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The impact of exposure to luxury brands on social media on self-esteem, conformity, and the counterfeit market.

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Abstract

Billions of people worldwide use a variety of social media platforms, with Facebook alone amassing "1.56 billion daily active users as of March 31, 2019" (Appel et al., 2019). The majority of luxury consumers are daily active users of social media for personal use or to research products and trends. The counterfeit market cannot survive without the foundations built by luxury brands. There is an abundance of literature available on both of these industries discussing them in relation to the research objectives to some extent.

This research paper investigates the impact of exposure to luxury brands on social media and its effect on self-esteem, conformity, and the counterfeit goods market. This investigation is carried out using primary and secondary data. Secondary data in the form of a literature review is used to examine the evidence relating to the chosen research objectives and hypotheses. A quantitative questionnaire is used as the methodology tool to gather primary data to further expand on the secondary data findings, with a total of 186 respondents.

The findings of this study reveals that exposure to luxury brands on social media have little impact on self-esteem, conformity, and the counterfeit market of the research sample. It is evident that more research should be undertaken to revaluate and re-examine the results using the recommendations for future research.

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Study

The aim of this research study is to uncover the effects on consumers as a result of exposure to luxury brands on social media. This dissertation will be divided into a total of seven sections:

- Introduction

- The Literature Review

- Research Question

- Methodology

- Findings and Analysis

- Conclusion, Limitations, & Recommendations

Constant changes in consumption and society cause some research to become outdated. The role of self-esteem as a deciding factor when making purchase choices differs from consumer to consumer. Researchers have examined in detail the effects of high self-esteem and low self-esteem as drivers of behaviour. Veblen's theory discussing esteem and consumption highlight the relationship of personal evaluations and consumption habits (Burnasheva and Suh, 2020). Consumers decide on whether they allow themselves to be independent in their purchase choices or influenced by social groups. Fans of luxury products often adopt the brands characteristics, and project their expectations on other members within the social group. Attributes of exclusivity, trendiness, status seeking, and expensiveness become a lifestyle.

Changes in societal norms and the rising popularity of social media platforms have an impact on consumers self-evaluations due to online comparisons. The luxury market has taken the world by storm, with spending in China alone amounting to $75.1 million in 2016, with expectations of global figures to reach $405 billion by 2025 (Mundel, Soopramanien and Huddleston, 2021). From the literature, Choi et al. (2018) found that 75% of luxury consumers are active users of social media, exposed to thousands of advertising messages daily. Luxury consumers can be categorised into different groups based on their experiences. Older consumers were previously their main cohort as they had the product knowledge and finances to support their purchase. Everchanging consumption habits meant that younger

consumers, also known as "spendthrifts", utilise social media and society to gather information on trends and brands to inspire their purchases.

In a consumption context, conformity refers to "consuming behaviour that consumers must have because of social and group pressures." (Juan Li and Su, 2007). This research project frequently references social groups and their influence on society. The effects of this influence have varying impacts depending on the situation if it is online or face-to-face. Limei and Wei (2020) claim that pressure from these social groups is weakened in an online context, this study examines levels of conformity based on social media exposure. A number of personal factors influence conformity levels. Fear of missing out and dread of social exclusion can cause consumers to completely alter their preferences to gain or maintain membership to luxury social groups. Those concerned with others perception of them are known to purchase expensive and unnecessary goods to conform to their ideal society.

Whether consumers prefer luxury or counterfeit goods for whichever reason, their income and finances will reflect their ability to make purchases. Theorists such as Veblen state that income directly affects self-esteem, it impacts a person's ability to purchase not only unnecessary goods but to cover basic needs. This study is concerned with disposable income in particular, how consumers choose to spend their leftover funds once all bills and necessities have been paid. Wealthy consumers do not have to second guess if they can afford luxury goods, and certainly in most cases do not consider counterfeit goods as a viable option. Individuals with lower disposable income who wish to signal an aura of wealth or status often turn to counterfeit goods to portray this image within means of their budget. There is limited literature examining the impact of income and counterfeit goods in relation to its positive or negative influence on counterfeit attitudes and purchase intentions.

The rise in popularity and the inaccessibility of luxury goods led to an increasing demand for counterfeit goods. The counterfeit market is responsible for a loss of 7% of worldwide business or €700 billion a year (Pratt and Zeng, 2019). An important element of this study is to examine participants opinions on their attitudes and purchase intentions towards counterfeit goods as a consequence of luxury brand exposure on social media. Some academics such as Schor (1998) and Frank (1999) as cited by Hudders and Pandelaere (2011) have been critical claiming that ownership of luxury goods does not make a person happier. There have been many advances in luxury and counterfeit goods, and the way in which consumers make their product choices since this statement, providing an opportunity to

examine the relationship between self-esteem and consumption of luxury and counterfeit goods.

The chosen research objectives and hypotheses created from an examination of the literature are tested using a quantitative questionnaire. The questionnaire is divided into six sections to understand participants opinions and feelings towards the research question, and to test the hypotheses. This is further discussed in Chapter Four: Methodology. Chapter: Five evaluates the findings and analysis. It discusses the results and highlights trends and key findings linking back to evidence from the literature review.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Self-Esteem and Social Luxury Exposure

Self-esteem is defined by Ye, Liu and Shi (2015) as "a positive or negative attitude that estimates the individual's holds about his ability, achievement, value and importance.". The concept of this self-evaluation can be further examined in internal and external capacities. Sheldon et al. (2001) as cited by Truong and McColl (2011) presents self-esteem as a "fundamental need" which can be obtained through materialistic purchases. A factor in the purchase decision making process includes consumers need for improvement and protection of their current self-esteem values. Purchasing behaviour of consumers is not always rational, "vanity and status" are becoming increasingly popular factors enabled by social media and the constant exposure to other people's lives. Higgins 1987 theory of self-discrepancy centres on the emotional repercussions of "the disagreement between the different selves". The negative differences between ones true and ideal self can ultimately lead to "compensatory behaviors" such as consumption to restore somewhat of a balance. (Öztek and Çengel, 2020). Although Higgins 1987 theory believes there is a negative difference between the true and ideal self, it is worth investigating the idea that compensatory behaviours occur through all levels of individual self-esteem, a constant need to consume to improve.

Rosenberg has conducted many studies and measures of self-esteem, most famously 'The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale' as it can be applied in a universal context. The scale consists of five positive and negative statements rated on a four-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Roth and Altmann, 2020). The scale is universally accepted and applauded due to its adaptability. However, critics have often looked at elements which may be improved. Greenberger et al. (2003) have questioned the wording and dimensionality of the scale, and its impact as a result. This study showcases Owens (1994) re-worded, eight-item version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, with results highlighting a relationship between self-deprecation leading to depression and vice-versa. Although there have been debate and criticism regarding the original Rosenberg scale, it remains the most popular and utilised method of measuring self-esteem globally.

In the consumer world, studies have shown that there is correlation between self-esteem and consumption habits. Wang Xue et al. (2014) as cited by Ye, Liu and Shi (2015) claims that those who experience high self-esteem have a positive outlook and without care for external opinions. On the contrary, individuals with low self-esteem experience negativities such as

feeling insecure or fearful and are more likely to tailor their behaviour following the actions of others. (Ye, Liu and Shi, 2015). Previous research shows that consumers with high self-esteem do not alter their consumer preferences when their identity is threatened by external forces, however those with low self-esteem will purchase goods not associated with their true identity but what they believe others will approve of. (Ye, Liu and Shi, 2015).

Burnasheva and Suh (2020) reference Veblen's theory whereby self-esteem has a direct correlation to the volume of possessions one owns. The concept of conspicuous consumption allows for those with lower self-esteem, and the financial resources, to attempt to increase their levels of esteem. It may be assumed that those exhibiting traits of low self-esteem will do whatever it takes to increase this, however research shows patterns of reluctance due to "insecurities and self-doubt". The need or want to compensate for low self-esteem can be overshadowed by psychological negativities. Stuppy, Mead and Van Osselaer's (2020) study of self-esteem in consumption places consumers in the low self-esteem category as those with a need to "self-verify". This self-verification offers a sense of "predictability, safety, and self-protection" as those with low self-esteem fear disillusioning expectations or rejection from peers and society. In comparison, high self-esteem individuals have a natural tendency to "self-enhance" as they view themselves as at minimum equal to others if not better. Their preferences include consumption of products or goods to enhance external attention and compliments. (Stuppy, Mead and Van Osselaer, 2020). This evaluation of consumers with either low or high self-esteem highlights patterns in consumption habits and rationale for purchase. The opinions and views of others impacts each side differently, sparking interest into whether levels of self-esteem has an effect on conformity consumption.

Schor (1998) and Frank (1999) as cited by Hudders and Pandelaere (2011) claim that "people who own luxuries are no happier than people without luxuries." This statement may be outdated due to its timeline, recent literature shows a relationship between luxury consumption and self-esteem, the extent to which can be investigated further.

Social media has steadily consumed the lives of many, continuously with the introduction of new platforms and sites. Social media can provide "personal identity, entertainment, empowerment, social interaction and information" with varying levels of span and regularity from users. This exposure to brands and peers on social media ultimately results in varying levels of 'social comparison'. Festinger's social comparison theory expresses that those on social media commonly compare themselves on the basis of what others have consumed

publicly. (Burnasheva and Suh, 2020). It is not uncommon for people to only share their "best lives", content that highlights their best aspects that may make others envious.

Luxury brands purposely created an image of fashion, exclusivity, desirability, and status (Choi et al., 2018). There are a multitude of justifications for purchasing luxurious goods, rarity and status are frequently stated as prominent factors in the purchasing decision process. Thus, those who purchase luxury goods and regularly post on social media are more than likely sharing their possessions due to excitement or to create envy. Whilst brands will have their own verified social media pages, brand communities are built through specialised pages whereby fans can interact and communicate with each other and the brand itself. Fans can be anyone from a regular customer to a distant admirer, a group of people who have a similar interest on a particular subject. This online community holds both positive and negative connotations, members can appreciate the discussion and interactions made with fellow members, or they may feel pressure to be informed or make purchases. (Jahn, Kunz and Meyer, 2013). Bloggers and influencers have taken the world of social media by storm, changing the way PR and marketing communications have been delivered in recent years.

A social media influencer is defined by Abidin (2016) cited by van Driel and Dumitrica (2020) as a person who "through the textual and visual narration of their personal, everyday [life], upon which paid advertorials – advertisements written in the form of editorial opinions – for products and services are premised.". Influencers and bloggers tend to provide a sense of genuineness and normality that their followers can trust and relate to by sharing snippets of their everyday life. Fashion is one of the biggest industries affecting the worldwide economy, clothing is a basic human need regardless of the price or style. Fashion can offer individualism, a sense of expression, and status. Fashion influencers typically consume vast amounts of clothing as it is their main from of content, showcasing newest products and anticipating upcoming trends. (Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2018). In 2012 an anonymous account was created under the handle 'The Rich Kids of Instagram', the page focused on Instagrammers around the world who led extraordinary and privileged lives, eventually leading to a reality TV show. The "kids" featured on this page unabashedly flaunt their wealth and luxurious lifestyles to hundreds of thousands of followers. (von Wachenfeldt, 2019). Exposure to this content can spur jealously and longing from followers due to the constant display of excessive wealth, luxury, and consumption.

