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## Pre-loved? Analysing the Dubai Luxe Resale Market

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### 5.1 Introduction

The market for secondhand/vintage fashion is reasonably well established in the UK and other Western markets where specialist ‘vintage’ fashion shops and charity shops are commonplace in the retail landscape; indeed, purchasing luxury fashion items from this kind of outlet is often perceived as an indication of a savvy fashion shopper seeking out designer items at a fraction of the price, and this can be the case across all social classes. Equally, on the seller side, the sale of secondhand luxury fashion items via sites like eBay or via these specialist secondhand retail outlets has increased rapidly and provides an opportunity for fashion consumers to generate income to fund

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their future fashion purchases, again with little in the way of stigma. This chapter focuses on the case of secondhand luxury retailing in Dubai, where issues of culture, social class and conspicuous consumption create a significantly different retail landscape for the secondhand luxury market of buyers and sellers.

The intention of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of the key theoretical concepts drawn from marketing literature relating to luxury fashion brands and the consumption of luxury, as well as issues around culture in relation to international marketing. A case study of secondhand luxury retailing is presented which is underpinned by this literature. The case study was collated using a range of secondary and primary data (collected via interviews and questionnaires with key informants and consumers in the Dubai market).

## 5.2 International Fashion Marketing

As brand owners look for further growth outside of their domestic market, they are increasingly internationalising the marketing of their brands and this has resulted in the rise of the global fashion brand. In today's fashion industry, there are many brands that can be considered fashion 'super brands' as they are sold across each of the world's continents. In many cases, these fashion brands have expanded into other industries, for example retail, hospitality and other product categories such as accessories and personal goods, although their historical and core business remains fashion apparel. The biggest challenge facing international fashion companies is how to market to consumers in a variety of international markets. International fashion marketing is concerned with the management of marketing activities across national boundaries. If fashion marketing is concerned with understanding the complex needs and wants of consumers of fashion and orienting strategic and operational activities to satisfy those demands, which are particularly complex due to the diversity of influences which shape consumer needs, as well as the fast moving

pace of fashion product life cycles, international fashion marketing is complicated further by the need to manage marketing activities across a diverse range of consumer markets in differing parts of the world (McCormick et al. 2014).

It is argued that as a result of globalisation (or perhaps it is a cause of globalisation), consumers are converging in their tastes and the way they behave. For example, it could be argued that young fashion consumers aged 15–25 have similar wants and needs for fashion products whether they live in Shanghai, Seattle or Seville. However, this theory is challenged and commentators in the field of globalisation and international marketing argue that despite a phenomenal rise in the sale of goods internationally, consumers remain divergent in their wants, needs and behaviours. This debate influences a firm's internationalisation strategy by determining the extent to which they take a discrete incremental approach to overseas expansion tailoring their marketing activities on a case-by-case basis to each individual international opportunity, or to the other extreme whereby there is a global strategy which directs a single approach to all marketing activity across the globe. The international marketing strategy will influence whether a firm chooses to standardise or adapt their marketing mix activities. The decision whether to standardise or adapt marketing activities is a fundamental component of international fashion marketing strategy. Even if it is established that fashion consumers have similar needs the world over, differences in the marketing environment of every market in which a company does business will affect the marketing activities in that country because these factors shape and drive consumer needs and wants in that particular market (McCormick et al. 2014). The marketing environment consists of political, economic, sociocultural and technological factors (also referred to as PEST factors). Table 5.1 shows examples of how characteristics of the macro-environment of each market may differ from that in the domestic market thereby affect marketing activities for a fashion company.

**Table 5.1** Impact of the macro-environment on international fashion marketing (authors' own)

Environmental factor	Domestic market	International market	Impact on marketing activities
Political	Free trade	Heavily regulated/controlled	Entry method into the international market may have to be with a local partner, e.g. a joint venture
Economic	Mature market	Emerging economy	Fashion marketing communications in the international market may have to focus on educating consumers about the brand proposition where they have not been previously exposed to fashion branding
Sociocultural	Main language English	English not widely spoken or understood	Brand names or advertising campaigns may have to be redone in local languages
Technological	Reliable communication and transportation infrastructure	Disparate internet access transportation subject to control or disruption	Marketing communication through the internet may not be effective Supply chain efficiency may be lost due to poor communication with overseas supply chain partners or disruption to transportation

