

# Social media interactions and brand luxuriousness: the role of materialism

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims at investigating how the level of brand–consumer interaction between luxury brands and consumers on social media may affect the perception of brands' luxuriousness. In particular, this study is focused on the moderating role of consumers' materialism.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study adopted a quantitative approach. Data were collected with two online experiments. Study 1 was run to test whether a luxury brand's product description was perceived as more luxurious when published on a social media platform versus the brand's website, and if consumers' materialism influences this effect. Study 2 explains the underlying psychological mechanism by underlining the mediating role of psychological distance.

**Findings** – The results show that branded luxury products are perceived as more luxurious when these are communicated on a social media platform (vs on the brand's Web page), and consumers are high (vs low) in materialism, due to high psychological distance.

**Originality/value** – Previous literature has neglected the relationship between materialism and social media communication, as well as the potential differential effect that a high versus low level of brand–consumer interaction may have, for luxury brands, in the online context. This study fills this gap by investigating the role of a consumer-related characteristic (i.e. the level of materialism) that represents an important dimension in luxury consumption. Moreover, this study sheds light on the mediating role of psychological distance in the context of luxury brands' online communication.

**Keywords** Social media, Brand–consumer interaction, Luxuriousness, Luxury brand, Materialism, Psychological distance

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, digital platforms constitute useful tools in the “platform economy”: an emerging organizational model for companies in which several activities (social, political and economic) become intertwined through a connection-based relationship between the market and the individual (Kenney and Zysman, 2015). Thus, social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter offer consumers the opportunity to search, create and disseminate information and perceptions about brands (Kamal *et al.*, 2013). Importantly, the number of people using the internet increased 10% between 2017 and 2018, with 5.11 billion unique mobile users and 3.26 billion people using social media on mobile devices (We Are Social, 2019). This growth has broad implications for companies, and especially those in the luxury sector, where the rising power of influencers and social media represent avenues to increase the accessibility of luxury products (The Boston Consulting Group, 2019). In this context, scholars and communication managers have sought to investigate and better

understand online consumer behaviour by focusing on brand–consumer interaction (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016; Rohm *et al.*, 2013; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016).

Interestingly, the expansion of digital platforms has changed traditional communication models, giving companies a greater opportunity to directly “listen” to consumers (Gurău, 2008; Key and Czaplewski, 2017). Moreover, the development of social media platforms has led to a multidimensional, bidirectional and peer-to-peer communication – one that allows multiple consumers to interact and cocreate content (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017). In this context, the relationship between brands and consumers is becoming more interactive (Royle and Laing, 2014) due to a plurality of means (e.g. multiple communication channels and social media application) (Hoffman and Novak, 1996; Vernuccio and Ceccotti, 2015) and consumers' approach to new technologies (Alalwan *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, brands are seeking new approaches and knowledge to successfully manage relationships with online

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customers (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016; Labrecque, 2014; Rohm *et al.*, 2013) and increase the effectiveness of brand–consumer interactions within the online context (Kohler *et al.*, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2007).

It is important to note how social media marketing activities have proliferated even within the luxury sector (Godey *et al.*, 2016; Kim and Ko, 2012) where they have been somewhat neglected. Although previous studies have highlighted how luxury brands are able to engage and reach their consumers through social media platforms in effective and successful ways (Kim and Ko, 2012; Phan *et al.*, 2011), some studies have underlined the need for luxury companies to improve their presence on digital platforms to capitalize on the digital revolution (Godey *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, luxury consumers are paying more attention to social media platforms (Martín-Consuegra *et al.*, 2019) and are buying more luxury products online. Against this backdrop, studies have affirmed the positive effects deriving from luxury consumers' involvement on social media platforms (Kim and Ko, 2012; Labrecque, 2014), particularly in terms of brand loyalty and perceived quality (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Therefore, given this growth in the luxury sector, there is value in better understanding how to strategically approach social media marketing.

This study focuses on the importance of online brand–consumer interaction for luxury brands, which has not been adequately investigated by previous studies. We investigate how consumers' materialism may influence the effectiveness of different levels of online brand–consumer interactions. Normally, luxury brands aim to increase sales by developing a unique brand identity and offering exclusive relationships with consumers (Kim and Lee, 2019). On social media platforms, these effects arise from consumers' interactions with companies and other consumers (Colella *et al.*, 2019; Martín-Consuegra *et al.*, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2020). In this regard, scholars have defined the concept of interactivity in terms of three strands (Kim and Lee, 2019): interactivity as a function (Okazaki, 2005); interactivity as perception of control, time and two-way communication (Kim *et al.*, 2012); and interactivity as a process of identifying the level of user interactivity (Coyle and Thorson, 2001; Liu and Shrum, 2002). In this study, we assess the importance of all three stands.

