

MASTER THESIS

**FAST FASHION CO-BRANDING
ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES:**

**A STUDY ON BRAND COMMUNICATION ON
INSTAGRAM**

MSc in Economics and Business Administration
Brand and Communications Management

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Abstract

Co-branding between fast fashion and luxury brands became a popular strategy. Parallelly, both types of brands increasingly include Instagram, one of key Social Networking Sites in fashion industry, in their branding efforts. Their contrasting nature and communication style led authors of this thesis to consider how fast fashion brand followers perceive impacted by collaboration with luxury partner content published on Instagram. Three theoretical perspectives were applied in studying their opinions linked to familiarity and expectations toward regular content and image of the brand created by it – brand associations, brand schemas and consumer-brand identification.

Exploratory study set within interpretivist research philosophy driven by inductive approach was designed to answer research question taking on consumer perspective. Within single case study of co-branding between fast fashion brand H&M and luxury brand Giambattista Valli qualitative methods were applied. Thematic Analysis of semi-structured interviews with H&M followers and Semiotic Analysis of content spread by H&M on Instagram due to collaboration were conducted.

Results show that brand followers mostly perceived the analyzed content as more luxury and not matching their expectations, leading to various reactions. In the moment of exposure, they associated H&M with traits incongruent with regular image, indicating short-term effect on their brand associations. Majority of respondents expressed lack of self-identification with H&M seen through analyzed visuals, however it did not entirely correlate with willingness to engage. The most differing opinions were found between highly loyal to H&M brand followers with rather negative evaluations and luxury consumers whose responses were rather positive.

To conclude, brand followers' perceptions and reactions have been mostly connected to the luxury side of the fast fashion co-branding content, with aesthetics being one of the main factors influencing their evaluations and engagement. The findings of this study indicate that Instagram is a useful tool for co-branding communication, however fast fashion managers should beware of meanings included in it in connection to expectations of different types of brand followers.

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List of Abbreviations

SNS Social Networking Site

SNSs Social Networking Sites

UGC User Generated Content

WoM Word-of-Mouth

eWoM Electronic Word-of-Mouth

CBI Consumer-Brand Identification

1. Introduction

In recent years various markets in the world faced challenges due to more competitive and fast-changing environment as well as more demanding consumers. One of business strategies which gained a lot of importance in responding to those events is co-branding being a form of a cooperation between two or more brands while double branding the products in order to leverage the assets of both brands (Blackett & Russell, 1999). This strategy became widely applied in various markets including fashion industry, which resulted in appearance of fast fashion co-branding joining fast fashion and luxury brands in an alliance (Shen et al., 2014). H&M has been recognized as pioneer in such initiatives by collaborating with Karl Lagerfeld making it the first luxury brand that partnered up with fast fashion brand (Shen et al., 2014). After the enormous success of its co-branded products other designer brands like Versace, Jimmy Choo, Marni and few more entered cooperation with H&M (Shen et al., 2014). Taking example from successful pioneer other fast fashion brands like Polish Reserved also applied this strategy making it more and more popular practice (Mróz-Gorgoń, 2016). The favorable outcome of fast fashion co-branding can be recognized as an interesting case as it is commonly known that both types of brands taking part in this kind of alliance differ in their characteristics, values, target and management including brand communication.

Increasing number of brands incorporate growing in importance Social Networking Site (SNS), Instagram, in their branding efforts as the answer for rising demand among consumers – nearly 90% of platform users follow at least one business account (Chen, 2020). Basing on Statista (2016a), 98% of global fashion brands are present on Instagram, being second (after automobile) industry most heavily using this platform. Therefore, whole spectrum of brands within fashion industry continuum may be encountered there, from fast fashion such as GAP to luxury like Louis Vuitton. Instagram, offering various tools, gives brands an opportunity to effectively communicate their identities through carefully designed brand-centered content. It is spread with no discrepancies across the SNS brand profile, form of company owned virtual brand community (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Communication practices of brands on SNSs are visibly divergent across different categories, due to the core differences in the characteristics and values they are supposed to transfer (Wang et al., 2018). At first glance, we observe that fast fashion brands pursue simple, product-related posts highlighting values such as affordability. Whereas content spread by luxury fashion brands one might describe as more refined, pursuing sense of exclusivity.

Based on the above-mentioned rising popularity of fast fashion co-branding and emergence of SNSs in fashion industry it led us to consider how fast fashion brand (host of the alliance) communicates and promotes collaboration with luxury brand across its community being radically diverse in brand characteristics and approach to communication. Due to interactive nature of Instagram we found it important to take on consumers perspective and investigate how brand community members perceive and react to such unusual event occurring within community they are part of. In order to provide holistic view on phenomena, this will be done with regard to possible brand intentions emerging from co-branding objectives. Best to our knowledge, no prior research addressed above considerations.

1.1. Problem Delimitation

For fast fashion brand one of benefits from allying with a luxury brand will be distinction from competitive brands in the same product category as well as shift toward more premium position in consumers minds, especially with regard to quality perceptions (Mróz-Gorgoń, 2016). At the same time, there may be a risk of bewilderment as co-branding being marketing strategy will inevitably impact communication and image of the brand familiar to its consumers (Mróz-Gorgoń, 2016). This is supported by Stankeviciute (2012) who suggests that in order to prevent luxury brand image dilution and maintain interest among audiences marketing efforts related to the alliance should follow guidelines of luxuriousness and incorporate luxury brand values along with most favorable associations of host brand. Oeppen and Jamal (2014) explain that image reinforcement goal of co-branding initiative will be achieved due to associations migration and therefore such alliance should emphasize the values which host attempts to absorb. Going further, Helmig et al. (2008) indicate that effective advertisements related to co-branding should emphasize functionality of product as well as quality and value overperforming regular offering. However, best to our knowledge, no research yet focused on investigation of co-branding communication strategies aiming at above goals within Instagram (nor other SNS) and consumers opinions towards them.

When designing pieces of brand communication across channels brand owners decide upon ways to increase brand equity - one of them is establishment and maintenance of desired brand associations (Keller, 2013, p. 219). Those refer to set of information linked to the brand held in minds of consumers, which demonstrate the way brand is perceived by them (Keller, 1993). Brand communication on SNSs (namely Facebook), disseminated by both firms and users, was proven to

have positive impact on overall Customer Based Brand Equity, including brand associations (Schivinski & Dąbrowski, 2016), what may point on channels efficiency in brand image creation. Not only may the message and its execution through various SNSs communication techniques differ across brands but also across various brand categories what may impact the communication effectiveness (Wang et al., 2018). Since fast fashion co-branding marketing activities should follow luxury guidelines and incorporate values of both brands, as described in previous paragraph, impact on the associations behind pieces of communication might be significant. Effect of such anomaly may be interesting to investigate as Sjödin and Törn (2006) suggested that consumers may interpret intended meanings differently because of established brand perceptions they possess. Similar issue was raised in the study by Koll and Von Wallpach (2014), which showed mismatch between intended and reflected brand associations of consumer goods and service brands, as well as explored its varying effect on consumer responses raised by individual preferences or external brand knowledge.

Schema Incongruity Theory by Mandler (1982) considering a match between piece of information and people expectations toward it suggests that depending on the level of mismatch reactions to such information may be either positive or negative. Previous studies on consumers responses to brand communication incongruity, more precisely ad-brand incongruity revealed inconsistent results, depending on familiarity with the brands (Lange & Dahlén, 2003) or incorporation of new brand values in the ads (Arbouh et al., 2018). Sjödin and Törn (2006) focused on brand schemas, while introducing concept of Brand Image Incongruity which explains that consumers evaluate each piece of brand communication with regard to established beliefs and associations of the brand in their minds. Considering SNSs context it might be crucial that communication matches the brand itself - as shown by Wang et al. (2018) incongruity occurring between brand and its Facebook posts can influence consumers intention to interact what affects their brand attitude. However, best to our knowledge, none of previous studies investigated opinions on ad-brand congruity and reactions toward it in the context of fast fashion co-branding communication on Instagram which due to differences in brand categories may be significant.

Firms use SNSs as a way to communicate with consumers - one of the tools are company driven brand fan pages which due to their brand-centered nature have been recognized as type of brand communities (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Therefore, people following brand profile on Instagram become members of its online brand community. Literature shows that brand communities can have positive effect on its members relationship with the brand as well as impact their brand perceptions, opinions and attitudes (Ansarin & Ozuem, 2015). As fan pages function in a network of social interactions,

which is not brand-related, its membership can serve as individuals' way to self-identify and share it with their group of "friends" on SNSs who may not be fans of the brand (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). The research of Tang et al. (2019) recognized person brand unfit as one of five main reasons for members to unfollow brand fan pages. Following Consumer-Brand Identification concept (CBI), brands may serve as means for self-expression for individuals resulting in consumer-brand relationship reinforcement (Lam et al., 2010), what when applied to SNSs brand communities setting may result in enhanced engagement with the brand (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018). Consequently, we are interested whether their perceived identification and willingness to engage with the brand on its Instagram profile may be affected by possibly different from regular image of the brand portrayed through co-branding communication.

To sum up, fast fashion co-branding communication on Instagram has been observed by us as a phenomenon worth exploring which best to our knowledge none of previous studies investigated before. We aim to get insights into the content itself to understand what brand associations it may evoke and how do they correspond to those recalled by consumers. We aim to know if such unusual communication is perceived as inconsistent with brand schemas and self-projections of consumers as well as how it impacts followers willingness to engage with it through its Instagram profile. Therefore, exploration of new phenomena from consumer perspective with usage of existing theories applied to new context is the goal of our thesis. To do so following research question and sub-questions have been established:

How do fast fashion brand followers perceive and react to brand communication on Instagram related to co-branding with luxury brand?

1. *What brand associations do fast fashion brand followers recall basing on its co-branding content on Instagram?*
2. *What are fast fashion brand followers opinions regarding congruity between brand they follow and its co-branding content on Instagram?*
3. *What are fast fashion brand followers perceptions on their self-identification and willingness to engage with the brand they follow based on its co-branding content on Instagram?*

1.2. Delimitation

This thesis scope is delimited within several dimensions.

First, it investigates single case study of fast fashion co-branding, Giambattista Valli x H&M. Exploration of the topic based on one example of collaboration with luxury fashion brand limits the results of the research. Moreover, it refers only to fashion industry which differs in characteristics comparing to other markets and therefore limits study applicability.

Second, our research on brand communication have been limited to the context of Instagram, one of Social Networking Sites. Even though fashion brands communicate through other platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram was chosen due to its relevancy and suitability to both luxury and fast fashion brands (Cheema, 2018; Krepapa et al., 2016) addressed in this study as well as its rising popularity among the consumers. Additionally, our research is narrowed to several Instagram posts chosen by us as representatives of studied phenomenon instead of taking into account entire co-branding campaign. Thus, even though we tried to ensure the variety between the selected posts the study is restricted to the subjectively chosen elements because of what some of possible results might be omitted.

Third, the chosen sample was limited to small number of participants due to complexity of the study, preliminary nature and detected patterns within collected data. It was limited in terms of demographics to the group of Millennials of similar age and same gender, namely European women. Therefore, the sample comprised female part of H&M consumers being the case study company and due to the online context, it was narrowed to the ones being members of H&M online community on Instagram. All above limitations have been justified in relation to the researched subject and context. However, it is worth noting that different sample might have brought distinct outcomes than the ones from our study.

1.3. Structure of Thesis

This thesis consists of six main chapters along with sub-chapters, structuring the reading process, which description illustrating content of each section may be found in Table 1.

Table 1*Structure of the thesis*

Chapter	Content
Chapter 1	Introduces and delimitates subject of investigation along with research question guiding further steps of study.
Chapter 2	Presents a review of relevant for this thesis literature used further in our research design and data analysis. This comprises background literature on co-branding, brand communication within Social Networking Sites as well as luxury and fast fashion brands. Moreover, theoretical perspectives guiding the research are introduced.
Chapter 3	Describes methodological choices made for the thesis with argumentation supporting them. Outlines the applied data collection methods containing both primary and secondary data as well as methods for data analysis. Quality of the research analyzing pros and cons is evaluated.
Chapter 4	Provides results from both analytical processes used in research, Semiotic Analysis and Thematic Analysis considering theoretical scope of study.
Chapter 5	Comprises analysis of the findings discussed with regard to studies and theories included in literature review guided by research question. Further, managerial implications from the thesis and its outcomes are drawn as well as suggestions for further research are indicated.
Chapter 6	Presents conclusions and provides final answer to thesis research question.

Note. Source: Own depiction

2. Literature Review

Literature review of our thesis comprises materials on topics recognized by us as most relevant in relation to investigated phenomenon, due to lack of those directly addressing it.

Firstly, we present co-branding concept, previous studies related to it, moving to the topic of fast fashion co-branding being the alliance between luxury and fast fashion brand. In-depth descriptions help to understand possible impact on brand communication.

Secondly, Social Networking Sites and their usage in brand communication are described. This section points on significant characteristics of platforms centering on online brand communities. Next, relevance of Instagram for fashion industry is explained.

Thirdly, literature on luxury and fast fashion brands is revised. In two subsequent chapters characteristics of both types of brands are described, focusing on their values and regular communication practices with special regard to SNSs. Similar structure of sections allows comparisons and underlines significant dissimilarities indicating importance of investigating joint communication strategies within SNSs sphere.

Lastly, theoretical perspectives used to investigate the phenomenon are presented. Brand Associations concept (Keller, 1993), Schema Incongruity Theory (Mandler, 1982) and Brand Image Incongruity concept (Sjödin & Törn, 2006) as well as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Consumer-Brand Identification concept (Lam et al., 2010) form theoretical framework of our study.

Literature review serves as reference point in research design and analyses described in chapter 3.

2.1. Co-Branding

2.1.1. Definition

In recent times the fast-changing marketplace and increasingly intense rivalry in the industries across the globe led to the growing significance of co-branded offerings (Helmig et al., 2008). Co-branding as one of branding strategies became a broadly applied business strategy for the markets like retailing, fast-moving consumer goods, financial and air services (Blackett & Russell, 1999).

In general, the concept of co-branding has not been defined through a single description as various scholars determine it slightly differently. The commonly used understanding of co-branding in the scientific literature is the one presented by Blackett and Russell (1999), who defined it as a way of at least two brands cooperating with each other keeping both names of the brands during usually rather longer partnership since its net value creation could not be enough for launching a new brand. The authors based their definition on two main principles regarding the type of the collaboration and its actual arrangements, comprising its expected length as well as its character and possible quantity of shared value that could be developed.

Co-branding, being a kind of *brand alliance*, may be of several forms such as concurrently presented brands in one ad or as the joined offering of given brands (Geylani et al., 2008). In our study the co-branding cooperation refers to the latter, thus two brands introducing their joint products. In chapter 2.1.3. we present specific type of such alliance, fast fashion co-branding, which is the focus of our research.

2.1.2. Effects of Co-Branding

The effects of co-branding may be observed in several different dimensions of brands and consumers mindsets. First, impact of the alliance may be observed considering the co-branded product or service itself. Following McCarthy and Norris (1999) and their quantitative study on ingredient branding outcomes across alimentary products, it may be observed that in case of a moderate quality brands, co-branded products released by them are evaluated more positively when it comes to perceived quality and product evaluations than compared with regular offering. Following the authors, co-branded products may improve competitive position of moderate-quality brand and shorten its distance from high-quality competitors. However, difference between customers beliefs about the brands may evoke uncertainty about the co-branded product and participating brands, even if improving brand perceptions as proven by Geylani et al. (2008). In their quantitative study on alliance between clothing and luggage brands, they showed that this may happen especially when host brand, perceived as highly reliable by the customer, enters an alliance with unknown brand – uncertainty toward unknown brand may be transferred both to host brand and co-branded product.

Impact of co-branding may be observed on participating brands after the alliance, known as spillover effect (Helmig et al., 2008). One of most frequent motivations to enter co-branding alliances is brand

image reinforcement (Geylani et al., 2008), being therefore one of possible spillover outcomes. When it comes to factors facilitating positive spillover effects, similarity of partnering brands products to co-branded one as well as congruity of the co-branded product with brand concepts may be of high importance (Helmig et al., 2008). Quantitative study by Simonin and Ruth (1998) on spillover effect evoked by co-branding revealed that positive attitudes toward partnering brands will be more visible in case of less known brands, where for familiar and preferred ones spillover effect may be weaker due to stronger prior associations. Moreover, in case of familiar brands, range of their prior brand associations held by consumers may be so wide that only another equally or more influential brand may be able to broaden or replace them (Grossman, 1997). Study by Simonin and Ruth (1998), executed within electronic and automobile industries also proved that spillover effect does not benefit both participating brands equally if those differ in familiarity, as well as it may be observed even in case of recurring alliances. If both participating brands are outperforming in different brand attributes, due to complementary salience effect their performance in the weaker ones should improve (Geylani et al., 2008). However, in case of too distanced brands, process of possible associations transfer in consumers' minds will be weaker (Geylani et al., 2008).

Little is known about impact of co-branding initiative on communication strategies and how those may facilitate achievement of alliance goals. According to Mróz-Gorgoń (2016), co-branding as a marketing strategy mainly aiming at brand image reinforcement should consequently impact their communications. However, the author claims that current literature still lacks research on this field and, therefore, attempts to investigate it are highly recommended in order to improve effectiveness in reaching above goals. Following Helmig et al. (2008), promotional activities in case of co-branding should focus on highlighting superior functionalism of a new product and clearly indicate a match between involved brands. Moreover, the authors suggest that spillover effect on partnering brands will more likely occur after advertising which will assure the audience about premium status of joint offering. Additional clues may be observed in co-branded advertising literature. If such alliance involves two well known yet different brands, strategy to facilitate associations transfer could be to expose them in different context (Grossman, 1997). Best to our knowledge, no prior research investigated accuracy of above within SNSs setting where the expectations of audiences and communication processes may differ, as will be presented in chapter 2.2.

2.1.3. Fast Fashion Co-Branding

One of product-related alliances within fashion industry, investigated in this study, is fast fashion co-branding. In order to understand its impact on brand communication within SNSs, we find it crucial to understand the phenomenon itself and goals it aims to achieve. In this thesis we follow *fast fashion co-branding* definition by Shen et al. (2014) describing it as brand development strategy of “partnerships between fast fashion and designer fashion brands launching a special co-branded line” (p. 101). Successful alliance between Karl Lagerfeld and H&M in 2004 is recognized to be a pioneer collection of fast fashion collaborations with luxury designer brands which tend to be sold out within enormously short periods of time, due to colossal interest (Shen et al., 2014).

Aim of the alliance follow co-branding motivations described in chapter 2.1.2. One of main goals, for both brands, will be image improvement as a result of brand associations migration (Oeppen & Jamal, 2014). In the study on co-branding within fashion sector, Oeppen and Jamal (2014) identified strategies increasing collaborations success and decreasing possibility of image dilution, with special regard to luxury brands:

- precise selection of partner – fit between images and alliance expectations as well as between values and cultures of participating brands;
- limited distribution – products may be offered for instance only at premium stores, in biggest ones, or only online;
- reduced availability – regarding both time frame and quantity of products.

Extending above with Stankeviciute (2012), luxury brand should only enter such alliance if it is about to follow regular practices of luxury branding in order to prevent creation of unfavorable associations or weaken the existing ones. Following the author, core luxury brand values and traits should be present and the lower range partner (in this case, fast fashion brand) should be of good reputation among luxury clientele.

Referring back to chapter 2.1.2., spillover effects might be stronger for fast fashion brand and beside common goal of image reinforcement, both brands may benefit differently. Following Mróz-Gorgoń (2016) effect on fast fashion brand image is likely to be more direct and visible, especially when it comes to quality perceptions among consumers and subsequent purchase intentions. When it comes to effects of fast fashion co-branding on luxury brand, they will be rather indirect (Mróz-Gorgoń, 2016). Besides financial benefits, they earn additional advertising (due to different channels used by

fast fashion brands) and reach new, mass audiences giving them opportunity to promote the brand outside target group (Mróz-Gorgoń, 2016; Shen et al., 2014). The latter one is of high importance for luxury brands as creating brand awareness and desire beyond their target group prevents potential value loss – amount of people familiar with the brand should significantly exceed those who can actually afford it (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, pp. 69-70). When it comes to brand associations borrowed from mass fashion brand within the alliance, designer brands gain an opportunity to test potential brand extension success as well as evoke initial brand awareness among new target group (Oeppen & Jamal, 2014). Lastly, spillover effect caused by associations transfer may improve both brands perceived authenticity and strengthen their competitive position (Oeppen & Jamal, 2014).

Moving to communication efforts related to fast fashion co-branding and its goals, literature provide scarce guidelines. One of success factors, as suggested by Mróz-Gorgoń (2016) in her study, would be equal involvement of both brands when it comes to any marketing campaigns. Basing on Stankeviciute (2012), however, alliance should follow luxury criteria, putting designer brand and its values in the center of marketing efforts.

2.2. Social Networking Sites and Fashion Industry

2.2.1. Brand Communication

Marketing communication is one of key tools in strategic brand management, through which brand may spread informative and persuasive messages among the audiences, create and maintain relationships with customers, as well as initiate brand-related conversations (Keller, 2013, p. 218). Brand communication strategy is crucial in brand equity building as each communication option may turn out to be most beneficial for different equity construct (Keller, 2013, p. 219). Through adequate communication brand may increase brand awareness, create and change associations related to the brand within consumers' minds as well as influence consumers feelings and judgments toward the brand (Keller, 2013, p. 219).

Growth of Social Media opened new opportunities for marketers but also imposed necessity to rethink actions undertaken within that sphere. Social Media broadens media coverage of the brand and allows the companies to reach and impact the consumer more effectively (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 20). This is performed through three general media categories: paid (indirectly controlled by company),

earned (out of company control) and owned (part of company assets), across which content may be distributed (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 21).

Social Networking Site (SNS) is “an online platform for building social relationships among people, in which they share interests, activities, information, or opinions.” (Park et al., 2015, p. 415). SNSs may not be classified as purely owned nor paid media (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 22). Different Social Media Zones in which SNSs are present may direct their purpose for brand communication - within Social Community focus is put on relationships with the customers and multi-way dialogues where within Social Publishing emphasis will be put on pursuing branded content and stimulating related conversations with commercial purpose (Tuten & Solomon, 2018 pp. 180, 214).

Two types of branded content may be distinguished within SNSs, depending on its authorship – User Generated Content (UGC) and firm-created communication (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). UGC is outside of the company control and it is not oriented commercially, where the latter one comprises all communication efforts performed by the company (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Study by Schivinski and Dabrowski (2016) on brand communication within Facebook proved firm-created communication to have significant impact on brand attitudes indirectly affecting consumers brand value perceptions, where UGC was recognized to directly stimulate entire consumer-based brand equity. The latter was also supported by study of Rachna and Khajuria (2017a), which detected strong influence of brand-related UGC on Facebook on each of consumer-based brand equity constructs. Therefore, basing on above described studies, both types of branded content on SNSs can serve as effective tool in improving brand value.

One of the tools provided by SNSs for brands to communicate and interact with their consumers are brand fan pages, which form a type of company-owned community for its brand fans (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Brand communities, following Cova et al. (2006, as cited in Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014), gather brand enthusiasts together and separate from outsiders by establishing their own values, attitudes or communication norms. Consequently, the content delivered by those kinds of brand-related pages must be attractive, exciting and creative in order to attract and engage its members (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). Key activities which companies use brand-owned communities within SNSs, according to study by Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014), relate to new products information and promotion, communication comprising both knowledge sharing and relationships maintenance through daily dialogues, competitions and basic customer service activities. Following these authors, benefits for brand may therefore comprise creation of strong and personal relationships with

community members, constant feedback from key consumers, brand awareness stimulation (also outside the target group), improvement of marketing activities effectiveness and brand loyalty increase. Moreover, Vukasović and Strašek (2014) conclude that SNSs are of key importance when communicating and developing brand identity, which should be the core of any activity within that sphere.

Another important aspect of SNSs as a brand communication tool is existence of electronic Word of Mouth (eWoM) (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013). Following Kietzmann and Canhoto (2013), eWoM refers to any kind of consumers statements about product, company or brand, based on their experiences with them, which are made public to various types of users through Internet channels. Word of Mouth (WoM) within SNSs may reach existing or potential target group members at low cost and in an effective way (Vukasović & Strašek, 2014), influencing their brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 89-90). This is facilitated by perceived authenticity of message built on trust and bonds among discussion members, what if related to negative message, may harm the brand and above variables (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 89-90).

Moving to strategy design, Beuker and Abbing (2010) claim that content and interaction with customers should be two central points in effective brand communication in any Social Media type - contrary to recent beliefs, brands should not fully adjust to users demands and expectations but rather learn how to initiate and successfully lead in brand-related conversations. Thus, first thing to do when planning brand communication strategy for those platforms, following Beuker and Abbing (2010), should be understanding target audience (their user needs, expectations and behaviours) and deciding on relationship that the brand wants to establish with them. Strategic choices should also comprise careful analysis of SNSs demographics, usage motivations, industry background or type of content demanded by the audiences varying across platforms (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p. 147). Chapter 2.2.2. will therefore elaborate on platform under our investigation, Instagram.

2.2.2. Instagram

Instagram is one of the SNSs designed for creating and sharing mainly visual- and image-oriented content including both photos and videos (Krepapa et al., 2016). It is one of the fastest growing SNSs, since as of June 2018 so eight years after its launch the platform reached 1 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018). As of January 2020, 35% of Instagram audience worldwide were aged from 25

to 34 years, where in total more than two thirds of all its users were 34 years old or younger (Statista, 2020). Consequently, many global brands especially the ones from dynamic industries recognized Instagram as a good tool for involving and communicating with its audience due to its immediacy (Helal & Ozuem, 2018) as well as it has been identified as more engaging than other SNSs especially in luxury market (Krepapa et al., 2016).

In connection to the visual nature of the platform, Instagram was identified as most appropriate SNS for fashion brands, both fast fashion and luxury ones, which are vastly centered on aesthetics and visual representations (Cheema, 2018; Krepapa et al., 2016). It differs from other SNSs by offering numerous forms of visual content like photos, videos, boomerangs, superzoom, hyperlapse, live streams and stories, where one can add text, music, stickers and GIFs (Instagram, n.d.-a). Those visual formats help in attracting consumers attention and interact with them as stories, being temporary posts visible for 24 hours, make 68% of viewers more interested in a brand or its offering (Instagram, n.d.-b). Stories can also be saved permanently as highlighted stories. The main page of each Instagram profile is called the feed, which includes all permanent posts of the user being every photo or video uploaded to their profile. There is also an option to use special filters, which can modify the look of the visuals for more attractive as well as add to them an entertaining component (Krepapa et al., 2016). Besides the image-oriented part, Instagram posts may also contain short caption and few hashtags as a way to categorize the content according to its topic and enable its higher exposure among the audience as well as possibility to engage (Helal & Ozuem, 2018). In relation to highly visual character of Instagram it is worth to mention that in general visual elements of ads were proven to be more influential on consumers as they are processed much faster than textual (Sojka & Giese, 2006).

For fashion brands, especially the luxury ones, it is essential to be consistent in terms of content, character and frequency of the posts, preferably daily (Krepapa et al., 2016). Looking at the average number of daily posts on Instagram by fashion brands in 2016, Primark was the most active followed by H&M and Lacoste (Statista, 2016b). The simple interface and purpose as well as high usability of this SNS resulted in a huge success which started from ordinary photo sharing and grew to fascination for communicating through visuals (Helal & Ozuem, 2018). In connection to that, Vaynerchuk (2013, as cited in Krepapa et al., 2016) identified Instagram as especially useful and beneficial in communicating brand personality, strengthening its image, sharing a story behind the brand as well as evoking feelings. Generally, it is very effective platform for fashion industry considering the possibility of its immediate communication to promote constantly changing fashion trends, which

helps to remain relevant for customers who can also give their direct feedback (Helal & Ozuem, 2018).

2.3. Luxury Fashion Brands

2.3.1. Characteristics

Luxury brands mostly are not restricted to single product or product category since they are rather based on authority and ethos than on narrow expertise (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, p. 145). Therefore, in this section we focus on both luxury and luxury fashion brand characteristics in order to accurately portray branding practices.

Even though luxury brands are expected to have various brand concepts as they aim to be perceived as unique, all of them share common feature of prestige (Van Gorp, 2012). They manifest traits of sophistication, genuineness, trust and in many cases their brand names are related to creators or country of origin (Van Gorp, 2012). Core identity of luxury brands, so called “brand nirvana”, lies in their timelessness and appraisal perceived by customers (Som & Blanckaert, 2015, pp. 134, 138). It has cultural representations and make a brand extraordinary, desired and difficult to imitate - in order to differentiate their identities through salient images, most of luxury brands comprise numerous points of reference in regard to context and subject, such as people (designer), products (attributes, quality), symbols (logo) or organization (mission, culture) (Som & Blanckaert, 2015, pp. 134-135). Additionally, emphasis is put on association with colors such as in case of Tiffany&Co. (Van Gorp, 2012).

Luxury brands focus on their congruence with codified identities over time rather than creating competitive advantage and positioning themselves along other brands (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, p. 147). In order to express unconventionality and strength they frequently imply various contrasts in their identities, for instance - Chanel being masculine and feminine at once (Som & Blanckaert, 2015, p. 139). Crucial in understanding luxury brands is also their closeness to art and incorporation of it in offered goods (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, pp. 147,180).

