Luxury Service Brands and Social Media

An Investigation of Luxury Service Brands' Social Media Marketing Strategies

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DECLARATION

I, Dean Creevey, as the author of this thesis, hereby declare that, except where duly acknowledged, this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any degree or qualification in any other university or country.

Signed: _____ Date: 19th August 2022

Doctoral Candidate: Dean Creevey

We hereby certify that all the unreferenced work described in this thesis and submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, is entirely the work of Dean Creevey. No portion of the work contained in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification to this or any other institution.

Signed: _____ Date: 19th August 2022

Supervisor: Prof. Joseph Coughlan

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Supervisor: Dr Christina O'Connor

DEDICATION

To my parents, Sharon and Des, and sister, Alison, who have never wavered in their support and belief that this thesis would finally be completed, even on the days when I wasn't so sure myself ...

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an investigation into the social media marketing strategies of luxury service brands. Specifically, the analysis explores how Michelin star restaurants in Ireland and the UK utilise social media platforms for the purposes of signalling their luxury status, with a specific focus on luxury brand authenticity, to consumers. To achieve this, participants within a total of 29 Michelin star restaurants across Ireland and the UK were interviewed over a nine-month period.

Secondary analysis within this study stemming from an in-depth consultation of literature surrounding the central theoretical areas of the study culminated in the proposal of a novel theoretical framework depicting social media's role within luxury organisations. In adopting a systematic literature review approach, the first major contribution of the thesis is the exhaustive analysis of the extant literature investigating the confluence of social media and luxury, a theoretical model illustrating the role of social media for luxury brand marketing, as well as a roadmap for future research in the area. This review was published in the *International Journal of Management Reviews* in 2022.

In adopting a critical realist perspective and being grounded within a signalling theoretical foundation, the primary analysis of the study stems from the narratives of the participants, their depictions of their business and ascension to Michelin star status, the strategic objectives of their social media marketing strategies and how they utilise these platforms for signalling luxury and, in particular, authenticity. The perspectives sought included perceptions of the value of social media for luxury service brand marketing, exploration of the nature of relationships between luxury brand and consumer, as well as the most pertinent forms of content and its embedded elements which maximise social media's signalling capacity. The live social media accounts of participants' restaurants were also consulted to provide evidence of the varying forms of signals utilised by these brands.

The study draws on the luxury services, social media marketing, and signalling theory literatures, culminating in the proposal of a taxonomy of eleven distinct signals of authenticity, further unpacked and discussed based on their degrees of tangibility/intangibility as well as their levels of implicitness/explicitness within luxury service brands' social media content. In doing so, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the role of social media platforms in luxury service brand marketing strategies and the specificities of authenticity signals embedded within social media content for luxury service brands. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions make significant contributions to the fledgling luxury services literature as well as the maturing social media marketing literature and provides practical, actionable insights and recommendations for luxury service brand managers to further apply these contemporary technologies for strategic marketing purposes.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have grappled with the concept of luxury for some time (Kapferer and Valette-Florence 2018), with inquiry being further fuelled by growth in luxury consumption (Fionda and Moore 2009; Ko, Costello, and Taylor 2019). The development of the internet, including social media platforms, has created many new questions for the luxury industry (Chandon, Laurent, and Valette-Florence 2016). A total of 4.62bn people use social media, equating to over 58% of the world's population (We Are Social 2022), driving a more open culture of information creation and sharing among online communities. However, this openness is seemingly in direct conflict with the traditional conceptualisation of luxury which, as Kapferer and Bastien (2009: 318) state, is "dominate its client" to preserve its status, alluding to a luxury brands' need to assert a level of authority over the consumer, similar to that of a parent-child relationship.

One way in which luxury brands seek to market themselves and communicate their superior levels of quality and prestige is through the effective use of signals in indicating their luxury status. Signalling theory has continued to grow in popularity among researchers in business (Connelly *et al*. 2011). The idea of signalling status has also gained popularity in luxury research (Gurzki and Woisetschläger 2017), yet much of this inquiry has focussed on the consumer perspective, neglecting the strategic marketing implications for, and approaches of, luxury brands. For example, research has focussed on consumer inferences of product quality based on signals such as price and brand reputation (Kirmani and Rao 2000) and has examined the purchase and consumption of luxury of goods as a means of individuals signalling their own status (e.g., Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Nelissen and Meijers 2011). Within an online setting, multiple signals elicit a complementary effect as supplementary signals serve to reinforce the strength of the more focal signal (Biswas, Dutta, and Biswas 2009). However, a gap remains in the literature pertaining to the use of signals by the brand and its management to effectively indicate a luxury service brand's luxury status.

It is clear from consultation with the literature, industry insights and market trends that the original conceptualisation of luxury requires adaptation in a social media-driven world. Not only has the societal perception of luxury changed, so too has its availability, communication, and consumption. The overarching research question, and therefore focus of this study, proposes a need to investigate how

Michelin star restaurants utilise social media platforms to signal luxury. The remainder of this chapter provides a brief overview of the main elements within the thesis.

1.1   Scope of Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how luxury service brands utilise social media within their marketing strategies. More specifically, it focuses on Michelin starred restaurants' endeavours to signal their authenticity as luxury brands through social media. Therefore, the scope of this study centres around three key theoretical areas: luxury services, social media marketing, and signalling theory, as shown below in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1.   Scope of the Study
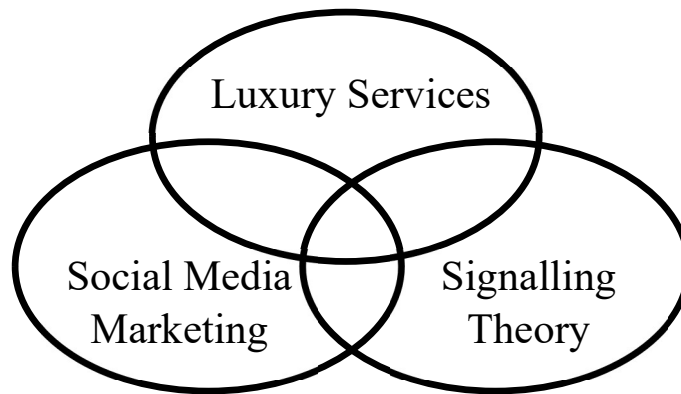
To draw insights relevant to addressing the desired research outcomes, the views of the social media marketing managers of Michelin star restaurants across Ireland and the UK were sought via semi-structured interviews. Their narratives not only provided rich insight into their own ideas and perceptions of luxury as well as their restaurants' luxury status within the hospitality industry, but also, crucially, first-hand anecdotes of how these visions are translated into effective and engaging social media marketing strategies. As is further discussed in Chapter Three, this study's definition of luxury service brands focusses on Michelin star restaurants, due not only to the worldwide appreciation of the accolade as a recognition of world-class luxury quality within the hospitality industry (Johnson *et al*. 2005; Bang, Choi, and Kim 2022), but also the consistency of criteria with which these awards are allocated, minimising bias in the sample selection process.

This study adopts signalling theory as the critical lens of the research. As further outlined in Section 2.3, signalling theory focusses on the alleviation of information asymmetries through the exchange of signals between senders and receivers within a signalling environment. In the case of the present study, senders are Michelin star restaurants seeking to utilise social media platforms as environments to send effective signals to consumers (receivers). In conducting this study, novel contributions will not only be made to luxury service brand and social media marketing theory but will also provide crucial strategic insights and recommendations for luxury service brand marketing managers.

1.2   Research Objectives

The overarching research question of this thesis is to investigate the how Michelin star restaurants utilise social media platforms to signal luxury. However, the scope of the research also entails further objectives which collectively will serve to comprehensively address the central objectives of the study, emerging as critical lines of inquiry as the research developed through a continuous, iterative process.

RO1. *How does the extant literature currently characterise the role of social media for luxury brands*?

RO2. *How can the dimensions of luxury service brands be signalled on social media*?

RO3. *How is authenticity signalled by Michelin star restaurants on social media*?

The above objectives stem from an initial broad scoping review of literature to effectively synthesise the literature on luxury and social media toward a more concerted investigation into the nature of authenticity signalling on social media. The rationale for choosing this approach is explained in the proceeding sub-section.

1.3   Methodological Approach

In recognising the feasibility of the major dichotomous positivist and interpretivist paradigms, this study adopts the view of Critical Realism (Bhaskar 1998; 2008) which advocates a hybrid approach in acknowledging that causal explanations of knowledge should be based on observable events, yet also recognise the influence of underlying social structures and networks within which actors are embedded. Applying signalling

theory within a social media marketing context lends itself to adopting this particular view given the exchange of signals from brands to consumers occurs within a wider social, albeit digital, environment.

Two research methods are used in this study. Firstly, via a systematic literature review approach, a novel theoretical framework examining the role of social media for luxury brand management and marketing is proposed. The objective of this is not only to synthesise the maturing stream of literature in this area, but also to further illuminate the research gap addressed within the empirical phase of the present study. Following this, in adopting a qualitative methodology, the study explores Michelin star restaurants' interpretations of luxury and investigates their approaches to signalling luxury, specifically authenticity, through their social media marketing activities. This approach captures critical marketing insights through the narratives of social media marketing managers, data which is then subjected to a thematic analysis to extrapolate the distinct themes related to the research participants' authenticity signalling approaches.

1.4   Outline of Contribution

The key contributions of the present study are four-fold. Firstly, in adopting a systematic literature review approach, the thesis proposes a theoretical framework of social media's role in luxury organisations (Section 4.2), synthesising the extant literature into luxury and social media. These themes include *brand strategy*, *social media communications*, *consumer attitudes and perceptions*, *engagement*, and *brand performance-related outcomes*. These themes (Figure 1.2) represent a set of interlocking gears which serve to both individually and collectively represent the major themes currently prevalent throughout the literature, not only to describing the current efforts of scholars to investigate the confluence of these two literature streams, but also to set the scene for the empirical phase of the study in highlighting the major gaps in the literature still to be addressed.

The primary empirical contributions of the study are twofold; first, the thesis proposes a series of luxury service brand dimensions which are utilised as key signals of luxury in social media marketing by Michelin star restaurants (Section 5.2), while secondly, the thesis develops a conceptual framework specifically exploring authenticity signalling on social media platforms for Michelin star restaurants (Section

5.3). Firstly, stemming from a comprehensive literature review, a series of luxury service brand dimensions are proposed and investigated regarding their utilisation as key signals of luxury within Michelin star restaurants' social media marketing strategies. These dimensions include *Authenticity*, *Brand Identity*, *Brand Integrity*, *Premium Price*, *Exclusivity*, *Marketing Communications*, *Environment*, *Brand Signature*, *Heritage,* and *Relationships*. As is further discussed throughout the thesis, the proposal of both the authenticity and relationship dimensions represent novel contributions to research.

The final contribution of this thesis is methodological as discussed in Section 6.4, as this study represents one of very few qualitative investigations adopting a brand perspective in the luxury marketing literature. Future research in this area may adopt this same criterion enabling comparative studies which can build on the theoretical contributions of this thesis.

Figure 1.2.   Social Media and Luxury Theoretical Framework
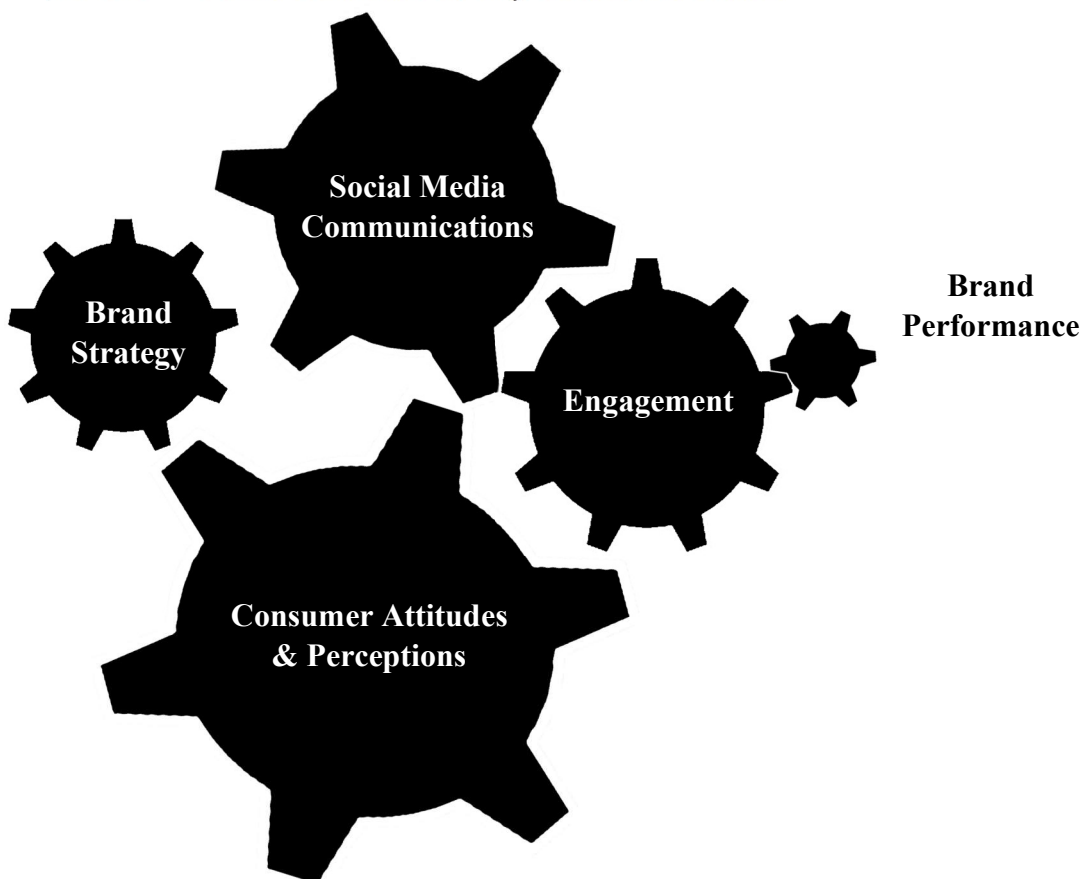
The second major contribution is the proposal of eleven distinct signals of authenticity (Figure 1.3): *identity, exclusivity, consistency, language and tone, mystery,*

relationships, *awards*, *location*, *ingredients*, *service experience*, and *atmosphere*. These signals are explored and discussed in terms of how they individually and collectively demonstrate luxury service brand authenticity. The conceptual framework contextualises these signals of authenticity based on the degree the tangibility/intangibility of these signals as well as their implicitness/explicitness within luxury service brands' social media content strategies. Overall, this model provides pivotal insights for luxury service brand marketers and makes crucial contributions to luxury, social media marketing, and signalling theory literatures.

Figure 1.3.   Luxury Service Brand Signals of Authenticity on Social Media
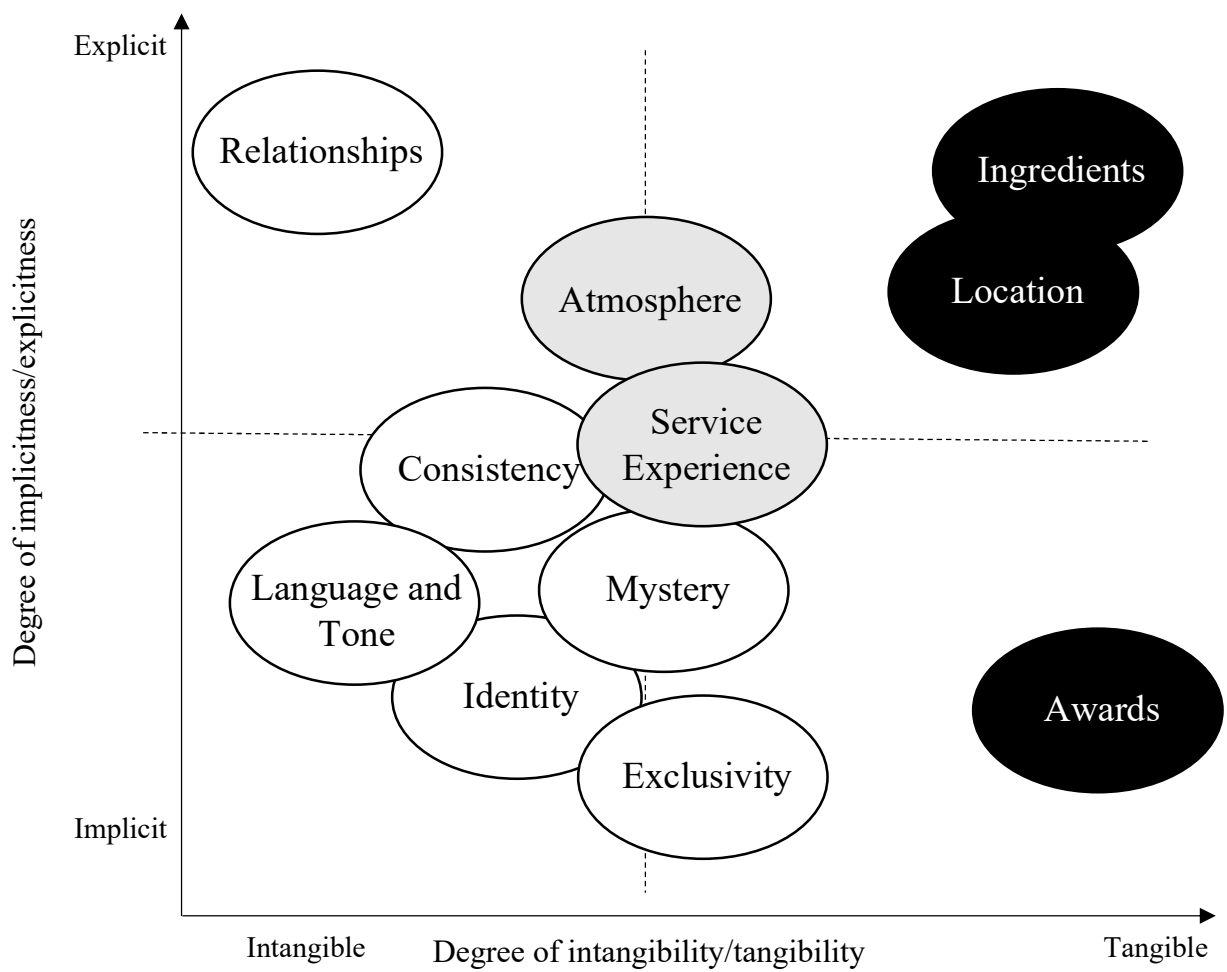
1.5   Industry Context

As was mentioned above in Section 1.1 and is further addressed within the *Methodology* chapter in the thesis, the industry context for the present study is the luxury hospitality sector, specifically Michelin star restaurants in Ireland and the UK. Michelin, a tyre manufacturer, was founded in 1889 in Clermont-Ferrand, France, by

brothers Andre and Edouard Michelin. The Michelin Guide was first published in 1920 as a free information guide for travellers containing information such as maps, instructions on how to change a tyre, and respite locations. Given Michelin's endeavours in tyre manufacturing and France's then only embryonic automobile industry, the guide served to encourage further adoption of cars and inspire exploration, thus driving up demand for tyres.

In the 1920s, the guide began to pay closer attention to both hotels and restaurants in Paris, assigning them to specific categories. It was then in 1926 when the guide began to utilise mystery diners, or inspectors, in awarding a single Michelin star to fine dining establishments worthy of the accolade. Five years later, the one-, two-, and three-star hierarchy was established with the criteria for allocation not being published for another five years after that: One Star: *A very good restaurant in its category*; Two Stars: *Excellent cooking, worth a detour*; Three Stars: *Exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey*.

Michelin is notoriously quite secretive regarding its techniques and approaches in identifying potential prospects for Michelin stars as well as the identity of its inspectors, however the guide does highlight five main criteria for inclusion: *product quality*; *mastery of flavour and cooking technique*; *presence of the chef's personality in their cuisine*; *harmony of the flavours*; and *consistency between visits*. Throughout the 20th century, Michelin Guides became the gold standard for fine dining and now contains ratings for over 40,000 establishments in 24 territories across three continents with sales of over 30 million guides since its launch (Michelin Guide 2022). Table 1.1 below depicts the definition of each Michelin award along with the evaluation criteria as prescribed by Michelin.

Table 1.1.   Michelin Awards and Evaluation Criteria

Award	Description
***	Exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey
**	Excellent cooking, worth a detour
*	A very good restaurant in its category

Michelin Inspector's 5 Restaurant Rating Criteria

1.	Quality of products
2.	Mastery of flavour and cooking techniques
3.	The personality of the chef represented in the dining experience
4.	Harmony of the flavours
5.	Consistency between inspectors' visits

The literature remains indecisive and limited in its conceptualisation of a 'luxury restaurant' (e.g., Meng and Elliott 2008; Chen *et al*. 2015; Yang and Mattila 2016). As will be further discussed in the *Methodology* chapter, possession of a Michelin star is adopted as the criteria for participation in the study as a 'luxury restaurant'. Given the inherent subjectivity of the concept of luxury, adopting a more rigid and consistently assessed and award classification minimises bias in the sample selection process. A recent Mintel report outlined how post-pandemic fine dining restaurants are undergoing "casualization" to increase the accessibility of their luxury offering, using the examples of three-star restaurants Alinea (Chicago) and Eleven Madison Park (New York) selling DIY meal kits during the pandemic (Topper 2021). Given these shifting trends, it is prudent to investigate how these restaurants have sought to adapt their marketing strategies accordingly, specifically how these brands

can maintain their luxury perception through signals on social media. A poll by Mintel found that only 32% of respondents agreed that "convenience is more important than authenticity when cooking/preparing world foods" (Pilkington 2021). This highlights the value of authenticity sought by consumers from their food and dining experiences, particularly as we emerge from the pandemic and luxury hospitality industry continues to recover.

1.6   Structure and Chapter Outline

Chapter One has introduced the current study, providing an overview of the overarching research question and sub-objectives, elaborating on the key theoretical concepts underpinning the study (luxury services, social media marketing, and signalling theory), before providing a brief description of the methodological approach used in the study. Finally, it outlines the main findings and contribution of the research and what implications they have for future academic inquiry and managerial practice.

Chapter Two is an examination of the extant literature pertaining to the major theoretical areas relevant to the study and is divided into three distinct sub-sections. The first explores a wide range of historical perceptions, definitions, and perspectives on the concept of luxury within society. Various historical perspectives and evolutions are discussed to sufficiently provide context to the later-discussed shift toward a more democratised conceptualisation of luxury within modern-day society, a phenomenon which turned out to be particularly pertinent to the current study's findings and contributions. The proceeding sub-section explores the history, albeit brief, of social media platforms and their rise to prominence, not only as critical strategic marketing tools, but also their prevalence within modern societal discourse as communication outlets and information dissemination channels. This review of the literature sets the foundation for the systematic literature review on the confluence of social media and luxury presented in Chapter Four which serves to address the first research objective. Chapter Two concludes with a discussion of the theoretical foundation of the study, signalling theory. As previously mentioned, the literature review identifies and presents the key research gap addressed in this study; that is, how do luxury service brands effectively signal luxury on social media platforms? The theoretical foundation of the study is signalling theory. This theory is subsequently utilised to unpack the narratives of the study's interview participants, further detailed in Chapter Four. It also

serves as a basis for the development of the novel contributions of this study, which is a conceptual model of authenticity signalling on social media platforms for luxury service brands, as further discussed and explored in Chapters Five and Six.

Chapter Three presents the research philosophy and methodology of the study. The research design is first introduced before a proposal of the central research question that is addressed in the research. What follows is a discussion of the prominent research philosophies which have guided academic research to date, before detailing the specific philosophical inclinations of the research, critical realism, and an examination of how this view informed the choice of method in the study. The chapter subsequently details the choice and rationale for the sample of the study, Michelin star restaurants in Ireland and the UK, as well the data collection, triangulation, and analysis methods adopted by the researcher. The chapter concludes with an overview of the ethical considerations relevant to the research and the steps taken to address and mitigate these potential concerns.

Chapter Four presents a systematic literature review examining the confluence of social media and luxury and addresses RO1. This literature review focusses specifically on the antecedents and consequences of luxury brands' utilisation of social media platforms as outlined in the extant literature. The findings of the review highlight, among other things, the critical research gap addressed in the empirical phase of this study; how can luxury service brands (historically elitist, rare, and exclusive) employ social media platforms (ubiquitous and democratised) to effectively signal brand authenticity. The overarching theoretical contribution of the review is the proposal of a conceptual model of social media use by luxury brands across five distinct themes and subsequent discussion of the linkages and synthesis of the current state of knowledge within this domain. This review paper was published in the *International Journal of Management Reviews* in 2022 (Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022).

Chapter Five proceeds to address RO2 in proposing and exploring the critical dimensions of luxury service brands and examines their utilisation as key signals of luxury within social media marketing strategies, providing evidence from the narratives of interview participants in the study. This sub-section explores how these dimensions are integrated into Michelin star restaurants' social media marketing

strategies and offers critical insights into luxury service brand dimensions and how they can be embedded within social media strategies.

The final sub-section of this chapter unpacks authenticity signalling by luxury service brands on social media platforms (RO3), presenting a total of eleven distinct signals which both individually and, in some cases, collectively, serve as critical signals of the brands' authenticity through the medium of social media content. These signals are explored and discussed, and a taxonomy is presented as the central theoretical contribution of the study, proposing not only the degree to which certain signals can be used in tandem with each other, but also their position within the taxonomy is predicated by both their degree of tangibility as a signal, as well as to what extent luxury service brands will either implicitly or explicitly embed these signals in their social media marketing content.

Chapter Six critically evaluates the central contributions of the research from both theory and practice perspectives across the areas central to the research inquiry: luxury services, social media marketing, and signalling theory. The critical and novel contribution to knowledge centres on the aforementioned taxonomy of authenticity signals for luxury service brands. This study furthers our understanding of how signalling theory can be applied in contemporary marketing contexts, while also further exemplifying the importance of social media platforms for luxury service brand marketing and management. A series of practical strategic recommendations is also presented to luxury service brand managers content on embedding critical signals of their brand authenticity in their future social media strategies.

Finally, the thesis is concluded with an examination of the limitations of the study, before offering some concluding remarks and proposing avenues for future research in these ever-growing streams of literature. The theoretical contributions of the research include, but are not limited to, paving the way for future research in the growing luxury services literature as well as social media marketing inquiry which will serve to further build on the foundations laid by this study. The overall layout and structure of the thesis is illustrated in Figure 1.4 below.

Figure 1.4.   Thesis Flowchart

INTRODUCTION

LITERATURE REVIEW

LUXURY SERVICES	SOCIAL MEDIA

SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

AUTHENTICITY	SIGNALLING THEORY

METHODOLOGY

PHILOSOPHY	DATA COLLECTION

DATA ANALYSIS

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

LUXURY SERVICE BRAND DIMENSIONS	SIGNALS OF LUXURY	SOCIAL MEDIA AND LUXURY BRANDS

CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSION
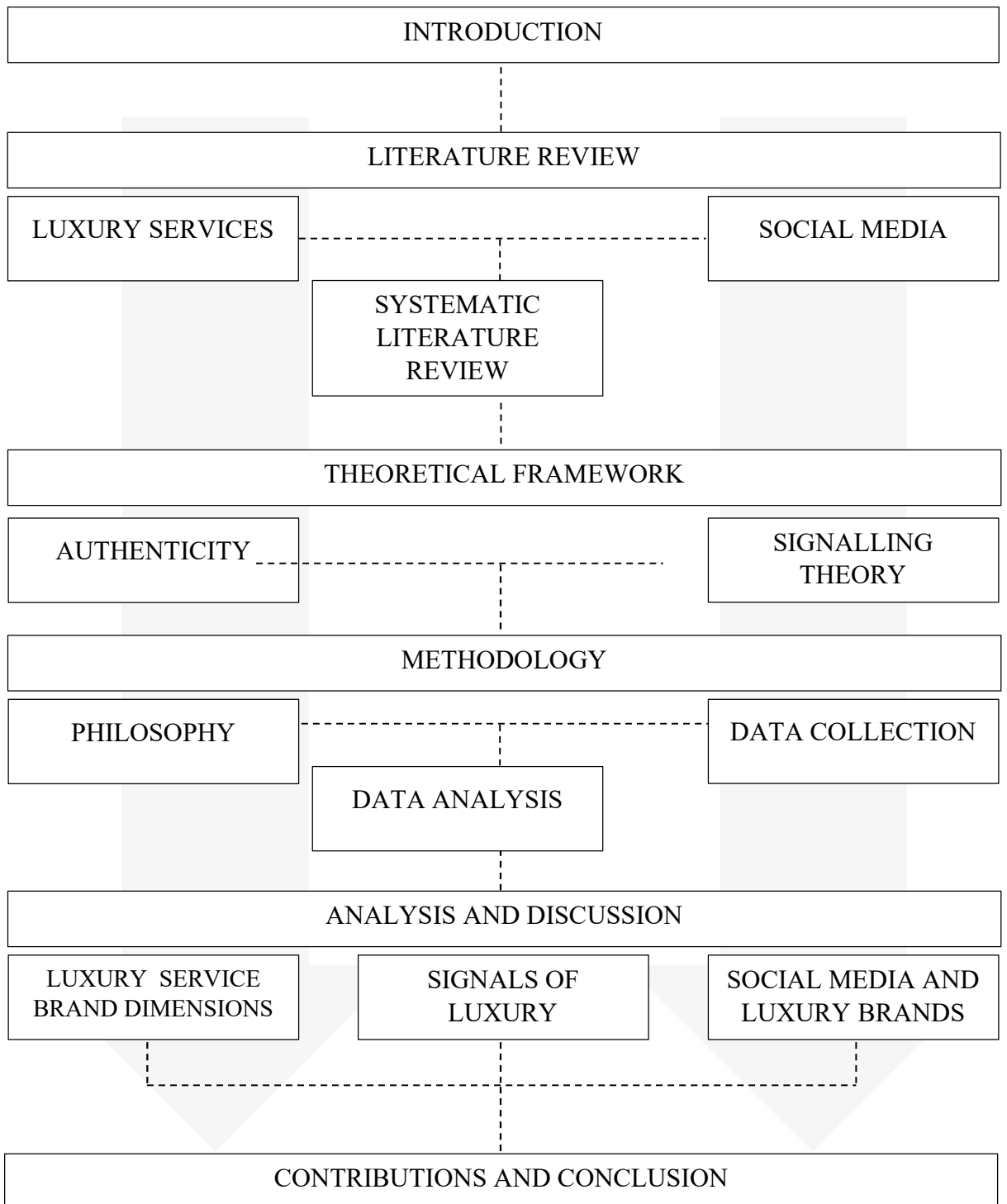
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0   Introduction

Chapter Two is an analysis of the extant literature pertaining to the central theoretical areas relevant to the study and is divided into three distinct sub-sections. Firstly, Section 2.1 presents a historical commentary and analysis of the concept of luxury, how its meaning evolved over time, and how it is defined and conceptualised in more modern literature. This sub-section culminates in the proposal of a series of dimensions of luxury service brands stemming from the literature review and serve as the basis for the conceptualisation of luxury service brand adopted in the present study.

The proceeding sub-section, Section 2.2, explores the history of social media and examines the primary categories of social media platforms and their prominence within the marketing literature. Given that the present study does not narrow the focus of inquiry to one specific category of social media platform, but rather the entire suite of platforms at luxury service brands' disposal, such a comprehensive examination of the diverse types of platforms provides a critical foundation for the research inquiry.

Finally, Section 2.3 includes a discussion on the theoretical foundation for the research, signalling theory. The central tenets of the theory are presented and discussed within the context of the present study, namely the signal (luxury), the signaller (Michelin star restaurant brands), the receiver (social media users) and the environment (social media platforms). These three sections collectively serve to provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the present study.

2.1   Luxury

The concept of luxury represents a ubiquitous component of society and, therefore, does not represent a wholly new phenomenon. The luxury industry remains a highly complex and competitive force which has flourished over the past couple of decades (Okonkwo 2009; Ko *et al*. 2016) despite some slow-down in more recent years (Kapferer and Valette-Florence 2018). Toward the end of the twentieth century, a renewed sense of consumer confidence, coupled with rising stock markets and a growth in disposable consumer income were cited as contributing factors for the rise in the demand for luxury (Nueno and Quelch 1998; Kapferer and Bastien 2009). These increased levels in the desire for luxury (Shukla, Banerjee, and Singh 2016), as well as a growth in the net worth of individuals with an appetite for luxury consumption

(Fionda and Moore 2009), has led to a globalisation of luxury, or luxury fever (Frank 1999). This trend of consumers 'trading up' to higher quality products and services across multiple categories (Silverstein and Fiske 2003) has forced a comprehensive reassessment of business models (Depeyre, Rigaud, and Seraidarian 2018). These developments have introduced both new consumers and new markets into the luxury domain and has, fittingly, been termed 'new luxury' (e.g., Belk 1999; Silverstein and Fiske 2003; Kapferer and Laurent 2016; Liu, Perry, Moore, and Warnaby 2016). It has also stimulated a growing business-focussed research stream (Gurzki and Woisetschläger 2017). This new luxury implies a form of luxury which is no longer deemed to possess the characteristics typical of the historical view of luxury, such as being exclusive or unique (Silverstein and Fiske 2003), which will be examined further in Section 2.1.1.

Luxury research, however, does remain in relative infancy, despite high levels of growth over the past decade or so (Brun and Castelli 2013; Gurzki and Woisetschläger 2017; Aliyev, Ürkmez, and Wagner 2017; Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022), with definitions of the term rarely being comprehensive and varying in focus between economic and social perspectives (van der Veen 2003). The growth of luxury consumption (Fionda and Moore 2009; Ko, Costello, and Taylor 2019) coupled with such ongoing debate has led to the current era of luxury being one of confusion, with a lack of consensus as to what the term actually means within contemporary society (Kapferer 1997; 2012; Kastanakis and Balabanis 2012). The problem with luxury as a term is its representation as a subjective impression (Kapferer 1997), which has resulted in an absence of a commonly accepted definition owing to the multidimensional nature of conceptualisations of the phenomenon (Turunen 2018).

Scholars endeavouring to investigate the current luxury climate have used terms such as the democratisation of luxury (Dubois and Laurent 1995; Truong, McColl, and Kitchen 2009; Mortelmans 2005; Kapferer 2006), mass affluence (Nunes, Johnson, and Breene 2004), masstige luxury (Silverstein and Fiske 2003; Roper *et al*. 2013; Kumar, Paul, and Unnithan 2020) and bandwagon luxury consumption (Kastanakis and Balabanis 2012) when discussing the product and consumer behaviour implications, respectively, of such developments. These masstige approaches have led to approaches by luxury brands to seek a balance between a high

perception of prestige with reasonable prices to attract the masses of predominantly middle-class consumers (Truong, McColl, and Kitchen 2009).

In seeking to garner a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of luxury, it is prudent to first examine its history, its evolution over time, and its modern-day conceptualisations according to literature. This discussion is presented in the following section.

2.1.1 Origins of Luxury

Luxury remains an enduring, complex phenomenon with no absolute beginning or end (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2018). Tynan *et al*. (2010) explain how the roots of the term luxury originate from *luxus*, meaning 'soft or extravagant living, (over)-indulgence' and 'sumptuousness, luxuriousness, opulence' (Oxford 1992), which led to a denunciation of the term among historical religious and moral authorities (Chandon, Laurent, and Valette-Florence 2016). Nueno and Quelch (1998) note luxury's origin, as well as that of the French parallel *luxe*, the Italian *lusso*, and the Spanish and Portuguese *lujo*, as deriving from the Latin *luxus*, representing an indulgence of the senses, regardless of cost. It shares its roots with *luxuria*, meaning excess, lasciviousness, and self-indulgence (Dubois, Czellar, and Laurent 2005) and was most commonly attributed to rare, hand-crafted products of excellent quality and craftmanship (Berry 1994).

The subsequent filtering of the term luxury from Latin to Norman French would see the Norman word *luxure* adopt the meaning of 'lust' or 'lechery', with the final adoption of 'luxury' from French to English in the 14th century carrying a sexual connotation. The familiar definition of the term, indicating lavishness and opulence didn't appear within English texts until the early 17th century, indicating a return of sorts closer to that of its original Latin meaning (Wilton 2013). For centuries, luxury had been the exclusive privilege of those in high society, such as royalty and religious authorities, through ostentatious displays of their wealth and status. This served as a stamp of superiority from the upper class looking to distance themselves from those lesser privileged thus acting as a social marker (Veblen 1899; Okonkwo 2009). Similarly, individuals occupying the upper echelons of society would be exempt from engaging in industrial occupations in favour of higher-order positions, such as

government or warfare; a structure which can be traced back to primitive barbarian culture (Veblen 1899).

A further examination of luxury's role within historical societies is presented below as an exploration of how it was perceived and embedded throughout society to further contextualise the changes in accessibility and perception brought about by globalisation and economic development of more recent times. This discussion is offered below.

2.1.2   The Greek Perspective

The Ancient Greeks regarded luxurious indulgence as a threat to society as they felt that excessive pleasure would turn the attention of citizens from the *polis* (community structure) to a more private life (Brun 2017), which in turn would cause societal division (Hunt 1995). Luxury was a threat to the Apollonian ideal of *sophrosyne*, meaning temperance or moderation, which also mirrored the Hebrew ideal of obedience which embodied values such as love, virtue, happiness, freedom, and wisdom which are seen as the antithesis of luxury (Sekora 1977). Plato stated that such a pursuit of voluminous, and possible unlimited, wealth would generate warfare among the *polis* as neighbours each sought to accumulate as much territory as possible in a bid to achieve their own luxurious living conditions (Berry 1994). This mindset shift prioritised tangible evidence of skill and ability through the accumulation of trophies as a symbol of self-assertion and success (Veblen 1899).

The Greeks viewed luxury as a vice which could not be eradicated, but one which must be suppressed (Sekora 1977). Once an individual's appetite exceeds beyond what is necessary to meet their fixed needs (food, clothing, shelter), desires begin to become insatiable, leading to peaceful, transactional exchanges being replaced by more competitive desires and conflict (Berry 1994). So much so, in fact, that the procurement of possessions by any other means was deemed "unworthy of man in his best estate" (Veblen 1899: 17). Thus, the root of such disharmony lies within the fall of the need-based economy and the resultant rise of luxurious desire (Berry 1994). Aristotle noted that, while money plays a legitimate role in facilitating exchange, a concern remains that individuals may come to view money, improperly, as an end rather than as a facilitator of the 'good life' (Berry 1994). Although, as Berry (1994) further notes, Aristotle does not explicitly refer to luxury; this dichotomy

between the natural good life and a more perverse life predicated by bodily pleasures and unlimited accumulation came to underscore the notion that a life of luxury was in fact an unworthy life.

Plato stated that those who give themselves to a life of luxury are incapable of defending themselves and unfit to be a part of the *warrior class*, made up of those who fight and risk death to defend those in the *polis*. The willingness to fight was seen not as an essence of humanity, but of masculinity. Therefore, the warrior who displayed the requisite courage (*andreia*) was seen to be acting like a man (*anér/andra*) (Berry 1994). Conversely, men living a life of luxury were emasculated, thought to represent less than a man, leading to a vulnerable and weakened *polis* (Hunt 1995). Similarly, Socrates spoke of the luxurious man as being dominated by the lowest part of the soul, a creature of impulse, unable to separate the necessary from unnecessary desires (Sekora 1977). As Veblen (1899: 14) put it: "… any effort that does not involve an assertion of prowess comes to be unworthy of the man." This was further demonstrated in Florus' writings on the downfall of King Antiochus of Syria; following his seizure of the Greek islands he proceeded to live a life of ease and luxury. Subsequently, once the Romans took to the field against him, he was easily defeated. Florus concluded that King Antiochus had already been defeated by his own luxury (Berry 1994).

These early writings on the phenomenon have painted Man as a naturally desirous creature, representing a pivotal element in what Berry (1994) terms the 'de-moralisation of luxury'. Highlighting the link between want, desire, and lack, Berry (1994) further notes the Aristotelian position of deficit being always applied to a normative standard. All individuals strive for complete satisfaction of all desires; a complete life absent of any deficiency. In this view, desire is limited and once these levels are sufficiently satisfied, desire ceases. As previously mentioned, it is then the pursuit of desires beyond this point which constitutes a lack of virtue (Berry 1994). Berry (1994: 113) proceeds to explore the more modern hypothesis, citing the writings of Barbon, rejecting this notion, that no such desire-less state exists: "The only way to be 'free' of desire is to be dead."

Further, it remains the particular desires of the individual which govern an object's desirability, rather than the object itself being objectively desirable to all individuals. Barbon wrote of how desires increase in tandem with wealth *ad infinitum*

and how individuals will particularly desire rare objects to display either on their person or in their homes. The role of imagination is crucial here; due to its inherent ability to surpass the fixed nature of needs into a more fanciful world, it can create want which results in desire of that which we do not possess. As a result, the changeable nature of the mind serves to directly affect the value of goods; Barbon writes of the interpretive nature of value, stating that as the mind changes, so does the desirability (and hence value) of goods. Therefore, the best judge of value remains the market as the value of goods remains subject to the willingness of the market to purchase them (Berry 1994).

2.1.3 The Roman Perspective

The term luxury also carried a negative connotation among the Ancient Romans, who utilised it as a means of signalling 'riotous living and sinful waste'. It was a term characterised as a vice rather than a virtue and used by the Romans as a term of denigration for the expenditures and lifestyles of the non-elite (Kovesi 2015). However, its role in creating social structure in pre-modern times was pivotal (Hunt 1995). Luxury became a political question due to its signification of the potentially troublesome power of the human desire, something which was seen as necessitating effective policing (Berry 1994). Similar to the Greeks, the once frugal Roman populace lived in harmony and in the absence of materialism and avarice. However, due to the Empire's continued rise to power and accumulation of vast amounts of wealth, greed began to manifest, threatening to destroy this harmony. Citizens were regarded not according to their merits, but to their own personal advantage and circumstance. This avarice was described as a poison which weakened the body and spirit and, similar to previous assertions, was insatiable and emasculating. Further, once the persistent pursuit and accumulation of wealth become normalised within society, the formerly accepted idea of a frugal life was disregarded, causing following generations to fall prey to luxury (Berry 1994).

These concerns led to the establishment of the office of Censor, whose obligation was to preserve the morals of citizens. Berry (1994) writes of the most celebrated holder of this office, Cato the Elder, who vowed to eradicate 'luxury and effeminacy' from his society. Luxury was the feminine, and femininity was viewed as undercutting the masculine principles of self-sufficiency and hardiness (Hunt 1995).

The Romans proceeded to introduce a series of sumptuary laws (*sumptuariae leges*) regulating consumption throughout the final two centuries BC, providing valuable insight not only into the Roman conceptualisation of luxury, but also the society's value system and identity (Berry 1994). Examples of such legislation was a restriction on the wearing of certain materials and styles, a limit on the weight of ornaments made from precious metals, and the cost of wedding gifts (Hunt 1995). Further constraints on consumption targeted costs and food menus; for example, the number of allowed guests at a dinner party was limited, the number of animals to be consumed at feasts was also restricted, as well as a prohibition on foreign wine, shellfish, and imported birds (Berry 1994; Hunt 1995).

Sumptuary legislation was enforced throughout classic civilisations across the world, including feudal Europe and early modern European powers, as well as the colonies of New England across the Atlantic, undergoing change over time (Hunt 1995). These changes included a shift from the aforementioned restrictions on the type and volume of food to be served to the imposing of dress codes among societal hierarchies, characterised by the enforcement of restrictions on the wearing of certain fabrics by members of varying social strata. Within his commentary, Berry (1994) outlines three forms of private luxury: self-indulgence, which could be expressed by buildings, furnishings, or banquets; greed (or *avaritia*), signifying wealth accumulation's surpassing of the public service ideal; and ambition (or *ambitio*), which could manifest as the utilisation of wealth to employ personal security services. The commonality between these forms is the premium they place upon self-gratification; while these more selfish pleasures are satisfied, reduced focus is placed upon the public good.

However, not all manifestations of wealth were chastised by the Romans. *Luxuria*, carrying negative connotations, was in direct contrast to *magnificenta*, or magnificence, which was related to *splendor* (splendour). In this instance, magnificence referred to the lauded use of wealth by the elite to further the greater good, for example the development of public projects, such as buildings and infrastructure (Kovesi 2015). However, beginning around the time of the Renaissance and early capitalist societies, luxury spread to bankers and industry leaders, leading to a new era of social acceptance of luxury more closely mirroring our experience today (Chandon, Laurent, and Valette-Florence 2016; Brun 2017). In the early centuries AD,

early Christian writings retained the conceptual link between luxury and corruption which had been previously postulated by the Romans, adding that vices were to be regarded as sins and were to be viewed in opposition to sobriety and chastity (Berry 1994). The Christian tradition conceived luxury as a violation of the necessary and natural order conceived by God. The view was that God provided for all the needs of the world, which were depicted as being simple; a perspective captured powerfully in the symbol of bread within the Christian tradition (Hunt 1995). There existed further theological division on the view of luxury between the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Broadly, while Catholics viewed luxury as a sin of pride, Protestants remained concerned regarding the results of indulgence in luxury, such as immorality and dissoluteness (Hunt 1995).

These historical perspectives on luxury and its place within society paint luxury as a controversial and divisive component within communities, even pushing rulers to introduce laws to restrict overindulgence and to regulate the display of wealth among the population. As detailed below, a dilution of the negative connotations surrounding luxury and overt displays of wealth began to occur as economic developments resulted in more individuals within society began to accumulate wealth of their own.

2.1.4 The Proceeding Centuries

Beginning around the thirteenth century, a new non-traditional elite group of consumers began to emerge in Europe, particularly in Italy (Kovesi 2015). This group was made up of merchants, craftspeople, textile workers, and tanners. This growth in trade and the resultant economic prosperity experienced by the wider populace led to an increased accessibility in products which had previously only been available to the *magnificent*. These developments were met with some resistance from the societal elite, who viewed these abundant imitations of their own lifestyles as immoral, leading to a re-envisioning of the *luxuria* concept. Eventually, in 1441, a new term was conceived in the Italian vernacular by the Florentine priest, humanist, and poet, Leonardo Dati (1408–1472), *lusso*, meaning luxury (Kovesi 2015). This reinvention of the concept of luxury continued into the proceeding centuries with its association with the Latin root *lux*, meaning 'light', making reference to precious metals and objects (such as gold or gems) which were produced for the monarchy or church

dignitaries (Brun and Castelli 2013). It wasn't until the fourteenth century however, with the emergence of the *bourgeoisie*, that the term gained a more positive perception among those outside the societal elite. Luxury started to represent a more inclusive notion of possessions which served to make life more comfortable (Brun and Castelli 2013). For example, in the 17th century, luxury was attributed to commodities such as rare pearls, crystal, perfumes, and Caribbean spices (Berthon *et al*. 2009).

Sekora (1977: 1-2) marked the eighteenth century as a turning point in the thinking of luxury, also referring to it as the most controversial issue of that century, asserting that "the concept of luxury is one of the oldest, most important, and most pervasive negative principles for organizing society Western history has known". Moving into the 19th century, the Victorians developed a keen interest in consumption. While also being a source of regulatory scrutiny and controversy, it was a time of liberalism and free trade. Regulatory endeavours included exerting control over 'unproductive' forms of consumption, such as cruel sports, drinking, and street betting, while more productive forms of leisure were provided via art galleries, libraries, and museums (Hilton 2004). Hilton writes that if the sumptuary legislation introduced in Europe in previous centuries had been an attempt to control the social order, the Victorian's intentions were to control the individual self. Individuals were bestowed the responsibility of considering the implications of their own consumption, while it was the state's duty to attempt to guide consumption toward more productive ends. Liberalism's core of independence and individuality lay at odds with government interference or influence, therefore, in its advocating of consumer choice (Hilton 2004).

Further, the second industrial revolution toward the end of the nineteenth century gave rise to the conceptualisation of luxury analogous with the modern meaning: the 'habit of indulgence in what is choice or costly' or 'something enjoyable or comfortable beyond the necessities of life' (Brun and Castelli 2013). In the United States, the latter stages of the 1800s was also a time of significant economic prosperity, a time termed the 'Gilded Age' which saw the establishment of many cultural institutions, such as opera houses and museums across multiple major cities (Harris 1962). The continuation of economic growth experienced in the twentieth century had a catalytic effect on the development of brands via the accumulation of a broader customer base as well as a burgeoning reputation for superior levels of quality. Global

trade sparked a revival of luxury as products of great craftmanship were produced and distributed by world-renowned makers. The continued industrialisation of luxury products has resulted in a more brand-focussed conception of luxury, moving beyond materials to dreams, images, and signs (Berthon *et al*. 2009).

In summary, luxury goods were originally considered such due to their exceptional quality, durability, design and performance. Today, effective positioning in the luxury market is more greatly predicated on the image of the brand along with the emotional factors governing consumption (Brun 2017). It remains a divisive topic, as some still consider luxury as conflicting with traditional community values, akin to the Ancient Greek and Roman perspectives discussed previously, whereas others view luxury as simply the "antidote to the mundane" (Berthon *et al*. 2009: 45). This chapter now transitions to a examining a more contemporary perspective of the definitions of luxury and of luxury products and services. These depictions of luxury as told by the literature provide a critical foundation for the later investigation of the research objectives of this thesis.

2.1.5 Defining Luxury

Luxury remains an elusive concept to define (Kovesi 2015; Hudders, Pandelaere, and Vyncke 2013), despite its prominence within contemporary society (Vickers and Renand 2003) and the commercial mainstream (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2018) and is often dependant on the context in question (Gutsatz and Heine 2018a). Despite this, a shift in what luxury means has been acknowledged (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2018). The interpretation of what is, and what is not, luxury remains subjective and is constantly evolving (Brun, 2017), rendering the prior historical conception of luxury as anything above daily living needs insufficient (Vickers and Renand 2003). Hunt (1995) writes that there exists no stable reference point of the concepts of need or necessity to be considered as its counterpoint. Rather, luxury discourse has generated a series of dichotomous signs which serve to contextualise the opposition between luxury and non-luxury. For example, in economics, luxury is discussed in terms of price elasticities, while in philosophy, it is examined within a needs/wants distinction (Mortelmans 2005).

The inconsistencies present in the existing definitions of luxury can be attributed to multiple factors (Heine and Phan 2011). Conceptualisations have either

encompassed a very broad scope, referring to factors such as resources or time, or else a much narrower scope examining only the best products in one category. Other definitions have contradicted the supposed necessity of certain characteristics for an offering to be considered luxury while others have assigned essentiality to certain consumer-focussed characteristics, such as purchasing motives and preferences (Heine and Phan 2011). However, it has also been suggested that luxury remains *more* than a mere characteristic or set of attributes, incorporating intangible as well as tangible dimensions (Berthon *et al*. 2009; Turunen 2018).

A definition of luxury products posited by Tynan *et al*. (2010: 1158) describes them as "high quality, expensive and non-essential products and services that appear to be rare, exclusive, prestigious, authentic and offer high levels of symbolic and emotional/hedonic values through customer experiences". Grossman and Shapiro (1988) use the term *status goods* in emphasising the consumer's desire to exhibit prestige, while also noting the negligible difference in functional utility of such goods. Wilson (2014: 17) focuses purely on cost in their definition, stating "in contemporary usage luxury translates as merely expensive", while Sekora (1977: 23) describes luxury as simply "anything unneeded". However, other authors have observed that luxury cannot be defined by price alone, and that expensive products many not always be considered luxury (Dubois and Czellar 2002). Therein lies the paradox of luxury; at its most elemental, it is conceptualised as being non-essential and superfluous to actual need. Yet, the business of luxury is predicated on such superfluous desires being converted to pressing needs (Kovesi 2015).

As noted, the multidimensional nature of the luxury concept has, thus far, resulted in an absence of a universally accepted definition of the phenomenon. Such challenges may be understood given the assertion by Okonkwo (2009: 302) that luxury is "neither a product, an object, a service nor is it a concept or a lifestyle", but rather is "an identity, a philosophy and a culture". Previous efforts at cementing a definition have been futile due the concept's inherently subjective nature (De Barnier *et al*. 2012). Despite this lack of consensus, certain characteristics are often associated with luxury brands including, but not limited to, high prices and levels of quality, brand history and heritage, exclusivity, scarcity and rarity, unique knowledge and capabilities, aesthetics and beauty, bespoke communications coupled with long-term relationships

with a select clientele, and prestigious brick and mortar outlets (Kernstock, Brexendorf, and Powell 2017; Baker *et al*. 2018; Turunen 2018).

In addition, Nueno and Quelch (1998: 62-63) posit a typology of luxury brand characteristics which also includes a global reputation, an association with a country of origin which possesses a strong reputation as a source of excellence in the relevant product category, an ability to effectively identify and address shifts in design when the category is fashion-intensive, as well as the personality and values of its creator. Empirical research carried out by Siew, Minor, and Felix (2018) further emphasises the role of country of origin in influencing consumers' affect and willingness to spend more on luxury brands. However, what is deemed luxury in the minds of certain individuals may not necessarily be the same for others (Kapferer 1997; Kapferer and Bastien 2009), and that "luxury is in the eye of the consumer" (Kapferer and Laurent 2016: 339). However, some consumers may view certain goods as either a luxury or necessity depending on the context of the need; for example, water may be deemed either a luxury or necessity depending on the context (Kemp 1998). It may be argued, therefore, that all products may be considered luxury once specific conditions are met and examined within certain contexts (Mortelmans 2005).

Veblen (1899) argued that we cannot allocate products or brands into luxury or non-luxury categories, that they must, rather, be considered within their socioeconomic context. Mortelmans (2005) echoes this sentiment in positing luxury as representing what lies above the absolute minimum required for survival, or fixed needs, as dictated by society. Drawing from semiotic theory, the study of signs, sign systems and sign processes (i.e., Chandler 2007), Hudders *et al*. (2013) propose a definition of luxury as a connotation that is ascribed to material and immaterial products, services, and brands. Given semiotic theory's position that a sign equates to anything unto which an individual attaches meaning, a sign ultimately has no meaning in and of itself. Tynan *et al*. (2010) add that luxury and non-luxury goods represent two ends of a continuum, and that where non-luxury ends, and true luxury begins, is a matter to be judged by consumers (cf. Berry 1994). Further, despite the apparent necessity of a brand or product to possess one or more of the previously mentioned luxury characteristics, the extant literature proposes that luxury is not inherent within an object (Berthon *et al*. 2009); that it represents *more* than just a collection of attributes, and that the attributes are not luxury *per se* (Turunen 2018). Additional

confusion exists as to whether the label of luxury primarily refers to a product or to a brand (Brun 2017).

Previous incarnations of the term have included a McKinsey (1990) report which defined luxury brands as those which "have constantly been able to justify a high price, i.e. significantly higher than the price of products with comparable tangible functions", taking a purely economic perspective and omitting other previously mentioned characteristics, such as history and heritage, although it may be assumed that such factors are complicit in the brands' ability to 'justify a high price' as the report suggests. Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2018: 425) seek to converge the assertions by previous authors in posting their own definition: "Luxury refers to hedonistic, high-quality objects, services, and experiences, sold at a price far beyond what their functional value would command, which represent sources of a sense of privilege, taste, pleasure, and refinement and produce recognition by relevant others, due to the power of the brand, its perceived exclusivity, and its heritage." Other attempts at a definition have been even more vague and generic, with some authors positing luxury as a characteristic of brands, utilising more vague terms such as "dream value" (Dubois and Paternault 1995: 71) or "aura" (Björkman 2002). For example, Björkman (2002: 76) highlights the importance of price level in creating an aura around a brand or product and that even lower priced brands may create their own luxury aura: "For them luxury aura is something that they relate to but not by selling luxury products but by letting the customers get the feeling that luxury is something that people consume very fast and that it is actually about vanity."

It is clear, from analysis of the extant literature, that definitions of luxury, as well as more specific concepts such as brand luxury, remain disparate and at times dichotomous (Miller and Mills 2012). This is further complicated by the inherent differences between products and services, such as services being intangible in nature and therefore more difficult to quantify or evaluate certain luxury characteristics which would be critical in products, such as quality of components, craftmanship, or design. Therefore, it is deemed prudent to conduct two separate analyses and critiques within this chapter. Firstly, luxury products will be examined; extant definitions as well as characterisations will be assessed and discussed before, secondly, the same approach will be extended to luxury services.

2.1.6 Luxury Products

While value brands satisfy, luxury products delight (Hagtvedt and Patrick 2009). It is not sufficient for a luxury product to simply be desired, it must be desired by many, yet attainable by a few (van der Veen 2003). The 'narrow' definition of luxury products as posited by Mortelmans (2005; see Table 2.1) is considered such due to the omission of luxury consumption by members of disadvantaged societies. In such circumstances, products may be deemed a luxury based on the social context in which they are consumed. This correlates with the notion that luxury lies within the eyes of the consumer (Berry 1994; Kapferer and Laurent 2016), further complicating attempts at concisely characterising and defining luxury. There have been several approaches employed toward differentiating between luxury and non-luxury products (Heine and Phan 2011). The characteristics- v consequence-based approach differentiates between the features and qualities of the offerings themselves and the benefits or utility gained in their consumption. However, as Heine and Phan (2011) explain, such benefits may not be exclusive to luxury products, which has led to a wide adoption of the characteristics-based approach as outlined in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1.   Selected Definitions of Luxury

Author(s)	Quote
Ng (1987: 186)	"… diamonds are valued not for their intrinsic consumption effects but because they are costly … it is the value, not the diamond itself, that counts"
Grossman and Shapiro (1988: 82)	[status goods] "those goods for which the mere use or display of a particular branded product confers prestige on their owners, apart from any utility deriving from their function."
Berry (1994: 41)	"a luxury good is a widely desired (because not yet generally attained) good that is believed to be 'pleasing', and the general desirability of which is explained by it being a specific refinement, or qualitative aspect, of some universal generic need"
Nueno and Quelch (1998: 61)	"whose ratio of functionality to price is low, while the ratio of intangible and situational utility to price is high"
Silverstein and Fiske (2003: 3)	"products and services that possess higher levels of quality, taste, and aspiration than other goods in the category but are not so expensive as to be out of reach"
Mortelmans (2005: 507-510)	[narrow definition] "those scarce products with an objective or symbolic extra value, with a higher standard of quality, and with a higher price than comparable products" … [broad definition] "those products that have a sign-value on top of (or in substitution of) their functional or economical meaning."
Heine and Phan (2011: 112)	"Luxury products have more than necessary and ordinary characteristics compared to other products of their category, which include their relatively high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinarity, and symbolic meaning."
Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2018: 425)	"Luxury refers to hedonistic, high-quality objects, services, and experiences, sold at a price far beyond what their functional value would command, which represent sources of a sense of privilege, taste, pleasure, and refinement and produce recognition by relevant others, due to the power of the brand, its perceived exclusivity, and its heritage"

The second approach is the expert- versus consumer-oriented approach, focusing on conceptualisations and definitions posited via either expert opinion or literature analyses. Adopting a more consumer-oriented approach mirrors current marketing trends (Heine and Phan 2011) while also acknowledging the previous point that luxury remains a subjective concept within the eyes of the consumer (Berry 1994; Kapferer and Laurent 2016). However, Heine and Phan (2011) highlight the over-reliance of some studies on convenience sampling, particularly students, who may not possess sufficient purchasing knowledge and experience in luxury offerings. Products, and their value, may be characterised within three distinct categories: products can

have a value-in-*use*, a value in *exchange*, or a *symbolic* value. Mortelmans (2005) posits a fourth logic, a reinterpretation of *sign*-value. Initially suggested by Baudrillard (1981) within a semiotic context, the sign-value of a product serves as a signal of status to society and may encompass multiple, or all, of the three previous categories.