As of 2016, 75% of those who purchase luxury goods also use social media. This is important for brands as they have the platforms to engage and build lasting relationships with their customers with no time or positioning restrictions. Luxury purchases are often unattainable for majority of consumers, with purchase intentions purely hypothetical with higher levels of subjective perception. Previous research shows that a "benefit-based" advertising appeal is more effective as consumers encapsulate the message in its entirety (Choi et al., 2018). Although social media allows for a deeper connection between brand and consumer, luxury advertising still remains to remind consumers of its exclusivity and status. Products, services, or events are used as emotional tools in advertising. Customers are unable to purchase some if not all goods through social media, these platforms are not a substitute for the in-store shopping experience. (Creevey, Coughlan and O'Connor, 2021).

Fashion shows are key events within the industry, Louis Vuitton have frequently streamed their shows across Facebook for fans to experience. Showcasing new products helps consumers recognise trends and plan future purchases accordingly. Womenswear fashion shows typically occur twice a year in London, New York, Paris, and Milan for Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter collections. This constant influx of new products by big name brands sets the trends for the following season, unfortunately resulting in expensive purchases becoming 'outdated' or 'unfashionable'. (Godey et al., 2016)

2.2 Luxury Consumption

"Luxury is a necessity that begins where necessity ends – Gabrielle Coco Chanel (1883-1971)" (Okonkwo, 2014).

A strong brand is a powerful asset to a company, it can be the deciding factor is most product choices or when choosing what type of people to surround yourself with. A brand is the base for symbolising credibility, reliability, and recognition to help consumers feel secure in their decision making process and purchases. Brands are not the company or products themselves, but a "name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of these" (Okonkwo, 2014). Luxury companies owe a proportion of their success to the actual branding strategies, products can only be so successful with strong backing of what a brand represents. Big brands in the luxury industry have the power to control future trends by telling consumers at seasonal fashion week shows what they should be buying. Everyday consumers rely on this guidance from iconic fashion houses to inspire their purchases to remain trendy and not become an outlier to society. Logos visually attract consumers, offering the impression that

the product they may or may not have been aware of holds a certain reputation. Brand equity of luxury companies predominantly consist of intangibles, measured against associations, attitudes, and imagery (Arminen, 2017).

There are many definitions for the term luxury due to the fact that luxury is perceptive, "What is luxury for some, is not for others.". There are however characteristics to describe luxury goods and services. Luxury differs from fashion or premium in that luxury focuses on the brand and its history, rarity in obtaining products, and creating aspiration for status. (Arminen, 2017). Rationale for purchasing luxury brands is rarely due to product functionality. Ownership of luxury goods offers the consumer status, acceptance in particular social groups, exclusivity, desirability, and envy from those who cannot afford such products or prices. Status achieved from these products is a psychological trait appealing to one's self-concept. (Vinerean and Opreana, 2019). Marketing communications are deemed a success when consumers accept the expensive pricing strategies as they believe the value received is sufficient compensation. (Tynan, McKechnie and Chhuon, 2010)

Kapferer proposed a framework for levels of luxury, segmented into "accessible, intermediate and inaccessible luxury brands" (Arminen, 2017). Accessible luxury comes in the form of brand extensions such as cosmetics and perfumes, not to be confused with line extensions which offer new products from the same category rather than an entire new product. They serve as an access for those who have not considered purchasing luxury or cannot afford premium luxury and still wish to be associated with the brand. Brand extensions can also come in the form of homewares, jewellery, children's clothing, hotels, and restaurants. (Hoffman and Coste-Manière, 2012). The iconic brand symbols such as Tiffany & Co's blue box allow for ease of introduction to new products and symbols as consumers recognise the brand and its established reputation.

Luxury consumption presents itself in many forms. Within the boundaries of traditional purchasing, consumers elicit a preference for luxury products that reflect their personal beliefs and values. Consumers who purchase luxury as an exceptional treat due to financial restrictions or with little knowledge of the industry typically gravitate towards "prominent brand identifiers" such as flashy logos and branding. Contrasting this, more experienced customers with affluent wealth prefer less ostentatious or showy products. (Dubois, Jung and Ordabayeva, 2021).

The characteristics associated with luxury brands encourages a need for "uniqueness" among consumers. Showcasing luxury brands and names through products helps to distinguish the user from other members of society. This wanting for uniqueness contradicts the idea of purchasing luxury to be accepted by society. One who is secure in their self-esteem and self-confidence does not care for the opinions of others, this sense of individuality rejects social conformity and does not consider it a factor during the purchase decision making process. Extrinsically motivated consumers are seen to be motivated by products that are "explicitly marked" to remain unique. (Shao, Grace and Ross, 2019)

As mentioned previously, what is determined as luxury is up to the perception of each individual and may differ between product categories from competing brands. (Arminen, 2017). The multidimensional qualities of luxury are dependent on the customers individual needs. Fabrizio Mosca and Gallo (2016) highlight the importance of Wiedmann, Hennings & Siebels' (2007, 2009) luxury value perception model. This model measures the dimensions under "financial, functional, individual, and social value". In terms of finance, luxury products ultimately cost more than average products. It is common for certain products to be bought as investments and kept in perfect condition to resell in the future for a profit. Higher pricing strategies are often justified by the materials used in the products, typically animal fur and leather for durability, with unique products made with reptile skin such as crocodile. Inner materialist values lead way to creating a goal for social acceptance. Rationality is rarely given a second thought in purchases, products such as the Hermes Birkin which can be sold for up to $100,000 and generates waiting list of thousands. This phenomenon cannot be considered rationale, yet the hype and desirability the product produces entices customers even further to become part of the community.

Consumer value refers to the value the customer receives from purchasing and using the products in comparison to the cost of what they've paid. Value differs from each individual depending on their social and financial situation. Consumer research is vital to determine which elements customers consider valuable and utilise this information to provide superior service and create a competitive advantage. (Arminen, 2017).

Customer segments have drastically changed for luxury brands. Previously older consumers with affluent finances had the resources to continuously purchase luxury products, the new luxury consumers are made up of younger "spendthrifts". Although the younger demographic may not purchase as much as previous customers, they possess a higher and

more informative extent of luxury knowledge. (Wu et al., 2015). This cohort of younger customers (typically aged 25-39) have a greater grasp of their self-awareness, rely on their personal beliefs, and have a newfound financial freedom to express themselves. Consuming luxury provides intrinsic rewards such as "pleasure and satisfaction" while simultaneously projecting an external image to be accepted into relevant social groups. (Rossi and Krey, 2019)

Human nature cannot control feelings of want and desire, either as a "bodily function" or a "mental state". Marketing communications by brands recognise consumers sense of desire and exploit this. Celebrity endorsements and PR packages sent to social media influencers expose consumers to brands even if they do not follow them directly. (Kuo and Nahasawa, 2020). Excessive promotion of new releases creates an expected hype and buzz for products, especially if they are limited edition. The introduction of the 'Louis Vuitton Multi Pochette Accessoires' took social media by storm. The bag itself gained popularity due to celebrity and influencer promotion, with the product itself virtually impossible to obtain. Louis Vuitton sold out of this iconic bag both online and in-store, with no confirmation of a restock. The scarcity and rarity of acquiring this coveted handbag along with constant exposure on social media created an incredible sense of desire among non-consumers of luxury and avid fans alike. Studies show that scarcity associated with luxury brands increases desirability for either the product or brands. Although research is limited surrounding desirability of luxury brands, combining the elements of luxury motivations and the theory of desirability, a connection can be made and explored further.

2.3 Conformity Consumption

Members of society who share similar interests and characteristics form what is known as a 'social group', heavily influenced by the groups "opinions, attitudes, and beliefs". Social groups have a direct and indirect role to play in members consumption habits to remain in line with the standards of the groups, resulting in conformity consumption. (Kang, Cui and Son, 2019)

Conformity in an online setting is less invasive than during face-to-face interactions. Consumers may be less likely to conform to the beliefs or opinions of others behind a virtual safety net. Group pressure is weakened, but the volume of information available online and the purchase behaviours of strangers can have a similar affect. (Limei and Wei, 2020). Social media subconsciously enhances the persuasion power of individuals. The publicly expressed

beliefs and opinions by others online lets individuals know that not only have they been exposed to the information, but that it is widely shared with the masses too (Arias, 2018). Exposure on social media to the public behaviours and norms of brands, influencers, and social groups can impact the private actions of consumers.

Social comparison occurs when a personal evaluation is made against "success, wealth, attractiveness and intelligence" in comparison to others in a social setting. This self-assessment derives from levels of self-esteem and the self-concept. Should the individual wish to exert their established social ranking they will focus on differentiating themselves from the masses, highlighting their uniqueness through fashion and consumption. Uniqueness is synonymous with high self-esteem, the confidence in one's decisions and positive personal attributes. Conversely, when the goal is to signify "social identity", conformity is present as consumers tend to base decisions on the opinions and values of others. (Jebarajakirthy and Das, 2021)

Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) is an addictive psychological trait describing the anxiety or unsettling feelings of a person who feels as if they are missing out on an activity or something of relevant interest, often associated with excessive social media usage. There is a prominent relationship between basic and social needs of belonging. The need for belonging derives from a want for recognition and status from peers to reduce the anxiety and risk of isolation. (Kang, Cui and Son, 2019)

Nonconformity in some cases can lead to social exclusion. Rejection in this case is defined by Yang (2019) as a direct statement that the individual is "not popular in social relations", being excluded or disregarded by society. This rejection by a group you wish to be a part of can increase if not start a train of negative psychological thoughts. Self-esteem is endangered by social exclusion, depending on the individual's current state of positive or negative esteem and whether acceptance or rejection is a trigger. Tak, Pareek, and Rishi (2017) as cited by Flynn (2018) proclaims that consumers use luxury goods to strengthen their personal image and self-esteem when comparing their valuables to others. Rejection, or fear of, from social groups inspires consumers to strategically plan their future purchases. Calculated purchases from "anthropomorphized brands" allows consumers to accomplish their social goals (Liu, Loken and Wang, 2020). Rejected individuals from the exclusive world of luxury may consist of those who cannot afford the costly prices or people who infrequently purchase. Rejected consumers are proven to be "more likely to conform to

others' opinions" (Chen, Wan and Levy, 2017). Excluded fans of luxury may turn to counterfeit brands and products to portray the perception associated with luxury and gain acceptance from relevant social groups.

