Building brand loyalty through Social Media in economic crisis: a gender and Gen Y perspective of South-East European luxury fashion consumers

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Executive summary

The thesis presents the scope, theoretical basis, research approach, findings, theoretical practitioner, and methodological implications, limitations and suggestions for future research of a study that investigated the role of Social Media (SM) for the development of brand loyalty toward luxury fashion brands (LFBs) among Generation Y (Gen Y) luxury fashion customers (LFCs) in Southeast Europe (SEE). Specific attention was also paid to the role of gender as an influencing factor in shaping Generation Y's luxury fashion consumer behavior.

Despite the implicit endorsements in academic literature, a gap in theoretical knowledge refers to luxury fashion consumption, implications of Social Media for building brand loyalty among Generation Y consumers, and the implications of the past economic crisis on luxury fashion consumption in the Balkan region. Precisely, the research focuses on countries in Southeast Europe: Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. The research objectives are:1) Investigate Generation Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands, 2) Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Generation Y luxury fashion customers, 3) Investigate gender differences in online consumer behavior among Generation Y luxury fashion customers, 4) Explore Generation Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media, 5) Explore Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in Southeast Europe given the past economic crisis.

The research was conducted via qualitative research approach toward data collection and data analysis. The research was based on two phases. The first phase presented a pilot study, based on focus group discussions (FGDs). Focus groups were fruitful in offering the researcher with preliminary understanding of the research phenomenon. The second phase of the research was based on individual interviews. Individual interviews assisted the process of investigating, identifying, and conceptualizing various views and issues pertaining the research objectives. The sample selection for both phases relied on purposive sample selection. The data analysis followed coding and thematic categorization and constant comparative analysis with existing literature.

The key findings that emerged from the research referred to: 1) consumer perceptions of luxury fashion brands: quality-price ratio, consumer distinctiveness, brand uniqueness; 2) gender differences in consumer behavior among Generation Y luxury fashion

customers: celebrities' influence, friends' influence, in-store experience, previous purchase experiences; 3) gender differences in online behavior among Generation Y luxury fashion customers: preference for online shopping, convenience of online shopping, perception of show-off in sharing personal brand experiences on Social Media, emphasis on previous purchase experiences; 4) Generation Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media: incorporating Social Media in luxury fashion brands' marketing, personalized communication, convenience, creative brand content, emphasis on previous purchase experiences; and 5) Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in Southeast Europe given the past economic crisis: Greek Generation Y consumer behaviour seem to be mostly affected by the past economic crisis, studied Generation Y luxury fashion customers seem to find creative ways to maintain their brand loyalty, Social Media is mostly useful in the context of offering discounts.

The present study thus broadened the luxury brand loyalty literature by shedding light on Social Media implications for building brand loyalty among technology savvy consumer segment such as Generation Y in less-studied markets, such as Southeast Europe. Further, this was the first study that empirically studied how the gender of luxury fashion customers influenced their Social Media behaviour and contributed for a better understanding of effective Social Media strategies for attracting and retaining young male and female consumers from the Southeast European region. Another contribution of the research referred to improving our understanding about the crisis' influence on Generation Y's consumer behaviour, by also considering Social Media as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining Generation Y luxury fashion customers in Southeast Europe. From practical standpoint, identifying differences/ similarities among the selected countries helped to provide insightful knowledge for luxury fashion marketers looking forward to expanding brand presence and attract local Generation Y customers.

Finally, the exploratory stance of the research also allowed to identify areas for future research. These referred to: 1) influence of age, 2) bloggers, 3) Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), 4) professional background, 5) impulsive shopping, 6) celebrity endorsers, 7) luxury fashion brands' status, and 8) expanding research in order countries in Southeast Europe.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Despite the financial disruptions caused by the 2008 economic crisis, the luxury market is expected to grow with 3% to 5% per year, reaching a total value of € 365 billion until the year 2025 (Bain & Company, 2018). Bain & Company (2018) further report that seven key trends shape the luxury industry, three of which are increase in online shopping, Gen Y consumers as a rising market for LFBs and the importance of SM as a vital source of competitive advantage.

This shift in market trends is of growing interest both for academics and practitioners. For example, a sizeable body of literature emphasizes on the experiential element of in-store environment as a crucial facet for the establishment of brand loyalty toward LFBs (Rao and Monroe, 1989; Kapferer, 2015; Crewe, 2016; Ko *et al*. 2016; Liu *et al*. 2016; Shamila, 2018). There is an exhaustive evidence about the importance of **brand loyalty** for companies that operate in the luxury fashion industry (Cheah *et al*. 2015; Crewe *et al.* 2016; Thakur and Kaur, 2016; Shen *et al*. 2017), demonstrating the usefulness of understanding its role in the luxury brand loyalty literature (Koronaki *et al.* 2018). These findings come within the backdrop of existing acknowledgment among scholars about the significance of SM in the luxury fashion sector (Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). However, owning to their distant nature of exclusivity and being hard to obtain (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Okonkwo, 2010; Quan and Shen, 2017) LFBs were slow to adopt SM with the fear of becoming too accessible (Andersen and Hansen, 2011; Kapferer and Bastein, 2012). Nonetheless, with the high importance placed on SM as a key source of competitive advantage (Andersen and Hansen, 2011; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Jain and Schultz, 2016) it comes as no surprise that researchers' eyes are captured to understand and conceptualize SM role for building brand loyalty in the luxury fashion industry (Andersen and Hansen, 2011; Ko *et al.* 2013; Kohli *et al.* 2015; Yoo and Park, 2016). Recent studies persistently acknowledge the value of online brand-customer interaction, customer engagement, brand recognition and constant brand exposure as core pillars of brand loyalty towards LFBs (Kapferer, 2015; Choi *et al.* 2016; Godey *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017).

Visible in this short illustration of studies, extant literature acknowledges the role of **SM as a valuable source for building brand loyalty** and as a source of competitive advantage for LFBs. In this context of the luxury fashion industry studies like this are

scarce. As shown by Herhausen *et al.* (2015), Makkar and Yap (2018) and Ko *et al.* (2019) additional research is required to get a better comprehension about how SM has reshaped the luxury fashion market as being of critical importance for building brand loyalty toward LFBs. Part of this interest is also triggered by the emergence of a new consumer segment: Generation Y consumers (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017).

Although LFBs cannot forget their core audience, Baby boomers – born between 1946-1960 (Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011), their survival depends on the ability to attract young consumers (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Kapferer, 2018; Butcher *et al.* 2017; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). However, academic knowledge on **Geneartion Y** consumer behaviour toward LFBs is scarce (Cheah *et al.* 2015; Mamat *et al.* 2016). This is further augmented by the fact that previous research questions the perceptions, motives and desires that stay behind luxury fashion consumption of Gen Y consumers (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; Schade *et al.* 2016; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Butcher *et al.* 2017; Raisanen *et al.* 2018). Moreover, apart from the fact that LFBs ought to gain better understanding of Gen Y consumer behaviour (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; Raisanen *et al.* 2018), literature provides conflicting views on Generation Y's brand loyalty toward LFBs (Godey *et al.* 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Fernandez, 2016). In this context, SM is cited as a valuable tool for building brand loyalty (Kim and Ko, 2012; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Specifically, available knowledge provides coherent arguments about Gen Y increased demand for LFBs (Williams and Page, 2011; Kim and Lee, 2015), which is largely driven by SM exposure (Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Postnord, 2016; Kapferer, 2018).

Thus, with their significant experience and knowledge in SM (Bolton et al. 2013; Verlato, 2018; Kapferer, 2018) and interest in LFBs (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017), Generation Y consumers present an appealing segment to be studied in the context of the interplay between SM and LFBs (Nadeem *et al.* 2015). The relevance of Gen Y LFCs is also emphasized by academics, who elucidate that it is imperative to learn more about Gen Y's SM usage and exposure to SM marketing activities in the context of LFBs, especially as it is more challenging to capture and maintain the attention, and brand loyalty, of this consumer group (Godey *et al.* 2013; Ramadhomi *et al.* 2015; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). Nonetheless, scholars caution that knowledge on Gen Y' SM usage impact and the effect of brand experience on brand loyalty is scarce (Bolton *et al.* 2013; Salman *et al.* 2016).

Specifically, Salman *et al.* (2016) articulate that marketing managers need to have thorough understanding of Gen Y LFCs' SM usage in order to ensure brand loyalty for a lifetime. In line with the discussion about Gen Y's consumer behaviour, SM usage and SM role for building brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs, this research has the potential to provide theoretical contributions to the luxury brand loyalty literature and offer insights of significant importance for professionals operating in the luxury fashion industry.

In order to obtain full comprehension of contemporary luxury fashion consumer, studies also emphasize the importance of understanding both **age and gender differences** (Sauer and Teichman, 2013; Lee and Workman, 2015; Schade *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). With the changes in the market of LFBs evident in the growth of male LFCs as an alluring consumer segment (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009; Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011; Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2012; Raisanen *et al.* 2018), it comes as no surprise that there is increased interest in investigating gender as a key factor in understanding luxury consumer behaviour (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Godey *et al.* 2016). This research explores gender differences in luxury fashion consumption (Levy and Loken, 2015; Roux *et al.* 2017) and brand loyalty toward LFBs (Sauer and Teichmann, 2013; Hur *et al*. 2014). Of significant importance to both theory development and practice is to investigate gender consumer characteristics in the underlying values and motives that drive Gen Y consumer behaviour in the context of LFBs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016; Roux *et al.* 2017; Ko *et al.* 2019).

Moreover, inquiries into gender differences are also related to SM usage and effect of SM on brand loyalty (Verlato, 2018). A large body of literature recognizes **gender differences in online behavior** (Chai *et al.* 2012; Porter *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013; Zhang *et al.* 2013; Lim *et al.* 2014). However, in the context of the luxury fashion domain studies like this are scarce. Few empirical studies are focused on this topic, highlighting the need for further investigation. Specifically, scholars address the need for better understanding of gender differences in online consumer behaviour (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016) and exploring gender as an influential factor that has behavioral implications on consumers' perception of SM marketing activities and the role of SM for development of brand loyalty in the luxury fashion domain (Gautam and Sharma, 2017).

Furthermore, it is suggested that an essential step in understanding Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior is to consider the challenging **economic times** (Giovannini *et al.*

2015; Chaney *et al.* 2017). A persistent view in extant studies is that the driving forces shaping consumption behaviour can be significantly influenced by certain events, triggering consumers to purchase LFBs in effort to elevate their societal positions (Jones, 2016). For example, scholars assert that factors such as high brand consciousness, assigned importance of public image, relatively low income, and little attention to their debt levels (Kradisching, 2015; Mamat *et al.* 2016) make the study of Gen Y consumers in the context of the past economic crisis an interesting avenue for theoretical inquiry (Chaney *et al.* 2017). Even though there is extant evidence about the consumption patterns of young Chinese LFCs as an emerging market (Jung and Shen, 2011; Liu *et al.* 2016; Rovai, 2018), recent publications are cautious to the fact that *"[…] experiencing a major economic crisis or unemployment period, for example, will influence a generation's values, and thus its consumption behaviour"* (Chaney *et al.* 2017, p. 186), academic literature on the effects of the 2008 financial collapse in the context of Gen Y LFCs is in fact scarce. Thus, the theoretical considerations of the research lie in improving our understanding of how such events as the past economic crisis has relevance to the consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al.* 2016).

Moreover, existing knowledge establishes that SM marketing is a valuable method for building brand loyalty among the Generation Y LFCs (Kim and Ko, 2012; Loureiro *et al.,* 2018), but the belief that SM can have the same effect on the brand loyalty of Generation Y LFCs from SEE, as for instance of young luxury fashion consumers from China (Liu *et al.* 2016; Rovai, 2018) overshadows our apprehension of the different SM marketing activities that can contribute to nurture brand loyalty across countries and regions around the globe. Although LFBs can identify similar Gen Y consumer characteristics across different markets, in many cases they have to adapt, partially or completely, their marketing activities (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). To address this void in the luxury brand loyalty literature and provide managerial implications, the study will help to gain insights for an understudied consumer segment, namely Gen Y LFCs from selected countries in SEE.

A case in point are luxury consumers in **Bulgaria, Romania and Greece**. Within the specific realm of the financial crisis, research demonstrated that despite the economic slowdown the region is expected to demonstrate a growing trend in luxury fashion consumption, especially by Gen Y consumers (Stamule and Todea, 2017). Notwithstanding, to the best of researcher's knowledge, there is no empirical

investigation in SEE about SM role in the context of the past economic crisis, let alone the countries that are part of the research (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece). Further, although previous studies provided first insights into gender differences in the values driving luxury fashion consumption (Ciornea, 2013), the study was limited to the Romanian market and identified the need for further research. As of researcher's vest of knowledge, there is no subsequent study that addresses this gap. Henceforth, the research responses to the need for multiple country investigation (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; Sayya and Nillson, 2017) in terms of gender differences in luxury fashion consumption.

Finally, whilst knowledge about Gen Y consumer behaviour in the luxury fashion domain is indisputable, interest in additional research inquiry is triggered by lack of clear conceptualization of **Gen Y LFCs from SEE** (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). Interestingly, although previous studies paved the way toward a better comprehension of the invaluable role of Generation Y consumers for the prosperity of LFBs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Bhaduri and Stanfoth, 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017), it seems that there is lack of clear conceptualization in SEE. Even though it has been only recently that studies have started focusing on the luxury fashion market in SEE, the modern market of Gen Y LFCs has been left unattended. Notwithstanding a recent publication on Gen Y's preferences for the buying experience, which has been carried in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Petra, 2016), it did not consider the luxury fashion market and there is a limited knowledge on Gen Y consumers in the context of the interplay between SM and LFBs for the development of brand loyalty.

The research reported in this thesis bridges the gap by furthering our understanding about the past crisis' influence on Gen Y's consumer behaviour, also considering SM as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs in SEE. The qualitative approach toward the scientific inquiry will allow to obtain a holistic view about consumers' perspectives and experiences (Chaney *et al.* 2018) related to the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs. Moreover, most of these studies examining the role of SM for building brand loyalty in the luxury fashion domain are focused on a single market. Thus, the research also adds novel insights on an existing phenomenon of growing interest both for academics and practitioners by comparing data obtained from the three countries (Godey *et al.* 2016). The study seeks to answer to two main research

questions, which are further divided into accompanying sub-questions. These are as follows:

1) What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour?

- How do Generation Y luxury fashion customers perceive luxury fashion brands? How do their perceptions differ among male/ female consumers?

- How do Generation Y luxury fashion customers behave based on their gender? What are the implications for the development of brand loyalty?

- How and why Generation Y luxury fashion customers choose online/ offline consumption experience? How do their choices differ between male/ female consumers?

- What are the behavioural characteristics that define Generation Y online consumer behaviour?

2) What is the role of Social Media in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation Y male and female luxury fashion customers in the context of the past economic crisis?

- How can luxury fashion brands attract, retain Generation Y luxury fashion customers and build brand loyalty through Social Media marketing strategies? How the gender of Generation Y luxury fashion customers defines their perceptions of Social Media marketing?

- What are implications of the past economic crisis on the consumer behaviour of Generation Y luxury fashion customers? How can Social Media be employed to attract, maintain and build brand loyalty among Generation Y luxury fashion customers?

In answering these questions, the research seeks to provide theoretical contributions to the luxury brand loyalty literature, with a focus on understanding gender differences among Generation Y LFCs with regards to the outlined areas that require additional empirical investigation. In doing so, the research will also likely yield fruitful managerial implications for professionals operating on the luxury fashion industry and for LFBs looking forward to expanding their market presence and attract local Generation Y LFCs. That being said, the preceding lines outline the research aims and objectives.

1.1. Aims and objectives

The aims of the study are:

1) extend knowledge on the role of Social Media for building brand loyalty toward luxury fashion brands

2) expand academic knowledge on how gender among Generation Y luxury fashion customers has an impact on consumers' brand loyalty toward luxury fashion brands

3) provide managerial implications for the development of creative Social Media strategies by taking into consideration the consequences of economic crisis on Generation Y's consumer behaviour

With the presented issues in mind, the main research objectives are presented below.

1) Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands

2) Explore gender differences in consumer behaviour among Gen Y luxury fashion customers

3) Investigate gender differences in online consumer behaviour among Gen Y luxury fashion customers

4) Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media

5) Explore Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour in SEE given the past economic crisis

The above areas need further research and considerations of these issues taken into consideration in conducting the research. That being said, the structure of the thesis was based on six chapters. The first chapter briefly introduces the background and significance of the research with a critical review of the luxury fashion domain and the aspects that pertained to the research context: gender, brand loyalty, Generation Y consumers, brand loyalty and the economic crisis. It highlighted the main research problem and expected contribution of the study. The second chapter presents a comprehensive literature review which will later serve the basis for comparative analysis between available academic knowledge and emerging empirical evidence. The third chapter presents the research design and research methodology. It reflects the developing nature of the research. It explains that the research undertakes an interpretive research design, based on a pilot study comprised of FGDs and a main study via individual interviews. The fourth chapter presents the analysis of empirical findings from the FGDs, illustrates how the pilot study informed the main research, and finalizes with a

comparative review with existing academic literature to arrive at preliminary conclusions. Chapter five presents findings from the individual interviews. The analysis of both phases was concluded with a comparative review with existing academic knowledge in order to arrive at additional theoretical considerations that pertain to the research phenomenon in SEE. Chapter six introduces the reader with a discussion, followed by theoretical implications, practitioner and methodological implications alike. Chapter seven serves to explain the limitations of the research, to propose areas for future research and the PhD report is summarized by presenting concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: LITERATURWE REVIEW

The chapter presents the theoretical background of the research. It is structured in a manner that reflects the developing structure of the literature review, being initiated with presenting the luxury concept, followed by a quick review of the evolution of luxury fashion in order to establish the contextual basis of the research. That is, the subsequent section focuses on luxury consumer values, and the value of brand loyalty, with an emphasis on LFBs. The chapter also addresses the significance of SM for the development of brand loyalty and its implications for LFBs. Following the central review of SM, the next section focuses on Gen Y consumers as a central point of the research, by also highlighting the benefits of studying this particular consumer audience. Attentions is also paid on the gender of LFCs as a subject of theoretical inquiry that deserves attention by scholars and practitioners operating in the luxury fashion domain. This is followed by an overview of the theoretical considerations related to the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on the consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs, by introducing the reader to the current pool of knowledge about consumption patterns of Gen Y LFCs in SEE. The chapter is concluded by emphasizing on the need for further research that will help the researcher to arrive at theoretical implications for expanding knowledge based on identified gaps in literature that also guided the research objectives pertaining to the research phenomenon.

"The luxury fashion industry is an empirically significant but theoretically neglected area of scholarship [...]" (Crewe, 2016, p.512). To develop more clarity about an industry that makes so many consumers' heart tingle, it is first important to conceptualize luxury branding.

2.1. The concept of luxury branding

Whilst scholars across different disciplines have attempted to provide a unified definition of a luxury brand, there is still lack of consensus around this concept (Ko *et al.* 2019). For instance, conventional wisdom suggests luxury is associated with conspicuous consumption as a sign that distinguishes members of high social class (Okonkwo, 2007). However, contradictory to the traditional luxury characteristics, evolution of luxury reached a new stage where it is no longer too unreachable or inaccessible, neither too unique nor exclusive (Kapferer, 2018). Thus, although the luxury phenomenon is not new to academia (Cristini *et al.* 2017), confusion originates from increased popularity of

luxury brands (Kapferer, 2012; Chandon *et al.* 2016; Derville and Kapferer, 2018). The phenomenon of *affluenza* lead to growth in the purchasing power of Gen Y consumers (Kapferer, 1997; Okonkwo, 2007; Giovannini *et al.* 2015), leading to the shift of key luxury credentials: from being exclusive, covered in a mystic vail, and strictly restricted to certain elite group to *"democratization"* of luxury (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Truong *et al.* 2008). In light of these, the pristine luxury concept as predominantly inaccessible and highly exclusive (Quan and Shen, 2017) indicates that LFBs should acknowledge that in today's reality desire and financial resources are enough to indulge oneself with luxury fashion possessions (Kapferer, 2018)

This, of course, does not come without drawbacks. In fact, global expansion is as good as luxury's biggest foe. While growth is genetically encrypted in luxury, this runs the risk of damaging perceived rarity, exclusiveness and uniqueness as core luxury pillars (Kapferer, 2015; Kapferer and Florence, 2016). This results in increasingly diverse consumer perceptions of luxury (Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Srinivasan *et al.* 2014; Chandon *et al.* 2016). This holds especially true for Generation Y consumers for whom *"luxury does not mean the same thing as once did"* (Kapferer, 2018, p. 60). Therefore, as many luxury aspects are vulnerable to transformation, so are the various meanings of luxury alike (Kapferer and Michaut, 2014). The idiosyncratic luxury concept creates a buzz among academics and practitioners (Llamas and Thomsen, 2016; Kim *et al.* 2016; Kapferer and Michaut, 2014; Janssen *et al.* 2017), indicating there is still much to learn. That being said, the following lines are devoted on providing a clearer view of the luxury concept, by viewing it from etymological, sociological and symbolic perspective.

First, despite the fragmented luxury conceptions (Roux *et al.* 2017), deriving from Latin etymology *"Luxus"* is considered the root of the term *"luxuria"* (Kapferer, 1997). It refers to *"any intense desire or craving for self-gratification"* (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009, p. 20). From this etymological perspective luxury has a very ambivalent meaning: *lux* or *luxus*, viewed as splendour or light and *luxuria* being associated with the negative concept of sin, wicked and excess (Cristini *et al.* 2017). Further, beyond etymological terms, thinking about luxury, the first association that comes to mind is premium-priced products (Nueno and Quelch, 1998), with the highest price-quality ratio (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009). However, the problem with this definition is that whichever products fall into the quality-price category can be regarded as luxury. As mentioned earlier, what can be luxury for some, might be perceived as a major brand for others (Phau and Prendergast,

2000; Srinivasan *et al.* 2014). Thus, luxury cannot be defined simply by price (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012). For they are expensive, they are defined by rarity, exclusivity, being hard to obtain, bringing pleasure, bringing societal elevation to their owners (Belk, 1988; Cristini *et al.* 2017). Herein, luxury can also be viewed from a sociological perspective.

Luxury products are more visible and carry symbolic aura, compared to necessities. Thus, from sociological point of view, luxury products are a distinguishing trait of the elite, high social class (Kapferer, 1997; Okonkwo, 2007). Luxury goods play a social stratification role, helping consumers to associate themselves with the mighty few. However, this perspective involves two issues. On one hand, while in the past luxury reflected the taste of the elite (Kapferer and Florence, 2016), today luxury is no longer a trademark of the high social class, as more consumers have access to these divine products (Kapferer, 2018). On the other hand, luxury's function to project distinctiveness on clients presents a key distinguishing characteristic (Kapferer and Florence, 2016). From this standpoint, exclusivity is indisputable. However, increased availability of luxury products allows *"[…] consumers to be unique, just like everyone else"* (Crane, 2000, p. 20). Then again, *"Luxury is in the eye of the consumer"* (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016, p. 19). Hereafter, luxury acts as individual perception of distinctiveness through which consumers present themselves in the society. This leads to the symbolic perspective of the luxury concept.

A core characteristic that marks luxury from other product categories (necessities) is that the former evokes satisfaction of consumers' functional and psychological needs (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000). Non-luxury products cannot meet the psychological needs of consumers because they are not a source of self-reward. While needs reflect fundamental marketing functions, desire symbolizes individual uniqueness, to reach dreams for certain lifestyle through iconic brands (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012). Henceforth, luxury products are defined as items that go beyond necessity (Bearden and Etzel, 1982). Thus, there is a clear distinction between *"complete necessity"* to *"complete luxury"* (Kemp, 1998, p. 594). Whereas necessity can elicit negative feelings in consumers, luxury products educe a positive emotional and psychological arousal (Kemp, 1998).

The reason to regard these brands as iconic is veiled in their brand signature, also known as brand DNA (Dubois and Peternault, 1995; Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Okonkwo, 2007; Atwal and Williams, 2009). Luxury rests on exclusivity,

excellence, and superior brand image (Phau and Prendergast, 2000). The "*brand DNA*" (Fionda and Moore, 2009, p. 357) represents the exquisite handmade aspect of luxury brands, where precision and craftsmanship are pivotal luxury traits. Thus, true luxury products are more than objects. They are authentic, handmade products, which carry creativity and inspiration of an ingenious artist (Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Srinivasan *et al.* 2014). Luxury symbolic meaning also resonates in the cultural heritage of these brands (Dion and Arnould, 2011). Each brand conveys its own culture and artistic heritage (Kapferer, 1997), evoking multi-sensory and experiential stimuli in consumer minds (Kapferer and Bastein, 2009). Thus, luxury brands are a *"configuration of a unique, aesthetic, functional, and expensive product-service experience"* (Magehee and Spake, 2012, p. 1436). Although this definition provides an adequate view of the luxury concept, it misses a crucial aspect. While luxury is associated with tangible attributes such price, physical qualities (high quality, handmade quality, aesthetics), and craftsmanship, it also incorporates intangible (symbolic) attributes such as cultural and artistic heritage. Therefore, core characteristics of the luxury concept, defining its nature are: 1) premium pricing 2) rarity, exclusivity, uniqueness 3) excellent quality 4) aesthetics and 5) heritage (Dubois *et al.* 2001). Above all, hedonism takes precedence over functionality. In these lines, luxury is indicator for consumers' social stand or a sign of self-expression (Kapferer and Bastein, 2009). Thus, the luxury concept can be summarized as: *"[...] luxury designates objects or services which are needlessly expensive: non-necessary—one can live without it—no functional argument can ever justify their price, only the feeling of privilege made of rare quality, hedonistic experience, symbolic elevation and conspicuousness."* (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012, p. 22).

In this vein, today luxury branding is more about fulfilling self-interests than ever before (Cristini *et al.* 2017). Whilst quality and excellence are still core luxury predecessors, in today's reality offering superior value is no longer enough (Deloitte, 2016). Rather, additional effort is required to ensure customer engagement and commitment (Shukla *et al.* 2016). There is a shift from luxury credentials of artistic craftsmanship toward more immaterial values, such as perceived uniqueness (Miller and Mills, 2012). Once maintaining exclusivity through materialistic luxury aspect, product quality and exclusivity, today luxury fashion brands address the hedonistic modern consumer (Cristini *et al.* 2017). Thus, consumer quest for exclusive luxury goes beyond product qualities (Han *et al.* 2010) to include desire for symbolic meanings.

Further, today's luxury consumers are ready to forgo a basic need in a crave to impulsively satisfy a short-term desire for positive experience (Cristini *et al.* 2017). Due to changes in the economic landscape, luxury brands successfully sprinkle their magical bloom through the so-called *"abundant rarity"* approach (Kapferer, 2012). This includes expansion of product portfolios by launching more affordable items, which also have sufficient contribution to the profits. Most of these products carry the handmade craftsmanship element of true LFBs (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016). However, a different angle infers that today the emphasis is more on offering glamourous logos rather than appreciation for high quality luxury products (Kapferer and Denzieau, 2014). Thus, the dilemma ahead of LFBs is to find the key toward responding to consumer demand, yet maintaining their scarcity value (Derville and Kapferer, 2018). To respond to this trend, big luxury designers trade down to offer *"mass prestige"* products at more accessible prices (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016; Kradisching, 2015). Furthermore, the luxury sector surrenders at the charisma of *masstige* or mass luxury, a term used for brands that offer luxury fashion pieces at lower prices than high-end brands (Loureiro *et al*. 2018). Hence, there is clear distinction between *true luxury* brands that have brand heritage (Ralph Lauren, Hugo Boss, Armani, Hermès, Bottega Venetta) and *new luxur*y (Armani Exchange, Boss Orange, RL Polo) created to prompt aspiration to bigger proportion of consumers through prestigious brand logos (Kapferer and Denzieau, 2014; Kradisching, 2015). However, perceived excellence, uniqueness, high quality, and symbolic significance present contemporary desire for luxury (Cristini *et al*. 2017).

Finally, desire for luxury in the modern society is also nourished through media (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Cristini *et al.* 2017; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Henceforth, in today's reality the prosperity of the luxury sector indicates the need to respond to consumer needs, which are defined by SM exposure, unique value systems, and increasingly challenging consumer behavior (Raisanen *et al.* 2018). Thus, based on the literature review, it is suggested that luxury branding is a subjective concept coupled with the fact that it fluctuates over time (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016; Cristini *et al*. 2017). Conclusively, building on early presented core dimensions as of what "luxury brand" constitutes (Dubois *et al.* 2001; Kapferer and Bastein, 2012), the author shall adopt one of the latest perspectives of a luxury brand. That is, a luxury brand should fulfill five key consumer criteria: "*1) be high quality, 2) offer authentic value via desired benefits, whether functional or emotional, 3) have a prestigious image within the market built on qualities such as artisanship, craftsmanship, or service quality, 4) be worthy of*

commanding a premium price, and 5) be capable of inspiring a deep connection, or resonance, with the consumer" (Ko *et al. 2*019, p.406). Another perspective would be that luxury and art are interrelated (Kapferer, 2015; Koronaki *et al.* 2018). Art is applied to functional products (Kapferer, 1997). Art in its luxury context is less ephemeral, it is an urge of an artist expressed in fine pieces of clothing. Consequently, the embodied majesty of LFBs is felt as customers enfold themselves with a halo of glamour with designers' fashion clothes (Gregory, 2014). From this stance, it is imperative to understand the concept of fashion and the interplay between luxury and fashion.

2.2. Defining luxury fashion

Referring to the etymological roots of the fashion concept, derived from the Latin word *mos*, the Italian *moda* (introduced around 1650) embodies different, yet related meanings: 1) tradition, norm, 2) directive, integrity and 3) rule (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009). Crane (2000, pp. 1-16) speaks of fashion as: *[...] Fashionable clothes are used to make statements about social class and social identity, but their principal messages are about the way women and men perceive them or are expected to perceive them"*. As depicted in *table 2:1*, luxury fashion has evolved under the impact of various external forces that shaped its modern look (Okonkwo, 2007).

Table 2:1: Evolution of luxury fashion

Period	Emblematic moments
Cretan period - Bronze Age (Crane, 2000)	Marked European fashion and lifestyle
Greek civilization (4th and 5th centuries BC) (Okonkwo, 2007)	-Sign for persons' education level -Clear distinction between men and women's fashion was established
Roman Empire in the Renaissance period (15th and 16th centuries) Baroque fashion in France	-Paved the way to luxury fashion -Representative for aristocratic society elites, symbolizing high status (Kapferer, 1997; Crane, 2000; Okonkwo, 2007)
End of 18th and beginning of 19th century (Rosa, 2013; Quan and Shen, 2017)	- Growing incomes of consumers: demand for exclusive and prestigious brands inspired the opening of luxury fashion houses: Hermes (1837) Burberry (1856), Cartier (1857), Chanel (1910), Prada (1913); Gucci (1921); Dior (1947) -Use of fashion as a symbol of wealth and social status
Birth of haute couture (1825-1895): Frederick Worth (Rosa, 2013)	-Empowerment of the couturier -Change in the position of the haute couture fashion designer from inferior to superior (Worth convinced the wife of Napoleon III,

	Empress Eugenie, to dress based on his suggestions) -The first to employ human mannequins
19th century dominant ideology: fixed gender identities; major differences between men and women (Crane, 2000)	-Upper-class women (not expected to work): ornamental and impractical designs of her clothing -Middle-class women: similar clothing to upper-class women with lower investments
20th century fashion (Okonkwo, 2007)	Governed by wealthy consumers, in an analogous way to the royalties in earlier centuries
First World War: the birth of French *Maisons* Lanvin, Patou and Chanel (Crane, 2000; Rosa, 2013)	-Models with simple lines (blouses, trousers, pullovers) -The little black dress *"Ford of fashion"* introduced by Chanel in 1920 *Garçonette:* women's aspiration for declaring a social status position was achieved wearing unconventional style (Men-alike jackets and ties) -Chanel designs: simplicity and functionality (new form of luxury distinction); use of less noble materials
Democratization of fashion (1960): Yves Saint Laurent – from 1960's onwards females' clothing was tailored in a way that women dress for themselves, as a sign of expressing their individuality (Rosa, 2013)	-Mixture of non-Western traditions with French style -introduction of the "street" style (leather jacket and jeans) -Focus on gender: mixture of feminine and masculine elements -Dior and Yves Saint Laurent: ready-to-wear luxury (closure of the gap between rich and poor)
1980's	the end of traditional haute couture (Crane, 2000)
1990-2000: "High" luxury becomes accessible to consumers on an international level (Rosa, 2013) -2000's and onwards	-Fashion: changing fashion - expression of individuality through "anti-fashion", personal style (Rosa, 2013) -Affordable/ accessible luxury (Cristini *et al.* 2017; Quan and Shen, 2017) -Mass luxury (Crewe, 2016; Cristini *et al.* 2017) -Increased consumption from Generation Y consumers (Giovannini *et al.* 2015) -Increased fahsion consciousness among male consumers (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009; Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2012) -Key success factors for luxury fashion brands: international expansion, distinct selling channels, focus on brand's heritage (Quan and Shen, 2017)

As presented in *table 2:1*, the different stages of fashion evolution demonstrate that LFBs have traditionally employed art to meet the desires of elite classes, helping them to communicate their aesthetic values and luxury philosophy (Choi *et al.* 2016). Fashion and art have joined forces to create an aesthetic appeal, triggering consumers' desire to

experience the brands' magic (Crewe, 2016). Therefore, building on the two concepts, there is difference between fashion and luxury, the former being seen as *"forward looking"* and the latter as *"timeless and well-grounded in the past"* (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009, p. 19). Luxury encompasses both tangible and intangible elements. In contrast to necessities, luxury goods prompt positive feelings in consumers. This the main difference: hedonism takes precedence over functionality. More so, there is general agreement that today the rare aspect of luxury surrenders at the charisma of mass luxury. To sum, although luxury represents on the perception of premium-priced products, that are symbolic for exclusivity, uniqueness and social elevation, the modern world fosters further debates about the pristine meanings of this concept, being challenged by Gen Y consumption, SM, democratization of luxury, and mass luxury. Thus, luxury can be perceived as a business model, as it takes time to build and sustain its iconic exclusive cachet in the long-term (not being mass produced, but taking time and effort to create), whilst fashion is ephemeral, being encoded in responding to the trends of its time (Kapferer, 2012; Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016).

Additionally, globalization impact is evident in new consumer segments from various geographies (Liu *et al*. 2016; Kapferer and Laurent, 2016), who are motivated by different values from the luxury experience (Sauer and Teichmann, 2013). As outlined in the beginning of the section that investigated relevant literature on luxury branding, although the luxury phenomenon is not new to academia (Cristini *et al.* 2017), confusion originates from increased popularity of luxury brands (Kapferer, 2012; Chandon *et al.* 2016; Derville and Kapferer, 2018). It was also highlighted in the introduction chapter that for Gen Y consumers *"luxury does not mean the same thing as once did"* (Kapferer, 2018, p. 60). From this stance, two gaps were identified in existing research:

- *"It is conceivable that age not only moderates motives for luxury consumption but also the actual perception of what luxury constitutes"* (Schade *et al.* 2016, p. 320)
- *"Understanding how consumers in a wide variety of countries may conceptualize luxury differently is an important starting point and a relevant consideration in the formation of a definition of luxury brands"* (Ko *et al.* 2019, p. 412)

Based on these, the first research objective is: *Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands.*

Finally, motivation presents an important aspect in consumer research since 1940 (Giovannini *et al.* 2015). In this vein, luxury fashion products, with their inherently exclusive attributes of uniqueness, high quality, price, provide the perfect source for building one's identity and for self-presentation in the society (Giovannini *et al.*2015). For this reason, luxury is inevitably related to consumers' perceptions of luxury (Chandon *et al*. 2016). Hence, defining luxury fashion brands requires prodding beneath the surface to understand consumer values.

2.3. Luxury consumer values

Luxury has moved from being a trademark of the elite, to a concept that fulfils the dreams for self-expression of each individual customer (Chandon *et al.* 2016). Thus, another reason for the confusion as of what the luxury concept stands for is that it emerges from multidimensional, subjective consumer perceptions (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009). In the luxury domain, these perceptions reflect in consumer values, as driving forces for luxury consumption (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Values present consumer beliefs about the desired characteristics of luxury brands, acting as a benchmark for consumer-brand choice (Roux *et al.* 2017). Consumer values are broadly classified as personal and interpersonal (Vigneron and Johnon, 1999).

2.3.2. Personal values

Personal values represent individual's inner triggers (Roux *et al*. 2017). Personal values include perfectionism and hedonism (Dubois and Laurent, 1994). Perfectionist consumers value product quality and there is direct link between materialism and positive luxury brand perceptions (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Alvandi *et al.* 2013; Hur *et al.* 2014). Consumers tend to evaluate quality based on price (Rao and Monroe, 1989). Since premium-priced luxury brands are a symbol of supreme excellence and craftsmanship (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999), consumer desire for quality is defined as personal trigger to attain perfection. On the other side, luxury brands do not merely offer a name, they provide consumers with a piece of the magical world they symbolize (Chandon *et al.* 2016). For they are expensive, LFBs are defined by rarity, exclusivity, being hard to obtain, bringing pleasure in the form of self-reward and self-esteem to their owners (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Cristini *et al.* 2017). Thus, there is direct relationship between perfectionism and perceived quality, manifested in the hedonistic values obtained from the luxury experience (Fournier, 1998; Kapferer and Bastein, 2009).

Hedonism refers to the private feelings and positive emotions that consumers derive from the luxury experience (Hirschman and Holbrok, 1982); Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). The sense of self-reward, self-pampering elevates the self-esteem of consumers (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Sung *et al.* 2015). Hereafter, it is non-negligible that luxury consumer behavior is triggered by desire to experience pleasure and happiness (Shukla and Purani, 2012). Besides, the cult of the luxury dream (Okonkwo, 2009) is fueled with desire for exceptional life (Kapferer, 2015), identification with outstanding people, perceived exclusivity and uniqueness (Belk, 1988; Kapferer and Tabatoni, 2011). Moreover, individuals hold more positive attitudes towards people with luxury brands (Nelissen and Meijers, 2011). From this perspective, consumer values are also based on interpersonal factors (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999).

2.3.3. Interpersonal values

Interpersonal values consist of three elements: social values (conformity), conspicuousness, and uniqueness (Amaldoss and Jain, 2005). Due to the high prices involved in acquiring luxury products, they act as a symbol for one's wealth and status (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009; Walley *et al.* 2013). Conspicuous consumption can be explained with the costly signaling theory. The theory contends that desire to enhance one's self-image through possession of material items leads to wasteful behavior (Nelissen and Meijers, 2011). In this regard, luxury brands involve higher acquisition costs (Chandon *et al.* 2016). Thus, conspicuousness refers to status consumption being driven by consumers' social needs through the display of costly signals of wealth (Raisanen *et al.* 2018). Owning a luxury brand serves the splendid function of presenting oneself as successful (Shamila, 2018). Hence, the prestigious trait of luxury brands is reflected in the search for high status, prestigious brands (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). Thus, due to the high prices involved in acquiring luxury products, they act as a symbol for one's wealth and status (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Vigneorn and Johnson, 2004).

Further, adherence to the social group, conformity, namely significant others, is explained with the "*bandwagon effect*", which represents one's desire to obtain goods, with the hope of receiving approval by the social group that an individual would like to be part of (Leibenstein, 1950). Public consciousness has the power to shape brand attitudes because belongingness to a certain group gives consumers a sense of recognition (Tuškej *et al.* 2013). Furthering on this statement, Chaney and Goulding (2016) asserted that consumers do not purchase certain products based on the products' qualities, but because of the

symbolic meanings assigned to these products. In such a consumer behavior, the consumers' purchase choices are in fact endorsed to the constant search for approval by their social environment (Hung *et al.* 2011; Cheah *et al.* 2015). In the context of fashion, such a behavior can be explained by employing findings from Arvidsson and Niessen (2015). Fashion markets, they say, serve as a splendid function to help consumers socializing and creating bonds with their peers or aspirational groups. Consequently, the desire to be accepted and being identified with a certain group, places a burden on consumers to make the right clothing choice for themselves (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Roux *et al.* 2017). In such cases, consumers are often seduced to accept the social group norm, instead of expressing their identities, as a key motive for their purchase choices in terms of fashion clothing (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). In other words, an inherent trait existent in conformist consumers is that they would likely adjust their purchases to fit to their desirable social group (Raisanen *et al.* 2018). However, research reveals that even though group belongingness, may be favored by some consumers, others might feel this significant other effect deviates them from showcasing their individual personalities (Agnes and Fischer, 2011). This leads to the importance of uniqueness for consumers.

Need for uniqueness, results in the purchase of goods that will help the individual to stand out from the crowd (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012). Consumers who want to differentiate themselves form others often emphasize on social dissimilarity, self-expression and independence through the purchase of distinguishing brands (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). In this spirit, Tian and McKenzie (2001) uncovered that consumers involve themselves into extensive search for creative, even unpopular choices, which require significant financial investments. With their note of caution about the implications of need for uniqueness on shopping behavior, their findings resemble what Tian *et al.* (2001) conceptualize as creative-choice counter conformity. To the extent that consumers seek for social distinctiveness, their behavior rests on variety seeking (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016) to express their unique identity through personal style (O'Cass, 2001). Interestingly, Snyder and Fromkin (1977) conceptualize that customers can purchase products, which are less popular, helping them to present their uniqueness, but without the risk of being scrutinized for their choices. On the other hand, Simonson and Nowlis (2000) articulate that counter conformity refers to unpopular choice where consumers purchase unconventional products, with the clear consciousness that their choice may be largely criticized by society and their peers. Thus, a remarkable characteristic shaping the

consumer behavior regarded as need for uniqueness is the purchase of brands that help consumers to *"dressing for self"*, rather than to impress other social actors (Shamila, 2018, p. 13).

Additionally, interest in studying the consumption patterns of Gen Y LFCs is the sheer recency of increased consumption from Gen Y consumers and their role as a valuable future market for LFBs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Kapferer and Laurent 2016; Butcher *et al.* 2017). However, academic knowledge on their consumer behavior towards LFBs is still scarce (Kradisching 2015; Cheah *et al.* 2015; Mamat *et al.* 2016). Hence, whilst consumer values historically received a significant attention in the academic literature, the study picks up one the trend of understanding Gen Y LFCs' consumer values (Butcher *et al.* 2017). More so, despite the large body of literature, much is yet to be learned about the impact of gender (Sauer and Teichman, 2013; Levy and Loken, 2015). As noted by Lues and Klerk (2016): *"Unique marketing strategies that effectively attract the target market are fundamental for effective differentiation and even more significant in the intensifying competitive environment that fashion brands and retailers find themselves today. For this reason, it is essential that fashion marketers and brand managers define and understand their target markets clearly, especially the contributors of consumer behaviour, of which gender is a key factor"* (p.84). Thus, in addressing the role of gender among Gen Y LFCs, this will help to further our understanding on how individuals' interpersonal and personal values (Vigneron and Johnson 1999) function among Gen Y customers in the context of LFBs. From this stance, three gaps were identified in the existing research:

- *"As shopping behaviours change, it becomes increasingly important to understand the mechanisms of change [...] Male and female consumer behaviours continue to change with each generation and are impacted by changes within society. More research is needed to better understand generational differences between male and female shopping behaviours and shopping channel choice"* (Shephard *et al.* 2016, pp. 5-15)

- *"[...] the traditional gender gap is diminishing. This trend questions the origins and motives of gender differences in luxury consumption"* (Roux *et al.* 2017, p. 102)

- *"[...] differences in motivation for luxury consumption between product and service categories, by gender, and by culture, is in need of additional study [...] Future research that investigates what consumer values or motivations to consume are most impactful in luxury consumption would also be valuable"* (Ko *et al.* 2019, pp.411-412)

Based on these gaps, the second research objective is: *Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers.*

Finally, because luxury brands have an inherently encoded capability to provide pleasure beyond customer satisfaction (Roux *et al.* 2017), the hedonistic values should have a profound role in building brand loyalty (Choi *et al*. 2016). Nevertheless, compared to their parents, young consumers demonstrate lower interest to relational cues and loyalty levels (Godey *et al.* 2013; Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016). Such challenges highlight the importance of understanding the phenomenon of brand loyalty and LFBs can create a loyal customer base.

2.4. Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty has been one of the most widely debated topics in academic research (Song, 2015). Curiosity in understanding this concept stems, in part, from theoretical standpoint, but its nature also excites the marketing world as it has substantial practical implications (Watson *et al.* 2015; Ramaswani and Arunachalam, 2016; Silva *et al.* 2016). A possible explanation is that the costs of serving a loyal customer are sufficiently lower than the expenses required for attracting and maintaining new customers (Ndubisi, 2006). Loyal customers are also more willing to act as brand evangelists and spread PWOM (Aaker, 1991). Yet, its importance for theory and practice lead to a paradoxical situation where increased attention resulted in too many definitions and views, without the ability to provide a theoretical umbrella of this concept (Watson *et al.* 2015; Ngobo, 2017). If there is some overarching construct that unifies such customer behavior, is it true that it can be defined as *brand loyalty*? (Beer and Watson, 2009). The answer to this question the first part of the section illustrates definitions of brand loyalty in academic literature.

2.4.1. Behavioral loyalty

Behavioral loyalty refers to repeat purchases resulting from *"readiness to act to the benefit of a particular entity"* (Oliver, 1999, p. 35). From this perspective, loyalty was categorized as *undivided loyalty, divided loyalty, unstable* loyalty and *no loyalty* (Brown, 1952) or as a *repeat purchasing behavior* (Kuehn, 1962).The behavioral approach to brand loyalty has been a main stream of research, receiving continuous support, and heavily highlighted in the loyalty literature (Song, 2015). It was until recent that

researchers (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; De Wulf *et al.* 2001; Farrelly and Quester, 2003; Heitmann *et al.* 2007; Dawes, 2009; Friend *et al.* 2011; Gelbrich, 2011), to mention just a few, have predominantly focused on the behavioral perspective of brand loyalty. This is rather logical as purchase behavior presents the first step in building brand loyalty (De Wulf *et al.* 2001; Ailawadi *et al.* 2008). Hence, it comes as no surprise that such an essential component has guided loyalty research in the path towards understanding this multidimensional construct.

To respond to the increased interest in brand loyalty, one of the gurus in marketing research, Keller (1993, p. 8) proposes that brand loyalty: *"occurs when favorable beliefs and attitudes for the brand are manifested in repeat buying behavior"*. The main contribution that Keller (1993) adds is the emphasis on the value of brand awareness and brand image as prerequisites for customers' steadiness to competitive offers. The true value of brand loyalty is that it can justify exceptional price tags, can act as a firewall against competitor actions, price wars, and resilience to outperform with novel product or service launches (Aaker, 1996). Nevertheless, it seems that many of the early identified perspectives on brand loyalty overlook the fact that loyalty is the result of habit and situational triggers (Watson *et al.* 2015). A major emphasis was placed on the benefits that it brings to companies, ignoring the customer perspective (Aksoy *et al.* 2015). Henceforth, despite its relevance in the marketing discipline, purely behavioral approaches are quite ignorant toward the array of psychological customer experiences. Hereafter, it would be wrong to close brand loyalty in a behavioral silo. Thus, it would be relevant to evaluate brand loyalty as *"[…] a measure of the attachment that a customer has to a brand''* (Aaker, 1996, p. 39), which provides evidence for the significance of understanding attitudinal loyalty.

2.4.2. Attitudinal loyalty

The affectionate bonds that customers can develop to brands are of paramount importance for relevant theoretical and managerial implications (Malefyt, 2015). Thus, the extended definition of brand loyalty also considers the attitudinal element. Attitudinal loyalty is a cognition or fulfilment of delightful feelings in the favor of a specific entity (Oliver, 1999). Consequently, in addition to repeat purchase behavior, there are six other crucial components that, when fulfilled, brand loyalty is defined as: *"(1) the biased (i.e., random) (2) behavioural response (i.e., purchase) (3) expressed over time (4) by some decision-*

making unit (5) with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such brands, and is (6) a function of psychological (i.e., decision making, evaluative) processes" (Jacoby and Kyener, 1973, p. 2). The main contribution of this definition is that it considers loyalty from customer perspective. Its uniqueness lies in the inclusion of the key role of brand commitment resulting from consumers' psychological process (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973). However, consumer commitment and brand loyalty should not be viewed as synonyms. Although loyalty and commitment represent bonding to brands, commitment is a sense of attachment and desire to maintain a relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Loyalty, on the other side, requires a behavior that involves efforts in sustaining long-term relationships (Aksoy *et al*. 2015).

From this perspective, both behavioral and attitudinal elements are an integral part of brand loyalty. Hereafter, the *"Attitude-behavior typology of loyalty"* (Dick and Basu, 1994) has important implications for understanding the concept of brand loyalty. According to this framework loyalty can range from *"no loyalty",* through *"spurious loyalty"* (temporary loyalty, customers are open to competitor actions) and *"latent loyalty"* (high relative attitude, but without purchases) to achieve *"loyalty"* (high levels of repurchase, strong preference, WOM). The framework provided novel insights by recognizing that each individual customer differs in his purchase behavior and brand attitudes. Nevertheless, there is one major drawback. It does not provide practical or managerial implications to encourage consumer movement to higher loyalty levels (Ngobo, 2017). This emphasizes the importance of understanding the emotional bonds for customer engagement (Vivek *et al.* 2012; Harmeling *et al.* 2015) that have implicit role for the development pf brand loyalty.

2.4.3. Loyalty: "a deeply held commitment"

As shown in the discussion above, the traditional conceptualization of brand loyalty has expanded from viewing it as a merely behavioral definition to attitudinal loyalty. However, there is still a missing link in obtaining a full comprehension of the concept. This requires understanding consumer affection, beliefs and psychological motives to capture the full potential of brand loyalty. Of particular relevance is the notion that: *"[...] consumers are not just buying brands because they like them or because they work well. They are involved in relationships with a collectivity of brands so as to benefit from the meanings they add to their lives. Some of these meanings are functional and utilitarian;*

others are psychological and emotional. All, however, are purposive and ego centered and therefore of great significance to the persons engaging them [...]" (Fournier, 1998, p. 360-161).

This view improves the appreciation of the roots of brand loyalty from consumer perspective. However, the irony is that while the relationship aspect of brand loyalty is missed, this multi-faceted construct is very much relationship-oriented (Fournier, 1998). Consequently, although there is no universal truth of brand loyalty, perhaps one of the most widely agreed definitions is: *"A deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/ service consistently in the future [...] despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior"*(Oliver, 1997, p. 392). This definition enhances the understanding of brand loyalty by recognizing that consumers' loyalty is more than behavior-attitude composition. Oliver (1997) argues that consumer loyalty is built over time and each consumer undergoes three attitudinal phases (cognitive-affective-conative) that ultimately lead to true loyalty. The first phase (cognitive) refers to consumer perception that one brand outperforms other alternatives in terms of product attributes. That is, consumers are loyal to the extent of re-purchase behavior. The next level, affective loyalty, results from ongoing consumer satisfaction that promptly build a sense of affection in consumers' minds. Conative loyalty refers to a "*deeply held commitment*" to repurchase a brand. Therefore, defining loyalty requires moving beyond the boundaries of ensuring repeated customer satisfaction to achieve strong brand feelings (Oliver, 1999).

The latter framework enriched academic knowledge by shedding light on another important aspect: the role of consumer satisfaction as an antecedent of brand loyalty. Based on *Expectation Confirmation Theory*, consumer satisfaction presents a vital element in the initial stages of building brand loyalty, as it is the result of prior consumer expectations and actual performance (Oliver, 1997). Then again, relying only on customers' positive experience is not enough. Rather, a loyal customer and a satisfied customer are two different terms (Aaker, 1991; Dick and Basu, 1994; Kabiraj and Shanmugan, 2011). Satisfaction enhances the primer consumer expectations (Watson *et al.* 2015), but it is trust and commitment that provide pleasurable feelings beyond single transaction experience (Jack and Powers, 2013). To conclude, exploring this concept is about understanding the broader context of consumers' experiences as a basis for building brand loyalty. Therefore, for the purpose of the research, the author employs the following

definition: "*A deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/ service consistently in the future [...] despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior*" (Oliver, 1997, p. 34). Finally, LFBs should possess profound understanding of luxury consumer behaviour (Okonkwo, 2007; Okonkwo, 2010; Kapferer, 2015; Crewe, 2016). Consequently, the following section presents how brand loyalty is built in the luxury fashion world.

2.5. Brand loyalty toward luxury fashion brands

The following discussion explores brand loyalty toward LFBs from several perspectives, including brand identity and emotional brand attachment, customer satisfaction, service quality, customization, and co-branding.

2.5.1. Brand identity and emotional brand attachment

Brand image and brand awareness are core prerequisites for customers' steadiness to competitive offers (Keller, 1993). Likewise, for LFBs, successful market performance depends on the establishment of strong brand identity (Okonkwo, 2007). Precisely, the triumph in strong brand identity is realized through brand awareness (recognizable style), innovation (novel product launches), premium pricing (exceptional price tags), exclusivity and product craftsmanship as inherent luxury facets (Fionda and Moore, 2009). Such an association was traditionally provoked by signalling with a brand name, namely strong brand identity (Choo *et al.* 2012). Nevertheless, building strong brand identity is no longer enough. Customers today emphasize on sense of closeness and emotional brand attachment (Choo *et al.* 2012). Similar to Oliver (1997, 1999) perspective that brand loyalty develops over time, in the context of luxury fashion brands such emotional values provide consumers with a memorable experience beyond single purchase transactions (Brun *et al.* 2008). Whilst emotional attachment positively affects brand loyalty, strong brand identity is one of the several antecedents triggering emotional brand attachment and subsequent brand loyalty (So *et al.* 2013). The value of engaging customers on an emotional level is a crucial factor for LFBs' success (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). At their heart emotional bonds are dependent on turning relationship points, based on customer engagement (Vivek *et al.* 2012; Harmeling *et al.* 2015). Thus, persistence in providing superior functional and symbolic benefits to develop stronger emotional attachments toward LFBs has significant implications for brand loyalty (So *et al.* 2013). One way is via customer satisfaction.

2.5.2. Customer satisfaction

The behavioural-intentions model (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) offers insightful knowledge into the relationship between customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. The model theorizes that two major factors can predict behavioural intention: the personal (attitudinal) aspect and social (normative) aspect. These factors vary across individuals, their behaviour and the situation they are exposed to (Miniard and Cohen, 1981). Thus, in consumption situation, service quality is a serious antecedent defining customer satisfaction, which in effect increases the likelihood for building brand loyalty (Thaichon and Quach, 2015). Consequently, for LFBs consumer satisfaction is positively influenced by utilitarian features, symbolic aspects, and social value (Yoo and Park, 2016). Customer satisfaction, in this case, is the product of price-quality ratio, symbolic aspects related to the acquisition of luxury fashion brands, and excellent in-store service, with the perspective of building long-term brand loyalty (Kim and Kim, 2014).

2.5.3. Service quality

A main substance of the luxury success formula refers to the hedonic in-store experience, created to challenge customers' stimuli and desire to experience the brands' magic (Naylor *et al*. 2008; Crewe, 2016; Shukla *et al*. 2016; Derville and Kapferer, 2018). Hence, conveying the splendor of the LFB through in-store environment is a key influencer triggering customers' purchase desire (Kim *et al.* 2016; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Additionally, a hallmark of LFBs is that they offer an additional bundle of advantages, including quality, brand credibility and perceived value (Fionda and Moore, 2009). Therefore, the choice of traditional in-store environment is highly triggered by rational consumer choice, as trust plays a crucial role (Hur, *et al.* 2014). Hence, the role of trust and commitment to build brand loyalty beyond single purchase experience (Jack and Powers, 2013) is as much valid for LFBs as in any other sector that involves B2C relationships.

Furthermore, the value of engaging customers on an emotional level is a crucial factor for LFBs success (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). In this vein, customers-salespeople relationship has profound implications for the development of brand loyalty, as a result of mutual trust and commitment (Beatty *et al.* 1996; Coutler and Ligas, 2004). RM has long served as a means through which luxury brands can build strong customer relationships (Meng and Elliott, 2008). Luxury brands' origin is defined by personal customer relationships (Andersen and Hansen, 2011). Specifically, the relationship

between customers and salespeople has the power to influence customer satisfaction and subsequent brand loyalty (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Crewe 2016; Stepień *et al.* 2016). Hence, because luxury brands encompass more symbolic meanings and high acquisition costs (Shukla and Purani, 2012), consumers assign greater importance to the purchase of luxury and the effect of trust-loyalty link is augmented (Hur *et al.* 2014). Therefore, LFBs should be persistent in providing superior functional, symbolic and social benefits to develop strong emotional attachments, which will ultimately lead to brand loyalty (Loureiro *et al.* 2018). In addition, one of the core characteristics defining the luxury concept is uniqueness, which is also observed in contemporary desire for unique products (Cristini *et al.* 2017). Accordingly, the next section will present the importance of customization for building brand loyalty.

2.5.4. Customization

In the initial stages of launching customization programs, there was a fear of diluting LFBs' image of rarity and exclusivity, or inability to meet exact customer desires (Abnett, 2015). Nonetheless, it appeared that customization may be the answer to brands' prayers. Customers identify four benefits from the customization process: functional, perceived uniqueness, self-design, and authorship pride (Schreier, 2006). With respect to the first benefit, one of the distinguishing characteristics of luxury brands relates to tangible attributes such price, physical qualities, and craftsmanship (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Atwal and Williams, 2009; Cristini *et al.* 2017). Additionally, cognitive values are representative for consumers' rational brand choice (Lee *et al.* 2015). In this spirit, luxury brands involve higher acquisition costs (Shukla and Purani, 2012). Hence, since perceived quality is a key brand characteristic, the functional value would have relevant implications for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs (Jung and Shen, 2011). The second perceived benefit is uniqueness. At their core, luxury brands are defined by rarity, exclusivity and uniqueness (Dubois, 2001; Kapferer, 2015; Kapferer and Florence, 2016). In this regard, consumer quest for exclusive luxury in the modern society goes beyond product qualities, to include hedonistic desire for symbolic meaning (Cristini *et al.* 2017). To paraphrase, consumers are seduced to make purchases they do not need, at a price level beyond what the utilitarian product features command (Kapferer, 2012), to experience pleasure and happiness (Shukla and Purani, 2012; Sung *et al.* 2015). To do so, they need the magic power of products from luxury brands (Kapferer, 2012). Such exclusive goods help the owner to stand out from the crowd and differentiate from

the commoners (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). Consequently, because luxury brands have an inherently encoded capability to provide pleasure beyond customer satisfaction (Roux *et al.* 2017), the hedonistic and symbolic values should have a profound role in building brand loyalty (Choi *et al.* 2016).

The other two perceived benefits are self- design and authorship pride. That is, consumers buy LFBs for self-pampering and self-esteem purposes (Hirschman and Holbrok, 1982; Stepień *et al.* 2016). This is especially important for perfectionists, who value product quality and for whom link between materialism and positive luxury brand perceptions is stronger (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Alvandi *et al.* 2013; Hur *et al.* 2014). Since premium-priced luxury brands are a symbol of supreme excellence and craftsmanship (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999), consumer desire to attain perfection is linked to self-design and authorship pride. In the case of customization, hedonic and creative achievement are both vital elements in the process of achieving customer satisfaction in the path toward building brand loyalty (Yoo and Park, 2016). Likewise, LFBs, with their strong association of high quality, uniqueness and exclusivity, offer customers with the best bundle of self-expressive functions, which are further augmented by authorship pride (Shreier, 2006; Giovannini *et al.* 2015). Finally, given the imbalanced economic recovery, the fear of the Great Recession persists at the forefront of consumer minds (Jenkins, 2014). Although consumers still look for LFBs, the focus is on taste rather than waste (Kradisching, 2015). To respond to this trend, LFBs expand their product portfolio, by offering luxury goods at different price levels while prices are set so that a brand is representative for luxury (Kapferer and Luarent, 2016). One option is through co-branding.

2.5.5. Co-branding

Whilst the market of luxury has been traditionally associated with elite class consumers (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009), there is a shift towards increased consumption from Gen Y consumers (Giovannini *et al.* 2015). Thus, the conventional elements LFBs traditionally use in their designs may no longer be applicable among this generational cohort (Kim and Jang, 2014; Andjelic, 2016). Hereafter, through co-branding LFBs can not only successfully respond to the changing marketplace, but also experience significant increase in brand loyalty (Mazodier and Merunka, 2014; Voss and Mohan, 2016; Shen *et al.* 2017).

Importantly, the brand resonates in the mind of the consumer (Keller, 1993). Hence, co-branding represents dual-edged sword: it can either strengthen brand loyalty or destroy brand image in consumers' minds. Brand image is a pivotal aspect in the path towards establishing brand loyalty, as it strengthens customers' steadiness to competitive offers (Keller, 1993). One of the core characteristics of luxury brands' image is excellent quality (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Fionda and Moore, 2009). Moreover, in the case of LFBs, the brand image has substantial impact on consumers' brand choice (Kim *et al.* 2016). Thus, if the partnership is not chosen carefully and the brands do not fit in the mind of the consumer, this may have negative effect on consumer perceptions (Helmig *et al.* 2008; Hanslin and Rindell, 2014). By contrast, if the co-branded products fit into the product portfolio of the LFB, consumers are more likely to perceive it in a positive manner (Voss and Mohan, 2016). In this context, co-branding has significant behavioral implications for Gen Y LFCs. Although Gen Y consumers are not currently at their greatest purchase power, their true value in fact lies in the near future when they will become the main customer segment of LFBs. Thus, even though they might still be in the years of buying from fast fashion brands, understanding their consumption patterns would likely yield valuable insights for securing their brand loyalty in the long-term.

In all, confidence in brands' image, thorough brand knowledge (Nueno and Quelch, 1998), trust, brand credibility and emotional attachment are strong predictors of brand loyalty (Hur *et al*. 2014). In addition, apart from trust, commitment and satisfaction, brand loyalty can be boosted via brand identity, excellent customer service, customer-salesperson relationship, product customization and co-branding. Finally, although the topic on brand loyalty is never exhaustive, the role of SM for building brand loyalty also presents an attractive area, which enjoys a mounting interest in academia. Thus, the following section discusses how brand loyalty can be enhanced by embracing the opportunities offered by the digital world.

2.6. Social Media role for building brand loyalty

Initially, websites served the function of browsing and purchasing products (Nadeem *et al.* 2015). Over time, SM significantly redefined the business landscape and the manner companies approach customer communication, attraction and retention (Loureiro *et al.* 2018; Kapferer, 2018). In fact, with the rise of SM, there never has been a better time to leverage customer loyalty. Consequently, e-loyalty as an extension of loyalty has gained momentum both in academic and practitioner research (Toufaily *et al.* 2013). Thus, developing SM presence and communication strategies is no longer an option, it is a requirement (Meyer, 2017). With that being said, it is essential to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute for the creation of loyal customers in the electronic environment.

2.6.1. E-loyalty drivers

The discussion on traditional brand loyalty lead to the conclusion there are several antecedents that can promise the development of a *"deeply held commitment"* (Oliver, 1997, p. 392). These are: satisfaction, repeat buying behavior, emotional brand attachment, trust, and commitment. E-loyalty, viewed as an extension of traditional loyalty (Luarn and Lin, 2003), refers to: *"customer's favorable attitude toward an electronic business resulting in repeat buying behavior"* (Anderson and Srinivasan, 2003, p. 125). Hence, the criteria that guide the development of loyalty in offline settings, should be similar to the ones that define the process of developing brand loyalty through the digital world. *Table 2:2* depicts identified studies in the field of e-loyalty, followed by a discussion on the aspects.

Table 2:2: Antecedents of e-loyalty

Study	Antecedents	Industry
Luarn and Lin (2003)	e-trust e-satisfaction	Online traveling services
Christodoulides and Michaelidou (2010)	e-satisfaction	Fashion
Hu and Chuang (2011)	e-trust	e-commerce
Judson *et al.* (2012)	Brand commitment	Social Media adoption
Sousa and Voss (2012)	e-service quality	e-banking
Polites *et al.* (2012)	Information quality Perceived usefulness e-trust	Online hotel reservations
Ariff e*t al*. (2013)	e-trust	e-banking

Palmer and Huo (2013)	e-trust	Online peer review websites for Skype
Rapp *et al.* (2013)	e-trust	Sports wear
Nguyen *et al.* (2013)	e-satisfaction	Clothing and home accessories
Rai and Medha (2013)	e-satisfaction e-trust	Life insurance
Thaichon and Quach (2015)	e-service e-trust e-satisfaction	Internet Service Provider
Li *et al.* (2015)	e-service quality	e-commerce
Arya and Srivastava (2015)	e-trust	product website, service website and social networking website
Ramadhoni *et al.* (2015)	e-satisfaction	-
Miguens and Vazguez (2017)	e-trust e-satisfaction	e-banking
Shamila (2018)	Online shopping experience	luxury fashion brands

As it appears from the table, e-satisfaction presents an important antecedent because it defines customer perception of making the right choice (Thaichon and Quach, 2015), which impacts e-loyalty (Christodoulides and Michaelidou, 2010; Ramadhoni *et al.*2015). Nevertheless, common wisdom suggests that brands should strive to perform better than simply ensuring customer satisfaction (Oliver, 1999). This is because simple re-purchase behavior cannot be the only factor hold accountable for brand loyalty, as it may simply be the result of habit or situational triggers (Aksoy *et al.* 2015; Watson *et al.* 2015). However, e- satisfaction is important in the initial stages of building brand loyalty, because it is the ingredient that triggers consumers' willingness for re-purchase (Cameran *et al.* 2010). Simply put, each customer needs time to evaluate brand performance. This evaluation depends on customer expectations and actual performance, as proposed by *Expectation Confirmation Theory* (Oliver, 1997). Then again, the online environment offers countless opportunities for consumers to explore product varieties, consult with other customers, read product reviews, compare prices, and browse without any time or space constraints (Chou *et al.* 2015; O'Reilly *et al.* 2018), which makes the establishment of brand loyalty even more difficult (Gommans *et al.* 2001; Toufaily *et al.* 2013). Consequently, e-satisfaction is of paramount importance (Ranaweera *et al.* 2005) and it is considered as the most critical element for building brand loyalty (Kim *et al.* 2016; Miguens and Vazguez, 2017). On the other hand, the initial excitement stemming from satisfaction, can quickly diminish. Therefore, e-satisfaction alone cannot have a significant contribution for the development of brand loyalty in the electronic

environment (Polites *et al.* 2012). In this spirt, e-trust also has a decisive role in the path toward brand loyalty (Ariff *et al.* 2013; Thaichon and Quach, 2015; Li *et al.* 2015).

Even though prior research provides diverse suggestions on the relative importance of e-satisfaction and e-trust (*table 2:2*), of prime importance is to acknowledge that e-satisfaction should be accompanied by e-trust, which has considerable role in building e-loyalty (Kanstperger and Kunz, 2010; Hu and Chuang, 2011; Palmer and Huo, 2013; Arya and Srivastava, 2015). In this context, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the digital world is that customers can search, select, and purchase products online of their choices fast and easy (Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015). Notwithstanding the positive aspects related to the online purchase experiences, a crucial aspect that requires attention is the potential risk involved in virtual purchases (Dhanapal *et al.* 2015). Henceforth, e-trust via physical fulfilment is a crucial antecedent of brand loyalty (Semeijn *et al.* 2005). Nevertheless, although e-trust is critical for brand loyalty, it may not be indicative for customer repurchase decision (Thaichon and Quach, 2015). Hereafter, from the behavioral perspective, e-loyalty can be viewed as re-purchase behavior in a reliable environment, which is supported by trust toward the product or service provider, namely the brand; while from the attitudinal perspective, it results in favorable attitudes and product attachment, represented by e-satisfaction (Li *et al.*2015).

Further, e-loyalty is essential for the success of a website based on the quality of services offered (e-service) and enjoyment from the browsing experience (Sousa and Voss, 2012; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). However, the Internet is not constrained to online purchases from companies' websites. Rather, SM encompasses *"virtual communities," "online communities," "blogs," "Web 2.0," "social networking sites," and "social computing,"* (Ngai *et al.* 2015, p. 42). This fosters the notion that if one is to provide significant theoretical and managerial implications, it is essential to explore both websites and SM role for building brand loyalty (Nadeem *et al.* 2015). Consequently, e-loyalty does not necessarily indicate only favorable attitudes and re-purchase behavior, but favorable attitudes and repeat browsing behavior (Arya and Srivastava, 2015). SM has the power to foster customer engagement and commitment, which in effect influence purchase loyalty (Severi *et al.* 2014). SNS's such as Facebook bring significant opportunities for brands to develop brand loyalty via customer engagement (Zhang *et al.* 2015). Henceforth, brands have the opportunity to engage consumers on an emotional level by providing young customers with personal brand

experience that fosters the sense of connection to the brand (Shamila, 2018). This can be achieved by adopting a customer-centric approach in online settings involving personalized service, individual care catered toward making customer feel the same level of intimacy as in traditional in-store environment (Rafaeli *et al*. 2016; Priporas *et al*. 2017; Foroudi *et al*. 2018). Furthermore, consumers are usually attracted to SM platforms because of personal needs or interests which, however, may not necessarily involve product or brand trigger (Crosby, 2018). Even if there are cases when consumers browse on SM to obtain product or brand information (Nisar and Whitehead, 2016), given that SM is the new Word of Mouth (WOM) marketing (Severi *et al.* 2014), online product review ought to have an impact on consumers' attitude towards brands (O'Reilly *et al.* 2018).

SM shifted the traditional one-way paradigm to two-way, interactive communication (Chae *et al.* 2015). In result, this not only allows companies to initiate interactive and direct communication, but also encourages information-sharing among consumers, namely electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM) (Ko *et al.* 2016). As nowadays consumers possess the power to determine communication flow, the manner they communicate has ample implications for *"influencing thousands, if not millions of clients and potential clients."* (Okonkwo, 2009, p. 308). By sharing their thoughts and opinions about products and brands on SM (Ko *et al.* 2019), consumers transfer e-WOM from mere exchange of brand information to a social activity that has the power to affect perceptions and actions (Alon *et al.* 2013; Verlato, 2018). Hence, e-WOM has a pivotal role in building consumer trust and brand loyalty (Marimon *et al.* 2012; Chae *et al.* 2015). In this regard, *Contagion theory* (LeBon, 1896) appears appropriate for providing rigidness to the discussion of e-WOM power for shaping brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs. *Social contagion* refers to change in people's behavior as a result of social interaction, social learning, and adherence to group expectations for a certain behavior (Latané, 2000). Transferred in SM context, social interaction has implications for the development of e-loyalty (Christodoulides and Michaelidou, 2010). Therefore, increased SM usage, through e-WOM, would likely impact e-trust and promotes the development of brand loyalty (Rapp *et al.* 2013; Choi and Bazarova, 2015). Finally, although SM luxury has been acknowledged as a separate sector in 2013 (Cristini *et al.* 2017), it is essential first to explore the paradox between such anecdotes as SM and LFBs (Okonkwo, 2009; Kapferer, 2015).

2.6.2. When heritage meets Social Media

Going back to the etymology of the word *luxury*, it can be suggested it has a very ambivalent meaning. One of the ways it can be understood is that luxury refers to deviating from the norm, something innovative. Therefore, employing SM as part of LFB's' marketing and communication strategies should not present a challenge. However, as depicted in *figure 2;1* the adoption of SM imposes several challenges for LFBs. The figure was constructed from: Fionda and Moore (2009), Okonkwo (2010), Kapferer and Bastein (2012), Kohli (2015), Bastein (2015), Gautam and Sharma (2017), Sayyah and Nilsson, (2017), Kapferer (2018)Further information is provided in the discussion below.

Figure 2:1: Challenges for adopting SM by luxury fashion brands
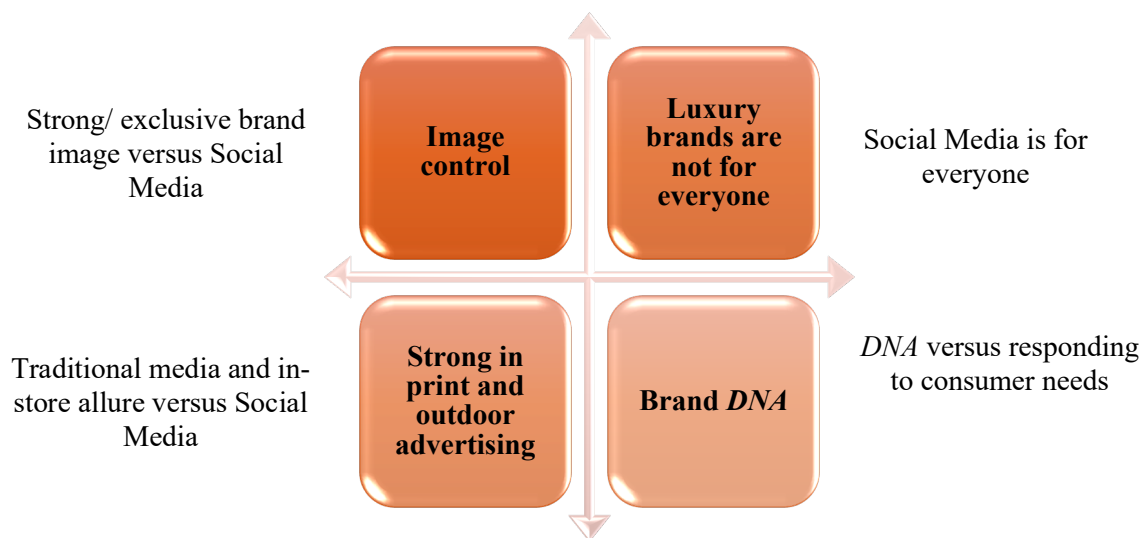
First, for companies that have long lasting history, their brands are the most important assets. While this is a desirable position to be in, it requires sufficient time of dedicated effort to develop LFBs. Once companies have created these assets, they are reasonably worried about maintaining them (Kohli *et al.* 2015). Likewise, because LFBs epitomize a *"dream"* (Seringhaus, 2002, p. 5), it is their prerogative to be concerned about eluding their brand image of exclusivity and rarity (Kapferer, 2018). This leads to the second challenge. Precisely, it refers to the distant approach that luxury brands exercise (Okonkwo, 2010), which is on the opposite of the digital world nature, characterized by availability, easiness and accessibility (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012).

Third, as part of their effort to maintain an exclusive image, luxury brands emphasize on symbolic meanings (Bastein, 2015). One way to achieve this traditionally included print

advertisement and in-store allure. Nonetheless, in the context of LFBs, SM brand content, created to allure to consumers' eyes, is of prime importance not only for triggering a purchase desire, but also for the development of brand loyalty (Gautam and Sharma, 2017). This is especially important as the luxury fashion industry is defined by the practice where value is quickly imitated by other brands. Therefore, LFBs need to constantly remind consumers of their uniqueness, for instance through online brand content (Kapferer, 2018). Moreover, the Internet consistently remains a preferred purchase channel over traditional brick-and-mortar for the numerous advantages it offers for both parties involved in the purchase process: wider product range, price matching convenience, deeper market penetration, enhanced customization, faster transactions, and reduced costs (Srinivasan *et al.* 2002; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). This does not imply that traditional stores are not relevant. On the contrary: they are still a special spot where customers explore, learn and socialize (Herhausen *et al.* 2015). Hence, persisting the experiential element of in-store environment (Kapferer, 2015) is still a crucial facet of LFBs. What has changed is that the Internet has opened the gates to a totally new, fascinating shopping experience (Derville and Kapferer, 2018). In effect, reliance on luxury core trait: one-to-one communication (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012) and in-store allure (Okonkwo, 2010) may seem outdated and obsolete. This indicates that the ability to offer exceptional buying experiences in online and offline settings is a crucial task in the contemporary market scenario (Herhausen *et al.* 2015).

Finally, SM is indeed the seal necessary for enhancing brand image and brand loyalty (Judson *et al.* 2012). Importantly, brand image in the context of LFBs is regarded as brand *"DNA"* (Fionda and Moore, 2009, p. 357). *Why do scholars and practitioners use DNA to describe luxury?* Each person possesses a specific DNA. To this point, everyone is unique. Likewise, DNA is deployed because brands want to emphasize on their uniqueness. The fact that they are absolutely different, cannot be compared, cannot be as much positioned as conventional items (Bastein, 2015). *DNA* is not what the consumer wants. This is the privilege of LFBs. They are not defined by consumers. However, this does not mean they do not have to listen to the consumer. Rather, ignoring the advancement of SM is equivalent to live in the 18th century (Okonkwo, 2010). Thus, a major crux of debate is how an industry defined by heritage, traditions and conventional way of storytelling can transmit its DNA to succeed in today' reality of increasingly digital consumer (Nitu *et al.* 2014). A sober assessment implies that LFBs must undertake sustainable strategies to convey their old story in new ways (Cristini *et al.* 2017).

2.7. Social Media role for building brand loyalty toward luxury fashion brands

The role of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs is explored by considering the four main challenges, which were presented in the previous section. The discussion is constructed by presenting each of the challenges, and how LFBs can successfully adopt SM to overcome these challenges and to build brand loyalty.

2.7.1. Image control

It can be argued that the *"digitalization of luxury"* (Rovai *et al.* 2019, p. 119) through SM contradicts the central luxury appeal: rarity, exclusivity, being hard to obtain, bringing pleasure in the form of self-reward to their owners (Belk, 1988; Cristini *et al.* 2017). But if one accepts that this entirely true, this would imply that it is straightforward: SM and luxury are two different concepts and there is no way LFBs can survive in the digital world. By contrast, studies have shown that SMME's present a valuable brand image building tool (Godey *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). This imposes a misconception that needs clarification.

Going back to the history of luxury fashion (*table 1*), there is evidence that luxury is preserved for the rich and affluent high-class consumers, and therefore it is highly exclusive. But within the ban of exclusiveness, there is also a high degree of inclusiveness in terms of luxury purchase behavior. Specifically, looking at luxury consumer motives and values, a main driver for luxury fashion consumption is adherence to social class group (Leibenstein, 1950). Further, consumer choices are highly based on e-WOM and recommendations from family and friends, who are considered the most trusted source on SM networks (Rapp *et al.* 2013; Choi and Bazarova, 2015). This holds especially true for Gen Y, who likely base their purchase decision on peers' opinion (Fernandez, 2009; Bolton *et al.* 2013). Therefore, luxury is more *"socially"* relevant than one might suspect. Recent publications evidence the decisive role of e-WOM for luxury fashion purchases (Mazzoli *et al.* 2019). Consequently, the manner consumers communicate has ample implications for affecting their values, brand attitudes and purchase decisions (Yeh and Choi, 2011; Verlato, 2018)). Through SM platforms consumers share their product and service experiences, allowing LFBs to apprehend consumer attitudes (Nadeem *et al.*2015). More so, with the exception of static banners, Gen Y consumers tend to demonstrate positive attitudes toward SM marketing activities (Kamal *et al.* 2013). Studies highlight the value of content that provides attractive and useful information,

coupled with catchy and entertaining SM marketing campaigns (Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017; Shen *et al.* 2017). Therefore, customer engagement can be boosted when LFBs communicate their values, beliefs and image in an open and honest manner, which will trigger Gen Y's desire to disseminate PWOM, interest in SM marketing activities, and ultimately contribute to the development of brand loyalty (Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Papandrea, 2019). Hence, the main task for luxury marketers is to provide good content because advocates are looking for opportunities to share their brand opinion (Kohli *et al.* 2015). The establishment of favorable brand image, through e-WOM and perceived trustworthiness on SM, presents a key component in the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs (Nisar and Whitehead, 2016). Having said that, the following section presents the role of SM in the context of the second challenge: distance versus availability.

2.7.2. Distance versus availability

Prior studies demonstrate that LFBs have successfully capitalized on the shift by reaching and engaging their customers through SM (Phan *et al.* 2011; Kim and Ko, 2012; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). For instance, pioneers in employing SM (Burberry, Channel, Tom Ford, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren) introduced the *"see now, buy now"* approach (Arienti, 2019). Consumers have online access to fashion shows, 3D review of selected products and opportunity for immediate purchase (Kapferer, 2015; Kapferer and Florence, 2016). However, luxury diffusion contradicts the central luxury appeal: *desire* (Crane, 2000; Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009; Kapferer and Bastein, 2012). The thought that increased availability can decrease the desirability of luxury goods and damage the dream value (Godey *et al.* 2016; Kapferer and Florence, 2016) perhaps sends shivers to many luxury fashion managers. Nevertheless, it is inappropriate to believe that dream fulfilment makes the luxury experience undesirable (Seringhaus, 2002). Hereafter, LFBs can achieve brand loyalty through persistence in providing superior functional and symbolic benefits toward the development of brand loyalty (So *et al.* 2013). Taking the traditional purchase process as an example (Kotler and Armstrong, 2005), what is unique to luxury brands is exactly the post-purchase stage. The end of the purchase is not the end of the interaction of the journey. It is the beginning of a new journey. It is the focal point when consumers start being more engaged with the brand and start thinking *"what next"*. That is, the post-purchase process creates a new desire. Thus, it is suggested that the role

of SM is related to the process of searching and evaluating opportunities for the next purchase (Choudhurry and Harrigan, 2014).

Specifically, consumption of luxury brands involves significant acquisition costs (Shukla and Purani, 2012). Therefore, consumers devote sufficient time to follow luxury fashion trends and to plan for their future purchases (Saric, 2017). In effect, SM provides the best means to gain inspiration for ideas (Giovannini *et al*. 2015; Deloitte, 2016). Thus, it is no wonder LFBs have come to realize the potential of Pinterest as a digital stage for showcasing their products (Doran, 2012). The explanation for the symbiosis between Pinterest and brands is explained as: *"[…] here's a platform where image is everything, where people are deliberately seeking out beautiful, inspirational and aspirational photos"* (Randolph, 2012). Besides digital content, studies have also emphasized on the critical role of embracing SM to escape from the distant image and nourish brand loyalty via SM activities that trigger consumers' emotions, which in effect boosts brand loyalty (Obra *et al.* 2013; Nyvseen and Pedersen, 2014). Having said that, the following section presents the role of SM in the context of the third challenge: traditional media and in-store allure.

2.7.3. Traditional media and in-store allure versus Social Media

Whilst the glossy photos in magazines are great to persist the mystery behind LFBs and trigger purchase desire, it is customer engagement that boosts brand loyalty (Harmeling *et al.* 2015). Here is where SM comes into play. On one hand, luxury brands are not defined by the consumer (Kapferer, 2018*)*. On the other hand, consumers expect that LFBs will be active on SM (Avall, 2017). More so, Gen Y have not grown up reading glossy magazines (Anderson, 2015). The is further challenged by the fact that the luxury fashion industry is defined by the practice where brand value appeals are quickly imitated by other brands, LFBs need to constantly remind consumers of their legitimacy and uniqueness. In this context, recent studies highlight the value of websites that provide attractive and useful information, coupled with catchy and entertaining SM marketing campaigns (Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017; Shen *et al.* 2017). Further, in purchasing a luxury brand, consumers do not simply buy a quality product, they buy part of the brand's myth and lifestyle philosophy (Krepapa *et al.* 2016). Thus, platforms such as Instagram are considered as a most appropriate scene for LFBs because its artistic and visual content surpasses the traditional advertorial character (Roderick, 2016*)*. Although the luxury industry was late on adopting Instagram (Hudson, 2017), researchers attribute the success

of LFBs' success on the platform to the simplistic interface and the focus on the visuals rather than textual marketing (Krepapa *et al.* 2016).

Recent studies also demonstrate that customer-brand communication has higher behavioral implications than SM marketing activities (Gautam and Sharma, 2017). The *"bewitched consumer"* (Dion and Arnould, 2011, p. 32) seeks active engagement with similar others and with the brand (Kapferer, 2015). This is explained with the fact that affluent consumers like to talk, they are "*[…] active and vocal. Never passive. They're in the know, they're insiders, they love to be engaged and share their favorite fashions […]"* (Scoble, 2017). LFBs can use this at their advantage by offering unique content (Godey *et al.* 2016), giving consumers a reason to talk and share more about their favorite brands. Hence, customer interaction via SM platforms is a powerful source for creating and maintaining a loyal customer base (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012; Kim and Ko, 2012).

With respect to in-store environment, customer service plays a key role for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs (Kim and Kim, 2014). This is achieved through unique store-level experience, where the customer receives personal attention (Shukla *et al.* 2016), contributing for customer satisfaction and subsequent brand loyalty (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Crewe *et al.* 2016; Stepień *et al.* 2016). However, the advancement of the Internet and change in consumer behavior triggered LFBs to transfer the shopping experience in the virtual world (Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Shamila, 2018). While this may seem a natural follow-up, it eludes the traditional purchase experience and customer-salesperson relationship (Osipova, 2015; Shukla *et al.* 2016). In this spirit, it is time for brands to leave the wrong assumption that luxury buyers will always prefer the traditional in-store environment, where they receive individual customer treatment (Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). The success of online ventures such as Yoox.com and Net-A-Porter (Shen *et al.* 2017) is indicative for the new trend in online purchase behavior. This implies that LFBs can increase customer engagement and subsequent brand loyalty through the establishment of trust, find ways to be helpful through the shopping experience and provide high quality online services (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Godey *et al.* 2016). Hereafter, SM is a valuable source for building brand loyalty, based on customizing the online services (Miguens and Vasguez, 2017). This also reinforces the importance of providing outstanding online consumer communication as part of ensuring memorable consumer experiences in order to *"exceed consumers' expectations"* (Boardman and McCormick, 2018, p. 24).

On the other hand, LFBs sell unique personal experience and a dream, which highlights the importance of traditional branded brick-and-mortar stores. This presents one of the defining characteristics of luxury. Yet, the contemporary consumer is less interested in traditional service quality and purchase experience as before (Shukla *et al.* 2016). Thus, the fame of digital luxury and e-commerce reinforce the importance of providing outstanding online retail consumer experiences (Hu and Quang, 2013). Importantly, the growing interest in Generation Y consumption habits for some causes the belief that there is a new purchase paradigm evident in the rise of luxury e-commerce (Miguens and Vasguez 2017; Cristini *et al.* 2017), whilst for others this consumer segment prefers the traditional CE (Donelly and Scaff, 2017). Consequently, the main task ahead of LFBs is to realize that consumers cannot be defined as purely online or offline (Gaillard, 2016). In many cases, luxury shoppers consult a brand website or SM channels, to decide on their offline purchase decision (Gaillard, 2016). Henceforth, branded websites and SM platforms can be used to enhance the consumer experience. It is brands' task to create an attractive and engaging brand content, that will enhance the exclusive brand image, drive customer purchase desire and nourish brand loyalty (Choudhury and Harrigan, 2014). Subsequently, it is imperative to understand the driving forces shaping Gen Y's motives to prefer online or offline buying experiences in order to provide this consumer segment with unforgettable buying experiences and construct effective attraction and retention strategies (Barwitz and Maas, 2018). In all, content and experiences are the necessary seal between offline and online channels pushing luxury brands to become experiential and SM experts at the same time (Franzé, 2017). The following section presents the role of SM for overcoming the last challenge: transmitting brands' DNA on SM.

2.7.4. Transmitting brand DNA on Social Media

Contemporary consumers are eager to learn more about brands' lifestyle, identity, craftmanship and values (Krepapa *et al*. 2016; Papandrea, 2019). They are also interested in the design process of these expensive luxurious items (Conlon, 2016). Hence, by finding innovative ways to tell more brand DNA, in the context of brand identity, helps for the development of *"deeper and more meaningful long-term relationships with customers"* (Haumann *et al.* 2014, p.78). However, this requires employing the perfect balance between keeping part of the mystery, while letting the customer to experience the soul of the brand (Conlon, 2016). In this context, the potential of Instagram was previously mentioned. Further on the discussion, it is suggested that the engaging content is due to the ability to communicate the unique brand identities. This can be achieved via

emphasizing on the heritage and the history behind the birth of the brand symbols, craftsmanship, inspiration behind product creation, product origin, presenting the designers, are examples of all effective creative content marketing on SM.

In all, creating desire, along with customer interaction and involvement, are the most significant drivers for engaging LFCs (Hollebeek *et al.* 2011; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Specifically, constructs such as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, visual presentation, customization and e-WOM contribute for boosting purchase intentions and for engaging consumers (Kim and Ko, 2012; Kapferer, 2015). Moreover, online brand-customer interaction, brand recognition and constant brand exposure elicit feelings of connection to the brand and are core pillars of brand loyalty (Choi *et al.* 2016; Godey *et al.* 2016; Kreapapa *et al.* 2016).

As evidence from academic literature on brand loyalty, including toward LFBs, and SM role for building brand loyalty toward LFBs indicated, existing research has covered valuable knowledge and insights into the role of brand loyalty in the luxury fashion domain. There is an exhaustive evidence about the significance of brand loyalty for companies that operate in the luxury fashion industry (Cheah *et al.* 2015; Crewe *et al.* 2016; Thakur and Kaur, 2016; Shen *et al.* 2017), demonstrating the usefulness of understanding its role in the luxury brand loyalty literature (Koronaki *et al.* 2018). However, the researcher foresaw the importance of understanding SM role for building brand loyalty, especially as *"in the current highly competitive marketing environment, to maximize long- term performance, consumers' future behavior or intentions to purchase is a key strategic asset that must be observed and cherished. To strengthen the bond between customer and brand, customer relationships are of prime importance. Therefore, use of social media for marketing communications seems to be the most apt medium for luxury fashion brands"* (Gautam and Sharma, 2017, p. 885). Moreover, whilst knowledge about Gen Y consumer behaviour in the luxury fashion domain is indisputable, interest in additional research inquiry is triggered by lack of clear conceptualization of Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). From this stance, interest in studying the role of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs among Gen Y LFCs was encouraged by identified gaps in academic literature. These are:

- *"Many people who are interested in Generation Y and their consumption behavior claim that Millenials are the most difficult group that marketers can attract and retain, which leads to discussions on brand loyalty of this generation"* (Yazici, 2016, p. 300)

- *"The topic of social media marketing and luxury brands will be an important one going forward. As a relatively new aspect of luxury brands' marketing mix, the topic is still evolving, though it remains clear that social media can be used to build brand image and enhance purchase intention"* (Ko *et al.* 2019, p. 412)

Based on the identified gaps in academic literature, the fourth research objective is: *Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media.* Finally, the shift in consumption patterns of contemporary Gen Y consumers, has demonstrated that the rise of "*digitalization of luxury*" (Rovai, 2018, p. 119) presents significant and valuable brand image building tool for LFBs (Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). The following section presents a literature review on Gen Y consumers.

2.8. Generation Y consumers

The section is initiated by illustrating the main age characteristics of this generational cohort, followed by a more detailed discussion about Gen Y consumers, role of LFBs in their lives, role of SM in Gen Y's lives, and theoretical background about their brand loyalty. The discussion is finalized by presenting the value of studying this consumer segment in the context of LFBs.

2.8.1. Who are Generation Y consumers?

Broadly, categorization of the birth dates for each generational cohort are classified as: Silent Generation or Swing Generation (1925-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1960), Generation X (1961-1981) and Gen Y. For others, Gen Y are born between 1981 and 1999 (Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011; Young and Hinesly, 2012). In their 20's and 30's (Yeoman and Beattie, 2006; Nadeem *et al.* 2015), some of Gen Y consumers are still in college while others are already established in the workforce (Giovannini *et al.* 2015). In order to provide a clear frame for the present study, Gen Y consumers are defined as those who are born between 1981-1999 (Bolton *et al.* 2013).

2.8.2. Raising Gen Y consumers

Gen Y consumers were raised by parents, who belong to the Baby Boomers generation (Yarrow and O'Donnell, 2009). These parents raised their kids by being an active part of their lives, striving to provide better opportunities for their kids than the ones they had (Cuffin, 2013; Lyons, 2016). Thus, whilst some refer to Gen Y as narcissistic, Gen Y

have very strong relationships with their parents, and families (McBeth, 2015; Ressel, 2016; Kane, 2017). This is why Gen Y is often referred as *"Peter Pan Generation"* (Bolton *et al.* 2013, p. 16), because they are reluctant to the opportunity to leave their parents' houses, getting married, or creating their own families, and being focused on career prospects (Purcell, 2015: Kane, 2017).

