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Online behaviour of luxury fashion brand advocates

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Abstract

Purpose – Over the past few years online fashion communities have proliferated becoming an increasingly powerful forum for user-generated content, and consequently, the fashion industry has shown great interest in such communities. The purpose of this paper is to review and analyse brand advocacy behaviour within luxury brand accessory forums: to analyse the role these communities play in influencing purchase intention; assessing their contribution to fashion brand love.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopted a netnographic approach to the phenomenon of online luxury accessory communities. The research reports observational data including blog texts and audience comments for four popular forums: The Purse Forum, The Fashion Spot, The Bag Forum (TBF) and Shoe Forum (SF). Although the forums are open to all and are designed to be internationally relevant; the observations were conducted from a base in the UK.

Findings – Findings indicate that informants display some unifying characteristics clustered around engagement, involvement, self-concept and self-connection, brand love and hedonic values. Informants however, display some discernible differences as they "rally" to two distinctive totems: first, active luxury brand advocates and second, passive brand advocates. Although subtle, these differences suggest significant possibilities for fashion brand owners.

Research limitations/implications – Further research could include the measurement of brand advocacy to distinguish more clearly between high and low levels of advocacy and the resulting consumer behaviour intentions. One sub-group that would be interesting to explore is that of brand evangelists and their relationship with fashion brands: what are the reasons for treating brands as religious artefacts and can this extreme level of advocacy be developed by marketing? The study focused on observing online posts by self-selected brand advocates. A worthwhile comparison could be made with fashion communities where brand marketers are active participants and how this influences the discourse and actions of brand advocates.

Practical implications – The findings indicate that all forum members are incredibly attached to their brands, but will still consider purchasing several brands as their "evoked set". Additionally, even when demonstrating involvement, they can operate as passive observers in the online community.

Originality/value – Social media, especially online forums, play an important role in contemporary luxury fashion branding. This study addresses the role these forums play in supporting brand love and the contribution they make to luxury brand advocacy. Membership and influence dynamics are reported; which have resonance to both practitioners and researchers.

Keywords Luxury brands, Online, Brand communities, Advocates, Netnography

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The luxury market has shown incredible global expansion over the past two decades and was estimated at $229 billion in 2009 (Dona a-Ilbo, 2010). Within this growth, competition has been fuelled by the emergence of new luxury and mass prestige brands; making it difficult for brand owners to preserve their brand image and identity effectively.

Apart from competitive pressures, customers have changed tremendously as social media moves apace; and society embraces the Web 2.0 era, luxury brand owners have been forced to consider online business models as a means of reaching a more demanding and increasingly digital-savvy public (Doherty, 2004). Online communities, such as discussion forums, and weblogs, have become very popular as a consequence of this digitised social world (Kozinets, 2010). Researchers have found that a fashion brand can enjoy a powerful synergy with social media. Park and Youn-Kyung (2015), found a positive relationship between social media activity and brand loyalty and within a wider context in outcome variables.

In these online communities, consumers do not simply seek information, but search for entertainment and meaningful social relationships. In these communities, brand advocates play a major role providing a crucial link between consumer and producer offering advice and guidance within the online community (Christopher *et al.*, 1991; Peck *et al.*, 1999). Consumers post openly about values, meaning and feelings and support the postings of other consumers creating a significant body of brand communications, independent to brand owner communications. The emergence of this eWOM has wide-reaching implications for several stakeholders. Increasing use of sites such as Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and Facebook have expanded and researchers including Kim and Ko (2010), found a correlation to increased purchase intention and levels of trust.

At the forefront of this step-change are brand advocates whose significant influence is tangibly observed trough advice and recommendations; Bughin *et al.* (2010) reported that word-of-mouth recommendations from trusted sources account for some 20 to 50 per cent of purchasing decisions. Thomas *et al.* (2007) noted the influence and popularity of MySpace and the communication taking place among predominantly teen fashion consumers and suggest that fashion marketers could glean a better understanding of today's fickle fashion conscious consumers by investigating such communities.

Bughin *et al.* (2010) also found that luxury brand purchasers tend to seek greater levels of information and also consider options longer than for non-luxury items. This study sought to analyse the motivations and behaviour of the online members of four sizeable luxury-accessories communities. To understand the subtle markers which effectively "tag" members as truly active advocates or as more passive members: who have yet to make the move to become an active brand advocate.

Thomas *et al.* (2007) suggest that fashion marketers should take care to investigate online forums of communication. The increasing trend of organising online communities/forums for luxury fashion accessories is popular and beginning to be part of everyday conversations in today's society (Simmons, 2008). McAlexander *et al.* (2002) found that relationships within communities strengthen brand loyalty and increase the likelihood of community involvement. Schau *et al.* (2009) suggested that community participation strengthened consumer commitment to the brand. It is necessary to acknowledge the fact that an internet presence is becoming a prerequisite in guaranteeing a representation and to ensure a well-orchestrated synergy garnered from different channels of digital communication. An important component of this presence are advocates who can effectively assist in co-creating your image, identity and contribute to your brand's positioning.

2. Core constructs of brand advocacy

Within existing papers some significant research gaps are identifiable: first, the brand advocacy concept has not been previously applied to luxury fashion accessories or online luxury fashion advocates; and second, previous brand community research (Muniz and

O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002, 2003; Jang *et al.*, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2008; Di Maria and Finotto, 2008) has been carried out in communities founded by brand owners. The four forums considered in this study (The Purse Forum (TPF); The Fashion Spot (TFS); The Bag Forum (TBF); and The Shoe Forum (SF)) were chosen to reflect on communities through a consumer-centric lens; and from a perspective of a free space where respondents express feelings, opinions and reactions to featured brands.

Through content analysis of the posts key behavioural traits emerged as community members through text conversations and posts demonstrated observable differences in joining two sub-groups as either active or passive brand loyalists. This study aimed to catalogue and analyse these behavioural traits developing those online advocacy behaviours addressed by Di Maria and Finotto (2008), Kim *et al.* (2008) and Jang *et al.* (2008).

The fashion accessory market encompasses a range of products designed to accompany clothing, to complete an overall look and includes bags, belts, scarves, and shoes (Jackson and Shaw, 2001, p. 182). Scholars and marketers identify dimensions and characteristics of "luxury" brands, including: brand identity, global reputation, emotional appeal, iconic product design (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997; Moore and Birtwistle, 2004; Okonkwo, 2007; Fionda and Moore, 2009). Luxury brand research also refers to key characteristics such as brand identity, product integrity, band signature, premium price, exclusivity, heritage and experience.

