforcing, questioning, and reshaping what the brand represents. To add to this, a similar pattern appears on Instagram where admiration is expressed through brief and limited forms of engagement. Comments like “obsessed” or “dream brand” reflect strong positive sentiment. This shows that, even though Instagram has low engagement, this platform still contributes to share perceptions of the brand.

4.4.1 Trust in sales associates

From interviews and online conversations with people, relationships with sales associates (SA) were one of the key aspects of the luxury experience. Trust in the brand and the people who represent it wasn't mutually exclusive. As one respondent explained: *“I won't buy anything... from an SA I don't trust”* (Interview 1, Female, 34, Reseller), and another said, *“my SA makes the whole experience... without her I wouldn't shop there”* (Interview 6, Female, 27, Aspirational Buyer). This was even evident in the online discussions. In one thread, users offered advice about navigating a boutique environment and said *“...a good SA changes everything”* (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”) as well as saying *“I expect them to get me and my taste”* (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”). What this suggests is that trust is not created solely through the brand of the product or service but rather occurs across multiple social situations. The sales associate functions as a bridge between consumer and brand, shaping how the brand is experienced in practice.

4.4.2 Positive and negative service experiences

Customer service experiences were all very diverse, which could lead to differing emotional responses towards the brand. The positive experiences came with a sense of being noticed and accepted, reinforcing a feeling of personal connection. By contrast,

negative experiences were often framed in terms of discomfort or exclusion. One participant reflected, *“I felt judged when going into the store”* (Interview 3, Female, 38, Teacher), demonstrating how the service interaction can cause more distance than connection. Experiences like this were shared broadly online. On one occasion, a person mentioned *“too many people... overwhelmed staff... not helpful”* when discussing their recent trips to the boutiques (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”), and another observed they waited *“25 minutes... the store was too busy”* (PurseForum, Thread 3: “What is your latest purchase?”). On Reddit, in a thread about first-time store visits, a user said, *“they can be quite cold if you’re not a regular”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Best way to start 2026”).

4.4.3 Perceived Emotional Intelligence in Brand Communication

The results also suggest that emotional intelligence, perceived as a consumer perception rather than a brand attribute, operates through what might be termed restrained moderation. Consumers did not commend Hermès for emotional display; they liked that it knows when not to show emotion. This preference for subtlety was true across interviews with participants and online discussions. One person mentioned that *“when a luxury brand tries too hard to be relatable... it feels desperate”* (Interview 2, Female, 29, Reseller). Another explained that *“I don’t expect them to be emotional... I expect them to be composed”* (Interview 4, Male, 45, Luxury Consumer). Just as more aspirational consumers described that *“it feels more special because they don’t overdo it”* (Interview 6, Female, 27, Aspirational Buyer), restraint becomes a form of emotional intelligence. This was also followed in the online world. On PurseForum, the brand’s distance was said to be part of its appeal, with one user commenting that *“they don’t try to please everyone... and that’s why it works”* (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”). There was a similar sentiment on Reddit when one user wrote, *“they don’t need to post all the time... it keeps the mystery”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Best way to start 2026”).

These findings indicate that consumers view limited visibility and controlled channels of communication not as disengagement but as a form of emotional discipline, in line with expectations of luxury consumption. This supports Chowdhury’s (2017) assertion that emotional intelligence is inferred indirectly from nuances rather than explicit

expression, and Schneider et al.'s (2023) finding that emotionally intelligent communication is context specific. In this sense, Hermès' minimal social media presence and subdued communication style, which are not seen as an absence, are considered an expression of emotional maturity, as they demonstrate that luxury is a balance between distance and warmth. But when such emotional intelligence wavers, especially service-related emotional intelligence, the effects go beyond individualised grievances. Negative experiences don't get locked away within closed boxes of the internet.

For example, a participant said, the feeling of being *"judged walking into the store"* (Interview 3, Female, 38, Teacher); another said, *"if the SA doesn't understand you, the whole experience feels off"* (Interview 1, Female, 34, Reseller). These experiences were mirrored on social media, where staff were depicted as *"cold if you're not a regular"* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: "Best way to start 2026") or *"not helpful... too busy to care"* (PurseForum, Thread 3: "What is your latest purchase?"). Such shared experiences reveal that perceived emotional intelligence isn't fixed but is still being determined and negotiated within a culture. When these experiences grow through community, they contribute to a collective sense of how the brand acts and what makes it stand out. This is closely connected to RQ3, which proposes that empathy-driven connections in a luxury setting arise not from emotional intensity but from contextually informed, controlled, socially legitimised emotional engagement.

4.5 Community Influence and Shared Meaning

This section examines how online communities shape consumers' interpretations and sense-making of Hermès (RQ3). Rather than forming opinions in isolation, consumers continuously engage with others, reinforcing, questioning, and reshaping what the brand represents.

4.5.1 Reinforcing brand meaning

Collective respect is strengthened as online communities promote shared respect for the brand. Even the briefest comments add to the larger culture of gratitude. Throughout a thread that users posted about recent purchases, phrases like *"beautiful collection"* and *"exquisite taste"* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: "Grateful for my H fairies") appeared

repeatedly. Similarly, on PurseForum, in discussions centred around Wishlist items, users were eager to express admiration with comment statements such as *“that bag is stunning... definitely worth the wait”* (PurseForum, Thread 1: “Hermès 2026 Wishlist”). Although these responses are straightforward enough to be simple, their repetition creates a common understanding of what is desirable and valuable. Over time, this builds a collective perception that is an emblem of Hermès, signifying quality, exclusivity, and achievement.

4.5.2 Challenging and negotiating meaning

Yet, communities do more than affirm meaning; they also contest and transform it. On the topic of visibility and exclusivity, more critical perspectives emerged. For instance, one user noted that *“once Hermès becomes too common, people move on”* (PurseForum, Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”). In another discussion focused on influencers, a user commented that *“it used to feel special... now it’s everywhere”* (PurseForum, Thread 5: “Influencers and Hermès”), reflecting concerns about overexposure. These contrasting views show that meaning is not stable.