Another main difference between Gen Y and previous generations is that they were raised in parallel with the technological advancements that the world witnessed (Barton *et al.* 2012). They grew up in times of information transparency, dominated by technology that provide instant gratification (Bolton *et al.* 2013). They are often regarded as *"digital natives"* for they are used to early and frequent technology exposure (Yang *et al.* 2012). They are used to obtaining needed information right on the spot, being enabled by the launch of SM channels (Bandilli, 2015). Thus, the early exposure to technology and opportunity to stay connected significantly contributed to the social life of Gen Y consumers (Yang *et al.* 2012; Rovai, 2018), who love to be surrounded by family, friends, co-workers, and similar others (Barton *et al.* 2012). They are highly social and participate in various communities that help them discuss different topics and foster their sense of belongingness (Ledbetter, 2017). They also love sharing about their experiences or products they obtained on SM channels, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest (Barton *et al.* 2012; Fromm, 2017). Finally, Gen Y grew in stable economic environment, which was interrupted by the 2008 financial downturn (Lyons, 2016). The following section presents the key consumption characteristics of this generational cohort.

2.8.3. Role of luxury fashion brands among Gen Y consumers

Being torn between the pursuit of socially desirable image for uniqueness makes no exception for Gen Y consumers, for whom a plethora of research has recognized that whilst being highly individualistic, this consumer segment is also affected by their aspirational group (Fernandez, 2009; Francis *et al.* 2015). Even though Gen Y consumers demonstrate high self- confidence, they are also likely to opt for conformity to group norms (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012; Ressel, 2016). Eagerness to be accepted by their group and ability to demonstrate group belongingness is often achieved through the purchase of material goods, especially clothing (Chaney *et al.* 2017). Interestingly, it is exactly the positive impact on their self- confidence, which triggers contemporary young consumers to conform to group expectations (Fernandez, 2009).

The behavior of Gen Y consumers is defined as highly social. They perform their purchases collectively in groups and base their purchase decisions on peers' opinions (Bakewell *et al.* 2006; Giovannini *et al.* 2015). Previous studies also found that young consumers prefer to rely on information that is provided by their peers (Fernandez, 2009; Bolton *et al*. 2013). Moreover, for Gen Y peer recommendations lead to positive attitudes toward brand online presence and affective responses toward SM-brand activities (Nadeem *et al.* 2015). On one hand, this is largely driven by their skepticism in advertisement and any information coming from companies (Fernandez *et al.,* 2016). On the other hand, public consciousness has the power to shape brand attitudes because belongingness to a certain group gives consumers a sense of recognition (Tuškej *et al.* 2013). More so, some empirical investigations have further demonstrated that the opinions of friends who are perceived as fashion experts and, abreast of latest trends, have the power to shape people's brand attitudes and preferences (Mafini *et al*. 2014; Butcher *et al.* 2017). This holds especially true for the consumption of LFBs (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). The effect of friends/ peers' opinions and suggestions are multiplied in cases when the consumer has a strong relationship with the group (Pinheiro, 2008). Collectively, this discussion implies that peer recommendations do not only lead to positive brand attitudes (Nadeem *et al.* 2015), but also has the power to encourage purchase intent of LFBs (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017).

Nevertheless, consumers can experience a high level of pressure to conform (Goldsmith *et al*. 2010). Consequently, when consumers feel intimidated that their personal identities can be diluted by social norms, their intuition is to search for brands that help them differentiate from the commoners (Snyder and Fromkin, 1977; Butcher *et al.* 2017). In this vein, youth is the period for displaying one's personality via extensive personal possessions (Belk, 1988). Gen Y consumers want to be associated with brand image for a range of values (Lazarevic, 2012), such as presenting their own identities and public self-consciousness (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012; Giovannini *et al.* 2015). They are more akin to the value of self-concept and public image, looking for LFBs to express their identities (Ashraf *et al.* 2017). This is the reason that they tend to favor brands with strong brand identity and values (Priporas *et al*. 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). In this vein, LFBs, with their inherently exclusive attributes of uniqueness, exclusivity and strong brand image provide the perfect source for building one's identity and for self-presentation in the society (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Cristini *et al.* 2017). Essentially, Gen Y consumers perceive

personal style as a means to express their identities and to distinguish themselves through the brands they purchase (Khallouli and Gharbi, 2013; Butcher *et al*. 2017). In effect, their desire for distinctiveness, prompts young consumers' enthusiasm to conduct multiple store visits (Kokkoris and Kuhnen, 2013). This is done with the firm belief that that variety seeking will assist Gen Y consumers to disassociate themselves, from others, including their peers (Ross and Harradine, 2004). Herein, desire to disassociate oneself through the purchase and wear of different fashion articles or brands is a symbolic characteristic of Gen Y segment (Ruvio *et al.* 2008). With the idea of distinguishing themselves from the group, consumers can even stretch their buying behavior to the extent that they purchase voguish fashion items (Rajput *et al*. 2012). In the search for clothing to express their uniqueness may cause some consumers to mix and match clothing items from different apparel segments: luxury and fast fashion brands.

Mix and match

Gen Y are not representative for the richest of the rich (Truong, 2010). They still lack the financial ability to purchase luxury goods on a regular basis (Ressel, 2016). For this, they are also referred as HENRY ("High Earner, Nor Rich Yet") consumers (Mendes, 2016). However, this generational cohort is creative in finding ways to transform luxury from inaccessible to accessible. They do this by prioritizing expenditures: trading down on everyday commodities, because they want to have higher financial opportunities to spend money on products that offer them pleasurable feelings (Giovannini *et al*. 2015). Another way Gen Y consumers achieve the dream is by matching more affordable items with LFBs, for instance by purchasing the basics at Zara with a bag from Loius Vuitton (Cardamenis, 2015). In other words, if young consumers think they deserve a piece of nice clothing or a leather bag, the cost involved in this is worth in keeping a high profile (Giovannini *et al*. 2015; Mendes, 2016). Hence, by putting a limit on expenditures for everyday commodities or by mixing and matching fashion goods, Gen Y consumers lead their path in the luxury fashion world. Another pronounced characteristic of Gen Y LFCs is the perception of luxury as an experience.

Luxury as an experience

Despite the fact that Gen Y are often viewed as a cohort that is largely addicted to luxury brands, the drivers for luxury consumption may no longer be justified with consumer's need for prestige or status (Kradisching, 2015). Rather, in order for a product to be worth the investment, it must provide them with an experience (Gustafson, 2015). They avoid

spending money on just any product (Ressel, 2016). On the contrary, young consumers demonstrate preference to collect experiences rather than objects (Fromm, 2017). Luxury shopping is an experience and a main substance of the luxury success formula refers to the hedonic in-store experience (Naylor *et al.* 2008; Crewe, 2016). Therefore, ensuring an outstanding customer service that makes Gen Y consumers feel cherished and valued is a promising route for securing customer attraction and retention (Herhausen *et al*. 2015). Consequently, one-to-one communication and social-experiential aspects of the shopping environment (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017) are essential drivers for ensuring positive experiences among this consumer segment. Support is also found that Gen Y consumers' purchase attitudes towards LFBs are affected by emotional and symbolic values rather than utilitarian product features, influencing their preferences for in-store purchases (Valaei and Nikashemi, 2017). Besides, Gen Y LFCs are still in the years of career development and have not reached their peak earning years yet (Giovannini *et al,* 2015). Since luxury brands involve higher acquisition costs (Shukla and Purani, 2012), they must be certain in the brand choices they make. Henceforth, the choice of the in-store environment is also driven by the perception of lowered risk involved in the acquisition of LFBs (Ramadhoni *et al*. 2015; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). Another trend related to Gen Y consumers is the increased availability of LFBs.

Increased availability

Gen Y were raised in an environment, in which luxury has changed from being highly exclusive to accessible for wider consumer segment (Truong *et al.* 2008). Importantly, the product factor (high quality) plays an essential role in Gen Y's lives (Carter, 2017). To respond to this trend, big luxury designers trade down to offer *"mass prestige"* products at more accessible prices (Kradisching, 2015; Kapferer and Laurent, 2016; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). In some cases, this is achieved through *old luxury brand extensions* or via *co-branded step-down line extensions* with the purpose of establishing themselves in the evoked set of brands (Phau and Cheong, 2009). For Gen Y consumers, this implies that they have access to LFBs, at affordable price levels (Cardamenis, 2015). This ultimately benefits brands as *"the future of prestige"* (Galloway, 2010, p. 2) will reach a point when they will have the financial resources to purchase products from brands' ordinary lines, building a lifetime of loyalty (Cardamenis, 2015). Additionally, it was previously noted that there is an increase of online purchases from websites such as *Yoox.com* and *Net-A-Porter.com*. What was missed is that young consumers are used to increased availability (Derville and Kapferer, 2018). Moreover, Gen Y consumers place

high importance on their free time and look for opportunities that contribute for work/life balance (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Derville and Kapferer 2018). Thus, such shift is driven by the advancement of online buying experiences which provide this segment with the opportunity to obtain their favorite LFBs in a convenient manner (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Kradisching, 2015). Hence, the shift in luxury fashion e-commerce is driven by the increasing purchase power and expenditure of Gen Y consumers (Giovannini *et al.* 2015). Thus, besides in-store experience, it is also vital to provide a smooth transition of the in-store experience in online settings (Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017).

2.8.4. Role of Social Media in Gen Y's lives

Gen Y consumers turn to various social networks to stay updated with news and to acquire necessary brand information (Anon, 2015). More so, the ability offered by platforms such as Instagram where consumers share images with their favorite brands (DeMers, 2017), makes Gen Y a very influential segment. This is because they can leave comments and recommend brands on SNSs (Nadeem *et al.* 2015), with the clear consciousness that their post will reach people even outside their network (Barton *et al.* 2012) and impact others' attitudes and brand loyalty (Nadeem *et al.* 2015). Moreover, Gen Y consumers are more interested in engaging with companies and brands than previous generations (Hollebeek *et al.* 2014; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). They are used to the opportunity offered by SM to reach brands directly and they prefer to build relationships through SM (Gautam and Sharma, 2017). Thus, the chances of being directly connected with their customers, offers companies enhanced prospects to obtain deeper comprehension into consumers, attitudes and opinions.

Further, the increased popularity of digital platforms allows Gen Y consumers to display their identity not only offline but also in the SM world (Baron, 2015). For their highly visual content, SM platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, or Pinterest, are the perfect place to present one's identity with a large community (Faw, 2012). Gen Y are open to the opportunity to share various aspects of their lives with the broader community, regardless if this happens by posting a photo on Instagram or in the form of physically meeting up with friends (Ressel, 2016). Consumers also express their individuality, while at the same time they get a lot of *"likes"*. Similarly, to the way that conformity to group expectations triggers a sense of high-self-confidence (Fernandez, 2009), approval in the online environment is an important self-validation factor that can boost their self-

confidence (Baron, 2015). Therefore, as Gen Y identities are highly dependent on what they share and they value referral group feedback, SM platforms are used as a means to enhance individual's social capital (Christofides *et al.* 2009). Herein, this generational cohort is highly affected by exposure to peers' posted content and feedback about LFBs, which was also found to have direct implications for brand loyalty (Morra *et al.* 2016).

Furthermore, luxury desire symbolizes a dream for certain lifestyle through iconic brands (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012). Throughout the course of history luxury consistently fascinated the public. All the way from the Roman Empire 15th/16th century, through 17th century Sun King, 19th century Vanderbilts, to today's celebrity names such as Beyonce or Jennifer Aniston, luxury inspired feelings of admiration and desire for a magnificent lifestyle. In the contemporary society, this dream is fueled by celebrities. Celebrities have the power to trigger consumption desire often because they evoke a sense of worship and a world that the consumer likes to experience (Mendes, 2016). This implies that by being exposed to celebrities on SM, Gen Y consumers' behavior is inevitably affected, often resulting in the purchase of the same clothes (Silva *at al.* 2016). Overall, the discussion indicates that the increased interest in LFBs from this generation is a reason for brands to learn more about the impact of SM on Gen Y's consumer behavior. This is especially important as previous studies are explicit about the positive SM effect on boosting Gen Y brand loyalty toward LFBs (Morra *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). This aspect is discussed in detail in the preceding section.

2.8.5. Brand loyalty of Gen Y consumers

In terms of brand loyalty, there are conflicting views on Gen Y's tendency to be loyal. On one hand, it is suggested that it is challenging to capture their brand loyalty (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Babijtchouk *et al.* 2018) and demonstrate lower interest in developing brand loyalty (Godey *et al.* 2013). On the other hand, research claims that this generation is more loyal to LFBs compared to their parents (Selvarajah, 2018). The differences in views and perceptions regarding Gen Y loyalty is not fictional. Rather, there are evident reasons that explain this phenomenon.

First, they have access to an array of information about brands online and follow the latest fashion trends (Ressel, 2016; Selvarajah, 2018). Thus, they challenge conventional buying process by obtaining brand information from various SM platforms (Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). This suggests that they are more likely to switch among brands based on

obtained information, for instance based on perceived financial convenience (Panatano and Priporas, 2016). Second, being in their 20's and 30's (Yeoman and Beattie, 2006; Nadeem *et al.* 2015), their values are susceptible to change (Giovannini *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, Gen Y consumers perceive personal style as a means to express their identities and to distinguish themselves through the brands they purchase (Khallouli and Gharbi, 2013; Butcher *et al.* 2017). In effect, their desire for distinctiveness, prompts young consumers' enthusiasm to conduct multiple store visits (Kokkoris and Kuhnen, 2013). On the other hand, it is suggested that young consumers have strong propensity to demonstrate loyalty specifically towards brands, which are congruent to their personal style and to which they feel a strong connection (Grotts and Johnson, 2013; Priporas *et al.* 2015; Giovannini *et al.* 2015). With these issues in mind, the following section presents a review of the rationale for studying Gen Y LFCs.

2.8.6. The implications: why studying Gen Y consumers?

The discussion is approached by considering the latter three sections: challenges for LFBs, impact of SM, and Gen Y LFCs.

First, there is a reason for LFBs to be concerned about persisting their image. However, Gen Y consumers demonstrate positive attitudes toward SM marketing activities and expect LFBs to be active on SM (Gautam and Sharma, 2017). They also challenge conventional buying process by obtaining brand information from various SM platforms (Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017), which have the power to impact their brand attitudes and purchase behavior. Thus, brand image is no longer in the hands of LFBs (Verlato, 2018). Hence, Gen Y are brand conscious, brand educated, like to engage with brands and talk about their favorite brands both offline and on SM platforms (Kim and Lee, 2015; Kradisching, 2015). These facts emphasize the importance of obtaining better comprehension of how to target this promising future consumer group, by studying the online consumer habits (Nadeem *et al.* 2015) of a consumer segment for whom there is still lack of valid theoretical understanding, namely Gen Y LFCs from SEE.

Second, there is difference between SM availability and the distant approach of LFBs. Gen Y LFCs are the main *suspects* for this trend. They present a knowledgeable group and they are involved in fashion more than previous generations (Bhaduri and Stanforth,

2016). Moreover, they are in the years of building their personal style, being affected by fashion trends, exposure to celebrities and obtain fashion inspiration from SM platforms. They are also susceptible to interpersonal influence and they look for approval from their peers (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). Consequently, learning more about SM brand exposure in the context of the outlined aspects presents an interesting avenue for research among Gen Y consumers. This is especially valuable as the age of consumers influences brand attitudes, purchase motives, consumer behavior, and brand loyalty (Chaney *et al.* 2017; Verlato, 2018). Thus, this will help to gain insights for Gen Y behavioral traits of a selected sample from the SEE region. Apart from theoretical implications, this will also bring practitioner implications because Gen Y LFCs' habits in terms of SM usage and exposure to various influences will likely shape their consumption behavior in the years to come.

The third challenge posed to LFBs referred to traditional media and in-store allure versus SM. Throughout the literature review it was revealed that Gen Y consumers appreciate when LFBs put effort to create a unique content, which provides them a reason to talk and share about their favorite brands. Thus, SNS's seems a powerful source for creating and maintaining a loyal customer base (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012; Kim and Ko, 2012). To this end, through SM LFBs have the potential not only to provide valuable brand information to consumers, but also to build brand loyalty through the establishment of trust, being helpful with practical matters and provide high quality online services (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Godey *et al.* 2016). In this spirit, the need for further investigation is evidenced in published literature highlighting that knowledge about the impact of SM on Gen Y's brand loyalty is scarce (Salman *et al.* 2016; Ko *et al.* 2019).

However, the paradox that emerged is that SM eludes the traditional purchase experience and customer-salesperson relationships (Shukla *et al.* 2016). This was further augmented by the fact that most of Gen Y consumers prefer the traditional in-store environment (Kestenbaum, 2017). With these issues in mind, the research seeks to fulfil a gap addressed by scholars (Ruvio *et al.* 2008; Ciorena, 2013; Ciorena, 2014; Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016) by extending knowledge with a focus on Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region, by responding to the debate about Gen Y LFCs' preferences for buying experiences and how SM influenced Gen Y consumer behavior in the context of their choices for buying experiences.

The fourth challenge referred to persisting the brand *DNA* while responding to consumer needs. A key emphasis among academics is that brands need to capitalize on the shift in young luxury consumer behavior, by moving away from celebrating their own heritage towards celebrating consumer passions (Kapferer, 2015; Choi *et al.* 2016; Godey *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). This phenomenon is indicative for the influence of Gen Y consumers as key players in triggering fashion innovations (Beaudoin *et al.* 1998; Gustafson, 2015). This emphasizes the need for better comprehension of Gen Y consumers' values that will further enrich academic knowledge and provide valuable practical insights for balancing between brand DNA, SM presence and attracting and keeping the modern segment of Gen Y LFCs. Additionally, the discussion on Gen Y consumers brought two conflicting views, regarding their brand loyalty. For some, Gen Y consumers are loyal toward LFBs (Selvarajah, 2018). By contrast, more recent findings reveal that this generational cohort has lower brand loyalty towards LFBs (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). Thus, as emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty play a crucial role in luxury fashion (Thakur and Kaur, 2016), it is imperative to understand which factors contribute for the development of emotionally bonded and loyal customer base. Having profound knowledge of SM usage and SM exposure impact on Gen Y consumer behavior will help LFBs to create fans, followers, brand ambassadors (Verlato, 2018) and to inspire a lifetime of brand loyalty (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Salman *et al.* 2016). Conclusively, albeit with the sample limitations, research into Gen Y behavioral traits has imperative theoretical and managerial implications (Workman and Lee, 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015) for better understanding of Gen Y tendency to develop brand loyalty toward LFBs and understanding the role of SM in the interplay between brand loyalty and LFBs. Thus, the contradictory existing knowledge about Gen Y brand loyalty indicates that a desirable direction of the present research is to broaden the luxury brand loyalty literature by shedding on light Gen Y's reasons and motives for developing brand loyalty toward LFBs.

In this context, although previous studies paved the way toward a better comprehension of the invaluable role of Gen Y consumers for the prosperity of LFBs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Bhaduri and Stanfoth, 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017), it seems that there is lack of clear conceptualization in SEE region context. Even though it has been only recently that studies have started focusing on the luxury fashion market in the SEE region, the modern market of Gen Y LFCs has been left unattended. Notwithstanding a recent publication on Gen Y's preferences for the buying experience,

which has been carried in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Petra, 2016), it did not consider the luxury fashion market and there is a limited knowledge on Gen Y consumers in the context of the interplay between SM and LFBs for the development of brand loyalty. Thus, the research seeks to fulfil a gap addressed by scholars (Ruvio *et al.* 2008; Ciorena, 2013; Ciorena, 2014; Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016) by extending knowledge with a focus on the modern segment of LFCs in the SEE region. Based on these observations in the academic literature, it is imperative to highlight the fourth research objective of this study: *Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media.*

Apart from age, gender is also an important aspect in marketing studies, as both are concerned with understanding the consumer behavior (Rocha *et al.* 2005; Godey *et al.* 2016). Moreover, as the luxury market demonstrated a stable growth throughout the last years, *"[...] insights into marketing responses towards luxury brands as well as the role of gender in this relationship are very important"* (Sauer and Teichmann, 2013, p. 890). The following section discusses gender role in luxury consumer behavior and SM usage.

2.9. Gender role in consumer behavior

The following discussion presents current knowledge on gender shopping behavior, luxury fashion consumption and SM usage.

2.9.1. Gender consumer behavior

Satisfaction for female customers can be boosted via sense of reliability and empathy (Karatepe, 2011). By contrast, males value relational switching costs (Frank *et al.* 2014) and perceive recreational conscious shopping as rewarding (Jack and Powers, 2013). This consumer behavior is representative for consumers' need to derive inherent satisfaction from the shopping experience (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006). Whilst hedonic motives are also valuable benefit from the shopping experience, the focus is on completing the set task in a time and energy efficient manner (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006). Thus, previous studies have found that consumers who are involved in this shopping behavior experience satisfaction from the final result of shopping (namely purchasing the specific product), rather than the experience per se (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006).

Conversely, the link between expectation congruence and impulsive-careless shopping exerts higher power on female customers who perceive this shopping behavior as rewarding (Shukla *et al.* 2013). Expectation congruence stands for customer satisfaction as the result of customers' expectations and performance appraisal and impulsive-careless shopping represents a loss of control in consumer purchase behavior (Shukla *et al.* 2013). An outcome is 'betrayal' on the favorite brand (Thompson, 2013) through impulse purchase of material goods to fulfill experiential needs (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009; Segal and Podoshen, 2013). Consequently, scholars also cautioned that brand loyalty is contingent to customers' gender (Levy and Loken, 2015). Particularly, females' desire to be acknowledged on a more personal level drives favorable reaction towards personalized attention (Melnyk *et al.* 2009). While males' loyalty is dependent on perceived power and status (Levy and Loken, 2015), brand image, brand reputation and products' uniqueness have strong influence on females' loyalty (Frank *et al.* 2014). With these consumer characteristics in mind, the following section introduces a review on gender and luxury fashion consumption.

2.9.2. Gender and luxury fashion consumption

There is coherent pattern of gender differences in luxury consumer values (Roux *et al.* 2017). For instance, women's nature to boost their body appearance through self-verification of the self-concept triggers them to display luxury brands as a sign of uniqueness (Wang and Griskevicious, 2013). Choosing the right clothing, creating a personal style and public image are essential steps in the process of fashioning a social identity for women (Appleford, 2015). A plausible reason is that fabrics have a special place in women's hearts, being associated with positive emotions, feelings and memories (Batey, 2014). Females hold more positive attitudes and higher purchase intentions toward LFBs (Sauer and Teichmann, 2013). Nevertheless, growth in males' apparel market (Shabat, 2015) and males' increased demand in terms of customized clothing indicate increased fashion consciousness among male consumers (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009; Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2012).

A recent study reveals that male LFCs perceive LFBs as a means for self-expression and self-presentation (Räisänen *et al.* 2018). A possible explanation is that social situations trigger males' desire to engage in status consumption in order to fulfill their social needs (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Shamila, 2018; Räisänen *et al.* 2018). This suggestion finds support in previous studies which identified that a key distinguishing consumer

characteristic is that men are driven by life-enriching goals (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009). A core driver for males' luxury consumption is perceived brand exclusivity, an exquisite piece of art that helps the consumer to broadcast his status and stand out from the crowd (Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Roux *et al.* 2017). Moreover, it should be noted that compared to older generations, males who belong to Gen Y consumer segment demonstrate willingness to engage in shopping and experience higher enjoyment from the shopping experience (Otnes and McGrath, 2011; Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011). This theorization is also affirmed by a more recent study demonstrating that when it comes to luxury fashion purchases, the experiential aspect of the shopping experience is important for both genders (Kim and Lee, 2015). One possible explanation is that because of their age, young consumers have more free time and prefer to share this time in shopping environment with friends (Dunne and Lusch, 2008). Thus, despite well-defined gender consumer characteristics, younger male LFCs redefine the market by demonstrating consumption behavior, traditionally viewed as feminine *"to fit within today's masculine concepts"* (Shephard *et al.* 2016, p. 4).

Additionally, it was previously mentioned that peer recommendations have a significant impact on Gen Y's consumer behavior (Bakewell *et al.* 2006; Giovannini *et al.* 2015). Studies also found that the effect of peers' impact differs across genders. For example, it is noted that female LFCs have higher tendency to rely on peer recommendations, especially when their purchases involve online shopping (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008). By contrast, the same research found that male LFCs rely on their own purchase needs and instincts and make more efficient purchase decisions (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008). A more recent study found that peers' influence on the consumer behavior of Gen Y consumers is equally strong both among male and female consumers (Nadeem *et al.* 2015). Nevertheless, the fact that genders differ in their underlying luxury values and purchase motives cannot be ignored. In this context, existing literature demonstrates gender differences in SM consumer behavior.

2.9.3. Gender usage of Social Media

Perception of message appeal is dependent on the specific gender of consumers (Folse *et al.* 2012). Endorsing to their interdependent nature (Melnyk *et al.* 2009), women seek interpersonal connectivity, self-discovery and maintaining their existing relationships on SM (Porter *et al.* 2012; Haferkamp and Papadakis, 2012). Therefore, they have lower

concern for risk-avoidance and image-impairment when they should disseminate Negative Word of Mouth (NWOM) to their closest friends (Zhang *et al.* 2013b). At the same time, increased satisfaction levels and strong brand commitment encourage females to transmit Positive Word of Mouth (PWOM) (Jack and Powers, 2013; Raïes and Perret, 2013; Belás *et al.* 2015). This explains why women greatly outnumber males in repurchase intentions based on service provider and personnel Word of Mouth (WOM) (Cho and Rutherford, 2011). By contrast, male consumers are concerned with the functional product appeals (Levy and Loken, 2015). Therefore, development of bonds on the individual level is a less attractive 'ingredient' for men (Porter *et al.* 2012). Further, relationship maintenance, trust and social ties present the core stone of females' online interaction, while males look after achieving control and have lower concern for belongingness in terms of communicating their product/ brand experiences and looking for online product reviews (Chai *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013). Hereafter, compared to males' pragmatic purchases, females are more emotional, use the Internet for social support, and place higher value on e-WOM (Fan and Miao, 2012; Folse *et al.* 2012).

Additionally, in order to obtain full comprehension of contemporary luxury fashion consumer, studies also emphasize the importance of understanding both age and gender differences (Sauer and Teichman, 2013; Lee and Workman, 2015; Schade *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). In this vein, luxury fashion has been traditionally associated with female consumers (Jung and Shen, 2011; Roux *et al.* 2017). On the other hand, given males' increased fashion consciousness (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009; Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011; Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2012; Räisänen *et al.* 2018), scholars acknowledge gender as a key factor in understanding luxury consumer behavior (Godey *et al.* 2016). However, despite the increased academic interest in gender differences in luxury fashion consumption (Erlandsson *et al.* 2013; Levy and Loken, 2015; Roux *et al.* 2017), research treats gender as a moderating variable rather than viewing it as a matter of theoretical investigation (Appleford, 2015). Consequently, studies emphasize the importance of understanding gender differences in consumer behavior (Kim and Lee, 2015; Levy and Loken, 2015), and brand loyalty toward luxury fashion brands (Sauer and Teichmann, 2013; Hur *et al.* 2014). Based on these observations, as noted before, the second research objective is: *Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers.*

Moreover, inquiries into gender differences in luxury fashion consumption are due not only to Gen Y consumers' experience with LFBs at younger age (Giovannini *et al.* 2015), but also because of the implications of SM usage and exposure on their consumer behavior (Verlato, 2018). A large body of literature recognizes gender differences in online behavior (Chai *et al.* 2012; Porter *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013; Zhang *et al.* 2013b; Lim *et al.* 2014). Thus, scholars address the need for better understanding of gender as an influential factor that has behavioral implications on consumers' purchase behavior, perception of SM marketing activities and the development of brand loyalty in the luxury fashion domain (Gautam and Sharma, 2017). Based on these observations, emerging gaps in academic literature refer to:

- *"[...] empirical research on Generation Y, which tends to be an ideal group to focus on in online settings, seems to be scarce. Therefore, it is vital to study the online and social networking patterns of Generation Y, because these behaviors are likely to vary in different contexts, and also across genders [...] marketing literature highlighting the shrinking Internet gender gap is scarce, so the role of gender deserves more attention"* (Nadeem *et al.* 2015, pp. 432-440)

- *"More research is needed to better understand generational differences between male and female shopping behaviors and shopping channel choice [...]"* (Shephard *et al.* 2016, pp. 5-15)

Reflecting on these gaps, the third research objective is: *Investigate gender differences in online consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers.*

Finally, the economic crisis forced a shift in consumer lifestyles, which was also evident in the launch of *genderless* clothing items targeting consumers who do not want to cater to specific gender roles (Amed and Berg, 2017). Furthermore, regardless of the momentary slowdown, slower growth, and regional differences, the luxury fashion market currently experiences sufficient growing rates (Kapferer and Florence, 2018). Thus, it is noteworthy to identify the challenges caused by the financial downturn and the importance of studying luxury fashion brands in the context of the past economic crisis.

2.10. Economic crisis

The 2008 financial crisis brought significant panic among consumers and industries. The turbulent economic events were one of the worst that the world has experienced in decades. However, there were some companies that stood steady in the face of the economic downturn (Kraj, 2015). This is due to the fact that economic recovery reaches brands in a different way because of new trends in consumer behavior as a result from the crisis (Piercy *et al.* 2010). Nevertheless, LFBs are not completely immune to the financial conditions (Kraj, 2015). Consequently, *figure 2:2* illustrates the main challenges caused by the past economic crisis, followed by a discussion on each of these aspects. The figure was constructed from: Noble and Schewe (2003), Okonkwo (2009), Li (2015), Chitrakorn (2015), Giovannini *et al.* (2015), Ellison (2016), Godey *et al*. (2016) Chaney *et al.* (2017), and Arienti (2017).

Figure 2:2: Challenges emerging from the economic crisis

First, the implications of the economic crisis on a global scale is that consumers are not as confident as before (Ellison, 2016). The post-crisis effect on consumer behavior is undeniable: consumers are more selective and demanding and less predictable in their brand and purchase choices (Amed and Berg, 2016). In effect, the most challenging task for LFBs is convincing consumers to buy something they already have, a piece of art that offers the best value (Gregory, 2014). Thereafter, the importance of *'impulse'* is a key component in luxury branding, (Li, 2015; Wells, 2017). Moreover, one of the biggest challenges for LFBs to unlock their potential is by targeting Gen Y consumers, while at the same time they retain older consumers (Ellison, 2016). This consumer group (i.e. Gen Y) is brought into the discussion because: a) they are the focus of the research and b) this

generation is of prime importance for luxury fashion brands, especially for the future years to come. As some of them are already established in the workforce (Giovannini *et al.* 2015), supposedly the crisis had an impact on their purchase habits. Moreover, a persistent view among scholars is that the driving forces shaping consumption behavior can be significantly influenced by certain events, triggering consumers to embrace LFBs' ability elevate their societal positions (Jones, 2016). Thus, the theoretical considerations of the research lie in improving our understanding of how such events as the economic crisis has relevance to the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs (Noble and Schewe, 2003; Godey *et al*. 2016; Chaney *et al.* 2017, p. 186).

Second, another pronounced trend is that the economic instability made the difference between true luxury (Chanel, Versace, Armani, Dior) and affordable luxury (Michael Kors) more visible. In effect, this leads to the establishment of affordable luxury companies such as Marc Jacobs, Kate Spade, Michael Kors, and Tory Burch (Li, 2015; Arienti, 2017). More so, this market is forecasted to grow with €150 billion until 2021 (Boston Consulting Group, 2016; Arienti, 2017). *The reason?* Luxury dreams are a crave, a desire for exceptional lifestyle (Okonkwo, 2009; Kapferer, 2015). Accessible LFBs appeal to consumers both through economic and visual stimuli. Nevertheless, these brands are not about design and craftsmanship (Chitrakorn, 2015). They are about implementing novel pricing strategies that speak to the younger consumer generations (Chitrakorn, 2015). Thus, a key challenge that derives from the economic crisis is to respond to the new market structure (new fashion brands) whilst protecting the symbolic capital and prestige.

Third, the luxury fashion industry is threatened by the increasing promotional selling environment (Arienti, 2017). Consumers become smart enough to seek for the best offer online (Deloitte, 2016; Pantano and Priporas, 2016). In other words, consumers buy less on full price, by taking an advantage of sales and promotions (Amed and Berg, 2016). Closely related to the latter two challenges is that the economic crisis caused another shift in consumer behavior: the rise of online sales (D'Arpizio *et al.* 2016; Arienti, 2017). This is further challenged by the birth of websites offering second-hand luxury (Kapferer, 2018). Such a trend can be attributed to the fact that such multi-brand websites: a) offer LFBs from a wide price and product spectrum, b) they often release promotional and sales campaigns that can be hardly ignored by the consumer, and c) multi-brand online stores cannot be controlled by LFBs (Kapferer, 2018). Moreover, the ability to meet market

demand in a rapid manner causes another challenge. Namely, the process of designing an exquisite piece of clothing involves a sophisticated and complex supply chain, where a product can pass through different designers, which puts a pressure on designing high quality fashion products (Conlon, 2016). Hereafter, given the presented challenges (sales culture, online sales, online multi-brand stores, fast market changes) LFBs should respond to the new market scenario, be adequate to the new trends in consumer behavior, whilst finding creative ways to persist their luxury cachet.

Finally, the fourth challenge refers to the uncertainty caused by events such as the election of the US president, and terrorist attacks (Ellison, 2016; Paton, 2017). Even though these events are not directly related to the financial crisis, they also have an impact on consumer behavior (Paton, 2017). On one hand, the fear of terrorist attacks keeps consumers away from certain shopping areas, *i.e. Paris, London* (Amed and Berg, 2016). On the other hand, the acquisition of LFBs involves a great degree of emotions, but if consumers become more accustomed to uncertainty, this will have a negative impact on their purchase intentions (Amed and Berg, 2016). Henceforth, another challenge ahead of LFBs is to understand the consumers' mindset as each generation experiences economic difficulties in a different way and this would have impact on their future consumption behavior (Noble and Schewe, 2003; Godey *et al.* 2016; Chaney *et al.* 2017). Overall, the luxury fashion industry can be defined as challenging, changing and uncertain (Amed and Berg, 2016). However, there are several reasons, driving the notion that even though LFBs were affected by the crisis, there is a promising future ahead of them, which is worth further investigation. This theorization is explored in detail in the following section.

2.10.1. Rationale for studying the link between luxury and the economic crisis

First, one of the main reasons for the flourishing performance of LFBs in difficult economic times is rooted in the sociological perspective. While LFCs eliminated discretionary spending, they persisted their shopping habits of purchasing luxury goods (Lockrem, 2013; Jenkins, 2014). The purchase and wear of designer label means status (Dubois and Peternault, 1995) and social recognition (Sung *et al.* 2015; Stepień *et al.* 2016). Given the imbalanced economic recovery, the fear of the Great Recession persists at the forefront of consumer minds (Jenkins, 2014). Thus, the show-off effect and ability

to demonstrate prestige and present oneself as successful (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) seems more effective in times of nation-wide financial crisis (Jones, 2016). In effect, these events have encouraged the importance of studying brand loyalty in greater depth, namely understand why and how whilst consumer cut from their expenses, they persist their shopping habits toward LFBs (Godey *et al.* 2016).

Second, the impact of the crisis on luxury performance across product categories is different (Amed and Berg, 2016). Specifically, the luxury fashion sector, the *"core of the core"* (Shea, 2013) outperforms other luxury product categories (Miller and Mills, 2012). It demonstrates a significant resilience in the face of the tough economic times, and it is one of the key value-contributing sectors for the world economy (Amed and Berg, 2016). There are various reasons that contribute for this performance. On one hand, it can be attributed to the *20%* increase in luxury consumer expenditure (Boston Consulting Group, 2017). On the other side, looking at different consumer segments (true luxury consumers and new luxury consumers), both segments demonstrated an increase in their expenditures (Willersdorf, 2018). Furthermore, while affordable luxury may seem as a threat to true luxury companies, it is exactly this brand segment that is *"guilty"* for the industry performance. Precisely, more than half of the LFC segment shifted from LFBs to affordable fashion brands (Willersdorf, 2018). However, the key value of true LFBs is that they have great heritage, a story behind the brand, and stronger brand image (Kapferer, 1997; Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Dubois *et al.* 2001; Dion and Arnould, 2011). By contrast, even though affordable luxury brands experience a significant growth and success, their fame can have an expiration date (Chitrakorn, 2015). Consequently, the existence of both true and affordable luxury creates a confusion about true consumer values. However, as this research is interested in Gen Y LFCs, their proneness to purchase such luxury fashion items cannot, and should not, be ignored. Thus, the future of LFBs is dependent on their ability to balance between consumer values that shape Gen Y consumer behavior: personal and interpersonal values (Kapferer and Bastein, 2009). Finding the right balance can differ among countries where LFBs are traditionally produced and purchased (Corbellini and Saviolo, 2009), as opposed to countries where luxury presents a new occurrence (Kapferer and Bastein, 2009).

Third, throughout the literature review it was revealed that SM has a positive impact on Gen Y LFCs' consumer behavior (Kim and Ko, 2012), customer engagement (Kim and Ko, 2012; Kapferer and Florence, 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017), and brand loyalty

(Kim, 2012; Kapferer, 2015), and increasing customer retention (Judson *et al.* 2012; Zhang *et al.* 2013a). Whilst online purchases are taking the fashion industry by storm, the emergence of digital platforms also urged LFBs to discover innovative ways to communicate and engage Gen Y LFCs (Amed and Berg, 2016). Still, traditional in-store environment and personal interaction remain important aspects for consumers (Kestenmbaum, 2017). Thus, ability to understand drivers for luxury consumption presents an uppermost important task, especially as the turbulent economic times might have an impact on consumers' choices of online versus offline buying experiences and the values, they search for in the shopping experiences.

The final point refers to the growing consumer power of Gen Y segment (Amed and Berg, 2016). Notably, regardless of the past economic crisis they remain loyal toward LFBs (Lodes and Buff, 2009), by finding novel ways to save from less expensive fashion items (Cardamenis, 2015). Moreover, as they grow old, young consumers become more sophisticated in the product attributes they look for when choosing LFBs (Soh and Gu, 2017). Henceforth, the luxury fashion sector experiences a great flux, caused by the growing power of Gen Y, digital innovations, ability to build one's identity through mix and match of clothing items, increased availability of luxury, and the dilemma between in-store buying experience versus online buying experience (Rein, 2016; Pantano and Priporas, 2016; Paton, 2017).As a result, the effect of these factors makes the study of Gen Y LFCs even more important *"[...] especially in the slow economic environment"* (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Acton, 2017). That being said, the following section presents available knowledge on consumer behavior in the SEE region.

2.11. Consumer behavior in South East Europe

The discussion is illustrated by a table, establishing a link between current knowledge on the impact of the past economic crisis and consumer behavior in SEE.

Table 2:3: Economic crisis and consumers in South-East Europe

Economic crisis – effect on luxury consumer behavior	Characteristics identified as typical for luxury consumers in SEE
Purchase of luxury for status, social recognition and prestige (more effective in tough economic times)	– **'wave' of new luxury consumers** who have experienced poverty and times of hardship (Mehmedovic and Agic, 2015; Kapferer and Bastein, 2009; Kapferer, 2015) value of *'loud luxury'* (visible brand logo for fashion brands)*: associated with high status and achievement (Han *et al.* 2010,

	p. 26) -look for opportunities to publicly demonstrate their social status (Kapferer, 2015)
Growth of **online sales and search for brand-related information**	-**active Internet users:** Romania 73,8%; Bulgaria 66,7%; Greece 70,3% (Internet World Stats, 2019) -consumers' brand-based choice: rooted on personal or SM-based recommendations (Priporas *et al.* 2015).
Traditional in-store **environment**	Consumers visit luxury stores for individual consumer treatment (Chadha and Husband, 2006; Husic and Ostapenko, 2010)
Affordable luxury/ true luxury	-effect of economic downturn: increased number of counterfeit purchases in Romania and Greece (Chiriac, 2013; Priporas *et al.* 2015) -consumer segment that stays truly loyal to their favorite luxury brands (Priporas *et al.* 2015)

As it appears from the table, there are similar consumer characteristics to what academic and practitioner research acknowledge as implications of the past economic crisis and consumer behavior in SEE. Even though the three countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece) are not emblematic for high quality of life (Mehmedovic and Agic, 2015), it is noteworthy to recognize that the fall of the communism is a main driver for growth of consumers' income and personal capital. Consequently, being representative for the *new wave* of luxury consumers (Kapferer and Bastein, 2009; Kapferer, 2015), increased desire for luxury is driven by materialistic values and desire to display symbols of social status. In other words, motives for luxury consumption in SEE are based on desire for a celebrity lifestyle that fits into certain elite social class group (Husic and Ostapenko, 2010). In this vein, consumers in Western cultures value the private meaning of luxury consumption (Wong and Ahuvia,1998). By contrast, consumers who have been recently introduced to luxury brands are interested in the brands' status, causing myopia to see the story that stays behind the brand (Okonkwo, 2010). These clients are more likely to perceive luxury as a source to climb the social ramp (Kapferer, 2015) and show off with their possessions (Stepieñ *et al.* 2016). Extending on previous findings, it would be fair to regard luxury fashion consumption motives in SEE as the Balkan syndrome.

However, as previously noted, Gen Y consumers differ from their parents in that they are exposed to luxury possessions at younger age (Shea, 2013). Yet, they also pay attention to public image (Kapferer and Bastein, 2012). Comparison with another country, which has gained significant attention from scholars and practitioners, China, shows that young

LFCs prefer more subtle, sophisticated styles (Deloitte, 2016). Although it is regarded as an emerging luxury market, brands such as LV and Gucci are perceived as less appealing, especially LV image as a *"brand for secretaries"*, and consumers prefer more exclusive brands such as Channel and Bottega Veneta (Willett, 2015). For example, Chinese consumers show high self-monitoring, and they use luxury goods to conform in terms of their social identity (Zhan and He, 2012). In this context, a cross-national study reveals that fashion consciousness in Bulgaria is closely linked to conformity to society values (Manrai *et al.* 2001). Overall, in EE countries men can freely convey their identities via clothing, while females need to comply to society expectations (Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2012).

In this context, research in Romania highlights the need to understand gender differences among luxury consumers (Moisescu, 2009). However, the only study the sheds some light on gender differences was conducted in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Petra, 2016). This example is brought into the discussion because, similarly to Bulgaria and Romania, it is representative for countries which experienced communism, evident in the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Specifically, the study showed that when it concerns the choice between online versus offline shopping female consumers perform their research and final purchases in the offline environment and they have several favorite stores where they make their purchases (Petra, 2016). By contrast, males were found to prefer the digital universe both for their research and final purchases, prefer well-known stores, where they can be sure of the product quality, and were defined as *"brand addicted"*, namely exerting higher loyalty levels (Petra, 2016, p. 47). Overall, the same study found that young consumers find the shopping experience as a fun, pleasurable and leisure activity (Petra, 2016). Thus, it is interesting to explore how existing knowledge is pertinent to the phenomenon under investigation, with a focus on three SEE countries: Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. Specifically, the study is interested in the topical issue of Gen Y LFCs, how their consumer behavior differs among male and female consumers and the implications of SM on their consumer behavior and brand loyalty. Finally, given the economic situation in each of the countries part of the research, LFBs are available to relatively limited number of consumers. Thus, as this research is interested in the impact of the 2008 economic crisis in SEE, the following section presents valuable information regarding consumer behavior of LFCs in the selected countries.

2.11.1. Economic crisis in South East Europe

Despite the challenging economic times, forecasts indicate that between 2018-2022 the sales of luxury apparel goods in Bulgaria will grow with 9,7% (Statista, 2017). From being the third largest channel in 2019, by 2022 the luxury fashion segment will achieve the highest sales in the country (Conlumino, 2015; Statista, 2017). The economic instability resulted in increased counterfeit purchases in Romania and Greece (Chiriac, 2013; Priporas *et al.* 2015).

With respect to Romania, since 2016 the economy shows signs of recovery (Statista, 2019). By 2017 it achieved the highest growth rate in the EU, reaching 5,7% in the second half (Gillet, 2017). Yet, given the economic downturn LFBs reconsidered their targeting strategies. Instead of targeting the 'ultra-rich' consumers, brands pay significant attention to the upper middle class (Anon, 2015). The fact that luxury fashion brands such as Dolve & Gabanna, Gucci, Burberry, Valentino and Roberto Cavalli survived throughout the economic crisis (Anon, 2015) implies the luxury fashion market has a promising future ahead. Another plausible reason is society pressure for certain appearance and Gen Y perception of luxury as a sign of success, high standards, expression of self-esteem and self-confidence (Zaharia and Zaharia, 2015). In effect, the luxury fashion market revenue is expected to grow from 3,3% in 2018 to 3,9% in 2020 (Lu, 2017).

Reports demonstrate Greece is the most affected by the economic crisis. While in 2015 and 2016 the luxury fashion market was defined by stability, with 1,2% estimated growth in the two-years period (Conlumino, 2015), industry analysis reveals that the luxury fashion market will grow with slower rate as opposed to Bulgaria and Romania. Specifically, future forecasts indicate negative growth 3,316% in 2018 to 3,3582% in 2020 (Lu, 2017). Although the landscape for the Greek luxury fashion market does not seem promising, the luxury goods sector (clothing footwear, accessories) is expected to be the second largest in the group of specialist retailers by 2020, with 19,5% market share (Conlumino, 2015). Moreover, there is a shift in consumer behavior from purchasing mass produced apparel and made in China towards authentic, craft made apparel items (Coghlan, 2017). Thus, whilst the economic crisis forced some consumers to turn to counterfeits, there is still a consumer segment that stays truly loyal to their favorite LFBs (Priporas *et al.* 2015). Conclusively, financial data demonstrates that while the economic crisis impact is undeniable, economic forecasts for Bulgaria and Romania reveal positive outlook for the period 2020-2022 (Conlumino, 2015; Lu, 2017; Statista, 2017). For

Romania this may be attributed to the emergence of a new luxury consumer class (upper middle class), represented by Gen Y consumers (Anon, 2015). Additionally, there is still a consumer segment in Greece, which stays truly loyal to their favorite LFBs and the shift in consumer preferences for authentic, handmade apparel products (Priporas *et al.* 2015; Coghlan, 2017).

Further, even though there is extant evidence about the consumption patterns of young Chinese luxury fashion consumers as an emerging market (Jung and Shen, 2011; Liu *et al.* 2016; Rovai, 2018), recent publications are cautious to the fact that the area of understanding *"[...] how young men and women in emerging markets use brand prominence for conspicuous consumption remains unexplored"* (Räisänen *et al.* 2018). A persistent view among scholars is that the driving forces shaping consumption behaviour can be significantly influenced by certain events, triggering consumers to embrace LFBs' ability elevate their societal positions (Jones, 2016). Thus, the theoretical considerations of the research lie in improving our understanding of how such events as the economic crisis has relevance to the consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al.* 2016). Additionally, despite scholars' recognition that *"[...] experiencing a major economic crisis or unemployment period, for example, will influence a generation's values, and thus its consumption behaviour"* (Noble and Schewe, 2003; Chaney *et al.* 2017, p. 186), academic literature on the effects of the 2008 financial collapse in the context of SEE is in fact scarce. More so, to the best of researcher's knowledge, most studies focus on luxury consumer behavior in SEE, consumer satisfaction, motives, values and brand loyalty in Romania (Moisescu, 2009; Ciornea, 2013; Ciorena, 2014; Diaconu, 2015; Zaharia and Zaharia, 2015; Bezzaonia and Joanta, 2016), counterfeit purchases in Romania (Chiriac, 2013), counterfeit purchases or luxury fashion retailers' perspective in Greece (Perry and Kyriakaki, 2014; Priporas *et al.* 2015) or are focused on Western Balkan countries (Husic and Ostapenko, 2010; Mehmedovic and Agic, 2015; Petra, 2016).

A case in point are luxury consumers in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. Consumers in these countries represent a market with common lifestyles and histories (Vasileva and Ivanova, 2012). They have commonalities in terms of being ruled by communist/ socialist parties (Ranova, 2006; Ciornea, 2014) until the years of 1989-1991. The fall of the communism brought new opportunities for trade and business, which also opened the doors to the luxury fashion world. Although consumers in these three countries cannot be

identified as a lucrative market per se, identifying common features among consumers on a regional level is valuable for providing insights into local consumer behavior (Mehmedovic and Agic, 2015). Henceforth, being raised in post- communist countries, Gen Y consumers are affected by social, historical and cultural events. Thus, Gen Y's consumer behavior has been regarded as different to the rest of Europe. Although Greece does not share the same past (being ruled by communist party), being considered a mature market (Arienti, 2019), the development of the luxury fashion market in the country owes to Gen Y LFCs as a rising consumer segment, who are also famous for their high levels of fashion consciousness (Perry and Kyriakaki, 2014). Thus, research on a regional level would provide valuable implications for marketing practitioners because apart from Croatia, these are the only countries in the South-East European region which have a membership in the European Union. Therefore, identifying differences/ similarities among the selected countries will provide insightful knowledge for luxury fashion marketers looking forward to expanding brand presence and attract local Gen Y customers. Building on the latter discussion, the main gaps identified in academic literature are:

- *"With its large population and growing purchase power, this market segment is of strategic importance to the luxury market, especially in the slow economic environment. As members of Generation Y enter their prime earning years, retailers and other members of the luxury market must revise their marketing strategies to cater to these consumers' needs and behavior patterns. Successful strategies may encourage a lifetime of loyalty to a brand"* (Giovannini *et al.* 2015, pp. 35-36)

- *"[...] experiencing a major economic crisis or unemployment period, for example, will influence a generation's values (Noble and Schewe, 2003), and thus its consumption behavior. Since the notion of generation describes groups of people who have experienced similar historical, social, cultural, political, and economic events (Mannheim, 1952), it would be interesting to link significant events witnessed by a given generation to its behavior"* (Chaney *et al.* 2017, p. 186)

Based on the discussion about the economic crisis, and SEE, the fifth and last research objective is: *Explore Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in SEE given the past economic crisis.*

2.12. Conclusion to the chapter

The section presents a summary of the literature review. Its purpose is to provide the reader with a review on the different aspects that were discussed throughout the literature review. It is illustrated with a table that presents the conceptual background to the research.

Table 2:4: Summary of the proposed research

Who?
Generation Y males and females
What?
-luxury fashion/clothing -both terms are viewed as a single entity, as consumers do not differentiate them (Rocha *et al.* 2005)
Which aspects?
-luxury consumer behaviour -Social Media impact on brand loyalty
Context
Economic crisis
Social Media platforms
brands' websites, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest; e-commerce websites (i.e. Net-A-Porter) -Social Media terminology: blogs, Web 2.0; Social Networking sites (Ngai *et al.* 2015)
Where
Bulgaria, Romania, Greece

As depicted in *table 2:4*, the research seeks to understand Gen Y's consumer behavior of LFCs from the SEE region. A central aspect of the research is to uncover Gen Y's perceptions toward LFBs and behavioral patterns of an under-researched LFC segment in SEE. They key focus is also to arrive at theoretical implications for expanding the current knowledge in the luxury fashion domain and to improve the understanding of SM role for the development of brand loyalty among Gen Y male and female LFCs. This was achieved by recruiting Gen Y LFCs who reside in countries in SEE: Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. This is further augmented by taking into consideration how certain events, as the economic crisis, influence the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs within a regional context. With these in mind, the research will make an attempt to contribute to the luxury brand loyalty literature. As illustrated, the essence of the research tackles upon gaps, which as illustrated in chapter 3, can be fulfilled by employing an interpretative approach toward the research inquiry.

The literature chapter has contributed to better understanding of the role of brand loyalty and SM toward LFBs. The chapter presented the theoretical background of the research. Focus was placed on providing the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the luxury concept, followed by a review of the evolution of luxury fashion in order to establish the contextual basis of the research. Next, focus was placed on luxury consumer values, and the value of brand loyalty, with an emphasis on LFBs. The chapter also addressed the significance of SM for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs. Following the central review of SM, the next section focused on Gen Y consumers as a central point of the research. Attention was also paid on the gender of LFCs as a subject of theoretical inquiry. Finally, the chapter put forward the theoretical considerations related to the impact of the economic crisis on the consumer behavior of LFCs, by introducing the reader to the current pool of knowledge about consumption patterns of Gen Y LFCs in SEE. That being said, the final section presents the need for further research.

2.13. The need for further research

The discussion is illustrated by a table that depicts the main areas of focus in previous studies, identified gaps in literature and proposed research objectives.

Table 2:5: Need for further research

Existing research	Gap	Objective
-studies are focused on Western countries (Zhang and Kim, 2013) or in emerging markets such as China (Jung and Shen, 2011; Liu *et al.* 2016; Rovai, 2018) -most studies focus on luxury consumer behavior, consumer satisfaction, motives, values and brand loyalty in Romania (Moisescu, 2009; Ciornea, 2013; Ciorena, 2014; Diaconu, 2015; Zaharia and Zaharia, 2015; Bezzaonia and Joanta, 2016), counterfeit purchases in Romania (Chiriac, 2013), counterfeit purchases or luxury fashion retailers' perspective in Greece (Perry and Kyriakaki, 2014; Priporas *et al.* 2015), are focused on Western Balkan countries, or countries from Central Europe (Husic and Ostapenko, 2010; Mehmedovic and Agic, 2015; Petra, 2016)	*"It is conceivable that age not only moderates motives for luxury consumption but also the actual perception of what luxury constitutes"* (Schade *et al.* 2016, p. 320) *"Understanding how consumers in a wide variety of countries may conceptualize luxury differently is an important starting point and a relevant consideration in the formation of a definition of luxury brands"* (Ko *et al.* 2019, p. 412)	Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands
- increased consumption from Gen Y consumers and their role as a valuable future market for luxury fashion brands (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Kapferer and Laurent 2016; Butcher *et al.* 2017). Whilst consumer values historically received a significant attention in the academic literature, the study picks up one the trend of understanding Gen Y LFCs' consumer values (Butcher *et al.* 2017).	-despite the large body of literature, much is yet to be learned about the impact of gender (Sauer and Teichman, 2013; Levy and Loken, 2015) *As shopping behaviours change, it becomes increasingly important to understand the mechanisms of change […] Male and female consumer behaviors continue to change with each generation and are impacted by changes within society. More research is needed to better understand generational differences between male and female shopping behaviors and shopping channel choice"* (Shephard *et al.* 2016, pp. 5-15) *[…] the traditional gender gap is diminishing. This trend questions the origins and motives of gender differences in luxury consumption*	Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers

	(Roux *et al.* 2017, p. 102) *"[...] differences in motivation for luxury consumption between product and service categories, by gender, and by culture, is in need of additional study [...] Future research that investigates what consumer values or motivations to consume are most impactful in luxury consumption would also be valuable"* (Ko *et al.* 2019, pp.411-412)	
-in the area of digital innovations, the discussion about Gen Y consumers cannot be considered complete without acknowledging their affection to SM (Barton *et al.* 2012; Bolton *et al.* 2013; Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Baron, 2015; Cardamenis, 2015; DeMers, 2017) - studies in Romania identified the need for further research (Moisescu, 2009; Ciornea, 2013) - increase in SM usage and browsing activities by male luxury fashion consumers is also a clear evidence for the need to understand Gen Y online SM behavior (Otnes and McGrath, 2011)	*"[...] empirical research on Generation Y, which tends to be an ideal group to focus on in online settings, seems to be scarce. Therefore, it is vital to study the online and social networking patterns of Generation Y, because these behaviors are likely to vary in different contexts, and also across genders [...] marketing literature highlighting the shrinking Internet gender gap is scarce, so the role of gender deserves more attention"* (Nadeem *et al.* 2015, pp. 432-440) *More research is needed to better understand generational differences between male and female shopping behaviors and shopping channel choice [...]* (Shephard *et al.* 2016, pp. 5-15)	Investigate gender differences in online consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers
-as Gen Y consumers age their SM habits will likely persist, which will have a direct impact both on the way luxury fashion brands approach SM marketing and communication, as well as online purchase experiences for this young segment (Kapferer, 2018) -the online experiences and evaluation of brand presence on SM has behavioral outcomes both in terms of online and offline brand loyalty (Herhausen *et al.* 2015)	*Many people who are interested in Generation Y and their consumption behavior claim that Millenials are the most difficult group that marketers can attract and retain, which leads to discussions on brand loyalty of this generation.* (Yazici, 2016, p. 300) *"The topic of social media marketing and luxury brands will be an important one going forward. As a relatively new aspect of luxury brands' marketing mix, the topic is still evolving, though it remains clear that social media can be used to build brand image and enhance purchase intention"*	Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media.

	(Ko *et al.* 2019, p.412)	
-previous research on Gen Y consumers is mostly focused on national factors in luxury fashion consumption (Rocha *et al.* 2005), attitudes towards luxury fashion brands (Beaudoin *et al.* 1998; Haataja, 2011; Young and Hinesly, 2012; Schade *et al.* 2016; Yazici, 2016; Shin *et al.* 2017), status consumption (Fernandez, 2009; Rathnayake, 2011; Kradisching, 2015), motives for luxury fashion consumption (Young and Hinesly, 2012; Kim and Jang, 2014; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Temperley, 2016), brand loyalty (Phau and Cheong, 2009; Lazarevic, 2012) - Research that supplies evidence on the impact of the economic crisis is scarce and it focuses on the phenomenon of *affluenza* and *democratization of luxury* (Truong *et al.* 2008), which resulted in new luxury consumers, namely Gen Y who have access to luxury brands, at affordable price levels (Truong, 2010; Cardamenis, 2015; Ressel, 2016)	*"With its large population and growing purchase power, this market segment is of strategic importance to the luxury market, especially in the slow economic environment. As members of Generation Y enter their prime earning years, retailers and other members of the luxury market must revise their marketing strategies to cater to these consumers' needs and behavior patterns. Successful strategies may encourage a lifetime of loyalty to a brand"* (Giovannini *et al.* 2015, pp. 35-36) *"[...] experiencing a major economic crisis or unemployment period, for example, will influence a generation's values (Noble and Schewe, 2003), and thus its consumption behavior. Since the notion of generation describes groups of people who have experienced similar historical, social, cultural, political, and economic events (Mannheim, 1952), it would be interesting to link significant events witnessed by a given generation to its behaviour"* (Chaney *et al.* 2017, p. 186)	Explore Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in Southeast Europe given the past economic crisis

First, as depicted in *table 2:5*, against the backdrop of previous research, there is lack of comprehensive knowledge on the way luxury consumption patterns in SEE evolve (Ciornea, 2013; Ciornea, 2014). Although LFBs can identify similar consumer characteristics across different markets (for instance Chinese consumers), in many cases they have to adapt, partially or completely, their marketing activities (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). Thus, although previous studies have covered some part of luxury fashion consumption patterns in SEE, it is imperative to understand country specific consumption peculiarities, especially as gaining insights into consumers' purchase intents and brand attitudes are key strategic assets for the development of brand loyalty (Schade *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017) by having in mind country specific consumer traits. Further, based on the literature review, the researcher identified a gap with respect to the impact of the past economic crisis on brand loyalty toward LFBs (Godey *et al*. 2016). This gap is more evident in the research addressing Gen Y LFCs in SEE (Ciornea, 2013; Ciornea, 2014; Diaconu, 2015). As depicted in *table 2:5*, provided the inadequacy of previous research, it is of prime importance to gain deeper insights into Gen Y consumers in the context of brand loyalty toward LFBs. This is especially important because this consumer segment presents an appealing opportunity for LFBs as their purchase power and population will increase in the future (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017).

Besides, today's reality of the digital revolution can no longer be questioned or resisted, even by an industry that carries so much economic and socio-cultural power. Throughout the course of academic research, it has become apparent that SM impact on brand loyalty is indisputable. Scholars are persistent in the view that as Gen Y present a promising future market segment (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Kapferer, 2018) their loyalty for LFBs and the value of understanding their online consumer habits for building a loyal customer base (Shea, 2013; Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Giovannini *et al.* 2015) is of prime importance, especially in studies that provide cross-cultural investigation in the context of SM and Gen Y LFCs (Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). More so**,** as presented in the literature review chapter, brand loyalty is built over time and each consumer undergoes 3 phases, to experience a *"deeply held commitment"* (Oliver, 1997, p. 392). In their effort to maintain the beautiful fairy-tale even in today's harsh reality of the past economic crisis, LFBs realize that emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty play a crucial role (Kapferer and Bastein, 2009; Thakur and Kaur, 2016; Shamila, 2018). Thus, building on the premise that loyalty involves efforts in sustaining long- term relationships (Aksoy, 2015), it seems that the questions are more than the

answers in the context of the specific region (*i.e.* SEE). Simply put, the research will seek to understand the impact of SM on brand loyalty of this young consumer group, by taking into consideration the implications of the past economic crisis on Gen Y LFCs. Moreover, when it comes to luxury fashion, there is an apparent shift in male's consumer behavior (Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011; Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2012; Shabat, 2015). As presented in *table 2:5*, previous studies highlighted the need for further research, including in the SEE region. As of researcher's knowledge, there is no following research that tackles into the gender role in luxury fashion consumer behavior, let alone one that seeks to explore SM role for building brand loyalty and the impact of the 2008 economic crisis in SEE. Although academic literature is clearer on gender differences in terms of SM usage, gaining deeper insight into Gen Y SM behavior will assist the researcher to provide theoretical implications to the luxury brand loyalty literature with a focus on SEE as a market of LFBs. Moreover, such an inquiry will help to provide managerial implications regarding the appropriate SM tactics in order to convert *"this digitally savvy"* consumer segment into a loyal consumer group (Salman *et al.* 2016, p. 144).

Finally, the outlined gaps throughout the literature review evidenced the still emergent stage of the research developed, its growing importance to the luxury brand loyalty literature, luxury fashion industry and the resulting need to obtain more comprehensive knowledge. The literature review also served the purpose to demonstrate the scarce, if not absent research in the context of Gen Y LFCs in SEE (by taking into consideration gender differences in consumer behavior), SM role for building brand loyalty toward LFBs, by having in mind the implications of the former economic crisis on Gen Y LFCs who reside in SEE.

The originality of the research stems from two aspects. First, there is scarcity in academic knowledge with respect to the economic crisis impact on luxury fashion consumption. As of researcher's vest of knowledge there are only three studies which investigate this issue. Whilst two of these studies are conducted outside the scope of the SEE region (Lodes and Buff, 2009; Kraj, 2015), the one study that investigates the impact of the economic crisis was limited in Greece and its prime focus is on counterfeit purchases (Priporas *et al.* 2015). This highlights the still embryonic stage of research in the context of economic crisis from 2008 with an emphasis on the need for further investigation in the context of the SEE region. Second, knowledge about the role of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs in SEE is scarce. A significant part of the studies in the context of LFBs,

SM and Gen Y consumers is limited to the wealthy nations (USA, Middle East China, West Europe). Thus, it seems existing literature about luxury fashion consumption lacks theoretical knowledge about consumption habits in SEE context. SM opened the doors to LFBs to reach other countries and regions around the globe. This develops a conceptual platform to the research in the context of under-studied regions such as SEE. Although there is evidence from implementing SM in other countries, evidence of similar endeavors in SEE is lacking. This encouraged researcher's interest to explore the implications of SM on Gen Y LFCs' consumer behavior and brand loyalty toward LFBs. Thus, the specific contribution of the research will be that will provide insights into building brand loyalty by taking into consideration the implications of the former economic crisis, by focusing on a rising luxury fashion consumer segment (Gen Y) in an unexplored market, via a cross-cultural study in SEE (Romania, Bulgaria and Greece). Subsequently, the research will add a fresh South East European perspective to an existing research phenomenon (Karatzas *et al.* 2019).

Further, as the research methodology chapter will further demonstrate, the research contributes to the scant empirical inquiry of real LFCs. With these in mind, an anticipated contribution of the research is that it will likely help to broaden the luxury brand loyalty literature. As presented in the following chapter it was not within the interest of this research to measure, conduct statistical analysis, or confirm previously established data sets, between the phenomena of SM, Gen Y LFCs and the economic crisis (based on the premise that the variables establishing a relationship among them are still not available in the context of the selected countries: Bulgaria, Romania and Greece). An interpretive mode of inquiry was considered valuable for addressing the above outlined areas of research, which were taken into consideration in designing the research approach. The following chapter presents how the investigation helped to gain insights into the identified gaps in academic literature and shed light on the research objectives.

Chapter 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following chapter presents the choice of approach toward the research inquiry. It is initiated by introducing the reader with a review behind the ontological, epistemological assumptions of interpretivist philosophy, followed by the rationale of choosing a research design. Next, there is a discussion about the different philosophies that guide the quantitative and qualitative methodologies, followed by an illustration for the choice of qualitative research method. Following the main research philosophy, the chapter puts forward the first phase of the research, which was initiated with a pilot study, based on FGDs. The discussion is accompanied by highlighting the value of conducting a pilot study, the rationale of choosing FGDs as a first method, by also evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, the sample selection criteria, questioning route, data collection and data analysis. Next, the discussion presents the second phase of the research. It presents the main study, which was carried via individual interviews. The manner of presenting the second phase follows the example of presenting the discussion of the first phase of the research. The aspects of employing a purposive sample selection, and participants recruitment are presented for both phases, because apart from some minor differences, the researcher followed the same procedure throughout the both phases of the research. The methodology chapter is concluded by emphasizing on the approach used to establish confidence in qualitative research.

3.1. Research philosophies: ontology and epistemology

At this stage, it is important to start the discussion by highlighting the importance of choosing a philosophical stance that acted as a benchmark in undertaking the research and guided the process of PhD studies in the quest of building knowledge of theoretical relevance. Essentially, it is considered relevant to introduce a quote that helped the researcher to comprehend the reasons behind undertaking this research and the importance of producing scientific knowledge. The quote refers to the importance of philosophy of research, therefore, it is worth quoting at length:

> *"Consideration of the philosophy of the research helps to contribute a deeper and wider perspective of research so that our own specific research projects can have a clearer purpose within the wider context"*

(Carson *et al.* 2001, p.1)

In other words, it is considered essential to outline the philosophical assumption that guided the researcher throughout the PhD studies, helping her to the choice of a research methodology in order to be able to enrich academic knowledge, by also taking into consideration relevant context-related factors, and would ultimately lead to fulfilling the purpose and objectives of the research. The discussion proceeds with a table showing the main ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions as the dominant philosophies guiding marketing research.

Table 3:1: Broad definitions/ explanations of positivism, interpretivism, ontology, epistemology and methodology

	Positivism	**Interpretivism**
Ontology		
Nature of 'being'/ nature of the world	Have direct access to real world	No direct access to real world
Reality	Single external reality	No single external reality
Epistemology		
'Grounds' of knowledge/ relationship between reality and research	Possible to obtain hard, secure objective knowledge	Understand through 'perceived' knowledge
	Research focuses on generalization and abstraction	Research focuses on the specific and concrete
	Thought governed by hypothesis and stated theories	Seeking to understand specific context
Methodology		
Focus of research	Concentrates on description and explanation	Concentrates on understanding and interpretation
Role of researcher	Detached, external observer	Researchers want to experience what they are studying
	Clear distinction between reason and feeling	Allow feelings and reason to govern actions
	Aim to discover external reality rather than creating the object of study	Partially create what is studied, the meaning of phenomena
	Strive to use rational, consistent, verbal, logical approach	Use of pre-understanding is important
	Seek to maintain clear distinction between facts and value judgements	Distinction between facts and value judgements less clear
	Distinction between science and personal experience	Accept influence from both science and personal experience

Techniques used by researchers	Formalized statistical and mathematical methods predominant	Primarily non-quantitative

The research key goal was to investigate and identify consumer perspectives related to the research phenomenon in order to understand and conceptualize LFC behavior and SM role for the development of brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region. As presented in table 6, provided the ontological interpretivist (relativistic) position of the researcher guided the epistemological philosophy in pursuit of uncovering details and creating knowledge about a phenomenon about which is yet known (Giddens, 1974). Therefore, as such data is empirically non-existent, interpretivist philosophy corresponded to the particularities of this research as it is suitable for marketing studies that seek to investigate phenomena with relatively limited base of previous knowledge (Deshpande, 1983).

Further, following the epistemological aspiration, the research was approached by seeking to understand the specific context, based on the value of imagination in marketing studies (Weick, 1989). Thus, *"isolation"* from existing theories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), provided the researcher with the opportunity to contribute for the development of scientific knowledge (Calder,1977; Denzin, 2012) when it concerns lack of empirical evidence in specific regions and industries (Barker *et al.* 2001). The thematic analysis was not restricted to previously identified themes in published literature. This allowed for the natural emergence of common properties and dimensions, which altogether shaped the themes that best represent the views and experiences of studied Generation Y luxury fashion customers (Boardman and McCormick, 2018; McNeill, 2018). This corresponds to the case of SM role for building brand loyalty among male and female Gen Y LFCs in SEE, within the context of the past economic crisis. Thus, the interpretative stance of the researcher led her interest in the quest for original, comprehensive, and unrestricted approach towards the unfamiliar (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007), as was the case of exploring the phenomenon of SM with the luxury fashion sector. Interest in unrestricted inquiry is what helped the researcher to obtain rich, in-depth understanding of concepts concerning such a new topic as SM in the context of LFBs in SEE (De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998) as viewed and experienced by studied LFCs. Therefore, the rationale of relying on interpretivist philosophy was what guided the researcher to the development of new conceptual theorizations.

Additionally, the ontological position of interpretivist philosophy, presented in table 6 persuaded the researcher to explore people's experiences, perceptions, attitudes, reasons, desires, and assumptions in the new area of research (Calder, 1977; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Wertz, 2005; Bratucu and Bratucu, 2012). This decision was based on the premise that the ontological and epistemological position of interpretivism, emphasizing on multidimensional realities and seeking to bring into light novel insights (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; cited in Creswell and Miller, 2000; Scotland, 2012), assisted in the quest for original, comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Seale, 1999; Denzin, 2012). Thus, the ontological, epistemological and methodological grounds of interpretivist paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) allowed the researcher to *"get closer to the behavior studied"* and provide valuable knowledge through the *"development of meaning"* (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007, p. 65) in the context of SM role for building brand loyalty among male and female Gen Y LFCs in SEE. The interpretative stance helped the researcher in the quest for unearthing and identifying concepts in cases when the study presents a relatively new topic area (Deshpande, 1983). The interpretive approach was considered relevant for this research for it allows:

1. to obtain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of SM and its impact on brand loyalty toward LFBs in SEE

2. to obtain a holistic perspective of Gen Y LFCs' perspectives toward LFBs, by acknowledging the multifaceted reality of the phenomenon under investigation

3. to obtain profound understanding of people's experiences (Calder, 1977; Wertz, 2005), perceptions, reasons, feelings and desires (Bratucu and Bratucu, 2012).

Additionally, interpretative theories are broadly defined as: *"[…] all non-positivistic research approaches that commonly use qualitative methods"* (Carson *et al*. 2001, p. 8). However, the presented theories in *figure 3:1* have differences in their ontological and epistemological positions, emphasis and focus.

Figure 3:1: Continuum of research philosophies
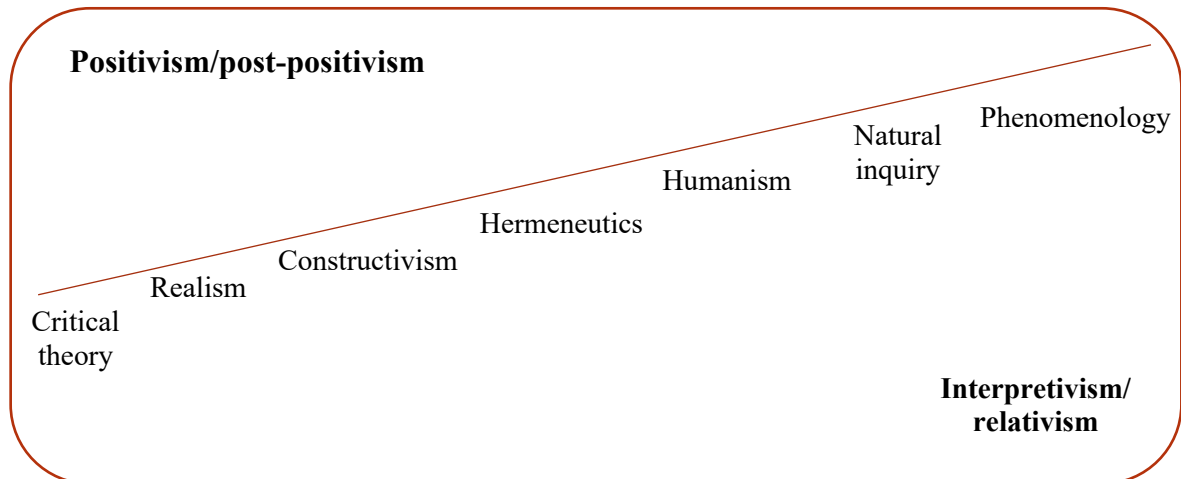
Source: Carson *et al.* (2001, p. 8)

As noted, the presented approaches have differences in terms of emphasis and focus. Herein, before outlining the interpretative approach toward the research, it is important to provide a brief overview of each of the theories illustrated in the continuum. This is accomplished via the following figure (*figure 3:2*).

Figure 3:2: Emphasis and focus of interpretative approaches

Critical theory: realities are socially constructed entities that are under constant internal influence; finding is the means.- change is the underlying aim	**Realism:** acknowledge the difference between the world and particular perceptions of it; triangulation of perceptions	**Constructivism:** achieve an understanding of the similarities and differences that both the researcher and the respondent held initially
Hermeneutics: read between the lines	**Humanism:** cause and effect cannot be separated; recognition of multiple realities; the researcher and the phenomenon are interactive; researcher understanding arises from direct personal experience	**Naturalistic inquiry**: the inquirer and the object interact to influence one another; **aim:** development of 'working hypotheses' that describe the individual 'case' rather than being concerned about 'generalizations'
	Phenomenology: committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor's own perspective; a prevailing approach to qualitative research in social sciences	

Adapted from: Carson *et al.* (2001, pp. 15-18); Scotland (2012, p. 13)

Having presented the underlying emphasis and focus of the interpretative theories, it is imperative to highlight that *"what knowledge is, and the ways of discovering it, are subjective"* (Scotland, 2012, p. 9). With this in mind, the choice of interpretative approach for the research was phenomenology. The emphasis and focus of this approach closely correspond to the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher. That is, interest in unrestricted inquiry is what helped the researcher to obtain rich, in-depth understanding of concepts concerning such a new topic as SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs in SEE (De Ruyter and Scholl, 1998) as viewed and experienced by studied LFCs. In other words, the phenomenological approach helped to explore people's experiences, perceptions, attitudes, reasons, desires, and assumptions in the new area of research (Calder, 1977; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Wertz, 2005; Bratucu and Bratucu, 2012). Finally, guided by the epistemological assumption of a marketing research rooted in *"grounds of knowledge"* (Carson *et al.* 2001, p.6) and interest in the concrete, rather than looking for generalizations, the following discussion evaluates the different perspectives of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

3.2. Review of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies

The discussion considers the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (Deshpande, 1983), in order to demonstrate the relevance of the selected research methodology (Calder and Tybout, 1989).

Table 3:2: Comparative presentation of qualitative and quantitative methods

Dimension	Qualitative research	Quantitative research
Purpose	Interpretation, understanding	Generalization, predictability
Sample size	Small	Large
Question format	Open-ended	Close-ended
Data collection	Expressed through words, video clips or pictures	Numerical/ standardized
Data analysis	Subjective, interpretive Provide more thorough explanation of relationships Acknowledgment of individual experiences	Objective, statistical Forecast casual relationships Demonstrate generalizability
Methods	Semi-structured: In-depth interviews; focus groups; participant observation	Structured methods (questionnaires, surveys, structured observation)

General framework	Phenomenological approach Flexibility in obtaining/ classifying responses Data collection and questions are constructed based on findings throughout the research process	Affirming previously established hypothesis More firm style in obtaining/classifying responses Responses obtained from respondents do not have the power to direct the research process

Source: Proctor (2005)

Following the main characteristics presented in table 7, at its heart, quantitative research has "*hypothetico-deductive*" nature (Deshpande, 1983, p.104; Seale, 1999, p. 23), which sits within the ontological perspective of confirming previously established facts, themes, constructs and data sets (Deshpande, 1983; Spiggle, 1994; Bansal and Corley, 2012). Based primarily on positivist principles, it is concerned with seeking answers to *"what"* and *"where"* questions (Prowse and Camfield, 2013) by encouraging distant, alienate observation of social structures (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Saele, 1999; Carson *et al.* 2001). By contrast, the underlying epistemological assumption of qualitative research favors the view that people actively participate in the development of social structures, in a manner that allows them to assign meanings close to their own perception of the world (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Saele, 1999; Carson *et al.* 2001). Elaborating on this view, Morgan and Smircich (1980, p. 498) add:

> *"For if one recognizes that the social world constitutes some form of open-ended process, any method that closes the subject of study within the confines of a laboratory […] does not do complete justice to the nature of the subject"*

In this vein, advocates of qualitative methodology (Giddens, 1974; Keat and Urry, 1975) question the suitability of positivist methods in social sciences, as such methods trigger a degree of method bias in marketing research (Deshpande, 1983). However, a major advantage of quantitative research refers to the opportunity for random sample selection, which increases the likelihood for generezability of results (Alasuutari, 2010; Charoenruck, 2011). Conversely, qualitative research is dedicated to a small group level (Haataja, 2011) and it is less concerned with generalizability (Hunt, 2011; Erlandsson *et al.* 2013). Specifically, although qualitative researchers apply *"casual ideas with more sensitivity to context and therefore with lower degree of formalization than quantitative researchers"* that the insights gathered by qualitative research still have a valuable information to contribute to existing knowledge *"beyond the absolutely particular"* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 235; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p.871).

Against this view, positivists reference the lack of scientific value in qualitative research. Scrutiny refers to knowledge created in a more subjective manner, providing unreliable and invalid findings (Miles, 1979; Gwyther and Inesedy, 2009) by ignoring previous theoretical contributions (Gwyther and Inesedy, 2009; Klag and Langley, 2013). Yet again, generalizability is not a concern of inductive methods, as their prime goal is the development of ideas by comparing scientific knowledge with everyday experience (Byers and Wilcox, 1991). Furthermore, the dynamics of qualitative approach (Bansal and Corley, 2012), allow the researcher to discover new, interesting areas of enquiry and raise new research questions (Bansal and Corley, 2012; Haataja, 2011). That is, for they lead to the production of unforeseen scientific knowledge (Miles, 1979), sometimes participants' views are preferred over well-established theoretical hypothesis (Calder, 1977). Henceforth, the "*rich, full, earthy*" nature (Miles, 1979, p. 590) of qualitative research allows for participants to raise novel concerns (Weber, 2004), offering deeper insights into managerial, practical and social aspects (Bansal and Carley, 2012). However, to overcome the risk of producing unreliable and invalid findings, the researcher took into consideration the importance of "*pre-understanding*" (Carson *et al.* 2001, p. 6) and integrated current theory and emergent knowledge (Roos, 1979; Bansal and Corley, 2012; Spiggle, 1994) to ensure "*earthy*" and "*undeniable*" findings (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Miles, 1979, p. 590). Nevertheless, a problematic aspect of qualitative research is rooted in its detailed, introspective approach to social science research: "*the surface which is not immediately apparent*" (Roos, 1979, p. 68). Nonetheless, there is both academic and practical evidence in support of managing the "*bureaucratization*" of data (Miles, 1979, p. 594) through systematic thematic categorization and by identifying emerging patterns to illustrate how current theory applies in the research context (Alasuutari, 2010; Bansal and Corely, 2012). The following section presents that choice of a research method.

3.3. The choice of qualitative research methodology

Qualitative methodology was considered appropriate for three reasons. First, to the best of researcher's knowledge, a limited number of studies in luxury consumption (Fionda and Moore, 2009; Wiedmann *et al.* 2009; Eng and Bogaert, 2010; Haataja, 2011; Dion and Arnould, 2011; Amatulli and Guido, 2011; Jiang and Cova, 2012; Hanslin and Rindell, 2014; Choi *et al.* 2016; Temperley, 2016), SM and its impact on brand loyalty (Harwood and Garry, 2010; Heinonen, 2011; Palmer and Huo, 2013; Alon *et al.* 2013),

and SM role for brand loyalty toward LFBs (Andersen and Hansen, 2011) are performed using the inductive approach. One can, however, mount an argument that both the qualitative and quantitative approaches require constant comparative analysis between literature and emerging findings (Jones, 1996; Seale, 1999). On the other hand, the urge to employ qualitative methodology was driven by the fact it allows to discover new categories and their interrelated properties (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Seale, 1999), rather than to be constrained by previously established theories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This, of course, does not imply that the researcher did not conduct constant comparison technique with existing academic literature in the quest to build knowledge of social science relevance (Seale, 1999). Instead of being restricted by *"powerful statistical techniques"* (Blackler and Brown, 1983, p. 354), emphasis was placed on understanding people's motives to engage in certain behavior, by evaluating everyday experience with scientific knowledge (Giddens, 1974; Calder, 1977).

Second, the research followed Deshpande's (1983) recommendation to employ qualitative methods in such instances when the study presents a relatively new topic area. As previously mentioned, there is lack of comprehensive knowledge on the way luxury consumption patterns evolve in the SEE region. Therefore, the research main goal was to obtain profound understanding of people's experiences (Calder, 1977; Wertz, 2005), perceptions, reasons, feelings and desires (Bratucu and Bratucu, 2012) related to the research phenomenon of SM impact on brand loyalty among male and female Gen Y LFCs in SEE. This closely corresponds to the perception that reality is multifaceted, rather than singular (Giddens, 1974; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This assisted the researcher to capture the nature of SM impact on brand loyalty in the context of the past economic crisis among Gen Y LFCs in SEE. Further, employing the etic approach would reduce the chances of identifying fresh findings that pertain to the context of the research (Lewis and Lewis, 1980). Such was the case of conducting a cross-country research by exploring the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on the purchase behavior of young male and female LFCs and the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs.

Thus, instead of viewing reality as an object, which would put the researcher in the position of a distant observer (Giddens, 1974; Carson *et al*. 2001), exploratory and interpretative research was deemed appropriate to understand the social context of the fashion industry (Jones, 2006). As stated by Jones (2006): *"[…] in the context of the*

apparel industry it is not possible, or maybe even derisible, to adopt a rigidly different position regarding the admissibility of other research paradigms. Apparel has a social context and dimension. Sociological research does tend to lean more heavily on alternative approaches such as phenomenology […] it has to be acknowledged that because, in industrial economics, controlled experiment is hardly ever possible, great reliance is thrown upon statistical investigations and interpretations. There is no concealing the fact that such tests are fraught with difficulties as, for example, statistical definitions change over time and data comparability becomes controversial" (pp. 32-33). The latter statement reminds of viewing luxury branding as a constantly changing concept (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016; Cristini *et al.* 2017). From this stance, the following table illustrates how the research objectives guided the choice of research methodology.

Table 3:3: Research objectives − research design

Objective	Research methodology
Explore Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in SEE given the past economic crisis	*Interpretative phenomenological stance:* helpful for the development of scientific knowledge when it concerns lack of empirical evidence in specific regions and industries (Barker *et al.* 2001), as is the case with SEE and the *impact of the past economic crisis on luxury fashion consumers* **-** capture the nature of SM impact on brand loyalty in the context of the past economic crisis among Gen Y in SEE
- Investigate gender differences in online consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers -Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media	Approach phenomenon of SM with the luxury fashion sector from *interpretative phenomenological stance*: interest in the unrestricted inquiry in order to obtain rich, in-depth *understanding of concepts concerning such a new topic as SM in the context of luxury fashion brands in SEE*
- Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands -Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers	*Interpretative phenomenological stance:* ability to *explore experiences, perceptions, attitudes, reasons, desires, and assumptions in the new area of research* (Calder, 1977; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Wertz, 2005; Bratucu and Bratucu, 2012) Perceive the *reality is multifaceted, rather than singular* (Giddens, 1974; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990): Emphasis on *open-ended, interpretive, multidimensional, and contextualized perspectives* (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; cited in Creswell and Miller, 2000), assists in the quest for original, comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Seale, 1999; Denzin, 2012)

As presented in *table 3:3*, the interpretative phenomenological methodology of the research was reflected in objectives that guided the research and in the type of methods and design followed by the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Barker *et al*. 2001). From this perspective, the character of the research phenomenon choreographed the choice of research methodology (Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Deshpande, 1983). Consequently, as some areas naturally lead to the choice of qualitative research (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), qualitative methodology was valuable for confirming, contrasting and expanding on academic knowledge (Calder, 1977; Garver and Cook, 2001; Garver, 2003). Finally, prior studies in the luxury vein highlight the value of qualitative research. In particular, the identified quotes are illustrated in the following table.

Table 3:4: Studies emphasizing on the value of qualitative research in the luxury fashion domain

To enhance academic understanding of SEE luxury consumer behavior *"[...] it is considered useful a* **qualitative research** *in order to identify a larger number of product attributes and feelings important to consumers [...]*   Ciornea (2014, p. 36)   *To* **perform luxury research, it also is necessary to analyze consumers' own perceptions**, *rather than insights from managers of luxury companies or marketing gurus, especially if those sources tend to propose a single, personal view of luxury*   Kapferer and Laurent (2016, p. 19)   **Luxury and consumer behavior is a wide area that needs to be explored.** *Since there are multiple networks at different levels of consumption, this is even more necessary. It appears that digital media is crucial for luxury brand marketers [...]*   Jain and Schultz (2016, p. 19)

Whilst each of the presented studies support the choice of this method, the discussion highlights Kapferer and Laurent's (2016) view because it captures the essence of the research: *understanding individual customer views, motives, thoughts and feelings* (Haataja, 2011). From this perspective, the scarcity of insights regarding Gen Y consumer behavior and SM role for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs in the context of the past economic crisis in SEE postured an interesting avenue for this research. The interpretive phenomenological position, emphasizing on open-ended, interpretive, multidimensional, and contextualized perspectives (Creswell and Miller, 2000), assisted in the quest for original, comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Seale, 1999; Denzin, 2012). The main interest of the research was to explore in-depth the phenomenon of SM among male and female Gen Y LFCs within the implications of the past economic

crisis in SEE. Thus, the emphasis was on the contextual (rather than general) manifestation of the research (Golafshani, 2003; Hogg and Maclaren, 2008) was what guided the choice of qualitative research approach. Considering the exploratory nature of the research, the values guiding the research were in accord to Gummesson's (2005) view implying that the answers can be found through exploratory and interpretative approach, rather than through the creation of growing volumes of data. The following section presents the choice of research methods. Specifically, the research included a pilot study (with FGDs) in the first year of the PhD studies (in 2016), followed by main data collection via individual interviews conducted two years later (in 2018).

3.4. PHASE 1: pilot study

3.4.1. Value of pilot study

Considering researcher's lack of experience as a moderator, the pilot study was helpful for improving one' skills in preparing for interviews (Kim, 2010). In this context, given the importance of rapport (Hamsphire *et al.* 2014) for ensuring questions are understood correctly and responses offer meaningful content (Paradise and Blankenship, 1951), the researcher took the "naïve" approach (Hamsphire *et al.* 2014; Sieber, 1973; Calder, 1977). Second, the pilot study assisted in checking (piloting) the questioning route (Sieber, 1973) and acted as a guideline for identifying broader perspectives for areas that need further in-depth research (Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992; Morgan, 1996; Marrelli, 2008; Kim, 2010) throughout the main study. The pilot study was also helpful in assisting the researcher to gain more experience in qualitative studies, experiencing challenges in participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis. Finally, performing a pilot study was useful in experiencing practical issues, related to sample selection and ethical considerations in qualitative research (Kelly, 2007). The following section discusses the rationale behind the decision to adopt FGD's for the first stage of the research.

3.4.2. Focus groups

Focus groups are defined as *"a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher"* (Morgan, 1996, p. 130). They represent a small group discussion of purposively selected participants and the researcher conducts several FGDs as a safeguard toward identifying emerging patterns across the FGDs (Herich, 2015; Nuymba *et al.* 2018; Merner and Porter, 2019; Lauri, 2019). Importantly, in this research method, the researcher adopts the role of a *"facilitator or a moderator"* with the purpose of enabling the discussion among group participants (Nuymba *et al.* 2018, p. 21). The researcher's role involves making participants feel comfortable to express their views, thoughts and perceptions without putting forward his or her personal bias and *"with minimal intervention"* to the participants' discussion (Lauri, 2019, p. 66).

The legacy of FGDs in social sciences is that they are purposively organized with the aim of obtaining valuable insights into consumers' perspectives about questions set by the researcher and that pertain to the research topic (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017; Merner and Porter, 2019). In this context, FGDs are considered valuable because they present a helpful method for understanding the aspects that appear to be of higher importance to those being investigated (Lienhoop, 2018). Based on this, FGDs proof effective in cases when there is lack of empirical evidence on the issues being investigated (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017). In effect, this method presented a valuable first choice for exploring a new territory, for which little literature was available (Byers and Wilcox, 1991). In this context, there is dearth of comprehensive knowledge on male and female Gen Y consumer behavior in the SEE region, especially in the context of Gen Y's online consumer behavior and the implications of SM exposure for building brand loyalty toward LFBs. These aspects, coupled with the reality emerging from the former economic crisis urged the need to explore, identify and conceptualize Gen Y LFCs' values, beliefs, attitudes and other related constructs that contribute for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs.

Thus, one of the reasons to employ FGDs was based on the premise of what one of the gurus in luxury research outlines: *"To perform luxury research, it also is necessary to analyse consumers' own perceptions [...]"* (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016, p. 19). FGDs allowed the researcher to grasp a wide range of opinions and views (Kook *et al.* 2019; Lauri, 2019) related to the topic of discussion. This closely corresponded to the second

reason for employing FGDs: obtaining fresh insights resulting from the discussions and debates among participants (Kook *et al.* 2019). By listening how participants build on each other's statements (Phillips, 2003; Marrelli, 2008), this enabled to grasp *"unexpected insights and potential theoretical developments"* (Kook *et al.* 2019, p. 92) originating from shared and individual construction of meanings. As participants' behavior evolved in natural dialogue atmosphere (Kook *et al.* 2019) the opportunity to witness areas where they agreed or disagreed (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017) contributed in the quest to understand the multifaceted reality of the phenomenon under investigation through participants' experiences.

Further, the advantage of FGDs to provoke greater emotion and spontaneity and identify important aspects as experienced by participants (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017; Lienhoop, 2018) presented a distinctive advantage for the research. Their recognition as one of *"the fastest ways to get a great detail of consumer feedback"* (Herich, 2015, p. 51) FGDs enabled the researcher to obtain rich amount of data in a timely manner (Marrelli, 2008). The ability to listen to participants' views (Morgan, 1996) corresponded to the interest of obtaining initial broader perspective, which helped to prepare for the main study (Lienhoop, 2018) in the quest to build knowledge on the interplay between SM and LFBs among Gen Y LFCs in SEE. Additionally, one of the aims of the study was to provide managerial implications. Against the criticism that social research rarely is *"practically useful"* (Alasuutari, 2010, p. 149), FGDs resemble an esteemed market research method that allows to obtain a *"firsthand contact with consumers"* (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017, p. 48). Hence, they proved valuable for their practical marketing applicability (Herich, 2015). Finally, it is important to provide a clear distinction between FGDs' strengths and weaknesses in order to increase the ability to judge the appropriateness of this research method.

3.4.3. Focus groups discussions: strengths and weaknesses

The discussion is initiated with a table, followed by a detailed discussion of the presented strengths and weaknesses of FGDs.

