If You Know, You Know — Or Do You?

The Fracturing Meaning of Luxury Fashion

A Qualitative Study Exploring How Industry Professionals and Consumers Interpret the Changing Meaning of Luxury

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Abstract

The luxury fashion industry is undergoing a significant transformation, shaped by increasing digital visibility, the rise of dupe culture, and shifting consumer values. This study examines how the meaning of luxury fashion is constructed and interpreted in the contemporary market, with particular focus on how these dynamics are experienced by those who consume luxury and those who produce it. Using a qualitative approach, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine consumers and nine industry professionals, and analysed through inductive thematic coding.

The findings reveal that while both groups share a set of foundational values – craftsmanship, authentic identity, and a retreat from conspicuous branding – they diverge significantly in how they experience, prioritise, and anticipate luxury. Consumers identify craftsmanship and material quality as the primary basis of luxury legitimacy, while professionals remain predominantly focused on commercial strategy, brand positioning, and competitive response to imitation. This divergence points to a deeper structural misalignment: the shared interpretive framework through which luxury has historically been understood is fracturing, with brands and consumers increasingly speaking different languages about what luxury is and what it is for.

These findings indicate that luxury is not in decline but in transition, and that its future legitimacy will depend on whether brands can credibly realign their practices with the enduring values consumers continue to hold them to. The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of luxury as a socially constructed and continuously evolving category, and offers practical implications for luxury brands navigating the tensions between visibility, authenticity, and commercial pressure.

Keywords: *luxury fashion, dupe culture, consumer perception, industry professionals, craftsmanship, inconspicuous consumption, symbolic value, qualitative research*

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Glossary of Key Terms

Luxury fashion brand – a fashion brand characterised by a combination of product integrity, a distinctive design signature, premium pricing, exclusivity, heritage, a carefully curated retail environment, exceptional service, a strong cultural identity, clear brand positioning, and deliberate marketing communications (Fionda and Moore, 2009).

Dupe culture – the widespread practice of producing and purchasing imitations of luxury designs at significantly lower price points, enabling consumers to access similar aesthetics without the financial investment associated with the original product (Zafran and Irfan Ahmed, 2025). Unlike counterfeit goods, dupes typically do not replicate brand logos or claim authenticity, but instead reproduce the visual language and design codes of luxury items.

Heritage – the selective and strategic mobilisation of a brand's past – encompassing its traditions, narratives, archival materials, symbols, and accumulated reputation – in ways that stakeholders recognise as meaningful and that the brand uses to shape its present identity and future direction (Urde, Greyser and Balmer, 2007; Balmer and Burghausen, 2015).

Logomania – the practice of prominently displaying brand logos, monograms, or insignia across luxury products as the primary signifier of value and status. Rather than relying on craftsmanship, material quality, or design to communicate luxury, logomania foregrounds the brand name itself as the product's most visible and defining feature. Rooted in the logic of conspicuous consumption – the use of visible expenditure to signal wealth and social position (Veblen, 1899) – logomania peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s and has since been associated with a broader cultural shift toward more understated and codified expressions of luxury distinction.

Quiet luxury – a consumption orientation characterised by the preference for understated, logo-free luxury goods that signal distinction through material quality, craftsmanship, and design refinement rather than overt brand visibility. Recognition depends on cultural knowledge rather than mass legibility, with status communicated selectively to similarly informed audiences (Han, Nunes and Drèze, 2010; Taylor, Borenstein and Pangarkar, 2025).

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1. Introduction

The luxury fashion industry is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by increasing digital visibility, evolving consumer values and the rapid diffusion of luxury aesthetics into the mass market. Traditionally, luxury has been associated with exclusivity, scarcity, and craftsmanship, where limited accessibility and high price points function as key mechanisms for maintaining desirability and distinction (Dubois and Ordabayeva, 2015). For the purposes of this study, luxury fashion is defined and understood as a category in which value is derived not only from functional quality but from intangible attributes – including heritage, craftsmanship, and social distinction. As Kapferer (1997, p. 253) notes, luxury goods are "intangibles associated with values and ethics" rather than simply products with superior tangible functions, and are characterised by the paradox of needing to be "desired by all but consumed only by the happy few" (Kapferer, 1997, p. 255). Within this framework, luxury goods derive value not only from their functional qualities but also from their ability to signal status and differentiate consumers within social hierarchies.

However, these foundational principles are increasingly being challenged – the expansion of digital platforms, particularly social media, has intensified the visibility of luxury brands, making them more accessible in symbolic and visual terms. While visibility is essential for cultural relevance, excessive exposure risks undermining the exclusivity that sustains luxury's symbolic value (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Roper *et al.*, 2013).

At the same time, the emergence of dupe culture has further complicated the contemporary luxury landscape. Through the widespread imitation of luxury designs by fast-fashion and mass-market brands, consumers are increasingly exposed to similar aesthetics across vastly different price points. This development enables access to the symbolic and visual aspects of luxury without the associated financial investment, thereby challenging traditional distinctions between luxury and non-luxury consumption (Zafran and Irfan Ahmed, 2025). As a result, the mechanisms through which luxury maintains differentiation are becoming less visually apparent.

These developments raise important questions about how consumers navigate and respond to a shifting luxury landscape. Research suggests that consumers engage with luxury brands not only as status markers but as tools for identity construction, integrating brand meanings into their self-concept and using them to communicate personal and social identities (Holt, 1995). This identity function depends heavily on luxury retaining its symbolic distinctiveness – grounded in perceptions of rarity, uniqueness, and social distinction (Wang, 2022). As visibility increases and imitation becomes more widespread, it becomes increasingly unclear whether these foundations remain stable, and how consumers continue to derive meaning from luxury when its signals are no longer exclusive.

The question of how luxury meaning is constructed and sustained under these conditions remains underexplored in the existing literature. As visibility increases and imitation becomes more prevalent, traditional signals of exclusivity may lose their effectiveness, potentially shifting the basis of luxury value toward alternative dimensions such as authenticity, craftsmanship, and personal relevance (Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels, 2009). Despite growing academic interest in luxury consumption, limited research has examined how the combined effects of digital visibility, hype-driven branding, and dupe culture are reshaping consumer perceptions of luxury.

This study aims to address this gap by exploring how luxury is understood in today's market context. By examining both consumer and industry perspectives, the research investigates whether increasing visibility and imitation contribute to the dilution of traditional luxury meanings or to their transformation. In doing so, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how luxury is being redefined in an era characterised by accessibility, digital exposure, and cultural diffusion.

1.1 Background

The luxury fashion industry has long operated on a set of principles that distinguish it from the broader fashion market: that its products carry meaning beyond their material function, that their value is sustained through scarcity and controlled access, and that the identity they confer on their owners is inseparable from the prestige attached to the brand. Within this traditional framework, restricted accessibility – maintained through high price points and controlled distribution–functions as a central driver for preserving rarity and desirability (Kapferer, 1997). Luxury goods consequently function as symbolic resources through which consumers communicate status, identity, and social position (Dittmar, 1994; Dubois and Ordabayeva, 2015).

While luxury consumption has often been associated with status signalling, research suggests that it is also driven by intrinsic motivations. Consumers may engage with luxury through an appreciation of design, craftsmanship, and cultural meaning, seeking internally rewarding experiences and emotions beyond purely social recognition (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Kruglanski *et al.*, 2018; Woolley and Fishbach, 2018). This points to the dual nature of luxury value encompassing both external, socially oriented benefits and internal, personally meaningful experiences.

From a consumer perspective, the value of luxury extends beyond functional quality to include symbolic and psychological dimensions. Consumers select luxury brands whose perceived image aligns with their own self-concept, using them as a means for expressing personal values and desired social identity (Sirgy, 1982; Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels, 2009). Furthermore, perceived uniqueness and scarcity are central drivers of luxury consumption, as they allow individuals to differentiate themselves from others and maintain a sense of exclusivity (Wang, 2022). Scarcity, therefore, is not merely a supply-side strategy but a central factor underlying the perceived value of luxury (Tsai, Yang and Liu, 2013).

The shift away from these traditional mechanisms is closely linked to the strategic choices luxury brands have made in response to digitalisation. They have increasingly adopted visibility-driven strategies, including influencer collaborations, digital campaigns, and logo-centric designs, which enhance brand awareness and cultural relevance. The expansion of social media has accelerated the circulation of luxury imagery, embedding brands more deeply within everyday consumer culture. While such strategies can strengthen brand recognition, research indicates that consumer evaluations of luxury are sensitive to external cues such as price, brand consistency, and perceived exclusivity (Ndofirepi *et al.*, 2022). When these signals become inconsistent or overly accessible, perceptions of quality and value may be negatively affected, indicating that increased visibility may not always reinforce luxury positioning.

Alongside this shift, the industry has witnessed the emergence of countertrends that reassert more traditional luxury values. The rise of minimalist or “quiet luxury” brands reflects a growing preference for understated design, subtle branding, and a renewed emphasis on craftsmanship and authenticity. This development aligns with research suggesting that luxury consumption is increasingly shaped by personal values such as self-identity, self-expression, and intrinsic satisfaction, rather than purely by overt status signalling (Taylor, Borenstein and Pangarkar, 2025). As a result, some consumers appear to be moving toward more discreet and personally meaningful expressions of luxury.

At the same time, structural tensions within the industry have intensified. Increased visibility has contributed to perceptions of overexposure, where luxury brands become too widely recognised to sustain their exclusivity. In parallel, the rise of dupe culture has further blurred the boundaries between luxury and non-luxury consumption. Industry evidence suggests that engagement with luxury dupes has grown significantly, particularly among younger consumers who often perceive such alternatives as accessible and strategically “savvy” (Vlamis, 2025, *Business Insider*). As similar aesthetics appear across different price levels, the distinction between authentic luxury and imitation becomes less clear, weakening luxury’s symbolic differentiation.

1.2 Purpose & Contributions

The purpose of this study is to examine how the meaning of luxury fashion is constructed, interpreted and experienced in the contemporary market context with particular attention to how consumers and industry professionals understand luxury differently – and where their understandings align. In particular, the research seeks to explore how increasing visibility, hype-driven branding strategies, and the rise of dupe culture are influencing the ways in which luxury is perceived by these two groups. By focusing on these developments, the study aims to assess whether the traditional foundations of luxury – such as exclusivity, scarcity, and symbolic distinction – are being maintained, diluted, or redefined in the eyes of those who consume it and those who produce and manage it.

This thesis adopts a comparative perspective by analysing insights from both groups. Consumers offer an understanding of how luxury is experienced, interpreted, and personally valued, while industry professionals offer a strategic perspective on how luxury is created, communicated, and managed commercially. These two perspectives do not always align, and examining both is central to the study's contribution. Bringing these perspectives together enables the identification of potential points of convergence and divergence between brand positioning and consumer perception.

