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Sustainability Claims in the Luxury Beauty Industry: An Exploratory Study of Consumers' Perceptions and Behaviour

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9.1 Introduction

Luxury has been known to signify status and power and is considered a means for social transformation (Berry, 1994; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019). The luxury industry experienced a 13% decline in 2020 but a strong rebound is anticipated in post-2021 (Mintel, 2021a). The beauty sector suffered in the first stage of the lockdown and consumers preferred skincare essentials to discretionary beauty, and although in 2021, the *lipstick effect* buoyed spending, prestige sectors may take longer to recover (Mintel, 2021b). During the pandemic, 51% of consumers purchased a beauty product to boost their mood, whereas 42% considered price and value for money as decisive purchase criteria (Mintel, 2021b). The UK has seen a decline in luxury consumption due

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to both the effect of Brexit and the pandemic making it an important market for further research (Mintel, 2021a).

The importance of sustainable development has been well established and companies have been addressing key environmental and social-economic issues and reassessing their values. In addition, consumers are showing growing concerns over social and environmental problems, pollution and their health. This has motivated businesses to communicate their commitment towards sustainability as a means of elevating consumer preference towards their products, which has resulted in overwhelming numbers and types of sustainability claims leading to consumer confusion (Heroux et al., 1988; Alevizou et al., 2015). An increasing number of independent brands, referred to as *industry disrupters*, have come forward with claims such as 'health benefits', 'clean beauty' or 'natural ingredients', causing confusion in the market in terms of the meaning and the 'true cost of clean beauty' (Alevizou, 2021).

However, the luxury beauty sector has been slower to respond compared to the rest of the beauty industry. This may be due to luxury and sustainability having conflicting values, which implies a weak association between the two concepts (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013; Bom et al., 2019; Athwal et al., 2019). In other words, luxury consumption signals, social status, a focus on aesthetics, hedonism and emotional values (see Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), whereas sustainability encapsulates altruism and a focus on the wider well-being (United Nations, 2021).

In order to address the market confusion, and the wide variety of claims, industry associations, governments and policy makers are working towards establishing clear guidelines for the avoidance of green/clean washing claims. On a regional level, in 2020, Cosmetics Europe revised its guide *Charter and Guiding Principles for Responsible Advertising and Marketing Communications* to better reflect the current challenges and assist consumers in making sustainable choices (Cosmetics Europe, 2020). On a national level, many governments are supporting businesses and consumers. In the UK, for instance, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) provides guidance for businesses to understand and comply with the existing obligations under consumer protection law when making environmental claims (CMA, 2021). Accordingly, claims

should be truthful and accurate; clear and unambiguous; must not omit important information; comparisons need to be fair, meaningful and consider the full life cycle and finally they should be substantiated. This guidance is in agreement with the ISO 14001 standards when making environmental claims, as well as, other guides dating back to the 1980s and with current international voluntary principles such as the ISEAL (https://www.isealalliance.org/).

Yet, most studies on luxury consumption have focused on apparel and fashion with little attention paid to the beauty industry despite the growing number and variety of sustainability claims (Sharma et al., 2022). This chapter fills this gap by focusing on the luxury beauty sector and its signals of sustainability. To the author's knowledge, there are only a handful of studies in this area from either a cosmetics consumption or a sustainability and luxury perspective. The primary aim and theoretical contribution of this chapter is to join two streams of literature—*sustainability claims* and *luxury beauty consumption*—and improve the understanding of consumer decision making in the beauty luxury industry under the influence of sustainability signals. In conceptualising luxury beauty consumption and sustainability claims engagement, this study undertakes a qualitative approach with two key research questions:

RQ1: *What are consumers' perceptions of luxury beauty brands and their signals of sustainability?*
RQ2: *How are consumers engaging with sustainability claims and how does that process influences their perceptions of 'self'?*

Following the perspective of Ajitha and Sivakumar (2017), in this chapter, luxury beauty brands are defined as cosmetics with limited supply and high price offering the individual the opportunity to personalise their appearance as well as a feeling of self and social desirability in addition to functional values. The term *sustainability claims* signifies environmental, social and economic claims and messages made from companies wishing to signal their approach to sustainable development (Alevizou et al., 2018).

