Ephemeral Content as an Instrument to Convey Identitary Values in Masstige Fashion Brands' Communication

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Abstract
During the last decades economists have noticed the increased power of middle-class consumers and call it a key megatrend. Scholars notice middle-class consumers changing their purchase habits and leaning more towards hedonic values than the utilitarian, aiming for social power and self-improvement. These changes have caused the emergency of masstige strategies among brands which refers to affordable luxury, or the "sweet spot between mass and class". Masstige strategies that are focused on the powerful middle-class are found to be radically different from the luxury and needs clear separate research insights. Ephemeral communication in social media is an exclusively important channel for masstige brands as people tend to spend longer time watching ephemeral content and remember better the message. This research fills the research gap and finds the relationship between ephemeral social media content, masstige strategies and consumers associations of it. The research will delve into how consumers perceive the messages conveyed by masstige brands in their Instagram Stories. This research will involve a triangulation approach, combining both qualitative content analysis and quasi-experiment.

Keywords: Ephemeral Communication, Masstige Fashion Brands, Social Media

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Introduction

Recent reports indicate a significant shift in the luxury fashion market, with a growing emphasis on younger consumers. For instance, Gucci's sales in 2018 were primarily driven by millennials (Handley, 2018). While luxury brands once resisted social media due to concerns about exclusivity, they have increasingly embraced it to appeal to this younger demographic (Felix et al., 2017; Phau & Prendergast, 2000). The rise of young fashion influencers on social media platforms has further fueled this trend, attracting a younger customer base. It's estimated that by 2026, 60% of global luxury spending will be made by consumers under 40 (Jiang et al., 2021). In order to achieve results, luxury brands must actively engage their young audience through social media.

In response to these changing consumer trends, scholars have observed the emergence of masstige brands and strategies. These brands target the middle class by combining prestige with affordability (Paul, 2015). The term "masstige" was introduced in 2003 by Silverstein and Fiske to describe this concept. However, this concept of new luxury provides many unanswered questions to the media scholars and the existing research is scarce (Kim et al., 2019).

Visual communication of masstige fashion brands is in need of exploration due to theoretical reasons – in literature analysis it was found that even though there are specific identitary values defined that distinguishes masstige fashion brands from luxury, there are no clear tools for empirical investigation (besides MMSS). Also, exploration of masstige fashion brands could contribute to a better understanding of practitioners – how to apply strategies in order to build a recognizable masstige fashion brand. The lack of knowledge in society also is an issue – it was not found a clear translation of this term in Lithuanian – the country of the empirical research. Scholars notice the advantages of Instagram for brands (brands can reach a large audience at a relatively low cost) and highlight a need for investigation on visual modality of Instagram to understand different appeals (Rietveld et al., 2020).

This study employs qualitative content analysis of six global masstige fashion brands (Calvin Klein, Coach, Armani Exchange, Ralph Lauren, Michael Kors, and Diesel) and semi-structured interviews with potential masstige brands consumers were. The research investigates the identitary values of masstige fashion brands (Freire, 2014) and aims to explore the way fashion brands represent their values in Instagram Stories. While focusing on three identitary values, which exclusive to masstige fashion brands, - Seasonality, Sexuality and Seduction, and Renewal, - this research employs Active Audience Theory and see audience as an active participant seeking for engagement. This research aims to answer what associations do masstige fashion brands' communication on Instagram Stories provoke for consumers and what representation consumers perceive as the most attractive and which – as the least attractive. We study three exclusive masstige brands' values – Seasonality, Sexuality and Seduction, and Renewal (Kim et al., 2019) and consider them to be reflected in chosen masstige fashion brands' communication on Instagram Stories. Furthermore, we validate the perception of these values by analysing the official websites of companies' – to see what values they declare by themselves in verbal communication.

With high respect to Critical discourse, the aim of this thesis is to focus on masstige fashion brands engaging communication, but not to contribute to higher sales rates of fashion brands. Moreover, the author of the thesis sees masstige fashion brands as an alternative to fast

fashion – by helping masstige brands to emerge and succeed it is possible to suspend the prosperity of destructive fast fashion.