Moving to its stratifying aspect, luxury brand separates its owner from the rest of society as well as from premium brands users – therefore, marketing efforts go beyond target group (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, pp. 143-144). Contrary to mass or premium brands simply launched to market, they

are gradually created over time and strengthened by growing number of seduced admirers (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, p. 144). Useful in understanding luxury branding may be framework by Fionda and Moore (2009) comprising nine characteristics of given product category developed through study on luxury fashion brands within British market:

- *clear brand identity* – distinct brand values corresponding to current environment, globalized approach, congruity of affective and aspirational allure;
- *marketing communications* – key for luxury brand image building, emphasis should be put on excellence of offering through techniques such as celebrity endorsement, fashion shows, events, blogs, press;
- *product integrity* – luxury products aim at exceeding customers' expectations, they should be excellent but not flawless, ingenious and visionary (seasonal products) but at the same time may be vintage (heritage products);
- *design signature* – core designs and patterns condensed in flagship products, which are aspirational in nature, exclusive and of highest quality;
- *premium price* – based on customers perceptions, avoiding discounts, creating aura of exclusivity and distance;
- *exclusivity* – along with rarity enhance customers perceived image of prestige, evoked by techniques such as personalized products, limited editions or waiting lists;
- *heritage* – enhancing perceived authenticity and expertise, often referring to brand genesis.
- *environment and service* – carefully selected distribution channels offering extraordinary experience for brand customers, reflecting brand values;
- *culture* – exceptional involvement, both internal and external in brand delivery.

On the other hand, it is important to understand what may underlie consumers motivations to choose luxury brands. One hint is that consumers feel accomplished due to symbolic consumption behind them, as they allow them to reach ideal self-images, for instance due to elevated social status (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). Therefore, indication of accomplishment reinforces significance of luxury fashion brands consumption (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). Perception of luxury is highly individual, formed on one's experiences and found in different attributes such as superior quality, scarcity, expertise, craftsmanship delivered through products, services, experiences (Hoffmann & Coste-Manière, 2012). In their study on luxury brands, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) extended their earlier framework of Prestige-Seeking Consumer Behavior (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999 as cited in Vigneron & Johnson,

2004). Authors proposed that luxury brands are perceived by consumers through following personal and non-personal traits:

- perceptions of quality – expectations of excellent performance and outstanding quality often based on finest designs, technologies or artistry;
- perceptions of conspicuousness – stratifying effect of consumption upscaling consumer social position often linked to aspects such as superior price being and indicator for excellent quality;
- perceptions of uniqueness – social impact of possessing rare, scarce objects;
- perceptions of extended self – luxury brands as means used in order to reach reference groups, gain their appreciation as well as scale of evaluating success of oneself;
- perceptions of hedonism – pleasure, gratification and emotional rewards related to consumption (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004).

2.3.2. Communication Practices

The marketing communication of luxury fashion brands is crucial to build, expand and manage their brand meaning and general image (Gurzki et al., 2019). Jin and Cedrola (2017) in their work summarized traditional communication practices of luxury fashion brands together with the emerging media. Primarily, image-based print media are still applied through billboards and specialized fashion magazines (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). Moreover, the authors referred to celebrity endorsement being commonly used by those brands to attract consumers and evoke positive associations. Basing on Carroll (2008, as cited in Jin & Cedrola, 2017), success of this tool depends on the coherency between the brand image and the chosen person, who has to be constantly committed to the brand. Selection of the endorser, following Jin and Cedrola (2017) depends on given luxury fashion creators - many of them choose models yet nowadays many brands also select recognizable actors or athletes instead. The authors also recalled public relations in a form of events like fashion shows (fashion weeks), openings of the stores, sponsorships and exclusive ceremonies as another luxury fashion brands communication technique along with personal selling performed by specialists what gives an opportunity for the buyer to custom the products (Jin & Cedrola, 2017).

Kapferer and Bastien (2009) state that the main goal of communication in luxury is to create the dream and strengthen brand's value instead of sale and therefore, it is mainly artistic, highly socially coded and allusive but always indirect (p. 210). Study by Gurzki et al. (2019) on luxury fashion

communication portrayed its main characteristics classified into three categories: enrichment, distancing and abstraction. The first one consists of the tools to support the brand with meaning through usage of sign systems (symbols), rhetoric and storytelling. The authors state that luxury fashion brands build complex sign systems in order to enrich their communication with special cultural meanings linked to the brand values. Thus, they use large number of signs related to brand (e.g. symbols of travel for Louis Vuitton) as well as luxury (e.g. symbols of craftsmanship and arts). The rhetorical structure of the luxury brands is more complicated and applied more often than for other types of brands, they use much more metaphors which are based on excess of contrasts (Gurзки et al., 2019). Moreover, comparing to other brands the luxury fashion brands use the most complex templates in their communication including product, model/object, setting, and usually adding a story to the campaign through narration and dynamism (Gurзки et al., 2019). For luxury brands storytelling is a key factor for creating the dream aspect of the brand, which is based on its ethos, that is the brand's myth - history which is being feed by the story (Som & Blanckaert, 2015, p. 140), also referred to as fashion tale (Jin & Cedrola, 2017). It is also used to build a status of the brand as well as stimulate WoM (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009, p. 222). Considering second communication category, luxury fashion brands highly rely on distancing techniques divided based on different aspects: temporal (tradition, time and history mention), spatial (outstanding locations), social (remarks about people's status concerning both look and the way of acting) and hypothetical (very unusual and artistic representation) (Gurзки et al., 2019). Gurзки et al. (2019) describe these tools as a way to distance the luxury brands from the ordinary and differentiate them from other types of brands by developing more sensual and emotional communication. As a third characteristic given by these authors luxury communication is more abstract as it includes bigger combination of themes that allow multiple ways of interpretation.

2.3.3. Communication within Social Networking Sites

In recent years more and more luxury fashion brands entered the digital area and started to use SNSs, however some of them still operate under threat of reduced exclusivity by being perceived as easily accessible and eventually more common (Kumar, 2019). Thus, in order to keep the tone associated with luxury brands their communication on SNSs is based on creating and underlining its unique lifestyle rather than simply promoting a product (Krepapa et al., 2016). Following Freire (2014) successful luxury brand communication can be obtained by the content of the brand being

unrepeatable and innovative while enhancing so called DNA of luxury brands such as heritage, brand signs history, the story of the product and its creator. Kreppa et al. (2016) state that the key strategies for SNSs usage center on highlighting the luxury brand ethos as well as its associated imagery, while presenting new product through artistic creation. Additionally, digital domain enables luxury brands to establish an atmosphere of desire by seducing consumers to their unique offering and present the brand as aspirational dreams, which can maintain its exclusive nature (Hennigs et al., 2012).

Kumar (2019) suggested that the main reasons for luxury brands to engage in SNSs is promotion and marketing resulting in stronger brand recognition by expanding their brand exposure to a broader audience especially digital generation. Furthermore, the author argues that the presence on SNSs and more socially oriented approach may bring other benefits such as enlarged brand loyalty and reinforced consumers familiarity with the brand, leading to their purchase intention. Moreover, SNSs are a good tool for gaining extended knowledge on brand effectiveness and consumers' responses to the brand through likes, comments, shares etc. (Kumar, 2019). Kim and Ko (2010) in their study on the influence of luxury fashion brands social media marketing on consumers identified five attributes of perceived social media activities: "entertainment, customization, interaction, word of mouth, and trend" (p. 170). The researchers suggested that since entertainment aspect of the content had positive effect on more variables including consumer relationship and purchase intention comparing to other SNSs properties, it should be of the main focus for luxury brands. It can be done by creating 360-degree experience, based on visuals such as pictures, videos, music tracks and 3D-product presentations that refer to the brands and support their multi-sensory luxury experience (Hennigs et al., 2012). Kim and Ko (2010) indicated that SNSs became effective platforms for affecting consumers' decision-making process and purchase intention on luxury products by engaging directly with customers and building relationships with them.

2.4. Fast Fashion Brands

2.4.1. *Characteristics*

Many scholars describe fast fashion brands concept basing on its similar main principles. Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz (2014) defined fast fashion as a business strategy which includes three elements: quick response, frequent assortment changes and fashionable designs at reasonable prices. According to Barnes and Lea-Greenwood (2006) it is based on the consumer-driven approach, being a

consequence of unpredictable and rapidly changing consumers wants and their constant need for novelty. Therefore, the apparel retailers have to continuously and instantly identify the rising new trends (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2014). In contrast to luxury fashion brands, fast fashion model does not belong to the personality of their designer or the country of its origin as one of their main characteristics, instead it forms a part of the current worldwide fashion culture (Gabrielli et al., 2013).

Zara and H&M identified as mass retailers have incorporated fast fashion model also described as 'quick fashion' and since then brands have been known from constant refreshed and stylish collections as well as their visibility in media (Cheema, 2018). While this phenomenon broadened in the fashion marketplace, those brands have been recognized more as fast fashion brands rather than mass retailers (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Due to dynamic character of fashion market and changes in consumers' lifestyle, brands produce smaller volumes and introduce bigger amount of 'seasons' which refers to very often changes in the offering which attracts consumers to frequently visit the stores (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010). Cheema (2018) states that worldwide retailers have formed their fast fashion business strategy on three key foundations: the price of the products, the method and velocity of production as well as trendiness and disposable character of apparel. According to Brooks (2015, as cited in Cheema, 2018) the word 'fast' refers to the pace in which the fast fashion brands adopt the latest trends from high fashion runways into their designs. Owing to the shift towards a quick response production and global business, fast fashion firms were able to instantly adjust to the newest trends and deliver up-to-date ready-to-wear products in order to match consumer demand in the shortest possible time (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). Indeed, the emergence of the fast fashion retailing was driven by continuous customers need for the high fashion designs (Cheema, 2018). Moreover, in the fashion industry the time factor plays a crucial role considering the dynamic character of styles going 'out of fashion' in a fast pace, making consumers constantly look for current trends (Joy et al., 2012). Nevertheless, fast fashion brands do not focus on forecasting the new fashion trends, they rather wait for the luxury fashion brands designs and then interpret them for their own creations (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010), thus adjusting the newest luxury projects into cheaper versions produced by mass-market retailers at a bargain (Joy et al., 2012).

Following Atwal et al. (2010, as cited in Cheema, 2018) the lower-income consumers being the main clients for fast fashion brands cause its emphasis on costs. Consequently, fast fashion market size is greater than luxury fashion due to their target segment of mass consumers while luxury brands generally serve more wealthy consumers (Shen et al., 2017). Moreover, the main target group for fast fashion offerings are young adults commonly referred to as mainstream clients who value stylish

apparel but can only afford it in the low-price (Cheema, 2018). One of the reasons is its free and less defined nature of fast fashion brands that provides temporary range of products which enables consumers to satisfy their need for expressing their diverse personal identity (Gabrielli et al., 2013) and their fashion desires (Joy et al., 2012). Consequently, fast fashion brands enable their consumers to select from a wide variety of choices, which stand relatively low risk due to its affordable prices (Gabrielli et al., 2013). Moreover, fast fashion is mostly the choice of young well-informed customers who want to look stylish thus compromise on mere quality of fashionable clothing in exchange of reasonable prices, which undermines sustainability (Joy et al., 2012). However, it gives this group of consumers a chance to create their individual look in line with their notion of self as they see fast fashion as the best alternative for luxury brands (Joy et al., 2012).

2.4.2. Communication Practices

One of key communication tools for fast fashion brands, according to Gabrielli et al (2013), may be WoM, as search for best offers and further exchange of advices are core concepts underlying brands nature. Meaning sharing, according to authors, is also a prospering technique – through online and in-store activities using narratives or brands may direct the way customers perceive them. Stores themselves are another influential communication channel for fast fashion brands – surroundings and atmosphere form an important touchpoint (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). One of key techniques of fast fashion in-store communication are “hero pieces” – flagship products translating key brand identity elements, such as trendiness or timeliness (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010).

Many communication practices of fast fashion brands follow luxury guidelines to enhance their images. One of such techniques is advertising in high fashion magazines, such as Vanity Fair, following luxury ads aesthetics (Okonkwo, 2007, p. 229). Celebrity endorsement may be another example. In case of mass fashion brands, those will be well-known fashion icons to target group, regardless their expertise, often endorsed in luxury communication (Okonkwo, 2007, p. 230).

Following Han et al. (2017) messages of fast fashion brands are creative, simple and distributed through various media in an engaging form when compared with other categories. Along with rapid turnover of products, messages commonly encourage audiences to follow new styles through increased consumption in order to stay relevant with trends (Han et al., 2017). In the discussion of study conducted on fast fashion consumption practices, Gabrielli et al. (2013) highlight that functional

values incorporated in fast fashion brand communication - efficiency (price/quality ratio) and transparency (clear expectations setting) should be highlighted in order to guide consumers in their bargain search. Moreover, authors suggest that experiential aspects of fast fashion brands, rooted in their emotional and hedonic values linked to bargain search (such as fun or satisfaction), should be emphasized in order to evoke and create stories preventing low-cost provider etiquette, although yet not so commonly practiced.

When considering visual content of promotional material, fast fashion brands, being a part of mass market tend to use relatively simple sign systems and rhetoric, often mirroring real-life situations with less importance of setting meaning in regular and repetitive way as indicated by Gurzki et al. (2019). Most commonly, according to authors, they use simple product/object templates (for instance, model on neutral studio background) or extend it with setting made of single symbols (such as water) - rarely they will use simple storytelling techniques. Distancing is rather omitted, occasionally they will use spatial (realistic, familiar locations) or social (slightly rebel model behavior) techniques (Gurzki et al., 2019). Lastly, following Gurzki et al. (2019), temporal distancing is avoided due to fast fashion focus on contemporality, where hypothetical distancing contradicts its realistic dimension.

2.4.3. Communication within Social Networking Sites

Being the most effective type of fashion brands when it comes to online communication, fast fashion brands heavily rely on growing in importance SNSs, what was explored through the study on fast fashion brand communication on Instagram by Bonilla et al. (2019) as well as the one by Loureiro et al. (2018). Product related posts highlight their functionalities and redirect customers to online shops through provided links where highlights present upcoming brand related events or campaigns, as in case of leading fast fashion brand, H&M (Bonilla et al., 2019). Brand engages in direct dialogues with the audience, both in private messages and below published content, what increases their sense of community belonging as well as follows persuasive communication strategy which was proven to be most engaging for fast fashion audience (Bonilla et al., 2019).

As observed by Loureiro et al. (2018) in their netnographic analysis of fashion brands activity on Instagram, some of fast fashion brands decide to contract celebrities such as bloggers or singers to increase brand credibility and generate increased interest. Moreover, creation of outfits comprising new pieces and serving as inspiration for audiences establishes creativity associations with brand

behind, as concluded by authors. Timeliness is also likely to be communicated through content related to current non-fashion related trends such as pieces worn at events, festivals, parties (Loureiro et al., 2018).

As concluded by Escobar-Rodríguez and Bonsón-Fernández (2017) in their analysis of content spread by fast fashion brands on Facebook, simple and short posts comprising visual elements such as photos or videos are most effective tools in creating engagement and interactions among current as well as potential customers who are targeted by fast fashion communication across SNSs. Another frequently used technique is incorporation of Call-To-Action buttons such as “buy now”, “more information” or “contact us” across various platform, which facilitate interaction between customer and brand (Escobar-Rodríguez & Bonsón-Fernández, 2017).

Fast fashion companies, recalling once more case of H&M, execute intense communication strategies on Social Media – multiple posts are published on daily basis through several SNSs, each transferring separate message adjusted to characteristics of platform either for informational purposes such as events announcement or for product-related promotional messages (Cheema, 2018). Moreover, community members activity is stimulated through contests or activities allowing interaction with celebrities (Cheema, 2018). User generated content is also of high importance for fast fashion brands being one of their communication strategies – it provides direct feedback and initiates consumer-to-consumer discussions backed up with branded messages (Cheema, 2018; Kucukusta et al., 2015, as cited in Cheema, 2018). In most cases, dedicated hashtags are created for campaigns in order to easily relate viral content produced by audience to fast fashion brand and therefore increase its credibility and form emotional bonds (Escobar-Rodríguez & Bonsón-Fernández, 2017).

2.5. Theoretical Considerations

2.5.1. Brand Associations

Levy (1959, as cited in Meenaghan, 1995) in his research about consumption process suggested that individuals' purchases are motivated not solely by the functions of the products but also by their meaning. Regarding more emotional aspect, advertising of brands aims at creating its specific personality or character through attaching unique associations both functional and symbolic (Meenaghan, 1995). Keller (1993) defined brand associations as “the other informational nodes

linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers” (p. 3). In the later work Kotler and Keller (2012) determined them in more detail as “all brand-related thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and so on that became linked to the brand node” (p. 186). Thus, brand associations reflect consumers perceptions on the brand and based on that create their brand image (Keller, 1993). According to Doyle (1989, as cited in Meenaghan, 1995) advertising plays a crucial role in building brand image by communicating on advantages of brand offering to customers while simultaneously positioning the brand in their minds. Moreover, brand associations function as one of the consumer-based brand equity dimensions, which concerns consumers responses to marketing influenced by their brand knowledge (Keller, 1993). They are also frequently a representation of the main origins of brand value as through them consumers sense brands to meet their needs (Keller, 2003, p. 392).

There are many forms of brand associations, thus Keller (1993) divided them regarding type of meaning that consumers have for a brand, creating three categories: *attributes*, *benefits* and *attitudes*. The brand attributes are the descriptive characteristics of a product, which can be both product-related (quality, size, design, color) as well as they might be more abstract non-product-related (price, user and usage imagery) (Keller, 2003, p. 66). In many product categories the external and independent aspects have bigger chances in developing unique associations (Keller, 2003, p. 73). Moreover, Keller (1993) states that attributes connected to typical user or the kind of usage situation can create brand personality attributes including its character as well as feelings that the brand induces. The author explains that brand associations also reflect the benefits being the value that the product delivers to the consumer: functional, experiential or symbolic. The functional benefits are based on the essential product advantages satisfying the basic needs while the experiential ones focus on the feelings connected to the usage of the product and linked to it more sensory, cognitive needs; both of those types of benefits mostly refer to the product-related aspects. The symbolic benefits include the external product advantages which are generally non-product-related. Those benefits specially correspond to socially visible products giving higher status to consumers leading to public approval and higher self-esteem. According to Keller (1993) attitudes concern how consumers judge the brand in general, which usually shapes their consumer behavior. As Keller (2003, p. 73) explains, various consumers may have diverse associations, however many are likely to share majority of them.

According to Keller (1993) brand associations can be characterized by uniqueness, strength and favorability. Unique associations include the ones that brands’ competitors do not have which enhances the differentiating aspects of the brand. The strength of brand associations refers to its

connection to the brand based on its quantity and quality. It also depends on how deeply consumer considers the product information and links it to already possessed brand knowledge (Keller, 2003, p. 71). The favorability of the associations is based on the persuasion of consumers that the brand can satisfy and meet their wants and needs (Keller, 2003, p. 72). Thus, in order to obtain a positive brand image, brand actions must combine all of those being critical for the brands success (Keller, 2003, p. 70).

In relation to brand communication Sjödin and Törn (2006) mentioned that prior studies suggest that the extent to which a piece of brand communication matches the previously formed associations about the brand can be between ideal and very weak. Additionally, the authors state that creation, reinforcement and consideration of consumers brand associations may be evoked by each fragment of brand communication. In the social media context, Khajuria and Rachna (2017b) study on Facebook revealed that brand communication on this type of platforms has a significant impact on brand associations creation as well as it can increase brand awareness and feeling of belongingness to the brand. Moreover, the authors suggested that aspects such as gender and age of the recipients may affect how this type of communication influences their brand associations.

Co-branding initiatives may leverage brand associations of well-established brand or the one with niche-specific associations helping the other brands to expand into new market. Secondary brand associations may result in positive outcomes by delivering additional support for the brand name while gaining higher awareness by strengthening its existing brand associations or transferring new positive ones from other entities (Keller, 2013). However, those associations may also possibly harm brand image by weakening brand associations or developing undesirable ones thus, in case of co-branded arrangements as described before brand managers need to analyze the fit between the brands to avoid those risks (Helmig et al., 2008).

In our thesis we focus on investigating the types of brand associations which will serve as form of meaning making - we aim at obtaining consumers opinions on brand communication related to co-branding which may not go in line with regular brand image. Thus, we do not concern the features of those brand associations as we believe they would be more suitable in case of regular content investigation. Consequently, we chose Keller's (1993) brand associations scale as the most relevant due to its holistic approach with regard to type of meaning covered allowing precise analysis of consumers' minds as well as its fit with other theories selected for this project presented in following sections.

2.5.2. Schema Incongruity and Brand Image Incongruity

Schema concept, according to Fiske and Linville (1980), refers to cognitive structures formed around given stimulus through previous experiences with it, stored within individuals' minds, guiding further encounters. When exposed to piece of information, knowledge stored in schemas will be evoked and confronted toward it to find match, resulting in congruity or incongruity standing for successful and unsuccessful search result (Fiske & Linville, 1980). Theory of Schema Incongruity by Mandler (1982) refers to situation in which piece of information (evidence) does not correspond to expectations (based on established schema) of recipient toward given event. Following Mandler (1982), schema *incongruity* may be understood as disruption of expectations caused by evidence where *congruity* refers to fit with expectations, whose reasoning we follow in our thesis. His theory explains that affective responses toward incongruities are impacted by cognitive effort required to resolve them (Mandler, 1982; Mandler 1982, as cited in Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989):

- Congruity with schema should lead to positive responses as achieved through little cognitive effort and not disturbing nor requiring changes within established schemas.
- Incongruity is perceived as having dual effect on recipients' responses, depending on its extent. In case of moderate incongruity, which Mandler described as possible to be assimilated within related schema or alternative one (delayed congruity) without major changes to them, responses may be positive and more significant than in case of congruent information due to heightened cognitive effort evoked by newness of stimuli, interest triggered by it and feeling of reward after its solution. Extreme incongruity, which may be either resolved through accommodation through structural changes within relevant schema or not resolved beside cognitive effort, depending on the result may but does not have to bring positive evaluations as well as may also evoke frustration and negative responses due to effort put in its processing.

Following Halkias and Kokkinaki (2013), in marketing context schemas may refer to several knowledge structures - products (product schema), brands (brand schema) or advertising (ad schema). As this thesis lies within brand and communications management scope, we focus on consumers brand schemas and incongruities between them and brand communication on Instagram. Firm created communication within Social Media may be one of advertising tools aiming at fulfilling marketing goals (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). Thus, literature on brand-ad incongruity is most suitable to our thesis. Below studies were conducted in the context of print ads while our research refers to SNSs communication possibly bringing different results.

Heckler and Childers (1992) explored phenomenon of incongruity across incompatible verbal and visual ads elements. According to them, schema incongruity consists of two variables guiding consumers evaluations: *relevancy* related to effectiveness of the message transfer and meaning creation as well as *expectancy* linked to fit of that meaning with relevant schemas. The authors revealed that incongruent ads are more memorable and lead to enhanced recall. They outlined that communication which comprise unexpected, yet relevant information has the most positive effects on consumers. Halkias and Kokkinaki (2013) applied above reasoning into branding context investigating responses toward chocolate bars ads of varying incongruity levels focusing on relevancy and expectancy of brand related information based on previous experiences with a brand. Brand communication of moderate incongruity appeared to have the most favorable impact on consumers reactions while the extreme incongruity discouraged them to properly understand its meaning, in line with Mandler (1982) hypotheses. The authors indicated that consumers with positive ad and brand attitudes perceived ads of moderate incongruity as more attractive. They concluded that incongruity in brand communication can result in creation of positive brand associations if resolved, where in case of failure customers may end up with unfavorable feelings and form undesired associations.

Lange and Dahlén (2003) investigated influence of ad-brand incongruity between familiar and unfamiliar brands of chocolate bars, same product category as in the study of Halkias and Kokkinaki (2013). The researchers found that incongruent promotional material of familiar brand led to increase of brand salience and memorability as well as it generated positive affective responses. However, incongruent ads for those brands appeared to be harder to remember as they did not match consumers brand schemas. This study suggested that familiarity with the brand is an important moderator of schema incongruity. Torn and Dahlén (2007) focused on familiar brands while researching ad-brand incongruity in a competitive context of well-established brands. Their study revealed positive impact of ad incongruity with brand associations on attention, ad and brand recall as well as ad attitudes. Similarly to Lange and Dahlén (2003), the authors proved that in case of familiar brands, incongruent ads and brand related message behind are processed more meticulously as brand schemas are revised more in-depth to find possible matches. Torn and Dahlén (2007) observed that incongruent promotional material of familiar brands did not have an effect on brand attitudes as also suggested in Lange and Dahlén (2003) study showing no bigger effect in a long term as consumers came back to established views on the brand. Additionally, they revealed no influence on purchase intention thus the incongruent ads of familiar brands did not improve brand evaluations. They also noticed that favorable effect of ad-brand incongruity on ad attitudes occurs only if it can be resolved what

corresponds to Mandler's assumptions. Their research indicated that competitive setting is another factor influencing incongruity thus, in this context incongruity of ads should be moderate in order to be resolved and positively evaluated.

Lastly, we refer to Sjödin and Törn (2006) paper on Brand Image Incongruity providing narrower view on schema incongruity. We follow their conceptualization of Brand Image Incongruity as phenomenon occurring when piece of brand communication does not go in line with image of the brand (set of brand associations) stored in brand schemas of recipients (Sjödin & Törn, 2006). Incongruent brand communication may have dual impact on consumers, affecting *consumer processing* and *consumer evaluation* (Sjödin & Törn, 2006):

- When it comes to consumer processing, authors propose that brand image incongruity may attract consumers interest, increase mental processing and motivate them to find cues enabling its accommodation. Secondly, it may result in noticeable emotional reactions, both negative and positive, triggered by feeling of surprise. Thirdly, information recall needed for incongruity resolving may lead to improved memory regarding the brand. Lastly, authors suggest that brand image incongruity in case of mature brands is likely to have little impact on already established brand perceptions, being assimilated as exceptional.
- Moving to effects on consumer evaluation, authors propose that when brand image incongruity is resolved by consumers, it should evoke positive responses toward piece of communication where in case of failure effect may be contrary, decreasing perceived credibility of communication. Secondly, they perceive resulting attitude toward brand as twofold - in case of incongruity resolving, positive attitude toward piece of communication and brand itself is proposed where in case of failure attitude toward brand should not be worsened. Lastly, authors suggest that there may be a long-term effect on attitudes caused by subsequent incongruities hindering possible changes.

To conclude, in our thesis we focus on perceived congruity and incongruity (Mandler, 1982) between brand schemas of fast fashion brand followers and pieces of its co-branding communication on Instagram in case of alliance with luxury brand and reactions towards it. We are also interested in perceptions and reactions toward Brand Image Incongruity (Sjödin & Törn, 2006) directly linked to Brand Associations (Keller, 1993) behind analyzed content. Consumers reactions in this thesis will refer to brand attitudes being the overall brand evaluations (Keller, 1993) as well as ad attitudes where in our case the "ad" refers to co-branding content on brand Instagram page. We adopt the Solomon

et al. (2013) ad attitude definition describing it as a tendency to react to an ad in either positive or negative way in the moment of exposure (p. 298). Feelings evoked by pieces of communication ranging from more favorable to unfavorable ones may form brand attitudes while having a direct influence on them (Solomon et al., 2013, p. 298). Thus, all the feelings elicited by analyzed content will be regarded as part of the consumers reactions.

2.5.3. Social Identity Theory and Consumer-Brand Identification

Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner (1986) suggests, inter alia, that individuals self-concepts are to significant extent shaped by social groups they belong to (understood as *in-groups*) and explores how those memberships guide intergroup behaviors (including groups one does not associate with, known as *out-groups*). Following the theory, three processes may be observed concerning group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Tajfel, 1982; Haslam 2004, as cited in Thompson & McHugh, 2009, p. 268):

- *Social Categorization* where individual assigns entities into relevant social groups to understand and undertake social actions toward their surroundings. Comparisons of salient group traits allow an individual to classify themselves into the ones matching their identities.
- *Social Identification* in which individual take on identities of most suitable and beneficial groups, forming their *social identity* (part of self-image derived from groups membership). Social identity impacts their self-esteem and is a subject of evaluations based on values associated with groups it comprises.
- *Social Comparison* concerns individuals aiming to retain positive social identity through above described in-group evaluations as well as comparisons with relevant out-groups within proper social situation. If not leading to positive outcomes may either make an individual leave the in-group or try to improve its position to differentiate from and outperform out-groups on given dimension.

Drawing from Social Identity Theory, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) conceptualized Customer-Company Identification. Following the authors, consumers who voluntarily incorporate given company as element of their social identity, described in previous paragraph, engage in both positive and negative events related to this organization. Moreover, they declared that consumers who identify with company identity (associations comprising its key values and demographics communicated

through mediums of varying company control) form the most committed relationships with organization as it helps them realize their self-projections.

Narrowing down to branding context, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) refer to brand identification as consumers perceptions of oneness between self-image and image of the brand, where the higher perceived congruity between those two, the higher consumer involvement with the brand (p. 49). Lam et al. (2010), on the other hand, conceptualized Consumer-Brand Identification (CBI) as “customer’s psychological state of perceiving, feeling, and valuing his or her belongingness with a brand” (p.130), whose conceptualization we follow in our thesis. In our case, given understanding refers to Instagram fast fashion brand followers and their relationship with that brand. Chosen conceptualization draws from Social Identity Theory and elements needed for group identification, namely cognitive (standing for awareness of belongingness to given group) and evaluative (referring to values associated with membership) components along with emotional effort one invests in them (Tajfel, 1982). Lam et al. (2010) combines above with consideration of Identity Theory by Stryker (1968) which relates to social roles of individuals within their surroundings. Stryker (1968) explains that *self* of the individual comprises various *identities* which are hierarchical and situation-dependent meaning that invoked identity (or identities) depends on suitability to circumstances. Moreover, following the author, feelings and wants of an individual are likely to be guided by those identities. Considering theoretical streams underlying their conceptualization, according to Lam et al. (2010), brands perform roles within two self-dimensions of consumers:

- *private*, as a component of their self-projections;
- *social*, as core element of consumers in-group which they feel part of, and with whose members they share brand identification with.