However, as noted by Mortelmans (2005: 511) sign-value is not exclusive to luxury products; luxury sign-values are assigned to products "only in moments of distinction". These moments of distinction described by Mortelmans (2005) include how a luxury car purchased by an individual may not be stored away from sight, but in a prominent position outside the home for society to view. Therefore, even while the car is not in use (value-in-use), it provides sign-value for the owner via the signalling of status to society in general. The means and methods of communication also holds significance in securing effective distinction. Mortelmans (2005) utilises the example of an individual boisterously vocalising their purchase of a Cartier watch versus a more subtle display of slipping the watch periodically from beneath their sleeve as contrasting signalling attempts in achieving distinction, with the latter being described as having a greater chance of success.

2.1.7   Luxury Services

Scholarly interest in luxury has primarily focussed on goods (Ko, Costello, and Taylor 2019), largely to date neglecting the importance of services (Thomsen *et al*. 2020; Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). Luxury goods, historically designed and produced for consumption by the societal elite, can act as a signal of an individual's actual, or desired, position within the societal hierarchy (Dubois 2020); however, investigation into the role of luxury services remains largely absent. Given that the value of a luxury offering extends beyond mere function into more emotional, hedonic dimensions (Ko, Costello, and Taylor 2019), this disregard for services is surprising, although historically not exclusive to luxury (Grönroos 1978). Not only has the classic goods-centric view of marketing been highlighted as insufficient in a services context (Grönroos and Ravald 2011; Vargo and Lusch 2004), its applicability to the luxury industry has also been questioned (Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Thomsen *et al*. 2020). Luxury as a concept for individuals continues to shift from "having-to-being and from owning-to-experiencing" (Cristini *et al*. 2017: 101). Luxury is no longer embedded within offerings themselves but rather attached to lived experiences as a subjective

interpretation by the individual of its significance to them personally (Kauppinen-Räisänen *et al*. 2019). Therefore, luxury services need to be examined as being distinct from both luxury goods and ordinary services (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020).

Nelson (1974) uses the term 'experience goods' in describing offerings which are more conducive to determining quality through actual consumption rather than by information search. Luxury services are thus defined as "extraordinary hedonic experiences" encompassing exclusivity dimensions which can be "monetary, social and hedonic in nature", where quality is "jointly determined by objective service features and subjective customer perceptions" (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020: 20). For example, although luxury experiences are less visible than luxury goods, dining at luxury restaurants can act as a signal of the wealth and status of individuals (Chen and Peng 2018) and while a Michelin star restaurant could be considered a luxury brand, dining in one may be considered more of a luxury to some than others. As such, not all extraordinary experiences may be considered luxury; a once-off event or experience, while being extraordinary, will not necessarily qualify as luxury. Therefore, luxury services should be considered a sub-category of extraordinary experiences and can range in degree of extraordinariness from everyday luxury to standard luxury, to elite luxury (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). The nature of luxury services makes it complicated for consumers to evaluate and quantify the benefits and potential negatives of consuming such luxuries. As such, consumers engage in activities, such as consulting with online word-of-mouth, that reduce the level of risk and uncertainty involved in such purchases (Chang and Ko 2017).

A review of the literature highlights several conceptualisations of luxury brands, yet specific characterisations of luxury service brands are lacking, with key service elements being largely ignored. For example, current definitions of luxury and of luxury brands omit references to the absence of transferral of ownership in the service encounter, the IHIP characteristics (intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability, perishability), and the additional 3 Ps of services marketing: people, processes, and the physical environment (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). It is based on this contribution that Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze (2020) propose the previously mentioned definition of a luxury service. However, a concise definition of a luxury service *brand* remains elusive. Drawing from extant definitions of luxury brands (Ko

et al. 2019) and luxury services (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020), the following definition of luxury service brands is proposed in this study:

> *A collection of tangible (including name, logo, personnel) and intangible (including authenticity, integrity, prestige) dimensions offering consumers the perception of extraordinary hedonic experiences that are both exclusive and consistently high quality.*

Given the lack of scholarly attention to luxury service brands to date, a comprehensive examination of existing classifications of luxury and luxury brand dimensions was conducted via a wide-ranging literature review to characterise the dimensions of luxury service brands. While some authors focus on defining luxury generally and others more narrowly on luxury brands (although largely ignoring service brands), neither were discounted from this analysis as luxury and luxury (product) brand characteristics are often used interchangeably and serve as a base for this study's conceptualisation of a luxury service brand. Stemming from a comprehensive review of the luxury branding, products, and services literatures, The dimensions of luxury service brands proposed in this study can be grouped under ten headings as follows: *Authenticity*, *Brand Identity*, *Brand Integrity*, *Premium Price*, *Exclusivity*, *Marketing Communications*, *Environment*, *Brand Signature*, *Heritage,* and *Relationships*. This classification closely reflects that of Fionda and Moore's (2009) classifications of luxury brands with some modifications and additions pertinent to service brand focus of the present study, as outlined in Table 2.2.

However, one of the conceptual contributions of this study is to propose a novel category, *relationships*, as a tenth category governing the classification of luxury brands. In adopting a consumer perspective, Phau and Prendergast (2000) posit loyalty and sales as components of luxury brands. This study agrees with this approach, and proposes that, given the already established role of consumer perception in allocating a luxury tag to brands as previously discussed, relationships are deemed an important inclusion in this study's construction of a luxury service brand. Further, and more pertinently to the empirical phase of this research, this typology of luxury brand dimensions highlights *authenticity* as a surprising omission from previous iterations of luxury brand dimensions proposed by scholars in the field, despite authenticity being central to some previous luxury brand research (i.e., Cappannelli and

Cappannelli 2004; Beverland 2009; Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Napoli *et al.* 2016). It is this classification which will serve as the basis for this study's addressing of its second and third research sub-objectives which investigate which key luxury dimensions services brands seek to embed within their social media marketing strategies, and how authenticity is signalled by luxury service brands in their social media marketing strategies. The following section explores each of these factors in turn.

Table 2.2.   Dimensions of Luxury Brands within the Literature

Thematic Dimensions	Okonkwo (2007)	Keller (2009)	Kapferer (1997)	Dubois, Laurent, and Czellar (2001)	Phau and Prendergast (2000)	Beverland (2005)
Authenticity						
Brand Identity	Identity Reputation Innovative	Image Management			Identity	
Brand Integrity	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality	Quality
Price	Price	Price	Price	Price		
Exclusivity	Unique		Unique Exclusivity	Unique	Exclusivity	
Marketing	Visible Emotional	Endorsements			Awareness	Downplaying Commercial Prowess
Environment	Distribution	Distribution				Production
Brand Signature	Creative Appealing	Trademarks Logos/Packaging	Beauty Sensuality	Aesthetics and Polysensuality Superfluousness		Stylistic Consistency
Heritage & Culture		Associations	History	Heritage		Heritage Associations (place)
Relationships					Loyalty Sales	

Table 2.2.   Dimensions of Luxury Brands (contd.)

Thematic Dimensions	Mortelmans (2005)	Nueno and Quelch (1998)	Fionda and Moore (2009)	Miller and Mills (2012)	Heine and Phan (2011)	Caniato *et al.* (2009)
Authenticity						
Brand Identity		Identity Flexibility Reputation	Identity	Identity Brand image		Reputation
Brand Integrity	Quality Durability	Quality	Integrity	Quality	Quality	Quality Performance
Price	Price		Price		Price	
Exclusivity	Exclusivity	Exclusivity Unique	Exclusivity		Rarity	Exclusivity Uniqueness
Marketing		Marketing	Marketing			Emotional Appeal
Environment	Limited Supply Distribution		Distribution			
Brand Signature	Unique Design	Design	Design	Design Creativity Aesthetic	Symbolism Extraordinarity Aesthetics	Recognisability Lifestyle Creation
Heritage & Culture		Heritage Association	Heritage Culture	Heritage		Heritage
Relationships						

2.1.8 Characteristics of Luxury Service Brands

Several characteristics have been cited throughout the literature in conceptualising luxury and luxury brands, including superior quality, exclusivity, uniqueness, heritage, culture, and premium pricing (Kapferer 1998; Nueno and Quelch 1998; Vigneron and Johnson 2004; Mortelmans 2005; Okonkwo 2007; Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2012; Fionda and Moore 2009). However, the diversity of some of the posited typologies have alluded to the fact that not everything luxury will satisfy all the above criteria, just as adhering to said criteria does not guarantee luxury status. Considerable attention has been paid to the various dimensions of luxury brands specifically (i.e., Fionda and Moore 2009; Miller and Mills 2012). Closely related to luxury services, the concept of experiential marketing continues to gain traction not only within Western societies, but also emerging economies (Atwal and Williams 2009). What used to be viewed as luxury services are now described as luxury experiences (Berthon *et al*. 2009). First introduced by Pine and Gilmore (1998), the distinction between services and experiences has been described as: "when a person buys a service, he purchases a set of intangible activities carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience, he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages … to engage him in a personal way" (Pine and Gilmore 1999: 2). As the authors put it in their original *Harvard Business Review* article: "Commodities are fungible, goods tangible, services intangible, and experiences *memorable*" (Pine and Gilmore 1998: 98).

A growth in access to products once, and perhaps still, viewed as luxury has resulted in an increased focus on the pursuit of experiences, whether in addition to, or as a substitute for, more materialistic forms of consumption (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2018). Experiences share the same design, marketing, and delivery characteristics as goods and services, yet have their own distinct qualities which present their own design challenges. Therefore, the marketing of experiences can be described as taking the essence of a product and extending it into a set of tangible, physical, and interactive experiences reinforcing the offer (Atwal and Williams 2009). However, little is presently known regarding the design of multisensory brand experiences resulting in sustainable brand strength and a high perception of consumer value (Wiedmann *et al*. 2018).

According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), experiences can be theorised as being across two dimensions. The first outlined is *customer participation*, referring to the degree of participation required on the part of the customer in affecting the performance. More involvement can fundamentally change the nature of an experience (Atwal and Williams 2009). Examples include attendees at a symphony (low participation) and taking part in skiing (high participation) (Pine and Gilmore 1998). One particularly interesting point to note is the authors' admission that even attendees at a ski race, while not participating, contribute to the visual and aural aspect of the event that is experienced by others. The second dimension described is the degree of *connection* linking the individual and the event, ranging from absorption (low connection) to immersion (high connection). A further example provided by Pine and Gilmore (1998) includes viewing the Kentucky Derby from the grandstand as opposed to the infield. While a view from the grandstand will provide a comprehensive vantage point from which to view (or absorb) the race, individuals within the infield can be more immersed in the sights, sounds, and smells around them, providing a fuller sensory experience.

Contemporary consumers now seek to differentiate themselves not only through the products and services they purchase, but also through the experiences they enjoy (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2018). The authors explicitly mention fine-dining as an example of such consumption, also adding holidays abroad, cultural events, and leisure activities. As noted by Atwal and Williams (2009), such assertions posit important questions for the luxury industry given the ubiquity of contemporary technologies. The current need for luxury brands is to create compelling, memorable, enjoyable, and positive customer experiences online (Okonkwo 2007). Particularly within the travel and hospitality sectors, luxury is no longer viewed in price or in material goods, but rather experiences and other intangible factors, such as "the experience of time, space, authenticity, community individuality and well-being" (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2018: 205). While there have been examples within the luxury industry of the utilisation of experiential marketing, Atwal and Williams (2009) suggest there is scope for improvement. Within the luxury hotel market for instance, research has found that a multisensory marketing strategy possesses enormous potential to induce a memorable experience of a brand and create positive outcomes such as brand strength and value perception. Specifically, such an approach

by brands can affect financial, functional, social, and individual dimensions of perceived value, resulting in a positive brand strength which, in turn, leads to cognitive, affective, and conative responses to the brand by consumers (Wiedmann *et al*. 2018).

While definitions of luxury remain highly subjective due to the intangibility of many of the characteristics mentioned in Table 2.3, multiple studies have sought to establish some criteria for brands to be considered luxury, with some commonalities as well as discrepancies among them. As previously shown, a review of classifications of luxury brands within the current literature may be grouped under the following categories: *Brand Identity*, *Brand Integrity*, *Premium Price*, *Exclusivity*, *Marketing*, *Environment*, *Brand Signature*, *Heritage*, *Authenticity*, and *Relationships*. This classification closely reflects that of Fionda and Moore (2009) which was ascertained to be the most comprehensive of the articles considered in this analysis. This typology's value has been recognised within the literature and has even been discussed within the context of luxury restaurants (Atwal, Bryson, Tavilla 2018).

Table 2.3.　　　Dimensions of Luxury Service Brands

DIMENSION	DESCRIPTION	SOURCES
Authenticity	Being worthy of acceptance, authoritative, trustworthy, not imaginary, false or an imitation Conforming to original principles and traditions; cannot involve alterations, dilution, or staging Can be subjective, socially constructed, dynamic, even possibly created, imagined, or invented	Cappannelli and Cappannelli 2004; Beverland 2009; Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Napoli *et al*. 2016
Brand Identity	Detailed plan of meaning originating from the company's inner beliefs and determines precisely how a brand wishes to be perceived by its stakeholders Service brands consciously pursue distinctiveness in performing and communicating their service Traditional view posits luxury brands should resist outside influences in shaping brand identity, yet more recent research has highlighted the key role of online communities in co-creating luxury brand identity	Kapferer 1997; Berry 2000; Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Heine *et al*. 2018; Essamri *et al*. 2019.
Brand Integrity	Consists of elements such as service quality, performance, and attention to detail and has been largely ignored in the luxury literature in favour of a goods focus Luxury brands build integrity through investment in innovation, creativity, and specialist knowledge/skill in the design, creation, and execution of their service	Fionda and Moore 2009; Kapferer and Laurent 2016; Ko *et al*. 2019; Wirtz *et al*. 2020.
Premium Price	Critical in the reinforcement of luxury status, however little research exists on luxury pricing strategies Pricing exceeds what the functional value of offerings would command (*monetary exclusivity*) Market pressure for offerings to rise in price, rather than fall as in traditional competitive markets	Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2006; Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Gutsatz and Heine 2018b; Ko *et al*. 2019, Wirtz *et al*. 2020.
Exclusivity	*Social* exclusivity: control of access and accessibility *Hedonic* exclusivity: infers that a certain level of customer knowledge and sophistication is required to truly enjoy the luxury service experience	Fionda and Moore 2009; Heine and Phan 2011; Wirtz *et al*. 2020
Marketing	*Information-based* rarity: relying on the information provided to consumers rather than on physical supply limitations to promote rarity	Catry 2003; Caniato *et al*. 2009; Okonkwo 2009;

	Emotional, rather than informational Use of storytelling to communicate brand vision and identity Creation of a lifestyle around the brand, rather than just selling a product/service Can diminish psychological distance between brand and consumer, affecting perceived exclusivity	Heine and Berghaus 2014; Yu *et al.* 2019; Park *et al.* 2020
Environment	Store environment brings value-adding factors contributing to luxury perception 'Temples of luxury' offer insight into the personality of the brand, enhancing the experiential dimension of the brand's offering through superior service Luxury brands have struggled to transfer the in-store experience online, especially critical as salesperson-customer relationship affects purchasing decisions and customer satisfaction E-service agents offer a more convenient option, richer interactions occur offline	Riley and Lacroix 2003; Fionda and Moore 2009; Kim and Ko 2010; Maman and Kourdoughli 2014; Chung *et al.* 2020.
Brand Signature	Embodies the unique styling and identity of the luxury brand Factors beyond the physical feature of the offering, i.e. packaging and aesthetic, further contribute to luxury perception High degree of recognisability, fuelling conspicuous consumption	Vigneron and Johnson 2004; Fionda and Moore 2009; Caniato *et al.* 2009
Heritage & Culture	Enables the embodiment of key knowledge and skills into the business over time From a consumer perspective, it offers quality reassurance via expertise and establishes authenticity within brand's luxury proposition Key competitive differentiating factor due to absence of imitability Flexibility to time design shifts to move with trends	Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Wiedmann *et al.* 2011; Nueno and Quelch 1998; Fionda and Moore 2009; Miller and Mills 2012
Relationships	Relational value is key for consumers, inspiring a deep connection with the luxury brand Luxury brands have been posited as socially constructed entities, with consumer experiences attributing meaning to luxury and co-creating brand identities Luxury brands have adjusted appeals to be more congruent with how consumers express themselves Consumer sharing of personal brand stories can strengthen brand community Consumers connect with luxury brands follow trends, enhance their own self-image, or display their passion for the brand	Tynan *et al.* 2010; Roper *et al.* 2013; Üçok Hughes *et al.* 2016; Ramadan *et al.* 2018; Ko *et al.* 2019; Essamri *et al.* 2019; Choi *et al.* 2020

2.1.8.1 Authenticity

Individuals today are disconnected with an overly commercialised world and thus lack faith in marketing, which has led to a further demand for more authentic experiences (Napoli *et al*. 2014); however, the marketing literature provides no straightforward answer as to the meaning of authenticity (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021). The term 'authentic' originates from the Latin *authenticus* and Greek *authentikos* and translates to being worthy of acceptance, authoritative, trustworthy, not imaginary, false or an imitation (Cappannelli and Cappannelli 2004). In this view, authenticity requires conforming to original principles and traditions and cannot involve alterations, dilution, or staging. However, this perspective omits the role of stakeholders, such as consumers, critics, and marketers, in conferring authenticity onto something (Beverland 2009), a pertinent note considering consumers with varying levels of cultural capital interpret different cues in authenticity signalling (Holt 1998). More subjective forms of authenticity include a connection to a time and place, as well as self-expression. This conceptualisation acknowledges that authenticity can be subjective, socially constructed, dynamic, even possibly created, imagined, or invented (Beverland 2009). This notion is underpinned by the position that consumers seek authenticity to ascribe meaning in their lives and prefer brands and experiences that reinforce their desired identity or identities (Beverland and Farrelly 2010) through the delivery of both utilitarian and hedonic value (Napoli *et al*. 2016).

Authenticity may be both intrinsic within an object (i.e., an absence of alteration) or a more intangible quality (i.e., conformity to tradition and history), as highlighted by the definition offered by Beverland (2005: 1008): "... story that balances industrial (production, distribution and marketing) and rhetorical attributes to project sincerity through the avowal of commitments to traditions (including production methods, product styling, firm values, and/or location), passion for craft and production excellence, *and* the public disavowal of the role of modern industrial attributes and commercial motivations" (original emphasis). This is built upon in later work where six attributes of authenticity are proposed: heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production, and downplaying commercial motives (Beverland 2006).

In adopting a wine brand perspective, Beverland (2005) discusses the need for luxury brands to continuously solidify their status as the definitive level of quality within their product class, as well as seeking to develop a sincere story in enhancing perceptions of authenticity. While status was ensured via the genuine commitment to quality and demonstration of historical quality and price performance, sincerity is achieved by establishing links to place, utilising traditional production methods, ensuring stylistic consistency, using culture and history as referents, and appearing above commercial considerations and downplaying their brand marketing prowess (Beverland 2005). The last point is of particular interest here; as Beverland (2005) writes, while firms reported to 'do no marketing', when pressed all participants in the study conceded to have engaged in some form of brand awareness campaign, such as press promotion or sponsoring high-profile events. While not necessarily investing wholesale in traditional advertising campaigns, such initiatives and positive associations send signals to consumers of an aspirational brand of exceptional quality.

As the above discussion outlines, authenticity is not absent within the literature as a component of luxury brands, yet the relative absence of specific inquiry into authenticity as a central dimension of luxury service brands is evident. This study addresses this key gap within the luxury services literature (RO3).

2.1.8.2 Brand Identity

A *brand identity* is a "detailed construction plan of meaning that originates from the companies' inner beliefs, is goal-driven by a vision and determines precisely how managers wish a brand to be perceived by its customers and other internal and external stakeholders" (Heine *et al*. 2018: 475). It therefore originates from the company, enabling the creation of a differentiated product with distinguishing features (Nandan 2005). Products that command a strong aspirational appeal do so not only from its quality, but also the prestigious images they generate in the minds of consumers (van Gorp 2012).

A clear brand identity refers to a unique set of brand associations which act as a promise to clients and includes both a core and extended identity. The core identity is described as "the central, timeless essence of the brand that remains constant as the brand moves to new markets and new products", while the extended identity offers "brand texture and completeness, and focuses on brand personality, relationship, and

strong symbol association" (Ghodeswar 2008: 5). A brand personality has been described as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker 1997: 347) and should act as the focal guiding point within branding management (Heine *et al*. 2018). A further depiction of identity is its representation of the symbolic and intangible nature of brands (Fionda and Moore 2009), and within a luxury context, provides the foundation for long-term capitalisation, respect for the brand's itinerary, and harmonisation of the brand in the eyes of the consumer. Therefore, luxury brands should ensure these values and identity traits are never compromised to maintain control of its future (Kapferer 1997). Luxury brands have indicated an awareness of the importance establishing a clear brand identity for the purposes of differentiation and enticement on both a functional and emotional level (Fionda and Moore 2009).

Recent literature has centred on a multi-stakeholder co-creative process to brand identity formulation (von Wallpach *et al*. 2017). While research has shown how brands, brand communities, and individuals all play roles in identity creation (Black and Veloutsou 2017), the collaborative nature of social media may act as a catalytic facilitator of such processes. A continuous flow of communication leads to a co-creation of meaning, facilitating in harmonious and complementary identities amongst these stakeholder groups (Black and Veloutsou 2017). Hughes, Bendoni, and Pehlivan (2016) recommend luxury brands use storytelling in enabling their customers to share their connection with the brand. However, the authors warn of potential dilution of the already-established brand image that an excessive reliance on such a communications approach may cause. Once a consumer perceives a brand as being more prestigious than others, they will have a higher propensity to feel that brand as a part of their own self (Tuškej and Podnar 2018). Interestingly, conflicting evidence from Foroudi *et al*. (2017) found social media as not being a significant factor in planned brand identity. However, the authors note a possible reason for this surprising finding may have been due to their sample not fully utilising social media platforms for branding purposes. Within a luxury context, an interesting point made by Kapferer and Bastien (2009) pertains to luxury brands' resistance to client demands in preserving the core identity and values of the brand. A luxury brand, as the authors write, "comes from the mind of its creator" and while disregarding consumer feedback and concerns regarding their product, the brand retains the "purity of design" and cements the product's status within luxury (Kapferer and Bastien 2009: 317).

2.1.8.3 Brand Integrity

The *integrity* category is made up of a variety of elements pertinent to both luxury products and services, such as quality and attention to detail. Luxury brands may seek to build a sense of integrity via investment in innovation, creativity, and specialist knowledge and skills in the design and creation of their offering (Fionda and Moore 2009). A further avenue of ensuring integrity includes investment in the quality of the brand's processes, such as the establishment of a quality and ethics board (Beverland 2005). Past research has confirmed the importance of product quality as a key identifier of luxury in the minds of consumers (Heine and Phan 2011). This perception of quality can be reliant on a variety of factors, including provider expertise, materials and components, construction and functional principles, workmanship, features, customer service, product size, comfort and usability, value and durability, functionality and performance, and safety (Heine and Phan 2011).

2.1.8.4 Premium Price

As previously indicated, a *premium price* remains a critical element in the reinforcement of the luxury status of a brand, however little research exists on luxury pricing strategies (Gutsatz and Heine 2018b). Traditionally viewed as bad luxury branding practice, the display of prices has been recently shown to in fact enhance luxury perception, specifically brand uniqueness and conspicuousness (Parguel *et al.* 2016). The pricing of luxury offerings far exceeds what their functional value would seem to command (Kapferer and Bastien 2009) and has been identified as perhaps the pivotal evaluating factor in determining luxuriousness due the ease of comparison between offerings (Kapferer and Laurent 2016). Assigning a premium price to luxury offerings not only signals the quality inherent within the product, for example the raw materials used in clothing or ingredients used at a Michelin star restaurant, but can also act as fundamental barrier to entry, enhancing the exclusivity of the offering in question (Fionda and Moore 2009). It also remains a powerful driver of luxury business, with changes in price having immediate and significant effects on performance.

Luxury brands, products and services experience the opposite of what economists refer to as disinflation with their offerings, whereby the pressure from the market is for their products to *rise* in price, rather than fall as in the case of traditional

competitive markets (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2006). However, scholars have recently advised luxury managers to investigate alternative means to pricing when looking to preserve the prestige of their brands (Massara, Porcheddu, and Melara 2019). Price may be viewed on a continuum, ranging from the minimum entry level to be considered a luxury offering up to a maximum level representing the highest form of luxury (Gutsatz and Heine 2018b: Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020).

Some definitions, such as the previously mentioned position of McKinsey (1990), have included price as the sole criteria for evaluating luxury. Rather than focusing on price specifically, Gutsatz and Heine (2018b) posit that the relative prices of luxury products measured in time, such as the amount of hours work required to attain them, remains stable over long periods and may even increase over time. However, some consumers have indicated a proclivity for searching for luxury products at lower prices, that others would think of as being expensive, rather than purchasing them at a high price themselves (Heine and Phan 2011).

2.1.8.5 Exclusivity

The degree to which an offering offers a degree of *exclusivity* to the consumer remains inherent in luxury branding (Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Ko *et al*. 2019). Any perception of a luxury brand as being too accessible can result in that brand's offering losing its exclusive appeal (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2014). However, continuous growth in the wealth of society generally has led to increased accessibility of luxury goods and services (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie 2011). Within their conceptualisation of luxury services, Wirtz, Holmqvist and Fritze (2020) detail how exclusivity may be monetary (i.e., high price), social (i.e., status) or hedonic (i.e., escapism) in nature. While a premium price, as mentioned above, can act as a proxy for establishing a sense of exclusivity with a luxury offering, other methods such as limiting production or restricting distribution can also enhance exclusivity (Fionda and Moore 2009).

Past research has also highlighted rarity as a key component of consumer luxury perception (Heine and Phan 2011). Hosting invitation-only events and clubs can act as social exclusivity signals for luxury service brands and can more easily be controlled in terms of consumption than luxury products which can be more widely available (Wirtz, Holmqvist and Fritze 2020). Regarding hedonic exclusivity, a recent

stream of research has emerged examining escapism as a manifestation of exclusivity, specifically the creation of *moments* of luxury, which are brief, liminal, and ephemeral in nature and serve to provide consumers with the means to collectively produce and engage in luxury services (Holmqvist, Ruiz, and Peñaloza 2020).

2.1.8.6 Marketing

Described as "virtual rarity" drivers, *marketing communications* may act as a vehicle for "information-based" rarity, relying on the information provided to consumers rather than on physical supply limitations to promote rarity (Catry 2003: 14-17). For example, targeted advertising strategies via exclusive magazines, while being distributed through mass-market outlets, still bestows a sense of selectivity on the brand alongside similarly prestigious brands. However, such approaches have had their critics, as luxury brands get likened to fast-moving consumer goods, resulting in luxury brands seeking to implement public relations campaigns, targeting their brands toward more specific, exclusive consumer segments, such as Mercedes' affiliation with Formula One (Catry 2003).

Given the central focus of social media marketing within the present study, a systematic literature review was conducted to address RO1 and comprehensively synthesise the literature surrounding luxury and social media marketing. This review is presented in Chapter Four.

2.1.8.7 Environment

When looking to establish an element of luxury surrounding the brand or its offering, supplementary factors beyond the offering itself, such as store *environment*, become value-adding factors contributing to the consumer's perception of luxury. For example, a flagship store, or servicescape (Bitner 1992) may offer insight into the personality of the brand, enhancing the "essential" experiential dimension of the brand's offering through superior service (Fionda and Moore 2009: 358). Luxury service brands face the challenge of not only establishing themselves as luxury in the eyes of consumers, but also maintaining that perception over time through consistent delivery of luxury-level service. As such, luxury servicescapes represent key environments in the provision of luxury services. The customer service element is also commonly associated with luxury; ancillary offerings such as a coffee while shopping inside a

boutique or lifetime guarantees and maintenance on purchases have been cited as critical signals aiding in consumers' perception of luxury (Heine and Phan 2011).

2.1.8.8 Brand Signature

The design, or *brand signature*, acts as a key brand signal by embodying the unique styling and identity to the brand and its offering. Luxury brands have recognised the value such signatures can have for the brand with factors such as packaging, and its alignment with the overall brand signature, being highlighted as pivotal contributing factors (Fionda and Moore 2009). Heine and Phan (2011) add somewhat of a *caveat* in their note regarding luxury products offering more features in their design than ordinary products, stating that these may only be considered luxury if they are indeed desired by the target market and do not undermine its usability.

2.1.8.9 Heritage and Culture

Brand and organisational *heritage* also play a significant role in the positioning of a luxury offering (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). Leveraging a brand's heritage is believed to provide a means of linking a brand's history with its current position (Rose *et al*. 2016). From an organisational perspective, heritage enables the embodiment of specific knowledge and skills into the business over time (Dion and Borraz 2015), whereas from a consumer perspective, it offers a sense of reassurance by signalling the quality of the production process (Wiedmann *et al*. 2011) and reduces purchasing risk (Stewart-Allen 2002). It distinguishes the brand from competitors, given the inherent difficulty in imitating a brand's heritage, increasing brand equity (Keller and Richey 2006). Positive evaluations of brand heritage evoked through advertisements has been shown to elicit a positive effect on brand attachment (Merchant and Rose 2013). Further, successfully evoking a brand's heritage generates positive emotions and trust, in turn promoting attachment and commitment, thereby increasing purchase intention (Rose *et al*. 2016). Heritage stores, the physical locations at the "heart of a brand's identity and history" (Dion and Borraz 2015: 77) have also been highlighted as being more than mere flagship stores for luxury brands, as exhibiting a specific aura described as "legendary, mythic, and even sacred" (Dion and Borraz 2015: 79). Within a social media context, however, heritage was found to negatively moderate the relationship between social media users' brand community engagement and loyalty (Nesi *et al*. 2019). The authors further elaborate that a reason for this may be related

to brands' failure to adequately utilise contemporary technologies and communities to effectively transmit their brand heritage. This remains a challenge for luxury brands, particularly given heritage's perceived importance among current conceptualisations of luxury brands (Table 2.3) to effectively utilise modern technologies and platforms to communicate the origins, traditions, and heritage of their brands.

Additionally, the *culture* of a brand refers to expertise of the brand and can assist in establishing authenticity within the brand's luxury proposition. It remains pivotal that management maintain a consistent and coherent culture amongst all stakeholders, for example manufacturers and designers (Fionda and Moore 2009). The most successful brands are cognisant that an internal culture supportive of the overarching brand strategy increases the chances of the brand delivering "a relevant, consistent, yet differentiated experience" (van Gorp 2012: 142). However, intangible factors such as culture and heritage are not limited to luxury brands alone. Such elements are associated with brands in general and can be more likely attributed as antecedents to brand luxury (Miller and Mills 2012).

2.1.8.10 Relationships

Finally, positive brand-customer *relationships* remain a critical component of business success, despite its omission from most of the above classifications of luxury (Table 2.3), but it is proposed here among this study's typology of luxury service brand characteristics. Luxury is steeped in social stratification, an exclusive privilege for the elite, who utilise luxury as an affirmation of their distinction or status (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Kastanakis and Balabanis 2012; Ordabayeva and Chandon 2011). The theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) ties luxury goods together with the need to ostentatiously display wealth as an indicator of status (Mason 1998), although status can also be presented via more sophisticated and subtle means (Canterbery 1998). A related construct to conspicuous consumption is social visibility of consumption (SVC). While some consumption takes place in private, other consumption practices may take place in public. However, in social consumption, other individuals partake in the consumption. Past research has concluded that SVC has a significant effect on travellers' decisions to visit a destination when that destination is socially visible (Josiassen and Assaf 2013). Such flamboyant displays remain important drivers of luxury consumption however, despite the recent

emergence of more hedonic and experiential motivations for consumers (Berger and Ward, 2010; Dion and Arnould, 2011). Such behaviour would include include flaunting or name-dropping and has been termed "conspicuous brand use" (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013).

Recent research has shown that a consumer's identification with a brand becomes stronger if that brand is perceived as prestigious and humanlike, while also stimulating higher levels of engagement between consumer and brand on social media (Tuškej and Podnar 2018). Recent industry reports have suggested that younger consumers, due in no small part to the proliferation of online platforms and information dissemination, have become warier of the supposed 'smoke and mirrors' upon which the allure of luxury is predicated, in a cultural climate which demonises the excessive consumption habits of the wealthy (Danziger 2017). Such realities have led to a call by researchers for luxury brands to adopt age-appropriate strategies to marketing (Schade *et al.* 2016). For example, young adults utilise luxury brands to signal their self-identities to others; luxury brands may utilise this fact by highlighting "signatures like logos, brand names, or predominant designs that identify luxury brands deliver consumers' desire to satisfy these social needs" (Schade *et al.* 2016: 320). However, such conspicuous consumption habits would seemingly be at odds with Danziger's (2017) previously mentioned assertion. This is further emphasised by the trend of the more value-conscious consumer (Silverstein 2006), providing a paradox for luxury brands who offer primarily emotional benefits at high prices to consumers continuously seeking functional benefits at a value price. Additional research has also found that luxury brand consumers value the perceived consistency between the brand's image and their own personal values and beliefs (Bian and Forsythe 2012).

The above discussion proposes and disseminates the critical dimensions of luxury service brands. However, a key gap within the literature and central focus of this study, is how these dimensions can be effectively signalled within luxury service brands' social media marketing strategies (RO2). It proposed both authenticity and relationships as novel dimensions of luxury service brands and calls for further inquiry into the nature of authenticity for luxury service brands and the critical signals of authenticity which can be embedded within social media marketing strategies (RO3).

In order to set the scene for the empirical phase of the thesis and the addressing of the above-mentioned ROs, firstly a commentary on the origins, development, and modern-day role of social media in presented in the next section of this chapter. Later, in Chapter Four, a systematic literature review approach is utilised in analysing the literature surrounding the confluence of luxury and social media-focussed literature streams (RO1).

2.2   Social Media

2.2.1   The Journey Toward Web *n*.0

Technology, and especially communications technology, is one of the main forces of change in today's world, shaping the way people not only communicate and work, but think and behave (Martí, Bigné, and Hyder 2013). The World Wide Web (also commonly known as the web) is not synonymous with the internet but is certainly the most prominent part of the internet that can be defined as a techno-social system to interact with humans based on technological networks (Aghaei *et al*. 2012). The web has become a mission critical component for business operations, enabling servicing of customers anywhere in the world on a constant basis, enhancing convenience, speed, and access.

In 1990, Berners-Lee made four developments that proved critical for the birth of the internet and the Web 1.0 era: the initial code for the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP), a language enabling computers to communicate with each other over the Internet; the Universal Resource Identifier (URL) scheme of web addresses; the World Wide Web, the first web browser; and the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) for formatting web pages. With an estimated life span of between 1997 and 2003 (Larson 2012), Web 1.0 was the origin of the web, representing a read-only interface with a small number of producers of web pages and large numbers of consumers of those web pages (Nath *et al*. 2014; Kambil 2008). It began as an information place for organisations to broadcast their information to people with limited user interactions and content contributions offered by its static and mostly mono-directional nature (Aghaei *et al*. 2012). The authors further note that organisations used this opportunity to establish an online presence for themselves, using the web as brochureware. Web 1.0's 'slow and clunky' nature, coupled with its client-pull (one-way) model and read-only format, left the door open for further technological advancement and evolution

(Nath *et al*. 2014). The first glimmerings of an evolution from the static web page days of Web 1.0 began to appear around the turn of the millennium, with the then capabilities of the internet being described as only a "proof of concept" and an "embryo" of what was to come (DiNucci 1999: 32).

Web 2.0, circa 2004-2007 (Larson 2012), was described as a 'read-write web' and was popularised by Dougherty and O'Reilly (O'Reilly 2007). It signalled a democratisation in both the consumption and creation of online content (Pattal *et al*. 2009) and a paradigm shift from the web as a publishing medium (Lassila and Hendler 2007). Content and applications were no longer created and published by individuals, but instead were continuously modified by all users in a participatory fashion (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). The internet became a collaborative platform where organisations could utilise the collective power of the multitude of users and capitalise on data access and network effects in order to create value for their customers (Kambil 2008). Aghaei *et al*. (2012) highlight the main technologies of Web 2.0 as blogs, really simple syndication (RSS), wikis, mashups, tags, folksonomy, and tag clouds, while also making note of the new advanced tools offered to developers: Asynchronous JavaScript (AJAX) and XML, Adobe Flex, and Google Web Toolkit. Nath *et al*. (2014), on the other hand, note the increased risks associated with a more openly accessible and dynamically generated web, which could manifest in the form of data privacy issues and identity theft.

The advancement from Web 2.0 to 3.0 was a much shorter transition than from 1.0 to 2.0. Pattal *et al*. (2009) noted how the web has evolved to 3.0 before we had fully got to grips with Web 2.0 and signaled 3.0 as the dawn of bringing machines and users closer together to produce more a dynamic, interactive, and efficient creation and management process of content. Web 3.0 links, integrates, and analyses data from a myriad of data sets to obtain new information streams. Such capabilities improve data management, support accessibility of mobile internet, stimulate creativity and innovation, enhance customer satisfaction and foster collaboration through the social web (Aghaei *et al*. 2012). Implications for organisations included a demand for a greater attention to analytics and computation to generate from the multitude of corporate and user-generated data (Kambil 2008). The author further highlights the increase in transparency offered by a much more open and collaborative web,

necessitating a managerial approach to placing a greater emphasis on communication and trust-building with their multiple stakeholders in an increasingly noisy world.

Nath *et al*. (2014) add the increased ability of search engines to produce more complete and targeted information, allowing closer connections to be established between users. While some work refers to 3.0 as the 'Semantic Web' (Lassila and Hendler 2007; Kambil 2008; Hendler 2009; Aghaei *et al*. 2012), other authors have identified the Semantic Web as an "evolving *extension* of the web 3.0" (Nath *et al*. 2014: 89, emphasis added). Whatever its conceptualisation, its advancement of web technology and its capability to create an environment whereby software may readily run complex tasks for users has been lauded by multiple commentators (Berners-Lee *et al*. 2001; Lassila and Hendler 2007; Kambil 2008; Hendler 2009; Aghaei *et al*. 2012; Nath *et al*. 2014). Aghaei *et al*. (2012) cite the main difference between Web 2.0 and 3.0 to be that while 2.0 placed a large focus on the creativity in content creation of users and producers, 3.0 places its focus on linked data sets, i.e., bringing data together and utilising it to produce a personalised and relevant experience for the user.

Applications of such technology can already be seen throughout academia and popular discourse, such as the design of an 'intelligent journal system' designed by Lai *et al*. (2012), in which Web 3.0 technologies would be incorporated to foster academic collaboration and knowledge distribution. Drawing on data privacy challenges of Web 2.0 outlined by Nath *et al*. (2014), the authors also assert that the same issues propagated to Web 3.0, even being amplified further by the increased scope of user collaboration and volume of data and content creation currently happening on the web. This notion is mirrored by Pattal *et al*. (2009) who acknowledge Web 3.0's arrival at a time before previous incarnations of web were fully secure and devoid of threats.

Further web advancement, dubbed Web 4.0 or the *symbiotic web* (Aghaei *et al*. 2012) is said to have occurred around 2012 (Larsen 2012). Kambil (2008) described the advancements in the processing power of machines and the enhanced ability of users to obtain information as the catalysts for web evolution from 1.0 to 3.0, while lauding Web 4.0 for the ability to connect people and objects at anytime, anywhere in the physical and digital worlds. Aghaei *et al*. (2012) add that artificial intelligence now becoming adept at reading the contents of the web and can react in the form of

executing processes to improve various aspects of the web experience for the user, such as page load times and advanced interfaces. The authors further describe how Web 4.0 would achieve a critical mass in participation in online networks, aiding the delivery of global transparency, governance, distribution, participation, and collaboration into key communities in industrial, political, social, and other communities (Aghaei *et al*. 2012).

2.2.2 The Birth of Social Media

Social media platforms are a by-product of the proliferation of the more interactive Web 2.0 and have developed further along with the web. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) discuss the origin of social media by highlighting the creation of *Usenet*, a worldwide discussion system allowing the publication of public messages, in 1979. However, the authors claim the birth of social media as we know it today as being around 1998 with the development of *Open Diary*, a social media platform which brought together a community of online diary writers (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). Boyd and Ellison (2008) claim the first recognisable social network was *SixDegrees*, created in 1997 by Andrew Weinreich. A now defunct platform, the creator claimed it was "simply ahead of its time", as users were only beginning to flock to the internet and as such did not have an established network of friends and contacts online at that time (Boyd and Ellison 2008: 214). It was then in the early 21st century that high-speed internet access acted as a catalyst in the creation of advanced social media platforms, Myspace in 2003 and Facebook the following year (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). The procession of social media platforms then emerged into existence around the mid-2000s, for example LinkedIn (2003), Flickr (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006).

2.2.3 Defining Social Media

A review of the literature reveals the lack of a unanimous agreement on a concise definition of social media, which is to be expected perhaps, given the novelty of some of the concepts involved (Xiang and Gretzel 2010). Social media research remains in a state of steady growth (Arrigo 2018; Creevey, Coughlan and O'Connor 2022). Nevertheless, it continues to have a profound influence on marketing practices of brands (Habibi *et al*. 2014). Disparity still exists in how authors define the term social media and its related concepts, despite its widespread presence in both academic and

popular discourse, as the term has been used to describe various and somewhat different ideas (Ariel and Avidar 2015).

While some have endeavoured to use terms such as social media and Web 2.0 interchangeably (Constantinides 2009), others, such as Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), explicitly draw a line between the terms. The authors describe Web 2.0 as providing the ideological and technological foundations enabling the evolution of social media, which they define as: "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 61). While also recognising a lack of a formal definition, Xiang and Gretzel (2010: 180) claim that social media can be generally understood to include "internet-based applications that carry consumer-generated content which encompasses media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience, and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers".

Somewhat in contradiction, Safko and Brake (2009) provide a much broader view of social media, considering it an umbrella term for multiple forms of online activity on conversational media platforms: "Social media refers to activities, practices and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos and audios" (Safko and Brake 2009: 6). Agresta and Bough (2011) seem to agree with this sentiment, emphasising the behavioural aspect of social media to the point whereby the author does not believe social media to refer to any form of object: "Social media is verb [sic]. It's the act of creating and posting content in any and all of the following hosted environments: online, mobile, virtual, or as yet to be named" (Agresta and Bough 2011: 2).

Such a definition would be rare, it would seem, given some more recent definitions (including Leung *et al*. 2013) of the term have served to focus on platforms and their content, similar to that that of the early definitions posed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), among others. Social media has been defined as: "online tools that allow users to share content, collaborate, and build networks and communities, with the possibility of reaching and involving large audiences …" (El Ouirdi *et al*. 2015:

454); "internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others." (Carr and Hayes 2015: 50).

2.2.4 Types of Social Media

As social media platforms remain in a constant state of flux and taking into account the diverse range of conceptualisations offered by authors as previously discussed, there has also been disparity in the approaches taken by authors in developing a comprehensive category set encompassing all social media platforms. Table 2.4 depicts the taxonomical approaches taken by several authors throughout the literature, illustrating the lack of a definitive taxonomy of social media.

While some authors are of the opinion that certain platforms should be separated, some believe they fall under one umbrella, e.g., Hansen *et al*. (2010) and Mangold and Faulds (2009) endeavouring to segregate the various types of social networking sites, while all the other authors represented in Table 2.4 remain content to group them under *social networking sites*, or a close variation of that term. Further, even more recent iterations have seen varying, sometimes conflicting, viewpoints of how social media platforms should be classified. For example, Van Looy (2016) uses the term *social communities*, highlighting the potential for such platforms being employed in both external and internal business processes. Also, whereas other authors have, for the most part, settled with the term 'blog' to describe the relevant platforms, Van Looy (2016) assigns the term *text publishing tools*, while also using *photo-*, *audio-*, and *video-publishing tools* to describe what other authors have grouped under *content communities*. Minazzi (2015), on the other hand, assigns a total of five classifications to social media platforms; while employing *content communities* to incorporate platforms where people "can share media contents like texts, videos, photos, etc.", the author further groups those platforms which other authors have segregated as microblogs, review platforms, and blogs/online diaries under the same classification, namely *virtual communities* (Minazzi 2015: 5-6). The following sub-sections provide a commentary on the various types of social media platform as outlined within the literature and marketing practice.

Table 2.4.　　Classifications of Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)	Constantinides and Fountain (2008)	Hansen *et al.* (2010)	Zarrella (2009)	Mangold and Faulds (2009)
Social Networking	Social Networks	Social and Dating	Social Networking	Social Networking Sites
		Professional		Invite-only
		Niche Networks		Business Networking
Blogs	Blogs	Blogs	Blogging	User Blogs
		Multimedia Blogs and Podcasts		Company Blogs
				Podcasts
		Microblogs and Activity Streams	Microblogging	
Content Communities	(Content) Communities	Wikis		Collaborative Websites
		Shared Documents		
		Video and TV	Media Sharing	Creativity Works Sharing Sites
		Photo and Art		
		Music		
	Content Aggregators	Bookmarks, News, and Books	Social News and Bookmarking	Social Bookmarking
	Forums/Bulletin Boards	Email	Forums	
		Discussion Forums		
		Location Sharing, Annotation, and games		
		Corporate and Government websites		News Delivery Sites
		Homepages		Educational Material Sharing
Virtual Social Worlds		Virtual Reality Worlds	Virtual Worlds	Virtual Worlds
Virtual Game Worlds		Massively Multiplayer Games		
		Financial Transactions		Commerce Communities
		User-generated Products	Ratings and Reviews	
		Review Sites		
		Idea Generation, Selection, and challenge sites		Educational Material Sharing
				Open-Source Software Communities
		Chat and Instant Messaging		
		Audio and videoconferencing		

2.2.4.1 Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

SNSs are websites which allow people to create profiles with personal information and share those contents with friends and colleagues (Minazzi 2015). Facebook, founded in 2004, has become the most popular and important, not just social networking site, but overall social media platform (Leung and Baloglu 2015), boasting 2.9bn active monthly users, representing a rise of over 2bn in just ten years (We Are Social 2022). Boyd and Ellison (2008) use the term social *network* sites, while also admitting that the term is often used interchangeably with SNS, before providing their definition which has been widely adopted throughout the literature: "We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd and Ellison 2008: 211). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) further add their definition: "Social networking sites are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other." (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010: 63). Minazzi (2015) further emphasises the shifting boundaries of SNSs to not only enable connection with friends for leisure or professional purposes, but also for companies to set up corporate profiles to establish a presence for the company itself, a single brand, or even a specific product.

2.2.4.2 Blogs

The term *blog* derives from *web log* and was first coined by Jorn Barger in December 1997 while entrepreneur Evan Williams first used the word *blog* as both a verb and a noun, in reference to posting to one's web log (Safko and Brake 2009: 162). According to Singh *et al*. (2008), the Oxford dictionaries added the terms *web log*, *web logging*, and *web logger* to the dictionary in 2003, and define a blog as a "web site on which an individual or group of users produce an ongoing narrative" (Singh *et al*. 2008: 284). The purpose and content of blogs can vary; examples would include tech blogs about computers and software to travel blogs that include reviews of restaurants, attractions, and accommodation options (Taylor, Barber, and Deale 2015).

Van Looy (2016: 32) adds that blogs are "online diaries or websites about a specific subject, in which content (called posts) appear in chronological order". It would probably be more accurate to describe blog content as being displayed in *reverse* chronological order, with newer content being displayed toward to top on the content feed, allowing users to stay informed of latest developments. Volo (2010), Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), and Fotis (2015) concur with this sentiment, with the latter adding that blogs can represent an online personal diary or journal that allows sharing of personal experiences, stories, thoughts, or ideas expressed in an informal, personal style. Some previous research in the tourism discipline, such as Schmallegger and Carson (2008), Bosangit *et al.* (2009), and Zehrer *et al.* (2011), have adopted a broader view of what constitutes a blog in considering product review sites such as TripAdvisor and HolidayCheck to be blogs. However, this study adopts the viewpoint that consumer review sites are a separate type of social media platform given that they are predicated on public user submissions regarding their opinions and experiences with businesses of myriad types, perhaps most notably the hospitality industry. Blogs, on the other hand, while largely facilitating user-generated content through comments and discussion functionality, blogs are most often maintained by either a single author or team of collaborators with blogs posts being published by these authors rather than users.

2.2.4.3 Microblogs

Microblogging has taken the concept of blogging and compacted it (Akehurst 2009). Microblogging tools are "Internet-based applications … which allow users to exchange small elements of content such as short sentences, individual images, or video links" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011: 106). They can also be characterised by short text messages to avoid an information overload by limiting the number of characters being published per post (Van Looy 2016). They can be considered halfway between traditional blogs and SNSs on the continuum of social media classification (Kaplan and Haenlein 2011), while also being characterised by a high degree of self-presentation/self-disclosure and a medium to low degree of social presence/media richness as illustrated by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). Minazzi (2015) adds that, initially, microblogs were simpler instruments devised for thought-sharing using text only but have now seen the social presence/media richness increase as the platforms have now enabled the sharing of richer content, such as images and videos.

Twitter was one of the world's first microblogs and currently boasts an 'advertising reach' of 436mn users (We Are Social 2022). Twitter was born in March 2006 as the result of an R&D project at the San Francisco–based start-up company Obvious, allowing users to send and receive brief (140 characters or less) text-based, micropost instant messages that are referred to as tweets (Safko and Brake 2009). Tweets are *a priori* public i.e., searchable via search engines and therefore available to all other users; other users can subscribe to a specific account, becoming 'followers' in order to receive that account's tweets in their own news feed (Fotis 2015). It should also be noted that advancements in Twitter's privacy policy has enabled users to "protect" their tweets, limiting visibility of the users' tweets to their own specific followers, also eliminating them from public searches. The unique function of hashtags, "#", which are not unique to microblogs but heavily utilised on these platforms, enables users to highlight the keywords in their messages or find other posts under certain keywords. Tweets can be forwarded (or "retweeted") into a social network of friends and contacts by the use of "RT<@username>" or via "<@username>" (Philander and Zhong 2016; Cha *et al*. 2010).

Further, Cha *et al*. (2010) highlight three interpersonal activities on Twitter; i) users *following* updates of other users; users *retweeting* posts, passing them along to their own network; and responding to (or commenting on) other people's tweets, called *mentioning*. It should further be added that users may also directly contact other users privately via direct messages, as a further avenue of private communication. Hays *et al*. (2013) highlight the differing relationship dynamic between users on Twitter; while they note that most Facebook friends have met offline, it is common for users of Twitter to follow accounts of those they have not met in real life such as celebrities, bloggers, new organisations, comedians, or other personal users with whom they share similar interests. Kwak *et al*. (2010) further add that there seems to be a low level of reciprocity among users' following of each other, noting that in their research, over two-thirds of users were not being followed back by those they were following themselves.

2.2.4.4 Content Community Platforms

Content communities are web-based applications that enable users to share media content such as videos, photos, documents and presentations, music and web links

(Fotis 2015). This is perhaps the broadest category of social media platforms, encompassing a wide variety of sub-categories, which has led some authors to employing a tactic of segregation of the various components of content communities such as photo-, audio-, and video-sharing platforms (Van Looy 2016; Hansen *et al.* 2010; Safko and Brake 2009).

Minazzi (2015: 11) describes content communities as "websites that allow users to share with a network of contacts media content of different types …" before proceeding to list examples of such sites. The author gives the example of BookCrossing as a text-sharing platform; Pinterest, Instagram, and Flickr as photo-sharing platforms; and YouTube as a video-sharing platform. Where such rigid classification structures utilised by other authors may be limiting would be in the continuous development of these platforms, including Instagram's introduction of video creation and sharing via its mobile app to complement its, originally, solely image-creation and sharing offering (Taylor 2013). YouTube introduced a live streaming of events service in 2011 (Solaris 2011) and YouTube Gaming in 2015, a live streaming service for gamers (Rosenberg 2015). Also, Flickr introduced video on its platform in 2008, and Pinterest also accommodates video, SlideShare presentations, and podcasts on its platforms (Sanchez 2014). More recently, platforms such as TikTok have garnered worldwide interest and usership, having accumulated an ad reach audience of 885mn individuals since its creation in 2016, which is skewed heavily toward a younger userbase (We Are Social 2022). As a platform, it enables the creation, sharing, and discovery of short-form videos and has already been a popular choice for tourism and hospitality brands to engage its young userbase (Wengel *et al.* 2022).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) highlight the lessened significance of self-presentation/self-disclosure on such platforms in favour of focusing on the actual, with users only needing to supply basic information (if any) in order to use the platforms. Such viewpoints would serve to justify the inclusion of *wikis* within the content community category. Wikis are sites that allow people to collect and edit their intelligence in one place at any time, truly representing the social media foundation of user-generated content (UGC) and the wisdom of the crowd (Safko and Brake 2009). Wikis have also been defined as "a freely expandable collection of interlinked Web

pages, a hypertext system for storing and modifying information – a database, where each page is easily editable by any user with a forms-capable Web browser client." (Leuf and Cunningham 2001: 14).

Fotis (2015) includes wikis among their own typology of social media platforms, highlighting Wikipedia, the world's most widely recognised wiki. The author further identifies public concern regarding the reliability of the information on display, as any user can contribute to the platform, increasing the risk of falsified or incorrect information being posted. Due to such an anarchical structure being employed in such collaborative platforms, coupled with the diminished significance of self-disclosure on content communities highlighted by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), this study includes wikis and other collaborative platforms within the remit of *content communities*, given their emphasis on content creation and sharing, and a reduced (but not absent) emphasis on personal networking.

2.2.4.5 Consumer Review Platforms

Consumer review platforms are applications that enable users to upload product-related reviews and ratings. Such platforms can offer a multitude of features such as the posting of images and comments, to more advanced capabilities such as the procurement of user-specific 'wish-lists', price comparisons, advanced search, multi-variable ratings, price history charts, buy/hold recommendations, price alerts, deals' rankings, merchant/retailers' evaluations, personalised shopping and more (Fotis 2015). It has been noted by multiple authors that UGC and platforms which harness it are now widespread, with consumers flocking to such platforms to gain the insight from those who have already purchased a product or service, trusting those consumers' opinion over corporate messages and advertising (Leung *et al*. 2013), with recommendations from friends and family being an especially potent source of advice (Pan and Crotts 2012).

This view is underlined by Cundari (2015), who states that consumer trust in brands has fallen across organisations of all sizes, with consumers instead turning to the aforementioned sources to determine trustworthiness and credibility of brands. However, this sentiment may not necessarily be applicable across all social media platform types; a recent study carried out by Habibi *et al*. (2014) found that structure and hierarchy were important mitigating factors in determining the level of trust

among consumer-consumer relationships within online brand communities. The authors cite possible ambiguities regarding the credibility of other consumers within the community given the lack, or absence of, some form of indicative hierarchy signifying an individual's level of knowledge and/or experience with the brand product or service, thus, affecting their level of potential usefulness or trustworthiness. It should be noted, however, that such a lack of structure is not a reality among all online communities. For example, TripAdvisor's contributor programme, *TripCollective*, recognises the quantity and quality of contributions from users, awarding points and badges to signify to other users the quality of the source of reviews (TripAdvisor 2022).

2.2.4.6 Online Forums

Online forums were one of the first internet-based networking and online communication tools (Safko and Brake 2009) and have been defined as "sites for exchanging ideas and information usually around special interests" (Constantinides and Fountain 2008). The term *forum* may refer to an entire community or to a specific sub-forum dealing with a distinct topic within a larger forum (Laughlin and MacDonald 2010). Reddit is perhaps the most popular of this category, with over 50mn daily active users (We Are Social 2022). Mangold and Faulds (2009) also identify "internet discussion boards and forums" among several "word-of-mouth forums", or platforms, which encompass social media: "Social media encompasses a wide range of online, word-of-mouth forums including blogs, company-sponsored discussion boards and chat rooms, consumer-to-consumer e-mail, consumer product or service ratings websites and forums, Internet discussion boards and forums, moblogs (sites containing digital audio, images, movies, or photographs), and social networking websites, to name a few" (Mangold and Faulds, 2009: 358). Laughlin and MacDonald (2010) cite how online forums have also been referred to by a number of other terms, such as internet forums, message boards, discussion boards, discussion groups, discussion forums, bulletin boards, web forums, or simply forums. They further differentiate these platforms from customer relationship services due to their lack of formality in comparison, with forum discussions about products being intertwined with conversations about non-product related issues (Laughlin and MacDonald 2010).

2.2.4.7 Location-based Social Media

Hansen *et al*. (2010) highlight the rise of social media platforms which have served to create connections between people, objects, and places. Fotis (2015) describes these tools as applications which allow users to articulate a list of other users with whom they share their geographic location at a specific point in time (or *check-in*), usually associated with a specific venue or place, with comments, reviews, and recommendations also included. The author further highlights these particular social media platforms as being a subset of location-based services, which are applications integrating geographic location (i.e., spatial coordinates) with the general notion of services; for example, emergency services, car navigation services, and tourist tour planning (Schiller and Voisard 2004). The growing capabilities of mobile communications and location-based services coupled with the growing diversity of tourism offerings and the ability of information technologies to connect niche demand with niche supply act as catalysts towards ever more individualised touristic experiences (Kansa and Wilde 2008).

2.2.4.8 Content Aggregators

The final category of social media platforms are *content aggregators*, which are websites that gather information from multiple other websites (e.g., webmail, news, other social media tools, etc.), and can be utilised as a personalised homepage, instead of starting with a search engine or corporate landing page. Aggregators give the user a personalised overview of new content relevant to them, such as social media updates, new blog posts, RSS (Rich Site Summary, also often called Real Simple Syndication) feeds etc. The information may also include incoming mails, personal agenda, news items, and weather forecasts (Van Looy 2016). Constantinides (2009) states that content aggregators can take two forms; one category entails applications which allow users to access fully customised, syndicated web content (RSS), similar to the definition given by Van Looy (2016). The second category refers to applications gathering material from different sources and creating a new, customised product or service, such as Google Maps (Constantinides 2009).

The above analysis takes a deeper look into the origins of social media as well as the myriad types of platforms which now permeate throughout the online world. Each with their own identities and nuances, social media platforms offer an abundance

of opportunities and challenges for luxury brands. The literature surrounding the confluence of luxury and social media is presented in Chapter Four and addresses RO1. However, firstly, the theoretical basis for the present study is presented in Section 2.3. As previously indicated, RO2 and RO3 pertain to the approaches of luxury service brands in effectively signalling luxury on social media platforms. The final sub-section of this chapter offers an analysis of signalling theory as it pertains to the empirical section of the present study. Firstly, the sub-section contains an overview of signalling theory and its origins before a discussion of the pivotal components of the theory as well as its applicability to the two main theoretical areas in this study, namely social media marketing and luxury service brands, is presented.

2.3 Signalling Theory

The first challenge of marketing remains the rendering of a brand as being credible, authentic, and of high quality in the eyes of the target audience to convert them into actual consumers of that brand. This is often achieved through comprehensive promotional activities incorporating elements such as communications, customer relationship management, content marketing, and customer engagement strategies. Stakeholders continuously search for information regarding brand or product quality which will reduce the level of risk associated with a certain course of action. However, not all the qualities of an organisation are wholly observable. Organisations endeavour to communicate their own unobservable qualities through observable elements, or signals, such as financial statements (Zhang and Wiersema 2009), debt levels (Ross 1973), and dividends (Bhattacharya 1979). For example, only high-quality firms would have positive financial statements and the capacity to make dividend payments over time. Such signalling is especially prevalent in the marketing discipline; a signal in this context is a marketing activity providing information which reveals insights into the unobservable qualities of the firm (Herbig and Milewicz 1996).

