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Taste for Luxury, Preference for Counterfeits

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Abstract

This thesis explores what is the role of taste in consumption of counterfeit luxury goods and whether engagement in this practice shows the emergence of a new taste regime. The study is based within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) with a particular focus on studies that consider consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures and marketplace ideologies, with special attention to theories of taste, cultural capital, and counterfeit luxury consumption. While the subject of taste has appeared to capture a high level of attention in consumer research, little has been said about how it is exercised in contexts where social acceptability is not given. This qualitative study therefore intends to close this gap by linking taste to consumption of counterfeit luxury goods and exploring the interplays of this type of consumer behaviour.

This thesis therefore addresses three research questions that facilitate the discussion on the role taste plays for consumers of counterfeit luxury goods. Specifically, the inquiry is structured around establishing how consumers showcase their taste with counterfeit luxury goods; what taste-related practices are performed by these consumers; and what social and cultural conditions allow the formulation of emergent taste regime of counterfeit luxury goods consumption. To achieve this, the study draws on netnography, phenomenological interviews, wardrobe interviews and visual methods, which work as an eco-system for gaining rich insight into counterfeit taste.

The findings of this study contribute to CCT by establishing how taste is practiced in the less institutionalised contexts. This research contributes to an understanding of “taste as practice” through emergence of three forms of tastes expressed by consumers of both genuine and non-genuine branded goods. Similarly, it deepens the understanding of taste-related practices by proposing that individuals engage in taste curation to reinforce their taste. This study also

deepens understanding of how taste is developed outside the context of sensory learning. The final contribution addresses Arsel and Bean (2013) call for the “*democratization of tastemaking through collaborative marketplace communities*” by introducing and discussing the concept of “*taste communities*”. This study concludes by emphasising the importance of further taste investigation in less institutionalised contexts as well as more profound inquiry into legitimization of taste for counterfeit luxury goods.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Research

1.0. Introduction

This purpose of this thesis is to build an understanding of the complexity of taste within counterfeit luxury consumption. This research contributes to consumer research and to existing theories of taste within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) by exploring how taste is practiced in contexts of low social acceptability. Building on existing consumer research, this study draws on literature on consumer identity projects and marketplace ideologies to develop rich understanding of the role of taste in counterfeit luxury goods consumption. This chapter introduces the thesis and presents an overview of discussion to follow. It firstly outlines the core theoretical tradition to which it contributes, namely Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), before introducing the context for the research study. This is followed by overview of research aim, questions and methodology chosen for this study. Finally, the chapter ends with a brief summary of the structure of the thesis.

1.1.Theoretical Tradition of Research

In their Reflection in Journal of Consumer Research, Arnould and Thompson (2005) propose a theoretical tradition to encompass the past twenty years of consumer research addressing sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption. They refer to this tradition as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which “*explores the heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader socio-historic frame of globalization and market capitalism*” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005:869). This thesis follows CCT tradition, by focusing on ideas of

consumption, cultures, and ideologies. It therefore unpacks consumption with the focus on how consumers orchestrate their taste. Building on CCT literature on conspicuous consumption (O’Cass and McEwen, 2004), inconspicuous consumption (Berger and Ward, 2010; Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016), habitus (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Paulson, 2017; Thompson et al., 2018), cultural capital (Holt, 1998), taste (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017) and cultural omnivores (Belezza and Berger, 2020; Pomiès and Arsel, 2022) this thesis contributes to three of CCT domains as outlined by Arnould and Thompson (2005): consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures and marketplace ideologies. In line with previous research on consumption and possession practices, specifically their hedonic, aesthetic, and ritualistic dimensions (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Thompson, 1996; Belk, Ger and Askegaard, 2003) this research seeks to explore taste and taste-related consumption practices in the context of counterfeit luxury consumption. Throughout this thesis, the reader will find references to notions of practice. However, this thesis does not use practice theory, as it is determined to establish the meaning of taste and practices related to it, rather than analyse repetitive practices in daily life. In doing so, this thesis sees taste as “practice” by looking at various activities that consumers perform in relation to it, which also help them to articulate their taste as such.

1.2.Research Context

The research context for this thesis is counterfeit luxury goods consumption and the purpose of this section is to define this domain that is used to meet the research aim. It begins by considering the consumer research interest in fashion before moving on to consider the role that counterfeit luxury products play in it. Consumption of counterfeit luxury products is an under-researched domain within the realms of Consumer Culture Theory. Being a context

with low levels of social acceptability it offers a fresh perspective on well defined concepts of consumer research.

1.2.1. Fashion in Consumer Culture

Fashion is a billion-dollar industry, which employs millions of people around the globe, reflects our society and culture, and has major influence on consumers and their definition of themselves (Solomon and Rabolt, 2009). Wilson (1985:9) refers to fashion as “*a cultural phenomenon, an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society*”. Fashion can be viewed as a style or appearance, individuals adopt to be noticed, embraced, admired, or regarded critically (Venkatesh et al., 2010); as signifier of one’s age, gender, social class (Meamber, Joy and Venkatesh, 2017); as dynamic social process which allows creation of novel styles adopted by specific fashion-conscious segments and then diffused to the public (Davis, 1992). Fashion is a complex and multidimensional term that intrigues researchers from various fields of inquiry.

The organization of fashion field itself includes a number of key actors, which form the system of fashion: clothing marketers (designers, manufacturers, and retailers); fashion media; mainstream media, who report on fashion; associations devoted to fashion; design and fashion schools; celebrities in the role of endorsers; and, of course, consumers (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). However, due to significant technological advancements in the recent years, the fashion system is experiencing fluidity as more actors are added to it. Emergence of online fashion communities (Parrott, Danbury and Kanthavanich, 2015), influencers and bloggers (Pemberton and Takhar, 2021), and proactive consumers (Bly, Gwozdz, and Reisch, 2015) allows a transformation of the system, the boundaries of which are becoming more

transparent. Fashion system thus facilitates the adoption of aesthetic products and their diffusion through performance of “*rituals of possession, exchange, grooming, and divestment*” (Meamber, Joy and Venkatesh, 2017:432).

Fashion has struggled to establish itself as a legitimate subject for research due to its complexity and ambiguity (Godart, 2012), however recently it has gained its popularity in consumer research, with increasing attention paid to the role of fashion practices within consumer culture. Early research on fashion in this domain has focused on exploration of clothing and personal adornment as well as their psychological functions (Dearbon, 1918). Later scholars have linked fashion to notions of class (Worth, 2020), gender (Crane, 2012), identity (Godart, 2012) and social change (Aspers and Godart, 2013) to name a few. Postmodern research sees fashion as part of the aesthetic economy (Entwistle, 2009), which resulted in a prevalence of research on fashion and aesthetic labour (Boyle and De Keere, 2019).

Over the years fashion was also extensively used as a context for theoretical inquiry within Consumer Culture Theory. In line with CCT research streams, scholars started investigation on how fashion relates to consumer identity projects (Murray, 2002; Parmentier and Fischer, 2011), marketplace cultures (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2012; McQuarrie et al., 2013), socio-historical patterning of consumption (Clarke and Turner, 2007; Kravets and Sandikci, 2014), and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). While some areas were studied in more depth in comparison to others, application and exploration of CCT domains in the field of fashion remains at the very beginning and requires further theoretical work. Given that the contribution to three key areas have emerged, fashion research in relation to identity projects, marketplace ideologies and

marketplace cultures will be now explored in further depth as they present an essential background for this thesis.

Fashion and Identity Projects

“When worn by a person, clothing becomes a look, a style, an extension of taste” (McQuarrie et al., 2013, 148). CCT is preoccupied with observation of coproductive ways in which consumers by *“working with marketer-generated materials forge a coherent if diversified and often fragmented sense of self”* (Arnould and Thompson, 2005:871). The marketplace is therefore seen as source of *“mythic and symbolic resources through which people, including those who lack resources to participate in the market as full-fledged consumers, construct narratives of identity”* (ibid.). Compared to other possessions, clothing contributes the most to our extended self as it is worn daily to compose our identity. Research on identity projects and fashion was mostly done in relation to self-presentation, as clothes allows individuals to express their self as well as work as props for impression management (Goffman, 1959).

Some scholars were interested in observing how consumers’ identity projects may or may not be constrained by the fashion discourses. This discussion was commenced by Thompson and Haytko (1997), who observed consumer fashion discourses and identified that consumers have potential to develop personalised fashion identities. They have focused on the examination of how consumers use these discourses with the goal of constructing narrative of personal history, as well as to understand their relationship with the consumer culture, which includes fashion trends and popular brand names. Their research was then “re-inquired” by Murray (2002), who established that individuals were successful in terms of creating their desired identities through fashion and fashion discourse. Murray concluded that consumers

tend to wear particular accessories or clothing as they are symbolic to Western culture and they tend to feel different when they wear clothing that emphasizes it. Both these studies indicate that consumption is an expressive moment, which helps to express desired symbolic statements (Levy, 1981).

Recent study by Parmentier and Fischer (2011) extended this theory by looking at fashion discourses and identities of fashion models. They have established that while certain individuals are able to develop their identity with the use of fashion props and discourse, those that strive for positioning in fashion fields have more limited scope for identity construction, which frequently results in “*unsustainable identity projects*” (Parmentier and Fischer, 2011:7). Similarly, Marion and Nairn (2011) used fashion discourse to explore the ways in which French teenage girls construct their evolving identity. They suggested that identity is a dynamic process of construction, where clothes play a role of creative process of identity production rather than remain a fruit of reproduction or classification.

Another stream of research focused on how fashion helps consumers to develop unique identity to facilitate differentiation from others. Consumers’ need for uniqueness can be defined as individual’s pursuit of differentiation towards others, which can be achieved through acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods for the purpose of development and enhancement of one’s social and personal identity (Tian et al., 2001). Individuals can fulfil their desire to be unique in a number of ways, which include display of possessions (Belk, 1988), style of interpersonal interaction (Maslach et al., 1985), or the dominance of knowledge in which they establish expertise (Holt, 1995). For instance, in Western culture, expressing one’s difference requires creating personal style via acquisition and demonstration of material goods that represent the self (Kron, 1983). This is

accomplished by a purchase of unique, novel, customised and limited-edition goods or via the decorative collection and display of goods (Tian et al., 2001). Hence, it can be common for consumers to dispose of goods that became too mainstream and are popular among their peers (Tepper, 1997).

On the other hand, Üstüner and Holt (2007) observed how individuals use fashion to construct collective identity. Although their study also focused on other domains of consumption apart from fashion, they have explored how through clothes and other consumption objects individuals engage in collective identity projects to accumulate in the environment. Overall, these studies suggest that for some consumers fashion and identity are inseparable, and clothes are seen as the core element that helps in practices of identity construction.

Fashion and Marketplace Ideologies

Following Schmitt, Brakus and Birglia (2022) this thesis defines ideology as “*ideas and ideals related to consumerism, which are manifested in consumers’ social representations and expressed in their communicative actions in marketplace*” (2022:75). Consumers are guided by their own ideologies and as they are entering the marketplace, they are looking for the ways to spread their beliefs further. Research that observed emergence of various ideologies has predominantly looked at how unsatisfied consumers became preoccupied with having an influence on the marketplace through “*refashioning the field*” (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015). By looking at how creators use their work to freshen up contemporary field of fashion, Dolbec and Fischer (2015) observed how even individuals with lower levels of social acceptance (i.e., small number of followers) were able to benefit from created opportunities,

which were the result of their institutional work. Their findings therefore suggest that through accumulation of individually incremental innovations of their existing practices, consumers can help provoke important market-level changes in the fashion field.

Another stream of ideology of “refashioning the field” can be attributed to how consumers use their ideology to receive greater choice when it comes to consumption objects. This discussion was started by Scaraboto and Fischer’s (2012) study, which explored how marginalised consumers seek greater inclusion and more choice from mainstream fashion retailers. They observed how “fatshionistas” – plus sized fashion consumers – through blogging were proposing their “ideology” of having more options in fashion retail. Their “ideology” allowed them to build collective consumer identity, which with the use of several strategies helped them to gain further inclusion in fashion marketplace. Despite that Scaraboto and Fischer’s (2012) study predominantly draw on institutional theory of enquiry, it still contributed to marketplace ideologies domain of CCT. This can be observed not only from individuals constructing collective identity projects, but also from the fact that they are using their social media and blogs to spread their ideology of being “fatshionista”. Similar perspective was observed by Zanette and Pereira Zamith Brito (2019), who explored how plus size consumers are expressing consumer resistance in the fashion field in their attempt to establish themselves as fashionable subjects. Similar to Scaraboto and Fischer (2012) these consumers also used “ideology”, including strategies of power, in order to achieve their recognition in the field. As a result, both of these studies suggest that contemporary consumers frequently engage in producing their own “ideology” in order to share their beliefs, values, and desires, as well as to articulate their identity and taste.

As for taste, research on marketplace ideologies has briefly connected it to the context of fashion. This was predominantly done to explore how individuals start new tastes (Dolbec and Maciel, 2018) as well as how their taste changes as they “grab the megaphone” (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Particularly, important work was done by McQuarrie et al. (2013) who have explored the notion of taste and cultural capital and how these are acquired by fashion bloggers throughout the time of their blog development. They explain the success of certain fashion bloggers by proposing a theory that cultural capital can be accumulated by publicly displaying taste, which is favourably received and helps to grow the audience. By spreading their own “ideologies of taste” these bloggers were thus able to grow their audience, their cultural capital, and, eventually, become part of the fashion system. More detailed discussion on interrelationship between taste ideologies in fashion is presented in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Fashion and Marketplace Cultures

Marketplace cultures are approached by CCT through exploration of “*the ways in which consumers forge feeling of social solidarity and create distinctive, fragmentary, self-selected, and sometime transient cultural worlds through the pursuit of common consumption interests*” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005:873). In the context of contemporary consumer research, marketplace cultures commonly refer to communities (Hungara and Nobre, 2021), tribes (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2007), and subcultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Similarly, development of technology has led to development of online communities, which have been explored extensively by modern consumer research from communities of practice (Gannon and Prothero 2016; 2018) to brand publics (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016) to networks of desire (Kozinets, Patterson and Ashman, 2017).

In their exploration of a community of beauty bloggers, Gannon and Prothero refer to “community of practice” defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDarmott, and Snyder, 2002:4). By applying Wenger’s framework (1998; 2000) they observed three core characteristics of community of practice - “mutual engagement”, “shared repertoire” and “joint enterprise”- and established that these practices shape the community of beauty bloggers, which exhibits some elements of consumer tribes. Another study by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016:1) explored the concept of brand publics, to which they refer as “social formations that are not based on interactions but on a continuous focus of interest and mediation”. Brand publics differ from brand communities in a way that participation is not structured by discussions and social relations. By looking at Louis Vuitton mentions on Twitter they have observed how the brand acts as a medium to offer publicity to consumer identity rather than as a tool to develop collective identity. Although this concept differs from other virtual communities, they do exhibit “shared rituals and traditions” that motivates participation in these virtual spaces (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016).

Finally, some of the studies discussed in relation to other domains of CCT in this section, too appeared to have characteristics of community. These include fashion bloggers, who got hold of megaphone through their activity (McQuarrie et al., 2013) since before they had an audience they had community; fatshionistas, whose collective identity also resembles a form of community where they are connected by the same cause (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2012), and creators preoccupied with “refashioning the field” (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015), who by actively engaging in form of aesthetic labor form their own institutional communities.

1.2.2. Luxury Counterfeits and their role in Fashion

“Changes in how we consume, largely impacted by developments in technology and global travel, on the one hand manipulated how and when we consume fashion, yet on the other hand, perpetuate and increase our desire to consume fashion” (Large, 2019:2). Acceleration of fashion cycle, drive for status, dissatisfaction with quality of authentic products and high price of the genuine products – are just a few reasons for growing popularity of counterfeit luxury products. Luxury counterfeits are viewed to be *“particularly insidious”* due to creating imbalance in the marketplace since *“when cheaper alternatives are available, the expectation is that their consumption will increase, prompting a decrease in genuine brands’ consumption”* (Sharma et al., 2022:900).

However, Hilton et al. (2004) argued that the nature of the fashion industry and fashion cycle encourages copying and imitation by producers and consumption of these products by consumers. While genuine luxury products are often perceived as expensive for the quality (Hussain, Kofinas and Win, 2017) and inaccessible (De Barnier, Falcy, and Valette-Florence, 2012), luxury counterfeits are seen to be the best alternative for these products when consumers want to enhance their status and project desired identity, which inclines them to engage in counterfeit luxury consumption. Khan et al. (2021:338) refer to counterfeit consumption as *“dynamic interplay between the motivational determinants, patterns and outcomes of wilful acquisition of counterfeit brands, which often serve consumer’s ulterior motives of impressing and deceiving the observers”*. Existing consumer research has mostly explored luxury counterfeits in relation to motives of counterfeit luxury consumption (Wilcox and Zaichkowsky, 2020; Shan, Jian, and Cui, 2021), consumer typologies (Berghaus, Müller-Stewens, and Reinecke, 2014), and effects of counterfeits (Romani et al., 2012; Kapfere and

Michaut, 2014). This is observed in a more in-depth discussion on the state of research on counterfeit luxury goods consumption presented in Chapter Three of this thesis.

1.3. Research Aim and Contribution

Within the research context and theoretical perspective presented above, this thesis aims to observe what is the role of taste in consumption of counterfeit luxury goods and whether engagement in this practice shows an emergence of a new taste regime. As presented above, using the context of counterfeit luxury goods consumption would allow observation of how individuals exercise taste in contexts where social acceptability is not given. Contributions to three areas have emerged, specifically to consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, and marketplace ideologies of taste.

1.4. Research Questions and Methodology

To achieve the aim stated above, three research questions were developed to guide the research direction. These research questions are as follows:

1. How do consumers showcase their taste with counterfeit luxury goods?
2. What taste-related practices are performed by consumers of counterfeit luxury goods?
3. What social and cultural conditions allow the formulation of an emerging taste regime of counterfeit luxury goods consumption?

Using an eco-system of research tools such as netnography, phenomenological interviews, wardrobe interviews and visual methods, allows for the emergence of a rich data set, the findings from which are discussed in detail in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Detailed

discussion of the justification for the research approach and methods is discussed further in Chapter Four.

1.5.Outline of Thesis

This thesis is presented in eight chapters. The Introduction chapter introduces the reader to the thesis by providing an overview of the research context. This is followed by Chapter Two which begins the review of consumer research tradition by focusing on the CCT domain and existing research around constructs of consumption, cultural capital, and taste. Chapter Three discusses the theory on counterfeit luxury consumption and reviews existing studies in this domain by linking it to motivation, status, identity construction and consumer resistance. Chapter Four discusses the methodological approach of this study and discusses in detail the social constructionist approach that underpins this thesis. It presents research design, sampling, data collection and data analysis strategies. Chapters Five, Six and Seven discuss findings of data collection in the present study. They focus on exploration of “taste as practice” and “taste as judgment”; introduce “taste curation” and discuss “taste development” as a process of continuous taste cultivation. Finally, they introduce the concept of “taste communities” and establish its role in relation to emergence of new tastes with the help of taste regimes. Chapter Eight presents key theoretical contributions of this study. It discusses implications of findings and acknowledges limitations of this study. The chapter ends with consideration of future research directions.

Chapter Two: Theoretical Foundations of Taste

2.0. Introduction

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework chosen for this research. Firstly, the notion of consumption and its role within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is discussed, which is followed by the exploration how consumption links to culture and aesthetics. Secondly, notions of “social class” and “distinction” are discussed in relation to consumption, which is followed by an overview of different types of luxury consumption, specifically conspicuous consumption, and inconspicuous consumption. Thirdly, building on the theory of habitus and cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu (1984), the role of taste is discussed in relation to contemporary consumption. This is done through an exploration of how taste is practiced and developed with the appropriation of taste regimes. Fourthly, the concept of taste is discussed in relation to the concept of “cultural omnivores” as their consumption patterns are explored in detail. Finally, the summary of key literature gaps is presented, which is followed by chapter conclusions. The aim of this chapter is therefore to establish clear theoretical foundations to underpin this thesis, as well as to identify key theoretical gaps that this study intends to fulfil.

2.1. Defining Consumption

“Modern consumption is, after all, a historical artifact” proposes McCracken (1990:3) in his collection of essays. Consumption has repeatedly been seen as a complex term with rich history, the modern connotation of which is a result of centuries of profound social, economic, and cultural changes in the West (McCracken, 1990). Scholars were interested in

studying how products were produced and later acquired by individuals, however the subject of how and why these products were used was under no interest, since research assumed it to be pretty obvious. Early empirical research mostly studied consumption in terms of economics, where examination of statistical records of household expenditures helped scholars to determine consumption and behaviour patterns (Warde, 2017).

As a specific topic within social sciences, consumption started to receive increased attention over the last sixty years. The introduction and consideration of such terms as “*the consumer*” (Baumgartner, 2002), “*consumer culture*” (Sassatelli, 2007), and “*consumer society*” (Baudrillard, 2016) indicate enhanced societal importance of purchasing of commodities and the significance of their cultural meanings. By studying consumption patterns, scholars try to understand human needs, desires, and practices. Postmodern consumer research often sees consumers as complex and diverse individuals that produce cultural meanings through performance of their actions and experiences (Firat et al., 1995; Kozinets, 2001; Holt, 2002). The meaning of consumption thus evolved “*from being either a matter of regenerating productive forces (sociology), maximizing utility (economics) or a process of acquisition (business studies) to become a term that seems to permeate the relations between society and individual, be it in the form of social classification and communications systems, identity formation process, ritualistic and community building processes, the relationship between the individual and the state under the reign of the new public management, or the search for existentially fulfilling experiences*” (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011:381). This interest in why and how individuals consume products, services, and experiences has led to the emergence of Consumer Culture Theory, also known as CCT.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) refers to “*a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings*” (Arnould and Thompson, 2005:868). The consumption of market-made commodities and symbols is central to the consumer culture (Holt, 2002), as well as interconnected systems of product images and objects, which consumers use to construct identities and meanings with the goal of making the collective sense of their experiences and lives (Kozinets, 2001). Possessions and identity frequently represent a key focus in Consumer Culture Theory (Belk et al., 1985; Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Holt, 2002; Murray, 2002; Schau and Gilly, 2003). Consumer culture theory explores how consumers actively re-work and transform symbolic meanings that are encoded in their possessions with the goal of developing their identity further (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Overall, Arnould and Thompson (2005) presented four key interrelated research domains are explored by CCT researchers – (1) consumer identity projects, (2) marketplace cultures, (3) the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies of consumers’ interpretive strategies. As articulated in Chapter One of this thesis, the present research intends to contribute to three domains of CCT, specifically consumer identity projects, marketplace culture and mass mediated marketplace ideologies. To achieve this, it uses Bourdieu’s (1984) theory on habitus, cultural capital, and taste. Therefore, in line with theme of the present research, this study views consumption as aesthetic experience, the core value of which is to receive hedonic pleasure. Next section explores this in further detail.

2.1.1. Consumption as Aesthetic Experience

Luxury products, no matter genuine or counterfeit, are part of hedonic product category – consumers purchase them more for their appearance and emotional value, rather than

utilitarian values they carry (Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer, 2011). Research on hedonic side of consumption suggests that this behaviour involves aspects of aesthetics and taste (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Schmitt and Simonson, 1997). While taste is discussed further in Section 2.6. of this chapter, this section dives into the notion of “aesthetics”.

The term aesthetics itself is rather complex and has come to possess different meanings.

Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008:45-46) propose three key conceptualisations of aesthetics:

- 1) *All forms of sensory experiences that are related to arts, paintings, crafts, music, and performances;*
- 2) *Sensory experiences that concern everyday objects;*
- 3) *Wide range of conceptual categories that define aesthetics as form and expression, harmony and order, symbolism and imagery, beauty, taste and feelings.*

In his overview of “aesthetic taste”, Spicher (2020) referred to the book “Everyday Aesthetics”, where Saito (2007) explored how contemporary aestheticians argue that aesthetics and theories of such extend beyond art, however the majority of discussion still centres around various forms of art. The essay on “Marketing and Aesthetic” written by Levy and Czepiel (1974:84) suggested that relationship between business and aesthetics is growing vigorously. They shared how after the concept of brand image was introduced in 1955, consumer behaviour became a distinct area of research. However, while behaviour research started gaining richness it previously lacked, aesthetics was still mostly considered in relation to product design. Nevertheless, as marketing practitioners understood that tastes vary among

groups in the population, they started drawing on aesthetics as a basis for market segmentation (Levy and Czepiel, 1974).

Luckily, contemporary marketplace relies on aesthetics more than it did in the time Levy and Czepiel's (1974) essay was released. Twenty first century saw a growth of creative directors, responsible for aesthetic side of business (VanderPloeg and Lee, 2018); marketplace experienced emergence of aesthetics labour (Pettinger, 2004); consumers who want to train their "Aesthetic Intelligence" (Brown, 2019); and TikTok videos that encourage users to share clips of "your aesthetics". Research connected aesthetics to consumption to explore tech-products and price premium (Lee, 2022), art (Araujo et al., 2020), design of hotelscales (Alfakhri et al., 2018) and Instagram (Crepax, 2020). More profound work on aesthetics was recently done by Brown (2019) in her book on "*Aesthetic Intelligence*", who suggested that aesthetics will be defining in terms of business success in the coming years. Drawing on real-life examples of product design, advertising, and marketing case studies, she explored the strategies that individuals can use to develop their taste and sense of aesthetics.

Scholars refer to individuals with a sense of aesthetics as having "*more sophisticated preferences regarding the design of things*" (Bloch, 1995:22) as well as superior preferences when it comes to consumption of products, services, and experiences. Aesthetic consumption is therefore significantly dependent on resources – given that consumers, who engage in this type of behaviour are ready to purchase only the most "*aesthetically pleasing*" product, utilitarian value becomes secondary. This shows that aesthetics as such becomes "*worry*" only for selected few – individuals, who have time and resources to engage in activities that help to develop one's "*sense of beauty*" (Macieal and Wallendorf, 2017). Aesthetics, or lack

of such, also allows individuals to distinguish themselves and to distinguish others. The next section looks at this in more detail through discussion of class, distinction, and consumption.

2.2. Social Class, Consumption and Distinction

Consumption is seen to be one of the determinant elements for articulation of social class boundaries (Wattanasuwan, 2003). As a result, the phenomenon of how differences in class shape lifestyle and consumption preferences appeared to be intriguing for scholars (Arnould and Thompson, 2018) mostly because previously class boundaries were predetermined by birth (royalty, nobility, and peasantry), but emergence and growth of capitalism has allowed more individuals to gain access to financial resources essential for hierarchy climbing. Marx (1867) was among the first to look at class and consumption, proposing a theory which highlighted that class segments have different degrees of control over their lives and that class advantages tend to translate into having power over others.

Building on Marx's theory, Max Weber (1978) introduced the term "social class" and claimed that in addition to financial resources, social hierarchy is also expressed and reproduced through "styles of life" that are different in their honorific value (Holt, 1998). He thus observed how lifestyles of individuals allowed them to construct and shape their level of social hierarchy – an approach which was later extended by researchers exploring consumption patterns of different casts and classes. In addition, Weber argued that social status is crucial as a resource for influencing perception of self and others, meaning that status groups were characterized by distinct approaches to socialization and lifestyle. This position implies that societies segregate into different groups based not only on their financial position, but also on their non-economic criteria, such as morals, culture, and lifestyle. These

ideas were further developed by Lloyd Warner (1949) in his work on lifestyles of middle- and working-class Americans. His study focused on the relationship between lifestyle and social class, in which he argued that consumer behaviours (by which he meant “*having a right house, the right kind of neighbourhood and so on*”) are key in expressing particular status positions in the community (Warner et al., 1949). Work of Warner inspired future researchers on class differences and was especially influential for Bourdieu (1984) and his work “Distinction”, which has made a profound influence on CCT researchers, focusing on social class differences through consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2018). In relation to class systems, Bourdieu conceptualised social class hierarchy as “*multidimensional social space within which groups are positioned in relation to each other and where the boundaries between groups are defined by the volume and forms of the capital they possess*” (Arnould and Thompson, 2018:n.a). In this social hierarchy, status reflects higher position in terms of a number of valued dimensions, including financial wealth (“*economic capital*”) or domain specific knowledge (“*cultural capital*”).

An extensive stream of literature suggests that social classes are structured and differentiated based on their tastes in consumption (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1997; Smith Maguire, 2016; Webster, 2019). Bourdieu, in particular, is seen as a founding father of this approach to distinction, as he was first to discuss such notions as habitus, capital and taste and how they structure consumption, which is explored in further sections of this chapter. Building on this, Holt (1998) proposed that class position is revealed not so much by what exactly individuals consume (ballet versus Star Wars films), but rather how these objects are consumed. This perspective shows that it is essential to observe ways and patterns in which certain products are consumed, along with consumer experiences and interpretation related to these.

Fashion as a context allows us to do this, as it has played a significant role in development of class (Braudel, 1981). Clothing has become a marker of identity within contemporary consumer society by helping individuals to define their social status (Entwistle, 2015). Garments therefore become useful in “*maintaining or subverting symbolic boundaries*” by indicating how individuals in different times perceive their positions in social structures as well as negotiate status boundaries (Crane, 2000:1). Previous centuries saw clothing as a principal mean for identification, which allowed communication of various aspects of identity, including occupation, religion, and social class (ibid.).

Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1957) were among the first to explore the correlation between social class, fashion, and status, establishing that fashion was one of the means adopted by new capitalistic consumers that helped them to challenge power and status through flaunting sumptuary laws as well as aggressively keeping up with latest fashion in order to maintain status and distinction (Wilson, 2003; Entwistle, 2015). In his exploration of fashion, Veblen (1899) discussed how its certain characteristics are particular to only those of “leisure class”, who mostly adopted fashion to fight for social status, rather than for its utilitarian value. Following Bourdieu (1984), Rafferty (2011:243) refers to fashion as “*to be perceived, interpreted and hence valued differently by women depending on the social class position they were born into, restrictions and/or advantages experienced over their trajectory, and their ‘position of arrival’*”. This perspective suggests that modern marketplace allows fashion to exist outside of class – vast availability of products of various price categories as well as their accessibility provokes “democratisation of fashion”.

One of the ways in which this democratisation occurs is through emulation, theories of which propose that fashion starts at the top and then percolates down to “lower orders” (Entwistle,

2015). Also known as “trickle down” theory, emulation implied that new social groups, such as merchants, industrialists, and new middle class, were able to buy fashions that were trickling down after the ruling class had the wear of them. This perspective suggests that as soon as other classes started imitating fashions of the upper class, crossing the line in distinction, elites turned away from these styles and adopted new ones to reinforce hierarchical order (Simmel, 1971). However, emulation received criticism from contemporary philosophers and moralists, who see it as disruption for natural and cosmological order where status is given by God (Entwistle, 2015). In their eyes this tradition is seen as a *“form of sin, rebellion and insubordination against proper order of the world, and represents moral, spiritual, and political corruption”* (Slater, 1997:69).

Interest in “trickle” theories has led to reinterpretations and extension of the concept. A perspective of “trickle-up” was introduced by Field (1970), who proposed that trends start on the street, and they flow upwards from lower classes to upper. By embracing the phenomenon of “Status Float” (Field, 1970), styles are embraced by luxury brands and are released as products for the rich. In the context of fashion specifically this implies that low-class trends are first adopted by upper classes and then they gradually “trickle down” to middle classes. This approach was used by Mohr et al. (2021) to study the trend of sustainability in fashion clothing. They have established that by being adopted by younger generation group or those with low income, sustainable fashion attracts attention of upper classes and fashion brands by “trickling up”. A recent study by Belezza and Berger (2019) suggested that elites sometimes adopt items that are associated with low-status groups with the goal of distinguishing themselves from middle-class consumers. Drawing on examples of lobster macaroni and cheese, IKEA shopping bag and Balenciaga Crocs, they suggest that there is a growing tendency of high-status individuals to adopt items associated with low status. As a result, they

have proposed “trickle round” model, which implies that trends and signals move directly from low-status groups to upper class and later diffuse to middle class. This behaviour sees consumers mixing low and high fashion items to make a statement about themselves as well as to distinguish their status from others (Belezza and Berger, 2019).

2.3. Forms of Luxury Consumption

As previous section showed, the main driver of consumption was race for class and status (Douglas and Isherwood, 2002). This is a process that has no end, since what at one time may confer status in a moment or two might be acquired by everyone, resulting in a dissolvent of its meaning (Trigg, 2001). Individuals have always aimed at continuous consumption with the focus on status acquisition and their possibility to be distinct from others. One of the ways this is commonly achieved is through acquisition of luxury goods, which create distance by vertically separating luxury consumers from other consumers and helps to connect them with desired group of similar individuals (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012). Consequently, luxury consumption and its various forms have been a major topic in research on consumer behaviour, often discussed in studies related to status consumption (Eastman et al., 1999; O’Cass and McEwan, 2004). However, it can be argued that the roots of modern luxury consumption lie in “*conspicuous consumption*” – a term introduced by Thorstein Veblen in his work “The Theory of Leisure Class” (1899). Next sections provide more in-depth theoretical formulation of various forms of luxury consumption, including “conspicuous consumption” and “inconspicuous consumption”.

2.3.1 Conspicuous Consumption

The adaptors of conspicuous consumption are seen to be buying the largest homes, the most expensive cars, and yachts, not forgetting about watches and other luxury possessions, all of which signal wealth to others (Mason, 1984). In “Theory of the Leisure Class” Veblen (1899) presented a framework where consumer preferences were based on social status and their standing in the hierarchy. He claimed that there are two ways in which individuals can display wealth – through extensive leisure activities, which he refers to as “*conspicuous leisure*” or through lavish expenditures on consumption and services, the activity he calls “*conspicuous consumption*”. At the core of “*conspicuous consumption*” lies the price of the product and the perceptions of individuals about it, through which status is derived (Turunen, 2018). Veblen himself defined conspicuous consumption as the activity of purchasing expensive with the aim of wasteful depiction of wealth rather than an attempt to satisfy utilitarian needs, the primary objective of which is the maintenance of higher social status – “*the most obvious form in which consumption occurs is seen in wearing of liveries and the occupation of spacious servants’ quarters. Another, scarcely less obstructive or less effective form of vicarious consumption, and much more widely prevalent one, is the consumption of food, clothing, dwelling, and furniture by the lady and the rest of the domestic establishment*” (Veblen, 1899:49).

Mason (1981) saw conspicuous consumption as satisfaction derived from the audience reaction to depiction of not positive attributes of worthy possessions, but to the wealth displayed by the individual, while Trigg (2001) explained this activity as “behaviour in which individuals display their wealth through high degree of luxury expenditures in products and services”. The present study follows the definition proposed by O’Cass and McEwen

(2004:34), who refer to conspicuous consumption as “*the tendency of individuals to enhance their image, through overt consumption of possessions, which communicates status to others*”. It was decided to choose this conceptualisation, since O’Cass and McEwen (2004) made emphasis on loud luxury products – items which feature brand logos that are easily recognisable to those around. Therefore, this study sees conspicuous consumption as a tool that individuals use to signal their status and capital in the competing modern-day environment.

Veblen (1899) argued that this competition is not between individual members of “leisure class” but between the group and its enemies. Conspicuous consumption is thus primarily motivated not by the utility function, but because it brings the opportunity to establish relative financial superiority. This ostentatious display of goods that are both highly expensive and highly valued provides the “leisure class” with an alternative path to social prestige in any society that recognizes wealth as a major status determinant (Mason, 1981). For instance, Veblen argues that “*since the consumption of these more excellent goods is evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit*” (1899:53). In order to keep up with this status and to avoid stultification “*he must also cultivate his tastes, for it now becomes incumbent on him to discriminate with some nicety between the noble and ignoble in consumable goods. He becomes connoisseur in credible viands of various degrees of merit, in manly beverages and trinkets, in seemly apparel and architecture, in weapons, games, dancers, and the narcotics*” (ibid.). This cultivation of aesthetic behaviour requires time and effort and thus transforms this leisure activity in a necessary business of learning how to live according to established standards. This passage shows that conspicuous consumption is an

important consequence of social evolution that gives increasing importance to wealth and leisure as major determinants of the social position and prestige within society.

Additionally, Veblen argued that in order to be truly effective, conspicuous consumption also needs a strong element of “conspicuous waste”, which is called *“waste because this expenditure does not serve human life or human well-being on the whole, not because it is a waste or misdirection of effort or expenditure as viewed from the standpoint of the individual consumer who chooses it”* (1899:67). This implies that again the majority of the products that were acquired were bought in a careless and useless ways in order to highlight the importance of one’s social position through careless spending to boost status. Most of the products bought were not even used according to their utility function, instead they just acted as visible possessions that were essential for maintenance of the members position in the “leisure class”.

Although Veblen’s work was presented more than a hundred years ago, this view of possessions still dominates recent studies (Belk, 1988; Berger and Heath, 2007), which established that individuals tend to communicate their desired identity in publicly visible domains, which often results in wealthier households spending large share of their income on visible status indicating goods, such as cars, clothing, accessories, and jewellery. However, this principle of over-spending only works with highly visible goods that help consumers to distinguish themselves from others in their circle (Charles et al. 2009). This is because, according to Duesenberry (1949), individuals consider conspicuous expenditures in comparison to other individuals, hoping to be seen favourably in the greater circles of the social status hierarchy. Next section looks at the notion of conspicuous consumption in contemporary consumer research by linking it to status, and materialism.

Status and Conspicuous Consumption

When speaking about conspicuous consumption or even defining the term, scholars never forget the word “*status*”, which is seen to be one of the drivers for such behaviour. It is thus essential to understand what research implies by this as well as whether status consumption and conspicuous consumption can be used synonymously. Eastman et al. (1999) defined status as “*position or rank in the society or group, which is awarded to others*”. Overall, three primary kinds of status were distinguished by previous research: status by definition or assignment (e.g. royalty), status by achievement (as a result of hard work in comparison to others), and status by consumption and possessions acquisition (Turunen, 2018). Hence, status and prestige also play significant role in shaping preferences for certain products since many of them are purchased not due to their utility function, but rather as means that display wealth and purchasing power of the individual (Mason, 1984).

A stream of research has explored how alternative or non-standard status is achieved through conspicuous consumption. For instance, Johnson et al. (2018) explored how by conspicuously consuming pro-social products, individuals are able to articulate their status and their engagement in pro-social behaviour. Belezza et al. (2016) looked at how a busy and overworked lifestyle has become a status symbol as opposed to traditional “leisure” lifestyle characteristic to conspicuous consumption. Bronner and de Hoog (2018) observed immaterial experiences and their relationship to conspicuous consumption, by looking at vacation choices and their communication on social media. By doing so, they were able to extend traditional theory beyond possessions and established that nonmaterial consumption makes individuals happier as opposed to material one. These several studies indicate how recent years saw reconfiguration of notions of “status” and “conspicuous consumption”, which

highlights that consumers are more interested in finding alternative ways to showcase and enhance their position in society.

Similarly, research was also preoccupied in establishing differences and similarities between conspicuous consumption and status consumption. The latter one generally involves high-end, expensive luxury products that most individuals do not consume on daily basis (Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2011). Status consumption can be defined as *“the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolise status both for the individual and surrounding significant others”* (Eastman et al., 1999:42). Under this type of consumption, individuals try to impress others, including superiors at workplace, friends or possible future partners and spouses. This suggests that individuals engaged in status consumption constantly attempt to compare themselves to others through demonstration of social power and wealth with their ability to consume material objects and status goods (Lertwannawit and Madhachitara, 2011). According to Turunen (2018) two types of consumption related to status can be identified: status seeking consumption and status consumption. Eastman et al. (1999) suggested that status seeking consumption implies striving for status and position in society through loud and recognisable products with strong signals. Hence, the main difference between the two is that status consumption is about the consumption for one’s position, while status-seeking consumption has the goal of pursuing higher position in the hierarchy (Turunen, 2018). This implies that in the case of status consumption individual already holds desired status position and consumes according to it with the goal of enhancing, while in the status-seeking consumption is intended for the acquisition of the desired social position.

Status consumption and conspicuous consumption are often interpreted as the same thing in various studies, which highlight that there is no difference between the two, as both emphasize the importance of status. This is, however, misrecognition, since despite the fact that both of them involve purchasing and consumption of luxury goods, the meaning and purpose behind them is distinct. Status consumption is concerned with consumers' desire to gain prestige from the acquisition of goods and products that depict status (for instance underwear – the wearer is aware about it, but does not expose it to others), while conspicuous consumption is about the visual display of products in the presence of others (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Hence, it can be established that status consumption emphasizes the nature of owning status products, while conspicuous consumption is undertaken with the goal of putting wealth and possessions for societal display.