The study contributes to the existing literature on luxury consumption and branding by addressing a contemporary gap related to the ever-changing nature of luxury in a highly visible and digitally mediated environment. While prior research has emphasised the importance of exclusivity, scarcity, and status signalling, less attention has been given to how these foundations are challenged by increased accessibility, visual saturation, and imitation. In this context, the thesis provides insight into how luxury meaning is being constructed differently by consumers and industry professionals – and what this divergence reveals about the broader tension between visibility-driven approaches and more restrained strategies associated with "quiet luxury."

By examining these dynamics, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of luxury fashion as a fluid and evolving concept, rather than a fixed category. The findings aim to offer both theoretical and practical implications, shedding light on how luxury brands can navigate the tension between maintaining exclusivity and remaining relevant in a highly visible and rapidly contested market.

This study does not seek to establish causal relationships, produce statistically generalisable findings, or offer a comprehensive account of the luxury fashion industry as a whole. Rather, it aims to provide a conceptually grounded and empirically informed understanding of how luxury is currently constructed and interpreted among a specific group of informed participants. The contribution lies in the depth and nuance of this account – not in its breadth or representativeness.

1.3 Research Question

The central research question guiding this study is:

How is the meaning of luxury fashion constructed and interpreted by consumers and industry professionals in the contemporary market context?

The research question directs attention to how two distinct groups – those who consume luxury and those who produce and manage it – understand, define, and experience luxury today, and whether their understandings converge or diverge. "Constructed and interpreted" reflects the study's theoretical premise, drawn from Berger and Luckmann (1966), that luxury is not a fixed category with stable, universally shared meanings, but one whose meaning is actively produced through social interaction, cultural context, and individual experience.

To support the investigation, the following sub-questions are addressed:

1. How do consumers perceive and define luxury fashion today?
2. How do industry professionals conceptualise and communicate luxury?
3. How do increased visibility, hype-driven branding, and dupe culture influence perceptions of luxury?
4. What tensions emerge between consumer and industry professional perspectives on the meaning and future of luxury?

Sub-questions 1 and 2 establish the two primary perspectives under investigation: how consumers define and experience luxury today – including which attributes such as craftsmanship, exclusivity, or personal relevance they prioritise – and how industry professionals conceptualise and communicate it, navigating the tension between commercial pressures and the values they associate with authentic luxury. Sub-question 3 addresses the three key market developments that form the study's contextual backdrop: visibility refers to the intensified presence of luxury brands across digital platforms; hype-driven branding refers to strategies that prioritise short-term cultural attention over long-term brand coherence; and dupe culture refers to the widespread production and consumption of luxury-inspired imitations at lower price points. Sub-question 4 brings these threads together by asking where the two groups diverge – not only in how they define luxury today, but in what they expect of it and how they anticipate its future. Identifying these tensions is central to the study's argument that the shared interpretive framework through which luxury has historically been understood is under pressure.

1.4 Delimitations

This study is subject to several delimitations that define its scope and clarify the boundaries of the research.

First, the study focuses specifically on luxury fashion, rather than the luxury sector more broadly. While luxury exists across multiple industries, including hospitality, automotive, and jewellery (Wang, 2022), luxury fashion represents a particularly relevant context due to its strong symbolic, aesthetic, and identity-related dimensions. In addition, fashion is highly visible and closely connected to trends, social media, and imitation practices, making it especially suitable for examining contemporary dynamics such as visibility, hype, and dupe culture. As such, the findings of this study are not intended to be generalised across all luxury sectors.

Second, the research examines perceptions and meanings of luxury, rather than financial performance, sales data, or firm-level outcomes. The aim of the study is to understand how luxury is interpreted and constructed by consumers and industry professionals, rather than to evaluate the economic success of luxury brands. While financial indicators may provide valuable insights into market performance, they do not capture the symbolic and experiential dimensions that are central to luxury consumption.

Third, the study adopts a qualitative research approach based on semi-structured interviews, rather than a quantitative methodology. This choice is motivated by the exploratory nature of the research, which seeks to capture nuanced, subjective interpretations of luxury. A qualitative approach allows for deeper insights into attitudes, perceptions, and meanings that may not be fully accessible through structured survey methods. However, this also implies that the findings are interpretive in nature and not statistically generalisable.

Finally, the study is intentionally bounded by a specific sample of consumers and industry professionals selected for their direct engagement with the luxury fashion market. The findings are therefore contextually situated rather than broadly representative, and are not intended to account for the full diversity of global luxury consumers or professionals.

These delimitations are necessary in order to maintain a clear and focused research design, while also acknowledging the boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted.

1.5 Structural Overview

This thesis is structured into six chapters, each designed to systematically explore how the meaning of luxury fashion is interpreted and constructed in the contemporary market.

The introduction provides the background, relevance, and objectives of the study, establishing the overall context and framing the research problem. It further outlines the purpose, research questions, and delimitations of the study.

Following this, the theoretical framework chapter examines existing literature on luxury branding and consumption, establishing the academic foundation upon which the study is built. Key concepts such as exclusivity, scarcity, symbolic value, identity, and contemporary dynamics such as visibility and imitation are discussed.

The methodology chapter details the research design and methods employed, explaining the choice of a qualitative approach and the use of semi-structured interviews as well as the delimitations that follow it. It further outlines the data collection process and analytical strategy used to address the research questions.

In the findings chapter, the results of the interviews are presented using an analytical narrative, highlighting the main themes that emerge from both consumer and industry perspectives.

The discussion chapter interprets these findings in relation to the theoretical framework, analysing their implications and exploring the tensions between traditional luxury values and contemporary market developments.

Finally, the conclusion summarises the study's key findings, acknowledges the limitations of the research, and suggests avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining Luxury and the Logic of Luxury Branding

This section examines the underlying logic of luxury branding, focusing on how value is constructed through exclusivity, craftsmanship, and symbolic meaning. The intangible attributes that distinguish luxury – rarity, heritage, and social distinction – do not operate independently but form a mutually reinforcing system in which each element sustains the others.

Exclusivity plays a central role within this system, as scarcity functions as a key mechanism for maintaining desirability. Restricted access – through high prices, limited distribution, and controlled availability – ensures that luxury goods retain their distinctiveness. However, as luxury becomes increasingly visible and accessible, its ability to signal distinction may weaken, challenging the stability of these traditional mechanisms (Tsai, Yang and Liu, 2013). Heritage and craftsmanship further reinforce the perceived authenticity of luxury brands by linking them to tradition and artisanal expertise (Urde, Greyser and Balmer, 2007). These elements form an "authentic core" that legitimises premium pricing and differentiates luxury from mass-market goods. Maintaining this core requires balancing continuity with adaptation, as brands must evolve while preserving their historical identity (Cooper, Merrilees and Miller, 2021).

At the same time, tensions emerge within the value system of luxury. The relationship between price and quality, traditionally central to luxury, may become unstable when consumers perceive a disconnect between cost and the quality or craftsmanship the price implies. This challenge is intensified in contemporary markets, where consumers increasingly evaluate luxury not only through price signals but also through perceived authenticity and personal meaning (Khan, Fazili and Bashir, 2021; Zafran and Irfan Ahmed, 2025).

The logic of luxury branding is becoming more complex, as the alignment between exclusivity, authenticity, and value is increasingly difficult to sustain. Whether luxury brands can credibly maintain these promises, or whether consumers have already begun to doubt them, is central to understanding how luxury functions today.

2.2 Luxury as Symbolic and Cultural Value

This section conceptualises luxury as a symbolic and cultural construct, emphasising its role in status signalling and identity expression. Luxury fashion consumption extends beyond functional utility, serving as a means through which individuals communicate identity, taste, and social positioning (Dittmar, 1994).

From a sociological perspective, luxury operates as a mechanism of distinction, where consumption practices are used to differentiate individuals within social hierarchies. Consumers engage with luxury brands as cultural resources, using them to construct and communicate identity – what Holt (1995) describes as consuming as a form of classification, through which individuals define themselves in relation to others. The emotional dimension of luxury consumption is further evidenced by research showing that desire for luxury goods is partly driven by social comparison – specifically, consumers who admire rather than resent those who own luxury items are more likely to aspire to ownership themselves (Sung and Phau, 2019). This highlights that the value of luxury is deeply embedded in meaning-making processes rather than material attributes alone.

At the same time, research suggests that luxury is not a universally defined concept, but is shaped through ongoing cultural interpretation. Consumers actively define what constitutes "true" luxury, constructing meanings that reflect both personal values and broader societal narratives. Luxury is thus best understood as a socially constructed category rather than a fixed one – its boundaries and meanings continuously reshaped through cultural and social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Roper et al., 2013).

The symbolic value of luxury in fashion is closely tied to its ability to signal exclusivity and status. However, this function becomes increasingly complex as luxury aesthetics diffuse into the mass market. The rise of imitation and dupe culture enables consumers to access similar symbolic cues at lower price points, suggesting that aspects of luxury's social value can be replicated without authentic ownership (Zafran and Irfan Ahmed, 2025). When symbolic markers are no longer exclusive, the clarity of luxury's social meaning becomes less stable, requiring new forms of differentiation.

The meaning of luxury is not fixed by brands alone but emerges through the ongoing interaction between brand positioning and consumer interpretation – shaped by, and contingent on, the social contexts in which it is experienced.

2.3 Visibility, Hype, and Contemporary Luxury Marketing

This section examines the increasing role of visibility and hype in contemporary luxury branding, focusing on the relationship between cultural relevance and exclusivity. As digital platforms reshape the fashion landscape, luxury brands face growing pressure to remain continuously visible and culturally engaging (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009).

Visibility is central to luxury branding, as consumers must recognise and engage with brands for them to hold cultural and social value. However, research suggests that luxury is fundamentally dependent on exclusivity, and when products become too widely accessible or visible, their ability to signal distinction may weaken (Dubois and Ordabayeva, 2015). Rather than simply reducing exclusivity, increased visibility restructures how luxury is communicated, shifting it from controlled brand signalling to more dispersed and consumer-mediated forms of meaning-making.

In response to the dynamics of digital culture, contemporary luxury marketing increasingly relies on hype-driven strategies, such as viral campaigns and attention-generating creative direction. These approaches aim to sustain cultural relevance in fast-moving environments but often prioritise short-term engagement over long-term brand coherence. As brand meaning is shaped through ongoing interaction between brands and consumers, control over luxury symbolism becomes more diffused and less centrally managed (Roper *et al.*, 2013). This contributes to the rapid circulation and reinterpretation of luxury aesthetics across different contexts. As a result, distinctions between luxury and non-luxury categories become less clearly defined, challenging the ability of brands to maintain differentiation.

2.4 Inconspicuous Consumption and the Rise of Minimalist Luxury

This section examines the shift toward inconspicuous consumption and the rise of minimalist luxury, characterised by subtle signalling and restrained aesthetics. In contrast to traditional logo-driven luxury, this approach reflects changing ways in which status and distinction are expressed.

