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Luxury fashion and gender inclusivity, *Case study on Acne Studios*

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Abstract

This paper investigates how luxury fashion brands approach the topic of gender inclusivity through their online consumer communication. In order to study this topic, the Swedish luxury fashion house Acne Studios was chosen as an appropriate case with which an intensive case study was conducted. Within the qualitative research analysis, the authors make use of a semiotic analysis of visual stimuli in order to explore the Instagram and TikTok accounts of the brand as well as fashion magazine articles where the brand is mentioned. The main findings are divided into four themes: *relevance*, *integrity*, *provocativeness*, and *openness*, which all represent the characteristics of Acne Studios that help them promote a more gender-inclusive agenda. Moreover, the study recognizes certain clashes in the brand's activities, which include celebrity partnerships that could damage the gender-inclusive image, as these personas may promote values that do not align with Acne Studios and the lack of menswear collections on their TikTok account. Lastly, possible theoretical, managerial, and societal implications of the study are discussed in more detail, including the need for other luxury brands to implement strategies to achieve a more gender-inclusive agenda so that everyone feels included and has the ability to dress according to their gender identity.

Keywords: luxury fashion brands, Acne Studios, gender inclusivity, social media

Introduction

This thesis concentrates on the impact of luxury fashion brands on gender inclusivity. As younger generations have expressed more interest in social and environmental issues (Ye & Kim, 2024), one way luxury fashion brands can help this cause is through implementing a more gender-inclusive agenda. Since these brands are typically tied with exclusivity and rarity (Lee et al., 2018) rather than inclusivity, it can become quite a challenging task. It is no surprise that within their communication with consumers these brands have been known to use sexualization and gender stereotypes to advertise their products (Adomaitis & Saiki, 2019; Michaelidou et al., 2022).

Now that the luxury sector is gaining back its pre-pandemic numbers and is predicted to grow even more (D'Arpizio et al., 2024), it is essential to understand how this can impact our society in a negative or positive way. As the power to purchase luxury goods is shifting towards the younger demographic of Millennials, Generation Z and Generation Alpha (D'Arpizio et al., 2024), the trends are shifting with them and even luxury fashion brands need to adapt in order to stay relevant (Ye & Kim, 2024; Lee et al., 2018).

One part of the adaptation process was represented by luxury fashion brands creating social media accounts as a form of communication with their customers. This step was crucial for the brands, as there was a high demand for them in the online space from their younger consumers (Ye & Kim, 2024). In order not to lose their preciousness (Calefato, 2023), the luxury fashion brands needed to find ways to differentiate themselves from mass market fashion brands. Recent research has been made on how that can be achieved through *visual* (Kusumasondjaja, 2020; Lee et al., 2018; Duong & Sung, 2021), *emotional* (Cruz-Ros et al., 2024; Joo & Kim, 2021; Azemi et al., 2022) and *technological* (Azemi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024) stimuli. By combining all of these elements, brands should be able to use their platforms to promote values such as gender inclusivity.

Even though fashion is known to be one of the main ways through which people can express themselves (Szczepaniak, 2015), only few researchers have attempted to explore the changing relationships between fashion and gender. The research that exists concentrates on how people view unisex clothing and how it still is not met with a great amount of acceptance from the general public (Luna & Barros, 2019). Another line of research focuses on the shifting trend of gender-bending and individuality-expressing fashion choices of the younger generations and how fashion stores cannot always accommodate them (Kim et al., 2022; Buentello et al., 2022). No previous research, however, has been done on how specifically luxury brands approach this topic. Thus, in order to comprehend this problem of gender inclusivity in fashion more in-depth, research is needed.

Hence, the *aim* of this thesis is to develop an understanding of how the luxury fashion sector approaches the topic of gender inclusivity. From this, the proposed *purpose* is to analyse luxury fashion brand's gender inclusiveness in their communication. The *research question* this thesis strives to answer is:

“How do luxury fashion brands promote gender-inclusive fashion in communication with their consumers?”

Research has not been done on how specifically luxury brands can become ambassadors of gender inclusivity in their communication with consumers on social media. Hence, the authors consider this thesis to be of theoretical relevance, as it will build a connection between the streams of research on luxury brands' communication in social media and the shift to a more gender-inclusive fashion society. Moreover, the thesis is relevant for luxury fashion brands, as they can use the insights found in order to strengthen their gender-inclusive agenda and help boost their relevance among the younger demographic.

The brand Acne Studios was chosen as an adequate case to help answer this research question. Acne Studios is one of the transformative brands that has been able to create a novel way of communicating their products to their consumers. They identify themselves as a luxury fashion house (Sustainability, n.d.) and in their products they mostly make use of an oversized silhouette mixed with distinctive patterns which allow for a general diverse gender impression. They are proactive in the world of environmental sustainability (Sustainability report, 2022) and through their communication they have also been able to achieve higher levels of social sustainability by creating an inclusive brand image. Therefore, the authors consider Acne Studios as a good case to research gender inclusivity in luxury fashion brand communication.

Next, a thorough literature review on the topics of luxury, gender in the fashion sector and on social media communication of luxury fashion brands is provided. This literature review highlights the existence of the research gap of how specifically luxury brands can become ambassadors of gender inclusivity in their clothing designs and in their communication with consumers on social media. This section also consists of a theoretical framework that creates a foundation on which the analysis is based on. It provides a well-rounded overview of relevant theories from the consumer's and brand's perspectives. After this theoretical portion of the thesis, a methodology is provided that shows how the proposed research question will be answered using qualitative research methods by conducting intensive case study research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) on the Swedish luxury fashion brand Acne Studios. The intensive case study method is enhanced with the help of semiotic analysis of visual imagery (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020). By applying these methods in the analysis, the authors were able to identify four main themes of how Acne Studios presents itself: **relevancy, integrity, provocativeness** and **openness**. Lastly, the interpretations of the findings are summarised in the conclusion section, which additionally includes theoretical, managerial, and societal implications along with the limitations of this thesis.

Literature review and theoretical framework

This section of the thesis is focused on providing a thorough review of all the useful knowledge gained from previous literature. As an introduction, background information on the topic is provided through descriptive theories relating to the world of fashion and gender inclusivity. Firstly, definitions of what luxury can mean and how brands in the fashion sector have embraced this concept are provided. Next, the research dives deeper into the relationship between gender and fashion and explains the challenges of creating a more inclusive environment for all parties involved in fashion. Lastly, the emphasis is on the communication side of the problem and how luxury fashion brands can use online consumer communication to promote their values.

In the following section, the authors present a number of mid-range theories that will additionally be useful for the upcoming analysis as a tool within the study of this thesis. An overview of both theories from the consumer's and brand's perspectives is provided in order for the reader to understand all the different elements that are present in online consumer communication that luxury fashion brands conduct. The first segment includes theories of brand perception, extended self, and symbolic meaning. These are then complemented with brand imagery, brand personality, brand meaning, and brand gender. Lastly, a theory discussion is provided in order to highlight which specific theories will be used in what way.

Understanding luxury

What makes a fashion brand luxurious can be identified in various ways. Even the location and size of the store can be telling signs (Nobbs et al., 2012). The size of luxury flagship stores is generally larger than is functionally necessary in order to amplify its exclusivity (Nobbs et al., 2012). Furthermore, the location of these stores is usually already tied to luxury and affluence (Nobbs et al., 2012). When it comes to the goods offered in their stores, they are very closely connected with the values of “...*quality, rarity, artisanal work and customization.*” (Calefato, 2023, p. 16) as well as sophistication (von Wachenfeldt, 2023). They can be perceived as precious and customers would, thus, be willing to pay more for what they represent than for what their function is (Calefato, 2023). Another way luxury fashion brands foster preciousness and exclusivity is essentially by staying hidden through the reduction of signs and the amplification of mystery, forcing customers to be in the ‘inner circle’ (Calefato, 2023). In their research, Hiljding and Susaeta (2023), found this understanding of luxury: “*Professionals and researchers are in full agreement in affirming that luxury is synonymous with quality – comprising such elements as technical superiority, attention to detail and craftsmanship, tradition (experience, antiquity and own history), creativity (relation with art and own style), exclusivity, high price (due to the manufacturing costs and the necessary investment), scarcity or rarity, a specific environment (related to the sales spaces, the presentation of the product and customer service) and beauty.*” (p. 122).

These insights can be further supported by Kim et al. (2019) who compared advertising between luxury and masstige fashion brands and found that these two opposing worlds of fashion share the cues of authenticity, accomplishment, sophistication, exclusivity and pride. On the other hand, the key ingredients that make a fashion brand perceived as luxurious are timelessness, experiential pleasure and heritage (Kim et al., 2019).

However, behind the mystery and rarity, luxury fashion brands aim to remain relevant in the eyes of the consumer and gain competitive advantage, therefore they opt for localised communication (Nobbs et al., 2021) and they keep their products in line with cultural intelligence (Serdari, 2023) and current trends through innovation (Hiljding & Susaeta, 2023). Moreover, research showed that in order for luxury fashion brands to maintain their value-based image throughout their lifetimes, it was necessary to combine the codes or signs of the brand with a comprehensive corporate strategy (Serdari, 2023). In the case of Chanel, the latter part consisted of tight distribution in combination with a pricing strategy (Serdari, 2023). Additionally, Hiljding and Susaeta (2023) highlight that the shift in the customer base needs to be tackled with excellence which comes from authenticity and can aid the brand in differentiating itself within the market. Authenticity is, moreover, seen as a tool luxury fashion brands can use in order to achieve ethicality (De Kerviler, 2023).

