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## Methodological Fitness-for-Purpose in the Phygital Age: The Case of Luxury

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## Methodological Fitness-for-Purpose in the Phygital Age: The Case of Luxury

Michael J-G Parnwell and Kelly Ying Meng

### Abstract

#### Purpose

The paper aims to contribute to this special issue on interpretivist research methodologies and the phygital consumerist landscape by exploring some underlying issues within the specific context of luxury consumption. The paper starts with a critique of current research, drawing particular attention to problems of reductionism, poor representativeness and weak contextualisation in research that adopts a positivist epistemology. The paper then highlights some of the contributions that interpretivist scholarship is making, and can potentially make, to our understanding of the experiential and humanistic aspects of luxury consumption, presented in a nuanced, discursive and deeply contextualised manner.

#### Methodology

This commentary is informed by an in-depth examination of the methodology and approach adopted in the 327 most-recently published academic articles on luxury (from late-2021).

#### Findings

This opinion piece suggests the need for a sea-change in the way that scholars approach luxury research in online, offline and hybrid phygital settings in order to capture and convey its true complexity, diversity, contingency and contextuality, its emotional and symbolic character, and to help ensure that it delivers findings that are of relevance and value to luxury industry practitioners.

#### Originality

This is the first paper to look comprehensively and critically at the methodological approaches adopted by academics writing in the field of luxury consumption.

#### Keywords

Luxury; phygital; methodology; positivism; interpretivism; reductionism; contextualisation; experiential.

### **Introduction**

In 1965, the philosopher Karl Popper wrote of clocks and clouds: the former regular, orderly and predictable; the latter seemingly random, disorderly and unpredictable (Popper, 1965).

These metaphorical representations of scientific positivism and interpretivist idealism were

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3 placed by Popper at opposite ends of a continuum wherein different epistemological practices  
4 and traditions held sway at different moments in history, at the whim of the “fashions of  
5 science” (Popper, 1972, 215). In the field of consumer research, and social studies more  
6 generally, the current ‘fashion’ has begun to question the utility of the reductionist and  
7 decontextualised tendencies of scientific reasoning, which has dominated consumer research  
8 hitherto, and is beginning to explore the scope for more subjective, nuanced and experiential  
9 methodological approaches to deliver deeper insight and a clearer understanding of consumer  
10 behaviour, not least in the hybrid online-offline settings that have come to the forefront since  
11 the global pandemic (Batat, 2023). This commentary will explore the extent to which research  
12 in the field of luxury is adequately positioned to contribute to this interpretivist turn given its  
13 majority focus on the hypothetico-deductive approach. [The interpretivist paradigm is centred  
14 on the belief that there are multiple ‘realities’ that are socially constructed and subjectively  
15 interpreted, which can not be described by universal laws, and where an understanding of  
16 context and an individuals’ experiences are vital for both knowledge and knowing \(Kivunja  
17 and Kuyini, 2017, 34; Sanchez \*et al.\*, 2023, 2-3\).](#)

## 40 Background

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44 Why the specific focus on the luxury industry? First, exploring a specific segment of the  
45 consumer market is consistent with the interpretivist call for case-specific and contextualised  
46 research which challenges the virtue of universalised narratives, even in newly-emerging fields  
47 such as the phygital. Second, the luxury industry’s relationship with the phygital landscape is  
48 a quite specific, evolving and in some ways rather uneasy one. Some ‘quiet’ luxury brands,  
49 such as Bottega Veneta, Hermès, Loro Piana and Brunello Cucinelli, have eschewed an online  
50 presence as a way of protecting their aura of exclusivity and seeking to maintain a one-to-one  
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3 relationship with customers (Quach and Thaichon 2017), relying predominantly on offline  
4 modalities such as flagship stores and boutiques. ‘Louder’ luxury brands, such as Dior, Louis  
5 Vuitton, Gucci and Balenciaga, have enthusiastically embraced online marketing to enhance  
6 brand awareness and increase sales around the world (Beauloye, 2023), in the process  
7 contributing in no small measure to the so-called ‘democratisation of luxury’ which  
8 simultaneously underpins its financial vitality and threatens its singularity.  
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19 Third, luxury as an industry is deeply human-centric, placing a heavy emphasis on  
20 understanding and catering to human emotions, desires and yearnings in their multifarious and  
21 contingent manifestations (Cristini, Kauppinen-Räsänen and Woodside, 2022; Xu and Mehta,  
22 2022). Luxury transcends the transactional, functional and managerial by emphasising the  
23 experiential (Wallpach *et al.*, 2020), seeking to choreograph exceptional and exclusive  
24 encounters that resonate with consumers’ emotions, identities and aspirations. Experiential  
25 luxury transcends object- and ownership-oriented consumerism and its association with  
26 conspicuity, instead emphasising interactions with luxury that involve life experiences and  
27 ‘moments’ (Wallpach *et al.*, 2020, 492). Luxury research in this experiential moment thus  
28 requires a human-centric approach which can delve deeply into the industry’s diverse,  
29 intangible, subjective, contextual and socially-constructed character in order to capture the  
30 essence of luxury consumption. As such, the luxury industry provides a perfect palette from  
31 which to construct an image of interpretivist research within hybrid settings.  
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51 This paper is structured in two main parts. The first presents a short critique of the current state  
52 of luxury research, drawing particular attention to limitations such as its tendency towards  
53 reductionism, questionable representativeness and shallow contextualisation, all of which are  
54 anathema to an industry that places such a strong emphasis on experience, essence, emotion  
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3 and symbolism in online, offline and hybrid settings. The second outlines the case for, and  
4 challenges facing, more interpretivist research in the field of luxury which focuses on deep  
5 immersion, narrative exposition, subjective judgement and uniqueness rather than sameness,  
6 and where the researcher reflects critically on their positionality, perspective and potential to  
7 bring about change.  
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17 By both critically evaluating existing luxury research and through incorporating the unique  
18 context of luxury, we hope we can contribute to this special issue by identifying gaps in our  
19 current knowledge and possible methodological pathways towards more relevant research. In  
20 the process, we hope to shed light on some of the implications of phygital marketing and its  
21 intersection with consumer research methodologies. Whilst research in hybrid phygital settings  
22 is still in its nascent stage within the luxury sector, it holds immense potential for advancing  
23 our understanding of consumer behaviours and preferences in this digitally-driven era. At the  
24 same time, by adopting some of the core arguments behind Batat's viewpoint article, we hope  
25 we can also address the current shortcomings of luxury research, which [are](#) something we  
26 drew attention to in our recent book (Parnwell and Meng, 2023). Finally, by addressing some  
27 of the limitations and challenges of interpretivist methodologies in this paper, we hope we will  
28 also contribute to this research agenda going forward by cautioning against a pendulum shift  
29 towards the subjective and the fluid that downplays the value of systematic analysis.  
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### 49 **The Current State of Luxury Research**