Conspicuous Consumption and Materialism

The search for status was proved to relate to the individual trait of materialism – the envy component of which leads to a continuous and insatiable desire for consumer product offerings that are better than those of friends or neighbours (Eckhardt et al., 2015). For individuals who live in materialistically oriented cultures, luxury possessions act as key players in helping to construct desired identity (Belk, 1988). The close relationship between conspicuous consumption and materialism was proven numerous times with the special focus placed on individual's relationship to his/her possessions, which is clear from explanations presented further below. While Belk (1984) referred to materialism as the importance individual attaches to possessions, Richins and Dawson (1992) observed materialism in terms of how individuals place possessions in centre of their life believing that they are vital for

their happiness as well as inevitable elements used to judge personal success and success of others based on quality and quantity of material items owned.

In addition, other empirical studies by Richins (1994a, 1994b) established that materialistic consumers tend to place higher value on products that can be worn or seen in public, and in some cases, may derive more pleasure from depicting the product to others than from actually using it. Podoshen and Andrzejewski (2012) explain this as a belief, pursued by materialists, that these goods are central to gaining social standing, power, status as well as happiness. In addition, Tatzel (2002) developed a framework that shows a strong link between free-spending materialism and conspicuous consumption. Her study proposes that the desire to consume is driven by the belief that success is linked to consuming in a displaying manner, which resonates with other studies mentioned above. In addition, research by O'Cass (2001) also highlights the link between materialism and conspicuous consumption arguing that consumers with strong materialistic tendencies use fashionable clothing to convey status to other.

Finally, previous research established that materialistic consumers are more prone to consuming counterfeit products. This is further explored in Section 3.3.2. of this thesis.

2.3.2. Inconspicuous Consumption

While existing research emphasizes that consumer items are supposed to be visible symbols where items are acquired and displayed to validate one's social claim as well as to emulate the behaviour of higher-status groups for social gain (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996; Veblen, 1899), other perspectives suggest that consumers might avoid products with explicit branding

as they reject ostentatious status symbols (Brooks, 2001; Davis, 1992) or feel guilty about consuming conspicuously (Seabrook, 2001). Twenty first century saw a turn in thinking towards different interpretations of consumption and its relation to social class and status, resulting in the emergence of subtle consumption, commonly known as “*inconspicuous consumption*”. The rise of inconspicuous consumption emerged as a result of dilution of a signalling ability of traditional luxury goods, a preference of individuals to not stand out during the times of economic hardship as well as increased desire for subtle designs that help to differentiate from others (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Another potential reason for growing popularity of inconspicuous consumption is due to the massive spread of luxury brands into mass market, emergence of high-quality counterfeits as well as the conspicuous consumption of nouveaux riches, all resulting in the meaning of traditional luxury goods being diluted (Wu et al., 2017). As a consequence, true elites have shifted away from consuming overt status symbols, preferring more subtle and inconspicuous offerings (Han et al., 2010).

The definition of inconspicuous consumption is completely opposite to that of conspicuous consumption. Eckhardt et al. (2015) defined “*inconspicuous consumption*” as “*the use of subtly marked products, which are misrecognized by most consumers, but facilitate interaction with those who have the requisite capital to decode the subtle signals*” (2015:808). The growing popularity of inconspicuous consumption has led to the emergence of inconspicuous brands, which are subtle and tend to be more refined in terms of their aesthetics and design. These brands thus have low visual prominence and use discreet signals in their design (Han et al., 2010).

Research, too, became interested in exploration of inconspicuous consumption as a new way of distinction. For instance, Berger and Ward (2010) concluded that individuals who can

afford truly high-status luxury prefer less conspicuous brands. In their research, they have observed 120 pairs of sunglasses, testing whether their brand was explicitly identifiable. They have established that although sunglasses with quiet branding provided less meaning and were misrecognised by majority of the participants, they were preferred by individuals with certain level of taste, as they viewed these products as tools to differentiate from others. These findings were also supported by Eckhardt et al. (2015), who established that subtle signals in products can be only picked up by true elite or by those who possess essential background to decode these meanings, which become more important as compared to those signals that can be understood by everyone.

Another study (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016) observed the patterns of inconspicuous dressing of Dutch men through implication of “*wardrobe interviews*”, establishing that participants prefer to dress rather inconspicuously than stand out among the crowd. For them clothing was seen as a language that can send certain signals or messages to the outside world along with communicating the identity of the wearer (Barnard, 2002). The researchers have identified that although respondents are aware that their inconspicuous dress is similar to their companions, but with it they are able to construct coherent and authentic identities, which express who they truly are. Hence, for them dressing in new trendy clothes every other day has a negative meaning since “*you are after all one person with one taste, and not all sorts of different types of persons*” (Van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016:31).

In terms of culture specific inconspicuous consumption, research was particularly interested to observe how these consumer preferences are expressed in the context of China. For instance, Wu et al. (2017) examined how Chinese luxury consumers redefined their identity and their conceptions of luxury, which resulted in the emergence of four forms of

inconspicuous consumption that are “*illustrated by consumers (1) with wished-for identities or fantasy lifestyle, (2) who appreciate aesthetics and function, (3) who are wealthy and prefer not to provoke envy and/or anger in times of economic austerity and (4) who desire to differentiate themselves and employ subtle signals that are only observable to people with the requisite knowledge to decode their meaning*” (2017:491). Although their study supported a number of existing theoretical propositions on inconspicuous consumption, they have managed to observe complexity of factors that influence consumers’ decision to choose inconspicuous products.

Another recent study by Zhang (2019) took a slightly different approach and observed how Chinese consumers used fashion to differentiate themselves during the Cultural Revolution. This research has established that superordinate social class did not distinguish themselves, but rather displayed “poverty” during these times. As opposed to other studies, Zhang (2019) showed that consumers adopted inconspicuous consumption and inconspicuous dressing to be part of the larger group during Cultural Revolution, as such elements as wealth and privileged social background have brought people high levels of criticism and public denunciations. Therefore, displays of poverty and illiteracy helped one survive in those times. These research findings are rather controversial to what was done in the area of inconspicuous consumption, as they show that this strategy was used not to distinguish oneself from the others, but rather to build a collective identity with others in order to avoid violence (Zhang, 2019).

Nevertheless, research on inconspicuous consumption is still fragmented as scholars were mostly interested in observing signals, rather than exploring how individuals consume inconspicuously. Therefore, it is suggested that further exploration of consumer practices and

tastes related to this type of consumption is essential, as it would allow to deepen understanding on how exactly consumers distinguish themselves from others by becoming adaptors of inconspicuous consumption. However, since the key argument behind inconspicuous consumption states that these signals can only be decoded by those individuals, who possess similar habitus and cultural capital to that of the wearer of these items (Berger and Ward, 2010), further exploration of these elements is essential.

2.4. The role of Habitus in Consumption

Bourdieu (1984) argued against Veblen's notion of "conspicuous consumption" as a form of distinction, proposing that constructing and maintaining symbolic borders between groups thorough excess consumption is "nothing": *"the naïve exhibitionism of 'conspicuous consumption', which seeks distinction in the crude display of ill-mastered luxury, is nothing composed to the unique capacity of pure gaze, a quasi-creative power which sets the aesthetic apart from the common herd by a radical difference which seems to be inscribed in 'persons'"* (1984:23). As a result, he proposed his own view on distinction in society through exploration of habitus, capital, and taste in his work "*Distinction*", which provides the most comprehensive analysis and attempt to develop a theoretical framework of social patterns of consumption of various social classes. Here, he observed three core concepts – habitus, cultural capital, and taste – to establish pre-determined boundaries that help individuals to distinguish themselves from others around them.

Habitus is one of the central components in consumer and sociological research (Arsel and Bean, 2013), as it helps scholars to understand what social and historical contexts influencers one or another pattern of behaviour. Bourdieu himself defined habitus as "*a system of lasting,*

transportable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every movement as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems” (1977:95). While this definition is rather hefty, one can explain habitus as everyday situations, practices, and choices, which tend to reflect the individual’s position in the social world. Habitus is thus inevitably linked to class – Seymour (2012) saw it as a link between objective and subjective components of class, where in the first case class is determined by economic factors, and in the second by a set of practices, dispositions, and feelings. Habitus therefore produces perceptions about the world, and while it does not determine one’s actions, it directs the route for certain practices to be adopted rather than others (Seymour, 2012). Finally, habitus shapes social actions of the individual – particularly, the choices they make in consumption of goods and services.

Commonly, research in CCT investigated the ways in which consumers seek to adapt their habitus and reconfigure their consumption practices to align with prevailing taste standards (Holt, 1997; Arsel and Bean, 2013; Kravets and Sandikici, 2014; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). Research established that when consumers are displaced from lifestyle contexts that “*fit like a glove*” (Allen, 2002), their habitus will be transformed and will evolve in their new socio-economic settings (Thompson, Henry, and Bardhi, 2018). The concept of “*fits like a glove*” was proposed by Allen (2002), who discussed habitus in terms of FLAG framework – Fits-Like-A-Glove – and practice theory. FLAG theorises choice as experience shaped by sociohistorical factors, where choice occurs across numerous domains of daily life – choosing a car, a partner, or a work of art – all of which are characterised by the experience of perfect fit (Allen, 2002). In his research he argued that practices are shaped in a number of ways, one of which is through social external factors – parents, peer groups, institutions, and mass

media, to name a few, who are able to influence practice as it unfolds. As Allen (2002) explored consumer choices of higher institutions, he concluded that these consumer choices are experienced in a flow of individuals' life as well as along their relationships with others, all of which shape their preference for one type of experience or another. In simple terms, Allen (2002) suggested that whatever choices individuals make, social institutions have an influence on what these choices should be.

Similarly, research was interested in linking habitus to social mobility (Paulson, 2017; Thompson et al., 2018). Here, scholars explored how individuals' habitus changes when they were displaced from their "*fit like a glove*" context. Paulson (2017) established that for the downwardly social mobility habitus appeared to be rooted in one's former class, while for upwardly social mobility, habitus was in slow transformation to match one's new position. For instance, Thompson et al. (2018) explored changes in habitus and coping strategies among divorced women, who have been displaced from their domestically oriented middle-class lifestyles. They have observed how certain individuals do not want their habitus to be reshaped as a result of social mobility. Consequently, by performing tastes that are discordant with their current circumstances, individuals may seek to maintain their "*ideological fitness*" with the goal of regaining their former lifestyles and status positions to avoid become marked by "*taste of necessity*" (Bourdieu, 1984) that has been imposed on them by these conditions. Thompson et al.'s (2018) research thus revealed that taste performances enable consumers to enact lifestyle-embedded ideologies as well as help them to perform rituals to position themselves as central players in social networks. These rituals include those that resembled their past life, such as inviting friends for dinner, adopting certain shopping tactics, and choosing relevant entertainment. Another interesting observation of habitus and social mobility was made by Lee and Kramer (2013), who observed a change of habitus in elite

college students, who experienced mobility through elite education. They have explored how by having pressure to acclimate to the dominant elite culture, students were faced with disparity between their new elite habitus and their previous habitus. Bourdieu (2004:111) referred to this disparity as “*cleft habitus*”, which implies that individuals are in transition and hold two habitus at the same time. Research by Lee and Kramer (2013) thus advanced this conceptualisation and establishes that individuals with “cleft habitus” are engaged in various strategies to juggle their identities. Observation of habitus in contexts of social mobility, thus allows us to observe how habitus changes and how this change influences taste and consumption patterns of individuals.

Additionally, scholars were preoccupied with extending the concept of habitus further to specific contexts, which resulted in the emergence of new notions of habitus. For instance, research by Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) investigated how different moral dispositions shape low-income, working-class residents of trailer park neighbourhood as well as their consumption practices and status negotiations. In doing so they have advanced the concept of “*moral habitus*”, introduced by Ignatow (2009), by observing how by living in trailers, these individuals exercise their moral habitus and taste through decoration of their homes, as well as by looking at their consumption patterns and social behaviours. Consequently, they highlighted the importance of studying status in micro cultural contexts, particularly those of marginalised communities. By linking “moral habitus” to consumption, they were thus able to explore how by using locally oriented moral codes, trailer community residents were able to shape their evaluations of themselves and others, as well as to showcase their status through their daily routines and activities (Saatcioglu and Ozanne, 2013). These findings therefore extend Bourdieu’s later work in which he explored the resistance of low-income individuals, with assumption that consumers of similar backgrounds share same habitus.

Additionally, research by Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) also supported the view that habitus is dynamic and can change throughout one's life rather than remain stable from the moment of birth. Another reconceptualization of habitus was explored by Carfagna et al. (2014), who observed how individuals navigate ethical consumption with their eco-habitus. Building on Haluza-Delay's (2008:213) conceptualisation of eco-habitus defined as "*practices of living socially and ecologically well in place*", Carfagna et al. (2014) explored patterns of consumption among ethical consumers. They have identified that "*eco-habitus*" entails them with a certain status and is practiced in a certain class of consumers, including "*young mothers 'voting with their dollars', foodie swappers, time traders, and climate concerned consumers*" (2014:175). By sharing the same eco-habitus, they are thus able to differentiate themselves from the rest of the society through performance of activities directed by eco-habitus. This suggests that micro-communities with their own rules, regulations, and rituals, are responsible for the formation of their own "themed" habitus, which dictates the course of their life.

Nevertheless, despite increasing interest of researchers in the concept of habitus, it has received a high level of criticism, which identified a number of difficulties with the construal of the concept (Crossley, 2001). Firstly, the validity of mechanisms through which tastes and dispositions are acquired are questionable. Bourdieu briefly mentioned that a person's habitus is shaped by social position while taste is shaped by particular institutionalized trainings, which implies that an individual's possibility to acquire taste is not only determined by their social position. However, Bourdieu immediately denies this option by claiming that taste is a result of a certain class position. This was questioned by McQuarrie et al. (2013), who observed how fashion bloggers developed tastes and acquired megaphone effect, none of whom had a habitus or cultural capital that would lead to having high level of taste in fashion

– all of them acquired it through education, development, and continuous practice. Hence, it can be argued that social position and habitus are not predeterminants of high levels of taste and thus can be acquired. Secondly, it should be noted that Bourdieu conducted his study in late 1960s, the period which did not offer even a fraction of advances in life as does current environment. Hence, it can be concluded that technological changes and growth in capital has led to the emergence of opportunities to develop cultural capital and tastes regardless of one's habitus. Finally, as this section has shown, exploration of habitus is inevitable without capital. The next section dives into this concept further.

2.5. Forms of Capital in Consumption

Holt (1998:1) refers to Bourdieu's (1984) work as "*the most comprehensive and influential attempt to develop a theoretical framework to plumb social patterning of consumption in an increasingly mystified social world*". In his exploration of social life, Bourdieu (1984) draws on three types of resources that individuals use to gain status (symbolic capital). He referred to them as "*capital*", describing how "*economic capital*", "*social capital*" and "*cultural capital*" operate in social fields of consumption. While "*economic capital*" is straightforward and implies wealth one possesses, "*social capital*" is bit more sophisticated as Bourdieu (1984) saw capacity of social networks and social connections individuals have. The core argument of Bourdieu's work on capital, therefore, implies that in order to achieve cultural capital individuals have to possess sufficient levels of economic and social capital. Interplay of these capitals is crucial for an individual's taste, as levels of these as well as mixes allow understanding of the level of taste individual possesses and expresses.

Contemporary consumer research was also preoccupied with extending the notion of “capital” further to other fields, which has resulted in the emergence of other forms of capital. For instance, research by Rafferty (2011) has explored the relationship between class relations, emotions and consumption and their influence on well-being. The author argues that *“the nature of consumers’ emotional involvement in self-fashioning practice provides a fascinating cite for exploring how the relationship between social class fractions and modes of consumption are occurring in society today”* (Rafferty, 2011:239-240). To explore this, she extended Bourdieu’s theory to emotional dimension and observes how class-based emotion provide a useful framework to interpret dimensions of fashion consumption strategies among women, as the nature of consumer’s emotional involvement in self-fashioning practices provides a fascinating site for exploration of the relationship between social class and modes of consumption. Following Reay’s (2004) definition of *“emotional capital”* that implies *“the positive emotional resources, such as love, devotion, support and understanding that parents and elders invest in children in an effort to equip them with advantages in their life”* (2011:246), Rafferty (2011) proposed the concept of *“emotional habitus”*, which she defined as *“the development of a set of emotional tendencies or dispositions, that are crucially influenced by others with whom we interact over the course of our lived trajectories”* (2011:246). She then argued that both emotional capital and emotional habitus shape our understandings of ourselves and impose meaning on our actions and behaviours.

Rafferty (2011) thus focused on exploration of how low emotional involvement (LEI) and high emotional involvement (HEI) influence self-fashioning practices of Irish females. This study established that consumers with LEI deploy “smart shopping practices”, in which they are guided by choosing products that would contain their value for longer periods of time as

compared to latest high street fashions. Engaging in this practice therefore makes these individuals feel elevated from other middle-class consumers since due to their low emotions they feel like they are getting the maximum use out of their purchases. On the other hand, those women with HEI have shown their turbulence towards self-fashioning practices as they are on the constant run towards their aspirational habitus. For them purchases thus act as emergent opportunities that can enable them to immerse into what they see as the highly valuable cultural category alongside social relations. The main goal for them is thus to use these products not for their own pleasure, but as boosters to their self-esteem and self-worth (Rafferty, 2011).

However, the dominant capital, which is particularly relevant to the present study is cultural capital.

2.5.1. Cultural Capital

Building on subtle aspects of Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, Bourdieu (1984) provided a contemporary development of the framework by introducing the concept of "*cultural capital*". While Veblen argued that established members of the upper-class society use their accumulated culture (inherited money) to distinguish from those of nouveau riches, Bourdieu considered cultural capital acquired at different points in the social ladder as a key factor (Trigg, 2001).

The definition of "*cultural capital*" remains rather unclear. While the term was coined in 1965 (Warde, 2017), the most profound exploration of "*cultural capital*" was done in "*Distinction*" (Bourdieu, 1984). Here, several connotations to what Bourdieu might mean by

“cultural capital” were presented. One of them, much cited by postmodern researchers (Jaeger, 2011), refers to *“familiarity with the legitimate culture within the society”*. Given the absence of page number, it can be assumed that the quote comes from an understanding of the concept, rather than its definition, since in-depth exploration of “Distinction” did not show evidence of the term defined as such. But, given its meaning, it is valid to say that what scholars understood by “cultural capital” can be explained through the quote above.

This research follows a definition summarised by Rafferty (2011) from Bourdieu’s work *“The Logic of Practice”*. Therefore, cultural capital stands for *“the specific set of cultural tastes, skills, preferences and knowledge that is acquired to different extents depending on particular positions within the social field”* (1990:66-76). Cultural capital thus emerges from possessing the kind of knowledge and familiarity with cultural products that enable a person to know how these products work, what one should say about them and how one can evaluate and appreciate them (Seymour, 2012). Cultural capital can be acquired in a number of ways, for instance it can come from habitus, possessions, activities, and knowledge:

“Cultural capital is acquired through immersion in habitus; it can be accumulated during a lifetime and passed on from generation and generation in the same way as economic capital. Cultural capital may come from actual possessions of certain culturally valued artefacts such as paintings. It may derive from activities such as going to the opera or from appreciating fine wine, or from knowledge about cultural products” (Seymour, 2012:6).

In his essay “The Forms of Capital” (1986), Bourdieu explored the notion of cultural capital further by emphasising that it can exist in three states:

*“in the **embodied** state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the **objectified** state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc; and in the **institutionalized** state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee.” (1986:47)*

This suggests that cultural capital is manifested in general taste level as well as taste for certain products. Bourdieu (1984) explained that in order to gain high social position, individuals not only need to possess high levels of financial capital, but also manners, education, and opinion on things, all of which constitute an individual's cultural capital. By emphasising that cultural capital is embodied, he then claims that educated individuals are thus physically and intellectually socialised in appreciation of high “legitimate” culture.

Consumer researchers have developed a fertile stream of research extending Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital by looking at it from a different perspective or applying it to the new context. Whereas most of the literature on cultural capital was written with reference to taste and is discussed in the next section, some of the research has been done solely in relation to cultural capital and its relevance in terms of everyday consumption. For instance, one stream of research explored consumption of individuals, who experienced inconsistency in terms of various forms of capital. Particularly, Chen and Nelson (2017) proposed a new perspective on cultural capital through exploration of “*new poor consumers*” – individuals, who have “*incongruent capital*”, which implies that they possess lower economic capital and

higher cultural capital. Their findings indicate a presence of a certain type of consumers, who have a taste for luxury and are willing to spend money on items that are of higher quality, even if it means that they would need to cut back on other expenses. By engaging in this activity, “*new poor consumers*” perform “*compromised ideal consumption*” where they strategically interpret the remaining capital to signal social class differences through reconfiguration of their resources and capabilities.

These findings also correlate with Coskuner-Balli and Thompson’s (2012) study on at-home-fathers, who capitalised their consumption to enhance conversing rates of the acquisition of subordinate cultural capital. Here, researchers focused on exploration of consumers, who made significant investments in subordinate forms of cultural capital but were faced with confrontation of limits and status costs posed by their relatively low conversion rate in terms of broader socio-economic hierarchy. Through their analysis of consumption practices of middle-class men, who abdicated their former breadwinner role in the family in favour of managing households as well as acting as primary caregivers to their children, this study explored “*domestic cultural capital*” and series of practices that help these individuals to enhance their status value. Having extended the stream of research on consumers who adapt to their new social role, Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2012) established that stay-at-home fathers have utilized their “*domestic cultural capital*” to enhance the value of economic, social and symbolic capital. For instance, participants have provided economic value to the household by shopping at thrift stores and searching for good deals, they have allayed their feelings of social isolation by engaging in social media interactions with other at-home fathers as well as engaged in DIY projects to boost their symbolic capital.

Similarly, in their paper on strategic poverty, Demetry, Turk and Fine (2015) observed two groups of consumers, namely “*transitional bourgeoisie*” or graduate students and artists, whose economic deprivation is temporary, and “*embedded activists*” – most of whom are committed adults rooted in political and religious organizations and who see their low-income situation as permanent one. Their research therefore established that poverty becomes a strategy, rather than a condition, when consumers possess sufficient levels of social and cultural capital in order to navigate economic uncertainty. By looking at the embedded activities of their respondents, Demetry et al. (2015) observed how low-income has different meaning from those with higher cultural and social capital as compared to those without, arguing that these individuals draw upon other forms of “wealth” to navigate their life and consumption choices. Particularly, “*graduate students*” saw poverty as temporary condition, which inclined them to develop numerous strategies to help them tackle their position. These findings show how by having higher levels of cultural capital, consumers are able to navigate the marketplace and maintain their status despite possessing lower levels of economic capital.

Overall, these studies propose that cultural capital, or lack of such, plays a crucial role when it comes to consumption. However, exploration of it suggests that research has mostly looked at how individuals adapt or live with their given cultural capital. Studies discussed above indicate possibility of fluctuations in levels of capital but there is no mention of how consumers can boost their existing capital. Nevertheless, as individuals can grow their economic capital by engaging in more work and earn more funds, this thesis suggests that they can transform and grow their cultural capital by engaging in educational activity that broadens their “sense of aesthetics”. To achieve this, this chapter now considers the final dimension of the theoretical framework used for this study – taste.

2.6. Defining Taste

In the introduction article to a “Consumption Markets & Culture” special issue on taste, Pomiès, Arsel and Bean refer to taste as “*a cross-disciplinary research object spanning empirical contexts including food, visual arts, wine, music, fashion, literature bodies and decoration*” (Pomiès, Arsel and Bean, 2021:1). This quote therefore presents taste as a rich subject of inquiry, the interest towards which is constantly growing among modern day consumer researchers. Research frequently draws on the concept of taste to describe the ability of individuals to make judgements about aesthetic objects (Arnould and Thompson, 2018). This presents taste as an activity that reaffirms social hierarchies as it reflects how members of society have different access to economic, cultural, and social resources (ibid.). Tastes are also enactments of ideological scripts, expressing influences of class socialisation. Performances of taste, therefore, are not just elements for status distinction (Holt, 1998; Ustuner and Holt, 2010) or practices of personality rewarding (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017), but also means for orchestrating social relationships (Allen, 2002) as well as producers of socially shared aesthetic experiences (Thompson et al., 2018). This broad spectrum of “what tastes are” emphasises the diversity and richness the concept received in current consumer research. However, a more profound inquiry in how taste is seen and discussed is essential.

Taste has a long tradition of discussion in philosophy, where the relationship of taste and judgement was discussed by Hume (1757) and Kant (1790), which lead to more profound understanding of aesthetic judgement and aesthetic taste. Specifically, Kant denied any standard of “*good taste*”, arguing that “*good taste*” indeed exists, however it could not be identified empirically, and its presence cannot be found in any standards or generalisations.

Bourdieu (1984), who framed taste as a structuring mechanism perpetuating class hierarchy, argued against the Kantian view, claiming that legitimate taste of the society refers to the taste of ruling class. In his extensive work “*Distinction*”, Bourdieu (1984) presented taste as a lifestyle:

“Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified objects or practices, is the generative formula of lifestyle, a unity set of distinctive preferences which express the same intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis” (1984:173).

Bourdieu (1984) identified three zones of cultural taste based on education level and social class, claiming that only those individuals that were growing up surrounded by objects of high culture and engaged in cultural production from the early age were likely to succeed in making relevant aesthetic judgements that were part of the high social position. In his discussion of “distinction” he proposed three levels of cultural taste: the first type is “*highbrow culture*”, which is characteristic to the dominant class (a “*true good taste*”); the second type refers to “*middlebrow taste*” that is typical for middle class and often characterised as “*petty bourgeoisie*”, meaning that individuals embrace aspects of both high and low culture, but they do not feel as comfortable with high culture as those with a “*true good taste*”; finally, the third type is “*popular taste*”, which is characteristic to the lower classes of society. Bourdieu characterized the latter type as “*taste of necessity*” since it does not require high levels of economic or cultural capital as in the case of highbrow taste. When it comes to distinction between the classes, members of the dominant class distinguish

themselves from those in the lower position by opposing to their tastes. Bourdieu thus claims that taste unites as well as separates individuals according to their lifestyles.

As for the present research, it is more relevant to observe taste from a perspective of aesthetics, and as a result this study follows the definition proposed by Hoyer and Stokburger-Sauer (2011:169), who defined taste as “*individual’s consistent and appropriate response to aesthetic consumption objects through any of the five senses that is highly correlated with some external standards*”. Consequently, taste is viewed as manifested preferences that are socially constructed and determined by culture.

2.6.1. Taste and Consumption

While Bourdieu’s theory of taste is seen as the most influential and yet controversial (Turner and Edmunds, 2002), other scholars have taken the concept outside France to explore it in other contexts of consumption. Specifically, significant advancement to Bourdieu’s taste theory was made by Holt (1997; 1998), who explored taste settings in the context of North American consumption. In his work, Holt focused not on differences in what objects were owned by consumers, but rather how consumers with different backgrounds consumed same product in different ways based on their taste and cultural capital. He argued that the main focus should be placed on “*the continuing relevance of embodied taste dispositions and not on comparison of the array of class-distinctive material goods and consumption interests*” as these patterns can shift and vary across time and place (Arnould and Thompson, 2018:n.a). Holt suggested that operationalizing Bourdieu’s theory in terms of preferences for cultural objects has become problematic, since utility of these items as consensus marker of class has weakened substantially as result of mass availability and accessibility of products, travel, and

media to everyone. Through observation of tastes and preferences of LCC (low cultural capital) and HCC (high cultural capital) individuals, Holt (1998) established that for LCC comfort and functionality were key determinants for consumption, while for those with HCC, taste became a form of self-expression. To support this argument, he developed a six-dimension system that can be used to evaluate taste and consumption patterns of HCC and LCC. These six categories include: “*material versus formal aesthetics, critical versus referential receptions of cultural texts, materialism versus idealism, cosmopolitan versus local, consumer subjectivity as individuality versus local identity, leisure as self-actualisation versus autotelic sociality*” (Holt, 1998:6). These dimensions therefore allow more profound understanding of taste across various domains of consumption.

Due to the nature of the concept, taste has received extensive attention in terms of its relation to food consumption. Warde (1997) and Warde and Martens (2000) observed how taste and status are expressed through food consumption in the UK, focusing on continuous importance of class, gender, and age as elements that structure consumption. Culinary taste was also explored as means for status negotiation (Purhonen and Heikkilä, 2017), identity formation (Cappellini et al., 2019), and distinction (Yalvaç and Karademir Hazır, 2021). Similarly, taste performance was also observed in the context of space (Skandalis, Banister and Byrom, 2016; Skandalis, Banister and Byrom, 2018). These studies have observed how musical taste is constructed through attendance of music festivals and concert halls. By connecting taste to space, Skandalis et al. (2016; 2018) established that taste is orchestrated through physical, historical, and sociocultural spatial meanings of the place. Building on “*taste regime*” theory, which is discussed further in Section 2.6.2., they have also established that concert hall works as “*emplaced taste regime*” by shaping attendees’ musical tastes as well as enhancing their consumption practices in the field of classic music.

Taste has been also widely recognized as a crucial element in identity construction practices. This claim is supported by Tsaousi's (2016) study on taste and embodied cultural capital in the context of women's underwear consumption. Tsaousi (2016) argues that women express their taste in underwear depending on their habitus-influenced assumptions, in addition to the premise that underwear functions as their embodied cultural capital that helps to support elements of female identity. Despite the fact that the word "taste" is hardly ever mentioned, it was often brought up in various ways, such as judgements about themselves or others sense of style and preference for different types of underwear in terms of colors and materials. The same patterns of discussion can be found in other research on fashion and style, where participants do not express taste in Bourdieusian sense, but often bring it up when speaking about preferences in consumption (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Another research on taste and identity was conducted by Hazir (2017), who expanded taste theory to exploration of emotions through examination of how cultural capital shapes the ways Turkish women (both covered and uncovered) experience their "self" in social interactions in the outer world. Hazir (2017) thus identified that individuals with HCC saw that aspirations of those with LCC enhanced their self-confidence as they were seen as the one who knows how "to get it right".

Research has also briefly connected taste to fashion, where fashion has always thought to be antithetical to "good taste" (Gronow, 1997). Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus and cultural capital played an important role in studies on fashion and dress, as these consumption practices act as embodied, which implies that body, clothing, and capital are inseparable. Tastes in clothing and embodiment practices, as well as their influence on class structures, have not received same level of attention as music or reading (Hazir, 2017). Bourdieu (1984) observed how peasants "*preference for suits made by rural tailor and their miscombination*

of colours was devalued by women, who were able to speak 'the language of urban fashion' since they alike men have adopted signs of urbanity through their encounters with urban life" (2008:90). This proposes the difference between what accounts for "good" and "poor" embodiment among consumers that occupy distinct social positions. As proposed by Rouse (1989) for something to be called fashion it should be adopted by ruling class, as they are viewed as having "*legitimate taste*". Hence, if this group of individuals adopts a certain dress or hat, these products are immediately perceived as "tasteful" with respect to fashion. Following this argument, Gronow (1997) sees taste as an element of social distinction; he claims that "good taste" should be understood as phenomenon that is not predetermined by birth or social origin of the individual but is rather acquired through the process of learning. This argument is supported by Entwistle (2015), who refers to tastes as being acquired, as no one is born with an immediate taste for certain food, rather this preference is acquired during one's life and development.

Additionally, research on taste and consumption was determined to extend theory and observe practices in other parts of the world, rather than in the context of British, French, and North American consumption. For instance, Turkey appeared to be an intriguing context for taste researchers (Üstüner and Holt, 2007; Üstüner and Holt, 2010; Hazir, 2017), which has led to exploration of habitus, cultural capital, and taste through the consumption practices of working class and low-income consumers. This perspective proposes an extension to existing theory not only from different geographical context, but also from looking at consumers with different consumption practices. For instance, Üstüner and Holt (2010) observed how Turkish upper-class consumers look down on middle-class individuals that eat large quantities of food at all-you-can-eat buffets. Their study focused on exploration of how status consumption works among LCC and HCC consumers in Turkey with the focus on Western Lifestyle as

Myth, which is central to the construction of Turkish upper-middle-class status. This theme was also explored in their previous research, where they focused on differences between generations and their take on taste among poor migrant women in Turkey (Üstüner and Holt, 2007). They have established that while generations of older Turkish women were inclined to maintain the tradition of knitting, whereas younger generations felt embarrassed about wearing a hand knit item, which highlights the importance of Western Lifestyle Myth as crucial strategy in gaining status. Both of these studies highlight that working-class consumers develop taste for necessity, while upper-class consumers possess aesthetic knowledge, time and money to develop a preference for delicate products (Arnould and Thompson, 2018).

Similarly, in the context of other cultures, research was also curious to observe similarities and differences in tastes among individuals who possess different levels of capitals. In the context of China, Zhang (2020) explored taste and consumption in terms of economic transition, by looking at consumption of individuals of different class. He established that while upper middle class in China constructed their individual style by choosing luxury products without logos in order to distinguish themselves from middle class and thus adopting inconspicuous consumption, while new rich consumers, who were identified as low in cultural capital, focused on well-known brands with well-known logos in order to follow the popular taste. This difference in tastes highlights that composition of economic and cultural capital differentiates consumption patterns across different social levels. For instance, despite the fact that new rich have accumulated a lot of wealth, upper-middle class often referred to these individuals as having “*bad taste and bad manners*” since they were driven by consumption for face maintenance and thus became the walking advertisement for brand-name luxury products (Zhang, 2020:13). This study strongly correlates with Holt’s

exploration of LCC and HCC in the US, however with a set of distinctive differences. For example, while HCC US consumers reject such traits as materialism, for Chinese HCCs this remains of significant importance due to the fact that the middle class is the first generation of middle-class consumers who were raised with economic constraints and difficulties. Similar to LCC in US, new rich Chinese also extensively embrace luxuries in order to showcase their wealth. However, here the context of Chinese philosophy should be considered as it has tremendous influence on consumption patterns and individuals' behaviour within this culture.

Finally, consumer research also started a discussion on taste and “cultural omnivores”, as can be seen from a discussion above. However, this review sees this discussion as rather fragmented with the focus on genuine product consumption – food, arts, books, and music. Given that these individuals consume wide selection of products from various price categories, this research suggests further inquiry into non-genuine consumption objects.

2.6.2. Taste Regimes

While earlier consumer researchers were predominantly influenced by Bourdieu's perspective on taste and distinction, recent years saw emergence of new theoretical lenses that focused on looking at taste from a practice-based perspective. Arsel and Bean (2013) have developed a theory that explains how taste is practiced and maintained in daily life through the following of “*taste regimes*”, which they define as “*a normative system, constructed in a discursive way, that interconnects aesthetics to everyday practice in a culture of consumption*” (Arsel and Bean, 2013:899). For them taste regime works as a discursive system that links aesthetics to practices and “propagates a shared understanding of aesthetic

order that shapes the way people use objects and deploy the meaning associated with the material” (Arsel and Bean, 2013:900).

Exploring “*taste regimes*” through a blog dedicated to house design and living, Arsel and Bean (2013) established that the concept of taste does not only have its meaning in a boundary-making process, but can also be seen as practice, which is continuously performed. They thus argue that consistent and habitual interactions that are shaped by “*taste regime*” consist of three basic practices that regulate consumption: “*problematization*”, “*ritualization*”, and “*instrumentalization*”. “*Problematization*” refers to how deviations from both normative and cultural standards become coded as problematic (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). The regime thus generates problems through making almost every object seen as a source of potential problem. In simpler words, this is related to the judgments made about appropriateness of something or the validity of combination of something (Arsel and Bean, 2013). Next practice is “*ritualization*”, which authors refer to as an expressive and symbolic activity that is constructed of multiple behaviours, occurring in a fixed episodic sequence; rituals thus influence the ways through which individuals acquire objects and how they use them with the goal of generating meaning. In this case “*taste regime*” helps individuals by prescribing ritualistic sets of doings as well as by providing scripts which guide how these material objects are used (Arsel and Bean, 2013). Final stage is “*instrumentalization*”, which is true process of connecting objects and doings in order to actualize meaning. For instance, through instrumentalization “*materialism and aesthetic consumption are transformed from a problematic obsession or affliction into a deliberate mode of goal fulfilment in the way that the athlete exercised, or an artist does studies for a painting*” (2012:909). This regime model thus helps to understand how taste is linked to daily practice, which is performed on continuous basis.

Emergence of “taste regimes” has started a new stream of studies in consumer research, which focus on extension of theory to other contexts. For instance, Dolbec and Maciel (2018) explored how by working together individuals are shaping the emergence of new taste regimes. In their paper on “*goth ninja*” avant-garde taste, they have explored the ways in which consumers “*mutually negotiate understandings of what constitutes taste in the consumption field*” (Dolbec and Maciel, 2018:96). To achieve this, they presented three types of consumer-led process that facilitate the emergence of taste regime, which include “*taste regime convergence*”, “*taste regime extension*”, and “*taste regime normalization*”. In the case of “*taste regime convergence*”, consumers are primarily concerned with ruling out objects and doings that they considered irrelevant to the taste regime or in other words “*this process narrows the aesthetic elements that constitute an emergent taste regime*” (Dolbec and Maciel, 2018:101). During “*taste regime extension*” consumers work to mutually expand the objects and doings that are part of the emerging taste regime with the primary focus on elements that were missing earlier. Finally, “*taste regime normalization*” implies that stabilization occurs to help link the objects and doings from the first two stages. Therefore, all these three processes do not operate separately, rather they support each other in producing a taste regime as well as orchestrating it (Dolbec and Maciel, 2018).

On the contrary, the concept of “*taste regime*” was reconceptualised by Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) into “*taste engineering*”. Their study extends consumer research by illuminating how taste evaluations are constituted in consumers, after habitus has instilled generic dispositions in them. Looking at male craft beer “*aficionados*”, seeking to become “*connoisseurs*”, the study focused on three elements related to taste: firstly, it connected taste to practice theory; secondly, the authors highlighted the resonance between taste regime and consumer habitus; and finally, it introduced a concept of “*taste engineering*”, defined as “*a*

strategy of action that helps to pursue institutionally patterned goals of cultural competence in the domain of consumption” (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). Alike “*taste regime*”, “*taste engineering*” is achieved through three building blocks: “*institutional benchmarking*”, “*autodidactics*”, and “*cooperative scaffolding*”. It is a strategy of actions and practices that seeks to move towards “connoisseurship” – the stage which is commonly defined as “the fine grained, discriminative faculty to judge and express taste according to the aesthetic principles of a consumption domain” (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017:734). Having looked at connoisseurship through the lens of practice theory, Lehrer (2009) referred to connoisseurship as the mastery of particular understandings, rules as well as engagements in a given practice.

In Maciel and Wallendorf’s paper connoisseurship is achieved through engagement in three building blocks mentioned earlier. The first step is “*institutional benchmarking*” during which consumers become acquainted with sensory and linguistic standards of the competence for instance through websites and books. During this process individuals use body techniques to evaluate certain consumption object and afterwards compare their personal evaluations to those established in institutional materials. This step is followed by “*autodidactics*”, where consumers break down the set of standards established during the first stage into achievable chunks with the goal of identifying ways to embody the information they found challenging. Final step is “*cooperating scaffolding*” – a building block in which consumers express and expand their competence through interactions with qualified peers, which creates both social cohesion and hierarchy. Therefore, each of these blocks helps individuals to engage in learning-oriented practices with the goal of becoming “*taste connoisseurs*”.

Nevertheless, all of the studies discussed above have focused on socially acceptable products and practices, but it remains unclear how taste regimes operate in less institutionalised contexts. Similarly, it is unclear whether individuals can engage in “taste engineering” in the field of consumption, where products are non-genuine. Also, while these articles do not explicitly say it, they all refer to their standard of taste as “legitimate”, however they do not elaborate on why they see them as legitimate. Is it legitimate because these products are from well-established categories supported by institutions? Or is it “legitimate” to certain group of consumers and illegitimate to others? Consequently, it can be argued that taste can be “legitimate” only in terms of the particular context and particular consumer group to which it is “legitimate”, since when it is taken out of this context it may lose its legitimacy. While the present research is not preoccupied with observation of “legitimacy” as such it intends to observe whether these taste regime related practices can be performed in other contexts and whether it leads to the emergence of taste, that can also be called “legitimate”.

2.7. The Rise of Cultural Omnivores

Having introduced the theoretical framework chosen for this study, this chapter now considers the final element of contemporary consumption for this research – the appearance and rise of “cultural omnivores”. It has become one of the dominant paradigms for characterizing the taste and preferences of high-status consumers (Smith Maguire, Ocejio and DeSoucey, 2022). Therefore, this section builds on previous discussion on cultural capital and taste to provide an overview on existing research on cultural omnivorous.