9.2 Conceptualising Sustainability Claims and Luxury Beauty Consumption

Beauty has been the epicentre of both the fashion and the beauty industries for centuries. Historically changes in the external environment seem to affect both industries and as women's fashion choices evolved so did their cosmetics and personal care choices (Matthews, 2018). The beauty industry also referred to as the cosmetics and personal care industry is part of the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) industry and is usually divided into five main business segments: toiletries, fragrances, skincare, haircare and make-up (Statista, n.d.). Furthermore, beauty products can be subdivided into premium and mass production segments depending on their marketing mix elements (Statista, n.d.). It must be noted that the structure of the beauty industry is highly regulated and complex (Callaghan, 2019). Yet, existing regulation is inadequate to protect consumers as the enforcement procedures are insufficient (Riccolo, 2021).

The historical origins and elaborations of the idea of luxury can be traced back to the Hellenic, Roman and Christian frameworks (Berry, 1994). The term itself is slippery and presents a number of challenges, as it is frequently used in daily language without a clear understanding or perception of the concept (Wiedmann et al., 2013). Indeed, Kapferer (1997) highlights the complexity behind luxury and luxury brand definitions. The author states that the problem with the word *luxury* is that "it is once a concept (a category), a subjective impression and a polemic term" (Kapferer, 1997, p. 251).

Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019) summarise the existing classifications and conceptualisations of brand luxury consumption into two broad perspectives: *Product-centric* (i.e. what is brand luxury) and *consumer-centric* (i.e. how consumers internalise meanings). The authors further discuss *social meanings* and *personalised meanings* under the consumer-centric perspective encapsulating meaning making at social and individualised levels. As previously noted, due to the lack of studies on consumers' perceptions of luxury beauty products and their signals of sustainability, as well as the two streams of literature involved (i.e. sustainability claims and luxury beauty products consumption), the focus of this chapter will remain on both perspectives as outlined by Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019).

9.2.1 Luxury Beauty Products and Sustainability Claims

Under the product-centric perspective, a luxury brand becomes a matter of identifying tangible and intangible product attributes and, as such, the assumption that luxury *can be crafted* (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019).

In the past few years, the beauty sector altogether has been relatively vocal, in terms of sustainability. The term *sustainability* often serves as a sort of *catch-all phrase* to describe an ongoing phenomenon with desirable characteristics that are replicated in the long term, such as a sustainable financial or economic policy or competitive advantage (Borland et al., 2016). Most efforts in the beauty industry fall under the environmental aspect rather than the socioeconomic ones (Bom et al., 2019). For instance, studies investigated the role of sustainability in the cosmetics industry noting that one main challenge is replacing unsustainable ingredients with more sustainable ones (ibid). Indeed, a current debate within the beauty industry is the *natural* versus *synthetic* ingredients with a growing number of companies overemphasising their 'natural ingredients' (Lin et al., 2018), whereas others have gone further with statements of 'free off' ingredients (Grabenhofer, 2020). This approach has created concerns amongst policy makers, and industry stakeholders in terms of product safety (Grabenhofer, 2020). In addition, Secchi et al. (2016) found that an alleged 'natural/eco-friendly' ingredient might result in a less preferable environmental profile from a life cycle assessment perspective.

Sustainability certifications could potentially be seen as a solution to the wide variety of claims (and debates) in the beauty industry as Bom et al. (2019) call for a single certification focused on sustainability, as this is not covered by the existing organic and natural ones. At this point, it should be noted that studies have supported certification standardization since the early 1980s as currently more than 450 labels in 199 countries and across 25 sectors (Ecolabel index, 2021). To make things even more complicated the beauty industry shares a number of certifications with other industries such as the food and fashion industries. For instance, Lin et al. (2018) highlight the effect of the food market and the FMCG sectors on the beauty industry as consumers become more health conscious.