'Bandwagoning' is a concept describing consumers behaviour as a result of increased popularity of products and goods within their social group. Preferences for goods are strictly psychological, with rationale for purchases based solely on the opinions of others. Conspicuous consumption in a social perspective consists of unnecessary and expensive purchases to prove their "richness" to society. (Parilti and Tunç, 2018). Uzgoren and Guney (2012) claim that price as a prestige indicator is of lesser importance than the effect of consuming such prestigious brands. The use of social networking sites and smartphone usage encourages FoMO amongst the vulnerable. Users experiencing an impending detachment from their social group have shown to interact with their desired social group on social networking sites, commonly displaying negative feelings when the lives of their peers seem unattainable. FoMO encourages unreasonable purchasing behaviour and applies pressure to consumers to favour specific brands. (Kang and Ma, 2020). Within the bandwagon effect for luxury goods, consumers have been known to purchase products (with either positive or negative associations) as long as they align with their personal self-image. If luxury is not a viable option counterfeit brands are an alternative at a fraction of the price, albeit an illegal industry. The portrayed image of luxury can allow consumers to gain membership to social communities regardless of restrictive consumption barriers.

The Veblen effect describes consumers need for social status fulfilled by paying higher prices for luxury goods (Balabanis and Stathopoulou, 2021). It can be argued that this is a form of conformity as consumers are willing to pay any price necessary to achieve social gratification from both their social groups and those who wish to belong. Typically when price increases, consumers reject the product, however within the Veblen effect a price increase further distinguishes those who can and cannot afford luxurious goods (Dahm, 2018). The goal is to increase the price to attract true luxury customers, but to not increase the volume of sales to where the products fall into the 'Snob effect' category where too much demand reduces exclusivity. (Radon, 2012).

Kastanakis and Balabanis (2014) define the snob effect as "the extent to which the demand for a consumer's good is decreased owing to the fact that others are also consuming the same commodity.". Consumers with this mindset seek to embrace luxury characteristics

such as exclusivity and rarity in both their purchases and their lifestyles. (Parilti and Tunç, 2018). Consumers showing traits of the 'Snob effect' do not conform to society, they reject the idea of owning products readily available to the masses and with to remain in a bubble of exclusivity and difference. For the product to be considered by snobbish customers, it must be available in limited quantities, with alternatives or counterfeits non-negotiable. (Leibenstein, 1950). The 'need for uniqueness' is expressed through purchasing consumer goods to differentiate from the traditional or popular societal norm, positively related to the snob effect (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2011). Luxury goods enable this due to their often unattainable nature and restricted clientele. External criticism or opinions are not a concern to these individuals as their high self-esteem allows them to confidently make their own choices, decisions made are not conventional by societal standards but allows distancing from social group norms. (Tak, 2020)

2.4 Influence of Income

Öztek and Çengel (2020) emphasise Veblen's 1934 theory that income has an effect on self-esteem. When one is economically secure and in a surplus, unnecessary goods are favoured as an attempt to boost their self-esteem. This is more prevalent within the low self-esteem category, where wealth is displayed as an attempt to enhance their personal reflection. Disposable income refers to the balance remaining once all bills, taxes, and other deductibles have been paid. This leaves a person with money free to spend how they see fit, often spent on unessential goods and increased consumption as the value of disposable income increases. Subsequently, a loss of expected disposable income results in a sole focus on essential goods. Age impacts buying behaviour as the ranking of importance on particular items changes due to circumstances, with priorities altering over the stages of the human life cycle. (Ramya and Mohamed Ali, 2016). Higher levels of disposable income can be attributed to "low inflation, falling commodity prices and low unemployment." (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2006). Increased freedom of spending means consumers can satisfy their desires on goods and services that will make them feel better about themselves. Mid to low level income individuals often sacrifice or downgrade in some aspects of their lives in order to upgrade their purchases. If disposable income is scarce or infrequent, people must prioritise for their situation and decide where the money will be spent on necessities or treating themselves.

Self-esteem is strongly related to levels of happiness and wellbeing, high self-esteem has been linked to substantial happiness (Baumeister et al., 2003). In Reyes-García et al. (2015) study of income and wellbeing, Easterlin (1974, 19995) states that "richer individuals

are likely happier than poorer ones". Many studies have been conducted on the relationship between happiness and income, with scholars discovering that a change in income may provide an increase in happiness, but only short-term before levels return to what they were. Comparison in a social aspect is determined as an underlying factor in the relationship of happiness and income. Yu and Chen (2016) have examined in their research, assuming that an individual's income level will have a positive or negative affect on their emotional wellbeing and happiness. Relative income measures income in comparison to other society members Results of this study shows that relative income is related to happiness, but also negative emotions.

Income essentially determines what consumers can purchase. Affluent consumers have the financial freedom to apportion some of their income to luxury goods. The value of one's income is typically unknown but can be assumed through approximating based on their purchase habits. Balabanis and Stathopoulou (2021) state that regardless of an individual's current financial position, there is an underlying need or instinct to "display their wealth". Ownership of wealth alone is merely insufficient to maintain esteem, there must be physical evidence showcasing affluence to appeal to self-esteem. Quality in products and goods is important to high income earners, this may reflect their choices when choosing luxury goods without consideration for counterfeit alternatives. Lower income earners tend to substitute less desirable yet similar brand choices to fulfil consumption and esteem motives.

Wealth and consumption are used as tools to indicate social status. Income and the longing for social status is divided into four groups by Han et al. (2016), for the purpose of this study there will be a focus on the "parvenus" and "poseurs" groups. Both categories have a common goal for gaining social prestige. What separates the two is the financial ability to purchase luxury goods. Those with less income may also wish to signal an image of wealth, in the case of luxury consumption through the purchase of counterfeits. Literature confirms that counterfeit goods appeal to low income earners, however there is a lack of evidence discussing the role of self-esteem in this relationship and its effect.

The actual value of luxury is interpreted differently depending on the person. Bizarrias, Strehlau and Brandão (2017) have dissected Wiedmann, Hennigs and Siebels' (2007) proposal to measure luxury under four dimensions: "financial value, quality value, individual and social". Financial value relates to the monetary elements associated with luxury purchase, these can be "price, resale and investment". (Bizarrias, Strehlau and Brandão, 2017)

For some, income can be the final decision maker for purchasing either luxury or counterfeit goods. Luxury goods pride themselves on their pricing strategies as part of their appeal and desirability. Studies show that lower income people can have the same intentions and wanting to purchase luxury goods as higher income earners but choose the counterfeit alternative due to financial restrictions. To receive the social and status benefits of luxury goods on a restricted budget, counterfeit goods provide the solution at a lower cost yet offer the sense of belonging and admiration yearned for. (Osman Gani et al., 2019). If a low-income individual has the opportunity to purchase a luxury good at a low price, high-income individuals must then purchase a more expensive item or bigger quantity of the original good to maintain their image of wealth and status. (Ergun, 2021)

2.5 The Counterfeit Market

The counterfeit market is one of the most rapidly growing businesses worldwide, resulting in "7% of all global commerce" as of 2018 (Antonopoulos et al., 2018). Successful branding is one of the most powerful tools an organisation can possess. The counterfeit market essentially "steals" the product, packaging, logos, and persona of the luxury good to convince consumers that the product is genuine or authentic. Imitation of goods is illegal due to intellectual property and trademark rights. This industry would not exist without customer demand. Purchasing luxury brands comes with both internal and external benefits such as status, esteem, and belonging. Luxury counterfeit goods appeal to these feelings for luxury fans who cannot afford or justify such expensive prices. Physical characteristics are appeased alongside the attributes the brand offers. (Jiang and Cova, 2012)

Consumers attitudes towards products or brands directly influences their intentions to purchase. Harun et al. (2020) as cited by Yaakop et al. (2021) claims that consumers will continue to repurchase from counterfeit brands due to their "positive or favorable attitude" in regard to the products themselves. Previous studies show that regardless of whether a consumer has purchased a luxury or counterfeit good, their attitude will remain favourable towards the luxury brand, however when informed of the price differences between the two this preference then switched (Patiro and Sihombing, 2014). Consumers show favourable attitudes for counterfeit goods when they are under the impression that luxury brands are ripping them off. There is a lower financial risk for imitation goods when the purpose for purchasing is conformity, there is no guarantee that the consumer will be accepted by their desired social group. (Toklu and Baran, 2017). Attitudes are not permanent and are dependent on the current situation. Consumers frequently change their viewpoints when presented with

other opinions, a positive or negative change in finances, education, or self-esteem evaluations.

Purchase intention arises from a number of factors, most prominently personal and social circumstances. The illegality of purchasing or selling counterfeit products rarely deters consumers, mainly due to the ease of accessibility of products (online and in-person) and lack of law enforcement. As a result of their study, Patiro and Sihombing (2014) states that income and age do not explain or show patterns of consumers intentions to purchase counterfeit goods. Income and the proportion of which is disposable may give insight into consumers pre-purchase intentions as the price difference between luxury and counterfeit goods is a standout factor. There must be some level of value in purchases for consumers. The concept of value consciousness states that when a multitude of options are available, consumers' willingness to purchase will increase for the product deemed the most 'valuable'. Wu and Zhao (2021) provide evidence that "high-value-conscious consumers" are price focused, and thus possess a powerful intent to purchase counterfeit luxury goods.

The polarity of pricing strategies is a common theme discussed by academics, although there is a gap in the literature determining whether income affects self-esteem and subsequently attitudes and purchase intentions for counterfeit goods.

"Face Saving" is a notion whereby consumers wish to keep a flattering self-image in a social context, especially during interactions with others. Maintaining this image is vital in luxury consumption, particularly for price sensitive consumers who already feel pressure to fit in with others. (Jiang and Cova, 2012). Any form of luxury from the paper shopping bags and packaging to receipts are bought by low income consumers to feel somewhat of a connection to the brand, these items are not necessarily purchased to showcase on a daily basis but to establish a personal and emotional connection to the brand. Perez, Castaño and Quintanilla (2010) suggest from their research that counterfeit consumers establish their self-concept by envisioning themselves as one who strategically plans their income to achieve relevant maximum pleasure, becoming a consumer who is savvy in their methods. Similarly to face saving, the purchase of replicas fools or misleads those within the desired audience. The process of purchasing imitation goods offers a base to self-express and communicate who the individual is or wishes to be, whilst satisfying the need for social inclusion.

Lascu and Zinkhan as cited by Jiang and Cova (2012) states that conformity heavily influences consumers purchase decisions by based on the opinions of others. Low self-esteem individuals are more likely to be sensitive to observation and reactions from peers and social groups. Once the popular product and brand has been established by the social group, the onus is on the individual whether they will purchase directly from the brand or seek a counterfeit alternative, this decision is largely based on their financial situation and value of disposable income.

The need or want to conform can stem from aspirational characters such as brands, celebrities, and peers. These hierarchical individuals recognise their influence and thus set or promote the latest, acceptable trends. Social networking platforms and other media resources are a driver for exposing everyday consumers to trends that are deemed popular, proposing that these consumer goods are what is needed to fit into society. These trendsetters pride themselves on their ability to differentiate between genuine goods and counterfeits, expressing their distaste for the latter. There is a lack of literature available to suggest whether this public distain from the "elitist" of the social groups affects consumers self-esteem, those who admire their opinions but are unable to afford the lifestyles themselves will be affected by their statements, predictably in a negative light. Juggessur (2009) shows the difference between fashion consumers. The "cognoscenti" are those who possess extensive knowledge about a subject, relying on their own judgements when making purchases as opposed to following social norms. Having said that, conformity consumers will within their means do what is necessary to rival fashion or social norms, either through purchases of genuine luxury, counterfeit alternatives, or approved look-a-likes.