This thesis introduces the novel concept of "masstige" to Lithuanian research, examining its relationship to ephemeral social media content, fashion brand identitary values, and consumer associations. The study aims to develop a framework for future research and practical applications and tools for research. In the presented part of the research the masstige term is presented.

Masstige Concept

Term “masstige” as the combination of mass and prestige was introduced by Silverstein and Fiske (2003). The masstige products are defined being in the “sweet spot between mass and class” (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003). Pioneers of the term discuss the changing in consumption and notice that people can buy premium products in categories that matter to them and buy low-cost products that do not matter so much – people’s spending habits do not correspond directly to their income (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003).

Masstige, combining two words - “mass” and “prestige” refers to the core element of communication – the receiver. While masstige brands convey the prestige just like the luxury, masstige brands are directed towards the mass consumption (Goyal, 2020), so the brands must balance the strategy and maintain the prestige while reaching the masses. Goyal (2020) summarizes that masstige brands are for masses and considered to be prestigious, are not rare, high quality and affordable in comparison to the luxury brands. While the term “masstige” is employed in this work, the literature offers a more nuanced spectrum of conceptualizations to characterize this market segment, like new luxury (Hart et al., 2016) or mass-consumed luxury (Nobre & Simoes, 2019).

In contrast to the traditional luxury which was about the product and defined by the company, scholars discuss the “new luxury” to be perceived by consumers as highly experiential and defined by the consumer (Florin et al., 2007). Prestige is often considered to be a trait of luxury and “prestige sensitivity” is one of the most widely discussed concepts in the study of prestige brand shopping. It defines “Favorable perceptions of price, based on feelings of prominence and status that higher prices signal to other people about purchaser” (Lichtenstein et al., 1993). Vigneron and Johnson (1999) highlight three types of brands according to their prestige (in an increasing order): upmarket brands, premiums brands, and luxury brands. Later Vigneron and Johnson (2017) changed the “premium” into “luxury” and developed a brand luxury index. In addition to the new luxury brands, scholars introduce “masstige” term to define brands targeted to the mass and less expensive than traditional luxury goods (Truong et al., 2009). Paul (2015) argues that masstige brand positioning techniques radically differ from traditional luxury which are very strictly consistent about maintaining their exclusivity, therefore combining perceived prestige with price premiums. Masstige, or new luxury, is a combination of a high-perceived prestige and reasonable price, so they would attract middle-class consumers (Paul, 2015). This way of democratizing luxury can be reflected as masstige campaigns on social media and luxury fashion brands collaborating with fast fashion brands for exclusive yet affordable collections (Mrad et al., 2019; Loureiro et al., 2018). Scholars define masstige to refer to these characteristics: accessible, new, and populous luxury (Kim et al., 2019). Scholars consider new luxury being masstige referring to not necessarily being rare, yet acquiring the luxury label because of the product design, additional services or the aura created by the brands (Brun & Castelli, 2013).

Truong et al. (2009) propose a three levels model of brands – traditional luxury, new luxury, and middle-range brands. Truong et al. (2009) find that old luxury brands cost three times more than new luxury brands and gives some examples what could be considered as the new luxury – BMW 1-series starting from $19,000 or Swarovski crystals with prices from around $20. Truong et al. (2009) investigate two new luxury fashion brands – Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren. It was found that masstige brands are perceived as more prestige than middle-range brands while their prices maintained reasonable in order to target wide segment of the audience (Truong et al., 2009). The trust, satisfaction and repurchase intention is considered to be the outcome of relationship marketing including elements of masstige fashion brands (Hong et al., 2010). People's need for status products was noticed in the early 2000s (Powderly & Macnulty, 1990) and it has increased so far.

Paul (2015) categorized Louis Vuitton's Japanese market strategy into three steps: loyal customers attached to the brand via shaped values of society, traditions, history, art; masstige strategy – collaboration of the brand with Japanese and western designers; the principles of four Ps (product, price, place and promotion) – maintaining the high quality and adapting them according to the changes in society and cultures (Paul, 2015). Common masstige strategies include collaborations between fast fashion companies and high-end fashion designers (Mrad et al., 2019). Another study exploring the collaboration between luxury brand Dior and mass brand Nike highlights the hedonic consistency such dualism bring to a consumer and identifies brand coolness of mass brands as a key element creating a perceived fit between such collaborations (Suzuki & Kanno, 2022).