Inconspicuous consumption refers to the use of subtle and less visible status signals, where recognition depends on cultural knowledge rather than overt branding. As demonstrated by Han, Nunes, and Drèze (2010), status signalling varies across consumer groups, with highly knowledgeable or high-status individuals preferring discreet signals that are recognisable only to similarly informed audiences. In this context, distinction is achieved through selective recognition rather than mass visibility.

This shift is closely linked to the increasing diffusion of visible luxury. As heavily branded products become more widespread and easier to imitate, their effectiveness as status markers declines. In response, consumers move toward more understated forms of luxury that are harder to replicate and therefore more exclusive (Bellezza, 2023). This reinforces the idea that status signalling adapts to maintain differentiation.

Recent research further identifies the emergence of "inconspicuous minimalists", who actively prefer luxury goods without visible logos. These consumers are less concerned with broad social recognition and more focused on craftsmanship, material quality, and design over branding visibility, and signal status within smaller, culturally informed groups (Taylor, Borenstein and Pangarkar, 2025).

Importantly, inconspicuous consumption does not represent a rejection of luxury, but a transformation in how it is expressed. High-status consumers continue to engage in luxury consumption, but favour understated aesthetics that allow for more controlled and context-selective signalling (Bellezza, 2023).

The rise of minimalist luxury reflects a shift from overt to coded forms of distinction, where visibility is replaced by subtlety. This illustrates the way luxury adapts to changing market conditions, maintaining its symbolic function while altering the way it is communicated.

2.5 The Democratisation and Dilution of Luxury

This section examines how increasing accessibility, imitation, and market diffusion reshape the boundaries of luxury. As luxury aesthetics become more widely available, traditional distinctions between luxury and non-luxury products are increasingly challenged.

The democratisation of luxury refers to the growing accessibility of luxury symbols, driven by digital visibility, globalisation, and the expansion of product categories. Dupe culture, in particular, enables consumers to access similar designs and aesthetic cues at significantly lower price points, reducing the exclusivity traditionally associated with luxury goods (Zafran and Irfan Ahmed, 2025). This creates an accessibility paradox, where increased exposure enhances desirability while simultaneously undermining the scarcity that sustains luxury value.

From a signalling perspective, imitation disrupts the ability of luxury goods to function as clear markers of status. When similar visual cues are widely accessible, their ability to differentiate consumers diminishes. This encourages shifts toward more subtle and less replicable forms of distinction, reinforcing the dynamic nature of status signalling (Han, Nunes and Drèze, 2010). This suggests that the boundaries of luxury are not fixed but continuously reconstructed in response to market diffusion.

At the same time, the emergence of minimalist brands further complicates the boundaries of luxury. Research shows that such brands can occupy positions along a spectrum ranging from highly exclusive to more accessible, shaping how consumers interpret their authenticity and value (Wilson and Bellezza, 2022). This suggests that luxury is not defined by fixed categories, but by how it is positioned and perceived within specific contexts.

Overall, the democratisation of luxury does not eliminate its symbolic value but transforms how it is constructed and recognised. As accessibility and imitation reshape the market, luxury becomes increasingly dependent on perception, context, and consumer interpretation rather than clear structural boundaries.

2.6 Summary and Themes for Empirical Investigation

The theoretical framework developed across this chapter establishes the conceptual foundation from which the empirical investigation proceeds. Luxury fashion is understood here not as a fixed category defined by price or product attributes, but as a socially constructed and continuously interpreted one – shaped by the interaction between brand positioning, consumer perception, and broader cultural dynamics (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Roper et al., 2013). Several interconnected tensions emerge from the literature that will be explored empirically.

The first concerns the relationship between visibility and exclusivity. As luxury brands have increasingly adopted digital and hype-driven strategies to maintain cultural relevance, the exclusivity that has historically underpinned their symbolic value is placed under pressure – raising the question of whether visibility and luxury distinction can coexist, or whether one necessarily undermines the other (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009).

The second concerns the shifting basis of status signalling. The literature documents a movement away from conspicuous, logo-driven consumption toward more understated and codified forms of distinction – a shift driven by the diffusion of visible luxury into the mass market and the growing preference among culturally informed consumers for signals legible only to similarly informed audiences (Han, Nunes and Drèze, 2010). Whether this shift is experienced consistently across consumers and industry professionals, and what it reveals about the changing logic of luxury distinction, will be examined in the findings.

The third concerns craftsmanship, authenticity, and commercial pressure. Heritage and artisanal quality function as the "authentic core" that legitimises luxury pricing and differentiates luxury from mass-market alternatives (Urde, Greyser and Balmer, 2007; Fionda and Moore, 2009). Yet the commercial imperatives of large-scale luxury production increasingly tension this core, with brands under pressure to grow without compromising the integrity that sustains their authority.

The fourth concerns dupe culture and the democratisation of luxury. As imitation makes the visual language of luxury widely accessible, the symbolic boundaries between luxury and non-luxury consumption become less stable – raising questions about whether dupe culture dilutes luxury meaning, reinforces the desirability of the original, or simply reflects a broader renegotiation of what luxury is for (Zafran and Irfan Ahmed, 2025).

Together, these themes provide the analytical lens through which the empirical findings are interpreted. The study investigates how consumers and industry professionals each navigate these tensions – and whether their responses converge or diverge in ways that illuminate the broader condition of luxury meaning today.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the research method employed and describes the chosen approach to address the established research questions.

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach in order to generate nuanced insights relevant to the research questions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, in which participants were invited to describe and reflect on their perspectives regarding the ongoing transformation of the luxury fashion market. This method enabled the deliberate selection of participants with relevant experience and knowledge of the sector – specifically, individuals who either possess the means to engage with high-end luxury products or who are professionally involved in the industry.

Although survey-based methods could have yielded a larger volume of responses, purposive participant selection was considered essential for obtaining in-depth reflections rather than limited or binary answers. This approach facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of how luxury is perceived and discussed by actors closely connected to the field (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019).

Data collection took place over approximately one month. This timeframe supported an iterative process in which insights from earlier interviews informed the interpretation of subsequent conversations. As the interviews progressed, recurring themes and emerging patterns were continuously reflected upon, enabling the researcher to develop a progressively more refined understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.2 Sample Selection

The sample comprised nine industry professionals and nine consumers, recruited through purposive sampling on the basis of their relevance to the research topic. While no universally agreed-upon standard exists for determining sample size in qualitative research, depth of insight was prioritised over breadth, in keeping with the exploratory and interpretive aims of the study (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). The sample size was also shaped by practical constraints, including the time available for data collection within the study period.

Industry professionals were selected on the basis of their active involvement in the fashion sector, encompassing roles in branding, marketing, consulting, and content creation within the luxury fashion ecosystem. Consumer participants were included based on demonstrated engagement with luxury fashion, identified through observable indicators such as interaction with luxury brands on social media, familiarity with high-end fashion houses, and regular engagement with luxury products.

Many participants were identified through existing professional networks and social media platforms, which facilitated access to individuals actively involved in luxury fashion consumption and discourse. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed the knowledge and experience necessary to provide informed reflections on the evolving meaning of luxury fashion. By focusing on individuals who interact closely with the market – whether professionally or as consumers – the study sought to capture perspectives grounded in lived experience rather than hypothetical opinion.

The consumer sample exhibited an uneven gender distribution, with female participants constituting the majority. This imbalance arose from the recruitment process and the social networks through which participants were accessed and is acknowledged as a contextual feature of the sample.

3.3 Interviews

Data were collected through 18 semi-structured interviews, conducted primarily online via Microsoft Teams. The online format was chosen partly in response to the geographical dispersion of participants, as conducting interviews digitally enabled the inclusion of individuals located across different parts of the world – a consideration deemed important for capturing diverse perspectives within the global luxury fashion industry. This format also offered practical flexibility for both the researcher and participants (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019, p. 453).

Although the two participant groups were presented with distinct but conceptually aligned interview guides, both sets of questions addressed comparable thematic areas. This approach allowed the interviews to be tailored to each group's respective role while maintaining sufficient consistency to enable comparative analysis. A brief introductory question was included at the start of each interview to confirm the participant's relationship with the luxury fashion industry: consumer participants were asked about their engagement with luxury fashion, while industry professionals were asked to describe their current role and background (see Appendix B, Pre-Question). This verified that all participants possessed experience relevant to the research topic.

The interview questions were designed to balance focus with flexibility, ensuring that key topics were addressed while allowing participants to elaborate freely. Questions were formulated in clear and accessible language to encourage open and detailed responses. Although the overall structure of the guide remained consistent, the wording and sequence of questions were occasionally adapted to suit the natural progression of individual conversations.

Interviews were conducted in either English or Bulgarian, depending on the participant's preference. To accommodate this, the guide was prepared in both languages in advance. Prior to each interview, participants received a selection of representative questions from each thematic area and were informed of the study's general purpose, enabling them to reflect on the topic beforehand – particularly for questions inviting personal examples (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019, p. 444).

The semi-structured format preserved a conversational character throughout. Rather than following a fixed script, discussions allowed participants to articulate their views and introduce relevant insights as they arose, consistent with the exploratory nature of the study. During transcription, non-relevant conversational segments were omitted to maintain analytical focus on content pertinent to the research questions – a practice consistent with qualitative research, in which transcription is understood as a selective process guided by the study's aims (Davidson, 2009, p. 36).

All interviews were recorded to preserve the accuracy of the collected data and to allow the researcher to focus on the conversation itself rather than on notetaking. Both online and in-person interviews were captured using a smartphone recording application. Recordings of the Bulgarian-language interviews were transcribed manually and then translated; English-language interviews were transcribed using the transcription functionality of the Voice Memos application (iPhone). All transcripts were subsequently reviewed to verify their accuracy (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019, p. 444).

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their interviews, ensuring awareness of the study's purpose and their rights as participants. The study adhered to GDPR standards, with particular attention to confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time (Brinkmann, Kvale, and Flick, 2018, p. 10).

For many consumer participants, the interviews represented their first occasion to reflect systematically on their purchasing habits in relation to the concepts introduced in this study. Variation in interview length reflected differences in the depth and detail of individual responses, with some participants expressing particularly strong views or providing extended examples. In several cases, the final open-ended question invited additional reflections beyond the structured topics, illustrating the flexibility afforded by the semi-structured format (Bell, Bryman, and Harley, 2019). Despite such variation, the interview protocol remained consistent across all sessions, ensuring equal opportunity to engage with the study's key themes (Brinkmann, Kvale, and Flick, 2018).

An overview of participants is presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 summarises the industry professionals, including their professional background, interview date, language, format, and duration. Table 2 provides corresponding information for consumer participants, along with an indication of their level of engagement with luxury fashion consumption.

