Luxury and Sustainability: From Paradox to Potential

Romanian Consumer Perspective on Sustainability Communication in the Luxury Fashion
Industry

Student Name: Ana-Maria Zamfir
Student Number: 623639

Supervisor: Dr. Vidhi Chaudhri

Master Media Studies - Media & Business
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

In today's fashion-focused culture, the luxury sector has benefitted from increased public interest for a very long time—both in positive and controversial ways and it still displays potential for ideological debate. Moreover, with the sustainability phenomenon reaching its peak, luxury brands face the challenge of integrating as much in their business practice and communicating it credibly—being urged to develop an ethical stature appropriate for our age. Existing literature on the topic displays consumers' opposing viewpoints on the relationship between luxury and sustainability as incompatible or prematurely compatible with reaching a common ground. However, more recent research focuses on ethical dimensions of sustainability to be used as communication strategies by luxury brands in order to increase credibility and set the tone for future sustainability endeavors in the luxury sector. Four focus groups with Millennials and Gen Z Romanian luxury consumers were conducted in order to investigate their views on the research topic. To achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, the researcher has followed three major directions for study: the consumer perspective on the luxury and sustainability paradox, the attitude-behavior gap and its factors, and expectations on how to reach alignment between personal and corporate values in terms of sustainability. This research confirms the existence of an attitude behavior gap between the positive outlook on luxury and sustainability, which does not translate into purchase behavior. The most relevant finding addresses the cause of the attitude behavior gap, which stems from practical considerations: the financial capacity to afford sustainable luxury products. As highlighted by most participants, the low affordability contributes to the ambivalent attitude towards luxury and sustainability, along with limited accessibility and availability of products. Moreover, for luxury brands to become truly sustainable, more transparent sustainability communication is required to align the personal and corporate values. Lastly, the results emerging from the analysis may constitute the basis for sustainability communication strategies in order to remove the ambivalence expressed by consumers regarding the relationship between luxury and sustainability.

KEYWORDS: *attitude-behavior gap, consumer perspective, luxury fashion, paradox, sustainability*

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Research Questions

The global luxury goods market reached US$309.6 billion in 2021, and it is estimated to grow to US$382.6 billion by 2025 (Statista, 2021). Paradoxically, the fashion industry is one of the major financial contributors to the luxury market and the second most polluting industry worldwide after oil (Qutab, 2020) which makes it a controversial sector worthy of examination.

In the light of accelerated environmental damage and societal issues, both fast fashion and luxury retailers have focused on sustainability in their discourse and corporate social responsibility practices, transforming the concept from a trend in the fashion industry (DuFault and Kho, 2015) to a core business practice (Winston, 2016).
According to Deloitte's report on Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2021, there is an increased awareness of environmental concerns and incorporation of sustainability practices into the long-term strategies of luxury retailers (Deloitte, 2021). The report highlights a strong link between organizations and society and alignment with consumers' and policy requirements, demonstrated by the positive response towards sustainable production and design of luxury goods, as well as communication on the topic. Additionally, operating in a socially and environmentally sensitive way and communicating about it contribute to increased customer satisfaction (Galbreath & Schum, 2012), a favourable public reputation (Carroll & Shabana, 2010), increased incentive for purchasing behaviour (Creyer, 1997), thus exceeding the financial aspect and placing the human factor in the centre of the business strategy.

In this paper, the concept of sustainability will be referred to as fulfilling present needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to fulfil their own (Brundtland Report, 1987, as cited in Owens, 2003, pp. 5-9), focusing on the importance of environment preservation, ethical practices, and conscious consumption of resources (Strong, 1997). The luxury sector is facing the same challenges as any other industry, from supply chain to consumers' retail experience, which is why the need to preserve materials, ensure ethical production and avoid pollution has become a central business practice. Furthermore, sustainability goals can be achieved by engaging in upstream practices for workers and downstream practices for products, such as sustainable packaging and recycling at the end of products' life. In short, sustainability in the luxury sector should encompass a triple bottom line of financial profit, respect for the environment and social responsibility (Pomering & Johnson, 2009).

Extensive research has been conducted on the topic of luxury in order to reach a consensus based on consumers' perspectives (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012), which defined it as good taste, high price, uniqueness, limited accessibility, or self-indulgence (De Barnier et al., 2012; Dubois et al., 2001; Dubois & Laurent, 1994). Additionally, social and psychological factors such as the need for prestige, status, uniqueness and self-reward (Amaldoss & Jain, 2005; Tsai, 2005) influence the purchase behaviour, while the symbolic character of a luxury product can outweigh the rational and objective aspect of it (Dubois et al., 2001). Lastly, Wiedmann et al. (2007) suggested a multidimensional framework to evaluate consumers' luxury value perception and value-based consumer categories, analysing individual, social, financial, and functional dimensions to examine luxury goods' value and consumption rationales.

While it is expected from fast fashion brands to be socially responsible to maintain a positive reputation, luxury brands must face the paradox of maintaining their core features and aligning to consumers' and societal expectations without altering the brand image or consumer perception. Luxury retailers are facing rapid technological developments and everchanging consumer bases which require overt communication on sustainability and real action taking on societal issues. At the same time, new generations bring up new expectations to be fulfilled in order to remain competitive and keep a positive brand image. Due to the novelty of the current situation and the inherent differences across companies within the industry, there are many questions that remain unanswered and that should be considered. Based on this, the following research questions have been developed:

RQ 1: How do Millennial and Gen Z consumers perceive the relevance and importance of sustainability communication in the luxury fashion sector?
RQ 2: How should luxury brands communicate sustainability in order to come across as reputable regarding their sustainability commitments?

The proposed research questions will be explored through four focus groups to investigate the relationship between luxury and sustainability from Gen Z and Millennial consumer perspectives in Romania. Existing literature on the Romanian luxury market focuses on status consumption and status prestige as motivations for luxury purchases rather than seeking their symbolic meaning of them (Vickers & Renand, 2003). The Romanian luxury market is a particularly interesting case from a financial and social perspective. On the one hand, it is based on global brands which demonstrates status symbols and welfare, while

on the other hand it still displays remnants of the communist regime. Factors such as forced social equality, conformity, and scarcity have led to a new social system focused on status consumption, which refers to the behavioural tendency to acquire and consume products that provide status to the individual as awarded by others (Han et al., 2010), thus creating social stratification and encouraging financial superiority in the form of luxury purchases and conspicuous consumption (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996). Cultural studies across Eastern Europe have revealed two types of luxury consumers based on their purchase behaviour and characteristics: the *nouveaux riches* or show-offers who chase status and social validation through conspicuous consumption, and the *connoisseurs* or old money rich, that have a solid cultural background and adhere to value-based lifestyle regarding individual, social and cultural manifestations (Sampson, 1994; p7).

Although status consumption is still prevalent amongst Romanian consumers, new generations have instilled new luxury value propositions and display status more subtly (Mason, 1992). Ethical values are particularly relevant for the Millennials, and Generation Z as representatives of a new culture that challenge the current state of affairs worldwide (Sobande, 2019). As the largest generation reaches their peak purchasing power, fashion retailers have started to accommodate their requests and expectations, challenging the traditional business models and instilling new and more sustainable practices (McKinsey & Company, 2017). The new generations engage in so-called green habits and focus on the human approach that matches their moral expectations of authenticity and transparency while grounding their perception and purchase intention on a brand's sustainability efforts (Chan & Wong, 2012) in order to reduce the environmental damage (Kang et al., 2013) and minimize the unethical work practices (Niinimaki, 2010).

1.2 Academic and Societal Relevance

When luxury brands start engaging in CSR practices and promote the concept of responsible luxury as requested by consumers, the luxury paradox occurs, in the sense that the same consumers that are now aware of their fashion consumption habits no longer perceive luxury and CSR as compatible notions, despite their openness to environmental and social issues (Joy et al., 2012). However, most consumers do not necessarily deem luxury and CSR as incompatible but rather associate luxury with superficiality and environmental damage (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). This perspective is confirmed by others who argue that luxury products that display features such as uniqueness and rarity improve consumers' perception of luxury and CSR compatibility (Janssen et al., 2014). In this case,

responsible luxury is displayed on a corporate side by aligning the brand strategy with consumers' conspicuous consumption motivations of social show-off through unique or prestigious luxury goods (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). From a consumer perspective, conspicuous consumption is prevalent in a modern lifestyle (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014) and it is the main reason for luxury purchases (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996, Truong & McColl, 2011); the only difference lies in the social status and the needs it creates (Han et al., 2010, Kapferer, 2010). Additionally, research shows that in order to fulfil these expectations, major retailers have started to invest in sustainable technologies to increase their business portfolios and have pledged to become more sustainable in communicating these goals.

1.3 Research approach & Structure of Study

With this study's background and research questions in mind, the structure of this thesis is as follows. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework that introduces concepts and theories that are pivotal to this study, such as luxury and sustainability, sustainability communication, attitude-behaviour gap concerning the luxury fashion sustainability paradox and greenwashing. Chapter 3 emphasizes the study's approach and method of primary data collection, as well as the steps taken to develop a discussion guide that would adequately answer this study's research questions and the way in which the data was collected. In chapter 4, the results and discussion are analysed in relation to this study's research questions and previous theory. Finally, chapter 5 discusses the study's limitations, practical and theoretical implications, and directions for future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

After mainly focusing on the fast fashion sector, scholars have recently started researching corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability in the luxury fashion industry, fuelled by various rationales. Sustainability literature shows that the growing public and media interest in the topic seeks to be satisfied by the businesses in order to maintain a good reputation and satisfy the external audiences (Porter & Kramer, 2006), as well as related issues such as climate change, social imbalances and decreasing natural resources (Haunschild et al., 2019). The sustainability aspect also influences the financial dimension in terms of investors, stakeholder satisfaction, and brand strategy in order to avoid partnering with unethical brands that could jeopardize the corporate reputation and lower the pricing power (Kapferer & Denizeau, 2014). The potential financial loss fuelled by the brands' silence on the topic and questions raised by the public has pushed luxury brands to start communicating about their sustainability practices (Bendell & Kleanthous, 2007).

Consequently, a decade later, brands have started to show increased awareness of societal and ethical issues, integrating them in the core brand purpose (Hsu, 2017) and extensively communicate with their internal and external stakeholders (Labuschagne et al., 2005). Generally, the human approach has made consumers opt for brands that match their ethical and moral values, reflected in their consumption choices (Nicholls & Lee, 2006). Additionally, research has shown that communication in the luxury sector influences and is influenced by the technological developments in the production process and the consumers' purchasing behaviour (Joy et al., 2012), directing them towards more sustainable ways.

