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User Generated Content and Brand Engagement: Exploring the role of electronic semiotics and symbolic interactionism on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex interplay of semiotics and symbolic interactionism in shaping customer perceptions and buying behaviours on luxury fashion brands' pages on Instagram. Existing research predominantly focuses on the quantitative aspects of social media influence, which leaves a research gap in understanding the qualitative nuances of these social interactions. This study addresses this gap by exploring how consumers interpret and attribute meanings to luxury fashion brands' symbols and signs, which are influenced by their social and cultural contexts. A total of 718 reviews were garnered from the Instagram pages of 10 eminent luxury fashion brands. Concurrently, 21 in-depth interviews were conducted with users engaged with luxury fashion brands on Instagram, which focused on semiotics and purchasing tendencies within the Instagram milieu. Grounded in symbolic interactionism theory and semiotic theory, the study identified six primary factors influencing consumer behaviour on Instagram: aesthetic excitation, symbolic discourse, emblematic valuation, digital resonance, semiotic faith, and semiotic compliance. Each factor represents specific ways consumers interpret and respond to brand messages. The research revealed that consumers' engagement with luxury fashion brands on Instagram extends beyond mere visual appeal to involve a dynamic, symbiotic process of meaning-making and interpretation. The study contributes novel insights into customer-brand interactions on Instagram and offers practical implications for fashion marketers. However, it is limited in its scope to Instagram and luxury fashion brands, which suggests that future research could explore other social media platforms and different brand categories.

1. Introduction

User-generated content (UGC) refers to the myriads of contents created and shared by users on online platforms that often reflects personal experiences, opinions, or affiliations (Naeem, 2020). The proliferation of UGC on social media platforms has reshaped the landscape of brand-consumer interactions, especially for luxury fashion brands (Liu et al., 2021). The active creation and dissemination of content by users enhance brand visibility and influence (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Naeem & Ozuem, 2021). At the same time, media convergence enables brands to deliver unified user-generated messages across various channels to engage customers (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022). The intersection of UGC and media convergence on platforms like Instagram facilitates a

dynamic environment where luxury brands can be both promoted and consumed (Argyris et al., 2020; De Jans et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2023). These social media platforms enhance consumer engagement through the sharing of UGC on luxury brands' social media pages, which influence the purchase decisions of customers (Delbaere et al., 2021; Lim & Rasul, 2022).

Instagram, a social media platform, is the primary focus of this paper because of its visual and symbolic features. Instagram's features enable consumers' symbolic interpretation of a brand's image, which has an impact on their engagement and purchase decisions (Chu et al., 2020; Reid & Duffy, 2018). Instagram's digital image capacities permit the construction of visually compelling user and brand representations (Huang & Ha, 2021; Rokka & Canniford, 2016) that engage consumers.

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Moreover, UGC also builds brand trust and favourable perceptions among customers, which are the key determinants of online purchasing decisions (Konuk, 2021; Kumar et al., 2021). Purchasing decisions can be fostered through the consistent publication of brand-related symbols and imagery on Instagram.

In consonance with Kusumasondjaja and Tjiptono's (2019, p. 20) recommendation that future research explores the role of "features on Instagram such as the number of 'loves' and comments may also be examined during buying of products", this research explores features that generate symbolic content and their influence on fashion buying behaviour. This study expands beyond traditional engagement metrics to comprehend how electronic symbolic content (e-semiotic) influences aspects of consumer buying behaviour. Gurzki et al. (2019) pointed out fashion's rich symbolic texture, which positions it as an ideal category in which to decode the intricate semiotics of luxury. Barnham (2019) suggested that the transition from sign to meaning remains inadequately explored; therefore, this study examines how consumers' symbolic interactions on Instagram impact their purchase decisions of luxury fashion brands.

Mingers and Willcocks (2017) explored the interactions between technology and semiotics to understand the generation and interpretation of signs, which underlines the need for a comprehensive exploration of how consumers' symbolic and textual interactions with each other and brands sculpt consumer-brand relationships, especially given the symbolic nature of luxury brands (Robertson et al., 2022). Therefore, in spotlighting the e-semiotics of luxury fashion brands and their subsequent impact on consumer behaviour, this research endeavours to address a gap in understanding of the role of the dynamics of e-semiotics in consumers' buying behaviour. Bridging this gap not only offers theoretical advancements but also practical implications.

Research question: How do the dynamics of e-semiotics on Instagram influence consumer buying behaviours for luxury fashion brands?

2. Literature review

The field of semiotics, originating from the Greek words "*semeio*" (sign) and "*tikos*" (interpreter), was introduced by De Saussure (1916). De Saussure presented two key concepts of semiotic theory: the sign, which consists of the signifier (the form) and the signified (the concept it represents). De Saussure emphasized their arbitrary relationship, which is established through social convention. A sign conveys meaning through the integration of the signifier and the signified (Shukla et al., 2023). Saussure also indicated that it was important to understand how signs relate in sequences and in mental associations. Brands use logos, symbols, and emojis on platforms to construct brand identity (Costello & Taylor, 2019) and influence perceptions (Freire, 2014). Customers create and share emojis and signs that evoke emotional responses. Brands can effectively guide consumer behaviour through strategic symbol placement. Moreover, Ko et al. (2019) stated that brands often utilize signs to denote exclusivity and luxury that influence consumer desires and purchasing behaviours.

"Symbolic interactionism theory assumes that people respond to elements of their environments according to the subjective meanings they attach to those elements, such as meanings being created and modified through social interaction involving symbolic communication with other people" (Nickerson, 2023, Para. 1). In this research, e-semiotics refers to the digital creation, exchange, and interpretation of signs and symbols on Instagram's brand pages. Brands use visual and textual elements, such as logos, hashtags, and emojis, to shape brand perceptions and drive consumer buying behaviour.

On Instagram, symbols, such as brand-specific hashtags, engage users and potentially drive sales (Giakoumaki & Kreppa, 2020). Instagram is an ideal platform for exploring e-semiotics because of its focus on high-quality visual content. The functionalities of Instagram include zooming, panning, creating, and sharing symbols with text, and colorizing. Instagram allows for the creation, sharing, and manipulation

of images and videos that represent brand-related signs and symbols, which facilitate symbolic interaction between customers, and between customers and brands (Colliander & Marder, 2018; Xue et al., 2023; Giakoumaki & Kreppa, 2020). Given the symbolic nature of luxury brands, Instagram serves as a powerful tool for engaging customers and influencing their purchasing behaviour through the interpretation of visual content.

Luxury brands represent sophistication and exclusivity; they offer more than monetary value because they provide symbolic meaning (Aaker, 1997), which is based on a symbolic social interaction and interpretation process in a specific context. Vickers and Athwal et al. (2019) stated that luxury brands leverage high levels of symbolic interactionism and craft a desired self-image for the consumer. The name or logo of a luxury brand is inherently symbolic and replete with symbolic meanings that draw potential consumers (Cesareo et al., 2023).

Existing research on semiotics and brands includes studies on how semiotic elements affect brand perception and consumer behaviour. For example, Arnold et al. (2001) explored institutional symbols in advertising and Plakoyiannaki et al. (2022) studied the visual consumption experiences of customers. These studies employed semiotic concepts to understand outcomes like economic action, brand value, and consumer reactions. Other studies examined the impact of storytelling on luxury brand success (Freire, 2014), cultural nuances in symbolic advertising (Oswald, 2020), or provided a comprehensive view of the complex relationships between semiotics and brand perception among customers (Athwal et al., 2019; Giakoumaki & Kreppa, 2020). However, there is a lack of understanding of the role of symbolic interactionism in shaping consumer behaviour in the context of luxury brand pages on Instagram.

