



A visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Generation Z



Dissertation was submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the **Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership degree** at The Independent Institute of Education, Vega School.

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is submitted to fulfil the requirements for the Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership Programme at The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE). It is my original work and has not been submitted for a postgraduate qualification at any other university or higher education institution.



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ABSTRACT

Fashion brand communication on Instagram plays a critical role in shaping Gen Z's perceptions of identity, self-expression, and beauty. However, concerns persist about the continued use of objectifying imagery in digital marketing, even as overt sexism declines. As such, this thesis asks: How does fashion brand communication target Generation Z on Instagram? To gain an understanding, this study explores how fashion brands engage Gen Z through visual and verbal strategies, exploring whether these communications reinforce or challenge harmful stereotypes. Given the increasing interest of Gen Z in inclusivity, authenticity and social awareness, brands need to assess how they navigate these expectations. Therefore, the research provides insight into ethical and responsible brand communication that fosters meaningful engagement with Gen Z audiences.

This research employed a phenomenological approach within the qualitative domain. I explored Instagram content from Adidas, Diesel, Zara, and Nike by integrating semiotic and visual grammar analysis as informed by the research of Roland Barthes, and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. Semiotic analysis decoded the signs within the posts, and thematic analysis synthesised these insights into broader patterns. A multimodal analysis framework was applied by which signifier and signified identification, textual elements (captions and alt-text), and compositional techniques (framing and colour) were incorporated. A custom point system quantified the potential for objectification in visual content, while thematic analysis identified recurring patterns in brand narratives. To unpack the research thematically Braun and Clarke's thinking on thematic analysis was used as a guide. This approach offered a nuanced lens to understand whether brands empower or objectify their audiences, and how Gen Z interacts with these portrayals.

The findings indicate that Gen Z gravitates toward brand narratives that reflect inclusivity, empowerment, and authenticity. Adidas and Nike prioritise athleticism and diversity, with low objectification scores that reinforce their alignment with Gen Z values. Diesel, in contrast, employs provocative visuals that, despite higher objectification scores, appeal to Gen Z's attraction to rebellion and individuality. Zara presents a balance between aspirational aesthetics and accessibility and engages Gen Z without relying on overt objectification. These insights highlight the tension between cultural preservation, societal disruption, and evolving consumer expectations – central themes in contemporary design discourse.

This research challenges existing marketing paradigms and advocates for more ethical engagement strategies by applying a critical design lens to fashion brand communication. The findings contribute to debates on cultural identity in globalised digital spaces and emphasise the need for brands to navigate authenticity while avoiding harmful stereotypes. The thesis offers a practical framework for assessing visual communication strategies that can equip industry professionals with tools to create content that resonates with the ethical and aesthetic sensibilities of Gen Z. The limitation of focus on a specific timeframe and sample set also paves the way on which future studies can expand.

The research underscores the importance of aligning the communication of the fashion brand with the values of Gen Z to foster deeper, more meaningful connections. By prioritising ethical storytelling and responsible representation, brands can contribute to a more inclusive and empowering digital

environment. Future research should explore the intersection of digital engagement, identity formation, and cultural preservation in fashion communication.

Keywords: Objectification, Fashion Brand Communication, Instagram, Generation Z, Ethical Marketing.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMINOLOGY

Terminology	Description
Fashion Brand Communication	In this study, Fashion Brand Communication represents the relationship, engagement, and dialogue cultivated between fashion brands and their consumers through alternative initiatives, platforms, and spaces (Huggard & Cope, 2020). The fashion industry heavily relies on change and what is perceived as fashionable today will inevitably change tomorrow. Therefore, these brands need to cultivate cultural credibility and relevance (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2018; Huggard & Cope, 2020). Fashion brands also supplement the construction of individual consumer identity; because of this, consumers are integral to the process of filtering through brand communication messages by using individual socio-cultural experiences. This allows for the construction of shared brand meaning (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2018; Huggard & Cope, 2020; Avis & Henderson, 2022) and as such, brands in this space stay relevant by transferring their brand values and messaging to fit all cultural contexts (Huggard & Cope, 2020; Avis & Henderson, 2022).
Generation Z	In this study, Generation Z represents the cohort of people who display purely Generation Z traits; these are people born between 2001 and 2010.
Instagram	Instagram is a free social networking site where users may share videos and photos with their followers (Delfino & Antonelli, 2022). Instagram (2023) defines its service as a free video and photo-sharing app that allows for uploading photos or videos and sharing them with a restricted number of friends or followers. Users can browse, comment on, and like friends' posted content (Instagram, 2023). For a Gen Z audience and the purposes of this study, fashion brand communication through the Instagram platform leverages trending aesthetics such as minimalism, streetwear and hyperrealism to shape brand identity and connect with Gen Z's visual preferences (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).
Engagement	In this study, engagement refers to the interactive behaviours (likes, comments, shares and saves) through which Gen Z users respond to brand content on Instagram. Engagement is understood as both a measurable metric and an indicator of relational connection between brands and audiences (Delfino and Antonelli, 2022; Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2018).

Authentic Communication / Authenticity	Authenticity denotes the perceived genuineness and transparency of brand communication. For Gen Z, authenticity is tied to values-based messaging, consistency and honesty, shaping how brand meaning is interpreted and trusted (Djafarova and Bowes, 2021; Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2018).
Inclusivity	Inclusivity refers to the representation of diverse bodies, identities and cultural expressions within brand communication. In this study, inclusivity links closely to engagement, as Gen Z responds positively to content that reflects diverse lived experiences (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024; Adams, 2021).
Purpose-Driven Narratives	Purpose-driven narratives are brand messages anchored in broader social, cultural or ethical values. They extend beyond product promotion to communicate identity, mission and societal contribution, an approach strongly favoured by Gen Z consumers, particularly in South Africa (Abrahams, 2025; Kemp, 2024; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024).
Hypersexualised Imagery	Hypersexualised imagery refers to visual content that uses sexual cues, poses, bodies or framing in ways that emphasise objectification or erotic appeal. This concept is central to this study as it relates directly to the objectification potential within fashion brand communication (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Karsay et al., 2018; Gales, 2023).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY	19
1.1 Introduction	19
1.2 Background of the Research Problem	19
1.3 Rationale	20
1.4 Problem Statement, Research Questions and Objectives	21
1.4.1 Problem statement	21
1.4.2 Research Questions	22
1.4.3 Aim and objectives	22
1.5 Research Design and Methodology	22
1.5.1 Research Design	22
1.5.1.1 Sample Selection Criteria	24
1.5.1.2 Sample size	24
1.5.2 Rationale behind each brand selection and specific content analysis approach	25
1.5.3 Research Methodology	26
1.5.3.1 Semiotic Approach	27
1.5.3.2 Thematic Analysis	27
1.6 Ethical Considerations	28
1.6.1 Trustworthiness	29
1.7 Limitations of the Study	29
1.8 Disciplinary Demarcation of the Research	29
1.9 Role of the Researcher	30
1.10 Contribution to the Discipline	30
1.11 Value of the Research	30
1.12 Structure of the Research Dissertation	32
1.13 Study Overview	33
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	34
2.1 Introduction	34
2.2 Conceptualisation	35
2.2.1 A Critical Review of Fashion, Brand, and Brand Communication	35
2.2.1.1 Fashion Beyond Aesthetics	35
2.2.1.2 Brand, a Multifaceted Construct in the Digital Age	35
2.2.1.3 Brand Communication	36
2.2.1.4 Fashion Brand Communication	36
2.2.2 The Audience (Gen Z), Social Media, and Instagram	36
2.2.2.1 Generation Z	36
2.2.2.2 Social Media	37
2.2.2.3 Instagram	37
2.2.2.4 Contextualising Fashion Brands on Instagram in South Africa	37

2.3 The Fundamentals of Fashion Brand Communication	38
2.3.1 Introduction	38
2.3.2 Responsible, Contemporary Brand Communication	38
2.3.3 Visual Brand Identity	39
2.3.3.1 Visual Brand Identity of Selected Sample of Brands	39
2.3.4 Digital Storytelling	40
2.3.5 Emotional Connection	42
2.4 Theoretical Foundations	42
2.4.1 Introduction	42
2.4.2 Key Theories	42
2.4.2.1 Integrating Additional Frameworks:	44
2.4.3 Data Analysis Tool	45
2.4.4 Frameworks	46
2.5 The Current Fashion Brand Landscape	48
2.5.1 Introduction	48
2.5.2 Overview of the Global Fashion Landscape	48
2.5.3 Brand Identity and Gen Z as the Digital Consumer	49
2.5.4 Instagram's Role in Fashion Marketing	50
2.5.4.1 Influencers and Brand Trust	50
2.5.4.2 Content Formats and Engagement Strategies	50
2.5.5 Effects of Fashion Branding	51
2.5.5.1 Mental Health and Self-Objectification	51
2.6 Conclusion	53
 CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	 55
3.1 Introduction	55
3.2 Research Design	56
3.2.1 Introduction	56
3.2.2 Research Paradigm and Approach	56
3.2.2.1 The Constructivist Paradigm	57
3.2.2.2 The Research Approach	57
3.2.3 Research Methodology	59
3.2.3.1 Collection:	60
3.2.3.2 Analysis:	60
3.2.3.3 Sample Selection	61
3.2.3.4 Data Collection	66
3.3 Data Analysis	67
3.3.1 Phenomenology	67
3.3.2 Combined Analysis Approach	67
3.3.3 Thematic Analysis	68

3.3.3.1 Preparing the Data through a Semiotic Approach	68
3.3.3.2 Semiotic Coding Through the Tool	70
3.3.3.3 Developing a Coding and Categorising Plan	70
3.3.3.4 Testing Code	70
3.3.3.5 Thematic Coding	70
3.3.3.6 Accessing Consistency in Coding	71
3.3.3.7 Data Interpretation	71
3.3.3.8 Reporting on Methods and Findings	71
3.4 Ethical Considerations	71
3.4.1 Use of Branded Content	71
3.4.2 Avoiding Harm from the Perspective of Brand Reputation	72
3.4.3 Deception of Brand Portrayal	72
3.4.4 Falsifying Information	72
3.4.5 Generation Z	72
3.4.6 POPIA Considerations	72
3.4.7 Other	72
3.5 Academic Rigour and Trustworthiness	73
3.5.1 Credibility	73
3.5.2 Transferability	74
3.5.3 Dependability	74
3.5.4 Confirmability	74
3.5.5 Research Assumptions	75
3.6 Chapter Summary	75
 CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	 76
4.1 Introduction	76
4.1.1 Chapter Structure	76
4.1.1.1 Reflection in Action	76
4.1.1.2 Thematic Analysis: Decoding the Branding Potential	77
4.1.1.3 Reflection on Action: A Synthesis of the Chapter and Contribution to the Field	77
4.1.2 Artefacts and Data Sources	77
4.2 Interpretation of the Semiotic Data Analysis and Findings	78
4.2.1 Introduction	78
4.2.2 Adidas, Empowerment through Performance and Inclusivity	79
4.2.2.1 Cultural Symbolism and National Identity	80
4.2.2.2 Inclusive Storytelling and Diverse Representation	81
4.2.2.3 Low Objectification, High Impact	82
4.2.2.4 Visual Strategy and Narrative Cohesion	82
4.2.3 Diesel, Rebellion and Relevance	82
4.2.3.1 The Provocation Paradox	84

4.2.3.2 Empowerment and Engagement	85
4.2.3.3 Decoding Diesel's Visual World	86
4.2.3.4 Integrating Product into a Broader Digital Brand Narrative	86
4.2.3.5 Multimodal Meaning-Making	87
4.2.4 Zara, A Blend of Aspiration and Accessibility?	87
4.2.4.1 Projecting Attainability Through Aspiration	89
4.2.4.2 Moderate Objectification as a Strategic Middle Ground	90
4.2.4.3 Aesthetic Inclusivity or Visual Exclusivity?	91
4.2.4.4 Textual Reinforcement of Brand Image	91
4.2.4.5 Lifestyle as Engagement Driver	92
4.2.4.6 Strategic Content Diversification	92
4.2.5 Nike, an Authentic Take on Athleticism	92
4.2.5.1 Celebrating Athletic Achievement, Empowering Athletes	93
4.2.5.2 Focus on Performance and Celebration of Achievement	94
4.2.5.3 Visual Storytelling to Establish Resonance	95
4.2.6 Accessibility and ALT Text	96
4.2.6.1 Supplementary Quantitative Observations	96
4.2.6.2 Comparative Analysis amongst the brands	97
4.3 Takeouts, Lessons and Guidelines	97
4.3.1 Adidas Key Takeaways	97
4.3.2 Diesel Key Takeaways	99
4.3.2.1 Lessons Learned from Diesel	99
4.3.2.2 Insights for Gen Z Engagement in Fashion Branding	100
4.3.3 Zara Key Takeaways	100
4.3.3.1 Lessons Learned from Zara	100
4.3.3.2 Insights for Gen Z Engagement in Fashion Branding	102
4.3.4 Nike Key Takeaways	103
4.3.4.1 Lessons Learned from Nike	103
4.3.4.2 Insights for Gen Z Engagement in Fashion Branding	104
4.4 Conclusion	105
 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	 107
5.1 Introduction	107
5.2 Conclusions Drawn from the Research	107
5.2.1 Secondary Research Question 1: What is the current fashion brand landscape?	107
5.2.2 Secondary Research Question 2: How does fashion brand communication visually target Generation Z on Instagram?	109
5.2.3 Secondary Research Question 3: How can fashion brand leaders create content that speaks best to this audience?	110
5.2.4 The primary research question: How does fashion brand communication target Generation Z on Instagram?	111

5.3 Implications	113
5.3.1 Theoretical Implications	113
5.3.2 Practical/Managerial Implications	113
5.4 Future Recommendations	113
5.5 Limitations of the Study	115
5.6 Chapter Summary: The Researcher's Reflection	115
 REFERENCES	 117
APPENDIX A	132
APPENDIX B	133
APPENDIX C	134
APPENDIX D	135
APPENDIX E	136
APPENDIX F	137
APPENDIX G	138
APPENDIX H	140

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Gen Z	Generation Z
UGC	User-generated content

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Study overview	30
Figure 2.1: Semiotic Theory (Adapted from Berger and Luckman, 1966)	38
Figure 2.2: Objectification Theory Visualisation	42
Figure 2.3: Data Analysis Tool, Linking Main Literature Themes to Analysis	49
Figure 3.1: Research Approach Overview	54
Figure 4.1: Sample artefact from the Thematic Analysis Summary compiled, specific to Adidas	75
Figure 4.3: Adidas Analysis Word Cloud	75
Figure 4.4: Adidas Most Liked Posts Aug to July 2023	76
Figure 4.5: Sample artefact of the compiled Thematic Analysis Summary, specific to Diesel	78
Figure 4.6: Sample artefact of the Analysis as a Word Cloud, specific to Diesel	79
Figure 4.7: Diesel Most Liked Posts Aug 2023 to July 2024	80
Figure 4.8: Sample artefact of the compiled Thematic Analysis Summary, specific to Zara	83
Figure 4.9: Sample artefact of the Analysis as a Word Cloud, specific to Zara	83
Figure 4.10: Zara Most Liked Posts Aug 2023 to July 2024	84
Figure 4.11: Sample artefact from the Thematic Analysis Summary compiled, specific to Nike	87
Figure 4.4: Nike Analysis Word Cloud	87
Figure 4.13: Nike Most Liked Posts May 2024 to July 2024	88
Figure 4.14: Thematic analysis summary of all brands	89
Figure 6.1: Diesel Post 1	130
Figure 6.2: Diesel Post 2	133
Figure 6.3: Diesel Post 3	136
Figure 6.4: Diesel Post 4	139
Figure 6.5: Diesel Post 5	142
Figure 6.6: Diesel Post 6	145
Figure 6.7: Diesel Post 7	148

Figure 6.8: Diesel Post 8	151
Figure 6.9: Diesel Post 9	154
Figure 6.10: Diesel Post 10	157
Figure 6.11: Diesel Post 11	160
Figure 6.12: Diesel Post 12	163
Figure 6.13: Zara Post 1	168
Figure 6.14: Zara Post 2	171
Figure 6.15: Zara Post 3	174
Figure 6.16: Zara Post 4	177
Figure 6.17: Zara Post 5	180
Figure 6.18: Zara Post 6	183
Figure 6.19: Zara Post 7.1	186
Figure 6.20: Zara Post 7.2	186
Figure 6.21: Zara Post 7.3	186
Figure 6.22: Zara Post 7.4	186
<i>Figure 6.23: Zara Post 7.5</i>	186
Figure 6.24: Zara Post 8.1	189
Figure 6.25: Zara Post 8.2	189
Figure 6.26: Zara Post 8.3	189
Figure 6.27: Zara Post 8.4	189
Figure 6.28: Zara Post 9.1	192
Figure 6.29: Zara Post 9.2	192
Figure 6.30: Zara Post 9.3	192
Figure 6.31: Zara Post 10.1	195
Figure 6.32: Zara Post 10.2	195
Figure 6.33: Zara Post 10.3	195
Figure 6.34: Zara Post 10.4	195
Figure 6.35: Zara Post 10.5	195
Figure 6.36: Zara Post 11.1	198
Figure 6.37: Zara Post 11.2	198
Figure 6.38: Zara Post 11.3	198
Figure 6.39: Zara Post 11.4	198
Figure 6.40: Zara Post 11.5	198
Figure 6.41: Zara Post 12.1	201

Figure 6.42: Zara Post 12.2	201
Figure 6.43: Zara Post 12.3	201
Figure 6.44: Zara Post 12.4	201
Figure 6.45: Zara Post 12.5	201
Figure 6.46: Adidas Post 1	207
Figure 6.47: Adidas Post 2	210
Figure 6.48: Adidas Post 3.1	213
Figure 6.49: Adidas Post 3.2	213
Figure 6.50: Adidas Post 4.1	216
Figure 6.51: Adidas Post 4.2	216
Figure 6.52: Adidas Post 5.1	219
Figure 6.53: Adidas Post 5.2	219
Figure 6.54: Adidas Post 5.3	219
Figure 6.55: Adidas Post 6.1	222
Figure 6.56: Adidas Post 6.2	222
Figure 6.57: Adidas Post 7	225
Figure 6.58: Adidas Post 8	228
Figure 6.59: Adidas Post 9	231
Figure 6.60: Adidas Post 10	234
Figure 6.61: Adidas Post 11.1	237
Figure 6.62: Adidas Post 11.2	237
Figure 6.63: Adidas Post 11.3	237
Figure 6.64: Adidas Post 12.1	240
Figure 6.65: Adidas Post 12.2	240
Figure 6.66: Adidas Post 12.3	240
Figure 6.67: Adidas Post 12.4	240
Figure 6.68: Adidas Post 12.5	240
Figure 6.69: Nike Post 1. 1	246
Figure 6.70: Nike Post 1.2	246
Figure 6.71: Nike Post 2	249
Figure 6.72: Nike Post 3.1	253
Figure 6.73: Nike Post 3.2	253
Figure 6.74: Nike Post 3.3	253
Figure 6.75: Nike Post 3.4	253

Figure 6.76: Nike Post 3.5	253
Figure 6.77: Nike Post 3.6	253

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1: Structure of the Research Dissertation	29
Table 3.1: Summary of research design and methodology chapter	50
Table 3.2: Overview of sample population chosen for the research	60
Table 4.1: Sample artefact of the Data Sheet compiled, specific to Adidas	74
Table 4.2: Sample artefact of the Data Sheet compiled, specific to Diesel	78
Table 4.3: Sample artefact of the compiled data sheet, specific to Zara	82
Table 4.4: Sample artefact of the compiled data sheet, specific to Nike	87

Chapter I

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

"The joy of dressing is an art."

John Galliano, Fashion designer (Previously Creative Director of John Galliano & Dior)

1.1 Introduction

Social media platforms have emerged as the main arena where marketers compete for consumer attention in the era of information overload (Cantoni et al., 2020; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). This environment is perfect for visual storytelling, making social media platforms like Instagram ideal for showcasing brand aesthetics and values, particularly in the fashion industry (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Delfino & Antonelli, 2022). However, a disturbing trend has presented itself in the constantly changing digital environment - the weaponisation of hypersexualised communication aimed at the malleable minds of Gen Z consumers (Karsay et al., 2018; Gales, 2023). Social media subject young minds to harmful stereotypes that can negatively influence wellbeing, which is accelerated by elevated frequency and prolonged exposure (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). While general objectification in advertising is well documented, there remains a significant knowledge gap regarding how Gen Z interprets these practices specifically. Concerns about how Gen Z interprets, and experiences marketing employed by fashion brands on social media platforms like Instagram, in the South African context, are becoming more prevalent; yet there is still a significant information gap in this area (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025).

By using a semiotic approach to guide the visual exploration of fashion brands' Instagram communication with Generation Z (hereafter referred to as Gen Z), this study explicitly aims to explore how brand communication resonates with and influences Gen Z users. In addition to empowering the youth and promoting positive portrayals of Gen Z, this visual exploration sheds light on this type of communication and how it influences Gen Z's understanding of fashion, sexuality, and self-image. A semiotic approach and thematic analysis of data collected from Instagram fashion brand content served to bridge this gap. This approach also underscores the most optimal means of communicating with Gen Z, in a way that is mindful of their well-being, to establish meaningful and lasting connections between brand and consumer.

1.2 Background of the Research Problem

Fashion brands traditionally used visual communication on social media platforms such as Instagram, to foster consumer connection and establish trustworthiness (Cantoni et al., 2020; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). This strategy resonates with Gen Z and how this audience engages with brands online in a way that feels authentic to them (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Kannan & Kumar, 2022). The concepts below are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the Literature Review.

The weaponisation of this type of communication, through the use of overt sexualisation as a tactic, is a concerning trend that directly contradicts the ideals of Gen Z (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Adams & Quereschi, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). The enhanced use of social media by Gen Z, and the separation from the world due to the pandemic isolation, has made these consumers more vulnerable to the effects of this tactic (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2021; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). Hypersexualisation perpetuates negative stereotypes and dehumanises men and women by portraying them as nothing more than the way that they appear (Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). Continuous exposure to this can harm young people's well-being, especially their self-perception and body image (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025).

Although general objectification trends are known, how South African Gen Z interprets hypersexualised fashion brand communication remains underexplored (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025).

This work seeks to bridge this gap using a semiotic approach and thematic analysis. The visual analysis explores how Gen Z's perceptions of fashion, sexuality, and self-perception are influenced by fashion brand communication. By addressing this gap, the study aimed to help create a more responsible and ethical environment for brand communication that promotes positive portrayals of Gen Z, when considering the generation's well-being as they connect digitally.

The problem of hypersexualised communication in fashion advertising is part of a broader cultural environment that has long been characterised by the pervasiveness of unattainable beauty standards (Wolf, 2002). Social media just exacerbates these stresses, which can result in a skewed sense of self and poor body image, particularly among young people (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025).

1.3 Rationale

Move over, "sex sells," objectification didn't dissipate, it just rebranded. Hypersexualised stereotypes, a by-product of overt objectification, persistently lurk in the shadows of online fashion brand communication (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). Young people are disproportionately affected by this harmful trend, which is visible in several fashion brands' Instagram communication strategies (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). This negatively influences the way young people perceive themselves and their place in the world (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2021; Gales, 2023).

According to Avis and Henderson (2022), brands are "multifaceted constructs" that shape value for their audience and are not mere monoliths. In this way, brands exchange co-created narratives to cultivate mutual understanding or meaning through the use of visual marketing (Avis & Henderson, 2022). Although such an exchange can benefit both the brand and the consumer, the brand must also employ responsible messaging (Havas, 2023). This is particularly pertinent when meaning is

created in the malleable minds of Gen Z, a generation that frequently interacts with and unpacks brand communication on platforms like Instagram (Mahmoud et al., 2021).

This study foregrounds a brand-centred perspective, aiming to understand Gen Z engagement specifically with the selected fashion brands. An established understanding of Gen Z's experience in this context is essential, considering the possible effects of hypersexualised communication on this generation (Gales, 2023). Previous studies like Baker and Powell (2013), Sabao (2013), Davis (2018), Fasoli et al. (2018), and Fyffe (2020) mainly concentrate on adult perspectives or explore specific advertisements without taking into account the broader cultural context, the distinct sensibilities of Gen Z or a South African perspective. This study sought to understand the perception and interpretation of South African Gen Z audiences regarding the messaging used by contemporary fashion brands to communicate with them and try to establish a relationship with them through Instagram. This study also sought to add to the expanding body of knowledge of the effects of visual communication on young consumers. Understanding Gen Z's nuanced experiences with hypersexualisation is crucial, as the generation represents a powerful demographic, growing in spending power, with distinct values and preferences (Schneider & Lee, 2022). The findings of this research can be particularly valuable for fashion brands and brand leaders looking to develop more responsible and effective communication or engagement strategies that resonate positively with Gen Z audiences.

This study used a semiotic approach to explore the realm of digital fashion brand communication on Instagram, specifically uncovering how it resonates with Gen Z audiences. The research purpose is explicitly to identify how brands can communicate ethically while engaging Gen Z effectively. This research seeks to transcend the critique and contribute to a more responsible and ethical communication landscape within the broader brand communication space as well as the fashion industry. Understanding Gen Z's nuanced experiences with hypersexualised messaging could spark a conversation within brand leadership communities and encourage a shift toward communication strategies that empower Gen Z, celebrate diverse representations, and contribute positively to a more inclusive and engaging future. By delving into Gen Z's interpretations through a semiotic approach, this research contributes to a more ethical communication landscape within the fashion industry, ultimately empowering Gen Z by fostering positive representations.

1.4 Problem Statement, Research Questions and Objectives

The following sections describe the problem statement, research questions, aims, and objectives.

1.4.1 Problem statement

Although overt sexism has become less prevalent recently, hypersexualised stereotypes persist in online fashion spaces, especially regarding Gen Z users (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). Concerns have been raised about the long-term effects of this damaging trend on the mental and social well-being of younger generations, as it promotes feelings of shame, anxiety, and image distortion (Karsay et al., 2018;

Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). This tendency is visible in many brand communication techniques on Instagram (Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). By exploring Gen Z's interpretation of hypersexualised fashion brand content, this study aims to inform brand-led engagement strategies while promoting responsible messaging. By understanding how Gen Z unpacks and experiences hypersexualised fashion brand content on Instagram, this study sought to solve this key problem. By identifying these processes, this study outcomes can help the fashion industry adopt more ethical and responsible communication strategies to strengthen brand-consumer engagement and empower Gen Z consumers.

1.4.2 Research Questions

The primary research question is the following.

How does fashion brand communication target Generation Z on Instagram?

The following secondary questions support the primary research question:

1. What is the current fashion brand landscape?
2. How does fashion brand communication visually target Generation Z on Instagram?
3. How can fashion brand leaders create content that speaks best to this audience?

1.4.3 Aim and objectives

This study wanted to visually explore the communication of fashion brands on Instagram that are aimed at Generation Z.

The following objectives guided this study:

1. Review the existing literature to gauge the current landscape of fashion brand communication.
2. To conduct a visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Generation Z.
3. Create a set of guidelines to assist/guide fashion brand leaders in creating Instagram content that speaks to Generation Z.

1.5 Research Design and Methodology

The following sections describe the research design and methodology.

1.5.1 Research Design

Constructivism argues that human beings are innately different from objects because, unlike objects, they are subject to change and can be influenced by their environment (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

In this way, Constructivists seek to describe meaningful social action by understanding human behaviour (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This paradigm has been selected because the research aimed to visually explore brand-led engagement with Gen Z's engagement in fashion brand communication on Instagram. This paradigm is selected as this research aims to visually explore how brands strategically engage Generation Z on Instagram.

This research adopted an exploratory design (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) to explore Gen Z's engagement with fashion brand communication on Instagram. The approach was preferred over a descriptive design due to the limited research on this specific phenomenon in this context. Exploratory designs are well suited to uncover underlying patterns and themes and cultivate a deeper understanding in relatively unexplored areas (Yin, 2017) such as the area of study: fashion brand engagement with South African Gen Z on Instagram.

This research employed a qualitative, inductive, and deductive approach (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) to gain in-depth insights into Gen Z's perspectives of contemporary fashion brand communication. A semiotic approach to data analysis and a thematic analysis of the semiotic coded data served as the chosen framework to explore how brands construct meaning and communicate strategically, and how Gen Z interprets it (Barthes, 1972; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The potential influence of hypersexualised messaging on Gen Z necessitates a deeper understanding of the generation's experience, which has often been overlooked in existing research. It was explored in the literature review of this study as a means of evaluating the current landscape of fashion brands. This study employs a semiotic approach to unpack signs, meaning, and brand strategies established by fashion brand communication on Instagram that resonate with Gen Z audiences. The study employed a semiotic approach to unpack signs, meaning and context established by fashion brand communication on Instagram that resonates with Gen Z audiences, moving beyond critique to contribute to a more responsible and ethical communication landscape within the fashion industry (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This approach allows for uncovering the "how" and "why" of Gen Z's engagement with fashion brands that aligns with the objectives of this research (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) as outlined in *Figure 3.1: Research Approach Overview*. It is important to acknowledge that a semiotic approach, like any interpretive approach, can be subject to some degree of subjectivity in interpreting signs and symbols. This study adopts a phenomenological stance, focusing on how Gen Z consumers interpret and experience fashion brand communication on Instagram. The approach prioritises lived experience and meaning-making, complementing the semiotic and thematic analyses to explore subjective interpretations of visual content.

The study focusses on the population of fashion brands that speak to Gen Z on Instagram in South Africa. The brands were selected based on their interest in and engagement with a South African Gen Z audience. These brands were chosen purposively according to the selection criteria outlined in Section 3.2.3.3.2.1, which considers relevance to Gen Z, consistency of Instagram activity, and evidence of locally targeted communication. The research includes brands across different affordability tiers to ensure a more representative understanding. Brands analysed include Diesel, Adidas, Zara, and Nike to capture a broad spectrum of brand strategy approaches and engagement styles. Brands analysed include Diesel, Adidas, Zara, and Nike to capture a broad spectrum of brand strategy approaches and engagement styles. These brands were chosen purposively according to the

selection criteria outlined in Section 3.2.3.3.2.1, which considers relevance to Gen Z, consistency of Instagram activity, and evidence of locally targeted communication. It acknowledges that Gen Z often follows and engages with brands, even if they cannot afford all the products (e.g., Diesel). For example, the selected brands include Diesel, Adidas, and Zara, which represent a range of price points.

A purposive sample was chosen based on Gen Z engagement, measured by post likes. The research acknowledges that likes might not be the most nuanced metric, but they offer a readily available indicator of daily audience interest. While engagement metrics are noted, the primary focus remains on brand strategy and communication style. This approach allowed for capturing content that resonates most with Gen Z, as the focus of this study was to understand Gen Z's preferences and interpretations of brand communication.

1.5.1.1 Sample Selection Criteria

The sample selection criteria focused on fashion brands that specifically target Gen Z consumers in South Africa, defined as individuals aged 13 to 27 years. Inclusion criteria also required brands to be an active and significant presence on Instagram. These brands strongly engage with their audience through posts, stories, and follower interactions to ensure their visibility and relevance within the Gen Z market. The criteria helped to identify brands that are effectively leveraging social media to connect with this demographic and influence purchasing decisions.

The screenshotted data will be systematically organised and documented, capturing details such as:

- Brand name
- Month of post
- Description of the visual content (e.g., clothing items, pose, background) on a denotation level
- Textual content (caption) and alternative text (ALT)
- Engagement metrics (likes, comments)
- This organised record keeping ensures transparency and facilitates the coding process during data analysis.

1.5.1.2 Sample size

The sample size consisted of twelve posts (the most engaged with per month for a year) from each of the three selected brands (a total of 36 posts) from the fashion spring/summer 2023, to autumn/winter season 2024 (August 2023 to August 2024).

A dual-stage sampling approach was employed to identify relevant posts for analysis.

Convenience sampling was used within each chosen brand to identify posts within a specified 12-month timeframe (August 2023 to August 2024). All content types (images, videos, carousels) were considered, with only the most engaged post (in terms of likes) being analysed per month, per brand. The most engaged posts were specifically selected and analysed to gain deeper insight into

the content that resonates the most with Gen Z within the chosen brands. Considering metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, this analysis allowed for the comparison of engagement levels across brands and content types (images, videos, carousels) within the 12-month timeframe. To ensure relevance, only posts related to fashion and youth, or containing potential representations of hypersexualisation were included. At the same time, irrelevant content (brand announcements and reposts) was excluded, and exploration adhered to platform guidelines and ethical considerations.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of relevant contemporary fashion brands favoured by Gen Z (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Three brands, Zara, Adidas and Diesel, were selected based on their engagement with South African Gen Z on Instagram and their representation of different levels of affordability within the target market. Analysing a representative sample of their Instagram posts over 12 months allowed for a deeper understanding of current communication practices with Gen Z in this space.

This research explored Gen Z's engagement with fashion brand communication on Instagram through a multi-brand case study. Three fashion brands were chosen for analysis based on their distinct identities and potential to resonate with different aspects of Gen Z's values and interests. Emphasis remains on capturing strategic communication rather than purely engagement metrics.

1.5.2 Rationale behind each brand selection and specific content analysis approach

Zara represents fast-fashion as a brand known for its affordable, trend-driven clothing that allows Gen Z to cultivate a capsule wardrobe (Chiu and Ho, 2023). Exploring Zara's Instagram content enabled an understanding of how Gen Z engages with trend-driven, fast fashion imagery online.

Diesel, a premium brand with a distinct aesthetic compared to Zara, offers a contrasting perspective on content and engagement (Bain & Company, 2022). Research suggests that Gen Z actively follows such brands on social media for inspiration, even if they primarily shop at more affordable alternatives (Chiu and Ho, 2023). Although Diesel might not necessarily fall within Gen Z's immediate purchasing range, their recent efforts towards conscious material usage and increased brand transparency resonate with Gen Z values. Generation Z engages with fashion brands aspirationally, even when price points are out of reach (Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024). Drawing on inspiration from culture, Gen Z uses platforms like Instagram as a reference point to emulate styling, poses, and aesthetics within their budget (Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024). This phenomenon allows high-fashion content to retain relevance despite financial inaccessibility. By offering curated, editorial content for free on their feeds, brands like Diesel are seen as aspirational mood boards for self-expression, creativity, and digital identity-building among young audiences. Furthermore, Diesel's identity as a rebellious and outspoken brand resonates with Gen Z's values (Eirini, 2020). By analysing Diesel's content, this study can explore Gen Z's interactions with more premium, inspirational, and rebellious brands that focus on a distinct aesthetic or brand story.

Adidas, an iconic sportswear brand, resonates with the focus of Gen Z on health, wellness, and social consciousness (Reilly, 2020). Their marketing visuals often feature athletes advocating for social

causes that resonate with Gen Z (Reilly, 2020). The content of Adidas provides a contrasting perspective to that of Zara and Diesel. Unlike Zara's trend-driven content or Diesel's focus on aesthetics, Adidas' content feature user-generated material or behind-the-scenes sports-based footage. This approach fosters a sense of community and authenticity that appeals to Gen Z (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

The selected brands originally included Diesel, Adidas, and Zara, representing a range of price points and points of differentiation to this audience; however, there was a late addition of Nike. While collecting data for this study, I came across a significant insight reported by the Sunday Times GenNext Awards, which highlighted Nike as the "coolest brand in South Africa" among youth (Bizcommunity, 2024). This insight aligns with the focus of this research on how fashion brands communicate with and appeal to Generation Z. The survey, conducted by Yellowwood, is a critical measure of youth trends in South Africa, particularly in the 15 to 24 age demographic, one of the fastest-growing populations globally. This recognition of Nike as the leading brand in the Gen Z space, while Adidas ranked fourth, provides valuable context for understanding the landscape of brand perceptions in this market. Nike's consistent appeal, as demonstrated in their performance at the GenNext Awards, underscores their influence within the youth culture, which is central to this study's exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Generation Z. As such, I have pivoted to include an analysis, similar to the above three brands, for three posts from Nike starting in May 2024 and ending with the rest of the study in July 2024.

By analysing various types of content and engagement metrics across these three distinct brands, the aim of this research was to understand how Gen Z interacts with fashion brand communication on Instagram.

1.5.3 Research Methodology

The research data was captured as screenshots directly from the Instagram platform. To ensure data accessibility and protection, these screenshots were systematically organised and documented for further analysis on a secure cloud storage platform (Google Drive).

A multimodal data analysis framework was specifically selected to assess the potential for objectification within fashion brand communication on Instagram targeted at Gen Z (*as outlined Figure 2.2: Data Analysis Tool Visualisation*). The framework draws upon two prominent theoretical lenses.

Seminal Source, Barthes Mythologies (Barthes, 1972): This portion of the semiotic analysis focused on identifying signifiers (clothing, poses, backgrounds) and signifieds (underlying messages) within the imagery (Barthes, 1972). Based on the literature review, a point system was developed to assign scores to signifiers associated with objectification. The system was refined throughout the analysis and is presented in an appendix.

Updated framework established by the Seminal Source, Barthes' *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1972) and the inclusion of multimodality through the more recent Kress and van Leeuwen's *Visual Grammar* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006):

This framework added another layer onto the seminal framework by exploring framing techniques (close-up vs. wide shot) and their influence on viewers' perception of the model's body. Additionally, and most importantly, it allowed for the exploration of multimodality in captions or alt-text, which aided in uncovering deeper meanings associated with these visual and verbal elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

By combining these two frameworks, the research sought to transcend the limitations of individual theories, offering a nuanced understanding of how fashion brands construct and potentially objectify Gen Z through visual communication strategies on Instagram.

The coding process involved the systematically deconstruction of visual elements and analysis of underlying messages through Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972) as a predominant and seminal framework and incorporating the role of multimodality and framing as emphasised by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). The two frameworks were complemented through the lens of the objectification theory throughout the analysis (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1998). The point system derived from the literature review was continuously evaluated and refined based on relevant academic sources, as illustrated in Figure 1.1.

It is important to note that the study employs a qualitative lens; therefore, the point system merely functioned as a guide throughout the coding and analysis process. For further reference, the point system and a selection of the sample of analysed posts are included as an addendum.

This research employs a mixed methods approach for analysis, combining a semiotic approach and thematic analysis.

1.5.3.1 Semiotic Approach

This method was used to deconstruct the visual and verbal content of the selected brands' Instagram posts by using the frameworks outlined above. A point system was developed to analyse signifiers and their signifieds systematically, assign points based on their objectification potential, and provide a means for the researcher to familiarise themselves with the analysed data.

1.5.3.2 Thematic Analysis

Following the semiotic approach, the coded semiotic data were further analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and connections related to the representation of Gen Z within the data. This allowed for a deeper understanding of how objectification is constructed across the three chosen brands, and for creating a set of guidelines to assist brand leaders in this space in the future.

By combining these methods, the research not only identified signs and underlying messages in brand communication, but also uncovered broader thematic trends related to the representation of

Gen Z. This exploration of strategic brand communication will help to uncover thematic patterns, and provide guidelines for ethical, responsible, and brand-focused engagement with Gen Z. Ultimately, this methodology facilitated the development of recommendations for responsible and ethical communication to avoid the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, and to resonate positively with Gen Z audiences.

1.6 Ethical Considerations

This study did not engage with human participants, since the data collection relied solely on screenshots of publicly available content from the Instagram platform. By focussing on such publicly accessible material, this approach aligns with the three primary ethical principles of justice, beneficence, and respect for persons, which ensured that privacy and user autonomy were upheld throughout the research process (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

Justice was promoted by ensuring fairness in the selection of the sample. Brands were chosen based on established criteria that ensured equitable representation and relevance to the research focus. This approach avoids exploiting any group while it ensures that the benefits and burdens of the research are evenly distributed.

Beneficence was addressed by minimising potential harm to brands or users, as data collection focused solely on public content, and no private or sensitive information is involved that reduced the risk of harm. The study aimed to maximise the benefits by contributing valuable information on the engagement of the fashion industry with Gen Z on Instagram with findings that intended to improve brand strategies and consumer experiences.

Respect for persons (autonomy) was maintained by strictly utilising public data without direct interaction or intervention with individual users. As the research did not involve direct engagement or personal information, there was no need for informed consent. However, the study respected the privacy of individuals by not intruding into private or restricted content and only exploring publicly shared information, thus protecting the autonomy and dignity of participants. This study will not utilise a traditional survey instrument or questionnaire. Data collection will be solely based on screenshots captured directly from the Instagram platform. The chosen method aligns with the ethical considerations of the research by focusing on publicly available content. Screenshots do not require user interaction or compromise user privacy in any way.

The chosen data collection instrument (screenshots) and recording methods are in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the proposal. They ensure that the research is non-invasive and focusses on publicly available content, respecting user privacy, and avoiding any potential harm or discomfort to participants.

1.6.1 Trustworthiness

The researcher followed a reflexive approach throughout the process. This involved reflecting on personal biases, assumptions, and potential influences on the research process and interpretation.

This self-awareness strengthens dependability and confirmability by acknowledging potential limitations and ensuring transparency.

The research also employed thick descriptions by providing detailed and contextualised accounts of the data and interpretations (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). These rich descriptions enhance dependability and transferability by allowing readers to understand the context and make their own judgements about the findings.

Established academic sources support the claims and interpretations to ensure credibility. Furthermore, augmentation, complementing findings with rich data excerpts and illustrative examples, further strengthen the credibility and confirmability by providing concrete evidence for interpretations.

This study rests on several key assumptions. It assumes that fashion brand communication on Instagram is intentionally crafted and can therefore be meaningfully analysed using semiotic and thematic methods. It also assumes that Generation Z engages with visual content in patterned ways shaped by cultural, social and digital influences. Furthermore, the selected posts are assumed to reflect each brand's broader communication style, and the analytical frameworks are considered suitable for identifying objectification cues and thematic trends. Finally, Instagram is assumed to be a relevant and meaningful platform for examining brand–audience interaction within the South African Gen Z context.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The researcher acknowledges the limitations inherent in a single researcher design, which can potentially limit the transferability of the findings to broader contexts. To address this limitation, purposive sampling, a qualitative sampling technique (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), was employed to select brands with diverse characteristics relevant to the research question. This intentional selection provided a more holistic understanding within the chosen scope.

Although the study used nonprobability sampling (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) that could limit generalisability, it allowed for the selection of brands based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives and questions. A detailed audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to enhance dependability and ensure that the research could be replicated by others. This trail documented the research decisions, data collection procedures, and analysis steps.

1.8 Disciplinary Demarcation of the Research

This research contributes to the field of strategic brand communication and creative brand leadership by exploring how fashion brands can use visual communication strategies on Instagram to target Gen Z. By unpacking contemporary brand communication practices through the semiotic framework with an understanding of objectification theory, this study sheds light on the underlying messages and potential objectification present in visual content targeted at this specific demographic. The findings of this semiotic analysis inform the development of more ethical and

responsible communication strategies within the fashion industry, towards fostering a more positive and empowering experience for Gen Z audiences on social media platforms such as Instagram.

1.9 Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I have a strong foundation in digital marketing and brand strategy, with extensive experience of using social media platforms for these purposes. This experience is complemented by a solid academic background in strategic brand communication, as evidenced by the undergraduate and postgraduate (BA Honours) degrees in the field.

This research upholds transparency in brand selection and the process post-selection. The criteria and rationale for selecting specific brands and posts within the research population are explicitly stated. The established academic literature supports all arguments and interpretations that ensure bias mitigation. In addition, the researcher employed reflexivity throughout the process by critically reflecting on all personal biases and assumptions.

1.10 Contribution to the Discipline

This research results contribute to the field of creative brand leadership. First, it proposes a multimodal framework to analyse the potential for objectification within fashion brand communication on Instagram. This framework can offer valuable tools for future investigations into similar topics. Second, the study provides helpful insights into the visual strategies that fashion brands employ to target Gen Z. Understanding these strategies can help researchers and industry professionals better understand how fashion brands position themselves toward this specific demographic. Furthermore, by uncovering the potential objectification embedded within fashion brand communication on Instagram, this research has the potential to spark crucial conversations about responsible representation and ethical marketing practices within the fashion industry. Ultimately, the findings of this study can inform the development of more ethical and responsible communication strategies and foster a more positive and empowering experience for Gen Z audiences on social media platforms.

1.11 Value of the Research

This research holds significant value in multiple aspects. First, it offers a critical perspective on fashion brand communication strategies and their potential impact on Gen Z. By critically exploring these strategies, research can raise awareness of possible negative influences and contribute to a more balanced understanding of fashion brand communication. Second, it highlights the importance of responsible and ethical communication practices within the fashion industry. This emphasis can encourage brands and brand leaders to be more mindful of the messages they transmit and their potential impact on young audiences. Furthermore, the research contributes to a more positive and empowering experience for Gen Z audiences on social media platforms. The study can pave the way for a more inclusive and respectful online environment by uncovering potentially harmful messages. Finally, the research provides valuable insights for fashion brands seeking to better understand and

engage with Gen Z consumers. Understanding the potential pitfalls of hypersexualisation can help brands develop more effective and responsible communication strategies that can ultimately lead to stronger brand-consumer relationships.

1.12 Structure of the Research Dissertation

Table 1.1: Structure of the Research Dissertation

Chapter 1 Orientation to the Study	This chapter serves as an introduction to the dissertation, outlining the rationale, aims, and objectives of the research. It also introduces the research questions that guide the investigation and briefly preview the content of Chapters 2, 3, and 4. Additionally, this chapter highlights the importance of the research and its contribution to the field.
Chapter 2 Literature Review	This chapter reviews the existing literature relevant to the research topic. By critically exploring current knowledge, the chapter identifies gaps in understanding and establishes the specific contribution that this study aims to make.
Chapter 3 Research Design and Methodology	This chapter details the research design and methods employed throughout the study. It explains the chosen methodology, data collection and analysis techniques, and addresses ethical considerations during the research process.
Chapter 4 Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Discussion of Findings	This chapter presents the data analysis process, interpretations of the findings, and a discussion of the results related to research questions, objectives, and existing literature. It includes relevant tables, charts, and other visual representations to support the analysis.
Chapter 5 Conclusions, Implications, Limitations and Recommendations	This final chapter answers the research questions. It discusses the implications of the study, acknowledges its limitations, and proposes recommendations for future research. The chapter also includes a personal reflection on the research journey.

1.13 Study Overview

STUDY OVERVIEW

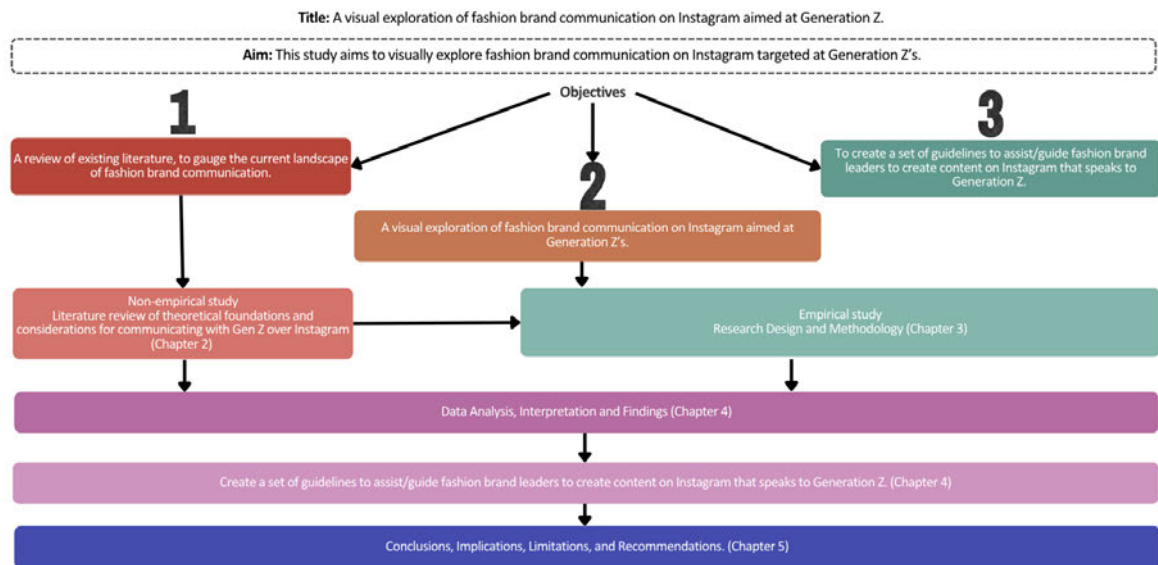


Figure 1.1: Study overview

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

(NON-EMPIRICAL STUDY)

“Success isn't about the end result, it's about what you learn along the way.”

Vera Wang, fashion designer and founder of Vera Wang

2.1 Introduction

The fashion industry feeds on rapid shifts and freedom of expression; however, it has drawn criticism recently for its damaging impact on society (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). In addition to the industry's environmental failures (Hemantha, 2021), the depiction of consumers through hypersexualised and stereotyped communication from fashion brand communicators contributes to distinct concerns regarding its influence on Gen Z (Karsay et al., 2018; Fyffe, 2020; Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025), a generation identifiable by its digital competency and social consciousness (Kannan and Kumar, 2022).

A recent global survey conducted by McKinsey that investigated Gen Z's holistic health confirmed that the use of social media can lead to poor body image; however, it can help with social connections and self-expression (Coe, Doy, Enomoto, & Healy, 2023). Other studies, such as Bekalu et al. (2019) have also indicated a definitive and nuanced association between social media and mental health. Coe et al. (2023) also report that Gen Z has the most tumultuous relationship with their mental health. In particular, Gen Z females have been cited as the most likely to experience the adverse effects of social media. This is further supported by reports from The Wall Street Journal that state that Meta and its employees are aware of the impact of Instagram, specifically on young girls (Adams & Quereshi, 2021).

To address this dilemma, this study explores Instagram's modern digital fashion landscape. It specifically explores its potential to objectify Gen Z through selected visual representations of the generation, using chosen imagery to display products. By analysing highly engaged Instagram fashion brand content and developing evidence-based guidelines, this study seeks to enable fashion brands and brand communicators to design effective communication strategies that appeal and resonate with Gen Z and their values.

This literature review gauges the current landscape of fashion brand communication. It explores the theoretical foundations of fashion brand communication, and the theoretical framework selected in the realm of semiotics. This review also provides an overview of the frameworks used to visually unpack the most engaged content shared by the chosen fashion brands on Instagram. For more detail, see Figure 2.4: Data Analysis tool, linking main literature themes to analysis. The overall aim

was to establish guidelines for brand communicators to create content that speaks best to Gen Z on Instagram.

The literature review offers an exploration of the existing research and knowledge concerning visual, digital brand communication with Gen Z and its potential implications for the generation's well-being. The insights and lessons from this review can inform the development of a research framework tool that will supplement the deeper exploration of digital visual codes when communicating with South African Gen Z on Instagram. Figure 2.4 also details these digital visual codes.

2.2 Conceptualisation

The reviewed literature covers the keyword conceptualisation of “fashion,” “brand,” and “brand communication” in Fashion Brand Communication, clearly defines the Gen Z audience, and the chosen platform for exploration, Instagram. These conceptualisations are followed by explaining and motivating the chosen theoretical framework and semiotic approach and provides a critical analysis of the existing body of knowledge relating to these topics.

2.2.1 A Critical Review of Fashion, Brand, and Brand Communication

This section engages with the contemporary academic literature to explore the multifaceted nature of fashion, brand, and brand communication in the context of Instagram and its Gen Z audience.

2.2.1.1 Fashion Beyond Aesthetics

Huggard and Cope (2020) describe fashion as an art form and a necessity centred around couture, artisanship and elitism. Clothing is defined as a functional dress form; however, fashion flourishes through individuality, change, and contradiction (IOPScience, 2023). Brands in the industry use non-tangible elements of symbolic or expressive importance to cultivate a sense of shared well-being and common interest in a consumer base (Huggard & Cope, 2020). In this way, fashion transcends the traditional dichotomy of an art form and becomes a necessity (Huggard & Cope, 2020). Huggard and Cope (2020) suggest that fashion is a necessity centred around couture, artisanship and elitism, while Venkatasamy (2015) describes it as a dynamic form of material or visual culture that dictates and challenges societal norms. Kawamura (2019) argues that fashion is a cultural expression that reflects and shapes societal norms. Furthermore, fashion is a significant economic driver, generating jobs and influencing global trade (Tiwari, 2023).

2.2.1.2 Brand, a Multifaceted Construct in the Digital Age

Brands have been redefined as complicated, multifaceted constructs with differing meanings, independence, co-creation, and scope (Avis & Henderson, 2022). More recently, the definition of brand was homed in on brand as experience, with the idea that a brand is essentially a container for the consumers' entire experience with a product or company (Huggard & Cope, 2020; Avis & Henderson, 2022). Brands are complex constructs that encompass the tangible, such as products,

and intangible, such as values and identity elements (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2013). Brands cultivate emotional connections with consumers, influence behaviour, and foster loyalty (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). However, Gorman (2024) takes a critical stance on fashion brand communication that highlights the potential for manipulation by posing the thought that strategic narratives and curated imagery can shape consumer desires that can potentially generate a sense of artificial "need" (Gorman, 2024). With increased awareness of marketing tactics, Gen Z is likely to be more discerning. According to Stachowiak-Krzyżan (2021), fashion brands on Instagram must strive for authenticity and transparency in their communication to align with their values and build trust with a Gen Z audience.

2.2.1.3 Brand Communication

Through the dissemination and proliferation of their brand's vision, values, goods, and services, businesses can inform, convince, enlighten, educate, remind, and enrich the understanding of their audiences (Avis & Henderson, 2022; IOPScience, 2023). Brand communication strategically disseminates a brand's message across various channels to persuade, inform, and build relationships with target audiences (D'Angelo, 2022). The rise of social media, particularly Instagram, has revolutionised brand communication strategies (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Consequently, brands can now engage in a more interactive and personalised dialogue with consumers (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2021).

2.2.1.4 Fashion Brand Communication

Fashion Brand Communication represents the relationship, engagement, and dialogue cultivated between fashion brands and their consumers through alternative initiatives, platforms, and spaces (Huggard & Cope, 2020). As the fashion industry is heavily dependent on change; what is perceived as fashionable today will inevitably change tomorrow. Therefore, fashion brands must cultivate cultural credibility and relevance (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2018; Huggard & Cope, 2020). Fashion brands also supplement the construction of individual consumer identity; because of this, consumers are integral to the process of filtering through brand communication messages by using individual sociocultural experiences, which allows for the construction of shared brand meaning (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2018; Avis & Henderson, 2022; Huggard & Cope, 2020). As such, brands in this space must transfer their brand values and messaging to fit all cultural contexts to remain relevant (Huggard & Cope, 2020; Avis & Henderson, 2022).

2.2.2 The Audience (Gen Z), Social Media, and Instagram

This section critically engages with contemporary academic literature to explore the Gen Z audience, social media, and Instagram.

2.2.2.1 Generation Z

Merriam-Webster (2023) loosely defines Gen Z as people born during the late 1990s and early 2000s, while Francis and Hoefel (2018) describe Gen Z as anyone born between 1995 and 2010. According to Roberts (2023), 76% of Gen Z enjoy the daily use of Instagram; they spend more than four hours a day online. Gen Z, or the social-savvy generation, has been defined as the generation that spends

more time talking to their friends online than in person (Roberts, 2023). Gen Z has also been dubbed the “digital native” generation due to its shared trait of extreme online use to kill time (Roberts, 2023). The typical Gen Z audience enjoys visual communication through images, which differs from the generations preceding them who prefer to communicate through innovative, text-based content (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021); however, some debate exists over which birth years most represent this generation and its qualities. According to Quirk (2021), there is a cohort of people on the cusp of both Gen Z and Millennials, known as Zillennials. These Zillennials show traits typically ascribed to Gen Z or Millennials. Quirk (2021) defines this age group as anyone born between 1996 and 2001. Among these differences, Gen Z is considered in this study to represent the cohort of people who display purely Gen Z traits; people born between 2001 and 2010.

2.2.2.2 Social Media

Arrigo (2018) defines social media as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Karsay, Knoll, and Matthes (2018) describe social media as being characterised by personal, visual content around the self. Qi and Cui (2018) consider social media to be websites and applications that enable users to create and share content with a network of friends, fans, or followers. Contemporary fashion companies utilise social media to create and share value-added content to satisfy consumer wants and needs; however, there are many challenges for brands in the ever-evolving digital advertising and social media space (Chu & Seock, 2020). As a result of the popularisation of this type of content, fashion brands can foster consistent engagement and communication with consumers in a more authentic way than traditional advertising (Chu & Seock, 2020).

2.2.2.3 Instagram

Instagram is a free social networking site where users can share videos and photos with their followers (Delfino & Antonelli, 2022). It defines its service as a free video and photo sharing app that allows one to upload photos or videos and share them with a restricted number of friends or followers. Users can browse, comment on, and like friends' posted content (Instagram, 2023). For a Gen Z audience, fashion brand communication through the Instagram platform leverages trending aesthetics such as minimalism, streetwear, and hyperrealism to shape brand identity and connect with Gen Z's visual preferences (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

2.2.2.4 Contextualising Fashion Brands on Instagram in South Africa

Within the South African context, Instagram functions as a central space where global fashion brands localise their communication and build relevance with younger consumers. Although brands such as Adidas, Diesel, Zara and Nike operate internationally, Adidas and Diesel maintain dedicated South African Instagram profiles that respond to local cultural cues, aesthetic preferences and economic conditions. For international readers, it is important to note that South Africa's social, cultural and digital landscape differs markedly from Global North markets: Gen Z users navigate issues such as cultural hybridity, post-apartheid identity formation, and economic inequality, which shape how

brand messages are interpreted and valued (Abrahams, 2025). South African Gen Z audiences engage actively with these brand pages through likes, comments and shared content, negotiating identity, belonging and aspiration in ways specific to the country's media environment (Abrahams, 2025). Consequently, the Instagram profiles selected for this study operate simultaneously as global brand touchpoints and as locally embedded communication spaces. This contextualisation strengthens the relevance of the chosen brands for analysing visual strategies in South Africa and aligns with the purposive sampling criteria outlined in Section 3.2.3.3.2.1.