Brand advocacy was examined as a key component of the loyalty ladder framework (Christopher *et al.*, 1991; Peck *et al.*, 1999) and is used as a guideline to define and distinguish between levels of online brand advocacy across the spectrum from: disinterested non-loyalists through to active advocates. Consumers perceive luxury fashion accessories as the objects that satisfy hedonic values rather than merely supporting a social status (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009; Truong, 2010). Some respondents prefer to consider several fashion houses (a set of preferences or multi-brand buying). This demonstrated a "loss of commitment" to a single brand (Firat *et al.*, 1994); suggesting that current consumers adopt a more active and involved posture moving between a state of individualism towards a search for social bonds and interaction (Simmons, 2008; Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010).

They join online communities to share their consumption experiences developing the consumer-brand relationship (or engagement) establishing their brand advocacy level (Fournier, 1998; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002, 2003; Muniz and Schau, 2005; Jang *et al.*, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2008; Simmons, 2008; Bowden, 2009).

We re-interpret the brand advocacy construct (see Figure 1) and map several inter-linked brand concepts including: brand love; brand loyalty; brand commitment; brand engagement; and brand involvement (Traylor, 1981; Dick and Basu, 1994; Amine, 1998;
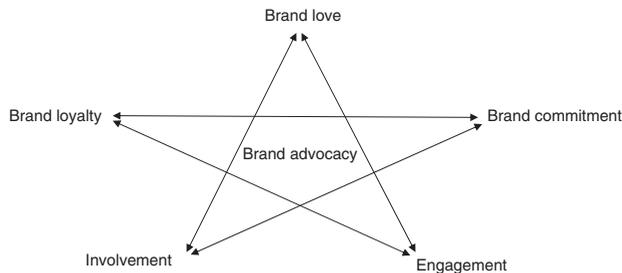

Figure 1.
The integration of core constructs to brand advocacy

Fournier, 1998; Fullerton, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2008; Bowden, 2009). These constructs may be distinctive in their own right, but in the context of this study they consistently overlap and support one other to mediate levels of consumer involvement.

Inter-linked advocacy constructs

Each construct effectively reflects another. For example, loyalty can be generated by brand love but at the same time brand love can also be an outcome of loyalty. Brand love can also deliver a tangible benefit, Ismail (2015), reported that a significant relationship exists between word-of-mouth and excitement, brand image and brand love. He also reports that an important leveraging effect can be harnessed. Long-term involvement and engagement create brand commitment and, similarly, being committed to the brand can result in affective and enduring involvement and engagement. Brand commitment is often considered to be a stronger level of emotional attachment than brand loyalty (Traylor, 1981). Involvement as the general level of interest (Day, 1970), the strength of the individual's belief system (Robertson, 1976), a response reflecting an individual's sense of self-identity (Traylor, 1981) is a related concept to loyalty and commitment. Repeat purchasing of high-involvement products is an indicator of both: brand loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Quester and Lim, 2003). Informants also demonstrated engagement as an emotional connection with particular objects, products or brands in a specific context (Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011) and "an ongoing emotional cognitive and behavioural activation state in individuals" (Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010, p. 804). Confidence, integrity, pride and passion for brands was frequently observed (Bowden, 2009, pp. 64-65) online brand communities members displayed distinct engagement states such as an increasing level of loyalty, emotional bonds and commitment.

Respondents provide evidence of amplified brand loyalty regularly reporting a fit between their personality and self-image to their perception of the brand's identity and image (Quester and Lim, 2003). Respondents also displayed examples of attitudinal loyalty (Olsen, 2007) and support Fournier's (1998) suggestion that affective commitment (or emotional commitment) is a strong driver of both repurchase and advocacy behaviour towards the brand in accord with Fullerton (2005).

More active informants passionately expressed their feelings in line with Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2009, p. 506). Enduring love and passion enables communities to feel that their beloved brands are unique, irreplaceable and feel that something was missing when they do not access these brands for a while (Fournier, 1998). Such ties are only found in brand advocates who display heightened levels of self-concept, representation and self-esteem. Wallace *et al.* (2014), explicitly studied self-expressive brands "liked" on Facebook; finding a powerful acceptance of the liked brand thereafter.

3. Methodology

We sought to explore the perceptions of luxury fashion accessories to identify the behaviours of online brand advocates within the brand community framework. Online brand communities represent a rich source, as respondents have sought a dedicated platform to express their opinions about their brands; in contrast to brand communities facilitated by brand owners where a transactional intention predominates (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Devasagayam and Buff, 2008). Wirtz *et al.* (2013), state that membership of online brand communities: reduced product uncertainty; engendered recommendations; assistance offered to fellow members; and provided members with an avenue to express their values.

An interpretivist approach

Most previous studies of brand communities have employed a quantitative instrument which can limit insight and a deeper understanding of attitudes and behaviours of online community members (Jang *et al.*, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2008). This study is based on netnography. An observational and non-participatory role was initially instigated prior to phase two when the researcher openly participated in conversations/discussions as a participant in four forums (participant observation) to gain a greater insight to reasons for behaviours discovered in the observation phase (Brewer, 2000; Saunders *et al.*, 2000; Kozinets, 2002; Babbie, 2007; Bryman, 2008).

The research approach was chosen to identify perceptions, behaviours and characteristics of online brand advocates by observing community members' interactions, conversations and activities. Qualitative methods were applied to uncover contemporary attitudes and behaviour displayed by online community informants (Kozinets, 2002). Although several forums informed the study, TPF predominates, as respondents here, were the most active and informative. Within the data gathering and interpretation phases we utilised a text-mining (Feldman and Sanger, 2006) approach to highlight key points and to assist the thematic development. This proved to be apposite in analysing the multiple posts across the contributory forums studied.

Netnography: as a research approach

Netnography is an adaptation of ethnography and forms an appropriate observational methodology to facilitate researchers in developing an understanding of the culture of a particular community (Brewer, 2000). It also provided an opportunity for the researcher to be immersed in a community in order to be able to better interpret the behaviours, conversations and practices of community members (Brewer, 2000; Bryman, 2008, Saunders *et al.*, 2000).