This study employs semiotic theory and symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework to explore how e-semiotics on Instagram influence consumer buying behaviours for luxury fashion brands. Both these theories provide a deep understanding of the complex interplay of signs, symbols, and meanings that permeate the digital landscape of brand-related e-semiotics on Instagram. According to Shoenberger et al. (2020), in semiotics, the signifier (such as images, videos, captions, and emojis) and the signified (the meanings these elements evoke) work together to convey luxury brand messages; however, this study extends this view by exploring how symbolic interactions develop luxury brand meanings that impact consumer buying behaviour. Instagram is rich in visual content and signifiers, which are interpreted by users to form meaningful luxury concepts on the basis of symbolic interaction (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

Instagram users create symbols that resonate with other consumers on a personal level; these symbols influence consumers' perceptions and self-concept of luxury brands (Ekinci et al., 2013). These symbols, which align with Peirce's (1931) concepts of icon, index, and symbol, interact with consumers' self-identity, thus reflecting the dynamic interplay of the 'I' and the 'Me' within symbolic interactionism theory (Ekinci et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2021). Symbolic interactionism theory suggests that these symbolic interpretations of luxury are influenced by social interactions that shape how images posted by luxury brands are seen, that is, the images are perceived as more than just visuals and evoke a symbolic response, and they become symbols of status or aspiration to buy a product (Shoenberger et al., 2020; Stubb & Colliander, 2019). Furthermore, visuals that convey symbolic language on Instagram encourage customers to generate more content through the use of other options on Instagram, such as captions, comments, and hashtag. Brands craft and convey symbolic messages to customers to engage them in visual communication, with the aim that customers analyze these symbolic elements to uncover deeper meanings (Peirce, 1931). Kim and Johnson (2016) indicated that symbolic interactionism theory highlights how meanings evolve through communication.

3. Research methodology

A social constructionist epistemological perspective was taken for

this research because this perspective aligns harmoniously with the theories of symbolic interactionism and semiotics. Social constructionists believe that realities are formed through our interactions with, and interpretations of, the world around us. This view indicates that subjective interpretations of brand-related symbols are instrumental in shaping societal constructs of luxury brands. This stance parallels with the tenets of symbolic interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015), where individuals respond to symbolic elements, such as brand logos, of their environments based on the subjective meanings they attach to those elements (Bowcher, 2018). Similarly, in semiotics, signs are decoded

based on personal, social, and cultural contexts (Bowcher, 2018), with meanings constructed in relation to the viewer's perspective and symbolic perception, for example, of a brand's logo (Zlatev, 2018). Therefore, a socially constructed view of consumer behaviour in this research refers to understanding consumers' symbolic interactions on Instagram that impact their buying behaviour.

Fig. 1 summarizes the research process of this study. The process began with the identification of the research How do the dynamics of e-semiotics on Instagram influence consumer buying behaviours for luxury fashion brands? Fig. 1 outlines the data collection stages. In Study 1,

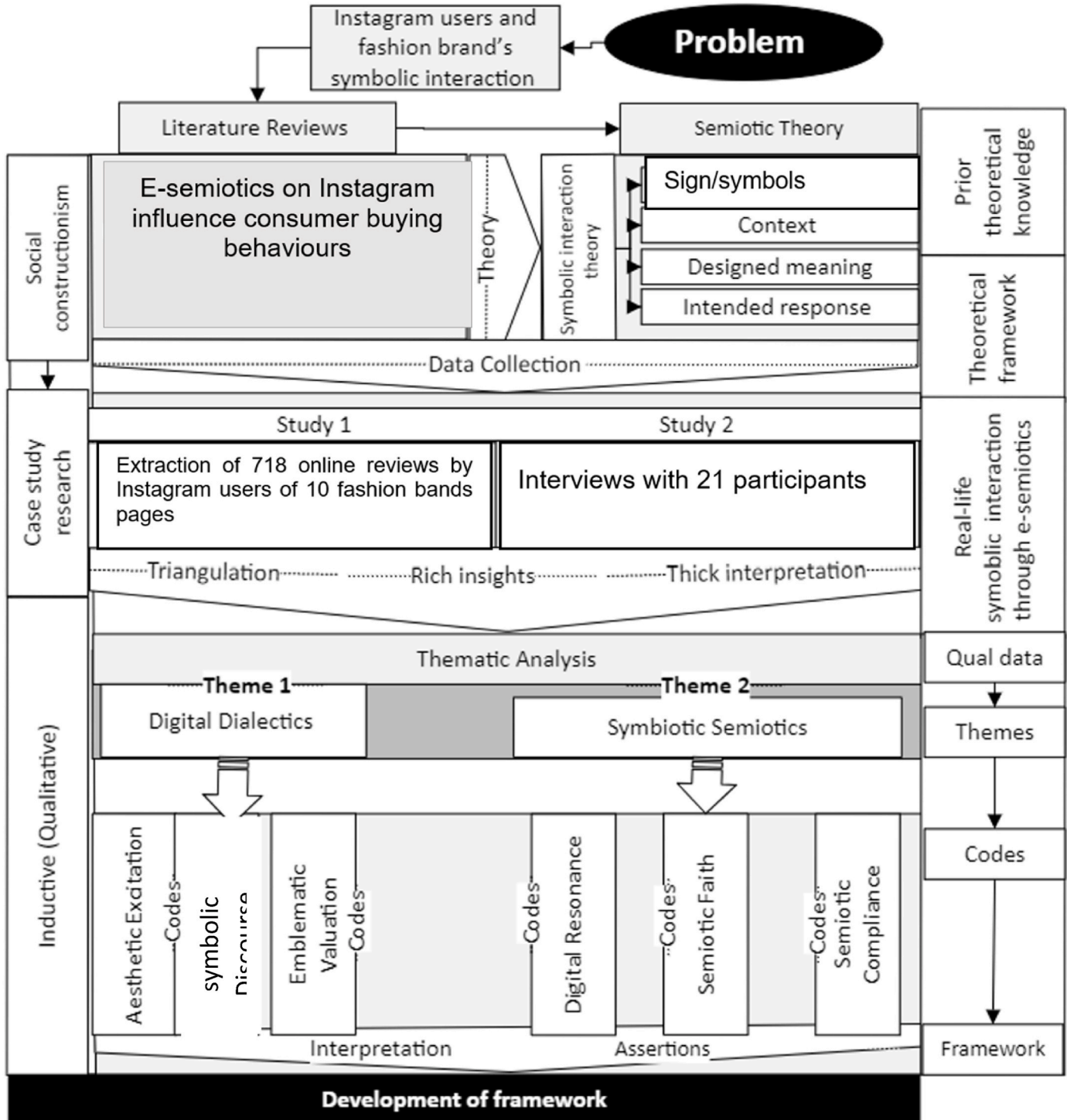


Fig. 1. Summary of research process.

data were collected from 718 online reviews of 10 luxury fashion brand pages on Instagram as of February 18, 2023 (Table 1). The 10 brands were selected on the basis of four crucial metrics indicative of their impact and presence on Instagram: the number of posts, followers, followings, and viral reels. Post-rigorous filtration, 34 reviews were subjected to detailed analysis. In Study 2, data were gathered from 21 semi-structured interviews with users engaged with luxury fashion brands on Instagram. An analysis of the symbols and signs used in the online reviews of luxury fashion brands' Instagram pages provide insight into how consumers interpret and assign meaning to the brands they follow (Rathi et al., 2022; Djafarova & Fouts, 2022) and aids understanding of consumer brand engagement. Brands utilize Instagram to connect with consumers and establish a solid brand identity, which can trigger a symbolic response from consumers on the basis of their perceived self-identity (Nedra et al., 2019; Rathi et al., 2022). Consequently, the online reviews helped to identify the different dynamics of the brand-related e-semiotics, and the semi-structured interviews provided insights into how these dynamics impact consumer buying behaviour of luxury fashion brands.

After that, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of semiotics, Instagram engagement, and buying behaviour. Open-ended questions (interview questions are listed in Appendix 1) and specific probes were used to elicit rich qualitative data from 21 participants (demographic details are listed in Appendix 2). The participants were selected through snowball sampling with the help of one of the researcher's social networks. The selection criteria for the participants were: over 18 years of age, actively engaged with luxury fashion brands on Instagram, and willing to participate in discussions.

The research incorporated a socio-semiotic thematic analysis to interpret the e-semiotics discernible in the reviews of selected luxury fashion brands on Instagram. This research used the six steps of thematic

analysis introduced by Naeem et al. (2023). Christou (2024) suggested that artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to do thematic analysis; therefore, AI was used to pick the relevant quotations and keywords from the collected data. After using AI, manual thematic analysis was conducted to ensure the accuracy of the selected quotations and keywords. This process began with the identification of quotations and keywords in the context of this research, which was followed by a meticulous thematic analysis to discover key codes. Meaningful emojis, figures, and pictures were selectively incorporated into the initial phase of the analysis, and served as an effective sign system. Subsequently, codes were formulated based on semiotics and the chosen keywords. These codes were drawn from quotations extracted from the semi-structured interviews and online reviews on Instagram. These codes were then categorized into pertinent themes and interpreted within the framework of semiotic and symbolic interactionism theories. The socio-semiotic analysis aimed to elucidate how these "texts" construct realities (Nickerson, 2023). We examined how semiotic choices of cultural representations are conditioned by implicit choices related to their conditioning dimensions. Consequently, the socio-semiotic thematic analysis provided a nuanced perspective that unravelled the impact of e-semiotics on brand trust among Instagram users. A visual representation of the socio-semiotic thematic analysis process is illustrated in Fig. 2.