Finally, CBI concept by Lam et al. (2010) backed up with Social Identity Theory was transferred into online brand communities on SNSs context. Those platforms allow users to create and establish personal identities through their unique profiles and exhibit them to their surroundings where public consumption activities such as brand following, tagging, joining in-groups and inner conversations satisfy their social identities (Simon et al., 2016). Study by Simon et al. (2016) on company owned brand communities on Facebook proved that consumer-brand identification may significantly impact the level of engagement on them. Basing on definitions of van Doorn et al. (2010), in their study, Simon et al. (2016) conceptualized *brand community engagement* as “consumer’s behavioural manifestations, such as sharing and socializing with the online brand community on Facebook” (p.

411). Thus, authors considered engagement from interpersonal perspective of community members. Similar results pattern to that of Simon et al. (2010) was observed in a research on outcomes of identification of consumers with corporate brands regarding Social Media responses by Tuškej and Podnar (2018), although authors took on slightly different approach to consumer-brand identification, drawing from organizational identification. Study proved that consumer-brand identification significantly impacts consumers' willingness to engage with corporate brand and its communication activities within Social Media sphere. Engagement with brand activities within Social Media in a given study was understood as part of consumer-brand engagement being “a general process that describes the strength and intensity of the interactive experience between the consumer and the corporate brand” (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018, p. 6). More precisely, authors defined it as act of consumer behavior extending acts of purchases, demonstrated through intentional and intense participation in activities initiated by the brand within Social Media sphere (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018, p. 7). Since our thesis focuses on consumers perceptions and reactions toward brand activities rather than interactions among brand followers, we follow above conceptualization of active brand engagement within Social Media by Tuškej and Podnar (2018), and with adjustments to context of our study, we refer to *engagement* as fast fashion brand community members active and voluntary interaction with that brand within its Instagram profile. Complementing above with Tuten and Solomon (2018) metrics related to interaction side of engagement, we will refer to willingness to like, share or comment pieces of brand content as manifestation of *engagement* (p. 348).

Findings of above described studies are of special importance for marketers, as engagement stands for one of key metrics in evaluating Social Media tactics and strategies (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, pp. 144-146). Due to interactivity of platforms, as described in previous sections, both consumers and brands are expected to participate in communication processes where the outcomes of it may be observed in accomplishment of many strategic objectives such as brand image building or loyalty creation through increased WoM or active brand community behaviors (Tuten & Solomon, 2018, p.145).

2.5.4. Summary

To summarize, above-described theoretical considerations will be used in answering the research question and achieving the aim of the thesis being an investigation of brand followers' perceptions

and reactions to co-branding content of the fast fashion brand they follow on Instagram. The content is expected to result in forming consumers perceptions based on reflected brand associations (Keller, 1993). Simultaneously, those perceptions will be studied with regard to Schema Incongruity Theory (Mandler, 1982), Brand Image Incongruity concept (Sjödén & Törn, 2006) and CBI concept (Lam et al., 2010). Ultimately, theoretical considerations will help in discovering brand followers' reactions and explaining rationale behind them. The chosen theories and concepts serve as a theoretical foundation for the thesis which along with background literature on luxury and fast fashion brands will be used to investigate brand followers' behavior in the given context.

3. Methodology

Methodological choices made to achieve the aim of our thesis are presented in this chapter. Subchapters follow “research onion” diagram by Saunders et al. (2019), describing steps necessary to create an accurate research design addressing established questions in most suitable way (pp. 128-130). As suggested by the authors, firstly we present research philosophy underlying our study. Secondly, theory development approach is discussed consequently leading to methodological decisions. Based on above, strategy and time horizon leading to final choice of techniques and procedures addressing research question are presented.

3.1. Research Philosophy

Well-chosen research philosophy is crucial as each of them may bring distinct outcomes and directions for the study design (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 130). Variety of them lies in three types of underlying assumptions:

- ontology – regards reality and its nature directing the way it and its actors should be studied;
- epistemology – relates to knowledge and its production, evaluation and communication;
- axiology – linked to the influence of values and beliefs of researcher and participants on research process (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 130-134).

Following Saunders et al. (2019), above will be the source of differences due to position on objectivism –subjectivism continuum (p. 134). They describe objectivism as claiming universal reality external to social actors which should be studied with no biasing values. Subjectivism perceives reality to be multiple and constructed by its actors perceptions and actions, calling for context dependent investigation and researcher values (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 137).

Based on above, five core business research philosophies may be listed (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 144-151):

- Positivism perceives knowledge as natural phenomena. Aims at producing unambiguous contributions and generalizations through highly scientific and bias-free research on an observable event.

- Critical realism centers on objective explanation of people's experiences in regard to layered reality of the phenomenon. It considers reality as independent and not entirely reachable for misleading human sensations.
- Postmodernism aims at challenging commonly accepted views on studied phenomenon through in-depth analysis. Highlights the importance of language and relations in social world order.
- Pragmatism focuses on practical, action-oriented solutions for given problem. Recognizes multiple realities and highlights impossibility of creating universal solutions. The methods and structure may vary.
- Interpretivism criticizes positivism and points on human ability of meaning creation. Aims at forming novel understandings of social worlds and their context from different angles. Researcher enters the social world focusing on interpretations and meanings.

Positivism does not fit to our study which is driven by qualitative data emerging within specific context. Critical realism is not suitable as we focus on current events and subjective perceptions. Postmodernism was not chosen as we do not aim at questioning already formed theories and truths but applying them in a new context. Pragmatism was rejected as our study aims at in-depth understanding of the phenomenon instead of resolving a problem. Interpretivism is most suitable to our thesis as explained in next section.

3.1.1. Interpretivism

Goal of this thesis is to investigate how fast fashion brand followers perceive and react to fast fashion brand communication of co-branding alliance with luxury brand on Instagram with regard to meanings behind the content. Therefore, high emphasis is put on understanding and contextual interpretation, in line with interpretivism assumptions (Carson et al., 2001, p. 4).

Following critical view of interpretivist philosophy towards positivism as well as its subjectivism, we do not aim to create generalizations (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 148) - we delimited our interest to chosen brand followers (being only a part of all fast fashion brand consumers) and their heterogeneous perceptions which could be interpreted differently by other researchers. Thus, in line with interpretivist epistemology we focused on specific and context-dependent knowledge based on

perceptions (Carson et al., 2001, p. 6). Investigation through brand schemas and brand associations perspective fits interpretivist ontology and epistemology, referring to distinct social realities of diverse social actors investigated through their opinions and narratives (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 144), since as stated by Keller (2003) different consumers may possess and reflect various associations. Similarly, considering CBI concept in the online context each SNSs user establishes their own personal identity through profile which simultaneously allows them to join a relevant reference group, such as brand fan page, adding to their distinct social identity (Simon et al., 2016). Therefore, perceptions and reactions of brand followers detected in this thesis might be different than for entire society as well as distinct between one another, following ontology of interpretivism which considers reality as complex and socially structured, rich in numerous meanings, interpretations and experiences (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 144). Considering once again epistemology of interpretivism, process of possessing acceptable knowledge just through theory would not be enough as main sources of information include narratives, perceptions and interpretations providing novel understandings and perspectives on the world (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 144), what besides above argumentation is important for us due to newness of phenomenon under investigation.

Regarding the axiology of the interpretivism the research is value-bound as researchers become a part of the study making their interpretations and beliefs considered as valuable contribution to the research process (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 149). We as researchers take part in the study through entering the social world of the participants as well as sharing their perspective through analyzing pieces of content discussed with them. We recognize that interpretivism mostly relies on qualitative methods and our feelings and beliefs may have an impact during the analysis as well as pre-understanding of the phenomenon (partially emerging from literature analysis) will impact our interpretations (Carson et al., 2001, p. 6).

3.2. Theory Development Approach

Next step according to Saunders et al. (2019), comprises consideration of the reasoning along subsequent steps of research process in relation to the goal of the study. Three of those can be listed (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 152-157; Bell et al., 2018, pp. 23-24):

- Deduction – research process begins with theoretical background, aims at validating the conclusions derived from it which are condensed into set of operationalized premises tested

throughout the study. Aim is to provide generalizations. Often incorporates quantitative methods.

- Induction – concerns a logical gap between derived judgements and noticed premises, considering humans' interpretations of social world. Research process in most cases starts with observations and data collection relevant for phenomenon exploration resulting in theory creation. However, choice of purely inductive approach in many cases may lead to creation of empirical generalizations.
- Abduction – useful in explaining new phenomenon which existing literature cannot address accurately, defeats limitations imposed by other approaches. Set of premises explaining the phenomenon are based on the conclusion, data is collected to explore given occurrence and detect patterns, aiming at generating a new perspective in theory or modify existing one.

As pointed by Saunders et al. (2019) although approaches differ from each other they can be combined within one research (p. 156). In line with chosen philosophy and qualitative nature of study, theory development reasoning of this thesis is primarily inductive while also incorporating deductive approach as it is delimited by theory. Considering lack of literature on researched topic in the specific context chosen approach seems suitable for producing data and its interpretation.

Deductive approach is applied mostly at the beginning of the paper as it starts with literature review within fields which we detected as possible phenomenon constructs in order to understand background of the study and decide on the direction of research. With the theoretical background in mind, we designed two subsequent parts of qualitative study following inductive approach to understand the nature of the phenomenon rather than testing the theories. First part of study, Semiotics started with data collection and through meaning making done by us resulted in set of possible brand associations behind co-branding related content. Second part of study, semi-structured interviews included deductive elements as guide was based on chosen theories. Outcomes of both were discussed and confronted toward literature section of this thesis. By applying primarily inductive reasoning, all respondents' answers were considered since alternative explanations are allowed in this approach as opposed to strictly deductive study which could limit our findings.

3.3. Methodological Choice

Next layer of research onion concerns choice among quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 175). Following the authors research may take on mono method or multi-method (more than one data collection technique) in terms of quantitative and qualitative studies or simple and complex in terms of the mixed studies. According to Matthews and Ross (2010) choice of methods depends on selected hypotheses or research questions as well as studied subject forcing certain approach (p. 113).

Basing on aim of our study and philosophy guiding it, multi-method qualitative approach is applied. Our research question aims at richer understanding of multiple meanings and reactions created by fast fashion co-branding content being of qualitative nature as they relate to self-projections, image of the brand stored in their minds and previous preconceptions. Thus, quantitative methods would not be efficient as they serve questions focused on countable events and generalizations (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 142). Qualitative methods are significant to us as they concern collecting and using non-numerical data like words or images to recognize the meanings behind them (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 179). Having in mind that online communities (such as those on Instagram) comprise significant qualitative data including textual and visual materials (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 408), this could allow efficient investigation of pieces of co-branding communication as complementary method in addressing research question. Applying more than one data collection technique should allow us to approach researched problem holistically.

Qualitative methods are often used under interpretivist philosophy (chosen for this study) with subjective stance where the researcher is involved in the studied social world (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 142). They can provide deeper insights through less structured design giving the respondents more freedom to express their differing interpretations and views (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 179). This is of high importance since as interpretivist researchers we aim to detect various points of view on problem and reasoning behind rather than general truth applicable to entire population. Therefore, highly structured quantitative methods focused on numerical data and exploring relationships between variables are not suitable to our research (Matthews & Ross, 2010, pp. 141-142).

3.4. Research Strategy

Following Saunders et al. (2019), next step after choosing research method considers research strategy being a tactics for the study to answer research question (p. 190). Following the authors, choice should be based on purpose of the study, research question, chosen philosophy and approach well as practical aspects as existing knowledge, time span or availability of data.

3.4.1. Exploratory research

Before deciding on the research design its purpose needs to be established being exploratory, descriptive, explanatory or evaluative (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 186). This thesis is recognized as exploratory.

Exploratory research focuses on investigating what is happening and gaining an understanding about studied subject by asking open questions usually starting with “What” or “How” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 186). This type of study is especially helpful in obtaining comprehension of a problem or phenomenon, which nature is not precise (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 186). This thesis serves an exploratory purpose since to our knowledge topic remains unclear in existing literature. In line with interpretivist focus it aims at understanding that phenomenon (Carson et al., 2001, p. 6). Goal is to explore various points of view on fast fashion Instagram co-branding communication, guided by theoretical streams which we as researchers evaluated as important to investigate. We aim to discover patterns within responses of relatively homogenous group of consumers and possible mediators of their perceptions. Those are preliminary routes which our research aims to investigate allowing further studies and commencing literature on the topic. Thus, explanatory research did not suit our thesis since its focus lies on investigating relationships with established variables nor descriptive study was relevant as it focuses on profiling certain events after exploration of them and, lastly, evaluative study was not chosen as it evaluates effectiveness of the events (Saunders et al., 2019, pp. 187-188).

3.4.2. Case Study

Following Saunders et al. (2019) next decisions should be made in regard to strategy aiming to answer research question. In line with interpretivist philosophy chosen for this thesis, as well as qualitative nature of subject matter, we recognized case study to be the most suitable one.

Case studies allow researchers to study phenomena in real-life context in order to comprehend its interaction with actors involved (Carson et al., 2001, p. 95). In line with this thesis subjectivist and interpretivist view, we believe that focusing on real-life setting is crucial as individuals' motivations to belong and engage within online brand community as well as their expectations toward its communication efforts will vary even within one community, making it difficult to generalize result across different brands. Moreover, each brand participating in co-branding alliance has unique features possibly evoking various reactions among audiences, thus in-depth investigation of them in practice seems reasonable.

Basing on Matthews and Ross (2010), case study must be closely linked to research question and have potential to produce satisfactory amount of data to answer it (p. 128). In this thesis, research question focuses on exploring the phenomenon rather than testing particular constructs of it – thus, case study seems the most suitable choice as it may produce enough qualitative data to answer the research question through meaning making.

Given strategy provides insights into nature, cause and effect of phenomenon simultaneously (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 196). This is covered by this research as our focus is more holistic, we do not only aim to explore phenomenon but also to understand what contributed to it and its construction (detect brand associations based on co-branding content) as well as how was it received (evoked brand associations towards parent brand behind the content) and with what effect (willingness to engage and belong to community, judgments on its congruity).

We chose a single case study due to its in-depth nature (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 198) which seems the most reasonable for our research, where multiple cases could diminish the focus on its detailed exploration. Moreover, selected case serves as representation of phenomenon which to our knowledge no existing literature has investigated yet.

3.4.2.1. Giambattista Valli x H&M

Case study chosen for this thesis investigates H&M being one of leading fast fashion retailers worldwide (Shen et al., 2014) and its recent co-branding alliance with Italian fashion designer and his homonymous luxury fashion brand Giambattista Valli. Swedish company offers clothing for entire family, cosmetics and accessories, supplied through global network of stores and online channels (Bonilla et al., 2019). Core of H&M brand consists of affordability, quality and sustainability (HM Group, 2020). Giambattista Valli, through his eponymous brand comprising couture and ready-to-wear collections, accessories and furs pursues its vision of sophisticated, glamorous, global, alluring woman by mixing concepts of modern luxury with femininity (Giambattista Valli, 2020). Signature designs encompass extravagant yet light feeling gowns and excellent cocktail dresses (Casely-Hayford, 2019) being appreciated by young, vital, cosmopolitan women (Giambattista Valli, 2020). Italian designer is known for frequent usage of tulle, pleats and floral patterns (Scrivener, 2019) as well as pearls being one of his attributes (Flaccavento, 2015). Collaboration between above described brands was officially announced on May 23rd, after conducting first promotional activities on Instagram (change of brands profile pictures into the same logo of co-brand, black heart) early drop arrived to 12 chosen stores on May 25th when on November 7th it was entirely launched both online and within selected shops worldwide (Casely-Hayford, 2019). Collection comprised mostly womenswear, however, accessories and pieces of men clothing were also released, all of them embodying designer romantic spirit and enormous attention to details (Casely-Hayford, 2019). Its main goal was to share designers' vision of beauty and love for it, enter and co-create people's happy moments as well as new love stories (Casely-Hayford, 2019). Heterogeneity of two brands, alliance with core fast fashion and luxury brands assumptions as well as timeliness of the event were main reasons to choose above described collaboration to be explored in our thesis.

Moreover, H&M is one of first and most successful brands in regard to such alliances. Since first collaboration in 2004 with Karl Lagerfeld, company regularly launches new co-branded collections which are sold out within extremely short periods of time, due to enormous interest and desire among consumers (Shen et al., 2014). Success of Swedish retailer alliances with highly recognized luxury brands may be observed in its financial results, reinforced brand equity and image, especially in regard to uniqueness (Shen et al., 2017; Cheema, 2018). Additionally, amount of buzz spread among public prove H&M expertise and explain incorporation of co-branding initiatives as one of company

main marketing strategies (Cheema, 2018). Thus, we considered this brand as most suitable for exploring fast fashion co-branding communication.

Lastly, H&M seems as best fit for studying fast fashion brand communities' practices and reactions due to company active and successful conduct of the brand profiles. Besides being a part of most prosperous part of fashion industry within Social Media (that is fast fashion sector), H&M performance is visibly outstanding. Having over 30 million followers on Facebook and Instagram, each day company spreads multiple posts on those platforms, utilizing them as part of multi-channel promotional program (Cheema, 2018). H&M success on Instagram is even more visible as it reaches twenty times higher engagement rates than competitors, what confirms communication strategy effectiveness (Bonilla et al., 2019; Loureiro, 2018). In line with common fast fashion practices within SNSs, H&M uses Instagram to engage its followers, enter conversations with them and stimulate UGC (through viral campaigns, hashtags and competitions) by applying various tools offered by the platform (Bonilla et al., 2019). To sum up, both above described Social Media metrics as well as compatibility with fast fashion communication contributed to final choice of H&M as case study company.

3.5. Time Horizon

Penultimate layer of the research framework by Saunders et al. (2019), concerns time horizon through which problem of the study is to be investigated following either longitudinal or cross-sectional approach.

As this thesis focuses on meaning making from constructs and effects of co-branding phenomenon by analyzing past brand decisions and consumers reactions towards presented content at the moment of exposure, we decided to apply cross-sectional time horizon. According to Matthews and Ross (2010) this type of studies allow to get deeper insights into people's testimonies, compare them and avoid possible biases caused by events occurring during data collection periods (p. 121). This is crucial for our study due to interactivity of SNSs and amount of content spread by the brands daily, as well as shifting tastes of consumers having impact on their perceptions and reactions. This applies to first part of our study aimed at detecting meanings and values of both types of brand anchored in analyzed content, translate them and their conjunction into possible associations and finally confront with the theory. Thus, emphasis is put on the meaning and interpretations rather than changeability

of phenomena which would be the main focus for longitudinal study. As we attempt to compare possibly intended brand associations with reflected ones and explore brand followers' reactions evoked by co-branding related content, cross-sectional study is more suitable due to its cause-and-effect nature (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 121).

3.6. Techniques and Procedures

The last layer of the followed research onion introduced by Saunders et al. (2019) concerns the techniques and procedures which consist of data collection and data analysis coherent with preceding methodological choices (p. 174). Those are described in chapters 3.7 and 3.8.

3.7. Data Collection

According to Matthews and Ross (2010, p. 181) data collection refers to an activity dependent on space, time and resources based on selection of the appropriate research tools in order to gather the needed data to answer previously formed research questions. Our research includes both primary and secondary data discussed below.

3.7.1. Secondary data

Due to chosen approach to theory development and time constraints, we decided to make use of secondary data. According to Saunders et al. (2019) this kind of data comprise all information gathered and used in previous studies (pp. 338-339), which we used in order to enrich our understandings and provide points of reference in our research. We used multiple-source and document secondary data, including snapshots, longitudinal data and text such as books, journal articles, industry reports, organizations websites and publications, all related to researched topic and chosen case study. Pieces of information were accessed through libraries as well as online databases. Secondary data was used by us interchangeably with primary data across various stages of research.

3.7.2. Primary Data

Due to exploratory nature of this study and lack of literature on fast fashion co-branding communication within Instagram seen from consumer perspective, we decided upon collecting and using primary data in answering research question. Primary data refers to pieces of information collected by the researchers through methods established within research setting, analyzed by them and used in order to address research question (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 51). We used both co-branding content spread by H&M on Instagram and its brand community members opinions towards it, as in our study we take on consumers perspective through which we aim to understand interpretations of message sent by the brand. Two types of primary data collection and analysis methods will be applied, explained in following sections.

3.7.2.1. Content Selection

In order to analyze observed phenomenon, we used screenshots of Instagram posts disseminated by H&M at their publicly available profile during their collaboration with Giambattista Valli. Those comprise materials published within Instagram promotional campaign, between May 23rd and November 8th, 2019. To ensure in-depth investigation of posts both in Semiotic Analysis and in the interviewing process, we decided upon mirroring purposive sampling technique (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 321), selecting four most insightful in our opinion pieces of content, which both differ visually and when in terms of form of delivery. Therefore, both photo- and video- based content from the feed and highlighted stories was chosen. As all the communication pieces belong to one campaign same frames may be implemented in different videos or longer formats, such as Instagram TV. Thus, materials published through the latter were not considered due to repeatability and numerous commonalities with other pieces. Moreover, to avoid repetitions and gain more insights, we conducted preliminary search by looking at all the pieces in order to select four which do not repeat any scene. By doing so, we considered that various formats may generate different reactions and may turn out to be more or less effective in pursuing intended associations. Moreover, due to differences in the content design and limitations of duration, we suspected that different types of communication content may vary in terms of amount of encoded associations. Lastly, we believe that Instagram followers have their preferences towards type of content they expect at brand profile they interact with. Thus, usage of various formats could possibly reveal which pieces are more likely to be

processed. Selected pieces of Instagram co-branding communication will be subsequently introduced and analyzed throughout Semiotics, described in next chapter.

3.7.2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

3.7.2.2.1. Type

The qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen as second method of primary data collection in our thesis considering its exploratory purpose, focus on diversity of responses as well interest on determined theoretical streams. This kind of interviews is usually used to gather data regarding human interpretations, experiences and understanding of social world (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 221). Both the sense of responses as well as the words used to express it are noticed (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 222).

Structured interviews were not relevant to our case as following Saunders et al. (2019) they focus on quantifiable data, not allowing complementary questions nor personal biases (p. 437). Therefore, interpretivist ontology perceiving the world as composed of multiple subjective realities (Carson et al., 2001, p. 6) and value-bond axiology (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 149) driving our logics contradicts above. In-depth interviews were not chosen as they give major control over conversation to the interviewee allowing data to emerge during informal conversations (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 438) what due to time constraints and risk of not reaching point of interest impacted our decision.

Semi-structured interviews are characterized by being based on predefined set of themes including main questions of interest in order to guide each interview in the right direction (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 437). The way in which interviewer uses list of themes depends on chosen research philosophy, giving more flexibility to interpretivist studies (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 437). Consequently, questions were adjusted during our interviewing process depending on the answers. Each participant shared different interpretations or information, what added additional points to each conversation and ultimately delivered meaningful, not considered by us insights.

3.7.2.2.2. Sampling

Sampling technique chosen by us is non-probability sampling as we focus on subjective, in-depth investigation of meanings produced within scope of interest rather than statistical interpretations as

suggested for probability approach (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 296). We decided to apply purposive sampling technique which, according to Matthews and Ross (2010), is suitable for case studies as it allows researchers to discover and understand feelings and judgments of selected social actors involved in phenomena (p.167). We perceived homogenous purposive sampling where cases from group within population share same characteristics (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, as cited in Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 167) to be most effective in our case. Above we back up with interpretivist ontology - each individual may perceive the same phenomenon differently, being influenced by the social world (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 148). This is also supported by the notion that each individual may hold different brand associations in their minds (Keller, 2003). Thus, we believe that delimitating sample to relatively similar entities should bring more reliable, in-depth observations of given group within population.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted reaching point of data saturation (lack of additional themes produced through new data (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 315)). From all the H&M consumers we decided on interviewing those who follow the brand on Instagram and fit within further described criteria. Although not of primary importance in our analysis, followers differed by their claimed engagement level (5 more active and 3 less active users) as possible indicator of various responses. We chose H&M followers who belong to brand community for at least six months and engage with its content through likes, shares and comments frequently (active users) or rarely (less active users). This group was narrowed down to women, born between 1980-2000 (so called “Millennials”), having up to average income since this group constitute main clientele among both fast fashion (as explained in literature review) and luxury brands (Danziger, 2019) as well as major share of Instagram users (Statista, 2020). Majority of respondents were Polish, as cross-national comparison was not considered by us at this stage of research. Lastly, we decided to limit above sample to followers who performed actual purchase in H&M within last three months, in order to ensure brand schemas strength as well as that brand may still constitute part of their self-concepts.

3.7.2.2.3. Interviewing Process

Interviews were conducted on one-to-one basis as each conversation was between just one researcher and one participant (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 442). Considering geographical distance as well as pandemic restrictions all the interviews were conducted via Skype what enabled face-to-face conversation helping to obtain more open discussion. Consequently, that had an influence on the

setting of the interviews which could not be selected by us, however, we asked the participants to choose calm place with good Internet connection so we could both hear and see each other without interruptions. We advised participants to select the space where they felt comfortable in order to assure pleasant atmosphere. Interviews were conducted in the span of a week in the middle of April and July, each lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in English what facilitated the analysis process.

Concerning the sensitive nature of the semi-structured interviews, which purpose is to gather personal opinions, feelings, interpretations and experiences some ethical issues need to be covered (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 226). Before conducting interviews participants of our study were asked if they agree to use their first names and their words as well as to record the conversation, just after receiving those confirmations recording started. All the respondents agreed for the recording thus all the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Additionally, we took notes of the most important points and some possible slight changes into the predetermined themes of the interviews that emerged during each conversation.

3.7.2.2.4. Interviews Guide

Interview guide was set as an agenda to be followed (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 437) including predetermined themes with additional notes to help during the interviewing process. It guaranteed that both interviewers covered the same topics. Questions related to key concepts from literature review in the context of chosen case study. Purpose was to deliver needed insights related to each of thesis sub-questions. Therefore, aim was to discover fast fashion brand followers perceptions (including reflected brand associations, resulting congruity with brand schemas and perceived identification with the brand) on fast fashion co-branding communication on Instagram and consequent reactions including attitudes toward brand and content itself as well as willingness to engage with the brand. Interview guide may be found in Appendix 1.

Saunders et al. (2019) distinguish between few types of questions - in our interviews we used prevailing amount of open questions followed by closed questions always supported by probing questions in order to get a deeper understanding of peoples' responses and their meanings (pp. 458-459). Moreover, we have applied two techniques introduced by Keller (2013), recommended in identification of brand associations. Firstly, *free association* task was used to uncover the range of

brand associations that come first in the mind of participants, supported by *follow-up questions* to guarantee relevant answers linked to associations typology (Keller, 2013, pp. 326-328). Secondly, *projective techniques* were used as they may reveal personal opinions and motivations of the interviewees hard to reach in other way (Keller, 2013, p. 328). More precisely we used *comparison task* where respondents compared the brand to a person giving the reasons behind their choice as this tool may be beneficial in understanding associations related to imagery (Keller, 2013, p. 330).

According to Kvale (2007) there are no standard rules regarding conduction of an interview, nevertheless each researcher needs to choose some typical methods concerning different parts of the interview process (p. 33). Following Saunders et al. (2019) hints, each interview started with an introduction which consisted of a welcoming part, explanation of the format and approximate length of the conversation as well as gaining consents described in previous section (pp. 455-456). After that recording has started. In the beginning the participants were asked demographic questions regarding their age, nationality and profession as well as warm-up question. Scope of the interviews was divided into three parts.

First part concerned regular preconceptions about H&M and its activity within Instagram. It started with the free association task (Keller, 2013) regarding the brand. Next, we asked participants how they perceive H&M style of Instagram communication as well as what makes them willing to engage with it. By doing so we aimed at detecting core brand associations as well as evoking established brand schemas.

Second part commenced with presenting respondents four pieces of H&M co-branding Instagram content spread due to collaboration with luxury designer brand Giambattista Valli also chosen for Semiotic Analysis, described in chapter 3.7.2.1. Participants got familiar with the content and were told to inform us about their readiness to proceed. Firstly, free association task (Keller, 2013) included question about respondents' first thoughts on H&M basing on displayed content. After that we asked them few follow-up questions about their perceptions on H&M basing on content regarding possible user, usage situation or likely advantages from using presented products in line with Keller (2013) guidelines and associations typology (pp. 327-328). Secondly, projective technique (Keller, 2013) was applied where participants were asked to (basing on seen content) imagine H&M as a person and describe its personality. Above tasks investigated what brand associations are evoked by analyzed content and what rationale lies behind it, relating to first research sub-question.

Third part of the interview started with general question about the content itself. Respondents were asked about their opinions toward fit of it with H&M as well as their expectations as brand community members. Doing so aimed to detect if schema incongruity (Mandler, 1982) or Brand Image Incongruity (Sjödén & Törn, 2006) between established H&M brand schemas (with stored brand image) and co-branding content occurred, what rationale lies behind and what attitudes it triggers relating to thesis second sub-question. Participants were asked if they would like to see more of it and how would that influence their willingness to engage. Moreover, we asked them if they still identify themselves with H&M communicating with this type of content. Latter two questions related to third sub-question of the thesis and focused on CBI concept and resulting willingness to engage (Lam et al., 2010, Tuškej & Podnar, 2018).

The interviews ended with summary of the most important points. Respondents were free to add some last comments or thoughts. In line with the ethical considerations we informed the participants about the possibility to access the results of their interviews.