Unfortunately with the rise in popularity of luxury brands, the counterfeit market gains demand. The counterfeit market negatively impacts jobs and sales from the luxury industry, "stealing" their customers for a fraction of their prices. Replicas come in the form of cosmetics, clothing, and electronics. Lower priced counterfeit goods appease fans of luxury by bridging the gap between those who can afford exorbitant prices and those who cannot. The brand itself must be attractive and desirable for replica sellers to manufacture products, dupes of popular brands such as Burberry, Louis Vuitton, and Gucci have been mass produced for sale online or in market stalls. Counterfeit products have seen an increase in quality due to factory production and consumer demand. Imitation luxury goods are produced as such a high quality and durability that they are often undetectable as a fake in comparison to genuine luxury. (Jiang and Cova, 2012)

There are two categories of counterfeiting: deceptive and non-deceptive. With certain products consumers are unable to distinguish replicas from genuine products. Luxury counterfeits are notably non-deceptive, consumers are highly aware of the fact they are not purchasing genuine, authentic products. Price plays a major role in purchase intention for "fake" goods, consumers are seeking the benefits of luxury goods at a price they can afford or are willing to pay. (AR, 2012). Consumers may purchase a counterfeit item and conclude that the cheaper price represents a cheaper quality, opting to purchase the authentic version in the future. Consumers make their decisions for choosing either authentic luxury or counterfeit brands based on if they have genuine interest in the brand and its values, or whether the personal and social benefits of the product outweigh its origin.

Chapter Three: Research Question

Multiple studies have been carried out based on the relationship between exposure to luxury brands and its effect on self-esteem, however there is limited research conducted on the further impact of this relationship on conformity, and purchase attitude or purchase intention for the counterfeit market. Oh (2021) investigated the relationship of "self-esteem and conspicuous consumption" although in terms of social classes. Their research found that those within a higher social class show that self-esteem is in fact "negatively related to conspicuous consumption". Similarly, Parilti and Tunç's (2018) research examines the "bandwagon effects of self-esteem and trait anxiety on luxury consumption behavior". Parilti and Tunç's paper investigated the impacts of self-esteem and trait anxiety but lacks the foresight of where consumers are originally exposed to or find information on luxury brands. Following research prior to this study, the researcher aims to discover in more detail whether there is a relationship between exposure to luxury brands on social media affects an individual's self-esteem, conformity habits, and their willingness to purchase counterfeit goods as a result. The following supplementary research objectives will be assessed to achieve this.

3.1 Research Objectives

Objective 1: To understand the relationship between income and purchase attitudes and intentions towards counterfeit goods.

This objective aims to understand if income levels have an influence on consumers purchase attitude or purchase intentions in relation to counterfeit goods. One of the main characteristics of luxury brands is their pricing strategies, products are placed in expensive categories to exude an image of exclusivity and belonging to a particular societal group or class. These products do not solely attract those with the disposable income to freely purchase, but also attract customers with less income but a desire to own their goods or become part of the brand community. Wu and Zhao (2021) conducted their study analysing consumers' willingness to purchase counterfeit goods. Counterfeit goods allow those with lower incomes to participate in this luxurious lifestyle, often sacrificing quality and expectations in favour of appearance and acceptance. This will be tested amongst a range of incomes to determine a correlation between income and purchase intention or attitudes.

H1a: People with low levels of disposable income have a positive attitude towards counterfeit goods.

H1b: People with high levels of disposable income are less likely to purchase counterfeit goods.

Objective 2: To identify the level of influence exposure to luxury brands on social media has on individuals.

Internet and social media usage has become more common with usage accounting for up to a third or 2 hours and 15 minutes of our daily lives. Social media users in particular emit their "bets lives" or as Burnasheva and Suh (2020) claim, "the ideal and the social self with respect to the brand image.". Studies undertaken by Veblen state that self-esteem is linked to conspicuous consumption and the quantities one possesses. Whether directly from the brand or indirectly from other users or influencers, consumers may experience varying levels of exposure to luxury brand marketing communications on social media. Kim and Ko (2012) as cited by Liu, Shin and Burns (2019) states that marketing content consists of five elements, "entertainment, inter-action, trendiness, customization, and WOM (word-of-mouth)". By implementing these techniques the luxury brands ensure that their messages get spread effectively. WOM advertising to family, friends, and peers can be more effective as it can be seen as authentic or genuine reactions to products or services. This objective aims to uncover the repercussions of exposure to luxurious advertising on an individual's self-esteem.

H2: Exposure to luxury brand marketing on social media negatively impacts people's self-esteem.

Objective 3: To examine the interrelationships between self-esteem and conformity.

Conformity to trends or consumption are not recent phenomena, prevalent with the introduction and popularity of brands such as Canada Goose or Moncler both in-person and online. It is natural as a member of society, regardless of which group, to be influenced consciously and unconsciously by those around you. Fear of missing out (FoMO) links to conformity in that consumers experience psychological and social needs of belonging. Dependent on one's self-esteem, their likelihood of compliance to social norms may be positive or negative. (Kang, Cui and Son, 2019). Souiden, M'Saad & Pons (2011) as cited by Toth (2014) further reinstates the concept that there is a relationship between conspicuous consumption of luxury goods and a desire to increase self-esteem. Consumers have been shown in their purchase behaviours to consumer products and goods seen to reflect their self-image. (Khalid et al., 2018). The goal of this objective is to examine the subject's evaluation of their self-esteem and conformity habits.

H3: People with lower self-esteem are more likely to conform to societal norms.

Objective 4: To analyse the impact of luxury brand exposure on social media and how it affects attitudes towards counterfeit goods.

Luxury products are not intended to be consumed by the masses, but for those amongst the higher classes and social groups. There are a multitude of factors contributing to luxury pricing strategies such as materials, overall quality, brand name, and association. The unattainable nature of these products for avid fans of luxury brands often leads to an increase in popularity for counterfeit goods. Wu and Zhao (2021) highlight the importance of attitudes in the "theory of planned behavior". Stravinskiene, Dovaliene and Ambrazeviciute's (2014) study of counterfeit brands found that advertising communications of luxury brands has somewhat impact on the counterfeit market. The purpose of this objective is to understand the external influences on consumer attitudes of the counterfeit market.

H4: Exposure to luxury brand marketing on social media positively impacts people's attitudes towards counterfeit goods.

Objective 5: To determine whether high conformity traits encourages consumers to purchase counterfeit goods.

Although consumers may experience feelings of high conformity and a need to belong to social groups, this may not always translate into an actual purchase. The aim of this objective is to establish a connection between motive to conform and a readiness or willingness for actual purchase intention. Purchase intention is inclusive of a number of external factors. Analysing purchase intention provides marketers with insight into purchase behaviour for the future. (Xi and Cheng, 2017). Several studies have been carried out on counterfeit purchase intention, for the purpose of this research the focus will specifically be in relation to conformity traits.

H5: People with high levels of conformity are more likely to purchase counterfeit goods.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1 Research Philosophy

Chege and Otieno (2020) state research philosophy as "the set of beliefs concerning the nature of the reality being investigated and the choice of the type of research philosophy applied in an area of research study depends on the knowledge being investigated". This assumption surrounding the evolution of knowledge can be as intense or as simple as the researcher intends. Assumptions are made during each stage of the research and aid in the development of research question. Relevant and appropriate assumptions form the basis for the entire project from methodological choice to analysing findings and link all elements together cohesively. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019)

To further understand the concept of reality, it can be categorised into three paradigms of positivism, interpretivism, and realism. Positivism and objectivism are directly interconnected concepts. No personal bias is present from the researcher as this approach is concerned with investigations and observations for data collection. (Žukauskas, Vveinhardt and Andriukaitienė, 2018).

The positivist paradigm was first established by Auguste Comte, a French philosopher, to investigate and understand human behaviour. The fundamental intent of positivism is to "provide explanations and to make predictions based on measurable outcomes.". Characteristics of this paradigm include the ability to research without context, remove bias from a factual search, develop hypotheses to be tested, and to construct a theory "to account for human and social behaviour". (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). The philosophy of positivism seeks to discover the causes or factoring characteristics of 'social phenomena'. Those with a positivist mindset regard the social world as an external entity that should be viewed with an objective outlook to ensure the researcher maintains an independent perspective. The examination and confirmation of hypotheses are essential elements of positivist research, the data is then investigated to prove or disprove theories. Surveys or questionnaires are common data collection methods within the positivism realm. (Liang, 2018)

4.1 Research Sample

The process of market research can provide different meanings depending on the circumstance, most commonly referred to as "the process by which we gain insight into how markets work." (Mooi, Marko Sarstedt and Mooi-Reci, 2018), in this case consumer behaviours as a result of exposure to luxury brands on social media.

The first step of Lumpur's (2016) sampling process is to establish the target population, the group of individuals who you wish to gain am deeper insight into. In this instance, the target population is social media users who have an interest in luxury brands and an awareness of the counterfeit market. Next step is to define the sampling frame. Contrasting to Lumpur's (2016) process, it is the opinion of Gregoire and Valentine (2008) as cited by West (2016) that prior to drawing a sample from the population, a 'sample frame' is necessary to identify and locate the segments. Frequently when working with larger populations, a list sampling frame may be unavailable. The chosen sample is likely to represent just one segment of the target population, the sample frame must be appropriate for the study's objectives and hypotheses. (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016). The sample frame must include all persons who fall into the target population while eliminating those who don't. The sample frame for this study should fulfil the following requirements:

- Has at least one active social media account

- Is comfortable assessing their self-esteem and conformity levels

- Possesses an interest in or has purchased from luxury brands

- Has an awareness of the counterfeit market

- Not a person who answers questionnaires with dishonesty

Thirdly this process states to choose a sampling technique from either "Probability Sampling" or "Non-probability Sampling". Probability sampling ensures that all portions of the wider target population have an equal opportunity for participation in the study. The main sub-sections of this technique are simple random sampling, systematic random sampling, stratified random sampling, and cluster sampling. Results of probability sampling are sufficient to make generalisations on the population as a whole as there is less bias present. The second sampling technique is non-probability whereby members of the population unknowingly have a greater chance of being selected for research. As a result of this, results contain a bias and cannot be used to generalise the total population. Methods within this technique are convenience sampling, purposive sampling, quote sampling, and "snowball" sampling. (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016). The final steps of the sampling process are to determine sample size, collect the data, and assess response rate (Lumpur, 2016).

After careful consideration of techniques available, non-probability sampling has been chosen for this study. This study has been conducted from a quantitative approach, the

sampling process requires elements of qualitative research due to the following limitations: time, accessibility of participants, expenses, and Covid-19 restrictions have all factored into this decision. Results of this sample are typically unable to construct generalisations about the target population. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling methods have been used. Convenience sampling allows participants to participate based on their own merits or interest, with the process ending once a predetermined quote has been reached or the time limit has elapsed. Subsequently, snowball sampling occurs when questionnaires are distributed through convenience sampling. Once respondents have engaged with the study, depending on their level of interest they may be inclined to encourage other individuals with similar characteristics to take part. (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016). As a result of using convenience and snowball sampling data collection, results cannot be generalised to the total population, but a reflection of the population who participated in the study.