The concept of “cultural omnivore” was coined by Peterson (1992), who in collaboration with Simkus (Peterson and Simkus, 1992) explored an anomaly where individuals of higher

social status were adding diverse practices to their cultural repertoire as opposed to previously established models of elite/mass cultural taste. They thus refer to omnivorousness as an element of elite status aesthetics that is *“being redefined as the appreciation of all distinctive leisure activities and creative forms along with the appreciation of the classic fine arts”* (Peterson and Simkus, 1992:252). In line with this, scholars argue that cultural omnivores commonly come from culturally and economically privileged social classes (Bryson, 1996, 1997), however some individuals from these social backgrounds give preference to univorous consumption. Omnivorousness is particularly prevalent among young, educated and high-status consumers (Peterson and Simkus, 1992), who by having broadened their cultural repertoire, do not consume all available options within the cultural field. For instance, they might be open to explore all music genres, apart from heavy metal, which they consider lowbrow (Bryson, 1996). In other cases, they might be more open to mixing high and lowbrow products, by frequently enjoying lobster mac and cheese (Bellezza and Berger, 2020). Existing research has mostly connected tastes of “cultural omnivores” to beer (Darwin, 2018) and coffee consumption (Pomiès and Arsel, 2022), food and gourmet writing (Johnston and Baumann, 2007), music (Favaro and Frateschi, 2007) and fashion (Bellezza and Berger, 2020) to name a few.

Scholars also linked the study of cultural omnivores to “aesthetic disposition” (Lizardo and Skiles, 2012) – a form of distanced formal gaze that allows individuals to appreciate variety of cultural products, from legitimate to ordinary. This aesthetic disposition is usually acquired either through socialization in the artistic fields (Lizardo and Skiles, 2012) or via social mobility (Chen and Nelson, 2020), which was explored earlier in this chapter. By being exposed to a variety of products from different status categories and as a result developing

aesthetic disposition, consumers therefore develop omnivorous tastes rather than a snobbery attitude.

Omnivorousness allows culturally and economically privileged individuals to signal their status through the choices they make in consumption (Bellezza and Berger, 2020; Pomiès and Arsel, 2022). For instance, research by Bellezza and Berger (2020) looked at trickle-down theories to determine why would consumers with high-status express preferences to cultural products traditionally associated with low-status groups. Their findings proposed “trickle round” of some signals by moving directly from lower to upper class before diffusing to middle class. Their observation of trickle-round products therefore suggests that adoption of certain products of low-status dimension allows distinction to consumers of high-status and therefore allows to observe their tastes from omnivorous perspective (Bellezza and Berger, 2020).

Similarly, in their ethnographic research on coffee consumption, Pomiès and Arsel (2022) proposed a move beyond seeing omnivorousness as means for status signalling through explanation that consumers tend to develop attachments to certain objects, which results in them consuming products of different cultural levels. Additionally, they have addressed how consumers develop aesthetic disposition, which results in them acquiring omnivorous tastes. Similar to other research (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017), they have established that omnivorous tastes can be achieved through engagement in socializing environment. However, by theorizing the formation of omnivorous consumer subject, they have determined that consumers can also develop omnivorous tastes by being under influence of marketed work performed by market professionals.

As this section has shown, omnivorous consumption is becoming more and more widespread as consumers are becoming more open to acquisition of novel tastes through consumption of variety of cultural products. With univorous consumption dominating the consumer behaviour in the last century, the new millennium brings consumers, who are ready expand their consumption by choosing products different cultural levels. However, in line with literature on taste, consumption of “cultural omnivores” too was mostly studied in the socially acceptable context of authentic products. Given that research (Bellezza and Berger, 2020) states that individuals consume products from different categories of low, mid, and high, it is intriguing whether consumers who purchase both authentic and counterfeit luxury can be considered “cultural omnivores” as well.

2.8. Conclusions

2.8.1. Positioning This Research and Key Literature Gaps

Overall, this chapter has explored theoretical foundations underpinning this thesis, which uses Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of habitus, cultural capital, and taste to explore three domains of consumer culture theory. First, the notions of consumption and aesthetics were explored, which was followed by integration of consumption as a form of distinction in social class. Secondly, literature review discussed two core types of luxury consumption, relevant for the present research – conspicuous consumption and inconspicuous consumption. Thirdly, the review has looked at three component of Bourdieu’s (1984) theory and positioned it in contemporary consumer research. While this review suggests that taste is growing to be explored in relation to various non-standard fields, this research still identified a number of theoretical opportunities and literature gaps that should be tackled.

Firstly, it appears that existing research on “taste” has focused on exploration of these within legitimate and socially acceptable contexts, products, and actions. However, there is no evidence of how taste and taste-related practices operate in context that have low levels of social acceptability. For instance, it is particularly intriguing whether performance of “taste regimes” and development of taste through “taste engineering” can be achieved in contexts where social acceptability is not given. This also raises a question whether the practices discussed in these approaches are translatable to other contexts, such as consumption of counterfeit luxury products.

Secondly, further exploration of how taste is transformed, how taste regimes change and how taste becomes democratised is essential. This review has briefly touched on “cultural omnivores” and their tastes. These individuals are therefore characterised as consumers of mixture of products and services across different categories – high, middle, and low. While existing research suggests that “cultural omnivores” choose from disparity of products, these again come from “legitimate” product category. Consequently, this suggests possibility of inquiry into whether “omnivores” consume both genuine and counterfeit products. Observation of this would allow us to see whether taste becomes democratised, and consumption of counterfeit luxury products becomes legitimate.

Finally, it should be noted that this chapter has raised a question of “taste legitimacy”. While this subject is intriguing for further inquiry, due to novelty of observing taste in relation to counterfeit consumption, it was decided that firstly taste as a whole should be explored in this domain and after this is done the subject of legitimacy should be brought up. Therefore, in the context of the present research taste will be observed as “taste” without adding “legitimate”

or “illegitimate” connotation to it. The current task is to establish whether so called “legitimate” taste practices can be performed in relation to less institutionalised contexts.

Chapter Three: Counterfeit Luxury Consumption

3.0. Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, copying has been a constant theme in the fashion history of the West (Lin, 2012). Take for instance the former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy who was supposed to wear American designers, but who satisfied her French style by ordering the copies of Paris couture made by American designer Chez Ninon. Other more recent examples include fictional characters Carrie and Samantha from *Sex and the City* shopping for fake Fendi Baguette on the streets of Los Angeles, while popular magazines *Elle* and *Glamour* offer sections “Steal Style” with tips on where to buy copycats for the latest designer brand offerings. Counterfeits are no longer seen as cheap and poorly made fakes sold on Canal Street (Barnett, 2005). Instead, due to the emergence of “superfakes” they are becoming the best possible alternatives for genuine luxury goods – sometimes even surpassing the latter ones with their quality and, of course, price. Existing research has said a lot about counterfeits, their consumers, and motivations for their purchase. However, with this phenomenon progressing exponentially, a fresher perspective on it is needed.

The aim of this chapter is therefore to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of counterfeit luxury goods consumption to underpin this thesis. Firstly, it considers the concept of counterfeit luxury goods and how it has been explored and defined in consumer research. Secondly, the chapter looks at attributes of these products as well as what motivates their consumption. Thirdly, consumers of counterfeit luxury goods are discussed and the ways in which they construct their identity with these products is observed. Fourthly, the chapter explores attitudes towards these products as well as consequences of such behaviour. Finally,

the chapter ends with recap of literature gaps identified, which helps to connect exploration of taste to the phenomenon of counterfeit luxury consumption. This is followed by chapter conclusions.

3.1. Defining Counterfeiting

The definition of “*counterfeit*” remains unclear (Berghaus et al., 2014). For instance, Lin highlights that in Mandarin Chinese, counterfeit goods are known under various names: *jihuo*, *franmaopin* or *kelong*, where the first two stand for counterfeit goods, while the last means “clone”. For Wilcox et al. (2009) definition of counterfeiting is essential in determining the motivations for counterfeit consumption as well as for identifying the scope and relevance of the phenomenon. According to Romani et al. (2012) counterfeits can be viewed as unauthorized production of articles that mimic certain features of original products and thus can pass themselves off as products manufactured by the authentic brand.

Lin (2011:n.a) proposed three ways of defining counterfeits:

- 1) *Unauthorized use of brand name or trademark (e.g. leather bag with the letters L and V printed on it in a way that exactly replicates the Louis Vuitton logo, but without authorization from Louis Vuitton)*
- 2) *International resemblance of a brand name product (e.g. pair of running shoes that are designed to look like a pair of Nike shoes, but have the name Vike and a checkmark rather than a swoosh)*
- 3) *Unauthorized sale of unauthorized production overstock (e.g. pair of Nike running shoes or Louis Vuitton leather bag, the sale of which is not authorized).*

These three typologies once again highlight how complicated it is to find one and all-fitting definition for counterfeit products. However, achieving a clear understanding on what is counterfeit and what is not, is challenging not only for researchers, but also to consumers themselves. Research highlights that most consumers fail to differentiate among counterfeiting, piracy, and imitation, and thus use term “*counterfeits*” loosely to name intellectual property infringing products in general (Hoe et al., 2003). In addition, counterfeits are often confused with copycats – products that are produced by mass-market companies with the goal of imitating design or some product element and passing it off as a cheaper substitute (Pike, 2016). Research too fails to clearly differentiate between “*counterfeits*”, “*copycats*” and “*knockoffs*”, using these terms as synonyms. For instance, when defining copycats, Gao et al. (2017) draw on definition of counterfeits, which was developed by Lai and Zaichkowsky almost twenty years ago (1999). This once again proves that not only consumers are not able to clearly see the difference between various levels of goods infringement, but also scholars examining the subject. This results in copycats being under researched, making it confusing not only to researchers when studied, but potentially to interviewees if such question arises.

In order to make the distinguishing process easier for this study, Okonkwo’s (2016:n.a) rationale of four levels of luxury counterfeit products is used and presented below:

- 1) *A counterfeit product refers to a 100 percent copy of the original product made to deceive consumers into believing that it is the genuine product.*
- 2) *A pirated product – a copy of a genuine item but produced with the knowledge that the consumer will be aware that the item is fake.*

- 3) *An imitation product is not 100 per cent identical of the original product but is similar in substance, name, design, form, meaning or intent and consumers are often aware that it is not the original product.*
- 4) *A custom-made product is a replica of a trademark design of branded product made by legitimate craftsmen who may have some connection with the brand.*

This rationale provides a good basis for understanding as well as further investigation of illegal products. However, it should be noted that in the majority of cases, true counterfeit products intend to convince others that they are real article. This implies and is clear from the framework presented above that despite the fact that the consumer of the product is or might be aware that the product bought is not real, in their eyes this product must be perceived by others as authentic.

Adapting the definition proposed by Phau and Teah (2009:4), who refer to counterfeits as *“reproductions of trademark brand, which are closely similar or identical to genuine articles, including packaging, labelling and trademarks to intentionally pass off as the original product”*, this study sees counterfeit luxury goods as *“products which are closely similar to authentic goods, featuring nearly identical packaging and labelling with the goal to pass off as authentic product, however being sold for a fraction of the price”*. This study also refers to counterfeit luxury products as fakes. Drawing from the definition above as well as previous research, it is evident that counterfeits are constantly compared with original *“authentic”* products. The concept of *“authenticity”* itself remains key in research on counterfeit consumption (Bian and Moutinho, 2009; Romani et al., 2019). The following section will discuss key themes in consumer research on authenticity and fashion.

3.1.1. Authenticity

Complex issues around authenticity have been of great interest to scholars, who have observed how ideas of authenticity have shifted and evolved throughout time as well as how central are subjects of originality and copying to contemporary fashion (Peters, 2016).

Contemporary marketing literature is generally built on the assumption that consumers seek exclusivity (Arnould and Price, 2000; Arnould and Thompson, 2005) as well as are enthusiastic for authenticity in marketing offerings (Hietanen et al., 2019). Consumers are thus constantly portrayed as irresistibly drawn to authentic meanings in consumption (Holt, 2002). When describing authenticity, Turunen (2018:121) refers to it as *“real, actual, and genuine, with an original supported by unquestionable evidence, verified”*. In her eyes authenticity thus brings trustworthiness and reliability to products, providing assurance that the product is what it seems to be (ibid.). The authenticity offered by real luxury brands generally takes the form of brand meanings around brand heritage (Fiona and Moore, 2009), uniqueness (Dion and Arnould, 2011; Kapferer, 2014), as well as high quality and exclusivity (Commuri, 2009).

In the field of luxury consumption and management, authenticity is commonly discussed in relation to emergence of counterfeits (Wilcox et al., 2009; Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000; Turunen and Laaksinen, 2011). Research established that the market for counterfeit luxury brands heavily relies on consumers' desire for real luxury (Hoe, 2003; Penz and Stottinger, 2005). When describing different forms of counterfeiting, literature draws upon a distinction based on how much counterfeit product resembles authentic item and to what extent is it likely to be mistaken for a real thing (Grossman and Shapiro, 1988). As it will be explored later, this resemblance is crucial for certain types of counterfeits consumers – they pay

significant attention to tiniest details when making their purchase in order to avoid facing any associated risks. On the other hand, for genuine luxury consumers, widespread popularity of counterfeits for their favourite brands may lead to them seeing these as inauthentic – by being heavily copied the product can lose all luxuriousness previously associated with it. However, Turunen (2018) suggests that since the variety of designs are currently created as inspired by something that was done in the past, one should question to what level is one or another product authentic. This suggests that for different consumers there are different levels of perceived authenticity, and authenticity of product as such may not be the determinant factor when it comes to consumption.

3.2. Attributes of Counterfeit Luxury Products

Every product can be observed as a bundle of intrinsic and extrinsic attributes or as a bundle of perceived attributes (Stokmans, 1991). These attributes usually comprise of price, quality, branding and value. Research established that both authentic and counterfeit luxury goods possess product-centred meanings, but for counterfeits functionality and aesthetic appeals are perceived as crucial (Turunen and Laaksonen, 2011). Consequently, individuals who do not wish to pay full price for the brand, persuade themselves that they will receive exact product related benefits from cheaper alternatives. For these consumers product attributes are of crucial importance – through investigation of branding and quality allows them to identify counterfeits that are indistinguishable from their genuine versions. While price is discussed further under motivations for counterfeit consumption, exploration of branding, quality and value is necessary to determine based on what elements consumers choose these products.

3.2.1. Conspicuousness and Branding

Conspicuousness is seen to be one of the key drivers for consumption of luxury counterfeits (Chen et al., 2015). Davidson et al. (2017:480) define product conspicuousness as “*degree to which product is noticeable, visible and identifiable to others*”. Generally, luxury brands vary in the extent to which their logo is conspicuous and whether it is highly visible to others. Conspicuousness is essential when it comes to consumers who want to gain recognition, approval, or acceptance from their existing or desired reference groups (O’Cass and McEwen, 2004). Based on “*conspicuousness*” or “*inconspicuousness*”, members of these groups can assess the product or brand by establishing how well it fits (or not) into their culture and decide whether they should accept the wearer or not.

Existing research has mainly focused on exploration of “*conspicuousness*” as having positive influence on the desire to purchase counterfeits. For instance, Davidson et al. (2017) conducted research on materialistic consumers and established that convincing counterfeits are unlikely to be purchased if they are not conspicuous, which emphasises that for consumers of counterfeits the main goal is to conspicuously showcase their status rather than to gain value associated with the product. As a result, conspicuousness is frequently associated with loud branding. According to Davidson et al. (2017) the lower is counterfeit products’ conspicuousness, the lower is the desire to purchase it. This perspective closely ties in with studies by Han et al (2008, 2010), who have observed the role of brand prominence when it comes to signalling of status. Throughout their discussion, Han et al. (2010) developed definitions for loud and quiet branding – they define “*loud brands*” as products that have visible markings to ensure that consumers can easily recognise the brand, making it conspicuous; while “*quiet brands*” are presented as products that are discreet and do not

show any visible markings of the brand (brand logo may be inside of the product, rather than outside), making it an inconspicuous brand. Their studies established that consumers show stronger preference for counterfeit products that have loud brand prominence (conspicuous brand), since the signals they send are more decipherable than of those counterfeits with quiet brand prominence (inconspicuous brand) (Han et al., 2008; Han et al., 2010). This also signifies how “loud luxury” as a segment which used to be product of conspicuous indulgence or the wealthy affluent consumers, has now transformed into a cultural “necessity” in mass market consumption (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009).

Following research by Han et al. (2008; 2010), Chen et al. (2015:509) refer to “counterfeit conspicuousness” as “*double-edge sword*” since “*on the one hand, consumers who cannot afford the authentic brand will purchase counterfeit with the hope of engaging in conspicuous consumption associated with authentic brand; on the other hand, the outcome may be negative because consumers face the risk of embarrassment if other consumers identify if their product is counterfeit*”. This premise suggests that certain consumers tend to choose their fakes with high level of caution. While some individuals are more inclined to buy conspicuous counterfeits that feature “loud” elements such as huge logos and recognizable patterns emphasising that for them quality and value become secondary, other individuals might avoid “conspicuous” counterfeits in order to avoid facing risk. However, little has been said about consumers who prefer “quiet” counterfeit products or products that are rarely distinguished as “designer”. The present study will attempt to resolve this limitation by trying to identify whether some consumers prefer “inconspicuous” counterfeits.

3.2.2. Quality

In the past, counterfeits presented themselves as low quality copies of authentic luxury products; their performance, reliability as well as durability were questionable and not guaranteed with any certainty (Lai and Zaichkowsky, 1999). However, recent years showed the quality of counterfeits significantly improved, making them frequently indistinguishable from their genuine versions (Jiang and Shan, 2018). For instance, Neuwirth (2011) proposed that high quality counterfeits have such a strong resemblance to their authentic versions that even the designers struggle to distinguish fake from real. It should also be explained that modern counterfeiting is not limited to “shoddy goods”, since due to some elopements of luxury goods production being outsourced to China, some of the fake products appear to be “real copies”, which are produced on the same factories as authentic ones. While Jiang and Shan (2018) established that although the quality of genuine luxury products may be better and higher, consumers still may doubt the necessity to pay such high prices for what they get. On the contrary, “real copies” appear to be the perfect resolution of this situation, which allow to bring counterfeits to their new era.

Nevertheless, consumers still go to great lengths to prevent negative consequences of being detected, by carefully studying products with the goal of identifying a reasonably good quality fake in order to safeguard themselves from embarrassment (Penz and Stottinger, 2012). Drawing on theory of representation, Penz and Stottinger (2008) have observed consumer’s interpretations of two terms – “original brands” and “counterfeit brands”. They have established that the concept “counterfeit brands” is associated with negative characteristics and emotions in addition to low quality, questionable legal aspects, and similarity with other products. Therefore, consumers expected these products to be short-

lived, along with providing a feeling of being cheated and embarrassed due to the fear of counterfeits attracting unwanted attention (Penz and Stottinger, 2008). However, some of their respondents admitted that counterfeits are often seen as alternatives to authentic brands, especially in the case of accessories, such as handbags and sunglasses. This perspective is purely dependent on whether the product is able to satisfy customer expectations and demonstrate superiority over its substitutes (Khan et al., 2021). Overall, in line with existing literature, it can be argued that quality improvement in counterfeit luxury products contributes to a favourable consumer attitude towards consumption of counterfeit products.

3.2.3. Value

Existing research identified three types of values that individuals see in consumption – exchange value, use value and identity value (Lin, 2011). By consuming added value of product, consumers are able to mark distinction *between “the taste of luxury and the tastes of necessity”* (Bourdieu, 1984:177). Consequently, when purchasing luxury products individuals are not only guided by utilitarian value of the product, but also its hedonic value. However, due to high quality of the product, certain items, for instance with quiet branding are purchased as they seem to be valuable not only in terms of its design, but also its longevity of wear. However, what about value for counterfeit luxury products? Research established that value consciousness has a positive influence on consumer willingness to purchase counterfeit products (Randhawa et al., 2015).

On the contrary to genuine luxury products, counterfeits possess greater hedonic value if compared to utilitarian value, since they may perform lesser in terms of product longevity, but they do possess higher levels in terms of appearance and status related value (Castano and

Perez, 2014). Wiedmann, Hennings and Klarmann (2011) have developed a conceptual model to see how value-based drivers affect buying behaviour in the trade-off between authentic and counterfeit products. By looking at four key values, namely financial, functional, individual, and social, they have established that counterfeit luxury products are primarily bought for the perceived good value for money. Additionally, in relation to other value drivers, such elements as social value and individual value also become important. For instance, in terms of individual value, fake luxury products allow individuals to conform to fashion without spending large amount of money especially on products that will remain “in-vogue” for a short period of time (Gentry et al., 2006).

However, certain consumers might contemplate “value” when it comes to purchasing counterfeit products. Given that these products are purchased to be worn and not just sit in the wardrobe, the aspect of social value becomes crucial as well. Phau and Teah (2009) argued that an individual’s desire to choose counterfeits largely depends on the reference group they are in – if their peers are knowledgeable in terms of determining whether the product is fake or real, then consumers are more likely to choose authentic offerings in order to save their “face”. Consequently, it can be argued that reference groups have a crucial effect on one’s desire to purchase authentic or counterfeit luxury products in order to fit in or distinguish themselves.

3.3. Motivations for Consumption of Luxury Counterfeits

Overall, consumers purchase branded products for two reasons: product attributes as well as intangible brand image associated with the product (Penz and Stottinger, 2012). The subject of what motivates consumers to purchase counterfeit luxury goods has received a high level

of attention within consumer research in recent years (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000; Gentry et al., 2001, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2009; Nwankwo, Hamelin, and Khaled, 2014; Wiedmann, Hennigs and Klarman, 2017; Wilcox and Zaichkowsky, 2020; Shan, Jian, and Cui, 2021). Literature suggests that consumers buy counterfeits due to various factors, including product characteristics (price and quality), consumer's demographic and psychographic variable (status and attitudes), social and cultural contexts (norms and social influences), mood and situational context (buying counterfeits while traveling or on vacation), and consumers' ethical and moral cues (compliance to law as well as ethical and moral standards) (Jiang and Cova, 2012; Priporas, Chen, Zhao, and Tan, 2020). While these drivers appear to be the most common ones, new perspectives constantly emerge in the literature. For instance, Turunen (2018) engaged in interesting discussion around product desirability and authenticity, suggesting that authentic and inauthentic luxury goods are not complete opposites, but their signals are just slightly different. Drawing from Gentry et al. (2006), the author offered two reasons for desire for counterfeits: firstly, counterfeits have signalling power and they allow to signal desired identity, or, secondly, they may signal the belonging to a specific subgroup that proudly uses fakes to make fun of the consumers of authentic luxury.

Another approach to counterfeit luxury purchases intentions was developed by Ngo, Northey, Tran and Septianto (2018) who observed both product involvement and product knowledge as drivers for counterfeit consumption. They have focused on exploration of two functions of luxury brands that drive counterfeit consumption, including self-expression with product signalling wealth, and self-presentation to "fit in". Through exploration of these drivers within advertising, they have established that slogans that implied social adjustive appeals results in increased desire to purchase counterfeits. Additionally, their research found that high product involvement level contributes to the increased desire to purchase counterfeits.

Additionally, research has also explored place in relation to counterfeit luxury consumption (Eisend and Schuchert-Guler, 2006; Gentry et al., 2006; Penz and Stottinger, 2012). It was established that counterfeits are often purchased in situations outside of everyday purchase occasions, for example during international travel or on holidays. This can be explained by having certain mood and experiencing emotions that positively enhance individual's desire to try new things (Eisend and Schuchert-Guler, 2006; Gentry et al., 2006). For instance, research by Penz and Stottinger (2012) explored emotional aspects tied to buying and owning counterfeits versus buying authenticics in relation to various motivation drivers. They have observed how emotions experienced when being at a certain place influence openness to purchase counterfeits and established that consumers *"feel amused by fakes, tended to buy them spontaneously, and describe the purchasing process as a joyful activity"* (Penz and Stottinger, 2012:589). This indicates how by being in unusual environment consumers are becoming more open to trying novel experiences, such as purchasing counterfeits.

However, the dominant driver that influences these purchases is distinct price advantage over their authentic counterparts (Moore and Dhalival, 2004; Wang, 2005). Research suggests that price as motivation works in two ways: while one group of consumers sees themselves as smart shoppers due to fakes being comparable in quality and performance to the authentic product, another group believes that counterfeits are inferior to originals in terms of quality and performance, but their price advantage totally compensates any shortfalls (Penz and Stottinger, 2012). Literature also showed that even those consumers who wanted to purchase authentic products at first, found the low prices of counterfeits attractive (Tom et al., 1998) and decided to choose them instead of genuine options. Block et al. (1993:31) referred to this

as possibility for individuals to *“buy counterfeits because they are getting prestige without paying for it”*.

This overview suggests that motivations for counterfeit consumption are endless. While some individuals might engage in this behaviour due to desire to portray a certain image, others see this activity as fun occasional opportunity. However, based on the theoretical approach to this research, further investigation of status, materialism, and consumer resistance as motivators for counterfeit luxury consumption is necessary.

3.3.1. Status Seeking and Status Signalling

This section offers an extension to discussion on status consumption discussed in Section 2.3. of Chapter Two. Individuals' consumption patterns symbolise their social class position and are seen as a significant determinant of their buying behaviour if compared to income and other indicators. Status seeking is universal and frequently advantageous behaviour (Geiger-Oneto et al., 2013). Malik et al. (2020) suggested that consumers can boost their ego by purchasing certain brands. However, opposed to consumers discussed in Chapter Two, certain individuals might not have means to purchase genuine luxury products for variety of reasons, but they still want to belong to certain groups as well as may feel the need to be associated with these brands in order to enhance their social standing in society (Khandeparkar and Motiani, 2018).

Consequently, research suggests that when individuals are motivated by the desire to signal status to other individuals, they are more likely to purchase counterfeit products than genuine luxury products, as the first ones allow them to fulfil their goals at much lower price (Wilcox

et al., 2009). Geiger-Oneto et al. (2013) examined the choices that individuals make when considering whether to purchase products with luxury brand labels, either genuine or counterfeit, and how this helps them to signal their status. They suggested that rather than signalling distinction through products, consumers now have to shift to signal distinction through lifestyles. For context of counterfeiting this implies that increase in product quality allows them to possess identical products to consumers of genuine products and therefore it becomes more feasible for them to signal status similar to their desired reference group. As a result, consumers of counterfeits are drawing for counterfeit branded products to gain appreciation of their peers (Penz and Stottinger, 2005), to exhibit desired identity (Eisend et al., 2017) as well as to achieve a certain position in society (Jian and Cova, 2012).

3.3.2. Materialism and its Influence on Counterfeit Luxury Consumption

Materialism is defined by Belk (1985) as the importance consumer attaches to worldly possessions and it is frequently expressed through three traits – envy, non-generosity, and possessiveness. Observation of the relationship between materialistic traits and desire to purchase counterfeits is of crucial importance, since most branded products are counterfeited because of their luxuriousness, status, and high price – elements that are highly appealing to materialistic consumers (Davidson, Nepomuceno, and Laroche, 2017). Research established that consumers that undertake prolonged product searches, process extensive product information as well as heavily focus on product appearance - its quality, functionality, and image – may do so due to their materialistic traits (Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2011). In the context of counterfeit consumption, such increased attention to these details signals high levels of materialism and suggests that consumers are afraid of someone finding out that the item they wear is not genuine.

Previous research on materialism and counterfeit luxury consumption revealed mixed results regarding whether the first one affects the second one positively or negatively. For instance, research argues that materialistic consumers are more likely to engage in counterfeit luxury consumption with the goal of “face” maintenance or in order to achieve desired social image (Furham and Valgeirsson, 2007). This was supported by Yoo and Lee (2009), who established that materialism positively affects individuals’ intentions to purchase counterfeits. Consequently, such findings suggest that consumers, who are high on materialism, are generally more concerned about depiction of their status and acquired possessions to relevant social groups.

However, another stream of research had an opposite view on this perspective. For example, Davidson, Nepomuceno and Laroche (2019) observed interactions between three constructs related to materialism – specifically risk of embarrassment, counterfeit detect ability, and product consciousness – and explored how these influence the decision to purchase luxury counterfeits. Their findings demonstrate that materialists show decreased intention to consume fake products when they feel that this acquisition might result in embarrassment. Similarly, Sharma and Chan (2010) established that materialistic consumers would choose not to buy counterfeits as they may be concerned about losing their “face” if others distinguish their product as fake. This is further discussed in Section 3.5.1. on counterfeits and “*face consciousness*”.

3.3.3. Consumer Resistance

Observations show that luxury brands frequently promote elitism and snobbery, which can be potential sources of envy among consumers (Khan et al., 2021). This malicious envy can frequently lead to negative feelings towards luxury brands and, as a result, anti-social behaviour. Scholars suggest that consumers' fight against social inequality (Thaichon and Quach, 2016) and disregard of sustainability by luxury brands (Batat, 2019) makes consumers feel resentment and as a result motivates them to actively seek luxury counterfeits, which suggests that consumers tend to engage in consumer resistance towards genuine luxury brands. Consumer resistance refers to "*resistance against a culture of consumption and the marketing of mass-produced meanings*" (Penaloza and Price, 1993). Given that counterfeit consumption is frequently seen as socially unacceptable, individuals draw on neutralisation techniques to justify their behaviour, where neutralisation stands for "*defence mechanism through which people downplay the repercussions of their behaviour*" (McGregor, 2008:261). Existing research has connected neutralisation to counterfeit luxury consumption to explore effects of rational and moral justifications during the purchase of counterfeits (Eisend and Schuchert-Güler, 2006), study the interplay between motivations and neutralizations process involved in this type of consumption (Bian, Wang, Smith and Yannopoulou, 2016), and to develop consumer typologies according to neutralisation strategies consumers use to justify their behaviour (Çekirdekci and Latif, 2019). Consequently, it can be argued that one of the forms of consumer resistance against genuine luxury brands is to purchase their counterfeit versions.

On the other hand, consumption of counterfeits and their acquisition is often seen as a fun process, associated with adventure, enjoyment, and desire to break the rules (Perez et al.,

2010). Research has shown that non-deceptive counterfeit consumption is frequently driven by adventure and fun (Sharma and Chan, 2011; Penz and Stottinger, 2012; Tang et al., 2014; Francis et al., 2015) and consumers see engagement in this type of consumption as a playful and sensory experience (Perez et al., 2010). For instance, Bian et al., (2016) connected counterfeit luxury consumption to consumers feel “*the thrill of the hunt*” as well as experience “*being part of the secret society*”. Consumers often see this as an opportunity to fool others into believing that they are the owners of authentic expensive luxury products. These motivations can be explained through the belief that luxury brands possess elements of the “elitist aura” by being available to only top few, which makes consumers feel unwanted for what they are ready to pay for. The most common example to support this motivation is the process of purchasing a Hermès Birkin handbag – the experience is surrounded with mystery, an allure of unavailability and secrecy. Such behaviour of luxury brands therefore may incline consumers to develop a feeling that they can take advantage of the brand without engaging with its high prices, limited availability, and elitist aura, by purchasing counterfeits (Marticotte and Arcand, 2017). Scholars refer to this effect as “*Robin Hood Syndrome*” the primary goal of which is to break the system (Kwong et al., 2009).

The “Robin Hood Syndrome” was widely discussed in counterfeit literature – Poddar et al. (2012) established that individuals feel moral responsibility to use their resources to control luxury brands, while Phau et al. (2013) identified that those consumers, who are unable to afford luxury products, feel envious of those who can and therefore purchase counterfeits in order to aspire to them. The “*Robin Hood Syndrome*” is highly related to identity construction, as these individuals are willing to showcase their “*Robin Hood*” self by engaging in counterfeit luxury consumption. The relationship between counterfeits and identity construction is discussed further in Section 3.5. of this chapter.

3.4. Consumers of Counterfeit Luxury Goods

Not only wealthy people are consumers of luxury products, since regardless of one's financial situation, individuals may desire to acquire and display products that project an image of wealth (Perez et al., 2010). At the same time, not all individuals are willing to pay a high price for these products. As a result, they frequently switch to the closest possible alternative – counterfeits. These consumers are therefore defined as final users of counterfeit luxury products, who either purchase these goods themselves or rely on others to do it for them (Berghaus, Müller-Stewens, and Reinecke, 2014). However, recent data shows that consumption of luxury counterfeits is not heavily dependent on financial status of the consumer and proposes that wealthy individuals of high status might engage in such behaviour as well (He, Zou, and Jin, 2010). Previous research suggests that demographic characteristics do not have a consistent relationship with the purchasing or the intention to purchase counterfeit brands (Bian and Moutino, 2011). In line with these findings Large (2019:43) shared that *“generalising a counterfeit buyer in terms of their typical demographic characteristics, ‘deviant’ values or lack of moral integrity is problematic and fails to offer much by way of a useful explanation for counterfeit fashion consumption”*.

From the consumers perspective, counterfeiting can be divided into three categories: 1) deceptive counterfeiting, which involves purchases that consumers make by being not aware that the product they buy is fake (Grossman and Shapiro, 1998); 2) non-deceptive counterfeiting, which implies purchases made in state of full awareness of product being fake (Penz and Stottinger, 2005); and 3) blur counterfeiting, in the case of which consumers are struggling to identify whether the product is fake or real (Bian, 2006). Existing literature has mainly focused on exploration of non-deceptive counterfeiting (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000;

Penz and Stottinger, 2005; Priporas, Kamenidou, Kapoulas, and Papadopoulou, 2015; Bian, Wang, Smith, and Yannopoulou, 2016) as it appears to be the most prevalent behaviour on the market and it is frequently adopted by consumers, who wish to purchase counterfeit products to present them as authentic.

Existing research has not reached consensus in identifying typologies of consumers, who engage in counterfeit luxury consumption. This can be explained by the fact that scholars generally were more interested in establishing why individuals choose these products, rather than identifying who consumes them. As a result, conceptualisation of consumer types remains fragmented. However, among all identified types of counterfeit consumers, two are seen to be particularly relevant for this research – “aspirational consumers” and “savvy consumers”. The next sections look at these in more detail.

3.4.1. “Aspirational Consumers”

Luxury products and their counterfeits frequently coexist, in many cases being in close geographic proximity as in Manhattan and Soho high-end designer stores neighbouring with Canal Street vendors of counterfeit Gucci (Barnett, 2005). This has a reflection on consumers and their reference groups, who are constantly choosing products that can differentiate them from others as well as to signal the right cues to their desired reference groups. Counterfeits possess additional property as they can easily signal an aspiration to be someone or something one is not – for instance, to feel wealthier than one’s income would warrant (Gino et al., 2010). As a result, scholars are interested to understand how genuine and counterfeit consumers coexist in competitive environment.

Previously, research on authentic luxury and counterfeits focused on two types of consumers: “snobs” or individuals who consume only authentic luxury products and “conformist” or consumers who give preference only to counterfeit luxury products (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). The concept “snob” was taken from Leibenstein’s (1950) theory of “Bandwagon Effects”, which he defined as “*extent to which the demand for commodity is increased due to the fact that others are also consuming the same commodity*” (1950:189). Therefore, Leibenstein (1950) argued that snob consumers are driven by their desire to be different from others. Consequently, these are consumers, who acquire and display material possessions for the purpose of differentiation, which makes products, that are owned by many individuals, lose value in their eyes (Turunen, 2018). On the other hand, conformists seek conformity and their value for product increases as more people purchase it (Bekir et al., 2011). Barnett (2005:1391) summarised this behaviour in the following way:

“First, a snob effect is produced when a certain elite class visibly employs a particular good. Second, an aspirational effect is created among the most astute non-elite shoppers eager to display the latest trends initiated by the elite. Finally, a bandwagon effect is created among the other non-elite shoppers eager not to be left out of the mainstream, which over time quickly destroys the snob effect, more slowly erodes the aspirational effect, and ultimately undermines the bandwagon effect, leaving elite shoppers to search for the next “in” thing”.

Applying this perspective to counterfeit luxury consumption, it can be observed that in the beginning snobs buy genuine luxury products and conformists buy counterfeit versions of these products. However, later conformists are becoming eager to stand out from others in their group by starting to consume genuine luxury product, which results in snobs abstaining

from purchasing these luxury products due to them becoming widespread among others. Research by Bekir et al. (2011) provided explanation to this phenomenon by developing the third type of consumer – “*aspirational consumer*” – whom they describe as not truly wealthy but actively seeking to project an image of wealth. This type of consumer was first mentioned by Barnett (2005), who defined them as non-elite consumers, who purchase luxury items with the aim of imitating tastes and lifestyles of elite consumers despite the fact that they are facing severe budget constraints. These consumers are likely to mix counterfeit products with genuine ones and through consumption of counterfeits they actually develop desire and likeliness to consume genuine luxury in the future (Bekir et al., 2011), as for them counterfeits are the first place to develop awareness and aspiration for genuine luxury (Ritson, 2007). While in practice “*aspirational consumers*” belong to conformist group, they are ready to tailor their consumption in order to mimic tastes of elite consumers. Hence, if they have identified that the fake product has failed to deliver the status conveyed by the authentic product, they are likely to revise their behaviour and purchase the genuine product instead (Barnett, 2005). As a result, it can be concluded that today’s consumers of counterfeits are more likely to be tomorrow’s consumers of genuine luxury.

3.4.2. “Savvy Consumers”

A wide selection of products in the marketplace suggests that more and more consumers are becoming “*cultural omnivores*”, who are described as individuals that enjoy products and activities drawn from both elite and popular culture (Savage and Gayo, 2011). These consumers tend to choose products from various price categories – low, middle, and high – which allows them to have more fluid relationships between social structures as opposed to those embedded in traditional paradigms (ibid.). Emergence of “*cultural omnivores*” has led

to reconfiguration of consumption, which resulted in the emergence of products where low status is mixed with high (Bellezza and Berger, 2019). While discussion on “*cultural omnivores*” was predominantly done in socially acceptable contexts of genuine products consumption, scholars appear to be interested in how consumers translate this behaviour in less institutionalised contexts.

To answer this call, Perez et al. (2010) proposed the concept of “*savvy consumer*”, which is used to describe individuals, who “*show a deep understanding of rules of their social context who carefully buy counterfeits to project desired image, have fun in the process and at the end feel good about themselves*” (2010:227). These individuals would thus purchase counterfeits when the originals are perceived as too trendy and in their opinion not being worth the investment. Perez et al. (2010) aimed to explore the relation between consumption of luxury products and identity construction by arguing that by purchasing these items, individuals are able to obtain real and symbolic benefits that allow them to express their desired social image to others. During this inquiry, they have managed to identify a new type of consumer, who, through consumption of counterfeits is “*being efficient*”, “*fools others*” and “*has fun*”. By creating their own rules of wearing both fake and genuine products, “*savvy consumers*” are thus able to pursue the benefits and prestige of authentic products in order to achieve socialization goals, as well as shopping for fakes as they enjoy the process and believe that it is a smart thing to do (Perez et al., 2010). This behaviour makes “*savvy regime*” extremely relevant to modern day marketplace where trends change dramatically with luxury brands increasing the price of their offerings, while at the same time decreasing the quality, which makes consumers develop new strategies that would allow them to keep their “*face*”. In line with literature on omnivores, this thesis is therefore determined to explore how consumption of “*savvy consumers*” translates into their taste.

3.5. Counterfeit Luxury Products and Identity Construction

The self contains a number of images that individuals are to themselves as well as to others around them, which motivates them to use brands and products in a way that helps to develop their desire image and contributes to their self in a meaningful way. Respectively, the self has a dramatic influence on consumer-decision making in terms of products and brands (Kressmann et al., 2006) and it can be argued that consumers give preference to products, the attributes of which are either consistent with their desired self or can help achieve this identity (Giovanni et al., 2015). Fashion is an inevitable element of the self. Compared to other possessions, clothing and accessories are the ones which contribute most to our self and help to extend it (Belk, 1988) as we think of our clothes in the same way as we think about our bodies (Bayley, 1991).

Possessions often help in identity construction and identity management, since by adopting a certain look or style, individuals can easily construct their identity (Belk, 1988; Kozinets, 2001; Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010). Like genuine luxury products, their counterfeits also help consumers to create desired identity (Eisend et al., 2017). As argued by Perez et al. (2010), consumers use counterfeit version of originals as props that aid them to “*convincingly play a role in front of a valued audience*” (2010:221). A dominant stream of research has focused on the exploration of extension of self as well as identity construction with the help of counterfeit luxury goods (Gino et al., 2010; Perez et al., 2010; Kang and Park, 2016), resulting in the emergence of two new concepts – “*counterfeit self*” (Gino et al., 2010) and “*narcissistic self*” (Kang and Park, 2016). Both of these terms are an extension to Belk’s (1988) work on possessions and self – the theory that was widely reinterpreted in the literature on both genuine and counterfeit consumption.