The concept of signalling theory emerged from a study in economics examining conditions whereby buyers and sellers experience information asymmetry (Spence 1973, 1974) and has increasingly been applied within a variety of organisational contexts (Connelly *et al.* 2011; Bergh *et al.* 2014; Taj 2016). Simply put, information asymmetries occur when "different people know different things" (Stiglitz 2002: 469; Kirmani and Rao 2000). As Figure 2.1 illustrates, signalling theory

revolves around the transference of information (a *signal*) from a *sender* to a *receiver* (Taj 2016) and is fundamentally concerned with reducing this information asymmetry between these two parties (Spence 2002). It offers insights into how signal senders and receivers distinguish between low- and high-quality actors based on the observable signal (Bergh *et al*. 2014). As some information is private, information asymmetries arise between those who hold that information and those who could potentially make better decisions if they had it. While both positive and negative information may be communicated to outsiders, signalling theory is primarily concerned with the propagation of positive information to convey favourable organisational attributes, although some scholars have focussed on negative information (Connelly *et al*. 2011).

Figure 2.1.   Signalling Timeline (Connelly *et al*. 2011: 44)
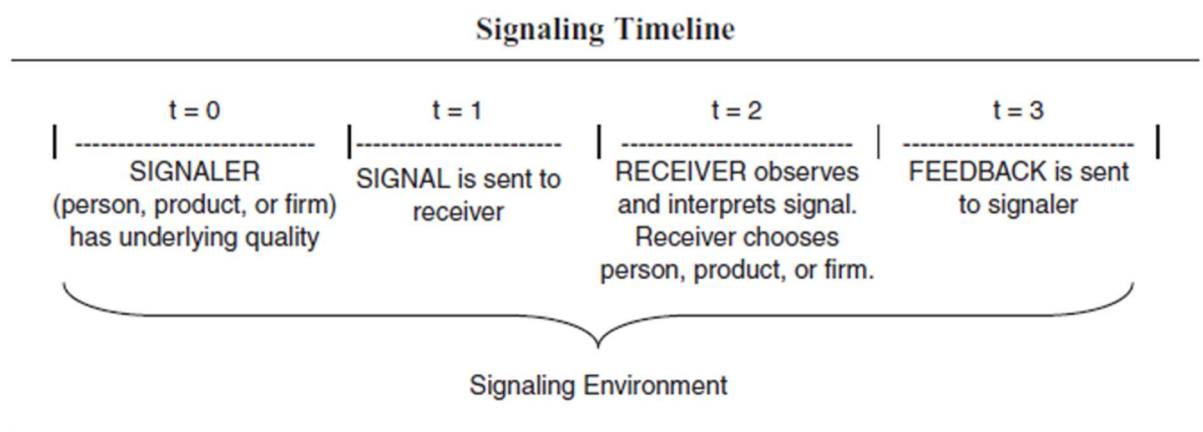
Note: t = time.

2.3.1   The Signal

A signal is an information cue transmitted from one party to another in a bid to influence a desired outcome (Taj 2016). A signal must carry information, about the state or future actions of the signaler or regarding the external environment, that is of interest to the receiver (Herbig and Milewicz 1996; Maynard Smith and Harper 2003). Marketing signals are pieces of information concerning the quality of the offering, brand reputation, or other stakeholders to strengthen brand equity (Herbig and Milewicz 1996; Rahman *et al*. 2018). Examples can include brand name, price, warranty, and advertising expenditure (Kirmani and Rao 2000). Most often, these signals are positive in nature and aim to deliberately reduce information asymmetry in furtherance of a firm's ultimate goal. However, negative signals may also be propagated, disturbing the signalling process and confusing receivers (Taj 2016).

There are two key characteristics of effective signals: observability and cost (Connelly *et al.* 2011). Observability simply refers to the extent to which a signal is noticeable, i.e., either implicit or explicit, to outsiders and is a necessary but not enough to constitute an effective signal. Signal cost represents the second critical component yet does not always allude to a financial cost; for example, a handicap signal may serve as a strategic cost. In these cases, an exhibition of quality also weakens the signaller by virtue of its cost (Dunham 2011). Signallers who do not possess sufficient means to send a signal of requisite quality will find it very difficult to convincingly do so, as transmission of the signal would require greater resources that the sender possesses, and this deficiency would also be clearly recognisable to the receiver (Dunham 2011). Clarity also remains a pivotal component of signal quality, strongly affecting factors such as receiver assumptions of signal consistency, credibility, uniqueness, and naturalness (Busser and Shulga 2019).

Within a marketing setting, signals convey information concerning product quality, reputation, or intentions of other stakeholders, and can be received by competitors, suppliers, and customers (Herbig and Milewicz 1996; Bergh *et al.* 2014). Marketing managers must make decisions such as the name of a new product or service, pricing, warranties, and advertising spend, which all can act as signals of quality (Kirmani and Rao 2000; Nian and Sundararajan 2022). Kirmani and Rao (2000) further note previous research's endeavours to investigate the effects of information such as advertising and pricing strategies on consumer perception and behaviour yet encourage this traditional view's integration with the emergent signalling theory approach. Signalling postulates consumers' expectations of brands' fulfilment of the implicit commitment conveyed by a signal, as not honouring such commitments would be economically unwise. Therefore, the signalling approach also considers firm's incentives.

Herbig and Milewicz (1996) discuss overt versus covert signalling. Whilst overt signalling refers to instances of conscious communication of a position by a firm within an industry, covert signalling occurs when no verbal signals are provided, rather the signal is transmitted solely though action or activity. Overt signals are more efficient due to their inexpensive and timely nature, whereas covert signalling incurs a higher cost, takes longer to achieve, and there is potential ambiguity of the meaning of the signal (Herbig and Milewicz 1996). All signals must overcome the scepticism

of its receivers before the sender can accrue any benefit from its production; one way of achieving this is through signal reliability. Reliability may be achieved through any of three criteria: where producing the signal would be prohibitively costly for a low-quality signaler (or handicap signalling); where the signaler would not stand to gain from producing a false signal (perhaps even causing harm); or where the signal could not be faked (Maynard Smith and Harper 2003). If a signaler does not have the underlying quality associated with the signal but believes the benefits of signalling outweigh the costs of producing the signal, the signaler may be motivated to attempt false signalling (Connelly *et al*. 2011). As well as cost, potential repercussions of false signalling, and a lack of utility gained from engaging in false signalling, signals may also be deemed honest due to 'cues' which indicate the inherent quality represented in the signal and the difficulty in its replication (Dunham 2011). An important question that must be asked is what separates a signal from mere noise? The concept of a separating equilibrium helps establish behaviours which may mistakenly be characterised as signals, yet not constitute signals within the purview of signalling theory (Bergh *et al*. 2014).

As alluded to above, handicap signalling (Zahavi 1975; 1977) underlines the reality that only signals which are too costly to fake are reliable and that it is the cost to the signaller in sending the signal which renders it trustworthy (Hawkes and Bird 2002). Applying handicap signalling raises two potential complications: regarding financial costliness, larger marketing budgets do not necessarily guarantee or even increase the reliability of the signal, although it may be interpreted this way by the receiver (Dunham 2011). The cost of exhibiting handicap signalling, coupled with the risk of signalling when the business is not sufficiently equipped to incur the cost of that signal acts as a prohibitor to the use of handicap signals in a business (Dunham 2011). On the other hand, signals which are not costly are not necessarily dishonest or unreliable. Where senders and receivers rank their preferences in the same order and dishonest signalling would be to the detriment of both parties, minimal cost signals can be effective (Maynard Smith and Harper 2003). Within business, this may manifest in companies seeking to establish and maintain ongoing professional relationships with consumers, investors, suppliers, etc., whereby false signalling will result in mutual loss (Dunham 2011).

2.3.2 The Signaller

Within signalling theory, the signaler represents an insider who possesses privileged information about the quality of an individual, product, or organisation, unavailable to outsiders (Taj 2016). This private information contributes to outsiders' perceptions of the underlying quality of these organisational elements (Connelly *et al*. 2011). A blend of technical knowledge and communicative ability remains critical to reducing information asymmetry between brand and consumer (Patterson 2016), with the firm's reputation also determining the effectiveness of such communication (Herbig and Milewicz 1996). Brands may engage in varying levels of visible or conspicuous branding activities to appeal to specific segments of consumers. Such strategies can equate to either 'loud' (or explicit) displays through conspicuous branding approaches or else more 'quiet' or implicit communication of their brand (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010). Within the present study, and as outlined in the proceeding methodology chapter, the examined *signallers* are social media managers of luxury service brands in Ireland and the UK.

2.3.3 The Receiver

Generally, receivers of signals are outsiders to the organisation, have limited information about the organisation but are willing to receive it. Consumers of intangible services absorb numerous signals from a variety of sources in attributing meaning to their consumption experiences (Patterson 2016). The feedback process, whereby a countersignal is sent by the receiver to the initial signaler, remains a critical component of the signalling process, yet remains largely ignored by the literature (Taj 2016). Within a social media setting, this feedback process often takes the form of UGC. While previous research has developed typologies of luxury consumers' endeavours to engage in varying signalling activities based on the prominence of branding elements such as logos on the products (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010), the literature remains devoid of studies examining such behaviour within a luxury service context, as well as subsequent efforts by luxury marketers to effectively signal the unobservable luxury elements of their service brands, most notably authenticity.

Differences in receivers of the signal can contribute to differences in the interpretation of the signal and feedback (Connelly *et al*. 2011). Both receiver attention, the extent to which receivers scan the environment for signals, and interpretation (i.e.,

whether the signal is received in the manner intended) greatly affect the efficacy of signals (Connelly *et al*. 2011; Taj 2016). For example, the size of advertising spend can be utilised as signals of new product quality (Barone, Taylor, and Urbany 2005; Nian and Sundararajan 2022).

2.3.4   The Environment

Social media platforms continue to permeate through business and society. This growth has inevitably led to a rise in academic research interest and a growth in the volume of literature over the last number of years (Alves, Fernandes, and Raposo 2016; Voorveld 2019; Creevey, Coughlan and O'Connor 2022). Service brands, particularly those within tourism and hospitality, have particularly recognised the potential of social media for brand marketing and in influencing the consumer planning process (Leung *et al*. 2013). The continued rise of mobile marketing further accentuates this trend, facilitating ongoing user-generated content creation and dissemination (Lamberton and Stephen 2016), behaviour which is especially prevalent when sharing tourism and hospitality experiences (Munar and Jacobsen 2014).

The effectiveness of a signal relies greatly on the environment within which it is published and interpreted, as instances of the medium reducing signal observability can cause environmental distortion (Connelly *et al*. 2011; Taj 2016). This reality could be applied to the social media environment, whereby ongoing algorithmic influences dictate the visibility of brand content on users' news feeds (Cotter 2019), resulting in perpetual alteration of content creators' own approaches when engaging with these platforms (i.e., Bishop 2019, 2020). Social media content published by brands may act as vehicles for such signals, as a signal may only provide a basis for making inferences regarding the true features of a brand's offering, rather than informing receivers of the absolute truth regarding those features (Herbig and Milewicz 1996).

Given the assumption of need for status being central to the theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899), it can be inferred that luxury consumers interpret signals from luxury brands. Social media platforms facilitate such signalling via content marketing, communications, and customer service strategies, yet investigation of social media platforms as signalling environments remain absent (Wang *et al*. 2021). The signalling environment overall, in fact, remains an under-researched as aspect of signalling theory (Connelly *et al*. 2011). Further, restaurant

social media marketing strategies also remains a scant area of the literature (Kim and Jang 2019) and it is this study's intention to address these research gaps.

2.3.5 Signalling Theory and Social Media Marketing

Signalling theory explains signal emission and reception within the digital context whereby information overload is strong (Keppeler and Papenfuß 2020). Marketers act as the signallers whose messages entice receivers via advertisements, social media content, or other forms of communication, while receivers act as analysts of the utility that can potentially be accrued from the product or service being marketed to them (Dunham 2011). The signalling environment has been highlighted throughout the literature as moderating signal strength and determining which signals to use and it remains important to understand how signals are sent online (Valsesia, Prosperio, and Nunes 2020). Recent literature has showcased social media platforms as integral elements in brands' marketing strategies (Kapoor *et al*. 2018), particularly service brands within tourism and hospitality (Leung *et al*. 2013). For example, the rise in volume of posting food images online by restaurant clients has resulted in many marketers leveraging such activity to increase the visibility of their brand online (Zhu *et al*. 2019). Not only does this activity potentially offer marketers the opportunity to amplify their brand in social media environments at little cost, it also positively influences the consumers' dining experience and brand evaluations. This effect is even more intense when consumers experience a higher volume of content interactions (Zhu *et al*. 2019).

The costs of establishing and maintaining a social media presence are incurred regardless of their effectiveness, thus highlighting their allocation within the sale-independent default-independent signal category proposed by Kirmani and Rao (2000). Not only do consumers remain open to learning to more about, and interacting with, brands on social media, marketing budgets continue to see increased allocation toward social media activities (VanMeter *et al*. 2018). It is important to note that the investment in social media marketing activities will not be recouped if a brand defaults on its signal. Therefore, the claims being made regarding the unobservable quality of the luxury service brand can be interpreted as genuine by receivers which in turn may induce initial trial and potentially future repeat purchase (Kirmani and Rao 2000; Sahni and Nair 2020). Within an inherently open social media setting, some

dimensions of luxury, for example exclusivity, can be preserved via private communications, rather than more public signals. Indeed, there has been suggestive evidence that exclusivity in communication may affect closeness beyond the content of the message itself (Carpenter, Green, and Laflam 2018). Luxury brands may seek to utilise such limited communication techniques, for example via private groups on social media platforms such as Facebook, to preserve a degree of exclusivity within such an openly accessible online platform. Such efforts may also enable luxury brands to target specific messages and content more accurately and succinctly towards narrow segments of consumers who may share tastes and motivations for luxury consumption. Hence, while social media marketing at its core perhaps threatens the veil of exclusivity so highly sought after by luxury brands, effectively limiting recipients of certain messages and content may preserve the exclusive element of the brand-consumer relationship online.

However, signalling assumes that consumers can perfectly observe the brand's advertising expenditure (Hertzendorf 1993), which may not always hold in a social media context as cost does not exist as a barrier to entry in the same way (Nian and Sundararajan 2022); however, as previously mentioned, ongoing algorithmic influences dictate the visibility of brand content on users' news feeds (Cotter 2019), necessitating approaches such as paid promotion of content to increase observability of the signal (i.e., Bishop 2019, 2020). Such a continuous stream of content increases the likelihood of signal loss (Hertzendorf 1993), whereby the content does not reach social media users, affecting user's perception of the resource levels being invested in social media by the brand. This may be overcome by continuous investment in marketing activities over time to ensure credible signal transfer, or else utilise third parties, such as celebrities or influencers, to endorse their products and alleviate signal loss (i.e., Hertzendorf 1993).

2.3.6 Signalling Theory and Luxury Service Brands

Previous studies have investigated the various appeals utilised by luxury brands in influencing consumer perception (i.e., Vigneron and Johnson 2004; Roux *et al*. 2017) and elements of luxury (e.g., heritage and history) has been highlighted as a key component of luxury branding requiring further attention from managers (Gurzki and Woisetschläger 2017). For example, in investigating how consumers select and

evaluate authenticity in consumption experiences, Beverland and Farrelly (2010) identify three goals: control, connection, and virtue as key drivers. Control refers to the degree of mastery of the individual self and their environment, while connection relates to others, culture, time, place, and community, and finally virtue centres on being true to a set of moral values. Napoli *et al*. (2014) add that consumers use a combination of cues, rather than a rigid set of criteria, in evaluating brand authenticity, highlighting the existence of multiple signals by which authenticity can be established. The authors proceed to propose seven dimensions of brand authenticity: brand heritage; quality commitment; craftsmanship; sincerity; nostalgia; cultural symbolism; and design consistency (Napoli *et al*. 2014).

Despite the volume of previous work in the area, little is known about how luxury service brands create signals of luxury (RO2), and specifically authenticity (RO3) on social media. Rather than seeking to represent potentially competing representations of authenticity, marketers continuously strive to cultivate rich brand meaning by crafting such representations together (Beverland 2005). While authenticity appeals have been investigated within luxury marketing and advertising, most of this inquiry has focussed on luxury products rather than services (e.g., Septianto *et al*. 2020). Many individuals position food and drink consumption as central components of their leisure experiences and are increasingly demanding more of their food in terms of authenticity (Beer 2008). Therefore, it is the intent of this study to investigate the prominent signals of luxury and specifically authenticity projected by luxury service brands on social media platforms.

2.4   Conclusion

In summary, an important question that remains is how can luxury service brands credibly signal luxury on social media? The aim of the present study is to employ a qualitative approach in creating a taxonomy and conceptual model of luxury signals utilised by luxury service brands on social media. While it should be acknowledged that Michelin stars are themselves widely recognised and highly regarded signals of quality, thus reducing information asymmetry in the market, they are limited in their capacity to signal the nature of the luxury experience as a whole. While the pervasive perception of Michelin star fine dining, as further explored in Chapter Four, is one of overtly formal and elitist, participants in this study have actively sought to communicate signals antithetical to this preconception in a bid to

represent their brand as more accessible while still maintaining that status as a luxury brand. While the inherently interactive nature of social media platforms facilitates multiple signals being sent in a bidirectional manner between signallers and receivers, this study focuses on a single dyad (Connelly *et al*. 2011): signalers (luxury service brands) signalling luxury to receivers (social media users).

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction to the Research Design

Chapter Two assessed the current state of the literature pertaining to the areas of social media, luxury and signalling theory. Given the rapidly expanding nature of this stream of research and the absence of a comprehensive meta-analysis of this area, this study sought to address this via a systematic review consolidating existing research in social media and luxury (RO1). This review is presented in Chapter Four and showcases the prominent themes emanating from this extant literature and, crucially, proposing a pathway for further development of this topic, including the current study. Chapter Two concludes by setting up the theoretical framework for the empirical phase of the study, exploring signalling theory and its applicability as the central theoretical tenet for the present exploratory study. Stemming from the literature gaps identified following the exhaustive review contained in Chapter Two, signalling theory is proposed as the most appropriate theoretical lens for the present study given the research objectives which are to explore the key signals of luxury, including authenticity specifically, for luxury service brands on social media.

Chapter Three discusses the research methodology as depicted in Figure 3.1 below, beginning with an outline of the research problem, as well as the aims and research questions of the study, before a thorough discussion of the chosen methodology to address same.

3.2 Study Aims and Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study is to investigate how luxury service brands utilise social media platforms to signal luxury. This main question is further broken down into three distinct sub-objectives: RO1. *How does the extant literature currently characterise the role of social media for luxury brands*? RO2. *How can the dimensions of luxury service brands be signalled on social media*? RO3. *How is authenticity signalled by Michelin star restaurants on social media*?

Figure 3.1.   Research Design
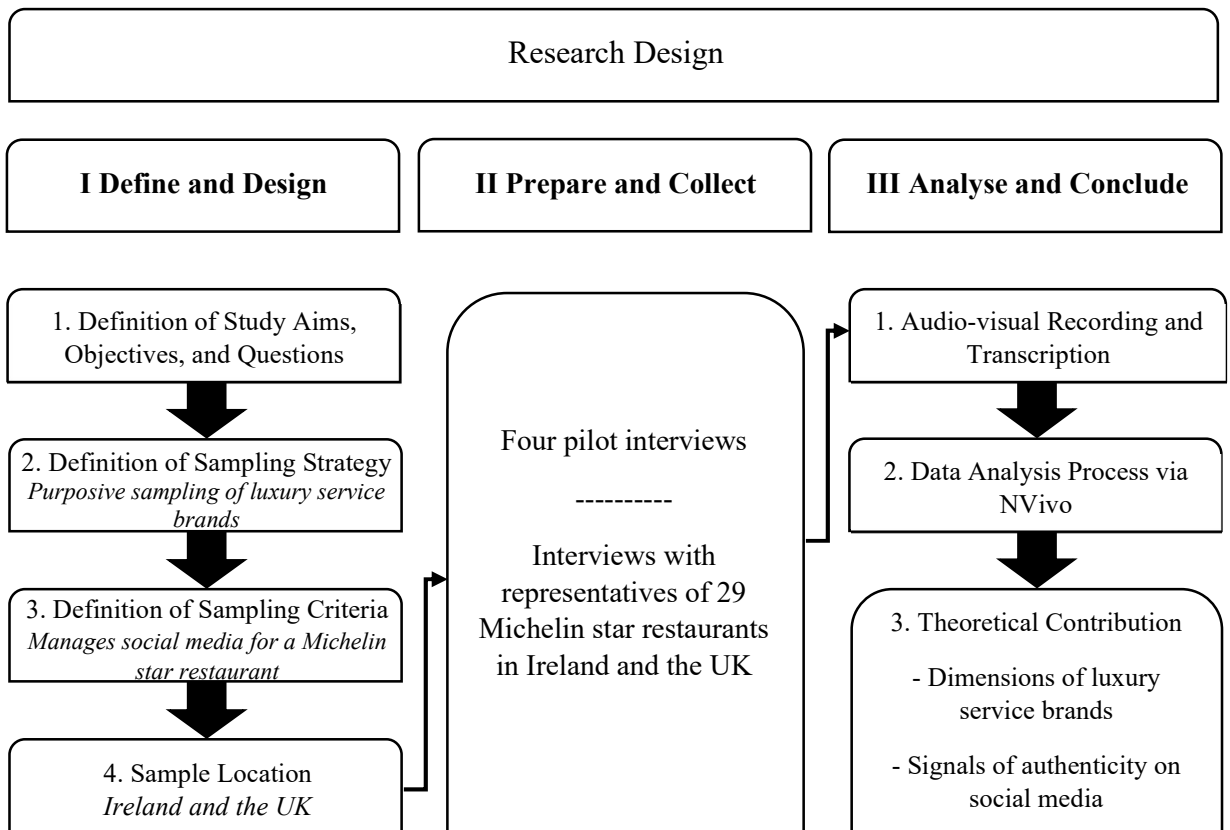
3.3   Research Philosophy

Given that an understanding of research philosophy remains an essential prerequisite in conducting research, this sub-section discusses the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of the study which underpin the data collection and analysis approaches. When designing a study, the researcher must consider their own personal set of beliefs about the world and how it functions. These sets of assumptions have been referred to as paradigms (Guba and Lincoln 1994) or worldviews (Creswell and Creswell 2018) and are described as a "set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world," the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts …" (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 107).

The literature highlights central tenets of research philosophy being *ontology*, *epistemology*, and *methodology* (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Ontology (*onto* from the Greek 'being' and *logia* from the Greek 'science, study, theory') surrounds the assumptions about the beliefs regarding the nature of reality and the question of what constitutes reality (Crotty 1998). It asks what is there in the world and what can be

known about it? For example, if a "real" world is assumed, then what can be known about it is "how things really are" and "how things really work" (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 108). Epistemology (*episteme* from the Greek 'knowledge') concerns what constitutes acceptable knowledge and surrounds the nature of the relationship between the knower (or would-be knower) and what can be known (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

The literature is well served with discussions on the varying philosophical stances in social research, their benefits and limitations, and these discussions continue (i.e., Guba and Lincoln 1994; 2005; Creswell and Creswell 2018; Bryman and Bell 2019). While these worldviews do share affinities with certain methodological approaches, it is noted that there exists no deterministic link forcing the use of certain methods within certain worldviews (Morgan 2014). Researchers bring their own philosophical worldview to their work through their discipline orientation, research communities, supervisors, and past research experience (Creswell and Creswell 2018). Despite the variances in discussions of research philosophy throughout the literature, such paradigms or worldviews exist on a continuum determined by the degree of either objectivity or subjectivity existent in the nature of both reality and knowledge. Both of these opposing views, *positivism* and *interpretivism*, are discussed below, before a more concerted examination of the approach adopted in this study, *critical realism*, is presented.

3.3.1 Positivism

In adopting a realist ontology (Guba and Lincoln 1994), positivism integrates the empiricist philosophical stance of the natural scientist that only phenomena that can be confirmed by the senses may be accepted as knowledge. With this stance, theory's purpose is to generate hypotheses and then designing experiments to test these hypotheses (McGregor and Murnane 2010), although knowledge can also be achieved via the gathering of facts that provide a basis for generalisations or laws (Bryman and Bell 2019). Objects within the world have a meaning prior to, and independently of, any consciousness of them. Further, it assumes the observer is unbiased and completely independent of what is being observed (Crotty 1998), with inquiry taking place through a one-way mirror (Guba and Lincoln 1994). However, humans (the observers) have thoughts, feelings and values, aspects which were largely absent from prevailing positivistic theories (Bryman and Bell 2019). These challenges gave rise to

the *postpositivist* worldview, acknowledging we cannot be absolutely positive regarding our claims of knowledge when studying the behaviours of humans (Creswell and Creswell 2018).

A strong positivist stance is now rare given that postpositivism has come to terms with the value-laden nature of science (Weber 2004). Like positivism, postpositivism assumes a reality yet concedes it can only be imperfectly interpreted due to the inherent flaws in human intellectual mechanisms and the intractable nature of phenomena (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Causal descriptions in this instance detail constant conjunctions of events, mapping inputs to outcomes. However, such a description lacks an explanation of these events (Smith 2006). This difference is most obviously seen methodologically in statistical survey methods asking 'who' and 'what' type questions as opposed to more in-depth 'how' and 'why' questions posed by more qualitative approaches research (Yin 2011). For example, as will be further outlined in Section 4.2.5.1, qualitative studies within the extant literature adopting survey techniques have explored the use of social media by individuals including attitudes toward social media marketing, brand perception, and purchase intention (e.g., Kim and Lee 2019; Bazi *et al.* 2020; Chen *et al.* 2021b). A discrepancy between theory and practice in social science exists here as the goal of such research is to move beyond events and move toward causal explanation. One further inconsistency surrounds generalisability as it assumes the uniformity of nature and therefore the context of differing situations is also thought to be the same resulting in assumptions beyond what the evidence presents (Smith 2006).

3.3.2 Interpretivism

Criticism of the positivistic approach's capacity to effectively contribute to knowledge within the social sciences emerged, highlighting the emphasis being placed on predicting outcomes in certain circumstances rather than understanding and explaining the processes determining such behaviour (Goodson and Phillimore 2004). *Interpretivism*, often considered alongside *constructivism*, is ideologically opposed to positivism in maintaining that it is in fact the central role of observer to interpret the *meanings* of people's actions. Interpretivist studies emphasise "subjective meanings and social-political as well as symbolic action in the process through which humans construct and reconstruct their reality" (Orlikowski and Baroudi 1991: 13).

Individuals employ their own sense making constructs to interpret the reality of their daily lives (Bryman and Bell 2019). These interpretations are not considered either more or less true among individuals, but rather either more or less informed or sophisticated (Guba and Lincoln 1994). As individuals develop multiple and varied meanings and direct them toward certain things, the researcher seeks the complexity of views rather than narrow meaning. To this end, current literature has adopted both managerial and consumer perspectives in investigating the role of social media for luxury brands, as outlined in Section 4.2.5, with examples including consumer engagement (e.g., Leban *et al*. 2020) or luxury brand use of social media platforms (Taylor *et al*. 2015).

Researchers acknowledge that their own backgrounds shape these interpretations, informed by personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell and Creswell 2018). One consequence of this position in the inability to distinguish between contingent and necessary effects, which questions how knowledge can therefore be created and generalised. If there is no rational basis to choose between competing theories, then how can generalisation be justified? Therefore, it can be argued that, in practice, researchers think in realist terms, as reality constantly regulates our experiences (Smith 2006).

3.3.3 Pragmatism

In contrast to the previously mentioned paradigms, pragmatism is not committed to any one specific system of philosophy and reality. In this view, researchers are free to choose the methods, techniques, and procedures or research best suited to their individual needs and purposes (Creswell and Creswell 2018). It argues that the meaning of an event cannot be given in advance of experience and that the focus of interpreting meaning goes beyond any particular methodology (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). It should not, however, be merely seen as a catch all view in adopting 'whatever works' methodologically speaking, yet rather be construed as a new way of thinking about the differences in approaches of the traditional worldviews and treating those differences as social contexts for inquiry, rather than as abstract philosophical systems.

Knowledge is not about an abstract relationship between the knower and the known, but rather an active process of inquiry that creates a continual back-and-forth movement between beliefs and actions (Morgan 2014). As pragmatism is not a

metaphysical or ontologically driven approach to inquiry, it does not seek to engage in a discussion strictly regarding forms of causation (Morgan 2007). As such, researchers adopting this view can employ multiple methods of data collection in best answering the research question, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Creswell 2007).

3.3.4 Critical Realism

After consideration of the aforementioned paradigms permeating through social sciences research, the present study adopts a critical realist stance. Critical realism is closely associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar (2008) and has become a recognised as a viable research paradigm when conducting social science research, and is the philosophical worldview adopted in this study. Rather than prescribing to either the positivistic or interpretivist worldviews, critical realism leverages elements of both and provides novel approaches to knowledge development. It acknowledges the role of subjective knowledge of social actors in a given setting as well as the independent structures constraining and enabling such actors to carry out certain actions within a particular setting (Sobh and Perry 2006; Wynn and Williams 2012). Its critique of positivism lies in its focus exclusively on observable events and disregarding of external influences on relationships between elements (Collier 1994).

While critical realists agree that knowledge should be positively applied, they reject the positivist method for doing this, positing causal explanations should be based on references to external structures rather than empirical regularities (Cruickshank 2012). Critical realists recognise the value of interpretivist methodologies (Bhaskar 1998), and the criticism of interpretivism surrounds the failure to relate discourse to the underlying social structures or networks in which actors are embedded. As marketing science is primarily concerned with transactions between buyers and sellers, marketing truths therefore exist within the larger social world, leading to a more realistic ontological worldview (Zinkhan and Hirschheim 1992).

The second half of the twentieth century saw much debate regarding the philosophical basis of the marketing discipline, as traditional positivistic-leaning views were challenged to acknowledge the social construction and evaluation of knowledge (Hunt 1990; Easton 2002). The critical realist seeks to go further to explain

how these forms of expression serve to explore causal explanations (McEvoy and Richards 2006). It is therefore the goal of critical realism not to identify generalisable findings, as in positivism, or to explore the lived experiences of social actors, as in interpretivism, but rather to develop deeper a meaning and understanding of reality.

Ontologically, critical realists discern three domains of reality: the empirical (what we experience either directly or indirectly), the actual (that which occurs, although may not necessarily be experienced), and the real or deep structures and mechanisms which generate phenomena. These domains consist of mechanisms, events, and experiences, collectively constituting critical realist ontology and it is this stratification which distinguishes critical realism from the traditional worldviews (Bhaskar 2008). The world is differentiated and stratified, consisting of not only events, but structures capable of generating events (Sayer 2010). Mechanisms are inherent to both physical and social structures, enabling and limiting what can happen in a given context (Smith 2006; Wynn and Williams 2012) and may be regarded as having either causal powers or certain susceptibilities (Sayer 2010). Events are specific happenings which are distinct in critical realism from the structures and mechanisms that generate them (Bhaskar 2008; Sayer 2010). Limitations remain in our abilities to discern or measure the effects of these events, so much so that we may only come to know them through extracting the from their observable effects rather than our perception of them (Wynn and Williams 2012). Finally, experiences are events which can be directly observed, although in critical realism it is also acknowledged that such experiences are only a subset of actual events generated (Bhaskar 2008). Direct observation of the full extent of experiences is rarely possible, unless under very controlled settings such as lab experiments, and as a subset of actual events, may under-specify the entirety of the events (Wynn and Williams 2012).

Epistemological assumptions within critical realism include mediated knowledge, striving for explanation rather than prediction, explanation by mechanisms, unobservability of these mechanisms as well as the potential for multiple mechanisms (Bhaskar 2008; Collier 1994). Entities comprising the world make up the intransitive dimension, operating independently of human knowledge or perception. Conversely, the transitive dimension consists of that which we know about reality, informed by reason and scientific research, always subject to revision and reinterpretation (Bhaskar 2008). Reality is known to exist independent of human

knowledge or our ability to perceive it, meaning that human experience remains only a portion of it. Intransitive entities do not necessarily change in the natural world but the knowledge objects within the transitive, such as theories, can change (Wynn and Williams 2012). Further, social phenomena such as actions, texts and institutions must not only be explained in terms of their production and effect, but also their meaning must be understood and interpreted. While this interpretation will be shaped from the researcher's own frame of meaning, such phenomena exist regardless of such interpretations (Sayer 2010). It is the relations among such objects which remain central to critical realist explanation and while such relations may not be of interest or importance to the research being carried, it does mean that they do not exist (Easton 2002).

To conclude, this study adopts a critical realist perspective, suited to exploring complex social phenomena whereby personal experiences and viewpoints are consulted and the researcher is required to understand an issue through the participants' lens via reflection and probing of meaning, structures, and issues (Hirschman 1986). Given the complexities and richness of the findings gathered in this study, it is not the intent of the researchers that these insights be generalisable, but rather comprehensively explore the contextual realities of the examined phenomenon.

3.4   Methodology

3.4.1   Rationale for Qualitative Research Approach

While it has been argued that different methods are not inherently good or bad, their level of appropriateness may differ within the context of a study (Veal 2006). The choice of whether to adopt a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods approach in this study does not only rely on the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the author, but also the nature of the research inquiry itself. Qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher is seeking to understand processes, how a business is managed, and how people perceive things and respond to different situations (Silverman 2017). It utilises an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). Rather than seeking to arrive at one singular, succinct definition of qualitative research, an exercise made almost redundant due to its wide applicability across disciplines and professions, Yin (2011: 7-8) highlights five distinctive features of the approach: studying the meaning of people's lives, under

real-world conditions; representing the views and perspectives of the people in a study; covering the contextual conditions within which people live; contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human social behaviour; and striving to use multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source.

As this study seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of authenticity signalling strategies for luxury service brands on social media, a qualitative approach is more appropriate as it will enable a more in-depth study to be conducted (Yin 2018). A key advantage of qualitative research is it enables direct interaction with the sample organisations to investigate precisely what is happening in that specific case while also offering the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the theoretical field (Gephart 2004).

3.4.2   Sample

Coupled with the large absence of luxury services generally, the literature has taken an inconsistent approach to characterising luxury restaurants. Wu and Liang (2009) describe restaurants as luxury based on their affiliation with high-end (four- and five-star) hotels. This approach neglects the standalone quality and prestige of the restaurant by basing its status on that of the hotel within which it is located. Additionally, Chen *et al*. (2015: 238) define a luxury restaurant as: "a full-service restaurant whose environment (e.g., décor, atmospherics, and services) and products (e.g., food and beverages) are carefully prepared and presented, unique, superior in quality and conspicuous". However, Chen *et al*. (2015) do not elaborate on what constitutes 'careful' preparation and presentation. It may be argued that all restaurant managers would consider that their own environment and product were 'carefully' prepared and presented. In addition, the authors do not provide any measurement scale for what constitutes 'superior' quality or indicate any mechanism for which such a factor would be assessed. Meng and Elliott (2008: 512) adopt the criterion of "average check per person $25 or above" as their qualification of a luxury restaurant. While it has been noted that luxury commands a high price (although not all high-priced objects are luxury), price alone cannot realistically be deemed enough to assign a restaurant as luxury.

Similarly, Yang and Mattila (2016: 1850) adopt the following definition: "a luxury restaurant refers to a restaurant that delivers excellent and expensive food, a

high quality of full table service, distinctive presentations and a sophisticated physical environment (atmosphere, décor, lighting, furniture, etc.)". Similar to Chen *et al.* (2015), this conceptualisation also lends itself to multiple interpretations. For example, the authors do not elaborate on what is meant by 'distinctive' or 'sophisticated' within the context of other restaurants. Also, their inclusion of an economic indicator (expensive food) is also highly contextual and may be interpreted differently by individual consumers. Further, as was previously mentioned, a premium price is often associated with luxury goods, but is by no means a sole indicator of luxury.

Therefore, acknowledging the imperfect nature of drawing distinct criteria for luxury service brands, the sample of participants examined in this study vis à vis luxury status will be restaurants currently holding at least one Michelin star. Luxury restaurants differ from traditional and fast-food outlets in how their primary purpose is to create and promote a luxury dining experience where guests will enjoy the highest quality dishes as well as elite service. Being a world-renowned standard in recognition of fine dining establishments attracting world-famous chefs and welcoming visitors from around the world (Clauzel *et al.* 2019; Batat and De Kerviler 2020), inclusion based on Michelin star status minimises any potential bias or discrimination in the selection of participants in the research. According to Michelin (2022a), a one-star establishment is considered "high quality cooking, worth a stop", two stars indicate "excellent cooking, worth a detour", while three stars represent the highest possible award and "exceptional cuisine, worth a special journey". Luxury dining entails entering the universe of the chef (Batat and De Kerviler 2020), characterised by the uniqueness of the place, exclusivity of the ingredients, the chef's own skill as well as the sensorial aspects within which diners are immersed to provide a memorable and authentic luxury service experience (Batat 2021).

However, one final note is that it cannot be categorically stated that Michelin star restaurants alone represent luxury restaurant establishments. Given the subjectivity inherent within the luxury concept, it must be acknowledged that certain other fine dining restaurants which do not hold a Michelin star could also occupy the luxury category. However, it can be confidently stated that all Michelin star restaurants are luxury services and as such represent an appropriate sample in this study. The Michelin Guide (2022) provides a complete list of all Michelin star restaurants worldwide, however the sample for the present study was limited to Ireland and the

UK due to their cultural similarities and substantial pool of potential cases. As of 2022, there are a total of 18 Michelin star restaurants in the Republic of Ireland (4 two star, 14 one star) and 174 in the UK (8 three star, 18 two star, 150 one star), totalling a sample of 194 potential participants. A more comprehensive account of the interview inclusion criteria is contained in Figure 3.2 below.

Figure 3.2.   Interview Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To be considered for participation in the research, the following criteria must be satisfied:

1.   Each participant must be over 18 years of age

2.   Each participant must, at the time of their participation, be employed by either

> i) a Michelin star restaurant (MSR) located within Ireland or the UK, or;
>
> ii) a marketing agency commissioned by a MSR located within Ireland or the UK to work on their digital marketing strategies including, but not limited to, their social media marketing strategies

3.   Each participant must be either solely or partially responsible for the management of the social media presences of the MSR. It is acknowledged that in some cases this will not be the only role the individual may hold and as such this will not discount the individual from participation

4.   The MSR which the interviewee is representing must hold either one, two, or three Michelin stars at the time of their participation, which must be verified by the official Michelin Guide: https://guide.michelin.com/

5.   The MSR which the interviewee is representing must have at least one active social media account. While there is no strict definition over what is deemed 'active', the researcher used their own discretion in determining whether certain MSRs would be unsuitable for the study

6.   There is no minimum length of time that the restaurant must have held their Michelin star(s)

3.4.3 Data Collection

Yin (2011) describes four methods of data collection in qualitative inquiry: *interviewing*, *observing*, *collecting and examining*, and *feeling*. *Interviewing* can take two forms: *structured* and *qualitative* and involves open-ended questions seeking to yield detailed responses about individuals' experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. The data gathered consists of verbatim quotations along with sufficient context to be interpretable (Patton 2002). For the purposes of this study, the *interview* method was chosen, more specifically *qualitative interviews* (Yin 2011). The following subsection outlines a rationale for the approach taken as well as further exploration of the qualitative interview process.

3.4.3.1 Qualitative Interviews

The interview remains the most common method of data gathering in qualitative research (Yin 2011) and may be utilised in various forms such as depth, exploratory, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews (King 2004). They are situated interactions in which researchers typically pose questions which are answered by respondents (Gephart 2004). The purpose of interviewing is to gain access to another individual's perspective and begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and can be made explicit (Patton 2002).

Yin (2011) identifies multiple features of a qualitative interview, outlining the differences compared to a more structured format. Firstly, the relationship between the interviewer and the participant is not strictly scripted; the researcher will form a mental framework of study questions, but the specific verbalised questions posed to any individual participant may differ according to the specific context and setting of the interview. Additionally, the interviewer doesn't adopt any specific behaviour or demeanour for each individual interview; the qualitative interview follows a more conversational format, allowing for a more fluent two-way interaction necessitating "intense listening … and a systematic effort to really hear and understand what people tell you" (Rubin and Rubin 1995: 17). The researcher does not merely act as an impersonal data collector, but as the actual research tool; the role of the researcher entails not only obtaining answers but learning what questions to ask and how to ask them (Taylor *et al.* 2016).

Finally, the central questions in the interview will be open- rather than close-ended, allowing the participant to use their own voice to discuss topics rather than having the researcher predefine the tone and flow of the conversation through a more rigid and structured format (Yin 2011). The role of the interviewer is critical here; asking straight questions will often result in a straight answer, more akin to positivist, survey research. The realist interview incorporates components of presenting the respondent with a description of the parameters of the initial theory for examination and offers the respondent the opportunity to clarify the thinking of the researcher based on their ideas (Mukumbang *et al.* 2020). An open-ended approach enables the interviewer to probe further information to seek clarification, and to address the variance in the professional, educational and personal histories of participants which may have precluded a more rigid, standardised structure (Barriball and While 1994). Each interview will be a 'story', with the unique nature and structure of these stories being the focus of interest, rather than focusing of "what percentage of respondents said what" (Veal 2006: 198). The words of an interview constitute the raw data, yet data does not solely consist of literal words; the interview process itself is co-created by both the interviewer and the participant, with meaning being attributed through interpretation (Griffee 2005).

3.4.3.2 Participant Recruitment

The research seeks to explore the views and approaches of individuals responsible for the social media marketing management of Michelin star restaurants to increase our understanding of how service brands can signal luxury (de Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2003). This included marketers, managers, chefs, and agency representatives (Table 3.2). The most appropriate method to achieve this objective within the examined sample was semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gain the perspective of others (Patton 2002; Yin 2011). Veal (2006) adds that the information gathered via qualitative interviews would be expected to vary considerably, and in complex ways, among participants. Each interview will be a 'story', with the unique nature and structure of these stories being the focus of interest, rather than focusing on "what percentage of respondents said what" (Veal 2006: 198).

Participants were recruited predominantly via social media through the official accounts of Michelin star restaurants or the personal accounts of the *Chef Patron* in

cases whereby the marketing of the restaurant was mainly conducted via these individuals' pages. A topic guide and indicative list of questions was provided to each interviewee following their agreement to participate in the research to further elaborate on the purpose of the research and their role within it. While the interview guide provided a general direction for the interviews, they were largely non-directive and allowed interviewees to elaborate freely on their restaurant's social media activities and their signalling of luxury to customers, potential customers and other stakeholders (Dion and Borraz 2017). As well as pilot interviews with three luxury service brand social media marketers and one elite informant, a total of 30 interviews were conducted across 29 Michelin star restaurants in Ireland the UK between September 2020 and May 2021. A total of 26 one-star restaurants participated in the study (90% of total sample), two participants had two stars (7% of total sample) and one participant had three Michelin stars (3% of total sample). This is largely reflective of the total sample population, with 84% of the total Michelin star restaurants in Ireland and the UK occupy the one-star category, 11% have two stars and 4% have three stars (Michelin 2022a).

Additionally, three pilot interviews with luxury service brand social media marketers as well as one additional interview with an external elite informant (renowned food critic), were carried out as depicted in Table 3.1. These pilot interviews were conducted with marketers within the luxury hospitality industry yet were not Michelin star restaurants. The objective of these pilot interviews was to further refine the interview structure while also garnering some preliminary insights into luxury brand social media marketing before consulting with the intended sample of the study. Elite informants possess the power to influence communities (Solarino and Aguinis 2021) and while the literature highlights many definitions which refer to elite informants being individuals *within* an organisation (i.e., Robson 2008), others pose more wide-ranging descriptions which prioritise their level of influence or power networks, even outside the firm (Undheim 2003). While this elite informant was not a marketer or had previously worked for a Michelin star restaurant, their intimate knowledge of the hospitality industry and specifically Michelin star restaurants, accumulated throughout their career qualifies them as being a key informant on the industry.

Table 3.1   Table of Pilot Interviews

#	Role	Industry	Location
A	Head Chef (non-Michelin star)	Hospitality	Ireland
B	Director of Marketing	Hospitality	Ireland
C	Head of Business Development	Hospitality	Ireland
D	Food Critic	Media	UK

Table 3.2   Table of Participants

#	Role	Stars	Location	Year Awarded
1	Chef Patron	*	UK	2019
2	Head Chef	*	Ireland	2013
3	Head Chef	*	UK	2019
4	Head Chef	*	Ireland	2020
5	Head Chef	*	UK	2019
6	Head Chef	*	UK	2018
7	Marketing Manager (Agency)	***	UK	2021
8	Marketing Manager	*	Ireland	2010
9	Marketing Manager	**	Ireland	2007
10a+b	Co-Owners	*	Ireland	2019
11	Chef Patron	*	UK	2008
12	Marketing Manager	*	UK	2015
13	Creative Director	*	UK	2016
14a+b	Co-Owners	*	UK	2009
15	Head Chef	*	Ireland	2014
16	Owner/Head Chef	*	Ireland	2003
17	Head Chef	*	Ireland	2016
18	Marketing Manager	*	UK	2018
19	Marketing Manager	*	UK	2019
20a+b	Co-Owners	*	Ireland	2019
21	Head Chef	*	Ireland	2020
22	Head Chef	*	UK	2019
23	Marketing Manager (Agency)	*	UK	2008
24	Marketing Manager (Agency)	*	UK	2021

25	Chef Patron	*	UK	2015
26	Head Chef	*	UK	2019
27	Head Chef	*	Ireland	2020
28	Chef Patron	**	UK	2014
29	Marketing Manager	*	UK	2021

These interviews were all conducted electronically due to a number of factors, the most prevailing of which was the presence of government-issued orders ranging from work-from-home instructions to lockdown orders due to the Covid-19 pandemic from early 2020. It was an important point of clarification for the participants in the study that they may contribute to the research electronically, ensuring social distancing and eradicating any potential breach of these orders. In addition, due to the aforementioned pandemic restrictions, international travel was not possible for non-essential purposes and due to the author's residence in the Republic of Ireland, travel to the UK was not possible during the data collection window. All interviews were conducted either via synchronous video call through online conferencing software such as Microsoft Teams or by phone where more practical such as where participants were located in more rural regions with less reliable broadband connections. Both online conferencing software (i.e., Chapman and Dilmperi 2022) and phone interviews (Cavusgil *et al*. 2022) have been recently utilised within the business literature for conducting qualitative interviews. In all cases, interviews were recorded and later transcribed and anonymised, as further detailed in Section 3.4.5.1.

3.4.3.3 Interview Approach in this Study

Following the comprehensive literature review conducted for this study and subsequent formulation of the central research questions, a number of open-ended questions to pose to participants were chosen to address the research aim of the study. As the goal of the interviews was an in-depth exploration of the views and experiences of the individuals responsible for managing the social media presences of luxury service brands, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate method. Prior to the interview, the existing digital marketing collateral and content (i.e., website, social media, TripAdvisor reviews) were consulted and initial notes were made regarding this content for further inquiry and discussion in the interview. Examples of this included rough notes being taken of possible signals which were intended to be transmitted through the participants social media content. Examples of

such content are contained within the discussion in Chapter Five to further contextualise the narratives of interview participants. This enabled a more succinct and focussed discussion regarding the signalling techniques being enacted by the participants when managing the luxury service brand's presence online.

3.4.3.4 Interview Instrument

A list of indicative questions is included in Appendix A, which was also distributed to participants ahead of time to further familiarise the participant with the nature of the study and the areas that would be explored in the interview. The interview was broadly divided into three sections, the first being an initial introductory section regarding the participant and the inception story of their restaurant. The opening section served as an introduction between researcher and participant while also setting the scene, creating context in relation to the restaurant, its Michelin journey, and its marketing strategies.

The next section followed lines of inquiry regarding their social media marketing activities of the participants restaurants which explored the varying signalling approaches being adopted, including what those signals were and how they were being signalled on social media. Participants were asked about the social media marketing strategies of the brand, their desired message of luxury they wish to communicate to followers as well as their perspective on the *how* exactly luxury can be signalled through social media activity for service brands. This strategic perspective was couple with some questions regarding the brand's audience and what exactly they felt social media users expect from luxury service brands, to further investigate the nature of interactions between luxury brand and consumer on social media.

The final phase examined luxury brands more broadly and enquired what the participants' perceptions of a luxury brand were and how they felt luxury marketing would develop. This section sought to gauge participants opinions and perspectives regarding their luxury status and what the future might hold for luxury service branding.

3.4.4   Other Sources of Data

In addition to the qualitative interviews, the official social media accounts of the participant restaurants were consulted to identify practical examples of content

published by these brands exemplifying the signals, specifically authenticity signals in addressing RO3, discussed by participants. Netnographic techniques (Kozinets 2010) have, predictably, been commonly used within social media research examining the luxury context. As discussed in Section 4.2.5.2, examples include the examination of brand attitudes through social media content (e.g., Blasi *et al*. 2020) and response strategies to user-generated content, specifically reviews, on social media (Chang *et al*. 2020). While the inclusion of social media data within the findings and discussion of the present study (i.e., Figures 5.2-5.4) are not intended to constitute a comprehensive netnographic inquiry, their inclusion is nevertheless prudent in further exemplifying and contextualising the narratives of the interview participants and are further explained in their respective sub-sections in Chapter Four.

3.4.5   Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is described by Braun and Clarke (2006: 79) as a "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data." It is seen as a flexible method due its independence of both underlying theory and epistemology, therefore enabling its application "across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 78) and its stages are represented and briefly described in Table 3.3 and the final thematic codebook from the study is included in Appendix G. Braun and Clarke (2006) note how previous studies have fallen short in sufficiently reporting the process and detail of analysis; expressing how researchers claim that themes simply 'emerged', or were 'discovered', during the analysis. Such assertions represent passive accounts of the analysis process, denying the *active* role the researcher always plays within the research process. Two critical advantages of thematic analysis over other methods include its incorporation of a generic set of skills that are commonly shared across a variety of qualitative analysis methods (Holloway and Todres 2003), while also being more appropriate for novice qualitative researchers as it does not require the technical or theoretical knowledge of other analysis methods (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Table 3.3.　　　Analytical Process (Adapted from Braun and Clarke 2006)

Phase	Description of the Process within NVivo	Strategic Objective	Iterative Process Throughout Analysis
Familiarisation with the Data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.	**Data Management** Open & hierarchal coding through NVivo	Assigning data to refined concepts to portray meaning
Systematic Data Coding	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.		Refining and distilling more abstract concepts
Generating Initial Themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	**Descriptive Accounts** Reordering, 'coding on' and annotating through NVivo	
Developing and Reviewing Potential Themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.		Assigning data to themes/concepts to portray meaning
Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	**Explanatory Accounts** Extrapolating deeper meaning, drafting summary statements and analytical memos through NVivo	Assigning meaning
Producing the Report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.		Generating themes and concepts

3.4.5.1 Familiarisation with the Data

While it may seem an obvious step, familiarisation is a crucial activity at the start of analysis as it provides the foundation upon which the structure of the research is built (Ritchie *et al.* 2003). Whether or not the researcher has collected the data themselves, or was procured elsewhere, it remains vital that the researcher immerse themselves in the data to become accustomed to the depth and breadth of its contents, via verbatim

transcripts of interviews, focus groups, or observations (Braun and Clarke 2006). While in theory a verbatim transcript captures 'everything', it's never possible to capture all that is communicated. Therefore, to capture as much as possible, the researcher needs to engage in several cycles of transcription and reviewing of the recording (Paulus *et al*. 2014).

All interviews were conducted via electronic means, either via phone or Microsoft Teams and, with the explicit consent of all participants, recorded and transcribed. This was due not only to geographical distances between the researcher and participants, but also the travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews, regardless of how they were conducted, were recorded using Microsoft Teams' recording feature and auto-transcription functionality. Each recording was automatically uploaded to the Microsoft Stream platform, ensuring secure storage through the cloud, only accessible by the researcher via a password protected account, while an access link to both the recording and transcript was also sent to each individual participant to ensure transparency. Despite the auto-transcribed file being generated by the recording software, it required considerable cleaning to ensure accurate representation of the participant responses in a separate Microsoft Word document, as well as satisfying the familiarisation phase of the analysis process.

Upon completion of the transcription process and preliminary analysis through multiple read-throughs of printed copies, which included highlighting of potential points of interest within the actual analysis, the transcription files were imported in NVivo qualitative data analysis software for further analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) note that due to its ability to manage large numbers of interview transcripts, computer-assisted analysis has become extensively advocated to avoid data overload. Through the utilisation of the software, researchers are required to code the data to develop themes or categories, allowing the researcher to "engage more meaningfully in the analysis process" (Sotiriadou *et al*. 2014: 220).

Sotiriadou *et al*. (2014) conclude with some potential shortcomings of NVivo, highlighting its time-consuming nature in identifying concepts in semi-structured interviews and the subjective nature of the data analysis, which could result in researcher bias. The developers of NVivo, QSR International, have strived to provide the user with a set of tools to assist the researcher in the analysis of qualitative data.

They note that use of the software does not aim to detract from the "time-honoured ways of learning from data", but rather to "increase the effectiveness and efficiency of such learning" (Bazeley and Jackson 2013: 2). However, the researcher acknowledges the need to be cognisant of the potential for certain underlying meaning of participants' anecdotes to be potentially overlooked given the increased convenience of utilising a software solution rather than a purely offline, manual analysis procedure.

3.4.5.2 Systematic Data Coding

The process of code generation begins when the researcher has comprehensively familiarised themselves with the data and involves the production if initial codes from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The researcher seeks to systematically examine the different interviews to clarify the underlying meanings of various concepts and themes and to synthesise different versions of events to put together a cohesive understanding of the overall narrative (Rubin and Rubin 1995). Codes are the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon in question (Boyatzis 1998).

The coded data will differ from the units of analysis, which are the, often broader, themes which start to develop in the proceeding phase (Braun and Clarke 2006). The process of coding involves labelling each unit of data within the transcript with a code that symbolises or summarises the meaning of that extract. Codes can range from being purely descriptive (for example: 'we use Instagram as part of our social media marketing strategy'), to umbrella labels for topics or themes (for example, data referring to *individual signals of authenticity*), through to more interpretive and analytical theories or concepts (such as reflections of *societal perceptions of luxury brands*) (i.e., Richards 2009).

Saldaña (2009) outlines a dual cycle process of coding. While various methods of coding may be implemented either cycle, an over-complication of the analytic process by employing an excessive number of coding methods, or perhaps incompatible methods (for example using an exploratory method with a procedural method) should be avoided. However, it was deemed appropriate for the purposes of this study to employ multiple methods of coding. The first cycle consisted of *attribute coding*, *initial* (or *open*) *coding*, and *provisional coding*, while *pattern coding* was

implemented in the second cycle. A description and rationale for the choices of coding method is outlined below.

Attribute coding, also referred to as *descriptive coding* (Miles and Huberman 1994) is usually undertaken at the beginning of the coding process and refers to basic descriptive information such as the fieldwork setting, participant characteristics or demographics, time frame, and/or other variables (Saldaña 2009). Within the present study, attribute coding was used to assess case information, such as location, number of Michelin stars, and the length of time those stars have been held. This data contributed to the analysis as a means of comparative case analysis to observe certain patterns in responses among participants of either similar or disparate characteristics.

Initial (or *open*) *coding* refers to the breaking down of qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences (Strauss and Corbin 1998). It is intended as a starting point to provide the researcher with analytic leads for further investigation (Saldaña 2009). Charmaz (2006) advises that a more detailed, line-by-line initial coding strategy is more suitable for interview transcripts than for researcher-generated field notes. The process will result in a multitude of code labels which will need to be compared and placed into broader, related groupings or categories which, in turn, will provide for further analysis via *pattern coding* in the second cycle (Saldaña 2009).

Provisional coding establishes a predetermined starting list of codes prior to fieldwork (Miles and Huberman 1994). These codes can be developed from anticipated categories or types of responses or actions that may arise in the data yet to be collected. They may originate from a variety of sources, such as the study's literature review, conceptual framework, research questions, pilot research, or the researcher's previous knowledge and experiences. These provisional codes may be revised, modified, deleted, or expanded to include new codes (Saldaña 2009). Provisional coding in the current study was informed by the study's research questions regarding luxury signals and social media marketing activities. It is recommended that the researcher exercise sufficient caution and flexibility to remain open to the possibility of new ideas beyond that of the predefined list (Saldaña 2009).

Pattern coding is appropriate for the second cycle of coding and has multiple applications, such as the development of major themes from the data, the search for rules, causes, and explanations in the data, examining social networks and patterns of human relationships, and the formation of theoretical constructs and processes (Saldaña 2009). Pattern codes are described by Miles and Huberman (1994: 69) as "explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration or explanation". They serve four important functions in qualitative analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994): reducing large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytic units; initiating analysis during data collection, so that later fieldwork can be more focused; aiding in the elaboration of a cognitive map, an evolving, more integrated schema for understanding local incidents and interactions; and in multi-case studies, laying the groundwork for cross-case analysis for surfacing common themes and directional processes. Within the current study, upon completion of the first cycle of coding, those codes were comprehensively revised and assessed for commonalities. Pattern codes were then assigned to such cases, in the form of a short sentence or phrase, to group those instances with similar meaning which were used as building blocks for the development of major themes or patterns of behaviour.

3.4.5.3 Generating Initial Themes

Phase three of the analysis process begins once all the data has been initially coded and collated, and a long list of codes have been identified across the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). A theme is an outcome of coding, categorisation, and analytic reflection, not something that is coded (Saldaña 2009). This phase operates at a broader level of analysis, on a thematic level rather than individual codes. The researcher analyses the codes in consideration of how they may combine to form an overarching theme. Some initial codes may form main themes, whereas others may form sub-themes, while others may be discarded altogether (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The approach taken in this study was to identify both *semantic* and *latent* themes (Boyatzis 1998) from the interview transcripts. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe a semantic approach as identifying themes within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, with the analytic process progressing from *description* to *interpretation* to theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications (Patton 2002). In contrast, a thematic analysis at the latent level goes

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beyond the semantic content of the data to identify or examine the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

3.4.5.4 Developing and Reviewing Potential Themes

Phase Four, *reviewing themes*, begins once the researcher has devised a set of candidate themes and involves the refinement of those themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). At this stage, it may be appropriate to collapse two themes together or split a theme into two or more themes, or to discard the candidate themes altogether to begin the process of theme development once again (Clarke and Braun 2013). To achieve this, the researcher must deal with the challenge of *convergence* (Guba 1978), which refers to evaluating what themes and sub-themes fit together with regularity. These regularities may then reveal *patterns* which may be sorted into distinct categories which, as Patton (2002) describes, may then be judged on two criteria: *internal homogeneity* and *external homogeneity*. The former criterion alludes to the extent to which the data within a certain category holds together or 'dovetails' in a certain way, while the latter concerns the extent to which differences between the categories are clear. Once the analysis for convergence is completed, the mirror analytical strategy involves examining *divergence* (Guba 1978), which involves the analyst 'fleshing out' patterns and categories. This process involves extension (building on items of information already known), bridging (making connections among different items), and surfacing (proposing new information that ought to fit and then verifying its existence) (Patton 2002).

The analyst brings the process to a close once all the sources of information have been exhausted, when sets of categories have been saturated so that new sources lead to redundancy, when clear regularities have emerged that feel integrated, and when the analysis begins to overextend beyond the boundaries of the issues and concerns guiding the analysis (Patton 2002). At this stage, the researcher will have amassed a collection of candidate themes, and sub-themes, and all extracts of data that have been coded in relation to them. Further, the researcher will begin to have a sense of the significance of the individual themes (Braun and Clarke 2006).

3.4.5.5 Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes

Phase Five begins once a set of candidate themes has been devised and involves the refinement of those themes. It will become apparent that some candidate themes are not really themes (e.g., if there are not enough data to support them, or the data are too diverse), while others might collapse into each other (e.g., two apparently separate themes might form one theme). At this stage, visual thematic maps may be utilised to visualise themes and their associated categories to ascertain the underlying essence of individual themes as well as the overall collective. There are two stages of theme review and refinement. Level one involves reviewing at the level of the coded data extracts; this entails re-reading the collated extracts from each theme and ascertaining whether they form a coherent pattern. Failure of the themes to comply to an acceptable fit will necessitate a re-examination of either individual data extracts, or indeed the theme. Once the themes form an acceptably coherent pattern, the researcher may proceed to level two, which involves a very similar process, but applied to the entire data set. Factor such as theme validity and their accurate reflection of the meanings in the data need to be examined here (Braun and Clarke 2006).