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54 Research on luxury has experienced a veritable explosion of interest over the last ten years or  
55 so, increasing more than ten-fold from the late noughties to the early twenties (Figure 1).

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58 <Insert Figure 1 around here>  
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3 Several factors help to explain this proliferation of interest. The luxury industry has undergone  
4 significant transformation during this period, characterised most particularly by its so-called  
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6 ‘democratisation’: the dilution of exclusivity and the expansion of attainability, the  
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8 massification and globalisation of production and consumption, the corporatisation of luxury  
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10 brands, and the proliferation of digital platforms which has dramatically increased accessibility  
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12 and awareness, particularly among the younger generations (Shukla, Rosendo-Rios and  
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14 Khalifa, 2022; Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2018; but see also Thomas, 2007<sup>8</sup>). Put simply,  
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16 there is more luxury taking more forms, attracting more interest from more people in more  
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18 places. In conjunction with this dramatic growth of research interest in luxury, the centre of  
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20 gravity in luxury scholarship has shifted quite dramatically from the West towards the global  
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22 East and South: between 2000 and 2011, 86.2% of all research was accounted for by scholars  
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24 who were based in Western institutions, whilst between 2012 and 2023, 34.3% of luxury  
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26 scholarship came from the emerging nations in the global south, particularly Asia. In theory,  
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28 local scholars are often best-placed to obtain research data on the processes, manifestations and  
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30 impacts of the luxury industry’s expansion in their countries, and the socio-cultural contexts  
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32 within which luxury consumerism operates, but this does not always manifest itself in reality,  
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34 as we shall see shortly.  
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45 To facilitate our critical evaluation of luxury research we closely examined the methodological  
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47 approaches adopted by scholars of luxury. We focused on the 327 most recent exemplars of  
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49 luxury research. Of these articles, 182 (56%) adopted a purely quantitative approach, 81 (25%)  
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51 were qualitative studies, and 20 (6%) used mixed methods but were essentially quantitative in  
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53 nature (qualitative methods were used inductively to establish the parameters for a subsequent  
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55 quantitative investigation). Thus 71.4% of luxury studies which used investigative research  
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57 methods were quantitative in approach. The remaining articles were either conceptual or  
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3 literature-based ‘think pieces’ or focused on developing mathematical models. Of the research  
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5 articles that used quantitative methods, 94 (51.7%) used Structural Equation Modelling (SEM),  
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7 52 (28.6%) conducted experiments or simulations, and the remainder (18.7%) used various  
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9 forms of statistical analysis, including regression and analysis of variance, but not within the  
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11 framework of SEM or experimentation. Almost all qualitative studies (98.8%) used content or  
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13 thematic analysis. A total of 144 empirical studies (50.1%) centred on hypothesis testing, seven  
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15 of which were qualitative studies and the remainder quantitative.  
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22 From this brief summary we can clearly see that luxury research predominantly adopts a  
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24 hypothetico-deductive approach. This, in itself, is not an issue: there is some very good  
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26 scholarship being undertaken using quantitative methods which helps to advance our  
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28 understanding of luxury consumerism and the dynamics of the industry (e.g., Bazi, Filieri and  
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30 Gorton, 2023; Ehrensperger *et al.*, 2022). But as a whole there are, in our view, a number of  
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32 significant shortcomings associated with the current approach to luxury research, and on which  
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34 we will focus our discussion in the remainder of this section. Most of these are the antithesis  
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36 of the research approach that has been advocated by Batat (2023) in her viewpoint article. The  
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38 key shortcomings on which we shall focus concern: reductionism, representativeness,  
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40 contextualisation, limited specialisation, and questionable practical value.  
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#### 47 *Reductionism*