2.3 The Fundamentals of Fashion Brand Communication

This section explores the theoretical foundations of fashion brand communication, and how these perspectives inform and influence the digital marketing strategies of fashion brand communicators using Instagram to target the Gen Z audience.

2.3.1 Introduction

The concept of brand image remains central to the realm of digital brand communication (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2013). Consumers engage with brands that mirror their attributes, values, and personality traits (Avis & Henderson, 2022). Fashion brands capitalise on the visual power of Instagram to cultivate a unique brand image to mirror these consumers (Jin & Ryu, 2020). This digital brand image is carefully cultivated through influencer partnerships, design aesthetics, and curated content (Jin & Ryu, 2020). As Gen Z is the most socially conscious and environmentally aware generation (Youn & Cho, 2020), brand image and the brands' ability to mirror their desired audience are impacted by the brands' stance on sustainability and social responsibility (Youn & Cho, 2020; Kannan & Kumar, 2022).

2.3.2 Responsible, Contemporary Brand Communication

Avis and Henderson (2022) have recently redefined the brand concept as complicated, multifaceted constructs with differing levels of meaning, independence, co-creation, and scope. In this way, the authors suggest that brands are visual marketing tools that cultivate value for their direct and indirect stakeholders, society, and their broader environment through an exchange of co-created meaning (Avis & Henderson, 2022). This is echoed by Havas (2023), who states that brands must be held accountable to their consumers by delivering on the personal, collective, and functional benefits of a brand's established image. These benefits include compassion for the audience's well-being in the long term and ensuring a consistent and reliable stream of revenue for the brand in the future (Havas, 2023). Huggard and Cope (2020) claim that combining emotional, physical, or intangible and tangible cues can trigger audience response when engaging with visual identity, brand imagery, and brand messaging. This definition of brand homes in on brand as experience, with the idea that a brand is essentially a container for the consumer's entire experience with a product or company (Huggard & Cope, 2020).

2.3.3 Visual Brand Identity

These are the visual elements of a brand, such as a logo, colour palette, shape, typography, use of language, and other elements that drive a brand's corporate identity (Huggard & Cope, 2020). Visual codes are communicated across all brand touchpoints such as product, packaging, social media images, visual merchandising, and web design. In contemporary branding, new social media like Instagram have become fundamental in formulating a communication strategy (Avis & Henderson, 2022). In the fashion industry, brand imagery must reflect a taste or lifestyle with which the consumer can identify (Huggard & Cope, 2020) and the product becomes a representative means to attain or exude this lifestyle (Huggard & Cope, 2020; Avis & Henderson, 2022). In this way, the industry can complement the construction of individual consumer identity (Huggard & Cope, 2020).

2.3.3.1 Visual Brand Identity of Selected Sample of Brands

As previously established, brands function as multifaceted communicators, their messages extending far beyond the products themselves (Avis & Henderson, 2022). Through a meticulously crafted visual language, brands cultivate a specific identity and target a particular audience (Huggard & Cope, 2020; Avis & Henderson, 2022). As this study semiotically explores how Diesel, Zara, and Adidas utilise visual codes to construct meaning and connect with their target consumers, the following section explores how their visual brand identities (logos, colour palettes, and marketing imagery) work together to create a distinct brand personality that allow these brands to resonate with specific demographics and aspirations.

2.3.3.1.1 Adidas

Adidas taps into an aspect of Gen Z's identity by focussing on health, wellness, and social consciousness. Adidas' iconic three-stripe logo symbolises athletic achievement and excellence that aligns with Gen Z's keenness on personal well-being (Reilly, 2020). Their marketing visuals frequently feature athletes who compete and advocate for social causes that resonate with Gen Z, such as environmental sustainability or racial equality. This approach acknowledges Gen Z's desire to actively shape the world around them. The brand's focus on performance apparel also caters to Gen Z's interest in self-improvement and to push their physical limits.

2.3.3.1.2 Diesel

Diesel leverages a bold and provocative aesthetic that resonates strongly with Gen Z. Their logo, a capital "D" with a diagonal arrow cutting through it, can be interpreted as a subtle phallic symbol, hinting at the brand's association with sexuality and youthful rebellion (Eirini, 2020). This aligns with their frequent use of dark and red colour palettes, which are still linked to passion, desire, and a touch of danger in contemporary culture (Singh & Srivastava, 2011). Diesel clothing often features exaggerated cuts, distressed details, and humorous or suggestive imagery that work together to create a brand identity that is loud, playful, and pushes boundaries. This semiotic approach speaks directly to Gen Z's desire for self-expression and individuality, a trend highlighted by studies like GlobalWebIndex's *Social Commerce Fundamentals 2022* report, which found that 60% of Gen Z use

social media to express themselves through fashion (GlobalWebIndex, 2022). Furthermore, Diesel's recent marketing campaigns have embraced social and environmental issues that are important to Gen Z, such as sustainability and body positivity. Their 'Find the D' campaign for FW23, for example, featured a diverse cast celebrating self-love and individuality (Diesel, 2023). This shows that Diesel understands the values of this generation and is actively seeking to connect with them on a deeper level.

2.3.3.1.3 Zara

While Diesel caters to a more rebellious side of Gen Z, Zara targets a different segment; the fashion-conscious individual who values affordability and on-trend style. The minimalist black and white wordmark logo of Zara conveys a sense of sophistication and timelessness that aligns with Gen Z's desire for curated, capsule wardrobes that transcend fleeting trends (Barnard, 2020). Zara's marketing visuals often feature models in everyday settings, showcasing the versatility of their clothing and its ability to be seamlessly integrated into existing wardrobes. This resonates with Gen Z's busy lifestyles and their preference for practicality. Additionally, Zara's fast fashion model allows it to quickly adapt to the latest trends, ensuring that Gen Z can afford to express their style.

2.3.3.1.4 Nike

The selected brands originally included Diesel, Adidas, and Zara, representing a range of price points and points of differentiation to this audience; however, there was a late addition of Nike. While collecting data for this study, I came across a significant insight reported by the Sunday Times GenNext Awards, which highlighted Nike as the "coolest brand in South Africa" among youth (Bizcommunity, 2024). This insight aligns with the focus of this research on how fashion brands communicate with and appeal to Generation Z. The survey, conducted by Yellowwood, is a critical measure of youth trends in South Africa, particularly in the aged thirteen (13) to 27 demographic, one of the fastest-growing populations globally. This recognition of Nike as the leading brand in the Gen Z space, while Adidas ranked fourth, provides valuable context for understanding the landscape of brand perceptions in this market. Nike's consistent appeal, as demonstrated in their performance at the GenNext Awards, underscores their influence within the youth culture, which is central to this study's exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Generation Z. As such, I have pivoted to include an analysis, similar to the above three brands, for three posts from Nike starting in May 2024 and ending with the rest of the study in July 2024.

2.3.4 Digital Storytelling

Digital content that tells a story holds the power of narrative, and with it the power to connect with consumers emotionally by mirroring their attitudes and day-to-day behaviours (Kemp et al., 2021). The more relatable and realistic the narrative is to its viewers, the stronger the brand identity and ultimately establishes a greater sense of empathy between the consumer and the brand. This creates a greater understanding of the community surrounding the brand (Bange et al., 2020). Fashion brands leverage the features available on Instagram, such as reels and stories, as tactical tools to share engaging narratives about their design processes or ethical practices (Djafarova &

Bowes, 2021). These narratives should speak directly to Gen Z's desire for authenticity and transparency to build trust and loyalty in the audience towards the brand and its product (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Adams & Quereshi, 2021; Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2021; Kannan & Kumar, 2022).

2.3.4.1.1 Narrative versus Story

A key distinction in digital marketing is between narratives and stories. A narrative is an overarching thread or theme that reflects a brand's values, purpose, and strategic messaging over time. A story, in contrast, is a specific instance of that narrative, such as an individual Instagram reel, carousel, or post illustrating the narrative in action (Kemp et al., 2021).

2.3.4.1.2 Digital Storytelling and Purpose-Driven Narratives

Digital storytelling enables brands to emotionally connect with consumers by reflecting their attitudes, behaviours, and values (Kemp et al., 2021). Authenticity, the perception that a brand is genuine and transparent, strengthens this connection and builds trust with Gen Z, who value transparency and relatability (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Adams & Quereshi, 2021). Similarly, inclusivity in visual content, such as diverse body types, ethnicities, and abilities, reinforces the brand's social responsibility and appeal (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2021). Engagement refers to the interaction between consumers and brand content, including likes, comments, shares, and time spent viewing posts, while hypersexualised imagery describes visual content that exaggerates or objectifies sexual characteristics, potentially impacting self-perception and consumer behaviour (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Adams & Quereshi, 2021). Fashion brands use Instagram features, such as Reels and Stories, to convey purpose-driven narratives, whether highlighting ethical practices, production processes, or lifestyle associations (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). These narratives are expressed through stories, providing concrete examples of the overarching brand narrative. Aligning narratives and stories with Gen Z's desire for authenticity, transparency, and inclusivity strengthens brand trust and loyalty (Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2021).

2.3.4.1.3 Visual vs Digital Brand Communication

Visual brand communication focuses on imagery, design, and aesthetic cues that convey brand identity and values. Digital brand communication encompasses visual content and interactive elements such as Stories, Reels, polls, influencer partnerships, and user-generated content (UGC), which together form a cohesive online presence. Short-form video, such as Instagram Reels, is particularly effective for engagement and purchase intention among Gen Z, as it allows dynamic storytelling and immersive experiences (Rizomyliotis, Lin, Konstantoulaki, and Phan, 2024; Ngo, Quach, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2023). Static images remain valuable for aesthetic-driven engagement but rely more on visual appeal and user-generated content to maintain interaction (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Brands can strategically combine static and dynamic formats to deliver cohesive narratives and stories that reinforce the overall brand strategy.

2.3.5 Emotional Connection

Emotional connection is the foundation of brand communication (Bange et al., 2020). Brands seek to harness the power of their online presence and digital narratives to build positive connections through interactions that cultivate an emotional connection with their consumer base (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). Fashion brands do this on Instagram by curating aspirational imagery that showcases their product in a desirable way (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

2.4 Theoretical Foundations

2.4.1 Introduction

This research explores how fashion brands communicate on Instagram, emphasising how they create and disseminate images that appeal to Gen Z in South Africa. This section outlines the theoretical foundations, key metrics, and frameworks underpinning a visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram, aimed at Gen Z.

To navigate this visual landscape, a semiotic approach was adopted, specifically drawing on the strengths of Barthes' mythologies (1972) and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006).

2.4.2 Key Theories

Semiotics is the study of signs and their interpretation. This method of visual analysis allows for the description of how objects and images can establish meaning when observed from a particular ideological lens (Muratovski, 2016). This form of analysis typically begins with a description of the content, imagery, or object, as outlined in Figure 2.1: Semiotic Theory.

SEMIOTIC THEORY

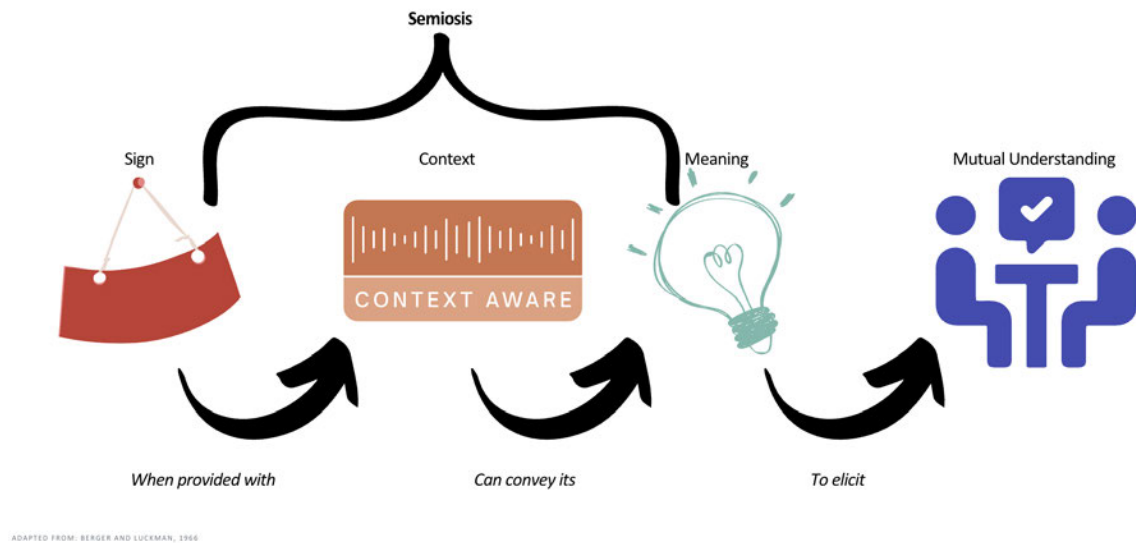


Figure 2.1: Semiotic Theory (Adapted from Berger and Luckman, 1966)

- **Sign:** According to Goldammer (1995), a sign is initially a manifestation of physical reality, referred to as a signifier. Signifiers are then experienced, interpreted, or perceived by the viewer and are known as the signified. According to Jung (1964), for a visual manifestation to form a sign, both the signifier and the signified are required, as it is the unification of the signifier. What is perceived or signified cultivates what is referred to as a sign (Goldammer, 1995). Jung (1964) asserts that this process enables signs to generate subconscious meaning through subliminal messaging.
- **Context:** Bowcher (2018) states that the semiotic context is the interpretation, interaction, or conversation sparked by the initial sign. The context provides the viewer with an intended meaning that allows the exchange of interpretation, interaction, or conversation to appear. This exchange allows the viewer to unpack and cultivate meaning by means of interaction with the sign (Goldammer, 1995).
- **Meaning:** Zlatev (2018) argues that the viewer of a sign and their subjective worldview and experience are the key drivers in cultivating meaning. In this way, an individual's understanding or experience of a sign is altered based on their subjective reality. It can differ from person to person, based on the context in which the sign is encountered and the viewers' subjective experience of reality (Goldammer, 1995).
- **Semiosis:** Goldammer (1995) suggests that semiosis is the process through which signs are bestowed a subjective meaning. This refers to the exchange between sign, context, and meaning, which results in the creation of an intended message. Jung (1964) referred to semiosis as the process of cultivating subconscious meaning by means of subliminal messaging.

2.4.2.1 Integrating Additional Frameworks:

- **Seminal Source, Barthes' Mythologies (1972):** This framework deconstructs the underlying ideologies and cultural assumptions embedded within Instagram-based fashion imagery. Through analysis of the signifiers, the specific visual elements like clothing choices or poses, their corresponding signifieds, and the deeper meanings related to sexuality and power dynamics, this should unveil how brands contribute to the mythification and naturalisation of specific portrayals of people.
- **Kress and van Leeuwen's The Grammar of Visual Design (2006):** This framework provides a systematic approach to analysing the intricate language of visual elements in these Instagram posts. Exploring specific aspects such as composition, colour, multimodality, and gaze can help us understand how they work together to construct and reinforce specific messages and interpretations.
- **Fredrickson and Roberts' Objectification Theory (1997):** While objectification theory is relevant to research on the potential negative impacts of fashion brand communication on Gen Z, it primarily focusses on the psychological consequences of objectification. This research focusses on understanding the mechanisms and representations employed by brands that contribute to objectification. Therefore, while objectification theory can inform an understanding of potential harms, it might not be the most suitable framework for analysing and deconstructing visual communication strategies. Objectification theory will only be used to supplement the research tool, but this research will not be guided solely by objectification theory.

Together, these frameworks offer a robust semiotic lens for exploring how fashion brands on Instagram construct and communicate representations of Gen Z. Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972) excels at unveiling the underlying ideologies and cultural assumptions embedded within seemingly innocuous cultural objects, such as fashion imagery. The use of this framework will allow this study to dissect how brands utilise signs (clothing choices, poses, etc.) to convey specific meanings related to sexuality. Deconstructing these myths can allow insight into how fashion brands normalise and perpetuate certain portrayals of young people, potentially shaping Gen Z self-perception and experiences.

Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006) provides a valuable toolkit to analyse the intricate language of visual elements by exploring how aspects such as composition, gaze, and colour are used in the imagery of fashion brands. Through this, understanding can be shaped as to how these aspects work together to construct and reinforce specific messages and interpretations. For instance, analysing the direction and intentionality of gaze within images can reveal power dynamics and potential objectification of the subject. At the same time, the use of colour and composition can contribute to specific narratives about desirability.

This combined approach will move beyond simply identifying representations to understanding the mechanisms by which they are constructed and the cultural context that shapes them. Analysis of both the signifiers (Barthes, 1972) and the specific visual language (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) can allow for a more nuanced understanding of how fashion brand communication on Instagram constructs and perpetuates potentially harmful representations.

This theoretical framework guided the visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram that enabled a critical analysis of the messages conveyed and their potential impact on Gen Z. By unpacking these mechanisms, the study outcomes can inform ethical content creation strategies that resonate with Gen Z in an empowering and responsible way.

2.4.3 Data Analysis Tool

This study used a data analysis tool constructed by merging elements from three prominent frameworks. Semiotic theories of the seminal source, Barthes *Mythologies* (1972) and an adaptation of the seminal source, Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006), along with an understanding of Fredrickson & Roberts' Objectification Theory (1997). This combined approach offered a comprehensive method to assess the objectification potential within fashion brand communication on Instagram targeted at Gen Z. The point system derived from this literature review was tested. One of the objectives of this study was to finalise the framework after the analysis and interpretation. This tool will be further explored in the appendix. The analysis was created on Google Docs and stored on the password-protected Google Cloud. This tool recorded and stored all data during the analysis.

The core of the analysis hinges on Barthes' (1972) concept of signs (signifiers and signifieds). Signifiers, such as clothing choices, poses, and background settings, are systematically identified and assigned points based on their association with stereotypical sexual markers and objectification. This point allocation directly contributes to the objectification score. Next, the analysis delves into the signifieds (underlying messages) to understand the construction of objectification through ideologies, cultural assumptions about sexuality, and power dynamics (Barthes, 1972). Colour palettes and composition further enrich the analysis by revealing implicit messages through colour associations and framing techniques (Barthes, 1972).

Kress and van Leeuwen's framework (2006) added another layer by exploring framing (close-up vs. wide shot) and how it influences viewers' perception of the model's body. Furthermore, the multimodal analysis explored how captions, comments, and user interactions reinforce or challenge the constructed image of sexuality, providing valuable insights into brand communication strategies and audience reception.

By combining these frameworks, this research tool aimed to transcend the limitations of individual theories. It systematically deconstructed visual elements, analysed underlying messages, and incorporated the role of multimodality, and offered a nuanced understanding of how fashion brands on Instagram can potentially contribute to the objectification of Gen Z. Throughout the coding process, the point system was continuously evaluated and supported by relevant academic sources (as outlined Figure 2.2: Data Analysis Tool Visualisation). This point system is attached along with the analysed posts as an addendum to the study.

2.4.4 Frameworks

Hypersexualised communication contrasts with the most basic principles of effective contemporary brand communication. Consumers, especially Gen Z, prioritise authenticity and engagement (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Kannan & Kumar, 2022), demanding transparency and genuine interaction from brands before establishing an emotional connection (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). Ethical and inclusive practices are no longer optional, as young consumers increasingly align their purchases with brands that reflect their values (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Gould & Swift, 2021). This literature review focusses on the frameworks proposed to guide modern brand communicators when talking to Gen Z on Instagram. Furthermore, the selected frameworks have been chosen to improve the understanding and practice of digital content creation and brand storytelling for a Gen Z audience.

As this study seeks to probe contemporary communication to explore potential objectification in modern-day media such as Instagram, objectification theory was used as a lens to supplement visual analysis, and an understanding of this theory is critical for this research (see Figure 2.3: Objectification Theory Visualisation). Notaro (2013) describes sexual objectification as treating a human being as an object. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) align the term with treating women's bodies as if they solely exist for the pleasure of other people, for the sale of products. Killbourne (1999) asserts that sexual objectification is the use of the female form to sell products. Sexual objectification has also been defined by Amini (2010), Stankiewicz and Roselli (2008), and Killbourne (1999) as the use of nudity, the stereotyping of female activities, or their body language; however, Reichert (2003) discovered that the use of sexually explicit imagery could create favourable consumer attitudes towards brand communication. Karsay, Knoll, and Mattes (2018) further add to the sentiment that the experience of observing sexually explicit advertising media acculturates the internalisation of an objectified view of the self. This can be physicalised through self-objectification, or chronic and obsessive attention to individual appearance (Karsay, Knoll, & Mattes, 2018). Karsay, Knoll, and Mattes (2018) further describe this phenomenon as consisting of cognitive and behavioural components such as valuing appearance over competence or participating in obsessive body monitoring. Karsay, Knoll, and Mattes (2018) argue that social media sites are characterised by visual content that revolves around the self, which can foster self-comparison, the internalisation of appearance ideals, and can ultimately increase self-objectification.

OBJECTIFICATION THEORY

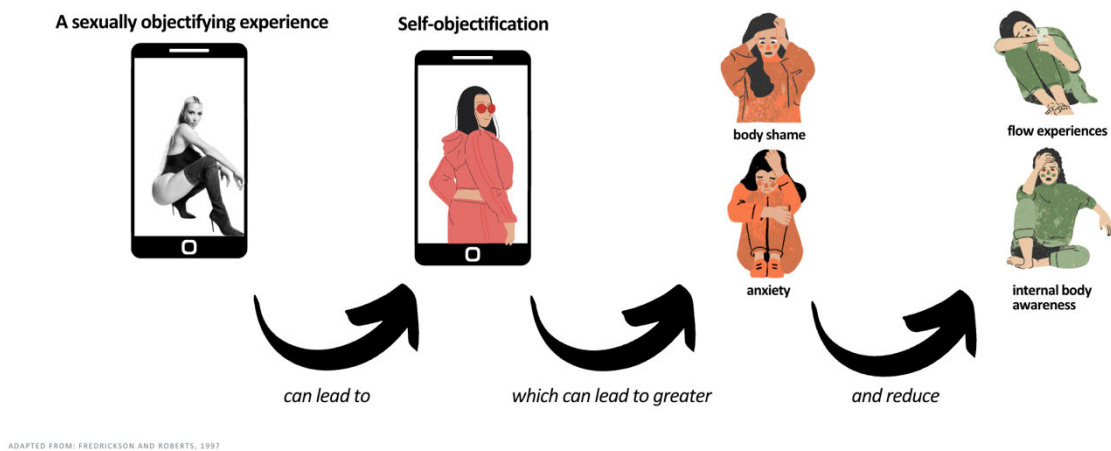


Figure 2.2: Objectification Theory Visualisation

Berger and Luckman (1966) provided an early framework for understanding semiotics, the study of signs, and their interpretation. This type of visual analysis allows for the unpacking of signs and context to create meaning (or semiosis), which in turn allows for the cultivation of mutual understanding, in this case between a brand and a desired target audience. Through this process, Jung (1964) asserted that signs have the potential to cultivate subconscious meaning employing subliminal messaging.

Barthes (1972), with Barthes' Mythologies, used semiotics to unveil the underlying ideologies and cultural assumptions embedded within seemingly innocuous cultural objects like fashion imagery. Semiotic understanding complements this study in cultivating a sense of how brands use signs to convey specific meanings to a desired target audience. Furthermore, deconstructing these myths can allow for the development of insight into how fashion brands normalise and perpetuate certain portrayals of young people, potentially shaping Gen Z self-perception and experiences.

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006) is a semiotic tool created to analyse the intricate language of visual elements. Exploring aspects like composition, gaze, and colour employed in fashion brand imagery allow for the shaping of understanding as to how these aspects work together to construct and reinforce specific messages and interpretations.

In conclusion, the frameworks proposed in the literature emphasise the importance of the identification of the signs and codes used to represent Gen Z online and serve as a means to decipher the underlying ideologies and narratives that contribute to the potential objectification of Gen Z. Delving deeper into the cultural assumptions that shape these representations (Barthes, 1972) and to analyse the specific visual mechanisms that were employed (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), allows for a more nuanced understanding of how fashion brand communication on Instagram constructs and perpetuates potentially harmful representations of femininity. By incorporating these

frameworks into the study of visual representation on the Internet, researchers and practitioners can better understand the dynamics of online content creation and develop more effective and responsible strategies to target Gen Z online.

2.5 The Current Fashion Brand Landscape

2.5.1 Introduction

The fashion industry exerts substantial cultural influence, shaping trends, personal identities, and enabling self-expression (Kohrs, 2020). However, it has long been criticised for its harmful practices, such as its contribution to accelerate environmental degradation (Hemantha, 2021), lack of inclusivity, and the reinforcement of hypersexualised and stereotypical portrayals (Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). The digital age has only served to magnify these issues as social media platforms like Instagram have become central to brand communication and consumer engagement. Gen Z, a socially conscious and digitally native cohort, engages with brand content differently than previous generations, prioritising authenticity, ethical values, and visual storytelling (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Adams, 2021; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). Despite this shift in consumer behaviour, the extent to which fashion brand communication on Instagram fosters objectification or empowerment remains a key concern in this study. This review of the literature explores core themes relevant to this study, including the evolving fashion landscape, the dynamics of the online brand identity and its resonance with Gen Z, the role of Instagram in fashion marketing, and the potential effect of digital fashion communication on audience well-being. By synthesising existing research, this review gauges the current landscape of fashion brand communication (*as set out in objective 1.4.3.1*) and sets the stage to critically explore how fashion brands balance engagement and responsibility to their audience through verbal and visual communication tactics (*see Chapter 3 for more on the analysis*).

This section is divided into four key thematic sections: the global fashion landscape, brand identity and Gen Z, the role of Instagram in brand communication, and the effects of fashion brand communication.

2.5.2 Overview of the Global Fashion Landscape

Although Gazzola et al., (2025) and Hemantha (2021) discuss the environmental harm caused by the fashion industry, its broader societal impact, particularly through objectification and stereotypification, deserves equal attention (Gould & Swift, 2021; Gales, 2023; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). Authors like Bandezi (2022) and Gales (2023) argue that these destructive representations of young individuals are rooted in objectification and stereotypification. In response to these issues, there is a growing movement of ethical and sustainable fashion brands (Fletcher & Grose, 2012; Gazzola et al., 2025), along with a surge in consumer activism demanding greater change (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Senanu et al., 2023). Additionally, social media platforms, particularly Instagram, have become central to fashion communication (Bevan-Dye & Motaung, 2023), requiring further analysis of their role in shaping perceptions. Frequent engagement on these

platforms requires further exploration of the tools and tactics employed by fashion brands within the digital space.

2.5.3 Brand Identity and Gen Z as the Digital Consumer

Avis and Henderson (2022) define brands as multifaceted constructs that embody meaning and identity. For this study, however, a more precise definition that considers shared values and experiences is crucial. As such, for this study, brands can be understood as curated experiences that communicate values, meaning, and identity through visual elements and messaging. This definition underscores the importance of genuinely aligning with consumer values (Vredenburg et al., 2020), especially for Gen Z, known for their social and ethical concerns (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Kannan & Kumar, 2022). In this context, Havas (2023) highlights the demand for accountability, and urges brands to prioritise long-term well-being and responsible communication. Huggard and Cope (2020) go beyond this by suggesting that emotional and physical cues trigger audience response, emphasising how visual identity can shape brand perception.

As digital natives, Gen Z's expectations of brands extend beyond traditional marketing strategies. In a world where digital fluency is second nature, brand interactions are heavily influenced by values such as authenticity, transparency, and meaningful engagement (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). To understand how Gen Z uses and engages with digital platforms, particularly Instagram, is crucial to understanding their brand interactions. With their constant engagement on social media, this cohort's expectations for brand communication on platforms like Instagram are shaped by their digital fluency (GlobalWebIndex, 2023). Rather than treating Gen Z as a monolith, focused research uncovers nuances in fashion consumption and media interpretation.

GlobalWebIndex (2023) reveals the unique fashion habits of Gen Z, driven by a desire for self-expression, inspiration, and humour, and their strong preference for discovering brands through social media platforms such as Instagram. These preferences signify a shift in the construction and consumption of brand identity, with Gen Z favouring relatable, entertaining, and human brands rather than traditional or corporate (GlobalWebIndex, 2023). However, while GlobalWebIndex (2023) highlights these consumer behaviours, it does not address the more problematic aspects of this shift, namely, the hypersexualised nature of fashion content online and its impact on young consumers. Research by Tiggemann and Erwin (2007) explores gender differences in self-objectification, offering important context for understanding how young people engage with fashion imagery. Vuong et al. (2020) further explore the relationship between social media use and adolescent body image concerns. Vuong et al. (2020) note that platforms like Instagram may exacerbate these issues with their highly visual and influencer-driven content. This intersection of brand identity, visual culture, and digital consumption warrants deeper investigation, particularly given Gen Z's vulnerability to these messages.

2.5.4 Instagram's Role in Fashion Marketing

Instagram has become the preferred platform for fashion brands trying to connect with Gen Z consumers (GlobalWebIndex, 2023). This generation engages with brands differently from others, characterised by their digital proficiency and preference for aesthetically appealing content (Senanu et al., 2023). Despite the wealth of data on social media marketing, there is still a lack of knowledge about Instagram's affordances and how this could influence the communication of fashion brands, especially regarding algorithm-driven content promotion and engagement tactics (Adams & Qureshi, 2021). To better understand how fashion brands communicate with Gen Z on Instagram, it is essential to explore the roles of influencers in building brand trust, as well as the content formats and strategies that drive engagement on the platform.

2.5.4.1 Influencers and Brand Trust

Influencers play a pivotal role in fashion brand communication on Instagram, with fashion brands leveraging macro- and micro-influencers to build customer trust and increase brand awareness (Jin & Ryu, 2019; Bevan-Dye & Motaung, 2023). Influencers resonate strongly with Gen Z's motivations for self-expression, social validation, and vanity, especially when perceived as fashion-forward or as leaders within the fashion space (Chiu and Ho, 2023; Bevan-Dye & Motaung, 2023). Furthermore, purchase intentions and brand preferences are significantly influenced by the ability of influencers to offer entertainment and informational value (Jin & Ryu, 2019; Chiu and Ho, 2023; Bevan-Dye & Motaung, 2023). These elements establish credibility and reinforce the emotional connection between Gen Z consumers and brands, enhancing brand loyalty (Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024).

2.5.4.2 Content Formats and Engagement Strategies

The distinction between static image posts and short-form video content, such as Reels, has become increasingly important in fashion marketing as Instagram continues to evolve. Short-form video is particularly effective in driving engagement and purchase intention among Gen Z consumers (Rizomyliotis et al., 2024). This effectiveness can be attributed to the interactive and dynamic nature of video content, which cultivates a deeper type of engagement and creates a more immersive brand experience (Ngo et al., 2023; Rizomyliotis et al., 2024). These videos provide engaging brand interactions and immersive buying experiences that align with Gen Z's appetite for dynamic content (Ngo et al., 2023; Fong et al., 2024; Rizomyliotis et al., 2024). In contrast, while static images still retain their value, they rely heavily on user-generated content and visual aesthetics to evoke strong feelings and encourage impulsive purchases (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Senanu et al., 2023). Although inspirational content and high-quality imagery can attract Gen Z consumers, maintaining sustained engagement requires thoughtful integration of interactive features and user-generated content (Senanu et al., 2023).

Increasingly, research demonstrates that Instagram's marketing tools (e.g., influencer endorsement, user-generated content (UGC), and advertisements) effectively shape consumer behaviour. These tools evoke strong emotions and encourage impulse purchases, particularly among female Gen Z

consumers (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Muhammad et al., 2023). Furthermore, Gen Z's purchase decisions are influenced by aesthetic appeal, limited-time sales, and reduced prices (Muhammad et al., 2023). Instagram's visual first format allows fashion brands to engage Gen Z consumers through dynamic, interactive content (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Muhammad et al., 2023), making it a powerful platform for building brand-consumer relationships. Consumer-generated material, interactive surveys, and high-quality photos and videos are key variables that influence the behavioural engagement between brands and Gen Z on the platform (Senanu et al., 2023). However, the commercialisation of Instagram's algorithm has been widely criticised for promoting high-engagement content at the expense of user well-being (Adams & Qureshi, 2021). This directly impacts fashion brands, which may feel pressured to adopt hyper-stylised, provocative, or idealised aesthetics to maximise visibility and drive user engagement. Another successful tactic to build brand-consumer interactions and promote widespread engagement is memetic branding, in which individuals can remix and redistribute branded content to encourage participation with the brand (Caliandro & Anselmi, 2021).

2.5.5 Effects of Fashion Branding

Building on the earlier exploration of Gen Z's desire for authentic communication (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024), Instagram's role as a visual first platform amplifies how brands communicate with this digitally native demographic (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Muhammad et al., 2023). As a space for curated self-presentation, Instagram shapes not only the public-facing identity of brands, but also influences the formation of personal identity, including aspects of self-objectification and visual self-representation (Lup et al., 2015; Karsay, Knoll, & Mattes, 2018; Tiggemann et al., 2018). In this context, fashion communication on Instagram is a key point of intersection between brand messaging and Gen Z's evolving perceptions of beauty, identity, and consumerism (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024).

2.5.5.1 Mental Health and Self-Objectification

Qi et al. (2018) provide a starting point and expand on the topic to include consequences such as eating disorders, low self-esteem, and distorted body perception. Tiggemann and Slater (2014) paint a more complete picture, considering broader societal factors like gender norms and media representations. Adams (2021) enriches the understanding of these issues by broadening the scope through a specific social media audience, such as adolescent females on Facebook.

Further research by Kannan and Kumar (2022) and Stachowiak-Krzyżan (2021) extends the conversation to Gen Z, noting that this effect is particularly pronounced post-pandemic as COVID-19 increased Gen Z's indoor time and their exposure to digital platforms, including Instagram, increased (Kannan & Kumar, 2022). The authors claim that the increased usage has significantly influenced how this generation perceives themselves and others, shaping their body image and mental health (Stachowiak-Krzyżan, 2021; Kannan & Kumar, 2022). Consequently, Gen Z has become the most active generation on social media platforms and has the most tumultuous relationship with mental health and body image (Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025).

2.5.5.1.1 The Fashion Magazine Effect, Traditional Objectification

Authors broadly agree that exposure to fashion magazines and other sexually objectifying visual media strongly predicts self-objectification (Aubrey, 2007; Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2015; Ward et al., 2017). This type of media historically promotes unrealistic beauty ideals, which individuals internalise, leading to self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Wolf, 2002; Aubrey, 2007; Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2015; Ward et al., 2017). However, scholars differ in their perspectives on the extent and way objectification manifests itself in individuals. Tiggemann and Slater (2015) and Aubrey (2007) highlight the link between self-objectification and mental health issues, such as increased body shame, appearance anxiety, and depressive symptoms. They argue that internalisation of unrealistic beauty ideals, such as those promoted by fashion magazines and fashion brands online, exacerbates these mental health challenges (Aubrey, 2007; Tiggemann & Slater, 2015). In contrast, Ward et al. (2017) suggest that self-objectification can negatively impact sexual health and agency, contributing to reduced sexual assertiveness and negative sexual affect. As a result, this study recognises the various detrimental outcomes such as mental health issues, body comparison, and impaired sexual health that have been associated with the proliferation of objectified images since the advent of fashion magazines (Wolf, 2002; Aubrey, 2007; Fardouly et al., 2015; Tiggemann & Slater, 2015; Ward et al., 2017). Furthermore, this study acknowledges that social media amplifies these effects with their capacity for broader reach and proliferation, affecting an even larger audience than its predecessor, traditional magazines (Coe et al., 2023).

2.5.5.1.2 The Effect of Contemporary Visual Content on Gen Z

Social media platforms, particularly Instagram, have dramatically reshaped how Gen Z engages and interacts with visual content, altering self-perception and emotional well-being (Lup et al., 2015). The phenomenon has been dubbed the "compare and despair" effect, underscoring the negative consequences of Instagram's emphasis on 'perfect' imagery, which intensifies appearance-based social comparison and even self-objectification, which contributes to body dissatisfaction, anxiety and low self-esteem (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Lup et al., 2015; Karsay, Knoll, & Mattes, 2018; Tiggemann et al., 2018). This effect is further amplified by increased social comparison, which fosters greater dissatisfaction when users are exposed to idealised depictions of beauty or success (Vogel et al., 2015). Adams and Qureshi (2021) argue that Instagram fosters a culture where young users, particularly women, feel compelled to conform to unrealistic beauty standards for social validation. This aligns with prior research on self-objectification in digital spaces and raises ethical concerns for fashion brands that capitalise on these pressures to drive engagement. However, by questioning perfection and encouraging a more balanced viewpoint on body image, countertrends like "Instagram vs reality" posts display potential to minimise these effects (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2019). This highlights Instagram's dual impact on Gen Z; while its content can encourage empowering narratives, it can also perpetuate hypersexualised ideals. Gen Z's exposure to empowering and provocative aesthetics on Instagram influences how this cohort interprets these images, shaping their emotional responses and individual personas (Engeln et al., 2020). Unlike less visual platforms like Facebook, Instagram's heavy reliance on imagery fosters increased appearance-based social comparison (Engeln et al., 2020).

Exposure to idealised beauty standards on Instagram correlates with lower body satisfaction (Engeln et al., 2020). However, Gen Z engages more enthusiastically with authentic and non-traditional content that disrupts established beauty norms (Adams, 2021). Brands that embrace rawness and imperfection, such as through memes or funny self-deprecating content, can foster relatability and counterbalance the hyper-perfection on Instagram by celebrating imperfection, rawness, and individuality (Adams, 2021). However, Adams and Qureshi (2021) highlight Instagram's role in reinforcing a performance culture over authenticity, where users craft idealised versions of themselves for social approval. This dynamic extends to fashion brand communication, often relying on curated aspirational imagery to engage Gen Z audiences (Adams & Qureshi, 2021). Micro-cores like Barbiecore and e-girl/e-boy aesthetics exemplify these trends, allowing Gen Z to explore identity and build community in digital spaces (Doshi et al., 2024). These subcultures challenge traditional beauty standards, providing empowerment through visual expression (Doshi et al., 2024). As a result, Gen Z enjoys a level of self-expression far greater than that of previous generations, mainly driven by fast fashion. Although fast fashion shortens trend cycles and negatively impacts the environment (Gazzola et al., 2025; Hemantha, 2021), it simultaneously enables Gen Z to express their individuality in previously unavailable ways (Doshi et al., 2024).

Instagram serves a dual purpose as both a platform for self-expression and a tool for economic persuasion, where visual aesthetics, emotional responses, and consumer behaviour intersect. The visually immersive experience on Instagram encourages impulsive purchases, primarily when brand communication is based on high-quality visuals (Muhammad et al., 2023). While adverse emotional reactions, such as jealousy or feelings of inadequacy, result from upward social comparison, and this may have a less direct influence on consumer behaviour (Muhammad et al., 2023), positive emotional reactions, such as appreciation or excitement, have a considerable effect on purchasing decisions (Muhammad et al., 2023).

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review has explored existing research on visual and digital brand communication with Gen Z, using a semiotic approach to guide the visual exploration and thematic analysis of Instagram content. The insights and lessons learnt from this review will inform the development of a research framework tool that will supplement the deeper exploration of digital visual codes when communicating with South African Gen Z via Instagram.

By exploring the theoretical foundations of fashion brand communication and semiotics, this review has established a foundation for analysing the visual language employed by brands on Instagram. The frameworks identified, such as Barthes' mythologies and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar were instrumental in deconstructing the most engaging content and its underlying messages. The literature underscores the increasing importance of ethical and responsible fashion communication, particularly in response to Gen Z's demand for authenticity and inclusivity. While Instagram provides brands with powerful engagement tools such as influencer marketing, short-form video content, and interactive storytelling, these exact mechanisms can also contribute to hypersexualisation, unrealistic beauty standards, and negative self-perception. The interplay between provocative imagery and

empowering aesthetics remains a central challenge in fashion brand communication, reinforcing the need for more conscious visual strategies.

Adopting a nuanced, semiotically informed approach becomes essential as fashion brands leverage Instagram to connect with Gen Z. By critically assessing objectification risks and prioritising more empowering representations, brands can cultivate deeper, more meaningful connections with their audience while minimising harm. This review provides a framework for understanding the complexities of fashion brand communication on Instagram, setting the stage for further analysis on how brands can ethically and effectively engage with Gen Z consumers.

Ultimately, this review informs the development of research-driven guidelines for fashion brand communicators. It offers a foundation for crafting content that resonates with Gen Z while aligning with their values. These guidelines can serve as a critical step toward fostering a more ethical and positive digital fashion communication landscape that empowers and engages Gen Z in meaningful and sustainable ways.

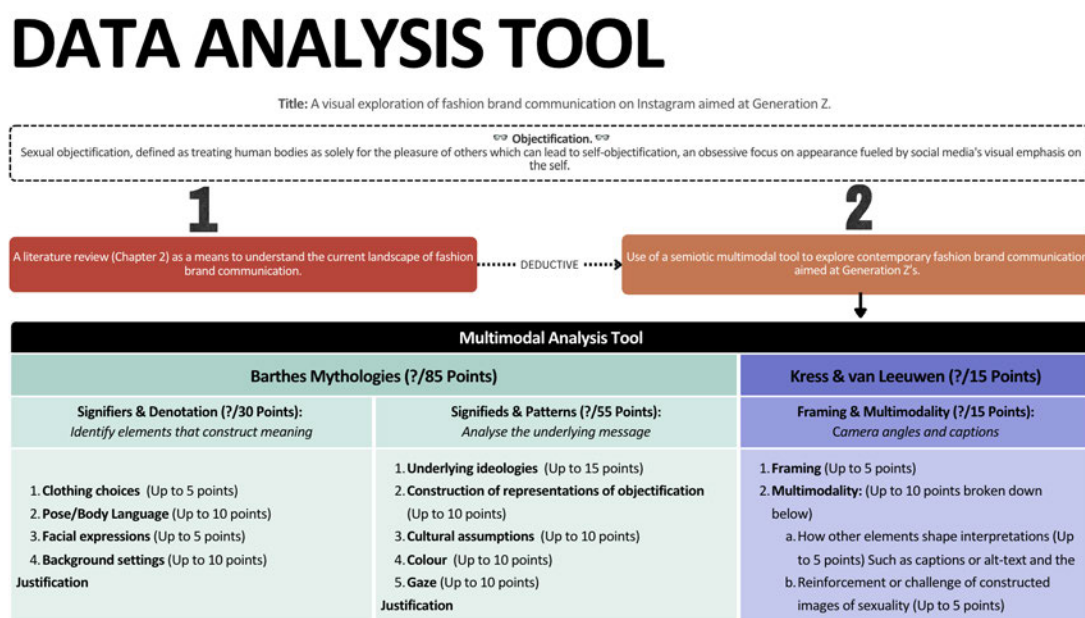


Figure 2.3: Data Analysis Tool, Linking Main Literature Themes to Analysis

Chapter 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

"It's not about perfection. It's about the process."

Virgil Abloh, Fashion designer, Creative Director of Louis Vuitton (prev.) and creator of Off-White

3.1 Introduction

Chapter two underscored the extent to which the fashion industry depends on constant visualisations and the impact these representations have on Gen Z's wellbeing. This insight highlights the significance of employing a nuanced semiotic framework to interpret the visual language that fashion brands use on Instagram. Subsequently, the research methodology used in Chapter Three must be able to fully comprehend the complex ways in which these representations speak to and resonate with Gen Z. The purpose of this chapter is to present the research design and methodology component of this study, using the second and third objectives to guide the research design and methodology as well as to establish a framework for visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram.

Table 3.1: Summary of research design and methodology chapter

A visual exploration of the communication of fashion brands on Instagram aimed at Generation Z.
Keywords: Fashion brand communication; Semiotic Approach; Generation Z; South African; Instagram
Research purpose and aim: From the design and methodology perspective of this research design, the purpose and aim of this study are to employ qualitative research methods, including a semiotic approach and thematic analysis of fashion brand content on Instagram based on user engagement, to explore how fashion brand strategies speak to Generation Z.
Objectives: The research speaks to objective 2, A visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Generation Z, and how exactly this research is laid out and grounded in the sphere of brand communication.

Research design and methodology: The study employs a constructivist paradigm, using a qualitative, exploratory, inductive, deductive, and semiotic research approach (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The research adopts a multimodal framework, combining Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Grammar of Visual Design and its seminal source, Barthes' Mythologies (1972) to unpack Gen Z's engagement with contemporary fashion brand communication on Instagram, targeted at a Gen Z audience. The methodology supports in-depth visual exploration and iterative refinement, ultimately aiming to help fashion brand leaders create content that best speaks to Gen Z over Instagram.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Introduction

This study adopted a constructivist paradigm, as demonstrated by the interpretative frameworks used to unpack how Gen Z responds to the content of fashion brands on Instagram. The paradigm and frameworks selected helped to understand how the Generation interacts with visual material on Instagram while acknowledging the dynamic nature of human behaviour. According to constructivism, people actively shape their views of the world through their interactions and experiences (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). As applied to this research, it emphasises how crucial it is to explore how Gen Z interprets and engages with fashion brand marketing using Instagram's visual language. To explore how Gen Z interacts with fashion brand marketing on Instagram, the study used an exploratory research approach. This research approach was used to discover deeper insights, underlying themes, and patterns in an area where limited research exists (Yin, 2017).

To understand this generation and gain rich insight into their experience of fashion brand communication over Instagram, in a bid to improve this communication in the future, the best-suited research design is one that is:

- Qualitative: Captures deep, nuanced insight into the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of Gen Z regarding fashion brand communication on Instagram.
- Visual: Incorporates a semiotic framework (Barthes, 1972; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to decode the visual and symbolic elements within Instagram posts.

3.2.2 Research Paradigm and Approach

This study sought to explore the potential influence of hypersexualised messaging on Gen Z, which requires a deeper understanding of the experience of Gen Z with brands encountered online. This has often been overlooked in existing research and has been explored in the literature review. The research employed a qualitative, inductive, and deductive approach (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) to gain in-depth insight into Gen Z's online fashion brand communication perspectives.

3.2.2.1 The Constructivist Paradigm

Constructivism asserts that humans are innately different from objects. This is because human beings, unlike objects, are subject to change and this change can be influenced by their environment (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). In this way, constructivists seek to describe meaningful social action by understanding human behaviour (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Considering the principles of the constructivist paradigm sourced from above, it can be understood that this paradigm recognises the significance of comprehending the creation of perception. Based on this understanding, constructivism asserts that humans are malleable and susceptible to external influence. This paradigm speaks to individuals deriving unique opinions and resultant experiences or perceptions from a sign or signifier. In the case of this study, constructivism speaks to unique users attributing individual understanding of a sign and its signified, such as the content shared in online fashion brand communication. As a result, in the case of this study, constructivism asserts that different users with different experiences will perceive or experience the same Instagram post from the same fashion brand entity differently. This paradigm has been selected as this research sought to visually explore the engagement and experience of Gen Z with fashion brand communication on Instagram. Through a constructivist lens, every perspective is shaped by specific stimuli, or experiences, that result in many actualities influenced by societal and personal concepts derived from individual experiences before encountering a sign or signified embedded post. As a result, this study sought to describe meaningful social action by understanding human behaviour by exploring the most engaging Instagram posts from fashion brand entities that seek to establish emotional connections with a Gen Z audience. This will be achieved by unpacking each post with the most significant monthly engagement, in terms of the digital narrative constructed through the signs and their meaning portrayed by the fashion brand on Instagram.

3.2.2.2 The Research Approach

This research adopted an exploratory design (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) to explore Gen Z's engagement with fashion brand communication over Instagram. This approach is preferred over a descriptive design due to the limited existing research on this specific phenomenon. Exploratory designs are well suited to uncover underlying patterns, themes, and deeper understanding in relatively unexplored areas (Yin, 2017). In this way, the exploratory nature of this study supports its constructivist paradigm and aids in uncovering patterns and insight by describing meaningful social action to cultivate an understanding of online human behaviour.

3.2.2.2.1 Qualitative Research Approach

The research employed a qualitative, inductive, and deductive approach (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) to gain in-depth insights into Gen Z's online fashion brand communication perspectives. Exploratory and interpretative in nature, qualitative research aims to understand the meaning and context of human experiences and actions (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), further aligning with the constructivist paradigm. The qualitative method used in this study enabled an in-depth exploration of the experience of Gen Z through their behaviours and patterns of engagement with fashion brands on Instagram. The researcher used a qualitative study to supplement the creation and development

of a deeper understanding of Gen Z's perceptions and experiences when engaging with fashion brand communication on Instagram. This understanding facilitated the discovery of more profound insights into a South African Gen Z audience, which can inform the guidelines established to aid fashion brand communicators who seek to speak to this audience in the future.

3.2.2.2.2 Semiotic Approach

As this study seeks to understand Gen Z's experience with fashion brand communication over Instagram, semiotics is the best-suited research approach. The use of a semiotic approach allowed the researcher to visually explore fashion brand communication aimed at Gen Z. This was done in a bid to create an understanding of how fashion brand communication on Instagram resonates with Gen Z audiences, moving beyond critique to contribute to a more responsible and ethical communication landscape within the fashion industry. The chosen semiotic approach is also well suited to this topic as it allows exploration of the visual experience of Gen Z by unpacking the engagement with fashion brand communication on Instagram. In this way, this study sought to describe meaningful social action by understanding human behaviour through a visual exploration of the most engaging Instagram posts from South African fashion brand entities that seek to establish emotional connections with a Gen Z audience. To this end, semiotics was used to unpack each post, with the most significant monthly engagement, in terms of the digital narrative constructed through the signs and their meaning portrayed by the fashion brand on Instagram. This was done to uncover the experience of Gen Z with South African fashion brands on Instagram by unpacking the shared meaning embedded within the most engaged Instagram posts.

In conclusion, a semiotic approach served as the chosen framework to explore how fashion brands construct meaning over Instagram and how South African Gen Z experiences this meaning (Barthes, 1972; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This approach allows for exploring the "how" and "why" of Gen Z's engagement with fashion brands, aligning with the objectives of this research (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

RESEARCH APPROACH OVERVIEW

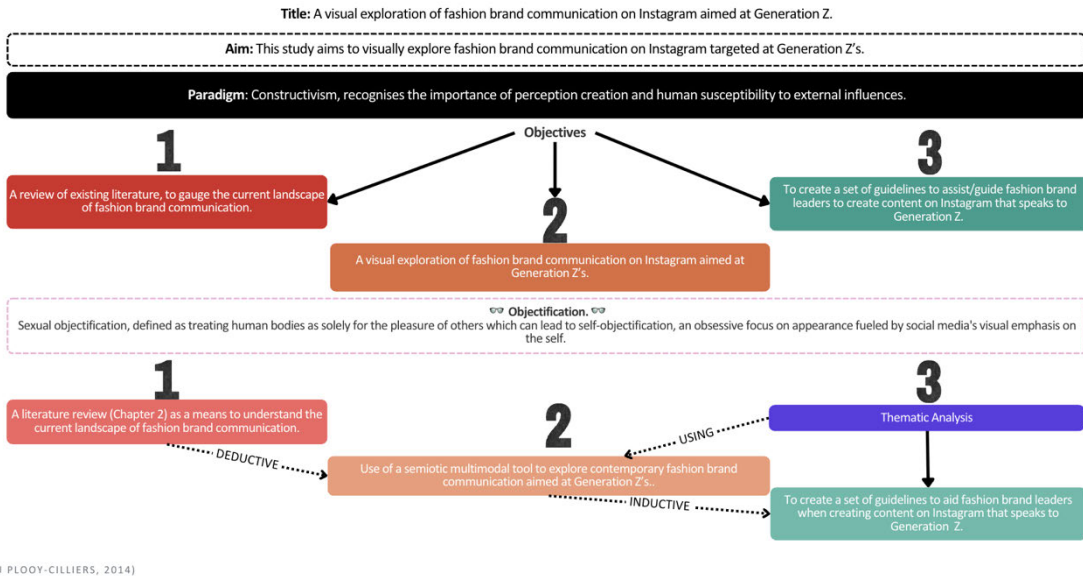


Figure 3.1: Research Approach Overview

3.2.3 Research Methodology

The chosen methodology facilitates in-depth exploration, visual analysis, and iterative refinement to guide fashion brand communicators when addressing the audience on this platform. The semiotic approach has been used as a methodology to achieve the relevant research objective of visual exploration of communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z. This research adopted a multimodal framework by combining Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Grammar of Visual Design, and Barthes' (1972) Mythologies to unpack Gen Z's engagement with contemporary fashion brand communication on Instagram, targeted at a South African Gen Z audience. By combining these frameworks, this research tool aimed to transcend the limitations of individual theories. It systematically deconstructed visual elements, analysed underlying messages, and incorporated the role of multimodality, offering a nuanced understanding of how fashion brands on Instagram potentially contribute to the objectification of Gen Z. Throughout the coding process, the point system was continuously evaluated and supported by relevant academic sources. This point score only aided the data analysis process, as this is a qualitative study. The point system is attached as an addendum to the study alongside the posts being analysed.

The core of the analysis hinges on Barthes and Gessualdi's concept of signs (signifiers and signifieds). Signifiers, such as clothing choices, poses, and background settings, were systematically identified and assigned points based on their association with stereotypical sexual markers and objectification, contributing to an overall objectification score. This score only aided in the data analysis process, as this is a qualitative study. The visual data analysis then delved into the signifieds (underlying messages) to understand the construction of potential objectification through ideologies, cultural assumptions about sexuality, and power dynamics. Colour palettes further enriched the analysis by

revealing implicit messages through colour associations. Kress and van Leeuwen's framework added another layer by exploring framing (close-up vs. wide shot) and how it influences viewers' perception of the model's body. Furthermore, multimodal analysis explored how captions, comments, and user interactions reinforce or challenge the constructed image of sexuality, providing valuable insights into brand communication strategies and audience reception. By combining these frameworks, this study aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how the selected fashion brands use visual communication on Instagram to build and naturalise specific representations of their Gen Z target audience.

The following is a description of the method used to conduct the visual analysis and aid in the development of the academic rigour and trustworthiness of this study:

3.2.3.1 Collection

A dual-stage sampling approach was employed to identify relevant posts for analysis.

3.2.3.1.1 Collection Part 1

Purposive sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of relevant contemporary fashion brands favoured by Gen Z (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Three brands, Zara, Adidas, and Diesel were selected based on their engagement with South African Gen Z on Instagram and their representation of different affordability levels and interests within the target market (*See Sampling Selection for Brands*). Analysing a representative sample of their Instagram posts over a year allowed for a deeper understanding of current communication practices with Gen Z in this space.

3.2.3.1.2 Collection Part 2

Within each chosen brand, convenience sampling was used to identify posts from a specified 12-month timeframe (e.g., August 1st, 2023, to August 1st, 2024). All content types (e.g., images, videos, carousels) were considered, with an engagement threshold implemented to focus on only the most impactful and engaged posts, per brand per month. Considering metrics like likes, comments, and shares, this analysis allowed for comparing engagement levels across brands and content types (e.g., images, videos, carousels) in a 12-month timeframe. Only the most engaged posts related to fashion brand communication were included to ensure relevance, excluding irrelevant content (e.g., brand announcements, reposts) and adhering to platform guidelines and ethical considerations (*see Sampling Selection for Posts*).

3.2.3.2 Analysis

A combined methodology of a semiotic approach and thematic analysis were used for the data analysis.

3.2.3.2.1 Analysis Part 1

The semiotic approach applied the frameworks mentioned above to analyse the visual and verbal content of the selected brand's Instagram posts, focussing on decoding the intended meaning and

underlying messages conveyed in the brand communication (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This was done by means of a score sheet or point system, which is in the appendix. It only served as an analysis aid, as this is a qualitative study.

3.2.3.2.2 Analysis Part 2

Thematic analysis involved thematic analysis of the coded data, in a bid to identify recurring patterns and connections related to the representation of Gen Z within the data (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This allowed for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon across the three chosen brands. Ultimately, this methodology was chosen because the study aimed to unveil the signs, context, and meaning associated with the chosen brand communication and to develop recommendations for responsible and ethical communication that avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes while resonating positively with Gen Z audiences.

In conclusion, the selected methodology facilitated in-depth exploration, visual analysis, and iterative refinement to guide fashion brand communicators when addressing this audience on this platform. The semiotic approach has been used as the methodology to achieve the relevant research objective of visual exploration of communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z. This, in tandem with thematic analysis, allowed for the creation of a deeper understanding of current communication practices with Gen Z in this space. The above steps of collection and analysis were carefully followed and adapted as needed to ensure the development of understanding and the achievement of the desired outcomes.

3.2.3.3 Sample Selection

Purposive sampling, also known as selective sampling, is a nonprobability sampling method in which the researcher selects a sample based on specific criteria that ensure the sample to be relevant to the study (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Purposive sampling is best suited to a study that is visually exploring fashion brand communication on Instagram as this sampling method allows the researcher to select participants, or in this case brands, that pertain to the topic of study. In this case, the topic was fashion brand communication with South African Gen Z. Nonprobability sampling also enabled the researcher to ensure that the sample is representative of the Gen Z fashion brand communication audience, allowing for in-depth exploration into the perspectives and experiences felt by this audience on Instagram. This targeted selection process is essential for qualitative research. It works particularly well to ensure that the selected brands are more equipped to provide pertinent, diverse and insightful information about this research. This approach involved carefully selecting brands based on specific attributes that align with the study's objectives. This study aimed to visually explore Gen Z's experiences while interacting with fashion brands on Instagram. This selection strategy was designed to highlight particular brands that could improve the understanding and outcomes of this study, as outlined in Table 3.2.