In addition to the conflicting values between the two terms in the luxury sector Achabou and Dekhili (2013) note that despite the increasing sustainability concerns, consumers prioritise product quality and brand reputation over environmental brand commitment and perceive the use of recycled materials in their luxury products negatively. This brings luxury beauty brand communication in a crossroad. In response, De Angelis et al. (2017) call for a reimagining of the two terms in the luxury sector as the concepts share overlapping values and practices. Focusing on the luxury beauty sector and its signals of sustainability is important, as studies have shown that among all luxury items, cosmetics and perfumes are the most widely and frequently consumed products (Dubois & Laurent, 1996).

9.2.2 Consuming Luxury Beauty Products and Sustainability Claims

The evolving portrayals of *beauty* seem to go hand in hand with consumers' quest for the *beautiful* (i.e. object, figure and experience). As such, their consumption is characterised by a certain dynamism and seems to result from them seeking to reinvent themselves and fit in their desired social worlds (Holt, 1995). When consumers do not manage to match their 'actual' self to their 'ideal' or 'social self', they may experience negative emotions (Higgins, 1987). In such cases, consumers may engage in phases of increased fashion consumption (Alevizou et al., 2021). In addition to increased consumption, consumers may turn to luxury brands consumption, as luxury brands are more socially visible and accepted (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). Bauer et al. (2011) note that consumers value the experiences with luxuries as they are able to generate special private moments. In other words rather than signalling social status, luxury good signal their *private self and experience*. In this aspect, consumers seem to apply an additional emotional element in their decision making (Steinhart et al., 2013).

Studies indicate that consumers are asking for additional information related to inclusion and diversity from their beauty brands (Pounders, 2018). It is not surprising that some studies note that consumers may see

a closer fit between luxury and sustainability in the beauty industry (Athwal et al., 2019). A few brands are incorporating social messages, inclusivity, diversity, and promoting self-esteem in their communication platforms. The results in terms of effectiveness of such messages are mixed. For instance, Halliwell and Dittmar (2004) report that it is thinness rather than attractiveness that is an issue for women anxious about their weight, which has been addressed by many fashion and beauty brands in their campaigns. However, some studies report that consumers perceive adverts featuring plus size models as promoting unhealthy behaviours (Pounders, 2018).

In terms of consumers' perceptions of sustainability and luxury product consumption, Beckham and Voyer (2014) highlighted the complexity of consumers' associations between luxury and sustainability consumption. In their study, consumers seem to associate luxury with unsustainability. The authors note that this was not the case when luxury was compared to high street brands. They also note that consumers deemed luxury brands less desirable and luxurious when labelled as sustainable. Overall, they found that consumers experience difficulty associating sustainability with luxury. Similarly, Davies et al. (2012) state that ethical-luxury is unlikely to keep pace with the growth of ethical commodities; however, in their study, consumers stated that they did not think of ethics when shopping for luxury goods. On the contrary, Steinhart et al. (2013) explored the environment claim perceptions for utilitarian and luxury products and found that consumers evaluated more favourably the products with an environmental claim. The authors found that consumers considered the claim as a utilitarian aspect of the product which increased its perceived functionality but also the justification of using the luxury product.

To further explore these inconsistencies a strand of research has classifying consumption/consumers of luxury goods. Dubois and Laurent (1996) explored luxury consumption under the supply–demand factors and identified a third type of luxury consumer which they called 'Excursionists' which in contrast to other types (i.e. no access and permanent access to luxury) their acquisition of luxury items is occasional and under specific circumstances which contrasts to their daily life. From a social practice perspective, Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019, p. 418)