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52 Whilst not wishing to decry modelling and experimentation *per se* as legitimate methodological  
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54 tools, we believe the tendency to (over)simplify the complexities and diversities of luxury  
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56 consumers and consumerism is something that should be more keenly problematised by  
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58 critically reflexive luxury scholarship. Structural Equation Modelling typically commences  
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3 with the formulation of a literature-informed conceptual model that suggests the nature and  
4 direction of relationships between component elements, posited by a series of hypotheses, with  
5 variables usually divided into ‘factors that explain’ (independent or explanatory variables) and  
6 a phenomenon or process ‘to be explained’ (dependent, response or outcome variable), such as  
7 luxury purchase intention. Each of these variables then needs to be converted into observed or  
8 measurement variables, where feasible, or left as latent variables or ‘factors’ which can be  
9 inferred by other variables in the model. The process of conversion can be problematic: what  
10 we would argue to be the great complexity of factors that influence consumer behaviour, most  
11 particularly in the field of luxury - which may be circumstantial, contextual, psychological,  
12 contingent, varied, multidimensional and often deeply personal – can only with care,  
13 consideration, creativity and criticality be converted to a handful of variables and boxes without  
14 reducing a situation to only a skeletal and quite superficial approximation to ‘reality’. There is  
15 no doubt that the conceptual models that luxury scholars are testing are eminently interesting  
16 and worthwhile as academic exercises, but representing processes such as democratisation,  
17 hedonism (Rosendo-Rios and Shukla, 2023), authenticity (Kwon, Amendah and Ahn, 2022),  
18 brand self-congruence and social capital (Bizarrias *et al.*, 2023) as numbers requires  
19 considerable ingenuity. Most researchers use previous studies to guide the construction of  
20 measurement variables: out of 92 studies using SEM that we examined, only three developed  
21 their own measures, either in whole or in part (Bazi, Filieri and Gorton, 2023; Rosendo-Rios  
22 and Shukla, 2023; Lim, Aggarwal and Dandotiya, 2022). One consequence of this is that most  
23 measurements of conceptual variables deliver a sameness that is not an adequate reflection of  
24 complex, contextual and constantly changing realities. The questions used to obtain data are  
25 also often very basic (e.g.: purchase intention: “I am likely to purchase luxury brands” [Ostovan  
26 and Nasr, 2022, 10]; hedonism: “I believe that owning luxury goods is a symbol of prestige”  
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3 [Rosendo-Rios and Shukla, 2023, 6]), and through a critical lens it is difficult to see how they  
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5 can yield deep and nuanced insights into complex social and psychological phenomena.  
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### 8 9 10 *Representativeness*

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15 There are around 400 million luxury consumers world-wide, and this figure is projected to  
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17 increase to 500 million by the year 2030 (D'Arpizo *et al.*, 2022). But the phrase 'luxury  
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19 consumer' is a misleadingly simple label which masks a phenomenally complex and diverse  
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21 array of purchasing (and non-purchasing) behaviour, motivations, mechanisms, signals and  
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23 associations, across a myriad of social, cultural and demographic contexts, and a diverse array  
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25 of luxury sectors. It is incumbent on the luxury researcher to ensure that the data upon which  
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27 they base their analysis and conclusions is sufficiently representative of the heterogeneity of  
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29 luxury consumerism. We contend in this section that luxury research could do much better in  
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31 this regard.  
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38 We start by looking at how researchers select participants for their studies. Quite a large number  
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40 of studies did not even use luxury consumers as the basis of their investigations into luxury  
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42 consumption: at least 29 of our sample studies used (predominantly undergraduate) students,  
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44 mainly for experiment-based research into perceptions of luxury goods. While these research  
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46 subjects are not technically luxury consumers, they are a convenient and accessible source of  
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48 data for academic researchers, and can foster an understanding of how young people react when  
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50 placed momentarily in the presence of luxury items.  
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56 The majority of studies we examined used 'have purchased a luxury item within the last x  
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58 months' or 'have stayed at a luxury hotel in the last year' as the key factor in determining  
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3 whether participants should be included in or excluded from a study. Whilst some researchers  
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5 were very clear about what constituted a luxury item (usually listing relevant brands), the  
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7 majority left the definition to the participants' own judgement. As we emphasise throughout  
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9 this discussion, 'luxury' is a complex phenomenon, and there is no simple yes/no threshold,  
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11 not least since the processes of democratisation and massification have taken hold over the last  
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13 few years. We could argue that while the act of purchasing or wanting to purchase a luxury  
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15 item may make a person a 'luxury consumer' in a technical sense, this categorisation lacks the  
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17 nuance that reflects the diversity and contextual nature of luxury consumption.  
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24 Sampling is a further bone of contention with regard to the representativeness of luxury data  
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26 sets. Dividing 400 million luxury consumers across the principal global markets suggests  
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28 relevant country populations that number in the tens of millions in parts of North America,  
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30 Europe and Asia. To this we must add the immense diversity of luxury consumers in each and  
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32 every one of these locations: not all luxury consumers are the same, and no market constitutes  
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34 a homogeneous entity. Set against this back-drop, our research revealed that the average sample  
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36 size across 266 surveys was 339.8 for quantitative studies (Standard Deviation 275.7), and 29.3  
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38 for qualitative studies (SD 22.8). These samples would generally be considered sufficient to  
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40 satisfy statistical requirements, and we do not wish to challenge this. But several factors suggest  
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42 to us that researchers are more preoccupied with obtaining data for their studies than ensuring  
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44 that these data adequately match the populations they are researching. We did not pick up a  
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46 single study which mapped out a sampling frame which adequately accommodated the entire  
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48 population or sub-group from which their sample was to be drawn. Given that the majority of  
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50 studies focused on particular countries, as we shall discuss shortly, the sampling frames should  
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52 technically encompass all luxury consumers, all millennials, all Gen Z, all luxury tourists and  
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54 so on within a particular spatial, social or cultural setting. Taking a sample of 328 Chinese  
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3 consumers and presenting it as an example of luxury consumption in a collectivist setting  
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5 (Carranza *et al.*, 2022), or around 300 consumers each from the USA and Thailand as the basis  
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7 for exploring the influence of religious commitment and global identity on luxury purchase  
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9 intention (Ma *et al.*, 2021), in our judgement is an inadequate basis for exploring the complex  
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11 and diverse psychological, behavioural and socially-contextualised drivers and outcomes of  
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13 luxury consumerism.  
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19 On top of this, a large majority of researchers who reported their sampling procedures (n=106)  
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21 used non-probabilistic sampling (86.8%). Admittedly, non-probabilistic sampling may  
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23 sometimes be better than random sampling at targeting cohorts of people that researchers are  
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25 particularly interested in, but questions can be asked about the ability of snowball, convenience  
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27 and opportunistic sampling, for instance, to deliver participants who are sufficiently  
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29 representative of the wider populations researchers are interested in and which their studies  
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31 claim to represent. A pattern we noticed was that the majority of researchers obtained data  
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33 samples, made some reference to sampling procedures and in some cases reflected on inherent  
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35 shortcomings, but these limitations were then often overlooked in the discussion of findings  
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37 and presentation of conclusions and recommendations.  
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45 Another trend that we noticed, which is also likely to have some bearing on representativeness,  
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47 was the growing use of crowdsourcing platforms to obtain data for luxury research. Out of 182  
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49 quantitative studies, at least 109 used some form of commercial service as an avenue to  
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51 obtaining data, 79 of which involved using crowdsourcing platforms such as Amazon MTurk,  
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53 Academic Prolific and Qualtrics. There is no doubt that the availability of such channels has  
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55 greatly improved the convenience and speed of conducting survey-based research, but this is  
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57 traded off against a greater distance and anonymity in the relationship between researcher and  
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3 research, which means the researcher has less direct control over the data-extraction process.  
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5 Researchers must also rely on a third party to oversee sampling and selection procedures, and  
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7 remain mindful of the fact that although they may commission a probabilistic or stratified  
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9 sample from the hordes of workers who populate crowdsourcing platforms, these in themselves  
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11 are not necessarily representative of the wider world. Platforms such as MTurk and Prolific  
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13 have fewer than one million ‘workers’ spread around the world, the selection of whom may  
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15 incorporate several forms of bias, together with problems with satisficers, bad faith work,  
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17 language proficiency (Marshall *et al.*, 2023), and now issues with bot- and AI-generated  
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19 responses (Veselovsky, Ribiero and West, 2023). If the proportion of luxury consumers in these  
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21 pools reflects their [share distribution](#) in of the population as a whole, then using crowdsourcing  
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23 platforms to generate data for luxury research is highly unlikely to deliver truly representative  
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25 samples.  
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### 33 *Contextualisation*