Generally, counterfeits help individuals to signal an aspiration to be someone they are not. However, this may lead to negative consequences by making individuals not admirable, but unethical by generating traits that incline consumers to act unethically. This perspective was explored by Gino et al. (2010), which lead to the development of “*counterfeit self*” concept. In their paper they have identified that when the product is not genuine enough it may possess a threat to the individual, who as a result might feel less genuine as well since “*products’ lack of authenticity may cause its owner to feel less authentic themselves – despite their belief that the product will actually have positive benefits – and these feelings then cause them to behave dishonestly and to view others people’s behaviour as more dishonest as well*” (Gino et al., 2010:712). Consequently, counterfeit products might actually have ironic outcomes that lead to harm of self-image via inauthenticity, rather than having a positive influence on one’s identity. It can be thus concluded that in some cases purchasing counterfeits with the aim of enhancing one’s social image may not result in desired outcomes, but rather be ruined through consumption of fake offerings.

Narcissism was significantly explored in physiological studies as a trait that encourages consumption of counterfeit luxury goods. Narcissism describes individuals’ proneness to have “*grandiose views of the self, an active fantasy life involving personal success, the assumption that one is unique or ‘special’, an arrogant attitude and desire for admiration, a sense of entitlement and envy for others’ success and possessions, and little empathy for others of willingness to exploit them*” (Campbell and Foster, 2007:116). Narcissistic consumers are thus those individuals who show excessive conceit and are prone to consume high-prestige products, being attractive targets of luxury brands (Fastoso, Bartikowski and Wang, 2018). Two types of narcissistic behaviour can be generally recorded – overt

narcissism, which encourages individuals to show their preference for authentic luxury products that have exclusivity, high quality, and status, as well as low social risk, and covert narcissism, which is related to lack of self-confidence, constant craving of compliments and strong levels of jealousy (Kang and Park, 2016).

Contemporary research has been increasingly interested in exploration of overt and covert narcissism in relation to counterfeit luxury consumption, which led to the development of interesting findings. For instance, Kang and Park (2016) proposed a term of “*narcissistic self*” as they have established that in order to get the most benefit for the self, counterfeit luxury offerings should feature loud branding in order to help others to recognize the brand. By looking at covert type of narcissism they have identified that these consumers feel less guilt about purchasing counterfeit products as they help them to keep up their ideal appearance. Similarly, these individuals also tend to become stressed and depressed when they find that people in their social circle have purchased a recently released product and therefore, they try to get their hands on new offerings faster than others to benefit from compliments and envy about their possessions from others (Kang and Park, 2016). Finally, covert narcissists prefer quantity over quality, which is highly different from behaviour of overt narcissists, who according to Kang and Park (2016) value genuine and exclusive products that are of high quality and are mostly quiet and inconspicuous luxury goods. Research by Fastoso et al. (2018) continued observation of covert and overt narcissism in relation to luxury brand loyalty as well as effect on counterfeit purchases. Specifically, they have observed counterfeit proneness, which they defined as “*individual-level psychological trait associated with counterfeit purchase behaviour that describes the general tendency of a consumer to prefer counterfeit over genuine products*” (Fastoso et al., 2018:525). Their research supports existing studies by establishing that overt narcissism is associated

negatively with counterfeit proneness, while covert – positively. Fastoso et al. (2018) thus argued that overt narcissists would avoid purchasing counterfeit products as only authentic products can deliver the recognition they want, while covert narcissists would actively engage in counterfeit consumption as this is a financially feasible way for them to keep up with changing tastes, trends, and standards in luxury consumption.

Overall, the literature sees consumption of counterfeit luxury as a beneficial instrument for construction of desired identity (Perez et al., 2010), where counterfeits serve a self-expressive function by helping consumers to communicate who they are. However, as articulated earlier, in doing so individuals have to be mindful of “preserving their face” as this consumption can easily transform positive effects into negative consequences. The next section explores this in further detail.

3.5.1. Face Consciousness and Counterfeits

“Face” refers to *“a sense of favourable social self-image that a person wants others to have in a relational and network context”*, while *“face consciousness”* is defined as *“desire to enhance, maintain, and avoid losing face in relation to significant others in social activities”* (Sharma and Chan, 2010:609). The concept of face is particularly important in Confucian cultures, where individuals are more concerned about other’s perceptions of them as well as they are more preoccupied with maintenance of their social image. In this respect, consumption of expensive brands can be therefore seen as a symbol of success, having a strong influence of “social face” (Jiang and Shan, 2016). This explains, why individuals with stronger face consciousness are more prone to purchase expensive status products that help to enhance their social reputation and recognition.

When it comes to counterfeit consumption, the influence of face consciousness works in two opposing ways: first, face conscious consumers may want to enhance their social image with replicas of well-known luxury brands, or, second, they may restrict themselves from buying these products because of the social risk of losing their face (Sharma and Chan, 2010). As suggested by Belk (1988) individuals that are highly face conscious pay more attention to extrinsic attributes of products, such as brand and depiction of brand logos, as compared to intrinsic attributes, which include quality. But, as the quality of counterfeits improves, this makes them a perfect solution for face conscious consumers. However, they still need to think of various strategies that would help them to maintain this allure of “*product realness*”. These strategies are therefore highly dependent on one’s expression of taste through the use of counterfeits, exploration of which is currently missing. This research will therefore attempt to look at how through taste counterfeit consumers can showcase “*product realness*”.

3.6. Attitudes towards Counterfeit Luxury Products

Attitude can be defined as leaned predisposition to respond to a given situation either in favourable or unfavourable way (Hidayat and Diwasasri, 2013). It is often used as a tool to predict consumer intentions and behaviour. Previously, it has been established that attitude is of great influence on behavioural intentions (Fishbein, 1970). Attitudes towards counterfeit products have been of wide interest to researchers, who established that based on the size of the counterfeit market, consumers do not feel ashamed of buying counterfeit products (Zampetakis, 2014). Scholars suggest that most consumers, who buy fakes, think of themselves as “*penny-wise shoppers, who have not scrambled to the snobbery and exorbitance of which businesses selling branded originals are guilty*” (Wee et al., 1995). As

a result, most of consumers have positive experience with counterfeits (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000; Turunen and Laaksonen, 2011).

On the contrary, other consumers feel that engagement in counterfeit consumption is immoral and sinful (Wager and Sanders, 2001; Tan, 2002; Moores and Chang, 2006; Kim et al., 2009; King and Johnson, 2013; Martinez and Jaeger, 2016). For them, counterfeit consumption is seen as manifestation of unlawful and unethical behaviour, in which consumers have poor moral standards even if they do not see this behaviour as unethical (Martinez and Jaeger, 2016). For instance, research by Kim et al. (2009) explored the influence of moral judgement, shame, and guilt on purchase intentions for counterfeits. They have established that moral judgements are negatively related to desire to consumer counterfeits and imitation products. Additionally, they identified that experience of guilt has a significant influence on decision to purchase grey-market offerings, however it does not influence consumption of counterfeit products.

Another stream of research observed attitudes of consumers who saw counterfeited brands as democratisation of luxury in a negative way (Phau and Teah, 2009). These consumers believe that counterfeits sold are of poor quality, in addition to questionable legal aspects associated with their production and distribution, which resulted in counterfeiting being seen as negative element of the system. Consumers thus sometimes referred to counterfeits as “*trash*” (Penz and Stottinger, 2008) and claimed that they would feel cheated due to the belief that counterfeits might attract unwanted attention (Hoon et al., 2001). In addition, elitist consumers see counterfeits as faux pas, as they possess danger to their position in society, while aspirational consumers view counterfeits as a way to achieve their desired identity. Consequently, this may also lead to elitist consumers deciding to avoid certain luxury brands

due to them being over-counterfeited. As a result, this provokes a discussion around “brand love” and relationships of consumers with brands as well as how these are influenced and/or transformed by emergence and widespread availability of counterfeits. This perspective is discussed in the next section.

3.6.1. “Fake Love”

Luxury brands are often associated with making their owners feel proud of owning a particular brand due to intangible benefits (Penz and Stottinger, 2012), along with experiencing joy and love towards the connection with the original brand. This relationship can result in development of “*brand love*” – a degree of passionate and emotional attachment consumer has towards a particular brand (Carol and Ahuvia, 2006). However, not all consumers possess the means to afford genuine luxury products, but they may feel the need to be associated with the brands they love, however which they never experienced in real life, in order to enhance their position in society. This type of brand relationship became known as “*fake love*”.

The concept of “*fake love*” was introduced and developed by Khandeparkar and Motiani (2018), who explored the possibility of brand love towards counterfeit luxury offerings. Building on the definition of brand love, they argue that consumers who are fake buyers tend to get emotionally attached, developing a passionate consumer-brand relationship with fake products which results in the emergence of “*fake love*”. In addition to this, they have also established that “*fake love*” could be the driver of demand for counterfeits as well as that it largely evolves from consumers’ desire to enhance their self (Khandeparkar and Motiani, 2018). This further supports Jiang and Cova’s (2012) perspective where consumers get

emotionally attached to counterfeits and develop passionate brand-love relationship with fake brands during their experience with them. In addition, these consumers are able to develop a lasting relationship with luxury brands, express themselves through them and feel discomfort when seen without them, which, in the long run, can result in consumers' switching to authentic consumption. Hence, consumers purchase fake products to see whether they can enhance their social position and if this is successfully achieved, they may develop brand love for the genuine product in the future.

3.7. Consequences of Counterfeit Luxury Consumption

When it comes to discussion on counterfeit production and consumption, research is constantly curious to know how genuine luxury brands react to this phenomenon. Here the views from luxury brands often separate in two directions: some brands see counterfeiting as beneficial and as clear evidence of their success, while others view them as having a negative impact due to the loss of "*exclusivity factor*" – a crucial element of luxury brands (Penz and Stottinger, 2008). Fakes of excellent quality that are nearly identical to authentic products represent a double theft, as they divert clients from genuine brands, while also making consumers believe that they have invested in genuine products (Kapferer and Michaut, 2014). Furthermore, one of the biggest issues related to counterfeits is that frequently consumers do not recognise it as a crime similar to selling fake medicine or alcohol, as they believe that there are no serious victims involved (Okonkwo, 2016).

On the contrary, another stream of research (Gistri et al., 2009; Romani et al., 2012) highlights how counterfeiting can be beneficial for luxury brands, as it might work as a steppingstone towards consumption of authentic products as was observed among

aspirational consumers, who tend to switch to original products when counterfeits fail them. For instance, Barnett (2005) argued that unauthorised copies of luxury products such as Gucci bags do not cause damage to authentic luxury brands but may even increase the status premium offered by the latter. This suggests that counterfeit products might create desire for genuine luxury products, especially for those consumers, who tend to differentiate themselves from those, who can only afford copies. Romani et al. (2012) summarised that the presence of counterfeits emphasises that these products are desired by mainstream consumers, for whom they are not available, making them turn to fake products. This, however, provides the authentic product with higher value level due to being envied and copied, hence consumers tend to experience greater pleasure from owning the genuine item. In addition, Raustiala and Sprigman (2006) established that counterfeiting generates demand for new genuine items by accelerating the fashion cycle, while Ritson (2007) viewed counterfeit products as the first signal of brand's renaissance when copies appear, or, of the final nail in the coffin, when they do not.

Furthermore, retail consultants used counterfeits to develop strategies for business professionals on how these illicit products can benefit genuine luxury brands. For instance, Radha Chadha and Paul Husband's (2010) book on luxury selling highlighted that fake products play an important role in spreading the luxury brand cult in Asia. They argued that despite manufacture, distribution and retailing of counterfeit products is illegal, these items create an aura of authenticity and desirability for genuine brands. In addition, counterfeits increase consumer awareness about authentic brand names in countries like China, leading to consumer interest in these brands (Lin, 2011). Counterfeits also inject creativity, innovation, and competition to the luxury brands industry, indicating that one always needs to move forward in order to be successful on the marketplace.

Finally, over emergence of counterfeits makes trendy, fashionable items be seen as a mark of “poor taste” due to their appropriation by wrong reference groups. This is particularly visible as various influencers are receiving numerous luxury products “for free” to market them to their audience, which makes brands lose the aura they were originally created for. This has led to the development of slow luxury, which is supported by the emergence of new and fresh brands that offer items of higher quality, but do not follow particular trends of modern fashion. While research has briefly connected counterfeits to brand avoidance (Lee et al., 2009), little has been said about anti-consumption of genuine products due to widespread availability of counterfeits and influence of this behaviour on reference groups.

3.8. Conclusion

3.8.1. Positioning this research and Key Literature Gaps: Linking Counterfeits to Taste

Khan, Fazili and Bashir (2021:337) highlighted that “*despite a growing body of literature on counterfeit consumption, counterfeiting scholarship remains mostly fragmented, reports inconsistent results, and lacks a clear research direction*”. Research on counterfeit luxury products appears to be dated and needs a fresh perspective. This chapter presented an overview of existing literature on counterfeit luxury consumption, by identifying key findings and establishing main research streams that appeared to be predominant in consumer research on counterfeit luxury consumption in the past twenty years. However, as this chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that existing research has failed to observe this phenomenon through Consumer Culture Theory. Drawing on review and research agenda on counterfeit luxury consumption provided by Khan et al. (2021), it is evident that counterfeits scholars gave their preference to such approaches as identity theory, theory of moral reasoning, theory of

planned behaviour and neutralization theory, while application of CCT is missing. This offers a significant gap in the literature, since by adopting CCT perspectives more profound inquiry could have been made into this type of consumer behaviour particularly to tackle key gaps that existing research has failed to explore.

By connecting taste to counterfeit luxury consumption, the present research intends to start an inquiry in how CCT can help to deepen the understanding of this type of consumer behaviour and by using counterfeit luxury consumption as the context for taste exploration, this study begins a discussion on how taste related practices are executed in less institutionalised environments. Throughout this chapter an attempt was made to connect existing research to the concept of taste. However, as it was mentioned earlier, research on counterfeits was mostly determined to establish why individuals consume these products, rather than how they consume them. As this review has shown, existing research has failed to connect taste to consumption of counterfeit luxury products. This chapter therefore identified a few gaps in literature on counterfeit luxury consumption, which this thesis intends to fulfil by adopting a CCT approach, specifically by looking at consumer identity projects, marketplace ideologies, and marketplace cultures (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

Firstly, existing research has mostly looked at conspicuous counterfeits and connected this phenomenon to conspicuous consumption (Chen et al., 2015). While interest in this perspective is valid due to the status derived from these products, it is suggested that more consumers might shift to consuming “*inconspicuous*” counterfeits to avoid driving attention to their persona. However, in line with literature on consumption motives as well as consumer typologies, it can be argued that only certain consumers would want to showcase their taste using subtle and quiet counterfeits. As explored in Chapter Two, inconspicuous

consumption too was mostly explored in relation to genuine products (Berger and Ward, 2010; Eckhardt et al., 2015), which leads to curious inquiry whether similar behaviour can be observed with opposite class of products and whether this leads to democratisation of taste.

Secondly, in line with propositions made in Chapter Two, further inquiry should be made in observation of tastes of “*cultural omnivores*” or “*savvy consumers*” as this chapter identified. As suggest by Perez et al. (2010), they see these individual as consuming authentic and counterfeit products concurrently, which offers a novel perspective on consumers, since literature previously looked either at consumers of genuine luxury products (Heine and Phan, 2011) or at consumers of counterfeit luxury products (Wilcox et al., 2009). Therefore, it is suggested that observation of tastes of “*savvy consumers*” would help to understand the thought process behind their consumption and would allow insight on how they interpret modern marketplace offerings.

Thirdly, existing research has briefly touched on strategies that help consumers to maintain the allure of “*product realness*” (Sharma and Chan, 2010). While research has failed to explore these in detail, it is suggested that these strategies correspond to how consumers incorporate counterfeit products in their wardrobes and style to match their taste. Therefore, profound inquiry into tastes of counterfeit consumers would help to observe how they maintain their face and if they are trying to emulate the taste of others in order to succeed.

Finally, the literature review revealed the predominance of reference groups and their influence on consumption choices when it comes to counterfeit products (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000). As research suggests, adoption of a product by the wrong reference group may lead to consumer decision to avoid purchasing this product (Lee et al., 2009).

Similarly, if counterfeits of genuine items become widely popular in reference groups that consumers do not want to associate themselves with, this may lead to their anti-consumption of genuine luxury products or brand avoidance. Consequently, exploring how the taste of others influences one's decision to purchase or restrain from buying certain products would help to understand how consumers make these choices.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.0. Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology for this study. It outlines the research aim and objectives, which emerged from the literature review presented in Chapters Two and Three. It then considers the philosophical approach and reasoning to this thesis, discussing ontological position within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). The present research draws on Interpretivism, specifically the stream of Social Constructionism, where the notion of experience creation is central (Galbin, 2014). It then sets the research in the framework of qualitative methods that have an established tradition within CCT. This is followed by observation of how data was collected with the use of netnography (Kozinets, 2015), phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989), wardrobe interviews (Klepp and Bierck, 2014) and visual sources (Bock et al., 2001). Finally, data analysis is discussed, and the chapter concludes with consideration of ethics and limitations encountered in the present research.

4.1. Research Aim and Questions

This thesis aims to observe what is the role of taste in consumption of counterfeit luxury goods and whether engagement in this practice shows an emergence of new taste regime. Using the context of counterfeit luxury goods consumption, this research observes how individuals exercise taste with the goal of deep understanding and interpretation of these marketplace practices.

Research questions developed for this study intend to meet the aim presented above as well as to indicate research direction. Research questions have thus guided sampling, data collection and analysis, as well as writing up of the data and presentation of findings. These research questions are as follows:

1. How do consumers showcase their taste with counterfeit luxury goods?
2. What taste-related practices are performed by consumers of counterfeit luxury goods?
3. What social and cultural conditions allow the formulation of an emerging taste regime of counterfeit luxury goods consumption?

4.2. Research Philosophy

Assumptions regarding ontology, human nature and epistemology are essential since they provide a basis for all approaches to social sciences (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The researcher's ontological position about the nature of reality and social being is crucial for research framing, as it is a starting point for construction of the conceptual framework for research. Within consumer research there are two dominant philosophical positions: positivism and interpretivism. Positivists believe that a single and unchanging reality exists, which implies that phenomenon studied can be removed from this reality to be explored in controlled environment and out of the context. Interpretivists, on the other hand, claim that reality is perceptual, thus many realities exist due to existence of different individuals and groups (Ozanne and Hudson, 1988). For them it is therefore crucial to explore the studied phenomenon in its natural setting, in its context. When it comes to objectivity of the reality, positivists believe that, given enough sophisticated research instruments, social reality can be accessed and represented objectively, while interpretivists hold the view that as humans

studying other humans, researchers are bound up and complicit in the same social worlds as participants studied, and therefore it is problematic to argue for absolute objectivity.

Interpretivists believe that the phenomenon is bound by time and context, and if these are removed, the phenomenon will lose its significance and results will be inaccurate. In line with research aim and objectives, the present study adopts an interpretivist position that is closely associated with qualitative inquiry.

Adapted from Hudson and Ozanne (1988), Table 1 below shows the main differences between positivist and interpretivist approaches to research:

Assumptions	Positivist	Interpretive
Ontological		
Nature of Reality	Single objective reality	Multiple socially constructed realities
Nature of Social Beings	Deterministic and Reactive	Voluntarism and Proactive
Axiology		
Overriding Goal	Explanation is done under general laws and predictions	Understanding is based on “Verstehen”
Epistemology		
Knowledge Generated	Time-Free and Context-Independent	Time Bound and Context is essential
View of Causality	Existence of Real Causes	Multiple and Simultaneous Shaping
Research Relationship	Dualism and Separation; Observation based	Interactive and Cooperative; no privileging of Observation point

Table 1: ‘Approaches to Research’, source Hudson and Ozanne (1988)

In terms of axiological assumptions, positivists believe that explanation can be done through generalizable universal laws which would allow them to predict behaviour of the subject studied. Interpretivists, on the other hand, hold the view that it is essential to gain an understanding of one's behaviour or of "*Verstehen*", the concept which refers to interpretation and understandings of subjective meanings that are attached to a given behaviour or grasping the shared meanings within a culture of contexts, language, roles and rituals (Wax, 1967). For interpretivists understanding is thus a continuous process rather than an end product (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988) since "*one never achieves the understanding; one achieves an understanding*" (Denzin, 1984). The present research adopts an interpretivist ontological position, which sees reality as socially constructed and contextual, and which is in line with current research aim and questions, since such terms as "fashion", "luxury" and "taste" are socially constructed as well. The next section follows a deeper discussion on ontology within consumer research.

4.2.1. CCT and Ontological Positioning

For years, consumer research was predominately dominated by different versions of positivism and quantitative inquiry, despite the fact that limitations of these approaches were constantly articulated in the literature (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). However, recent years showed a growing interest in post-positivist, interpretive inquiry particularly emerging in Europe. In his essay *Studies in the New Consumer Behavior* (1995), Belk emphasized on the emergence of 1980s alternative perspectives in consumer behavior research, which represented a radical shift from positivist approaches dominating the discipline since 1950s (Goulding, 1999). This has resulted in the discipline becoming rather interdisciplinary, presenting opportunities to new methods of inquiry (Belk, 1995).

However, in the early 1980's consumption was reconceptualized into a rather complex concept that now involved three steps: acquisition, usage and disposal (Holbrook, 1995). This has resulted in a shift of consumer exploration, since researchers were now interested in knowing "*what people did with the products that they purchased and how they disposed of them*" (Shankar and Goulding, 2001). This observation demanded methods that would provide rich descriptions, and which would focus on observation of these novel experiences surrounding the process of consumption, resulting in the emergence of interpretive research, the goal of which would be "*not prediction, but instead, understanding*" (Tadajewski, 2006:449).

In his *Consumer Behavior Odyssey*, Belk (1991) argued that consumer research methodology has evolved in four stages: during the first stage, 1920/1930s, consumer research was focused on understanding and interpreting consumers' needs with a supply and demand framework, in which consumer was recognized as a rational human being; the next phase commenced in the 1950s at the times of which consumer research was focused on the emotional relationship developing between consumers and products; the third stage occurred in the 1960s, during which consumer research was predominantly executed with the help of positivistic methodologies, which helped researchers to generate models that would predict and help understand purchasing behavior of consumers; finally, the forth staged began in the 1980s, the period that saw many changes taking place, resulting in the emergence of "*new consumer behavior research*" (Sherry, 1991).

Over the years, many paradigms appeared that aimed to characterize the research tradition that was emerging. Between mid-80s to mid-90s, the Association of Consumer Research

encouraged scholars to explore methodological issues in the field, resulting in the production of a number of papers that aimed to redefine how interpretive research can establish a better understanding of why consumers engage in certain types of behavior or consumption (Arnould et al., 2019). These included: Anderson's (1986) framework of critical relativism; Hudson and Ozanne's (1988) introduction to interpretive research, phenomenological inquiry and method of existential phenomenology proposed by Thompson et al. (1989); hermeneutics (Arnould and Fischer, 1994); Spiggle's (1994) guide for qualitative data analysis as well as a brief outline of critical theory (Murray and Ozanne, 1991) to name a few. However, each of them failed to signify linkages within this research tradition, as they were either focused on methodological distinctions or made irrelevant contrasts between the approaches, assuming a dominant consumer research paradigm.

As a response to this, Arnould and Thompson (2005) proposed a new term – Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which *“refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings”* (2005:868). CCT thus provides researchers with a shared theoretical orientation towards the study of cultural complexities of consumption, through exploration of *“the heterogenous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groupings that exist within the broader sociohistoric frame of globalization and market capitalism”* (Arnould and Thompson, 2005:867). It is not a unified theory, but rather *“continuously evolving perspective on consumer society and markets that shape cultural life”* (Arnould et al., 2019:87). The postmodern turn (Arnould et al., 2019), which had a profound influence on the research in the UK and Europe, entailed blurring between production and consumption, suggesting that marketing institutions are the basis of conscious meaning making, representing processes that construct realities we live in.

Nevertheless, CCT was and remains a subject of heavy criticism of scholars who questioned “*the need for CCT*” (Arnould and Thompson, 2007:5), arguing that “*CCT has institutionalized a hyper individualizing, overly agentic, and sociologically improvised mode of analysis that impedes systematic investigation into the historical, ideological, and sociological shaping of marketing, markets and consumer systems*” (Thompson et al., 2013:149). However, it is crucial to understand that the consumer is influenced by a vast number of factors that lead to one or another action, including social and cultural elements, the exploration of which is crucial for the full understanding of the marketplace and its actors. CCT allows researchers to be immersed in the phenomenon, to look at the picture fully rather than analyze it briefly.

4.2.2. Interpretivism within Consumer Research

Interpretivism defines consumer research as “*a way of interpreting the intersubjective meanings through which consumers view the world*” (Marsden and Littler, 1996:645). Sherry (1990) referred to the “*interpretive turn*” in consumer research, while other scholars described it as “*naturalistic*” and “*humanistic*” (Belk et al., 1988; Hirschman, 1989). The origin of interpretive consumer research is rooted in motivational theory’s application of an epistemology inherited from in-depth psychology and psychoanalysis (Tadajewski, 2006) and its approach is presented as “*seeking understanding*”, which involves identification of both individual and shared meanings (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000).

Interpretivists do not reject quantitative approaches to consumer research, but they see their limitations primarily in their static state, as opposed to viewing consumers in a way of

continuous emergence (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000). For instance, Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) referred to quantitative methods as those that are based on one point in time, offering a snapshot of someone who is no longer there. Researcher thus needs to be immersed into the phenomenon in order to investigate and comprehend consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986), rather than fitting consumer experiences into some preexisting structure for investigation. The qualitative researcher is thus “*not an objective and politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study*” of researched objects but is rather “*historically and locally situated within the very process being studied*” (Denzin, 2001:325). This implies that interpretive research is dominated by qualitative inquiry, which allows researchers to explore individual meanings and constructions which consumers ascribe to their experiences, as opposed to comparing patterns and occurrences.

A chapter by Sherry and Kozinets (1999) in *Qualitative Inquiry in Marketing and Consumer Research* provides a great overview of distinctive features of a number of qualitative studies dominant in the field. One of the key characteristics is “*naturalistic observation*”, that involves immersion in a field setting along with prolonged engagement with informants. When engaging in observation, researchers often employ “emergent design” as it allows them to comprehensively capture the phenomenon studied. Understanding and context immersion is another vital element, that leads to “*progressive contextualization*” – a strategy that helps to unpack the concept within its context of existence. Finally, researchers expressed interest in the quest for “*sensitized concepts*” – lived experiences of informants, their worldview, and its interpretation. This makes participants be seen as rather collaborators than merely subjects under study, resulting in emergence of “*thick description*” (Geertz, 1973). One of the distinct features of interpretivism, is that it does not necessarily connect paradigm to required methods of inquiry, implying that researchers are free to deploy different

methodological tools to gain insights into the phenomenon. For instance, a social constructionism study in its nature may adopt elements of phenomenological interviews to gain constructed narrative around concepts studied (Roux and Belk, 2018). This possibility has led to emergence of several distinctive approaches and techniques to qualitative inquiry within interpretive research including phenomenology (Thompson et al., 1989) and hermeneutics (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997).

Despite its continuous development and extensive use, interpretive approaches continue to be a subject of high level of criticism by positivists due to its belief in the existence of multiple individually constructed realities, which are constrained in social and cultural ways. This perspective therefore presents researchers as dependent on reality, whereas in the case of positivism the key assumption regarding reality is that it is already there and the researcher is not dependent upon it (Shankar and Gouldin, 2001). Similarly, interpretivism is seen to be constrained by context, however this study does not see this as limitation, rather it is believed that context is crucial for profound inquiry into how individuals interpret their realities. Therefore, presented research adopts an interpretivism approach, since its goal is to understand reality and phenomena studied by being immersed in it.

4.3. Epistemology

Previous sections highlight that the ontology of this study comes from the interpretivist paradigm. This section discusses the epistemology of this study in further detail.

Epistemology is focused on understanding how knowledge and meaning are generated and interpreted. These can be separated into three elements: how knowledge is generated, the research tradition approach and the interrelationship between researcher and researched

(Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). All of these elements are considered in the discussion of the chosen research paradigm presented below.

4.3.1. Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge which examines *“the development of jointly constructed understandings of the world”* (Galbin, 2014:82). It deals not only with *“the empirical variety of knowledge in human societies, but also with the processes by which the body of ‘knowledge’ comes to be socially established as ‘reality’”* (Berger and Luckmann, 1991:15). It has many roots – including existential phenomenological psychology, social history, and hermeneutics (Galbin, 2014). Social constructionism holds belief that multiple realities exist with a particular perspective being dominant at particular time, being created *“afresh in each encounter of everyday life as individuals imposed themselves on their world to establish a realm of meaningful definition”* (Morgan and Smirchich, 1980:494). This is implemented with the use of language, labels and routines that help individuals to establish symbolic modes of being present in the world (ibd.). Individuals thus create these realities with the goal of making them meaningful to themselves and others. However, *“among the multiple realities there is one that presents itself as reality par excellence”* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:35). The reality is commonly referred to as reality of everyday life:

“The reality of everyday life appears already objectified, that is, constituted by an order of objects that have been designated as objects before my appearance on the scene. The language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objectifications and posits the order of within which these make sense and within which everyday life has meaning for me.” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:35).

This everyday reality described above presents individuals as in an intersubjective world, which they share with others with whom they can interact, as noted by Berger and Luckmann (1966:37): *“I am alone in the world of my dreams, but I know that the world of everyday life is as real as it is to myself”*. This intersubjectivity results in the construction of shared realities, when, for instance, individuals utilize the same language or engage in similar practices, as *“most importantly I know that there is an ongoing correspondence between my meanings and their meanings in this world, that we share a common sense about its reality”* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:37). Epistemology that views reality as social construction thus focuses on exploration and analysis of specific processes during which this reality is constructed – *“reality resides in the process through which it is created, and possible knowledge is confined to an understanding of that process”* (Morgan and Smircich, 1980:497). When it comes to identity and knowledge, these are constructed within the social and historical conditions of culture and these are influenced by an intricate set of factors (from political to economic) (Keating and McLoughlin, 2005). Adapted from Buttle (1998:66), Table 2 below summarizes characteristics of social constructionism:

Reality is relative, historic, and changeable; it is an interpretive act of persons in communities; there are many realities present at one time.
Truth is relative and local, while knowledge is endogenous; scientific knowledge is contested by the time and place of its production.
Theories derive their strength from social support and scientists share collective practices of interpretation.

Table 2: "Characteristics of Social Constructionism", source Buttle (1998:66)

The use of social constructionism approach within consumer research is particularly useful when it comes to such issues as social perception, identity formation and social

categorization, as in Thompson and Haytko (1997). Social constructionism is thus a perspective which holds that human life exists due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985). Individual actions are thus structured by what is assumed to be right and wrong, what is seen as “good” and “bad” in terms of day-to-day activities.

In their article on alternative paradigms, Marsden and Littler (1996:648) have applied principles of marketing research to social constructionism perspective, which resulted in the following five premises that extensively characterize principles of social constructionism research:

“1) marketers are participant observes collaborating with the consumers in the research process; consumers are active participants studied in their natural environment; 2) consumers are segmented in terms of their subjective use of the market; techniques include ideographic interviews; 3) consumers are viewed from an internal-subjective (inside-out) perspective; consumers and marketers are both viewed as active meaning-makers; 4) consumers, with marketers, create and invent alternative realities, meanings and ultimately products; product markets are characterized and analyzed from consumer’s viewpoint; 5) adopts a meaning based (ordinary-language) model of decision-making and communication process; communicate through exchanges of symbolic patterns of meanings”.

These principles closely tie in with a CCT perspective and in particular with the present research, since the present research intends to establish a close relationship with participants in order to make them part of the research. Consumer research from a social constructionist perspective follows qualitative methods of inquiry which involve researchers working tightly with consumers and in contrast to standardized laboratory-type research techniques which

allows study of consumers in their natural settings (Marsden and Littler, 1996). Social constructionism thus focuses on the ways people “*describe, explain or otherwise account for the world in which they live*” (Gergen, 1985:3) thus asking markets to experiment with rather than on consumers in order to achieve in depth understanding of actions, practices, and experiences of consumers (Marsden and Littler, 1996). By using qualitative methods, researchers are thus able to preserve the meanings in their original form as they were received from consumers: “*by viewing consumers as agents of their own behavior from a social constructionist view, therefore, makes the meanings which consumers give to products a necessary part of understanding the rules, meanings and choices criteria that guide their purchasing behavior*” (Marsden and Littler, 1996:651). Taking this into account, it is clear that positivist research lacks this understanding, presenting a rather passive model of consumer behaviour.

Summing up, social constructionism deals with emergence and shaping of social knowledge (Keating and McLoughlin, 2005), and is particularly useful due to its strong emphasis on the consumer’s view and interpretation of the world. For years, it has been a useful application within many fields of social sciences and is currently particularly useful in the field of consumer research when it comes to exploration of identity formation and representation (Creed, Scully and Austin, 2002; Matsui, 2009; Newcombe, McCarthy, Cronin and McCarthy, 2011; Ustuner and Holt, 2007). Some general criticisms of social constructionism are that it falls towards nurture end of the continuum, meaning that it generally ignores the contribution made by physical and biological sciences, thus placing all the focus on social and cultural factors (Brickell, 2006). However, the present research does not see this as limitation since consideration of physical and biological aspects might not be essential for consideration when it comes to certain subjects. While this can be more important when

dealing with such terms as gender and sexuality, in the case of taste the main emphasis should be placed on social and cultural factors.

When it comes to the present research, social constructionism is seen to be the most suitable approach since it mainly deals with realities constructed by individuals collectively.

Particularly, social constructionism helps in exploration of taste as it allows to explore the meanings that individuals assign to it. The following quote from Burr (2015) highlights the appropriacy of social constructionism in the present research: *“Just because we think of some music as ‘classic’ and some as ‘pop’ doesn’t mean that there is anything in the nature of music itself that means it has to be divided in a particular way”* (2015:3). Although Burr discusses the debate around music, one can easily substitute music with taste and discuss both “classic” and “pop” in relation to it, arguing that based on subjectivity of taste it does not mean that it has to be divided in a particular way. In social constructionism reality and conceptions are socially defined, however they refer to subjective experience of everyday life, meaning that everything individuals construct is subjective rather than objective.

Taste too is subjective matter, as each individual or groups of individuals themselves construct their notion of taste and what they mean by it. In line with discussion on taste presented in Chapter Two (Section 2.5), social constructionism thus emphasises that the ways in which individuals understand their reality and the world are historically and culturally specific. This understanding is also reflected in one of the research questions for this study, which intends to identify how taste is socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, adopting a social constructionism perspective will allow this study to pursue the research questions presented earlier in this section.

4.4. Data Collection

The present study followed a multi-method approach, drawing on netnography, phenomenological interviews, wardrobe interviews and visual sources. These emerge from the researcher's position on ontology, epistemology and philosophical paradigm chosen for this research. Using multi-method approach was necessary in this research due to the nature of the studied topic and became possible through remaining focused on the primary foundations and goals as advised by Thompson (1997). Adapting his framework to multi-method interpretivist research, it was essential to (1) discern individual patterns of meanings in relation to the research questions; (2) to discern overall patterns of meaning from the different groups of individuals included in the research and (3) to derive broader theoretical implications from analytical interpretation of the data collected from all of the sources.

In the course of three years the researcher has been actively engaging with experiences around counterfeit goods consumption through following conversations on forums and Facebook groups, through watching YouTube videos on fake luxury products, as well as by having discussions with participants involved in the research. Therefore, the nature of this research can be described as "*self as instrument*" (Rew, Bechtel and Sapp, 1993), where the researcher performs several roles, including "*instrument administrator, data collector, data analyst, and data interpreter*" (Guba and Lincoln, 1981:128). This immersion allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, following discussions of both consumers and insiders of the industry. Similarly, it is worth mentioning that the researcher experience with fashion through being immersed in it for more than fifteen years due to the personal interest helped significantly in this research. Not only it eased the communication process with participants, but it also facilitated interpretations due to the

knowledge acquired throughout the lifetime. As this will be more visible in findings chapters of this thesis, being genuinely passionate about fashion from a very young age allowed researcher to notice tiniest details of this type of consumption, which might not have been as clear to someone who is not as immersed. This interest has also resulted in detailed interaction with data, summed up in the Table 3 below, which presents an overview of data collection tools in this research.

Method	Source	Data Collected
Netnography	YouTube Videos	13 video transcripts (45 pages)
Netnography	YouTube Videos	comments under 10 videos (30 pages)
Netnography	Forum Threads	27 threads (650 pages)
Phenomenological Interviews	Interviews	18 interviews (176 pages of transcripts)
Wardrobe Interviews	Interviews	5 interviews (part of 18 interviews)
Visual Methods	YouTube Videos, Forum Threads, Interviews	70 images, including photographs and screenshots

Table 3: Overview of Data Collection

Overall, all these methods have worked as a one eco-system, with each tool helping the other one. The choice to use a combination of methods was guided by Perez, Castano and Quantanilla's (2010:299) research, who mentioned need for alternative methods:

“Most of those who refused to participate responded that we were mistaken when assuming that they owned counterfeits; although we were certain that they did. We concluded that these individuals were afraid of losing their face with us researchers, also probably worried about confidence issues. We suggest that an alternative method such as blog analysis could be used to avoid this limitation, thus allowing researchers to reach consumers of counterfeits who are hard to interview personally”.

Consequently, this study incorporates both personal and digital methods, which allows to build a more in-depth understanding of a modern-day consumer of luxury counterfeits. Due to COVID-19 pandemic most of the data collection was done in the digital space, with interviews being done through Zoom. This has actually facilitated discussion, as participants were in the comfort of their own house, and inclined participants to show their possessions, which might not have been possible in the real-life discussion scenario. Further sections describe data collection methods in more detail with the focus on netnography, phenomenological interviews, wardrobe interviews and visual methods.

4.5. Netnography

The present research began with netnography, which allowed to shape further course of inquiry. Netnography is an established approach of qualitative research, whose name draws from terms “*Internet*” and “*ethnography*” (Kozinets, 2015). It is a method of data collection and analysis of participant-observation research from the data shared freely on the internet. Netnography adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities that emerge through computer mediated communications and uses publicly available information to examine lived experiences online (Kozinets, 2007). When describing novelty and importance of this approach, Kozinets claims that “*anywhere there is online consumer activity and interaction, there are interesting sources of data for consumer and marketing researchers and the potential for netnography to reveal insights about online communal consumer culture, practices and meanings*” (2007:131).

The output of this method tends to generate rich description through interpretations and provides detailed representations of the lived online experiences of community members (Kozinets, Dolbec and Early, 2014). Highlighting the procedure, Kozinets proposed it as a four-step system which involves “(1) *making cultural entrée*, (2) *gathering and analyzing data*, (3) *conducting ethical research*, (4) *providing opportunities for culture member feedback*” (2007:130). Derived netnographic data is complex, since online interactions themselves are complex and can happen in numerous ways, both publicly and privately, across various social platforms, and are often presented in different formats – visual, text and audio (Kozinets, Dolbec and Early, 2014).

One of the key advantages of netnography is that online researchers can gather a vast amount of data without making their presence visible to online members (Kozinets, 2010). This also allows researchers to access numerous archival data that can be found on forums and search engines (Kozinets, Dolbek and Early, 2014). In addition, due to online being geographically diverse, netnography as a method is highly flexible allowing to observe online interactions of geographically dispersed members. This also means that there are no strict time constraints as in the case of interview, which implies that research can actively engage in “*in-depth observation*” throughout established period of time. Netnography thus allows the researcher to be immersed in a community study with the goal of achieving better interpretation of behaviour, as well as conversations and patterns of behaviours of these community members (Saunders et al., 2016). However, netnography also offers a wide scope of issues that are related to the truthfulness of identity presentation. Since it is based primarily on observation of textual discourse online and informants might therefore be presumed to present a carefully cultivated and controlled self-image (Kozinets, 2002).

In terms of netnography, key focus in data collection was made on YouTube videos as well as observation of selected fashion forums. This activity that was performed regularly over the course of two years allowed the researcher to be immersed in the field of study as well as helped generate rich insight not only in terms of textual discourse, but also from a visual perspective. The next sections dive deeper into netnographic data collection of the present research, focusing on YouTube and Forum Communities.