4.6 Summary of Findings

The results demonstrate that consumer perceptions of Hermès develop through an ongoing process that integrates personal experience with shared meaning-making. Trust, authenticity, and emotional attachment are not fixed qualities but are always open to interpretation and modification. Consumers do not simply receive brand meaning; they are engaged in formulating how the brand is understood. In all these themes, admiration, scepticism, aspiration, and critique coexist and suggest the complexity of luxury consumption in digital environments. Such analysis together shows that luxury consumption is neither a static nor brand-controlled endeavour, nor is it merely a situation constantly being constructed and negotiated in a digital context; rather, it is constantly enacted and constructed in relation to digital settings.

5 Discussion

This chapter synthesises the central findings and reflects on their relationship to the research questions and other literature. Particularly in digital spaces and in luxury consumption, trust, emotional attachment, authenticity, and empathy emerge as the focus of scrutiny. These dimensions do not emerge as stable aspects or discrete categories; rather, they emerge through interaction, interpretation, and shared experience. Sharma et al. (2022) argue that luxury consumption is no longer just about products, but about meaning and experience and a similar paper emerged from Dubois et al. (2021), who explains that luxury is characterised not by stable features but by ongoing tensions. In this setting, Hermès should be seen more as a brand where meaning is constantly being negotiated since it is defined as much by the consumers and their conversations as by the brand itself.

5.1 Trust and Emotional Attachment in Consumer Discourse (RQ1)

How do consumers communicate emotional attachment and trust within Hermès online communities?

These findings indicate that trust in Hermès is complex, not a one-time conclusion arrived at by chance, and that it is also constructed by the social milieu as a social event. Luxury consumption is thus situated as a dynamic phenomenon, negotiated in a process of interaction, interpretation and shared reality, rather than an enduring, predictable relationship. Previous research tends to frame trust in the luxury realm as established through positive brand narratives and perceptions of consistency (Husain et al., 2022). Although the findings partly support this theory, they reinforce it and show that trust can be found not solely through experience, but through active validation and revision in social situations. Consumers do not base their trust solely on their own interactions with the brand; rather, trust is inferred from others' perceptions and experiences in online conversations. It becomes a model of social proof, a narrative of successful purchases as well as long-term relationships with sales associates or consistent brand behaviour and therefore reinforces perceptions of reliability.

On the one hand, statements of frustration or doubt, mainly regarding exclusivity and access, are in the background, casting scepticism on these converging viewpoints. This

dynamic mirrors the tensions proposed by Dubois et al. (2021), in which luxury consumption is shaped by the interacting forces of desire and doubt. Yet the results do more than simply confirm that these tensions are internal or individual; rather, they are negotiated collectively. As such, trust is not a fixed perception but a dynamic, contested construct that emerges through dialogue. Consumers simultaneously praise and critique, illustrating trust as conditional acceptance rather than absolute confidence. The emotional attachment is similar to this. In contrast to the conventional wisdom in which brand strong links are frequently linked to the emotional relationship (Donvito et al., 2020), emotional attachments here seem subtle and symbolic. Consumers almost never use specific words such as “love” or “connection” when defining their relationships, so they only speak about attachment to other people and in relatively private terms rather than using emotional labels like “love” or “connection.” Rather than expressing it directly, people show their attachment mostly through admiration, aspiration, or the symbolic value of ownership or access to the brand. We posit that emotional attachment in the luxury context may be functioning differently from in other consumption contexts, for example, where proximity and intimacy are more important. Attachment isn’t established alone, of course.

The results point to how online communities make emotional experiences that much more intense and validating. Embracing and validating expressions of excitement and pride in collective experiences through interaction. It aligns with Chapman and Dilmeri (2022), who claim that luxury value is co-created through experiential and socially embedded interactions. However, the results broaden this view to reveal that emotional attachment is co-constructed and socially regulated. The community's reaction determines what may be perceived as appropriate emotional expressivity, which, for luxury purposes, may facilitate a balance between excitement and control. In addition, the results indicate that attachment is a construction of anticipation and process rather than ownership alone. Desire is maintained through the acts of waiting, imagining, and interacting with the brand, suggesting that attachment is based on the experience of pursuit rather than ownership.

This challenges hierarchical models of attachment, which follow a linear progression from purchase to loyalty, and indicates that attachment can form without acquisition and can even be strengthened at its limits. Taken together, these results are also in line with

previous research, which has proposed a reconceived understanding of trust and emotional attachment as socially determined, ongoing processes. In contrast, with trust regarded as a stable factor and attachment as a strictly emotional factor, our research shows that both are formed by interactions, ambiguities, and co-interpretation. Consumer–brand relationships in luxury contexts, in this fashion, are not inessential or given but rather constructed within channels of discussion and experience.

5.2 Authenticity and Brand Communication (RQ2)

In what ways do consumers interpret Hermès' emotional tone and authenticity?

Authenticity is something consumers actively interpret rather than merely accept. Hyun et al. (2024) highlight the importance of heritage in creating authenticity, while Sun et al. (2024) emphasise consistency and originality and these elements are indeed still valid, yet the findings suggest that consumers are watching closely to see how brands actually present themselves in action. Communication that is subtle, moderate and controlled can be seen as sincere, while anything that feels overly promotional or over-sold is likely to be quickly scorned. Dubois et al. (2021) articulate the tension between signalling and sincerity in luxury, and it's a tension that's particularly evident in this case. Consumers are aware of marketing efforts but question whether they are legitimate. When communication matches expectations of refinement, it enhances authenticity. It's distance-creating when it feels forced. Also fascinating is the fact that authenticity is context dependent. Schreuder et al. (2024) propose that consumers associate brands with values and affective associations. Yet the results indicate that these perceptions are not solid. A heightened visibility and one in which the brand is particularly visible through influencers – causes some consumers to wonder if the brand still has an elite, or rare, feel.

5.3 Empathy, Engagement, and Brand Relationships (RQ3)

Which forms of engagement reflect empathy-based relationships between Hermès and its consumers?