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Luxury consumption is complex and, we argue strongly, is profoundly influenced by the  
context within which it occurs. Luxury consumers may have the purchase of a luxury item, or  
attachment to a brand, or followership of a brand’s social media platform or KOL in common,  
but each luxury consumer is placed in a social, locational, cultural and demographic context,  
the collectivity of which creates the heterogeneous mosaic of luxury consumers that makes the  
industry so fascinating to study, but at the same time so challenging to research. Because of  
limitations of space, we will focus on country here as a proxy for context. From our sample of  
327 pieces of academic research on luxury, 197 studies drew data from 47 specified countries  
(see Figure 3), giving a total country count of 267: this constitutes 68% of all studies that used  
empirical data (twenty-eight studies focused on two or more countries).

<Insert Figure 2 around here>

However, we use the term ‘country contexts’ loosely here, because the large majority of studies drew data from specific countries but did not produce what we might call ‘context rich’ pieces of analysis. A context-rich study might include some of the following: a section outlining the country context of the study and the socio-cultural characteristics of the target group; a discussion which highlights the heterogeneity of the country context and of the research subjects; an indication of how sampling procedures were designed to capture such heterogeneity (not simply basic demographic features); a reflection on how a sample taken from a specific location may not have captured this heterogeneity, and thus the interpretation of results should be cautious, and generalised conclusions avoided; and discussion of findings should be nuanced according to the context of the research. What we tended to find, in contrast, was that a limited sample of participants from a single nation tended, in the final discussion, to be extrapolated to the country as a whole without reference either to representativeness or the diversity of said population; some limited country studies were later presented as typical of, for example, Asia, ‘collectivist’ or ‘individualist’ cultures, emerging economies, and so on; or the country context was never mentioned, even when it was clear that samples had been country-specific. The overriding impression was that a significant number of studies were more focused on extracting data that positioning these data in context.

We only have space for a couple of examples. Some studies contained quite sweeping generalisations: “given the cultural similarities among Asian countries, an investigation on luxury brand consumption in the Chinese market can not only provide a better understanding of luxury markets in Asia but also shed light on global luxury brand consumption trends” (Wang and Chen, 2021, 660), which demonstrates poorly nuanced contextual understanding. Bizzarias *et al.* (2023) looked at the luxury consumption potential of underprivileged

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3 individuals from a developing country [Brazil], focusing on "...the dual mechanisms of social  
4 capital and social approval [which] combine to explain how customers distant from power can  
5 engage in the consumption of luxury brands" (ibid., 15). The sophisticated analysis was based  
6 on a convenience sample of 196 (mostly undergraduate) students from two universities in  
7 Brazil, but neither their specific locational context nor relevant sociological aspects of Brazil  
8 as the setting for the research were discussed at any point. The authors do reflect on the  
9 possibility that "there might be context-dependent variables that could change the effects we  
10 found" (ibid., 16), and suggest that qualitative research on the same topic could deliver a more  
11 'open' perspective (ibid., 16). In contrast, Jiang, Gao and Shi (2021) did at least reflect on the  
12 way that contextual specificity makes it difficult to extrapolate findings to wider contexts:  
13 "...we cannot generalise the findings from the individual to the national level, because we  
14 conceptualise PDB ([power-distance beliefs]) as an individual cultural value rather than a  
15 country-level one in our study. We argue that generalising the United States as a low-PDB  
16 country and China as a high-PDB country might oversimplify the complex cultural  
17 phenomenon, because each country might have both high- and low-PDB value individuals."  
18 This shows good cultural-contextual understanding and reflexive caution.