Gender in fashion

When talking about different ways gender can be expressed in fashion in more diverse ways, the following terms often come up: ‘unisex’, ‘genderless’, ‘gender-neutral’, ‘gender-inclusive’, ‘gender-bending’, ‘gender-diverse’ and ‘gender-fluid’. Many times in research, these terms have been used interchangeably and due to there not being a universal definition, there is still a lot of discussion on this topic. Bardey et al. (2020) defined unisex clothing as “*clothing that can be worn by both males and females*” (p. 421) and they highlight that “*At the essence of unisex fashion is clothing that is culturally and physically appropriate for both genders.*” (p. 423). Furthermore, Smith and Bamberger (2021) point out “*Whereas gender neutrality is the pretense that gender does not exist or matter, gender inclusion in our research and publishing means that we recognize and study how the experiences and behaviors of all individuals are shaped by the gendered world they live in.*” (p. 442). Thus, within this thesis, the terms ‘unisex’, ‘genderfluid’, ‘gender-bending’, ‘gender-diverse’ and ‘gender-inclusive’ will be used to describe the efforts of creating the world where all genders are seen, accepted and accommodated. It will refrain from the use of the terms ‘gender-neutral’ or ‘genderless’ in the discussed context as these terms would imply the elimination of gender.

In order to understand the challenge of creating a more gender-inclusive world especially in the field of luxury fashion it is essential to look at how these kinds of brands have been presenting themselves. Luxury fashion brands are well-known for publishing advertisements of a more controversial nature in order to create a reaction within society (Adomaitis & Saiki, 2019). The kind of controversy these brands used was many times connected with a large

degree of sexuality, especially with their women models, regardless of their age (Adomaitis & Saiki, 2019). More sexualization and use of stereotypes was confirmed even when compared to their non-luxury fashion brand counterparts (Michaelidou et al., 2022). Thus, even the well-known prestigious brands had their role to play in the objectification of women as well as the creation of unrealistic body standards, that current movements are trying to overcome by creating a more positive narrative for consumers (Adomaitis & Saiki, 2019). The reality is that these brands “*rely on culturally defined gender expressions and identities in their advertising, which are likely to match the stereotypical views of the wealthy luxury brand user.*” (Michaelidou et al., 2022, p. 1287). However, the more inclusive narrative is being supported by the younger demographic, thus, there is pressure being created on the luxury sector to incorporate a variety of sustainable practices (Ye & Kim, 2024).

When looking at the previous research regarding gender-inclusive clothing, one of the streams concentrates on unisex clothing. In their research, Luna and Barros (2019) highlight that in media the terms ‘unisex’ and ‘genderless’ are used interchangeably which they believe causes certain confusion as they are not the same. They found that what was mostly considered as noticeable genderless/unisex fashion by the public “*is usually associated with men wearing garments that conform to patterns more common to woman’s clothing and to the mixture of stereotyped elements of gender present in the clothing of people in whom a biological sex is often not clearly identified*” (p. 291). Furthermore, they discovered that this type of fashion is often met with a significant amount of resentment from the public (Luna & Barros, 2019). This was confirmed by Bardey et al. (2020) who also discussed that a large part of the stigma towards this type of clothing lies in the reality that even though designers of these clothes make them with the idea of helping a societal cause, consumers may not find them fashionable, which to them is a priority. However, since the purchasing power is shifting towards the younger demographic of millennials and generation z these genderless fashion pieces have started to become more normalised (Kim et al., 2022). This started as a result of younger customers judging the clothing based on how they can show their individuality especially from a more gender fluid fashion perspective (Kim et al., 2022).

Additionally, a stepping stone towards a more gender-inclusive fashion experience for all of customers is the increasing popularity of cross-gender shopping (Buentello et al., 2022) which also represents the second thread of research regarding gender-inclusive clothing. Nevertheless, even within this practice there are barriers present in various forms, such as the layout of the store, the staff or the gender binary imagery that is present in advertising (Buentello et al., 2022). This challenge is present in the luxury fashion world as well, as the collections are presented in a binary manner with womenswear and menswear runway shows. This duality is also clearly shown in fashion magazines who report on these runway shows (e.g. in the Seasons section of Vogue (Nast, n.d. a)). Thus, even though the designs could be meant to be worn by anyone it is not as easy to demonstrate.

Communication of luxury fashion

Even though brand promotion through social media has now become an irreplaceable tool for marketers worldwide, it was not that easy for luxury fashion brands to integrate themselves into this digital landscape. For them, being a part of social media platforms created a challenge of combining the need for a larger customer base and the potential of losing what defines them as luxurious which includes exclusivity and rarity (Lee et al., 2018). Uploading posts on social media accounts makes the brands easily and instantly accessible to the masses which is the opposite of mystery. Thus, extensive research has been done on what these brands can do in order to retain their exclusive image even in the world of social media communication.

Within the visual stimuli research, it was shown that opting for more expressive aesthetics as opposed to classical aesthetics is beneficial for luxury fashion brands in maintaining their hedonic appeal online (Kusumasondjaja, 2020). This is essential as social media communication plays a crucial role in the journey of a modern consumer and when they choose to buy in the luxury sector, it can translate to them opting for hedonistic behaviour (Hiljding & Susaeta, 2023). Furthermore, Duong and Sung (2021) discovered conspicuousness as the dimension of luxury that had a positive impact on brand engagement which ties in with the mentioned expressive theme (Kusumasondjaja, 2020). Using these types of visual stimuli, luxury fashion brands are: “... *appealing to passions, senses, intelligence and pleasure*” (Calefato, 2023, p. 17) which further fosters the preciousness luxury brands represent. When it comes to the complexity of the images posted by brands, Lee et al. (2018) studies showed that it is important to understand the levels of familiarity the viewers have with the brand in order to create the right message (Lee et al., 2018).

Furthermore, emotional stimuli are as important for social media communication. It was found that luxury fashion brands that strive for the promotion of their rituals and traditions in their online communication are able to foster the love consumers have for the brand even if they are not paying customers (Cruz-Ros et al., 2024). Consumers can be further encouraged to share their version of these rituals which can promote general consumer engagement with the brand and build eWOM (Cruz-Ros et al., 2024). Furthermore, research was made on the relationships of the feelings of envy and admiration towards luxury fashion brands and it was found that both have the ability to create strong brand-customer connections (Joo & Kim, 2021). However, the positive feelings of admiration and general warmth are stronger and thus the discussed brands should strive to create a positive image and become able/well-intentioned brands (Joo & Kim, 2021). Generally, the goal is to find the right combination of elements within social media communication that stimulate the consumers cognitive and emotional side through relatability, attainability and social effectuality (Azemi et al., 2022). Within these three themes, relatability touches upon both, attainability connects to the more cognitive side and social effectuality the more emotional one (Azemi et al., 2022).

Lastly, luxury fashion brands can make use of the technological stimuli of social media in order to easier manage their content. For example, Azemi et al. (2022) highlight that communication with different luxury fashion consumers across different social media platforms should serve different purposes. They recommend Instagram as the platform to conduct the first step of the mobile marketing journey, call for engagement. Following this, the authors suggest using Twitter, TikTok and Facebook as reminder platforms in order to achieve the desired last step, call for action, again on Instagram. Additionally, narrowing down the type of content the brand posts in combination with high-quality imagery and offering various engagement levels with customers helps the brands to maintain the luxurious image (Zhang et al., 2024). This can, moreover, be tied to the localised advertising strategy (Nobbs et al., 2021).

Theories from the consumer's perspective

Brand perception

In order to stay relevant, luxury fashion brands started using social media as a new way to communicate with their audience. Being present in the online space has enabled a larger customer base, and with that, new ways of perceiving the brands (Joo & Kim, 2021).

Kervyn et al. (2012) propose that the Stereotype Content Model (SCM) introduced by Fiske et al. (2002) helps understand how customers perceive and relate to brands. The model explains how people perceive social groups on two social perception dimensions: Warmth and Competence (Kervyn et al., 2012). As the researchers wrote, warmth indicates positive, cooperative intentions, whereas one with negative, competitive, and exploitative intentions appears cold. The other dimension, competence, answers the question "*Is that other able to carry out its intentions?*" (Kervyn et al., 2012, p. 167). If the answer is yes, one is perceived as competent, if the answer is no, one is perceived as incompetent. Consequently, while warmth is associated with helpfulness, sincerity, friendliness, and trustworthiness, competence includes efficiency, intelligence, conscientiousness, and skill (Kervyn et al., 2012).

Based on this model, four groups were identified: warm and competent, cold and incompetent, warm and incompetent and lastly, cold and competent (Cuddy et al., 2007). Following further research, Cuddy et al. (2007) found that these groups also have an emotional consequence. Four emotions were identified and paired with the different groups. Groups perceived as warm and competent elicit admiration, cold and incompetent elicit contempt, warm and incompetent elicit pity and cold and competent elicit envy (Cuddy et al., 2007).

Building on the Stereotype Content Model, Kervyn et al. (2012) therefore introduced the Brands as Intentional Agents Framework (BIAF) that can be applied to brand perception.

The BIAF calls the two dimensions “intentions” and “ability” as opposed to warmth and competence. The four groups that were identified, similarly to the SCM, also elicit specific emotions. Brands perceived as able/well-intentioned elicit admiration, unable/ill-intentioned elicit contempt, able/ill-intentioned elicit envy, and unable/well-intentioned elicit pity (Kervyn et al., 2012). Research also showed that well-intentioned brands received higher purchase intent and loyalty than ill-intentioned brands, as well as high-ability brands received higher purchase intent and loyalty than low-ability brands (Kervyn et al., 2012).

Joo and Kim (2021) presented the BIAF in relation to luxury brands. Prior to luxury brands’ presence on social media, it was perceived that luxury brands were able but ill-intentioned toward the general public. However, when luxury brands started creating social media accounts and they became less exclusive and more accessible to consumers, regardless of economic status, customers’ perception of said brands began to shift (Joo & Kim, 2021). Customers started to view them as intimate and trustworthy which contributed to higher consumer purchase intention (Joo & Kim, 2021).