In addition to the masstige strategies, Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) introduced a Bandwagon Luxury Consumption model which refers to brand position strategies fostering the mass consumption of luxury brands. Another approach was the introduction of Populence paradigm – a process when the premium products are marketed and popularized to achieve mass consumption (Granot et al., 2013). Finally, Paul (2015) introduced a Masstige Mean Score Scale (MMSS) and Masstige Index (MMI) as a tool to measure the "Masstige value" using likert scale. The method consists of data collection of customers or potentials customers and calculating the score of responses to the ten questions (Paul, 2015). Paul (2015) is also introducing a pyramid model to depict that brands should target not only high income group, but also all the members of the middle class and upper part of the bottom of the pyramid. The brand with a higher masstige value has a higher success chance, according to Paul (2015). Later on Paul (2018) expands his idea and states that following a masstige strategy based on MMSS a brand can gain a strong masstige value in a foreign country. Scholars find that masstige value of a brand is related to consumer engagement with the brand (Jabbar et al., 2023).

Scholars find that masstige fashion brand with a perceived functional value increases the willingness to buy. The same effect has a masstige brand with a perceived experiential value and perceived symbolic value, so marketers are advised to strengthen these dimensions by improving quality and enhancing sincerity (Das et al., 2022). Masstige social media strategies for luxury and mass-market fashion brands are found to receive neutral or positive attitude by consumers, therefore brands can employ this strategy sustaining attitude towards the brand and widening the range of offers (Bilro et al., 2021). Paul (2015) explains Japanese luxury market employing masstige strategies and causing bandwagon effect – luxury market became mass market. Vigneron and Johnson (1999) proposes that bandwagon consumers pay less attention to the price of a product as the sign of the prestige, but will emphasize the attitude of others while consuming prestige brands.

Scholars state that status and conspicuousness are two different constructs (Truong et al., 2008). The demand for masstige brands can be explained by the shift of consumption from conspicuousness to inconspicuousness in three steps – traditional conspicuous consumption, the rise of luxury for masses and the death of classes, and the rise of inconspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2014). Scholars also use terms quiet and loud luxury to categorize luxury brands (Amatulli et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2021; Pino et al., 2019). Loud luxury brands have clear brand signals, such as logos, while quiet luxury brands are less recognizable to the masses (Jiang et al., 2021). Wiedmann et al. (2007) found that individual, social, financial and functional factors siginificantly influence consumers' perception of luxury and their purchasing behaviour globally.

Scholars find neo-luxury and the masstige brands to be emerging topic with high need for scholarly implications, masstige marketing needs separation from luxury consumption (Rodrigues & Rodrigues, 2019; Kim et al., 2019; Das et al., 2022).

Changing Consumption

Although research on masstige consumption is subject to limitations, some scholars have initiated to define the relationships between consumer and masstige brands (Moorlock et al., 2023). Consumers employ masstige brands as instrumental tools for their identity projects, utilized to signal worth and desired self-concepts (Granot et al., 2013). Scholars highlight consumers deriving hedonic benefits and psychological empowerment through their association with masstige brands (Kim et al., 2019). Scholars identify customer – masstige brand relationship to be more complex and intense than the relationship with less presstiguous or luxury brands, also highlight the features of such relationship to be volatility, multiplicity and fluidity (Moorlock et al., 2023). Scholars have found that consumers' affective desire and perceived value for masstige products ignites inspiration which is leading to purchase intention and masstige engagement (Das et al., 2021). Innovations in fashion and the ability to adapt them is a way to stand out and it brings distinction, therefore high-status consumers first adopting them, converts those into status symbols (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979).

The transformation of luxury from status symbol to a lifestyle choice has paved the way for masstige brands. Hemetsberger et al. (2012) notice that luxury consumption is no longer regarded as a marker of social class; luxury is more about activities and experiences than brand names (Hudders & Pandelaire, 2013). Scholars find the boundaries between narcissism and luxury consumption – overt narcissistic consumers hold a value-expressive attitude towards luxury products which leads to quiet luxury, while covert narcissistic consumers hold social-adjustive attitude and it leads to loud luxury (Jiang et al., 2021). Scholars notice that growing luxury market fosters the growth of masstige brands (Goyal, 2020).