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42 Taking the above criteria into consideration, we examined all the empirical studies contained  
43 within our sample to determine the extent to which research with a country focus was  
44 adequately contextualised. This is obviously a subjective judgement, but we believe the  
45 following data are sufficiently robust to convey a sense of the extent to which luxury research  
46 is contextually immersed and nuanced. We found that only 24.1% (56) of 231 empirical studies  
47 paid attention to contextualisation, although in a further 5 studies context was implicit in the  
48 way findings were presented. 171 studies (73.7%) did not satisfy any of the criteria mentioned  
49 above. Only 10.7% of quantitative studies ( $n=159$ ) and 7.1% of mixed methods studies  
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3 (n=14) were contextualised, compared with 72.1% of qualitative studies (n=61). In Table 1  
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5 we have cross-tabulated contextualisation against the country or regional focus of luxury  
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7 research. Whilst a lack of contextualisation was seen across the board, this aspect of research  
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9 was particularly weak in the Indian sub-continent and the USA. Paradoxically, it was pleasing  
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11 to see that almost half of all research involving Middle Eastern countries (and, in almost all  
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13 cases, Middle Eastern researchers) paid consistent attention to contextual settings. This was in  
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15 part explained by the slightly higher preponderance of qualitative research emanating from this  
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17 region. Studies which focused on brands rather than countries tended to present a higher degree  
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19 of contextualisation (to the brand(s) rather than location), but this was also in part explained  
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21 by brand-focused research adopting a predominantly qualitative approach. The same was  
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23 largely the case for research focusing on countries in Europe.  
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### 33 *Limited Luxury Specialisation*

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38 There is no doubt that luxury as a research arena has grown in popularity in recent years, but  
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40 in the majority of instances research in this field it is not being undertaken by scholars who  
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42 may be thought of as luxury specialists and who are versed in the behavioural nuances and  
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44 contextual intricacies of the luxury industry. More typically, academic specialists in marketing,  
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46 business, psychology and so on are being drawn into the *tableau vivant* of luxury as an alluring  
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48 test-bed for ideas and propositions which are approached with a disciplinary eye rather than an  
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50 immersive feel, and which reproduce mainstream tropes rather than adopting a critical  
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52 perspective on luxury (Armitage and Roberts, 2016, 12-19). We base this statement on some  
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54 research we undertook into luxury research authorship. From the 327 articles we used for our  
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56 investigation we selected 196 that involved empirical research and which had been (co)written  
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3 by up to three authors, giving a total of 387 authors whose disciplinary profiles we then  
4 examined. We did this by perusing their affiliated university profiles and their profiles on  
5 public platforms such as LinkedIn, Research Gate and Academia. These authors were then  
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10 grouped ~~them~~ into twelve disciplinary categories.

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15 The exercise revealed that the authors are drawn from a wide range of (sub-)disciplinary  
16 backgrounds, which showcases the multidisciplinary spread of luxury research. The majority  
17 of authors (21.2%) lie within the discipline of marketing, highlighting its dominant role in  
18 luxury research. Consumer behaviour and psychology (17.8%) emerged as another significant  
19 disciplinary category, emphasising the importance of understanding consumers' motivations,  
20 perceptions, and decision-making processes in luxury consumption. For the purposes of this  
21 study, luxury itself is recognised as a distinct (sub-)disciplinary field ([see also, Armitage and](#)  
22 [Roberts, 2016, 14](#)), where researchers specialise specifically in the arena of luxury, and  
23 typically reside in institutions dedicated to the understanding of luxury, broadly defined, and  
24 offer specialist teaching programmes in areas such as luxury brand management, luxury market  
25 dynamics, and the cultural significance of luxury consumption. Only 17.8% of all authors were  
26 considered to be luxury specialists, based on the informed judgement of one such. Additionally,  
27 the fields of culture and society (6.5%), business and management (6.2%), and hospitality and  
28 tourism (8.8%) collectively make up around a quarter of all luxury research. Sustainability and  
29 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (3.6%) have emerged as a growing area of interest  
30 within the luxury industry.  
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54 While researchers on luxury were thus drawn from a diverse array of mainstream disciplines,  
55 true interdisciplinary research was very limited in our sample of publications and authors,  
56 despite our view that the segmentation of luxury research inadequately synchronises with its  
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3 multidisciplinary nature and the importance of a holistic understanding to grasp its fluid  
4 character and interconnected nuances. This compartmentalised intellectual approach may be  
5 one factor in helping to explain why there is currently a paucity of theoretical formulations  
6 which apply to and are derived specifically from a luxury industry perspective, whereas  
7 examples from luxury have been used extensively to advance theory, concepts and empirical  
8 understanding in other disciplinary fields.  
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### 19 *Relevance and Value*