3.4.5.6 Producing the Report

Once the researcher has assembled a set of fully worked-out themes, the final phase involves the actual writing-up of the report. The goal of the write-up is to "tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 93). The write-up must provide sufficient evidence of the prevalence of themes within the data via vivid examples or extracts which encapsulate the essence of the point or theme that is being demonstrated. However, the write-up must be *more* than simply providing data; any extracts used for illustration must be embedded within the analytic narrative the compellingly portrays the story being told in the data. The narrative should go *beyond* simple description of the data and should make a persuasive *argument* in relation to the research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006).

3.4.6 Research Evaluation

Research findings should be as trustworthy as possible, and every research study must be evaluated in relation to the procedures used to generate the findings. Many perspectives exist regarding the importance of validation in qualitative research, the

definition of it, terms to describe it, and procedures for establishing it (Creswell 2007). Validity in qualitative research refers to the *appropriateness* of the tools, processes, and data employed within a study. The researcher must ensure that the research question is valid the desired outcome, the choice of methodology is appropriate for addressing the research questions, the design is valid for the methodology, and the sampling and data analysis is appropriate, and the results and conclusions are valid for the sample and context (Leung 2015).

Upon examination of the various typologies of qualitative 'validity' throughout the literature, it was concluded that the present study would adopt an amalgam of the criteria set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Henwood and Pidgeon (1992). These criteria include *credibility*, *dependability*, *reflexivity*, *transferability*, and *confirmability*. *Credibility* represents the qualitative parallel to the *internal validity* criterion within the quantitative domain. The emphasis here is focussed on ensuring that the representations of the research participants' socially constructed realities are accurate and reflective of the participants' actual intentions. Techniques which may be adopted in order to ensure efficiency in this regard include the following: i) lengthy research involvement on the part of the researcher in order to build trust and rapport and to collect sufficient data; ii) use of reflection via engaging with another individual in order to discuss ideas, test findings etc.; iii) development of a thorough analysis that accounts for negative cases by refining the analysis in order to produce the best possible explanation of the phenomenon being studied; iv) checking data, analysis and interpretations with participants; and v) ensuring the researchers' preconceived expectations about what the research would reveal are not prioritised over the social constructions of the participant through the regular recording and challenging of them during analysis of the data (cf. Creswell 2007).

Dependability seeks the means to take both factors of instability and phenomenal or design induced changes into account (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Within extensive data sets, there exists the risk that data collection may become inconsistent over time; for example, interview participants may be asked the same core framework of questions, however interviewing remains an evolving process during which interviewers acquire novel insights into the phenomenon of study that can subsequently lead to more probing follow-up questions or narrow the focus of

observation (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Within the present study, a core framework of questions (Appendix A) was utilised to ensure consistency across all interviews, yet a semi-structured format was adopted to accommodate for and facilitate the individual narratives of participants (Yin 2011).

In terms of *reflexivity*, Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) acknowledge the inevitable role of the actual research activity in shaping the object of inquiry, as the research and participant are characterised as interdependent in the social process of the research. Reflexivity related to the degree of influence that the researcher exerts, either intentionally or unintentionally, on the findings (Jootun *et al*. 2009). Mauthner and Doucet (2003) suggest that the importance of *being* reflexive is recognised throughout social science research, however it has not been translated into data analysis practice in terms of the practicalities and methods of doing it. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend the keeping of a reflexive journal, whereby the researcher enters such information as "what is done, and why it is done, at all phases in the research process" (Henwood and Pidgeon 1992: 106). Within the present study, this was carried out not only with handwritten notes taken during the interviewing process, but also via the annotations feature within NVivo whereby comments, notes, and preliminary observations were recorded during the early phases of the data analysis process (i.e., data familiarisation and systematic data coding). Jootun *et al*. (2009) further note the possibility of the researcher becoming enmeshed with the participants of the research, which may lead to researchers having difficulty in separating their own experiences from those of the participants, resulting in subjectivity. The authors further elaborate their own approach of implementing an informal, conversational style in their interviews (the sample was made of university students) which allowed participants to freely voice their opinions and feelings, which was also the approach adopted here.

Transferability represents the qualitative parallel to the more quantitatively focussed *external validity* or *generalisability*. Merriam writes that external validity "is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations" (Shenton 2004: 69). Within the qualitative paradigm, where sampling decisions are not made based on statistical grounds, the suggestion is that researchers speak of their research findings in terms of transferability, rather than generalisability

(Lincoln and Guba 1985). In providing a thorough description of the research questions, design, context, findings, and interpretations, the researcher provides readers, as well as the broader academic and industrial community, with the opportunity to judge the transferability of the study to an alternative setting (Henwood and Pidgeon 1992). However, some scholars have noted that, in practice, generalisability within naturalistic inquiry is never possible due to all observations being specific to the individual contexts within which they were observed (Erlandson *et al.* 1993). Some conflicting views include that of Stake (1994) who posits that, although each case may be unique, it is also a representative example of a broader group and, as such, the notion of transferability should not be immediately discounted. The present study incorporates a sample of luxury service brands, specifically Michelin star restaurants, and while it is not intended that the findings of the study be considered generalisable to the global population, it is believed that the theoretical contributions of the study discussed in Chapter Six can have a wider impact on theory and practice in areas such as luxury hospitality as well as social media marketing more generally.

Finally, the concept of *confirmability* relates to the qualitative investigator's comparable concern to objectivity. Patton (2002) recognises the difficulty of ensuring objectivity, as while tests, experiments, and questionnaires are formulated by humans, the intrusion of researcher bias is inevitable. Therefore, Shenton (2004) writes, steps must be taken to ensure, as far as possible, that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher. Shenton (2004) also emphasises the role of triangulation, and its capability in reducing investigator bias, as a pertinent strategy in promoting confirmability. Incorporating live, published examples of social media content depicting the varying signals of luxury communicated by Michelin star restaurants within the analysis and discussion is intended to address this and add further contest to the findings. Additionally, Miles and Huberman (1994) note a key criterion for ensuring confirmability is the extent to which a researcher openly discloses their personal predispositions. This entails the researcher divulging their own beliefs and viewpoints which may have underpinned decisions made regarding the research design, methods adopted, the reasoning for favouring one approach over the other, etc. (Shenton 2004), which are outlined in the previous *Research Philosophy* section.

3.5   Ethical Considerations

Before this research study took place, ethical approval was sought from the Maynooth University Ethics Committee. The research included human participation through interviews; therefore, the ethical review was conducted by the University's Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee (SRESC). The application (Appendix D) was submitted in February 2020, outlining key points of information regarding the research purpose, objectives, methodology, and policies regarding the protection of participants identities.

Alongside the comprehensive application, all submissions to the SRESC must be accompanied by a number of supplementary documents pertinent to carrying out the research. Given the primary data collection approach in the study is qualitative interviews, an indicative list of interview questions (Appendix A) was submitted to the SRESC outlining the interview approach, which began by inquiring about the origin of the restaurant before moving into a more focussed discussion on their social media marketing strategies. Additionally, samples of the participant information letter (Appendix B) and consent form (Appendix C) were submitted, which outlined details about individuals' participant in the study, what it entailed, an assurance of confidentiality, as well as contact information should they have any questions prior to their participation. The final element of the application was a letter of support (Appendix E) drafted by the research supervisors outlining the preparedness and competence of the researcher to carry out the research to a professional and ethical standard, while also acting as a commitment of support and endorsement of the application.

The application was approved in March 2020 (Appendix F).

3.6   Conclusion

This chapter mapped out the philosophical and methodological underpinnings within the present study. Grounded in a critical realist perspective, the research adopts a semi-structured interview technique in collecting data from the primary sample in the study. A thorough commentary and justification for these choices are presented, alongside a comprehensive account of the data analysis approach utilised in the study.

The chapter closes with an account of the main considerations regarding data validity criteria and how this was applied to the present study before, finally, an examination of the ethical implications of the research as well as a presentation of the requisite documentation approving the researcher carrying out the study. The next chapter is a presentation of the data analysis and a discussion of the research findings addressing the research questions of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOCIAL MEDIA AND LUXURY - A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Declaration

The following chapter is a reprint of the article "Social Media and Luxury: A Systematic Literature Review" published in the *International Journal of Management Reviews* in 2022 and is a shared publication between the author of this thesis and his supervisory team. The burden of work including article collection, analysis, and write-up was led by the thesis author, however the contributions, input, and feedback of his co-authors on multiple drafts was instrumental in creating the final manuscript.

4.1 Introduction

The overarching research question of this thesis is to investigate the how Michelin star restaurants utilise social media platforms to signal luxury. This main question is further broken down into three distinct objectives: RO1. *How does the extant literature currently characterise the role of social media for luxury brands*? RO2. *How can the dimensions of luxury service brands be signalled on social media*? RO3. *How is authenticity signalled by Michelin star restaurants on social media*?

The first research objective pertains to the comprehensive analysis of the extant literature examining the convergence of luxury and social media. Chapter Two discussed their ideological opposition of the two concepts, luxury being historically exclusive and rare while social media is predicated on the idea of open and democratised access. As such, a systematic literature review approach was taken in investigating how the literature has characterised the role of social media for luxury brands and addresses RO1. That review is presented below.

4.2 RO1: Social Media and Luxury - A Systematic Literature Review

The following subsection is a systematic literature review paper published in the *International Journal of Management Reviews* in 2022 (Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022), with the only amendments being reformatting where relevant in line with the rest of the thesis.

4.2.1 Abstract

Luxury, historically an exclusive, rare and elitist phenomenon, is changing. This is predominantly driven by technological developments, particularly social media, and the rising level of consumer empowerment in the marketplace. A maturing stream of research has emerged assessing the effects of social media platforms on luxury brands, offerings and consumers. However, there has been no comprehensive analysis of this extant literature synthesizing the current state of knowledge and postulating future research directions. This paper addresses this gap by utilizing a systematic literature review approach. A total of 115 articles were collected and analysed and five core themes were identified, examining (1) luxury brand strategy, (2) luxury brand social media communications, (3) luxury consumer attitudes and perceptions, (4) engagement and (5) social media's influence on brand performance-related outcomes.

These themes are comprehensively explored to understand the myriad impacts of social media on luxury businesses before conceptualizing the themes as a holistic framework explaining social media's role within luxury. The framework developed highlights the fragmented yet progressive nature of research on the confluence of social media and luxury and signals fruitful avenues for further inquiry. It is proposed that scholarly attention is directed towards multiple lines of inquiry, including social media's role in luxury brand construction online, social media's role in facilitating 'moments of luxury', younger consumers' luxury consumption, as well as the integration of both future innovative technological developments and novel social media platforms within luxury branding.

4.2.2 Introduction

The continued growth of social media has altered the fabric of business. Change has occurred not only in the format of business communication, but also in consumers' capacity to construct, distribute and consume brand-related messages. This presents a wealth of opportunities and challenges for businesses, particularly the luxury industry. The democratization of the creation and distribution of business communication, fuelled by the ubiquity of social media, continues to pose pertinent questions for luxury brands striving to preserve a reputation grounded in exclusivity, rarity and uniqueness. To date, a comprehensive review on the role of social media within a luxury context has yet to be conducted. It is the purpose of this paper to synthesize the contributions of scholars within this field, explore the current lines of inquiry and propose avenues for future research. The chapter begins with a brief examination of both luxury and social media within academic discourse before describing the review methodology, outlining the article collection process and inclusion criteria. This is followed by a critical analysis and discussion of the scholarly work in the field surrounding five distinct themes: (1) luxury *brand strategy*, (2) luxury brand *social media communications*, (3) luxury *consumer attitudes and perceptions*, (4) *engagement* and (5) social media's *influence on brand performance-related outcomes*. It concludes with proposed research avenues for the advancement of this important topic.

4.2.3 Background

4.2.3.1 Luxury

Definitions of luxury abound and vary in focus between economic and social perspectives (van der Veen 2003). As a result, there exists a lack of consensus as to what luxury means in both commercial and non-commercial settings, predominantly due to its subjective nature (Kapferer, 1997; 2012; Kauppinen-Räisänen *et al.*, 2019). Luxury research, including brand use of online technologies (Baker *et al.*, 2018), remains in relative infancy, despite an increase in volume over recent years (Aliyev *et al.* 2017; Gurzki and Woisetschläger 2017; Stephen, 2020).

Extant definitions of luxury have adopted multiple perspectives. For example, a luxury brand has been defined as a branded product or service which is of 'high quality', providing 'authentic value… whether functional or emotional', has 'a prestigious image within the market', is 'worthy of commanding a premium price' and can inspire a 'deep connection, or resonance, with the consumer' (Ko *et al.* 2019: 406). From a consumer perspective, luxury has been defined as a subjective contextual interpretation of a lived experience, as opposed to being embedded within the offering itself (Bauer *et al.* 2011; Kauppinen-Räisänen *et al.* 2019). This has led to luxury brand research shifting from a traditional features and benefits approach towards a more emotionally driven paradigm (Atwal and Williams 2009) congruent with social media, which is driven by similar experiential imperatives (Huang *et al.* 2018).

4.2.3.2 Social Media

The term social media has taken on multiple meanings and remains open to interpretation, given the dynamic nature of these online environments; however, in a broad sense it refers to online platforms which facilitate interaction among users, including the creation and distribution of information, content and ideas (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). A stream of research investigating social media's role within business, particularly marketing and management, has since emerged (Alves *et al.* 2016; Lamberton and Stephen 2016). These platforms have accentuated a disruption in the power relations between brands and consumers, due in no small part to the velocity at which information can be exchanged among individuals (Pantano 2021), constituting a profound challenge to traditional branding theory and practice (Leitch and Merlot 2017). Social media research remains inherently susceptible to the ever-changing

technological environment, given the accelerated rate of innovation and user adoption; however, an incongruity exists as the volume of empirical studies across the branding literature is low (Hollebeek *et al.* 2014), a surprising discrepancy given previous calls that the novel complexities of these new technologies warrant investigation (Felix *et al.* 2017).

Research has adopted both a consumer perspective, through the investigation of consumer attitudes and behaviour towards brands' social media activities, and a firm-level perspective, in proposing how brands can extract the maximum value from these platforms (Alves *et al.* 2016). Prior studies demonstrate social media's ability to satisfy brand objectives, such as growing sales, increasing brand awareness, enhancing brand image, stimulating traffic to brand websites, and fostering communication and interactivity through the creation and sharing of UGC (Felix *et al.* 2017; Kumar *et al.* 2016; Schultz and Peltier 2013). Some brands seek to utilize social media to create and nurture relationships with customers, employees, communities, and other stakeholders, while others may simply employ such platforms as additional information push outlets, with comparatively little relationship building (Felix *et al.* 2017). Such varied approaches may be attributed to a lack of understanding of the most effective ways to utilize these platforms (Schultz and Peltier, 2013). This reality seems to have transferred to academic research, given the relatively low volume of studies taking a managerial perspective into the impact of digital communications on firm performance (Alves *et al.* 2016; Leeflang *et al.* 2014).

Within a non-luxury setting, magazine readers exhibited more positive reactions to advertisements once they also found the stories contained within the magazine engaging (Malthouse *et al.* 2007). Similarly, TV viewers were found to have more positive feelings towards to the advertisements shown during a commercial break once they also had positive feelings about the programme itself (Coulter 1998). These findings raise interesting questions in examining the effectiveness of embedding social media marketing content within the broader advertising environment.

4.2.3.3 Social Media and Luxury

Early luxury brand research portrays the internet as an unavoidable evolution, posing both threats and opportunities for organizations. For example, while social media platforms offer increased opportunities for brand–consumer interaction, they are not

seen as a substitute for the on-site purchasing experience within stores or 'temples of luxury' (Riley and Lacroix 2003: 103). Given assertions that luxury communication remains more emotional than informational (Okonkwo 2010), effective communication via social media poses a challenge (Cervellon and Galipienzo 2015). Early adoption examples include Louis Vuitton's utilization of Facebook as a means of sharing its catwalk presentations with fans (Kapferer 2012), while Perrey and Spillecke (2012) discussed Burberry's venture into the Chinese social media sphere via the launch of a 24-h customer service facility through online instant messaging services. Such efforts remain especially pertinent, given the predominantly young demographic of social media usage (Liu *et al*. 2019; We Are Social 2021) and the importance of this market in maintaining luxury brand equity, even if they currently do not yet have the means to purchase luxury products or services (Kapferer 1998).

4.2.4 Approach to the Review

The objective of this review is to investigate existing scholarship, develop a conceptual framework and identify directions for future research in the luxury and social media domain (Jones and Gatrell 2014). A systematic review approach (Tranfield *et al*. 2003) is used in collecting and analysing the prominent research themes across the literature pertaining to these areas. The collection of literature consisted of two stages. Firstly, in October 2019, multiple academic databases were searched using the string < 'luxury' AND 'social media' > within the title, abstract and keyword fields (Bocconcelli *et al*., 2018). These relatively broad terms were chosen to identify as many potentially relevant articles as possible within the initial search results, before a manual removal process of non-relevant literature was conducted. No specific timeframe for publication was applied, due to the relative novelty of social media research. Further filters, where applicable, were applied to limit search results to English-language, peer-reviewed academic journal articles, excluding books, chapters, conference proceedings and non-refereed publications (Calabrò *et al*. 2019). Only full-length articles which offered original conceptual or empirical insights were deemed suitable for the study (Keupp *et al*. 2011; López-Duarte *et al*. 2015), omitting editorials or special issue introductions. Additionally, only publications listed within either the Australian Business Deans Council Journal List (ABDC 2018) or the Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide (AJG 2018) were included

in the review, to further ensure relevance to the business discipline (Nguyen *et al.* 2016; Ott and Michailova 2018).

The second stage of the collection process involved a consultation of the articles' abstracts to confirm suitability for the review, before a more thorough analysis of the article was conducted. To further ensure comprehensiveness of the review, one final consultation with the reference lists within the accepted articles enabled identification of any literature not initially gathered via the database search process (Baldacchino *et al.* 2015; Lamberton & Stephen 2016). This was supplemented by an online search of articles which had cited the chosen articles, to locate more recent research which may also have been missed. This process was then repeated in January 2021 to check for any articles which had been published since the original literature search, to ensure the review was as current as possible and to update the publication dates of articles in press. A final total of 115 articles are included in this review, identified in the References by an asterisk (Soundararajan *et al.* 2018). Table 4.1 illustrates the final number of articles collected from the various databases, with their publication title and year depicted in Table 4.2. This volume of articles is indicative of the recent rise in academic attention paid to these literature streams; Alves *et al.*'s (2016) analysis of social media research totalled 44 articles, while a recent review into sustainable luxury marketing totals 46 articles (Athwal *et al.* 2019b). Key points of information from all articles were then entered into an Excel spreadsheet to quickly identify and remove any duplicate results and to carry out a descriptive analysis of the accepted articles (see Tables 4.4-4.8 later in the *Discussion*).

Table 4.1.   Number of Publications on Social Media and Luxury

Database	Results from Query	Duplicates/Rejected Articles	Accepted Articles
EBSCOhost*	288	235	53
Scopus	213	171	42
Web of Science	219	212	7
ScienceDirect	34	27	7
manual inclusion	-	-	6
Total	754	645	115

*List of individual databases searched within EBSCOhost is included in Appendix B

Table 4.2   Number of Publications by Journal and Year of Publication

Journal	Articles		Year	Articles
Journal of Business Research	20		2021	5
Journal of Global Fashion Marketing	14		2020	41
Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management	6		2019	23
Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	5		2018	10
Journal of Product & Brand Management	4		2017	9
Journal of Interactive Advertising	4		2016	8
International Journal of Hospitality Management	4		2015	4
Marketing Intelligence and Planning	4		2014	7
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	4		2013	2
Journal of Brand Management	3		2012	3
Journal of Business Ethics	3		2011	2
Journal of Marketing Communications	2		2010	1
Psychology & Marketing	2		-	-
Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing	2		-	-
Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics	2		-	-
Cornell Hospitality Quarterly	2		-	-
Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management	2		-	-
Journal of Strategic Marketing	2		-	-
Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal	2		-	-
Other*	28		-	-
Total	115		**Total**	115

* For convenience, 'Other' represents publications contributing a single article to the review.

The methodologies and sampling strategies employed were quite varied. Given the somewhat predictable coupling of both online and offline-based data collection methods across the literature, it is prudent to divide this discussion into subsections examining each of the most prominent methodologies in turn and how they were implemented.

4.2.5   Methodological Characteristics of the Sample

4.2.5.1 Survey Methods

The most common data collection method (31% of articles) was the use of survey methods. While the vast majority of these (86%) were conducted online, there were some which used intercept methods. Such an approach facilitates a quantitative exploration of factors such as social media usage and behaviour (e.g. Chen *et al*. 2021b; Ha *et al*. 2019; Martín-Consuegra *et al*. 2019), attitudes towards social media marketing and advertising (e.g. Chu *et al*. 2013; Godey *et al*. 2016; Xie and Lou 2020), brand perception (e.g. Farrag 2017; Park *et al*. 2020), brand–consumer relationships

(e.g. Bazi *et al*. 2020; Kefi and Maar 2020) and purchase intention (e.g. Kim and Lee 2019; Morra *et al*. 2017; Mou *et al*. 2019).

4.2.5.2 Netnography

Given the vast array of data publicly available on social media, netnographic techniques (Kozinets 2010) were predictably prominent throughout the reviewed articles. A key advantage in adopting such techniques includes convenience of access, with the significant volume of existing online data providing ample research opportunities for scholars. Further, it eliminates the partial element of bias in providing an overview of actual approaches taken by luxury brands on social media, rather than a reliance on reported practices and anecdotal evidence from practitioners and consumers. A popular subset, especially among more recent publications, was an analysis of brand attitudes through social media content (e.g., Blasi *et al*. 2020; Chen *et al*. 2021a), as well as user reviews and subsequent response strategies by management on related platforms (e.g., Chang *et al*. 2020; Jang and Moutinho 2019; Schuckert *et al*. 2019), particularly in the hospitality industry.

4.2.5.3 Experimental Design

Studies incorporating experimental designs were primarily concerned with consumer attitudes and behaviour towards branded social media content under specific conditions. For example, multiple studies employed either genuine, amended or fictitious social media content in investigating constructs such as brand attitudes (e.g., Park *et al*. 2020), attitudes towards social media advertising (e.g., Choi *et al*., 2020; Venus Jin *et al*. 2019), consumer attention (e.g., Daugherty and Hoffman 2014), advocacy behaviours (e.g., Kwon *et al*. 2017) and users' experience-sharing habits (e.g., Liu *et al*. 2019).

4.2.5.4 Interviews

Studies adopting interviews as their primary data collection method incorporated both managerial and consumer perspectives. Lines of inquiry included exploration of the nature of consumers' relationships with luxury brands on social media, including brand co-creation and destruction (Quach and Thaichon 2017), brand satisfaction (Athwal *et al*. 2019a), purchasing behaviour (Jain and Schultz 2019) and social media engagement (Leban *et al*. 2020; Pentina *et al*. 2018; Ramadan *et al*. 2018).

From a managerial perspective, interviews provided exploratory insights into luxury brand use of social media marketing (Taylor *et al*. 2015) and inquiry into the management of the luxury consumer purchase process (Jain and Schultz 2019). Further types of informants also included influencers who can occupy a form of middle ground between brand and consumer and seek to reconcile both luxury consumption and an ethical lifestyle (Leban *et al*. 2021). Overall, interviews are a relatively underutilized method of data collection among studies in this area.

4.2.5.5 Case Studies

Case studies facilitate a deeper dive into the complex nature of luxury brands rather than mere surface-level observations (Beverland 2005) and are a commonly used method for exploration of an underdeveloped topic (Annie Jin 2012; Essamri *et al*. 2019). In terms of industries, the fashion sector has proven the most popular, with brands such as Louis Vuitton (Annie Jin 2012), Coach (Ng 2014), Dolce & Gabbana (Atwal *et al*. 2020; Pantano 2021), Burberry (Phan *et al*., 2011; Straker & Wrigley, 2016), Calvin Klein and DKNY (Kontu and Vecchi 2014) all being examined, although the luxury hospitality and motor industries are also included (Essamri *et al*. 2019; Qian *et al*. 2020).

4.2.5.6 Sampling

As Table 4.3 illustrates, most studies (88%) have been conducted across North America, Europe and Asia, predominantly (77%) based within either the fashion or tourism/hospitality sectors, illustrating a rather narrow industry focus of inquiry to date. While this indicates a growing maturity of luxury research within these industrial and geographical contexts, it also illuminates some underexplored areas which may be of interest to scholars moving forward.

Table 4.3.   Location of Research and Industry Contexts

Location	Articles		Industry	Articles
Europe	36		Fashion	62
Asia	33		Tourism/Hospitality	26
North America	32		General	16
Multiple locations	10		Multiple industries	5
Australia	4		Jewellery/Beauty	4
Not disclosed	2		Vehicles	1
-	-		Wine	1
Total	115		**Total**	115

An interesting context underpinning the research themes was the examination of younger Millennial and/or Generation Z consumers as the research sample. While there seem to be differing opinions on the start and end points for the birth of the Millennial generation, Bolton et al. (2013) adopt the criteria of being born between 1981 and 1999, with Generation Z consumers being born thereafter. Millennial consumers have been steady buyers of luxury, accounting for 35% of consumption in 2019, set to rise to 45% by 2025 (D'Arpizio *et al.* 2020). This generation has been described as 'online community builders' (Salman *et al.* 2016: 138), with a strong predisposition to use social media to create, consume and distribute content (Mazzucchelli *et al.* 2018; Zollo *et al.* 2020). Multiple studies included university student participants, due to their level of access to online technologies (Kamal *et al.* 2013), heavy social media usage (Morra *et al.* 2017) and the influence such platforms can have on their purchasing behaviours (Daugherty and Hoffman 2014). Some studies did not explicitly target university students, however they were aimed at the Millennial age group; for example, Quach and Thaichon (2017) described two-thirds of their sample as being aged between 23 and 35, while over half of the respondents in Prentice and Loureiro's (2018) study were 18–35 years old. This generation is now approaching a point in their lives whereby they are seeking affordable upgrades from conventional brands, as well as tastefulness and youthfulness (Wang and Qiao 2020), signifying their importance to the future direction of the industry.

4.2.6 Inductive Analysis

Once the articles to be included in the review were finalized, a thematic analysis facilitated the grouping of the examined studies into categories depending on their central focus of inquiry and contribution (Clarke *et al*. 2012). The objective of this process was to inductively identify themes which depict the role of social media within the luxury domain for the purposes of developing a conceptual model to position social media within luxury brand strategy (Wood and McKelvie 2015). This involved the authors individually consulting each of the articles in their entirety and compiling notes on their findings and contributions, eliminating potential bias (Athwal *et al*. 2019b). The goal of a general inductive analysis approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the dominant themes inherent in raw data and to establish clear and transparent links to such themes, with the end goal to develop a model about the underlying structure of experiences or processes evident in the data (Thomas 2006). The authors remained in regular consultation and thoroughly discussed the examined articles, before arriving at a consensus regarding the major over-arching themes (Baron *et al*. 2014).

4.2.7 Findings and Contributions

A total of five distinct themes were identified pertaining to the organizational contexts in which luxury and social media were being investigated through the literature, which serve as the central pillars for the conceptual framework: *brand strategy*, luxury *brand social media communications*, luxury *consumer attitudes and perceptions*, *engagement* and social media's *influence on brand performance-related outcomes*. Among the articles examined, it became apparent that several studies' central focus and contribution permeated throughout multiple themes, thus the proposal of an integrative, holistic framework of social media and luxury, demonstrating each theme's level of maturation within the literature. These factors are visually represented by the interlocking gears between each theme, while the size of the gears represents the volume of studies primarily pertinent to each theme (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1.   Theoretical Framework
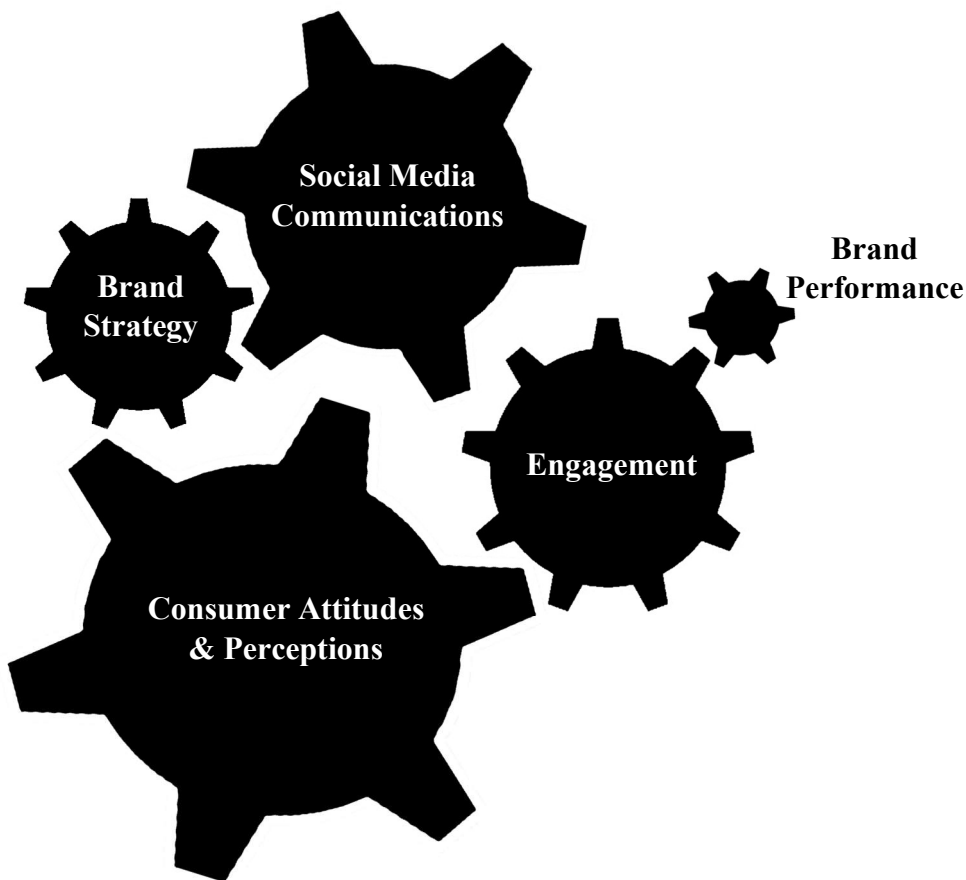
As Figure 4.2 shows, the volume of research examining social media and luxury has been steadily increasing from a flat level in the early 2010s to a rising trend from 2017 onwards across all emergent themes. While the volume of social media-centric research continues to rise generally (Alves *et al*. 2016; Voorveld 2019), its role within a luxury context is becoming a particularly popular avenue of academic inquiry (Arrigo 2018), further emphasising the need for this conceptual framework of social media's role within luxury brand management. As only five 2021 articles were published at the time of this review, these were omitted from Figure 4.2 due to incomplete data although are included in the tabular depictions of themes in the *Discussion* section.

Figure 4.2.   Number of Publications across Themes by Year
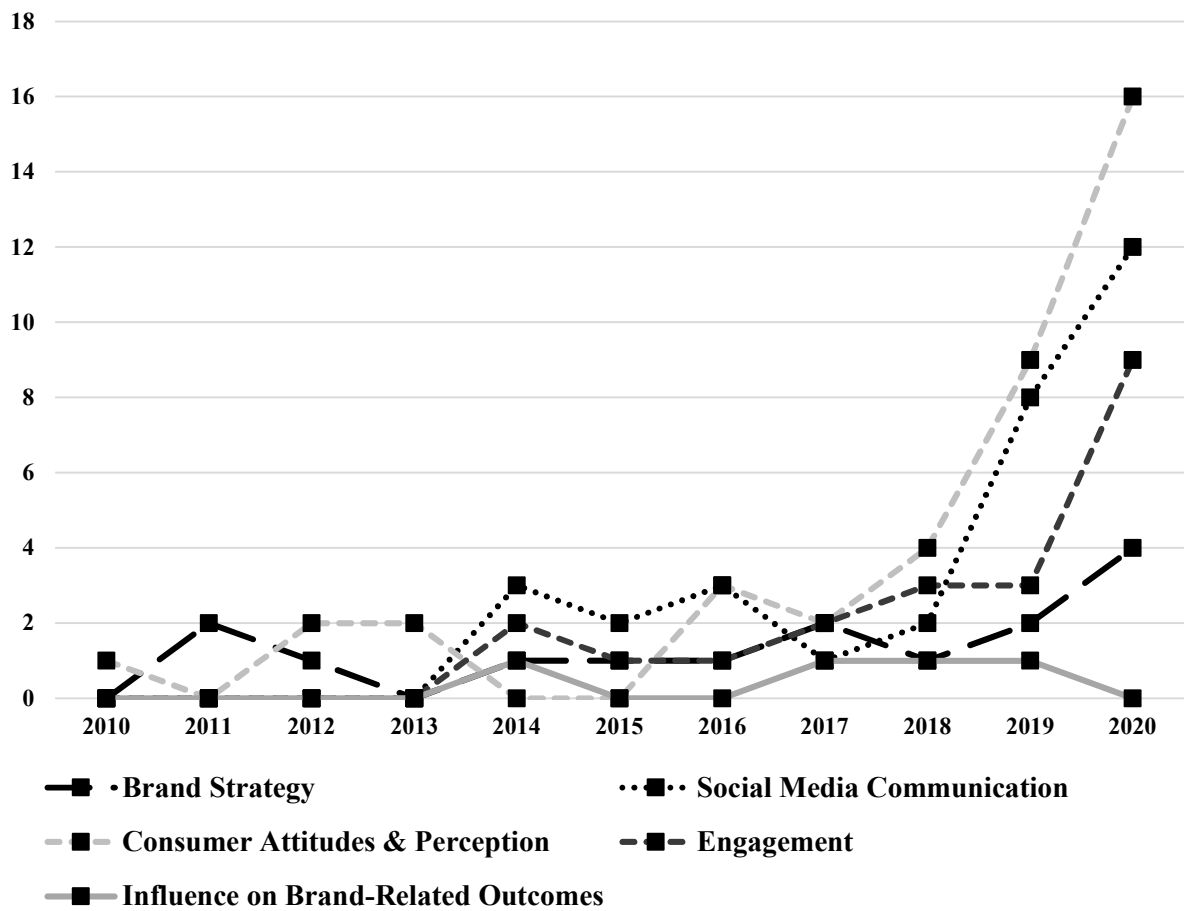
This review posits, which the proceeding discussion will elaborate, that the brand's overall strategy will inform and guide the subsequent integration of social media communications in the overall media mix (Voorveld 2019), while also contributing to consumer attitudes and behaviours toward the brand (Choi *et al*. 2020). These factors will act as antecedents of sustained levels of engagement with consumers (Liu, Shin, and Burns 2021) impacting brand performance-related outcomes (Jang and Moutinho 2019). The discussion will critically analyse these individual theoretical elements as well as explore the existing *linkages* bridging the individual themes collectively informing the luxury and social media literature.

4.2.7.1 Theme 1: Brand Strategy

The first thematic area examines social media platforms' integration into luxury brand strategy, consisting of 15 articles (Table 4.4). Of these 15 articles, five relate purely to

brand strategy, while ten demonstrate linkage or interplay with other emergent themes, as noted. Integration of online platforms into the overall strategy of a luxury brand requires the involvement of top-level management (Heine and Berghaus 2014) and thus far they have been relatively slow, even fearful, adopters (Okonkwo 2009; Kapferer 2015), as questions remain how exactly such technologies may be used to preserve a luxurious brand aura and offer a reflective customer service experience (Baker *et al*. 2018). Existing research in the field points toward a lack of coherent and clearly defined social media strategies from luxury brands (Reyneke *et al*. 2011) as well as an absence of in-depth case studies examining luxury branding strategy in emerging markets (Yu *et al*. 2019). Social media provides brands with the means to engage with consumers directly, with the specificities of each platform facilitating innovative brand-building approaches online (Lee and Watkins 2016; Chen and Wang 2017), with the goal for luxury brands being to drive offline consumer activities (Chen and Wang 2017). However, television remains the dominant segment in terms of media spend for luxury brands (30.2% of total budget) (Statista 2018). The optimal traditional/digital media spending mix is generally taken to be 3:1 in favour of traditional media channels, with strong potential for synergistic benefits being accrued from effective utilisation of both formats (Findley *et al*. 2020). In terms of quality of exposure, television advertising is as effective today as it was thirty years ago, however obtaining that quality exposure is more challenging. This is coupled with the increase in multi-device usage and 'distracted viewing' (Findley *et al*. 2020), emphasising brands' need for omnichannel approaches to harness the reciprocal nature of contemporary luxury brand-consumer relationships (Anido Freire 2014).

Table 4.4.   Brand Strategy Overview

#	Year	Author(s)	Focus of Inquiry	Theme Links	Industry	Methodology	Sample
1	2011	Phan, Thomas, & Heine	Re-branding strategy	-	Fashion	Case study	Burberry
2	2011	Reyneke, Pitt, & Berthon	Brand visibility	-	Wine	Secondary data	Social media presences
3	2012	Rishi & Gaur	Strategic challenges faced by brands	-	Hotels	Focus groups, interviews, netnographic (net) content analysis	Management, academics, consumer reviews
4	2014	Heine & Berghaus	Brand strategy and comms	COM	Fashion	Semi-structured interviews	Management
5	2015	Gibbs, MacDonald & MacKay	HR strategy	-	Hotels	Online survey	HR management
6	2016	Lee & Watkins	Vlog strategies & perception	CAP	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
7	2017	Chen & Wang	Social media (SM) strategy and consumer perception	CAP	Fashion	Net content analysis, interviews	Brands' WeChat accounts, consumers
8	2017	Slivar & Bayer	Referral and affiliate marketing strategies	-	Hotels	Netnographic content analysis	Websites, consumer reviews
9	2018	Baker, Ashill, Amer, & Diab	Digital adoption strategy	COM	Five categories*	Net content analysis	Online presences
10	2019	Proctor & Kitchen	Celebrity endorsement strategy	COM	Jewellery	Literature review	N/A
11	2019	Yu, Rahman, & Yan	Branding strategies	-	Fashion	Case study	Aimer Group
12	2020	Yu & Hu	Celebrity endorsement strategy and consumer perception	CAP	Fashion	Net content analysis, experiment	Social media presences, consumers
13	2020	Leban, Thomsen, von Wallpach, & Voyer	Influencer personas and brand identity strategy	COM	General	Interviews, net content analysis	High-net-worth influencers
14	2020	Wiedmann & von Mettenheim	Strategic success factors of Influencers	CAP	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
15	2020	Song and Kim	Effectiveness of celebrity endorsements	CAP	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers

*Baker *et al*. (2018, p. 37) examined luxury brands across the categories of "automobiles, fashion, jewellery, watches, and yachts."
COM: Indicates linkage with Theme 2: *Social Media Communications*; CAP: Indicates linkage with Theme 3: *Consumer Attitudes & Perceptions*

Online branding strategies can encompass both tangible and intangible dimensions, with tangible dimensions encompassing product integrity, brand signature, and premium pricing, coupled with intangible qualities including exclusivity, experience, and stakeholder commitment (Yu *et al.* 2019). Global brand-building strategies online often necessitate promotion of a lifestyle, rather than simply selling a product (Yu *et al.* 2019), a task made easier by already-established brand recognisability and awareness (Slivar and Bayer 2017). Luxury products embody either technical or symbolic luxury, dependant on their representation of either high-class performance or hedonistic elements (Reddy and Terblanche 2005). The quality of a luxury brand's online presence should reflect its products ensuring brand consistency (Phan *et al.* 2011), especially across diverse cultures (Yu and Hu 2020).

There seems to be conflicting evidence as to whether luxury brands should engage in highly interactive, community-building approaches on social media or else seek to maintain a sense of psychological distance from consumers to preserve an aura of exclusivity. The nature of luxury offerings acts as a key determining factor in the level of relationship-building adopted by luxury brands on social media. As Athwal *et al.* (2019a) suggest, Millennials are the first generation to utilise technology across the entire customer journey, which has been a motivating factor behind luxury brands' adoption of social media and in developing innovative strategies (Kim and Ko 2010; Chu *et al.* 2013). However, perhaps contradicting the inherent sociable and interactive nature of these platforms, Millennial users have been found to be widely accepting of the more distant approach taken by luxury brands on social media, such as publishing content without seeking interaction with users (Athwal *et al.* 2019a). In fact, value perceptions can decrease if psychological distance is not maintained and if the brand is viewed as being too accessible (Park *et al.* 2020). Instead, luxury brand social media strategy must be to portray an 'aspirational dream', incorporating exclusive behind-the-scenes access and content through their social media presences. It is this perceived accessibility, rather than actual interaction, which fulfils the affective and cognitive needs of Millennials (Athwal et al. 2019a; Xie and Lou 2020). The next sub-section explores the second theme, *Social Media Communications*, which is followed by another sub-section where the interplay between these themes is explored.

4.2.7.2 Theme 2: Social Media Communications

The second theme adopts a *brand communications* perspective to luxury and social media, a generally underutilised approach in the literature (Zhou *et al*. 2020). Table 4.5 provides an overview of the 31 articles in this theme. Social media marketing activities are segmented into five dimensions: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation, and word-of-mouth (WOM) (Kim and Ko 2012; Godey *et al*. 2016), although this conceptualisation has been challenged based on WOM being categorised as a behavioural outcome and therefore omitted from recent work (Liu, Shin, and Burns 2021; Cheung *et al*. 2020). Studies have highlighted the role of these five dimensions in generating brand and customer equity (Kim and Ko 2012; Godey *et al*. 2016) and predicting user interaction (Cheung *et al*. 2020), although effective customisation efforts prove especially challenging in such public fora (Liu, Shin, and Burns 2021). Social media research often focusses more on content, rather than message, driven by factors such as channel, source, and message characteristics (Voorveld 2019; Wang and Chen 2020), with luxury brand recognition and trust shaped by both content attributes and consumer characteristics (Venus Jin and Ryu 2020). For example, 'classical' aesthetics, such as symmetricity and clarity, are more frequently utilised by luxury fashion brands over 'expressive' aesthetics, which are more creative and complex in nature. However, user interactions were more numerous among content adopting expressive aesthetics (Kusumasondjaja 2020).

Table 4.5.   Social Media Communication Overview

#	Year	Author(s)	Focus of Inquiry	Theme Links	Industry	Methodology	Sample
1	2014	Daugherty & Hoffman	eWOM in SM comms	CAP	Cars and restaurants	Experiment	Consumers
2	2014	Ng	Social media comms	CAP	Fashion	Case study	Coach
3	2014	Maman Larraufie & Kourdoughli	Use of e-semiotics in SM comms	-	Fashion	Net analysis	Websites
4	2015	Cervellon & Galipienzo	Effect of different appeals in brands' SM comms	CAP	Hotels	Experiment	Facebook content
5	2015	Taylor, Barber, & Deale	SM comms	CAP	Hotels	Interviews, online survey	Management, consumers
6	2016	Salman, Ferguson, Paulin, & Schattke	Support for cause-related events	CAP	Fashion	Online survey and experiment	Consumers
7	2016	Üçok Hughes, Bendoni, & Pehlivan	Story giving in comms	CAP	Jewellery	Case study	Tiffany and Co.
8	2016	Wu, Clark, Kang, & Fine	SM comms	-	Hotels	Net content analysis	Twitter and Sina Weibo content
9	2017	Gautam & Sharma	Impact of social media on purchase intentions	CAP	Fashion	Field survey	Consumer
10	2018	Huang, Ha, & Kim	Narrative persuasion in SM comms	CAP	Hotels	Online survey	Consumers
11	2018	Morra, Gelosa, Ceruti, & Mazzucchelli	Impact of SM comms on purchase intent	CAP	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
12	2019	Athwal, Istanbulluoglu, & McCormack	Gratification sought by users from SM comms	CAP	Fashion	Net content analysis, interviews	Brands' social media accounts, consumers
13	2019	Atwal, Bryson, & Tavilla	Consumer-generated comms	CAP	Restaurants	Diary research, focus group	Consumers
14	2019	Alrawadieh & Dincer	Managerial response strategies	-	Hotels	Net content analysis	Consumer reviews
15	2019	Ha, Huang, & Park	Effectiveness of SM comms	CAP	Fashion & hotels	Online survey	Consumers
16	2019	Liu, Perry, & Gadzinski	SM comms and user perception	CAP	Fashion	Multiple case studies	Managers, consumers, and brands' WeChat content
17	2019	Mazzoli, Grazzini, Donvito, & Aiello	Brand associations in SM comms	-	Fashion	Net content analysis	Twitter content
18	2019	Schuckert, Liang, Law, & Sun	Managerial review response strategies	CAP	Hotels	Net content analysis	Consumer reviews
19	2019	Mandler, Johnen, & Gräve	Success drivers of luxury SM comms	CAP	Fashion, vehicles, Cosmetics, Champagne	Net content analysis, experiment	Brands' Facebook content, consumers

20	2020	Choi, Seo, Wagner, & Yoon	Consumer evaluation of SM comms	CAP	Fashion	Experiment	Consumers
21	2020	Chung, Ko, Joung, & Kim	E-service and comms via chatbots	CAP	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
22	2020	Kusumasondjaja	Role of aesthetics and modality in responses to Instagram content	CAP	Fashion	Net content analysis	Instagram content
23	2020	Venus Jin & Ryu	Effectiveness of various forms of Instagram content	CAP	Fashion	Experiment	Consumers
24	2020	Kong, Witmaier, & Ko	Link sustainability comms to eWOM and purchase intent	CAP	Fashion	Experiment	Consumers
25	2020	Lee & Youn	Effect of social distance embedded in SM content	CAP	Fashion	Experiment	Consumers
26	2020	Passavanti, Pantano, Priporas, & Verteramo	Use of digital channels for luxury brand marketing comms	-	Fashion, accessories, vehicles	Multi Case Study	Five brands
27	2020	Septianto, Seo, & Errmann	Emotional appeals embedded in comms by sustainable brands	CAP	Fashion	Experiment	Consumers
28	2020	Wang & Chen	Self-presentation and interactivity in SM comms	CAP	Fashion	Experiment	Consumers
29	2020	Wang, Huang, & Pérez-Ríos	Luxury brand comms on Twitter v Weibo	-	Fashion	Net content analysis	Twitter and Weibo content
30	2020	Zhou, Barnes, McCormick, & Blazquez Cano	Narrative strategies by influencers in creating eWOM	CAP	Fashion	Net content analysis	Influencers' Weibo and WeChat content
31	2020	Jiang, Huhmann, & Hyman	Masculinity in luxury brand SM comms in China	CAP	Fashion	Net content analysis	Instagram and Weibo

CAP: Indicates linkage with Theme 3: Consumer Attitudes & Perception

The creation of meaning and desire remain pivotal in luxury communication for brands (Gurzki *et al.* 2019). Visual showcasing of classical non-personal luxury characteristics, including heritage and speciality, remain central to brands' social media communications (Maman Larraufie and Kourdoughli 2014; Lee and Youn 2020; Wang *et al.* 2020) and have been found to elicit a stronger consumer affect than personal dimensions such as hedonism and the extended self (Mandler *et al.* 2019). Conversely, communication of non-luxury elements such as sustainability, a growing element of luxury (Athwal *et al.* 2019b; Septianto *et al.* 2020), could be perceived as deceptive if claims are made in vague and unverifiable ways in their content (Kong *et al.* 2021).

Communication and response strategies on review platforms, such as TripAdvisor, provide insights into the approaches of luxury brands online, although there seems to be no broadly applicable strategy to respond to online reviews. Luxury hotel guests seem to value more in-depth, lengthy responses rather than shorter, concise messages (Schuckert *et al.* 2019; Xie *et al.* 2017). Such findings would concur with the previously mentioned assertion by Phan *et al.* (2011) of an expectation from consumers of superior levels of quality across all aspects of the luxury brand experience, including online communications from both brands and clients, implying less emphasis on a sales-driven communication focus in favour of a social media strategy that emphasizes relationship building (Taylor *et al.* 2015).

Research surrounding luxury brand–consumer communications on social media remains fragmented, with limited guidance on how exactly luxury brands can design effective strategies (Mandler *et al.* 2019). While the premise of social media accentuates the role of the user at its core, luxury brands must strike a balance between fostering relationships with their online audiences while preserving control over the central message being communicated. Consumers expect high-quality content and communication from luxury brands, reflective of the quality and status of the brand itself (Chung *et al.* 2020). While some researchers have endeavoured to explore the effectiveness of the various dimensions of social media marketing (i.e., Cheung *et al.* 2021; Godey *et al.* 2016; Kim and Ko 2012; Liu *et al.* 2021), there remains scope for further inquiry regarding the antecedents and anticipated outcomes for luxury brand communication on social media. The challenge therein for luxury brands remains developing an effective social media communications strategy which effectively

resonates with the diverse segments of the audience, while also mirroring their strategic brand values and desired consumer image and perception. Further examination of luxury brand strategy and how it informs both social media communications and consumer perception is offered in the following linking themes section, to understand how social media can enhance brand–consumer relationships.

4.2.7.3 Linking Brand Strategy and Social Media Communications

Discussion of the interplay between the theoretical implications of the review themes serves to further illustrate the integrative nature of the proposed framework and identify the most pertinent areas where future research can further contribute to its development. Brand–consumer dialogue on social media fosters personal relationships, with storytelling a key method in communicating brand vision and identity (Heine and Berghaus 2014). An important consideration in online communications strategy is whether to engage in a branding-only approach online or to incorporate sales tactics; for example, highly seasonal luxury products are more suited to a direct sales-driven approach (Baker *et al*. 2018). However, reliance on a unidirectional model of branding is problematic, given the increased influence of contributions from consumers and online communities in luxury branding (Essamri *et al*. 2019; Phan *et al*. 2011). Conversely, products that experience lower sales volume and are less fashion-sensitive, such as yachts, benefit from a more brand-building, relationship approach (Baker *et al*. 2018).

In highlighting the inevitability of a co-created process of brand formulation and communication, Üçok Hughes *et al*. (2016) recommend that luxury brands foster and nurture connections with their online audience by encouraging consumers to share their own brand stories as a means of strengthening community engagement (cf. Essamri *et al*. 2019; discussed further in Theme 4). Social media facilitates such interactions, yet the diverse nature and normative structure of individual platforms, and cultural diversity of online communities, indicate a lack of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach for brand communications (Jiang *et al*. 2020; Wu *et al*. 2016). Marketers must understand users' motivations for sharing brand-related stories and identify commonalties among these narratives to inform their own strategies (Üçok Hughes *et al*. 2016).

A recent trend in strategic social media communications has been the delegation by brands of transmission of their message to third parties, such as influencers. These individuals have created their own personal brand and garnered a following on social media, leading to opportunities for collaboration with luxury brands (Leban *et al*. 2021; Wiedmann and von Mettenheim 2020). Influencers utilize a variety of narrative strategies in their social media communications, characterized as advising, enthusing, educating, appraising, amusing and assembling (Zhou *et al*. 2020). This typology from Zhou *et al*. (2020) provides critical distinctions in influencer-driven eWOM generation strategies on social media, given that influencers command their own message, rather than just serve as vehicles for communications wholly controlled by the brand. User–influencer interaction increases luxury brand perception and purchase intention once the brand community feels a close association with the influencer (Lee and Watkins 2016). Such strong associative ties are not felt by consumers towards the pairing of brands and more traditional celebrities, given their tendency to endorse multiple brands and products (Song and Kim 2020). Establishing closeness can be achieved through influencers' conspicuous displays of ethicality in their luxury consumption and lifestyle, thereby retaining legitimacy as positive role models (Leban *et al*. 2021). This feeds into the notion that trustworthiness and attractiveness are more important factors than actual expertise in determining the effectiveness of influencers (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim 2020). However, uncertainty still exists amongst practitioners about the use of influencers (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020). For example, any negative perception of the influencer can also be transferred to the brand they are representing (Campbell and Warren, 2012). Therefore, luxury brands should ensure the appropriateness of the individual endorsing the brand (Proctor and Kitchen 2019), as well as the narrative approach (Zhou *et al*. 2020), to maximize the effectiveness of influencer campaigns.

The next subsection will analyse the third theme, *consumer attitudes and perceptions*, before exploring linkages between the *brand strategy* and *consumer attitudes and perceptions* themes, followed by the linkages between the *social media communications* and *consumer attitudes and perceptions* themes.

4.2.7.4 Theme 3: Consumer Attitudes and Perceptions

The largest theme in this review (37% of total articles; see Table 4.6) examined the *attitudes and perceptions of consumers* towards luxury brands on social media, reflecting Anido Freire (2014), who notes that most researchers have focused on this area. While consumers' satisfaction with a social media presence is a positive predictor of a favourable brand attitude (Annie Jin 2012; tom Dieck *et al*. 2017), marketers and consumers appear to be at an impasse regarding what constitutes luxury on social media, as not all content is interpreted equally across user groups (Castellano and Khelladi 2016; Chen *et al*. 2021a). Luxury brands should not only adopt social media platforms in their branding activities, but also endeavour to understand the personal motivations of users in engaging with luxury brands' online communities to maximize the effectiveness of these efforts (Zollo *et al*. 2020) and avoid the aforementioned negative effects on value perception that a decrease in psychological distance can incur (Park *et al*. 2020). Social media platforms have been found to elicit positive effects on a variety of consumer outcomes, including perception (Lee and Watkins 2016; Lee *et al*. 2018), reputation (Castellano and Khelladi 2016), awareness, image, loyalty (Godey *et al*. 2016), exclusivity (Xie and Lou 2020) and romance (Beig and Khan 2020), but can also foster negativity, even hate, towards brands (Atwal *et al*. 2020; Pantano 2021).

Table 4.6.　　　Consumer Attitudes and Perceptions Overview

#	Year	Author(s)	Focus of Inquiry	Links	Industry	Methodology	Sample
1	2010	Kim & Ko	SM and customer relationships	COM	Fashion	Field survey	Consumers
2	2012	Kim & Ko	SM and customer relationships	COM	Fashion	Field survey	Consumers
3	2012	Annie Jin	Consumer satisfaction with brands' SM presence	COM	Fashion	Online survey	Louis Vuitton
4	2013	Chu, Kamal, & Kim	Consumer attitudes to SMM	COM	General	Online survey	Consumers
5	2013	Kamal, Chu, & Pedram	Materialism's impact on attitudes	COM	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
6	2016	Castellano & Khelladi	Influence of reputation, image, and SM on e-reputation	STR	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
7	2016	Godey, *et al.*	Influence of SM strategy on brand equity and response	COM	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
8	2016	Philander & Zhong	Sentiment on SM	-	Hotels	Net content analysis	Hotel tweets
9	2017	Farrag	Brand attitudes, purchase intentions	-	Fashion	Interviews, field survey	Managers, consumers
10	2017	tom Dieck, Jung, Kim, & Moon	Acceptance of SM	-	Hotels	Interviews, online survey	Consumers
11	2018	Helal, Ozuem, and Lancaster	Impact of SM on brand perception	-	Fashion	Online survey, interviews	Consumers
12	2018	Lee, Hur, & Watkins	Effect of visual complexity on brand perceptions	STR	Fashion	Online experiment	Consumers
13	2018	Mazzucchelli, *et al.*	Consumer UGC's effect on loyalty	-	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
14	2018	Charoennan & Huang	Impact of conspicuous consumption on brand attitudes	-	Fashion	Literature review	N/A
15	2019	Chu, Kamal, & Kim	Attitudes and response to SM advertising	COM	General	Literature review	N/A
16	2019	Gunasekar & Sudhakar	Attitudes toward online reviews	-	Hotels	Net content analysis	Consumer reviews
17	2019	Kim & Lee	Brand community integration's effect on attitudes and loyalty	ENG	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
18	2019	Liu, Wu, & Li	Sharing of experiences affecting intention	-	Tourism	Experiment	Consumers
19	2019	Venus Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu	Consumer attitudes toward celebrity endorsements	-	Fashion	Experiment	Consumers, influencers
20	2019	Jain & Schultz	Digital platform use across the purchasing cycle	-	General	Focus groups, observation, interviews	Consumers, managers
21	2019	Mou, Gao, & Yang	Role of SM on intention to purchase	-	Hotels	Online survey	Consumers
22	2019	Wu & Gao	Investigate emotional experiences within service interaction	-	Hotels	Net content analysis	Consumer reviews
23	2019	Hlee, Lee, Yang, & Koo	Impact of content richness and source credibility in reviews	-	Restaurants	Net content analysis	Consumer Reviews
24	2020	Beig & Khan	Role of SM in building brand romance	COM	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers

25	2020	Giglio, Pantano, Bilotta, & Melewar	Consumer perception of luxury hotel brands	STR	Hotels	Net content analysis	Consumer reviews
26	2020	Chung & Kim	Effects of mergers and acquisitions on luxury brand loyalty	STR	Fashion	Experiment	Consumers
27	2020	Eastman, Shin, & Ruhland	Students' relationships with luxury brands	COM	General	Collage method, interviews	Consumers
28	2020	Blasi, Brigato, & Sedita	Perceptions of eco-friendliness in fashion brands	COM	Fashion	Net content analysis	Twitter content
29	2020	Wallace, Buil, & de Chernatony	Conspicuous virtue signalling on SM	-	General	Online surveys	Consumers
30	2020	Atwal, Bryson, & Kaiser	Development and spread of brand hate on SM	COM	Fashion	Case study	Dolce & Gabbana
31	2020	Chang *et al*.	Sentiment analysis via hotel reviews	-	Hotels	Net content analysis	Consumer reviews
32	2020	Chen, Wang, & Qiao	Young male consumers' perception of luxury advertising	-	General	Interviews, net content analysis	Consumers, Sina Weibo content
33	2020	Wallace, Buil, & Catalán	Consumers' self-congruence with luxury fashion brands	-	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
34	2020	Wang & Qiao	Meaning and perception of luxury-lite brands	COM	General	Focus groups, net content analysis	Consumers, Sina Weibo content
35	2020	Xie & Lou	Perceived value of luxury content	COM	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
36	2020	Zollo, Filieri, Rialti, & Yoon	Role of brand communities in building brand equity	ENG	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
37	2020	Kim & Phua	Consumer responses to empowerment hashtags	COM	Cosmetics	Experiment	Consumers
38	2020	Qian, Law, Wei, Shen, & Sun	Comparison of self-positioned versus perceived image	STR	Hotels	Case study	Upper House Hotel
39	2020	Cheung *et al*.	SM driving brand-related activities	COM	Cosmetics	Online survey	Consumers
40	2021	Chen, Zhang, Xie, & Niu	Low-key behaviour on social media	COM	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
41	2021	Feng, Yang, Yu, and Tu	Negative effects of positive reviews	-	Hotels	Online survey	Consumers
42	2021	Pantano	Viral effect of negative stereotypes leading to brand hate	COM	Fashion	Case study	Dolce & Gabbana

STR: Indicates linkage with Theme 1: *Brand Strategy*; COM: Indicates linkage with Theme 2: *Social Media Communications*; ENG: Indicates linkage with Theme 4: *Engagement*

Luxury managers have adjusted their brand appeals to be more congruent with how consumers seek to express themselves (Choi *et al*. 2020), although the literature remains divided on the link between the individual's virtual and actual self on social media (Wallace *et al*. 2020). For example, social media use is a significant predictor of materialism (Kamal *et al*. 2013), which is associated with conspicuous consumption whereby individuals are more likely to display brands more aligned with their ideal self than their actual self on social media (Wallace *et al*. 2020). Conversely, in a collectivist Chinese context, consumers engage in more inconspicuous displays of luxury consumption in their own social media content. This contributes to the individual's self-image while preserving interpersonal relationships by avoiding ostentatious displays and possibly attracting negative comments (Chen *et al*. 2021b).