One researcher with a keen interest in fashion and a frequent purchaser of luxury fashion brands subscribed and became a member of four selected sites: TPF; TFS; TBF; and SF; creating an online profile and identity. The four communities were selected based on guidelines set out by Kozinets (2010) and comprised the following criteria: relevant information about fashion and fashion accessories, highly active community members, interactivity between participants and richness of the information posted by members. Although not announced initially as a researcher in phase one of data collection; reported findings have been harvested from open forums/conversations, where members were aware that their written messages/opinions were available to read in a public space (Xun and Reynolds, 2010). Observations were made between April 2010 and June 2011.

As an additional security measure only usernames have been used, protecting the participants' real identities. Such intensive observation provided a sense of the reality, spontaneity and to witness the natural aspects of the community over the time spent interacting with the community (Bryman, 2008). In addition, netnography can also produce rich and insightful results (Flick, 2006; Kelly and Gibbons, 2008; Zickar and Carter, 2010). Notwithstanding the fact that netnography can raise some ethical concerns, the online communities were carefully selected and monitored as they are open to the public and welcome anyone who has an interest in luxury fashion accessories to join their communities.

The forums

The communities of interest were formed around a shared set of interests for handbags, shoes and fashion accessories. Community members on these sites have created a

culture, values, norms and rules they accept and practice demonstrating the core characteristics of online communities as: first, consciousness of kind; second, sharing and celebrating rituals, tradition and brand stories; third, integrating and maintaining membership; fourth, developing brand to consumer and consumer to consumer relationships; fifth, sharing a moral responsibility (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Devasagayam and Buff, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2008).

These sites also offer sub-forums categorised by brands and topics where members can participate in and post information/discussion related to the particular brand they admire. Community members create "threads" to start discussions on these brands and other members routinely view and "post" back comments or opinions. Threads on these sites refer to new discussion topics and posts are replies from members to the original threads and topics. A snapshot of the four communities is provided in Table I indicating their size and activity of members in terms of discussion threads and posts. These online sites also delivered a high level of information transparency according to Xun and Reynolds (2010) by providing an archive of sub-forums, threads, posts available to this investigation. It was a key criterion that the selected virtual fashion communities were not facilitated by any commercial organisation in order to increase the reliability and validity of the data. Community rules state clearly their purpose as a C2C forum and breaching of community rules results in members being banned from the forum and any "commercial" posts being deleted. In addition, the fashion expert researcher uncovered no evidence of the studied posts not being genuine; that is, we expect the studied posts to be credible and therefore valid entries by legitimate fashion consumers who have a real passion for fashion brands, mostly women under 30 years (Kulmala *et al.*, 2013). Such fashion lovers have previously been found to be vocal and freely sharing their opinions and consumption experiences (Thomas *et al.*, 2007). Overall, the selected fashion forums offer a rich, heterogeneous and international perspective of fashion accessory consumption and related attitudes.

The process
Our approach followed that of some other netnopgraphic studies, e.g. Kozinets and Handelman (1998) and Williams and Copes (2005), where data from a period of "lurking" were used to inform online interview questions in order to expand on themes that emerged from earlier analysis. The extensive initial and iterative observation phase was conducted between April 2010 to February 2011 where data were gathered alongside a reflection on the available literature; the researcher adopted the role of non-participant observer in the initial data collection phase to catalogue perceptions, behaviours and characteristics of online brand advocates. Phase 1 enabled us to consider emerging themes; including: multi-brand buying and the prerequisites leading to the exhibition of brand advocacy behaviour. From this phase TPF with its highly active members emerged as a particularly rich source of data in relation to brand advocacy and this forum predominates in the data collection and selected quotes.

Forum	Members	Threads	Posts	
The Purse Forum	263,370	531,893	15,533,864	**Table I.**
The Fashion Spot	67,251	90,159	7,717,536	Scope and scale of
The Bag Forum	26,680	13,127	202,129	the online
Shoe Forum	33,206	4,438	14,604	community
				membership

In Phase 2 conducted between April 2011 and June 2011, the researcher adopted the role as a fully fledged community member to develop the emergent themes garnered in Phase 1. The role of "participant-experiencer" (see Walstrom, 2004a, p. 175; cited in Garcia *et al.*, 2009) entails active contribution to the group being studied which could be undertaken with a high degree of credibility based on personal experience with fashion accessories. Data gained from both phases were mapped enabling the research team to consider naturalistic data based on observed perceptions, behaviours and characteristics of the community informants outlined in the results section.

Data collection and analysis
The data collection involved observation of unique posts by active members of the selected fashion forums. During the period of April 2010 to June 2011 75 successful visits were made lasting an average of two hours. Unsuccessful visits were abandoned due to low activity and the site re-visited at a different time. The empirical data consisted mainly of naturally occurring texts using informal language in addition to specific fashion terminology understood by members of the fashion forums. Some posts were also accompanied by pictures featuring the fashion items (mostly handbags). The value of such data to the investigation lies in the rich, detailed and longitudinal information about individuals in relation to their consumption behaviour and fashion-led attitudes (Kozinets, 2007). A log was created for each visit recording the date, time and duration of the forum visit in addition to a narrative reflection of the content of the posts and identification of key themes.

Data selection focused on relevant threads (TPF = 29; TFS = 7; TBF = 6; TSF was discontinued due to low relevance and activity) relating to four aspects of brand advocacy: involvement; brand love; brand commitment; and brand loyalty generating a total of 234 meaningful blog posts for further analysis. These posts were then analysed using visual and interpretive content analysis to divide the data into behavioural categories mapped first to the Brand Framework (Keller, 2008) and subsequently to loyalty frameworks such as the loyalty ladder (Christopher *et al.*, 1991) and the social network contributor ladder (Harridge-March and Quinton, 2009) as outlined in Table II. The data analysis followed a thematic coding procedure (Strauss, 1987) and included and open coding stage (Flick, 2006) to assign key words to represent the meaning or context of the posts before axial coding (Flick, 2006) was undertaken to identify categories that reflect the theoretical constructs under investigation.

4. Findings
The first phase of the research harvested findings from a number of non-participant observations (see the Appendix). Three principal themes emerged following initial data analysis:

(1) *Perceptions of luxury brands*. This theme encapsulated how community members perceive luxury fashion accessories. It also explains the relationship between luxury fashion items and the user.