4.5.1. YouTube

In the year of 2018, YouTube was rated the number one social network in the US, used by 73% of adults in the country (Kozinets, 2019). It is an international social media phenomenon that allows users to engage in continuous video sharing through uploading unlimited number of videos, rating them, and sharing with others. The platform's popularity has led to the emergence of video blogging, vloggers, and YouTubers across various industries, including fashion, beauty, traveling, cooking and technology (Kozinets, 2019). YouTube has also been extensively used as a tool for ethnography and netnography within consumer research (Snelson, 2015; Ashman et al., 2018). For instance, existing research was interested in studying behaviour of YouTube bloggers (Snelson, 2015; Ashman et al., 2018) as well as their influence on modern-day consumers.

Research began with the process of scouting YouTube. Scouting involves reading through search results, following, and exploring them in order to identify which ones are the key (Kozinets, 2019). Scouting allows the researcher to inform the knowledge of the topic as well as introduce new search terms, which helps to redefine research focused into more effective terms (ibid.). It also helped to gain more current information on the topic of counterfeit

consumption and also to establish “*emotional and intellectual engagement with data*” (Kozinets, 2019:224). In scouting researcher is looking for specific social media conversations and posts on site (YouTube) that help to address research questions. The present research started with scouting through keywords on YouTube, such as “*fake luxury haul*”, “*replica luxury collection*”, “*replica bag collection*” and “*fake bag collection*”. While all of these keywords essentially describe videos where vloggers showcase their replica possessions, popular culture defines hauls as “*a video showing shopping spree*” (Jeffries, 2011:59).

In the process of scouting a number of videos tagged “vova haul” were identified and appeared to be increasingly intriguing to research. After these were thoroughly explored, researcher incorporated “vova haul uk” into keywords that were used for searching videos on YouTube during the next several months. After most of the credible YouTube videos were watched, it was decided to focus only on videos tagged as “vova hauls”. While “vova hauls” are explored more in depth in Chapter Seven of this thesis, a brief introduction into the term is necessary. Vova is an app and website, similar to AliExpress and Taobao, which allows users to purchase various product categories, which are shipped from China (Apple, 2021). However, this app has gained huge popularity among younger generation of consumers, after a number of YouTube and TikTok videos, which revealed that Vova is a space for cheap counterfeit luxury goods. As a result, this has led to the emergence and popularity of “vova hauls”, where haul is defined as “a vlog titled ‘Makeup Haul’ or ‘(Store Name) Haul’ and is a video showing a shopping spree in that given area, showing products or clothing that will usually be featured in future How To, or tutorial videos” (Urban Dictionary, 2009). As a result, a number of YouTubers, who have done “vova hauls” were selected as appropriate for

further study. This selection was based on the frequency of posting haul videos, relevance of content, number of views and comments.

Overall, a total of thirteen videos were selected from six vloggers for further analysis. After the videos were chosen, each of them was transcribed, and comments under the video were copied and pasted into the Word document for further analysis. While one vlogger had comments switched off, other vloggers had between twenty to fifty comments that were collected for the analysis. Each of the videos lasted fifteen minutes on average. All of these were done in one standard, where firstly the vlogger would do a little introduction to the video, and then present their haul. More specifically these videos are discussed in Chapter Seven of this thesis. The final selection of vloggers chosen for this study is presented in the Table 4 below.

Vlogger	Video Selected	Views
Alice Holmes	“I found seriously Cheap Designer items on Vova! Louis Vuitton, Fendi, Gucci, Michael Kors”	35k
	“I found really CHEAP Designer items on Vova!”	58k
	“I found unbelievable Cheap Designer items on Vova! Gucci, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Dior”	10k
	“I found very CHEAP DESIGNER items on Vova”	12k
	“I Found so many CHEAP DESIGNER ITEMS on DHGATE”	5.7k
Amber Knight	“TESTING seriously CHEAP DESIGNER items and I’m SHOOK”	55k
	“I found seriously CHEAP designer items ... I got a pair of Balenciagas for HOW MUCH!?”	82k
Ellie Victoria	“FAKE Designer Items Haul?! Really Cheap!! £16 AirPods”	37k
	“Fake Designer Items Haul?! Really Cheap!! YSL Bag £20?!”	51k

	“Huge Vova Haul!!! Fake designer items for amazing prices!! SHOOK”	15k
Katy Rebecca	“Designer Haul (Fake) Gucci for £3!!”	6.8k
Lucy Ledgeway	“Testing Fake Designer Dupes from Vova 2020”	109k
McKenna Grace	“Testing Fake Designer Items from Vova – Is it a Scam?!”	69k

Table 4: List of Vova Haulers chosen for analysis

On average, each blogger has posted minimum one video on Vova Haul, while some turned this topic into a mini-series comprising of four or more videos. In each of these haul videos, the YouTuber follows a strict process – after greeting the audience and briefly talking about what is this video about, the vlogger then talks about each item in the haul, showing close-ups of it while reflecting on it. Sometimes vloggers do compare the item to the authentic one, however in the majority of cases they tend to say that the item is identical to authentic, when in reality it is not. On average each haul features five to ten items, including bags, clothes, jewellery, and shoes. Vloggers mention the price and if they have worn the item already, they reflect on this experience as well. The public generally reacts positively to this movement, which is often referred to as “*so much fun*”. However, it should be noted that as of October 2021 Vova app and Website were removed and therefore these videos show a phenomenon that happened during a specific timeframe (December 2019 till October 2021).

4.5.2. Forum Communities

Online communities, such as discussion forums Reddit, have become extremely popular among consumers. In these virtual communities, users not only seek to find information, but also search for meaningful social relationships. In addition, online communities allow individuals to be who they truly are, as their identity is not disclosed with the use of various

nicknames and avoidance of their real personal information. Exploration of forums was core to early netnographic studies, as they offer a vast amount of data including honest conversations and personal stories. Research suggests that the use of relatively anonymous social sites such as Reddit and other forums allows users to share freely, creating a “*culture of disinhibition and open disclosure*” (Shelton et al., 2015:10). In relation to rather sensitive topics that may possess threat to one’s status, such as counterfeit luxury consumption, forums work best for finding like-minded individuals, ask for advice and share stories. This openness surrounding one common goal allows these users to create their own community where there is no place for hate and negativity towards fake luxury products. These communities thus represent a rich source of data, which is difficult to be obtained through interviews due to the nature of the topic.

The discovery of RepLadies was a turning point in research, as it is one of the most popular forums dedicated to counterfeit luxury products. The forum met criteria set by Kozinets (2019) – it featured relevant information about counterfeit luxury products, highly active community members, interactivity between participants, and richness of the information posted by members. A total of twelve visits which lasted approximately four hours each were made to the forum, where the researcher was going through the posts in discussion section and filtering the threads that would bring the most richness for the present research. This approach was guided mostly by interview questions as well as by researcher’s interest and curiosity. If a thread was seen to be particularly insightful, it was then chosen for further in-depth analysis. Research was mostly looking for threads that would inform on the taste of RepLadies, their consumption preferences and their collections. A list of threads chosen for analysis in this study is presented in the table below.

	Thread Title
1	Apart from pricing, what makes you want to buy reps over authentic?
2	What do you consider low/mid tier VS high tier?
3	Has anyone been called out?
4	Reps you though you'd love but now regret?
5	What is your ethical standpoint on reps? Is it ethical?
6	Replica Success Stories
7	How do you decide what bags to purchase authentic and what to buy as a rep?
8	How do you explain your habit?
9	Do you wear reps with flaws?
10	Do you still wear your first rep?
11	How open are you about owning reps?
12	How many reps do you buy a year and what is your "rep buying strategy"?
13	Does social media influence your rep buying decisions?
14	Why the obsession with accuracy and fear of getting called out?
15	Does your AGE or LIFESTYLE ever stop you from buying reps?
16	Influencers that wear reps
17	Unrealistic lifestyle portrayal due to reps?
18	Show me your bag storage
19	Show your collection / storage ideas for your purses
20	Show me your bag closet
21	My collection of Rep Chaneles
22	How do you store your bags / shoes
23	How have reps changed your taste?
24	How do you store or display your hanbags?
25	How many reps do you buy each year on average?
26	Pre-owned authentic vs rep?
27	Luxury Design on Contemporary Budget?

Table 5: Selection of RepLadies Threads chosen for this study

Overall, a total of twenty-seven threads were scouted for further analysis, each of them comprising of fifty to three hundred comments. The topics included but were not limited to replica bags collection, attributes of replica bags, openness about owning replicas products, possession of unrealistic lifestyles, and ethical issues behind this consumption. Data collection involved in-depth observation of threads and data was derived from a period of "lurking" with the goal of informing in-depth interviews that were conducted with consumers

of counterfeit luxury products. The researcher adopted a non-participatory role in the community, by simply observing the interactions that were happening online. This role of the researcher allowed following of more than one hundred conversations in the course of nine months. The researcher did not want to intrude, rather silently observe the interactions happening online. When performing research, attention was mostly paid to discussion threads rather than product evaluations and reviews, as these were rich in their nature and allowed to gain a vast number of insights that are valuable for this research. The forum is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

4.6. In-depth Phenomenological Interviews

“Human beings are conversational creatures who live a dialogue life” (Brinkman, 2014:278). Conversations act as rich sources of knowledge that help to achieve an understanding of personal and social aspects of our lives. By engaging in a dialogue, consumers showcase their identity, consumption patterns and experiences. In the consumer research context, in-depth interviews are seen to be forms of dialogue that help researchers to construct and process meanings about day-to-day consumption activities. Interviews are thus a useful tool to learn about the world of others, seeking to understand central themes in the life of the interviewee in a qualitative setting (Qu and Dumay, 2011). In classical literature interviews are defined as *“face-to-face verbal interchange in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information or expressions of opinion or belief from another person or persons”* (Maccoby and Maccoby, 1954:499). Later scholars refer to interviews as interchange of views between two or more persons about a theme or themes of mutual interests (Brinkmann, 2014). The present study follows definition proposed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2008), who see qualitative research interview as a method the purpose of which

is to obtain thick descriptions and deep reflections of the life world of interviewees in order to achieve an interpretation of phenomenon studied. In their description of interview method, Qu and Dumay (2011:243) referred to it as “*art of questioning and interpreting the answers*”, seeing them as research vehicles, the aim of which is to produce empirical materials for the questions studied.

The present study implements phenomenological interviews as a method for data collection. Although the present research is situated in social constructionism paradigm, in-depth phenomenological interviews provide the best fit for the current research as they allow to generate richness of the phenomenon under study. The primary goal of phenomenological interviews is to attain a first-person description of a specific element of experience (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989). Phenomenological research is thus interested in describing the person’s experience in the way he or she experiences it, rather than from theoretical standpoint (Bevan, 2014). Phenomenology as epistemological perspective recognizes human experience as complex and grounded in the world which is experienced intersubjectively and has meaning (Mason, 2002). Therefore, in order to explore a person’s particular experience, it is essential for the researcher to consider the context as well as biography from which experience can gain meaning. In phenomenological interview process this study intends to follow adopted phenomenological theory of Husserl (1970) which was proposed by Bevan (2014). The focus of the framework is thus placed on accurate description and thematization of experiences in a systematic way through the use of “themes of contextualizing experience, apprehending the phenomenon, and clarification of phenomenon” (Bevan, 2014:142). In the present study this framework helps to clearly define consumer experiences related to taste and consumption of counterfeit luxury products and afterwards unpack them with the result of generating rich interpretations.

The present study deployed semi-structured or guided approach to phenomenological interviews (please refer to Appendix I for the sample of interview with Florence). The process of semi-structured interview involves prepared questioning guided by identified themes in *“a consistent and systematic manner interposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate responses”* (Qu and Dumay, 2011:246). The focus is thus placed on interview guide, which incorporates a set of broad themes to be covered during the interview, helping to direct a conversation towards the topics and questions studied. The use of semi-structured interviews proposes a major advantage of making the interview process more structured, systematic, and comprehensive, while the tone of interviews remains conversational and narrative (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). Semi-structured interviews are also seen as flexible and accessible, as well as *“capable of disclosing important and often hidden facets of human and organizational behavior”* (Qu and Dumay, 2011:246). Hence, the interview guide was developed for this study with indicative topics and questions prepared to facilitate interviews and discussions. The interview guide was also helpful in a way that it allowed to say focused on key themes explored but also aided in getting broad answers on the phenomenon under study. Generally, the benefit of using semi-structured interviews as a method lies in their *“unique ability to uncover the private and sometimes incommunicable social world of the interviewee, to gain insight into alternative assumptions and ways of seeing”* (Qu and Dumay, 2011:255). Phenomenological interviews are thus seen to be an ideal tool for entering another person’s perspective.

In this study a total of eighteen interviews were conducted, out of these ten are used to inform the findings. Interviews were planned in a way to enable a natural conversation between researcher and participant. All of the participants in the study expressed interest in fashion, which helped to provide extensive descriptions of their experiences. Interview started with

researcher setting the scene for the discussion, by providing more information on the notion of current research as well as informing participants about their rights within the research. The interview finished with both researcher and participant reflecting on the interview and sometimes additional comments were made by the participant. Interviews were arranged at times that suited the participants to allow the best possible convenience. Three interviews were done in-person before the COVID-19 lockdown, while the rest of them were done via Zoom. Interviews that were done via Zoom featured respondents in their homes, which in some cases allowed the researcher to see their collection of handbags or clothes as some of the items were demonstrated during the interview. Interviews through Zoom actually resulted in richer discussion as compared to those that were done in person as these allowed respondents to see their collection, which made them remember more and also allowed researcher to ask additional questions. Discussion covered topics including shopping habits, fashion following, respondents' style and taste, and fake designer consumption to name a few. In addition, respondents that were recruited through Facebook Group Bag Chat were also asked about their handbag collection in detail.

On average, interviews lasted around forty-five minutes. With participant's permission, interviews were recorded either using personal recording device for those done in person or with Zoom encrypted software. All interviews were transcribed and annotated with additional comments, impressions, and observations in order to help restore that experience during data analysis. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research with participants names changed. Audio recordings were stored securely on a password protected Cloud location. Transcribing them allowed researcher to be immersed in the data as well as use excerpts to illustrate findings and discussion in line with the tradition of consumer research.

4.6.1. Wardrobe Interviews

As part of in-depth interviews, this study implemented elements of “*wardrobe interviews*” with the goal of enhancing the richness of narratives, since “*the wardrobe provides a basis to talk about the self: while going through all items in the wardrobe participants are stimulated to think about which items of clothing are stuffed away at the back of the closet and why, which items are preserved for work or for leisure only, which items they feel the most attached to, and which items remind them of persons, periods or special events*” (van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016:27). Wardrobe studies are extensively used in fashion studies on consumption and identity, as they help to analyse the relationship between clothes and the wearer along with contributing to the increase of material elements within studies. In the process of discussing the contents of the ones wardrobe, consumers often touch on maintenance, cleanliness, acquisition, and disposal, which are seen to be part of wardrobe structure (Klepp and Bierck, 2014). This relatively new approach to learning consumer patterns and behaviors was proposed and implemented by anthropologist Sophie Woodward (2007), who in her book “*Why Women Wear What They Wear*” explored the process of women choosing their clothes and getting dressed. Woodward (2007) questioned participants on their choices as they told stories about the items they decided to wear. This approach was later deployed by various other fashion-oriented scholars (Klepp and Bierck, 2014; Twigg and Buse, 2016; van der Laan and Velthuis, 2016; McDowell, 2019; Maguire and Fahy, 2022), as this method was seen as enabling a connection between researched individual, their subjects and researcher.

In present study, wardrobe interviews helped to connect narratives told during phenomenological interviews with the material objects owned by respondents. Due to

COVID-19 most of the interviews were done via Zoom, therefore make it easier and at the same time more difficult to do Wardrobe Interviews. As wardrobes are commonly seen as an intimate element of one's life, using Zoom actually facilitated the conduction of wardrobe interviews as the personal space of participants was not invaded by the presence of the researcher. Hence, a number of interview participants were willing to show their items during the interviews and have offered to send pictures with some captions afterwards. Participants were asked to talk about their collection of handbags and accessories, naming them, telling stories of how these were bought and how these are used. Due to the researcher not seeing the wardrobe, participants were able to choose the items they were happy to talk about themselves.

This “small talk” actually allowed researcher to build trust and create a rather natural conversation, which was an essential preparation before dialogue on fake luxury consumption. The information and photos provided by participants have showed how passionate they are about their possessions; how important these are for them as well as how open they are to the research about consuming fake products. As these “wardrobe interviews” happened during in-depth interviews, only some participants were comfortable with showcasing their collection. Overall, a total of five wardrobe interviews were conducted, which resulted in thirty-six photos that were received for further analysis. These photos are later used to illustrate discussion of findings in chapters five, six and seven.

4.7. Theoretical Sampling

The research first started with convenience sampling, which involves choosing participants that are close to the network of the researcher and easy to reach. Saunders (2012) highlights

that samples chosen through convenience technique frequently meet the purposeful approach criteria in achieving the research aim. Convenience sampling was also deployed in order to test interview questions as well as to understand how the whole process of interviewing would go. Participants recruited here were acquaintances that the researcher knew were interested in fashion and shopping. This allowed to test interview themes and questions as well as helped to understand the questions that work best to start discussion on counterfeit consumption.

Next, research deployed purposeful sampling approach. Purposeful sampling focuses on selection of information-rich cases, the study of which illuminates the questions under study (Patton, 2002). This implies selecting participants, who are especially knowledgeable or are experienced with the phenomenon under study (Palinkas et al., 2015). In order to recruit participants, it was decided to post a recruiting ad on several Facebook Groups that researcher was part of for some time, including Glasgow Girls Club, London Fashion Creatives and Bag Chat. These were chosen based on group interests, as fashion appeared to be a regular topic of discussion in all of them. While Glasgow Girls Club featured audience with wider interests, London Fashion Creatives and Bag Chat appeared to be an ideal match for recruitment as all of the members were frequent consumers of luxury items, both real and fake. The recruitment ad included information about the research – its topic, specifically mentioning counterfeit luxury consumption with words “replica luxury and fashion products”, age range for participants, duration of interview and contact details of researcher.

Overall, four rounds of recruitment were done over the course of six months. During the first round, the largest number of potential participants reached out to researcher to be interviewed. However, after they were explained that they will have to talk about their

experiences with counterfeit luxury products and their consumption, a number of potential participants dropped out and did not respond to any messages, which reinforces the difficulty articulated by Perez et al (2010) noted earlier. Second and third rounds of recruiting were more successful, allowing to recruit seven participants, who were not friends or acquaintances of the researcher. Finally, the fourth round of recruitment through Facebook group Bag Chat allowed to gain the biggest number of participants from one source, presumably because the group was dedicated to luxury bags only. The total list of interview participants is presented below in Table 6, with names changed to pseudonyms.

	Participant	Age	Location	Occupation	Counterfeit Consumption Status
1	Alicia	18	Glasgow	College Student	Active
2	Amelie	26	London	Finance	Active
3	Ava	24	London	University Student	Never
4	Bella	26	London	Fashion Designer	Never
5	Blaire	20	Glasgow	University Student	Never
6	Claire	53	London	College Tutor	Accidentally in the Past
7	Esme	23	London	Fashion Buyer	Never
8	Florence	23	London	Fashion Consultant	Accidentally in the Past
9	Jessica	35	London	Finance	Accidentally in the Past
10	Lauren	43	Glasgow	Nail Salon Owner	In the Past
11	Martina	42	London	Communications	Never
12	Michelle	26	London	Lawyer	In the Past
13	Nicola	38	Cheshire	Marketing Professional	In the Past
14	Rebecca	18	London	University Student	In the Past
15	Ruby	26	Glasgow	Finance	Never
16	Sasha	24	Glasgow	Self-Employed	Active
17	Tasha	23	London	Technology	Active
18	Vivian	34	Manchester	Lecturer at University	Active

Table 6: Overview of Interview Respondents

Overall, the present study deployed eighteen participants for in-depth interviews, aged eighteen to fifty-three and located across the UK, mainly Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London.

The majority of participants appeared to be between twenty to thirty years old, as during this period individuals are more likely to be constantly engaged in development of their style and taste and thus are more prone to consume counterfeit luxury products in order to achieve status and project desired identity (Eisend and Schucher-Güler, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2009). In terms of education and occupation, several of these participants were still university students, while the rest worked as professionals in fashion, technology, marketing, and communication. All of these participants were recruited based on their interest in fashion and, as it appeared during the interview process, all of them have been familiar with counterfeit luxury goods. Only a few of them identified themselves as consumers of luxury counterfeits, while others shared that they used to have a few counterfeits in the past. All of the participants deployed in this study were also occasional consumers of genuine luxury products. While this study conducted eighteen interviews, not all interviews appear in the findings due to the richness of netnography data. Also, in line with Perez et al. (2010) findings not all interview participants were particularly happy to have a profound discussion on their experience with counterfeits due to being scared about losing their face. However, all of the interviews helped to achieve broader understanding of the phenomenon as well as allowed to look at it from different perspectives.

4.8. Visual Methods: Photographic Data

Throughout history, photography is constantly used as a tool to document and analyse societies (Banks, 2018). When talking about images, Serafinelli (2017) refers to them as “*communicative instances*”, arguing that they represent objects as well as their relationship in the world. Images also represent meanings, since “*each individual produces meaning by relating image to his or her own personal experiences, knowledge and wider central*

discourses” (Pink, 2007:82). The fashion industry as such is highly visual, where images in advertisements aid in “*narrative transportation*” (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010), while fashion bloggers communicate the latest trends on social media and personal blogs sharing millions of images daily (McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips, 2012).

Visual data is highly contextualised; the analysis of it “*is almost impossible without taking into account the context in which the visual was produced and finally received*” (Bock et al., 2001:272) and social scientists often complain that “*photographs alone do not represent, for example, emotions, social relations, relations to power and exploitation*” (Pink, 2007:12).

These citations emphasize that it is essential for them to be contextualised with verbal discourses or other knowledge in order to understand and feel these experiences. Hence, all images, even those that are created by researchers should always be considered in terms of context, in particular context of production, consumption and exchange (Banks, 2018).

Interpretation of photographic images is not limited to the qualitative analysis of visual content, social behaviours of users before and after the photo exchange are also essential for meaning making (Serafinelli, 2017).

In this study visual data is used in tandem with netnography and wardrobe interviews, as it allows to provide depth to reflections of consumers on their possessions. For wardrobe interviews, photographs were taken by interview participants and were sent to the researcher before, during or after the interview. Participants took these photos using personal smartphones and, after they were sent to the researcher, they were saved to a fingerprint protected personal computer. After their analysis, it was decided to create a Power Point for researcher use only in order to match images with descriptions made by participants. This allowed a better structure and organisation, since each wardrobe participant was given several

slides that shared a story of their wardrobe, making it easy for researcher to interpret and analyse this data with the actual interview. For netnography, photos were screenshotted by the researcher during the scouting process. On the forums, the researcher was looking for images that represented collections, storing space and wardrobes, while on YouTube visual data consisted mostly of screenshots of haulers purchases. These images too were added to a Power Point presentation and included brief captions that would facilitate findings write up at a later stage. Using images in the present research thus allowed to link rich descriptions of participants with their collections and representation of possessions.

4.9. Overview of Data Analysis

“Consumer researchers by using alternative perspectives attempt to understand and represent meanings by studying (1) the meanings that others attach to their experience, (2) how those meanings cohere and form patterns, and (3) how symbolic forms, rituals, traditions, and cultural codes (especially those involving consumption) affirm and reproduce cultural themes” (Spiggle, 1994:497). To achieve these aims articulated, data analysis is essential. While the present research used multi-method approach, it did not divide its data in terms of the analysis, meaning that the same approach was used for netnography and interviews. Specifically, three steps were essential to generate understanding of the data collected – data organization, data analysis, and data interpretation.

The process of data analysis began with data organization. Here data requires ordering, collating and management in order to make it structured and feasible for the analysis. To develop a system, the textual data was organised in three password-protected folders, specifically “Forum Threads”, “Vova Hauls”, and “Interview Transcripts”. Visual data was

organized in a Power Point with additional notes from participants. This structure allowed researcher to work on data inference in a more feasible way. In the present research specifically, data inference was divided into two stages: analysis and interpretation, where analysis “*breaks down or divides some complex whole into its constituent parts*” and interpretation suggests that “*one makes a construal – asks what something means or grasps the sense of it*” (Spiggle, 1994:492).

This research follows Spiggle (1994) approach to data analysis and interpretation. Firstly, in terms of data analysis categorization and abstraction were performed. Categorization refers to the process of data classification and labelling using codes (Spiggle, 1994). The present research did not use any software for data analysis, as in some cases it can be seen as limitation as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:203) suggested that there “*are no mechanic substitutes for those complex processes of reading and interpretation*”. Consequently, categorisation was approached manually, using highlighters, post it notes, scissors and file cards. Specifically, after interview transcripts were printed, they were read through to identify key themes. During the second and third reading, the researcher used coded highlighters, which corresponded to themes identified, to highlight relevant units of data. These themes were then coded in tables using Microsoft Word. Similar activity was also performed with forum threads and “vova hauls” transcripts. Secondly, abstraction was used to “*collapse more empirically grounded categories into higher-order conceptual constructions*” (Spiggle, 1994:493). Here, some minor themes were combined in order to facilitate data interpretation. With respect to “vova hauls”, key themes were grouped according to product categories in all the videos, in addition to general themes that emerged throughout the analysis. As for forum threads, each thread was analysed for key themes, which were then grouped to achieve higher-order conceptual constructions.

Next, after data analysis, interpretation process began. Here the goal was to “*make sense of data through more abstract conceptualisations*” (Spiggle, 1994). To do so, the research followed “seeking patterns in meanings” approach proposed by Spiggle (1994). By looking at all themes across three data sets, researcher was thus preoccupied with identifying recognition or resemblance in meanings across analysed data. Here, the researcher was looking for recurring elements, parallel structures, and similar themes. Categorisation and abstraction performed during the first step, allowed researcher to observe similarities and differences across three data sets, which led to identification of common patterns. During this process researcher was heavily dependent on critical reflexivity. After interpretation was completed, a list of key themes was produced. As a final step in this process, this list was extended with specific examples and quotes to help researcher to structure findings chapter. Here, the images were also added to facilitate findings write up.

4.10. Methodological Limitations

Due to the richness and complexity of the chosen topic, this thesis therefore draws on multiple qualitative methods including netnography, phenomenological interviews, wardrobe interviews and visual methods to inform data collection. Khan et al., (2021) share that research on counterfeit consumption was mostly done using surveys and questionnaires, which indicates lack of qualitative methods. By adopting a selection of qualitative tools, this study therefore attempts to provoke further qualitative inquiry in consumer research on luxury counterfeits. However, the sensitivity of the chosen topic suggests that not all individuals are able to talk openly about this type of consumption (Perez et al., 2010), which explains the prevalence of quantitative studies in this domain. Nevertheless, as any type of

consumption, counterfeit luxury consumption is full of consumer meanings related to this experience, and therefore observation of it from quantitative perspective may not lead to depth and richness data associated with it. Similarly, due to topic sensitivity, drawing only one method might not lead to desired results. Therefore, this research argues that exploration of counterfeit luxury consumption should be done from a multi-method approach, as it was performed in the current study.

As this study draws on a selection of methods, it acknowledges the challenges presented in using them as well as the operational difficulties in analysis and combination of these tools. Therefore, one of the key limitations, which is reflective of the nature of qualitative tradition is the time required for both data collection and its interpretation, the process which is frequently very time consuming. Each interview required a couple of hours to be transcribed, while visits to the forum also required significant time and efforts as it was necessary to go through each thread to identify its relevance. In addition, interpretation, and coding of information from YouTube videos, forum threads and interviews required dedication and time as it was essential to structure information according to content and themes. As presented research incorporates a lot of data in dataset, it was decided to keep the sample under twenty participants, so that each interview was transcribed and analysed thoroughly.

While the present study draws only on ten interviews throughout findings discussion, the remaining eight interviews were used for general interpretation of both counterfeit consumption and taste. Specifically, these helped to understand how consumers interpret these concepts of counterfeits and taste as well as consumption related to them and has provided a basis for further data interpretation. Similarly, due to having another rich source of data – netnography – it was decided that it would be more beneficial for the present research

to focus on a few narratives of consumers and explore them in depth, rather than briefly touch on all eighteen participants. Therefore, these narratives in combination with YouTube videos and forum discussions allowed to present a rich analysis of contemporary counterfeit luxury consumption. Finally, in line with what was said above, interviews appeared to be the most challenging data source due to participants being relatively close about their consumption preferences, while netnography offered higher level of openness about one's consumption habits.

Consequently, due to topic sensitivity, the present research experienced minor difficulties with recruitment of participants. At this stage, a number of participants have expressed interest about being part of the research, but as they understood that they will need to reflect on their experience with counterfeit luxury goods, they became silent and have not responded to any messages. During the interviews, the subject of fakes was discussed towards the end of the interview, which allowed to build relationship and trust between researcher and participants, resulting in rather natural conversation on this controversial subject. However, in line with Perez, Castano and Quantanilla (2010:299) research, several participants of this study appeared to lie about them having bought any counterfeit products. While researcher has seen these participants wear counterfeits on multiple occasions, during the interview they did not admit to ever purchasing such items. Due to potential lack of honesty on such topic, it was therefore decided to spend more time on netnography, as forums are seen as relatively "safe" space, where individuals can share their thoughts without their identity being disclosed. Consequently, this explains limited interview sample used in the present research.

Finally, existing study managed to get only several wardrobe interviews, which appeared to be part of in-depth interviews. While this approach to qualitative inquiry has not been used

extensively by consumer researchers, it presents tremendous value particularly in exploration of collections and possessions.

4.11. Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection was started, the present research has received an ethical approval from the University of Strathclyde in January 2020. Like any research, the present study requires to consider ethical elements of conducting research to protect researcher and research participants. Kozinets (2010:156) highlights four difficulties associated with ethical netnographic research: *“(1) whether online communities should be treated as public or private spaces, (2) how to gain informed consent from online community members, (3) the necessity of avoiding harm to online community members, and (4) how to portray data relating to netnographic research participants”*. The key ethical consideration one needs to address when conducting research is to establish whether the netnography source is public or private. The present research has conducted research on public platforms, such as YouTube and Reddit, where *“members are fully aware of this public function”* (Kozinets, 2010). As the content posted on YouTube and Reddit can be accessed by anyone, according to Walther (2002:207) members of these communities therefore *“must be aware that these systems are, at their foundation and by definition, mechanisms for the storage, transmission, and retrieval of comments”*. Therefore, by accessing what is available publicly this research qualifies for a human subject exemption in terms of netnography.

Given that key ethical consideration for present study is the use of usernames of forum members as well reveal of the identity of vloggers through the use of their real names, this needs a further explanation. Specifically, RepLadies have experienced a change after this

thesis was submitted in June 2022. On 28th of April 2022, The Cut have published an article on RepLadies forum called “The Rich New York Women Who Love Their Fake Birkins”, which apparently has brought a lot of unwanted attention. Consequently, in August the moderators of the forum have made it private – it became accessible only to its members. However, a few weeks later the forum was deleted, and it remained unclear whether it will be operating again, instead the moderators have opened a new forum, the entrance to which is monitored by only allowing members, who have certain level of “karma” – previous activity on Reddit. After the revisions to this thesis were made, I found out that they have reopened the forum, however it is unclear whether it is the one that was previously deleted or if it is a new one operating under the same name. Therefore, the search for any nicknames, usernames as well as images and quotes, would not result in any data as technically it no longer exists on the internet.

When it comes to the reveal of identities of vloggers, British Sociological Association and Association of Internet Research were consulted, however limited guidance was received. Specifically, having looked at “Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0” (Association of Internet Research, 2019) and “Ethics Guidelines and Collated Resources for Digital Research” (British Sociological Association, 2016) it was established that they provide rather general advice on ethical research and given the year these were published, they appear to be dated particularly in terms of digital research. Given the rapid change in digital world, and consequently, research related to it, this study adheres to British Sociological Association’s guidance on *“using ‘situational ethics’ that allow for discretion, flexibility, and innovation”* (2016:3)) when it comes to conducting research as well as treating each research situation as “unique” and avoid applying a standard template in order to guarantee ethical practice.

Association of Internet Research (2019) talks elaborately on “informed consent” in relation to Big Data projects that use machine learning to collect and analyse information. Such guidance can be seen as more appropriate for projects of bigger scope and since this project was not done using AI, it can be argued that research acted as a filter to remove any information that can be considered sensitive or damaging to the netnographic participants. Similarly, YouTube terms of use were consulted, however as a platform, YouTube only offers general advice on using materials in an ethical way. The only guidance that is offered is that content can be used without consent of the creator under the “fair use” agreement, which suggests that “*works of commentary, criticism, research, teaching, or new maybe considered fair use*” (YouTube, 2022). As the videos were used for research purpose only and not commercial use, given YouTube guidelines the consent is not required.

In terms of revealing real identities of netnographic participants, existing research frequently uses real names of online community members and creators. For instance, McQuarrie et al. (2013) used real blog names and do not cover faces in their study on fashion bloggers, while Lovelock (2017) disclosed real names of YouTubers, who performed coming out on YouTube. Similarly, real identities were revealed by Duffy and Hund (2018) in their study on entrepreneurial femininity among fashion bloggers, while Parrott, Danbury and Kanthavanich (2015) used real forum nicknames to support findings in their research on luxury brand advocates on fashion forums. In line with these studies, present research sees vloggers as media personas – similar to authors, who publish their work in newspapers, blogs, and magazines. Consequently, given the amount of dedication, time, and work they invest in their platform, in line with Cocker et al. (2021) this study keeps their real names as anonymisation would prevent them from being recognised for all the work they have done. As for the visual data, the faces of participants are either missing or blurred.

Ethical considerations are crucial throughout the interview due to interaction of researcher with participants. Saunders et al., (2012) presented a number of principles that were developed to recognise ethical issues in interview-based research. These include “*privacy of those taking part, voluntary nature of research and right to withdraw, informed consent of those taking part, ensuring confidentiality of data, and maintenance of anonymity of those taking part*” (Saunders et al., 2012:243). To ensure this is limited, an emphasis was placed on creating a good rapport during the interview as well as building trust with informants. Before the interview each participant completed a consent form and was provided with the relevant participant information sheets, which included relevant contact numbers and email addresses of the research team should they have any questions. Participants were notified that they could withdraw from the study at any time and that the information they provided can be withdrawn from the research at any time. Additionally, they were notified that they can refuse to answer any questions during the interview. To protect their identity, their names have been changed to pseudonyms and specific details of their occupation are not disclosed.

Finally, all data was stored on a personal computer in password protected files. After interviews were transcribed, recordings were deleted. The list of participants with their real name is known only to researcher and any sensitive personal information of participants is not recorded anywhere.

4.12. Chapter Conclusions

This chapter presented the methodological approach chosen for this study. It situated the research within social constructionism epistemology that compliments CCT research on

identity projects, marketplace cultures and marketplace ideologies. This chapter defined research aims as those which are focused on exploration of patterns of consumption and taste performance. This study adopts social constructionist approach which seeks to gain a deep understanding of constructed understandings of reality. This chapter has also presented the chosen research design and strategy, which have been discussed in line with the research aim and objectives. After the research methods deployed in this study were thoroughly discussed, this chapter explored key methodological limitations and ethical considerations of the present research relevant to this research.

Chapter Five: Understanding Taste

5.0. Introduction

“Taste is something very few people have in large quantities, although Madison Avenue advertising would have you believe each time you buy one of their products, you automatically get an overdose of taste. Now, enough of that nonsense. No one is ever going to bottle taste. It’s a sense you are born with, and if you’re smart, cultivate like a rare flower all through life. Taste comes from both sides of the tracks: the environment during the growing years, and parents who know when to expose a child to fine music, books, art, and the association of friends. And God’s graces are just as abundant to the poor. Many of the world’s greatest artists and musicians came from humble surroundings. It’s all very true: high fashion does gravitate around society, who claim to have taste. It’s only because they have the time, money, and places to wear trendsetting creations. It’s a ridiculous belief that money brings taste; it definitely doesn’t. As a matter of fact, it often merely allows one to enjoy bad taste with louder vulgarity. If a large number of society women appear to have fine taste, it’s not necessarily so, as these groups all follow the mold established by a couple of leaders. This crowd is scared to death to ever express its own personality or taste, out of fear of criticism. Women outside sleek social cliques often enjoy more freedom expressing personal taste; that’s why the cities of Chicago, Dallas, and San Francisco have larger numbers of individually fashionable women who are not dominated by the rigid rules of a few leaders.” (Excerpt from Bill Cunningham “Fashion Climbing” 2018:337-338).

The findings chapter begins with the excerpt from Bill Cunningham's "Fashion Climbing" that teases out a reflection on what constitutes taste in the twenty first century. Even though that this excerpt is more suitable to be placed in Literature Review chapter, it was decided to use it as an extended epigraph to the Findings chapter to facilitate the discussion on taste. Although some might find Cunningham's view as "provoking", it summarises the researchers' thoughts on taste well. As next three chapters unfold, the reader will find a lot of similarity in thoughts in terms of taste, its connectivity to money, its cultivation and practice. This chapter therefore starts the inquiry into "taste" and its meaning for consumers, which is achieved by observation of taste through two different levels – taste as practice and taste as judgment.

5.1. Taste as Practice

Individuals use various consumption objects to express their identity and taste to those around them (Holt, 1998). The present research identified three types of tastes: taste of the authentic consumers (authentic taste), taste of the hybrid consumers (hybrid taste), and taste of replica consumers (replica taste). While it may seem that these tastes differ significantly, a set of similarities were identified during the analysis. After a great debate, it was decided to observe and present these tastes as just "tastes" without adding any "good" or "poor" adjectives to them. Looking at them as they are, allows building of a more profound understanding of post-modern consumer taste. While "authentic" as appropriate term was debated due to its contested meaning in CCT research, this study uses it to describe genuine luxury products.

5.1.1. Authentic Taste

Consumers with authentic taste (further ATC) appeared to be interview participants in the majority. Their narratives suggest that fashion is an important element of their identity. ATCs are very attentive to their appearance – they are very perceptive followers of what is in fashion. They are guided by the advice of elite taste makers of their choice, and they are constantly engaged in activities that help them to elevate their taste (Üstüner and Holt, 2010). In doing so, they mostly engage in inconspicuous consumption (Berger and Ward, 2010) and give preference to subtle products of well-known brands. This behaviour was explored among several interview participants, regardless of their age and occupation. Most of their narratives featured references to inconspicuous products, brands, and stylistic choices. By having resources to purchase authentic luxury products, they want to distance themselves from other consumers by choosing exclusive and niche market offerings. Therefore, their taste is mostly described in relation to inconspicuous consumption. Below are four consumer stories that help to understand how exactly inconspicuous consumption is integrated into Authentic Taste. These narratives not only allow more profound inquiry into the notions of “inconspicuous consumption” and “inconspicuous taste”, but also help to build an understanding about how this taste is emulated by other types of consumers, which is discussed further in this chapter.

The first consumer narrative features Jessica, a 35-year-old banker, who sees fashion as an important element of her identity. She describes herself as a very keen follower of fashion and beauty trends. Jessica is particularly passionate about craftsmanship, especially when it comes to handbags. When describing her taste, she explains that the COVID-19 pandemic had a dramatic influence on her wardrobe:

so whenever we were going to the offices, it would be formal office style, but I would just spritz it up with additional accessories or colours, like play with colours. I just like the unusual styles for the office, but obviously it's a client facing environment as well where I would need to meet clients of the bank side, I have to be within certain limits of how wild I can be with my accessories and with colours I choose. I would say that is the style. I am thinking about shifting career like to become a health coach, focusing on mother and baby or focusing on mental health. I'm not sure which one yet but both are very like keen interests for me. But that might be a whole new version in terms of style, how I would be able to experiment.

Jessica defines her taste in terms of what fits into the social agenda of her life (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). She mentions how due to her work role, her wardrobe mostly consists of formal clothes which she would occasionally “*spritz with additional accessories or colours*”. However, due to being in a client facing environment, she shares that she had to be mindful with her accessories as well as had to dress according to certain standards. However, as she mentions that she wants to change a career path, she reflects on how it might lead to a “*whole new version in terms of style*”. Despite the fact the process of finding new style is time consuming (Reese, 2016), Jessica shares that she is excited about it. Her decision to change careers emerged in the pandemic and during our conversation she was reflecting on how she is currently engaged in a reformulation of her wardrobe. She shared that her taste is currently undergoing a transformation and that she aspires to dress like Rosie Huntington-Whiteley – a famous model and entrepreneur, who used to be one of Victoria's Secret Angels in the past:

I feel like I'm on the same page with Rosie Huntington right here as she said that she would go for the best quality I can afford but also the best comfort and she looks amazing. But she doesn't wear logos or brands, like she does wear brands and they are expensive, but it doesn't look like you know screaming-screaming something. It rather looks like "look I'm comfortable in who I am and what I am wearing". But obviously she is in that industry. She is, you know, she's a model.