Table 3:5: Focus group discussions: strengths and weaknesses

Strengths	Weaknesses
Obtaining rich qualitative data for which little advanced knowledge is available (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017)	Group think effect: participants with weaker personalities would likely follow those with stronger personalities (Zaharia *et al.* 2008; McCullough, 2011)
Time-effectiveness (Marrelli, 2008; Herich, 2015)	Successful data collection requires participant trust (Marrelli, 2008; Nuymba *et al.* 2018; Kruger *et al.*2019)
Direct observation of group dynamics (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017; Kook *et al.* 2019)	Quality of data gathered may vary among focus group discussions depending on analytical ability and experience of participants (Marrelli, 2008)
Interaction among members, which stimulates otherwise forgotten memories of experience- spontaneity (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017; Lienhoop, 2018)	Issues related to managing data (Marrelli, 2008; Merner and Porter, 2019)
Offer wider pool of opinions, views, attitudes, and perceptions (Lienhoop, 2018; Kook *et al.* 2019; Lauri, 2019)	Group discussion and quality of data gathered depends on the skills of the moderator (Marrelli, 2008; Merner and Porter, 2019)
Marketing applicability (Herich, 2015)	
Great possibility to interact with respondents through the use of probing to attain great depth in participants' responses (McCullough, 2011)	
Easy to set up (McCullough, 2011)	

First, building on the strengths presented in *table 3:5*, the notion that FGDs are easy to set up is one aspect that surprised the researcher. In fact, this advantage can easily be regarded as a disadvantage. Although the researcher recruited university students who belong to one educational institution, they had different schedules. Apart from this, given that FGDs took place during the academic year, participant recruitment was problematic due to the tight schedule of students. This posed a challenge to arrange time that was convenient for all the participants. Nevertheless, students demonstrated interest in the topic and willingness to contribute to knowledge by taking part in the research.

Another advantage presented in the table refers to the opportunity to obtain in-depth knowledge via probing (McCullough, 2011). In this context, the researcher did not have previous experience as a moderator/ facilitator. This researcher's weakness was solved by reviewing relevant literature proving guidelines to the successful execution of FGDs (Marrelli, 2008; Lauri, 2019). Standardization helped to overcome the lack of previous experience as a moderator (Marrelli, 2008). This included preparing a list of pre-defined questions (Herich, 2015) that all participants (in all FGDs) were asked to share their perspectives. However, as the researcher's role is no more than to enable a discussion

among participants (Nuymba *et al.* 2018), she did not strictly follow the order of questions as it appeared in the pre-defined questioning route. This means that in cases when a participant introduced a different perspective, opinion or concern, the researcher followed up via probing and/or asking other participants about their opinions (Lauri, 2019).

With respect to the presented disadvantages, the researcher did not experience difficulties in gaining participants' trust. This can be explained with the fact that she was part of the same educational institution and students were confident that the research would be conducted in an ethical manner. Apart from this, the recruitment of participants was supported by staff members of the faculties of the University of Sheffield. Additionally, all participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form, which secured that their personal identities and audio recordings from FGDs remain anonymous. Another disadvantage of FGDs refers to quality of data gathered, depending on the analytical ability and experience of participants (Marrelli, 2008). Based on researcher's experience, this cannot be identified as a disadvantage. This assertion stems from the fact that the research recruited participants, based on specific criteria. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the process of FGDs did not pose another challenge to the quality of data. This refers to participants' skills in English. While both male and female participants in Romania were able to express their views vividly, some participants in Bulgaria and Greece experienced issues to vocalize their views in English. It is important to note that the researcher did not put any pressure on participants with lower skills in English. At the same time, it was an interesting experience to observe how other group participants were eager to help their peers to share their opinion.

Scholars acknowledge the issue of managing data from FGDs (Marrelli, 2008). This issue was easily managed by adopting the long-table approach for focus group analysis (Krueger, 2000). The long table approach involved printing the transcripts in different colors of paper. The printed transcripts were cut and grouped together based on emerging themes. The ones, which outstand from the themes were also sorted in a different folder. Following this procedure, the researcher wrote a short summary for each FGDs to facilitate the analysis of findings. Finally, the researcher experienced the greatest challenge during the process of data transcription. Although this was a necessary and vital step in data analysis, it presented an inevitably exhausting and time-consuming task. The following section is devoted on explaining the sample selection criteria for the FGDs.

3.4.4. Sample selection criteria for focus group discussions

The researcher recruited participants who were university students. Specifically, the relative affordability of LFBs compared to other products in the luxury sector (Raluca *et al.* 2012) implies that university students have the opportunity to purchase LFBs. In addition, students are often at the center of targeting strategies for numerous brands (Baek *et al.* 2010) and represent valuable future market for LFBs (Liu *et al.*2012). The decision to recruit university students was based on two additional factors. First, FGDs were part of a pilot study. As noted, they are appropriate for research areas, for which there is little available knowledge and provide broader perspectives on issues to be studied. Thus, the relative accessibility of student samples allowed the researcher to listen to the voice of consumers and obtain valuable information on important concepts as experienced by consumers in a timely manner. Second, information on the consumption patterns of LFCs from different age groups that belong to Gen Y segment in SEE is theoretically non-explicit. Therefore, based on specific criteria, the researcher allowed herself the luxury to include university students in the first stage of the research in order to obtain broader range of perspectives on the research topic. Participants' selection was based on distributing a demographic questionnaire including several criteria, presented in *table 3:6.*

Table 3:6 Sample selection criteria for focus groups

•   Age (18-28 years old)
•   frequency of luxury fashion consumption
•   frequency of Social Media usage
•   nationality (Bulgaria, Romania, Greece)
•   list some of the luxury fashion brands to which participants are actual customers

The age criterium enabled to capture wider span of perspectives from Gen Y LFCs who are at different age. Even though younger students (18-23 years old), who are in the years of studying for their Bachelor degrees may be *light* consumers of LFBs, their contribution was considered valuable because as these consumers grow old, their loyalty would likely evolve (Rein, 2016). The inclusion of Master students provided valuable insights to the research. As some of them were already established in the workforce their views and experiences provided insightful knowledge on their consumption behavior and the role of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs. As of the decision to include frequency of luxury fashion consumption, it was essential to recruit participants who had experience with LFBs in order to understand what are the *"individual target groups"* opinions,

perspectives, views and concerns (Henninger *et al.* 2016, 404). Participants would be able to contribute to the discussion regarding consumer experience, attitudes, values, and brand loyalty toward LFBs. The final sample included participants who purchase luxury fashion brands at least twice per year (every six months).

The rationale for including SM usage was threefold. First, academic literature provides firm evidence that Gen Y consumers are technology savvy and their lives are largely defined by connectedness offered by the digital world (Barton *et al.* 2012; Bolton *et al.* 2013;). Second, this decision was driven under the assumption that when it concerns SM usage, academic literature outlines clear gender differences. Third, literature revealed quite opposing views on Gen Y brand loyalty (Fernandez *et al.* 2016; Carter, 2017) and the impact of SM on the purchase experience and subsequent brand loyalty of Gen Y LFCs (Kestenbaum, 2017). Hence, by selecting participants based on the frequency of SM usage, this allowed the researcher to explore consumer mind-set on questions related to SM activities and consumers' perspectives on the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty among male and female Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region.

The sample was also defined by including a geographical criterion. It should be noted that for the purpose of establishing clear understanding of the geographic area of the research, SEE is used as a term that refers to the three selected countries for the research: Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. As mentioned before (in the introduction chapter) although consumers in these countries cannot be defined as a lucrative market segment per se, *"Seeing similar consumer segments region-wide shifts the emphasis from differences to similarities and leads to the regional cooperation"* (Mehmedovic and Agic, 2015, p. 8). Choosing three countries, which belong to the SEE region and are EU members helped the researcher to determine common geographic basis for the study, which allowed to focus on the essential component of the research: explore, identify and understand luxury fashion consumer behavior. Finally, the decision to include a question on naming some of the LFBs in the questionnaire was based on the premise that each person has different views as of what defines the luxury concept (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016). Thus, this helped the researcher to identify prospective participants who have experience with brands within the range 'affordable luxury-true luxury'. Having presented the sample selection criteria, the following section presents the approach to data collection.

3.4.5. Data collection for focus group discussions

The process of data collection for FGDs started on 20th of October and it was finalized on 10th of December 2016. As it was previously outlined, FGDs took place during the academic year. Students demonstrated interest in the topic and willingness to contribute to knowledge by taking part in the research. All FGDs were conducted at the premises of faculties of the University of Sheffield (in Thessaloniki, Sofia, and Bucharest) in order to ensure that participants felt comfortable in a familiar environment (Krueger, 2000). Selecting participants who shared similar characteristics contributed for more relaxed environment for FGDs (Morgan, 1996; Krueger, 2000). A detailed review about the questioning route as part of the data collection is presented below (*table 3:7*). The questionnaire for FGDs consisted of open-ended questions. The questioning route was developed based on guidelines for focus groups' questioning routes, suggested by Krueger (2000) and May (2001). It followed a structure of five groups of questions, which were considered coherent with the research topic.

Table 3:7 Questioning route for focus group discussions

Opening questions

1. How often do you use Social Media?
 	
    2. Does this include virtual brand communities devoted on luxury fashion brands?
 	
    3. Can you present yourself as a luxury consumer?
 	
    4. Can you describe your first experience with a luxury brand? (How did that make you feel?)

Introductory questions
1. What are your attitudes towards luxury fashion brands?   2. What meanings does luxury entail in your mind?
Transition questions (luxury consumers' values/ attitudes/ motives)
1. What are the reasons for your desire toward luxury brands?   2. What aspects do you enjoy the most in the luxury consumption experience?
Key questions
-Gender role in consumer behavior   1. How do you think genders differ in motives to purchase luxury fashion brands?   2. What triggers you to maintain loyal to a luxury fashion brand/ set of brands?   3. How do you feel about sharing your brand experience in SM?   4. In what ways this affects your brand loyalty from a male/female standpoint?

Social Media role in building brand loyalty and customer engagement
1. What SM brand-related activities do you find most interesting?
2.How these aspects differ between male/female consumers?
3. Please describe the importance that SM established brand relationships as opposed to offline environment?
-Self-brand congruence
1. In what ways luxury fashion brand/s help you build your sense of self/ present yourself in the society?
2. How do you mean that from a gender standpoint?
-Role of culture in luxury consumption
1. In your view, in what ways cultural background affects luxury fashion consumption?
2. What about conformity to society values? (in terms of gender differences?)

Ending questions
1. Suppose you had one minute to talk the brand executive of your favourite brand? What recommendations would you give to him/ her for enhancing brand's presence in SM?
2. Of all the aspects we discussed which ones are the most important to you?

The approximate duration of focus groups was about 48 minutes to one hour and twenty minutes. The researcher did not pose any pressure on participants, providing them with enough time to engage in productive conversation. This was very important, especially in cases when the researcher sensed that it was better to allow the participants express their views and thoughts that will yield insightful knowledge. All focus groups were audio-recorded by obtaining written consent from all participants. At later stage, the audio-recordings were transcribed, which resulted in 79 lists of transcribed data. The following section presents the discussion dynamics across the FGDs.

3.4.6. Discussion dynamics

This section seeks to provide the reader with an initial grasp of the environment that surrounded the FGDs. The researcher relied on previous studies, which suggest that segmentation (based on common consumer characteristics and direct experience with the research phenomenon) helps to explore how consumer perspectives varied among genders (Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992; Morgan, 1996; Kruger *et al.* 2019). The

structural basis of the following table (*table 3:8*) is based on the sequence in which FGDs took place throughout the pilot study, respectively 1) Greece, 2) Bulgaria, and 3) Romania.

Table 3:8 Discussion dynamics of focus group discussions

Greece	
1st group: males	2nd group: females
Number of participants: 4	Number of participants: 5
First group: participants were responsive and eager to support the researcher in her endeavor -the researcher had the opportunity to obtain a good understanding of participants' consumption patterns and the perceptions of SM as a part of the consumer buying experience and for building brand loyalty -three of the participants were more active and the researcher had to opt for probing whilst also mastering the skills of a moderator without the risk of preventing participants to elaborate on their views -in most of the cases participants were responding one by one to the questions and there were also instances when they involved themselves in a group discussion -the first FGD went smoothly, the participants did not feel time-pressure, they were calm, and this was also a pleasant first-time experience for the researcher. **Second group:** participants had a positive attitude toward their role in the research and they were eager to contribute knowledge to the research -three of the participants were more active, whilst the other two were more modest in their participation. This required the researcher's abilities as a moderator, both for probing and leading the group discussion in a way that all respondents had the opportunity to share their views. - the opinion of participants who were more active did not influence the responses of those who exerted a more "introvert" behavior - as with the male focus group, there were instances when participants initiated a discussion amongst themselves. -one of the participants did not speak English fluently and this was the reason that she did not participate actively in the FGD. -the FGD went smoothly, with no time pressure for participants, they were calm, and responsive	
Bulgaria	
1st group: females	2nd group: males
Number of participants: 4	Number of participants: 5

First group: the overall vibe of the FGD was more tense and participants were less elaborate in their responses. The researcher attributes this to the fact that the FGD was conducted during the mid-terms' period for participants. Importantly, the intense vibes were mostly felt in the first part of the FGD (opening, introductory and transition questions). Once respondents felt at ease and relaxed, they started providing more elaborate replies.

- one of the respondents did not speak English fluently. The researcher had to opt for probing in order to encourage the respondent to express her views. This was done only up to the extent that the respondent felt comfortable to speak.

-participants provided direct responses to the questions, without involving themselves into a dialogue amongst themselves. This did not reduce the quality of empirical data as the researcher made sure all of the participants had an opportunity to share their views considered important for the research

Second group: participants demonstrated positive attitude, interest in the research topic and willingness to contribute to the research. The atmosphere of the FGD was very pleasant and positive.

-participants demonstrated confidence in their views and all of them were equally active in the FGD

-the researcher had the role of a moderator, making sure that participants' responses offered meaningful content to the context of the research

-the FGD ran smoothly, participants provided vivid responses and built over each other's views

Romania	
1st group: males	2nd group: females
Number of participants: 5	Number of participants: 5

First group: conducted during a weekend in which the MA students had lectures as part of their academic calendar. Since the lectures took place during the whole day, the researcher was allocated time for the FGD during the lunch break (one hour).

-all respondents were very positive, interested in the research and demonstrated enthusiasm to contribute to knowledge

-all of the participants spoke fluent English

-the FGD ran smoothly, participants provided consistent views, meaning that in most of the cases they agreed upon their responses

-in some instances, participants provided direct answers to the questions, whilst there were also cases when they encouraged dialogues among themselves

Second group: conducted during a weekend in which the MA students had lectures as part of their academic calendar. The participants agreed to stay after the lectures were finished for the day. This was very impressive as it was a sign for respondents' keenness to contribute to the research.

-all participants spoke fluent English

-one of the participants was more silent and the researcher had to opt for probing in order to ensure that the respondent expressed her views

-the FGD allowed the researcher to grasp the full spectrum of participants' views, beliefs and perceptions related to the research questions

-the vibes that surrounded the FGD were positive and in most of the cases respondents agreed on their views

Having presented the data collection, the following section presents the approach to data analysis of FGDs.

3.4.7. Data analysis of focus groups

The analysis was conducted via identification of patterns across respondents' meanings, views, and experiences (Spiggle, 1994). It followed coding and thematic categorization, looking to identify consistency/ inconsistency in findings, understand how and why these emerge in the context of the FGD's (Singh, 2015). The analysis was based on long table approach (Krueger, 2000) and a constant comparative review with existing literature (Calder, 1977) to identify emerging patterns in luxury consumer behavior and advance existing academic knowledge. The long table approach involved printing the transcripts in different colors of paper. The printed transcripts were cut and grouped together based on emerging themes. The ones, which outstand from the themes were also sorted in a different folder. An example of how the researcher employed the long-table approach is presented in *appendix 1*. Following this procedure, the researcher wrote a short summary for each FGDs to facilitate the analysis of findings. With this in mind, the following section discusses the main study of the research.

3.5. PHASE 2: main study

Participants in FGDs may be concerned revealing personal information (Morgan, 1996), not to be an object of group scrutiny (Zaharia *et al.* 2008), or a victim of the*" group think"* effect (Marrelli, 2008, p. 44). Moreover, it is impossible to predict all of the necessary questions that will likely yield insightful knowledge to a research topic (Paradise and Blankenship, 1951). Thus, the research exploited the advantages of FGDs being helpful for gaining initial understanding on the research topic, followed by individual interviews for the main study (Morgan, 1996).

3.5.1. The choice of individual semi-structured interviews

The semi-structured interview is defined as a method of questioning, in which *"questions are normally specified, but the interviewer is freer to probe beyond the answers in a manner which would appear prejudicial to the aims of standardization and comparability"* (May, 2001, p. 123). The choice of semi-structured interviews is based on four reasons. First, this research was interested in uncovering details about a phenomenon about which is little yet known (Calder, 1977; Miles and Huberman, 1994;

Wertz, 2005;) and understanding consumers' motives to engage in a certain behavior (Giddens, 1974). Therefore, the choice of research method closely corresponded to the exploratory nature of the research, as it is *"most useful in the interpretative survey, where it may be used to uncover hidden motivations"* (Paradise and Blankenship, 1951, p. 279).

Second, based on the premise that reality is multifaceted rather than singular (Giddens, 1974; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) individual interviews were considered appropriate as they helped to gain insight into the way different people interpret the world and obtain more profound understanding of participants' experiences and views, considered significant for the research (Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992; Zaharia *et al.* 2008; Hunt, 2011). This was achieved as semi-structured interviews allowed participants to respond in their own terms while there was still room for comparability of responses (May, 2001). Consequently, interviews yielded unique ideas and significant insights into the topic area, not attainable through other methods (Fern, 1982). For comparison purposes, structured interviews are performed with statistically representative population for the purposes of generalization (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). By contrast, the combination of FGDs with semi-structured interviews assisted the process of investigating, identifying, and conceptualizing various views and issues pertaining the question of SM impact on building brand loyalty toward LFBs (De Ruyter and Scholl,1998). Third, the ability to probe beyond the surface and enter into a fruitful conversation secured access to the deepest thoughts of respondents (Jain and Schultz, 2016). In this way, individual interviews were considered suitable for they offered a pool of diverse and unique ideas, experiences and views (Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992; Heary and Hennessey, 2006; Hunt, 2011). This enabled to fulfil the purpose for an exploratory research that seeks an original, comprehensive, and unrestricted approach towards the unfamiliar (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007).

Finally, proposed avenue for future research based on a study among Romanian luxury consumers acted as a benchmark for the choice of individual interviews: *"[...] an individual interview with luxury fashion consumers will help establishing other physical, beneficial or image properties and to clarify aspects regarding "value" and "style"; also, affective measures (emotional feelings and the reference groups) [...]"* (Ciornea, 2013, p. 63). Notably, in their conclusion based on research among Romanian LFCs, Zaharia and Zaharia (2015, p.207) stress*: "To avoid certain methodological*

shortcomings, we believe it would be most appropriate for this kind of research to use individual interview method". Therefore, the choice of employing individual interviews as a research method for the main study was theory impregnated. Additionally, if one is to scrutinize the external validity of findings from interviews, apology is that sometimes respondents can provide examples with acquaintances or relatives (Orrange, 2003). Similar characteristic was observed in FGDs. The following section evaluates the characteristics of individual interviews.

3.5.2. Strengths and weaknesses of individual interviews

The discussion is illustrated with a table, followed by a detailed discussion of the presented strengths and weaknesses of individual interviews.

Table 3:9 Strengths and weaknesses of individual interviews

Strengths	Weaknesses
Questioning via probing secures higher chances that participants understand the questions correctly (Paradise and Blankenship, 1951)	Mobility of participants, location of interviews, flexibility of schedules (Morgan, 1996)
The quality of ideas from individual interviews is higher compared to the quality of ideas obtained from focus groups (Fern, 1982; Kruger *et al.* 2019)	Unable to understand group norms (Seal *et al.* 1998)
Produce greater range of themes, compared to focus groups (Seal *et al.* 1998)	Restricted to question-answer approach (Heary and Hennessy, 2006)
More time available for individuals to express their thoughts (Morgan, 1996)	Requires longer time period to schedule each individual interview
Greater control of the interviewer over the interview process compared to the discussion dynamics of focus groups (Morgan, 1996)	
Ability to obtain specific and more accurate ideas of individual's experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005)	
Transcription process is less time-consuming, compared to FGDs	

As of the first strength presented in *table 3:9*, probing provided the researcher the opportunity to dig under the surface in order to obtain greater insights into individual participants' views, beliefs and thoughts. However, an aspect that the researcher noticed throughout individual interviews is that, compared to FGDs where probing can occur among participants in a natural dialog atmosphere, this presented a more delicate technique for interviews. Whilst some participants were open to probing, others were less incline to explain their views in further detail.

In regard to the fourth strength, more time, there are two sides of the coin. On one hand, individual interviews gave participants more time to give rich information on the various questions (Morgan, 1996) that pertained to the research topics. On the other hand, even though individual interviews gave participants the opportunity to explain their thoughts more vividly, some of them were concerned about their schedules and the time that an interview would require. The researcher reflected this issue by informing participants that the approximate duration of an interview takes between 40 minutes to one hour. This information was accompanied by explaining to participants that the duration of an interview depended on their responses and that the interview would be scheduled in a manner convenient for them. In effect, this gave participants the freedom to be the *"coordinators"* for scheduling the interview, which made them feel more relaxed during the interview, without thinking of the time that the interview will take.

Regarding the next strength, greater control of the interviewer (Morgan, 1996), the researcher noticed it is also quite controversial. On one hand, the researcher considers that is actually one of the characteristics considered by literature as a weakness, namely restricted to question-answer approach (Heary and Hennessy, 2006), that contributed for better focus and control over the dynamics of the interview. However, throughout the course of interviews, the researcher noticed that although she had greater control as opposed to FGDs, some participants were carried away in their responses and the interviewer had to remind them of the question, or to probe by repeating the question in order to make sure that participants were thinking of the specific question again and provide more concrete responses.

As of the following strength presented in *table 3:9*, that the quality of ideas from individual interviews is higher compared to the quality of ideas obtained from FGDs (Fern, 1982; Kruger *et al.* 2019), the researcher would allow herself the liberty to state that both types of exploratory research produced ideas of equal quality. Specifically, whilst the quality of ideas from FGDs could be the product of discussion dynamics, the quality of ideas obtained from individual interviews was due to the ability to obtain specific and more accurate ideas of individual's experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Moreover, the range of ideas that emerged from individual interviews could also be due to the greater burden on the individual to explain themselves (Agar and MacDonald, 1995). On the other hand, as noticed before, the quality of ideas obtained from interviews was also dependent on individual's desire to elaborate on their views. Even though the

researcher was ready with probes and subsequent questions, she had to be sensitive to each participant's willingness to provide more detailed responses. Thus, although both FGDs and individual interviews have different characteristics, in fact both approaches contributed to fulfill the research objectives by offering the researcher with insights about consumers' experiences

Additionally, one distinctive advantage of interviews, which is the result of researcher's personal experience, is that the transcription process is less time- consuming, compared to FGDs. The researcher would allow herself to consider this as an advantage of crucial importance, for two main reasons. First, it was helpful for facilitating the process of theoretical saturation. Second, as a rule of thumb among qualitative researchers is that qualitative research involves sufficient *"time- and labour intensive"* process of data collection and analysis (Hays and Wood, 2011, p. 291). Nevertheless, compared to the transcription process of FGDs, transcribing interviews was much less time-consuming process. In effect, this assisted the researcher to focus on other important tasks related to identifying prospective participants and data collection.

With respect to the presented **weaknesses**, the first one referred to sample accessibility. However, compared to FGDs, arranging the most convenient time and date for individual interviews was a significantly easier task. Thus, experience demonstrated that the difficulty of arranging FGDs, cannot be even compared to the smooth process of planning an interview with one participant. Regarding the location of interviews, this disadvantage was defeated at the beginning of data collection, as the researcher provided clear guidelines to participants in each of the countries. Thus, instead of considering these aspects as weaknesses, one can view them as obstacles that need to be given attention and find the most appropriate solution for smoothing the process of data collection. Further, data collection via individual interviews required longer time period to schedule each individual interview. Yet, by employing the advantages offered by the Internet to facilitate the process of data collection, enabled the researcher to finalize into set time limits or reach participants who were either geographically dispersed or did not have the opportunity to meet for face to face interviews.

Finally, the last weakness presented in *table 3:9* referred to the lower ability to understand group norms (Seal *et al.* 1998). Nevertheless, the opportunity to gain insight into how individual people interact, interpret the world (Frels and Onwuegbuzie, 2013) and ability

to obtain more accurate ideas of individual's experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005) as a distinctive strength of individual interviews suggest that the purpose of this method was not to understand group dynamics, but rather to understand the individual's thoughts, views, beliefs and perceptions. The next section discusses the sample selection criteria for individual interviews.

3.5.3. Sample selection criteria for individual interviews

As the researcher did not allocate a suitable existing list of the population, based on her experience from the pilot study, she developed a demographic questionnaire to create a sampling framework (Saunders *et al.* 2009). The main sampling criteria are presented in *table 3:10.*

Table 3:10 Sampling criteria for individual interviews

Criteria	Main study
Age	post-university Gen Y (27-36)
Gender	Male; female
Nationality	Greek, Bulgarian, Romanian
Social Media usage	Several times per day/ Everyday
Consumption	At least twice per year (in one year period)
English	Fluent
Indicative list of brand names	Yes
Luxury fashion/clothing	All items that can be worn on the person: apparel; watches; jewelry; leather goods, shoes (Choo *et al.* 2012; Zhang and Kim, 2013)

First, the age of participants was defined, based on the year of birth, as suggested by academic literature. Specifically, Gen Y consumers is the segment born in the period after 1981 until the year of 1999 (Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011; Bolton *et al.* 2013). The pilot study focused on Gen Y LFCs, who are university students, have limited income and tight budgets (Giovannini *et al.* 2015). Recognizing this as a limitation the main study recruited participants who were in the workforce and have their own incomes in order to understand the impact of the economic crisis from 2008 on their purchase behavior. This is also compatible with previous studies in luxury fashion literature, which used students for their pilot studies, and post-university Gen Y consumers for the main research (Shin *et al.* 2017). Second, SM usage and luxury fashion consumption were identified, based on characteristics of participants in the pilot study. Participants from the pilot study used SM platforms at least *"Everyday"* and most of them purchased luxury fashion brands at least

"Every six months". Thus, it was important to allocate participants who fulfil similar criteria (de Vaus, 1996). Third, the criteria for nationality followed the geographical grounds, which were established for the pilot study. Although previous studies do not direct the attention strictly to the need for research in Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, they outlined that future research can be conducted in cross-country context among markets that share similar characteristics (Ciornea, 2014; Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016) with a specific emphasis on understanding gender differencesin multiple country investigation (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). Such was the case with the chosen countries. Henceforth, although consumers in the selected countries cannot be defined as a lucrative market segment per se, identifying common features among consumers on a regional level is valuable for providing insights into local consumption patterns (Mehmedovic and Agic, 2015) and gain insights into the consumers' views about questions about the research topic. Fourth, the sample included participants who were actual LFCs. Prior luxury consumption experience was selected for better representation, based on participants' consumption behavior (Leibenstein, 1950). The inclusion of actual frequent LFCs helped to exclude basic economic drivers (Kapferer and Michaut, 2014) and secure the appropriateness of research findings (Kapferer and Florence, 2016).

Further, the criterion for *"English"* was added because throughout the pilot study some participants were shy or not able to freely express in English. Sixth, the reasoning for including an indicative list of brands is that while evaluating filled demographic questionnaires for the pilot study, the researcher noticed that brands such as Zara, H&M, Bershka, Stradivarius were perceived as luxury. Additionally, based on Zhang and Kim (2013) definition of luxury fashion, the research was interested in luxury fashion/clothing goods, because both terms are viewed as a single entity and consumers do not differentiate them (Rocha *et al*. 2005; Ngai *et al.* 2015). This excludes small luxury buyers and gift-giving: sunglasses, business cardholders, keyrings, neckties, cellular phone accessories, cosmetics, perfumes (Choo *et al*. 2012). Finally, identifying an equal number of participants from each gender per country was important part of the research (both for the pilot study and main study) on luxury fashion consumer behavior in the SEE region. As a first step in the research, pilot study (FGDs) provided valuable insights into gender differences in luxury fashion consumer behavior in a research area that is scarce on empirical evidence (Sussman, 1964). In effect, following this example, the employment of an equal number of individual interviews among male and female LFCs benefited the research by providing knowledge regarding the impact of SM on Gen Y brand loyalty

and helped to offer better scope for LFBs to target this young promising consumer group by suggesting possible strategies based on customer segmentation. Having presented the sample selection criteria, the next section presents the data collection for individual interviews.

3.5.4. Data collection for individual interviews

The process of theoretical sampling was performed until the moment of identifying theoretical saturation. Theoretical saturation *"means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category"* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 61). The underlying premise was to collect data until the moment the researcher identified similarities in responses, which secured confidence that collected data was sufficient to generate theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Spiggle, 1994). The researcher aimed to include participants who belong to the criteria for Gen Y consumers, but at the same time to be of different ages to include diverse viewpoints (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As an essential component in qualitative studies, the data collection procedure was initiated by establishing rapport (Hamisphere *et al.* 2014). In broad terms rapport *"involves trust and a respect for the interviewee and the information he or she shares. It is also the means of establishing a safe and comfortable environment for sharing the interviewee's personal experiences and attitudes as they actually occurred"* (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p. 316). The effort to establish rapport was achieved through the first group (theme) of questions in the interview protocol. This helped to establish more relaxed environment and to enable participants to respond in their own words.

The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Skype. The second option was included for two main reasons. First, prospective participants were geographically dispersed, and Skype was employed for convenience reasons. Second, researcher's experience from the pilot study showed that even though in some case prospective participants were willing to help, their schedules did not allow them to take part in the research, due to the need to be physically present. Yet, whether a Skype interview is an appropriate tool for qualitative studies depends on the sensitivity of the topic being discussed (Iacono *et al.* 2016). Whilst this may pose a challenge for more sensitive topics (*i.e.* personal health issues), the researcher took considerate attention not to include questions that query for details from their personal lives and/ or sensitive topics they can be reluctant to discuss. Moreover, in support of the use of Skype interviews, it appeared that some participants were more positive toward taking part in the research when they

learned they could respond to questions in the environment of their own homes (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; Hanna, 2012). This also increased the opportunity to recruit participants and gather rich data in a timely manner (Iacono *et al.* 2016).

However, a significant issue in this case refers to the establishment of rapport (Burkitt, 2004). Nevertheless, this presents an obstacle only in cases when the researcher interviews shyer or introvert participants (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). One strategy to overcome this obstacle was to keep communication for distributing the information sheet and arranging the interviews, for example via e-mail or Facebook communication (Seitz, 2016). More so, Skype interviews may cause technical inconveniency, which can create abrupt feelings and loss of intimacy (Seitz, 2016). However, as previously outlined keeping a communication before the interviews helped to establish rapport, which assisted in the process of conducting the interviews. Richness of data was ensued by putting more effort to listen to participants' responses and the emotions they expressed throughout the interviews (Seitz, 2016). Another option would have been to send the interview questions by e-mail. However, this was not considered an effective option because: a) the response takes weeks (Haataja, 2011), which harms the procedure in terms of time effectiveness and b) questionnaires are not suitable for exploratory studies, which involve a large number of open-ended questions (Saunders *et al.* 2009). Thus, the use of Internet tools (*i.e.* Skype) increased the opportunity for interviewing consumers, considered appropriate for the research, without limiting the opportunities for interviews due to space or time factors, and without compromising the quality of the interview (Haataja, 2011).

Finally, the researcher could have included the option for Facetime or WhatsApp interviews. The researcher did not include this opportunity because this implies that participants would have to provide their phone numbers. This would have run the risk of giving participants the impression that they should provide personal data. This is also why the questionnaire was designed in a way that prospective participants had the choice to decide whether they wanted to provide their phone numbers. That being said, the next section presents a detailed review of the questioning route for interviews.

3.5.5. Questioning route of individual interviews

The questioning route for the main study was based on semi-structured interviews. It was organized by using a list of pre-determined open-ended questions, and accompanying probes (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). Open-ended questions were a preferred approach for the interviews because they provided freedom to participants to respond in their own language (Jones, 1996; May, 2001). However, a cited disadvantage of open-ended questions is that they run the risk of producing more detailed responses than the question suggests (Jones, 1996). Nevertheless, except for the difficulties with managing data that such responses may cause, the latter aspect was not regarded as a disadvantage. On the contrary, the context in which the interviews took place was an important aspect of the research for enhancing the quality of research findings (Paradise and Blankenship, 1951; Prowse and Camfield, 2013). The dialogue nature of the interviews rendered accurate findings (Morgan, 1996; Prowse and Camfield, 2013) by obtaining fruitful insights from participants' responses (Cheong, 2013). One way through which this was achieved was by dividing the interview protocol into five sections, based on different themes. In this way, the researcher had the opportunity to yield responses on a wide range of questions pertaining to the research topic (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

Table 3:11 Themes of the interview protocol

Theme 1: Basic views on luxury
Theme 2: Consumer values and brand loyalty
Theme 3: Social Media usage and Social Media role for the development of brand loyalty
Theme 4: Economic crisis impact on consumer behavior and brand loyalty, role of Social Media for the development of brand loyalty
Theme 5: Ending questions: managerial suggestions, additional views

As depicted in *table 3:11*, the themes corresponded to the research objectives of the research. These were as follows: 1) Unearth Gen Y's perceptions of luxury fashion brands; 2) Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior by considering the role of gender, 3) Explore luxury fashion consumer behavior in SEE given the past economic crisis, 4) Gender as a factor defining Gen Y behavior of luxury fashion customers on Social Media, and 5) Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through SM. Specifically, the following figure illustrates how the themes were developed in a manner that helped to fulfill each of the research objectives.

Figure 3:3 Interview protocol themes corresponding to the research objectives

Theme 1: Basic views on luxury	***Objective 1***: Unearth Gen Y's perceptions of luxury fashion brands
Theme 2: Consumer values and brand loyalty	***Objective 2:*** Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior by considering the role of gender
Theme 3: Social Media usage and Social Media role for the development of brand loyalty	***Objectives 4 and 5***: -Gender as a factor defining Gen Y behavior of luxury fashion customers on Social Media -Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through SM
Theme 4: Economic crisis impact on consumer behavior and brand loyalty, role of Social Media	***Objective 3***: Explore luxury fashion consumer behavior in SEE given the past economic crisis

It is important to outline that interview questions (the interview protocol) was not piloted prior to conducting the individual interviews. Rather, the pilot study served the basis for piloting the questions, see whether they are understood correctly, offer meaningful insights, and identify areas that need further research. With this in mind, the following lines present how the FGDs from the pilot study helped the researcher to prepare the questioning route for the individual interviews. First, the pilot study assisted in obtaining more general understanding of the research topic (Morgan, 1996) and in checking the questioning route (Sieber, 1973). Consequently, the researcher decided to include some of the same questions for the individual interviews, which elicited valuable information on the research topic. These are presented in the following table.

Table 3:12 Use of the same questions in FGDs and individual interviews

Questions used for FGD's	Reasons to repeat the questions in the QR for individual interviews
1.*Can you describe your first experience with a luxury brand? How did that make you feel?* (**in the interview protocol:** *Do you remember your first experience with luxury fashion? Would you please describe it to me/ How did you feel back then?* 2.*What are your attitudes towards luxury fashion brands?* 3.*Which aspects do you enjoy the most in the luxury consumption experience?* 4.*What Social Media brand activities do you find most interesting?* (**in the interview protocol:** *What do you enjoy the most in the luxury fashion experience?*) 5. *Please describe the importance that Social Media brand relationships have as opposed to offline environment?* (**in the interview protocol:** *Do you prefer these luxury fashion brand build a relationship with you on social media platforms or offline? Why?* 6. *Ending questions*	1) these questions made participants feel more relaxed for the conversation to follow and introduce the respondent to the topic (Krueger, 2000; May, 2001) 2) to obtain first-person description and understand respondents' luxury brand experiences (Cheong, 2013) 3) responses to these questions elicited valuable information on participants' consumer behavior throughout the FGD's, which further enhanced the analysis and findings that start to emerge

Building on *table 3:12*, the last group of questions (*ending questions*) were kept because: a) they provided valuable managerial implications and b) allowed the participants to address concerns and ideas they did not have the opportunity to discuss during the interviews or were the most important to them (Krueger, 2000; May, 2001). Second, the pilot study helped to identify broader perspectives for areas that need further in-depth research (Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992; Morgan, 1996; Marrelli, 2008; Kim, 2010) throughout the main study. For better representation purposes, these areas and corresponding questions are presented in detail in the following table.

Table 3:13 How pilot study findings informed the questioning route for individual interviews

Insights from the pilot study	Corresponding questions
Brands such as Zara, H&M, Bershka, Stradivarius were listed as luxury in the demographic questionnaire for the pilot study	*What is your understanding of luxury?*

Findings from the pilot study reveal that attitudes revolve around perceived uniqueness and desire to be distinguished from the bandwagon consumer group.	*What would be your reaction if you see other people, wearing the same luxury clothes as yours?* *How is that/ Why?*
Participants emphasized on the intrinsic aspects (*i.e.* quality and uniqueness) Male consumers acknowledged terms as family and club, increased fashion consciousness and joy Females recognized brands' story and the manner it is communicated in traditional in-store environment	*Would you define yourself as a loyal customer to some of these brands?* *What makes you desire for luxury fashion brands?* *What are your motives to purchase luxury fashion brands?* *What criteria do you look for when choosing luxury fashion brands?* *How would you finish the sentence: When I think of my favorite luxury fashion brand/ I feel…?*
Findings demonstrated clear gender differences in males' aspiration for the dream factor of luxury fashion brands as opposed to females' quest for increased brand availability on different SM platforms.	*What is your opinion about luxury brands' participation in Social Media? Can you give me more examples?* *How would you finish the sentence: When I think of my favourite luxury fashion brand I feel...* *How Social Media help you to develop that feeling/ for that feeling to last longer?* *How Social Media help to boost your brand loyalty towards these luxury fashion brands?*
The analysis revealed that a core driver for participants' preferences for the traditional retail format was the financial aspect (price) of acquiring luxury fashion brands (ability to evaluate utilitarian product features and perceived risk in online purchases) Emerging findings implied that the query is not about the difference between affordable and true luxury, but about brand loyalty in the context of the past economic crisis, including the value of SM for building brand loyalty	*How is purchase behaviour of luxury fashion brands affected by the economic crisis?* *In this context, how do you think Social Media can be helpful for attracting your attention? And for developing brand loyalty?*

As of the first question, the researcher also found support in academic literature, suggesting that consumer perception of luxury is strictly subjective, the questioning route included one question asking participants their own view of luxury (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016). As of the second series of questions presented in *table 3:13* (third row), pilot study findings contradict what seems to be current knowledge. Specifically, prior research demonstrates young consumers' interest in the product aspect (Kim and Brandon, 2010) and lower attention to service quality and purchase experience (Shukla *et al.* 2016). Further, studies in India show that consumers emphasize more on the product characteristics of the brand (Jain *et al.* 2012; Jain and Shultz, 2016). Based on the initial findings, the researcher considered essential to obtain further in-depth understanding into the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs and the prospects for brand loyalty toward LFBs. Following the interest in Gen Y LFCs evidenced in published literature, it was considered valuable to deepen our understanding of existing issues such as Gen Y LFCs' preferences for in-store versus online buying experience (Miguens and Vasguez 2017; Cristini *et al.* 2017; Donelly and Scaff, 2017) and provide fresh insights into the debate about Gen Y's brand loyalty (Godey *et al.* 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Babijtchouk *et al.* 2018; Selvarajah, 2018).

Regarding the fourth group of questions, the pilot study contributed for better comprehension of consumer beliefs (Kim and Lee, 2015) about SM impact on brand loyalty (Gautam and Sharma, 2017) in a region for which there has been a paucity of academic knowledge, as was the case with SEE. On the same note, because brand loyalty is dependent on the gender of the consumer (Levy and Loken, 2015) to produce significant theoretical and managerial implications, it is essential to explore both websites and SM, by considering the role of gender in consumer perceptions of SM marketing activities (Nadeem *et al.* 2015). In this context, as demonstrated in table 16, initial findings from the pilot study shed light on an interesting aspect regarding gender differences in their perspectives about SM presence of LFBs. Consequently, it was considered valuable to elicit additional knowledge, by asking interview participants questions that would help the researcher to uncover more details about gender as an influencing factor in consumer perceptions of SM marketing activities of LFBs, and thus, fulfill the research objectives.

As of the last group of questions presented in table 16, initial findings inclined the researcher to consider the role of the economic crisis on the consumer behavior of Gen Y

LFCs. Specifically, the findings indicated that the economic crisis might have left its marks on Gen Y LFCs, making them more considerate about luxury fashion purchases. Thus, the pilot study stimulated an interest in exploring further the economic crisis effect on Gen Y luxury fashion customers' behavior and the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs in the SEE region. Finally, as mentioned before, it is not possible to predict all of the necessary questions that will likely yield insightful knowledge to the research topic (Paradise and Blankenship, 1951). By performing a continual investigation (based on two phases: pilot study and a main study) of a phenomenon, the researcher exploited the potential of exploratory research for enhancing findings in social science studies (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Seale, 1999). Based on the insights from the FGDs, this helped the researcher to explore further aspects that were considered important for building knowledge of theoretical and managerial relevance. Grounded on the emerging empirical data, the interview protocol was constructed by including questions which were inspired from the FGDs. These are presented in *table 3:14*.

Table 3:14 Insights for areas that need further research in the main study (second phase) based on pilot study findings (first phase)

-purchase triggers
-enjoyable aspects in the luxury fashion consumption experience
-reaction of seeing other people with the same luxury fashion items/ brands impact of
-celebrities' impact on luxury fashion consumption
-impact of peers on luxury fashion consumption
-Social Media part in the decision-making process (for future purchases)
-perspectives on sharing personal brand experiences on SM
-preferences for online versus offline purchases
-preferences for the development of online versus offline customer-brand relationships
-perspectives on online-brand communication, interest in following brands on SM

As depicted in *table 3:14*, insights from FGDs which were part of the pilot study (first phase) led to recognizing areas that need further research and could help to broaden the luxury brand loyalty literature with an emphasis on Gen Y LFCs. It is important to provide the reader with a comprehensive view of the approach toward developing the interview protocol. This is illustrated in the following table (*table 3:15*). The table is constructed

by presenting how insights from academic literature about constructing an interview protocol assisted the researcher to develop the questioning route for individual interviews.

Table 3:15 Guidelines for developing the interview protocol

Guidelines in academic literature	How the researcher adapted the guidelines
Open-ended, broader questions introduce participants to the core nature of the research (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006)	The interview was initiated with an open-ended, broader question
Use the simplest language possible when asking the questions (May, 2001)	In developing the interview protocol the researcher complied with this guidance
Longer questions are developed with caution to ensure precision that participants understand the concepts, without using prejudicial language (Paradise and Blankenship, 1951; Jones, 1996; deVaus, 1996)	When longer questions were necessary to elicit additional information, these questions were developed with caution to ensure precision that participants understand the context and concepts the researcher is interested in, without using prejudicial or biased language
Ask for participants' definition of the terms, used in questions: doing so by having a sequence of questions that include a certain concept (Jones, 1996; de Vaus, 1996).	Questions were developed to reduce ambiguity in some of the words (concepts) used in the questions. The researcher constructed preceding questions that provide clarification to participants' definition of the terms, used in the subsequent questions
Autobiographical questions: provide respondents time to think about their responses, which improved response accuracy (Burton and Blair, 1991)	The first theme of questions included an autobiographical question
A question based on the everyday approach: based on the grounds of conducting an ethical research when approaching sensitive topics (de Vaus, 1996; May, 2001)	The first question in the theme about the economic crisis was based on the *everyday approach*. By introducing respondents to the context of the past economic crisis (through *impersonal wording*), the researcher aimed to make them feel more relaxed for the subsequent questions, which were based on *personal wording* to understand their feelings and opinion on the matter (de Vaus, 1996, p. 85).
Filter approach: used in attempt to obtain in-depth understanding of participants' *beliefs* (de Vaus, 1996, p. 82; May, 2001, p. 107)	The final question regarding brand loyalty and three of the questions in the theme about *Social Media* were based on the filter approach
Group prior and subsequent questions in a way that participants can respond to the subsequent question in light of their previous responses (Jones, 1996)	The sequence of questions that pertained to brand loyalty, Social Media and the economic crisis aimed at easing respondents to think about their beliefs in

	more detail
Understand participants' attitudes, namely *"what they think is desirable"* (de Vaus, 1996, p. 82)	Part of the questions in the theme of Social Media and the Ending questions were developed using this guideline
Probes are a valuable source for encouraging participants to share more information and *"get below the surface"* (Burr *et al.* 2014, p. 343). This was approached with caution to reduce bias in probing and avoid misleading respondents to the nature of information the researcher might be looking for (Jones, 1996; May, 2001).	Gaining comprehensive knowledge was achieved via probing. The researcher prepared part of the questions with subsequent probes.

Following the routes of semi-structured interviews, the researcher allowed herself the liberty to change the order of the questions, depending on the manner respondents were leading the discussion. This means that in some cases when, for example, respondents talked about the importance of uniqueness of LFBs, the researcher did not follow the exact order of the questions, but instead asked participants the question "*What would be your reaction if you see other people, wearing the same luxury clothes as yours?*". Such instances were an exception from the rule and the researcher tried to comply to the initial order of questions in the interview protocol. Having presented how the pilot study informed the main study and guidelines to developing the questioning route, the following table (*table 3:16*) illustrates the questioning route for individual interviews.

Table 3:16 Interview protocol for individual interviews

Theme 1: Basic views on luxury
1. What is your understanding of *luxury*?
2. What are your attitudes towards luxury fashion brands?
3. Do you remember your first experience with luxury fashion? Would you please describe it to me?
Theme 2: Consumer values and brand loyalty
1. What makes you desire luxury fashion brands?
2. What are your motives to purchase luxury fashion brands?
3. What criteria do you have when choosing luxury fashion brands?
4. What do you enjoy the most in the luxury consumption experience?
5. What would be your reaction if you see other people, wearing the same luxury clothes as yours?
-How is that/ Why?
6. What do you understand by the phrase *"brand loyalty"*?
7. Do you have favorite luxury fashion brands?
8. Would you define yourself as a loyal customer to some of these brands?
-No: Why is that?
How will this change if you see celebrities wearing these brands?

-Yes: What makes you stay loyal to these brands?
   Do you think you were affected by seeing celebrities wearing such brands? -
     In what ways?
9. How is your attitude towards luxury fashion brands affected by seeing friends' posts or opinion on Social Media?

Theme 3: Social Media usage and Social Media role for the development of brand loyalty

1. Do you share your brand experience on SM? -Why is that?
2. Do you follow any luxury fashion brands on social media?
     -Yes: How did you start following them?
           What makes you to follow these brands?
    -No: Why?
         How this will change if you see your friends following some of these brands?
3. How do you use Social Media to plan your future purchases of luxury fashion brands?
4. What is your opinion about luxury fashion brands' participation in Social Media?
   -Can you give me some examples?
5. What is your preferred channel to buy luxury fashion brands?
6. Do you prefer luxury fashion brands to build a relationship with you on SM platforms or offline?
-Social Media
     What SM activities attracted your attention?
      What SM activities kept your attention?
      How Social Media help to boost your brand loyalty towards these luxury fashion brands?
  -in-store
     What aspects would you wish to see/ experience as a luxury fashion customer on SM?
      Can you please provide examples with some brands?
      In what situation would you consider SM interaction/communication with luxury fashion brands?
7. What defines a good Social Media presence of a luxury fashion brand?
8. How would you finish the sentence*: "When I think of my favourite luxury fashion brand I feel..."*
9. How SM helps you to develop that feeling?

Theme 4: Economic crisis impact on consumer behavior and brand loyalty, role of Social Media for the development of brand loyalty
1.   There is evidence about the economic crisis' effect on purchase of luxury fashion brands. How is your purchase behavior of luxury fashion brand/s affected by the economic crisis? -Could you please elaborate on that? 2.   In this context, how do you think Social Media can be helpful for attracting your attention? And for developing brand loyalty?
Theme 5: Ending questions
1. Suppose you had one minute to talk to the marketing manager of your favorite luxury fashion brand? What recommendations would you give him for enhancing brand's presence in Social Media? 2. Is there anything else you would like to clarify?

The following section is devoted on providing the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the approach toward data analysis of individual interviews.

3.5.6. Data analysis of individual interviews

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, including all the probes used to elicit additional information (Jones, 1996). The transcribed data served the basis for subsequent analysis of findings. Qualitative research involves sufficient *"time- and labour intensive"* process of data collection and analysis (Hays and Wood, 2011, p. 291). NVivo was employed as a valuable tool for organizing the bulk of data, and identify excerpts related to the emerging themes and categories to support the findings credibility. NVivo presents a computer-based program designed specifically for the qualitative inquiries as it helps organize and retrieve qualitative data in the process of analyzing emerging findings (Crowley *et al.* 2002). Importantly, the program was used only for managing the large bulk of data (by uploading all the transcriptions at one place), text search and for the development of mind maps. Thus, instead of distancing the researcher from the empirical data, NVivo was utilized to facilitate the analysis of data (Hutchinson *et al.* 2010). The *"bureaucratization"* of data (Miles, 1979, p. 594) was managed by following guidelines on analyzing qualitative data through systematic thematic analysis. Thematic analysis presents a *"method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data"* (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This included four stages, presented in the following table (*table 3:17*).

Table 3:17 Data analysis of individual interviews

1)Data instances were coded and grouped together for later comparison purposes
In attempt to move from the uncertainty accompanying qualitative research (Klag and Langley, 2013), the researcher approached data analysis via *open coding* (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The process of *"naming and categorizing"* participants' responses (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 62), helped the researcher to move from the unknown towards understanding and insight pertaining to the research phenomenon (Klag and Langley, 2013)
2) Identify how categories and their properties interact among each other
Achieved via *axial coding* in which data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 96). Data analysis, based on segmentation, coding and categorization was valuable for

identifying data patterns and regularities (Hays and Wood, 2011)
3) Identification of theoretical saturation: no new categories emerge from the analysis
Data analysis, based on segmentation, coding and categorization was valuable for identifying data patterns and regularities (Hays and Wood, 2011). Through *selective coding* (Selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development), emergent insights were constantly compared among each other (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 116; Seale, 1999). Constant comparison refers to: *"a cyclical process of collecting and analysing data search for convergent and divergent categories, using coding structures from previous rounds of analysis to inform future analysis"* (Hays and Wood, 2011)
4) Presenting findings
Emerging findings were compared and contrasted with literature, with the purpose of enhancing *theoretical sensitivity* (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 50). Existing literature served the basis for supplementary validation either to support the findings or to demonstrate how the research added to theory with fresh and unique concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 52). This process helped to identify emerging patterns to illustrate how current theory applies in the research context (Miles, 1979; Alasuutari, 2010; Bansal and Corley, 2012). For findings that were not compatible with the others, the researcher tried to find possible explanations and were also presented as properties (Singh, 2015). Findings that were considered most relevant to the study present the themes (Singh, 2015)

Regarding the first step to data analysis, as Strauss and Corbin assert: *"During open coding the data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, compared or similarities and differences, and questions are asked about the phenomena as reflected in the data"* (p. 62). Although codes present a great barrier that prevents *"openness to new ideas that is often the hallmark of research studies of good quality"* (Seale, 1999, p. 104), they were *"helpful for organizing the data analysis"* and establishing rigor in the relationships among emerging constructs and concepts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 825; Bansal and Corley, 2012). As of the second step, the axial coding was followed by constant comparison among participants' views, meanings and opinions with the purpose of detecting *emic redundancies*: identifying similarities/ differences across participant perspectives (Spiggle, 1994, p. 499). Regarding the third step in data analysis, the constant comparative technique was achieved via identifying consistency/ inconsistency

in findings (Spiggle, 1994; Singh, 2015) towards systematic comparison of themes emerging from large body of data to produce rich and detailed understanding of the research topic (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The final step referred to presenting findings. Essentially, themes and their interactions are presented as title headings. Properties are presented as section headings. To eliminate the risk of losing the context in which participants shared their views and experiences (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and provide richness about the way themes were developed, the researcher employed *thick description* by presenting the full responses of interviewees (Hunt, 2011, p. 299). This was also performed in order to allow readers to form their own conclusions about the findings (Hunt, 2011). An additional evidence about the analysis of responses from individual interviews is presented in *appendix 2.*

The researcher presented the debate among epistemological-ontological philosophies, the choice of research methodology, sample selection criteria, questioning routes, and data analysis. Having presented this information, the following lines illustrate the rationale for the use of purposive sample selection and participant recruitment, both for FGD's and individual interviews.

3.6. The choice of a purposive sample selection

The decision related to sample selection for the research was approached by identifying the desired sample of participants (Krueger, 2000). Given the importance of common characteristics, knowledge and experience of participants (Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992), sample selection followed the *"fit for purpose"* approach (May, 2001, p. 95). Famous as non-probability purposive sampling, this strategy presents: *"a form of non-probability sampling where cases are judged as typical of some category of cases of interest to the researcher"* (deVaus, 1996, p. 78). Based on the interpretivist and exploratory premise of the research, focus was placed on obtaining an idea of the range of consumer experiences and views, rather than on generalizing for the population (deVaus, 1996; Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992). For this reason, purposive sample selection was considered relevant for it allowed to identify participants who could contribute with their rich experiences and offer fruitful theoretical insights (Haataja, 2011; Lucas, 2014) to the topic of Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior and SM impact on brand loyalty toward LFBs in the context of the former economic crisis. Consequently, the choice of sample strategy was based on the premise that the research

aimed to uncover details about a phenomenon about which little is yet known (Giddens, 1974) and contribute for the development of scientific knowledge (Calder,1977; Denzin, 2012). Nonetheless, not every member of Gen Y cohort is interested (or will ever be interested/ be able to purchase) in luxury fashion brands (Ressel, 2016). Thus, the decision to employ purposive sampling was also theory driven. In particular, it was of crucial importance that selected participants were actual LFCs. This was in accordance to Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggestion that researchers who take the exploratory road for their study should not opt for random sample selection. In this spirit, purposive sample was a resourceful tool for gathering rich data and secure sample cohesion for populations defined by rarity (Lucas, 2014; Hanslin and Rindell, 2014), as is the case with Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region.

As outlined, the researcher cannot opt for generalizable statements, as selected samples are not representative of the wider population segment (Orrange, 2003; Hunt, 2011). Nevertheless, by obtaining insightful information on the research phenomenon, the research could provide rich contextual basis to better tailor future studies, which endeavor in the topic area. Finally, the decision to employ purposive sample was supported by previous studies. The purposive sampling strategy is well-established in studies on brand loyalty (Liu and Yang, 2009; Kang *et al.* 2015) and in the luxury fashion context (Brun *et al.* 2008; Hanslin and Rindell, 2014; Kim and Kim, 2014; Liu *et al*. 2016). That being said, the following section sheds more light on an additional technique that was used for the sample selection for individual interviews.

3.6.1. Sample selection for individual interviews

Individual interviews and non-probability sampling are regarded as the appropriate method to approach the research topic, which finds support in relevant literature: *in-depth interviewers admit one cannot generalize from the non-probability samples. Yet, many still maintain such samples provide theoretical insights*" (Lucas, 2014, p. 406). An additional technique for individual interviews was based on snowball purposive sampling. Although snowball sampling does not ensure representativeness, this technique was effective for identifying prospective participants, who are otherwise hard to reach (Baltar and Brunet, 2012; Cleveland *et al.* 2013; Lucas, 2014). The sample selection was based on theoretical sampling: data coding and analysis and decisions about need for additional participants to ensure complete diversity of data until the researcher was confident that saturation is achieved (Jones, 1996; Seale, 1999). As trust plays a pivotal

role for establishing early contact with participants, the researcher opted for her network of friends and acquaintances, similarly to other studies in the field (Baltar and Brunet, 2012; Cheong, 2013; Butcher *et al.* 2017). The rationale was that friends would be more eager to participate in helping to identify more participants, considered appropriate for the research (Cleveland *et al.* 2013).

The main disadvantages of snowball sampling refer to response bias, sample bias and sampling error (Baltar and Brunet, 2012). To overcome the first drawback, the researcher approached prospective participants by explaining the research, their role in it, and providing them with an information sheet. Although the researcher does not underestimate the first bias, it is important to note that participants were selected on the basis of their experience with luxury fashion brands, which suggests that they would be possess to necessary knowledge to provide fruitful responses pertaining to the research topic (de Vaus, 1996; Jones, 1996). Regarding the remaining drawbacks, as the researcher did not allocate a suitable existing list of the population, based on her experience from the pilot study, she developed a demographic questionnaire to create a sampling framework (Saunders *et al.* 2009). Finally, the choice of individual interviews and purposive snowball sampling was also justified with previous studies in the luxury fashion sector, which have employed the same research and sampling methods (*table 3:18*).

Table 3:18 Previous research using in the luxury fashion domain qualitative research (individual interviews; purposive, snowball sampling)

Research	Scope	Method
Brun *et al.* (2008)	The role of supply chain management in luxury fashion retail (multiple case study in Italy)	*12 interviews* with luxury fashion manufacturers
Amatulli and Guido (2011)	Determinants of purchase intention for luxury fashion products	*40 interviews* (20 women; 20 men) with luxury fashion customers
Dion and Arnould (2011)	Luxury retail strategy	*7 interviews* with luxury store managers
Jiang and Cova (2012)	Social and personal meanings of luxury counterfeit consumption	*25 interviews* with luxury and counterfeit customers
Hanslin and Rindell (2014)	-Consumer-brand relationships in the luxury fashion sector (in the context of step-down line extensions)	Purposive sampling *13 interviews* (8 with females; 5 with males)
Perry and	Explore the decision-making process used	*5 semi-structured*

Kyriakaki (2014)	by luxury fashion retailer buyers in Greece	*interviews* and participant observation
Choi *et al.* (2016)	The role luxury brand value co- creation in SM settings	*10 interviews* with Chanel customers (semi-structured; snowball sampling)
Jain and Schultz (2016)	SM impact on luxury consumer brand-based choice	*10 interviews*; snowball sampling
Temperley (2016)	-male luxury fashion consumption behavour (UK and Germany)	*-8 interviews* -purposive sampling

Further on *table 3:18*, a common line of support for the choice of research method are related past studies that have employed inductive methodology by using individual interviews and snowball sampling. Given the lack of experience, the researcher decided that it would be better to follow the example of experts in the field in terms of the necessary number of interviews. Based on these studies, the researcher recruited around 20 respondents in each country. Apart from the evidence provided in *table 19*, the following quote is indicative for the importance of choosing the right participants and the quality of research questions (Hunt, 2011), rather than for the number of interviews: *"[…] it is possible to interview as few as 50 people with the right questions, and to come up with more useful answers than by asking 500 or even 50,000 people the wrong questions"* (Britt, 1950, pp. 671-672). In other words, for interpretivist studies the quality, rather than the quantity, of the data is of higher importance (Spiggle, 1994). Support was also found from Polkinghorne (1989; cited in Hays and Wood, 2011), stating an effective sample size of 5-25 participants. Having presented the sampling approach for the research, the following section presents the process of participant recruitment that took place for FGDs and individual interviews.

3.7. Participant recruitment for the research

Both the pilot and main studies in the research were initiated only once the researcher had the approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of Sheffield. The researcher paid considerate attention to the ethical procedures and considerations in conducting a sociological research. Some of these considerations included: 1) all participants were ensured full anonymity and signed a consent form, 2) data from FGDs and individual

interviews is stored in researcher's PC in password secured folders, 3) participants were informed about their role in the research and gratitude was expressed for their contribution in the research process, 4) participants were explained their rights to participate as well as to withdraw at any point of the research process. That being said, the following table presents a timetable with all the steps the researcher accomplished throughout the period of selecting and recruiting participants for FGDs and individual interviews.

Table 3:19 Participant recruitment for the research (pilot study and main study)

Steps	
Step 1	**Focus groups**
	asked the Head of BAED in Thessaloniki, Greece for approval to visit classes of Undergraduate and Postgraduate students in each of the countries (date of asking for the permission: 17.10.2016)
	Individual interviews
	First contact with researcher's friends and acquaintances (date: 22.01.2018)
Step 2	**Focus groups**
	Prior to visiting faculties of City College in Romania and Bulgaria, additional consent was asked from local Program Coordinators Romania: 27.10.2016 Bulgaria: 29.10.2016
	Individual interviews
	the researcher asked for permission to use the premises of City College: International faculty of the University of Sheffield and its partner universities in Bulgaria and Romania, for individual interviews Greece: 23.01.2018 Romania: 19.02.2018 Bulgaria: 29.01.2018
Step 3	**Focus groups**
	For recruitment purposes: obtained a list of class schedules (from the course administrators) for first, second and third level students, from the BAED
	Individual interviews
	The researcher started by creating a group of the closest friends (who also knew each other, so they would not feel strange to participate in a group where do not know people), explained to them the purpose of the research, sent them the information sheet and the questionnaire. Additionally, the researcher provided them with information about the profile that participants should fit to take part in the research
Step 4	**Focus groups**
	Lecturers were asked to allocate 10 minutes during which the researcher provided brief oral description of the research topic, distributed the information sheet and the questionnaire.
	Individual interviews
	The researcher informed her friends and acquaintances that prospective participants can contact her over Facebook, by typing her name in the search tab. The other option was that participants would send the filled

	questionnaires to the mediators (i.e. *mutual friends*) and they would forward it back to the researcher
Step 5	**Focus groups**
	Undergraduate students in Greece and Bulgaria were approached during lectures Postgraduate students in Romania were approached both by e-mail from the local Program Coordinator and the researcher visited classes of first and second level Postgraduate students.
	Individual interviews
	started in Bulgaria: beginning of February 2018 Prospective participants were first asked to send back the filled in questionnaire -During participant recruitment and data collection in Bulgaria, the researcher did not stop looking for prospective participants in the other two countries. This allowed her to have three Skype interviews with Romanian participants (one male and two female participants) and one with female Greek participant, at the time when she was still focused mostly in finding participants in Bulgaria.
Step 6	**Focus groups**
	After reviewing the filled questionnaires, students were approached via their university e-mail or personally during class breaks, with an invitation to participate in FGD's
	Individual interviews
	Participant recruitment in Greece - first face-to-face interview was held on 12th of March at Leontos Sofou, City College, Thessaloniki Participant recruitment was initiated on the same day as for Bulgaria, using the same group created on Messanger. The researcher also employed a Facebook group, created by the PhD students at SEERC to send them information about the research. This was done because there are both Greek and Romanian PhD students at SEERC. This helped the researcher to identify one more female participant for the research.
Step 7	**Focus groups**
	FGD's took place in the premises of City College premises at a time convenient for students (Kapoulas and Mayer, 2004). The schedule of FGD's was: 20th and 21st of October: FGD's in Greece 7th and 8th of November: FGD' in Bulgaria 12th and 13th. Of November" FGD's in Romania
Step 8	**Individual interviews**
	Individual interviews in Romania: the first was held on 8th of March, 2018 Most interviews were held over Skype, with the exception of 2 interviews for which the researcher travelled to Bucharest

Following the timetable of participant recruitment presented in *table 3:19*, the following lines present the reader with a more detailed review of participant recruitment for FGD's and individual interviews.

3.7.1. Participant recruitment for focus group discussions

Students were recruited in two focus groups per country: males and females. By dividing groups into males/ females the study took advantage of segmentation (Morgan, 1996), to explore how consumer perspectives vary among genders (Krueger, 2000). Segmenting participants based on common characteristics and direct experience with the phenomenon (Paradise and Blankenship, 1951; Merton *et al.* 1956; Byers and Wilcox, 1991; Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992) also contributed to the progress of FGDs (Morgan, 1996) and offered in-depth responses resulting from reciprocity (mutual characteristics) and participants' resemblance (Broom *et al.* 2009). Referring to the lack of prior experience as a moderator, choosing mini focus groups of five (Kapoulas and Mayer, 2004) facilitated leading of the group discussion (Morgan, 1996; Marrelli, 2008). Four of the focus groups consisted of five students. The remaining two focus groups consisted of four participants. These groups were in Greece (males) and in Bulgaria (females). Krueger (2000) and Fern (1982) cite a group size between 4-12 and 4-8 participants as effective for obtaining comprehensive insights. Scholars provide different opinions on what defines an effective group size, ranging from 4 till 12 participants (Merton *et al.* 1956; Byers and Wilcox, 1991; Brotherson and Goldstein, 1992; Marrelli, 2008). The decision to conduct FGDs of a smaller size was based on the relative easiness to lead the discussion, and greater flexibility for each participant to have enough time to share his view (Krueger, 2000). The choice of mini focus groups, divided by gender was felt appropriate in cases when researchers seek *"an element of homogeneity so that the opinions stem from an element of communality amongst participants"* (Carson *et al.* 2001, p. 118). The final sample included 10 participants from Postgraduate studies in Romania, 9 participants from Bachelor studies in Bulgaria (4 females and 5 males), and 9 students from Bachelor studies in Greece (4 males and 5 females). *Table 3:20* provides a summary of the final sample of FGDs.

Table 3:20 Focus group participants

Participant	Nationality	Age	Gender
Group 1			
GS6	Greece	19	male
GS7	Greece	19	male
GS8	Greece	20	male
GS9	Greece	19	male
Group 2			
GS10	Greece	18	female
GS11	Greece	20	female
GS12	Greece	20	female

GS13	Greece	19	female
GS14	Greece	22	female
Group 3			
BS15	Bulgaria	19	female
BS16	Bulgaria	18	female
BS17	Bulgaria	18	female
BS18	Bulgaria	19	female
Group 4			
BS19	Bulgaria	19	male
BS20	Bulgaria	22	male
BS21	Bulgaria	20	male
BS22	Bulgaria	23	male
BS23	Bulgaria	21	male
Group 5			
RS24	Romania	23	male
RS25	Romania	25	male
RS26	Romania	24	male
RS27	Romania	24	male
RS28	Romania	23	male
Group 6			
RS29	Romania	28	female
RS30	Romania	28	female
RS31	Romania	24	female
RS32	Romania	23	female
RS33	Romania	22	female

Following the presentation of the sample for FGDs, the following section discusses details around the process of participants recruitment for individual interviews.

3.7.2. Participant recruitment for individual interviews

Some of the participants filled the questionnaire on their PC's, others filled it in, gave it to researchers' friends and they provided it to the researcher prior to the interview, or sent a photo of the filled questionnaire. The last option was provided as an opportunity in case participants wanted the fill in a hard copy but did not have access to a scanner where they can transfer the file to a computer and send it back.

Participant recruitment for individual interviews in Bulgaria

Most of the interviews took place at the premises of VUZF in Sofia (the partner university of City College in Bulgaria). Others were held over Skype for reasons such as some female participants and one male participant had to take care of their babies and they were not able to leave their homes, they live outside Sofia, or simply for convenience purposes. Participant recruitment and data collection continued for a month and two weeks. Three

of the interviews were re-scheduled for a different day and time, due to participants' professional or personal duties. Most of the participants were friends of friends and there were rare cases one friends' friends had the opportunity or willingness to find other prospective participants for the research. The final sample for Bulgaria included 22 participants (11 female and 11 males).

Participant recruitment for individual interviews in Greece

Apart from the groups on Messanger, the rest of researcher's friends and acquaintances were contacted separately for each person. Those who accepted to help received the information sheet, questionnaire and criteria for participants over Messenger or via e-mail. The researcher kept contact with all of them during the period when she was in Bulgaria. The process of collecting questionnaires followed the same procedure as in Bulgaria. Some participants gave the questionnaires to the mediators, others filled it in the electronic version, sent as a scanned version or simply took a photo of the filled hard copy. The researcher informed her contacts that they can provide her name to participants for contact purposes on Facebook. Interviews were held either at two of the buildings of City College, Thessaloniki or over Skype. Skype was a preferred choice for people who have very busy work schedules, or they live in Athens, Greece. The final sample size included 20 participants (10 males and 10 females). Similarly to the research in Bulgaria, Skype allowed the researcher to conduct an interview with one female Romanian participant, while she was also recruiting participants in Greece.

Participant recruitment for individual interviews in Romania

Participants recruitment in Romania followed the same procedure as in Bulgaria and Greece. The final sample included 19 participants. Finally, the following table presents the final sample that was part of the research.

Table 3:21 Participants in individual interviews

Participant	Age	Gender	Context of the interview	Participant code
Bulgaria				
PBG1	28	Female	Face-to-face	PBG1, 28, female
PBG2	30	Male	Face-to-face	PBG2, 30, male
PBG3	28	Female	Face-to-face	PBG3, female, 28
PBG4	27	Male	Face-to-face	PBG4, male, 27
PBG5	27	Female	Face-to-face	PBG5, female, 27
PBG6	30	Female	Skype	PBG6, female, 30
PBG7	27	Female	Skype	PBG7, female, 27

PBG8	32	Male	Face-to-face	PBG8, male, 32
PBG9	30	Male	Face-to-face	PBG9, male, 30
PBG10	35	Male	Face-to-face	PBG10, male, 35
PBG11	33	Female	Face-to-face	PBG11, female, 33
PBG12	35	Male	Face-to-face	PBG12, male, 35
PBG13	31	Male	Face-to-face	PBG13, male, 31
PBG14	29	Male	Face-to-face	PBG14, male, 29
PBG15	36	Male	Skype	PBG15, male, 36
PBG16	34	Female	Skype	PBG16, female, 34
PBG17	29	Male	Face-to-face	PBG17, male, 29
PBG18	29	Female	Skype	PBG18, female, 29
PBG19	28	Female	Skype	PBG19, female, 28
PBG20	31	Female	Face-to-face	PBG20, female, 31
PBG21	33	Female	Face-to-face	PBG21, female, 33
PBG22	27	Male	Skype	PBG22, male, 27
			Greece	
PGR1	28	Female	Skype	PGR1, female, 28
PGR2	33	Female	Skype	PGR2, female, 33
PGR3	28	Male	Face-to-face	PGR3, male, 28
PGR4	34	Female	Face-to-face	PGR4, female, 34
PGR5	27	Female	Face-to-face	PGR5, female, 27
PGR6	28	Female	Face-to-face	PGR6, female, 28
PGR7	36	Male	Face-to-face	PGR7, male, 36
PGR8	31	Male	Face-to-face	PGR8, male, 31
PGR9	34	Male	Face-to-face	PGR9, male, 34
PGR10	29	Male	Face-to-face	PGR10, male, 29
PGR11	27	Female	Face-to-face	PGR11, female, 27
PGR12	30	Male	Face-to-face	PGR12, male, 30
PGR13	27	Female	Skype	PGR13, female, 27
PGR14	28	Male	Skype	PGR14, male, 28
PGR15	36	Female	Skype	PGR15, female, 36
PGR16	35	Female	Skype	PGR16, female, 35
PGR17	28	Male	Skype	PGR17, male, 28
PGR18	27	Female	Skype	PGR18, female, 27
PGR19	27	Male	Skype	PGR19, male, 27
PGR20	28	Male	Skype	PGR20, male, 28
			Romania	
PR1	27	Female	Skype	PR1, female, 27
PR2	27	Female	Skype	PR2, female, 27
PR3	28	Male	Skype	PR3, male, 28
PR4	29	Female	Skype	PR4, female, 29
PR5	35	Female	Skype	PR5, female, 35
PR6	36	Male	Skype	PR6, male, 36
PR7	27	Female	Skype	PR7, male, 27
PR8	28	Female	Skype	PR8, male, 28
PR9	27	Female	Skype	PR9, female, 27
PR10	28	Female	Face-to-face	PR10, female, 28
PR11	29	Female	Face-to-face	PR11, female, 29

PR12	32	Male	Skype	PR12, male, 32
PR13	33	Male	Skype	PR13, male, 33
PR14	31	Male	Skype	PR14, male, 31
PR15	31	Female	Skype	PR15, female, 31
PR16	29	Male	Skype	PR16, male, 29
PR17	36	Male	Skype	PR17, male, 36
PR18	34	Male	Skype	PR18, male, 34
PR19	36	Male	Skype	PR19, male, 36

Consent forms for interviews, which were conducted over Skype were received prior to the interviews. After arranging the date and time for the interview, the researcher sent the consent form to each individual participant and asked them to fill it in and send it before the interview. Participants sent the consent form the day before the interview, either over Messenger or over Skype, but the last case occurred in rare occasions. The researcher ensured that she has the consent forms printed and also signed them before the actual interview took place. Alongside participant recruitment in the three countries, the researcher was conducting interviews and transcribing data. Data transcription was performed for two main reasons. First, through this process the researcher was able to identify and detect possible similarities or differences across participants' responses, which helped her to decide on the next set of participants she had to look for until achieving *theoretical saturation.* Second, data transcription was performed for time-effective purpose. Participants were not offered any additional motive for participation, except the benefit from experiencing FGDs and individual interviews and the researcher expressed gratitude for their contribution to the research. The final section is devoted to discussing the approaches for ensuring soundness of research findings and analysis.

3.8. Establishing confidence in qualitative findings

Even though qualitative researchers have the freedom to be creative in the inquiry of seeking new and previously unexplored phenomena (Denzin, 2012) this also presents a burden in terms of ensuring their data is theoretically sound (Seale, 1999). A major critique of qualitative research, therefore, is that knowledge created in a more subjective manner, provides unreliable and invalid findings (Gwyther and Inesedy, 2009; Miles, 1979) by ignoring previous theoretical contributions (Klag and Langley, 2013). Thus, the main concern stems from the subjective interpretation of findings. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) note: *"In social science research, the interviewer generally upholds a monopoly*

of interpretation over the interviewee's statements. The research interviewer, as the "big interpreter" maintains an exclusive privilege to interpret and report what the interviewee really meant" (p. 589). In other words, given that the *"researcher is the instrument"* (Morrow, 2005, p. 252), quality of presented findings is dependent on researcher's ability to illustrate the decisions taken throughout the data collection and analysis (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999).

Conventional wisdom suggests that the trustworthiness of a research can be judged by the degree of validity (internal and external) and reliability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Whilst internal validity refers to *"the extent to which variations in an outcome (dependent) can be attributed to controlled variation in an independent variable"* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 90), external validity is concerned with generalizability of findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Reliability can be seen as a synonym of replicability (Morse *et al.* 2002). However, the judgement of these issues largely belongs to the positivistic paradigm (Seale, 1999). Thus, although on the surface the practice of evaluating a research report based on its validity and reliability may seem right, this research is concerned with the interpretative data (Morse *et al.* 2002). Interpretation of data, however, is subjective and there will always be the chance of different interpretations by different researchers/ reviewers (Seale, 1999). More so, the use of purposive sampling technique helped to capture a wide variety of customer perspectives, allowing readers to make their own interpretations about the applicability of findings (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, validity and reliability issues have no relationship to qualitative research because they are concerned with generalization, measurements and quantitative data (Stenbacka, 2001). Consequently, the value of qualitative research should be judged by issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Prior to illustrating how each of these criteria were employed for the research, it is important to outline one very important aspect, which refers to hard and soft data. This research took the interpretative and exploratory stance and it was concerned with interpretation of *soft data*, such as people's attitudes, motives, feelings, values, perceptions, meanings, etc. (Morse *et al.* 2002). However, hard data was also an important aspect of the research. Hard data refers to demographic data and sampling criteria used for participant recruitment (Morse *et al.* 2002). This process presented a crucial aspect of the research, as it is a key predecessor for ensuring rigor in findings. The quality of hard data was secured through *theoretical sampling*. Specifically, the researcher opted to identify as diverse sample as possible till she was confident that data saturation was achieved (Jones,

1996; Seale, 1999). This was accomplished via negative cases, (identifying data that is extraordinary and identifying other similar examples) and finding possible explanations to incorporate them in the process of building theory (Singh, 2015). Along with this, the researcher completed theoretical sampling via *"data saturation"*: the process of *"similar examples"* to identify *"emic redundancies"* (Spiggle, 1994, p. 499).

The first criterium, ***credibility*** was achieved through prolonged engagement and deployment of multiple qualitative methods, namely FGDs for the pilot study and individual interviews for the main study (Limoln and Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement presents a process through which the researcher invests a *"sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the "culture", testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or the respondents, and building trust"* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 301). In other words, the investigator spent a considerable time in the field in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and ensure that *"subjective individual constructions"* did not *"creep into the data"* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 302' Scotland, 2012, p. 12; Denzin, 1978). In this regard, the research was performed over the span of 2 years. Particularly, the pilot study (FGDs) were performed in a period of nearly 2 months and the main study (individual interviews) took place over 4 months. As trust is a *"developmental process"* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 303), the extended period of FGDs and individual interviews gave the researcher considerable time to establish rapport and build trust with the respondents. Importantly, this also included demonstrating to participants that their personal data will not be used in an inappropriate (unethical) manner, ensuring that the personal agenda of the researcher will not overshadow the ethical conduct of a sociological research, and the *"interests of the respondents will be honored as much as those of the investigator"* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 303). Additionally, prolonged engagement helped to ensure the credibility of findings by keeping track of the field notes and process of data analysis. Specifically, during the prolonged engagement the researcher tried to approach the emerging data from different perspectives in order to ensure that she grasped fully the contextual data. Eventually, at the end of the data analysis, she noticed that the final analysis was not *"continuously predictable from the original formulation"* (Lincoln. And Guba, 1985, p. 302). This gave the investigator the confidence that the time spent in the field was sufficient to fully grasp the phenomenon whilst at the time she did not deviate from her ontological and epistemological position (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Further, the use of two research methods helped to achieve credibility, as the use of multiple

qualitative methods is a proven approach in making the *"data believable"* (Webb *et al.* 1996; in Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 306).

Essentially, an alternative approach would be to opt for member checks. This presents a process through which the researcher checks the analysis of findings back with respondents (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), to validate concepts and complete data collection (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Although this approach is viewed as a valuable technique for ensuring credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), it resembles more closely the critical paradigm where the researcher and participants are involved in the analysis of data (Freire, 1950; in Scotland, 2012). By contrast, the interpretivist phenomenological position of the investigator contends member checks as inappropriate technique *"to confirm the study results with participants"* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, p. 812). For one, this would run the risk of participants changing their minds regarding their standpoint (Morse *et al.* 2002). Second, the investigator decided not to incorporate member checks also due to the risk that *"participants do not appreciate the theoretical development of the study and try to find their own data in the presentation"* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, p. 812). In either of the cases, this would put the researcher in a position of changing the findings. An alternative risk would be that the participants have *"situated motives"* and they do not provide the researcher with a comprehensive feedback due to willingness to *"please the investigator"* (Lincoln and Guba, 1895, p.302). Importantly, the performance of FGD is also perceived as a form of member checks, because the dialogue nature of this method (Merton *et al.* 1956) helps to *"increase the accuracy of the necessary data"* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018, p. 812). In any case, whether one wishes to include member checks for ensuring credibility is open to debate, but a defense to such criticism is that the same way that the approach toward uncovering a research phenomenon is subjective (Denzin, 1978; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Scotland, 2012), so are the approaches toward ensuring credibility.

Transferability is synonym of applicability (external validity) for quantitative studies (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999). However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) note: *"the naturalist cannot specify the external validity of an enquiry; he or she can provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility"* (p. 316). Based on the *emic* approach of qualitative reading, thick description was achieved by presenting direct quotes from interviews to illustrate the key insights and allow readers

to formulate their own interpretations and conclusions about the findings (Seale, 1999; Hunt, 2011). Interpretation of data, however, is subjective and there would always be the chance of different interpretations by different researchers/ reviewers (Seale, 1999). In addition to presenting excerpts from interviews, *thick description* was achieved by providing readers with more detailed review of the sample choice, method used in the research, data analysis and the decisions that were part of the research process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this way, readers possess a sufficient information to judge the *transferability* of findings to other settings familiar to them (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Additionally, by conducting a constant comparison, the researcher identified how existing literature was *transferable* to the findings and emerging knowledge in the context of the research (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Constant comparative method of emerging categories and relevant literature was helpful in the quest to produce knowledge of theoretical relevance (Seale, 1999). Thus, the research planted the seeds for future studies to come, by muddying the waters around the impact of SM and the economic crisis on Gen Y brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands in the SEE region.

Dependability was achieved via *inquiry audit*, a process that is *"based metaphorically on the fiscal audit"* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 317). This was applied by providing research methodology chapter to researcher's supervisors and presenting the research to conferences. The task was performed in an analogous way as *doing debriefing*. The purpose was to receive feedback on the research approach, emerging data, findings, interpretations, presented managerial, practical and theoretical implication and conclusions to *judge the trustworthiness* of the research and evaluate the level of *theoretical coherence* throughout the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 283; Morse *et al.* 2002). Finally, ***confirmability*** was achieved via *audit trial* (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 319). This strategy includes presenting all necessary records related the research inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It was realized by providing the reader with review of the ontological-epistemological debate, full and detailed review of the rationale for the choice of research methodology, the specific methods used for data collection, sample selection criteria, data collection process (including participant recruitment), data collection (including questioning route) and criteria used for enhancing confidence in the qualitative stance of the research. *Table 3:22* presents a summary of the methods that are employed for ensuring theoretical soundness of the research and findings.

Table 3:22 Theoretical soundness in qualitative research

Criteria	How these were applied in the research
Credibility	Prolonged engagement; use of two research methods (focus group discussions and individual interviews)
Transferability	1) thick description 2) how existing literature is transferable to emerging knowledge
Dependability	inquiry audit: provided research methodology chapter to researcher's supervisors and presenting the research to conferences
Confirmability	Audit trial
Other strategies	Theoretical sampling (negative cases; data saturation

The use of these criteria as a benchmark in the research design is believed to have assisted for the evaluation of the credibility, transferability, dependability and the confirmability of the research efforts presented in this PhD project. Finally, Marshall and Rossman (1995) provide an additional benchmark to check the "goodness of qualitative research" by responding to 20 critical questions. The answers to these questions related to the specific research can be found in *appendix 3*.

In all, the chapter presented the choice of approach toward the research inquiry. It presented to the reader with a review behind the ontological, epistemological assumptions of interpretivist philosophy, qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the rationale of choosing a research design, which was carried by FGDs and individual interviews. The chapter presented how the research was approached by discussing the first and the second phases (FGDs and individual interviews) of the PhD project. The research was approached by FGDs as part of a pilot study and individual interviews as part of the main study. The aspects of employing a purposive sample selection, and participants recruitment were also presented for both phases. The methodology chapter was concluded by emphasizing on the approach used to establish confidence in qualitative research. In the next chapters the thesis further continues with the presentation of the findings and the main implications from the research.

The preceding three chapters (chapter 4, 5 and 6) illustrate findings from the two phases of the research that took place over the course of three years' time. The research was performed in two different stages: conducting a pilot study and a main study. The pilot study was performed with the purpose of gaining initial insights into the vibes that define

Gen Y LFCs' consumer behavior in SEE. The pilot study was also a valuable platform that informed the direction of the questioning route for the main study. The the structural basis of the chapters includes:

- **Chapter 4: findings phase 1 focus groups**
  o Reflection of findings from FGDs
  o Comparative review with academic literature
- **Chapter 5: findings phase 2 individual interviews**
  o Reflection of findings from individual interviews
  o Comparative review with academic literature
- **Chapter 6: findings phase 2 individual interviews - Social Media**
  o Reflection of findings from individual interviews
  o Comparative review with academic literature

Chapter 4: FINDINGS PHASE 1 FOCUS GROUPS

The chapter presents findings from the FGDs in the pilot study. Each of the sub-sections throughout the analysis presents the set of themes and properties that provide the reader with a comprehensive review of the main concepts that composed the reality as seen and experienced by the studied Gen Y LFCs who took part in FGDs. The main emerging themes from the focus groups analysis were constructed based on reviewing participants' responses that shed light into the main research areas of this study. That is, focus was placed on context-related responses that were relevant to the research objectives. Accordingly, the research objectives are: 1) Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands 2) Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers, 3) Investigate gender differences in online consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers, 4) Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media. The section is structured in a way that depicts the themes and properties that altogether shaped the outlook of participants' lifeworld, by providing a comprehensive view of the aspects that emerged as being of highest value for studied Gen Y LFC. The section is structured along the following main emerging themes:

- Gen Y's perceptions of luxury fashion brands
- Key consumption characteristics of Gen Y consumers
- Consumers' perspectives about Social Media role for luxury fashion consumption and brand loyalty

The outlined themes formed the structural basis of developing the sections that present the main thematic areas, which composed the emerging knowledge about Gen Y's luxury fashion consumer behavior and perspectives on SM as part of the consumer buying experience and influencing brand loyalty. Each of the sections provide a detailed review about the aspects that appeared as most valuable for the studied Gen Y LFCs. The first section presents the theme on brand quality.

4.1. Perceived quality

Key words: ***long-lasting, certainty of quality, price-quality ratio***

The concept of perceived quality was a prevailing theme that emerged throughout all FGD's. However, as consumers' perspectives toward luxury fashion brands, it was mostly highlighted by participants from Romania and Greece. Consumers explained that quality of luxury fashion brands was consistent, meaning that luxury fashion garments **last for a long time**. The quality of luxury fashion items meant that luxury fashion customers of those studied could wear the items for a long period of time. As attested by participants in two of the FGDs:

Table 4:1 Examples attesting to quality: long-lasting

- […] I mean the price you pay for these good it will pay-off. You feel proud while wearing something or having, possessing an object made by a luxurious brand, it's high quality. You know it's not going to disappoint you throughout the years. Especially if it's timeless. I mean pieces like the little black dress, statement garments, they will always be great to use
(RS32, female, 23)
- agreement from RS31, female, 24 and RS33, female, 22
-First of all, the quality for me. It's expensive because other brands might have the same quality… it might be the little things but …it has…it might have the same thing, cheaper but after a week I can't wear it. It's torn up, it's dirty, it can't be cleaned…whatever happens, happens. When I buy a luxury product like that it has the guarantee, I'm gonna keep it for three years at least, or maybe more
(GS8, male, 20)
-I also pick them because of the quality
(GS6, male, 19)
-Of course...I'm saying the quality is the same, everything is the same, it's still...there is difference in the cut
(GS8, male, 20)
- I believe the quality is the first factor that you're going to choose for the brand and after...after the quality everything else comes […]
(GS7, male, 19)

As illustrated by the examples, FGD's uncovered that for participants the long-lasting quality of luxury fashion garments was a reason for them to consider that the purchase price was worth the investment. According to respondents the quality of luxury fashion garments covered the **price** at which items were offered. In the minds of those interviewed, the purchase of LFBs was perceived from an investment perspective. The

financial aspect of acquiring luxury fashion items was deservedly so, given the quality of LFBs. Herein, findings signified that for this segment the importance of quality as a key brands' feature had an impact on their purchase behavior. This was also reflected in the perception of price-quality ratio as focus groups' interviewees discussed quality from an investment perspective (the price being worth the investment). As stated by one respondent: *"You want to invest in it"* (GS13, female, 19). Notably, the views about perceived quality overlapped among male and female participants Thus, findings revealed that for Gen Y LFCs of those studied, the perception of luxury fashion purchases from an investment perspective (items that last for a long time and being worth the financial "sacrifice") appeared as a core perceived attribute of LFBs regardless of the gender of the consumer. This has important theoretical implications, demonstrating that whilst the consumption psychology might be defined by the consumers' gender, when it comes to the financial aspect of acquiring luxury fashion items, customers from FGDs have the same standards in their purchase decisions. That is, they look for quality luxury fashion items that are worth the investment: be that items would last for a long period of time and perceived price-quality ratio. Additionally, a unifying characteristic of FGDs was that participants spoke about the uniqueness of LFBs. The following section presents findings about perceived brand uniqueness.

4.2. Brand uniqueness

Key words: ***unique, not easy to buy, exceptional (chances of seeing someone else with the same luxury fashion brand/ item), brand DNA***

Perceived **brand uniqueness** appeared as an important brand characteristic across the FGD's from the three countries. Discussants explained that LFBs were "different". In this context, one of the specifics for selecting participants in the research was based on the criteria that they had to be LFCs. However, this did not exclude the possibility they also could be customers of lower-priced brands from the fast fashion segment. Consequently, participants justified their views about brand uniqueness by drawing a comparison with fast fashion brands. Participants draw a comparison with fast fashion brands such as Zara and H&M to justify their responses. In the eyes of those studied, the higher acquisition costs involved in the purchase of LFBs implied that there would be fewer people that would be in possession of the same luxury fashion garment and/ or brand. According to discussants the accessibility of fast fashion brands such as Zara and H&M increased the

chances that there would be more consumers who would have the financial ability to attain the fashion products offered at the flagship stores of more affordable brands from the fast fashion segment. As illustrated by the following examples:

Table 4:2 Examples attesting to perceived brand uniqueness

-I hate the fact that in stores like Zara, H&M, and similar to that, I hate the fact that you can buy a T-shirt and all of us may have the same T-shirt that's…I don't think it's not happening so frequently, yeah, with luxury brands (GS13, female, 19) *-Yes* (GS10, female, 18) and (GS12, female, 20) *-[…] I have the same with GS13, female, 19 because I like more to feel unique as GS14, female, 22 said, because of the…all the girls have the same T- shirt or dress, if it is cheap* (GS12, female, 20) *-Because if it is a casual brand it is more easy to buy it and that's when you go out and you see other 10 girls wearing the same...style"* (GS14, female, 22) *-I agree* (GS11, female, 20) *-Well, they are unique clothes. I mean if you walk into Ellie Saab store, I don't think that you can see these dresses in a shop like Stradivarius […] Yeah, they are different and unique* (BS16, female, 18) *-Sure, yes* (BS17, female, 18) *-Yeah* (BS15, female, 19) *-I agree with her, totally […] I agree completely with her* (BS18, female, 19)

Findings were an index that for female participants brand/product uniqueness was a core aspect of LFBs. Females of those who took part in the research were resolute in their convictions that if they purchase LFBs, this would decrease the chances of seeing other people with the same luxury fashion garment/ brand. In effect, findings implied that LFBs were more appealing, because of the perception that they were more unconventional purchase option. Henceforth, this indicated that the imbedded uniqueness in LFBs was a key factor that defined the perceptions of female interviewees who were part of the FGD. Building on the latter statement, the context of participants' responses indicated that they perceived LFBs as a form of "escape" from the masses. An evidence for the latter suggestion was that the context of participants' responses indicated that they perceived

LFB's majestic power to **project distinctiveness on consumers.** In this context, respondents shared that luxury fashion brands evoked feelings of uniqueness, bestowed on their personal identities. According to participants, the purchase and wear of luxury fashion garments made participants "feel unique". As explained by one participant:

You are unique, you feel unique [...] Maybe that's the most special part of wearing or having something that is luxurious

<div align="right">(BS17, female, 18)</div>

Consequently, the empirical investigation demonstrated that participants based their perceptions on the way the embedded uniqueness of LFBs is mirrored on the consumers' identities. Findings can be explained with the perceived role of LFBs to distinguish consumers from the mass. The shared views were an example of the immense role of LFBs which goes beyond utilitarian functions. They demonstrated how such a simple act of wearing these brands evoked associations with the opportunity to differentiate oneself from others. Henceforth, the empirical investigation indicated that Gen Y LFCs perceived LFBs as a means for presenting their identities to the public.

Further, female participants also talked about brand uniqueness by referring to **brand DNA**. An outlook of FGDs uncovered that the core criteria these consumers employed in the decision-making process was LFB's story. In the minds of those studied, the market offers a wide variety of LFBS, many of which offer superior products. The point of difference for these consumers was the brands' histories and how brands manage to present their heritage and legacy. As illustrated by the following example:

For me…I buy more the philosophy of the brand than the brand itself. I mean even if there are a lot of luxury brands, I don't have sympathy for all of them. I like the story of the brand, so I buy the story of the brand. Not only the brand itself [...] There are many good brands, luxury brands that make bags. But the point of difference is that you buy their story, the way they communicate, the way they act with you [...]

<div align="right">(RS29, female, 28)</div>

Participants agreed that it was important how LFBs manage to communicate their story via different marketing strategies, including via direct customer interaction. Findings uncovered that brand uniqueness stretched beyond utilitarian product features toward a more symbolic meaning that encompassed brands' traditions, culture and history. Herein, the empirics indicated that in participants' minds, the ability to preserve and communicate brand ethos was a core purchase driver because of brands' ability to stay true to their traditions and history and how LFBs manage to transfer the brand DNA to the public.

Conclusively, the section presented findings about the role of perceived brand uniqueness. It could be suggested that whilst there are common consumption characteristics among countries that took part in the research, there are also specific country peculiarities that shape the consumer behavior of those studied. This was reflected in the analysis of empirical data, which revealed that whilst for Bulgarian and Greek participants in the FGDs brand uniqueness resembled associations with product features (unique designs) and consumer uniqueness (being among the few luxury ones to purchase luxury fashion brands), for Romanian participants the emphasis was on the symbolic meaning of brand uniqueness being synonymous to the "heartbeat" of the brand. That being said, the following section presents findings about the value of brand recognition among studied Gen Y luxury fashion customers from FGDs.