(2) *Multi-brand purchasing in a luxury fashion context*. A behavioural trait witnessed as brand advocates declared their loyalty to a group of brands (an evoked preference set). The loyalty ladder suggests that brand advocacy is traditionally connected to a single brand. Contemporary informants do not appear to adhere to this assumption.

The loyalty ladder	Social network contributor ladder	Key behaviours	Codes/key words	Examples
Brand advocate	Evangelist/ celebrity	Active advocacy behaviours	Recommending the brand/ product Defending the brand Showing support	znzngo "My sister liked my monogram Artsy so much and when the Empreinte line came out I immediately recommended for het to get it and the next day she bought it and luv luv [love] it!" 15 April 2011 footlocker "i don't want to see Hermes turning into LV. i don't want a monogrammed Birkin […] hope the Hermes family can stay strong and be united" 24 October 2010
Supporter	Insider/devotee	Attitudinal loyalty	Brand love Positive attitude to the brand	ariluvya21 "There are so many other adjectives I could use to describe Hermes but I think we all agree that no amount of words can describe how absolutely marvellous this brand is" 29 July 2010
Client	Mingler	Repeat purchase but no attitudinal loyalty	Equal brand opportunist	boyoverboard "I wouldn't ever feel like I was exclusively tied to one brand. I've never been a person who shops at one particular store. I just happen to love LV more than any other brand but if I see something that I want from another designer I'm quite happy to buy that too" 5 April 2011
Customer	Newby/tourist	Fist time buyer	First purchase	tabbyco "I just recently purchased my first Goyard and I had to familiarise myself with all the styles before making a purchase" 12 April 2011
Prospect	Lurker	Information seeking	Information lurking	Thenurse "For months, I spent hours and hours reading about the different leathers and lurking in this forum" 28 July 2010

Table II.
Loyalty behaviour categories and examples of forum posts

(3) *Brand advocacy indicators.* We suggest influences as antecedents to respondents' advocacy behaviours, including: brand recommendation; brand discussions; and brand defence. These behaviours can be classified as significant markers of advocacy and furthermore can differentiate active from passive advocates.

In Phase 2 of the data collection participant observation techniques were utilised and "seed" questions were posted to pump-prime discussion as outlined in Table III (all replies from respondents were saved, compiled and transcribed as the basis for further content analysis).

Several sub-themes were categorised and are discussed below: these quotes are representative of key themes from the threads which support findings published in previous studies including the core constructs of brand advocacy discussed earlier.

Self-concept/self-connection
Self-concept refers to an individual expression of who the person is and who s/he wants to be (Solomon *et al.*, 2006). Respondents reported aspects of their brand relationship as self-connection (Fournier, 1998). In this context aspects of self-connection and

Thread	Forum	Start date (2011)	Replies	Views	Relationship to research topic
Annoyed to see fakes?	TPF	25 May	76	1,988	Defending the brand; maintain
	TBF	25 May	2	974	brand image and reputation
Have you ever	TPF	14 April	25	770	WOM; encourage purchase
recommended LV to	TBF	14 April	1	819	
friends and family?	TFS	14 April	1	845	
What if?	TPF	19 June	11	495	How brand advocates feel if
					beloved handbag is no longer
	TBF	19 June	1	717	in fashion or is discontinued
Love talking about LV?	TPF	29 May	3	264	Expressing love for brands
	TBF	9 May	5	904	
What do you feel (loving	TPF	3 May	28	1,009	Involvement and emotional
your bag)?	TBF	3 May	3	837	attachment to the brand/bags
	TFS	3 May	5	1,210	
Channel girls	TPF	28 April	4	486	Integration of self-identity and
	TFS	28 April	1	519	brand identity
Loyal or not?	TPF	25 April	52	1,783	Multi-brand buying
	TBF	9 April	5	891	
	TFS	19 June	19	3,883	

Table III.
Discussion threads
for Phase 2

self-concept were observed as respondents reflected (Fournier, 1998, Solomon *et al.*, 2006) examples:

> I like to change my style everyday but it's all me, just like Gucci is always different but always Gucci (papertiger, 18 May 2010).

> I enjoy wearing a designer bag to complete my look/outfit. And LV fits the bill perfectly! (Yikkie, 2 January 2011).

Some members go further and incorporate brand names as a part of their usernames including: "Balenciaga-boy"; chanel_luv"; "Dior Junkie"; "guccidiva"; "LVDevotee"; "Pradagal"; "chanellover"; "MsBurberry". Informants often displayed affection for several brands in accordance with Goulding (2003) creating and supporting several multiple identities in support of Simmons (2008):

> Back in the days right after college and my first job in finance, I was very much the Chanel classic type. But then I reached 35 and realised I hated accounting and finance and totally switch careers to become a writer and editor for beauty magazines. So now, Balenciaga bags are my faves. Still classy when they need to be, but rocker/punk and edgy also. Just like me (SMKelly, 28 April 2011).

Involvement
Informants displayed long-term attachment cementing their brand commitment (Michaelidou and Dibb, 2008). Community members felt that desirable objects enhanced their image and could fulfil their desires. Informants reported a heightened level of attachment:

> I [have] been having this addiction since last Nov […] And it has never stop [stopped]! I can't stop looking forward to the new collection and I can't stop going into the shop! (jessiephy, 14 May 2010).

In addition to cited obsessions and deep love for brands, forum members often reported enduring involvement with the brand which developed into long-term brand loyalty. For example:

> All my life since I can remember I've always loved Gucci. From the vintage pieces to the latest and greatest (joyceluvsbags, 13 May 2010).

> I can say that since I got my first LV when I was 11 (I saved up my allowance for months), I never went back to the cheaper brands! (sarahguz, 16 March 2010).

Brand love
It is a key construct (Fournier, 1998) in motivating brand advocates to form positive attitudes through advocacy behaviours, i.e. recommending and defending the brand. Messages declaring love of the brands by community members were often observed:

> I love Hermes (Alundpr, 5 April 2011).

> I have recently started dating someone and I told him that LV is my first boyfriend. No one will become between me and LV (OnMyMiNd04, 16 Jan 2011).

> I love my Gucci items. I will never part with them (BagLovingMon, 1 January 2010).