Table 1 (Professionals)

Interviewee	*Career / Role*	*Date*	*Language*	*Setting*	*Duration*
Professional 1	Founder & CEO, Former-Senior Project Manager of Major Fashion House	February 20th, 2026	English	Online	34:41
Professional 2	Stylist, Personal Luxury Fashion Shopper, Store Owner	March 2nd, 2026	Bulgarian	In-person	36:43
Professional 3	Designer, Brand Owner & Manager	March 2nd, 2026	Bulgarian	In-person	31:51
Professional 4	Prominent Luxury Fashion Content Creator and Cultural Commentator	March 6th, 2026	English	Online	28:42
Professional 5	Designer, Brand Owner & Manager	March 9th, 2026	Bulgarian	Online	41:20
Professional 6	Former-Luxury Fashion Store Employee	March 11th, 2026	English	Online	59:42
Professional 7	Luxury Fashion Blogger, Luxury Fashion Content Creator	March 13th, 2026	Bulgarian	Online	36:22
Professional 8	Management Consultant (Luxury Goods)	March 15th, 2026	English	Online	17:46
Professional 9	Data Analyst (Fashion Industry)	March 15th, 2026	English	Online	23:01
					μ = 34:32

Table 2 (Consumers)

Interviewee	*Engagement with Luxury Fashion*	*Date*	*Language*	*Setting*	*Duration*
Consumer 1	Purchases luxury fashion several times per year	February 23rd, 2026	English	Online	29:01
Consumer 2	Occasional luxury fashion buyer	February 24th, 2026	English	Online	35:21
Consumer 3	Purchases luxury fashion several times per year	February 24th, 2026	English	Online	31:36
Consumer 4	Regular luxury consumer and fashion enthusiast	February 25th, 2026	English	Online	28:42
Consumer 5	Regular luxury consumer and fashion enthusiast	March 6th, 2026	Bulgarian	Online	27:56
Consumer 6	Purchases luxury fashion several times per year	March 11th, 2026	English	Online	30:31
Consumer 7	Regular luxury consumer and fashion enthusiast	March 11th, 2026	English	Online	26:17
Consumer 8	Purchases luxury fashion several times per year	March 14th, 2026	English	Online	25:01
Consumer 9	Occasional luxury fashion buyer	March 16th, 2026	English	Online	22:36
					μ = *28:33*

3.4 Analysis

The analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, whereby themes emerged directly from the data rather than from predefined categories (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). All interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times prior to coding to develop a thorough familiarity with participants' perspectives. NVivo 15 was used as a supporting tool to organise and manage the coding process.

Each transcript was coded individually. Codes were applied when a passage reflected a participant's evaluation of, or attitude toward, a specific dimension of luxury – including how they define it, what they value in it, how they respond to contemporary market dynamics such as visibility and imitation, and how they anticipate its future. Initial codes remained close to the language of the data, capturing both explicit statements and implicit meanings. Where a passage addressed multiple dimensions simultaneously, overlapping codes were applied.

As coding progressed across transcripts, codes were continuously compared and refined. Related codes were grouped on the basis of conceptual similarity, and higher-order themes were identified where patterns recurred consistently across participants. A clear distinction was maintained between consumer and professional transcripts throughout, enabling systematic comparison between the two groups. Thematic saturation was considered reached once additional interviews ceased to produce new codes or perspectives (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). A final review ensured clarity, consistency, and alignment with the overall research focus (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The coding process resulted in six themes: The Tension between Visibility and Exclusivity; The Shift from Logos to Subtlety; The Reconstruction of Luxury Meaning; Authenticity and Craftsmanship; Dupe Culture and Luxury Dilution; and The Future Reorientation of Luxury. These themes form the structure of the findings chapter, where they are presented as an analytical narrative integrating participant insights with interpretive commentary.

3.5 Trustworthiness

Given the qualitative nature of this study, quality is evaluated using the trustworthiness framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which offers criteria more appropriate to qualitative inquiry than the conventional quantitative measures of reliability, validity, and generalisability.

Credibility was supported using semi-structured interviews with two distinct participant groups – nine consumers and nine industry professionals, allowing for cross-referencing of perspectives and strengthening confidence in the plausibility of the findings. Interview recordings were transcribed carefully to capture participants' statements with precision, and a consistent interview guide was applied across all eighteen interviews to ensure coherence in data collection.

Although the qualitative design of this study does not permit statistical generalisation, the findings offer transferable insights through the depth and contextual richness of the data collected (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019, p. 65). The purposive sampling strategy, which targeted participants with direct engagement in the luxury market, contributes to the contextual specificity necessary for meaningful transferability rather than quantitatively precise generalisation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability was addressed through the systematic application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, supported by NVivo 15, which provided an auditable and transparent record of analytical decisions throughout the coding process. Finally, confirmability was maintained through reflexive awareness of the researcher's own positionality, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participant accounts rather than shaped by prior assumptions.

In keeping with the principle of transferability, the small, purposively selected sample reflects the perspectives of a specific group of individuals within the luxury fashion market, offering contextual depth rather than broad applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings should be interpreted with awareness that the sample reflects a specific group of participants whose cultural backgrounds, geographic locations, and spending power may not fully represent the diversity of the broader luxury fashion market.

4. Findings

This chapter presents the findings from 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with nine consumers and nine industry professionals. The analysis is organised around six themes that emerged inductively from the data through thematic coding in NVivo 15. Where notable differences arise between consumer and professional perspectives, these are highlighted. Selected quotations are included to substantiate key points.

4.1 Theme 1: Visibility vs Exclusivity Tension

The tension between visibility and exclusivity emerged as one of the most prominent themes across both groups. Three sub-themes were identified: Controlled Scarcity and Selective Visibility; Hype, Virality, and Trend Fatigue; and Overexposure and Loss of Exclusivity. While the overall direction of opinion was broadly shared, notable differences emerged in how consumers and professionals framed these dynamics.

4.1.1 Controlled Scarcity and Selective Visibility

Participants across both groups recognised scarcity as a foundational mechanism of luxury value, though professionals engaged with it in considerably more strategic depth. This aligns with Kapferer's (1997) observation that luxury is defined by the paradox of being desired by all but consumed by few – a condition that must be deliberately maintained rather than left to emerge naturally. Several professionals described scarcity not as an inherent property of luxury goods but as a deliberately constructed brand tool that must be managed to remain credible. Professional 2 was candid about this:

> *"Scarcity is often used as a marketing strategy. Brands create the impression that certain products are extremely limited, even when the scarcity is controlled through marketing. Hermès is a good example – they are manipulating the market, because in no world Hermès would only be able to produce 20 bags a year."*

Consumers engaged with scarcity primarily through personal experience rather than strategic analysis, describing how limited availability intensified desire and how its disappearance diminished it. Several noted that once a previously scarce item became widely visible, their attachment to it weakened considerably. This is consistent with Tsai, Yang and Liu's (2013) argument that scarcity is not merely a supply-side strategy but a central driver of perceived luxury value – when it erodes, so too does the consumer's sense of distinction.

4.1.2 Hype, Virality, and Trend Fatigue

Hype and virality were among the most evenly distributed sub-themes across both groups, and the tone was notably sceptical. Professionals broadly agreed that visibility-driven strategies generate short-term engagement but risk long-term brand damage – a tension Kapferer and Bastien (2009) identify as structurally embedded in contemporary luxury marketing, where the pressure to remain culturally relevant increasingly conflicts with the exclusivity that sustains symbolic value. Professional 4 captured the cumulative effect succinctly:

> *"When everything is presented as a 'must-have,' eventually nothing really feels special anymore."*

Professional 9 compared hype campaigns to a "sugar high" – generating a spike of engagement without building anything substantial for the brand long term.

Growing scepticism toward influencer marketing was also noted, with several professionals observing that audiences are increasingly aware that posts are paid partnerships, which reduces perceived authenticity.

Among consumers, trend fatigue manifested as a direct behavioural response. Consumer 7 described stopping wearing a product for nearly a year after it became overexposed on social media, and identified a wider pattern of aesthetic cycling:

> *"People were overstimulated by how much everything was being duplicated, so they started gravitating toward something more low-key and less obvious. But then those aesthetics became widely popular as well, and the cycle repeated itself."*

This dynamic reflects Roper et al.'s (2013) argument that as brand meaning becomes increasingly shaped through consumer-mediated circulation rather than controlled brand communication, luxury's symbolic coherence becomes harder to maintain.

4.1.3 Overexposure and Loss of Exclusivity

Overexposure and loss of exclusivity was coded more heavily among consumers than professionals, and carried notable affective weight. Consumers consistently described a point at which a product crosses from aspirational to over-familiar, at which their desire for it noticeably diminishes. Consumer 5 captured this directly:

> *"Louis Vuitton has become very visible because it is so widely replicated. I also feel that Jacquemus became too mainstream at some point. When I see a product everywhere, it stops feeling rare, and rarity is something I associate strongly with luxury."*

Professionals framed overexposure in more structural terms, situating it within the global expansion of the luxury consumer base over the past decade. Professional 1 described how the rapid growth of newly wealthy consumers – particularly in China – had intensified visible logo culture, triggering a counter-reaction among longer-established consumers who began moving toward more discreet alternatives. This pattern is consistent with Han, Nunes and Drèze's (2010) account of how status signalling adapts in response to market saturation, as visible luxury becomes more widely accessible, consumers with greater cultural capital migrate toward subtler signals legible only to similarly informed audiences. Both groups of participants converged on the view that overexposure is not simply a consequence of poor brand management but reflects a fundamental shift in the symbolic economy of luxury visibility.

4.2 Theme 2: Shift from Logos to Subtlety

The shift from conspicuous, logo-driven luxury toward understated aesthetics was one of the most consistently coded themes across the entire dataset. Participants broadly agreed that visible logomania has given way to a preference for discretion and material quality – a direction widely described as quiet luxury. While the shift itself was not contested, the two groups offered somewhat different accounts of its meaning and durability.

4.2.1 Consumer Perspectives

Consumer aversion to visible logos was widespread and often expressed with conviction. The dominant sentiment was that heavy branding signals insecurity – that a product relying on its logo to communicate value is already admitting it lacks other means of doing so. Consumer 4 put it directly:

> *"If someone truly understands fashion, they will recognise the piece without needing a large logo. I prefer the idea that "If you know, you know"."*

This sensibility maps closely onto Han, Nunes and Drèze's (2010) distinction between loud and quiet signals of status – where consumers with higher cultural capital favour understated cues legible only to similarly informed audiences, rather than broad markers designed for mass recognition. This position was not universal, however. Several consumers acknowledged that branding could work when it functions as a subtle design detail rather than dominating the product, citing Chanel's practice of embedding its logo into buttons or stitching as a workable balance between brand presence and restraint.

