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A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF AFRICAN LUXURY – A SOUTH AFRICAN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Luxury consumption, specifically luxury brands are generally regarded as globally homogenous and consistent across cultures. However, McCracken's work on culture and consumption, established that cultural values and meaning are conveyed through consumption and discharge varying meanings across different cultures (McCracken, 1986). In emerging luxury growth markets such as South Africa (SA), culturally framed antecedents and consequences of luxury consumption differ from established markets in Europe, the USA and Japan. More specifically, these contrast with societal structures in India (Shahid & Paul, 2021; Shukla, 2012; Tak, 2020), Confucian values in China (Bian & Forsythe, 2012; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998) or religion in the Middle East (Marciniak & Mohsen, 2014; Teimourpour & Hanzaee, 2011) and to a lesser extent in the African context (Madinga & Maziriri, 2019; Steinfield, 2015). Despite these insights, no attempt has been made to conceptually establish luxury and its values and meaning within a culturally constituted emerging luxury growth market.

Veblen (1899) first conceptually defined the primal philosophy of Western luxury as a perceptual marker reinforcing an individual's social stature. It has been heralded as a lifestyle enabler for affluent individuals to leverage their purchasing power to access rare, incomparable, and unattainable luxuries (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2019). In their cross-cultural studies, Shukla and Purani (2012) highlighted the importance of culture level differences in collectivist societies such as SA, stating their value in influencing social identity and luxury purchase motives. Typically, emerging middle-class consumers have an externally motivated self-concept due to their heavy reliance to comply with social norms and to signal status and recognition from peers (Shukla, 2008; Shukla & Purani, 2018). Evaluating the role of social groups in influencing luxury consumption culture, and dependency on the social context to frame a luxury consumer's perception of value is important and thus establish culturally bound luxury concepts e.g. African luxury.

Africa's widely embraced philosophy of *Ubuntu* speaks of the continent's humility and common code for cohesion and generosity (Mooij, 2010; Hofstede, 2011) and thus incongruent with Western luxury values of materialistic displays of success. *Luxe Ubuntu* is the notion of community consciousness and the values based on which Africa's luxury fundamentally differs from the West, as purposeful and driving motives for luxury consumption in Africa premised on the collective values of *Ubuntu* (Martin-Leke & Ellis, 2014). The emergence of the *Afro Luxe* as a new, dynamic and affluent class of African consumers embracing their heritage and reclaiming their traditional pride is driven by status and prestige-seeking behavior that reflects their success by the money they have amassed as an indicator of self-enhancement (Crosswaite, 2014).

South Africa is leading the renaissance of luxury in Africa with a celebration of heritage giving rise to more ethnocentric African luxury, which has increased this consumer's desire to enjoy distinctive products without having to discount their cultural identity (Stiehler, 2016). The *Afro Luxe* have acquired a refined taste which justifies the high expectations they have for luxury brands to understand their unique set of challenges, tastes, preferences, behaviors and consumption needs. They are likely to apply a much less complex value metric than their Western counterparts, to determining their luxury perceptions and subsequent purchase behavior. For luxury brands to succeed in Africa they would have to be principled on communal ethics, cohesion, and common upliftment by assigning meaning and social value that drive self-perception which transcends individuality (Martin-Leke & Ellis, 2014; Lian et al, 2017; Picarelli, 2020).

The *Brand Luxury Index (BLI)* applies value-based dimensions to articulate how luxury brands are perceived in relation to oneself, utilized and measured by luxury consumers and their significant others; the *BLI* is a widely utilised scale to measure luxury brand dimensionality, and provides a social context for consumers to decode luxuriousness in

(Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). However, additionally, the influence of cultural dimensions has been acknowledged as justifiable in explaining the heterogeneity in luxury consumption across different markets (Conejo et al., 2020).

Smith and Colgate's (2007) framework regards luxury consumer decision-making as a non-linear process evaluating dimensions of value, incorporating utilitarian and economic perspectives driving consumption from a functional and investment aspect; for instance, price-quality is closely linked with exclusivity for consumers in individualist societies (Aliyev & Wagner, 2018) whereas it manifests as price-consciousness among South African consumers evaluating their affordability to access luxury brands (Kim and Johnson, 2015). At a more functional dimension, price and quality emerge as a prominent theme which the initial BLI offered as a key perception of value that drives brand choice among Western consumers. Many of the studies contextualized regionally have been widely impactful in understanding the influence of local culture on the luxury consumption psyche of emerging geographies (Kim & Johnson, 2015). Thus, conceptually, African Luxury attempts to integrate *Ubuntu* values with Western luxury values.