4.3 Research Instrument

"Quantitative research involves the collection of data so that information can be quantified and subjected to statistical treatment in order to support or refute alternative knowledge claims" (Apuke, 2017). Data is collected in the form of statistics and numbers to form a final report which can be applied to the general population. The main advantage for this method is that results can be generalised, with interpretations of findings seen as intentional as opposed to coincidence. This research approach relies heavily on hypotheses testing, if required they can be replicated at any given time in the future for further research. As with all forms of data collection there are disadvantages. As the topic is of personal interest there must remain an element of 'researcher detachment' to avoid a bias, with participants unaware of their level of personal involvement. Quantitative study requires the researcher to direct the entire course of the study from the research question to analysing the data. This non-flexibility leaves little room for participants to contribute other than when questioned in the data collection tool. As hypotheses and design is predetermined and must be followed, creative thinking or encouragement of imagination is not endorsed. (Daniel, 2016)

Qualitative research is concerned with an investigation of "culture, society and behaviour through an analysis and synthesis of people's words and actions.". Traditional data collection in this approach includes case studies, observation, and focus groups. Technological advancements allows for examination of social media platforms, forums, and emails. Qualitative research aims to analyse "social phenomena" (Hogan, Dolan and Donnelly, 2009), with studies seeking to express the reasoning for people's feelings or thoughts and its

effect on their behaviour. Qualitative research produces results which define a person's opinions and "interprets the meanings of their actions", which is the case in testing the effects of exposure to luxury brands on social media. (Rahman, 2016). Although qualitative approaches result in worded data, this can be translated into a quantitative, numerical format to establish a deeper insight into your findings. (Atieno, 2009). A common disadvantage is the lack of generalisability within smaller sample groups, final findings cannot be a representative of the total population as there was some element of selection in the distribution of the data instrument. (Rahman, 2016). As this data style is concerned with words and phrases rather than numerical statements, ambiguity in interpreting the human language can leave room for error or misinterpretation. (Atieno, 2009). Qualitative research questions can often be vague in nature, quantitative data collection can offer close-ended questions to avoid confusion in respondents. The use of fixed or Likert Scale answers allows for questions to be answered rapidly and avoid long responses. The questions may require a 'word response' which can later be converted into numerical values appropriately displayed on graphs and tables. (Ahmad et al., 2019)

4.4 Questionnaire

The use of a questionnaire as a collection tool is to "gather primary data, seeking people's thoughts and actions." (dos Santos Rocha, 2019). The primary focus for this research study were people who are users of social media who have a level of interest in luxury brands. Participants were asked to complete the survey using the 'Microsoft Forms' template with discrete and private responses. Within quantitative research, questionnaires have been chosen as the appropriate tool and transmit via the following social media platforms: Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and Facebook. Online questionnaires offer ease of accessibility and distribution in comparison to offline. Each of the 186 responses will be examined to prove or disprove the chosen hypotheses and answer the research question. The questionnaire was open July and August 2021 with a total of 186 responses received, with an average time of 7 minutes to complete.

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) was divided into six sections to assess different elements of the research. The first section provided respondents with a brief overview of why the study was being conducted, with a voluntary opt-in box for those taking part to confirm their consent for their responses to be analysed. From this, the second section focused on demographics – gender, age, employment status, and income details. Income is a key variable in the chosen hypotheses, gaining an insight into the value of net and disposable income of

participants allows for testing whether this has an influence into their purchasing behaviour. The age and gender sections were intentionally open-ended to encourage participation from all demographics to avoid generalisation of the population. The third section focused on self-esteem. During the research stage the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSS) was discovered. This scale is designed in a Likert fashion and contains five positive and five negative statements scored on the basis of 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree'. The RSS provides a basis of determining whether self-esteem is impacted as a result of luxury brand exposure on social media. The fourth section analyses normative conformity, these statements were presented in Likert style with answers ranging from 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree' to uncover whether external influences had an effect on attitudes and purchasing behaviour. Statements such as "When buying products, I generally purchase brands that I think others will approve of.", "It is important that others like the products and brands I buy.", and "If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy." were presented to participants. The next section firstly asks participants whether they have ever purchased a counterfeit goods, following with six statements to determine attitudes towards counterfeit goods and six statements discussing purchase intention towards counterfeit goods. The results of these statements will aid in testing the hypotheses alongside the other variables. Finally, the last section asks respondents about their experience with luxury brands on social media. The question of "What social media platforms do you use?" was asked with eight pre-filled answers and an 'Other' section for participants to write other social platforms not listed. The final seven statements ask for opinions about luxury brands on these social media platforms and what level of influence they possess.

4.5 Data Analysis

The Microsoft Forms service automatically generates all results into an Excel spreadsheet for the researcher to download upon completion of data collection. For the purpose of this study, a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software is used to formulate and configure data from the questionnaire from the Microsoft Forms Excel file. Multiple questions rely on word based answers, this software allows the transformation from written to numerical data. (Arkkelin, 2014). The process of analysing data can be a time consuming process, SPSS reduces the risk of mistakes while transforming the data into multiple variables to be interpreted. (Gogoi, 2020). Data is presented in the form of descriptive statistics (summaries of variables created from the data collection process) and inferential statistics

(conclusions drawn from the data of the chosen population) in the form of frequency charts, graphs, and histograms (Shukla, 2018).

4.6 Limitations of The Study

Price and Murnan (2004) define research limitations as "the systematic bias that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the results.". With studies of this style, there are an array of limitations which have an impact on the overall results. Time management was a concern due to external factors, to combat elements of this online questionnaires were chosen. Questionnaires provide a range of advantages, however the global pandemic posed limitations to its distribution. Online dispersal across multiple social platforms was favoured as face to face transmission was unavailable. An equal representation of all demographics for random sampling is difficult to obtain depending on your chosen platforms and demographics of your followers. The online survey supplied a range of ages and income levels offering diversity in perspectives; however it was evident there was an uneven male to female ratio which may affect the overall findings. As a researcher it is impossible to know if respondents are answering your questionnaire absolutely truthfully, untrue opinions can divert the final figures and judgements. Should this study be used in the future for further research, elements of both qualitative and quantitative research methods may be used to gain an extensive insight into a comparison to those who are luxury brand customers who are not active social media users.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

This research study has been conducted in line with National College of Ireland's ethical guidelines and procedures. Informed consent is vital to express to participants throughout the research process. All ethical considerations were followed throughout the research process. Respondents were provided with relevant details of the research to make an informed consent decision with the opening statement, with the option to withdraw from the study at any point. No personal or identifying details were required ensuring participants of their anonymity due to the nature of questions regarding income or self-esteem values. Participants were informed that their answers would be used to facilitate in an MSc Marketing research study, and should they require further information, they could contact the researcher through email.

Chapter Five: Findings and Analysis

5.1 Overall Findings

This section aims to report and analyse the results of the questionnaire and determine their relevance to the study. The results of these findings are not definite, but representative of the sample who participated in the study. The statistics and results presented will consist of a general overview, then discussed under each of the five research sub-objectives. The questionnaire was administered through Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp and Facebook as it was a key factor to own a social media account. Maintaining anonymity of respondents throughout the process is important, it allows the researcher to as sensitive questions regarding income or self-esteem without disturbing the honesty of answers. The questionnaire was constructed asking carefully curated questions associated with the main purpose for this study. The six sections consisted of 'Demographics', 'Self-esteem', 'Conformity', 'Counterfeit Goods', and finally 'Luxury Brands on Social Media'. Results of this survey will be presented in this section in the form of graphs, tables, and diagrams using SPSS, Microsoft Excel and data from Microsoft Forms. The chosen research objectives are analysed using the Pearson correlation coefficient or Pearson's r.

5.1.1 General Statistics

The following statistics provide context to understand more about participants and their background. The average age of respondents is 35 with a mode age of 22, the largest proportion is the 21-30 age group at 31%. The lowest group representative is 60+ with one person. Full-time employment is the most popular occupational status followed by part-time employment. Income was first introduced in the survey by asking respondents what their pre-tax monthly income is. 58 people (31%) within the group earn €1,000-€1,999 monthly before tax deductions. The next popular income range is €2,000-€2,999 with 55 people (30%). 45 participants (24%) receive between €0-€999 a month. 18 respondents earn more than €4,000 per month, with the majority answering that they work full-time. 10 group members (5%) take home €3,000-€3,999 pre-tax monthly income. Ownership or purchasing of counterfeit goods is not necessary to take part in the questionnaire, the question was asked as a lead into the counterfeit attitude and purchase intention sections. 74% or 137 respondents chose 'Yes', with 26% or 49 stated that 'No' they have never purchased a counterfeit good.

Figure 1: Questionnaire - Have you ever purchase a counterfeit good?

● Yes	137
● No	49

5.2 Objective 1

The first objective of this study is to understand the relationship between income and purchase attitudes and intentions towards counterfeit goods. To determine if disposable income is a barrier affecting consumers attitudes in preferences for luxury or counterfeits. Pre-tax income was asked as to not confuse respondents, leading into the next question of disposable income, the value left over once all necessities and bills have been paid. Microsoft Forms displayed responses in a bar chart showing the three most popular answers are €250-€499 (37 people), €100-€249 (35 people), and €1-€99 (35 people). Interestingly, 14 out of 186 respondents state that they have no disposable income once they have taken care of necessities. 25 people from the group have the ability to spend €500-€749 monthly to treat themselves, followed by 17 people left with €750-€999. The higher cohort of earners of 21 respondents can spend between €1,000-€2,499 on additional consumer items, with just 2 participants amassing over €2,500 in disposable income each month.

Consumers attitudes towards goods provides insights into their thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Six statements were provided in the survey with a Likert scale rating from strongly agree to strongly disagree to determine consumers attitudes. The first statement is "People who buy counterfeit products are committing a crime.", resulting in 38% disagreeing and 10% strongly disagreeing. The second statement asking the criminality of counterfeit sellers, 29% agree with 13% strongly agreeing. In terms of reliability of the goods, just 2% strongly agree with the majority feeling of 39% in disagreement. Price is a key factor in both purchase attitude and intention of counterfeit goods, participants of this survey are 29% in some form of agreement with 41% disagreeing with the statement. The benefits of purchasing counterfeit goods is topical in the literature review. 6% of participants in this questionnaire strongly agree that they are beneficial and 34% are also in agreement. A neutral result of 30% may be due to other factors. Based on attitudes alone, 19% and 11% disagree and strongly disagree that counterfeit goods generally benefit consumers. Finally there is a majority of 37% that believe "There is nothing wrong with purchasing counterfeit products.".