4.2.2 Professional Perspectives

Professionals debated whether quiet luxury represents a temporary trend or a deeper structural shift. Some positioned it as a cyclical return – pointing to earlier minimalist moments in fashion history – while others argued that the underlying values around quality, restraint, and longevity reflect a more lasting reorientation. Professional 5 took a clear position:

> *"Quiet luxury is more of a deep strategic change than a temporary trend. Today, consumers increasingly look for qualities such as discretion, high-quality workmanship, attention to detail, and timeless pieces that retain their value over time."*

This is consistent with Taylor, Borenstein and Pangarkar's (2025) identification of "inconspicuous minimalists" – consumers who actively prefer luxury goods without visible logos, prioritising craftsmanship and material quality over broad social recognition. The consensus among professionals was that while the label itself may fade, the strategic direction it describes is unlikely to reverse entirely.

4.3 Theme 3: Reconstruction of Luxury

Theme 3 captures a broader reconstitution of what luxury means – a movement away from luxury as a purely external, status-oriented category toward a more personal, value-driven understanding. Two sub-themes are examined: longevity, timelessness, and wearability, coded more extensively among consumers; and luxury as identity and symbolic value, which showed the most even distribution between both groups in the entire dataset.

4.3.1 Longevity, Timelessness, and Wearability

Consumers consistently framed the value of luxury not in terms of immediate desirability but in terms of how long a product would remain relevant, functional, and personally meaningful. Several participants described a deliberate shift away from trend-driven purchasing toward pieces that could justify their cost through durability and lasting relevance. This reflects what Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels (2009) identify as the financial and functional dimensions of luxury value – where perceived quality and long-term utility become central to how consumers assess whether a luxury purchase is worthwhile. Consumer 7 articulated this clearly:

> *"Compared to a few years ago, I am much less influenced by whether something is trendy or viral, and much more focused on whether it feels timeless, practical, and likely to last."*

Consumer 9 expressed a similar view, describing reliability and durability as the primary criteria through which a high-cost purchase could be justified – and noting that a well-made piece, unlike a fast fashion alternative, could reasonably be expected to remain wearable for years without going out of style.

The turn toward vintage luxury, raised by several participants, reinforced this sub-theme. Both consumers and professionals noted that older pieces from major houses often demonstrate higher quality than modern equivalents, suggesting that longevity has become not only a purchasing criterion but a form of implicit critique of current production standards. Professionals framed longevity as a strategic rather than personal concern, identifying a growing consumer orientation toward timeless design and longer product life cycles as a structural market shift. Several noted that this creates a tension with the industry's commercial logic, which incentivises constant “newness” – a contradiction that Cooper, Merrilees and Miller (2021) identify as a central challenge for luxury brands navigating the balance between heritage continuity and commercial adaptation.

4.3.2 Luxury as Identity and Symbolic Value

Luxury as identity and symbolic value was highly consistent between both groups – suggesting that despite all the shifts documented elsewhere in the findings, the identity function of luxury remains central to how it is understood and experienced. What appears to be changing is not whether luxury serves an identity function, but how that function operates. This distinction is important: Holt (1995) identifies consuming as a means of self-expression and identity construction as one of the primary ways individuals engage with brands – and the data suggest that this mode of engagement is becoming more dominant relative to purely status-oriented consumption.

Several consumers described a personal evolution away from purchasing luxury as a social signal toward engaging with it as a form of self-expression. Consumer 2 captured this shift:

> *“When I first started purchasing luxury items, it felt like a personal milestone – almost a symbol that I had achieved something. Over time my perspective changed. Now I buy luxury items much more intentionally. I think about how they fit into my daily life rather than whether they signal status.”*

This trajectory aligns with Sirgy's (1982) self-congruity framework, which holds that consumers select brands whose perceived image aligns with their own self-concept – suggesting that as luxury consumption becomes more personally driven, brand identity and consumer identity must be more carefully aligned.

Heritage emerged as a particularly significant dimension of this identity function for both groups. Consumers frequently cited the history and legacy of a brand as central to why it felt luxurious, while professionals described storytelling and emotional connection as the primary mechanisms through which luxury brands differentiate themselves from cheaper alternatives. Professional 8 identified a growing gap between how the two groups experience this:

> *"Professionals still tend to talk in terms like heritage, craftsmanship, and brand codes. Consumers often think about luxury more through lived value – whether it feels special, whether it feels worth the price, and whether it fits their identity. The disconnect becomes especially obvious when brands talk about timelessness, but behave in ways that feel driven by hype."*

4.4 Theme 4: Authenticity and Craftsmanship Tension

Theme 4 addresses the relationship between craftsmanship, commercial pressure, and the perceived integrity of luxury brands. Craftsmanship occupies a central position in the logic of luxury branding – functioning, as Fionda and Moore (2009) argue, as one of the defining attributes that distinguishes luxury from mass-market alternatives and legitimises premium pricing. Three sub-themes are examined: Commercial Pressure versus Brand Integrity, coded considerably more heavily among professionals; Craftsmanship and Quality, which attracted the highest coding frequency of any sub-theme in the study; and Perceived Decline in Quality, which carried notable weight despite its relatively lower coding frequency.

4.4.1 Commercial Pressure versus Brand Integrity

Professionals engaged with the tension between commercial imperatives and brand integrity more extensively than any other sub-theme in their group. The central concern was consistent: growth, scale, and the demand for constant newness are structurally at odds with the exclusivity and quality that define luxury's symbolic authority. This tension is well documented – Cooper, Merrilees and Miller (2021) identify it as a defining paradox of luxury brand management, where the imperative to grow commercially conflicts directly with the need to preserve the heritage and scarcity that underpin perceived authenticity. Professional 9 framed this as a fundamental contradiction:

> *"You can't endlessly scale something that is high end without changing its nature. Thus the pressure to keep delivering growth often becomes the enemy of integrity."*

Hermès was frequently cited as a model for managing this tension – their strategy of limited production, controlled distribution, and refusal to aggressively expand output presented as evidence that scarcity and commercial success can coexist. Consumers engaged with this tension less directly, though several described a broadening of their evaluative criteria to include not only product quality but the ethics and values behind the brand – reflecting what Khan, Fazili and Bashir (2021) identify as a growing consumer sensitivity to the perceived authenticity of luxury, where brand behaviour is increasingly scrutinised alongside product quality.

4.4.2 Craftsmanship and Quality

Across interviews, craftsmanship functioned not simply as a desirable attribute but as the primary criterion through which the legitimacy of luxury pricing was assessed. This aligns with Kapferer's (1997) argument that luxury value is rooted in intangible associations – where the perception of skill, care, and artisanal intention embedded in a product is as important as its functional qualities. Consumer 7 described craftsmanship as the first thing they look for, noting that a luxury product should demonstrate through its materials, fit, and construction that it offers something genuinely superior. Consumer 6 connected this directly to value justification:

> *"In today's market, where so many products feel mass-produced and lacking in thought or care, craftsmanship becomes one of the clearest ways to distinguish luxury from ordinary fashion. The value of a luxury item comes from the feeling that real skill, effort, and intention went into creating it."*

Professionals acknowledged craftsmanship as foundational while also contextualising it within the commercial realities of large-scale production. Professional 5 introduced an important distinction between craftsmanship as a material reality and as a communicative strategy, noting that with growth and larger production volumes many brands resort to industrialised processes that gradually displace handmade labour. This creates a tension between the traditional image of artisanal production and contemporary manufacturing realities – one that Cooper et al. (2021) identify as central to heritage brand management, where the authentic core of a brand must be actively preserved rather than assumed.

4.4.3 Perceived Decline in Quality

The perception that contemporary luxury brands are failing to deliver the material standard their pricing implies emerged as a source of genuine disappointment among participants, and in several cases had directly altered purchasing behaviour. Consumer 8 described a shift in the experience of luxury shopping itself:

> *"Part of the luxury shopping experience should be the confidence that everything is perfectly crafted and of the highest quality. Now, I often feel that it is necessary to inspect items very carefully before buying them, and that takes away some of the trust and effortless sense of luxury that I personally value."*

This erosion of confidence has tangible consequences for brand perception. Khan, Fazili and Bashir (2021) argue that when consumers perceive a disconnect between a brand's premium positioning and its actual product quality, the legitimacy of luxury pricing comes into question – weakening the trust that sustains long-term brand loyalty. Among professionals, the perceived decline was acknowledged with candour. Professional 7 described a direct personal experience of quality issues with a recent Louis Vuitton purchase, adding that this had led them to rely increasingly on vintage pieces where craftsmanship is more reliable. Professional 9 offered a measured structural diagnosis – arguing that craftsmanship remains central in theory but is not always equally visible in practice, particularly in more entry-level luxury where the heritage narrative can diverge significantly from the manufacturing reality.

4.5 Theme 5: Dupe Culture and Luxury Dilution

Theme 5 examines how participants understand and respond to the proliferation of luxury imitations. Three sub-themes are addressed: dupes and dilution of luxury; dupes as access and democratisation; and brand response to dupes. The most pronounced divergence in the entire dataset emerged here – not in the direction of opinion but in its framing and intensity.

Consumers engaged with dupe culture primarily through the lens of personal behaviour, while professionals addressed it as a strategic challenge.

4.5.1 Dupes and Dilution of Luxury

Consumers broadly acknowledged that imitations affect the symbolic value of luxury goods, though they tended to locate this effect at the level of specific products rather than entire brands. The dilution dynamic was felt most acutely when overexposure and imitation converged – when a product became simultaneously ubiquitous and widely copied, desire for the original diminished. Several consumers noted, however, that this effect is not straightforward. Consumer 9 observed that widespread imitation can paradoxically reinforce the desirability of the original, since the volume of copies signals that something distinctive and worth replicating exists. This ambivalence reflects the complexity that Zafran and Irfan Ahmed (2025) identify in dupe culture's relationship to luxury value – where imitation simultaneously threatens and, in some cases, reaffirms the perceived superiority of the original.

Professionals engaged with dilution in more structural terms. Professional 8 argued that dupes expose a fundamental vulnerability in products whose value rests too heavily on appearance:

> *"If a product can be copied visually and that copy satisfies a large part of the market, then the original may have relied too much on appearance alone. So strategically, it pushes luxury brands to be much clearer about what cannot be copied so easily – like craftsmanship, materials, provenance, service, and emotional meaning."*

This observation aligns with Han, Nunes and Drèze's (2010) argument that as visible signals of luxury become easier to replicate, the basis of distinction shifts toward elements that are inherently harder to imitate – reinforcing the move away from logo-driven value toward more deeply embedded markers of quality and provenance.