Extended self

Individuals can express themselves in numerous ways. One common way of developing self-image and identity is through purchasing and consuming products (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

According to Belk (1988), we unknowingly or knowingly, intentionally, or unintentionally regard our possessions as parts of ourselves. So much so that James (1890, as cited in Belk, 1988) stated we are the sum of our possessions. Belk (1988) modernised Rochberg-Halton’s (1984, as cited in Belk, 1988) definition of the extended self: he includes people, places, group possessions and even bodily possessions like vital organs to the already existing mix of external objects and personal possessions that represents the diverse aspects of the total self. Since consumers equate their possessions to their own self, they hold the power to choose the products and brands they would like to materialise and define their self-concept through as well as communicate it to others (Szczepaniak, 2015). Individuals can either communicate their actual self-concept or ideal self-concept. When expressing actual self-concept, consumers show who they are, as opposed to portraying who they would like to be and who they want others to perceive them (ideal self-concept). Fashion is commonly used to express either (Szczepaniak, 2015). Fashion is also a great communication tool that helps reduce the distance between an individual and the society, distinguish an individual from others while also signalling the individual’s group membership, position within a certain societal group and indicating group identity (Szczepaniak, 2015; Belk, 1988). All in all, fashion expresses self-image and identity in both personal and social context.

Symbolic meaning

In order to successfully express ourselves through fashion, we need to understand how meaning is created and accepted by others.

Barnard (2002) examined whether the source of the meaning can be internal to the garment or design itself. Some say meaning is in the item, that meaning inheres in the choice of colour, texture or shape. This stand fails when it is expanded to different cultures: it is hard to determine an item's meaning if one is not familiar with the culture. If meaning is laid in the artefact itself, it could be interpreted in the same way no matter one's cultural background. Similarly, if meaning was only in the garment, it presumes that time passing would not change the meaning, therefore skinny jeans would always be considered trendy (Barnard, 2002).

With the help of semiology, Barnard (2002) found that consumers need codes or systems of signs to successfully interpret meaning. Saussure (1974, as cited in Barnard, 2002) proposed that the sign is made up of two parts: the signifier that stands for something (red dress), and the signified that is something else that is being represented (sexy). Meanings are constructed by using signifiers that already exist and individuals have no control over (Barnard, 2002).

Barnard (2002) writes that there are two levels of meanings: the first is the 'denotational' meaning and the second level is referred to as 'connotational' meaning. Denotational meaning is the initial, first order of meaning: it is common sense, factual and literal, and because of this it does not vary much from person to person who share the same culture. On the other hand, connotational meaning or second order of meaning is the feeling a garment evokes. Because of its associative and subjective nature, the meaning is almost never the same amongst various people (Barnard, 2002). The recognition that consumers not only base their consumption choices on products' utilities but also their symbolic meaning is fundamental to postmodernism (Belk, 1988).

Elliot (1997, as cited in Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) explained the two functions of the symbolic meanings of products and how they operate: 'social-symbolism' operates outward in constructing the social world, whereas 'self-symbolism' inward in constructing our self-identity. Since we live in a symbol-rich environment, our possessions and the situations we experience hold meaning that are determined by the interpretation of these symbols. Although consumers agreed on shared meanings of some symbols through the socialisation process, there is room for individual symbolic interpretations to be developed. Not everyone who owns the same garment, for example, bought it for the same symbolic meaning. Through symbolic consumption, people construct, maintain and express their multiple identities while also categorising themselves in society (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

As discussed, consumption plays a big role in providing meaning and value for creating and maintaining the consumer's personal and social world, therefore advertising is recognized as

one of the major sources of these symbolic meanings (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). The cultural meanings are transferred to brands, which results in brands often being the symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity. The interpretation of brands however may vary as individuals may make sense of the meanings according to their personal limitations (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Theories from the brand's perspective

Brand imagery

Brand imagery is a combination of user imagery and usage imagery (Sotiropoulos, 2003, as cited in Agerup, 2016). The two concepts can be put together to create brand imagery because both describe factors that have symbolic nature (Agerup, 2016).

User imagery can be defined as “*a stereotyped perception of the generalized user of a particular brand*” (Parker, 2005, p. 19, as cited in Agerup, 2016) or as Sirgy (1982, as cited in Agerup, 2016) wrote, a set of human characteristics associated with the brand user. User imagery attributes can be formed fairly easily: either directly from personal experiences and contact with brand users or indirectly through the depiction of the target market that can be communicated via brand advertisement or other type of information for example word of mouth (Keller, 1993, as cited in Agerup, 2016). These two types are defined as the ideal user and the typical user (Aaker, 1996, as cited in Agerup, 2016).

The ideal user is a personality that the brand wants to portray and communicate as their brand user to achieve a better brand image. Although, in most cases the ideal user is normally not the target group of the company (Agerup, 2016).

On the other hand, the typical user is someone who uses the brand by choice. Typical users therefore reflect on the brand, and that can cause troublesome consequences. If the gap between ideal and typical user imagery gets too wide, the general public might not be able to interpret the brand meaning and might come up with alternative and false meanings based on what they see in real life (Agerup, 2016).

Consumers often choose brands based on the people representing or using them. If consumers like those people and would like to be more like those people themselves, they will associate their qualities with the brand and as a result end up as brand users. It is apparent that typical users have the strongest effect on brand perception: they are transparent, authentic, relatable and most importantly not paid to share experiences about a product or brand. Typical user imagery then could be thought of as a visual word-of-mouth: rather than other people's opinion of a brand, it represents unfiltered and honest visual information about the brand user. Celebrities and models, however beautiful and more accomplished than the average person, are less relatable and therefore less impactful for brand perception (Agerup, 2016).

Lastly, user imagery is not only important to brand owners but brand users and non-brand users as well. Brand owners need to implement appropriate user imagery as it affects brand personality, that affects self-image congruity and as a result, customer satisfaction. User imagery is important to brand users because it allows them to express themselves using their products. Non-brand users also need to be paid attention to as their avoidance can be experiential, moral or identity-based in nature (Aagerup, 2016).

Usage imagery can be defined as the perceived stereotype of the situations in which a brand or product is generally used, portrays situations and lifestyles in which the brand is used (Biel, 1992, as cited in Aagerup, 2016; Fiore, 2010, as cited in Aagerup, 2016). Similarly to user imagery, usage imagery attributes can be formed directly and indirectly. Directly from a consumer's personal experiences and indirectly through the depiction of it through advertising or word-of-mouth (Keller, 1993, as cited in Aagerup, 2016). Usage imagery when being used appropriately – consumers accept it as suitable for the product - can have significant effects in brand attitude and also brand loyalty. This is called usage imagery congruity: consumers tend to rate products higher in their appropriate environment than one that is more unnatural. Symbolic brand image is therefore shaped by usage imagery and usage imagery also shapes brand meaning (Aagerup, 2016).

With the rapid growth of the internet and social media, brand imagery is more widely available than ever and it is easier to see both user and usage imagery. Furthermore, social media is getting more visual in character and as a result of that, the amount of brand imagery available is huge (Aagerup, 2016).

Brand personality

Aagerup (2016) views brand personality as the symbolic character of brand image and it is affected by user imagery. Brand personality can be defined as Keller (2003, as cited in Aagerup, 2016) wrote: how consumers feel about a brand rather than what they feel the brand is or does. The most common definition however is the following: *“the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”* (Aaker, 1997, p. 347, as cited in Aagerup, 2016).

Brand personality can lead to a number of positive outcomes: it induces emotions in consumers, can increase trust and loyalty, can positively influence consumer-brand relationships, can have a positive influence on brand preference, affection and purchase intention or can have a positive effect on consumer satisfaction. The main reason brand personality can have these numerous positive effects is that it allows consumers to clearly interpret the brand on an emotional level and truly understand its meaning (Aagerup, 2016).

All in all, an appropriate, recognizable, and well-defined brand personality is crucial to a successful brand's appeal (Aagerup, 2016).

Brand meaning

According to Berry (2000), consumers perceive brand meaning from three sources: the customer experience, the presented brand and external brand communications. Similarly, Balmer's (2003, as cited in Agerup, 2016) version of total corporate communication has three categories: primary, that can be viewed as Berry's (2000) customer experience, secondary as the presented brand and a tertiary as external brand communications.

The first level includes the first impressions and experience with the brand. This could mean product design, pricing or how corporate policies are perceived. The second level refers to communications by the company like advertisements, promotions and PR. Lastly, the third level includes any communication that is not controlled by the company but affects a brand: public speech and print, word-of-mouth and brand imagery (Agerup, 2016). Agerup (2016) summarised this as first, second and third level being what companies do, what they say and what people say about them.

As discussed earlier, due to the Internet's rapid growth, the third level and its different forms of communication are gaining more importance: typical user imagery and usage imagery (Agerup, 2016).

Brand gender

Brand gender could be defined as "*the set of human personality traits associated with masculinity and femininity applicable and relevant to brands*" (Grohmann, 2009, p. 106).

In addition, brand gender encompasses two independent dimensions, one of which is masculine brand personality traits and the other is feminine brand personality traits (Grohmann, 2009). Masculine brand personality traits, according to Grohmann's (2009) study involve adjectives like adventurous, aggressive, brave, daring, dominant and sturdy. Feminine personality traits however include: expresses tender feelings, fragile, graceful, sensitive, sweet and last but not least, tender (Grohmann, 2009).

Moreover, four brand genders can be distinguished: masculine, feminine, undifferentiated and androgynous. Masculine means high in masculinity and low in femininity, feminine is the opposite of this: high in femininity and low in masculinity, undifferentiated means low in both masculinity and femininity and on the contrary, androgynous means high in both masculinity and femininity (Vacas de Carvalho et al., 2020). The reason why consumers associate human personality traits and personality traits regarding gender with brands lies behind them being able to relate to brands in a similar manner than to their friends and family, perceiving brands as parts of their extended self, or seeing brands marketed with certain characteristics (Grohmann, 2009).

Brand gender's bi-dimensional nature (brand masculinity and brand femininity) emerges from consumers' need to express themselves along multiple dimensions (Grohmann, 2009). Since gender is part of consumers' self-concept, there is a want and need to express femininity and masculinity through brand choice. Gender dimensions of personality are particularly important in the case of apparel brands as consumers use the masculine or feminine personality traits of the brand and its products to express their own version of masculinity or femininity (Grohmann, 2009). To help with this, brands create feminine or masculine brand associations like the choice of packaging colour and style (Grohmann, 2009).

When it comes to the two dimensions of brand gender, an asymmetric importance can be detected. Study shows that masculine brands are more effective than feminine ones: females are more likely to accept masculine brands than males accepting feminine brands. Males are aware of the cultural stigma around using and engaging with feminine brands and therefore can feel threatened in their gender identity (Vacas de Carvalho et al., 2020).