3.2.3.3.1 Sample Population

This study considered the population of fashion brands that target Gen Z on Instagram in South Africa. The brands were selected based on their demonstrated interest in and engagement with a

South African Gen Z audience. The research includes brands across different affordability tiers and interest levels to ensure a more representative understanding. It acknowledges that Gen Z often follows and engages with brands for inspiration, even if they cannot afford all the products. The selected brands originally included Diesel, Adidas and Zara, representing a range of price points and differentiation points for this audience; however, there was a late addition of Nike. While collecting data for this study, I came across a significant insight reported by the Sunday Times GenNext Awards, which highlighted Nike as the "coolest brand in South Africa" among youth (Bizcommunity, 2024). This insight aligns with the focus of this research on how fashion brands communicate with and appeal to Gen Z.

The survey, conducted by Yellowwood, is a critical measure of youth trends in South Africa, particularly in the demographic of 15-24 years, one of the fastest growing populations globally. This recognition of Nike as the leading brand in the Gen Z space, while Adidas ranked fourth, provides valuable context for understanding the landscape of brand perceptions in this market. Nike's consistent appeal, as demonstrated in its performance at the GenNext Awards, underscores its influence within the youth culture, which is central to this study's exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z. As such, I have moved to include an analysis, like the above three brands, for three Nike posts starting in May 2024 and ending with the rest of the study in July 2024.

Within each chosen brand, convenience sampling was used to identify posts from a specified 12-month time frame (e.g., August 1st, 2023, to August 1st, 2024). All content types (e.g. images, videos, carousels) were considered, with an engagement threshold implemented to focus on only the most impactful and engaged posts, per brand per month. Considering metrics such as likes, comments, and shares, this analysis has also allowed comparing engagement levels between brands and content types (e.g., images, videos, and carousels) within the 12-month time frame. Only the most engaged posts related to fashion brand communication were included to ensure relevance, while excluding irrelevant content (e.g., brand announcements, reposts) and adhering to platform guidelines and ethical considerations.

N=12 per brand (of which there were originally 3, with an additional three posts from Nike). As such, N=39.

The sample consisted of 12 posts (most engaged with per month for a year) from each of the three selected brands, and an additional three from Nike (total of 39 posts) in the timeframe of the fashion spring/summer 2023 to autumn/winter season 2024 (August 2023 to August 2024).

3.2.3.3.2 Sample Selection Process:

A dual stage sampling approach was used to identify relevant posts for analysis. Within each chosen brand, convenience sampling was used to identify posts from a specified 12-month timeframe (e.g., August 1st, 2023, to August 1st, 2024). All content types (e.g., images, videos, carousels) were considered, with an engagement threshold implemented to focus on only the most impactful and engaged posts, per brand per month (as outlined Table 3.2).

3.2.3.3.3 Selection Criteria for Brands:

This study considered the population of fashion brands targeting Gen Z on Instagram in South Africa. Brands were selected based on their demonstrated interest and engagement with a South African Gen Z audience. The research includes brands in different affordability levels to ensure a more representative understanding. It acknowledges that Gen Z often follows and engages with brands even if they cannot afford all the products (e.g., Diesel). Three brands, Zara, Adidas, and Diesel were selected based on their engagement with South African Gen Z on Instagram and their representation of different affordability levels within the target market. Analysing a representative sample of their Instagram posts over a year allowed for a deeper understanding of current communication practices with Gen Z in this space.

Below is a deeper exploration of each chosen brand and the reasons for their inclusion in this study.

3.2.3.3.3.1 Zara

Zara is a fast fashion retailer renowned for its stylish apparel at affordable prices. Although Gen Z mostly shops at more affordable stores, research indicates that they actively follow brands like Zara on social media for inspiration and ideas (Chiu and Ho, 2023; Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024). As such, Zara was chosen for Gen Z's interest in the brand. By exploring Zara's brand communication, the researcher could understand how Gen Z engages with inspirational content and potentially integrates it into their individual fashion decisions by exploring Zara's.

3.2.3.3.3.2 Diesel

Compared to Zara, Diesel is a more exclusive brand with a unique aesthetic and an elevated price point. Even though Diesel might not necessarily fall within Gen Z's immediate purchasing power range, exploring Gen Z's interaction with inspirational brands can offer greater insight into their experience. As once again, research indicates that Gen Z actively follows brands outside their price range on social media for inspiration and ideas (Chiu and Ho, 2023; Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024), this was explored as Gen Z's experience with inspirational brands can influence their decisions and alter their perception. Furthermore, research suggests that Gen Z is interested in sustainable fashion (Bain & Company, 2022). Although outwardly Diesel may not be perceived as being concerned with sustainability, its newer initiatives seek to use more sustainable materials and be more transparent. This aligns with the ideals of Gen Z and makes Diesel a useful contrast to Zara.

3.2.3.3.3.3 Adidas

Adidas appeals to a distinct facet of Gen Z's identity, specifically through the brand's focus on well-being, activism, and health. The distinctive Adidas three-stripe symbol is representative of quality and athleticism, which corresponds to Gen Z's focus on personal well-being (Reilly, 2020). In the brand communication and content of Adidas, athletes are typically featured in action and promoting topical social issues that appeal to Gen Z, such as racial equality or environmental sustainability. This approach recognises Gen Z's desire to actively shape the world around them.

Adidas's emphasis on performance clothing fulfils Gen Z's need to challenge their physical limits and grow as people.

3.2.3.3.4 Selection Criteria for Posts:

The selection of brands sought to span the broad interests of the Gen Z fashion brand audience spanning from fast fashion to rebellious activism to well-being focused. This selection was a means of extracting the richest insights possible from the communication shared on these brand pages and from their online audience engagement.

Within each chosen brand, convenience sampling was used to identify posts from a specified twelve-month timeframe (e.g., August 1st, 2023, to August 1st, 2024). All content types (e.g., images, videos, carousels) were considered, with an engagement threshold implemented to focus on only the most impactful and engaged posts, per brand per month. As such, the sample size will consist of 12 posts (most engaged with per month for a year) from each of the three selected brands (total of 36 posts) in the time frame of the fashion spring/summer 2023 to autumn/winter season 2024 (August 2023 to August 2024).

This analysis, considering metrics like likes, comments, and shares, allowed for a comparison of engagement levels across brands and content types (e.g., images, videos, carousels) within the 12-month timeframe. To ensure relevance, only the most engaged posts relating to fashion brand communication were included, while irrelevant content (e.g., brand announcements, reposts) was excluded and adhered to platform guidelines and ethical considerations. A purposive sample was chosen based on Gen Z engagement, measured by post likes. The research acknowledges that likes may not be the most nuanced metric but offer a readily available indicator of audience interest on a day-to-day basis. This approach allowed the researcher to capture content that resonates with Gen Z, even if it is sponsored, as the focus is on understanding Gen Z's preferences and interpretations of brand communication, regardless of paid promotion.

This rigorous selection approach was essential to ensure that the results of the study were rooted in a rich and informed variety of perspectives, which reinforced the validity of the findings of this visual analysis. This was done in a bid to cultivate a framework for digital brand communication that is multifaceted, inclusive, and effective. This study addresses potential selection bias by transparently including details about the selection criteria and the reasoning behind selecting the sample and population used in this study. This study also sought to ensure a thorough and reflective visual analysis that encapsulates the experiences and perceptions of a large Gen Z audience that engages with fashion brand communication on Instagram. The population consisted of Instagram content targeting South African Gen Z, aged thirteen (13) to 27. Purposive and criterion sampling was used to select posts with high engagement, ensuring relevance to the research objectives while maintaining the qualitative focus of the study.

Table 3.2: Overview of sample population chosen for the research

The population included in the research.	This study focused on the population of fashion brands that target Gen Z on Instagram in South Africa. The brands were selected based on their interest in and engagement with a South African Gen Z audience. The research includes brands across different affordability tiers and interest levels to ensure a more representative understanding. It acknowledges that Gen Z often follows and engages with brands, even if they cannot afford all the products for inspiration. The selected brands include Diesel, Adidas, and Zara, representing a range of price points and points of differentiation for this audience.
The inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants	Within each chosen brand, convenience sampling will be used to identify posts from a specified twelve-month timeframe (e.g., August 1st, 2023, to August 1st, 2024). All content types (e.g., images, videos, carousels) will be considered, with an engagement threshold implemented to focus on only the most impactful and engaged posts per brand per month. Considering metrics like likes, comments, and shares, this analysis will allow comparing engagement levels between brands and content types (e.g., images, videos, carousels) within the twelve-month time frame. Only the most engaged posts related to fashion brand communication will be included to ensure relevance, excluding irrelevant content (e.g., brand announcements, reposts) and adhering to platform guidelines and ethical considerations.
The ideal number of posts to be unpacked	N=12 per brand The sample size will consist of twelve posts (the most engaged with per month for a year) from each of the three selected brands (a total of 36 posts) from the fashion spring/summer 2023 to autumn/winter season 2024 (August 2023 to August 2024).

The chosen sampling method

Nonprobability, Purposive sampling:

Purposive sampling is best suited to a study that visually explores fashion brand communication on Instagram, as this sampling method allows the researcher to select brands that pertain to the topic of study. Probability sampling also allows the researcher to ensure that the sample is representative of the Gen Z fashion brand communication audience, allowing for in-depth exploration into the perspectives and experiences felt by this audience on Instagram. This study aims to visually explore the experiences of Gen Z while interacting with fashion brands on Instagram. This selection strategy was designed to highlight particular brands that could improve the understanding and outcomes of this study (see 3.2.3.3).

3.2.3.4 Data Collection

This section presents the data collection tool and process of this research.

3.2.3.4.1 Data collection tool and process

The data collected was used to answer the objective of visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z. As such, data was collected through qualitative research. This study did not use a traditional survey instrument or questionnaire. Data collection relied solely on screenshots captured directly from the discussed sample, brand, and pages of the Instagram platform. The data was collected through publicly available content on brand Instagram pages, so no participants are directly involved. The chosen method aligns with the ethical considerations of the research by focussing on publicly available content. Screenshots do not require user interaction or compromise user privacy in any way. There are also no anticipated confidentiality concerns, as the research did not collect personal information about users who interact with the posts (data collection sample) on Instagram. This research acknowledges that POPIA applies to research involving South African participants or data. However, since the study focuses on publicly available content on Instagram, informed consent from brands or individual users was not required under POPIA for this specific data collection method. This data was collected from the sample and brand pages over one year (from August 2023 to August 2024). This period was selected to represent the fashion spring/summer 2023 to autumn/winter season 2024 (August 2023 to August 2024). Data was collected through screenshots that capture the image and caption, directly from the Instagram platform, using the above detailed sampling criteria. These screenshots will be systematically organised and documented for further analysis.

The screenshots were systematically organised and documented, capturing details such as:

- Brand name
- Month of post
- Description of the visual content (e.g., clothing items, pose, background) on a denotation level
- Textual content (caption) and alternative text (ALT)
- Engagement metrics (likes, comments)

This organised record keeping ensured transparency and facilitated the coding process during data analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study sought to visually explore fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z, and was sought to be achieved through three objectives:

1. Review the existing literature to gauge the current landscape of fashion brand communication.
2. A visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z.
3. To create a set of guidelines to guide fashion brand leaders in creating content on Instagram that speaks to Gen Z.

3.3.1 Phenomenology

A literature review was used to phenomenologically gauge the current landscape of fashion brand communication. The information gained through the literature review was analysed by way of content analysis to further the study to explore South African Gen Z's perception and experience with fashion brand communication on Instagram.

3.3.2 Combined Analysis Approach

To uncover insight into objective two, a visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z has been employed, a combined data analysis methodology of a semiotic approach and thematic analysis. The semiotic approach involves applying the frameworks mentioned above to analyse the visual and verbal content of the selected brand's Instagram posts, focussing on decoding the intended meaning and underlying messages conveyed in the brand communication (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This has been done using a score sheet or point system that only served as an analysis aid. Thematic analysis involves analysis of the coded data, thematically, in a bid to identify recurring patterns and connections, and in this instance, related to the representation of Gen Z within the data (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This allowed for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon across the three chosen brands. Ultimately, this chosen methodology spoke to the research goal of unveiling signs, context, and meaning associated with the selected brand communication to develop recommendations for responsible and ethical communication that avoids perpetuating harmful stereotypes while resonating positively with Gen Z audiences. Although a point system was applied to visual and verbal elements for organisational purposes, the study remains

qualitative. The scoring facilitated reflexive engagement with the data, supporting the identification of themes without producing quantitative generalisations. This study employs a combined qualitative methodology using semiotic and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Semiotic analysis systematically decodes visual and verbal elements in Instagram posts, while thematic analysis identifies patterns and themes related to Generation Z's perception of fashion brand communication. The point system supports data organisation and reflexive interpretation but does not produce quantitative results. Sampling was purposive and criterion-based, targeting South African Gen Z audiences. A phenomenological stance underpins the research, focusing on subjective experience and meaning-making. Reliability and validity were ensured through pilot testing and iterative refinement of coding categories. Although a point system was applied to visual and verbal elements for organisational purposes, the study remains qualitative. The scoring facilitated reflexive engagement with the data, supporting the identification of themes without producing quantitative generalisations. This study employs a combined qualitative methodology using semiotic and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Semiotic analysis systematically decodes visual and verbal elements in Instagram posts, while thematic analysis identifies patterns and themes related to Generation Z's perception of fashion brand communication. The point system supports data organisation and reflexive interpretation but does not produce quantitative results. Sampling was purposive and criterion-based, targeting South African Gen Z audiences. A phenomenological stance underpins the research, focusing on subjective experience and meaning-making. Reliability and validity were ensured through pilot testing and iterative refinement of coding categories.

3.3.3 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis involved analysis of the coded data, thematically, in a bid to identify recurring patterns and connections related to the representation of Gen Z within the data (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allows for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon across the three chosen brands. Ultimately, this methodology was chosen as this research aimed to unveil the signs, context, and meaning associated with the selected brand communication and develop recommendations for responsible and ethical communication that avoids perpetuating harmful stereotypes and resonates positively with Gen Z audiences. Semiotic analysis provided a structured understanding of visual and verbal codes, while thematic analysis identified recurring patterns and themes from these codes, enabling a deeper interpretation of how Gen Z perceives brand communication on Instagram. Semiotic analysis provided a structured understanding of visual and verbal codes, while thematic analysis identified recurring patterns and themes from these codes, enabling a deeper interpretation of how Gen Z perceives brand communication on Instagram.

3.3.3.1 Preparing the Data through a Semiotic Approach

To organise and convert or transcribe the raw visual data collected, the semiotic approach has been used, all inclusions and exclusions being informed by the questions and objectives of this study. The semiotic scoresheet and point system tool employed culminates from a preliminary data analysis tool that emerges from three prominent frameworks of the literature review, namely:

1. Barthes and Gessualdi's Semiotics

2. Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar
3. Objectification Theory

This combined approach offered a comprehensive method to assess the potential for objectification within fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z. The point system derived from the literature review has been tested. These metrics were derived from themes present in Barthes' (1972) identification of cultural myths, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) articulation of compositional elements, and visual cues associated with objectification theory. One of the objectives of this study was to finalise the framework after analysis and interpretation. This tool is explained in more detail in the Appendix. This analysis took place on Google Docs, and stored in the password-protected Google Cloud, a tool that records and stores all data.

The core of the analysis hinges on Barthes and Gessualdi's concept of signs (signifiers and signifieds). Signifiers, such as clothing choices, poses, and background settings, were systematically identified and assigned points based on their association with stereotypical sexual markers and objectification, contributing to an overall objectification score. The analysis delves into the signifieds (underlying messages) to understand the construction of objectification through ideologies, cultural assumptions about sexuality, and power dynamics. Colour palettes and composition further enriched this analysis by revealing implicit messages through colour associations and framing techniques. Kress and van Leeuwen's framework added another layer by exploring framing (close-up vs. wide shot) and how it influences viewers' perception of the model's body. Furthermore, multimodal analysis explores how captions, comments, and user interactions reinforce or challenge the constructed image of sexuality, providing valuable information on brand communication strategies and audience reception. By combining these frameworks, this research tool transcends the limitations of individual theories. It systematically deconstructs visual elements, analyses underlying messages, incorporates the role of multimodality, and offered a nuanced understanding of how fashion brands on Instagram could contribute to the objectification of Gen Z. Throughout the coding process, the point system has been continuously evaluated and supported by relevant academic sources. This point system is attached as an addendum alongside the posts that were analysed.

The semiotic research tool aided in the inclusion of all visual and verbal cues in the form of holistically analysed posts from purposively sampled brands and can be accessed in the Appendix. This process helps to organise the data to supplement thorough analysis. Furthermore, decoding and unpacking such data allows for the development of familiarity with the information gathered. To supplement familiarity and aid in organisation, the point system was derived. This system assigns each post from each brand, for a total of 36 posts, a score out of 100 to simplify the analysis. This point system helps in "memoing" and revisiting the material for deeper reflection (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Such a process allows a researcher to detail any notes, ideas, or insights gleaned from the visual data while analysing and coding to make sense of the data. As such, this semiotic tool and the resultant notes served as additional data that were analysed and evidence of the processes that have been followed. Ultimately, the cross-checking increases the trustworthiness of this study.

3.3.3.2 Semiotic Coding Through the Tool

This semiotic research tool also serves as a coding tool, allowing for assigning code to sets of pre-analysed, visual data in the form of text.

From this point on, the tool has already aided in breaking down and weighting the analysis into three semiotic-based sections, namely:

- Signifiers and Denotation
- Signifieds and Patterns
- Framing and Multimodality

These sections are then scored for organisational purposes, which allows for a simplistic comparison of data between posts and the optimisation of organisation and efficiency (as outlined in Figure 2.2: Data Analysis Tool Visualisation). The custom point system was developed from established semiotic and objectification frameworks. Scores were pilot-tested for consistency, and thresholds were defined to reflect degrees of objectification. The system enhanced reflexive thematic analysis but did not transform the study into a quantitative design.

3.3.3.3 Developing a Coding and Categorising Plan

Based on the raw data and using inductive and deductive reasoning, new codes or categories emerged; however, the initial structure of the semiotic data analysis tool remains the best grouping of information.

- Signifiers and Denotation
- Signifieds and Patterns
- Framing and Multimodality

This allows for seamless grouping of information. In this way, every code, theme, and category are defined clearly and systematically, facilitating the identification of emerging themes and codes in the simplest way possible. The uncovered codes are exhaustive, mutually exclusive, and specific (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

3.3.3.4 Testing Code

The testing code involved testing the consistency of chosen category definitions on a small sample of data (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), in this case, six posts. If the consistency was low, the coding definitions and rules were redefined. At this point, any issues were resolved.

3.3.3.5 Thematic Coding

Also known as concept coding, it is the process of data reduction through thematic identification (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The predetermined themes that were derived from the literature review, aided in identifying and contextualising all the data that informed the research question. New and unexpected codes emerged and were added to the overall analysis. As the

development of codes is an iterative process, it requires reading, rereading, and constantly comparing to uncover emergent themes. The researcher then wrote these themes as descriptive, followed by an explanatory paragraph for each category. Some themes emerged only after multiple reads.

3.3.3.6 Accessing Consistency in Coding

This step is used to recheck the consistency used to code the data.

3.3.3.7 Data Interpretation

The interpretation of previously identified themes and categories at this stage of interpretation, augmentation and analysis, is key. All data discussed were analysed through theoretical constructs that were already established in the literature review, and researcher augmentation. This allowed for an amplification of the understanding of the broader research question. This interpretation followed three steps:

- Relationship explanation
- Consideration of added information
- Ensuring that all factors have been accounted for to avoid misinterpretation

3.3.3.8 Reporting on Methods and Findings

Reporting of methods and findings required transparent and honest reporting of all findings and allowed for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon across the three chosen brands. Ultimately, this methodology was chosen because the study aimed to reveal the signs, context, and meaning associated with the selected brand communication and develop recommendations for responsible and ethical communication that avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes and resonates positively with Gen Z audiences.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

This study did not collect data from human participants; however, the following ethical considerations were followed during the proposed research:

3.4.1 Use of Branded Content

According to Instagram's terms of use, when sharing, posting or uploading content that is covered by intellectual property rights on the platform, all users grant a “non-exclusive, royalty-free, transferable, sublicensable, worldwide licence to host, use, distribute, modify, run, copy, publicly perform or display, translate and create derivative works of the content” (Instagram, 2023). This means that all content posted on the platform is available, accessible, and in the public domain, and the brands used as a part of this research would have to consent to this before uploading images to the platform. As such, these images are free for public use, including the use demonstrated in this study.

3.4.2 Avoiding Harm from the Perspective of Brand Reputation

The established literature supports all analyses to avoid harm to the brands' reputation.

3.4.3 Deception of Brand Portrayal

The researcher avoided deception and mitigated bias by supporting all argumentation with established literature and employing reflexivity. The brand and post selection process were transparent. An audit trail, as well as augmentation, were used to create dependability. Initially, this study sought to protect all brands used, as part of the population employing confidentiality; however, after the presentation and defence of this proposal, the broader committee agreed that it would be more transparent to share brand names and posts, as they are found on the Instagram platform. This was due to various reasons, the most notable being that, due to the category, brand codes would be easily recognisable to all viewers.

3.4.4 Falsifying Information

The images used were screenshotted directly from the Instagram application, their brand names and logos were not removed to protect the reputation of the selected brands; but these images were also not edited or altered in any way, to best gauge and improve the experience of Gen Z when encountering these posts on the platform.

3.4.5 Generation Z

This study did not work directly with children in the population; however, the entry barrier on Instagram is over the age of 13. As such, it can be understood that there are users on the platform who are under 18 years old. This is pertinent to this study, as this study simply seeks to improve the experience of all members of this vulnerable age group and protect them from further exposure to this problem.

3.4.6 POPIA Considerations

This research acknowledges that POPIA applies to research involving South African participants or data. However, since the study focusses on publicly available content on Instagram, informed consent from brands or individual users is not required under POPIA for this specific data collection method.

3.4.7 Other

As the researcher of this study, I hereby confirm that I have read and acknowledged the implications of the following ethical considerations.

- I. Falsifying information
- II. Distorting results
- III. Allowing bias to influence interpretations of the research

- IV. Misusing information
- V. Using inappropriate research methods

3.5 Academic Rigour and Trustworthiness

Being a qualitative study, the purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of a particular phenomenon (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), in this case hypersexualised imagery to sell a product within a specific context (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), through Instagram communication by members of the fashion industry. The purpose of this study is not to generalise the results to a broader population. As such, the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of this research were further explored to establish the study's trustworthiness.

3.5.1 Credibility

Credibility is a measure of trustworthiness to ensure that the described topic is accurate (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). According to du Plooy-Cilliers (2014), credibility is considered the most significant indicator of trustworthiness in qualitative research. I used the following strategies to guarantee the credibility of this study's qualitative elements:

- Sections 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.2.3 comprised the setting and environment parameters; sections 3.2.3.3, 3.2.3.3.1, and 3.2.3.3.1.2 provide the population parameter; and Chapters 2 and 3 contained the underlying theoretical framework (cf. Barthes, 1972; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).
- Although triangulation is a technique that the researcher is aware of, it has not been used to support the validity of this study. However, it may be suggested in the future to add another layer of research to this study, for example user interviews.
- The researcher has used direct quotes to enhance the findings, as well as visual representations of the sample used to semiotically supplement this study. Screenshots of this data was analysed, assessed, and presented as stated in Section 3.2.3.
- The credibility of this study is demonstrated by the comparison of an empirical study and a nonempirical literature review.
- At each stage of this study, peer reviews were continuously requested from IIE Readers and my supervisor.
- The population was chosen and data was gathered via purposive sampling; although this selection process has its limitations, this was consistently carried out to guarantee that the most representative sample would be explored.

To ensure credibility, all the research claims and interpretations are supported by established academic sources. Additionally, the use of augmentation, where findings are complemented with rich data excerpts and illustrative examples, to further strengthen credibility and confirmability by providing concrete evidence for interpretations.

3.5.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the analysis and conclusions are transferable from one research effort to another (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). In this way, the capacity of a study's findings to be applied or used in the theory and practice of another study in a similar setting and producing comparable outcomes is known as transferability. The involvement of only one researcher and the selection of three brands could potentially limit the transferability of findings to broader contexts and populations. To address this, this research employed purposive sampling and a qualitative sampling technique (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014) to select brands with diverse characteristics considered relevant to the research question. This intentional selection aimed to provide a more holistic understanding within the chosen scope. Although the findings may not be transferable due to the lack of triangulation used in this study, that is not the purpose of this qualitative research. This research sought to gain an understanding of a particular phenomenon (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), in this case hypersexualised imagery to sell a product, within a specific context (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014), through Instagram communication by members of the fashion industry. The research employed thick descriptions, providing detailed and contextualised accounts of the data and interpretations (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). These rich descriptions enhance the transferability of this study by allowing readers to understand the context and make their judgements about the findings. To ensure that the research meets the IIE ethical research guidelines, the researcher was transparent about the selection process of the brands and posts used in the study. This includes providing clear justifications for choices and acknowledging potential biases. Transparency and reflexivity were prioritised to minimise deception and bias. This involved a transparent selection process, careful use and justification of the chosen brands, and support of arguments with established literature.

3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability is the degree to which the methodologies of a study are well recorded and explained that enables other researchers to assess, monitor, and analyse the procedure and, consequently, the reproducibility of the study. This research will use logical, well-documented, and audited analysis and a systematically documented research process. Again, the research employed thick descriptions and provides detailed and contextualised accounts of the data and interpretations to enhance the study's dependability. While the nonprobability sampling method might limit generalisability, it allows for selecting brands based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives and questions. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to document research decisions, data collection procedures, and analysis steps. This trail allows for independent verification and enhanced dependability, ensuring that others can replicate the research.

3.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability must ensure that the data collected supports the trustworthiness of the findings and that the findings are not influenced by researcher bias (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The researcher practiced reflexivity, reflecting on all biases, assumptions, and potential influences on the research

process and interpretation. This self-awareness strengthens dependability and confirmability by acknowledging potential limitations and ensuring transparency. An information-rich audit trail was used to confirm interpretations and findings based on these data. Frequent peer review and adhering to ethical guidelines helped further reduce researcher bias. Despite taking all these precautions, it is essential to acknowledge the researcher's subjectivity while analysing and interpreting the semiotic qualitative data. My subjectivity was managed by consistently engaging in reflexivity, which involved critically exploring and considering my choices and acknowledging my role in the study. These methods strengthen the validity of the research, according to du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014).

3.5.5 Research Assumptions

This study is guided by several underlying assumptions. It assumes that fashion brand communication on Instagram is intentionally constructed and therefore suitable for semiotic and thematic interpretation. It assumes that Generation Z engages with and interprets visual content through identifiable patterns shaped by cultural, social and digital influences. It also assumes that the selected posts are representative of each brand's broader communication approach, and that the researcher's analytical frameworks can reliably identify objectification cues and thematic patterns. Finally, it assumes that Instagram functions as a meaningful site for understanding brand–audience interaction within the South African Gen Z context.

3.6 Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 has outlined the research methodology used to visually explore the fashion brand communication targeted at Gen Z on Instagram. This chapter serves as a blueprint for an in-depth exploration of the verbal and visual content of select Instagram posts using a multimodal semiotic and thematic analysis to offer insight into common themes and connections relative to how Gen Z is represented by fashion brands on Instagram.

A noteworthy component is the combination of a semiotic approach, thematic analysis, and phenomenology, which allowed the study to provide a comprehensive approach to develop insight into the current fashion brand landscape and helped craft effective communication strategies for brand communicators seeking to connect with a Gen Z audience.

The chapter illustrates the ethical framework required to ensure the integrity of the research process, detailing concepts such as the use of branded content, avoiding harm from the perspective of brand communication, and the accounted for POPIA considerations.

To promote a strong and dependable research conclusion, this chapter declares the trustworthiness and academic rigour of the research grounded through reliability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter provides an extensive blueprint for the forthcoming research journey.

Chapter 4

DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION, AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

(EMPIRICAL STUDY)

“Social media has turned fashion into the Hunger Games.”

Glenn Martens, fashion designer and Creative Director of Diesel

4.1 Introduction

The primary objective of this chapter is to visually explore fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z (*as set out in the primary objective 1.4.3*). This chapter also critically unpacks the findings from the visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram, specifically targeting Gen Z in South Africa (*as set out in Objective 1.4.3.2*). The review of the literature in Chapter 2 provided an understanding of the current landscape of fashion brand communication (*see 2.5 for more detail*), which informed the development of the multimodal semiotic tool discussed in Chapter 3 (*see 3.3 for more detail*). This tool was designed to analyse contemporary fashion brand communication strategies aimed at Gen Z (*see Figure 2.4: Data Analysis Tool, Linking Main Literature Themes to Analysis for more detail*). Additionally, a thematic analysis of the findings of this semiotic exploration was conducted to inductively develop guidelines for fashion brand leaders to create more effective Instagram content for this audience (*as outlined in Figure 3.1: Research Approach Overview*). This chapter comprehensively discusses these findings, their implications for fashion brand communication on Instagram, and guidelines for engaging South African Gen Z consumers (*as set out in objective 1.4.3.4*).

This chapter seeks to:

1. Analyse the visual data collected using the multimodal semiotic tool.
2. Identify the key themes and patterns that emerge from the data.
3. Develop guidelines to assist fashion brand leaders in crafting Instagram content that speaks to Gen Z.

4.1.1 Chapter Structure

4.1.1.1 Reflection in Action

The reflexive process at the root of qualitative research requires the researcher to engage with the collected data endlessly, influencing the research process as it unfolds (Schön, 1983). The phrase 'reflection in action' perfectly captures this fluid and cyclical participation. I positioned myself in both roles throughout data collection and analysis, allowing insights to emerge organically while refining

my interpretive framework. Acting as a neutral observer and an engaged participant allowed the research to shape my perspective and influence the process as it unfolded. As I immersed myself even deeper into my research, I continuously iterated and reiterated versions of the semiotic multimodal tool used to analyse the 39 Instagram posts. This iterative process deepened my understanding of emerging patterns and themes, ultimately strengthening my insight into Instagram's current fashion brand landscape while refining the analytical approach. The initial findings revealed key themes that were further enriched using established models, such as Barthes' (1972) *Mythologies* and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Grammar of Visual Design*. These theoretical frameworks informed the scoring system, which evolved throughout the study to ensure a more nuanced exploration of Gen Z's engagement with contemporary fashion brand communication on Instagram. This process supported the development of actionable insights for brand leaders, which is discussed in this chapter.

4.1.1.2 Thematic Analysis: Decoding the Branding Potential

Based on the initial insights, I conducted a more intricate thematic analysis. This involved coding raw data, consolidating key themes, and exploring their significance within the broader context of fashion brand communication with Gen Z on Instagram (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The aim was to establish best practices to effectively engage this audience. Thematic analysis is an iterative process in which the initial codes are continuously explored, refined, and reassessed as the data set expands and evolves (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The main objective was to develop guidelines to help fashion brand leaders create Instagram content that resonates with Gen Z, in part through this iterative exploration.

4.1.1.3 Reflection on Action: A Synthesis of the Chapter and Contribution to the Field

After navigating the intricate process of gathering data, obtaining initial insight and conducting an extensive thematic analysis, it became essential to take a brief step back and consider the entire process. This retrospective step assessed the wins, challenges, and learnings from the previous steps and allowed for a critical evaluation of the methodological approach, emerging patterns, and key learnings. A central component of this process was the development of the multimodal semiotic analysis tool, which served as an analytical framework and to curate guidelines aligned with this study's third research objective (see 1.4.3). This constitutes a tangible contribution to the area of contemporary brand communication. By combining theory and practice, this tool has evolved into a framework for self-reflection in the brand communication space.

4.1.2 Artefacts and Data Sources

Various forms of data were collected and used in the analysis, including:

- **Instagram post screenshots:** The posts of the most engaged fashion brands were collected over a 12-month period, capturing the most interaction with content per month for each selected brand (see Figures 4.4, 4.7, 4.10 and 4.13).

- **Semiotic multimodal tool:** The analytical framework outlined in Chapter 3 was applied to explore visual and textual elements of fashion brand communication on Instagram (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). The point-based system served as a qualitative analysis aid rather than a quantitative measure. This tool simply enabled the identification of key visual and textual themes and supported the thematic coding process (see Figure 2.4: Data Analysis Tool, Linking Main Literature Themes to Analysis for more detail).
- **Data Sheet:** The findings of the semiotic analysis summarising significant insights were systematically compiled into a structured data sheet. The sheet was categorised by brand to facilitate a clearer thematic comparison (Bathes, 1972; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). This data sheet has been split by brand for the purpose of the thematic analysis and coding (see Tables: 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4).

4.2 Interpretation of the Semiotic Data Analysis and Findings

Fashion brand communication is a dynamic and evolving topic of research, especially when considering its engagement with Gen Z. Authenticity, inclusivity and purpose-driven narratives have become essential to effectively connect and engage with this demographic (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). Gen Z is notably distinct from previous generations due to a unique set of values and digital fluency (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). This study explores how four prominent fashion brands, Adidas, Diesel, Zara, and Nike, are using Instagram as a strategic platform to connect with Gen Z. Using a semiotic approach, the analysis explores key elements such as signifiers, signified meanings, framing, and multimodality (see Figure 2.4: Data Analysis Tool, Linking Main Literature Themes to Analysis for more detail) to understand how these brands construct their digital identities. By comparing their visual and textual strategies, this study offers insights into the evolving relationship between fashion brands and their digitally native audience.

4.2.1 Introduction

The analysis of Adidas, Diesel, Zara, and Nike reveals distinct but interconnected strategies to engage Gen Z. Each brand interprets contemporary social norms, including inclusivity, authenticity, and purpose-driven narratives, through a unique lens (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024). The study uncovers key emergent themes in fashion brand communication through a semiotic exploration of signifiers, signifieds, framing, and multimodality. While some of the chosen brands emphasise athleticism and community building, others focus on sleek sophistication, rebellion, and individuality. In addition to outlining these findings, this section explores the effect of these strategies on Gen Z engagement in a digital context, demonstrating how each brand creates meaning through its textual and visual choices, and explores what these brands are doing and why they are appealing to this generation. In this way, this chapter seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the motives behind current trends in fashion brand communication.

4.2.2 Adidas, Empowerment through Performance and Inclusivity

In contrast to Diesel's boundary-pushing aesthetic and Zara's aspirational cool, Adidas presents a grounded, value-driven narrative rooted in empowerment, performance, and collective identity. Its Instagram strategy reflects a conscious move away from sexualisation, instead favouring authenticity, cultural resonance, and emotional storytelling to drive user engagement (see 2.5.4.2). Through dynamic visuals and carefully curated local narratives, Adidas positions the athletic body as a vessel of resilience, pride, and purpose.

Table 4.1: Sample artefact of the Data Sheet compiled, specific to Adidas

Adidas							
Brand	Post	Like Count	Total Score	Key Elements Contributing to Objectification	Key Elements Contributing to Non-Objectification	Key Insights/Observations	
Adidas South Africa	1	29,420	18	None	Focus on storytelling, emotional connection, community	No objectification. Focuses on storytelling and emotional connection.	
	2	6,606	24	Subtle emphasis on body in some shots	Focus on individuality, confidence, self-expression	No objectification. Emphasises individuality, confidence, and self-expression.	
	3	14,176	27	None	Focus on teamwork, perseverance, community	No objectification. Celebrates teamwork, perseverance, and community.	
	4	52,015	22	None	Focus on national pride, athletic achievement	No objectification. Highlights national pride and athletic achievement.	
	5	2,087	27	None	Focus on innovation, individuality, self-expression through fashion	No objectification. Focuses on innovation, individuality, and self-expression through fashion.	
	6	2,014	15	None	Focus on inclusivity, skill, teamwork	No objectification. Emphasises inclusivity, skill, and teamwork.	
	7	4,580	34	Occasional isolated body part shots, body-hugging attire	Focus on strength, empowerment, authentic expression	Minor objectifying elements present due to some aesthetic choices, but overall tone is of empowerment.	
	8	3,140	17	None	Focus on individuality, cultural identity, creative expression	No objectification. Focuses on individuality, cultural identity, and creative expression.	
	9	5,085	20	None	Focus on personal achievement, breaking barriers, resilience	No objectification. Celebrates athletic excellence and individuality.	
	10	6,941	13	None	Focus on functionality, performance, sportsmanship	No objectification. Emphasises performance and community values.	
	11	19,540	24	None	Focus on authentic moments, camaraderie, team identity	No objectification. Prioritises authentic storytelling and team dynamics.	
	12	121,087	30	None	Focus on team legacy, cultural heritage, professionalism	No objectification. Blends promotional intent with cultural storytelling.	

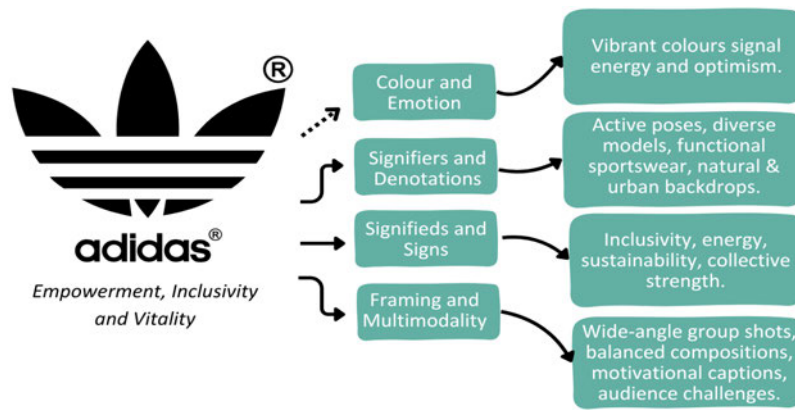


Figure 4.1: Sample artefact from the Thematic Analysis Summary compiled, specific to Adidas



Figure 4.3: Adidas Analysis Word Cloud

4.2.2.1 Cultural Symbolism and National Identity

Adidas taps into powerful local symbols to resonate deeply with its South African Gen Z audience. The brand's content regularly spotlights national sporting heroes and moments of communal victory. Notable examples include a carousel post commemorating the Springboks' Rugby World Cup victory (Post 4, Figure 4.4.4), captioned "Three Captains. Three Stripes. 3-Cups 4 Cups," and featuring iconic captains over time, Pienaar, Smit, and Kolisi. This post amassed 52,015 likes, suggesting that Gen Z South Africans strongly identify with messages of legacy, leadership, unity, and celebrations of South African victory. Similarly, Adidas celebrates the Orlando Pirates' championship moments in Posts 3, 10, 11 and 12 (See Figures: 4.4.3, 4.4.10, 4.4.11, 4.4.12) through vibrant visuals, behind-the-scenes carousels, and motivational overlays like "You Got This" and captions like "Success is earned. This is Pirates." These celebratory images are embedded with semiotic cues, team camaraderie, cultural pride, and emotional intensity that appeal to a generation desperate for a sense of belonging, identity, and shared experiences (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022) (see 2.5.4.1).

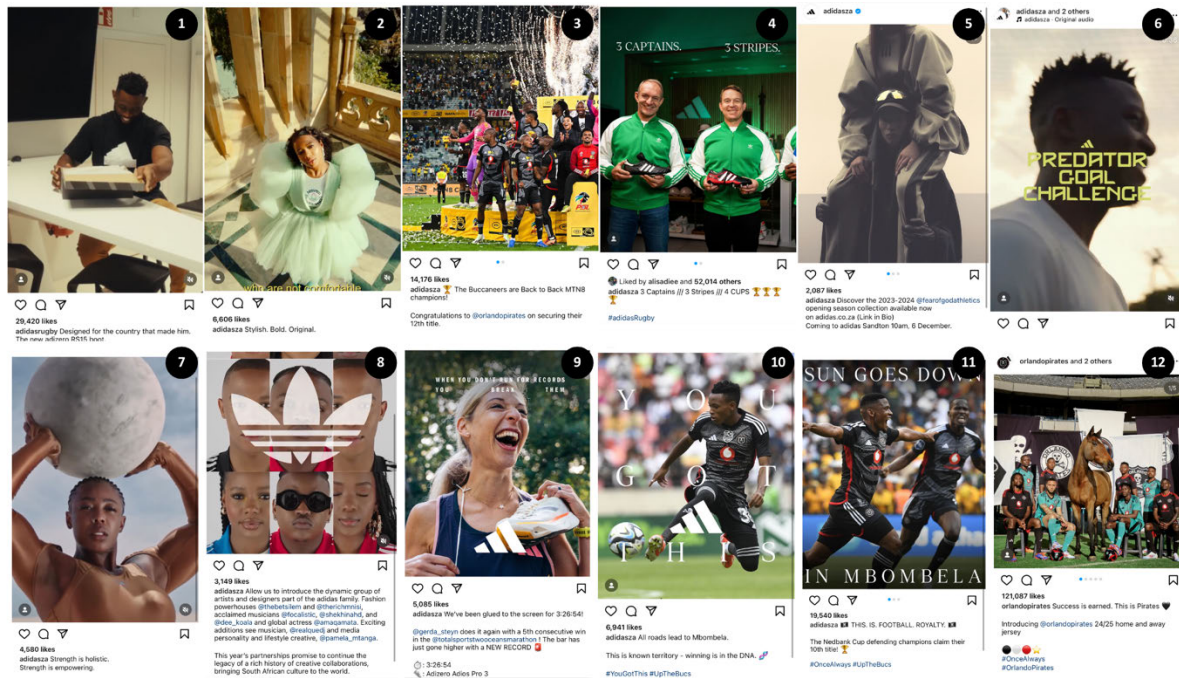


Figure 4.4: Adidas Most Liked Posts Aug to July 2023¹

4.2.2.2 Inclusive Storytelling and Diverse Representation

Beyond national pride, Adidas showcased a diverse cast of South African voices through its Adidas Originals campaign (See Figures: 4.4.2, 4.4.7, 4.4.8). These videos feature influencers of varying backgrounds and following sizes, from lesser-known voices to high-profile names in South African fashion like Thebe Magugu, each sharing personal definitions of originality, empowerment, and strength (See Figure 4.4.8). The Adidas Originals' campaign of 2023/24 (See Figures: 4.4.2, 4.4.7, 4.4.8) effectively reflects Gen Z values of inclusivity and diversity (Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025; Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024) by spotlighting emerging and established South African figures together. Global fashion force Thebe Magugu and digital creator Lenzo Mangonyane, for example, represent different ends of the contemporary South African creative spectrum, reinforcing Adidas's commitment to local relevance and authentic representation (See Figure 4.4.8). Their inclusion highlights a design-intelligent strategy that elevates individuality while remaining culturally attuned to nuanced issues around race, gender, and identity in South Africa (Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025; Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024). This is furthered in Figure 4.4.7, which features a self-described South African "fitfluencer" Zinhle Masango proclaiming that to her, "Strength is holistic. Strength is empowering," while lifting a heavy rock-shaped object over her head, a metaphorical and literal representation of overcoming weighty societal pressures. This campaign avoids aesthetic perfection in favour of raw, emotionally honest messaging. Her portrayal is modestly styled, powerfully posed,

¹ Figure 4.4.1: Adidas August 2023 Video Cover; Figure 4.4.2: Adidas September 2023 Video Cover; Figure 4.4.3: Adidas October 2023 Carousel Cover; Figure 4.4.4: Adidas November 2023 Carousel Cover; Figure 4.4.5: Adidas December 2023; Figure 4.4.6: Adidas January 2024 Video Cover; Figure 4.4.7: Adidas February 2024 Video Cover; Figure 4.4.8: Adidas March 2024 Video Cover; Figure 4.4.9: Adidas April 2024; Figure 4.4.10: Adidas May 2024; Figure 4.4.11: Adidas June 2024; Figure 4.4.12: Adidas July 2024 Carousel Cover

and emotionally resonant, resisting objectification while embodying strength. Combined with Adidas's use of vibrant colour palettes and egalitarian framing, the result is a brand expression that feels inclusive and affirming, offering Gen Z an aspirational ideal grounded in relatability rather than exclusion. It aligns with Gen Z's desire for relatability, not idealisation, affirming Adams' (2021) observation that younger audiences gravitate toward brands that challenge hyper-perfectionism and elevate realness. The findings of this study support Adams (2021) by embracing the rawness of athleticism, Adidas can foster relatability and counterbalance the hyper-perfection on Instagram by celebrating imperfection and rawness (Adams, 2021) (*see 2.5.5.1.2*).

4.2.2.3 Low Objectification, High Impact

Adidas's restraint in objectification is evident in its visual and verbal design choices. Posts like the UGC-driven "Predator Goal Challenge" are a prime example. Post 6 (*See Figure 4.4.6, scored 15/100 in objectification*) or the motivational Orlando Pirates shoutout (*Post 10, Figure 4.4.10, scored 13/100 in objectification*) demonstrate that decisive engagements do not need to rely on even the slightest sexualisation. Instead, Adidas champions performance, participation, and inspiration, elements that drive Gen Z engagement more effectively than objectified aesthetics. Further supporting Adams (2021) in that by embracing the rawness of athleticism, Adidas can foster relatability by celebrating imperfection and rawness (Adams, 2021). The post featuring Gerda Steyn also confirms this (*See Figure 4.4.9*) she is smiling after the race with the text "When you don't run for records, you break them," and achieves this balance beautifully by celebrating feminine athleticism, without compromising authenticity or subjectivity, while earning low objectification scores and continuously upholding Gen Z-aligned values (*see 2.5.5.1.2*).

4.2.2.4 Visual Strategy and Narrative Cohesion

Adidas' visual grammar is consistent, high-quality, and grounded in real-world environments such as stadiums and community settings. Each post is supported by crisp photography, dynamic composition, and minimal but emotionally charged text overlays like "The sun goes down in Mbombela" (*See Figure 4.4.11*) as an example. Hashtags are relevant, captions are succinct, and the overall aesthetic remains cohesive across the feed (*see 2.5.4.2*). This multimodal, visual and verbal strategy reinforces Adidas' ethos of empowerment and aligns with the literature's emphasis on authenticity alongside aesthetics in Gen Z branding, throughout an entire year of posting (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Adams, 2021; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Havas, 2023; Muhammad et al., 2023). Adidas communicates with clarity, purpose, and intentionality, curating a feed that feel like a movement.

4.2.3 Diesel, Rebellion and Relevance

Diesel's Instagram posts exemplify how fashion brands navigate digital communication to connect with Gen Z. The brand strategically uses provocative visuals to cut through contemporary clutter, while aligning with the brand's identity of promoting rebellious self-expression (Eirini, 2020). However, this strategy presents a paradox. This study explores Diesel's highest-engagement posts over a year to unpack the tension between provocative branding and Gen Z's evolving expectations. Breaking down this type of paradoxical posting has allowed exploration of the brand's tension

between the allure of pushing limits and the need to connect with Gen Z. Furthermore, Generation Zs' divergent values of authenticity, inclusivity, and purpose-driven narratives (Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024; Francis and Hoefel, 2018) (see 2.5.3), instil a set of inherent contradictions within the logic of Diesels' digital fashion brand communicators.

Table 4.2: Sample artefact of the Data Sheet compiled, specific to Diesel

Diesel							
Brand	Post #	Like Count	Total Score	Key Elements Contributing to Objectification	Key Elements Contributing to Non-Objectification	Key Insights/Observations	
Diesel South Africa	1	974	61	Faceless portrayal; Red background; Ripped jeans	Loose fitting clothing; Relaxed pose; Subverts Gender Norms	Tension between empowerment and objectification; moderate objectification due to faceless portrayal and focus on physicality.	
	2	2142	62	Revealing clothing; Sexualised poses	Diverse individuals; Celebrates self-expression; Subverts norms; Rebellious; Playful multimodal elements	Mix of empowerment and objectification; celebrates diversity but some elements are sexualised.	
	3	588	86	Scantily clad models; Suggestive poses; Objectification of women	Challenges gender norms; Subversive; Playful; Rebellious	Leverages sexuality and challenges gender norms but primarily objectifies women.	
	4	1925	43	Tommy Cash as cult leader; Models as followers	Critiques consumerism; Less sexualisation; Subversive; Rebellious	Critiques consumerism while reinforcing Diesel's role; less sexualisation but power dynamics present.	
	5	823	31	Lack of face on model	Challenges traditional masculinity; Symbolises individuality and activism	Challenges traditional masculinity and resonates with Gen Z values but lack of face contributes to objectification.	
	6	1032	77	Revealing clothing; Close-up shots; Seductive; No face	Playful; Luxe; Inclusive; Allusive caption	Mix of objectification and empowerment; high score due to revealing clothing and suggestive elements.	
	7	466	44	Stiletto boots; Billboard with lips	Urban setting; Confident female model; Playful caption	Urban streetwear aesthetic but lacks focus; female model mixes empowerment and objectification.	
	8	455	51	Shiny tracksuit; Minimalist background	Unisex fashion; Restrained approach to sexuality	Modern masculinity with restrained sexuality; minimalist context leads to some objectification.	
	9	1296	27	None	Empowerment; Individuality; South African artist	Modern masculinity; empowerment; and individuality; South African context	
	10	8676	38	Provocative pose; Minimalist setting; Allusive	Challenges conventional femininity; Confident model; Subversive; Playful	Bold and rebellious; challenges gender norms; provocative execution risks being perceived as excessive.	
	11	1606	0	None	Product-focused; No human subject	Pure product showcase; avoids objectification.	
	12	754	0	None	Product-focused; No human subject	Product showcase; focuses on design and innovation; avoids objectification.	

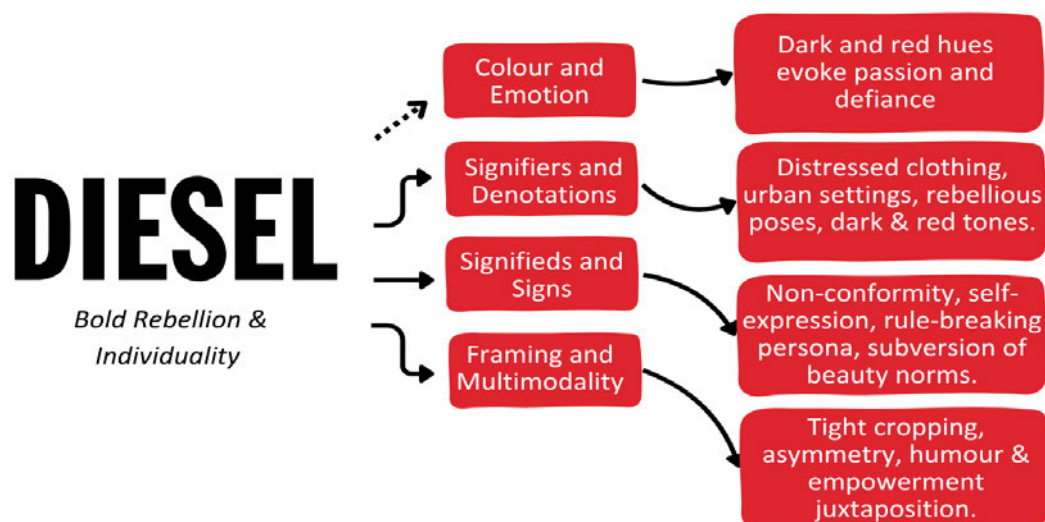


Figure 4.5: Sample artefact of the compiled Thematic Analysis Summary, specific to Diesel



Figure 4.6: Sample artefact of the Analysis as a Word Cloud, specific to Diesel

4.2.3.1 The Provocation Paradox

Diesel's established brand identity is often linked to provocative visuals (Eirini, 2020), which drives brand communicators to use tactics like exaggerated poses and suggestive themes to capture attention and cut through the clutter in the saturated digital space on Instagram. However, this exploration of Diesel's Instagram has revealed a critical tension between rebellion and relevance. Specifically, Post 3 (see Figure 4.7.3) received a remarkably high objectification score of 86/100 according to the semiotic analysis tool used to analyse the data in this study. Figure 4.7.3, from October 2023, generated comparatively low engagement, with only 588 likes. This disparity suggests that although hypersexualised content may capture initial attention, its effectiveness in fostering sustained engagement or meaningful brand connection is limited. This aligns with Muhammad et al. (2023), who found that Gen Zs' purchase decisions are driven by aesthetic appeal, but their purchasing is moderated by deeper values too, such as authenticity and inclusivity (see section 2.5.5.1.2, *The Effect of Contemporary Visual Content on Gen Z*), the findings of this exploration support Muhammad et al. (2023) in that this generation is influenced by aesthetic appeal. The findings of this study are also aligned with the thinking of Senanu et al. (2023), as Gen Z consumers can be engaged with high-quality imagery. However, sustained engagement levels require thoughtful integration with interactive features and user-generated content. As such, it is evident that visual aesthetics evoke strong feelings to encourage impulsive purchases and increased engagement (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021; Muhammad et al., 2023; Senanu et al., 2023).

Analysing high-scoring posts suggests that visually provocative or idealised content can garner greater engagement. This aligns with broader critiques of Instagram's impact on young users, where the pressure to curate an appealing digital persona promotes self-objectification (Adams & Qureshi, 2021). As highlighted in Adams and Qureshi's discussion (2021), the performative nature of Instagram reinforces the notion that showing more skin or adhering to ideal beauty standards results in higher engagement metrics, a pattern that fashion brands can knowingly or unknowingly exploit. Several potential factors could be responsible for this. First, hypersexualised imagery has become so prevalent on digital platforms, with other brands using similar tactics to cut through the online clutter, that viewers have become desensitised to it (Lup et al., 2015). Second, Gen Z increasingly

prioritises authenticity and meaningful connection (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Adams, 2021; Havas, 2023; Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024), values that inherently conflict with overtly provocative content, but are influenced by aesthetically appealing imagery (Muhammad et al., 2023). However, hypersexualized imagery runs the risk of being perceived, by Gen Z viewers, as exploitative (Lup et al., 2015; Karsay, Knoll, & Mattes, 2018; Tiggemann et al., 2018; Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Adams, 2021; Havas, 2023). This contradicts Gen Z's desire for inclusivity and respect (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Adams, 2021; Havas, 2023). As such, even though the hypersexualisation used as a tactic in Post 3 (see Figure 4.7.3) may be consistent with Diesel's brand identity (Eirini, 2020), it may prove detrimental to the brand in a long-term contemporary sociocultural context (see 2.5.5.1.2).

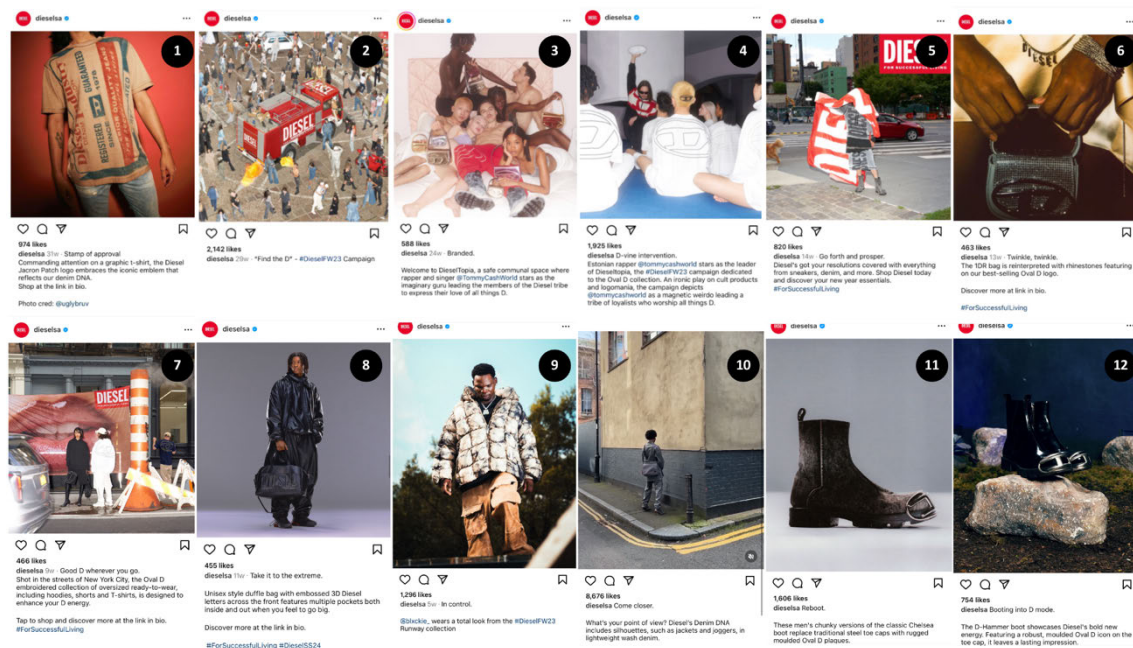


Figure 4.7: Diesel Most Liked Posts Aug 2023 to July 2024²

4.2.3.2 Empowerment and Engagement

In contrast to the decreasing engagement from purely provocative posts, posts that balance provocation or rebellion with earnest empowerment and a witty, quirky, or humorous perspective have a more substantial effect on Gen Z (Adams, 2021). Gen Z engages more enthusiastically with genuine and nontraditional content that disrupts established conventions (Adams, 2021), aligning with Diesel's brand identity of promoting rebellious self-expression (Eirini, 2020). The effectiveness of this approach is demonstrated in Post 10 (See Figure 4.7.10). This post suggests that leaning into the

² Figure 4.7.1: Diesel August 2023; Figure 4.7.2: Diesel September 2023; Figure 4.7.3: Diesel October 2023; Figure 4.7.4: Diesel November 2023; Figure 4.7.5: Diesel December 2023; Figure 4.7.6: Diesel January 2024; Figure 4.7.7: Diesel February 2024; Figure 4.7.8: Diesel March 2024; Figure 4.7.9: Diesel April 2024; Figure 4.7.10: Diesel May 2024 Video Cover; Figure 4.7.11: Diesel June 2024; Figure 4.7.12: Diesel July 2024

rebellious and quirky side of the brand's identity, rather than relying on mere provocation, is a more effective strategy for garnering engagement. The use of a confident model in an urban setting, mixed with a witty and playful approach, expressed a message of rebellion, individuality, and self-expression without relying on hyper-sexualisation; but rather by using humour to encourage a feeling of empowerment and self-expression. At first glance, the model appears to be a man urinating against a wall wearing all Diesel in a rebellious, almost crude act. As the camera moves closer, the striking misdirect unravels, and the viewer can see that it's a young Black woman in Diesel, wearing heels and holding a water hose. With a cheeky smile, she uses it to draw the Diesel 'D' logo onto the ground. Her sideways smile breaks the fourth wall, playful, confident, defiant (*See Figure 4.7.10*). The image subverts gender norms and uses coded posture to provoke to challenge viewer assumptions. This bold visual twist confronts gendered assumptions and street-level power dynamics, reshaping rebellion into creative expression; quirky, bold, and unmistakably Diesel. Though provocative, Diesel's use of humour and confidence reframes this defiance as empowerment. As Adams (2021) notes, Gen Z engages most with witty, non-traditional content that is authentic and subversive. The effect of this post is further evident in significantly higher engagement, despite receiving a lower objectification score (38/100). This suggests that in the case of Diesel, authentic and empowering communication, accomplished by cleverly and wittily subverting social norms, is more effective than simply pursuing shock value through provocation. The findings of this study support Adams (2021) by embracing flaws and rawness (*see 2.5.5.1.2*); brands can foster relatability to combat hyper-perfection and objectification on Instagram by celebrating imperfection and rawness (Adams, 2021).