While most research has focused on the positive effects of social media on consumer perceptions of luxury brands, the proliferation of such platforms can inevitably lead to negative sentiment being shared online, although this is largely absent in the luxury brand literature (Pantano 2021). Two papers by Atwal *et al*. (2020) and Pantano (2021) examine the negative consequences of Dolce & Gabbana's 2018 advertising campaign in China, which reinforced certain stereotypes about Chinese people and culture, leading to calls to boycott the brand and the cancellation of its impending fashion show (Atwal *et al*. 2020). While examining the same case, both studies offered novel contributions to the literature through an illustration of the potentially rapid diffusion of negative sentiment on social media (Pantano 2021), as well as the anti-consumption behaviours, or brand hate, exhibited by social media users (Atwal *et al*. 2020).

Consumer attitudes are investigated by brands on social media through sentiment analysis of multiple forms of UGC, especially online reviews. While potentially costly, time-consuming and vulnerable to self-selection and recall bias, sentiment analysis provides naturalistic insights into brand performance (Philander and Zhong 2016). It has been highlighted as an effective way of harnessing real-time information in evaluating client opinion and perception of brands (Philander and Zhong 2016), as consumers perceive UGC and eWOM as trustworthy sources of information (tom Dieck *et al*. 2017). While early research investigated the informational value of online reviews for users, more recent inquiry has been directed to exploring the hedonic side of review evaluation (Hlee *et al*., 2019). Such content

can also effectively capture the tangible elements of predominantly intangible luxury experiences, such as hotel amenities and dining (Giglio *et al*. 2020; Mou *et al*. 2019). Luxury brands should encourage and amplify positive reviews and comments (Gunasekar and Sudhakar 2019; tom Dieck *et al*. 2017), especially given the role of reviews and subsequent interactions in the emotional experience of hotel guests (Wu and Gao 2020). However, this should be encouraged on platforms with a lesser capacity for social comparison, such as TripAdvisor, rather than more personal platforms, such as Facebook. Due to the perceived similarity between peers on these more personal platforms, a review of a luxury hotel may trigger envious emotional and behavioural responses, resulting in decreased purchase intentions towards that hotel brand (Feng *et al*. 2021).

The following *linking themes* sections serve to synthesize how the literature has examined bridging luxury brand strategy and social media communications with the resultant impact on perception and attitudes.

4.2.7.5 Linking Brand Strategy and Consumer Attitudes and Perceptions

Luxury brands have thus far struggled to transfer the luxury in-store experience online (Holmqvist *et al*. 2020b; Maman Larraufie and Kourdoughli 2014), a critical factor in retail as the strength of the salesperson–customer relationship elicits a significant positive effect on both purchase decision and customer satisfaction with their purchase (Kim *et al*. 2010). When a luxury brand improves the quality of its social media activities, it increases brand equity and intention to purchase (Morra *et al*. 2017). While it could potentially represent a dilution or loss of brand identity, UGC presents an opportunity for the brand to evolve and adapt to changing market perceptions, tastes and preferences (Mazzoli *et al*. 2019).

4.2.7.6 Linking Social Media Communications and Consumer Attitudes and Perceptions

Limits remain in our understanding of consumer attitudes towards luxury brands on social media, particularly negative attitudes. Different aspects of this theme have been investigated within the context of social media content and communication; however, the literature remains devoid of a holistic theory examining the effects of luxury brand communications on consumer attitudes, perceptions and behaviour. The mode of

communication, including types of social media and content features, exhibit varying influences on consumer perceptions. Findings from Farrag (2017) indicate experiential needs as being the most important factor influencing attitude towards luxury brands, further emphasizing the need for a shift away from a traditional to a more experiential luxury communications strategy (Batat 2019), particularly when targeting younger consumers (Eastman *et al*. 2020). Within social media, this could equate to content offering backstage insights, legacy narratives or craftsmanship imagery (Xie and Lou 2020), with image and video being more effective content forms in influencing reputation (Castellano and Khelladi 2016). Although evidence has been found supporting multiple social media marketing dimensions' effectiveness in luxury brands' social media activities (Kim and Ko 2012; Liu *et al*. 2021), entertainment has the highest influence in building and influencing luxury brands' social media presence (Beig and Khan 2020). It is also the best predictor of social media users consuming and contributing to brand-related content, while interaction is the best predictor of users creating their own content for brands (Cheung *et al*. 2021).

If users are unfamiliar with a brand, a higher level of visual complexity in content has a greater effect on increasing luxury perception (Lee *et al*. 2018), while users already familiar with a brand perceive a simpler image as emitting a greater sense of luxury. This can be linked to findings within traditional media settings; in high-involvement contexts, a more novel and unexpected approach from advertisers results in increased encouragement to process advertising stimuli across TV and print (De Pelsmacker *et al*. 2002). As luxury goods are considered high involvement (Kim *et al*. 2010; Lin 2012), this raises the question as to the appropriateness of simply translating traditional advertising techniques online rather than moulding the brand strategy to align with the contextual nuances of individual social media platforms. Benefit-based appeals in content have been found to have a greater effectiveness than attribute-based appeals, facilitating expression of user beliefs and values (Choi *et al*. 2020), whereas more luxury brand-conscious users are more likely to have favourable attitudes towards promotional content (Chu *et al*. 2013).

The following section examines Theme 4, *Engagement*, before exploring how the literature links luxury *brand social media communications* and *customer attitudes and perceptions* with *engagement*.

4.2.7.7 Theme 4: Engagement

Excellence and quality in luxury products are no longer sufficient in a contemporary context; luxury brands must also offer a rewarding and engaging customer experience, which social media can facilitate (Batat 2019; Bazi *et al*. 2020). Research has taken an inconsistent approach to conceptualizing digital consumer engagement (Liu *et al*. 2021; Pentina *et al*. 2018), yet it remains a strategic imperative for brands (Quach and Thaichon 2017) consisting of cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions (Hollebeek *et al*. 2014). Within a luxury and social media context, the topic shows a high rate of growth in publication volume among the themes examined in this study. While 20% of articles in this review occupied the engagement theme, 61% of these have been published since 2019 (Table 4.7). Recent evidence illustrates that social media marketing activities exhibit significant positive effects on engagement (Liu *et al*. 2021), highlighting a greater sense of psychological ownership of luxury brand interactions by consumers (Kim *et al*. 2016), which is more easily facilitated by social media over more traditional channels. Despite these trends, studies remain predominantly qualitative in nature and lack direct observation of resultant engagement behaviours (Liu *et al*. 2021). This is particularly significant as digital engagement remains highly dependent on the individual social media platform (Voorveld *et al*. 2018) and the distinctiveness of luxury brands implies it may be problematic to assume motivations for engagement remain the same as for non-luxury brands (Bazi *et al*. 2020).

Table 4.7. Engagement Overview

#	Year	Author(s)	Focus of Inquiry	C, A, B*	Theme Links	Industry	Methodology	Sample
1	2014	Dhaoui	Social media marketing as a driver of engagement	B	CAP	General	Content analysis	Brands' Facebook content
2	2014	Kontu & Vecchi	Behavioural engagement with brand content	B	COM	Fashion	Case study	Burberry, Calvin Klein, DKNY
3	2015	Parrott, Danbury, & Kanthavanich	Engagement as a construct of advocacy	B	CAP	Fashion	Content analysis	Online forums
4	2016	Straker & Wrigley	Building engagement through online experiences	C, A, B	COM	Fashion	Case study	Burberry
5	2017	Kwon, Ratneshwar, & Thorson	Brand advocacy behaviours	B	CAP	Fashion	Experiment	Female consumers
6	2017	Quach & Thaichon	Engagement as a driver of co-creation	C, A, B	CAP	Fashion	Interviews	Consumers
7	2018	Pentina, Guilloux, & Micu	Social media engagement behaviours' role in co-creation	B	-	Fashion	Interviews	Consumers
8	2018	Prentice & Loureiro	Behavioural engagement as an antecedent of well-being	B	CAP	Fashion	Field survey	Consumers
9	2018	Ramadan, Farah, & Dukenjian	Understanding social media followers to build engagement	C, A, B	CAP	General	Interviews	Consumers
10	2019	Burnasheva, Suh, & Villalobos-Moron	Impact of sense of community and identity on brand love	C, A, B	CAP	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
11	2019	Essamri, McKechnie, & Winklhofer	Brand communities co-creating brand identity	C, A, B	STR	Vehicles	Case study	Aston Martin
12	2019	Martín-Consuegra, et al.	Relationship between involvement, interaction and behavioural intention	C, A, B	CAP	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
13	2020	Leban, Seo, & Voyer	SM users' lurking practices' impact on content consumption	B	COM	General	Interviews	Consumers
14	2020	Giakoumaki & Krepapa	Influence of self-concept on engagement with brands' content	B	COM, CAP	General	Experiment	Consumers
15	2020	Kefi & Maar	Influence of content forms on engagement	C, A, B	COM	Fashion	Online survey	Consumers
16	2020	Aydin	Factors influencing engagement with brand content	B	COM	Hotels	Content analysis	Facebook content
17	2020	Koivisto & Mattila	Role of UGC in experiential marketing	B	CAP	Fashion	Content analysis	Louis Vuitton event
18	2020	Park, Im, & Kim	Impact of engagement on luxury value	C, A, B	CAP	Fashion	Experiments	Consumers

19	2020	Bazi, Filieri, & Gorton	Drivers of consumer engagement with luxury brands	C, A, B	CAP	General	Semi-structured interviews	Consumers
20	2020	Nyadzayo, Johnson, & Rossi	Drivers of brand engagement that enhance loyalty and WOM	C, A, B	CAP	General	Online survey	Consumers
21	2020	Oliveira & Fernandes	Drivers and outcomes of consumer engagement on Instagram	C, A, B	CAP	General	Online survey	Consumers
22	2021	Liu, Shin, & Burns	Impact of social media marketing on behavioural engagement	B	COM	Fashion	Content analysis	Brands' Twitter content
23	2021	Park, Hyun, & Thavisay	Role of luxury perception in engagement in SM WOM and purchase intent	B	CAP	General	Online survey	Consumers

* Engagement dimensions examined; C – Cognitive, A – Affective, B – Behavioural

STR: Indicates linkage with Theme 1: *Brand Strategy*; COM: Indicates linkage with Theme 2: *Social Media Communications*; CAP: Indicates linkage with Theme 3: *Consumer Attitudes & Perceptions*

Overall, the volume of research on consumer engagement continues to grow since its evolution into the brand- and consumer-related literatures (e.g., Brodie *et al.* 2011; Hollebeek *et al.* 2014) and, coupled with the opportunities for further social media-focused inquiry (Lamberton and Stephen 2016), represents a potentially rich source of future research. Much of the current research surrounding social media and engagement is centred around the behavioural outcomes of social media strategies. This has led to the proposal of typologies of social media community members based on their capacity and motivation to interact with and contribute to the brand and the brand community (Ramadan *et al.* 2018), as well as development of process frameworks detailing the co-creation of luxury brand identity (Essamri *et al.* 2019). The following linking themes sections will further explore the bridging of the theoretical contributions of this theme with those of Theme 2: S*ocial Media Communications* and Theme 3: *Consumer Attitudes and Perceptions*.

4.2.7.8 Linking Social Media Communications and Engagement

While luxury brands may have originally seemed reluctant to embrace the democratization of online platforms (Oliveira and Fernandes 2020), and some remain largely inactive (Aydin 2020), others are now leading this process through engaging content marketing strategies (Kontu and Vecchi 2014), creating an ongoing two-way dialogue with consumers (Quach and Thaichon 2017). In fact, consumers who are more likely to talk about luxury brands on social media are also more likely to purchase them (Park *et al.* 2021). Incorporating entertaining, interactive and trendy elements into social media communications has a significant positive effect on behavioural engagement (Liu *et al.* 2021), while similar conclusions have been drawn from the examination of hedonic, informative and celebratory dimensions in communications (Aydin 2020; Kefi and Maar 2020).

Brands are now strongly recommended to include greater interactivity as a central social media objective to not only increase engagement between brand and consumer, but also between consumers (Martín-Consuegra *et al.* 2019; Straker and Wrigley 2016) who perceive luxury items as sources of self-differentiation (Parrott *et al.* 2015). Regardless of the level of interaction, luxury brands can still benefit from these user-to-user exchanges and facilitate these through providing content which provides value for users (Heine and Berghaus 2014). These interactions can either help

or hinder the brand, due to their potential virality and subsequent positive or negative associations (Pentina *et al.* 2018). These interactions add value by facilitating potential relationships among the online brand community (Phan *et al.* 2011). This experience of belonging has been found to enhance brand love within online communities (Burnasheva *et al.* 2019). This is of particular importance within a luxury context, as fulfilling an emotional experience for consumers relies not only on consumption of the offering itself, but all engagements (Straker and Wrigley 2016).

4.2.7.9 Linking Consumer Attitudes and Perceptions and Engagement

Social media users have a propensity to include brands as a part of how they view themselves, affecting both their propensity to engage (Giakoumaki and Krepapa 2020; Oliveira and Fernandes 2020) as well as repurchase and advocacy behaviour (Nyadzayo *et al.* 2020). Consumer motivation for engaging with luxury brands on social media encompasses elements such as content relevancy, brand–customer relationships, hedonic, socio-psychological, brand equity and technological factors (Bazi *et al.* 2020). Straker and Wrigley (2016) discuss Burberry's use of digital channels in building engagement with consumers, stating that interactions facilitated online allow users to reflect on their own identities and engage in social integration (Giakoumaki and Krepapa 2020). Luxury brands can even induce an ideal, dream-like state through their social media content, in what Bazi et al. (2020) term 'brand ethereality', bridging the imagination gap between brands and consumers.

However, it is not just the content, but its intended audience as well as platform characteristics which are also key to engagement (Pentina *et al.* 2018). Ramadan *et al.* (2018) propose six forms of social media follower: three customer and three non-customer groups. The non-customer groups, *pragmatists*, *bystanders* and *trend-hunters*, while lacking the means to purchase luxury brands, exert a varying level of willingness to interact with these brands on social media. Both active and passive participation represent key drivers of a strong brand–consumer relationship (Kefi and Maar, 2020), with various forms of lurking practices also posing opportunities for luxury brands to develop a desire for luxury products through these secondary audiences (Leban *et al.* 2020). Some users will remain passive, observing those who are more active, whereas others actively promote and defend the brand, acting as product experts (Parrott *et al.* 2015).

Users who feel that they will gain self-enhancement benefits from engaging in brand advocacy behaviours are more likely to do so (Kwon *et al*. 2017). The customer groups, *image seekers*, *passionate owners* and *prime consumers*, all purchase from luxury brands yet engage differently on social media (Ramadan *et al*. 2018). For example, *image-seekers* associate luxury brands with status, success and self-improvement, and therefore exert maximum effort to make luxury purchases. In contrast, *prime consumers*, while possessing the means to purchase from luxury brands, merely perceive such luxuries as part of their adopted lifestyle and would not view such purchases as being as luxurious or significant as other consumers might. From an active participation perspective, reciprocity of exchange has been found to be an influencing factor in consumer–brand interactions (Kefi and Maar 2020). The most active brand advocates on social media seek to develop a deeper, long-term connection with the brand by engaging in behaviours such as incorporating a brand name into their online username (Parrott *et al*. 2015).

While the volume of studies within the current review adopting a service-dominant logic perspective (Vargo and Lusch 2004) is low, it nonetheless provides insight into the shifting dynamic surrounding value creation within luxury (Holmqvist, Visconti, *et al*. 2020). Many facets of brand value are no longer created solely by marketers, but increasingly are influenced and co-created by consumers (Grönroos 2011). However, it remains the responsibility of the brand to understand and adhere to the norms of interaction, community rules and consumer needs on these platforms (Phan *et al*. 2011). Co-creation of the luxury brand experience encapsulates all interactions between a variety of parties, including the brand, staff, customers and other stakeholders, such as online communities; engagement remains key to value creation (Nyadzayo *et al*. 2020; Quach and Thaichon 2017). Current literature outlines co-creative processes in luxury brand identity development. Essamri et al. (2019) posit *nurturing*, *bridging* and *partnering* as bi-directional identity co-creation processes which capture the symbiotic roles of brands and online communities. This experience of belonging, achieved through accumulation of a sense of community and social identity, can increase feelings of brand love among online users (Burnasheva *et al*. 2019). While nurturing aims to raise the desirability of the brand and encourage aspirations of ownership, bridging seeks to bring the internal and external sources of brand identity meanings together to generate synergistic value between these inputs.

Partnering, finally, is demonstrated through ongoing coordination by brand and community, sharing this co-created brand identity and meaning through marketing activities and UGC (Essamri *et al*. 2019).

4.2.7.10   Theme 5: Brand Performance-Related Outcomes

The final theme examines social media's influence across varying indicators of business performance (Table 4.8). Totalling just four articles, this branch of luxury social media research remains wholly underserved, limiting our understanding of the tangible benefits of social media for luxury brands. Despite the growing levels of social media adoption within the industry, questions remain as to the impact that such investment is having on actual business performance (Kim and Chae 2018). Further inquiry is certainly warranted, given consumers' incorporation of social media at various stages of the luxury purchase cycle, yet consumer preference remains for luxury purchases to be made in-store (Jain and Schultz 2019). Current research in the area remains largely fixed on the hospitality industry, perhaps due to the industry having a higher rate of social media usage (Kim and Chae 2018). While it is generally acknowledged that positive reviews are important for hotel brands, the importance of such high ratings is even greater for luxury hotels (Blal and Sturman 2014). A high volume of reviews may suggest to potential visitors that the hotel's experience is not associated with exclusivity (Blal and Sturman 2014). However, contradictory findings from Kim and Chae (2018) depict a positive association between both eWOM levels and customer engagement on revenue. Price promotions are also negatively perceived by luxury consumers, diminishing their consumption and damaging brand credibility (Jang and Moutinho 2019).

Table 4.8.　　Brand Performance-Related Outcomes Overview

#	Year	Author(s)	Focus of Inquiry	Links	Industry	Methodology	Sample
1	2014	Blal & Sturman	Review volume and valence's role on revenue	-	Hotels	Secondary data	STR Global data
2	2017	Xie, Kwok, & Wang	Review response impact on revenue	ENG	Hotels	Net content analysis	Consumer reviews
3	2018	Kim & Chae	Social media's impact on revenue	ENG	Hotels	Secondary data, net content analysis	Annual reports, Twitter content
4	2019	Jang & Moutinho	Promotions' effect on consumer spending	-	Hotels	Net content and revenue analysis	Consumer reviews, hotels' data

ENG: Indicates linkage with Theme 4: *Engagement*

Given that the current generation of consumers utilize digital platforms across multiple stages of the consumer journey (Athwal *et al*. 2019a; Jain and Schultz 2019), our understanding of the most effective means of promoting such positive outcomes through social media content strategies remains limited. Future research can continue to bridge the findings discussed in previous themes regarding brand strategy, social media communications, consumer attitudes and behaviour, engagement and brand performance through a holistic examination of luxury brand social media strategies and the resultant outcomes for the brand and brand community.

4.2.7.11　　Linking Engagement and Brand Performance-Related Outcomes

Despite the low volume of research seeking to attribute social media activities to sales generation and consumer spending, there were a couple of instances linking Themes 4 and 5. Kim and Chae (2018) found a positive association between social media use (encompassing both eWOM and customer engagement dimensions) and hotel performance. Being a resource-intensive activity, building customer engagement through generation of original messages, responses to UGC and general sharing of relevant content will require more investment than simply relying on eWOM (Kim and Chae 2018). Providing timely, lengthy responses to online reviews is important for luxury hotels, with responses specifically from front-line managers, rather than executive staff, being more effective (Xie *et al*. 2017). However, as previously mentioned, a high volume of reviews can negatively impact perceived exclusivity (Blal and Sturman 2014) while continuous interaction, by its nature, decreases

psychological distance which can lessen value perceptions among consumers (Park *et al*. 2020). Further research into the diverse nature of luxury services (i.e., hospitality) and the effect of brand–consumer engagement for luxury product and luxury service brands on revenue generation and consumer spend can further strengthen this link between Theme 4: *engagement* and Theme 5: *brand performance-related outcomes* in the model.

4.2.8 Future Luxury and Social Media Research Agenda

As represented by the upward trend in publication volume depicted in Figure 4.1, current gaps within the literature, as well as ongoing technological innovation and development and changing consumer preferences, paint luxury theory as a vibrant prospect for further inquiry (Aliyev *et al*. 2017; Chu *et al*. 2019; Cristini *et al*. 2017). The theoretical framework and subsequent discussion outline the key contributions in this field to date, highlighting social media as a process, rather than an isolated activity, within a luxury context, encompassing multiple thematic elements. The following areas of research are proposed to deepen our understanding of social media's role within luxury and further develop this theoretical framework.

4.2.8.1 Luxury Brand Strategy

The involvement of top-level management is required to successfully implement and manage digital channels in luxury brand strategy (Heine and Berghaus 2014), particularly a participatory leadership style to effectively work with consumers and other stakeholders through the value co-creation process (Essamri *et al*. 2019). While luxury brand strategy is technically limited to their target market, the symbolic nature of luxury brands often permeates throughout wider society (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). Future endeavours can build on the work of Üçok Hughes *et al*. (2016) and Essamri *et al*. (2019) where, due to the increased role of consumers in brand construction, the impact of democratization in content creation is ripe for further exploration in the context of contemporary luxury brands. For example, Gurzki *et al*. (2019) posit enrichment, distancing and abstraction as key factors for brands looking to construct luxury narratives through advertising and call for further inquiry to examine this typology's application to the social media context. However, the increased role of third parties, such as influencers, in this regard requires further inquiry (Seo and Buchanan-Oliver 2015). Contemporary luxury brand construction

has been acknowledged to involve multiple stakeholders rather than just the brand itself (Essamri *et al.* 2019), however, this remains an under-researched area, especially as 73% of luxury brands employed some form of influencer marketing in 2017 and a further 15% had plans to adopt influencer marketing over the subsequent 12 months (Statista 2018). A review of social media communications also calls for an increased focus on influencers (Voorveld 2019), who are more relatable than traditional celebrities as brand advocates in a social media setting (Venus Jin *et al.* 2019). Luxury brands need to shift the brand narrative to a more community-focused approach (Üçok Hughes *et al.* 2016), with current inquiry already investigating these narrative approaches by influencers (Zhou *et al.* 2020). Within a social media context, this evolving brand–consumer relationship dynamic and transfer of power provides an interesting avenue for further luxury research. Such an investigation could complement the typology of Ramadan *et al.* (2018), exploring in what ways and capacities each category of social media follower influences luxury brand construction.

4.2.8.2 Luxury Services

Another stream of research warranting wider investigation across all elements of the framework is the marketing of luxury services on social media (Stephen 2020; Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). While the need for additional inquiry into luxury service perceptions and quality dimensions has already been highlighted (Aliyev *et al.* 2017), this review further amplifies this call for increased research into the social media marketing approaches of luxury service brands. Social media provides an environment where users can exchange service experiences with other users while also interacting with service brands directly (Swani *et al.* 2021), and further investigation into the luxury services context is warranted. As Table 4.3 depicts, nearly a quarter of the review articles examined luxury service brands, specifically within the tourism and hospitality sector, reflecting its status as a leading luxury industry sector. Luxury services are defined as 'extraordinary hedonic experiences that are exclusive whereby exclusivity can be monetary, social and hedonic in nature, and luxuriousness is jointly determined by objective service features and subjective customer perceptions' (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020: 682). Luxury is derived from the experience of a luxurious service setting (Kauppinen-Räisänen *et al.* 2019), yet further scope exists for scholars to examine how such luxury experiences may be embedded within social

media strategies and the consequences on user perceptions and value co-creation (Holmqvist, Visconti *et al.* 2020).

Previous research in advertising has outlined the role of culture in the use of emotional or rational advertisement strategies in services marketing (Albers-Miller and Stafford 1999), yet this remains under-researched in luxury services (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). A recent industry report outlines how nearly half of all consumers, including most Millennials, indicated a preference for luxury experiences over products (Boston Consulting Group 2017; Eastman *et al.* 2020). One industry potentially well-suited to a growth in attention is luxury restaurants. While social media users posting food-related content has become a global phenomenon, the volume of research into the implications of such behaviour for luxury restaurant brands remains scant. Within a non-luxury setting, publication of food-related content can positively influence consumers' dining experiences and brand evaluations (Zhu *et al.* 2019), yet the extant literature remains largely devoid of investigations on such behaviours within a luxury setting.

4.2.8.3 User-Generated Content

The role of UGC informing brand strategy across social media platforms continues to pose both an opportunity and a challenge for brands (Park *et al.* 2021; Yadav and Pavlou 2014). How can such content be leveraged into existing strategies while still preserving that luxury aura surrounding the brand? Can amateur social media content help luxury brands through a more inclusive community structure which could improve brand–consumer relations and encourage further UGC creation? Or would it in fact hinder, even possibly dilute, luxury perceptions through a perceived loss of exclusivity brought about by such an approach? As outlined in this review, several studies (e.g., Heine and Berghaus 2014; Huang *et al.* 2018; Schuckert *et al.* 2019) have endeavoured to investigate the current content marketing and communications approaches of luxury brands on social media and their effectiveness, yet a more concerted research focus into the most effective methods of incorporating luxury elements into the varying forms of digital content which appeal to online users warrants attention. Further comprehensive examination of the role and influence of social media platforms across the entire luxury purchasing cycle would provide invaluable insight for marketers and managers in maximizing the effectiveness of their

communications strategy at the different touchpoints of the consumer journey (Jain and Schultz, 2019).

4.2.8.4 Technological Development

Additionally, while the articles examined in this study highlight the absence to date of luxury research incorporating technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality and artificial intelligence, the growth of these areas within marketing provides an interesting pathway for future luxury brand communications research (e.g., Morillo *et al*. 2019; Rauschnabel *et al*., 2019). The success of AI service agents, for example, is predicated on the customer feeling that they have received communication quality befitting a luxury brand (Chung *et al*. 2020). Luxury fashion brands, for instance, may utilize such technologies to convert events into purely virtual occasions for online consumption (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2012). Specific foci of interest may include ephemeral content, such as Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok stories, given their inherent perishability and therefore rarity and popularity among younger consumers. Posting purchases on social media significantly increases consumers' perceived impact of purchases on themselves and interpersonal relationships, which increases happiness (Duan and Dholakia 2017). Such behaviour can be linked to Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899, 1979), involving individuals' public display of wealth to accumulate status, however previous work has already highlighted a varied desire by users from diverse cultures to engage in such loud or discreet brand displays (Chen *et al*. 2021b; Wallace *et al*. 2020). Further research examining implications for the varying forms of luxury consumer (e.g., Han *et al*. 2010) and social media follower (Ramadan *et al*. 2018) is yet to be carried out.

4.2.8.5 Young Consumers

A study by Statista (2018) describes that 42% of consumers aged 18 to 26 use social media as the leading source of new luxury brand discovery, while older cohorts rely more on word-of-mouth and print. Another segment of luxury consumer, slightly older than Millennials, are known as HENRYs (High-Earners-Not-Rich-Yet), who are aged, on average, 43 years old with an income above US$100,000 and also exhibit high levels of digital literacy and as such are heavily influenced by modern technology in their purchasing decisions (Deloitte 2019). Future research could investigate how online platforms and communities influence social comparison and stimulate luxury

desirability among young consumers, in the same way as traditional media does for older consumers (Mandel *et al.* 2006).

Linked to the previous subsection, technological innovations will continue to facilitate consumers' identification and location of offerings most suited to their individual needs. However, some Generation Z consumers have indicated concern regarding the potential impact that such a reliance from brands on technology will have on interpersonal relationships and job security in the future (Priporas *et al.* 2017). While viewing themselves as critical actors in the co-creation of creativity and conversation with luxury brands, Generation Z consumers supplement online connections with in-store visits to engage on a more intimate and emotional level with luxury brands (D'Arpizio *et al.* 2020). Future research should seek to comprehensively understand consumer attitudes towards luxury brands' online presence, while more accurately tying these factors to subsequent offline intentions and behaviours. Inquiry into these generational cohorts remains limited generally (Priporas *et al.* 2020) and represents a predictable future path for research within the luxury social media context.

4.2.8.6 Storytelling

A recent stream of research examining the strategic role of storytelling in generating positive levels of engagement for brands on social media has emerged (Dessart and Pitardi 2019; Singh and Sonnenburg 2012). Specifically, this branch of the brand engagement literature has been extended to the online domain, examining the effects of brand content in creating the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions of engagement. A luxury brand's value proposition is what drives the creation of visual marketing content on social media (Koivisto and Mattila 2020), therefore deeper insights into the brand–consumer dynamics within the context of social media content marketing strategies could further inform both theory and practice. Elements of storytelling such as plot, characters, and verisimilitude have been found to play varying roles across all three engagement dimensions within a beauty brand context (Dessart and Pitardi 2019), yet further inquiry may examine effects on luxury consumers on social media.

4.2.8.7 Moments of Luxury

The concept of luxury 'moments' has recently begun to emerge within the literature, examining a temporal dimension to luxury consumption (Bauer *et al.* 2011; Holmqvist

et al. 2020c; von Wallpach *et al.* 2020). Currently an underdeveloped topic, as luxury research has focused more on brand-controlled characteristics, such as quality and exclusivity, in conceptualizing luxury (Ko *et al.* 2019), there exists much scope for further research into these 'moments of luxury' being generated, experienced and shared on social media platforms. Von Wallpach *et al.* (2020: 500) posit luxuriousness as being embedded in small enjoyments or instances which facilitate 'temporal escapism from everyday mundane life', while escapism has also been linked to luxury experiences (Holmqvist *et al.* 2020c), as well as brands which have been described as 'the antidote to the mundane' (Berthon *et al.* 2009: 45). Escapism has also been linked to individuals' social media engagement (Athwal *et al.* 2019b; Hall-Phillips *et al.* 2016); however, future research should seek to bridge these two literature streams in investigating the characteristics of social media platforms, content and brand communications which generate such engaging moments of luxury for individuals, as well as their outcomes.

4.2.8.8 Attribution to Business Performance

The final theme examined studies which sought to attribute the influence of social media on brand performance. By virtue of it being the least populated theme, it is proposed to offer the widest avenue for future research. Due to the limited availability of organization performance data, it does present the most challenges for researchers; however, it could also provide the most lucrative insights into the outcomes of all activities encased within the previously mentioned themes. For example, recent work has proposed luxury brands on a continuum (i.e., Cristini *et al.* 2017; Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020), depending on their quantity and level of luxury characteristics, while others have focused on luxury consumers and their motivations and intentions (i.e., Han *et al.* 2010). Future work should seek to connect these streams and investigate the resultant outcomes on brand performance. To conclude, a graphical depiction of the future research avenues is included below in Figure 4.3. This chart maps the future research directions across the five elements of the integrative conceptual framework developed in this paper, from the review of the extant literature. The future directions provide further evidence that the interlocking of the themes in the conceptual framework developed in this paper will continue to be a key focus of inquiry in the confluence of luxury and social media.

Figure 4.3.   Avenues for Future Research

Brand Strategy	Social Media Communications	Consumer Attitude & Perceptions	Engagement	Brand Performance

Multi-stakeholder approach in luxury brand formulation online

Use of new technologies such as AR, VR, and AI

Measurement of social media efforts and link to business outcomes

Use of Influencers in social media strategy

Social media and luxury services

Incorporation of luxury elements into varying forms of digital content

Explore 'luxury moments' on social media

Utilisation of UGC in marketing strategies while preserving a luxury brand aura

Impact of UGC on consumer behaviour across all stages of the luxury purchasing cycle

Storytelling in luxury communications

Individual/synergistic roles of both traditional and digital channels in luxury branding

Investigation of younger consumers' attitudes and values toward luxury

4.3   Conclusion

Research continues to aim at establishing the most effective modes of content for influencing consumer attitudes and social media behaviours towards luxury brands (Huang *et al*. 2018; Wu *et al*. 2016). Given the assertion by Chen and Wang (2017) of a discrepancy between how luxury brands approach social media and how users perceive brands on these platforms, further inquiry should be directed towards answering the question 'what constitutes luxury on social media?' While varying taxonomies of luxury and of luxury brands have been proposed within the literature, the dynamic social media environment has fundamentally altered the communications paradigm between luxury brands and consumers.

This paper has developed a set of five interlocking themes which have been inductively developed from the literature into a comprehensive framework to understand current research and act as a guide upon which to build future research efforts. As luxury brands strive to provide superior quality offerings to consumers offline, the expectation will remain to offer similar quality content to social media users which represents the brand in the most appropriate fashion. The challenge, therefore, remains the democratization of both the luxury and social media environments and the oft-noted shift in power between brand and consumer.

CHAPTER FIVE
ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Primary Research

While the systematic literature review in this study highlighted multiple instances of researchers exploring approaches by luxury brands to social media marketing, thus addressing the first sub-question, procurement of first-hand accounts from social media managers of luxury brands via semi-structured interviews is a wholly underutilised methodology and as such represents a significant methodological gap within the literature (Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022). The interviewing process in this study was a critically important exercise in understanding how these businesses began very commonly with the vision and dream of just one or two individuals, yet over time was nurtured into world-class restaurants. Each participant in the study told of their restaurant's origin story, often born from the Head Chef's own career experience being trained within Michelin star restaurants and harbouring ambitions to eventually ascend to this elite level themselves within their own restaurant, instilling their own vision and ambition into not only the menu but the entire service experience. These narratives often underpinned their perception of Michelin stars as a luxury allocation and subsequently informed their social media strategies. This chapter unpacks, interprets, and presents the findings from the interview process exploring approaches by Michelin star restaurants in signalling their brand authenticity on social media.

5.1.1 Pilot Interviews

Firstly, the pilot interviews with luxury hospitality practitioners along with the solitary elite informant provided expert knowledge outside the Michelin star restaurant practitioner perspective into the nature of luxury services and marketing, serving to set the scene for the primary data collection from the study's main sample. In multiple cases, their depictions of luxury services, and the challenges in signalling luxury elements effectively, mirrored that of the study's sample. Participants spoke of a requirement by luxury service brands to ensure a consistently elite level of service to clients yet emphasised the value of personalisation and personality as key signals of their luxury status given the inherent subjective differences in what luxury may mean to certain individuals.

> "But what five star means to you and to me could be different like I may love silver service and I like may like to be called Mr [*surname*] and I may like to

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be, you know, waited on hand and foot. Whereas you might prefer a more laissez faire attitude, left free, just friendly when you want help and nice touches, unexpected touches, but you don't want to be smothered, it depends. Even if you look at Michelin star restaurants. If you look at that, some of them have this you know, almost over the top service with white gloves and whatever, whereas others have a much more relaxed atmosphere to it so. I think each customer has a different view, and that's one of the difficulties in having a broad categorization of five-star luxury in the first place because your expectation of what that is that mine could vary greatly." (PB)

Another pilot interviewee (PC) emphasised how luxury has "so, so changed" and that luxury in a post-pandemic world will be "a lot more authentic, a lot more experiential, more sustainable. They're all the words they're using for luxury right now" and that their clients "expect silver service, they expect the service to be five-star". Where social media can assist in these activities, as PC explained, is not through the generation of sales via special offers or deals, but by inspiring the online community through the varying signals of luxury communicated through their content, blogs, and podcasts. These are particularly interesting and informative viewpoint, highlighting the reality that such luxury accolades and ratings can actually present challenges due to their inevitability of such external luxury allocations causing potential clients to develop pre-conceived notions and expectations as to the nature of the luxury experience, which may not necessarily reflect the brand identity of the service provider. This was, in fact, a large element of the motivation outlined by PA who preferred to "undersell" their offering through social media marketing so as to temper expectations in a bid to ultimately maximise the guest's satisfaction. This approach was further utilised to ensure consistency between the signals being communicated through social media and the actual experience on site. As PA explained, while some brands may seek to over-produce their online imagery and either over-garnish or otherwise agonise over the presentation of a dish on their Instagram feed, for example, the failure to replicate such attention to detail levels within the actual dining experience can risk customer dissatisfaction.

As is further discussed in Section 5.2.1.2, luxury service brands seek to develop quite distinct brand identities despite the uniformity of the criteria applied in

deciding their five-star status (in the case of hotels) or their Michelin star status (in the case of restaurants). PB further elaborated that homogenisation of luxury service delivery, for the purposes of ensuring consistency, may actually detract from the experience for those seeking a more personalised experience. While luxury service brands should seek to instil a degree of homogenisation of service delivery where possible to maximise the efficiency of the business, personalisation remains a critical signal of luxury within a hospitality setting which can often be represented through the service provision of the staff.

> "... one of my enormous fears for marketing is the homogenisation of product and service delivery. Because I think it takes away from what can be potentially great and if I had the money, it's what I would focus my time and energy on, is creating this bespoke individual product as much as possible while keeping the benefits of homogenisation behind the scenes ... Take the opportunity to encourage your staff to share their personality. You know, allow people to express themselves so our marketing philosophy this year or while we're working on is personal touch. So, every time we do some marketing thing within the business, we're asking where's the personal touch here? I mean, the girl who's making up the room for you, and she signed personally as opposed to just putting a card and that's how you try to reduce this homogenisation and therefore the blandness of execution." (PB)

One aspect of the luxury service experience which was prominently discussed among the non-Michelin star restaurant pilot interviewees was the value of the intangible experience in creating a luxury aura for their brand. For example, PC spoke of guest expectation regarding luxury amenities, such as marble bathrooms, being made available as standard and detailed how their marketing strategies most often emphasised more experiential factors, such as the heritage of the venue and its location (i.e., Beverland 2005; 2006), the historical aspects of the venue's family ownership as well as the unique and bespoke activities and itineraries which can be crafted. As PC further noted "they're all about the added value and to be made felt special", further exemplifying the reality of the luxury service not only offering elite level tangible elements, such as facilities and amenities, but also the personal touches which serve to augment the luxuriousness of the experience. This is further discussed by PA who

spoke of their definition of luxury as multi-faceted; whereas in luxury dining specifically as encompassing ingredients and cuisine which wouldn't usually be accessible or affordable in everyday life, while home cooking could still be considered to have luxury elements such as expensive proteins from specialist outlets may also be considered luxury in the eyes of the individual.

When questioned regarding their opinion on the emergent trend of consumer co-creation of luxury brand identities (i.e., Essamri *et al*. 2019), the pilot study uncovered viewpoints much more aligned with the classical view of luxury, that it is the brand which seeks to establish its own identity and remain forthright in its portrayal and communication of that identity to the consumer in order to preserve its authenticity as a luxury brand. Given the inherent subjectivity of the luxury service construct (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020), it is not seen as feasible to attempt to 'be all things to all people', but rather brands seek to cement their own unique identity as a signal of its luxury status. This requires a clear and concise strategy to be conceived by upper-level management (i.e., Heine and Berghaus 2014) which is then embodied within the marketing strategies of the brand in the hope that consumers will relate and align themselves to the brand. PA added further context to this argument in describing how in previous years, a chef would design their fine dining tasting menu and it would be a reflection purely of the chef given that it would be their imagination and execution which would decide the culinary experience within the restaurant. However, in line with more modern interpretations of luxury, chefs are now informed more than ever regarding the varying tastes and preferences of their much more well-travelled and cultured diners than in past years.

> "We all have a different interpretation of what brands or characteristics of the brands are important to us, so I suppose what I'm saying is that as long as we're clear about our own characteristics, what our brand does stand for, we're hoping the consumer will identify with those and hopefully want to associate themselves with those characteristics, which I believe is what those brands in your research have been doing. By saying we have this heritage, or we have this unique manufacturing process, I think they're outlining their own characteristics so that consumers can align themselves to it?" (PB)

While the above quote clearly points to the importance of a luxury brand maintaining the locus of control surrounding the manifestation of their brand identity online, it is interesting that same participant later in the interview discussed their social media marketing content strategies as being more consumer focussed, rather than brand focussed. They mentioned their tone of voice on Instagram, for example, was "not where they'd like to be" and that they "are better on Facebook and Twitter" (PB). This further accentuates the reality for luxury brands that regardless of their desire to maintain absolute control over the brand's online persona and communications, the democratised nature of social media platforms necessitates a relinquishing, to some degree, of control in order to build and maintain an engaged following online.

> "I think we're better on Facebook and Twitter than we are in Instagram, because Instagram is a relatively new medium to us and I think we're getting better at it, but I don't think our stock of imagery is up to date, modern, good enough, ok? But that is something we are aware of and we'll try to address in time, but more importantly, I don't think our tone of voice for that platform is where I'd like it to be, ok? But leaving that aside, if you take into account this work in progress and everything is always a work in progress, just some are more specifically at front of mind than others and I would argue that we should still be trying to deliver messages that are appropriate to our target audiences at the appropriate time and doing it in a manner that reflects them, almost so far as that you're mirroring their own style and expectation. I think it's a two-way communication, right?" (PB)

One of the key motivating factors for brands wanting to establish authenticity through effective signalling is that there is exists so much information online from a multitude of sources, i.e., direct (the restaurant) or indirect (the Michelin guide or UGC on social media) which has been shown to lead to both information and social overload causing social fatigue (Zhang *et al*. 2022). A classic example of this was the 'Shed at Dulwich' which was a spoof restaurant created by Oobah Butler, who wanted to unmask the phenomenon of restaurants paying for fake reviews by claiming to have established an independent restaurant in London and through accumulating a succession of fake reviews on TripAdvisor, managed to ascend to the top ranked restaurant in London a mere six months after its 'opening' (Butler 2017). This

epitomises the need for the brands to establish authenticity within these environments whereby information is in such plentiful supply through reliable signals (Maynard Smith and Harper 2003), as outlined in the following quote.

> "... we all have a phone in our pocket with the world's knowledge theoretically in the fingertips. So, the difference now is this problem not of knowledge or content, or lack of accessing information, the problem's with reliability." (PD)

To conclude, the pilot interviews served to not only provide some preliminary insights into the social media marketing strategies of luxury hospitality brands (PA, PB, PC) as well as some historical insights into the Michelin Guide and fine dining (PD), but also help refine and amend the interview structure and technique ahead of the primary data collection phase with the Michelin star restaurant sample in the study in addressing RO2 and RO3. These are addressed in the proceeding sub-sections.

5.2   RO2: Dimensions of Luxury within Social Media Strategies

The findings reveal multiple approaches being taken by Michelin star restaurants in both embedding luxury dimensions within their social media marketing strategies (RO2) and in signalling authenticity on social media (RO3, see Section 5.3). Regarding luxury brand dimensions, all previously asserted dimensions of luxury service brands (Table 2.3) are utilised which, to reiterate, are as follows: *Authenticity*, *Brand Identity*, *Brand Integrity*, *Premium Price*, *Exclusivity*, *Marketing*, *Environment*, *Brand Signature*, *Heritage & Culture*, *Relationships.* Table 5.1 below illustrates these themes and provides indicative quotes for each code before a more in-depth analysis is offered in the proceeding sub-sections. Additionally, an underlying theme permeating throughout the above-mentioned luxury service brand dimensions which also represents a theoretical contribution of the study is participants' endeavours to actually *downplay* their luxury status, ironically, as a means of signalling their luxury quality. This is discussed in the final sub-section in this section.

5.2.1   Luxury Service Brand Dimensions

The literature review in this study identified ten distinct luxury service brand dimensions which were then used as a thematic map with which to address the second research objective of this study: *How can the dimensions of luxury service brands be signalled on social media?* Using this typology born from the literature, the primary

data collection sought to explore how each of these individual dimensions are utilised as signals of luxury within Michelin star restaurants' social media marketing strategies. The following is an exploration of these signals.

Table 5.1.   Dimensions of Luxury Service Brands within Social Media Strategies

Dimension	Sample Quotes
Authenticity	"I don't think it's about the luxury actually. I think it's about authenticity. So, I think that anyone can post a picture of a really comfy looking bed and the sheets might cost an absolute fortune, and it's a handmade mattress or whatever it is ... I don't think that works anymore because it's too generic. The things that work well for us or when you're showing something that you do that nobody else does ... Even though it sounds really rustic and simple, actually for me, defines the luxury that we show" (P12)
Brand Identity	"I don't think you could fill a restaurant without [*social media*] these days really, especially when we have a high-level chef involved as well, the combination of his personal social media and restaurant's social media. I think it helps you kind of stand out from the crowd. I mean we have one Michelin star, but there are quite a few restaurants in [*location*] that have that, and they really do range from kind of a restaurant similar to ours and then [*restaurant name*], something like that through to [*restaurant names*] where it's a very different experience. Yeah, I think for us it helps us kind of distinguish ourselves ..." (P19)
Brand Integrity	"Just to give them a taste, you know, if we got a wine or we've got a wine supplier that's brought in something amazing, we'll take a picture and say it's this is really interesting because you know the vineyards in France. But actually, the guy that makes the wine used to be in [*location*], do you know, something like that? 'cause people want a bit of information, they want a bit of history about, you know, the items you know they want the provenance of things as well." (P1)
Brand Signature	"A lot of chefs have their own style, so your personality. So, that's one thing I get a lot of comments from this that people say if you're flicking through Instagram, they know which dishes are mine, which is nice. You can see ... this is a dish by [*mentions own name*], because it's got [*their*] sort style to it." (P26)
Heritage & Culture	"Conversational, I think, authentic, engaged. Uh, kind of subtly positioning [*restaurant name*] as an authority in its field. Uhm, not just in terms of the food, but in terms of the whole experience. So, you know, we've worked very hard in the last year in particular, to

Heritage & Culture (contd.)	showcase the culture, the working culture in [*restaurant name*]. Because you might know that it's extremely difficult to find very good people to work at this level in hospitality … So, it's not just chefs, you're talking about experienced people in reservations, experienced waitstaff. So, it's also part of my job to make sure that the culture of [*restaurant name*] is represented very well." (P9)
Environment	"We got some very nice photography stuff and so we work closely with the photographer. We had a different collection by him each year in [*restaurant name*] ... we would sell the work that was hanging on our walls and in return, we would get beautiful, framed work hanging on our walls, which essentially decorated our dining room." (P20b)
Exclusivity	"Definitely social media has brought these luxury brands, they're on peoples' phones every day. We call them luxury, but they're everyday brands now these luxury brands..." (P16)
Marketing	"If you're doing it right, you're consistent with the message on the brand and the visual identity and voice, you naturally will create the audience you want to have through just discipline and consistency." (P7)
Price	"It's trying to find ways of giving a better service without deducting and without giving... Like you know, you might talk about fashion but go on [*fashion retailer*] or something, it's 50% off everything. You'll never see that when you go onto a luxury fashion site, so it's kind of the same thing with service, so it's what can you give?" (P8)
Relationships	"Yeah, I mean you wouldn't be here without your suppliers. They wouldn't be here without you. So, it's a two-way thing, isn't it? So, you should big up your suppliers and you should help your suppliers." (P28)

5.2.1.1 Authenticity

Given that authenticity as a signal of luxury represents one of the core theoretical contributions of the study, and is the subject of the final research objectives, this is explored in comprehensive detail in Section 5.3. A total of eleven distinct signals of authenticity from the data have been categorised into three groups: *tangible*, *intangible*, and *mixed* tangibility related to the luxury servicescape. These signals are further positioned within the axes based on their *explicitness/implicitness* when represented through their social media marketing content. A full discussion on this objective is presented in Section 5.3.

5.2.1.2 Brand Identity

A *brand identity* is a "detailed construction plan of meaning that originates from the companies' inner beliefs, is goal-driven by a vision and determines precisely how managers wish a brand to be perceived by its customers and other internal and external stakeholders" (Heine *et al*. 2018: 475) and is the minimal goal of any advertising material (Mittal 1999). Within a luxury context, it provides the foundation for long-term profitability, respect for the brand's philosophy, and contributes to a luxury brand perception in the eyes of the consumer. Therefore, luxury brands should ensure these values and identity traits are never compromised to maintain control of their future (Kapferer 1997). Table 4.10 below illustrates the thematic codebook for this dimension, outlining the sub-codes in terms of their prominence within the interviews, the most of which referred to more open and warm codes such as *personal* and *family* being central elements of their brand identity, rather than the more cold and traditional luxury dimensions of *elitism* and *ego*.

Table 5.2.   Brand Identity Thematic Codebook

Brand Identity		Interviews	References
Personal	References to the brand identity and experience being personal, elements of personalisation, unique etc.	14	30
Personality	References to the personalities of the chefs, team, etc.	14	23
Family	References to family being at the centre of their desired brand image and identity.	11	23
Brand Development	References to brand development.	13	22
Motivation	References to motivation in operating the business, drive, ambition etc.	15	19
Honesty	References to being honest in their brand identity	8	17
Elitism	References to elitism and whether the restaurant feels the need to conform to such categorisations.	9	16
Simplicity	References to marketing content being quite simple in message, tone, layout etc.	7	13
Ego	References to ego within the context of it driving business or marketing decisions.	6	11
Humble	References to staying humble during success.	3	7

Participants spoke about the role of ensuring a high degree of personalisation in the luxury service experience. Participants emphasised the idea of ensuring a degree of personal touch and attention being central to their luxury service provision, both online and offline. In contrast to previous assertions of luxury whereby brands must seek to "dominate its client" (Kapferer and Bastien 2009: 318) in order to preserve it status as an elite level brand and should engage in minimal consultation with the consumer regarding the formation of the luxury offering or the delivery of a service, participants in the current study spoke about personalisation and relationship-building

throughout the service experience as a key element of their brand identity, which is more in-line with more recent research on brand identity formulation (e.g. von Wallpach *et al.* 2017; Black and Veloutsou 2017).

> "... been here now 25 years in June and I think you know people saying you know, who does all your marketing? Well, I do. That's the job. I pick up the phone. I reply on Twitter. It is very personable, and I think that's exactly what they want you know and if you could make time for people, they make time for you. That starts a real story, you know, nothing really to it." (P25)

The notion of a personalised and bespoke service provision was further demonstrated by P17 who further emphasised the role of the staff at the restaurant as embodying the identity of the brand through their interactions with the guests with the ultimate goal being to decipher what style of service each individual diner may prefer, whether that be one of consistent interaction or else to be granted more privacy, or else specific dietary requirements.

> "Someone makes a booking, they ring up, they get someone nice at the end of the line, ask some questions and see if they have any allergies or whatever and we take note of everything that they gave us ... on the night, someone greets them at the door, shows them to the table. As soon as they sit down, they're given some snacks served by one of the chefs you know, say hi and introduce themselves, and they have a drink, sommelier comes over and talks to the wine list and the menu, answering any questions. Then someone else comes over and reiterates the requests that they had beforehand. It's just to make them feel like they've been listened to beforehand ... through that kind of stage you get the feeling of whether the guests wants interaction, or they don't want interaction. Sometimes they don't want to have all this, so they might wanna be left alone so we find that out then the night will go on from there." (P17)

An interesting sub-thread of this code was the admission from participants that by engaging in social media marketing activities, they were potentially at risk of diluting their desired brand identity because of, as one participant put it, "how fake Instagram can seem" and its ability to present a reality which is "very filtered and just showing your best side", it was nonetheless still an integral element of their social

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media marketing strategy as "people want that, they want to feel like, oh wow, that looks amazing" (P12) and they felt their ability to provide a genuine representation of luxury online was a key determining factor in their propensity to showcase their identity through social media.

Participants elaborated on how such efforts at personalised communication would transcend into their social media marketing activities. As Kapferer (1997) notes, luxury brands need to ensure their core values and identity traits should not be compromised to preserve control of its future and the interview data provided multiple examples of how participants believed this to be the case across not just the service experience, but also their social media activities. Stemming from the above-mentioned need for brands to cut through the 'fakeness' and overly filtered nature of social media, participants outlined how this more personable approach as generating better reactions from online followers and utilising social media as an extension of the on-site experience and representation of the brand's identity.

> "I think the general principle for social media, particularly for restaurants, you get a better reaction when it is personal. Also, when it's coming directly from the restaurant in real time." (P24)

Further contributions from the participants in this thread referred to the potential for social media activity to overlap the onsite experience in terms of quality and the feelings and signals the brand is looking to evoke to its guests. For example, P18 elaborated on their view that social media should serve as an extension of the luxury service experience and help maintain the connections and relationships cultivated through the on-site experience.

> "At the end of the day, we're hospitality, we're in the business of pleasing people and making people happy. And yeah, bringing them joy and lovely memories, and hospitality has to be social. If you can't extend that into social media, I think that it should be an extension of experience here in terms of that connection with you." (P18)

The final note here relates to the previously asserted findings of Foroudi *et al.* (2017) who found social media not to be a significant factor in planned brand identity, however, add the caveat that such a finding may have been due to the absence of a full

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utilisation of social media by the research sample. The first theme within the systematic literature review, *Brand Strategy*, discussed the necessity of top-level managerial involvement in the integration of social media platforms into branding strategy which can also include offline activities (Section 4.2.7.1). The participants in the present study continuously outlined their commitment and approach to social media marketing as originating from the 'top', often the *Head Chef* or *Chef Patron* (e.g., the above quotes from P25 and P17) or the restaurants' Head of Marketing (e.g., the above quotes from P24 and P18).

5.2.1.3 Brand Integrity

As previously asserted in Section 2.1.8.3, the *brand integrity* category is made up of a variety of elements relevant to luxury services, such as quality and attention to detail. Luxury service brands may seek to build a sense of integrity by investment in innovation, creativity, and specialist knowledge and skills in the design and creation of their service (Fionda and Moore 2009). As is demonstrated below in Table 5.3, the most voluminous code within the brand integrity theme relates to narratives from participants pertaining to their ongoing learning and development efforts which seek to ensure the future of the business in adopting novel and innovative service delivery techniques and marketing technologies, whilst preserving the core luxury ideals and values as outlined in the previous *brand identity* section.

> "It's a very well-established restaurant, but it went through a really difficult time at the last recession years of 2007, 2008, hadn't quite let's say developed with the times and this feeds into the whole digital side of it I think with travel and how people book hotels and also restaurants and what their expectations are and I think that the previous management hadn't moved with the times fast enough and is very difficult to futureproof when you are a small business like this." (P12)

Michelin star restaurants not only have the challenges of remaining consistent in the quality of their service offering, it is also incumbent on them to remain adaptable to shifting trends such as the seasonality of ingredients and changing trends in fine dining. As P21 outlines below, the integrity of the brand lies not within its achievement of the Michelin star standard, but the *maintaining* of that standard as well as the improvement and development of the dishes they are creating.

"So, we had a dish on September last year and we're going to put it back on in September this year. We'll look at that spec sheet and go ok, how can we improve this? Do we need to take anything away? Do we need to add something to that dish to improve it? Or do we just not do anything to it at all? And often we find now if we look at a dish that we did in 2017 and we put it on in 2021, we're probably going to strip a lot of it off and refine it a little bit more. That would be yeah, definitely refine and just question everything and it's four, five of us just question is that right? Is that wrong?" (P21)

While there were multiple examples of interviewees outlining their intentions to continue to develop both the tangible and intangible elements of their luxury service experience, there remained the caveat that the core identity of the brand must remain intact and there had to remain that consistency in how the luxury service was created and delivered so as to preserve that identity over time as a further signal of its integrity.

"You just keep improving. If you become obsessed there's no point. Yeah, like I wanna get new crockery, improve stuff, keep adapting, you know? But still keep our same ethos, know what I'm saying?" (P15)

Kapferer and Bastien (2009) prescribe luxury brands to resist client demands to adapt or change their offering in preserving the core identity and values of the brand, which can include provider expertise, materials and components, construction and functional principles, workmanship, features, customer service, product size, comfort and usability, value and durability, functionality and performance, and safety (Heine and Phan 2011). The integrity of these luxury service brands lies within their abilities to adapt to moving times while striving to maintain these core values including, as participants attested to, the adoption of novel technologies such as social media for their marketing communications, despite earlier claims of luxury brands being more fearful of such open-source platforms (Okonkwo 2009; Kapferer 2015).

"So yeah, I think it's what's appropriate for your brand and appropriate for your audience and how you want to speak to them and how you want to engage with them. So um, on social media, you have to adapt really quickly anyway, so it's a very iterative kind of process. So, um, like if something doesn't work, you know you just write it off to experience and you just try something else,

but you have to, you know, there is obviously, you know, digital you can see everything." (P9)

Table 5.3.   Brand Integrity Thematic Codebook

Brand Integrity		Interviews	References
Learning and Development	References to adaptation, learning and development	18	38
Performance	References to performance in terms of social media or restaurant/hotel performance.	16	35
Management	References to the management of the restaurant	12	18
Passion	Discussion of participants' own personal drive and passions	11	17
Pride	References to pride in their work and their achievements.	4	8
Innovation	References to innovation in dishes or other elements of the experience	5	7

"And I suppose, yeah, you do look what other people are doing. You got all that so really like you might just take one snippet from what [*another chef*] put up on his Instagram and go, oh, that's a really good idea. I could use that, but in a different way. So, I guess trial and error is always what we're about. It's really hard to explain but like I'm not on Instagram to show off, so I'm just showing people what we're doing at the restaurant. And you know, if someone takes an idea from me, that's great." (P21)

In sum, participants signal the integrity of the brand via presentation of their continuously innovative cooking and dish design techniques in their social media content. Whereas Kapferer and Bastien (2009) propose luxury brands should resist changing the core of the brand, this doesn't seem as much of a priority for luxury service brands. Instead, participants spoke of their willingness to be more open to adopting new, innovative techniques to improve their own skill and their offering. Michelin themselves, in their limited disclosure of the criteria for being awarded a

Michelin star, state 'consistency between visits' as a key criterion, so too are the 'mastery of flavour and cooking technique' as well as the 'presence of the chef's personality in their cuisine' (Michelin Guide 2022). It is clear from the participants narratives that such qualities are not deemed secretive but in fact are publicly displayed, not only during the dining experience itself but also through the depiction of their cuisine on their social media accounts, thus representing conspicuous signals of their brand's integrity.

5.2.1.4 Brand Signature

As discussed in Section 2.1.8.8, the *brand signature*, acts as a key brand signal by embodying the unique styling and identity to the brand and its offering. Luxury brands have recognised the value such signatures can have for the brand with factors such as packaging, and its alignment with the overall brand signature, being highlighted as pivotal contributing factors (Fionda and Moore 2009). However, there remains a significant gap in the literature pertaining to the value and role of brand signatures for luxury service brands. Table 5.4 below depicts the thematic codebook for the *brand signature* dimension. It is noticeably less voluminous than other dimensions, further exemplifying its absence within the luxury services literature. As one participant noted: "We're all human, you can't replicate that bespoke experience on Instagram and stuff like that. You know you have to be here to understand it because it's very hard to get across into social media platforms or marketing platforms, how the experience is in the restaurant?" (P26). Given the predominance of intangibility within the luxury service brands and service experience, and thus an absence of marketing collateral such as distinctive product design or packaging, the subcodes within the brand signature pertain also to intangible signals, the largest of which refers to the reputation of the brand, including the chef and/or the restaurant.

Table 5.4.　　Brand Signature Thematic Codebook

Brand Signature		Interviews	References
Reputation	References to the reputation of the chef, restaurant, etc.	10	15
Aesthetic	References to the aesthetics of the plate, content, etc	4	9
Recognition	References to recognisability of the brand's content, messaging etc.	6	7
Unique	References to being unique as a brand on social media	6	7

Participants spoke of the brand reputation stemming from both a local and wider audience, with social media often the vehicle whereby these two online communities often came together in their respect and support for the brand.

"I think our best posts are always, always Michelin related, actually. Even though we have Michelin inspectors come along and they tweeted on Twitter saying we're real excited and like that got a lot of support and I think that meant a lot to the community that we live in because they are hugely supportive. Even if they've never even stepped through the door, they're always so proud to have a Michelin star restaurant in the town. So, they love that and they're always very supportive of any awards that we get." (P29)

While some participants, who were more recent recipients of the Michelin star award, spoke of the subsequent visibility and brand awareness gained from the award resulting in further growth in their social media audience, others who had maintained the award over a longer period of time spoke of the already-existing brand awareness around the time that social media platforms begun to experience major growth in the late-2000s which ultimately provided a new platform whereby signals of their luxury status could be disseminated by both the brand and their customers.