Research on luxury consumer's ideas and intentions towards sustainability is at an early stage. In the last decade several changes, trends and development areas have occurred in the luxury industry, which have created an increased interest in the field. Considering these changes and the limited, yet growing amount of research, an in-depth investigation of the different facets of sustainability in the luxury fashion industry is presented in this research.

2.1 Sustainable Luxury – The Business Case

As part of the controversial industry sector, fashion industry has been deemed as the second largest polluting industry worldwide after oil (Woodside & Fine, 2019), causing significant harm to the environment and attracting a considerable amount of publicity regarding sustainability and environmental issues (Smith, 2003). The concepts of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability have become core business pillars in the last

decades, especially in the luxury sector, stemming from increasing consumer demand for transparency and, consequently, sustainability practices implementation. Corporate social responsibility has countless definitions, and it is still the dominant concept in business literature, whereas sustainability has developed as a separate branch (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). This way, considering the precarious position of the fashion industry within the broader spectrum of societal function, a focus on sustainable business practices can help bring socio-economic value to businesses that exist within the sector. For this study, sustainability will be referred to as a cumulation of policies and practices which demonstrate social awareness and satisfy community needs by providing a proper ground for future development in terms of economic, social, and environmental issues (Enderle & Tavis, 1998; Lii & Lee, 2012) by engaging in ethical behaviour.

Drawing on existing research, Wiedmann et al. (2007) suggest four dimensions of luxury value perception based on consumers' views and influence on purchase behaviour while explaining the concept of luxury and profiling the consumers of luxury goods, as follows: social, individual, functional, and financial.

The social dimension is observed in consumers' consumption of luxury goods in relation to and perceived by the social group as a form of membership to a particular group, prestige, or indicator of wealth (Wiedman et al., 2007). The authors have linked the social aspect of value perception to conspicuous consumption as a form of status symbol and wealth indicator among social groups, creating hierarchies and public recognition for validation-seeking consumers (Wiedmann et al., 2007).

The individual level refers to the personal added value to luxury purchases and the correlation between luxury purchases and improved self-image as a form of satisfying emotional needs through instant gratification. Additionally, the individual level is the most subjective because it depends on the individual luxury perception, which translates into the purchase behaviour through consumers' capability and willingness to buy luxury items.

The functional aspect addresses luxury products' objective utility, which validates their purchase and consumption. Contributing factors to the functional aspect of luxury products are superior functionality, higher quality, and perceived uniqueness as indicators of exclusivity (Wiedmann et al., 2007). Lastly, the financial dimension can be assessed through luxury items' objective monetary value and the economic capabilities of consumers to obtain a specific luxury product, which demonstrates the higher quality and exclusivity aspect of such a product.

Researchers in the field have added the emotional and the symbolic values as an extension to the social and individual aspects, demonstrating their prevalence in the luxury sector compared with functionality, for instance. The emotional dimension has an intrinsic value and explains the consumer's own feelings toward owning a luxury product. At the same time, the symbolic aspect is translated as an external factor, as a form of high social status acknowledgement, success, and prosperity (Ciornea et al., 2012), reflected through other people's opinions about a certain aspect. Emotional and symbolic values demonstrate that luxury purchases validate the needs and wants of consumers and reinforce the definition of luxury products: "images in the minds of consumers that comprise associations about a high level of price, quality, aesthetics, rarity, extraordinariness and a high degree of non-functional associations" (Heine, 2012, p.62).

The fashion industry has been under constant scrutiny mostly concerning fast fashion brands, while CSR practices have started to become relevant for the luxury brands only recently, facing scepticism regarding ethical issues, sustainability, and socially responsible behaviour in general (Winston, 2016). Thus, when engaging in CSR practices, it is imperative for luxury retailers to highlight communication on the topic as a key element and make it known to their stakeholders as the status quo (McWilliams & Siegel, 2010).

Brands have jumped on the sustainability trend and have acknowledged the competitive advantage of communicating sustainability and started to use it as a marketing strategy and innovation opportunity (Porter & Kramer, 2006), which would benefit the overall brand identity as well (Montiel, 2008). However, the altruistic incentive of communicating sustainability becomes an issue when it is solely used for marketing purposes, lacking transparency, and providing false claims contributing to the phenomenon of greenwashing. The concept of greenwashing can be defined as an environmental performance instilled by the brands by providing incomplete statements or disinformation regarding sustainability efforts in order to communicate a seemingly environmentally responsible image but ending up misleading the public (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020).

The luxury fashion sector portrays the epitome of high-quality and exclusive products and sets the tone for new trends and designs. Hence, it constitutes a model for fast-fashion brands which copy and adapt luxury items to their price range and provide consumers with accessible and affordable garments (Caro & Martinez-de-Albeniz, 2015). However, in order to trigger a real behaviour change (Genç, 2017)) and challenge the current fashion consumption patterns (Han et al., 2017), luxury brands are facing a greater responsibility than

fast fashion in terms of transparency and sustainability initiatives which should cascade from "the top of fashion chain" (Macchion et al., 2017; pp.9-28).

Sustainability in the luxury sector refers to a future-oriented approach and aims to compensate for and minimize the social and environmental harm caused by the increased supply and demand of luxury goods in the last decade (Joy et al., 2012). Additionally, sustainability implies conservation and conscious usage of natural resources, which are essential for luxury brands and confirm the long-term investment made in luxury products (Kapferer, 2014), as opposed to the throwaway feature of fast fashion (Dickenbrock & Martinez, 2018). On top of that, criticism of different facets of sustainability is still present in the luxury sector, targeting hidden parts in the supply chain, such as the use of animal products (Kapferer, 2010), unethical working conditions, or destruction of the local environment (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2017).

For a luxury brand to remain profitable and keep a positive brand image in the long run, communicating sustainability brings along legitimacy on the market and alignment between consumer and corporate values while reflecting a certain lifestyle and belief system (Beard, 2008). In this regard, brands are stepping up their efforts to offer sustainable products and communicate about them by integrating the ecology lexicon into their corporate discourse (Ceryellon & Wernerfelt, 2012) in order to emphasize the diversity and complexity of the field and how it is influenced by human factors. Consequently, new trends in sustainable fashion have emerged, such as slow fashion, based on innovative design concepts and creating long-lasting value (Todeschini et al., 2017). By increasing awareness of the topic, consumers can lower the environmental impact and adhere to a new purchasing behaviour by opting for sustainable brands instead of fast fashion ones.

Researchers have argued that a convergence of the two concepts – luxury and sustainability - would improve the luxury industry's public image and facilitate a real social change in sustainability (Muratovski, 2015). The luxury sector's potential to become a leader is measured by consumers' appreciation and capabilities to endorse the luxury brands in order to become part of the change (Joy et al., 2012). This way, luxury brands could trigger a change in values among consumers and shift their perspectives from seeking social validation to discernment and altruism in their purchase behaviour and creating a new luxury dimension (Kapferer, 2010).

2.1.1 Sustainable luxury in the Eastern European space

The paradox of sustainability in the luxury sector can also be analysed in terms of attitude-behaviour theory by looking at the dissonance between consumers' ethical concerns and their translation into actual purchase behaviour from two perspectives. On the one hand, Davies et al. (2012) suggest that consumers tend to disregard ethical issues, including sustainability, when making luxury purchases. This practice is based on consumers' assumption that the exclusive nature of the luxury sector cannot be unsustainable, due to non-mass production in family-owned ateliers. In this case, subjectivity is a key factor among luxury consumers, as the more they like a product, the more likely it is to overlook or minimise the ethical issues. Additionally, scholars have discovered that luxury purchases satisfy immediate psychological needs such as self-fulfilment and increased self-esteem through instant gratification (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 1995; Troung & McColl, 2011), which ultimately leads to conspicuous consumption. On the other hand, Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau (2014) state that although consumers display a positive attitude toward sustainable products, their behaviour does not translate into willingness to make the actual purchase, leaving aside paying more for them. Scholars studying the phenomenon found that almost half of the consumers do not relate to environmentally friendly designs and perceive them as unfashionable styles, which along with high prices, are valid reasons for not translating their sustainability values into actual behaviour (Young et al., 2009).

An extensive study on countries that experienced communism like Russia, Romania and Poland shows that the luxury market did not develop at the same pace as in the non-communist space due to the historical repression of individuality and self-expression and obligation to conform to the regime. Research on Romanian luxury consumers has found that social status is a core personal value for most of them and is reinforced by status symbols such as luxury goods, unique life experiences and lavish lifestyle, which are pursued for their symbolic meaning (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006) and to signal a superior status (Wiedmann et al., 2007).

Carrying communist remnants, present-day Romanian fashion consumers tend to overcompensate for the period of forced social alignment and scarcity during the regime by displaying a present-day need for social differentiation (Manrai et al., 2001). The importance of economic and social differentiation has increased ever since, along with the consumption of status symbols that improve social status (Eastman et al., 1999). Studies on Romanian luxury consumers of the last decade follow three major directions when analysing the

purchase behaviour such as personal values, consumers' segmentation, and factors of consumer satisfaction with luxury products in general (Ciornea et al., 2012). Additionally, Romanian consumers' attitude towards luxury products is focused on the willingness to make financial compromises, save, or work extra shifts in order to afford and access certain luxury products (Ciornea & et al., 2012). Lastly, Schütte and Ciarlante (1998) have observed that in collectivistic societies such as Romania, consumers value conspicuous consumption more than in individualistic ones. Conspicuous consumption of luxury products and status insecurity regarding membership in higher status groups illustrate public status validation, wealth, and power (Eastman et al., 1999) through visible and noticeable purchases (Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

2.1.2 The attitude- behaviour gap in luxury consumption in Romania

Luxury fashion consumption has often been associated with ostentation, overconsumption (Bagwell & Bernheim, 1996), indulgence and pleasure. In his extensive research on the topic, Kapferer (2014) argues that luxury is defined by exclusivity or limited availability both in products and the audience's purchase capabilities.

Research on the consumer perspective has found that consumers perceive luxury and sustainability as opposing concepts (Kapferer & Michaut Denizeau, 2014) and confirmed the existence of paradoxes between luxury values and sustainable consumption (Naderi and Strutton, 2015). These findings have also raised the subjectivity factor in consumer purchase behaviour and created a challenge for the luxury industry, as consumers require a lot from luxury brands, and they are still doubting the co-existence of the two concepts.

The paradox of luxury sustainability refers to exclusive products in terms of price and accessibility, only available to a limited audience which keeps the industry small-scale and does not create additional damage to the environment or use of new resources (Kapferer, 2010). Increased awareness of the paradox has triggered changes in the production techniques in the luxury sector, addressing key steps in the supply chain such as material preservation, pollution reduction, packaging, recycling, and ethical working conditions (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). Both luxury and sustainability have a moral dimension unfolding in seemingly opposite ways. While luxury is perceived as egotistical in nature, encouraging an individualistic way of life (Godart & Seong, 2015), sustainability has an altruistic dimension, aiming to provide better living conditions and equal chances for future generations. This opposition is the moral ground for believing that luxury cannot be

sustainable due to its excess and show-off nature which creates inequalities in society (Gardetti & Torres, 2015).