4.3. Brand prominence

Key words: ***recognition, language, brand name, show-off, status***

This theme presented the views of what could be considered a minority of studied consumers. Specifically, it was mentioned by participants from Bulgaria. Henceforth, the purchase of LFBs because of brand recognition did not appear as a major consumption characteristic amongst studied Gen Y LFCs. However, it was considered important to understand participants' perceived brand prominence in order to gain a better comprehension of the consumption values of the studied LFC segment from the SEE region. Upon exploring the mindset of studied Gen Y LFCs, the empirics demonstrated that studied males were more inclined to purchase LFBs because of the perceived **status symbol.** This statement stemmed from an outlook of participants' discussion regarding the meanings that luxury entailed in their minds. As the following example demonstrates:

There is certain kind of symbol status that is recognizable by the majority of people. So, for example if you have a Rolex people just see it, they can recognize it's Rolex […] it's just [uhm] kind of a language people can communicate with your clothes, your choices of fashion and so on

(BS22, male, 23)

A common inclination among male participants was that all LFBs offered more or less similar products. In the minds of those studied, the difference in the decision-making process was the choice of LFBs that enjoy higher recognition and reinforce the status of consumers. Consequently, a core perceived characteristic was that LFBs epitomize status

symbol and prestige. Thus, it could be suggested that male participants used LFBs as a means to send a message about their position in the society and present themselves as successful. Put differently, findings were an index that in the eyes of discussants LFBs were used as a non-verbal means for communicating their status position. By contrast, for female participants the purchase and wear of LFBs as a status symbol was disapproved. An outlook of females' responses demonstrated that the root of their criticism was in the perception that a key consumption trigger was the opportunity to "**show-off**" with luxury fashion possessions. As illustrated by the following example:

-*[…] I was recently told about a situation where there are like few families, which are…like they are millionaires literally in Bulgaria and they are going to Sen Trope for vacation and they just dress with jewelry all around like [uhm] even the guy, the man was with like….walking stick…they were just dressed very…not in a good way…to show off basically […]*

<div align="right">(BS15, female, 19)</div>

-*Ostentation.*

<div align="right">(BS16, female, 18)</div>

A harmonized perspective among female participants was the observation that other LFCs want to fulfill superstitious goals through the purchase of LFBs. Consequently, findings implied that there are gender differences in the perception of brand recognition. This was reflected in findings that male participants were more likely to embrace the opportunity to use LFBs as a "language" of their social status, whilst for female participants this was condemned as a consumer behavior showing signs of shallowness. Herein, it can be suggested that males' emphasis on brand recognition is encapsulated in their consumer nature to use signs of prestige as a form to validate their societal positions. By contrast, the analysis indicated that archetypes of prestige and status encoded in luxury possessions were not an important factor among studied female LFCs. In this context, it was also interesting to find how studied Gen Y LFCs perceived the idea of transferring brand prominence in the digital world.

4.4. Brand prominence in the digital world

Key words: ***buy for myself, don't like, bragging, showing-off***

Discussants' views demonstrated that the preciousness of luxury fashion consumption was based on the personal experience in acquiring LFBs This also evoked associations of sharing one's brand experience on SM as an act of **"show- off"** and "bragging". Among the spectrum of opinions, interviewees outlined the financial aspect of acquiring luxury fashion brands. As illustrated by the following examples:

Table 4:3 Examples attesting to the perception of show-off in the digital world

> *-I buy it for myself, I don't buy it for…*
>
> (RS26, male, 24)
>
> *-Exactly. I don't see a reason why to share it with somebody else. Maybe if we see each other and 'Hey, look at my shoes' then that's totally different...but to go to the length of posting it and seeing what other people say online and...I wouldn't do that*
>
> (RS24, male, 23)
>
> *-I don't wanna offend anyone with this statement but I think that this kind of thing is...even if you have right there new Raybans, I find that really snobbish and like it's...I would never do that*
>
> (RS27, male, 24)
>
> *-Because some people tag them in order to show that they have them […] I hate that, I don't do it, I don't like it*
>
> (GS10, female, 18)
>
> *-Yeah, I know*
>
> (GS13, female, 19)
>
> *-Yeah, I don't do it*
>
> (GS10, female, 18)

Interviewees explained that the purchase of LFBs was personal choice and experience. Sharing those experiences on SM was perceived as an act of violence, which interfered with the privacy of individual luxury fashion consumption. This implied that these customers did not need to display their luxury fashion acquisitions in order to receive an additional source of validation for the value of the purchase. Consequently, findings were an indication that for this segment the act of sharing personal brand experiences interfered with the consumption of LFBs being rooted in the personal feelings and satisfaction from the consumption experience.

Additionally, one female participant admitted that she shares her personal brand experiences due to her **professional background**. As she stated: *"I have a blog, a fashion blog. Well, I like, I share my views when I like for example…I just recently launched the blog and I wrote about Louis Vuitton and Miu Miu and I liked their collection so I wrote about them […] also I share about my personal style if I like how I'm dressed today I'll take a picture and I'll post it […]"* (BS15, female, 19). Such sentiments allowed to identify a potential to contribute to knowledge by demonstrating how contextual circumstances (professional background) influenced patterns in the inclines to share personal brand experiences and opinions of LFBs on SM. However, this statement is based on an insignificant number of views. Nevertheless, the empirics bear an interesting point for further investigation about the role of professional background as an influential factor of Gen Y LFCs' behavior from SEE. In all, the latter section illustrated findings

about Gen Y's perceptions toward LFBs of participants who were part in the FGDs. Conclusively, the next section presents a summary of the emerging findings with an overview of the main implications that stood out from the analysis.

4.5. Summary of emerging findings about Gen Y's perceptions of luxury fashion brands

Figure 4:1 Gen Y's perceptions of luxury fashion brands (FGDs)
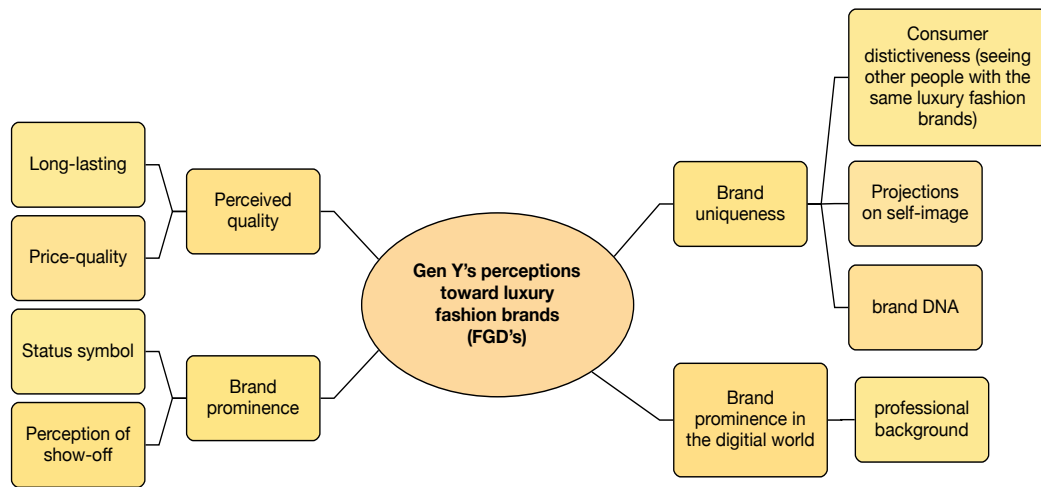
Acknowledging the limitation of a qualitative research inquiry, findings propose that: to a great extent for the majority of Gen Y in SEE their perceptions revolve around quality and brand uniqueness. An evidence for this theorization were the empirics demonstrating that the majority of customers talked about perceived quality, followed by brand uniqueness and brand DNA as key drivers that shaped their perceptions of LFBs. The following section presents findings about Gen Y LFCs' consumer characteristics of young customers who took part in the FGDs.

4.6. Previous purchase experiences: certainty of quality

Key words: ***satisfaction, happy, previous purchases, quality, value for money***

In most of the cases participants associated their **previous purchase experiences** with the consistent quality of luxury fashion brands. It appeared that quality was an important factor that defined the consumer behavior of studied consumers. An evidence for this statement were instances when participants outlined predominantly as a factor that shaped their brand loyalty toward luxury fashion brands. The reasons that discussants mentioned referred to previous purchase experiences based on which they had the opportunity to evaluate the quality of luxury fashion garments. Consistently over time, they felt secured in the persistent quality as main product attributes. As illustrated by the following examples:

Table 4:4 Examples attesting to the importance of previous purchase experiences

Yeah, it's like a rule: if you are happy with something that you have experienced you want to experience it again and wearing and buying clothes and being happy after that. So…it will make you go to that brand again
(BS17, female, 18)
-Mhm, yeah...I bought a product, I liked it and [uhm] it served me maybe...some two years or one year and a half and it didn't [uhm] rip or it didn't change its colour...so, its quality is good enough
(BS18, female, 19)
Maybe it gives a certainty of quality, that their quality is high […] if you had some item from there and you liked it and you saw that it's qualitative, that's one thing that can make you go back and buy something more
(RS25, male, 25)
-If you are satisfied with your previous and previous and previous purchase of course you will follow…maybe it was good quality, maybe it was value for money…and you realize it after some time you are happy with your purchase, of course next time you will try it again
(GS9, male, 19)
-[…] I don't know why...I mean you just buy them, it is what GS9, male said, if the quality is good, if you have the money to afford buying a luxury product of fashion or whatever, you will buy it […] if you are happy with the brand, if you think the products are good, you are going to buy them, that's it
(GS7, male, 19)

Acknowledging the sample limitations, it could be suggested that the value of quality was of universal importance for Gen Y LFCs. That is, quality was a uniform factor of focus groups participants' consumer behavior, regardless of their gender or nationality. An evidence for this statement were the empirics showing that the value of quality stretched across participants' initial purchase triggers to be outlined as a key factor defining their brand loyalty. Herein, findings implied that studied Gen Y LFCs place a significant value on the perceived worthiness of their purchases. The empirics were an indication that a crucial component for participants was how they evaluated their luxury fashion acquisitions from a price-quality perspective. It would appear that satisfaction from previous purchase experiences was the key trigger that encouraged this segment of customers to "design" a list of top favorite LFBs and stick to them without feeling the need to explore other brand alternatives. In effect, findings indicated that satisfaction with the quality based on previous purchases was an incrementally important factor for the development of brand loyalty. Notably, the views of male and female participants overlapped both in the context of quality as a component triggering participants' brand loyalty. This has important theoretical implication, demonstrating that whilst the consumption psychology might be defined by the consumers' gender, when it comes to the financial aspect of acquiring luxury fashion items, customers from FGDs have the same standards in their purchase decisions and brand loyalty. That is, they look for quality LFBs that are worth the investment. Within the context of the research, it could be suggested that the experience of the past economic crisis made Gen Y LFCs more sensitive to their expenses, fostering the preference for "secure" purchases. Additionally, the context of the research also included uncovering details about Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior based on the consumers' gender. In this regard, it was interesting to note that the purchase of quality luxury fashion items was a source of self-reward and self-confidence for a segment of the studied females.

Self-reward and self-confidence

It was interesting to note that within the context of quality, Romanian female participants shared that the ability to acquire LFBs was a source of **self-confidence**. This was an important revelation indicating that the acquisition of LFBs had a significant role in the lives of studied Romanian females beyond the purchase per se. For example, as explained by another female respondent "*[...] It's a self-accomplishment reward. You want something, you fight for it and then...yeah! It's a bit sick, I know to have your rewards in*

luxury brands but it's very fulfilling, yeah, I think this is the word" (RS30, female, 28). The purchase of quality fashion items was associated with self-reward, which in effect evoked feelings of self-confidence. This was an index of the massive role of LFBs for boosting the self-esteem amongst Romanian female participants, making respondents put efforts into achieving the ultimate utopia of acquiring a quality luxury fashion garment. From theoretical standpoint, the empirical investigation was the first one to demonstrate that the purchase of LFBs was a source of internal satisfaction expressed in the feelings of self-reward and self-confidence, for studied female LFCs. In this context, the study aimed at understanding how the gender of consumers affected their consumer behavior. In no way this was more evident than in the emphasis on personal style by female participants in the FGDs.

4.7. Personal style

Key words: ***mantra, close to personal style, preference for personal style, not brands, dress in an expensive way versus having a sense for fashion***

Respondents shared that their **purchase decisions** were grounded on how well the brand fitted the individual's personal style rather than vice versa: being driven by the brand image and falling into the trap of letting the LFBs to define participants' personal styles. Put differently, personal preferences and purchase decisions were based on the perceived match between personal style and the style of fashion clothing items offered by certain luxury fashion brands. As illustrated by the following example:

- [...] So, why do I prefer Pinko than Juicy... it's your style. Pinko is another style from Juicy. [...]

(GS13, female, 19)

-Yeah, I agree

(GS10, female, 18), followed by head knocking from the other girls

The empirical investigation indicated that the consumption behavior of studied Gen Y LFCs was defined by individual tastes and preferences that together shaped their personal styles. Herein, this means that the value of personal style as key consumer trait had significant behavioral implications on the studied Gen Y segment. Interestingly, the respondent's emphasis on personal style was followed by an agreement by the other female participants. Thus, this signifies personal style as an influential factor defining the consumption behavior of studied females. On the other hand, besides the main view provided by the "leading" excerpt quote, the other participants did not elaborate on their

responses to explain how personal style influenced their consumer behavior. Consequently, although the group agreement about personal style supplied intriguing insights, the researcher took into consideration the group think effect (Morgan,1996; Zaharia *et al*. 2008; Marrelli, 2008; McCullough, 2011). Thus, individual interviews were considered an invaluable aspect of the research that would contribute for better understanding of Gen Y LFC's behavior from the SEE region. Apart from the role of personal style as a benchmark for the purchase choices of those studied, the empirical investigation also uncovered that female LFCs often used LFBs as a form for expressing their personal identities.

Female participants in the FGDs highlighted the importance of personal style in the context of **perceived self-brand similarity.** A common perspective was that the ability to develop a personal style was an essential part in the lives of those studied. According to discussants, it was exactly the personal style through which an individual can communicate his or her identity. In effect, the common perception among this group of females was that personal style was the means through which they could communicate their personal identities. As illustrated by the following example:

[…] I tend to buy a lot of Italian brands because I think they represent me, they are weird, they are the same style, this is how I consider myself: a little bit freaky, a little bit elegant, so this is my approach to brands

<div align="right">(RS31, female, 24)</div>

Herein, findings indicated that this segment of female LFCs was more likely to base their purchase decision on the extent that LFBs resonate with consumers' personal styles and identities. The exploratory investigation contained implications being the first one to demonstrate that the choices of LFBs in SEE was largely defined by how well the luxury fashion garment/ brand fitted into females' customers' ideas of the acquired fashion items as a source for communicating one's identity.

Furthermore, this was also the reason that female participants highlighted that the value of personal style was the **ability to combine different fashion articles**. Respondents attributed their views to the belief that they would purchase both luxury and non-luxury items if they perceived the fashion garments as an organic fit to the individual's personal style. As illustrated by the following examples:

Table 4:5 Examples attesting to the ability to combine fashion articles

-*You are building your style and your style says who you are. That's like my motto for the brands, so…*

(BS16, female, 18)

-*Yeah…me too. Even though it doesn't really matter what kind of brand you are really wearing […] if I like it, I will buy it if it's from Louis Vuitton or Zara. I will buy if it's like from lower, how should I say, not such a popular shop, like I will buy it if I like it*

(BS15, female, 19)

As illustrated, female participants would be as inclined to purchase fashion garments from the fast fashion sector (lower-priced, more affordable brands), as if these items are from LFBs. Moreover, their purchase decisions were based on personal tastes, rather than being driven by social conventions that define fashion trends. Therefore, the allure of LFBs was not enough to evoke an association of luxury fashion as being synonymous to personal style. Nor was the appealing charisma of luxury fashion garments that would contribute to brand loyalty. In the eyes of focus group participants, they did not feel obliged to purchase solely LFBs in order to build their personal styles. According to discussants, they could wear fashion items from the fast fashion industry with the same confidence as if they were to wear fashion garments from the luxury segment. This was an interesting contribution to the current research, indicating that participants followed their own tastes and preferences, rather than being seduced by the fashion trends or styles of particular LFBs. Consequently, this is an index that such a consumer behavior was a barrier to the development of brand loyalty was due to the fact that for this segment of interviewees exhibited a changing behavior in their consumption patterns because they preferred to adapt different brands to their personal tastes and preferences rather than to modify their styles to fit into certain brands' styles. Finally, building on the analysis about Gen Y's perceptions of LFBs and the key consumption characteristics of Gen Y LFCs who took part in the FGDs, the following section presents a summary of emerging findings.

4.8. Summary of emerging findings about Gen Y luxury fashion consumers' characteristics

Figure 4:2 Gen Y's luxury fashion consumers' characteristics (FGDs)
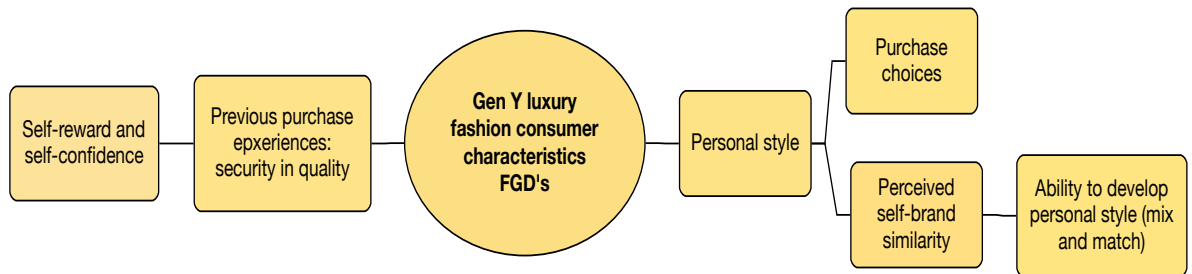
Findings uncovered a key consumption characteristic of Gen Y LFCs, revealing that satisfaction from previous purchase experiences was a key influencer for the development of brand loyalty among studied Gen Y LFCs. Additionally, this research was interested in understanding how the gender of LFCs influenced their consumption habits. In no way this was more evident than in the self-reward and self-confidence expressed by female participants. Importantly, this was a shared perspective from Master students who were also in the workforce. Henceforth, this means that the purchase of LFBs was a source of inner satisfaction for this studied consumer segment, implying that the ability to acquire LFBs was a symbol for self-accomplishment for those studied. Finally, acknowledging the limitation of a qualitative research, findings propose that: to a great extent the consumption behavior of female Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region is driven by the importance of personal style. Thus, based on the studied sample. findings suggest that a key behavioral trait of female Gen Y LFCs from SEE is the value of personal styles. Henceforth, this would imply that the reliance on personal tastes, preferences and personal style acted a barrier toward the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs.

4.9. Gender differences in luxury fashion consumption

Key words: *differentiation, purchase choices, women buy more, consumer nature, habit, brand love*

Fashionable appearance for females

A shared perspective among this segment of studied Gen Y LFCs was that a core consumption aspect typical for females was the value of fashionable appearance. Particularly, this segment of participants "blamed" the societal expectations for males' as opposed to females' appearances and the clothing items both genders need to choose from to compile a final look. The participants did so by referring to the wider variety of fashion items to choose from, the number of fashion articles to be considered in styling an outfit, and also the palette of colors to choose from. As explained by discussants:

Table 4:6 Fashionable appearances for females (FGDs)

You cannot wear the same dress again and again, they can wear the same suit, for example twice, but we cannot do that, you can wear a dress one time and… (GS10, female, 18) *[…] I mean, a woman needs a bag, needs shoes, needs something to wear, something to wear under [group laughter] and they just want a shirt, or a T-shirt, trousers, there are like five simple things […] They will combine with another trouser, I mean the T-shirt, and you'll never understand that it was the same T-shirt with the previous week. But if I wear the same let's say dress, as she (GS10, female, 18) said, or something that is maybe say one piece or two pieces but our… you can remember them…everybody will notice it […]* (GS13, female, 19)

What emerged as an interesting aspect in the females' FGD was that participants also endorsed their consumer behavior to the need for uniqueness. Interestingly, this was in contrast to the importance of long-lasting aspect of quality (opportunity to wear the clothing items for a long period of time). Precisely, female discussants shared that the search for uniqueness was triggered by the perception that they have to look different on a daily basis. Females' responses implied that whilst female LFCs of those studied might have a more special bond with fashion (search for uniqueness), traits of their consumer behavior demonstrated signs of conformity to society values. This was manifested in the fact that Greek females acknowledged that their consumer behavior was also largely defined of could be formulated as "dress to impress" mindset. Henceforth, taking into consideration the contradictory views (emphasis on long-lasting aspect of quality versus importance of uniqueness), findings mean that whilst females have a strong preference for quality of LFBs, the search for uniqueness is in fact very much defined by societal

expectations as of what constitutes an acceptable "unique" female appearance. An additional outlook of participants' responses uncovered a remarkable consumer characteristic evident in the likelihood of female participants to opt for impulsive shopping.

Impulsive purchases: a female trait

An evidence for females' impulsive purchases emerged from the FGDs with Greek and Bulgarian females. Their views demonstrated that what appeared as an impulsive consumer behavior was that studied females placed higher emphasis on the clothing item rather than on the brand. For example, as the following excerpts reveal:

Table 4:7 Expressed views related to impulsive purchases

-It depends...I don't concentrate on a thing if it's luxury or not, just if I like something, I buy it. It depends...on the price maybe, on the quality, that's it" (BS17, female, 18) *-I don't care if the clothes that I will buy are brands, luxury brands or just brands. I want to buy something that I really, really like. And sometimes these clothes are from luxury brands...doesn't mean something for me [...]"* (GS12, female, 20)

In other words what was regarded as a standard females' purchase behavior for those who took part in FGDs was grounded on the appeal of the particular fashion item. Notably, the empirics uncovered that for the studied segment the luxury factor did not have a decisive role in the final purchase decision. Instead, findings indicated that the final appearance of studied females can be a **mixture of luxury and non-luxury fashion brands**. In this vein, Bulgarian and Greek females were among the segment of studied Gen Y LFCs who emphasized on personal style. Thus, emerging findings supplied an additional evidence for the importance of personal style, by clarifying that it also is an influencing factor making studied females less likely to become to loyal LFBs. Henceforth, findings supply additional evidence for the value of presenting individual personal identity through the purchase and wear of fashion brands that match the personal styles and personalities of studied Gen Y female LFCs. In comparison, findings indicated that for studied male LFCs the brand (including previous purchase experiences) was the pivotal aspect that shaped their strong emotional brand attachment in the form of brand love.

Brand love: a male trait

This category was constructed from the responses of a small portion of studied Gen Y LFCs. It was outlined by male participants. This was an important revelation in the context of gender differences among studied Gen Y LFCs from SEE. Specifically, it was remarkable to identify male respondents referred to the concept of brand love to explain their consumer behavior. From a theoretical implication aspect, this assumes that emotional brand attachment had significant behavioral implications on studied male LFCs, evident in the expressed feelings of "brand love". Male interviewees explained their feelings toward LFBs by denoting to specific brands. A detailed outlook of their recounts revealed that the feeling of brand love was the result of previous purchase experiences. As illustrated by the following example:

I believe that after a while...I don't know if you'll agree with me but you fall in love with the brands, I mean you buy once...when I say I want to buy clothing I always think about this particular brand [...] I don't know why [...]

(GS7, male, 19)

Yes, yes

(GS6, male, 19 and GS8, male, 20)

According to these customers, they would prefer to visit the brands to which they felt the strongest emotional brand attachment. Herein, findings indicated that the impact of positive purchase experiences on males' consumer behavior (persistent product quality) stretched beyond brand loyalty to make these interviewees experience strong emotional attachments as brand love. The empirics also uncovered that studied males exercised a more rationalized consumer behavior (purchase less). Herein, it could be suggested that in the minds of those studied the purchase has to be well-worth the investment. The basis for this evaluation appeared to be previous purchase experiences as a focal point defining males' "nature" to maintain loyal to LFBs. Herein, the main implication is that male LFCs of those interviewed were more likely to maintain loyal to their "beloved" LFBs. Conclusively, the latter section presented the theme about gender differences in luxury fashion consumption among studied Gen Y consumers. Based on the empirical data, it is suggested that the appearance for female participants was a vital component in the path toward displaying personal uniqueness. By contrast, male LFCs of those studied had higher propensity to sustain their brand loyalty toward LFBs, evident in the feelings of "brand love". Conclusively, building on the analysis about the key consumption characteristics of studied Gen Y LFCs from SEE, the following section illustrates the main conclusions, about the consumption behaviour of Gen Y LFCs who were part of FGDs.

4.10. Summary of emerging findings about gender differences in luxury fashion consumption

Figure 4:3 Gender differences in luxury fashion consumption
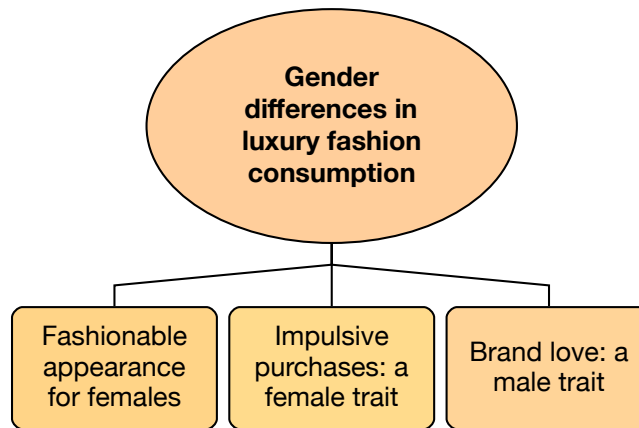
Acknowledging the sample limitations, it is suggested that there are gender differences in the Gen Y's luxury fashion consumer behaviour. The most noticeable differences were captured in the identified importance of uniqueness for female participants and importance of satisfaction from previous purchase experiences highlighted mostly in the context of perceived quality and brand love among studied males. Herein, the empirics implied that the behavioural patterns of studied Gen Y LFCs from SEE is still significantly defined by conventional gender consumption patterns. These were reflected in the emotional aspect of luxury fashion consumption (need for uniqueness for female luxury fashion customers) and focus on utilitarian aspects (satisfaction from previous purchase experiences, based on perceive product/ brand superior quality for males). Having said that, the following section illustrates findings about different aspects related to participants' mentality toward SM and LFBs.

CONSUMERS' PERSPECTIVES ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA ROLE IN LUXURY FASHION CONSUMPTION AND BRAND LOYALTY

4.11. Consumer buying experiences

The section seeks to uncover the core values that drive Gen Y LFCs' preferences for online as opposed to offline shopping experience of those studied. A remarkable characteristic identified from the empirical data referred to the propensity of the majority of studied LFCs to opt for the offline buying experience. On one hand, by recognizing the qualitative limitations of the study, the empirics indicated that Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region have quite conventional mentality when it concerns the choice between online versus offline purchase experiences. Recognizing that the two purchase alternatives are "very different", the preferences for offline buying experience were an implication that for participants the in-store atmosphere presented an integral part of the luxury experience, providing participants with the sense of security for their financial investments. This was reflected in the emphasis on personalized customer service, ability to see/ try the fashion items, and perceived risk in online purchases. On the other hand, an additional outlook of participants' responses demonstrated that they would opt for the online buying option. Some participants also shared that they would exploit the advantage of the digital universe to browse for product information on various SM platforms. However, the final purchase decision would be made at the physical store. The section was initiated by presenting findings about the value of in-store experience.

In-store experience

Key words: *family, customer experience, comfortable, fit/ try, private feeling, luxurious experience, trust, risk*

The exploratory analysis uncovered that they value the in-store buying experience for the **personalized customer experience**. The allure of in-store environment appealed with a great magnetizing power, enticing participants' choices of the traditional purchase method. Studied consumers outlined the personal touch of employee-customer interactions and the positive emotions derived within the context of the traditional shopping environment. Participants emphasized on the fact that the in-store environment (personalized service and attention) is a fundamental component of the luxury experience.

That is, the fact that they could receive face to face service at the physical store was a leading factor that defined their preferences for the traditional buying experience. The most valuable aspects included: "luxurious feelings", meaning the manner salespeople talk to customers, making them feel special, "welcome" and "comfortable", which boosted the sense of being part of the brand. For instance, as the following excerpts from FGDs reveal:

Table 4:8 Examples attesting to personalized customer experiences

-For me […] the service that they gave me, that they offered me…if they were rude to me of course I'm not gonna go back there to try something on…like if I go to a company and they are all friendly willing to help me and…'you can match this thing with this thing, combine with this thing' […]makes you feel comfortable …you can spend hours there just browsing […] make you feel welcome, that's what they offer apart from their product…their service! […] makes you feel like you are part of something…you are part of their club…you are part of their consumer, the consumer experience. It makes you feel like you are…

(GS8, male, 20)

-Yeah, the service is important. It's also the relationship that you build with the company (GS7, male, 19)

-The experience is different. It's different when you go to the store and you can try the clothing and you can see whether it fits you or not, you like the way the colour looks on you or whatever

(BS18, female, 19)

-You can get like more help and like different opinion than on Social Media. Like…when you go to a store and the service is…

(BS15, female, 19)

-Yeah because there is an atmosphere in *the store that you cannot feel while doing it online […] because you get in the atmosphere of being on a shop for clothes, you watch the other women that are going to buy something, you...you have a chance to touch, to look to...to explore what you are actually searching. And you can do that in Social Media too but you can't taste the feeling of actually purchasing a nice dress or something, which is actually the most important thing when you buy something, you dress it and look fabulous and feel great and if you do it...*

(BS17, female, 18)

- There is certain atmosphere in luxury stores, not just for clothes that you get when you walk in. There are people dressed nice, they smile, there is good lighting, good design, and...So, those things make your shopping a lot more special for example if you just walk in a random store, where there are thousands of clothes and nobody is even paying attention to you

(BS19, male, 19)

-Yeah, they make it more private feeling.

(BS20, male, 22)

The emphasis on the in-store environment was appraised because of the "private" and "luxurious" feeling, because of the personalized customer treatment. In the minds of those studied, the full glamour of LFBs could only be entirely experienced at in-store level, where they were involved in face-to-face communication and received personalized customer attention. Herein, acknowledging the sample limitations, findings uncovered an important consumption pattern of Gen Y LFCs who took part in the research. Specifically, the qualitative stance of the research served the basis for exploring the principles that guided the consumption behavior of Gen Y LFCs from SEE. In effect, the empirical evidence based on participants' responses allowed to suggest that studied Gen Y LFCs need to feel cherished by LFBs. Findings denoted to the idea that, an essential component of the consumption experience for this consumer segment was to provide them with unforgettable in-store consumer experiences. Henceforth, albeit with the limitations of a qualitative research, it could be speculated that the personal (human) touch of in-store experience was a main purchase trigger and a factor defining the brand loyalty for this segment of studied Gen Y LFBs. The latter suggestion was also supported by the empirical evidence which reflected on participants' responses in the context of their purchase triggers and brand loyalty toward LFBs. This is an important revelation, implying that the sense of brand loyalty originated from interviewees' loyalty bestowed on the shop assistants at the store.

Findings from the FGDs uncovered that studied Gen Y LFCs value the in-store buying experience mainly because of the **ability to evaluate utilitarian product features.** Participants' views indicated that they were considerate about the risk involved in the online purchases of LFBs. This was also reflected in the expressed preferences for the traditional retail format were mainly based on the opportunity to see and try the fashion items. A predominant perspective was that the online purchase option involves risks in terms of incorrect product fitting or sizes. Studied LFCs wanted to feel secure about their financial investments, especially when the purchase required higher acquisition costs. As illustrated by the following examples:

Table 4:9 Examples attesting to the ability to evaluate utilitarian product features

Yes, I prefer the traditional way because from online shopping you don't if you are .you don't know the specifics […] I don't know if…for me I mean…if the number, the size of the cloth fits me   (GS14, female, 22)

> *- It's very different, both are very different [...] I don't think...they can never be compared. Like when you go to a store it's just that...the experience is very different...you see, you actually see and you can like touch and feel [...]*
>
> (BS15, female, 19)
>
> *-The experience is different. It's different when you go to the store and you can try the clothing and you can see whether it fits you or not, you like the way the color looks on you or whatever*
>
> (BS18, female, 19)
>
> *-The same, exactly. You can see whether you look fat in that dress or ...*
>
> (BS16, female, 18)
>
> (group laughter)
>
> *-Very important.* (BS17, female, 18)
>
> *- At the moment it has to be something that I really like, and I cannot find in store in order to buy it online [...]*
>
> (RS25, male, 25)
>
> *-[…] I'm more reluctant to choose online because I think I have trust issues with that. It's just better if you go in the shop, touch that pair of jeans, jacket, shoes that I wanna buy and see them…really be there, feel on the size, feel the purchase beat*
>
> (RS27, male, 24)

Participants acknowledged the advantage of being able to see and try the fashion garments at the physical store environment. Mindful of the limitations of a qualitative research, the empirical evidence suggested that participants' reluctance to foresee the advantages offered by the digital world were rooted in the low trust levels and perceived risk in e-commerce. Herein, the empirics implied that Gen Y's consumption behavior of those studied was granted to the perceived **value for money as** participants' urge to visit the physical stores had a deconstructive impact on the trust levels in online buying experiences. **This indicated that young LFCs of those studied wanted to feel secure about the worthiness of their purchases.** Rooted in the opportunity to evaluate product qualities, findings demonstrated that the perceived distrust levels in the online purchase experience spilled evenly amongst male and female interviewees from the three countries, making them more suspicious toward the risks of online purchases Thus, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to demonstrate that Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region prefer the traditional retail format for reasons considered as quite conventional and being speculated as a trademark of older generations. The findings about emphasis on customer service and security in the monetary investments appeared as important aspects for this consumer segment, which is also of theoretical relevance for a better understanding of local consumption patterns of this particular consumer group.

Nonetheless, as the analysis further demonstrates, there are also instances, which are an exception to the rule, namely preference for online purchase experiences.

Exceptions from the rule: online purchase experiences

First, even though some male participants were optimistic towards the online purchase experience, this was only in cases when they **felt secure about the brands' sizes and fittings**. In eyes of interviewees, the online purchase experience was a risky move unless they were entirely convinced in the utilitarian product qualities or the purchase involved fashion items from LFBs that participants had previous buying experiences. Likewise, an exception to the preference for the traditional retail format for female participants was that the choice of the digital consumer experience was driven by the type of product they would like to buy. As illustrated by the following examples:

Table 4:10 Examples attesting to the security in brands' sizes and fittings

[…] I tend to go online for, but only because I purchased it before I trust but at the moment I prefer going and trying out then purchasing it in the store than online. But even for me the trend is going slowly towards online
(RS28, male, 23)
-And it's also the quality. I'm not sure it's the quality they say it is. As long as I go in the shop...and I'm also sure in that shop. I know and I go buy there from they are...those are original ones. Maybe if you buy from the Internet, from different sites, not from the official site of the brand that they are not the original brands, it's not an original one
(RS27, male, 24)
It depends on the products. Like, if it's clothes it's better to go to the store, but if it is like for example bags or an accessory, I'm not taking shoes as an example because that's risky…just like accessories if you do it online the experience is the same as if you go to the store […]
(BS15, female, 19)
-And if you consider the risk that you take when you are purchasing online...it's actually the best thing you could do is just go to the store and...
(BS17, female, 18)

Consequently, findings indicated that for participants the choices between the digital consumer experience and traditional retail format were also based on the financial consideration and perceived risk involved in luxury fashion acquisitions. Herein, the empirics implied that consumption behavior of those studied was driven be the perception of perceived risk, trust and value for money as a core driver for participants' urge to visit brands' physical stores. Thus, as of researcher's vest of knowledge, this study was the first to shed initial light on the possible effects of the economic crisis on the consumption

habits of Gen Y LFCs from SEE. Consequently, the theoretical relevance of the emerging data originated from demonstrating how the financial investments in luxury fashion purchases affected participants' preferences for the offline purchase experience, based on perceived trust, with the only exception being the purchases of well-known brands or items which are perceived as involving lower risk in making a faulty purchase choice.

As noted, there is an exception to the rule. An additional evidence for this statement were the instances when participants shared, they would opt for online purchases in case of **lack of physical store availability in their home country**. This finding supplied important revelation about country peculiarities, being shared only by Romanian discussants. As explained by respondents:

Me too. I bought five clothes online maximum because I couldn't find them here at my disposal. But if I can find them here and I can find them also online I will always go and try them on [...]

(RS24, male, 23)

This finding can be explained with the perspective of brand loyalty (based on previous purchase experiences). Precisely, Romanian males who took part in the research were found to be brand loyal to LFBs. Thus, even though these customers might experience difficulties in terms of store availability, they would not opt for alternative options. Henceforth, participants' previous purchase experiences inspired the desire to purchase from the same LFBs, even if that meant that customers would not have the opportunity to indulge themselves with the full in-store experience. Nevertheless, participants admitted that their attitudes toward the online buying experience may undergo changes. This was reflected in the confessions that although they preferred the traditional retail format, their future purchases may be performed also using the online alternative. A possible explanation for these confessions is that one of the greatest advantages of the online buying experience is that SM platforms offer the convenience of timely and efficient purchases that customers cannot experience in the traditional approach. Thus, findings also implied that the accessible nature of the digital world influences the mindset of this consumer segment with quite traditional views, making them re-consider the opportunities offered by the online buying experience.

Female participants also shared that sometimes they would opt for **SM browsing prior to the actual purchase.** For instance: - *"We can be informed online…and then we go to the stores"* (GS10, female, 18). Such views indicated that this segment of female LFCs utilize SM to inform themselves prior to the actual purchase. In other words, SM was appraised as an invaluable tool for obtaining a vast amount of brand information, allowing participants to make a well-informed purchase decision. Herein, although female LFCs of those studied were also resolute in their convictions about the benefits of the traditional retail format, it would appear that the convenience of SM (be that only for its informative role) made it a fundamental part of the shopping experience. Thus, the initial insights from pilot study served as a ground for informing the main study. Specifically, based on the insights from the females' FGD, the researcher decided to include a question about the role of SM in the decision-making process. The question was: *"How do you use Social Media to plan your future purchases of luxury fashion brands?"*. Consequently, the value of the pilot study was that it also served as a basis for developing the questions for the interview protocol for the main study.

In sum, the emerging empirics indicated that Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region share common consumption patterns. This was reflected in the preferences for the offline purchase approach being driven by: 1) perceived risk in online purchases (low trust levels), 2) opting for online purchases when they involve accessories (bags), and 3) preference for the traditional retail format because of the opportunity to see and try the fashion items and personalized customer service. However, upon tackling Gen Y mind-set toward their preferred buying experiences, the empirics uncovered regional differences. The consumption peculiarities of the countries that took part in the research referred to: 1) the feeling of family for Greek males, 2) the likelihood of Romanian males to opt for online purchases based on previous purchase experiences or when the brand is not physically available in their home country, and 3) Greek females' proneness to browse on SM platforms prior to the actual purchase. Thus, the findings demonstrated that a common trait of Gen Y LFCs from SEE is rooted in their preferences for offline purchases, whilst the manner studied customers utilize SM differed across countries. An exception was females' inclines to purchase luxury fashion accessories (from Bulgaria and Greece).

The specific question that participants were asked to share their views referred to their preferences for offline versus online approach toward the development of customer-brand

relationships. All participants, with no exception talked about offline versus online purchases. This was even in cases when the researcher repeated the question to make sure they understand it correctly. Based on this experience, the researcher decided to include two different questions in the interview protocol for the main study. As noted, one of the questions asked participants to share their views specifically about the preferred purchase channel, which was followed by a question asking interviewees' viewpoints about the preferred approach toward building brand loyalty. In this way, the researcher reduced the risk of misleading participants about the question, which in effect would have reduced the chances of obtaining insights about interviewees' recounts on the specific questions.

4.12. Summary of emerging findings about consumer buying experienc*es*

Figure 4:4 Consumer buying experiences (FGDs)
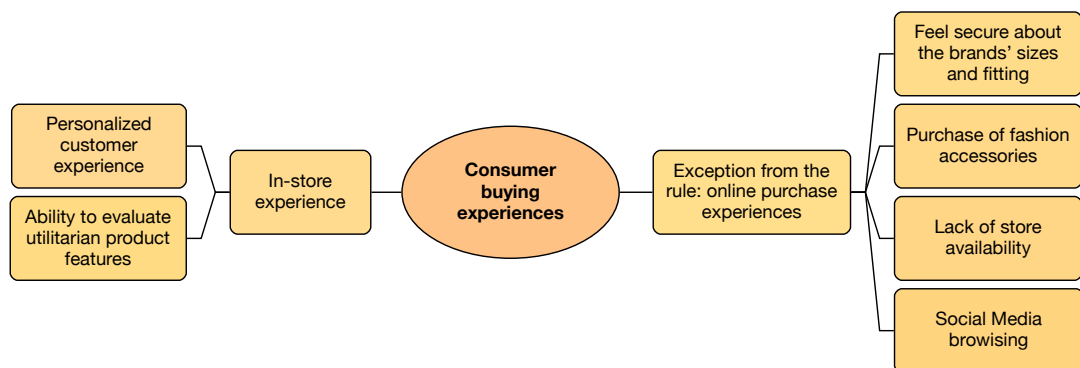
Findings showed that the personal touch of in-store experience, ability to evaluate utilitarian product features and perceived risk in the online buying experience were a unifying aspect among studied customers from both genders. In regard to consumption peculiarities amongst participants based on their gender, the empirics revealed that: 1) male participants would opt for online purchases in cases when there is lack store availability in their home country and they are familiar with the product features (fit/size), 2) female participants would opt for online purchases in cases when the purchase involves accessories (bags) and are more likely to embrace the opportunity offered by SM platforms to obtain various product/ brand information (browsing) before the actual purchase at the physical store. Conclusively, the empirical investigation indicated that whilst there are specific consumption patterns typical for each gender, the underlying values that defined participants' consumer behavior were the same. Henceforth, albeit with the sample limitations, it is suggested that Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region have

strong preferences for the traditional retail format. That being said, the following section presents findings about Gen Y's mindset toward the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty.

4.13. Gen Y's perceived value of Social Media for building brand loyalty

The main emerging themes referred to: 1) Maintain the "dream" factor) 2) Social Media as a must for luxury fashion brands, 3) Celebrities as the new fashion influencers. The first section presents findings about participants' perception of Social Media as an antonym to luxury fashion brands.

Maintain the "dream" factor

Key words: ***bring down the status, know the brands before Social Media, harm/ lower brands' prestige, luxury advantage, oral, pressure, annoying, spamming***

First, a common reference point was that LFBs enjoy a worldwide fame long before the launch of SM networks. Participants attested to the fact that as valuable and helpful SM are, luxury fashion brands should master the balance between SM marketing whilst **maintaining their exclusivity.** By giving examples with Chanel and Louis Vuitton, interviewees explained that LFBs were not obliged to "advertise their sales" and if not adapted properly, SM presence would run the risk of "bringing down the status". Extensive SM coverage was considered as an unusual addition to the luxury marketing strategy because customers who would like to obtain brand information or purchase an item would use brands' websites or go directly to the physical store. As explained by participants:

Table 4:11 Examples attesting to the importance of maintaining LFB's exclusivity

> *[…] luxury goods, like Louis Vuitton, Channel, I don't know, others, they don't need that much of a media. Like...they do Social Media, but we don't know the brands from Social Media. Like I know Louis Vuitton is doing perfect handbags, shoes, different jewelry but I know from the store, I don't know them from Social Media […] You should just have a website in my opinion and provide information but...and maybe, maybe a Social Media page but nothing too pushy, or too extravagant*
>
> (RS27, male, 24)
>
> *-I also think that excessive marketing can even bring down the status of such luxury brands because they are supposed to be something special, I don't know [...] I mean a brand that is certainly luxury should have this oral, like you want to touch them. It's not like they will come to you and try to persuade you to buy their products. So… yeah, I think that excessive marketing and online activities may also harm it or at least lower their prestige*
>
> (RS24, male, 23)

Findings implied that male interviewees would value if brands do not fall under the trap of SM presence as the key to brands' success. Put differently, in the minds of those studied instead of placing the focus on adapting their marketing strategies to fit to the new marketing paradigm caused by SM, the approach should be vice versa. That is, SM should be adapted to serve the specific needs and peculiarities of the sector, instead of altering what stands behind the LFBs' image of exclusivity and aspects that have ignited participants' purchase desires and brand loyalty. In this context, an additional outlook of participants' responses inclined to the suggestion that SM was perceived as an important component of LFB's marketing up to the extent that customers would have the opportunity to obtain relevant brand information.

Further, as signified by the former example, SM communication activities also run the risk of **being perceived as "pushy".** In these eyes of male participants, any brands' SM posts or other online activities (personal communication) were perceived as "spamming" and "annoying". A main concern was that brands were so active in their posts that they become aggressive. This irritated participants because of the observation that LFBs utilized a template-based communication. This indicated that male LFCs had negative attitudes toward SM-communication activities because of the value of privacy in their lives. As illustrated by the following examples:

Table 4:12 Views about online communication perceived as pushy

It's annoying for me. Any kind of contact. I don't wanna talk to you. If I wanna talk to you, I will come to your store […] It has become as a spamming for us
(GS8, male, 20)
It's like we see the same things and they tell us the same thing every time we go into their Facebook page […] If I want to buy something I will come to your store and I will buy it and you can help me then
(GS7, male, 19)

In most of their part, these were customers who preferred to visit brands' flagship stores. The common ground was that participants would receive the information and help they need from the shop assistants and they would prefer a tailor-made communication. This implied that for the studied sample of male LFCs the pristine exclusive image should be maintained even in a world governed by digital connectedness and vast amount of information, which "forces" the belief that SM is the key to brand success and customer retention. In other words, the main implication is that knowing the essence of what luxury

stands for, these customers did not need additional incentives in order to entice to their purchase desires and maintain their brand loyalty.

In this vein, an accompanying reason for the lack of interest in SM brands' posts and communication initiatives referred *reliance on personal consumer needs and purchase instincts*. This was reflected both in participants' preferences to visit LFBs' official websites or flagship stores. Subsequently, findings can be explained with the participants' preference for the traditional retail format for purchasing LFS. Henceforth, the main implication is that in the minds of participants LFB's SM could not contribute for purchase desires, customer engagement, let alone the development of brand loyalty. In other words, findings provide an additional evidence that for this segment the in-store environment not only provided them with a sense of security for their financial investments and pleasurable feelings from personalized customer service, but it also presented the holy grail of the path toward building brand loyalty.

Notably, male participants justified their perspectives with the **differences in the way genders perceive the value of SM.** In the eyes of male participants, females were more likely to use SM to obtain information for luxury fashion brands and fashion trends. According to participants, this was the reason that females were more likely to follow LFBs on SM. For instance: "*And also what I can see and compare between me and I don't know…my sisters or my girlfriend when we use Instagram […] they have like Channel I don't know what trending other thing with fashion, top fashion models, top fashion…they have a lot of this there*" (RS27, male, 24). This comment was followed by an agreement by the majority of other FG discussants. Findings imposed that LFCs did not perceive the value of SM for following LFBs on SM since they already had a mind map of their LFBs. Importantly, male participants whose responses shaped the theme of SM as an antonym were from Greece and Romania. Findings can be attributed to country similarities, reflected in the value systems that guided participants' sensitivity to the luxury pristine image. Consequently, this was the first research in the context of SM role for the development of brand loyalty to demonstrate that studied males' brand devotion expressed in brand loyalty and brand love (based predominantly on in-store experience , customer satisfaction and perspectives of brands' magical aura) in fact have severe implications on their perspectives about SM presence and communication of LFBs. Additionally, the revelation from the example introduced in interesting information for further exploration about Gen Y LFCs' inclines to follow brands on SM. Apart from the

presented example, females from the FGDs held in Greece and Bulgaria also admitted that they followed some LFBs on SM. Thus, insights from the pilot study served as a basis for constructing the interview protocol for the main study. The following section presents findings about the perception of SM as being an essential component of LFB's marketing strategies.

Social Media as a must for luxury fashion brands

Key words: *accessible, trustworthy, videos, new collections, ambassadors, personal recommendations, visual, personalized messages*

The main premise revolved around **brand accessibility and availability on SM platforms.** According to discussants, *trust* played a pivotal role in luxury fashion consumption. In the eyes of those studied integrating customers into the marketing approach would have a positive impact on consumers' trust in LFBs. As attested by one respondent:

[...] maybe if I see that this luxury brand is [uhm] trying to be more accessible by wider range of people and they actually give approve that this brand is trustworthy for example. It will...catch my interest because if you are going to pay a lot of money for something you have to know that you won't be sorry after that [...]

(BS17, female, 18)

This statement was welcomed by an agreement from the group. Whilst participants did not refer directly to low trust levels, these findings served as an additional evidence to the role of trust as an influencing factor in luxury fashion consumption. This theoretical proposition stems from the previous sections that presented empirical data about participants' emphasis on quality and perceived risk in online purchases. It was interesting to note that participants justified their responses by giving examples with the influence their peers can have on luxury fashion consumption. The core idea was that LFBs require significant financial investments. Building on this premise, participants explained that if LFBs manage to escape from their image of exclusivity toward a more inclusive and friendlier approach this would likely build a sense of trustworthiness in consumers' minds from other people's recommendations and vice versa: using loyal customers as a key strategic tool for disseminating Positive Word of Mouth (PWOM) - both online and offline. Thus, acknowledging the sample limitations, the main implication is that the "personal recommendation" was an imperative as a means to LFBs' success among LFCs' who belong to the Gen Y segment from SEE.

Further, participants appreciated LFBs' initiatives to incorporate SM in their marketing because in this way brands could **keep consumers informed about new collections, brand information and fashion trends.** As demonstrated by the following testimonials:

Table 4:13 Examples attesting to informative brand content

-Previews of the new collections (RS32, female, 23) *-Especially for new collections it's very, very good. I mean it's like a kind reminder. Actually, that's how brands should use Social Media: as a kind reminder for their loyal customers. [...] you want to sell, to have results, ok to increase the awareness, the reputation, but you want to have sales. So, it's important to address to your loyal customers and maybe I think your loyal customers will be ambassadors for your brand. I mean if they are not public figures [...]* (RS29, female, 28) *-Their campaigns. For me it's visual [...] And also, how they treat you in online. Like she said with the messages, like they make you feel like they are made for you and things like that* (RS33, female, 22)

Findings signified that female participants perceived SM as a useful platform for obtaining brand information whilst also regarding its potential as an interactive medium through which they could transfer brand relationships in the online world. Henceforth, findings indicated that by obliging to customers' "rules" to open the gates to luxury fashion brands' mystic world, SM was the necessary "evil" that could help LFBs to get closer to Gen Y customers of those studied. Herein, findings supply evidence for the value of informative brand content. Informative brand content appeared as the ultimate marketing activity that could increase participants' interests in luxury fashion brands' SM activities. The focal point was that this segment appreciated brand content, which appealed to their visual stimuli. Henceforth, the empirics indicated that the need to stay updated with brand news, collections, and visuals that not only aspired their imagination and purchase desires, but also could stimulate participants' brand loyalty.

Additionally, this theme was constructed from the insights provided by female participants from the three countries that were included in the research (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece). Thus, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first research to uncover a common trait of studied females from the SEE region, based on the favorable perception of SM as an important merge into the LFBs' marketing and communication tactics. This holds important theoretical implications, highlighting that female LFCs are more interested in SM-brand activities. From practical standpoint,

findings pinpoint to the idea of using SM to target young female LFCs from the SEE region. In this regard, the identified disparity between males' perspective of communication initiatives on brands' behalf and females' acceptance of personalized communication aspired to address further the perceived value of online communication for this particularly tenacious segment of Gen Y LFCs. Consequently, the interview protocol included a series of questions that readdressed interviewees' mindset toward the most interesting aspects in SM-brands' activities and tackled specifically on perspectives about customer-brand communication established over SM networks. Finally, whilst male and female participants differed in perspectives about incorporating SM into the luxury fashion world, their views united around the influence of celebrities' influence on their consumer behavior.

Celebrities: the new fashion influencers on Social Media

Key words: ***public figures, admire, search, vision of yourself, close to personality***

Participants spoke about the role of celebrities for boosting their interests in LFB. By acknowledging that they were not aware of all the LFB available on the market, discussants admitted that exposure to celebrities' posts on SM could elevate their curiosity to explore new brands and "search more" about the brands' products. As explained by participants:

Table 4:14 Examples attesting to celebrities' influence

I also have some…I like some public figures…actors, singers…and I see something that they wear I'm gonna take a closer look at what that person that I admire is wearing. So, using celebrities for me…if I get exposed
(RS30, female, 28)
-*Yeah for me...I would buy a Longine watch necessarily but I could stare at the poster with the guy from the Mentalist for like hours...of course 'to analyze the structure of the watch and the way it...'* (as a joke). *It gives a good customer experience*
(RS31, female, 24)
[...]I like when fashion bloggers tag or generally public figures people tag a new brand because I just [uhm] I find a new brand and I want to explore it and search more of that
(GS13, female, 19)
-*Yeah.* (GS14, female, 22)

Participants vocalized that exposure to celebrities had an impact on their purchase desires, resulting in the acquisition of the same luxury fashion items/ brands. Therefore, the empirical data implied that celebrities could have mostly an informative role, namely raising brand awareness among the segment of studied Gen Y LFC from SEE. More so,

there were also testimonials attesting to celebrities as an influencing factor driving the purchase desire of those studied. For instance:

[…] I think they create a certain vision for you that you like about yourself. Maybe then I can be attracted or maintain loyal. Like with...like he said with nice videos and showing things [...] So, in the same way if they show me something that I can like about myself I can...consider ...to my personality or something that I like

(BS20, male, 22)

Although a minority, presented by Bulgarian males, findings uncovered that famous people could inspire future purchases. Herein, it could be speculated that celebrities' influence was rooted in the development of an idealized self-image. Put differently, the perception of some of the studied LFCs was that if they dress with the same fashion items/ brands as celebrities, they would become closer to their idealized images. Hence, for these interviewees, once copied, the style of celebrities would make customers feel closer to their idealized identities. As noted, this segment of LFCs included both male and female participants. Acknowledging the limitations of an exploratory research, the empirics were an index for the Gen Y LFCs' inclines to aspire to famous people. Findings also signified the role of celebrities as an influencing factor defining the consumption behavior of the studied sample from the SEE region. The latter statement also stems from the fact that LFCs who referred to celebrities in their responses included participants from the three countries that took part in the research (Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece). Thus, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study in the path toward understanding the influence celebrities' influence on Gen Y luxury fashion consumption behavior in SEE. This has important implications for composing LFBs' marketing campaigns to attract and retain this peculiar audience from the region. The following section presents a summary of the discussion about participants' views on the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty.

4.14. Summary of emerging findings about Gen Y's perceived value of Social Media for building brand loyalty

Figure 4:5 Perceived value of Social Media for building brand loyalty
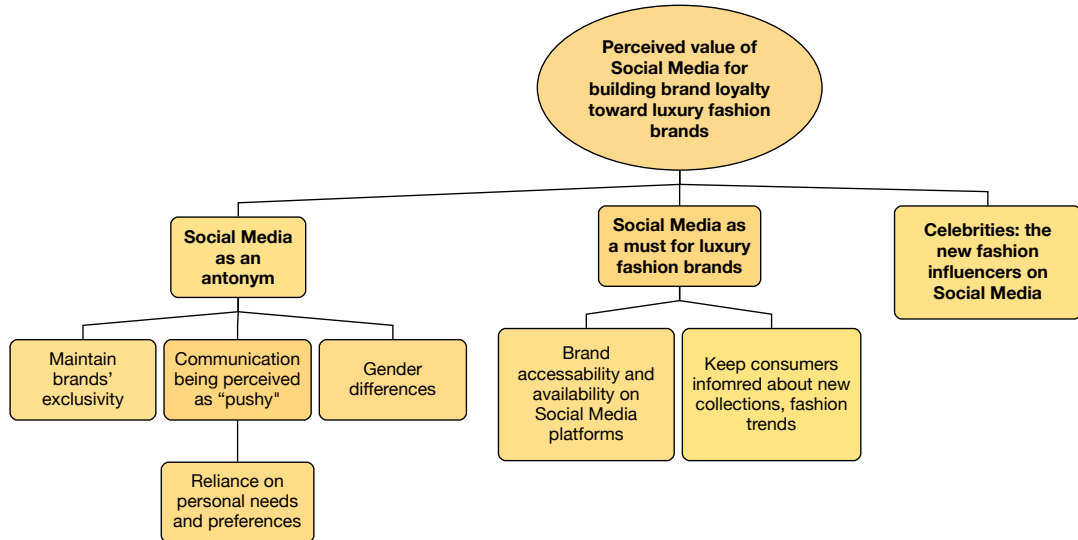
Mindful of the sample limitations, findings were indicative for the influence of the gender on the manner Gen Y LFCs appreciate the role of SM as an important marketing tactic for attracting and retaining customers. Whereas for male customers the "old" and traditional" luxury fashion image clashed with the "new and modern" world of SM, for female customers, SM was the means through which LFBs should adapt to the changes in the marketplace and embrace SM as the ultimate means for boosting customer attention and brand loyalty. The empirics revealed that one area in which both male and female customers were "vulnerable" toward SM exposure referred to celebrities' influence on their purchase desires. The empirics were an index for the Gen Y LFCs' inclines to aspire to famous people, regardless of their gender. This has important implications for composing LFBs' marketing campaigns to attract and retain this peculiar audience from SEE. In all, the analysis allowed to obtain an initial understanding of Gen Y LFCs' perceptions of LFBs. The pilot study also helped to gain an initial comprehension of Gen Y's consumption characteristics, and how they differ among male and female LFCs. The analysis also allowed to identify Gen Y's preferences for online as opposed to offline buying experiences. The section also provided insights into Gen Y's perspectives about the role of SM as a means for attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs. The following discussion depicts the main emerging themes and properties that altogether shaped the analysis of the preliminary findings from the pilot study.

4.15. Summary of emerging findings from focus group discussions

Guided by the main research questions: 1) What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour? and 2) What is the role of Social Media in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation Y male and female luxury fashion consumers in the context of the past economic crisis? the subsequent discussion presents a critical summary of findings by drawing a comparison with existing literature. This was accomplished by illustrating how the emerging findings from the pilot study helped to achieve each of the research objectives.

First, interest in studying Gen Y consumers in the context of LFBs was the sheer recency of their recognition as a powerful market segment (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Butcher *et al.* 2017; Kapferer, 2018). With the mounting interest in understanding regional behavioral traits (Ruvio *et al.* 2008), scholars also caution that it is of prime importance to gain insights into brand perceptions in the path toward building brand loyalty (Schade *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). Thus, *the first research objective was* to ***investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands.*** The exploratory investigation demonstrated that price and uniqueness presented the core aspects that Gen Y LFCs of those studied use to form their perceptions toward LFBs. The influence of gender on the mentality of studied Gen Y LFCs became evident in the cases when female participants emphasized on brand uniqueness. Findings implied that LFBs were more appealing, because of the perception that they were a more unconventional purchase option. Henceforth, this indicated that the embedded uniqueness in LFBs was a key factor that defined the perceptions of studied females. Whilst the consumption psychology might be defined by the consumers' gender, when it comes to the financial aspect of acquiring LFBs customers from FGD's had the same standards in their purchase decisions. That is, they look for quality luxury fashion items that are worth the investment. In light of the emerging findings from the first phase of the research, the pilot study made a contribution to academia, being the first one to extend the conceptualization of LFBs on a regional level, by addressing Gen Y LFCs from Bulgaria, Romania and Greece.

Second, previous studies question the motives and desires that stay behind luxury fashion consumption of Gen Y consumers (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016;

Fernandez *et al.* 2016; Schade *et al.* 2016; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Roux *et al.* 2017; Butcher *et al.* 2017; Raisanen *et al.* 2018). Nevertheless, it seems that there is lack of clear conceptualization of Gen Y luxury fashion consumption from SEE (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). More so, the need of grasping the role of gender among young consumers from emerging markets is also acknowledged as being of theoretical relevance (Raisanen *et al.* 2018). Thus, due to the inadequacy of previous studies, the second research objective was to ***explore gender differences in consumer behaviour among Gen Y luxury fashion customers***. In this vein, existing knowledge suggests that Gen Y consumers' purchase attitudes towards LFBs are affected by emotional and symbolic values rather than utilitarian product features (Valaei and Nikashemi, 2017). By contrast, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this study was the first to empirically demonstrate that satisfaction from previous purchase experiences, with an emphasis on quality, has significant behavioural implications on the studied Gen Y LFCs.

Further, the analysis uncovered that to a great extent the consumption behavior of studied female Gen Y LFCs in SEE was driven by personal style, also expressed in the context of impulsive purchases. The empirical investigation implied that the reliance on personal tastes, preferences and personal style acted as a barrier toward the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs. Remarkably, this is in sharp contrast to recent studies suggesting that satisfaction from the hedonic and symbolic benefits contribute to the development of brand loyalty (Choi *et al.* 2016; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). In line with existing literature, findings indicated that studied females involve in creative-counter conformity in order to express their identities and dissociate themselves from the commoners (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; O'Cass, 2001; Tian and McKenzie, 2001). Thus, the research yielded intriguing findings, demonstrating that females are more likely to visit several stores, whilst males have one favorite store/ brand (Petra, 2016). Thus, it would appear that there are certain consumer characteristics typical for Gen Y LFCs in SEE and countries from Central Europe. Based on the empirical data, this was the first study to empirically demonstrate that Gen Y females' tendency to practice dissimilarity is inherently encoded in their consumer behavior. Findings indicated that female Gen Y LFCs are more likely to use their personal styles as a means to claim their own identities. In light of these, it could be suggested that personal style, including LFBs have a self-expressive value (Kapferer and Bastein, 2009; Appleford, 2015) for female LFCs in SEE.

Further, the limited literature discusses the buying preferences of consumers from Central Europe, with no focus on LFBs (Petra, 2016) or it is restricted to the study of female consumers from Romania, and it is based on the positivist research approach (Ciornea, 2014), thus, providing no vivid evidence for the underlying reasons that drive consumers' online consumer behavior. Henceforth, this study is the first to conduct a theoretical investigation on the role of gender by responding to the need for understanding Gen Y's online consumer behavior (Otnes and McGrath, 2011; Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Appleford, 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016). Thus, the third objective was to ***Investigate gender differences in online consumer behaviour among Gen Y luxury fashion customers.*** Findings demonstrated that the personal touch (personalized customer service) was the cornerstone of studied Gen Y's preference for the traditional retail format. This is in line with previous publications highlighting that ensuring an outstanding customer service makes Gen Y consumers feel cherished and valued which is a promising route for securing attraction and retention (Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). In light of these, it is theorized that the brand loyalty of those studied could be the result of interviewees' loyalty bestowed on the shop assistants at the store. Therefore, the theoretical implication of the research is that it was the first to demonstrate that the hedonic in-store experience, is of significant value for the development of brand loyalty among LFCs from SEE.

The empirics revealed that previous purchase experiences inspired a sense of certainty in the quality of LFBs, which in effect made studied Gen Y LFCs more incline to rely on the online alternative to acquire LFBs This was reflected in cases of limited brand availability. Overall, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to demonstrate that the choice of the in-store environment is also driven by the perception of lowered risk involved in expensive purchases, such as the acquisition of LFBs (Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). Henceforth, within the context of the research, it could be suggested that the experience of the economic crisis made Gen Y LFCs more sensitive to their expenses, fostering the preference for "secure" purchases.

Finally, a consistent view among academics is that the evaluation of online brand presence has behavioral outcomes both on the online and offline brand loyalty (Herhausen *et al.* 2015). On the other hand, literature provides conflicting views about the brand loyalty of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al.* 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Fernandez *et al.* 2016) whilst SM is also acknowledged as being of prime

importance for attracting and retaining this consumer segment (Kim and Ko, 2012; Loureiro *et al*. 2018). In this vein, interest in additional inquiry was triggered by the lack of clear conceptualization of Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). Thus, the fourth research objective addressed by the pilot study was to ***Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media***. Mindful of the sample limitations, findings were indicative for the influence of the gender of LFCs on the manner they appreciate the role of SM as an important marketing tactic for attracting and retaining customers. For male customers the "old" and traditional" luxury fashion image clashed with the "new and modern" world of SM. Whilst current study findings comply with existing knowledge about males' ignorance toward the development of customer-brand relationships (Chai *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013), the research enabled to inform that studied male LFCs from the SEE region are reluctant toward the notion of transferring customer-brand relationships in the digital world exactly due to the perception of LFBs' exclusivity. This means that in-store experience and reliance on personal consumer needs and instincts (namely brand loyalty) are the cornerstone of young males' LFCs from the SEE region. However, this suggestion must be interpreted with caution as findings are not applicable for bigger segment of the population.

Recognizing the limitations of a qualitative inquiry, findings implied that female LFCs are more confident in the chances offered by SM to take a new spin on how brand loyalty can be developed outside the traditional retail format. Specifically, findings demonstrated that LFBs which are less dogmatic in persisting their image of exclusivity and adopt a more flexible approach toward incorporating SM into their marketing have higher chances to capitalize on attracting and retaining this demanding consumer segment in the long-term. In support of the latter statement were the empirics demonstrating that there are instances when brands' responsiveness to adapt to Gen Y's needs for obtaining brand information can also be granted with brand loyalty. This was an interesting revelation in light of existing knowledge, which suggests that females are more likely to embrace SM as an opportunity to maintain their existing relationships (Porter *et al.* 2012; Haferkamp and Papadakis, 2012; Chai *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013). Thus, the empirical investigation also extended our knowledge about the significance of providing a smooth transition of the in- store experience in online settings and opportunity to nourish brand loyalty via SM (Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017; Gautam and Sharma, 2017) by being the first one to clarify that this is especially valuable strategy for female

LFCs from SEE. In sum, from a theoretical implication aspect, this was the first research in the SEE region to demonstrate how the gender of Gen Y LFCs in fact plays an important role in the manner studied consumers perceived LFBs' presence on SM and the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs.

Conclusively, the section presented an analysis of an exploratory investigation based on FGDs as part of a pilot study. It illustrated an empirical data about brand perceptions, consumer behavior, consumer buying experiences, and perceived value of SM for the development of brand loyalty. As suggested by academics, findings can be jeopardized by the group think effect (Morgan,1996; Zaharia *et al.* 2008; McCullough, 2011; Marrelli, 2008). Nevertheless, the pilot study helped to obtain valuable insights to theory-building, being reflective for Gen Y's luxury fashion consumer behavior and impact of SM for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs in the SEE region. However, the decision to further pursue the topic of SM role for the development of brand loyalty was based on extensive research showing that there have not been investigations that collectively explore the interplay between Gen Y males and female consumer behavior, brand loyalty, SM and the impact of the 2008 economic crisis on the mindset of this young segment in the context of LFBs in SEE. Completion of data collection via individual interviews helped to refine and obtain comprehensive understanding of Gen Y's LFCs on different aspects that pertain to the research topic.

In all, FGDs helped to provide fresh insights into Gen Y's perceptions toward LFBs, Gen Y LFCs' consumer behaviour, their tendency to develop brand loyalty toward LFBs and the role of SM for developing brand loyalty toward LFBs. Thus, the FGDs helped to broaden luxury brand loyalty literature by answering the main research questions: 1) What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour? and 2) What is the role of Social Media in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation male and female luxury fashion consumers in the context of the past economic crisis. Specifically, the analysis of FGDs showed that Gen Y's brand loyalty and the role of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs is largely dependent on the gender of those studied. This was evident in the differences in brand loyalty: personal style for females versus dependence on previous purchase experiences and personal consumer needs for males, and differences in the idea of incorporating SM for building brand loyalty: persisting the traditional pristine image of LFBs for males versus positive outlook of employing SM for

attracting and retaining consumers for females. In order to provide a more comprehensive response to the research question, the individual interviews helped to understand the impact of the economic crisis on Gen Y's consumer behaviour and SM role of building brand loyalty toward LFBs. The following chapter presents findings from individual interviews.

Chapter 5: FINDINGS PHASE 2 INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

The chapter is structured in a way depicts the themes and properties that altogether shaped the outlooks of participants' lifeworld, by providing a comprehensive view of the aspects that emerged as being of highest value for studied Gen Y LFCs. The analysis is structured along the following main sections:

- Gen Y's perceptions of luxury fashion brands
- Consumption characteristics of Gen Y LFCs
- Age and gender defining Gen Y's luxury fashion consumer behaviour
- Impact of the economic crisis on the consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs

Altogether, these sections seek to fulfill three of the research objectives:

-Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands

-Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers

-Explore Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in SEE given the past economic crisis

5.1. Perceived quality: investing in preciousness

Key words: *fit, last long, materials, fabrics, fit, design, price, value for money, brand loyalty*

This theme constituted the views of a significant portion of studied Gen Y LFCs. It was outlined by 54 of the interviewees who took part in the research. Most often, the cases in which it appeared as an important factor characterizing participants' consumer behavior referred to quality as an attitude, purchase trigger, criteria, enjoyable aspects in the consumption experience and brand loyalty. This implied that quality has an essential role that defined the consumption behavior of studied Gen Y customers, including the standards they follow in purchase decisions. Interviewees referred to **product design and materials** used in the craftsmanship of fashion items. In participants' minds the design was associated with the fitting of the clothing items. Interviewees emphasized on the fabrics/ materials used in the production of fashion garments. This was accompanied by highlighting that the fashion item/s they purchase would not get destroyed shortly after they have been worn. Put differently, in customer's eyes of those studied, the quality of fashion items was also associated with the fact that they last for a **long period of time**. As the examples presented in the table revealed:

Table 5:1 Examples attesting to perceived quality: investing in preciousness

> *[…] the design makes very big difference, the materials also, how you feel it, how they stay on you, how… how they [uhm] they feel after 10 washings! Most of the things, I'm talking about normal shirts, brands that are 10 or 20 euros, which are not luxury, but after 10 or 20, maximum 20 washes, you can see that the colors are destroyed, the model is changed, the… even the size is changing, it's getting smaller or bigger! […] I love LaCoste […] I have 3 shirts that I… I wear them all the summer and after one year of washing them and everything, the colors are the same! I noticed that! So, yeah, that means quality for me! […] these are some motivations, the quality of the shirt, for example, I don't buy a thing, let's say if I see a shirt that costs 200 euros, I just see the price and then I buy it straight, because this is not wise. […]*
>
> (PR19, male, 36)
>
> *[…] I know that a bag from a luxury brand is from genuine leather for example and I want that kind of product because I don't want to use for [uhm] two or three times and to get rid of it because it's broken or something else! So, that means the product is... has a good quality, a premium one! […]*
>
> (PR5, female, 35)

> *The most I… like for the brands I buy, the most important is the quality […]when the quality is good so you… you can… use it for a long time […] For example, for bags you can use it for a long time and for clothes, you feel good in these clothes and they fit your… body in a good way […]*
>
> (PBG18, female, 29)

In interviewees' eyes, quality appeared as a crucial benchmark that defined their decision to purchase LFBs. Moreover, findings demonstrated that interviewees have mapped out a list of criteria they look for in a fashion product and they relied on **previous purchase experiences** to guide them in their future purchase endeavours. This implanted the idea that customers' purchase choices were also based on trust expressed in the belief that LFBs offer quality products. Furthermore, in the context of the long-lasting aspect, this indicated that customers perceived such purchases from an investment perspective. In this context, for part of interviewees, quality also evoked positive feelings of joy. For them, the most enjoyable aspect of the consumption experience referred to the fact that the fashion items they purchase would last for a long period of time. Herein, given that the acquisition of LFBs involved high monetary investments, the empirics demonstrated that for the studied segment their purchases should be a synonym of "value for money".

Further on the latter statement, participants also talked about quality by establishing a nexus to **price**. Customers' viewpoints stretched across two opposing views. For some of them, the high price tags of fashion garments were not justified. They composed their perceptions around the notion that the fabrics or the final quality was not adequate for the price at which products were offered. Perceived from an investment perspective, this implied that customers were price-sensitive to the purchases they make. However, price did not present a milestone for quality fashion items they liked. Nevertheless, their financial philosophy and perception of price-quality ratio did have a sufficient impact on their purchase habits. As of the other segment, they expressed favourable views toward the pricing policy of LFBs. The empirics revealed that studied customers were receptive toward the prices because of perceived price-quality ratio. Moreover, participants endorsed their views to the notion that the quality appeal covered for the cost at which fashion garments were offered. Findings implied that in customers' minds of those interviewed the interpretation of LFBs entailed a positive perception of quality which comes at a certain cost. As illustrated by the following examples presented in the table:

Table 5:2 Expressed views about the perception of price-quality ratio

Not justified	*I think they are super expensive without giving me any advantage [...] I don't think there is value... there is no value for money in other words, generally! But for some brands it's ok. That's why I'm buying them as well. Especially in clothes [...]* (PGR20, male, 28) *[…] because sometimes the materials, you know, just plain cotton on silk and I don't see why something needs to cost so much when it's just you know, a cotton dress that was made in… Asia or something, so that's a bit annoying.* (PR2, female, 27)
Justified	*[...]some people say that luxury brands are just ridiculously expensive without any reason but to me it's not the way I think. I think that these luxury brands are expensive because they are usually from great quality and they are something that [uhm] I think the price for these luxury brands is worth, totally worth* (PBG2, male, 30) *[…] the quality, it's the preciousness, it's the investment. For example, it's not the same if you buy [uhm] let's say a Chanel bag or you buy a Zara bag […]* (PGR5, female, 27).

In addition, one of the specifics for selecting participants in the research was based on the criteria that they had to be LFCs. However, as depicted in the last example form the table, this did not exclude the possibility they could also be customers of fast fashion brands. In this context, whilst acknowledging the perceived match between price and quality, participants drew a comparison with brands from the non-luxury sector. Most often, they cited the fashion brand Zara. Put differently, the purchase experiences of interviewees allowed them to form an opinion about the difference in acquiring a fashion item from a LFB as opposed to buying from the high street brands. This indicated that studied LFCs were ready to invest higher portion of their incomes in LFBs knowing that they would obtain an item of superior quality.

More so, it was noteworthy that quality appeared as the most significant factor for **brand loyalty.** For most of the customers who shared that their brand loyalty was largely based on quality, this was also a main purchase trigger or criteria they looked for in choosing LFBs. The researcher identified an overlap in their responses which referred to: quality that lasts for long period of time, justified price-quality ratio (value for money) and drawing comparisons with fast fashion brands. Combined, findings indicated that participants' loyalty was the outcome of their inclination to perceive such purchases from an investment perspective rather than buying lower-priced items that would fade into oblivion. As depicted in the following statements:

Table 5:3 Examples attesting to quality as a source of brand loyalty

> *I like what they sell! And I'm very happy with my bags! For example, with Michael Kors, they are very… long-lasting [uhm] I mean quality that will not go out of fashion very soon! Things like that!*
>
> (PR15, female, 31)
>
> *[…] It has to have quality. If that brand proves it has quality, it has the best…. you don't even have to say what brand you wear. Practically, it speaks for itself. So, as I said for me the most important is quality: for shoes, for pants, for suits, for anything you buy […] If you buy something from an expensive brand believe if you know your brands really well [uhm] you are going to wear them for years. So, quality. For me, it's the quality…just being sure that you go and buy something that is worth*
>
> (PBG4, male, 27)

Based on the presented examples, it would appear that satisfaction from previous purchase experiences was the key trigger that encouraged this segment of customers to "design" a list of top favorite LFBs and stick to them without feeling the need to explore other brand alternatives. In effect, findings indicated that satisfaction with the quality based on previous purchases was an incrementally important factor for the development of brand loyalty.

Additionally, few customers voiced that there are also regional fashion designers which also promise quality that does not surrender to the one of LFBs with a worldwide fame. One of the stated: *"[...] there is also [uhm] local designers in every country that produce very good garments, with very good quality materials [uhm] and patterns and I can totally say that those are luxurious as well, I would consider a dress from Maria Lucia Hohan, which is Romanian designer, a luxury item for sure!* (PR11, female, 29). This view was also shared by one male participant from Romania (PR16, male, 29). Although a minority, interviewees' recounts were a sign that these customers were not seduced by the "lust" of brand prominence typical for LFBs. Instead they were as inclined to purchase from local fashion designers being secured in the quality of the fashion garments.

Finally, perceived quality appeared an important factor defining the positive attitudes toward LFBs amongst participants from both genders. This was an index that studied Gen Y LFCs place high value on the utilitarian product features. The favorable attitudes expressed by interviewees were reflected in the empirical data, demonstrating that quality appeared as a key purchase criteria and purchase trigger for the studied female LFCs. This indicated that young female LFCs of those studied wanted to feel secure about the worthiness of their purchases. Finally, quality also appeared that it was a chief component evoking a sense of trust amongst male LFCs, which was reflected in their brand loyalty

based on the quality of LFBs. Finally, apart from the utilitarian product features, the analysis also uncovered Gen Y's interest in the symbolic brand elements, such as brand DNA. The following section discusses emerging findings about brand DNA in detail.

5.2. Brand DNA

Key words: ***always in fashion, never dying fashion, aesthetics, individuality, legendary, work efforts, art, artists, unique/ different/ timeless design, brand style***

This theme represented the views of a significant portion of the customers who took part in the research. It was discussed by 25 participants and brand DNA emerged as an important component that had the power to boost participants' purchase triggers and brand loyalty. Findings indicated that the efforts brand put in sustaining their core values, traditions, designs and brand image have a substantial effect on the consumption behavior of Gen Y LFCs who were interviewed. Interviews demonstrated impressive respect toward the **craftsmanship**, including work efforts and resources, in the creation of luxury fashion garments. In their eyes, the creativity of fashion designers was equivalent to the performances of any other kind of artists (actors, musicians). Participants paid respect to the work, imagination, and ingenuity involved in the craftsmanship of fashion garments by relating them with art. As illustrated by the following examples presented in the table:

Table 5:4 Expressed perceptions about brand DNA

[…] you see the creativeness of the human being. Let's see it from this perspective as well. I mean, not only the musicians and the actors are people who really can do something. They are not the only artists in the world. Because being [uhm] a designer, being a successful fashion designer is very important thing […]
(PBG11, female, 33)

I know how difficult it is and how many efforts stand behind a collection, from fabrics up to craftsmanship, it's …. People see only a dress, but it's so much resource and so much thinking, so to me it's close to art!
(PBG21, female, 33)

The empirics demonstrated that Gen Y customers of those interviewed were sympathetic toward the work efforts involved in the production of quality items. Herein, this implies that for this segment, the meaning of quality surpassed tangible product attributes and encapsulated the symbolic meaning of creativity involved in the design of fashion garments. Thus, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study in the SEE

region, to demonstrate that young LFCs are sensitive to the "heartbeat" of LFBs. This was an important finding for theory-building, fulfilling a gap in academic knowledge about the mindset of Gen Y LFCs.

Among the spectrum of views, the different and **unique designs** were associated as a stamp of each LFB. Interviewees explained their views by outlining that the creativity involved in designing unique fashion pieces was reflected in the timeless designs that will always remain in fashion. In doing so, they also demonstrated appreciation toward the fact that even though brands adapt to fashion changes in the marketplace, they are always authentic to their identities, culture and values. For example, as interviewees explained:

Table 5:5 Expressed perceptions about brands' unique designs

[…] For me personally is the unique design, something that… I can really appreciate because I don't know how to explain… I mean, it's not about the…brand image, its' about how they manage to elevate their DNA on top of fashion trends. I mean, it's not about the brand itself, it's about what they do and how they do it (PBG6, female, 36) *The most important is the tone voice of the brand and… the way they… the way they interact with the audience and… Maybe the heart of the brand that stands behind the brand is more important than the models they create […]* (PBG16, female, 34)

The emphasis on brand DNA implied that participants look for LFBs which manage to respond to changes in the market landscape whilst introducing new fashion items that reflect the core brand identity. Herein, the empirics indicated that in participants' minds, the ability to preserve and communicate brand ethos was a core purchase driver because of brands' ability to stay true to their traditions and how LFBs manage to reflect the brand DNA by embroidering it into their fashion pieces. Furthermore, customers who emphasized on the unique design in the context of brand loyalty also shared that they prefer to purchase brands that resonate with their own identities. Specifically, insights bear an interesting finding about Gen Y's tendency to purchase LFBs as an extension of the self, based on perceived **self-brand similarity.** As illustrated by the following example: As one participant explained:

[…] I find myself in them, somehow. Just when I see let's say the new pair of shoes…I find something from myself in the pair that I see, and I know that when I put it there will be people who will come and tell me "Those shoes are made for you" […] They may keep the same…style but they always make a different vision, which is critical […]
(PBG11, female, 33)

In this vein, brand uniqueness could be seen as synonymous to brand DNA. This uniqueness has always been part of a bigger picture that presents the brands' story and identity. Whereas the approach toward presenting brand image might vary across different target segments, it has always been a focal point of LFBs' marketing. More so, in the same way that brand DNA reflects its uniqueness, each person has a unique personality that he wants to present (market) to the world. Therefore, it appeared as an organic fit that interviewees who discussed self-brand similarity also admitted that brand DNA defined their loyalty. Herein, findings indicated that this segment of female LFCs was more likely to base their purchase decision on the extent that LFBs resonate with consumers' personal styles and identities. The exploratory investigation contained interesting implications being the first one to demonstrate that the choices of luxury fashion items/ brands was largely defined by how well the luxury fashion garment/ brand fitted into females' customers' ideas of the acquired fashion items as a source for communicating one's identity.

Further, brand legacy was also highlighted as a chief reason which provoked positive attitudes, purchase desires and brand loyalty. Customers spoke about **brand history and culture** that were inherent part even in the contemporary fashion pieces designs. It was interesting to note that some of them explained the value of history, traditions and culture by drawing a metaphor with the way certain bird breeds survived because of their unique characteristics which transcended the course of time. Precisely, customers explained:

Table 5:6 Expressed perceptions about brands' history and culture

[…] the LaCoste shirt or certain Reebok shirts [uhm] Reebok and Nike have certain models that you can remake but it's just not the same thing. So, they had the whole experience of decades with this model…It's like the ostrich. The ostrich is a bird which comes from the era of the dinosaurs. So, it was so well designed that it didn't have to evolve to survive… and I guess some of these designs and [uhm] innovations at a time are worth being loyal to. Because they just did it the right way […]
(PBG8, male, 32)
[…] being unique is really important so … every brand has its own characteristics and its own identity! So, I would never like to change that!
(PGR2, female, 33)

As demonstrated, the empirics indicated that brand DNA influence stretched beyond purchase triggers, having a substantial effect on the manner studied customers evaluate their brand loyalty based on the way brands manage to sustain their traditions, values and culture. In participants' minds, the ability to preserve and communicate brand ethos was

a core driver for customer loyalty because of the perception that brands remain loyal towards their traditions. Therefore, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first research to empirically demonstrate that LFBs that successfully capitalize on their traditions, history and culture and manage to communicate them through their designs and marketing tactics would enjoy winning the loyalty of studied Gen Y LFCs for a lifetime. Finally, brand DNA triggered favorable attitudes among both genders of studied customers, appeared as a purchase trigger and criteria amongst Gen Y LFCs who took part in the research. Herein, from a theoretical standpoint, it could be suggested that the positive perception of the symbolic elements is a distinct trait existent in the Gen LFCs of those studied. Brand DNA appeared as a core driver for brand loyalty among both genders of interviewed LFCs. Consequently, from a conceptual standpoint, the findings contributed to academia by clarifying that Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region were more likely to aspire to LFBs that stay true to their brand history, culture, inherent craftsmanship and unique designs that represent the "tone voice" of the brand.

In all, brand DNA symbolizes the unique features and identity of each brand. More so, embedded in the brand DNA is brand exclusivity. It is exactly the exclusive luxury cachet that makes these brands recognizable. Herein, the next sections present findings about the impact of perceived brand uniqueness and brand recognition as factors that have a fundamental role in the consumer behavior of studied Gen Y consumers.

5.3. Brand uniqueness

Key words: ***able to buy; not common; not easily accessible; premium; soul; special place; seeing fakes; market availability; price and uniqueness; loss of luxury value***

The concept of perceived brand uniqueness emerged among 29 of the customers who took part in the research. It was interesting to note that brand uniqueness had the power to trigger a purchase desire only for two of the participants. The minority of participants whose purchase triggers were based on brand uniqueness implied that this segment was not attracted or seduced by the lavish images of LFBs. The value of brand uniqueness appeared mostly in cases when participants shared their views about the most enjoyable aspects in the luxury fashion consumption experience and their reactions if they were to see other people with the same luxury fashion items/ brands (25 of the studied customers). Besides, the context of participants' responses uncovered that perceived brand uniqueness

was also an important factor that defined participants' understanding of luxury and purchase criteria. Consequently, it could be suggested that the full glamour of brand uniqueness was experienced at the post-purchase stage, because it reflected the way participants felt about their purchases.

Bringing joy to Generation Y's consumer lives

The aspects that bring participants positive emotions at the post-purchase stage referred to the perception of **limited brand accessibility**, being among the few lucky ones to purchase these divine fashion items. Customers attested to the belief that the purchase of fashion items that were not mainstream made them feel special. In this context, interviewees favored luxury fashion items which were extravagant or part of limited collections. In the minds of those studied, the idea was that the purchase of LFBs helped them to differentiate themselves from the commoners. As illustrated by the following examples in the table:

Table 5:7 Expressed views about limited brand accessibility

> *[…] I feel better when I buy something special and also when I find something, which is not so…how to say…easy accessible to most of the people. When I buy something, which is not so common*
>
> (PBG10, male, 35)
>
> *[…] Diesel has Black Gold collection: they are more expensive than the others […] the one which is more expensive are more unique and they don't have so many bags like a production. So, you have a unique one. Not many of us can have it. This is the idea behind it*
>
> (PBG1, female, 27)

As demonstrated, interviewees' responses demonstrated that the purchase and wear of LFBs was perceived as a symbol of distinguishing themselves from the crowd. Findings can be explained with the perceived role of LFBs to distinguish consumers from the mass. Herein, the empirical data implied that LFBs which are covered by an aura of exclusivity and requiring higher acquisition costs fostered feelings of superiority and distinctiveness in customers' minds.

Interviewees also expressed feelings of joy from the **ability to purchase luxury fashion brands**. An outlook of interviewees' responses about their understanding and attitudes toward LFBs demonstrated that brand uniqueness revolved around the concept of limited brand availability and "premium" fashion items. Consequently, in the eyes of these customers, perceived brand uniqueness was associated with the financial investments necessary to obtain these exquisite fashion garments. For example:

[…] I save to buy a watch now, which is a luxurious thing and it is an occasion. I waited for my 30th anniversary in order to buy something really special for me and I'm really glad I can afford it now in this stage of life. So, I think it is an occasion and if you buy a 100euro watch for example it's not an occasion, it's just casual, something that you can wear every day. But if you buy something that you saved for a year for example you wear it on special occasions. It's special. It has place in your heart. It has a soul, whereas everything Chinese cheap made, ready that you can go today and buy for 15euros cannot be special for you or for anybody else

<div align="right">(PBG9, male, 30)</div>

Acknowledging the high acquisition costs, customers testified that there were instances when they had to **save money** in order to obtain their desired LFBs. In effect, they expressed feelings of satisfaction of being "able to afford it" (GR14, male, 28). It was notable that the time devoted to allocating financial resources was not restricted solely to the idea of brand exclusivity per se. For some of the interviewees, the determination to save money in order to buy LFBs defined by scarcity implied that they develop special bonds with these brands. By comparing luxury fashion purchases with cheaper ones, their views indicated that brands, which were easily accessible to wider customer segments did not have any extraordinary features that would make them worth being aspired to. On the other hand, luxury fashion pieces, with their symbolic appeals had the power to evoke an emotional brand attachment. Overall, findings were indicative for the feeling of pride in customers' minds of those interviewed. The empirics demonstrated that whilst customers did not always have a disposable income ready to spend on exclusive LFBs, the allure with which these brands shine encouraged interviewees to budget their financial resources in order to be able to afford them. From theoretical standpoint, the empirical investigation was the first one to demonstrate that the purchase of LFBs was a source of internal satisfaction expressed in the feeling of pride, for studied LFCs. Brand uniqueness also emerged as an invaluable element defining the consumer behavior of studied Gen Y consumers in regard to their reactions if they were to see other people wearing the same luxury fashion items/ brands**.**

Seeing other people with the same luxury fashion brands

This segment of interviewees provided two opposing views. Whilst for some of them, this did not present an issue, others expressed quite negative views. As of the former segment, their attitudes toward such a situation revolved around **brand availability**. Specifically, customers acknowledged that whilst exclusivity is an inherent part LFBs, this exclusiveness was not limited to the production of single custom-made fashion items. Consequently, they did not express negative feelings toward the possibility that someone

else embraced the opportunity to indulge himself by purchasing the same luxury fashion item/ brand. For example, as illustrated by the excerpt quotes in the table:

Table 5:8 Expressed views about brand availability

> *[…] now that I have kids for example, my needs are for big bags, the big shop bags that they call them […] Previously I bought different kind of bags and maybe some small bags for [uhm] going out but the last years my needs drive me! […] I… know that these things are not unique. Ok, some of them are unique, but I'm not going to search for this unique thing in order to feel ok with myself. I'm ok if someone wears the same thing as me*
>
> (PGR15, female, 36)
>
> *I don't really care […] Maybe I will take some examples to try to make an outfit with the same piece you know… to compare that total outfit, but yeah… I wouldn't really mind.*
>
> (PGR1, female, 28)

A possible explanation of interviewees' responses was that they also spoke about the importance of quality as a crucial component in their decision-making process. This suggestion stems from the fact that customers who shared that they did not mind seeing other people with the same luxury fashion brand/ item highlighted the value of quality in their brand choices. Moreover, customers also testified that their "indifference" was due to the fact that their purchase choices were based on personal consumer needs. Taking into consideration the context of participants responses, emphasis on quality and recognition of brand availability, findings were an index that this segment of interviewees Gen Y consumers purchase LFBs for their own pleasure. In other words, for them it was irrelevant whether they were to be exposed in situation where they see someone else with the same brand/item, because the value of such purchases transcended the need for uniqueness, whilst the accent was on how these brands fulfilled the needs, criteria and purchase triggers of interviewees.

Moreover, as demonstrated by the latter example in the table, in customers eyes the prospect of fulfilling their own purchase needs and criteria did not exclude the fact that they could **"borrow" style ideas** from other people. Even though this view was shared by a minority of interviewees (only two participants), their testimonials provided valuable insights into Gen Y customer mindset of those studied. Precisely, participants' views indicated that their reactions (taking style ideas) might be attributed to the fact that these customers were still in the process of defining their own styles. This suggestion also stems from an additional observation showing that these interviewees were under 30 years old

(at the age of 28-29 years old). Herein, being on the virtue of discovering their personal styles, participants used other people styles' as a "benchmark" for inspiration to experiment with different clothing combinations. As of researcher's knowledge, this was the first research in the SEE region to produce theoretically relevant findings about the value of consumer distinctiveness through the purchase and wear of LFBs, by also demonstrating how age defines studied consumers' inclines to borrow style ideas.

Importantly, the customers who had a negative perspective presented the majority of those who spoke about their attitudes toward the idea of others being in possession of the same luxury fashion brands/ items. This indicated a need for uniqueness and preeminence in the purchase of LFBs as a key behavioral driver for the studied Gen Y LFCs. Participants attested to the fact that a main reason to purchase LFBs referred to the **embedded exclusivity and uniqueness**. Part of this exclusive aura was the limited accessibility. Therefore, interviewed customers wanted to be unique in the possession of these items. As explained by one participant:

[…] my reaction… "Are you kidding me?" I just bought this thing for quite an amount of money and… hm, my reaction will not be so good! If I wear an expensive thing and they guy next to me wears the same, hm, you just… I don't like it! This is my reaction! I really don't like it! I really, really, really don't like it!

(PGR8, male, 31)

The empirics indicated that among the spectrum of values that interviewees perceived in the possession of luxury fashion items was that the high acquisition costs of LFBs were a symbol of exclusivity and limited accessibility. This suggestion stems from two factors. First, some of the interviewees who spoke about their negative reactions referred directly to the price tags of LFBs. Second, the context of participants' responses revealed that brand uniqueness was also an important purchase criterion. Hence, it could be suggested that in interviewees' minds brand exclusivity implied that paying the price premium was a sign for uniqueness assigned to the person in possession of these exquisite fashion garments.