"You can see, I think the difference also is when social media came into play, we were already an established restaurant as opposed to a restaurant that was

kind of starting new and needed that push right at the beginning. We already had, you know, regular customers we had people who were already coming in through the doors and who would disseminate through word of mouth about us." (P14b)

One critical element of Michelin star restaurants' brand signatures is that of the style of the chef, in terms of their cooking style, choice of cuisine, use of ingredients, presentation style, etc. Participants spoke of their endeavours to assert their own chef's or restaurant's stylistic signature on their social media in a bid to signal their luxury status and differentiate their brand from competitors.

"A lot of chefs have their own style, so your personality. So, that's one thing I get a lot of comments from this that people say if you're flicking through Instagram, they know which dishes are mine, which is nice. You can see this is a dish by [*participant mentions own name*] 'cause it's got [*their*] sort style to it which is again going back to Michelin, absolute paramount 'cause that's where they wanna see that you're not doing the same dishes as absolutely everyone in the world." (P26)

One important point of note here which has only recently been acknowledged in the literature (i.e., Bang, Choi, and Kim 2022: 2299) is that Michelin stars are awarded purely for "kitchen performance" and that other factors, such as the servicescape, are not considered when awarding star allocations. This raises really interesting questions for chefs looking to attain a Michelin star in terms of their incorporation of a distinct style in their restaurant, whether regarding plating or servicescape design and how they balance their desire to ascend to Michelin star status while also offering a more holistic luxury service experience. As P4 outlines below, there can be quite divergent approaches by Michelin star chefs in this regard.

"For me, and Michelin's line themselves is that one star is all about food, just about food. So, if you look at restaurants like see [*names another Michelin star restaurant*] last year [*the same restaurant*] at one star. Their plates were picture perfect, absolutely sublime looking stuff. Really, you know there was no, every i dotted and t crossed, not a parsley leaf out of place, and then you look at guys like [*another Michelin star restaurant*] and he goes I don't care what it looks

like, I know it tastes banging. I just put it on the plate and there's a giant feed, there you go." (P4)

In conclusion, luxury service brands rely less on conspicuous logos and product designs which are a mainstay of luxury products, not only making their products more recognisable but also enabling conspicuous consumption by consumers of those brands (i.e., Han *et al*. 2010). It is clear not only from the narratives of the study's participants but also the volume of this particular dimension relative to the others in the research, that luxury service brands recognise the value of unique brand signatures, however they are not fully utilised as conspicuous signals of luxury on social media. The warning from Heine and Phan (2011) to luxury brands to avoid overloading luxury products with features in an attempt to further distinguish it from competitors while in actuality only serving to hinder its usability is not applicable here. As Michelin suggest, one of the criteria for winning a star considered by Michelin is the 'presence of the chef's personality in their cuisine'; it can be argued that this can be translated into factors such as the plating arrangement of the food, the style of cooking used, cuisine, or ingredients, and as the participants outlined above, these can be wide-ranging depending on the personal preferences and approaches of individual chefs and restaurants rather than strict adherence to a pre-conceived uniform criteria which would then be evaluated by Michelin in allocating its star awards. This represents a critical opportunity for chefs and restaurants to further develop and signal their own brand signature through social media, similar to the methods employed by luxury product brands.

5.2.1.5 Heritage & Culture

As previously discussed in Section 2.1.8.9, brand and/or organisational *heritage and culture* play a pivotal role in the positioning of a luxury brand's offering (Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Fionda and Moore 2009). Ultimately, they distinguish the brand from competitors, given the inherent difficulty in imitating a brand's heritage or culture (Keller and Richey 2006). Table 5.5 below illustrates the sub-codes within the *heritage and culture* dimension. Utilising a brand's heritage enables the business to draw distinctive links between its origin and its current position (Rose *et al*. 2016), facilitating the integration of skills and training which serve to signal the quality of the production process (Wiedmann *et al*. 2011; Dion and Borraz 2015). The

preponderance of participants spoke about their own career experience and training in luxury hospitality and fine dining, narrating on how those early career experiences fuelled an ambition to open and/or own a Michelin star restaurant of their own as a means of instilling their own identity and heritage into their personally crafted luxury service experience.

> "I've been cooking since about 16. My first job was at a Michelin star restaurant 'til I was 20. I did Michelin star restaurants ... So, I was [*mentions another Michelin star chef's name*] pastry chef for a couple years after that. I also did some private chef work in a villa over that time and went to Dubai for five years as a group exec chef then came back here three and a half years ago because I wanted to do my restaurant finally after 20 years." (P6)

The most voluminous code within this dimension made reference to the restaurant's place within their locality as a pivotal signal of its heritage and integration in the community. Luxury brands seek to emphasise their connection to other entities, such as a place or other people, in order to reaffirm its traditional values (Keller 2009). Often, luxury brands are limited in what they can create and therefore seek to cultivate its own unique brand story as a form of differentiation (Beverland 2005). Participants utilised their heritage as a signal by continuously demonstrating their presence and involvement in the community, seeking to establish a connection and cultivate a story through their engagement with local stakeholders which has strengthened the brand's bond with the local community.

Table 5.5.   Heritage & Culture Thematic Codebook

Heritage & Culture		Interviews	References
Local	References to the restaurant's location	20	76
Career Experience	Examples of participants discussing their previous career and work experience	25	46
Ambition	References to ambition of the owner, chef, team, business, etc.	19	37
Traditional	References to the traditional perspective of Michelin and whether it has also been adapted here	18	36
Culture	References to culture of the restaurant, guests, etc.	11	22
Sustainability	References to sustainability in luxury	8	15
Resilience	References to resilience in the business, not necessarily specific to marketing	9	11
Cuisine	References to discussions of the chef's cuisine	7	8
Flexibility	References to restaurants being flexible with their approach to guests, offering, etc.	4	6

"... for every comment that we get negatively, there would be several people that would go on and say stuff on (*the chef's*) behalf. It's definitely one of those community things and I think we're like a big dysfunctional family. So that's one of those things that you could say whatever you like about your own town or your own family. But soon as somebody else outside says something, that's it, everybody's like no, no, no, no. It was really nice and it was very nice to show (*the chef*) that as well, so as I said he did take it personally." (P29)

It remains a crucial point of emphasis for luxury service brands that they not only authentically represent the culture of their brand on social media as a signal of their luxury status, it is also imperative that the same consistency and coherency be expected of their stakeholders, such as their suppliers (Fionda and Moore 2009). Participants acknowledged this in detailing the ongoing collaborative relationships

they have with their suppliers and their integral role in shaping the brand's culture and reinforcing their heritage through social media marketing.

> "... we are so fortunate to be located where we are and that is incredible, passionate food producers and suppliers and you know share their stories and to share their passion and knowledge and share (*the Head Chef's*) knowledge and you know (*their*) family's history and it all kind of adds to people's understanding and to make sure that people have that understanding so that it doesn't hinder them from trying to come and experience us ..." (10b)

Despite the previous assertions from both the literature discussed in Chapter Two and the data collected in the current study that contemporary luxury brands recognise the historical view of luxury no longer holds as much sway in the eyes of consumers due to increased accessibility and the globalisation of luxury brands, there were still ample accounts from participants pertaining to the preservation of more traditional values with their culture relating to aspects such as fine dining traditions, servicescapes, cuisine, or ingredient sourcing and preparation. As previously mentioned, the most successful brands are fully aware that an internal culture supportive of the overarching brand strategy increases the chances of the brand delivering "a relevant, consistent, yet differentiated experience" (van Gorp 2012: 142). It were these adherences to traditional values which were often spoken of as key signals in the brands' social media marketing strategies as a means to signal their luxury status.

> "So that's why those little things are the things that are the luxury which is perhaps we give them a glass of apple juice when they arrive, and they're not expecting it. It's also all about that, but ahead of time on the digital it's definitely communicating those things." (P12)

There was also some input from participants which predicted that the more traditional fine dining, Michelin star establishment will remain in demand even as more contemporary dining options begin to emerge and Michelin duly widens their scope in terms of star allocation.

> "I think every city will have at least two or three places with real tablecloths, linen and nice glassware and cutlery. I think that would keep going. I think it

will, but it won't be as many. They would be special occasion operations, I think. Yes, I think so." (P16)

Regarding social media content, how this often manifests is live captures of the restaurant during service, with P24 describing how a post of their first service back after the lifting of government restrictions due to the pandemic performed particularly well as it signalled the atmosphere and the culture within the restaurant, thereby alleviating potential misconceptions of the restaurant as being "stuffy" or "formal".

"I'm just thinking back to Wednesday night was our first service [*since lockdown*]. It's so good to be back and a picture of plating up what looks like a dozen dishes. Looking at that and that had 857 impressions, 89 engagements. That to me is good content. People are engaging with it; they're seeing it and it creates a sense that it creates that warm sense where people go you know what this place is quite fun. I mean it's not cheap ... it is not by any stretch of the imagination a cheap restaurant. But I think where the social media works for me is that it makes it feel welcoming, accessible, if not financially. People think yeah you know this isn't stuffy, formal, gonna have to put on a jacket and tie and be on my best behaviour." (P24)

In summary, this dimension was primarily populated with accounts from the participants of constantly striving to achieve a service level worthy of their Michelin star allocation and how this ambition is deeply rooted within the culture of the restaurant with the demands of exceptional standards often stemming from the Chef and permeating throughout the entire staff at the restaurants. How this dimension would manifest as a signal on social media would include, as P24 discussed, in creating a representation of the culture of the restaurant through their content which receives positive levels of engagement from the audience.

5.2.1.6 Environment

The literature outlines luxury brand *environments*, such as retail stores, as critical value-adding dimensions of luxury, enriching consumers' luxury perception through the provision of superior service and ancillary offerings (Fionda and Moore 2009; Heine and Phan 2011). The *environment* dimension pertains to submissions by participants as to the role of both the service environment and the natural environment

in signalling their luxury status through their social media marketing strategies by incorporating signals such as the indigenous ingredients, natural landscape as well as showcasing the restaurant's servicescape. In fact, analysis in this study has determined environment to be a key signal of luxury authenticity, and as such the bulk of discussion has been included within the proceeding Section 5.3 to avoid repetition.

Regarding its pertinence to the current research objective, participants spoke of their efforts to signal their luxury status by showcasing the bespoke aspects of the *crafts* within their luxury service environment often in the form of unique décor, tableware, or other aspect of the building. Given that there is only a single sub-code within this dimension, no table is included in this sub-section. Participants spoke of how their own approach to food is inspired by the environment around them and how the restaurant's story is so often engrained within their own surroundings and the local people.

> "And I suppose that's the sense of adventure coming from a city and move into a small town and trying really trying to involve all of yourself in the local community and support the local community. And all that came down to like all of our plateware, a local potter originally from (*location*), but lives down in (*location*) and really like their stuff ... We wanted this long table as a convivial dining space, a local carpenter from the (*location*), he built the thing for us. Yeah, all sorts of just locals chipping in." (20a)

Not only were the bespoke elements of the service environment discussed as signals of luxury, but they could also represent elements which serve to make the experience extraordinary and make the diner feel special given the level of individuality across all aspects of the service experience, both tangible and intangible. The levels of success of such subjective luxury service perceptions, however, rests largely on the individual themselves, informed by factors such as their own needs and preferences, interpretation of the experience, socio-economic class, and situational needs (Wirtz *et al*. 2020).

> "... you know the crockery that you have is handmade for you, or bespoke made for you, the tables and chairs. It's an individuality as well. You go somewhere that's the person's personality, it's their thoughts from the building, the decor,

the plates, the crockery, the glassware, the food that's on the plate. The style of service, the staff as well and it's just knowing how to make someone feel special. Knowing how to make the person that already feel special feel even more special." (P1)

In sum, the luxury service environment not only plays a major role in the interpretation and perception of the experience of the diner, it also serves as a pivotal signal of their restaurant's luxury status through their social media marketing strategies. As previously mentioned, the luxury service environment is further examined and discussed as also a signal of authenticity specifically for luxury service brands in Section 5.3.

5.2.1.7 Exclusivity

Despite the increase in global accessibility and consumption of luxury, *exclusivity* remains a key dimension of luxury brands as outlined in the literature (see Section 2.1.8.5). Perceptions of exclusivity for luxury brands can stem from characteristics such as price, as well as limiting production or restricting distribution (Fionda and Moore 2009). While social media marketing at its core inherently threatens the veil of exclusivity sought by luxury brands, effectively limiting recipients of certain messages and content may preserve the exclusive element of the brand-consumer relationship online (Carpenter, Green, and Laflam 2018). Table 5.6 below depicts the sub-codes within the exclusivity dimension.

Table 5.6.   Exclusivity Thematic Codebook

Exclusivity		Interviews	References
Accessibility	References to accessibility in communication to the social media audience	20	48
Conspicuousness	References to the conspicuous elements of luxury service marketing	8	14
Dilution	References to the dilution of the luxury element of the brand brought about by social media	7	12

As is further explored in Section 5.3.1.2 where exclusivity is also discussed as a key signal of authenticity, participants described their intent to refrain from an overly elitist, exclusionary marketing approach in favour of promoting the accessibility of luxury by encouraging those individuals who may not previously have thought Michelin star dining to be accessible to them, intimidating, overly formal, or strict in their adherence to the more traditional luxury values. In fact, participants spoke of their explicit intention to actively remove the supposed stereotype attached with luxury dining in favour of a more accessible perception among consumers.

> "Yeah so, I suppose when we want to do, we want to democratise the whole, that you have to be of a certain mindset or education to get the whole food is inherently wrong. It's something that you put into your body to sustain yourself, nourish yourself and give yourself pleasure. So that in itself we hope, I hope that doesn't come across in any way elitist, you know?" (P17)

It was during these discussions on exclusivity that the aforementioned preconceptions of Michelin star dining being overly formal and exclusionary, rather than exclusive. However, on the whole, participants described their intention to alleviate such perceptions by signalling the exclusiveness of their offering in terms of its quality, rather than seeking to signal its luxury status with more exclusionary marketing tactics.

> "The focus is on the experience that you get when you dine there, and that experience is a very egalitarian, democratic one and it has been from day one. So, everybody's welcome. Nobody's treated any differently. So that ethos means that actually when you you know, I think the perception of Michelin star dining, particularly once you go above one star, is that it's a bit stiff and it's a bit formal and you know, uhm, a lot of the younger generation, really most of them just not interested in that kind of dining. Like for example, they don't tend to drink a lot of fine wine. It'll be more cocktails, whiskey, um spirits. So, it's about showing them that the experience in [*mentions the restaurant's name*] is a very relaxed, warm, welcoming experience, and you can have whatever you want. You know, it's not about looking down on people 'cause they don't want to drink wine, you know?" (P9)

Although participants were quite defiant in their assertions that they strive for their brands to be accessible for all, this intention needs to be balanced with the accurate and effective representation of the brand's luxury status on social media to effectively differentiate itself from both Michelin and non-Michelin competitors. However, participants described their approach to this on social media as being a less conspicuous form of signalling (i.e., Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010), at times actively downplaying the luxury status of the brand (i.e., Beverland 2005). The underlying purpose seems to be an aversion to diluting the impact of the Michelin star by constantly invoking it explicitly within their social media content while also still striving to showcase their exclusive qualities.

"... like we do use the word luxury, but I suppose the best way to say it, it's saying it without boasting. So, if you just say if you're talking about the Michelin restaurant, you're not going to say 'the fantastic, the amazing' like, 'best in the world', like you want to kind of refine it and make it like make it sound still exciting, but without being boastful of it and getting people excited without I suppose showing off." (P8)

Further examples of this more implicit form of signalling included more of 'show' rather than 'tell' approach via demonstrations and evidence of the quality of the luxury service experience rather than more overtly emphasising the Michelin star award as the central signal of luxury.

"You know you don't wanna keep saying 'oh look Michelin star dish at [*mentions restaurant's name*]', 'this is a Michelin star turbot dish', 'a Michelin star', you know, like if you're ramming it down people's throats, you know I don't think that it's a good thing, you know?" (P3)

Of course, the inherent risk of engaging in social media marketing is that, by its very nature in being more open source and visible, the perception of exclusivity may suffer via the diminishing of psychological distance between brand and consumer (Park, Im, and Kim 2020) and hence a more balanced brand-consumer dynamic (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). This sentiment was shared by participants, who acknowledged that at its core, social media does challenge those traditional luxury characteristics and that this must be carefully managed to balance the perception of exclusivity while also ensuring a vibrant social media presence.

"But you know it's not showing every new dish with them every day or showing the preparation everyday 'cause I just think you're sort of diluting expectations, you know?" (P1)

"Considering how we market that message, it's about doing it with finesse. You don't wanna shout from the rooftops, you don't want to devalue the product as being a Michelin star property because that's all you talk about." (P23)

While exclusivity remains a prominent feature of luxury and of luxury brands throughout the literature, the luxury service brands in this study, on the whole, have sought to leverage the exclusivity of their offering in terms of the uniqueness of their dining experience. It is not utilised as an exclusionary signal, seeking to only appeal to certain individuals, but more so to demonstrate their hospitable and humble nature while offering a world-class luxury service.

5.2.1.8 Marketing

The systematic literature review in this study explored the role of social media in luxury brand marketing and management. The objective of the data collection process with regard to this dimension was to explore how participants in the research integrated social media into their overarching marketing strategy, so is viewed as a higher-level dimension than others in this typology which would be more inherent signals of luxury, such as *exclusivity* and *brand identity*. Table 5.7 below lists the sub-codes within the *marketing* dimension.

Table 5.7.   Marketing Thematic Codebook

Marketing		Interviews	References
Storytelling	References to storytelling in social media communications	20	49
Visual	References to the visual aspect of social media generally or certain platforms	21	42
Engagement	References to the audience engaging with the brand's content on social media	15	34
Control	References to controlling in terms of the brand, communications, online presences etc	13	27
Behind the Scenes	References to facilitating 'behind the scenes' like content and interaction with social media audiences	13	21
Awareness	References to building brand awareness on social media	13	21
Aspirational	References to being aspirational and social media activities to promote that.	10	19

As previously noted in Section 4.2.8.6, a recent stream of literature examining the role of storytelling in generating brand engagement on social media has emerged, with elements such as plot, characters, and verisimilitude have been found to play varying roles across all three engagement dimensions within a beauty brand context (Dessart and Pitardi 2019). However, literature pertaining its role and applicability for luxury brands remains scarce. The majority of the narratives within this sub-code relate to individuals being at the centre of Michelin star restaurants' stories, be they those who founded the restaurant, guests, staff, suppliers, or members of the local community. Such an approach, as the participants elaborated, represent a classical means of engaging with others through more modern technologies, with real people being at its core.

> "We've got the tech revolution and people are losing touch so you know, we're all on phones and so [*mentions the restaurant's name*] really is a place where it's slow living in some senses, returning back to her face to face meeting, real stories from farmers, wine makers and slow craft and very face to face

connection. Yeah, so I think we glean off identity from the past and then from the present in terms of the people who come through the walls of [*mentions the restaurant's name*] influencing where we go all the time." (P13)

As previously outlined in the systematic literature review, storytelling continues to garner attention from researchers and practitioners alike in luxury marketing. Participants further elaborated here that this technique enables the showcasing of people at the centre of the luxury service brand and is grounded in the experience, rather than just the product.

"It's like the things that make a great restaurant great, opposed to just 'the great things it does'. It's about that why and a story, a story why they do what they do, not just what they do [...] Storytelling, uhm, I think it's still only on the cusp [...] Our slogan, if you like, is telling stories of extraordinary people and that is fundamentally what we do. And it's always about the story and the experience, I think that it is going to continue to grow across all companies and begin to see the value or not. Because you're selling that journey in that experience of the product as opposed to just what the product is." (P7)

"The kitchen is at the heart of everything that we do and it is the story. You know it's the main story of us as well, because you know [*the restaurant*] is owned by [*mentions Head Chef's name*], [*their*] dream come reality and all of [*their*] accolades held over the years and achievements." (P18)

In terms of visual communication approaches, the systematic literature review in this study found 'classical' aesthetics are more frequently utilised by luxury fashion brands over 'expressive' aesthetics (Kusumasondjaja 2020), with heritage and speciality being particularly popular elements of luxury brands social media strategies (Maman Larraufie and Kourdoughli 2014; Lee and Youn 2020; Wang *et al*. 2020). Participants spoke of the challenge in designing content marketing strategies which strikes the balance between signalling luxury effectively and engaging the online audience. Approaches predominantly included a 'behind the scenes' approach, seeking to signal the luxury elements of the service experience through depiction of its unique aspects such as food preparation, kitchen operations, or staff members. The main objective in these cases is to effectively demonstrate the elite-level of knowledge and skill within the restaurant, thus signalling the luxury status of the brand.

"... what would I look for in in, you know, social media for a [*Michelin*] star restaurant is, like, you know, obviously I want culinary content with what they do in the kitchen, how the kitchen's setup or how the pass is set up or whatever" (P17)

"... so [*mentions Head Chef's name*] takes a very artistic technical approach to things, so they sketch dishes before they actually try making them, they have wonderful patterns and geometric moulds and wonderful things that they had to specially make for them. And they'll share their process on social media." (P24)

Participants also spoke of their motivation and purpose for their social media marketing activities as not being purely motivated by sales, reflecting Beverland's (2005) assertion that luxury brands should appear above commercial motivations. P7, for example, described their own motivation for engaging in social media marketing as more "documenting the craft" and more implicitly signalling their luxury quality by "talking about everything apart from the actual product".

"... it's more about documenting the story and making people feel like they're part of it and taking them along that journey. From everything from the most basic things you know in the restaurant day-to-day things, the people within them you know people are a big part of [*mentions the restaurant's name*], just talking about that you know the team, all of that. Yeah, we don't set out any of the content to drive sales, that's never the motive, it's more informative and documenting just the craft itself [...] I think that comes back the not selling the product type of thing, like to experience the product you have to you have to go to the restaurant. That's kind of the exclusivity element of it is like, um, we're talking about everything apart from the actual product essentially." (P7)

To conclude, similar to other signals discussed in this section, the majority of participants spoke of attempting to dispel any potential ambivalence from the public regarding the elitism or overly exclusive nature of their luxury service brand. Rather than take a overly sales-focussed approach to their social media marketing strategies, participants utilised both tangible and intangible signals of luxury such as the story of the stages of production of individuals dishes or else images of the finished product.

5.2.1.9 Price

As discussed in Section 2.1.8.4, a premium price is a key characteristic in reinforcing the luxury status of a brand, despite the paucity of research on luxury pricing strategies (Gutsatz and Heine 2018b). Predictably, and consistent with earlier narratives from participants (e.g., P7's quote in Section 4.4.1.8 previously) that their main motivation for engaging in social media marketing is not solely sales-driven, this particular dimension was the least voluminous of all dimensions, consisting of just two sub-codes (Table 5.8). Charging a high price for luxury offerings not only signals the quality within the service, for example the ingredients used, but can also act as fundamental barrier to entry, enhancing the exclusivity of the service (Fionda and Moore 2009; Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020).

Table 5.8.   Price Thematic Codebook

Price		Interviews	References
Price	References to price or financial means of MS diners	21	31
Costs	References to the costs of running the restaurant, recruitment, suppliers, etc.	9	14

Participants alluded to their approaches to maintain luxury perceptions among consumers by refusing to engage in special offers or promotions, thus maintain the price as a signal of their luxury status.

> "It's still something you want to keep exclusive, so you can't like shove it down people's throats. I thought that the biggest challenge, you know, when you look at a three-star hotel, they're gonna show like '20% off this today'. Like, you can't really do things like that [*with luxury brands*] so a lot of it is just informing your client of the services that you have ..." (P8)

Participants detailed their approach regarding the price dimension as not being focussed on advertising the prices of their restaurant, due to the already-established perception of Michelin star restaurants commanding a high price relative to other restaurants, but rather in signalling the quality of the experience to justify such a price.

"I think you're keeping it exclusive by the nature of your product. I'm not cheapening the product; I would never think 'maybe you should do a [€/£] 29 lunch menu. I would strongly recommend against that. No, I think the beauty of social media is that you make yourself accessible and you maintain your reputation by your content." (P24)

"There's a lot of places out there that buy everything ready-made and it just comes in and then the chef you know all the people who cook the food turn up at 11 o'clock and then they pull everything out the freezer. I'm not saying I want to shout about that we do all the hours under the sun, but it's nice to let the people know there's a reason why, you know Michelin star restaurants or high-end restaurants are a little bit more expensive, and rightly so because the amount of effort it takes." (P5)

The above quotes serve to underline the approaches by luxury brands in seeking to take a more implicit, or inconspicuous, approach to signalling their luxury status by *showing* rather than *telling*. This further underlines Beverland's (2005) work which established how luxury wine brands sought to downplay their commercial prowess and builds upon these findings in exploring how these more implicit signals are produced and communicated within a social media environment by luxury service brands. A more in-depth investigation into signal implicitness or explicitness within a authenticity context is provided in Section 5.3.

5.2.1.10   Relationships

The final luxury brand dimension refers to the *relationships* created and maintained by the luxury service brand and the role those play in driving the social media marketing activities of the brand. Although related constructs, such as loyalty and sales, have been proposed as key characteristics of luxury brands within the literature (Phau and Prendergast 2000), it is one of this study's contributions to explicitly posit relationships as a key luxury brand dimension (Section 2.1.8.10). The thematic codebook and sub-codes for the relationships dimension are depicted in Table 5.9 below.

Table 5.9.   Relationships Thematic Codebook

Relationships		Interviews	References
Perception	References to stakeholder perception of luxury	28	66
Expectations	References to the management of expectation	19	40
Trust	References to building trust	8	13
Relatability	References to the brand being relatable to a more casual audience	9	12
Image	References to brand image	6	8
Togetherness	References to the team being a close-knit unit	4	6

It should be noted here that relationships are also posited as a key signal of authenticity in the proceeding discussion (Section 5.3), however it is deemed prudent to also include here as a key dimension of luxury brands more holistically due to the diverse nature of the relationships luxury service brands have with other parties and stakeholders, for example either professional or personal, and how those relationships influence their social media content and marketing strategies. For example, the most voluminous sub-code within this dimension pertained to the outside perception of the restaurant as a luxury brand from stakeholders, which include guests, suppliers, the local community, and industry practitioners. One interesting stream of conversation from participants in this regard was their admission that the perception of luxury itself has changed and so has had an effect on their relationships with their social media following.

> "I think our perception of luxury has definitely changed, and I think a lot of that comes from kind of the Instagram influencers because there are kind of items there that people would think 'oh that's luxury' but because you got influencers pushing them, people feel that they should have them too and convince themselves that it it's not a luxury anymore. It's just the day-to-day item. So, it is hard to define what luxury is anymore." (P26)

Participants spoke of their relationships with their social media following as being one of support and, at times, pride in their accomplishments. Given Michelin's worldwide recognition as the highest indicator of luxury within the restaurant industry, local communities have tended to rally around the Michelin star restaurants in their

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area as a local point of pride and have subsequently engaged in social media activity of their own to boost its visibility even further.

> "... we have Michelin inspectors come along and they tweeted on Twitter saying we're real excited and I think that meant a lot to the community that we live in because they are hugely supportive. Even if they've never even stepped through the door, they're always so proud to have a Michelin star restaurant in the in the town. So, they love that and they're always very supportive of any awards that we get." (P29)

Some interviewees even spoke of a sense of psychological ownership (i.e., Kim *et al*. 2016; Essamri *et al*. 2019; Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020) of the brand among their local regulars, further cementing their close relationships with their diners which can then be extended beyond the luxury service encounter to social media platforms and even manifest in user-generated signals of luxury being generated through positive eWOM.

> "You know our regular customer base is so massive and genuinely care about the restaurant you know, most of our regulars call it 'my restaurant'. They refer to it as 'have you been to my restaurant?' to their friends, you know? Especially then they're the people who kind of keep this going all the time. You know, it's great to be in contact with them and showing what we're doing ..." (P5)

Finally, participants spoke about trying to establish trust among their online audience as a means of encouraging bookings. Given that the price of dining in a Michelin star restaurant remains high relative to other restaurants, participants spoke of the importance of instilling trust and confidence in their social media following in making such an investment in their luxury service experience. Given the previously mentioned efforts these restaurants to seem more accessible and to allay any ambivalence regarding the tone or atmosphere of the restaurant as being overtly formal or even elitist, participants spoke of the need to not only assure individuals that they strive to create a more inclusive, welcoming atmosphere, but also seek to assure consumers that the cost of dining in their restaurants represents good value and can result in positive UGC from their diners.

"... because it's so expensive for some people to stay with us and dine even. It is not a casual decision and there is a casual feel to social media still, which if it doesn't matter if [*spending*] a grand on a weekend is nothing to you, then yeah you can be booking like this and there are people like that, but the lion share of people still need to speak to someone [...] They go from social media to the website, then they call us. It's a lot of money and they need to hear someone, and I think that we are still some way away from that going. They need to have confidence ..." (P12)

"... the important thing is that when people arrive and they sit down is that we get them to trust us because people can be sceptical and you can get people who are used to dining in you know white tablecloth restaurants [*or*] people who aren't used to going out to kind of high-end restaurants. Important thing is that we get them to trust us [...] And if we can create that connection through the trust, well then you can kind of trust that they're going to treat the material, photo or whatever they take, well, you know? Because we've given them the experience and they trust us. They go away with those feelings that we want people to have, and therefore they share that information, you know?" (P27)

5.2.1.11   Downplaying Luxury

As well as the aforementioned dimensions of luxury service brands discussed above, one additional signal which was already flagged within the discussion above but also warrants a specific focus is that of participants seeking to actively downplay their luxury status (i.e., Beverland 2005). This is related to the previously discussed efforts by Michelin star restaurant brands to promote accessibility in their brand and to combat lingering public perceptions of elitism which may exist around luxury fine dining. While Michelin star restaurants proudly showcase the quality of their luxury service offering by integrating the signals discussed in this section, one recurring theme which was pervasive throughout multiple interviews in this study was the desire to actually downplay their luxury status, endeavouring to 'show' their quality through signals within social media content rather than explicitly 'tell' consumers by over-relying on the Michelin star award as a sole indicator of their luxury status. This represents an interesting contribution to luxury service branding literature and builds on the earlier work of Beverland (2005; 2006) which found that luxury wine brands

tended to downplay their commercial motives, aiming to be perceived as being above such commercial motivations and driven more by the craft of winemaking and the creation of a high-quality product. Similarly, participants in this study were not over-zealous in their signalling of their own status among the world's elite restaurants on social media, choosing instead to focus more on the quality of their luxury service offering despite already having received recognition of same by Michelin.

> "... like I said, we don't try to push ourselves as like a luxury brand, we push ourselves with quality." (P29)

> "I think that there will be a point where we won't even need to talk about star very much and will douse it down ... But once people are in, it'll be something we talk about less and less ... " (P13)

A further interesting submission from P13 actually went a step further than the above admission that the Michelin star award itself might be something that they speak about less as time progresses and the association of the brand with luxury quality becomes more prevalent; P13 spoke of an outright ban on words such as "glamorous and luxury" in their social media marketing activities as they were of the opinion that presenting the brand as a 'luxury brand' could entice people to "only come for status reasons" and that "what we're after is curious customers rather than status driven customers" (P13). While this is an interesting finding and further exemplifies luxury service brands seeking to more subtly signal their luxury status and even avoid utilising terms such as luxury, it also raises important questions for the motivations of individuals to engage with luxury service brands on social media and their perception of their social media marketing strategies and their perceptions of luxury attached to those brands. This approach of seeking to downplay their luxury status as a signal, ironically, of their luxury status is further discussed and exemplified in the next section whereby signals of luxury service brand authenticity on social media are examined.

To conclude, this sub-section has explored how each dimension within the novel typology of luxury service brands is utilised within social media strategies by Michelin star restaurants to signal their luxury status. The present study proposes *authenticity* within its typology, so it is the purpose of RO3 to explore this more thoroughly; specifically, how authenticity may be signalled on social media for luxury

service brands. The following section addresses this research question before a comprehensive roundup of theoretical and managerial implications are presented in the proceeding Chapter Six.

5.3   RO3: Signals of Authenticity on Social Media

Stemming from the thematic analysis and in addressing RO3, a total of eleven distinct signals of authenticity been categorised into three groups (Figure 5.1): *tangible* (dark background), *intangible* (light background), and mixed tangibility related to the luxury *servicescape* (shaded background). Previous research has highlighted both tangible and intangible dimensions of both authenticity (Beverland 2005; 2006) and online branding strategies (Yu *et al*. 2019), so this approach was also adopted here for investigating signals of authenticity, which also follows the inclusion of a tangibility/intangibility distinction within the definition of luxury service brands proposed in Section 2.1.7. These signals are further positioned within the axes based on their *explicitness/implicitness* when represented through their social media marketing content. Observability remains a key characteristic of signals (Connelly *et al*. 2011) and have been adopted as a critical lens in previous studies; for example, Han Nunes, and Drèze (2010) distinguish between loud (conspicuous) and quiet (discreet) branding approaches on social media, while Herbig and Milewicz (1996) discuss overt versus covert signalling. Multiple consumer studies have also examined the effects of conspicuous consumption of luxury brands online (i.e., Wallace *et al*. 2020; Chen *et al*. 2021b). Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to also adopt these criteria to further investigate the level of conspicuousness Michelin star restaurants deem necessary when embedding such signals of authenticity in their social media content.

As will be further explored in the discussion, there was also a degree of overlap amongst certain authenticity signals, representing participants' approaches to embedding multiple signals within individual social media posts. This aligns with previous assertions that consumers use a combination of cues, rather than a rigid set of criteria, in evaluating brand authenticity (Napoli *et al*. 2014). Servicescapes are composed of both tangible and intangible elements (Bitner 1992), thus we propose that servicescape authenticity comprises a blend not only of tangible and intangible signals but are also both explicitly and implicitly presented on social media.

Figure 5.1.   Luxury service brand signals of authenticity on social media
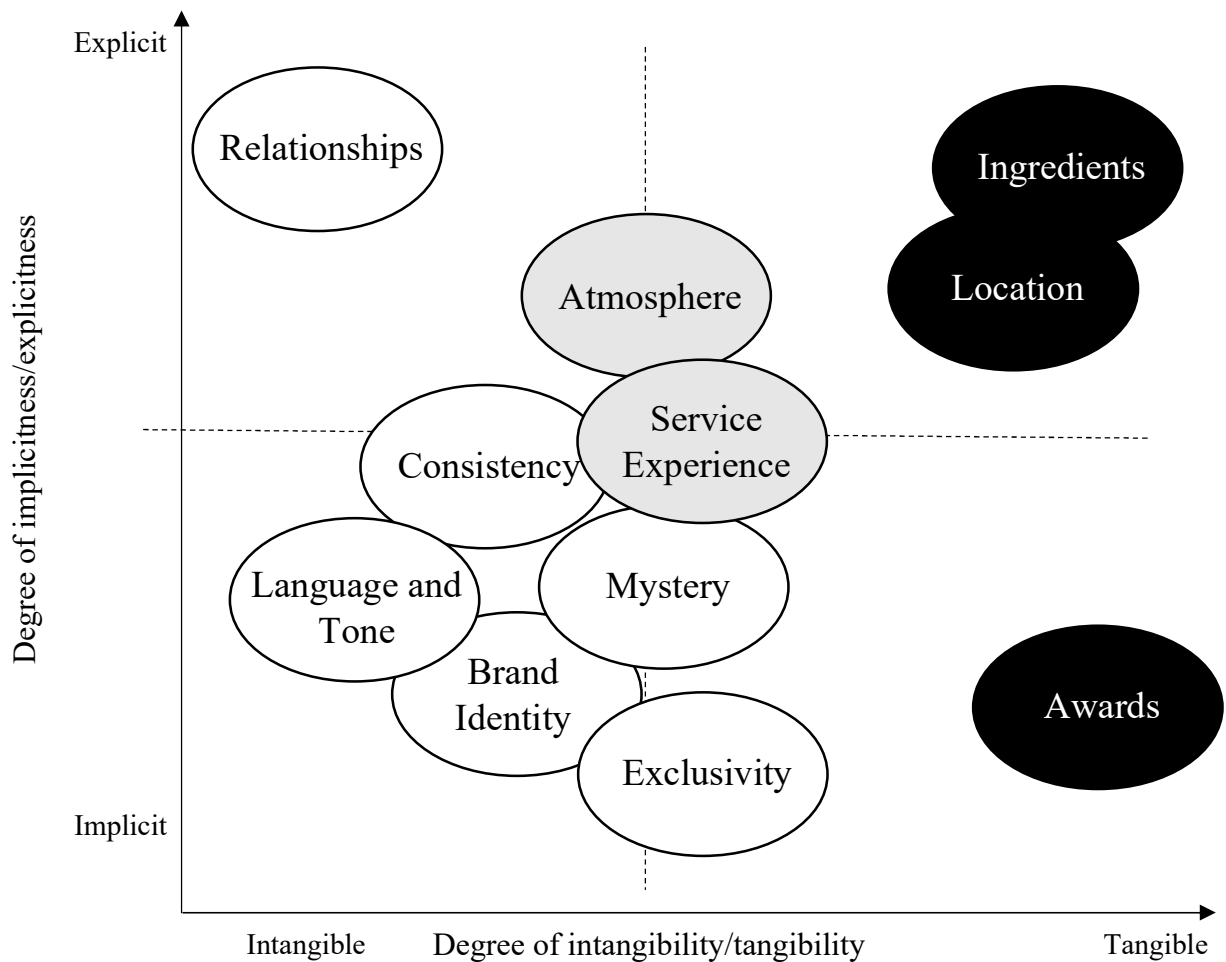
While early literature points to an ambivalence from luxury brands regarding allocation of resources to social media marketing (Okonkwo 2009; Kapferer 2015), the vast majority of participants spoke with fervour of their online presence, albeit offering diverse accounts of how and why they use social media. Examples of the minority of participants being more 'resistant' include P22 who stated that while their own social media activity levels were low, they would endeavour to respond to every TripAdvisor review posted about the restaurant, regardless of whether it was positive or negative. As discussed in Chapter Two, review platforms, while a category outside the more mainstream social networking sites and content communities, remain a critical social media platform category, especially within the hospitality industry. Social media gives brands the means to interact with consumers directly, with the specificities of each platform necessitating innovative engagement approaches online (Lee and Watkins 2016), with the ultimate goal being to inspire offline purchasing

activities (Chen and Wang 2017). Signal effectiveness relies on the environment within which it is consumed, as instances of the medium reducing signal observability can cause environmental distortion (Connelly *et al.* 2011; Taj 2016). Therefore, these lines of inquiry were followed to explore methods of signalling via direct interaction with brand-generated content on all relevant platforms, rather than focussing solely on one platform (i.e., Kumar *et al.* 2016).

Overall, the findings depict an interestingly divergent set of approaches, not only to social media marketing, but also in perception and utilisation of Michelin stars themselves as a signal of authenticity. While Michelin's own criteria for awarding stars remains consistent across the entire industry, albeit secretive, how chefs, marketers, and agencies actually interpret and leverage these awards is interestingly quite varied. While some view the award as a stamp of their authority among the world's elite restaurants, others simply view it as a feather in their cap, a by-product of the hard work and determination they demonstrate every day in their business. This was particularly highlighted in how restaurants seek to signal their brand authenticity through their social media marketing activities. While some examples focussed on the restaurants' own personal characteristics, such as their own brand identity, the ingredients they use, or the service experience at their restaurant, other examples included other external elements, such as relationships with suppliers or the restaurants' geographical location.

As depicted in Figure 5.1, the majority of signals of authenticity utilised by luxury service brands on social media occupy the implicit-intangible portion of the graph. This is reflective of assertions that luxury brands tend to downplay their marketing expertise and commercial motivations to preserve brand authenticity (Beverland 2005). Further, while consumers of luxury products can self-select the degree of conspicuous consumption of their luxury consumption by choosing products with either a large visible logo or else more subtle, discreet design (Han *et al.* 2010), luxury service brands need to proactively manage conspicuousness, often in a more subtle manner, given the inseparability of the service provision and consumption (Wirtz, Holmqvist and Fritze 2020). Thus, it is argued that as luxury service brands are more likely engage in subtle and discreet practices to preserve their clients' privacy, for example (Wirtz, Holmqvist and Fritze 2020), they are also more likely to implicitly signal authenticity on social media. These signals are further explored in the discussion

below. While it should be noted that some of these signals are also included as signals of luxury more holistically as discussed in Section 5.2, their inclusion here relates to their utilisation as signals of *authenticity* specifically.

5.3.1 Intangible

The first category within the proposed framework refers to six intangible signals of authenticity for luxury service brands, either explicitly or implicitly embedded within their social media marketing strategies. The concept of intangibility is widespread throughout the services literature (Mittal 1999), including within a luxury setting (Kim, Hyun and Park 2020). Intangibility presents challenges for consumers at both the pre- and post-purchase phases of service experience; firstly, through difficulty in understanding the service and, secondly, in evaluating the service experience (Legg and Baker 1987). In luxury dining settings, for example, diners do not perceive food as merely a commodity, but as an artistic experience integrating authentic, emotional, and aesthetic components (Batat 2021b). The findings uncovered a total of six purely intangible signals of authenticity utilised by Michelin star restaurants in their social media marketing strategies, as further explored below: identity, exclusivity, consistency, language and tone, mystery, and relationships.

5.3.1.1 Brand Identity

As previously mentioned, a *brand identity* is a "detailed construction plan of meaning that originates from the companies' inner beliefs, is goal-driven by a vision and determines precisely how managers wish a brand to be perceived by its customers and other internal and external stakeholders" (Heine *et al*. 2018: 475) and is the minimal goal of any advertising material (Mittal 1999). A depiction of identity is its portrayal of both the symbolic and intangible dimensions of brands (Fionda and Moore 2009). The analysis found multiple instances of participants striving to create and portray a distinct brand identity through their social media marketing strategies as a means of cementing a perception of authenticity within the minds of consumers. The central focus of such identities did differ among participants, however. Representation of the personalities of the restaurant owners and/or Head Chefs were highlighted as being central to the brand's identity, with resultant social media marketing strategies being reflective of these, whereas other sought to develop a persona wholly predicated on the brand itself, rather than any one individual.

"Identity and persona of the brand, that's something that we spend a lot of time on [...] It's a vital part of it and we spend a lot of time understanding the brand, developing the voice of the brand itself in that platform." (P7)

"I would say the thing that my restaurant has, that the restaurants around here don't have, that don't have stars, we're probably more original and more a sense of identity to my restaurant than other restaurants. So, there's very good restaurants here, but there may be rip-offs of other restaurants, that take dishes from other places. Whereas mine has a very, very clear sense of its own identity and where it belongs and what it does. And that's me personally, I think I get it across very well in the product that we offer and also incredibly consistent." (P22)

Some participants discussed their intention to communicate their brand's identity through the lens of the chef's own personality, given its existence as a "job of passion" (P5), chefs represent a fruitful avenue on which to base their brand identity. In one example, given their non-conformity with the 'traditional', almost caricature, perception of a Michelin star chef in how they would perhaps historically be expected to present themselves to guests within a luxury service environment, one participant spoke of a shift away from such stereotypes.

"I'm not your typical clean-cut boy. Like I said I've got tattoos on my arms ... and people you know back in the day did associate with tattoos being a negative thing, but especially as a head chef and I'm meeting guests and stuff like that, but I don't think it really matters nowadays. I think those times are sort of gone." (P21)

This particular notion ties succinctly into another participant's description of the need for chefs to establish their own personal brand identity, not dissimilar to that of an online influencer, to preserve their brand's identity and further promote it across myriad marketing channels, not just social media.

"And it's interesting, I had a conversation with [*Head Chef*] the other day; he had a magazine interview and one of the questions was about like which up and coming chefs do you think will hit the big time and stuff and he made a quite interesting comment on that, that actually it doesn't really matter so much

now about what a chef's able to do, it's how well they kind of put themselves on screen. There's normally a few that get pushed on telly and stuff, and they're the ones that they seem to be like the best chefs because they're on the telly rather than actual ability to cook." (P29)

Interestingly, one participant, unprompted, rounded on this as a common approach but spoke of their aversion to such tactics, preferring to put the client at the centre of focus. This acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the luxury service experience underpinned their desire to 'create moments' and 'memories' through food for their clients to cherish. Thus, the brand's vision and identity were born around facilitating such extraordinary subjective experiences, rather than being predicated on their own luxury status and characteristics.

"So, the kind of motto we always held was whose moment are you holding? I think a lot of Michelin star restaurants go after the kind of chef is the hero. Basically, all arriving to worship the chef? [*laughs*] ... But we're very clear that the customer is our focus. Customers should be the hero. And when people are coming to us, it's about they're coming to have the food because they want to connect with people. Really, food is always deeper than what's on the plate. Food is about relationships, about memories." (P13)

Finally, some participants even outlined the identity of both the *Head Chef's* brand and the restaurant being one and the same, born from the original building and design of the restaurant itself, instilling their personality into various elements of the servicescape.

"I wanted the restaurant to reflect my personality and my brother's personality and how we grew up and stuff like that. So even how like myself and my brother built the restaurant. You know we did about 60% of the work like literally digging with our hands in a basement, plasterboard the whole restaurant. So inevitably the restaurant is full of our kind of blood, sweat and tears. You know, our personality is now intertwined with it." (P27)

"I've got an awesome restaurant, which reflects me completely ... serving courses of just pure filth food wise, zero pretentiousness. So, you come to have a good time and forget about life for a few hours." (P28)

An additional thread of brand identity stemmed from the participant's desire to establish themselves as key stakeholders in the local community. Heritage is a key component of luxury brand identity (Miller and Mills 2012; Kapferer and Valette-Florence 2018), often portrayed through the design of the physical retail store, incorporating historical elements and distinguishing factors to create authentic, 'sacred' brand locations (Dion and Borraz 2015). Successfully articulating a brand's heritage generates positive emotions and trust, in turn promoting attachment and commitment which increases purchase intention (Rose *et al.* 2016; Becker *et al.* 2019). However, failure to adequately utilise contemporary technologies and communities to effectively communicate brand heritage can have an adverse effect on brands (Nesi *et al.* 2019). Within a service context, enhancing the experience through immersing the client within the heritage of the brand, thus strengthening ties between brand and consumer, further fosters authenticity (Holmqvist, Ruiz, and Peñaloza 2020). The current study illuminated various examples of the restaurant seeking to provide an experience steeped in the history of the restaurant, the cuisine, the chef, and the local community.

> "You know, we've got a lot of different angles that we can tell our story here, with it being old, with it being a lot of people's favourite place, you know quite a lot of famous people have been and gone through the doors." (P25)

> "I know there's such history with [*the Head Chef*], from his [*nationality*] heritage that there's this incredible story that we have kind of built the restaurant upon and that's quite unique, like I don't know any other Michelin restaurant that is literally ten minutes away from where the chef was born and grew up, so yeah unique in that sense." (P10b)

Within the examined luxury service context, brand heritage and ties to the local community was achieved through the promotion and support of local farmers and suppliers as elements within their own supply chain to strengthen ties within the local economy. Incorporating a heritage element into service experience, whether through the menu, building design, décor, or social media content, allows the brand to 'tell the story' of the restaurant, to further engage their clientele within the origin and identity of the restaurant.

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"We've got the tech revolution and people are losing touch, so you know, we're all on phones and so [*the restaurant*] really is a place where it's slow living in some senses, returning back to face to face meeting real stories from farmers, wine makers and slow craft and very face to face connection. Yeah, so I think we glean off [*our*] identity from the past and then from the present in terms of the people who come through the walls of [*the restaurant*] influencing where we go all the time." (P13)

"You know that's kind of my business and the business dictated how the restaurant has to be in the same way with my culture and upbringing has dictated the way I am as a chef. To get all that as good as it can be, has won the star." (P22)

To summarise, participants utilise social media platforms to implicitly portray their brand identities to further augment the online audience's perception of the brand's authenticity. While the literature remains well served with conceptualizations of authenticity embedding tradition, heritage, and craftsmanship into their operations (Beverland 2005), participants in the current study demonstrated how such efforts transcend the service experience to also include online communications through social media.

5.3.1.2 Exclusivity

While discussions persist regarding a concise definition and conceptualisation of luxury, one characteristic which has remained prominent throughout literature over time is that of exclusivity (Kapferer 1997; Ko, Costello, and Taylor 2019). As outlined in a review by Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor (2022), social media users are more accepting of luxury brands taking a more distant approach to communication across the various platforms to preserve exclusivity and brand perception may even suffer if psychological distance is not maintained (Athwal *et al.* 2019; Park *et al.* 2020). While previous studies have focussed on luxury products, there were some similarities found within the current luxury service context.

As previously discussed, luxury service exclusivity can be secured through monetary, social, or hedonic means (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). While a premium price can act as a proxy for establishing a sense of exclusivity with a luxury

offering, other methods such as limiting production or restricting distribution can also enhance exclusivity (Fionda and Moore 2009). Given that Michelin stars are awarded to individual restaurants, as opposed to chains or franchises, the exclusivity of the brands is inherent within their existence as a unique experience. As previously noted, evidence suggests that exclusivity in communication may affect closeness beyond the content of the message itself (Carpenter, Green, and Laflam 2018). Interestingly, participants outlined a primarily implicit, subtle approach to showcasing the exclusivity of the brand in favour of being perceived as more accessible, not feeling the need for overt, and possibly even counterproductive, displays of their exclusive status.

> "It's a very rare occasion that I would post about the Michelin [*star*] just because it's such an exclusive product that you wouldn't really have to sell it as much that I'd have to showcase it." (P8)

> "Advertising was kind of, I guess, classy, but very subtle. You know, the Michelin star did the advertising for you, in a sense." (P27)

While there are conscious efforts from participants to alleviate any potential elitist exclusivity perceptions surrounding their restaurant through their social media activities, there were concessions that the nature of their luxury service experience does act as a source of price exclusivity by default. Again, due to their intent to remain accessible, their communication took a more implicit approach to representing such exclusivity.

> "I'm not for keeping things exclusive. I think you're keeping it exclusive by the nature of your product [...] I think the beauty of social media is that you make yourself accessible and you maintain your reputation by your content [...] I think accessibility is important, no matter how many accolades you might have, stars, price point or whatever. I think accessibility is better than being exclusive." (P24)

The above quote from P24 is especially interesting in that it shuns the classical perspective of luxury brands being seeking to limit their exposure to consumers at large, aligning with Yang and Mattila (2014) who found that luxury hospitality brands are less vulnerable than luxury products to a negative reaction from affluent consumers

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with a high need for status (*parvenus*, see Han *et al*. 2010) when less affluent consumers purchase from these luxury brands. In fact, this was a common thread throughout the study whereby participants actively promote their accessibility through reducing the aforementioned price exclusivity as part of local community initiatives, such as festivals. Such initiatives enhance accessibility appeal in particular to a younger millennial social media audience, who in turn are more active on these platforms and more likely to create and distribute content of their own (Zollo *et al*. 2020).

> "... should we make the restaurant appeal to a wider group, or should we make it appeal even more to the type of customers we already have? For example, we launched afternoon tea before lockdown and we actively decided to target a younger group of people, to almost create a feeder group of new customers, right? So, they would be able to access what we do for 40 [*euro/pounds*] a head." (P14a)

> "You know we're doing barbeques for the village hall, raising money for the church the last couple weeks and you know, we do a carol service at Christmas for the village and things like that and we put the food on and raise money for them so we're part of the community as well. And that helps you know through the power of social media, helps to keep that part going. You know people in the village know what's going on through Facebook and Instagram and things, so it's a great tool to get to a lot of people." (P25)

While such accessibility approaches will increase the visibility of the brand online, the challenge still remains of not being seen as too accessible, which can actually lead to a decrease in luxury perception (Park *et al*. 2020). Further, the literature highlights the need for luxury brands to continuously communicate an 'aspirational dream', via content such as 'behind-the-scenes' looks into the operations of the restaurant, and it is this perceived accessibility which fulfils the cognitive and affective needs of millennials (Athwal *et al*. 2019; Xie and Lou 2020). While participants clearly feel that remaining accessible, rather than exclusive, represents are more fruitful tenet of their social media strategy, they must remain cautious so as not to dilute the authenticity of their brand by being too accessible for the sake of the maximising their visibility on social media and growing their audience.

5.3.1.3 Consistency

The majority of participants referred to importance of their restaurants maintaining a high level of consistency across several aspects of the luxury service brand and experience to reinforce authenticity, including communication via social media, aligning with previous research on luxury authenticity (Beverland 2006). The quality of a luxury brand's social media presence should be reflective of the quality of its products and/or services to ensure brand consistency across all customer touchpoints (Phan *et al*. 2011) and cultures (Yu and Hu 2020). One interesting thread within this theme was the source of demand to be consistent. As the following quote alludes to, social media audiences themselves expect a quality of communication on social media befitting a luxury brand, to the point of contacting the brand directly to point out mistakes in their communications.

> "You know we have the type of audience that will email and call if there are mistakes. … We're not talking about massive spelling mistakes, we're talking about grammatical errors, sentence structures. I have been written to by a subscriber to our database about how a sentence structure wasn't strictly speaking grammatically correct." (P12)

Such standards of consistency can also stem from the marketing department themselves, ensuring all aspects of the brand, when engaging with either clientele at the restaurant or else online, achieves consistent levels of quality reflecting an authentic luxury standard. As will be later examined in the *Language and Tone* subsection, multiple different personas may be adopted by luxury service brands, yet the consistency in quality and accuracy of their social media communications were prominently discussed throughout the interviews.

> "If you're providing something of a luxury quality, whether it's food or product, you need to make sure that every marketing touchpoint is also luxury [...] I want every marketing touchpoint to be as much as you're buying into the experience." (P23)

> "I hate bad spelling and bad grammar and so we just always make sure that everything is kind of on point in that in that aspect as well, because I think, I don't want to sound elitist at all when I say this, but if you see somewhere

posting about their business and it's all kind of grammatically incorrect and there's spelling mistakes, you think actually, if they don't put the effort into getting that right, then it makes you wonder about the content of their business as well." (P29)

Predictably, *Head Chefs* were also great proponents, and often the leading source, of consistency demands in both the luxury service delivery and the supplementary social media marketing activities. Chefs can be influential and legitimate leaders and play a significant social role serving both their own business and the wider community through their reputation, expertise, and history (Batat 2021a), further enhancing the authenticity of the luxury service brand. In the absence of recognisable brand signatures such as logos and distinctive product design in luxury service brands, Chefs often act as proxies who are the driving force behind the restaurant's ascent to Michelin star status as a realisation of their career ambitions and demand such consistent levels of quality across all aspects of the luxury service experience and the extra demands those responsibilities bring.

"You should never drop your standards, no matter what you're doing. Whether you put something on a plate or something in a box for someone to cook at home, your standards should be exactly the same as in your restaurant when you're running it." (P28)

"Yeah, I mean you have to have reality checks with yourself. When you're a chef and just responsible for cooking, it's a smaller picture that you're looking at [...] When you become a restauranteur, it's do the toilets work? Is there a light bulb gone? It's the fire axe ok? Is the roof ok? A lot more involved." (P11)

Additionally, while participants on the whole explicitly stated that the pressure to maintain consistent levels of quality across all aspects of the luxury brand experience came from within the business, Michelin itself served as a prominent undertone during these conversations, as a reminder of the potential consequences of dropping those standards, i.e., losing their Michelin star status.

"Yes, there are negatives to it. Expectations is a big thing about having a Michelin star. When people come in the doors, they expect something, but even they don't understand, they kind of understand maybe something they're going

to get that is totally different than another eating experience in a local neighbourhood restaurant. That is not the case, really. Really the star is saying that the restaurant is consistent. If you come in tonight and come in two weeks' time, or next year, it's the very same. That's what a star is saying, but people have missed that point? We expect a lot more, put it that way!" [*laughs*] (P16)

While participants were quick note that "no pressure from Michelin, all the pressure came from myself" (P6), "it's just a guidebook" (P17), or "it's just somebody else's opinion. They make tyres, you know what I mean?" (P28), all participants spoke about the importance of, once achieving Michelin star status, striving to maintain those levels of quality consistently so as to remain among the Michelin starred ranks. One participant who achieved a Michelin star more recently outlined how it was actually to the detriment of their regular diners that the restaurant embed consistency so centrally in its menu and experience to achieve a Michelin star that the opportunity cost was offering a wider variety of experiences as a core signal of their luxury authenticity.

"Like I said, consistency is very very important. So, we were bashing out the same menu over and over and over again. Now we did change it little bit here and there, but we knew it was an expensive meal and the idea was it's not a meal you come back for once-a-week kind of thing. It's a bit of an occasion ... However, holidaymakers might come once, two, three, four times in two weeks and sometimes they might have the exact same meal every time they come. So, that's the kind of decision you have to take. You know that was to the detriment of the customer which is a bit of a bad decision to take. You know that your product isn't quite good enough for the customer. It's like we really need to change the menu for our customers so that there having a good experience each time and we did." (P20a)

In terms of branding the restaurant, there was a surprising level of discrepancy in terms of the level of formalisation of the branding guidelines and strategy amongst participants in the study to achieve consistency in how the brand is portrayed online. While early social media research points to a lack of clearly defined strategies among luxury brands (Reyneke *et al*. 2011), this seems to still be the case over ten years later. Interestingly, a pattern of a more discernible, formal approach was more common

among agency participants and those specifically tasked with social media marketing and management in-house, rather than those whose role encompassed more elements than solely social media management, such as Head Chefs or owners, favouring a more ad-hoc approach.

> "Yeah, I mean, we have brand guidelines format from a visual perspective which I created in 2018 and I'm very fixed on that. And that's actually been remarkably difficult with the small business to make sure that everything was always on brand [...] I did create some guidelines in that respect in terms of making new starters understand what the brand meant, which was beyond just a logo, but an embodiment of our ethos and everything else." (P12)

> "So, for a luxury brand, I think you have the availability to be a little bit more, I suppose consistent with your content because it's an overall, it's the umbrella for everything." (P8)

> "So, a lot of restaurants, you know, luxury restaurants, they would all have brand guidelines, generally speaking, uhm, it's the middle level restaurants that probably find it more difficult to be consistent with that and it changes. I see a lot of restaurants doing that and constantly putting out different messages; being very casual one moment and then trying to be very professional the next, 'cause it's very mixed, so I'd say that's probably the key part of that and just being disciplined with it." (P7)

Conversely, some participants described a much more ad-hoc approach to their social media marketing, reflective of the changeable nature of the platforms themselves and shifting trends within content marketing and audience preferences. In such cases, authenticity was signalled more so by adhering to these trends and maintaining a consistency in engagement with the audience, rather than rigidly utilising the same techniques within the ever-evolving social media environment.

> "To keep everybody up to date, what's going on at the restaurant, it's all completely off the cuff [...] I'll put a post up at three in the morning. I don't care only people in America will see it!" (P28)

"Like a lot of people do, I don't really take [*social media*] that serious. I mean it is important for the business. Definitely does get people being interested, but I think the people that are looking, like they're gonna come and love you anyway." (P1)

"Em, not really to be honest? Nothing set in stone. Yeah, we kind of play it by ear a lot of the time. I mean, we know what works well. We know what's popular with our audiences. So, we adhere to that as much as possible, that's what we follow." (P19)

To conclude, consistency as a signal for luxury brand authenticity is often not just demanded from varying sources, but often multiple sources simultaneously. The data outlined the inherent responsibility of the restaurant to maintain such elite standards consistently across all aspects of the brands' operations, from the service experience itself to its online communications. Within a social media context, such demands are often as simple as ensuring consistency of the visuals of dishes against what is actually served on site so as not to mislead customers. The intention of the participants was to implicitly signal a style of communication through consistency in posting on social media: "It's very much that style that becomes the restaurant ... if you go onto news feed, if you didn't even see the name, you would know that that's a photograph from [*the restaurant*]", (P7) with practical examples including the visual components of imagery being shared on social media, with one participant describing their use of "the same filter ... same vignette level ... same crop ... same mode on the camera" (P24).