According to Bourdieu (as cited in Sampson, 1994, p.7) it appears that Eastern European countries are facing a prevalence of *nouveaux riches* who constitute an interesting social category and object of discourse based on their conflicting economic resources and social status (Sampson, 1994). Moreover, the *nouveaux riches* are aware of their flaws and limitations in terms of "money without culture" (Sampson, 1994; p.9) which is why they try to fill the void by raising their social status through finances and ostentatious luxury products. Hence, a new social phenomenon has emerged, called "symbolic struggles" which refers to *nouveaux riches'* efforts to adhere to higher spheres of culture, consumption and lifestyle but being challenged by their own "vulgarity in taste and discourse" (Bourdieu, 1996; p.14).

2.2 Millennial and Gen Z consumer perspective on sustainability communication

In the past 20 years, sustainability has penetrated all industries and sectors due to the increased awareness of key stakeholders. At the same time, studies show that consumers have started to educate themselves on the topic and require brands to publish sustainability reports and engage in two-way communication. Additionally, research shows that consumers are more inclined to choose sustainability-oriented brands rather than profit-oriented ones while reacting positively towards businesses that openly show awareness of environmental and societal issues (Carlson et al., 1993; Zimmer et al., 1994).

The prolonged silence displayed by luxury brands on the topic of sustainability displays luxury and sustainability as contradictory terms (Beckham & Voyer, 2014), creating a general dilemma between luxury brands' prestige and value (De Barnier et al., 2012) and consumers' expectations of environmental practices and ethically produced garments (Achabou & Dekhili, 2003). Previous literature on consumer behaviour focuses on the following recurring themes: sustainable consumerism, disposal behaviour and buying behaviour, creating a research gap in consumer perspective on sustainability communications of luxury retailers (Dach & Allmendinger, 2014). Additional research has shown that consumers, as the main group of stakeholders, start to investigate sustainability and social responsibility practices when they become personally aware of the ethical dimension of the products, which leads to adapting their purchase behaviour (Davies et al., 2012) and confirms their preference for retailers they perceive as socially and environmentally responsible (Laszlo & Zhexembayeva, 2011). Therefore, scholars have started to investigate the

phenomenon and focus on how young fashion consumers and fashion connoisseurs look into environmental and ethical concerns of their purchases (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009).

Thus, the increasing demand for sustainability communications and ethically sourced or slow fashion products (Fletcher, 2010) reflect a knowledgeable consumer expecting transparency on sustainability practices (Du et al., 2010; Mohr & Webb, 2005) and requiring businesses to actively engage in corporate sustainability communications (Adams & Frost, 2006). Companies can respond to this demand by fulfilling the consumer expectations on sustainability and becoming aware of the benefits of committing to sustainability practices such as competitive advantage and modified buying behaviour (Du et al., 2010; Porter & Kramer, 2006), fostering a real change in the fashion industry (Bendell & Kleanthous, 2007).

One of the most significant contributions on consumers' perception on sustainability communication is provided by Chan and Wong (2012) who argue that product adaptation to market needs regarding eco-fashion triggers positive feelings among consumers but not an increased willingness to pay higher prices associated with such products. Consequently, besides ethically and sustainably producing clothes, luxury retailers must be able to create a thorough communication strategy and deliver what consumers need (Turunen & Halme, 2021). Platania et al. (2019) have analysed the emotional motivation behind eco-luxury products consumption and confirmed once again the importance of how luxury producers communicate their CSR and sustainability activities (Kunz et al., 2020). Their research is extremely beneficial for marketers as it shows that consumers prefer products which carry a certain meaning and symbolism, reflecting their personal values.

Han et al. (2017) conducted extensive research with luxury consumers and fashion designers to directly understand the sustainable communication strategies from industry experts. Key takeaways of the research showed that communication about sustainability issues is successful when straightforward and accessible to various audiences, while complex language and storytelling alienate the audience. Additionally, social media was deemed the most engaging tool for sustainability communication, as opposed to traditional media outlets or printed press coverage, which do not engage with the subject. Finally, consumers prioritize aesthetics, design, and style before communication about sustainability, which brands translated as focusing on quality and functionality before coming up with sustainability issues.

Solomon (2018) has identified several steps in sustainability communication that can help facilitate the consumer decision making process. The first process is the cognitive one, represented by consumers' first interaction with a particular product, evaluating their personal

15

needs and the alternatives, leading to a conscious decision. The second process is habitual, which involves no extra effort from the consumers regarding decision-making, and it can be translated through routines. Finally, the third process is emotional, and it occurs when stimuli trigger emotional reactions among consumers. Generally, clear and coherent sustainability communication triggers the cognitive process among consumers due to their increasing familiarity with the topic and the products (Bangsa & Schlegelmilch, 2020).

Lastly, Isenmann et al. (2011) state that one-way communication no longer fits present-day stakeholders' expectations about companies' statements on the matter. Education and awareness on the topic of sustainability in general are on the increase, which is why standardisation of online and offline messages is seen as outdated and no longer sufficient in showing support for the cause. Instead, stakeholders expect customised and complete information according to their preferences and values (Isenman et al., 2011), which requires stakeholder dialogue and two-way communication on sustainability reporting, thus reinforcing legitimacy and contributing to an overall positive corporate reputation (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

More recently, Bain & Company, Inc. (2016) in collaboration with Farfetch, have studied the future of luxury brands in the age of digitalisation and its potential consequences for the new type of luxury consumer. Research has shown that by 2025, the millennial generation will have reached the peak of their luxury purchase potential, while Gen Z will have different requests and needs to be fulfilled by the luxury brands. The new phenomenon is called "the *millennialization* of society" (Bain, 2016; p.1) and refers to a reverse educational process where younger generations of consumers educate the elders in domains such as digital, tech, or fashion and bring them up to date with latest trends. Besides generational differences, a study from 2021 predicted that Asian market will become the main luxury market by 2025 replacing the USA, while Europe will still be the main luxury provider of luxury goods (Bain, 2021; p.14).

Additionally, the "millennial state of mind" (Bain, 2016; p.1) refers to three growth areas of digitalisation for brands to cater for consumers' needs: uneasiness, urgency, and uniqueness. First, the uneasiness feature refers to increased digital interaction among the luxury community before deciding to make luxury purchases. It has been reported that 70% of luxury purchases are triggered by previous digital interactions with the brand, the product, or other consumers, which leads to double the number of website visits compared to physical store ones. Next, the urgency dimension is represented by younger generations' need to spend less time before buying luxury products. Lastly, the uniqueness dimension is translated

16

through consumers' requiring brands to align their narratives and practices to their personal values in terms of sustainability and future orientation. The report has estimated that physical stores are still the main providers of luxury products, with 75% of purchases being made on site by 2025 (Bain, 2016; p.1).

Gen Z consumers are born in an era of instability, and rapid technological developments focused on improving themselves and the world around them. As they enter the labour market at a time when pandemics, war and the financial crisis have scathed the society, they will challenge the status quo of business practice both from a corporate and a consumer perspective (Bencsik et al., 2016; Cameron & Pagnattaro, 2017). Research on sustainability among millennials and Gen Z has shown an increased awareness of the topic in major fields and sectors such as food production, education, mobility and fashion (Bencsik et al., 2016; Sahin et al., 2012; Toppinen et al., 2013). It is important to mention that a prevalent sustainable behaviour was noticed among Gen Z women rather than men, based on a psychological connection between sustainability and femininity. In contrast, men are perceived to avoid engaging in eco-friendly practices (Brough, 2016).

More recent research on generational differences shows an improvement in millennials' behaviour in terms of awareness of circular economy and sustainability practices. At the same time, Gen Z was born into these pre-existing values. One cross-generational study shows that younger generations' definitions of luxury do not differ much from the previous ones, citing the same luxury features with some differences in their sustainability narratives as mentioned above (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2019).

2.3 Summary & Research Questions

Overall, the fact that academic literature pictures a rather one-sided consumer perspective on the relationship between luxury and sustainability calls for a deeper investigation of a more nuanced understanding of consumer perceptions in the field. Not only is the paradox investigated in more depths to be able to provide a complex understanding of its existence, but also the academic viewpoint of convergence is taken onto the next level. This way, one can assure that profound new knowledge is brought to existing patterns. This research will, in conclusion, make a statement about how the consumer today makes sense of the relationship between the concepts in today's society.

In conclusion, until now a majority of consumers seems to perceive a paradox and there are several theories that can explain why. Still, this raises the question if consumers could adapt different viewpoints in the future, considering that currently many entities are trying to raise awareness for sustainability.

RQ 1: How do Millennial and Gen Z consumers perceive the relevance and importance of sustainability communication in the luxury fashion sector?
RQ 2: How should luxury brands communicate sustainability in order to come across as reputable regarding their sustainability commitments?

3. METHOD

3.1 Qualitative methodology

This research aims to study the sustainability communication practices of luxury brands and their influence on Romanian consumers. Subsequently, the research aims to analyze consumers' perspectives on sustainability communication and their incentives to purchase sustainable luxury products. In order to attain a deep understanding of these topics, a qualitative research approach has been used in this thesis as it provides an in-depth and detailed investigation of the chosen phenomenon (Patton, 2002).

Qualitative research is based on three main concepts when investigating certain phenomena in different contexts: self-reflexivity, context, and thick description, which must be applied both to the researcher and the research process itself so that the results are trustworthy (Bengtsson, 2016). Qualitative methods are appropriate and useful for achieving a variety of research goals that facilitate understanding the world, societal issues, institutions, or cultural phenomena both on their own or in a complementary relationship with other research methods (Tracy, 2019). Additionally, the qualitative methodology is based on concepts and interpretations of participants' viewpoints. Therefore, it can help explain quantitative data, which is mostly based on existing theoretical notions and models to be tested, which means that theoretical knowledge on a specific topic is incomplete. In this case, this study aims to address a gap in research on the topic of luxury fashion sustainability communication and its influence on Romanian consumers.

The researcher's self-reflection capacity is essential for qualitative research (Burnard, 1995). On the one hand, the more engaged in the process, the greater the capability to develop explanations upon participants' contributions and create second-order interpretations (Tracy, 2019). On the other hand, however, the researcher must be aware of their preconceptions on the subject, both during research planning and during analysis, in order to minimize their personal bias toward the results (Elo et al., 2014, Long & Johnson, 2000). The researcher's background may influence the research direction, which is why observation and interpretation are the primary analytical resources prone to the researcher's own subjectivity (Tracy, 2019). Having previous knowledge or familiarity with the research topic or the participants constitutes an advantage as long as it does not influence the participants' opinions and discussions or the interpretation of the results (Bengtsson, 2016).