Brand love was observed as a common factor supporting brand advocacy behaviour which reinforced affective involvement, fantasy fulfilment, desire and admiration. Many informants hedonically freely associated with concepts of social status, symbolic consumption and conspicuous consumption (Firat *et al.*, 1994; Goulding, 2003; Banister and Hogg, 2004; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009):

> I use their wallets, shoes, and cases [hard-sided luggage] for STATUS. I love the look on my friends' faces (even though a few of them also have LV). I think that is why most people get LV anyways (LVadict424, 3 December 2008).

> I think it IS a nice sense of accomplishment to be able to wear LV's like a badge of success! Absolutely! (Ishcat, 3 January 2011).

In the context of this study, informants display high levels of engagement:

> I was just telling my DH [dear husband] how I'm so in love with anything BV [Bottega Veneta] […] honestly, not even Chanel has got me so hooked. Actually, I now hardly visit the other sub-forums […] I'm visiting here ONLY most times! (mlbags, 1 May 2007 she posted the message with pictures of herself and her BV handbags).

Informants also report an integration of their personal identities with brand identities. An example of self-brand connection (Sprott *et al.*, 2009) demonstrated a significant level of brand love; where respondents cite: strong and binding emotional bonds with their brand. One example is Prada Psycho who joined the TPF community in July 2006 using a picture of film star Meryl Streep posing with a Prada bag. A prolific advocate making over 18,000 posts so far; generating 126 threads (discussion topics). Other respondents also displayed self-exhibition (Simmons, 2008):

> […] its November already! C'mon [come on] ladies & gents […] show us the goodies! (hunniesochic, 1 November 2011).

> Omg [oh my god] I love love your clutch!! So pretty! Congrats with the purchase (bjorn, 1 November 2011).

[…] all drool worthy! pls [please] share where you got the clutch from. I have been trying to get one too (H-Angel, 1 November 2011).

Another example is momoftwins, a Louis Vuitton advocate, and posting pictures of an extensive LV collection.

I suppose I've become an addict. I cannot stop buying. I have never shared pictures of my belonging before, but finally photographed everything and wanted to share with all of you. I will narrate as I post pictures here too (momoftwins, 2 June 2011).

[…] your collection is STUNNING! CONGRATS!!! (LVjudy, 2 June 2011).

OMG [oh my god], loving this thread! I am seriously living vicariously through your collection here (emilykj, 2 June 2011).

Adoration (pseudo-religious) worship of brands

Some members adore their brands elevating these to a higher level of worship. An example is "Sydspy" contributing over three thousand posts to the Hermès forum since joining the TPF community in 2009. In addition to their online activity Sydspy also visits Hermès boutiques in several countries:

[…] after have been lurking in the background enjoying the site of the lovely members' H treasures […] I would like to share my joy with you lovely people. Thank you for letting me share (Sydspy, 27 October 2009).

Active brand advocacy: from online to off-line

Active online brand advocates not only display their levels of brand advocacy within online communities, they also show their support of the brand in the physical world too. For instance, ramblingdoll exhibits the love of Chanel by taking photos of store window displays and shares the pictures with other community members:

Imagine that Chanel lovers: 12 gigantic store windows dedicated to CHANEL only! There are simply stunning. So I decided that this morning, I would get up early to avoid tourists and the usual crowd to go and take lots of pictures and share this event with you, Chanel lovers! (ramblingdoll, 13 November 2011).

In another example, Hermès advocates held group meetings in Hong Kong, Singapore, Sydney and London. The attendees choose to wear a variety of Hermès products to declare themselves as core fans of the brand and take photos of their Hermès accessories posting these as trophies online. These posts often feature several key components of a "brand": brand identity including brand awareness; brand image and brand positioning (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997; Keller, 2008). A significant connection between brand communities and the development of the brand advocacy concept was observed through informants' immersion into a brand community.

Brand identity

Forum members often refer to and mention key terms including: uniqueness and the identity of the brand (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997; Rajagopal and Sanchez, 2004; Dall'Olmo Riley et al., 2004; Moore and Birtwistle, 2004; Okonkwo, 2007; Keller, 2008; Fionda and Moore, 2009). They demonstrate high levels of brand literacy

and clearly understand what their brands represent. The posts below demonstrate how brand advocates express this knowledge:

> Hermes pieces are elegant luxury, ravishing designs, exquisite beauty, sumptuous leather, timeless and ageless (ariluvya21, 29 July 2010).

> BV's genuine craftsmanship and understated luxury (Cate14, 24 June 2011).

Advocates report opinions such as: Chanel is very feminine, sophisticated and high class; Hermès is an ultimate luxury, simply elegant, timeless and excellent in craftsmanship and Bottega Veneta is a work of art, classic and understated luxury.

Brand image and brand positioning
"Forum members posted many items demonstrating associations reflecting both characteristics of the product or aspects independent of the product" (Keller, 2008, p. 51). They demonstrated that a luxury brand must possess a distinct positioning to retain its luxury status maintaining a desirable quality (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997; Dall'Olmo Riley *et al.*, 2004; Moore and Birtwistle, 2004; Okonkwo, 2007; Fionda and Moore, 2009):

> Is the monogram losing its classic appeal? (vinolady, 4 March 2010).

> I have not heard this type of negativity towards the monogram (aprilshowers040, 4 March 2010).

> I Love love the monogram logo in LV. No matter what anyone says […] it's beautiful to me (Forsyte, 4 March 2010).

Another example was a thread asking "do you feel like Louis Vuitton is too available?" (instigated by "OnMyMiNd04" on 5 May 2010):

> I love carrying LV, and love seeing LV being carried. I like it when I see another person carrying it, as it is beautiful to me. I don't mind when I'm being surrounded by beauty (MOWCAM, 5 May 2010).

> I don't think it is too available but it is very popular (which doesn't matter to me at all). I just buy what I love and [this] makes me happy (Kburns2000, 5 May 2010).

Informants perceive luxury fashion accessories as sentimental and desirable objects. Beyond symbolic, conspicuous reasons and social status, these items also give them hedonic values, fulfilment of desires and increase of self-esteem. To support these findings, the brand advocates were asked about their perceptions of luxury fashion accessories:

> […] my bags are a constant source of happiness for me. they represent so many things, celebration and times gone by. I feel they are little snaps shorts of time, cause [because] I remember thing so much better when I'm looking at a particular bag (baglady2006, 4 May 2011).

