An investigation of the influence of the democratisation of luxury brands on brand resonance amongst luxury brand consumers in a South African context.

Student Name: Brigita Hess
Student Number: [redacted]
Supervisor: Dr. Helena van Wyk

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ABSTRACT

The luxury sector's substantial economic growth is attributed to a phenomenon known as the democratisation of luxury brands. While luxury brands are traditionally perceived as exclusive commodities accessible only to an elite few, the democratisation of luxury brands has resulted in the increased accessibility of luxury brands to a larger population of consumers. The proliferation of this phenomenon has encouraged some academics to suggest that the nature of luxury brands has brought forth a new luxury in which luxury brands are egalitarian, inclusive and ubiquitous. This study has sought to determine whether luxury brand consumers resonate with new, democratic notions of luxury, or whether they resonate with traditional, elitist notions of luxury. This study was supported by a qualitative research approach informed by an interpretivist paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of luxury brand consumers using an interview schedule as the data collection tool. The data was measured against Keller’s Brand Resonance Pyramid as the theoretical framework and the findings are reported in this document. The findings of this consumer-centric study suggest that luxury brand consumers resonate with the traditional associated of luxury being exclusivity, prestige and elitism.

Key words: luxury brands, democratisation of luxury brands, brand resonance

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1. Chapter 1: Introduction

This research paper presents a study relevant to the field of luxury brands and reports on the findings of an investigation into a phenomenon known as the democratisation of luxury. This study sought to investigate the influence of the democratisation of luxury on brand resonance amongst luxury brand consumers in South Africa in the pursuit to understand the implications of such a phenomenon on the future of luxury brand management and the relationship between luxury brands and luxury brand consumers.

The chapter presents the background and rationale of this study, the research problem under investigation and the consequent research questions and objectives that this study sought to achieve. Next, the conceptualisation of the key concepts is presented, in addition to an overview of the research methodology. This chapter concludes with the structure of this paper.

1.1. Background and orientation (contextualization)

The luxury industry has grown substantially in recent years proving to be a significant economic sector (Heine, 2012; Brun & Castelli, 2013; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). Once a niche industry aimed at a few, the burgeoning luxury industry is dominated by conglomerates such as LVMH whose luxury brands, which include Louis Vuitton and Dior, are recognised the world over (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). The increasing ubiquity of these luxury brands signals a growing appetite for luxury amongst global consumers (Kauppinen-Räisänen, Gummerus, Koskull & Cristini, 2019).

In response to the demand for luxury, luxury brands have broadened their formally narrow target audience to include a greater population of consumers (Kapferer; Klippert & Leproux, 2014). These consumers can now access affordable luxury items made accessible to them by strategic luxury brand extensions (Heine, 2012; Kapferer et al., 2014). This phenomenon whereby luxury brands, which were once exclusively available to an elite few, are made accessible to a larger population is known as the democratisation of luxury (Granot, Russell & Brashear-Alejandro, 2013; Hudders, Pandelaere & Vyncke, 2013; Cristini, Kauppinen-Räisänen & Woodside, 2017).

The democratisation of luxury has contributed significantly to the growth of the luxury sector (Brun & Castelli, 2013; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015). However while this growth may seem positive, it presents a paradoxical dilemma to the luxury industry (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). This dilemma links back to traditional notions of luxury brands as rare commodities reserved for a social elite with the financial means to indulge in luxury items as markers of social status (Kapferer, 2015). Luxury brands have historically been associated with the concepts of exclusivity and rarity as well as prestige and elitism (Heine, 2012; Brun & Castelli, 2013; Kapferer, 2015). It is these characteristics, traditionally at least, that have driven the desire for luxury brands, which is the desire to own something that others do not or cannot own (Kapferer & Michaut, 2016).

This traditional idea of luxury as an industry that is characterised by exclusivity, rarity, prestige and elitism is in direct contrast with the phenomenon of the democratisation of luxury that suggests that luxury is, quite antithetically, egalitarian, inclusive and accessible (Granot et al., 2013; Cristini, et al., 2017; Kauppinen-Räisänen et al. 2019). Cristini et al. (2017: 101) suggest that the democratisation of luxury has made way for a ‘new luxury’, one that is “no longer too exclusive or unique, and it is neither too unreachable or inaccessible any longer”. Similarly, Kauppinen-Räisänen et al. (2019: 231) state that “the new wave of luxury is not limited to the exclusive or the rare, nor is it inaccessible to the majority of consumers”. This presents a disparity that exists in academic literature between two opposing notions of what constitutes luxury in a contemporary age.

While some authors (Heine, 2012; Brun & Castelli, 2013; Hennings, Wiedmann, Klarmann & Behrens, 2012; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016) posit that exclusivity is the true identifier of luxury that must be preserved, others (Granot et al., 2013; Cristini, et al., 2017; Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019) suggest that the future of luxury is accessible, inclusive and no longer reserved for an elite. This thinking offers a new perspective on luxury brand management that is radically different to how luxury brands are traditionally managed and can influence how luxury brands are managed in the future. This demonstrates the importance of a study of this nature, as will be explored further in the next section.

1.2. Rationale

The democratisation of luxury brands suggests that luxury brands are evolving from the traditional and elitist characteristics of exclusivity, rarity and prestige to new and democratic characteristics of inclusivity, ubiquity and accessibility (Brun & Castelli, 2013; Hudders et al., 2013; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015). While many authors explore how the democratisation of luxury brands is redefining the concept of luxury (Granot et al., 2013; Hudders et al., 2013; Cristini et al., 2017), there is little research that thoroughly investigates the consumer perceptions of luxury brands and even less still that investigate consumer perceptions of luxury brands amongst a sample of luxury brand consumers (Heine, 2012; Kapferer & Michaut, 2016; Romaniak & Huang, 2020).

The importance of a consumer-centric study lies in the knowledge that luxury brands are not naturally luxurious by themselves, rather they are perceived as luxurious by consumers (Hudders et al., 2013). Therefore, with the democratisation of luxury brands challenging traditional definitions of luxury, this study seeks to understand the implications of such a phenomenon from the perspective of the luxury brand consumer. This study pursues to understand whether or not luxury can exist outside of the traditional characteristics that have defined it, whether luxury brand consumers align with concepts of new, democratised luxury or with that of traditional, elitist luxury and whether these occurrences will influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers.

1.3. Problem Statement

To make a valuable contribution to this subject matter, it is important to consider whether luxury brand consumers continue to value the traditional luxury associations of exclusivity, rarity and prestige, or whether they value the democratic luxury associations of inclusivity, ubiquity and accessibility, and how this may ultimately influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers.

Therefore, the problem statement that this research proposal seeks to consider is as follows: How will the democratisation of luxury influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers?

1.3.1. Why is the problem worth investigating?

Considering that the desirability of luxury brands have long since been attributed to their exclusive nature, the increasing accessibility of luxury brands may undermine the concept of luxury and compromise the desirability of luxury brands (Brun & Castelli, 2013). Whether this may be the case is dependent on the attitudes that luxury brand consumers hold towards the antithetical concepts of new, democratised luxury versus traditional, elitist luxury. Therefore, the answer to this problem will provide consumer-centric insight into the implications of this phenomenon on the relationship between luxury brands and their consumers. This insight will allow luxury brand managers to make informed decisions that will either favour democratised growth strategies or traditional luxury brand management strategies that serve to preserve the notion of luxury brands as exclusive.

1.4. Research Questions

The following research questions have been determined to answer the consumer-centric problem statement outlined in section 1.3:

1) How is the democratisation of luxury influencing luxury brands?
2) What perceptions do luxury brand consumers hold regarding democratised luxury?
3) How will luxury consumer perceptions about democratised luxury ultimately influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with the luxury brand consumer?

1.5. Research Objectives

Based on the research questions presented in section 1.4, the objectives of this study are:

1) To determine how the democratisation of luxury is influencing luxury brands.
2) To investigate the perceptions that luxury brand consumers hold regarding democratised luxury.
3) To evaluate how luxury consumer perceptions of democratised luxury will influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers.

1.6. Purpose Statement

Following the problem identified in section 1.3, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the democratisation of luxury will influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers, measured against Keller's (2009) brand resonance pyramid.

1.7. Conceptualisation of the Key Concepts

This study centres on three key concepts: luxury brands, the democratisation of luxury brands and brand resonance. It is pertinent to understand what defines a luxury brand, a subject which is currently debated in academic literature as is explored in section 2.1 of Chapter 2. The democratisation of luxury brands refers to a phenomenon whereby luxury brands are made increasingly more accessible to a larger audience of consumers (Brun & Castelli, 2013), the contributing factors of which are explored in section 2.2 of Chapter 2. The consumer-centric nature of this investigation seeks to understand the implication of the phenomenon under investigation on brand resonance amongst luxury brand consumers. Brand resonance refers to "… the nature of the relationship customers have with the brand and the extent to which they feel they are 'in sync' with the brand" (Keller, 2009: 144) and is explored in section 2.3 of Chapter 2.

1.8. Overview of the Research Methodology

The researcher utilised a qualitative research approach informed by an interpretivist paradigm. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of luxury brand consumers using an interview schedule as the data collection tool. The data was recorded, transcribed and analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis. The research methodology is explored in detail in Chapter 3.

1.9. Structure of the Paper

Chapter 2 presents a literature review in which academic literature centring on the key concepts of luxury brands, democratised luxury and brand resonance is critically analysed. Chapter 3 details the research methodology which includes the selected paradigm and research approach, as well as the research design. Furthermore, this chapter illustrates the population and sample, data collection method and data analysis method. Chapter 3 will conclude with the limitations and delimitations of this study. Chapter 4 will present the findings of this study as they relate to the existing body of academic literature on luxury brands. This research paper will conclude with Chapter 5 which will illustrate how the findings have answered the research questions that underpin this investigation, what these findings contribute to the field of luxury brands, as well as the implications of these findings for future practice and further investigation.