More so, for some of the interviewees increased brand availability was perceived as a loss of the **luxury exclusive value**. Specifically, being exposed in a situation where they were to see too many people wearing these brands, meant that luxury was no more as exclusive or unique. An additional evidence for this statement was that for some of the studied Gen Y consumers, as more people had access to these divine products, this would lead to

erosion of the luxury value as being exclusive and hard to obtain. As stated by one respondent:

[...] more or less, you see it, but you don't see it that often! My reaction would be that.... It's very [uhm] easy for people to get it, so it's not a luxury brand anymore! This is what I will think! [...] in my mind this is what it makes it luxury, is this! That I can find it, I can get it, but not everyone can! [...]

(GR18, female, 27)

A possible explanation of participants' views could be found in their sentiments toward luxury uniqueness expressed as part of their understanding of luxury. As the excerpt quote indicated, for them, luxury entailed authentic products defined by high prices, making it accessible to a limited audience, which in effect "sets them apart from everyone else". Thus, from theoretical implication aspect, the research implied that these customers' perceptions of luxury entailed the conventional aspects of what luxury stands for: being limited to a well-defined group of people from a certain social class.

Finally, for a small portion of interviewees the negative reactions emerged from **seeing fakes**. Participants did not mind seeing other people with the same luxury fashion items/ brands. However, that was only in cases when "unless they are fakes or… just like copies" (PGR3, male, 28). What had a negative effect was spotting someone with a fake version of the original one. For instance:

In general, I don't mind. However, for instance with LV, there are a lot of fake bags and I really don't like this... Even I stopped wearing some of my bags because of this. I know it may be a stupid reason, but [uhm] it just.... Interferes with the brand... And if I see something like this, I don't like it. But if I see somebody else who wears the same or similar to my clothing, I will be ok with it [...]

(PBG19, female, 28)

Although this segment was a minority (only three participants), their views provided fruitful insights to understand the value system of Gen Y consumers who took part in the research. A possible explanation is hidden in brand DNA and perceived quality as purchase triggers. Hence, participants' respect for brands history, traditions, and culture evoked a sense of frustration from the fact that there were producers of counterfeits, but also from other consumers' actions that encourage the production of such items. In the eyes of interviewees who appreciated brand DNA, it was inacceptable that other consumers would "interfere" with the brand identities by purchasing counterfeited versions. The magnitude of this effect might be that interviewees would re-consider re-purchasing the brand. This means that for interviewees, the financial resources were perceived as the necessary sacrifice to obtain desired fashion items that helped them to

"stand out from the crowd". Based on the emerging empirics, the study extended the understanding of Gen LFCs from SEE. Specifically, the study clarifies that for Gen Y's the perception of LFBs' uniqueness is conceptualized in terms of three main factors: limited brand accessibility, ability to purchase LFBs, and perceived loss of luxury value (including instances of seeing counterfeited versions). For a small portion of interviewees, the increased brand availability was perceived in a positive way. Herein, it can be theorized that brand uniqueness had a fundamental role in the lives of studied Gen Y LFCs, being perceived as a means to practice dissimilarity. Additionally, upon exploring participants' viewpoints about brand uniqueness, it became evident that for studied Gen Y consumers this perception was also transferred in the way they behaved in the digital universe.

Brand uniqueness: negative perception of show-off

Participants' views demonstrated that the preciousness of brand uniqueness was based on the personal aspect of luxury fashion consumption. In effect, this also evoked associations of sharing one's brand experiences on SM as an act of show-off. Among the spectrum of opinions, interviewees rationalized their opinions by outlining the financial aspect of acquiring luxury fashion brands. Specifically, realizing that they were among a selected sample of customers who could afford luxury fashion brands, participants paid respect to the fact that other people may not have the same level of disposable income to spend on those brands. As presented by the following examples in the table:

Table 5:9 Expressed views about show-off in sharing brand experiences on SM

No! Because I think that we live in a small society and it is not nice to demonstrate that you can buy something and of course I have in mind the economic crisis. So… I don't like to show that I have bought something, I don't like that [uhm] that's why! (PGR13, female, 27) *[…] Maybe someone else would feel bad because they also work hard but their situation does not allow them extravagant purchases […] I've always shown away from making a parade of my luxury brands! So, I don't think I've ever shared or discussed, or bragged or anything like that on social media about having something new […]* (PR9, female, 27) *No, Never, never! Because I don't feel comfortable to show to other people the things that maybe someone else cannot buy and if someone can buy the same things, does not need my... information. They know the size, the new things, so I do not need to show to them what I have bought! It's a personal decision, a personal issue... personal experience!* (PGR16, female, 35)

As demonstrated, in participants' eyes, the purchase and wear of LFBs was not perceived as something that a person could comfortably disseminate as an information on SM networks. Interviewees were considerate about the notion that their SM posts might lead to negative feelings in people who might not have the financial abilities for luxury fashion purchases. This revealed a notable pattern of studied Gen Y consumer behavior, implying that participants were sensitive to the economic vibes among the populations in their countries. They were respectful toward the value of having the "advantage" to purchase LFBs. Such findings also provided important insights about the impact of the economic crisis on the mindset of young interviewees. Herein, the empirics suggest that even though it has been 10 years already, the massive effect of the economic crisis could still be sensed in the way it influenced the consumer behavior of studied Gen Y customers.

It was also interesting to note that in participants' minds if they posted their unique purchases, they would run the risk of giving a "hint" to someone else to acquire the same item. As noted, these customers were part of the segment who talked about the embedded uniqueness of LFBs. Herein, it could be speculated that in the eyes of these customers luxury fashion purchases had an emotional component attached to them as they carried a symbol of uniqueness attached to the person who was in possession of the exclusive fashion item. Additionally, within the context of personalized brand experiences, studied customers outlined that they purchase and wear LFBs for themselves and for their own pleasure. As illustrated by the following example:

[...] the personal experience is the first thing. But if I don't explain to them why I bought it, I'm not going to come out as someone who bought it because I like the Bushemi story or how Farrell launched the BBC brand. It's going to look more like I'm bragging about how much I spend on a jacket, which is not my case

(PBG8, male, 32)

Interviewees explained their views by outlining that the purchase of LFBs was personal choice and experience, which was part of their personal lives. Sharing those experiences on SM was perceived as an act of violence being associated with showing-off which interfered with the privacy of individual luxury fashion consumption. In other words, the hedonic luxury components were sacred. This implied that these customers did not need to display their luxury fashion acquisitions in order to receive an additional source of validation for the value of the purchase. Thus, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to demonstrate the value of personal experiences in luxury fashion consumption and the sensitivity toward the economic/ financial aspect of acquiring LFBs

expressed in the negative perceptions of sharing personal brand experiences on SM networks, on behalf of studied Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region.

The empirical data demonstrated that the components that studied LFCs valued as part of perceived brand uniqueness were equally important among male and female interviewees. These included the aspects from the luxury fashion consumption experience that evoked positive emotions and the negative perception of show-off related to posting personal brand experiences on SM. Herein, mindful of the sample limitations, it could be suggested that the embedded uniqueness of LFBs was the core stone of the consumer behavior of studied LFCs, regardless of their gender.

However, a closer look reveals that male LFCs who took part in the research were more reserved in their attitudes toward the chances of seeing others with the same luxury fashion brands/ items. Their reactions were rooted in the financial investments necessary to acquire LFBs. For the studied males, part of the positive emotions from the luxury fashion experience originated from the ability to purchase their desired luxury fashion products. Consequently, for studied male luxury fashion customers perceived uniqueness revolved around the financial investments necessary to acquire luxury fashion items, which also shaped their negative attitudes toward the idea of seeing others with identical luxury fashion brands/ clothes. On the other side, females' concerns related to brand uniqueness revolved around perceived loss of luxury value as a result of increased number of consumers with the same luxury fashion brands/ clothes. This indicated that for female consumers of those interviewed, brand uniqueness revolved around the symbolic, rather than financial, meaning of LFBs. Herein, the empirics uncovered how the consumption behavior of Gen Y LFCs and their perceptions of brand uniqueness were dependent on the gender of those studied. The following section presents findings about the value of brand prominence among interviewed Gen Y LFCs.

5.4. Brand prominence: the path toward self-positioning

Key words*: self-branding, well-seen, brand name, logo, shallowness, vanity, prestige, recognizable, business*

The theme was outlined by 15 of studied Gen Y LFCs. A detailed review of participants' recounts demonstrated that its effect was experienced mostly as a purchase trigger. Nevertheless, interviewees also outlined it as an attitude toward LFBs. For some of them, their attitudes and purchase triggers overlapped. Altogether, these findings implied that interviewees search for LFBs acted as a means of "self-branding". Put differently, participants search for brands with **recognizable image** that would help them to, communicate their status and position themselves in the society.

The main aspects which emerged across the views of interviewees were that the brand recognition (name, image, logo) show prestige and send a message about the status of the person wearing the brand. In effect, they perceived such brands as the means through which they can be "seen in a positive way" by other social actors and be accepted in certain social groups they aspired to. A common inclination amongst this segment referred to the notion that the "brand matters" in order to be recognized by people. As explained by one participant:

[…] I think they also show prestige because they are recognizable brands […] I just find them to be more premium product at a higher price that they are recognizable by a lot of people that know the brands […]It's nice to hear every now and then that you've got something that other people recognize it! […] So, it's [uhm] the recognition they have. In the status I mean, yeah, the prestige. The status that I said earlier is [uhm] is a kind of… it shows a level of prestige and it shows a kind of … I don't know if it shows economic status […]

(PGR12, male, 30)

A reflection on empirical data suggested that the purchase of LFBs was not performed to fulfill the inner satisfaction of this segment. Instead, findings implied that the choice of clothing item served the need for society approval. In other words, the full glamour of the luxury fashion purchases was certified when interviewees could improve their social standings. Consequently, a core perceived characteristic was that LFBs epitomize status symbol and prestige. Thus, it could be suggested that participants used LFBs as a means to send a message about their position in the society and present themselves as successful. Put differently, findings were an indication that in the eyes of LFBs were used as a non-verbal means for communicating their status position. Interestingly, participants also referred to their job positions. From participants' perspective, brands were an important

component in the development of a **professional image**. Customers attested that their job positions were a prerequisite to LFBs. For instance, one respondent explained:

[...] It's about my image that I care a lot! I want to look very good, I have a lot of meetings with clients, with important clients! So, it's very important for me to... to look good and clothes are... the most important things when we are talking about the image of a businessman [...]I have to meet a lot of people every day, I have to... to dress accordingly, because I go to different events or I go to some important meetings with Romanian or foreign companies, so.... I want to be perfect in terms of image! [...]

(PR17, male, 36)

As acknowledged by interviewees, they needed brands that help them to build a solid and reliable image. Their main trigger was rooted in brands' ability to put customers among a professional group of people they work with and LFBs' role to *"make a good image of a man among his partners, co-workers and clients"* (PR18, male,34). Findings indicated that for this segment of interviewees brand recognition was not about the lavish aspect of displaying of status symbols amongst the society. Instead, investment LFBs was a crucial component in creating a reliable image in order to convey trust and credence among other social actors in their professional field. Whilst findings should be interpreted with caution, not being generalizable for bigger portion of the population, they demonstrated how LFBs are often used as a business card for studied LFCs. This has important implications for the behavior of Gen Y consumers who are already established in the workforce. Finally, theoretically, the findings supplied evidence for the impact of brand prominence as the means for improving the social standings of studied Gen Y LFCs. Notably, for part of the studied segment, SM platforms presented the place where they could also display their luxury fashion purchases.

Brand prominence in the digital world

Key words: *vanity; proud, show: luxury, something good*

Findings demonstrated that sharing ones' luxury fashion purchases on SM was important for a very small segment of studied customers. Compared to those who valued the personal aspect and perceived SM posts of their purchases as a show-off (19 interviewees), participants who shared their luxury fashion items on SM were only six in total. This was an additional evidence that for bigger portion of studied Gen Y customers, the value of personal experiences and brand uniqueness was essential rather than displaying brand prominence as a symbol of status, both among offline social actors and on SM platforms. It was notable that for most of their part, respondents did it for "**vanity reasons".** As articulated by one interviewee:

[...] if I bought something good, maybe sometimes happened that I took a photo and posted it on Social Media [...] To show to the others that I have something good

(PBG12, male, 35)

Studied LFCs embraced the opportunity offered by SM to exhibit their acquisitions with wider audiences as a tactic to validate their social status through the unique brand purchases. Participants' views contained an interesting implication about the behavior of studied Gen Y customers. It would appear that for this segment of interviewees the full glory of LFBs' uniqueness embellished in cases the new possessions were publicly communicated on different SM platforms.

Additionally, it was interesting to note that the perceptions of brand prominence as a source of self-positioning, both in offline settings and in the digital world, were defined by the gender of interviewees. Precisely, the empirics demonstrated that male luxury fashion customers of those studied were more incline to purchase LFBs for brands' inherent recognition and as a means to display their social status. Thus, findings imposed important implications for the role of gender as a factor defining the consumption behavior of those studied, demonstrating that male LFCs would exploit the advantages of brand prominence to display their social status and as a form of personal achievements.

However, for bigger portion of interviewees, this behavior (status display) was not transferred in the digital universe. Rather, the empirics demonstrated that interviewees expressed negative attitudes toward the idea of sharing their personal brand experiences on SM platforms. This was a shared perspective both among male and female LFCs who took part in the research. Notably, it was exactly the value of "personal" brand experiences that shaped the negative attitudes of sharing brand experiences on SM platforms amongst studied males. In a similar vein, females compared such a behavior (sharing brand experiences on SM) as an act of a "show-off". Consequently, findings were an indication that whilst there were distinctive characteristics defining the consumption behavior based on participants' gender, for Gen Y LFCs who took part in research the act of sharing personal brand experiences interfered with the purchase and consumption of LFBs being rooted in the personal feelings and satisfaction from the consumption experience. The next section presents a summary of the analysis about Gen Y's perceptions of LFBs.

5.5. Summary of emerging findings about Gen Y's perceptions of luxury fashion brands

Figure 5:1 Gen Y's perceptions of luxury fashion brands
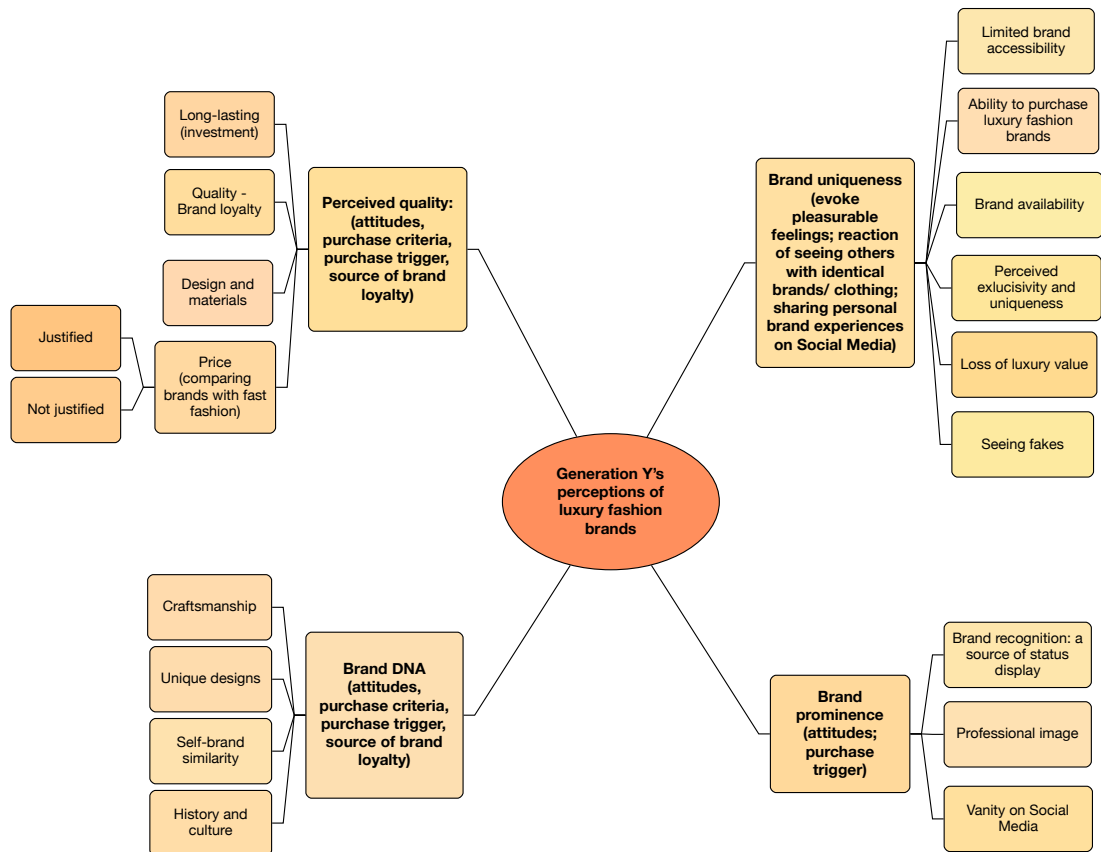
Acknowledging the limitation of a qualitative research, findings propose that: to a great extent for the majority of Gen Y LFCs in SEE their perceptions revolve around quality, brand uniqueness, and brand DNA. An evidence for this theorization were the empirics demonstrating that the majority of customers talked about perceived quality, followed by brand uniqueness and brand DNA as key drivers that shaped their perceptions of LFBs. Conclusively, the discussions on the importance of brand uniqueness as opposed to brand prominence landed important information about these two aspects of luxury fashion consumption as driving forces which characterize the consumption behaviour of studied Gen Y LFCs. That is, luxury as a socially relevant concept and luxury as a metaphor of personal style. These two themes are explored in detail in the following discussions.

5.6. Personal style

Key words: ***change brands, mix and match, personal opinion/preferences, taste, appropriate, suitable, associate with the brand, combining clothes, Social Media, brand awareness, brand loyalty***

The theme about personal style emerged as a vital characteristic defining the consumption habits of nearly half of the studied Gen Y LFCs (29 participants). The empirical evidence demonstrated that the development of personal style was of great importance for the interviewed Gen Y LFCs and it orchestrated the way they take purchase decisions, their mindsets toward personal style as a source of differentiation and communicating their identities. Interviewees' testimonials provided fruitful insights into the context of the study and the significance of participants' personal taste, preferences and opinions. The preceding sections present the main themes that emerged within the context of personal style for those studied.

Confidence in personal tastes and preferences

This category emerged amongst interviewees' opinions about the possible impacts of celebrities for increasing brand loyalty and friends' opinions in the purchase choices. As of the former aspect, celebrities could not have an influential role in affecting brand loyalty of those studied, because they have already determined their personal styles and had strong opinions of the fashion items and brands they like. On the other hand, interviewees testified that there were in a situation when identified a celebrity wearing a LFB and they liked it. However, interviewees were thoughtful about how the specific fashion item would look on them, whether this referred particularly to the body fit or as an element compiling the final look. As illustrated by the following example:

> *[…] I have my style, I know what I like. […] I don't remember to buy something because I saw that Cristiano Ronaldo is wearing it. For example, I love him as a player, but I don't like his clothes or what he is producing. So, it's not very important for me. It's important how it looks on me!*
>
> (PR17, male, 36)

According to participants even if they were attracted by the general appeal of the celebrities' styles, this would not affect them to the extent of buying the same luxury fashion brand/ item, let alone to impact their brand loyalty. As outlined, the main reason was that the brand choices of interviewed Gen Y consumers were based on their personal preferences and tastes. Consequently, findings speak about participants' firm convictions

in their own tastes, preferences and opinions toward LFBs that defined their personal styles. Herein, this means that celebrities can only have an informative role for raising brand awareness for LFBs. Furthermore, the significance of personal style amongst studied Gen Y LFCs was also uncovered in the cases when participants talked about the influence of their friends. Precisely, according to interviewees their friends could not impact their purchase choices and brand attitudes because personal style presented a definite aspect characterizing their consumption habits. As explained by one participant:

My friends? Well, I have friends that have the same taste as I do regarding clothes and different brand items and I have that are totally [uhm] that don't like to buy branded stuff for sure! I don't think they affect me in any way, I just have my own taste and I just buy whatever I feel, whenever I feel. I'm not really influenced by them!

(PR7, female, 27)

Participants explained that some of their friends have similar brand preferences, whilst others did not share the same style views or passion for LFBs. According to participants, none of their peers could influence their purchase choices. They justified their views with an emphasis on personal preferences and personal opinion about the brands they like and the way they match participants' own styles. The empirics indicated that personal tastes, preferences, and opinions shaped the consumption behaviour of this segment of interviewed Gen Y LFCs for whom personal style was a core driver in their purchase choices. In all, findings mean that celebrities could have an informative role LFBs amongst interviewed young customers. The same applied for participants' friends. In light of these, the following section presents findings about celebrities' and friends' potential for raising brand awareness.

Celebrities' and peers' role for raising brand awareness

An additional outlook revealed that even though customers were sceptical toward celebrity influence, this did not exclude **celebrities' role for increasing brand awareness**. Interviewees justified their vulnerability by admitting that celebrities had the power to make them desire, search and sometimes purchase products, which were not previously among the spectrum of preferred brands. For instance, as the following table presents, interviewees admitted:

Table 5:10 Examples attesting to celebrities' role for increasing brand awareness

> *I think from Instagram, when they upload a photo and they are dress in some of these brands […] this makes me search the brands, the clothes that they have, and you want to buy them! You search the web*
>
> (PGR11, female, 27)
>
> *[…] I will go and see how the product looks on me and if it fits my criteria to buy it, I will buy it! That's my perspective*
>
> (PGR12, male, 30)

As demonstrated, customers acknowledged the impact of famous people for introducing them to previously unknown brands or fashion items. Although in this situation celebrity exposure triggered their interest in the fashion item/ brand, they did not necessarily end up purchasing it. As respondents clearly outlined, the final buying decision would be based only on their personal criteria and tastes. Further, whilst participants admitted they could be affected to search and try the brand/ fashion garment worn by a celebrity, for them seeing a fashion product/ brand worn a celebrity did not mean that they would jump over their heads to purchase it. This further strengthened the notion that customers who took part in the research have a strong opinion about their personal tastes and styles in the choices of luxury fashion brands.

More so, findings contained interesting implications for the **impact of friends for increasing brand awareness.** Customers admitted they were not familiar with of all the products and brands available on the marketplace. They acknowledged that friends can introduce them to previously unknown brands. This provided an interesting insight, because it highlighted the power of friends similar to one of the fashion bloggers. Fashion bloggers do not always have to mention the brands they wear. However, this does not mean that the brand or fashion item does not become sensation over a night, simply because it is seen on a certain fashion influencer. Similarly, seeing a friend wearing a fashion item or brand acted as a reminder to check this brand and even purchase some of the brands' products. Participants admitted that their curiosity might be triggered by seeing their friends wearing LFBs offline or as friends' posts on SM networks. This triggered them to go to the physical store or use the advantage of SM to explore the brand in detail. As one interviewee explained:

[…] Social Media in some way…when I'm looking for something or searching for something specific and when I see a brand I don't recognize, if I… like the thing I see I will buy it. But affected… it this way, yes. When I something beautiful [uhm] I may talk

to my friends about it occasionally… But if suits me, I will buy it. If it doesn't, even if it looks good on my friend, I won't buy it. If I like what she posted… or he, I may [uhm] may look at it more thorough and if I like something, yes, maybe I will [uhm] buy it or at least go and see it

(PBG6, female, 30)

This example provided evidence for the superior role of friends on influencing consumers tastes, brand attitudes and preferences. Friends were perceived as a valuable source of brand information. Nevertheless, although participants partially hold their friends liable for triggering their interest in certain fashion articles or brands, the ultimate decision whether or not to buy the product was theirs. They took the final decision based on personal vision of style, taste, and product quality. The empirics were indicative for the impact of friends, even on *cynical* consumers, for shaping brand attitudes. This signified the role of friends as brand ambassadors, having the power to contour consumers' tastes and preferences. More so, it was indicative how if a friend posts brand content or simply wears a brand, this influenced customers to the extent that they even purchased products they previously did not know or even did not like. However, friends' influence stretched to the extent that they could impact customers' interest in a particular item or brand. If the product or brand did not fit with participants' tastes, it was unlikely that they would purchase it. Theoretically, findings further our understanding of Gen Y's luxury fashion customer behaviour on a regional level, demonstrating that personal style is a major behavioural driver. In this vein, the following section presents findings about the value of creativity in developing a personal style for the segment of studied Gen Y LFCs.

Creativity in developing a personal style

In the eyes of these customers, the value of personal style was **the ability to combine different fashion articles.** This was a predominant perspective, which defined participants' attitudes toward LFBs. Respondents attributed their views to the belief that they would purchase both luxury and non-luxury items if they perceived the fashion garments as an organic fit to the individual's personal style. As illustrated by the following testimonials:

Table 5:11 Examples attesting to the ability to combine fashion articles

> *[...] I can wear something luxury [uhm] as for example my watch…However, my other clothes to be both from the local market shop. So, I like it. I think it's good people to possess them [...] I think at the end of the day the goal is just to have [uhm] the comfort from wearing things that express your style [...]*
>
> (PBG5, female, 27)
>
> *[...] It's the style! It's the item itself! The patterns, the fittings, the way you have combined it with the other items... then it works for you ok and you have a good appearance. That's the way I am, let's say... if I'm loyal to a brand because I don't consider myself loyal to a brand... Yes, I may have a lot of items from one brand. However, I have them because I like the line, I like the style, not the brand! [...]*
>
> (PBG13, male, 31)
>
> *[...] it depends on what I like, if I like it. So, if I want something, if I like something, I can buy it and so I do! But only if I like it! Not because it's in fashion for example.*
>
> (PGR2, female, 33)

According to interviewees, they did were not obliged to purchase solely LFBs in order to build their personal styles. Put differently, they would be as inclined to purchase fashion garments from the fast fashion sector, as if these items were from a LFB. Moreover, their purchase decisions were based on personal tastes, rather than being driven by social conventions that define fashion trends. Therefore, the allure of LFBs was not enough to evoke an association of luxury fashion as being synonymous to personal style. Nor was the appealing charisma of luxury fashion garments that would contribute to brand loyalty. A predominant perspective among customers who testified they were not brand loyal referred to the fact that they preferred "to change brands" and "like different things". Even though customers could still opt for purchasing mostly luxury fashion items, they were not fully committed to a list of several favorite LFBs. Participants placed the emphasis on style in terms of product style or how the combination of different fashion articles matched the personal style of those studied. This was an interesting conceptual contribution to the current research, indicating that participants followed their own tastes and preferences, rather than being seduced by the fashion trends or styles of particular luxury fashion brands. Consequently, this was an index that the lack of brand loyalty was due to the fact that for this segment of interviewees exhibited a changing behavior in their consumption patterns because they preferred to adapt different brands to their personal tastes and preferences.

Furthermore, the value of personal style was reflected in participants' **reactions if they were to see other people with the same luxury fashion brands/ items.** Mastering the art of combining different fashion items was the reason that for this customer segment of

interviewees did not matter that they might meet someone else with the same brand/ item. As the following examples demonstrate:

Table 5:12 Gen Y's reactions if they were to see other people with the same luxury fashion brands/ items

I don't really care. I mean I… don't care if another girl wears the same clothes as mine because you know… maybe we have different style, we match the clothes in a different way, so I don't really care about that! (PGR13, female, 27)
[…] doesn't bother me because I… I want… if I bought the stuff, I wanted it, obviously and …doesn't make a difference for me if someone else wears the same stuff. It's not all about the name of the brands. It's about the way I want to look and the way I look. (PBG15, male, 36)

As demonstrated, customers' views of personal style can be explained by establishing a nexus to the music industry. For instance, a person knows an original song in Spanish, and it is his favorite. It sounds amazing! It has a rhythm that makes his feet moving like they are 'independent from his body'. Then the singer decides to make a second version in English to capture bigger audience. But it is not the same. The words somehow do not match the music in the same way as the original version. It was the same with personal style for participants. One piece of clothing might be combined in so many different ways. It was up to the consumer to decide which way fit their personal styles. One female might want to wear a classic black leather jacket with jeans and sport shoes and that makes her feel great! On the other hand, another female customer is used to wear that exact leather jacket, but with high heels and dresses or skirts. In case the first girl has to wear the second outfit she might do it for professional reasons, but at the moment she goes back home, she will change it into the look that fits her the best. The look that is her style. Thus, the main implication from findings is that for this segment of studied Gen Y LFCs personal style was perceived as a form of expressing their identities. Based on the latter discussion, the empirics uncovered perceived self-brand similarity as a source for communicating one's identity to be a key trigger for luxury fashion purchases.

The category consisted of views about the perception that brands helped studied LFCs to express their identities. It emerged among a very small portion of interviewees (seven of the studied customers). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that it was emphasized as a purchase trigger. This indicated the power of perceived similarity between brand image and personal identity in defining the consumption habits of those studied. Notably, these customers expressed their identities through their own visions of style, not being driven by glossy brand images. Instead, their consumer behaviour and brand choices were motivated by the way interviewees perceived particular items as reflecting their personal identities. As explained by participants:

Table 5:13 Examples attesting to luxury as a means for self-expression

> *[…] they make you show your own style, […] let's say for example my Vivian Westwood dress. It's just a simple black dress […] know that when I put this dress, usually I feel [hm] I feel myself. I feel in a way that this dress shows to the other people something for me, just the way that I feel, the designer found a way to express it […] they are going to describe me in front of other people, the way that I feel. I find something of myself in this item […]*
>
> (PBG11, female, 33*)*
>
> *[…] Their voice is …. I can feel is the as mine […] some people say that we are exactly what our habits are and… this is exactly the same with my… with buying fashion. You know that your body looks great in these specific brands and when you find them, you don't want to change them […]*
>
> (PBG16, female, 33*)*

Interviewees explained their viewpoints with the reasoning that they looked for brands which were "matching their voices". Findings can be explained with the metaphor "you are what you eat". Likewise, for these customers "they are what they wear". Whether they referred to a particular item, or set of fashion items, which when compiled in the right way, vibrated with the same ambiance as the interviewees' personal identities. The main implication was that this segment of Gen Y customers was more inclined to purchase LFBs through which interviewees could communicate their personal identities. Notably, the most interesting finding was that it was in fact the perceived self-brand similarity that triggered the sense of brand loyalty among this segment. Thus, although presenting a minority, for part of the studied Gen Y LFCs' loyalty was the result of the ability to express one's identity via luxury fashion brands. On the same notice, the examples also offered fruitful insights about previous purchase experiences as drivers of brand loyalty.

Additionally, the analysis of individual interviews uncovered that the gender was an influential factor in way interviewees diverged in the different aspects related to luxury as a metaphor of personal style. Specifically, celebrities emerged as a source of raising brand awareness amongst Gen Y LFCs from both genders. This indicated the powerful role of famous people for introducing Gen Y LFCs to LFBs. It also notified that these customers were more likely to be interested and purchase LFBs based on exposure to celebrities they aspired to. However, the latter suggestion remains open to debate since the analysis about Gen Y's selective behavior and the role of SM for building brand loyalty shed further light celebrities' influence depending on the gender of studied consumers. Further, a notable finding also referred to the fact that female customers demonstrated higher inclines to peers' effect. This implied that female customers are more likely perceive the opinion of friends as a reliable source of information related to LFBs.

Although the empirical data revealed that female interviewees were susceptible to peers' influence, findings illuminated that confidence of personal taste, style and preferences was a hallmark for luxury fashion customers, regardless of their gender. This indicated that personal needs, tastes, preferences shape the consumption behavior of studied Gen Y LFCs. On the other hand, female interviewees presented the majority of consumers who emphasized on the creativity of developing personal style. This was accompanied by the perception of personal style as a means for self-expression. Herein, acknowledging the sample limitations, it could be suggested that the consumption of LFBs by female consumers is rooted in the importance of developing a personal style, which also has a complementary role in helping these consumers to communicate their personal identities.

5.7. Previous purchase experiences as a source of brand loyalty

Key words: *first option, always go first to these shops, mind map, able to choose*

A prevailing theme among this segment was that they had a certain list of brands they first check when they were looking for their next purchase opportunities. Most often, they shared that this was the result of previous purchase experiences. They outlined that when a customer is satisfied with his purchases, the most normal act was to return to this brand. Therefore, this provided the basis to outline purchase experiences as a considerable reason to consider them as brand loyal customers. As the following examples demonstrated:

Table 5:14 Examples attesting to previous purchase experiences as a source of brand loyalty

> *If you are wearing a brand for 5 to 10 years [uhm] and you constantly find what you like in those shops, the normal reaction is always to go first to these shops! […] I like A, B, C brands, when I go shopping […] going first to the brands that I like and buying from them doesn't give any opportunities to the others! I think this is the… this is the explanation why I still buy for many years from the same brands. I think this is the reason […]*
>
> (PR17, male, 36)
>
> *[…] I really think it's because once I've liked myself in a model or whatever and then I know that each time if I go there, I will be… able to choose fast and to like myself in… something from this shop and go away […]*
>
> (PBG20, female, 31)

As revealed, studied customers have a preferred list of LFBs because they always were able to find something for themselves. It would appear that satisfaction from previous purchase experiences was the key trigger that encouraged this segment of customers to "design" a list of top favorite LFBs and stick to them without feeling the need to explore other brand alternatives. In effect, findings indicated that satisfaction with the quality based on previous purchases was an incrementally important factor for the development of brand loyalty. Notably, the views of male and female participants overlapped in the context of quality as a component triggering participants' brand loyalty. This has important theoretical implications, demonstrating that when it comes to the financial aspect of acquiring luxury fashion items, interviewees have the same standards in their purchase decisions and brand loyalty. That is, they look for quality luxury fashion items that are worth the investment and satisfy the financial investments necessary to acquire LFBs. Within the context of the research, it could be suggested that the experience of the economic crisis made Gen Y LFCs more sensitive to their expenses, fostering the preference for "secure" purchases. Additionally, a remarkable finding was that within the bundle of exclusiveness in luxury fashion consumption, there was also a degree of inclusiveness in terms of the consumption behavior of studied Gen Y luxury fashion customers. This was the basis for exploring luxury as a socially relevant concept.

5.8. Luxury as a socially relevant concept

Key words: ***shopping with friends, talk to friends, friends' opinions, recommendations, affect each other, soulmate, the perfect match, share the same interests***

Upon exploring Gen Y's characteristics, it became evident that the social groups of interviewees had an influential role in their decision-making process. Importantly, this theme emerged among 24 of the studied Gen Y LFCs. This shows that for a significant portion of interviewees luxury was perceived as a means through which they could socialize, discuss brands, and recognize similar others. The social aspect of luxury fashion consumption was mostly identified in cases when interviewed customers spend shopping time with their friends, in situations when they exchanged brand-related information with their peers, and in instances when the recognized a soulmate in other people.

Shopping together

It appeared that sometimes participants could experience a dilemma between personal preferences and friends' opinions. Friends' opinions, suggestions or feedback seemed to have triggered interviewees' interests in luxury fashion consumption. Most often, they cited shopping together with their friends as a fun and enjoyable experience. As one participant explained:

It's normal your friends to affect your decisions [...] it's much more fun to go with some friends, have a coffee and spend the day in shopping. So, they affect you [...] I may listen to them, sometimes I listen but most of times I don't, I'm just buying it, because I like it. And also, I know what I have in my wardrobe. So, I know with what I can combine it. This is the most important part: to buy an item that actually you can combine with the other stuff you have in your wardrobe or at least if you like something that much not to wear it twice per year [...] So, in that case your friends can affect your decision and some moment…my friends affect my decision, whether I buy it or not, or whether I have similar stuff [...] So… it's the same but basically, they can affect me but not that much [...]
(PBG13, male, 31)

It is important to highlight that participants spoke frankly about the friends' potential to influence purchase decisions, whether that related to the shopping environment or relevant discussion before the actual purchase. It was interesting how the participants recognized that it is normal to be affected by their friends. Since a similar view was also shared by other respondents, this was an indicator that customers perceived the shopping experience as an opportunity to socialize and obtain friends' feedback right on the spot. However, the fact that customers were interested in the fiends' opinions does not mean that they perceived them as being trusted on a good faith. Although interviewees demonstrated openness to consider friends' opinions, findings revealed that they relied

on their personal tastes and preferences. Although interviewees were still convinced in their personal tastes, these findings have important theoretical implications for the role of friends on Gen Y's luxury fashion customer behaviour of those studied, evident in the cases when they spend shopping time together. Albeit with the sample limitations, this means that whilst SM browsing and shopping opportunities keep broadening up, the consumption behaviour of Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region is defined by the social element of consumption. Furthermore, apart from spending shopping time together, participants also admitted that their peers could influence their purchase choices, based on brand -related discussions.

Brand-related discussions

Peers could also leave their footprints on the mind-set of Gen Y customers' tastes and preferences through the exchange of brand-related information. Participants admitted that the influence of their peers was due to the fact that they often involve themselves in discussions with friends that focused on LFBs and future purchases. Interviewees testimonials uncovered that they relied on friends' recommendations, opinions, and they could affect each other's purchase decisions and brand attitudes. As the following examples in the table illustrate:

Table 5:15 Examples about brand-related discussions with friends

I usually I talk to my friends about shirts, about clothes but I have a different style than most of my friends! I prefer leather, I prefer other materials. So… if some of my friends tell me "listen, this is very good product" I will go and test it first! Yeah, I will go and test it! But if I really like it, I will buy it. If I don't know, not! So, yeah, in a way, I trust my friends! […]
(PR19, male, 36)
[…] if I don't know and it's really expensive maybe I will ask a friend and it depends on… if the certain friend likes it also, it will be "ok go and get it" but… usually I don't consult with anyone […]
(PR8, male, 28)

Interviewees shared that as a result of peers' information, they would also be more inclined to reconsider their opinions, brand preferences and purchase desires towards LFBs. Moreover, in interviewees' minds, the opinion of their friends was important, and they often looked for a feedback before they made a purchase decision. Herein, findings implied that friends were perceived as a trusted source of brand information. This can be perceived from the perspective that friends were the additional "proof" that made participants confident in their brand choices. This also indicated for the importance of

peers' approval amongst the studied segment of Gen Y LFCs. In this context, an additional evidence for the vital role of friends as a trustworthy source of brand information was that when it comes to significant financial investments, some customers were seduced to embrace friends' opinion as the most trusted source. Altogether, findings implemented the idea that friends could be an important source of validation for the purchase choices of Gen Y LFCs who took part in the research.

An additional evidence for this theorization was that customers who took part in the research also discussed luxury fashion items or brands with their friends on SM platforms. In some of the cases, these were the same interviewees who also discussed LFBs in offline settings. In other instances, the segment also included interviewees who exchanged brand-related information only on SM. In both cases, SM was embraced as a valuable platform for the context of interviewees' conversations with their friends. They explained that they could send links with ideas for their future luxury fashion purchases. This most often occurred in situations when customers search for brands and ask their friends for their opinions and feedback. For example:

[…] here are times as well when me and my friends are like "Oh, what do you want to buy next?" so we send each other some links "This is what I like, do you like", get your opinion and so on

(PR2, female, 27)

Importantly, this segment of interviewees included customers who shared negative perceptions toward sharing brand experiences on SM. That was, unless they shared their experiences with friends or looked for peers' feedback. Thus, it was interesting to identify how the open, user-friendly and accessible nature of SM made customers who are otherwise averse to the idea of sharing their brand experiences embraced the opportunity to share such information with their friends. Nonetheless, interviewees recounts suggested that these customers might talk to their friends about certain luxury fashion items or brands, but friends did not have the sublime power of the decision makers. Nevertheless, this did not imply that friends were an irrelevant factor in shaping interviewees' brand preferences. What these findings implied was that only upon being exposed to brand -related communication on SM, interviewees were susceptible to peers' influence. On the same notice, the discussion denoted to the idea of luxury as a socially relevant concept. This was supported by an evidence indicating that luxury consumption being driven by friends' recommendations, opinions and feedback. To the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to demonstrate that for the segment of studied Gen Y LFCs, LFBs had the symbolic role of signifying group belongingness.

From this stance, the following section presents findings about the divine role of LFBs helping participants to identify soulmates in other people.

Recognizing a soulmate

An additional outlook of customers' recounts revealed that for some LFBs were employed as a benchmark for associating themselves with other people. Most often, interviewees outlined that they perceived it as a common ground for allocating someone else with a similar taste and style. In their eyes, having similar or the same style meant not only that they shared the same taste for clothes, but that they had the same vision for life and the same thinking. As demonstrated by the following examples in the table:

Table 5:16 Expressed views about recognizing a soulmate

[…] maybe as a soulmate […] I'm sure that you have experienced that… such a [uhm] circumstance when you meet someone and with the…let's say same bag and you just [uhm] smile to each other
(PBG16, female, 34)
[…] sometimes if it's in my circle of friends, I'll even be excited that someone picked the same thing as I did. Maybe even they bought because they saw me wearing it! So, I will be happy to see someone appreciates my choice! […]
(PR11, female, 29)
[…] it depends on the people. If it's my best friend or some friend it's not a problem [uhm] But… different people, I don't know […] I try to buy things, which are unique enough for… me to wear and for everybody else […]
(PBG6, female, 30)

Further on the presented examples, elaborating on their own views triggered customers to admit that spotting someone with the same style, meant they found their soulmate. Such a finding can be attributed to the choice of fashion brands. Precisely, luxury fashion brands fame rests on their uniqueness. Likewise, interviewees' perception was that as someone else made the same choice, that person was unique as the brand choices he made. As it is in human nature to judge by the first appearance, personal style was the means through which customers identified similar others with common unique personalities. However, as demonstrated by the last example in the table, there were instances when participants made a clear distinction between random people and their circle of friends. Their rationale was that they tried to purchase clothes which were less likely to be seen on other people. Exception to that was if some of their friends had the same brand or particular fashion article. This behaviour was similar to the one where customers used the style of other people as a reference point. The difference was in the perceived value of

clothing as a symbol of group belongingness. Herein, findings implied that LFBs acted as a stamp that defines a certain circle of friends, bound together because of shared interests and tastes.

In addition, a detailed outlook of participants' responses uncovered that there were no significant differences among LFCs based on their gender. This refers to consumers' testimonials that they like to spend shopping time with their friends, discuss LFBs with their peers, and use LFBs to recognize similar others. This indicated that regardless of their gender, Gen Y LFCs of those studied have higher propensity to exploit luxury fashion consumption as a means through which they can socialize. This was reflected both in the decision buying process (shopping with friends and brand-related discussions) and at the post-purchase stage (identifying similar others). Thus, findings may be of important theoretical relevance, indicating that the social aspect of luxury consumption is perceived as a symbol of elevating the sense of group belongingness of those studied.

Conclusively, the latter discussion presented findings about LFBs as a symbol through which participants recognize similar others. The effect of luxury fashion brands to foster the feeling of bonds between interviewees and other people who have similar tastes, preferences and styles was strengthened in cases when others referred to the close group of friends. Herein, the empirics denoted to the idea that sometimes interviewees could exert a selective behavior in their luxury fashion consumption. This aspect is discussed in detail in the following section.

5.9. Gen Y selective consumption behavior

The theme of the selective consumption behavior emerged in instances when participants talked about the possible influence of celebrities and friends on their purchase choices and brand loyalty. Nevertheless, participants' testimonials revealed that for some of the interviewees friends' and celebrities' influences were dependent on the perception of peers' competency and perceived match between celebrities and brand DNA. In some other instances, the role of celebrities was perceived as a manipulation, based on the professional knowledge and background of interviewees.

Key words: *special attitude, stylish, knowledgeable, like-minded, similar interests in fashion*

There were two important factors for this segment of studied Gen Y consumers: an expert opinion of a knowledgeable friend, and an opinion which comes from a friend with similar interests in fashion. As of the former factor, participants admitted that they could be influenced only by certain peers. Findings revealed that some of the interviewed customers had specific criteria in order to consider a friend's opinion. These were: perceived expertise, knowledge and good taste in style. For instance, as illustrated by the following examples in the table:

Table 5:17 Expressed views about friends' competencies

That's a good question, depends on the friends. If my friends are related to fashion and have an opinion about brands, trends I will have positive attitude but if they don't have special attitude towards fashion, clothes, style and they buy such kind of brands just because it's trendy maybe this will not have any...how to say...effect (PBG10, male, 35) *[…] generally I have a strong opinion, but when people I… I feel that they are stylish, and they are friends of mine and they buy a lot of luxury brands, then I trust them 100%! […] when I ask her, what do you think about this and she says "perfect", then there are no second thoughts because she has very good… very good experience for many years!* (PGR9, male, 34)

As revealed, customers would attach greater value on friends who have some background with fashion. For instance, having an opinion, which could be justified with solid experience, facts and evidence, or friends who work in the fashion industry. Findings demonstrated that participants selected certain friends as reliable sources of brand information and related suggestions. This implied that these customers did not like the idea of following the masses in purchasing trendy luxury fashion items. This was reflected in the fact that they were selective in relying on friends' opinion which might be considered versatile, namely being driven by fashion trends rather than on personal expertise or personal styles. Importantly, customers who relied on friends' *expert* opinion were not affected by the SM exposure to friends' posts. Henceforth, it could be suggested that participants who relied on their friends for professional opinion, perceived no need to consult SM pages because of caused *myopia* to see the opportunities offered by the digital world. The exploratory analysis showed that for a segment of studied Gen Y

consumers, their proneness to rely on peers' opinion and feedback is more likely to appear in cases when this opinion is supported by factual data, based on peers' background knowledge in fashion. Theoretically, this has important implications demonstrating how reliance on certain friends' opinions can actually be a barrier in participants' interest in SM-brand activities. In a similar vein, interviewees also shared that the impact of celebrities was dependent on the perceived identity celebrity and how it aligned with the brand image.

Celebrity personality

Key words*: **brand DNA, dangerous, disappointed, like the celebrity, purchase desire, brand attachment***

For this segment of interviewees celebrities' influence was a subject of doubt as long as the celebrity was favoured. Customers framed their responses by raising arguments about the celebrities' personalities. In case participants had a negative perception of the particular celebrity, this would evoke negative feelings, outlining that they would be "disappointed". According to interviewees if the celebrity was not perceived as appropriate for the brand image it stands for this could be even regarded as an "anti-commercial". As avowed by participants' views in the following table:

Table 5:18 Expressed views about celebrity personality

It depends on the celebrity that is wearing them again. If it's a celebrity that I like it can influence me. For example, if I see a nice item to… a celebrity that I like, I might desire it […] They should have the proper strategy that is [uhm] is not let's say changing over time but it mostly sticking to each brand's DNA and… collaborates with the right people. For example, I wouldn't like to see Chanel having as a face Kim Kardashian
(PGR5, female, 27)
Ah, that's a good question. It depends, I guess, from the celebrity because… I think playing with celebrities is very dangerous nowadays because…If I see…Let's say I like a brand for clothes and see … but's let's say Kim Kardashian or the face of them. It's going to be an anti-commercial for me. I'm never going back to the same place […] probably if I see wearing it it's going to affect me because it has affected my buying decisions in the past when again I'm going to speak about watches… but I saw presidents wearing certain kind of brand and it got me interested in that brand. The French president, I saw him, and I got interested in the brand that he is wearing.
(PBG9, male, 30)

As demonstrated, the key point was that in the minds of those studied, the inappropriate celebrity choices would interfere with the core brand DNA. This could even discourage them to continue buying the same brand. This is why participants also vocalized that when it comes to SM exposure and brands' posts, brands should choose carefully their "collaborations" and to work with "the right people" Essentially, participants who talked about the negative impact of celebrities comprised both loyal and non-loyal customers toward luxury fashion brands. Consequently, a striking finding was how a negative perception could have a destructive impact and transform loyal customers to eliminate these brands from their "loyalty" lists. Nonetheless, as the latter excerpt quote revealed, interviewees were not entirely reverse to celebrities' influence on their purchase choices and brand desires. This was supported by explaining that if they liked the celebrity, this could have a positive impact on their buying behaviour. In effect, findings were an index that celebrities' influence was boosted in cases when participants' reactions were driven by seeing a famous person they aspired to. This could also be interpreted as a symbol of an idealized self-identity and the perception of luxury fashion brands as a form of bringing interviewees closer to their ideal self-images.

Moreover, findings also uncovered the impact of celebrities on boosting the sense of brand loyalty amongst interviewees. Although it was outlined by a minority of customers, it is important that such views were also shared by non-loyal interviewees. Thus, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study in the SEE region to reveal the powerful celebrities' role in changing the mind-set of Gen Y LFCs by transforming them into loyal customers. Although findings should be interpreted with caution, not being representative for the entire population, this has important theoretical implications fulfilling a gap in academic knowledge about the influence of celebrities on Gen Y LFCs in SEE. Finally, the role of celebrities was perceived as a manipulation, based on the professional knowledge and background of interviewees.

Perception of celebrities based on customers' professional background

Key words: *celebrity endorsement, marketing, perfect image*

To begin with, only five customers referred to celebrities as a means to manipulate customer minds. Although very small in number, their responses offered interesting insights into the context of the research. It appeared that perceived manipulation was due to the fact that these participants realized how media creates an imaginary glamorous aura

around celebrities. At the same time, participants acknowledged that the lavish lifestyles that were broadcasted on different media channels served the purpose of boosting the splendid appeal of celebrities' lifestyles. For example, one participant explained:

[…] they create this perfect image, you know and [uhm] in the end, in reality they are normal persons. So, why to try to imitate somebody who is [uhm] in reality a normal person. Practically, they build an image for... for the fans and for the people and for I don't know, celebrity issues!

(PR5, female, 35)

Interviewees justified their responses by using marketing terms as celebrity endorsement. Moreover, they admitted that their viewpoints stem, in part, from their knowledge in the marketing field. They did not specify whether that comprehension was due to professional or educational expertise. Nevertheless, the value of their responses lies in the emerging knowledge about the impact of customer background. Precisely, responses allowed to identify a potential to contribute to knowledge by demonstrating how contextual circumstances (professional background) influenced the consumption behavior of those studied. The theoretical value of this revelation lies in the fact that this was a step forward into understanding the influence of celebrities in the context of LFBs among a segment for which research is still in its embryonic stage, namely young LFCs from the SEE region. However, this statement is based on a very small portion of interviewees and it is a subject of further inquiry.

In addition, the analysis of individual interviews uncovered that gender also had a great impact in the way it shaped the selective behaviour of studied Gen Y LFCs. This was reflected in the empirical data demonstrating that male interviewees were more likely to judge the opinion, recommendations and tastes of friends based on their competency. Whilst female interviewees were more incline to accept peers' opinions, studied male LFCs demonstrated a dose of scepticism toward friends' opinions. Consequently, mindful of the researcher's subjective bias, males' selective behaviour can be attributed to the importance of status for interviewed male LFCs. Precisely, since brand prominence appeared to be a leading factor shaping the consumption behaviour of male interviewees, it could be suggested that male participants select peers' opinions and recommendations that would help customers to purchase brands that would upgrade the social status of consumers.

As noted, (in the section about celebrities' influence for raising brand awareness), celebrities' impact spilled across studied Gen Y LFCs from both genders, leaving the discussion about the consumption specifics of each gender open to debate. In this context, an additional outlook of participants' responses revealed that studied males were more likely to be affected by exposure to celebrities. Nevertheless, this was dependent on the extent to which interviewees favoured the particular celebrity. Henceforth, findings were an index that the gender of Gen Y LFCs shaped the way interviewees perceived LFBs as a source of expressing their identities. Precisely, whilst for female participants the emphasis was placed on personal style as a means for self-expression (of their real identities), the empirics indicated that a trademark of studied male LFCs was the consumption of brands that help them develop an idealized identity. Further, the empirical data showed that in some instances the participants' perception of celebrities was defined by their professional background. This implied that professional background influenced the consumption behaviour of Gen Y luxury fashion consumers. Finally, building on the analysis about the key consumption characteristics of Gen Y luxury fashion customers, the following section presents the main conclusions.

5.10. Summary of emerging findings about Gen Y luxury fashion consumers' characteristics

Figure 5:2 Gen Y luxury fashion consumers' characteristics
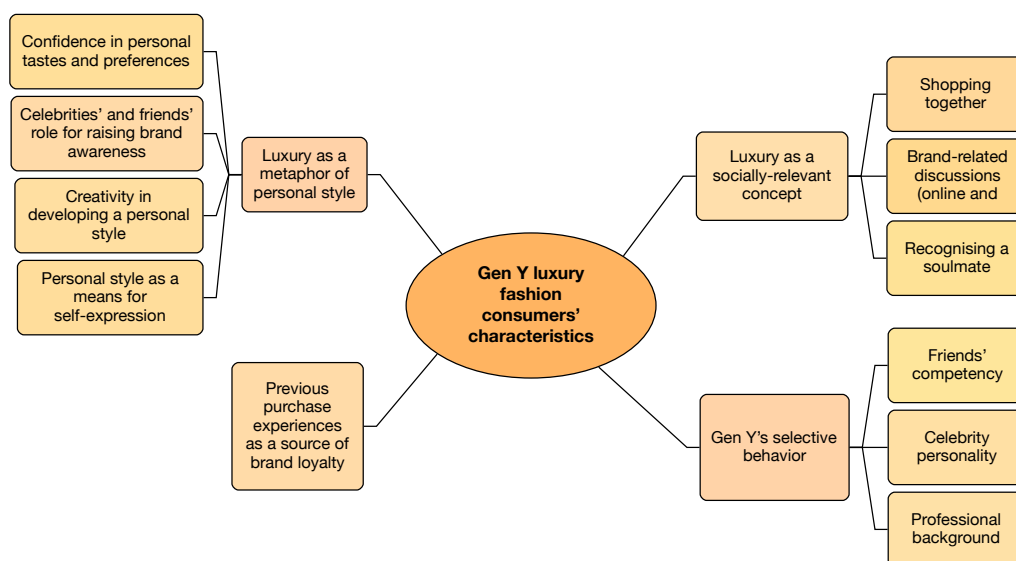
Findings uncovered that satisfaction from previous purchase experiences was a key influencer for the development of brand loyalty among studied Gen Y LFCs. Moreover, findings about recognizing a soulmate may be of important theoretical relevance, indicating that the social aspect of luxury consumption is perceived as a symbol of elevating the sense of group belongingness of those studied. Acknowledging the limitation of a qualitative research, findings propose that: to a great extent the consumption behaviour of the majority of Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region is driven by the importance of personal style. Personal style appeared as a dominant characteristic of this generational cohort evident in the fact that celebrities and friends had an informative function in the lives of those studied. Thus, based on the studied sample, findings suggest that a key behavioural trait of Gen Y LFCs who reside in SEE is the value of personal styles. Additionally, findings have an important implication, emphasizing on the perceived match between brand DNA and celebrity image. In effect, the main implication is that although participants admire celebrities' glamorous looks, they were "demanding" toward brands' ability to stay true to their core values and images. Further, findings revealed that professional background influenced the participants' perceptions toward celebrities' role in advertising LFBs. Herein, the empirics also uncovered a dose of scepticism toward the use of celebrities as part of luxury fashion brands' marketing strategies. The notion of perceived manipulation was also highlighted by customers in the context of their age.

5.11. Age defining Gen Y's consumer behavior

Key words: *younger, time, perception of others: taste*

This theme emerged as a chief factor defining the behavior of studied Gen Y LFCs with respect to their perceptions of celebrities' and peers' influences, perspectives about sharing brand experiences on SM networks and perception of others. The first two properties were identified based on participants' responses, in which they outlined their age as a factor that characterized their consumption habits. The third aspect, perception of other people emerged naturally in the process of exploring the context-related factors of interviewees' responses. Additionally, tit was considered as an invaluable insight into the research context because it demonstrated how Gen Y LFCs who took part in the research reacted to different situations related to luxury fashion consumption based on their age.

It was notable that customers who spoke about friends' influences were the same participants who also justified their endurance to celebrities' impact with the age factor. Regarding friends' impact, interviewees' rationale was that customers at younger age could be easily influenced by their peers, because they are still not abreast of their personal tastes and preferences. Namely, by the clothing and brand choices. In customers' eyes, younger people's tastes and preferences were vulnerable to peers' impact and influencers, because of the need for belongingness and identification with a certain group. As attested by one customer:

[...] I don't know if it's just me, but people around 30 and after, when they already stepped into the… higher social class let's say in one or another way, they [uhm] First of all, you don't have time for this. And then [uhm] as well you… you just take it something that it's normal, you don't take it as something that is special, you are not affected. When you are younger you are affected because it's something that is there, and you cannot touch it! And even about friends etcetera… when you are younger, you are like … ok I should also wear this and I should also have that in order to be part of this little community but when you get… older, you don't think like that… Because you already have your community and everything. So… probably it's just [uhm] changing the mind-set in years [...]

(PBG20, female, 31)

The example provided interesting insight about the role of friends depending on customers' age. Whilst for young consumers LFBs would be placed on a golden pedestal, symbolizing group recognition and belongingness, it was different for customers who have reached a different stage in life. Customers at their 30's were less likely to be affected because they have already defined their individual styles, tastes and brand preferences. In an analogous way, these customers were not craving for the group identification because they have defined their circle of friends. Whether talking about fashion brands in the context of personal style or group belongingness, customer views were an epitome of how people define their tastes, styles and communities based on their personalities. Theoretically, albeit with the sample limitations, findings demonstrated how a customer identity might resemble an idealistic identity for younger customers, whilst once a customer has identified his or her taste at later stage in life, the choice is non- negotiable.

Further, a dominant perspective among interviewees who spoke about celebrities' influence was that they referred to their matured perspective on personal identity.

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According to them, customers at younger age are more likely to be affected by celebrities and it is easier to be diverted from their true identities. According to interviewees this was also reflected in confusion of the personal styles of younger consumers. As attested by participants' views presented in the table:

Table 5:19 Expressed views about age as a barrier to external influence of celebrities

> *[...] like if I speak of myself probably when I was 18 or 19 years old I was [uhm] really impressed by celebrities, wearing these brands [...] but nowadays, like... many years after, I don't follow them anymore. I mean... the person which was 18 is not the person that I'm today! Today I have my own individual... style and my own individual qualities that I like in myself. [...]*
>
> (PBG20, female, 31)
>
> *[...] if I was younger maybe I would... I would let myself of thinking "Ok what is she wearing, so it must be good, I must buy it too!" But no, now I wouldn't even think about that! I wouldn't even think about that, no! I know that it really matters, and people follow celebrities and they do exactly what celebrities do! [...] but not me!*
>
> (PGR2, female, 33)

According to interviewees younger consumers would choose to imitate famous people, which they perceive as iconic for reasons such as aspiring their identity or style. Herein, findings pointed to a clear articulation that interviewees passed the stage of celebrity admiration. Their confidence was the result of personal experiences which shaped their identities. The confidence in their own identities was reflected in their personal styles. Theoretically, this finding provided an additional evidence to the importance of personal style for the studied segment of Gen Y LFCs. The novelty also stemmed from the fact that it allowed to understand how the age of studied customers has an impact on the way they perceived peers' and celebrities' influence on the personal purchase choices. Following this discussion, the following section presents findings about age as a barrier to share brand experiences on SM.

Customers' age as a barrier from sharing brand experiences on Social Media

The rationale among this group was that people at younger age are more likely to share their brand experiences on SM. Participants did so by also admitting that they once were also seduced by the chance to make relevant posts. However, they did not express the same level of passion toward this activity anymore. The main reason for the change in their behavior was that they placed their priorities in order, which left them with less time and passion to pay attention on their SM accounts. As explained by one customer:

Probably few years ago I did more frequently than nowadays I don't have a lot of time now for Social Media in that way, so... probably few years ago, yeah. Nowadays, not that much. I mean you upload more pictures, you upload more of your new stuff and things like that. I don't know...that's probably more for youngsters to do it... nowadays not that much...sharing... you know, sharing what I wear and stuff like that. I don't share my pictures at all or almost at all [...]

(PBG14, male, 29)

Emerging commonalities demonstrated that customers who talked about their age as a factor defining their SM behaviors were under 30 years old (in the range between 27-29 years old). This implied that their former SM behavior was largely driven by desire to communicate their luxury fashion purchases with wider audience on SM networks as a source of an additional pleasure from the luxury fashion acquisition. Put differently, it could be speculated that their actions were triggered by desire to "validate" their purchases by receiving broadcasting them on SM. By contrast, as they have grown up this stage, their consumption priorities and mindset about sharing luxury fashion purchases in the digital universe have changed. Consequently, mindful of the researcher's subjective bias, it could be speculated that as these customers earn their own incomes, they preferred more subtle forms of luxury fashion consumption rather than to broadcast their luxury fashion purchases as a form of recognition. Directly related to the LFBs' embedded recognition, the age of other participants characterized the way they perceived other people wearing luxury fashion brands.

Customers' age defining the perception of other people

This category emerged from interviewees' reactions if they were to see other people with the same luxury fashion clothing/ brands. Importantly, this was the biggest segment of studied customers for which age presented a chief element that defined their consumer behavior. However, it presented a minority of the studied sample (seven interviewees). Nevertheless, it signified the power of participants' age to affect their consumer behavior, making interviewees more inclined to pay attention to the appearances of other social actors. For this segment, the perception of other people involved screening the other person in order to understand more about his style. Prominent examples about the discussion are presented in the following table:

Table 5:20 Views about customers' age defining the perception of other people

I would say that [uhm] they have a good taste of fashion I think   (PGR19, male, 27)   *I'm going to say these people have taste…and then I'm going to say they have good choice. I think it's different between men and women, I guess. I'm going to say, if I had the chance "nice jacket" or whatever I see "nice shirt" […]*   (PBG4, male, 27)

It was notable to identify how in participants' minds the idea of taste was associated with luxury. This is a very interesting finding, revealing how the minds of these customers luxury was an epitome for taste. Notably, participants' responses that formed the property were of customers at the age of 27-28 years old. This means that younger participants had higher propensity to perceive the clothing choices of other people as a statement of a good taste. In other words, brand prominence was used as a benchmark to "judge" the tastes of other people. Thus, from theoretical implication aspect, findings mean that younger LFCs can be more easily impressed by the looks of other social actors. This has important implications for LFBs demonstrating that they can embrace the opportunity to invite more 'real' people in their campaigns in order to appeal to the younger audience of Gen Y LFCs.

Alongside age, it was interesting to note that another unifying element amongst these customers was their gender. Specifically, most of them (with one exception) were males. This finding can be explained with the emphasis on brand prominence. Precisely, the role of brand prominence as a symbol of self-positioning was outlined by male interviewees. Herein, it could be suggested that male participants used brand prominence as a benchmark to appraise the taste of other people in an analogous way they communicated their own status based on the choices of LFBs. In this context, the discussion denoted the idea of conducting an additional outlook of participants' responses in order to understand gender as an influence on the consumption patterns of interviewed Gen Y LFCs. Moreover, the interest in exploring gender differences in luxury fashion consumption behavior amongst the studied sample was also triggered by the "clue" offered by the last excerpt quote presented in the table: "*[…] I think it's different between men and women […] "(*PBG4, male, 27). It demonstrated that studied LFCs had different perspectives about the role of LFBs in their lives depending on their gender. Thus, the following section presents findings about different aspects of the interviewees' consumption patterns based on their gender.

5.12. Gender differences in Generation Y's consumer behavior

The theme about gender differences emerged across what could be regarded as a minority of interviewed LFCs (18 respondents). The context-related factors in which participants justified their consumption customs with their gender included: purchase triggers, reactions if they were to see other people with the same luxury fashion brands/ items, purchase criteria, and aspects they enjoy in the luxury fashion consumption experience. Besides, the researcher allowed herself the liberty to identify gender differences in the way interviewees exerted impulsive shopping behaviors. Based on interviewees' responses, there were four main categories: 1) females' need for uniqueness, 2) the value of self-indulgence among females, 3) gender differences in impulsive shopping, 4) brand love.

Females' need for uniqueness

Key words: ***competition, women care more, uniqueness, negative emotions***

This category was composed based on the views of male interviewees. It was outlined by five of the respondents. It emerged as a predominant perspective amongst males' responses about the possible situation of being exposed to other people who would wear the same luxury fashion brands/ clothes. As attested by participants' views presented in the next table:

Table 5:21 Expressed views about females' need for uniqueness

None! I really don't care! Neither good [...] I mean it's not that I will feel bad and say" Oh, someone is wearing the same watch as me, I'm not unique now!" I know that with women, I've to understand that with women this happens a lot. So, I've understood that when a girl, a woman sees another woman having the same bag or the same… there is some kind of competition! I don't feel like that!
(PGR7, male, 36)
[…] I don't care, really, I don't care! That's probably… what women care more than man […] I don't care if someone else wears it. No matter who is it, you know. If I like it, it's ok
(PBG14, male, 29)

It was interesting to note that in an attempt to explain their possible reactions if they were to meet others with identical luxury fashion brands/ clothes, male participants justified their behavior by drawing a comparison with females' psychology. According to studied males, female consumers were more likely to perceive such a situation in a negative way. They explained this with the reasoning that females have higher propensity to perceive luxury fashion clothing as a symbol of uniqueness. In this context, the insights provided by male participants supplied additional evidence for the importance of brand uniqueness

projected on the consumer amongst studied female LFCs. More so, the perception of luxury as a means for self-expression was outlined by female interviewees. The latter statement also finds support in a female respondent who explained her attitude toward the idea of other people having the same luxury fashion brands/ clothes with the role of gender shaping her behavior*:*

[...] usually you know how it is with girls, so you don't like as much, I think. It's... it could be oh, you know [uhm] "I paid a lot of money for this and I don't really like seeing other people wearing the same exact thing, I'm not unique anymore

(PR8, female, 28)

Findings implied that perceived brand uniqueness and LFBs' role as a means for self-expression was a typical trait for female consumers who took part in the research. Thus, it would appear that females' consumption behavior was synonymous to need for uniqueness, expressed through the purchase and wear of LFBs. Henceforth, findings supplied additional evidence for the value of presenting individual identity through the purchase and wear of fashion brands that match the personal styles and personalities of studied Gen Y female LFCs. The latter statement could also be explained with the role of marketing in females' behavior of those studied.

The value of self-indulgence among females

Key words: ***well-dressed, luxury, psychological trick, classic fashion pieces***

This category emerged in the context of purchase triggers toward LFBs. Notably, it was outlined by female participants. The main rationale of this segment was that the allure of LFBs had a significant impact on their purchase desires. Interviewees explained that some luxury fashion items were classic pieces that appealed to women and in their desires for luxury fashion purchases were driven by the idea that of being "well-dressed" implied wearing luxury fashion brands. For instance, one participant stated:

[...] it's a little bit of psychological trick that is happening in my head probably [...] I want to be... well-dressed and well-dressed in my mind is a luxury brand because especially we women want to be well-dressed [...]

(PGR1, female, 28)

Female interviewees referred to the "psychological trick" by providing different examples, including desire for eternal fashion pieces such the "Chanel bags or Tiffany jewelry" or the idea that they liked certain brands by attributing to female psychology as

a driving factor of their consumption behavior. From this stance, participants' responses indicated that their purchase desires were rooted in the notion of luxury fashion consumption as bringing pleasure in the eyes of those studied. Consequently, findings implied that for female interviewees the value of luxury fashion purchases was associated with the emotional aspect of the consumption experience as a form of self-indulgence. The theoretical relevance of this finding stems from the fact that the study put forward how marketing of luxury fashion brands affects females LFCs who belong to the Gen Y segment in SEE. The latter discussion provided insights into the value of hedonic aspects of LFBs in the lives of female LFCs from those studied. Whilst this appeared as a typical trait for female interviewees, the following discussion illustrates that findings provided contradicting views about the shopping habits of interviewed LFCs.

Gender differences in impulsive shopping

Key words: ***males' purchases based on specific needs, females purchase more often, obsessed, thinking all the time, buy straight away***

This category was composed by the majority of participants who justified their views by referring to gender differences in luxury fashion consumption (11 interviewees). Importantly, it was constructed by approaching the analysis from two different perspectives. The category emerged naturally across interviewees' testimonials about perceived gender differences in the frequency of luxury fashion purchases. An additional outlook of interviewees' recounts allowed the researcher to identify specific traits in the purchase habits between studied males and females. Although participants did not speak directly about the role of gender influencing their purchase habits, the context of their responses shed light into the decision-making process of interviewed Gen Y LFCs. The main context of the discussion refers to gender differences in impulsive shopping behavior amongst interviewees.

First, it was interesting to note that upon explaining their consumption habits in terms of purchase frequency, male interviewees endorsed to traits in females' consumer behavior. By establishing a comparison with females' inclines to visit LFBs' stores more often, males explained that their purchase habits do not reflect the characteristics of a typical "woman behavior". Instead, studied male customers explained that they do not purchase as often because their purchases were based on specific consumer needs. Likewise,

females' perspectives attributed to the notion that women were less likely to employ specific criteria in their purchase habits. Examples attesting to the discussion are presented in the following table:

Table 5:22 Views about females' shopping behavior

[…] especially for me, and probably most men, I think…it's very different between men and women. So… men buy because they need it, they like it, but they do not really enjoy the way women do […] (PBG14, male, 29)
[…] I don't think that women have criteria. Whatever we like, we buy [uhm] Interesting, on other hand…this is it. The criteria is just when I put it on me, to see that…that's the perfect match, yeah (PBG11, female, 33)

As demonstrated, according to male and female interviewees who took part in the study, female participants relied less on specific purchase criteria rather than on purchase impulses. More so, in the eyes of those interviewed, the impulsive shopping behavior made female customers more incline to be seduced by different brand alternatives on the market. Thus, testimonials provided valuable insights about their shopping habits toward LFBs, emphasizing on the male interviewees' propensity to perform more reasonable purchase behavior compared to that of female consumers. The emerging differences between studied males and females could be explained with the perception of the shopping experience. Precisely, the researcher identified contradicting views about the shopping experience as a "therapy" amongst interviewed Gen Y LFCs. Specifically, male respondents suggested that their perspectives of the consumption experience did not revolve around the shopping experience per se. Instead, they emphasized on the ability to purchase LFBs. By contrast, a females' perspective of the positive feelings obtained from the shopping experience referred to hedonic aspect of the in-store environment. As demonstrated by the following testimonials:

Table 5:23 Gender differences in the perceived value of hedonic in-store experience

I don't know about this shopping therapy that everybody talks about, but I've never experienced that! I don't enjoy… I just buy them, and it feels good to be able to afford it! (PGR14, male, 28)
[…] usually this kind of brands are stored in good shops, in good shopping centers [uhm] I like buying things. This is like shopping therapy […] (PBG5, female, 27)

Herein, findings about participants' perceived differences in the way genders approach the decision-making process can be endorsed to gender differences in the way studied Gen Y LFCs appraise the hedonic components of the shopping experience. This implied that whilst male participants might base their purchase decisions by evaluating utilitarian product features, for female participants the hedonic aspect of luxury fashion consumption presented a significant component of their purchase experiences. Theatrically, the empirical data assisted to fill a gap in academic knowledge about Gen Y LFCs' purchase triggers of customers from SEE by showing how the gender of consumers evokes the utilitarian or hedonic stimuli.

Further, upon exploring participants' recounts, findings revealed an existing trait of studied Gen Y LFCs. Precisely, participants were divided into two segments: impulsive shoppers and addicted to LFBs. The first group of consumers admitted they were likely to opt for spontaneous purchases. They demonstrated a behavior, characterized by short-term desire. For example:

[…] when I see some nice clothes, I buy them, nice products, I buy them, straight away, because I like them. I see them first time and I like them, and I buy them. That's it. It's just…it's just going out shopping sometimes and you buy them… because I see them, I like it and I buy it. It's simple. Sometimes I go especially for… especially for an exact product, but sometimes I just go out shopping and I buy them […]

(PBG15, male, 36)

Participants explained that sometimes they go purposefully on shopping in an attempt to purchase a new luxury fashion item. In other cases, they would randomly identify an item that would appeal to them. The bottom line in both cases was that they would make a quick purchase decision. In other words, they would make an impulsive purchase decision. Notably, this was a perspective shared by male interviewees. The empirics implied that some of the male interviewees were less considerate in their purchase decisions and relied on initial purchase instincts. Thus, it was interesting to identify a consumption trait in studied males that breaks the traditional dogmas about males' consumption behavior. By contrast, females' customer behavior of those studied signified a pattern of fascination toward LFBs. Specifically, female participants explained that they would not always purchase luxury fashion items impulsively. Rather, interviewees attributed their decision-making process to the financial investments necessary to obtain LFBs. As stated by one participant:

I buy something when I really like it because it's really expensive, so I can't afford [uhm] so many things, but when I'm obsessed with something, I will definitely find a way to buy it! [...]

<div align="right">(PGR13, female, 27)</div>

In the eyes of these customers, the price was the main factor which made them more considerate about the impact of impulse purchases on their financial situation. Nevertheless, findings revealed that price in fact was not a sufficient factor that would prevent studied females from acquiring their desired LFBs. Instead, when the products' appeal was sufficient enough to make female interviewees "thinking all the time", they would be creative in finding a way to obtain the luxury fashion object of their desires. Nevertheless, as females emphasized on price, the empirics revealed a more rationalized pattern in their consumer behavior. Within the context of the research, findings contained interesting implications about the possible influence of the economic downturn on the consumer behavior of studied females. Consequently, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this study helped to put forward the possible effects of the economic downturn on the mindset of female Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in a region that has not been extensively studied before, namely SEE. Whilst seemingly simplistic, findings did not fully uncover how genders differ in the factors that underline their consumption behavior (impulse purchases versus price consideration). This triggered researcher's interest to explore further gender differences in the decisions-making process among studied Gen Y LFCs. Building on the latter statement, findings uncovered that both genders shared feelings of love in the context of luxury fashion brands.

Brand love

Key words: ***love, certain brands, style, brand DNA, loyal, Balenciaga***

This category was constructed from the responses of a small portion of studied Gen Y LFCs (14 interviewees). On one hand, this was a sign that emotional brand attachment was significant for the minority of the studied customers. On the other hand, findings provided valuable insights into the context of the research. The empirics supplied evidence for the influence of consumers' gender on their propensity to develop feelings of emotional brand attachment based on different brand features. Specifically, the researcher identified differences in the manner genders referred to certain brands or other criteria (style, brand DNA, specific products) to explain their feelings of love. Notably,

male interviewees explained their emotions by denoting to specific brands. By contrast, females' responses revolved the luxury fashion consumption experience.

As of the former segment, male interviewees, their views denoted to the idea that a main substance of their consumer behavior was the feeling of brand love. Participants explained that they did not favor all of the LFBs available on the market. Rather, they had a particular list of brands as a first option when they consider their next purchases. As explained by one respondent:

[…] it's not that I like all the luxurious brands. It's that I like certain brands and the fact I love them is that they treat you perfectly! And the clothes are not destroying as you put them in the washing machine, and I find them all elegant and chic!

<div align="right">(PGR17, male, 28)</div>

According to these customers, they would prefer to visit the LFBs' stores to which they felt the strongest emotional brand attachment. Most often, this was the result of customer service and quality. Herein, findings indicated that the impact of positive purchase experiences on males' consumer behaviour (customer service and persistent product quality) stretched studied beyond brand loyalty to make these interviewees experience strong emotional attachments as brand love. Herein, the main implication is that male LFCs of those interviewed were more likely to maintain loyal to their "beloved" luxury fashion brands. As of the other segment, female interviewees, they expressed feelings of love toward different aspects related to luxury fashion consumption. These included brand DNA, personal style, or specific luxury fashion items. As the following examples in the table demonstrate:

Table 5:24 Examples about feeling of love toward different aspects in the luxury fashion consumption

[…] I have a piece from Balenciaga, I have a leather jacket from Balenciaga, which I love very, very much and… but I cannot say that Balenciaga is one of my favorite brands because I only own a piece or two from Balenciaga! […] (PR9, female, 27) *[…] when Balenciaga came up with these sneakers recently, I am crazy about them and they are sold everywhere […] So, for example I saw them on Instagram. But it was just… it was pure kind of … first sign love […]* (PBG21, female, 33)

It was notable that female interviewees had the propensity to develop feelings of emotional attachment based on their own vision of style. Perhaps it was exactly the emphasis on personal style that could be the reason for the lack of emotional brand attachment (brand love). Put differently, the findings imply that the feeling of "love"

shared by female respondents were the outcome of how different luxury fashion pieces matched participants' personal styles. Further, it was interesting that female participants who talked about "love" toward certain fashion pieces justified their views by giving examples with Balenciaga. This provided an interesting perspective about the brand's role in the lives of studied female Gen Y customers, suggesting that the brand offers fashion items which match the styles of the younger generation. However, this suggestion was based on a very small sample and requires further investigation in order to identify its reliability and applicability.

Conclusively, throughout the discussion it was noted that both genders from studied Gen Y LFCs had the propensity to exert an impulsive shopping behavior. The discussion demonstrated that whilst male interviewees were more incline to develop strong emotional connection with LFBs, described as brand love, female participants were more sporadic in their consumption behavior. More so, whilst the researcher identified an impulsive shopping behavior among studied males, this did not exclude the opportunity that males referred to their purchase habits by considering their favorite LFBs. Herein, the main implication is that male LFCs of those interviewed were more likely to maintain loyal to their "beloved" LFBs. This finding can be assigned to males' laziness to search for new purchase opportunities. Thus, this study offers a fresh perspective on gender differences among Gen Y LFCs in SEE, by suggesting that males' loyalty toward LFBs can actually be the result of laziness. By contrast, given that findings about personal style and luxury fashion brands as a form of self-expression appeared vital amongst studied female consumers, the main implication is that the "love" for these customers was dependent on their personal tastes, preferences, styles and how brands help them to express their identities. That being said, the preceding section presents a summary of the emerging findings about age and gender as influential factors defining Gen Y LFCs' behavior.

5.13. Summary of emerging findings: age and gender defining Gen Y's consumer behavior

The emerging empirical data served a comparative role to findings for the sections that discussed aspects related to luxury as a metaphor of personal style, luxury as a socially relevant concept, brand recognition/ prominence, and the role of personal style as a means for self-expression.

Figure 5:3 Age and gender defining Gen Y's consumer behavior
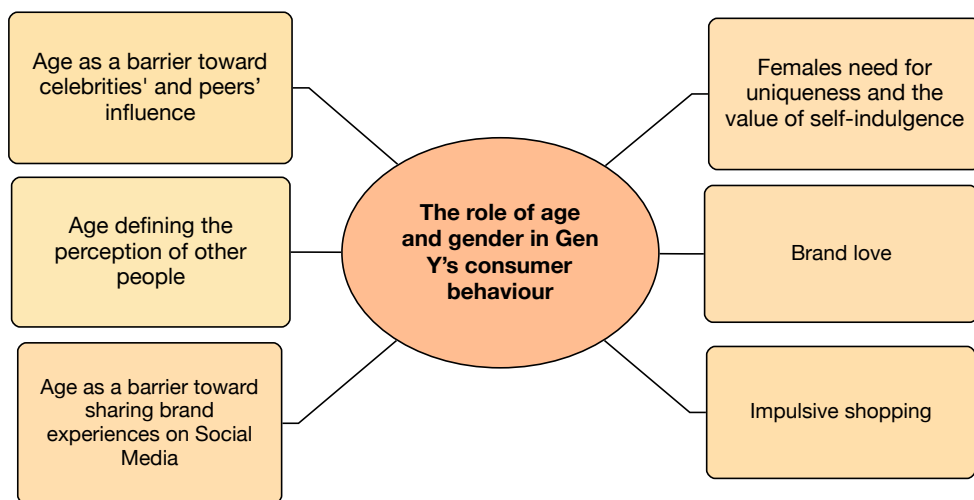
Findings assisted to further our understanding of Gen Y consumer behavior from the SEE region by demonstrating that gender has strong behavioral implications on those studied. This theoretical proposition was supported by the empirical evidence that personal style, namely need for uniqueness, had more relevance in the females' segment of those studied. The empirical investigation also generated important findings about the gender of consumers influencing their impulsive behavior as opposed to brand loyalty. In this vein, the discussion about brand love demonstrated that studied males were likely to develop an emotional brand attachment toward LFBs, which can be attributed to consumer laziness to search for new brands and purchase opportunities. Thus, it would appear that reliance on previous purchase experiences, specific purchase needs and employing certain criteria, is exclusively relevant for studied male LFCs. Findings about females' consumer behavior uncovered that they place emphasis on the price of LFBs. Based on the empirics, it could be suggested that in addition to the importance of personal style, price also has a

fundamental role in what appeared to be a typical female consumption pattern, namely impulsive behavior.

Additionally, the discussion about the impact of age also uncovered important theoretical implications about the age of studied LFCs as being of great relevance for their consumer behavior. This bears an interesting point for future researchers, who look forward to exploring how Gen Y LFCs' behavior is influenced based on their age. With that being said, the next section presents a summary of the latter section. It is followed by an analysis that focuses on participants' perspectives of how their purchase habits were influenced by the 2008 financial downturn.

5.14. Impact of the past economic crisis on Gen Y luxury fashion customers

It is important to highlight that the majority of participants were affected by the economic crisis (45 of the studied consumers). This demonstrated the massive effect of the economic crisis from 2008 on the consumption habits of Gen Y LFCs. The implications of its influence resonated in the way the financial downturn shaped studied customers' purchase behavior toward LFBs. At the same time, there were also participants who shared that their consumption patterns were not influenced by the economic crisis (16 of studied consumers). Although constituting the minority of studied consumers, the analysis generated findings, which were of theoretical relevance for understanding the Gen Y's consumer behavior as a result of the economic crisis.

Upon exploring participants' responses, the empirics demonstrated that the influence of the economic crisis was perceived in a different way amongst interviewees from the three countries which were the focus of the research. Based on the studied sample, the analysis uncovered the following country peculiarities: 1) Greek customers were defined as experiencing the most severe influence of the economic crisis, 2) Bulgarian customers reduced the frequency of luxury fashion purchases, and 3) Romanian customers emphasized on the value of quality. Herein, albeit with the limitations of a qualitative research approach, the section presents findings based on identified country peculiarities.

The segment of studied Gen Y LFCs from Greece experienced the effect of the economic crisis in its toughest form. The harsh effect of the economic situation was expressed in cases when interviewees reduced the number of luxury fashion purchases, had to save/ budget their expenses whilst also evaluating the need for purchasing a new luxury fashion garment. Regarding the first aspect, **reduce the number of luxury fashion purchases**, this was a predominant perspective among most of the studied Gen Y LFCs. The main rationale of this consumer segment was that the outcome of the economic crisis on their consumption habits was that they limited the quantity of buying luxury fashion items. Nevertheless, their responses demonstrated that whilst they could not afford the same level of self-indulgence, the financial difficulties caused by the economic downturn did not stop them from being loyal to their favorite LFBs. Instead, participants admitted that once they have already experienced the pleasure of having quality fashion items, they would always find a way to obtain the luxury fashion product of their desires. As illustrated by the following examples in the table:

Table 5:25 Views about reducing the number of luxury fashion purchases (Greek LFCs)

[…] some years ago, I wouldn't even think of buying these products, but now I think of it very much and it's my behavior [uhm] my purchasing behavior is… like I buy them less! I still buy them, but I would not buy five pieces, I would buy three pieces, let's say. (PGR1, female, 28) *A lot! Because when you… when there is no crisis, you buy let's say one item in two weeks, one item in one month […]* (PGR9, male, 34) *A lot! the last three to four years I'm not buying luxury brands as often as used to! I'm actually saving money to buy something like that for few months! […] in the back of your mind, you always want, if you've tried a high quality, a high-end brand, luxury brand, you always go back! […]* (PGR18, female, 27)

Whilst participants provided different perspectives as of what constituted buying "less" (ranging from three pieces, one item a week, to one item per month), the context of their responses revealed that the economic crisis made them "a lot" more sensitive toward spending money on extravagant purchases. An additional evidence for the latter statement stemmed from insights about participants' criteria for luxury fashion purchases. Precisely, for some of the interviewees alongside quality, personal style, or brand

recognition, a chief criterion in their decision-making process was price. As demonstrated by the following examples in the table:

Table 5:26 Price as an important factor in the context of the past economic crisis (Greek LFCs)

Of course, first I check if they suit my style [uhm] and the next is the price because they are various luxury brands you can find again a coat let's say for 300 or 30 000. So… I prefer the luxury brands that I can afford! [...]
(PGR1, female, 28)
It's simple! It's between the price and which product I like more! I mean like… let's say I see two pairs of shoes [uhm] and they are exactly the same, the same style, I will buy the cheaper one! But if it's two different pairs of shoes and the price is let's say the same, I will buy the shoes that I will wear more! This is that simple! For me!
(PGR9, male, 34)

Based on the excerpt quotes, it could be suggested that the economic crisis boosted interviewees' inclines of those studied to pay higher attention to the price of luxury fashion items. In other words, they would choose the item that fits into their budget and they find as being worth the investment. Findings about participants' reduced amount of luxury fashion purchases demonstrated that the financial downturn had a significant impact on the consumption culture of studied Gen Y LFCs. The empirics implied increased level of price sensitivity and extra consideration about the need to purchase excessive amounts of luxury fashion items. Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrated that whilst Greek consumers of those studied cutback on the number of purchases, they did not entirely disappear from the luxury fashion scene, also reflected in the fact that some of them maintained their brand loyalty. In this vein, as findings further demonstrate, Greek interviewees found alternative approaches in order to obtain their desired luxury fashion items.

The empirics demonstrated that an alternative means through which studied Greek Gen Y LFCs retained the opportunity to enjoy luxury fashion items was to **purchase luxury fashion items at lower prices.** This consumer segment consisted only of four respondents. However, their reactions provided valuable insights about participants' inclination to involve a dose of creativity in finding ways to continue being able to have a "bite" from the luxury fashion world. Specifically, interviewees explained that before the economic crisis they were paid lower attention to the price involved in acquiring luxury fashion garments. In participants' eyes, the economic downturn made them more cautious about the choices of LFBs. A common inclination was that they would still opt

for LFBs, but they would do so either by purchasing previous season collections at discounts or by buying from LFBs that offer their products at lower price range. As illustrated by the following examples in the table:

Table 5:27 Views about purchases of luxury fashion items at lower prices (Greek LFCs)

Look! Before economic crisis I bought Hogan or what else and after the economic crisis, at this time of the economic crisis I can buy Hamilton, Tommy Hilfiger and [uhm] brands with lower price! (PGR8, male, 31)   *[…] I did travel one week ago for a business, but I was lucky enough to be in Florence, so… the shops you know, Italy, they were all over [uhm] I didn't go into stores that I like. For example, I didn't go into Chanel, I didn't go into Venetta Bottega, I didn't go into LV because I knew that I would have to spend a bigger amount of money that I didn't want at that moment! So, I did buy something, but it was from [uhm] a cheaper brand let's say. For example, I didn't spend 1000 euros, I spent 400 euros! So, it's not cheap of course, but I knew that I don't want to spend money for example on Venetta Bottega […]* (PGR15, female, 36)

As uncovered by the examples, similarly to the segment of interviewees who reduced the quantity of luxury fashion purchases, the analysis revealed that customers who opted for lower-priced luxury were also "price sensitive". From this stance, it was interesting to note that the economic downturn made participants aware of the possible outcomes from their luxury fashion purchases. This was reflected in responses demonstrating that interviewees tried to resist the temptation of buying more expensive luxury fashion garments. Instead, in most of the cases their choices would be to purchase from cheaper, yet luxury, fashion brands. Herein, the empirics indicated that customers' behavior of those studied was based on the creative combination of finding better deals, which allowed them to sustain their purchase habits and enjoy the pleasure of wearing LFBs. Notably, the economic crisis did not force participants to turn to brands from the fashion industry or to counterfeits. Instead they still preferred the luxury fashion domain. Altogether, findings implied that LFBs had an important role in the lives of those studied, which was reflected in participants' emphasis on acquiring luxury, though cheaper, fashion articles. Finally, an additional evidence for the influence of the economic crisis on the mindset of studied Gen Y LFCs from Greece was that it made them more thoughtful about their spending habits. As explained by participants:

Table 5:28 Examples about evaluating of the need to buy luxury fashion brands (Greek LFCs)

[...] we live in times of crisis, so... we must be more, we should think more where we can spend our money! [...]
(PGR11, female, 27)
I definitely have to think to buy such things [uhm] I am definitely affected by that because you have to [uhm] save some money in order to buy brands like these and... I... yes, I'm totally affect anyway.
(PGR13, male, 27)

These views were shared by interviewees who testified that the economic downturn influenced the conventional way they approached the decision-making process. Participants explained that before the financial collapse they were more likely to engage themselves in impulsive shopping. By contrast, their current consumption routines involved precise **evaluation of how much they needed or liked a particular luxury fashion item.** In cases when they were convinced in its appeal (of the luxury fashion item), they would ***budget their finances*** in order to be able to acquire the desirable garment. Theoretically, the main implication is that the economic slowdown left significant footprints in the minds of studied LFCs from Greece. This was reflected in the differences in their purchase patterns in the pre-crisis versus post-crisis period. Whereas interviewees did not withdraw from luxury fashion purchases, they changed the decision-making process involved in acquiring these glamorous fashion garments.

Overall, the analysis revealed that the economic crisis had a sufficient impact on the consumption behavior of studied Gen Y LFCs. This was mirrored in the fact that participants reduced the quantity of luxury fashion purchases, evaluated the need to buy luxury fashion brands, opted for cheaper luxury fashion brands, and planned more carefully their future purchases of luxury fashion items. This theorization was supported by evidence implying that Greek interviewees were more careless in their purchase decisions in the pre-crisis period. The empirics uncovered that their current consumption habits involved product screening and careful allocation of personal incomes in order to be able to acquire the LFBs that interviewees wished for. Nevertheless, as noted throughout the discussion, the financial collapse did not discourage interviewees from the opportunity to obtain their desired luxury fashion items. Herein, it could be suggested that participants' post-crisis consumer behavior was rooted in the recognition and status of LFBs. An evidence for the latter statement was a perspective provided by a Greek interviewee. According to him:

[...] The character of our people to show something else than what they really are leads our country to the economic crisis and I think we have to change our mind, to... buy more Greek brands and to stop love luxury, but products in normal prices! [...]

(PGR16, male, 35)

Conclusively, acknowledging the sample limitations, it could be suggested that a chief factor influencing the post-crisis behavior of Greek Gen Y LFCs was the perception of LFBs as a symbol of status, recognition, creating the illusion of higher social position. Importantly, whilst the economic crisis did not hit Bulgarian participants as harshly, they shared a common characteristic in their post-purchase behavior as Greek interviewees.

Bulgarian luxury fashion customers: reduced frequency

Key words: *lower frequency, the need to buy, prefer luxury*

Compared to Greek interviewees, the segment of studied Gen Y LFCs from Bulgaria employed fewer strategies in order to persist the opportunity for luxury fashion acquisitions. This finding could be explained with the lower impact of the economic crisis on Bulgarian interviewees' consumer behavior. Precisely, the empirics demonstrated that the majority of participants who did not experience difficulties due to the economic downturn were from Bulgaria (8 out 17 interviewees). Mindful of the sample limitations, this indicated that Bulgarian Gen Y LFCs succeeded in maintaining their income levels at the same rate in order to allow themselves luxury fashion purchases. Having said that, the main rationale of the segment of interviewees who had to modify their consumption habits was that the economic crisis forced them to reduce the frequency of luxury fashion brands.