4.2.3.3 Decoding Diesel's Visual World

Diesel strategically leverages visual signifiers that engage with Barthes' (1977) concept of 'mythologies', the idea that cultural symbols shape ideological meaning. In this way, the Diesel logo may function as a subtle phallic symbol (Eirini, 2020), reinforcing themes of sexuality and youthful rebellion (*See section 2.3.3.1.2 Diesel Visual Brand Identity*). This theme is then reinforced again through dark and red colour palettes, which evoke connotations of passion, danger, and intensity, solidifying the brand's rebellious spirit (Singh & Srivastava, 2011; Eirini, 2020). The use of varied settings in Diesel's Instagram posts, ranging from gritty urban landscapes (*See Figures: 4.7.2, 4.7.5, 4.7.7 and 4.7.10*) to minimalist studio shots (*See Figures: 4.7.1, 4.7.3, 4.7.8, 4.7.11 and 4.7.12*), contribute to the multifaceted identity of the brand by creating a feeling of dynamism and ambiguity (Eirini, 2020) (*see 2.5.4.2*). The visual signifiers or "mythologies" are designed to function as signifying practices, combining denotation and connotation to create meaning. The urban setting choice (*See Figures: 4.7.2, 4.7.5, 4.7.7 and 4.7.10*), for example, denotes a physical location but also connotes a specific lifestyle, a set of values, and a relevant social context relevant to the target audience, Gen Z.

4.2.3.4 Integrating Product into a Broader Digital Brand Narrative

Although Diesel's Instagram focuses on narrative-driven posts, minimalist product posts (*See Figures 4.7.11 and 4.7.12*) remain part of the brand's digital strategy. These minimalist product posts, devoid of objectification, reinforce Diesel's emphasis on quality and innovation while maintaining strong

audience engagement. In particular, these high-quality product-focused posts gained higher engagement metrics (in terms of likes), (see 2.5.4.2 and table 4.2) than the more provocative Post 3 (See Figure 4.7.3), which received 588 likes from the brand's Instagram audience. Post 11 (Figure 4.7.11) received 1606 likes, and Post 12 (Figure 4.7.12) received 754 likes. Diesel can drive product focus in the competitive digital landscape through simple product display, in this case, boots, without provocation.

4.2.3.5 Multimodal Meaning-Making

Diesel effectively and consistently harnesses the power of multimodality by combining impactful visuals with bold, rebellious captions and hashtags. This layered approach to communication aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) notion of multimodality as a site of meaning negotiation, where text and image combine to produce complex interpretations. A recurring motif on Diesel's Instagram is the letter 'D', the brands' logo which references the brand's name, but also carries subtle sexual connotations, functioning as Eirini (2020) suggests, as a phallic symbol and quirky sexual innuendo (See section 2.3.3.1.2 *Diesel Visual Brand Identity*). This dual meaning is evident in Post 2 (see Figure 4.7.2), where a "Where's Waldo" style visual plays with models scattered in the background, paired with the caption "Find the D." Ambiguity amplifies objectification while reinforcing Diesel's cheeky, defiant tone. Similarly, Post 7 (see Figure 4.7.7) features modestly dressed models, but the caption 'Good D wherever you go' delivers a double entendre, embedding brand identity and playful provocation in equal measure. These examples illustrate how Diesel uses multimodality to cut through the clutter without visual objectification, curating a consistent and subversive brand voice that resonates with Gen Z's appetite for edgy, layered content (see 2.5.5).

4.2.4 Zara, A Blend of Aspiration and Accessibility?

As seen in Chapter 2, Gen Z seeks out brands that reflect aspiration and accessibility, seeking stylish options that align with their values, and are attainable to them (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar and Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna and Priyanka, 2024). At first glance, Zara's Instagram presence appears to reflect this balance. The brand's content combines modern trends with classic elegance, curating a sophisticated visual identity that feels elevated but familiar. However, a more thorough analysis reveals a more complex dynamic, particularly within the South African context. In all selected posts, Zara exclusively presents thin, predominantly white female models, with only one or two exceptions. This limited representation subtly undermines the accessibility of the brand, raising important questions about inclusivity and relatability for a diverse Gen Z audience (see 2.5.5). The following analysis of Zara's best-performing posts over 12 months explores how the brand engages this audience, while critically exploring whether the aspiration it promotes is truly accessible in a local cultural context.

Table 4.3: Sample artefact of the compiled data sheet, specific to Zara

Brand	Post	Like Count	Total Score	Key Elements Contributing to Objectification	Key Elements Contributing to Non-Objectification	Key Insights/Observations
Zara	1	55980	67	Focus on legs	Confident posture; direct gaze	Timeless styling; inclusive representation (age); subtle objectification.
	2	77059	34	None	Urban setting; casual elegance	Urban sophistication; lacks emotional resonance due to passive pose.
	3	90146	75	High slit and cutout details	Confident pose; elegant presentation	Bold and contemporary fashion; effectively uses colour contrast.
	4	247747	49	Slightly agape mouth	Vibrant colour; approachable styling	Engaging presentation; ambiguous tone and limited background.
	5	123923	80	Form-fitting dress	Poised posture; serious expression	Bold fashion; walks a line between empowerment and objectification.
	6	126701	79	Focus on bare legs; alluring footwear	Bold fashion statement; minimalist aesthetic	Daring yet stylish image; focus on legs and revealing styling.
	7	183254	60	Sheer materials; high slits	Diverse range of outfits; playful yet refined tone	Playful yet sophisticated approach to Valentine's fashion; subtle sensuality.
	8	113965	72	Focus on legs; suggestive pose; Bikinis	Effortless style; natural expression	Relaxed and natural aesthetic; suggestive elements introduce objectification.
	9	109876	67	Relaxed poses and revealing designs	Playful energy; relatable/ relaxing setting	Playful and relatable; relaxed poses but revealing designs
	10	64938	68	Sensual styling and body-emphasising poses	Confident gaze; elegant styling	Bold and expressive; revealing clothing and suggestive pose.
	11	74532	54	Overemphasis on body-centric elements	Fashionable and modern	Fashionable and modern but reinforces stereotypes
	12	137654	59	Poses, expressions, and the interplay between the model and the setting	Focus on sophistication	Certain visual elements reinforce traditional notions of femininity and allure

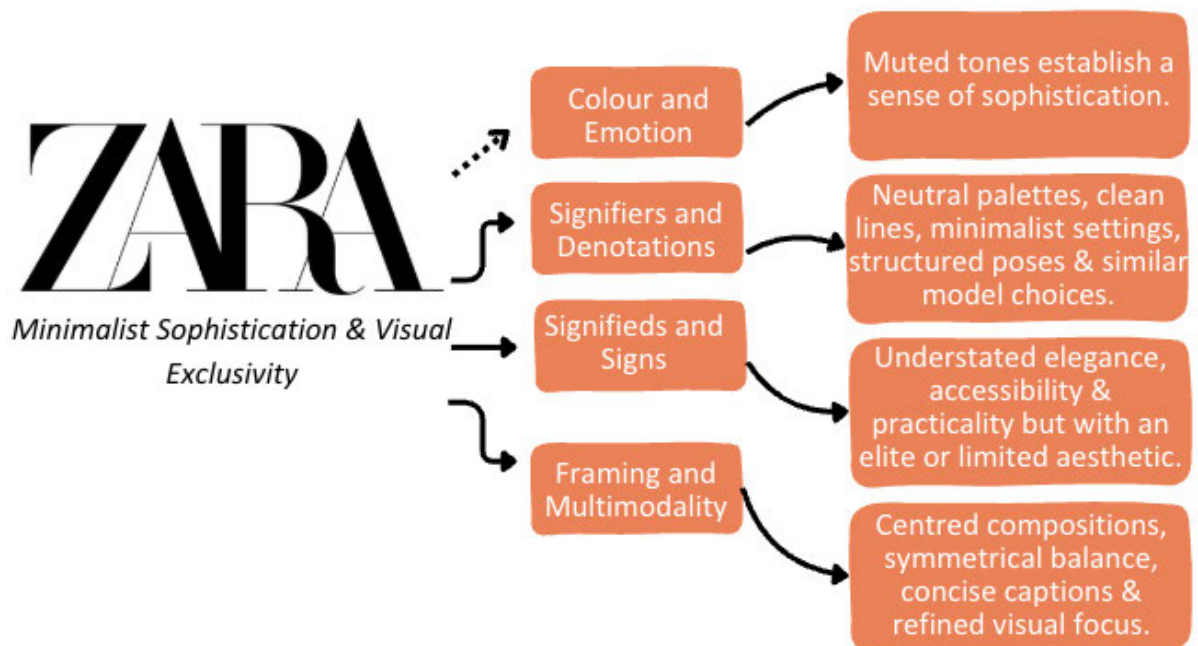


Figure 4.8: Sample artefact of the compiled Thematic Analysis Summary, specific to Zara



Figure 4.9: Sample artefact of the Analysis as a Word Cloud, specific to Zara

4.2.4.1 Projecting Attainability Through Aspiration

Zara's visual language oscillates between aspiration and attainability. Post 4 (See Figure 4.10.4) showcases chic winter fashion in a beautiful, yet simplistic and approachable setting, exemplifying this strategy. Despite its moderate objectification score (49/100), the post achieved significant engagement (247,747 likes), suggesting that Zara does not need to rely on overt sexualisation to drive attention. Instead, Zara focusses on high-fashion styling, clean aesthetics, and subtle sophistication to create content that feels aspirational and within reach. This approach effectively blends high-fashion aesthetics and an approachable tone, distinguishing Zara from higher-end luxury brands that often employ more exclusive and potentially intimidating imagery and other fashion brands that rely more heavily on sexualised content. This is consistent with Djafarova and Bowes (2021), who found that Gen Z is drawn to quality and aesthetic value over sexualised appeal, and Muhammad et al. (2023), who confirm that Gen Z's fashion purchasing decisions are significantly influenced by the visual presentation of products on Instagram. However, Zara's particular version of 'attainability' is complicated by its narrow depiction of beauty (See Figure 15). While avoiding sexualised imagery, Zara consistently features thin, white female models, this visual consistency reinforces a limited and exclusionary beauty standard (see 2.5.5.2.1). As such, in the case of Zara, the imagery must be considered in its entirety (See Figure 15). Within a South African context, where the majority of Gen Z do not see themselves reflected in this ideal, the brand's interpretation of aspirational sophistication may be alienating. As such, Zara succeeds in projecting a restrained elegance that distinguishes it from overtly sexualised and more luxe competitors; however, its approach also raises critical questions about whether the aesthetic it promotes is truly inclusive or simply another iteration of exclusivity dressed up as minimalism.

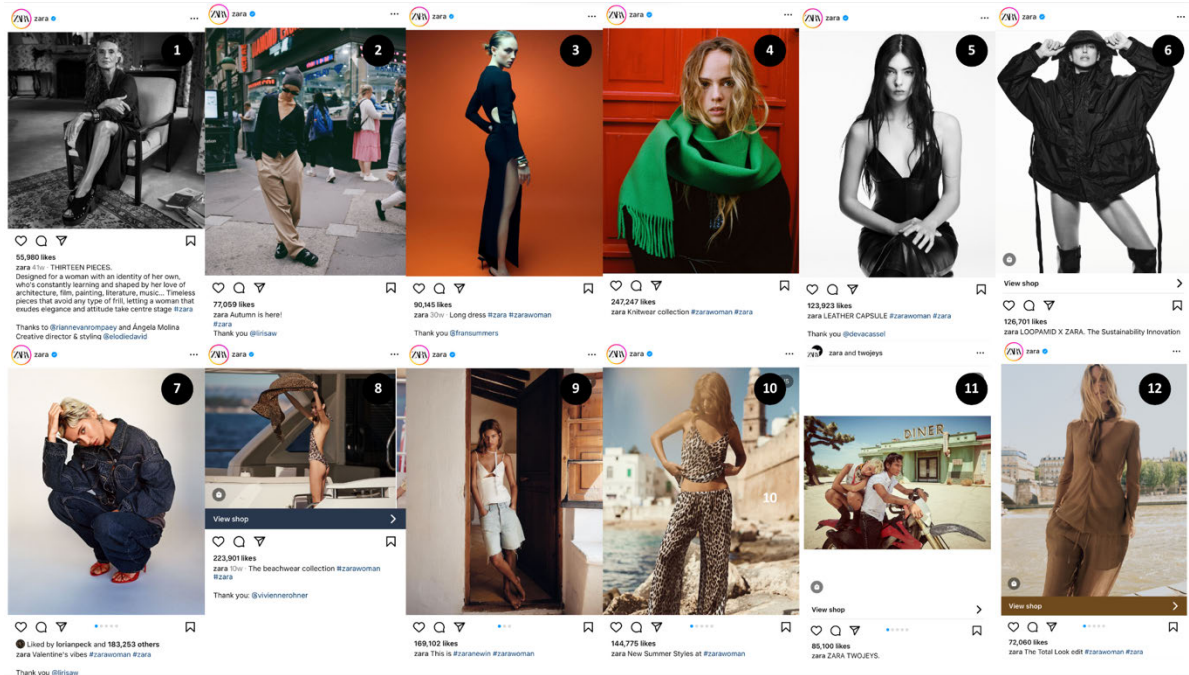


Figure 4.10: Zara Most Liked Posts Aug 2023 to July 2024³

4.2.4.2 Moderate Objectification as a Strategic Middle Ground

Analysing Zara's Instagram content reveals that moderate objectification, scoring around the 50-mark, could serve as a strategic sweet spot. These posts appear to resonate particularly well with Gen Z audiences, especially when combined with visual cues of attainability and aesthetic sophistication. For example, Post 4 (See Figure 4.10.4) features a chic winter outfit styled in a clean, minimalist setting, earned a moderate objectification score of 49/100 and received 247,747 likes. This suggests that subtle sensuality, when paired with accessible imagery and simple styling, can generate strong engagement without requiring any sexualisation. Conversely, content with significantly higher objectification scores (70 and higher), such as Post 6 (See Figure 4.10.6), which received a score of 79/100 and 126,701 likes, performed less consistently. The post (See Figure 4.10.6) places visual emphasis on the model's bare legs by revealing styling and provocative composition. While still engaging, it did not outperform the more subtly styled posts like Post 4 (See Figure 4.10.4), indicating that overt sexualisation is not necessarily more effective in garnering engagement. These patterns support Adams (2021), who found that Gen Z values narratives of relatability, individuality, and authenticity over idealised or overly sexualised portrayals (see 2.5.5.1). Audiences seem to reward brands that cultivate a sense of rawness and authenticity, those that embrace imperfection rather than projecting hyper-curated ideals (see 2.5.4).

³ Figure 4.10.1: Zara August 2023; Figure 4.10.2: Zara September 2023; Figure 4.10.3: Zara October 2023; Figure 4.10.4: Zara November 2023; Figure 4.10.5: Zara December 2023; Figure 4.10.6: Zara January 2024; Figure 4.10.7: Zara February 2024 Carousel Cover; Figure 4.10.8: Zara March 2024 Carousel Cover; Figure 4.10.9: Zara April 2024 Carousel Cover; Figure 4.10.10: Zara May 2024 Carousel Cover; Figure 4.10.11: Zara June 2024 Carousel Cover; Figure 4.10.12: Zara July 2024 Carousel Cover

However, these findings also raise tension about Instagram's engagement-first model. Adams and Qureshi (2021) argue that the platform's algorithm inherently promotes polished, performative content, pressuring brands into creating hyper-stylised imagery to stay visible. This creates an ethical dilemma for brands like Zara, as content must be visually compelling to maintain engagement and visibility; however, the audience is simultaneously demanding authenticity, relatability, and more responsible representation (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Kannan & Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Kaushik, 2022; Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). Zara's strategy, which blends minimalist sensuality with editorial polish, reflects a conscious effort to navigate these competing demands. The brand appears to be searching for a middle ground, to satisfy the algorithm while also connecting with Gen Z's desire for inspiration and relation. This suggests that the future of brand communication on Instagram may lie in carefully curated authenticity, a visual language that can balance performance with sincerity.

4.2.4.3 Aesthetic Inclusivity or Visual Exclusivity?

Zara's Instagram aesthetic projects an image of accessible luxury, carefully curated through neutral palettes, clean compositions, and minimalist backdrops. Relaxed and self-assured postures of the models contribute to a visual language of understated elegance, refined but approachable. This aesthetic blurs the distinction between high fashion and everyday wear, positioning Zara as aspirational, achievable, or within reach. However, Zara's consistent use of thin, white, predominantly female models complicates this perception of attainability. Despite maintaining a single global Instagram account, Zara's exclusionary casting practices signal a narrow, Eurocentric ideal of beauty that subtly contradicts its desired visual language of inclusivity and accessibility (see 2.5.5.2.1). This visual exclusivity is especially problematic in a South African context, where diversity in race, body type, and gender expression is a lived reality, as well as a cultural imperative. (Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025). It is also important to note that the Zara product offering extends beyond womenswear, and this narrow casting further limits the diversity of representation in its full potential consumer base. By consistently reinforcing a specific body and racial archetype, Zara implicitly defines who their 'ideal consumer' is and, by extension, who is excluded from their beauty ideal. This repetition creates a coded visual message that Zara's 'attainable luxury' version is reserved only for those who adhere to this narrow ideal (see 2.5.5.2.1).

Prasanna and Priyanka (2024) note that Gen Z values aspiration and inclusivity. Although in the past exclusivity has been used to signal prestige, Gen Z audiences expect brands to represent and reflect diverse identities. Zara's failure to include a wider representation, risks alienating segments of this generation, especially in multicultural markets such as South Africa (Prasanna & Priyanka, 2024; Abrahams, 2025; Bohdanovska, 2025) (see 2.5.5.1.2). What is marketed as minimalist sophistication can risk being interpreted as visual exclusion. Consequently, Zara's accessibility aesthetic, in practice, supports inaccessible ideals in a South African context.

4.2.4.4 Textual Reinforcement of Brand Image

Zara's clear, succinct, neutral captions seek to enhance the curated 'attainable luxury' brand image by providing context and indicating a way of life. Captions such as "The Total Look Edit" seen in Post 12

(See Figure 4.10.12) offer styling inspiration through subtle suggestion while reinforcing Zaras' accessible luxury positioning. This subtle, understated textual approach complements the minimalist visual aesthetic, aiming to enhance the brand's sophisticated and accessible image (see 2.5.4.2). Gen Z engages more with messaging that allows space for personal interpretation and avoids overly sales-driven language (Adams, 2021). Zara's minimalist captions reinforce this, allowing the visuals to do the storytelling while maintaining tone and brand coherence.

4.2.4.5 Lifestyle as Engagement Driver

Zara's highest-performing content prioritises lifestyle-orientated aspirational visuals that minimise overt sexualisation but often lean towards stereotypical representation. Post 4 (See Figure 4.10.4) exemplifies this, showcasing chic winter fashion in an idyllic but approachable setting. Featuring a thin white model, this post achieved the highest engagement in the dataset (247,747 likes) despite its moderate objectification score. The success of this post highlights the effectiveness of portraying aspirational lifestyles and emotional resonance, rather than relying solely on sexualised imagery or explicit product focus, as a strategy for connecting with Generation Z. This portrayal of raw reality can evoke emotions, driving engagement with Gen Z (Adams, 2021) (see 2.5.5.1.2).

4.2.4.6 Strategic Content Diversification

Zara deliberately varies its content to keep viewers interested and encourage engagement. Using various visual components, such as tactical days (See Figure 4.10.7, a *Valentines Day* post), textile details (See Figure 4.10.4 for the focus on knitwear), urban landscapes (See Figure 4.10.2), and lifestyle imagery (See Figures: 4.10.1, 4.10.2, 4.10.9, 4.10.10, 4.10.11 and 4.10.12), improves engagement metrics while preventing aesthetic monotony and visual fatigue. This strategic approach to content creation curates a fascinating and compelling online presence. Senanu et al. (2023) emphasise the value of content diversity in sustaining Gen Z engagement. Zara's use of multiple post formats, ranging from behind-the-scenes to product close-ups, reflects a strategy that avoids visual monotony and maintains user interest and engagement over time (see 2.5.4.2).

4.2.5 Nike, an Authentic Take on Athleticism

By emphasising performance, diversity, and genuine portrayal, Nike's Instagram presence successfully engages with Gen Z. This exploration explored Nike's most popular Instagram posts, revealing important tactics for engaging this selective audience. Important conclusions show that Nike successfully uses minimal objectification, genuine narratives, and athlete empowerment to establish a solid and genuine brand bond with Gen Z.

Table 4.4: Sample artefact of the compiled data sheet, specific to Nike

Brand	Post #	Like Count	Total Score	Key Elements Contributing to Objectification	Key Elements Contributing to Non-Objectification	Key Insights/Observations
Nike	1	394541	21	Focus on physicality; surreal background	Athletic attire; no overt sexualisation	Prioritises athleticism and spectacle over personality; minimal emotional engagement.
	2	908445	16	Close-up shot emphasises physical intensity	Triumphant pose and expression; dark background	Focuses on athletic achievement and triumph; minimal cultural or contextual depth.
	3	783309	0	None	Focus on sportswear; no human figures	Pure product showcase; avoids objectification; emphasises functionality and design.

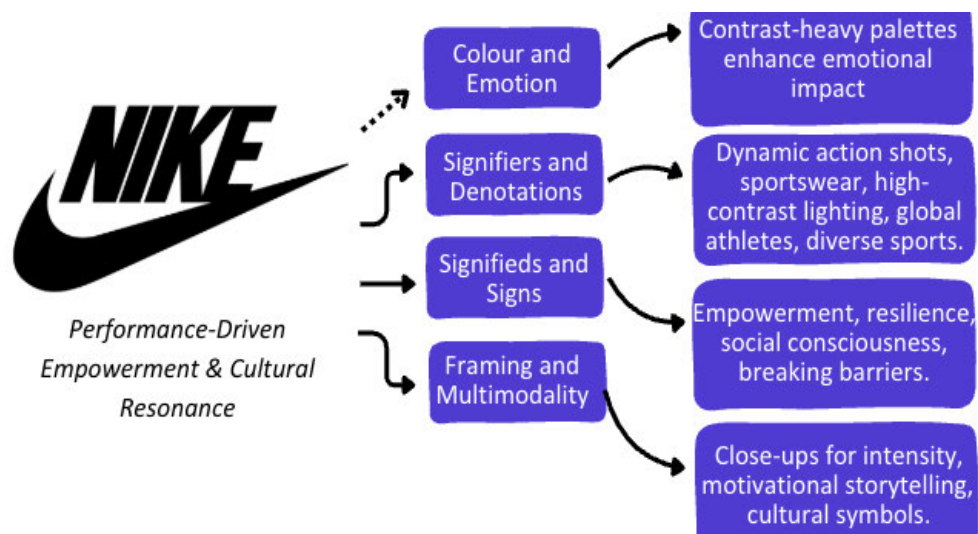


Figure 4.11: Sample artefact from the Thematic Analysis Summary compiled, specific to Nike



Figure 4.12: Nike Analysis Word Cloud

4.2.5.1 Celebrating Athletic Achievement, Empowering Athletes

Nike capitalises on the strength of individual empowerment and athletic success. Gen Z responds strongly to posts that display players in moments of victory, like Post 2 from June 2024, which shows Vinicius Jr. celebrating winning the European Trophy. Nike appeals to the need of Gen Z for motivation and personal development by exhibiting commitment, diligence, and the pursuit of

perfection. Similarly to Adidas, the findings of this study about Nike support Adams (2021) in that by promoting the reality of athleticism, fostering relatability, and counterbalancing the hyper-perfection seen on Instagram by celebrating imperfection and rawness, brands can garner greater engagement from Gen Z.

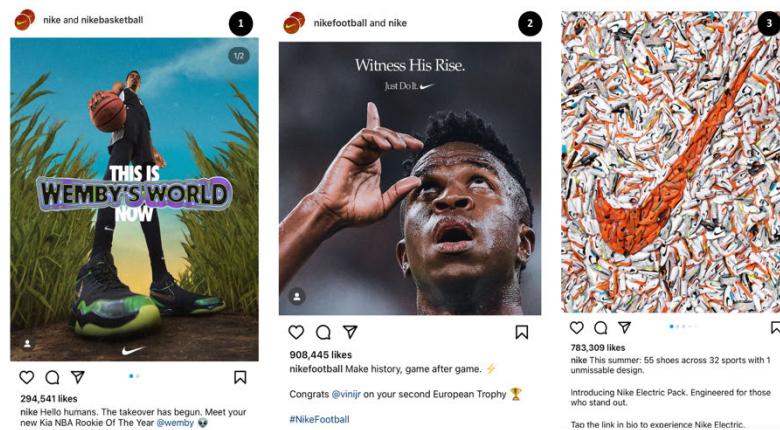


Figure 4.13: Nike Most Liked Posts May 2024 to July 2024⁴

4.2.5.2 Focus on Performance and Celebration of Achievement

Nike prioritises authentic depictions of athletes and celebrates their accomplishments to minimise objectification in the content used on the brand's global Instagram page. Nike produces highly engaged content without depending on sexualised imagery, posts like Post 1 from May 2024 (See Figure 4.13.1), showcase the brand's celebration of Victor Wembanyama (a.k.a. Wemby) as a sports hero. Post 2, from June 2024 (See Figure 4.13.2), uses a similar method and congratulates Vinicius Jr. on his latest achievement of the European trophy, with a close-up of him on the field. This was further developed by Post 3 in July 2024 (See Figure 4.13.3), which displays the brand's full range of products through a creative visual display in the form of a carousel post. Post 3 (See Figure 4.13.3) focusses on product performance, functionality, and innovation per brand pillar, which, as a result, was also an invaluable opportunity for the global Nike brand page to highlight the other Nike sub-brand pages on the platform. This was achieved by tagging the sub-brand pages (such as Nike Running, Nike Football, Nike Basketball, Nike Skateboarding or SB and Nike Sportswear) to interesting visual displays of products. In this way, the brand could garner greater engagement, increase their online presence, grow their sub-brand communities and showcase products, without using overt sexualisation as a tactic in any of their online content (see 2.5.4.2).

⁴ Figure 4.13.1: Nike May 2024 Carousel Cover; Figure 4.13.2: Nike June 2024; Figure 4.13.3: Nike July 2024 Carousel Cover.

4.2.5.3 Visual Storytelling to Establish Resonance

Nike excels at using strong visuals to tell powerful stories that truly connect with Gen Z. In a world of perfect, retouched images online, Nike's ability to focus on the real 'blood, sweat and tears' of athletic achievement feels authentic. For example, Post 2 (See Figure 4.13.2) from June 2024 zoomed in on the intense emotion of Vinicius Jr after his victory, showing the raw effort behind it. This visual power connects with Gen Z's values of hard work and inspires a sense of community (Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Adams, 2021). By sharing these genuine stories, Nike can build trust and become more than just a brand to its online audience; it can become a symbol of shared goals and success. The findings of this study support Adams (2021) and Francis and Hoefel (2018) as the combination of genuine emotion, powerful visuals, and meaningful stories drive engagement, creating a strong, sustainable connection between brand and audience (see 2.5.5.1.2).

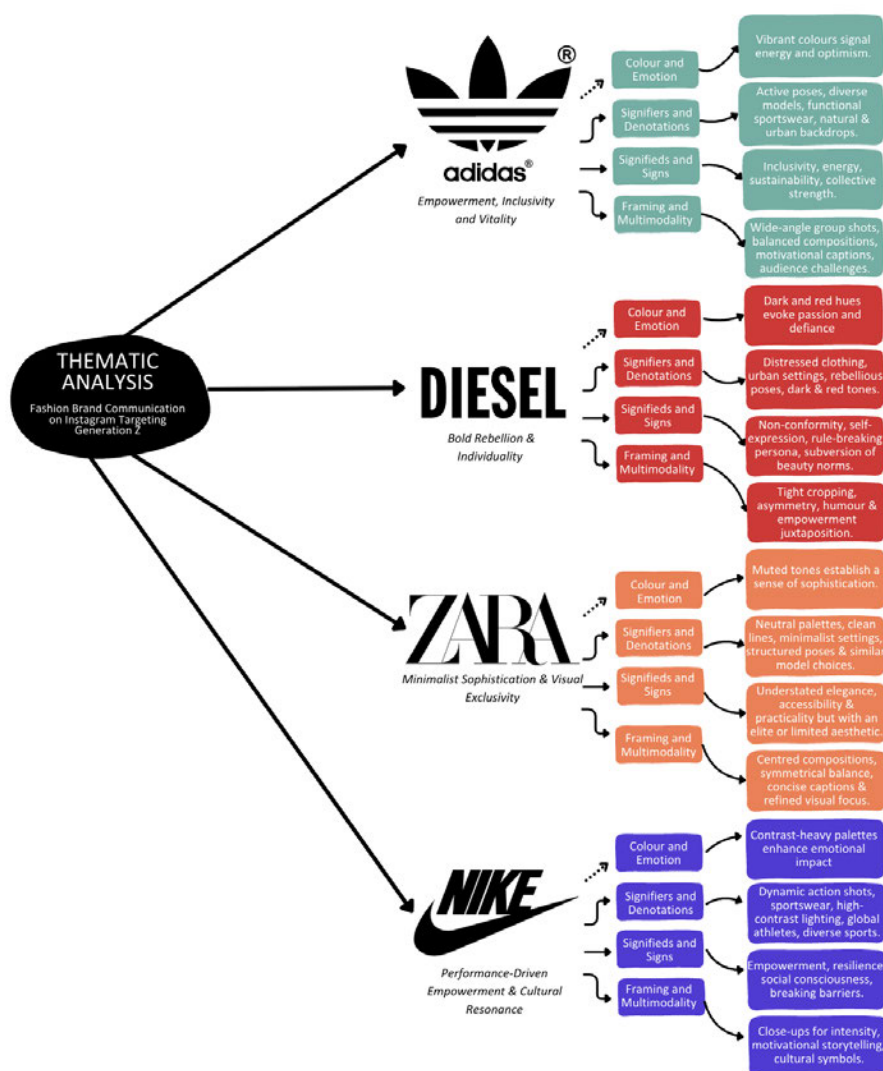


Figure 4.14: Thematic analysis summary of all brands

4.2.6 Accessibility and ALT Text

A notable and holistic observation emerged regarding accessibility practices in all four brands. None of the analysed posts, or brands, used alternative text (ALT text) to provide image descriptions for visually impaired users. The absence of ALT text represents a gap in representation and inclusivity, particularly as digital accessibility becomes an increasingly central expectation in brand communication. However, it is important to note that this study was conducted between August 2023 and July 2024, prior to a broader industry shift in which social media platforms began to adopt stronger search engine optimisation (SEO) functionalities. As social media platforms have evolved into spaces of social interaction and searchability, ALT text has gained greater prominence for accessibility, as well as content discoverability. At the time of data collection, this practice had not yet been widely integrated into brand social media strategy.

4.2.6.1 Supplementary Quantitative Observations

While the primary nature of this study remains qualitative and focused on the multimodal and semiotic interpretation of objectification potential within fashion brand Instagram content, certain quantitative insights emerged that warrant inclusion. Though not statistically generalisable, these observations offer supporting evidence and nuance, especially in exploring the relationship between objectification and user engagement. Given their relevance, it would be reductive to exclude them entirely. Presented below are brand-specific summaries and a comparative analysis, drawn from post-level engagement data and corresponding objectification scores.

4.2.6.1.1 Adidas Supplementary Quantitative Observations

As seen from the analysis summary of the posts in Figure 4.4, Figure 4.4.7 received the highest objectification score ($n = 34$); however, it still has minor objectification elements compared to the other two brands. On the contrary, Figure 4.4.10 received the lowest objectification score ($n = 13$) as the emphasis is on performance and the soccer community values. Interesting, explicit objectification cues (e.g., *body-hugging attire in Figure 4.4.7*) did not guarantee high engagement due to context.

4.2.6.1.2 Diesel Supplementary Quantitative Observations

As seen from the analysis summary of the posts in Figure 4.7, the post with the highest objectification score is Figure 4.7.3 ($n = 86$) since it leverages sexuality and challenges gender norms but primarily objectifies the models. Visual strategies like revealing clothing and sexualised poses are the most relied-on forms of objectification. More explicit objectification cues (e.g., “scantily clad,” “objectification of women”) are used sparingly, possibly indicating a shift towards subtler methods or mixed messages (empowerment versus objectification). The post with the lowest objectification score was Figures 4.7.11 ($n = 0$) and 4.7.12 ($n = 0$) since it is product-focused with no human subject. The analysis also indicates that there is no statistically significant relationship between the level of objectification and the number of likes a post received.

4.2.6.1.3 Zara Supplementary Quantitative Observations

As seen from the summary of the analysis of the posts in Figure 4.10, the post with the highest objectification score (n = 80) is Figure 4.10.5, since it uses a revealing form-fitting dress on a posed model. Although this post has a high objectification score, it can be argued that it walks the line between empowerment and objectification. Figure 4.10.6 is another post with a high objectification score (n = 79). On the contrary, the post with the lowest objectification score (n = 34) was Figure 4.10.2 due to its casualness in an urban setting without emotional resonance due to the passive pose used, which is almost on par with the Adidas highest objectification score post. Although objectification measures are present in many Zara posts, they do not significantly influence user engagement (measured by likes). Posts with low objectification still receive high engagement, suggesting that contextual aesthetics, styling, and presentation may play a more critical role in audience response than objectification alone.

4.2.6.2 Comparative Analysis amongst the brands

Zara achieved the highest average engagement (n = 6553) with the lowest average objectification score (n = 9.2). On the other hand, Diesel had the lowest engagement (n = 2280) but the highest average objectification score (n = 13.8), suggesting that objectification does not guarantee higher engagement. Adidas rates in the middle with an average engagement of 5147.6 with an average objectification score of 11.1. However, it should be noted that Zara only has one global page and therefore can drive greater engagement; whereas Diesel and Adidas have pages tailored specifically to the South African audience resulting in naturally lower reach.

4.3 Takeouts, Lessons and Guidelines

4.3.1 Adidas Key Takeaways

Adidas successfully engages Gen Z by aligning its brand values with its cultural mindset. This brand avoids objectification and focuses on visual storytelling that feels grounded, relatable, and purpose driven. Adidas leans into themes of inclusivity, empowerment, and cultural relevance, making space for diverse identities and celebrating athletic achievement in authentic, non-sexualised ways.

4.3.1.1 Lessons Learned from Adidas

Adidas' Instagram strategy illustrates how purpose-led storytelling, authentic athlete representation, and visually cohesive narratives can engage Gen Z while balancing inspiration, inclusivity, and minimal objectification.

4.3.1.1.1 Purpose-Led Performance and Representation

Adidas positions sport as a unifying and empowering force. By spotlighting under-represented athletes, such as Gerda Steyn and the Orlando Pirates, and tying performance to social and cultural relevance, Adidas engages Gen Z through stories that go beyond winning by emphasising purpose, progress, and personal growth.

4.3.1.1.2 Low-Objectification, High-Authenticity Content

Adidas consciously avoids overly stylised, objectifying and perfected portrayals. Its content centres on athletic movement, teamwork, and authentic settings, framing the athlete as capable, empowered, and multidimensional.

4.3.1.1.3 The Influence of Visual Storytelling

Adidas uses visual storytelling that frames sport as a site of identity, expression, and community building. The brand communicates real values over vanity through strong, consistent aesthetics and narrative cohesion.

4.3.1.1.4 Authentic Aspiration

Showcasing aspirational imagery while maintaining an authentic and relatable tone allows brands, like Adidas, to connect with Gen Z on a deeper level, inspiring, motivating, and resonating.

4.3.1.2 Insights for Gen Z Engagement in Fashion Branding

The section below discusses insights for Gen Z engagement in fashion branding regarding inclusivity, cultural relevance, resilience, growth, authenticity, minimal objectification, high-quality visuals and the use of a variation of formats.

4.3.1.2.1 Embed Inclusivity

Centre communication around diverse athletes, body types, and backgrounds to authentically reflect Gen Z's world across race, gender, ability, and identity. Inclusion should be visible and intentional.

4.3.1.2.2 Harness Cultural Relevance

Align brand messaging and content sharing with significant cultural moments and events such as tactical days, national achievements, and include local heroes to foster a deeper connection with Gen Z's sense of community and identity.

4.3.1.2.3 Share Stories of Resilience and Growth

Emphasise athletic achievement and the journeys of influential people and share inspiring narratives that resonate with Gen Z's values of self-improvement, resilience, and ambition. Gen Z values narratives of personal struggle, growth, and perseverance over filtered perfection or empty success.

4.3.1.2.4 Embrace Authenticity and Endorse Minimal Objectification

Avoid overly stylised or objectifying imagery. Focus on showcasing authenticity, athleticism, individuality, and inclusivity in a respectful and relatable way.

4.3.1.2.5 High-Quality Visuals and Clear Messaging

Use high-quality photography and videography. Craft concise and engaging captions relevant to the brand story to effectively communicate the brand message and capture attention but maintain consistency with brand identity.

4.3.1.2.6 Vary Format Use

Try out several forms of content, such as reels, carousels, and user-generated content, to keep the audience interested and offer a dynamic content experience.

4.3.2 Diesel Key Takeaways

The findings from Diesel's 12 Instagram posts and the engagement they received offer valuable insights for fashion brand communicators navigating the intricacies of digital communication. The lessons are broken down into key lessons learnt from the brands' strategies and the broader insights for brands communicating with Gen Z.

4.3.2.1 Lessons Learned from Diesel

Diesel's Instagram strategy demonstrates how provocative aesthetics, semiotic precision, and multimodal storytelling can be combined with authentic empowerment to resonate with Gen Z audiences.

4.3.2.1.1 Authentic Empowerment

Diesel's approach suggests that although provocation may grab attention initially, it performs best when paired with clever multimodality, intriguing narratives, and authentic empowerment. Gen Z prefers brands that question convention but emphasise authenticity and upbeat messaging. This is demonstrated by the far greater engagement rates of campaigns that go beyond the simple shock value to communicate messages with originality and encourage rebellion through self-expression.

4.3.2.1.2 Semiotic Strategies

Diesel's use of visual elements, such as colour palettes and background settings, highlights the crucial role of semiotics in digital brand communication. These visual codes function as powerful signifiers that allow the construction of meaning and the reinforcement of brand identity. As such, brands should carefully consider the symbolic connotations of their visual choices to communicate their intended messages clearly and meaningfully.

4.3.2.1.3 The Power of Multimodality

Diesel's interplay between visuals, captions, and hashtags demonstrates the importance of multimodality in creating immersive and engaging brand experiences. Brands that leverage multimodal elements effectively can craft cohesive messages, enhance audience engagement, and strengthen brand identity.

4.3.2.1.4 Narratives to Drive Gen Z Engagement

Although product-focused content maintains brand visibility, narrative-driven posts resonate more deeply with Gen Z, as these types of post foster stronger emotional connections between brands and a Gen Z consumer base. Brands seeking to engage Gen Z should prioritise storytelling that aligns with their values and aspirations.

4.3.2.2 Insights for Gen Z Engagement in Fashion Branding

To engage Gen Z meaningfully, fashion brands must prioritise empowerment strategies, authentic, values-driven communication that goes beyond surface-level spectacle, weaving narratives that empower, resonate, and foster lasting connections.

4.3.2.2.1 Empowerment Strategies

Contemporary brands should step away from relying on superficial spectacles and cultivate authentic connections with their audience. In the case of Gen Z, this requires a nuanced understanding of the Generation's values and creating content that resonates with their lived experiences in a bid to foster genuine, lasting engagement.

4.3.2.2.2 Authentic Storytelling

Authentic storytelling aligns with Gen Z's values, and as such, it is crucial to achieving effective engagement. This means authentically incorporating themes of sustainability, inclusivity and self-expression (Francis & Hoefel, 2018) in a consistent, genuine manner and avoiding performative activism, as this can tarnish brand image.

4.3.2.2.3 Integration of Product and Narrative

A comprehensive and captivating brand experience involves finding the right balance between emotional-resonant narratives and product-focused content. This involves carefully weaving the features and details of the product seamlessly into meaningful stories to build awareness and establish emotional affinity.

4.3.2.2.4 Multimodality for Nuance and Complexity

Careful consideration of the interplay between visual and textual elements is essential to avoid contradiction and misinterpretation, ensuring consistent and effective communication. Brands should take advantage of the potential benefits of multimodality to create authentic layered messages that resonate with their target audience.

4.3.3 Zara Key Takeaways

The exploration of Zara's Instagram posts has revealed key insights into effectively engaging with Gen Z as a digital brand communicator. Exploring the relationship of textual and visual elements, the

degree of objectification, and the variety of content can teach several crucial lessons. The findings have implications for brand communicators who seek to connect with Gen Z in the digital space.

4.3.3.1 Lessons Learned from Zara

Zara's Instagram strategy highlights the delicate balance between aspirational aesthetics, subtle sensuality, and the need for inclusive, authentic representation to engage Gen Z effectively.

4.3.3.1.1 Aspiration at the Expense of Accessibility

Zara skilfully seeks to strike a balance between a relatable tone and aesthetic, aspirational imagery. This has been achieved through models using natural poses and relaxed expressions to present the clothing in relatable, everyday contexts and create a sense of attainable aspiration. Unfortunately, the use of exclusively white, thin, female models and overt stereotypification undermines this relatability, especially in a South African context, where Gen Z consumers expect greater representation. From a semiotic perspective, the repeated use of these models becomes a signifier for Zara's 'ideal consumer', reinforcing a narrow and exclusionary brand ideal. This dissonance between aspirational styling and limited representation risks alienating South African Gen Z, a digitally savvy and socially conscious audience.

4.3.3.1.2 Subtle Sensuality Outperforms Overt Objectification

Moderate objectification, achieved through subtle hints of sensuality seen in pose, style, or clothing choices, outperforms overtly sexualised content. This suggests that Gen Z can be captivated by subtle allure when combined with a focus on styling that places a prime focus on clothing. Conversely, overt objectification may be perceived as exploitative or inauthentic. This insight speaks to the broader tension between ethical brand positioning and algorithmic imperatives for attention. As Adams and Qureshi (2020) shared, platforms often reward provocative content. However, Zara's success with more subtle sensuality suggests that Gen Z audiences may value empowerment and authenticity over sexualisation, especially when styling remains central.

4.3.3.1.3 Visual Storytelling Benefits Brand Perception

In the case of Zara's digital branding, visuals are carefully curated and paired with concise, neutral captions, forming a clear multimodal strategy. This synergy between visual and textual elements reinforces brand storytelling, allowing Zara to construct an aspirational lifestyle while giving viewers space for personal interpretation. This aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of multimodality, where meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple modes rather than in isolation. These elements work together to create a cohesive brand story that positions the brand as an authority on lifestyle. The consistent application of particular visual elements, such as neutral colour palettes and clean compositions, is combined with short, simple, and straightforward captions, such as "The Total Look Edit," creating a familiar and desirable brand environment.

4.3.3.1.4 Content Diversity Drives Engagement

Maintaining audience engagement and avoiding visual fatigue involves a variety of content types and imagery. While Zara diversifies content format, ranging from close-up product shots to lifestyle imagery, this diversity does not necessarily translate to inclusivity in representation. Repetition of similar body types and cultural aesthetics across varied formats may reinforce narrow ideals, highlighting the need for diversity in content style and the identities and narratives portrayed.

4.3.3.1.5 Ethical Representation as a Strategic Imperative

Zara's content strategy highlights a broader challenge facing fashion brands today: balancing aspirational aesthetics with ethical and inclusive representation. Although the brand's visual consistency and subtle sensuality resonate with Gen Z values, its lack of diverse representation risks alienating parts of its audience. Future digital communication strategies must go beyond visual attraction to consider the symbolic impact of who is shown, how and why.

4.3.3.2 Insights for Gen Z Engagement in Fashion Branding

To resonate with Generation Z, fashion brands must balance aspirational aesthetics with relatability, craft subtle yet empowering visual narratives, and ensure diverse, authentic representation that builds trust and sustains engagement.

4.3.3.2.1 Aspiration and Relatability, a Balance

Gen Z responds to content that feels both aspirational and relatable. Zara's aesthetic, built on clean compositions and understated luxury, works well when combined with naturalistic poses and relaxed expressions. However, true relatability is undermined by the brand's repeated use of white, thin, female models. In the South African context, this signals exclusivity rather than inclusion. To foster deeper engagement, brand communicators must interrogate their visual signifiers (Barthes, 1972) and ensure that aspirational narratives do not come at the cost of representational inclusivity.

4.3.3.2.2 Subtle Sensuality Over Overt Objectification

Zara demonstrates that subtle sensuality can maintain visual interest without resorting to overt sexualisation. Strategic pose, styling, and framing can create allure while keeping the focus on clothing, rather than the body as an object. This reflects Gen Z's nuanced view of empowerment, where confidence and individuality are valued over exploitation. Such semiotic choices suggest that less explicit depictions can have greater cultural and commercial resonance, especially when paired with multimodal storytelling that respects viewer interpretation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

4.3.3.2.3 Enhancing Brand Perception through Visual Storytelling

Gen Z expects more than product placement and seeks immersive visual narratives. Zara achieves this by combining high-quality imagery with minimalist yet thematic captions ("The Total Look Edit"), creating an impression of editorial authority. This is an effective multimodal strategy in which meaning is constructed through the interplay of image, text, tone, and context. Brand

communicators must curate consistent visual styles while using captions to establish mood, context, and intent, aligning with the visual grammar that shapes Gen Z's media literacy.

4.3.3.2.4 Diverse Content Encourages Engagement

Visual variety sustains attention but must extend beyond format to include diversity in representation. Zara's success in mixing studio shots, lifestyle imagery, and occasional UGC shows that multiple content types can co-exist cohesively. However, aesthetic diversity should be matched by demographic diversity. Content creators should experiment with formats (images, reels, stories) and explore who is represented and how. Monitoring engagement data across these variables can reveal what resonates visually and ethically with Gen Z.

4.3.3.2.5 Inclusive Representation Builds Trust

Ethical fashion communication is not just a moral imperative; it is a strategic one. In a globalised, yet localised social media landscape, audiences are attuned to who is visible and who is not. Brands that do not reflect the diversity of their markets risk alienating their audience. Gen Z, in particular, is vocal about performative inclusion and expects authentic and sustained diversity. Representation must transcend tokenism to be integrated into every layer of visual and verbal brand storytelling.

4.3.4 Nike Key Takeaways

Nike's strategic approach to engaging Gen Z offers a compelling case study for brand communicators aiming to connect with this demographic online. Although it was a late addition to the study, the analysis of Nike's top performing posts reveals powerful tactics rooted in authenticity, empowerment, and emotionally resonant storytelling. These lessons offer valuable guidance for brands looking to build sustainable relationships with Gen Z consumers in the fashion space.

4.3.4.1 Lessons Learned from Nike

Nike's Instagram strategy offers key insights into how purpose-driven storytelling, authentic representation, and interest-based community building can effectively engage Gen Z while reinforcing brand identity and values.

4.3.4.1.1 Emulating "Just Do It"

Nike's enduring Just Do It campaign reflects a strategic commitment to inspiring excellence and athletic determination. Across the analysed posts, the brand consistently celebrated real athletes, underscoring themes of perseverance, hard work, and personal triumph. This is very similar to the strategy seen on the Adidas page (See Figures: 4.4.3, 4.4.4, 4.4.7, 4.4.9, 4.4.10, 4.4.11, 4.4.12, 4.13.1, 4.13.2). This authentic motivational positioning resonates with Gen Z's value of purpose-led storytelling and reinforces Nike's identity as a brand that champions achievement without resorting to objectification.

4.3.4.1.2 Authentic Representation

Nike's approach to athlete representation has evolved significantly, exhibiting a growing awareness of social expectations. Nike's approach consistently avoids objectification and prioritises authentic portrayals and narratives. By showcasing athletes as multifaceted human beings, Nike aligns with Gen Z's values of inclusivity and respect. Again, this is akin to the strategy seen on the Adidas page (See Figures: 4.4.3, 4.4.4, 4.4.7, 4.4.9, 4.4.10, 4.4.11, 4.4.12, 4.13.1, 4.13.2). This tactic can establish trust and reinforce Nike's commitment to promoting athletes in a way that connects with the changing social consciousness of its evolving and maturing target audience.

4.3.4.1.3 Mastery of Emotional Connection

Nike's messaging is identifiable through their visually captivating storylines that provoke tremendous emotions. Nike's expertise in visual storytelling highlights the importance of high-quality imagery and emotionally significant narratives, as these tactics can establish significant relationships with a Gen Z audience. By displaying the raw emotions and passion involved in athletic achievement, Nike surpasses traditional advertising, creating powerful stories that resonate on an emotional level. This purposeful use of imagery is foundational to Nike's success in engaging with Gen Z. Again, this is coherent and aligned with the strategy of Adidas South Africa (See Figures: 4.4.3, 4.4.4, 4.4.7, 4.4.9, 4.4.10, 4.4.11, 4.4.12, 4.13.1, 4.13.2).

4.3.4.1.4 Product Innovation and Interest-Led Community Building

Nike's communication strategy shares product display in a distinctive way that speaks to the values and online behaviours of Gen Z. Nike consistently highlights technological advancements and performance benefits, positioning its apparel as cutting-edge and functional. This product-centric focus resonates with Gen Z's appreciation for innovation, particularly when it enhances lifestyle or performance. What sets Nike apart, however, is its unique structuring of content on Instagram by interest rather than geography. Instead of operating global and localised accounts (like Adidas and Diesel) or a singular global page (like Zara), Nike segments its presence into specialised pages such as @nike, @nikefootball, @nikerunning, @nikebasketball, and @nikesb. Each of these microcommunities enables deeper and more targeted storytelling that aligns with Gen Z's preference for personalised and passion-driven content. This approach successfully showcases the versatility and innovation of Nike's range. It builds relevance by meeting Gen Z in the space of their specific interests, allowing the cultivation of brand affinity by creating a feeling of belonging and shared identity.

4.3.4.2 Insights for Gen Z Engagement in Fashion Branding

To connect meaningfully with Generation Z on Instagram, fashion brands must prioritise authenticity, inclusivity, emotional resonance, and opportunities for co-creation, translating their values into visually compelling and purpose-driven communication.

4.3.4.2.1 Authenticity and Meaningful Connections

Brand communicators should prioritise stories that feel lived in and honest, focussing on real journeys, personal growth, and the virtues of hard work, devotion, and perseverance. Authentic storytelling, favouring relatability over curated perfection, resonates with Gen Z's desire for genuine connection, especially when shared through platform-native formats like reels, behind-the-scenes content, or influencer/user collaborations.

4.3.4.2.2 Reject Objectification and Embrace Inclusive Representation

Brand communicators should reject overt sexualisation in favour of empowering and respectful portrayals. Gen Z is quick to detect and reject inauthentic or exploitative imagery. Thoughtful scroll-stopping sensuality can exist without exploitation; however, this must be approached with care and purpose. Moreover, inclusive representation must go beyond tokenism. It should be intentional, consistent, and expansive while also reflecting diversity in race, body type, gender expression, disability, and lived experience. This is an ethical obligation and a strategic necessity. Gen Z expects that the brands they support mirror their values of fairness, individuality, and visibility. Building a recognisable, relatable identity hinges on amplifying a broad spectrum of voices and visuals.

4.3.4.2.3 Embrace Visual Storytelling that Sparks Emotion

Invest in dynamic, high-quality visuals that look good and share a meaningful message. Gen Z responds to emotionally evocative narratives, primarily through multimodal, Instagram-native formats like carousels, fast-cut videos, and stylised typographic overlays. Visual storytelling must go beyond aesthetics and should build a sense of connection, progression, and build the brand's world for the consumer.

4.3.4.2.4 Showcase Innovation Through Lifestyle Integration

Gen Z is drawn to products that reflect purpose and self-expression. Highlight items' design, performance, and innovation by showing how products can add to users' lives by solving problems, enhancing identity, or enabling self-performance. Visualise lived utility for athletes or creative consumers and clearly communicate the role of the product in helping users express who they are or aspire to be (as seen in Nike and Adidas's Instagram strategies).

4.3.4.2.5 Reflect Gen Z Values Through Actionable Content

Brand messaging should transcend slogans and reflect inclusivity, empowerment, and authenticity through tangible actions and deliberate storytelling decisions. Celebrate diverse talent, honour community voices, support real causes, and highlight ethical production and sustainability efforts. Content should go beyond promotion and demonstrate the brand's values in action.

4.3.4.2.6 Foster Micro-Communities and Co-Creation

Gen Z doesn't just follow a brand for the sake of it; they want to collaborate, create, and belong. Seek to build micro-communities through interest-based Instagram accounts, creator takeovers, comment

engagement, and UGC spotlights. Empower your audience to shape the narrative with you. Brands that enable contribution over passive consumption create relevance, retention, and resonance.

4.4 Conclusion

This exploration of Instagram strategies of Diesel, Zara, Adidas, and Nike highlight the varied and dynamic ways in which fashion brands engage with Gen Z. Each brand demonstrates a nuanced understanding of visual language, employing distinct semiotic strategies to construct identity and foster audience engagement. This underscores the critical role of imagery, symbolism, and narrative in shaping brand perception within digital spaces.

Diesel navigates a 'provocation paradox', balancing its rebellious ethos with Gen Z's preference for authenticity and empowerment. While its provocative visuals command attention, Diesel's distinctiveness lies in its ability to subvert social norms through wit, irony, and narratives of self-expression. Zara, by contrast, cultivates an aesthetic of 'accessible aspiration', merging contemporary trends with refined elegance to create an appeal that feels desirable and attainable. This is achieved through everyday styling, naturalistic poses, and lifestyle-based imagery that positions fashion as wearable and relatable. However, this accessibility is complicated by the brand's continued reliance on thin, white female models, which subtly reinforces exclusion under the guise of inclusivity. The tension between aspirational styling and limited representation highlights the importance of aligning visual strategies with authentic, inclusive values, especially within the diverse South African context.

Adidas prioritises community-building and athletic achievement, leveraging influencer collaborations and user-generated content to create a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Nike similarly emphasises themes of athletic performance and empowerment, inspiring Gen Z through narratives of perseverance, innovation, and social responsibility. Both brands employ strategic storytelling to cultivate an emotional connection, reinforcing their cultural relevance among younger audiences.

Ultimately, the success of all four brands lies in their ability to interpret and adapt to the evolving values of Gen Z. Whether through the language of rebellion and self-expression, aspirational but accessible styling, or community-driven empowerment, each brand demonstrates a commitment to authenticity and meaningful engagement. These findings reinforce the importance of strategic semiotic choices, immersive storytelling, and a deep understanding of audience values in contemporary fashion brand communication. Brands who successfully navigate these complexities will be best positioned to foster lasting relationships with Gen Z and maintain relevance in an increasingly competitive digital landscape.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"Fashion is a reflection of our times. Fashion can tell you everything that's going on in the world."

Anna Wintour, Editor-in-Chief of Vogue

5.1 Introduction

Following the ninth level of the Higher Education Qualification Framework, this dissertation's final chapter addresses the research questions by combining uncovered insights, contributions made to the field of contemporary fashion brand communication, a critical analysis of the study, suggestions for additional research in this space, and a final reflection on the research process and related skill set acquired.

5.2 Conclusions Drawn from the Research

This section discusses the primary and secondary research questions. The secondary research questions in the following sections support the answer to this question and enabled the researcher to answer to the primary questions of how fashion brand communication targets Gen Z on Instagram. The sections to follow aim to summarise the final conclusions drawn to answer each question. The secondary research questions in the following sections support the answer to the main question.

5.2.1 Secondary Research Question 1: What is the current fashion brand landscape?

This research question was guided by the first objective of reviewing existing literature to gauge the current landscape of fashion brand communication (*as set out in objective 1.4.3.1*) which forms the non-empirical section of this study (*see Chapter 2*). This review of the literature has explored existing research on visual and digital brand communication with Gen Z, using a semiotic approach to guide visual exploration and thematic analysis of Instagram content. The insights and lessons learnt in Chapter 2 informed the development of a research framework tool that was used to supplement the deeper exploration of digital visual codes when communicating with South African Gen Z on Instagram.

