

The Present and Future of the Luxury-Sustainability Paradox

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Abstract

An understanding of luxury consumer behaviour, the implications on current luxury brand initiatives, and future directions, with a focus on the significance of coexisting sustainability practices and luxury values, are discussed in this chapter. Prior to recent changes in the business in response to trends in luxury, sustainable luxury was formerly seen to be an oxymoron. Now, sustainability is essential. Although in its current state, luxury and corporate social responsibility (CSR) may not be at the forefront of all consumers' minds, there are growing influential stakeholder groups who will compel luxury brands to take social responsibility. It may appear that the success of CSR initiatives, in particular, the ability of brands to connect implicit identity values of luxury to the various principles of CSR, will determine the future of luxury firms.

Keywords: Luxury; Sustainability; CSR; Paradox; Pro-environmental Behaviour

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8.1 Introduction

Luxury and sustainability have long been seen as mutually incompatible concepts. According to research (Freire & Loussaïef, 2018; Kim et al., 2022; Teah et al., 2021), maintaining an elite market presence and exclusive branding while staying socially and environmentally responsible creates uncomfortable tensions for luxury brands. However, the past decade has seen luxury businesses change their standpoint and make sustainability, environmental responsibility, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) central to their value propositions (Cavender, 2018; Freire & Loussaïef, 2018; Rapp & Mikeska, 2014). Luxury customers' and investors' awareness of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) concepts has increased significantly over the past year (DiPasquantonio et al., 2021). Luxury firms will have to produce less, avoid waste, and build products that (theoretically) a lifetime and this shift has forced some introspection over an existential question: Is the definition of luxury in tune with today's customers?

Frequently, what some consumers consider to be a luxury, others may view as a fundamental necessity. Additionally, the idea of luxury can take on a completely different meaning in a future society with diminishing resources (Cavender, 2018; Rapp & Mikeska, 2014). The widespread belief that sustainable behaviour is expensive, unnecessary, or unpleasant to daily living is one that changes regularly. However, although sharing many of the same "negative" characteristics as luxury goods, such as being pricey, unnecessary, and usually inconvenient, owning them is seen as a privilege rather than a hassle (Rapp & Mikeska, 2014). Sustainable products typically have "fundamental" traits to luxury goods: they need exceptional innovation and design,

excellent materials, high quality, and uniqueness (Kunz et al., 2020; Peng & Chen, 2019). Thus, buying luxury goods does not necessarily mean conspicuous consumption; rather it is also perceived as an investment in quality and sustainability (Cheah et al., 2022; Janssen et al., 2014; Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2020). Arguably, both concepts do not differ all that much from one another.

While research examining sustainable luxury exists, current knowledge lacks agreement and structure. To move the debate forward, this chapter intends to explore issues related to luxury brands and sustainability, with two main objectives: (i) to explore the extent of the perceived contradiction between their luxury consumption and sustainability in the eye of the luxury consumer and (ii) to understand the drivers of this perceived contradiction.

8.2 Luxury-Sustainability Paradox: Can Luxury and Sustainability Stay Together?

8.2.1 Binomial Identity of Luxury Brands

Luxury purchases are, by definition, “irrational” (Kapferer, 2012). For instance, a non-luxury handbag is a fraction of the cost of a luxury handbag, but the functional values of both handbags are the same. “Irrationality”, in this case, can be seen as buying a product not for its function but for other reasons that are symbolic and hedonistic (Davies et al., 2012). Thus, luxury is bought out of emotions, not rationality. Paradoxically, the notion of luxury also means excess, whereas the notion of sustainability invites us to meet the needs of the current generation without

compromising the future generation’s ability to meet theirs (Janssen et al., 2014). Furthermore, luxury exhibits social distinction (Kapferer, 1998) and is magnified as an exclusive consumption (Muniz & Guzmán, 2021). However, CSR and sustainability focus on the planet and people and not only on profit (Peng & Chen, 2019). The binomial values of luxury versus CSR are summarised in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1 Binomial Values of Luxury versus CSR