From the literature, the first hypothesis aims to uncover whether attitude towards counterfeit goods is influenced by a consumer's disposable income. A Pearson Correlation test was used to input the two variables. The negative correlation between disposable income and attitude towards counterfeit goods highlights a weak relationship between the variables, $r(184) = -.06$, $p = 0.45$, the null hypothesis is rejected. As the value is close to 0, it signifies a weak relationship between variables. These results show that statistically there is no significant correlation between the two variables. I

in terms of Hypothesis 1a, there is no evidence in this study to support that as disposable income increases, attitude towards counterfeit goods decreases.

Research into current literature shows that the amount of income, mainly disposable income, that a person has will influence their purchase decision making process. It is shown that consumers with lower disposable income often prioritise upgrading their purchases and willingly downgrade in other aspects of their life.

🔵 €0-€999	45
🟠 €1,000-€1,999	58
🟢 €2,000-€2,999	55
🔴 €3,000-€3,999	10
🟣 €4,000+	18

Figure 2: Questionnaire - Pre-tax monthly income results.

The second hypothesis is linked into Objective 1 as it also assesses disposable income. Purchase attitudes are not the same as purchase intention, but they can have an influence on the outcome. Five statements were provided in the survey with a Likert scale rating from strongly agree to strongly disagree. All data was transferred from Microsoft Forms to Excel and SPSS. First glance at the automatically generated Forms graph, the results appear to be swayed negatively. In their study, Osman Gani et al. (2019) state that they found a positive relationship between "price factors and counterfeit purchase intention". As mentioned before, price is an important factor when choosing between counterfeit or genuine goods. 20% strongly agree and 38% agree that "I would buy counterfeit products because the prices of designer products are unfair.". In terms of affordability of luxury or counterfeit goods, 65% disagree that they would still prefer to purchase the replicated version if they can afford the genuine product. There is less agreement regarding future purchase of counterfeit goods due to financial restrictions at 27% for, 45% against, and 27% neutrality. Rationale for statement four, "I will never consider buying counterfeit products.", may be due to a number of external

factors not just pricing and income. 57% people do not rule out that they will purchase counterfeit goods in the future, with just 20% agreeing with the statement. Similarly to statement four, statement five questions whether "The probability that I will consider buying counterfeit products is high.". Results show that 44% agree that may make a purchase in the future with 34% in disagreement, similar to results of the previous statement.

Variables for Hypothesis 1b are disposable income and purchase intention towards counterfeit goods. The results of the Pearson test are as follows: $r(184) = -.09$, $p = 0.21$. There is not a statistically significant correlation between the chosen variables. These results determine that Hypothesis 1b has been disproved, the figures show that levels of disposable income does not have an effect on consumers purchase intention for counterfeit goods. As $p>0.05$, the test fails to reject the hypothesis.

Purchase intention will differ from customer to customer, their rationale determining their budget. Genuine fans of luxury products and their brand values are known to opt-in to purchase the genuine product. The counterfeit market strongly bases its unique selling point on their affordability in comparison to luxury brand prices. Income does not explain direct reasoning but may provide insight into habits or patters.
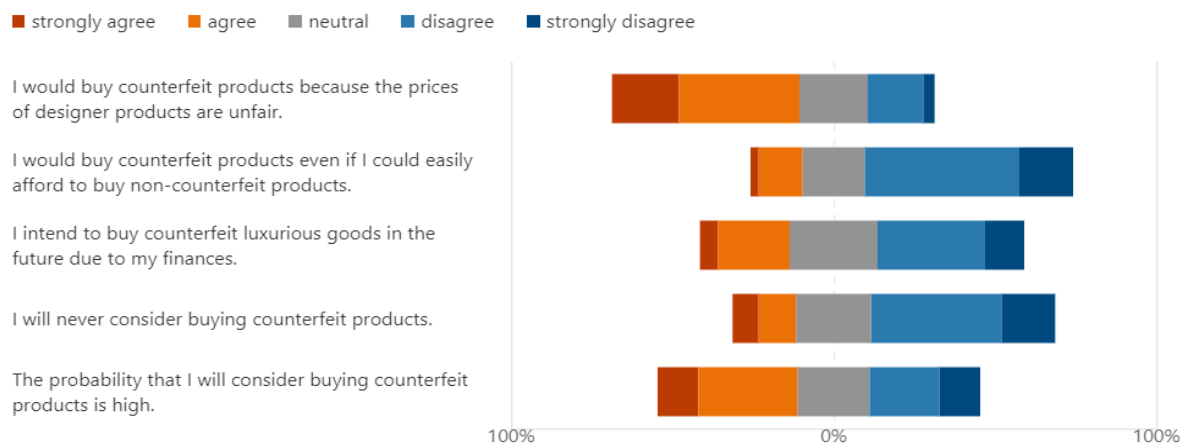
Figure 3: Questionnaire - Attitudes towards counterfeit goods.

5.3 Objective 2

The second objective is to identify the level of influence exposure to luxury brands on social media has on individuals. All respondents use social media as that is where the questionnaire was distributed. When asked which social media websites they use the most popular networking site came in at Facebook with 173 responses, followed by 156 for Instagram, and 117 for YouTube. These sites are popular for sharing photo and video content. The topic of this research project is strongly associated with self-esteem; therefore The Rosenberg Self-

Esteem Scale was used to analyse respondent's personal evaluations. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale scores 10 statements on the basis of strongly agree (SA), agree (A), disagree (D), and strongly disagree (SD). As declared in the 'Methodology' section, depending on the statement the overall individual result can range between 0-30 with each answer scored from 0-3. A result of 15 points or less suggests the respondent may have low self-esteem. The average self-esteem score recorded amongst the 186 participants was 18 which suggests a moderate level of esteem within the group. A frequency chart was made using Excel grouping scores together in intervals of five. Three people scored between 0-5 (which is the lowest), 23 scored 6-10, 33 scored between 11-15, 60 scored 16-20 (the most frequent range), 43 scored 21-25, and finally 24 scored between 26-30. The aim of this objective was to investigate if overexposure to luxury brands and products on social media negatively effects consumers self-esteem.

Results of this test from SPSS show that $r(186) = .07$, $p = .32$. Due to the nature of this result, no evidence to support the hypothesis that exposure to luxury marketing content on social media impacts consumers self-esteem negatively, one variable does not cause a direct increase or decrease in the other chosen variable. Seeing that p>0.05, the test fails to reject the null hypothesis.

Luxury brands pride themselves on desirability and projecting an obvious statement to masses of consumers of what their brand stands for. A constant projection of status, exclusivity, and brand personality tells consumers and non-consumers that this is what their products or services provide, essentially stating that these feelings cannot be achieved otherwise. With online advertising worth an estimated $230 billion as of 2017 (Kaspar, Weber and Wilbers, 2019), it is not uncommon for consumers to be exposed to up to 10,000 advertisements daily. Of course not all of these advertisements will hold recall in the mind, but some may resonate with consumers subconsciously. People will come across luxury goods on social media, whether it is an influencer with structured content, peers, the official brand page itself, or a paid advertisement.
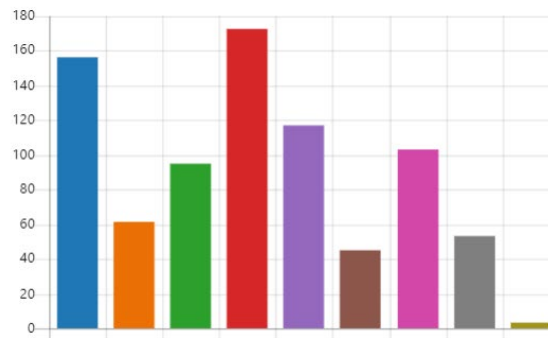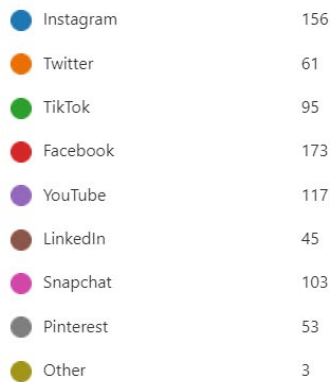
Instagram	156
Twitter	61
TikTok	95
Facebook	173
YouTube	117
LinkedIn	45
Snapchat	103
Pinterest	53
Other	3

Figure 4: Questionnaire - List of social media platforms used by participants.

5.4 Objective 3

The third objective aims to examine the interrelationships between self-esteem and conformity. As previously mentioned, the average Rosenberg Self-Esteem Score amongst survey respondents was 18, with 60 participants scoring above average between 16-20. Participants were asked to answer eight statements about purchase conformity on a five-point Likert scale. Microsoft Forms data shows that there is a clear disagreement from participants with the provided statements. The most prominent reaction is to the statement,, "If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy." with 50% of respondents in disagreement. Respondents rarely opted to stay neutral when answering the provided statements with a minimum of 6% and maximum of 15%.

Score Range	Frequency
0-5	3
6-10	23
11-15	33
16-20	60
21-25	43
26-30	24
Average	
18.65363128	

Figure 5: Frequency table for Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

Hypothesis 3 is concerned with the variables of self-esteem and conformity. There is a weak correlation present The findings for this hypothesis based on self-esteem and conformity variables are: $r(186) = -.11$, $p = .12$. From these figures we can conclude that changes in self-esteem are not strongly correlated with feelings of conformity. The results do not offer significant evidence to show that an increase or decrease in self-esteem will affect an individual's conformity values. Once again $p>0.05$ at a value of 0.12, a weak result and failing to reject the null hypothesis.

Cooley's "notion of the "looking glass" self" states that an individual self-evaluation of esteem reflects the views from those who are influential or are deemed important, especially

from unattainable social groups. Association with social groups disregards individual perspective in favour of the "larger collective".(Jetten et al., 2015). Traits of "uniqueness" is common amongst consumers with high self-esteem. They do not require external validation in their purchases, and as a result reject the idea of conforming to others' opinions. Consumers seeking to project their uniqueness may purchase goods that are popular or mainstream, but their internal thought process does not suggest they make the purchase to conform to society. The fear of missing out (FoMO) is experienced in varying degrees by "approximately 70% of all adults in developed countries" (Argan and Argan, 2019). Zhang et al. (2016) state in their study that "excessive strong conformity leads to lower self-esteem". Conformity as a basic human need, stimulating good or bad behaviours. Conformity behaviours mimicking social groups is formed on trust, but this is often seen as a weakness in the person and their esteem. (Upgris et al., 2018)

Correlations

		SelfEsteem	Conformity
SelfEsteem	Pearson Correlation	1	-.114
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.120
	N	186	186
Conformity	Pearson Correlation	-.114	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.120	
	N	186	186

Figure 6: Pearson correlation coefficient table for 'self-esteem' and 'conformity'.

5.5 Objective 4

To analyse the impact of luxury brand exposure on social media and how it affects attitudes towards counterfeit goods. Participants were asked to rank their experiences with luxury brands on social media across seven statements. The benefits of purchasing counterfeit goods is topical in the literature review. 6% of participants in this questionnaire strongly agree that they are beneficial and 34% are also in agreement. A neutral result of 30% may be due to other factors. Based on attitudes alone, 19% and 11% disagree and strongly disagree that counterfeit goods generally benefit consumers. Finally there is a majority of 37% that believe "There is nothing wrong with purchasing counterfeit products.".