### 5.3 Luxury Fashion Brands and Consumption

Luxury fashion brands have emerged as a result of the commercialisation of fashion designers' collections. Typically, a contemporary luxury fashion brand has grown from the foundation of the original fashion designer, for example Chanel, Dior and Versace, and although the original fashion designer may no longer be around, their legacy was developed into a brand, and subsequently, the 'equity' of that brand leveraged to sell a myriad of products and services under the brand name. Of course, there are also newer fashion designers in the mix, including Marc Jacobs and Stella McCartney, but regardless of who the original or existing 'designer' is, or was, at the helm, they are now typically owned by large luxury brand conglomerates such as Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy (LVMH) (which owns in addition to the Louis Vuitton brand, luxury brands including Celine, Fendi, Kenzo, Givenchy and Marc Jacobs) or Kering (which owns amongst others Stella McCartney, Gucci, Saint Laurent and Balenciaga). Although many of these brands were established as fashion apparel brands, many now extend into a variety of product categories beyond apparel, but typically in associated categories such as accessories and cosmetics. Luxury brands are defined as those offering high quality, distinctiveness, exclusivity, premium pricing and high levels of emotional and symbolic value (Fionda and Moore 2009; Okonkwo 2009).

Consumption of branded luxury goods has been found to be as a result of the consumer's desire to express their social status, success and cultural group membership (De Mooij 2004) with possession of luxury goods acting as a status symbol for its owner (Miremadi et al. 2011). Luxury consumption is an important symbol for success, and in particular, this is evidenced in the high demand for luxury items in rapidly growing economies. '*Once you succeed, you want to enjoy. Luxury has become the self-reward of high growth countries*' (Kapferer and Bastien 2012).

## 5.4 Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption

Materialism arguably goes hand in hand with any analysis of luxury consumers. Materialism is defined by Richins and Dawson (1992) as a '*set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life*' whereby the pursuit and ownership of possessions are linked to happiness and perceptions of success. Research has found that the levels of materialism amongst consumers vary according to cultural and economic conditions, but that it tends to be highest in markets where there has been rapid and recent socio-economic and cultural change as this is the key way in which consumers can demonstrate their success and status in society (Kamal et al. 2013).

Whilst materialism concentrates on the beliefs and values a consumer holds about the possession of certain goods, conspicuous consumption is a concept developed by Veblen in the late 1800s relating to the 'showing off' of material possessions to others. Veblen argued that wealthy individuals consume conspicuous goods in order to display their wealth and achieve greater social status, and the subsequent analysis of this theory has led to the concept of the 'Veblen effects' which are said to exist when consumers are willing to pay higher prices for certain branded goods even when functionally equivalent but cheaper goods are on offer (Bagwell and Bernheim 1996). Highly branded goods (such as the popular contemporary luxury fashion brands, e.g. Armani, Prada, Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel) offer high levels of differentiation in the market and thus greater levels of conspicuousness of consumption and status (O'Cass and McEwen 2004).

There are those who argue that conspicuous consumption has had its day, and this may be true in more established Western societies, where the super-rich look for more subtle ways of displaying their wealth or indeed look to more overt demonstrations of wealth than through their fashion choices (wearing overtly branded garments), for example by purchasing super cars or yachts. However, conspicuous consumption remains attractive in both emerging and developing markets, and in consumer segments where affluence is relatively new.

## 5.5 Luxury Dubai—The Market

Dubai is the second largest emirate in the United Arab Emirates with a population in the region of 5.4 million by 2015 (of whom 94% were foreign citizens) (Euromonitor 2018), and it has witnessed rapid economic growth since the 1980s underpinned by tourism, retailing (especially at the luxury end of the market), air transportation and as a hub for multinational corporations, especially in the financial sector. Over 100 of the Fortune 500 Companies have hubs in Dubai, and in 2015, the city attracted nearly 15 million visitors, making it the 4th most visited city globally (Euromonitor 2018). Furthermore, the population of Dubai tend to be extremely wealthy, and despite being one of the lowest in the UAE, it has an above average income per capita than the top 30 developed nations average (Sychyk 2016), and as a result of its marketing efforts and ‘mega projects’ (architecture, leisure, hotels, malls, etc.), it has become well established as a luxury tourist destination, attracting many wealthy visitors enticed to the destination by the glitz and glamour offered by the city.

Although its history and culture is deeply rooted in Islamic traditions, it is known for a more relaxed attitude than some of its Middle Eastern neighbours, and with the large population of Western expats and visiting tourists, creating something of an east meets west cultural melting pot. For example, although Emirati men and women will typically wear long robes (the men wearing traditional dishdasha or kandura (a long white shirt dress) with ghutra (a headdress) and women wearing an abaya (a long black cloak) and hijab (headscarf)) in public, it is not unusual to find that they may be dressed underneath their robes in the latest luxury designer fashion items from Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Prada and carrying the latest designer handbag and wearing luxury brand watches and jewellery. Indeed, the consumption of handbags, accessories and shoes from luxury brands is particularly important in the Dubai market simply because these are often the key items visible to others when the majority of locals wear robes in public.