4.5.2 Dupes as Access and Democratisation

Both groups recognised the democratising function of dupe culture, though with different inflections. Consumers tended to view accessible imitations pragmatically – as a reasonable way to engage with aesthetics that lie beyond their means, or in some cases as a low-risk way to trial a style before committing to an expensive purchase. Consumer 5 described buying an inspired version of the Chanel ballerina slippers to test whether the design suited her wardrobe, and subsequently purchasing the original. This pragmatic orientation reflects Holt's (1995) observation that consumers engage with brands across multiple registers simultaneously – where the aesthetic appeal of a product can be separated from its symbolic and social dimensions, allowing for selective engagement without full commitment to the meanings attached to authentic ownership.

Professionals largely accepted the democratisation argument but qualified it carefully. The consensus was captured by Professional 4, who argued that dupes democratise the look of luxury more than its meaning – since luxury is not only about design but about context, provenance, and the social meaning attached to an object. Professional 8 distilled this distinction:

> *"They democratise access to the look of luxury, but not to luxury itself. And that distinction matters."*

This distinction is theoretically significant. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that meaning is produced through social interaction and shared interpretive frameworks – suggesting that the symbolic value of luxury cannot be transferred through visual replication alone, since it is embedded in the social contexts and cultural narratives that surround authentic ownership rather than in the object itself.

4.5.3 Brand Response to Dupes

Brand response to dupes was coded far more extensively among professionals than consumers, reflecting the industry's direct engagement with imitation as a strategic challenge. The most consistent response described was a shift toward elements of value that are inherently difficult to replicate – proprietary materials, complex construction techniques, service, and experience. This strategic reorientation is consistent with Kapferer's (1997) argument that the authentic core of luxury – grounded in craftsmanship, heritage, and intangible meaning – is what ultimately separates it from imitation, and that brands which allow their value to rest primarily on visible design codes become inherently vulnerable. Professional 8 argued that dupe culture has pushed brands to concentrate on the dimensions of value that cannot be easily copied – shifting emphasis toward craftsmanship, heritage, construction, service, and the emotional logic behind ownership. Professional 6 illustrated this with a concrete example:

> *"Brands like Bottega Veneta have invested heavily in the materials and techniques they use in their leather products. They use very high-quality leather and specialised machinery to create certain textures and finishes. Producing those materials requires significant investment and technical expertise, which makes it much harder for fast-fashion brands to replicate them accurately."*

Professionals also noted that the industry's response has been uneven. Some brands have sharpened their creative identity and moved toward more restrained communication, while others remain reliant on celebrity and virality. The brands most exposed to dupe culture, several participants suggested, are those whose value has rested primarily on visible design codes – precisely the codes that are easiest to imitate. This unevenness reflects a broader strategic divergence that Roper et al. (2013) identify as characteristic of contemporary luxury – where the absence of a unified response to market disruption results in increasingly fragmented brand positioning.

4.6 Theme 6: Future Reorientation of Luxury

Theme 6 addresses how participants anticipate and evaluate the future direction of the luxury fashion industry. The sub-theme of future expectations and criticism produced the most pronounced asymmetry in the entire dataset, with professionals coding it more than twice as frequently as consumers. This reflects a structural difference in how the two groups relate to the industry's trajectory: professionals engage with the future of luxury as a strategic and institutional question, while consumers express expectations grounded in personal experience and unmet desires.

4.6.1 Consumer Expectations

Consumer perspectives on the future were characterised by a shared desire for brands to reconnect with the values that originally defined them. Criticism of current industry behaviour was common, with several participants pointing to overproduction, trend dependency, and the prioritisation of marketing over product quality as the central problems. The normative direction expressed was consistent across the group – fewer products, better made, more clearly grounded in heritage and creative identity. Consumer 6 captured a widely shared ambivalence about whether this is already happening:

> *"Some recent fashion weeks have shown more interesting directions. At the same time, many major luxury brands have not been doing anything particularly exciting recently. There are always new bags and highly visible products, but not always ideas that feel especially creative or distinctive."*

This frustration reflects a broader pattern identified by Kapferer and Bastien (2009), who argue that when luxury brands prioritise commercial visibility over creative and product integrity, they risk losing the very qualities that make them desirable in the first place. Several consumers also pointed to personalisation and sustainability as dimensions they expected luxury to engage with more seriously in the future – reflecting a broader expectation that luxury should justify its price not only through material quality but through ethical consistency and personal relevance, consistent with the shift toward intrinsically motivated consumption that Ryan and Deci (2000) associate with deeper and more durable forms of engagement. Taken together, these expectations point toward a broader renegotiation of what luxury is for – one in which the traditional mechanisms of exclusivity, visibility, and status signalling are being reassessed in favour of more enduring and personally meaningful foundations (Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels, 2009).

4.6.2 Professional Expectations and Strategic Outlook

Professionals engaged with the future of luxury in considerably greater depth, and a recurring observation was that the industry currently lacks a shared definition of what luxury means – with different brands moving in significantly different directions in response to this uncertainty. This fragmentation is not incidental – it reflects the broader instability in luxury's symbolic foundations that Berger and Luckmann (1966) associate with periods of accelerated social change, in which previously stable categories of meaning become contested and open to renegotiation. Professional 9 described the moment precisely:

> *“The industry feels split at the moment. On one side, you have brands leaning very heavily into heritage, craftsmanship, and this whole “old money” idea. And on the other side, you have brands that are still trying to capture younger consumers through drops, collaborations, streetwear influences, and digital hype. We are in a moment where luxury has become a bit fragmented in terms of identity.”*

Despite this fragmentation, a directional consensus emerged among professionals. The brands most likely to succeed, several argued, are those that move away from broadcasting status through visibility and toward what Professional 8 described as earned distinction – justifying value through credibility, product integrity, and stronger emotional relationships with consumers rather than dependence on prestige signals. This orientation resonates with Kapferer's (1997) argument that the long-term authority of a luxury brand rests not on its visibility but on the depth and consistency of the values it embodies.

Several professionals also identified a structural disconnect between industry priorities and consumer expectations. Professionals within the industry tend to focus on novelty and the next directional shift, while many high-value consumers are looking for consistency, quality, and pieces that last. Professional 9 noted that this gap is not new, but that it is becoming harder to ignore as consumers grow more informed, more sceptical, and more willing to turn to vintage as an alternative to contemporary luxury that fails to meet their expectations. As Roper et al. (2013) suggest, when the meanings brands project and the meanings consumers construct diverge significantly, the symbolic coherence that sustains luxury value begins to erode – and that erosion, the data suggest, is already underway.

5. Discussion

This chapter is structured around the central research question – how the meaning of luxury fashion is constructed and interpreted by consumers and industry professionals in the contemporary market context – and the four sub-questions that support it. The discussion moves from where the two groups converge in their understanding of luxury, to where they diverge, to what that divergence collectively reveals about the stability of luxury as a socially constructed category. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue, such categories remain stable only as long as a shared interpretive framework is continuously reproduced through interaction and mutual understanding. The findings suggest this framework is fracturing: consumers and industry professionals are increasingly creating different versions of what luxury means, prioritising different values, and responding to the same market developments in fundamentally different ways. Rather than a straightforward erosion of traditional luxury values, what emerges is a process of active renegotiation – one whose outcome remains unresolved, and whose resolution will depend on whether the industry can realign itself with the values consumers continue to hold it to.

5.1 Where Consumers and Professionals Converge

Despite the divergences documented throughout the findings, both consumer and professional participants converged consistently on a set of foundational values – and it is this convergence that reveals what luxury's enduring core actually is. Craftsmanship and quality attracted the highest coding frequency of any sub-theme in the entire dataset, with consumers producing notably more references than professionals (85 versus 40). That both groups placed craftsmanship at the centre of their understanding of luxury – despite approaching it from different positions – is theoretically significant. It suggests that material integrity remains the irreducible foundation of luxury legitimacy, consistent with Kapferer's (1997) argument that luxury value is rooted in intangible associations of skill, care, and artisanal intention, and with Fionda and Moore's (2009) identification of craftsmanship as the defining attribute that separates luxury from mass-market alternatives. Where the groups differ is not in whether craftsmanship matters but in how they engage with it – professionals tend to frame it as a communicative and strategic asset, while consumers experience it as a material reality to be evaluated at the point of purchase, and one that contemporary luxury brands are, in their view, failing to consistently deliver.

A similar pattern of convergence emerged around the shift from logos to subtlety, coded consistently across both groups (consumers 58, professionals 43). Both described the retreat from visible logomania not as a passing trend but as a meaningful reorientation – one that reflects a broader recalibration of how status and distinction are communicated. Han, Nunes and Drèze (2010) anticipate this shift in their account of how status signalling adapts in response to market saturation: as visible luxury becomes more widely accessible and easier to imitate, consumers with greater cultural capital migrate toward subtler, less replicable markers of distinction. That both groups arrived at this conclusion independently, and with comparable frequency, suggests that the move toward quiet luxury reflects a genuine structural change in the symbolic economy of luxury rather than a cyclical aesthetic preference.

Luxury as identity and symbolic value produced a combined coding frequency equal to that of craftsmanship and quality (consumers 70, professionals 55), but with a notably more even distribution between the two groups – suggesting that while craftsmanship is experienced primarily through a consumer lens, the identity function of luxury remains equally central to both groups. What appears to be changing, however, is not whether luxury serves an identity function but how that function operates – a distinction that Holt (1995) anticipates in his account of consuming as a form of identity construction, and that Sirgy's (1982) self-congruity framework helps to theorise. As luxury consumption becomes more personally driven, the alignment between brand identity and consumer self-concept becomes more important than the brand's broader social legibility – a shift with significant implications for how luxury brands position and communicate themselves. Taken together, these convergences reveal that the foundational logic of luxury – grounded in craftsmanship, authentic identity, and coded distinction – has not collapsed. What is collapsing is the industry's ability to consistently deliver on it.

5.2 Where Consumers and Professionals Diverge

If the convergences reveal what luxury's enduring core is, the divergences reveal why that core is under threat. Across several sub-themes, consumer and professional participants not only emphasised different concerns but appeared to be engaging with fundamentally different versions of the same industry – and it is in these gaps that the structural problem becomes visible.

The most pronounced asymmetry in the entire dataset emerged around commercial pressure versus brand integrity, coded considerably more frequently among professionals than consumers (59 versus 36). This disparity reflects the structural position of industry professionals, who must navigate the operational realities of balancing growth imperatives with brand coherence – a tension that is largely invisible to consumers but acutely present in managerial decision-making. Cooper, Merrilees and Miller (2021) identify this as a defining paradox of luxury brand management, where the imperative to grow commercially conflicts directly with the need to preserve the heritage and scarcity that underpin perceived authenticity. What is striking, however, is not that this tension exists – it is well documented – but that consumers are largely unaware of it as a strategic problem while simultaneously experiencing its consequences. The perceived decline in quality sub-theme, though relatively modest in absolute coding frequency (consumers 21, professionals 15), carried considerable affective weight across both groups – suggesting that the downstream effects of commercial pressure are being felt by consumers even when its upstream causes remain invisible to them. This disconnect is significant: professionals are managing a tension that consumers are experiencing as disappointment, and neither group appears fully aware of how the other is processing it.