By exploring the theoretical foundations of fashion brand communication and semiotics, the literature review established a foundation for analysing the visual language employed by brands on

Instagram. The frameworks identified, being Barthes' mythologies and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, have become instrumental in deconstructing the most engaging content and its underlying messages. The literature underscored the increasing importance of ethical and responsible fashion communication, particularly in response to Gen Z's demand for authenticity and inclusivity. While Instagram provides brands with powerful engagement tools such as influencer marketing, short-form video content, and interactive storytelling, these exact mechanisms can also contribute to hypersexualisation, unrealistic beauty standards, and negative self-perception (see 2.5.5.1.2 *The Effect of Contemporary Visual Content on Gen Z*). The interplay between provocative imagery and empowering aesthetics remains a central challenge in fashion brand communication, reinforcing the need for more conscious visual strategies.

Adopting a nuanced, semiotically informed approach becomes essential as fashion brands leverage Instagram to connect with Gen Z. By critically assessing objectification risks and prioritising more empowering representations, brands can cultivate deeper, more meaningful connections with their audience while minimising harm. This review provided a framework for understanding the complexities of fashion brand communication on Instagram, setting the stage for further analysis of how brands can ethically and effectively engage with Gen Z consumers in support of secondary research question 2 (*as set out in research question 1.4.2.2*).

Furthermore, the review also informed the development of research-driven guidelines for fashion brand communicators by offering a foundation for crafting content that resonates with Gen Z while aligning with their values to support the third secondary research question (*as defined in research question 1.4.2.3*). These guidelines will serve as a critical step toward fostering a more ethical and positive digital fashion communication landscape that empowers and engages Gen Z in meaningful and sustainable ways.

The current fashion brand landscape is defined by the strategic use of visual communication on social media platforms, most notably Instagram, to foster connection, establish trust, and resonate with the values of Gen Z (see 2.2.2.3). This demographic expects brands to reflect authenticity, self-expression, and ethical responsibility, prompting fashion brands to reevaluate traditional marketing approaches (see 2.5.3). While objectified and stereotyped imagery is still widely used to cut through the digital clutter and maximise engagement, socially conscious consumers are increasingly scrutinising these strategies (see 2.5.5.1.2 *The Effect of Contemporary Visual Content on Gen Z*). The literature review highlighted the fashion industry's contribution to environmental harm and its role in perpetuating narrow ideals, which have only fuelled a growing movement toward more ethical, sustainable, and inclusive branding (see 2.5.5.1.2 *The Effect of Contemporary Visual Content on Gen Z*).

Within this shifting context, fashion brands rely heavily on influencers, particularly those aligned with Gen Z ideals of individuality and social validation, to shape brand narratives and deepen emotional connections (see 2.5.4.1 *Influencers and Brand Trust*). Content strategies are also evolving, with short-form video formats such as Reels on Instagram which outperform static posts in capturing attention and driving purchase intentions. Furthermore, user-generated content and aesthetically curated posts have remained relevant, especially with interactive tools that encourage participation

and online engagement (see 2.5.4.2 *Content Formats and Engagement Strategies*). However, Instagram's algorithmic structures, which reward high engagement, pressure brands to adopt hyper-stylised or provocative imagery, potentially compromising brand authenticity and user wellbeing (see 2.5.5.1.2 *The Effect of Contemporary Visual Content on Gen Z*). Tactics such as memetic branding and immersive storytelling have emerged to invite consumer interaction through humour and encourage co-creation of brand meaning and identity, further emphasising the participatory nature of Gen Z engagement (see 2.5.4.2 *Content Formats and Engagement Strategies*).

Ultimately, this landscape is shaped by the tension between visibility and values. While brands strive to remain relevant and visible in a competitive digital environment, brand communicators must also address the ethical demands of their audience (see 2.5.5.1.2 *The Effect of Contemporary Visual Content on Gen Z*). The result is a complex branding environment that is visual but also ideological, performative, and increasingly shaped by cultural and technological forces (see 2.5.2).

5.2.2 Secondary Research Question 2: How does fashion brand communication visually target Generation Z on Instagram?

This research question was guided by the second objective for a visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Gen Z (*as set out in objective 1.4.3.2*) and formed the empirical exploration of this study (see *Chapters 3 and 4*). Fashion brand communication targeting Gen Z on Instagram harnesses a considered combination of visual codes, aesthetic strategies, and cultural cues that seek to resonate with the values, identity, and digital fluency of Gen Z (see 2.5.5.1.2 *The Effect of Contemporary Visual Content on Gen Z*). This exploration of four brands, Adidas, Diesel, Zara and Nike, revealed varied but intentional approaches to creating visual messages to engage with this cohort.

Adidas communicates through a visually empowering lens, emphasising individuality, movement, and subcultural relevance. The brand consistently features diverse representations of race, gender, and body type, using urban settings, athletic poses, and natural expressions. As a result, the brand's choices reflect a South African audience and demographic. The visuals avoid overt objectification and instead highlight authenticity, purpose, and inclusivity, aligning closely with the values of Gen Z and the cohort's expectations from their favourite brands (see *section 4.2.3*). Diesel takes a more disruptive and provocative route, frequently using sexually suggestive imagery, exposed skin, and editorial-style compositions. Objectification in Diesel's brand communication on Instagram is high; however, this is layered with self-aware humour, bold colour palettes, and themes of self-love and rebellion. Diesel's confrontational, rebellious aesthetic and brand image can push boundaries, but it is done in a way that appeals to Gen Z's appetite for non-conformity, radical self-expression, and openness around sexuality, particularly when framed through the lens of empowerment and body positivity.

Zara, by contrast, presents a narrower visual narrative; see *section 4.2.4*. The brand's content tends to favour a uniform casting of thin white female models, with minimal diversity in race or body type. This lack of inclusivity is in stark contrast to the other brands explored. This could potentially limit

Zara's resonance with South African Gen Z, an audience searching for authentic and varied representations. The brand's aesthetic is minimalist and fashion-forward, often framed in static posed compositions with muted backgrounds. While visually polished, its content is less culturally or ethically engaging and more aligned with traditional high-fashion editorial norms.

Although analysed later with a smaller sample of posts in section 4.2.5, Nike strongly reinforces empowerment, diversity, and dynamic movement in its visual strategy. The posts prominently feature athletes and athletic bodies, inclusive casting, and bold brand storytelling. The visuals are rooted in performance and purpose, which aligns closely with Gen Z's values around representation, strength, and social impact.

Across the brands explored, except for Zara in terms of diversity, the key visual strategies used to engage Gen Z include:

- Inclusive representation in terms of race, gender identity, and body types.
- Empowering portrayals that emphasise movement, individuality, and authenticity.
- Cultural relevance to a South African Gen Z audience, either through subcultural cues (Adidas), bold statements (Diesel), or purpose-led storytelling (Nike/Adidas).
- Intentional composition, whether it is loud and provocative or clean and minimal, is used to construct a recognisable and resonant brand identity.
- Use of gaze, colour, and framing to reinforce or subvert dominant ideologies, often in ways that invite Gen Z to see themselves in the brand, encouraging engagement and participation (see 2.5.3).

Ultimately, brands targeting Gen Z on Instagram do so through visual strategies and how these visuals are framed, particularly regarding audience representation, and whether visual and verbal messaging aligns with Gen Z's deep desire for authenticity, ethical awareness, and empowered self-expression (see 2.5.3, as well as in 4.3).

5.2.3 Secondary Research Question 3: How can fashion brand leaders create content that speaks best to this audience?

This research question was guided by the third objective; to derive a set of guidelines to assist/guide fashion brand leaders in creating Instagram content that speaks to Gen Z (*as set out in objective 1.4.3.3*). This is essentially the study's contribution to the field of knowledge. To communicate best with Gen Z on Instagram, fashion brand leaders must embrace a strategy rooted in authenticity, ethical representation, and cultural alignment. Drawing from the visual analysis of Adidas, Diesel, Zara, and Nike, six key guidelines have emerged to inform content development that will resonate with this audience. These were unpacked in section 4.3.4.2.

1. **Authenticity and Meaningful Connections:** Brand communicators should prioritise harnessing authentic narratives, focussing brand storytelling on real journeys, personal growth, and the virtues of hard work, devotion, and perseverance. Authentic narratives

resonate with Gen Z's desire for genuine connection, pushing beyond superficial, surface-level marketing messages.

2. **Reject Objectification and Embrace Inclusive Representation:** Brand communicators should emphasise appropriate and authentic representations of humans, athletes, and personalities over overtly sexualised imagery. They should also ensure that representation is inclusive and reflects the diversity of the audience to establish sustainable credibility and trust.
3. **Embrace Visual Storytelling that Sparks Emotion:** Invest in high-quality dynamic visuals that look good and share a meaningful message. Gen Z responds to emotionally evocative narratives, primarily through multimodal, native Instagram formats such as carousels, fast-cut videos, and stylised typographic overlays. Visual storytelling must go beyond aesthetics, build a sense of connection and progression, and build the brand's world for the consumer.
4. **Showcase Innovation Through Lifestyle Integration:** Gen Z is drawn to products that reflect purpose and self-expression. Highlight items' design, performance, and innovation by showing how products can add to users' lives by solving problems, enhancing identity, or enabling self-performance. Visualise the lived utility for athletes or creative consumers and communicate the role of the product in helping users express who they are or aspire to be. (Seen in Nike and Adidas's Instagram strategies.)
5. **Reflect Gen Z Values Through Actionable Content:** Brand messaging should go beyond slogans and reflect inclusivity, empowerment, and authenticity through tangible actions and deliberate storytelling decisions. It should celebrate diverse talent, honour community voices, support real causes, and spotlight ethical production and sustainability efforts. Content must go beyond promotion and demonstrate the brand's values in action.
6. **Foster Micro-Communities and Co-Creation:** Gen Z does not just follow a brand for the sake of it; they want to collaborate, create, and belong. Seek to build microcommunities through interest-based Instagram accounts, creator takeovers, comment engagement, and UGC spotlights. Empower your audience to shape the narrative with you. Brands that enable contribution over passive consumption create relevance, retention, and resonance.

To truly connect with Gen Z, fashion brand communication must be strategically ethical, visually engaging, and deeply human. Brands internalising these principles are more likely to foster visibility, drive engagement, and secure meaningful cultural relevance within an increasingly saturated digital fashion landscape (see 4.3).

5.2.4 The primary research question: How does fashion brand communication target Generation Z on Instagram?

Now that all the secondary research questions were unpacked in the sections above, the conclusions of each can be drawn together to answer the primary research question of this study. Effective fashion brand communication on Instagram targets Gen Z through a combination of visual strategies that harness authenticity, inclusivity, emotional connection, and lifestyle alignment. This multimodal and semiotic analysis of Instagram content from Adidas, Diesel, Nike, and Zara uncovers that successful engagement with Gen Z hinges on more than just visual appeal, but also on the way

values, identity, and relevance to the audience are communicated through imagery, tone, and representation.

Adidas and Nike demonstrate a value-led, athlete-focused approach, using visual storytelling to highlight performance, perseverance, and personal triumph. The content shared reflects the deep desire of Gen Z for authenticity, and the use of diverse, empowered athletic individuals contributes to a sense of relatability and aspiration. The tone of this content is motivational, with posts that showcase movement, confidence and ambition that align with the values of Gen Z through purpose-driven branding.

Diesel, by contrast, leverages a rebellious, highly stylised aesthetic that plays into Gen Z's desire for self-expression, rebellion, humour, and disruption of norms. Diesel's provocative visuals, saturated palettes, and playful compositions speak of identity as a performance, pushing boundaries in a way that appeals to a more experimental, risk-taking and culturally aware audience segment.

However, Zara adopts a minimalist and editorial approach that, while aligned with traditional editorial fashion photography, lacks the inclusive representation sought by this generation. Zara's overreliance on thin white models and muted emotion in its imagery results in a more distant and less emotionally engaging tone. Although Zara's aesthetic may appeal to some Gen Z subgroups, it falls short in reflecting the broader generational emphasis on diversity, voice, and visibility, especially in South Africa.

Across all brands, visual communication is a powerful tool for targeting Gen Z; however, this must go beyond aesthetics. Gen Z seeks content that feels real, inclusive, and meaningful and will engage with brands that reflect their values and lived experiences. This generation is highly selective and visually and digitally literate. As such, Gen Z gravitates toward content that feels intentional, ethical, and aligned with their stories and perspectives on the world.

As such, fashion brands target Gen Z on Instagram by:

1. Telling authentic stories that reflect realistic journeys and shared values.
2. Minimising objectification and promote empowering representations of all people.
3. Investing in high-impact visual storytelling that can capture attention and deepen engagement.
4. Demonstrating functionality and innovation, particularly for performance-driven apparel.
5. Aligning with Gen Z's values, speaking of inclusivity, social awareness, and individual expression where possible.

These visual strategies are not isolated design recommendations but cultural signs that will inevitably shape how Gen Z perceives, connects with, and ultimately supports fashion brands in the current climate (see 2.5, 4.2 and 4.3).

This study found that effective fashion brand communication on Instagram targets Gen Z through authentic storytelling, emotional visual narratives, and alignment with Gen Z's values of inclusivity, individuality, and empowerment. In comparison, brands such as Adidas, Diesel, and Nike embraced

diverse representation and minimised objectification through athleticism and humour. Zara fell short by only representing a narrow and quite exclusionary ideal. Across the brands, visual elements such as colour palettes, gaze, composition and multimodality were strategically used to evoke mood, convey identity, and position products in aspirational lifestyles and contexts. The findings reveal that Gen Z responds best to content that is visually engaging, socially conscious, and grounded in purpose, rather than overt sexuality or trend chasing. These insights have shaped a set of guidelines for fashion brand leaders, underscoring the importance of authentic representation, meaningful connections, and value-driven content in content creation. Ultimately, effective Instagram communication for Gen Z lies in ethical storytelling that reflects who they are, what they care about, and how they want to be perceived (*as discussed as Potential Contributions in 1.11 and 1.12 Value of the Research*).

5.3 Implications

5.3.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the growing body of visual communication and branding literature by applying a multimodal semiotic framework to the analysis of fashion brand content targeting Gen Z. By combining Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar and an understanding of Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1998) the research offers a structured method to evaluate the potential for objectification and the communicative intent of brand Instagram posts. This hybrid approach bridges the gap between critical visual analysis and contemporary digital branding, highlighting how digital spaces construct and consume meaning. As such, the findings reinforce the need for ethical considerations in visual branding, particularly when addressing identity politics, power dynamics, and the shifting expectations of younger audiences in post-digital environments.

5.3.2 Practical/Managerial Implications

Practically, this study potentially equips brand leaders, strategists and content creators with actionable insights into how to engage South African Gen Z audiences more effectively and ethically on Instagram. By exploring leading brands Adidas, Diesel, Zara, and Nike, it becomes clear that content that prioritises inclusivity, authenticity, and low objectification resonates most with this audience. The guidelines offer a roadmap for brands and brand communicators to refine their creative strategies, ensuring alignment with Gen Z values such as diversity, empowerment, and meaningful connection. In a cluttered digital world, the study demonstrates that sustained engagement requires more than just aesthetic appeal; it demands purpose-driven, socially aware storytelling that authentically reflects the identity and aspirations of a conscious youth market.

5.4 Future Recommendations

This study provides valuable insights into how fashion brand communication targets Gen Z on Instagram; however, there are several opportunities for future research to build on its strengths and

address its limitations. These recommendations will guide future scholars and practitioners in refining methodological approaches and theoretical engagement.

- **Broadened Sampling and Content Diversity:** Future studies should consider expanding the sampling strategy to include various types and platforms of content beyond the highest-engagement posts. Incorporating different platforms like TikTok or less performing content could offer a different view of brand communication strategies. This broader approach could allow for a deeper exploration into how different platforms and content types contribute to engagement and perception among Gen Z audiences.
- **Deeper Platform and Engagement Analysis:** Given Instagram's algorithmic influence on content visibility, relying solely on likes and comments as engagement metrics can obscure deeper user perceptions. Future research should incorporate more nuanced forms of audience insight, such as shares, sentiment analysis, comment trends, or direct Instagram insights. This could provide a more layered understanding of how and why Gen Z responds to content beyond surface-level interactions.
- **SA Brands Focus:** Future research could also explore South African fashion brands that hold strong appeal for local Gen Z audiences, such as The Fix, Sportscene, Archive, or local designer-led labels. Exploring these brands would provide a comparative perspective on how global and local identities shape visual communication strategies within the South African market. This would deepen understanding of how locally embedded cultural cues, socio-political contexts, and hybrid aesthetic trends influence Gen Z engagement, particularly if future studies integrate a more explicit focus on South African Gen Z identity.
- **Expanded Theoretical Engagement with Visual Culture:** The study draws on Barthes (1972) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) for its analytical lens, yet there remains scope to incorporate additional theorists, such as Baudrillard (1994) or Hall (1997), who address broader themes of hyperreality, representation, and identity. Future studies could benefit from a deeper engagement with these different frameworks, particularly when exploring brand mythologies, digital culture, or the construction of authenticity.
- **Consideration of Gen Z's Shifting Cultural Context:** As a generation shaped by rapid socio-political, cultural, and technological change, Gen Z's preferences are far from static. Future research could consider longitudinal methods that track changes in brand strategies over time or in response to major global events. This would ensure findings remain responsive to the fluid nature of the formation of Gen Z's identity, cultural affiliations, and digital behaviours.

This study potentially forms a foundation for understanding how visual communication and Instagram branding intersect with the Gen Z identity. Future researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive, contextually sensitive, and ethically grounded understanding of contemporary fashion branding by continuing to evolve methodological frameworks, expanding theoretical engagement, and considering Gen Z's changes over time.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

While this study offers meaningful insights into how fashion brands communicate with Gen Z on Instagram, several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualise the findings. First, as a qualitative visual exploration conducted by a single researcher, the interpretation of Instagram content is inevitably shaped by subjective judgement. Despite the use of established analytical frameworks and a clear audit trail, personal biases, however consciously mitigated, may have influenced the analysis. This is a recognised limitation of interpretive research, where meaning is constructed through the analyst's lens.

Secondly, the study focused exclusively on four fashion brands, Adidas, Diesel, Zara and Nike, selected through a purposive sampling for their affordability, visibility, contrasting styles and resonance with South African Gen Z audiences. While this targeted selection allowed for deep engagement with brand-specific visual strategies, it also restricts the breadth of representation. The insights can therefore not be assumed to reflect the entire fashion sector or be generalised across all brands, markets, or platforms.

Third, this study analysed a curated selection of high-engagement posts published on Instagram between August 2023 and August 2024. This approach ensured relevance to the target demographic and captured moments of strong audience interaction. However, it may have excluded more experimental or niche content that offers alternative communicative value. Additionally, the platform-specific focus means that broader cross-channel dynamics, such as those on TikTok, X, or YouTube, fall outside the scope of this research.

Finally, audience reception and interpretation were not directly measured. The study explored how brands visually construct messages for Gen Z. Still, it did not include empirical audience feedback or behavioural data to validate how this content is received, understood, or acted upon. As such, the findings speak to representational strategies rather than audience impact or effectiveness. Despite these limitations, this study contributes a focused and semiotically grounded exploration of fashion brand communication, offering valuable starting points for academic inquiry and practical strategy development aimed at Gen Z (see 3.5).

5.6 Chapter Summary: The Researcher's Reflection

This research journey has been one of academic and personal growth. When I started writing, I was driven by a sense of disconnect felt from fashion brand communication on Instagram that did not reflect who I was as a fashion-mad Gen Z consumer. This feeling became the foundation for exploring how brands choose to communicate, what messages they curate, and how brand communicators can be more effective and responsible when engaging with South African Gen Z online.

Typically, what I expected to be a straightforward walk in the park turned out to be anything but that. The research process was full of unexpected twists that deepened my understanding of my subject and myself. One of the most challenging moments came during my data analysis, when my father's health declined and my life seemed to slam on the brakes. Balancing academic and professional

demands with emotional stress was incredibly difficult. During long nights of coding and analysis, the background comfort of old Disney movies kept me grounded. In that time, this research became more than I had ever anticipated; it became my quiet form of strength.

As this study evolved, so did my understanding of what matters in brand communication. Although objectification was my initial concern, a deep desire for authenticity, emotional connection, and community began to emerge in the findings. What began as a personal frustration grew into a set of six actionable guidelines that reflect the values of Gen Z. This paper has helped me navigate a dynamic digital world, making sense of the communication strategies that shape our culture, which led to a deep and unwavering understanding of the importance of empathy, relevance, and responsibility in modern brand leadership. I finish this journey proud of this body of work, as it reflects the contemporary challenges faced by brands in engaging Gen Z, but also offers brand communicators a meaningful and grounded set of solutions. Beyond this body of work, this research is a call for more intentional, authentic, and human-centred brand communication with a generation crying out for it.

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APPENDIX A

ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER

"We have to be responsible for our products from the very beginning."

Eileen Fisher, American fashion designer and entrepreneur



Our Ref: M. 631124
Enquiries: research@iie.ac.za

08 November 2024

Outcome of Ethical Clearance Application for Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership.

Student name: Stephanie Brickman
Student number: ST10046750
Brand and campus: IIEVega

Dear Stephanie,

Thank you for submitting the ethical clearance application for the study: *A Visual Exploration of Fashion Brand Communication on Instagram Aimed at Generation Z.*

We are pleased to inform you that your ethical clearance application has been approved. This means that you may proceed with data collection.

You are reminded to inform the IIE's Higher Degrees Committee of any changes made to the research methodology or title of the research prior to examination. Kindly ensure that all ethical considerations are duly applied whilst collecting, analysing and interpreting the data for the completion of your research.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact your programme team or supervisor directly.

Dr Reza Hosseini
Chair: Higher Degrees Committee



ADvTECH House: Inanda Greens, 54 Wierda Rd West, Wierda Valley 2196
P.O. Box 2369, Randburg 2125
Directors: GD Whyte (UK), JDR Oesch, MD Aitken, SCD Lurie
Group Company Secretary: CB Crouse



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SAMPLE ANALYSIS SHEET

"Luxury is in every detail."

Hubert de Givenchy, French fashion designer and founder of Givenchy

Blank Bespoke Scoring System for Data Analysis Analysis (100 Points)

Higher the points, the higher the colour of the subject/s

Barthes & Gesuel (?/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (?/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

1. **Clothing choices** (Up to 5 points)
Stereotypical sexual markers, revealing attire, fabric, style, silhouette, and association with sexualisation.
2. **Pose/Body Language** (Up to 10 points)
Submissive stances, exaggerated sexuality
3. **Facial expressions** (Up to 5 points)
Seductive gazes, vulnerability
4. **Background settings** (Up to 10 points)
Luxury environments, specific cultural connotations

Justification: Briefly explain how these elements are used in the post.

Signifieds & Patterns (?/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

1. Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (Up to 15 points)
2. **Construction of specific representations of colour**
(desirable, objectified) (Up to 10 points)
3. **Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics** (Up to 10 points)
4. **Colour palettes** (Up to 10 points)
Dominant colours and their association with sexuality.
5. **Composition** (Up to 5 points)
Framing, camera angles, and their influence on perception.
6. **Gaze** (Up to 5 points)
Direction of the model's gaze and the power dynamics it establishes.

Justification: Explain the interpretation of the message conveyed and connection between point allocation and the colour scale.

Kress & van Leeuwen (?/15 Points)

1. **Framing** (Up to 5 points)
Close-up, wide shot and its influence on the viewer's perception.
2. **Multimodality:** (Up to 10 points broken down below)
 - a. How other elements shape interpretations (Up to 5 points)
Captions, comments, user interactions
 - b. Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image of sexuality (Up to 5 points)

Justification (Mandatory): Briefly explain how these elements contribute to the brand message.

ACCEPTED CONFERENCE LETTER

"I want to empower women. I want people to be afraid of the women I dress."

Alexander McQueen, British fashion designer, couturier and founder of Alexander McQueen



31 March 2025

Primary Author: Stephany Brickman
Institution: IIE - Vega School
Email: yolandibur@gmail.com

Paper ID	1166
Paper Title	A visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Generation Z
Status	ACCEPT (Full paper)

We received over 120 abstracts from 24 different national and international institutions! We look forward to the outcomes and conversations at the 18th national 2025 DEFSA conference, *Design+ Disruptions, Realities, Futures*. All abstracts went through a double-blind peer review process.

I am happy to inform you that your abstract was accepted for a **full paper presentation** at the 2025 Conference from the 18th to 19th September. The reviewers made the following comments on your submission. We ask that you consider the feedback presented by the reviewers when developing the full paper.

Feedback from the reviewers is as follows:

Reviewer 1	Abstract review evaluation with no comments conveyed to author
Reviewer 2	Abstract review evaluation with no comments conveyed to author

The full paper should be completed for a double-blind peer review by **Thursday, 19th of June 2025**. A conference paper template and guidelines will be shared within the coming week. Should you have any queries, please get in touch with me at president-elect@defsa.org.za.

Kind Regards,
 Kimberly Bediako

2025 DEFSA Conference Organising Committee Chair



DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

"Style is a way to say who you are without having to speak."

Rachel Zoe, American fashion designer, businesswoman and celebrity stylist



FRANCI CRONJE

(PhD, Media Studies)

Author's Development Editor

Date: July 15, 2025

Editing Certificate

This document certifies that the dissertation mentioned below was edited for language and grammatical clarity by Dr. Franci Cronje:

*A visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at
Generation Z*

By authors:

Stephanie Brickman

I certify the edit did not alter or add to the authors' message during the editing process.

Signed:

Dr Franci Cronje

PhD (Media Studies); MA(FA); MPhil in Higher Education

Email: franci.cronje@gmail.com

Appendix E

TURNITIN REPORT

"Fashion is instant language."

Miuccia Prada, fashion designer and founder of MiuMiu



DISCLOSURE OF AI USAGE IN MY ASSESSMENT

“Fashion is about the present and the immediate future.”

Oscar de la Renta, Dominican fashion designer, Creator of Oscar de la Renta

OpenAI. 2025. Chat-GPT (Version 3.5). [Large language model]. Available at:

<https://chatgpt.com/c/67e66db9-4a68-8004-b6dc-17b6eb8e47ff>

- Correcting grammar and spelling
- Feedback on work done, asking for areas to improve (Findings and literature review)
- Summaries of my work pre-analysis
- Critique of style/flow of writing (help to edit)

UglyRobot. 2025. DocsBot/ [AI Image Description Generator] Available at:

<https://docsbot.ai/tools/image/description-generator>

- Denotative unpacking (Data analysis annexure) before analysis

Google. 2025. Gemini (Version 2.0). [Large language model]. Available at:

<https://gemini.google.com/app/f8c563cd8ad3e525>

- Correcting grammar and spelling
- Correcting figure numbers

Perplexity. 2025. Perplexity. [Large language model]. Available at:

<https://www.perplexity.ai/search/it-sounds-so-dumb-but-my-maste-0wN8iVsFSRi5AB9ic8PjhQ>

- Correcting grammar and spelling
- Drafting emails to ask Yolandi/Franci questions on occasion

Grammarly. 2025. [Editing tool]. Available at: <https://app.grammarly.com/>

- Correcting grammar and spelling throughout

Consensus. 2025. Consensus. [Research tool]. Available at:

https://consensus.app/search/compare-and-despair-effect-instagram/1sMooO1oSW21EpEgNrKkow/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=clipboard

- Sourcing more readings/literature for the findings chapter and literature review

Research Rabbit. 2025. Research Rabbit. [Research tool]. Available at: <https://www.researchrabbit.ai/>

-Sourcing more readings/literature for the findings chapter and literature review

CiteThisForMe. 2025. Cite this for me. [Citation tool]. Available at: <https://www.citethisforme.com/>

-Help with initial citation layout

CERTIFICATE OF RELEASE (ANNEXURE F)

“Fashion should be a form of escapism, and not a form of imprisonment.”

Alexander McQueen, British fashion designer, couturier and founder of Alexander McQueen

Annexure F – Certificate of Release (IIE007)

2025



ANNEXURE F – CERTIFICATE

OF RELEASE (IIE007)

Select the relevant category for which the Certificate of Release is submitted for.

1. Academic Seminar	☐
2. Proposal submission to the Higher Degrees Committee	☐
3. Submission of Dissertation or Thesis for examination.	☒

Students submitting a Master's or Doctoral Proposal, Dissertation, or Thesis should complete Part 1 of this form and send an electronic copy to their supervisor and co-supervisor, who then have to share it with the National Higher Degrees Programme Manager.

PART 1 Student	
Names:	Stephanie
Surname:	Brickman
Student number:	10047650
Email:	steffbrickman@gmail.com
Contact number:	072 200 2026
Degree:	MA Creative Brand Leadership
Title of Study:	A visual exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Generation Z
I confirm that my proposal has been prepared in accordance with the guidelines of The Independent Institute of Education on the submission of a Master's / Doctoral proposal.	
	22/9/25
Signature of candidate	Date

PART 2 Supervisor and co-supervisor	
Supervisor title, first and last names:	Dr Yolandi Burger
I confirm that the candidate's proposal has been prepared to my satisfaction and in accordance with the guidelines of The Independent Institute of Education on the submission of a Master's / Doctoral proposal.	
	22/9/25
Signature of supervisor	Date

ANALYSES

"To create something exceptional, your mindset must be relentlessly focused on the smallest detail."

Giorgio Armani, Italian fashion designer, Creator of Armani

Framework Blank

Analysis (100 Points)

Higher the points, the higher the colour of the subject/s

Barthes & Gesuel (?/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (?/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

1. **Clothing choices** (Up to 5 points)
Stereotypical sexual markers, revealing attire, fabric, style, silhouette, and association with sexualisation.
2. **Pose/Body Language** (Up to 10 points)
Submissive stances, exaggerated sexuality
3. **Facial expressions** (Up to 5 points)
Seductive gazes, vulnerability
4. **Background settings** (Up to 10 points)
Luxury environments, specific cultural connotations

Justification: Briefly explain how these elements are used in the post.

Signifieds & Patterns (?/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

1. Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (Up to 15 points)
2. **Construction** of specific **representations of colour**
(desirable, objectified) (Up to 10 points)
3. **Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics** (Up to 10 points)
4. **Colour palettes** (Up to 10 points)
Dominant colours and their association with sexuality.
5. **Composition** (Up to 5 points)
Framing, camera angles, and their influence on perception.
6. **Gaze** (Up to 5 points)
Direction of the model's gaze and the power dynamics it establishes.

Justification: Explain the interpretation of the message conveyed and connection between point allocation and the colour scale.

Kress & van Leeuwen (?/15 Points)

1. **Framing** (Up to 5 points)
Close-up, wide shot and its influence on the viewer's perception.
2. **Multimodality:** (Up to 10 points broken down below)
 - a. How other elements shape interpretations (Up to 5 points)
Captions, comments, user interactions
 - b. Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image of sexuality (Up to 5 points)

Justification (Mandatory): Briefly explain how these elements contribute to the brand message.

1.1.1.1.1. Data Collection: Diesel Post 1

Diesel August 2023

Highest Engagement: 974
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CwamCg6KRBF/>

Total: 61/100 Points.



Figure 6.1: Diesel Post 1

Barthes and Gesuel (54/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (15/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (2/5 points)

The model wears a loose-fitting T-shirt and baggy jeans, which are generally not associated with sexualisation. However, the ripped detail on the upper thigh introduces an element of suggestiveness, drawing subtle attention to the model's body. The ripped jeans highlight a rebellious aesthetic, which Kaiser (1991) links to the rejection of societal norms. While this adds complexity to the outfit's narrative, it does introduce a slight sexual undertone.

Pose/Body Language (1/10 points)

The relaxed stance, open shoulders, and visible hands project confidence and self-assuredness rather than inviting a sexualised interpretation. The neutral pose resists objectification by presenting the model as empowered rather than submissive or provocative. However, its lack of expressiveness leaves minimal scope for deeper interpretation, meriting a low score.

Facial expressions (5/5 points)

As the face is absent, focus is redirected solely to the body. This depersonalisation, common in fashion photography, heightens the likelihood of objectification (Karsay et al., 2018). The absence of a face aligns with Barthes' "punctum," drawing attention to the torso and legs. This intentional choice emphasises the product but objectifies the model in the process.

Background settings (7/10 points)

The striking red backdrop is bold and visually captivating, with strong associations of passion, danger, and intensity, which can amplify the image's sexual connotation. Singh & Srivastava (2011) identify red as a colour symbolising power and desire. While this adds depth to the visual narrative, its potential to enhance objectification through these associations limits its subversive potential.

Justification: The visual elements in this post strike a careful balance between highlighting the product and the model's body. The loose-fitting clothing and relaxed pose reduce the likelihood of overt sexualisation. However, the ripped jeans and the faceless portrayal subtly elevate objectification by emphasising the model's physical form rather than their individuality. The bold red background heightens visual intensity, drawing attention to the subject while evoking connotations of passion and rebellion. These choices align with Diesel's bold brand identity but create a nuanced interplay between empowerment and objectification.

Signifieds & Patterns (39/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (9/15 points)

By choosing a model with a gender-neutral presentation and clothing that resists gender stereotypes, the post challenges traditional depictions of masculinity and femininity. However, the faceless model undermines this message by objectifying the body. Barthes' concept of "myth" applies here, as the post both disrupts and reinforces traditional ideologies. While it resists gender norms, the depersonalisation and focus on the body limit the ideological depth.

Construction of specific representations of colour (8/10 points)

The red backdrop dominates the scene, evoking passion and intensity while aligning with Diesel's bold brand identity. The red tones intensify the model's presence and contribute to a striking visual impact. This displays strong alignment with Diesel's rebellious image.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (7/10 points)

The red background and ripped jeans evoke traditional associations of masculinity and boldness, while the relaxed pose and anonymous model subtly challenge these stereotypes. The imagery balances conformity and subversion of cultural norms. While red and distressed denim can signal rebellion, the model's pose resists overt sexualisation.

Colour palettes (7/10 points)

The dominance of red emphasises vibrancy and desire while aligning with Diesel's provocative aesthetic. Singh and Srivastava (2011) suggest that red is culturally coded to signify energy and allure. While the colour strengthens the visual impact, it also risks amplifying objectification.

Composition (3/5 points)

The focus on the torso and legs directs attention to the model's physicality and the clothing's details. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that mid-shot compositions often highlight the subject's body as the central focus. This approach enhances the emphasis on the product, but risks objectifying the model.

Gaze (5/5 points)

As the model's face is absent, eliminating any direct interaction with the audience. Without a gaze to connect with viewers, the model is depersonalised and objectified.

Justification: This section reflects Diesel's dual approach to messaging. The red background and distressed denim reinforce cultural associations of power, passion, and rebellion, aligning with the brand's rebellious ethos. Simultaneously, the gender-neutral presentation of the model challenges traditional stereotypes, signalling inclusivity and modernity. However, the faceless depiction undermines this progressive stance by depersonalising the model, focussing on their physicality rather than their identity. The composition and colour palette work cohesively to establish a visually striking narrative but remain tethered to traditional power dynamics, reflecting both conformity to and subversion of societal norms.

Kress and van Leeuwen (7/15 Points)

Framing (4/5 points)

The framing isolates the torso and legs and places emphasis on the clothing while reducing the model to a physical form. This choice ensures product visibility but risks objectification by omitting personal identity markers such as the face. The mid-shot composition serves Diesel's storytelling needs but limits deeper engagement with the model as a relatable subject.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption reinforces the bold persona of the Diesel brand, encouraging viewers to "Own the streets." User comments amplify this by expressing admiration for the bold styling, creating a co-constructed image of confidence.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The post supports Diesel's brand identity of rebellion and individuality and aligns with the expectations of its audience. It challenges traditional notions of power by avoiding overt objectification and offers a balanced and contemporary portrayal.

Justification: The framing and multimodal elements work cohesively to deliver Diesel's brand message. The caption and user interaction create an inclusive narrative that resonates with the audience's desire for self-expression, reinforcing the overall themes of empowerment and rebellion. Diesel's approach aligns with modern branding principles, blending emotional and tangible cues to foster audience engagement. The post avoids objectification, instead prioritising individuality and empowerment that demonstrates an ethical and contemporary visual communication strategy. By addressing themes that are important to Gen Z, such as self-expression and authenticity, Diesel ensures relevance and accountability in its brand messaging.

1.1.1.1.2. Data Collection: Diesel Post 2

Diesel September 2023

Highest Engagement: 2 142
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cw-lK72KuYj/>

Total: 62/100 Points.



Figure 6.2: Diesel Post 2

Barthes and Gesuel (53/85 Points)

Signifiers and Denotation (17/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (4/5 points)

A wide array of outfits, including firemen's uniforms, tinfoil suits, and signature denim-on-denim, is present. However, the scene also features revealing clothing such as crop tops, shirtless men, and individuals without pants. While not overtly objectifying due to the zoomed-out perspective, the choice of attire trends toward sexualisation.

Pose/Body Language (7/10 points)

The scene is dynamic and features diverse poses: a fireman waving, a shirtless man blowing fire, a woman posing with a motorcycle, and couples kissing. Many of these poses lean toward sensuality, such as the motorcyclist's stance and shirtless fire-breather.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Most expressions appear playful and relaxed, contributing to an air of self-expression. Only a few individuals face the camera directly, and these portray confident or joyful demeanours.

Background settings (5/10 points)

Set on a bustling urban street, the scene features a red Diesel-branded fire truck, a food stand, and a motorcycle. The backdrop highlights the brand's integration of streetwear with contemporary trends while reinforcing its rebellious, chaotic aesthetic.

Justification: The chaotic composition presents elements of both empowerment and objectification. While there is a clear emphasis on self-expression and diversity, certain poses and clothing choices inject a sexualised undertone. The zoomed-out perspective helps diffuse focus from individual bodies that offers a balance between provocative and playful visuals.

Signifieds and Patterns (36/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (11/15 points)

The playful caption “Find the D” can be interpreted in multiple ways: a light-hearted search for Diesel’s logo or a suggestive innuendo. The kissing sailors evoke an iconic World War II photograph, recontextualising it with LGBTQ+ representation, blending nostalgia with progressive ideals.

Construction of specific representations of colour (8/10 points)

Red elements like the fire truck and motorcycle dominate, symbolising passion and vitality. These pops of colour contrast with muted urban tones and are central to Diesel’s branding.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (8/10 points)

The image challenges gender norms (e.g., the kissing sailors) while simultaneously sexualising some subjects. Traditional power dynamics are subverted through depictions of both masculine and feminine sensuality, creating a layered narrative.

Colour palettes (7/10 points)

The palette centres on Diesel’s signature red against neutral urban tones. This cohesive colour scheme conveys energy and power, aligning with Gen Z’s affinity for bold, eye-catching visuals.

Composition (2/5 points)

The wide, bird's-eye perspective reduces individual focus and makes it difficult to gauge the sexuality of any one element. However, the overall scene remains visually chaotic, with a subtle presence of objectification.

Gaze (0/5 points)

Most faces are either obscured or turned away, negating the opportunity to analyse direct or implied gazes.

Justification: This post cleverly integrates elements of rebellion and inclusivity and challenges traditional stereotypes while remaining playful. However, the busy composition, along with specific instances of sexualised imagery, contributes to a lingering objectifying tone.

Kress and van Leeuwen (9/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The wide, bird's-eye perspective prioritises the bustling street scene over individual subjects. While this reduces the potential for overt objectification, it also limits viewer engagement with specific narratives or figures.

Multimodality (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (4/5 points)

The caption "Find the D" adds a layer of potential suggestiveness depending on interpretation. It could be a play on the search for the Diesel logo ("D") or something more suggestive. The suggestive caption "Find the D" invites playful interaction but can be read as provocative.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (4/5 points)

The post reinforces Diesel's image as a brand embracing chaos, diversity, and self-expression. However, elements like the shirtless man and the posing motorcyclist sustain a sexualised undertone.

Justification: The multimodal interplay of visuals, text, and audience interaction creates a cohesive, yet provocative brand message. Despite the wide framing, sexualised elements persist, reinforcing a tension between empowerment and objectification. Diesel's September 2023 post highlights the brand's rebellious spirit and celebration of diversity. The chaotic street scene, coupled with bold visual elements and a provocative caption, effectively engages Gen Z by blending playfulness with subversive undertones. However, certain poses and wardrobe choices perpetuate a degree of objectification, tempering the post's progressive elements.

1.1.1.1.3. Data Collection: Diesel Post 3

Diesel October 2023

Highest Engagement: 588 Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cyh4F5Lq_2G/

Total: 86/100 Points.



Figure 6.3: Diesel Post 3

Barthes and Gesuel (76/85)

Signifiers & Denotation (30/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (5/5 points)

The models are scantily dressed: four shirtless men and three women wearing revealing attire, such as a sports bra, sweatpants, or merely a Diesel bag and bra. This minimal clothing emphasises physicality and adds to the sexually charged nature of the post.

Pose/Body Language (10/10 points)

All models lie on a bed, with some looking at the camera and others interacting. The central man directly gazes at the camera, drawing focus. Two men at the back share an intimate look, while other models' body language leans into sensuality and connection.

Facial expressions (5/5 points)

The five models at the forefront gaze directly into the camera, exuding confidence or allure. The two men in the background share a longing gaze, creating layers of intimacy and complexity.

Background settings (10/10 points)

The setting, a white bed, a champagne-toned headboard, and scattered roses, exudes luxury and intimacy. This carefully curated environment highlights the sensual undertones of the post.

Justification: The combination of minimal clothing, intimate body language, and a luxurious setting constructs a sexually charged visual narrative. This aligns with Danesi's (2004) insights on how

advertisements often exploit physicality and sensuality to craft aspirational or provocative messaging.

Signifieds & Patterns (46/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (12/15 points)

The caption "Branded. Welcome to DieselTopia... a safe communal space" juxtaposes the overtly sensual image with the idea of safety and inclusivity. This duality plays on themes of sexual liberation while using the models' physicality to challenge traditional norms and reinforce Diesel's edgy, rebellious brand identity.

Construction of specific representations of colour (9/10 points)

The arrangement of models and focus on their bodies underline objectification, especially through prominent displays of chests and legs. The intimacy between the two male models challenges heteronormative gender norms while highlighting physical aesthetics.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (8/10 points)

The central male model assumes a dominant position via a direct gaze and confident pose, reinforcing traditional male power dynamics. However, the intimate interaction between the two male models introduces a modern, inclusive take on masculinity. Women's bodies, on the other hand, are presented for the male gaze, maintaining conventional objectification.

Colour palettes (7/10 points)

The image's primary tones, white and red, symbolise contrasting ideas of purity and passion. The white bed and roses evoke a sense of innocence, juxtaposed with red accents (e.g., a model's Diesel pants) that emphasise desire and seduction.

Composition (5/5 points)

The shot focuses on the models arranged on the bed, creating a crowded and visually stimulating composition that emphasises their bodies and sexuality.

Gaze (5/5 points)

Most of the models are looking directly at the camera, which invites the viewer's gaze. The intimacy between the two men in the background provides a shift in gaze dynamics, adding complexity to the power structures at play. The direct gazes increase the objectification of the models, inviting the viewer to become complicit in the sexualisation of the image. The two men's gaze towards one another introduces an alternative sexual dynamic that complicates the reading of the image.

Justification: The way the models are arranged on the bed, their gazes directed at the camera, and the emphasis on specific body parts all contribute to a sense of colour. This aligns with Barnard's (2003) concept of fashion as communication, where clothing choices and body language can be used to convey sexual messages (Barnard, 2020). While the image challenges traditional gender norms by featuring intimacy between men, it still reinforces the idea of female bodies existing for the male gaze.

Kress and van Leeuwen (10/15 Points)

Framing (5/5 points)

The medium shot frames the models on the bed, reinforcing the sexual focus on their bodies. The tight framing allows little room for distraction, ensuring that the bodies are the central visual element. The framing directly supports the objectification of the models, ensuring that their bodies remain the primary focus.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How *other elements* shape interpretation (3/5 points)

The caption "Branded. Welcome to DieselTopia... a safe communal space" contrasts with the image's sexually charged visuals. It creates tension by implying a space of comfort and safety while showcasing the models in intimate, sexually suggestive poses. The caption, though seemingly playful, adds a layer of complexity to the image, suggesting that Diesel is branding itself as a "safe space" even while sexualising its models.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The image reinforces traditional gender dynamics, where the male models are dominant and the women are displayed for male desire. However, the subtle intimacy between the two men behind the central model introduces a slight challenge to these norms. While Diesel does challenge traditional gender roles by showcasing male intimacy, it still heavily relies on objectification and traditional power structures, reinforcing the overarching theme of sexualised branding.

Justification: The caption "Branded. Welcome to DieselTopia... a safe communal space" creates a tension with the visual elements. While it suggests a safe space, the focus on sexuality creates a disjuncture. This doesn't necessarily lessen the colour, but it adds another layer of complexity. This aligns with Reilly's (2020) concept of brand tone of voice acting as a "seduction" tool, where the message might be suggestive even if the literal meaning is different (Reilly, 2020).

1.1.1.1.1.4. Data Collection: Diesel Post 4

Diesel November 2023

Highest Engagement: 1925 Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cz6W_szoVSI/

Total: 43/100 Points.



Figure 6.4: Diesel Post 4

Barthes and Gesuel (36/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (10/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (3/5 points)

All models wear Diesel clothing: Tommy Cash is dressed in a Diesel shirt and sunglasses, while the others are in white jackets and shirts with prominent Diesel logos. The centrality of the Diesel logo, particularly in the clothing, reinforces the brand's dominant role in the image. The clothing choices, though not overly sexual, position the models as extensions of the brand, aligning them with Diesel's cultural significance.

Pose/Body Language (4/10 points)

Tommy Cash is seated, crouched, facing the camera while holding a Diesel bag. The others sit with crossed legs, facing him in profile. The poses create a hierarchy, with Tommy Cash in a leadership position, symbolising authority and control. The body language implies devotion or submission from the other models, creating a sense of power dynamics, with Cash positioned as the leader or figurehead.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Tommy Cash faces the camera with a solemn expression, as though leading a religious ceremony. The models with exposed faces appear as though they are listening intently to him. The serious, almost reverential expressions contribute to the image's cult-like atmosphere. The facial expressions

strengthen the power imbalance, positioning Tommy Cash as the leader and the others as devoted followers, further building the idea of brand worship.

Background settings (2/10 points)

The scene is a small, dimly lit room with grey walls and a large grey pillar. The confined, utilitarian setting contrasts with the grandeur of the branding and adds a layer of mystery. The lack of opulence reinforces the idea of branding and consumerism being the central focus, positioning Diesel as both the religion and the object of devotion in this narrative.

Justification: The clothing choices (Diesel logo being central) and poses (Tommy Cash facing the camera, others turned towards him) establish him as the leader and the others as followers worshipping the brand. The blue yoga mat splitting the image adds an interesting detail. It creates a visual division between Tommy Cash and the other models, potentially reinforcing his leadership role. However, this could also be seen as a symbolic barrier, separating the "leader" from his "followers."

Signifieds & Patterns (26/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (10/15 points)

The caption, which references "cult products" and "logomania," offers a satirical critique of consumerism and brand obsession. However, the image still promotes Diesel branding, and the models are reduced to mere vehicles for the clothing. Diesel plays with irony by satirising consumerism yet still reinforces the role of the brand as central to identity and desire. This commentary hints at the growing influence of branding in our social lives while still perpetuating its power.

Construction of specific representations of colour (4/10 points)

The models' positioning, showing only their profiles and placing the men at Tommy Cash's feet, suggests a power structure. However, the image is not overtly sexual, instead highlighting the branding and authority of Diesel. The somewhat objectifying positioning of the models – particularly the women, with their profiles emphasized and their physicality muted – aligns them as passive players in the consumption of the Diesel brand. Though not sexual, there is still a slight reduction of individuality through their representation.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (3/10 points)

The image challenges traditional gender norms by focusing on the dynamic between Tommy Cash and the other models, though there is little sexualisation. The hierarchy is evident, with Cash as the dominant figure, and the others positioned as followers. While the image doesn't overtly sexualise the models, the power dynamics at play reinforce a traditional leader-follower structure. This sets a tone of obedience and submission, suggesting that the brand's influence is so strong it dictates the models' roles.

Colour palettes (4/10 points)

The colour palette is primarily white (jackets), grey (walls, pillar), and black with red accents (Tommy Cash's shirt). White evokes purity, but in this context, it is merged with branding. Black adds edginess,

and the red accents highlight Diesel's logo. The colours reinforce the idea of branding as a central force, yet do not evoke overt sexuality. Instead, they suggest strength and authority, with red subtly reinforcing the notion of desire, but in a more subdued and ironic way given the setting.

Composition (3/5 points)

The models are arranged in a confined space, with Tommy Cash in the centre. This layout strengthens his leadership role. The composition directs attention to Tommy Cash, ensuring he is seen as the central figure. The tight space makes it clear that the models are part of a group, reinforcing the idea of collective worship of the Diesel brand.

Gaze (2/5 points)

Only Tommy Cash faces the camera, while the others look towards him, establishing a sense of focus on him as the leader. The lack of direct engagement with the viewer by the other models positions Tommy Cash as the central figure, while the others serve as secondary participants in this brand narrative.

Justification: The image constructs a scene that uses a cult-like setting and branding to promote Diesel clothing. While there's less emphasis on sexuality compared to the previous description, the women's poses and focus on Diesel logos still contribute to a sense of colour (but to a lesser degree). The inclusion of the blue yoga mat adds another layer to the analysis. It could be seen as a barrier separating the models from the branded message, suggesting a tension between blind consumerism and individuality.

Kress and van Leeuwen (7/15 Points)

Framing (2/5 points)

The image is a straightforward shot, capturing all the models in the confined space. The framing keeps the focus on the group dynamics and the central position of Tommy Cash. This framing reinforces the sense of hierarchy within the group, placing Tommy as the figurehead of the Diesel "cult."

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (3/5 points)

The caption, "D-vine intervention," is a playful take on "divine intervention," suggesting that Diesel is almost a religious entity. This creates a humorous but subtly ironic atmosphere, adding complexity to the brand's portrayal. The use of humour through the caption plays with the idea of brand obsession, transforming Diesel into a "divine" presence while still critiquing the idolisation of consumer goods.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The image subtly challenges traditional consumer desire by framing the models as part of a brand "cult," which critiques the obsession with branding.

Justification: The framing and caption contribute to the overall message that positions Diesel as a central element in the lives of the models, bordering on obsession. This is achieved with a touch of

humour that downplays overt colour. The blue yoga mat cutting through the image disrupts the sense of a unified group and challenges the leader-follower dynamic.

1.1.1.1.1.5. Data Collection: Diesel Post 5

Diesel December 2023

Highest Engagement: 823 Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C1gov0voGam/>

Total: 31/100 Points.



Figure 6.5: Diesel Post 5

Barthes and Gesuel (28/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (9/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The man's baggy, worn-out grey t-shirt and shorts reflect a casual, laid-back aesthetic consistent with Diesel's image. The charcoal logo on his shirt complements the bold red flag, reinforcing brand identity while appealing to Gen Z's love of comfort and self-expression (Eirini, 2020). The use of oversized, distressed clothing echoes youth-centric streetwear trends and fosters relatability. The focus on Diesel's logo subtly asserts brand recognition without overtly sexualising the subject.

Pose/Body Language (2/10 points)

The man's focused stance on the flag suggests determination and engagement. His body language conveys a purposeful, rebellious energy, in line with Diesel's ethos of individuality. While the stance is dynamic, it doesn't strongly evoke sexuality or objectification. Instead, it portrays empowerment, resonating with Gen Z's preference for authentic self-representation.

Facial expressions (5/5 points)

The absence of the subject's face shifts the focus entirely onto his body and action. This technique, while common in fashion photography, could imply objectification by reducing individuality to a symbolic representation. The lack of a face is a well-known technique used to objectify the model, focusing solely on the body (Karsay et al, 2018). The exclusion of the face depersonalises the model, making him a vessel for Diesel's narrative. This aligns with scholarly critiques of faceless imagery contributing to objectification in advertising.

Background settings (1/10 points)

The urban environment, with a parked car and a dog nearby, anchors the scene in everyday life, enhancing relatability. This setting connects with Gen Z's urban lifestyle and emphasises individuality within communal spaces. The mundane elements juxtapose the boldness of the flag, underscoring Diesel's message of standing out amidst the ordinary.

Justification: The clothing choices reflect Diesel's identity as a brand that embraces youth culture and self-expression. The pose underscores a message of empowerment, resonating with Gen Z's desire for authenticity and individuality.

Signifieds & Patterns (19/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (6/15 points)

The flag, a prominent element, symbolises both personal aspirations and broader social movements. It aligns with Diesel's engagement in contemporary issues like sustainability, individuality, and activism. The flag can symbolise both personal aspirations and broader social movements, reflecting Diesel's engagement with contemporary issues like sustainability and individuality (GlobalWebIndex, 2022). The flag's dual symbolism, personal and collective, mirrors Gen Z's affinity for both individuality and activism, making it a potent narrative device.

Construction of specific representations of colour (2/10 points)

The grey tones in the man's clothing suggest urban grit and relatability, while the red flag adds a sense of urgency and passion. The red serves as a visual focal point, conveying rebellion and intensity, aligning with Diesel's provocative branding. The restrained palette enhances the image's narrative depth without overstating sexuality.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (2/10 points)

The image challenges traditional portrayals of masculinity, presenting a dynamic and expressive figure engaged in meaningful action. The red flag evokes themes of activism and empowerment, resonating with Gen Z's values (Singh & Srivastava, 2011). By focusing on action rather than physique or overt sexuality, the image redefines masculinity in a progressive, socially conscious way.

Colour palettes (4/10 points)

The interplay between neutral greys and bold red highlights Diesel's aesthetic of blending subtlety with boldness. The colour scheme reinforces the themes of rebellion and individuality while maintaining relatability through neutral tones.

Composition (4/5 points)

The framing balances the subject and the flag, ensuring both are equally emphasised. The composition effectively communicates the significance of the individual within a broader movement, embodying Diesel's brand ethos.

Gaze (1/5 points)

The absence of a visible gaze focuses attention on the action and narrative elements rather than the model's personal identity. The lack of a gaze reduces the potential for direct connection with the audience, limiting its emotional impact but aligning with the depersonalised, symbolic tone of the image.

Justification: The gaze contributes to a complex representation that balances empowerment with vulnerability. While it does not explicitly sexualize the subject, it aligns with Diesel's provocative aesthetic by inviting viewers to engage with themes of individuality and self-expression.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

A mid-shot captures the man and the flag, ensuring the viewer's attention is divided between these elements. This framing underscores both individual action and symbolic representation, contributing to a balanced narrative.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption ties Diesel's products to New Year resolutions, linking the visual narrative to themes of aspiration and self-improvement. The text adds depth by positioning Diesel as a catalyst for positive change, aligning the brand with Gen Z's values.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The depiction of an active male figure engaged in a meaningful act challenges conventional norms in fashion advertising. By focusing on individuality and action over aesthetics or sexuality, the image aligns with Diesel's strategy to resonate with socially conscious Gen Z audiences.

Justification: The caption complements the visual narrative by connecting Diesel's products to broader themes of aspiration and self-improvement. This post showcases Diesel's ability to blend bold aesthetics with subtle social commentary.

1.1.1.1.1.6. Data Collection: Diesel Post 6

Diesel January 2024

Highest Engagement: 463 Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2-YaG1NICG/>

Total: 73/100 Points.



Figure 6.6: Diesel Post 6

Barthes and Gesuel (67/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (24/30 Points) *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (4/5 points)

The woman's short satin skirt conveys a blend of femininity and allure. The choice of fabric and cut suggests sophistication while subtly revealing, aligning with Diesel's provocative aesthetic.

Pose/Body Language (8/10 points)

The close-up focus on the woman's hand holding the bag creates intimacy with the viewer. This framing draws attention to her legs and the elegance of her hand, subtly sexualizing the image through suggestion rather than overt displays.

Facial expressions (5/5 points)

The absence of the subject's face shifts attention to her body and accessories. This depersonalisation aligns with techniques used in fashion photography to objectify models by emphasising physical attributes over individuality. The lack of a face is a well-known technique used to objectify the model, focusing solely on the body (Karsay et al, 2018).

Background settings (7/10 points)

The minimal background keeps the focus on the woman's hand, legs, and the Diesel bag. The warm colour palette adds a luxurious and inviting atmosphere, enhancing the image's elegance.

Justification: The elements in this section combine to create an image that is both elegant and subtly suggestive. The emphasis on luxury and delicacy aligns with Diesel's branding, while the lack of overt sexualisation ensures the focus remains on sophistication and intimacy.

Signifieds & Patterns (43/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (10/15 points)

The image perpetuates the ideology of associating luxury with femininity and desirability. By focusing on elegance and refined accessories, it reinforces societal notions of beauty tied to material possessions.

Construction of specific representations of colour (8/10 points)

The warm tones of beige, brown, and gold evoke sophistication and luxury while subtly referencing traditional femininity. The focus on chains and accessories suggests wealth and status while also hinting at traditional markers of femininity.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (10/10 points)

The close-up shot between the legs subtly engages cultural narratives of desirability and power, presenting beauty as tied to physical allure and wealth.

Colour palettes (6/10 points)

The harmonious colour scheme amplifies the image's sense of opulence and elegance while maintaining a modern and appealing tone.

Composition (4/5 points)

The close-up framing draws attention to the hand and bag, creating an intimate and aspirational connection that supports Diesel's narrative.

Gaze (5/5 points)

The absence of a direct gaze shifts interpretive power to the viewer. The positioning of the hand invites a closer look, creating an intimate and engaging dynamic that complements the product focus.