Luxury	CSR
Hedonism	Altruism
Superficiality	Responsibility
Wants	Needs
Ostentation	Moderation
Self-enhancing	Self-transcendence
Social distinction	Equality
Excess	Frugality
Emotions	Rationality

Sustainable luxury was long considered an oxymoron until recent shifts in the industry responding to trends in luxury took sustainability from niche to necessary. Until now, luxury has

been linked to wealth, status, and possessions (Kapferer, 2012); however, luxury expectations are changing, especially for the young affluent and socially conscious luxury consumer. These consumers not only indulge in extravagant luxury experiences but also aspire to be associated with brands that espouse values such as moderation and sustainable consumption (Cavender, 2018; Freire & Loussaïef, 2018; Rapp & Mikeska, 2014). As a result, “status has become less about ‘what I have’ and much more about ‘who I am’.” According to research (Davies et al., 2012; Janssen et al., 2014), maintaining an elite market presence and exclusive branding while staying socially and environmentally responsible creates uncomfortable tensions for luxury brands and businesses. This is because CSR entails self-transcendent values such as equality, moderation, and universalism, while luxury brands relate to self-enhancement values such as elitism, hedonism, and extravagance (see Table 8.1, for example, of binomial values). Recent studies and media coverage reveal that luxury brands are frequently implicated in environmental scandals, including those involving the burning of out-of-season clothing (Paton, 2018), resource-intensive fast fashion (Brooks, 2019), violations of animal and human rights (Mueller-Hirth, 2017), mink farming (Donato et al., 2019), and slave/child labour (Thevenon & Edmonds, 2019). Instead of the stakeholder idea that is depicted, these activities demonstrate that businesses are maximising profits at any cost, as mentioned in the shareholder theory (Rugimbana et al., 2008). As a result, consumers’ scepticism about luxury businesses grows as they are forced to contend with beliefs that clash with their commitment to CSR (Teah et al., 2021). More specifically, consumers are finding it difficult to discern between ethical and unethical businesses as a result of the recent media stories of corporations engaged in corporate

malpractice despite promoting themselves as having strong corporate citizenship (Muniz & Guzmán, 2021; Wong & Dhanesh, 2017).

8.3 Factors Influencing Consumers' Preference for Sustainable Luxury

8.3.1 Consumer Value Perception of Sustainable Luxury Brands

Many people who buy luxury goods typically exhibit consumption goals that combine personal and social objectives (Freire & Loussaïef, 2018). By introducing two key dimensions – personal perceptions, which include perceived hedonic value and perceived extended self, and non-personal perceptions, which include perceived conspicuousness, perceived uniqueness, and perceived quality – Vigneron and Johnson (2004) distinguished between luxury and non-luxury brands. To enlarge these categories, Wiedmann et al. (2009) used four latent dimensions of value: social (including prestige and noticeable), functional (including usability, quality, and originality), individual (including self-identity, material, and hedonic), and financial (e.g., price). Customers' impressions of “sustainable luxury” are impacted more by the concept of sustainability than by the concept of luxury, according to a recent study by Wang et al. (2021). When a luxury commodity is linked to sustainability, for instance, the perceived value connected to scarcity may be reduced. For example, the average luxury buyer is hesitant to purchase a Hermès product manufactured with recycled cotton, according to Achabou and Dekhili's (2013) study, because they believe recycling diminishes the item's worth and originality, which, in turn,