In particular, we investigate the effect that a high versus low level of brand–consumer interaction may have on the perception of luxuriousness for products promoted online. Furthermore, considering that social media platforms can stimulate the level of materialism among users and, in turn, increase social comparisons (Chu *et al.*, 2013, 2016), leading them to inflate their expectations, perhaps unrealistically, so (Atay *et al.*, 2009) we explore the explanatory role of psychological distance. Indeed, this study speculates and demonstrates that – for luxury brands in the digital context – high levels of brand–consumer interaction may lead to higher perceived luxuriousness when consumers are high in materialism, which is due to a higher perceived psychological distance.

Through our analysis, this research offers three main theoretical contributions. First, the findings contribute to the literature on digital marketing by showing that the effectiveness of a luxury brand's online communication messages may

depend on the target audience's level of materialism. Specifically, the results underline that communicating luxury products through social media platforms can be more effective when targeting highly materialistic consumers. Second, we add to the literature on online luxury branding and luxury consumption by demonstrating that consumers' perception of brand luxuriousness in the digital context is influenced by both the type of digital platform used and by consumers' personal orientation towards materialism. Third, we extend the literature on psychological distance by examining how such consumers' perception is influenced by the level of brand–consumer interaction, which in turn, influences consumers' perceived brand luxuriousness. The results also have relevant managerial implications that we deeply discuss at the end of the paper.

The paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, we present the relevant theoretical background. In Section 3, we report our applied methodology and the results of the experiments. Finally, in Section 4, we offer a general discussion of the results, identifying the main theoretical and managerial implications and suggesting future lines of research.

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1 Digital platforms in luxury context

In light of the disruptive development of digitization and the resulting information and communication technologies, there is an increasing awareness that digital platforms drive the economy of the information age (Kenney and Zysman, 2016). The relevant literature (Gawer and Cusumano, 2014) defines these platforms as multilateral digital structures that set the terms of their participants' interactions with each other. On this basis, digital platforms have produced profound economic and social consequences by radically altering the way people socialize in this emerging economy (Kenney and Zysman, 2016) and thereby generating strong competition with traditional business models (Cramer and Krueger, 2016; Park *et al.*, 2020).

Digital platforms have also surpassed the utopian predictions of the first internet era (Haberly *et al.*, 2019), providing a series of design rules and infrastructures that allow users to quickly interact with each other (Ondrus *et al.*, 2015). In this sense, digital platforms are reorganizing sectors of the global economy, breaking down barriers to entry by offering reduced costs (Haberly *et al.*, 2019) and changing the logic of creating and acquiring value (Kenney and Zysman, 2015). According to Baden-Fuller *et al.* (2017), digital technology cannot always mean greater value for the consumer and greater profits, which renders them an interesting and important topic of study (Yunis *et al.*, 2018).

Recent research has found that people are more predisposed to use digital platforms than to read or watch TV (Langaro *et al.*, 2015) by projecting their existing brand attachment onto these digital applications. On these grounds, North and Oliver (2014) suggested that a brand must be available on several digital platforms to be considered contemporary and relevant to consumers. In this context, marketing techniques have been rapidly translated into the digital world, effectively becoming a socio-commercial activity (Üçok Hughes *et al.*, 2016). This paradigm change involves promoting products and services

through digital distribution channels such as computers, smartphones or other digital devices (Taken Smith, 2012). In short, today's social media are well-organized digital platforms that represent an important communication channel for users (Colella *et al.*, 2019).

Nowadays, the main social media platforms (e.g. Facebook and Instagram) allow companies to create Web pages for their marketing communications (Jahn *et al.*, 2012) and develop close relationships with online consumers (Rohm *et al.*, 2013). As such, these platforms represent an incredible opportunity for the luxury sector (Okonkwo, 2009). According to Kim and Ko (2012), luxury brands can attract friendly, and even emotional, attention by interacting with consumers through social media platforms, thereby stimulating the desire for greater brand involvement and cocreative experiences (Martín-Consuegra *et al.*, 2019). For this reason, marketing research is focusing its attention on the relationship between consumers and brands (Hudson *et al.*, 2016), and specifically on their interactions and involvement (Rohm *et al.*, 2013) in a digital context. Through social media interactions, firms aim to build and maintain a positive consumer–brand relationship (Hudson *et al.*, 2016). However, in the luxury context, scholars and marketing managers do not yet have a clear understanding of how social media communication affects consumers' brand perceptions (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016), which can lead to underestimating the potential benefits of fostering those relationships (Simon and Tossan, 2018).