3.8. Data Analysis

Last element of the “research onion” by Saunders et al. (2019) is the data analysis. According to Matthews and Ross (2010) instead of considering it as a singular process it should be seen as set of procedures used to describe, analyze and evaluate the gathered information (p. 317). Authors explain that data analysis helps in finding patterns in data, simplifying the information for easier understanding and ultimately to find responses for the research questions and explore the hypotheses. The next two sections will elaborate on the two applied techniques - Semiotic Analysis and Thematic Analysis.

3.8.1. Semiotic Analysis

Through the first part of study we wanted to understand what brand associations may be found behind H&M co-branding content joining values of two highly distinct brands in order to understand brand followers perceptions. Thus, we focused on meanings behind visuals - core of Instagram communication. Semiotics was found to be the most suitable analysis method as it is defined as “study

of signs” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 683), with signs being communication elements carrying non-literal meanings. Alternative strategy, content analysis is rather used for detecting communication patterns imposing more quantitative considerations (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 683), not fitting the aim of our thesis. Semiotics is commonly used by researchers within communication area, such as previously mentioned work by Freire (2014) or the study by Kim et al. (2019). Kim et al. (2019) decomposed promotional visual content of masstige fashion brands while extracting their identities found in messages built on signs like for example sepia coloring relating to Hollywood in 60’ associating Louis Vuitton with timelessness.

From Semiotics point of view, signs are composed of *signifier*, that is detectable communication element such as phrase or image and *signified*, which stands for the meaning carried by the former (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 683). Saunders et al. (2019) explains that each sign may be labelled as *denotative*, meaning that its significance should be obvious to the decoder or *connotative*, pointing on indirect sense (p. 685). They suggest that since signs may carry multiple meaning themselves or may change them when combined with others, Semiotics should be applied within selected context such as cultural one allowing meanings delimitation. This fits our case since both of us belong to fast fashion target group of young adults (Cheema, 2018) and entire sample chosen for second part of study is raised in European culture. Moreover, background literature on luxury and fast fashion brands (chapters 2.3 and 2.4) as well as case study description served as point of reference in choosing relevant meanings.

We decided to follow Barthesian approach to Semiotic Analysis of photographs described in his essays “The Photographic Message” (Barthes, 1961/1977) outlining how photographs carry meaning to the recipients and “Rhetoric of the Image” (Barthes, 1964/1977) analyzing meaning behind advertising images. Previous studies tested applicability of Barthes approach across different forms and channels of modern communication as well as contexts of studies. Ardianto and Son (2019) applied Barthes semiotics in their study of meanings behind dairy products television advertisements where the work by Holm Frandsen and Jensen (2012) used it to investigate luxury branding on Facebook. We found Barthes approach suitable for our thesis as firstly, it fits commercial setting (in our case, H&M co-branding campaign), as proven by Barthes (1964/1977) in his study on messages behind Panzani advertisement. Secondly, Barthes points on necessity of investigating meanings carried by the photographs in relation to textual elements accompanying them, since former one cannot be truly understood without the latter one (Barthes, 1964/1977). This is of high importance for us, since visual and textual elements form basis of any content on Instagram. Lastly, Barthes

(1964/1977) perceives photographs as subjects of analysis open to various social and cultural interpretations what goes in line with the context of our analysis and further investigation of reactions toward given content among brand followers.

Following Barthes (1964/1977), photographs meant for commercial purpose will carry three types of messages sent by the source:

- *Linguistic* relates to meaning carried by textual element accompanying the visual. This meaning can be found as *anchorage*, where text guides understanding of the photograph or *relay*, where both elements are complementary in meaning formation.
- *Coded iconic* stands for literal reading of the image being its denotation.
- *Non-coded iconic* relates to symbolic message behind the visual often varying in regard to cultural background, being its connotation.

Basing on above, when analyzing pieces of communication spread by H&M (the source) across its Instagram profile we will focus on captions accompanying the visuals, literal meanings of the content and symbolic meanings, delimited by our study context and literature background, respectively.

Since co-branded outfits are inseparable elements of analyzed content, we tried to focus on the meanings emerging from juxtaposition within the visuals and impact on message rather than evaluating the design itself. As subjects of analysis varied in form, we standardized them in order to efficiently use chosen analysis method - all videos were divided into sequences of unrepeatable frames. In order to detect possibly many connotations within analyzed content we enriched the process by making use of six connotation procedures listed in “The Photographic Message” (Barthes, 1961/1977) as techniques to convey meaning through visuals. Similar approach was applied in previous research exploring Social Media content such as the one by Holm Frandsen and Jensen (2012) in the context of luxury brands as well as study by Gliniecka (2018) and teenagers blogs. Connotators comprise:

- *trick effects* – attempts to manipulate photograph denotation;
- *pose* – body and objects position;
- *objects* – carriers of mental connections such as ideas or beliefs;
- *photogenia* – editorial interventions such as exposure techniques;
- *aestheticism* – artistic appeals;
- *syntax* – meaning emerging from aggregation of visuals (Barthes, 1961/1977).

Following the above list, we focused on H&M interventions in presented on visuals reality, message behind composition and poses of objects, salient elements bringing obvious meanings, selection of lighting and colors, artistic inspirations within visuals composition and meanings emerging from sequences of frames within the videos, respectively.

Emerging meanings were finally classified according to Keller (1993) typology described in chapter 2.5.1., in order to illustrate what brand associations may be evoked through pieces of analyzed content, according to our subjective evaluations. Therefore, findings were set within frames of existing theory and allowed comparisons and discussion with second part of study.

3.8.2. Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis was chosen by us as means of interpreting data collected through interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined it as a “method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). Thematic Analysis is characterized by its flexibility and ability to deliver detailed description of given data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is not assigned to any particular research philosophy or approach, however chosen assumptions for the research will have an effect on the way in which the data should be interpreted through this analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). Accordingly, as interpretivist approach was chosen for our thesis, through Thematic Analysis we aimed at finding various interpretations of H&M co-branding Instagram content among our respondents. Due to time constraints, those were delimited to theoretical scope of the thesis, focusing on brand associations, opinions on congruity with the brand as well as resulting identification with it.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) “theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). In Thematic Analysis there are two core ways of detecting themes: deductive which is theory-driven and inductive which is data-driven, however, it is also possible to combine them (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 651). Considering purpose of this study and our methodological choices we followed mixed approach which enabled us to gather relevant themes not assumed basing just on theoretical considerations. When considering brand associations, we applied predetermined themes which corresponded to Brand Associations typology, namely brand attributes, attitudes and benefits (Keller, 1993). In case of analysis of perceptions and affective reactions toward regular and co-

branding related Instagram communication our approach was data driven. When it comes to opinions on perceived fit between co-branding content and H&M, we used two predetermined themes – “Perceived consistencies” and “Perceived inconsistencies” related to concepts of Brand Image Incongruity (Sjödin & Törn, 2006) and Schema Incongruity (Mandler, 1982). Lastly, two predetermined themes “Self-identification” and “Willingness to engage” were established with regard to third sub-question of the thesis and were drawn from CBI concept (Lam et al., 2010) and study by Tuškej and Podnar (2018). All the codes were established inductively.

We followed Thematic Analysis guide comprising six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

1. Familiarization with data which involves transcription of data, reading and making notes.
2. Generation of codes thus the process of coding which is labelling the data in a systematic way through the whole data set.
3. Search of themes, which involves categorizing the codes into potential themes.
4. Reviewing the themes which is based on improving them by assessing the coded data inside the themes as well as checking the relevance of themes as a whole in relation to data set.
5. Defining and naming the themes, at this point the ‘story’ behind each theme in connection to the research question should be determined and ensured they do not overlap between each other.
6. Production of the report, which involves presenting the final outcomes of the analysis by referring back to the literature and research question.

Basing on above, we started with transcribing the semi-structured interviews, while making initial notes, which we refer to as “preliminary codes” in our analysis. After getting familiar with gathered data set, we moved to producing final codes which later were categorized and sorted into potential themes in case of inductive sections as well as predetermined themes where they related to deductive part of analysis. Coding process may be found in Appendix 3. Later, all themes and codes assigned to them have been revised according to their relevance for the researched subject. Lastly, the final themes have been defined and named. For clear organization and classification outcomes were transferred into tables (Appendix 4 & 5).

3.9. Quality of Research

The assessment of the quality of the research often depends on its approach, distinguished between more positivist or interpretivist (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 213). As our study follows the latter and is of qualitative nature, we applied Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Saunders et al., 2019) proposition of more relevant but still equivalent forms of criteria to the ones used in quantitative research assessment (validity and reliability), namely: dependability (reliability), credibility (internal validity) and transferability (external validity) (p. 216).

3.9.1. Dependability

Quality metrics of dependability refers to the extent to which qualitative research may be perceived as reliable, allowing further replications or development (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 217). Due to humanistic nature of our study, its subjectivity and narrow delimitation we followed hints provided by Lincoln and Guba (1985), devoting to extensive reporting (as cited in Saunders et al., 2019, p. 217). Thus, any change through the research process may be detected and analyzed, as well as each step and decision is precisely described. In theoretical part of the thesis, we justified choice of each construct and its relation to our research question and context. Moreover, we broadly described background of our study, that is fast fashion co-branding, luxury and fast fashion brands as well as brand communication within Social Networking Sites in order to allow its possible applicability for further studies as well as clarify our methodological choices and discussion of results. In methodological part we extensively presented our choices for research design and justified them basing on our case. Study process was documented and provided in appendices which enables readers to familiarize themselves with our way of thinking and interdependencies. For Semiotics we created tables in which we detect and describe six connotators and possibly resulting brand associations. Moreover, each piece of communication content was extracted and provided in thesis to facilitate process of reading and understanding. In case of semi-structured interviews, we provided their full transcription and coding process in the appendix. We believe that by doing all the above, our research may serve as point of reference for other studies within similar context.

3.9.2. Credibility

The second quality criteria introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility refers to the extent between outcomes of subject matter analysis and the actual state of affairs, especially important for interpretivist studies (as cited in Saunders et al., 2019, p. 218). Matthews and Ross (2010) suggest that one way to increase it may be done through reference of the outcomes towards existing theories as well as follow ups with participants (p. 53). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also point at involvement of more than one researcher within the process as well as attention to negative cases (as cited in Saunders et al., 2019, p. 218). To assure that, both of us were equally engaged in entire study within this thesis. In regard to Semiotic Analysis, each researcher interpreted the meanings behind the co-branding content and extracted possible brand associations in regard to luxury and fast fashion brands description from literature review, which were later jointly discussed, compared toward Keller (1993) brand associations scale and led to final analysis. In case of interviewing process, each of us conducted and transcribed four interviews, which were analyzed jointly with codes and themes assignment and examined in the light of previously introduced theories on brand associations and brand community behavior. Lastly, we discussed outcomes of both studies, identified common patterns and indicated possible branding consequences. Moreover, each of our respondents was offered to correct her inputs or add new insights in the end of the interviews as well as she was offered to receive its full transcript. Credibility criteria was also considered in sampling process as before conducting actual interviews, we assured that participants fit our assumptions listed in “Sampling” section as well as during the process we asked indirect control questions regarding consumers engagement and expectations in case of detecting negative cases.

3.9.3. Transferability

As mentioned before used for the qualitative research transferability is a parallel version of external validity or generalizability used in quantitative research (Saunders et al., 2019). Transferability refers to the possibility of moving the findings of the research to a different setting (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 13). In line with interpretivist philosophy and qualitative nature of this study its purpose was to gather data centered on a particular context, namely fast fashion co-branding communication on Instagram and fast fashion online brand community members. As described in the previous chapters fashion industry including the explored luxury and fast fashion brands have their own characteristics

and values, which vary from other industries. Thus, due to case study method as well as uniqueness of the environment and small samples chosen for our research its results will be deeper and more specified, making it harder to apply in a different setting. However, we presented a detailed description of all the aspects of the research as its aim, environment, design, findings as well as our subjective interpretations, which as explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985) should give the reader the possibility to make decision on transferability of this research to another context (as cited in Saunders et al., 2019, p. 218).

4. Results

4.1. Semiotic Analysis

This section presents Semiotic Analysis of H&M content on Instagram, spread due to co-branding with Giambattista Valli, through which we aimed at detecting meanings and brand associations which may be formed by pieces of communication. Results will be confronted with Thematic Analysis outcomes and background literature in the Discussion chapter (5.1.) addressing first sub-question of thesis. Entire analytical process following Barthes connotators (1961/1977) and meanings type (Barthes, 1964/1977) may be found in Appendix 2. Brand associations, as described in chapter 3.8.1., will be classified using Keller's (1993) Brand Associations typology.

4.1.1. Visual 1

This section presents an analysis of Figure 1.

Figure 1

H&M x Giambattista Valli Instagram Highlight Photo



Note. Source: H&M (n.d.-a)

Linguistic element, in our opinion, performs the role of its anchorage and suggests the way of interpreting the visual. Firstly, one may observe tag with the name of the designer and his brand (@giambattistavalliparis), through which they might understand that the dress was designed by him as well that presented interior may be one of his ateliers. Therefore, product-related associations of “designer” might be evoked. References to the creator standing behind the brand one may link to luxury brands as implementation of designers as point of reference is common practice in their branding strategies (Som & Blanckaert, 2015). Secondly, we think that the phrase “sneak peek” may suggest that given photograph is a part of something secret aiming at evoking feelings of curiosity and privilege. Thirdly, one might link the expression “magical world” with the world of dreams turning denoted interior into abstract location possible to be entered through co-branded collection on behalf of H&M invitation. Therefore, we believe that “positive” brand attitude based on feeling of “desire” might be formed. Both may be again seen as references to luxury brands and the “dream” aspect they intend to form (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009, p. 210). Lastly, hashtag “#Project<3” links the visual with other pieces of co-branding content and might be read as encouragement to explore and engage with it along with collection promotion. One might link usage of heart-shaped emoji instead of regular word to timeliness of the offering and its youth appeal. Modern communication style may be seen as fitting fast fashion brands values of availability, credibility and timeliness (Loureiro et al., 2018; Escobar-Rodriguez et al., 2017) and consequently, form associations of “young” and “modern” brand personality.

At the level of denotation, image represents red dress displayed on the mannequin and placed within display case equipped with little mirrors on the top and the bottom. Display case is placed between two wooden tables of irregular shape and doors with golden handles and half-round shaped cornices, in front of the window. Walls and doors are painted beige, floor is made of brown parquet. On the left and right sides of the photograph one may observe pieces of light material.

Moving to connotated meaning of the photograph, one might observe references to the magical world. Mirrors placed on different sides of the display case and their reflections create an optical illusion and as a *trick effect* might pursue sense of magic, turning casual interior into extraordinary setting where items from co-branded collection emerge, what as we believe might create product associations of “dreamy designs”. Emphasizing the history behind the product and its creator would again be in line with luxury branding (Hennigs et al., 2012). Pieces of material visible on the foreground

perceived as window curtains, through the *pose* connotator might give impression of snooping in, being a witness of secret uncovering and as we believe might aim at evoking feelings of entitlement and gratitude toward the sender, generating “positive” brand attitude evoked by “appreciation”. In this case, sender might be perceived as up-to-date, fitting in fast fashion values of timeliness (Loureiro et al., 2018).

Dress itself might give impression of being piece of art, conjoining highest quality with unique design, being object of desires what may be connoted through multiple *poses*. Therefore, product associations of “excellent quality”, “uniqueness”, “detail orientation” might be recalled. Position of the dress in the center of photograph might attract viewers’ attention and articulate its importance, shifting focus toward it, creating product associations of “salience” as well as communicating experiential benefits of “center of attention” and “superiority”. The fact that the dress is placed inside the display case similar to ones in museums, one might read as indicator of its high value, importance and delicacy, similarly to piece of art. Therefore, product association of “value”, “fragility” and “artistic” might be evoked, as well as “expensive” price range traits and “wealthy” user associations. References to art, excellence of design and quality once again bring in luxury brand values (Som & Blanckaert, 2015). Display case itself, as an *object*, might connote protection and care given to the item by its creators and required from potential buyer who may not easily reach it due to glass wall. This relative inaccessibility fits luxury brand characteristics of exclusivity and rarity (Fionda & Moore, 2009) and might evoke associations of “caring” user, “sophisticated” brand personality and symbolic benefits of “privilege” and “high class”.

Moving back to *pose* of the dress, its position on the vintage-looking mannequin, which through possible connotations to culture of tailoring and handicraft might create the impression of craftsmanship behind the apparel and its uniqueness, being one of its kind. Expertise and tradition are another luxury brands attributes (Hoffmann & Coste-Manière, 2012) which we find. Possibly, one might form symbolic benefits associations of “high fashion world” as well as “fashion conscious” user. *Photogenia* of spotlights directed toward dress, giving shadows to its surroundings might be linked by the recipient to the world of celebrities being in the center of attention in the “red carpet” and might create impression that the dress is meant for special occasions and will benefit its owner with admiration and desire from the public. All above fit conspicuous and hedonic perceptions related to consumption among luxury brands consumers (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). As we believe, associations of “special occasions”, “red carpet” and “events” related to usage occasion may be

formed at this point. Moreover, associations to experiential benefits of “standing out” as well as “confident” and “admired” user having “strong personality” might be recalled.

Selection of given dress from the entire collection may be backed up with the possible meaning emerging from its color, shape and material - tulle. Tulle, which is a fabric commonly used for ballet dresses and gowns, might reinforce artistic perception of the item and indicate the occasion for which it is meant, for instance higher culture event. In this point we find possible product associations of “sophisticated fabrics”, functional benefits associations of “good investment” and usage situation associations of “outside home” and “formal”. Moreover, tulle is a fabric present in many of Giambattista Valli designs (Scrivener, 2019) what links the collection with its creator following luxury branding practices of brand signature (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Linked to above, we find possible symbolic benefits of “prestige”. Red color of the dress, which might connote roses, tango, love one might understand as being in the center of attention when wearing the gown as well as passionate and energetic aura spread by its user. Therefore, associations of “passionate”, “energetic” and “attention seeker” related to user of brand might be recalled.

Interior itself, which might be perceived as place where the co-branded collection was created through numerous *objects* might shape the connotations. Design comprising parquet, high ceiling, beige walls with high doorpost in our opinion represents rather vintage, high class style, similar to those in palaces, what might connote sophistication, heritage and wealth, being one of key luxury brands characteristics (Van Gorp, 2012). Two tables of modern design and contrasting colors might be seen as elements of contemporality and nonconformity possibly connoting unpredictability and wildness complementing hereditary impressions and evoking “contrasting” brand personality association. We think that modern elements may aim at creating impressions of relative availability and diversity of collection, in line with fast fashion values (Cheema, 2018). *Photogenic* interventions of dimness and golden lighting might connote mysteriousness of the place and its owner, its elegance and history as well as increase the perceived value of experience offered by H&M to followers.

4.1.2. Visual 2

This section presents an analysis of Figure 2.

Figure 2

H&M x Giambattista Valli Instagram Highlight Video



Note. Source: H&M (n.d.-b)

At the linguistic level the meaning of the visual is anchored in a form of geotag “TOKYO JAPAN” guiding the possible understanding of the presented situation. It serves as remote location that we think points at internationalism and globalization of the collection, which can be associated with “international” personality of the brand as well as it can indicate associations to its “diverse” and “cosmopolitan” users. Moreover, it may possibly symbolize multicultural scale of the event with its wide reach from its origin in Europe to Asia as well as its worldwide availability and universality, which are connected to the fast fashion trait of composing the present global fashion culture (Gabrielli et al., 2013). Therefore, the possible symbolic benefit could be an approval from “global fashionistas”.

The denotation of these set of shots being its second meaning includes street view of the storefront with two mannequins wearing floral dresses in natural human-like poses (looking in one direction, hugging each other) and digital screen showcasing the collection. The corner of the display is decorated with purple flowers. Additionally, there is a street full of cars and bikes visible in the reflection of the glass display and in front of the storefront there are few people passing by, looking or pointing at it.

At the connotation level the indirect meaning of each denotated signifier in this video based on the seven screenshots representing each frame have been analyzed. The street perspective, amateur way of recording with a mobile phone and no visible editing has been encoded as a *trick effect* connotator which may give the viewer an impression of being the one recording as one of the people passing by. It goes in line with current common use of Instagram as a tool for sharing the moment by its young users, which can possibly imply association to “young” personality of the brand. Additionally, it could be linked to *aestheticism* where nowadays this type of videos are used as a part of personal stories or vlogs on SNSs.

The connotators of *pose* like the movement of passing cars and bikes on the street as well as people walking in a rush may imply fast pace, busy life, which in modern times is very typical for most of the people trying to reconcile various aspects of their lives in a short period of time. Those meanings could be associated with “busy”, “multi-tasking”, “modern” and possibly “spontaneous” user. However, some pedestrians passing next to the storefront took a moment to look or point at it which we think suggests their curiosity and interest in the display as well as possible amazement which is worth their time and sharing with others. The items showcased at the storefront as well as its design itself aim at catching people’s attention, thus pedestrians' reactions included in this video can possibly symbolize its success as something eye-catching. Therefore, brand products could be associated with “eye-catching designs” and feeling of being in “center of attention”.

Subsequently, connotators of *objects* like typical for fast fashion shop mannequins used for the display may give a sense of familiarity along with its commonness and accessibility, where easy available ready-to-wear clothing is one of the fast fashion aims (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). In connection to accessibility the cost of the products can be possibly associated with “reasonable price”. Additionally, the mannequins’ poses are very human-like, which we think suggests more laidback and casual look of the storefront, which can be possibly associated with brands’ “down-to-earth” personality. The mannequins are wearing dresses from co-branding collection which may connote

extraordinary, elegant luxury style (Fionda & Moore, 2009) pointing at associations to “extraordinary” design and “high quality” of the products likewise more casual but still stylish design corresponding to fast fashion (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2014), which could be associated with “smart casual” and “stylish” design of the products. One may think that juxtaposition of those two distinctive features of the brands symbolizes multidimensionality of collection, fitting different types of consumers or usage situations making it more versatile. Thus, usage imagery of the presented products could be associated with “universal occasions” both “formal” and “informal” as well as different types of customers can possibly feel like “experiencing luxury” through those products giving “superior comfort”. Moreover, floral pattern of the dress and flowers decorating the display may suggest feminine and fresh character of the collection. Subsequently, products could be associated with “feminine” style, which would benefit the user by making her “feeling womanly”. The digital screen standing behind the mannequins displays photos presenting other pieces from the collection by highlighting the scale of event and its essence which may imply high quality and professionalism being typical luxury features (Fionda & Moore, 2009), thus brand personality could be possibly associated with being “professional”. Additionally, changing photos and digital screen itself adds connotations of dynamism and modernity to the whole storefront design, linking brands’ personality to association of being “dynamic” and “interesting”.

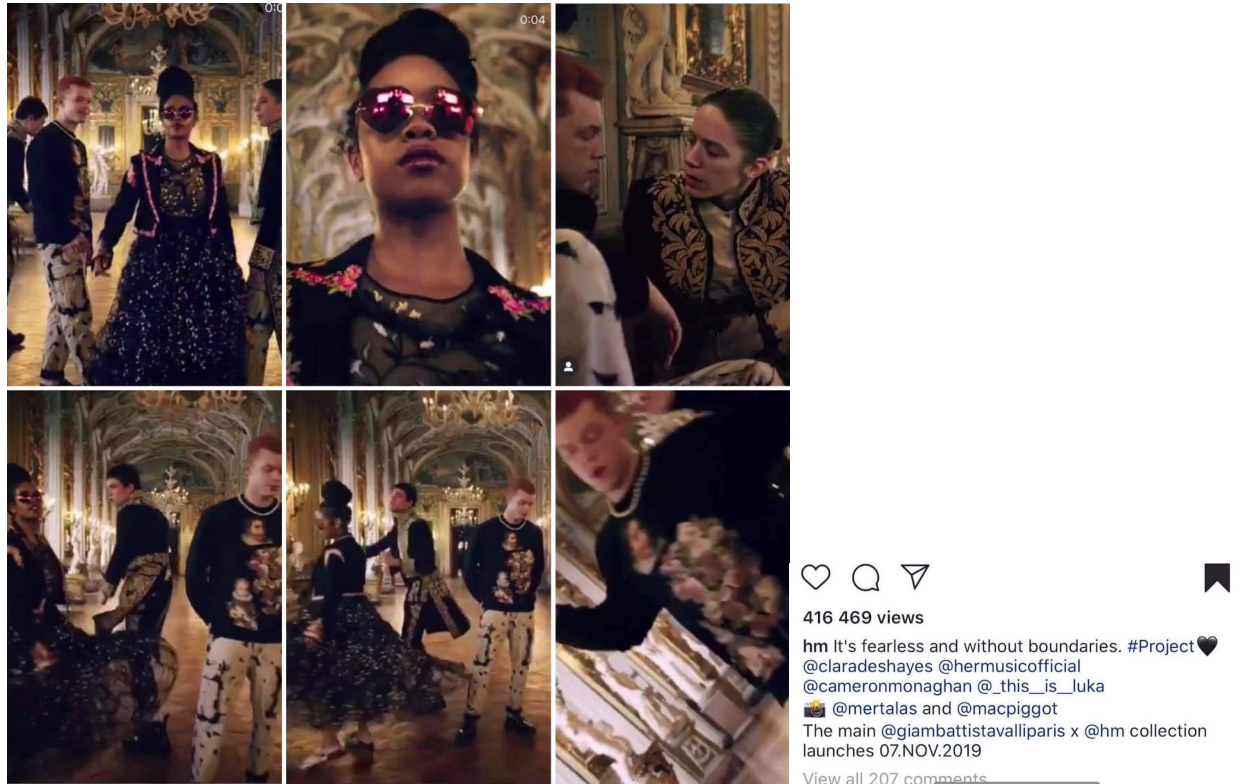
The natural colors of the video and daylight as forms of *photogenia* may emphasize its natural setting giving a real-life effect. Thus, we think it creates connotations to ordinariness, authenticity and credibility of the communication and the brand behind it, as it is not only based on staged photoshoots. Ultimately it can be associated with the “authentic” personality of the brand as well as it can intent on evoking “positive” attitude due to sense of “trust”. Lastly, *syntax* referring to the sequence of frames in the video from this story may create an overall atmosphere of everyday life in an international setting giving a sense of accessibility.

4.1.3. Visual 3

This section presents an analysis of Figure 3.

Figure 3

H&M x Giambattista Valli Instagram Feed Video



Note. Source: H&M (2019a)

Linguistic element, in our opinion, once again anchors the visual and guides the meaning formation. Firstly, following the caption itself, “it’s fearless and without boundaries” one might perceive presented situation as inappropriate and contrary to adopted standards. Moreover, they may feel encouraged to go outside their comfort zone considering actors in the visual as role models. We think that hashtag “#Project<3” typed right next to it might suggest that rebellious aura emerges from co-branded collection and H&M as its host. Therefore, “rebellious” brand personality association may possibly be created. H&M may consequently be seen as enabler for self-expression and individualism, what fits fast fashion characteristics of changing styles satisfying diverse self-concepts (Gabrielli et al., 2013). Tagging celebrities (@claradeshayes, @hermusicofficial, @cameronmonaghan, @_this_is_luka) may create prestigious and trendy atmosphere as well as due to different background which they come from (musicians, actors, models) one might get a feeling of diversity of brand and presented collection along with its global reach. Therefore, brand

associations of “spectacular” personality and “celebrity-like feeling” symbolic benefit may possibly be reflected. Emoji of the camera along with tags of photographers (@mertalas, @macpiggot) might be perceived as indicator of professionalism and range of co-branding campaign and the brand behind. Lastly, tags of participating in alliance brands and launch date are provided what recipient might read as relative scarcity.

When it comes to denotation of visual, one may observe a group of people wearing items from co-branded collection, two men and two women inside the spacious interior, equipped with multiple sculptures, paintings, chandeliers and candles. Each person is occupied with different activity, man on the left side dances, woman in the pink glasses comes by and joins the dance, red-haired man and woman on the left side talk, attempt to kiss and lastly separate. In the last frame red-haired man joins the dance. People are wearing full body covering outfits, along with jewelry and shoes.

At the level of connotation, we think that recipient attention may be directed towards people and their actions. People in the video might be perceived to enjoy the moment and not care about the outer world, what might be found in *trick effect* of distortion of the background and its blur. Consequently, association of “laidback” user as well as “event” and “fun situation” related to usage situations might be formed. Moreover, one might observe that shots are done from below, similarly to the way in which authorities tend to be presented (Messaris, 1994), what may reinforce attention toward people and products, highlight their importance, confidence and prestige. Therefore, associations of “strong personality” and “confident” user may be evoked, as well as experiential benefits of “prestige”. It might be observed that although all actors wear items from the same collection, each of them behaves differently, what may form association of “individualist” user. Multiple *objects* and *poses* forming profiles of actors are present. One may observe that all the actors are in movement or dancing, what may connote freedom and joy which they experience forming associations of functional benefits of “comfort” and experiential benefits of “enjoyment” and “freedom”. It is worth noting that outfits are covering the bodies of the actors what may attract all the attention on the pieces of clothing and the way they allow above described self-expression, possibly forming symbolic benefits associations of “self-expression” as well as product associations of “diverse designs” and “eye-catching designs”.