Justification: This section highlights Diesel's ability to balance traditional representations of femininity with modern aesthetics. The warm tones, intimate framing, and focus on accessories combine to reinforce themes of luxury, allure, and empowerment.

Kress and van Leeuwen (6/15 Points)

Framing (4/5 points)

The close-up shot centers attention on the woman's hand and the bag, creating a sense of intimacy and exclusivity that aligns with Diesel's luxury-oriented messaging.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption ties the visual to themes of elegance and aspiration, reinforcing the luxurious tone of the image.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The image reinforces traditional notions of beauty and femininity but integrates them with contemporary fashion marketing strategies that celebrate individuality and sophistication.

Justification: The framing and caption work cohesively to create a luxurious narrative. By focusing on elegance and aspiration, Diesel maintains its brand identity while engaging with Gen Z's desire for self-expression through sophisticated fashion.

1.1.1.1.1.7. Data Collection: Diesel Post 7

Diesel February 2024

Highest Engagement: 466 Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C4NI2WalxzF/>

Total: 44/100 Points.



Figure 6.7: Diesel Post 7

Barthes and Gesuel (34/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (8/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The male model's all-white ensemble of oversized hoodies, shorts, and T-shirts prominently featuring Diesel's logo contrasts with the female model's all-black outfit, incorporating oversized clothing and leather stiletto boots. This juxtaposition blends urban streetwear with sophistication, emphasising Diesel's edgy aesthetic.

Pose/Body Language (2/10 points)

The relaxed stances align with streetwear culture. The male model's central, confident posture anchors the image, while the female model's lean forward and direct gaze add assertiveness. However, the lack of dynamic or narrative-driven poses reduces their overall impact.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

The male model's neutral yet confident expression aligns with an urban, nonchalant vibe. The female model's slight smile paired with a direct gaze introduces a dynamic that combines approachability with authority.

Background settings (4/10 points)

The New York City backdrop, with its brick buildings and busy streets, contributes to the urban narrative. However, the large billboard featuring lips distracts from the models, drawing attention to a secondary subject, the man in the background wearing Diesel.

Justification: The visual elements effectively communicate an urban identity rooted in streetwear culture. However, the scattered focus due to competing background elements like the billboard weakens the cohesion of the intended narrative.

Signifieds & Patterns (26/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (8/15 points)

The black-and-white contrast in the clothing can symbolise identity dualities, while the billboard with lips comments on beauty standards and consumerism. This juxtaposition reflects both individuality and conformity within the brand's cultural context.

Construction of specific **representations of colour** (4/10 points)

The models' styling promotes individuality, yet the female model's stiletto boots subtly reinforce traditional beauty frameworks, introducing tension between empowerment and objectification.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (4/10 points)

The female model's direct gaze challenges gender stereotypes by asserting power and engagement. However, her styling and positioning partially align with traditional portrayals of women as desirable objects, creating a nuanced interplay of sexuality and agency.

Colour palettes (4/10 points)

The contrast between black and white clothing creates visual intrigue, while the orange construction cone adds unexpected vibrancy. However, the colour choices lack deeper symbolic resonance or integration into a cohesive theme.

Composition (3/5 points)

The models occupy central positions, framed by a lively urban backdrop. The billboard and construction cone introduce layers to the scene but also dilute the focus on the models.

Gaze (3/5 points)

The female model's direct gaze fosters engagement, while the male model's outward gaze contributes to the sense of urban exploration. Together, they balance individuality with collective brand identity.

Justification: The image grapples with themes of individuality, societal norms, and consumer culture but struggles to maintain a cohesive focus. The interplay of urban elements and fashion highlights Diesel's branding but at the expense of clarity in its messaging.

Kress and van Leeuwen (10/15 Points)

Framing (3/5 points)

The framing highlights the models while situating them within an urban context. However, the inclusion of distracting elements like the billboard reduces the impact of the central figures.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (5/5 points)

The billboard featuring lips adds commentary on beauty standards, tying into the Diesel caption “Good D wherever you go.” The embossed Diesel 'D' logo reinforces the brand’s playful yet provocative messaging.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

While the urban setting challenges traditional high-fashion contexts, the visual clutter and reliance on conventional gender dynamics weaken the image’s potential to fully subvert norms.

Justification: This image captures Diesel's urban, streetwear-inspired aesthetic but struggles with focus due to competing elements in the background. While it touches on themes of individuality, gender dynamics, and consumerism, the execution dilutes its potential impact. The juxtaposition of empowerment and objectification in the female model’s portrayal reflects ongoing tensions in fashion marketing.

1.1.1.1.1.8. Data Collection: Diesel Post 8

Diesel March 2024

Highest Engagement: 455 Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C6EK-2FoStu/>

Total: 51/100 Points.



Figure 6.8: Diesel Post 8

Barthes and Gesuel (45/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (16/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (3/5 points)

The male model wears a black Diesel tracksuit made from shiny, textured fabric. This choice blends functionality with a modern, sleek aesthetic. While the material could evoke subtle allure, the fully clothed presentation leans towards practicality rather than overt sexualisation.

Pose/Body Language (3/10 points)

The pose, a slight turn of the body with the face angled away from the camera, suggests confidence and a hint of introspection. While this stance can be interpreted as inviting viewer engagement, it does not overtly emphasise physical attributes.

Facial expressions (4/5 points)

The neutral expression with a slight pout introduces an element of intrigue. However, the subdued nature of the expression limits its potential to strongly evoke seduction or objectification.

Background settings (6/10 points)

The grey studio backdrop is minimalist, keeping the focus on the model and the product. However, the simplicity can inadvertently make the model seem objectified due to the lack of narrative context or additional elements to frame the scene meaningfully.

Justification: The styling and pose support Diesel's brand identity as modern and stylish but avoid excessive sexualisation. The minimalist background places emphasis on the product and model, which can lean toward objectification if interpreted as solely highlighting physical attributes.

Signifieds & Patterns (29/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (8/15 points)

The image reflects contemporary masculinity, blending practicality and style. While unisex fashion is hinted at, the visual emphasis on the model's physical presence could inadvertently reinforce traditional ideas of attractiveness tied to appearance.

Construction of specific representations of colour (3/10 points)

The representation of masculinity here is confident and understated, which aligns with empowerment rather than overt objectification. However, the tracksuit's shiny texture adds a subtle layer of sensuality.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (6/10 points)

While the unisex aesthetic challenges strict gender norms, the focus on the male model's allure suggests an ongoing association between masculinity and physicality, reinforcing subtle cultural assumptions.

Colour palettes (6/10 points)

The all-black colour scheme conveys sophistication and power. Its association with dominance ties into traditional masculine tropes but remains balanced by the model's understated presence.

Composition (4/5 points)

The central framing highlights both the model and Diesel's product. However, the static and minimalistic setup limits narrative depth and makes the model appear slightly objectified as a focal point.

Gaze (2/5 points)

The model's lack of direct eye contact creates a detached aura, which can evoke viewer curiosity but lacks a strong connection to counterbalance objectification potential.

Justification: This image conveys confidence and modern masculinity with a restrained approach to sexuality. However, the reliance on physicality and minimal context places some weight on the model as a visual object rather than an individual.

Kress and van Leeuwen (6/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing, while full-body and focused on both the model and product, lacks dynamic composition or depth. This straightforward presentation limits engagement and reinforces the static, objectified nature of the model.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (3/5 points)

The caption connects Diesel products to freedom and adventure, adding some narrative value to the visual content. However, the minimalism of the image itself struggles to fully embody these themes.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The unisex fashion narrative challenges traditional gender norms to an extent, but the static setup and lack of context reduce its ability to fully challenge conventional advertising norms.

Justification: The caption aligns with Diesel's brand messaging of freedom and aspiration. However, the limited interaction between the visual elements and these broader themes weakens the overall narrative. The image promotes Diesel's modern, functional, and stylish branding while hinting at inclusivity through unisex fashion. However, the minimalist setup, static framing, and focus on the model's physicality detract from the image's potential to convey a deeper narrative.

1.1.1.1.1.9. Data Collection: Diesel Post 9

Diesel April 2024

Highest Engagement: 1296
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C7A-pdAPFDD/>

Total: 27/100 Points.

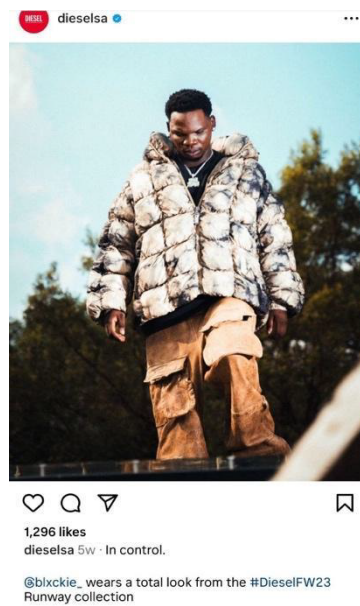


Figure 6.9: Diesel Post 9

Barthes and Gesuel (24/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (9/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

Blxckie's beige quilted puffer jacket and light brown cargo-style work pants reflect Diesel's emphasis on blending style with practicality. While the outfit is functional and fashionable, it does not prioritise allure or sexualisation and aligns with the brand's image.

Pose/Body Language (4/10 points)

The full-shot of Blxckie walking angled toward the upper right corner conveys confidence and control. This sense of movement enhances the image's dynamism and communicates a message of empowerment without veering into objectification.

Facial expressions (2/5 points)

Blxckie's neutral expression reinforces the themes of focus and determination. While it conveys self-assurance, it lacks emotive depth, limiting the potential for sexualisation or overt engagement.

Background settings (2/10 points)

The natural outdoor backdrop, featuring trees and a light-blue sky, adds aesthetic value without strongly contributing to the narrative or the model's portrayal. The setting is visually pleasing but does not significantly influence the image's overall interpretation.

Justification Blxckie's wardrobe and confident pose reinforce Diesel's brand identity without emphasising physicality or sexualised allure. The image maintains a focus on empowerment and individuality rather than objectification.

Signifieds & Patterns (15/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (6/15 points)

The image aligns with contemporary masculinity, promoting a blend of style and functionality. Blxckie's presence as a South African cultural figure enhances Diesel's alignment with empowerment narratives, though the ideological depth remains limited.

Construction of specific representations of colour (3/10 points)

Blxckie's confident yet understated portrayal challenges traditional masculine tropes in fashion but does not innovate significantly in terms of broader representation or ideological subversion.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (3/10 points)

The inclusion of a South African artist adds cultural depth, aligning Diesel with inclusivity through localisation. However, the lack of emphasis on power dynamics or explicit challenges to stereotypes results in a moderate score.

Colour palettes (1/10 points)

The warm beige and light brown tones blend seamlessly with the natural setting. While aesthetically harmonious, the colour palette does not strongly contribute to ideological or thematic depth.

Composition (1/5 points)

The full-body shot captures Blxckie's outfit and movement effectively, but the composition does not incorporate layers of meaning or additional narrative cues.

Gaze (1/5 points)

The lack of direct gaze creates a detached feel. While it contributes to the "in control" theme, it limits the viewer's engagement and emotional connection with the subject.

Justification: Overall, this image promotes modern masculinity that balances style with functionality. It effectively utilises visual storytelling to convey themes of empowerment. In this way, the image succeeds in portraying modern masculinity and individuality, but it lacks the complexity or ideological richness

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The full-body framing allows for a comprehensive view of both Blxckie and his outfit, but it does not use dynamic techniques to elevate the image's interpretive depth or narrative engagement.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption, "In control," ties into the visual narrative of confidence but does not add significant layers of meaning.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

Featuring a prominent South African artist supports Diesel's inclusive and localised branding but does not push the boundaries of traditional advertising norms.

Justification: This post effectively portrays themes of empowerment, confidence, and individuality without veering into objectification. While Blxckie's inclusion as a South African artist adds cultural relevance, the image lacks ideological and narrative depth.

1.1.1.1.10. Data Collection: Diesel Post 10

Diesel May 2024

Highest Engagement: 8676
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C7A-pdAPFDD/>

Total: 38/100 Points.



Figure 6.10: Diesel Post 10

Link to View Video: [Diesel:May:2024:Video.mp4](#)

Barthes and Gesuel (32/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (15/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (3/5 points)

The model's outfit, a combination of baggy pants, a blazer made of shiny leather-like fabric, and black heels, disrupts traditional fashion norms by blending masculine and feminine elements. This fusion of high fashion and casual wear aligns with Diesel's edgy and experimental brand identity. However, the ensemble prioritises boldness over overt sexualisation, maintaining a moderate score.

Pose/Body Language (5/10 points)

The act of urinating against a wall is deliberately provocative, subverting gender norms in a striking way. While this challenges societal expectations, the transition to direct eye contact and a confident smile softens the tone, emphasising empowerment over crudeness. Despite its boldness, the initial pose could evoke discomfort or controversy.

Facial expressions (2/5 points)

The direct eye contact and confident smile signal self-assurance and defiance, shifting focus from objectification to empowerment. However, the expression's impact on reducing potential objectification is modest, given the provocative context.

Background settings (5/10 points)

The urban street corner provides an everyday, relatable backdrop that enhances the rebellious tone of the content. While the setting supports the narrative, it does not strongly contribute to deeper ideological meaning.

Justification: The clothing choices and confident demeanour reinforce Diesel's identity as unconventional and bold. The provocative context challenges norms but avoids overt sexualisation, maintaining balance between edginess and empowerment.

Signifieds & Patterns (17/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (6/15 points)

This video challenges conventional femininity by presenting the model engaging in an act traditionally associated with masculinity. While it promotes freedom and self-expression, the underlying ideology lacks complexity and risks being perceived as shock value rather than substantive commentary.

Construction of specific **representations of colour** (2/10 points)

The portrayal of the model as gender-neutral before revealing her identity subtly engages with themes of fluidity and inclusion. However, the focus on defiance through provocative behaviour limits a deeper exploration of these concepts.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (4/10 points)

The defiant act subverts norms about women's behaviour in public spaces, but it risks reinforcing stereotypes about rebelliousness being linked to inappropriate conduct. The video walks a fine line between empowerment and controversy.

Colour palettes (2/10 points)

The dark grey and black tones contribute to Diesel's edgy aesthetic while suggesting sophistication. However, the palette's role in shaping the ideological narrative is minimal.

Composition (2/5 points)

The shift from focusing on the model's back to revealing her face creates intrigue and keeps viewers engaged. However, the composition's emphasis on the provocative action slightly detracts from its overall narrative sophistication.

Gaze (1/5 points)

The direct gaze at the camera after her identity is revealed creates an engaging connection with viewers, inviting them to consider her confidence and attitude rather than reducing her to a mere object.

Justification: The video uses bold storytelling to align with Diesel's brand values but struggles to balance empowerment with potential perceptions of shock-driven messaging.

Kress and van Leeuwen (6/15 Points)

Framing (2/5 points)

The framing effectively transitions from an ambiguous view of the model's back to her full identity and confident gaze. While this approach adds narrative depth, the initial framing risks being interpreted as voyeuristic.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)**How other elements shape interpretation (2/5 points)**

The caption "Come closer" invites curiosity and aligns with Diesel's call for bold self-expression. However, its interpretive depth is limited, offering minimal additional context to the visual content.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The juxtaposition of the provocative act with the model's confident gaze challenges traditional advertising norms. However, the execution risks alienating audiences who may view the content as overly controversial.

Justification: The caption and framing integrate well with Diesel's branding, but the multimodal elements lack the nuance to fully support the visual narrative's provocative tone. This video encapsulates Diesel's bold, rebellious identity, pushing boundaries by challenging gender norms and societal expectations. While it resonates with themes of empowerment and individuality, the provocative execution risks being perceived as excessive.

1.1.1.1.1.1. Data Collection: Diesel Post 11

Diesel June 2024

Highest Engagement: 1606
Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C81sta_olgL/

Total: 0/100 Points.



Figure 6.11: Diesel Post 11

Barthes and Gesuel (0/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (0/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (0/5 points)

The image showcases a pair of chunky Chelsea boots, emphasising their design, material, and craftsmanship without involving a human subject. This keeps the focus strictly on the product.

Pose/Body Language (0/10 points)

As this is a product-focused image without any model, there are no poses or body language to assess. The boots are angled to show the boots "side profile" to the camera, inviting viewers to appreciate their design.

Facial expressions (0/5 points)

As this is a product-focused image without any model, there is no expression to assess.

Background settings (0/10 points)

The light grey-blue backdrop serves to isolate the boots, ensuring clarity and emphasis on their features. This neutral context supports the product's presentation without contributing to colour or sexualisation.

Justification: This post highlights the boots as an object of style and functionality, completely avoiding any elements that could contribute to objectification.

Signifieds & Patterns (/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (0/15 points)

The promotion of rugged Chelsea boots aligns with Diesel's brand ideology of merging durability with edgy aesthetics. However, this is a straightforward product showcase with no deeper social or cultural commentary.

Construction of specific representations of colour (0/10 points)

The product image avoids reinforcing or challenging any cultural or gendered assumptions, keeping the focus on style and innovation.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (0/10 points)

By highlighting the product itself, the post avoids engaging with or perpetuating any cultural assumptions about sexuality or power dynamics.

Colour palettes (0/10 points)

The dark brown tones of the boots against the neutral background enhance the visual appeal but do not signify any deeper ideological meaning.

Composition (0/5 points)

The clean, straightforward composition centres on the boots, ensuring clarity and professionalism.

Gaze (0/5 points)

The absence of a model means there is no gaze to analyse.

Justification: The straightforward focus on product design and style avoids engaging with themes of objectification, making this an entirely neutral post.

Kress and van Leeuwen (/15 Points)

Framing (0/5 points)

The framing isolates the boots, presenting them clearly and effectively. There is no suggestion of objectification in the image's framing or composition.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (0/5 points)

The caption invites viewers to consider these boots as part of their wardrobe refresh. It encourages engagement with the product while promoting Diesel's innovative approach to classic styles.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (0/5 points)

By presenting these boots as a modern take on a classic style, Diesel reinforces its image as a brand that values both tradition and contemporary fashion trends without relying on overtly sexualised imagery.

Justification: This post is a pure product showcase that aligns with the brand's aesthetic while avoiding any objectification.

1.1.1.1.12. Data Collection: Diesel Post 12

Diesel July 2024

Highest Engagement: 754 Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C9R64N7o1Qg/>

Total:0/100 Points.



Figure 6.12: Diesel Post 12

Barthes and Gesuel (0/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (0/5 points)

The image showcases a pair of black, high-top D-Hammer boots, highlighting their bold design and shiny, patent-leather material. This presentation reflects Diesel's innovative approach but excludes any sexualisation or colour-related connotations.

Pose/Body Language (0/10 points)

As this is a product-focused image without any model, there are no poses or body language to assess. The boots are positioned atop a large rock, which adds a dynamic element to the presentation.

Facial expressions (0/5 points)

As this is a product-focused image without any model, there is no expression to assess.

Background settings (0/10 points)

The boots are staged on a large rock, with a dark and moody backdrop that enhances their visual prominence. This setting underscores Diesel's commitment to high-fashion aesthetics without involving objectification.

Justification: The image focuses entirely on the product's design, prioritising style and craftsmanship while excluding any visual cues that could contribute to objectification.

Signifieds & Patterns (/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (0/15 points)

The image promotes an ideology of practicality and modern style. By showcasing the D-Hammer boot as a bold statement piece, Diesel aligns itself with contemporary fashion trends that favour aesthetics and functionality without any implications of colour.

Construction of specific representations of colour (0/10 points)

The representation of the boots as showcasing Diesel's "bold new energy" suggests innovation and strength. This appeals to consumers looking for stylish yet practical footwear without any sexualised connotations.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (0/10 points)

The emphasis on ruggedness may resonate with cultural assumptions about strength but does not overtly sexualise the product or its intended wearer.

Colour palettes (0/10 points)

The black colour of the boots contrasts well with the light brownish-gray rock, creating visual interest while maintaining an elegant look typical of Diesel products.

Composition (0/5 points)

The composition effectively showcases the boots in detail, allowing viewers to appreciate their design without distraction from other elements.

Gaze (0/5 points)

As this is a product image without a model, there is no gaze to analyse.

Justification: The post remains a straightforward display of product design and innovation.

Kress and van Leeuwen (0/15 Points)

Framing (0/5 points)

The framing focuses solely on the boots, emphasising their design and features without incorporating any models or additional elements that could introduce sexualisation.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (0/5 points)

The caption invites viewers to consider these boots as part of their wardrobe refresh. It encourages engagement with the product while promoting Diesel's innovative approach to classic styles. The

caption may emphasise the boots' boldness and style, encouraging viewers to consider their inclusion in a modern wardrobe. However, this remains focused on the product's appeal.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (0/5 points)

By presenting these boots as a modern take on a classic style, Diesel reinforces its image as a brand that values both tradition and contemporary fashion trends without relying on overtly sexualised imagery.

Justification: The visual and textual elements work together to highlight the boots' design and innovation, remaining consistent with Diesel's brand identity while excluding any sexualised or colour-driven implications.

Findings and Observations for Diesel Instagram Posts

The analysis of Diesel's 12 highest-engaged Instagram posts over a year provides valuable insights into how the brand communicates with Generation Z. The scores, ranging from 0/100 to 86/100, reveal a diverse approach balancing bold, provocative aesthetics with simpler, product-focused posts.

Key Observations:

1. **High Engagement and High Objectification (Post 3: 86/100, 588 Likes)**
Diesel's bold campaigns, such as those employing provocative themes or models in exaggerated poses, garnered high objectification scores but did not consistently achieve high engagement. For instance, Post 3's high objectification (86/100) scored low engagement (588 likes). This suggests that while Diesel's edgy identity resonates with some, oversexualisation may alienate a broader audience, even within Gen Z.
2. **Rebellion and Empowerment (Post 10: 38/100, 8,676 Likes)**
Posts like Post 10 effectively utilised subversive messaging while maintaining relatively low objectification scores. The model's confident, engaging demeanour and the urban setting appealed to Diesel's Gen Z audience, reflecting values of empowerment and individuality.
3. **Minimalist Product Displays (Posts 11 and 12: 0/100, 1,606 Likes and 754 Likes)**
Posts focused solely on product display (e.g., footwear with no models) received the lowest objectification scores. However, these posts still engaged audiences to some extent, likely due to Diesel's strong branding and focus on quality and innovation.
4. **Diverse Aesthetic Approaches**
Diesel employed a mix of moody, high-fashion imagery and relatable urban settings. This variation helped maintain engagement across a diverse audience, indicating the importance of adaptability in visual communication.

Implications for Gen Z Targeting

The findings align with the dissertation's aim to understand how fashion brands communicate with Gen Z on Instagram. Diesel's emphasis on rebellion, individuality, and innovation speaks to Gen Z's desire for authenticity and self-expression. However, the disparity in engagement and objectification scores highlights a need for balance: content should empower rather than objectify to resonate deeply with this audience.

Preliminary Guidelines for Fashion Brand Leaders

1. **Prioritise Empowerment Over Sexualisation**
Use confident, engaging portrayals of models that inspire individuality and freedom. Avoid oversexualisation, as it risks disengaging Gen Z audiences.
2. **Leverage Authentic Storytelling**
Incorporate themes of rebellion, sustainability, or inclusivity that align with Gen Z values. Posts that tell a story or evoke emotion, such as Post 10, often achieve higher engagement.
3. **Mix Product-Centric and Narrative-Driven Posts**

While minimalist product-focused posts have value (Posts 11 and 12), incorporating human narratives can enhance relatability and emotional impact.

4. Maximise Visual Impact Through Multimodality

Pay attention to colour palettes, composition, and text elements. Edgy and innovative visuals (e.g., Post 6) can attract attention, but these should complement rather than overwhelm the brand's message.

5. Adaptable Aesthetics for Diverse Preferences

Experiment with both high-fashion and everyday settings. This duality allows the brand to connect with varied segments within the Gen Z demographic.

Engagement Data Integration

The decision to analyse the most engaged post each month provides a critical reference for understanding audience preferences. High engagement, as seen in Post 10 (8,676 Likes), underscores the importance of balancing bold aesthetics with relatable and empowering content. Engagement rates are a key metric to refine future strategies, ensuring posts align with audience expectations.

These findings and guidelines will contribute to the final dissertation chapter, addressing the primary and secondary research questions while guiding fashion brands in creating impactful, Gen Z-focused Instagram strategies.

1.1.1.1.1.13. Data Collection: Zara Post 1

Zara August 2023

Highest Engagement: 55 980
Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cvw52m7OQ_C/

Total: 67/100 Points.



Figure 6.13: Zara Post 1

Barthes and Gesuel (59/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (21/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (3/5 points)

The model is styled in a black, loose-fitting, long-sleeve dress that exudes sophistication. While the outfit is stylish and elevates the brand's image of elegance, it subtly hints at allure without being overtly sexualised, which aligns with Zara's refined aesthetic.

Pose/Body Language (6/10 points)

Seated with her left leg closer to the camera, the model's posture creates a balance between confidence and allure. The pose subtly highlights her legs due to the cut of the dress, adding a trace of sensuality while maintaining an overall empowered presence.

Facial expressions (4/5 points)

The model's direct gaze and slight closed-mouth smile suggest confidence and poise. Her expression feels natural and approachable, fostering a sense of connection while reinforcing the brand's sophisticated tone.

Background settings (8/10 points)

Set in a chic indoor space with a patterned rug and a fireplace, the environment enhances the perception of timeless luxury. This setting complements the model's outfit and overall presence without relying on overt cues of sexualisation.

Justification: The denotative elements in this image reflect Zara's emphasis on timeless style and empowerment. While the outfit and pose introduce slight hints of allure, the overall presentation supports a narrative of confidence and sophistication, which is central to the brand's positioning.

Signifieds & Patterns (38/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society: (12/15 points)

The post communicates themes of self-expression and empowerment, particularly by featuring an older model. This challenges the ageism often seen in fashion, presenting a progressive and inclusive message that resonates with Gen Z's values.

Construction of specific representations of colour: (4/10 points)

Although the model's confident representation challenges traditional beauty norms, the deliberate focus on her legs could be perceived as slightly objectifying. This undermines the otherwise inclusive messaging to a degree.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (5/10 points)

While showcasing an older woman is a positive step toward inclusivity, the subtle emphasis on her legs adheres to conventional representations of femininity and allure, introducing a layer of complexity to the portrayal.

Colour palettes (9/10 points)

The black-and-white aesthetic contributes a timeless, elegant feel, drawing attention to the model's features and outfit while aligning with Zara's sophisticated branding.

Composition (4/5 points)

The composition effectively frames the model and her outfit as the focal points, ensuring the product remains the centrepiece of attention without distractions.

Gaze (4/5 points)

The model's direct gaze exudes confidence and authority. This aligns with the brand's ethos while maintaining an engaging connection with the audience.

Justification: Zara successfully balances modernity and tradition, showcasing inclusivity and strength through the choice of model and setting. However, the slight focus on allure in her pose and framing introduces an element of objectification that slightly detracts from the empowering narrative.

Kress and van Leeuwen (8/15 Points)

Framing (3/5 points)

The close framing centres entirely on the model and her outfit, amplifying the message of sophistication but offering limited contextualisation beyond her immediate environment.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (2/5 points)

The caption complements the image by highlighting Zara's innovative fashion offerings and encouraging viewers to connect with its progressive aesthetic.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (3/5 points)

The choice to feature an older model in a confident pose challenges traditional fashion norms while aligning with Gen Z's call for inclusivity. However, the slight objectifying focus on her legs creates a tension between empowerment and allure.

Justification: This post leverages multimodal elements to convey Zara's focus on empowerment, style, and inclusivity, resonating with Gen Z values while maintaining the brand's polished aesthetic. Zara's August 2023 post leverages timeless styling and inclusive representation by featuring an older woman in an elegant setting. The confident posture and direct gaze communicate empowerment, which aligns with Gen Z's preference for authenticity and inclusivity. However, the subtle focus on her legs introduces elements of objectification that complicate the otherwise progressive message.

To resonate more strongly with Gen Z, Zara could further prioritise depictions that challenge conventional beauty norms without relying on subtle cues of allure, ensuring a more cohesive alignment with themes of empowerment and individuality.

1.1.1.1.14. Data Collection: Zara Post 2

Zara September 2023

Highest Engagement: 77 059
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cwxrfutotku/>

Total: 34/100 Points.



Figure 6.14: Zara Post 2

Barthes and Gesuel (30/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (11/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (2/5 points)

The dark gray cardigan paired with beige trousers and black shoes creates a polished yet casual autumn look. While stylish, these choices lean heavily on simplicity, reflecting practicality over statement-making. The outfit lacks elements that overtly sexualise or detract from the theme of everyday wear.

Pose/Body Language (3/10 points)

The model's relaxed stance, hands in pockets, feet crossed, and gaze directed downward, communicates a laid-back, approachable vibe. However, this body language lacks dynamism or assertiveness, which could contribute to perceptions of passivity.

Facial expressions (0/5 points)

The downward gaze and lack of visible facial engagement eliminate this element entirely. Without facial expression, the post loses an opportunity to convey confidence or connection.

Background settings (6/10 points)

The lively city street featuring pedestrians and storefronts establishes a relatable urban setting. This backdrop effectively complements the narrative of Zara's urban aesthetic but doesn't elevate the image significantly beyond being contextually supportive.

Justification: The styling and setting successfully reflect Zara's vision of urban, functional fashion for everyday life. While the post avoids overt sexualisation, the lack of engagement through gaze or dynamic body language limits its emotional resonance.

Signifieds & Patterns (19/55 points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society: (10/15 points)

The focus on urban style reinforces Zara's alignment with contemporary values, including practicality and individualism. The image suggests empowerment through comfort and casual elegance, yet the model's passive pose weakens the overall message of strength.

Construction of specific representations of colour (2/10 points)

The casual disengaged pose and lack of direct gaze dilute the model's agency. While not overtly objectifying, this positioning aligns with traditional representations that favour passivity, overactive engagement.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (3/10 points)

The portrayal subtly challenges stereotypes by showcasing a woman in a relatable, street-style context. However, the passive stance risks reinforcing assumptions about femininity being synonymous with passivity, limiting the post's impact.

Colour palettes (1/10 points)

The muted tones (gray, beige, and black) offer seasonal appropriateness but lack vibrancy or a strong visual statement. While the palette aligns with autumn fashion, it does little to captivate the audience or highlight individuality.

Composition (3/5 points)

The framing effectively situates the model within the urban environment, focusing on her outfit and surroundings in a balanced manner. However, it doesn't introduce striking compositional elements to enhance visual impact.

Gaze (0/5 points)

The lack of eye contact diminishes viewer engagement and reduces the potential for connection. A direct gaze could have conveyed confidence, anchoring the post with a stronger narrative.

Justification: While the image aligns with Zara's branding of urban sophistication, the passive pose and lack of vibrant elements limit its ability to inspire or engage audiences at a deeper level.

Kress and van Leeuwen (4/15 Points)

Framing (2/5 points)

The model is adequately framed within her urban surroundings, keeping the focus on her outfit. However, the framing lacks creativity or elements that elevate the visual narrative beyond the basics.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption, "Autumn is here!" is generic, missing an opportunity to connect the image to Zara's broader brand identity or the model's portrayal.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

While the post reinforces Zara's focus on practicality and seasonality, it does not challenge norms or introduce compelling narratives about individuality or empowerment.

Justification: The post functions as a serviceable promotion of seasonal fashion but falls short of leveraging its visual and textual elements to create a meaningful connection or challenge cultural norms effectively. The urban setting and emphasis on casual elegance effectively align with Zara's brand ethos. The lack of overt sexualisation ensures the focus remains on the outfit and context. The absence of direct engagement, both through facial expression and gaze, results in a passive portrayal that lacks emotional resonance. Additionally, muted colours and a generic caption fail to make the post stand out visually or thematically.

1.1.1.1.15. Data Collection: Zara Post 3

Zara October 2023

Highest Engagement: 90 146
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CyxmwqSqUd5/>

Total: 75/100 Points.



Figure 6.15: Zara Post 3

Barthes and Gesuel (66/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (24/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (4/5 points)

The long black dress with a high slit and cutout details combines allure with sophistication. The design highlights the model's figure while maintaining an elegant balance with its long sleeves. This blend of revealing and reserved elements creates a statement piece suitable for evening wear.

Pose/Body Language (8/10 points)

The model's profile pose with her back slightly turned and a gaze over her shoulder conveys a mix of intrigue and confidence. This stance accentuates the dress's features and suggests a narrative of poise and self-assuredness. However, the pose introduces slight sensuality, keeping the overall tone sophisticated yet bold.

Facial expressions (4/5 points)

The model's subtle yet engaging expression enhances the sense of allure. Her over-the-shoulder gaze adds depth, inviting viewers into the narrative of the image while maintaining a confident and elegant demeanour.

Background settings (8/10 points)

The vibrant orange background contrasts beautifully with the black dress, drawing attention to the model and her outfit. This intentional colour choice elevates the overall visual impact without overshadowing the fashion focus.

Justification: The carefully selected outfit, pose, and background work together to embody Zara's brand identity, highlighting bold, contemporary fashion without overtly sexualised undertones.

Signifieds & Patterns (42/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (12/15 points)

The image champions empowerment through bold fashion choices, suggesting that personal style can serve as a vehicle for confidence and self-expression. The high slit and cutout details are presented as elements of a modern aesthetic, reinforcing Zara's appeal to those seeking striking yet sophisticated looks.

Construction of specific representations of colour (6/10 points)

While the design choices (e.g., high slit, cutouts) lean toward sensuality, the presentation steers clear of overt sexualisation. The model's confident pose adds a sense of agency, balancing allure with empowerment.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (7/10 points)

The post challenges outdated norms by presenting a daring outfit worn with confidence. However, it also partially reinforces cultural associations between femininity and sensuality, even as it frames this as an empowered choice.

Colour palettes (9/10 points)

The sharp contrast between the black dress and orange background commands attention, making the post visually compelling. This palette underscores Zara's ability to pair simplicity with boldness effectively.

Composition (4/5 points)

The composition directs focus toward the model and her outfit, integrating the background without distracting from the primary subject. While effective, it could be more dynamic to create additional visual intrigue.

Gaze (4/5 points)

The over-the-shoulder gaze engages viewers meaningfully, suggesting confidence and a sense of individuality. This choice helps maintain the balance between empowerment and sensuality.

Justification: This post aligns with Zara's branding by promoting confidence and sophistication in fashion. The combination of striking design, vibrant aesthetics, and poised presentation communicates modernity without overstepping into objectification.

Kress and van Leeuwen (9/15 Points)

Framing (4/5 points)

The tight framing ensures that the model and her outfit remain the focal points while leveraging the vibrant background to add depth and impact. This framing reinforces the bold yet elegant tone of the image.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (3/5 points)

The caption, "Long dress," is functional but lacks creativity. While it identifies the product, it misses an opportunity to tell a more compelling story or connect with Zara's broader brand messaging.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The post reinforces Zara's positioning as a modern and bold fashion brand. However, it doesn't significantly challenge existing norms or introduce innovative narratives around fashion and empowerment.

Justification: The post leverages strong visuals and thoughtful design elements to elevate its impact. However, a more engaging caption or innovative narrative could strengthen its connection to Zara's audience. Effective use of colour contrast and composition to draw attention to the model and her outfit. Confident pose and elegant presentation align with Zara's image as a purveyor of bold, sophisticated fashion. The high slit and cutouts, while not overtly objectifying, lean toward sensuality, requiring careful balancing to avoid reducing the narrative to allure. The caption is uninspired, missing the opportunity to deepen viewer engagement or highlight Zara's unique fashion perspective.

1.1.1.1.16. Data Collection: Zara Post 4

Zara November 2023

Highest Engagement: 247 747
Likes

Link to post:
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CzRZ-uzKKLw/>

Total: 49/100 Points.



Figure 6.16: Zara Post 4

Barthes and Gesuel (45/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (16/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (3/5 points)

The model is wearing a vibrant green scarf/shawl, which stands out against the red door/panelled wall and immediately draws the viewer's attention. Its casual, relaxed drape suggests effortless style, aligning with Zara's contemporary aesthetic. The choice of a bold colour suggests a focus on fashion and style, while the scarf's casual appearance aligns with a relaxed yet fashionable aesthetic.

Pose/Body Language (7/10 points)

The model is positioned from her elbows up, looking directly at the camera with her mouth slightly agape. This pose conveys openness and engagement, suggesting confidence. However, the slight agape expression may also introduce an element of vulnerability.

Facial expressions (3/5 points)

The direct gaze at the camera combined with her mouth slightly open creates an inviting and approachable expression. This can engage viewers but may also be interpreted as slightly suggestive, depending on context.

Background settings (3/10 points)

The vibrant red door/panelled wall provides a striking contrast to the green scarf, enhancing the overall visual impact of the image. This choice creates a lively atmosphere that complements the

fashion being showcased. The red panelled wall contrasts strikingly with the scarf but lacks depth or context, providing only a visually pleasing backdrop without enriching the narrative.

Justification: The clothing choices reflect Zara's commitment to stylish and bold fashion. The model's pose and expression contribute to an engaging presentation that balances confidence with a hint of vulnerability. Zara successfully draws attention to its accessory while using the model's pose and expression to connect emotionally. However, the ambiguous tone and lack of background richness slightly undercut the full potential for empowerment in the image.

Signifieds & Patterns (29/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society: (5/15 points)

The image promotes an ideology of self-expression through fashion. By showcasing a model in a bold scarf against a vibrant background, Zara aligns itself with contemporary values around individuality and style. This post aligns with Zara's promotion of individuality and boldness in fashion but doesn't fully embody broader societal values like empowerment or inclusivity.

Construction of specific representations of colour (6/10 points)

The interplay of green and red effectively creates a festive and eye-catching image, subtly reflecting confidence and seasonal style.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (6/10 points)

While the portrayal hints at allure through gaze and expression, it doesn't challenge traditional notions significantly enough to stand out as empowering.

Colour palettes (7/10 points)

The vibrant green of the scarf against the red background creates a visually striking contrast that enhances the overall aesthetic while drawing attention to the model's features. The striking colour contrast enhances the visual appeal, ensuring the scarf remains the focal point while maintaining cohesion.

Composition (1/5 points)

The composition effectively showcases both the model and her outfit, allowing viewers to appreciate her presence without distraction from other elements. Although visually balanced, the simplicity of the setup underutilises the opportunity to tell a richer story.

Gaze (4/5 points)

The direct eye contact is engaging, but the slightly agape mouth may lean towards inviting objectification rather than asserting confidence.

Justification: Zara's bold colour play captures attention, but the overall narrative feels limited, leaving room to strengthen themes of empowerment.

Kress and van Leeuwen (4/15 Points)

Framing (2/5 points)

The framing keeps the focus on the model and scarf, ensuring clarity but lacking an element of storytelling or environmental intrigue.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)**How other elements shape interpretation: (1/5 points)**

The caption "Knitwear collection" complements the scarf but misses an opportunity to evoke lifestyle associations or aspirations.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image: (1/5 points)

The image reinforces Zara's fashion-forward identity but doesn't challenge societal norms or stereotypes significantly.

Justification: The combination of vibrant colour, approachable styling, and direct gaze aligns with Zara's branding but could benefit from a more cohesive message of empowerment and confidence.

1.1.1.1.1.17. Data Collection: Zara Post 5

Zara December 2023

Highest Engagement: 123 923
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C0dzDMeK8sV/>

Total: 80/100 Points.



Figure 6.17: Zara Post 5

Barthes and Gesuel (70/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (25/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (5/5 points)

The model is wearing a form-fitting leather or pleather dress with a V-neckline. This choice of material and cut highlights her figure and suggests a bold, edgy aesthetic. Although the exact length of the dress is not visible due to her seated position, the emphasis on texture through lighting adds to its appeal. The fitted nature of the dress accentuates her body shape, which could be interpreted as sexualised due to its emphasis on her figure. The leather dress's bold texture and form-fitting cut perfectly align with Zara's edgy, high-fashion identity. The attention to material and structure highlights a modern, daring aesthetic.

Pose/Body Language (7/10 points)

The model is seated with her hands placed on her lap, which covers most of her thighs and mid-section. This pose conveys a sense of poise and control, although it may also introduce an element of vulnerability due to the partial exposure. The relaxed yet posed posture indicates confidence. While her posture is confident, the positioning can suggest submission or passivity.

Facial expressions (4/5 points)

The model's serious expression and direct gaze at the viewer convey confidence and engagement. This expression invites connection while maintaining an air of seriousness that can enhance the overall impact of the image. The model's serious, confident expression enhances the image's overall impact. It avoids overt seduction but still leans slightly into the allure created by her attire.

Background settings (9/10 points)

The plain white backdrop isolates the model, allowing her to be the central focus. This isolation can enhance the viewer's attention on her body and attire, potentially reinforcing colour. The plain white backdrop isolates the model and her shape effectively, ensuring the dress remains the centrepiece. However, this starkness might overly simplify the visual narrative.

Justification: While the clothing choices reflect bold fashion, they also introduce elements that could be perceived as sexualised. The combination of bold attire, poised posture, and focused expression strongly conveys Zara's branding while walking a delicate line between empowerment and potential objectification.

Signifieds & Patterns (45/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society: (11/15 points)

The image promotes empowerment through fashion but does so in a context that could be interpreted as objectifying due to the emphasis on physical appearance. It reflects contemporary values around self-expression while also playing into traditional notions of femininity. In this way, the post advocates for self-expression and boldness, albeit within a framework that still subtly reinforces traditional standards of beauty and desirability.

Construction of specific representations of colour (8/10 points)

The fitted nature of the dress and the model's pose may lead to interpretations of colour. While she appears empowered, there is an underlying tension in how her body is presented. The monochrome palette enhances sophistication and places further emphasis on the model's figure and dress.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (8/10 points)

The portrayal challenges traditional norms but simultaneously reinforces cultural assumptions about women's bodies being objects of desire. The combination of a serious expression with revealing attire complicates this representation. The image straddles empowerment and objectification, using visual cues that challenge and reinforce femininity's association with allure.

Colour palettes (8/10 points)

The black-and-white aesthetic creates a classic look but also serves to highlight the model's figure without distractions from colour. However, the black-and-white aesthetic is classic and impactful, elevating the image's overall sophistication.

Composition (4/5 points)

The centred, uncluttered composition ensures a sharp focus on the model and product but risks overemphasising physicality.

Gaze (4/5 points)

The direct gaze is commanding, adding confidence and engagement, though it can also encourage scrutiny.

Justification: Zara achieves a striking balance of boldness and elegance but could refine the interplay between empowerment and objectification to better align with progressive values.

Kress and van Leeuwen (10/15 Points)

Framing (4/5 points)

The framing isolates the model effectively but could reinforce colour by focusing solely on her physical appearance without context beyond product and sale. The framing isolates the subject effectively, ensuring clarity and focus. However, the lack of contextual depth limits storytelling opportunities.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation: (3/5 points)

The caption "LEATHER CAPSULE" invites engagement but does not mitigate the potential for sexualisation inherent in the imagery. The "LEATHER CAPSULE" caption also amplifies the exclusivity and boldness of the imagery, enhancing its overall impact.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (3/5 points)

The visual and verbal elements cohesively reinforce Zara's edgy and modern brand identity, striking a chord with its audience.

Justification: This post encapsulates Zara's aesthetic vision effectively while walking a fine line between celebrating bold femininity and catering to traditional allure.

1.1.1.1.1.18. Data Collection: Zara Post 6

Zara January 2024

Highest Engagement: 126 701 Likes

Link to post: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2b9q15Krb0/>

Total: 79/100 Points.

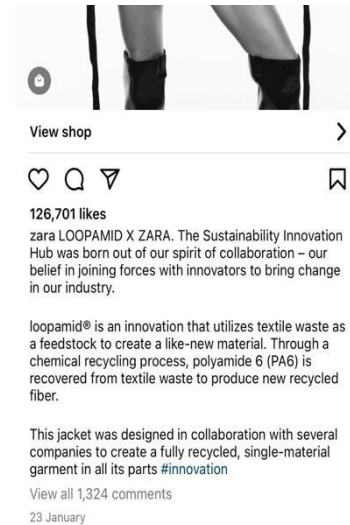


Figure 6.18: Zara Post 6

Caption 6.18: Zara Post 5

Barthes and Gesuel (69/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (26/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (5/5 points)

The oversized bomber jacket paired with knee-high boots creates a bold fashion statement. While the absence of visible lower garments enhances the visual impact of the boots, it also draws attention to the model's legs. The combination of elements may evoke a potential sexual undertone.

Pose/Body Language (8/10 points)

The three-quarter pose with arms raised pulling the hood adds a sense of movement and dynamic energy. However, the focus on her legs, amplified by the absence of pants, may enhance the suggested exposure or vulnerability, creating a dual reading of empowerment and objectification.

Facial expressions (4/5 points)

The model's direct gaze and neutral expression project confidence, aligning with the minimalist aesthetic. While the expression is not overtly provocative, the interplay with revealing attire complicates its interpretation, teetering between self-assurance and subtle allure.

Background settings (9/10 points)

The plain white background effectively isolates the model, focusing attention solely on her and her outfit. While this minimalist approach highlights the clothing, it inadvertently amplifies the model's physical presence, which can heighten the perceived objectification.

Justification: The outfit and styling embody Zara's modern aesthetic but introduce elements of sexualisation through the focus on bare legs and alluring footwear. The pose and setting reinforce the minimalist yet provocative tone.

Signifieds & Patterns (43/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (10/15 points)

The image promotes a contemporary fashion ideology rooted in boldness and individuality. However, it subtly leans into traditional notions of femininity and allure by accentuating physical appearance, reflecting an ongoing tension in the representation of women in fashion.

Construction of specific representations of colour (8/10 points)

The stark contrast between the black boots and white background creates a strong visual hierarchy, drawing immediate attention to the model's legs. The absence of vibrant colours ensures focus remains on the silhouette and texture, enhancing its stylistic impact.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (8/10 points)

The portrayal navigates themes of empowerment but also perpetuates cultural notions of femininity as inherently linked to physical allure. The serious expression juxtaposed with revealing elements reinforces this complexity.

Colour palettes (9/10 points)

The black-and-white palette evokes sophistication while directing attention to the model's form. This intentional choice aligns with Zara's branding, though it may also heighten the potential for objectification.

Composition (5/5 points)

The centered placement of the model ensures the outfit is the focal point, effectively showcasing Zara's product. However, the emphasis on the lower body introduces interpretative layers tied to objectification.

Gaze (3/5 points)

The direct gaze establishes a connection with viewers, exuding confidence. Yet, in the context of the styling, it may also invite scrutiny, complicating the reading of empowerment versus objectification.

Justification: The post reflects Zara's bold branding while subtly perpetuating objectifying visual codes. The interplay of simplicity, focus on the model's body, and minimalist aesthetics leaves room for varied interpretations.

Kress and van Leeuwen (10/15 Points)

Framing (4/5 points)

The close framing isolates the model effectively but contributes to an emphasis on her body, particularly her legs, which could heighten perceptions of objectification.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (2/5 points)

The caption underscores Zara's innovative collection, contextualising the outfit within a broader narrative of contemporary fashion. However, the minimalist visual design overshadows the textual messaging, amplifying physical emphasis.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (4/5 points)

The image reinforces Zara's daring yet stylish image but skirts the edge of objectification by relying on revealing styling and dynamic posing to draw attention.

Justification: The visual and textual elements align with Zara's branding goals but highlight the fine balance between empowerment and objectification, with an emphasis on fashion-forward styling.

1.1.1.1.19. Data Collection: Zara Post 7

Zara February 2024

Highest Engagement: 183 254

Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C3GDJwXs5XU/?img_index=1

Total: 60/100 Points.

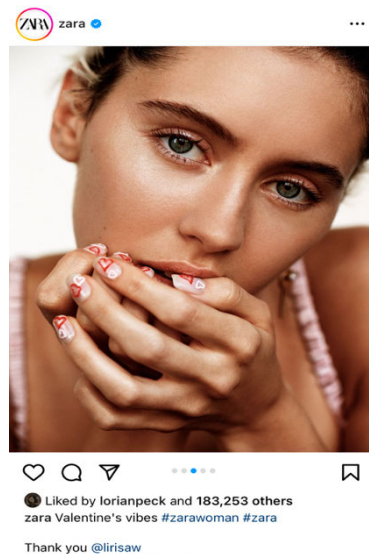


Figure 6.19: Zara Post 7.1



Figure 6.20: Zara Post 7.2



Figure 6.21: Zara Post 7.3



Figure 6.22: Zara Post 7.4



Figure 6.23: Zara Post 7.5

Barthes and Gesuel (55/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (21/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (4/5 points)

The diverse range of outfits, from distressed denim to an elegant satin skirt, demonstrates Zara's playful yet sophisticated approach to Valentine's fashion. Heart-shaped patches and vibrant colours

reinforce themes of love and celebration. However, sheer materials and high slits in some outfits may introduce subtle sensuality, which can be interpreted as sexualising certain looks.

Pose/Body Language (6/10 points)

The variety of poses, from relaxed crouching to seated with legs apart, projects confidence and playfulness. However, specific poses in images 4 and 5 emphasise the model's legs and silhouette, potentially introducing a layer of objectification or vulnerability.

Facial expressions (3/5 points)

The range of expressions, from neutral to slightly contemplative, aligns with the playful yet refined tone. In image 3, the subtle lip-biting adds a hint of allure without crossing into overt sexualisation. Overall, the expressions maintain an approachable vibe while subtly engaging viewers.

Background settings (8/10 points)

The neutral-toned backgrounds (grey, beige, taupe) effectively isolate the model and her outfits, keeping focus on the clothing. While these choices enhance the fashion-forward aesthetic, they may unintentionally amplify attention on the model's body due to the minimal distractions.

Justification: The clothing and poses reflect Zara's intent to balance playful, romantic themes with high-fashion styling. However, certain poses and elements of the styling introduce a degree of sexualisation that contrasts with the otherwise empowering presentation.

Signifieds & Patterns (34/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (12/15 points)

The campaign promotes themes of individuality and self-expression, aligned with contemporary Valentine's Day ideals. By offering diverse styles, Zara encourages women to embrace personal style and playfulness. However, subtle sexualisation in some imagery may dilute the empowering message.

Construction of specific representations of colour (7/10 points)

The vibrant reds and soft pastels evoke romantic themes, complemented by the playful styling. Yet, the sheer and form-fitting elements in certain outfits, alongside provocative poses, draw attention to the model's body, creating a layered reading of sensuality versus empowerment.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (6/10 points)

The imagery challenges traditional femininity by prioritising bold fashion choices. However, it also subtly reinforces assumptions about women's bodies as central to visual appeal, particularly through revealing styling and leg-focused compositions.

Colour palettes (3/10 points)

The use of soft creams, pinks, and vibrant reds creates a romantic yet approachable aesthetic. While these tones enhance the campaign's charm, they also contribute to an emphasis on the model's physical form in some frames.

Composition (3/5 points)

The compositions effectively showcase the outfits, ensuring each piece is given prominence. However, some images (notably 4 and 5) place undue emphasis on the model's legs and silhouette, which could heighten perceptions of objectification.

Gaze (3/5 points)

The direct gaze in several images creates a connection with viewers, projecting confidence. However, the physical framing and outfit choices may shift the gaze's effect from empowerment to an invitation for scrutiny.

Justification: While the campaign effectively captures Zara's ethos of playful sophistication, the balance between empowerment and objectification is uneven due to some styling and compositional choices.

Kress and van Leeuwen (5/15 Points)

Framing (3/5 points)

The minimalist framing ensures focus remains on the model and the clothing. However, the tight framing on certain poses amplifies attention on the model's body, creating interpretative tension between empowerment and objectification.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption, "Valentine's vibes," reinforces the campaign's playful intent, inviting viewers to engage with the collection in a celebratory context. However, the imagery slightly overpowers the text in shaping viewer perceptions.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The campaign reinforces Zara's brand identity as bold and modern, presenting a mix of empowering and sensual elements. However, reliance on certain styling choices risks prioritising allure over individuality.

Justification: The visual and textual elements complement each other well, but the campaign could better align its empowering message by avoiding poses or styling that verge on objectification.

1.1.1.1.1.20. Data Collection: Zara Post 8

Zara March 2024

Highest Engagement: 223 001 Likes

Link to post: https://www.instagram.com/p/C4qCS4oKV4K/?img_index=1

Total: 72/100 Points.

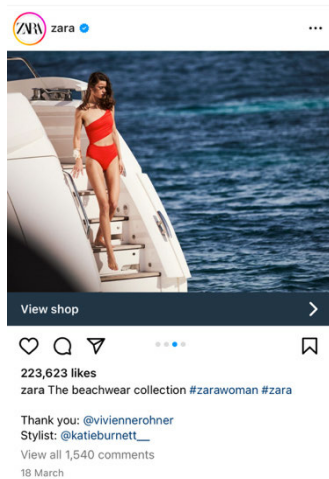


Figure 6.24: Zara Post 8.1

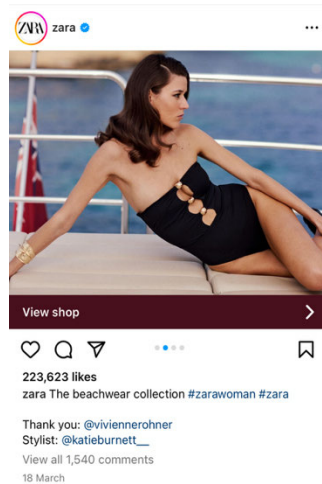


Figure 6.25: Zara Post 8.2



Figure 6.26: Zara Post 8.3

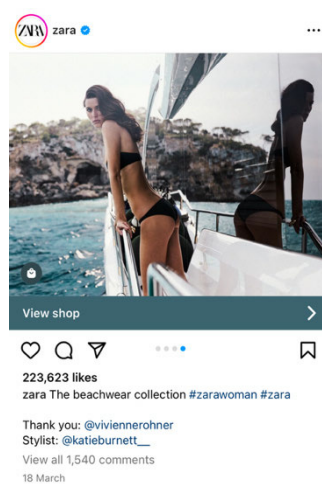


Figure 6.27: Zara Post 8.4

Barthes and Gesuel (67/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (24/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (5/5 points)

The selection of swimsuits, including leopard-print and cutout designs, reflects Zara's commitment to high-fashion beachwear. The bold styles align with summer trends and emphasise sophistication. Given the inherent nature of swimwear, sensuality is present but is consistent with the category norms.

Pose/Body Language (7/10 points)

The model's poses range from dynamic (standing confidently on a yacht) to less active (reclining or perched on a railing). While the confident poses convey empowerment, others focus on her body's curves, leaning towards objectification by framing her as an object of aesthetic appeal rather than an active participant.

Facial expressions (4/5 points)

The model's neutral expressions, including direct gazes and moments of disengagement (e.g., looking past the camera), convey a sense of calm and sophistication. However, in the context of swimwear, this neutrality can sometimes be interpreted as alluring rather than empowering.

Background settings (8/10 points)

The luxurious outdoor environments, such as yachts and coastal backdrops, evoke themes of aspiration and leisure. However, by framing the model as part of these affluent settings, the focus on her physical form can subtly reinforce objectification, particularly when paired with swimwear.

Justification: While the clothing and settings align with Zara's sophisticated beachwear branding, the poses and framing contribute to an interpretation that mixes empowerment with a subtle reinforcement of traditional ideals of femininity and sensuality.

Signifieds & Patterns (43/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (13/15 points)

The images align with themes of luxury and body positivity, inviting women to embrace their style confidently. However, the reliance on certain poses perpetuates the cultural expectation of women's bodies as central to their appeal, blurring the empowering narrative.

Construction of specific representations of colour (7/10 points)

The vibrant tones of the swimsuits contrast effectively with the coastal backgrounds, adding sophistication and visual dynamism. The bold styling contributes to the aspirational tone, though it also draws attention to the model's physique.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (8/10 points)

Zara challenges traditional feminine ideals by portraying a confident, modern woman. However, the emphasis on her physical form within these luxurious settings reiterates the historical use of women's bodies as objects of allure, especially in swimwear campaigns.

Colour palettes (7/10 points)

The balance of vibrant and neutral tones complements the campaign's aspirational aesthetic. However, this interplay of colour also highlights the model's body shape, aligning with conventional beauty ideals.

Composition (4/5 points)

The composition effectively highlights the model and the swimwear, maintaining visual balance. However, some shots, especially those that heavily crop to emphasise the model's legs or torso, verge on objectification.

Gaze (4/5 points)

The model's gaze, whether direct or disengaged, maintains viewer engagement. However, the framing of certain poses alongside her gaze may subtly invite scrutiny rather than projecting power.

Justification: The campaign effectively highlights Zara's positioning as a modern fashion brand but sometimes over-relies on traditional tropes of female sensuality, diluting the empowering message.

Kress and van Leeuwen (5/15 Points)

Framing (3/5 points)

The framing successfully places the model in aspirational settings, balancing context with focus on the beachwear. However, tighter shots emphasising specific body parts occasionally detract from this balance.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption, "The beachwear collection," succinctly introduces the collection, inviting engagement. While it complements the visual narrative, the imagery may overshadow the text due to its sensual undertones.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The campaign reinforces Zara's modern, aspirational identity. However, its reliance on a sensual aesthetic somewhat limits the scope for broader inclusivity in defining empowerment.

Justification: The interplay of text, visuals, and setting underscores Zara's branding while walking a fine line between empowerment and sensual appeal.

1.1.1.1.1.21. Data Collection: Zara Post 9

Zara April 2024

Highest Engagement: 169 102
Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C5eOIdntW-E/?img_index=1

Total: 67/100 Points.