In line with the above, this research empirically investigates how consumers' level of interaction (reflected in different behaviours and psychological mechanisms) relates to their perceptions of a brand as luxurious. More specifically, we seek to provide a concrete understanding of the relationship between materialism (as a moderator) and social media communication (Chang and Zhang, 2008; Kamal *et al.*, 2013), as there is a lack of research about the effects of their interaction on consumers' behaviours both within and beyond social media platforms (Hudson *et al.*, 2016).

## 2.2 Materialism in luxury consumption

Several scholars have tried to define materialism from different perspectives (Sun *et al.*, 2017). Materialism can be understood as possessiveness, envy and greed towards other categories of subjects (Belk, 1985), thus determining a certain superfluity in the purchased product (Amatulli and Guido, 2012). According to Belk (1985), highly materialistic consumers find a sense of desirability in property, devoting more time and energy to product-related activities. In this sense, when consumers are highly materialistic, they give higher priority to material goods and have positive attitudes towards purchasing (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2007), which helps to cement their identity and improve their well-being (Ger and Belk, 1990; Tascioglu *et al.*, 2017). Richins and Dawson (1992) describe materialism as a system of personal values oriented around the acquisition of specific goods (Demirbag, 2010) that are essential to reaching a desired state. In sum, materialism represents the degree to which consumers consider possession to be a central value (Chang and Arkin, 2002; Richins and Dawson, 1992), and consequently, it involves placing relatively more importance on purchasing and possessing objects (Segev, 2015; Sun *et al.*, 2017; Tascioglu *et al.*, 2017). However, the literature has

investigated the impact of materialism on several aspects, emphasizing both positive and negative effects (Christopher and Schlenker, 2004; Segev, 2015). To illustrate, Segev (2015) found a negative relationship between the happiness dimension of materialism and life satisfaction; Kasser (2002) suggested that material possessions help consumers cope with negative feelings, but that materialistic individuals, who are focused on possessions, are less healthy because they do not focus on affiliations with other people.

Although the majority of studies investigating materialism found a negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction or affective well-being, researchers have sought to elevate our knowledge about the construct of materialism. Thus, they have encouraged studies that look at materialism from different theoretical perspectives and focused on its underlying mechanisms (Ruvio *et al.*, 2014; Šeinauskienė *et al.*, 2016; Shrum *et al.*, 2014).

On this basis, materialism can be studied as either a personality trait (Belk, 1985) or a personal value (Richins and Dawson, 1992). Importantly, a context where materialism seems to play a central role is that of luxury. Indeed, given that luxury brands are traditionally associated with high quality, exclusivity and prestige, as well as convey a high symbolic and emotional value (Chan *et al.*, 2015; Okonkwo, 2009), materialism is strongly related with luxury consumption (Hudders *et al.*, 2013). In this context, the meaning that luxury brands may have for consumers is based on consumers' individual characteristics (Amatulli and Guido, 2012; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), which include materialism (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2007). Importantly, luxury consumers who are exposed to social interactions are more inclined towards demonstrating wealth, success and status (Nelissen and Meijers, 2011; Sharda and Bhat, 2018). Similarly, luxury consumption could be considered an ostentatious display of wealth (Neave *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, another context where materialism seems to play a key role is that of digital platforms. Nowadays, brands are increasingly using digital platforms to build and convey brand symbolism or consumption-related attitudes (Belch and Belch, 2009). To illustrate, social media platforms not only allow marketers to provide users with relevant content; they also enable consumer interaction and feedback (Ismail *et al.*, 2018). Importantly, Chu *et al.* (2013) suggest that social media platforms can increase users' level of materialism by frequently exposing them to consumption-related messages. Furthermore, a high level of materialism is associated with the increased opportunity for social comparisons on social media platforms (Chu *et al.*, 2016).