Given Dubai’s position as one of the global leaders in retail destinations, the city boasts a large number of world-class shopping malls

(around 70) including the world's 7th largest mall, The Dubai Mall (Singh and Prashar 2013). Many of the world's luxury brands have presence in the Dubai retail market given its relatively large market share and the size of the consumer market for luxury brands as a result of the high net worth resident and non-resident population.

## 5.6 Luxury Dubai—The Consumers

Consumers in Dubai are categorised into locals (Al-Muwateneen) and foreigners (Al-Wafideen). The highest strata of consumers in the Al-Muwateneen are the extensive ruling sheikh families who have extremely high levels of wealth, power and status in this society. There is a large merchant (selling international consumer goods) and growing middle-class (growing rapidly as a result of the benefits afforded by a high-quality free education system) and the low-income groups typically made up of farmers, former pearl divers and Bedouin nomads. Similarly, the foreign population is also made up of different classes, including top professionals with high salaries and benefits, middle-range professional such as teachers, nurses and skilled technicians, and low-paid, semi-skilled and unskilled workers who have typically migrated to Dubai from Asia (Beraja 2016).

The composition of the consumers and the unique characteristics of the market in Dubai lend itself to high levels of demand for luxury branded fashion goods. The nature of the market as a rapidly developing economic region results in a large proportion of local consumers with high levels of materialism keen to demonstrate their success and status through conspicuous consumption. Foreign consumers, attracted to the city as a result of the luxurious lifestyle it offers, keen to 'fit in' and demonstrate their own success and/or the attraction to visit a destination like Dubai is synonymous with wanting to purchase luxury fashion goods, e.g. purchasing a trip to Dubai (a luxury leisure destination) comes from a similar set of desires and wants as purchasing luxury goods, also offering a segment with high levels of demand for luxury fashion goods. Dubai is also a market where consumers are under the increasing influence of social media



and Western advertising and ideals, plus the liberalisation of attitudes and the hedonistic lifestyle ([www.dubai.com](http://www.dubai.com), 2017) perpetuated by the luxury living culture in Dubai, further contributing to the high demand for luxury fashion.

It should be noted that although the demand for luxury continues to grow in Dubai, the lingering effect of the financial crisis post 2008 and the subsequent austerity measures put in place in the UAE remains an issue, and although it impacts some segments of the market more than others, there are consumers who are less affluent than they were, but still have the same aspirations for luxury goods that they always had.

## 5.7 Dubai Pre-loved Luxe

This section presents an overview of the market for secondhand luxury fashion in Dubai, drawing on a range of literature, secondary data and primary research collected via a series of key informant and consumer interviews and questionnaires in 2016 and presented in a case study style. The research focuses on the structure/channels to market for secondhand luxury fashion and analyses some of the sociocultural issues that emerge as being central to the development of the secondhand luxury retail market in Dubai.

Although the primary market for luxury fashion is well established in Dubai, the market for secondhand luxury is far less developed than in markets such as the UK and USA; however given the huge consumption of luxury fashion in Dubai, the secondhand market is ripe for growth, but is constrained largely as a result of the sociocultural composition of the market.

The concept of the charity shop is not part of the retail landscape in the same way that it is in the UK, USA and other Western markets, and so this kind of channel to market is simply not an option, or part of the consumer psyche in Dubai. Although there are 'flea' markets, these tend to be similar to the 'car boot sale' or 'jumble sale' concept popular in the West and tend to be frequented only by the lowest social classes of both locals and immigrant communities, and so tend to be irrelevant even for the secondhand luxury market. So, there is no cultural

reference point for secondhand consumption embedded in this market, and as a result, it has not really become commonplace, and yet as the market has matured over 20–30 years of growth in retail and consumption, a critical mass of consumers and the product they own has been reached—where does all the ‘stuff’ go? How much more can be bought? This presented an opportunity for local entrepreneurs, and a very small number of secondhand luxury resellers have emerged.