Scholars of the last century have noticed that consumers often learn about affluent lifestyle from television shows (O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997) and then try to imitate this kind of lifestyle and consume similar prestige products. Vigneron and Johnson (1999) juxtapose the "high" and "mass" culture as the consumption of both of them construct prestige. Terms ambiguousness is related to the encoding and decoding processes of communication described by Stuart Hall (Hall, 1973). S. Hall describes television through the process of creation of a message, a decoder. ada and Ibáñez (2020) describes Instagram stories as

"always-on" TV show" and states that audience constantly needs availability and accessibility.

Masstige is fundamentally predicated on prestige-seeking behavior, which is conceptualized by Vigneron and Johnson (1999). Scholars find five values of prestige and combine them with motivations as follows: conspicuous – Veblenian, unique – snob, social – bandwagon, emotional – hedonist, quality – perfectionist (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). Scholars propose different attitudes of consumers regarding prestige – Veblenians consider price to be an indicator for prestige, snobs perceive price as indicator of exclusivity, bandwagon consumers pay less attention to the price but the effect they make on others is a key factor for them (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). Granot et al. (2013) find that from a consumer's standpoint, masstige brands appeal due to their quality, style, selective conspicuousness, signaling, self-catering, exploring and inconspicuous consumption. Kapferer et al. (2017) states that the newly rich people want their success to be visible, and upper middle classes imitate the wealthy – luxury has become extremely visible. Another idea arguing the shift in luxury market is that many brands claim luxury because the word itself sells and the efforts to update the term are useless because of the fundamental meaning of luxury in various subjects (Kapferer et al., 2017). Scholars find that consumption of masstige brands lead to brand happiness (Kumar et al., 2021).

Von Wachenfeldt (2018) proposes the myth of luxury to consist of brand, object in the ad campaign, social narratives, and meaning. While deconstructing luxury ads, author notices that while luxury is dedicated for a few people, advertising is for the masses – the communication of luxury applies seductive strategies for mass-mediated products (von Wachenfeldt, 2018).

Identitary Values of Masstige Brands

Visual aesthetics refers to a balance between design elements and concepts (Cai & Xu, 2011) and can be classified into expressive aesthetics and classical aesthetics (Bhandari et al., 2019). The brand identity is made visible through elements, such as logos, typography, color and layout (Phillips et al., 2014). Freire (2014) introduces the "identitary values" which signify the characteristics of luxury. Following this approach Kim et al. (2018) aims to identify indentitary values of masstige brands vs luxury brands in their advertisements. Based on various rankings for the luxury brands category scholars chose Gucci, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, and Dolce&Gabbana, while for the masstige – Calvin Klein, Michael Kors, Coach, and Armani Exchange (Kim et al., 2018). The common inherent values for both luxury and masstige brands were found to be exclusivity, sophistication, authenticity, accomplishment, and pride. The fundamental themes for the luxury brands were found to be heritage, timelessness, and aesthetic pleasure, while themes linked to the masstige brands – seasonality, sexuality, and a sense of renewal (Kim et al., 2018). It is also found that masstige brands differ from luxury by their functional, financial, social, and individual brand values (Goyal, 2020). Analysis of luxury ads confirmed the identitary values or the themes of luxury to be – adventure, seduction, love, and play (von Wachenfeldt, 2018). Wiedmann et al. (2007) defines luxury consumers' value perception sets: functional, financial, social, and individual.

Conclusions

The presented part represents masstige as the emerging type of fashion brands that still lacks scholar attention. This dissertation contributes to the growing body of research on masstige fashion brands and their visual communication on social media platforms. By examining the identitary values of masstige brands and analyzing their representation on Instagram Stories, this study offers valuable insights into the strategies employed by these brands to engage younger consumers. The findings highlight the importance of understanding consumer associations with masstige brands and the role of social media in shaping these perceptions.

This research provides a theoretical framework for analyzing masstige brands and their visual communication, as well as practical implications for marketers and brand managers. By identifying the key identitary values that resonate with younger consumers, brands can develop more effective marketing strategies and strengthen their brand identity.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the changing landscape of luxury consumption and the role of social media in shaping consumer behavior. It offers a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between masstige brands, consumers, and social media platforms.

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