> I feel that way about my bags, new and old! Sometimes I love going to Selfridges etc to just walk around and look at all the new beautiful bags even if I don't buy any. I did go through a phase where I had to have my bags on my bed all the time when I slept (lifeisstiffanyblu, 8 May 2011).

Multi-brand purchase in a luxury fashion context
Many forum devotees reported that they were attached to a variety of styles, identities and looks to accompany various social contexts. This behaviour supports the findings

published by Ehrenberg and Goodhardt (1970). To expand on this theme (and as part of the participant observation phase) a discussion was posted by the expert fashion researcher prompting forum members to respond to a series of linked questions: do they buy only one brand, why do they buy that (those) brands, what do they think about buying items from other brands, do they think buying other brands is disloyal to the brand they love?

A total of 50 meaningful replies were harvested. Most members reported that they buy other brands for variety and to compliment their outfits, occasions and moods. For example:

Variety is the spice of life […] while I would consider myself mostly an LV girl; I do admire and buy other brands (scaredycat, 5 April 2011).

Just because you favour one brand does not mean you can't buy another (Lv-nowwhat, 5 April 2011).

After being stuck on one brand at a time, I've finally come to realise that having a bag collection is no necessarily about having all the same thing (indiaink, 9 April 2011).

The examples above confirm that many respondents refused to commit themselves to buying only one brand preferring to embrace multi-brand purchases as a reflection of a desire to express multiple identities through an evoked set of preferred brands:

For some reason, I feel weird when I buy another brand! For example say I fall in love with a Gucci bag I bring it home and then I feel weird and start to think I could've bought a LV bag instead and always end up returning it the next day! (joyceluvsbags, 6 April 2011).

I don't buy other brands. I'm true to LV (img, 6 April 2011).

Brand advocacy indicators

Brand advocates can be seen to adore brands to the point where they feel compelled to recommend the brand to others (Christopher *et al.*, 1991; Peck *et al.*, 1999) and to actively engage in activities organised around the brand (Schultz, 2000):

Oh I helped one of my friends getting her LVs – I recommended the style to her and guide her through LV site (how to purchase & return policy.etc). Whenever she called, it was about LV – I was like her personal SA [sale assistant] lol [laugh out loud] (aprillsrin, 14 April 2011).

I've been urging my cousin to buy one. She keeps eyeing a few on the web site! We're supposed to set up a lunch out together and I'm going to make her go to a store with me (psxgurl, 14 April 2011).

Positive WOM – positive affirmation was a recurring theme:

I use Bottega Veneta. I like to talk about it because the designer uses some non-conventional methods in manufacturing. So I like talking about BV because of the interesting treatment of the leather (jburgh, 9 May 2011).

[…] because it's about my passion and it's really fun (flowerbobon, 29 May 2011).

I like talking and reading about it here because I know everyone else will understand me (dwoo, 29 May 2011).

Some respondents took this further, expressing opinion concerning developments in their brand's company structures, these often centred on personnel changes:

> I think this is going to be a smooth transition for the brand I'm happy we just have to wait and see her collections (Hermes1922, 27 May 2010).

> [...] she's been doing the ready to wear for a while with Lee, as well as working at McQueen fir 14 years so she was the only right person for the job, congratulations to her! (Chanelcouture09, 27 May 2010).

Defending the brand – defence was also regularly observed:

> [...] it absolutely annoys me to see fakes! Not only are they ridiculous and tacky, but they're illegal too. And honestly, I wished more people took fakes seriously rather than adopting the whole "it's not my business/it's just a purse" attitude, maybe then there would be more crackdowns on the whole industry (conrad18, 31 May 2011).

> [...] buying a counterfeit bag is supporting an industry rife with sweatshop labour and child labours violations" 27 May 2011. LV*LIFESTYLE "I get annoyed because of the whole child labour/ organised crime thing that's wrapped around fake (Rose60610, 27 May 2011).

5. Discussion
The observations reveal evidence that luxury fashion accessories are strongly related to the self-concept because consumers use these products to convey their identities, personalities and image (Solomon *et al.*, 2006). Luxury fashion accessories also provide opportunities for respondents to express how they want to be seen in societies and in context to societal groupings (Carroll, 2008; Solomon and Rabolt, 2009; Eisingerich and Rubera, 2010). Furthermore, consumers integrate symbolic meanings with their own identities or to "manufacture" the identities they seek (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2009); this is revealed from the choice of members' usernames: "Balenciaga-boy", "guccidiva" and "Pradagal".

Online brand communities: gateways to brand advocates
Online brand communities are places where consumers gather in a virtual world to share their interests, organise activities, exchange brand stories and discuss topics about the brands they love (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002).

The findings of this study concur with studies published by O'Guinn and Belk (1989) and Kozinets (2001). The four online forums have effectively become a "place of comfort" where participants can liberate and celebrate their love and obsession of luxury brands/ handbags. Effectively constructing a gateway for brand advocates to meet and converse with similar people; to share thoughts, feelings, opinions and passions for a brand (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Kim *et al.*, 2008; Jang *et al.*, 2008). Some members took these one stage further and developed friendships with the other members, meeting over lunch and attending assemblies; becoming actively engaged brand advocates as reported by: Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen (2009).

The findings identify some online advocacy behaviours which in turn supports the consumer behaviour expressed in the loyalty ladder (Christopher *et al.*, 1991; Peck *et al.*, 1999) and the social network contributor ladder (Harridge-March and Quinton, 2009). Respondents display such behaviour to occupy a position at the pinnacle of the loyalty ladder. Within the context of the social network contributor ladder, members

demonstrably act as market mavens and brand guardians (Solomon *et al.*, 2006; Trusov *et al.*, 2009; Kozinets *et al.*, 2010) and can be considered to occupy this space as an evangelist/insider and devotee.

Multi-brand buying behaviour

The concept of a linear loyalty ladder suggests that a consumer can gravitate to become an advocate and loyal to one brand (Christopher *et al.*, 1991; Peck *et al.*, 1999). In contrast, findings reveal that commitment or loyalty to a single fashion brand may not be a crucial or fundamental criterion of brand advocacy as respondents report multiple sets of preferred brands. Furthermore, as fashion trends change every season and not every brand owner can provide new variants to satisfy a diverse range of highly literate consumers. The concept of multi-brand buying (Ehrenberg and Goodhardt, 1970) is evidenced in this study as respondents juggle with a variety of identities and play a more active role in consumption developing a complex set of preferences for brands in order to support their multiple selves; expressed in various social contexts (Simmons, 2008, p. 300).