In this passage Jessica reflects on “*her aspirational style*” – the one of Rosie Huntington-Whiteley. She explains that like Rosie she values quality and comfort when it comes to creating outfits. The brands that Jessica refers to here can be classified as inconspicuous – they are characterised by discreet signals and low visual prominence (Han et al., 2010). Consequently, from Jessica’s narrative it can be concluded that she sees herself as the adaptor of “inconspicuous luxury”. This is also supported with her reflection on her collection of luxury handbags. When Jessica shares how she decided to purchase a Chanel bag, she mentioned that she does not like the “*one with the CC*” logo since it is “*screaming*” to her. This shows how Jessica avoids loud branding that is easily identifiable by other individuals and gives preference to more subtle products instead. For instance, her Chanel Reissue bag does not feature any logos and to identify it as Chanel one needs to be aware of brand aesthetics.

Furthermore, it is also interesting how Jessica mentions that Rosie looks like that because “*she is a model*” and “*she is in that industry*”. It can be proposed that Jessica draws the line between reality and expectation, where the expectation is Rosie looking flawless due to her media personality, and reality being a day-to-day life of ordinary fashion consumers. The “system” that Jessica refers to might be interpreted as a “fashion system” (Entwistle, 2015).

By being a model, Rosie is in fact part of the “fashion system”, which gives her certain perks like having a personal stylist to curate her outfits as well as working with brands and showcasing their products in her daily looks. Those consumers, who are outside of the “fashion system” usually curate their outfits themselves and, of course, the brands that are featured in these “looks” are totally dependent on the budget of the wearer. As a result, Jessica maybe hesitant whether she would be able to dress in the same way. However, she mentioned that she started experimenting as she is rearranging her personal style currently and she is now *“braver with certain things”*.

Despite the age and career difference, Jessica and Rebecca, an 18-year-old Central Saint Martins student, share the same taste. In their narratives both shared how they have developed a preference for “classic style”. For example, Jessica reflects that when it comes to “going out clothes” she would wear something *“classic”* – she avoids wearing short clothes because of her height as *“they make me look silly, like I am wearing clothes for a little girl instead of something that would suit me”*. As a result, Jessica gives preference to more classic clothes, such as *“Karen Millen style or some romantic styles”*. Rebecca also describes her taste in terms of “classic style”, however she mentions that *“you have to have a certain lifestyle to wear this type of clothes everyday”*:

Classic style is sticking with neutral colours, like black, beige, nude, white. And when you dress in more office like blazers, blouses, pants and pencil skirts, dresses, heels. For the lifestyle, for me, as student, I don't think I would be comfortable every single day wearing heels, dresses or blouses and blazers. But sometimes it's nice to wear something that looks chic and expensive. I really like that sometimes you can put expensive outfits from shops like ZARA. So, it's basically to do with your taste and

how you can put it all together. If you can do it, you can just buy clothes from ZARA, H&M and Primark and they will look good.

It is intriguing how despite age difference both Jessica and Rebecca give preference to rather “*conservative flair*” (Thompson and Haytko, 1997:28) and to limited spectre of neutral colours rather than to flashier styles that feature a combination of extremely bright colours. In this overview of what constitutes classic style, Rebecca reflects how even though it is not comfortable for her to wear classic clothes everyday as a student, she still tries to dress elegantly. For her it is important to look chic and expensive, however she mentions that one does not need to spend a lot of money to get the “classic look”. She reflects on constructing her outfits from various retail outlets that range in their price points. When describing her own style, Rebecca mentions how she likes to mix designer and fast fashion products as it is essential for her not to have “*labels everywhere*”:

I think that you have to have a healthy combination of luxury and fast fashion. So, if you will use, for example, a designer bag, you can't just wear the whole designer outfit in one way, as you will have labels everywhere. And it's not that nice to look at the person, who has labels everywhere. So, I think if you have a designer and your bag shows who the designer is, you might stick with something simpler as an outfit or if you are wearing like a staple T-shirt or something that says, you have to have a combination of simple clothes and one accent

Both passages describe Rebecca as a “*fashion bricoleur*” (Thompson and Haytko, 1997:27). By making a reference to how she uses various brands in one outfit, Rebecca personalises her style by combining culturally available resources to create something new. Opposed to those

individuals, who prefer to purchase the whole “look”, Rebecca prefers to create a coherent ensemble from a set of brands that would allow her to showcase her taste best.

In this passage Rebecca draws on words “*healthy combination*” when describing outfits. She explains that it is essential to mix products to look stylish, whereas wearing labels head to toe would give the opposite result. She provides some advice on how to subtle down the “loud” bag by adding more minimalistic elements to the outfit. During the interview Rebecca shared that if she is wearing her Louis Vuitton bags, she keeps the outfit as simple as possible to “*not attract unnecessary attention*”. Even though these products are frequently loud in their nature, Rebecca shares that she feels like they complement her personaliy, but she explained that in the nearest future she wants to add more subtle accessories to her collection. This indicates her decision to move towards “inconspicuous luxury” (Halwani, 2021).

The third consumer narrative features Nicola, a marketing manager, who expressed similar taste in handbags as Rebecca. While she also sees her taste as “classic”, her interpretation of it is different to Jessica and Rebecca. She does not draw on minimalistic and subtle colour variations in the outfit, nor does she wear only classic clothes. Instead, she reflects on how she wears “loud” products but does it in the “inconspicuous” way:

So, like with my taste I am very classic, you know, I don't like anything that is too flashy. I hate anything with like Balenciaga. I hate things like that. I would never have it. I am more very subtle in my choice, but you'll know that it's a Chanel bag or Louis Vuitton, but it's not in your face. And I appreciate everyone has their different levels of taste and if, for instance, I was wearing my Gucci bag and I've got a Gucci belt, but I would never wear them at the same time. You know, I am very quiet, reserved with when and how I wear more expensive things or you know, I don't like when it's

like “ok she’s got the belt and she’s got the bag and she’s got this, and she’s got that”. I don’t want to be seen as I’m having too much even

Nicola’s narrative provides another dimension to inconspicuous consumption. It is interesting how she makes parallels between different brands – Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Balenciaga. Given that all these brands are rather conspicuous, it is interesting to see how Nicola interpretes them through inconspicuous consumption. She starts by saying that she gives preference to subtle objects (Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson, 2015). While she mentions that she likes such brands as Louis Vuitton and Chanel, she explains that she would choose only those products that have no visible branding like her Chanel Wallet on Chain, which features a tiny CC logo. Additionally, Nicola draws on “*different levels of taste*” when describing her preference for Gucci product. She shares how while for others it is ok to wear several branded things in one outfit, she personally avoids doing this. Nicola explains that she is very “quiet” when it comes to depiction of her luxury possessions. Similar to Rebecca she purchases these products because they complement her taste and because she genuinely likes them, rather than she wants to showcase her status to the society.

Nicola’s desire to avoid being a “*walking name brand*” (Thompson and Haytko, 1997:27), which can be seen from her perspective on wearing Gucci, indicates the importance of appropriately mixing fashion brands of different segments to enforce “*decommodification*” (ibid). By not wearing two products from one brand in one outfit, Nicola showcases her uniqueness as well as desire not to follow popular taste. Her use of Gucci as an example is not surprising – GG belts and bags became increasingly popular in the fashion community, which led to the emergence of widespread counterfeit alternatives. Wearing both the belt and the bag in the outfit was considered on trend when these products were first launched, but as

their popularity was growing such stylistic choice became a cliché. As she reflects on her current taste, Nicola shares that she would avoid “*glaringly obvious*” stylistic combinations:

Like I am more considered of what I would buy now. It has become more ... probably more mature. I wouldn't get anything which is like glaringly obvious, but I do wanna have ... like a bigger Chanel bag now that I've got a small one. And I thought that after you get a wallet on the chain you probably won't have that desire, but you do because you are still like, oh, it's so nice to have. And, you know, the more I would look at other different brands now and you know I feel like I just have to have Gucci. I don't know. I have to have this. I do love looking at different kinds of brands that are available now. And like being a bit more out there with what I love.

This passage provides several interesting observations on Nicola's taste and consumption. As she calls her taste “*more mature*” she still mentions how she wants to acquire certain brands and products. For example, she shares how she believed that she would not want to buy a bigger Chanel handbag after she purchased her WOC, but as she had done so, she is still considering future Chanel purchases. Similarly, she mentions that she must have Gucci – this indicates how she sees brand's aesthetic matching her taste and therefore wishes to add other Gucci products to her collection. In line with her being “quiet” about how she wears status symbols, it can be argued that inconspicuous consumption may not only centre around avoiding products with massive logos, but also trying to choose less popular alternatives from “loud” brands. Whereas previous research mostly discussed “inconspicuous consumption” and “inconspicuous luxury” through brand prominence (Han et al., 2010), Nicola's story allows us to look at this type of behaviour from a product perspective. As a result, inconspicuous products can be found in conspicuous brands.

As consumers of authentic products purchase products that are constantly replicated, it is crucial for ATC to find ways to distinguish themselves from other individuals. In this domain exclusivity plays a very important role when it comes to depiction of their taste. The final narrative features Michelle - a 26-year-old lawyer, who is very attentive to what she buys and what she wears. As she describes her taste as minimalistic and elegant, she is always shopping for exclusive things – not in terms of buying the most expensive products but selecting things that not many individuals have. To do so, Michelle conducts “research” to inform her taste and purchase decisions:

Well, I look at a lot of websites, for example that one, the Facebook group, for opinions of people. I look at Instagram as it has a lot of ads and things, so I would always be comparing prices and checking new bags and looking into it and thinking would I wear these. I also have a Pinterest board, where I have different outfits and things like that. So that's what I do

Here, Michelle makes a reference to various sources that help her navigate a complex marketplace and allow her to gain opinions on product offerings she is interested in. Surprisingly, she makes a reference to Facebook group “BagChat” through which she was recruited. Michelle mentions that for her it works as reasonable source for opinions on certain products, since individuals, who post there, are real life consumers and not bloggers, who are potentially sponsored to share only positive aspects of engagement with objects. However, while “BagChat” is frequently filled with popular and well-known models of handbags, Michelle is running after exclusive products. For instance, during the interview she described how through her research she discovered a few brands “that are very small and produce

handbags in small batches” with all their accessories being handmade in Italy and are not so known to the public. She explains that this “*run for the exclusivity*” is driven by widespread availability of counterfeit products as well as extreme popularity of social media influencers, who all appear to be having same handbags:

Sometimes, when I see that everyone is wearing the same thing, I try not to wear it because I don't want to be part of them

Similar to participants in Thompson and Haytko (1997), Michelle therefore chooses the objects that would help her develop a sense of personal identity through contrast between her taste and taste of others. For Michelle taste is an instrument for social competition (Thompson and Haytko, 1997), as staying ahead in her fashion choices allows her to symbolically gain advantage in her circle as well as outside of it. Michelle’s narrative indicates how she values “discreet luxury” (Halwani, 2021) – she is not drawn to brands that are immediately recognisable by others:

Well. I like Ferragamo, Sandro, Valentino. I would not go for something that is Dolce Gabbana, which is super flashy and like, you know, and at the same time I've done my own research and I think things like Michael Kors don't look nice, they are mostly cheap and done with plastic material. So, I would not release my money in that. If I see a brand and it's less well known and the quality is much better than the brand that is well known, I would always go for lesser known brand, which probably will make it cheaper.

As Michelle reflects on her passage it can be observed how important it is for her that accessories and clothes, she chooses are inconspicuous. She draws on several brands that she prefers and makes a clear statement about avoiding “Dolce and Gabbana” as it is “*super flashy*”, which emphasises how she sees it as “conspicuous brand” (O’Cass and McEwen, 2004). Similarly, she shares how she would always choose something niche and not well known. It can be established that for her quality is of more importance rather than status derived from owning luxury products. Michelle mentions how she would prioritise high quality over a well-established name of the brand. This presents her as a consumer, who acquires designer products because they offer a more long-term wear as opposed to fast fashion retailers. While she mentions such brands as Salvatore Ferragamo and Valentino, her narrative suggests that she likes these brands not for the status that they can give her, but rather for their timeless designs and craftsmanship. Similarly, she starts discussion on how buying niche brands allows her to save money. This presents Michelle as smart consumer – to her having a taste does not mean spending a lot of money to enhance it:

So, you know, I think a lot of people kind know that taste equals to like money and big fat expenses, but that is so not true. I think you can dress more tasteful in full Zara outfit. It just depends on the person. That’s why I do so much research and I try to look at my own collection and not buy things because of trends and kind of purchase a bit and I am really proud of it. That really reflects my taste in something rather than something I’m buying and spending ridiculous amount of money and I will not be wearing in like six months from now. So, I will try to buy the basics of really high quality instead of trends.

These four narratives articulate how consumers exercise Authentic Taste. As it was discovered in this chapter, taste practices of ATCs in this research are centred around various levels of inconspicuous consumption. However, it should be noted that some consumers of genuine luxury products might express taste for conspicuous luxury, they have just not been part of this research. Particularly, this form of “inconspicuous” taste is achieved by ATCs preference for “classic style”, low brand prominence, niche brands and discreet luxury. Although all four consumers appear to have similar taste, each of them is on different stage when it comes to inconspicuous consumption. While someone like Rebecca is only starting to transform her wardrobe into more subtle domain by adding more plain and silent handbags, Michelle is more advanced into this process. Jessica and Nicola too have their own strategies for making their taste more “inconspicuous”. Similarly, Michelle’s story suggests that ATCs consumers might express preference to discreet luxury to avoid being associated with negative reference groups that wear counterfeits to enhance their status.

It can therefore be assumed that one of the motivations for inconspicuous dressing for ATC participants in the present research is to differentiate from consumers that wear counterfeits. This perspective also came up in discussion on “taste as judgement”, which is discussed further in Section 5.2. of this chapter. Since replica products are more widespread for brands and objects that are popular in the society, subtle products allow ATCs to distinguish themselves from replica wearers. Consequently, by choosing quiet and less popular products these consumers express their admiration for luxury brands, but they are not trying to show-off their status with these products as those, who purchase conspicuous products. Instead, they signal “discreet status”, which can only be identified by consumers who share similar tastes. Therefore, observation of ATCs tastes and consumption patterns works as a benchmark for taste emulation by other consumers. As the findings chapter unfolds further,

the reader will find similarity in tastes of certain RTCs, who try to emulate the taste of authentic consumers to make an impression on having similar taste as well as similar level of symbolic capital.

5.1.2. Hybrid Taste

Today's consumers are seen to be unpredictable, contradictory, and unmanageable, which emphasises contemporary Western consumption as fragmented and volatile (Gabriel and Lang, 2006). In line with this Hybrid Taste offers a novel and insightful perspective on consumer taste as well as the phenomena of counterfeit luxury consumption. Whereas Authentic Taste and Replica Taste are straightforward in their meaning, Hybrid Taste Consumers (HTC) are more complex in their purchase decisions. Following literature on "*hybrid consumption*" (Ehrnrooth and Gronroos, 2013), consumers with hybrid taste do not fit into any market segment since they are prone to consume both authentic and counterfeit products depending on the situation. As a result, the present research sees these consumers as following two paths – the first one features individuals, who consume both authentic and replica concurrently, while the second one is followed by consumers who are in transition stage, which implies that they are either moving from replicas towards authentic products or vice versa. This section features two narratives, which allow more profound inquiry into Hybrid Taste and HTC. Both stories feature two different individuals with two different tastes. From a literature perspective they can be seen as "*cultural omnivores*" (Emmison, 2003). Even though tastes of these consumers differ a lot, their consumption patterns are similar.

Amelie is twenty-six, she used to work in finance but is currently taking a career break. Amelie was the only Asian participant of the present research and due to her cultural background, her opinion on fakes and counterfeit consumption was different to other consumers. Her collection features both authentic and counterfeit products, which identifies her as HTC. During the interview she only disclosed one bag to be fake in her collection, however it can be assumed that she might have other fakes in her wardrobe. Amelie's narrative on her personal style suggests that her taste is similar to ATCs as she prefers styles that are "timeless" and "classic":

I would always stick to something that would last a really long time. Something that's not just quality wise, but also the style. Something timeless, classic just because if you are to spend thousands of pounds on something, you really should be able to keep that for a long time. So, I never really wear anything too trendy, you know, will stick to sort of turtleneck, and a nice, good coat. That is probably how I would describe my style. I don't go too adventurous.

Throughout our conversation Amelie frequently draw on such words as "timeless", "not trendy" and "forever" to describe her taste. As can be observed from a passage above as well as others to come, she expresses preference for similar styles as ATCs. In line with ATC participants, Amelie also does not follow trends and chooses styles similar to "classic style". However, she was the only participant for whom value derived from owning a product was of crucial importance. Throughout the conversation Amelie frequently used the word "value" to describe her consumption choices. For example, she draws on the price of luxury items and shares that if one is to spend that amount on something, it should last years, and the quality should be impeccable. It can be argued that Amelie presents herself as a smart consumer

(Perez et al., 2010). She does not want to spend too much on the items that are seen as “not having value” in her eyes. For instance, a passage below offers an interesting perspective on how Amelie chooses which handbags to add to her collection:

Well, with bags as well I like to stay in classic style. On top of sort of being able to last awhile but I also buy something that if I have to sell it, I can make money on it, if that makes sense. So, things like a Gucci Marmont – I will never buy, because I don't think ten years from now people will want it. So, I stick to things like Chanel classic flap, Lady Dior, Celine. What's called classic bags. Fendi Peekaboo, for example. So things that are classic, but things that also other people want. So that in case I do have to sell it, not only I will lose the money, but I do believe that they could still keep their value. So that's how I operate. I don't like losing out on personal belongings.

Here Amelie reflects on the process of choosing new handbags. Similar to her narrative on personal style, she likes to choose timeless and classic handbags that hold their value well. It is interesting how she draws on such popular handbags as Gucci Marmont and sees them as something that consumers would not want ten years from now. Despite drawing on inconspicuous style in fashion, this study argues that Amelie is a conspicuous consumer. She shares that she gives preference only to handbags that “*other people want*”, which shows how she is not interested in differentiating herself from other consumers as ATCs. She explains this behaviour by viewing her handbags as “*investment purchases*” – during the interview she shares how she only buys products that she can easily sell without losing money. To support this, she draws on such popular and conspicuous handbags as Chanel classic flap, Lady Dior and Celine. While Celine as a brand can be seen as a rather inconspicuous brand which does not use large logos in its product, it has become heavily

popular in the last ten years. Consequently, it is argued that “conspicuousness” is not only dependent on brand prominence but also on how popular the product is itself. As a result, despite Amelie’s narrative indicates her preference for inconspicuous consumption, her collection still features popular and easily recognisable handbags:

I have a top two, definitely my favourite ones are my Lady Dior and my Chanel classic flap. It’s just because you cannot go wrong with them. And the thing is ... I sort of cringe a little bit of those two choices because they are so popular. And that’s what everybody has. But the truth is, they do go with everything. And when I bought those a couple of years ago, the quality was honestly second to none. So, they do beat a lot of other fashion brands in terms of quality, when I bought it anyways.

Amelie’s collection, which is presented below, can be characterised as heavily conspicuous. Even though it does not feature massive logos, all of the handbags are very recognisable even by those who are outside of fashion consumption. It is interesting how Amelie herself understands that her bags are “popular”, but again she explains this as classic choice, which goes well with everything. Additionally, she draws on quality as an important factor of choosing these handbags. With quality of luxury products decreasing, it becomes difficult to find products where the quality reflects high prices. Consequently, it is understandable why Amelie chose these luxury handbags and not others. In the interview she also frequently mentioned her Lady Dior handbags. She shared that it is the only handbags she has, which has a brand name on it. Given that “DIOR” is hidden in the charms, Amelie shares that “it’s the closest thing that I felt comfortable putting the name of the bag on”. This indicates how Amelie tries to avoid brand logos when it comes to choosing her handbags. This perspective allows to conclude that conspicuousness is not determined only by brand prominence but also

by other elements of the product. Consequently, it can be argued that products can be conspicuous on several levels – firstly, they might feature brand logos and be easily detectable due to high brand prominence, and secondly, they might be recognisable due to their nature. Amelie’s collection (Image 1) showcases the certain level of conspicuousness, with her possessions being popular and well known due to their designs, shapes, and names.



Image 1: Amelie's Handbag Collection

Being an omnivorous consumer, Amelie buys products from a range of price categories. For instance, in one of her recent trips to Vietnam she purchased a fake Louis Vuitton bag. She explains that as her friend was buying one, she decided to purchase one as well. Amelie chose a replica Louis Vuitton Pochette Metis, and she reflects how she was considering the purchase of the authentic handbag several months prior to her trip. However, she was not satisfied with the quality due to the uneven glazing. Consequently, as she saw the bag on the fake market, she decided to purchase it as she “*saw no difference*”. Since then, she continues to use this bag regularly, and shares how after putting it “*through hell*” it still looks like new.

Amelie refers to her fake Louis Vuitton handbag as her “*beater bag*”. Given that it is fake, it has a low emotional investment to her and therefore she is not worried about any damage:

I wear my fake bag when I do things that I know will screw the bag – walking my dogs, going out in the storms, doing tons of shopping and stuffing hundred things in the bag. So I don’t necessarily dress up when I, you know, when I go to somewhere that I like to look nice, then I would not wear a fake bag obviously.

This passage shows how Amelie sees her fake bag as a product with low emotional investments and as a result ready to accept the good enough quality (Ehrnrooth and Gronroos, 2013). Amelie attributes her perception to her cultural background, which makes her not oppressive to fakes, but inclines her to see them as reasonable alternatives for certain designer products. For instance, she mentioned that in some cases the quality of the replica surpassed the quality of authentic. Consequently, Amelie approaches her collection as “smart consumer” – she mentions how to her “*buying fakes really reflects taste*” as well as whether an individual understands the value that the bag has or does not. Her narrative suggests that although handbags fall in the category of hedonic products, their utilitarian elements as functional and financial value are crucial for Amelie. As a result, she prefers to choose counterfeits for those products that she knows will not meet her quality standards as well as which are not seen by her as a reasonable investment.

While Amelie appeared to be having similar tastes to ATC, Vivian had a rather distinct taste among all the participants. Vivian is 34, she works as an academic in the field of fashion and helps brands with their social media. She shares that she was always passionate about fashion and liked to dress up from early childhood. She wanted to pursue a career of fashion designer,

but because she could not draw, she decided to study fashion marketing instead. Vivian appeared to have the most unusual taste of all. As Vivian reflects on her taste, she mentions that she used to care more about fashion in the past, while her current taste in clothes can be described as “*more grown up with less room for experimenting*”:

It's one of the two things – so, it's either really loud or really plain. There's not really much in between. So, I like bold prints, I like a lot of bright colour, so a lot of the time I am dressed in really bright really loud things or super plain things. I've got like Adidas tracksuit that's all over bright print, I've got a Champion tracksuit I mentioned, I've got things like green prom dress, I'm looking at chain print shirt, leopard print

It is interesting how Vivian shares that her outfits can be either plain or loud. While she does not speak much about her “*plain outfits*”, Vivian’s narrative indicates that she has “*intentionally bad taste*” (Henderson and DeLong, 2000:243). As discussion on ATCs has shown, “good taste” in fashion is commonly associated with classic items of neutral colours, something minimalistic, that does not feature logos, is timeless and requires skills to decode it. On the contrary, ATCs as well as Vivian, refer to loud items when it comes to “bad taste” – the prevalence of large logos in the outfits, many bright colours in one outfits and bold prints to name a few. As she draws on incorporating bright prints, such as leopard, it can be observed how she is using unexpected and loud clothes with the purpose of creating a distinct style. Vivian’s taste can therefore be explained as “*collected, altered and combined*” (Henderson and DeLong, 2000:242) to suit her aesthetic. Being a “*fashion bricoleur*” (Thompson and Haytko, 1997:27) Vivien can craft her non-conformist identity. Similarly, this passage highlights how Vivian’s taste is different to all the participants in this study.

While others referred to such styles as “classic style” and “French style” to create their look, Vivian explained that to her these styles are “*boring*”:

I just think things that are tasteful look boring. They are quite safe. Things that are traditionally described as tasteful seem to be quite safe and then actually as a trend grows something that was once tasteful, suddenly becomes ... like it's everywhere and then everyone's got it and then, suddenly, it's not good taste anymore

Vivian compares tasteful things to trendy clothes as she explains how she sees everyone following the same style rather than expressing their own. Her rejection of “*safe things*” shows how her taste is distinct from trendy choices, which allows to show her individuality. By utilising her symbolic capital, Vivian stands out from others through her personal style. This desire to be unique is formulated in terms of her nonconformist narrative that explains her preference for autonomy and independence in terms of fashion (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Consequently, Vivian herself sees her taste as “bad taste”:

So, I like things that are in traditionally bad taste, mostly because they're loud and bright. So, like I said chain print, anything by Moschino, anything like loud and quite overtly bad taste or kitsch or out there. You're not going to look at me and think that I am chic or well put together

It is interesting how open Vivian is about having a controversial “bad” taste. While the majority of participants exaggerated positivity by mentioning “having good taste” in their consumer narratives about oneself, Vivian’s story appears to be the opposite of it. This again supports her non-standard taste and personality as well as desire to differentiate herself from

others around her. For instance, she draws on her favourite brand Moschino to explain her stylistic preferences. She shares how this brand is an epitome of her taste. During the in-situ wardrobe interview, Vivian showcased her wide Moschino collection (Image 2), which includes both authentic and replica items. She describes this brand as loud and fun, as she believes that it matches her personality well:

I've also got a lot of real Moschino things and quite a few Moschino things from the H&M Moschino collection a couple of years ago. I've also got a fake Moschino belt. So, I really love Moschino, it is one of my favourite designers. I really like all the chain print, all the gold or the black and gold or the kind of loud funness of it. I've got a fake Moschino chain jumper, so it's black, it's oversized. Then from the HM collection I've got a kind of leopard and chain print bomber jacket, my husband bought some real gold Moschino logo flip flops, which I wear all the time and I'm a bit terrified of damaging

As research connects kitsch to “knock-off imitation luxury products” (Binkley, 2000:132), it is not surprising that Vivian’s collection features fakes as they appear to be part of her “bad taste” style. Vivian shares that her “Moschino collection” reflects her taste well – it is full of logos, which are part of her style. It can be established that Vivian expresses a combination of “brand love” and “fake love” for Moschino (Batra, Ahuvia and Bagozzi, 2012; Khandeparkar and Motiani, 2018). Her narratives suggest that she is very passionate about her collection as well as having “total look” from Moschino. Her form of “brand love” is also expressed by Vivian’s fears of ruining the “Moschino logo flip flops”. While such item, made from rubber, can be perceived as easily disposable by some consumers, Vivian cherishes it a lot and ensures its preservation (Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung, 2017).

Similarly, Vivian expressed excitement about wearing these accessories – she shares that as she is getting a puppy soon, her husband “*bought the dog collar from HM Moschino collection, so we’re going to look really silly with me and my flip flops and the dog with his little dog collar*”. As Vivian refers to herself as “*looking silly*”, it is believed that she feels proud about wearing her favourite brand and showcasing her unconventional personality. While it can be argued that Vivian’s taste can be observed from perspective of conspicuous consumption (Turunen, 2018) due to her preference for logos and loud items, the present research believes that Vivian’s collection does not correspond to conspicuous taste. Given that one of the primarily motivations for conspicuous consumption is status, Vivian’s narrative suggests that for her fashion is about “*fun and joy of dressing up*”. As she shares later in the interview, fakes to her are not about adding status and she would never pretend that her replicas are “*real deal*”.



Image 2: Vivian's Moschino Collection

These narratives showcase how differently consumers approach their taste in terms of conspicuous consumption. Hybrid Taste appears to be the most unconventional taste among all tastes presented in this research. Given that most of HTCs appear to be in transition stage or consume replica and authentic products concurrently, more profound exploration into Replica Taste is essential.

5.1.3. Replica Taste

The present research observed participants who identified as consumers who engage in non-deceptive counterfeit consumption (Penz and Stottinger, 2005). These consumers are referred to as having Replica Taste (RTC). Further exploration suggests that two forms of Replica Taste can be identified. The first one is described as “popular” due to the nature of replica products consumed. These are usually easily detectable items of poor quality, which in some cases can look far from their authentic version. The second form of Replica Taste can be described as “high-end” as products purchased by these consumers are frequently indistinguishable from their authentic versions. While these two forms of Replica Taste feature contrasting levels of product difference, they have a common similarity when it comes to their consumers. Similar to Holt’s LCCs, Replica Taste Consumers (RTC) devote extraordinary effort to tracking and mimicking the taste of ATC. Overall, the present research identified two sets of consumers, who have expressed Replica Taste – Vova Haulers and RepLadies, who were briefly discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis. While more profound inquiry into their consumption patterns is made in further sections of this thesis, a brief overview of their taste is presented to build a profound understanding of “taste as practice”. Both groups have different “benchmarks” of Authentic Taste that they replicate in their consumption.

While previous research has looked at the influence Instagram celebrities had on the fashion industry (Marroncelli and Braithwaite, 2020), nothing has been said about their impact on consumer tastes and fashion choices. One cluster of consumers (Vova Haulers) studied in this research appears to be the exponential example of how Instagram Influencers impact the taste of their audience. By following reality stars or other Instagram celebrities they are mimicking their taste by all possible means. One of the ways they can emerge themselves in this “hyperreality” is by purchasing counterfeit alternatives for the accessories seen on their favourite Instagram celebrities. These items typically include popular products, some of which were mentioned earlier in this chapter. In-depth inquiry into Vova Hauler’s content suggests that they frequently purchase similar products for their videos as well as consumption. For example, Alice and Ellie purchased similar Moschino T-Shirts and share their excitement in their videos:

The next thing I bought is a Moschino couture t-shirt. This was around £10 and it even comes with the actual tag as well. So, there is a Moschino Couture writing and it has like a police bear on it, it has the couture writing stitched. This is such a good quality and the material is lovely and I love Moschino as a brand. This looks lovely when I wear like Fake Tan because it kind of shows it up a little bit but its absolutely beautiful for £10 I obviously had to buy this because Moschino quality is really really nice and the bear is really cute (Alice Holmes “I found really CHEAP DESIGNER items on Vova”).

The next day I have is a clothing item and it’s just this top. So it’s a Moschino top or fake Moschino top and I really really like this. Other than it is very creased, so it does

need to be like ironed but I'll probably just take it to the wash because I'm not sure whether this type of top can be ironed. Because it's really like soft material. So, it looks like this, it says Moschino and then there's this little teddy bear in a police uniform, I think, or is just a leather jacket and a hat, I don't really know. It's really good and I really like it. I got this in size large because I just wanted it to be a bit oversized and this is not oversized at all. So I'm glad I got a large because God knows what size small or XS will look like. I do really like this. I just hope I can iron it and the print will like somewhat go to normal and straight and not like crinkly (Ellie Victoria "Huge Vova Haul!! Fake designer items for amazing prices!! SHOOK")

Both passages showcase how excited Vova Haulers are about their new purchase. However, even in the case of the same item, a set of difference in taste can be identified. For Alice the brand is crucial – she emphasises Moschino several time as well as shares how she generally loves this brand. While it is unclear whether she ever owned anything authentic from the brand, this behaviour can be an indication of “fake love” (Khandeparkar and Motiani, 2018). In line with existing research, Alice appears to be expressing emotional attachment to Moschino brand which is similar to “brand love”. In Alice’s eyes, Moschino is seen as a brand that can help her to project a higher social status, which results in a positive word of mouth. Alice appears to be very pleased with the product, as can be seen from her mentioning how she is planning to style it. On the contrary, Ellie appears to be more impressed with actual qualities of the garment – sizing, materials, and quality. As she shows the product to her audience, she focuses more on practicality of purchasing this product. This can be attributed to how she comments on the “creasing” of the top, which she hopes would go away after ironing. Given that these loud tops are frequently incorporated by Instagram celebrities

in their outfits, the choice of these product suggest how both Alice and Ellie aspire to acquire similar taste to their aspirational reference group (White and Dahl, 2006).

While most Vova Haulers purchased such accessories as handbags, phone cases and sunglasses, Amber and Lucy decided to go further and buy “Cartier” jewellery (Image 3) – Amber went for the LOVE bracelet, while Lucy chose the LOVE ring. Both products are conspicuous and loud in their nature – they are signature to Cartier brand and are admired by a certain class of consumers. Because of their concept as well as conspicuousness they are increasingly popular among Instagram celebrities, which increases desire of others to own them. Given the high price of these items, it comes at no surprise that Vova Haulers decided to purchase replicas of this jewellery:

This is by far the best thing that I have ever bought from Vova. You guys would have seen me wearing it in the videos, I have had a few dms “omg where is this from”. This is by far the best thing I’ve ever bought. So, this cost me £15.54 which, if you asked me, that’s a bargain. Cartier. I thought I’d go and explore the jewellery side of Vova because I haven’t before and I’m so glad I did. It comes in a bag and everything. It even came with a certificate, it came in a little bag, the box with the screwdriver. If you know Cartier bracelets, you kind of have to screw them on and off to get them on and off. So here we have a bracelet. I love it. I never thought I was kind of bracelet person, but turns out I am. So, actually it says Cartier inside if you guys can see that and it is just stunning. It’s just perfect, the quality is so good, it doesn’t feel cheap at all and I am not about to spend 5 grand on a bracelet. I don’t know how people ... like fine if you’ve got the money, but I just couldn’t bring myself to spending that much on a piece of jewellery. Maybe I’m immature still, maybe one day when I’m a

grown woman I'll want to, but as for now I'm fine wearing this and I just think it's so pretty (Amber Knight "TESTING seriously CHEAP DESIGNER items and I'm SHOOK")



Image 3: Cartier Jewellery

So the next item that I bought is a Cartier ring. These are selling on Vova for 2 pounds. You can get them in gold, rose gold and silver. I picked up the silver one. I cannot tell enough how much bargain this is. I filmed this video in May and its not July and I've worn this so many times, I've slept in it, I've showered in it. My fingers never gone green. Like I don't know. Is this sterling silver, I have no idea but its such a nice ring. I'm mind blown by this. So on the website, a Cartier ring, just like this one is 1580 pounds. That might seem like one pound to some people because they are like rich. But OMG I mean if I was rich I wouldn't really care, I mean I'd rather spend it like on charities and stuff like instead of just a ring. But you know if you have enough money to get both then you do that. Honestly, I don't even know what size I got. Oh my God... Boogie boogie boogie. Honestly that I nice fit. If you got a Cartier ring yourself you will know there is a huge difference probably between this ring and

the one you've got obviously. I think with Cartier products they give you like a screwdriver. I think this is bougie and I'm gonna tell everyone about Cartier. I'm joking. I like it, its quite like a thick chunky ring. I feel like I'm rich. Obviously, after this lockdown I'm gonna be going out and my friends be like "oh my god you've earned so much money during lockdown" (Lucy Ledgeway "Testing Fake Designer Dupes from Vova 2020")

Similar to other Vova Haulers, Amber and Lucy share the excitement about their Cartier purchases with their audience. Ambers draws on product characteristics – she highlights how the packaging kit is complete with screwdriver, certificate, box, and bag. Given that counterfeits do not offer the same aesthetic experience when it comes to their purchase, receiving a “full package” might allow consumers to mimic the feeling of buying the beautifully wrapped product from the store. Similarly, both Amber and Lucy draw on brand prominence of the product (Han et al., 2010). They understand that this product is recognisable by others and due to its price and conspicuousness it is seen as status symbol. Both emphasise high prices of the authentic and Amber shares how she is not going to spend five thousand pounds on a bracelet. Lucy also shares how she is planning to wear it non-stop after lockdown and how she thinks her friends are going to feel jealous that she has such a “bougie ring”, where “bougie” refers to “extravagant, used in relation to conspicuous consumption of the urban upper-middle class” (Urban Dictionary, 2022). Consequently, given that the product is easily identifiable, it can be argued that Vova Haulers purchased it due to its conspicuousness (Chen et al., 2015).

Additionally, it is also interesting how Amber and Lucy draw parallel between owners of fake Cartier (themselves) and those who have authentic Cartier jewellery. For instance, both

refer to these individuals as “rich”, while Lucy also makes a comment about the difference between authentic and replica products by saying “*if you have a Cartier ring yourself*”. At the same time, both Amber and Lucy do not appear to be willing to spend money on authentic products – as can be seen from these two excerpts they would rather spend it on something else. It can be thus established that for them the bracelet and the ring are about depiction of status and self-enhancement rather than about the history or the design of the product. While authentic consumers might purchase it due to its interesting story as well as brand’s heritage, for replica consumers like Vova Haulers it is all about the desired image that brands help them to achieve.

These several passages indicate how Vova Haulers express preference towards popular, conspicuous items that allow them to enhance their social status. As opposed to other consumers presented in this research, who purchase luxury items because of lifestyle fit, Vova Haulers acquire them because of their signalling ability (Han, Nunes and Drèze, 2010). In addition, these narratives suggest how Vova Haulers see their replica purchases as indistinguishable from authentic products (Jiang and Shan, 2018). While the taste of Vova Haulers is discussed in great depth in the Chapter Seven of this thesis, this brief overview indicates that Vova Haulers appear to be the only consumers studied in this research who did not develop their taste but rather borrowed the taste of others. This perspective is supported by the selection of products these consumers purchased – when describing their recent acquisitions, the majority of them often referred to them as “*popular*” items “*that everyone gets*”. As opposed to other consumers studied in the present research, Vova Haulers therefore did not express individualistic taste preferences, instead they have emulated the taste of their aspirational reference groups – various UK and US influencers – with the use of counterfeit products.

The other form of Replica Taste presented here as “high end taste” features consumers, who purchase products that are nearly or indistinguishable from their authentic version. In line with Holt’s LCC, these consumers are mostly prominent to mimicking the taste of the ATC, which is discussed further in Taste Communities section of this chapter as it was mostly visible in the RepLadies forum. Tasha – one of the interview participants – appeared to be a long-time member of RepLadies forum. She is a 23-year-old programmer who works for a company in London. Tasha can be described as “aspirational consumer” (Barnett, 2005; Bekir et., 2011), who purchases replica items with the aim of imitating tastes and lifestyle of elite consumers. Throughout our conversation Tasha described herself as a fashion savvy individual, who likes to shop a lot. For her fashion is about “*self-expression*”, so she is constantly on the run for finding new stylistic decisions. For instance, during the interview Tasha shared how she always liked to dress up “*even for university and things*”:

I work in a company where if you are in the main office here in the financial district in London you are expected to be very dressed up. But because I work in technology, we sit in a completely different office and its completely causal dress, and a lot of people are coming in in jeans and t-shirts. They kind of tell you that from the start that you can dress whatever you want but I’ve noticed it is people who are in their 40s-50s who are very established are very comfortable coming in in a t-shirt everyday. But the ones that just started wanna be taken more seriously and I guess if you dress in a very casual way, you don’t necessarily look like you are very knowledgeable or worth listening to. And a bit of that dressing up kind of helps you to be taken more seriously

In this passage Tasha reflects on dressing in her workplace environment. She shares how important it is for her to look put together even when her colleagues are dressed “*in jeans and t-shirts*”. Despite the liberal regulations on dress – the opportunity to dress casually – Tasha sticks to her own dress-code. She shares how she wants to be treated seriously, which is why she likes to come to work properly dressed. Similar to other RepLadies, Tasha incorporates elements of “classic style” into her wardrobe. She refers to her taste in fashion as “*US style preppy, with a bit of Instagram French*”. Tasha also mentioned how her friends frequently comment on her appearance – for instance she shared that as they went out shopping her friends said to her that she looks like she is “*off to play a round of golf*”.

This reference to golf – a sport that is commonly played by high status individuals – indicates Tasha’s preference for “Old Money Aesthetic”, which has recently become increasingly popular due to TikTok users being fascinated with it. According to Falekos and Morgan (2022), the term old money aesthetics refers to quiet luxury and “*often consists of preppy, monochromatic and covertly luxurious clothing*” (n.a.). Authors distinguish between old money – “*rich people who inherited their wealth, usually from a longline list of ancestors who also inherited it*” – and new money – individuals, who became rich later in life by engaging in various business-like activities – entertainment, real estate, entrepreneurship to name a few (Falekos and Morgan, 2022). As TikTok creators show, “Old Money Aesthetics” features simple yet luxurious clothes from such brands as Ralph Lauren, Loro Piana and Hermès, opposed to flashy and loud Gucci, Phillip Plein and Versace that are commonly associated with new money.