identified five distinct forms of luxury brand consumption: (1) investing in brand luxury, (2) escaping into/with brands, (3) perpetuating an affluent lifestyle, (4) conveying social status and (5) engaging in self-transformation. The authors note that there is a broad and paradoxical range of personalised meanings consumers construct about luxury brands and consumer engagement with luxury consumption can be situational and contextual. Henninger et al. (2017) focused on luxury consumption amongst Chinese consumers and found four consumption types. In particular, they argue that their category of luxury 'indulgers' ignores the moral compass when they decide to purchase luxury products. Most importantly, the authors note that whilst sustainability is not a key decision making factor, consumers are expecting high corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards from their luxury brands as a minimum requirement but at the same time the authors caution brands when communicating CSR intensively and on all their communication platform due to consumer scepticism. From a consumer segmentation point of view, Makkar and Yap (2018) discussed their typology of inconspicuous consumption and identified four consumer segments (fashion influencers, trendsetters, fashion followers and luxe conservatives). Contrary to previous studies, the authors support the ability to move upwards in social status by both accumulating cultural capital and developing the inner self. However, there are limited/no studies exploring consumers' luxury beauty brand consumption from a sustainability point of view, which is addressed in this chapter.

9.3 Methodology and Analysis

This study adopted a phenomenological approach with the aim of eliciting in-depth information on consumers' perceptions. As the key research questions surrounded two strands of literature and to the best knowledge of the author, there are no previous studies exploring the specific topic a qualitative approach was deemed as the most appropriate (Patton, 2002).

A convenience sampling approach was used where 11 female participants from the ages of 30–50 were recruited who had purchased luxury products (skin care, make-up, fragrance) in the past year. Consumers

within these age groups are considered the strongest segments for luxury purchases (Statista, 2021). In addition, participants were asked to take photographs of their purchases as seen in their 'personal spaces'. These visuals were used as an elicitation technique probing interviewees to discuss lived rather than hypothetical experiences. Photo-elicitation has been used as a projective technique and involves showing photographs to participants (either their own or the researcher's) and then asking them to talk about what they see (Barton, 2015; Walker & Widel, 1985). Semi-structured interviews were used as they are appropriate to generate rich data (Cassell, 2015). Data saturation, for the key research themes meaning the point where further data collection does not elicit new information (Patton, 2002), was met after eight interviews. The interviews lasted up to 1 h and were conducted online (Table 9.1).

Due to the amount of visual and textual material, NVivo was used to manage data collection. Ethical approval was granted by the author's institution and participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the research focus as well as the approach. Respondents were recruited via the professional networks of the researcher. The requirement was for participants to have purchased a luxury beauty product within the past year. As such the aim was to capture a wide range of participants (i.e. as classified by Dubois & Laurent, 1996) rather than focus on the most affluent ones. Snowballing recruitment was also adopted and participants recommended their family or friends as potential interviewees.

The interview protocol consisted of three main parts. In the first part of the interview, participants were asked about their perceptions of beauty and luxury beauty and their awareness of sustainability signals. In the main part of the interview, two key themes were explored and were centred on the key research questions. In particular, questions such as the following were asked: "What is your relationship with your luxury beauty brand?" "What do you know about the social and environmental responsibility of your luxury beauty brand?" "What type of sustainability information- communicated by your luxury brand- are you aware of?" "How do you feel about it and what does it means to you?"

Data were analysed following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved: *audio data familiarisation; verbatim transcription; reading the transcripts and keeping initial notes; generating the*

Table 9.1 Participant profiles and purchases

ID	Age group	Profession	Brands	Other luxury categories
Emma	30–40	General practitioner manager	Dior, Estee Lauder, Bobbi Brown	Handbags, shoes, clothes (discount retailers)
Diana	40–50	University professor	No7, Indie luxury cosmetics	Handbags, clothes, accessories, jewellery
Rachel	40–50	Marketing	Indi luxury brands, dermatologist created/approved/ marketed brands	Handbags, shoes, clothes, jewellery
Sophie	40–50	Psychologist	Dior, Estee Lauder, Bobbi Brown	Handbags, shoes, clothes, jewellery, cosmetic procedures, diet/ visits to dietician
Mary	30–40	Teacher	Bobby Brown, Bumble and bumble, Dior	Not mentioned
Elisabeth	40–50	Teacher	Dior, Lancôme	Handbags, shoes, clothes, jewellery
Sherry	40–50	Public sector worker	Dior, Lancôme, dermatologist created/approved/ marketed brands	Cosmetic procedures, diet/ visits dietician/
Donna	40–50	Real estate agent	Indi luxury brands, dermatologist created/approved/ marketed brands	Diet/visits to dietician, Gucci, Prada, Dolce and Gabbana, Hermes
Marta	30–40	Psychologist	Dior, Lancôme, Estee lauder, Bobbi Brown	Handbags, shoes, clothes, jewellery
Anna	30–40	Teacher	Indi luxury brands, dermatologist created/approved/ marketed brands	Handbags
Johnnie	40–50	Marketing	La Mer, Christian Dior, Charlotte Tilbury, Elemis	Handbags, shoes, clothes