diminishes its status. Another similar example is Italian luxury fashion house Prada's "fur-free" policy, which demonstrates a commitment to innovation and social responsibility; however, the environmental impact of sourcing alternatives such as synthetic faux fur is now in the spotlight (Bramley, 2019). This implies that when the sustainable idea for a premium product is advocated, some commonly held values or needs linked with luxury purchasing are challenged. The research on how hedonism and sustainable luxury fit together has been inconsistent, according to Athwal et al. (2019), which is another illustration of a change in value perception. On the one hand, a consumer can consider sustainability to be purely practical and luxury to be hedonistic (Steinhart et al., 2013). However, Cervellon and Shammas (2013) assert that hedonism is a crucial element of sustainable luxury and a significant advantage of eco-friendly products. Increasingly, the purchase intents of luxury consumers are frequently motivated by hedonic necessity and sustainable luxury (Wang et al., 2021). As such, luxury manufacturers must find a method to market their products as something more than symbols of consumers' wealth and social standing in order to fulfil the rising need for businesses to develop items that adhere to high ESG standards.

8.3.2 Consumers' Sociodemographic Characteristics

Environmentally conscious consumers are becoming more prevalent, and they look for businesses that operate ethically and sustainably (Janssen et al., 2014). According to research, between 30% and 40% of consumers of luxury items, according to research, might be categorised as sustainable luxury customers (Quach et al., 2022). Sociodemographic

characteristics, for example, including gender, income, occupation, and product familiarity, influence how often people buy green products (Kim et al., 2022). Studies reveal that younger women are the group most worried about environmental and ethical problems in the case of textile items (Niinimäki & Hassi, 2011). Furthermore, low childhood socioeconomic status increases consumer preference for sustainable luxury brands and products (Kim et al., 2022). It would seem that the younger luxury consumer segments are increasingly attempting to fit their purchases with freshly discovered ethical principles and ecological lifestyles in addition to feeling conflicted about what they truly need (Davies et al., 2012; Wong & Dhanesh, 2017). Younger customers are flooding the luxury market; in 2025, it's predicted that demand will be made up of 50% of those aged 45 and under (DiPasquantonio et al., 2021). Younger millennials and Generation Z, for instance, have completely distinct sets of beliefs and are only starting to enter the workforce. These young customers express new ideals when they purchase; they are more deliberate in their decision-making and want to buy less and buy better (Kim et al., 2022). They search for specific products that correspond to what they value or consider important and demand more luxury companies in terms of everything from equality to the environment (Quach et al., 2022). To purchase products that are environmentally friendly products, this new generation of consumers who are responsible and concerned with the environment (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2012) research the use of recycled materials or organic labelling in the products that they purchase. Additionally, they frequently understand and are even willing to pay more for green products than they would for conventional ones (DiPasquantonio et al., 2021; Gam et al., 2010). As a result, this is timely evidence that consumers of luxury goods are altering their behaviour.

8.3.3 Communicating Social Changes

While prosocial actions like recycling and reusing products can be highly beneficial, encouraging sustainable consumer behaviour can have a greater positive influence on the environment (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2012; Gam et al., 2010; Paton, 2018). The concept of subjective happiness may be applied in the context of sustainable consumption (Xiao & Li, 2011). The survey, which was conducted in 14 locations, identified a brand-new pattern: customers who indicated green purchasing intents and sustainable behaviour started receiving higher ratings for life satisfaction than purchasers of more traditional, “unsustainable” goods. The study also revealed that consumers were willing to engage in “prosocial spending”, giving up their individual interests in favour of collective interests and short-term losses in favour of long-term gains (e.g., purchasing greener items) (Xiao & Li, 2011). This shows that people are beginning to value sustainable consumption more than non-sustainable consumption, beyond only the cost (Janssen et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2022; Shimul & Phau, 2022).