4. Findings and analysis

This section defines each code, furnishes instances from the primary data sources (i.e., Instagram reviews and semi-structured interviews), and contextualizes each component within the frameworks of symbolic interactionism and semiotic theory.

4.1. Major theme 1: digital dialectics

Digital dialectics captures the interplay of visual aesthetics, symbolic communication, and brand symbolism on Instagram, which have an impact on consumers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands. It underscores how e-semiotics, from visual appeal to emblematic values, impacts consumer buying behaviours on the basis of what a brand shared and what a customer replied in the context of symbolic meaning.

4.1.1. Code 1: Aesthetic excitation

This refers to the potent stimulation of the visual appeal provided by luxury fashion brands on Instagram. This visual energy establishes a dynamic environment that engrosses the viewer's attention, enhances symbolic interaction, and creates a compelling narrative around the brand's symbolic identity. Aesthetic excitation is the enthusiasm and energy generated by the visual components of a composition. The ability to craft visuals that draw the attention of viewers and make them want to read text, look at posters, and generally take notice is a key component of aesthetic excitation. It has also been argued that Instagram facilitates the creation of instant images and symbols which can be identified with hashtags. Instagram users' visual interactions with brands occur in the form of symbolic signs, pictures, and emojis, which are later related to luxury brands.

"I do not like the collection. Painted dots on building could not be a nice art as I could not figure out the inspiration and purpose behind this concept 🤔🤔" (BA5, Instagram review, January 19, 2023). This is one review of an artwork (painted dots and handbags) on a building done by Louis Vuitton. Many Instagram followers of this brand were frustrated and shared embarrassment, oops, and disgusting emojis that were liked by 219 people: "Not a creative thought 🤔🤔🤔🤔"; "Terrible #louisvuitton 🤔🤔🤔🤔"; "Simply Ugly 🤔🤔🤔🤔"; "No 🤔🤔🤔" (BA5, Instagram review, January 26, 2023). Similarly, some respondents shared crying, disliking, shame, disgusting, and disapproval emojis in response to Louis Vuitton's visual because as brand lovers they found no

Table 1
Selected luxury fashion brands on Instagram.

Luxury fashion brand	Posts on Instagram	Followers on Instagram (in millions)	Total number of followings	Viral reel (total views, likes, and comments)
Nike (B1)	1075	27.5	150	35.5 million views, 1.3 million likes, and 8.87 thousand comments
Adidas (B2)	908	27.1	352	85.6 million views, 313 thousand likes, and 3.7 thousand comments
Gucci (B3)	9371	50.9	5	32.3 million views, 104 thousand likes, and 734 comments
Dior (B4)	10413	43.3	293	65.1 million views, 691 thousand likes, and 29.3 thousand comments
Louis Vuitton (B5)	6807	51.8	7	77.3 million views, 1.5 million likes, and 2158 comments
Zara (B6)	4036	56.8	90	14 million, 425 thousand likes, 1404 comments
Chanel (B7)	5326	54.8	3	10.6 million, 54.8 thousand likes, and 258 comments
Prada (B8)	7714	31.6	7	40.7 million, 47.9 thousand likes, 180 comments
Versace (B9)	7132	28.5	2	9.2 million, 502 thousand likes, 3437 comments
Burberry (B10)	34	20.0	1	665 thousand, 16.2 thousand likes, 257 comments

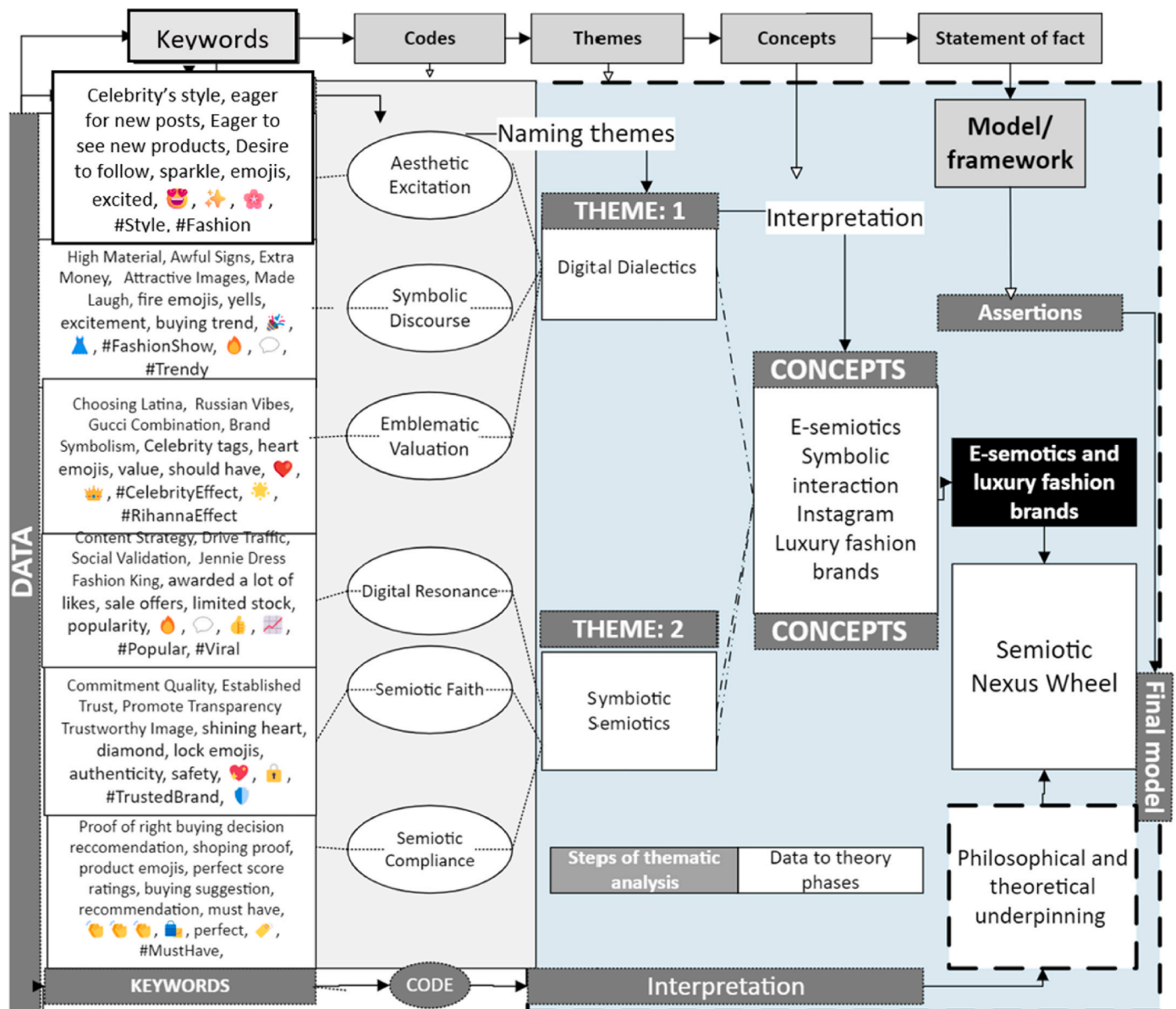


Fig. 2. Systematic thematic analysis process to develop conceptual framework.

creativity, meaning, or usefulness in the shared visual.

Several expensive brands sponsored athletes with a disability and shared pictures of them wearing brand logos to convey the message to their followers that brands are taking social responsibility and improving the lives of people who are special. A review stated, "that's why I love you because you are inspiring us by doing this act 🙌🏻" (BA1, Instagram review, January 28, 2023). This post used visuals to express that brand followers feel pride in the socially responsible actions of their dream brand.

A consumer shared a frustration/rage emoji in relation to a shoes image posted by adidas, "that is actually what happened to adidas product in real because they are terrible and having poor quality😡😡" (BA2, Instagram review, January 23, 2023). This message was posted against the adidas Alphaedge 4D; the intended purpose of this ad was to show how liquid, light, and oxygen are used to craft a high-performance luxury pair of shoes (see the image in Appendix 3).