Next, the context is also a significant aspect concerning the external resources, such as financial and time constraints or participants' availability, as data collection and analysis

19

must be adapted to such factors and the internal factors mentioned above. Finally, increased awareness of the research's personal bias, context, and circumstances can help prevent any misrepresentations that may occur regarding the data (Catanzaro, 1988).

Lastly, the thick description is an extension of context, and it refers to investigating certain circumstances before postulating theories, as the meaning is context dependent.

As opposed to the quantitative research approach, the qualitative one is more suitable in this paper for investigating the proposed research questions in an exploratory manner along with placing them in context, especially on the topic of sustainability in the luxury industry, where limited research has been conducted so far. Additionally, the study has an interpretive character based on participants' understanding and discussions of the concepts of luxury and sustainability to grasp how luxury brands' sustainability communication influences their perspective and purchase behaviour.

Qualitative research is used for exploring new theoretical perspectives, understanding underlying patterns and themes within data and building on existing knowledge developed in the theoretical part (Marti, 2020). Additionally, qualitative research focuses on examining and connecting details to build the empirical and theoretical knowledge to formulate ideas based on culture and context and build larger knowledge chains (Tracy, 2019). In this case, qualitative research is used to uncover intuitive understandings of two major concepts based on consumers' perspectives: values-in-use (Schein, 2004) and the alignment of behaviour to such values. This way, research in context provides insights into what people do at a practical level, rather than researching what they say they do at a declarative level (Tracy, 2019). This thesis focuses on luxury fashion sustainability communication and addresses the Romanian consumer and purchasing behaviour by researching their perspective on the topic, with consumers' perspectives being the primary source of evidence in the research (Jonker & Pennink, 2010).

Qualitative research emphasizes knowledge creation by engaging several parties in the process and exploring specific phenomena and events from the perspective of those involved (Jonker & Pennink, 2010). In this case, the qualitative research shows an inside out view as opposed to the quantitative methodology, which examines phenomena from an outside in angle (Jonker & Pennink, 2010). The present study investigates from inside out Romanian consumers' perspectives on luxury brands' sustainability communication and their influence on purchase behaviour.

3.2 Focus groups with Romanian consumers

For this research, a series of focus groups were conducted. As a research technique, focus groups constitute guided group discussions between research participants as a means to generate data (Kitzinger, 1995) and grasp the details and reasoning behind individuals' beliefs, perceptions and attitudes (Powell & Single, 1996). Focus group discussions are based on engaging participants in the same collective activity, in this case, debating a particular set of concepts (Kitzinger, 1995), in order to explore their perception of luxury fashion sustainability communication. Observation and interpretation of the group dynamics and individual contributions provide data and insights that would not be accessible without group interaction (Morgan, 1990).

This method is particularly useful in consumer research as it allows the researcher to assess how consumers collectively make sense of various subjects through social interaction and experience (Patton, 2015) by pursuing an exchange of ideas that leads to relevant responses and meaningful information (Threlfall, 1999). While the topic of luxury fashion sustainability communication and its influence on Romanian consumers is complex and displays various facets, the existing knowledge is limited. Consequently, additional data collection methods are required to ensure the validity of findings generated through focus groups, as "perspectives are formed and sustained in social groups" (Patton, 2015). As this study aims to analyse the consumer perspective, focus groups allowed the researcher to explore consumers' motivations and beliefs regarding luxury sustainability communication and how it influences their behaviour.

Generally, the group interaction illustrates both similarities and differences between the participants, leading to various opinions and observations concerning the research topic. At the same time, as the scope of the method is to find overarching themes, the group discussions manage to reach common perspectives but from different angles. This way, the participants can deliver honest and critical views on the topic without being pressured by the group dynamics in any way (Powell & Single, 1996) and were encouraged to debate the research topic through a series of open-ended questions, share personal insights, and engage in dialogue without inhibition by or deferential to intra-group differences (Powell & Single, 1996).

3.3 Sample & sampling procedure

Following the methodological guidelines for this thesis, four focus groups of four participants each were conducted between mid-April to mid-May 2022. Each focus group

lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, which constituted enough time given the complexity of the topic and the number of participants in each group. Initially, participants were recruited through the researcher's professional network, and each participant was asked for additional recommendations. Using snowball sampling, 16 participants were recruited and contacted via social media.

The Romanian consumers were recruited from the researcher's personal and extended network using referrals for recruitment so that the researcher was able to keep an objective distance from the participants.

The even number of four focus groups allowed for a comparison of two different categories of consumers among the participants. Two focus groups consisted of millennial consumers living and working in Romania between the ages of 25 to 35 and will be referred to as *focus group 1* and *focus group 3*. The other two focus groups included participants of gen Z who are between 19 to 24 years old, studying or working in the Netherlands and UK, which will be referred to as *focus group 2* and *focus group 4*. The number of focus groups is displayed in the same order in which they were pursued during the two weeks of data collection. A detailed overview of the focus group participants is provided in Appendix 2.

Non-probability sampling was used to recruit participants. The responding target group consisted of millennials and gen Z participants living in Romania and the Netherlands, who are the most relevant category for the purposes of this study. Anonymity was not necessary for the participants of this research, and basic information about them is available in Appendix 2, including information about gender, age, education level, workplace, and place of residence.

Snowball sampling was used as a primary method to recruit participants, where each participant was required to recommend one person who might be interested in participating in the focus group. Snowball sampling was chosen because it allowed reaching a population which otherwise might have been impossible to conduct research on, in this case, Romanian potential luxury consumers, and discover characteristics about a population which are not evident at first sight (Goodman, 1961). The chain-referral method consisted in the initial participants' recommending more potential participants who proved successful; therefore, the target group of 16 participants was reached. Sampling was conducted in a non-random manner, and it cannot lead to empirical generalizations (Patton, 2015) but using snowball sampling allowed for various insights on the research topic, which is another advantage of conducting focus groups (Breen, 2006).

When selecting participants, the following criteria have been considered: demographics (age, gender, profession, location), psychographics (attitude, values) and purchase behaviour (rationale, amount). The financial aspect of the luxury sector is a sensitive issue, and it is implied that luxury consumers have above-average income. However, according to the literature, the luxury sector is subjective itself (De Barnier, Falcy, & Valette-Florence, 2012); therefore, assessing potential luxury consumers' approaches can lead to insightful results.

Despite the limited timeframe and availability of the participants, the discussion guide was expanded and adapted after each focus group, including new dimensions that were not initially anticipated (Brennen, 2017) and demonstrating good use of qualitative research's iterative qualities. The sample of participants is diverse in academic and professional backgrounds, and some of the participants' characteristics are shared with the researcher, such as age, sex, and language (Powell & Single, 1996).

Given the research topic, it was more challenging to get male participants to engage in the discussions than it was for female participants, which leads to a dominant female ratio. In total, the sample consisted of 16 Romanian participants from various academic or professional backgrounds such as Communication, Marketing, Management, or Software Engineering, to name a few. All participants who agreed to participate in the study believed that the research topic was aligned with their belief system and wanted to share their opinions in a formal setting. Despite the sample being fully Romanian, a certain degree of diversity was achieved by including participants from different age groups, education levels and professions which led to a viable sample displaying various perspectives on luxury fashion and sustainability communication.

3.4 Specific procedures

All focus group sessions were conducted by the researcher in English via the Zoom platform, audio and video recorded with participant consent, which makes computer mediated communication an important dimension in data collection. Recordings were needed to facilitate the transcription process and note participants' way of responding in terms of language slips, stuttering, correcting themselves or pausing in speech. The researcher had to listen actively and closely follow the discussion in order to note the most important aspects of participants' interaction and reach the main concepts in discussions.

Conducting focus groups online involved reduced costs and removed constraints associated with time and location as the participants could join from anywhere at the

mutually agreed time that was convenient for them. Additionally, in comparison with the traditional face-to-face focus groups, computer-mediated ones result in an increased quantity of data and exchange of creative ideas among participants (Cooper et al., 1998, Valacich et al., 1994) due to the psychological distance provided by the internet which stimulates group participation by creating a limited self-disclosure and encouraging more hesitant participants to engage in the discussions. Another positive aspect is the interaction among participants, following up on each other's ideas without waiting and taking turns speaking (Valacich et al., 1994), which leads to a larger quantity of data than in a face-to-face setting.

Generally, the data collection process was successful, and no major difficulties were encountered, except for minor technical glitches which did not affect the flow of discussion. The video and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, resulting in a total of 85 pages of 1.5-spaced text.

3.5 Operationalization

Before beginning the focus group discussion, each participant was asked to sign a consent form declaring his or her agreement to participate in the focus group and to be recorded in an audio and visual format for research purposes (Appendix 4). This ensured that participants were aware of the research topic and their rights as research participants. In this form, participants could also indicate if they would not like their identity to be revealed in the research documentation. Each participant gave their consent to be recorded during the discussion among all focus groups.

To accustom all participants to the research topic, all focus groups started with an introduction of the researcher and the study before the group discussion began. Based on the theoretical framework, a discussion guide that covered several areas of interest was formulated: general aspects of luxury and sustainability, millennial and Gen Z consumer perspective on sustainability communication, attitude and behaviour displayed regarding the two concepts. The discussion guide contained open-ended questions, and the order of the questions was from broad to specific after establishing rapport with the participants. In order to discover relevant patterns during the discussions, it was important to find out how consumers understand the concepts of luxury and sustainability and the relationship between the two.

Naturally, the second research aspect was the consumer perspective on sustainability communication of luxury brands to explore sustainability awareness and the communication channels and message. Key takeaways from literature show that communication about

sustainability is successful when open and accessible, mostly transmitted on social media to reach a variety of audiences (Han et al., 2017). The attitude-behaviour gap was examined in order to see if consumers make luxury sustainable purchases or whether their values are not translated into the purchase behaviour (Davies, Lee, & Ahonkai, 2011). Additionally, research has shown a preference for non-mass availability when it comes to luxury products and higher quality which is particularly relevant for further consumer behaviour studies and sustainability communication strategies.

Participants were allowed to interact informally and engage in conversations to get accustomed to the setting and each other before starting the recording and the discussions. This ice-breaking technique is aimed at easing the initial tension and helping participants relax before diving into the formal discussion (Powell & Single, 1996). A focus group discussion guide was used to create a clear structure for the unfolding discussions. The discussion guide included four categories focused on one aspect of the research. The order of the questions was broad to narrow, but following the course of the discussion, they were asked when it was more suitable.

The discussion guide allowed for a certain freedom in terms of new questions coming up during the discussion, which the probing questions might not have covered. The initial questions to measure the concepts were posed in every group in order to facilitate the recurring further analysis and results. The transcription process followed every focus group leading to gathering all data on time.