Theory discussion

This chapter was created in order to help the reader understand how exactly the above-mentioned theories are going to be incorporated in the analysis process. As will be explained in the methodology, qualitative research will be used in order to collect data and analyse them. However, the role of the authors is to analyse the data also through the theoretical lens gained from the theoretical research. Firstly, the authors will attempt to identify the different kinds of stimuli Acne Studios uses in their online communication (Kusumasondjaja, 2020; Lee et al., 2018; Duong & Sung, 2021; Cruz-Ros et al., 2024; Joo & Kim, 2021; Azemi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024) and how these stimuli allow for the balance between luxury and inclusivity to shine through. Next, the authors will use consumer theories in order to understand how the collected data could be perceived by the user. Using the BIAF model the authors will determine whether Acne Studios is an able/unable and well-/ill-intentioned brand. Furthermore, the analysis will attempt to identify the signifiers and signified meanings using the symbolic meaning theories in order to understand the true essence of the brand. Moving onto the brand's side theories, which will help in understanding the brand's motives for their actions, the authors will identify the types of brand imagery used by Acne Studios. Connected to this will be the exploration of the usage imagery through the posts of the brand. Next, the analysis will be used to identify the key characteristics of the brand personality of Acne Studios'. Tying it all together the analysis should then create a representable case for the brand meanings and brand gender associated with Acne Studios'. By identifying all these characteristics the authors should be able to provide an answer to the proposed research question.

Methodology

In order to gain answers to the research question of how luxury fashion brands promote gender-inclusive fashion in communication with their consumers, it is first necessary to understand what kind of methods will be used in this process by the authors. Firstly, a search for and review of previous literature was conducted, from which the authors were able to construct the literature review and theoretical framework included in previous chapters. The knowledge gained from this research could then be used to conduct the empirical qualitative research in a structured manner. Since the authors consider the company and brand of Acne Studios as a good case for interpreting the specifics of successful promotion of gender-inclusive clothing in the luxury sector, an intensive case study approach was chosen as the method. Within the intensive case study research, the authors chose semiotic analysis of visual imagery as the method for analysing the data collected from the brand's social media accounts and from fashion magazines that contained articles talking about Acne Studios. This data was further analysed using the theory discussion of the theoretical framework and direct interpretations.

Previous literature

Within their search for and review of previous literature, the authors made use of the resources provided by the university library of the School of Business Economics and Law in Gothenburg. In order to achieve the most reliable results, the literature review mainly consists of database search through Business Source Premier and Scopus. Additional scientific papers were found using the reference lists from the papers found within the database search. The search was limited to papers written in English. The searched terms included "luxury fashion", "luxury", "fashion", "gender", "communication", "expression", "inclusivity", "unisex" and their various combinations.

Empirical research

Intensive case study research

Since the authors want to explore, understand and interpret the work of Acne Studios, they opted for qualitative research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The focus is on Acne Studios' luxury fashion brand communication and its relation to gender inclusivity over time. Thus, the authors chose to conduct the empirical research under the umbrella of case study research. It is a very adaptable kind of research method and can be tailored to the specific aim and purpose of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This even relates to the type of data obtained in the collection process (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). However, the general understanding is that it can be used to understand complex issues and help in their

interpretation and production of knowledge (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), there are two types of case studies: intensive and extensive. Intensive case studies are used in single-case study research and extensive when there are multiple case studies that are to be compared (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Since the authors of this thesis are concentrating on the single case of Acne Studios within the world of luxury fashion brands they opted for the intensive case study approach. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) used this description to explain the method better: “*This aims at understanding a unique case from the inside by providing a thick, holistic and contextualized description.*” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 118). Moreover, “... *the main purpose of intensive case studies is to offer interpretations on the case made by the researcher...*” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 120). The method should take into account all the relevant settings the case is in: “...*economic, social, cultural, technological, historical, and physical...*” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 120). The case should be special in some way in order for it to be relevant to study it and the researchers’ role is to find ways to understand and interpret its specialness (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Therefore, when conducting an intensive case study a review of materials needs to be done prior to the actual analysis in order to prove that the case is suitable (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). That is why the authors chose to conduct a review of the relevant research fields and theoretical approaches and provide their more detailed reasonings for the case in the following paragraph.

Acne Studios

In order to gain a better understanding of why Acne Studios is a suitable case to explore, it is necessary to understand what Acne Studios is. Acne Studios is a Stockholm based luxury fashion house that provides their consumers with a large variety of luxury “*men’s and women’s ready-to-wear, footwear, accessories and denim.*” (About, n.d.). They were established in 1996 (Jonny Johansson: Bof 500: The people shaping the global fashion industry, 2022) which makes them a relatively new luxury brand compared to the more established houses like Gucci, Chanel or Prada. Perhaps, by not having as much heritage as the other luxury fashion houses they were able to transform the perception of luxury. The style of the brand is very minimalist and contemporary. In their designs they show innovation through oversized silhouettes with characteristic patterns and utilisation of combined materials. They strive for new creative ideas in the fashion industry as their name also suggests: “*Acne, an acronym for Ambition to Create Novel Expressions*” (Nast, n.d. b). They additionally show this innovative creative approach through their collaborations with a diverse range of designers and brands (Acne Studios, n.d. a). In their creative manifesto they clearly show what they represent: “*Fashion is an expression of identity and values, and it is our mission to ensure it deserves a part in creating a more sustainable and inclusive world to live in. We are asking the challenging questions and collectively embracing change.*” (Creative manifesto, n.d.). They are proactive in the world of environmental sustainability with long-term sustainability targets such as design for longevity, preferred materials and low-impact production (Sustainability report, 2022). Even though there are luxury fashion brands that use comparable designs and attract similar kinds of audience, such as, Balenciaga

or Off-White (P., 2023), it could be said that Acne Studios conducts their overall communication and brand imagery in a more gender-inclusive and generally socially sustainable way. For example, in addition to having specific unisex pieces, Acne Studios makes use of the same colour palettes for both genders and showcases models who are not necessarily posing as more feminine or masculine even though some of the designs could be seen as having these features (Women's Clothing, n.d.; Men's Clothing, n.d.), this is not necessarily the case when it comes to Balenciaga (Women's ready-to-wear, n.d.; Men's ready-to-wear, n.d.) and Off-White (Women, n.d.; Men, n.d.). Therefore, looking at the bigger picture of luxury fashion communication and gender inclusivity, the authors believe that Acne Studios is a relevant case to study. The company has had a different approach compared to their peers and within their capabilities, they have been successful in creating a more inclusive platform for all consumers.

Data collection and analysis

In order to understand exactly how Acne Studios is using social media communication to promote gender inclusivity as a luxury brand the data needs to be collected within the online space. Acne Studios has accounts on multiple social media platforms, which include Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, TikTok and Instagram. The brand is most frequently active on Instagram, Facebook and TikTok and gains the most responses on these three platforms as well as has the most followers there 4,3 million (Acne Studios, n.d. b), 598 thousand (Acne Studios, n.d. c) and 134,6 thousand (acnestudiosofficial, n.d.) respectively. However, since the image posts on Instagram and Facebook do not contain significant differences, only Instagram will be analysed from the two. TikTok will be used to analyse the video posts. These posts will be further complimented by fashion magazine issues which concentrated on Acne Studios during fashion week. In order to stay inside the realm of intensive case study research where the single case can be studied over time (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) the data was collected from all posts dating from 2019 - 2024. However, the first TikTok of the brand was posted on the 21st of September 2022 (acnestudiosofficial, n.d.), therefore, the data collection could not go further.

Acne Studios presents two women's as well as men's collections each year: Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter. However, there was no men's Spring/Summer collection for 2021. The authors therefore analysed 23 collections: from FW2024 to SS2019.

The authors used the fashion magazine literature, from the year 2019 until the mentions of the latest FW2024 collection, in order to find out how the fashion media perceives Acne, their designs and their aesthetic. This data mainly represents the third level of brand meaning which the consumers perceive (Aagerup, 2016). The data was collected from the fashion magazine Women's Wear Daily (WWD). The publications were filtered on whether they mentioned Acne Studios and whether they were giving active interpretations of the fashion items of the brand. The articles that remained for the analysis were talking about the specific collections either Spring/Summer or Fall/Winter of the year and it was a mix of their

womenswear and menswear collections. These collections were mostly presented by Acne Studios during the Paris Fashion Week on the brand's fashion show. The writers of these articles generally gave a summary of the theme of the collection, provided comments said by the creative director Jonny Johansson and summarised the most prominent pieces in the collection.

To analyse all of the collected data, the authors chose semiotic analysis of visual imagery (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020) as the most suitable research method, as it helps researchers identify the different kinds of meanings behind images (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020). For the purpose of this research the authors are going to use semiotic analysis mainly in order to interpret visuals gained from the content Acne Studios post on their social media accounts. Thus, the authors looked out for a number of things within the social media analysis: colour of posts and the feed, text on posts that are visible from the feed view, types of posts (videos or pictures of the collection announcements, visuals of the runway space, runway images, product images, full body shots, behind the scene pictures, celebrity pictures).

Overall, the analysis will be carried out by using a combination of coding based on the theoretical concepts presented in the theory discussion and direct interpretations of themes and patterns found through the semiotic analysis of visual stimuli, whilst staying inside the realm of the intensive case study method.

Quality of study

In order to ensure the highest quality of qualitative research several evaluation criteria were implemented in the research process. Based on the suggestions of Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were executed. To achieve dependability, the authors of this thesis provided the reader with screenshots of main posts, as well as informative objective descriptions of what is shown on them together with the specific quotes from their captions and from magazine articles. Only after presenting the data to the reader did the authors draw interpretations and analyse them through a theoretical lens. Nextly, transferability was improved by the application of the concepts from the theory discussion to the analysis process in order to show the differences and similarities to previous research. A thorough review of previous literature was also helpful within the criteria of credibility, as the insights found were used as a foundation to draw logical conclusions in the semiotic analysis of visual imagery. Lastly, to reach confirmability, the authors provided clear explanations of the links between the data and theory in a way that is easy to follow for the reader.