Therefore, because the construct of materialism is related to social interaction and could influence the perception of brand luxuriousness, it seems reasonable to speculate that, in the digital context, perceptions of luxuriousness may be influenced by both the level of brand–consumer interaction and consumers' level of materialism. However, no studies have analyzed how the level of materialism may influence the effectiveness of brand–consumer interactions in the online context and for luxury brands. Thus, this research investigates how materialism moderates the relationship between the level of brand–consumer interaction on digital platforms and the perception of luxuriousness. More specifically, on the basis of previous studies that underlined how materialism is strongly



linked to luxury perception and how social interaction may stimulate social comparison and materialism, we hypothesize that a higher perception of luxuriousness, in the online context, is a function of both the high level of brand–consumer interaction and the high level of consumers’ materialism. Formally:

- H1.* When consumers are characterized by a higher (lower) level of materialism, a high level of brand–consumer interaction on the digital platform will increase (decrease) the perception of brand luxuriousness.

### 2.3 Psychological distance and perceived luxuriousness

To better substantiate our proposal, we also investigated the underlying mechanism of the effect observed with Study 1. More specifically, we wanted to shed light on the mediating role of psychological distance. The main studies on psychological distance are related to the construal level theory (hereafter CLT) (Liberman and Trope, 1998) and refer to cognitive judgments and distance factors in people’s decision-making (Liberman *et al.*, 2007; Trope *et al.*, 2007). According to Liberman *et al.* (2007), people perceive an object, event or person as psychologically distant when they lack a direct, lived experience with it. Moreover, formality (Slepian *et al.*, 2015) and attainability (Gjesme, 1981) of an object can determinate a form of psychological distance (Park *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, CLT aims to explain the link between mental constructions and psychological distance, predicting how this link affects people’s perceptions and behaviours (Liberman and Trope, 2008; Sungur *et al.*, 2016; Trope and Liberman, 2010). However, although this theory has been widely applied in different research fields (Bar-Anan *et al.*, 2006; Chen and Li, 2018; Williams *et al.*, 2014), the disruptive development of digitization and digital communication has significantly influenced the concept of distance (Katz and Byrne, 2013; Norman *et al.*, 2016) in online contexts (Sungur *et al.*, 2019). As a consequence, some studies have empirically explored how digitalization (Katz and Byrne, 2013) and social media platforms (Lim *et al.*, 2012) can influence the concept of distance and psychological distance (Norman *et al.*, 2016).

Importantly, psychological distance plays a central role in the luxury sector (Choi *et al.*, 2020; Kapferer, 1997; Park *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, luxury brands’ main objective is typically oriented around creating and maintaining a psychological distance between the luxury market and the mass market (Choi *et al.*, 2020; Kapferer and Bastien, 2012; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, according to Miyazaki *et al.* (2005), the main characteristics of luxury brands (e.g. rarity and exclusivity) generally encourage the perception that they are difficult to obtain. In this vein, some studies have investigated the effects of psychological distance in the field of luxury management (Choi *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2020; Yu *et al.*, 2017). To illustrate, Yu *et al.* (2017) discovered how behavioural targeting for luxury brands reduces psychological distance and generates a more positive attitude towards an online advertisement. Moreover, according to Park *et al.* (2020), a high need for status induces consumers to more positively evaluate psychologically distant luxury brands, which suggests that there are variables that may

moderate the relationship between psychological distance and luxury brand value on social media platforms.

Importantly, the previous literature has also underlined that social media platforms can stimulate the level of materialism among users and, in turn, increase social comparisons (Chu *et al.*, 2013, 2016). Researchers have also demonstrated that such comparisons typically activate some concerns among materialistic individuals about their own standard of living, leading them to inflate their expectations, perhaps unrealistically so (Atay *et al.*, 2009). In this sense, there is a completely unexplored topic for the luxury marketing field to address: namely, how interaction and psychological distance independently impact the perception. To fill this gap, we also tested the mediating role of psychological distance in the effect of brand–consumer interaction on perceived brand luxuriousness in the digital context. Following the previous literature, we argue that highly materialistic individuals may see an increase in perceived brand luxuriousness when they experience high psychological distance prompted by a high level of brand–consumer interaction. Based on this reasoning, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H2.* When consumers are characterized by a higher (lower) level of materialism, a high level of brand–consumer interaction on the digital platform will increase (decrease) the perception of brand luxuriousness due to high (low) psychological distance.