It can be argued that shared visuals generate engagement of consumers as they express their thoughts about the usefulness of the visuals for them in relation to their perceptions of a brand's identity.

4.1.2. Code 2: Symbolic discourse

Symbolic discourse pertains to the exchange and negotiation of meanings between users and luxury fashion brands using symbolic signs and digital expressions (e.g., emojis and hashtags) on Instagram. This interaction involves the creation and exchange of brand-related content, such as brand advertisements, hashtags, stickers, filters, and augmented reality features on Instagram. This dialogue cultivates a shared understanding and interpretation of a brand's identity and values, which are based both on what a brand shares and what customers understand. An examination of e-semiotic interactions can reveal the significance and value that people attribute to their favourite luxury fashion brands on Instagram. For example, "a pair for my wife (👉🏻) is coming 🙌🏻" (BA1, Instagram review, January 28, 2023). This post was liked by 896 people; it has meanings displayed through "giving hands up" and other symbols that express how this brand lover congratulated the brand (Nike) on the shoes and was excited by them. On the other hand, a negative review was shared, "I bought your shoes at Vomero Nike that caused me a serious injury then I stopped using it and I recovered my feet. But when I again tried it then it caused injury again that means it has low standard material so, please tell me solution 😞" (BA1, Instagram review, January 27, 2023). This

review showed that the pair of shoes had no value to the brand user who was expecting a solution from the brand, especially because they had endured low product quality. “I used Nike shoes but believe me they are offering high quality material that’s why I always complain on its official page 🤔 😞” (P5, semi-structured interview). “Awful 🤔 🤔 🤔”; “Extra dots = extra money 🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔” LV is just now 🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔” (BA5, Instagram review, January 17, 2023). “🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔” and “Just shit 🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔 🤔” (BA2, Instagram review, January 28, 2023).

Signs, such as emojis, along with comments reflect how consumers react to the advertisements of brands. The meanings and values associated with luxury fashion brands are constructed through enjoyable e-semiotic interactions between users and brands that are expressed using various Instagram features that encourage engagement.

4.1.3. Code 3: Emblematic valuation

Emblematic valuation delineates how consumers associate subjective emotions and meanings to brand-associated symbols on Instagram. These emblematic elements, which include symbols, signs, photos, and emojis, are pivotal in shaping the brand’s identity. However, these symbolic elements predominantly capture users’ post-consumption sentiments rather than their purchase motivations. For instance, comments such as “thank you for choosing a Latina girl of my country for your product ad 🇵🇷 🇵🇷 🇵🇷” (BA5, Instagram review, January 16, 2023) and “My favourite team is Argentina 🇦🇷 ... Leo Messi 🇦🇷 who wears my favourite brand jersey” (BA2, Instagram review, December 11, 2022) highlight an appreciation of brand symbolism and representation. However, while these comments showcase a deep emotional connection, the direct correlation between these sentiments and purchase behaviours remains less explored.

Another facet of emblematic valuation in the context of Instagram is the cultural and emotional value users place on engagement metrics. While a user’s comment, “Russian vibes, style, and Gucci, O my God what a combination 🇷🇺” (BA3, Instagram review, July 13, 2022), received significant likes, this does not explicitly quantify its influence on purchase decisions. The association between high engagement and social validation is clear, as shown by comments such as “🇷🇺 🇷🇺 thank u Prada 🇷🇺 ❤️ for selecting my #winmetawin from my country 🇷🇺 🇷🇺” (BA8, Instagram review, January 11, 2023). However, a more concrete linkage between these emblematic valuations and actual purchase decisions is warranted to strengthen the findings. It is not just about users’ perceptions of symbols, but, more critically, how these symbols influence future purchase decisions. While emblematic valuation offers a rich lens into the influence of a brand’s symbolism on Instagram, its direct impact on purchasing behaviours requires more concrete evidence to fully elucidate its significance.

4.2. Major theme 2: symbiotic semiotics

This theme emphasizes the mutualistic nature of semiotic elements (signs, symbols, and meanings) and how together they create a vibrant and coherent digital narrative to influence the buying behaviour of customers.

4.2.1. Code 1: Digital resonance

The code ‘digital resonance’ captures the role of Instagram as a vibrantly engaging platform for the fashion industry, where brands and followers mutually influence each other through visual and semiotic exchanges. The interactive nature of the platform allows for a resonance of ideas, symbols, and aesthetics, which facilitate an in-depth understanding of an audience’s preferences and enhance brand recognition. Instagram’s interactive features make it an effective tool for brands to engage with customers and motivate them to share brand-related symbols, signs, and emojis. “On Instagram, I find likes, comments, and shares, provides valuable feedback for luxury fashion brands about the popularity of their content and what resonates with their audience” (P13, semi-structured

interview). It is important to look beyond the number of followers and likes for luxury fashion brands on Instagram and focus on how a luxury fashion brand’s audience engages with its content. As a marketer, “I can assure you that by monitoring the digital resonance metrics, luxury fashion brands can tailor their content strategy to increase their reach and visibility on the platform” (P21, semi-structured interview). For example, if a luxury fashion brand notices that posts featuring models wearing the brand’s clothing receive more engagement, then it might choose to focus more on creating such content through the official Instagram page. “I think luxury fashion brands can use Instagram to drive traffic to their website and increase sales by including links to products in their posts, and encouraging their followers to engage with their content by asking questions, running contests, or creating polls” (P11, semi-structured interview). This comment indicates that efforts are required from marketers to divert traffic to generate sales from digital resonance.

By studying the e-semiotics of digital resonance, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how people use the platform, how they interpret and assign meaning to engagement, and how these meanings change over time. “The number of likes that a post receives can be seen as a symbol of popularity, success, or social validation that shows followers are really engaged with luxury fashion brands using Instagram” (P3, semi-structured interview).

Followers of luxury fashion brands share emojis and short messages to show they are associated and to appreciate and validate content that includes their favourite celebrity’s 3D pictures on luxury fashion brands’ pages; the content resonance and endorsement of the celebrities of that brand could lead to a purchase decision. “That’s why I am here to see this 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷”; “Jennie dress 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷”; “Kwon Ji-yong is the fashion king 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷”; “@jennierubyjane global fashion Icon, perfect selection 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷” (BA7, Instagram review, December 19, 2022).

4.2.2. Code 2: Semiotic faith

The code semiotic faith reflects the cultivation of trust in luxury fashion brands through e-semiotics on Instagram. Trust, in this context, transcends traditional parameters like product quality and is based on the realm of shared semiotics (symbols, signs, visual elements) and their associated meanings. Faith is generated from meaningful e-semiotic interactions that significantly contribute to a brand’s image. These interactions can enhance a shopping experience and can increase customer engagement and trust in luxury fashion brands, as customers can make informed decisions about their purchases. “I noticed Instagram luxury fashion brands’ pages engaging customers to share their experiences, such as product reviews or photos; luxury fashion brands can show that they value their customers’ opinions and feedback. This can also help build trust with potential customers, as they can see the brand’s products being used and loved by real people” (P4, semi-structured interview). “I want to work with Prada someday 🇵🇷 🇵🇷, Prada is all time favourite ❤️ 🇵🇷 🇵🇷” (B8, Instagram review February 15, 2023). “This outfit best fits for the needs of NCTzen 🇵🇷” (B8, Instagram review February 04, 2023). “I really like Gucci as they monitor online conversations and respond to customer feedback. Many times, I saw Instagram address negative experiences, which builds customer trust” (P10, semi-structured interview). Luxury fashion brands use e-semiotics to create a strong sense of community and connection with their customers, such as through social media or online forums. It can be argued that the exchange of e-semiotics between Instagram users and luxury fashion brands can contribute to the development of brand trust by creating a unique customer experience through virtual try-on features and augmented reality.

By fostering an inclusive, supportive, and interactive community, a luxury fashion brand can create a strong sense of trust and loyalty among its customers. “My brand has maintained its unwavering commitment to quality and excellence. They have consistently offered the best products at discounted prices through various sale events 🇰🇷 🇰🇷 🇰🇷” (BA9, Instagram review, January 13, 2022). “We want sana (celebrity for ad)

please 💖💖💖💖💖💖💖💖, ♥ love it ♥" (B8, Instagram review, January 01, 2023); the sharing of the love and fire signs in this review builds the trust of customer in the luxury meaning of the brand, which could lead to a purchase decision for that brand. "I observed that by responding to fashion lovers on Instagram, luxury fashion brands can better understand their audience's needs and preferences, build a strong community, and establish brand trust and engagement" (P15, semi-structured interview).