In the next chapter, this research study will present a literature review in which academic literature centring on the key concepts of luxury brands, democratised luxury and brand resonance are explored.

2. Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this chapter is to gain insight and understanding into the body of literature that exists around the research topic. The literature reviewed was selected based on its relevance to the key concepts of the study: luxury brands, the democratisation of luxury brands and brand resonance. Additionally, this chapter will present a theoretical framework upon which brand resonance is measured. This literature review begins with an exploration of how luxury brands are defined.

2.1. Defining Luxury Brands

Despite the interest in luxury amongst academic scholars and the consequent growing body of literature on the subject (Heine, 2012; Becker, Lee & Nobre, 2018), the only consensus that exists as to what defines the concept of luxury is that there is no consensus (Choo, Moon, Kim & Yoon, 2012; Heine, 2012; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2015; Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019). The concept of luxury evades definition because luxury is an amorphous and abstract term that is forever changing and evolving (De Barnier, Valette-Florence & Falcy, 2012; Ko, Costello & Taylor, 2017). Luxury brands are social and cultural symbols that are open to subjective interpretations and can therefore contain a myriad of meanings that may differ from one individual to the next (Becker et al., 2018). This makes luxury a particular elusive concept. Resultantly many scholars have attempted to develop frameworks to offer a reference point from which luxury and luxury brands can be described.

Luxury brand expert Klaus Heine (2012) contributes an ambitious piece of literature that aims to serve as a taxonomy of luxury to aid in categorising and defining luxury brands. In this literature, Heine (2012) explores various potential approaches to defining luxury, including characteristic versus consequence-based approaches whereby, in line with means-end theory, characteristics are a means to an end and consequences are the achieved end typically representative of consumer purchase motives or consumer values. This will be explored further in the next sections.

2.1.1. Characteristic-Based Definitions

Heine (2012) prefers a characteristic-based approach to luxury brand definition and asserts that comparative terms such as luxury are dependent on characteristics to define them. Based on a conceptual framework, Heine (2012: 55) defines luxury brands as those that bear the following characteristics: "…high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness, and symbolic meaning". Heine (2012) explains that characteristics of this nature must be differentiated from their consequences and provides an example by differentiating the characteristic of rarity from the consequence of prestige.

Many proposed definitions of luxury mirror Heine's thinking of defining luxury through characteristics. Dubois, Laurent and Czellar's (2005) definition of luxury brands as those that possess the characteristics of excellent quality, very high price, scarcity and uniqueness, aesthetics and polysensuality, ancestral heritage and personal history, as well as superfluousness, is often cited in contemporary academic literature (De Barnier et al, 2012; Brun & Castelli, 2013; Räisänen et al., 2019). Brun and Castelli (2013) developed Critical Success Factors (CSF) to characterise luxury products which include references to premium quality, heritage of craftsmanship, exclusivity, product excellence and emotional appeal, global reputation, style and design, country of origin, uniqueness, superior technical performance and the creation of a lifestyle. Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2016) determine eight factors that drive the desirability of luxury brands which include product superiority, selective distribution, class and status, uniqueness, not for everybody, a glamour factor, elitism and creativity.

Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2017) view characteristic-based definitions as product-centric in that a product's luxury status is assumed to exist within the product itself. The author's suggest that, as a consequence of socio-cultural developments such as democratisation, a consumer-centric approach to understanding luxury brands is required to understand how consumers interpret luxury brand meaning. This includes social meanings, which speak to what luxury brands signify at a collective level, and personalised meaning which refers to individual interpretations of luxury (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2017). These ideas are explored further in the next section.

2.1.2. Consequence-Based Definitions

Heine (2012) selects Berthon, Pitt, Parent and Berthon's (2009) approach to defining luxury as an example of a consequence-based method. Berthon et al. (2009) suggest that luxury is more than a set of characteristics and to define luxury in this way fails to capture its multidimensionality. Instead, Berthon et al. (2009) define luxury in the context of three dimensions. The first is the functional dimension which represents the material embodiment of the luxury brand and signals characteristics such as craftsmanship. The second is the experiential dimension and refers to the personal and hedonic value of a luxury brand as experienced by an individual. Lastly, the symbolic dimension represents the social aspect of luxury brands and refers to luxury brands as symbols of particular social attributes such as wealth and prestige.

The idea to develop frameworks around the multidimensionality of luxury brands is explored in various literature, although it is taken from a position that such frameworks provide less of a consequence-based definition for luxury brands and more of a value-based understanding of luxury consumer motives. For example, Choo et al. (2012) consider luxury brands from the perspective of luxury customer value, which is how consumers seek to benefit from luxury consumption. Choo et al. (2012) propose a framework comprised of a utilitarian dimension which includes excellence value and functional value; a hedonic dimension that includes aesthetic, pleasure and experience value; a symbolic dimension that includes self-expressive and social value and, lastly, an economic dimension which refers to the financial value or price of luxury.

Heine (2012: 27) criticises consequence-based approaches stating that "…the consequences do not apply exclusively to luxury products". For example, one can derive hedonistic value or feelings of pleasure from luxury as well as non-luxury products. These theories reveal how complex the multidimensional nature of luxury brands are, and why academics have not yet reached a consensus as to how to define them. However, many academics do agree that luxury possesses a duality likened to the double-faced god of Janus, two facets representative of the personal dimension of luxury brands and the social dimension (Kapferer & Michaut, 2015; Cristini et al., 2017; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2017). The next section will explore where these various definitions and categorisations of luxury brands potentially converge.

2.1.3. Luxury, Elitism and Exclusivity.

De Barnier et al. (2012) offer some insight as to what commonalities exist amongst various frameworks that seek to define luxury. The authors studied three existing measurements of luxury (one created by Kapferer in 1998, the other by Vigneron and Johnson in 1999 and the final by Dubois, Laurent and Czellar in 2001) to determine where these measurements converge. From this study, De Barnier et al. (2012: 631) determined that “the notion of ‘elitism’ is the only dimension to occur in all three scales simultaneously”. The findings of De Barnier et al. (2012) encouraged Kapferer and Michaut (2016:9) to posit that “…elitism is the kernel of the concept of luxury: having something that others do not have” and affirms Kapferer and Michaut’s (2015) position of luxury as a means of social stratification whereby society’s elite separate themselves from others through the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods.

Conspicuous consumption has long been of interest to academics both before and after it was coined by Thorstein Veblen (1899) in his seminal work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). Conspicuous consumption describes ostentatious and competitive status-seeking consumption behaviour with the intent to indicate one’s membership to a superior class (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). Based on this theory, luxury brands are consumed by the elite as a means to express a desire for uniqueness or to differentiate themselves from the mass (Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). Kapferer and Valette-Florence (2016) suggest that this elitist dimension of luxury is what makes luxury desirable to broader consumer segments who seek to imitate the affluent few. Therefore Kapferer and Michaut (2015: 9) state that “there is luxury meanwhile because not everybody can get it: luxury is discriminatory and its objective in democratic open societies is to create social stratification”.

These perspectives underscore the significance of the luxury brand characteristic of exclusivity, with Kapferer and Michaut (2016: 12) proclaiming that “…luxury value, above all else, rests on a promise of exclusivity”. Many scholars agree with this proclamation. For example, Heine (2012) takes a conclusive stance that luxury brands must possess prestige and that luxury must preserve its image of exclusivity. Hudders et al. (2013) state that luxury and exclusivity are inherently connected, and Brun and Castelli (2013) consider exclusivity to be the aspect of luxury that is most pertinent.

However, there is a phenomenon occurring within the sphere of luxury brands that is contradictory to the traditional aspects of luxury and can suggest a new definition for luxury. This phenomenon is called the democratisation of luxury and is examined in the section to follow.

2.2. Democratised Luxury

The democratisation of luxury refers to the increasing accessibility of luxury brands to a larger population of consumers (Brun & Castelli, 2013). This phenomenon has encouraged some academics to suggest that luxury brands are no longer the realm of a social elite (Yeoman, 2011; Granot et al., 2013; Cristini, et al., 2017). Instead, luxury is the norm and exclusivity is commonplace (Hudders et al., 2013). Many factors have contributed to the luxury sector's substantial growth and the phenomenon of the democratisation of luxury (Kapferer, 2015; Rambourg, 2020). This literature review will focus on the most significant factors.

2.2.1. The Luxury Brand Conglomerate

The first factor is the rise of the luxury brand conglomerate (Brun & Castelli, 2013; Kapferer, 2015; Rambourg, 2020). Traditionally luxury brands were owned and run by family companies who have since sold their brands to, what are today, large luxury brand firms. For example, LVMH owns Louis Vuitton, Dior and Tiffany & Co to name a few, while Kering owns Gucci, Saint Laurent and Bottega Veneta (Kapferer, 2015; Rambourg, 2020). Unlike family-owned brands that could grow at their own pace, luxury brand firms are listed companies with shareholders who expect to see growth (Kapferer, 2015). To pursue growth, luxury brands are bending the rules of luxury brand management by targeting consumers who would not ordinarily be able to afford the brand's product offering (Kapferer, 2015). To achieve this, luxury brands have made their products accessible to the market by introducing affordable ranges or accessory lines (Hein, 2012; Kapferer, 2015; Rambourg, 2020). The logic is if a consumer cannot afford a classic Chanel handbag, the consumer can at least afford to own a pair of Chanel sunglasses for example. Although most of the luxury brand's product offerings may still be out of reach for most consumers, this strategy increases the presence or ubiquity of the brand (Kapferer, 2015; Rambourg, 2020).

2.2.2. The Rise of Masstige

The second factor that is contributing to democratised luxury is the rise of masstige brands (Heine, 2012; Kapferer, 2015). Although these brands can exude elements of luxuriousness, masstige brands differ from luxury brands in that they follow a different business model. As Kapferer (2015) explains, where luxury brands seek to limit their production and distribution to maintain rarity and exclusivity, masstige brands produce quantities for the masses and are not as selective with their distribution. Brands like Coach, Ralph Lauren and Michael Kors fall under this category. These brands give the illusion of 'accessible luxury' (Rambourg; 2020) by offering consumers products that have elements of luxury, but at more affordable prices (Kapferer, 2015).