Selection of long dress for a woman wearing heart-shaped glasses, what one may perceive as female piece of clothing combined with fashionistas accessories might connote modernity and trendiness combined with old-fashioned designs of the styles. Therefore, they might form product association of “trendy” as well as user imagery association of “fashionista”. Moreover, one may reflect brand

personality associations of “contrasting”, fitting luxury brands unconventionality (Som & Blanckaert, 2015). It can be seen that when woman walks by others give her way showing respect and impression she arouses. At this point, one might form experiential benefits association of “center of attention” as well as user imagery association of “popular”. Different reactions toward her style may be observed – man smiled and followed her with his eyes what might signify that he is intrigued by her and feels attraction while the woman gave her relatively neutral look with dose of jealousy. Based on that, that one may form experiential benefits associations of “feeling desired” and “attractiveness”. Walk of the woman with glasses may be seen as assertive, she keeps her chin up and turns around in the end. This might remind runway walks and therefore carry connotations of high fashion world which H&M brings to the consumers, as well as confidence and power she feels while wearing runway-like designs. Therefore, one may recall associations to experiential benefit of “runway-feeling” and symbolic benefit of “high fashion world”.

It may be observed that same outfit is worn by man and woman. This may connote the universality of design and H&M gender equality philosophy, sending a social message to the public. Therefore, product associations of “unisex” and “combined styles” as well as user association of “male and female” might be recalled. Choice of tie-dye patterned trousers for unisex outfit, which one may link to hippie culture, combined with tailcoats being apparel worn at special occasions may reinforce above message and highlight that the brand allows expression of self rather than fitting it into other people and system expectation. This goes in line with youth spirit of fast fashion brands, focused in consumers and their diverse identities expression (Gabrielli et al., 2013). Consequently, recipient may recall associations to symbolic benefits of “individualism” and “young” brand personality as well as “formal and informal” usage imagery. One may also observed *pose* of woman initiating the kiss what may connote that as modern woman she knows her value and power. In line with that, we find possible brand personality trait of “feminist”. Moreover, they may observe that co-branded item enhances one attractiveness regardless of gender, therefore not favoring any of them. Implementation of such relatively private scene in the video (enhanced by the “pose” of actors sitting on the side) due to its sensuality might evoke feelings of controversy and strengthen perceived rebelliousness of H&M, forming brand personality association of “controversial”. After the kiss attempt, red-haired man joins the dance with his hands up what might connote feeling of victory and joy which arose due to love affection.

One may note that both women, visibly differing in style and attitude, are with buns - hairstyle commonly worn for special events as well by ballet dancers, which might connote inseparable from

the designs elegance, regardless way of styling. Based on that, they might recall product associations of “elegant” and “modern”. Connotations to the designer might also be observed, emphasizing his presence and co-authorship of collection what is done through pearls - attribute often worn by Giambattista Valli as his lucky charm (Flaccavento, 2015), following luxury branding practices of designer as point of reference (Som & Blanckaert, 2015, pp. 134-135). The behavior of the man on the left side might also be noted - during the entire clip he keeps dancing and not paying attention to the events occurring. Therefore, he might give impression of being individualist, devoted to his passion and expressing himself through it, possibly shaping “passionate” user imagery associations.

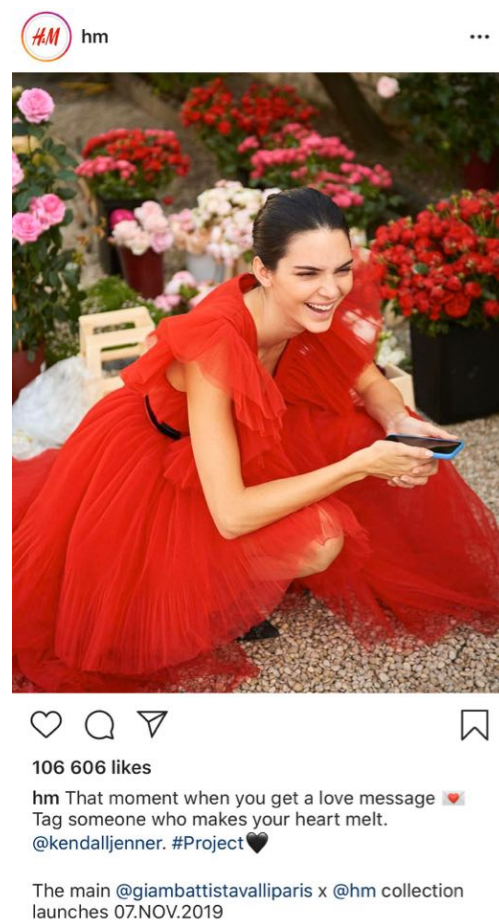
Multiple *objects* of interior, in our opinion, comprise numerous luxurious connotations. Antique design, comprising multiple white and golden elements, magnificent chandelier and candles might resemble palaces and therefore connote wealthiness and status of the actors, possibly creating brand associations of “wealthy” user and “snob” symbolic benefit. Paintings and sculptures might be seen as emphasizing artistic nature of the collection and designer, in line with luxury brand values of art (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012), what may evoke “artistic” brand personality association. One might perceive the palace itself as resembling Italian architecture, what may bring connotations to Italian fashion culture and consequent quality. It is also worth noting that Italy is designer country of origin (Scrivener, 2019), what may possibly direct above understanding. By doing so, one might better understand Giambattista Valli aesthetics due to communicated country of origin, as commonly done by luxury brands (Van Gorp, 2012). Thereby, product associations of “high quality” and “expensive” price range might be formed. Dusk combined with golden, warm lighting through *photogenia* might connote sophistication and royalty of the place at the same time seeping it secret and intriguing the viewer. Moreover, high contrast might aim at intensifying recipient emotion and emphasizing products value. Therefore, “positive” attitude may be generated basing on feelings of “interest” and “curiosity”. Lastly, when considering *aestheticism* and *syntax* of the visual, one might observe resemblance to videoclips, modern way of shooting the films, since frames are short and dynamic, as well as sign systems are relatively complex. One might say that by doing so individualism and diversity of the actors is highlighted giving an impression of set of parallel stories brought together to form one. Therefore, feeling of contemporality and youthfulness, bringing in fast fashion values, may be evoked (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010).

4.1.4. Visual 4

This section presents an analysis of Figure 4.

Figure 4

H&M x Giambattista Valli Instagram Feed Photo



Note. Source: H&M (2019b)

Looking at the linguistic type of message the meaning of the photograph is anchored in the caption, which comprise few different pieces of information. The main body of the caption starts with the phrase “that moment”, which we think can be linked to its common usage in the popular nowadays “memes” being one of the most entertaining images shared on social networking sites among millennials which can imply the young and joyful spirit of the brand and its communication. In

consequence it could be possibly associated to “young” and “joyful” brand personality. The next significant elements in the caption are the phrase “love message” and emoji of love letter, which may correspond to the moment presented on the picture, thus receiving a message from a loved one suggesting “love” as the theme of this piece of brand communication. Moreover, it is followed by a sentence: “Tag someone who makes your heart melt.”, which invites to engagement with the visual by sharing it while simultaneously possibly evoking positive emotions. Additionally, it can be seen as encouragement to come out of someone’s comfort zone by being confident about sharing feelings. Including the tag with the name of the model (@kendalljenner) serves as a form of celebrity endorsement where the tag with the name of the designer and his brand (@giambattistavalliparis) indicates its connection with luxury fashion. However, the tag with designer name is complied with the tag of the fast fashion brand (@hm, owning the Instagram profile) suggests combination of those two types of brands resulting in a collection, which release date is also mentioned to inform about the purchase possibility. Lastly, the text includes hashtag “#Project<3”, which may indicate that the objects presented on the photograph are part of a bigger undertaking (co-branding collection) and its heart-shaped emoji corresponds to the before-mentioned “love” theme. Moreover, this hashtag serves as a tool to stimulate engagement of the receivers and enable wider exposure of this collection communication, based on its role presented in the literature review (Helal & Ozuem, 2018).

At the denotative level of the meaning this photograph presents a girl in a red, tulle gown crouching while holding her phone and laughing. The picture was taken during the day outdoors as the floor is full of pebbles and there is some small trunk and a wall in the background. There are multiple buckets full of red, pink and white roses as well as some gardening equipment and plastic mesh standing behind the girl.

Lastly, the connotation of this photograph has been analyzed to detect its indirect meaning. The *trick effect* connotator in a form of blurred background and high contrast applied in this visual may suggest concentration on the first plan which includes the girl in a gown being the center of attention. Therefore, it can be possibly associated with experiential benefit namely being “center of attention”, while using the presented product. Moreover, the gardening equipment and plastic mesh visible in the background may indicate that this photograph was not a planned part of the photoshoot but was rather taken during the break giving the impression of sharing behind the scenes moment comprising real life setting. Thus, we think that the personality of the brand will could be associated with “down-to-earth” character.

Additionally, connotator *pose* including mainly the position of the girl crouching looks very comfortable which may suggest relaxing and natural feeling of the image, consequently her pose could imply the benefit of “comfort” while using this product. Moreover, she is securing her phone by holding it with her both hands, what may symbolize her caring character. Both of those meanings can imply associations to “laidback” and “caring” user of the products. The laughing face of the girl looks very sincere as she was caught in her actual, intimate moment of joy and happiness, implying positive and authentic look of the visual, where the latter - genuineness is one of the traits intended to be manifested by luxury brands (Van Gorp, 2012). It could be also connected to the caption indicating receiving a love message, which is a reason to smile and be happy. Based on that, the brand personality could be possibly associated with someone “joyful” and “authentic”.

The main *object* connotator is the long gown in which the girl is dressed may suggest its more formal usage for special occasions or elegant events, while simultaneously creating following associations to usage imagery: “formal”, “events” and “special occasions”. It is made from French material - tulle being a signature fabric used by the designer Giambattista Valli (HM, 2019), which we think suggests the luxury side of the collection as one of the luxury features includes key elements of designs as brand signatures (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Therefore, the presented product on the visual can be possibly associated with its “sophisticated fabric”. Due to the lightness of tulle it is commonly related to ballet, thus may connote delicacy, elegance and art, which is widely incorporated aspect in luxury products (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Consequently, the product can be possibly associated with its “elegant” and “artistic” attributes as well as the brand personality can be associated with someone “artistic”. Additionally, the product could be associated with “salient” colors as the gown has a vivid red color, which is known from symbolizing love, power, passion and energy. Again, it goes in line with the text of the caption which main message is spreading love being also the main theme of this co-branded collection. Moreover, the typical user who would wear a dress in this color could be possibly associated with someone “passionate”, “energetic” and “confident”. The girl wearing the gown is a well-known for younger people professional model in her twenties, namely Kendall Jenner, which consequently can imply associations to “popular” typical user and thus “celebrity-like feeling” as well as “high class” and “high fashion world” approval while using the presented product. Kendall Jenners’ high activity and popularity on Instagram could be one of the reasons for including her as the main model for this co-branding project in order to gain exposure among millennials, who are the main fast fashion target market (Cheema, 2018) as well as possibly symbolize young and trendy

character of the brand and collection. Thus, the brand personality may be associated to being “young”, while product style could be linked to “trendy design”.

The model is presented with barely any make up, which we think indicates the freshness and naturalness, giving an impression of more reachable look corresponding to the lower-income fast fashion mass consumers (Shen et al., 2017). Additionally, her hair is put in a bun, which can possibly have similar connotations to the ones connected above with tulle, thus ballet, elegance and art as it is commonly known as very neat and classy hair pinning. Thus, the typical user of those product could be associated with someone “natural” and “neat”. One may think that the smartphone, which the girl is holding gives more modern and up-to-date look to the photograph as it is currently everyday use object enabling people to connect, it can possibly point at “modern” brand personality. It is linked to the caption indicating that the model was caught while receiving a message from her loved one on her phone, which can be associated with “feeling desired” and “feeling attractive”. Interpreting the photograph in this way is possible through the amount of the elements in the photograph as well as the narration included in the caption, which connects to the story behind the communication. However, we think that presenting relatively casual situation may give a feeling of more accessible nature of the collection as it can be used in real life situations not just on the red carpet, from which designed clothes are known from. This could be possibly associated with typical usage of the product “during the day” as well as “in the evening”, where the more reachable character of the visual could also imply the association to the “reasonable price”.

As mentioned before the background of the image is full of roses, which we think were used to emphasize the feminine character of the co-branding collection, suggesting associations to “feminine” design of the products giving the benefit of “feeling womanly”. Moreover, roses in numerous cultures and contexts connote many deep emotions (Daniels, 2020), thus suggesting the symbolic and emotional nature of the co-branding communication. Lastly, the daylight and warm colors of the visual as forms of *photogenia* may represent its positive energy and summery, casual feeling, which could indicate general “positive” attitudes.

4.1.5. Summary

Basing on meanings and associations extracted from each post, we searched for recurring traits. Table 2 presents final overview of brand associations found behind pieces of analyzed content. Summarized

results of Semiotic Analysis presented in the below table will be referred to in chapter 5.1. along with Thematic Analysis outcomes presented in next section.

Table 2

Brand associations behind co-branding content grouped using Keller (1993) Brand Associations typology

Brand association type	Identified brand associations
Attributes	
Product-related	Excellent quality, artistic, uniqueness, sophisticated fabrics, salient colors, eye catching design, elegant, trendy, feminine
Non-product-related	
Price	High cost, reasonable price
User imagery	Caring, confident, strong personality, energetic, passionate, wealthy, popular, laidback
Usage imagery	Special occasions, events, formal, formal/informal
Personality	Young, contrasting, artistic, modern, authentic, down-to-earth
Benefits	
Functional	Comfort
Experiential	Prestige, center of attention, feeling womanly, feeling desired, attractiveness
Symbolic	High fashion world, celebrity-like feeling, privilege, high class
Attitudes	Positive

Note. Source: Own depiction

4.2. Thematic Analysis

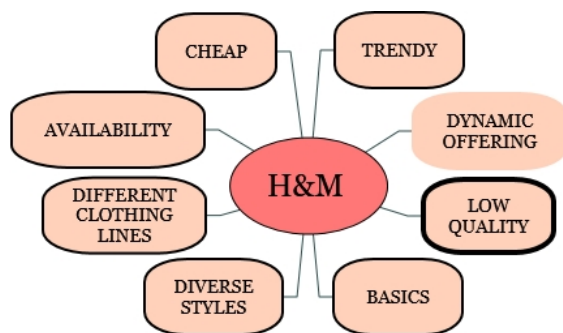
This section presents results of interviews analysis. Final overview of codes and themes corresponding to each of research sub-questions along with examples of respondents' quotes, which

we refer to below, may be found in Appendix 4 and 5. Free associations analyzed as the sequences of words are presented in section 4.2.1. and in analytical process were merged with remaining associations assigned to preliminary themes.

4.2.1. Free Associations

Figure 5

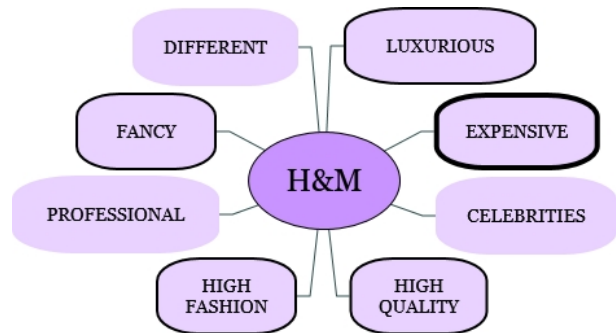
H&M Free Associations



Note. Source: Own depiction

Figure 6

H&M Free Associations Evoked by Co-branding Content



Note. Source: Own depiction

This section presents respondents' primary brand associations detected through Keller's (2013) *free association task*. It was used twice - firstly to elicit general brand associations towards H&M and secondly to elicit brand associations evoked by the co-branding content of the brand on Instagram. Due to scope of answers provided, associations shared by at least two respondents were analyzed.

Following Keller (2013) hints, free associations detected through interviews (Appendix 4) were used to create mental maps summarizing core traits reflected by analyzed group of consumers (p. 296), created in NVivo 12 Pro software. The thickest borders signify the brand associations shared by the most interviewees, the less thick ones signify the less popular associations and no borders signify that only three or less respondents shared the mentioned association. The Figure 5. presents free associations of participants when asked about the H&M without any stimuli as we refer to it as "regular H&M" for an easier distinction. Thus, the most common brand association towards H&M

between the interviewees was “low quality” followed by associations like “cheap” and “trendy”. The other elicited brand associations included “availability”, “basics”, “diverse styles” as well as “different clothing lines”. The least common free association among respondents concerned “dynamic offering”. The Figure 6. includes the H&M free associations evoked by co-branding related content, which were mentioned by respondents after seeing displayed stimuli. The most respondents associated H&M in this case with “expensive”. Less common free associations comprise “high fashion”, “high quality”, “luxurious” and “fancy”. Moreover, just three or two interviewees shared associations of “different”, “professional” and “celebrities”. While looking at both mind maps it is evident that in some cases respondents associated H&M with contradictory things depending on the situation. The most opposed associations between regular H&M and H&M behind the co-branding content were those of “low quality” (Fig. 5.) and “high quality” (Fig. 6.) as well as “cheap” (Fig. 5.) and “expensive” (Fig. 6.). Additionally, none of the associations was repeated in relation to both cases.

To sum up, H&M and H&M seen through co-branding related content has been associated by participants with radically different traits. Co-branding communication of H&M evoked more expensive, higher in quality and professionalism associations of the brand in consumers' minds.

4.2.2. Perceptions Toward Regular H&M Content on Instagram

First part of Thematic Analysis outcomes aimed at understanding brand followers perceptions toward regular H&M communication on Instagram as well as factors contributing to engagement with it. Theme “Regular content perceptions” presents part of followers brand schemas related to regular H&M Instagram communication. Theme “Engagement factor” presents traits leading to engagement with the brand. Both allowed us to understand followers expectations and responses to co-branding content.

4.2.2.1. Regular Content Perceptions

Eight key characteristics of regular H&M communication were detected through interviewing process. Firstly, six respondents, including two less active users, claimed that content spread by the brand within its Instagram profile is “eye-catching”. Several reasons were given as basis for

understanding. One of them was visual salience of posts, based on their colors, patterns as well as selection of products.

“They have a lot of materials for example, a lot of patterns, which on the posts are bright, they have flowers, (...) some kind of squares.” (Interviewee 2)

Another explanation was linked to the interest which posts gather and element of surprise maintaining their attention. Respondents appreciated H&M creativity and attempts to exceed followers' expectations.

“Hmm, I'm usually quite surprised. And it kind of triggers that kind of feeling “okay, this is actually cooler than I thought H&M products would be.” (Interviewee 5).

*“They are always posting things that are like relevant and that keeps the attention there”
(Interviewee 3)*

Second perception toward regular H&M communication related to “diversity” was reflected by six respondents as well, including three less active users. In this point followers recognized that the brand tends to use various endorsers, including celebrities, models and influencers. On the other hand, respondents claimed that in their communication H&M pursues different images of woman, being of various size, skin color, gender and appearance.

“They are trying to use different models for each campaign, they don't stick to the same faces, you know.” (Interviewee 4)

“I would say they publish a lot of female photos, very diverse, like many sizes, skin colors, that's cool.” (Interviewee 7)

Third notion regarding regular H&M related to its “realistic” aspect, reflected by four respondents, including two of less active users. Respondents explained that strength of brand communication may be found in its authenticity and credibility. This, according to interviewees is highly influenced by H&M tendency to focus on real-life situations within their content forming an aura of accessibility and presenting their offering in most favorable way, that is, on models. Consequently, followers claimed possibility of identifying themselves with situations presented in posts.

“(...) It's not only focused on clothes, but it's also focused on people in their real-life situations, like people on the streets, some festivals, parties, like people around me.” (Interviewee 1)

“They are not fake, and also it’s not like only clothes and nothing else, like some hipster brands... Here you can see the clothes, but how they look like in real life, that’s cool.” (Interviewee 7)

Fourth characteristics of regular H&M communication related to its “meaningfulness”, reflected by two respondents, both more and less active users. Brand followers noted that H&M besides spreading commercially oriented content, brings up more socially oriented issues. Moreover, respondents paid attention to captions accompanying the visuals, frequently carrying more informational meaning, increasing brand credibility.

“I saw, for example, the one I was reading about the leader in this company and it’s nice that they inform us about that.” (Interviewee 2)

Fifth trait perceived by H&M followers related to “accessible” nature of content, perceived by three respondents, including both of less active users. Followers explained that regular H&M content is easily comprehensible, simple and relevant. Interviewees appreciated that emphasis is put on brand and its offering, relating to casual situations they can identify themselves.

„I think their content is simple, they focus on showing the clothes in real life, I wouldn’t say that there is some bigger story behind” (Interviewee 4)

Sixth quality of regular H&M communication reflected by four respondents, including less active user, was defined as “active”. Brand followers noted that H&M tends to engage in conversations with community members. Moreover, respondents perceived the content to be dynamic, addressing target audience demands. Active communication also reflected frequency of new branded content publication, where respondents noticed that it is disseminated through various tools such as stories and feed, as well as multiple times a day.

“Well, I think they’re quite good, quite engaging and dynamic” (Interviewee 3)

“And actually, they publish a lot, like both on the feed and stories, each time that I enter Instagram, I see something from H&M.” (Interviewee 1)

Seventh feature detected within perceptions of six followers, including two of less active users, was being “product related”. Respondents agreed that content disseminated by H&M stays relevant to brand offering, even though taking on more creative approach, as described above. Branded content was perceived to present different styles, often serving as inspiration for consumers, especially when

showcasing complete outfits. Moreover, commercial aspect was strengthened by presence of price tags, key for budget-constrained clientele.

„So, you know, you basically see products available on an e-shop, H&M e-shop, often women wearing those clothes, some outfits. There is always a link to them, price, I guess.” (Interviewee 5)

“I wouldn’t say that there is some bigger story behind. Yeah, I would say that their content is simple and focused on clothes.” (Interviewee 4)

Lastly, three respondents described the regular H&M content as “youthful” as in their opinion it corresponds to the young target market of the brand.

“I would say in general their Instagram page is very modern definitely more for younger viewers.” (Interviewee 8)

Above discussed traits were reflected by both more and less active community members. Less active followers were found to both support traits of accessibility, diversity and realism of regular content, where in case of other features their responses were interchangeable. Basing on above described traits, expectations of followers toward brand communication are set.

4.2.2.2. Regular Engagement Factor

The first code in this theme and simultaneously first engagement factor concerned “novelty” including preliminary codes of outstanding and novel content. In total three interviewees in their answers strengthened the importance of the innovative idea behind the content that should be included in order for them to engage with it.

“I think it should be something interesting, different than other brands. Like maybe with some idea behind it. It wouldn’t be a simple picture of clothes, but I think it should be something which is not so usual.” (Interviewee 1)

The next engagement factor concerns “CSR” (Corporate Social Responsibility) matters with a preliminary code of meaningful content, which was mentioned by only one respondent, who is an active H&M follower.

“(…) if there was anything that I would grab my attention I think it would be anything sustainability related, they also publish that.” (Interviewee 5)

Another factor was “product in use”, which was a code referring to responses related to product-oriented and people-oriented content as well as the one including outfit inspirations. Both participants who listed this factor were the more active followers of H&M Instagram profile. Interviewee 4 stated that she values seeing simply products presented on the content on people in order to see how the clothes look on a person in real-life situations as it serves as an inspiration or instruction on how to wear the presented products.

“I really like their content which they have now, because when I’m looking for clothes, I want to see clothes, you know. I don’t need any bigger picture of anything, which is not related to the brand. I enjoy when they publish clothes within everyday use or I don’t know, some outfits which show me how to wear them.” (Interviewee 4)

The following code is also product connected - “appealing product”, which was mentioned by three respondents who would engage with the brand content if the presented on it offering was visually attractive and could serve as an inspiration.

“I would probably share it if it’s something that is in my style or in the style of a person that I know. So, then I will send it to that person as a recommendation.” (Interviewee 6)

Moreover, three participants also pointed at the general “aesthetics” of the content as another factor.

“Something kind of in my style, I mean colors, light, you know... I really enjoy aesthetic content there” (Interviewee 7)

The next code “interaction” was another factor, since two participants said that they like to engage with content which has more interactive character and in some form invites to engage.

“And also, like considering the Instagram and these new social media platforms that allow you to engage. So, it probably it uses some like questions or for example “which one do you prefer?” make something that calls you to make an action.” (Interviewee 3)

The last engagement factor mentioned by only one follower concerned the content which is “well-prepared”.

“There must be some idea, like not some random photos or something...” (Interviewee 7)

The least mentioned engagement factors concerning CSR and well-prepared content were listed by only one active follower of H&M Instagram profile. Additionally, only active members of H&M

online brand community expressed willingness to engage with the brand profile due to visuals presenting products in use. The rest of answers was claimed by both type of users.

4.2.3. Brand Associations Evoked by H&M Co-branding Content

Part of Thematic Analysis directly linked to co-branding communication, following structure of thesis, firstly considered brand associations reflected by H&M followers based on analyzed content. Themes within this section were derived from Keller's Association Scale (1993): attributes, benefits and attitudes with their sub-categories described in chapter 2.5.1. Brand associations shared at least by two respondents are presented.

4.2.3.1. Product-Related Attributes

The most respondents, five out of eight, associated product of the brand behind the displayed co-branding content with "high quality" and "high fashion", putting brand products outside fast fashion category. Second most common trait was "extraordinary designs" and "luxurious" reflecting exclusivity of products, each reflected by four interviewees.

"Another thing is that they show this room [visual 1], it looks like a designer boutique, his workplace, it kind of tells me "this is piece of high, high fashion", you know, designed, handmade."
(Interviewee 7)

"(...) they don't look casual, but they are something different and extraordinary." (Interviewee 2)

Traits mentioned by three respondents comprised those of "piece of art", "designer" and "fancy designs", placing co-branded items beyond fast fashion category and putting it once again within high fashion class and underlying craftsmanship.

"And also, in the first story [visual 1] the dress looks like a piece of art in a museum so something precious." (Interviewee 3)

"I would probably say fancy, high fashion, professional, very artistic as a designer was behind that for sure." (Interviewee 6)

The other elicited product-related attributes mentioned by two respondents comprised “vivid colors”, “elaborate styles” and “professional”, highlighting products salience and excellence of smallest details. Moreover, two respondents also mentioned association of “eye-catching designs”.

“(…) it's very out there, bright colors. And the one of the contents that shows you know, very embroidered very, like elaborate kind of pieces, which is good, which is not something that I would normally choose for a day today [visual 3].” (Interviewee 5)

“All those clothes are really eye-catching, like you are automatically in center of attention, like people will look at you.” (Interviewee 7)

All the above traits were reflected by both more and less active users, beside “vivid colors” and “eye-catching designs”, claimed by two active followers.

4.2.3.2. Non-Product Related Attributes

In case of the non-product related attributes both less and more active followers shared the associations connected to superior price and perceived the brand as unreachable through associations of “expensive” reflected by six followers and “limited availability/exclusive” mentioned by two users.

“It's limited, not only because of its price, which I guess is pretty higher than usual, but I think that also because of the limited series of this products, they write when it is launched, I feel like they make a big hype around it.” (Interviewee 1)

4.2.3.3. User Imagery

Six out of eight interviewees associated typical user of the H&M based on co-branding content to be someone “popular/influencer” as they explained that this person would be a famous persona in a world of fashion or on Instagram, enjoying wearing this type of clothes on everyday basis or has more occasions to put it on.

“Because if you are, you know, fashion designer, or I don't know, somebody who's posting a lot on Instagram it is a totally different situation and you can wear it all the time (…)” (Interviewee 2)

“And also, the one which has the opportunity to attend some parties of bigger range, you know. More fancy ones.” (Interviewee 4)

The next most common association was connected to user imagery personality, interests and demographics, namely “original”, “daring”, followed by “fashion conscious” and “young adults”. Followers described this person as someone who likes to look different, knows and follows recent trends and fashion world participants and is not bothered about others opinion.

“(…) maybe it's for the people having the more, I don't know, extraordinary, “loud” kind of style. People who like to be “different”.” (Interviewee 1)

“Well, I would say elegant with attention to the latest trends, probably someone who likes to express him or herself through fashion.” (Interviewee 3)

In line with above, three respondents associated typical user of the brand with trait of “confident”, complementing daring and youth spirit of the person.

“I think that this person is probably more brave, confident and young. Also, probably confident of their body and not caring about other people’s opinion. Someone who likes to stand out, not boring, original.” (Interviewee 6)

Lastly, two brand followers associated the user with traits of “above average income” and “elegant”, placing typical user of the brand within higher society members, both regarding material status and

“So, young girl, something about 20-30 years old girl. I think very girly. With a little bit higher status than middle one.” (Interviewee 4)

“Well, I would say elegant with attention to the latest trends probably someone who likes to express him or herself through fashion.” (Interviewee 3)

Considering type of users claiming above traits, each was reflected by both more and less active followers.

4.2.3.4. Usage Imagery

All the respondents associated typical usage situation of products presented on H&M co-branding content with “special occasion”. The other more popular answers among participants included “party”

and “wedding”. Three or two of the interviewees also listed “special dinner”, “gala” and “fashion event”.

“I would say that products presented this way would be for some, I don't know, occasions like celebrations, some gala, cocktail party, etc.” (Interviewee 1)

“Okay, so I think some fancy party, or some cocktail party. Maybe even wedding? Some kind of runway shows, fashion events.” (Interviewee 4)

“Yeah, so as I told you, not casual situation. Special occasion, maybe some party. Something official, maybe date but rather like fancy dinner or something.” (Interviewee 7)

To conclude, usage imagery of the presented H&M products has been associated with “special occasion” by all the participants and thus both types of followers.

4.2.3.5. Personality

Theme “personality” covered associations belonging to last sub-category of non-product related attributes, brand personality of H&M evoked by co-branding related content. Two most frequently mentioned traits, each reflected by half of the respondents, comprised associations of “diversified/surprising” and “young”. Respondents agreed that H&M shows its youthful nature as well as its less known side, which makes it stand out both in relation to regular content as well as visually differing pieces of content.