To demonstrate the levers of influence on luxury consumption in South Africa (SA), we opted for focus groups to collect data that investigates the consumer's measurement of value. We gathered qualitative focus group data to be explorative and purposely concentrated from 30 participants across six focus groups of key informants, moderated in a focused environment and recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes. Participants were professionals and entrepreneurs in the private and public sectors in management, executive or c-suite level positions with relatively high-income levels which classify them as middle to upper class with shared lifestyles, common interests, similar social experiences, professional expertise, and geographic location (Johannesburg metropolitan, South Africa) to represent diverse opinions; they were all either already consuming luxury or aspiring towards it. Data was analyzed using the NVivo 12 software to refine the data collected and draw re-emerging themes to validate observations between different focus groups.

From this analysis 12 themes of African luxury values emerged (see **TABLE 1**) and contrasted with existing literature specifically to identify (1) congruence with previously identified Western values based luxury concepts – classified as *Traditional Maintained* -, as well as (2) *Traditional redefined* values and (3) *non-traditional emerging* values that are underpinned by the emerging market luxury consumption literature (see **FIGURE 1**).

Traditional-maintained refers to themes that are consistent with traditional western luxury value frameworks. As SA consumers become more affluent, **history/ heritage** begins to feature as their value perceptions draw closer to the orthodox Westernized luxury consumption behavior (Dubois et al., 2021). **Price and quality** are on par with the **conspicuousness** value in **prestige-seeking** collectivists like South Africans, an important determinant of purchase intentions (Aliyev & Wagner, 2018). African luxury consumers are known to be status and prestige-seeking consumers, a key facet driving luxury consumption amongst collectivist consumer groups in this study (Crosswaite, 2014; Wiedmann et al, 2009). Supporting local **craftsmanship**, promoting community spirit and authentically capturing our stories and experiences in the creation **timeless** luxury products (Martin-leke & Ellis, 2014). This has a close association to conspicuousness which is also an emerging affluent trait and a key influence on SA's entry level luxury market (Crosswaite, 2014).

Traditional-redefined are themes present in Western luxury concepts, however their valance differs and needs to be redefined to draw more context and relevance to the region. **Hedonism** is less of a motive for luxury consumption in SA unlike the West (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2019; Lee et al., 2019; Shukla, 2012; Shukla & Purani, 2012). The majority of elite black South Africans who claim to have 'made it', automatically perceive themselves as successful defining their identity according to their material possessions as extended self rather than personal values (Crosswaite, 2004). In SA, the cultural diversity prompts **rarity/ uniqueness** rather than exclusivity of access (Fionda & Moore, 2009).

Non-traditional emerging values are African-specific variables which we expect to emerge as new. **Authenticity** strives for a balance of the *Traditional Maintained* values of craftsmanship and timelessness (Martin-Leke & Ellis, 2014). New money induces **materialism**, and this is a typical trait for SA consumers that strive to acquire luxury products for the sake of external validation (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2019). Luxury desirability stems from the contemporary interpretations of **traditional** creativity based on SA's cultural diversity (Crosswaite, 2014).