4.2.3. Code 3: Semiotic compliance

Semiotic compliance refers to the notion of a user's fulfilment or social agreement with the aesthetic and symbolic values portrayed by the brands or influencers they follow, which leads them to comply with these values in their purchase decisions. Semiotic compliance encapsulates the idea that Instagram, as a fashion-focused platform, is instrumental in shaping and reinforcing these symbolic interactions that ultimately influence purchasing behaviours. Instagram pages are a go-to for fashion lovers and followers. When brands and celebrities post a new look, Instagram users usually love to follow and buy the products. For example, "Park Jimin is perfect as always that's why I followed his fashion and buy similar products 💖💖💖💖, #DIOR #JIMIN" (BA4, Instagram review, January 13, 2022). Similarly, another fashion lover shared the view, "my queen Bella, I really love your fashion that's why I am here to follow your new look and buy the same within no time 😍😍😍" (BA9, Instagram review, March 18, 2022). "It's all about emotions, every piece of this fashion show is worth to see, buy and try ♥💖" (BA8, Instagram review, March 18, 2022). Instagram influencers and luxury fashion brands often use Instagram to showcase their products, which makes it easier for users to discover and purchase new clothing items. For example, "Keep killing it with your style, I can't wait to see what's next so I can buy too! 💖💖💖" (BA6, Instagram review, June 12, 2022). "Need 😍, I owned one because of Win 😍♥, 😍😍😍 perfect, Divine ✨♥♥" (B8, Instagram review, January 22, 2023). "Shakira is always so chic and sophisticated, and I admire the way she mixes and matches different pieces to create stunning outfits. Every time she posts a new look on Instagram, I find myself wanting to emulate her style and buy the same" (P14, semi-structured interview). "😍😍 wish we could've been there!!, 😍!! can't wait ♥♥♥♥♥, love u Niki ♥" (B1, Instagram review, November 26, 2022).

Instagram also provides a platform for users to share their own fashion choices and provide recommendations to others, which further shapes fashion trends and buying habits. Instagram also allows real-time communication between buyers and sellers, which makes it a convenient platform for engaging and increasing fashion purchases.

"Ever since the brand introduced those symbolic dove emojis 🕊, it resonates with peace and love. Just ordered their latest collection because it feels so positive and aligned with my values 🕊️" (P8, semi-structured interview). The brand's use of the dove emoji (e-semiotics) resonates with users on an emotional level; it influences their perception of the brand's values and drives their purchasing decisions. "Their use of the globe emoji 🌐 with every sustainable product really speaks volumes. I know where my next purchase is from!" (P3, semi-structured interview). The brand's consistent use of the globe emoji highlights their commitment to sustainability, which impacts consumer perception and motivates environmentally conscious purchasing. "Their campaign #LoveYourself 💖 has such an empowering message. Saw their posts, felt inspired, and bought the featured dress!" (P1, semi-structured interview). The combination of a powerful hashtag and the heart emoji signals a strong positive and empowering message that influences perception and is a catalyst for a purchase. "The vibrant colors and the sunshine emoji ☀ in their posts give me summer vibes. I couldn't resist and got the entire summer collection!" (P4, semi-structured interview). The brand's use of emojis and visuals evokes strong seasonal associations that impact consumers' perceptions of the brand's offerings and drive season-specific purchases. "The brand's consistent use of the diamond emoji 💎 makes me associate luxury and

exclusivity with them. Just treat me to their limited-edition bag" (B1, Instagram review, August 1, 2022). The repeated use of the diamond emoji reinforces luxury perceptions, driving purchases from consumers seeking exclusivity. "Every post with a heart-eyes emoji 😍 from them guarantees it's a must-have. Ordered the latest pair of shoes they showcased!" (B3, Instagram review, December 14, 2022). The brand's strategic use of the heart-eyes emoji signals standout products, which affects consumers' perceptions of the desirability of products and influences their purchase decisions. "Their use of the recycling emoji ♻ with certain products made me realize their sustainable efforts. Proud to support such brands; just bought their eco-friendly jacket" (P11, semi-structured interview). Through e-semiotics, a brand can communicate its sustainability efforts, thereby influencing environmentally aware consumers' perceptions and purchase behaviours.

5. Discussion

Social media, particularly platforms like Instagram, have become arenas for luxury fashion brands to engage in aesthetic excitation, symbolic discourse, and emblematic valuation to influence consumer behaviours (Mandler et al., 2020; Athwal et al., 2019). The dynamics of e-semiotics on Instagram undeniably influence consumer buying behaviours. The visual appeal and emblematic valuation of brands like Louis Vuitton or Prada on Instagram can sway consumer opinions and sentiments (Bazi et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2021). However, complexity lies in understanding the nuanced relationships between visual stimuli, symbolic interpretations, and actual purchase motivations. This research introduces the Semiotic Nexus Wheel (Fig. 3), which incorporates specific elements from semiotic theory and symbolic interactionism theory. The model explains consumers' symbolic interactions and decision-making processes in the context of luxury fashion brands on Instagram.

The Semiotic Nexus Wheel model (Fig. 3) portrays the intricate relationships between consumers and luxury fashion brands on the Instagram platform. It is built on the foundation of semiotic theory and symbolic interactionism to illustrate the multilayered process of consumer engagement with, and response to, brand communications. This conceptual model explains how interactions in the digital field with elements such as visual aesthetics, symbol exchange, and symbolism of the brand contribute to the consumer experience and influence purchasing behaviour. The conceptual model breaks down consumer-brand interaction into initial aesthetic appeal, symbolic interaction that leads to mutual meaning, and emblematic interaction where the symbolic matter becomes politically and emotionally meaningful.

The outermost layer addresses the foundational elements of semiotic theory and shows the process of interaction of signifier and signified. Next, the second layer details consumer reactions through aesthetic excitation, symbolic discourse, and emblematic valuation. The third layer represents consumer responses: sensory excitement, visual appeal, brand narrative, narrative symbols, and symbolic iconography. The penultimate layer encompasses semiotic faith, emblematic valuation, and digital resonance, which signal the transition to decision making.

The dynamics of e-semiotics on Instagram, namely aesthetic excitation, symbolic discourse, emblematic valuation, digital resonance, semiotic faith, and semiotic compliance, intricately develop the fabric of consumer buying behaviours for luxury fashion brands. Aesthetic excitation, manifested through visually appealing content, captures the attention of the customer and drives them to delve deeper into brand narratives through an exchange of the most exciting signs and symbols.

Aesthetic excitation is augmented by symbolic discourse, where brands employ symbolic fashion iconography to communicate their ethos and heritage, which fosters a deep symbolic connection through an exchange of semiotics between customers and brands. Therefore, this stage creates an emotional connection between customers and brands. Emblematic valuation places value on symbols that are associated with the brand's identity and engage consumers' emotions, which lead

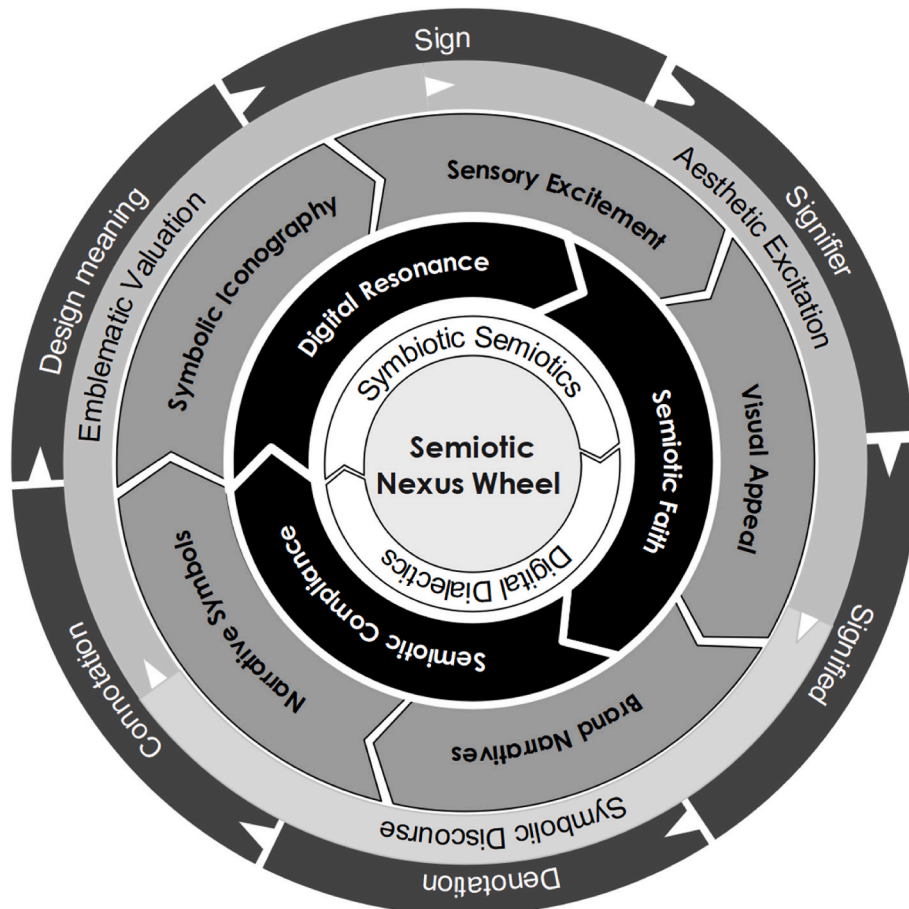


Fig. 3. Semiotic Nexus Wheel.