3.6 Data analysis

This study was focused on potential consumers of luxury fashion who were inquired about their perception of sustainability communication in the luxury sector. Their answers and insights were analysed by looking at the discussion transcripts. The unit of analysis was 60 pages of transcripts. In order to identify patterns and themes, the researcher looked for recurrent words and phrases across discussion and grouped them around three main areas: luxury and sustainability, consumer perspective on sustainability communication, attitude and behaviour towards luxury and sustainable products.

The focus groups discussions were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis following the method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012). The thematic analysis aims to identify, organise, and offer insights into patterns of themes in a dataset to disclose collective or shared meanings and understandings of a specific phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the phenomenon to be researched was luxury sustainability communication

practices of luxury brands and their influence on Romanian consumers, focusing on luxury and sustainability as general concepts, the consumer perspective of sustainability communication, and the attitude-behaviour gap among consumers. Naturally, thematic analysis is accessible and flexible enough to help find meaning across the entire dataset and explore behaviours, attitudes and understanding of the topic by looking at apparent meanings in the data, as well as latent meanings that lie behind what is explicitly stated (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

An inductive approach was used, which means that coding and data analysis are based on what is *in* the data itself (Boyatzis, 1998). Thus, codes and themes derive and unfold from data. The first step was to immerse in the data by reading the transcripts of each focus group and listening to the audio recordings in order to capture everything while looking for similar aspects or recurring concepts. A lot of note-making was done during this process, as certain aspects were overlooked during the initial focus group discussions, and it involved annotating the transcripts and writing comments to be considered in the analysis.

During this stage, the researcher became familiar with the dataset's content in an observational way rather than systematic and inclusive (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second step was to generate the initial codes and start a systematic analysis of the data. At this stage, coding was a mix of descriptive and interpretative and stayed very close to the content of the data based on the participants' surface opinions and latent meanings.

Next, during the third step, the researcher searched for themes as overarching categories based on the initial codes, so the analysis took shape. A theme can be defined as a "patterned response within the dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or minimal information that describes and leads to a maximum interpretation of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998) based on similarity and overlap of broader topics. Therefore, searching for themes is an active process that leads to constructing meaning and themes rather than discovering them literally (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are based on common features which can help describe meaningful patterns in the data, such as recurrent phrases, repetition, or emphasis of one or more concepts among initial codes (Lawless & Chen, 2018). An important aspect of this step was exploring the relationship between themes to ensure they are distinct and stand-alone while providing a meaningful display of data.

Research shows that qualitative research has achieved the desired outcome when the point of saturation is being reached (Saunders et al., 2018). In this case, throughout conducting the focus groups, relevant data has been collected up to the point of saturation, in the sense that participants were reiterating the same concepts. Participants' reaching

repetition has created the opportunity to form patterns and themes during the analysis. At this point, the researcher was particularly observant of the group dynamics and the conforming influence which may occur, also known as the "group effect", in the sense that participants tend to adjust their beliefs according to other opinions or social expectations of the group (Carey, 1994).

4. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section provides the findings of the four focus groups and aims to answer the two research questions regarding the relevance of sustainability communication in the luxury sector according to Millennial and Gen Z consumers, as well as their expectations from luxury brands sustainability communication. Firstly, results show the existence of an attitude behaviour gap which creates a paradox among consumers and refers to an existing awareness and positive attitude towards sustainability in the luxury sector, which is not necessarily translated into purchase behaviour. Next, results show an ambivalent attitude towards luxury and sustainability based on practical considerations regarding the luxury market in the Eastern European space, such as limited accessibility, availability, or affordability. Lastly, it became clear that consumers have clear expectations in terms of sustainability communication from luxury brands which should be aligned with their personal values and based on the potential for future education on the topic.

Firstly, significant evidence was found regarding the two operating concepts – luxury and sustainability – and consumers expressed opposing viewpoints when describing the relationship between them, as either incompatible with no chance to reach a mutual ground or prematurely compatible with potential to become reality (Gardetti & Giron, 2017). There are different ways of understanding the concepts of luxury and sustainability due to their subjective nature. In order to evaluate consumers' understanding of the relationship between the two concepts, it is important to observe how they make sense of the concepts individually, if they display a consensus in opinions or if there are several ways of interpretation. From the discussions, it becomes clear that most participants perceive luxury and sustainability as two opposing concepts due to luxury's nature of profit and conspicuousness, and sustainability's focus on ethical practices and future orientation., making the two incompatible and building on the paradox of luxury fashion sustainability.

During the focus groups, participants showed a positive attitude towards the concept of luxury and most of them associated it with being expensive and exclusive, as well as an investment in a timeless piece. Generally, there was no criticism towards the concept per se, but rather towards the brands where exclusivity is no longer valid; as stated by one participant, "those items cannot possibly bring such a great utility to justify the high price" (P12). A significant number of participants have profiled two types of luxury consumers in Romania based on their luxury purchase behaviour. The first type of consumer was referred

28

to as "fake rich", meaning a consumer of luxury goods who seeks social recognition, not aware of the luxury value or the issue of sustainability. Participants emphasized the show-off aspect on a funny note by stating that Romanian luxury consumers want to seem richer than they are by buying counterfeit or stolen items while "their cars are more expensive than the houses they live in, it's common practice" (P9). The second type of consumer pertains to a smaller group that can afford and acknowledge the value of luxury products and perceive it as an investment in long-lasting quality without the aim to show off through this type of purchase, as explained by one participant: "I guess the person who pays like €800 for a pair of sneakers, could pay €1200. If you afford to pay €800, you can definitely add €400 more because we're talking about luxury now" (P14).

Generally, the majority of participants agreed that luxury purchases are not a necessity, and they try to be critical about it. However, at the same time, they do not deny seeking the pleasure and satisfaction a luxury product would bring. This segmentation of consumers also includes celebrities and influencers as flaunters and, in some cases, representatives of counterfeit culture, which is common practice in Romania and confirms the show-off aspect based on luxury items. Most participants have identified themselves as the latter type acknowledging the value of luxury products as superior in quality and long-term investment in their image, rather than going for trendy pieces which are perceived as popular and have little value in the long term. Additionally, the participants clearly distinguished between luxury and fast fashion based on affordability, accessibility and availability dimensions. They mentioned that luxury items could be acquired mostly through online orders in Romania due to the lack of physical stores, whereas fast fashion is equally accessible offline and online, as described by one participant "[…] Valentino, Louis Vuitton, you order through the shop, so still ordering online […] if I go shop at Zara, I pick the clothes out myself, I need to wait in a queue to pay for that" (P15).

Next, in terms of sustainability, most participants have showed awareness towards the topic, but they do not necessarily adhere to it in their daily purchase behaviour. Most of them have linked sustainability to investing in good quality pieces which would not be disposed of so easily and could be passed down to new generations. However, they have prioritised the financial aspect and argued that higher incomes grant increased sustainable options, as being financially capable of making a sustainable choice would benefit both at a personal and at a collective level, leading to a healthier environment, changed behaviour and better life overall, as mentioned by one participant "the more your income grows, the more sustainability plays

a role in what you buy; if you're living on a very low income, sustainability is probably at the very bottom of your priorities list – be it clothes, food, anything" (P12). Additionally, they have mentioned possible sustainability solutions, focusing on recycling and transparency from both fast fashion and luxury retailers, as well as education at all levels on the topic of sustainability "not only awareness, but education on how each thing you do impacts the environment and in what way […] we've had grandparents living in rural areas […] but younger generations don't know where the milk comes from" (P3). Overall, a homogenous understanding on the topic of sustainability in luxury fashion and in general was displayed by the participants and directions for future improvement in behaviour could be noticed.

Lastly, they have agreed that luxury fashion is not easily accessible on the Romanian market. However, they proceed to invest in a luxury piece when the occasion occurs, which makes them an interesting group to research. Sustainability in luxury fashion is still at an early stage due to the lack of specificity on the Romanian market but the development potential is high especially among Gen Z or Romanians living abroad.

4.1 Ambivalence of consumer perspectives

4.1.1 Affordability

At a theoretical level, the consumer ambivalence manifests as having both positive and negative feelings during the purchase experience (Andrade & Cohen, 2007) based on specific cultural and social contexts of consumption (Edinger-Schons et al., 2018). In the Romanian context, ambivalence is translated through consumers' appreciation for luxury goods while not having the full capability to purchase them due to practical considerations and hence, not really considering the sustainability factor in the process. Given the socio-economic dynamics, consumers' ambivalence stems from the affordability dimension of luxury goods, followed by the accessibility and availability dimensions to a lesser extent.

Ambivalence regarding affordability manifests through different consumer perspectives on luxury purchases based on their financial level at the time, which vary from upper middle class to rich social classes compared to the general standard of living in Romania, which is why they opt for luxury purchases as a form of investment and genuine value recognition of luxury. Throughout the discussions, participants have argued that the financial aspect is prevalent due to the average standard of living which implies moderate living costs and thorough financial planning, which do not include indulging in extravagant

expenses very often. The high price of luxury goods is perceived as an expected outcome of excellent quality (Dubois et al., 2001), enhancing the exclusivity attributes of such products and signalling financial prosperity.

However, despite participants' strong opinions on the topics separately, they expressed ambivalence regarding the relationship between luxury and sustainability based on the affordability dimension. On the one hand, given the high price and exclusive nature of luxury products, they cannot be unsustainable, being produced in limited quantity in non-mass ateliers. On the other hand, participants could not comprehend some luxury brands' practices of destroying unsold items through burning or cutting instead of lowering the prices or redesigning the existing ones in a creative way, thus engaging them in a circular economy and prolonging the product end of life. Another aspect of ambivalence in terms of affordability was explained by a millennial participant living in the UK who argued that his willingness to buy sustainable products depends on the price difference between sustainable and non-sustainable ones. In the case of a reasonable percentage, he would go for a sustainable one, confirming once again the prevalence of the financial factor. The three other participants of the focus group agreed with his hypothesis and added that factors such as social status and the need to show off outweigh the potential of sustainable investment, making sustainability a secondary driver for buying, depending on the demographics.

4.1.2 Accessibility

Existing research describes the concept of luxury as nuanced and subjective, linking it to a high standard of living, expensive products, and brands, based on consumers' perception and psychological and cultural studies (De Barnier et al., 2012). To elaborate on the existing theories, the participants of this research were asked to describe and explain the concept of luxury mainly through the lenses of luxury fashion, but other sectors were also relevant. Generally, the participants deemed luxury products as having a better quality, being well produced and long-lasting, thus manifesting a preference towards them. The implications of the accessibility dimension in the luxury and sustainability context can be explained through consumers' efforts to make luxury purchases based on the assumption that luxury is accessible to a fortunate few (Joy et al., 2012), especially in challenging markets like the Romanian one.