Figure 6.28: Zara Post 9.1



Figure 6.29: Zara Post 9.2



Figure 6.30: Zara Post 9.3

Barthes and Gesuel (62/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (23/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (4/5 points)

The casual summer outfits, including a cream cut-out tank top, black halter-neck top, and tie-dye bikini top with wide-leg jeans, embody relaxed yet trendy aesthetics. While stylish, the cut-outs and

fitted designs lean towards sensuality, particularly with the bikini top, which shifts focus to the model's physique.

Pose/Body Language (7/10 points)

The poses, such as standing against a doorway or sitting on a patio, convey a relaxed and natural vibe. However, poses that deliberately emphasise body parts (e.g., highlighting legs or curves) introduce elements of objectification, detracting from the overall empowerment message.

Facial expressions (4/5 points)

Neutral and relaxed expressions suggest confidence. However, in the context of casual yet revealing attire, these expressions can sometimes amplify interpretations of allure.

Background settings (8/10 points)

The warm, rustic outdoor settings add depth to the summer aesthetic, enhancing the collection's overall appeal. While the backgrounds support the narrative, their composition often accentuates the model's body, subtly reinforcing objectification.

Justification: The campaign successfully reflects Zara's casual summer fashion ethos. However, the interplay of relaxed poses and revealing designs partially detracts from its empowerment narrative by prioritising aesthetics over substance.

Signifieds & Patterns (39/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (12/15 points)

The imagery aligns with themes of individuality and comfort, showcasing modern summer styles. Despite these progressive undertones, certain elements perpetuate conventional ideals of beauty and body display, which could dilute the narrative of self-expression.

Construction of specific representations of colour (6/10 points)

The earthy tones of the outfits harmonise with the natural backdrops, creating a cohesive aesthetic. However, this balance is occasionally disrupted by poses that draw disproportionate attention to the model's physique.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (6/10 points)

While Zara's portrayal of a confident woman challenges some traditional gender norms, the focus on her body, accentuated by revealing attire, reaffirms the cultural expectation of women's appearance being central to their worth.

Colour palettes (7/10 points)

The light and airy colour scheme enhances the summery vibe and highlights the model's outfits. The palettes remain elegant, though they sometimes work to highlight physical features, reinforcing an aesthetic-driven narrative.

Composition (4/5 points)

The composition balances the model and her surroundings well, creating a pleasing visual flow. However, tighter frames that focus on specific body parts lean towards objectification.

Gaze (4/5 points)

The model's neutral gaze engages viewers subtly but lacks the dynamic confidence that might shift the narrative fully towards empowerment.

Justification: The campaign effectively promotes Zara's summer collection, yet it remains tethered to cultural conventions of sensuality and aesthetic allure, occasionally undermining its message of comfort and individuality.

Kress and van Leeuwen (5/15 Points)

Framing (3/5 points)

The framing integrates the model into the natural settings, adding contextual depth. However, certain compositions prioritise body emphasis over the holistic presentation of the outfits.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption, "This is #zaranewin," ties the imagery to Zara's branding strategy, though the visual focus on physicality might overshadow the text's intent.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

By presenting a confident woman in summer attire, Zara reinforces its reputation for stylish seasonal collections. The campaign successfully avoids overt sexualisation, though subtle elements of sensuality remain.

Justification: The presentation complements Zara's branding by showcasing its commitment to modern fashion while striking a balance between empowerment and allure.

1.1.1.1.1.22. Data Collection: Zara Post 10

Zara May 2024

Highest Engagement: 144 775 Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C6x6hZruCKW/?img_index=1

Total: 68/100 Points.



Figure 6.31: Zara Post 10.1

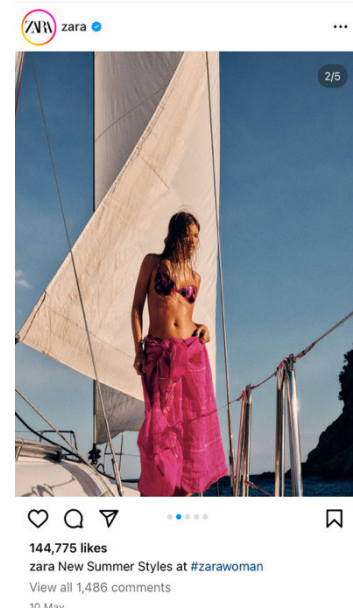


Figure 6.32: Zara Post 10.2



Figure 6.33: Zara Post 10.3



Figure 6.34: Zara Post 10.4

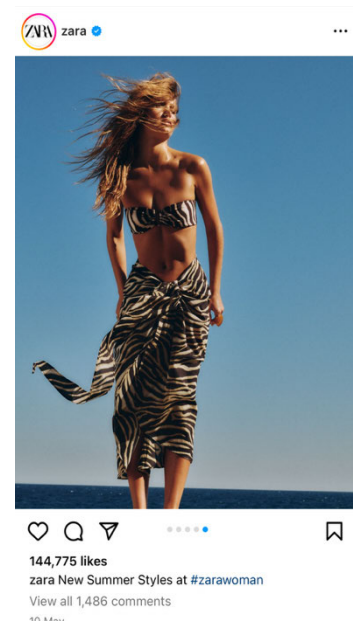


Figure 6.35: Zara Post 10.5

Barthes and Gesuel (60/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (23/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (5/5 points)

The leopard-print and zebra-striped outfits, swimwear, and summer dresses highlight Zara's trendy approach to summer fashion. The incorporation of animal prints and fitted styles introduces playful sensuality, particularly in swimwear, which directly aligns with summer aesthetics. The use of animal prints and fitted styles can introduce elements of sensuality, particularly in swimwear.

Pose/Body Language (5/10 points)

While some poses convey confidence and elegance, others, such as those highlighting the model's curves or body shape in swimwear, lean toward objectification. A seated pose with her back to the camera exemplifies this imbalance by prioritising physical allure over the collection itself.

Facial expressions (4/5 points)

The relaxed and neutral expressions project subtle confidence. However, the model's gaze, often directed away from the camera, may evoke allure and introspection, amplifying interpretations of sensuality in some contexts.

Background settings (9/10 points)

The vibrant outdoor settings, including beaches and sailboats, amplify the glamorous appeal of the campaign. Although the scenery enhances the collection's narrative, it also shifts focus onto the model's body, subtly reinforcing objectification.

Justification: Zara successfully embodies summer fashion with trendy and visually engaging imagery. However, the interplay of sensual styling and body-emphasising poses sometimes detracts from the empowerment narrative.

Signifieds & Patterns (37/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (11/15 points)

By showcasing diverse summer styles, the campaign reflects themes of self-expression and leisure. However, the recurring emphasis on physical appearance adheres to traditional beauty standards, limiting its progressive impact.

Construction of specific representations of colour (5/10 points)

The palette of soft and vibrant tones enhances the summery feel and elegance of the collection. Yet, certain colour and print choices draw excessive attention to the model's physique, reinforcing objectification patterns.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (6/10 points)

The imagery promotes a confident portrayal of women but relies on sensual poses and revealing outfits. This approach perpetuates the narrative of women's bodies as focal points, particularly in the swimwear contexts.

Colour palettes (7/10 points)

Earthy and vibrant colours work harmoniously with the natural settings, creating a pleasing aesthetic. While visually impactful, these choices can unintentionally heighten the focus on physical features.

Composition (4/5 points)

The compositions balance the outfits and settings well, though tight framing on certain body parts (e.g., legs or back) detracts from the focus on the collection.

Gaze (4/5 points)

The direct gaze is minimal, with most images featuring the model looking away. While this adds a casual, introspective tone, it inadvertently reinforces passive narratives that align with objectification tropes.

Justification: The campaign delivers on summer fashion and glamour but falters by reinforcing aesthetic-driven ideals, limiting the scope for an empowered portrayal.

Kress and van Leeuwen (8/15 Points)**Framing (4/5 points)**

The framing effectively integrates the model within scenic settings, keeping the focus on summer fashion. However, compositions that prioritise body-centric angles undermine the balance between empowerment and sensuality.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (2/5 points)

The caption “New Summer Styles” is engaging but generic, failing to add meaningful context to the visual narrative.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The campaign reinforces Zara’s trendy image but does little to challenge traditional portrayals of women in fashion.

Justification: The multimodal elements of this post align with Zara’s brand strategy but lack the nuance to disrupt entrenched ideals of femininity and sensuality.

1.1.1.1.1.23. Data Collection: Zara Post 11

Zara June 2024

Highest Engagement: 85 100 Likes

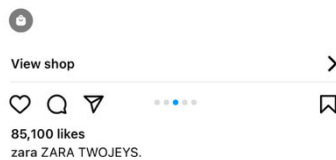
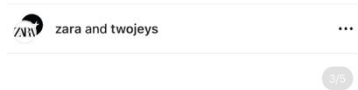


Figure 6.36: Zara Post 11.1

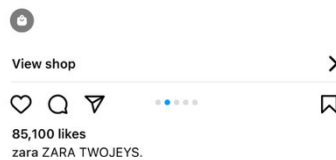
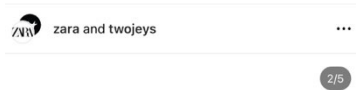


Figure 6.37: Zara Post 11.2

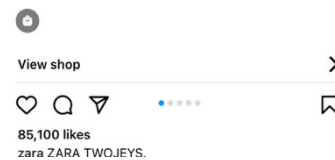
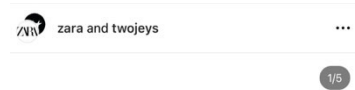


Figure 6.38: Zara Post 11.3

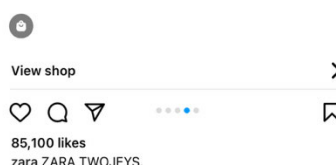
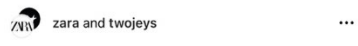


Figure 6.39: Zara Post 11.4

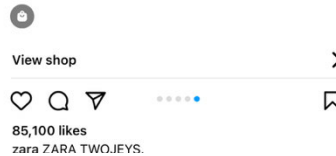


Figure 6.40: Zara Post 11.5

85,100 likes
zara ZARA TWOJEYS.

Men's jewellery start-up brand, TwoJeys, and Zara have joined forces to create a radical capsule collection for every contemporary pleasure-seeking mind. The unique collaboration with Zara was born to capture the imagination of fellow travelers across the world.
#zaratwojeys

Thanks to @evanmock @lirisaw @carlisleikens @campschill @yan__li @lennykoundeldiaw

Photographer: @glen_luchford
Stylist: @melzy917
Make up: @yad1m
Hair Stylist: @paulhanlonhair
Production: @dayinternational

Caption: Zara Post 11

Link to post: https://www.instagram.com/p/C7vxi8SNtng/?img_index=1

Total: 54/100 Points.

Barthes and Gesuel (48/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (17/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (2/5 points)

The outfits reflect a casual, adventurous summer theme, blending practicality and trendiness. However, the form-fitting and minimally covered pieces, particularly on the female model, introduce a subtle but consistent emphasis on sensuality, diminishing the overall empowerment narrative.

Pose/Body Language (5/10 points)

Poses range from casual to dynamic, such as seated on a motorcycle or horseback. The female model's stances, particularly when seated or leaning, focus on her physique, which can subtly signal vulnerability. While the male model's poses are neutral, the disparity in portrayal reinforces potential objectification.

Facial expressions (3/5 points)

Neutral and contemplative expressions dominate the carousel, adding a layer of introspection. However, the subdued engagement through downcast gazes or looking away contributes to passive allure rather than confidence.

Background settings (7/10 points)

The scenic outdoor settings, desert landscapes and vintage diners, enhance the adventurous theme. While these backdrops contextualise the campaign, they also draw attention to the models' appearances, emphasising their bodies over the outfits in certain compositions.

Justification: Although Zara effectively presents a summer collection rooted in casual style and adventure, the overemphasis on body-centric elements detracts from the empowering tone.

Signifieds & Patterns (31/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (8/15 points)

Themes of individuality and leisure are communicated, aligning with Zara's summer collection. However, the reliance on body-focused imagery undermines the progressive portrayal of modern adventure and freedom.

Construction of specific representations of colour (5/10 points)

Warm tones and vibrant palettes enhance the visuals, yet their use often draws excessive focus to the models' physiques, especially in more revealing clothing.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (6/10 points)

While the male model is styled with simplicity, the female model's outfits and poses lean into traditional expectations of allure, perpetuating an imbalance in portrayals of gender and power dynamics.

Colour palettes (6/10 points)

The palette is harmonious and visually engaging, contributing to the summer aesthetic. However, the emphasis on warm tones and patterns can detract attention from the clothing to the models themselves.

Composition (3/5 points)

The compositions are balanced but lack innovation, with repetitive framing that often prioritises the models' physical features over the collection itself.

Gaze (3/5 points)

While the direct gaze appears sparingly, it sometimes reinforces a sense of scrutiny, inviting focus on appearance rather than the campaign's adventurous tone.

Justification: The imagery underscores Zara's branding as fashionable and modern but reinforces stereotypes by prioritising physical allure over the adventurous and carefree theme.

Kress and van Leeuwen (6/15 Points)

Framing (3/5 points)

The framing places the models in scenic settings, balancing the narrative of adventure. However, tighter shots on specific body angles shift the focus toward objectification rather than the full collection.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption, "New Summer Styles at #zarawoman," is generic and lacks depth, offering limited contextual support to the visual narrative.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

While Zara positions itself as a trend-forward brand for summer styles, it reinforces traditional and objectifying portrayals rather than challenging norms or offering fresh perspectives.

Justification: The multimodal elements fall short in meaningfully enhancing the campaign's adventurous tone, with a tendency to reinforce rather than disrupt conventional portrayals.

1.1.1.1.1.24. Data Collection: Zara Post 12

Zara July 2024

Highest Engagement: 72 060 Likes

Link to post: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9SMDa1qOu7/?img_index=5

Total: 59/100 Points.



Figure 6.41: Zara Post 12.1

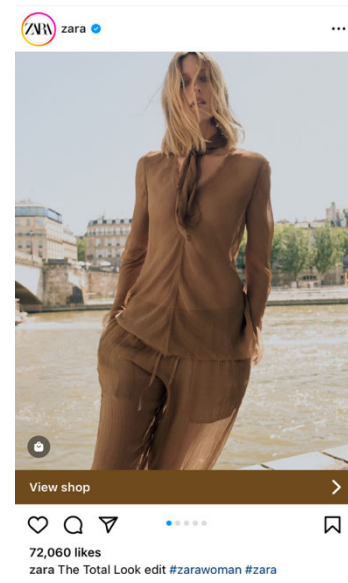


Figure 6.42: Zara Post 12.2



Figure 6.43: Zara Post 12.3



Figure 6.44: Zara Post 12.4



Figure 6.45: Zara Post 12.5

Barthes and Gesuel (53/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (18/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (3/5 points)

The model wears a variety of stylish outfits, including a semi-sheer button-down top with matching wide-leg pants, a cream midi-length dress, a wrap-style shirt dress, an off-white tunic, and a linen vest-style top with wide-legged pants. These choices reflect a sophisticated yet relaxed summer aesthetic. The flowing fabrics and loose fits align with a sophisticated summer aesthetic. However, the semi-sheer and form-fitting elements in certain outfits subtly draw attention to the model's physique, balancing elegance with sensuality.

Pose/Body Language (6/10 points)

The poses convey confidence and ease, adding to the theme of casual elegance. Yet, some stances, like peeking through her hair or leaning, focus on her physical features, occasionally suggesting vulnerability or allure.

Facial expressions (2/5 points)

Neutral expressions dominate the carousel, with moments of playful engagement. These expressions strike a balance between confidence and approachability but occasionally lean into subtle allure through gestures like peeking through her hair.

Background settings (7/10 points)

Classic European cityscapes elevate the campaign's elegance and aspirational tone. However, the scenic settings often emphasise the model's body and positioning over the collection, detracting from a pure focus on the fashion.

Justification: The denotative elements reflect Zara's emphasis on stylish summer sophistication but occasionally veer into objectification through specific poses, expressions, and the interplay between the model and the setting.

Signifieds & Patterns (35/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (8/15 points)

Zara promotes themes of individuality and chic summer style while reinforcing aspirational values. However, the execution sometimes over-relies on aestheticised portrayals of femininity rather than challenging conventional representations.

Construction of specific representations of colour (6/10 points)

The soft colour palette is cohesive and sophisticated, contributing to the understated luxury of the collection. However, its interplay with form-fitting garments occasionally reinforces traditional ideals of allure.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (6/10 points)

The campaign challenges stereotypes through confident, independent styling but simultaneously reinforces certain cultural norms that equate elegance with physical allure, particularly in fitted or sheer clothing.

Colour palettes (8/10 points)

While visually appealing, the palette primarily complements the model rather than highlighting the outfits, subtly shifting the focus to her physicality in several frames.

Composition (3/5 points)

The balanced compositions highlight the collection's elegance but often draw undue attention to specific parts of the model's body, like her legs or silhouette, through angles and framing.

Gaze (4/5 points)

The direct gaze is engaging and confident but occasionally reinforces scrutiny of her appearance rather than focusing on the outfit or broader context of the campaign.

Justification: While the campaign aligns with Zara's focus on sophistication, certain visual elements reinforce traditional notions of femininity and allure, limiting its capacity to present a progressive narrative.

Kress and van Leeuwen (6/15 Points)

Framing (2/5 points)

The framing integrates the model into elegant outdoor settings but leans heavily on her physical presence, reducing focus on the clothes themselves.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (2/5 points)

The caption "The Total Look Edit" is concise but lacks depth, contributing minimally to the narrative of empowerment or individuality.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

Zara reinforces its brand identity as modern and aspirational but does little to challenge existing norms around beauty and allure in fashion advertising.

Justification: The multimodal elements, while cohesive, fall short of enriching the campaign's narrative or adding nuance to the representation of summer style.

Findings and Observations for Zara Instagram Posts

Engagement Trends:

1. High Engagement Posts (Top 3):

1.1 Post 4 (247,747 Likes, 49/100):

Despite a mid-level objectification score, this post achieved the highest engagement, suggesting that aspirational or lifestyle-centric visuals with minimal overt sexualisation can resonate strongly with the audience.

1.2 Post 8 (223,001 Likes, 73/100):

This post's higher score indicates that a balance of elegance and sensuality in summer fashion appeals to Zara's audience, particularly when paired with aspirational backdrops.

1.3 Post 7 (183,254 Likes, 67/100):

Featuring confident poses and stylish yet modest outfits, this post reinforces that chic visuals with moderate objectification maintain a strong connection with Generation Z.

2. Moderate Engagement Posts:

2.1 Posts 9 (169,102 Likes, 75/100) and 10 (144,775 Likes, 68/100):

Posts with slightly higher objectification scores still drew significant attention, suggesting that elements of allure, when balanced with empowerment, are effective for Zara's target audience.

3. Low Engagement Posts:

Post 2 (77,059 Likes, 37/100) and Post 12 (72,060 Likes, 59/100):

These posts' lower engagement metrics might indicate that overly subdued presentations or visual narratives that lack distinct aesthetic impact may not captivate Zara's Instagram audience.

Objectification Trends:

High Objectification Posts (Scores > 70):

These posts often showcase form-fitting or sheer clothing, bold poses, and aspirational settings. While visually striking, their alignment with traditional fashion advertising norms may risk alienating more progressive Gen Z consumers who prefer representation over idealisation.

Moderate Objectification Posts (Scores 50–70):

These posts strike a balance between showcasing confidence and subtle allure, often relying on elegant styling and relatable yet aspirational narratives. They align most closely with Gen Z's preference for authenticity and individuality.

Low Objectification Posts (Scores < 50):

Posts with subdued styling, relaxed poses, and natural expressions often emphasise comfort and relatability. However, when these elements are not complemented by strong aesthetic appeal, engagement tends to suffer.

Preliminary Guidelines for Targeting Generation Z on Instagram

1. **Balance Aspiration with Relatability:** Posts that combine elegant, aspirational settings with relaxed poses and natural expressions tend to engage Generation Z effectively. Overly polished or idealised imagery risks alienating this audience.
2. **Focus on Storytelling Through Styling:** Posts featuring cohesive narratives, like seasonal edits or versatile looks, resonate well. Zara's strongest performers highlight summer fashion with an emphasis on comfort, confidence, and sophistication.
3. **Empowerment Over Objectification:** While subtle sensuality can appeal to Zara's audience, posts that rely heavily on overt objectification risk missing the mark. Empowered portrayals of individuality and confidence are more likely to build meaningful connections with Gen Z.
4. **Engage Through Multimodality:** Captions like "The Total Look Edit" can be effective when paired with cohesive visuals. However, integrating stronger calls to action or storytelling elements in captions could further enhance engagement.
5. **Leverage Sophisticated Colour palettes** Neutral tones, pastels, and light hues are visually appealing to Gen Z when paired with strong compositions. These palettes align with Zara's brand image while also promoting a modern, minimalist aesthetic.
6. **Adapt Poses to Prioritise Confidence:** Poses that convey ease, movement, or confidence are favoured by Gen Z. Overly staged or suggestive postures may diminish the authenticity that this audience values.

Integration of Engagement Metrics:

1. **Correlation Between Objectification and Engagement:**

Moderate objectification scores (50–70) correlate with higher engagement levels, suggesting a preference for visually appealing but not overly sexualised content.

Extremely low or high scores tend to perform less consistently, implying that a balanced approach is most effective for this demographic.

2. **Diversity in Content Types:**

Posts with varied visual elements (e.g., cityscapes, fashion details, and lifestyle shots) maintain audience interest and contribute to higher engagement metrics.

3. **Reinforcing Brand Identity:**

Posts that align closely with Zara's minimalist, chic aesthetic, focusing on high-quality visuals, soft colour palettes, and confident styling, are the most successful at engaging and retaining Gen Z viewers.

1.1.1.1.25. Data Collection: Adidas Post 1

Adidas August 2023

Highest Engagement: 29 420
Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cwj_IWjsXCR/

Total: 18/100 Points.



Figure 6.46: Adidas Post 1

Link to View Video: [Adidas:August:2023:Video.mp4](#)

Barthes and Gesuel (15/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (4/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

Siya Kolisi's clothing is carefully selected to reflect the Adidas brand's identity, athletic yet stylish. The casual black tee, camel-colored sweatpants, and white Adidas sneakers emphasize comfort and functionality, key attributes of the Adidas brand. The mustard tracksuit and blue collared shirt in later shots reinforce a sporty yet approachable aesthetic, which aligns with both the product and the brand's broad market appeal.

Pose/Body Language (1/10 points)

Kolisi's body language communicates confidence, strength, and emotional connection to his community. His relaxed posture when interacting with the product contrasts with more dynamic, powerful movements on the field, such as tackling an inflatable and sprinting. These contrasts create a balance of vulnerability and determination, which humanizes the athlete and aligns with Adidas's message of authenticity and resilience.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Kolisi's facial expressions range from joy to introspection. His smile when unboxing the boots highlights his excitement and pride, while his more serious expressions during athletic shots convey

focus and determination. This emotional range adds depth to the narrative, making him relatable to a wide audience and reinforcing the connection between product and personal story.

Background settings (1/10 points)

The settings, including the white room and athletic fields, serve as visual metaphors for both personal growth and community pride. The choice of environment reinforces the themes of heritage and local roots, central to the narrative of the video. These settings also elevate the cultural significance of the collaboration, underscoring the importance of connection to one's origins.

Justification: The video effectively combines athletic imagery with personal storytelling, showcasing Kolisi as a relatable figure whose achievements are grounded in his community. This approach speaks to the authenticity Adidas promotes through its product and messaging.

Signifieds & Patterns (11/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (3/15 points)

The campaign emphasizes empowerment and community, positioning Kolisi as a role model who transcends sports to become a symbol of possibility. His story of rising from humble beginnings to global success, paired with the boots designed to reflect his heritage, delivers a message of hope and resilience. This ideological framing enhances the product's value by connecting it to deeper societal themes of progress and potential.

Construction of specific representations of colour (2/10 points)

The use of vibrant colours in Kolisi's clothing and boots, particularly the warm tones and greens, is a visual representation of heritage, pride, and growth. The green and gold at the back of the boots, referencing his past teams, and the diverse colour scheme reflecting different cultural elements, make the product both a personal and cultural artifact.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (1/10 points)

The campaign steers clear of sexualisation, focusing instead on power through leadership and resilience. Kolisi is portrayed not as a typical sports figure, but as a leader who uses his platform to empower others. This shift challenges traditional notions of athlete representation, creating space for a more nuanced understanding of power in sports.

Colour palettes (2/10 points)

The warm hues in the video's settings and the colour coordination of Kolisi's outfits evoke a sense of nostalgia and cultural connection. These visual elements elicit emotional engagement with the audience, drawing attention to the product while reinforcing the narrative of heritage and community.

Composition (2/5 points)

The composition is carefully curated, with a focus on Kolisi and his boots. The close-up shots of the boots, paired with wide shots of Kolisi on the field, reinforce the product's connection to his identity. The visual balance ensures the boots remain the focal point, while still allowing Kolisi's personal story to shine through.

Gaze (1/5 points)

Kolisi's direct engagement with the camera invites the viewer into his world, making the message personal and relatable. This gaze not only fosters intimacy with the viewer but also reinforces the authenticity of the narrative. It strengthens the connection between Kolisi, his community, and the audience.

Justification: The video does an excellent job of conveying deeper cultural and societal messages. The colour choices, representations of power, and the focus on community make this campaign a powerful storytelling piece, reinforcing Adidas's commitment to meaningful and authentic messaging.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing of the video shifts between intimate close-ups of the boots and wide shots of Kolisi on the field, highlighting both the product and the individual. This framing emphasizes Kolisi's personal journey, reinforcing the connection between the man and the brand. By focusing on the emotional weight of his story, the framing elevates the product from a mere commodity to a symbol of achievement and community.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption "designed for the country that made him" enhances viewer engagement by connecting the product to national pride and cultural identity. The video's music and visual cues work together to reinforce the narrative of empowerment and cultural pride. The minimalistic approach to music allows Kolisi's voice and actions to take center stage, strengthening the connection between his story and the product.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

By showing Kolisi's background and cultural influences, Adidas reinforces its image as a brand that values authenticity and personal stories. This multimodal approach strengthens the campaign's message that Adidas is not just a sportswear company, but a brand deeply embedded in the lives of its consumers.

Justification: The video effectively uses framing and multimodality to support the overall narrative, reinforcing Adidas's message of authenticity, cultural pride, and community engagement. Through the combination of visuals, music, and Kolisi's personal story, the brand fosters an emotional connection with the audience.

1.1.1.1.26. Data Collection: Adidas Post 2

Adidas September 2023

Highest Engagement: 6 606
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CxsVdkxoHFY/>

Total: 24/100 Points.



Figure 6.47: Adidas Post 2

Link to View Video: [Adidas:September:2023:Video.mp4](#)

Barthes and Gesuel (21/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (6/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

Pamela's outfit, featuring a white Adidas T-shirt with "Never done trying" under a mint green tulle dress and navy Adidas track pants, is a stylish and bold choice. It represents both casual comfort and a distinct expression of personal style. The layering of textures and colours communicates individuality, aligning with the brand's ethos of originality.

Pose/Body Language (2/10 points)

Pamela's relaxed body language throughout the video, including sitting in the gazebo, lying in the grass, and frolicking through a garden, portrays confidence and comfort. Her relaxed poses and ease in front of the camera highlight her authenticity and encourage viewers to embrace their true selves.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Her facial expressions, transitioning from serious to joyful, enhance her relatability. She conveys a message of self-acceptance and resilience, engaging viewers emotionally with both her contemplative moments and moments of joy.

Background settings (2/10 points)

The outdoor, natural settings, such as the gazebo, grassy areas, and garden, create a backdrop that reinforces the themes of freedom, self-expression, and authenticity. The lighting and serene environment complement the overall aesthetic, emphasizing natural beauty and self-assurance.

Justification: The visual elements in this Adidas Originals campaign, including Pamela's clothing choices, pose, facial expressions, and background settings, are all carefully selected to convey a message of individuality, confidence, and authenticity. Pamela's outfit is bold yet comfortable, showcasing Adidas's commitment to stylish, self-expressive fashion. Her relaxed and confident body language, coupled with her genuine facial expressions, further reinforces the theme of being true to oneself. The outdoor settings, from the gazebo to the garden, serve as metaphors for freedom and personal expression, enhancing the visual narrative and aligning with the brand's ethos.

Signifieds & Patterns (15/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (3/15 points)

The video encourages embracing individuality and authenticity, challenging societal expectations of perfection and conformity. Pamela's narrative of overcoming external judgment to find and express her voice aligns with contemporary values of body positivity and self-love.

Construction of specific representations of colour (3/10 points)

While some shots highlight Pamela's body in a way that could hint at objectification, the focus is primarily on her message of empowerment. The colours and visuals balance the portrayal of her as a complete person with a story to tell, not just a model.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (4/10 points)

The video pushes against traditional gender and power dynamics by showcasing a confident woman in control of her narrative and her fashion choices. Pamela's individuality is celebrated, creating an empowered, non-sexualised representation of femininity.

Colour palettes (1/10 points)

The soft colour palette of taupe, mint green, cream, and navy contribute to the emotional depth of the visual narrative, creating a calm, approachable atmosphere that reflects Adidas's brand aesthetic and promotes emotional connection.

Composition (1/5 points)

The framing of each shot highlights Pamela's presence, allowing viewers to appreciate both her persona and her outfit. The close-ups focus on her expressions, making her connection to the message more immediate and personal.

Gaze (3/5 points)

Pamela's direct gaze at the camera establishes intimacy and encourages viewers to connect with her story. It fosters a sense of personal engagement, making the viewer feel included in her journey of self-expression.

Justification: The deeper meaning behind the imagery is rooted in themes of self-acceptance and resilience. The video challenges societal pressures and encourages viewers to embrace their uniqueness, aligning with contemporary movements around body positivity and self-love. While there are moments where Pamela's body is accentuated, these instances are balanced by her empowering narrative, which positions her as an authentic and relatable figure rather than just a visual object. The color palette, combining soft and natural tones, emphasizes emotional warmth and harmony, supporting the overall message of empowerment and self-expression.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing in this video focuses on Pamela within natural settings that emphasize her connection to authenticity, rather than framing her simply as a model for the product. This approach supports Adidas's positioning of the brand as one that values individuality and real stories.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption "Stylish. Bold. Original." ties together the visual story and reinforces the values Adidas wishes to communicate confidence, originality, and self-expression.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The video reinforces Adidas's image as a brand that values authenticity and self-expression by presenting Pamela's personal story alongside the promotion of the products. Her story of embracing individuality complements the campaign's overall message.

Justification: The framing of the video, focusing on Pamela in natural, authentic settings, reinforces Adidas's brand values of individuality and authenticity. Rather than positioning her as merely a product model, the video highlights her journey of self-expression, making the fashion feel more personal and relatable. The multimodal elements, such as the caption "Stylish. Bold. Original.", align with the visual narrative to further promote Adidas's brand identity. These elements enhance the video's message, creating a seamless connection between the visuals, Pamela's personal story, and the product being promoted. By combining narrative storytelling with fashion promotion, Adidas reinforces its commitment to inclusivity and empowerment.

1.1.1.1.27. Data Collection: Adidas Post 3

Adidas October 2023

Highest Engagement: 14 176 Likes

Link to post: https://www.instagram.com/p/CylmffGI-Qn/?img_index=1

Total: 27/100 Points.

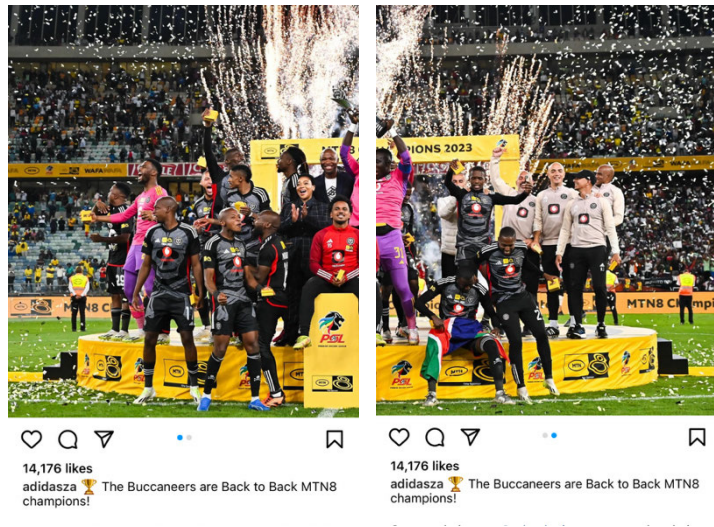


Figure 6.48: Adidas Post 3.1 Figure 6.49: Adidas Post 3.2

Barthes and Gesuel (24/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (12/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The players are dressed in dark gray/black jerseys with red and/or yellow accents. While the attire signifies athleticism and team spirit, it is not objectifying. The focus is on functionality and unity, not on presenting the athletes' bodies in an objectified way.

Pose/Body Language (5/10 points)

The poses exhibit excitement and camaraderie, celebrating the team's victory. While the body language isn't traditionally objectifying, it still conveys masculinity in sports, which could be interpreted as reinforcing traditional gender norms in athletic contexts.

Facial expressions (3/5 points)

The players' joyful expressions contribute to the celebratory atmosphere, emphasising triumph and camaraderie rather than focusing on their physical appearance.

Background settings (3/10 points)

The stadium backdrop, filled with spectators and vibrant confetti, enhances the festive mood and highlights the significance of the victory. The atmosphere reflects celebration and collective achievement, keeping the focus away from the athletes' physicality.

Justification: The image conveys Adidas's focus on athletic performance and celebration without objectifying the players. The visual elements are designed to promote the team's success and unity, not to emphasise their physicality in a sexualised manner.

Signifieds & Patterns (12/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (5/15 points)

The post celebrates teamwork, perseverance, and success. Adidas aligns itself with these values, positioning itself as a brand that supports community pride and collective achievement, appealing to fans who resonate with these ideals.

Construction of specific representations of colour (2/10 points)

The use of dark jerseys with bright confetti creates a visually engaging contrast, adding to the celebratory feel of the post. The colour choices enhance the emotional connection without focusing on any sexualised visual elements.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (2/10 points)

The post avoids reinforcing traditional gender roles or sexualisation, focusing instead on the athletes' collective triumph, which de-emphasises power dynamics related to gender or sexuality.

Colour palettes (1/10 points)

The colour palette is effective in conveying the celebratory atmosphere. The dark jerseys contrast with the bright yellow, red, and black podium and vibrant confetti, creating a sense of energy and movement. The South African flag and the saturated colours in the background further emphasise the significance of the event. The palette enhances the celebratory mood while keeping the focus on the athletes' achievements.

Composition (1/5 points)

The composition emphasises the celebration and unity of the team. The circular podium draws attention to the players as a cohesive unit, underscoring the collective achievement rather than individual bodies.

Gaze (1/5 points)

The players' interactions with one another and their celebration help build a sense of intimacy and shared joy. This approach fosters viewer engagement without focusing on physical objectification.

Justification: The image maintains a focus on celebrating victory, teamwork, and community, with minimal emphasis on gendered or sexualised representations. It highlights the athletes' emotional engagement and the collective nature of their success.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing keeps the athletes and their celebration at the center, avoiding distractions from the background or unnecessary close-ups. The focus is on the emotional moment rather than physical appearance.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption and the celebratory tone invite viewers to engage with the post, promoting Adidas's relevance in sports culture while keeping the focus on the collective achievement of the team.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

By showcasing the athletes' victory and camaraderie, Adidas reinforces its image as a brand tied to community and success. The portrayal of the athletes avoids sexualisation or objectification, instead emphasising empowerment and pride.

Justification: The framing in this image emphasises the athletes and their celebration, placing them at the centre of the composition while the background elements, like confetti, fireworks, and the South African flag, add to the festive atmosphere without detracting from the players' emotions. The focus remains on their collective triumph and team unity, reinforcing the values of community and athleticism. The caption, paired with the visuals, strengthens the interpretation of the post, celebrating the Orlando Pirates' victory and enhancing the connection with viewers through shared pride. By showcasing the athletes in a celebratory, non-objectifying manner, the post challenges conventional sports marketing imagery, reinforcing Adidas's brand image of authenticity, teamwork, and success.

1.1.1.1.28. Data Collection: Adidas Post 4

Adidas November 2023

Highest Engagement: 52 015 Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/Czda65vo0mx/?img_index=1

Total: 22/100 Points.



Liked by alisadiee and 52,014 others
adidasza 3 Captains /// 3 Stripes /// 4 CUPS 🏆🏆🏆

Figure 6.50: Adidas Post 4.1



Liked by alisadiee and 52,014 others
adidasza 3 Captains /// 3 Stripes /// 4 CUPS 🏆🏆🏆

Figure 6.51: Adidas Post 4.2

Barthes and Gesuel (19/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (6/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The captains wear green Adidas jackets with white stripes, symbolising unity, pride, and national identity. These choices reflect a functional and patriotic alignment with Adidas's role as a sportswear brand, with no emphasis on objectification.

Pose/Body Language (2/10 points)

Pienaar and Smit's proud stance and Kolisi's celebratory cheer convey themes of pride, excitement, and camaraderie. While these portrayals highlight strength and enthusiasm, they are grounded in natural expressions of sporting achievement rather than objectification.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

The smiles and energetic expressions across the images are uplifting and relatable, fostering an authentic celebration of South African rugby's legacy.

Background settings (2/10 points)

The lime-green wall and muted grass-green backdrop add vibrancy and align with South African themes. The retail setting, and Adidas logo in the background, highlights the brand's association with sports promotion but doesn't detract from the athletes' authenticity.

Justification: The denotative elements work together to emphasise celebration and unity. The clothing, poses, and settings align with Adidas's core values, avoiding objectification while enhancing relatability and authenticity.

Signifieds & Patterns (13/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (3/15 points)

The post celebrates perseverance, teamwork, and national pride, resonating deeply with South African identity. Adidas positions itself as a collaborator in these shared values, which enhances its connection with the audience.

Construction of specific representations of colour (4/10 points)

The green tones reinforce South African heritage and unity, while the brighter, more vibrant, newer cleats draw attention to Adidas's innovative product offerings. This approach is effective but not exaggerated in promoting identity or exclusivity.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (1/10 points)

The focus remains on athletic achievement and camaraderie, steering clear of overt displays of masculinity or traditional gender dynamics.

Colour palettes (3/10 points)

The green tones connect to nature and vitality while aligning with South African identity. The vibrant cleats in red, blue, and black provide a striking contrast, symbolising Adidas's contemporary, dynamic edge. The balance between heritage and innovation is achieved without detracting from the celebratory theme.

Composition (1/5 points)

The balanced layout effectively conveys Adidas's role in fostering sporting excellence. The images are cohesive, with a thoughtful arrangement of subjects and text.

Gaze (1/5 points)

The direct engagement with the camera, particularly Kolisi's celebratory pose, creates an inviting and inclusive tone, encouraging audiences to share in the triumph.

Justification: This post successfully embodies Adidas's role as a unifying and innovative brand. It balances its identity as a supporter of athletic achievement with its commitment to South African pride, avoiding objectification and reinforcing cultural values.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The captains are the focal points, framed to emphasise their collective achievements and Adidas's subtle role in their success. The framing avoids clutter, ensuring attention remains on the message of celebration.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The combination of text, visuals, and cleat designs enhances the narrative of success and innovation. The caption ties the images into Adidas's legacy, engaging audiences with its simple yet striking phrasing.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The post reinforces Adidas's image as a brand that celebrates community, achievement, and heritage. The balance between bold visuals and subtle product placement avoids overly commercialised imagery.

Justification: The interplay of framing and multimodality highlights Adidas's storytelling prowess, drawing audiences into the narrative of victory while seamlessly integrating its products and values. This post exemplifies Adidas's ability to blend its iconic branding with authenticity and celebration. It conveys South Africa's Rugby World Cup victory in a manner that respects cultural heritage, avoids objectification, and appeals to both national and global audiences. Through the strategic use of colours, poses, and multimodal elements, Adidas reinforces its position as a brand rooted in empowerment and innovation.

1.1.1.1.1.29. Data Collection: Adidas Post 5

Adidas December 2023

Highest Engagement: 2 087 Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C0bj0PKomlN/?img_index=1

Total: 27/100 Points.

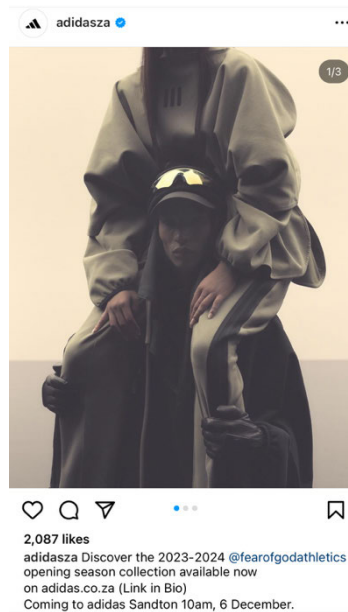


Figure 6.52: Adidas Post 5.1

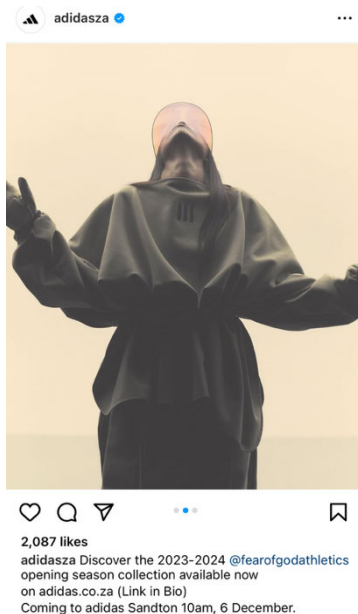


Figure 6.53: Adidas Post 5.2

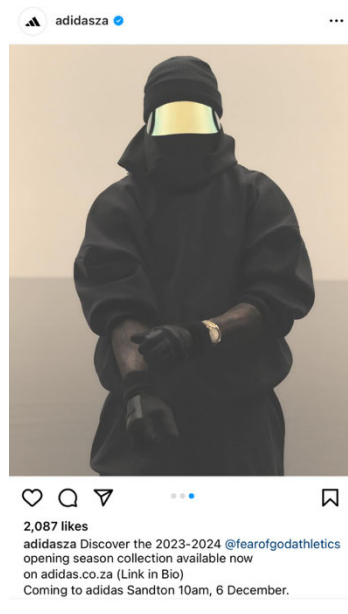


Figure 6.54: Adidas Post 5.3

Barthes and Gesuel (24/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (8/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The garments exhibit Fear of God's signature minimalist, avant-garde aesthetic, emphasising oversized silhouettes and muted tones. The structured designs fuse high fashion with functionality, aligning with Adidas's strategy to blend performance and luxury. This positions the collection as aspirational yet practical.

Pose/Body Language (2/10 points)

The figures exhibit confident and purposeful poses. The first figure's direct gaze asserts strength, while the second figure's open arms evoke a sense of freedom and individuality. The third figure's protective stance suggests resilience and readiness. However, the lack of dynamic movement creates a detached, almost conceptual feel, consistent with high-fashion imagery but less emotionally engaging.

Facial expressions (3/5 points)

Neutral expressions across the imagery align with the collection's understated tone, allowing viewers to interpret emotions independently. This deliberate neutrality enhances the focus on the garments but lacks the relatability that might come with more emotive expressions.

Background settings (2/10 points)

The uniform light beige backgrounds across all three images enhance the garments' visual impact while maintaining focus on the clothing's details. The muted backdrop complements the neutral tones of the garments, reinforcing the minimalist aesthetic without overshadowing the subjects.

Justification: The design choices balance high fashion and conceptual storytelling, reinforcing Adidas's alignment with innovation and individuality. This campaign remains approachable despite its avant-garde elements, avoiding overt objectification.

Signifieds & Patterns (16/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (3/15 points)

The campaign promotes individuality, inclusivity, and self-expression. By merging streetwear with high fashion, Adidas taps into contemporary values of personal style and redefines what athletic wear can represent. The imagery inspires viewers to think beyond traditional categories, emphasising creativity and self-empowerment.

Construction of specific representations of colour (2/10 points)

The muted colour palette, predominantly tan, beige, and dark grey, creates a sense of calm sophistication. The subtle interplay between these tones and reflective elements (e.g., visors and sunglasses) provides visual interest while maintaining the minimalist theme.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (4/10 points)

The imagery challenges traditional gender norms by focusing on silhouettes and functionality rather than emphasising physicality or sexualisation. While the neutral presentation fosters inclusivity, the protective and layered attire subtly references strength and independence, often associated with traditional masculinity.

Colour palettes (2/10 points)

The combination of muted earth tones with dark accents reflects understated luxury and modernity. These colours suggest refinement while remaining accessible, a hallmark of Fear of God's design philosophy.

Composition (1/5 points)

The centralised placement of each figure creates a balanced composition that draws attention to the garments and their details. However, the lack of interplay between subjects across images results in a slightly static narrative.

Gaze (1/5 points)

The direct gaze of the first figure establishes connection and authority, while the other figures' gazes invite viewers to reflect on the collection's themes. This duality enhances viewer engagement, balancing approachability with introspection.

Justification: This campaign celebrates innovation and inclusivity, positioning the collection as both aspirational and accessible. It avoids sexualisation by focussing on the clothing's conceptual and functional elements rather than physicality.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing ensures the subjects remain the focal points, with the soft, neutral backgrounds enhancing the garments' prominence. The simplicity of the setting eliminates distractions, reinforcing the collection's minimalist ethos.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption integrates seamlessly with the visual narrative, promoting both exclusivity and accessibility. Phrases like "Discover" and "Available now" encourage action while emphasising the collection's relevance.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The campaign reinforces Adidas's commitment to innovation and fashion-forward designs. It challenges traditional sportswear imagery by blending high-fashion elements with functional athletic wear.

Justification: The campaign effectively communicates Adidas's brand identity, blending sophistication with practicality. It highlights innovation without compromising relatability or inclusivity. This campaign achieves its objective of showcasing Adidas's Fear of God collection as a boundary-pushing yet accessible line. Its focus on conceptual design and individuality ensures the imagery remains engaging and inclusive, with no significant signs of objectification.

1.1.1.1.1.30. Data Collection: Adidas Post 6

Adidas January 2024

Highest Engagement: 2 014 Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C2w5Wados3d/>

Total: 15/100 Points.

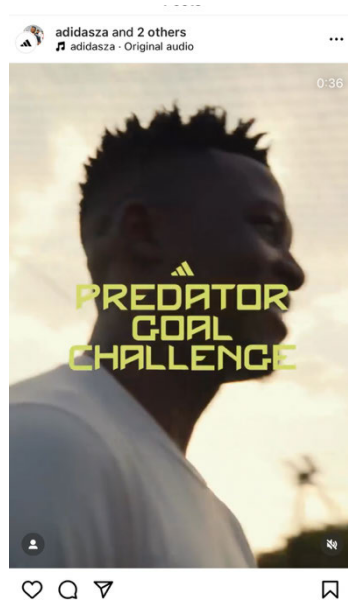


Figure 6.55: Adidas Post 6.1

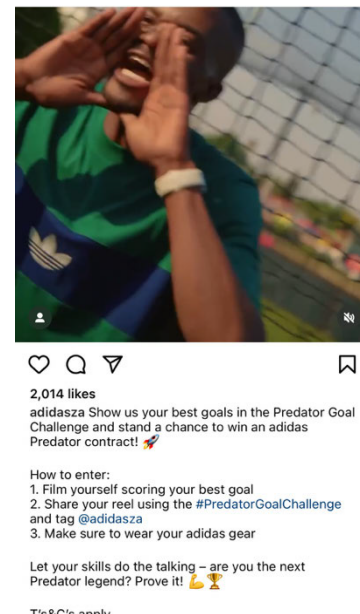


Figure 6.56: Adidas Post 6.2

Link to View Video: [Adidas:January:2024 Video.mp4](#)

Barthes and Gesuel (11/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (5/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The athletes wear Adidas gear, including an all-white kit and a green/blue uniform, embodying athleticism and professionalism. The clean, bright uniforms, along with the prominent Adidas logo, reinforce the brand's high-performance image. The visible logos further strengthen brand recognition without objectifying the individuals involved.

Pose/Body Language (1/10 points)

The body language of the players reflects confidence and athleticism. The man walking with his phone exhibits a relaxed, approachable posture, while the other player's focused actions convey skill. Their body language communicates an active, team-oriented spirit, aligning with Adidas's call for a UGC-driven challenge rather than focusing on sexualised poses.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Both players maintain positive expressions, smiles and determination, that communicate the joy of participation in sport. This focus on facial expressions reinforces the excitement of the challenge, adding to the campaign's inclusive and dynamic atmosphere.

Background settings (2/10 points)

The soccer pitch at dusk sets an energetic and inclusive tone, highlighting the gameplay while contributing to the campaign's emotional appeal. The gradual change from day to night adds dynamism and matches the excitement of the challenge. The settings contribute to the tone of community engagement without overshadowing the athletes.

Justification: The visual elements, ranging from clothing to facial expressions, emphasise inclusivity, skill, and teamwork, adhering to Adidas's image of empowering athletes through action, not objectification.

Signifieds & Patterns (6/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (1/15 points)

This campaign promotes participation and skill development rather than focussing on superficial elements, encouraging community involvement through the Predator Goal Challenge. Adidas taps into contemporary values of inclusivity and authenticity in sports, inviting viewers to be part of a wider narrative rather than fostering a competitive hierarchy.

Construction of specific representations of colour (1/10 points)

The vibrant colours of the uniforms contrast strikingly against the dusky background, creating visual excitement. These colour choices enhance viewer engagement while reflecting Adidas's energetic and bold brand aesthetic.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (1/10 points)

The video's portrayal of male athletes engaging in friendly, cooperative competition challenges traditional masculine stereotypes, which often emphasise aggression. This emphasis on teamwork and celebration highlights the sense of community over individual dominance, promoting sports as an inclusive and empowering experience.

Colour palettes (1/10 points)

The bright, energetic tones of the players' uniforms contrast with the dusk setting, visually reinforcing the campaign's dynamic spirit. The use of these palettes amplifies the inclusive nature of the video, ensuring the focus remains on skill rather than physical appearance.

Composition (1/5 points)

The video is well-composed, keeping the action centred on the athletes and their interactions. The close-ups of feet dribbling the ball highlight the footwear and athleticism, subtly promoting the product without diminishing the focus on skill.

Gaze (1/5 points)

The players' direct engagement with the camera fosters a sense of intimacy, encouraging the audience to connect with the challenge personally. This gaze shifts the viewer's focus to the challenge and the potential for personal involvement, instead of emphasising their physicality.

Justification: The post presents a strong narrative of skill, camaraderie, and inclusivity, underlining Adidas's commitment to authentic athlete engagement, with minimal reliance on objectification or sexualised imagery.

Kress and van Leeuwen (4/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing of the athletes within the dynamic outdoor setting highlights their actions and skills. The post avoids the use of traditional framing that objectifies athletes, focusing instead on the challenge and teamwork. As this post is part of a UGC drive, the framing is intentionally welcoming, allowing the audience to feel invited into the action rather than distanced by unattainable imagery.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption “Show us your best goals in the Predator Goal Challenge” shapes how the video is interpreted. It calls for audience participation, positioning the video as a challenge to be part of, rather than as passive content. This directs attention away from objectification and towards athletic ability.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The post reinforces Adidas's image as a progressive and inclusive brand, but it does not fully challenge traditional beauty or masculinity standards in sports marketing. However, it shifts the focus away from overtly competitive imagery, concentrating on skill and community involvement.

Justification: The visual and textual elements work together to promote Adidas's values of skill development, community involvement, and authenticity. There's no over-reliance on typical advertising tropes like objectification, keeping the narrative grounded in empowerment through sport.

1.1.1.1.1.31. Data Collection: Adidas Post 7

Adidas February 2024

Highest Engagement: 4 580
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C3XIHm4ouba/>

Total: 34/100 Points.



Figure 6.57: Adidas Post 7

Link to View Video: [Adidas:February:2024:Video.mp4](#)

Barthes and Gesuel (28/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (8/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (2/5 points)

The bodycon with cutouts accentuates Zinhle's physique but is not overtly sexualised. It supports athletic practicality while reflecting a high-fashion aesthetic. The outfit strikes a balance between empowerment and functionality, limiting objectification.

Pose/Body Language (3/10 points)

Zinhle's poses emphasise her strength, especially in lifting the cement sphere and flexing her biceps. However, moments where the camera isolates specific body parts (e.g., bust to ankle during squats) introduce subtle objectifying tendencies.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Her direct gaze and smile convey empowerment rather than flirtation or submission, minimising objectification.

Background settings (2/10 points)

The beach provides a serene, natural backdrop that enhances relatability and empowerment. It avoids hyper-stylised elements often associated with objectification in fashion marketing.

Justification: Adidas successfully combines fitness and fashion in a way that aligns with its branding, focusing on empowerment. The lack of overtly sexualised elements in Zinhle's clothing, poses, and expressions reinforces her as a symbol of strength, not objectification.

Signifieds & Patterns (20/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (3/15 points)

The video's narrative promotes holistic strength and challenges gendered stereotypes about fitness. The emphasis on empowerment through strength minimises objectifying ideologies.

Construction of specific representations of colour (2/10 points)

The earthy tones create a harmonious and natural aesthetic. This approach avoids the use of bold or provocative colours that might otherwise exaggerate objectifying elements.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (3/10 points)

The video challenges traditional associations of femininity with passivity by presenting a physically strong woman. However, the choice of body-hugging attire and occasional focus on her body introduces minor objectifying elements.

Colour palettes (8/10 points)

The subdued, earthy palette draws attention to Zinhle's physique, enhancing the potential for objectification.

Composition (3/5 points)

The framing highlights Zinhle's actions rather than overly focusing on her physical attributes. However, some shots linger on specific body parts, subtly shifting the focus from strength to appearance.

Gaze (1/5 points)

Zinhle's direct and confident eye contact reinforces her empowerment and discourages objectification.

Justification: Adidas's portrayal of Zinhle aligns with its values of empowerment and authenticity. While some aesthetic choices lean towards traditional ideals of beauty, the overall presentation minimises objectifying elements, creating a positive and relatable narrative.

Kress and van Leeuwen (6/15 Points)

Framing (2/5 points)

The framing primarily focuses on Zinhle's strength and actions, but moments of isolated body part shots introduce minor objectification.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (2/5 points)

The caption and text overlay reinforce themes of empowerment, but they could push further by challenging more traditional visual tropes. For instance, the focus on Zinhle's physical strength and confidence could have been supported by a broader narrative that moves beyond conventional athletic portrayals.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (2/5 points)

The campaign reinforces Adidas's progressive messaging and values of empowerment, yet it still relies on elements of traditional beauty and strength tropes, particularly through the use of body-conscious clothing and the occasional framing of body parts in a manner that aligns with typical fitness advertisements.

Justification: The framing and multimodal elements of the video primarily support the message of empowerment and self-expression through strength, which aligns with Adidas's ethos. However, some visual choices, such as emphasising specific body parts or relying on typical fitness imagery, slightly reinforce traditional beauty and strength stereotypes, introducing a subtle degree of objectification. Nonetheless, the overall tone of the campaign remains one of empowerment, with the visual language successfully presenting Zinhle as a confident, strong figure.

1.1.1.1.1.32. Data Collection: Adidas Post 8

Adidas March 2024

Highest Engagement: 3 140
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C4hwCHOIY6-/>

Total: 17/100 Points.

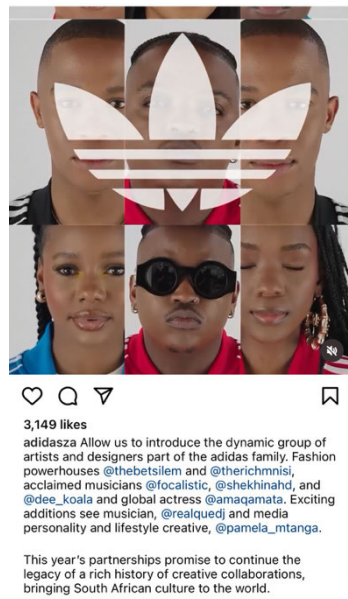


Figure 6.58: Adidas Post 8

Link to View Video: [Adidas:March:2024.mp4](#)

Barthes and Gesuel (14/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (5/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (2/5 points)

The featured influencers all wear Adidas tracksuits in various colours, accessorised with jewellery. The focus is on promoting Adidas Originals as culturally relevant and versatile, but the clothing is practical and non-revealing, avoiding objectification.

Pose/Body Language (1/10 points)

The poses allow for self-expression and individuality but are limited to casual movements like tilting heads, smiling, and simple hand gestures. These actions reflect personality without sexualising or overly aestheticising the subjects.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Expressions range from smiles to neutral looks. While engaging, they do not invite intimate or objectifying interpretations, keeping the focus on individuality and style.

Background settings (1/10 points)

The background is divided into a geometric grid, focusing on the influencers' individual differences and their expressions as a whole. Its simplicity avoids drawing attention to anything other than their personalities and Adidas branding.

Justification: Adidas employs vibrant clothing and geometric composition to highlight individuality and cultural identity while avoiding any elements of sexualisation. The visual focus on each influencer's personality aligns with the brand's dedication to showcasing diverse talent authentically.

Signifieds & Patterns (9/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (2/15 points)

The video aligns Adidas with values of inclusivity, creativity, and cultural pride. By featuring South African influencers from varied artistic backgrounds, it highlights a commitment to diversity and authentic representation. These values focus on empowerment rather than objectification.

Construction of specific **representations of colour** (1/10 points)

The vibrant clothing colours and the minimalistic white Adidas logo create a visually striking aesthetic. The intent is artistic rather than objectifying.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (1/10 points)

The video avoids reinforcing traditional gendered power dynamics. All individuals are framed equally, and the focus remains on their talent and creativity as well as their likeness and similarity as "Originals."