On the basis of this, we may assert that encouraging sustainable consumption is a feasible self-fulfilling action (e.g., subjective happiness). Due to this cultural transition, ideas like voluntary simplicity, ecological living, ethical consumerism, and consumption reduction must be promoted and accepted globally (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2012; Cervellon & Shammas, 2013). Using luxury brands as agents of social change is one approach to do this. Progressiveness, timelessness, resiliency, originality, craftsmanship, and a positive customer experience are the guiding characteristics of luxury businesses (Wang et al., 2021), and the ideals of luxury, sustainability,

and social responsibility are all based on these traits. Luxury businesses are also well-positioned to lead by example and influence social change since they are frequently recognised as admired, copied, or emulated aspirational brands (DiPasquantonio et al., 2021; Freire & Loussaïef, 2018). Given the aforementioned discussions, critics should focus on bringing about social change through consumer-driven strategies rather than resisting consumerism (Janssen et al., 2014). This might be done using luxury brands directly or aspirational advertising or marketing similar to that used in luxury branding. In the end, people cannot be asked to change their behaviour if they are not given new goals to strive towards.

8.4 Barriers to Consumers' Preference for Sustainable Luxury

To meet consumer demand for ethical consumption, many luxury brands have incorporated sustainability as a principal direction for branding (e.g., Han et al., 2017, Jang et al., 2012; Quach et al., 2022). However, luxury brand CSR is not without its challenges. Luxury brands have to contest with conflicting values between CSR and luxury (see CSR-luxury paradox in Muniz & Guzmán, 2021; Wong & Dhanesh, 2017), logistic and supply chain issues (Fernie & Sparks, 2018; Towers et al., 2013), and consumer scepticism (Osburg et al., 2021; Teah et al., 2021). In particular, the debate over whether luxury and sustainability coexist has been evident in current literature. Although the arguments regarding the binomial identity of luxury brands and sustainability (Feng et al., 2020; Freire & Loussa, 2018) have gained academic attention, scholars agree by large that luxury brands should mitigate the contradictory factors in their CSR

practices (Davies et al., 2012). The current body of research has uncovered several factors that act as barriers to consumers' preference for sustainable luxury products.

8.4.1 Perceived Risks and Benefits

The additional costs associated with sustainable brands have been identified as one of the key factors that result in negative consumer evaluation (Grasso et al., 2000). However, consumers' higher level of interest and involvement in luxury branding reduces the adverse effect of a higher price on purchase intention (Kapferer, 2012). Studies show that consumers not only feel a sense of risk toward "the sustainable" products (e.g., sustainable plastic clothing) but also develop scepticism regarding the quality of the product (e.g., Kumagai & Nagasawa, 2020). The perceived functional, financial, emotional, and self-image risks prevent consumers from adopting luxury products and services (Kunz et al., 2020; Peng & Chen, 2019). Studies report that consumers' perceived risks and scepticism (i.e., potential greenwashing) are associated with green product knowledge (Peng & Chen, 2019). Studies also note that a lack of information, availability of goods/services, and the irregularity of the purchase could influence luxury consumers' negative attitude toward sustainability (Davies et al. 2012). Therefore, providing relevant CSR information could not only increase consumer awareness but also positively influence luxury buying decisions (Bray et al., 2011). For instance, Stella McCartney, through its Cares Green platform, attempts to influence policymakers to take action and to empower students, professionals, and businesses to embrace sustainability and ethical practices

(O'Connor, 2018). Taken together, building consumer knowledge, educating consumers about sustainability practices, and nurturing eco-conscious consumer groups may dilute the impact of the aforementioned risk and scepticism (Petersen & Wilcox, 2016). Such risk and scepticisms are also relevant to the consumers' understanding of the luxury value and related alignment with sustainability practices (Septianto et al., 2021).

8.4.2 Consumer, Culture, and Conspicuousness

The impact of consumers' demographic and cultural factors on their evaluation of sustainable luxury brands has been examined as well. For example, consumers in a collectivist society (vs. individualistic society) tend to share more negative word-of-mouth regarding the price of sustainable luxury products (Amatulli et al., 2017). Notwithstanding, brand positioning also plays a role in constituting consumers' preference for sustainable luxury brands. For instance, a higher level of perceived conspicuousness in luxury branding negatively impacts consumers' perception of sustainability practices in the luxury sector (Janssen et al., 2017). This can also be relevant to the specific product characteristics – as such, consumers of luxury brands consider durable products (e.g., jewellery or cars) more sustainable than less enduring purchases (Janssen et al., 2014).