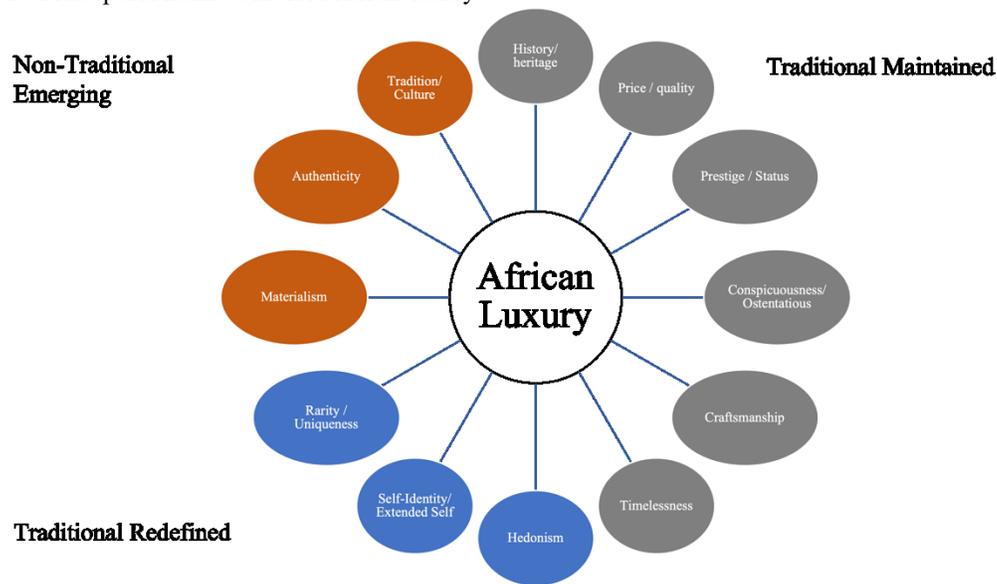
TABLE 1: Exemplary Focus Group Extracts

VALUE DIMENSION	DATA EXTRACT
Hedonism	“Luxury for me is an art worth investing in, and I’m more willing to buy brands that make an effort in the experiences they give me beyond just buying their products. I want to feel important and exclusive”
History/ heritage	“it’s fairly young, so it’s not tried and tested with my palate, so I’d go with what I know. But also I just obviously think there’s a level of refinement that comes with time, and I think given more time, it will be more refined”
Prestige/ status	“There’s a lot of emotions attached to this bag is that if you carry it. Number one, you must be important. You must have a lot of money you have, because not a lot of people own that bag it’s a privilege to own it”
Self-identity/ Extended self	“There are certain statement pieces by Western luxury brands that I would want to have in my wardrobe”
Conspicuousness/ ostentatious	“As soon as something is overexposed, it doesn’t matter if it’s with people that are close to me then it doesn’t seem exclusive, and I tend to stay away from that thing”
Price-Quality	“I would still pay more for B obviously being a champagne versus an MCC”
Rarity/ uniqueness	“I think it’s just a nice clash of the two worlds of like German engineering and African art”
Materialism	“I love it when I can show my friends that I’ve arrived, especially when they like my posts on social media. It makes me feel good especially cos I work hard to be able to afford this”
Culture/ tradition	“And the reason I would go with B is because I’m an African. And for us, our cultural heritage is the dress that we wear”
Authenticity	“So, it’s definitely A for me. Yeah, it’s a personal favourite of mine, I like its authenticity as well. And, again, it’s a South African woman that started it.”
Craftsmanship	“I do believe a lot more effort that has gone in producing this design, as opposed to Burberry which is, I think, you know, they’ve been reproducing this design over so many years...it seems more like an item that’s been mass produced”
Timelessness	“but also when there’s a time factor to it, you know I can look at Cartier, and 20 years from now, it’s still valuable because of the time passage that has passed for me that’s where I find value and I look at that”

A conceptual understanding of sub-Saharan Africa culturally bounded luxury is needed to inform marketing practices from consumer goods, communications, supply chain and distribution to pricing as sub-Saharan Africa develops economically, giving rise to more affluent consumer groups. We lay the foundations for a culturally bound understanding of luxury, which acknowledges some global elements of luxury (Kapferer, 2016) but equally establishes Africa specific values rooted in culture within the concept and thus offering explanatory power for emerging market luxury research (Shukla, 2012) and thus extend the conceptual understanding of luxury overall.

Even though exploratory in nature, insights with managerial implications. Rather than attempting to emulate Western luxury brands to capitalise on cultural relics (Crosswaite, 2014; Steinfeld, 2015) or related cues that cannot be replicated by non-African luxury businesses. Therefore, emerging or aspirational African luxury businesses should highlight their non-traditional emergent luxury values associated with of authenticity, materialism and culture/tradition from an *Ubuntu* context as these are valued by African luxury consumers; similarly redefined traditional luxury values should feature alongside non-traditional emergent African luxury values to differentiate themselves from Western brands and appeal to consumers in a way that Western luxury brands are not able to. Since our findings deviate from established Western luxury assumptions in parts, business support, access to funding and policy on a broader scale need to shift and recognise the value of African luxury business embracing *Ubuntu* values as part of their business model and should be encouraged to do so.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework for African luxury



However, the exploratory nature of this study has limitations. Thus, future research is needed to explicitly explore values within other emerging markets as these are likely to differ from Africa's *Ubuntu*, some of which have already been acknowledged in the literature e.g. Islam or religion in general (Teimourpour & Hanzae, 2011) or Confucian values (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Equally, further research of this framework in the African context is needed; whilst this exploratory study is from a South African perspective, this luxury concept and its values form the basis for scale development and quantitative testing within sub-Saharan Africa context to establish its broader validity or identify gaps and weaknesses in the concept/ framework. In conclusion, we highlight the importance to acknowledge culture bound values within a global phenomenon of luxury consumption and extend existing concepts of luxury. Our findings offer actionable insights for African luxury businesses, and we identify future research opportunities to further explore the African Luxury Concept.

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