In relationships, respondents hardly explicitly framed relationships as “empathy”. Instead, empathy in this case was inferred from expectations for brand behaviour. In one, participants wrote how they wished Hermès would engage “*sensitively but not*

performatively” during events or social issues. Lee and Wu’s (2025) highlight the fact that luxury consumers believe that they feel a high degree of competence (competence) but a low level of warmth (warmth), and as such, these consumers only appreciate mild empathy (warmth) when it seems appropriate to them. In fact, many users appreciated brand gestures that valued emotional moments (like a simple holiday note) but criticised any suggestion of manipulative marketing. This approach to empathy aligns with Lehnert and Kühnl (2024), who suggest that empathy in the customer experience encompasses both cognitive and affective elements. The current study also anticipated that Hermès would express empathy not through overt emotional expression but by taking actions appropriate to the surrounding situation.

Understanding empathetic engagement in this way meant listening and responding appropriately, rather than crying openly. As evidenced by the community data, empathy operates differently in Hermès consumer discourse than either positive involvement or group warmth does within the same consumer domain, yet they are superficially related. Positive engagement can reflect a broader affective tone of the community—such as encouragement, enjoyment, and appreciation — shared and common in many luxury consumer spaces. Empathy, on the other hand, means something very particular: that of actively validating and acknowledging another person’s emotional expression. That difference comes through in the expressions of folks in a community that react not just to the consequence of an event, but to the burden of another person’s experience.

For instance, when a user wrote, *“I was literally shaking when I got the call”* (Reddit, r/Hermes, Thread: “Grateful for my H fairies”), they received a communal celebratory reaction. Responses like *“We all understand how special this is... congratulations!”* reflected a type of perspective-taking: the respondent is utilising what they know of that emotional experience to recognise what the other has felt and not just what they have gotten. Likewise, when users discussed frustration and unsuccessful attempts to obtain a product, those who had undergone the same process also responded to that question, confirming that there were emotional challenges rather than just providing guidance. This is what Lehnert and Kühnl (2024) refer to as empathy in the exact sense of cognitive and affective atonement to another's experience; it is a difference that the Hermès online community represents rather than just an information exchange forum. Crucially, this empathy for consumers compensates for the emotional distance which

some consumers see as inherent to the brand itself, indicating that in ultra-luxury environments, the empathic connection is not only imparted by the brand but is co-created by the community in which the brand operates. This result further complicates the findings of the brand empathy research. Emotional expression can support customer relationships, as Arief and Pangestu (2022) also encourage.

Nevertheless, as we now know, too much emotional signalling will be seen as undesirable in a luxury context. Similarly, Salciuviene et al. (2025) highlight the role of emotional engagement in the making of brand relationships; the findings in this study imply that this behaviour would work best in moderation and in context-specific ways. Expanding on this work, the results can be better conceptualised in terms of emotional intelligence (EI), which appears to drive an underlying mechanism that shapes the interpretation of empathy in luxury contexts. In contrast to what is often associated with the importance of overt emotion, consumers respond better to emotionally intelligent restraint. In this way, empathy is measured not by open heat, but by the brand's ability to acknowledge when it makes sense to share, when it's better to hold back. This aligns with Chowdhury's (2017) finding that emotional intelligence is often inferred from subtle cues rather than overt messaging. Similarly, Schneider et al. (2023) argue that emotionally intelligent communication is characterised not by how profound it is, but by whether the context in which it was communicated was suitable.

The results advance this framing by demonstrating that, in the context of luxury consumption, emotional intelligence can be viewed as a measure of distance, with restraint denoting confidence, control, and brand maturity. Hermès' low social media engagement and restrained communication style were thus viewed much differently, not as empathetic lapses, but as an emotional intelligence consistent with luxury standards. When that balance gets disrupted, especially in service interactions, the perceived lack of emotional intelligence becomes apparent. Negative experiences are not only seen as personal failures but, across online communities, amplify negative feedback, shaping perceptions of the brand. This implies that emotional intelligence is not a static characteristic but a socio-affective measurement that is constantly reinforced or contested through shared consumption.

Finally, brand engagement in online contexts indicates an empathetic connection. Connections to the community, likes, comments, advice-sharers' comments and

celebrations together are all tied into the overall narrative. As Chapman and Dilmeri (2022) state, this experiential, pleasurable content drives the highest engagement in luxury communities. Our data affirm this message: posts that were fun, aspirational or validated members' choices generated a sense of collective empathy and belonging. Conversely, technical or overly promotional posts elicited little response. This shows that empathy for Hermès fans is co-produced in the community through engaging, relevant content rather than a simple brand-driven narrative. That empathy in luxury branding is curtailed, rather than maximised. Although the literature largely considers that greater emotional expression strengthens consumer involvement, the results indicate negative effects in the luxury context. Too much emotional signalling threatens credibility and is why moderation between the warmth and cool is so important.

5.4 Community Influence and Shared Meaning

In all the questions under investigation, online communities play a major role in shaping how luxury brand meanings emerge and evolve. It does not form independent consumer perceptions that emerge from dynamic contact and interaction, shared interpretation, and collective sense-making (cf. Kozinets, 2020; Chapman & Dilmeri, 2022). Within these spaces, experiences of trust or emotional attachment take on meaning as they are discussed, reinforced, and sometimes questioned. A positive customer-service story, for instance, is passed down as folklore that validates the brand in society. On the other hand, a negative story (e.g., about a rude salesperson) circulated online, feeding greater scepticism. This interaction was well illustrated in Raichur et al. (2025), who found that consumer-led forums focus on branding and enhancement, while enterprise-based forums provide product news and perks. Our findings also indicate that consumers differentiate brand-managed spaces and peer groups. This underscores the importance of netnography in representing the socially embedded construction of consumer perceptions, in which meanings are created through interaction rather than separation.