## 3. Method

This research proposes that when consumers are exposed to online messages intended to promote a new luxury product, the ensuing effect on the perception of brand luxuriousness may change depending on a platform-based factor and customer-based factor. To study these effects, we adopted a quantitative approach. Specifically, Study 1 assesses whether the perceived luxuriousness of a brand will be higher on a digital platform that allows customers to strongly interact with the brand (e.g. Instagram) when consumers are particularly materialistic. In short, our study tests how the interaction between the type of digital platform (high vs low) and the level of consumers’ materialism (high vs low) may affect the perceived luxuriousness of brands. Study 2 explains the logic of the psychological mechanism underlying this effect through the inclusion of a mediator: psychological distance. In both studies, we adopted the same measurement for the moderator (materialism) to confer robustness to the results.

### 3.1 Study 1

#### 3.1.1 Design and procedure

In this experiment, aimed at testing *H1*, we first pretested our manipulation of online brand–customer interaction level with 55 online respondents. They were asked to rate two versions of a communication message about a new watch introduced by a fictitious luxury brand (i.e. Perrelli) in terms of how directly they could interact with the brand (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). The results of the pretest revealed that the scores for the perceived opportunity to interact with the brand were significantly higher in the high interaction condition ( $M = 5.11$ ;  $SD = 1.82$ ) than in the low interaction condition ( $M = 4.11$ ;

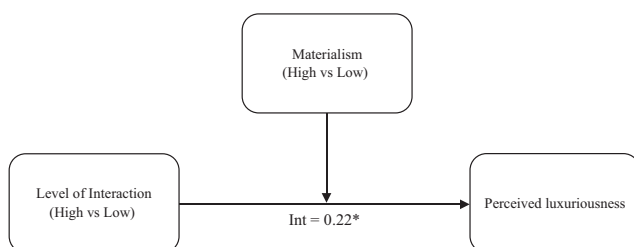
$SD = 1.74$ ;  $F = 3.94$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Based on these results, we proceeded with the main study. We recruited 83 US participants ( $M_{age} = 34.5$ ,  $SD = 10.01$ , 53% males) from an online paid pool of respondents via the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform and randomly assigned them to one of two conditions in a two-cell (brand–consumer interaction: high vs low  $\times$  consumers' materialism: measured continuously) design. First, participants were asked to complete a materialism questionnaire using a nine-item measure drawn from the study of Richins (2004) (e.g. "I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes"; "The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life";  $\alpha = 0.85$ ); all items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Then, participants were randomly exposed to a communication message published by a fictitious brand (i.e. Perrelli) on its official Instagram page or on its website. After watching and reading the communication message, participants were asked to rate the brand luxuriousness using the 20-item measure of the Brand Luxury Index (hereafter, BLI) adapted from the study of Vigneron and Johnson (2004) and based on five-point bipolar questions (e.g. "Elitist/Popular", "Luxurious/Upmarket", "Superior/Better";  $\alpha = 0.94$ ). Finally, participants supplied their sociodemographic information.

### 3.1.2 Results

We tested  $H1$  by running the Model 1 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS developed by Hayes (2017), where materialism was the moderator of the relationship between the level of brand–consumer interaction (low =  $-1$ ; high =  $1$ ) and the BLI (Figure 1). As we wanted to control for the effect of age, we included this measure as a covariate in our analyses; the effect of age on the dependent variable was not significant ( $b = -0.00$ ,  $t = -0.49$ ,  $p = 0.62$ ).

The results show that the level of brand–consumer interaction had no significant effect on the BLI ( $b = 0.13$ ;  $t = 1.75$ ;  $p = 0.09$ ), whereas materialism had a significant and positive effect on the BLI ( $b = 0.23$ ;  $t = 2.48$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). More importantly, the results show that the effect of the interaction (level of brand–consumer interaction  $\times$  materialism) on the perceived brand luxuriousness was positive and significant ( $b = 0.22$ ;  $t = 2.44$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). To better examine this interaction, we looked at the conditional effects of the level of brand–consumer interaction on the dependent variable at different levels of materialism. Interestingly, at a low level of materialism, the effect of the level of brand–customer interaction on the BLI was negative and nonsignificant ( $M - 1SD$ ,  $b = -0.09$ ;  $t = -0.80$ ;

**Figure 1** Moderated models (Study 1)



Note: \* $p < 0.05$

$p = 0.42$ ; C.I.:  $-0.35, 0.15$ ). Meanwhile, the effect of the level of brand–consumer interaction on the dependent variable was positive and significant when considering the middle ( $b = 0.17$ ;  $t = 2.15$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ; C.I.:  $0.01, 0.32$ ) and high level of consumers' materialism ( $M + 1SD$ ,  $b = 0.35$ ;  $t = 2.99$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; C.I.:  $0.12, 0.58$ ). This finding is consistent with  $H1$  (see Appendix for a summary of results).