2.2.3. Emerging Markets

The third factor contributing to democratised luxury is the substantial economic growth in emerging markets, most significantly in China, which luxury brands have sought to benefit from (Kapferer, 2015; Rambourg, 2020). Chinese statesman Deng Xiaoping's motto 'to get rich is glorious' (as cited in Rambourg, 2020: 51) captures the contemporary zeitgeist of China. The motto has become widely accepted amongst the population and is credited for the country's increasing penchant for luxury bands (Rambourg, 2020). Rambourg (2020) reports that in 2020, before the Covid-19 outbreak, consumer confidence in China was at a 30 year high. This is reflected in the consumption behaviours of the Chinese nation who are set to surpass the United States as the biggest luxury goods market (Kapferer, 2015; Rambourg, 2020).

2.2.4. Counterfeit Luxury

Counterfeit luxury brands also contribute to the democratisation of luxury brands. Whilst the other factors presented speak to how the strategic decisions of luxury brands have contributed to democratised luxury, the proliferation of counterfeit luxury goods exist outside of the control of luxury brands and their management. Yet Kapferer and Michaut (2014) suggest that increased demand for counterfeit luxury items is an unintended consequence of the luxury brand sector's recent growth, as growth in the luxury brand market often signals growth in the shadow market of counterfeit luxury. The more luxury brands grow, the more ubiquitous they become, making it difficult for luxury brands to defend their exclusivity (Yeoman, 2011). Many authors maintain that luxury must preserve the illusion of rarity and the characteristic of exclusivity (Heine, 2012; Brun & Castelli, 2013; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). Rambourg (2020) concurs, stating that the ubiquity of luxury brands is not compatible with exclusivity, a characteristic that Rambourg (2020) considers a key contributor to the desirability of luxury brands. On the subject, Rambourg (2020: 168) makes this poignant statement: "In luxury, ubiquity doesn't get you anything; the illusion of scarcity and exclusivity do". Despite this, luxury brands are adopting strategies for growth.

According to Ko et al. (2017: 2), luxury brands should inspire a "… deep connection, or resonance, with the consumer". Therefore, whether the democratisation of luxury is a cause for concern is dependent on how it may influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury consumers. The next section will cover brand resonance and present a conceptual framework for measuring it.

2.3. Brand Resonance

Choo et al. (2012) suggest that gaining insight into what defines a luxury brand requires understanding how luxury consumers perceive and interact with luxury brands because consumers play an active role in co-creating luxury brand value. In line with this thinking, De Barnier et al. (2012: 626) state that "…the domain of luxury is therefore unquestionably tied up with the perception that consumers have of luxury brands". Therefore, considering the role of the consumer in granting a brand luxury status, this study requires that luxury brands thoroughly understand the implications of democratised luxury on their ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers.

To understand the implication of democratised luxury on brand resonance amongst luxury brand consumers, this study sought to explore how the democratisation of luxury brands may be redefining the luxury brand consumer. However just as luxury brands are ill-defined so too are luxury consumers and the aspects that differentiate them from non-luxury consumers (Heine: 2012). Therefore the sections to follow will present the dichotomic definitions that have been explored as to what defines luxury brand consumers and their attitudes toward luxury.

2.3.1. The Elitist versus The Democrat

In the seminal article, *Consumer Rapport to Luxury: Analysing Complex and Ambivalent Attitudes,* Dubois, Czellar and Laurent (2005) explored three different types of attitudes toward the concept of luxury: Elitism, Democratisation and Distance. The distant type refers to those consumers who do not possess positive or negative feelings towards luxury, but who feel as though luxury is a different world to which they do not belong (Dubois et al., 2005). The researcher takes the position that one who does not feel they belong to the world of luxury is not representative of a luxury brand consumer and will therefore focus specifically on the elitist and the democrat.

Dubois et al. (2005) define elitists as those who align to the traditional views of luxury as reserved for an elite few. Elitists take the position that luxury should only be accessible to a few, allowing its consumers to differentiate themselves from others (Dubois et al., 2005). On the contrary, democrats take the position that luxury should not be reserved for an elite nor should it be a tool for differentiation but instead, it should be accessible to many (Dubois et al., 2005). The authors (2005) suggest that to understand whether a luxury brand will lose its status if it becomes too common requires that one determine whether luxury brand consumers are elitists or democrats. This is what this study seeks to reveal to understand how the democratisation of luxury brands may influence a luxury brands ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers.

2.3.2. The Snob Effect versus The Bandwagon Effect

Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) explore luxury brand consumption in the context of Lebenstein's (1950) seminal work on consumer demand theory titled *Bandwagon, Snob, and Veblen Effects in The Theory of Consumption Demand*. Lebenstein (1950) defines the bandwagon effect as the phenomenon whereby consumer demand for a commodity increases when others, particularly those of higher economic standing, are also consuming the same commodity. This type of consumption behaviour is representative of those consumers who engage in the consumption of luxury brands in pursuit of social status and social recognition to gain membership into particular social groups (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).

Conversely, Lebenstein (1950) defines the snob effect as the phenomenon whereby the demand for a commodity decreases when others are consuming the same commodity. This type of behaviour is representative of those who only value a luxury brand or product when very few others own it (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). The snob effect is associated with a strong need for uniqueness and desire to be exclusive (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Shahid, Islam, Farooki & Thomas, 2021).

The concept of the elitist versus the democrat, and the snob effect versus the bandwagon effect reveals the dichotomous nature of luxury brand consumption. This provides a literary foundation upon which brand resonance can be explored based on which behaviour is most representative of the contemporary luxury brand consumer. This can provide insight into whether traditional and elitist ideas of luxury or new and democratic ideas of luxury are most likely to resonate with these consumers. The model upon which brand resonance will be measured is presented in the next section.

2.3.3. Brand Resonance Pyramid

Keller (2009: 144) defines brand resonance as "… the nature of the relationship customers have with the brand and the extent to which they feel they are 'in sync' with the brand". According to Raut, Pawar, Brito and Sisodia (2019: 299), brand resonance can be understood as "…the level of identification a consumer has with a brand" and reiterate that brand resonance refers to the relationship that exists between a consumer and a brand. Raut, Brito & Pawar (2020: 162) define band resonance as the “extent to which a consumer develops strong behavioural, psychological and social bonds with the brands s/he consumes”. What these definitions reveal is that brand resonance refers to a strong emotional and psychological relationship that exists between a luxury brand and a luxury consumer. Therefore, the stronger the brand resonance, the more a consumer will feel that they are in sync with the brand, and the stronger the relationship between the consumer and the brand.

Keller’s (2009) Brand Resonance Pyramid offers a framework against which brand resonance can be measured. The pyramid comprises six sequential building blocks, the first of which is brand salience and refers to the ease at which consumers can recall the brand (Keller: 2009). This is followed by brand performance and brand image which refer to how the brand meets the functional needs of the consumer, and the social and psychological needs of the consumer respectively (Keller: 2009). The next step includes brand judgements which places focus on the consumers own personal thoughts, opinions and evaluations of the brand, followed by brand feelings which deal with the emotions that a consumer holds toward a brand (Keller: 2009). The final building block is brand resonance which determines the relationship that exists between the consumer and the brand (Keller: 2009). The pyramid presents a multi-dimensional framework that can be utilised to measure the multi-dimensional nature of luxury brands and their ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers.

The literature reveals a common criticism that arises with reference to the Brand Resonance Pyramid. That criticism is that the pyramid does not act as a quantitative scale by which brand resonance can be measured by a numerical value (Ande, Gunasekaran, Murugesan & Natarajan, 2015; Raut et al., 2019; Raut et al., 2020). However, as this research study seeks to employ a qualitative research approach as opposed to a quantitative approach, this concern is not relevant to this study.

2.4. Summary

The literature has revealed that luxury brands are largely associated with the characteristic of exclusivity (Heine, 2012; Brun & Castelli, 2013; Kapferer & Michaut., 2016). However, the democratisation of luxury has seen luxury brands adopting strategies that trade exclusivity for growth (Rambourg, 2020). As luxury brands become increasingly ubiquitous, it is important to consider how the democratisation of luxury will influence luxury consumer perceptions of luxury brands and a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers. Therefore the researcher has identified Keller's (2009) Brand Resonance Pyramid as the theoretical framework to measure brand resonance within the context of this study. The next chapter will explore the research methodology.

3. Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This study aims to determine how the democratisation of luxury will influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers. In this chapter, the researcher presents a discussion on the research methodology implemented in pursuit to answer the research questions presented in section 1.4. This chapter discusses the research paradigm, approach and design as it relates to the research topic. Additionally, this chapter describes the population and sample of this study, as well as the method for data collection and data analysis. Lastly, this chapter presents the limitations and delimitations of this study.

3.1. Research Paradigm

A paradigm offers a lens through which to view, understand and interpret reality (Niewenhuis, 2020). There exist three dominant paradigms: positivism, interpretivism and critical realism (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). These paradigms differ from one another in that positivism takes a scientific view that suggests that reality is governed by irrefutable laws that can be explained through objective observation and reason (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). By contrast, interpretivism rejects the notion of an objective reality and suggests that there exist multiple subjective realities that are to be observed, understood and interpreted (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Critical realism, like interpretivism, asserts that reality is socially constructed, however, critical realism, unlike interpretivism, aims to challenge and transform social constructs as opposed to merely observing them (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014).

As luxury is a social construct (Hudders et al., 2013), this research does not seek to objectively define or scientifically measure luxury in line with a paradigm of positivism. Neither does it seek to challenge or transform social ideas around luxury in congruence with critical realism. Instead, this research seeks to study and understand the complex and relative nature of luxury, and to observe and interpret the social meanings that are attributed to luxury brands by their consumers. Therefore the researcher has selected the paradigm of interpretivism as the lens by which this study will be conducted.