initial codes (themes and subthemes); reviewing key emerging themes and creating a thematic representation; following an ongoing analysis and producing a written report.

9.4 Findings and Discussion

When defining luxury beauty products, participants referred to both utilitarian and hedonic brand benefits which agree with previous studies (Apaolaza-Ibanez et al., 2011) as participants seem to voice their preference for functional aspects of the products (i.e. ingredients targeting specific concerns) as well as more aesthetic (packaging and product texture) and sensorial stimuli (scent and feel on the skin). Participants also referred to premium price and quality (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), the desire for luxury products (Belk et al., 2003), social status signalling (Han et al., 2010) and an escape from their daily routines and *self* (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). As such, consumers' perceptions of their luxury beauty brands and their sustainability signals are discussed from a *product* and a *consumption* perspective which are interwoven and do not seem to exist in *isolation.*

9.4.1 The Luxury Beauty Brand and Its Sustainability Signals: A Product Perspective

The meanings of both luxury and luxury beauty brands found most participants in agreement. For these consumers, luxury brands are connected to higher prices, limited availability, social status signalling and a sense of self-transformation. All participants were quite vocal when discussing their luxury beauty brand purchases and were keen to discuss researching, buying, using, storing, displaying and disposing their preferred luxury beauty products. Most consumers seem to agree that when a luxury beauty product 'works for them' they will keep purchasing it. This was attributed to both the financial and time investment towards these purchases and their *fit* with consumers' personalities and beauty needs/concerns. As Sophie (40–50) stated:

> I'm very loyal [to my luxury brands]…I am satisfied with the brands I am currently using…I mean I tried all…a lot of natural products, as well as, cheaper brands but they did not work for me. So I went back to my regular ones which I will keep buying for life!

In addition, participants referred to the shopping experience itself as a benefit in acquiring luxury beauty brands. As Diana (40–50) mentioned the 'idea' of luxury consumption is connected to her well-being.

> That [spending on luxury beauty] is what makes people feel better about themselves and feel happy and these are the things we do in order to value our self in a way…and be kind to yourself, and if being kind to yourself means buying La Mer or a really expensive face cream go and do it!

Participants also stressed the importance of the retail experience as most participants preferred to visit their favourite retailers rather than purchase luxury brands online. This signals that the luxury beauty experience starts prior to buying/touching the product.

A common response pattern during the interviews was the silence following the question about product/brand sustainability signals. As an initial reaction, most participants were apologetic for not considering sustainability as a factor in their luxury beauty brand purchases. As Rachel (40–50) stated:

> I don't think I have, really…that is something I am conscious about…That's why I go to Luxury Brand X as I know what I am getting, I would like to think that [brand X] products are green and sustainable otherwise they should not be selling them because they are a big company. But I don't know, I haven't really given that an awful lot of thought too.

Most participants stated various reasons for not considering sustainability during their luxury beauty products purchasing. A commonly cited reason was the lack of communication from the part of the brand. As Donna (40–50) mentioned:

> No, I am sorry I haven't [considered sustainability]! I follow [brand Y] them on Instagram and the only images I see are those of beautiful people…I do not recall seeing anything about the environment!