consumers to covet tokens of luxury and prestige (Le Roux et al., 2016). Once consumers are drawn in, digital resonance amplifies the message, which is based on visualization of the brand through symbols; Lee and Hsieh (2022) stated that this is achieved through users' emotional engagement that enhances a brand's symbolic visibility, such as sharing love signs that show a customer's liking of a brand.

The next identified element is semiotic faith, which is based on the types of symbols shared and how these symbols are understood and trusted by customers; for example, the lock emoji shows that a customer will stick to that brand and a diamond emoji shows that this product is one of best choices. Semiotic faith fosters brand loyalty that can ensure repeated patronage (Rindell & Santos, 2021). Semiotic faith is the emotional trust of the customer, which is based on symbolic signs that convey meaning; the trust a customer shows through signs leads to them think about a purchase decision, which is called semiotic compliance. Semiotic compliance propels consumers to take a purchase decision through excitement, semiotic engagement, symbolic meaning and semiotic faith. Liu et al. (2021) stated that shopping proof and customer endorsement can lead to purchase decisions, for example, shopping carts as signs and sharing a buying experience can trigger a purchase decision that is based on a customer's emotional attachment to a brand and the exchange of symbolic interaction on Instagram.

5.1. Dynamics of e-semiotics and purchase behaviour

The dynamics of e-semiotics on Instagram play a significant role in influencing consumer purchase behaviours by creating various visual and symbolic impressions and interactions. Table 2 shows how diverse semiotic dynamics influence consumers' choices in the field of luxury fashion on Instagram. Table 3 provides interview comments for each

type of symbolic interaction, the key signs and symbols used, such as emojis and hashtags, and their impact on purchase behaviour. Instagram users are highly sympathetic to visual and symbolic cues; these cues influence users' engagement and choices on the digital stage.

Signs and symbols indicating "Visual appeal, style", such as 😊 and 😍, appeal to an attractive aesthetic, which develops consumers' excitement to buy a brand because they desire to imitate celebrities in terms of the styles they wear. "Emojis, hashtags, captions", like 📸 and #FashionShow, indicate general excitement and inclusion, and make consumers want to join trending fashion dialogues to keep up with the fashion trend. "Celebrity endorsements", including symbols such as ❤️ and #RihannaEffect, elevate products' status and connect the customer with social status, as fans' "must-have" items increase the items' desirability. Moreover, "Social media interactions, follower engagement" with symbols like 🔄 mean to go with the flow, and #Viral, promotes the popularity and credibility of a brand through the social proof of other social media users (Naeem & Ozuem, 2022). "Trust, brand loyalty" symbols, such as 🤝, show how much people love and trust a brand, which can be converted to purchase decisions. "Purchasing actions, consumer testimonials" are composed of positive and encouraging emojis, such as 🙌 and 🎉, which signal that friends approve of the items being bought, which influences purchase decisions.

It has been identified that sensory excitement and visual appeal are the major two factors that initiate a combination of textual and symbolic interaction; both these both factors can be likened to the Saussurean concept of the signifier, which represents the material form of a sign as perceived through our senses (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). Brands harness this sensory stimulation of users to captivate consumers on platforms like Instagram. Furthermore, brand narratives and narrative symbols evoke the symbolic interactionism principle of meaning (Siuda

Table 2
Enhanced impact of e-semiotics on consumer buying behaviour for luxury fashion brands on Instagram.

E-semiotic dynamic	Evidence from primary data	Signs and symbols	Relevant emojis and signs	Explanation of impact on purchase decisions
Aesthetic excitation	"The sparkle, color emojis on Instagram, they really attract and make the fashion excited for me to buy (P12, Interview)	Visual appeal, style	💎, ✨, 🌟, #Style, #Fashion	Aesthetic elements on Instagram, such as style and visual appeal, captivate attention and create emotional engagement, which can lead to a desire to emulate celebrity style, thus influencing purchase decisions. Aesthetic elements mirror the style and visual need of Instagram to be used by users. Fashion-related hashtags and emojis attract attention and create emotional engagement in users, who also become aspiring
Symbolic discourse	"I can say some emojis like fire emojis, yells in the caption, I would automatically feel the excitement and want to be a part of that buying trend" (P7, Interview)	Emojis, hashtags, captions	🔥, 🗣️, #FashionShow,	Symbolic elements, like the hashtag and the emoji, represent a brand story or a motif in which users wish to insert themselves, they want to be a part of it. Customers want to purchase the same products as celebrities or desired items
Emblematic valuation	"Celebrity tags and heart emojis beside a product, creates value for me. It seems like something I should have that brand!" (P9, Interview)	Celebrity endorsements, product images	💖, 📸, #CelebrityEffect, ✨, #RihannaEffect	The endorsement of celebrities with signs and symbols has meaning and value, which affects perception and purchasing; the quality and desirability of the product have a value. Therefore, luxury products become signs of quality or desire, and when a celebrity's favourite is made known, fans also want to buy it
Digital resonance	"A post that is awarded a lot of likes, sale offers, limited stock, thumbs up, with popular or viral hashtags shows its popularity, which I can trust to buy" (P14, Interview)	Social media interactions, follower engagement	🔥, 💬, 👍, 📌, #Popular, #Viral	The resonance of brand content, such as a fire sign with offers and limited stock left with sales graph, increases brand visibility to encourage users to take advantage of offers, which increases consumer interaction and potential purchases
Semiotic faith	"I can say seeing the emojis like shining heart, diamond and lock emojis on posts reassures me of the authenticity and safety of the purchase" (P18, Interview)	Trust, brand loyalty	💖, 🔒, #TrustedBrand, 🛡️	Users trust and follow the fashion brand logo they love and the products. A brand's authenticity is transmitted through continuous sharing of brand logos and users' responses with lock, diamond or heart emojis, which show how much people love and trust the brand; this endorsement and brand loyalty convert to purchase decisions
Semiotic compliance	"I see some of the product emojis, some perfect score ratings, buying suggestion, recommendation celebrities, friends recommendation with shopping cart emojis, or lots of users saying must have or perfect one or awesome, with clapping emojis encouraged me that, I should buy it to keep up with the trend because it shows that its proof of right buying decision" (P15, Interview)	Purchasing actions, consumer testimonials	👏👏👏, 🛒, "perfect", 🙌, #MustHave	Compliance with the semiotic cues from brands, such as sharing proof of shopping, evidence of recommendations by favoured celebrities followed by users, directly influence users' purchasing decisions

et al., 2022), where individuals ascribe luxury brands' meanings to symbols based on social constructions. These narratives become the signified because customers endorse the luxury meaning through the relevant signs and symbols – the concepts prompted by visual stimuli (Siuda et al., 2022). Drawing from Peirce's Icon, Index, and Symbol model, symbolic iconography acts as an icon that represents luxury brands. This constructed image of a brand as luxury and prestige leads to digital resonance on Instagram, which can be related to Hall's idea of Code, where conventions help derive socially constructed meaning (Peterson, 2019). In this digital era, the 'code' is the cultural acceptance and development of social meaning which are value associated with virality and visibility on platforms like Instagram.