In this regard, the accessibility dimension turned out to be a contributing factor to the ambivalent attitude of consumers to a lesser extent than affordability, since scarcity and

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increased desirability are core features of luxury products, as shown by literature and confirmed by this research. The luxury market in Romania is mainly limited to Bucharest, creating geographical limitations in terms of accessibility. Even then, additional effort is required in order to make luxury purchases, which enhances the exclusivity dimension of luxury, as explained by two participants from different parts of Romania, North-Eastern and the capital city "[…] in Iasi there is no luxury store. Suppose you want to buy something you need to either go to Bucharest or get it when travelling abroad. So, physically not really" (P14) and "the Gucci store in Bucharest is now closed, it's not even there anymore" (P15). However, participants displayed an increased knowledge of online retailers such as Farfetch or Luisa Via Roma, which deliver original luxury products to Romania and have an established fanbase among luxury consumers, despite the additional costs they require, as explained by participant 8: "So if you can afford the price and the delivery taxes, you can buy almost anything you want in terms of luxury".

Luxury distribution involves making goods available to relevant consumers and making scarcity a core success factor for luxury brands (Brun & Castelli, 2013). Based on the perceived scarcity, sensitive consumers started to consider the sustainability factor before making luxury purchases as an extension of their personal values and behaviour. Acquiring luxury products often requires emotional and financial efforts, which increase their value and confirm the long-term investment nature of such products, selective distribution, high prices, and preservation of brand desirability (Dubois & Paternault, 1995), as confirmed by participant 16: "I think people just want to support the brand and be part of the brand. For luxury items, it's about the whole brand, they like it and need to have it".

However, the limited accessibility turned out not to be a reason strong enough for Millennial and Gen Z participants to purchase luxury items. Both Millennials and Gen Z look for ways to limit the usage of natural resources and demonstrate an increased awareness of the individual and collective impact, which goes beyond the environmental aspect of sustainability. The discussions revealed that luxury's limited accessibility is justified if it derives from a harmonious coexistence of nature and humans and fulfils societal needs rather than individual ones, emphasizing the community aspect and encapsulating the overall wellbeing of ecological, financial and political dimensions both globally and locally (Joy et al., 2012).

4.1.3 Availability

Lastly, from the discussions, it seems clear that availability is closely linked to affordability and accessibility and is challenging for luxury purchases. Four respondents have mentioned relying on three luxury fashion websites for online orders in Romania, Farfetch, Luisa Via Roma and MyTheresa, due to the legitimacy and availability of the products. The same respondents emphasized that physical stores in Romania are part of big hotel galleries and have limited products on offer, usually from previous collections, as explained by participants who visit the stores regularly "[…] even if they are available in Bucharest, they're very hard to get" (P15) and "[…] even if you want something, you still have to order in the shop. So not very helpful" (P13). However, one participant significantly added that sustainability depends on products' availability to some extent, based on the fact that people would choose more sustainable products if they were readily available and did not require due diligence on the product or the brand, pre-ordering and long waiting time, as they would feel encouraged by the variety of existing offers.

4.2 Attitude behaviour gap in luxury purchase behaviour

Consumers' perception of the relationship between luxury and sustainability is based on previous assumptions and knowledge of fast fashion practices and the tendency to extrapolate them to the luxury sector. Millennial participants justified the attitude behaviour gap through the financial aspect and consumers' education on the topic. Gen Z participants did not display a major concern regarding the financial aspect, but rather towards the ethical one in terms of sustainable practices embraced by brands, if they act on it or engage in greenwashing. They showed a great interest in the fast fashion retailer Zara regardless of the occasion, arguing that they produce the most successful dupes of luxury designs but at lower quality and prices. Despite being aware of these aspects, they often opt for buying Zara products without investing too much thought into it beforehand. As one participant put it: "Of course, I'm also buying from fast fashion, because that's life, sometimes you just need that cheap Zara T shirt" (P16).

The attitude behaviour gap can also be explained with reference to the paradox described in the theoretical framework and the dimensions of ambivalence of consumers' attitude explained in the previous section. Half of the participants do not consider the sustainability factor in their decision-making process of buying luxury products, although they do not necessarily see the concepts as mutually exclusive, just less important than the

design for instance. As one participant put it: "I don't think they would fit my style, so I would go back to items which are more popular. I mostly look at what I like and not if they're sustainable" (P13).

Additionally, they also argued that the attitude-behaviour gap occurs due to financial constraints when individuals consume what they can afford and not necessarily what they believe in or what they would like to consume in terms of ethics and sustainability. Participants living in the UK and Netherlands evaluated the luxury market back home, as they knew it, through the lenses of the financial capacities of consumers and concluded that the financial aspect prevails, as follows:

[…] If you're living on a very low income, sustainability is probably at the very bottom of your priorities list. However, when you actually afford to make a choice between two products, you're probably going to pick the one that's a bit more pricey but more sustainable. (P12)

Another aspect of the ambivalence mentioned above that contributes to the attitude behaviour gap is the misalignment of values derived from the segmentation of consumers, those who do it to show off and those who understand the value of luxury goods. What is interesting to point out here is that the show-off category is perceived as having bad taste. Participants living in the Netherlands were highly critical of this type of behaviour, describing it as a cultural trait for Balkan cultures who perceive the high price as a prestige and status indicator (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). As one participant put it:

[…] the category of people that can't afford it and they just want to show off and loan from the bank. They can't afford it, but they still buy it. It's really strange that this is the pattern that comes to my mind when I think about Romanian consumers. (P10)

Finally, participants approached attitude behaviour gap both from the consumer and the corporate perspectives and concluded that sustainability practices are easier to impose onto fast fashion brands that are known for mass producing and using child labour in third world countries, as clearly stated by Millennial participants who analysed it in a triple bottom line and concluded that "luxury fashion has the margins not to be as impactful on the environment and everything, whereas fast fashion simply does not" (P12).

34

4.3 Needs vs Wants among Millennials and Gen Z

Derived from the attitude-behaviour gap, the aspect of needs vs wants also occurred throughout the discussions, as many participants embraced the perspective of consumers whose needs and wants must be satisfied (Daly & Walsh, 2010) by being able to access the right product at the right price (Kotler & Levy, 1973).

Millennials described the needs as something that is missing at a certain point that requires urgent replacement, disregarding the price or the environmental impact. As explained by two of the participants, they assess their needs in terms of functionality and necessity regarding different situations, in which cases the financial aspect prevails. However, sustainability does not surface as the main driver for buying and rather as a consequence of the financial capabilities: "If I have a pair of long, functional jeans, skinny jeans, I don't need another one unless they break. I am quite strict with that" (P10).

Contrastingly, the wants have a more subjective value and are assessed through more self-reflection. In this case, they described luxury purchases as proof of self-fulfilment without necessarily linking it to the types of luxury consumers they have previously mentioned. While the needs require immediate action, the wants are based on human vanity and societal influence in terms of purchasing goods that would potentially harm the environment, as explained by participant 12:

[…] it's not good to change your phone every two years. However, if you afford to, you'll most likely do it just because, you know, the new one is shinier, and has whatever new feature that you've heard about from your friends. And you want to try it. (P12)

Participants six and seven described a positive correlation between the needs and the wants based on intrinsic values. They were generally more lenient towards luxury purchases by explaining that "[…] Some people just like good products and have money to buy them, there's nothing to judge. They want to have nicer, finer things to make themselves feel better. It's also related to their self-image and if it suits them" (P6).

However, despite advocating for luxury purchases, they argued that luxury consumers might not be the right target group to reach to market or advertise sustainability based on a lack of awareness or interest in the topic. Similarly, most Millennial participants were highly critical of Gen Z's culture of buying expensive sneakers, which is a weird practice they would not engage in and do not consider as a long-term investment, but as a means to satisfy

35

immediate wants and adhere to a certain cultural group, Participant three emphasizes this practice by stating:

Younger generations tend to invest a lot in sports shoes, which I don't understand. There are lot of methods to check the authenticity of these products, similar to checking money. That's not luxury from my point of view, it's just to fit in. (P3)

For Gen Z, there is a fine line between wants and needs regarding their purchase behaviour. On the one hand, the financial aspect is not a core value for them, and they would rather go for meaningful purchases in terms of time and energy saving or comfort. On the other hand, they face increased social pressure in terms of luxury purchases due to social media exposure, which makes them disregard the sustainability factor and go for hyped pieces to fit in certain groups. For example, participants compared asking for an iPod as a gift a few years ago and asking for Versace shoes now, pressuring themselves and their parents to keep up with the last trends.

However, they displayed an increased knowledge on sustainability, regardless of their income, and based on ethical values. They had a similar approach to millennials regarding the income and likelihood of purchasing sustainable products as it increases; however, the willingness to pay is still low, according to one of the participants: "Definitely for us as Gen Z, sustainability plays an important role. 65% of consumers or a similar percentage actually consider sustainability when they purchase things" (P10). They clearly distinguish between profit-oriented and sustainability-oriented brands and argue that a paradigm change has taken place, as the minority that used to look for sustainability and go for vegan practices slowly starts to become a majority, hence a new type of consumer. Therefore, luxury brands should acknowledge the change in consumer base according to how they choose to deal with sustainability practices and even develop a new business strategy adapted to the new requirements.

From the discussions, it seems clear that millennials and Gen Z display both similar and different opinions on the topic of luxury fashion sustainability. As previously mentioned, millennials have placed the financial aspect at the core of their purchase behaviour due to having experienced both peaceful and tormented times, which left them in political and financial uncertainty. Contrastingly, Gen Z was born in an ever-changing, highly technologized world, facing various forms of distress from the beginning, which made them highly aware of their individual and collective contribution to the state of the world. As a

result, the two generations have different approaches to what they need versus what they want in terms of sustainable purchases.

Participant ten elaborates and deepens the matter by mentioning that luxury purchases should indeed be approached as long-term investments, translated as being passed down the generations or resold for a higher value, such as Rolex watches or Birkin bags. Other Millennial participants echoed her thoughts and agreed that luxury industry could be assessed by looking at the end life of a product, as its lifecycle could validate the sustainable investment feature or not.

Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of materials for producing luxury items based on the commercial aspect and referred to sustainable luxury materials as "the best quality they can produce in terms of ecological materials while banning the exotic leather and the natural fur" (P1). However, other participants argued that sustainable alternatives for materials would contradict the core nature of luxury products and dilute the original exclusivity features, despite the high quality, durability and increasing value of the items, as highlighted by participant 14 who expects to get the most quality out of their money's worth:

I'm paying a certain price but I'm getting a better quality. If I compare a bag from Gucci to random bag from Zara […] Fake leather will never compare to real leather. And you can't have a fake leather bag that in 10 years from now will be more expensive than now. (P14)

4.4 Exclusivity of sustainable products – communication from brands

1. 4.4.1 Transparency

Research on brands' communication approaches of the last decade shows that taking a stance on sustainability issues brings legitimacy to the market and alignment between consumers' personal and corporate values (Beard, 2008). Therefore, in order to fulfil the new market requirements and settle the sustainability expectations, brands are increasing their efforts to integrate and communicate pro-environmental and ethical practices through the brand narrative and brand identity. Throughout the focus groups, it became clear that consumers who are aware of sustainability issues are more likely to require transparent communication on the topic and shift their focus towards luxury brands that include the triple bottom line principle in their business practice. Although not fully confirmed by research, lack of disclosure on sustainability concerns may likely contribute to the attitude-behavior

gap explained above and constitute an additional confirmation of the incongruence between environmentally friendly attitudes and actual behavior (Agyeman & Kollmuss, 2002; Verbeke & Vermeir, 2006).

The luxury sector can use sustainability as leverage when developing effective communication strategies and campaigns to deliver them in an impactful way. For instance, both Millennials and Gen Z participants appreciate the clear and straightforward communication of sustainability reports and statistics from consulting groups and perceive them as credible and reliable, which would not require further due diligence from them. However, due to the nature of these reports, they are not readily available and can easily become overly technical even for educated consumers, which would discourage them from seeking sustainability data.

Consequently, consumers expect communication across social media platforms as a middle ground solution, enabling them to observe the sustainability practices of luxury brands closely and engage in two-way communication (Kahle & Valette-Florence, 2014). This way, brands would demonstrate transparency regarding sustainability and reduce the gap between consumers and corporate levels by delivering relevant information to prevent lack of interest, insufficient knowledge and skepticism around genuinely sustainable behavior (Kong et al., 2021) and avoid greenwashing.

During the discussions, participants mentioned transparency as a core value in sustainability communication expected from both fast fashion and the luxury sector. Although at first, they seemed lenient about transparency efforts and could tolerate prefabricated considerations on sustainability at face value. However, as more challenges were coming up during the discussions, they reconsidered their position and strongly advocated for full disclosure, as highlighted by one of the participants "five years ago there was barely any disclosure in fashion industry and now we're talking about transparency up to the farm level - raw materials, production, suppliers" (P9).

The topic of transparency has led to a new direction of the discussion among participants who brought up Stella McCartney as one of the pioneering, fully sustainable luxury brands (Athwal et al., 2019). They highlighted that the pro-environmental feature constituted the primary success factor of her brand, along with proposing the vegan ethos for all luxury brands. In addition, factors such as commitment to a completely cruelty-free production, usage of recycled materials, ethically sourced wool, and investing in organic

38

cotton have kept her relevant and respected for a long time (Paton & Friedman, 2019).

As one participant voiced, "Stella is a believer because she started this thing before being a trend or being pressured by social standards" (P14). Furthermore, participants were highly knowledgeable of her business acumen as they had followed her for a long time. They mentioned that she published the first environmental profit and loss (EPL) as a joint venture with Kering back in 2013 in order to disclose and measure every aspect of the business, from the environmental dimension to the monetary value, during a time when sustainability movement was starting to expand across all industries.

However, as sustainability is becoming a global movement, Stella McCartney's success is fading, which creates an interesting paradox in the luxury sector, as put forward by one of the participants who assessed the situation as counterintuitive by stating that "she's been sustainable for so long and since people are becoming more and more aware, you'd expect her sales to burst, not blend in the background" (P15). This paradox is reflected by Stella McCartney as an industry representative because, despite her investment in sustainable production and long-term advocacy, her efforts have rarely been financially rewarded in terms of sales, and she has even experienced significant profit losses in the last five years (Shearsmith, 2021). Consequently, as there is no immediate financial gain or benefit from being sustainable other than the moral one, luxury brands display little to no incentive to invest in sustainability practices and communicate about them, as long as the sales and profit are satisfactory.

4.4.2 Greenwashing

Greenwashing is another challenging dimension in sustainability communication which can occur due to luxury brands' lack of transparency in communication discussed above and lack of tangible information (Vehmas et al., 2018). Most Gen Z participants were vocal on the greenwashing issue, demonstrating an increased knowledge and awareness of the topic. They could sense and describe when sustainability is done for PR reasons, resulting in greenwashing, and when it is part of the brand values; as explained by one participant, "brands don't want to be sustainable, they just show they can be, and force sustainability because it's a trend" (P13). As the sustainability narrative has reached its peak in the last decade, there is a fine line between showing genuine support for sustainability causes and following a marketing strategy in the global context by targeting consumers based on their values. As one participant put it, "especially considering how well marketed sustainability is,

I have my doubts. I think they are doing it with the intention to sell even though they're not truly sincere about it" (P11).

Consequently, credibility becomes a core value of luxury brands which needs to be promoted to consumers; otherwise, consumers would not perceive the alignment between luxury values and sustainability principles as genuine, enhancing their superficial and ambivalent outlook on the industry. Additionally, the credibility level determines the damage control needed in greenwashing backlash and minimizes the potential effects on the corporate reputation to avoid a cancel culture. Results of the focus groups are in line with the theory regarding credibility and greenwashing and confirm that luxury brands should start focusing on implementing sustainable business practices across the entire supply chain and business operations. Hence, participants expect to see the entire production process, from the raw material to the final product, displayed in creative ways and how their purchases influence or contribute to the brand's sustainability goals. Accountability and transparency would ultimately make consumers perceive the entire purchase experience as personal and meaningful, which would provide them with a sense of control and awareness over the entire production process, not just the purchase decision, as they could observe all stakeholders involved in the process and make conscious choices.

4.4.3 Other ethical considerations

Another important aspect for several participants was related to ethical issues perceived as more challenging than sustainability for luxury brands, such as sexual allegations, legal issues, racism, or child labour in third world countries. Participants were highly critical and vigilant about such practices and declared that sustainability communication is not the main issue to be addressed by brands in such cases. From their consumer perspective, they would personally take action against them, both offline and online, and join boycott initiatives or punish brands by no longer purchasing from them. One participant explained that Dolce & Gabbana scandal in China triggered her awareness of ethical issues, which was put into practice when she decided to punish Alexander Wang due to allegations of sexual misconduct, in which case she made a clear distinction between sustainability and ethics, as follows,

[…] I care a bit more about ethical issues rather than sustainability. When I stopped purchasing Alexander Wang, that shifted a bit in my mind, as someone who consumes a lot of social media, you get caught up by the whole cancel culture that's going on. (P15)

Next, Millennial participants vehemently despise child labour among fast fashion retailers and assume that luxury brands do not produce in these circumstances, provide ethical working conditions and abide by the local legislation. However, due to transparency requirements on sustainable practices, improved production standards are also expected. Lastly, as participants explained it, the price of luxury should cover the sustainable production costs and the use of high-quality materials which ultimately would lead to genuinely sustainable behaviour, positive corporate reputation and increased sales.

4.5 Summary

While this study focused on the Romanian consumer perspective on sustainability communication in the luxury fashion sector, participants explored and brought up several dimensions related to sustainability in some way or form, mainly compared to the fast fashion sector, which appeared as more accessible to them. This aspect revealed that they do not always perceive luxury and sustainability as connected, as explained by the ambivalent attitude where the affordability dimension prevails and contributes to the attitude-behaviour gap (RQ1). These different facets of the relationship between luxury and sustainability show that consumers appreciate long-term investments in quality and expect brands to be transparent and engage in sustainability issues so that they can assess whether they are committed to their promises and honouring their requests (RQ2).

5.CONCLUSION

5.1 Theoretical & Practical Implications

      In the last decade, research has established that the luxury industry needs to communicate more extensively on sustainability issues and prioritise the societal dimension to the same extent as the financial one (Kapferer, 2010; Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014). The luxury sector's increased involvement in societal issues can be extensively beneficial for the business practice, supporting the business case for sustainability in the luxury sector. Given the world's environmental, financial, and political state, sustainability practices across industries should not be overlooked. Existing research has focused on both corporate and consumer sides, analysing how luxury brands bridge the gap between luxury and sustainability and how consumers perceive luxury brand sustainability communication. The main goal of this research paper was to explore Millennial and Gen Z Romanian consumers' perception of the importance of sustainability communication in the luxury sector and how brands should address it in order to be perceived as credible in their sustainability endeavours. Little research has been done on the consumer perspective for luxury purchases in Romania. This study has allowed for that to happen by focusing on consumers' understanding of luxury and sustainability, addressing the existing attitude-behaviour gap and paradox and examining the potential ethical issues across the industry.

      This study confirms previous research conducted by Han et al. (2017) and adds more nuance to sustainability communication as researched by industry experts. In Romania's case, research shows that lack of awareness of luxury and sustainability stems from practical constraints such as low affordability, accessibility and availability of products due to a low financial level, and not due to intentional ignorance. Furthermore, although clear and coherent sustainability communication triggers cognitive processes among consumers, this study shows that brands' sustainability communication does not influence the consumer purchase decision to the same extent human mediated one does. For instance, public figures who start endorsing sustainability causes by taking a stance on them are perceived as more credible and familiar than brands' official statements or sustainability reports, which translates as successful communication.

      Another relevant aspect refers to the relationship between quality and sustainability features of luxury products based on their financial value. By comparing brands from various categories, such as Zara, Coach and Gucci, the key takeaway was that in order to increase the credibility level, brands should first deliver the quality, functionality, aesthetics and design

expected and requested by consumers and then emphasize it in their communication strategies. This way, brands can showcase how sustainable luxury products constitute a long-term investment, as previous non-sustainable ones have also had. Luxury consumption depends on both the cultural and financial awareness, especially in developing countries such as Romania, where luxury consumers must overcome challenges before making the actual purchase. Consequently, the value of such purchases increases in a direct proportion to the effort made to get such products, which enhances consumers' social value and facilitates their membership to certain social groups (Bacila et al., 2012).

Lastly, in the digital age, brands are more susceptible to cancel culture and greenwashing due to the fine line between genuine support and marketing endeavours facilitated by social media platforms; therefore, engaging in sustainability communication the right way might increase the brand desirability due to extensive online accessibility or might lead to punishment for false statements through cancel culture. Social media creates a favourable space for consumer interaction, building brand-consumer relationships and facilitating consumer decision-making (Kim & Ko, 2010). By being active on social media, luxury brands establish rapport with consumers, engage in conversation to create brand equity and increase brand loyalty.

5.2 Limitations

Throughout the process of conducting this study, certain decisions were made to achieve trustworthy results. However, this aspect also led to several limitations that must be mentioned when evaluating the results of this research. Firstly, the data sample consisted of 4 focus groups with a total of 16 participants with a predominance of female participants, creating a gender imbalance from the start. Given the gender of the researcher, it was natural for female participants to be more approachable and more inclined to participate in the research. An additional sample consisting of 4 male participants for one more group would have balanced the results and offered a more nuanced perspective on the research topic, although saturation was reached.