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24 When we wrote our book on research methodology for luxury management (Parnwell and  
25 Meng, 2023), we drew attention to the apparent mismatch between the research outputs of  
26 academics writing on luxury and the information needs of the luxury industry. Whilst the  
27 former have grown exponentially, only a very small proportion of the practitioners we surveyed  
28 or interviewed indicated that they regularly used academic articles to inform their decision-  
29 making, preferring the more accessible and digestible industry reports produced by such  
30 companies as Bain & Co, Statista, Boston Consulting Group, Euromonitor, and so on. In order  
31 to validate our findings from this somewhat limited piece of empirical research (a survey of 81  
32 industry insiders and in-depth interviews with 10 respected industry practitioners), we  
33 undertook a follow-up survey for the present article. One of the co-authors conducted a quick  
34 Poll via LinkedIn (open for two weeks) to find out how frequently luxury managers rely on  
35 academic research outputs for their business operations.  
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53 According to the poll results, it appears that luxury managers have varying degrees of reliance  
54 on academic research outputs for their business operations. Out of the 271 votes received from  
55 both posts, 20% of respondents indicated that academic research outputs play a significant role  
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3 in informing and shaping their decision-making processes. On the other hand, 36% of stated  
4 that they occasionally and selectively consult academic research outputs: this group recognises  
5 the potential value of academic research but may not incorporate it into their day-to-day  
6 operations consistently. A further 44% of respondents voted that academic research outputs are  
7 rarely (34%) or never (10%) utilised in their day-to-day operations, suggesting that they may  
8 prioritise other sources of information or rely more heavily on industry publications,  
9 consultancies, as well as in-house knowledge and experience.  
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21 An argument can be made that producing practical outputs that are of use to luxury industry  
22 practitioners is not the principal purpose of academic research, but this view could be countered  
23 by the observation that more than half the empirical papers we examined as background to this  
24 article included a section towards the end of the discussion which assessed the management  
25 implications of their research findings for the luxury industry specifically and for marketing *et*  
26 *cetera* in general. We also observed that not a single paper discussed how the research outputs  
27 could be delivered to industry practitioners in a way that was useful to them. There seemed to  
28 be an assumption that simply undertaking the research, presenting the findings and suggesting  
29 its value would make a difference to how luxury practitioners approached their business. The  
30 discussion above suggests that this is insufficient in a majority of instances. This observation  
31 is also consistent with the view presented in the previous section, and from our own research,  
32 that very few academics writing on luxury have a first-hand association with the industry.  
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### 51 **An Interpretivist Future for Luxury Research**

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56 The discussion thus far has focused on some of the shortcomings that are manifest in  
57 contemporary luxury research, when seen against the need for scholarship that is better tuned  
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3 in to the diverse, experiential and qualitative character of consumers' engagement with brands  
4 and markets in physical, digital and hybrid [phygital](#) settings. In drawing attention to widespread  
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6 tendencies towards reductionism, questionable representativeness and scant regard for  
7  
8 contextualisation, we have also started to highlight some of the challenges that lie in the path  
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10 of interpretivist scholarship on phygital landscapes and processes. In the remainder of this  
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12 paper we will look at some of the changes that need to be made – and indeed are already taking  
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14 place – if we are to get close to the heart and soul of luxury consumption, and phygital  
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16 consumption more generally.  
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24 We should first make clear where we stand on the meaning of 'luxury'. Our focus is not on  
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26 utilitarian aspects such as price, branding, strategy, showiness and ownership, but rather on  
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28 emblematic elements such as place, people, stories, history, excellence and essence. Luxury  
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30 has, by definition, to be exclusive (Thomas, 2007). The luxury consumer is someone who  
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32 understands and appreciates the symbolic character of luxury. Who and where these people  
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34 are, how and why they engage with luxury, and with others through luxury, is something that  
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36 is deeply personal and individual, the psychological and behavioural underpinnings of which  
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38 can not be simply explained by fitting people into broad and generalised conceptual boxes -  
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40 such as Gen Z, Indian, materialist, hedonist, post-consumerist - populated by data obtained  
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42 from reductive instruments and remote, extractive processes. Each luxury consumer has their  
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44 own personality, story, history, trajectory, motivation, social position, cultural context and  
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46 behavioural disposition. For this reason, we do not believe that the shortcomings we have  
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48 highlighted can simply be ameliorated through 'better' positivist research. We need a much  
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50 more human-centred [and experience-focused](#) approach if we are to capture the 'true' essence  
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54 of luxury consumption in hybrid settings.  
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3 We will use two brief examples to illustrate our thinking in this regard. The first concerns the  
4 so-called 're-moralisation of luxury' (Berry, 2016; Csaba, 2008). Christopher Berry (2016)  
5 approached this from three perspectives: ethical, social and green. Several words come to mind  
6 in the latter context – sustainable, responsible, inconspicuous, post-consumerist, altruistic,  
7 experiential, self-actualisational – which all have a resonance in trends which are growing in  
8 prominence within luxury consumption. The point here is not to detail the character and  
9 underpinnings of such trends, but to consider what methodological techniques we can deploy  
10 to capture their fundamental essence. Shifts in consumer attitudes and behaviour are not  
11 occurring simultaneously and universally – far from it: in different parts of the world, indeed  
12 even in different neighbourhoods, we can find individuals and social groups who display the  
13 full gamut of luxury consumerist traits, from acquisitive and showy, through discerning, to  
14 experiential and emotional, responsible, and, finally, transcendental (B and T Magazine, 2023,  
15 citing Christopher Sanderson, The Future Laboratory). Who they are, what is influencing their  
16 (shift in) behaviour, how profound it is in reality, and what this all means for future luxury  
17 consumption are intellectual and practical questions for which we need insightful, nuanced and  
18 context-sensitive answers. It is hard to see how a five-element structural equation model, or an  
19 experiment involving undergraduate students, can deliver such outcomes. Rather, we need  
20 research that is fine-grained, ground-truthed, immersed, ethnographic, comparative, meaning-  
21 focused and discursively-presented, perhaps by multiple teams of researchers, in order to make  
22 sense of the simultaneous multiplicities of contemporary reality.