Interpretivism asserts that reality is fluid in that it exists "…as people experience it and assign meaning to it" (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Kennan, 2018: 304). This is true of the shape-shifting nature of luxury brands whereby one's reality of what constitutes luxury may differ from the reality of another. Consequently this study may reveal different interpretations and meanings of luxury. This illustrates an alignment between the socially constructed concept of luxury and interpretivist belief, and demonstrates the appropriateness of an interpretivist lens for this study. The next section will discuss the selected research approach.

3.2. Research Approach

Williamson (2013) suggests that a researcher select their approach based on the questions that their study seeks to answer. The researcher should consider whether the answers to these questions would be satisfied by measurement or fact, or if the answers will present some complexity (Williamson, 2013). The research questions presented in Section 1.4. sought to elicit the personal opinions and perspectives of the sample. As luxury is in itself a subjective social construct, the objective and scientific nature of a quantitative study would be limited in pursuit to understand the personal and social meanings that luxury consumers assign to luxury brands.

This research poses complex questions for which there is no one right answer. The subjectivity of luxury brand meaning presents the possibility of varying answers that differ as a consequence of one's personal interpretations of meaning. It is circumstances of this nature where an interpretivist paradigm complemented by a qualitative approach is ideal (Williamson, 2013). For this reason, the researcher has deemed a qualitative research approach as most appropriate for this study.

3.3. Research Design

It is important to consider the research design as it pertains to time. There exist two types of studies in which qualitative research can be conducted: longitudinal and cross-sectional (Pascoe, 2014). A longitudinal study refers to an extended investigation that studies the influence of a particular phenomenon amongst a sample over a period of time (Tanner, 2013). On the other hand, a cross-sectional study investigates the influence of a particular phenomenon amongst a sample at one point in time (Tanner, 2013). Due to time limitations, this study has utilised a cross-sectional, qualitative research approach. The next section discusses the population and sample.

3.4. Population and Sample

3.4.1. Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis refers to the who and the what that is to be researched (Williamson, 2013). The unit of analysis can refer to an individual, a group or an organisation and therefore defines the scope and boundaries of the study (Williamson, 2013). The unit of analysis for this study is a luxury brand consumer.

3.4.2. Population

A population refers to “the total group of people from whom information is required” (Wiid & Diggins as cited in Pascoe, 2014). The population of this study are luxury brand consumers. However, as luxury brand consumers are represented globally (Kapferer & Michaut, 2016), the population exceeds the scope of this study. Therefore, population parameters were defined to determine an accessible population.

Considering that this investigation will take place in a South African context, the population is, specifically, luxury brand consumers in South Africa. In addition to the locality of the consumers as a parameter, the researcher has determined a target population through additional parameters which describe the key characteristics or attributes that the population must possess and have in common (Williamson, 2013).

As discussed, the democratisation of luxury has meant that luxury brands have become accessible to a wider category of consumers that include non-luxury and occasional luxury brand consumers (Kapferer & Michaut, 2016). As this study seeks to understand the influence of the democratisation of luxury brands on luxury brand consumers, it is important that the population parameters defined result in a sample that consists of luxury brand consumers only and exclude non-luxury or occasional luxury brand consumers.

The distinction is important because the meanings that a luxury brand consumer may attribute to luxury brands can differ greatly from that of a non-luxury brand consumer (Heine, 2012). Consequently, both Heine (2012) and Kapferer and Michaut (2016) have expressed scepticism of research studies where the sample is ill-considered. Heine (2012: 134) criticises the often-cited study of Dubois et al. (2005) who selected respondents based on the following criterion; “all respondents had acquired [...] at least one product they considered luxurious”. To Heine (2012), this criterion could include anyone as a luxury consumer and anything as a luxury product.

3.4.3. Sample

Informed by the concerns raised by Heine (2012), the researcher has sought to eliminate non-luxury and occasional luxury brand consumers from the sample. Therefore, limited to the confines of the determined population parameters, this research defines the appropriate sample as one who has purchased at least one item from the Louis Vuitton store located in Sandton City’s Diamond Walk and has purchased at least two other items from another luxury fashion brand. To further eliminate occasional luxury brand consumers from the sample, all luxury brand purchases must have been conducted within the past year.

To gain access to the accessible population of this study, a snowball sampling technique had been employed in the selection of the sample whereby those participants who met the stipulated sample criteria were referred to the researcher. The researcher further qualified these participants in the interview process.

In summary, this section has presented the unit of analysis, the population, the sampling method and the accessible sample of this study. The next section will illustrate the methods of data collection that the researcher has employed.

3.5. Data Collection

This study required collecting qualitative data that provided insight into the lived experiences of the sample and their subjective interpretations of luxury brand meaning (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014).

There exists various qualitative data collection methods, the most common of which are field research and unobtrusive research (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Unobtrusive research implies that the researcher is "…not directly involved with the research participants" (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014: 191) whereas field research requires that the researcher conduct their research in the context of a social setting whereby the researcher participates in and observes the particular phenomenon or under investigation (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014).

For this study, field research is most appropriate and has been selected as the data collection method. This has taken place in the form of semi-structured interviews whereby the researcher has posed questions to the participants with the intent to uncover, understand and learn of their perspectives on the phenomenon of the democratisation of luxury brands (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014).

The interviews had been conducted with the aid of an interview schedule as presented in Table 1.1, as well as in Annexure A. The interview schedule served as the research instrument selected to facilitate the acquisition of data (Dadhe, 2016). The compilation of this interview schedule was guided by the research questions in Chapter 1, as well as the key concepts of luxury brands, democratised luxury and brand resonance with the latter supported by Keller's (2009) Brand Resonance Pyramid.

The interview schedule assisted the researcher to remain within the appropriate line of questioning most relevant to the study (Williamson, 2013). These interviews were semi-structured, as opposed to structured, allowing the researcher to pose follow up questions for further probing or clarification to acquire a deeper understanding of the participants' answers to the questions (Williamson, 2013, Nieuwenhuis, 2020).

Questions one and two of the interview schedule serve to qualify the interview participants as luxury brand consumers while questions three and four, concerning the key concept of luxury brands, were structured with the intent to determine how the sample define luxury brands. Informed by the second key concept of this study being the democratisation of luxury bands, questions five, six and seven served to determine whether luxury brand consumers were aware of this phenomenon and the consequent increasing accessibility of luxury brands to a greater number of consumers.

Lastly, questions eight to thirteen of the interview schedule served to uncover insights on the final key concept of brand resonance. These questions were modelled on Keller's (2009) brand resonance pyramid and covered the four components of the pyramid which includes salience, performance and imagery, judgements and feelings, and resonance. The researcher selected Louis Vuitton as the luxury brand to measure against Keller's (2009) brand resonance pyramid as Louis Vuitton is the world's most valuable luxury brand (Jenik, 2021).

This resulted in a research instrument constructed with the intent to acquire data that could reveal new insights into the influence of the democratisation of luxury brands on brand resonance amongst luxury brand consumers in South Africa. These insights are presented and analysed in Chapter 4 of this study. In the next section, the researcher will discuss the methods used in the analysis of the data acquired from the collection phase.

Table 1.1: Interview Schedule

The body of interview	Research question
	1. Have you shopped at the Louis Vuitton store located at Sandton City's Diamond Walk in the past year? What did you purchase? 2. Have you purchased from other luxury brands within the past year? If so, what did you purchase from them?
Central Question Concept 01: Luxury Brands	3. What do you believe distinguishes luxury brands from ordinary brands? 4. What do you think makes luxury brands so valuable or so desirable to people?
Central question concept 02: Democratised Luxury	5. Have you perceived any notable shifts or changes in the luxury brand market in recent years that have caught your attention? If so, what may these shifts, or changes be? 6. What is your opinion of the following statement: "luxury value, above all else, rests on a promise of exclusivity"? 7. Do you think that more people have access to luxury brands? If so, what do you think is contributing to this?
Central question concept 03: Brand Resonance. Part A : Salience (Category identification)	8. Do you consider Louis Vuitton to be a luxury brand? Why or why not?
Central question concept 03: Brand Resonance. Part B : Performance/ Imagery	9. What characteristics do you associated with the brand Louis Vuitton?
Central question concept 03: Brand Resonance. Part C : Judgements/ Feelings	10. Louis Vuitton is the most valuable luxury brand in the world. As a Louis Vuitton consumer, what do you credit as the reason why Louis Vuitton is a brand that you desire and that you value? 11. How does purchasing, owning and wearing or using a Louis Vuitton branded item make you feel?
Central question concept 03: Brand Resonance. Part D : Resonance	12. Do you think that a luxury brand like Louis Vuitton can maintain its desirability and its value if it becomes more inclusive, that is if Louis Vuitton becomes more accessible to more people? Why or why not? 13. Do you think that a Louis Vuitton branded item would lose its value for you if everyone owned one? Why or why not?

3.6. Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews represent this study's raw data. This data has undergone thematic analysis whereby the data has been systemically organised to allow for patterns and relationships to emerge (Skovdal & Cornish; 2015). The researcher utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phased approach which allowed the researcher to draw compelling connections between the patterns that emerged from the data, and to categorise these connections into themes (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015; Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2017).

The first phase began with the researcher transcribing the recorded interviews word-for-word to convert the data into text that could be analysed (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2014). These transcripts were documented using Microsoft Word and an example of a transcript has been provided in Annexure A. This data, now in text form, was transferred into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet where the data was divided and recorded across three tabs based on the key concepts of luxury brands, the democratisation of luxury and brand resonance.

Once the data had been recorded, the researcher commenced the second phase which is the process of generating codes (Braun et al., 2017). A code is described as a descriptive or conceptual label in the form of an individual word or a phrase that is selected due to its relevance to the research topic (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015; Braun et al., 2017).The researcher assigned these codes to particular sections of the data by highlighting the relevant aspects of the data in the Excel spreadsheet (Braun et al., 2017). This process is referred to as coding (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015).