Furthermore, as materialism was a continuous variable, we explored its significant interaction effect through the Johnson–Neyman "floodlight" approach (Spiller et al., 2013). The results revealed that the magnitude of the positive effect of the brand–consumer interaction level on BLI increased with increasing material values, thus supporting  $H1$ . In particular, the projector analysis shows that the positive effect of the brand–consumer interaction level on the BLI was significant for materialism levels equal to and greater than 3.40 ( $b_{JN} = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.8$ , 95% C.I.:  $0.00, 0.31$ ) (Figure 2).

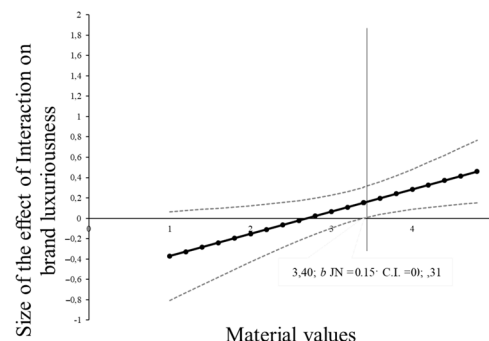
Overall, the results of Study 1 suggest that communication on social media platforms, rather than on a brand's website, is more likely to be effective among consumers with higher levels of materialism. Second, it appears that consumers' materialism is an important factor in these results. Finally, Study 1 supports our initial prediction that, when consumers are highly materialistic, a high (vs low) level of brand–consumer interaction increases (vs decreases) perceived brand luxuriousness ( $H1$ ). This was a condition that needed to be met to explain the psychological mechanism predicted by  $H2$ .

## 3.2 Study 2

### 3.2.1 Design and procedure

In this experiment, aimed at testing  $H2$ , we recruited 125 US participants ( $M_{age} = 33$ ,  $SD = 10.55$ , 53.6% males) from an online paid pool of respondents via the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform. They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions in a two-cell (brand–consumer interaction: high vs low  $\times$  consumers' materialism: measured continuously) design. First, participants were asked to complete the same measure of materialism used in Study 1 ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ). Then, to manipulate the level of brand–consumer interaction, we created and pretested an Instagram page and a website page that both promoted a pair of sunglasses from a real brand (i.e. Ray-Ban). We pretested our manipulation of online brand–customer interaction level with 88 online respondents, asking them to rate how directly they could interact with the brand (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). The pretest confirmed that the

**Figure 2** Floodlight analysis (Study 1)



scores for the perceived opportunity to interact with the brand were significantly higher in the high interaction condition ( $M = 6.15$ ;  $SD = 0.71$ ) than in the low interaction condition ( $M = 5.04$ ;  $SD = 1.59$ ;  $F = 14.71$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

In the high-level brand–consumer interaction condition, the communication message encouraged consumers to share their ideas regarding the brand. Moreover, in this condition, respondents had the chance to really leave a comment. Meanwhile, in the low-level brand–consumer interaction condition, the luxury brand only displayed the image of its product and did not offer an opportunity to concretely interact with the brand. This opportunity (or lack thereof) to leave a real message for the brand on the digital platform served as a more robust and realistic stimuli for our manipulation. Following the manipulation phase, participants were asked to rate the perceived psychological distance they felt towards the brand. Psychological distance was included as a mediating variable, assessed using the measure proposed by Park *et al.* (2020) and featuring two seven-point bipolar dimensions (i.e. “Casual/Formal”; “Attainable/Unattainable”;  $r = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Differently from Study 1, this study captured perceived brand luxuriousness through a measure drawn from Hagtvedt and Patrick (2016), which featured three seven-point bipolar dimensions (i.e. “Inexpensive/Expensive”; “Low-end/High-end”; “Value-for-money/Luxury”;  $\alpha = 0.88$ ). Because we used a real brand in this study, we also controlled for brand familiarity (“To what extent are you familiar with the Ray-Ban brand?”; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Finally, participants supplied their sociodemographic information.