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51 A second example concerns the growing prevalence and importance of online modalities and  
52 communities in the definition and operationalisation of luxury today. Digital channels and  
53 social media - together with their associated KOLs, influencers, bloggers, marketers and the  
54 like – provide an essential lubricant for luxury (with some exceptions), and getting to grips  
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3 with the intricacies of the relationship between brands and consumers through pure digital or  
4 hybrid phygital channels is essential not only to brand strategy but also to understanding the  
5 rapidly evolving socio-cultural contexts of luxury consumption, or brand engagement more  
6 broadly. Writing code to scrape masses of information from digital artefacts and archives, and  
7 using automated tools for data processing (such as Latent Semantic Analysis) may indeed  
8 deliver and digest huge sets of data, but the inputs and outputs also lack personality,  
9 individuality, nuance and context. The focus in this kind of research tends to be on what people  
10 write (or the images they create) rather than the who, how and why of communication, the  
11 context from which it originates, and the symbolism it conveys. Interpretivist Natural  
12 Language Processing ([Artificial Intelligence](#)) may [possibly](#) arrive one day, but in the meantime  
13 there remains tremendous scope for the various techniques of qualitative investigation and  
14 analysis to help curate a deep and thick understanding of the diversity, dynamics and meaning  
15 of the luxury brand-consumer interface on-line, in-store and in multiple permutations of both.  
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35 Research by Mrad, Farah and Mehdi (2023) conveys a sense of what can be achieved through  
36 qualitative research in phygital settings. Their investigation centred on the use of the WhatsApp  
37 communication service by luxury brands, and was based on in-depth interviews with 27 luxury  
38 consumers in the UK. Their findings revealed a level of insight into luxury consumers' feelings  
39 and perceptions that simply could not be achieved through web-scraped data or Likert scale  
40 surveys. Their research highlighted the double-edged sword of social media communication by  
41 luxury brands. On the one hand, they found that receiving customised or personalised messages  
42 from luxury brands enhanced consumers' privileged sense of being valued by these brands in  
43 a way that would not be realised through mass marketing or mass communication via  
44 WhatsApp that would be more typical of high street brands (ibid., p.346). Some customers used  
45 WhatsApp to seek information about luxury brands and product ranges rather than going to  
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3 physical stores, where they would feel under pressure to buy (ibid., p.345). Paradoxically, other  
4 luxury consumers were reluctant to engage fully with WhatsApp because the multisensory  
5 experience of visiting a physical store was such an important part of consumers' relationship  
6 with their preferred luxury brands, and could not be replicated or replaced by social media  
7 communication, however imaginatively designed it is (ibid., p.347). Consumers were also very  
8 quick to react when luxury brands overstretched their use of social media, becoming too  
9 'pushy' or when they started using WhatsApp as a marketing tool, as opposed to a personalised  
10 means of communication (ibid., p.349-350).  
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24 As this study and many others show, the pendulum has already started to swing in the direction  
25 of more interpretivist research (Christodoulides and Wiedmann, 2022), as evidenced by the  
26 fact that almost one-third of all empirical studies in the field of luxury now adopt qualitative  
27 methodologies, in full or in part, as evidenced by our own survey of the literature. Some  
28 positive examples from our perusal of recent luxury research might include, for example, the  
29 constructivist qualitative research on luxury lodges by Manfreda *et al.* (2023) which is strong  
30 on reflexivity, insider positionality and contextualisation; Bellezza (2022), which is a good  
31 example of the use of Grounded Theory in luxury research; the study by Zha *et al.* (2022) of  
32 the importance of sensory experiences in brand engagement (including, but not exclusive to  
33 luxury); Wu's (2022) marketing-oriented ethnographic study using field observation; Philippe,  
34 Debenedetti and Chaney (2022), which is a fine example of qualitative content analysis using  
35 imagery; and Hlady-Rispal and Blancheton's (2022) study of two French luxury clusters, which  
36 exemplifies contextualised research. One pleasing observation we have made is that some of  
37 this qualitative research has involved luxury industry-connected individuals mobilising their  
38 personal networks to access key actors and provide deep insight through interviews and case  
39 studies (e.g., Loranger and Roerass, 2023; Javornik *et al.*, 2021; Bai *et al.*, 2022). One  
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3 consequence of this is that we gain more insight into brands' and managers' perspectives on  
4 luxury, when the vast majority of research studies tend to focus on consumers, not least because  
5 of easier data access.  
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## 10 11 12 **Conclusions and Considerations** 13

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17 In advocating a shift along the continuum of research from positivism to interpretivism, we  
18 should be mindful of a number of challenges that must first be met. Immersion, engagement,  
19 deep contextual and experiential understanding, and closeness to research participants (both  
20 online and offline) may take more time to nurture than most research and publication schedules  
21 allow. Holistic, multidisciplinary, discursive and empathetic styles will take time and dexterity  
22 to develop, and to become more widely accepted as authoritative and valid. Conventions,  
23 traditions, rigid intellectual boundaries, and the gatekeepers of academic disciplines and  
24 publications channels need to evolve and be more open to change if new research directions  
25 are to become mainstreamed. There is an urgent need for more theory that is luxury-specific  
26 rather than borrowed or adapted from umbrella disciplines; and even more important is for  
27 these theoretical formulations to be informed by grassroots realities and bottom-up processes  
28 which also provide scope for localised and indigenous perspectives on luxury to thrive  
29 ([Konadu-Osei, Boros and Bosch, 2023](#)). Luxury researchers need to engage in more  
30 collaborative research (including with the luxury industry itself) rather than operating from  
31 disciplinary silos and *assuming* research outputs have some practical value and relevance. [Also,](#)  
32 [whilst the current discussion has inevitably focused on luxury in the field of market research,](#)  
33 [its core argument can be applied in other branches of luxury studies, including philosophy,](#)  
34 [sociology, political economy, consumer culture and cultural geography \(Armitage and Roberts,](#)  
35 [2016, 4-5\).](#)  
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Researchers also need to reflect on the speed with which luxury itself is evolving, perhaps more rapidly and profoundly than other areas of consumption (and, indeed, post-consumption), meaning that researchers need to be conceptually and methodologically nimble rather than using old lenses to explore new phenomena, processes and outcomes:

“...what is regarded as luxury varies through time and space, and across economic, social and cultural contexts. It is therefore essential that critical luxury studies reflects the need to follow the shifts and turns that the meaning of luxury takes through multiple and constantly evolving contexts” (Armitage and Roberts, 2016, 12).