Once the coding process was completed, the researcher commenced phase 3 which is the process of constructing themes (Braun et al., 2017). These themes were recorded in a column of the excel spreadsheet and were assigned a colour that aligned with the identified codes in the data. The process involved examining the codes to make connections and identify patterns that emerged between the codes (Braun et al., 2017).

The fourth phase required that the themes undergo a process of review where the themes were further defined, clarified or potentially rejected based on their relevance to the study (Braun et al., 2017). The reviewing process continued into phase five where the researcher began to define, name and categorise these themes (Braun et al., 2017). It is at this phase that the researcher began to analyse and interpret these findings, drawing meaning and conclusions from the connections and patterns that had emerged to tell a story of the findings by way of an analytical narrative (Braun et al., 2017). The result of this phase is presented in Chapter 4.

Finally, in phase six, the researcher is to produce a report that will present and communicate the analytical narrative in relation to its relevance to the context of the research questions and the study as a whole (Braun et al., 2017). The completion and submission of this research document is representative of the completion of phase six. In the next section, the research will discuss the limitations and delimitations of this study.

3.7. Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study refer to those circumstances, influences or constraints that place restrictions on the study beyond the control of the researcher. The delimitations refer to the decisions made and the parameters set by the researcher (Enslin, 2014).

As there exists a short timeframe in which the data is to be collected and analysed, time is one of the limitations of this study (Enslin, 2014). Consequently, the researcher has selected to conduct this study utilising a cross-sectional, qualitative approach whereby the study will focus on one point in time, as opposed to a longitudinal approach that would encourage the study to take place over an extended period (Tanner, 2013).

The accessibility of a population is another limitation that concerns this study (Enslin, 2014). Luxury brand consumers are represented globally and while the literature suggests that luxury brand consumers hold similar perceptions of luxury brands regardless of their nationality, there are some variances between the perceptions of luxury brands amongst luxury consumers from different countries (Kapferer & Michaut, 2016). The researcher has selected a qualitative research design that will value the unique and subjective experiences of South African luxury brand consumers as a contribution to the academic literature on luxury brands.

Additionally, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic is a notable occurrence as it has shaped the current socio-economic climate and the current consumer sentiment in South Africa (McKingsey and Company, 2020). The pandemic may influence the perceptions and experiences of luxury brand consumers. Therefore the findings represented in this study may potentially differ from a similar study conducted in a future that has advanced beyond the pandemic.

In summary, this chapter detailed the research methodology and the population and sample of this study. Additionally, it described the data collection and analysis methods and discussed the limitations and delimitations of this study as it pertains to time, population, geography and current socio-economic conditions. The next chapter will present the findings of this study.

4. Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This chapter will present the findings and discuss the validity, reliability and trustworthiness of this study.

4.1. Findings

This section discusses the three data categories that emerged in the data analysis phase with the aid of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Category A presents the key themes as they relate to the concept of luxury brands and how they are defined by the luxury brand consumer in the South African context. Category B reveals the key themes as they relate to the concept of the democratisation of luxury brands as perceived by the luxury brand consumer. Lastly, Category C explores the complex social meanings of luxury brands as they relate to the key concept of brand resonance amongst luxury brand consumers. In the sections to follow, the researcher presents the data categories and discusses the findings.

4.1.1. Category A: Defining Luxury Brands

The literature revealed that the concept of luxury brands has evaded academic definition largely due to its subjective and ever-changing nature (Heine, 2012). In light of this, it is essential to determine how luxury brand consumers in South Africa define a luxury brand. Defining luxury brands from the perspective of the sample was first explored in general terms by questions three and four of the interview schedule in Table 1.1. This data is documented in Table 4.1. This concept was further explored with specific reference to the luxury brand Louis Vuitton in questions eight and nine of the interview schedule. This data is documented in Table 4.2.

Aligned with Heine's (2012) assertion that comparative terms such as luxury are dependent on characteristics to define them, the sample determined five characteristics that were repeated to define both luxury brands presented in Table 4.1, as well as the luxury brand of Louis Vuitton presented in Table 4.2. These five characteristics are exclusivity, quality, price, aesthetic appeal and class. These characteristics will be further analysed in the sections to follow.

4.1.1.1. Exclusivity

Based on frequency, exclusivity ranked above all other characteristics as is evidenced in both Table 4.1 and Table 4.2. Exclusivity implies that luxury brands are reserved for a particular group of people, a notion that is mirrored in the sample's use of language. As one participant expressed, "it's [luxury brands] not for everyone. Many people would like to have it, but not everyone can have it", whilst another suggests that "exclusivity is there because not everyone can attain it or not everyone can have it". This suggests that, to the luxury brand consumer, luxury brands are not for everyone but are instead reserved for a privileged few of which they form a part. This demonstrates the value of exclusivity for luxury brand consumers, a characteristic representative of the traditional and elitist notions of luxury explored in the literature review (De Barnier et al., 2012; Kapferer & Michaut, 2016).

Regarding the Louis Vuitton brand, exclusivity is highly valued by the sample especially concerning the items made even more exclusive by their limited edition status. One participant explains their preference for limited edition items, "you're not going to have a lot of people having it. Because it's just going to be for a certain period of time…that means you will be, one of the rare person to have it". The participant goes on to explain how they avoid the ubiquitous Louis Vuitton items, "if they just tell me 'okay that one is quite popular' then I'll say 'I'm not going to buy it'. Even if it's popular I'm not going to buy it. That's why I prefer limited edition because you're not going to get a lot of people having it."

This perspective is mirrored by another participant who confesses that they, too, avoid Louis Vuitton items whose style or model has become too ubiquitous as is revealed in the following statement, "I must admit, there are certain bags within Louis Vuitton that, because I've seen so many people have it, I probably don't even use it anymore". These insights suggest that, while exclusivity is desirable to luxury brand consumers, ubiquity is not. This insight mirrors Rambourg's (2020) thinking that suggests that the ubiquity of luxury brands is not compatible with the characteristic of exclusivity.

Table 4.1: The Characteristics of Luxury Brands.

THEME	FREQUENCY	VERBATIM
Exclusivity	33	"I think there is, there is a great element of exclusivity because I feel like there's not many [luxury brands] around, so…you will have something that not everyone has."
Quality	27	""First of all, I think the quality. The quality of luxury brands, it's way, way different and above just ordinary brands… So they're not just, like, expensive, for no reason. There's a, there's a quality, there's value to it. Yes. That's what makes them different to ordinary brands."
High Price	9	"Uh. Let's say. The price. You have the price, you have the quality, you have the longevity…The price is there because of the quality already that you have… we know, with luxury brands we are spending a lot of money."
Aesthetic Appeal	4	"…the two things that stand out for me, is the quality and the look. And obviously, okay, the look being design and the uniqueness of each piece."
Class	3	"You know, you can wear an ordinary dress. As long as, if you pair it with a Louis Vuitton bag, it totally changes your outfit. You know, or Gucci wristwatch. It gives you a bit of class, you know?"

Table 4.2: The Characteristics of Louis Vuitton

THEME	FREQUENCY	VERBATIM
Exclusivity	23	"I do, um, consider it [Louis Vuitton] to be a luxury brand. Because of its exclusivity. Um, as far as I know. I think there's only two shops in South Africa, two or three. There's two I think one here and one in in Cape Town."
Aesthetic Appeal	20	"Aesthetically, their [Louis Vuitton] things are pleasing. So maybe for the aesthetics. Definitely the aesthetics. That's what you go to."
Quality	17	"I don't know what else I can say about Louis Vuitton, but for me, actually what attracted me to them is the, the quality of their stuff. "
Class	12	"They [Louis Vuitton] focus a lot on, on class. That's why I think it's a luxury brand…So I think for me it is a luxury brand because they focus on looking classy."
High Price	11	"Um, the pricing definitely makes it [Louis Vuitton] a luxury brand."

The strong desire for exclusivity expressed by the sample is inextricably linked to an apparent need or desire to distinguish oneself from the other. Providing some insight into the reason for their luxury brand consumption, one participant proclaims, "I would not wear something that everybody wears. So, like I say, I'm an individual". Similarly, the participant presented earlier explains their penchant for limited edition items in the following statement, "[limited edition] means you will be one of the rare person to have it, because I don't like to have…what everyone has". This justification for luxury brand purchases, being the desire to possess what others do not to distinguish oneself from others, is reflected amongst two-thirds of the sample's responses.

This finding gives some insight into the consumption behaviours and motivations of luxury brand consumers that is supported by the literature which suggested that luxury brands can be consumed with the intent to communicate one's uniqueness (Shahid et al., 2021). This strong desire for uniqueness expressed by the sample is representative of snob consumption behaviour which describes the behaviour of consumers who only value a luxury brand or product when very few others own it (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). Consumers with a strong desire for uniqueness make choices that will make them feel distinct and are likely to abandon products that are copied by others (Yang & Mattila, 2013). This explains why the participants avoid the more ubiquitous Louis Vuitton luxury branded items.

4.1.1.2. Quality and High Price

Another key characteristic as revealed by the data is quality. Quality is so synonymous with luxury brands that when the participants were asked to determine what distinguishes luxury brands from ordinary brands, four out of the six participants identified quality first, before referencing any other characteristic. Quality is an integral characteristic of luxury brands because it is the characteristic that justifies another key characteristic of luxury brands, the high price. One participant expressed that they are aware of and willing to buy luxury branded items at a high price because they are not purchasing the item alone, but also the longevity and the quality that the item guarantees in addition to the service that the luxury brand provides.

However in the following statement, one participant suggests that quality alone does not make a luxury brand, “I've also seen, um, other high quality brands that are not branded. So I think it's the quality and the, the name, just the reputation that the brand has built for itself”. This participant suggests that the name of a luxury brand holds intrinsic value, while another participant suggests that it is the presence of both the characteristics of exclusivity and quality combined that contributes to the value of a luxury branded item as is evidenced in the following statement, “definitely it’s the quality and the exclusivity…this is actually what makes it valuable”.