Digital resonance subsequently feeds into semiotic faith because the digital resonance of a brand has been developed by the brand and customer that mirrors the concept of connotation from semiotic theory (Peterson, 2019). Just as connotations provide secondary cultural meanings, semiotic faith encompasses the trust consumers place in the perceived authenticity and credibility of brands online because of the socially constructed symbolic meaning as luxury brand through the symbolic interaction of customers and brands. This faith then finds its counterpart in symbolic interactionism's thought process (Pracejus et al., 2006), where individuals internally reflect upon symbolic luxury meanings of fashion brands before acting to buy products. Semiotic compliance, where consumers align their behaviours with brand narratives and their own developed symbolic meanings, is reminiscent of

the "I" and "Me" from symbolic interactionism (Pracejus et al., 2006). The "Me" internalizes societal norms and expectations, in this case, the allure of luxury brands that would lead to consumer purchase decisions because, at this stage, the customer's own meaning is aligned with the brand meaning as luxury brand and because of this matching of meaning customers take a purchase decision. This entire process emphasizes the interconnectedness of semiotic theory and symbolic interactionism and illustrates how sensory stimuli and symbolic interpretations on platforms like Instagram profoundly influence consumer buying behaviours.

5.2. The role of social processes in interpretation and meaning of brand-related symbols in luxury fashion brands on Instagram

Instagram has redefined luxury fashion branding through visual appeal; it has created a unique space for aesthetic excitation. Through aesthetic excitation, typified by visuals and instant imagery, a luxury fashion brand immerses viewers in a dynamic narrative about the brand's identity (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). A brand employs captivating visuals, often interlaced with symbols, emojis, and hashtags, to foster interaction with consumers; consequently, that interaction builds a compelling narrative around the brand's identity (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). However, some semiotic responses can build a confusing image of the brand, for example, the use of emojis in reviews on Instagram, such as "😂😂", of Louis Vuitton's controversial artwork show-cases how aesthetics can engender both positive and negative responses;

these signs show a mismatch between the brand's shared meaning and the actual meaning developed by customers.

Symbolic discourse facilitates an exchange of meanings between users and brands using symbolic signs as social digital expressions of customers. Brands and consumers co-create meanings (Le Roux et al., 2016; Peterson, 2019), as evidenced by interactions surrounding luxury shoe brands like Niki and adidas. A brand and users negotiate the brand's values and identity through hashtags because hashtags specify meanings (Ekinici et al., 2013; Pentina et al., 2018) that could lead to development of a shared meaning of a brand. Emblematic valuation represents how consumers attribute emotions to brand symbols, which is about a brand's shared meaning and customers' symbolic response. It is not merely about direct purchase motivations but post-consumption sentiments (Cao et al., 2021). Emojis and comments, such as appreciation for brand representation with "👟👟😊", showcase deeply emotional and positive connections and the power of brand symbolism (Ordenes et al., 2019). However, this appreciation does not necessarily translate into direct purchase behaviours for all types of customer, but customers who develop a positive meaning can drive the purchase behaviour of other customers. For instance, a consumer expressing excitement about a shoe purchase with "👟👟" and "😊" or frustration with "😞" becomes part of a broader conversation where luxury brands and consumers co-create meaning based on both positive and negative emotions, which we refer to as emblematic valuation.

Emblematic valuation involves consumers associating subjective emotions and meanings with brand symbols, which is a major reason to buy a specific brand (Sarvasuo et al., 2022). Emblematic valuation provides insights into the influence of a brand's symbolism on purchase behaviour, but the transition from perception to purchasing behaviour is not explicitly clear (Ozuem et al., 2021). In essence, e-semiotics on Instagram, via aesthetic visuals, symbolic interactions, and emblematic associations, creates an intricate web of social influences on consumer behaviours, which is based on the wisdom of friends and the wisdom of the crowd (Naeem, 2020). However, Baudier et al. (2023) stated that the direct impact of social influence on actual purchasing decisions remains an area for deeper exploration.

5.3. The interplay of aesthetics, symbols, and valuation in luxury fashion brand engagement

In the digital realm of Instagram, luxury fashion brands employ a sophisticated blend of aesthetic excitation, symbolic discourse, and emblematic valuation; each of these factors plays a crucial role in influencing consumer buying behaviours. Aesthetic excitation, driven by the powerful visual stimuli offered by brands, is an initial stage of symbolic engagement that captivates attention and narrates a brand's identity. For instance, Louis Vuitton's artwork of painted dots on a building drew diverse reactions, which ranged from admiration to confusion (Kim & Johnson, 2016), but this confusion led brand lovers to symbolically defend the brand. Such visual energy not only garners attention but also incites interaction through emojis and comments, thus creating a digital dialogue around the brand's aesthetics (Colliander & Marder, 2018); therefore, the symbolic interaction of customers also triggers customers' interaction in the social clarification of brand meanings.

Symbolic discourse extends this dialogue and fosters an exchange of meanings using symbolic signs, emojis, and hashtags. Reviews like "a pair for my wife (👰) is coming 🥰😊" exemplify how brand narratives become intertwined with personal stories, which combine with brand meanings in a social context where it triggers social meaning mediated through emojis (Boerman, 2020; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

Emblematic valuation underscores how consumers assign emotional weight and symbolic judgement to brand symbols as social proof. Emojis, for instance, bridge gaps in linguistic expression. Emojis vividly capture sentiments as seen in "thank you for choosing a Latina girl of my

country for your product ad 🇵🇷👏😊", which shows a sense of affiliation with the brand that gives a sense of the locality and moral values of the brand; this sense of moral support might lead to purchases of the product (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017) because such emblematic associations resonate emotionally through a sense of social responsibility, but their direct correlation to purchasing behaviours remains a nuanced domain (Erkan & Evans, 2016). Although a comment like "Russian vibes, style, and Gucci, O my God what a combination 🥰" showcases engagement of the customer, who sees the brand through a specific sense of style combination, its influence on purchase decisions might be indirect and operate through the subtle dynamics of social validation and social affiliation (Bazi et al., 2020; Herzallah et al., 2022).

Together, these dynamics of e-semiotics on Instagram create a tapestry of sensory excitement, social application, visual appeal, and social narrative symbols, which effectively mould consumer buying behaviours of luxury fashion brands (Pentina et al., 2018). As such, luxury brands on Instagram seamlessly blend visual aesthetics, symbolic interactions, and emblematic values to create a rich tapestry that shapes consumer affiliation that leads to purchase decisions.

5.4. Deciphering consumer behaviours in relation to luxury fashion brands

The pervasive influence of social media on consumer behaviour concerning luxury fashion brands is underpinned by the dynamics of e-semiotics. These dynamics, named as digital resonance, semiotic faith, and semiotic compliance, play vital roles in driving consumer purchase decisions.

At the digital resonance stage, the virtual presentation and alignment between the brand's intended meaning and customers developed symbolic meaning are evident. In the realm of luxury fashion brands on social media, the importance of sensory excitement, visual appeal, brand narratives, narrative symbols, and symbolic iconography worked as emotional drive because of symbolic engagement of customers. Akar and Dalgic (2018) emphasized the significance of social networks in shaping online consumer purchase intentions and they suggested that visuals and textual narratives resonate with consumers' purchase decisions because of their emotional drive. Athwal et al. (2019) indicated that the digital presentation of brands develops a digital narrative that drives brand sales. Visually appealing narratives, which we refer to as digital resonance, create a deep connection between a brand and the consumer on the basis of the symbolic resemblance to customer engagement of the socially constructed meaning of luxury brand on social media.

Digital resonance is complemented by semiotic faith, where consumers believe in the authenticity of a luxury brand's messages. This semiotic faith contributes to semiotic compliance, where consumers not only believe but also act upon a brand's messages by engaging with the brand or even making purchase decisions. As Carter and Fuller (2015) stated that the brand authenticity as luxury meaning being developed through development of the semiotic faith. For instance, a heart emoji ❤️ may signify a user's approval of a luxury fashion item because the sign is being shared by the customer in the context of buying a product for a loved one, while comments with a fire emoji 🔥 can represent the perceived "hotness" or trendiness of a product, which strengthens the context. These micro-interactions, termed symbolic interactionism in this research, offer insights into how consumers imbibe meanings from brand communications (Le Roux et al., 2016) on Instagram through relating them to the social context.

Semiotic compliance is the final outcome of the symbolic interaction, which is the zenith of the e-semiotic process, that determines the consumer's purchase decision. Influencer posts, customer posts, and emojis, which are often complemented by emojis like the star-struck emoji 🌟 or the sparkling stars ✨, serve as powerful semiotic tools symbolizing the luxury meaning of a brand, which lead to a purchase decision.