A particular concern we have about the present enterprise of luxury research, and which is relevant to calls for more reflexive scholarship, concerns its purpose. In our view, research is an extractive industry, drawing, mining or scraping data on human activities and perceptions from various sources, in the belief (or assumption) that it makes a difference to society and industry, beyond enhancing researchers' careers and reputations (Igwe and Madichie, 2022). Crowdsourcing and digital platforms add further distance between the researcher and the people who are the source of their data, creating an increasingly impersonal, anonymous, superficial and mechanical relationship which obfuscates researchers' responsibilities towards their participants. More funding agencies today are concerned about the demonstrable social impact of the research they support, so it is incumbent on researchers of luxury to be more proactive in ensuring their outputs reach those who could most benefit from their findings – in our instance the luxury industry itself - which in turn may necessitate their closer involvement with practitioners in the design and execution of this research.

Having made the case for more interpretivist research in the field of luxury, most particularly in phygital settings, we should not lose sight of two considerations that simultaneously reinforce and weaken our argument. The underlying need is for 'good' research, whatever its

epistemological flavour. We have drawn attention to some of the limitations of current research when seen through the lens of the distinctively human and contextual character of luxury consumption. We do not necessarily need a full pendulum swing from positivism to interpretivism to ameliorate these shortcomings, and indeed there is plenty of scope for quantitative analysis to contribute to our understanding of the phygital in luxury consumption. We should also remain mindful of some of the limitations of interpretivism, such as subjectivity, potential selection bias, non-generalisability, non-replicability, low reliability, conceptual fluidity and so on. There is certainly scope for a qualitative revolution in luxury research, and in explorations into the phygital environment more generally, but we must be careful not to throw the baby of investigative rigour out with the bathwater of superficial or reductionist research.

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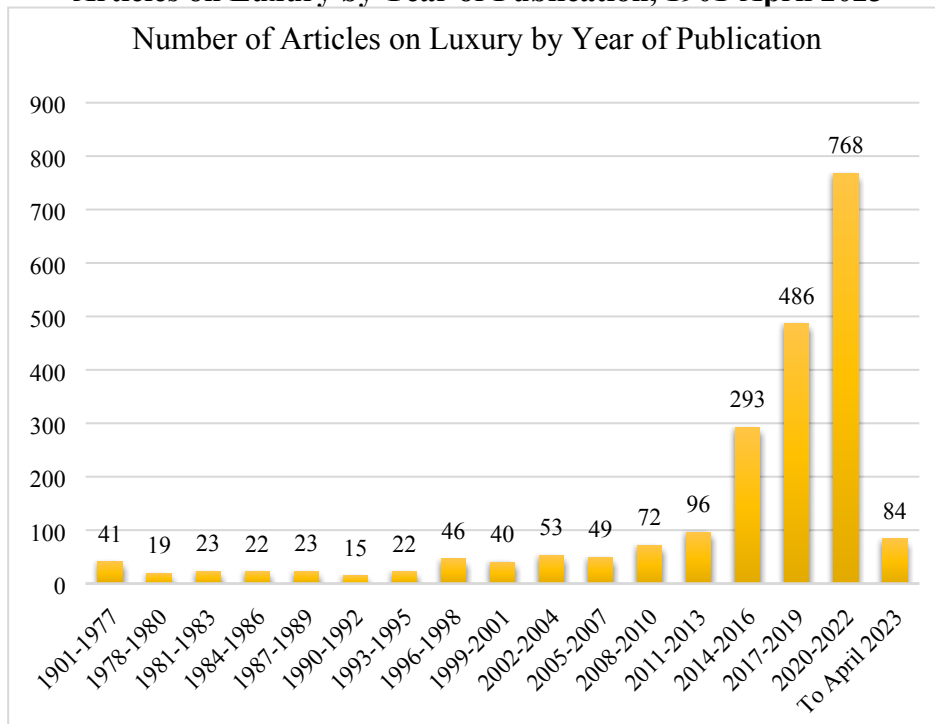
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Qualitative Market Research

**Figure 1:**  
**Articles on Luxury by Year of Publication, 1901-April 2023**



Data Source: Calculated from [the](#) Web of Science (Clarivate PLC)





**Table 1**  
**Luxury Research Contextualisation and Methodological Approach,**  
**by Country or Region (n=248)**

Country/ Region	Contextualisation		Approach		n=
	Contextualised	Not Contextualised	Quantitative or Mixed	Qualitative	
USA	10.5	89.5	87.9	12.1	57
China	22.7	77.3	82.2	17.8	44
India & Pakistan	6.7	93.3	82.7	17.3	30
Europe	35.8	64.2	61.5	38.5	53
Other Asia	25.0	75.0	81.2	18.8	32
Middle East	46.7	53.3	73.3	26.7	15
Brands	64.7	35.3	35.3	64.7	17
Average	25.4	74.6			248

Source: Co-authors' Research