Customers explained that the effect of the economic crisis was felt in the **frequency of buying luxury fashion brands.** A shared perspective amongst interviewees was that whilst the final quantity of purchased luxury fashion items remained the same, the difference was in the number of times participants would go for shopping. As explained by one respondent:

[...] I can say that it is not reflected that much. I can reduce how many times...the frequency I go to the shops but... I think generally, I think it does not reflect my year budget. For example, if I can go to the stores 2,3,4 times per year and buy in total for example 5 or 6 or 10 items...in the case of the economic crisis I will go just once or twice but...at the end I will buy the same things

(PBG10, male, 35)

In the eyes of interviewees, their intuition would still encourage them to opt for LFBs, with the only difference being that they would ***plan their future expenditures on luxury fashion brands.*** Herein, it would appear that Bulgarian and Greek customers share common consumption patterns as a result of the economic crisis. However, whilst interviewees shared a common ground in terms of the post-crisis effect making them to plan their luxury fashion purchases, variance in the purchase routines of Bulgarian interviewees was that they would devote the same level of expenses on LFBs. Herein, it could be suggested that whereas for some of the Greek interviewees the question was about *whether* to spend on luxury fashion, the question for Bulgarian participants referred to *when* to go shopping for luxury fashion items. Thus, findings implied that the economic crisis had a lower influence on the consumption habits of studied Gen Y LFCs from Bulgaria. However, the main implication from findings was that whilst Bulgarian interviewees could still have higher finances at their disposal for LFBs, the post-crisis effect made them more considerate about the outcomes of repeated shopping on their financial situation. Additionally, findings demonstrated that although Greek consumers of those studied were sufficiently influenced by the economic downturn, they still survived in preserving their place in the luxury fashion market. Likewise, the empirics revealed that although Bulgarian interviewees had to plan their future purchases and decline the frequency of visiting luxury fashion stores, they did not abandon the opportunity to indulge themselves with the exquisite luxury fashion garments. Herein, it would appear that these two segments shared another common characteristic in their consumption mentalities. That is, the perception of LFBs as a form of status and recognition. This suggestion finds support in the following excerpt quote:

[…] I don't think that the fashion industry is affected by any kind of… financial crisis. Because… all the people don't… all the people want to show their status, even if they don't have it. For example, like with the iPhones, I think the iPhone is a luxury good, is that true… yeah, it's kind of expensive… And my opinion and the way I see everybody is buying unnecessarily those phones… whenever the new model comes up, everybody has it, no matter if they need it or not because it's just a phone! But they must have it! Because it shows their status! So, I don't think that luxury goods are… affected by the financial crisis

(PBG22, male, 27)

Interviewees whose views shaped the theme about the impact of the economic crisis on Bulgarian Gen Y LFCs also referred to brand uniqueness in the context of their brand attitudes, purchase triggers, aspects that they enjoyed the most in the luxury fashion consumption experience, and reaction if they were to see other people with the same LFBs. Therefore, acknowledging the sample limitations, it can be concluded that the post-

crisis effect on the consumption practices of Bulgarian Gen Y LFCs was rooted in the combination of need for uniqueness and status display as part of the consumers' psychology of studied Gen Y LFCs from Bulgaria. Finally, findings about Romanian interviewees' consumption patterns displayed an interesting finding about participants' emphasis on quality. This was an indication that whilst Bulgarian and Greek consumers had common consumption characteristics, Romanian interviewees exerted a behavior that distinguished them as a luxury fashion consumer segment.

Romanian luxury fashion customers: too poor to buy cheap stuff

Key words: *find a solution, too poor to buy cheap products, quality, buy less but better*

This consumer group demonstrated the most significant difference in terms of the economic crisis effect on their consumption patterns. Findings about the consumption peculiarities of studied Romanian Gen Y LFCs demonstrated that the financial downturn did not intervene as much with their consumer behavior and the manner they evaluate luxury fashion purchases. That is, compared to the empirics which showed that the financial crisis had more severe implications on the consumers' mentalities of Bulgarian and Greek participants. The chief perspective of this consumer group referred to the importance of **buying quality fashion items**. A common pattern amongst interviewees' perspectives was that they reasoned their responses by employing the phrase "too poor to buy cheap stuff" or "cheap products". From this stance, participants explained that even if in the rare cases when might purchase luxury fashion items at a lower rate, the focus would still be on acquiring quality fashion garments**.** As the following examples in the table illustrate, participants might reduce the number of items they would purchase, but the chief focus would still be on the quality of the fashion items.

Table 5:29 Examples about the importance of quality (Romanian LFCs)

> *[…] we are too poor to use cheap products! So, I don't know, you make some financial efforts, I don't know exactly but … You find a solution not to replace a luxury brand with other brand! Because for example, if you buy a pair of shoes from a luxury brand which provides quality and let's say you pay 400 euros for a pair shoes, ok, the economic crisis [uhm] doesn't allow you to buy… each month this pair of shoes and you go to [uhm] normal brand which has…. not the same quality in the end you will see that you will buy two, three pairs of shoes. So, in the end the cost is the same! So, go and buy a luxury brand! […]*
>
> (PR5, female, 35)

> *[…] I remember my parents saying that [uhm] people need to understand that they are too poor to buy cheap things! So… the idea was always to try to buy something of quality rather…. if it's just one item, rather than buying more pairs of the same […]*
>
> (PR11, female, 29)
>
> *I prefer to have, really, I prefer to have a number, a small number of things, but better than thousand!*
>
> (PR19, male,

A common inclination amongst interviewees was that it would be wiser to devote higher amount of money on a single luxury fashion item rather than on few, cheaper, but lower quality items. The main rationale was that the final result would be having the same expenses, if not more, but dispersed across several purchases. Participants justified their views with the importance of buying fashion items that promise consistent quality over time. Theoretically, findings supplied evidence that interviewees preferred to buy quality products from an investment perspective. Herein, it would appear that Romanian LFCs of those studied had thoughtful consumption habits before the economic crisis. However, findings did not imply that the economic crisis was an irrelevant factor in the consumption culture of studied Romanian LFCs. Instead, albeit with the qualitative limitations, it is suggested that the economic crisis had a minor effect on the purchase habits of Romanian LFCs because of their embedded mentality to prefer buying fewer but quality items, rather than an excessive amount of cheaper clothing. An additional proof for the latter suggestion was a quote from a Romanian participant, highlighting that a common belief among Romanian consumers is to associate quality with luxury. As stated by the respondent: *"[…] here in Romania we were born and raised like this. Everything, which is expensive [uhm] has a higher quality, you know. So, this was the… the way let's say, how we were raised"* (PR5, female, 35).

Conclusively, the empirics revealed that quality was a defining element of the consumption behavior of Romanian Gen Y LFCs of those studied. This holds important theoretical implications, demonstrating that the value of perceived quality as an influential factor in Gen Y's consumer behavior is of great relevance for the segment of Romanian participants. Having presented findings about the impact of the economic crisis on a regional level, the following section sheds light on the mindset of interviewees who were not influenced by the economic crisis.

As outlined, this presented a minority of studied Gen Y LFCs. Additionally, this segment consisted mostly of Bulgarian interviewees, followed by Romanian and Greek participants. Herein, based on the empirics, findings were fairly consistent, implying that the most severe impact of the financial downturn was among Greek LFCs of those studied. That being said, the analysis uncovered that most often interviewees attributed their "resistance" to the financial downturn to their lifestyles and purchase preferences. A common pattern which emerged among the majority of interviewees was that they hold *job positions* which allowed them to maintain their desired level of luxury fashion purchases. As illustrated by the following examples in the table:

Table 5:30 Views of LFCs who were not affected by the economic crisis

To be honest, in the big crisis 2008, I was still… very… the big, the big, big crisis was during… I was a student […] So, I didn't really… feel it. Because anyway I had to save lot of months money in order to buy something that I really want. So, I didn't feel it by myself much. Yeah, because then after the crisis I already was with a good career, so…   (PBG20, female, 31)   *Uhm, in Romania we had economic crisis for 10 years ago. I was 20 then. And in school, I didn't wear Burberry then. Now I have a position in management, it is something else. So, I cannot say anything about that.*   (PR15, female, 31)

As demonstrated, in the eyes of those studied, the crisis did not affect them because the difference in their work status before as opposed to after the crisis. According to some of the interviewees, they could not experience difference in their consumption behavior because of they were university students when the crisis first hit in 2008. They became luxury fashion customers at a later stage in their lives when they started their professional careers. In a similar vein, a common inclination among interviewees was that having certain job positions, and devoting efforts to prosper in their professional fields allowed them the "luxury" to purchase LFBs. Herein although the empirical evidence demonstrated the significant impact of the economic crisis on the consumption patterns of studied LFCs, the investigation generated important findings about a consumer segment for whom their professional prosperity allowed them to maintain their lifestyles regardless of the financial collapse.

Additionally, participants attributed their consumption behavior explaining that **personal financial situations or purchase preferences** made them more considerate about their spending habits rather than the economic crisis per se. An evidence for this suggestion is the following excerpt quote:

When I lose income, when my income is lower. Maybe… I don't buy them that often […] from the story from my Energie jeans, since then I don't spend all of my money for clothes, shoes and such stuff. It's the… financial thinking of… of managing your… financial inflows and outflows

(PBG17, male, 29)

Conclusively, findings implied that participants' "ability" to persist their luxury fashion purchases on the same level was due to their personal experiences which thought them to manage their personal finances. This holds essential implications, indicating that participants' past experiences would likely have persistent behavioral implications on their consumption habits in the years to come. The following section presents a summary of the emerging findings about interviewees' mindset regarding the economic crisis impact on their consumer behaviors.

5.15. Summary of emerging findings about the economic crisis impact on Gen Y luxury fashion customers

Figure 5:4 Impact of the past economic crisis
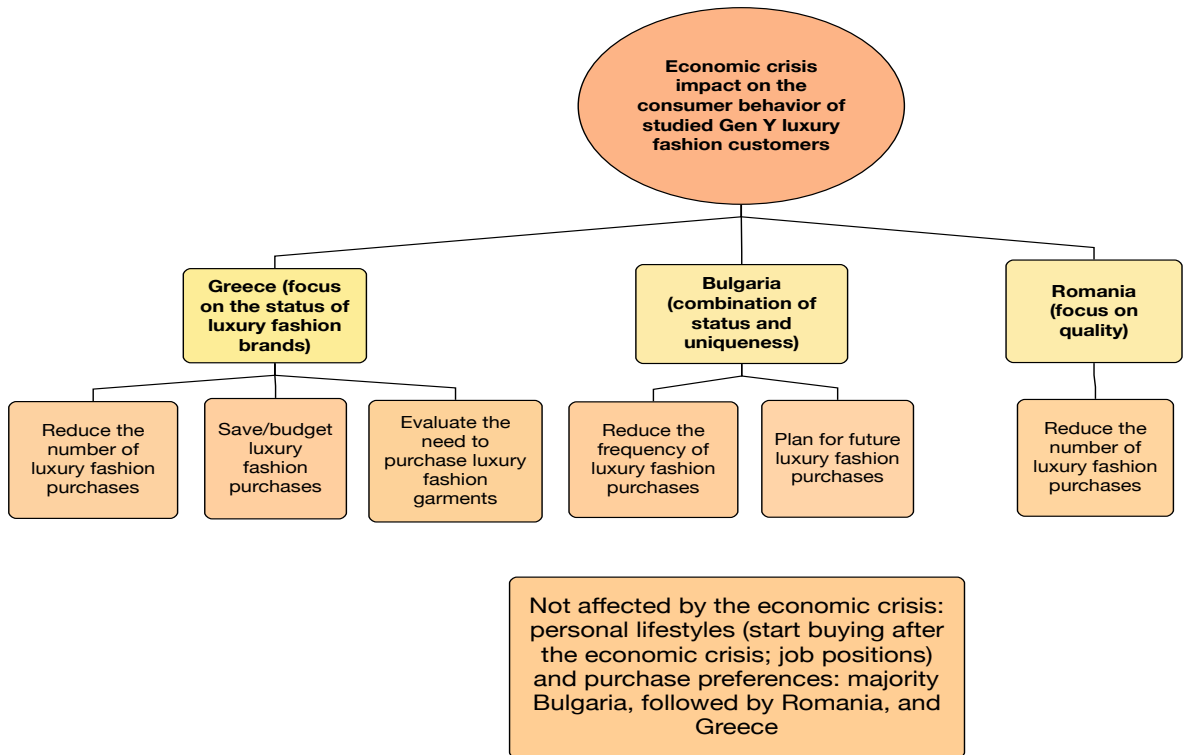
Findings uncovered that whereas Gen Y LFCs from the three countries which took part in the research shared a common faith in their post-crisis consumption behavior, there were also specific country peculiarities. Regarding the identified similarities across studied Gen Y LFCs, the empirics showed that: 1) Gen Y LFCs are price sensitive; 2) Greece and Bulgaria: plan/budget their future luxury fashion purchases; 3) Greece and Bulgaria: purchase LFB for their status symbol, and 4) Greece and Romania: reduced the quantity of luxury fashion purchases. The analysis illuminated the following country peculiarities: 1) Greek customers: focus on status; 2) Bulgarian consumers: combination of status and uniqueness; 3) Romanian consumers: cautious consumer behavior before the economic crisis and focus on the quality of luxury fashion items. These findings were a valuable contribution to the context of the research, being the first to supply theoretical implications for the influence of the economic crisis on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region.

It would appear that whilst the underlying reasons to continue LFBs amongst studied Gen Y LFCs differed across the three countries, the effect of the financial downturn (although

evident in different ways) was a uniform factor defining the consumption behavior of those studied. To conclude, this was the first study to empirically demonstrate how the economic crisis impact on Gen Y's luxury fashion consumer behavior of a segment for which there is lack of empirical knowledge, namely young LFCs from SEE. The theoretical relevance of the findings is that they showed how the financial downturn shaped studied customers' purchase behavior toward LFBs. The following section presents a summary of findings by following the research objectives which were addressed in presenting findings in the latter discussion.

5.16. Summary of emerging findings from individual interviews: perceptions: consumer behavior, impact of the economic crisis

Chapter five addressed three of the research objectives, focused on Social Media. These were: 1) Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands, 2) Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers, and 3) Explore Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in SEE given the past economic crisis.

Regarding the first objective, the research demonstrated that quality, brand DNA and LFBs' ability to project consumer distinctiveness were the core aspects that Gen Y LFCs of those studied use to form their perceptions toward LFBs. The relationship between *price and perceived quality* (Nueno and Quelch, 1998) and LFBs' association with the high prices (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009) is widely acknowledged by brand literature. Nevertheless, an existing concern among academics is that the global expansion of luxury results in diverse consumer perceptions (Phau and Predergast, 2000; Srinivasan *et al.* 2014; Chandon *et al.* 2016; Kapferer, 2018). By contrast, the study helped to fill a gap in academic literature regarding regional Gen Y's consumer behavior by demonstrating that quality was an important factor defining the positive attitudes toward LFBs shared both by male and female consumers. To the best of researcher's knowledge, this was an important insight being the first to demonstrate that studied Gen Y LFCs from SEE place high value on the utilitarian product features.

As of brand DNA, previous publications discuss that the traditional values LFBs rely on might no longer by applicable among Gen Y consumers (Kradisching, 2015; Gautam and

Sharma, 2017; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Herein, it was interesting to note that it was outlined not only as an attribute that fosters purchase desires, but also a key factor defining the brand loyalty. That was, regardless of the gender of studied Gen Y interviewees. Herein, this was the first study in the SEE region to demonstrate that young LFCs are sensitive to the "heartbeat" of brands. An evidence for this theorization were findings which demonstrated that brands which successfully capitalize on their brand ethos via their clothing items and marketing strategies would enjoy winning the loyalty of studied Gen Y LFCs.

As of the latter important aspect shaping the interviewees' perceptions, brand uniqueness, the most notable finding was how it was outlined in the context of projecting consumer distinctiveness. The research implied that studied Gen Y LFCs' perceptions in fact entailed the conventional aspects of what luxury stands for: being limited to a well-defined group of people from a certain social class. The novelty of the study was that it helped to fill a gap in academic knowledge by demonstrating that brand uniqueness has a fundamental role in the lives of studied Gen Y consumers being perceived as a means to practice dissimilarity. Importantly, whilst seemingly both genders expressed similar views about brand uniqueness, males' perspectives revolved around the financial aspect of the purchases, whilst for studied females, brand uniqueness entailed a symbolic value. Thus, an additional value of the research was that is furthered our understanding about gender as an influential factor defining the values that Gen Y LFCs derive from perceived brand uniqueness. In light of these, individual interviews made a contribution to academic knowledge, being the first to extent the conceptualization of LFBs on a regional level, by addressing Gen Y LFCs from Romania, Bulgaria and Greece.

The second research objective addressed in chapter five was to ***explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers.*** Whilst previous studies acknowledged the value of understanding the behavioral and consumption traits of Gen Y LFCs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; Fernandez *et al.* 2016; Schade *et al.* 2016; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Roux *et al.* 2017; Butcher *et al.* 2017; Raisanen *et al.* 2018), there is lack of clear conceptualization of Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). The exploratory investigation generated an important finding about the immense role that personal styles have on shaping the consumer behavior of studied Gen Y LFCs. More so, the need of grasping the role of gender among young consumers from emerging markets is also

acknowledged as being of theoretical relevance (Raisanen *et al.* 2018). In no way this was more evident than in the empirics showing that the value of personal style had significant behavioral implications on studied females. In line with existing literature, finding indicated that studied females involve in creative-counter conformity in the search of unpopular choices in order to express their identities and dissociate themselves from the commoners (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; O'Cass, 2001; Tian and McKenzie, 2001). Thus, the research yielded intriguing findings, which contradict what previous research suggested to be a typical males' trait (Raisanen *et al.* 2018). Acknowledging the sample limitations, the investigation was indicative that personal style as a hallmark for presenting personal identities was a typical consumer trait for female LFCs. Consequently, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to uncover that reliance on personal style was in fact a major barrier to the development of brand loyalty. On another notice, a consistent view among academics is that whilst being highly individualistic, Gen Y consumers are also affected by their peers (Fernandez, 2009; Francis *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). Previous research in the region found that females are more likely to be influenced by their peers (Ciornea, 2014). Likewise, a notable finding referred to females' inclines to rely on friends' opinions and identifying a soulmate through matching clothing items. From theoretical implication aspect, the study helped to improve our understanding of LFBs being perceived as the means through which those studied are not placed in the "social Siberia". In other words, as of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to demonstrate that for studied females LFBs carried a symbolic role of group belongingness.

Additionally, owing to gender differences, a pronounced revelation from the research referred to males' propensity to base their brand loyalty, and brand love, on satisfaction from previous purchase experiences. The search for fashion items that offer value for money was a clear indication that this consumer segment was price sensitive, evident in the emphasis on price-quality ratio. Thus, the research furthered our understanding of male Gen Y luxury fashion customer behavior from the SEE region by revealing that satisfaction from previous purchase experiences was the key trigger of brand loyalty to deep emotional attachments, such as brand love. In light of these, individual interviews made a contribution to academic knowledge, being the first to extent the understanding of Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior on a regional level, by addressing Gen Y LFCs from SEE.

The last research objective addressed in the chapter was to ***explore Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior in SEE given the past economic crisis.*** A persistent view among scholars is that the driving forces shaping consumption behaviour can be significantly influenced by certain events, triggering consumers to purchase LFBs in order to elevate their societal positions (Jones, 2016). Thus, the theoretical considerations of the research lie in improving our understanding of how such events as the past economic crisis has relevance to the consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al*. 2016). More so, to the best of researcher's knowledge, there is no empirical investigation in SEE about SM role in the context of the former economic crisis, let alone the countries that are part of the research (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece). In this context, the exploratory investigation demonstrated that while the crisis effect was inevitable for studied Gen Y LFCs, findings indicated that the principal traits of their addiction to LFBs were rooted in the specific social dogmas for each of the countries. Thus, this research bridged the gap by furthering our understanding about the crisis' influence on Gen Y's consumer behaviour, by also considering SM as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs in SEE.

The following chapter presents findings about different aspects related to participants' consumer behavior on SM, perceptions of SM marketing and communication activities of LFBs and SM role for attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs given the past economic crisis.

Chapter 6: FINDINGS PHASE 2 INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS-SOCIAL MEDIA

The chapter is structured in a way depicts the themes and properties that altogether shaped the outlooks of participants' lifeworld, by providing a comprehensive view of the aspects that emerged as being of highest value for studied Gen Y LFCs. The analysis is structured along the following main sections:

- The value of consumer buying experiences
- Generation Y's perceived values in the development of brand loyalty via Social Media

These sections seek to fulfill the following research objectives:

- Investigate gender differences in online consumer behaviour among Gen Y luxury fashion customers

- Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media

CONSUMERS' PERSPECTIVES ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA ROLE IN LUXURY FASHION CONSUMPTION, BRAND LOYALTY AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

6.1. The value of consumer buying experiences

A remarkable characteristic identified from the interview data referred to the propensity of the majority of studied LFCs to opt for online purchases (41 respondents). On one hand, this indicated a shift in the traditional consumption paradigm of studied Gen Y LFCs from SEE. On the other hand, an additional outlook of participants' responses demonstrated that in some instances interviewees would opt for the online buying option due the limited choices of offline buying opportunities, perceived financial advantage in the online buying experience, when the purchase involved "lower-risk" fashion items, or participants' knowledge of the utilitarian product features. Nevertheless, this did not imply that interviewees were indifferent to the advantages offered by the digital world. In this vein, the convenience of the online purchase experience was also appraised by a significant portion of studied consumers. Moreover, participants also shared that they would exploit the advantage of the digital universe to browse for product information on various SM platforms. However, the final purchase decision would be made at the physical store. That being said, the first section highlights the importance of convenience for studied Gen Y LFCs.

Convenience of the online shopping experience

Key words**: *convenience, time, fast, easy*

Individual interviews uncovered that studied LFCs shared a common preference for the online shopping regardless of their gender. The exploratory analysis uncovered that interviewees' favorable attitudes toward the online shopping experience were rooted in the convenience of conducting purchases via various SM platforms. A common perception amongst this consumer segment was that the digital world offered them the opportunity to buy luxury fashion garments in a fast, easy, and timely manner. Most responses unified across the aspect of efficient and easy to navigate online shopping. Alongside the value of convenience, interviewees referred to the variety of products in the digital universe, the useful product information, reliable deliveries and (in the rare cases when necessary) return of purchased products. As illustrated by the following examples in the table:

Table 6:1 Examples attesting to convenience of online shopping

> *It's easier. You have larger variety of products and [uhm] as I said earlier you can return things that you don't like or… aren't something that you expected and is more convenient way from any… any, any point of view […]*
>
> (PR3, male, 28)
>
> *I prefer to buy it online […] it's really easy to order it online, not to go back to the store again in two days maybe because some of the… of the things I buy, I think if I want to buy them and this is maybe 1,2,3 days sometimes and… it's really easier on the Internet and I can check it several times […]*
>
> (PBG18, female, 29)

As demonstrated, interviewees' responses indicated that the main trigger for their inclines to opt for the online shopping experience was embedded in the comfort of SM availability at any time and place that was convenient for interviewees. Additionally, as noted at the end of the section that focused on the age of interviewees, findings demonstrated that it appeared as a defining factor influencing participants' preferences for the online shopping experience. Precisely, most of the interviewees who acknowledged the advantages of the Internet for their luxury fashion purchases, were under 30 years old (13 out of 16). Albeit with the sample limitations, the findings fill a gap in existing literature by supplying important implications for the purchase culture of the studied Gen Y segment from SEE. Precisely, their preferences for online shopping can have impactful outcomes for the boost of luxury e-commerce in SEE. Further, another perceived advantage of the online shopping experience referred to the opportunity to find better deals.

Consumers' perceived values from finding better deals online

Key words: *better offers, lower prices online; better deals online*

This perspective was shared only by three interviewees (2 females and one male participant). Although a significant minority, their views provided invaluable insights into the context of the research. Specifically, the researcher identified contradictions across the interviewees' mentality toward the significance of in-store versus digital consumer purchase experiences. Precisely, interviewed Gen Y's perspectives uncovered that customers were resolute in their convictions that a chief aspect which evoked positive emotions from the consumption experience referred to the in-store environment and personalized customer service. For example, as noted by one interviewee:

[…] it's the experience of buying them! Cause you get to talk with the shopping assistants, you get to look at all the models, try them on, think about them [uhm] then it's the whole process of taking them, packing them […] everything is slower, it's calmer, it's more… enjoyable as a process if you do it in a store! So, that's very nice, because you get a very nice treatment as a customer […]

(PR11, female, 29)

Seemingly, findings revealed that the physical store environment was a core stone of interviewees' positive emotional arousal from the shopping experience. Thus, it would seem an organic fit that participants' purchase approach would align with their emphasis on the exceptional in-store shopping atmosphere. Remarkably, the analysis uncovered a shift in the mindset of those studied, illuminating interviewees' propensity to abandon what seemed to be their first choice of traditional in-store environment, in favor of the online buying process. As attested by the same interviewee:

[…] If I could I would buy them offline all the time! But I find that… I will get much better deals online […]

(PR11, female, 29)

In attempt to understand the mindset of studied Gen Y LFCs, a critical illumination from the exploratory research demonstrated that the shift in the core values driving interviewees' choices for a purchase channel was predominantly caused by the opportunity to purchase LFBs at cheaper prices. Henceforth, findings illustrated how the ability to purchase luxury fashion items for a fraction of the cost exerted higher authority on the consumer behavior of studied consumers. Herein, it could be suggested that their vulnerability was due to the financial aspect of acquiring LFBs, which in effect encouraged interviewees' inclines to sacrifice the positive emotions derived from enjoyable in-store atmosphere in favor of the opportunity to obtain their desired items at a price range that would have lower impact on their finances. Equally important is the fact that customers who expressed such views were females. However, the small portion of interviewees (three respondents) who referred to the financial advantage of the online purchase experience did not allow the researcher to arrive at significant theoretical implications about gender differences amongst the studied sample. Whilst the issue of price sensitivity amongst studied Gen Y LFCs depending on their gender remains open to debate, based on the emerging findings it could be theorized that the informative nature of SM assumed more relevance among female LFCs, allowing them to browse various SM platforms to obtain the needed brand/ product information. Further, apart from the preferences for online buying experiences, another common characteristic among genders referred to their preference for in-store environment because of customer service.

Key words: ***full in-store luxury experience, customer service, atmosphere, attended***

This was a shared perspective among both genders of studied Gen LFCs. Whilst the analysis shed light on gender differences in the underlining values contouring their choices of purchase channels, it appeared that the physical environment was a uniform factor among studied Gen Y LFCs from both genders. The allure of in-store environment appealed with a great magnetizing power, enticing participants' choices of the traditional purchase method. However, the value of in-store experience was outlined by a minority of studied consumers (8 participants). That is, compared to interviewees who spoke about the convenience and the price advantage of online shopping (20 interviewees). Herein, the research generated important findings about the value system of studied Gen LFCs, demonstrating that the convenience and financial aspects related to luxury fashion consumption, rather than on the hedonic in-store experience, were of higher relevance for the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs who took part in the research.

The empirics demonstrated that interviewees' preferences for the traditional retail format were driven by in-store "lust", with emotional and physical aspects as main components of the customer purchase experience. Participants' responses signified the **in-store environment** as a main venue where they could experience the luxury world. Studied consumers outlined the personal touch of employee-customer interactions and the positive emotions derived within the context of the traditional shopping environment. The most valuable aspects included: the manner salespeople talk to customers, demonstrating respect and willingness to be of assistance, and their professionalism as fashion advisers. As the following table depicts, customers explained:

Table 6:2 Examples attesting to in-store shopping experience

Offline. Because I like the experience in the boutiques! [...] I like going there, be treated from [uhm] a real human being, being served in a way. I like the whole experience! The nice atmosphere, the visual set-up [...]
(PGR5, female, 27)
[...] Alice in wonderland! [...] it's very good when you go somewhere, and you need something, to find someone who can help you! Plus, at the end of the day buying this product [uhm] gives you this experience as well! You buy this product but by buying the product you don't only pay [uhm] the material itself [...] Buying a luxury brand at the end of the day is exactly this: for me...to feel the experience of really having it! [...]
(PBG11, female, 33)

As demonstrated, in the minds of those studied, the full glamour of LFBs could only be entirely experienced at in-store level, where they were involved in face-to-face communication and received personalized customer attention. Herein, to the best of researcher's knowledge, findings were the first to uncover an important consumption pattern of studied Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region. The empirical evidence allowed to arrive to the theorization that studied Gen Y LFCs need to feel cherished by LFBs. An evidence for this theorization was that an essential component of the consumption experience for this consumer segment was to provide them with unforgettable in-store consumer experiences. The discussion means that for the interviewed Gen Y LFCs the in-store atmosphere was perceived as the holy grail of luxury experience. Importantly, the exploratory investigation also uncovered specific gender peculiarities in the consumption culture of the studied LFCs. That being said, the following section presents gender differences in the choices of a purchase approach.

Gender differences in the choices of buying experiences

The section presents findings about interviewees' preferences for online as opposed to offline purchase experiences, based on emerging consumption patterns of each gender. The main categories which shaped the structural approach toward the analysis included: 1) male LFCs from the interviewed sample: ability to evaluate the utilitarian product features, perceived risk of online purchases, and 2) female interviewees: browsing on SM platforms prior to the purchase, preference for offline buying experience with the exception of limited physical store availability in their home countries, opt for online purchases depending on the product (mostly fashion accessories).

Ability to evaluate utilitarian product features: a typical males' trait

Key words: ***try, see, fit, size, price, risk***

The opportunity to evaluate different product characteristics at the physical store was outlined predominantly by male interviewees. In the eyes of this customer segment the store landscape provided them with the opportunity to try the fashion items. The most noticeable pattern, which emerged across interviewees' responses revolved around the accurate fitting and sizes. Whilst the concept of expensive products varied across participants (from 200 to 10 000 euros), studied male LFCs emphasized on the importance of correct size and fitting. Although proper products information and easy return (in case of damage) were acknowledged, customers were still reluctant to spread

their money without the chance to touch, see, and try the chosen items. As presented by interviewees' responses in the following table:

Table 6:3 Examples attesting to the ability to evaluate utilitarian product features

I go to the store, not online because I have to see the cloth on me! If I have to a buy T-shirt for 200 euros, I have to see it, I touch, I feel the product and approve it!
(PR13, male, 33)
Definitely directly from the shops [...] I prefer to go directly to the store, to see, to touch my future stuff...to try, to see them and then to buy it
(PBG10, male, 35)

Building on the presented examples, it would appear that male customers of those studied were less likely to opt for the online purchase experience because of the need to feel confident about the product utilitarian product qualities. Mindful of the limitations of a qualitative research, the empirical evidence suggested that males' challenge to foresee the advantages offered by the digital world were rooted in the perceived distrust and perceived risk in e-commerce. An additional evidence for the latter suggestion stems from the fact that even though some male participants were optimistic towards the online purchase experience, this was only in cases when they felt secure about the brands' sizes and fittings. For instance:

[...] I prefer online when it's something that is not so expensive or if I have worn the same trouser for example in another color or I have the same size in another kind of trouser. For example, if it's jeans also I know my size and I cannot find it, so... if I cannot order it to bring it to me in the store, I will order online definitely! I prefer online [uhm] payments and buying clothes when the products are a little bit cheaper! When they are luxury brands... and it depends on the quantity of course, I prefer to go to the store! [...]
(PGR17, male, 28)

According to male interviewees, the online purchase experience was a "risky" move unless they were entirely convinced in the utilitarian product qualities or the purchase required lower financial investment. Herein, the empirics implied that males' consumption behavior of those studied was driven be the perception of value for money as a core driver for participants' urge to visit brands' physical stores. This theorization stems from additional observation that participants who emphasized on the physical store environment as a safe place where they could experience the luxury fashion product features, also emphasized on product quality and fitting as main purchase criteria. As explained by the same participant:

My criteria are first of all that I will like it, the purpose that I want to buy something like this and that will fit perfectly on my body!
(PGR17, male, 28)

Consequently, an alternative perspective of interviewees' recounts would be to understand how the emerging findings align within the context of the past economic crisis. Precisely, the analysis of the economic crisis' impact demonstrated that Greek LFCs experienced the most significant change in their consumption behavior in the post-crisis period. On the other hand, the empirics uncovered that the effect of the financial downturn on the consumption behavior of Bulgarian and Romanian participants was reflected in minor changes in the consumption patterns of studied Gen Y LFCs. In this vein, findings uncovered that the importance of evaluating utilitarian product features emerged on a regional level. Herein, the analysis demonstrated that whilst seemingly Bulgarian and Romanian LFCs of those studied did not experience the same difficulties as Greek interviewees in the consumption of LFBs, participants from the three countries shared a common characteristic in their preferences for the offline buying experience. Rooted in the opportunity to evaluate product qualities, findings demonstrated that the economic crisis' effect spilled evenly amongst interviewees from the three countries, making them more suspicious toward the risks of online purchases. Thus, the exploratory investigation filled a gap in academic knowledge by demonstrating that the ability to evaluate product qualities and perceived risk in the online purchase experience was a significantly relevant factor defining studied males' preferences for the offline buying experience, irrespective of their nationality. Thus, as of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to empirically demonstrate how the gender of Gen Y LFCs influences their preferences for buying experiences. In this vein, findings uncovered that female interviewees could change the offline buying experience in case of limited brand availability in their home countries.

Online purchases as an alternative approach due to limited store availability: females' consumption behavior

Key words: personal care, customer treatment, try, see, brand availability

This segment of LFCs appraised the advantages of the offline buying experience for the exceptional in-store experience and ability to evaluate utilitarian product features. In the eyes of these customers, the physical store environment provided them with an outstanding consumer experience, where they received individual customer treatment. Moreover, they also acknowledged the advantage of being able to see and try the fashion garments. However, the empirics demonstrated that the limited store availability could sometimes force this consumer segment to turn to the digital alternative of buying luxury

fashion brands. As demonstrated by the following example of two responses by the same interviewee:

Table 6:4 Examples attesting to online purchases as an alternative approach due to limited store availability

> *The care! The personal care! So, how, how… either the salesperson is approaching and how everyone is talking to you when buying such an item […]*
>
> (PR8, female, 28)
>
> *[…] you cannot find a wide variety of ... of stuff that I like here in Bucharest, so it's either you… you cannot find it here. So, online is the only option […] I usually don't have time to go out and look for stuff, so usually I'm a lot of the time on social media, so whenever I see something, I prefer to buy it online […]*
>
> (PR8, female, 28)

A possible explanation of participants' preferences to opt for the online alternative of the traditional retail format was hidden in the fact that most of these customers were brand loyal. Whilst the reasons they outlined for their brand loyalty referred to different aspects such brand DNA or quality a common ground was that their previous purchase experiences encouraged their desires to return to the same LFBs. Consequently, findings implied that even though female LFCs might face challenges in terms of store availability, they would not opt for alternative options. Rather, participants' brand loyalty inspired the desire to purchase from the same brands, even if that meant that customers would not have the opportunity to indulge themselves with the full in-store experience. Nevertheless, the segment also consisted of customers who were not brand loyal. Herein, it could be suggested that a core driver for their decision to opt for the online buying experience was rooted in the convenience, ease and efficiency of online purchases.

The latter discussion does not imply the female LFCs of those interviewed were not considerate about the financial aspect involved in the acquisition of LFBs. Instead, participants' views indicated that they were considerate about the risk involved in the online purchases of LFBs. This is why some female interviewees explained that their choices of the digital consumer experience were driven by the type of product they would like to buy. For instance:

[…] if it's bags… if it's something that I don't need to… you know, you don't need to… try it and fit you, I can buy it online. But for shoes and for clothes definitely…. Not online. In the retail shop […]

(PBG20, female, 31)

Most often, customers cited fashion accessories (shoes, bags) as an acceptable choice for online purchases. They explained that the price range of LFBs made them cautious about choosing the online option for buying clothing items. Consequently, findings indicated that the choices between the digital consumer experience and traditional retail format were also based on an element of financial consideration involved in luxury fashion acquisitions. This means that studied female Gen Y LFCs need to feel safe about their financial investments. Additionally, findings could also be seen from the perspective of regional differences in the consumption behavior of interviewees as a consequence of the economic crisis. Specifically, the analysis demonstrated that the consumption patterns of Bulgarian and Romanian participants were not significantly influenced by the financial downturn. By contrast, Greek interviewees expressed views which indicated that their consumer behavior has been sufficiently injured by the 2008 financial collapse. Herein, it was interesting to note that female customers whose views uncovered inclines to opt for online purchases in cases of store unavailability included participants from the three countries. Thus, findings indicated that on a regional level customers' previous purchase experiences (brand loyalty) made interviewees to embrace the online buying experience. From theoretical implication aspect, this study filled a gap in existing knowledge about Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region by demonstrating that they develop solid brand loyalty to the extent that they remain stable in the face of brand alternatives. Based on the analysis of emerging findings, the following section presents a summary of Gen Y's preferences for the online versus offline buying experiences.

6.2. Summary of emerging findings about the value of consumer buying experiences

Figure 6:1 Consumer buying experiences
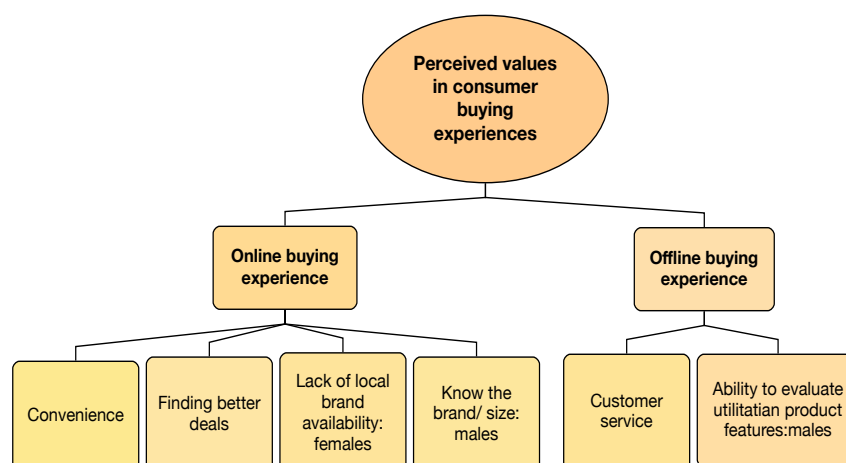
Acknowledging the sample limitation, findings propose that: to a great extent Gen Y in SEE prefer the online purchase experience. This theorization was supported by an evidence demonstrating that the majority of studied Gen Y LFCs preferred the online purchase environment. Thus, although participants seemed to be reluctant and concerned toward the online buying experience, their consumer behavior was in fact driven by the convenience, better deals, and lack of store availability.

The analysis about Gen Y's preferences for online versus offline buying experiences showed that the convenience of online purchases and pleasurable in-store atmosphere were a unifying aspect among studied customers from both genders. In regard to gender consumption peculiarities amongst participants, the empirics revealed that: 1) male interviewees exert higher levels of perceived risk in the online buying experience and prefer the traditional retail format because of the ability to evaluate utilitarian product features, the only exception being of they were confident in the size and fitting of luxury fashion products, 2) female participants were more likely to involve themselves in online browsing to find better deals, demonstrated more open-minded consumer mentality being ready to sacrifice the in-store experience in case the specific brand was not available in their home countries, whilst also demonstrating a price-cautious behavior expressed in the preference for online shopping of solely for luxury fashion accessories. Thus, acknowledging the sample limitations, the research demonstrated that the gender influence is still very much existent factor defining the behavioral patterns of Gen Y LFCs from SEE. The following section presents findings about Gen Y's mindset toward the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs.

6.3. Gen Y' perceived values in the development of brand loyalty via Social Media

Before embarking on the thematic interpretation of emerging data, the author wishes to outline the approach to the analysis of this section. To start with, the researcher explored the perspectives of followers and non-followers about SM role for the development of brand loyalty. It was important to highlight that the segment of non-followers constituted a minority (15 interviewees), compared to those who followed LFBs. Further, the researcher identified recurrence of similarity in responses of customers who followed luxury fashion brands on SM. These recurrences appeared across interviewees'

testimonials about the reasons to follow LFBs and the activities they outlined as attracting or keeping their attention in SM brand marketing. Overall, participants split into almost equal in portion views: 26 of them preferred the online approach toward developing brand relationships, and 30 attested to the development of traditional (offline brand relationships). Interviewees' testimonials were invaluable because they revealed the aspects these customers cherished in SM-brand activities in the long-term. With that being said, the section was initiated by presenting findings about the value of in-store service and the perceived mismatch between the concepts of SM and customer-brand relationships.

Building customer-brand relationships through traditional in-store experience

Key words: ***not personal, not tailored, face-to-face communication, personalized attention, customer service***

Customers talked about the **perceived mismatch between SM and customer-brand relationships.** Importantly, this segment provided two opposing views. For a minority of them SM was "not important" and "not possible" develop brand loyalty. As explained by one respondent:

[…] this is a tricky… an interesting question, not tricky because I'm trying to imagine how brands would establish some kind of a relationship with me via social media. I don't know how that might happen. I… I can't imagine, I mean it's totally different […]

(PR9, female, 27)

Essentially, the majority of them were loyal customers. Thus, their perspective of "relationships" surpassed the idea of merely being exposed to informative or creative brand content. Whilst few of them outlined personalized communication, it was mentioned alongside brand content. Therefore, it could be speculated that these customers perceived SM brands' posts being useful for information, updates and inspiration. However, the in-store environment remained the "holy grail" for experiencing the brands' magic and building customer-brand relationships. Thus, in the minds of those studied the value of personalized customer service and relationships developed at the in-store environment could not be transferred in the digital universe. Aspects that appeared across interviewees' responses referred to face-to-face communication, outstanding shop assistants' performance, personalized attention, care, and respect. As the following examples point out:

Table 6:5 Examples attesting to perceived mismatch between Social Media and customer-brand relationships

> *I prefer in-store! […] Because of course they cannot have personal relationship with each one of their customers, of course it's automated newsletters or replies. So, I don't believe that you can build a strong relationship online […]*
>
> (PGR17, male, 28)
>
> *I don't know how… how social Media can be personal in general. Well, it's different when you go to a traditional store and when you speak to people directly. If you are online, they can still search your profile and everything but usually this is done by automatic machines, so it's different! It doesn't feel as much real as it is in person!*
>
> (PBG19, female, 28)

As uncovered by the excerpt quotes, according to this segment, receiving automated messages was not even close to the idea of one-to-one personal communication. A predominant perspective was that the true luxury experience could only be lived through the in-store environment. The main implication was that personalized customer service was perceived as a distinctive feature of LFBs, which in effect heightened participants' sense of brand attachment. Put differently, the brand is created by human beings. Participants wanted to feel it human in every possible way, including through customer-brand interactions. Therefore, their sentiments exposed that face-to-face communication at an in-store level (i.e. experiencing the humanity of the brand) was the core stone of customer engagement and subsequent brand loyalty.

Further, for the majority of participants, a chief theme referred the notion that **brand loyalty falls outside the SM world**. Customers rationalized their responses with the argument that a condition for their brand loyalty were previous brand experiences. Among the spectrum of aspects, they outlined customer service, product quality ("value for money") and customer satisfaction. As the following evidence of participants' views highlight:

Table 6:6 Evidence attesting to brand loyalty outside Social Media

> *I think the items! I don't know… if I bought a bag and I was really happy with it [uhm] they make me loyal! If they have [uhm] unique clothes and when you wear them, you are very appreciated, and you come back to the stores and buy again! […] I don't know if my reasons are related to marketing campaigns. I don't think they are related*
>
> (PR15, female, 31)
>
> *If the product is value for money! In order to make me think go back to their brand, their store and buy something from them, I must be sure that I will not be disappointed about the money that I will pay and the product I get for this money […]*
>
> (PGR11, female, 27)

> *I realize that I get affected to a brand when I'm using their products but following them on social media is because I've used their products! This is why I will stay… and see and see what's going on and follow […]*
>
> (PGR18, female, 27)

As demonstrated, young LFCs who took part in the research relied on true brand experiences rather than some fictional brand engagement, which did not have the same magnitude on customers' behavior, let alone on the development of brand loyalty. Consequently, acknowledging the sample limitation, the main implication was that whilst SM could be useful for keeping the sparkle of brand loyalty alive, brand loyalty was the outcome of customer experiences at the physical store environment and product satisfaction. Additionally, interviewees who voiced concerns about the perceived disparity between the concept of customer-brand relationships and SM nature were mostly females. Albeit with the limitations of a qualitative research, this signified that the gender of LFCs influenced their mindset toward the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty. This emerged in the empirical data demonstrating that female consumers of those studied perceived SM as the opposite of what it appeared to be the roots of their concept of brand loyalty: in-store environment with the exceptional personalized customer service, ability to try the fashion items, and subsequent customer satisfaction. In all, participants' views indicated that SM was not considered valuable platform for building or enhancing brand loyalty. This was reflected in views about perceived mismatch between SM and the concept of customer-brand relationships, also reflected in the difference between in-store personalized customer service versus SM "automated" communication. It also appeared that brand loyalty developed outside SM was of crucial importance for the studied customers. It was exactly their loyalty, which triggered interest in following brands on SM in the long-term. Therefore, it could be theorized that the value of offline experiences did not eliminate the invaluable role of SM for boosting brand loyalty.

In this spirit, additional observation of participants' recounts demonstrated that whilst SM was "accused" for its distant nature, the majority of customers expressed positive views about the value of SM for bringing luxury fashion brands closer to customers (28 as opposed to 12).

Key words*: normal, good, positive, a must, mandatory, essential, natural, the best way to engage young customers, stick to brand DNA*

Before embarking upon the discussion about the perceived value of SM nourishing brand loyalty, there are two essential points to be highlighted. First, customers who expressed positive views were mostly interested in following LFBs' SM posts (22 out of 28). On one hand, this finding is self-explanatory showing that following brands' SM activities assisted participants to form an opinion in favor of brands' marketing activities. On the other hand, with an exception of two customers, this segment constituted loyal brand interviewees. Herein, it could be theorized that participants' brand loyalty was the "magic" power that elicited positive perceptions toward LFBs' presence on SM platforms. This was an indication that the favorable attitudes toward LFBs' presence on SM originated from participants' eagerness to be updated with news about their favorite brands. In addition, a bigger portion of these customers expressed preferences for the offline approach towards the development of brand loyalty. This was an interesting finding, implying that whilst studied customers valued the in-store environment as a focal component for experiencing the brand, this did not eliminate SM role for increasing customer engagement. Consequently, participants' testimonials also demonstrated a key characteristic that defined Gen Y behavior of respondents. Specifically, the empirics revealed that since SM was an integral part of Gen Y's lives of interviewees, they would expect LFBs to act accordingly and be present on the digital landscape.

The main premise that constituted the theme revolved around the importance of integrating SM in brands' marketing campaigns in order to **respond to Gen Y customers' needs and preferences** for obtaining relevant brand information. According to interviewees, this could be achieved by moving away from brand image of "exclusivity" toward a more "inclusive" marketing approach. For example, as asserted by customers:

Table 6:7 Examples attesting to responding to Gen Y customers' needs and preferences

> *[…] this is of crucial importance for all of us, all of the customers. A lot of people think it is overrated, just because they don't use so much Social Media. But for us, the Millennials, is of crucial importance. This is what I meant.*
>
> (PBG5, female, 27)

> *[…] I think it's very essential and very important to have Social Media presence as a luxurious fashion brand! Because you need to take into consideration a wide range of customers around the world, around the globe, because when you are on the Internet, you are international, you are everywhere, and you approach all your customers no matter where you are! So, I find it very important that they have a social presence!*
>
> (PGR12, male, 30)

Building on the presented examples, participants appreciated LFBs' initiatives to incorporate SM in their marketing because in this way brands could come closer to the young segment, by keeping consumers informed about collections and fashion trends. As a consequence, participants declared that this would leave to higher chances of customer engagement. Henceforth, findings indicated that by obliging to customers' "rules" to open the gates to LFBs' mystic world, SM was the necessary "evil" that helped brands to get closer to Gen Y customers of those studied. However, according to participants, **moving away from luxury fashion brands' image rooted in exclusivity should be performed with caution** ensuring that marketing actions on SM platforms are not annoying, aggressive or pushy, by also staying true to brands' unique DNA's. As participants' views presented in the table illustrate:

Table 6:8 Examples attesting to incorporating SM by staying true to brands' images

> *I do think that they actually a great job [uhm] I mean not being too aggressive but still being informative about what they do and giving examples of how you can combine their items*
>
> (PBG7, female, 27)
>
> *[…] This is a digital area that we live in! So [uhm] this is something that is inevitable! […] the main rationale is the more premium you become, the less you need to use Facebook or Twitter or that kind of stuff! Which is like mass media […] For example, you don't expect Chanel advertising on mass TV! You expect to see… them in selected events because they are premium! […]*
>
> (PGR7, male, 36)

As revealed, in interviewees' minds, it was "inevitable" that at some point LFBs were to embrace SM as a medium for attracting and retaining customers' attention. Nonetheless, an important prerequisite was that brands do not betray their true identities. Consequently, interviewees' testimonials indicated that brands' efforts to respond to the customers' lifestyles, should not interfere with what appeared to be a crucial component in participants' perceptions of brands' images: their DNA.

Further on the latter statement, some participants also expressed concerns that whilst SM usefulness cannot be ignored, there are different platforms and marketing approaches.

The most cited SM platforms to accomplish this task were Instagram and Pinterest. Precisely, SM activities and communication **channels should be aligned with the brands' images.** According to participants, as valuable and helpful SM are, brands should master the balance between SM inclusivity whilst maintaining their exclusivity. By giving examples with Chanel, Vivian Westwood and Louis Vuitton, interviewees explained that if not selected properly, SM presence of LFBs would run the risk of going "down the ladder", which is "too low profile" for brands. Therefore, findings implied that as "demanding" as these customers might be in terms of brands' availability on SM, interviewees would also value if brands do not fall under the digital trap. This means that they do not want to see LFBs being equals with fast fashion ("basic level") brands which pay less attention to their image presentation and lack customer segmentation.

Finally, in most of their part, customers who expressed favorable attitudes toward the idea of luxury fashion brands' presence on SM platforms were male interviewees (18 interviewees from 29 who formed the theme about SM as "a must for luxury fashion brands). The analysis demonstrated that the gender of participants defined their mindset toward the notion of bringing together two seemingly different concepts: social media versus LFBs. It appeared that male participants were more resolute in their conviction that LFBs should forgo what appeared to be the "old-school" approach toward communicating an exclusive brand image and accept SM as the new marketing paradigm for attracting and keeping the attention of the young audience. Some of the females' responses also signified positive opinion about incorporating SM platforms as part of LFBs' marketing. Nonetheless, altogether findings about the perception of SM as an antonym to build brand loyalty in the luxury fashion domain and the fact that females presented a minority of interviewees who acknowledged SM as "a must" for LFBs implied that studied female customers have a more conventional perspective toward the approaches that LFBs should adopt to communicate their brand image and develop brand loyalty. That being said, the preceding section analyses findings about the importance of brand content among studied Gen Y LFCs.

Informative brand content was the key marketing activity that built a momentum in interviewees' interests in LFBs' activities on SM networks. It appeared as a key factor defining interviewees' positive attitudes toward SM-brand activities and ongoing interest in SM-brand posts. Equally important is the fact that participants who spoke about informative brand content favored only the offline approach toward the development of brand loyalty. This indicated that whilst for participants being informed about fashion trends, new collections and style ideas was an integral component in maintaining their purchase desires, SM did not appear as being important for the development of brand loyalty. It could be suggested that participants' preferences for the offline approach of developing brand loyalty was because they placed higher emphasis on the in-store experience and satisfaction from previous purchases of luxury fashion brands. An evidence for the latter statement was identified in the way interviewees envisioned the concept of brand loyalty. Precisely, for the majority of this segment the concept of brand loyalty revolved around customer service and product satisfaction. For instance, as participants' responses pointed out:

Table 6:9 Examples attesting to Gen Y's views of brand loyalty

[…] brand loyalty for me means that you are already sure of the quality, of the standard of this brand and…you continue buying from this brand regularly […] (PBG7, male, 27) *[…] from my perspective it could be [uhm] when I go, when I actually shop in the store cause I think for…especially for these luxury brands, I think the experience is a lot better when you actually shop in-store…. And it's how they treat you […]* (PR1, female, 27)

The examples generated valuable findings indicating that the importance of in-store experiences and satisfaction from previous purchase experiences are fairly consistent influential factors among Gen Y consumers of those studied. This theorization was based on the empirical evidence that also demonstrated that in-store experience was an important factor driving participants' preferences for the traditional retail format and satisfaction from previous purchase experiences in the context of quality and males' expressed feelings of brand love.

With that being said, the main rationale was that participants were interested in brands' SM activities because of the **quality of brand content**. Customers expressed beliefs that the nature of LFBs was to offer quality in every aspect and be pioneers. From this stance, interviewees articulated that it was natural that brands' SM campaigns offer "quality of the content", which was "attractive and catchy" and made them "check the new items". Quality was directly linked to entertaining and appealing brand content, executed with attention to details. As articulated by one customer:

[…] I mean not only to catch my attention, but also to make me go back and see what else they do, not only as design for the clothes, I think this works for me! They keep me interested if they have newsfeeds also [uhm] the offers are also attractive and catchy. So, from the beginning to the end! The quality should be everywhere! Also, the frequent updates […] I think these things also help the brands to keep my attention in their activities on Social Media

(PGR11, female, 27)

Interviewees demonstrated appreciation toward the efforts that stand behind the development of extraordinary marketing campaigns, provoking their long-term interest in SM-brand activities. Herein, findings supplied evidence for the value of informative brand content. Informative brand content appeared as the ultimate marketing activity that could increase participants' interests in LFBs' SM activities. The focal point was that this segment appreciated brand content, which appealed to their visual stimuli. Henceforth, the empirics indicated that quality brand content not only aspired participants' imagination and purchase desires, but also could stimulate participants' brand loyalty. Thus, the utilization of SM for sharing quality informative brand content appeared as an essential prerequisite for attracting and retaining Gen Y consumers' attention and cultivating heightened sense of brand loyalty.

Nevertheless, brand content had to have mostly **informative role**, helping participants to stay updated. The spectrum of aspects included being updated with fashion trends, brand collections, new designs, and obtaining style ideas. Minding the researchers' subjective bias, it could be speculated these customers wanted to present themselves as trendy and fashionable. In effect, LFBs' marketing approach to present new collections and fashion looks seduced interviewed customers to experiment and explore different outfit opportunities. However, at its core fashion has a short-term *expiry date*. Nevertheless, LFBs have always been inventive in finding ways to remain fashionable in a world where fashion trends fate within a blink of an eye. Likewise, it appeared that the reason for participants' interest in LFBs' SM activities was because they offered customers an

insight into the fashion trends and style ideas. The focal point was that this segment appreciated brand content, which appealed to their visual senses, allowing them to get updated about brand news, collections, styles and fashion trends in a timely manner.

This was a predominant perspective among interviewees who preferred the online approach towards building brand relationships. The main advantage referred to the **ease, comfort and convenience** of informative brand content. Such a sentiment was also reflected in instances when informative brand content was valuable for customers with a purchase trigger as it helped to see *"what's new in order to have some new ideas and in order to refresh my style"* (PGR16, female, 35). This implied that these customers need the convenience of not strolling around the stores to review the latest fashion trends, collections, or obtaining specific brand information. Consequently, brand content which offered LFCs of those studied with insights into new collections/ fashion trends/ style ideas, emerged as a key influential factor provoking the purchase desire of interviewed LFCs. This theorization was also supported by the insights presented in the following table:

Table 6:10 Examples attesting to ease, comfort and convenience of informative brand content

Keep posting and being informative. Maybe daily or once per week or something… Generally, I like to be informed about their new designs, colors (PGR20, male, 28) *The new items brought to the public [uhm] the new influence of fashion, what is new on the market, what is new in the year. For example, this year the color is… I don't know, blue or green, let's say green is more fashionable this year and something like that. Basically, what is new as fashion influence!* (PR14, male, 31) *They upload photos of their collection and this makes me check, check the new items […] You can easily find them, check their collection, check the new collection […] I think you can find information very easy* (PBG18, female, 29)

As demonstrated, by removing all the "silos" of different brand touchpoints, LFBs gave the opportunity to interviewees to have all the information (i.e. via brand content) at the palm of their hands. However, this did not contribute to perceive the digital universe as helpful for the development of brand loyalty. Instead, most customers preferred the traditional, in-store environment (both amongst followers and non-followers). Nonetheless, their responses indicated that there was still an opportunity to incorporate

SM for boosting the interest of this otherwise traditional segment, who valued brand relationships developed at a store level. Precisely, the convenience of obtaining fashion updates and relevant information appeared important aspects for interviewees. Yet, findings indicated that participants perceived SM as a useful platform for obtaining brand/ fashion information whilst disregarding its potential as an interactive medium through which they could transfer brand relationships in the online world. Findings supplied important information, indicating that although participants seemed to be fairly positive toward the value of SM for being informed, their visionary of brand loyalty assumed more relevance of the in-store environment as having a strong behavioral implication for the development of brand loyalty. Importantly, the value of informative brand content was a shared perspective both by male and female LFCs who took part in the research. This implied that the need to stay updated with brand news, fashion trends, collections, and style ideals was a uniform consumption pattern triggering participants' interests in SM- brand activities, regardless of the consumer gender. Besides the informative nature of brand content, participants also expressed favorable attitudes toward creative brand content on SM networks.

Creative brand content: making customers "starving" for more

Key words: creative, engaging, interactive, clever, mystery

This theme was constructed by customers who can be described as loyal followers. Herein, findings implied that creative brand content had a sufficient impact on customers' mindset of those studied. Precisely, being exposed to content which surpassed the usual informative function helped participants to gain insights into brands' "personalities" beyond the traditional marketing approach. In effect, this emerged as a critical component that would likely trigger heightened sense of customer engagement, leading to responsiveness to brands' efforts to approach LFCs on SM platforms.

Findings about customers who expressed preferences for the ***offline approach toward building brand loyalty*** demonstrated that luxury fashion brands should embrace SM as a platform where they can show more **details about the work efforts and craftsmanship**. This involved revealing details from the craftsmanship of the luxury fashion items and behind the scenes photoshoots. As explained by one customer:

Maybe more information about the thing I'm buying, the first thing. It doesn't matter if it's clothes or bags. Maybe also how it is made, because these are beautiful products and I really think more people will be interested to know more about the production process.

So, yeah, more information about the specific thing and maybe more real pictures I mean by real pictures… By real pictures I mean not photos from reviews and… fashion shows but real women wearing them. Maybe something like that. They will look more… how to say… more real!

(PBG6, female, 30)

Such views implied that studied customers were not simply interested in the fashion garments per se. Interviewees were eager to learn about the people and work involved in the design of their favorite brands. This required revealing part of the craftsmanship inlaid in the production process. Hence, findings indicated that emphasis on authenticity was the key to spark an interest in participants, make them feel more connected and boost customer engagement. Additionally, the example pointed to another key finding. That was, participants did not want to see only the pretty faces of the paid models hired to promote the brands and drive store visits. Instead, they wanted to see **real people**. As explained by one customer:

[…] I think most people would like to know how real is the brand and to see real people wearing those clothes, how they really look: without Photoshop, without the extra effects and the flashes, just the real thing! And this is what is missing I think on Social Media […] real photos, real people, even if they are models to be like in… real environment, not photoshopped because we can all do that with filter in these times […]

(PBG19, female, 28)

Importantly, these were also participants who admitted that their loyalty cannot be affected by celebrities. Combined, these findings implied that by presenting more real faces, this would increase the chances that participants feel a sense of connection to the person from the picture, hence, increasing the chances for heightened sense of brand attachment to LFBs. In other words, the more personal participants feel the brand, the higher prospects for SM role in boosting brand loyalty.

As of the latter segment (***preference for online approach)*** interviewees justified their emphasis on **content that differed from the traditional advertorial character**. The main argument was that the conventional advertisement approach did not match the luxury profile. In the minds of those studied, the appealing aspect of brand content rested mainly in the opportunity to learn more about the brands' image, history and culture. Interviewees referred to such SM activities as a unique prospect to "experience the brand" and see the "history behind the product". Participants repeatedly mentioned the value of creative brand content and how brands "can do more" to engage customers. Their testimonials revealed an interesting perspective about how SM can be successfully

utilized for increasing LFCs' purchase desires of those studied whilst keeping part of the enigmatic brand identities. Participants' perspectives of creativity revolved around having a SM-marketing concept that capitalizes on SM viral nature, and engages customers' attention, but at the same time brands do not become "an open book" for all customers and there are few lucky ones to experience the brand. Creative brand content appeared as common aspect that attracted interviewees' attention and boosted the sense of brand loyalty because it triggered customers' "desire to buy" and "want more" luxury fashion purchases. Participants' views illuminated essential premises about the value of SM for communicating brands' images in a manner that matches customers' need to feel engaged whilst LFBs do not deviate from their core concept of exclusiveness. As the excerpt quotes in the following table indicate:

Table 6:11 Examples attesting to creative brand content

[…] that will make people look for them, make them starving [uhm] Let's say, more teasing campaigns that just… reveal a tiny part of… of the whole and to make the… to make the public look by themselves for the details (PBG16, female, 34) *From its content marketing! How creative is their… their marketing overall! How interactive it is. How that affects you in order to engage you more and more in their social media!* (GR19, male, 27) *[…] the way that they tried to build [uhm] to build a history behind the product, for example as some companies present their history with short videos or what I told you before with the photos […]* (PGR2, female, 33)

Building on the presented examples, findings implied that whilst participants appraised LFBs' efforts to respond to the new trends in the marketing domain caused by the rise of SM, interviewees' perspective of "creativity" revolved around being present on SM networks whilst keeping part of the mystery. Their responses indicated a belief that brands should step outside their comfort zones and put efforts into encouraging customer engagement. In the eyes of those studied, this required a change in the mindset of brands, coming closer to customers, through the relevant SM channels. Additionally, customers endorsed their positive attitudes toward brands' strategy to embrace SM as a space where they can **communicate their activities related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).** This was mostly related to contributions to the environment and charity activities. Prominent examples are presented in the following table:

Table 6:12 Examples attesting to promotion Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities on Social Media

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[...] the environmentally friendly things, I'm really into that! So, many brands do that [uhm] yeah, stuff like that, I really like these things [uhm] So, I'm always liking what they do. And usually when it pops-up in my online feed I will go to their online shop and see what's new! So, this is what keeps my attention mostly. Their campaigns and their actions, not everyone but many companies do that towards the environment. I really like that!

(PGR18, female, 27)

[...] for example, if I can tell you for Armani one thing that keeps my attention and makes me prefer the brand for the last years, makes me very happy is that they stopped using real leather for their clothes! So... that makes me very happy and makes me prefer them more! [...] when I read it on Social Media, that made me happy that a brand that I like is also.... Also cares for the animals because I am a big animal lover and I also donate money to different non-profit organizations, etcetera. So, yeah, this is how Social Media helped me... but this is for Armani, I don't know for the other brands

(PGR10, male, 29)

I'm sure all of these brands are making charities and something... charity is a good way to make people buy from you! If they say for example "This T-shirt costs 500 bucks and half of the money is going to... poor kids or... cancer fighting or... whatever" Probably this will make me buy it! [...] Commercials, initiatives as well, like the charity thing [...]

(PBG22, male, 27)

On one side, such sentiments could be explained with the fact that these customers were earlier identified as brand loyal. Hence, their loyalty encouraged them to use SM as a tool for learning more about their favorite brands' activities. On the other hand, findings can be endorsed to participants' personal attitudes towards environmental causes. Sharing that they "like that" and it makes them "happy" because of their "personality" and their love for animals implies that CSR activities were perceived on a personal level. Seeing that their favorite companies took actions for environmental causes simply elevated brand image and for some, was a promise for brand loyalty in the long-term. However, the notion of how truly passionate brands were towards CSR activities, or it was simply a marketing trick, was outside the scope of participants' responses. Thus, it is suggested that it was participants' brand loyalty, which nourished their interests and admiration towards CSR activities. SM were simply the cherry on the pie, helping to increase brand awareness and make these customers even more devoted to their favorite LFBs. The latter statement found support in participants' emphasis on CSR as a factor that defined their positive attitudes toward SM-brand activities, long-term interests in SM-brands' activities, which for some also contributed to their brand loyalty. Consequently, although the research findings do not include enough data to support a major contribution, to the

best of researcher's knowledge this was the first exploratory investigation to build the path toward understanding the value of communicating CSR activities via SM for boosting brands' images among Gen Y LFCs in SEE.

In addition, interviewees' whose responses shaped the theme about creative brand content were both male and female luxury fashion customers. Acknowledging the sample limitation, this was an indication that for LFCs of those interviewed creativity in SM-brand content was a focal point in presenting the brands' images in a way that engages the consumer. This was reflected in responses emphasizing on the ability to engage customers whilst also keeping part of the mystery, revealing part of the work process, showing more real people, and communicating CSR activities. Whilst in some instances, participants' loyalty existed before the brand adopted SM for their marketing, the discussion was indicative for the value of flawless transition of brand image in SM settings in a way that becomes synonymous to creativity in interviewees' minds and encourages customer engagement. Consequently, the latter discussion leads to interviewees' brand loyalty as a main trigger for their interests in LFBs' marketing activities on SM platforms.

Brand loyalty as a trigger that defines interest in brand content

Interviewees demonstrated appreciation and respect toward the creativity that stands behind the glamorous brands. By honoring the work of fashion designers, participants acknowledged how much effort is put to develop masterpieces in a manner that resonates with the core brand identity. As contextualized by customers' views presented in the table:

Table 6:13 Examples attesting to brand loyalty as a trigger that defines interest in brand content

[…] I like seeing those things because you see the creativeness of the human being. Let's see it from this perspective as well. I mean, not only the musicians and the actors are people who really can do something. They are not the only artists in the world. Because being [uhm] a designer, being a successful fashion designer is very important thing […] So, if I stop following some of those people maybe I'm not gonna be buying anymore their products. How…how can I stay loyal if I don't know what's going on….and if I don't see the new development that they have
(PBG11, female, 33)
Because [uhm] it's about loyalty! It's about… my favorite brands that are in my mind are higher than the others. So, this is the reason […]
(PGR8, male, 31)

> *Because I want to be updated of the… news about that brands I am loyal to and everything that happens!*
>
> (PR17, male, 36)

As demonstrated, it was notable that LFBs which are traditionally exclusive found a successful strategy that speaks in customers' voice. This boosted participants' curiosity to learn more about their cherished brands and the thoughtfulness that goes behind product craftsmanship. This presented an interesting insight, indicating that a segment of interviewees put efforts into maintaining their loyalty. It is an indication how in customers' minds their brand loyalty was the result of significant devotion that goes beyond simple re-purchase behavior, to the extent of demonstrating support by passionately following their favorite LFBs on different SM networks. Additionally, in most of their part interviewees who justified their interests in the LFBs' activities on SM with their brand loyalty were males. In this vein, the discussion about perceived quality, brand love, and satisfaction from previous purchase experiences, demonstrated that satisfaction from the quality of luxury fashion products was a chief reason contributing to the loyalty of studied male LFCs. Consequently, combined these findings imply that the male interviewees who were satisfied from their purchases and experienced a sense of brand loyalty were also eager to follow their favorite brands on SM platforms. Finally, participants also highlighted that brands should be considerate of not crossing the line between interesting and informative content to being perceived as "annoying". Having this in mind, the analysis uncovered that there was also a segment of customers who were very clear about their choices not to follow LFBs' SM activities because of perceived spam.

Brands' posts perceived as spam

Key words: *clean newsfeed, spam, annoying, aggressive, not interested*

First, in these eyes of these interviewees, any brands' SM posts or other online activities were perceived as spam. They explained their perspectives by outlining that they wanted to **keep their newsfeeds clean**. A main concern was that LFBs were so active in their posts that they become aggressive in their SM activities, which at some point irritated participants because their newsfeeds were flooded with information. As presented by the following participants' responses:

Table 6:14 Examples attesting to brands' posts perceived as spam

> *[…] It was too much spam on my…. newsfeed. If you follow ten of them then you cannot see what your friends are doing! How are they!*
>
> (GR1, female, 28)
>
> […] *If it's something that is not annoying! I mean that there is stuff that are so annoying because they want so much to see them, you to see to them, so they may become annoying […]*
>
> (PGR16, female, 36)

As uncovered, participants used SM tools for different purposes rather than following LFBs' online activities. In most of their part, these were customers who preferred to visit brands' websites. Their idea was that websites offered a clean and simple view of products and collections. This allowed participants to compare different products, without being overwhelmed with a surplus information. This implied that for the studied sample of LFCs the pristine exclusive image should be maintained even in a world governed by digital connectedness and vast amount of information, which "forces" the belief that SM is the key to brand success and customer retention. In other words, the main implication is that knowing the essence of what luxury stands for, these customers did not need additional incentives in order to entice to their purchase desires and maintain their brand loyalty.

Further, others admitted that they did not experience such a passion that would trigger them to actively follow LFBs on SM. Importantly, these customers perceived **following LFBs' on SM as a form of burden**. This was evident by confessions demonstrating that participants turned to SM only in their free time and preferred to advice with bloggers or websites. An accompanying reason for the lack of interest in SM brands' posts referred ***reliance on personal consumer needs and purchase instincts.*** These participants did not follow LFBs on SM. They did not understand the value of following brands on SM, as they already had a mind map designed in their minds. As articulated by participants:

Table 6:15 Examples attesting to reliance on personal consumer needs and purchase instincts

> *I'm just not interested in it enough to have it on my newsfeed all the time. So, only when I'm like… you know, I have some free time and then I just to… see [uhm] like browse fashion bloggers on Instagram or I can check their website […]*
>
> (PR2, female, 27)
>
> *[…] when I need something, like for example T-shirt, I will go to the store and find something that fits me […] I need something, I go to the mall or the store. I need a T-*

> *shirt, I'm going in, I'm looking for…looking at 2,3,4 T-shirts and I'm picking just one of it and go!*
>
> (PBG22, male, 27)

As the presented excerpt quotes suggested, rather than being bombarded by online posts, interviewees were resolute in their convictions of the value of personal purchase needs and instincts. Customers' responses exemplified signs of brand loyalty. Although they did not follow LFBs on SM, they were very accurate and persistent in their purchase choices. Besides, the fact that they stick to particular LFBs could be simply because they know that when they visit a particular store, they would be able to find their desired product in a quick and efficient manner. The discussion demonstrated that for part of the interviewees, brands' SM activities were perceived as spam, for which some of them preferred to rely on their own consumer needs and instincts. These findings can also be attributed to participants' preference for the offline approach towards the development of brand loyalty. Hence, it is suggested that in their eyes, following brands on SM could not contribute for customer engagement, let alone brand loyalty. Equally important was the fact that this segment included both interviewees who were loyal to LFBs and participants who did not express feelings of brand loyalty. This implied that participants did not need to be constantly exposed to SM marketing of LFBs in order to evoke a purchase desire or to maintain their brand loyalty.

Importantly, the segment of customers who perceived SM LFBs' posts as spam were mostly female interviewees. This imposed interesting findings especially in light of suggestions that some male customers expressed believes that females were more likely to explore the advantages of SM for obtaining brand information. As stated by one participant: *"[…] just because everyone is using Instagram especially in our age, the application is easy to it and I don't know, everyone is in love with Instagram, I don't know what's happening! Especially women! I think it's addictive! It's pure addiction!"* (PGR17, male, 28). By contrast, findings indicated that part of the female LFCs of those studied, challenged the conventional perception of females' consumer behavior and "addiction" with SM platforms. This was reflected in the perception of SM posts of LFBs as spam, which also has implications for the value of maintaining the image of brand exclusivity. However, the empirics revealed that there was still a way to capture and retain the attention of this demanding consumer segment. As the latter example in the table signified, that could be achieved via personalized communication.

Key words: *tailored communication, tailored offers, direct communication, emotions, special approach, special offers*

Before presenting findings, it was important to highlight that this theme constituted mainly the views of participants who followed LFBs on SM platforms. Personalized communication was revealed as a vital factor which kept participants' interests in SM posts and was also cited as the trigger that could possibly trigger interviewees' curiosity in SM-marketing and communication initiatives. That is, irrespective of interviewees' preferences for the offline approach toward nourishing brand loyalty. Henceforth, it could be speculated that studied customers' positive attitudes toward personalized communication originated from participants' expectation toward brands to upgrade customer engagement toward an approach that aims to engage customers on a more personal level.

Further, although constituting a minority, the value of personalized communication also emerged across the segment of interviewees who did not follow LFBs on SM networks. For this segment of interviewees brand content was not sufficient enough to trigger participants' interests in SM brand activities. Interviewees did not perceive value in simply being among the millions, or perhaps billions of customers, who were passionately following SM brand activities. However, the analysis of individual interviewees uncovered that LFCs from this segment appreciated brands' initiatives based on personalized communication. This means that although evidently practicing disinterest in SM-brand content, the appeal of personalized communication had strong behavioral implications on the mindset of those studied, evident in their favorable attitudes toward personalized customer communication.

A noticeable pattern that emerged across interviewees' responses revolved around **attention, personalized communication and the idea of transferring the offline service experience in online settings.** Insights from interviews demonstrated that online communication should not be treated as a universal approach for all customers. Participants vocalized that in order to nurture brand loyalty, LFBs should dedicate efforts in delivering personalized customer experiences. In participants' perspectives, this involved a great deal of sensitivity to the particular needs of each individual customer. Such communication activities should entail tailor-made offers, ads or any other brand/

product information adapted to their specific interests, tastes and needs. The key idea was that such purchases were perceived as "an emotional thing" (PBG9, male, 30). As explained by one interviewee:

[…] it's very important how they manage and how they know to… to keep you as a loyal customer! Because [uhm] this is very important, you know. In each business from my point of view, is very important to focus on… on loyalty! So… here it depends [uhm] on their sales' actions [uhm] I don't know, how they approach you. If they are very nice and have a good database [uhm] and they are sending [uhm] gift birthday card […] It's very important! Because luxury brands in general they know that [uhm] they need to work with the emotion. And if they catch you in terms of emotion, you are a loyal customer! For life!

(PR5, female, 35)

Personalized communication was the core stone for developing a meaningful connection to the brand. Whether that concerned tailored product/ fashion suggestions or relevant information based on previous purchases, personal styles, general brand updates or event invitations, the underlining notion was that these customers wanted to see messages specifically designed for them. Consequently, brands' initiatives, which successfully engage customers on an emotional level had the sublime power to boost studied customers' sense of attachment and make interviewees feel "closer to the brand" (PGR3, male, 28). The key implication was that Gen Y LFCs of those interviewed appreciated when brands put additional efforts to ensure customer indulgence. In other words, participants need to be shown appreciation for their brand devotion and loyalty. The effect of brand activities that follow such customer-communication strategies reflected the massive impact on customers' emotional stimuli, which in effect could contribute to heightened sense of brand attachment and subsequent loyalty. Additionally, a unifying element among these customers was the preference for the development of offline brand relationships. Thus, on one hand, such views highlighted the importance of previous experience and customer satisfaction discussed previously. On the other hand, it also reflected that personalized communication could be a valuable marketing move for LFBs looking to capitalize on SM for attracting and retaining customers through different means other than brand content.

Further, a value for interviewees was exposure to **tailor-made communication** that made them feel special, unique and pampered. As the examples in the following table demonstrate:

Table 6:16 Examples attesting to tailor-made communication on Social Media

> *[…] Maybe if I see something interesting for me. For example, if I am interested in jeans, pure blue jeans and to see exactly what I need and of course to understand everything related to this […] When I have interest in jeans, or shirts, or suits, to receive information only about these: new models, discount, some special offer, something like this […]like some kind of e-mails, or some kind of messages, which are tailored personally to me. Not general. Maybe like this I can consider online communication […]*
>
> **(**PBG10, male, 35)
>
> *[…] All the newsletters, all the events they do… they organize parties or [uhm] closed events for particular customers, they invite you or you can receive special offers on these brands [uhm] And also the… the idea of something more… they pay more attention I mean to the customer! […] These are…. these are things that I like more! These are the things that I'm following! And they make me more… you know, I'm coming closer to the brand in a way! […]*
>
> (PGR3, male, 28)

Following the examples, albeit with the limitations of a qualitative research, it could be speculated that the personal (human) touch of in-store experience was the main trigger for the development of brand loyalty for this segment of studied Gen Y LFCs. This is an important revelation, implying that the sense of brand loyalty originated from interviewees' loyalty bestowed on the shop assistants at the store. Therefore, the task ahead of LFBs is to find a way to respond to the needs of this segment, by mastering the art of transferring the exceptional in-store service in the digital universe to ensure delightful online communication experiences.

More so, participants voiced that they would appreciate the opportunity for **direct online brand interactions**. For instance:

People should be able to send messages at least for a specific brand or a specific shop or something like that, that offers those luxury brands. And [uhm] they should have faster communication with their clients […] They should be prepared technically. They should be prepared with people just to give the client a feedback, really good, really fast. I think that's important because you are running a luxury brand. You should have quality in services. Not only in the store. Everywhere. […]

(PBG4, male, 27)

According to participants, direct customer-brand communication implied exceptional handling of online customer interactions. In effect, when LFBs utilize SM to handle customer issues, requests and questions in a way that studied Gen Y LFCs have delightful online experiences, this could strengthen customer engagement. This finding advanced the importance of the personal aspect for interviewed Gen Y LFCs, based on the affirmative contribution of the need for one-to-one communication as a basis for the development of brand loyalty.

In addition, interviewees who spoke about personalized communication via SM included LFCs from both genders. This means that LFCs need to feel that brands put additional efforts in order to attract and retain consumers' attention and brand loyalty. In other words, recognizing the sample limitations, the study filled a gap in academic knowledge regarding SEE by showing that Gen Y LFCs in SEE need to feel cherished and appraised on a personal level appeared to be a uniform consumer characteristic among what conventional wisdom suggests that each gender has different consumption habits. Finally, in the context of personalized communication, interviewees also shared that if they receive special discounts this could significantly influence their purchase behavior.

Discounts: a magic tool

Key words: ***tailor-made discounts for loyal customers, personal touch***

This theme emerged among interviewees who were loyal to LFBs and also followed LFBs on different SM platforms. Importantly, the majority of them preferred the offline approach toward the development of building brand loyalty. Therefore, it could be postulated that whilst LFCs' loyalty of those studied triggered their interest in following brands' SM activities, participants also anticipated that brands would recognize their devotion and be proactive by approaching customers online with personalized discounts. The main aspects which emerged across respondents' views referred to receiving personalized mails containing tailor-made discounts for loyal customers, whilst a minority of the interviewees also highlighted that newsletter could not be personalized. For them (the latter segment), it was enough that they had the opportunity to be informed about brands' offerings.

As of the former segment, all of them favored brand relationships developed at the traditional retail format. Besides, findings demonstrated that the opportunity to purchase their favorite LFBs at a fraction of the cost could modify their perceptions toward the idea of online brand communication. For instance: one customer explained:

[…] if they engage me in a certain way. Let's say "we are having a discount on this collection and because you have been previously a customer of ours, we are going to take you 10% off". So, this is going to make you think "This watch is getting really old now, so probably I should buy a new one, I can probably afford one […]

(PBG9, male, 30)

Participants shared that the LFBs which use SM as a medium to approach customers with personal offers would benefit because in interviewees' eyes this was "much more

effective", making studied customers feel cherished which also could foster customer engagement because they received "the attention you want as a consumer!" (PGR18, female, 27). Importantly, this was a shared view amongst the segment who expressed preferences for the offline approach toward building brand loyalty. Herein, mindful of the sample limitations, the empirics helped to fill a gap in academic knowledge about the impact of SM on Gen Y's mindset toward the idea of building brand loyalty toward LFBs. Furthermore, as previously outlined, there was also a minority of participants who were positive toward the opportunity to use SM as a medium for nourishing brand loyalty. They testified that receiving mails with information about price reductions was a communication approach that kept them alert of brands' SM activities. For instance:

[…] You can do campaigns; you can make discounts or… send codes that you might have for example 20% discount […]

(PGR17, male, 28)

However, the difference in their views was that they did not expect LFBs to personalize the newsletters based on previous purchases. Moreover, they did not express the need to be acknowledged on a personal level for their brand loyalty. On one hand, these findings could be attributed to the notion that participants' loyalty was the outcome of other reasons other than financial incentives. In this context, discounts emerged as a marketing strategy that would attract and keep participants' interests in SM communication initiatives. However, when it comes to SM role for boosting brand loyalty, price reductions were not outlined as having a part in contributing to customers' brand loyalty of those studied. On the other hand, it could also be suggested that receiving information about price reductions was an ample purchase motive, making interviewees think about future purchase opportunities from the specific brands.

So far, the discussion indicated that the opportunity to purchase their favorite LFBs at a lower cost (whether that refers to personalized discounts or general discount information) played a significant role in making customers responsive toward online communication initiatives on brands' behalf. It could be speculated that the economic crisis made interviewees more sensitive toward price offerings. An additional evidence for this statement was that participants spoke about the value of newsletters and personalized mails in the context of SM role for attracting and retaining customers whose customer behavior could be affected by the economic crisis.

Further, participants' views about the aspects that could attract and keep their attention in SM-brands' marketing and communication activities overlapped. These referred to personalized mails and informative newsletters. As of the former, for the majority of studied customers this entailed receiving mails with personalized discounts, based on their loyalty and past purchase behavior. In customers' eyes, this would make them feel acknowledged on a personal level because of their loyalty regardless of possible financial difficulties due to the economic crisis. As presented by the following excerpt quotes:

Table 6:17 Examples attesting to personalized communication in the context of the past economic crisis

[…] give a small, special discount every now and then […] even if it's an economic crisis and you kind of can't afford too much of it, if you still… if you want something, if you still want it and then they keep at… they keep engaged, back to what I was saying earlier (simple things like reminders on your birthdays, discounts here and there) I think they can manage to retain me as a loyal customer […] bottom line is the personal touch that these brands should focus on to… to keep the customer!   (PR1, female, 27)   *[…] if I see that the brands are interacting with me, with… me as a customer and understand my… situation nowadays, maybe I will be more loyal to them. I mean… if they… It's like a friendship […] I would… summarize it in one sentence. When my incomes are low, if I feel that the brand, I love… supports me in that difficult situation, by putting down the prices, I would appreciate that later when I have higher incomes.*   (PBG17, male, 29)

As demonstrated, the key point outlined by interviewees was that they did not always have disposable incomes for luxury fashion purchases. This was also reflected in responses that in some cases interviewees preferred to wait until the price drops. In effect, from theoretical implication aspect, this implied that brands that demonstrate compassion to customers' financial situations and brand loyalty by personalizing discount offers have the chance to secure customers' loyalty of those studied for a lifetime. Moreover, the "personalized" aspect of receiving discounts indicated that there is an emotional aspect attached to the opportunity to save from luxury fashion purchases. Thus, the findings provided an evidence that the personal satisfaction from receiving tailor-made discounts could leverage the emotional attachment to LFBs, based on the perception that their loyalty has been granted with recognition.

As of the latter segment, discounts as a unified marketing strategy appeared as an important aspect in the context of the past economic crisis. As one interviewee stated:

[…] they can keep people posted on what is happening behind the scenes and what is something new they will come up with and of course in times of crisis discounts always are a magic tool!

(PR12, male, 32)

Such views were mostly shared in the context of SM impact on attracting LFCs, minding the economic crisis' effects. Herein, it could be suggested that the accessible nature of the digital universe inclined participants to believe that SM platforms could be successfully employed to make LFBs accessible for wider consumer segments. However, it has to be acknowledged that such marketing strategies might not work for all LFBs. Significant price reductions and promotional activities via SM would be more suitable for brands from the fast fashion segment. Nevertheless, the impact of the economic crisis cannot be ignored. Therefore, it could be suggested that such a strategy (unified marketing focusing on discounts) might be more appropriate for the segment of affordable LFBs. From a theoretical implication aspect, the empirics suggested that studied Gen Y LFCs are cost cautious, as also reflected in the context of the economic crisis.

Additionally, the majority of participants who emphasized on discounts were males. In this context, the analysis about gender differences in the choices of buying experiences (online versus offline) demonstrated that male LFCs were more price sensitive as opposed to female LFCs of those studied. Likewise, the theoretical relevance of the study also stemmed from the fact that it highlighted that is was the first to empirically demonstrate that the price-sensitivity of studied male customers also shaped their consumer mentality toward the perceived value of receiving discounts (both personalized and as part of a uniform SM-marketing strategy).

Further, the opportunity to receive discounts was acknowledged by interviewees from the three countries that took part in the research. In this vein, the discussion about the economic crisis illustrated how LFCs were influenced by the 2008 financial collapse. Whilst the analysis of individual interviews demonstrated differences on a regional level, it would appear that the opportunity to receive discounts was equally appealing for studied LFCs on a regional level. This means that although some of the interviewed LFCs might cope better with the consequences of the economic crisis (for example Romania versus Greece), this did not imply that discounts were not appreciated. Rather, all participants from this segment, regardless of their financial positions, would still embrace the opportunity to acquire LFBs at a discounted price. Finally, whilst personalized

communication emerged as a crucial indicator for interviewees, another portion of them did not share such positive attitudes, expressing a perception of fake behavior on brands' behalf.

Fake brand behavior

Key words: *not a true relationship, customer feedback, negative feedback, useful newsletters*

This category emerged amongst loyal followers who preferred the offline approach toward developing brand loyalty. Consequently, it could be postulated that their preferences for the offline approach might be the result of previous disappointment based on perceived mismatch between brands' activities and LFBs' true intentions. In other words, since participants' loyalty also transferred in the digital universe (by following brands), they expected that LFBs would behave accordingly. Failure to do so shaped interviewees' negative perception of fake brand behavior.

These customers reasoned that the personal customer care brands try to reinforce as part of their image was pompous and **did not match the reality**. A vivid example of this stance was captured in the following response:

[…] the survey they ask you to do after purchasing something and the newsletter on my mail and on social media I see that they don't really do something that gives you this… attention on social media but [uhm] I don't think they do something specific on social media to be honest! This is not a true relationship! But through e-mail and I get many newsletters that I do read, and I do find helpful for my purchases, when I'm about to buy something. Uhm, also like I said, attractive campaigns, for example when I see [uhm] for example, Instagram stories from their runways and their shows [uhm] the really frequent updates on what they are doing

(PGR18, female, 27)

In the minds of those studied, the activities of LFBs could not qualify as customer care. Interviewees testified that under this activity, brands' purpose was to leave customers with the impression that their opinion was valuable. In participants' eyes such behavior did match the concept of "true relationship". Such views also indicated that LFCs need to feel their opinion was taken into consideration and cherished by brands. Failure to do so left interviewees with negative attitudes toward the truthfulness of brands' true intentions. In effect, this might flop the possibility to initiate, let alone, develop long-term brand loyalty. Within the context of the research, such responses supplied implications

for the way LFBs utilize customer surveys and feedback in order to obtain comprehensive understanding of customers' needs.

However, an additional outlook of participants' responses uncovered that interviewees were open toward brands' efforts which reflect brands' honesty. According to interviewees, this could be achieved by **posting customers' feedback on SM platforms**. For instance:

[…] I'm a big fan when a luxury brand is posting also the bad [uhm] experiences that a customer had with them! You know, because most of them are deleting from Facebook if [uhm] a bad experience is shared, there, you know! So… I really like when somebody has these guts, you know, to leave it there and try to solve it! […]

(PR5, female, 35)

Whilst LFBs stand for quality, each customer has their own purchase triggers, needs, preferences and style. The key idea was that brands cannot satisfy the needs of all customers. Therefore, they should be ready to accept and share the negative ones as well. In this context, SM open nature allows customers to exchange brand experiences. Thus, brands should not be ignorant toward the impact of customer-to-customer communication and act in a proactive manner by demonstrating integrity in their SM marketing activities. Overall, the findings helped to further our understanding of Gen Y's perceptions toward SM activities of LFBs on a regional level. To the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to uncover Gen Y's mindset about LFBs' SM activities as "fake", which also has important implications for brands looking forward to capitalize on this market in SEE. Importantly, the majority of customers who expressed concerns of fake brand behavior were females. Mindful of the sample limitations, this finding implied that female consumers have the tendency to question the true intentions of LFBs to use SM for customer engagement and the development of brand loyalty. Theoretically, findings revealed that a typical narrative for females' attitudes toward SM-brand activities was that they judge online brand performance based on aspects of integrity and honesty in brands' SM behavior. In this context, in no way was the gender of participants more evident than in the findings demonstrating females' role as brand ambassadors on SM networks.

There were also interviewees who demonstrated a behavior of brand ambassadors. This was reflected in their behavioral patterns of sharing brand content on SM platforms. Even though this segment constituted a mixture of loyal and non-loyal customers, it was noticeable that interviewees would be ready to further the popularization of brands' SM content by sharing it with their online audiences. However, a detailed outlook of participants' online behavior provided a justification for this odd situation of their behavior (non-loyal customers sharing brand content). Precisely, this segment of customers shared mostly **brand content**, including different collections or products. They did not share brand content on a regular basis, but simply when they came across an information, which they found interesting. As explained by one participant:

[...] for example, when they... most of these [uhm] post their new fashion collections and everything and if I see something I really, really like then yeah, I will definitely share as well. But it's quite rarely actually. I don't do it that often!

(PR1, female, 27)

Findings implied that they did not maintain constant interest in the SM marketing activities of LFBs. Rather, the participants' curiosity was triggered in situations when they saw a different fashion item/ collection that matched their own styles and fashion preferences. Nevertheless, it was notable to find that even non-loyal customers would promptly act in favor of increasing brand awareness. Albeit with the sample limitation, findings highlighted the value of SM for LFBs, as a means through which even non-loyal Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region would adopt a behavior of brand loyalists.

As of brand loyalists, an outstanding finding referred to the nexus that these interviewees established between **sharing their personal brand experiences on SM** platforms and brand loyalty. Acknowledging the small portion of customers who confessed this view (only five), it appeared that SM played an equally significant role in boosting the sense of brand loyalty toward LFBS amongst interviewees. The value of sharing brand experiences was explained with the opportunity to maintain the special feeling for longer period of time, often related to the chance of re-experiencing it again. As rationalized by one customer:

[…] it can help you for them to last longer […] just when you scroll the pictures back and you see the happy moments that you have taken them on and the comments that you have posted, like hash tagging, just it keeps… the Social Media helps you keeping it alive, just keeping the feeling alive, yeah! […]

(PBG11, female, 33)

It could be speculated that since SM allowed participants to re-live their positive experiences, by connecting the experience with the fashion item/ brand, this would eventually boost interviewees' sense of brand attachment, which in effect could also be a sign for increased brand loyalty (depending on whether the customer was loyal beforehand). Thus, it would appear that the available and accessible nature of SM was the reason that participants acknowledged its role for boosting their emotional brand attachment. Additionally, participants who testified such views were in the segment of loyal customers who followed LFBs on SM. Herein, following brands on SM could also have an impact on the purchase triggers of this segment of interviewed LFCs. This statement is based on additional observation that interviewees were interested in informative brand content (collections/ style ideas/ fashion trends). Consequently, it is suggested that being exposed to brands' posts influenced the interviewees' purchase desires because exposure to brand content could evoke memories of sharing personal brand experiences on SM platforms. Therefore, SM had an important role in maintaining brand loyalty by constantly "reminding" consumers of those studied how the purchase and share of LFBs made them feel. Finally, apart from customers' role as brand ambassadors on SM, the findings revealed that celebrities and bloggers also have a fundamental role in triggering participants' interests in LFBs.

Celebrities as the new fashion influencers

Key words: important, good, unique, catch the trend, Millennials, trends, fashionable

Celebrities appeared as an important factor defining participants' purchase desires and raising brand awareness. The theme also emerged to be of significant importance not only for keeping participants' ongoing interest in SM marketing activities of LFBs, but also as an incentive sparking a sense of brand attachment and driving positive attitudes toward SM marketing activities of LFBs. It was a predominant theme amongst the segment of customers who followed LBs on SM and were also brand loyal. On one hand, this seemed an organic fit because this consumer group demonstrated interests in different SM marketing activities of LFBs. On the other hand, as the preceding discussion

demonstrates, findings highlighted the influential role of celebrities for nourishing interviewees' interest in SM marketing activities of LFBs.

Participants admitted that celebrities made them desire, search and even purchase LFBs or fashion items which they were previously not aware of. In this vein, the empirics revealed the role of celebrities as trend setters. This emerged across participants' views that signified the role of brand content for obtaining updates about fashion trends and celebrities as mediators for maintaining brand loyalty via SM. As the examples in the following table illustrate:

Table 6:18 Views about celebrities' as fashion influencers

I think the most important part of it is the appearance of…. popular people wearing their products [...] I have the suit of Messy or…Cristiano Ronaldo for example for Dsquared, for example I wanna be like him or I want to have the same suit or something like that. So, probably the appearance of stars on Social Media is really important (PBG14, male, 29)
[…] You learn brands from famous people! Because you follow… that's why Media is amazing! Following famous people, they wear something very nice, you are interested what is this, you check the tags [...] you are thinking to buy as well (PGR9, male, 34)

As demonstrated, interviewees acknowledged that celebrity endorsement was a valuable marketing strategy. According to participants, employing SM would be the best choice of a platform to disseminate brands' collaborations to attract young customers and raise awareness about new collections and designs. More so, interviewed customers spoke about their interests in obtaining insights on fashion trends by also establishing a nexus to the role of SM for nourishing their sense of brand attachment by presenting the lavish looks of celebrities. Herein, it could be speculated that the perception of these customers was that if they dress with the same fashion items/ brands as celebrities, they would be fashionable. Hence, for interviewees, celebrities had the image of fashion gurus, whose style once copied would make customers feel closer to their idealized identities. This generated an important about celebrities' powerful effect on participants' consumer behaviour. Specifically, the empirics demonstrated that through the purchase of LFBs studied LFCs would achieve the sublime goal of being unique as their cherished celebrities.