“Well, yeah, it's something different than the regular H&M, more luxurious, I would say I see the brand like with many faces.” (Interviewee 1)

“I would say young person, maybe 20 to 30, it would be a girl I mean it would be definitely a woman. Also, pretty nice and open-minded.” (Interviewee 8)

As above mentioned in the statement of Interviewee 8 another two respondents (in total three) also referred to brands personality to be “girly” and “open-minded”. Another personality trait listed by the same number of followers concerned “strong personality” as well as “caring” character of the brand with regard to H&M bringing piece of luxury world through the content and being respectful to high fashion.

“(...) that person wants everyone to feel special, like is caring. You know, it’s H&M so they want you to feel luxury but in accessible way” (Interviewee 4)

“Yes, of course they, they show on these photos that they care about those products” (Interviewee 2)

H&M was also perceived (in all cases by two respondents) as being “glamorous” as well as “confident” creating aura of authority and resoluteness around itself. Parallely, more down-to-earth and accessible traits such as “funny” and “energetic” were mentioned, establishing observable contrasts within relatively neutral regular perceptions. Moreover, more fashion related traits were noted by respondents, pointing on features such as “trendy” and “international”, emphasizing timeliness and modernity of the brand.

“Well, I would say confident, modern, crazy. (...) following the trends, trendy would be the word, I guess. I think it's kind of „cosmopolitan”, you know, big cities, etc.” (Interviewee 1)

“(...) a person in those settings will be a bit eccentric, a little bit like weird, quirky, but funny, a little bit glamorous, a little bit “out there” kind of person.” (Interviewee 5)

Each of above traits was reflected by both types of users, beside “glamorous” association reported only by active followers.

4.2.3.6. Functional Benefits

Among all the benefits, functional ones, directly related to products of the brand were least acknowledged. Only one respondent, active user, reflected possible advantage of “investment” basing on supposed high quality of product, contrary to regular perceptions.

“Also, I think that when you wear it, you can feel it is expensive.” (Interviewee 3)

4.2.3.7. Experiential Benefits

Experiential benefits, relating to feelings emerging from usage of the brand basing on H&M co-branding related content were of highest number detected by us. Most common benefit, mentioned by seven respondents relates to “standing out” emerging from extraordinariness of products

perceptions. It was followed by the benefit of “heightened self-esteem” listed by half of the interviewees, who claimed those products may evoke feeling of confidence.

“(...) when you are outside surrounded with like “gray” people wearing normal clothes, you can be someone unexpected and really cool” (Interviewee 2)

“I think those products can make you feel like original or extraordinary. (...) Also, maybe it would make someone’s confidence higher.” (Interviewee 8)

Additionally, feelings emerging from brand usage such as “feeling special” and being “center of attention” each mentioned by three respondents, where two participants also referred to “feeling attractive”, which indicates seeing H&M as enabler for self-value enhancement.

“Like, you would be really in the center of attention, as I said before. Like everyone would look at you. You would also feel womanly, like I guess you could feel that kind of attractiveness...”
(Interviewee 7)

Each of above traits was reflected by both types of users beside “feeling attractive” considered by active followers.

4.2.3.8. Symbolic Benefits

When it comes to symbolic benefits reflected within the content and brand behind, half of the respondents noted social approval coming from entering the “high fashion world”, being form of aspirational group for consumers of fast fashion brands. Along with above, two respondents perceived H&M as a mean of “self-expression” and parallel “privilege”, allowing individuals to form and present their ideal selves constructed through inaccessible for majority of consumers pieces into their surroundings and at the same time signaling their awareness when it comes to fashion craft.

“Yeah, just popping in, tapping into that high fashion world a bit, with this kind of pieces rather than just bland, you know, typical t-shirt (...)” (Interviewee 5)

“I think it's a one way to express yourself and then since it's a collaboration with less known brand (...) you kind of become a part of a smaller circle.” (Interviewee 3)

Moreover, three respondents believed that brand may bring advantages of getting closer to “celebrity style” and experiencing it, signaling their extraordinary style and enhancing self-esteem, along with above mentioned feelings of privilege.

“Because when you can wear the dress which is shown like “the only one”, like here [visual 1], you just feel kind of privileged, special (...). Also, if you can wear a dress that is worn by Kendall Jenner you can feel better, special.” (Interviewee 4)

Associations of aspirational groups comprising fashion world and celebrities were claimed by both more and less active followers, where self-expression and privilege were reflected by active users.

4.2.3.9. Attitudes

Co-branding content was also observed to evoke certain attitudes toward the brand behind. Two major attitudes were distinguished, each linked to different emotion being its source. “Positive” attitudes mostly linked to being impressed or surprised by the brand and its personality, were noted to be favorable attitudes.

“Yes, it is something different. It's something unexpected for me but I don't mind it. I like when brands can be unexpected.” (Interviewee 6)

“It reminded me how it also looks like. After seeing those visuals, I can tell you that I can still kind of feel this photo and I'm thinking about this part of view. All of them look cool.” (Interviewee 2)

On the other hand, “negative” attitudes which were expressed through feelings of confusion or being deceived, were observed as unfavorable attitudes.

“It seems like I'm really confused with the brand. (...) all of it makes sense to me, what they're doing, considering that I know the brand very well. But maybe if I was new to the brand, I would be a little bit confused about what their strategy is (...)” (Interviewee 5)

“You know, because H&M is not an expensive brand. It's not luxury brand. So, making their pieces look like special and only in the world, like on those posts it's just like lying to the customers.” (Interviewee 4)

What is worth noting, is that both less and more active followers claimed positive attitudes toward the brand and content itself. When it comes to active followers, favorable attitudes were blended with

negative ones, which were only present among this sub-group of respondents. Moreover, respondent 4, who claimed to identify herself and her style with regular H&M expressed highly negative attitude.

4.2.4. Perceptions Toward H&M Co-Branding Content on Instagram

Next part of Thematic Analysis outcomes describes H&M followers perceptions regarding fit between co-branding content and the brand they follow, corresponding to second sub-question of the thesis. We wanted to understand how they evaluate congruity between content and the brand, what are the sources of potential incongruities and lastly, what reactions did it evoke. Above led to creation of four themes – “Content perceptions”, “Perceived inconsistencies”, “Perceived consistencies” and “Evoked feelings”.

4.2.4.1. Content Perceptions

The first code in this section describes piece of co-branding communication as “extraordinary”, which corresponds to its look itself, creativity of composition as well as the selection and designs of the products presented on it. Both active and less active H&M community members shared this perception.

“Putting famous models, placing the dress in the front of the picture, selecting proper lighting. Also, this “fearless” people dancing in a palace, it’s pretty creative idea.” (Interviewee 4)

“Well, I would say, it’s because of the particularity of the designs, because it’s not something that you see everywhere. Because if they show a white T-shirt, it could be H&M, it could be Zara, it could be whatever. But this dress you see it from H&M and nowhere else.” (Interviewee 3)

Half of the respondents also perceived the co-branding related H&M content as “professional”, which is the next code emerging referring to general professionalism, good lighting and high visual quality.

“It’s really professional, even this one [visual 2], it seems to be “random”, but everything is there, at right place.” (Interviewee 1)

“They show us them in a really nice way for example, because of the background, the background is like, it looks nice, looks expensive, they pay attention to make a high-quality photo in a good scenario.” (Interviewee 2)

The next code related to “story behind” was one of the most popular perceptions as it was mentioned by seven out of eight interviewees including all less active followers. This code was build based on few preliminary codes like story behind more precisely atmosphere of love, magic and mystery and movie as one of the respondents referred to it as well. Respondents perceived the content to carry meaning behind, showcase entire story behind the collection and at the same time present clothes in unusual for H&M way.

“I think that the idea was to, okay, show the clothes which are really colorful and interesting, but at the same time, you can see the interior, which is super classy, the models and the different, abstract type of movement, like partying, okay, so it's just really kind of artistic, something like this, it shows me some bigger story I would say.” (Interviewee 1)

“There is something behind that, like some history, fairytale [laughs].” (Interviewee 7)

The next code devoted to “luxurious aesthetics”, which was also the perception listed by seven interviewees including all less active members of H&M online community. Thus, similarly to the previous code the participants noticed the expensive setting and simultaneously connected it with luxury and uniqueness.

“But this movie, which you showed me looks like you know rich, there's a lot of gold. And everything looks so expensive (...).” (Interviewee 2)

“Also, the background and the general like atmosphere of this content can tell us that it is something unique, something high quality.” (Interviewee 8)

We have also created a separate code for “aesthetic” as three respondents, including both types of followers additionally referred to the outstanding visual aesthetic of H&M communication.

“And generally, I like how both of those posts look like, they look really aesthetic and it is just nice to look at it.” (Interviewee 7)

Subsequently, half of interviewees also perceived the co-branding H&M content as “contrasting”. Some of them like Interviewee 1 who is a less active follower of H&M, however, is a frequent consumer of luxury fashion brands compared this type of H&M piece of communication to specific luxury brand Moschino which this participant associates with contrasts. Participants referred to contrasts mostly basing on the scenario and the situation displayed on the visuals.

“Also, this one [visual 3] it's a bit like from the Moschino style, like many contrasts, both when I think about people and their behavior and the place where they are.” (Interviewee 1)

“I also like the aesthetic of this, like it is more between young and innovative and traditional and more classical. I think it's a nice combination.” (Interviewee 3)

Half of the interviewees including both less active H&M followers thought that displayed visuals have “consistent composition”, while referring to all the elements on the posts matching each other as well as detailed setting.

“All the details there “do the job”, for example, surroundings, interior, light, colors.” (Interviewee 1)

“So, I think that they also care about this clothes and clothes suit to the situation, so they have similar character to what is going on the visual.” (Interviewee 2)

The same number of respondents also including both less active H&M online community members perceived the co-branding H&M content as “unexpected” as they are used to a different type or style of visuals within H&M profile.

“I said “fresh” because it is just something new, what you are not used to daily if you are H&M follower, not in line with content which I told you about before.” (Interviewee 4)

All three less active followers of the brand described the presented H&M content as “artistic” and as a result they perceived it as impressive.

“I like it because it's more special and obviously more artistic. So, it feels special.” (Interviewee 6)

The next code is “celebrity-related” as half of the participants recognized the model within the H&M co-branding related content by mentioning her name or general appearance, what for some of them was an indicator of products quality and value.

“From looking at this photo and when I see the professional model that is wearing this, and also this kind of photo, I'm thinking that it will be more expensive and that the quality is better.” (Interviewee 2)

The next code in this theme is “campaign inconsistency” which refers to three respondents' opinion both more active H&M followers, that one of the displayed visuals does not fit the rest of the co-

branding content of H&M, which was chosen as representative one of the whole campaign. However, it seems like a very individual perception as one of the participants said:

“Well, that one [points on visual number 2] looks a little bit different compared to all the others because it's not that strategic maybe. Personally, I don't like it that much. [laughs] But this might be because it is a video and it's a little bit too long for what it's showing.” (Interviewee 3)

Another code used to describe followers perceptions toward co-branding related content is “slightly familiar”. Five respondents, including two less active, recognized some of the communication elements which they associate with H&M and consequently perceived those as matching the brand. More precisely, followers recognized hints of H&M authenticity (real-life situations), diversity (models) and accessibility along with all the other uncommon tactics.

“(…), I think because the second story is showing the clothes from like a user, buyer perspective from the street, so kind of accessible and approachable.” (Interviewee 6)

“And the last one [visual 4], just standard, you know, celebrity content that you regularly encounter at H&M profile. So yeah, it's nice, familiar, more casual, but a bit different because of clothes.” (Interviewee 5)

Lastly, two respondents, including one less active follower, perceived investigated content as “intriguing”. Two rationale were given, one respondent explained that she perceived backstage frames as attention-catching where the other respondent perceived visuals as intriguing due to its unusual plot.

“It looks more edgy and a little bit more careless, shows this young people confidence. So, I think it's fun because you don't know what is happening, so you keep looking at it.” (Interviewee 3)

The last code is “staged” as one respondent who is also a less active H&M community member found situation presented on the co-branding content as unrealistic.

“Like those people [visual 3], they are not some casual people, enjoying everyday situations, it looks like very “staged”.” (Interviewee 1)

To sum up, fourteen traits illustrating respondents perceptions towards co-branding related H&M content were found. Each of above was reflected by both types of users beside “artistic” and “staged” mentioned by less active users and “campaign inconsistency” claimed by active user.

4.2.4.2. Perceived Inconsistencies

Within the theme “Perceived inconsistencies” we identified two intertwined codes, each describing different source of perceived mismatch between co-branding content and H&M. Firstly, within the code “brand image conflict” six respondents experienced conflict between image of the brand created through the visuals (message behind the content) and H&M brand image stored in their memory. Five followers claimed to perceive overall brand image conflict, seeing the brand behind the visuals as giving up its core values toward high fashion brand status.

“Yeah, it's more high fashion. Obviously, I said fast fashion about H&M, but this doesn't fit the regular image.” (Interviewee 5)

Taking closer look into dimensions of brand image conflict, source of incongruity was detected within product-related and non-product related attributes among three respondents, including one less active user. Respondents claimed that image of the brand created through co-branding content contradicts H&M core values of affordability, product design and use.

“I would say it's not fitted with H&M because in my mind the H&M is a really cheap shop and the target of this shop is rather younger girls and women, and I'm not pretty sure if they would really want to buy this because for example the price.” (Interviewee 8)

Secondly, seven respondents perceived a mismatch when it comes to message execution, what we included within the code “communication style”. Followers found co-branding content visually mismatching H&M Instagram profile nor fitting the brand itself. Mismatch was explained through expectations toward given product category and regular posts spread by the brand, for instance related to its focus on the products. Mismatch in communication style was also explained by aesthetics and recognition of luxurious tactics, which respondents were familiar with.

“I really enjoy following this kind of content, but maybe when seeing it in some other profile, here I rather expect some street style photos, some look-books alike, not surrealism and so on, because it's still H&M.” (Interviewee 1)

“And if comes to the photos I mean they just look like too much high fashion, so it seems fake like H&M pretends something.” (Interviewee 8)

Two respondents perceived co-branding related content as being expected within other brand communities they are part of, belonging to premium and luxury categories.

„I'm also the follower of luxury brands. So, I think that this kind of content you sent me, okay, meet my expectations for other brands than in case of H&M.” (Interviewee 1)

Above inconsistencies were claimed by both more and less active users. However, some of the factors such as luxury brand community membership, regular content and brand image preference mediated the evaluations of inconsistencies and feelings evoked, as described in “Evoked feelings” section.

4.2.4.3. Perceived Consistencies

The first code “H&M co-branding strategies” was the most common answer mentioned by five participants as a reasoning for their perceived fit between the presented co-branding related pieces of H&M communication and their stored knowledge of the brand. Indeed, both more active and less active members of online H&M community argued about the perceived consistency of the displayed H&M co-branding content based on their previous knowledge and experience with similar collaborations done by the brand, treating it as an exemption from regular practices.

“(…) I know that they have collaborated with other brands and they made some collections that were more fancy. So, I would say it fits them as like a special kind of product, but not daily thing that they have.” (Interviewee 6)

The next code, which have been found in this theme was “brand personality fit”, which related to differentiated brand personality of H&M related to its broad offering and vast clientele, as noted by one active follower.

“They show different personality. But I think it’s quite good, you know you have a lot of customers and it’s really good they try to suit to everybody. (...) it's good to have clothes in the different quality because also sometimes they are looking forward to those kind of things.” (Interviewee 2)

The last code. “community members expectations” corresponded to H&M followers expectations which have been met by co-branding content. Two interviewees, both less and more active users, said that the reason behind their met expectations is the usage of celebrities in this piece of H&M communication, based on daily practices of the brand.

“I mean, some of it is what I would expect, knowing the brand. So, the Kendall Jenner content, it's kind of standard, also when you look at rather normal setting there. It's kind of expectable.” (Interviewee 5)

Both less and more active users found above consistencies, beside brand personality fit perceived by active brand follower.

4.2.4.4. Evoked Feelings

When it comes to feelings evoked by co-branding related content, six respondents experienced “enjoyment”. This was justified by visually pleasing nature of the posts, story behind them creating special atmosphere and contrasts observed within character of visuals, combining modernity with the classical.

“I also like the aesthetic of this, like it is more between young and innovative and traditional and more classical. I think it’s a nice combination.” (Interviewee 3)

“And I think the light is really well played in this content. Because it's really well prepared and looks super professional, gives some kind of mystery to the posts” (Interviewee 1)

Moreover, respondents felt “enjoyment” since they feel sympathy for the celebrity recognized within the content as well as they were positively surprised while seeing something new and more intriguing than regularly.

“(...) For sure, I can tell you that this advertisement with Kendall and with those clothes was one of my favorite ones. I just like her look and I like looking at her.” (Interviewee 2)

“But actually, I think it is kind of nice surprise from time to time, to see something different (...)” (Interviewee 7)

One of the followers noted feeling of “privilege” evoked by backstage experience offered by the brand (visual 4), which made the respondent feel like having exclusive access to the brand and unique activities as its follower.

“So, it's an interesting mix. Like I feel I know some „backstage” which others, who don’t follow H&M cannot see.” (Interviewee 1)

Moving to more unfavorable feelings, two respondents experienced “dislike” caused by inconsistency within campaign as well as mismatch with their perceptions toward H&M. With regard to latter one, found co-branding content aesthetics and carried message mismatching the brand and its simplicity.

“I like easy and simple content which H&M posts normally. So, this one, in my opinion is too fancy for H&M.” (Interviewee 4)

“Well, that one [visual 2] looks a little bit different compared to all the others because it's not that strategic maybe. Personally, I don't like it that much.” (Interviewee 3)

Moreover, two respondents experienced “confusion”. Respondents linked it to mixed feelings evoked by the contents, where positive and negative emotions overlapped as well as insufficient explanation of the campaign elements from the brand side, such as usage of hashtags unfamiliar to them before and once more, inconsistencies when it comes to communication style.

“I'm a little bit confused about what the “project” is. So, I see the hashtag “#project<3” that I'm not really sure of. It doesn't really give me much clue. Why is it called a project and what it is about, you know” (Interviewee 5)

Additionally, two respondents experienced feeling of “doubt”. Even though interviewees found content visually pleasing and engaging, they did not perceive it to be convincing as it did not go in line with what they think the brand stands for.

“But there is an image conflict because obviously, they have very basic stuff and at the same time they do this. So, yeah, but as I said, like, I don't see it as technically like a very negative thing, but maybe not too convincing for me.” (Interviewee 5)

“You know, I know H&M very well, so I know that in the end it is not as luxury as it looks like, so after seeing those I still remember what I like it for.” (Interviewee 7)

Lastly, three respondents shared their feeling of “no purchase intention”, as the presented offering did not go in line with their personal needs and style.

*“But on those photos I can't find anything I would like to buy, which are more like basic stuff.”
(Interviewee 8)*

To conclude, co-branding content evoked various feelings among both types of H&M followers. Factors positively influencing the responses comprised character and aesthetics of visuals as well as community membership. On the other hand, unfavorable responses were mentioned only by more active H&M followers caused by inconsistency in campaign, mismatch to their regular image of H&M as well as not enough explanation included. Nevertheless, the same participants also expressed

their enjoyment. Three participants clearly stated that due to their needs and personal style they would not buy presented products.

4.2.5. Consumer-Brand Identification

Last part of thematic analysis outcomes, in line with structure of the thesis concerns brand followers' perceptions on their identification with the brand based on co-branding related Instagram communication and resulting willingness to engage with it. Within this part of analysis, we created two themes – “Self-identification” and “Willingness to engage”.

4.2.5.1. Self-Identification

When it comes to self-identification with H&M behind investigated content, respondent gave both negative and positive answers, resulting in two codes, “self-identification” and “lack of self-identification”. Three of brand followers, including one less active, perceived H&M communicating in different way as still fitting their self-concepts. One respondent (Interviewee 1) justified her opinion with being also luxury brands consumer, whose communication style she was familiar with. Another reasons for self-identification were perceived in similarities regarding personality traits of the brand and followers, namely diversity and passion for fashion along with diverse style of consumers.

“I don't think it fits the brand to be honest, it rather fits my style, since I also buy at more premium shops.” (Interviewee 1)”

“I love things like that, and I feel that I also suit to things like that, unless you know, only the price could be a problem, but I really like it.” (Interviewee 2)

On the other hand, „lack of self-identification” was noted among five remaining followers, including two less active users. In all cases, respondents justified their point of view with identification with regular H&M and their communication, perceiving H&M communicating different way as not fitting their style nor preferences. Two interviewees emphasized their strong identification with core brand and personal mismatch with luxurious brands and their clientele. Moreover, even though not

identifying themselves with H&M based on investigated pieces of content, they highlighted that their identification with brand was not affected in a long-term perspective.

“I don’t want to pretend that I’m luxury customer or I’m part of that world. I follow H&M because I like the brand the way it is, not the way it tries to enter some high fashion club.” (Interviewee 4)

“No, with those ones I don’t really feel any bigger connection, you know [laughs]. But still, I know that this is just one-time thing, and I still perceive H&M to be in my style.” (Interviewee 7)

4.2.5.2. Willingness to Engage

Next factor giving opposite results among respondents concerned their engagement with brand through co-branding related content. All respondents who identified themselves with the brand behind the visuals experienced feeling of “willingness to engage”, which was explained by similarity to luxury content (noted by luxury consumer, respondent 1), its extraordinariness and aesthetics. In addition to them, one more and two less active followers who did not identify themselves with H&M communicating different way were willing to engage with the content due to visual pleasure experienced.

“But in general, yes I would engage because they are really interesting, unique and it’s worth to see.” (Interviewee 2)

“Yeah, definitely I would like it and maybe talk with my friends about this collaboration or about those photos on their Instagram, since they look very nice and interesting.” (Interviewee 8)

On the other hand, two respondents who did not identify themselves with H&M seen through co-branding content was observed to be “unwilling to engage”. Similarly, as in case of self-identification, it was backed up by their loyalty and self-identification with regular H&M image, as may also be explained through active H&M follower status.

“I wouldn’t give it a like or anything, because for me it’s just like another world and not H&M which I like. I know they have those premium collections but here it just looks too premium and in the end it’s still H&M” (Interviewee 4)

“It is just not my style, and at this kind of accounts I focus mostly on clothes, models and I enjoy seeing how and where I can wear the items.” (Interviewee 7)

To conclude, H&M followers reported contrasting perceptions toward self-identification with the brand both in case of more and less active users. Relationships with luxurious brands, level of attachment with H&M as well as aesthetic preferences were found to be mediating the responses.

5. Discussion

5.1. Brand Associations

Following section refers to first research sub-question investigating fast fashion brand followers' perceptions of co-branding related content on Instagram considering brand associations. Findings from both parts of our study will be discussed jointly and refer to Brand Image Incongruity concept (Sjödin & Törn, 2006) as well as co-branding, luxury and fast fashion branding literature.

Product-related attributes (Keller, 1993), in our case brand associations related to H&M products, have been vastly overlapping between brand followers' responses and associations found through Semiotic Analysis. As we suppose, basing on analyzed content, brand tried to create associations related to superiority and uniqueness of products, extraordinary and artistic designs along with excellent quality corresponding to key luxury traits such as those of uniqueness, sophistication (Van Gorp, 2012) and closeness to art (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012), which were also reflected by interviewed brands followers. However, typical for fast fashion brands product related traits of trendiness and timeliness (Cheema, 2018) found by us within pieces of H&M co-branding content were omitted by respondents.

Similar pattern was observed within *non-product-related attributes* (Keller, 1993). Regarding the brand associations related to the *price* we noticed that through analyzed content H&M may be seen as more expensive yet still accessible for its consumers. Nevertheless, brand followers responses were contradictory - they associated the brand with premium prices, being limited and exclusive. Therefore, core fast fashion traits of affordability and accessibility (Caro & Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2014) were replaced in consumer perceptions by associations mirroring luxurious brands characteristics of premium prices and exclusivity (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Based on the co-branding content we observed that typical *user* of the brand may be associated with individualism, having rather strong personality, what in our opinion may fit young clientele of fast fashion brands (Cheema, 2018) what was also reflected by interviewees. Nevertheless, typical user of H&M seen through co-branding related content could be associated with affluence and superior social status, what was also reflected by brand followers and once again linked the brand associations with luxury traits, more precisely wealthy clientele (Shen et al., 2017). Co-branding content created strong associations to special occasions as the typical *usage* situation from both our and respondents perspective.

Nevertheless, even though we noticed that basing on visuals one may attach more informal and casual associations of *usage imagery*, brand followers described the brand to be chosen for special occasions, important and fancy events. Thus, once again associations reflected by H&M followers could be compared to those corresponding to luxury brands - in this case, their prestige and sophistication (Van Gorp, 2012). *Brand personality* associations found through Semiotic Analysis corresponding to H&M young, modern and diversified character covered with brand followers perceptions, being in line with fast fashion global approach and diversity (Gabrielli et al., 2013). However, majority of brand associations reflected by interviewees indicated that contrary to rather approachable traits found behind the content such as “down-to-earth”, they perceived the brand personality as strong, energetic and confident what in our opinion corresponds to luxury brands unconventionality and strength (Van Gorp, 2012; Som & Blanckaert, 2015).

Considering *functional benefits* (Keller, 1993) we think that through models behavior, one may reflect associations of relative comfort linked to usage of H&M products, which was not reflected by any of the interviewed brand followers. One of them, on the other hand, perceived products to be a form of investment. Such opinion is rather contradictory to fast fashion consumers novelty needs and consequent frequent purchases (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2006). The functional benefits were the least addressed and reflected brand associations of H&M, as opposed to the experiential and symbolic benefits, what goes in line with Keller (1993) who argued that symbolic benefits are especially related to more socially evident products.

The *experiential benefits* (Keller, 1993) which we found basing on the meanings within pieces of communication were in line with those reflected by interviewed H&M followers, namely feeling of being in a center of attention as well as feeling special and attractive. While within the brand posts we found emphasis on the femininity and seduction as possible experiential benefits, brand followers focused on the perks of standing out and improved self-esteem emerging from brand usage. In general, we found all the above experiential benefits corresponding to luxury brand perceptions of uniqueness, hedonism and conspicuousness benefitting their consumers with emotional rewards, social position and interest (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004) along with benefits from symbolic fashion brands consumption, used to construct consumers ideal self-images (Jin & Cedrola, 2017).

Regarding *symbolic benefits* (Keller, 1993), pieces of content may evoke brand associations linked to high fashion world as well as entry to aspirational groups. All the above were also reflected by interviewees. While behind the content we found mostly social value benefits brand followers also

noticed self-expression as another symbolic benefit. Albeit idea of fast fashion brands is to bring high fashion designs to their regular clientele (Bhardwaj & Fairhurst, 2010) at affordable prices (Joy et al., 2012), basing on followers responses they perceived H&M to provide the actual access to above aspirational groups achieved through products perceived by them as luxurious, what goes in line with Vigneron and Johnson (2004) perceptions of extended self, characterizing luxury brand consumption, allowing consumers to reach their reference groups.

Lastly, considering *attitudes* (Keller, 1993), we think that co-branding related communication could evoke positive attitudes, what was partially confirmed by respondents' reactions. Depending on consumer, positive attitudes backed up with feelings of surprise and impression as well as negative ones caused by feelings of confusion and deception were observed. This will be further discussed in upcoming section.

As may be observed, brand associations typical for luxury brands prevailed over those typical for fast fashion brands within pieces of analyzed H&M content, what may be explained through objectives of fast fashion co-branding, aiming at shift toward more premium position among consumers (Mróz-Gorgoń, 2016) as well as image dilution prevention when seen from luxury brand perspective (Stankeviciute, 2012). Accomplishment of above in the moment of exposure was confirmed by brand followers - when analyzing free associations task radical contradictions between regular H&M associations and those reflected when exposed to pieces of analyzed content may be observed. In line with fast fashion brands offerings disposability and affordability (Cheema, 2018), regular H&M image comprised strong associations of being cheap, low quality or broadly available where when seen through co-branding content in line with luxury brands outstanding quality, artistry and stratifying effect linked to premium prices (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004) H&M was seen as expensive, sophisticated and of high quality. As basing on co-branding content H&M followers mostly reflected brand associations mismatching the brand (and consequently, its category, as shown in preceding paragraphs) Brand Image Incongruity (Sjödín & Törn, 2006) occurred. Important to note is the fact that even though through Semiotics Analysis we found brand associations fitting H&M and its brand category, they were barely noticed by brand followers. This is supported by Sjödín and Törn (2006) hypothesis that brand image incongruencies attracts consumers attention and require more elaboration to solve them. It may be observed that none of H&M free associations regarding regular and co-branding related content overlapped. This may suggest that even though at the moment of exposure followers perceived H&M through luxury-originated associations at delay they returned to regular preconceptions, what may indicate that spillover effect in a form of image reinforcement, which

following Geylani et al. (2008) stands for key motivations of co-branding alliances, may be absent. Such outcome is in line with Sjödin & Törn (2006) hypothesis that in case of mature brands consumers are likely to assimilate incongruities as an exemption and not change previous beliefs about the brand. Respondents of our study voluntarily joined the brand community months ago, they are regular consumers of H&M and therefore, we believe that it is well established in their minds.

5.2. Congruity Perceptions

The subsequent sections relate to second sub-question of the thesis regarding perceptions on congruity between fast fashion brand and its co-branding content on Instagram. Findings from interviews will be discussed in light of Schema Incongruity Theory (Mandler, 1982) as well as Brand Image Incongruity concept (Sjödin & Törn, 2006) and related studies included in the literature review.

The respondents perceived majority of co-branding related content within H&M Instagram page as incongruent with their brand schemas established for H&M, however, some still fitted within them. Thus, it indicates that the occurred incongruity observed by H&M followers have been of moderate level as some of the interruptions of their expectations have been resolved, which goes in line with general assumptions of Schema Incongruity Theory (Mandler, 1982).