Donna continued to discuss her perception for the lack of brand interaction with such messages. In particular, she mentioned that the brand "probably does not prioritise the environment", whereas other participants stressed the focus of their luxury brands on science and being effective rather than *natural* which *is not effective* (Sophie, 40–50). However, most admitted that this was not a primary concern when they purchased these types of products as opposed to food and other fast moving consumer goods. Indeed, as Henninger et al. (2017) pointed out consumers ignore the moral compass when shopping for luxury goods and as McDonald et al. (2012) some consumers seem to be selectors in terms of *their green areas of consumption* as they can be green in one category and not another.

However, after the initial silence—and justification of it—consumers discussed their concerns in terms of the products they purchase (or discontinued purchasing) and their environmental and social considerations.

A few interviewees were concerned about animal welfare, ingredients and testing practices. However, this was not always translated in more research-based and ethical purchase behaviour. Diana (40–50) mentioned that in the past, she used a very effective skincare line which was using animal derived ingredients.

> For a while I knew this woman who was doing beauty and she did some beauty for me and she gave me… she got me into trying her cosmetics, and that was in a period of my life where I did the full work, and I did look at the ingredients and they had meres placenta in it …uhm and I was appalled, I had beautiful soft skin and certainly the rituals of cleansing and toning with these products was working but I was appalled and I did not use it again. And of course I did not know at that point that meres placenta is sold on to beauty companies because why would you if you haven't encountered it?

Yet, luxury brands seem to see potential in placenta-derived cosmetics such as equine placenta, which is seen as a superior ingredient for skin care (Lim, 2020). The beauty industry is known to use ingredients (e.g. lactic acid, beeswax, carmine, shark liver oil and vitamin A) derived from animals, gastropods, insects, fish and other species (see PETA, n.d.). This may explain the popularity of "Vegan Approved" certifications. However, none of the interviewees mentioned coming across that certification on their favourite luxury beauty products. This lack of clarity and transparency may induce negative brand perceptions and preferences.

However, this is not always the case as some consumers may decide to consciously lower their ethical standards. An example is Mary (30–40) who kept stressing the importance of animal welfare and testing in her daily consumption but ignored these concerns when purchasing luxury brands "but obviously yes, I try and buy things that are not tested on animals", only to conclude, "I have not checked my Dior lipstick but honestly I think because it is high end …it probably is". It can be seen that for this type of consumers ethical values are lowered, as the assumption is that *luxury and sustainability do not fit within a product* and as such, a choice needs to be made. Mary attributed this behaviour to the lack of trust towards luxury brands and sustainability claims:

> Honestly, the main problem that I have is that I do not trust most of the brands even when they say they are sustainable and ethical. There's… loads of them have the Bunny Mark or saying that they are …but they are not…or they are lying and say 'oh yeah you can recycle all or plastic packaging but actually only three recycling centres in the UK take it and your local council doesn't take it anyway'. So it is kind of less of a concern because it is less achievable.

She also highlighted the effect of global regulatory differences in terms of animal testing as some brands selling in specific parts of the world will need to be tested on animals.

Packaging was mentioned as a key concern as consumers felt more knowledgeable discussing packaging than other aspects of the supply chain and production process. A few consumers purchased refillable

skincare products, which seems to be a popular luxury beauty market trend. As Rachel (40–50) stated:

> For me packaging is important as it creates that sense of luxury, so yes packaging is important. On the other hand, I also prefer refillable products as waste is reduced considerably. So yes, I have been using refillable skincare products and I will continue doing so.

This is not surprising as studies seem to stress the priority of packaging and waste reduction for consumers (Mintel, 2020). In addition, reports stress the reduced environmental impact of reusable versus single-use packaging (Zero Waste Europe, 2020). Other consumers did not have similar perceptions, awareness or experience. As Johnnie (40–50) mentioned:

> I have used refills yes, I bought a [brand C] foundation in a reusable tin. I was not happy as the tin broke right after the second refill.