### 3.2.2 Results

To test the predicted moderation mediation, we estimated Model 7 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS. The level of brand–consumer interaction served as the independent variable (low = −1; high = 1), materialism served as the moderator, psychological distance served as the mediator and perceived brand luxuriousness served as the dependent variable. As we wanted to control for the effect of brand familiarity, we included this measure as a covariate in our analyses; its effect on psychological distance was not significant ( $b = 0.12$ ,  $t = 0.95$ ,  $p = 0.34$ ). A t-test revealed no significant differences in terms of familiarity ( $M_{high-interaction} = 5.94$ ,  $SD = 1.15$  vs  $M_{low-interaction} = 5.89$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $t = 0.21$ , *ns*) or liking ( $M_{high-interaction} = 5.74$ ,  $SD = 1.31$  vs  $M_{low-interaction} = 5.71$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ,  $t = 0.11$ , *ns*) between the two experimental conditions.

The results show that the effect of the interaction (level of brand–consumer interaction  $\times$  materialism) on psychological distance was positive and significant ( $b = 0.26$ ,  $t = 2.64$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Also, psychological distance had a positive and significant effect on the dependent variable ( $b = 0.17$ ,  $t = 3.19$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Importantly, the index of moderated mediation was significant ( $b = 0.04$ , 95% CI = 0.00, 0.09). More specifically, conditional indirect effects revealed that psychological distance significantly mediated the effect of the level of brand–consumer interaction on perceived brand luxuriousness when participants’ level of materialism was high ( $M + 1SD$ ,  $b = 0.08$ , C.I. = 0.00, 0.18), but not when it was medium ( $b = 0.04$ , C.I. = −0.01, 0.09) or low ( $M - 1SD$ ,  $b = -0.01$ , C.I. = −0.05, 0.03) (Figure 3).

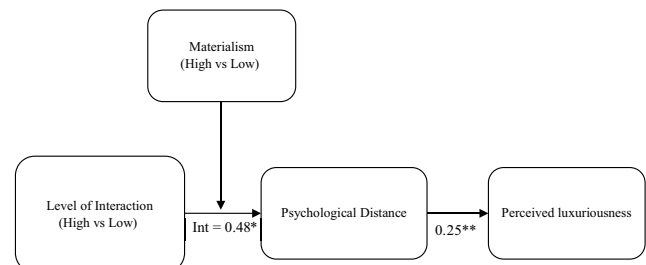
As materialism was a continuous variable, again we explored the interaction through the Johnson–Neyman “floodlight” approach (Spiller *et al.*, 2013). The results of this analysis showed that the effect of level of brand–consumer interaction on psychological distance increases as materialism levels increase, thus offering support to our H2. In particular, the projector analysis showed that the positive effect of the interaction level on psychological distance was significant for materialism levels equal to and greater than 5.45 ( $b_{JN} = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ , 95% C.I.: 0.00, 0.55) (Figure 4).

Overall, the results of Study 2 provide further support for the findings of Study 1, empirically demonstrating that consumers’ level of materialism impacts the effect of brand–consumer interaction on perceived luxuriousness. Moreover, the results from Study 2 shed light on the role of psychological distance, which increases as a function of high brand–consumer interaction and high materialism, and ultimately has a positive impact on perceived brand luxuriousness. As hypothesized in H1 and H2, the findings suggest that communication developed on social media platforms, rather than on a brand’s website, is more likely to be effective among consumers with high levels of materialism.

## 4. General discussion

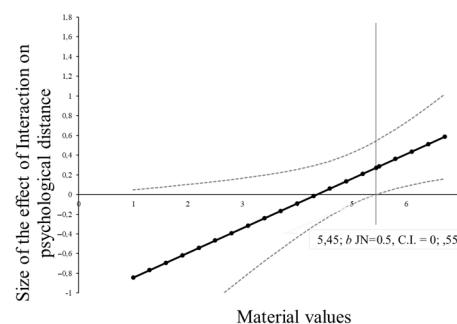
Together, our studies provide evidence to support our research proposal: namely, that in an online context, materialism moderates the effect that the level of brand–consumer interaction (high vs low) on digital platforms may have on the perception of brand luxuriousness. To the best of our

Figure 3 Moderated mediation model (Study 2)



Notes: \* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$

Figure 4 Floodlight analysis (Study 2)





knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the role of materialism as a moderator of the relationship between the level of brand–consumer interaction (high vs low) and the perception of a brand’s luxuriousness in the online context.