Analysis

In order to allow an easier comprehension of the main findings that were found within the semiotic analysis, they have been divided into four main themes that were most prominent

across all the sources, i.e. Instagram, TikTok and magazine data collection. These four chosen themes are **relevancy**, **integrity**, **provocativeness** and **openness**. They describe how Acne Studios presents themselves and help explain how they promote gender-inclusive clothing in their communication.

Relevancy

As was mentioned before, the main idea of why luxury brands started their own social media accounts was to stay relevant and adapt to their new customer base (Ye & Kim, 2024). However, simply creating a social media account is not the key to relevancy, it is only the first step which should then be followed by the posting of appropriate content. Through their content, even luxury fashion brands are able to guide their consumers to express their self-concept (Szczepaniak, 2015) via their products. Furthermore, the brands can help draw the connections between their clothes and the meanings behind them, in other words, unveil the signifier and signified (Barnard, 2002). Thus, it is important that what the content represents is relevant for the viewer in order for it to have any meaningful effect for the brand. Relatability also allows for the stimulation of both the emotional and cognitive side (Azemi et al., 2022).

The way Acne's relevance manifests in their Instagram account can be seen through their SS and FW collections and fashion shows as well as the celebrities attending these shows, celebrity partnerships and most liked posts.

Showcasing the celebrities who attended the fashion shows became more and more important as time has passed. A couple of years ago, there were either no posts or only a few about celebrities attending the shows and even then, the pictures were less curated than they are now. Today, there are multiple posts presenting different celebrities: pictures and videos both. By including more posts of celebrities, the brand can strengthen ideal user imagery, they are able to create a certain image of their brand that they would like to portray and communicate to consumers (Aagerup, 2016).

Moreover, Acne Studios often collaborates with celebrities which enables them to stay relevant, gain more attention within different consumer groups and again, strengthen ideal user imagery (Aagerup, 2016) and with that, brand perception. Acne collaborated with celebrities such as the members of the girl band ILLIT, Yves Tumor, Anok Yai, Chanmina, Kylie Jenner, Barbie Ferreira, Rosalía, Devon Aoki, Honey Dijon, Bladee and Lily McMenamy. Furthermore, many celebrities were shown in their Instagram wearing Acne Studios: Beyonce, Little Simz, Emma Chamberlain, Role Model, Mia Khalifa, Hailey Bieber, Tommy Cash, Jared Leto, Caroline Polachek, Rihanna, ASAP Rocky, Jennifer Lawrence, Emily Ratajkowski and Willow Smith.

When collecting data, three main celebrity collaborations stood out that were showcasing the relevancy aspect of the brand and were further analysed: Acne x Kylie Jenner, Acne x Rosalía and Acne x Yves Tumor.

Acne Studios announced that Kylie Jenner was the new face of Acne in a collaboration post where she was wearing the FW23 denim collection (Figure 1). In the images, she is wearing a number of outfits that combine ultra-oversized jeans and baggy jeans with oversized denim jackets, oversized denim long coats and a bra-like top. The oversized pieces represent masculinity, while the small and form fitted tops signal femininity, mixing the two can create a look that is both masculine and feminine.

The collection and, with that, Acne Studios, received some backlash following their announcement. The comments were not central to the research, however, it was unavoidable seeing them when conducting the research. Many of them expressed feelings of disappointment in the brand for choosing our generation's biggest celebrity - who can be quite controversial - to be their new face. Kylie Jenner does not necessarily have the reputation of being a gender-inclusivity ambassador, more so, she, amongst her family, is more well-known for setting unrealistic body and beauty standards (Frangos, 2018). With the decision to have Kylie Jenner be Acne's new face, the brand's user imagery can suffer (Aagerup, 2016). Therefore, consumers might associate Jenner's human characteristics - that might not be aligned with what Acne represents - with the brand user (Sirgy, 1982, as cited in Aagerup, 2016) and choose not to use Acne's garments for their individual self-expression.

With this decision however, and with the power of Kylie Jenner, new types of consumers were attracted to the brand.



Figure 1
Acne x Kylie Jenner
Photo courtesy of Carlijn Jacobs
(Acne Studios, 2023a)

Continuing with Rosalía's partnership with the brand, Rosalía first appeared in Acne's Instagram feed in March 2023, and the last time the pop-star has been posted to their socials was in September 2023. In the meantime, she was starring in Acne Studios FW22 campaign and touring the world in custom Acne pieces. Her presence on Acne's Instagram included images and videos of the FW22 campaign, images and videos of her going to award shows in Acne Studios, tour pictures featuring custom looks, pictures of her attending fashion week and a cover photo for Dazed magazine wearing Acne.

Rosalía was very influential for the brand, thus, long after the collection was live, images of her were still posted to the brand's account. According to one of the post's captions, she finished her world tour with a total of 128 custom pieces for both her and her dancers. With Rosalía touring the world in custom Acne garments and the brand posting pictures and videos of certain concert looks, Acne highlighted their relevance.

The FW22 campaign's imagery is composed of big boxy blazers, leather clothes, vintage floral prints, patchwork jeans, big bows, big belts and accessories and hair as a dress. In the garments, the mix of masculinity and femininity can again be seen with bold statement pieces, such as accessories (Figure 2).

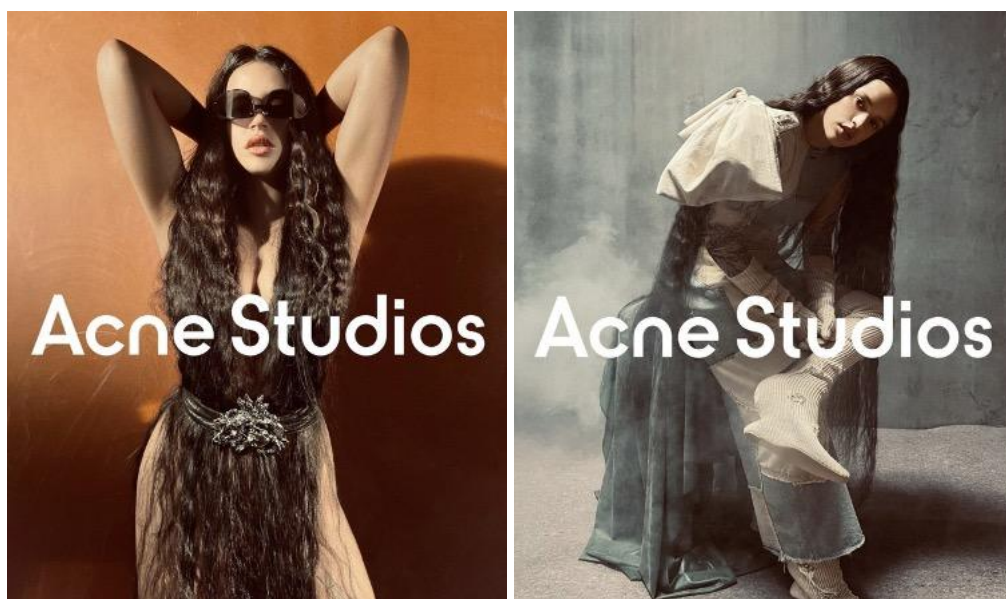


Figure 2
Acne x Rosalía
Photo courtesy of Paul Kookier
(Acne Studios, 2022a), (Acne Studios, 2022b)

Lastly, another celebrity who Acne has partnered with for their FW24 collection is Yves Tumor, an American musician and producer, who is more known within the underground circles.

Yves Tumor, compared to the other celebrities that the brand has collaborated with and campaigns that the authors have analysed, is different in a sense that they are not as widely

known as Kylie Jenner or Rosalía. They reach another audience that Kylie or Rosalía might not be able to. They can diversify Acne's reach further.

The images on the brand's Instagram feed created a futuristic sensation with the help of the designs of the pieces: leather items, baggy denim jeans, jorts, maxi boots, skin tight shirts, crop tops, denim oversized jackets, dresses with heavy accessories like sunglasses, multiple belts, necklaces (Figure 3). The items in this collection, modelled by Yves, as well as many others by Acne, are also presented as ultra feminine and ultra masculine at the same time.



Figure 3
Acne x Yves Tumor
Photo courtesy of Jordan Hemingway
(Acne Studios, 2024a)

Acne Studios' Instagram account has 4,2 million followers (Acne Studios, n.d. b) (as of May 26, 2024). Posts like product pictures and model images get around 5 thousand likes on average, while some can gain significantly more. These posts include images of new store openings, campaign teasers, special product launches, celebrities attending fashion week or celebrities partnering with Acne and starring in campaigns.

Another way the brand is showing their relevance is through their most liked Instagram posts (Figure 4). Two of the three most liked posts included celebrities, and the third one was a picture of one of their stores.

The most liked picture with 491 thousand likes is the announcement of Kylie Jenner being Acne Studios' new face and her starring in their FW23 denim collection. The second one, with 103 thousand likes is a video of the girl band, ILLIT arriving at Paris Fashion Week wearing pieces of Acne's FW24 collection. Lastly, in third place comes an image of Acne's iconic pink holiday bow photographed at their Greene Street store in New York.

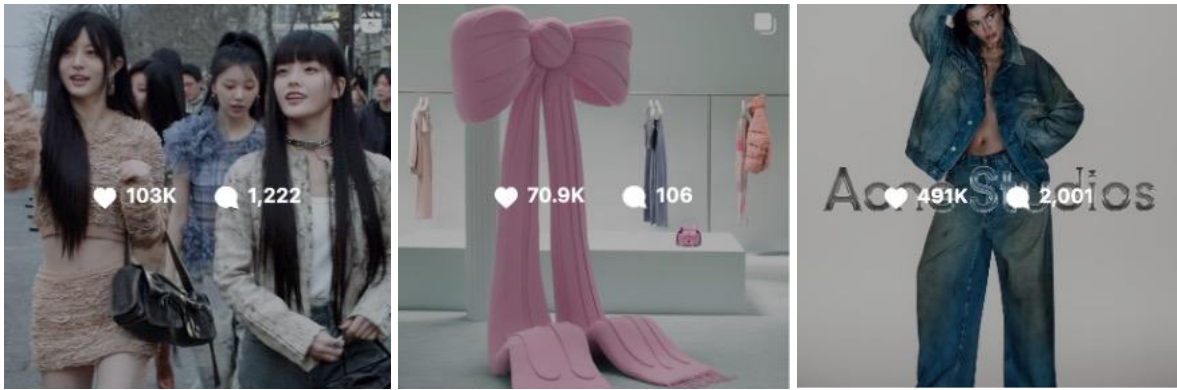


Figure 4
 Most liked posts on Acne Studios' Instagram account
 (Acne Studios, 2024b), (Acne Studios, 2023b), (Acne Studios, 2023c)

It is not entirely surprising that two posts including celebrities won first and second place. Involving celebrities in campaigns usually means that their supporters will be supporting the projects they star in and the brand they partnered with. As mentioned before, celebrity campaigns have the ability to attract different types of consumers, and with that make the brand more widely known as well as relevant.