Another stream of research upholds the question of whether sustainability practices in luxury branding match or conflict with the consumer's self-identity (Athwal et al., 2019). Due to the distinct characteristics of luxury brands (e.g., exclusivity and rarity), the perceived benefits are

different from their non-luxury counterparts. One can argue that ultra-high net worth (UHNW) consumers' desired luxury (e.g., products made from crocodile skins) does not fit within the sustainability practices of the brand (Beckham & Voyer, 2014; Hanks, 2016). The simultaneous presence of sustainability practices and environmental misconduct (e.g., burning unsold products) may result in brand hypocrisy, whereby consumers' desire for exclusivity may reduce the perceived hypocrisy (Cheah et al., 2022). Furthermore, the production exploitation with manufacture in luxury industries may have a mixed impact on consumer evaluation (Eisenberg, 2016). However, the changes in luxury branding strategy in relation to sustainability practices have been evident with the notion that sustainable luxury brands should embrace the consumers' culture and community to enhance the new worldview (DeLeon, 2019).

8.4.3 Consumer-Brand Identification

There are counterintuitive arguments regarding whether the up-class and sophisticated personalities of luxury brands are affected by their CSR initiatives, whereas sophisticated brands are perceived to be less ethical than sincere brands (Pinto et al., 2019). Also, to some extent, consumers' "dream for exclusive luxury" and "parenthesis of pleasure" are not expected to be reduced by sustainability guidelines and principles (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2020). Notwithstanding, a group of consumers also feel that the global luxury manufacturing industry is too small to have a significant impact on the future of the planet; consequently, sustainability in luxury branding does not seem desired by these consumers (Ehrich & Irwin, 2005). Studies suggest that luxury brands need to show strong links between sustainability practices and the

inherent traits of the brands (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2014; Sengabira et al., 2020). For example, Hermès emphasised the human touch in their branding strategy to communicate the authenticity of sustainable luxury (de Kerviler et al., 2021). Such a link is important for both maintaining the brand identity at the consumer level and financial stability at the macro-level (i.e., the stock market) (Feng et al., 2020). As a result, the interplay of perceived luxury, perceived sustainability, and CSR scepticism result in the attitude–behaviour gap (de Klerk et al., 2018).

8.5 Moving Ahead: How to Mitigate the Paradox?

To navigate the paradox, brands have endeavoured in various initiatives to build consumer confidence and evaluation. The principles of “stakeholder marketing” and “cause-related” activities have been proven to be effective strategies when building consumer trust and engagement in the short term (Janssen et al., 2014; Teah et al., 2021). For example, through a charitable endeavour (such as MasterCard and the United Nations World Food Programme for the Brazil World Cup), customer relationship management activities enable companies to experiment with CSR and philanthropy. This endeavour is carried out with the assistance of a third-party charity that may convey ideas of CSR through association. Another short-term opportunity lies in leveraging existing environmentally friendly knowledge and behaviours. Recycling waste products and refuse has been a long staple of sustainability initiatives employed and mandated by governments, households, and businesses (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2012; Gam et al., 2010). However, scepticism among recyclers has raised questions regarding the efficacy of

recycling. Reports have shown that recycling may not be beneficial for the environment – labour, carbon footprint, and the fact that items collected are not actually recycled.