Some ultra-active advocates display near-religious adoration for their brands to proactively construct an identity. An example of such behaviours is often observed by membership of Hermès groups.

More commonly forum participants follow a set of favoured brands. This is a critical observation as previous loyalty studies including ladders propose that such behaviour is observable around a single and separate brand. Brand advocacy has in a post-modern context truly become a two-way relationship between the brand owner and brand advocate.

6. Conclusion

The study sought to consider two aspects: first, to study the perceptions and attitudes of luxury fashion devotees and second, to classify the characteristics/behaviours of online brand advocates; to construct a contemporary study providing meaningful information to both academics and practitioners.

This study reveals that brand advocates perceive luxury fashion accessories beyond the products that represent their social status. At the extreme end of the spectrum they adore brands and worship them elevating them to a pseudo-religious plane. Hermès advocates most demonstrably report their love for handbags and for an extended list of Hermes brands including apparel and jewellery.

One key finding of this study is that certain forum members display passive brand advocacy behaviour, sometimes lurking in the background observing other members who are more proactive and active: "it feels great having people around you that share the same taste in something you genuinely love" captures the distinctive type of behaviour that differentiates brand advocates from other categories of loyalists.

Self-selected brand advocates voluntarily promote and defend the brand and act as market mavens (Solomon *et al.*, 2006) or experts in luxury handbags. They promote genuine and positive opinions on the brands/products. They display a willingness to share, a unique attribute of active advocates who enjoy socialising/presenting themselves as brand devotees to their peer group (Simmons, 2008).

Generally, consumers perceive luxury handbags as exclusive and unique items which will make them "different" from others. Contrastingly, brand advocates encourage other consumers to buy similar bags to them. In fact, they feel more complete when bags they own are desired by others and are placed on a "must-have"

list. In doing so, active advocates can be differentiated from passive loyalists; who tend to internalise their feelings and emotions and do not engage in online community activities. This study found that brand advocates can also advocate multiple brands. They often embrace a set of brands they are loyal to as this effectively provides them with more brand/product experiences to enjoy and share with their peers.

Active advocates seek a deeper engagement with their brands effectively building a long-term relationship with the brands. As brand advocates actively support multiple brands at the same time, brand owners should recognise these behaviours in order to keep their brands attractive by inventing new fashion trends, facilitating brand communities and inviting brand advocates to engage in brand events. Such activities will keep active advocates spreading positive WOM and recommending the brand to others.

The research also highlighted the potential capital of text-mining. This approach and information retrieval, could be beneficial to luxury brand owners who in addition to employing contemporary analytics; they could add predictive analytics garnered from the posts made by advocates; thereby converting text to data for complimentary analysis or to test predictions made through transactional data gathering modes.

Implications
The findings recognise and catalogue key brand advocates' behaviours such as frequently and publicly discussing, recommending and exchanging opinions on the brands/products with other consumers. Brand owners are aware of the fashion collaboration phenomenon through such branding strategies as dual branding, product bundling, ingredient branding, co-branding and brand extension, SooKyoung *et al.* (2009). Researchers can also reflect upon these behaviours. Co-creation and feedback opportunities are suggested in this study as are indicators or tags that differentiate active loyalists from passive loyalists from merely aware brand consumers. Rather than passively perceiving marketer-created value through the exchange process, luxury customers are believed to actively engage in the value creation process through consumption at "multiple points of interaction" Prahalad and Ramaswamy, (2004). As social media use proliferates and grows in scope and importance online community behaviour traits and practices becomes more interesting to researchers and practitioners to gauge brands' value and reach.

Marketing and brand communications have shifted to a two-way process between producer and consumer. This change has also been exacerbated by increasingly hostile levels of competition in uncertain economic times. All information sources regardless of their genesis are important as we seek to better understand and catalogue contemporary consumer behaviour. The power and influence of social media extends and grows almost unperceptively, Belk (2013) catalogues the extent that digital devices have ramped up community connectivity, effectively creating a digital world where people can access each other instantaneously and virtually anywhere. A development that challenges luxury brand owners across a multi-verse of industries to both connect to and respond to online communities to truly mine information from this increasingly important platform.

In addition to listening to and responding to key influencers and advocates brand owners can also attend to the possibilities to leverage consumer love and to further develop these fruitful relationships to develop peer-to-peer marketing opportunities.

Dessart *et al.* (2015) in researching online communities and social media found an enhanced marketing relationship and strongly established relationship marketing aspects including brand satisfaction, trust, loyalty and consumer engagement.

Brand owners need to be mindful of the increasing power of consumers and almost in a symbiotic fashion, need to harness the power of peer-to-peer marketing opportunities. Advocates represent a powerful force as they often help less-experienced peers to make purchase decisions and have enormous influence regarding a brand's image, position and identity.

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Limitations and directions for future research
Although our exploratory study provides initial insight on brand advocacy behaviour in online fashion communities, this focused on a sub-culture of fashion accessories, in particular handbags and the results may not be applicable to other fashion communities. In addition, the study was conducted during a booming period of online social networking, so the behaviours of consumers may change and be different in future. Much remains to be learnt about consumer advocacy behaviour and the response by marketing management to this phenomenon.

An interesting area for further research concerns the measurement of brand advocacy to distinguish more clearly between high and low levels of advocacy and the resulting consumer behaviour intentions. One sub-group that would be interesting to explore is that of brand evangelists and their relationship with fashion brands: what are the reasons for treating brands as religious artefacts and can this extreme level of advocacy be developed by marketing? Our study focused on observing online posts by self-selected brand advocates. A worthwhile comparison could be made with fashion communities where brand marketers are active participants and how this influences the discourse and actions of brand advocates.

The netnographic approach is useful in an attempt to deliver contemporary behaviour and attitude measurements free from the strictures of more traditional data gathering instruments. However a comparative study using focus groups would be interesting, to delve deeper into the insights suggested in this study.

Further to a netnographic approach text and data-mining techniques could also be considered to give both companies and researchers another field for consideration. Themes could emerge from this method of analysis that could be used in connection with analytics to test findings or test if real time sales data and feedback was in concert with information freely given by forum members.