5.3.1.4 Language and Tone

The language and tone of the restaurant's social media marketing acts as an implicit embodiment of the brand's identity continuously represented through social media communications and content. Luxury bands need to ensure that their content and communication are reflective of the quality and status of the brand's status (Chung *et al*. 2020). A recurring theme within responses was the importance of ensuring an authentic voice on social media, reflective either the tone of the restaurant itself or the Head Chef's own vision for their restaurant. To this end, those who managed their social media in house were more likely to describe the benefits as being more in control of the content, the message, and the tone of the entire presence. One participant

outlined their experience working with a ghost-writer on a previous book but decided to write it themselves, saying "that doesn't sound like me, you know?" (P25) and their desire to continue to ingrain that authentic voice within the social media content they share. Further similar examples in the data include failed outsourcing of marketing due to a lack of fit between the brand and the consultant/agency, further emphasising the requirement for "somebody outside needed to be a very particular person who really understood what the restaurant was about" (P20b). This demonstrates the overlap depicted in Figure 1 between this signal and *Identity* and *Consistency*, highlighting the interplay between these signals as language and tone is informed by the luxury brand identity while also needing to be consistent in order to maximise its effectiveness as a signal.

The approaches to incorporating appropriate language and tone within social media content and communications discussed by participants included a formal approach befitting a traditional luxury brand rather than it being driven by just one individual as in the previous example. Interestingly, the sole three Michelin star participant in the study was the strongest proponent of adopting a more formal and structured approach "spawned from brand guidelines and the story brand strategy that we create" (P7). This would reflect previous assertions that luxury brands "dominate" the brand-client relationship, asserting a level of authority similar to that of a parent's relationship with a child to preserve status (Kapferer and Bastien 2009: 318). Another participant outlined, given their Michelin star status, the necessity to observe a "very refined" tone of voice, with a proclivity for "attention to detail and (being) quite traditional" (P18) in their communication.

However, this was not a universal approach. Other participants, primarily newer members of the Michelin Guide, preferred to keep the language and tone of their social media communications more informal, in alignment not only with the overall nature of the social media platforms themselves, but also as a means of portraying themselves as an authentic brand, particularly to younger audiences, through more accessible language and even humour.

> "So, it's just keeping it kind of really personable and just kind of cheery and friendly and not too daunting, we don't want people feeling that there never welcome." (P29)

As previous research has already found, luxury brands taking a more informal, accessible tone can lead to a diminishing of psychological distance which in turn can negatively affect brand perception in luxury fashion brands (Park *et al*. 2020). This the first study of its kind within a luxury services context and we propose a more relaxed, informal tone aligned with the general atmosphere of social media platforms was a much more common strategy for Michelin star restaurants intent on reducing the perception of elitism that is often associated with luxury brands. For example, participants spoke about their tone of voice on social media as "fairly tongue in cheek" (P6), "less po faced" (P17), and having a "quirkiness to it" (P8). One participant even described their disdain for the term luxury and related terminology, explaining that it "sets the wrong tone" (P13) and their preference that their Michelin star status would not result in a perception of elitism, but rather signal the quality of their service experience. This if further exemplified by P24, who elaborated on the tone of their restaurant as often incorporating a combination of an image of their world class ingredients alongside a much more laid-back and informal caption, thus showcasing the quality of the produce, yet preserving an authenticity in the brand's personality on social media.

In sum, although the sample size of three-star restaurants in the present study was limited (n=1), it was nonetheless interesting to observe a much more formal approach being taken by this brand in their tone and use of language on social media due to their being high in elite luxury characteristics (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020), whereas one star restaurants were much more likely to adopt a more casual, informal tone so as to seem more approachable and accessible to social media users.

5.3.1.5 Mystery

Another signal was the desire of a portion of participants to preserve an aura of mystique around the luxury service experience and not to disclose too much so as to lessen the perception of exclusivity or authenticity and to ensure the provision of an extraordinary hedonic experience (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). Mystery is characterised as a cognition-focussed element of brand image, reflective of individuals' thoughts and valuations of a brand (Cho and Fiore 2015). Mystery has been found to play a central role in eliciting strong passionate feelings toward neo-luxury brands (Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019), defined brands offering products and services with

superior levels of quality, but not priced so expensively so as to be out of reach for consumers (Silverstein *et al.* 2005). This finding further exemplifies how mystery can be utilised to form brand associations directly (i.e., through the luxury service experience) or indirectly (i.e., through social media marketing) (Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019).

A sense of mystery can be utilised to form brand associations either directly, such as through the luxury service experience itself, or indirectly via social media (Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019). Particularly given the ubiquity of social media, preserving an element of mystery and surprise around the luxury service experience is challenging, especially as consumers continuously seek information via review platforms and social media prior to luxury experiences. In this case, authenticity is signalled by the restraint shown by Michelin star restaurants to only showcase certain amounts of the experience on social media. As participants noted, "I think you can show too much on social media as well; think it's good to hold a little back" (P3), "I mean, you want to entice people to come, we don't wanna spoil it for them" (P1) and "I'll put up two dishes up and be like this is what we're doing at the moment, but they don't know what the other seven courses are" (P26).

Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani (2021) find that originality matters more when assessing the authenticity of low-coproduction services (vs. high) and legitimacy is more prudent in cases of high-coproduction services. Consumers more involved in co-creating value care more about whether an offering adheres to specific standards, in this case Michelin star standards. In instances whereby consumers contribute less to in the co-creation of value in luxury services, it is the distinctiveness of the offering which contributes more to the assessment of authenticity. This study's findings indicate that Michelin star restaurants seek to employ both these components of authenticity through the preservation of an aura of mystery in their social media marketing strategies by purposefully withholding certain elements of the luxury service experience to users to maximise that sense of originality during the service encounter, while ensuring those elements which are portrayed online further exemplify their Michelin star status and quality.

> "There's more of a chance to strip back a little bit because they are so exclusive, and as well, you know it's your content. You need to have good quality content

you can't just be lashing it out and as well it's a case of keeping that exclusivity, keeping a little bit of the of the wonder of like 'oh, what's it actually like?' and like you kind of look forward to seeing something new [...] Like especially in hospitality, you actually can't see absolutely everything, and I think that's kind of interesting. But yeah, absolutely keeping a little bit of mystery of what's to come, because that's what's going to keep you excited. If you knew absolutely everything down to a tee, like what are you having to look forward to? (P8)

"I think people not knowing absolutely everything you're doing from a social media point of view is really important because you want there to be a bit of mystery. Like, obviously you want people to know what the restaurant looks like, what the chef does, who the chef is [...] I don't think you should have every single thing about your business up on social media. I think sometimes you're like 'why don't you come and have a look?' Surely it's got to be a bit more exciting than knowing absolutely everything before you get there." (P26)

The final area of this signal relates to the challenge of endeavouring to preserve a mysterious element to the service experience while also mitigating guest expectations. As was discussed initially in the *Consistency* signal (and later in the *Awards* signal), guests' prior perceptions of luxury hospitality and preconceived notions of what a Michelin star restaurant should be are often misaligned with how Michelin actually allocates its star awards. While participants detailed their conservative approach to divulging too much about the nature of the experience, the risk in doing so relates to guests then forming their own potentially unrealistic, or at the very least misguided, expectations of the experience.

"But I think going back to the Michelin question that explaining the experience, you don't want to reveal too much either. You want to inspire people to come and enjoy restaurant, but you don't want to reveal all of the experience, all of the little details and because they need to be an element of surprise when they're here. You know you don't want to set all of their expectations before they come." (P18)

Mystery remains underserved by the literature as it pertains to luxury service brands, however it is a commonly used signal within participants' social media

marketing strategies. As the literature has shown, mystery elicits strong passionate feelings from consumers toward neo-luxury brands (Rodrigues and Rodrigues 2019), and the findings of the present study have further exemplified how and why luxury service brands look to utilise mystery as a signal of their authenticity.

5.3.1.6 Relationships

"Because restaurants are whole package, not just the food or just the wine or you know, pre-covid, customers come in they're like giving you a hug and 'ah sorry we haven't seen you in ages.'" (P5)

While relationships is proposed as a key dimension of luxury service brands in the previous sub-section, it is also posited in this study as a critical signal of luxury service brand authenticity specifically. Phau and Prendergast (2000) discuss customer loyalty as a key competitive component of luxury brands, emphasising how widespread consumption of a luxury product erodes exclusivity and, consequentially, its luxury status. Instead, luxury brands must build and nurture relationships with a very select consumer segment, securing both exclusivity and revenue in the process. The analysis found that the majority of participants use social media as a means of showcasing and promoting their relationships with various stakeholders in both the local community and abroad. This aligns with previous research positing associations with both individuals and places being key signals of authenticity (Beverland 2006; 2009). The most popular code within this theme pertained to restaurants' endeavours to depict relationships with their suppliers, who were mostly local, further cementing their role and status within the community. Examples of social media content embedding supplier-based relationship signals is included in Figure 5.2.

The authenticity of the food offering was explicitly linked to the locality of the produce (further discussed in the *Ingredients* sub-section), which participants outlined began with maintaining strong collaborative relationships with suppliers. Participants spoke about the suppliers being part of the story of the restaurant and a critical element to their social media strategy.

"... and to be honest it's very important for me to make sure people know about the suppliers, because that's how they survive." (P2)

"... you wouldn't be here without your suppliers. They wouldn't be here without you. So, it's a two-way thing, isn't it? So, you should big up your suppliers and you should help your suppliers ..." (P28)

Figure 5.2.   Example Posts (1)

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

(iv)
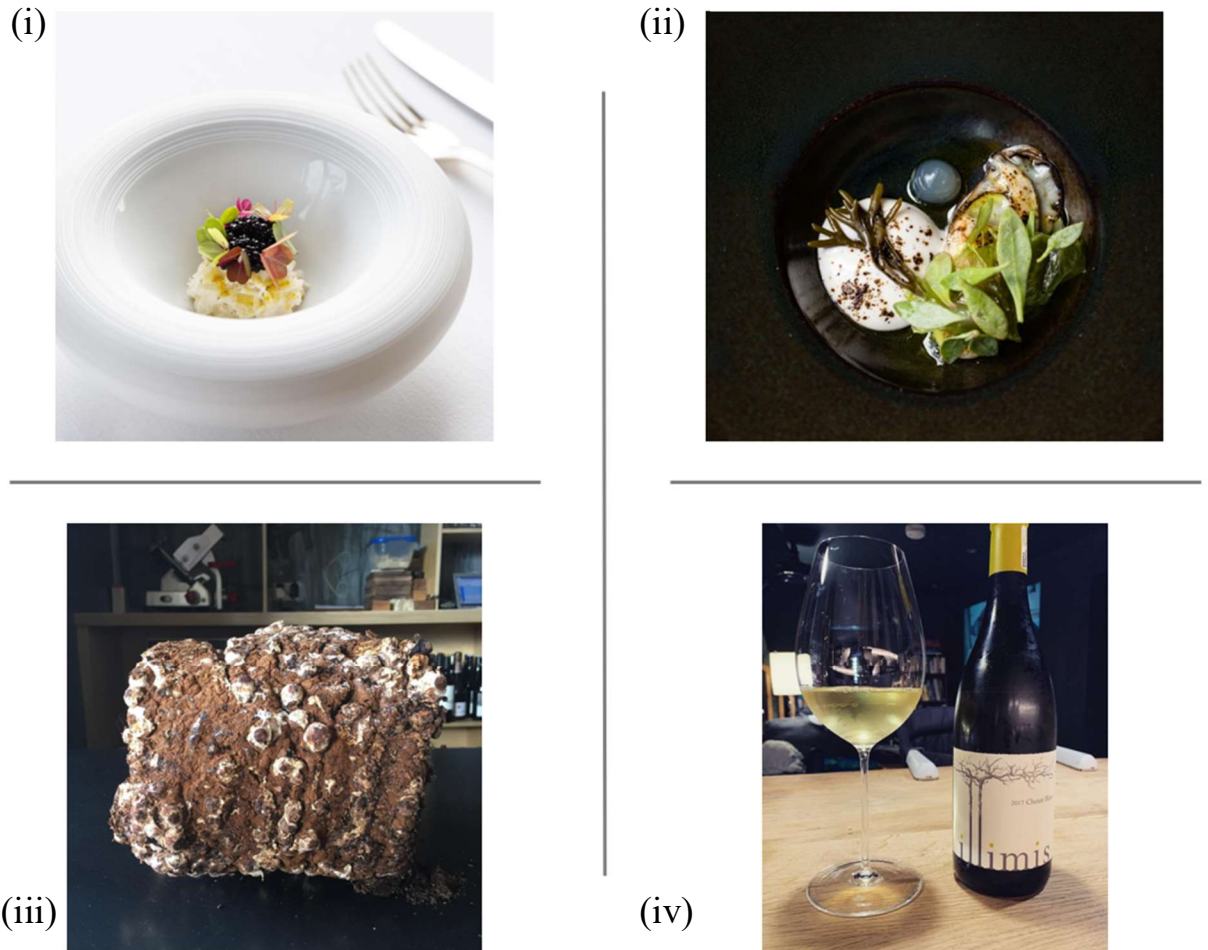
Captions:

(i)   "[*Head Chef*] and his team in [*restaurant*] work closely with our family of local growers, farmers and fishermen, whose produce they aim to celebrate. The result is a menu of simple, refined dishes which allow the true personality of these outstanding foods to shine through [...]" (P21)

(ii)   "One of our most popular little dishes last year was this [*supplier*] with sea herbs..." (P2)

(iii)   "We got our very own pet log from [*supplier*]. I've actually always wanted one of these shiitake logs so we can grow some shiitake in [*restaurant*]. We

are treating it with the utmost care as instructed. Thanks so much guys."
(P17)

(iv)   "2017 Chenin blanc from South Africa tonight 🍷😍 from [*supplier*] this time 🤍" (P28)

Authenticity is further signalled through the communication of the restaurants' commitment to investing in local suppliers as opposed to major international suppliers, with a further emphasis on the personal relationships being cultivated simultaneously.

"Our ethos for the restaurant is to support small farmers that we have been working with for years and to cut out the middleman, not buy stuff from big suppliers or central providers [...] the story of the people that we engage with like farmers, whatever. They're all friends of ours." (P17)

"... the people that I work with, the people that are catching the fish, the people that are growing the vegetables. That's what I want to work on and start making the world know that we're about [*local*] produce." (P21)

Additionally, participants described the importance of establishing close relationships with the local community. While services do not bestow actual ownership onto the consumer, establishing a sense of psychological ownership among consumers has been highlighted as a pivotal focus in enhancing luxury perception (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020) and may even act as a substitute for the need for material ownership of products (Fritze *et al*. 2020). Strengthening associations with certain events, such as arts and culture initiatives, enhances perceptions of authenticity (Hitzler and Müller-Stewens 2017). Participants wanted to communicate that despite the luxury nature of the business, that "it's not all about the bottom line" (P25). Examples provided by participants pertain to charitable or other CSR initiatives and creating a sense of local pride and shared ownership in the restaurant.

"It's good to have backing, we do a lot of different things with [health service] and obviously that's topical, cooking with the kids and things like that. So, it's definitely that feel good factor and it's getting our message out there and across to people that it's not all about the bottom line [...] You know we're doing

barbeques for the village hall, raising money for the church the last couple weeks and you know, we do a carol service at Christmas for the village and things like that and we put the food on and raise money for them so we're part of the community as well. And that helps you know through the power of social media, helps to keep that part going." (P25)

"You know our regular customer base so massive and genuinely care about the restaurant you know, most of our regulars call it 'my restaurant'. They refer to it as 'have you been to my restaurant?' to their friends, you know? Especially then they're the people who kind of keep this going all the time. You know it's great to be in contact with them and showing what we're doing ..." (P5)

"We do a couple of specials as well each year we take part in the [*name*] food festival which means that we do like 3 courses for I think 35 (£/€) and that's always completely full. That's kind of for the locals so that they know that we are still, we are their restaurants as well. It's not just a restaurant for them to send tourists to. It's part of the town and part of what they can enjoy." (P29)

In social media terms, such relationships are built and maintained through the provision of authentic value to the audience, often through educational content, such as instructional videos and demos of certain recipes and subsequent interaction with their followers who would be able to follow at home with a smaller budget than traditional Michelin star meals would command, particularly during the lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, including in disadvantaged areas.

"... like the at home boxes, people get a real kind of sense of pride that they managed to cook this food and I think, yeah, that's what [*Head Chef*] wants to do is go kind of create some videos, with kind of cheap ingredients as well. Not anything kind of over the top that people aren't gonna be able to afford. Because we know that we're in a community where they are families that don't know how to cook and food poverty is a massive thing in this area, so again, it's that community thing of being able to kind of share the experience and say you can create something really delicious with basic cheap ingredients. I think that probably that will be our direction is just engage more and support more within the community." (P27)

To summarise, participants discuss the value in showcasing their tight knit relationships, both personally and professionally, with the local community and suppliers. The underlying tone throughout these signals was the intention by the restaurant to underplay their own luxury status and seek to promote those supporting parties who aid their business. This is reflected in the sample social media posts contained in Figure 5.2 which serve to promote local produce and producers, rather than explicitly promote the restaurant directly. This approach aligns with Beverland's (2005) assertion that luxury brands downplay their commercial motives in favour of a more brand and relationship-building approach.

5.3.2 Tangible

It is important to recognise that many services, particularly luxury, do contain some form of tangible components (Mittal 1999). For example, the bespoke tableware and place settings within a Michelin star restaurant are physical representations of a luxury service. Such tangible signals can facilitate conspicuous consumption of luxury services by providing 'instagrammable' cues such as posting images of fine dining courses (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). The three tangible signals discussed by participants in this study relate to the *awards* received by the restaurant; their associations and links to the physical *location* of their operations; as well as the high-quality *ingredients* they offer as part of their service as further detailed below.

5.3.2.1 Awards

Previous research has examined how luxury brands tend to downplay their marketing prowess (Beverland 2005) and this is largely supported here through a more implicit representation of their Michelin star (luxury) status. Related research in luxury products outlines how more inconspicuous approaches to signalling luxury, while having a higher chance of being misconstrued, are preferred by those who can effectively interpret them as a means of distinguishing themselves from mainstream consumers (Berger and Ward 2010). Participants outlined that while they were extremely proud of their achievements having ascended to Michelin star status, even harbouring ambitions of progressing to higher award categories, they were less explicit in their signalling of such accolades, preferring to focus on creating and delivering memorable experiences for their guests. The award itself is viewed as a "stamp of authority" (P12), the same participant also described it as "something we talk about

less and less" as their main intention in social media is to attract "curious customers rather than status driven customers". This was an interesting perspective as it clearly highlighted the intention of the restaurant to remain authentic in the eyes of the public by not looking to oversell the status associated with being Michelin star, but rather implicitly utilising it as a promise of a luxury level service experience. Another *Head Chef* participant took a similar view, viewing the award as motivation to continuously strive for exceptional standards in their work, choosing to omit any mention of a Michelin star from their personal social media accounts.

> "Like if you look at my Instagram, if you look at the Instagram of the restaurant, I don't even think it mentions a Michelin star. Mine doesn't anyway, like it stayed the same. It just says the owner at [*restaurant*]. My Michelin star, my plague, is in my kitchen because, for me, it wasn't important necessarily to let people know we're a Michelin star restaurant, it was more for me and the other people working there to respect the standard and when I walk into the kitchen, I see the star every day and it's like 'ok, well this is what we're working at and this is why you gotta get up and go', you know?" (P27)

One further participant outlined their aversion to overtly referring to the Michelin star constantly in order to downplay guest expectations, alluding to preconceived notions among consumers as to what being a Michelin star restaurant represents in terms of anticipated service environment and experience.

> "In old interviews I used to refer to the restaurant as the shed, not because of the state of the place, but for the size of the place. Because I wanted people's perception to be more realistic of that we are a small restaurant [...] It was just trying to convey that. So, it's almost you know a self-derogatory angle really when you think about it, but it was just to try to inform guests what they were coming into." (P11)

The largest focus from participants regarding this particular thread, however, builds on the previous discussion on the restaurant maintaining an air of accessibility despite its ascendance to Michelin star level. Perhaps anticipating the effect such an award would have on external perceptions of the restaurant, participants remained adamant that it wasn't going to lead to a more elitist, exclusionary marketing approach.

One participant even spoke of how Michelin themselves actually support this approach, praising restaurants for adopting their own identity, rather than prescribing to any preconceived luxury brand formula.

"So, when we opened in October for instance, yeah the whole tone of it was a lot more friendly and a lot more open and a lot less, you know, pompous [...] But you know, I'd spoken to Michelin and they were so open and so cool, it kinda changed my, like they said, you know, we like the fact that you know you got your decor the way it is, we like the fact that you're honest, we like what you do. You don't have to try and be something that you aren't." (P6)

"I would definitely say the service industry is much more about luxury accessibility. So, it's about making people feel special, making them feel welcome [...] You know that the star is fantastic in terms of the exposure and kind of that label of luxury and fine dining, but at the same time saying like you know, everyone is welcome. If you want to eat our food, come." (P19)

Other participants saw the award not as an accolade to be merely shown off, but as an opportunity to pioneer a democratisation of the aforementioned traditional perception of Michelin star level dining and promote a more open, accessible attitude to fine dining.

"I suppose we want to democratise the whole [*notion*] that you have to be of a certain mindset or education to get the food is inherently wrong. It's something that you put into your body to sustain yourself, nourish yourself and give yourself pleasure. So that in itself, I hope that doesn't come across in any way elitist you know?" (P17)

In summary, while being the most tangible signal of authenticity, the Michelin star award is among the most implicitly communicated signals among this study's participants, with it being utilised as a source of vindication of the chef's and restaurants achievements and motivation for continuing to maintain such standards, rather than as a pure advertising tool on social media and other marketing channels. This aligns with the previous discussion that these restaurants seek not to preserve an elitist tag, but rather promote accessibility of such luxury experiences.

5.3.2.2 Location

As previously mentioned, one of the components of authenticity highlighted within the literature is connection to a certain place (Beverland 2009). The findings outline a series of efforts by restaurants to showcase the natural beauty of the local landscape, either on the immediate grounds of the restaurant or the wider region to further cement their presence within that locality (Figure 4.6). As one participant noted: "We've very influenced by having a sense of place, so we've been to lots of restaurants and the ones that always resonate most with us, those who have a sense of root" (P13). Unsurprisingly, location was often discussed as a pivotal element of the restaurant's social media marketing strategy and due to the geographical dispersion of the locations, provided the most diversity in terms of content potential: "We're right on the beach, which is a beautiful sandy beach. You put a picture of a sunrise; it beats everything else" (P5) and "It is really very much a hidden gem. A beautiful Georgian property overlooking the river estuary and views are astounding" (P18).

Another participant spoke of a particularly popular social media post which highlighted this trend aptly. P20b described a post which contained a picture of a pair of donkeys and "absolutely nothing to do with the with the restaurant" yet in terms of engagement was the restaurants second most popular post after the announcement that they were awarded a Michelin star. As the participant further noted: "perhaps that picture more than any other actually captured the place and the magical nature of [*location*]" (P20b). Instances like these serve to further emphasise the desire of these restaurants to promote not only their own business, but the entire locality, including its suppliers, produce, *flora* and *fauna* which collectively construct the location's authentic character and identity, further interlinking this signal with *Ingredients*, as further explored below.

Figure 5.3.   Example Posts (2)

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

(iv)

Captions:

(i)   "A beautiful rainbow over [*location*]. We're so lucky to get to enjoy this
         incredible view" (P5)

(ii)   "We're steeped in history. Made for explorers. #feedingthecurious" (P13)

(iii)   "Surrounded by 1,000 acres of estate, [*venue*] is the perfect base for
         exploring the [*location*] Countryside. We have some wonderful walks in the
         local area ranging from 30 minutes to over 4 hours. And wellies are available
         for all!" (P12)

(iv)   "Wonderful [*location*] 🖤" (P10)

One final element within the location signal refers to the establishment of the
restaurant as pivotal components of the local economy, boosting the visibility of not
only other local businesses, but also the region itself as a potential tourism destination
by virtue of its worldwide recognition of its Michelin star status. Such associations
and cooperative partnerships further enhance the economic prosperity of a region,
further signalling the restaurant's authenticity as an industry leader within its locality.

    "We just put a load of stuff in the fridge for our bar menu, and you know, now
    as we reopen, we're working a lot of local distilleries and breweries, and they

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were loving it not just because they want to support local, but now they can say with their brand 'we supply a Michelin star restaurant'. That's great for us, like we're supporting local, and they also supported local but able to add something to their brands to keep people interested. It's nice to be able to do that with other local companies." (P29)

"... like social media for us was a way of communicating with people who may potentially come to [*location*], people outside [*location*] [...] Our [*international*] following went through the roof when we won the Michelin star. Followers from all around the world and you know in the most unlikely places, but they're following you because of the star." (P20b)

In sum, the location of the restaurant is often utilised as a signal of authenticity on social media to demonstrate the inspiration that is drawn from the local landscape and history of their location and embedded in the luxury service experience either through the local ingredients that are foraged and used, or the local suppliers who work collaboratively with the Michelin star restaurant. Given the restaurant's inherent connection to their own individual place as a means of signalling its authenticity (Beverland 2009), social media can not only serve to highlight this association with the place, but also enhance the perception of the restaurant itself through representation of its place within the wider environment as previously shown in Figure 5.3.

5.3.2.3 Ingredients

The final code examined the quality of the ingredients sourced by the restaurant as a means of signalling their authenticity as a luxury service brand. Features and operations which preserve the authenticity of luxury brands should also be extended to its suppliers (Chevalier and Mazzalovo 2012), with procurement of raw materials being an especially important aspect of both the luxury product and service industries (Hitzler and Müller-Stewens 2017). As previously discussed, restaurants' relationships with their suppliers are a key component of their social media strategies, yet the ingredients themselves and their origin are a crucial tangible element of the luxury service experience and social media marketing strategies. One participant described their social media strategy as being the "story behind (the food)", providing examples of catching seafood on a trawler in the North Sea or posting hedgerows of

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brambles. In their own words: "it's telling the whole story from start to finish, setting the scene, and social media can do that" (P25). The authenticity in this sense was certainly highlighted by participants in their depiction of them sourcing their own ingredients which would later be used in the restaurant, as opposed to a more impersonal approach of purchasing from wholesalers or more central providers. In referring to a video they posted on Instagram, another participant described foraging for mushrooms; again, not overly concerned with promoting the restaurant or looking to increase bookings, the purpose was simply to showcase the landscape and the quality of natural ingredients therein: "yesterday I was in the woods and stumbled across this massive patch of mushrooms and if you turn the sound up on that being pulled out the ground, just that's perfection in a mushroom, which the chefs or foragers will understand" (P22).

Other participants did, however, highlight the quality of their ingredients as a major selling point for their restaurant, through characteristics such as their quality or rarity. As one participant put it: "It's ingredients, isn't it? Showing ingredients, things that people don't always see in a [*local*] restaurant I suppose. Special ingredients that make people go 'oh I want to try that'" (P28). Other participants spoke candidly about the price of the ingredients that they use in their restaurant, yet this was not incorporated into their social media content strategies. Rather, participants acknowledged that to remain at Michelin star standard, only the highest quality ingredients would suffice, and this is subsequently showcased on social media as a means of signalling authenticity: "Now, even on Instagram, you know we're using really expensive top-grade caviar ... just to show that we're not using (*caviar*) from Tesco" (P11).

In closing, the three tangible signals of authenticity can differ in terms of the level of explicitness with which they are showcased on social media. Participants sought to downplay the significance of their Michelin star award, focussing instead on promoting the natural landscape and ingredients afforded to them by their local environment. This has proved to further strengthen ties with the local community and illustrate their authenticity through a genuine commitment not only to local produce, but also the local economy.

5.3.3 Servicescape

Servicescape is defined as "the built environment (i.e., manmade, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment)" (Bitner 1992: 58) and remains a critical component of service branding (Mutum 2017). Previous research on luxury servicescapes within hospitality have investigated elements such as use of colour and employee behaviour in influencing consumer attitudes (Kim, Hyun and Park 2020; Kim and Baker 2022). Luxury brands seek to build a sense of integrity via investment in innovation, creativity, and specialist knowledge and skills in the design and creation of their offering (Fionda and Moore 2009). Interestingly, while previous luxury goods research emphasises elitist attitudes from staff actually benefitting consumer attitudes and desire for the brand (Ward and Dahl 2014; Dion and Borraz 2017), this does not apply in luxury services and can in fact have a drastically negative effect on employee-customer rapport and behavioural intention toward the brand (Holmqvist, Visconti *et al*. 2020; Kim and Baker 2022). This study's findings aligned with this sentiment, with many participants outlining their intention to remain both friendly and accessible to guests rather than seeking to establish an aura of elitism or exclusionary exclusivity within the service environment as a means of preserving authenticity. Two specific signals occupy the servicescape category: *service experience*, and *atmosphere*.

5.3.3.1 Service Experience

Physical elements within a service experience aid in the development of a brand identity, however, require uniqueness as a pivotal signal (Mittal 1999). For luxury products, such uniqueness may come from minor imperfections within the hand-making process acting as a seal of exclusivity (Nueno and Quelch 1998). However, such imperfections are not tolerated within a luxury service context, as previously discussed within the *consistency* signal section. Examples of previous research into authenticity of service experience has focussed on elements such as the service provider's use of language during the service encounter (Kraak and Holmqvist 2017).

Within the present study participants, predictably, highlighted the quality of the overall luxury service experience as being a key signal of authenticity within their social media marketing strategies; specifically, the findings depict the luxury service experience being both extraordinary and multi-sensory. Given the inherently

intangible nature of luxury services, effective signalling of the experience quality is challenging, as represented by the following quotes: "You can't replicate that bespoke experience on Instagram. You know, you have to be here to understand it because it's very hard to get across into social media platforms, how the experience is in the restaurant" (P26) and "We've got priceless works of art [...] I don't post about because that doesn't communicate (the experience), you know what I mean? Like once you're there, you are enveloped in the surroundings" (P12).

However, participants did provide some insight into their strategies for addressing this. Interestingly, the emphasis was not on individual elements, such as the quality of the food itself or the restaurant setting, but rather the depiction of the experience holistically. This was a more implicit approach whereby the overall luxury quality of the service experience was signalled to reinforce brand authenticity, rather than explicit representation of individual elements, as described in the following quotes.

> "It's not so much how you say it, you want the experience to be to be front and centre. You know, it's not about using fancy language, you want to write nicely, but you want the emphasis is still to be on the dish or the wine or the element of the experience that you're trying to share with people." (P9)

> "We never uhm sell products, we never promote products [...] we're selling that experience or some like journey and that relationship with the guests and people who become friends with you and the brand and that's the biggest part of that for us." (P7)

Interviewees described the luxury service experience as being multi-sensory, incorporating elements beyond food alone, although there were variances in how participants describe the most prudent ways of achieving this in line with the identity of the restaurant. Luxury service experiences can transcend functional customer intent with the brand having the capability to manage multiple stimuli of the experience and related luxury perception (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020).

> "I'd read studies about the power of the smell, and you know how it affects people. I followed that route, so I got a fresh smell. So, whenever a resident comes in, you know one of our regular regulars, without opening their eyes,

they know they're in [*the restaurant*]. It was an off the shelf smell and during lockdown, I thought I'd like to take it to the next level so, I'll have a scent created. So, worked with a lab and they've created the scent. So now the restaurant has a unique scent which will get a bit of PR spin off and then I have a company to make them into candles." (P11)

This participant further explained the subsequent public relations and social media promotion that ensued as having an effect on further driving the authenticity of the brand through differentiation. Other sensory discussions from this participant revolved around the adapting of the décor to a specific theme, which was subsequently shared on Instagram.

"So, for example, we're doing constellations and galaxies as a theme. So, we have some surface-ware which has a celestial theme and then the décor is changed to reflect that. Then we use visuals, so we use projectors. On an average night we'll use two laser projectors and two 4K projectors to convey that imagery of a constellation or whatever we do [...] and because they're a physical decoration as well, you'll see on our Instagram." (P11)

Another important element within the *Service Experience* signal which made up a sizable portion of the social media content of participants pertains to the staff employed within the restaurants, alongside the Head Chef. These include, but are not limited to, the *Maître d'*, wait staff, *Sommelier*, *Sous Chef*, *Chef De Partie*, and Kitchen Porters. The recruitment, retention, and motivation of staff with the requisite competencies and social skills is critical to long term success and perhaps the most significant challenge for Michelin star restaurants (Johnson *et al*. 2005). Therefore, such a workforce represent a critical signal of authenticity, one which was often explicitly embedded within social media content. Participants detailed the responsibility of the staff members to embody the ethos of hospitality in how they carry out their duties in the restaurant, highlighting in particular the passion with which the staff operate to ensure the service experience retains its luxury quality.

"... the brand isn't just what's on a printed piece of paper, it's also what's on the screen. It's also embodied in the people; the minute you shake someone's hand [...] the minute you open the door for someone, the minute you ask them how

they are, the minute you smile at them across the lobby. All of that is the brand."
(P12)

"... you know if it's delicious food, beautifully presented. But you know, it's not served by, you know, a lot of mindless robots. It's served by people who put their heart and souls into what they're doing." (P6)

"What are we really passionate about? What could we spend our lives doing and still love it? And what can we be best in the world at? [...] kind of forming immersive experiences, so not just the food, but the wider (experience), and food was a huge part of that. Also, who's on our team? Who's gonna actually give genuine weight to this? [...] now we're able to recruit according to our values and so we're having some incredible team members come through now because we've laid out the vision. And it's all very well having a vision, but (you need) the team to bring authenticity to it. (P13)

Indeed, one of the prevalent reasons behind the restaurants pride in their staff and the quality of service that they provide was the challenges in attracting and maintaining staffing quality levels, due to factors such as the seasonality of some of the restaurants located in more rural and tourism-reliant areas, as well as the higher levels of turnover in the hospitality sector relative to other industries. The Covid-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdowns, was also cited as a contributing factor to the challenge in retaining staff of sufficient skill and experience at Michelin level.

"... the hardest thing with running it seasonally [...] which is probably for me the biggest factor of Michelin is the consistency of experience. It doesn't matter what style of dining you're in, it's like 'what was the experience the last time?' and when you open seasonally and you're changing staff? That would be my biggest fear, is what happens if you get new chef? New floor staff ..."
(P2)

"The style of service [...] the staff as well, and it's just knowing how to make someone feel special, knowing how to make the person that already feels special feel even more special. Obviously, if you've got a bit of cash, you know you've got the finer things in life, but you know they want to feel like, you know, like they're being spoiled." (P1)

While many participants acknowledged that Michelin is secretive about its star-awarding criteria, the one-star award is largely acknowledged to be based purely on the quality of the food, with the overall service experience elements such as décor, crockery and atmosphere only considered at high award categories. Nevertheless, participants spoke at length of how they seek to ensure an extraordinary luxury service experience for their guests, acknowledging the value of these critical service factors in their social media marketing strategy: "the table setting, the cutlery and shiny glass? That kind of shot always works well" (P16); "it's a good mix of shots of your product, but also the experience that you're given too. So, we'd also include images of sommeliers or the staff" (P8).

In sum, participants take great pride in showcasing the supplementary elements to the Michelin star dining experience, including their location, décor, and table settings in their social media marketing strategies to further augment the perception of authenticity within the minds of consumers. While acknowledging the difficulty in effectively communicating the intangible nuances of the luxury service experience, participants emphasised these elements provide effective means of brand differentiation and authenticity signalling.

5.3.3.2 Atmosphere

The final aspect of signalling authenticity relates to the atmosphere the luxury brand seeks to create within the luxury servicescape. Described as "ambient conditions" by Bitner (1992: 66), these include temperature, noise, music, and scent and affect both guest enjoyment and staff performance. Interestingly, participants in the study stressed their intent to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere, rather than a more rigid, formulaic setting more commonly seen in other luxury environments, such as luxury retail (Riley and Lacroix 2003), with participants signalling their intent to be "seen to be relaxed [...] because there is that idea of the stuffy fine dining restaurant with cloths and people are not comfortable when they're in there" (P10b). Examples of social media content embedding atmosphere-based signals is included in Figure 5.7. Interestingly, restaurants took differing approaches to creating a desirable atmosphere in their restaurant. While one participant spoke of live music creating a "night out and a meal all in one" (P28), another spoke of there being no music but rather the "ambient

noises (of) other people's conversation" (P9) being the desired soundtrack within the restaurant.

This intangible element to the servicescape can be difficult to communicate through social media, with participants outlining their intentions to best represent the atmosphere that guests can expect in the restaurant through their social media content (Figure 5.4): "I think (social media users) expect to see an actual visual representation of the actual style or the atmosphere or the kind of ethos of the place?" (P6). Another participant (P14a) spoke of their concerted approach to ensuring good levels of light within their image, driven partly because their closest geographical competitor adopts a darker tone to their social media content, and it is their desire to portray a lighter, genial atmosphere. While there were disparities among participants regarding the degree of formality they would attribute to their restaurants, there remains an overarching desire to retain a sense of warmth and personalised hospitality across social media marketing strategies. For example, while one participant spoke of "hand painted wallpaper, luxury chandeliers ... white tablecloths" in their dining room, they also emphasised "the experience should always be individual" (P18), catering to individual needs and requests in order to ensure an extraordinary luxury service experience. Whereas other participants detailed a similar personal experience, yet without the overly formal atmosphere: "We don't want anything like formal. We never want to say you know the stereotypical tablecloths and tables. We wanted everything to be very relaxed" (P10a); "we don't offer that luxury that you will get in a country house hotel. So, if you're going out for a Michelin star meal and you're the kind of person who loves [*high level luxury restaurant*] and that kind of thing, you might not like my restaurant" (P22). These findings further highlight the shift in how Michelin star restaurants perceive their own luxury status and how the subsequent social media marketing activities to demonstrate their brand authenticity are acutely informed by these perceptions.

Figure 5.4.　　Example Posts (3)

(i)

(ii)

(iii)

(iv)

(i)　　　A little piece of calm in the vibrant streets (P2)

(ii)　　　With room for 16 guests, our light-filled Private Dining Room is the perfect place to create new memories with colleagues, clients, friends or family (P18)

(iii)　　　The slow curve of our plushly upholstered banquette seating allows guests at tables of two in this dining space to sit side by side. Maximum comfort, optimal people-watching. And they get to see the chefs, too, as they put the finishing touches to dishes using the island hob in the room (P9)

(iv)　　　A warm, [*local*] welcome awaits (P1)

In summary, Michelin star restaurants utilise a variety of tangible, intangible and blended servicescape elements to signal brand authenticity through social media marketing activities. While more tangible elements can be more explicitly signalled, such as location and ingredients, this was not always as the case as the majority of participants tended to represent their Michelin star status more implicitly. This was an especially interesting finding, given that Michelin stars possess extremely high signalling value through their widespread recognisability and credibility, yet participants largely focussed on elements more central to the brand experience (i.e., location and ingredients) as pivotal authenticity signals rather than recognition from

external awarding bodies. The majority of signals of authenticity this study investigated predominantly occupied the intangible category, exploring more subjective elements such as the service experience, atmosphere, and mystery. Broadly speaking, while participants seek to withhold certain elements of the service experience by limiting how much of the luxury service experience they disclose on social media platforms, the authenticity of their luxury status and quality is still to the forefront of their marketing strategies and is in these cases signalled through elements such as their unwavering commitment to ensuring consistency across all aspects of the service experience and their marketing strategies, their close relationships with local stakeholders, as well as the establishment of a clear and recognisable brand identity, born out of the story of the restaurant and its place within the local community.

5.4   Conclusion

This chapter presented, unpacked, and discussed the data collected and analysed in this study pursuant to addressing each of the three research objectives. Firstly, the dimensions of luxury service brands as born from the literature review in Chapter Two are investigated as potential signals of luxury on social media platforms. All dimensions proposed in the typology are utilised, albeit in different ways, as key signals throughout the participants' social media marketing strategies.

However, one surprising finding which permeated throughout multiple dimensions as discussed in Section 5.2 was the ongoing efforts from these Michelin star restaurants to downplay their luxury status in favour of a more authenticity-driven approach whereby the quality of the service offering is signalled via demonstrations of the luxury service elements which can be tangible or intangible in nature. It is this finding which is then, finally, explored further in the concluding subsection of this chapter, examining luxury service brand authenticity and how it is signalled, either explicitly or implicitly, via social media marketing strategies. These findings provide ample theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions for both researchers and practitioners alike which are presented in the following Chapter Six.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

6.0   Introduction

This chapter synthesises both the theoretical and managerial contributions and implications of the present study. These contributions stem not only from the findings and discussion of the empirical data in Chapter Five, but are a blend of the research objectives, purpose of the study, literature review, and theoretical framework. In doing so, the thesis makes significant novel contributions to both academic research and industry practice.

In answering the first research objectives, this study has cultivated the most comprehensive systematic literature review on the growing area of luxury and social media to date. This is reflected in the publication of the review in the *International Journal of Management Reviews* (Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022). This review was not only relevant to the current study in contextualising the purpose of the study and highlighting the existing gaps in our knowledge of how social media is utilised by luxury service brands, it also makes a novel and significant contribution to the field by the proposal of a conceptual framework depicting the pivotal role of social media for luxury brands across five distinct themes, as further synthesised in Section 6.1 below.

In addressing the second research objective, this study proposes a novel typology of luxury service brand dimensions and further examines their use as signals of luxury within Michelin star restaurants' social media marketing strategies. In doing so, this study addresses contemporaneous calls for further research on luxury service brands (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020), social media use by luxury brands (Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022) as well as signalling theory (Connelly *et al.* 2011; Nian and Sundararajan 2022). The contributions of the study pertinent to the second research objective are further detailed in Section 6.2.

Stemming from RO2, the final research objective of the study sought to further investigate the role of a novel proposed dimension of luxury service brands, authenticity, as a pivotal signal utilised in Michelin star restaurants' social media marketing strategies. Given the absence of a concise definition and conceptualisation of authenticity within the marketing literature (Nunes, Ordanini, and Giambastiani 2021), this study makes a significant contribution of investigating the nature of authenticity for luxury service brands and how a variety of signals, both tangible and

intangible, may be either explicitly or implicitly utilised on social media. These contributions are further explained in Section 6.3.

This chapter concludes with a proposal of fruitful avenues for further research highlighted by the contributions of this study as well as the managerial implications of the findings (Section 6.5), the limitations of the study's methodologies, findings, and conclusions (Section 6.6), followed by some potential future research directions (Section 6.7) in closing the thesis.

6.1   Contribution One: Theoretical Framework of Social Media's Role in Luxury Brands

The first major contributions of the thesis are the synthesis of the extant literature on social media and luxury, the proposal of a conceptual framework examining social media's role in luxury organisations (Figure 6.1), and the provision of a roadmap for future inquiry in this area. This chapter was published as a paper within the *International Journal of Management Reviews* in January 2022 (Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022). As discussed in Section 4.2, a total of five distinct themes were identified relating to the organizational contexts in which luxury and social media were being investigated within the literature, which served as the central pillars for the conceptual framework: *brand strategy*, luxury *brand social media communications*, luxury *consumer attitudes and perceptions*, *engagement* and social media's *influence on brand performance-related outcomes*.

Figure 6.1.   Social Media and Luxury Theoretical Framework
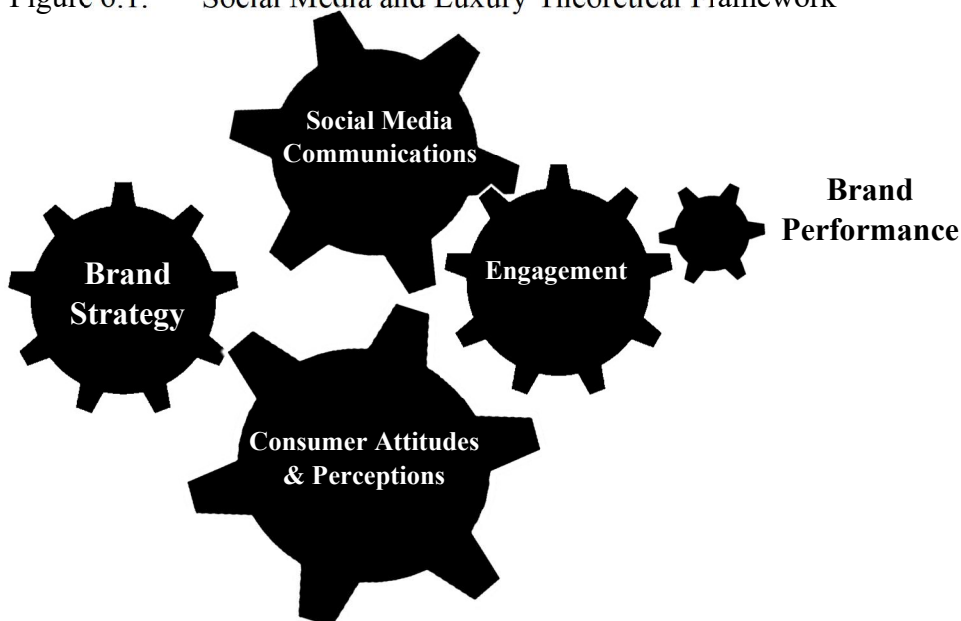
In terms of brand strategy, existing research points toward a lack of coherent and clearly defined social media strategies from luxury brands (Reyneke *et al.* 2011), which was part of the motivation for the current study. Questions remain how exactly such technologies may be used to preserve brand luxury and offer a representative customer service experience (Baker *et al.* 2018). The literature shows conflicting evidence as to whether luxury brands should seek to engage in highly interactive, community-building approaches on social media or else seek to maintain a sense of psychological distance from consumers to preserve an aura of exclusivity. Social media provides brands with the means to engage consumers directly, while the specificities of these platforms facilitate innovative brand-building approaches (Lee and Watkins 2016; Chen and Wang 2017). However, perhaps contradicting the inherent interactive nature of these platforms, Millennial users have been found to be widely accepting of the more distant approach taken by luxury brands on social media, such as publishing content without seeking interaction with users (Athwal *et al.* 2019a). In fact, value perceptions can decrease if psychological distance is not maintained and if the brand is viewed as being too accessible (Park *et al.* 2020) and it is, in fact, this *perceived* accessibility, rather than actual interaction, which fulfils the affective and cognitive needs of Millennials (Athwal et al. 2019a; Xie and Lou 2020).

The creation of meaning and desire remain pivotal in luxury *communication* for brands (Gurzki *et al.* 2019), however adoption of a *brand* communications perspective in luxury and social media research remains a underutilised approach (Zhou *et al.* 2020). The limited studies to date have highlighted how visual portrayal of non-personal luxury characteristics, including heritage and speciality, remain central to brands' social media communications (Maman Larraufie and Kourdoughli 2014; Lee and Youn 2020; Wang *et al.* 2020) and have been found to elicit a stronger consumer affect than personal dimensions such as hedonism and the extended self (Mandler *et al.* 2019). Social media research often focusses more closely on content, rather than the message, which is driven by factors including channel, content source, and characteristics (Voorveld 2019; Wang and Chen 2020), with luxury brand recognition and trust noted as being shaped by both content attributes and consumer characteristics (Venus Jin and Ryu 2020). Conversely, communication of non-luxury elements such as sustainability, a growing element of luxury (Athwal *et al.* 2019b; Septianto *et al.* 2020), could be perceived as deceptive if claims are made in vague

and unverifiable ways in their content (Kong *et al*. 2021). There remains scope for further inquiry regarding the antecedents and anticipated outcomes for luxury brand communication on social media. The challenge for luxury brands remains in developing an effective social media communications strategy which effectively resonates with the diverse segments of the audience, while reflecting their brand values and desired image and perception among consumers.

Luxury brands should not only adopt social media platforms in their branding activities, but also endeavour to understand the personal motivations of users in engaging with luxury brands' online communities to maximize the effectiveness of these efforts (Zollo *et al*. 2020) and avoid the aforementioned negative effects on value perception that a decrease in psychological distance can incur (Park *et al*. 2020). Social media platforms have been found to elicit positive effects on a variety of consumer outcomes, including perception (Lee and Watkins 2016; Lee *et al*. 2018), reputation (Castellano and Khelladi 2016), awareness, image, loyalty (Godey *et al*. 2016), exclusivity (Xie and Lou 2020) and romance (Beig and Khan 2020). While the majority of research has focused on the positive effects of social media on consumer perceptions of luxury brands, the proliferation of such platforms can invariably also lead to negativity being shared online as told by the case study of Dolce & Gabbana's 2018 advertising campaign in China, although this is a scant area of inquiry in the luxury literature (Atwal *et al*. 2020; Pantano 2021).

Consumer attitudes may be investigated by luxury brands on social media through comprehensive sentiment analysis of multiple forms of UGC published online, particularly online reviews which can provide naturalistic insights into brand performance and public perception (Philander and Zhong 2016). Such content can also effectively capture the tangible elements of predominantly intangible luxury experiences, such as dining (Giglio *et al*. 2020; Mou *et al*. 2019). While it could potentially represent a dilution or loss of brand identity, UGC presents an opportunity for the brand to evolve and adapt to changing market perceptions, tastes and preferences (Mazzoli *et al*. 2019).

However, recent evidence illustrates that social media marketing activities result in positive effects on engagement (Liu *et al*. 2021), highlighting a greater sense of psychological ownership of luxury brand interactions by consumers (Kim *et al*.

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2016), which is more easily facilitated by social media over more traditional channels. This has led to the proposal of typologies of social media community members based on their capacity and motivation to interact with and contribute to the brand and the brand community (Ramadan *et al*. 2018), as well as development of process frameworks detailing the co-creation of luxury brand identity (Essamri *et al*. 2019). Incorporation of entertaining, interactive and trendy components into social media communications has a significant positive effect on behavioural engagement (Liu *et al*. 2021), while similar conclusions have been drawn from the investigation of hedonic, informative and celebratory dimensions in communications (Aydin 2020; Kefi and Maar 2020). Consumer motivation for engaging with luxury brands on social media encompasses factors such as content relevancy, brand–customer relationships, hedonic, socio-psychological, brand equity and technological factors (Bazi *et al*. 2020). Active and passive participation represent pivotal drivers of a strong brand–consumer relationship (Kefi and Maar, 2020), with varying forms of lurking practices also posing opportunities for luxury brands to develop a desire for luxury products through these secondary audiences (Leban *et al*. 2020). Some users will always remain passive, observing those who are more active, whereas others actively promote and defend the brand, acting as product experts (Parrott *et al*. 2015).

Finally, a further contribution of the review is the highlighting of the paucity of research investigating the tangible impact of social media on luxury brand performance. Despite the growing levels of social media adoption within the industry, questions remain as to the impact that such investment is having on actual business performance (Kim and Chae 2018). Further inquiry is certainly warranted, given consumers' incorporation of social media at various stages of the luxury purchase cycle, yet consumer preference remains for luxury purchases to be made in-store (Jain and Schultz 2019). Given that current consumers utilize digital platforms across multiple stages of the consumer journey (Athwal *et al*. 2019a; Jain and Schultz 2019), the literature's understanding of the most effective means of generating positive outcomes through social media content strategies remains limited.

The theoretical framework and subsequent discussion outline the key contributions in this field to date, highlighting social media as a process, rather than an isolated activity, within a luxury context, encompassing multiple thematic elements.

A range of potential areas of further research to further develop this theoretical framework are proposed later in this chapter.

6.2   Contribution Two: Dimensions of Luxury Service Brands on Social Media

This thesis also extends the growing literature on luxury service brands (Holmqvist, Visconti, *et al*. 2020; Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020; Holmqvist, Wirtz, and Fritze 2022). Several characteristics have been cited throughout the literature in conceptualising luxury and luxury brands (e.g., Fionda and Moore 2009), yet such attention is only beginning to be paid to luxury service brands. A comprehensive assessment of existing classifications of luxury and luxury brand dimensions was conducted via a wide-ranging literature review to propose a novel typology of the dimensions of luxury service brands, which as outlined in Section 2.1.7 and further explored in Section 2.1.8, include: *Authenticity*, *Brand Identity*, *Brand Integrity*, *Premium Price*, *Exclusivity*, *Marketing Communications*, *Environment*, *Brand Signature*, *Heritage,* and *Relationships.* Section 4.4 explores how these dimensions are integrated into Michelin star restaurants' social media marketing strategies as signals of luxury. In addition to the aforementioned dimensions, an interesting contribution of the research is the extension of the work of Beverland (2005, 2006) who posits luxury brands as downplaying their luxury status and being 'above commercial motivations'. This study further develops this position in exemplifying how luxury service brands seek to signal luxury in more subtle ways through their social media marketing strategies, through demonstrations of the luxury elements of their service offering rather than relying on more tangible and explicit signals, such as the Michelin star award itself.

The current study shows that there is no silver bullet to signalling luxury on social media for luxury service brands. In fact, there exists a variety of diverse approaches currently utilised across all of the dimensions of luxury service brands as proposed in this study. One of the main themes underpinning the approaches of participants in their social media marketing is to encourage inclusivity and to alleviate the traditional perception of Michelin star dining as being universally overtly formal and elitist through the signalling of the various dimensions. These include effective representation of the relationships the business has cultivated with its suppliers, staff, guests, the community, and the industry at large.

The findings in particular highlighted the participants' strategic intentions regarding social media, which is not primarily driven by a desire to increase sales, despite evidence throughout the literature linking social media activity to sales (Kumar *et al.* 2016). Rather, social media platforms enable the signalling of other unique aspects of the brand in showcasing their luxury status. For example, brands seek to cut through the overly filtered nature of social media, with participants outlining how a more personable approach generates better reactions from online followers and utilising social media as an *extension* of the on-site experience and representation of the brand's identity in providing value to their online following. This is reflective of Riley and Lacroix (2003: 103) who warn that 'temples of luxury', i.e., the luxury service environment, remains the optimum setting for delivery of the luxury service, and social media platforms should not be viewed as potential substitutes for the luxury service environment. The integrity of these luxury service brands lies within their abilities to adapt to moving times while striving to maintain these core values including, as participants attested to, including the adoption of novel technologies such as social media for their marketing communications, despite the literature positing luxury brands as being more fearful of such open-source platforms (Okonkwo 2009; Kapferer 2015). Participants spoke of their ongoing learning and development efforts seeking to ensure the future of the business by adopting novel and innovative service delivery techniques and marketing technologies, whilst preserving the core luxury ideals and values of the brand.

Given the predominance of intangibility within the luxury service brands and service experience (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020), and thus an absence of marketing collateral such as distinctive product design or packaging, the brand signature dimension was a relatively under-populated dimension, with the preponderance of narratives pertaining to the reputation of the restaurant or, most commonly, the *Head Chef. Head Chefs*, as the central figureheads within Michelin star restaurants, can often lead social and community initiatives further embedding the brand within their locality (Batat 2021a) and as such, represent personal brands which heighten the recognisability of the restaurant and acts as a further signal of its luxury status. Within the present study, one aspect of this dimension that was discussed was the recognisability of the *Head Chef's* style of food presentation or restaurant layout. These can be viewed as valuable luxury signals differentiating certain brands from

others not only due to their uniqueness, but also a signal which possibly may be only received and interpreted by those 'in the know' and are already familiar with such signals, which increase their value to those individuals.

Heritage and culture distinguish a luxury brand from competitors (Beverland 2005; Fionda and Moore 2009), given the inherent difficulty in imitating these dimensions. Early career experiences have proved to fuel the ambition of restauranteurs to open and/or own a Michelin star restaurant as an avenue to instil their own identity and heritage into a meticulously crafted luxury service experience. In line with recent literature, the historical view of luxury no longer holds as much sway in the eyes of consumers due to increased accessibility and the globalisation of luxury brands as well the increased role of the consumer in formulating and constructing luxury brands (Silverstein and Fiske 2003; Kauppinen-Räisänen *et al.* 2019; Essamri *et al.* 2009). Despite this, there were still multiple accounts from participants pertaining to the preservation of more traditional values with their culture relating to aspects such as fine dining traditions, servicescapes, cuisine, or ingredient sourcing and preparation. It is this confluence of traditional values with the modernity of social media platforms which ultimately lie at the core of the contributions of this thesis and as the rate of growth in research in this area continues (Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022), it is predicted that this overlap will continue to become more pronounced.

A related finding to the diminishment of an overtly traditional luxury approach by service brands is the concerted effort by Michelin star restaurants to emphasise the exclusivity of the luxury service experience through its quality and , yet sought to promote themselves as an accessible, welcoming brand seeking to alleviate the traditional perception of Michelin star dining as being universally overtly formal and elitist. The literature demonstrates how perceptions of luxury may be diminished if brands employ a more accessibility-based strategy, thus lowering exclusivity (Park *et al.* 2020). However, in this study participants narrated of their explicit intention to abolish the supposed stereotype attached with luxury dining in favour of a more accessible perception among consumers through their social media strategies. This attitude and approach may be attributed to the nature of services and their variance to luxury products in terms of their tangibility, and that luxury service brands are of the

view that such exclusivity-driven branding practices are not as prudent as may the case for luxury product brands. Importantly, this intention needs to be balanced with the accurate and effective representation of the brand's luxury status on social media to effectively differentiate itself from both Michelin and non-Michelin competitors, often via the aforementioned approaches incorporating brand identity and integrity dimensions in their social media strategies.

Contributions to the marketing dimension are more strategic in nature, exploring how Michelin star restaurants situate social media platforms within their overarching marketing strategies (Heine and Berghaus 2014) and addresses calls for more strategic social media marketing research for luxury brands (Reyneke *et al*. 2011; Yu *et al*. 2019). The findings show a potentially very interesting line of inquiry into the utilisation of social media platforms for brand storytelling. Such an approach, as the participants elaborated, represent a classical means of engaging with others through more modern technologies, with real people being at its core. As previously mentioned, participants did not adopt an overtly sales-focussed approach to their social media marketing strategies (Baker *et al*. 2018), however both costs and price are utilised as explicit signals of the quality of the brand within their social media content (Gutsatz and Heine 2018b). Finally, the relationships dimension represents one of the novel contributions of the luxury service brand typology proposed in this study. One interesting contribution of in this regard was their admission that the perception of luxury itself has changed and so has had an effect on their relationships with their social media following. These luxury brands are no longer seen as being unreachable yet remain desirable, thus inspiring connections and engagement through social media and the establishment of trust. As the price of dining in a Michelin star restaurant remains high relative to other restaurants, participants spoke of the importance of instilling trust and confidence in their social media following in encouraging such an investment in their luxury service experience, thus creating brand loyalty (Phau and Prendergast 2000). Given the previously mentioned efforts these restaurants to seem more accessible and to allay any ambivalence regarding the tone or atmosphere of the restaurant as being overtly formal or elitist, participants spoke of the need to not only assure individuals that they strive to create a more inclusive, welcoming atmosphere, but also seek to assure consumers that the cost of dining in their restaurants represents good value.

6.3   Contribution Three: Signals of Authenticity on Social Media

Developing social media-specific dynamic capabilities and resources have direct effects on social media performance and indirect effect on future brand perceptions (Marchand *et al*. 2021). This research also further contributes to the growing literature on social media management for luxury brands (see Creevey, Coughlan, and O'Connor 2022). Given the seemingly ideological opposition of a democratised, open-access social media landscape with that of luxury brands striving to maintain their luxury status, this study sheds lights on how luxury service brands, specifically Michelin star restaurants, are utilising such platforms as a means to communicate their brand authenticity by either explicit or implicit representation of both tangible and intangible signals related to the luxury service brand and experience. This contribution answers call for further inquiry into the nature of signals within marketing research (Connelly *et al*. 2011; Dunham 2011).