To her friends she is seen as an individual with high level of cultural capital whose choices signal high level of taste (Prieur and Savage, 2013). Tasha’s desire to express sophisticated

taste also translates to her purchases. For instance, she gives preference to unknown items of luxury brands that will not be identified easily by others:

I like items where ... if it gets recognized, it would only be recognized by people who would also be consumers of it. So, you've got a Louis Vuitton bag and most of the time it is so flashy, and everyone knows what that is. Everyone is like "Ok, you are spending about a thousand on a bag". And I think that can lead to a lot of kind of assumption about being irresponsible with money and things like that

Here Tasha shares how important it is for her to buy products that are only recognized by a certain group of consumers – those who have a similar level of cultural capital. This shows how Tasha chooses products that would make her part of her “*aspirational reference group*” (White and Dahl, 2006). She is not interested in buying conspicuous products that only indicate how much money the wearer had spent on them. Instead, she looks for the products that will allow her to articulate her sophisticated taste and become part of her desired reference group. Tasha's collection did not feature popular products, instead these were rather inconspicuous and complemented Tasha's style and taste well (Image 4).



Image 4: Tasha's Collection of Replica Shoes

One of the ways which allows Tasha to achieve her “*Hamptons beach kind of look*” is through consumption of replica products. Her collection features a wide selection of replica products, ranging from mass market to luxury brands. She shares how during her university time she did an exchange year in Hong Kong, which resulted in liberal views of counterfeits. As she remembers that period, she reflects how the products she was exposed to were of high quality and “*some of them you’d never assume are fake*”. Consequently, this experience had led to Tasha being a frequent consumer of replica products. Living in the UK she still orders her stuff from China – through TaoBao or WeChat – with the latter one allowing her access to factories that offer the top quality. Tasha shares how she spends a lot of time on RepLadies forum – reading reviews and looking at what others buy – she explains that it helps her to ensure that she get the best possible fakes.

Tasha is not open about wearing counterfeits to those around her. However, opposed to findings in previous research (Chen et al., 2014; Shan, Jiang, and Cui, 2021), she is not afraid of losing her face. Tasha explains that she has a strategy for which products to purchase that

allows her to avoid being identified as replica consumer. For instance, she explains that she avoids purchasing very popular products, which ties in with Tasha's consumption patterns discussed above:

I think I stay away from really really popular designs, just because they are really popular. Whereas if it's a lesser known bag, I kind of rely on every other cue I get of in terms of who I am and kind of buying brands that are within my price range. So no one would have any reason to think that I have a fake bag. I guess if I was with a 3000 pound Chanel it would be more dubious. Or well, because I do have friends who wear Chanel, maybe more like and Hermès bag – that would be suspicious. But for a little Chloe, Mulberry – its what a lot of people in my age range and my job would wear. So, I think no one really assumes.

The passage above shows the strategy that Tasha adopts to make her fake purchases “believable”. She shares that her key tactic is to purchase products that are within her price range – she refers to such expensive brands like Chanel and Hermès by saying that it will be suspicious if she bought them. As a result, Tasha avoids purchasing popular products as they can be easily recognised by others. Instead, she chooses inconspicuous replicas and gives preference to brands, which she can easily purchase authentic. This allows Tasha to guide her taste towards “aspirational reference groups”, save money and at the same time to not be afraid of losing her face with replica products. The image below showcases Tasha's current replica handbags collection (Image 5) – these are rather subtle, and it will be difficult for the majority of consumers to identify them not only as replica, but as designer overall. None of them feature flashy logos and none of them are easily recognisable conspicuous models. Rather this collection reflects possessions that someone with Tasha's status can have.



Image 5: Tasha's Collection of Replica Bags

Consequently, Tasha is not afraid of taking her replicas possessions into the “wild”. As can be seen from her consumer narrative, she feels quite confident with how she expresses her taste. For instance, one of her possessions – a Saint Laurent bag – is used regularly for work:

This one is my main work one and its incredibly plain and I feel like it's nice enough that when people come and look they will be like 'you put some effort to this, you are not kind of showing to work with a backpack' and it's something that people of my age will be like 'that's a fair first real adult bag'. But my older co-workers will look at it and I don't think they will recognise 'Saint Laurent' the way they would maybe if it was something cheaper. In some days I feel like my 40-50-year-old co-workers judge me for wasting money

The Saint Laurent bag, like many of other Tasha's “luxury possessions” appeared to be fake. During the interview, Tasha frequently mentioned having a collection of designer items. However, over the course of the interview it appeared that all her luxury products are fake, with the majority being acquired after she joined RepLadies forum. It is interesting how

Tasha refers to her Saint Laurent bag as the “*first real adult bag*”, which makes it clear that for her it is a valuable possession that helps her to create her signature work outfit.

Potentially, Tasha sees it like that due to the nature of the bag itself – it is plain black structured tote bag that can fit all the essentials. There is nothing on it except for the tiny “Saint Laurent” logo, but one needs to have enough capital to identify it as a designer product (Berger and Ward, 2010). Opposed to other RepLadies, who frequently avoided wearing their designer products to work, Tasha sees this as effort put in as opposed to “showing to work with backpack”. This showcases how Tasha adapts “classic style” or a taste of ATC. Despite working in an industry where hoodies and t-shirts are norm, Tasha wants to portray an image of someone who made it well in life. As a result, she relies on luxury brands to communicate a desired identity to others while deemphasising the need to signal status (Halwani, 2021). Tasha’s consumer narrative provides an introduction into a more profound inquiry in RepLadies taste, which is discussed further in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

5.2. Taste as Judgement

Expressing what taste means can be a tricky and challenging task to perform – not only due to its subjectivity, but also, potentially, because individuals might not think about it in great depth. Taste judgements, on the contrary, are opinions that are shared everyday – either silently in our head, to our friends or on social media. During the interviews, on the forum and in YouTube videos, consumers expressed a great variety of consumer judgements on various aesthetic objects – a handbag, a trend, an outfit, or even their own style. While the majority of these are direct, others are more discreet. Observation of these judgments allows us to build deeper understanding of consumers’ interpretations of “good” and “poor” taste.

According to Bourdieu (1984) aesthetic judgements reflect and reproduce class position of an individual. Consumers are socially predisposed to make certain judgments and these preferences and tastes therefore signal their distinction – or lack thereof – within the class system. For example, certain class of consumers (those with HCC) might say that the popular item is no longer desirable within their class due to its mass popularisation and, when making a taste judgment, they will describe it as something that should be avoided because it is owned by many individuals. On the contrary, LCC consumers might see this product as a “dream object” as for them the popularity of products adds desirability. For example, Nicola, an ATC, shares how she used to buy “popular items” in the past, but she stopped because they became overly appropriated:

I have bought things that were extremely popular. The Gucci belt is probably the biggest example for me that I have bought, but also, I don't have Soho Disco because I don't want to have what everyone else has got. So, I do a bit of both. Like I do like some bits, but I wouldn't buy Louis Vuitton Multi Pochette, for instance, I don't like them. I think they are not to my taste at all. I am nice to some things because I do like them while the really popular things are not for my taste

Here Nicola reflects on her experience with products, which she calls “*extremely popular*”.

In this case it implies accessories and clothes that are massively purchased by fashionistas around the globe, which leads to them being recognizable even to ordinary consumers.

However, it is interesting how Nicola remains selective about “popular purchases” – for example she shares that she purchased a Gucci belt – a very popular item among luxury fashion consumers for the past several years – however she avoided the Gucci Soho Disco bag as in her opinion “everyone has it”. This may indicate how Nicola wants to differentiate

or, in extreme, distance herself from dissociative reference groups (White and Dahl, 2006). In line with previous research (Hammerl, Dorner, Foscht, and Brandstätter, 2016) Nicola therefore makes her purchases based on what reference groups she aspires to be part of (aspirational groups) as well as what groups she would like to avoid (dissociative reference groups).

Further observation indicates that Nicolas' avoidance of the Gucci belt is not surprising, since this particular "luxury object" was extremely popular among Vova Haulers, who frequently showcased the fake Gucci belt in their hauls. Some of the YouTubers fancied the item so much, that they even purchased it in multiple colours and variations. In line with other popular products, such as Louis Vuitton handbags and Calvin Klein sets, the belt has appeared in nearly every video with haulers sharing the excitement about the purchase with their audience:

"I got a Gucci belt as well. It's quite small, but it's cute, it's leather. It's the smallish one, it's really nice. I can't show you normally as I have to figure out how to put it on"

(Katy Rebecca "Designer Haul (Fake) Gucci for £3!!")

"Oh yeah, I'm in the Gucci Gang! Kind of, because its fake, but who doesn't love a fake Gucci belt? Guess what? Its actually got both Gs. Some of them are like CGs and they really aren't good fakes, but this is pretty good"

(Emxfmm "FAKE DESIGNER ITEMS HAUL?! Super Cheap VOVA HAUL")

“So, the next thing I got was something actually repeated from my last Vova video and I have already bought one of these, but I just thought I didn’t really like it. I wasn’t impressed with it, so I thought I’d just buy another one and actually get the one I wanted in the first place. I got myself another Gucci belt. Now this is the one that I wanted at the first time around ... I’ve worn it already and it did it’s job”

(Ellie Victoria “FAKE Designer Items Haul?! Really Cheap!! YSL Bag for £20”)

These several quotes portray Vova Haulers’ excitement about buying a fake Gucci belt. It is intriguing how three different persons speak about one product. For instance, Katy Rebecca reflects on how she is yet to figure out how to wear it, while highlighting that it is “leather”, which for her potentially implies the longevity of wearing it. Emxfmm appears to be the most excited about the belt – she even makes the reference to pop culture with her “Gucci Gang” saying. It is interesting how she draws on the Gucci logo in the belt – she is actually very happy that the logo is made in the correct way, which allows her to potentially get away with it being faked and be perceived as real by those, who see her wearing it. Finally, Ellie Victoria has decided to repeat her purchase as she was not really satisfied with how her previous belt turned out – it is always a gamble when it comes to purchasing counterfeit products. Overall, these three quotes indicate the importance of fake Gucci belts to certain class of consumers, who are outside of the circle of regular luxury shoppers. Opposed to Nicola, who sees individuals wearing these popular products as negative reference groups she wishes to avoid, for Vova Haulers these consumers work as an aspirational group (Hammerl, Dorner, Foscht, and Brandstätter, 2016) – by all means they want to be a part of it.

Consequently, the quotes above indicate that Nicola’s decision to not wear a Gucci belt can be explained by the fact that it is adopted by “wrong” types of individuals (Berger and Heath,

2007). Given that consumers signal their taste through the adoption of certain items, it is crucial for them to be associated with right group of individuals. If certain taste is adopted only by “insiders”, these signals are communicated in the right way, however as soon as this taste is adopted by the “outsiders” as in the case of Gucci belt and Vova Haulers, signals change and they no longer provide their original meaning. As a result, these products start to attain negative meanings. Similar to how Nicola used to wear a belt but as it became overly popular and heavily replicated, Nicola no longer feels like this belt enhances the identity she wants to showcase. Therefore, she decided not to wear it often or even remove it from her collection in the future to not associate herself with the “*wrong group*”. This signals how Nicola diverts herself from certain social groups in order to avoid communicating undesired identities (Berger and Heath, 2007).

A similar pattern of behaviour was explored in two other consumer narratives, where Sasha and Michelle have shared how they stopped wearing Michael Kors products:

As for Michael Kors bags ... You know, when they first came out there was a big trend when every girl wanted a Michael Kors bag, Michael Kors watches, Michael Kors purses. And at that period in life when it came out it was just too much for me. Everyone's got them and it makes it less interesting. Louis Vuitton sometimes can be quite vintage, they've got quite vintage bags, they have been around for years so that's why I kind of like them. And they are not ... there wasn't a phase where everyone was kind of getting them, it was maybe like years ago, but with Michael Kors its like a constant ... like a girls dream that her boyfriend buys her a Michael Kors bag or, you know, if she's got one like ... for me that's like no. I don't like that. So, that's kind of puts me off. I want something that is rare, that not everyone's got.

Like if it is not branded then I'm gonna go for it. Or if it's a brand, it is not the same style as everyone is going for. (Sasha, 24)

So, I had this one Michael Kors ... It's a typical one. Not like the big tote bag, but the smaller one. And for some reason I bought it in pink, like neon pink. I don't really know where I wore it, maybe like during the weekend, but it was so scratched as it's made of some weird canvas and looks plastic. So, it looked like that after wearing it for a while and then when I was around it did not look super nice and put together. So, I had a constant feeling of like people are going to think it's fake. And that's really not a problem, as I said there is a chance I have one, but I just don't want to be part of people who probably have fakes. (Michelle, 26)

Both quotes indicate how consumers perform brand resistance to Michael Kors. Sasha reflects on how Michael Kors used to be “a big trend” with female consumers being obsessed with owning a range of Michael Kors products. For her, this popularity of the brand made it “less interesting” – this indicates how important it is for certain consumers to acquire products that are not overly-popular as it allows them to be unique and differentiate from others. She then draws a parallel between two brands – Michael Kors and Louis Vuitton – and mentions that although Louis Vuitton bags are quite popular as well, she did not see a “phase” when everyone suddenly started buying them. This can be explained by the fact that Michael Kors has a more affordable price point as compared to Louis Vuitton, as well as it is targeted and advertised to a relatively younger audience than Louis Vuitton products. As Sasha contemplates about her experience with Michael Kors, she concludes that she prefers to buy rare products that are unique and not purchased by others. Similarly, she explains that if she is ever to buy from Michael Kors, she would buy a product with no visible logo or

something that is not typical to the brand. This suggests that while others purchase this brand directly for the signals their logo has, some consumers tend to avoid them as in their mind they do not hold positive value (Han et al., 2010).

On the other hand, Michelle shares how she used to have a “*typical*” Michael Kors bag. As she reflects on material substances (Ferreira and Scaraboto, 2016) of the bags, she describes it as a “*neon pink*”, “*scratched*” and “*made of some weird canvas*” that looks like “*plastic*”. Because of this she was constantly in fear that others might see it as “fake”.

However, it is interesting how Michelle shares that she does not have the problem with the bag being perceived as fake, because she thinks that there is a chance that some of her handbags may be fake. During the interview she shared how she bought a Longchamp bag on resale and currently she is not sure whether the bag is authentic or fake. Hence, she has a rather “liberal” opinion on counterfeit products, which is highlighted in this passage.

Nevertheless, despite these beliefs, she still explains how she does not want to be a part of the group that wears fakes. This fear of being associated with negative reference groups (Hammerl, Dorner, Foscht, and Brandstätter, 2016) inclined Michelle to purchase only subtle and niche brands as she believes that over-popularity of certain products may result in them being perceived as fakes by others.

Both quotes highlight how Sasha and Michelle express brand resistance towards Michael Kors. Similar to Nicola this resistance is partially related to the product being adopted by a wrong group as well as the brand becoming “inauthentic” due to the widespread of counterfeits (Lee, Motion and Conroy, 2008). As a result, Sasha and Michelle, who are very attentive to their appearance and identity, do not want to be recognised as part of the group that favours this particular brand due to a belief that it can ruin their identity as well as

damage their position in the society. This perspective provides an opposite view on Michael Kors consumption, since existing research mostly connected this brand to the concept of brand love (Rodrigues and Rodrigues, 2019).

Other consumer taste judgments were situated around individual opinions on the taste of others. Consumers are generally very generous when it comes to providing opinions on those around them particularly when it relates to activities where they see themselves as “experts”. Participants in the present research too provided a vast collection of opinions on taste or distaste of others. This has provoked inquiry into the debate around “good” and “poor” taste, which in consumer behaviour research traditionally centres around subjectivity and figuring out “*whether ordinary consumers (non-experts or members of the mass audience) have good taste*” (Holbrook, 2005:75). This subjectivity is described through taste being related to individuals’ sense of aesthetic. Given that most of individuals in the present research are counted as “ordinary consumers” – they have not disclosed themselves as part of the fashion system (Debenedetti and Larceneux, F, 2011) – this exploration centres around opinions of one set of “ordinary consumers”.

In this domain, RepLadies have been generous with their judgements due to the nature of the forum. These judgements were observed on regular threads such as OOTD (Outfit Of The Day) as well as featured separate threads under Discussion. Identifying replicas as well as discussing those who wear them appears to be one of the most popular topics on RepLadies. For instance, recent discussion focused on “Influencers who wear reps”, which may be explained by the fact that frequently influencers are presenting an “unrealistic” lifestyle in terms of their consumption. While having numerous designer purchases can be reasonable for those with millions of followers due to their work with luxury brands, seeing other, not so

established, influencers showcasing new designer bags every single day hints at “unrealistic” consumption and makes consumers question the authenticity of items:

Honestly, I think a lot of influencers and bloggers have reps but don't tell anyone. They all have so many designer bags it's almost not believable. Even the ones with smaller followings seem to have a million chanel bags

So many UK influencers are tagging reps as fakes at the moment – BubblyAquarius has just started stunting all these designer bags when last year she was saying how she saved over a year for a pair of Chanel boots Now she's got countless Chanel bags, shoes, other designer clothes ... it's hilarious no one seems to question it that follows her. She's going down the 'start with fakes to look successful in hopes of gaining attention of real brands for free shit' route. It's just so disingenuous. I wouldn't dream of saying something is real when it isn't, mostly because I'm not dumb enough to pay a 1000% mark up for the sake of a name though!

I really don't think they can afford them either. There's an Australian influencer who claims to have spent at least \$200,000 at Hermes but she also films vlogs of her life and based on the state of their house, kids rooms etc and I genuinely hope she is lying and just buys reps because there are so many other things in her life that \$200,000 could (and should) have been spent on

Chiara Ferragni used to wear reps when she started, the irony – since she's the biggest out there now

I wonder how many of them are on this thread right now hoping their names aren't in the comments

These excerpts from RepLadies discussion show how unconvinced consumers are when it comes to influencers and their lifestyle and purchases. For instance, RepLadies draw on such situations when the “luxury collection” did not match the environment of the wearer – the house, the lifestyle, the narrative. This suggests that the image that bloggers present on social media, does not correspond their reality. Consequently, such observations lead to consumers perceiving bloggers as inauthentic (Silver, Newman, and Small, 2021). RepLadies discuss how influencers’ narratives are not consistent. Being aware of prices, availability, and rarity of certain items, it is difficult for them to believe that some bloggers have only authentic luxury items in their collection. Observation of this thread suggests that this does not depend on number of followers, for instance one of the RepLadies refers to Chiara Ferragni – the most famous fashion influencer – who started her blog with wearing fakes. Another RepLady shares that some influencers followed a similar strategy in order to capture the attention of luxury brands. While RepLadies question whether some of their favourite bloggers are members of RepLadies forum, it can be established that many influencers lost their authenticity in their eyes not because they are potentially wearing fakes, but because they are pretending that these are authentic.

Interview participants too frequently expressed taste judgements about others. Several discussions centred around perceptions of whether others were wearing fakes. For instance, Rebecca shared how one of her school friends, who had a high level of economic capital, decided to wear replica shoes to a party:

One of my friends, she was studying in my school, she actually has a lot of real designer items, and I won't say that I would expect from her to wear something fake, but during one of the parties she decided to go with shoes that look like Valentino. From the front, if you look at them, you will think that they are real, but if you look close enough, you know it's a total fake. Because the quality and the type of shoes that she was wearing, I don't think Valentino would sell it. You can see from even far away, the glue parts of them, how the heel was glued and the texture. It doesn't make her look bad, it just proves that sometimes even people with money can have poor taste and make poor decisions. Maybe she was not really comfortable in wearing real Valentino shoes to some small school party as she was scared of ruining them. And she decided that she cannot lose the status of the girl, who has everything designer.

Similarly, Nicola shared an observation of a man she saw in a hotel in London:

I was in London two weeks ago and a man in the lobby was standing next to me and he had a Gucci shirt on, he had Gucci trainers, he had Gucci bag and I thought it was just too much. Like he needed people to know that he was wearing head to toe Gucci, which to me is bad taste.

Both passages include reflections on “poor” taste. While all the individuals described appear to have high economic capital, their taste indicates lower cultural capital. While Nicola is not sure whether the man was wearing real or fake Gucci products, she explained that it did look suspicious and “too much”. As Rebecca and Nicola elaborate on their observations, they share that these individuals should have chosen some more subtle and not as popular and

labelled. While they understand that they wanted to show themselves as stylish and “*having money*”, they have achieved quite the opposite. Consequently, these observations introduce a new type of consumer. While previous literature has mostly looked at the consumers who have higher levels of cultural capital and lower levels of economic capital (Chen and Nelson, 2020), these examples provide an opposite perspective as they introduce consumers with high economic capital and lower cultural capital. As this observation is outside of the present research scope, further inquiry into this class of consumers would be intriguing.

Generally, participants associated “good” taste with minimalism, subtle colours, avoidance of prints and brand logos. Consumer discussions usually positioned “good” taste in line with “classic style” or outfits “*French people wear*”:

So, things like, you don't wear more than two colours in one outfit, sometimes three, but the third one has to be black and something that goes with those. To me good taste says styled well. So, when they look at you and everything looks just so well put together, but you can't pinpoint what it is because everything goes together rather than, Oh My God, a massive Gucci logo across your chest

This quote from Amelie's interview sums up participants understanding of “good taste” well. Here she talks about crafting the “*good taste outfit*” with the reference to colour combinations. As an HTC, Amelie expressed similar taste choices to the ATCs, however her possessions appeared to be much more conspicuous. With the reference to “good taste” Amelie again draws on the combination of items that can be called “classic style”. It is interesting how she mentions that the outfit is styled well, but it is difficult to say what exactly makes it “good taste”. Having a balance in clothes as well as accessories therefore

helps consumers to showcase their cultural and symbolic capital, without indicating how much money they have spent.

Drawing from Amelie's quote, one of the dominant discussions on "good" and "bad" taste of others was centred around the use of brand logos. Generally, all participants apart from Vivian expressed negativity towards high logo visibility in clothes and accessories. These were commonly associated with having "bad" taste even by Vivian, who expressed preference for loud items. Literature relates logos to conspicuousness and conspicuous consumption at the core of which is the desire to showcase one's status (Turunen, 2018). Consequently, high brand prominence is frequently connected to the desire to show off through distinction from others in their circle (Charles et al., 2009). Esme shares that to her logos are "not good taste":

Personally, I don't like when people have branded labels everywhere. Like if you've got a Juicy tracksuit, or if you have Dior bag that says Dior everywhere. I am not a fan of that, I think it looks a bit cheap and tacky.

Here Esme shares that to her logos signal tackiness and fakes. During the interview she shared that if she saw someone dressed head to toe in logos, she would automatically assume that all products are fake. A majority of participants shared a similar viewpoint to Esme, they tried not to purchase products with logos to not be perceived as "fake wearers". For instance, Amelie spoke about her collection of handbags, she shared that she tries to avoid brand logos. She mentioned that she is very frustrated with Christian Dior because they started to put their logo on every product:

I'm so frustrated with Dior these days ... how they just put Christian Dior on every single thing and that really annoys me. So yeah, I really dislike logomania going on at the moment. To me, a bag has just to be ... it has to look good. It's got to be, you know, made of beautiful leather, shiny leather and have very zero logo on it or something very subtle like a small Chanel CC, that's fine.

Similarly, Amelie refers to other designer products that feature large logos. She says that it is “very cringy” because others around you will know that “she’s got a Saint Laurent bag”. This conversation with Amelie therefore highlights how products can have different levels of conspicuousness and how style with high level of brand prominence will be frequently seen as “tacky”. It is interesting how Amelie draws parallels between “bad” taste handbags and “good” taste handbags – in the first case she draws on loudness, while in the second she refers to the touch and feel of leather, subtle logos, and quietness. As a result, it can be established that for Amelie “poor” taste in consumption implies loud, attention and status seeking choices. This viewpoint on logos was supported by Sasha, who interpreted logos as a sign of “showing off”, which to her indicates “poor taste”:

I probably say that's bad taste. Simply for the fact that if someone wears all designer stuff, to me its just someone who wants to show off. You know, it doesn't matter how much money you have got, you know, you can still get normal reasonably priced stuff. Like for myself, I earn a good wage, I earn good money, but I still go to Primark. Someone likes to be flashy, but not in a good way. Not in a stylish way. If you get friends like, maybe a guy, who makes a lot of money and he wants to show off with his watches, his trainers, his jackets, but he is being flashy about it. I'm not keen on that, because it is more about them showing how much money they have.

The individuals Sasha is referring to are described by Mason (2001) as purely conspicuous consumers who derive satisfaction from the audience reaction to the wealth they display – the watches, the trainers and logo t-shirts. These products can be thus seen as tools used for impression management, when individuals want others to believe that they have high social position. Consequently, inquiry into taste as judgement allowed a deeper understanding of consumer interpretations of taste as well as started a discussion on what they see as “good” and “poor” taste.

5.3. Conclusion of “Understanding Taste”

The first findings section has attempted to provide an understanding of modern taste through exploring it as practice and as judgement. Participants in the present research saw taste as highly subjective and therefore experienced difficulty with explaining what it means for them. Therefore, inquiry into taste through practice and judgement allowed to build an in-depth review of what constitutes taste to modern day consumers.

Exploration of “taste as practice” resulted in emergence of three types of tastes – Authentic Taste, Hybrid Taste, and Replica Taste. Observation of Authentic Taste showcased consumer preference for “classic style” and inconspicuous luxury. ATCs have utilised “luxury products” as part of their lifestyle rather than as a status symbol. As a result, they have expressed preference towards niche and subtle products that are not very well-known in the fashion community. By choosing discreet luxury they were able to differentiate themselves from other consumers, specifically HTC and RTC. These findings are consistent with the emergent body of literature on inconspicuous consumption (Makkar and Yap, 2018; Wu et

al., 2017). These findings extend the literature on inconspicuous consumption by adding more context to how individuals can express their taste to modern luxury offerings. Whereas previous literature has mostly looked at branding of products and its relevance to inconspicuous consumption, the present research extends that literature by establishing that consumers might not only prefer subtle products from loud brands, but they also might consume niche and unpopular brands to signal their status.

Observation of Hybrid Taste allows observation of how individuals express their taste by consuming authentic and counterfeit products concurrently. HTC consumers can be described as omnivores (Ehrnrooth and Gronroos, 2013), who engage in activities similar to hybrid consumption. It also appears that Hybrid Taste Consumers are prone to consume conspicuous products – this can be explained by the fact that they appear to be in transition stage of their consumption. Hybrid Taste was also explored among RepLadies, some of which consume authentic and replica products concurrently. Whereas previous research has looked solely either on consumers of authentic luxury or on consumers of counterfeit products (Geiger-Oneto et al., 2013), Hybrid Taste extends that literature by presenting a third type of consumer in this environment.

Finally, observation of Replica Taste allowed a profound inquiry in taste emulation. In line with Holt (1998) this research argues that Replica Taste Consumers devote extraordinary effort to mimic the tastes of Authentic Taste Consumers. In-depth inquiry into RT showcased that replica consumers express two types of taste – “popular” and “high end”. The first one was explored among Vova Haulers, who tracked and emulated the taste of popular UK and US influencers by choosing similar styles to those worn on their Instagram profiles. Consumers, who mostly appeared to be RepLadies, expressed “high end” taste and were

preoccupied with mimicking the taste of Authentic Taste Consumers presented in this research. They have expressed similar preferences, draw on “classic style” products as well as adopted “inconspicuous consumption” strategy. While the first group of consumers purchased mostly popular “designer” replica items due to its conspicuousness (Bian, Haque, and Smith, 2015), the second group purchased the products mostly to make them part of their lifestyle fit similar to ATCs. These finds extend the literature on “taste emulation”, “conspicuous consumption” and “inconspicuous consumption”. They show how consumers with different levels of cultural capital navigate replica marketplace offerings and how they incorporate this taste in their identities. Further inquiry into Replica Taste Consumers is made in the Taste Communities section of this thesis.

Observation of “taste as judgement” primarily focused on opinions that individuals express about objects as well as others. This connected taste to such concepts as “conspicuous consumption”, “inconspicuous consumption”, “brand prominence”, and “cultural capital” which were discussed in the literature review chapter of this thesis. Additionally, “taste as judgement” allowed observation of consumers relationship with reference groups as well as how their taste helps them to navigate this complex environment. As a result, it was established that participants connected tastes of ATC’s to “good taste”, while the use of loud logos was seen as an indicator of “bad taste”. Participants shared that they would avoid wearing certain products that were appropriated by “negative reference groups” to disassociate themselves as well as to not be seen as “fake wearers”. In line with existing research (Lee, Fernandez, and Hyman, 2009), consumers appear to develop brand hate towards products that are incorporated by “negative reference groups”. As a result, they are trying to give preference to other products and types of consumption to differentiate themselves. Finally, this section introduced consumers who appear to have high economic

capital but low cultural capital, which provides a contrasting perspective to what was covered in previous research.

Overall, this section shows that consumer tastes are dynamic, therefore more profound inquiry into how these are cultivated and developed is essential.

Chapter Six: Taste Curation and Taste Development

6.0. Introduction

The previous findings section has shown that consumer taste is dynamic as well as consumers' perceptions about consumption choices they make. Literature suggests that certain consumers are prone to constantly engage in activities that would help them to acquire more aesthetic knowledge in the field of their interest (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). To understand how taste is continuously exercised, further exploration of related practices is necessary. This study identified two dimensions of continuous taste exercise – “taste curation” and “taste development”. Each of them features a set of practices that help consumers to cultivate their taste.

6.1. Taste Curation

To fully understanding the meaning behind the concept of “taste curation” a quick overview of “curation” itself is required. O’Neill (2007) refers to “*the curatorial turn*” in 1980s that forged the development of current curatorial practices. Curation therefore can be defined as “*an art of selection, refinement and arrangement to add value*” (Bhaskar, 2016:8). It involves such activities as acquisition, preservation, use/display, and interpretation, which are commonly referred to as “*curatorial practices*” (Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung, 2017:220). While curation has received extensive consideration in relation to collections and museums (Lubar, 2017), its relationship to consumption is rather limited. Several studies within consumer research have used “*curation*” to describe consumers’ relationship with their possessions (Woodward and Greasley, 2017; Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung, 2017;

Abdelrahman, Banister and Hamson, 2020). Research frequently refers to this behaviour as “curatorial consumption”. Coined by McCracken (1988:49) it implies “*a pattern of consumption in which individual treats his or her possessions as having strong mnemonic value and entertains a sense of responsibility to these possessions that enjoys their conservation, display, and safe transmission*”.

Curatorial consumption was mostly studied in relation to “*family heirlooms*” which allows us to emphasize the process of “*safe transmission*”. McCracken (1990) draws on established practices of curation, including preservation and display of the object, to develop an account of the “curatorial consumer” who is preoccupied with a sense of responsibility towards “family heirlooms”. Recently, this theoretical perspective was extended beyond “*family heirlooms*”, which resulted in the emergence of a new stream of literature connecting curation and consumption. As a result, curation has been connected to such fields as fashion (Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung, 2017; Woodward and Greasley, 2017), food (Joosse and Hracs, 2015), music (Jansson and Hracs, 2018) and digital (Davis, 2016) to name a few.

This study proposes that similar to “*curatorial consumption*” individuals can curate their taste. To my knowledge, the concept of “taste curation” has not been used in literature, however a number of studies describe practices that would classify as “taste curation”. These include curation of home through taste regimes (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Choi-Johansson and Cassinger, 2018), curation of lifestyle (Bean, Khorramian and O’Donnell, 2018), and curation of personal style (Dolbec and Maciel, 2018). This research defines taste curation as the practice of selection, refinement, and organization with the goal of enhancement of aesthetic identity. Individuals, who engage in taste curation, interpret, translate, and shape the marketplace by organizing and evaluating their values (Joosse and Hracs, 2015). Taste

curation does not only help them to engage in guardship of their current possessions, but also makes their taste more refined when it comes to their future acquisitions. This research established that similar to curation in art spaces, taste curation involves a set of elements that help consumers generate meaning. These elements include objects, space, and doings. The next sections feature a more profound inquiry into these, which helps to build a conceptual understanding of “taste curation”.

6.1.1. Objects

Literature emphasises that objects frequently become central to consumer practices, having sufficient impact on consumer identity and experiences (Ferreira and Scaraboto, 2016). These set of objects can be referred to as “collections”. While Belk (1995) suggests that collections imply deliberately curated groups of special items that are often separated from everyday acts of consumption, the present study in line with Woodward and Greasley (2017) suggests that certain collections can imply everyday consumption and looking at them from this perspective would allow us to widen our understanding beyond the “*enactment or cessation of social practices*” (Woodward and Greasley, 2017:660).

Particularly, in the context of this study, objects refer to accessories – handbags and shoes – that are seen by participants as everyday luxuries. Given that these objects are referred to by participants as “collections”, it is suggested that they all engage in collecting – “*a special type of consumption*” (Belk, 1995:65). Objects of these collections, including shoes, handbags, and clothes, are utilised for their intended functional purpose, while at the same time being cherished as a valuable part of a collection. Discourses in the present study highlight a similarity between both consumers of authentic and fake luxury products in terms

of how they approach these objects – curate them, plan them and display. Fake or real – they are as cherished as the most valuable heirlooms. Peeking at collections allows us to see how consumers grow in terms of their purchases – as their cultural and economic capital increases, they can afford products of better quality, higher price or generally more of them.

Understanding how consumers start their collections allows understanding of what meanings they attach to their possessions.

Collections are dynamic – they feature things that were passed down for generations, owned for years, recent acquisitions as well as ordinary objects that are used and those that are only displayed (Woodward and Greasley, 2017). The RepLadies forum, particularly, features a variety of threads dedicated to “*collections*”. Here members ask others to post images of their collection, share how these collections started as well as elaborate on their “collecting” practices. This allows them to “*extend the reach of their collection*” by virtually displaying it to other consumers (Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung, 2017: 229). These rich narratives therefore offer an “inside look” in the RepLadies wardrobes – observation of how consumers speak and care about their possessions allows to build a profound understanding of how they curate their taste. For instance, when reflecting on how their collection started, RepLadies frequently mention “family heirlooms” – handbags passed from mother to daughter:

Though she denies it, my mom is a socialite somewhere in Southeast Asia. I was introduced to luxury handbags pretty early on (13-14 years of age), but never really liked the attention they brought until I graduated from college and started working. I got a lot of hands-me-downs from my mom and my sister: Prada Galleria (that I ended up using as a work bag or to go to job interviews LOL), Chanel 2.5 reissue,

Hermes Lindy and Balenciaga City in purple (the only one I used to death, the rest just seemed ?old? at the time) to name a few.

(milkteabae)

In this passage, milkteabae shares how her socialite mother introduced her to the world of handbags. She reflects that while she was introduced to them relatively early, she did not like the attention they brought until she started working. She then mentions that she has received a lot of “*hands-me-down*” handbags from her mother and sister. The bags that milkteabae refers to are mostly classic in their nature and feature the items desired by many fashionistas – such as Chanel 2.5 Reissue and Prada Galleria. Given that these objects hold significant value, they are passed down to others to ensure their preservation (Abdelrahman, Banister, and Hampson, 2020). Opposed to being traditional “family heirlooms” such as antiques and furniture that are placed in one’s house or are carefully displayed, these handbags are taken out to be seen in the world. Whereas there might be not as much historical value as in the traditional sense of curatorial consumption of “family heirlooms”, these possessions are still valuable to milkteabae given the sentimental value they hold.

While other forum members did not mention inheriting handbags from their family members, they have shared how their mothers inclined them to start their collection by buying them designer handbags:

My mom started off my collection when I was 14 with a Coach bag. We had matching bags in different sizes. She had a medium one and I had a smaller one. I was hooked onto Coach for a couple of years and spent my allowance and birthday money on Coach SLGs. 2 years later she gifted me a DE Speedy 25 after I debated between that,

a Neverfull, and an Alma. I continued to build my collection with my part time job with MK, Coach, Kate Spade and Ted Baker bags.

(PalePinkCamellias)

My mom and I were on vacation in Italy, and we popped into Louis Vuitton on a whim...where we discovered it was so much cheaper there than the US! And had a VAT refund!! She bought me the papillon 30 as a special gift...and I've been hooked ever since. I've been a full bag lady since. I buy them to reward myself for crushing promotions or projects at work and have gone nuts at the luxury outlets near Florence doing so. I always buy myself a special treat when I'm abroad in the EU - a YSL fanny pack on my baby moon, a Chanel jumbo classic flap with gold hardware when I graduated business school, a Prada double zip saffiano tote when I got my first promotion out of b school...too many to count.

(Blazingfatboy)

In these narratives forum members reflect on how their mothers influenced their taste in handbags. Literature sees mothers as playing significant role in terms of children's "consumption-related skills, knowledge and attitudes" (Ward, 1974:1) by being responsible for their appearance and clothes from early days. Both PalePinkCamellias and Blazingfatboy reflect on shopping trips with their mothers to high end fashion stores. The phenomenon of mothers and daughters shopping together for clothes was well portrayed in popular culture as well as academic literature (Klepp and Storm Mathisen, 2005; Gavish, Shoham and Ruvio, 2010; Appleford, 2014). By engaging in common fashion consumption and practices related to it, daughters fashion habits are influenced by their mothers. These habits therefore can become part of their everyday consumption in the future as can be seen from Blazingfatboy's

story. Here she reflects on how on their trip to Italy her mother bought her a Louis Vuitton Papillon 30 handbag as a special gift. She then reflects how she likes to reward herself for accomplishments with handbags. This indicates that her mother “*passed on*” (Appleford, 2014:155) her fashion habit to her and Blazingfatboy therefore purchases handbags as reward for various accomplishments. As a result, she follows similar pattern to her mother, for instance buys a handbag every time she is in Europe.

Following Appleford (2014) this research thus argues that mothers who share similar fashion taste with their daughters and engage in fashion consumption practices together, are seen to be playing a key role in developing their daughter’s fashion habitus. With mothers being able to provide more honest advice than friends or retail assistants, they often work as the first role models for their daughters. For instance, PalePinkCamellias reflects on how she and her mom had matching Coach purses, which indicates matching tastes and similarity in fashion items usage (Gavish, Shoham and Ruvio, 2010). This had a significant influence on her future consumption choices as can be seen from her obsession with Coach, which she continues to buy to this day.

While the fashion habits discussed above refer to everyday fashion consumption, they also help to understand how fashion savvy consumers can start collecting fashion items. Certain objects, such as Coach or Louis Vuitton handbags mentioned above, therefore become an important “sacred” piece of collections. Not only they have unique meaning for the collector because of their reference to childhood or to a special bond with their mother, but they also work as “the object” that started the collection for them. As a result, these objects become a special case of the extended self (Belk, 1988).

On the other hand, other participants have started their collections themselves without the influence of others. For example, Claire, an ATC, who appeared to be the most passionate about collection curation among all interview participants, shared how she was building her collection (Image 6) for a few decades:

“Okay, so I started off with my Gucci re-release bamboo handle that was about ten years ago. I bought that and was kind of a bit disappointed. It was between that or classic Chanel. They were the same price at that time, and I went for Gucci, thinking “oh, I will get a Chanel at some point in the future”. Of course, they cost an absolute fortune now, so I’m now saving up for a Chanel. Then I went and bought my Dior Lady and got a little purse to go with it. I’ve always had things like Jimmy Choo. So, I’ve always had Jimmy Choo bags and shoes. These were my wedding ones, so they are my favourite”.

This passage indicates how for Claire handbags are an important element of her identity. As past research sees branded handbags as *“contemporary representations of luxury, social status, materialistic conformity, and women’s personal achievement”* (Rosenberg, Turunen, Järvelä, and Arnould, 2020:n.a) such devotion towards one’s collection is of no surprise. While the wardrobes of the present study featured a variety of other luxury items, it is handbags that appeared to be the centre of consumer narratives. Similar to wristwatches, handbags act as an indicator of stylishness, discrimination, and socio-economic class (Berger, 2010). Here Claire reflects on how she started her accessories collection. She shares how she purchased her first luxury handbag, Gucci Bamboo, about which she was hesitant since she was choosing between it and a classic Chanel bag. This debate about what product to purchase first provides an insight on her “non-standard” taste – instead of purchasing a

classic, yet popular, item, Claire decided to choose an object that was not imposed on her by media or the fashion community.