Currently, there are only a handful of secondhand luxury retailers, the most notorious of which is Reems Closet located in a low-key mall off the Sheikh Zayed Road. Rumoured to be a Cheshire native (and thus bringing a wealth of experience from the home of the ‘Cheshire Housewives’ and footballer WAGs of the northwest of England where there are multiple secondhand retailers full of luxury designer fashion items), Reem Mohammed, the store’s owner acknowledges that the secondhand market for luxury fashion is underdeveloped in Dubai (Whitehouse 2008). The store is marketed as a treasure trove for fashionistas and conveys a message of ‘quality’ steering well away from anything which might be counterfeit. The credibility of the product being sold is of vital importance to maintain trust amongst their consumers, and so product knowledge when purchasing the secondhand items to sell in the store is vital. Reem describes the store as ‘...an elite club...’ (Whitehouse 2008, p. 27), and customers get to know about it generally via word of mouth and buzz amongst local fashionistas. Although the store is in a mall, it is not one of the mainstream high-end malls and its physical location within the mall is in a quiet and discrete area of the mall away from the major retailers, to help maintain the air of discretion. Marketing tactics are also used to attract tourists keen to get access to the breadth and depth of secondhand luxury available in the store which is likely to be of a much higher quality than in the UK, simply because of the large proportion of wealthy consumers in the market and the mass of product available. The product range consists of mostly high-end designer clothing and accessories from the likes of Chanel, Hermes, Prada, etc., but Reem also actively seeks out vintage designer items which will offer something unusual and different for her customers.

Like Reems Closet, Garderobe is a well-known secondhand luxury fashion reseller priding itself on the quality of its merchandise and the credibility of product knowledge in terms of accepting the product for sale and in terms of how it sells the product to customers. Maintaining their trustworthiness is a key aspect of their retail proposition—no fakes here. Garderobe pays more attractive commissions to the higher end product, e.g. the most exclusive Chanel and Hermes products attract commissions of around 80% compared with the more standard commissions of 40–50%. This is an important aspect of range management to maintain and convey the overall quality of the luxury proposition. Unlike Reems Closet which is a more traditional retail outlet presented as something of a ‘treasure trove’ of secondhand luxury fashion (in a similar vein to the vintage stores found in the UK, albeit with typically higher end product), Garderobe is located in a villa outside of the main commercial/retail areas and to some degree is shrouded in secrecy with a key aspect of their marketing message being around ‘discretion’ for buyers and sellers. So, like Reems Closet, there is an air of exclusivity and secrecy, although manifested in slightly different ways. This element of secrecy is fairly significant in this market. Given the links between brands, luxury, conspicuous consumption and one’s status in society, for most consumers of secondhand luxury in the Dubai market would wish to keep their purchases secret since it is at odds with the idealism they are buying into, and often the maid or servant would be sent to do the deal with the reseller, rather than the actual owner of the luxury item, in order to maintain secrecy. Similarly, those wishing to sell their secondhand goods via these resellers would want to keep this secret for many reasons, for example to save face in relation to their status (not wanting to be seen ‘having’ to make money by selling their personal possessions), because it was an unwanted gift and/or because it was given as a gift but the person may prefer the cash they can generate.

Gift giving is an important part of life in Dubai, for example in business negotiations and relationships, as well as in personal lives, for example giving gifts to teachers (it is not uncommon for teachers to receive extremely expensive luxury items from their pupils as a mark of

respect and value). These gifts can often be found in the secondhand luxury resellers' outlets especially when the gift recipient tends to be from the lower end of the income spectrum and would value the cash rather than the item. Typical sellers of secondhand luxury in Dubai are maids or servants working for the very wealthy families who might be given unwanted luxury items from their employer and sell the items on to generate cash. Other examples we found included flight attendants given lavish gifts by frequent flyers in return for special treatment in flight, and mistresses given gifts by their (typically older and much wealthier) lovers. This aspect of the secondhand markets contributes significantly to the need for secrecy. Those selling their unwanted gifts would face potentially severe consequences if it were ever to be discovered, given the links with gift giving and 'face'.

The secrecy surrounding the resale of secondhand luxury in Dubai limited the findings of the research, and it is difficult to make sense of the motivations of incredibly wealthy consumers wanting to be 'bothered' by reselling their unwanted items. For those with so much wealth, they can afford to spend thousands of pounds on a new handbag, why would they want to bother with selling them in the secondhand market. However, there is a fledgling but growing concern for sustainability amongst fashion consumers and Islamic teaching guides to not be wasteful in consumption (Beraja 2016), and so this could potentially provide some rationale as to what drives luxury consumers to sell their unwanted goods. Furthermore, the financial crisis and ongoing financial challenges in the market have resulted in large numbers of consumers finding themselves to be less wealthy than they once were, but wanting to maintain the lifestyle they previously had.