Therefore, Instagram's role as an e-semiotic platform is as a platform of symbolic dance that creates and shares symbols to develop the luxury meanings of brands that shape consumer buying behaviours for luxury fashion brands.

6. Conclusion and contribution

This paper contributes to existing theoretical knowledge in several significant ways. It introduces understanding of customers' Semiotic Nexus Wheel within the realm of fashion marketing, specifically within the context of Instagram. The paper further deploys the joint application of symbolic interactionism and semiotic theory within consumer buying behaviour through incorporating customers' shared symbols and signs in a real context of luxury fashion brands. It highlights the intricate processes through which customers create, share, respond, interpret, and assign meaning to luxury brands through symbols they encounter in their interactions with brands on Instagram, which has features of symbolic interaction. Consequently, this research contributes theoretical insights in this field on the basis of these two theories. This study introduces the concept of semiotic compliance, a stage where consumers' purchasing decisions are influenced by their understanding and interpretation of a brand's symbols. It provides an innovative approach to understanding the role of aesthetics in customer decision-making processes through the development of a brand's symbolic meaning, which influences a customer's purchase decision. It emphasizes that aesthetics can influence initial customer engagement, emotional attachment, and the development of customer purchase behaviour towards brands. This theoretical contribution is particularly significant given the growing importance of visual communication in today's digital era, most specifically on Instagram.

From a practical perspective, this paper provides valuable insights for fashion marketers looking to optimize their social media symbolic strategies through understanding theoretical concepts of e-semiotics. Understanding the interplay between semiotic theory factors, such as signs, signification, interpretants, and objects, and social interaction theory factors, such as communication, roles, norms, and context, is important for marketers in the luxury fashion industry. Through an in-depth understanding of theoretical elements, such as signs (like the symbols and icons of luxury fashion brands) and signification, marketers can trigger symbolic interaction and craft meaningful brand narratives that resonate on a symbolic level with consumers. This, coupled with a deep understanding of social interactions in the context of luxury fashion on Instagram, allows for tailored communications that fit the brand roles and norms of their target fashion customers. The research findings indicate that such an approach can influence consumers' symbolic emotional attachment and purchase behaviours by creating a resonant brand identity that directly links with, and reflects, consumer values and desires. Engaging effectively with theoretical insights can improve practical insights by directing marketers to not only present a compelling brand image but also foster a symbolic interactive community to develop socially constructed meanings and values that are understood, developed, and shared by customers, which will ultimately enhance consumers' inclination to purchase.

7. Limitations and future directions

This paper delves into the nuances of e-semiotics and luxury fashion brands on Instagram; it anchors its findings within the frameworks of symbolic interactionism and semiotic theory, which is why the focus of this study was to understand the role of semiotic interaction in influencing customers' purchase decisions. However, it has been recognized that a lot of semiotics directly reflect the elements of brand love, but this research is limited to interaction and symbolism; therefore, future researchers could consider the emotional connections of customers, and apply [Sternberg's \(1986\)](#) Triangular Theory of Love to dissect the components of intimacy, passion, and commitment in the context of

sharing, creating, and developing the meaning of brand love on Instagram.

Moreover, this research is limited to exploring how e-symbolic interaction impacts customer buying behaviour, but future research can explore the flow of brand engagement and the flow of the buying process of the customer. Therefore, there is another theoretical avenue for future research in which [Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory \(1990\)](#) could illuminate the consumer journey through phases of pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. Researchers could analyze how consumers go through the buying process and the flow of consumers' sharing of symbolic brand content and the development of luxury brand meanings that could lead to purchasing decisions. By extending the theoretical framework to include these two theories, future researchers can explore the complex interplay between e-semiotics, consumer engagement, customer buying process and brand love within the expansive sphere of symbolic social interactions.

As this research is based on data extracted from Instagram pages of luxury brands, future researchers could benefit from including data from food and beverage, or travel pages. Additionally, future studies might investigate different social media platforms, including TikTok and Snapchat.

Additionally, future studies could also explore differences and similarities between social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement because [Naeem and Ozuem \(2021, 2022\)](#) stated that social brand engagement and consumer brand engagement differ in terms of factors behind them and in terms of level of engagement. This would allow a broader understanding of how e-semiotics operates across different digital platforms and influences user engagement, social brand engagement, and consumer brand engagement. Additionally, this research predominantly focused on the impact of e-semiotics dynamics in the context of purchasing decisions. Future studies could explore the role of hashtags in enhancing e-semiotic effects in the context of brand love, social engagement, and consumer engagement.

One primary constraint is the specific focus on the fashion sector through extracting data from online reviews of Instagram pages of luxury fashion brands. Another significant limitation of this research is that it is based on 21 semi-structured interviews. Future researchers could collect data from a large number of participants to generalize the results to test the developed model. Moreover, as social media platforms continue to evolve by integrating advanced features, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and AI-driven experiences, it becomes crucial to investigate how these technological advancements influence customer engagement through their use of these technologies to create, share, and develop meaning of symbolic communication. Furthermore, this research employed artificial intelligence (AI) for thematic analysis to identify keywords and quotations. These quotations and keywords were manually verified to ensure their relevance and accuracy, thus highlighting a potential area for further exploration, such as ways to use AI in theory development, in qualitative research, and reflection on theory development process. [Charmaz \(2006\)](#) emphasized the necessity of reflection in theory development to enhance the credibility of the theory. [Christou \(2024\)](#) proposed that AI could significantly aid in the development of theoretical constructs from qualitative data. So, a future avenue for methodological research could be to explore the role of AI theory development, which could provide deeper insights into the theory development and reflection process that could be linked back to the employed thematic analysis process.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Muhammad Naeem: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Wilson Ozuem:** Validation, Supervision. **Silvia Ranfagni:** Software, Resources. **Kerry Howell:** Methodology.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this manuscript, AI-assisted technology was employed specifically in selecting keywords and quotations from data. After using this AI, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the published article.

The authors would also like to acknowledge the use of ChatGPT in the development of this article. ChatGPT was strategically utilized to

refine and elevate the clarity of language and sentence structure. The authors have thoroughly reviewed and edited the entire manuscript and take full responsibility for the accuracy of the information presented.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendices.

Appendix 1: Semi structure interview questions

1. Could you please explain what usually attracts you on Instagram post of luxury fashion brand?
2. What types of types of emojis or specific symbols frequently gain your attention?
3. Could you please how do different symbols, such as logos or specific design elements, used by luxury fashion brands on Instagram exit you share the symbols or emojis?
4. Can you give an example of a post where the any specific types of emojis influenced your perception toward a brand and why did you get influenced?
5. Are there particular symbols or types of fashion related content evoking strong emotional responses from you and from you friend on Instagram? Please describe them.
6. How do these emotional responses in the form symbols and sings influence your perception, buying decision and relationship with the luxury fashion brand?
7. In what ways do the visual presentation of content either share by brand or Instagram users posts impact you're buying decisions and interest in luxury fashion products?
8. Can you recall a specific post that significantly enhanced your desire to learn more about or purchase a product?
9. How do you use the signs and symbols (emojis) to express the value of a luxury brand's products on Instagram?
10. Could you explain how symbolic (likes, comments, shares, emojis) interaction impact on the purchase decision on Instagram? Please elaborate.
11. Coul you please describe how does the symbolic interaction (likes, emojis, comments, shares) improve the customer trust and interest in the luxury fashion brand?

Appendix 2: Demographic information's of participation

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Occupation	Instagram usage Frequency
P1	22	Female	Student	Daily
P2	27	Male	Market	Daily
P3	34	Male	HR manager	Daily
P4	38	Female	Fashion Blogger	Daily
P5	29	Male	Graphic Designer	Daily
P6	42	Male	Retail Manager	Daily
P7	24	Male	Student	Daily
P8	31	Female	Entrepreneur	Daily
P9	27	Female	Fashion Designer	Daily
P10	34	Male	Photographer	Daily
P11	32	Male	Social Media Manager	Daily
P12	37	Male	Business Analyst	Multiple times in a day
P13	39	Female	Business manager	Multiple times in a day
P14	35	Female	Marketing manager	Multiple times in a day
P15	33	Male	PhD student	Multiple times in a day
P16	34	Female	PhD student	Multiple times in a day
P17	21	Male	Student	Multiple times in a day
P18	20	Male	Student	Multiple times in a day
P19	28	Male	Customer services office	Multiple times in a day
P20	30	Female	PhD student	Multiple times in a day
P21	27	Male	PhD student	Multiple times in a day

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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