Therefore from the statements presented, one can deduce that while quality is an essential characteristic that a brand must possess to be a luxury brand, quality alone does not make a luxury brand, and while high price is a key characteristic of luxury brands, it is mostly the consequence of, dependent on and justified by other key characteristics such as quality and exclusivity.

4.1.1.3. Aesthetic Appeal and Class

Finally aesthetic appeal and class are the two final characteristics that the sample attributed to luxury brands. It is evident in the data sets presented that aesthetic appeal ranked higher as a characteristic attributed to the luxury brand of Louis Vuitton as evidenced by Table 4.2, than it did with regard to luxury brands in general as evidenced by Table 4.1. It is of the researcher's opinion that this discrepancy is due to the mental images that are brought forth when one thinks of Louis Vuitton specifically, as opposed to luxury brands in a broader context. To expand on this notion, the term Louis Vuitton can bring to mind branded items from which one can reference the style, design and aesthetic appeal, whereas the broad term of luxury brands may not achieve the same mental constructions.

To conclude the interpretation of Category A, it is evident from the data that the sample value exclusivity above all other characteristics that define luxury brands. Five out of the six participants interviewed agreed with the statement that "luxury value, above all else, rests on a promise of exclusivity" (Kapferer & Michaut, 2016: 12) with one participant proclaiming that "exclusivity is absolutely critical for the brand to maintain the high standard, and to be sought out for".

However, one participant suggests that perhaps this is no longer the case. Expressing disagreement with the statement, one participant brings to question whether luxury brands are maintaining their exclusivity, "Oh, I think it's not, not anymore. Because…I can walk out of my apartment, go downstairs to the, to the basement and I've already seen four or five people with a Louis Vuitton item….So, not really, I don't think, not anymore".

What this participant is communicating is an acknowledgement that luxury branded items have become ubiquitous, or even commonplace. The growing number of consumers that possess luxury branded items, as is suggested in this participant's statement, speaks to the increasing accessibility of luxury brands. Luxury brands that are becoming ubiquitous, accessible and even commonplace are characteristics strongly associated with the phenomenon of the democratisation of luxury (Hudders et al, 2012). This will be explored in the data category to follow.

4.1.2. Category B: The Democratisation of Luxury Brands

The luxury industry has grown substantially in recent years with luxury brands becoming more accessible to a growing number of consumers (Kapferer & Michaut, 2016, Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2019). This increased demand and accessibility of luxury brands is referred to as the democratisation of luxury brands, a phenomenon credited as the reason why luxury brands have become increasingly ubiquitous (Brun & Castelli, 2013; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016).

Questions five, six and seven of the interview schedule in Table 1.1 were included with the purpose to explore the key concept of the democratisation of luxury brands. With the aid of these questions, the researcher sought to test whether luxury brand consumers were aware of this phenomenon and the consequent increasing accessibility of luxury brands to a greater number of consumers, or whether they had observed shifts in the luxury brand market that were suggestive of the democratisation of luxury brands. The insights determined from the data are presented in Table 4.3.

With the sample having agreed that luxury brands are becoming more accessible to more people, the research sort to determine which factors the sample credit for the increasing accessibility of luxury brands. These factors are explored in the next sections.

Table 4.3: Contributing Factors To The Democratisation of Luxury Brands

THEME	FREQUENCY	VERBATIM
Counterfeits	23	“I'm seeing more and more counterfeit items now, because the desire to have a luxury brand has increased”.
Social Media	23	“I think there's more. It's, it’s [luxury brands] more out there. And it could be because of social media. Perhaps it's just always been the case. But, um, we were just not seeing it because social media was not as big as it is right now”.
Influencers	19	“Because if a certain influencer perhaps only shops at LV, and that influencer is my role model where everything she does I want to do, then I'm also going to end up now ‘Okay, I only shop at LV’”.
Racial Diversity	16	“Um, perhaps another change not in the, in the market per se, but in the demographics of the consumers. I think there's definitely been a shift and that is influenced by, um, in South Africa in particular with, uh, more access, um uh, to financial freedom by, um, specific groups in South Africa, which has not always been the case. So we are seeing more diversity in terms of who has access to, um, these brands, which I think speaks to your, your topic at hand”.
Travel Restrictions	3	“You know, I can't go on holiday. You know, perhaps if, if the country was open I'd be spending less on brands and more on traveling but I can't”.

4.1.2.1. Counterfeits

The sample acknowledged an increasing prevalence of counterfeit luxury items in South Africa. One participant shares their experience, “they [luxury brands] give limited stock. They’ll maybe bring…twenty or thirty pairs only of a specific shoe…It was better like that because I knew there is a limited number of us that will have that…shoe design….now with replicas being available…now there’s thousands of us that have it”.

The participant’s experience reveals that the prevalence of counterfeit items diminishes the exclusivity of owning a luxury branded item of which there is a limited number, because of the greater number of counterfeit versions. Counterfeit items also infringe upon the luxury brand consumer’s need to distinguish themselves from others, as those who purchase counterfeit luxury brands are assumed to be true luxury brand consumers. As one participant states, “you can't tell which ones are real and which ones are counterfeits. So, it doesn't really matter. We're all thrown into the same pool”.

Consumers purchase counterfeit luxury brands conform to social expectations and imitate the elite (Hietanen, Mattila, Sihvonen & Tokkanen, 2018). This is representative of the bandwagon effect whereby consumers aspire to form part of an elite class through the status-seeking consumption of luxury goods, albeit counterfeit (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). This demonstrates a contrast between those who are luxury brand consumers and those who are not. While luxury brand consumers display snob behaviour whereby they seek to display uniqueness and differentiate themselves from the mass, counterfeit luxury brand consumers display bandwagon behaviour and seek to conform to social expectations by emulating the consumption behaviours of the elite (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Hietanen et al., 2018).

Kapferer and Michaut (2014: 60) warn that counterfeit luxury brands “dilute the 'exclusivity factor' that is critical to luxury brands”. This is supported by the research data that suggests that the influx of counterfeit luxury brands is compromising the exclusivity of luxury brands. The next section will discuss the phenomenon credited by the sample for driving the increased consumption of counterfeit luxury banded items; social media and digital influencers.

4.1.2.2. Social Media and Influencers

The sample perceived social media to be a contributing factor to the democratisation of luxury brands. When asked whether the participants perceived any noticeable shifts in the luxury band market, one participant referred to the increased ubiquity of luxury brands for which they credit the advent of social media, “it’s more out there. And it could be because of social media. Perhaps it's just always been the case. But, um, we were just not seeing it because social media was not as big as it is right now”.

The sample revealed that the reasons why social media is such a significant contributor to the growing accessibility and ubiquity of luxury brands is twofold. First, it contributes to an increased awareness of luxury brands to a large audience of consumers who may not have otherwise been aware that a luxury brand existed. Additionally, as a participant reveals, social media also brings awareness as to where these luxury brands can be purchased, “firstly you'd never…know where these shops are. Uh. Now we know because of social media, there's a place called Diamond Walk".

The second reason is that social media and digital influencers are contributing to an increased desire to own luxury brands, as reflected in this statement, “social media, I think has a lot to do with that desire. Because all your influencers have, uh, designer items”. Social media’s ability to influence the desire for luxury brands is also what the sample believe is contributing to the preceding factor, the consumption of counterfeit luxury goods, “social media is really influencing this [desire for luxury brands]. I think that's why there's so many counterfeited products nowadays, unlike before”.

Kang and Ma (2020) state that social media drives bandwagon consumption in that social media users will seek to identify with particular reference groups by observing and imitating the consumption behaviours of this respected group. Typical of bandwagon consumption, consumers are motivated to consume luxury brands for their social value, their prestige and status, and their ability to signal belonging to a particular social group (Kang & Ma, 2020). These consumers are also more susceptible to the influence of the portrayal of affluent lifestyles by celebrities and influencers (Kang & Ma, 2020). The next factor contributing to the ubiquity of luxury brands is explored in the next section.

4.1.2.3. Racial Diversity

Half of the sample attest to observing a shift in the demographics of luxury brand consumers in South Africa. Luxury brand consumers have become more representative, inclusive and diverse, a positive consequence of the increased accessibility of luxury brands. The data reveals that previously, some of the participants had perceived luxury brands as being, not only class exclusive, but racially exclusive in that only white people in South Africa had access to luxury brands. However, in recent years, the participants observe a shift in the South African luxury brand market in which black South Africans are powerful luxury brand consumers.

To shed light on the significance of this observation, particular from a South African context where groups of people were economically crippled on the back of racial prejudice, it is important to note that the sample who took part in this study represent the non-white population, with the majority of participants representing black South Africans or Africans. Therefore their intimate experiences reference a time in South Africa that was strongly characterised by racial prejudice.

One participant explains how growing up, they observed that it was only white people that had access to luxury brands. Now that has changed as most of the people they see in luxury stores are black people, representing that the demographic has actually “shifted”. Another participant explains that the luxury brand market has experienced this shift because previously economically excluded racial groups now have financial freedom. Therefore this participant observes that, in a democratic South Africa, a once excluded group now has “strong financial muscle” that is demonstrated in the South African luxury brand market.

Although South Africa offers a particularly unique perspective based on its recent history, the increased economic growth and spending power of society is typical of the emerging market trends and the growing middle class that have contributed so significantly to the growth of luxury brands (Kapferer, 2015; Rambourg, 2020). The next section will present the final factor identified by the sample that is contributing to the increasing accessibility of luxury brands.

4.1.2.4. Travel Restrictions

One-third of the sample identified travel restrictions as a factor contributing to the increased consumption of luxury brands, although to a far lesser degree than the other contributing factors based on the frequency reported in Table 4.3. The participants expressed that their increased consumption of luxury brands over the past year comes as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, “perhaps if, if the country was open I'd be spending less on brands and more on travelling but I can't”. Funds that may have previously been reserved to invest in travel and experiences were, instead, spent on luxury brands. While this increased spend in luxury brands was not reflected in global consumption trends, with the luxury market reporting a decline in sales as a consequence of the pandemic, the luxury sector is expected to bounce back from the pandemic with a 4% increase as a consequence of local spending (Reuters, 2021).