The netnographic analysis demonstrates that brand meaning is co-produced through the social network. According to Chapman and Dilmeri (2022), luxury value is added through the co-creation of experiences with brands and consumers online. We observe consumer knowledge sharing (e.g. on Hermès purchasing procedures), mutual advice between customers, and reinforcement of group norms, such as modesty in

demonstrating luxury. They do this together to define what it means to be a Hermès enthusiast. Schreuder et al. (2024) argue that theory is incapable of explaining consumers' prototype of a brand-relationship; our evidence supplements and adds texture to that prototype as a well-functioning and pleasant communal (not necessarily exclusive) warmth around quality and joy. Online communities emerge as an instrument of persuasion and validation and they determine the desirable, acceptable or authentic, effectively acting as informal gatekeepers of luxury meaning. This builds on the extant literature by emphasising the normative legitimacy of consumers' communities of interest in shaping brand perception.

5.5 The “Hermès Game” and the Structure of Luxury Access

One of the most unique contributions of this research is the identification of the “Hermès game”, a concept that defines the often-informal, opaque act of negotiating access to elite items. Though this system is not explicitly stated by the brand, it is well discussed and recognised by consumers, indicating that it represents a shared meaning-making system rather than a formal set of rules. There is a long tradition in this literature of placing exclusivity and scarcity as central drivers of luxury value (e.g., Abdrabbo et al., 2025), which are usually described as “strategies used by brands to increase brand desirability”. To speculate on this issue, one can consider Cialdini's (1984) scarcity principle, which holds that individuals attach greater value to an opportunity or resource when it is limited or becomes less available.

Scarcity works in the Hermès game on two planes at once. At the product level, the scarcity of quota bags, like the Birkin, creates the sorts of circumstances Cialdini describes, and when purchasing is rare, desire grows stronger, so that acquisition seems like more than a purchase, but a success. At the level of relationships, access itself is limited, mediated by relationships with sales representatives, and shaped by unwritten rules that consumers are forced to “learn” over time. This second layer is particularly important because it implies that scarcity is not merely a property of the object, but also a property of the process, extending and sustaining desire beyond the moment of purchase. Crucially, the online community also significantly amplifies this effect: if consumers decode and disseminate knowledge about how the system operates together, they do not dilute scarcity but rather confirm it by turning limited access into a kind of

social capital that can make playing the game feel substantial rather than merely demoralising.

In this way, the “Hermès game” is more than a transaction, but a socially embedded system of knowledge and participation. This was not determined only by financial means, but also by relational, temporal, and interpretative factors, such as relationships with sales associates, purchase histories, and perceived alignment with brand expectations. More importantly, it is this system that remains ambiguous rather than transparent. Consumers often characterise the process as inconsistent, unpredictable and reliant upon unstated rules that are never fully articulated. But far from denying the possibility of uncertainty, many consumers engage with it, regarding it as a process that they must learn to negotiate. This aligns with Dubois et al.'s (2021) model of luxury as intrinsically bound up with tension but rather expands it to consider how such tensions are collectively interpreted and managed in consumer communities.

Simultaneously, the “Hermès game” exposes a core paradox of luxury consumption. If limited access renders consumers increasingly desirable and reinforces the brand's symbolic value, it also often produces frustration, scepticism, and disengagement. As such, consumers are placed in a double role, operating both within and against the system. This duality represents a more reflexive type of consumption in which people are privy to the means that shape their own experience, yet they persist with those processes. Importantly, this result indicates that luxury consumption is not only symbolic or experiential but also institutionalised by informal power and hierarchy.

Access, a kind of capital, is accessed through relationships, knowledge and station in the consumption network. This problem calls into question oversimplified models of luxury that portray it as either status- or experience-driven by luxury-enhanced lifestyles, and posits that luxury is situated within intricate, socially constructed systems through which exclusion and inclusion occur. In addition, the role of online communities is pivotal in enforcing and legitimising this system. Citing shared accounts, guidance, advice and collective interpretation, consumers turn personal experiences into communal knowledge. By doing so, they can minimise uncertainty, but at the same time underpin the legitimacy of the system. Not only is the “Hermès game” experienced; it is also reproduced socially and constantly in interaction. This study also contributes to luxury research by repositioning exclusivity as an active, socially negotiated process

rather than a static brand attribute. The discursive identification of the “Hermès game” illustrates how access, value, and meaning are co-constituted through networks of interaction, as consumers actively participate in shaping the systems in which they participate. This points to the need for future research to examine how power, knowledge, and community practice influence luxury consumption in digital environments beyond brand perspectives.

5.6 General Perceptions of Luxury

Broader views of “luxury,” however, are useful in putting Hermès into perspective for participants. They’re frequently about longevity, craftsmanship and emotional value over time. One respondent expressed the desire that *“my new wallet ages well and gets better over time,”* in line with Han and Kim’s (2020) assertion that experiences and symbols of value (that is, quality and emotional rewards) underpin luxury shopping. These luxury ideals, then, can coexist with critical perspectives. The same consumers who enjoy exclusivity may regret its shortcomings. Many said they were irritated by waiting lists or by opaque purchase rules. This dichotomy also aligns with Sharma et al.’s (2022) review, which found that countervailing themes (e.g. consumption drivers vs counterfeits) occur in luxury research.

The researcher Dubois et al. (2021) has revealed that being luxe is about tensions (e.g., aspiration and guilt), thus Heritage and craftsmanship contribute to trustworthiness and pride, but exclusivity and perceived elitism can upset attachment. Essentially, Hermès lies in the realm of the classic luxury formula (that is, exclusivity, high quality); however, it is facing a different set of consumer demands. As Singh et al. (2021) observe, luxury brand commitment in emerging markets arises from both aspiration for status and social compliance. Similarly, community members both aspire to Hermès as a status symbol and criticise any deviation from their personal values. This double consciousness suggests that luxury consumption is not only aspirational but also reflexive. Customers express both admiration and criticism of the systems in which they engage, indicating a highly nuanced, self-reflective form of luxury engagement that undercuts what has traditionally been considered the default mode of engagement.

5.7 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to the literature on luxury consumer–brand interactions by reshaping perceptions of crucial concepts such as trust, authenticity, emotional bonding, and exclusivity in digital and socially embedded environments.