Finally, consumers stated that they had no awareness of any luxury beauty brands certifications or labelling. This is not surprising as luxury beauty is not particularly vocal on product packaging in terms of sustainability nor on its communication. As discussed earlier in the context of other luxury sectors, consumers may perceive the use of recycled materials in their luxury products negatively (Achabou & Dekhili, 2013). In the context of beauty products and especially in luxury beauty a few consumers mentioned that more 'natural-based' products are not as effective as luxury beauty brands due to the investment of luxury brands into science backed-up results. As Jen (30–40) mentioned:

> I am unsure of the effectiveness of natural products, I mean what is in them? When do they expire? Where do you store them? With brands like [luxury Brand F] I can see the ingredients…I know there is an entire scientific team behind the brand and …er…quality controls, and audits and all that… but with natural products …well I doubt they have resources for all that.

This view ties well with the low consumer awareness of what sustainability means for the beauty industry. In other words, some consumers do not perceive a good fit between science and sustainability in the beauty industry. This stereotypical view creates a double challenge for brands in the beauty industry as on the one hand luxury is seen as conflicting with sustainability and on the other hand 'more natural based beauty' as not being backed up by science and effectiveness.

9.4.2 The Luxury Beauty Brand and Its Sustainability Signals: A Consumption Perspective

Consumers discussed usage and disposal of their products. A few consumers pointed out that purchasing luxury cosmetics means purchasing less often and, as such, economising and creating less waste. As Emma (30–40) pointed out

> I think buying luxury beauty products is more sustainable. I noticed that I consume less product, I become more frugal… and I try to squeeze out every last drop out of my products.

Whereas Donna (40–50) points out that when she travels, she never packs her premium skincare but buys cheap skincare at her destination, which she can throw away instead of carrying it back home. Such throwaway consumption behaviour can be encountered in the fashion industry where it has been reported that consumers will purchase "throwaway outfits" (Censuswide, n.d.). The effects of fast fashion are well-documented in the literature and this study highlights a similar consumption behaviour in the beauty industry. This beauty products throwaway trend deserves more research.

Participants also discussed their luxury beauty consumption during lockdown. Most stressed the lack of availability of their brands online and others highlighted some changes in the frequency of consumption during lockdown, as well as, the introduction of more luxury brands in their daily routines. As Johnnie (40–50) mentioned:

> I was finding lockdown really hard…and I looked at my face a whole lot more than before lockdown…And I started focusing more on signs of ageing…dark circles…wrinkles and all that. Working from home and being 'connected' did not help either. Zoom was my new mirror… I think it made me more self-conscious and slightly disappointed…and yes…! I ended up buying more luxury skincare products than before...and it was the first time I actually considered more invasive solutions.

Accordingly, consumers seem to connect their well-being with luxury beauty brand consumption. In this study, women seek confidence in their skincare routines and brands in order to improve their perceived desired or ideal self. This is in agreement with previous studies indicating the use of cosmetic products as a relief from feelings of dissatisfaction with the actual self (Apaolaza-Ibanez et al., 2011). In addition, this study highlights that consumers make comparisons not only with attractive role models (see Apaolaza-Ibanez et al., 2011) but also with *past* or *desired* versions of the self.

Finally, participants discussed their spaces of consumption and their skincare routines and referred to them as self-care and well-being *rituals*. When discussing their routines, none of the interviewees mentioned any environmental and social concerns. A few consumers discussed their recycling practice and they seem to be guided by product/package labelling. As previously mentioned, some consumers were sceptical in terms of recycling these products, whereas others admitted not knowing what to do with the empty packages. None of the interviewees was aware of any retailer or brand recycling scheme. The luxury industry advises consumers to (1) research recycling restrictions in their local area, (2) check packaging and labelling guidelines, (3) separate components and (4) clean and condense containers before recycling them (GPA Global, 2021). Yet, none of the participants were aware of these guidelines.

9.5 Conclusion, Contribution, Limitations and Future Research

This study informs current knowledge on luxury beauty consumption and the role of sustainability signals. Even though the sample of this study is its key limitation, the aim of the study was to explore lived experiences and understand the relationship between luxury beauty consumption and sustainability signals. First, the attention is drawn to the *battle of selves*' spectrum of consumer decision making and luxury consumption. In addition to studies emphasising the connection of luxury consumption with, self-concept enhancement (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), identity and 'extended self' reflections (Belk, 1988), seeking 'uniqueness and self-transformation' (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019) this study highlights the inner *decision making in terms of values and selves*. As such, the theoretical contribution of this study is the *five emerging behavioural patterns*.