When analysing the brand's TikTok account it was clear that Acne Studios used a specific strategy in order to create relevant content for their consumers to enjoy. They promoted their content through hashtags and by tagging celebrities which were included in the posts to attract attention. Their efforts were especially successful through the celebrity partnerships as these generated the most likes. The brand took part in trends, however, they made sure to do it in a way that is in line with their brand and keeps them authentic. Lastly, they stayed consistent in their structure, which could help the user build a sense of familiarity. Thus, by combining all these elements, Acne Studios was able to keep a relevant aspect to their activities whilst keeping their specific luxury look.

More specifically, Acne Studios' TikTok account relevance is shown through the brand's approach to trends. Overall, many of the posts contained hashtags such as #AcneStudios, #ParisFashionWeek, #PFW, #TikTokFashion (only in their FW2024 collection) in many cases, which could be seen as the brand making use of technological elements of social media (Azemi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). Another use of technological elements can be seen in the structure that the brand posts in. It is fairly consistent, and for their fashion collections, it comprises a teaser for the show, posts from the show itself, and then posts with models wearing the outfits to imply that they are available in stores. Following this collection structure, the brand also had a holiday campaign every year in the winter months and presented possible gift ideas for the customers in a CGI format with playful animations. When it comes to specific trends, the brand created a video with the POV (point of view) trend, where they showed a model from behind walking down the street with a large Acne Studios scarf with the description: "*POV: you're on your way to our head office, wearing #AcneStudiosScarf*" (acnestudiosofficial, 2023a). Another trend they used, however, in a very specific way, was the ASMR trend where viewers usually turn up the volume of the video to

listen to different kinds of satisfying audios. In the case of Acne Studios, they did prompt the viewer to turn up the volume. The viewer/listener was then met with different sounds of zippers opening and closing and leather being touched; however, they were combined with psychedelic-sounding music, so the sounds could have appeared more unnerving than satisfying. Lastly, the brand never used trending TikTok music or sounds, but they did use two audios from TikTok creators (acnestudiosofficial, 2023b; acnestudiosofficial, 2023c). One of them is a creator called Jake Shane, who has 2,9 million followers on TikTok (as of May 30, 2024) (Jake Shane, n.d.); however, the sound was only used in 23 videos across the platform, and the other is from the creator Bella, who has 84,9 thousand followers (as of May 30, 2024) (Bella, n.d.), and the sound was only used in 5 videos across TikTok. Thus, even though the sounds came from TikTok, they are not the typical mainstream ones.

Similarly to their Instagram account, a major part of the brand's relevance on TikTok was shown by putting the spotlight on celebrities. The brand consistently posted videos with a large number of celebrities. They were shown in multiple ways: arriving to the runway show, being photographed at the show, through personalised invitations to the show (Johnny Suh) (acnestudiosofficial, 2024a) and lastly, through celebrity collaborations. When it came to the collaborations the brand made sure to tag the celebrity and these posts usually generated a greater amount of likes as the followers of these celebrities were more likely to be attracted to the brand's posts. The biggest collaborations were with the rising K-pop band ILLIT for the SS24 collection, where one of the posts had 209,4 thousand likes (acnestudiosofficial, 2024b); Kylie Jenner in their FW23 denim collection which posts achieved 139,8 thousand (acnestudiosofficial, 2023d) and 354,8 thousand likes (acnestudiosofficial, 2023e); Devon Aoki in their SS23 collection where one of the posts gained 192,9 thousand likes (acnestudiosofficial, 2023f); and Rosalia in their FW22 collection which was one of the first campaigns the brand posted on TikTok. Interestingly a part of the celebrity collaborations consisted of videos which had no music and just showed the billboards of the celebrities wearing Acne Studios in different cities. Lastly, it should be mentioned that in the more recent posts from the runway the brand made sure to tag the celebrities that were shown instead of simply writing "Guestlist" and the type of collection in the video description as they used to do before. By truly embracing the celebrity collaborations, the brand could be said to utilise the ideal user imagery (Aagerup, 2016) as these celebrities have the personality which could promote a better brand image for Acne Studios.

When analysing the magazine articles which wrote about Acne Studios, the main source of relevancy that was found was through the use of 'the world around us' by the creative director Jonny Johansson. In the sense that many of the collections' themes were inspired either by current events or by past events from Johansson's life. Johansson took inspiration from these events, however, he always made sure to add his personal touch to them and make them his own. The following events were mentioned: the lift of pandemic restrictions (Diderich 2023a; Diderich 2022a), technological advancement (Diderich 2023b), the war in Ukraine (J. D., 2023; Moore 2022a), the FIFA world cup (J. D., 2023), the pandemic (Diderich 2021; J. D., 2020), the evolution of AI (Diderich 2020), student life (Spencer, 2019), and the transformation of fashion taste with younger generations (Diderich, 2019).

Acne Studios has, thus, shown that they are still relevant to the younger audience. By showing this side of their brand meaning (Aagerup, 2016) they allow themselves to build a closer connection to their consumers (Cruz-Ros et al., 2024). Acne Studios was able to attain relevancy even as a luxury fashion brand, and by having this foundation, they are able to further promote values that are important to them, especially the gender-inclusivity of their items.

Integrity

On top of showing relevancy in their content, Acne Studios showed a certain degree of integrity which could allow them to be perceived as a more able and well-intentioned brand (Kervyn et al., 2012). Within their activities, they make an effort to show that their brand has a purpose which could have a positive influence on society. This is backed up by their creative manifesto (Creative manifesto, n.d.) and their environmental sustainability efforts (Sustainability report, 2022). Furthermore, the analysis over the specified period of time showed that these efforts are on-going, evolving, and have been there since the start and are expressed in multiple ways.

The way Acne portrayed integrity within their Instagram account can be detected by analysing the different collections and the posts regarding the collections and their display at fashion shows.

As time has passed Acne Studios put more effort and attention into highlighting the artists that were contributing to their fashion shows. From the SS19 to FW20 collections posts about the collections were structured the same: there was a dedicated post to announce the date of the fashion shows, a post to present the runway and runway videos where the music was credited to the artist.

In the following years, Acne has started collaborating with artists for their fashion shows: runway set designers and live performing artists. After this, the posts regarding the collections have changed in a way that there was another dedicated post added introducing the artist who was contributing to the shows. In all cases the artists were introduced and credited in a written form and in many cases they got a dedicated post showcasing and introducing them.

Collaborating with more artists as Acne Studios was growing is a sign of integrity. The brand could have continued with music playing in the background of their fashion shows and crediting the artists in their Instagram posts, however they decided to give smaller artists a chance for recognition by collaborating with them, displaying their art in the runway, providing the time and place to perform live in fashion shows as well as introducing and crediting them on the brand's Instagram account.

Likewise, within their TikTok account the brand evolved in how they displayed these artist collaborations, at first they just mentioned the collaborator with a hashtag and their name. However, in the latest Year of the Dragon campaign they posted a video solely dedicated to the artist and their work (acnestudiosofficial, 2024c).

What stood out in the magazine analysis, was that the collections often used denim mixed with a combination of other materials. Whenever denim was prominent in the given collection, it was seen as a reflection upon the roots of the company (Diderich, 2024; Diderich, 2023a). This is because Acne Studios first started out their company just by making jeans with creative stitching (*Jonny Johansson: Bof 500: The people shaping the global fashion industry*, 2022). Therefore, even though the brand could be seen as not having substantial heritage or tradition, as it is relatively new compared to the other big luxury fashion houses, they try to incorporate their essence through the use of materials.

Lastly, the celebrity collaborations the brand chose allowed Acne Studios to bring more attention to the brand and their values. These personas could be considered as innovative in their own way and have put significant effort to pave their way in the industry. For example: “*Yves Tumor, a musician whose genre defies categorization, proved a perfect fit for this season’s helter-skelter aesthetic.*” (Diderich, 2024); collaboration with NBA star Russel Westbrook: “*For Johansson, who confessed a fascination for the connection between sportswear and ready-to-wear, it was important that Westbrook, an athlete known for his edgy off-the-court looks, added his personal style to the collaboration.*” (Burlet, 2019). Whilst some collaborating celebrities are more gender-inclusive and edgy, others, such as Kylie Jenner, could be seen as more of a tool for attention rather than a gender-inclusivity ambassador. It should be mentioned that her fans perceive her as very accepting and inclusive, however, at the same time, she also portrays certain body and beauty standards which are not so easily attainable (Frangos, 2018). Therefore, there is a certain clash of the gender-inclusive values the brand is promoting and the celebrities they chose to work with, especially on such a large scale as they did with Kylie Jenner.

Acne Studios has shown their integrity through the validation of the artist collaborations and through highlighting their essence in their use of denim material in their fashion items. This could be seen as efforts of the brand to be more able and well-intentioned (Kervyn et al., 2012). However, it clashes to a certain degree when it comes to the types of celebrities they collaborate with and what they stand for. As mentioned before, the celebrities represent the ideal user imagery of the brand (Aagerup, 2016) and if the consumers feel like some of the celebrities are not as inclusive, it could be very damaging for the brand and the values they wish to push. However, they could help the new-found audience gain a different perspective on fashion and, thus, still help create a more inclusive environment.