Luxury brands have showcased their support towards green initiatives like recycling through 100% recyclable packaging and embedding their supply chain with the sustainable sourcing of raw materials (Kunz et al., 2020; Peng & Chen, 2019). Some examples of luxury brands that implement green practices include the InterContinental Hotels Group with its Green Engage™ System to measure energy, waste, and water use (IHG, 2015); Stella McCartney has used eco-friendly materials for its products, including vegan leather, recycled synthetic fabrics, organic cotton, and faux fur (Wolfe, 2018); Versace, Burberry, and Furla have also committed to stopping using real fur for their products (Jones, 2018), and Gucci has used eco-friendly materials for its eyewear since 2011 as well as a new environmentally friendly production process (Heerde, 2018). More recently, sustainable social movements have focused on upcycling: giving materials a second life and new function. This involves repurposing wasted or broken materials: furniture and plastics for form or function. Luxury brands, in addition to shifting production closer to end consumers and adopting technologies like blockchain to increase traceability and transparency, are looking to create products that theoretically last forever; refreshing and repairing products when required (DiPasquantonio et al., 2021). In the same vein, second-hand designer websites such as Vestiaire Collective, Farfetch, and Purse Affair sell certified pre-loved/owned items. Brands like Hermès, Chanel, and Coach have repair services to freshen up jewellery, leather goods, and watches. Luxury cars such as BMW, Audi, Porsche, and Mercedes Benz have certified pre-owned vehicles in their showrooms. However,

companies' business model of planned obsolescence requires the constant purchase of new releases. The secondary market prevents new purchases.

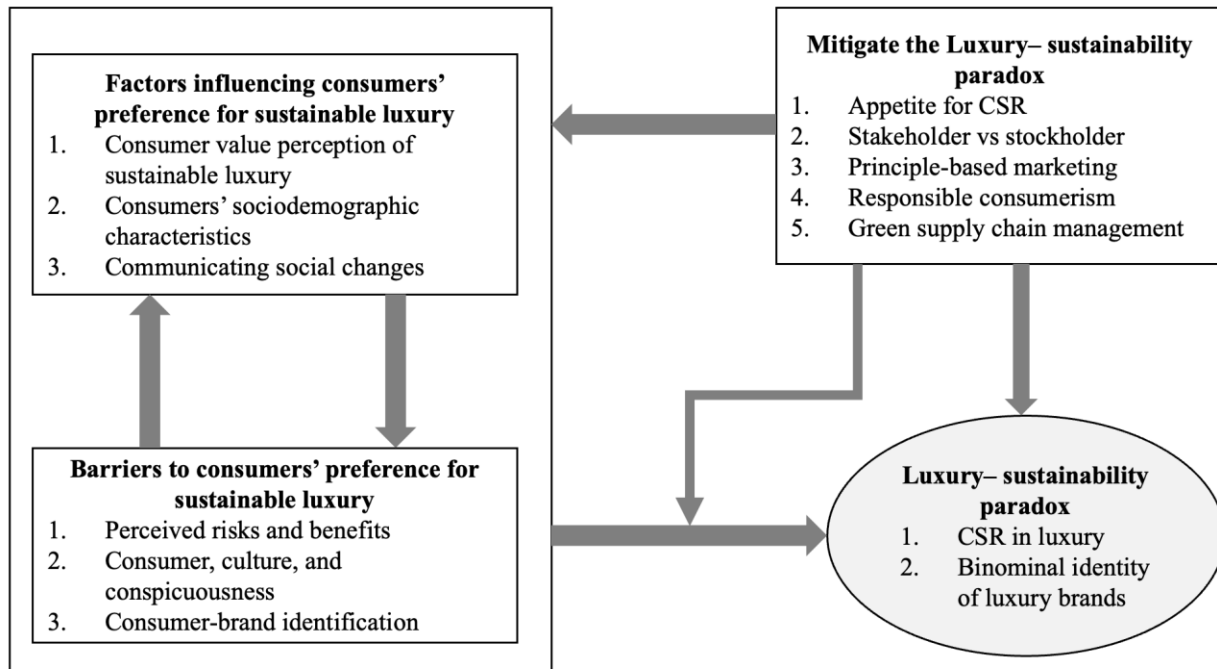


Figure 1. Framework for mitigating luxury-sustainability paradox

Unless companies have a financial incentive to operate in a secondary market, they may not do so. More significantly, is a purchase from a secondary market a real luxury experience? Luxury brands would require a retail environment they can control to reflect the brand experience. In the longer term, for luxury companies and brands to buy into ethical consumerism, they should enlist a financial imperative to do so. To bridge the gap between binomial identity values and the advent of CSR and the rise of ethical consumerism has given birth to companies with an agenda