To conclude the analysis and interpretation of this category, luxury brand consumers have identified four factors contributing to the increased accessibility and ubiquity of luxury brands; counterfeit consumption, social media, racial diversity and travel restrictions. These factors, particularly counterfeit consumption and social media, have implications for the social meaning ascribed to luxury brands that will be explored further in the category to follow.

4.1.3. Category C: Luxury Brand Meaning and Brand Resonance

The literature reveals that consumers ascribe social and personal meanings to luxury brands (Hudders et al., 2013; Becker et al., 2018). This section discusses the social meanings presented in the data with the aid of Keller’s (2009) Brand Resonance Pyramid, as it relates to a luxury brand’s ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers. The next section will begin with a discussion on social stratification and social circles.

Table 4.4: Social Meanings of Luxury Brands

THEME	FREQUENCY	VERBATIM
Social Stratification.	21	"So we, our circle, we already know that if we see a certain class of person holding that item. Chances are it's either a gift or it's either counterfeit".
Social Circles	11	"So I think definitely, um, the, uh, more people have access to the brands, and when you are in a social circle, especially, and you notice just how much attention and, um, interest, uh, a person wearing a certain brand gets. Or respect, even. Um, it also makes you want to be part of that exclusive circle. Um, it makes you want to have access too, and therefore that is why I think we are seeing more and more people wanting to go into that space".
Social Perceptions of Wealth & success	26	"I think South Africans have that notion that if you drive a certain car, you wear a certain bag, or you have certain clothing items that you are, perceived to be rich or wealthy".
Social Pressure	9	"Going back to, uh, people give you a certain status when they see you wearing these things [luxury branded items]. So it, it also gives other people peer pressure, and that's why now they go to counterfeited products. It gives them peer pressure, and they also want to be, uh, classified within a certain status.".
Social Status	8	"I've noticed you become more noticed when wearing luxury brands. I think people then start, um, giving you a certain status and class when they see that".

4.1.3.1. Social Stratification and Social Circles

The literature explored the notion of luxury brands as a means of social stratification whereby society's elite separate themselves from the mass through the consumption of luxury brands (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Kapferer & Michaut, 2016). The data revealed that luxury brands are still used to stratify society today, specifically in a South African context. Luxury brand consumers are cognisant of a luxury brand's ability to signal membership of an elite class, a concept that is reinforced between the social dynamics which take place between those who are members of the same elite group and those who are not as is evidenced by the samples personal experiences.

To demonstrate the social dynamic between a luxury brand consumer and others, a participant shares their experience, “people seem to, uh, give you a certain status when they see that [luxury brands]. I do see the difference when I'm wearing my normal clothes. To others, I'm just like a normal everyday girl. But once I start wearing my designer things, everybody wants to, like, cater to you and pay attention to you. And you know. Put you amongst a certain class. So I think it's just, it's just the way society reacts to them [luxury brands]”. This participant's experience suggests that people treat luxury brand consumers differently because they categorise luxury brand consumers within a certain social class. This external reinforcement is a consequence of the social meanings that luxury brands possess as symbols of status and prestige in a social context (Yang & Mattila, 2013).

Based on the data, there appears to exist a symbolic language exchange that takes place between members of the same elite that allows them to recognise each other through the presence of luxury brands. This empowers them to compose their social circles of people who belong to the same class as is exemplified by this participant's statement, “you'll find that all my friends have designer items. Um, by default, okay because we don't go out looking for [luxury brand consumers] (Laughs)…So, you will find that your circle of friends prefers designer items, and, um, you'll get invited to nice things you know, because this person knows that person knows that person, you know. It‘s all just. Yeah, social circles”.

Although this participant suggests that their social circle is not intentionally composed of luxury brand consumers, they provided another insight that suggests that they are, however, cognisant of those who don’t belong to this particular class of people, “our circle, we already know that if we see a certain class of person holding that item. Chances are it's either a gift or it's either counterfeit”. The data reveals that counterfeit luxury brand consumers are often associated with the lower class. Another participant reveals how their association of counterfeits with low class people made them hesitant to characterise the Louis Vuitton brand as classy due to the prevalence of counterfeit Louis Vuitton items, “I don’t want to say class, because there's a lot of trashy people out there that are also using the brand…then they buy fakes and all of that”.

This classism is embedded in luxury brand consumption and is acknowledged as somewhat of an ugly truth. As one participant states, “we cannot deny that in this world we live in, in addition to racism and gender, and whatever else, there is also classism. People look at you and they think, okay, um, perhaps we can talk on this level with this particular person, because they are wearing a luxury brand. It may not be desirable, but it is fact”. These findings are typical of the snob effect whereby luxury brands are consumed as a means for members of society’s elite to differentiate themselves from others while simultaneously communicating their membership to a high social class (Patsiaouras & and Fitchett, 2012). These insights support Kapferer and Michaut’s (2015:9) statement that “luxury is discriminatory and its objective in democratic open societies is to create social stratification” and suggests that it is the traditional and elitist aspects of luxury brands that strongly resonate with luxury brand consumers.

The next section will explore the consumption of luxury brands, whether genuine or counterfeit, by aspirant or occasional luxury brand consumers as perceived by the sample of true luxury brand consumers.

4.1.3.2. Social Perception, Social Pressure and the Pursuit of Social Status

A strong theme, evidenced by its frequency in Table 4.4, is the relationship between luxury brands and social perceptions of wealth and success. This theme discusses the ability to create and outwardly communicate a perception of oneself, with particular regard to one's financial success, by leveraging the symbolism of luxury brands. As one participant shares, "[luxury brands] creates a perception of wealth, or financial well-being", an appealing benefit of luxury brands because "people want to be seen or, uh, perceived to be doing well in life". These perceptions of luxury brands is what differentiates luxury brands from ordinary brands as they are "…better able to convey meaning—and, thus, express and construct identities—than other branded products…" (Eisend, Hartmann & Apaolaza, 2017).

Perception implies that a scenario may be perceived in a manner that may not reflect reality. People can leverage the social symbolism of luxury brands to construct an image of wealth that may not be true, "I want to emphasise on perception because not everyone who buys luxury goods is necessarily wealthy or well-off financially. But because of the benefits, and the perception that it gives to whoever is watching, people would rather, um, stay in a smaller home and buy luxury goods". Additionally, this participant states that "I think they are fully aware of what impact or perception it [luxury brands] creates. And this is why you find people even going to the extra mile of buying, um, fake items, because it's about perception". This perception is a strong motivation for the consumption of counterfeit luxury brands (Eisend et al., 2017).

Social status and social pressure presented in Table 4.4 offer insight as to why people would potentially go to great lengths to create a perception of themselves through luxury bands. The first insight revealed is that there exists a desire to achieve social status. As one participant states, "people give you a certain status when they see you wearing these things [luxury brands]. So it…gives other people peer pressure, and that's why now they go to counterfeited products…they also want to be, uh, classified within a certain status". This proclamation aligns with another participants response when asked what they believe drives people to consume counterfeit luxury banded items, "to fit in. To seem as…though they have the money…I think they want to be part of certain circles. So maybe that's the reason. To conform to societal pressure ".

Using luxury brands, whether counterfeit or genuine, to confirm, to fit in or to gain membership into particular status groups, is linked to bandwagon consumption (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Hietanen et al., 2018). This insight highlights a key difference between true luxury brand consumers and aspirant, counterfeit, occasional or non-luxury brand consumers. Consuming luxury brands to fit in is antithetical to the luxury brand consumer's snob behaviour that represents a strong need for uniqueness and desire to be exclusive (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). Therefore, from the perspective of the sample, this type of status-seeking consumption behaviour that includes counterfeit luxury consumption is associated with those consumers who do not form part of their group and therefore does not resonate with luxury brand consumers. Having presented the data in this section, the validity and reliability of this study is discussed in the next section.

4.2. Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

The purpose of this section is to articulate how the researcher has ensured rigour and trustworthiness by exercising good practice that has resulted in research that is valid and reliable (Williamson, 2013). Assessing and demonstrating trustworthiness in qualitative research is pertinent because it speaks to the integrity of findings (Williamson, 2013). In qualitative research, validity and reliability give way to four preferred criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Williamson, 2013).

Credibility refers to the accuracy with which the researcher's interpretation of the findings reflects the multiple realities of the participants (Williamson, 2013; Koonin, 2014). In line with strategies proposed by Nieuwenhuis (2016), the researcher has pursued credibility by developing a carefully considered research methodology that included a research design founded on an interpretivist paradigm that has informed the logical selection of a qualitative approach. Additionally, a sampling frame was developed to ensure a sample that constitutes true luxury brand consumers as opposed to non-luxury or occasional luxury brand consumers. For data collection an interview schedule was compiled based on a theoretical framework, namely Keller's

(2009) Brand Resonance Pyramid, and the data has been analysed deductively against this framework. Additionally, the research has been completed under the supervision of the researcher's appointed supervisor.

Qualitative research refers to the transferability of research findings, the applicability of findings to similar situations, as opposed to generalisability (Koonin, 2014; Niewenhuis, 2016). In Section 3.7 of this research proposal, the limitations and delimitations of this study were presented. In that section, the researcher made note of the variances that can exist between the perception of luxury brands amongst luxury consumers based on geography. Therefore the experiences of South African luxury brand consumers cannot be generalised to the experience of global luxury brand consumers.

The dependability of one's study looks at the quality of the processes followed to collect and analyse the data in order to draw one's findings (Koonin, 2014). The researcher has ensured dependability through the careful consideration of the research methods, tools and techniques selected for the purpose of data collection and data analysis. The interview schedule has been shaped by the theoretical framework of Keller's (2009) Brand Resonance Pyramid and tested to ensure its dependability.