First, the results add to the literature on trust and emotional attachment by illustrating that these constructs are not stable reflections of brand effectiveness but are actively negotiated social constructs. Husain et al. (2022) argue that trust develops through positive brand experiences and consistency. But the results of this study go further than that, demonstrating that trust is not merely put on paper, but instead is actively interpreted and confirmed in ways that consumers use its terms. Just as the brand and individual attachment are emotionally related through shared experiences and interaction with the community, emotional attachment is not simply produced by individual brand relationships. This also illustrates the group side of consumer–brand relationships, where the experience of meaning is generated not only by the brand itself but also by other consumers.

Second, the research recontextualises authenticity as an interpretation and context-based judgment rather than a fixed status of the brand. Hyun et al. (2024) highlight heritage and craftsmanship as the main source of authenticity perceptions. In a similar view, Sun et al. (2024) emphasise consistency and brand originality as key factor of maintaining brand attachment and from these perspectives, the findings reveal that authenticity is continually interpreted by consumers and communication type. This indicates that authenticity can change between contexts and platforms. The study offers a dynamic interpretation of authenticity as a co-created, reframed phenomenon through interactions.

Third, this study adds to the literature on empathy and emotional engagement in luxury branding by suggesting the concept of constrained or moderated empathy. According to Arief and Pangestu (2022), emotional expression facilitates consumer relationships; Salciuviene et al. (2025) also highlight emotional engagement as a significant element in forming brand links. But this study's results point to a more complex picture. Consumers prefer restraint, nuance, and familiarity with context over overt emotional expression. Lee and Wu (2025) explain this well by observing that luxury brands are

rated high in competence but lower in warmth. It also aligns with the argument put forward by Lehnert and Kühnl (2024) that empathy is informed by both cognitive and affective perspectives. In this regard, empathy is not performative but carefully balanced, suggesting that emotional engagement in luxury is subject to different levels of scrutiny than in non-luxury contexts.

Fourth, and most importantly, it provides a theory of the “Hermès game” as a new aspect of the study of luxury consumption. Dubois et al. (2021) stress that luxury consumption is influenced by tensions that have inherent causes, while Abdrabbo et al. (2025) highlight scarcity as the driving force behind luxury desirability. Drawing on these insights, we show exclusivity as a socially constructed, structurally embedded mechanism of access. Not only do consumers react to scarcity, but they also interpret, negotiate, and reproduce the rules of access through shared knowledge and interaction. From this study, we find that luxury consumption is shaped not only by symbolic meaning and emotional experience, but also by less conventional systems of power, hierarchy, and participation. In more general terms, this research adds to luxury studies by shifting attention away from brand-controlled meaning toward socially negotiated meaning. Kozinets (2010) underscores the importance of online communities as consumer interaction settings, while Kozinets (2020) reinforces the significance of digital environments in processes of making meaning.

The same goes for Chapman and Dilmperi (2022), who posit that the value of luxury is co-constructed via interaction. Based on their perspectives, we can illustrate that consumer–brand relationships are embedded in networks of interaction that constantly constitute, reinforce, and contest meanings. At a more general level, this study deepens theoretical consideration by revealing that luxury consumption is not a fixed or individualised process, but a dynamic, interactional process of discourse, community, and systems of access. Therefore, this suggests the need to conduct further research on the nature of luxury value beyond static models of luxury value and to explore how meaning, power, and participation are negotiated in and through digital and social spaces.

5.8 Summary

This chapter shows that luxury consumption of the brand is dynamic and socially constructed. Trust, emotional attachment, authenticity and empathy are continuously shaped through interaction, and shared experiences within online communities.

6 Conclusions

This research aimed to look at how consumers view Hermès as a luxury brand while it examines its credibility focusing specifically on trust, authenticity, emotional connection and empathy. The research studied the insights of luxury consumption by integrating netnographic data with semi-structured interviews, while exploring how brand's profile emerges from personal experiences and shared interactions.

The result of this study shows that consumer-brand relationships in luxury settings are not static and not entirely governed by the brand. They arise from continuous process of interpretation, negotiation and social interaction. Trust was given due to brand's consistent positive consumer experiences and strengthened through online communities. Similarly, emotional attachment was conveyed through symbolic expressions, ambition and mutual acknowledgment of the consumers and fans.

Authenticity was not taken for granted since consumers actively interpret it through tone, context and consistency. Regarding empathy within luxury brand is exhibited by moderation and emotional ties. The key contribution of this research is the identification of the "Hermes game" which emphasizes how access to luxury is perceived as a socially constructed and unclear process. Consumers instead of reacting to exclusivity they engage in navigating and reproducing the brand's system via mutual knowledge and online interaction.

Overall, this discovery shows that luxury consumption is symbolic and organized through informal systems of influence that brand's consumers create to decode the "Hermes game".

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

Here are some main findings from the analysis. To begin with, trust does not seem to be automatically given to the brand but instead, it develops gradually and remains open to review while consumers appreciate consistency and restrain since this makes them see those traits as qualities of credibility. Trust, though, is not fixed. It's constructed from both personal experiences and accounts from certain online communities, where good news and bad news can go hand in hand.

Secondly, emotional attachment is symbolic or controlled. Instead of emotionally close, individuals describe feelings of admiration, of aspiration, of respect. Attachment is most often associated with anticipation and how the product becomes, rather than owning. Crucially, these feelings aren't experienced alone; they are fostered through interactions between people.

Thirdly, authenticity appears as something consumers actively choose to interpret. It doesn't automatically have to be born out of heritage or craftsmanship. Rather, it's assessed based on tone, communication style and continuity across contexts. Small things like how the brand tells its story or how sales associates approach the relationship also shape authenticity if the brand appears authentic.

A key finding concerns the "Hermès game." That tells us a great deal about how consumers think about and navigate access to the brand's most exclusive products. This structure is regarded as informal and less well defined than it appears. In it, consumers engage and learn through experience and shared knowledge, which both makes it valuable and frustrating.