The market for secondhand luxury remains relatively small largely because there is a large proportion of high net worth consumers in Dubai able to buy in the primary market. The literature tells us that the ownership of luxury brands is closely associated with status in society by both Arab and Western consumers; however, research has shown that Arab consumers in particular are concerned with maintaining their dignity in relation to their position in society and use their purchasing of luxury brands as way achieving this (Beraja 2016), and this is the case

across all social classes where even less wealthy consumers use 'dressing up' as a way of increasing their perceived place in this highly status-oriented market. Although there are many who have no material or financial need to buy lower-priced secondhand luxury goods, there are many of middle-class/middle-income earners present in Dubai (both locals and foreigners) for whom the opportunity to purchase secondhand luxury goods can offer a way of buying into the levels of status they crave via the consumption of luxury fashion.

One aspect fuelling demand for secondhand luxury which emerges as being somewhat unique in Dubai is that the secondhand channels offer luxury brands which are not typically available in the primary market. These brands are those retailed outside Dubai but then brought into the country by the wealthy expats and foreigners. Although most of the major luxury brands have retail presence in Dubai, some of the more unusual or less well-known designers, such as Fabiana Filippi, are only available secondhand. However, this adds to their attraction as they can offer that 'something different' whereby the exclusivity can add to the perception of prestige.

The notion of 'vintage' is not well understood in the Dubai market. Most consumers of luxury fashions (whether it be first or secondhand) are motivated to make their purchases as a result of the desire for conspicuous consumption, to 'fit in' and to show their status in their social circle, and having the latest style or collection is very important. Dubai is characterised by its hedonistic lifestyle (even within the constraints of the Islamic way of life), particularly by young consumers, and in particular across the wealthiest social classes where consumers are quickly 'bored' and look to move on to the next new item. This need for newness contributes to the resale market as these consumers get bored quickly and also do not want to be seen in the same garment twice, and so the secondhand market for luxury fashion in Dubai, unlike other secondhand markets, can often include product ranges which feature 'in season' product. Returning to the notion of 'vintage', although this tends to be less well understood by the majority of luxury consumers, there are those who are the most sophisticated and fashion savvy and who have more of a desire to 'be different' or seek their status through the combination of their conspicuous consumption

of luxury brands in conjunction with their fashion credentials may seek out the vintage items. Furthermore, in this relatively new market for luxury fashion, these more 'historic' items can have additional appeal since they are ultra-rare in this market. Of course, this opens up a new opportunity for tourist visitors from places like the UK or USA where their true vintage pieces can be very attractive for retailers of second-hand luxury vintage fashion, with the potential to achieve a high resale value.

Literature confirms that visual merchandising and the quality of the in-store experience is valued amongst Arab and Western consumers alike (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2010; Beraja 2016), and the second-hand luxury retailers maintain good standards of store environment and whilst these were a long way off the excesses of luxury flagship stores found in the glitzy malls of Dubai, they were in line with the quality of product being sold and the consumers shopping in them, after all, despite being secondhand, much of the merchandise in this second-hand luxury segment still commands retail prices in the thousands of pounds. The retail environments were characterised by opulent, luxury fittings, sophisticated displays and comfortable relaxing surroundings, whilst maintaining the element of exclusivity and secrecy. For example, Garderobe's remote location in a villa is important for secrecy and discretion, but inside the customer finds a high-quality retail outfit.

In both the case of Reems Closet and Garderobe, the business owners had partners and/or employees of Arab descent to assist with negotiating deals, providing an understanding of the local laws and customs and deal certain clients and customers, ensuring that the sociocultural issues were understood and responded to in the business and consumer transactions.

## 5.8 Summary

The secondhand luxury market in Dubai is a small but growing market. It is a highly unusual market given the relative widespread wealth in this region, and its uniqueness, derived as a result of the make-up of consumers, with a broad range of wealth, and the mix of Arab and

Westerners contributes to both the availability of secondhand luxury product as well as the demand to purchase it. These sociocultural and economic factors make the market for secondhand luxury in Dubai unique. In the cases researched in this project, there were signs of expansion across borders into neighbouring countries where the Luxe market is growing or well established and where there is potential for untapped secondhand product and potential for consumer demand too. However, unless these neighbouring countries replicate the Dubai model of relaxed religious attitudes, open tourism, extreme high-profile mega projects in building/leisure and providing a hub for foreign company business operations, it will be difficult to replicate the heady mix of expats and locals and the unique demand pattern this creates for the sale and purchase of secondhand luxury.

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