Variables drafted from this hypothesis are social media exposure and attitude towards counterfeit products. Data from SPSS Pearson correlation show $r(186) = -.11$, $p = .13$, rejecting the null hypothesis. Once again there is a weak relationship present between the two

variables. There is not enough evidence from this test to determine that social media exposure significantly positively impacts consumers attitudes for counterfeit goods.

Consumers are over-stimulated with advertisements and screen time, with smartphone usage representing "80% of total digital time" (Islam et al., 2021). Social media is used not only to create personal relationships with your peers, but for brands to connect with consumers to project their communication strategies. Brands can try penetrating the mind of consumers, but ultimately user-generated content has a stronger effect on "brand equity and attitude". (Chung and Kim, 2019). Attitudes can form as a reflection of personal or external influence. It may not be an easy task to determine whether a product is genuine or counterfeit though a screen or social media. If the sole purpose for wanting designer goods is to flaunt it on social media, a good quality replica will achieve the same effect and benefits at a lower cost. There is unfortunately always a risk that the consumer will be caught and shamed for owning a counterfeit good. Although there is less control for leaders of social groups online, the deceitful notions of purchasing imitation luxury can be spread wide and far across networks leaving the consumer with an unfavourable reputation and tainted attitude towards counterfeit goods.
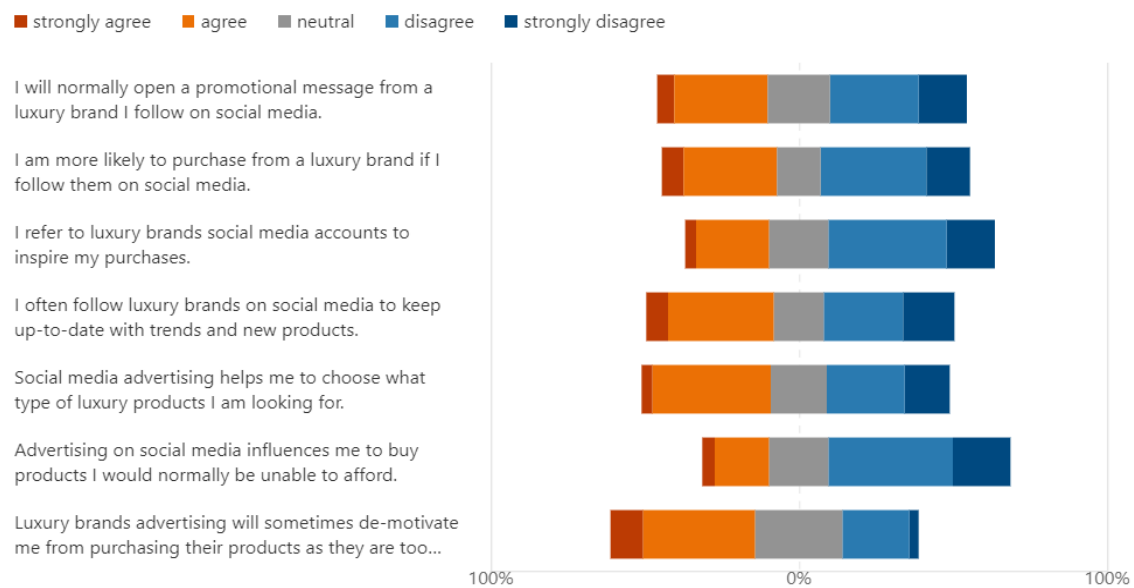
Figure 7: Questionnaire - Luxury brands on social media.

5.6 Objective 5

Objective five is to determine whether high conformity traits encourages consumers to purchase counterfeit goods. The highest percentage of answers are negative in response to the conformity statements. Low figures of 3% or less are present in the strongly agree category, with high figures of 27-40% strongly disagreeing with the statements. Respondents rarely

opted to stay neutral with a minimum of 6% and maximum of 15%. The biggest reaction is to the statement,, "If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy." with 50% of respondents in disagreement. Participants responded to counterfeit purchase intention statements with varied views. Price was a major factor within purchase intention with 57% in agreement, although 63% disagreed that they would buy counterfeit alternatives if they could easily afford the authentic luxury item. 57% of respondents disagreed with the statement, "I will never consider buying counterfeit products.".

The variables of conformity and counterfeit purchase intention were tested for Hypothesis 5. The Pearson test findings are as follows: $r(186) = .04$, $p = .57$, rejecting the null hypothesis. As the Pearson r value is positive, it suggests that as conformity amongst consumers increases, their purchase intention for counterfeit goods increases, the same process occurs during a decrease.

Conformity is measured individually, with consumers showing stronger tendencies when trying to achieve membership to a social group. Fear of missing out or social exclusion from the vulnerable almost forces them to do whatever possible to retain their membership to their desired group. Also known as herding, consumers are proven to follow the collective group decision when determining their own personal behaviours. Social influences encourage desirability and a want for belonging for people in search for social group acceptance. Social comparison provides wandering individuals with information in their search for a group. Acceptance into a social group, in this case luxury consumers, offers a multitude of benefits. There are lower risks involved as the group provides the relevant information need, with members able to simply follow to remain in conformity. (Chen et al., 2015). This study is concerned with social media exposure, with less group pressure found in an online environment. Direct pressure may not be applied from social groups, but their practices are public knowledge. Consumers may think they have made their own decisions independently, but exposure to others purchase and behaviours has an effect whether they are aware or unaware. (Limei and Wei, 2020)

strongly agree ■ **agree** ■ **neutral** ■ **disagree** ■ **strongly disagree**

1) I rarely purchase the latest fashion styles until I am sure my friends approve them.

2) It is important that others like the products and brands I buy.

3) When buying products, I generally purchase brands that I think others will approve of.

4) If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy.

5) I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others.

6) I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same product and brands that others purchase.

7) If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy.

8) I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase.
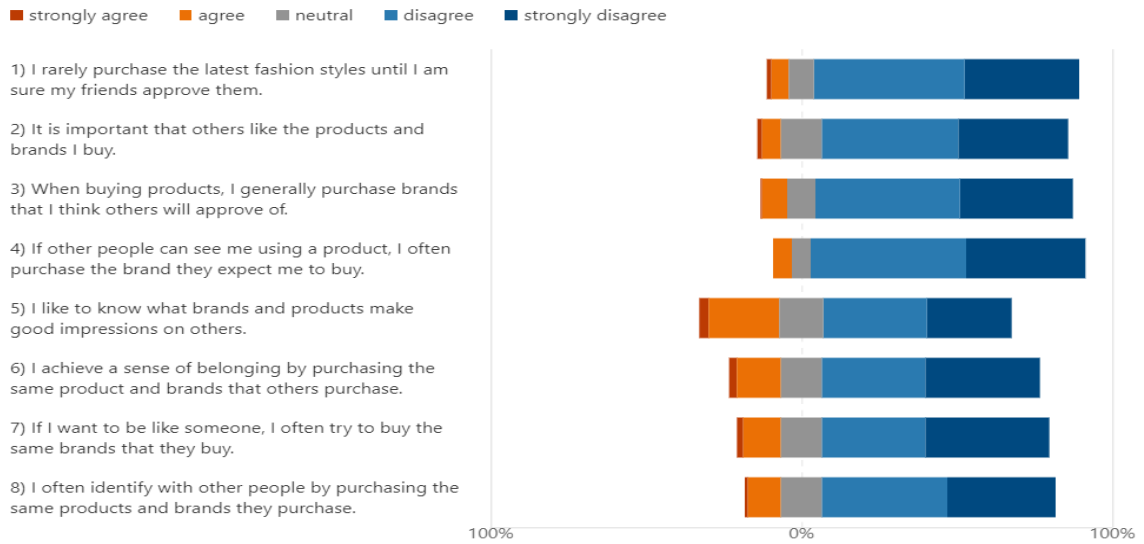
100%   0%   100%

Figure 8: Questionnaire - Conformity

Chapter Six: Discussion

The discussion chapter of this study evaluates the results of the questionnaire and hypotheses in comparison to the literature available. In this section it will be established whether the answer from respondents is expected or unexpected to have been uncovered. The six hypotheses were tested using Pearson's correlation coefficient, with a result of failing to reject all of them.

6.1 Objective 1

The first research objective from this study is composed of two hypotheses. Hypothesis 1a sought to identify whether the level of personal disposable income has an impact on consumers attitudes towards counterfeit goods. From the results of the Pearson correlation test ($r(184) = -.06$, $p = 0.45$), there is not sufficient evidence from the research sample to conclude that disposable income positively impacts consumers attitude towards counterfeit goods. In terms of the attitude statements participants were asked to answer, there is a clear preference for neutrality or disagreement. Studies from Toklu and Baran (2017) investigate the role of pricing and income, suggesting that replica goods possess lower financial risk to consumers as the benefits of the product are similar. A portion of the literature states that income does have an effect on counterfeit attitudes, but there is a gap in investigating disposable income in particular. Kenneth et al. (2003) as cited by Safa and Jessica (2005) uncovered that income as a whole does not have a consequential impact on counterfeit purchases behaviour. The majority of research and studies focus on income overall, but not the income where they have the freedom to spend (as all necessities have been paid) as they please and if that hinders their attitude towards counterfeits as a better alternative to authentic goods. Attitudes are seen as more favourable when price is considered as luxury brands are viewed as ripping customers off. Consumers now more than ever have more disposable income, as this increases the search for status and acceptance increases (Husic and Cicic, 2009). Those with lower income values can still have the same intentions or desire to purchase luxury goods as their higher earning counterparts. Counterfeit goods allow consumers to turn their fantasies of owning luxury goods into a reality, for a fraction of the price. Their attitude for the counterfeit market is largely based on personal circumstances.

Hypothesis 1b is similar to Hypothesis 1a, instead of attitude it attempts to examine the relationship between disposable income and purchase intention for counterfeit goods. The Pearson correlation results ($r(184) = -.09$, $p = 0.21$) of this test do not provide adequate

evidence to show that those with low disposable income are more likely to purchase counterfeit goods. The questionnaire data shows mixed opinions for purchase intentions. 58% of respondents say they would choose counterfeit over luxury due to the prices, although in comparison 65% say they would not purchase counterfeit if they had the financial means to afford the luxury piece. In their research, Yunos and Abdul Lasi (2020) discovered that 90% of consumers in their study agree that income is an important demographic in counterfeit purchase intention. Patiro and Sihombing (2014) argue that income alone is not sufficient to sway consumers purchase intentions. Value is a common theme amongst researchers, claiming that the value offered to consumers by purchasing either counterfeit or luxury holds a high importance. When multiple options are accessible to consumers the product with the highest perception of value is most likely to be favoured. Customers with a high value conscious are seen to be focused by monetary elements and emit strong intents to purchase counterfeit goods (Wu and Zhao, 2021). Malla and Yukongdi (2020) also confirm price conscious customers favour counterfeit goods due to the lower prices and acceptable value for money.