This exemplifies exclusivity not only being enforced by the brand but also interpreted and reproduced by consumers. Finally, the study reveals that online communities are fundamental in how we think of the brand. Such are the spaces and the ways experiences are shared, lived, affirmed, and even confronted. What these spaces do is show us, and by doing so, they enable us to recognise that what Hermès is not fixed, but rather actively reconstructed by means of this exercise, in which consumers decide what Hermès is.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study adds to the literature on luxury consumption, allowing for a fresh consideration of a deeper, possibly more dynamic understanding of the relationship between consumers and brands. First, it finds that trust and emotional attachment are not static outcomes, but rather processes created and forged through interaction and meaning. They don't build from direct experience with the brand, but rather from shared narratives and community engagement. Second, the study redefines authenticity as an explanatory rather than inherent phenomenon. Meanwhile, prior research often associates authenticity with heritage or craftsmanship, and the results show that it is measured in a contextual way, from the everyday interactions and communication. Third, the study proposes a more

complex perception of empathy in luxury. Rather than presupposing that an emotional outburst is associated with superior relationships, the results indicate that restraint is pertinent. It seems that subtle behaviour, rather than clear emotional expression, is preferred by a new generation of consumers. Lastly, the definition of the “Hermès game” builds on pre-existing discussions of exclusivity. It suggests that luxury consumption is not only an act of symbolic value but also an attempt to negotiate informal systems of access for knowledge exchange, relationships, and timing. This moves away from the idea of brand-controlled strategy and moves towards socially constructed systems of participation.

6.3 Practical Implications

The findings offer useful insights for luxury brands. First, it seems that consistency is more important than visibility. Consumers like it when things stay the same and make sense, so if a brand keeps changing its message or strategy, it can make people trust it less. For luxury brands, how something is communicated is extremely important as what is communicated from their consumers or fans thus, brands should follow a communication that is perceived positive and avoid direct sales-driven messages. This tone and message delivery play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of authenticity.

Another critical role is the service interaction of a brand. Sales associates represent the brand and for many consumers, they are the primary point through which the brand is experienced. In a result, a brand should invest in consistency and personalised service to maintain positive consumer relationships.

6.4 Limitations

This study has several limitations we should discuss. First, we got our information from communities that anyone can access, like Reddit and PurseForum. We could not look at groups on Facebook because of privacy rules and ethical things we must think about. This means we might have missed some discussions that are more personal or just for certain groups. This is a problem with studying online: we can only access data from places that let us in.

Second, the data collection period was limited to three months due to university requirements, and a longer period of observation could have provided a deeper insight of how consumer perceptions and discussions evolve over time.

Third, the study followed netnographic research which means that there was no intervention thus, no control from the researcher over the context or content of the data but only collecting online interactions. Based on that, online users are often anonymous and selectively present themselves which means that the individual choose how to present their experiences rather than providing their offline realities.

Finally, as others have said, what we find in netnography might not hold true for everyone in these online communities. These communities are made up of people who're really involved, so what we learned should be seen as special to these groups, not something that applies to everyone.

6.5 Future Research

This research provides valuable understanding of how consumers negotiate luxury meanings in online environments, but there are several research topics are open for future exploration. In future what could be examined is how these dynamics vary across specific platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or Reddit, since each carries its own community culture and content logic that may shape luxury perceptions in unique ways. Also, another future study topic could be about the generational differences which also needs closer attention. Particularly Gen Z consumers increasingly drive digital brand communities and may relate to luxury in ways that differ substantially from older generations. This study could be examined as longitudinal research as this will assist in monitoring how consumer-driven meaning-making develops as both platforms and branding strategies evolve over time. Cross-cultural comparisons would enhance the field, as the interpretations of luxury are probably not consistent across various national and cultural settings. Finally, another future research can be about the increasing influence of influencers in crafting luxury narratives offers a valuable avenue for additional research, as does the conflict between exclusivity and sustainability, a conflict that is becoming more crucial in how consumers assess and interact with luxury brands online.

6.6 Final Reflection

At the beginning of this research, the focus was to understand how consumers engage with Hermès as a luxury brand in the digital world. What was discovered went far beyond what was first initially anticipated. The study revealed that trust, authenticity, and emotional attachment are not fixed qualities that a brand simply projects and consumers passively receive they are negotiated, constructed, and continuously reassessed through conversation, shared experience, and community. The "Hermès game," in particular, was something that the study was not anticipated finding. It emerged organically from the data as a collective, lived system that consumers have built around a brand that tells them very little about their purchase rules. That kind of grassroots meaning making, where people decode an opaque brand through peer knowledge and shared frustration, shares a great deal about how powerful online communities have become as sites of interpretation and not just information.

The biggest result from the findings that was made, was the emotional restraint that consumers' relationship with Hermès. Unlike other luxury brands where enthusiasm is openly performed, Hermès evokes something quieter, a sense of aspiration, reverence, and patience that consumers seem to understand without it ever being stated and that finding challenged some of the initial assumptions about emotional attachment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Codebook (Thematic Analysis)

The following codebook was developed through an iterative coding using ATLAS.ti combining both inductive and interpretive approaches. The codes were generated directly from the data, allowing the patterns to emerge organically from participant narratives and online communications. These codes were then grouped into broader categories through a process of constant comparison and re-evaluation. In details, rather than applying a predefined work, the analysis remained flexible to enable the identification of themes that were grouped in the dataset while also interpreted in relation to the research questions of this study. This approach aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006) view of thematic analysis as a reflective process that themes are constructed through engagement with the data rather than discovered as objective entities.

Each code in the codebook is defined through three components: definition, indicators within the data, and examples. This structure ensure consistency in coding and to maintain transparency in how meanings were interpreted across different data sources, including interviews, PurseForum, Reddit, and Instagram.