Provocativeness

Even during the background research that was made and presented in the previous chapters, it became clear that Acne Studios brings with itself a novel approach to luxury communication. It was shown with their creative manifesto (Creative manifesto, n.d.), their sustainability efforts (Sustainability report, 2022), having specific unisex pieces, using of the same colour palettes for both genders, and showcasing models who are not necessarily posing as more feminine or masculine, even though some of the designs could be seen as having these features (Women's Clothing, n.d.; Men's Clothing, n.d.). This approach could be described as risk-taking, revolutionary or bold. During the analysis of the different materials, provocativeness was the characteristic that stood out the most. This is because many of the ideas that Acne Studios puts out into the world are meant to stir up discussions and help consumers rethink their perceptions of the world. Provocativeness on Acnes Studios' terms could be seen as their brand meaning, as they convey this through all three levels: their designs which form a first impression, their online communication, and it is also seen in the third-party media which talks about the brand (Aagerup, 2016).

Provocativeness through Acne's Instagram account can be best described by analysing the 'Musubi bag campaign'.

The Musubi bag campaign from 2022 caused controversy due to the provocative nature of the campaign. In the centre, there is Acne Studios' signature Musubi bag that is presented exclusively by nude male dancers' bodies. The concept of naked male bodies in a campaign in itself was quite foreign for the general public, but the campaign being about a handbag, which is typically associated with women (Rosenberg et al., 2022), raised distress amongst some people. However, consumers are well acquainted with luxury fashion brands using controversial advertisements to gain a reaction that stereotypically involves womens' bodies which results in the sexualization and objectification of women (Adomaitis & Saiki, 2019).

On the other hand, the Musubi bag campaign can be seen as a step in the right direction, tearing down stereotypes. Acne's reasoning for the concept of the campaign is that the male dancers' muscular bodies resemble the figurative qualities in the signature bags (Acne Studios, 2022c). Moreover, the brand's signature Musubi bag can be seen as the signifier and the signified meaning can suggest that handbags are not exclusive to women but men as well (Barnard, 2002), promoting gender inclusivity. This proves the notion that Acne Studios takes traditional beliefs and redefines them in an unconventional way.

On Acne's Instagram feed, this particular campaign was shown in seventeen separate posts (Figure 5). These posts included pictures of the models with the products, pictures of billboards in multiple locations: Stockholm, Los Angeles, New York, Milan and Berlin and a short video of Acne Studios HQ's elevator opening with the campaign images on the doors.



Figure 5
 The Musubi bag campaign
 Photo courtesy of Talia Chetrit
 (Acne Studios, 2022d), (Acne Studios, 2022e)

Continuing with the social media analysis, the general TikTok content impression could be simply expressed through the word ‘chaos’. This element was shown mainly through the edits which were used to show the runway shows, where the brand presented their new collections. The edits are very fast paced, they use a lot of camera movement, dramatic zooms and at times they use specific distortion through shaking. They were accompanied by songs which had a futuristic and psychedelic quality to them. This was however, very complementary to the design themselves as they have similar qualities and are often composed of many contrasting elements. Another example of the chaos theme could be seen in their collaboration with Suzi Leenaars who presented different items from Acne Studios. One of the displays showed her in a branded outfit with three bags over her neck jumping up and down (acnestudiosofficial, 2023g). A different display showed her wearing sweaters both as a top and bottom part of her outfit whilst balancing a bag on top of her stretched leg (acnestudiosofficial, 2022). However, even though these elements could be seen as chaotic overall, they were still under the umbrella of clearly structured, consistent campaigns. Thus, the chaos was controlled and very much in-line with the overall Acne Studios brand.

The way how the theme of provocativeness was shown in the magazine articles was redefinition. The creative director of Acne Studios, Jonny Johansson, took it upon himself to transform common concepts such as weddings (Diderich, 2022a), business wear (Diderich, 2019), collecting souvenirs (Diderich, 2023a) or lingerie (Conti, 2021) into something completely new. Johansson showed this not only through the combination of unlikely colours or silhouettes but also through the techniques used to make the clothing. The showstopper designs were all meticulously crafted and one of the things that made them stand out was the redefinition of traditional craft (e.g. knitting, crocheting, corsetry) into something provocative (Conti, 2021). Another example could be painting pants to make them appear as jeans

(Moore, 2022a). Moreover the brand used AI to help design one of their collections adding a completely new dimension to the world of luxury fashion (Diderich, 2020). The redefinition also goes hand in hand with the topic of gender, as Johansson attempted to redefine masculinity and the image of a 'true man' with specific hobbies: "*Tie-dyed, washed and bleached fabrics echoed the mineral textures of cave walls, while snug singlets were worn with calf socks, in a wry take on soccer's stranglehold on the male psyche.*" (J. D., 2023). In some articles the authors point out that society might not be ready for some of the Acne Studios outfits (Diderich, 2024), just like was shown in previous research with genderless fashion in general (Luna & Barros, 2019; Bardey et al., 2020).

Additionally, these redefined pieces were accompanied by a creative use of contrast. Whether this was the untraditional combination of contrasting materials, or the contrasting combinations of specific fashion items or the contrasting themes shown on the runway. The creative director wanted to show that he can do it all. The contrasting themes that were shown included: uptown and downtown, high- and low-end, scary-sweet, futuristic and low tech (J. D., 2023); sweet and rough (Moore, 2022b); ugly-chic (Diderich, 2022b); light in the dark, night and day (J. D., 2020); retro-future (K. F., 2019).

The novel approach of Acne has made them one of the few luxury brands which is capable of tying together the concept of luxury with inclusion. They are not afraid of redefining common concepts and using contrasting elements to prove to their audience that anything can be done with the right cohesive vision. Even when using controversial tactics like in the Musubi bag campaign, they made sure to explain their motives and show the artistry behind it. As opposed to the use of celebrities which was questioned in the previous element, Acne Studios has shown that when it comes to their designs, they have been able to find the right balance between contrasting features.

Openness

In order to show their consumers that Acne Studios truly strives to be a gender-inclusive brand, they openly talk about it through their platforms. In addition to their first-hand communication on this topic, this element of their brand meaning (Aagerup, 2016) is also supported through the articles written about them. The brand mainly shows effort in deconstructing gender norms and proving that their clothes are suitable for anyone. Therefore showing an androgynous brand gender (Vacas de Carvalho et al., 2020).

Acne's gender-inclusivity generally shows through their Instagram account, but more specifically throughout their SS and FW collections and their collaborations.

Creative director Jonny Johansson supported the notion of Acne Studios being an androgynous brand by describing a menswear collection like "ultra-masculine versus ultra-feminine" (Acne Studios, 2023d). This notion can be extended to the brand as a whole. Looking through all 23 collections, the authors concluded that gender inclusivity stems from

hyper-feminine menswear designs such as cropped apparel, items incorporating frills, lace, tulle, and mesh material, see-through designs, articles of clothing using colour combinations traditionally associated with femininity, skirts, scarves, and handbags (Figure 6).



Figure 6
Ultra-feminine versus ultra-masculine FW23 menswear collection
Photo courtesy of Estelle Hanania
(Acne Studios, 2023e), (Acne Studios, 2023f)

Another characteristic was heavy accessorising when shooting men's collections is contributing to the gender-inclusive imagery on their Instagram. Moreover, their signature unisex baggy jeans, especially when paired with a cropped or skin tight top, create a contrast between femininity and masculinity (Figure 7).



Figure 7
Accessories and baggy jeans SS24 menswear collection
Photo courtesy of Jordan Hemingway
(Acne Studios, 2023g)

Another sign of gender fluidity is utilising models of the opposite sex for presenting a specific collection (Figure 8).



Figure 8
Opposite sex for FW22 Menswear collection
Photo courtesy of Eloise Parry
(Acne Studios, 2022f)

Moreover, gender-inclusivity is highlighted in Acne's SS22 denim collection and FW menswear collection.

“Reimagined classics” is how Acne Studios described their SS22 denim collection on their Instagram page (Acne Studios, 2022g). The collection utilises both female and male models to showcase the new pieces: both are wearing jeans and latex underwear and accessories. This collection is built around Acne's foundational piece, denim, that works for anyone regardless of their gender. In one of the photos, a male model is wearing more form-fitted jeans, their 1977 women's jeans, while another presents a female model in their 2021 men's loose bootcut jeans (Figure 9). This proves Acne's garments to be gender-inclusive and meant to be worn by people regardless of their gender.

As the whole concept of this collection suggests, Acne's designs, and in this case, this particular collection, again, presents the notion of gender inclusivity through apparel shown via the images and videos on their Instagram feed.



Figure 9
 SS22 denim collection
 Photo courtesy of Carlijn Jacobs
 (Acne Studios, 2022g), (Acne Studios, 2022h)

Another example of how Acne Studios openly shows they are androgynous in terms of brand gender is the FW23 menswear collection: hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity were showcased through this collection with the use of different designs. Models were captured wearing oversized jackets, dresses, baggy jeans with traditionally feminine tops, skirts, oversized blazers and lace detailed clothing (Figure 10). Stereotypically feminine items were combined with stereotypically masculine ones and created “for a new age of self expression” as Jonny Johansson, the creative director of Acne Studios said in the caption of their Instagram post (Acne Studios, 2023h).



Figure 10
 FW23 menswear collection
 Photo courtesy of Estelle Hanania
 (Acne Studios, 2023i), (Acne Studios, 2023j)

On the other hand, when looking at their TikTok platform, Acne Studios only promoted their womenswear collections and showcased males only when it came to celebrity guests or collaborations. Thus, they weren't as open in showing the inclusivity of their designs in this form of online consumer communication.