Theoretically, this study offers three main contributions to the literature. First, the findings contribute to the literature on digital marketing by showing that the effectiveness of a luxury brand’s online communication may depend on the target audience’s level of materialism. Specifically, the results underline that communicating luxury products through social media platforms can be more effective if addressed to an audience of highly materialistic consumers. Indeed, several studies on luxury and social media have sought to examine the relationship between luxury consumption and social media marketing (Amatulli *et al.*, 2017; Colella *et al.*, 2019; Godey *et al.*, 2016; Jahn *et al.*, 2012; Kim and Ko, 2012; Kim and Lee, 2019; Martín-Consuegra *et al.*, 2019); in this vein, this research considers a specific consumer-related characteristic (materialism) and its impact on various online channels. Second, we add to the literature on online luxury branding and luxury consumption by demonstrating that consumers’ perception of brand luxuriousness in the digital context is influenced by both the type of digital platform used and consumers’ personal orientation towards materialism (Nelissen and Meijers, 2011) – that is, consumers’ tendency to emphasize public displays of success and status (Sharda and Bhat, 2018). Third, we extend the literature on psychological distance by examining how such consumers’ perception is influenced by the level of brand–consumer interaction, which in turn, influences consumers’ perceived brand luxuriousness. Prior research has demonstrated that psychological distance is a significant construct (Park *et al.*, 2020), and our research highlights its central role in online luxury branding.

At a managerial level, our results may help luxury brand managers and social media strategists who want to improve brand–consumer interactions through social media platforms. According to The Boston Consulting Group (2019), online luxury sales are constantly growing, and it is important for luxury firms to mix different communication platforms. Typically, brand managers integrate more than two digital platforms into their marketing strategies (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016). Based on our findings, managers should be able to segment the market on the basis of consumers’ materialism. More specifically, luxury brand or digital marketing managers should develop communication messages aimed at promoting their products through digital channels characterized by high brand–consumer interactions and where the target markets feature materialistic consumers. To illustrate, such strategies should be particularly useful in emerging luxury markets, where the majority of luxury consumers still have a materialistic approach to luxury products (Eng and Bogaert, 2010; Pino *et al.*, 2019). However, to achieve such results, firms need to leverage the high brand–consumer interaction that characterizes digital platforms.

Finally, this study features some limitations that might open avenues for future studies. First, in Study 1, we restricted participants’ ability to exercise real interaction behaviour, although Study 2 adopted stimuli that helped correct for this issue. Nonetheless, future studies could replicate our simple moderation model by incorporating more behavioural stimuli

for the high brand–consumer interaction manipulation. Second, our two experiments exclusively involved US participants; thus, there may be potential cultural differences that limit the generalizability of the results. Future research could replicate our studies across other geographical contexts and nationalities. Third, although our experiments adopted measures for psychological distance and perceived brand luxuriousness that have been established in the literature (Hagtvedt and Patrick, 2016; Park *et al.*, 2020; Richins, 2004; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), other studies could replicate our effects by applying different measures. Fourth, we focused on the moderating role of consumers’ materialism, but other consumer-related characteristics could also be acting as moderators (e.g. conspicuous consumption, self-esteem and status-seeking). Future research may explore the potential role of other variables, as well as treat consumers’ intention to buy as a dependent variable.

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## Appendix

**Table A1** Summary of results (study\_1 and study\_2)

Study_1	b	S.E.	t	p
Brand-consumer_interaction → BLI	0.13	0.08	1.75	0.09
Materialism → BLI	0.23	0.91	2.48	0.01
Brand-consumer_interaction × materialism → BLI → BLI	0.22	0.09	2.44	0.02
low level of materialism: $b = -0.09$ ; 95% CI = $-0.35, 0.15$				
middle level of materialism: $b = 0.17$ ; 95% CI = $0.01, 0.32$				
high level of materialism: $b = 0.35$ ; 95% CI = $0.12, 0.58$				
<i>Study_2</i>				
Brand-consumer_interaction → psych. distance	0.17	0.13	1.32	0.19
Materialism → psych. distance	0.44	0.12	3.63	0.00
Psych. distance → perceived luxuriousness	0.17	0.05	3.19	0.00
Brand-consumer inter. × materialism → psych. dist.	0.26	0.11	2.43	0.02
Index of moderated mediation: $b = 0.04$ , 95% CI = $0.00, 0.09$				
Indirect effect of brand-consumer_interaction on perceived luxuriousness via psych. distance:				
Low level of materialism: $b = -0.01$ ; 95% CI = $-0.05, 0.03$				
Middle level of materialism: $b = 0.04$ ; 95% CI = $-0.01, 0.09$				
High level of materialism: $b = 0.08$ ; 95% CI = $0.00, 0.18$				

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