A further divergence emerged around the future reorientation of luxury, where professionals coded the sub-theme more than twice as frequently as consumers (53 versus 24). Professionals situated dilution within a broader strategic vulnerability – arguing that brands whose value rests primarily on visible design codes are inherently exposed to imitation. Consumers, by contrast, articulated expectations that were more immediate and personal, such as fewer products, better made, more clearly grounded in heritage and creative identity. The fact that professionals are more preoccupied with strategic positioning while consumers are more focused on whether brands will simply deliver on their basic promises points to a deepening misalignment between what the industry is optimising for and what consumers are actually asking for. As Roper et al. (2013) observe, when the meanings brands project and the meanings consumers construct diverge significantly, the symbolic coherence that sustains luxury value begins to erode – and the data suggest this erosion is already underway.

The divergence around dupe culture further illustrates this pattern. Brand response to dupes was coded far more extensively among professionals than consumers (26 versus 7) – reflecting the industry's preoccupation with imitation as a strategic and reputational threat. For consumers, however, dupe culture is experienced largely as a practical and normalised feature of the contemporary market landscape. Several participants described engaging with imitations without any meaningful reduction in their aspiration toward authentic luxury, and some noted that widespread imitation paradoxically reinforces the desirability of the original. This ambivalence reflects the complexity that Zafran and Irfan Ahmed (2025) identify in dupe culture's relationship to luxury value – where imitation simultaneously threatens and, in some cases, reaffirms the perceived superiority of the original. The industry is expending considerable strategic energy on a phenomenon that consumers have largely normalised, while the issues consumers care most about – craftsmanship, authenticity, personal meaning – receive comparatively less strategic attention. This inversion of priorities is, in itself, a symptom of the broader divergence the data reveal.

5.3 The Widening Gap and What It Means for Luxury

The convergences and divergences documented in the preceding sections collectively point toward a conclusion that goes beyond the sum of individual themes: the shared interpretive framework through which luxury has historically been understood – by brands, by consumers, and by the broader culture – is fracturing. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that socially constructed categories remain stable only as long as the interpretive frameworks that sustain them are continuously reproduced through interaction and shared understanding. When those frameworks begin to diverge, the category itself becomes unstable, not because its foundational values have disappeared, but because different groups are increasingly constructing different versions of what it means. The findings suggest that luxury is in precisely this condition: its foundational values remain widely recognised, but the mechanisms through which they are communicated, experienced, and reproduced are pulling in different directions.

The most revealing expression of this fracture is the gap between what the industry prioritises and what consumers are genuinely asking for. Professionals are predominantly engaged with questions of commercial strategy, brand positioning, and competitive response to imitation – the institutional concerns of an industry under financial and cultural pressure. Consumers, by contrast, are asking more fundamental questions: whether the products still justify their price, whether the brands behind them are consistent and credible, and whether luxury still offers something that cannot be found elsewhere. These are not unreasonable expectations – they are, in fact, precisely the promises that luxury has always made. That the industry appears increasingly unable to deliver on them, while remaining focused on the strategic questions that surround rather than address them, represents a significant failure of alignment. Professional 8 captured this directly, observing that the gap is most visible when brands invoke timelessness in their messaging while their actual behaviour remains oriented toward hype and short-term visibility.

This misalignment has a specific structural dimension that the coding data make visible. The sub-themes that consumers coded most heavily – craftsmanship and quality, luxury as identity, longevity and timelessness – are precisely the dimensions of luxury value that are hardest to manufacture through marketing and easiest to undermine through commercial shortcuts. The sub-themes that professionals coded most heavily – commercial pressure versus brand integrity, future strategic outlook, brand response to dupes – are the institutional concerns of an industry managing the consequences of those same shortcuts. Read together, these patterns suggest that the industry is caught in a self-reinforcing cycle: commercial pressures erode the material and symbolic foundations of luxury, which consumers experience as disappointment and disengagement, which intensifies the pressure on brands to compensate through visibility and hype, which further erodes those foundations. Kapferer and Bastien (2009) identify this as the central paradox of contemporary luxury marketing – that the strategies through which brands seek to maintain relevance are often the same strategies that undermine the exclusivity on which their relevance depends.

What makes this moment particularly significant is that consumers are becoming more rather than less capable of detecting this gap. The turn toward vintage luxury, raised independently by both groups, is emblematic: it represents not simply a purchasing preference but an active rejection of contemporary luxury's failure to deliver on its own premises. As consumers grow more informed, more sceptical, and more willing to seek alternatives, the window within which brands can sustain a divergence between their narrative and their reality is narrowing (Roper et al., 2013). The renegotiation currently underway is not something imposed on the industry from outside – it is the downstream effect of strategic decisions the industry itself made: prioritising scale over scarcity, visibility over integrity, and marketing narratives over material quality. Whether luxury emerges from this moment with its symbolic authority intact will depend not on how effectively brands manage their visibility, but on whether they can close the gap between what they promise and what they deliver.

5.4 Managerial Implications

While this study does not seek to prescribe strategic direction, the patterns documented throughout this chapter point toward several practical considerations for luxury fashion brands navigating the tensions the findings reveal.

The most urgent implication concerns the misalignment between industry priorities and consumer expectations. The findings suggest that brands are expending considerable strategic energy on visibility, hype, and competitive response to imitation – precisely the areas where consumers are least concerned – while underinvesting in the dimensions consumers care most about: craftsmanship, material integrity, longevity, and authentic heritage. Reorienting strategic priorities toward these foundational dimensions is not simply a question of brand positioning but of basic credibility. Brands that continue to compensate for declining product standards through marketing narratives will find that an increasingly informed and sceptical consumer base is less and less willing to accept the substitution.

Second, the response to dupe culture should be reconsidered. The pronounced asymmetry between professional and consumer coding on this sub-theme suggests that the industry is more preoccupied with imitation as a threat than consumers are. For many consumers, dupes do not diminish aspiration toward authentic luxury – they simply shift its timing or reinforce the desirability of the original. The strategic implication is clear: rather than defending what can be copied, brands should deepen what cannot. Investing in proprietary materials, complex construction techniques, exceptional service, and the emotional logic of ownership offers a more sustainable and more compelling form of differentiation than logo protection alone.

Third, the shift toward personally meaningful luxury consumption requires a corresponding shift in how brands communicate. As the findings demonstrate, consumers are evaluating luxury less through its social legibility and more through its personal relevance – asking not whether a product signals status but whether it fits their identity, justifies its cost over time, and reflects values they recognise as their own. Brands that communicate exclusively through prestige signals and heritage narratives risk losing resonance with this segment. Developing more nuanced and honest brand narratives – ones that speak to craftsmanship, longevity, and emotional meaning in ways that are grounded in actual product and production standards – is likely to prove more durable than visibility-driven strategies in an environment where consumer trust in luxury's traditional promises is weakening.

Finally, the growing turn toward vintage luxury should be understood as a signal rather than a trend. Both consumer and professional participants described vintage not merely as a purchasing preference but as an implicit critique of contemporary production standards. Brands that dismiss this shift risk accelerating their own irrelevance among the most informed and high-value consumer segments. Those that respond by genuinely investing in the quality, consistency, and integrity that vintage represents – rather than simply claiming those values through marketing – are better positioned to reclaim the authority that the findings suggest is currently slipping away.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary

This study has examined how the meaning of luxury fashion is constructed and interpreted in the contemporary market, drawing on semi-structured interviews with nine consumers and nine industry professionals. Guided by a theoretical framework encompassing luxury branding, symbolic value, inconspicuous consumption, and the democratisation of luxury, the research investigated how increasing visibility, hype-driven branding, and the rise of dupe culture are reshaping perceptions of luxury among those who consume and those who produce it.

The findings reveal that consumers and industry professionals share a set of foundational values – craftsmanship, authentic identity, and a retreat from conspicuous branding – but diverge significantly in how they experience, prioritise, and anticipate luxury. This divergence is not merely a difference in perspective but a symptom of a deeper structural misalignment: professionals are predominantly engaged with questions of commercial strategy, brand positioning, and competitive response to imitation, while consumers are asking more fundamental questions about whether luxury still delivers on its core promises of quality, authenticity, and meaningful distinction. The coding data make this visible – craftsmanship and quality was the most referenced sub-theme in the entire dataset, coded more than twice as frequently by consumers as by professionals, suggesting that the industry is underinvesting in precisely the dimension consumers care about most.

Drawing on Berger and Luckmann (1966), the Discussion argues that the stability of luxury as a socially constructed category depends on a shared interpretive framework between brands and consumers – and that this framework is fracturing. As the traditional signals through which luxury has communicated distinction lose their effectiveness, and as the industry's response remains fragmented and inconsistent, the symbolic authority of luxury is under pressure in ways that visibility-driven strategies cannot resolve. The findings suggest that luxury is not in decline but in transition, and that its future legitimacy will depend on whether brands can credibly realign their practices with the enduring values consumers continue to hold them to.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study encountered several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. The consumer sample exhibited a gender imbalance, with female participants constituting the majority, which may have restricted the range of perspectives represented and introduced a degree of homogeneity in how luxury consumption was described and evaluated. Furthermore, the sample does not fully account for variation in participants' cultural backgrounds or financial background and spending behaviour, which may shape both the symbolic meaning participants attach to luxury and the degree of deliberation with which they approach it. Recruitment through existing professional networks and social media platforms, while effective in accessing informed participants, may similarly have limited the diversity of viewpoints captured. As with all qualitative research based on self-reported data, the findings are also subject to recall bias and social desirability effects – participants may have framed their purchasing behaviour and attitudes toward luxury in ways that reflect how they wish to be perceived rather than how they consistently act (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). Finally, the translation of Bulgarian-language interviews, while carefully conducted, introduces a degree of interpretive nuance that cannot be entirely eliminated.

Several directions for future research emerge from the gaps this study identifies. The central finding of this thesis – that consumers and industry professionals share foundational values about luxury but diverge significantly in how they experience and prioritise them – was established through a qualitative and purposive sample, and could not be tested for broader applicability. A quantitative study examining whether this consumer-professional disconnect holds systematically across larger and more diverse populations would be a valuable and directly motivated extension of this work. Second, while this study examines how consumers and industry professionals respond to dupe culture, it does not address how fast fashion brands strategically position themselves in relation to luxury – a perspective that would meaningfully complement the findings from the other side of the market. Third, vintage luxury surfaced independently across both consumer and professional interviews as both a purchasing preference and an implicit critique of contemporary production standards, yet remained peripheral to the study's focus. Given its growing cultural and commercial significance, a dedicated investigation of vintage consumption within the luxury market represents a timely and theoretically rich avenue for future research.