The authors of the articles included in the magazine analysis, however, particularly pointed out the genderlessness and gender fluidity of the collections: "*Cycling shorts and skintight knits with tubular padding were great for couples sharing a vacation wardrobe*" (Diderich, 2023a); "... *with his [Jonny Johansson] designs mirroring the advent of genderless dressing.*" (Diderich, 2023a); "*Johnny Johansson is no stranger to gender bending, but with war and soccer in the headlines, he felt the moment was ripe to revisit masculine stereotypes.*" (J. D., 2023); "*The designer picked the theme as an ironic take on toxic masculinity*" (J. D., 2023); "*His caveman looked like a cross between a wrestler and Britney Spears.*" (J. D., 2023); "*But most of these outfits defied categorization, reflecting the fluid state of menswear in general.*" (Diderich, 2022a); "*His [Jonny Johansson] masterful handling of gender fluidity was also seen in a look that paired a sheer pastel shirt with lace trim and elegant, but masculine trousers, in black.*" (Spencer, 2019). As can be seen from the direct quotes, the gender-bending perception was created through the themes of the collections, the clothing items and their designs. It should be mentioned, however, that this theme was only specifically mentioned when it came to the menswears collections. This can be linked back to the theory of brand gender and the stigma that is present around men wearing more feminine fashion items (Vacas de Carvalho et al., 2020). Thus, in the menswear collections it can be seen as riskier, out-of-the-box or revolutionary to use designs such as the ones presented by Acne Studios. Nonetheless, in the womenswear collections, the authors of the articles noticed that the brand opted for a transgender model in one of their shows: "*Transgender model Krow, who earlier in the week walked in the Balmain men's show, proved the perfect androgynous muse in a taupe blazer tucked into paper-bag-waist pants, worn with sturdy boots and a faux fur messenger bag with a chunky chain strap.*" (Diderich, 2019).

The brand has shown that they clearly represent an androgynous brand gender showing both high masculinity and femininity (Vacas de Carvalho et al., 2020). It is mostly expressed through the designs of the pieces and what they then in-turn represent for the consumer, thus creating the signifier and signified (Barnard, 2002). The brand allows their consumer to express themselves in the way they want to and attempts to make everyone feel welcome to wear their clothes. Although they are sometimes more direct and open about communicating this side of their activities, it always shines through the designs and the models they chose in an indirect way.

Tying it all together, the authors believe that the four main themes of relevancy, integrity, provocativeness and openness that were identified, thus, represent the base values a luxury fashion brand should achieve in order to be able to promote gender inclusivity. The themes are closely tied to the concept of brand personality (Aagerup, 2016). The human characteristics that represent Acne Studios' brand personality (Aagerup, 2016) are being modern, fresh, mindful, risky, provocative, edgy, open, honest, and brave.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to develop a better understanding of how the luxury fashion sector approaches the topic of gender inclusivity. In order to fulfil this aim and answer the proposed research question, the authors have conducted a semiotic analysis on the two main social media accounts of the brand, which are on the platforms Instagram and TikTok, supplemented by the insights gained from magazine articles about Acne Studios' collections.

Based on the analysis of all the materials, the researchers chose to divide the main findings into four main themes: **relevancy**, **integrity**, **provocativeness** and **openness**. These four themes were most prominent across all the sources: Instagram, TikTok, and magazine data collection. They describe how Acne Studios presents themselves and help explain how they promote gender-inclusive clothing in their communication.

In regards to the first theme, Acne Studios highlighted their relevance on Instagram by showcasing celebrities who are either attending their fashion shows, generally wearing their garments or partnering with the brand for a collaboration. By implementing this, the brand ensures its relevance and attracts new, different types of consumers. It is proven by the brand's most liked posts, which includes two posts of celebrities: Kylie Jenner (Acne Studios, 2023c) and the girl band, ILLIT (Acne Studios, 2024b). The way relevance is shown through TikTok – next to highlighting celebrities similarly to their Instagram account – is by using hashtags (#AcneStudios, #ParisFashionWeek, #PFW, #TikTokFashion) and taking part in trends in a specific way that is authentic to the brand. With this, the brand is able to keep a relevant aspect to their activities whilst keeping their specific luxury look. The relevance theme is shown through the magazine articles as well, more specifically through the use of 'the world around us' by the creative director Jonny Johansson. Many of the collections took inspiration from current events or Johansson's personal life and experiences.

Relevancy is apparent within Acne's online presence: they are still relevant to the younger audience, and by showing this side of their brand meaning (Aagerup, 2016) they allow themselves to build a closer connection to their consumers (Cruz-Ros et al., 2024). By incorporating content of celebrities, the brand utilises the ideal user imagery (Aagerup, 2016) as these celebrities have the personality which could promote a better brand image for Acne Studios. As Acne was able to achieve relevance both online and offline, they are able to further promote the values that are important to them, especially when it comes to the gender-inclusivity of their items.

Following with the next theme, integrity, the brand was found to be perceived as able and well-intentioned (Kervyn et al., 2012) by making a conscious effort to show that their brand has a purpose which could have a positive influence on society. Based on the authors' analysis, these efforts that are backed up by the brand's creative manifesto (Creative manifesto, n.d.) and their environmental sustainability efforts (Sustainability report, 2022) are on-going. Integrity on both Instagram and TikTok is shown through the use and crediting of

the artists the brand collaborates with for their fashion shows. As time has passed, Acne collaborated with more artists for their shows and they have dedicated individual posts for highlighting and introducing the artists. In the magazine analysis, integrity was shown through the incorporation of denim: Acne Studios was born by making jeans with creative stitching (*Jonny Johansson: Bof 500: The people shaping the global fashion industry, 2022*). Despite Acne being a relatively new luxury brand, compared to the big luxury fashion houses, they try to incorporate their heritage through the use of materials.

Even though the brand is perceived as able and well-intentioned, there is a clash caused by the celebrities they choose to collaborate with and what they stand for. As celebrities represent the ideal user imagery of the brand (Agerup, 2016), if the consumers feel like some of the celebrities are not as appropriate for Acne and their inclusive values, it could be very damaging for the brand and the values they wish to express and push. However, they could help the new-found audience gain a different perspective on fashion and, thus, still help create a more inclusive environment.

Provocativeness is very prominent throughout Acne's activities: many of the ideas that Acne Studios present are meant to stir up discussions and help consumers rethink their perceptions of the world. Provocativeness was for example shown through their Musubi bag campaign on Instagram, where Acne Studios' signature Musubi bag was exclusively presented by nude male dancers' bodies. The campaign caused controversy, however, it can be seen as a step in the right direction, tearing down stereotypes and initiating conversation about important topics. On TikTok, chaos was dominating: fast paced edits, a lot of camera movement, dramatic zooms, distortion through shaking and the use of futuristic and psychedelic music. The magazines pointed out the brand's provocativeness through the brand's use of redefinition and contrasts.

Acne is one of the few luxury fashion brands that can tie together the concept of luxury with inclusion. They are not afraid of redefining common concepts and using contrasting elements to prove to their audience that anything can be done with the right cohesive vision. Whenever using controversial tactics, the brand makes sure to emphasise their motives and show the artistry behind them.

Lastly, openness is shown through Acne's Instagram account by clearly showing signs of an androgynous brand with describing a menswear collection like "ultra-masculine versus ultra-feminine" (Acne Studios, 2023d), by presenting gender fluid values with the use of models of the opposite sex for presenting a specific collection and by their gender-inclusive designs. However, on TikTok, Acne Studios only promoted their womenswear collections and showcased males, only when it came to celebrity guests or collaborations. Thus, they weren't as open in showing the inclusivity of their designs in this form of online consumer communication. On the other hand, magazines highlighted the overall genderlessness and gender fluidity of the brand's collections.

Acne Studios has clearly stated their androgynous brand gender, showing both high masculinity and femininity (Vacas de Carvalho et al., 2020). It is mostly shown through their designs, and what they then in-turn represent for the consumer, thus creating the signifier and signified (Barnard, 2002). With their gender-inclusive designs, the brand allows all types of consumers to authentically express themselves. Lastly, the overall themes that they show in their communications are aligned with the different parts of their modern, fresh, mindful, risky, provocative, edgy, open, honest and brave brand personality (Aagerup, 2016).

Theoretical, managerial and societal implications

This study fills in the research gap present in the field of fashion, bridging together the topics of gender inclusivity, luxury fashion and online communication with consumers. Research before has concentrated only on gender inclusivity and fashion in general (Bardey et al., 2020; Luna & Barros., 2019; Kim et al., 2022; Buentello et al., 2022) and separately on online communication of luxury fashion brands through visual (Kusumasondjaja, 2020; Lee et al., 2018;), emotional (Cruz-Ros et al., 2024; Joo & Kim, 2021; Duong & Sung, 2021; Azemi et al., 2022) and technological stimuli (Azemi et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). This research showed that in order to be able to promote gender inclusivity it is necessary to highlight the brand's relevancy, integrity, provocativeness and openness and make efforts to keep them present across all communication channels.

The authors believe that if luxury fashion brands make an ongoing effort to understand these four levels and implement them in their communication strategies, they too will be able to promote a more gender-inclusive agenda.

By implementing a more gender-inclusive agenda, luxury fashion brands will have the opportunity to build a closer connection to the increasing younger consumer group (D'Arpizio et al., 2024) which is becoming extremely concerned with the world's problems (Ye & Kim, 2024). Furthermore, since the purchasing power is shifting towards the younger consumers and they have started to normalise genderless fashion pieces (Kim et al., 2022), luxury fashion brands, if wanting to stay relevant, need to cater towards them and design more gender-inclusive garments, so that younger generations too can show their individuality especially from a more gender fluid fashion perspective (Kim et al., 2022). Lastly, by luxury fashion brands promoting and implementing gender inclusivity, emerging and smaller brands will have a great example to follow to create a better world, where everyone feels included and has the ability to dress according to their gender identity (Bardey et al., 2020).

Limitations and future research

Since this research is within the realms of an intensive case study method, the scope of the knowledge gained is limited only to Acne Studios relating to the problem of gender inclusivity in luxury fashion. Therefore, in order to gain more insights, future research could

concentrate on other luxury brands which have made efforts in promoting gender inclusivity through their activities. Moreover, the focus could bring in more insights from the consumer's perspective of why they consider these brands as gender-inclusive or exclusive. Lastly, this research recognized the possible clashes between the celebrity collaborators' values and the brand's gender-inclusive ones, however it could be beneficial to dive more into the celebrity and luxury brand dynamic, in order to understand how it could be utilised more appropriately.

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