Interviewed H&M online brand community members perceived the co-branding content as congruent with H&M concerning few aspects. The most mentioned reasoning was brand followers' previous knowledge on H&M co-branding strategies, what may be explained with numerous previous collaborations with luxury brands done by H&M before (Shen et al., 2017) being part of their brand schemas, which goes in line with Mandler (1982) assumptions on congruity as no interruptions with their expectations occurred in those terms. However, the perceived congruity by those consumers was based solely on their familiarity with previous H&M collaborations with luxury brands, where the luxury nature of the co-branding related content itself was still perceived as incongruent with the usual image of the brand. Another factor which directly met the expectations of H&M brand followers was celebrity as an endorser being commonly applied in general communication practices of fast fashion brands (Okonkwo, 2007) as well as their Instagram efforts (Loureiro et al., 2018) making the co-branding content congruent with H&M schemas. It matches Mandler (1982) assumptions as it did not require the brand followers to change their already established brand schemas. Additionally, the endorser chosen for this collaboration was Kendall Jenner being especially famous among

millennials, who are the main target group of fast fashion brands (Cheema, 2018). As H&M online community members were familiar with celebrity endorsement strategy of the brand basing on Heckler and Childers (1992) congruency occurred as their evaluations of expectancy and relevancy of the co-branding content including celebrity with their brand schemas were favorable. Another factor which moderated the opinions of the H&M brand fans was the street shot on one of the visuals, overlapping with their regular content perceptions regarding its realistic nature which is also one of the characteristics of fast fashion communication (Gurzki et al., 2019). Thus, in line with Mandler (1982) as it met the expectancies of community members towards brand visuals, it led to congruity perceptions. Therefore, the H&M choice of well-known celebrity as their endorser as well as including buyer perspective in the co-branding related content moderated the general opinion on incongruity as brand followers perceived those pieces of communication as more familiar. Additionally, one more active follower also seen co-branding content as congruent with H&M in terms of its personality, namely its diversified nature. It was based on her free brand associations towards regular H&M like various styles and clothing lines of the brand, thus it fitted with her previously established brand schemas.

As brand followers in some cases perceived co-branding related content as congruent with H&M brand yet the noticed inconsistencies have been recalled more often by almost all the respondents. It can be explained due to more in-depth consumer processing of incongruent brand communication, where inconsistent elements attract more attention as proposed by Sjödin and Törn (2006). The perceived incongruity between co-branding content of H&M within Instagram and H&M brand have been observed in terms of message behind those pieces of communication as well as message execution so the content itself.

As previously mentioned, results showed that consumers associated co-branding content of H&M very differently as opposed to the “regular” H&M. Thus, basing on Sjödin and Törn (2006) Brand Image Incongruity occurred as H&M community members’ brand associations evoked through this content were not in line with their previously established brand image of H&M. Majority of H&M followers specifically pointed at this mismatch as one of the main reasons for the observed incongruity. Besides the overall perception of brand image conflict brand followers experienced major inconsistencies regarding product category and its perceived price, which as explained in previous section on brand associations indicates their strength within their H&M brand schemas and their importance for consumers. Therefore, in this case the Brand Image Incongruity (Sjödin & Törn,

2006) occurred with special regard to core fast fashion traits, found in product and non-product-related attributes (price).

As mentioned above the style for co-branding communication within the H&M Instagram fan page being contradictory to the regular one has been the other source of perceived incongruities frequently alluded by H&M brand community members as it did not match their schemas established for the brand (Mandler, 1982). Moreover, this may be supported by Wang et al. (2018) who claimed that brand communication on brand fan pages differs between product categories thus community members expectations for each category may vary. In general followers' content perceptions indicate that H&M co-branding related pieces of communication, carrying values and associations of both brands (as revealed through Semiotics) in majority were seen as luxurious pointing at image reinforcement, which basing on Geylani et al. (2008) is one of the goals of co-branding cooperation. However, when both familiar and luxury communication elements were noticed some of the brand followers seen it as campaign inconsistency. Nevertheless, H&M co-branding content was most commonly perceived to carry a story behind, what may be directly linked to storytelling techniques widely used by luxury brands in order to sustain their myth (Som & Blanckaert, 2015, p. 140) being contradictory to regular H&M content which was seen as realistic and focused on products. Simultaneously, co-branding content was described by majority to be of luxurious aesthetic, along with perceptions of professionalism and consistency, what may be linked to luxury signifiers incorporated within complex sign systems applied by luxury brands (Gurzki et al., 2019). Once again, when reflecting on regular content perceptions, it contradicts with traits of accessibility and simplicity of H&M communication expressed by brand followers being also one of the characteristics of fast fashion promotional materials (Gurzki et al., 2019). Brand followers perceived the regular content of the Instagram H&M fan page as eye-catching being seemingly similar to their description of its co-branding related content as extraordinary and artistic, where the perception of the latter may point on linkage to luxury brand communication salience, differentiating them among other brand categories (Gurzki et al., 2019). Additionally, presented pieces of H&M communication have been perceived as contrasting, where one of the brand followers even compared it with a style of specific luxury brand, which following Mandler (1982) could be an alternative schema assimilating the incongruity. It also supports Lange and Dahlén (2003) and Torn and Dahlén (2007) results on in-depth revision of schemas to find the possible match in case ad-brand incongruity of familiar brand. Next, on contrary to regular content perceptions relating to its real-life situations focus, co-branding content was uniquely perceived as staged, connecting it with luxury communication strategies, which through

carefully planned communication aim at delivering brand philosophy to the audience (Krepapa et al., 2016). Additionally, few H&M followers directly expressed that the presented pieces of content did not meet their H&M community members expectations as they do not look like a typical content of this brand, thus do not meet their previously established schemas resulting in incongruity (Mandler, 1982). Some of those who shared this opinion being also luxury brands community members found the content meeting their expectations for those communities rather than H&M being fast fashion brand. It goes in line with findings of in-depth search for schema match in case of familiar brand by Lange and Dahlén (2003), in our case relating to match found with regard to other brand being the luxury one forming an alternative schema mentioned by Mandler (1982) assimilating incongruity. Reflecting on the theory, communication style was of the factors for Brand Image Incongruity (Sjödín & Törn, 2006) as basing on previous experiences with H&M and familiarity with its regular content, co-branding content within H&M Instagram fan page was not meeting followers' expectations.

In line with Sjödín and Törn (2006) hypothesis regarding heightened and diversified responses toward moderately incongruent brand communication processing, H&M co-branding content within its Instagram page evoked diverse reactions among its brand community members. The brand attitudes revealed as a part of reflected brand associations based on the presented pieces of brand communication have been both positive and negative. The positive brand attitudes were evoked through feelings of surprise and impression, while the negative ones were triggered when feeling confused and deceived with the brand. Therefore, the brand attitudes of H&M followers resulted from incongruity between co-branding content and the brand were positive for community members who resolved it through favorable reactions, which goes in line with Sjödín and Törn (2006) effects on consumers evaluations. In case of negative ones our findings only partially support Sjödín and Törn (2006) as negative attitudes arose in case of unresolved incongruity as respondents felt deceived with the brand. However, those brand attitudes have been expressed in the moment of exposure thus having in mind familiarity of H&M followers with the brand and its activities as well as belongingness to the community after seeing analyzed content at the moment of its publication, the incongruity evoked by co-branding related content may not have had a bigger effect on brand attitudes in a long-term, as also suggested in the study of Lange and Dahlén (2003).

Specific elements of the co-branding content within H&M Instagram page which were perceived as either congruent or incongruent with H&M evoked differing feelings. Although this content was perceived as incongruent in terms of communication style vast majority of the brand followers enjoyed it from various reasons like the visual looks, story behind or celebrity, which could indicate

that their ad attitude was positive due to resolved incongruity going in line with Sjödin and Törn (2006) assumptions. However, highly loyal to core H&M follower found luxuriousness mismatching the brand and evaluated it negatively, where the rest of respondents appreciated visually pleasing content, what may be also explained by aesthetics being one of regular engagement factors detected. In case of the highly loyal to core H&M community member expressing negative attitude toward the content she emphasized her admiration for the regular Instagram brand communication, which fits her expectations going in line with Sjödin and Törn (2006) as recall of the brand was improved as well as in accordance to Lange and Dahlén (2003) due to familiarity with the brand. Results regarding loyal to core H&M follower show that incongruency caused by co-branding related content had positive impact on brand attitude and negative one on ad attitude. On the other hand, enjoyment was evoked in H&M brand followers who were also luxury brands community members and found the content meeting their expectations for those communities rather than H&M, which simultaneously resulted in feelings of confusion toward the brand. Those H&M brand followers expressed their positive attitude toward the ad, however a negative one toward the fast fashion brand. Thus, the co-branding content had an effect on both ad and brand attitudes of H&M brand followers, which complements the findings of Torn and Dahlén (2007) who claimed that for familiar brands incongruent ads did not influence brand attitudes. However, incorporation of both familiar and luxury communication elements was perceived by some of the followers as campaign inconsistency, generating negative evaluations of the ad. Moreover, juxtaposition of both evoked mixed feelings resulting in confusion with the brand and its image in some of the H&M followers. Minority of brand followers had a feeling of doubt claiming that the luxury look of visuals is not convincing enough as in the end they know what H&M normally stands for so their sympathy for the brand stayed the same. Thus, the co-branding related content of H&M did not convince the respondents on luxuriousness of the brand and it had little influence on evaluation of the regular image of the H&M, which in accordance to Torn and Dahlén (2007) could be related to familiarity with the brand or in line with Sjödin and Törn (2006) due to maturity of the brand. However, the doubt feeling of one of the brand followers was also connected with the credibility of the communication, which decrease was presented by Sjödin and Törn (2006) as an effect of unresolved brand image incongruity where from our results it can be also seen in the case of resolved one. Additionally, although majority of respondents enjoyed the co-branding content of H&M almost half of them said that they would not like to buy any of the presented products as they do not fit their personal style. Thus, results show a negative effect on purchase intention, but it was not due to incongruent ads itself which supports the

findings of Torn and Dahlén (2007) for familiar brands. Interestingly, less active user and at the same time member of luxury brand community experienced feeling of privilege due to backstage experience offered by the brand to the community members but it was not considered as incongruity.

5.3. Consumer-Brand Identification

Last part of the discussion relates to third sub-question of the thesis and takes into consideration fast fashion brand followers identification with the brand and willingness to engage with it influenced by co-branding content. Results from interviews will be discussed with regard to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and CBI concept (Lam et al., 2010) along with related studies presented within literature review.

When it comes to H&M followers CBI, thus their perceptions, valuations and feelings toward belongingness with the brand (Lam et al., 2010), we observed two core patterns.

Firstly, majority of our respondents did not identify with the brand communicating in incongruent way, claiming that H&M co-branding related content and brand seen through it did not correspond to their personal style nor content preferences. Therefore, brand seen through co-branding content did not meet their expectations within private-self dimension, being component of consumers self-projections (Lam et al., 2010). Moreover, considering cognitive component of group identification (Tajfel, 1982) being a base for consumers perceptions toward belongingness with the brand (Lam et al., 2010), results were negative as respondents consciously did not perceive changed image of H&M as fitting their self-concepts. Some of the interviewed followers not only did not identify with the brand itself seen through co-branding content due to mismatch with its core traits but also perceived dissimilarities with its potential clientele, as in case of Interviewee 4, who claimed to be highly loyal to regular H&M. Since core values which our respondents associated H&M with regularly did not overlap with those found behind co-branding pieces, it may be observed that evaluative component of group identification (Tajfel, 1982), underlying consumer valuation of relationship with the brand (Lam et al., 2010) was again evaluated negatively. Moreover, mismatch within social dimension of selves, related to belongingness to brand enthusiasts (Lam et al., 2010) was also observed. Basing on Social Identity Theory (1986), it may be concluded that those consumers perceived clientele of co-branding items as an out-group, not corresponding to their identities. Worth noting is the fact that when claiming lack of identification with “unusual” H&M, brand followers emphasized that regular

H&M is the brand they associate themselves with, highlighted emotional bond and satisfaction with the brand as well as stressed constancy of positive self-identification with the brand after the alliance. Thus, three elements of CBI listed by Lam et al. (2010) – perceptions, feelings and valuations were brought and positively judged by them, explaining high loyalty claimed by the followers. This may be backed up with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) assumptions regarding social comparison, as when the evaluation of the ingroup was negative (not leading to heightened self-esteem), given interviewees tended to improve group position through emphasizing its most salient traits. Lastly, when it comes to emotional component of group identification (Tajfel, 1982), underlying feelings toward brand belongingness (Lam et al., 2010), highly loyal to core H&M respondents revealed negative and neutral affective responses to co-branding-based perceptions of the brand.

Second part of respondents positively evaluated their belongingness with the brand based on co-branding related content, even though they perceived incongruities between the content and the brand. As explained in results section, this was supported by perceived overlap with either brand followers personality traits such as fashion-consciousness or established relationships with luxury brands. Therefore, even though brand seemed unfamiliar when compared to regular H&M perceptions, it fitted followers private-self projections (Lam et al., 2010). Basing on Social Identity Theory (1986) and social categorization principles, it may be therefore observed that personality traits and luxury values served as bases for classification into given group and further identification. Since in both cases respondents claimed to identify with the brand and positively evaluated values behind changed image of the brand, cognitive and evaluative components of group identification (Tajfel, 1982), underlying perceptions and valuations of brand relationship (Lam et al., 2010) were positive. Contrary to Interviewee 4, negatively evaluating her similarity to potential clientele, Interviewee 1 highlighted that belongingness to luxury online brand communities impacted her evaluation. Therefore, for brand follower involved with relationships with luxury brands, H&M seen through co-branding content still fitted her social-self, as following Lam et al. (2010), she perceived herself part of its clientele. Moreover, basing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) her positive evaluations toward self-identification may be explained by the fact that luxury brands form part of her social identity, therefore it is possible that potential H&M clientele was still perceived by her as in-group. Similarly, respondents who justified their self-identification with personality traits and style possibly found those categories as allowing self-identification. Lastly, moving to feelings linked to identification with the brand (Lam et al., 2010), built on emotional element of group identification (Tajfel, 1982),

most of above respondents gave positive answers. Exemption here is luxury consumer who even though enjoyed the content itself, was confused about changed image of the brand. This, as we suspect, may be explained by the fact that her social identity comprised both luxury and fast fashion brands and therefore, her expectations toward given brand were different than in case of remaining respondents.

Following the study by Tuškej and Podnar (2018), consumer identification with the brand may lead to increased engagement with it and its Social Media activities. Findings of our study support above hypothesis, however, inconsistent results occurred when it comes to reverse situation, lack of self-identification. All the above described H&M followers who identified themselves with H&M basing on co-branding related content were willing to engage with it in its Instagram online brand community, supporting and complementing study by Tuškej and Podnar (2018), since authors focus was not restricted to brand community members. However, it should be noted that our respondents did not directly point on self-identification as reason to engage with the brand. Perceived similarity to “luxurious” communication was again given as justification for the response in case of luxury consumer, where others focused on aesthetics and novelty of content overlapping with regular engagement factors.

Interestingly, majority of brand followers who did not identify themselves with H&M seen through co-branding related content were still willing to engage with it explaining it through uniqueness and aesthetics of the posts, what overlaps with regular engagement factors toward H&M account. However, two H&M followers, who claimed to be highly loyal to regular H&M and did not identify with the brand seen through co-branding content, were unwilling to engage with the H&M co-branding content as it did not meet their expectations towards the H&M profile. This finding may be seen as corresponding to study by Tang et al. (2019) in which lack of perceived congruity between consumer and the brand may lead to brand fan page discontinuance. Worth noting is the fact that for one of them “aesthetics” was one of regular engagement factors and this feature was also used by the interviewee in description of co-branding content.

5.4. Managerial Implications

Basing on findings of our study implications for fast fashion brand managers may be drawn. However, qualitative and subjective nature of our study should be kept in mind and therefore, below implications should not be perceived as universal truth but rather case-study based hints.

Firstly, drawing from majority of respondent's opinions, it may be observed that familiar elements associated with fast fashion brands communication on Instagram allowed them to process visually unfamiliar co-branding related content and positively influenced their evaluations. Thus, fast fashion brand managers may consider incorporating both core fast fashion message execution elements and those following luxury guidelines to stay relevant for brand followers and increase possibility of decoding success. Such components, according to our respondents comprise for instance celebrities.

Secondly, our study revealed that in addition to above mentioned celebrity endorsement used within brand communication on Instagram, aesthetics of branded content significantly impacted its evaluations made by interviewed fast fashion brand followers as well as led to increased willingness to engage with the brand. Therefore, when planning co-branding campaigns on Instagram it might be beneficial for fast fashion brand managers to ensure both above traits in order to make the content engaging and satisfactory for brand followers.

Thirdly, basing on both parts of our study it may be observed that brand associations found within fast fashion co-branding content on Instagram not always overlapped with those reflected by our respondents. Moreover, brand followers focused on unfamiliar traits instead of those suitable for brand category and associated with particular brand regularly. Thus, it may indicate to fast fashion brand managers that Instagram may be useful as one of tools used in co-branding campaigns as it successfully created associations increasing brand image at the moment of exposure, however, basing on associations linked to the brand regularly it may not be as efficient to be sole channel used. Furthermore, managers should be aware that when spreading content unusual in form, carrying traits of both brands it may not be decoded as planned, and core values being in minority within co-branding campaign may be omitted and consequently, lead to creation of not appealing to target group associations.

Fourthly, basing on our respondents reactions to co-branding related content, fast fashion brand managers should take into consideration that unusual, “luxurious” communication on Instagram might be treated as source of entertainment and surprise rather than purchase stimulus. Therefore,

this type of content may possibly be used as a tool to enhance positive evaluations of brand and its Instagram activities, but not necessarily lead to sales level increase.

Fifthly, our study revealed that perceptions and responses to fast fashion co-branding content on Instagram may vary depending on type of relationship consumers have with the brand as well as their individual preferences drawn from their self-projections or other brand communities followers may belong to within Instagram. Thus, unusual, “luxurious” communication may help brand managers reach and attract attention of premium and luxury brands clientele or those consumers who aspire to be one of them but at the same time if done too frequently may harm rather than reinforce relationships with most loyal consumers. At this point, two aspects should be touched upon. On one hand, managers should be aware that even though incongruent co-branding communication may intrigue luxury clientele it might not necessarily convince them to make purchase since the core of the brand is already known to them, yet familiar communication should probably fit their preferences and result in engaging and favorable behaviors. On the other hand, most loyal consumers belonging to other brand communities from the same brand category may not evaluate pieces of communication as favorably due to strong preconceptions toward brand and themselves – thus, brand managers should take into account that those followers expect typical for fast fashion brand content and combination of both luxurious and regular way of communicating within period of co-branding campaign may turn out to be beneficial compromise.

5.5. Further Research

Further in-depth investigations may be conducted within the scope of each of thesis sub-questions.

When it comes to brand associations our research studied their typology following Keller (1993) classification to obtain preliminary overview of followers perceptions. Our respondents focused on luxury traits underlying co-branding content, omitting majority of those matching fast fashion brand. Further research could apply quantitative methods focused on brand associations strength, uniqueness and favorability (Keller, 1993) related to detected by us traits in order to portray image of the brand created through co-branding content as well as understand hierarchy of their importance. Quantitative methods in this case would increase credibility of research outcomes, decrease possibility of personal participants biases and provide more holistic view on consumer behavior. Since our research comprised subjective analysis of content aiming at understanding possible brand intentions, further

studies could include interviews with brand managers to confirm analytical predictions and allow campaign evaluations.

Moving to brand schemas investigation, our study used pieces of content already known by respondents, what could possibly impact their responses and reactions. Further research could apply experimental methods using fictitious pieces of content carrying luxury associations unfamiliar to respondents in order to detect whether opinions toward incongruities would differ. Since respondents expressed various emotional reactions toward incongruent communication, addition of neuroscientific methods focused on validating affective responses might be beneficial. Lastly, although co-branding related content was enjoyed by majority of our respondents, no purchase intention was observed. Therefore, further studies could investigate drivers of purchase intention within given context in order to increase future campaigns persuasiveness.

Considering identification of consumer with the brand and engagement with it, our study detected that belongingness to other brand communities impacted our respondents opinions. Further research could apply netnography, which is an online form of ethnography in order to investigate the online brand community as social construct (Belk et al., 2012, p. 106). Researchers could investigate how interactions and relationships with other brand community members might possibly impact brand followers behaviors. Since we focused on engagement as interaction between brand and followers, outcomes of netnographic study could provide complementary outcomes and lead to holistic understanding of followers behavior. Moreover, due to not intrusive nature of online observation, netnography could provide researchers with more realistic reactions to branded content as well as reliable engagement metrics.

Considering limitations of this paper further research could enrich the studied sample. Following studies could first of all validate our findings on bigger sample. As this thesis was limited to perceptions of Instagram brand followers, further research could add brand community outsiders and form a comparative study. Moreover, due to international character of fast fashions brands further research could investigate geographically varied sample, giving cross-national view on the topic. As our paper revealed contrary opinions between highly loyal fast fashion consumers and the ones being also luxury brands clientele further research could explore various patterns of views among brand followers. Above angles could give a broader view on the researched topic as well as detect new patterns of related consumer behavior.

As our findings were obtained through single case study following research could apply multiple case study approach giving wider view on the explored phenomena and increasing credibility of the research. Moreover, new angle could be added to the study by incorporating another SNSs, which might reveal new insights and increase transferability findings to other settings.

6. Conclusions

The last chapter of this thesis comprises final reflections and conclusions in order to provide the answer for the main research question:

How do fast fashion brand followers perceive and react to brand communication on Instagram related to co-branding with luxury brand?

The aim of this thesis was to investigate fast fashion co-branding related content on Instagram from the consumer perspective, more precisely the fast fashion brand followers on Instagram. We found it worth exploring as we observed vast differences between communication of fast fashion and luxury brands, thus we considered it interesting to see how consumers perceive their joined efforts in case of co-branding alliance, which applicability grows in recent years. Moreover, Instagram setting was chosen due to its popularity for both brands as well as consumers and best to our knowledge no previous research related to communication of this type of alliance has been conducted on this platform, which holds differing characteristics both in terms of brand communication and its users.

To achieve the main objective this thesis was guided by the interpretivist approach and qualitative methods including semiotics and interviews, based on the chosen case study. Consequently, in connection to relative subjectivism of this paper approach its results provide preliminary insights on possible perceptions and reactions of the fast fashion consumers.

We found that basing on the meanings included in the co-branding content on Instagram consumers may perceive this fast fashion brand communication as comprising both fast fashion and luxury brand traits. However, the respondents did not confirm that while associating the brand with more luxury features forming their brand perceptions. The brand followers omitted the meanings regarding price, brand personality and user which we found included in this type of communication to possibly elicit the brand associations familiar for fast fashion brands. Instead the consumers paid more attention to unfamiliar values while associating the brand based on co-branding content with luxury brand traits focusing mainly on its perceived more expensive pricing, design and quality product features as well as its more prestigious and symbolic value. However, the study revealed that brand associations connected to luxury brands have been reflected just in the moment of exposure to the analyzed content while without the stimuli the regular fast fashion brand associations have been mentioned. This

indicates that the co-branding related brand communication on Instagram may not have a long-term effect on fast fashion brand associations of its brand followers.

In connection to consumers reflected brand associations as well as their general perceptions the co-branding content appeared to be evaluated by them as moderately incongruent with the fast fashion brand. It was found that brand followers in vast majority considered the elements and meanings included in this content as more luxury and thus incongruent with their regular image of the brand. In result, it was seen that the amount of the congruent aspects included in this brand communication were not enough to meet their previously established brand schemas. Consequently, it was found that fast fashion brand followers reacted both positively and negatively to the different aspects of co-branding related content on Instagram.

The main differences in opinions and rationale behind them were observed between highly loyal fast fashion followers and the ones who were also luxury consumers. The latter ones liked the type of communication itself however they were confused with the brand, where the loyal brand followers disliked the content however it evoked positive reactions to the regular brand being recalled. The study revealed that although rather no purchase intention has been stimulated through the analyzed content the majority of brand respondents still enjoyed it. It was found that co-branding content of fast fashion brand had an effect on both ad and brand attitude, while the latter one was only observed in the moment of exposure as most of the respondents ultimately went back to their previous opinions on the brand they follow.

The study showed that brand followers' opinions on their self-identification with the brand basing on the co-branding communication on Instagram slightly differed between the individuals, where majority expressed lack of identification. It was observed that both positive and negative opinions were caused by match or mismatch with their self-projections as well as their group identification or lack of it with the perceived clientele. Once again, the study revealed contrasting results mainly between highly loyal brand consumers and the ones who also follow luxury brands, where in terms of both previously mentioned factors their opinions were opposite being negative for the first group and positive for the latter. Moreover, it was observed that self-identification of brand followers did not always correlate with their willingness to engage. It was found that the respondents who felt belongingness to the brand basing on analyzed content wanted to engage with it, while surprisingly vast majority of the ones that did not identify with it also was willing to engage. However, our study

showed that in this case self-identification could not be the direct reason for stimulated engagement as consumers listed aesthetics and novelty of the content as the main influencing factors.

Overall, brand followers' opinions indicated that managers should be careful while applying co-branding communication on Instagram to avoid harming their relationships, where on the other hand it might help in possessing more luxury consumers.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE	
Part 1. Background questions about H&M	
Questions	Theoretical setting
What comes to your mind when thinking about a fast fashion brand like H&M?	Free associations task (Keller, 2013) detecting schemas (Mandler, 1982) for H&M.
How would you describe H&M Instagram content?	Schemas (Mandler, 1982) formed around H&M Instagram profile.
How would you describe piece of content within H&M profile that you would react to, share, comment or like?	Engagement (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018; Tuten & Solomon, 2018) factors for followers in regular H&M communication efforts.
Part 2. Brand associations evoked by H&M co-branding content	
Questions	Theoretical setting
<p>What comes to your mind when you think about the brand (H&M) behind this content?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell me about 10-15 traits, related to any aspect. Can you shortly explain why you think so? <p>By looking at this content, how would you describe person that would choose those products? Why?</p> <p>How do you imagine a situation in which product could be used, basing on these visuals? Why?</p> <p>What do you think could be the advantages of using those products? Why?</p> <p>If the brand behind this content was a person, how would you characterize them?</p>	<p>Free associations task (Keller, 2013) uncovering top-of-mind brand associations evoked by H&M co-branding content.</p> <p>Follow up questions in line with Keller (2013) suggestions uncovering subsequent categories of brand associations evoked by co-branding content.</p> <p>Projective technique (Keller, 2013) portraying H&M brand personality perceived through co-branding content.</p>
Part 3. H&M co-branding content perceptions	
Questions	Theoretical setting
What do you think about the content itself? <i>Why?</i>	Ad attitude (Solomon et al., 2013, p. 298)
<p>Do you think that this content fits H&M?</p> <p>Does it meet your content expectations?</p> <p>Would you like to see more of it?</p>	Brand Image Incongruity (Sjödén & Törn, 2006) and Schema Incongruity (Mandler, 1982) occurring between

Would you engage with it? Why/to what extent?	pieces of H&M co-branding content and established brand schemas. Engagement (Tuškej & Podnar, 2018; Tuten & Solomon, 2018) with H&M co-branding content.
Would you say you can identify yourself with the brand communicating with this kind of content? Why/why not?	Consumer-brand Identification (Lam et al., 2010) affected by H&M co-branding content

Appendix 2: Semiotic Analysis

1. Analysis of meanings

VISUAL 1 - HIGHLIGHT STORY PHOTO		
Connotator	Signifier	Signified
Trick effect	Mirror effect	Optical illusion, “magical world”, mirror room
Pose	Dress in the center	Attracting attention, importance
	Dress inside the display case	Feeling of exhibition, precious and important object, piece of art, highest quality, fragility
	Dress on a mannequin	Craftsmanship, handmade, unique piece, high fashion /haute couture atelier, high visible
	Curtain on the first plan	Uncovering a secret, feeling of peeking/snooping in, possibility to enter closed group/world
Objects	Curtain	Symbolizes things we are hiding from outdoor world
	Two tables	Modern design, contemporality
	Dress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red • Tulle 	Special occasion, elegance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • French, ballet, art, innocence, elegance • Power, passion, energy, desire, love
	Gold belt	Richness, possibility to customize, attention to detail
	Display case	Inaccessibility, protection, showing off
	Indoor (wooden floors, high ceiling, walls)	Place of high importance or richness, connected to history or art, old-fashioned, very classy

	Mannequin	Atelier, tailor shop/tailoring studio, fashion
Photogenia	Spotlights on dress	Gives shadows, gives a feeling of being famous, importance, desire, center of attention
	Background in dimness	Mystery, privacy, something hidden
	Warm/golden light	Feeling of historical, classy, old setting
Aestheticism	n/a	n/a
Syntax	n/a	n/a
Text	“sneak peek”	Little insight into unknown, revealing secret, gives a feeling of knowing something not many people know about
	“magical world”	Separate world, open to followers through collection, collaboration as something extraordinary
	#Project<3	Dress is part of the project, sneak peek into the whole project, “invitation” to enter, discover and engage
	@giambattistavalliparis	May suggest owner of “atelier”, more private face of designer, H&M as “inviting”

VISUAL 2 - STORY VIDEO		
Connotator	Signifier	Signified
Trick effect	“Amateur” street shot	Mobile phone feeling in line with modern technique and Instagram assumptions - gives a feeling of recording it personally as a person who was right there. Increased authenticity and credibility
Pose	Apparel showcased next to digital screen with campaign	Modern factor, innovation, sense of possibility to reach the presented “dream” through purchase
	Mannequins at storefront, separated from people, caught in life-like situation	Feeling of closed worlds, separated from busy world, distancing, items relatively accessible yet not for everyone; pointing at something, looking in one direction, holding each other
	People and cars/bikes (in the reflection) passing	Fast life feeling