6.2 Objective 2

Hypothesis 2 in Objective 2 tests the effect of exposure to luxury brands and content on social media in terms of self-esteem. Using the variables of social media exposure and self-esteem, the Pearson correlation results ($r(186) = .07$, $p = .32$) signify that there is not significant evidence present and so we fail to reject the hypothesis. Self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg's universal scale from 0-30 with an average of 18 amongst the group, a satisfactory score of esteem is 15. Participants are heavily active on social media platforms in particular video and photo sharing sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Sightings of luxury products on social media can be as subtle as an accessory in an outfit image or as blatantly obvious as the main focus of the content. The main role of social media "influencers" or "bloggers" is to provide their followers with an abundance of content on what is trendy leading to massive overconsumption. The results of this test are surprising as everchanging trends and an influx of new products can apply immense pressure to consumers to purchase popular items to keep up with this fashionable society. Other accounts such as 'The Rich Kids of Instagram' are created as a deliberate action to showcase their abundance of wealth. The possessions these 'kids' own are more than often unattainable for the everyday consumer as it is situation of overconsumption and showboating. While the result of this test is unexpected when looking at content created by influencers, luxury brands adjust their

values and image slightly when communicating online on social media. One of the main attributes of luxury is that it is exclusive and made to cater to specific consumers. Online however, their motive is to catch the attention of all consumers to include them with the brand one way or another. Fashion shows streamed on Facebook allow social media users to interact and communicate with the brand as if they are as important as the celebrities sitting front row. This "benefit-based" advertising appeal strategy as discussed by Choi et al. (2018) offers consumers who cannot afford actual luxury items some sense of community and relationship with these large fashion houses.

6.3 Objective 3

The third hypotheses from Objective 3 tested self-esteem against conformity using the Pearson correlation coefficient (r(186) = -.11, p = .12). 127 out of 186 respondents scored above the satisfactory Rosenberg esteem level so it is slightly expected that they do not conform to trends easily. The majority of conformity trends such as bandwagoning and a need for uniqueness are more commonly found amongst those with low self-esteem. As mentioned previously, the conformity results of this research sample seemed to show a strong disagreement with the provided statements. A combination of moderate to high self-esteem and low conformity tendencies resulted in failure to reject the hypothesis. The relationship between self-esteem and conformity was a popular topic among researchers in the 1960's and 1970's, with few updates for current literature. The 'need for uniqueness' as described by Kastanakis and Balabanis (2011) states that consumers with any level of positive self-esteem reject the idea of purchasing products purely because they are popular or to fit in with others. Rahmatika and Kusmaryani (2020) claim that "society cannot be separated from consumptive behavior.", that people buy more than what is necessary to keep up with society's patterns. Adolescents in particular are more vulnerable to consumption conformity behaviour, influenced heavily by advertisements, friends, and emotions. The average age of respondents of this questionnaire is 35 with a mode of 22, surpassing adolescent status. As the group age is older, there may be more solid levels of self-esteem due to life experience and thus less leverage for opinions and emotions to be influenced. Individual self-esteem is a result of "a psychological construct derived from his/her relationship and association with social groups." (Khare et al., 2011). A low attachment or desire to social groups can improve self-esteem as external pressure is limited or irrelevant, there is no desire to consume goods and conform to their behaviours.

6.4 Objective 4

Hypothesis 4 tested whether the effect exposure to luxury brands on social media positively impacts consumers attitudes towards counterfeit goods. The results ($r(186) = -.11$, $p = .13$) failed to reject the hypothesis and therefore cannot be deemed sufficient evidence to conclude that this effect exists. Data from the counterfeit attitude statements from the questionnaire are average and do not show a distinct preference either positively or negatively. 54% of respondents say they disagree that they allow social media to influence their purchases, with 59% also disagreeing that "Advertising on social media influences me to buy products I would normally be unable to afford.". Although the participants in this questionnaire are fans of luxury brands and avid social media users, it is clear that they are not heavily influenced by marketing techniques to determine their purchases. An exposure to counterfeit brands on social media may have a harder impact on consumers attitudes due to them evaluating the actual products they will be purchasing. Counterfeit goods are rarely advertised on social media, mainly due to legal issues. The manufacturers of these products to not have trademark or licence permission to profit of the brands name, logo, and entire essence. Freedman (1999) as cited by Hoe, Hogg and Hart (2003) expresses that counterfeiting is a "victimless crime". Questionnaire responses to criminality show 41% agree that "People who sell counterfeit products are committing a crime.", but 48% disagree that consuming the products is committing a crime. Products are found through wholesale sites and mainly word-of-mouth communication from previous customers.

6.5 Objective 5

The final hypothesis examined the variables of conformity and counterfeit purchase intention, with the Pearson test (: $r(186) = .04$, $p = .57$) failing to reject the hypothesis due to insufficient evidence from the sample. Just 25% of participants agree that they like to know which products or brands make a good impression on others and 73% disagreeing with the statement "If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy.", highlighting low conformity values among the sample group. Studies from Malla and Yukongdi (2020) show that people will purchase genuine luxury to receive "a sense of gratification from the purchase.". Counterfeit consumers take a risk of exposing themselves in social situations and losing an image they have built due to low confidence or self-esteem. If there is a personal interest in belonging to social groups, their establishment of trends can influence which purchases are acceptable or approved. Purchases can represent not only a personal image but also a social image. Genuine personal gratification cannot be achieved if

purchases are made in order to comply with the norms established by the hierarchies of social groups. Consumers are more vulnerable to social groups when they lack information, particularly about luxury products relying on their assistance and assurance for guidance. If those within the social groups emphasise their knowledge for differentiating between luxury and counterfeit, that will have an impact on the consumers behaviours and purchase intentions for the replicated goods. If consumers are normatively susceptibility they are highly aware of the self-image and impressions they portray, unfortunately the purchase or ownership of counterfeit products do not create good impressions resulting in adverse attitudes and negative connotations for the replicated goods.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

Having examined and dissected the effect of exposure to luxury brands on social media and its impact on self-esteem, conformity, and the counterfeit market, this final chapter will showcase the findings of this research project. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the study with recommendations for further research on the topics.

To conclude this study the chosen variables of exposure to luxury brands on social media, income, self-esteem, conformity, counterfeit goods attitude and purchase intention are independent with little significant influence on each other. All five research objectives failed to reject the hypotheses showing no evidence from the questionnaire sample that there were relationships present.

The questionnaire was distributed through Microsoft Forms on social media platforms. In hindsight there are possible alternative questions that could have been asked to respondents to delve deeper into the topic, using different variables to solve the main research question.

There is conflicting evidence in the literature review that contradicts some of the variables. For example, researchers have varied opinions and evidence on the role of income when making luxury or counterfeit purchases depending on the context. If income is the only factor when choosing between luxury and counterfeit, from the research it seems more likely that lower earners will opt to choose the counterfeit products. However, when deciding between luxury and counterfeit, the value of income may not be a deterrent as consumers obsessed with membership of social groups are found to do what is necessary to maintain status, even if that means downgrading in other aspects of their life to afford this luxurious persona.

7.2 Limitations

The generalisability of the data from the questionnaire is limited due to a number of factors. The sample may not have been accurate due to online distribution and a case of snowball sampling whereby respondents shared the questionnaire with friends or family but may not have been the ideal candidate.

Restraints of the global pandemic meant that choosing a population sample was difficult to monitor and control. Importantly consumers income and spending habits have changed drastically due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. Responses to the questionnaire

may have shown different results if lifestyles and consumption patterns had not changed so drastically.

The limitations mentioned may be the reason for rejection of the hypotheses, however the results can still be supported by the research and literature. Due to the method of distribution, the results are representative of the sample only and not generalisable to the wider population.

7.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings and analysis of this study, I recommend that if a similar study is to be drafted that the researcher gathers their data through structured interviews. Switching to a qualitative approach would allow participants of the study to fully meet the criteria to critically evaluate against the research objectives and hypotheses. Face-to-face interactions with industry experts, luxury connoisseurs, and counterfeit product fans can offer direct and relevant knowledge.

Future research can be carried out to investigate the counterfeit market in detail. There are a number of factors contributing to attitudes and purchase intention found during the research stage of this study. A complete viewpoint of all variables contributing to their attitudes and rationale for purchase intentions offers a basis for improving this study.

This study has opened an insight into the world of luxury and counterfeit goods from a consumer behaviour perspective. If applicable, future research into this topic may take into account these recommendations to use this study as a base for an altered approach.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Questionnaire

Section 1 – Demographics

    1) What gender do you identify as?

- Female

- Male

- Transgender

- Non-binary

- Other (please specify)

    2) What is your age?

        _____

    3) What is your current employment status?

- Employed full-time

- Employed part-time

- Self-employed

- Seeking opportunities

- Not working/homemaker

- Prefer not to say

    4) What is your personal monthly pre-tax income?

- €0-999

- €1,000-1,999

- €2,000-2,999

- €3,000-3,999

- €4,000+

Section 2 – Self-Esteem

5) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

4 scale answers (strongly agree – agree – disagree – strongly disagree)

I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

I am able to do things as well as most other people.

I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

I take a positive attitude toward myself.

On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

I wish I could have more respect for myself.

I certainly feel useless at times.

At times I think I am no good at all.

Section 3 – Conformity

6) Conformity

5 scale answers (strongly agree – agree – neutral – disagree – strongly disagree

I rarely purchase the latest fashion styles until I am sure my friends approve them.

It is important that others like the products and brands I buy.

When buying products, I generally purchase brands that I think others will approve of.

If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy.

I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others.

I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same product and brands that others purchase.

If I want to be like someone, I often try to buy the same brands that they buy.

I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase

Section 4 –Counterfeit Goods

7) Have you ever purchased a counterfeit good?

- Yes

- No

8) Attitudes

5 scale answers (strongly agree – agree – neutral – disagree – strongly disagree

People who buy counterfeit products are committing a crime.

People who sell counterfeit products are committing a crime.

Counterfeit goods are as reliable as genuine products.

Considering the price, I prefer counterfeit products.

Buying counterfeit products generally benefits the consumer.

There is nothing wrong with purchasing counterfeit products

9) Purchase Intentions

5 scale answers (strongly agree – agree – neutral – disagree – strongly disagree

I would buy counterfeit products because the prices of designer products are unfair.

I would buy counterfeit products even if I could easily afford to buy non-counterfeit products.

I intend to buy counterfeit luxurious goods in the future due to my finances.

I will never consider buying counterfeit products.

The probability that I will consider buying counterfeit products is high.

Section 5 – Luxury Brands on Social Media

10) What social media platforms do you use?

- Instagram
- Twitter
- Facebook
- Pinterest
- YouTube
- LinkedIn
- Other: _____

11) Luxury on Social Media

5 scale answers (strongly agree – agree – neutral – disagree – strongly disagree

I will normally open a promotional message from a luxury brand I follow on social media.

I am more likely to purchase from a luxury brand if I follow them on social media.

I refer to luxury brands social media accounts to inspire my purchases.

I often follow luxury brands on social media to keep up-to-date with trends and new products.

Social media advertising helps me to choose what type of luxury products I am looking for.

Advertising on social media influences me to buy products I would normally be unable to afford.

Luxury brands advertising will sometimes de-motivate me from purchasing their products as they are too expensive.