Category 1: Empathy

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example
Empathy: Understanding	Recognizing others' experiences	"I get what you mean"	Agreement with feelings
Empathy: Support	Offering help or reassurance	Advice, encouragement	"You should try..."
Empathy: Shared Experience	Relating via own story	"Same happened to me"	Personal comparison
Empathy: Positive Reaction	Expressing happiness for others	"So happy for you!"	Celebratory tone

Category 2: Trust

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example
Trust: Brand reliability	Confidence in Hermès quality/consistency	“They never disappoint”	Brand confidence
Trust: Authenticity	Perception of brand genuineness	“Real luxury”	Authentic image
Trust: System fairness	Perception of fairness in access (quota bags, prespend)	“It’s unfair/confusing”	Criticism of system
Trust: Sales associate relationship	Trust/distrust toward SA behavior	“My SA helps / ignores me”	Relationship dynamic
Trust: Community trust	Trust in advice from others	“People here are honest”	Peer trust
Trust: Distrust / skepticism	Doubting brand or information	“Don’t believe everything”	Critical stance

Category 3: Emotional Attachment

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example
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Attachment: Desire / aspiration	Wanting Hermès products	Wishlists, dream bags	“I want a Birkin”
Attachment: Excitement / joy	Happiness from purchase	Celebratory tone	“I’m so excited!”
Attachment: Loyalty	Commitment to brand	Repeat buying	“I only buy Hermès”
Attachment: Identity	Brand reflects self	“This is me”	Self-expression
Attachment: Pride	Satisfaction in ownership	Achievement tone	“Finally got it”

Attachment: Obsession	Intense focus on acquiring	“The game”, waiting	Fixation
Attachment: Authentic appreciation	Valuing quality/history/use	“I buy for craftsmanship”	Non-performative
Attachment: Use-value over display	Preference for using products	“I want it worn”	Practical attachment

Attachment: Rejection of validation	Rejecting social approval motives	“Not for flexing”	Anti-validation
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Category 4: Emotional Intelligence (Perceived)

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example
EI: Customer understanding	Brand understands emotions	“They get their clients”	Emotional awareness
EI: Emotion management	Brand handles emotions well	Calm, subtle service	Controlled interaction
EI: Relationship building	Creating long-term connection	“It’s a relationship”	Relational focus
EI: Subtle communication	Non-pushy luxury communication	“Not aggressive selling”	Refinement
EI: Emotional distance	Controlled exclusivity	“They keep distance”	Luxury detachment
EI: Lack of EI	Failure to respond emotionally	“They don’t care”	Negative perception

Category 5: The Hermes game (Data-driven)

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example
Game: Strategy	Tactics to obtain bags	“Build relationship”	Strategic behaviour
Game: Rules	Unwritten system norms	“You must...”	Implicit rules
Game: Frustration	Emotional tension in process	“So confusing/unfair”	Negative feelings
Game: Reward	Success in obtaining items	“Got the offer”	Achievement

Category 6: Status & Exclusivity

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example
Status: Signaling	Using Hermès to show status	Display behavior	“Flexing”
Status: Anti-signaling	Rejecting status display	Criticism of flexing	“Not about status”
Exclusivity: Scarcity	Limited availability	“Hard to get”	Rarity
Exclusivity: Prestige	Elite perception	“Special/rare”	Luxury identity
Exclusivity: Client hierarchy	Tiered customer system	“Top clients”	Stratification
Exclusivity: Prespend system	Spending requirements	“2x prespend”	Access mechanism

Category 7: Community culture

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example
Community: Advice sharing	Helping others	Suggestions	“You should...”
Community: Knowledge sharing	Insider info	Tips, explanations	“This is how it works”
Community: Validation seeking	Asking for approval	“What do you think?”	Seeking feedback
Community: Norm correction	Correcting others	“That’s not true”	Regulation
Community: Insider skepticism	Doubting shared knowledge	“Don’t trust everything”	Critical stance

Category 8: Resistance & Criticism

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example
Criticism: Brand practices	Critique of Hermès system	“Unfair”, “manipulative”	Brand critique
Criticism: Consumer behavior	Critique of buyers	“People are crazy”	Social critique
Criticism: Social media performance	Critique of Instagram culture	“Too curated/fake”	Influencer critique
Criticism: Product/design	Dislike of items	“I don’t like...”	Product critique
Criticism: Anti-hype	Rejecting popularity	“Overrated”	Resistance

Appendix B: Interview Guide

The following semi-structured interview guide was used to explore participants' perceptions and emotional engagement with luxury fashion brands on social media. Questions were organised into thematic sections to encourage open and reflective responses.

Section 1: Participant Background and Context

1. Could you tell me your age range and where you're currently based?
2. Which luxury fashion brands do you follow on social media, and what made you follow them?

Section 2: Emotional Intelligence and Brand Responsiveness

3. Have you ever felt that a luxury brand understood how you were feeling as a consumer?
4. Can you describe a moment when a brand communicated in a way that felt emotionally intelligent or aware?

Section 3: Empathy and Emotional Engagement

5. How important is it to you that brands show empathy online?
6. Can you recall a brand post or campaign that showed empathy and resonated with you?

Section 4: Brand Authenticity and Trust

7. What makes a luxury brand feel authentic or genuine on social media?
8. Have you ever stopped trusting a brand—or started trusting it more—based on their social media behavior?

Section 5: Emotional Attachment and Enthusiasm

9. Can you think of a time when you felt excited, proud, or emotionally attached to a brand based on their content?
10. What kind of posts (e.g., storytelling, behind-the-scenes, influencer collaborations) create that emotional connection for you?

Section 6: Community and Shared Emotion

11. Do you discuss luxury brands or their posts with others online?
12. Do you feel more connected to a brand when you see others sharing their feelings or experiences?

Section 7: Closing Reflections

13. What advice would you give luxury brands that want to connect better with people like you?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to share about how you feel or connect with brands online?

Appendix C: Sample Data (PurseForum/ Forum Extracts)

This appendix was from PurseForum platform, and each thread has been selected to reflect recurring themes identified in the research. Usernames have been anonymised and presented as they appeared in the original discussions.

Thread 1: “Hermès 2026 Wishlist”

- “This is on my wishlist for 2026... hoping I can finally get it this year.”
- “My dream bag... I’ve been thinking about it for so long.”

Thread 3: “What is your latest purchase?”

- “Finally getting offered one feels like winning.”
- “I waited so long for this... totally worth it.”

Thread 4: “Unpopular Hermès Opinions”

- “No matter how much you spend, Hermès does not owe you a bag.”
- “I spent so much and still nothing... it’s frustrating.”
- “I’m not playing any games and buying things I don’t want.”

Thread 5: “Influencers and Hermès”

- “It used to feel exclusive... now it’s everywhere.”
- “Influencers have made Hermès feel less special.”