Additionally, in most of their part, interviewees who spoke about the impact of being exposed on celebrities (including brand collaborations) on SM platforms were males. In this vein, the analysis of individual interviews uncovered that male LFCs were also more incline to be affected by celebrities in case interviewees favoured the image of the particular famous person. Henceforth, combined findings implied that male LFCs who took part in the research were more incline to aspire to famous people. Consequently, this also imposed important implications about their consumption behavior, mirrored in the desire and purchase of the same luxury fashion brands/ items. Consequently, from theoretical implication aspect, it can be suggested that the purchase of LFBs helped to feed male interviewees' vision of idealized identity that is closer to the personality (celebrity image) they aspired to. Thus, by joining forces with famous faces that resonate with customers' idealized personalities of those studied is a promise for securing increased purchase desire and customer engagement from LFCs of those who took part in the research. Finally, bloggers also emerged as an influential source that affected interviewees' purchase triggers, which could also have possible implications for the development of customer-brand relationships. The main reason for introducing this theme in the section about SM was that bloggers' existence would have not been possible without SM proliferation.

Bloggers: the new fashion leaders

Key words: *fashion trends, style ideas, fashion icons, bloggers, purchase desire*

Importantly, the theme appeared predominantly across the segment of interviews who shared that they follow LFBs on SM. Being on the rise of SM upheaval, these fashion influencers seem to have captured the attention of studied Gen Y LFCs, influencing their consumer behavior. Findings revealed that bloggers had a significant impact on interviewees' purchase triggers. Most often, this was the result of SM exposure or interviewees' interest in obtaining insights about fashion trends and style ideas. Essentially, participants justified their views with the explanation that being exposed to bloggers' posts triggered a purchase desire. The main idea was that the visual allure of bloggers' images provoked these customers' desire to buy from the same brand. As attested by one customer:

[...] If you check every day Social Media you can see fashion icons or… fashion bloggers. You think that they are nice and they… put you in a way to think about shopping a luxury brand or something [...]

(PGR6, female, 28)

Acknowledging other similar views, empirics uncovered an important aspect. That is, mindful of the sample limitations, the investigation demonstrated that SM has become an inherent part in Gen Y's lives of LFCs from SEE. They used different SM platforms as a benchmark for obtaining fashion information on a daily basis. Subsequently, bloggers appeared as the ultimate fashion leaders, who made interviewees desire LFBs. In this context, customers also provided insightful perspectives on the value of bloggers for leveraging brands' SM presence without compromising brands' exclusive images. Precisely, the strategy of working with fashion influencers was well-recognized as invaluable for "brands to spread out" and "promoting brands". Herein, it would appear that bloggers played a vast role in triggering participants' interests in the possibility for transferring brand loyalty in the digital world. An evidence for this statement is the following example:

[...] keeping the content relevant and keeping themselves present on social media, not only on their accounts, but... they need to spread out cause people don't just follow brands. They follow... I don't know, fashion bloggers, they follow celebrities, they follow multi-brand stores, they follow magazines. So, that's the way they would reach out to me online! [...]

(PR11, female, 29)

As it would appear, bloggers' influence stretched beyond boosting participants' desires for luxury fashion brands, but it might as well spark the light of brand loyalty among traditionally non-loyal participants. Importantly, most of the participants who recognized bloggers' influence were brand loyal. Overall, the segment who talked about bloggers' influence were positive toward SM influential role for the development of brand loyalty. On one hand, findings might be indicative for bloggers' behavioral impact on those studied to the extent that by following influencers' posts (or posted brands' collaborations) impacted participants' purchase desires and reflected in increased customer engagement on different SM platforms. On the other hand, the empirics might be an indication that interviewees would be more interested in bloggers' posts *per se* rather than making an association with the brands. In effect, it could be speculated that in participants' minds the online relationships referred to customer-blogger (one-to-one) sense of attachment. Whilst these speculations might require further investigation, the originality of the research lies in supplying fresh insights about the impact of bloggers on the purchase desires and brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region. Additionally, the analysis of individual interviews revealed that participants' who expressed favorable attitudes toward bloggers as fashion influencers were females.

Herein, combined with the findings about females' perceptions of LFBs' SM posts as spam, the empirics supplied an important implication, emphasizing on the role of bloggers as part of brands' SM marketing strategies, without risking brands' image of exclusivity.

The section presented findings about Gen Y LFCs' perspectives of SM role for attracting their attention in LFBs' activities on different SM platforms. This was performed by taking into consideration the perspectives of participants who followed LFBs and those who did not express interest in following LFBs on SM. Further, upon exploring the mindset of studied LFCs, the researcher paid attention to participants' preferences for online versus offline customer-brand relationships. The analysis of individual interviews also took into consideration the manner interviewees envisioned the role of SM for attracting and keeping LFCs attention and brand loyalty in the context of the economic crisis. In this vein, the final section presented additional evidence about the role of SM for the development of brand loyalty in the post-crisis era.

Social Media in the post-crisis era

Key words: *get closer to customers, increase desire, increase awareness, low budget lines, personal preferences, tags and links*

The following analysis seeks to shed additional light into the mindset of Gen Y LFCs about the supporting role of SM for attracting and retaining consumers given the post-crisis effect on the consumption patterns of those studied. The analysis was approached by considering interviewees' responses about SM influence in the context of the economic crisis and insights obtained from one of the ending questions (suggestions to managers of luxury fashion brands). Importantly, the opportunity to purchase at a discounted price was the top SM-brands' activity outlined by interviewed Gen Y LFCs. However, accompanying aspects that appeared as beneficial in the eyes of those studied included: 1) SM as a platform that helps LFBs get closer to customers, 2) promote low budget lines via SM, and 3) seeing posts with tags/ links of the brands. Nevertheless, although a minority, it was also notable that for some of the interviewees the idea of SM as a supporting platform for attracting or retaining customers appeared nearly impossible, mainly for the reason that they had their own personal preferences.

As of the first aspect, SM as a platform that helps LFBs to **get closer to young consumers**, it was outlined by participants from the three countries that took part in the research (Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece). The main rationale of this segment was that by being exposed to SM marketing activities of LFBs, this would help brands to "get closer to customers", make them "more desirable", and reach more consumers from the "middle class". In the eyes of those studied, whilst the economic crisis forced LFBs to close luxury fashion stores in the region, the international reach of SM allowed consumers to be informed about brands' news and collections. As the examples in the following table present:

Table 6:19 Examples attesting to the value of SM to get closer to customers in the context of the past economic crisis

[…] the expensive shops of brands in Thessaloniki are closed! At this time, we have only Attica, we have only one Attica or one in Tsimiski… that's the only thing. With Facebook or Instagram or other Social Networks [uhm] it's better, it very easier to see the brands, the new collections!
(PGR8, male, 31)
[…] it will make me loyal to new brands, but it will not take my attention from the old brands that I'm used to!
(PR7, female, 27)
[…] I think that Social Media can be used in… in order to get awareness and to reach lot of people and… in the economic crisis it's [uhm] very good way for the business to optimize marketing budgets.
(PBG20, female, 31)

As demonstrated, the key premise was that the nature of SM being open and accessible at all times and places was a great chance for customers to see brands' collections and relevant brand information. In effect, according to interviewees this would increase brand awareness and could even make some of the interviewed consumers loyal to new LFBs they have not considered before. However, not at the expense of their loyalty LFBs that are in their present top lists. Herein, this was an indication for the valuable role of SM in the lives of Gen Y LFCs, who although being influenced by the economic crisis, still would embrace the opportunity to have a "sneak" into the luxury fashion world, and eventually purchase some of the garments depending on their financial situation. Thus, SM could be perceived as the *"Narnia",* the magic land, that allows consumers to experience the luxury world.

Another key premise was that SM could be embraced as a channel LFBs can promote **lower-budget collections**. Within the context of getting closer to consumers, the main idea of participants who talked about low budget lines was that such a strategy would be helpful not only in terms of the crisis, but also for attracting a larger customer base to LFBs'. As one participant explained:

Maybe to make a low budget line! [...] I guess this low budget line can do the thing! If I will not afford to buy these things, maybe if... I don't if they have a line which is cheaper, I will buy! [...] I'm thinking about this line, which you can have smaller prices can bring more customers! Not only in the crisis time, but maybe another category of people! [...]
(PR15, female, 31)

Such views indicated that whilst the economic crisis made Gen Y LFCs more considerate about their expenses, it did not decrease the luxury "lust" amongst the studied segment. Even though some of the interviewees did not speak about themselves *per se*, their responses were an index that consumers would not stop craving for LFBs. As the examples demonstrated, this could be the foundation for a new era in the manner LFBs attract younger consumers, whilst at the same time not putting at risk their exclusiveness. Additionally, this was a shared perspective amongst interviewees from Bulgaria and Romania. Mindful of the researcher's subjective bias, insights into participants' mindset supplied additional evidence about the importance of buying quality items for Romanian interviewees and brands that stand for status and uniqueness amongst studied Bulgarian Gen Y consumers. Theoretically, the study filled a gap in academic knowledge by supplying empirical evidence about the interplay between SM and the economic crisis among Gen Y luxury fashion customers from the SEE region.

Further, the third aspect that was outlined in the context of SM role in post-crisis times referred to seeing **posts with tags/ links on SM networks**. This was shared only by two participants. Nonetheless, it was considered essential to present interviewees' perspectives because they added further insight into the context of the research as of how LFBs could employ the advantages of SM as an integrated component of brands' marketing. According to interviewees, the endurance of luxury desirability can be enhanced via SM because their interests were previously triggered by exposure to posts where other people (including friends) who tagged the brands they were wearing. In effect, this encouraged participants to explore the LFBs. For instance:

If I see my friends, for example on Facebook, wearing it this and posting photo with some things from a certain brand, this is very.... easy for me to see some new ideas, or if I ... if I see that a certain brand is more active, now these days. So, if they are active, they have no crisis let's say, or the crisis is over.

(PBG12, male, 35)

The key idea was that SM would help LFCs of those studied to have fast and easy access to brands' websites and relevant brand information. In other words, their responses revolved the value of convenience, the difference being that they referred to seeing friends' or other people's posts with links/ tags to the product/ brand information. Herein, this was an additional evidence for the immense value of SM as an opportunity that LFBs can embrace in order to capitalize on consumers' desire for instant gratification of those studied. Equally important was the fact that in the minds of those studied seeing that LFBs were active on SM platforms was perceived as a symbol of a victory over the economic crisis. Theoretically, findings provided fresh insights into the role of SM among Gen Y LFCs from SEE. Precisely, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to uncover that by being active on SM LFBs could mark consumers' post-crisis consumption behavior, predisposing consumers to re-evaluate their consumer behavior and boost purchase desires. Finally, as noted, there were some interviewees for whom the idea of SM as a supporting platform for attracting or retaining customers appeared nearly **impossible, including the reason that they had their own personal preferences**. Essentially, interviewees vocalized that as their behavior was affected by the economic crisis, SM could not make them re-consider their buying preferences and consumption behavior. As customer explained:

[...] I don't think they can help me in Social Media to change the brands I buy right now and buy another brand or more from the same brand! Because economic crisis has to do with [uhm] the salary, has to do with the money that you take and with the… for example, the feeling that you have to buy. First of all, the crisis affects for you to take less money, low profits and so, you will stop buying as you used to buy, and I don't think Social Media has a way to change that! [...]

(PGR10, male, 29)

In the eyes of those studied, the financial downturn left significant footprints on their purchase culture, because of the decreased income levels. Thus, they explained that SM could not have a role in changing participants' purchase habits because there were other factors that defined their purchase decisions. Herein, findings implied that whilst throughout individual interviews SM were cited as a valuable marketing tool for getting LFBs closer to consumers, the positive influence was possible only up to the extent that studied consumers feel a particular purchase would be an organic fit to their personal

budgets. The theoretical relevance of the findings is that they showed how the financial downturn shaped studied customers' purchase behavior toward LFBs. Moreover, the novelty of the research was that it filled a gap in academic knowledge by supplying fresh insights into understanding the financial downturn impact on Gen Y LFCs in the context of SM role for attracting and retaining this particular consumer group. The following section presents a summary of the findings about Gen Y's perceived value in the development of brand loyalty via SM.

6.4. Summary of emerging findings about Gen Y's perceived values in the development of brand loyalty over Social Media

The empirics demonstrated that in most of their part, studied Gen Y LFCs were loyal toward LFBs interested in following LFBs on SM platforms and preferred the traditional approach toward the development of brand loyalty. From a theoretical implication aspect, the findings provided an evidence that a distinct trait existent in studied Gen Y's consumer behavior was the reliance on in-store experience as a basis to formulate a positive outlook toward LFBs. In effect, this becomes the ground on which Gen Y consumers of those interviewed, developed brand loyalty gradually over time. As the analysis illustrated, brand loyalty has a significant impactful relevance to the desire of those studied to follow LFBs on SM. To conclude, brand loyalty and desire to follow LFBs on SM were the "masterpieces" of a beautifully curated in-store experiences, where customers receive personal attention, personal service, personal communication, and personal discounts. The key word is personal. As the analysis revealed, the personalized aspect was the core stone for developing a meaningful connection to the brand.

An additional outlook of participants' responses uncovered that perspectives on the value of SM for the development of brand loyalty were dependent on the customer gender of those studied. From this stance, the themes were divided was follows: 1) **gender commonalities**: brand content, brand ambassadors, 2) **male interviewees:** SM as "a must" for LFBs, discounts, follow brands on SM based on brand loyalty, tailored personalized communication, celebrities' influence and 3) **female interviewees**: SM as an antonym to customer-brand relationships, brand posts perceived as spam, following bloggers, personalized communication: newsletters/ mails, direct communication, and perception of fake brand behavior. In light of these, the research generated an important

finding about gender differences in the perception of SM role for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs. Perhaps the most noticeable difference among genders was the perception of spam for females and the pattern to follow LFBs on SM based on brand loyalty for males. Thus, the originality of the research was that it filled a gap in academic knowledge in the context of SEE by demonstrating how the gender of Gen Y LFCs influences their perspectives about the value of SM for the development of brand loyalty.

Conclusively, the following figure presents a summary of the key emerging findings, followed by a discussion about identified dilemmas in the perceived value of Social Media for building brand loyalty.

Figure 6:2 Perceived value of Social Media for building brand loyalty
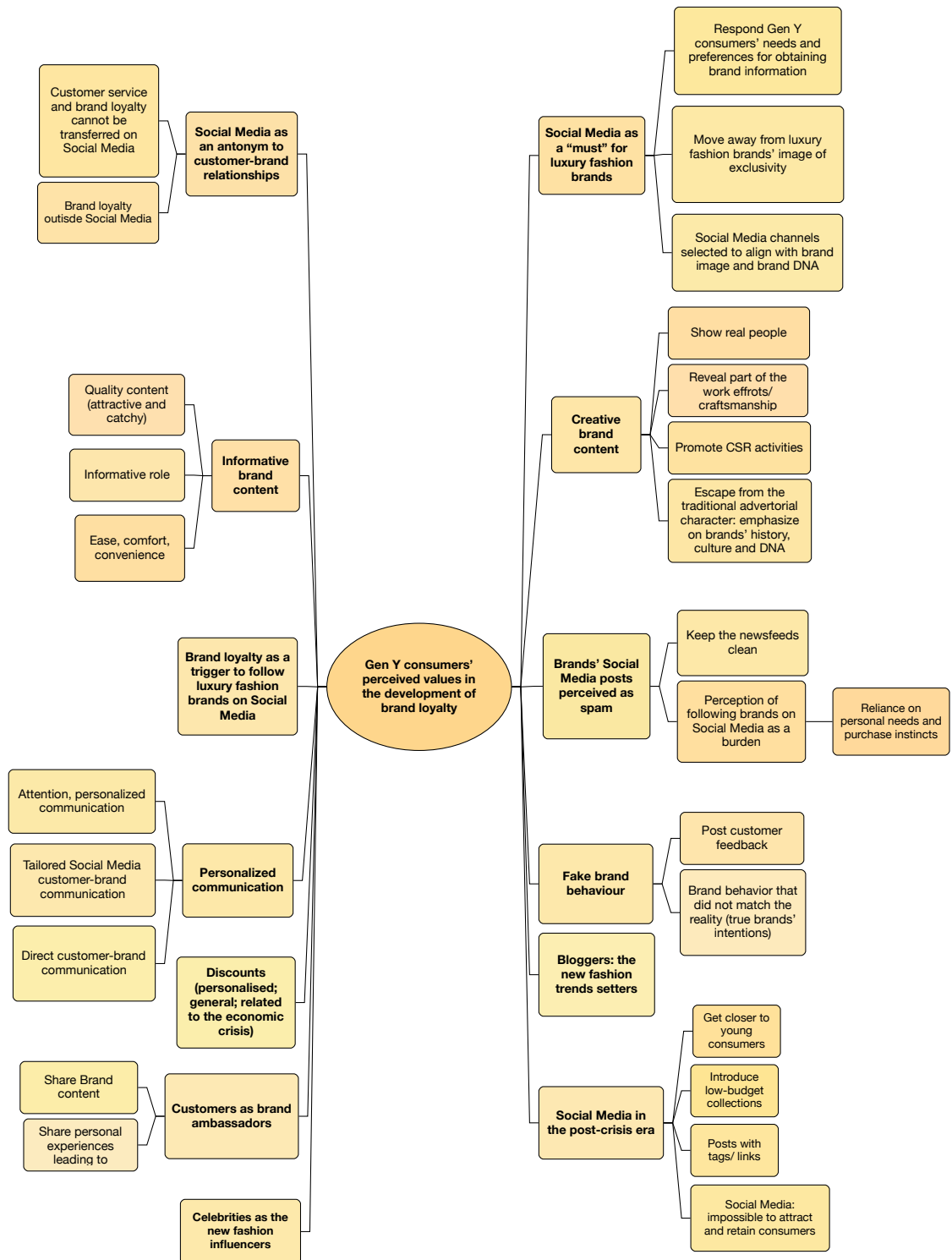
In all, findings propose that brand content that is informative and creative (whilst also not running away from brand DNA), celebrities' styles and brand choices, personalized communication, and opportunity to purchase LFBs at a fraction of the price are all a promise for increased customer attention and retention of Gen Y LFCS from SEE. Finally, acknowledging the sample limitations, the main conclusions about the role of SM

for attracting and retaining GenY LFCs within the context of the past economic crisis are: 1) Gen Y LFCs from SEE expect LFBS to embrace SM to provide information, 2) LFBs should incorporate SM in a way that does not put at risk the luxury cachet, and 3) the economic crisis made Gen Y LFCs more cost cautious, also evident in the expressed perspectives about SM in the context of the 2008 economic crisis.

In all, the analysis of individual interviews helped to gain a comprehensive view of Gen Y's perceptions and consumer behavior about questions that pertained to the research objectives. The following section presents a summary of the emerging findings that altogether shaped the analysis of individual interviews. This was accomplished by presenting how the individual interviews helped to fulfill each of the research objectives.

6.5. Summary of emerging findings from individual interviews: Social Media

Chapter six addressed two of the research objectives, focused on Social Media. These were: 1) Investigate gender differences in online consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers and 2) Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media.

In regard to the former research objective addressed in the chapter, as of researcher's knowledge, this study was the first to conduct a theoretical investigation on the role of gender by responding to the need for understanding Gen Y's online consumer behavior in the context of LFBs (Otnes and McGrath, 2011; Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Appleford, 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016). This was achieved by uncovering that the convenience of online shopping in fact outshined the in-store purchase experience. Notably, findings indicated a massive shift in the traditional consumption paradigm caused by the consumption habits of interviewed Gen Y LFCs. Thus, it would appear that existing knowledge about the perceived advantages of the online environment (Gommans *et al.* 2001; Bolton *et al.* 2013; Bandilli, 2015; Chou *et al.* 2015; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017) are applicable to those studied. Moreover, the fresh insights helped to fill a gap in existing literature by supplying important implications for the purchase culture of interviewed LFCs from SEE. Precisely, the preferences for online shopping will have impactful outcomes for the development of luxury fashion e-commerce in SEE.

Essentially, in contrast to existing knowledge on males' inclines to browse and shop online (Petra, 2016), this study was the first to identify that the use of SM for browsing (to find better deals) was exclusively relevant characteristic of interviewed female LFCs. Thus, the study supplied fresh insights by demonstrating that SM informative nature assumed more relevance among studied females, evident in their preferences to browse online. Thus, it would appear that the online buying alternative has important implications for the lower loyalty of studied females (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009; Thompson, 2013; Segal and Podoshen, 2013). Additionally, findings were straightforward about the fact that interviewed customers who were more likely to abandon the traditional store environment being seduced by alluring price alternatives in the digital world were from Romania. Theoretically, to the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first research to empirically demonstrate how the advancement of SM was in fact a major factor that contributed to the post-crisis consumption behavior of Romanian consumers of those studied, namely persisting the ability to buy LFBs. More so, the theoretical relevance of the research was also that it was the first to demonstrate country peculiarities in the usage of SM for the purchase of LFBs.

Furthermore, the study filled a gap in academic knowledge about gender as an influential factor of Gen Y's consumer behavior my showing that studied males perceived higher risk in online shopping experience. Interestingly, previous research uncovers that male consumers are more incline to opt for online purchases (Petra, 2016). Mindful of the limitations of qualitative research, the empirical evidence pointed out that males' inability to foresee the opportunities offered by the digital world were rooted in the perceived distrust and risk in online purchases of LFBs. This brought novel insights into the context of the research, by showing how the emerging findings align within the context of the past economic crisis. Specifically, within the context of the studied sample, findings uncovered a typical males' trait on a regional level, showing how the economic crisis' effect spilled among interviewees from the three countries, making them more suspicious to the potential risks involved in online purchases. Thus, the exploratory investigation filled a gap in academic knowledge by demonstrating that the need to feel secure about their luxury fashion purchases was a significantly relevant factor driving studied males' preferences for the offline buying experience. This closely resembles what is suggested to be the root for the preference of the traditional in-store environment: lower risk for purchases that require high financial investment (Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017). In all, from e theoretical implication aspect, the study demonstrated that

the gender of those studied was a very much existent factor defining the behavioral patterns of Gen LFCS from SEE.

Regarding the latter research objective addressed in chapter six, literature provides conflicting views about the brand loyalty of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al.* 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Fernandez *et al.* 2016) whilst SM is also acknowledged as being of prime importance for attracting and retaining this consumer segment (Kim and Ko, 2012; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Interest in additional inquiry was also triggered by the lack of clear conceptualization of Gen Y LFCs from SEE (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). By a means of an exploratory study, findings propose that young interviewees perceive SM as a must for LFBs, are interested in informative and creative brand content, celebrities' exposure, personalized communication and opportunity to purchase LFBs at a discounted price. These are all a promise for increased customer attention and retention of Gen Y LFCs from SEE.

The theoretical relevance of findings was further strengthened by showing how the gender of those studied influenced their perspectives about SM role for the development of brand loyalty. More so, the research is a direct response to the call to understand gender differences in perceptions of SM marketing activities of LFBs (Gautam and Sharma, 2017). An interesting revelation from the research was that males were more interested in following brands on SM. This is in sharp contrast to existing knowledge, which suggests that increased satisfaction levels encourage females to search for opportunities to maintain their existing relationships on SM (Porter *et al.* 2012; Haferkamp and Papadakis, 2012; Chai *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013). By contrast, studied female customers have a more conventional perspective toward the approaches that LFBs should adopt to communicate their brand image and develop brand loyalty. From this stance, the study helped to fill a gap in academic literature, by empirically demonstrating gender differences in the sensitivity toward LFBs' ethos versus embracing SM as the ultimate marketing approach for targeting the young generation of those studied.

Another pronounced gender difference referred to the value of receiving discounts. Previous studies notice that females are more receptive toward discounts (Petra, 2016). By contrast, the empirical investigation showed that receiving discounts was a typical trait of studied males on a regional level. This was evident in the perceived value of SM as a medium through which LFBs can attract and retain interviewees' loyalty via

communicating personalized discounted prices. Consequently, the study helped to fill a gap in academic knowledge, by showing that brands which demonstrate compassion to customers' financial situations by personalizing discount offers have the chance to secure males' customer loyalty for a lifetime. Additionally, findings revealed that a typical narrative for studied males was their inclination to be affected by celebrities. The analysis generated an important implication about males' consumer behavior being rooted in the perception of LFBs as a form of achieving their ideal identities close to the famous people interviewees aspired to (Cheah *et al.* 2015; Shamila, 2018; Raisanen *et al.* 2018). Henceforth, the novelty of the study was that it revealed that brands' approach to incorporate SM to foster their glamorous images via collaborations with celebrities is a winning strategy among studied male LFCs. To the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to showcase the behavioural implications of celebrities based on the gender of studied Gen Y LFCs. In effect, this research is a response to the need for better segmentation of Gen Y customers (Gautam and Sharma, 2017) based on thorough understanding of how Gen Y LFCs can be predictable in their consumer behaviour.

However, findings uncovered that certain perceptions of SM role for the development of brand loyalty were exclusively relevant for studied Gen Y consumers, regardless of their gender. One of them referred to the perception of informative brand content for increasing purchase desires. Thus, it seems that the distinct traits identified in the SM usage of studied Gen Y LFCs from the SEE region are in line with what has been addressed by existing knowledge (Bolton *et al.* 2013; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017) about Gen Y's practice to take advantage of SM platforms because of the convenience to obtain brand information. Yet, findings indicated that those studied perceived informative brand content as useful for brand information, they disregarded its potential for building or nourishing brand loyalty. Thus, by means of an empirical research, the study furthers our understanding of SM as an influential factor in the lives of studied Gen Y LFCs. Specifically, to the best of researcher's knowledge, the study was the first to demonstrate that LFBs which adopt a more flexible approach into incorporating SM to respond to Gen Y's habits, have higher chances to attract and retain this demanding consumer group from the SEE region.

The same pattern of gender similarities was noticed in the context of creative brand content, including for building brand loyalty. The research supplied evidence that in purchasing a LFB, consumers do not simply buy a quality product, they buy part of the

brand's myth and lifestyle philosophy (Krepapa *et al.* 2016). This was a sign for the value of creativity in providing exciting, original, inspiring, and entertaining content. Theoretically, this means that findings from previous studies about the positive impact of creative brand content on the consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs (Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Shen *et al.* 2017) have relevance to the consumer psychology of those studied. Overall, findings closely resemble the idea that by finding innovate ways to tell more about brands' images helps for the development of *"deeper and more meaningful long-term relationships with customers"* (Haumann *et al.* 2014, p.78; Krepapa *et al.* 2016; Papandrea, 2019).

Further, throughout the analysis it appeared that it was their common search for personal/ human touch that was of great relevance for the development of brand loyalty among both genders. As noted, the underlying aspects as of what constituted personalized communication differed among genders. Thus, on one side, the study was the first to offer a detailed outlook of preferred communication approaches over SM based on the customer gender. This would help LFBs to design effective marketing strategies based on careful segmentation. On the other side, as participants achieved consensus over the value of personalized communication, this indicated that via SM LFBs have the potential to build brand loyalty through the establishment of trust, being helpful with practical matters and providing high quality consulting services (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Godey *et al.* 2016). Essentially, the value of personalized communication was outlined on a regional level. Mindful of the sample limitations, the exploratory study was the first to demonstrate that LFBs which take a new spin on building brand loyalty outside the traditional retail format have chances to capitalize on Gen Y LFCs from SEE in the long term.

Moreover, findings were indicative for the impact of the past economic crisis on interviewees' perceptions of sharing their personal experiences on SM and the views of SM for attracting and retaining consumers in the post-crisis era. As of the former aspect, researchers have the firm belief that a key defining characteristic of Gen Y consumers is that they are very active in sharing their personal brand experiences on SM, regardless if this is leaving a comment or sharing a photo wearing a LFB (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Kohli *et al.* 2015; Reseel, 2016; Scoble, 2017, DeMers, 2017). However, to the best of researcher's knowledge, there is no research about the Gen Y's online consumer habits in the SEE region. Thus, the novelty of this research is that it uncovers that it is exactly

the financial aspect of acquiring LFBs which makes studied Gen Y LFCs averse to the idea of posting/ sharing their personal brand experiences on SM.

In regard to the latter aspect, findings supplied fresh insights that Gen Y LFCs would purchase LFBs that match their personal needs (quality, status, uniqueness), without the feel that this would clatter their personal finances. More so, as of researcher's knowledge, this was the first study to uncover that by being active on SM, LFBs could predispose consumers to re-evaluate their consumer behavior and boost purchase desires. Nevertheless, the positive influence of SM on attracting and retaining those studied was possible only up to the extent that consumers feel a particular purchase would be an organic fit to their personal budgets. In all, the novelty of the research was that it filled a gap in academic knowledge by supplying fresh insights into understanding the financial downturn impact on Gen Y LFCs in the context of SM role for attracting and retaining this particular consumer group.

Conclusively, findings from individual interviews presented in chapters 5 and 6 helped to provide fresh insights into Gen Y's perceptions toward LFBs, Gen Y LFCs' consumer behaviour, their tendency to develop brand loyalty toward LFBs, the role of SM for developing brand loyalty toward LFBs (including consideration of the past economic crisis) and the behavioural implications of economic crisis on Gen Y LFCs from SEE. Thus, individual interviews helped to broaden luxury brand loyalty literature by answering the main research questions: 1) What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour? and 2) What is the role of Social Media in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation Y male and female luxury fashion customers in the context of the past economic crisis. Specifically, the analysis of individual interviews showed that Gen Y's brand loyalty and the role of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs is largely dependent on the gender of those studied. This was evident in the differences in brand loyalty: personal style for females versus dependence on previous purchase experiences for males, and differences in the idea of incorporating SM for building brand loyalty: persisting the traditional pristine image of LFBs for females versus positive outlook of employing SM for attracting and retaining consumers for males. Finally, the individual interviews helped to provide a more comprehensive response to the research question by demonstrating that although the underlying reasons to continue buying LFB differed across the three countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece), the effect of the financial

downturn was in fact a uniform factor defining the consumption behaviour of studied Gen Y LFCs from SEE. As of the SM role for building brand loyalty, the research uncovered that the positive influence of SM on attracting and retaining those studied was possible only up to the extent that consumers feel a particular purchase would be an organic fit to their personal budgets. Having presented the theoretical relevance of the empirical evidence from individual interviews with regards to luxury brand loyalty literature, the following chapter presents a discussion about the findings that emerged from the two studies conducted in this research.

Chapter 7: DISCUSSION

The motivation behind this research was routed in the literature that discusses the increased purchase power of Gen Y consumers, their value as a consumer segment for LFBs and the role of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs. Whilst scholars acknowledge the value of Gen Y consumers as a rising consumer segment for LFBs (Butcher *et al.* 2017; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Kapferer, 2018) academic literature on their consumer behaviour toward LFBs is in fact scarce (Mamat *et al.* 2016). Existing research acknowledging the importance of brand loyalty toward LFBs (Thakur and Kaur, 2015; Crewe, 2016; Shen *et al.* 2017) is concerned with understanding Gen Y's brand loyalty toward LFBs. The increased interest in this aspect for some causes the belief that it is challenging to capture the brand loyalty of this consumer segment (Giovannini *et al*. 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Babijtchouk *et al.* 2018) whilst others contend that Gen Y consumers are more loyal to LFBs compared to their parents (Selvarajah *et al.* 2018).

Moreover, studies persistently emphasize on the importance of understanding gender differences in Gen Y's consumer behaviour in the context of LFBs (Lee and Workman, 2015; Schade *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). Scholars are concerned with gaining a better comprehension of gender impact on shopping behaviour and shopping channel choice (Shephard *et al.* 2016). In this context, highlights addressed in this research were embedded in academic literature emphasizing on the role of SM in Gen Y's lives, its implications for building brand loyalty and acknowledging that online consumer behaviour and perceptions of SM marketing activities are dependent on the gender of consumers (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016; Ko *et al.* 2019).

Additionally, scholars acknowledge both the theoretical and practitioner value of gaining insights into the implications that major events such as the economic crisis have on consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al.* 2016; Chaney *et al.* 2017). Finally, although published literature recognizes the role of SM for building brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs (Kim and Ko, 2012; Loureiro *et al.* 2018), evidence of similar endeavours in SEE is lacking. Altogether, these gaps encouraged the researcher's interest to explore the role of SM among male and female LFCs who belong to the Gen Y consumer segment and to identify predispositions for implementing SM to build brand loyalty toward LFBs by also taking into consideration the possible implications of the past economic crisis. Consequently, the research reported in this thesis filled the outlined gaps in academic literature by addressing the following research questions:

1) What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour?

• How do Generation Y luxury fashion customers perceive luxury fashion brands? How do their perceptions differ among male/ female consumers?

• How do Generation Y luxury fashion customers behave based on their gender? What are the implications for the development of brand loyalty?

• How and why Generation Y luxury fashion customers choose online/ offline consumption experience? How do their choices differ between male/ female consumers?

• What are the behavioural characteristics that define Generation Y online consumer behaviour?

2) What is the role of Social Media in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation Y male and female luxury fashion customers in the context of the past economic crisis?

• How can luxury fashion brands attract, retain Generation Y luxury fashion customers and build brand loyalty through Social Media marketing strategies? How the gender of Generation Y luxury fashion customers defines their perceptions of Social Media marketing?

• What are implications of the past economic crisis on the consumer behaviour of Generation Y luxury fashion customers? How can Social Media be employed to attract, maintain and build brand loyalty among Generation Y luxury fashion customers?

In answering these questions, an emphasis of the research was to make theoretical contributions to the luxury brand loyalty literature with a focus on Gen Y LFCs and to

offer insights to marketing professionals operating in the luxury fashion industry. To do so, the research was based on the following research objectives:

1) Investigate Generation Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands

2) Explore gender differences in consumer behaviour among Generation Y luxury fashion customers

3) Investigate gender differences in online consumer behaviour among Generation Y luxury fashion customers

4) Explore Generation Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media

5) Explore Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour in SEE given the past economic crisis

The following table illustrates the main findings that emerged in regard to questions 1 and 2. The presentation of findings is followed by discussions for each of the questions along with sections that present a comparative review with existing literature.

Table 7:1 Emerging findings based on the research questions

Research question 1: What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour?
Sub-question 1: *How do Generation Y luxury fashion customers perceive luxury fashion brands? How do their perceptions differ among male/ female consumers?*
The study uncovered that Gen Y LFCs' perceptions of LFBs are based on quality, brand uniqueness and brand DNA. There were no gender differences in the outlined perceptions toward LFBs.
Sub-question 2: *How do Generation Y luxury fashion customers behave based on their gender? What are the implications for the development of brand loyalty?*
-Previous purchase experiences have a valuable role among studied male and female Gen Y LFCs. -Gender appeared to be an influential factor defining specific consumer characteristics among those studied. This refers to the search for consumer distinctiveness through personal style, alongside impulsive purchases and friends' influence to be a typical female trait. Findings revealed that the importance of personal style can act as a barrier toward the development of brand loyalty. -Seemingly findings demonstrated that studied males are more likely to be loyal to LFBs. However, this can actually by an indication for consumer "laziness".
Sub-question 3: *How and why Generation Y luxury fashion customers choose online/ offline consumption experience? How do their choices differ between male/ female consumers?*
-The research uncovered an age difference among studied Gen Y LFCs. -Younger Gen Y LFCs (18-28 years old) prefer the in-store experience, whilst respondents who were 27-36 years old would likely opt for the online buying experience.

-An interesting revelation for the latter segment of Gen Y LFCs was that males expressed perceived risk in online purchases of LFBs.
-Findings uncovered within-generational differences among Gen Y LFCs, by also revealing the possible implications of the economic crisis on participants' choices for buying experiences.

Sub-question 4: *What are the behavioral characteristics that define Generation Y online consumer behavior?*

-For studied Gen Y LFCs sharing their luxury fashion purchases on SM was perceived as a show-off and a symbol of snobbish behaviour.
-Males' interest to follow LFBs on SM platforms
-Females can act as brand ambassadors, spreading out brand content on SM. However, this referred only to instances when the particular post (fashion item/ collection or post) resembled with their personal styles and fashion tastes.

Research question 2: What is the role of Social Media in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation Y male and female luxury fashion customers in the context of the past economic crisis?

Sub-question 1: *How can luxury fashion brands attract, retain Generation Y luxury fashion customers and build brand loyalty through Social Media marketing strategies? How the gender of Generation Y luxury fashion customers defines their perceptions of Social Media marketing?*

-There are two main consumer segments among Gen Y LFCs of those studied: preference for in-store experience as the path toward building brand loyalty as opposed to acceptance of SM as the new medium that can help LFBs maintain customers in the long term.
-The research demonstrated that SM marketing activities such as personalized communication and creative brand content have an impact on building brand loyalty toward LFBs. This finding applied both for male and female LFCs of those studied.
SM marketing activities such as informative brand content and incorporating SM into LFBs' marketing appeared to have an impact mainly on attracting Gen Y LFCs.

-Gender differences were identified in the context of how male and female LFCs evaluated the effectiveness of online personalized communication. The research uncovered that female LFCs were positive toward the opportunity for direct communication with LFBs. Male LFCs emphasized on the value of personalized communication that is tailored to their specific tastes and needs.
-Gender differences in the context of receiving discounts (as part of online personalized communication) to be exclusively relevant for studied male LFCs.
-Positive impact of celebrities on the consumer behaviour and brand loyalty of male LFCs.

Sub-question 2: *What are the implications of the economic crisis on the consumer behaviour of Generation Y luxury fashion consumers? How can Social Media be employed to attract, maintain and build brand loyalty among Generation Y luxury fashion customers?*

-The past economic crisis had different implications on the consumer behaviour of studied Gen Y LFCs across the three countries that were part of the research: Bulgaria, Romania and Greece.
-The research demonstrated that the most severe effect of the past economic crisis was experienced by Gen Y LFCs from Greece. This was evident in the examples about the reduced number of purchases, evaluation of the need to purchase LFBs, purchase of LFBs at lower prices, and plan of future purchases of LFBs.
- Gen Y LFCs from Bulgaria: reduced number of purchases and planning future purchases of LFBs. An identified characteristic of the sample from Bulgaria referred

to the fact that whilst the past economic crisis left its marks on the consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs, they maintained the ability to purchase the same quantity of luxury fashion pieces.
- Gen Y LFCs from Romania: the least affected by the economic crisis due to their established habits to search for quality in their purchase choices prior to the economic crisis.

-The post-crisis consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs is rooted in the specific social dogmas of each of the countries that were part of the research. It would appear that the consumer behaviour of Gen Y LFCs from Greece is rooted in the search for status through the purchase of LFBs. Findings uncovered that Bulgarian Gen Y LFCs maintained their habits to purchase LFBs because of the perceived symbol of status and uniqueness related to the possession of LFBs. As outlined, the investigation demonstrated that the sample of Gen Y LFCs from Romania persisted their consumer behaviour due to the consumer mentality of searching for quality fashion pieces.

-There are two main strategies that can assist LFBs in their effort to attract, maintain and nourish brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs from the region. These are: 1) implement SM marketing strategies that would help LFBs to get closer to Gen Y consumers through increasing brand awareness and purchase desire and 2) launch of low budget lines that will not interfere with the core brand image.

7.1. Discussion of findings question 1: What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour?

Brand uniqueness only serves the purpose of creating positive attitudes toward LFBs. Brand loyalty is based on the perception of price-quality ratio and brand DNA as core pillars of luxury in consumers' minds. Major events as the past economic crisis also have an impact on the emphasis that consumers place on perceived price and quality, being driven by price sensitivity and the perception of luxury fashion purchases from an investment perspective. This highlights the importance of satisfaction and trust in the product 'performance' as a result of previous purchase experiences. Turbulent economic events such as the 2008 economic crisis makes Gen Y LFCs more sensitive to their expenses, fostering a preference for secure/ familiar purchases of LFBs.

Certain specifics of the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs are a subject of gender differences. This can be observed with the emphasis that female consumers place on personal style, causing impulsive buying behavior, which has a negative influence on the prospects for the development of brand loyalty. Due to the value of personal style for females, friends cannot have an impact on brand loyalty. However, as peers/ friends have a role in increasing brand awareness, this is an indication for their impact in the initial

stages of building brand loyalty through helping female consumers to familiarize themselves with previously unknown LFBs. Females' consumer behavior with an emphasis on personal style can be a sign for conformity to social norms, namely performing a consumer behavior of meeting society expectations (including friends) for diversity in female fashionable appearances. Brand loyalty of male luxury fashion consumers identified as brand love, is based on consumer 'laziness' to search for other alternatives available on the market.

The consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs can also be understood from an age perspective. Despite the recognition of Gen Y consumers as a segment with common consumption characteristics, there are within-generational differences in the context of consumer preferences for buying experiences. Specifically, the age of consumers defines the 'romantic' perception of in-store experience for younger Gen Y consumers (18-28 years old), whilst the online buying experience is a more appealing option for Gen Y consumers who are 27-36 years old. These within-generational differences can be attributed to the convenience of the online buying experience. The advancement of luxury e-commerce allows consumers who have more tight daily schedules (work; raising kids) to purchase LFBs in a timely and convenient manner. The emphasis on convenience can be explained with males 'laziness' and the importance of personal style for females. In other words, the digital universe provides studied females with the opportunity to choose from an array of LFBs to combine their clothing choices, whilst it also presents a timesaving and efficient option to purchase the favorite LFBs for studied males. Consequently, findings can be explained by viewing this consumer segment as rational-decision makers.

On the other hand, it would appear that the preferences of younger Gen Y LFCs for in-store experience are emotionally driven. On one hand, this preference can be the result of the need to prove to themselves that they are perceived as special, appraised, cherished and valued through personalized customer service at a store level. Once fulfilled, this need also has an impact on the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs. An additional perspective implies that the feeling of being appraised and cherished is the outcome of personalized attention by sales assistants at the store. Herein, the emotional decision to visit the store is also driven by a sense of loyalty bestowed to the shop assistants at the store.

The research also uncovered that the perceived risk in online purchases is more perceptible among male LFCs who belong to the 'older' segment of Gen Y consumers (27-36 years old). This finding can be explained if it is considered that the heightened sense of perceived risk in online purchases of LFBs is augmented by the past economic crisis. The findings here suggest that Gen Y LFCs who are already in the workforce (rely on their personal finances) are more sensitive to purchases which involve high acquisition costs. Thus, the findings provide some insights into the implications of the past economic crisis on the increased sense of risk in the online buying experience with a focus on male LFCs. The emerging findings traced in this qualitative investigation may also uncover an interesting characteristic of Gen Y's online consumer behavior. The empirical research has evidenced the fact that Gen Y LFCs do not approve of sharing personal brand experiences (and purchases) on SM due to the perception of show-off and snobbish behavior. In relation to the specificities of the research, insights evidenced compassion to the economic vibes as a result of the financial crisis, demonstrating respect toward the 'luxury' to purchase LFBs.

An important finding highlighted from the research was males' interest to follow LFBs on SM. The empirical data obtained throughout the research emphasized that satisfaction from previous purchase experiences has a significant impact on males' interest to follow LFBs on SM. Within the understanding of males' laziness, the research supplied a fresh perspective regarding the implications of customer satisfaction on the online consumer behavior of male LFCs. This finding can be justified with the notion that by following LFBs on SM puts at ease keeping in track with new fashion/ collection releases without the need for 'window-shopping'. Finally, the research provided an insight about the extent to which personal style has implications on the online consumer behavior of female LFCs in SEE, as evidenced in their desire to share brand content on SM. This can be explained with the fact that female LFCs are likely to act in favor of LFBs which they perceive as close to their personal styles and/ or resemble with the identities that they would like to be associated with through the choice and combination of the fashion items and brands they purchase. The following figure depicts the key findings that emerged from the research in regard to the first question, followed by a comparative review with existing knowledge.

Figure 7:1 Generation Y perceptions of luxury fashion brands, consumer behavior and online consumer behavior
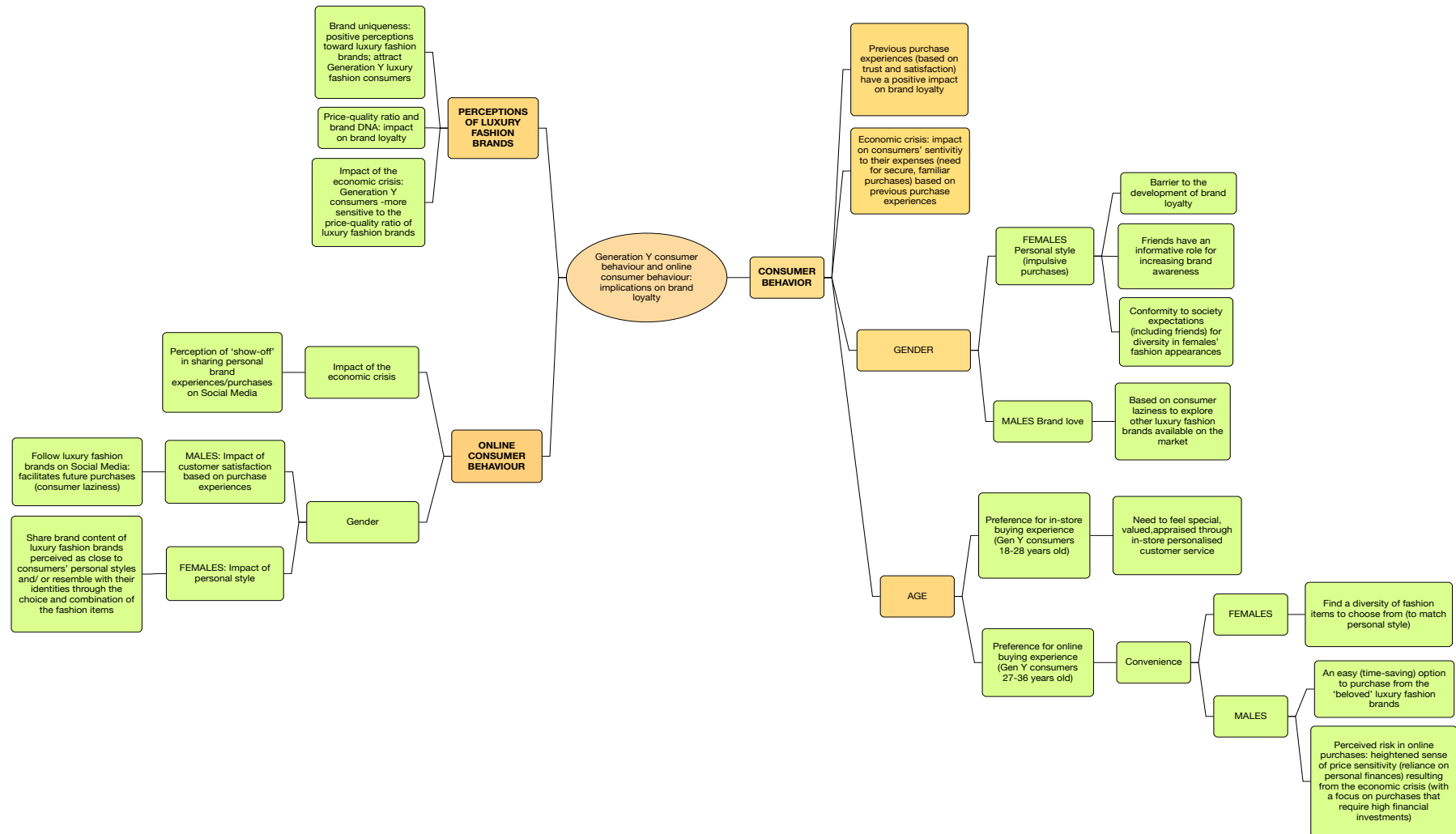
The research uncovered that quality-price ratio, brand uniqueness and brand DNA as core luxury facets (Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Dubois *et al.* 2001; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Okonkwo, 2007; Atwal and Williams, 2011) hold true for Gen Y LFCs of those studied. Within the context of the focus of the research, namely, to gain a better comprehension of Gen Y LFCs' brand loyalty, findings illuminated an important characteristic about the consumer behavior of those studied. Particularly, it can be suggested that their brand loyalty is largely defined by the perception of LFBs' quality and brand DNA.

Existing studies demonstrate that whilst Gen Y consumers present a powerful segment, they have not reached their peak earning years yet (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Mendes, 2016). This research demonstrated that sensitivity to the financial aspect of acquiring LFBs is inherently encoded in the consumer behavior of those studied. This suggestion was supported by the various instances when participants cited concerns related to price (purchase of LFBs from an investment perspective, reliance on previous purchase experiences, price sensitivity, value for money, quality-price ratio as a purchase criteria and purchase trigger). Additional insights evidenced that the price sensitivity can be also justified with the past economic crisis. To the best of researcher's knowledge, previous research in Romania identified that perceived price was an indicator for quality (Ciornea, 2014). However, the research was not conducted among actual Gen Y LFCs and was interested in the general population's perceptions of luxury. Thus, although previous research highlighted the role of perceived price, the actual Gen Y customers' perspectives in the context LFBs remained unclear. In terms of conceptual contributions, the study furthered our understanding of the target population (Henninger *et al.* 2016) perceptions of LFBs, the implications for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs, by also uncovering that the past economic crisis boosted Gen Y LFCs' sensitivity to the investment involved in acquiring LFBs.

Further, insights uncovered that brand DNA has an impact on the mindset, purchase behavior and brand loyalty of studied Gen Y LFCs. Previous publications discuss that the traditional values LFBs rely on might no longer by applicable among Gen Y consumers (Kradisching, 2015). On one hand, this is the root for the common inclination that LFBs need to capitalize on the shift in the consumer behavior of Gen Y consumers, by moving away from emphasizing on their heritage and history towards responding to consumer

expectations of the modern Gen Y luxury fashion consumer segment (Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). On the other hand, mindful of the sample limitations, the current study was the first to demonstrate that Gen Y LFCs from SEE value brand DNA, evident in the findings about the positive impact on brand loyalty toward LFBs. This suggestion is embedded in existing literature highlighting that preserving the strong brand identity is a core facet of brand loyalty (Okonkwo, 2007), thus, providing an insight into the debate about Gen Y consumer behavior of LFCs from emerging markets such as SEE. Specifically, a topical issue among academics is that whilst Gen Y LFCs are exposed to luxury fashion possessions at younger age (Shea, 2013), they also pay attention to public image. Moreover, consumers who have been recently introduced to LFBs are interested in the brands' status, causing myopia to see the story that stays behind the brand (Okonkwo, 2010) and are more likely to show off with their possessions (Stepieñ *et al.* 2016). Consequently, mindful of the qualitative stance of the research, it sheds light on an existing discussion in published literature by providing an empirical evidence about the relevance of brand DNA to the development of brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs from SEE.

The research also contributed to the theoretical discussion about Gen Y consumers as an invaluable segment for LFBs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Bhaduri and Stanfoth, 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017), with a focus on Gen Y LFCs from SEE. As evidenced from the empirical data emphasis was placed on previous purchase experiences as a key aspect that has implications on the consumer behavior, including brand loyalty of Gen Y LFCs. This finding can be explained with published literature about Gen Y income levels and the price point of LFBs (Shukla and Purani, 2012; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Mamat *et al.* 2016) as reflected in the impact of customer satisfaction on the prospects for developing brand loyalty toward LFBs. In light of these, the research made a contribution to academic knowledge, being the first to extent the understanding of the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs on a regional level, by addressing Gen Y LFCs from Romania, Bulgaria and Greece.

The exploratory analysis generated an important finding about the role that personal tastes, preferences and styles have on shaping the consumer behavior of studied females. The importance of celebrating their own individualities via consumer distinctiveness outshined the development of brand loyalty. This is in sharp contrast to studies suggesting that satisfaction from the hedonic and symbolic benefits contribute to the development of

brand loyalty (Choi *et al.* 2016; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Thus, an important contribution of the research was that whilst it affirmed a distinctive trait of Gen Y consumers to purchase brands that resonate with their own identities (Priporas *et al.* 2015), it furthered the conceptual contribution within the scope of SEE. Existing knowledge tells us that creating a personal style and public image are essential steps in the process of creating a social identity for women (Appleford, 2015) whilst they are also famous for their interdependent nature (Melnyk *et al.* 2009). The research offered detailed insights about females' consumer behavior with an emphasis on personal style as a symbol for conformity to social norms, namely performing a consumer behavior of meeting society expectations for diversity in female fashionable appearances.

Further, building on Levy and Loken (2015) suggestion that brand loyalty is dependent on the gender of consumers, the study offers fresh insights into the aspects that contribute for the development of brand loyalty among male LFCs who belong to the Gen Y segment in SEE. An acknowledged consumer characteristic in published literature is that whilst men are less enthusiastic toward fashion purchases, being mostly driven by life-enriching goals (Wiedmann *et al.* 2009), they are also likely to develop a sense of brand addiction (Petra, 2016). In light of these, the research enabled to inform that the relatively low enthusiasm and brand addiction addressed in existing studies is in fact the result of consumer laziness to investigate other brand alternatives available on the market. Thus, by means of qualitative research, the study also extends on research recognizing that males are more pragmatic in their consumer behavior (Fan and Miao, 2012; Folse *et al.* 2012) with a focus on highlighting consumer laziness among Gen Y male LFCs in SEE. Existing studies also highlight the need for a better understanding of the preferences for a buying experience among Gen Y LFCs (Makkar and Yap, 2018). The growing interest in the consumption habits of Gen Y LFCs for some causes the belief that there is a new purchase paradigm evident in the rise of luxury e-commerce (Miguens and Vasguez, 2017; Cristini *et al.* 2017) whilst for others this consumer segment prefers the traditional in-store experience (Donelly and Scaff, 2017). An interesting revelation from this research referred to within-generational differences identified in the preferences for buying experiences. In particular, findings demonstrated that the age of consumers defines the 'romantic' perception of in-store experience for younger Gen Y consumers (18-28 years old), whilst the online buying experience is a more appealing option for Gen Y consumers who are 27-36 years old.

By a means of an exploratory research, the investigation revealed that there are two sub-segments among Gen Y LFCs in SEE: emotional decision-makers (young Gen Y LFCs) and rational decision makers (older Gen Y LFCs). The study elaborated on existing knowledge about the positive impact of personalized service experience (Shukla *et al.* 2016; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Derville and Kapferer, 2018) and customer-salespeople relationship impact on brand loyalty (Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Coutler and Ligas, 2004; Crewe, 2016; Stepieñ *et al.* 2016) to highlight that these aspects appear to be exclusively relevant for younger Gen Y LFCs. Moreover, the empirical evidence from the research builds on the theoretical discussion about the need of Gen Y LFC to feel cherished and pampered (Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017) to clarify that this consumer characteristic holds true for the younger consumer segment of Gen Y LFCs.

The research also uncovered that the older segment of Gen Y LFCs prefer the online buying experience due to perceived convenience. Building on existing studies which recognize the value of activities which contribute for a better work-life balance (Giovannini *et al.* 2015) and convenient purchases for Gen Y consumers (Pantano and Priporas, 2016) the research demonstrated that these aspects have a vital role in the lives of Gen Y LFCs who are 27-36 years old. In light of these findings, this was the first exploratory investigation to uncover within-generational differences that exist among Gen Y LFCs in SEE. This was achieved by providing an empirical evidence about the power of in-store experience on the consumer behavior and brand loyalty of younger Gen Y LFCs and by discovering that the preference for online buying experience is a typical characteristic of Gen Y LFCs aged 27-36 years old, who place an emphasis on the convenience of online purchases.

Extant literature provides conflicting views about consumers' habits to use SM for their purchases based on their gender (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Petra, 2016). Consequently, a highlight in previous studies is the need to further investigate gender differences in shopping channel choice (Shephard *et al.* 2016). In this context, findings revealed gender differences in the underlying motives for the expressed preferences for online buying experience. The research offered detailed insights explaining that whilst the preference for convenient online purchases was important for the rational consumer segment of Gen Y LFCs, their preferences were rooted in the consumer psychology based on their gender. The study extended on existing knowledge about the importance of personal style for

females (Appleford, 2015) and the pragmatic shopping nature of male consumers (Fan and Miao, 2012; Folse *et al.* 2012; Chai *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013) to demonstrate that these consumer characteristics influence the choices for online buying experiences of Gen Y LFCs in SEE.

In the context of within-generational differences among Gen Y LFCs, the research uncovered that male LFCs who belong to the segment of rational decision-makers (Gen Y LFCs 27-36 years old) perceive higher risk in online purchases. The study finds support in published literature which acknowledges males' pragmatic consumer nature (Fan and Miao, 2012; Folse *et al.* 2012; Chai *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013) to emphasize that the past economic crisis increased the sense pf perceived risk, distrust in online purchases of LFBs and the need for secure purchases in the traditional retail environment.

The empirical research evidenced that Gen Y LFCs do not approve of sharing personal brand experiences (and purchases) on SM due to the perception of show-off. The analysis demonstrated that for studied Gen Y LFCs the act of sharing personal brand experiences interfered with the purchase and consumption of LFBs being rooted in the personal feelings, customer satisfaction and brand uniqueness. On one hand, findings are embedded in literature explaining that LFCs who have a strong emotional bond with LFBs do not need to broadcast their purchases to larger audience (Loureiro *et al.* 2018) in order to receive approval as a source of validation of their purchase choices. On the other hand, the research demonstrated that knowledge about Gen Y's inclines to portray their luxury fashion possessions on SM is not necessarily applicable in the context of the studied sample. Specifically, in contrast to the belief about Gen Y's inclination to share their luxury fashion purchases on SM (Cristini *et al.* 2017) and the economic crisis impact on consumer desire to project symbols of status (Jones, 2016) the study supplied fresh insights as evidenced in the negative perception of show-off and snobbish behavior associated with posting luxury fashion purchases on SM. In light of this, it is suggested that the value of brand prominence as a means for improving the social standings is not a defining characteristic of Gen Y LFCs from SEE. This theoretical proposition was supported by an evidence that the participants were sensitive to the economic vibes in their countries, demonstrating respect toward the value of having the advantage to purchase LFBs. The research builds on existing literature about the implications of the past economic crisis on Gen Y's consumer behavior (Godey *et al.* 2016; Chaney *et al.*

2017) to improve our understanding of the online consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs in SEE by providing detailed information about the negative perception of show-off.

The research revealed males' interest to follow LFBs on SM. This finding extends on what is termed as 'obsession' as a core purchase driver (Loureiro *et al.* 2018), to demonstrate that obsession also has an impact on the online consumer behavior of male Gen Y LFCs. Within this reading, the qualitative research supplied a fresh perspective regarding the implications of customer satisfaction on the online consumer behavior of male LFCs. Based on these findings, it can be suggested that an aspect in the consumer experience which is often regarded as having a role only in the initial stages of building brand loyalty, namely customer satisfaction, especially in comparison to trust and commitment (Oliver, 1997; Jack and Powers, 2013; Watson *et al.* 2015), has a profound role in driving males' interest to follow LFBs on SM. By repeatedly emphasizing on males' pragmatic consumer nature (Fan and Miao, 2012; Folse *et al.* 2012; Chai *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013), the research uncovered that males' 'obsession' to follow LFBs on SM and reliance on previous purchase experiences is rooted in consumer laziness to explore other brand alternatives available on the market. Consequently, the research made a contribution to academic knowledge, being the first to extent the understanding of males' online consumer behavior on a regional level, with a focus on Gen Y LFCs from Romania, Bulgaria and Greece.

Finally, the research expanded on the importance of personal style for female LFCs, which also appeared to be the basis for their desire to share brands' posts on SM. The research steps on existing knowledge about the interdependent nature of females (Melnyk *et al.* 2009) and the use of SM for social support (Fan and Miao, 2012; Folse *et al.* 2012) to illuminate that the relationship between personal style and conformity to social expectations for diversity in females' fashion appearances may also have implications in the online consumer behavior of female LFCs in SEE. This was evident in the fact that female LFCs are likely to act in favor of LFBs which they perceive as close to their personal styles and/ or resemble with the appearances that they would like to be associated with through the choice and combination of the fashion items and brands they purchase. The following lines illustrate a discussion about the findings that pertain to the second research question.

7.2. Discussion of findings research question 2: What is the role of Social Media in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation Y male and female luxury fashion customers in the context of the past economic crisis?

The empirical data demonstrated that Gen Y LFCs are multifaceted and so are their views of the development of brand loyalty in the traditional luxury retail environment as opposed to on SM platforms. Albeit with the sample limitations, it is suggested that there are two main consumer segments of Gen Y LFCs. The first one perceives the in-store experience as the holy grail for the development brand loyalty. The empirical investigation uncovered that the experiential aspects of the traditional retail environment are significant factors in building brand loyalty among this consumer segment. This implies that the sense of brand loyalty originated from the Gen Y's loyalty bestowed to the shop assistants at the store. Thus, findings served to explain that the perspective of building brand loyalty in the traditional retail environment is based on loyalty toward shop assistants that in turn has implications on the sense of brand loyalty toward LFBs. This can be justified with consumers' need to be serviced and paid attention as a customer at an individual level. To the best of researcher's knowledge, this was the first exploratory investigation to uncover the impact of hedonic in-store experience on building brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs in SEE.

The second consumer segment is positive toward incorporating SM for attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs. However, the positive impact of SM on brand loyalty is possible only in cases when LFBs are not being tricked into losing their brand DNA and exclusive image. Findings can be explained with one of the main perceptions of LFBs that appeared to be a valuable antecedent for building brand loyalty, namely brand DNA. The study evidenced that whilst studied Gen Y LFCs expect that LFBs incorporate SM into their marketing, brands' efforts to respond to the consumers' expectation should not interfere with what appeared to be a crucial component in participants' perceptions of brands' images: their DNA. In light of these, the empirical investigation uncovered that preserving the strong brand identity as a core facet of LFBs has a great relevance to studied Gen Y's favorable attitudes toward LFB's SM marketing activities.

Gender similarities exist in the positive effect of personalized communication. Insights uncovered that personalized communication is the SM activity that has the potential to yield heightened sense of brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs. Essentially, Gen Y LFCs

who appraise the efforts that stand behind online personalized communication have preferences for the development of brand loyalty at a store revel. Hence, it is suggested that these consumers expect the same level of intimacy in online settings. It appeared that it was the common search for personal approach that was of great relevance for Gen Y LFCs. Thus, the empirical data served to explain the impact of ensuring an outstanding online consumer experience that makes Gen Y LFCs feel cherished and valued through personalized online customer communication.

The emerging findings traced in this qualitative research demonstrated that there are differences in the way male and female LFCs evaluate personalized communication on SM. Male LFCs are more receptive toward online communication that is based on tailored offers and brand/ product information adapted to their specific interests, tastes and needs. The underlining explanation could be that these consumers want to see messages specifically designed for them. Moreover, studied male Gen Y LFCs appreciate when brands put additional efforts to ensure customer indulgence. Subsequently, the emphasis on personalized communication for male LFCs can be explained with the notion that they judge the effectiveness of online personalized communication based on LFBs' commitment to master the art of transferring the exceptional in-store service in the digital universe to ensure delightful online communication experiences.

Moreover, a typical males' trait that emerged from the studied sample, was that this segment of Gen Y LFCs also has positive attitudes toward receiving discounts as part of personalized communication. The empirical data demonstrated that male Gen Y LFCs evaluate the effectiveness of online personalized communication based on LFBs commitment to maintain and develop customer relationships. This implied that brands that demonstrate compassion to customers' financial situations and brand loyalty by personalizing discounted offers have the chance to secure consumers' loyalty of those studied for a lifetime. Thus, the personal satisfaction from receiving tailored discounts surpasses the financial advantage per se, to influence consumers' emotions based on the perception that their loyalty has been granted with recognition. Herein, a noticeable pattern that emerged from the empirical investigation was that for studied male LFCs the emphasis is placed on online personalized communication at the post-purchase stage of the consumer experience.

On the other hand, female LFCs emphasized on the opportunity to have a direct online communication with LFBs. It can be theorized that in the in the digital age of collecting brand and product information and conducting purchases online, the studied female sample expects LFBs to replicate the in-store experience in the sense of receiving the necessary product/ brand information right on the spot. Put differently, this finding can be explained with the impulsive consumer nature identified among the studied sample of female Gen Y LFCs. In the context of gender differences in consumer behavior, the research uncovered that studied females are more likely to conduct impulsive purchases of LFBs. Building on this finding, it can be suggested that the need for direct online communication is a sign that female LFCs evaluate the online consumer experience on the basis of how online services (online communication) help them to make their purchase decisions. This explains that the female sample of Gen Y LFCs places value on online communication at the pre-purchase stage in online settings. Thus, the study provided meaningful details and insightful information about the preferred communication approaches based on the gender of consumers.

Recognizing the sample limitations, it is theorized that the purchase triggers for male LFCs are affected by exposure to celebrities on SM, and their influence was mounted in cases when the consumer perceives the celebrity as an organic fit to the brands' images. This also has an influence on the brand loyalty of those studied. Herein, it is proposed that male LFCs of those studied have a more idealized vision of their identities, evident in the celebrities' influence on their consumer behavior and the search of brands that would elevate their social standings. From a conceptual standpoint, the value of the research was that it helped to clarify that celebrities' influence on LFCs in SEE is dependent customers' gender. This also helped to illuminate that the gender of those studied is a defining factor in shaping the extent to which LFCs are susceptible to external influence.

By means of an empirical research, the research uncovered the positive impact of creative brand content on building brand loyalty among studied Gen Y LFCs. Notably, the segment of studied Gen Y LFCs has preferences toward the opportunity to build brand loyalty both in the traditional in-store environment and on SM. Findings implied that whilst participants appraised LFBs' efforts to respond to the new trends in the marketing domain caused by the rise of SM, their perspectives of creative SM marketing revolved around LFBs' presence on SM platforms whilst keeping part of the exclusive cachet

behind LFBs.The study revealed that the deep emotional arousal triggered by creative brand content stems from revealing part of the mystery behind the glamorous brand logos, with an emphasis on the humanity and authenticity of the brand as important prerequisites for the development of brand loyalty among studied Gen Y LFCs. Findings can be explained with the notion that creative SM marketing that emphasizes on authenticity, be that through revealing part of the work process or presenting more real faces, is the key to make studied Gen Y LFCs feel more connected to LFBs. To paraphrase, the more personal Gen Y consumers feel the brand, the higher prospects for SM marketing in encouraging their brand loyalty. Thus, the detailed knowledge about creative brand content that emerged from this research contributes to the growing discussions about Gen Y's brand loyalty by providing insightful information about the impact of SM marketing that goes beyond the traditional advertorial character on the prospects of nourishing brand loyalty toward LFBs.

Findings illuminated a distinct trait in the SM usage of studied Gen Y LFCs about their practice to take advantage of SM platforms because of the convenience to obtain brand information. Notwithstanding, studied Gen Y consumers disregarded the potential of informative brand content for nourishing brand loyalty. Instead, the research showed that for those studied the development of brand loyalty can only be nourished through the traditional in-store experience. This helps to explain that the importance of in-store experiences and satisfaction from previous purchase experiences are fairly influential factors among this segment of studied Gen Y LFCs. Therefore, an additional revelation from the research is that for a consumer segment of Gen Y LFCs informative brand content does not play a role in building brand loyalty due to their conventional perspective of brand loyalty being developed at a traditional retail format.

Further, although it can be argued that due to their age Gen Y LFCs do not have a sufficient experience prior to the economic crisis which occurred in 2008, a fresh perspective indicated that this consumer segment was also affected by disruptions in the economy. Whilst the financial downturn left its marks on the consumption culture of Gen Y LFCs, a cross-country comparison may offer fruitful insights into the implications of the past economic crisis on Gen Y LFCs based on the consumer psychology that appear as typical for each country. Focus in this discussion is placed on Greece, Romania and Bulgaria.

It would appear that Gen Y LFCs from Greece experienced the hardest impact of the past economic crisis. There are two possible scenarios that can explain this phenomenon. First, it is likely that these consumers had the opportunity to have access to LFBs at younger age due to reliance on finances from their parents. Thus, they were used to a more frivolous consumer behavior, such as buying large volumes of luxury fashion pieces and/or spontaneous purchases of LFBs, without being constrained by financial considerations. Second, the market structure in their home country (local flagship stores of LFBs in Greece) can also be considered to be the root for the early and frequent exposure to luxury fashion possessions. Combined, these aspects can explain that Gen Y LFCs from markets such as Greece experienced the hardest impact of economic crisis because of the subsequent stress of not having the chances for as frequent purchases of LFBs as before. In effect, such drastic changes in their financial freedom made it harder for this segment of Gen Y consumers to adjust to the new reality of limited financial abilities and the need to evaluate the purchase of LFBs. Moreover, the early possession of luxury fashion pieces can also be considered the reason behind the 'addiction' of buying LFBs due to the perception of status among other society members. Particularly, once these consumers are used to the social elevation that LFBs bring to their lives, they would likely embrace the chances to maintain their social standings through finding creative ways to purchase LFBs.

The economic crisis also left its marks on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs from Bulgaria and Romania. Nevertheless, in both instances, the ability to acquire LFBs for these consumers can be explained with the notion that they gained access to LFBs at a later stage of their lives. This may be due to either the fact that they were introduced to the luxury fashion consumption experience only after they started relying on their personal finances or because of the unavailability of local flagship stores in their home countries in the years prior to the economic crisis. Put differently, their consumer behavior in the post-crisis era is rooted either on the market structure or consumer psychology. In either of the cases, this means that Gen Y LFCs from Romania and Bulgaria did not experience the same level of difficulty to cope with the implications of the past economic crisis because they did not have access to LFBs prior to the financial downturn in 2008. In other words, these consumers were raised with a consumer mentality that does not necessarily involve the purchase and possession of LFBs. In effect, it would appear that the lack of accessibility to LFBs acted in favor of Gen Y consumers from Bulgaria and Romania. This means that their consumer behavior is based

on a more sober assessment of purchases of LFBs, which in turn helped these Gen Y LFCs to sustain their consumption habits.

Within the context of consumer values, there are differences among Gen Y LFCs from Romania and Bulgaria. As of the former segment, the value of perceived quality is of great relevance, defining the consumer behavior of Romanian Gen Y LFCs. In regard to the consumer behavior of studied Bulgarian Gen Y LFCs, it is based on the combination of perceived brand uniqueness and status display. These differences can be explained with the particular values in which Gen Y consumers were raised. Hence, the search for different benefits and values from the possession of LFBs is deeply rooted in the specific doctrines of different societies in these two countries.

Altogether, this means that whilst consumers from countries which are initially perceived as a region with common consumption characteristics and practices (such as Romania, Bulgaria and Greece) have different consumer behavior based on two aspects. First, the market structure: developed market – Greece versus developing markets: Bulgaria and Romania have an impact based on how early Gen Y consumers were introduced to LFBs. Second, a factor that influences the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs is the specific value systems in which they were raised. Thus, the research set out to understand the implications of the past economic crisis on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs based both the peculiarities of consumer values across countries and on specific market structures.

SM can be strategically used to attract, maintain and nourish brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs who were affected by the past economic crisis. This can be achieved either by increasing brand awareness and through launch of low-budget collections at more affordable prices. The benefit of the former strategy is that it can trigger purchase desire and boost the chances for building brand loyalty toward LFBs. The effect of this strategy can be explained with the consumer quest for LFBs. Whilst Gen Y consumers revised their consumption habits as a consequence of the past economic crisis, the desire for the opportunity to purchase LFBs outshines the financial considerations. This can be explained with the allure of brand image for LFBs.

In regard to the latter strategy, launch of low-budget lines, this speaks of the idea that whilst Gen Y LFCs have an experience with LFBs, their income levels are not sufficient

enough to afford themselves only high-end luxury fashion pieces. An additional perspective can explain the underlying reason for Gen Y's interest in more affordable luxury fashion items. Specifically, consumers who raised the idea of low-budget collections are from Bulgaria and Romania. These consumers are interested mostly in the brand uniqueness and quality of LFBs. In contrast, Gen Y LFCs from Greece look for opportunities to purchase LFBs mainly due to the status display. This serves to explain that Gen Y LFCs who are interested in aspects other than the perceived status of LFBs, such as uniqueness and quality, are also likely to purchase luxury fashion pieces which are positioned at a lower priced point. In contrast, Gen Y LFCs interested in the status symbol of LFBs do not appear to be potential customers for more affordable LFBs. The role of SM in the case of Gen Y consumers who are interested in more affordable LFBs is to raise brand awareness with the prospect of attracting and maintaining this consumer segment in the long term.

The following figure depicts the key findings that emerged from the research in regard to the second question, followed by a comparative review with existing knowledge.

Figure 7:2 Perceptions of Generation Y luxury fashion customers toward Social Media marketing for building brand loyalty toward luxury fashion brands
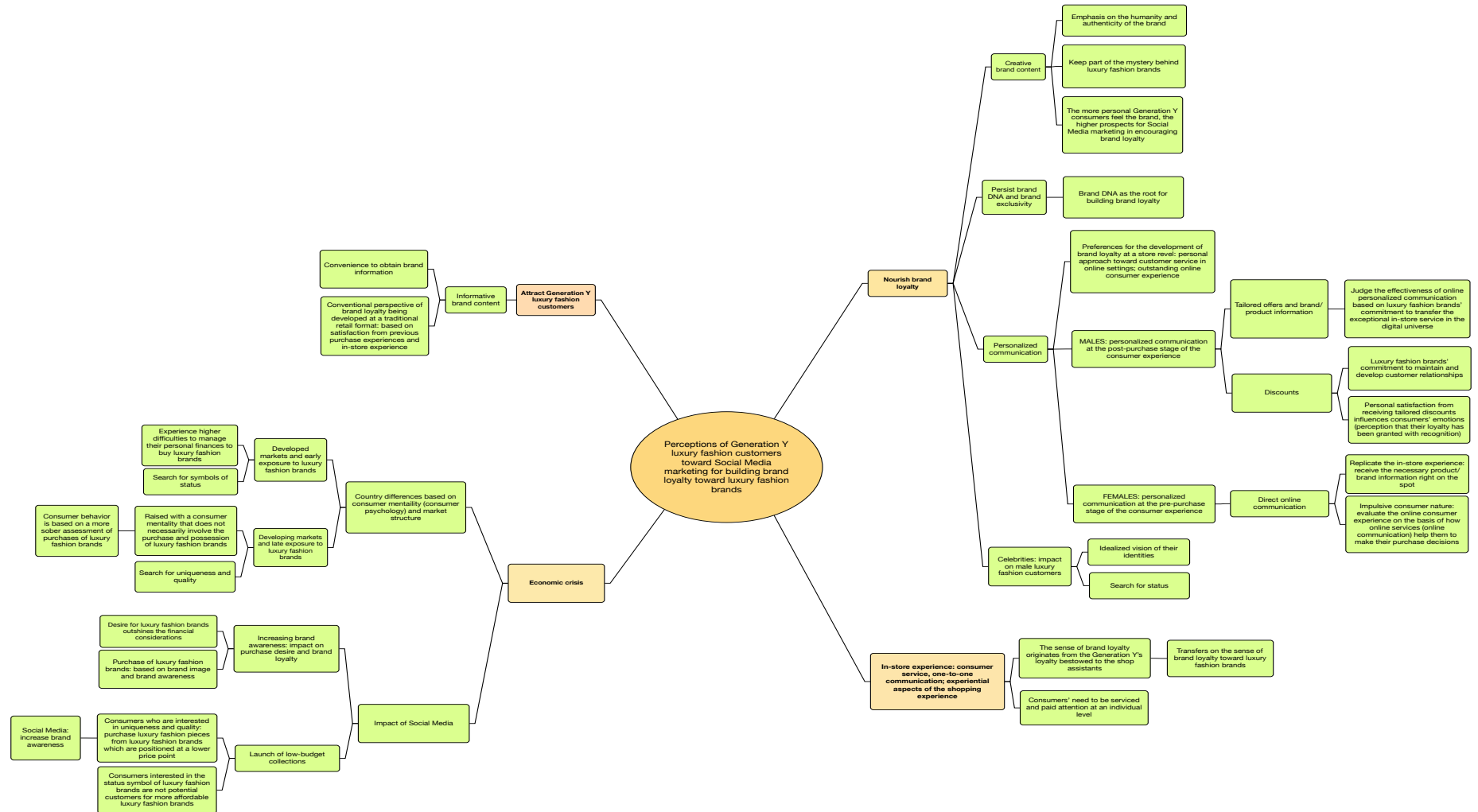
First, the research contributed to the theoretical discussion about the role of traditional retail experience as opposed to SM marketing for the development of brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs (Miguens and Vasguez, 2017; Donelly and Scaff, 2017; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017).

The empirical investigation uncovered that the outstanding customer service, one-to-one communication, and experiential aspects of the shopping experience (Herhausen *et al.* 2015; (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017) are significant aspects for building brand loyalty among studied Gen Y LFCs. The study steps on existing research about the positive impact of experiential in-store environment on Gen Y LFCs' purchase intentions (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017), to explain that it also has implications for boosting their brand loyalty. This was justified with the notion that the brand loyalty of studied Gen Y LFCs originates from customers' loyalty bestowed on the shop assistants at the store. Consequently, existing knowledge about personal service experience (Shukla *et al.* 2016; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Derville and Kapferer, 2018) and customer-salespeople relationships implications for the development of brand loyalty (Beatty *et al.* 1996; Coutler and Ligas, 2004; Reynolds and Beatty, 1999; Crewe *et al.* 2016; Stepień *et al.* 2016) appears to be applicable within the context of the studied sample. As of researcher's knowledge, this was the first exploratory investigation to uncover the power of hedonic in-store experience on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs SEE.

The study also contributed to the theoretical conversation about the impact of SM on Gen Y's brand loyalty toward LFBs (Bolton *et al.* 2013; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Postnord, 2016; Salman *et al.* 2016; Kapferer, 2018). This was achieved by revealing details about what in reality actual LFCs expect as SM marketing activities of LFBs. Extant research points toward the notion that Gen Y consumers are interested in engaging with brands on SM (Hollebeek *et al.* 2014; Loureiro *et al.* 2018), have positive attitudes toward SM marketing (Kamal *et al.* 2013) and prefer to build customer-brand relationships through SM (Gautam and Sharma, 2017). Whilst such claims hold true for part of the studied sample, the research also uncovered details which go beyond existing knowledge, indicating that particular SM marketing activities have implications for boosting brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs. Seemingly evident from the emerging data is that Gen Y LFCs appreciate when LFBs put efforts to respond to the expectations of the digital

consumer, however, not at the expense of losing their authenticity, exclusivity, and enigmatic images. Whilst the research builds on published literature about the positive impact of SM on brand loyalty toward LFBs (Kim and Ko, 2012; Loureiro *et al.* 2018), it reasons that previous studies emphasize on the impact of SM on Gen Y's brand loyalty (Kim and Ko, 2012; Cheah *et al.* 2016; Crewe, 2016; Thakur and Kaur, 2016; Shen *et al.* 2017; Loureiro *et al.* 2018) to the extent that it is already established as a rule of thumb which causes to overlook the idea that Gen Y consumers are sensitive to the efforts that stand behind the creation LFBs' identities and legacy. In doing so, it also advances knowledge with a focus on Gen Y LFCs from SEE by revealing how this consumer segment constructs meanings around SM presence of LFBs and the implications on their brand loyalty based on detailed insights about the SM marketing activities they appreciate the most.

The theoretical relevance of findings was strengthened by demonstrating that informative brand content is an important marketing strategy that would trigger an initial and ongoing interest in SM marketing activities of LFBs. Findings illuminated that the distinct traits identified in the SM usage of studied Gen Y LFCs are in line with what has been addressed by existing knowledge (Pantano and Priporas, 2016; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017) about their practice to take advantage of SM platforms because of the convenience to obtain brand information. It was outlined both by studied males and females. This finding bears an interesting point in light of existing knowledge. Specifically, previous research provides conflicting views about genders' habit to use SM for obtaining brand information (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Petra, 2016). By means of an empirical research, the study demonstrated that the convenience of having access to brand information on SM is equally appealing to both genders. Thus, from a theoretical implication aspect, the study demonstrated that LFBs which adopt a more flexible approach into incorporating SM to respond to Gen Y's need for convenience to obtain brand and product information have higher chances to attract and retain this demanding consumer group from SEE.

Yet, findings indicated that those studied disregarded the potential of informative brand content for nourishing brand loyalty. Although the researcher do not claim to provide a response to the existing debate about Generation Y's brand loyalty (Godey *et al.* 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Selvarajah, 2018), the argument is embedded in existing literature on brand loyalty as a relationship-construct (Fournier, 1998) and the role of satisfaction as a vital first step toward building brand loyalty (Oliver,

1997). Specifically, it would appear that for those studied customer satisfaction and emotional arousal necessary for the development of brand loyalty can only be experienced through the traditional in-store experience.

Creative brand content appeared as an aspect that attracts Gen Y's attention and boosted the sense of brand loyalty. This can be explained with the notion that by purchasing a LFB, consumers do not simply buy a quality product, they purchase part of the brand's history, values and lifestyle philosophy (Krepapa *et al.* 2016). By extending on previous findings, the research supplied valuable evidence about the importance of persisting brand DNA, with an emphasis on brand identity and authenticity on SM. Theoretically, this means that findings from previous studies about the positive impact of creative brand content on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs (Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Shen *et al.* 2017) have relevance to the consumer psychology of those studied. Findings closely resemble the idea that by finding innovate ways to tell more about brands' stories, values and identities helps for the development of brand loyalty (Haumann *et al.* 2014; Papandrea, 2019). Consequently, the research furthered our understanding about the value of creative brand content for Gen Y LFCs from SEE. This was achieved by providing fresh insights into the debate about the value system of the new wave of LFCs (Kapferer and Bastein, 2009; Kapferer, 2015) such as the studied sample from SEE as opposed to the belief that Gen Y consumers are interested in learning more about the brands' identities and stories (Krepapa *et al.* 2016). In doing so, the research responded to the call for a better understanding about the impact of SM marketing activities of LFBs on attracting and retaining Gen Y consumers from different countries and regions (Lin *et al.* 2016; Rovai, 2018).

The research also provided insights about Gen Y's search for personal touch in the online consumer experience that was of relevance to the development brand loyalty. This was reflected in the emphasis of personalized communication. Thus, it would appear that existing knowledge about Gen Y's mindset with emphasis on the sense of feeling cherished (Herhausen *et al.* 2015) applies within the context of those studied. The research helped to enrich our knowledge about Gen Y LFCs who reside in SEE, by supplying evidence about the positive impact of personal/ human touch through SM communication for the development brand loyalty. In doing so, the research also answered to the call for a multi-country investigation to gain a better understanding of

gender differences in the perceptions of SM marketing activities of LFBs (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017).

Specifically, by elaborating on existing knowledge about young consumers' tendency to use SM because of the opportunity to receive discounts (Pantano and Priporas 2016; O'Reilly *et al.* 2018), an additional revelation referred to the emotional aspect of receiving discounts for studied male LFCs. Although the financial benefit of purchasing LFBs at a fraction of the cost cannot be left unattended, which is explained with the Gen Y consumers' disposable incomes (Giovannini *et al.* 2015), participants' reference to personalized discounts with emphasis on their brand loyalty and the past economic crisis helped to broaden the luxury brand loyalty literature, with a focus on Gen Y LFCs from SEE. The personal aspect of receiving discounts indicated that there is an emotional factor attached to the opportunity to save from luxury fashion purchases. Thus, the personal satisfaction from receiving tailored discounts surpasses the financial advantage per se, to influence consumers' emotions based on the perception that their loyalty has been granted with recognition. The author employs the relationship theory (Fournier, 1998) as an enabling lens to explain that the sense of mutual commitment has positive influence not only on consumers' desire for repeated in-store experience (Coutler and Ligas 2004; Borghini *et al.* 2009) but also on the expressed tolerance toward LFBs' online communication designed to foster consumer retention through the appropriate mechanisms (such as personalized offers based on consumers' purchase histories).

Building on the importance of understanding gender differences in the perceptions of SM marketing activities of LFBs (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017), the study also reported that for the studied segment of female LFCs the value of online personalized communication is based on the opportunity for direct communication with LFBs. This finding was explained with the impulsive consumer nature of female consumers (Shukla *et al.* 2013). Thus, the research steps on existing knowledge about gender as an influential factor in shaping consumer behavior to explain that the need for direct online communication is a sign that female LFCs evaluate the online consumer experience on the basis of how online services (online communication) help them to make their purchase decisions. An important revelation from the research also referred to celebrities' influence on studied male Gen Y LFCs. It is proposed that male LFCs have a more idealized vision of their identities, evident in the celebrities' influence on their consumer behavior and the search of brands that would elevate their social standings.

From a conceptual standpoint, this closely resembles existing knowledge about males' consumer behavior being driven by social comparisons in search for their idealistic identities (Cheah *et al.* 2015; Shamila, 2018; Raisanen *et al.* 2018). Henceforth, the value of the research was that it helped to clarify that celebrities' influence on LFCs in SEE was dependent customers' gender.

Additionally, the theoretical considerations of the research lie in improving our understanding of how such events as the past economic crisis has relevance to the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al.* 2016). In doing so, it provided a response to the call for an additional research in the context of the past economic crisis' impact on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Chaney *et al.* 2017), with a focus on consumers who reside in SEE. This research steps on existing knowledge suggesting that consumers cut back but did not completely disappear as a result of the financial crisis (Lockrem, 2013) to fill a gap in the luxury brand loyalty literature by furthering our understanding about the crisis' influence on Gen Y's consumer behavior. Based on the empirical evidence, the research argues that Gen Y consumers tend to spend a substantial proportion of their budgets on LFBs (Mamat *et al.* 2016).

Instead, it provided fresh insights into the manner Gen Y LFCs manage their finances and re-evaluate their consumption habits. The exploratory investigation broadened the luxury brand loyalty literature by demonstrating that while the crisis effect was inevitable for studied Gen Y LFCs, the country comparisons (Godey *et al.* 2016) allowed to suggest that the principal traits of Gen Y's search for LFBs were rooted in the specific social dogmas in each of the countries. Consequently, the research revealed that Gen Y LFCs who were raised in what can be considered a developed country (Greece) were in fact interested in the status symbol of LFBs. By contrast, Gen Y LFCs who were raised in what emerged from the research and recognized by literature as developing countries due to their history of being ruled by communist parties, Bulgaria and Romania (Ranova, 2006; Ciornea, 2014), place emphasis mostly on the brand uniqueness and quality.

This is in sharp contrast with existing knowledge suggesting that consumers in Western cultures value the private meaning of luxury consumption whilst consumers who have been recently introduced to the luxury consumption experience are interested in the brands' status and look for opportunities to show-off with their possessions (Wong and

Ahuvia,1998; Okonkwo, 2010; Kapferer, 2015; Stepień *et al.* 2016). Thus, as evidenced from the studied sample it may be misleading to place all developing versus developed countries under one common dominator. The exploratory investigation discovered that the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs should be understood both from market structure and consumer psychology (social dogmas) in which consumers were raised. The contextual rather than general focus of the research allowed to explain that the effect of the economic crisis on consumers' desire to demonstrate prestige (Jones, 2016) has relevance on consumers who despite of being raised in developed countries, perceive LFBs from a social elevating perspective. By contrast, consumers who were raised in developing markets and with consumer mentality that does necessarily involve the possession of LFBs are more cautious about their spending habits and place emphasis on uniqueness and inner satisfaction from product quality (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012; Alvandi *et al.* 2013; Hur *et al.* 2014; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). Consequently, the value of the research is that it demonstrated how the past economic crisis influenced the personal and interpersonal values (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999) that shape the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs with a focus on a consumer segment from SEE.

The research also supplied empirical evidence into the role of SM for attracting and retaining consumers in the post-crisis era. One of the identified strategies referred to increasing brand awareness. This is explained with brand image and brand awareness as core prerequisites for customers' steadiness to competitive offers (Keller, 1993). Whilst the past economic crisis left its marks on Generation Y's consumption habits and caused a shift in consumer values and consumer behavior, brand awareness and brand image are still strong predictors of brand loyalty in today's world of digitalization. Another emerging strategy referred to the launch of low-budget lines. The research builds on existing knowledge about the value of mass prestige or masstige LFBs offered at lower prices to respond to the needs of the young consumers whilst not putting at risk the scarcity value (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016; Kradisching, 2015; Derville and Kapferer, 2018; Loureiro *et al.* 2018) to highlight that this strategy may be used to create more affordable collections that will appeal to consumers both through financial and visual stimuli, but without losing the exclusive image of LFBs whilst SM may appear to be the perfect platform to stimulate consumers' interest, purchase desire and brand loyalty. Thus, this research filled a gap in the luxury brand loyalty literature by furthering our understanding about the crisis' influence on Gen Y's consumer behavior, also considering SM as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs from SEE.

In all, a detailed evaluation of the findings as presented in the discussion chapter and the summary figures (*figure 7:1* and *figure 7:2*) demonstrated that there are six main emerging aspects that assist in the quest to provide detailed insights and offer meaningful information about the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs. These are presented in *figure 7:3* which serves as the basis for presenting the main theoretical and practitioner implications. The following chapter presents the main theoretical, practitioner and methodological implications. It also introduces the reader to the main research limitations and suggestions for future research.

Figure 7:3 A holistic framework of the main characteristics that identify the consumer behavior of Generation Y luxury fashion customers
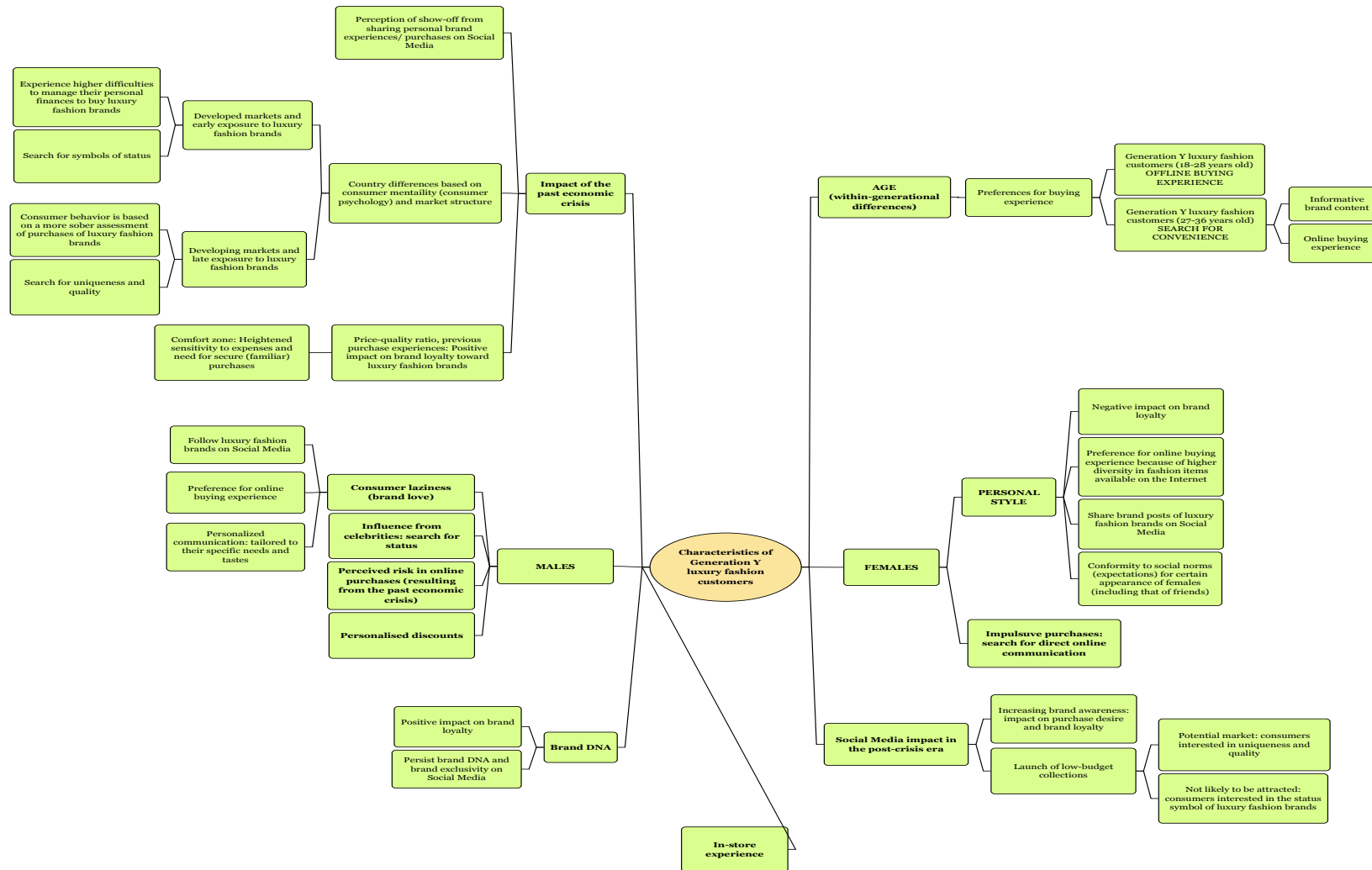
Chapter 8 CONCLUDING REMAKRS

The chapter presents the main theoretical implications drawn from the research, along with the practical, managerial and methodological insights to demonstrate the value of this research to the theory and practice. The next section of the thesis identifies some of the research limitations. It is important to acknowledge these limitations in order to allow readers to make their own conclusions about the value of this research, and to discuss the opportunities for further research. The chapter is finalized with the main conclusions drawn from the findings.