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8. Appendix

Appendix A: AI Disclosure

The following AI-powered tools were used in the preparation of this thesis: Claude (Anthropic) and Grammarly.

Claude was used across multiple stages of the writing process. Its primary role was academic language correction, structural feedback, and editorial refinement across chapters including the Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Findings. It was additionally used to translate the interview guides into Bulgarian for data collection purposes, and as a sounding board during the decision process – helping to narrow and develop ideas where the direction of an argument was uncertain. Clarity of expression was also verified by prompting Claude to summarise its interpretation of a given passage, ensuring the intended reasoning was communicated effectively. Grammarly was used for spelling, grammar, and surface-level clarity checks throughout.

Neither tool was used to generate substantive content, theoretical arguments, or analytical interpretations. All ideas, coding decisions, and conclusions are the author's own. Interview data were collected and coded independently using NVivo 15, and thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework without AI involvement.

Two potential risks were identified in this process. First, when prompted imprecisely, AI output may not integrate coherently with the surrounding text. Second, AI refinement of phrasing risks subtly reframing the original intent or diluting the author's analytical voice. To mitigate both, all AI outputs were reviewed in detail prior to inclusion, ensuring that the original reasoning and tone remained intact. Working iteratively with AI tools also reinforced the value of precise prompting and critical evaluation of generated text – a process that sharpened awareness of how phrasing choices affect analytical clarity.

Appendix B: Interview Guides (English)

Interview guide for professionals:

Pre-Question: What is your line of work?

1. Professional Perspective on Luxury

From your perspective, how would you define luxury fashion today?
How does this differ from how luxury was understood 10-15 years ago?
Do you think the industry agrees on what luxury means right now?

2. Shock Marketing & Virality

How do you view shock-driven marketing and viral moments in luxury fashion?
What do these strategies aim to achieve and what do they risk by doing it?
Is there a point where visibility undermines luxury rather than strengthens it?

3. Minimalism & Strategic Restraint

Why do you think minimalist and understated brands are gaining traction now?
Do you see "quiet luxury" as a trend, or a deeper strategic shift?
How do restraint and scarcity function as branding tools today?

4. Craft, Authenticity & Brand Integrity

How central is craftsmanship to luxury branding in practice, not just in messaging?
Do you think consumers are becoming more sensitive to authenticity?
Where do you see tension between commercial pressure and brand integrity?

5. Dupe Culture & Market Pressure

How do dupes and fast-fashion imitations impact luxury brands strategically?
Do you think dupes democratise luxury meaning or dilute it?
Has dupe culture forced luxury brands to rethink design or communication?

6. Interpreting Consumer Fatigue

Do you perceive signs of consumer fatigue with hype, logos, or spectacle?
How are brands responding to this shift, if at all?
Are professionals and consumers aligned in how they interpret luxury today?

7. Looking Ahead

What do you believe the future of luxury branding will prioritize?

Has luxury "lost the plot," or is it simply evolving?
Who do you think is driving the redefinition of luxury right now: brands, consumers, or culture?

Interview guide for consumers:

Pre-Question: How often do you purchase luxury items?

1. Defining Luxury

When you hear the word *luxury fashion*, what comes to mind?
What specifically makes something feel "luxurious" to you today?
Has your personal definition of luxury changed over the past few years? Why or why not?

2. Logos, Hype & Visibility

How do you feel about visible logos and bold branding in luxury fashion?
Do hype and virality enhance luxury or reduce exclusivity?
Have you ever felt a luxury brand became *too visible*?

3. Minimalism & Quiet Luxury

What do you associate with minimalist or "quiet luxury" brands?
Do understated designs feel more or less luxurious to you than statement pieces?
What feelings do minimalist luxury brands evoke compared to louder ones for you?

4. Craftsmanship & Authenticity

How important is craftsmanship or quality when you evaluate luxury?
Do you feel luxury brands still deliver these values today?
How do you personally decide whether a luxury product is "worth it"?

5. Dupe Culture & Imitation

What are your thoughts on dupes and fast-fashion imitations of luxury items?
Do dupes affect how special or desirable the original luxury item feels?
Have dupes changed how you engage with or view luxury brands?

6. The Future of Luxury

Do you think luxury fashion is moving in the right direction?
What do you hope luxury brands will focus on more in the future?
In your opinion, what *should* luxury stand for today?

Appendix C: Interview Guides (Bulgarian)

Interview guide for professionals:

Предварителен въпрос: Каква е вашата професия?

1. Професионална перспектива за лукса

Как бихте дефинирали луксозната мода днес от ваша гледна точка?
По какъв начин това се различава от разбирането за лукс преди 10-15 години?
Смятате ли, че индустрията е единодушна относно значението на лукса в момента?

2. Шок маркетинг и вайръл моменти

Как гледате на маркетинга, базиран на шок ефект, и на вирусните моменти в луксозната мода?
Какво целят тези стратегии и какви рискове крият?
Съществува ли момент, в който видимостта вреди на лукса, вместо да го укрепва?

3. Минимализъм и стратегическа сдържаност

Защо смятате, че минималистичните и сдържани брандове набират популярност в момента?
Възприемате ли „тихия лукс" като тенденция или като по-дълбока стратегическа промяна?
Как сдържаността и дефицитът функционират като инструменти за брандиране днес?

4. Майсторство, автентичност и интегритет на бранда

Колко централно място заема майсторството в луксозното брандиране на практика, а не само в комуникацията?
Смятате ли, че потребителите стават все по-чувствителни към автентичността?
Къде виждате напрежение между търговския натиск и интегритета на бранда?

5. Дюпове и пазарен натиск

Какво е стратегическото въздействие на дюповете и имитациите от масовата мода върху луксозните брандове?
Смятате ли, че дюповете демократизират значението на лукса или го разводняват?
Принудила ли е културата на дюповете луксозните брандове да преосмислят дизайна или комуникацията си?

6. Интерпретиране на потребителската умора

Забелязвате ли признаци на потребителска умора от хайп, лога или зрелищност?
Как реагират брандовете на тази промяна, ако изобщо реагират?
Съгласувани ли са професионалистите и потребителите в начина, по който интерпретират лукса днес?

7. Поглед напред

Какво смятате, че ще бъде приоритет в бъдещето на луксозното брандиране?
Изгубила ли е луксозната индустрия своята същност или просто се развива?
Кой според вас движи предефинирането на лукса в момента: брандовете, потребителите или културата?

Interview guide for consumers:

Предварителен въпрос: Колко често купувате луксозни артикули?

1. Дефиниране на лукса

Какво ви идва наум, когато чуете думите "луксозна мода"?
Какво конкретно ви кара да усещате нещо като "луксозно" днес?
Променила ли се е личната ви дефиниция за лукс през последните няколко години? Защо или защо не?

2. Логота, хайп и видимост

Какво е отношението ви към видимите логота и отчетливото брандиране в луксозната мода?
Хайпът и вайръл разпространение издигат ли лукса или намаляват усещането за ексклузивност?
Случвало ли ви се е да усетите, че даден луксозен бранд е станал прекалено видим?

3. Минимализъм и "тихият лукс"

Какво асоциирате с минималистичните или "тихо луксозните" брандове?
Сдържаният дизайн усеща ли се като по-луксозен или по-малко луксозен в сравнение с изявените артикули?
Какви чувства предизвикват минималистичните луксозни брандове у вас в сравнение с по-"шумните"?

4. Майсторство и автентичност

Колко важни са майсторството и качеството при оценката ви на луксозен продукт?
Смятате ли, че луксозните брандове все още отстояват тези ценности днес?
Как лично вие преценявате дали даден луксозен продукт "си заслужава"?

5. Дюпове и имитации

Какво мислите за дюповете и имитациите на луксозни артикули от масовата мода?
Влияят ли дюповете на усещането за изключителност и желаност на оригиналния луксозен продукт?
Променили ли са дюповете начина, по който се отнасяте към луксозните брандове или ги възприемате?

6. Бъдещето на лукса

Смятате ли, че луксозната мода се развива в правилна посока?
На какво се надявате луксозните брандове да обърнат повече внимание в бъдеще?
Според вас какво трябва да олицетворява луксът днес?

Appendix D: NVivo 15 Coding Results

Matrix Coding Query — Consumers vs Industry Professionals																					
		Consumers											***Industry Professionals***								
Theme	**Sub-theme**	**C1**	**C2**	**C3**	**C4**	**C5**	**C6**	**C7**	**C8**	**C9**	**Total**	**P1**	**P2**	**P3**	**P4**	**P5**	**P6**	**P7**	**P8**	**P9**	**Total**
Theme 1: Visibility vs Exclusivity Tension	Controlled Scarcity & Selective Visibility	3	1	2	0	3	4	2	1	1	**17**	6	2	1	5	4	4	3	5	5	**35**
	Hype, Virality & Trend Fatigue	3	3	3	2	1	2	10	6	10	**40**	3	4	4	4	6	4	4	4	4	**37**
	Overexposure & Loss of Exclusivity	3	3	4	1	3	4	8	7	5	**38**	2	2	1	3	1	5	5	3	4	**26**
Theme 2: Shift from Logos to Subtlety	Shift from Logos to Subtlety	6	4	3	5	5	4	11	9	11	**58**	6	5	8	5	4	5	3	3	4	**43**
Theme 3: Reconstruction of Luxury Meaning	Longevity, Timelessness & Wearability	4	3	4	4	7	1	4	8	7	**42**	0	2	4	3	3	0	5	2	2	**21**
	Luxury as Identity & Symbolic Value	7	7	2	7	3	5	11	12	16	**70**	7	6	6	6	7	6	2	8	7	**55**
Theme 4: Authenticity & Craftsmanship Tension	Commercial Pressure vs Brand Integrity	4	5	6	5	1	2	4	2	7	**36**	6	5	7	9	9	4	4	8	7	**59**
	Craftsmanship & Quality	6	4	4	7	9	5	16	15	19	**85**	4	4	3	3	7	9	4	3	3	**40**
	Perceived Decline in Quality	1	2	1	1	1	1	4	3	7	**21**	0	1	0	0	3	1	7	1	2	**15**
Theme 5: Dupe Culture & Luxury Dilution	Brand Response to Dupes	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	2	**7**	1	3	3	3	4	3	2	4	3	**26**
	Dupes & Dilution of Luxury	3	2	2	3	2	1	6	2	5	**26**	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	**15**
	Dupes as Access and Democratisation	1	2	2	0	2	1	1	3	2	**14**	0	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	**11**
Theme 6: Future Reorientation of Luxury	Future of Luxury (Expectations & Criticism)	3	3	3	3	3	2	1	4	2	**24**	2	6	5	7	8	6	6	6	7	**53**

Note. *Values represent the number of coded references per participant per sub-theme. C = Consumer; P = Industry Professional.*