to help parts of society from its moment of inception (Janssen et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2022; Teah et al., 2021). These companies are thus “born and bred” to do CSR; unlikely to be seen by some as “jumping onto the CSR bandwagon” or “greenwashing” (Bianchi & Birtwistle, 2012; Cervellon & Shammass, 2013). Furthermore, these “Principle-based Entities” have principles to help parts of society as part of their brand DNA (Janssen et al., 2014). For instance, Patagonia, an apparel company born and bred in CSR principles, has higher consumer evaluations when engaging in CSR compared to companies that are not born and bred in CSR principles, such as North Face, Columbia Sportswear, Puma, and GAP (Rapp & Mikeska, 2014). Similarly, luxury brands have had success with repositioning to better adhere to CSR obligations. For instance, the LVMH group of companies has conducted a company-wide shift towards CSR as its core principle leading to changes in infrastructure, supply chain, staff KPIs, and marketing communications (Freire & Loussaïef, 2018). This was achieved through the prioritised allocation of resources and management attention. However, some brands within the umbrella have a deeply entrenched image of traditional luxury that will benefit more from brand extension simply because changing public perception and attitudes towards the brand is too far-fetched. For example, Hermès is deeply rooted in traditional luxury due to its vintage and heritage, while Petite H was born as a brand extension to pursue more CSR-related endeavours. Overall, in order to move forward, luxury companies will have to embrace a paradigm shift in business models to address the challenges faced in stakeholder versus shareholder theories and perspectives (Rugimbana et al., 2008; Teah et al., 2021). Luxury companies must also consider the economic viability and take years to have these changes cascade to parts of the business. As a result, many luxury companies have started initiatives like ethical sourcing as well as employing traditional

artisans and incorporating their designs into artworks and motifs (Cavender, 2018). Based on the foregoing, a framework for mitigating the luxury-sustainability paradox is presented in Figure 8.1.

8.6 Conclusion

Ethical consumerism is here to stay. Certain consumer groups realise their power over companies and will punish brands that do not fall within their ethical requirements. To coexist, luxury brands must find ways to navigate the landscape of luxury and CSR. Scholars have sought to understand the drivers and barriers behind sustainable luxury consumption. While the collective consumer has yet to come to a consensus, considerable headway has been made towards bridging the gap between binomial identity values. Brands have also embarked on various CSR initiatives to foster positive consumer evaluations and prevent negative consequences. Some of these solutions are labelled “band-aid”; these are short-term methods such as stakeholder marketing, cause-related marketing, and other efforts such as recyclable packaging, upcycling, and developing secondary markets for pre-owned/loved items. Standalone, these efforts have been shown to diminish in their return towards maintaining positive consumer evaluations once the novelty wears off and eventually serve little purpose but to be seen as greenwashing. However, a long-term solution may exist in the form of principle-based marketing – principles and values that form the DNA of the brand that aligns with CSR values which cascade into all aspects of the company, such as infrastructure, supply chain, sourcing of raw materials, and staff KPIs. This endeavour requires a concerted effort company-wide and requires resources and time to shift

brand perceptions and image, particularly in brands that have a long-established image of traditional luxury entrenched in consumer perception.

Taken together, the key takeaways from this book chapter are as follows:

1. Ethical consumerism, green consumption, and social responsibility is a prioritised agenda on the list of many stakeholders including luxury brands.
2. Luxury brands face challenges when communicating CSR initiatives due to binomial identity values.
3. Understanding barriers and drivers behind the consumption of luxury brands from an ethical perspective allows luxury brands to further understand the attitude–behaviour gap.
4. There are ways luxury brands can try to reconcile the attitude–behaviour gap, some shorter term, while some endeavours are more permanent but more resource intensive.

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