Appendix D: Sample Data (Reddit/Forum extracts)

This appendix is the netnographic dataset from Reddit that includes, discussions and represents patterns of trust, emotional attachment, exclusivity and community validation.

Thread 1: “Best way to start 2026”

- “You don’t just walk in and buy a Birkin... it doesn’t work like that.”
- “It really depends on the relationship you build.”
- “They can be quite cold if you’re not a regular.”

Thread 2: “Grateful for my H fairies”

- “I was literally shaking when I got the call.”
- “So happy for you!! You deserve it.”
- “We all understand how special this is... congratulations!”

Thread 3: “Scored Birkin 30 Rouge H in Paris”

- “I just walked in and got offered one... I couldn’t believe it.”
- “It really depends on timing and luck.”

Thread 4: General r/Hermes Discussions

- “Sometimes it feels like you’re guessing what they want from you.”
- “You need patience... it’s not straightforward at all.”

Appendix E: Sample Data (Instagram/Forum extracts)

This appendix presents a selection of Instagram posts and user comments to Hermès official account. These collection of data, reflect how consumers engage with brand's content and it provided insight into patterns identified in the analysis, including admiration, emotional reaction, and brand interpretation.

Thread 1: "SS26 Collection"

- "Absolutely stunning collection."
- "So elegant... Hermès never disappoints."
- "This is art, not just fashion."

Thread 2: "Tabler Sellier Bag"

- "I need this bag in my life."
- "Not sure about the shape, but still beautiful."
- "This is such a timeless piece."

Thread 3: "Drawing on Your Mind Campaign"

- "This campaign is so creative."
- "Hermès always tells a story in a different way."
- "I don't fully understand it, but I love it."

Thread 4: "General Instagram Engagement"

- "Obsessed with this."
- "Dream brand."
- "Goals."

Appendix F: Atlas.ti Output/Coding Tree

This appendix is an overview of the coding structure that was developed during the thematic analysis using the software ATLAS.ti. The coding process followed an inductive approach, where themes were identified through repeated engagement with the data. The final coding tree reflects the key themes and subthemes that informed the findings chapter.

F1. Main themes and subthemes

1. Trust

- Trust through consistency
- Trust through brand restraint
- Trust as ongoing evaluation
- Trust influenced by community validation

2. Authenticity

- Authenticity as subtle communication
- Authenticity through brand consistency
- Authenticity and influencer impact
- Authenticity as consumer interpretation

3. Emotional Attachment

- Controlled emotional attachment
- Aspirational desire
- Anticipation and Wishlist behaviour
- Emotional distance vs admiration

3. Emotional Attachment

- Controlled emotional attachment
- Aspirational desire
- Anticipation and Wishlist behaviour
- Emotional distance vs admiration

4. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

- Empathy as expectation of behaviour

- Emotional intelligence as restraint
- Contextual appropriateness of communication
- Negative emotional experiences (lack of empathy)

5. The “Hermès Game” (Exclusivity and Access)

- Navigating implicit rules
- Relationship-building with sales associates
- Uncertainty and unpredictability
- Desire vs frustration
- Resistance to the system

6. Customer Experience and Service Interactions

- Trust in sales associates
- Personalised service
- Negative service experiences
- Feeling judged or excluded

7. Community Influence

- Community validation
- Shared emotional experiences
- Knowledge exchange
- Norm reinforcement
- Critical discourse and disagreement

8. General Perceptions of Luxury

- Craftsmanship and quality
- Longevity and investment value
- Status and symbolic meaning
- Tension between aspiration and critique

F2. Notes of Coding process

The coding process involved multiple rounds of review and initial codes were generated from the data and later grouped into broader themes based on patterns of meanings. Rather than relying on frequency alone, themes were developed based on their relevance to the research questions of this study. Thus, some themes appear less frequently in the dataset but play a critical role in shaping how consumers understand luxury and brand relationships. To sum up, the use of ATLAS.ti supported the organisational, the comparison and the visualization of the codes, enabling a systematic approach to identify connections between themes.

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title:

Emotional Engagement, Empathy, and Trust in Luxury Fashion Branding on social media

Researcher:

Varvara Sarmalli

master's Student in Experiential Digital Marketing and Communications

Cyprus University of Technology

Supervisor:

Dr Christiana Tsaousi

Purpose of the Study

This study explores how consumers emotionally engage with luxury fashion brands, such as Hermès, through social media platforms. It focuses on emotional intelligence, empathy, brand authenticity, and consumer trust. The findings aim to contribute to academic understanding of consumer–brand relationships in digital environments.

Why Have I Been Invited?

You have been invited to participate because you are over the age of 25, actively use social media, and engage with luxury fashion brands. Your experiences and perspectives are valuable for understanding how consumers interact with brands online.

What Will I Be Asked to Do?

If you agree to participate, you will take part in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30–45 minutes. The interview will be conducted via Zoom (or another agreed platform) and, with your permission, will be audio-recorded for research purposes only.

Do I Have to Take Part?

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question and may withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. Your decision will not have any negative consequences.

Will My Data Be Kept Confidential?

All information you provide will be treated with strict confidentiality. Your identity will be anonymised in all transcripts and in the final thesis. Any identifying details will be removed.

The data will be used solely for academic purposes within this master's thesis. All data will be securely stored in encrypted digital files and retained for a limited period in accordance with university guidelines, after which it will be permanently deleted.

Are There Any Risks or Benefits?

No significant risks are anticipated from participation in this study. You may find it beneficial to reflect on your experiences with luxury brands. Your contribution will support academic research in digital marketing and consumer behaviour.

Ethical Approval

This study has been conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of Cyprus University of Technology, including principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection.

Contact Information

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher using the details provided above. For concerns regarding ethical conduct, you may contact the university's ethics review committee.

Consent Form

Please read the statements below and indicate your agreement:

- ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.
- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without consequence.
- ☐ I agree to the interview being audio-recorded for research purposes.
- ☐ I understand that my identity will be anonymised in the final thesis.
- ☐ I consent to participate in this research study.

Participant's Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____