A study based in another territory for example the USA or Asia would also enable researchers to assess whether local factors mediate results and or attitudes expressed by respondents.

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Appendix

Themes	Constructs	Shared codes/key words	Examples from Phase 1 non-participant observation	Examples from Phase 2 participant observation
1. Perceptions of luxury fashion accessories	Self-concept Self-connection Involvement	Identity/personality	Bag-terfly "I would probably be a BV […] a classic yet sophisticated kinda [kind of] way" 23 August 2010 Indicating self-concept/self-connection by usernames such as "Dior Junkie", "MsBurberry" and "guccidiva"	SMKelly "Balenciaga bags are my favs. Still classy when they need to be, but rocker/punk and edgy also. Just like me" 28 April 2011
	Hedonic values	Happiness	LVDevotee "they just feel great and are a delight to carry and use!" 8 January 2008 NikolineSofieK "I love the bags, they are angles sent from above to satisfy us" 3 May 2010	baglady2006 "my bags are a constant source of happiness for me" 4 May 2011 mammabyrdie "It's like carrying a little of escapism on your arms" 6 May 2011
		Sentimental/memorable objects	pinkybear "I love the fact that I can pass it down to my daughter" 7 December 2008 ayengel "I don't want to part with it, I love it so much" 13 September 2010	calipursegal "I love my bags. I have photos of them in my phone and sometimes when I miss a bag I'll look at the pics" 3 May 2011 SassieMe "Sometimes, I pull my bags out of their boxes and try on different outfits and basically play a grown-up version of "dress up". So silly, but it does make me happy!" 4 May 2011
		Reward	LVGLITTER "my Vuitton's my way of rewarding myself for working hard and being a good person" 3 January 2011 balihai88 "when I finally take a break I head straight to H and want to buy everything in sight because I want to reward myself for working so hard" 9 June 2011	Sunnyday3074 "It's our right to indulge ourselves" 8 May 2011 samara_15 "I love to put my bags near me at work so when I start to feel stressed out, I look at them and think "this is one of the reason you work so hard!" 5 May 2011
		Love, passion, obsession	ariluvya21 "I am in love with Hermes" 29 July 2010 BagLovingMon "I love my Gucci items. I will never part with them" 1 January 2010	bagIver "I adore my bags and love the feeling that each and every bag I own give me" 8 May 2011 flowerbobon "because it's about my passion and it's really fun" 29 May 2011
2. Multi-brand buying in luxury fashion context	Brand commitment	Not committing to the only one brand	baglover90 "I was a diehard fan of chole and balenciga. but now I rather have a different bag, all with their own style and personalities, than the same bag in different colours" 10 April 2011 baggladdy "I'm more of an LV girl, but how can you not add a Chanel? I plan to get next spring for my BIG 40th Bday [birthday]" 28 April 2010	scaredycat "Variety is the spice of life […] while I would consider myself mostly an LV girl; I do admire and buy other brands" 5 April 2011 boyoverboard "I wouldn't ever feel like I was exclusively tied to one brand" 5 April 2011

(*continued*)

Table AI.
Comparisons
between the two
data sets

Table AI.

Themes	Constructs	Shared codes/key words	Examples from Phase 1 non-participant observation	Examples from Phase 2 participant observation
3. Brand advocate indicators	Brand loyalty	Attitudinal loyalty	krawford "I have so many designer bags but my Bottegas are always my go to bag" 25 June 2011 OnMyMiNd04 "No one will come between me and LV" 16 January 2010	msresinhead "I just love my LVs I can't explain it in no simpler terms than this, I just feel good around them" 5 May 2011 boyoverboard "LV is my favourite brand, and it's not going die off" 19 June 2011
		Behavioural loyalty (repeat purchase)	lexis.s "I already bought 2 Classic Jumbo these past week because the soon-coming-price-increase panic" 22 May 2011	joyceluvsbags "I just love how LV holds it's value and if in a couple of years or months I get tired of a certain bag I feel ok knowing that if I decided to sell I won't lose a whole lot of money" 6 April 2011
		Multiple attitudinal commitments/ loyalties to preferred brands	louch "I just bought a Marc Jacobs Fuschia Bonnie bag and a Chloe purple suede pochette. Love them both" 22 April 2009 darknight11 "I totally love LV and Gucci, they are my 2 favs [favourites]l" 13 August 2009	COACH ADDICT "I have certain brands I love and tend to buy often like Gucci and Valentino" 11 April 2011 cindy05 "I own mostly lvs but also have chanel, balenciaga, Marc Jacobs, Prada, Gucci. I've brunch out over the years" 6 April 2011
	Brand advocacy behaviours	Recommending the brand (convey love of the brands, hedonic feeling, increasing self-esteem, want to share good quality of the products)	fettfleck "I would recommend them also because I am very content with their bags and accessories" 4 May 2010 LVMN "I recommend LV to anyone that is willing to talk about bags with me!" 11 May 2011	SMkelly "it thrills me to no end when a friend or family member takes my suggestion and loves the bag" 14 April 2011 poonski "all my friends told me that I'm an "expensive" influence. I got most of my friends into buying designer bags. It feels great having people around you that shares the same taste in something you genuinely love" 14 April 2011
		Positive WOM (convey love and interest of the brands, hedonic feeling)	dinitegrity "The leather is just so divine and strong!" 4 May 2011 llson "I feel this is another hit for Fendi – I really like it and would like to add one to my closet of bags" 13 July 2009	Lv-nowwhat "It's something I like and know about" 29 May 2011 flowerbobon "because it's about my passion and it's really fun" 29 May 2011
		Defending the brand (convey moral responsibilities and love of the brands)	CleoCouture "I really hate all the fakes on eBay!!! I get so mad sometimes, I just can't wait to report these scumbags" 6 September 2007 monogram_boy "Most PATHETIC YouTube video ever. I can't believe this girl is actually PROUD of her nasty plastic "Goyard" bag. She acts as if its [it is] the greatest thing ever" 1 June 2011	Rose60610 "buying counterfeit bags is supporting an industry rife with sweatshop labour and child labour violations" 27 May 2011 Conrad18 "it absolutely annoys me to see fakes! Not only they are ridiculous and tacky, but they're illegal too" 31 May 2011

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