As reiterated above, this study's typology of luxury brand dimensions highlights authenticity as a surprising omission from previous iterations of luxury brand dimensions proposed by scholars in the field, despite authenticity being central to some previous luxury brand research. This thesis provide evidence of luxury service brands utilising myriad strategies to employing such platforms to signal authenticity via both tangible and intangible signals. Previous research has highlighted intangible features, such as authenticity, storytelling, nostalgia, identity, and heritage, as pivotal in cultivating diners' perceptions of ethical and sustainable food practices in luxury dining experiences (Batat 2021b). This thesis extends these findings in investigating Michelin star restaurants' strategies in signalling authenticity on social media platforms utilising both intangible and intangible signals explicitly as well as implicitly. Interestingly, the characteristics with perhaps the highest signalling quality (the Michelin star award) was among the most implicitly signalled qualities of these participants. While being widely recognised and highly regarded signals of quality of the food on offer at these restaurants, Michelin star awards are limited in their signalling capacity regarding the nature of the luxury service experience as a whole, including the servicescape. Michelin star restaurants, on the whole, choose not to conspicuously display their award on social media as a signal of their luxury status, but rather seek to emphasise components more central to the luxury service experience itself. Some participants explained that this approach was due to their desire to

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downplay expectations of potential diners who may have a more traditional perception of a Michelin star restaurant as being overly formal with luxurious décor and table settings. This is further exemplified in the literature which posits stakeholders' conferring of authenticity onto something as a means of reinforcing their own desired identity (Beverland 2009; Beverland and Farrelly 2010).

However, Michelin themselves have remained progressive in their awarding of stars and sought to move on from such perceptions (Johnson *et al*. 2005); for example, a food truck in Singapore was awarded one Michelin star in 2016 (before losing the designation in 2021), which offered its signature dish for $2.50 (Marcus 2021). This is one example of a clear statement from Michelin that it prioritises the quality of the food on offer in awarding its one-star allocation, rather than an additional adherence to the traditionally formal luxury servicescape setting. The accentuates the argument from Chapter Two whereby previous assertions of luxury have necessitated a premium price as a non-negotiable characteristic of world-class luxury quality. This progression is also reflected in the study's sample, with over half of participants having obtained one star within the last three years. This cohort of younger Michelin star restaurants and chefs is representative of a younger, active social media generation looking to engage with luxury brands online to augment their on-site visits to connect on a more intimate and emotional level with luxury brands (D'Arpizio *et al*. 2020). Therefore, a key contribution of the current study is that while some luxury brands adhere to the historical typology of a luxury brand, luxury service brands are not necessarily bound by the traditional confines of luxury allocation. Instead, as discussed in Chapter Five, their portrayal of their authenticity as luxury brands stem from mostly quality-related signals, such as the ingredients they use, the consistency of the quality of the experience, as well the varying tangible and intangible elements of the service experience itself.

Despite the consistent and rigorous criteria for the award of Michelin stars, the findings outline numerous varying approaches taken by brands to showcase brand authenticity depending on characteristics such as their desired brand identity, their relationships and associations with local communities and stakeholders, as well as the design and feel of their servicescape. Brand managers may look to utilise either explicit or implicit signals of authenticity, often driven by the tangibility of the object of the signal itself. For example, the quality of the ingredients sourced and used by the

restaurants were often explicitly referred to, while more elusive intangible signals such as preservation of an aura of mystery about the luxury experience were more subtle and implicitly described by participants. Luxury service brand marketers looking to further solidify perceptions of brand authenticity among a social media audience can adopt the strategies of the participants in this study and tailor those content marketing approaches to suit their own brand, audience, and industry.

6.4   Contribution Four: Qualitative Inquiry into Luxury Signalling

The final contribution of this thesis is methodological, as this study represents one of very few qualitative investigations adopting a brand perspective in the luxury marketing literature. As the systematic literature review discussed, interviews are a relatively underutilized method of data collection among studies in this area with existing studies largely adopting consumer perspectives in investigating constructs such as brand satisfaction (Athwal *et al*. 2019a), purchasing behaviour (Jain and Schultz 2019) and engagement (Pentina *et al*. 2018; Ramadan *et al*. 2018; Leban *et al*. 2020), for example. The current study is the first of its kind to employ a semi-structured interview approach to investigating Michelin star restaurants' social media marketing strategies in Ireland and the UK. As will be further mentioned the next section, *Limitations*, it is also the first study to adopt the criterion of the Michelin star award as qualifying as a luxury restaurant for sampling purposes. As discussed in the Methodology chapter, the literature has taken an inconsistent approach to characterising luxury restaurants. It can be confidently stated that Michelin star restaurants are luxury quality services (i.e., Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020) and as such represented a prudent sample in this study. Future research in this area may adopt this same criterion enabling comparative studies which can build on the theoretical contributions of this thesis.

6.5   Managerial Implications

The findings of the study not only provide theoretical contributions which will serve to further academic inquiry into the role of social media for luxury service brands, they also present multiple opportunities for Social Media Managers of luxury service brands. Section 5.2 proposes a variety of luxury service brand dimensions which practitioners may look to utilise in their social media marketing strategies in order to signal their luxury status. However, regardless of the dimension which managers may

look to utilise as a signal, the findings describe Michelin star restaurants seeking to downplay their luxury status, choosing not to constantly parade the fact that they are a Michelin star restaurant, but rather signal their luxury status through demonstration of the varying elements of their brands and their luxury service offering. Content marketing strategies should be geared toward the effective signalling of their luxury brand dimensions but should avoid more overt displays of their luxury status which may possibly be counterproductive, potentially even interpreted as arrogance, to their social media strategy.

The above implication also extends into the second major recommendation for practitioners which is to seek to embed signals of authenticity into social media content. Signals of authenticity as posited in Section 5.3 of this thesis may be either tangible or intangible, and may be either explicitly or implicitly signalled, yet all can be utilised either individually or collectively to signal luxury brand authenticity on social media. The content examples (Figures 5.2-5.4) provide some indications of the possible approaches Social Media Managers can take to embedding authenticity signals in their imagery posted on social media, however further work may be directed toward how best to embed authenticity signals in alternative forms of content, such as videos or blogs. Practitioners should note the position of the literature regarding how authenticity is conferred onto something (Beverland 2009) and therefore may not necessarily be totally under the brand's control. The goal for Social Media Managers, therefore, should be to utilise signals which further emphasise the more traditional aspects of the brand, such as the "passion for craft and production excellence, and the public disavowal of the role of modern industrial attributes and commercial motivations" (Beverland 2005: 1008). Adopting this definition, this can be achieved, for example, by the communication of intangible signals such as the brand's unique identity as well as tangible signals such as the natural ingredients used within the restaurant, their origin and the techniques used in converting them into a Michelin star worthy dish. Finally, as discussed above, Social Media Managers should seek to communicate these signals in a more subtle and nuanced way, rather than constantly emphasising their Michelin star status as the pivotal signal of luxury. Downplaying the value of the Michelin star serves to add an aura of modesty and approachability to the brand which, as the findings outlined, remains a strategic objective for Michelin star restaurants in their social media marketing strategies.

6.6   Limitations

Certain limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the results of the research. Although adopting the criterion of a Michelin star as a means of assessing the service brand's luxury status, it cannot be categorically stated that only Michelin star restaurants should be considered luxury restaurants. Some chefs are openly against inclusion within the Michelin Guide, for reasons such as increased pressures associated with higher costs of maintaining a Michelin star standard, increased expectations from consumers, or unmanageable levels of demand following the increased notoriety associated with the award (Forster 2018). Additionally, the Michelin Guide does not operate worldwide but rather in set locations, thus eliminating the possibility of restaurants worthy of the award ever being considered in certain regions of the world; for example, two restaurants in Australia were included in a recent list of the world's top 100 restaurants (San Pellegrino 2022), yet Michelin do not currently publish a guide there. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that the Michelin Guide is an exhaustive list of luxury restaurants or that restaurants without a Michelin star shouldn't be potentially considered a luxury service brand. Further, in their proposal of a continuum comparing ordinary and luxury services, Wirtz *et al.* (2020: 681) assign three-star Michelin dining as being comparatively high in luxury characteristics, with "casual fine dining" being assigned a comparatively lower level of luxury. While it should be noted that this study did not seek to establish between levels of luxury or determine which of the brands participating in the study exude more luxury characteristics than others, it should be noted as a limitation of the research that only one participant (P7) was a three-star Michelin restaurant and as such the entire sample does not universally reflect the 'high in luxury characteristics' category as posited by Wirtz *et al.* (2020).

Perhaps the largest limitation or stipulation surrounding the carrying out of the research has been the Covid-19 pandemic, the ensuing government-enforced restrictions in early 2020 and beyond, and their results on all aspects of society. In 2020 alone, sales the global luxury industry was forecast to contract by between 25-30% (D'Arpizio *et al.* 2020), the market's first contraction since the global recession of the late-2000s (Lawry 2022), having a particularly profound impact on the luxury hospitality sector (Bonfanti *et al.* 2021). Michelin themselves set up a barometer

tracking the worldwide rate of Michelin star restaurants open at varying times during the pandemic, with numbers as low as just 14% during 2020 (Michelin 2022b). This of course not only had a major impact on the rate of Michelin star restaurant closures across the sample regions of Ireland and the UK but also, in many cases, caused a complete cessation of all marketing activity, including on social media. Due to the restrictions and the ongoing uncertainty of when these establishment have begun to resume business operations, many staff had to be either furloughed or even made redundant in situations whereby restaurants would reopen under social distancing guidelines, resulting in a reduction of the capacity of the venue (Digby 2020; Coyle 2020). Due to these stresses and uncertainties, many restaurants declined to participate in the research once the data collection process started in mid-2020. As restrictions began to ease, and the hospitality sector commenced its reopening in late-2020 and early-2021, restaurants were more open to participation. However, given the precarious and volatile nature of the situation, including the prospect of the introduction of further restrictions on the industry, face-to-face interviews, as well as more fieldwork-related data collection techniques such as ethnography, were either not feasible or simply not possible in this study. This has to be acknowledged as a limitation, particularly given the reliance of Michelin star restaurants on the on-site experience in signalling their luxury status, including ambience, atmosphere, and service quality. Future research may seek to adopt an ethnographic case study approach in investigating the fidelity, or reliability (Berger and Ward 2010) of the signals being communicated through social media platforms. One area which remains underserved within the literature remains the potential of signals of luxury to backfire on brands on social media, whether through issues with the signal itself, the signaler, the recipient, or indeed the signalling environment (Connelly *et al.* 2011).

Further, a limitation of the findings of the thesis pertains to the absence of data quantifying the actual performance of the social media content and the resultant impact, if any, such marketing strategies have on outcomes such as consumer perception and behaviour. While the findings uncover valuable insights into the nature and motivation of Michelin star restaurants' social media marketing strategies, it provides ample evidence for the feasibility of a study to further build on the foundations of this thesis to better understand how such signals are received and interpreted via varying forms of content (i.e., image v video) as well as varying social media platforms (i.e.,

Instagram v TikTok). The final limitation of the thesis relates to its sample. As of 2022, there are a total of 3,261 Michelin star restaurants across over 35 countries and territories in the world. This study's sample included restaurants solely in Ireland and the UK. The findings of the research represent an interesting opportunity for further inquiry into signals of luxury across varying cultures. Additionally, the sample was not large enough to draw any significant conclusions regarding the variance in signalling strategies by restaurants across each of the three Michelin star levels. The majority of this study's sample were one-star establishments, and this presents an opportunity for further inquiry, for example, into luxury signalling strategies for exclusively three-star reestablishments, the highest Michelin award category and, therefore, the highest level of luxury restaurant brand (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020).

6.7   Future Research Directions

The findings of the current study present multiple opportunities to further develop this important area of research as stated originally in the systematic literature review. Figure 6.2 below is a re-inclusion of the avenues for future research discussed in the review with further additions made based on the findings of the thesis. For example, the present study presents an opportunity for future researchers to adopt a longitudinal approach to examining luxury signals and how they change over time and what effect, if any, shifting trends in luxury service consumption post-pandemic as well as evolving social media usage trends. Future attention will be directed toward the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on a multitude of business and societal factors, and luxury service research will undoubtedly play a significant role in this research as the luxury industry seeks to recover.

The marketing of luxury services on social media will no doubt continue to garner scholastic attention into the future (Aliyev *et al*. 2017; Stephen 2020; Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). Advertising research has highlighted the specificities of services marketing strategies (i.e., Albers-Miller and Stafford 1999), yet this area remains wholly under-researched in a luxury services context (Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020). For example, within a non-luxury setting, posting food content positively influences dining experiences and brand evaluations (Zhu *et al*. 2019), yet the literature remains largely devoid of investigations on such behaviours within a

luxury setting. Storytelling has been cited as an effective way for luxury brands to communicate their identity to consumers (Ehrensperger *et al.* 2022). Additional studies can build on this work in ascertaining how a story of authenticity, guided by the signals discussed in this study, may be cultivated, and delivered through social media platforms. Further, the current qualitative study does not measure the effectiveness and influences of each authenticity signal on consumer outcomes, such as perception, loyalty, or intention to purchase. Further quantitative work can build on this exploratory paper to contextualise the effectiveness of individual signals of luxury and authenticity.

Figure 6.2.   Avenues for Future Research

Brand Strategy	Social Media Communications	Consumer Attitude & Perceptions	Engagement	Brand Performance

Multi-stakeholder approach in luxury brand formulation online

Measurement of signal effectiveness and link to business outcomes

Integration of luxury signals across diverse social media platforms

Cross-cultural examination of luxury signal effectiveness

Social media and luxury services

Explore 'luxury moments' on social media

Role of third parties in luxury signalling on social media

Impact of UGC on consumer behaviour across all stages of the luxury purchasing cycle

Storytelling as a signal of luxury

Individual/synergistic roles of both traditional and digital channels in luxury branding

Investigation of younger consumers' attitudes and values toward luxury

The concept of luxury 'moments' continues to emerge among the literature, examining a temporal dimension to luxury consumption (Bauer *et al*. 2011; Holmqvist *et al*. 2020c; von Wallpach *et al*. 2020). There exists much scope for future studies into these 'moments of luxury' being generated, experienced, and shared on social media platforms. The signals discussed in this study could potentially be used as a starting point in investigating the nature of these 'moments', which signals are most effective and the characteristics of the signaller which can potentially be the brand itself, consumers, or third parties such as influencers or critics. The systematic literature review calls for an increased research focus on influencers (Voorveld 2019), who are more relatable than traditional celebrities as brand advocates in a social media setting (Venus Jin *et al*. 2019). Further inquiry should be guided toward these third parties as either individual signallers of luxury or co-creators of signals on social media and how effective such signals are in affecting consumer behaviour and luxury perception. Within a social media context, evolving brand–consumer relationship dynamic provides an interesting avenue for further luxury signalling research. This type of study could complement the typology proposed by Ramadan *et al*. (2018) in investigating in what ways and capacities each type of social media follower creates luxury brand signals. Related to this, further netnographic (Kozinets 2010) work may experiment with the varying forms of signals and establish their efficacy on consumer perceptions of luxury and subsequent engagement and purchasing behaviour.

In closing, this research, while limited in its context to just a small percentage of global Michelin star restaurants, provides not only critical insights into luxury brand signalling on social media marketing platforms, but also broader evidence of how luxury brands are embracing contemporary marketing platforms and are no longer fearful of the impact such platforms will have on the perception of luxury, but actually view them as viable platforms to communicate a diverse variety of luxury signals to an online audience. The systematic literature review not only served to synthesise the current contributions of scholars to the luxury and social media research streams, but also provides a roadmap for future research in this rapidly growing area. As Sigala (2020) mentions, the challenges provided by the Covid-19 pandemic have already and will further fuel a wealth of academic research aiming to make transformational contributions serving real needs and providing meaningful value for stakeholders.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A.   Indicative Interview Questions

INCEPTION STORY

1.   Can you tell me a bit about yourself and role here at the restaurant?

2.   Can you tell me a little bit about the restaurant?

3.   Can you describe the process that went into obtaining a Michelin star (MS)?

DAILY SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING ACTIVITIES

4.   How would you describe the main considerations in marketing/promoting a MS brand?

5.   How many individuals are responsible for the marketing activities of the restaurant?

6.   Which social media platforms is the restaurant currently active on?

7.   How would you describe the overall aim of the social media marketing strategy of the brand?

8.   Could you provide an overview of a typical day for the restaurant in terms of social media marketing? (planning, posting, interacting, etc.)

9.   How active do you feel a luxury brand should be on social media?

10.   How would you describe the main benefits of engaging in social media marketing?

11.   i) How would describe the current social media audience of the restaurant?

ii) Have you encountered a discrepancy between your social media audience and target market?

12.   How would you describe the main message that you are looking to communicate through social media?

13.   What features within social media content showcase/communicate luxury?

14.   Could you describe an example of a successful social media post/campaign for the restaurant?

15.   What do you feel social media users expect from luxury brands on social media?

16.   Why do you think people follow/interact luxury brands on social media?

17.   i) How aware are you of the conversation/comments online regarding your brand? and ii) what, if any, approach have you adopted to addressing such?

18.   Do you differentiate between current customers and prospective customers in your content communications strategy?

19.   In such an open-source and saturated social media environment, how can a luxury brand build credibility among its audience?

20.   Could you describe an instance whereby you received a negative reaction to a social media post and what the response was?

PERCEPTIONS OF LUXURY STATUS

21.   How would you describe a luxury brand?

22.   What distinguishes a MS restaurant from a non-MS?

23.   How (if at all) has your marketing strategy and approach changed since achieving a Michelin star?

24.   How do you envision the future of luxury marketing?

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INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Purpose of the Study

I'm Dean Creevey, a Doctoral Candidate in the School of Business at Maynooth University.

As part of the requirements for my PhD, I am undertaking a research study under the supervision of Prof Joseph Coughlan and Dr Christina O'Connor.

The study is concerned with the marketing strategies of luxury brands. Specifically, I am investigating how Michelin star restaurants (MSRs) utilise social media platforms for marketing and branding purposes.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve participation of representatives from MSRs responsible for marketing through a series of interviews. Lines of inquiry will include the nature of the business' origins and its journey to Michelin star status, its past and current social media marketing strategies as well as participants' own perception of what makes a luxury, high-end brand successful.

Who has approved this study?

This study has been reviewed and received ethical approval from Maynooth University Research Ethics committee. You may have a copy of this approval if you request it.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked as this study focuses specifically on luxury service brands (hospitality), rather than the more traditional luxury product brands (i.e., fashion). As a MSR, this business has achieved an exceptional level of quality recognised by a worldwide standard.

Do you have to take part?

No, you are under no obligation whatsoever to take part in this research. However, we hope that you will agree to take part and give us some of your time to participate in an interview with the researcher. It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part.

If you decide to do so, you will be asked to sign a consent form and given a copy and the information sheet for your own records. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and/or to withdraw your information up until such time as the research findings are published with the final thesis which will be submitted upon the study's completion. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your relationships with Maynooth University in any way whatsoever.

What information will be collected?

Data will be collected through interviews with research participants, which will be recorded with the informed consent of the participants before being transcribed and analysed. The types of information which will be sought after by the researcher will include anecdotal evidence of the social media marketing strategies of MSRs as well as participants personal experience and opinions regarding luxury brand marketing and management.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes, all information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. No names will be identified at any time. The identity of the organisations taking part will also be anonymised, with the only descriptive information disclosed being that they will have achieved Michelin star status and whether they are located within either a rural or urban setting for a more comprehensive comparative analysis of cases.

All hard copy information will be held in a locked cabinet at the researchers' place of work (School of Business, Maynooth University), electronic information will be encrypted and held securely on a MU PC or servers and will be accessed only by the

researcher, Dean Creevey, and the research supervisors, Prof Joseph Coughlan and Dr Christina O'Connor.

No information will be distributed to any other unauthorised individual or third party. If you so wish, the data that you provide can also be made available to you at your own discretion.

Please also note the following:

It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.

What will happen to the information which you give?

All the information you provide will be kept at Maynooth University in such a way that it will not be possible to identify you. On completion of the research, the data will be retained on the MU server. After ten years, all data will be destroyed (by the PI). Manual data will be shredded confidentially, and electronic data will be reformatted or overwritten by the PI in Maynooth University.

What will happen to the results?

The research will be written up and presented as a final thesis for submission for consideration for a PhD. Further outputs may include individual papers for submission to academic conferences, peer-reviewed journals, and/or industry publications. A copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

I don't envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part but I am of course available to discuss any potential concerns you may have regarding participation.

What if there is a problem?

At the end of the interview, you will have the opportunity to elaborate on how you found the experience and how you are feeling. You may contact my research supervisor, Prof Joseph Coughlan, either by email (Joseph.Coughlan@mu.ie) or by phone (01 474 7560) if you feel the research has not been carried out as described above.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can contact me by email: Dean.Creevey@mu.ie.

Thank you for your consideration in participating in this study.

Appendix C.   Participant Consent Form

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

I, [***Please enter full name here***], agree to participate in Dean Creevey's research study titled *An Investigation into Luxury Signalling in Social Media Marketing of Services*.

Please tick each statement below:

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me verbally and in writing. I've been able to ask questions, which were answered satisfactorily ☐

I am participating voluntarily ☐

I give permission for my interview with Dean Creevey to be audio-recorded ☐

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether that is before it starts or while I am participating ☐

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data right up to submission of the final thesis in June 2022 ☐

It has been explained to me how my data will be managed and that I may access it on request
☐

I understand the limits of confidentiality as described in the information sheet ☐

I understand that my data, in an anonymous format, may be used in further research projects and any subsequent publications if I give permission below ☐

[***Please select as appropriate***]
I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview ☐
I agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐
I do not agree for my data to be used for further research projects ☐

Signed: Date:

Participant Name in block capitals:

P.T.O.

I the undersigned have taken the time to fully explain to the above participant the nature and purpose of this study in a manner that they could understand. I have explained the risks involved as well as the possible benefits. I have invited them to ask questions on any aspect of the study that concerned them.

Signed: Date:

Researcher Name in block capitals: DEAN CREEVEY

If during your participation in this study you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at research.ethics@mu.ie or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

For your information the Data Controller for this research project is Maynooth University, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Maynooth University Data Protection officer is Ann McKeon in Humanity house, room 17, who can be contacted at ann.mckeon@mu.ie. Maynooth University Data Privacy policies can be found at https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/data-protection.

Appendix D. Ethical Approval Application Form

Social Research Ethics Sub-Committee

Protocol for Tier 2-3 Ethical Review of a Research Project Involving Participation of Humans

(This form must be submitted via the online [Ethics Module in RIS](#)).

Applicant.

Name:	MU Address/Department
DEAN CREEVEY	SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Title. Brief title of the research project:

AN INVESTIGATION INTO LUXURY SIGNALLING IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING OF SERVICES

Research Objectives. Please summarize briefly the objective(s) of the research, including relevant details such as purpose, research question, hypothesis, etc. **(maximum 100 words)**.

Use plain English
The objectives of this study are to reconceptualise the concept of luxury with contemporary society, investigate how luxury brands are utilising modern communication platforms (social media) to engage in luxury signalling, and finally to propose strategic direction for luxury brands to optimise their marketing strategies within this dynamic and fluid online environment.

Methodology.

4a. Where will the research be carried out?

Location(s)	*Please describe the locations where the research will be carried out. If research will be carried out abroad illustrate how you have given due consideration to the ethical norms and data protection requirements for the country/culture etc. Note that when working with institutions abroad you might also require ethical approval from that institution/organisation.*
	The research will adopt an interpretive case study approach, taking an in-depth look at the approach taken and role of social media marketing within Michelin star restaurants in Ireland and the UK. Given Ireland's limited pool of Michelin star restaurants, it is deemed necessary to further broaden the potential scope of the project. However, given the proximity of Ireland and the UK (both geographically and culturally), it is not anticipated that this extended research design will encounter any additional ethical considerations.

4b. Briefly describe the overall methodology of the project.

In order to investigate the issues discussed above, the current research will adopt an interpretive case study approach. As a qualitative case study, narratives from individuals representing these brands will be collected via semi-structured interviews to address the proposed research objectives. Cases will be recruited from the hospitality industry, with a planned focus on restaurant brands. The criteria being adopted in this study vis à vis luxury status will be the inclusion of restaurants which currently hold at least one Michelin star. Being a world-renowned standard in recognition of fine dining establishments, inclusion based on Michelin star status avoids any potential discrimination in the selection of cases in the research. Given the subjectivity inherent within the luxury concept, it must be recognised that certain other fine dining restaurants which do not hold a Michelin star would also warrant luxury status. However, it can be confidently stated that all Michelin star restaurants do occupy the luxury category.

The pool of participants within each case will include multiple stakeholders within the business, for example Restaurateur, Restaurant Manager, Head Waiters, and their marketing team. This is to ensure a multi-stakeholder examination of the narratives surrounding luxury conceptualisation which can then be compared to the subsequent integration of luxury elements into the business' social media marketing strategies. Issues to be explored within interviews will include marketing strategy, luxury differentiation on social media, level of activity, and general online communication approaches.

A list of indicative interview questions is attached in a separate file in the application.

Since the introduction of GDPR guidelines, MU cannot use the Survey Monkey or many of the traditional platforms any longer. The university has a licence to onlinesurveys.ac.uk

To get access to this platform, please contact laura.mcelwain@mu.ie

Please note the use of this platform is subject to Maynooth University OnlineSurveys User Policy

1. **Participants.**

5a. Who will the participants be?

Current and former employees of Michelin star restaurants and their agents (i.e. agencies) with responsibility for marketing activities.

5b. Outline the recruitment process, considering any criteria for inclusion/exclusion.

To eliminate potential selection bias, the research will adopt the Michelin Guide as the sole criterion for confirming luxury status. Therefore, restaurants currently holding at least one Michelin star will be deemed eligible to participate. However, we acknowledge that non-possession of a Michelin star does not necessarily mean that restaurant does not qualify as luxury. As a result, we may employ other

indicators of luxury (as informed by the literature) if our initial criterion proves too restrictive. Potential participants will be contacted directly by the researcher, who will outline the purpose and procedures involved in the project before seeking confirmation of their willingness to participate. Contact information will be sourced from relevant public sources, such as websites, social media presences, review sites, etc.

5c. What will research participants be asked to do for the purposes of this research study?
NB: This information should be reflected in the content of the Information Sheet and Consent Form.
Research participants will take part in semi-structured interviews, which are envisioned to have a duration of 1-2 hours each. Certain participants may be interviewed multiple times to provide updates, clarification etc. to previous interviews.

5d. Conflict of Interest.   ☐ Yes
☒ No

Please consider the basis of any potential conflict of interest and describe the steps you will take to address this should it arise?

Access the Conflict of Interest Policy here

There are no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

5e. Will the research involve power relationships e.g. student/employee/employer/colleague etc.?

☐ Yes   ☒ No

If yes to above, please outline the basis of the potential power relationship and describe the steps you will take to address this should it arise?

Note that power relationships may exist in situations other than supervisor-student relationships and or adult/child relationships.

5f. Will the participants be remunerated, and if so, in what form?

While the study will not offer remuneration to participants, the overall research findings will be made available to participants.

Risk/Benefit Analysis

6a. Potential Risks: Please identify and describe any potential risks arising from the research techniques, procedures or outputs (such as physical stress/reactions, psychological emotional distress, or reactions) and for each one, explain how you will address or minimise them.

While the research does not intent to touch upon any potentially sensitive issues for participants, all interviewees will be informed prior to their participation that they may withdraw their consent to participate at any time during the research process.

6b. Potential Benefits: Provide a list of potential benefits for this Research.

Please detail any potential benefits of the study which may be relevant to the participants/ your discipline /and/or the wider society.

The present study will make significant contributions to three branches of research: luxury, social media marketing, and signalling theory literature:
1.   Through observation of luxury service marketing within a contemporary lens (social media platforms), the research will enable the development and refinement of theoretical frameworks encompassing the composition of luxury brands incorporating both brand- and consumer-led factors;
2.   The consistently altering social media landscape will continue to provide new questions for marketers who continue to seek to engage users through the myriad platforms and communications avenues available to them to engage in effective signalling with their audiences. Therefore, adopting a social media-focussed approach to the current research ensures relevance within the current marketing landscape;
3.   A significant contribution will be made to signalling theory literature, namely the operationalisation of luxury brand social media presences as the *signaler* and the embedding of *signals* within social media content for distribution to social media users as *receivers*.

6c. Risk/Benefit Analysis: Taking into account your answer in section 9 (a) & (b) above, please provide a short justification for proceeding with the research as outlined in this project.

Bearing in mind that the benefits should out-weigh the risks

There are no risks attached to participating this study. The benefits from participation will include the following:

1.   Enhancement of their social media marketing strategies through shared learnings originating from the study;
2.   An established link with an active researcher in the area of luxury service marketing providing an avenue for ongoing collaboration.

3.   **Informed Consent.**
This section focuses on what and how, you tell participants about your research, and then obtain their informed consent as outlined in ***section 3.4 of MU Research Ethics Policy.***
Please note if you are collecting personally identifiable data you must seek explicit consent in a recordable manner (e.g. written or audio recorded and transcribed)
Template consent form available from the website

7a. Confirm you are seeking and recording informed consent from participants   ☒

1.   Who will be responsible for seeking and recording consent?   **Dean Creevey**

When and where is consent obtained e.g. do participants get an information sheet and sign a consent form, keeping a copy for their records or is consent secured by another means?

All prospective participants will receive a comprehensive consent form detailing the practicalities of their participation in the study, the types of data that will be recorded, how it will be recorded, how it will be stored, and when it will be destroyed. Participants will be made clearly aware that they may, upon request, receive a written transcript of their own

interview(s) for approval/clarification. All participants will be provided with a personal copy of the consent form, while also required to sign a second copy for the researcher's records. These records, and any other potentially identifiable information of participants will be anonymised and either stored within the researcher's personal storage locker within the School of Business or else within an encrypted folder on the researcher's personal laptop, depending on the nature of the data in question.

An indicative copy of the consent form is included as an attachment to this application.

Please note:

Consent must be recorded in an appropriate format.

If your research involves children or other vulnerable people, explain how you will obtain their assent.

For projects in which participants will be involved over the long term, you must include details of how you will ensure ongoing consent.

Limits to confidentiality Statement:

Ensure that participants are informed of the limits to confidentiality as outlined in section 3.3 of the ethics policy

The following or similar text should be used in consent/information sheet.

'It must be recognized that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent.'

7b. If applicable, please also justify deceiving or withholding information from participants (see section 4.9 MU Ethics Policy).

N/A

Follow-up. As appropriate, please explain what strategies you have in place to debrief or follow up with participants – especially in cases where information is withheld or deception is involved or where research has been carried out on sensitive topics, and/or with vulnerable persons.

As the research will involve case studies, the researcher will remain in regular contact with participants in the research, facilitating ongoing collaboration for research purposes but also to ensure clarity and understanding as to the study's purpose and the participant's role within it.

Data Management, Storage

Please complete 9a if personally identifiable data is being collected. If no personally identifiable data is being collected please move to 9b.

9a. Anonymity

Page 2 of the   Maynooth University's Research Integrity Policy states 'where ever possible personally identifiable data should be rendered anonymous in order to provide the best protection for participants'.

Will personally identifiable data be protected through the use of pseudonyms and/or codes?

   Yes ☒ No   ☐

If yes, please confirm that the key to pseudonyms and/or codes will be held in a separate location to the raw data?   ☒

Will personally identifiable data collected be irreversibly anonymised (All identifiers including keys to link pseudonyms or codes back to individual participants are destroyed)?

   Yes ☒ No   ☐

Who will be responsible for rendering the data anonymous?   Dean Creevey

If you answered No to above and are keeping personally identifiable data please explain your decision & rationale for not adhering to the policy.

| |
| |

9b. Data Access and Security:

Data must be stored in a safe, secure and accessible form, must be held for an appropriate length of time, to allow (if necessary) for future reassessment or verification of the data from primary sources, as outlined in the Maynooth University's Research Integrity Policy.

Please tick the box to confirm

Only the researchers listed on this application will have access to the personal information and data collected from participants
☒

Electronic Information sheets/consent forms and data collected will be encrypted and stored on a PC or secure server at Maynooth University   ☒

Hard copy Information sheets/consent forms and data collected will be held securely in locked cabinets, locked rooms or rooms with limited access on campus
☒

Please justify any exceptions to the information stated above

| |
| |

Do you plan to transfer Data outside of the European Economic Area? Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, please confirm you are doing so in accordance with Section 6 of the Maynooth University Data Protection Policy Yes ☐

See Data Commissioners website for a list of approved countries and exceptions

9c. Data Storage:

Are you planning to collect data on a mobile device (SB keys, smart phones; video recorders; audio recorders and/or laptops)? Yes ☒ No ☐

If yes, to be compliant with Data protection Law, please confirm:

Data collected on a mobile device will be protected with a strong password at a minimum, and/or encrypted if the device supports encryption ☒

Data will be removed from the mobile device as soon as is practicable ☒

Data will be removed to a desktop PC/ server in a secure location at Maynooth University ☒

9d. Secondary Use and Processing:

Are you planning for any secondary use of the data? Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, please confirm you will obtain explicit consent for;

Re-use and/or sharing of anonymous data at the beginning of the project ☒

Re-use and/or sharing of the identifiable data for any purpose other than the current research project ☒

Depositing in an Archive such as the Irish Qualitative Data Archive or the Irish Social Science Data Archive ? ☐

If yes, please give name and contact details for the proposed archive N/A

9e. Data Disposal: Data should be destroyed in a manner appropriate to the sensitivity of that data.

Please confirm:

Paper based data will be destroyed by confidentially shredding or incineration ☒

Electronic files will be deleted by overwriting ☒

Who will be responsible for destroying personally identifiable data? Dean Creevey

Professional Codes of Ethics. Please append an appropriate code of ethics governing research in your area to this protocol, and/or provide a link to the website where the code may be found.

Maynooth University General Ethics Policy:

https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/research/research-development-office/ethics/ethics-general-policy-documents

Submission Check List

Completed application form ☐ Letter from supervisor if applicant is a student ☐ if applicable – copies of: prior ethical approval ☐ ethical approval from other institutions ☐ proposed information sheet   and consent form ☐ Samples of surveys/questionnaires, indicative focus groups/interview questions etc. ☐ Documentary evidence for the use of existing data records, sourced from third party organisations, that consent was originally sought for data to be used for research purposes ☐ Please upload your full application to RIS as one single File.

TEMPLATE FOR SUPERVISOR'S LETTER

The supervisor's letter should outline how the student is suitably prepared to carry out the type of research proposed. The following points should be addressed:

Please elaborate on the student's preparedness to undertake the proposed research.

Please provide details of the student's methodological competence to undertake the research project.

Please address your confidence in the student's ability to manage risks that may arise as part of the research project.

Please describe the support that you and the department will give to the student in the management and the execution of the research project.

TEMPLATE FOR INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM [please use the Maynooth University Research ethics template information and consent form]

Appendix E.   Supervisor's Letter to the Ethics Committee

Research Ethics Committee,
Maynooth University

Re: Supervisor Letter in Support of Ethics Application for PhD Student – Dean Creevey

Dear Chair of the Committee,
This letter is in support of the ethics application submitted for the PhD work of Mr. Dean Creevey. The requirements are fourfold:

Preparedness
Dean has completed a significant literature review in the area of the PhD – Social media management in the luxury context. This has resulted in a paper under review at a journal and in this paper, we discuss the methodologies of a range of papers including papers that are similar to the research approach being adopted here. This method is in keeping with the nature of the research project and the traditions in the field. He has also conducted prior qualitative studies in another institution so as supervisors we feel he is well prepared.

Competence
Dean has already completed a Masters by Research using qualitative methods and also have completed a taught module at UCD on qualitative methods in the last academic year. He is also completing a taught module in the School of Business designed for PhD students who wish to carry out qualitative work. As such he is well prepared for this phase of his research.

Confidence in ability to meet risks
Dean has already completed qualitative research and has completed one module (and doing another) specifically on qualitative methods. As part of his experience and within the modules, typical risks are addressed. Both his supervisors are available for questions at all times during the research fieldwork

Support from Supervisor and Department
Dean is a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). He will get support from the department in ensuring that he has time to complete his fieldwork and space to interview respondents should they wish to be interviewed in a neutral location. From the supervisor side, we will be available for meetings on a regular basis throughout the fieldwork and have started to work to identify approaches to contact key informants needed in the industry. We have also reviewed the draft application and the list of proposed questions.

Should the committee have any questions, Professor Coughlan is happy to answer them in the immediate time frame as Dr. O'Connor is currently on leave. Although she is on leave, she has reviewed the draft application.

Yours sincerely,

Joseph Coughlan.

[On behalf of]
Professor Joseph Coughlan & Dr. Christina O'Connor
School of Business

Appendix F.   Ethics Approval

Ethics Approval

VALERIE BARTLEY | 25-MAR-20

Dear DEAN DESMOND CREEVEY,

Your Ethics Review has been now been approved:

- Ethics Review ID: 2399930
- PI: Dean Desmond Creevey
- Title: An investigation into luxury signaling in social media marketing of services

Please login to RIS in order to view the application and review it.

Appendix G.   Thematic Codebook

Systematic Data Coding

Name	Description	Files	References
Accessibility	References to accessibility in communication to the social media audience	20	48
Addiction	References to social media being an addiction	2	4
Adversity	References to personal adversity experienced by the chef, staff, etc.	1	1
Aesthetic	References to the aesthetics of the plate, content, etc	4	9
Affluent	References to the restaurant being located in a quite affluent area.	1	1
Amateur	References to the content being quite amateur in its composition	1	1
Ambition	References to ambition of the owner, chef, team, business etc	19	37
Anticipation	References to building anticipation for a visit with their social media content	2	3
Aspirational	References to being aspirational and social media activities to promote that.	10	19
Association	References to efforts at association with other bodies, restaurants, chefs, etc.	6	12
Atmosphere	Refs to atmosphere in terms of working environment, dining, etc.	19	34
Attention	References to attention span of online audiences, including potential for information overload.	2	3

Audience	References to social media audience	26	98
Authenticity	References to authenticity in brand, content, messaging etc.	19	59
Authority	Refs to the brand as being an authority	4	5
Awareness	References to building brand awareness on social media	13	21
Balance	References to achieving balance in their work	3	4
Behind the Scenes	References to 'behind the scenes' like content and interaction with social media audiences	13	21
Brand Development	References to brand development	13	22
Budget	References to marketing budget	8	15
Building	References to the actual building, whether the history, architecture etc.	18	31
Bullish	Examples of being bullish about their business, its quality, their success etc	1	1
Care	References to giving genuine care to staff, stakeholders, etc	1	1
Career Experience	Examples of participants discussing their previous career and work experience	25	46
Casual	References to the menu, dress code, atmosphere, etc being more of a casual feel	13	19
Caution	References to the need for a cautious approach to social media marketing	8	11
Change	References to any major changes undergone by the business and its effects	8	10
Character	References to the character of the chef, team, brand, building etc	3	3

Chefs	References to the chefs, particularly when using their own status and recognisability	23	79
Co-Creation	References to individuals co-creating the Michelin experience	6	10
Collaboration	References to the team working collaboratively in designing content or managing social media	10	19
Comfortable	References to seeking to make the guest feel comfortable	7	9
Competitors	References to competitors, i.e., other MS restaurants or aspiring chefs, etc	13	15
Complicated	References to aspects of the brand being overly complicated	2	2
Confidence	References to consumer confidence in the brand or else brand's own confidence in itself	3	4
Conflict	Examples of conflict within the business either with customers, suppliers or other stakeholders	1	2
Conform	References to a need (or not need) to conform to a certain standard or behaviour	3	4
Connection	References to establishing and maintaining a connection between brand and consumer	9	15
Consistency	References to need for consistency in messaging, branding, content etc.	27	90
Conspicuousness	References to the conspicuous elements of luxury service marketing	8	14
Control	References to controlling in terms of the brand, communications, online presences etc	13	27
Controversy	References to actual or potential sources of controversy mentioned	6	8
Convenience	References to convenience, i.e., takeaway food or else social media as a platform	4	6

Costs	References to the costs of running the restaurant, recruitment, suppliers, etc.	9	14
Crafts	References to crafts within either the restaurant or embedded in content	6	10
Creativity	References to creativity in content, food, menu, environment, etc	4	6
Crowdfunding	References to crowdfunding platforms or activities	1	3
Cuisines	References to specific cuisines, either what the restaurant offers or else inspiration	7	8
Culture	References to culture of team, chefs, locality, guests, cuisine etc	11	22
Curated	References to social media content being overly curated or even fake or misleading.	7	14
Curiosity	References to the curiosity in the experience, food, brand story etc.	3	3
Demanding	References to the demanding nature of the MS restaurant	12	19
Department	References to the marketing department (if applicable) and the responsibilities therein	1	1
Destination	References to the surroundings as a tourism destination and integration with marketing	7	15
Differentiation	References to differentiation in social media marketing strategy	4	6
Dilution	References to the dilution of the luxury element of the brand due to perpetual visibility	7	12
Disruptive	References to disruption in the industry	1	2
Diversity	References to diversity in clientele, staff, fans, cuisine etc.	4	7
Downplay	References to downplaying the elite status of the restaurant	7	11

Education	References to involvement in enhancing learning and awareness of food and cooking	6	11
Efficiency	References to either efficiencies or inefficiencies in the social media marketing strategy	3	4
Effort	References to communicating the levels of effort required to run a Michelin star restaurant	2	2
Ego	References to ego within the context of it driving business or marketing decisions	6	11
Elitism	References to elitism, whether the restaurant feels the need to conform to such categorisation	9	16
Engagement	References to the audience engaging with the brand's content on social media	15	34
Entertainment	References to social media content providing entertainment value	2	2
Environment	Refs to environment, whether within the restaurant or more general environs	15	28
Escapism	References to luxury service experiences being a form of escapism	1	1
Evaluation	References to evaluation, analytics, performance results etc.	2	6
eWOM and UGC	References to eWOM and UGC being generated as a result of social media content	20	44
Excess	References to excess being a component of luxury services	1	1
Excitement	References to building excitement surrounding the restaurant with their social media content	5	7
Exclusivity	References to exclusivity as a key component of the luxury service brand experience.	6	11
Expectations	References to the creation and management of expectation fuelled by social media	19	40

Experience	References to representing or communicating the experience of the restaurant in social media	24	66
Family	References to family being at the centre of their desired brand image and identity	11	23
Flexibility	References to restaurants being flexible with their staff, guests, offering etc	4	6
Food Poverty	Refs to food poverty in the locality of the restaurant	1	1
Formality	References to formality in MS restaurants	4	4
Freedom	References to a sense of freedom in running the restaurant	3	3
Fun	References to a desire to evoke or have fun with social media content	4	4
Governance	References to the governance of restaurant, travel, hospitality etc industries.	1	1
Hands On	References to being very hands on with aspects of the business	1	1
Heritage	References to exploration of heritage within marketing content	11	28
Honesty	References to being honest in their brand identity	8	17
Humble	References to staying humble during success.	3	7
Identity	References to brand identity	15	38
Ignorance	References to instances of ignorance of Michelin star food or luxury services	1	5
Illusion	References to the service experience being an illusion.	2	2

Image	References to brand image	6	8
Inclusivity	References to inclusivity as it pertains to branding activities	3	5
Individuality	References to showcasing individuality in their restaurant, menu, layout etc.	5	6
Influencers/Third Parties	References to collaboration with third parties or influencers for content and/or campaigns	14	23
Informational	References to informational content	3	6
Ingredients	References to sourcing of ingredients, origins etc.	16	43
Innovation	References to innovation in dishes or other elements of the experience	5	7
Inspiration	References to sources of inspiration for the chef, restaurant, marketing etc.	6	17
Intimate	References to the setting of the restaurant, tone etc being intimate in nature	3	4
Intimidating	References to intimidation	3	3
Intrigue	References to looking to generate intrigue with either their dishes or their social media content	1	1
Introducing	References to efforts to introduce people to luxury services and Michelin star cuisine	2	4
Investment	References to the levels of investment need to maintain Michelin star level operations	10	15
Isolated	References to the chef, or by extension the restaurant, feeling isolated due to their location	1	1
Joy	References to looking to spark joy in their social media activity	2	2

Language and Tone	References to use of language and/or tone	22	65
Leadership	References to leadership within the team	2	2
Learning and Development	References to adaptation, learning and development	18	38
Legacy	References to the legacy of the restaurant being a focus or by-product of their social media	3	3
Listening	References to the brand listening to the current conversations regarding the brand online	1	1
Live	References to live content on social media	1	1
Local	References to the local people, ingredients, culture, tradition etc	20	76
Loyalty	References to loyalty from fans/followers and/or guests	15	18
Luck	References to luck in terms of the business operations or marketing opportunities that arose.	4	4
Management	References to the management of the restaurant	12	18
Marketing Agency	Examples of participants discussing the agency they own/work for	18	25
Meaningful	References to deeper, more meaningful content, descriptions, examples, etc	3	4
Media	References to other forms of media/PR activity	18	36
Memory	References to the memory of the experience being key to driving social media engagement	4	4
Mental Health	References to mental health, most likely attributed to the pandemic.	2	5

Menu	References to the menu, service approach, dishes etc	14	35
Meticulousness	References to the meticulous preparation in MS level food and/or designing online content	6	7
Michelin	References to the actual process involved in achieving a Michelin star as well as the Guide	23	103
Misleading	References to potentially misleading or false information or content on social media	4	5
Monotony	References to the potential for monotony of keeping things ultra-consistent over time	2	5
Motivation	References to motivation in operating the business, drive, ambition etc.	15	19
Mystery	References to looking to establish a sense of mystery in their marketing material	14	22
Negativity	References to negative comments and content	17	31
Networking	References to networking with others within the industry or without	11	25
News	References to news items being the focus of social media content.	2	2
Niche	References to niche content or audiences on social media	2	2
Nutrition	References to nutrition in relation to menus etc.	2	2
Objectives	References to strategic objectives of the social media presences	7	14
Organic	References to a more organic, 'go with the flow' approach	8	13
Originality	References to ensuring a new, fresh experience, converse to machine like consistency	1	3
Overload	References to their being an overload of content on social media	3	4

Ownership	References to the local community taking pseudo ownership of the restaurant	2	2
Pandemic	References to the pandemic	11	23
Passion	Discussion of participants' own personal drive and passions	11	17
Perception	References to public perception of luxury and/or Michelin star dining specifically	28	66
Performance	References to performance in terms of social media or restaurant/hotel performance.	16	35
Perishability	References to perishability in luxury perception, definition or content	1	1
Personal	References to the experience being personal, elements of personalisation, unique etc.	14	30
Personality	References to the personalities of the chefs, team, etc.	14	23
Platforms	References to social media platforms currently being used.	23	48
Policy	References to restaurant rules/policy	2	3
Political	References to the politics between either restaurants or Michelin or other stakeholders	3	5
Pressure	References to MS restaurants as high-pressure environments	16	27
Price	References to price or financial means of MS diners	21	31
Pride	References to pride in their work and their achievements.	4	8
Private	References to the chef (or other individual) being a very private person re social media	1	1
Professionalism	References to professionalism in the delivery of a luxury service.	6	7

Promotions	References to running promotions online, including via social media	6	8
Purpose	References to social media marketing activities having a specific purpose rather than ad hoc	2	4
Quality	References to luxury quality	25	53
Reach	References to the reach afforded by social media and/or the Michelin star	2	3
Reciprocation	Refs to reciprocation of engagement from the brand to its followers	1	1
Recognition	References to recognisability of the brand's content, messaging etc.	6	7
Recovery	References to service recovery whether via social media or offline.	6	8
Reflection	Instances of interviewees self-reflecting on their experiences	2	2
Relatability	References to the brand being relatable to a more casual audience	9	12
Relationships	References to building and/or maintaining relationships with the social media audience	27	89
Relaxed	References to the desire to create a relaxing atmosphere within the restaurant or signal on SM	16	32
Relevance	References to relevance in social media content	3	3
Reputation	References to the reputation of the chef, staff, restaurant, etc.	10	15
Resilience	References to resilience in the business, not necessarily specific to marketing	9	11
Restrictions	References to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic.	1	4

Reviews	References to online reviews and their content	6	11
Reward	References to the brand rewarding their fans/followers	3	3
Risk	References to the level of risk involved in financing, running, marketing a Michelin star brand	3	4
Role Model	References to the chef being a role model for younger chefs or individuals in the industry.	1	1
Roles	References to roles and responsibilities of the individuals managing social media	10	20
Scale	References to the change in scale of operations due to MS award.	2	3
Scarcity	References to scarcity in terms of product or else marketing activities	4	4
Seasonality	References to the seasonality of the business and viability in off peak times	13	25
Segmentation	References to segmentation of either the brand (i.e., diffusion) or consumer segments	2	2
Self-Deprecating	References to being self-deprecating in their comms	1	1
Self-Regulating	References to brands being self-regulatory in ensuring their content is reflective of the brand.	1	2
Selling	References to selling through social media, or lack thereof	3	5
Setting	References to the restaurant's setting in the locality	14	24
Shared Success	References to their following/guests sharing in the success of the restaurant	9	14
Simplicity	References to marketing content being quite simple in message, tone, layout etc	7	13

Space	References to the space in the restaurant and how that may affect the experience	2	2
Speed	References to how quickly social media can be used to share information, etc	1	1
Staff	References to the staff members, training, etc needed for the restaurant	18	34
Status	References to the status associated with holding a Michelin star	3	3
Storytelling	References to storytelling in social media communications	20	49
Substitute	References to social media content providing a pseudo-luxury service experience	1	1
Subtle	References to subtlety in advertising, content, etc.	2	3
Subversion	References to either explicit or implicit attempts at subverting expectations	6	6
Suppliers	References to the suppliers for the restaurant and the role they play in brand communications	17	38
Support	References to instances of support from the online community	3	3
Surprise	References to offering surprises to clients when they arrive or during their visit	3	3
Sustainability	References to sustainability in luxury	8	15
Tastes	References to the varying tastes of individuals and diners	4	5
Technology	References to the development of technology and/or adoption of novel tech in marketing	3	6
Territorial	References to restaurants being quite territorial regarding customers, suppliers, cuisine, etc.	1	1

Time	References to time, i.e., amount of time taken to build a following, craft a menu etc.	14	26
Togetherness	Refs to the restaurant team being a close-knit unit	4	6
Topics	References to topics being or not being included in their social media content	1	1
Toxic	References to the toxic side of social media	2	2
Traditional	References to the traditional perspective of Michelin and whether it has also been adopted	18	36
Transition	References to looking to ascend to Michelin star standard or achieve more stars	1	2
Transparency	References to promoting transparency in social media activity	4	6
Travel	References to travel in regards to guests travelling or chefs travelling for experience etc	1	1
Trends	References to trends in social media/marketing generally	20	59
Trust	References to building trust between brand and consumer	8	13
Truth	References to truthfulness in their marketing material	1	1
Unique	References to being unique as a brand on social media	6	7
Value	References to value, whether brand or consumer perspective	12	15
Vindication	References to the Michelin star being a vindication of the efforts and quality of the restaurant	1	1
Visibility	References to visibility in social media	8	11

Visual	References to the visual aspect of social media generally or certain platforms	21	42
Volume	References to the volume or regularity of social media activity	8	10
Welcoming	References to wanting to make the guest feel welcome	5	7

Defining, Refining and Naming Themes

Name	Files	References
Luxury Dimensions with Social Media Marketing		
Luxury Brand Dimensions		
Authenticity	20	62
Care	1	1
Collaboration	1	1
Connections	4	4
Consistency	3	5
Culture	1	2
Curated	2	2
Evolution	1	1

Failure	1	1
Family	3	3
Generic	1	1
Genuine	9	14
Heritage	5	8
Honesty	5	9
Humanise	3	3
Identity	10	13
Immediacy	1	1
Inclusivity	2	5
Leading Authority	1	1
Make Time	1	1
Mystery	1	1
Openness	2	4
Passion	1	1
Personable	4	9

Personal Journey	2	2
Pride	1	1
Responsibility	1	1
Restrictive	1	2
Setting	2	3
Sourcing	2	4
Staff	4	7
Standard of Living	1	1
Subjectivity	1	3
Sustainability	1	1
Unexpected	1	1
Unique	2	4
Value for Money	1	1
Voice	5	8
Brand Identity		
Brand Development	13	22

Ego	6	11
Elitism	9	16
Family	11	23
Honesty	8	17
Humble	3	7
Motivation	15	19
Personal	14	30
Personality	14	23
Simplicity	7	13
Brand Integrity		
Innovation	5	7
Learning and Development	18	38
Management	12	18
Passion	11	17
Performance	16	35
Pride	4	8

Brand Signature		
Aesthetic	4	9
Recognition	6	7
Reputation	10	15
Unique	6	7
Culture & Heritage		
Ambition	19	37
Cuisines	7	8
Menu	14	35
Culture	11	22
Flexibility	4	6
Heritage	0	0
Career Experience	25	46
Local	20	76
Affluent	2	2
CSR	3	3

Disadvantaged	1	2
Focus on Local	3	3
Inaccessible	1	1
Ingredients and Suppliers	14	33
Loyalty	4	4
Personality	4	6
Homely	2	2
Place in the Community	9	14
Politics	2	4
Pride	3	7
Seasonality	1	1
Tribalism	2	3
Uncertainty	1	2
Resilience	9	11
Sustainability	8	15
Traditional	18	36

Downplay	8	12
Environment		
Crafts	6	10
Exclusivity		
Accessibility	20	48
Conspicuousness	8	14
Dilution	7	12
Marketing		
Aspirational	10	19
Awareness	13	21
Behind the Scenes	13	21
Control	13	27
Engagement	15	34
Storytelling	20	49
Consistency	2	2
Education	1	1

Ingredients	8	9
Journey	6	13
People	8	17
Performance	1	1
Place	6	8
Purpose	2	3
Seasons	2	2
Tone	5	7
Visual	21	42
Price		
Costs	9	14
Price	21	31
Relationships		
Expectations	19	40
Image	6	8
Perception	28	66

Authenticity	6	8
Elitism	1	1
Intimidating	2	2
Local	2	2
Luxury	12	19
Michelin	16	26
Pride	1	1
Status (Employer)	2	2
Stereotype	1	4
Sustainability	1	1
Value	2	2
Welcoming	5	5
Relatability	9	12
Togetherness	4	6
Trust	8	13
Luxury Service Dimensions		

Behaviours and Perceptions of Customers		
Connection	9	15
Demanding	12	19
Excitement	5	7
Pressure	16	27
Time	14	26
Value	12	15
Service Characteristics		
Comfortable	7	9
Meticulousness	6	7
Professionalism	6	7
Relaxed	16	32
Casual	13	19
Roles	10	20
Seasonality	13	25
Welcoming	5	7

Miscellaneous		
Media	18	36
Negativity	17	31
Pandemic	11	23
Platforms	23	48
Trends	20	59
Accessibility	6	11
Customer or User Experience	7	7
Diversity	5	6
E-Commerce	1	1
Focus on Time	1	1
Influencers	2	2
Meaning	8	16
Media	4	4
New Experiences	5	7
Platforms and Content	5	6

Supporting Local	3	3
Sustainability	3	4
Signals of Authenticity		
Intangible		
Consistency	27	90
Branding	12	22
Challenges	4	4
Communications	11	18
Customer Service	3	4
Experience	11	11
Menu	2	4
Posting Regularity	1	1
Quality	11	16
Vision	2	2
Visuals	10	18
Exclusivity	6	11

Identity	15	38
Brand Guidelines	3	4
Chefs	23	79
Accessible	7	13
Accomplishment	1	1
Ambition	7	9
Caution	2	4
Disdain for Social Media	1	1
Commitment	7	9
Control	2	2
Convenience	1	1
Driving Trends	4	5
Experience	3	3
Humble	3	3
Networks	8	11
Passion	6	7

Personal Brand	9	20
Personality	11	17
Private	1	1
Standards	1	1
Style	4	5
Upbringing	6	7
Competition	1	1
Consistency	7	11
Engagement	1	3
Heritage	11	28
Humour	1	1
Innovation	1	1
Passions and Values	2	4
Perception	1	1
Personality	5	7
Recognisability	2	2

Support Local	4	4
Sustainability	1	1
Language and Tone	22	65
Audience Expectation	2	2
Authentic	8	10
Contemporary	1	1
Detail	5	5
eWOM and UGC	20	44
Formal	3	5
Humorous	6	8
Inclusive	4	4
Informal	9	10
Personable	4	8
Thoughtful	6	10
Mystery	14	22
Balance	2	3

Expectations	3	9
Michelin	1	1
Minimalist	2	3
Oversharing	2	2
Preservation	9	13
Trying Something New	2	3
Relationships	27	89
Acceptance	1	1
Advocacy	3	3
Approachable	6	7
Aspirational	3	4
Association	6	12
Audience	26	98
Age	2	3
Older	8	16
Younger	11	17

Aspirational	1	1
Casual	2	3
Corporate	2	2
HNW Individuals	3	3
Customer Service	3	6
Database	1	2
Elitist	3	3
Expectation	4	9
Family	2	2
Tribe	1	2
Foodies	5	5
Gender	1	2
Industry	8	11
Influence	1	1
Location	1	2
Local	4	7

Non-Local	7	8
Loyalty	7	8
Occasion	2	2
Research	1	2
Sensitivities	1	1
Star Chasers	5	5
Tech Savvy	1	2
Co-Creation	4	4
Collaboration	10	19
Community	8	11
Culture	1	1
Education	2	2
Generational	3	4
Honesty	1	1
Industry	4	5
Influencers or Third Parties	14	23

Inspirational	1	2
Landmark	1	1
Loyalty	15	18
Marketing Agency	18	25
Memorability	2	2
Networking	11	25
Pandemic	2	2
Reciprocation	5	5
Recognisability	4	5
Regulars	7	12
Relatable	4	5
Respect	7	8
Rewards	2	2
Service Recovery	1	2
Shared Ownership	4	5
Shared Success	9	14

Staff	2	4
Superficial	1	1
Suppliers	8	19
Suppliers	17	38
Tension	3	3
Mixed (Servicescape)	0	0
Atmosphere	19	34
Building	18	31
Features	10	12
History	6	8
Location	1	1
Setting	14	25
Experience	24	66
Aspirational	1	1
Atmosphere	10	12
Authentic	4	4

Co-Creation	5	6
Consistency	2	2
Environment	15	28
Authenticity	4	7
Behind the Scenes	2	3
Landscape	6	11
Service Experience	10	15
Sustainability	2	2
Expectation	4	7
Extraordinary	13	15
Itinerary	1	1
Multi-Sensory	13	21
Mystery	2	2
Nostalgia	3	4
Personalisation	10	11
Preferences	4	5

Quality	25	53
Content	15	16
Customer Service	2	2
Effort	4	5
Experience	9	12
Food	11	18
General	5	7
Management	2	2
Staff	4	4
Third Parties	2	2
Spoil Yourself	4	5
Staff	18	34
Touchpoints	6	8
UGC	4	4
Value	1	1
Tangible	0	0

Ingredients	16	43
Cost	3	3
Local	8	14
Menu	14	35
Presentation	1	1
Procurement	11	18
Quality	13	22
Seasonality	2	2
Sustainability	3	4
Variety	3	3
Local	20	76
Affluent	2	2
Building	18	31
Features	10	12
History	6	8
Location	1	1

CSR	3	3
Destination	7	15
Disadvantaged	1	2
Environment	15	28
Authenticity	4	7
Behind the Scenes	2	3
Landscape	6	11
Service Experience	10	15
Sustainability	2	2
Focus on Local	3	3
Inaccessible	1	1
Ingredients and Suppliers	14	33
Loyalty	4	4
Personality	4	6
Homely	2	2
Place in the Community	9	14

Politics	2	4
Pride	3	7
Seasonality	1	1
Setting	14	25
Tribalism	2	3
Uncertainty	1	2
Michelin	23	104
Accessibility	8	13
Change	11	19
Pressure	8	13
Process	1	1
Profitability	1	1
Promotion	6	9
Relationship	5	7
Reputation	7	9
Standard	7	9
Values	7	15