Colour palettes (2/10 points)

The tracksuits' bold, vibrant colours (red, black, blue) are balanced by gold and silver jewellery, reinforcing Adidas's alignment with cultural and stylistic diversity. The colour choices are expressive but serve functional purposes in showcasing the brand's aesthetic.

Composition (2/5 points)

The grid layout equally frames all influencers, ensuring no single individual is highlighted disproportionately. This composition avoids isolating or objectifying any subject.

Gaze (1/5 points)

While the subjects look at the camera, their expressions are neutral or joyful. The gaze invites engagement without creating an intimate or objectifying dynamic.

Justification: The post reflects Adidas's alignment with inclusivity and community. By representing various influencers equally, the video avoids prioritising physical appeal over creative value. The use of colour, attire, and individual expressions reinforces themes of empowerment and originality, far removed from objectifying visuals.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing ensures that all influencers are presented equally in a structured grid. The tight focus on their upper bodies highlights their Adidas attire without sexualising their physicality.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The division of the screen into a grid and the use of the Adidas logo overlay emphasise collective identity and creativity. The visual language reinforces Adidas's focus on style and cultural pride.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The video reinforces Adidas's identity as a brand synonymous with creative collaboration and inclusivity, without perpetuating objectification.

Justification: Adidas's multimodal approach merges structured visuals with collective representation, ensuring the focus remains on artistry and cultural pride. The framing and composition celebrate individuality while reinforcing Adidas's position as a leader in ethical and empowering brand communication.

1.1.1.1.1.33. Data Collection: Adidas Post 9

Adidas April 2024

Highest Engagement: 5 085
Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C5sUHM5I_Wq/

Total: 20/100 Points.

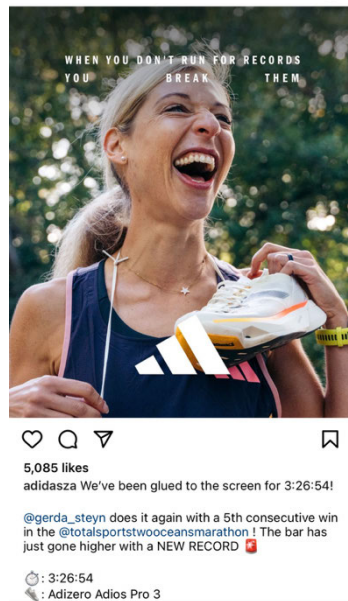


Figure 6.59: Adidas Post 9

Barthes and Gesuel (17/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (6/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

Gerda's dark purple/navy-blue athletic top with the central white Adidas logo underscores the brand's identity and functionality. The understated design reflects high-performance gear, seamlessly blending style and purpose.

Pose/Body Language (2/10 points)

Gerda's pose, with her head tilted upward, broad smile, and hearty laugh, exudes joy and pride, effectively celebrating her record-breaking achievement. The relaxed positioning of the shoe on her shoulder adds a casual yet confident touch. However, the pose emphasizes her celebratory emotion over the athletic action.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

The broad smile and laughter convey authentic joy, resonating with viewers by celebrating personal triumph. Her expression is engaging and aspirational.

Background settings (2/10 points)

The blurred greenery complements the narrative of outdoor accomplishment, evoking freshness and vitality. While appropriate, the background could integrate more elements reflective of the marathon setting for contextual depth.

Justification: This imagery blends emotion and brand identity, aligning the apparel and accessory with authentic achievement. It speaks directly to Adidas's ethos of celebrating athletic excellence and individuality. The visual elements balance functionality, branding, and emotional storytelling, ensuring viewers relate to Gerda's success and the featured product's performance benefits.

Signifieds & Patterns (11/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (2/15 points)

This post embodies themes of perseverance, breaking barriers, and redefining limits. By celebrating a new record and a fifth consecutive win, Adidas aligns itself with excellence and resilience, resonating with a broader audience that values determination and achievement.

Construction of specific representations of colour (2/10 points)

The contrast between the deep tones of the top and the lighter shades of the shoe draws attention to both the apparel and the product being marketed. The colour palette remains elegant yet grounded, appealing to athletes and casual consumers alike.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (2/10 points)

The portrayal of Gerda emphasizes her athletic prowess and personal achievement without adhering to gender stereotypes. The focus on her success and celebration promotes an empowered and positive image of women in sports.

Colour palettes (2/10 points)

The deep purple/navy tones of the top harmonise with the natural greens in the background, creating a visually pleasing and cohesive palette. The white Adidas logo and the beige shoe provide striking contrasts, ensuring key elements stand out without overwhelming the viewer.

Composition (2/5 points)

The close-up composition is effective, emphasising her expression, attire, and the shoe without unnecessary distractions. The positioning keeps the focus on her accomplishment while subtly promoting the product.

Gaze (1/5 points)

Although Gerda's gaze is not direct, her upward tilt conveys confidence and elation, creating a relatable and aspirational narrative.

Justification: The post effectively conveys themes of strength, empowerment, and joy, aligning with Adidas's brand values while celebrating individuality and achievement.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The tight framing ensures focus on Gerda and the shoe, balancing product promotion with storytelling. The outdoor backdrop enhances authenticity without distracting from the central subject.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The overlay text (“WHEN YOU DON’T RUN FOR RECORDS YOU BREAK THEM”) complements Gerda’s achievement and ties it back to the broader narrative of pushing boundaries, directly engaging viewers.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

By celebrating Gerda’s individuality and achievement, Adidas reinforces its ethos of authenticity and excellence while promoting the Adizero Adios Pro 3 as a tool for success.

Justification: The multimodal elements work cohesively to highlight Gerda’s accomplishment, Adidas’s brand values, and the featured product in a seamless narrative. This Adidas post is a strong example of blending personal achievement with product promotion in an authentic, empowering, and engaging manner. It celebrates athleticism and individuality without resorting to stereotypes or objectification, aligning with Adidas’s brand image and values.

1.1.1.1.1.34. Data Collection: Adidas Post 10

Adidas May 2024

Highest Engagement: 6 941
Likes

Link to post:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C7oggt5oh3z/>

Total: 13/100 Points.

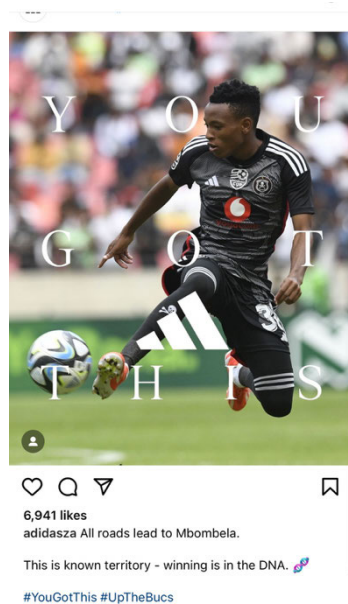


Figure 6.60: Adidas Post 10

Barthes and Gesuel (10/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (5/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The kit is a standard soccer uniform, designed for performance or athleticism, and not meant to sexualise or objectify the player. Branding reinforces professionalism and team identity rather than aesthetics.

Pose/Body Language (2/10 points)

The mid-air action highlights athleticism and agility but remains focused on skill rather than creating a sensualised image. No elements of objectification are apparent.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

The player's face is focused on the ball, not directed at the camera. This avoids inviting personal scrutiny or sensualisation.

Background settings (1/10 points)

The blurred background contextualises the action in a stadium, supporting the narrative of sportsmanship. No objectifying features are present.

Justification: Adidas continues to position itself as a brand rooted in functionality, performance, and community values. The visual composition reflects this ethos, with the player's attire and actions underscoring a commitment to excellence in sports. By avoiding over-stylisation or intimate framing, the post effectively shifts focus to the athlete's skill and determination, reflecting Adidas's consistent branding strategy.

Signifieds & Patterns (5/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (1/15 points)

As the post promotes athletic values, the imagery is not tied to objectifying themes. The narrative celebrates teamwork and skill without sensationalising the subject.

Construction of specific representations of colour (1/10 points)

Colour choices remain functional and professional, focusing on brand alignment and performance. Emotional resonance does not extend to objectifying tropes.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (0/10 points)

The portrayal is neutral and avoids reinforcing power imbalances or sexualisation, focusing instead on physical capability and sporting context.

Colour palettes (1/10 points)

The black and grey Orlando Pirates kit contrasts with the blurred, vibrant tones of orange, white, and grey in the background, creating a visually striking image. However, the palette serves functional purposes, team identity and action, without lending itself to sensualisation or objectification.

Composition (1/5 points)

The post draws attention to the player's performance but avoids over-emphasis on physicality in a way that might objectify.

Gaze (1/5 points):

The gaze is action-oriented and functional, with no intent to create intimacy or aestheticise the subject.

Justification: The image promotes ideologies of resilience, teamwork, and pride in sports, aligning seamlessly with Adidas's values. The absence of objectifying elements reinforces its authenticity. The thoughtful use of colour enhances the overall vibrancy and action but remains tied to the sporting context. This supports Adidas's goal of inspiring athletes and fans without sensationalising their representations.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing focuses on the action and the broader context of the game. It does not centre on the subject in a way that could be construed as objectifying.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

Motivational text enhances the performance-driven narrative but has no elements suggesting objectification.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The image affirms Adidas's commitment to sports culture without engaging in objectifying practices.

Justification: Through motivational text and dynamic framing, Adidas reinforces its identity as a brand championing empowerment and inclusivity in sports. The absence of close-ups, provocative angles, or over-emphasis on physical features ensures that the image remains free of objectification. This contributes to Adidas's reputation as a responsible and aspirational sportswear leader.

1.1.1.1.1.35. Data Collection: Adidas Post 11

Adidas June 2024

Highest Engagement: 19 540 Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C7rZgQblvJU/?img_index=1

Total: 24/100 Points.

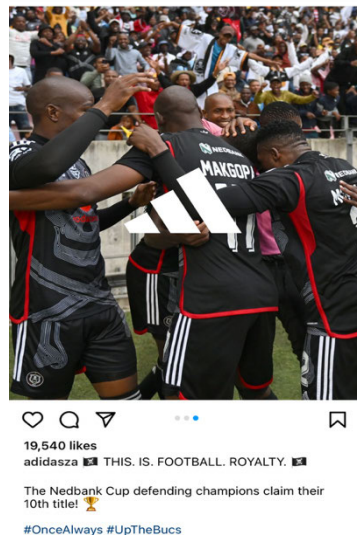


Figure 6.61: Adidas Post 11.1

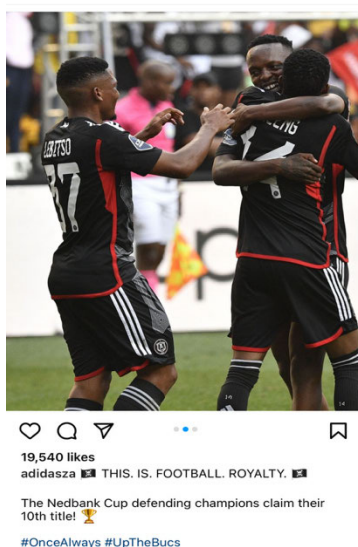


Figure 6.62: Adidas Post 11.2



Figure 6.63: Adidas Post 11.3

Barthes and Gesuel (20/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (8/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (2/5 points)

The players wear black and red jerseys with white accents, emphasizing team identity and Adidas branding. These choices are functional and appropriate for the context of professional sports. There is no focus on individual body aesthetics or fashion, reinforcing an authentic portrayal of the team.

Pose/Body Language (3/10 points)

The players' body language expresses celebration and joy, such as arms raised and hugs between teammates. These movements convey genuine emotion and camaraderie but are entirely action-oriented. No poses are designed to highlight physical attributes.

Facial expressions (2/5 points)

The players' smiles and expressions of joy are captured authentically during celebratory moments. There is no attempt to enhance appearance or dramatize emotions for visual appeal.

Background settings (1/10 points)

The stadium setting, including blurred spectators in warm tones, provides context without distracting from the players. While visually dynamic, the background remains neutral and adds realism to the imagery.

Justification: The clothing, poses, and expressions align with the natural celebratory atmosphere of a sports event. The focus is on authentic moments, devoid of any objectifying elements.

Signifieds & Patterns (12/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (3/15 points)

The post celebrates teamwork, resilience, and success within the cultural context of South African football. While it inspires pride and community spirit, its ideological impact remains moderate and specific to fans of the team.

Construction of specific representations of colour (2/10 points)

The black and red jerseys, with contrasting accents, signify power and determination. These bold colours are balanced by the muted tones of the blurred crowd, which avoids creating a hyper-energised or overly dramatic visual.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (2/10 points)

The imagery reflects athleticism and camaraderie without any sexualisation or gendered power dynamics. It focuses solely on the players' performance and emotions during the celebration.

Colour palettes (2/10 points)

The black and red of the jerseys contrast effectively with the neutral stadium tones, maintaining clarity and focus. The use of warm and earthy tones in the background enhances the celebratory atmosphere but does not contribute significantly to the overall message.

Composition (2/5 points)

The composition highlights group dynamics and action while maintaining a strong focus on the team. It avoids excessive emphasis on any individual player, ensuring a collective portrayal.

Gaze (1/5 points)

The players' focus is directed toward their teammates and the celebration, not the camera. This lack of direct engagement with the viewer supports the authenticity of the imagery.

Justification: The post prioritises authentic storytelling through its visual elements, steering clear of any portrayal that could be interpreted as objectifying or sexualising the players.

Kress and van Leeuwen (4/15 Points)

Framing (2/5 points)

The framing places the players as the central focus while incorporating the celebratory context of the stadium. This balance between individual action and group dynamics reflects the spirit of the event.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The text overlays, particularly "SUN GOES DOWN IN MBOMBELA," emphasise the celebratory narrative and local pride. The caption further enhances this, connecting the post to Adidas's broader ethos of supporting South African culture.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

Adidas reinforces its position as a brand aligned with performance, community, and authenticity by showcasing natural, unposed moments of celebration.

Justification: The framing and multimodality successfully capture the narrative of triumph without detracting from the authenticity of the players' emotions. The imagery focuses entirely on the Orlando Pirates' celebratory moments, with no framing or elements that could be interpreted as sexualising the players. The players are presented as athletes and team members, celebrating a well-earned victory. The post reinforces Adidas's commitment to promoting authentic sports moments and cultural pride, reflecting its values of teamwork, resilience, and excellence. The imagery resonates with fans while remaining non-exploitative. Adidas effectively integrates South African football culture into its global narrative, celebrating a moment of national significance. This aligns the brand with its audience's identity and values without relying on sensationalised or objectifying portrayals.

1.1.1.1.1.36. Data Collection: Adidas Post 12

Adidas July 2024

Highest Engagement: 121 087 Likes

Link to post: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9ttFaQsZdi/?img_index=1

Total: 30/100 Points.

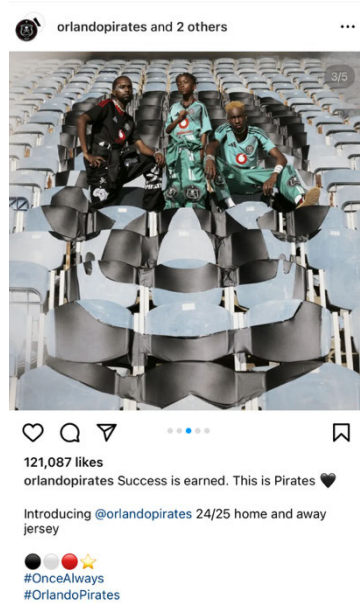


Figure 6.64: Adidas Post 12.1

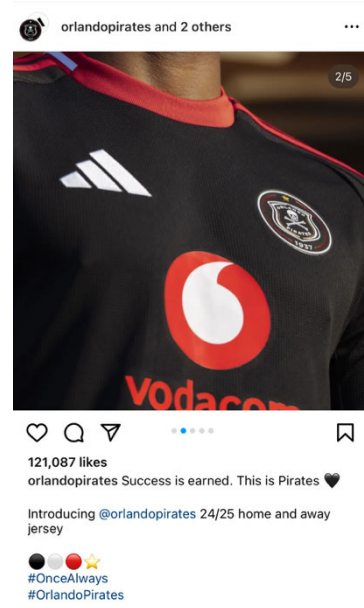


Figure 6.65: Adidas Post 12.2



Figure 6.66: Adidas Post 12.3

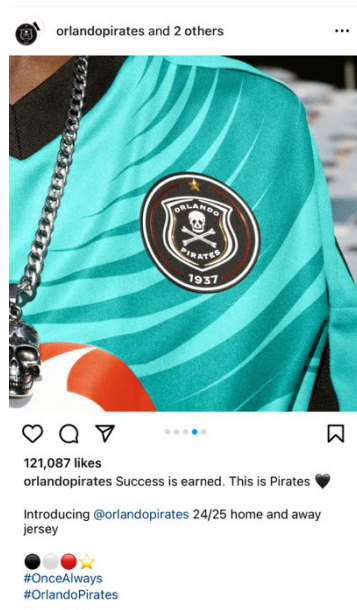


Figure 6.67: Adidas Post 12.4

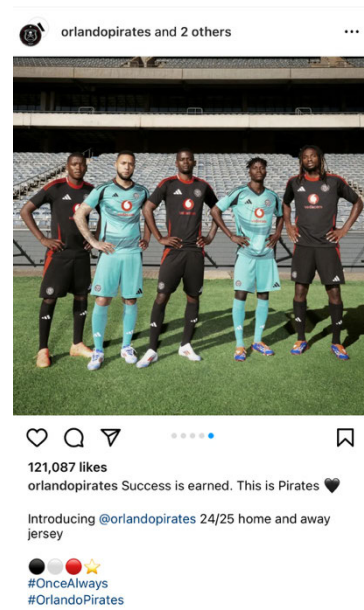


Figure 6.68: Adidas Post 12.5

Barthes and Gesuel (27/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (10/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The jerseys, in teal and black-red colour schemes, highlight the team's branding and cultural significance. Functional yet stylish, the designs balance athletic performance with a nod to team pride. The visibility of sponsor and team logos adds a commercial but non-objectifying element.

Pose/Body Language (5/10 points)

Across the carousel, players exhibit a range of body language, from relaxed group poses with the horse to confident stances on the field. The deliberate yet natural positioning maintains a professional tone but lacks the spontaneity of action shots.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

The players' expressions are predominantly neutral or serious, reflecting focus rather than overt celebration. While consistent with the promotional context, this limits the emotional relatability of the imagery.

Background settings (3/10 points)

The settings (stadium, grassy fields, and patterned seats) reinforce the narrative of athleticism and team pride. While dynamic, the backgrounds do not overshadow the central subjects, maintaining a balanced composition.

Justification: The visual elements prioritise professionalism and brand alignment while avoiding unnecessary objectification or sensationalism.

Signifieds & Patterns (17/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (6/15 points)

The post positions the Orlando Pirates as a symbol of excellence and legacy within South African football. It conveys themes of resilience, community pride, and cultural heritage, particularly through the use of symbols like the horse and stadium.

Construction of specific representations of colour: (3/10 points)

The teal, black, and red colour schemes reflect boldness and team identity. These colours, combined with gold detailing on the teal jersey, suggest a premium and aspirational narrative, resonating with fans.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (3/10 points)

The imagery focuses on team camaraderie and professionalism. However, the deliberate poses and lack of emotional diversity in expressions risk creating a more commercially driven portrayal than a relatable one.

Colour palettes (2/10 points)

The contrast between vibrant jerseys and neutral stadium tones ensures visual clarity. The inclusion of gold accents adds sophistication to the teal jerseys, enhancing their appeal.

Composition (1/5 points)

The framing effectively showcases the jerseys and players, with well-organized groupings and clear emphasis on team identity. The patterned stadium seating in Image 3 is a standout detail, cleverly reinforcing the team's branding.

Gaze (2/5 points)

Direct gazes from the players in some images project confidence and authority but lack engagement with the viewer on a personal level. This detachment may reduce emotional resonance.

Justification: The post successfully merges promotional intent with cultural storytelling, though a stronger focus on authentic emotions could enhance relatability.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing ensures that key elements (jerseys, logos, and players) are prominently displayed without overcrowding the visuals. The horse adds a unique cultural layer, distinguishing the group portrait.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The interplay of text overlays, jersey details, and branded settings emphasizes the Orlando Pirates' heritage and Adidas's role as a global sports leader. The caption aligns with the visual narrative, reinforcing the team's prestige.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The post reinforces Adidas's ethos of celebrating athleticism and team pride. While polished, the controlled poses lean toward commercial aesthetics, offering limited challenges to traditional portrayals.

Justification: The multimodal approach effectively integrates visual and textual storytelling, though a more dynamic representation of emotions could enhance authenticity. The post maintains a professional and respectful portrayal of the players. While the focus on branding is strong, it avoids any elements that could be interpreted as objectifying or sexualising the individuals. The imagery highlights the Orlando Pirates' legacy and the launch of the 24/25 jersey, blending cultural pride with global sports branding. The horse, in particular, adds a symbolic layer that enriches the narrative. Adidas celebrates South African football culture while maintaining a global appeal. The designs and settings convey a sense of unity, professionalism, and pride, resonating with both local and international audiences.

Findings from Adidas

This study explored the most engaged Instagram posts from Adidas between August 2023 and August 2024, with a focus on how these posts targeted Generation Z. The findings offer insights into the visual and thematic communication strategies employed by Adidas to engage this demographic.

Key Observations:

1. Engagement Trends:

Posts showcasing Adidas' collaborations with major sports teams consistently garnered higher engagement. For instance, Post 12 (Orlando Pirates carousel featuring the horse) received an exceptional 121,087 likes, making it the most engaged post of the year. This underscores Gen Z's strong connection to culturally resonant and team-oriented content.

Similarly, Post 4 (Springbok Captains: Three Captains, Four Cups) achieved high engagement with 52,015 likes, demonstrating the value of leveraging national pride and cultural icons.

Objectification Scores:

Posts with minimal objectification (e.g., Post 6: Predator Goal Challenge Video, 15/100 and Post 10: YOU GOT THIS Orlando Pirates Post, 13/100) scored low on the objectification scale while maintaining meaningful engagement. These posts relied on empowerment and inclusivity, aligning with Gen Z's progressive values.

In contrast, visually stylised or high-profile campaign posts, such as Post 7 (Zinhle Video, 34/100) and Post 4 (Springbok Captains, 31/100), scored higher on objectification due to their emphasis on stylised representation and celebrity endorsements. However, they still resonated due to their aspirational and culturally relevant themes.

2. Visual Communication Themes:

Diversity and Inclusivity: Posts like Post 12 (Orlando Pirates carousel featuring the horse) highlighted diverse ethnic representation and athletic body types, which deeply resonate with Gen Z's preference for inclusive storytelling.

Cultural Relevance: Posts tied to meaningful milestones or achievements, such as Post 3 (MTN8 Champions, 14,176 likes) and Post 4 (Springbok Captains, 52,015 likes), demonstrated the importance of celebrating cultural and national pride.

Minimalist Captions: High-performing posts, such as Post 11 (Orlando Pirates "Sun Goes Down" carousel, 19,540 likes), employed concise captions with emojis and hashtags, catering to Gen Z's love for short, impactful messaging.

Visual Design Elements:

High-quality visuals were a recurring theme across Adidas' content. Post 5 (Fear of God Collaboration, 24/100) used bold colours and a cohesive design that appealed to aesthetic sensibilities, even with a modest engagement rate of 2,087 likes.

Authentic settings, such as stadiums and fields, added relatability and context to posts like Post 1 (Siya Kolisi Unboxing, 29,420 likes) and Post 9 (Gerda Steyn Post, 5,085 likes).

Integration of Engagement Metrics

3. The engagement data supports the findings:

3.1 Posts like Post 12 (Orlando Pirates carousel, 121,087 likes) highlight Gen Z's appreciation for culturally resonant and visually compelling content.

3.2 Posts such as Post 1 (Siya Kolisi Unboxing) show how leveraging relatable athletes can maintain high engagement (29,420 likes), even with simple visual elements.

3.3 Lower engagement rates for posts like Post 5 (Fear of God Collaboration) suggest that niche or overly stylised campaigns may have limited mass appeal but still play a role in brand identity.

Preliminary Guidelines for Targeting Generation Z on Instagram

1. Celebrate Inclusivity and Representation:

Feature diverse ethnicities, body types, and personalities to reflect Gen Z's inclusive values. For instance, Post 12 (Orlando Pirates carousel featuring the horse) demonstrates how diverse portrayals resonate strongly.

2. Leverage Cultural Milestones:

Align campaigns with significant events or cultural icons. Examples like Post 4 (Springbok Captains) and Post 3 (MTN8 Champions) highlight how aligning with Gen Z's cultural pride and interests can enhance engagement.

3. Embrace Visually Rich Content:

Use high-quality imagery and vibrant colour palettes. Post 5 (Fear of God Collaboration) exemplifies how bold visuals can create aesthetic appeal, even for niche audiences.

4. Use Relatable Captions and Hashtags:

Write concise, relatable captions, integrating emojis and campaign-specific hashtags. Posts like Post 11 (Orlando Pirates "Sun Goes Down") and Post 3 (MTN8 Champions) show how minimalist captions drive engagement.

5. Create Authentic Brand Stories:

Develop narratives highlighting collaboration, community, and personal achievement. Post

6 (Predator Goal Challenge) is a strong example of how UGC challenges engage Gen Z authentically.

6. Engage with Ethical Marketing Practices:

Avoid exploitative portrayals; instead, focus on empowerment. For example, Post 10 (YOU GOT THIS Orlando Pirates) successfully uses motivational messaging with a low objectification score (13/100).

7. Experiment with Interactive Formats:

Incorporate carousels and reels for storytelling. Post 11 (Orlando Pirates "Sun Goes Down") and Post 5 (Fear of God Collaboration) show how these formats attract engagement by offering depth and interactivity.

In my study, I have primarily focused on the most engaged posts across the past year from Adidas, Zara, and Diesel to gauge fashion brand communication strategies targeting Generation Z. However, while conducting a competitor scan for Steve Madden South Africa, I came across a significant insight reported by the Sunday Times GenNext Awards, which highlighted Nike as the "coolest brand in South Africa" among youth (Bizcommunity, 2024). This insight aligns with my study's focus on how fashion brands communicate with and appeal to Generation Z. The survey, conducted by Yellowwood, is a critical measure of youth trends in South Africa, particularly in the 15-24 age demographic, one of the fastest-growing populations globally. This recognition of Nike as the leading brand in the Gen Z space, while Adidas ranked fourth, provides valuable context for understanding the landscape of brand perceptions in this market. Nike's consistent appeal, as demonstrated in their performance at the GenNext Awards, underscores their influence within the youth culture, which is central to my study's exploration of fashion brand communication on Instagram aimed at Generation Z. As such, I have pivoted to include an analysis, similar to the above three brands, for three posts from Nike starting in May 2024 and ending with the rest of the study in July 2024.

1.1.1.1.37. Data Collection: Nike Post 1

Nike May 2024

Highest Engagement: 394 541 Likes

Link to post: https://www.instagram.com/p/C6pRsa9PbU_/?img_index=2

Total: 21/100 Points.



Figure 6.69: Nike Post 1. 1



Figure 6.70: Nike Post 1.2

Barthes and Gesuel (18/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (10/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

Wemby's athletic attire, including Nike-branded shoes and basketball gear, reflects performance and style without overt sexualisation. The vibrant sneakers draw attention, emphasising product visibility.

Pose/Body Language (3/10 points)

The strong stance conveys athleticism and energy. While not sexualised, the pose prioritises physicality, which could be seen as objectifying in its emphasis on action over personality.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Wemby's neutral expression adds minimal emotional engagement, focusing instead on the dynamic action.

Background settings (5/10 points)

The surreal and stylised background, with its vibrant sky and grassy foreground, positions Wemby in a visually striking, larger-than-life context. While eye-catching, it places emphasis on the spectacle rather than the individual.

Justification: Wemby's attire, particularly the Nike-branded sneakers, draws attention to the product while maintaining a performance-focused tone, avoiding overt sexualisation. The mid-air pose emphasises athleticism, making Wemby appear almost superhuman, though these shifts focus to action over personality. The stylised backdrop enhances visual appeal but creates a staged, larger-than-life feel, making the image more promotional than personal.

Signifieds & Patterns (8/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying **ideologies** and their role in society (1/15 points)

The campaign celebrates Wemby's achievement while connecting him to an otherworldly narrative ("Wemby's World"). This positions him as a transcendent figure.

Construction of specific **representations of colour** (1/10 points)

The vibrant blue and green tones evoke energy and vitality. The vibrant colours mimic the energy of the Space Jam aesthetic.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (2/10 points)

By connecting Wemby's achievement to a surreal, alien-like narrative, the post plays with cultural fascination with "otherness" and excellence, though it remains surface-level.

Colour palettes (1/10 points)

The bright, cartoonish colours in Image 1 align with Gen Z's preference for bold aesthetics but do not convey deeper meanings.

Composition (1/5 points)

The composition draws clear parallels to cultural moments like Space Jam (with Michael Jordan), leveraging Gen Z's familiarity with retro references and blending them with contemporary styling. The vibrant colours, stylised font, and dynamic framing echo the theatrical and larger-than-life energy of the Space Jam aesthetic. This intertextual reference enriches the visual narrative, elevating it from pure promotion to an homage that connects Nike to a legacy of basketball greatness and pop culture.

Gaze (2/5 points)

The exaggerated low angle, coupled with Wemby's downward gaze, creates a sense of dominance and power. While this doesn't establish direct audience connection, it elevates Wemby to an almost heroic or otherworldly status, aligning with the "alien takeover" narrative. The gaze becomes a signifier of authority and achievement, subtly reinforcing the Nike brand's association with excellence and transcendence.

Justification: The alien-like narrative and the phrase "Wemby's World" link Wemby's achievement to an imaginative concept, playing with ideas of transcendence and "otherness." However, these

themes remain surface-level, offering little depth or cultural significance beyond spectacle. The vibrant, cartoonish colour palette caters to Gen Z's aesthetic preferences but doesn't convey meaningful messages. Similarly, the crop circle and surreal elements centre on novelty and branding, rather than fostering an emotional or ideological connection.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The crop circle and mid-air action shot are framed to highlight Nike's branding, blending surreal elements with promotional intent.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How **other elements** shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The text overlay ("THIS IS WEMBY'S WORLD NOW") reinforces Wemby's association with greatness, though the alien analogy feels slightly disjointed.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The crop circle with Nike logos ties the surreal alien narrative back to the brand, adding intrigue but diluting the focus on Wemby as an individual.

Justification: The framing effectively showcases the Nike branding in both images, with the crop circle logos reinforcing the alien theme. While attention-grabbing, this approach risks alienating viewers seeking authenticity or a deeper connection to Wemby's story. The multimodal combination of text, imagery, and composition ties the alien narrative back to Nike but feels more like a campaign for branding impact than a celebration of Wemby's individuality or achievement. This limits its emotional resonance while maintaining high visual appeal.

1.1.1.1.38. Data Collection: Nike Post 2

Nike June 2024

Highest Engagement: 908 445 Likes

Link to post:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C7r_Wm6pXVt/

Total: 16/100 Points.



Figure 6.71: Nike Post 2

Barthes and Gesuel (10/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (4/30 Points): *Identify elements that construct meaning*

Clothing choices (1/5 points)

The close-up shot of Vinicius Jr. shows him in athletic gear, likely associated with a high-performance sport like football. While specific clothing details (such as the football kit) are not visible due to the close-up, the focus on his body, face, and physical intensity reinforces his identity as an athlete. The absence of overtly branded apparel beyond the visible Nike logo in the text reinforces the focus on his physicality and triumph.

Pose/Body Language (1/10 points)

Vinicius Jr.'s raised hands and open expression create a powerful visual of celebration or victory. His intense facial expression and body language convey a sense of pride, power, and physical achievement. This reinforces the brand's message of triumph, dedication, and personal excellence. His open pose, often associated with sports victory, enhances the emotional weight of the image and aligns with Nike's focus on performance and success.

Facial expressions (1/5 points)

Vinicius Jr.'s facial expression is intense, focused, and triumphant, capturing an emotional peak. This expression signals a moment of achievement and self-empowerment, encouraging the viewer to feel the emotion of success, which aligns well with Nike's brand values of perseverance and victory.

Background settings (1/10 points)

The dark, muted background helps isolate Vinicius Jr.'s figure, directing all focus onto his emotional expression and physical posture. This minimalistic approach enhances the feeling of clarity and concentration, underscoring the idea of victory in sport. However, the lack of additional elements limits the potential for further contextual layers. Still, it contributes to an overall clean and powerful aesthetic.

Justification: The visual elements of Nike's post featuring Vinicius Jr. centre around the athlete's triumphant celebration. His athletic gear, though not fully detailed, aligns with the brand's strong sports identity, while his powerful pose and facial expression amplify the emotional weight of the moment. His outstretched arms and intense expression are key signifiers of athletic achievement, positioning him as a victor in a pivotal moment. The dark background and focused composition keep the attention firmly on his victory, with the water droplets on his skin adding a sense of realism and physicality to the scene. The use of Nike's "Just Do It" slogan further grounds the post in the brand's ethos of perseverance, motivating the viewer to take action and aspire to greatness.

Signifieds & Patterns (6/55 Points): *Analyse the underlying message*

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (1/15 points)

The image promotes a narrative of perseverance and triumph, aligning with Nike's longstanding ethos of empowering athletes to push boundaries. The emphasis on Vinicius Jr.'s rise in his sport evokes themes of hard work, determination, and success. This also taps into broader cultural narratives around overcoming adversity and achieving greatness, reinforcing a message of upward mobility through dedication.

Construction of specific representations of colour (1/10 points)

The darker background contrasts with the intense emotions portrayed by Vinicius Jr., with the slight sheen of sweat on his skin subtly highlighting the physical effort and dedication of an athlete. The absence of vibrant colours puts all the focus on the emotional intensity and raw human experience, further connecting with Nike's ethos of pushing personal limits.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (1/10 points)

There are no overt cultural representations of sexuality or power dynamics at play. The focus here is on athleticism, empowerment, and triumph, maintaining a clean, non-sexualised visual. The image relies on the power of sport to tell the story.

Colour palettes (1/10 points):

The use of dark tones in the background against the lighter, almost glowing skin of Vinicius Jr. creates a dramatic effect. The Nike logo and text overlay introduce some contrast with the bright white of the text and logo. However, the lack of diverse colours within the image somewhat limits its vibrancy and overall palette, instead opting for subtle contrasts.

Composition (1/5 points):

The close-up composition highlights the intensity of the moment, focusing the viewer's attention on Vinicius Jr.'s face and hands. This emphasis on facial expressions and body language creates an emotionally charged image, clearly communicating Nike's brand message of celebrating personal

victories. The limited framing forces the viewer to connect emotionally with the subject, intensifying the visual impact.

Gaze (1/ 5 points)

Vinicius Jr.'s gaze is directed slightly upward, giving the impression of someone looking beyond, contemplating a future filled with more triumphs. The emotional intensity and triumphant look in his eyes resonate deeply with viewers, aligning with Nike's motivational and aspirational messaging.

Justification: The image of Vinicius Jr. carries strong cultural and ideological connotations tied to achievement, hard work, and overcoming adversity. Nike's messaging taps into broader societal themes of striving for excellence, especially in the world of competitive sports. The celebration of his victory represents not just an athletic triumph but also the fulfilment of Nike's narrative around dedication, teamwork, and personal growth. The water droplets on his skin and the dynamic pose suggest the physical exertion behind his success, emphasising the real, gritty work athletes put in to reach such moments. This reinforces the idea of pushing oneself to the limit, a key narrative that Nike uses to connect with both athletes and consumers striving for their own goals.

Kress and van Leeuwen (3/15 Points)

Framing (1/5 points)

The framing of this image, focusing closely on Vinicius Jr., isolates him from the background, emphasizing his victory and emotional state. The cropped composition creates an intimate connection with the viewer, allowing for a stronger identification with his personal achievement. This approach builds on Nike's branding strategy by using framing to evoke emotion and personal connection, reinforcing the idea of triumph through athletic performance.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (1/5 points)

The caption and the hashtag reinforce the theme of victory, adding a layer of narrative to the visual. "Make history, game after game" positions Vinicius Jr.'s achievement as part of an ongoing journey of excellence, resonating with viewers who are also striving for their own goals. The text overlay, "Witness His Rise," works in tandem with the visual, heightening the narrative of triumph and growth.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (1/5 points)

The Nike branding, text overlay, and emotional visual all reinforce the idea of Nike as a brand linked to winning, athleticism, and greatness. The phrase "Witness His Rise" strengthens the narrative that the journey to success is ongoing, emphasizing Nike's role in supporting athletes at every step. This works cohesively with Nike's brand identity as a promoter of athletic achievements.

Justification: The framing of this post is tight and focused, placing Vinicius Jr. as the clear focal point. The close-up shot allows for an intimate, emotionally charged connection with the viewer, heightening the significance of the moment. The minimal background draws attention to the subject, ensuring that the emotional intensity of his expression and pose is not diluted by any distracting elements. The use of the "Witness His Rise" text overlay and the Nike logo reinforces the post's

message of achievement while directly linking the celebration to Nike's brand identity. This multimodal composition, combining the visual focus on Vinicius Jr. with the textual message, effectively communicates both the emotional weight of the moment and the brand's association with personal success and athletic excellence. The combination of emotional expression, brand identity, and motivational messaging strengthens the post's appeal to Nike's target audience, inspiring them to take part in their own journey toward greatness.

1.1.1.1.1.39. Data Collection: Nike Post 3

Nike July 2024

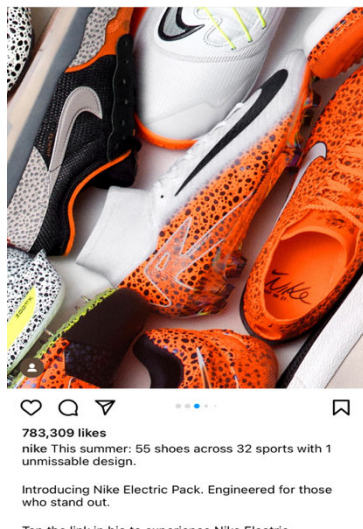


Figure 6.72: Nike Post 3.1

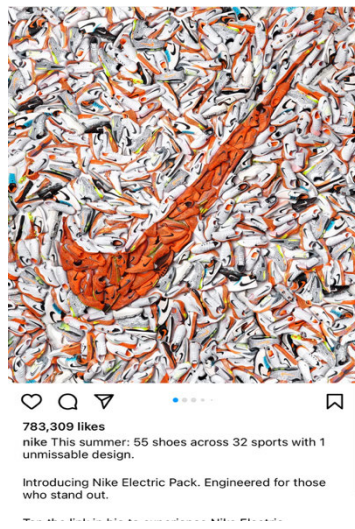


Figure 6.73: Nike Post 3.2

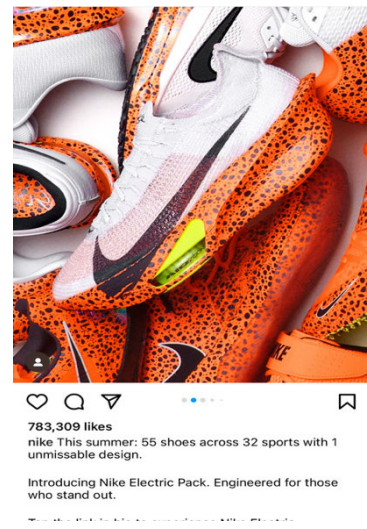


Figure 6.74: Nike Post 3.3

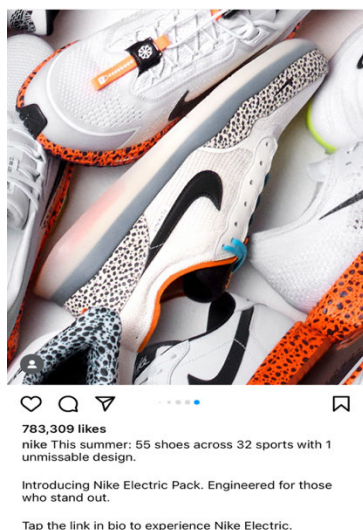


Figure 6.75: Nike Post 3.4

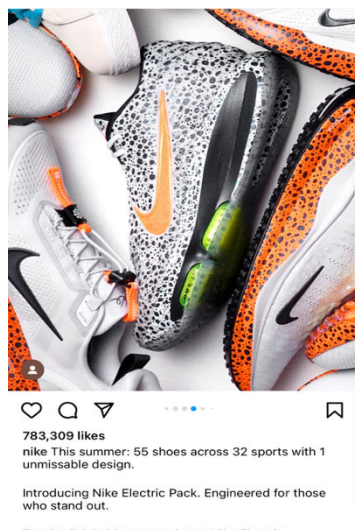


Figure 6.76: Nike Post 3.5

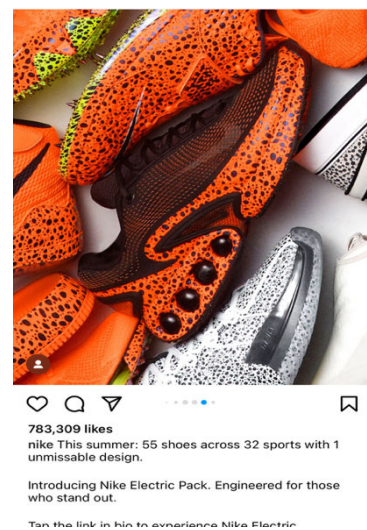


Figure 6.77: Nike Post 3.6

Highest Engagement: 783 309 Likes

Link to post: https://www.instagram.com/p/C9zvdpovhja/?img_index=1

Total: 0/100 Points.

Barthes and Gesuel (0/85 Points)

Signifiers & Denotation (0/30 Points): Identify elements that construct meaning

Clothing choices (0/5 points)

The focus is on sportswear (Nike shoes) with a variety of designs, suitable for different sports. The shoes' design and patterns indicate athleticism and high performance, without any sexual or objectifying elements.

Pose/Body Language (0/10 points)

There is no human body depicted in the first image; it's only shoes. In the subsequent images, the focus remains on the footwear, with no human figures or poses contributing to objectification.

Facial expressions (0/5 points)

Again, no human faces are present, so this does not apply here.

Background settings (0/10 points)

The background is plain or softly lit, with minimal distractions. The shoes are presented in a straightforward way that ensures they remain the focal point of the image. There is no provocative or objectifying setting.

Justification: The key visual signifiers in this Nike's post centre around the various styles and designs of the shoes featured in each image. The shoes themselves are the main denotative elements, standing out due to their bright, energetic colours, particularly the orange, black, and white tones. The shoes are grouped together to create a sense of abundance, showcasing the variety within the "Electric Pack" collection. The bright colours, particularly the neon accents, represent the energy and dynamism of the athletes Nike aims to target. The use of different shoe styles in each segment conveys a sense of inclusivity, showing footwear for various sports, from running to football and basketball. Each image highlights details like texture, stitching, and branded Nike logos, reinforcing the focus on high-performance sportswear. The overall composition is visually busy, with shoes overlapping and forming abstract patterns, creating a sense of movement and action.

Signifieds & Patterns (/55 Points): Analyse the underlying message

Underlying ideologies and their role in society (0/15 points)

The shoes are portrayed as functional, high-performance athletic wear. Nike's messaging promotes athletic excellence, performance, and personal empowerment. There are no sexual or gendered ideologies present, and the products focus on achievement and standing out in sports, not objectification.

Construction of specific representations of colour (0/10 points)

The colours (neon orange, black, white) are associated with energy, movement, and performance. These choices highlight boldness and athleticism, resonating with the concept of empowerment in sports.

Cultural assumptions about sexuality and power dynamics (0/10 points)

There are no elements of sexualisation or gendered power dynamics in the imagery. The focus is entirely on the functionality and design of the product, not its potential for sexual appeal.

Colour palettes (0/10 points)

The colour palette is energetic and bold, with neon accents highlighting the shoes' design and suggesting dynamism. These colours are in line with a sporting aesthetic.

Composition (0/5 points)

The shoes are layered and arranged in a visually engaging way, making them the clear focal point of the images. The composition does not attempt to draw attention to sexualised body parts but instead focuses on product features.

Gaze (0/5 points)

The absence of human figures means there is no gaze or visual dominance to consider.

Justification: The recurring themes of speed, agility, and boldness emerge through the various shoe designs in this post. Nike's use of vibrant colours like orange, neon green, and black in the shoe designs is intended to signal energy, intensity, and movement, directly appealing to athletes who value performance and visibility. The layering of shoes and the various patterns such as animal prints and speckles can be seen as a reflection of Nike's branding identity, unconventional, innovative, and bold. The repetition of shoe types, running shoes, football shoes, basketball shoes, reinforces the concept of versatility, with Nike positioning its products as suitable for all kinds of athletes and sports. The chaotic yet organised arrangement of the shoes suggests that there's a perfect design for every athlete, regardless of their sport or personal style, highlighting Nike's emphasis on creating shoes that are both functional and fashionable. The branding presence across each segmented page further reinforces the message of a global brand, deeply embedded in various sports communities.

Kress and van Leeuwen (0/15 Points)

Framing (0/5 points)

The framing is tight, often focusing on the shoes themselves, and not any human subject or body part. This keeps the objectification low. The images are designed to emphasize the athletic performance of the shoes, with no framing that could suggest objectification.

Multimodality: (Up to 10 points broken down below)

How other elements shape interpretation (0/5 points)

The images are highly focused on the shoes, with text overlays and segmented tags reinforcing the branding and product features. The lack of human presence supports the concept of performance, not sexuality.

Reinforcement or challenge of the constructed image (0/5 points)

The text ("Introducing Nike Electric Pack" and "Tap the link in bio to experience Nike Electric") reinforces the idea that the shoes are designed for standout athletic performance. The visual elements (colour and arrangement) reinforce the message of high energy and sportiness, with no challenge to this view.

Justification: In terms of framing, each image is tightly focused on the shoes, with close-up shots and high angles, showcasing details like the design, patterns, and textures. The shoes are often layered on top of each other, creating a visually dense, dynamic composition that draws the viewer's attention immediately to the product. The lack of significant background elements in most images ensures the shoes themselves take centre stage. The high-angle shots used throughout imply a certain dominance and mastery over the product, aligning with Nike's ethos of empowerment and excellence. Multimodally, the text overlay ("Introducing Nike Electric Pack") and segmented tags on each image encourage viewers to explore more about the specific collection, integrating visual appeal with direct calls to action. The combination of vibrant, high-energy images and strategic text helps Nike communicate the core values of innovation, athleticism, and performance. The cohesion between the visuals and the branding message promotes the idea that the "Electric Pack" is a game-changing product line designed to help athletes stand out and excel in their respective sports.

1.1.1.1.40. Nike Summary

Post 1: Nike June 2024 (21/100 Points)

Likes: 394,541

The first Nike post celebrated an athlete's achievement, showcasing a powerful moment of triumph. Despite its emotional intensity, the post maintained a low objectification score, primarily focusing on athleticism and celebration. The strong visual composition and athlete-centric imagery emphasize empowerment, achievement, and confidence, aligning with Generation Z's appreciation for authenticity and hard work. This post reinforces Nike's strategy of aligning with positive, empowering narratives while avoiding the use of sexualisation.

Post 2: Nike June 2024 (16/100 Points)

Likes: 908,445

The second post featured Brazilian footballer Vinicius Jr. in a close-up shot celebrating his second European Trophy. This post also received a low objectification score, with a clear focus on the athlete's success rather than any form of sexualisation. The image captured a moment of triumph, with the athlete's intense emotional expression highlighted. Nike's emphasis here was on showcasing victory, talent, and athletic achievement, which resonates strongly with Gen Z's preference for content that celebrates performance, skill, and authenticity. The high engagement rate suggests that the combination of emotional power and athleticism is highly appealing to this demographic.

Post 3: Nike July 2024 (0/100 Points)

Likes: 783,309

The third post from Nike featured a carousel of images showcasing various sneakers from the "Nike Electric Pack." This post scored 0 for objectification, as it focused entirely on the product without human figures, poses, or sexualised elements. The emphasis on product design, colour patterns, and performance features demonstrates Nike's ability to engage Generation Z by highlighting innovation, style, and functionality. The absence of any objectifying imagery reflects Nike's strategic avoidance of sexualisation, instead promoting empowerment through the functionality and aesthetic of the shoes. The high engagement rate indicates that Gen Z values content that is product-centric and focuses on functionality and style rather than identity-based or sexualised imagery.

Key Insights for Nike's Strategy:

Authentic and Empowering Messaging

1. Nike's posts consistently focus on empowering athletes, showcasing their achievements or the performance of their products, which resonates with Generation Z's desire for real, inspiring content. The brand avoids the use of sexualisation or objectification, instead reinforcing confidence, talent, and skill.

Product-Centric Content is Effective

2. Nike's third post, which focused purely on product design, achieved high engagement without the need for human figures or overtly sexualised elements. This demonstrates that Generation Z values functional, innovative products showcased in a visually appealing way,

indicating that brands can be successful by concentrating on the quality and design of their offerings.

Emotional and Inspirational Appeal

3. Nike taps into the emotional resonance of sport, using imagery of athletes in moments of achievement or success. This emotional connection, coupled with athletic prowess, drives engagement, indicating that Gen Z responds well to content that celebrates personal growth, success, and authenticity.

Summary of Fashion Brand Communication Targeting Generation Z on Instagram

This study explores how fashion brands communicate with Generation Z on Instagram, focusing on visual strategies, engagement metrics, and the objectification potential of their content. Through a detailed analysis of four major brands, Adidas, Diesel, Zara, and Nike, key insights were drawn regarding how these brands align with or diverge from Gen Z's preferences and values. The analysis of engagement data and objectification scores reveals nuanced strategies in their Instagram campaigns, each tailored to resonate with different aspects of Generation Z's identity and aspirations.

1. Adidas: Empowerment through Performance and Inclusivity

Adidas' Instagram content consistently showcases athletes in moments of athleticism and achievement, with a notable focus on empowerment and inclusivity. Posts often highlight personal success stories, tapping into the Gen Z ethos of resilience and self-expression. The brand's relatively low objectification scores indicate that Adidas avoids overt sexualisation, instead emphasising performance, body positivity, and diversity. The inclusion of Gen Z influencers and athletes in Adidas campaigns speaks to the importance of representation in brand communication. The high engagement rates suggest that Gen Z values authenticity, as well as a focus on performance and inclusivity, which Adidas effectively integrates into its Instagram presence.

2. Diesel: Provocative Identity and Bold Aesthetics

Diesel's Instagram communication employs a more provocative and boundary-pushing approach, frequently using bold, edgy imagery to communicate a sense of rebelliousness and individuality. The brand's higher objectification scores reflect a deliberate use of sexualised visuals, exaggerated fashion, and controversial imagery to appeal to Gen Z's desire for self-expression and defiance of traditional norms. However, Diesel balances this with messages about sustainability, body positivity, and inclusivity through campaigns like #DIESELTRIBUTE, highlighting the complexity of the brand's identity. The high engagement rates on these posts indicate that Diesel's unapologetic aesthetic resonates with Generation Z, who are attracted to content that challenges societal conventions while celebrating individuality.

3. Zara: Fashion as Aspiration and Lifestyle

Zara's Instagram content positions itself as a leader in fast fashion with a focus on aspirational lifestyle and contemporary trends. The brand's posts often feature sophisticated, stylish visuals that convey a sense of luxury and exclusivity, with an emphasis on seasonal trends and timeless fashion. Zara's lower objectification scores suggest a more subtle and understated approach to visual communication, focusing on the clothes and styling rather than sexualised portrayals. The brand's ability to blend high-fashion aesthetics with a relatable, accessible tone has led to high engagement

from Gen Z audiences, who are drawn to Zara's ability to reflect current trends while maintaining a sense of luxury. Zara's approach demonstrates how fashion brands can successfully target Gen Z by balancing aspirational messaging with accessibility.

4. Nike: Empowerment through Athleticism and Innovation

Nike's Instagram content consistently reinforces its identity as a brand that empowers athletes, particularly through its celebration of triumphs, resilience, and innovation. Nike's posts, including those featuring athletes like Vinicius Jr. and product-focused content, highlight achievement, hard work, and performance over objectification. With low objectification scores across the posts analysed, Nike emphasises athleticism, emotional strength, and the functionality of its products, aligning with Gen Z's preferences for authenticity and inspiration. The high engagement rates reflect Nike's success in resonating with Gen Z through messages of empowerment, determination, and innovation. The brand's ability to promote products with a focus on performance, functionality, and style without relying on sexualisation has proven effective in reaching this audience.

The findings from this analysis reveal that Generation Z's engagement with fashion brand communication on Instagram is shaped by a preference for authentic, empowering content that prioritises performance, individuality, and inclusivity over objectification. Brands like Adidas and Nike have successfully tapped into this by focusing on athleticism, empowerment, and authenticity, while Diesel appeals to the rebellious spirit of Gen Z with its bold, provocative aesthetics. Zara's approach, which combines aspirational fashion with accessibility, further underscores the importance of balancing exclusivity with relatability. These insights will inform the development of guidelines for fashion brand leaders on how to best communicate with Gen Z on Instagram, aligning visual content with the values and preferences of this generation.

Preliminary insights

Objectification Scores

Nike had the lowest objectification scores overall, particularly in their post with Vinicius Jr. (Post 2), scoring 16/100 points. This reflects their focus on athlete representation, triumph, and empowerment through athletic achievement.

Diesel exhibited higher objectification scores compared to the other brands, with their highest score being 62/100 points (Post 3), linked to their bold, provocative aesthetic that appeals to Generation Z's desire for individuality and self-expression.

Zara and Adidas had more balanced objectification scores. Zara's images leaned more towards style and aesthetics with moderate objectification, while Adidas showed a consistent effort to balance performance and fashion without excessive sexualisation.

Engagement Analysis

Nike had the highest engagement across its posts, with 908,445 likes on Post 2, driven by its global brand recognition, athletic celebrity endorsements, and high-profile campaigns.

Zara had the second highest engagement, particularly because of its global reach, though engagement numbers are still significant considering their target market is more broad-based.

Diesel and Adidas had more localised engagement, with smaller but consistent interaction from South African Gen Z audiences, which is crucial for understanding how each brand adapts to its market.

Visual Content Strategy

Nike: Nike's content consistently aligns with the empowerment of athletes and the celebration of sports achievements. Their posts tend to have a low objectification and focus more on empowerment and performance. This strategy of highlighting athletic success, exemplified by the focus on Vinicius Jr., ties into their broader marketing ethos of "Just Do It," which speaks to an audience looking for motivation and inspiration.

Diesel: Diesel's visual strategy is more provocative and boundary-pushing, aiming to align with Gen Z's desire for rebellion, self-expression, and individuality. Diesel's use of bold colour palettes, edgy poses, and exaggerated styling suggests a more high-risk approach to target Gen Z, potentially using a higher objectification score due to its styling choices.

Adidas: Adidas balances between the performance and lifestyle aspects of sportswear, appealing to Gen Z's desire for both functionality and fashion. The content is focused on athletes and influencers, with a focus on empowerment and inclusivity, aligning with broader brand values of performance and teamwork.

Zara: Zara, with its fashion-forward content, focuses on visual appeal, style, and trends, with a moderate level of objectification based on its more aesthetic-focused imagery. It appeals to Gen Z through sleek, minimalist visuals and focus on fashion, fitting the preferences of Gen Z for both aspirational and relatable content.

Market Reach Consideration

Global Reach: Both Nike and Zara have larger global reach, as they only use global Instagram pages which helps them achieve higher engagement levels. Nike's international influence, backed by sports sponsorships and celebrity endorsements, contributes to its top-ranking status.

Local Reach: Diesel and Adidas, being more locally focused (in this case, South Africa), generate engagement that is more specific to a smaller demographic, allowing for deeper insights into how Gen Z in this specific region interacts with global brands. The smaller engagement here is expected, but the high engagement rates for Diesel and Adidas posts in South Africa could reflect strong regional loyalty and relevance.

Key Insights for Guideline Development

Content Style & Engagement: It's important to acknowledge that visual content aimed at Generation Z requires a balance between empowerment, authenticity, and aspirational appeal. Adidas and Nike succeed in creating content that focuses on athletes and empowerment, appealing to the ambition and self-expression of Gen Z. Diesel's high objectification score signals a stronger connection to rebellion and individuality, which resonates with Gen Z's desire for personal expression.

Influencers & Celebrity Partnerships: Nike's use of sports figures and influencers, like Vinicius Jr., demonstrates the importance of celebrity partnerships in aligning with the passions and identities of

Gen Z. Athletes, musicians, and celebrities serve as conduits for the message of the brand, amplifying its appeal.

Objectification in Visual Strategy: While Diesel and Zara lean into a more sexualised visual identity, Nike and Adidas create more inclusive and performance-driven content.

Understanding the balance between these approaches can help fashion brands create content that resonates with Gen Z's diverse values, where authenticity and self-expression are central.

Brand Message Consistency: Brands should maintain a consistent visual identity across platforms, as Nike has done with its focus on performance and empowerment. This creates stronger brand loyalty, especially among young, aspirational audiences like Gen Z.

The analysis of these four brands has illuminated key strategies in fashion brand communication on Instagram targeting Generation Z. Nike's focus on performance, empowerment, and athlete representation has a low objectification score but generates high engagement due to its global presence and consistent brand ethos. Diesel, with its provocative, rebellious aesthetic, appeals to Gen Z's desire for individuality but results in higher objectification. Adidas and Zara strike a balance between fashion and functionality, with Adidas creating more inclusive and performance-driven content, while Zara focuses on aesthetic-driven fashion content. These observations will inform the guidelines for fashion brand communication, emphasising the need for authenticity, visual appeal, and empowerment in resonating with Gen Z's values on Instagram.