On the one end of the spectrum, the more ***luxury minded self*** is leading beauty consumption but also has never considered any sustainability signals. Sophie (40–50), Johnnie (40–50), Sherry (40–50) and Emma (30–40), for instance, seem aware of sustainability and are consuming more sustainable options in other sectors but have consciously decided to ignore these, when dealing with their beauty routines. For these consumers, the weight of the decision is on the product attributes, effectiveness, experience, skincare needs and the science behind the brands. These consumers are aware of sustainability signals but prefer to ignore them in the name of their beauty rituals. There were no 'apologetic responses nor reactions' but clear statements of priorities in beauty consumption. Very close to this behavioural consumption pattern is the ***luxury minded 'trapped' self*** encapsulates consumers who have strong ethical values in other parts of their lives but do not believe that the industry can be sustainable by default, which makes them sceptical, 'trapped' and distrustful towards beauty brands and sustainability. These consumers seem to be informed and cite greenwashing and other unethical brand practices as a justification for ignoring their *values*.

Next to these consumers are ones that are ***luxury minded but unreached*** by sustainability signals. Elisabeth (40–50) apologised for

never giving it a thought or not being aware, but also Donna (40–50) justified her luxury beauty choices as "luxury brands do not want to talk about these things or simply they do not care". In this category, luxury brands are not successful with their sustainability communication (if any) which may present a risk, as these consumers seemed more *apologetic* in their responses and stated that maybe they should do more research in the future. This is not to say that brands should clean/greenwash, but potentially more transparency in terms of their sustainability strategy and practices may be beneficial to their customer base.

Closer to the more ***sustainability and luxury minded*** consumers are those who have selected more sustainable luxury options for ethical reasons. This pattern of behaviour is more receptive to brand communication and is ready to adopt more sustainable consumption practices.

At the end of the spectrum are consumers who are more ***sustainability minded***. These consumers seem to connect their consumption with ethical values and as such, abort luxury brands not fitting their standards. Transparent, clear and substantiated sustainability labelling and brand communication are important elements of decision making as beauty consumption is part of the overall lifestyle. McDonald et al. (2012) report similar patterns in their study with their category of *translators* and this study echoes their findings of this strictly ethical minded category of consumers who will *sacrifice* their beauty rituals in spite of the noted effectiveness.

Finally, it should be noted that these patterns are not rigid expressions of the self(ves) but fluid according to the context or type of beauty product consumed (skincare, makeup, fragrance etc.). This is in agreement with past studies claiming consumer agency and switching behaviour between their luxury consumption practices in order to address contextual and situational concerns (Reckwitz, 2002; Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019; McDonald et al., 2012; Henninger et al., 2017).

9.5.1 Managerial Implications

This study presents some implications for brand managers and marketers. First, the different behavioural patterns signal the complexity of the luxury beauty brand sector. This study echoes previous studies on luxury

consumption in fashion (see Henninger et al., 2017; Alevizou et al., 2021) and further highlights particular patterns in the luxury beauty industry. Brand managers, beyond exploring demographics and social status or lifestyle considerations can focus on engaging with consumers' values by addressing them in a sustainable, verifiable, ethical and transparent approach. Most importantly, consumer education in terms of clean beauty claims becomes vital as a wave of *cleanwashing* claims seems to disrupt brands committed to sustainable development. In addition, organisations need to pay more attention to the disposal of their products as consumers seem to be confused as to where to (or whether) recycle their products. Opportunities seem to exist in creating more reusable/refillable products and as such more research needs to be invested in sustainable product design and packaging.

As previously mentioned the sample for this study is a limitation. Future research can explore further these behavioural patterns in terms of consumer perceptions of product efficiency, brand communication, product disposal and sustainability signals.

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