	<p>by</p> <p>People looking at the storefront</p> <p>People pointing</p>	<p>Curiosity, intrigue, showcasing interest in the collection (“hurry up, others are also interested!”), eye catching, worth their precious time</p> <p>Amazed, surprised (something new), worth sharing</p>
Objects	<p>Screen with photos:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official campaign <p>Shop mannequins:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dresses <p>Flowers</p> <p>Street, buildings</p> <p>Storefront</p> <p>Floral co-branded dresses</p>	<p>Dynamic, modern:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-quality feeling, professionalism, highlighting the scale of event and its essence <p>Simplicity, real shop feeling, sense of availability and familiarity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extraordinary dresses within one’s reach <p>Feminine, freshness, nature - spring; purple color - pride, success</p> <p>Big city life, flow of life</p> <p>Barrier, to admire, to show off</p> <p>Casual looks, feminine, showing multidimensionality of collection, “each may find something”, casual shape yet stylish and elegant</p>
Photogenia	Natural colors, daylight	Natural setting, real life effect, casual look
Aestheticism	<p>Personal story</p> <p>TV ad</p> <p>Vlog</p>	<p>Could be made by an average Instagram user</p> <p>Looks like an ordinary TV ad for perfumes or clothes corresponding to everyday lifestyle,</p> <p>Contemporary, in line with new media trends and target group preferences and activities (UGC)</p>
Syntax	Frames sequence	Atmosphere of everyday life in an international setting, accessibility
Text	Tokyo geotags	“Remote location”, sense of internationalization, cosmopolitan woman, global scale of the event, scale of appreciation and desire among different cultures and locations - no matter where, goal is achieved

VISUAL 3 - VIDEO FEED		
Connotator	Signifier	Signified
Trick effect	Background distortion	Magical setting, illusion, “feeling the moment”, sense of “forgetting about the world”
	Shots from below	Represents person’s confidence and power - popular in presenting authorities (e.g. president)
	Shots from participant position	Feeling of participation and sneaking in
	Blurred background (in some parts)	Focus on first plan - people, indication of their importance and range
Pose	Models moving (movement)	Dynamism, fast-changing
	Models dance	Joy, freedom, confidence, celebration
	Assertive walk of models with chin up	Confidence, power, runway-feeling, fashion world
	Model turning around	Feeling of actor satisfaction, achievement, joy
	Models giving way to woman in dress: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Various facial expressions of man and woman 	Respect, admiration, attraction toward her effect of impression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attraction vs. jealousy
	Models attempt to kiss: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kiss initiated by woman 	Love, tension, sexuality; controversy; arouses emotions, interest: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> confidence and power of woman - one possibly encouraged another
	Models sitting on the side	Private, intimate moment
	Model post “kiss” dance with hands up	Gesture of tribute, joy, victory
Objects	Uninterrupted dance of man on the side	Individualism of a man, feeling of “enjoying his moment”, he is being himself, careless
	Heart-shaped glasses (pink)	Love, modernity, trendy, covering a secret/emotion, being “incognito”

	Long dress	Attraction, love, femininity (intriguing)
	Outfits covering the body	Attractiveness and attention as results of outfits and inner characteristics
	Gold elements on clothes	Represents courage, passion, wealth, glamour, splendor
	Tie-dye pattern	Being different, rebellion, hippie, (rejection of customs established in society)
	Same clothes worn by man and woman	Gender equality, universality
	Pearl necklaces	Pearls - wisdom, purity, generosity; Giambattista Valli signature element
	Women with buns	References to elegance, ballet, high class and events
	Antique interior – palace: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chandelier • paintings (wall and ceiling), sculptures • candles (instead of lamps) • Italian palace 	White and gold indoor – wealth: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbol of wealth, associated with palaces • Artistic • Old-fashioned • Place with history, designer country of origin, Italian elegance and high class, relation to Italian fashion, heritage
	Black color of clothing	Power, elegance, formality, sophistication
	Tailcoat	Old-fashioned style, used for special occasions, higher social class, elegance
Photogenia	Dusk	Mystery, something forbidden and intriguing
	Golden, warm lighting	Elegance, royalty, sophistication
	Enhanced candle lighting	References to history and vintage feelings
	High contrast	Exposition of products, intensification of emotions
Aestheticism	Videoclip	Modern form of movie creation, short and dynamic frames giving feeling of contemporaneity and timeliness, enhanced transfer of emotions
Syntax	Frames sequence	Freedom, individualism, dynamism, contrasts

Text	<p>Fearless, without boundaries</p> <p>#Project<3 @taggedcelebrities</p> <p>Camera emoji @creators</p> <p>@gimabatissta x @H&M collection</p> <p>Launch date</p>	<p>Direction for decoding, dynamics, suggested way of interpretation, highlighting, encouraging to go outside comfort zone and stand out</p> <p>Hype related to collection, prestige, diversity due to different celebrities' backgrounds</p> <p>Professionalism, quality, high range of observed event</p> <p>Designer collaboration, the way to become part of it, quality and trendiness indication</p> <p>Informative, commercial indicator</p>
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VISUAL 4 – FEED PHOTO		
Connotator	Signifier	Signified
Trick effect	Blurred background, high contrast	Makes the recipient focus on the first plan, which is the girl in a dress; it attracts attention
Pose	<p>Model:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crouching down • Holding hands • Laughing face <p>Objects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “mess” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relaxed, resting position, natural • Care, warmth, secure • Fun, enjoyment, feeling comfortable, entertainment, private moment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background shots, accessibility, ordinariness, “in progress”
Objects	<p>Dress/gown:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tulle • Red <p>Smartphone:</p> <p>Roses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red • Pink • White <p>Model:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal brand 	<p>Special occasion, elegance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • French, ballet, art, innocence, elegance • Power, passion, energy, desire, love <p>Connectedness, modernity, contemporary, everyday use object, up to date</p> <p>Femininity, delicacy, fragility, spring - flourish season, full of life, freshness, important occasions, given as a gift, emotions, care:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep emotions: love, passion, desire • Admiration, joy, gratitude, gentle, elegance • Purity, innocence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kendall Jenner - celebrity, youth, popularity, trendiness

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural make up • Hair (bun) <p>Gardening equipment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth, freshness, natural • Elegance, ballet, art <p>Randomness, casualty of location (real life setting), outdoor</p>
Photogenia	<p>Daylight</p> <p>Colors, warm</p> <p>High contrast, contrasting colors</p>	<p>Casual occasion</p> <p>Positive feeling, fun, summer,</p> <p>Intensity, attention, rebelliousness</p>
Aestheticism	n/a	n/a
Syntax	n/a	n/a
Text	<p>“That moment”</p> <p>Emoji + “love message”</p> <p>“Tag someone (...) heart melt”</p> <p>@kendall</p> <p>#project<3</p> <p>Collection release</p> <p>@giambattistavaliiparis</p>	<p>“Meme” - enjoyment, youth, timeliness, “new media”</p> <p>Symbol of love letter, relation to photo and object engagement, sharing, emotional appeal</p> <p>Celebrity highlight</p> <p>“Closed group”, engagement, invitation to join separate magical world/spreading love</p> <p>Informative, purchase simulation</p> <p>Fashion, designer, luxury brand, credibility</p>

2. Brand associations behind the visuals grouped using Keller (1993) Brand Associations typology

VISUAL 1 - HIGHLIGHT STORY PHOTO		
Category	Sub-category	Found associations
Attributes	Product-related	Designer, dreamy, excellent quality, detail-oriented, artistic, unique design, fragility, valuable, tulle - high quality fabric, red
	Non-product-related:	
	Price	High cost
	User imagery	Knowledgeable and caring user, attention seeker, confident, strong personality, admired, energetic, passionate, above average income
	Usage imagery	Used at special occasions, red carpet, high society events, outside home, formal
	Personality	Surprising, youth, sophisticated, modern

Benefits	Functional	Good investment
	Experiential	Privileged, up-to-date feeling, stand out, outperforming others, center of attention
	Symbolic	High fashion entry, fashion elite, privilege, being desired, craftsmanship, high class
Attitudes		Appreciation, desire and gratitude

VISUAL 2 - STORY VIDEO

Category	Sub-category	Found associations
Attributes	Product-related	Extraordinary, eye catching design, smart casual, stylish, feminine, high quality
	Non-product-related: Price User imagery Usage imagery Personality	Reasonable price Cosmopolitan, busy, multi-tasking, modern, diverse, spontaneous Universal occasions, formal/informal International, authentic, young, interesting, professional, dynamic, available
Benefits	Functional	Superior comfort
	Experiential	Attracting attention, experiencing luxury, feeling womanly
	Symbolic	Global fashionistas
Attitudes		Positive: trust

VISUAL 3 - VIDEO FEED

Category	Sub-category	Found associations
Attributes	Product-related	Diverse designs, high quality, eye catching design, trendy, modern, combined styles, unisex, elegant
	Non-product-related: Price User imagery Usage imagery Personality	Expensive/valuable Open-minded, daring, celebrities, careless, confident, individualist, fashionista, both male and female, passionate, wealthy Fun situation, special events, formal/informal Rebellious, spectacular, contrasting, bold, feminist, controversial, artistic, young
Benefits	Functional	Comfort
	Experiential	Prestige, enjoyment, freedom, center of attention, attractiveness, seduction, runway feeling
	Symbolic	Self-expression, individualism, prestige, celebrity-like feeling, high fashion world, snob
Attitudes		Interest, curiosity

VISUAL 4 - FEED PHOTO		
Category	Sub-category	Found associations
Attributes	Product-related	Gown, elegant, tulle - sophisticated fabric, artistic designs, vivid red, trendy, feminine designs
	Non-product-related:	
	Price	Reasonable price
	User imagery	Emotionally confident, popular, laidback, caring, energetic, millennials, natural, neat
	Usage imagery	Formal, special occasion, elegant event, during the day and during the night events
	Personality	Young, joyful, available, authentic, artistic, timeliness, reachable, passionate
Benefits	Functional	Comfortable, delicacy
	Experiential	Center of attention, admiration, feeling desired, feeling womanly
	Symbolic	Luxury fashion world, higher class, model-like feeling
Attitudes		Positive, engagement, trust, love

Appendix 3: Transcribed and Coded Interviews (Enclosed Separately)

Appendix 4: Free Associations Overview

1. Free associations (Keller, 2013) toward H&M – regular vs. based on co-branding content

FREE ASSOCIATIONS FOR REGULAR H&M	
Free Associations	Interviewee
Cheap, trendy, timeliness, runway-inspired, casual design, dynamic offering, availability	1
Basic things, huge shops, low quality, confusing name, interesting designs, affordable perishable shoes, diversified styles, perishable accessories, satisfactory	2
Fashion, latest trends, dynamic offering, young people, youth, cheap, average quality	3
Clothes for everyone, different clothing lines, seasonality, multi-purpose usage	4
Low quality, fast fashion, trends, availability	5
Different clothing lines, different styles, basic customer, cheap prices, low quality, accessible	6
Cool, different clothing lines, cheap, trendy, reliable, low quality, basic style, app	7
Average quality, different clothing lines, diverse styles, cheap, trendy, basic things, practical, available	8

FREE ASSOCIATIONS EVOKED BY CO-BRANDING CONTENT	
Free associations	Interviewee
Modern, interesting, different, premium, luxurious, sophisticated, expensive	1
Luxurious, expensive, professional, fashionable, high quality, nice	2
High fashion, high quality, exclusive, influencers, young	3
“Alice in the Wonderland”, fancy, expensive, new, fresh, unusual	4
Glamorous, high fashion, celebrity	5
Fancy, high fashion, professional, artistic, designer, high quality, expensive	6
Different, luxurious, female, elegant, expensive	7
High fashion, expensive, luxury, Gucci, Chanel, high quality	8

2. Merged free associations toward H&M – regular vs. based on co-branding content

MERGED REGULAR H&M ASSOCIATIONS		
Brand Associations	Preliminary top-of-mind	Interviewee
cheap	cheap, cheap prices	1, 3, 6, 7, 8
trendy	trendy, latest trends, trends	1, 3, 5, 7, 8
availability	availability, accessible, available	1, 5, 6, 8
dynamic offering	dynamic offering	1, 3
diverse styles	diversified styles, clothes for everyone, different styles	2, 4, 6, 8
low quality	low quality, average quality	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8
different clothing lines	different clothing lines	4, 6, 7, 8
basics	casual design, basic things, basic style	1, 2, 7, 8

MERGED ASSOCIATIONS EVOKED BY CO-BRANDING CONTENT		
Brand Associations	Preliminary top-of-mind	Interviewee
different	different, unusual	1, 4, 7
luxurious	luxurious, luxurious, luxury	1, 2, 7, 8
fancy	sophisticated, fancy, elegant	1, 4, 6, 7

expensive	expensive	1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8
high fashion	high fashion	3, 5, 6, 8
celebrities	influencers, celebrity	3, 5
high quality	high quality	2, 3, 6, 8
professional	professional	2, 6

Appendix 5: Thematic Analysis Results – Summary of Final Codes and Themes

REGULAR H&M INSTAGRAM COMMUNICATION

Theme	Code	Preliminary code (Interview)	Example of quote
Regular content perceptions	eye-catching	colorful (1), eye-catching (2,3,5, 7), interesting (2, 7), creative (4), surprising (5)	<p>“They are always posting things that are like relevant and that keeps the attention there” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“And after seeing that it is... Hmm, I'm usually quite surprised. And it kind of triggers that kind of feeling “okay, this is actually cooler than I thought H&M products would be.” (Interviewee 5)</p>
	diverse	diverse models (1,2,4,6,7,8), diverse celebrities (4)	<p>“When I'm looking on that I see a lot of interesting photos for example the pictures are really interesting because there are a lot of people with for example different color of the skin.” (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>“I would say they publish a lot of female photos, very diverse, like many sizes, skin colors, that's cool.” (Interviewee 7)</p>
	realistic	authentic (1,6, 7), real-life situations (1,4,6, 7)	<p>“It's not only focused on clothes, but it's also focused on people in their real life situations, like people on the streets, some</p>

			<p>festivals, parties, like people around me” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“They are not fake, and also it’s not like only clothes and nothing else, like some hipster brands... Here you can see the clothes, but how they look like in real life, that’s cool.” (Interviewee 7)</p>
	meaningful	social campaigns (1), meaningful captions (2)	<p>“I saw, for example, the one I was reading about the leader in this company and it’s nice that they inform us about that.” (Interviewee 2)</p>
	accessible	simple (4), accessible (1,6)	<p>“I would add that regular one is more accessible for people, and this one I think majority of followers who do not buy luxury brands would evaluate it worse way than me.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>„I think their content is simple, they focus on showing the clothes in real life, I wouldn’t say that there is some bigger story behind” (Interviewee 4)</p>
	active	intense communication (1,5), engaging (3), dynamic (3, 7)	<p>“Well, I think they're quite good, quite engaging and dynamic” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“And actually, they publish a lot, like both on the feed and stories, each time that I enter Instagram, I see something from H&M.” (Interviewee 1)</p>
	product related	presenting different styles (2, 8), product related (4), product-centered (4,5,6, 8), relevant (3), inspiration (5,6), price tag (5)	<p>“I wouldn’t say that there is some bigger story behind. Yeah, I would say that their content is simple and focused on clothes.” (Interviewee 4)</p> <p>„So, you know, you basically see products available on an e-shop,</p>

			H&M e-shop, often women wearing those clothes, some outfits. There is always a link to them, price, I guess.” (Interviewee 5)
	youthful	youthful (3,6, 8)	“I would say in general their Instagram page is very modern definitely more for younger viewers.” (Interviewee 8)
Regular engagement factor	novelty	outstanding content (1, 7), novel (3)	“I think it should be something interesting, different than other brands. Like maybe with some idea behind it. It wouldn’t be a simple picture of clothes but I think it should be something which is not so usual.” (Interviewee 1)
	CSR	meaningful content (5)	“(…) if there was anything that I would grab my attention I think it would be anything sustainability related, they also publish that.” (Interviewee 5)
	product in use	people-oriented (2), product-oriented (4), outfit inspirations (4)	“I really like their content which they have now, because when I’m looking for clothes, I want to see clothes, you know. I don’t need any bigger picture of anything, which is not related to the brand. I enjoy when they publish clothes within everyday use or I don’t know, some outfits which show me how to wear them.” (Interviewee 4)
	appealing product	appealing product, inc. inspiration (5,6, 8)	“I would probably share it if it's something that is in my style or in the style of a person that I know. So then I will send it to that person as a recommendation.” (Interviewee 6)

	aesthetics	aesthetic (3,6, 7)	“Something kind of in my style, I mean colors, light, you know... I really enjoy aesthetic content there” (Interviewee 7)
	interaction	interaction (3,6)	“And also like considering the Instagram and these new social media platforms that allow you to engage. So it probably it uses some like questions or for example “which one do you prefer?” make something that calls you to make an action.” (Interviewee 3)
	well-prepared	well-prepared (7)	“There must be some idea, like not some random photos or something...” (Interviewee 7)

H&M CO-BRANDING RELATED CONTENT ON INSTAGRAM

1. *Brand Associations (Keller, 1993) - Co-branding related content*

Theme	Code	Interview number
Product-related attributes	high quality	1, 2, 3, 6, 8
	high fashion	3, 5, 6, 7, 8
	extraordinary design	1, 2, 3, 5
	luxurious	1, 2, 7, 8
	piece of art	1, 3, 6
	designer	1, 6, 7
	fancy design	4, 6, 8
	vivid colours	2, 5
	elaborate styles	1, 5
	professional	2, 6
	eye-catching designs	3, 7
	memorable design	2

	extravagant	1
	detailed	2
	feminine design	4
	trendy	8
	handmade	7
	elegant	7
Non-product-related attributes	expensive	1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8
	limited availability/exclusive	1, 3
	reasonable price	5
User imagery	popular/influencer	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
	original	1, 2, 5, 6
	young adults	2, 4, 6, 8
	fashion conscious	1, 2, 3, 8
	daring	2, 5, 6, 7
	confident	3, 6, 7
	above average income	1, 4
	elegant	3, 8
	both genders	2
	expressive	2
	unique taste	2
	cheerful	2
	fashionista	2
	loved/admired	2
	cool	1
	outgoing	7
	girly	4
	hipster	4
	strong personality	3

	fancy	8
	open-minded	7
	higher class	7
Usage imagery	special occasion	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	party	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	wedding	2, 3, 4, 5, 6
	special dinner	2, 3, 7
	gala	1, 6
	fashion event	4, 6
	red carpet	5
	work event	6
	different situations	5
	special event	8
Personality	diversified/surprising	1, 4, 6, 7
	young	1, 3, 7, 8
	caring	2, 4, 6
	strong personality	3, 6, 7
	open-minded	2, 6, 8
	girly	5, 7, 8
	confident	1, 2
	energetic	3, 6
	funny	5, 6
	trendy	1, 3
	international	1, 2
	glamorous	5, 7
	popular	3
	talkative	2
	cool	3

	emotional	2
	modern	1
	innovative	4
	crazy	1
	creative	4
	quirky	5
	eccentric	5
	twofold	2
Functional Benefits	investment	4
Experiential Benefits	standing out	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	heightened self-esteem	2, 3, 7, 8
	feeling special	2, 4, 8
	center of attention	1, 2, 7
	feeling attractive	3, 7
	superiority	4
	feeling cool	3
Symbolic Benefits	high fashion belongingness - social approval	3, 5, 6, 7
	celebrity style	3, 4, 8
	self-expression	3, 5
	privilege	4, 7
	fashion acknowledgment	3
Attitudes	positive (impressed, surprised)	2, 6
	negative (confused, deceived)	4, 5

2. Co-branding related content perceptions and reactions

Theme	Code	Preliminary code (Interview)	Example of quote
Content perceptions	extraordinary	extraordinary (1,4, 8), extraordinary designs (3, 7, 8)	<p>“Putting famous models, placing the dress in the front of the picture, selecting proper lighting. Also, this “fearless” people dancing in a palace, it’s pretty creative idea.” (Interviewee 4)</p> <p>“Well, I would say, it’s because of the particularity of the designs, because it's not something that you see everywhere. Because if they show a white T-shirt, it could be H&M, it could Zara, it could be whatever. But this dress you see it from H&M and nowhere else.” (Interviewee 3)</p>
	professional	professional (1,2, 7, 8), good lighting (1, 2, 8), high visual quality (1,2)	<p>“It’s really professional, even this one [visual 2], it seems to be “random” but everything is there, at right place.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“They show us them in a really nice way for example, because of the background, the background is like, it looks nice, looks expensive, they pay attention to make a high quality photo in a good scenario.” (Interviewee 2)</p>
	story behind	atmosphere: mystery (1), love (2,5), magical (2,4); story behind (1,2,6, 7, 8), movie (4)	<p>“I think that the idea was to, okay, show the clothes which are really colourful and interesting, but at the same time, you can see the interior, which is super classy, the models and the different, abstract type of movement, like partying, okay, so it's just really kind of artistic, something like this, it shows me some bigger story I would say.” (Interviewee 1)</p>

			“There is something behind that, like some history, fairytale [laughs].” (Interviewee 7)
	luxurious aesthetics	luxurious aesthetics (1,2,3,4, 8), expensive setting (2, 6, 7, 8)	<p>“But this movie, which you showed me looks like you know rich, there's a lot of gold. And everything looks so expensive (...).” (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>“Also the background and the general like atmosphere of this content can tell us that it is something unique, something high quality.” (Interviewee 8)</p>
	contrasting	contrasts (1,3,4)	<p>“Also, this one [visual 3] it's a bit like from the Moschino style, like many contrasts, both when I think about people and their behavior and the place where they are.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“I also like the aesthetic of this, like it is more between young and innovative and traditional and more classical. I think it's a nice combination.” (Interviewee 3)</p>
	consistent composition	detailed setting (2), consistent composition (1,2,6)	<p>“All the details there “do the job”, for example, surroundings, interior, light, colors.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“So I think that they also care about this clothes and clothes suit to the situation so they have similar character to what is going on the visual.” (Interviewee 2)</p>
	unexpected	unexpected - H&M (1,4,6)	“I said “fresh” because it is just something new, what you are not used to daily if you are H&M follower, not in line with content which I told you about before.” (Interviewee 4)

	artistic	artistic (1,6, 8)	“I like it because it's more special and obviously more artistic. So it feels special.” (Interviewee 6)
	staged	unrealistic (1)	“Like those people [visual 3], they are not some casual people, enjoying everyday situations, it looks like very “staged”.” (Interviewee 1)
	aesthetic	aesthetic (1,5, 7)	“And generally, I like how both of those posts look like, they look really aesthetic and it is just nice to look at it.” (Interviewee 7)
	celebrity-related	recognizable celebrity [visual 4] (2,3,6, 7)	“From looking at this photo and when I see the professional model that is wearing this, and also this kind of photo, I'm thinking that it will be more expensive and that the quality is better.” (Interviewee 2)
	campaign inconsistency	campaign inconsistency [visual 2;3] (3,5, 7)	“Well, that one [points on visual number 2] looks a little bit different compared to all the others because it's not that strategic maybe. Personally, I don't like it that much. [laughs] But this might be because it is a video and it's a little bit too long for what it's showing.” (Interviewee 3)
	slightly familiar	familiar elements: community member (3,5,6), familiar elements (1, 7)	<p>“(…), I think because the second story is showing the clothes from like a user, buyer perspective from the street, so kind of accessible and approachable.” (Interviewee 6)</p> <p>“And the last one [visual 4], just standard, you know, celebrity content that you regularly encounter at H&M profile. So yeah, it's nice, familiar, more casual, but a bit different because of clothes.” (Interviewee 5)</p>

	intriguing	intriguing (1,3)	“It looks more edgy and a little bit more careless, shows these young people confidence. So I think it's fun because you don't know what is happening so you keep looking at it.” (Interviewee 3)
Perceived inconsistencies	brand image conflict	brand image conflict (1, 4, 5, 7, 8), product (1), price (3,4), product/price (3,4)	<p>“Yeah, it's more high fashion. Obviously, I said fast fashion about H&M, but this doesn't fit the regular image.” (Interviewee 5)</p> <p>“ I would say it's not fitted with H&M because in my mind the H&M is a really cheap shop and the target of this shop is rather younger girls and women, and I'm not pretty sure if they would really want to buy this because for example the price.” (Interviewee 8)</p>
	communication style	communication style (1,3,4,6, 7, 8), product focus (3) product category (1,5)	<p>“I really enjoy following this kind of content, but maybe when seeing it in some other profile, here I rather expect some street style photos, some look-books alike, not surrealism and so on, because it's still H&M.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>„I'm also the follower of luxury brands. So, I think that this kind of content you sent me, okay, meet my expectations for other brands than in case of H&M.” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“And if comes to the photos I mean they just look like too much high fashion so it seems fake like H&M pretends something.” (Interviewee 8)</p>

Perceived consistencies	H&M co-branding strategies	H&M co-branding strategies (2,3,5,6,7)	“(…) I know that they have collaborated with other brands and they made some collections that were more fancy. So I would say it fits them as like a special kind of product, but not daily thing that they have.” (Interviewee 6)
	Brand personality fit	differentiated personality (2)	“They show different personality. But I think it’s quite good, you know you have a lot of customers and it’s really good they try to suit to everybody. (…) it’s good to have clothes in the different quality because also sometimes they are looking forward to those kind of things.” (Interviewee 2)
	Content expectations	met expectations: celebrity (5,6)	“I mean, some of it is what I would expect, knowing the brand. So, the Kendall Jenner content, it’s kind of standard, also when you look at rather normal setting there. It’s kind of expectable.” (Interviewee 5)
Evoked feelings	enjoyment	enjoyment: story behind (1,2), realistic/dynamic (3), visually pleasing (1,2,3,5,8), celebrity (2), surprise (7)	<p>“And I think the light is really well played in this content. Because it’s really well prepared and looks super professional, gives some kind of mystery to the posts” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“I also like the aesthetic of this, like it is more between young and innovative and traditional and more classical. I think it’s a nice combination.” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“Okay so I like it. For sure, I can tell you that this advertisement with Kendall and with those clothes was one of my favorite</p>

			<p>ones. I just like her look and I like looking at her.” (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>“But actually, I think it is kind of nice surprise from time to time, to see something different (...)” (Interviewee 7)</p>
	privilege	privilege: community member (1)	<p>“So, it's an interesting mix. Like I feel I know some „backstage” which others, who don't follow H&M cannot see.” (Interviewee 1)</p>
	dislike	dislike: inconsistency (3), mismatch H&M (4)	<p>“Well, that one [visual 2] looks a little bit different compared to all the others because it's not that strategic maybe. Personally, I don't like it that much.” (Interviewee 3)</p> <p>“I like easy and simple content which H&M posts normally. So, this one, in my opinion is too fancy for H&M.” (Interviewee 4)</p>
	confusion	confusion: mixed feelings (3,5), not enough explanation (5)	<p>“I'm a little bit confused about what the “project” is. So, I see the hashtag “#project<3” that I'm not really sure of. It doesn't really give me much clue. Why is it called a project and what it is about, you know.” (Interviewee 5)</p>
	doubt	doubt: not convinced (5, 7)	<p>“But there is an image conflict because obviously, they have very basic stuff and at the same time they do this. So, yeah, but as I said, like, I don't see it as technically like a very negative thing, but maybe not too convincing for me.” (Interviewee 5)</p> <p>“You know, I know H&M very well, so I know that in the end it is not as luxury as it looks like, so</p>

			after seeing those I still remember what I like it for.” (Interviewee 7)
	no purchase intention	no purchase intention (1, 7, 8)	“But on those photos I can't find anything I would like to buy, which are more like basic stuff.” (Interviewee 8)

3. Consumer-Brand Identification

Theme	Code	Preliminary code (Interview)	Example of quote
Self-identification	self-identification	self-identification: luxury consumers (1), personality (2,3), passion for fashion (3)	<p>“I don't think it fits the brand to be honest, it rather fits my style, since I also buy at more premium shops [laughs].” (Interviewee 1)</p> <p>“I love things like that, and I feel that I also suit to things like that, unless you know, only the price could be a problem, but I really like it.” (Interviewee 2)</p>
	lack of self-identification	lack of self-identification: loyalty to core H&M (4, 5, 6, 7, 8)	<p>“I don't want to pretend that I'm luxury customer or I'm part of that world. I follow H&M because I like the brand the way it is, not the way it tries to enter some high fashion club.” (Interviewee 4)</p> <p>“No, with those ones I don't really feel any bigger connection, you know [laughs]. But still, I know that this is just one-time thing, and I still perceive H&M to be in my style.” (Interviewee 7)</p>
Willingness to engage	willingness to engage	willingness to engage: luxury consumer (1), extraordinary (2,6), aesthetics (3,5,6, 8)	<p>“But in general yes I would engage because they are really interesting, unique and it's worth to see.” (Interviewee 2)</p> <p>“Yeah, definitely I would like it and maybe talk with my friends about this collaboration or about</p>

			those photos on their Instagram, since they look very nice and interesting.” (Interviewee 8)
	unwillingness to engage	unwillingness to engage: expectations (4, 7)	<p>“I wouldn’t give it a like or anything, because for me it’s just like another world and not H&M which I like. I know they have those premium collections but here it just looks too premium and in the end it’s still H&M” (Interviewee 4)</p> <p>“It is just not my style, and at this kind of accounts I focus mostly on clothes, models and I enjoy seeing how and where I can wear the items.” (Interviewee 7)</p>