8.1. Theoretical implications

This section attempts to highlight the new theoretical propositions that emerged from the findings and to suggest how the current knowledge about Gen Y's consumer behavior, with a focus on gender differences, SM impact on brand loyalty toward LFBs and the impact of the past economic crisis is extended by this research. The most significant findings that emerged from this research are: 1) gender differences, 2) age: within-generational differences in consumer preferences for in-store buying experience versus online buying experience, 3) in-store experience, 4) economic crisis impact on the consumer behaviour of Generation Y LFCs, 5) emphasis on brand DNA and 6) Social Media in the post-crisis era.

8.1.1. Gender differences

Previous studies suggest that male LFCs are more likely to perceive LFBs as a means for self-expression and self-presentation in the society (Räisänen *et al*. 2018). On one hand, this is quite self-explanatory given the recognition of status for males in published literature which is mostly quantitative and with focus on brand prominence (Cheah *et al.* 2015; Levy and Loken, 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Shamila, 2018; Räisänen *et al.* 2018). On the other hand, studies suggest that whilst females involve in creative-counter conformity (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; O'Cass, 2001; Tian and McKenzie, 2001) and in search for symbols of uniqueness (Appleford, 2015) their consumer behavior is also based on interdependence (Melnyk *et al.* 2009). As evidenced from the exploratory investigation, personal style appeared as a typical female consumer characteristic. The research contributed to the theoretical discussion about brand loyalty of Gen Y consumers (Godey *et al.* 2013; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Fernandez *et al.* 2016; Selvarajah, 2018) by showing that personal style is a barrier to the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs.

This finding is in sharp contrast to studies suggesting that satisfaction from the hedonic and symbolic benefits contribute to the development of brand loyalty (Choi *et al.* 2016; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). In this context, the finding about personal style was explained with conformity to social expectations for diversity in females' appearances. Thus, the exploratory investigation also responded to the increased interest to comprehend gender consumer behavior and brand loyalty in the context of LFBs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Levy and Loken, 2015; Appleford, 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016; Roux *et al.* 2017). As outlined in published literature, globalization impact is evident in diverse consumer segments from various geographies (Liu *et al.* 2016; Kapferer and Laurent, 2016), who are motivated by different values from the luxury experience (Sauer and Teichmann, 2013). By supplying fresh insights to the call for a better understanding of gender differences among young consumers from emerging markets (Räisänen *et al.* 2018) the research provided detailed insights into the underlying aspects related to personal style that prevent female LFCs to develop brand loyalty toward LFBs.

In addition, previous studies provide cohesive arguments that Gen Y consumers are often seduced to share their product and service experiences on SM (Nadeem *et al.*2015; Kohli *et al.* 2015). This also leads to the belief that LFBs can use this at their advantage by offering unique content (Godey *et al.* 2016), giving consumers a reason to share more about their favorite brands on SM. This research uncovered that whilst females are more likely to share posts of LFBs on SM platforms, this was explained with the importance of personal style and/ or sharing posts of LFBs which resemble with the identities that female LFCs would like to be associated with. Thus, the exploratory investigation responded to the call for an additional research in the context of obtaining a better comprehension about gender differences in online consumer behavior of Gen Y consumers (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016). Subsequently, the emerging findings contributed to the theoretical discussion about the role of gender as having a relevance in the online consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs to demonstrate that females demonstrate a behavior of brand ambassadors in case when they perceive LFBs as close to their personal styles and/ or they would like to be associated with.

Within the context of personal style, the research revealed that this consumer characteristic has implications on the choice of online buying experience for female LFCs. Existing studies acknowledge the impact of SM on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs regarding their choices of buying experience (Bolton *et al.* 2013; Nadeem *et al.*

2015; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). However, confusion originates from conflicting views about Gen Y's preferences for a buying experience (Naylor et al. 2008; Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Crewe, 2016; Cristini *et al.* 2017; Miguens and Vasuguez, 2017). Thus, on one hand, the research answered to Verhoef *et al.* (2009), Verhoef *et al.* (2015), Nadeem *et al.* (2015), Grewal *et al.* (2017), Makkar and Yap (2018) suggestion to investigate how SM influenced the preferences for buying experience in the luxury fashion domain with a focus on understanding the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs. This was done by showing the perceived benefits of online buying experience for female LFCs. Specifically, the empirical evidence demonstrated that the choice of online buying experience for female LFCs is rooted in the search for diversity in fashion items to choose from to match consumers' personal styles. In this context, as evidenced from the research for a segment of male LFCs the preference for online buying experience is based on consumer laziness and perceived risk in online purchases.

Thus, by stepping on published literature about males' pragmatic consumer behavior (Fan and Miao, 2012; Folse *et al.* 2012) and the value of personal style for females (Appleford, 2015) the research contributed fresh insights to the debate about gender differences in shopping channel choices (Brosdahl and Carpenter, 2011; Kim and Lee, 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016). This was achieved by unearthing the possible impact of the past economic downturn on the consumer psychology of male Gen Y LFCs. In effect, the research provided detailed information about the motivational factors that shape the preferences for online consumer behavior based on the gender of Gen Y LFCs.

Extending on the findings about males' online consumer behavior, the research uncovered that this consumer segment is more likely to follow LFBs on SM based on customer satisfaction from previous purchase experiences. This finding was explained with consumer laziness and the notion that following brands on SM facilitates future purchases for male LFCs. Previous studies suggest that one of the main challenges ahead of LFBs refers to their distant and exclusive nature as opposed to the open and accessible nature of SM (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Okonkwo, 2010; Kapferer and Bastein, 2012; Quan and Shen, 2017). An important acknowledgement refers to consumers' interest to follow brands and fashion trends on SM in order to gain inspiration for ideas (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Deloitte, 2016; Saric, 2017). Nevertheless, part of this knowledge is based on practitioner articles, rather than on academic research. Moreover, in light of existing

knowledge highlighting females' addiction to SM (Raïes and Perret, 2013; Belás *et al.* 2015) as opposed to males' ignorant consumer nature (Chai *et al.* 2012; Okazaki *et al.* 2013) the research may provide a meaningful information about the deep psychology of male LFCs which will be helpful in building concrete knowledge about the significant role of customer satisfaction for boosting males' interest in following LFBs on SM.

Furthermore, studies in the SM-LFBs dyad report that online communication presents a beneficial SM marketing strategy that can ease LFBs to overcome the challenge of building brand loyalty via the traditional retail format as opposed to SM (Dion and Arnould, 2011; Kim and Ko, 2012; Kapferer and Bastein, 2015; Godey *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). Notwithstanding, a recent study highlights the need for a better comprehension of SM role for building brand loyalty toward LFBs (Koronaki *et al.* 2018). The empirical evidence illustrated that the effectiveness of online personalized communication is dependent on the gender of Gen Y LFCs. This was performed by showing that male LFCs appreciate tailored communication including personalized discounts whilst females are interested in direct online communication with LFBs and/or multi-brand online stores that offer LFBs. Thus, the research builds on existing knowledge about females' impulsive consumer behavior (Shukla *et al.* 2013) to demonstrate that it also has implications on the perceptions of SM activities. Furthermore, whilst existing knowledge provides coherent views about the positive impact of personalized attention and rewards on females' brand loyalty (Melnyk *et al.* 2009; Porter *et al.* 2012) this research revealed that personalized attention and discounts have positive implications for the development of brand loyalty among male LFCs. This can be explained with the financial aspect of acquiring LFBs (Shukla and Purani, 2012; Chandon *et al.* 2016) as a basis for males' positive perceptions of individualized attention as part of online communication with LFBs. Hereafter, the research contributed to luxury brand loyalty literature by supplying evidence to the increasing interest in understanding gender differences in perceptions of LFBs' SM marketing (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Shephard *et al.* 2016; Ko *et al.* 2019).

Finally, the research uncovered that exposure to celebrities on SM has implications on nourishing brand loyalty among male Gen Y LFCs. Findings were explained with males' consumer behavior based on idealistic identities and the search of brands that would elevate their social standings. This argument is embedded in published literature discussing males' search for status (Levy and Loken, 2015) being driven by consumers'

social needs through the display of costly signals of wealth (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Shamila, 2018; Räisänen *et al.* 2018) to further acknowledge how this male trait has implications toward the positive perceptions toward SM marketing activities of LFBs. Thus, the research stepped on knowledge about conspicuous consumption (Vigneron and Johnson 1999; Wiedmann *et al.* 2009; Walley *et al.* 2013) to improve our understanding about consumer reactions to SM marketing activities based on consumers' gender (Gautam and Sharma, 2017).

8.1.2. Age: within-generational differences

The research uncovered within-generational differences among Gen Y LFCs. This was identified in the context of preferences for buying experiences. The empirical evidence demonstrated that Gen Y LFCs who are 18-28 years old prefer the in-store experience due to their need to feel special, valued and appraised as customers of LFBs. By contrast, Gen Y LFCs who are 27-36 years old prefer the online buying experience due to perceived convenience both in context of online purchases and obtaining brand/product information.

On one hand, findings are embedded in published literature discussing the magic power of in-store experience on consumers' purchase stimuli and brand loyalty (Rao and Monroe, 1989; Naylor *et al.* 2008; Kapferer, 2015; Crewe, 2016; Ko *et al.* 2016; Liu *et al.* 2016; Kim *et al.* 2016; Shukla *et al.* 2016; Derville and Kapferer, 2018; Loureiro *et al.* 2018; Shamila, 2018), whilst recognizing that the online retail environment allures to consumers mainly due the convenience of overcoming time and space boundaries (Pantano, 2013) compared to the limitation of store location in the traditional buying experience (Pantano and Priporas 2016; Foroudi *et al.* 2018). The empirics pointed to a segment that is still sentimental toward the exceptional in-store experience, supporting prior works (Stepień *et al.* 2016; Donelly and Scaff 2017), while also being explicit about the impact of perceived convenience on Gen Y consumers who value opportunities that contribute for their work-life balance (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Derville and Kapferer, 2018).

On the other hand, the emerging data reflected consumer traits that can be exclusively relevant for Gen Y consumers depending on the age segment to which they belong. Findings endorsed to the notion that whilst Gen Y consumers share similar consumer characteristics toward LFBs, there are also within-generational differences in the

underlying motives and perceived benefits in the choices of online versus traditional retail experience. The study elaborated on existing research which increasingly toys with the idea that it is challenging to understand the preferences for buying experience of Gen Y LFCs (Naylor *et al.* 2008; Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Crewe, 2016; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Cristini *et al.* 2017; Miguens and Vasguez, 2017). However, an identified gap in existing studies is that they are interested in understanding preferences for buying experience with a focus on Gen Y consumers at 18-24 years old (Lues and Klark, 2016; Pantano and Priporas, 2016) or generational differences capturing a wide range of perspectives from consumers at the age 32-72 years old (Kim and Lee, 2015). As of researcher's knowledge, the only research that captures a bigger portion of Gen Y consumers is focused on females and it is based on quantitative mode of inquiry (Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Thus, based on the *"philosophical understanding of the role of methodology in the overall evaluation process"* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 871), the qualitative stance of the research allowed to provide detailed insights about the notion that Gen Y consumers should not be placed under a common dominator as a consumer segment that shares exactly the same consumer characteristics.

8.1.3. In-store experience

Extant research discusses the value of emotional and symbolic values, outstanding customer service, one-to-one communication, and social-experiential aspects of the shopping environment as important aspects for ensuring positive experiences, attraction and retention of Gen Y consumers (Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017). The empirics pointed to a segment that is sentimental toward the exceptional in-store experience, supporting prior works (Stepieñ *et al.* 2016; Donelly and Scaff, 2017). Findings also highlighted the importance of in-store experience as an essential component for building brand loyalty toward LFBs. Thus, whilst supporting existing studies in the field of hedonic in-store experience (Naylor *et al.* 2008; Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Crewe, 2016, Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017) the research supplied additional evidence about the invaluable role of outstanding customer experience at the traditional retail format. The theoretical relevance of the research to the luxury brand loyalty literature is that it provided detailed insights and meaningful information to the existing debate about Gen Y's preferences for in-store experience versus online buying experience. In doing so, it extended to the theoretical discussion by emphasizing on the impact of hedonic in-store experience on brand loyalty toward LFBs with a focus on Gen Y LFCs.

8.1.4. Economic crisis impact on the consumer behavior of Generation Y luxury fashion customers

First, the relationship between price and perceived quality (Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Wiedmann *et al.* 2009) is widely acknowledged by literature. Notwithstanding, an existing discussion among scholars is the importance of gaining a better understanding of the perceptions and motives that stand behind the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Schade *et al.* 2016; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Räisänen *et al.* 2018). This research picked up on the trend of understanding how consumer values function among Gen Y LFCs (Butcher *et al.* 2017), to demonstrate the positive impact of perceived price-quality ratio on brand loyalty toward LFBs. In this context, existing research about Gen Y's consumer behavior is mostly quantitative or focused on understanding the importance of status among Gen Y consumers (Shukla, 2010; Kim and Jang, 2014; Kim and Lee, 2015; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Cheah *et al.* 2015; Mamat *et al.* 2016; Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016).

By contrast, the qualitative nature of this research allowed to unearth the importance of satisfaction from previous purchase experiences for Gen Y LFCs for whom what is known refers to their low or limited income levels, little attention to their debts, being referred as HENRY's and their ability to mix and match LFBs with more affordable items (Kradisching, 2015; Cardamenis, 2015; Mamat *et al.* 2016; Mendes, 2016). Part of this knowledge is based on practical articles, instead of thorough academic studies. Hereafter, this exploratory investigation also contributed to the theoretical discussion about the tendency of Gen Y consumers to develop brand loyalty (Godey *et al.* 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Selvrajah, 2018). This was achieved by providing an empirical evidence about the possible implications of the past economic crisis on Gen Y LFCs' preferences for familiar/ secure purchases based on perceived price-quality ratio and satisfaction from previous purchase experiences. Altogether, it would appear that the brand loyalty of Gen Y LFCs can be explained with the past economic crisis impact on consumers' preference or desire to stay in their comfort zones of making reliable purchases.

Second, an interesting revelation from the research referred to the perception of show-off, which apart from being rooted in the customer satisfaction and personal feelings of the consumption experience, is largely defined by the implications of the economic crisis on the online consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs. Thus, the research contributed to the

theoretical understanding of Gen Y's online consumer behavior for whom a consistent perception refers to their consumer practice of sharing brand experiences/ purchases on SM (Baron, 2015; DeMers, 2017). Nevertheless, as of researcher's knowledge, most of this information stems from practitioner articles. Henceforth, in contrast to the common belief that Gen Y LFCs are seized by the glamour and lavish looks of LFBs (Cristini *et al.* 2017) and that the economic crisis triggers a desire to project their status (Jones, 2016) the exploratory investigation supplied insights into the manner the past economic crisis has implications on the online consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs, evidenced in the perception of show-off in sharing personal brand experiences/ purchases on SM. The originality of the research stems from the lack of existing empirical evidence about the consequence of the economic crisis on the online consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs. Specifically, it provided fresh insights into the consumer psychology of what is regarded as an important endeavor to understand the online consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs as a valuable consumer segment for LFBs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Bhaduri and Stanfoth, 2016; Kapferer and Laurent 2016; Butcher *et al.* 2017; Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017) by illustrating the implications of the economic crisis on the negative perception of show-off and snobbish behavior of sharing personal brand experiences/ purchases on SM.

Finally, a persistent view among academics is that the driving forces shaping consumption behavior can be significantly influenced by certain events, triggering consumers' desire to embrace LFBs' ability to elevate their social positions (Jones, 2016). The research uncovered that whilst the effect of the past economic crisis was a uniform factor defining the consumption behavior of Gen Y LFCs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Godey *et al.* 2016; Chaney *et al.* 2017), the underlying motives of persisting the habit of buying LFBs differs even across countries. As illuminated from the emerging data, these motives are rooted on the peculiarities of consumer psychology and market structure. The research demonstrated an empirical evidence about the impact of the past economic crisis on the personal and interpersonal values (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999) that shape the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs. Consequently, it uncovered specifics to the existing puzzle about the consumer behavior of consumers who have been recently introduced to LFBs, consumer behavior of consumers who are used to the opportunity for luxury fashion possessions (Wong and Ahuvia,1998; Okonkwo, 2010; Kapferer, 2015; Stepień *et al.* 2016) and the knowledge of Gen Y's experience with LFBs at younger age (Shea, 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015). To the best of researcher's knowledge, there are only three

studies that investigate the impact of the past economic crisis within the context of luxury fashion consumption. However, whilst existing knowledge offers fruitful insights, it is mostly quantitative in nature (offering representative examinations rather than deeper comprehension of the research phenomenon), with a focus mainly on college students (thus neglecting Gen Y consumers who are established in the workforce) or are interested in the effect of the financial downturn on counterfeit purchases (Lodes and Buff 2009; Kraj, 2015; Priporas *et al.* 2015). Herein, the theoretical value of this research lies in the fact that it proposes a fresh perspective about the implications of the past economic crisis on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs with a focus on understanding the underlying drivers and motives for luxury fashion consumption.

8.1.5. Emphasis on brand DNA

Published literature discusses that the traditional values LFBs rely on might no longer by applicable among Gen Y consumers (Kradisching, 2015). On one hand, this is the root for the common inclination that LFBs need to capitalize on the shift in young luxury consumer behavior, by moving away from celebrating their own heritage towards responding to consumers' needs and expectations (Gautam and Sharma, 2017). On the other hand, this can be explained with the focus that previous publications place in the quest to understand Gen Y consumer behavior. To the best of researcher's knowledge, existing studies are mostly focused on the role of brand prominence and status consumption for Gen Y consumers (Shukla, 2010; Kim and Jang, 2014; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Cheah *et al.* 2015; Kim and Lee, 2015). At the same time, there are conflicting views about the consumer behavior of the new wave of LFCs, interested mostly in the brands' logos (Han *et al.* 2010; Mehmedovic and Agic, 2015; Kapferer and Bastein, 2009; Kapferer, 2015) coupled with the recognition that Gen Y consumers are interested in learning more about brands' myth and stories (Krepapa *et al*. 2016). From this stance, the research contributed to the theoretical discussion in the context of age as an influential factor on the perceptions toward LFBs (Schade *et al.* 2016; Kapferer, 2018). Specifically, it uncovered valuable information about the role of brand DNA for building brand loyalty toward LFBs among Gen Y LFCs. In this way, the exploratory investigation contributed to the discussion about Gen Y's brand loyalty (Godey *et al.* 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Selvarajah, 2018) by supplying detailed information about brand DNA (Dubois and Peternault, 1995; Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Okonkwo, 2007; Atwal and Williams, 2009) as an essential aspect that has implications on the development of brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs.

Further, studies report that Gen Y consumers are interested in engaging with brands on SM (Loureiro *et al.* 2018), demonstrate positive attitudes toward SM marketing (Kamal *et al.* 2013) and the positive impact of SM on brand loyalty (Kim and ko, 2012; Loureiro *et al.* 2018). Moreover, extant research emphasizes on creative and engaging brand content along with recognizing the importance of communicating brands' values in an open and honest manner on SM (Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017; Shen *et al.* 2017; Gautam and Sharma, 2017). However, an identified gap in published literature is that previous research is focused mostly on a single SM platform/ set of platforms or is mostly interested in understanding the females' perceptions toward SM marketing (Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Krepapa *et al.* 2016; Boardman and McCormick, 2018; Mazzoli *et al.* 2019). Thus, the value of findings about the emphasis on maintaining brand DNA and exclusivity on SM in the context of LFBs' presence on SM and creative brand content is twofold.

First, the research offered insights about the positive perceptions of online presence of LFBs and creative brand content both for male and female Gen Y LFCs. Thus, it responded to the call for a better comprehension in the role of gender in perceptions of SM marketing (Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Verlato, 2018; Ko *et al.* 2019). Second, the research stepped on existing knowledge about consumers' interests to learn more about brands' lifestyles, identities, craftmanship and values (Krepapa *et al.* 2016; Papandrea, 2019) to uncover a detailed information about perceptions of SM marketing activities and the aspects Gen Y LFCs appreciate as part of creative brand content. The exploratory investigation advanced knowledge by revealing how Gen Y consumers construct meaning around SM presence of LFBs and the implications for building brand loyalty toward LFBs. Thus, the research contributed to the luxury brand loyalty literature by providing fresh insights to the discussion about SM impact on nourishing brand loyalty toward LFBs dyad (Koronaki *et al.* 2018) and the debate about finding creative ways to transmit brand DNA on SM to appeal to Gen Y consumers.

8.1.6. Social Media in the post-crisis era

Existing research increasingly toys with the idea of improving our understanding how such events as the economic crisis has relevance to the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al.* 2016; Chaney *et al.* 2017). Whilst studies provide cohesive data about the value of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs among Gen Y consumers (Kim and Ko, 2012; Loureiro *et al.* 2018), there is lack of evidence about the role of SM for

attracting and retaining Gen Y consumers in the quest for building brand loyalty toward LFBs by taking into consideration the implications of the past economic crisis. This highlights the still embryonic stage of research in the context of the past economic crisis with a focus in obtaining a better comprehension about SM role for building brand loyalty toward LFBs, the growing importance for the luxury brand loyalty literature, and the subsequent need of acquiring additional insights. The research uncovered that whilst Gen Y LFCs were affected by the past economic crisis, SM can be successfully utilized to attract and retain this consumer segment. This was demonstrated by emphasizing on the value of increasing brand awareness on SM and promoting the launch of low-budget collections. This research contributed with an empirical evidence about the limited-or lack thereof- knowledge in the context of SM impact on brand loyalty toward LFBs among Gen Y LFCs by reflecting the implications of the past economic crisis.

Overall, the research picked up on the trend of understanding Gen Y consumer behavioural traits by also having theoretical considerations about the gender of consumers. This helped to fulfil a gap in existing literature in the context of the SEE region by uncovering what has been addressed as an important aspect for theory and practice, namely identifying the underlying motives that drive luxury fashion consumption among young male and female luxury fashion customers (Shephard *et al.* 2016; Roux *et al.* 2017) and the role of SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs (Koronaki *et al.* 2018; Ko *et al.* 2019). Based on the key emerging findings, the preceding section discusses the main practitioner implications.

8.2. Practitioner implications

The first aspect referred to ***personal style*** for female LFCs. This holds important information for LFBs operating in the SEE region. Personal style appeared as the driving force that defines the consumer behavior of female LFCs, the search for direct communication with LFBs online, preference for online buying experience and willingness to share posts of LFBs on SM. Personal style emerged as a barrier toward the development of brand loyalty. Thus, the consumer behavior of female LFCs can be influenced through personalized in-store experience. Chances are they will appreciate an expert that will help them to add fashion pieces that will match their wardrobe styles. These shop assistants can adopt the role of personal stylists, helping female customers to choose the best outfit based on their body types and appropriate choice of color scheme. LFBs can implement a software that will help them to keep track of previous purchases. This will have implications in terms of having a better understanding of the style preferences of female customers. A possible outcome will be that female LFCs will return to the flagship stores of LFBs based on the perception that they will be offered fashion items that will match their personal styles.

The emphasis on personal style also has implications on the preference for online buying experience. A possible rout for LFBs is to emphasize on styling fashion pieces, instead of presenting them as separate items. This can be achieved by working with fashion styling experts who will put together the different fashion items to develop overall styling looks that will appeal to female consumers who base their purchase decisions on personal style. Whether the stylist is part of the employees working for the LFBs or are hired on an outsourcing contract, his or her job will be to put together fashion pieces for photoshoots that will be later uploaded on the brands' websites and/or multi-brand online stores that sell LFBs. In this context, personal style appeared to be the root for females' willingness to share posts of LFBs on SM. LFBs can also take an advantage of the photoshoots and beside presenting them on their official websites and multi-brand online stores, they can also post this content on SM platforms. A possible outlet for showcasing the styled fashion looks can be Instagram. It allows sharing of posts of other people and brands. This can be a valuable strategy especially as Instagram removed the following activity tab in 2019 (Meisenzahl, 2019). This allowed people to easily see what likes their friends' likes and follows on the platform. Without this activity, the chances for attracting more attention to brands' posts becomes a more challenging task. Thus, LFBs can work

on developing content that will appeal to female customers, triggering their desire to share it on their personal Instagram feeds. An alternative approach will be to work with bloggers and/or vloggers who are perceived as fashion gurus amongst their audiences. They can present brands' clothes as part of styling an entire outfit. In both cases, the task ahead of LFBs is to become famous as consumers' 'go-to experts' and provide content that highlights brands' value for consumers as being more than simply selling glamorous fashion pieces.

Additionally, the research uncovered that the impulsive consumer behavior of female LFCs has an impact on their preferences for direct online communication with LFBs or multi-brand stores that sell LFBs. Whilst multi-brand stores offer the opportunity for direct communication, it is a rare occasion that consumers have the opportunity for direct online communication with LFBs via their official websites. It is possible that LFBs have not implemented this option due to the emphasis on maintaining their exclusivity. On the other hand, LFBs can think of offering customers the opportunity for direct online communication via Instagram. The platform is perceived as appropriate for maintaining LFBs' exclusive image whilst also giving consumers a peak to their glamorous fashion creations. In this way, LFBs can maintain part of the mystery whilst also responding to consumers' needs and expectations.

The second factor referred to ***consumer laziness*** for male LFCs. Satisfaction from previous purchase experiences was the key trigger that encouraged male LFCs to design a list of top favorite LFBs and stick to them without the need to explore other alternatives on the market. This has implications on the consumer behavior of male LFCs, their preferences for online buying experience and interest to follow LFBs on SM. Most often, customer satisfaction was the result of superior product quality. Therefore, the task ahead of LFBs operating in the SEE region or looking forward to expanding their customer base is to ensure that they persist the quality of clothing pieces. In this way, LFBs can ensure brand loyalty of male LFCs that goes beyond simple re-purchase behavior, including in online settings, but also a loyal customer base of brand followers on SM. Moreover, the identified consumer laziness was also the root for the positive perceptions of personalized online communication that focuses on consumers' personal tastes and needs, based on the purchase history of each individual customer. Subsequently, LFBs can benefit from this insight and apply strategies that will help to improve their knowledge about individual customer needs and preferences on a regional level. This can be achieved via developing

a customer relationship software that will help local brand managers of LFBs to analyze and understand the needs of their loyal customers who belong to the Gen Y male consumer segment.

In the context of male consumer behavior among Gen Y LFCs, the research uncovered that *celebrities* have an impact on their purchase desires and brand loyalty toward LFBs. LFBs can use this at their advantage and emphasize on celebrity endorsement. The collaboration with celebrities can also be promoted via SM platforms. However, it should be performed with caution, meaning that LFBs should select carefully the celebrities they work with. This means that the choices of famous faces that represent LFBs should align with brands' images and identities. Otherwise, they would run the risk of losing loyal male LFCs. If selected properly, LFBs would have the chance of increasing their loyal based of male LFCs.

The research identified *age differences* in Gen Y's preferences for a buying experience. Based on the empirical data, the research allowed to arrive at the theorization that there are two main consumer segments among studied Gen Y LFCs, based on identified within-generational differences. The first segment consists of Gen Y consumers at the age of 18-28 years old. They value the in-store hedonic experience. Even though there is no rule book for customer service, findings highlight that LFBs looking forward on capitalizing on this consumer segment can put efforts into ensuring an outstanding consumer service. This would suggest the importance of personnel training in order to ensure a unified customer service across countries. Altogether, these aspects of in-store experience present the core stone for customer engagement at a store level, which would ultimately result in brand loyalty in the long term.

The second segment consists of Gen Y consumers at the age of 27-36 years old. Mindfull of the sample limitations, what these insights indicated was that LFBs should enhance the online buying experience by improving the decision-making process at the pre-purchase assessment and search for information stages of the buying process. A possible route for marketing practitioners will be to expand the opportunities for online browsing and purchases (as consumers appreciate the opportunity to find better deals online, browse for product/ brand information, purchase luxury fashion items in a convenient manner also in cases of limited physical store availability). Thus, acknowledging the context in which the sample was chosen (Gen Y consumers who reside in SEE), a possible approach will

be to enhance the convenience of online buying experience. Whilst the e-commerce of luxury fashion brands is already an existing fact, to the best of researcher's knowledge, some of the online multi-brand stores do not offer delivery to all of the countries that were part of the research. This does not imply that LFBs should become as accessible as fast fashion brands. Instead, the emphasis is on the recognition that there is a consumer segment in SEE whose consumer behavior and loyalty deserves brands' attention. Thus, it will be of great value if LFBs offer and improve the deliveries in this region. This suggestion is tailored toward brands' official websites and online multi-brand stores such as Net.A.Porter, Yoox.com, Luisaviaroma.com and Farfetch.com which are famous for offering luxury fashion brands.

As of the convenience in obtaining brand information online, it is suggested that LFBs should think of incorporating SM in order to keep young LFCs aware of brands' news. This would include collections, style ideas, fashion trends, and relevant brand information. Importantly, the platforms that brands can use include Pinterest and Instagram. This suggestion was based on the fact that these were cited as the most appropriate SM platforms by participants. Whilst this might not secure Gen Y's loyalty, it is a promise for customer attraction. Eventually, LFBs can use the advantages of these platforms to tailor the ads and information they provide based on clients' specific search interests.

Further, LFBs can develop strategies to shift the use of desktop SM tools toward mobile/ smart technology applications to improve the browsing, purchase and search for brands or online stores. Although consumers in this study did not specifically outline the need to integrate mobile applications to improve the online buying experience, this suggestion was based on consumers' explicit emphasis on convenience. Thus, inspired by the recent works of Pantano and Priporas (2016), Priporas *et al.* (2017) and Foroudi *et al.* (2018), whose studies were conducted in the United Kingdom and Italy, and in other product categories (including clothing), the author proposes that a possible route for LFBs is to follow the examples from other industries and adopt smart/ mobile technologies according to the specifics of the sector and the particular characteristics of Gen Y consumers.

Another emerging characteristic of Gen Y LFCs referred to the emphasis on ***in-store experience*** as a key factor that contributes for the development of brand loyalty toward LFBs. An uppermost task for LFBs is to focus on ensuring memorable, outstanding and exceptional consumer experiences. Triggering consumers' interest to experience the in-store environment is only part of the efforts required to retain customers in the long term. The task ahead of LFBs is to find ways to personalize the product and in-store experience in order to create that special place for young LFCs. As each individual customer has his or her subjective vision of outstanding in-store experience, LFBs should find the perfect balance between leaving customers to browse through the fashion pieces on their own whilst also assisting them with personalized service attention and customer-centric approach.

As noted, there are within-generational differences in the preferences for buying experience. In the reality of multi-channel touch points (Foroudi *et al.* 2018) and emphasis on in-store experience for building brand loyalty, LFBs can offer a customer experience that is both customized and flawlessly integrated both online and offline. A possible strategy would involve what the recent partnership between Gucci and the online luxury retailer Farfetch introduced as the *"The store of the future"* (Woodworth, 2019). The in-store technology allows customers to log in their Farfetch accounts and staff members can also see details about customers' profiles (wish lists, browsing histories and purchase histories). In this way, Gen Y luxury fashion shoppers have the opportunity to receive personalized attention, which can also have an impact on brand loyalty. The advantage of this technology for store assistants is that they can improve the customer-centric approach with minimal efforts required.

Findings also pointed to the importance of persisting the ***brand DNA*** for Gen Y LFCs. This would involve persisting the brands' DNA in terms of the future collections that differentiate each LFB. Henceforth, LFBs should also keep their own identities embraided into the styles of the clothes in order to keep their loyal customers.

LFBs should also embrace SM as a valuable tool for attracting and retaining the segment of Gen Y consumers. If LFBs manage to escape from their image of exclusivity toward a more inclusive and friendlier approach this would likely increase the opportunities for building a devoted customer segment of Gen Y loyalists. By obliging to customers' expectations to open the gates to LFBs' mystic world, SM is the necessary 'evil' that would help brands to get closer to Gen Y LFCs of those studied. However, LFBs' efforts to respond to the customers' lifestyles and expectations, should not interfere with what appeared to be a crucial component in participants' perceptions of LFBs: their DNA. Brands should incorporate SM into LFB's marketing whilst persisting the brand DNA with emphasis on exclusivity, uniqueness, history, traditions, craftsmanship and brands' cultures.

The same applies for *creative brand content*. The key point was that LFBs should escape from the traditional advertorial character via showing real people in their campaigns, promoting their CSR activities, and revealing part of the work process. Altogether, these aspects promoted the idea that since it is not in the human nature to react well to redundancies, fashion can be perceived as an antidote of boredom. Therefore, there should always be something innovative that keeps customers' attention. Findings pointed out that the same applies for SM brand content. Henceforth, the task ahead of LFBs that are interested in attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs from SEE is to always find a way to surprise this consumer segment with interesting and inspiring content that reveals part of the mystery and makes customers feel closer to the brand by replacing the glossy models with more real faces and showing the humanity of the brand through promoting CSR activities.

Moreover, the research uncovered the implications of the *past economic crisis* on Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region. This was outlined in the context of consumer behavior, online consumer behavior and prospects for attracting and retaining Gen Y consumers via SM. As of the former aspect, the research uncovered that the past economic crisis boosted their sensitivity to the price-quality ratio. The investigation revealed that Gen Y LFCs are price sensitive and perceive the purchases of LFBs from an investment perspective. LFBs cannot risk their exclusive images by dropping the prices or compromise the quality of their fashion pieces. An alternative approach would be to introduce low-budget lines. Similarly, to the concept of masstige brands (Kapferer and Laurent, 2016; Kradisching, 2015; Loureiro *et al*. 2018), this can be done by developing new brands, offered at lower

price-points that will carry the prestige of the main brand, whilst be promoted as a separate brand on the market. The benefit of this strategy is that it will appeal to consumers with visual and financial stimuli, whilst it will not compromise the prestigious images of the main LFBs. Another option would be to collaborate with fast fashion brands and offer lower-priced collections (similarly to the collaborations of H&M with luxury fashion designers and LFBs such as the collaboration between Versace and H&M).

Findings demonstrated that although the economic crisis had seemingly similar behavioral implications on Gen Y LFCs, the post-crisis crisis consumer behavior implied that the specific social norms, values and beliefs are of considerate relevance for the Gen Y's continual desire toward LFBs. From this perspective, it is suggested that LFB's strategies to attract and retain Gen Y's LFC should be based on country segmentation. Precisely, the proposed marketing tactics for each of the countries are as follows: 1) Greece: emphasis on status elevation, 2) Bulgaria: status and mostly brand uniqueness, 3) Romania: emphasis on the quality of LFBs.

Moreover, the research supplied evidence for the financial downturn impact on Gen Y LFC in the context of SM role for attracting and retaining this particular consumer group. Based on the analysis, it is suggested that appropriate strategies would be to: 1) offer discounts (both personalized and as a uniform marketing campaign on SM), 2) introduce low-budget lines for Gen Y LFCs in Romania and Bulgaria, 3) find innovative ways to appeal to Gen Y LFCs who are otherwise reluctant to foresee the opportunities offered by SM because of their personal preferences or financial situations for Gen Y LFCs in Bulgaria and Greece: this can be achieved by raising brand awareness.

Finally, as evidenced from the research, the economic crisis also had an impact on *the negative perception of show-off in sharing personal brand experiences on SM platforms*. This perception was rooted in the personal aspect of consumption, including personal brand experiences, customer satisfaction and perceived brand uniqueness. From practitioner standpoint, findings indicated that LFBs operating in the SEE region or are interesting in attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs should not put significant emphasis on their status and prestigious images. This is of crucial importance especially as those studied were sensitive to the economic vibes in their home countries. Instead, the focus should be placed on ensuring outstanding customer satisfaction, the symbolic role of brand uniqueness.

The discussion highlighted the theoretical and practitioner implications. Besides, it is also imperative to highlight how the research assisted in contributing to methodology.

8.3. Methodological contributions

First, the research was approached in two phases including FGDs and individual interviews. As of researcher's knowledge, there is no existing research that combines these two research methods within the context of the research phenomenon in the SEE region. The first phase was conducted via FGDs and the second phase encompassed individual interviews. In effect, the research was valuable in providing evidence about the significance of combining qualitative research approaches in studies interested in understating the reality as multifaceted rather than singular (Giddens, 1974; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The adoption of FGDs and individual interviews had an invaluable role in demonstrating the richness of theoretical and practitioner insights that can emerge from a qualitative research approach. This was a significant as it assisted the researcher to capture detailed insights when the study presents a relatively new topic area. Such was the case of SM impact on brand loyalty in the context of the past economic crisis among Gen Y LFCs in SEE.

Furthermore, the approach toward investigating the research phenomenon was to employ a qualitative research methodology. In doing so, the research laid the grounds for further studies that would seek to expand academic knowledge by investigating the phenomenon of SM for building brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs in SEE. The qualitative stance of the research was what helped the researcher to investigate a previously under-studied region, namely SEE, in order to understand the complex nature of Gen Y's LFCs mindset, consumer behaviour, preferences for a purchase approach and the influence of SM for building brand loyalty within the context of the past economic crisis. The use of qualitative research inquiry enabled the researcher to obtain fresh insights into Gen Y's mindset about questions that pertained to the research topic. In effect, this appeared of immense value for uncovering essential themes and properties that altogether constructed the reality as seen and experienced by those studied.

Finally, the research also contributed to practice and knowledge by being presented in some of the most prestigious and recognized conferences in the Marketing field. For detailed reference of the conferences, please refer to *appendix 2*. As uncovered the exploratory investigation produced important implications for theory, practice and methodology. However, the research was not free of limitations. These are thoroughly presented in the following section.

8.4. Limitations

The acknowledgement of the research limitations will likely enable the readers to evaluate the significance of the research. Moreover, by identifying the limitations helped the researcher to arrive at suggestions for further research. The chapter is concluded by presenting a conclusion to the investigation of SM impact on brand loyalty toward LFBs among Gen Y LFCs.

First, an important limitation referred to the English language. Specifically, both the FGDs and the interviews were conducted in English. This put a burden to some participants in focus groups to express themselves in the best way they would like. As a result, the researcher included the criteria of fluent English for the main study. However, even though participants were selected also on the basis of their English language skills, perhaps if they had the opportunity to express themselves in their own language, they would have provided more detailed responses. Nevertheless, this was an important criterion for two main reasons. First, given that the research was conducted among three countries, the option for English was the most reasonable one. Second, researcher's personal experience from previous research in Master thesis demonstrates that the context of the responses can be lost if one is to translate interviews from one language to another.

The second limitation referred to the information sheet. Although it was compulsory and useful part of an ethical qualitative research, the researcher noticed one negative aspect. Specifically, as all participants read the information sheet, for some of them this affected their responses. They tried to incorporate SM as part of their responses in the first part of the interview. The researcher explains this with the fact that as they were aware of the context of the research, participants were trying to be helpful with their responses.

However, perhaps a less detailed information sheet would have been a better option, as this would not "direct" participants towards the "right" answers.

Third, the research did not take an advantage of incorporating written questionnaires that have part of the interview questions. This would have allowed to capture a bigger sample. Throughout the process of data collection, the researcher recognized that some prospective participants would have been ready to take part in the research if they had the opportunity to provide their answers in a written form. Therefore, the lack of questionnaires (similar to the questioning route) was a missed chance to capture bigger segment of the target sample. In effect, future studies looking to understand Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior and the impact of Social Media can perhaps incorporate questionnaires in addition to individual interviews in order to get fuller picture of luxury fashion consumption in SEE and the impact of Social Media for building brand loyalty among Gen Y consumers.

The fourth limitation referred to the small sample size. The research was conducted only with a selected number of participants, who fulfilled certain criteria (following the purposive sampling technique). Therefore, findings cannot be generalizable for bigger proportion of the population in the selected countries. A subsequent research can expand findings via quantitative methods.

Finally, a limitation was related to the lack of experience and/ or training in conducting qualitative research. This is regarded as a limitation because the researcher recognizes she does not possess the full range of abilities and knowledge that a professional researcher would have. This is limitation also stems partially from the fact that the researcher obtained her knowledge from books and articles on the topic as well as on her own experience in qualitative research (from conducting FGDs as part of the pilot study and individual interviews for her MA thesis).

8.5. Suggestions for further research

First, further research in the field of SM for building brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs can focus on exploring how the age of consumers influences their consumer behavior. This suggestion is based on findings about age as a barrier to celebrities' influence, as defining perceptions of other people and as a barrier toward sharing personal brand experiences on SM. Although the research produced valuable insights into the role of age for shaping the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs, findings were based on a minority of studied Gen Y LFCs. Thus, further endeavors could extend the understanding of age as an influencing factor for the consumption patterns of young LFCs in SEE.

Second, the exploratory investigation uncovered that bloggers have an important role for driving purchase desires and brand loyalty among female Gen Y LFCs in SEE. However, this theorization is based predominantly on findings from a small portion of participants in individual interviews. Whilst the study enabled to inform the behavioral implications of bloggers on those studied, future research could expand the understanding of the underlying aspects that make bloggers an influential aspect in luxury fashion consumption among Gen Y in the SEE region.

Further, the findings from individual interviews supplied important evidence about the value of CSR among studied Gen Y LFCs. This was an essential revelation being the first to highlight the value of communicating CSR activities via SM for boosting LFBs' images among Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region. However, this theorization was based on a small portion of interviewed participants. Thus, it requires further investigation in order to further our understanding of promoting CSR activities on SM for influencing the purchase desires and brand loyalty of Gen Y LFCs in SEE.

Fourth, professional background appeared to have behavioral implications on Gen Y's online behavior and purchase of LFB in order to build a professional image. Whilst this aspect emerged both in FGDs and individual interviews, it was outlined by a minority of studied Gen Y LFCs. Henceforth, further endeavors can perhaps elaborate on this aspect as an influential factor shaping the offline and online consumer patterns of Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region.

Fifth, seemingly impulsive shopping appeared to be exclusively relevant for studied females who took part in both phases of the research. However, as with other aspects, it was not classified as a major emerging theme. An evidence for this theoretical proposition was that individual interviews also uncovered that male LFCs can also exert an impulsive shopping behavior. In light of these, it is suggested that further research can address the underlying reasons that drive LFC to be seduced by impulsive purchases. Academic knowledge can also be enriched by investigating how these differ among male and female LFCs in SEE.

Sixth, within the context of celebrities' influence, a notable aspect was that participants outlined Kim Kardashian as a face they would not like to see as a brand ambassador of LFBs. Moreover, the analysis of individual interviews revealed that the choice of celebrity personality should be carefully aligned with LFBs' images and identities. Nonetheless, as valuable as these insights were for contributing toward understanding of the mindset of Gen Y LFCs, they did not present a major emerging theme. Therefore, further research can illuminate the importance of collaborating with famous people that are perceived in a positive way by the public.

Moreover, a notable finding referred to the perceived status of LFBs by male LFCs. This aspect emerged in FGDs and individual interviews. However, in both cases it was outshined by the importance of brand uniqueness, brand DNA and the perception of show-off in sharing personal brand experiences on SM. Nevertheless, the empirical investigation allowed to inform that LFBs have a social elevation aspect for male LFCs. Yet, this suggestion was based on the small portion of studied male LFCs. Thus, further research can provide more comprehensive insights into the role of LFBs for communicating one's status position among young male LFCs. This will yield valuable contributions to theory as current findings are not applicable for bigger portion of the population in SEE. Future studies can also investigate the role of SM for building brand loyalty among Gen Y LFCs by expanding on other countries in SEE beyond those that were part of the research (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece). Finally, throughout the discussion the researcher pointed to segments among Gen Y LFCs that emerged from the empirical data. However, the researcher did not take an advantage of typology. The use of typology will help future researchers to better cluster empirical data and outline clearer distinctions among emerging consumer segments (Makkar and Yap, 2018), thus, improve their ability to highlight the novelty in identified characteristics of Gen Y LFCs.

8.6. Conclusion

The empirical investigation answered the key research questions: *1) What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behavior?* and *2) What is the role of SM in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation male and female LFCs in the context of the past economic crisis.* The theoretical contribution of the research is threefold. First, by means of a qualitative research, it provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape Gen Y's perceptions toward LFBs, consumer behavior, online consumer behavior, perceptions of SM marketing activities of LFBs, with an emphasis on understanding gender differences, and the implications of the past economic crisis and the role of SM in attracting and retaining Gen Y consumers by having in mind the impact of the past economic crisis on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs. Based on the key emerging findings, the research provided a holistic framework that illustrates the main Gen Y's consumer characteristics. The six main consumer characteristics identified in this research are: 1) gender differences in consumer behavior, online consumer behavior and perceptions of SM marketing activities of LFBs, 2) within-generational differences in preferences for a buying experience: preference for in-store buying experience among Gen Y LFCs who are 18-28 years old due the need to feel valued, cherished and appraised as LFCs and preference for online buying experience among Gen Y LFCs who are 27-36 years old due to perceived convenience , 3) in-store experience for building brand loyalty toward LFBs, 4) emphasis on brand DNA, 5) impact of the past economic crisis and 6) Social Media role for building brand loyalty in the post-crisis era. This will hopefully be of assistance to scholars and practitioners to understand the focal aspects that can be considered as relevant to Gen Y LFCs. In effect, the insights obtained from this research can also help to grasp the key aspects based on which Gen Y LFCs can be more predictable in their consumer behavior.

Second, drawing on an exploratory study of Gen Y LFCs from selected countries in SEE (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece), the research contributed to the luxury brand loyalty literature by providing insights into existing debates and issues identified in extant research. These are: **1)** age as an influential factor on the perceptions toward LFBs (Schade *et al.* 2016; Kapferer, 2018) and growth of luxury: risk of damaging the luxury concept versus persisting the core of the luxury concept (|Kapferer, 2012; Kapferer, 2015; Kapferer and Florence, 2016; Chandon *et al.* 2016; Derville and Kapferer, 2018;

Kapferer, 2018), **2)** how consumer values function among Gen Y consumers: emphasis on product quality versus emphasis on service experience, individualistic versus susceptible to friends' influence, emphasis on product quality versus emphasis on conspicuousness (Kim and Brandon, 2010; Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Shukla *et al.* 2016; Butcher *et al.* 2017), **3)** brand loyalty of Gen Y LFCs (Godey *et al.* 2013; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017; Selvarajah, 2018), **4)** preferences for in-store buying experience versus preferences for online buying experience (Naylor *et al.* 2008; Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Ramadhoni *et al.* 2015; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Nadeem *et al.* 2015; Crewe, 2016; Miguens and Vasguez, 2017; Gautam and Sharma, 2017), **5)** SM role for building brand loyalty toward LFBs (Kim and Ko, 2012; Cheah *et al.* 2015; Thakur and Kaur, 2016; Crewe, 2016; Shen *et al.* 2017; Loureiro *et al.* 2018; Koronaki *et al.* 2018), **6)** gender role in consumers' choices for a buying experience, **7)** gender differences in perceptions of SM marketing (Raïes and Perret, 2013; Belás *et al.* 2015; Gautam and Sharma, 2017), **8)** challenges related to implementing SM for building brand loyalty toward LFBs: image control, distance versus availability, traditional media and in-store experience versus SM, transmitting brand DNA on SM (Fernandez, 2009; Rapp *et al.* 2013; Kamal *et al.* 2013; So *et al.* 2013; Nyvseen and Pedersen, 2014; Harmeling *et al.* 2015; Kapferer, 2015; Kapferer and Bastein, 2015; Godey *et al.* 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Shen *et al.* 2017; Kapferer, 2018; Verlato, 2018; Papandrea, 2019), **9)** new wave of LFCs versus Gen Y consumers' exposure to LFBs at younger age (Wong and Ahuvia,1998; Okonkwo, 2010; Kapferer, 2015; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Stepień *et al.* 2016) and **10)** implications of the economic crisis on the consumer behavior of Gen Y consumers (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Chaney *et al.* 2017).

Being exploratory driven, however, the research did not seek to generalize findings about the questions that pertained to the research topic. Instead, the use of direct quotations to highlight the key insights was performed to allow readers to formulate their own conclusions about the findings (Hunt, 2011). More so, the use of purposive sampling technique helped to capture a wide variety of customer perspectives, allowing readers to make their own interpretations about the applicability of findings (Merriam 1998). Future research can provide additional insights that will strengthen the reliability and applicability of the research phenomenon.

Third, by presenting an empirical data from countries outside West Europe or emerging markets such as China and India can also help to broaden the luxury brand loyalty

literature by introducing novel insights into an existing research phenomenon in other regions worldwide (Karatzas *et al.* 2019).

The rationale behind choosing Bulgaria, Romania and Greece for the study on Gen Y LFCs is twofold. First, despite the economic slowdown the region is expected to demonstrate a growing trend in luxury fashion consumption, especially by Gen Y consumers (Stamule and Todea, 2017). Second, whilst knowledge about Gen Y consumer behavior in the luxury fashion domain is indisputable, interest in additional research inquiry was triggered by the lack of clear conceptualization of Gen Y LFCs from SEE (Bezzaouia and Joanta, 2016). Although previous studies paved the way toward a better comprehension of the invaluable role of Gen Y consumers for the prosperity of LFBs (Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Bhaduri and Stanfoth, 2016; Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017), based on the outlined gaps in extant research and the presented literature review it appeared that there is lack of clear conceptualization about Gen Y LFCs from SEE. On the other hand, existing studies clearly point to the value of cross-country comparisons both in terms of understanding gender differences among Gen Y LFCs (Bhaduri and Stanforth, 2016; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017) on a regional level (Mehmedovic ang Agic, 2015). Thus, by conducting a comparison from the three countries (Godey *et al.* 2016), helped the researcher to determine common geographic basis for the study, which allowed to focus on the essential component of the research: explore, identify and understand luxury fashion consumer behavior. Research on a regional level proved meaningful as apart from Croatia, these are the only countries in SEE with an EU membership.

To the best of researcher's knowledge there was no empirical investigation about SM role in the context of the past economic crisis, let alone the countries that were part of the research (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece). Thus, this research bridged the gap by furthering our understanding about the crisis' influence on Gen Y's consumer behavior, by also considering SM as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining Gen Y LFCs who reside in SEE. Consequently, in achieving the research objectives by also identifying differences/ similarities among the selected countries the research not only offered theoretical contributions to the luxury brand loyalty literature, but it also provided insightful knowledge for luxury fashion marketers looking forward to expanding brand presence and attract local Gen Y customers.

Generation Y consumers are of substantial importance for the future of the LFBs and their purchase power will continue to grow (Giovannini *et al,* 2015). Therefore, the value of understanding how LFBs can successfully implement SM marketing and communication strategies for nourishing brand loyalty of this consumer segment will not diminish any time soon. This exploratory investigation produced important implications for theory and practice. The researcher was also able to identify areas for further research. Altogether, these aspects presented the main conclusions drawn from the research that was conducted in two phases (pilot study via FGDs and a main study via individual interviews). In light of these, the following table presents a summary of the main theoretical and practitioner implications and how these helped to fulfil the identified gaps in academic literature and achieve the research objectives. This is accompanied by illustrating the main areas for further research.

Table 8:1 Summary of investigation findings, theoretical, practitioner implications and propositions for further research

Gaps	Investigation findings (emerging themes)	Theoretical implications	Practitioner implications	Further research
"It is conceivable that age not only moderates motives for luxury consumption but also the actual perception of what luxury constitutes" (Schade *et al.* 2016, p. 320) *"Understanding how consumers in a wide variety of countries may conceptualize luxury differently is an important starting point and a relevant consideration in the formation of a definition of luxury brands"* (Ko *et al.* 2019, p. 412) **Objective 1: Investigate Gen Y luxury fashion customers' perceptions of luxury fashion brands**	1.quality-price ratio 2.consumer distinctiveness 3.brand uniqueness	1.the study furthered our understanding of Gen Y's perceptions toward LFB among luxury fashion customers from the SEE region 2. Gen Y females' tendency to practice dissimilarity is inherently encoded in their consumer behavior and purchase choices. -communicating one's identity through clothing is exclusively relevant to female LFC 3. Gen Y LFC from SEE value brand DNA, evident in the findings about the emphasis on persisting brands' DNA on SM	1. introduce low-budget lines; collaborate with fast fashion brands and offer lower-priced collection; persist the quality of their collections, whilst also making sure that the price covers the utilitarian product features 2. marketing, communications and in-store service strategies should be crafted with caution by paying attention on the value of personal style and self-identity as a pivotal moment in the decision-making of studied Gen Y female LFC 3.incorporating SM into LFB's marketing whilst persisting the brand DNA with emphasis on exclusivity, uniqueness,	-research about age as an influencing factor on Gen Y LFC's consumption behavior (consumer distinctiveness) -research about impulsive shopping (price)

			history, traditions, craftsmanship and brands' cultures -persisting the brands' DNA in terms of the future collections that differentiate each LFB	
As shopping behaviours change, it becomes increasingly important to understand the mechanisms of change […] Male and female consumer behaviors continue to change with each generation and are impacted by changes within society […] (Shephard *et al.* 2016, pp. 5-15) *[…] the traditional gender gap is diminishing. This trend questions the origins and motives of gender differences in luxury consumption* (Roux *et al.* 2017, p. 102)	1.celebrities' influence 2. friends' influence 3.in-store experience 4. previous purchase experiences	1. male luxury fashion customers of those studied have a more idealized vision of their identities, evident in the celebrities' influence on their consumer behavior and the search of brands that would elevate their social standings. 2. whilst having a personal style, females are in fact susceptible to friends' influences. This also signified signs of group belongingness 3. in-store experience the holy grail for the development brand loyalty. -the sense of brand loyalty originated from interviewees' loyalty bestowed on the shop assistants at the store	1. the choices of famous faces that represent LFBs should align with brands' images and identities. Otherwise, they would run the risk of losing loyal male LFC. If selected properly, LFB would have the chance of increasing their loyal based of male LFCs 2. provide small symbolic gifts for friends at a store level. -invite LFC's peers to act as fashion influencers (both in offline and online context) -invite friends to visit a selected fashion conference for free or to visit the brand's headquarters. -promote the symbol of group belongingness in their	-professional background (celebrities' influence) -impulsive shopping (in-store experience and impulsive shopping) -status (celebrities' influence)

[...] differences in motivation for luxury consumption between product and service categories, by gender, and by culture, is in need of additional study [...] Future research that investigates what consumer values or motivations to consume are most impactful in luxury consumption would also be valuable" (Ko *et al.* 2019, pp.411-412) **Objective 2: Explore gender differences in consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers**		-power of hedonic in-store experience on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFC in the SEE region 4. By a means of an exploratory research, it could be theorized that brand loyalty and consumer behavior are highly influenced by satisfaction, which also increases purchase desire and customer commitment of Gen Y LFC from SEE	marketing campaigns in order to appeal to this segment of female LFCs 3.LFBs should put efforts into ensuring an outstanding customer service. This would suggest the importance of personnel training in order to ensure a unified customer service across countries	
*[...] empirical research on Generation Y, which tends to be an ideal group to focus on in online settings, seems to be scarce. Therefore, it is vital to study the **online and social networking patterns of Generation Y**, because these behaviors are likely to*	1.Online purchases 2.Convenience of online shopping 3.Perception of show-off in sharing personal brand experiences on Social Media	1 and 2 this research is the first in the SEE region to demonstrate that Gen Y LFC take advantage of SM for their browsing and purchase activities 3. for Gen Y LFCs in the SEE region the act of sharing personal brand experiences interfered with the purchase	1 and 2 LFBs should acknowledge that whilst Gen Y LFCs from the SEE may not present as big market as in some other world regions, there are consumers who are even ready to sacrifice the in-store experience in order to obtain their favorite LFBs.	-impulsive shopping (in the context of online purchases, convenience and previous purchase experiences) -age (perception of show-off in sharing personal brand experiences on Social Media)

vary in different contexts, and also across genders [...] marketing literature highlighting the shrinking Internet gender gap is scarce, so the role of gender deserves more attention (Nadeem *et al.* 2015, pp. 432-440) *More research is needed to better understand generational differences between male and female shopping behaviors and shopping channel choice [...]* (Shephard *et al.* 2016, pp. 5-15) **Objective 3: Investigate gender differences in online consumer behavior among Gen Y luxury fashion customers**	4. previous purchase experiences	and consumption of LFB being rooted in the personal feelings, customer satisfaction and brand uniqueness -Gen Y LFCs are sensitive to the economic vibes among the populations in their countries, demonstrating respect toward the value of having the "advantage" to purchase LFBs 4. the empirical investigation demonstrated that the significant financial investments that accompany the purchase of LFBs (Shukla and Purani, 2012), foster the significance of e-trust and e-satisfaction for consumers' purchases in a reliable online environment and security about the product features and overall brand performance (Anderson and Srinivasan, 2003; Ariff *et al*. 2013;Thaichon and Quach, 2015; Li *et al*.2015).	-LFBs should ensure deliveries to SEE offered both at their official websites and online multi-brand stores such as Net.A.Porter, Yoox.com, Assos.com 3. LFBs should not put significant emphasis on their status and prestigious images -focus should be placed on ensuring outstanding customer satisfaction, the symbolic role of brand uniqueness	

		-By a means of an exploratory research, it could be theorized that brand loyalty and consumer behavior are highly influenced by satisfaction, which also increases purchase desire and customer commitment of Gen Y LFCs from SEE	
Many people who are interested in Generation Y and their consumption behavior claim that Millenials are the most difficult group that marketers can attract and retain, which leads to discussions on brand loyalty of this generation. (Yazici, 2016, p. 300) *"The topic of social media marketing and luxury brands will be an important one going forward. As a relatively new aspect of luxury brands' marketing mix, the topic is still evolving, though it remains clear that social media can be used to build brand*	1.breaking the dogmas 2.personalized communication 3.convenience 4.creative brand content 5.previous purchase experiences	1.the exploratory investigation signified the importance of SM marketing activities and a smooth transition of in-store experience in online settings as the ultimate strategy for nourishing brand loyalty via SM (Herhausen *et al.* 2015; Sayyah and Nilsson, 2017; Gautam and Sharma, 2017) -To the best of researcher's knowledge, the exploratory study was the first to demonstrate that LFBs which take a new spin on building and nourishing brand loyalty outside the traditional retail format have chances to capitalize on this segment of Gen Y LFCs from SEE.	1. LFB should embrace SM as a valuable tool for attracting and retaining this consumer segment -If LFBs manage to escape from their image of exclusivity toward a more inclusive and friendlier approach this would likely increase the opportunities for building a devoted customer segment of Gen Y loyalists -LFB's efforts to respond to the customers' lifestyles, should not interfere with what appeared to be a crucial component in participants' perceptions of brands' images: their DNA	-research in the importance of promoting CSR activities (in the context of creative brand content) -bloggers' as fashion influencers driving purchase desire and brand loyalty (in the context of breaking the dogmas) -impulsive shopping (in the context of convenience)

image and enhance purchase intention" (Ko *et al.* 2019, p.412) **Objective 4: Explore Gen Y gender differences in building brand loyalty towards luxury fashion brands through Social Media.**		2. the exploratory investigation furthered our understanding about Gen Y's LFC's mindset from the SEE region, being the first to conceptualize that this segment needs to feel cherished and valued by LFBs -- individual interviews helped to enrich our knowledge about Gen Y LFC in the SEE region, by supplying evidence about the monumental impact of personal/ human touch for the development brand loyalty 3.by means of an empirical research, the study furthers our understanding of SM as an influential factor in the lives of studied Gen Y LFCs -LFBs which are less dogmatic in persisting their image of exclusivity and adopt a more flexible approach into incorporating SM to respond to Gen Y's habits, have higher chances to attract and retain	2. find a way to respond to the needs of this segment, by mastering the art of transferring the exceptional in-store service in the digital universe to ensure delightful online communication experiences for young LFCs from the SEE region 3. LFBs should think of incorporating SM in order to keep young LFCs aware of brands' news. This would include collections, style ideas, fashion trends, and relevant brand information. -the platforms that brands can use include Pinterest and Instagram. -LFBs can use the advantages of these platforms to tailor the ads and information they provide based on clients' specific search interests 4. the task ahead of LFBs is to always find way to "surprise" Gen Y LFCs from	

		this demanding consumer group from the SEE region	SEE with interesting and inspiring content that reveals part of the mystery and makes customers feel closer to the brand by replacing the glossy models with more real faces and showing the "humanity" of the brand through promoting CSR activities	
		4. the empirics were a sign for the value of creativity in providing exciting, original, inspiring, and entertaining content -Theoretically, this means that findings from previous studies about the positive impact of creative brand content on the consumer behavior of Gen Y LFCs (Gautam and Sharma, 2017; Shen *et al.* 2017) have relevance to the consumer psychology of those studied 5. individual interviews made a contribution to academic knowledge, being the first to extent the understanding of Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behavior on a regional level, by addressing Gen Y luxury fashion customers from Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. This was achieved by also supplying novel insights about the	5. ensure that they persist the quality of clothing and fashion accessories. This would likely seal the opportunity not only for attracting, but also for preserving a loyal customer base of Gen Y LFCs and a customer base of loyal followers on SM platforms in the SEE region	

		monumental role of customer satisfaction as a trigger to follow LFBs on SM		
Objective 5: Explore Gen Y luxury fashion consumer behaviour in SEE given the past economic crisis *With its large population and growing purchase power, this market segment is of strategic importance to the luxury market, especially in the slow economic environment. As members of Generation Y enter their prime earning years, retailers and other members of the luxury*	1.Impact of the economic crisis across countries from the research 2.Influence of Social Media in the post-crisis era	1.The second phase uncovered that although the underlying reasons to continue buying LFBs differed across the three countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece), the effect of the financial downturn was in fact a uniform factor defining the consumption behavior of studied Gen Y LFCs from SEE. -the research responded to the need for better conceptualization of economic events on the consumer behavior of Gen Y	1. LFB's strategies to attract and retain Gen Y LFCs should be based on country segmentation. 1-Greece: emphasis on status elevation - Bulgaria: emphasis on status elevation and brand uniqueness - Romania: emphasis on the quality of LFBs 2. - introduce low-budget lines for Gen Y LFCs in Romania and Bulgaria	-impulsive shopping (within the context of economic crisis' effect on Gen Y LFC's consumption patterns; introduction of low-budget lines) -status for male LFCs (within the context of findings about consumer sociology of Gen Y LFCs from Greece and Bulgaria)

market must revise their marketing strategies to cater to these consumers' needs and behavior patterns […] (Giovannini *et al.* 2015, pp. 35-36) *[...] experiencing a major economic crisis or unemployment period, for example, will influence a generation's values (Noble and Schewe, 2003), and thus its consumption behavior. Since the notion of generation describes groups of people who have experienced similar historical, social, cultural, political, and economic events (Mannheim, 1952), it would be interesting to link significant events witnessed by a given generation to its behavior* (Chaney *et al.* 2017, p. 186)		luxury fashion customers (Noble and Schewe, 2003; Giovannini *et al.* 2015; Godey *et al.* 2016; Chaney *et al.* 2017) from the SEE region 2. the novelty of the research was that it filled a gap in academic knowledge by supplying fresh insights into understanding the financial downturn impact on Gen Y LFCs in the context of SM role for attracting and retaining this particular consumer group	-take advantage of posts with tags/ links to the brands' official SM pages or websites for the three countries that were part of the research -find innovative ways to appeal to Gen Y LFCs who are otherwise reluctant to foresee the opportunities offered by SM because of their personal preferences or financial situations for Gen Y LFCs in Bulgaria and Greece.	

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Appendix 1: Data analysis of focus group discussions (long-table approach)

Picture 1: Preferences for traditional in-store experience versus Social Media

Social media: vs. traditional in-store environ.

(GS males:) online → impersonal

> 3) GS8, male: 20: "Much more prefer the offline approach (GS7, male, 19: "Mhm")…I would appreciate it more because online is much more impersonal […] they send the same thing to everybody, I don't like that. If I go to the store, and if you help me much more appreciated, much more"
>
> GS7, male, 19: "It's like we see the same things and they tell us the same thing every time we go into their Facebook page: this product and this product… and you just see the same thing all over again day after day and it's just boring. If I want something I will come to your store and I will buy it and you can help me then. You can say to me 'yes you can buy this, you can buy this or that, this is more expensive, this better quality though'…I don't like this"

not in the fashion industry
(IT ⇒ community)

> When asked for beyond point of purchase:
> GS7, male, 19: "No"
> GS8, male, 20: "No, no…not in the fashion industry. Fashion industry doesn't have any…it's either you like it, it suits you, it's good…If you go to the IT industry, then maybe yes, ask someone who knows better […] that's where the community comes into play. In the fashion… I like it, but I don't care what's your fashion opinion, we are different (GS9, male, 19: "Mhm")… we are not gonna have the same one"

brand interaction doesn't play a role

> GS7, male, 19: "I don't think that online or offline interaction with the firm plays any role…it's just the firm offering that product and me deciding whether to buy it or not […] it's simple"

(GS females:) don't do it (association with tagging)

sharing in SM!

> 3) GS10, female, 18, GS13, female, 19 and GS14, female, 22: "No…I don't do that"
>
> GS13, female, 19: "I hate tagging the page of the brand [GS14, female, 22: "Yes"] and people are like 'What, are a fashion blogger and you are going to show to us that you have these clothes' No! I don't feel ok with that [GS10*] and you know why? Fashion bloggers do that because it's an advertisement trick. We pay for these clothes. We don't get paid to advertise them, so why tagging them […] I don't feel ok when you a tag a page from let's say Toms because Toms is…you can say that Toms is non-profit somehow organization. I mean the fact that the [GS10, female, 18: "But I like Toms"; GS14, female, 22: "You don't look at it as a brand, you mean?"]…no, but it's another type of brand [GS10, female, 18: "Helping people"]…let's say [uhm] helping the children who don't have shoes to wear but again sometimes of advertisement of Toms that they have some [uhm] campaigns they are saying 'Take a photo of your feet and your dog's feet and upload it Social Media and you will…we will give 1 euro for each photo to the poor children'. In that way I don't have a problem but…let's leave people to live their lives, let's not hate too much" (group laughter)
>
> GS14, female, 22: "I agree with what she said"

-1-

: Preferences for traditional in-store experience versus Social Media; perception of show-off

BS males:) personal (in-store atmosphere)

BS19, male, 19: "There is certain atmosphere in luxury stores, not just for clothes that you get when you walk in. There are people dressed nice, they smile, they is good lighting, good design, and…So, those things make your shopping a lot more special for example if you just walk in a random store, where there are thousands of clothes and nobody is even paying attention to you"

BS20, male, 22: "Yeah, they make it more private feeling."

BS22, male, 23: "You are part of the brand"

(similar to Greek respondents)

sometimes: annoying

BS22, male, 23: "There are always the people that work there? So, it really depends on their attitude. If you are going to like it because if there are all smiles and they are nice, you appreciate it even though sometimes they are annoying like too much 'Oh can I help you? Oh you wanna try this or that' like sometimes it's really…"

(similar to GS8: service – change the store)

BS23, male, 21: "Yeah…and even it is really small they say 'Perfect, amazing, this is for you' and I hate this kind of stuff"

offline: personal

GS13, female, 19: "In luxury brands because of the fact that are luxurious I like when I go and I buy it from the store because in some brands I know people, I know the people who work there so they tell me the true, the truth. I mean 'Don't take that, it doesn't fit you so well' or 'Look at that' and they have [uhm] connected me with some type of clothes. Let' say I have one brand on my mind that […] the girls from there they told me that 'Put on this, it's your style' [*]. It's your style', yeah…I love this relationship between the people who are working there. In online shopping you don't have this opportunity, but ok…it changes"

GS14, female, 22:" And you don't have the face-to-face…"

GS12, female, 20: "Service"

GS14, female, 22: "Service, yes"

Clothing | fit | size ✳

GS13, female, 19: "But I like the traditional way to shop, to go shopping…"

GS14, female, 22: "Yes, I prefer the traditional way because from online shopping you don't if you are….you don't know the specifics [GS10, female, 18: "Yeah"]

GS13, female, 19: "You don't know the person who sells you the cloth"

GS14, female, 22: "No, I don't know if…for me I mean…if the number, the size of the cloth [GS12, female, 20: "Is correct" and GS, female, 18: "Fits you"] fits me"

show-off

GS10, female, 18: "Yes, because they don't advertise it in order to take money. They just bought it and they do it to show off […] That's why I don't like it too"

GS13, female, 19: "Yes"

GS14, female, 22: "I think that they are not advertising because of the brand…because they want to show that they have money [GS10, female, 18: "That's what I thought so"] that's another reason that they want to advertise the

Picture 3: Online buying experience versus offline buying experience

trust issues

BS19, male, 19: "I mean, there is also that thing for men, guys, they are visual people and for me to buy something I will get much better in the outfit if I see it in person, if I can touch, if I can like see it on myself. On the other hand, if I'm looking it on the screen it's a bit more strange. I mean I can't imagine how it will look in the real life [...]"

BS21, male, 23: "Well...there are so many clothes that don't fit the way they look so that is the problem of looking at them online. Maybe they fit differently, maybe they don't look that good in real life, so it's better if you go to the store and see it yourself."

BS23, male, 21: "Yeah, I totally agree with him"

fit

BS20, male, 22: "Yeah, I agree. Most of the clothes, they don't fit the size, you know. The same size in different brands, but they....they are larger, smaller so you just have to go. It's much easier to go just into the store and take it quicker"

BS23, male, 21: "I prefer the traditional ways: entering the shop, looking for something particularly. I need for example jeans. I have to go and buy jeans. I go out, go in my favorite shop, buy jeans And go home."

if they search online before buying

BS19, male, 19, BS22, male, 23 and BS23, male, 21: "No' I don't do that"

BS20, male, 22: "No, I don't want to waste my time with other people's opinions. If I like it, that's enough for me. I don't want to be influenced by others, that's important for me" (same as Greek boys)

BS females:) in-store atmosphere

BS18, female, 19: "Well...I will choose the in-store environment probably, whether if it's going to be for accessories, or for bags, or for clothes. I would choose it...yeah [...] it's different experience, I feel different when I can go and try on the shoes and when I see them online and I just the number that I want to purchase and that's it"

BS16, female, 18: "Yeah, and in the store, there is luxurious feeling. If the store is good. I mean that you feel obviously different when you go to buy a dress from Ellie Saab or you go to 'Ilienzi'. I would feel miserable there" (group laughter)

Picture 4: Share personal brand experience on Social Media (perception of show-off); follow luxury fashion brands on Social Media

BS males: not much for guys (Sharing)

BS 22, male 23: "It's not much of a guys' thing"

BS 23, male, 21: "I don't... yeah"

BS 20, male, 22: "I don't like it as well"

showing-off / bragging

BS19, male, 19: "I mean if you bought something expensive it looks like you are trying to brag how rich you are [BS23, male, 21: "Mhm"] and if it's like something ordinary who actually nobody cares about…"
BS20, male, 22: "It's stupid in my opinion, I don't like it"
BS23, male, 21: "Showing off, yeah"
BS20, male, 22: "It devalues money, devalues the effort that your parents put into you having this standard"
BS22, male, 23: "Yeah"

looks like this

BS19, male, 19: "Yeah..I think it's just that you can't share a luxury fashion brand without like you are bragging. It's just…doesn't work out because that's the way it looks. Even if you are not, it looks like you are showing what you bought. So…it's just…and it's not even a guys' thing. I mean if you buy something and you are like 'Hey where did you buy that from' and he is like 'Oh I bought it from there'. It's not like posting on your Facebook and then 10 guys asking 'Such a cool shirt. How much it costs?"

BS21, male, 20, BS22, male, 23 and BS23, male, 21: "I agree"

=> no effect on brand loyalty (brand loyalty)

(SM-brand activit...

videos

BS23, male, 21: "I don't know. Probably through some videos. I don't know…when I see something cool I…for example I saw Kanye West once wearing very cool jeans and I liked them. I usually don't look into clothes like that but they were like really cool. So, I checked but I didn't find them"

follow

BS22, male, 23: "If it's something not close, only related it could attract…like a cool video or some cool advertisement. If it's just the clothes it's probably it's not gonna interest a lot of guys"

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Appendix 2: Evidence of analysis of individual interviews by using Nvivo

The following pictures present an additional evidence about the use of Nvivo for the data analysis from individual interviews. The researcher employed the opportunity for text search and word frequency to create word trees and word clouds. The researcher performed an additional activity before developing word trees and word clouds.These functions were used by processing the imported transcriptions one-by-one by using the coding activity of "nodes". A "node" is a type of coding which is related to a particular collection of texts as a reference point (Jones, 2007). The researcher added only a tittle to each node, without an additional description. The thematic analysis allowed the researcher to identify emerging themes and categories from the transcribed data. Thus, the assignment of nodes was created based on the emerging data, rather than on pre-defined criteria (Hutchinson *et al.* 2010). This allowed the researcher to identify the aspects that appeared as being the most important for those studied. The presented pictures are examples of how the researcher employed the advantages of Nvivo for analyzing qualitative data. The examples refer to: quality of LFBs, brand DNA, personal style, perception of show-off, economic crisis, creative brand content, and preferences for a buying experience.

Picture 5: Quality of luxury fashion brands (word cloud)

Picture 6: Quality of luxury fashion brands (word tree)

quality

Left side branches:

about
- I think is [uhm]
- it quality ! I care

and
- all these like plastic , low
- their design and materials
- They have a label

better (of)
- and they have a higher
- are buying something of nice
- because I think it's a
- of
  - fabric to be
  - of pounds and
  - that it has much
- comes from price and [uhm]
- go back to [uhm] to

good
- a
  - a luxury thing !
  - product is … has
- my mind goes to
- are not like
- very
  - good garments , with
  - it as a
  - one ! Uhm , very ….
  - thing … with very ,

high
- female , 30 : Something unique ,
- it's something that it's
- PBG7 , female :[uhm] the
- uhm] or cars even …

is
- in depth [uhm] basically high -
- produce good product , which
- that
  - something
    - pay for
    - to buy
  - something you [uhm]

the
- it aesthetically pleasing ! Is it
- it has to do with
- I'm wearing . They should be
- known world - wide for their
- more expensive than the product
- that ! So , yeah , that means
- that … aesthetics , individuality [uhm] it's
- ,
  - male : First of all
  - that's mainly for myself
  - want to be dressed
- actually and watches . And
- as well . It's mostly
- fashion brands ? PBG22 , male :
- for me it's just
- it makes me desire …
- looking a lot about
- male : The designs [uhm]
- quality ! I'm obsessed with
- quality of the … stuff .
- they are usually from great
- they don't have the necessary
- you know that you buy

Right side branches:

!
- I care about quality , I
- I'm obsessed with the quality
- So I've had [uhm] I

,
- a premium one ! And … I
- because when you buy something
- high prices and sometimes over -
- I care about aesthetics ! I
- it's
  - a good craftsmanship . You
  - the preciousness , it's the
- some of them . There are
- which will lasts long … not

.
- So
  - I'm more likely to
  - usually when I think
- What are your motives to
- You just don't pay for

also That's what I think

and
- for their design and
- I understand something like
- is different from the
- it's
  - a product that
  - reliable ! So … it's
- price . I mean when
- respect ! If you respect
- the
  - textures and everything !
  - … the good design
- they are something that [
- You have a really

as I already told you …
brands uhm] high - end pricing [
but at the price that
clothes So , I'm [uhm] for
compared to others . So , the

for
- me ! Because maybe you
- sure . I think that's

I guess of the … of
in terms of material and

is
- really different from the
- very
  - , very good . The
  - good , the price

item that will last in
materials uhm] and patterns and
mostly and unique design . What

of the
- materials they use ,
- … stuff . The quality

or textures on them , the
stuff For example , I have
than non - luxurious fashion brands
that they offer you to

thing
- What are your attitudes
- with very , very good

to cover that raise in
… depends on … I mean , it

449

Picture 7: Perception of brand DNA (word cloud)

**Picture 8:** Personal style (word cloud)

Picture 9: Personal style (word tree)


Picture 9: Personal style (word tree)

**Picture 10:** Perception of show-off (word cloud)

Picture 11: Perception of show-off (word tree)

# Impact of the economic crisis

Picture 12: Greece (word cloud)


Picture 13: Romania (word cloud)

Picture 15: Creative brand content on Social Media (word cloud)

Picture 16: Creative content on Social Media (word tree)

Picture 17: Preferences for online buying experience (word cloud)

Picture 18: Preferences for online buying experience (word trees)

easy way , the quick way , the faster ! The

aren't something that you expected and

is the correct size , so … everything

is more

convenient

, in my opinion . Also , you can return it .

from any … any , any point of view .

I would say ! Do you prefer luxury

way

process outside I don't like it ! I usually lately just purchase via

male : Online ! From their e - shops ! Because I buy everything from

me good or something … And actually , I can see it

this is maybe 1,2,3 days sometimes and … it's really easier

on

the

internet

! Uhm it has been … I mean the experience has been fine , there's

, I can think for one or two days and it's really easy

. I'm not usually … the usual buyer from physical stores . I do much

and I can check it several times , to see if I like

commerce buying ! Because it's the

two days and it's really

PGR9 , male : Because it's

you can find information

very

easy

.

For example ,… I don't know

You sit in your couch

to order it online , not

way the quick way , the

Appendix 3: Marshall and Rossman twenty questions to judge the goodness of qualitative research

1. *"The method is explicated in detail, so the reader can judge whether it was adequate and makes sense. An articulate rationale for the use of qualitative research is given so that sceptics will accept the approach. The methods for attaining entry and managing role, data collection, recording, analysis, ethics and exit are discussed. There is an auditability trail – a running record of procedures – and there is description of how the site and sample were selected. Data collection and analysis procedures are public, not magical."*

The chapter "Research design and methodology" provides detailed description of the logic behind choosing the method for exploring the chosen subject of investigation, method of data collection, data analysis and presenting findings. The approach to data collection, analysis and reporting are explained in such a manner that the reader can fully comprehend the steps that the researcher followed throughout the period of field work.

2. *"Assumptions are stated. Biases are expressed, and the researcher does a kind of self- analysis for personal biases and a framework analysis for theoretical biases."*

The main assumption was part of the process in forming the research questions. Specifically, the main research questions are: *1) What are the consumer characteristics, in online and offline settings, that define Generation Y luxury fashion consumer behavior?* and *2) What is the role of SM in the path toward building brand loyalty among Generation Y male and female LFCs in the context of the past economic crisis?* The research questions were largely guided by academic literature, which originally suggested that as being heavy users of SM, Gen Y consumers would be open to various social media initiatives of luxury fashion brands in the path towards building brand loyalty. Furthermore, the research was based on the principles of qualitative methodology for presenting findings, which also reflects participants' way of interpreting the phenomenon under investigation. Further, the researcher employed Nvivo for initial data analysis, which helped her to see how emerging themes evolved. This was also helpful to reduce the risk of subjectivity in data analysis. In addition, the researcher maintained close collaboration with her supervisors throughout the process of data analysis (i.e. inquiry audit). This helped to reduce the risk of making assumptions of bias.

3. "The research guards against value judgements in data collection and analysis"

The researcher took considerate attention to value judgements by selecting participants based on certain criteria. Although gender, age and nationality were part of these criteria, they served the sole role of fulfilling the objectives of the phenomenon under investigation, namely understanding the role of Social Media for building brand loyalty among Gen Y consumers in selected South East European countries (Bulgaria, Romania and Greece), by taking into consideration the role of gender among this generational cohort. Thus, issues of gender, race, or nationality were a part of the research to the extent that selected participants would be able to provide insightful information based on their personal experience.

4. "***There is abundant evidence from raw data to demonstrate the connection between the presented findings and the real world, and the data are presented in readable, accessible form, perhaps aided by graphics, models, charts, and figures.***"

The chapters "Findings" (chapters four, five and six) was devoted to present findings in way that they are readable and accessible to readers.

5. ***"The research questions are stated, and the study answers those questions and generates further questions".***

The main questions that guided the research were clearly stated in the Introduction chapter. The researcher also followed this procedure in the process of preparing the literature review chapter and in developing the research methodology. Findings obtained from the pilot study served as a basis for choosing individual interviews and also for repeating some of the questions that were part of the pilot study, which proved to be useful in the process of phenomenon investigation. Moreover, findings obtained through the pilot study were used alongside findings for the main study in order to allow the researcher to obtain full comprehension of the studied phenomenon. Nvivo software was of great valuable tool which assisted the researcher in capturing emerging themes from the main study. These steps helped the researcher for the development of theoretical patterns, providing managerial and theoretical implications, and for the accumulation of new knowledge. Finally, based on participants' responses the researcher was able to provide suggested avenues for further research.

6. "***The relationship between this study and previous studies is explicit. Definitions of phenomena are provided, with reference to previously identified phenomena, but it is clear that the research goes beyond previously established frameworks-challenging old ways of thinking***"

The literature review chapter provides a detailed outlook of different perspectives on brand loyalty and its importance in the luxury fashion sector. Further, the dilemma between the different worlds of Social Media and luxury fashion brands is also presented. The literature review also provides the reader with an explicit review of previous findings regarding the role of Social Media for the development of brand loyalty in the luxury fashion sector. This is further articulated by presenting Gen Y luxury fashion consumer mind-set and how Social Media can benefit luxury fashion brands in the path towards building brand loyalty among this generational cohort. Throughout the literature review chapter, the author tried to raise questions that emerged from previous studies, see how subsequent studies tried to answer these questions. Moreover, based on the literature review, the researcher identified several gaps. These specifically refer to lack of clear understanding about luxury fashion consumers who belong to Gen Y consumer segment in three Balkan countries: Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. Consequently, the literature review chapter concludes by explaining the need for further research. Throughout the data analysis, the researcher conducted constant comparative analysis between emerging findings and existing literature. Thus, based on exploratory approach to the research phenomenon, the author was able to identify emerging patterns which guided her to the accumulation of fresh insights and contribution to existing knowledge.

7. "***The study is reported in a manner that is accessible to other researchers, practitioners and policymakers. It makes adequate translation of findings so that others will be able to use the findings in a timely way.***"

The chapters that presented findings were developed in such a way that the researcher tried to achieve this by presenting findings based on emerging themes and categories, so that readers with different professional backgrounds can easily capture the main findings that emerge from this investigation. More so, alongside the concluding part of the chapter the researcher presents a table with a summary of the main managerial, practitioner and academic contributions that stem from this research.

8. *"**Evidence is presented showing that the researcher was tolerant of ambiguity, searched for alternative explanations, checked out negative instances, and used a variety of methods to check the findings (i.e. triangulation).**"*

The chapter titled "research design and methodology" aims to cover all the outlined aspects. The researcher explained the ontological and epistemological stance, advantages and disadvantages of existing alternative methods. The discussion on the use of emic versus the etic approach was followed by a critical review as of why qualitative research methodology was considered appropriate for the particular topic under investigation. Regarding the second aspect, namely negative instances, the methodology chapter explained that the researcher opted to achieve theoretical sampling via data saturation. The researcher also opted to identify as diverse sample as possible by including participants who belong to the criteria for Gen Y consumers, but at the same time to be of different ages to include diverse viewpoints (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Negative cases were achieved by identifying other similar examples and finding possible explanations to incorporate them in the process of building theory (Morse, 2005; Singh, 2015).

9. *"**The report acknowledges the limitations of generalizability while assisting the readers in seeing the transferability of findings.**"*

Similar to some previous points, the researcher raises the issue of generalizability in the "research methodology" chapter. She clearly outlines that by conducting a research using the emic approach, the research is less concerned with generalizability of findings (Hunt, 2011; Erlandsson *et al.* 2013). The prime goal is the development of ideas by comparing scientific knowledge with everyday experience (Byers and Wilcox, 1991). Thus, the emphasis is on the contextual (rather than general) manifestation of the research (Golafshani, 2003; Hogg and Maclaren, 2008). Additionally, the process of thick description also aimed to provide readers with sufficient information to judge the *transferability* of findings to other settings familiar to them (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The use of direct quotations to highlight the key insights was performed to allow readers to formulate their own conclusions about the findings (Hunt 2011). More so, the use of purposive sampling technique helped to capture a wide variety of customer perspectives, allowing readers to make their own interpretations about the applicability of findings (Merriam 1998).

10. ***"It is clear that there was a phase of 'first days in the field' in which a problem focus was generated from observation, not from library research. In other words, it is a study that is an exploration, not merely a study to find contextual data to verify old theories."***

It would be an act of crime to state that literature review as not sufficiently helpful in the first phase of the student PhD studies. It was exactly review of previous studies which helped the researcher to identify the area of research that would the most interesting to her and identify gaps that emerged throughout the literature review process. Importantly, the pilot study assisted the researcher to identify specific areas that need further research for the main study (via individual interviews). By crafting a broad range of issues that emerged from the literature review, the researcher had the opportunity to gain initial insights in the phenomenon and prepare the interview protocol with questions that helped her to answer the key research questions and fulfil the objectives and aims of the research. More so, the fact that findings both from focus groups and interviews demonstrated that young consumers are interested also in the story that says behind the brands and are not blind for such aspects, which contradicts what previous studies suggests, implies that the research went beyond verifying old theories to develop new knowledge.

11. ***"Observations are made (or sampled) of a full range of activities over a full cycle of activities."***

Presented findings are the product of a exploratory investigation, in which the researcher conducted pilot study at the end of the first year of her PhD studies and a main study in order to capture the full range of Gen Y luxury fashion consumer perspectives that pertain to the phenomenon of Social Media role for building brand loyalty, based on participants views in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. Nevertheless, the researcher cannot consider this as a full cycle because as "avenues for further research" alongside the small sample selection used in this research suggest future studies can further extend knowledge by exploring the topic of Social Media and luxury fashion brands in selected SEE countries.

12. "***Data are preserved and are available for e-analysis***"

As part of achieving confirmability, the researcher opted for audit trial. This will also allow researchers who value the ethical principles of preserving participant's anonymity to use this data for subsequent studies. In this context, mentioned earlier in the research methodology chapter and point 11 in this section, the small sample of this study cannot be used to generalize for bigger proportion of the population. Nevertheless, the researcher will be honored if she can take part in future studies expanding on the knowledge of

luxury fashion consumer behavior in the Balkan region, as fieldwork was one of the aspects that she enjoyed the most throughout her the years of working on her PhD thesis.

13. ***"Methods are devised for checking data quality (e.g. informants'' knowledgeability, ulterior motives, and truthfulness) and for guarding against ethnocentric explanations."***

Based on participant's responses the researcher was able to attain insightful knowledge regarding Gen Y luxury fashion consumers' mind-set and the role of social media for the development of brand loyalty among these consumers in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. In addition, respondents' views from focus groups are compared and contrasted with responses from individual interviews. This helped the researcher get fuller picture of participants' interpretation on questions concerning the research topic (given that the researcher also opted for identifying data saturation and negative instances).

14. "***In-field analysis is documented***"

The process of fieldwork was based on three aspects. First, the approach to data analysis of pilot study findings was informed by literature, which suggested the long-table table as an appropriate tool for analysis focus groups data. Second, the analysis of individual interviews also followed suggestions made by academics who with no doubt can be regarded as gurus in the filed qualitative data analysis (e.g. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Data analysis was also approached by employing Nvivo with the purpose of facilitating the process of open coding: data management, data categorization, identifying emerging constructs and concepts, similarities/ differences among participant's views. This was followed by axial and selective coding. There is both, computer-based and hand-written evidence on the phase of data analysis and identification of emerging categories, patterns and their regularities/ properties. Third, the researcher had to provide written justification for the choice of data analysis methods to his supervisors for feedback.

15. ***"Meaning is elicited from cross-cultural perspectives."***

The researcher recognizes that even though the selected countries share common cultural and historical background, participant's responses might be affected by specific cultural peculiarities that cater to each country.

16. ***"The researcher is careful about sensitivity of those being researched-ethical standards are maintained."***

The researcher respects the ethical standards of qualitative research. She ensured full anonymity of participants' personal data. Participants' names were replaced with codes. All personal data that is stored on researcher's PC (both from focus groups and individual

interviews) is in password-secured folder. Hard-written questionnaires and all consent forms are stored in a secure place at researcher's home premises.

17. "***People in the research benefit in some way (ranging from getting a free meal to an hour of sympathetic listening empowered to throw of their chains).***"

As outlined in the research methodology chapter, participants in focus groups and individual interviews were not offered any additional motive for participation, except the benefit from the experience of being part in marketing research and the researcher expressed gratitude for their contribution to the research.

18. "***Data collection strategies are the most adequate and efficient available. There is evidence that the researcher is a finely tuned research instrument, whose personal talents, experiential biases, and insights are used consciously. The researcher is careful to be self-analytical and recognize when he or she is getting subjective or going naïve.***"

Undoubtfully, conducting a pilot study helped the researcher to gain experience in the process of data collection. This includes the whole process from preparing all the necessary documents to recruit participants (e.g. information sheet, questionnaire), the process of participant recruitment, establishing rapport, and arranging the time and place for focus groups/ interviews, which is convenient for participants. Even though all these aspects sometimes can be challenging and the researcher faced milestones in the path towards completing data collection, she is grateful for the experience she gained in this research. In addition, as outlined in the research methodology chapter, peer checks were conducted in order to secure dependability of qualitative findings. This was achieved by providing the research methodology chapter and findings to researcher's supervisors and presenting findings to conferences:

-Gubatova, Z., Kapoulas, A. & Cheng, R. (2017) Title: Building brand loyalty through Social Media in times of economic crisis: a gender and Gen Y perspective of luxury fashion consumers in South East Europe. EuroMed Academy of Business Proceedings, Rome, 2017.

- Zlatina Gubatova, Alexandros Kapoulas, Ranis Cheng (2018) Title: Building brand loyalty through Social Media in economic crisis: a gender and Gen Y perspective of luxury fashion consumers in South East Europe. Academy of Marketing: Marketing the Brave, Striling, Scotland

-Zlatina Gubatova, Alexadnros Kapoulas, Ranis Cheng (2019) Title: A lesson for luxury fashion brands: Social Media role in influencing Gen Y's online and offline purchase decision. Global Fashion Conference, Paris, France, 2019

19. "The study is tied into 'the big picture'. The researcher looks historically at the setting to try to understand linkages among systems."

The study is tied into "the big picture" in the sense that the researcher initiated the research by crafting broader themes of questions for the pilot study. This helped her to prepare the set of questions to be asked during individual interviews. This process assisted the researcher to move from the narrow perspective about "old-fashioned" luxury fashion consumption in South East Europe to understand young consumers' perspective and comprehend how the phenomenon of Social Media unfolds in the context of building brand loyalty among this generational cohort.

20. "***The researcher traces the historical context to understand how institutions and roles have evolved.***"

It was important to have an understanding of the historical, cultural and economic background for each of the countries that are part of the research. This was essential in order to understand how these aspects might affect consumers' perspectives, views, opinions, beliefs, and consumer behavior towards luxury fashion brands.

Source: Marshall and Rossman (1995, pp. 147-148)