Lastly, confirmability is the degree to which the findings of the study are informed by the realities of the study participants as opposed to the bias of the researcher (Williamson, 2013; Nieuwenhuis, 2016). To allow for confirmability, the researcher has kept record of the data in its raw form, being the audio recorded interviews, as well as the transcripts which represent the audio recorded data converted into verbatim text. Both the audio recorded interviews and the consequence transcripts have been stored in order to allow for others to scrutinise the research (Koonin, 2014). An example of a transcript is provided in Annexure A.

In summary, the researcher has ensured rigour and trustworthiness of the research findings by abiding by the four criteria of trustworthiness for qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. This chapter to follow with the conclusion of this research study.

5. Chapter 5: Conclusion

The research report concludes with this chapter which will discuss how the data findings presented in Chapter 4 have answered the research questions that have underpinned this investigation into the democratisation of luxury brands. Additionally, this chapter discusses the implications of the findings on future practice, as well as the ethical consideration of this study.

5.1. Concluding Answers to the Research Questions

This section presents the answers to the research questions that underpin this study.

5.1.1. How is the democratisation of luxury influencing luxury brands?

The researcher explored a consumer-centric perspective of the democratisation of luxury brands. Firstly, to answer this research question, the researcher sought to uncover whether luxury brand consumers were aware of the democratisation of luxury brands and the increasing accessibility of luxury brands to a larger group of consumers, or whether they had observed shifts or possible influences in the luxury brand market that were suggestive of the phenomenon. Secondly, the research sort to determine the factors the luxury brand consumers believe have contributed to this phenomenon.

The data revealed that all participants observed the increasing accessibility and ubiquity of luxury brands, consequences that are indicative of the democratisation of luxury brands. The sample perceived four factors contributing to the phenomenon; counterfeit consumption, social media and influencers, racial diversity and travel restrictions. The most significant factor identified was the prevalence of counterfeit consumption. According to Kapferer and Michaut (2014) an increased demand for counterfeit luxury items is an unintended consequence of the luxury brand sector's recent growth. Therefore what the sample has identified as a result of the democratisation of luxury brands is the increased prevalence counterfeit consumption in South Africa. The perceptions that the sample hold in this regard are explored in the next section.

5.1.2. What perceptions do luxury consumers hold regarding democratised luxury?

The findings reveal that two of the four factors identified by the sample as contributing factors to the democratisation of luxury brands, being counterfeit consumption and social media and influencers, overlap with one another. The sample recognises the prevalence of counterfeit consumption while simultaneously suggesting that social media is driving an increased desire for luxury brand consumption that has concurrently driven the increased consumption of counterfeit luxury brands. These factors are perceived negatively by the sample.

How these factors influence consumption behaviours is perceived by the sample as consumption behaviours associated with a desire to fit in, conform or give in to societal pressure. Consequently, the sample associate this behaviour with aspirant or non-luxury brand consumers. This is because the increased consumption of luxury brands, whether genuine or counterfeit, as a consequence of social and social media influence, is symbolic of the bandwagon effect (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Hietanen et al., 2018; Kang and Ma; 2020). Social media drives bandwagon consumption because social media users seek to identify with particular reference groups, particularly those of a higher social class, by observing and imitating the consumption behaviours of this respected group (Kang and Ma; 2020). For consumers who cannot afford to imitate these reference groups with the purchase of authentic luxury brands, counterfeit luxury brands are consumed to emulate the consumption of the elite (Hietanen et al., 2018).

These behaviours do not resonate with true luxury brand consumers as true luxury brand consumers demonstrate snob behaviour whereby they leverage luxury brands to differentiate themselves as opposed to fit and therefore only value a luxury brand or product when very few others own it (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). Resultantly, luxury brand consumer perceptions toward the increasing accessibility of luxury brands is unfavourable as it infringes upon their desire to differentiate themselves from the masses (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). The contributing factors of racial diversity and travel restrictions are the exception as these factors have influenced the samples own consumption behaviours.

5.1.3. How will luxury consumer perceptions about democratised luxury ultimately influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with the luxury brand consumer?

Considering that the desirability of luxury brands has traditionally been attributed to their exclusive nature, the increasing accessibility of luxury brands may undermine the concept of luxury and compromise the desirability of luxury brands (Brun & Castelli, 2013). Dubois et al. (2005) suggest that to understand whether luxury brands will lose their status if they become too common requires that one determine whether luxury brand consumers hold elitists perceptions of luxury or democrat perceptions of luxury.

Dubois et al. (2005) define elitists as those who align to the traditional views of luxury as reserved for an elite few, allowing its consumers to differentiate themselves from others, while democrats take the position that luxury should not be reserved for an elite nor should it be a tool for differentiation but instead, it should be accessible to many (Dubois et al., 2005). To determine how the democratisation of luxury brands will influence a luxury brand's ability to resonate with luxury brand consumers requires understanding whether luxury brand consumers continue to value the traditional luxury associations of exclusivity, rarity and prestige, or whether they value the democratic luxury associations of inclusivity, ubiquity and accessibility.

To answer Dubois et al. (2005), it is clear that South African luxury brand consumers hold elitist views on luxury. This is evidenced, first, by the fact that these consumers value exclusivity as a key characteristic of luxury brands as is presented in Chapter 4. Luxury brand consumers seek out exclusivity and avoid ubiquity, relishing limited edition luxury items while rejecting those that have become too popular. The motivating factor is a desire to express individuality and distinguish themselves from the masses, therefore embracing products that are limited to a few and abandoning products copied by others (Yang & Mattila, 2013). This behaviour is characteristic of the snob effect discussed in the preceding section and, as well as the elitist position described by Dubois et al. (2005). This supports Rambourg's proclamation poignant statement: "In luxury, ubiquity doesn't get you anything; the illusion of scarcity and exclusivity do".

Secondly, it is evident from the data that there exists a strong correlation between luxury brand consumptions and class distinction, whereby South Africa's luxury brand consumers leverage the presence of luxury brands to construct their social circles and to stratify society based on wealth symbolised through luxury brands. This classism is externally reinforced by the social dynamics that take place between members of the same elite group and members of a lower class. Just as one participant suggested that "[luxury brands] are not for everyone" so too do they proclaim that "class is not for everyone". Therefore it can be deduced that luxury brand consumers agree that luxury brands are not for everyone, but are instead reserved for a privileged few of which they form a part. This mirrors traditional and elitist perspectives on luxury consumption (Heine, 2012, Patsiaouras et al., 2012; Kapferer et al., 2014; Kapferer et al. 2016), and supports Kapferer and Michaut's (2015:9) statement that "luxury is discriminatory and its objective in democratic open societies is to create social stratification".

Supported by the data, the researcher concludes that South African luxury brand consumers hold elitist perceptions of luxury whereby exclusivity and elitism are key characteristics of luxury brands. Therefore, the concept of the democratisation of luxury brands whereby luxury brands are made increasingly accessible to more consumers will not resonate with true luxury brand consumers as this increased accessibility and ubiquity of luxury brands undermines the exclusivity of luxury brands (Brun & Castelli: 2013). The implications of this finding on future practice is discussed in the next section.

5.2. Implications of findings on future practice.

This study sought to investigate the influence of the democratisation of luxury on brand resonance amongst luxury brand consumers in South Africa in the pursuit to understand the implications of such a phenomenon on the future of luxury brand management and the relationship between luxury brands and luxury brand consumers.

The findings of this study have revealed that, despite the democratisation of luxury brands, luxury brand consumers continue to strongly resonate with the traditional, elitist associations of luxury brands. This insight will allow luxury brand managers to make informed decisions regarding their brand and marketing strategies based on the potential ramifications of the selected strategy. Strategies that favour democratised growth strategies are at risk of becoming too ubiquitous. This risks the relationship with luxury brand consumers as the findings reveal that luxury brand consumers are likely to reject luxury branded items that are too ubiquitous as they no longer resonate with their need for individuality and differentiation. On the contrary, luxury brand strategies that serve to protect the notion of luxury brands as exclusive commodities are likely to curtail luxury brand growth in favour of preserving the luxury brand consumer relationship.

5.3. Conclusion

This study explored various aspects of the relationship between luxury brands and their consumers and provided some rich insight into the socio-psychological motivations of luxury brand consumption. Here, it was revealed that South African luxury brand consumers still value the traditional luxury associations of exclusivity, elitism and prestige over the democratic luxury associations of inclusivity, accessibility and ubiquity. These findings suggest that for luxury brands to successfully resonate with luxury brand consumers, they must uphold these traditional associations. The findings also revealed key differences between the motivations of luxury brand consumers as they related to elitist and snob consumption behaviour, and the motivations of aspirant, counterfeit, occasional, or non-luxury brand consumers as they related to democratic and bandwagon consumption behaviour. However, it is important to acknowledge that aspirant, occasional, counterfeit and non-luxury brand consumers are profiled in this study based on the perceptions of luxury brand consumers.

To further strengthen the understanding of the influence of the democratisation of luxury brands on brand resonance amongst luxury brand consumers, there are areas for potential further research. The researcher would recommend further investigation into the factor of social media and digital influencers specifically and its influence on the democratisation and luxury brand consumption, as the researcher feels there is more to reveal here than this study may suggest. Secondly, the researcher would suggest producing similarly studies in other emerging markets to determine if these findings are representative of emerging market trends. Similarly, the research would recommend producing similar studies in mature markets which may reveal different results. This would allow for a more thorough understanding of luxury brand consumers from a global perspective.

5.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethics is an important component of research study (Johanson, 2013). Johanson (2013) defines research ethics as a system of moral principles or a code of conduct that guides the researcher on ethical practices. Guided by the research ethics presented by Johanson (2013) the researcher had obtained the consent of this study's participants in writing before conducting any interviews. Vega institution consent forms were provided to the participants for this purpose, an example of which is provided in Annexure A . The researcher has protected the identity of the participants and ensured their anonymity by removing any reference to their names or any other identifying information (Louw, 2014). Regarding the management and storage of the data, the data will be stored on a research-protected computer owned by the researcher to prevent data tampering (Johanson, 2013). The data will be effectively destroyed after five years (Johanson, 2013).The researcher will not distort the findings or misuse or falsify information in any way (Louw, 2014).

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