Secondly, the sessions were conducted online via Zoom due to practical considerations regarding time and expense, given the researcher's and the participants' different time zones. The web-based nature of the research provided a prolific space and time for group interaction; however, the interactive nature included individuals dominating the discussion, tendencies to comply with the normative group discourse as well as conflicting opinions among the participants (Smithson, 2000).

43

Lastly, the sample consisted of highly educated and working individuals pertaining to elevated social groups and displaying similar lifestyles, despite displaying contrasting opinions on the research topic. None of the participants was a public figure in the classical sense or engaged in the political scene in any way, shape, or form.

Although the recruitment process was not challenging per se, trying to schedule the sessions at a mutually convenient time was difficult in order to ensure that all participants were available for each discussion. As previously mentioned, the sessions were conducted with participants studying and working in Romania and abroad, which provided diverse backgrounds and perspectives on the research topic.

5.3 Directions for future research

Sustainability in the luxury sector is on the road to convergence, and there is increased potential for future research. Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions can be made in order to approach sustainability in the luxury sector in a more productive way. As this research analysed the topic through a limited number of participants, the current study can constitute the foundation for a survey on consumer behaviour, engaging a large number of participants and obtaining a variety of opinions and insights which would provide more nuance to existing angles and analyse the recurrency of topics or innovate in creative ways. Here it would also be interesting to observe the sustainability approach towards fast fashion retailers and then compare the results with the luxury ones in terms of transparency and credibility, for instance.

Secondly, this research was based on Romanian consumers with similar education and socioeconomic levels, showing homogenous views and understanding of luxury and sustainability. An interesting direction to pursue would be a cross-cultural study between the Eastern European Western luxury markets and observing how different understandings of luxury values influence the consumer behaviour and purchase decision of luxury products.

Lastly, in terms of luxury and sustainability, Romania is not a big luxury market yet, but existing consumers replicate the expectations of transparency as seen in international markets. Therefore, this direction would contribute immensely to birding the gap between practical constraints of affordability, accessibility and availability of luxury products and add more nuance to brands' alignment at an international level. This way, the luxury sector would become more approachable and even attract a new consumer base.

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Appendix 1 Moderator Guide

Introduction

Welcome

Hello everyone, I am Ana Maria Zamfir. I'm a student in Media & Business at Erasmus University Rotterdam

and I am the moderator of our discussion today. Thank you all for agreeing to take part in this focus group. I appreciate your willingness to participate.

Background

As part of my master thesis, I am conducting this focus group to explore Romanian luxury consumers' perspective on luxury fashion brands and their sustainability communication strategies. I need your input and I would like you to share your honest and open thoughts with me so that I can gather relevant data that helps me with my research.

Guidelines

I have a few guidelines and rules to facilitate our discussion:

1. I want you to do the talking. I would like everyone to participate. I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.

2. There are no right or wrong answers. Every person's experience and opinion are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree. I expect and want to hear a wide range of opinions.

3. I want to emphasize that what is said in this discussion will remain here and it will be used for research purposes only. You should be comfortable to share anything if sensitive issues come up. Please don't interrupt another participant's remarks and let's have just one speaker at a time.

4. The discussion will last for about one hour. Please silence your mobile phones.

Please give everyone the chance to express his/her opinion during the conversation. You can address each other if you like.

5. Before we start, I would like to ask for your consent orally. I will also provide you with a digital one for you to sign.

6. This session will be recorded for research purposes, as I want to capture everything you have to say. Are there any questions?

Ok, let's get started!

Opening

I would like to start by asking each of you to briefly introduce yourselves by your name, age, hobbies, or any other relevant information. Who would like to start?

Body

Thank you everyone. Let's dive into our topic of today. As I said, we will operate with two major concepts, luxury fashion and sustainability. Therefore, this will be the logical order of discussion but feel free to address related topics.

Luxury and Sustainability Communication

RQ 1: What do Romanian consumers consider credible in terms of sustainability communications of luxury fashion brands?

Luxury

What comes first to your mind when thinking about luxury in general?

What do you think about the luxury fashion products available in Romania?

How would you describe the luxury fashion consumers in Romania?

Let's do a bit of consumer profiling.

What are the factors that influence your purchase intention of luxury products?

What would be considered an investment in luxury products?

      Why is that?

How would you asses the value of a product in time? Increases in time or decreases or stays the same?

      Can you give an example?

Sustainability

When you think of sustainability what are the first associations that come to mind?

      What does sustainability mean to you?

Which are the sectors you think about the first when you think about sustainability?

Do you make sustainably conscious purchases?

      Can you share an example?

Do you consider the sustainability factor when deciding to buy a product?

      In what ways, can you explain?

What other factors influence your purchase intention of sustainable products? (If any)

What do you think about the impact of buying a sustainable product?

How would you describe the relationship between luxury fashion and sustainability? (If any)

      Could you share an example?

What are the factors that contribute to your opinion on the relationship between luxury fashion and sustainability?

Are these opposing concepts? Are they mutually exclusive? Can they co-exist? Do they represent clashing values?

Do you think sustainability awareness has an impact on luxury fashion industry?

      Why? Why not? In what ways?

How would you assess their communication in terms of believability?

Would it convince you to change something in your behavior?

      What? In what ways?

Do you think that luxury brands make an effort towards sustainability?

      If so, in what ways?

What are your expectations in terms of behavior that luxury retailers should adopt in the future?

Would you reward or punish a brand for this type of behavior?

      If so, in what ways?

Consumer perspective on luxury brands sustainability communication

RQ 2 How is the consumer perspective influenced by the luxury & sustainability communication?

Have you seen/come across sustainability campaigns, statement releases or ads made by luxury fashion brands?

    Which ones?

    What was their key message?

    Where did you see it? What channels of comm did they use most?

Who should make a bigger effort – the consumer of the brand?

How would you describe a sustainable luxury product?

Do you think the way sustainability is communicated influences your purchase decision?

    If yes, could you elaborate in what ways?

Would you actively seek out such communication if you were to purchase a luxury product?

    Why/why not?

What are your thoughts on paying a higher price for a sustainable product over a non-sustainable one? What are the margins?

    Could you please explain or give an example?

Conclusion

We're reaching the end of our discussion today. It was a very productive session and I'm glad that everyone contributed with valuable insights on the topic of luxury and sustainability.

Is there anything else that anyone would like to add to our discussion regarding luxury, sustainability, or anything else?

Thank you once again for taking part in this focus group. I hope it was a pleasant experience for you as it was for me. I want to emphasize once again that everything that has been discussed here will be used for research purposes only. Please feel free to email me with any questions you may have about today's session. Thank you again and see you soon!

Appendix 2 Participant list

Focus group 1 – Millennials

Participant	Gender	Age	Education level	Occupation	Place of residence
P1	F	24	Master's degree	Accountant	Romania
P2	F	27	Bachelor's degree	Accountant	Romania
P3	F	34	PhD	Professor	Romania
P4	F	25	Master's degree	Accountant	Romania

Focus group 2 – Gen Z

Participant	Gender	Age	Education level	Occupation	Place of residence
P5	F	23	Master's degree	Student	Netherlands
P6	F	25	Master's degree	Web Dev	Romania
P7	F	27	Master's degree	Architect	Romania
P8	F	22	Bachelor's degree	Student	Romania

Focus group 3 – Millennials

Participant	Gender	Age	Education level	Occupation	Place of residence
P9	F	23	Master's degree	Student	Netherlands
P10	F	25	Bachelor's degree	Marketing	Netherlands
P11	F	19	Bachelor's degree	Student	Netherlands
P12	M	27	Master's degree	Web Dev	UK

Focus group 4 – Gen Z

Participant	Gender	Age	Education level	Occupation	Place of residence
P13	F	23	Bachelor's degree	Student	Netherlands
P14	F	23	Master's degree	Student	Netherlands
P15	F	19	Bachelor's degree	Student	Netherlands
P16	F	24	Master's degree	Team Lead	Romania

Appendix 3 Thematic coding frame

Themes	Subcategories	Illustrative quote from the data
Sustainability dimensions	Sustainability dimensions in fast fashion	Fast fashion is consumed by loads of people and it's consumed in much higher volumes than luxury fashion Working in factories, the relationship with suppliers, lack of transparency are problems that are common in fast fashion
	Sustainability dimensions in luxury fashion	I mean starting from sneakers ending with like luxury bags, Birkins, whatever. They tend to go up in price. Sustainability definitely plays a factor for consumers our age, but it's interesting to look at the demographics
Ambivalence of consumers	Attitude behavior gap	I don't think necessarily for people who afford luxury fashion, sustainability is a driver for buying… the other drivers outweigh, like status, need to show off, a need to self-prove
	Segmentation of consumers	In my opinion, there's two categories of people. There are the ones who can actually afford it and they're doing it for whatever feeling of uniqueness those clothes give them. And there's people who don't actually afford it but still want to use power projection so they can be part of the first group
Generational differences	Millennial consumers	I think this should be emphasized to the younger generation because the majority of them put their money aside to get like a luxury fashion item
	Gen Z consumers	Definitely for us, as Gen Z, sustainability plays an important role, like at least for 65% of consumers consider sustainability when they purchase things.
Ethical issues in luxury fashion sustainability	Greenwashing	We can blame H&M and go on about their practices for ages, but actually the big investors are H&M, C&A. C&A is the biggest global buyer for organic cotton.
	Transparency	I feel like if you get an incentive and see more corporate social responsibility in action and transparency as a consumer, you will, also feel like "oh, if big brands are doing this, then this motivates me to also contribute and spend more on something sustainable", you know…you kind of diminish the larger problem, like deforestation, oil dumping and all that
	Labor	If I know for a fact that a brand uses child labor in Asia, I'm probably less inclined to buy from them even though the price is lower because child labor is not sustainable at the end of the day or ethically correct

Appendix 4 Participant Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:
Ana-Maria Zamfir, 623639az@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION
You are invited to participate in research about luxury fashion and sustainability communication. The purpose of the study is to understand the consumer perspective on luxury fashion sustainability communication in Romania.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be part of a focus group.
In general terms, my questions will be related to fashion, sustainability, environment and purchase behaviour.
Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio and video recording of the focus group.

I will use the material from the participants and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

A. As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to as participants, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender or location.

You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT Your participation in this study will take approximately 60-90 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study.

Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— dr Vidhi V Chaudhri, Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam, chaudhri@eshcc.eur.nl.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you DO NOT NEED to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name

Signature

Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study

Name

Signature

Date

This copy of the consent form is for you to keep.