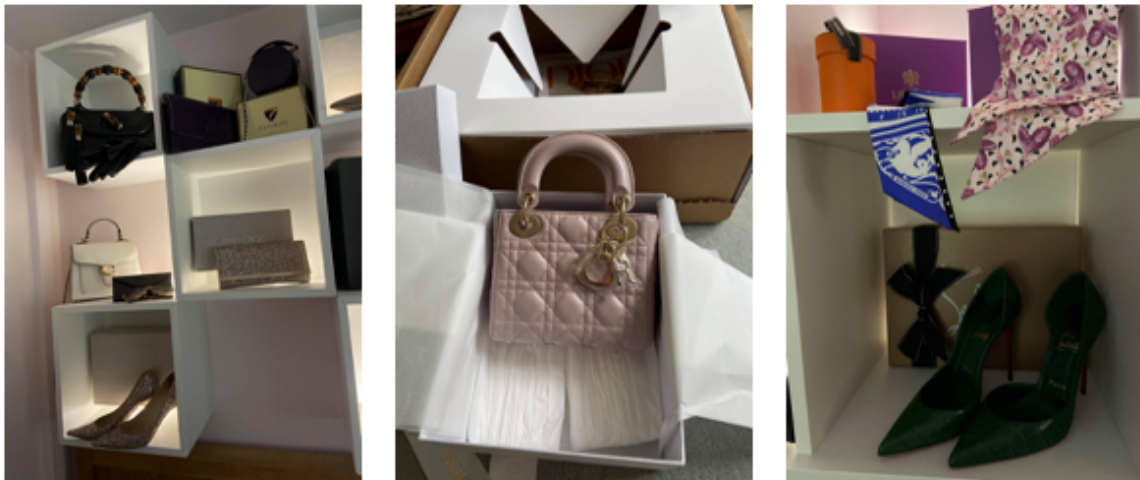


Image 6: Claire's Collection of Handbags

Nevertheless, since Claire kept this bag after more than ten years, it hints that for her this object is of significant value – it acts as a founding stone of her collection. After this, her taste and collection took a relatively “classic” turn – for instance, she purchased a long-time fashion connoisseurs favourite Lady Dior in addition to other more contemporary handbags as Aspinal of London. Several interview participants appeared to have relatively similar collections, which may be explained by the fact that they have been recruited from the same Facebook group. To Claire as well as other participants, collections appear to be full of “loved objects” (Ahuvia, 2005). These “loved objects” therefore act as a tool that helps consumers to express their identity (Belk, 1988). As these collections become an inevitable part of their self, individuals cherish them and develop a set of rituals to generate meaning. However, for these objects to generate meaning they must be put in space – another element of taste curation, which is discussed next.

6.1.2. Space

Curation is heavily related to space. A museum or gallery is curated as a space to showcase the concept behind the exhibition as well as notable works; a home is curated as a space to reflect the owner and their taste; a store is curated using various merchandising techniques to increase sales and get the most value even from the tiniest space. Curation of personal fashion objects, too, implies significant work on space. Construction of handbag displays, dedication of whole rooms to a walk-in closet, utilising favourite accessories as decorative art objects where others can see them – all these are inevitable example of connectivity between curation and space (McDowell, 2019). While previously wardrobes were seen as private spaces with “*clothes behind doors*” (Cwerner, 2001: 80), growing popularity of practices that help consumers to elevate their wardrobe game has inclined numbers of individuals to invest in their personal fashion space. Participants in the present research too have followed guidance from Pinterest, popular TV shows and media articles and created their own curated space. As a result, wardrobes become an element of “*fashion autobiography*” (Horsley, 2014).

Space of display allow us to understand how curation occurs (Joosse and Hracs, 2015). When discussing collections, RepLadies usually mention their storage system, which is not a surprise. With replica accessories being times cheaper than authentic, RepLadies can purchase more of these and, as a result, they are always looking for advice on how to store their possessions. Given that collecting is frequently seen as a competitive activity that helps individuals to orchestrate their status (Belk, 1995), RepLadies share images of their wardrobe spaces on the forum which not only allows them to reinforce their knowledge on how to store possessions, but also helps them to depict their cultural capital online. While some RepLadies

are more comfortable in terms of sharing their full collections, others share just sections of their wardrobes to avoid being identified by others.

RepLadies wardrobe spaces are a work of art. Not only do they showcase interesting collections, but they are curated in a way that would depict objects in the best possible way. Cwerner (2001:83) sees wardrobes as *“an object of consumption itself, as part of modern home furniture ... Wardrobes not only house fashion, but they are also objects of taste and fashion in the house”*. Observation of images posted to RepLadies suggests that these consumers spend significant amount of time to create spaces for their collections. These spaces are structured by order – they feature numerous drawers, shelves and boxes that help consumers to navigate their space.



Image 7: snowy95 Handbag Display Space

To achieve this, RepLadies frequently engage in *“prosumption activities”* (Wolf and McQuitty, 2010) to construct spaces for their collections. In doing so, they use inexpensive storage systems such as IKEA and transform them into displays for their possessions. Usually

these shelves are white, which allows the colours and details of handbags to stand out. However, these storage units are frequently upgraded using decorative elements. For instance, snowy95 shares how her husband helped her to create space (Image 7) to showcase her replica bags:

My little purse corner 🥰. I'm a handbag person so definitely more into keeping them display as nice as I could. My hubby did the custom lighting job

Similar displays were also found in Claire's example. During our zoom interview, she was sitting in the guest bedroom, which she transformed into a mini display for her bags. Claire undertook this project during COVID19 pandemic as the guest bedroom was not used. Below is an excerpt taken from Claire's post on Bag Chat, where she shares her decision to create space for her objects:

"My poor husband. After watching many YouTube videos and seeing people's displays, I have decided my beautiful bags and shoes should not be in a wardrobe (closet), so they are going to be displayed. Guest bedroom will be decorated, and shelving boxes bought and put on the wall. Why buy art when you can use your bags and shoes to decorate"

It is interesting how both snowy95 and Claire have engaged their husbands into DIY (Do-It-Yourself) projects to create their dream spaces to showcase their collections. These DIY projects enforce creativity as well as allow consumers to customise storage systems. Given that collections are diverse, products available on the marketplace might not be suitable to all consumers, therefore adaptation or transformation of these items would allow them to serve

to “particular needs” (Wolf and McQuitty, 2010:160). For instance, Claire shares how after watching numerous YouTube videos and seeing handbag displays of others, she was inspired to use her guest bedroom as a space for displaying her bags and shoes. Both snowy95 and Claire have used standard IKEA shelves and updated them using lights – this customisation allowed them to construct their “dream displays”. Additionally, it is also interesting how Claire mentions that the space will be “decorated” with her accessories being “art used to decorate”. Although, snowy95 does not explicitly mention this, her “displaying as nice as I could” also suggests that for her, similar to Claire, these objects not only hold utilitarian and hedonic value, but also so called “decorative value” – both fashionistas treat their objects as art and want others to admire them. By carefully displaying their collection, snowy95 and Claire engage in the practice of taste curation – they select objects that they believe are the most suitable to be displayed to a “public eye” – even if, in the case of Claire, it is just her close friends staying over.

Another interesting similarity that can be found between snowy95 and Claire is how they use branded boxes and shopping bags in their display space. This decorative move is particularly intriguing, since these objects are commonly either re-used for their original purpose (bags for carrying other things and boxes for storage) or thrown away as disposable. However, here consumers are assigning them bigger value by using them as decorative objects to enhance their curated space. For instance, Claire shares that she has a few carrier bags above her wardrobe (Image 8) – *“just a few of them – my favourite ones”*. The bags that she is referring to are a mixture of contemporary and luxury designer – Karl Lagerfeld, Burberry, and Dior. While Claire does not explicitly mention why she uses these objects to enhance her space, one of the RepLadies suggests that it makes her *“feel fancy”*:

A lot of people like displaying the boxes and shopping bags because it looks fancy and nice on their vanity or on shelves. You can see that a lot in the luxury community on YouTube and Instagram. Those that can't afford to buy the actual product may also like using them for décor

This passage helps to shed light on motivations for displaying such objects. However, it is interesting how some consumers can buy designers boxes on eBay and other retailers to make an impression of being part of the luxury community. Not surprisingly, a scroll on Depop offers a wide selection of Louis Vuitton, Prada and even Diptyque empty boxes that can be used as props when it comes to decoration of space. Another RepLady, ebonycynthia, mentioned how she *“just ordered some boxes off Taobao to get my closet together”*.



Image 8: Claire's Collection of Designer Carrier Bags

It can thus be argued that these elements help individuals to curate their wardrobe with the goal of meeting certain aesthetics – potentially, the ones they are seeing on YouTube or on Instagram. While Claire mentions that the display of her collection is permanent, she is

constantly occupied with the curation process. For instance, she reflects on how she is lacking space – during lockdown she added quite a lot of objects to her collection as due to inability to travel as well as spend money elsewhere Claire appeared to have additional disposable income that she decided to spend on luxury possessions. Adding to this, Claire started her “*curation journey*” in lockdown, which can be explained through the decrease in utilitarian use of Claire’s items. For instance, her sparkly evening Jimmy Choo shoes have remained unworn, but by looking at them every day, Claire is able to receive hedonic and emotional pleasure as well as look forward to the time when she will be able to wear them again.

The spaces discussed above offer a very glamorous perspective – having a whole room dedicated to handbags and shoes signals status and wealth. This high-end appeal may be explained through the growing popularity of TV shows as well as media narratives dedicated to the massive wardrobes of celebrities. Websites, as “The Coveteur” have documented the wardrobes of celebrities and fashion socialites for more than a decade, which had a profound influence on how individuals perceive their wardrobe space (Mark, 2016). Vibrant images and remarkable collections helped consumers to reinterpret the space they live in.

Consequently, this has left its mark on consumer society and, as a result, fashionistas who have the tiniest flats still want to make space for their numerous pairs of heels. To illustrate, mailehm shared an intriguing image of her curated space to RepLadies (Image 9):



Image 9: mailehm's Curated Space

This collection image is particularly interesting – while other forum members posted well refined “instagrammable” wardrobes and displays, mailehm posted something opposite to that. When sharing her collection, RepLady mentioned that she lives *“in a 500 sq ft apartment with the tiniest closet so all storage must also be decor”*, which provides an interesting perspective of how consumers curate their collection when having limited space. Although, quite a few notable bags are present in the image (Christian Dior Book Tote, Louis Vuitton Neverfull, Chanel WOC, and Celine Nano Luggage), several other collections are also featured, such as Sailor Moon character figures and a set of Sailor Moon Manga. Additionally, the bags are placed close to cans of soup and beans. This provides an interesting metaphor, as when describing “individual collecting” Belk (1995:66) refers to the can of peas:

“collecting is highly involving passionate consumption rather than an uninvolved form of consumption like buying canned peas (unless of course one is a collector of

canned peas in which case such a purchase for the collection may matter a great deal)”

This example shows how consumers can curate their space in limited conditions. It offers a contrasting perspective to that of the glamorous spaces. Here objects too act as decorative elements to enhance the visual appeal of the space, however they generate different meaning in these conditions. It can be argued that they have more decorative value, as incorporation of them in the home interior allows individuals not only curate their collection, but also to curate the space where they live. However, the placement of objects into spaces requires a set of rituals that individuals perform regularly. The final section of “taste curation” discusses how consumers perform various doings that help them to curate their taste.

6.1.3. Doings

In the present research consumer narratives of fashionable life “are told through practices of purchasing, wearing and keeping the garments in the space of their wardrobes” (McDowell, 2019:62). Alike to taste regimes, consumers want to follow certain aesthetics, which requires them to curate their collection to meet the standards. Therefore, curation is not only connected to what items to put on display and what to hide, but also with what objects to buy, keep and get rid of. When consumers acquire objects and place them in space they are engaging in consumptive curatorial efforts (Davis, 2016). Through these doings they are able to attach meanings to these objects as well as reinterpret their value within the collection. These efforts are referred to as “curatorial practices” and comprise of such activities as acquisition, preservation, usage, and disposal (Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung, 2017). While

the aspect of usage is discussed in more detail in other sections of this thesis, remaining activities and their relevance for taste curation are presented below.

Acquisition

While acquisition was briefly discussed in relation to Objects, more profound inquiry is essential. Given that most of the objects in these collections are luxury items, participants have spent a lot of time thinking about whether they are worth purchasing. While scholars frequently describe luxury consumption as “emotional” (Kapferer and Bastien, 2012), the present research suggests that a significant level of “rationality” is considered when making these purchases even with the “dream objects”. For instance, Nicola refers on how hesitant she was about purchasing her dream bag – Chanel Wallet on Chain:

“So, with the Chanel WOC, I’ve always wanted a Chanel handbag. That was the epitome, and it was kind of entry level what I could probably afford. I wanted it with silver hardware, caviar and so it was always onto working to get it. So, with that one it was an emotional decision because I really wanted one, but it did take me ... You know they are a couple of grand, aren’t they? So, to spend that on quite a small handbag really, it was a big decision, and, you know, I decided to buy it.”

The passage above shows Nicola’s hesitation about spending a large sum of money on the handbag. While Nicola does not specify here why she is unsure about the purchase apart from its high price, it can be argued that Nicola expresses hesitation towards the quality as well as value of the handbag. She emphasises the price several time, which indicates that to Nicola it is a very important decision. On the other hand, the quote also shows how for Nicola it was a

“dream bag” – this can be observed by how she spoke of the bag itself. She shares that she knew from the beginning which handbag she wanted – what leather, what size, what hardware. This shows how determined Nicola was with her purchase, but due to its high price she was still hesitant about “*whether it is worth the money*”.

This hesitation is related to another level of acquisition, which centred around what handbag to buy as real and what as fake. In the context of Replica Taste, consumer discussions of objects also centred around what handbags to purchase authentic and what fake. Exploration of this allows to build a profound understanding of how consumers approach the choice of objects in their collections as well as how they express Replica Taste. This type of curation was particularly visible in RepLadies forum, who frequently engaged in the practice of collective curation (Joosse and Hracs, 2015) by discussing, evaluating, and selecting the products collectively. Previously, research looked at how consumers show their status by choosing or rejecting counterfeits (Geiger-Oneto et al., 2010) as well as established what are the value-based drivers for this behaviour (Weidmann, Hennings and Klarmann, 2017). RepLadies decision too was shaped by two core factors. Firstly, the majority of RepLadies purchased replica products to understand whether the authentic bag would fit in their wardrobe and secondly, they have shared how they prefer to purchase fakes for trendy items and authentic for classic items, which is in line with Hybrid Taste observations. Consequently, by choosing or rejecting a certain handbag, RepLadies showcase their taste. Below are two excerpts that summarise the RepLadies acquisition process well:

I like to buy reps of trend pieces Bc they hold no value and buy authentic bags that hold their value like My chanel classic flap. With the exception of Hermes. I purchased a rep Lindy soon to be sent my way from UB. I want a rep birkin but I

don't have the young rich asian look right now 😊 I need a few other items before I can pull a birkin off but by then maybe I'll get the real one? To be honest I feel like our lives will be happier without feeling the need to obtain these luxury goods.

(chanellover)

I'm successful-ish, in my 30's, working in finance - I'm also a loud kinky woc who lives for fashion and camp. My rep purchases are compliments to my overall wardrobe which is a mix of vintage, me made, splurge items, thrifts, and any and everything I'd like to wear, regardless of where it came from. I generally buy niche brands with some iconic pieces to pay homage to particular moments in fashion (ex. Buying a rep Stephen Sprouse Graffiti Neverfull). This is to say reps are an extension of my style/aesthetic, I get no social benefits from it (no shade to anyone who does, slay your game y'all) so I'm less apt to feel super serious about it. I like the look, essentially, so the brands almost become secondary.

(mintarany)

Both these quotes indicate the main approaches to acquisition of handbags in the RepLadies forum. For instance, chanellover shares how she prefers to buy fakes of the trendy pieces and invest in authentic classic objects that hold their value well. This approach resonates with Hybrid Taste well, particularly with the narrative of Amelie, who also shared that she would purchase the classic only in “authentic”. This perspective indicates that consumers see certain products and brands as disposable and having no value (Wiedmann, Hennigs, and Siebels, 2009). As trends come and go, RepLadies cannot justify to themselves the high price of the bag that will not be fashionable in a year from now. They see these products as “disposable luxury” – while the term is yet to be studied by scholars, it can be explained by the idea that

consumers do not see these products as having value. However, as they still want to present themselves as fashion-oriented individuals, so counterfeits become the best available alternatives. On the other hand, Mintarany shares how to her “*brands almost become secondary*” – she only acquires objects that match her identity, her wardrobe, and her style. Mintarany buys both fakes and reals, since for her the origin of the product is not important – it is more the overall look than the price tag that matters. While it is not clear from the quote whether Mintarany has both replica and authentic or only replica handbags, she shares that she buys “iconic pieces to pay homage to particular moments in fashion” such as her replica Sprouse Graffiti Nerverfull bag from Louis Vuitton. Overall, both quotes highlight how by having access to the best counterfeits, RepLadies remain selective in their purchases. They carefully evaluate their objects and acquire those items that will fit in with their aesthetic.

Preservation

As consumer narratives suggest, participants have developed special bonds with their possessions, which makes them preoccupied with preserving their “loved objects” While some forum members had their handbags on display, others stored them in dust bags as they wanted to protect them from light and air. This indicates how forum members treat both authentic and replica handbags equally – for them there is no difference, they see them as equal objects of their collection. Surprisingly, despite replicas being relatively cheap as compared to authentic, they are treated as fragile by collectors and are carefully protected from potential hazards through a set of ritualistic activities. It can be therefore argued that by performing a set of caring responsibilities, consumers can transform replicas into objects of luxury status (Banister, Roper and Potavanich, 2019).



Image 10: debnank1's Curated Storage Space

For example, debnank1 collection (Image 10) features both authentic and replica handbags. These are all carefully placed in “*old Ikea stereo component shelving repurposed*” as well as “*labelled with pictures*”. This practice is frequently favoured by stylists, who use it to navigate extensive wardrobes of their clients as it allows to protect accessories from dust and light damage, while images facilitate easiness in terms of finding the right piece. These findings complement Banister, Roper and Potavanich’s (2019) paper on consumer practices of everyday luxury. Similar to participants in their study, RepLadies engage in “*caretaking*” of their possessions, which refers to “*the continual dedication and constant care for objects associated with consumers’ passion, trust and respect for these objects*” (Banister, Roper and Potavanich, 2019:464). This activity therefore implies a ritual that helps RepLadies to maintain luxury status of the object or to ascribe luxury status to their replica possessions. Given that replicas are frequently perceived as low-quality disposable items (Qian, Gong, and

Chen, 2015), the practice of caretaking shows how consumers can experience “*pleasure, trust, respect or fear of loss and separation*” (Banister, Roper and Potavanich, 2019:460) towards these items. For instance, another RepLadies member – Avecviolet – shares that she has a set of “rituals” to maintain her handbags:

Recently, I put them all back in their dust bags and storage boxes except the few that are currently in rotation. It's work to keep them maintained and looking good! It's not really good for them to sit out like that. The leather can dry out faster and they can lose their shape. Beautiful bags long to be used or tucked in for hibernation!

While they were out, I was always messing with them too — dusting, shifting the stuffing, and periodically hanging them to make sure the straps stay nice and straight. I felt like a mom checking on her sleeping baby to make sure they're still ok. 🤪 As a part of regular maintenance, I seasonally condition all my babies with Apple or Cadillac whether they are in storage or out. It helps a lot.

Avecviolet emphasises that it is “work” to keep her possessions in a good condition. She reflects on having a set of rituals she performs to keep the shape of handbags and their straps. However, what is particularly interesting is that she treats them as her children. This is supported with her continuous use of words “*baby*” and “*babies*” when describing her collection. Similarly, she shares that she seasonally conditions her handbags, which makes these cleaning rituals “*similar to a parent's loving cleansing of a child*” (Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung, 2017:236). This type of caretaking for luxury handbags is a usual act in the fashion community. It can go from using the stuffing for the bag so that it does not lose shape and keeping them in dust bags for the protection from dust and light damage to taking handbags for a “SPA ritual”, where they are professionally cleaned with all minor damages

being fixed. However, it is interesting how by performing the same caretaking practices with replica handbags, consumers can assign them the “*luxury meaning*” (Banister, Roper and Potavanich, 2019). By paying this kind of attention to replica handbags, consumers can elevate the experience of owning them. Since the majority of RepLadies mentioned that they “*don’t find any difference*” in owning authentic and replica products, caretaking activities suggest that both types of these products have the same value for consumers. This provides a novel perspective on the existing belief that counterfeits are disposable – increase in quality as well as change in perception towards them by a certain class of consumers allows us to see them on the same level to the authentic.

Deaccessioning

Similar to participants in Abdelrahman, Banister and Hampson (2020), the perception that these objects are valuable and meaningful encourages individuals to preserve them as well as initiate their transferal to new owners. Several participants in this study have passed on their objects to others who would cherish them and ensure their preservation. By selling them on online platforms, they are allowing these objects to continuously circulate in the marketplace (Abdelrahman et al., 2020). This transferal also allows consumers to engage in continuous curation – although some objects of their “exhibition” might be permanent, the majority of them are “deaccessioned” – gifted to family members or sold to free up space for future purchases. This perspective was largely dominant among RepLadies, who frequently “liquidated authentic to fund more reps”:

I’ve been having some thoughts about selling my authentic bags to make way for replicas. I have, at this point, only authentic bags in my collection (with the exception

of a v low-tier Le Chiquito from AE, lol) and am seriously considering liquidating most of it to make way for reps

(Jd-2747)

I sold an auth bag recently to fund more reps. But it was a very seasonal trendy bag that I wouldn't have bought if not for a very generous employee discount. I don't think I'd sell my auth Celine luggage or anything like that

(wag00n)

Keep the ones you adore, sell the ones that you don't love. If your collection is large, this is a great compromise. I had an extensive authentic collection consisting of Chanel, Bottega Veneta, LV, and Celine. I kept 1 jumbo CF, and my nano luggage tote. The rest I sold with no regrets. With that money, I gained a bunch more reps (with the money left over!)

(hoxton37)

These quotes provide a novel perspective on counterfeit consumption, by showcasing how consumers express resistance to authentic products and are willing to trade them for counterfeits. Observation of RepLadies suggests that the main reason for their transition to counterfeit consumption is dissatisfaction with quality of the authentic products.

Consequently, it can be argued that by “*blaming the victim*” (Strutton et al., 1994), RepLadies express consumer resistance with their actions. For instance, the quotes above feature a debate about whether RepLadies should sell certain authentic handbags from their collection to purchase more replica products. This discussion shows how consumers are questioning the capitalistic system by choosing what products are worth to be real and what

fake (Lee, Motion, and Conroy, 2008). As it appears, all these forum members have or had an extravagant collection of luxury handbags that features a selection of expensive designers. While one of the members, Jd-2747, is still hesitant about selling her pricey possessions, others share how they have successfully disposed their authentic products to free up space for replicas. It is particularly interesting how wag00n mentions that she sold a designer handbag, which she purchased for “*a very generous employee discount*”. While she does not mention the brand of the sold handbag, it shows how even by being part of the “fashion system” consumers are finding ways to resist it. This avoidance of authentic products is similar to experiential avoidance discussed in Lee et al. (2009), however RepLadies do not avoid the whole brand, instead they shift to consuming it in the form of fakes. This behaviour offers a novel perspective on why consumers purchase counterfeits instead of authentic products.

On the other hand, the decision to “*downsize exhibition*” may be forced by change in meanings that the objects have for the curator (Abdelrahman, Banister and Hampson, 2020). For example, Jessica, is in the process of “downsizing” her collection (Image 11) after she purchased her dream bag – Chanel Reissue. She explains that she decided to sell everything except “*four bags that I decided would be my capsule collection*”. This indicates how Jessica decided to transform her wardrobe and started her cleanse with handbags with the goal of creating a “*capsule collection for life, not just some dreaming occasions that would never happen because I now have children, so life has changed*”. This quote explains Jessica’s decision to adapt her taste to new realities – she understands that the life with children requires not only changes in her regimen, but also her wardrobe. She reflects how before having children she tried different styles, sizes, and colours of handbags, but now she feels like the time has come for her to create her signature look and collection.



Image 11: Jessica's Handbags

When it comes to “deaccessioning”, Jessica’s approach is rather unusual – it is common among collectors to keep vintage or unique pieces in their collection even if these are not used and get rid of more popular items. Jessica, on the contrary, is selling handbags that are “*too old in my collection*”. For instance, Jessica’s wardrobe featured several “*collectors’ items*”, such as Dior Panarea bag, that she sold recently:

I remember the one that I purchased like five or six years, and I love it. I truly love it and I sold it today actually. It’s hard to part with it, but at the same time ... It’s a Dior Panarea, beautiful canvas, and lovely pink colour. I just know I won’t use it. I think it’s the pandemic as well. I just won’t use it.

Here Jessica shares that although it was difficult for her to part with the handbag, she decided that it was a right choice – she did not use it for quite some time due to lockdown. She mentioned that this change of lifestyle had a profound influence on her consumption habits

and in addition to becoming a mom required her to adapt her taste to new realities (Thompson et al., 2018). During the interview Jessica reflected how being busy with work, she never had time to curate her wardrobe, but now as she is taking some time off in her career she finally decided to “*downsize the collection*”. Similarly, Jessica also sold her Louis Vuitton Neverful, despite it being “*such an emotional attachment ... it travelled the world with me*”. Jessica decided that it was time to sell it since it was “*confusing that everyone is wearing it, it is no longer unique*”. This quote shows how for Jessica Neverful has lost its uniqueness, making it a primary reason for selling. Similar to other participants in the present research, namely Michelle and Sasha, Jessica too does not want to follow popular taste and keep products that the majority of consumers are wearing. However, it is questionable whether uniqueness is of crucial importance to her, given that Jessica has sold a rare Dior bag. All in all, Jessica’s narrative emphasises the “*dynamics of collection*” (Woodward and Greasley, 2017) as she decided to get rid of these objects because she felt like they no longer belong.

This section observed how individuals curate their taste with the use of objects, space, and doings. While the reader now has a clearer understanding of “taste curation”, it is now essential to understand how consumers cultivate their taste for these objects with the help of “taste development”.

6.2. Taste Development

“*Taste is something that one learns, refines, and transforms*” (Pathmann and Schuber, 2021:2948). During their life consumers are constantly progressing in terms of how they understand the world around them as they are constantly faced with new meanings and interpretations. By being exposed to these meanings as well as by gaining more cultural and

economic capitals, consumers can elevate their taste and preferences. The present research refers to this process as “taste development”. The subject of “taste development” was constantly brought up in the present study – either as continuous discussion during interviews or as a how to guide in forum communities. Enquiring how taste is developed encompasses both curiosity as well as need for theoretical justification, since previously limited studies have observed how one develops their taste (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017) as this activity is often perceived as something that happens naturally.

Taste development is a complex and time-consuming process. As fashion is a fast-paced industry, where new styles and trends are introduced on a regular basis, consumers are faced with an opportunity for constant development of style and taste. Whereas some consumers find it exciting and entertaining to navigate the fashion world on their own, others are frequently in need of other, more professional, opinion on these matters. As a response to this, modern century saw the growth and popularity of “stylists” – individuals, who professionally give fashion advice to consumers. In this context “styling” implies “*choosing, trying on, and combining multiple alternative garments and products, making them desirable to buy, wear, or use*” (Pöllänen, Parkko and Kapainen, 2019:n.a). Styling is heavily linked to time and place (Warkander, 2013) as it requires significant effort from both sides – the stylist and the client – with core tasks ranging from wardrobe decluttering to appearance change. For instance, Nicola shares how she is constantly engaged in activities that help her to develop her style with the professional help:

“So, recently, I’ve had my colours done for the season. So, it’s easier to kind of look and think about what I know will suit me. I bought a Burberry scarf and I really wanted a classic beige one. Every time I tried it, I was like oh it looks awful on me.

And as much as I wanted to buy it, I always kept thinking that it doesn't look right. Every time I tried it on or when I came by, there would be something that was stopping me and then I looked at the different colourway. So, I went for white and black and then I've now been sort of more creative teaming it rather than just having a black top underneath or a white top underneath, I will do purple underneath. So, now that I am understanding my colours a bit more, I feel more focused on what I am buying. So, I know I don't need to keep looking at beige stuff because I know beige is never going to look right on me.” (Nicola, 38)

In this passage Nicola reflects on how she decided to turn for professional stylist advice to have her “*colours done*”. In this case, stylists’ knowledge of various body types, proportions and colour effects helps consumers to resolve problems related to everyday adornment (Pöllänen, Parkko and Kaipainen, 2019). Specifically, Nicola’s struggle with choosing the right colours for her according to her image archetype inclined her to get her “colours done” professionally – a process where image consultants would create a chart for consumers based on their skin undertone as well as hair and eyes colour. As a result, consumers become more aware of the colours that suit them and therefore they can navigate industrial fashion easier (McCann, 2014). For instance, Nicola highlights that after receiving stylists’ advice she felt more “*focused*”, emphasising that it became easier for her to choose clothes as well as to come up with new combinations from her existing garments. Specifically, she reflects on a tiring process of choosing a Burberry scarf – Nicola shares that she wanted to buy it for quite some time. At first, she wanted to go for a classic version of the Burberry scarf – a beige one, however every time she tried it on, Nicola felt like it did not suit her and therefore she never continued with the purchase. However, after having a chart of colours that suit her, Nicola decided to try another colour option of the scarf – a black and white – which allows more

creativity in terms of the outfits she creates. This desire to find what is right for her allows Nicola to develop her taste. Although she finds it difficult to do this on her own, having someone who has more cultural capital help her with fashionable choices allows Nicola to develop her aesthetic knowledge by following the advice of this person.

However, other consumers might be more comfortable and even more interested in finding other ways through which they can develop their taste without professional help. Overall, this study identified three approaches to personal taste development. The first one follows and extends “taste engineering” introduced by Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) and is specifically relevant to the community of RepLadies, which acts as partial institution. Here, the process is transformed with a fourth practice being added that allows us to see how taste development is performed in RepLadies community. The second approach sees “taste development” achieved through “exposure” – by being exposed to aesthetic objects through life experience and through social media, individuals can train their aesthetic intelligence and taste. Development of taste through “exposure” can be performed in two ways – by engaging in “exposure through social media” and by experiencing “exposure through change in environment”. All these approaches are discussed in further detail below.

6.2.1. Taste Development through “Taste Engineering”

The main reason behind the popularity of “RepLadies” can be attributed to how forum members make the purchase of counterfeits accessible. In its discussion of counterfeits, research frequently refers to poorly made products that can be found online or on the markets in popular holiday destinations (Radón, 2012). RepLadies, on the contrary, have other sources for this type of product, which allows forum members to get their hands on replicas

of the highest possible quality that are frequently indistinguishable from their authentic versions. Therefore, one of the key findings in relation to taste development within RepLadies is how member's taste in counterfeits changes after they joined the forum. In depth analysis of consumer narratives in discussion threads shows that previously members of this community purchased recognisable replicas of very poor quality “*from Canal Street and Chinatown*”, however after they joined the RepLadies community, members shared that they were able to step up their game by purchasing realistic fakes of better quality. Below are two quotes that illustrate the difference between pre-RepLadies consumption and post-RepLadies consumption:

I bought fakes from Chinatown. Like \$120 worth of reps. They're all in the donation bin now lol. It's not much but I could've used the \$120 to get the 1:1 rep 🤔

(annabanana316)

I bought such horrible low tier stuff before I got into RepLadies! I've still got some garbage on TB, but overall the more I learned and started building my little book of TB/Superbuy tricks (always buy extra photos with the measuring clothes!) the better my hauls have gotten!

(JSchecter11)

Here, community members reflect on their pre-RepLadies purchases – they emphasise the low quality of replica products from unreliable merchants. This type of poor quality of counterfeits was heavily addressed in existing literature (Qian, 2014) and it is worth mentioning that the products that scholars refer to as “counterfeits” frequently imply items of very poor quality. On the contrary, post-RepLadies purchases suggest that members started buying products that had close resemblance to authentic items – “superfakes”. Although,

research suggested that the quality of replica products is improving, little has been said on the emergence of this type of counterfeit products. “Superfakes” refer to counterfeits of luxury products that are identical to authentic products sold for a fraction of their price that can easily trick others into believing that they are real. Since searching for “superfakes” requires sufficient product knowledge, skill and time, these products are frequently not available to ordinary consumers. Hence, the majority of new RepLadies members are generally not aware about “superfakes” before finding the forum and as a result they are prone to consume replicas of poor quality. These quotes therefore highlight how community can help consumers to navigate through a variety of marketplace offerings as well as to help them develop their taste in terms of the purchases they make.

As a digital space, RepLadies connects individuals of various backgrounds with different levels of cultural, economic, and social capitals, but all of them have one passion in common – finding the best possible replica at the best possible price. The forum thus allows consumers to request help and get opinions, which allows consumers to develop their aesthetic knowledge on levels of product quality as well as how well it corresponds to its authentic version. For instance, JSchechter11 shares that before findings RepLadies, she used to buy “*horrible low tier stuff*”, which in the forum language means replicas that are easy to distinguish as fakes even by those with lower levels of cultural capital. By saying this, JSchechter11 herself admits that her cultural capital in terms of replica purchases was of very low level, however by being part of the forum community she was able to train her eye and develop her cultural capital by “*building my little book of TB/Superbuy tricks*” and since then her hauls became more proficient in this nature. This example shows how not only individuals themselves can develop their cultural capital and taste, but also how community helps to bring taste to the new level.

Additionally, as new forum members develop their aesthetic awareness on replica products, they train their eye to distinguish flaws and imperfections in the purchases they made before. In this domain they frequently refer to their previous purchases as “terrible”:

my first rep was a DHgate Chanel boy. I thought it looked 1:1 at that time but as I started looking more and more into purses I realized that it looked sooooo bad.

(gabybenitezzz)

My first rep was a terrible Damier Aur Neverfull MM from Amazon with PU handles and I used it when I go to the beach and to renaissance fairs where it will be dusty, distinguishing, and dirty. I'll probably use it as a diaper bag after I get pregnant because it will be my first baby and I know I'll not learn how to wrap diapers properly the first few times lol. My first quality rep was a Pochette Metis from OC and I wear it a LOT. But I only got into the rep game two years ago and have been staying near the LV/mid-tier Chanel stuff. I really want to start getting into higher end Dior, Hermes and Chanel CF end of the pool.

(Badgerpaws90210)

Both quotes highlight how significantly the taste of the forum members has improved after they joined the community. For instance, gabybenitezz shares how at first, she thought that her Chanel Boy replica from DHgate - online merchant, like Taobao and AliExpress – looked 1:1 or identical to its authentic version, but after she spent some time on RepLadies forum she realised that the bag was far from what the authentic Chanel Boy looks like. Thinking

that low quality replicas look “identical” to authentic products is common among those who have low cultural capital (LCC) in the fashion field. For these consumers, this class of products may look “exactly the same” as they are not aware or do not pay attention to small details that those with high cultural capital (HCC) will easily catch. Therefore, after joining the forums, gabybenitezz like other members was able to develop her cultural capital, which makes her see her past purchases as easily detectable fakes. Similarly, Badgerpaws90210 makes a comparison between her purchases before joining the forum and after she had been a member for some time. Here, she refers to her first replica as “*terrible*”, highlighting its disposability by mentioning that she will use it as a diaper bag when she has her first baby. On the contrary, when she is talking about her purchase after she became a forum member, she refers to it as her “*first quality replica*” which she wears frequently. By making this clear distinction about their pre-RepLadies and post-RepLadies consumption choices, forum members emphasise how significantly has their cultural capital and taste developed.

The examples above show how by being members of partial institution, consumers were able to develop their taste. However, further inquiry into how exactly they were able to do it is necessary. As highlighted in the beginning of this section, majority of RepLadies were able to develop their taste and aesthetic knowledge through “taste engineering”. Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) highlight that consumers, whose habitus resonates with consumer markets such as fine food, home decoration and fashion often pursue a goal of developing their taste to judge aesthetic experiences related to them. The RepLadies community works as a strong example of individuals engaging in “taste engineering” to enhance their aesthetic awareness and knowledge on luxury replicas. However, in contrast to beer connoisseurs which have clearly identified “taste engineering” practices that happen consequently, in the RepLadies community these practices can happen either simultaneously or some of them may be

skipped. Overall, this study identifies four practices under “taste engineering”. Following Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) it adopts “Institutional Benchmarking”, “Autodidactics” and “Cooperative Scaffolding”, as well as adds an additional fourth practice that was identified in the context studied – “Contribution to Institutional Materials”. However, during the analysis of the forum threads it was observed that “taste engineering” in RepLadies does not follow the same pattern as it does in Maciel and Wallendorf’s (2017) framework. Here, two practices – “Autodidactics” and “Cooperative Scaffolding” – are exchanged in terms of the consequence when they are exercised. It was established that in the RepLadies community “Cooperative Scaffolding” happened after “Institutional Benchmarking” and was followed by “Autodidactics”. The four practices are presented in the figure below in sequence as they are performed in context studied.

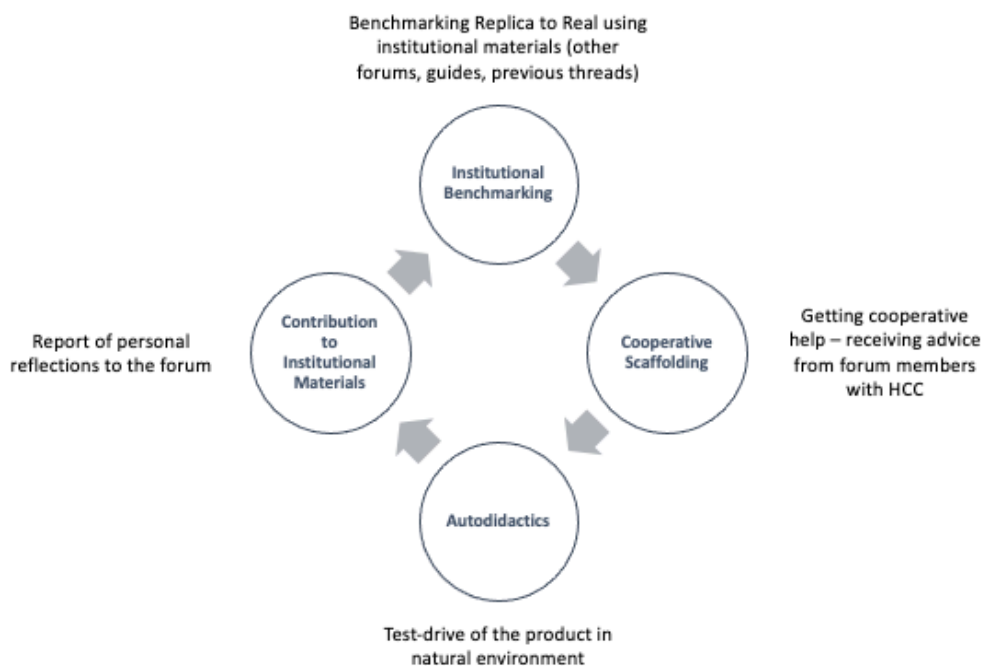


Figure 1: Taste Engineering on RepLadies

In relation to the first practice – “Institutional Benchmarking” – RepLadies compare replica accessories to authentic ones to see what differences and similarities can be identified.

Similarly, they may also use other fashion forums to gather information as well as check archived RepLadies posts to compare their personal evaluations against institutional materials, which helps them to enhance their cultural competence (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). However, RepLadies itself with a history of five and a half years, remains the dominant source of “institutional materials”. Here, the members have posted a wide selection of “Guides” to help newer members navigate the field of replica fashion. While some of these “Guides” refer directly to purchases, for instance *“Updated Factory Directory”*, *“A Spreadsheet of different factories / sellers / some trustworthy Instagram sellers”*, *“Who produces the best rep”*, there is also a wide range of brand guides including *“Hermes Guide”*, *“Loewe Guide”*, *“Hermes Birkin Guide”* and *“Chanel Boy Guide”* to name a few.

For example, *“Loewe Guide”* appeared to be a hefty document that presented a detailed overview of the brand history, materials, and craftsmanship as well as an analysis of factories that produce Loewe replicas. The *“Loewe Guide”* presents all the essential information on authentic handbags. For instance, the *“Materials and Craftsmanship”* section presents an overview of leather, hardware, and lining. Additionally, it also features images of authentic interior labels as well as date codes for all popular Loewe handbags. Finally, in the factories section an in-depth overview of key producers is provided with pricing, images and ranking based on RepLadies reviews. *“Loewe Guide”* therefore acts “a groundwork work for the dispersed practice of institutional benchmarking” (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017:735). As a result, whenever RepLadies with LCC are willing to make a purchase of a Loewe replica, they might turn to the guide for information on how the authentic product is supposed to look like. Therefore, while searching for replica handbags, RepLadies can refer to the guide to find the best product for their budget. This process allows them to benchmark their findings as well as develop their aesthetic awareness about various luxury accessories.

In relation to the second practice – “Cooperative Scaffolding” – RepLadies share their desired purchases to the forum for evaluation or QC – Quality Check – to see whether they will pass the test. Other more knowledgeable forum members will then share their opinions and feedback on replica accessories, which also helps those with LCC to train their eye. “Cooperative Scaffolding” thus helps those individuals, whose habitus does not include a sense of aesthetic authority (Ustuner and Holt, 2010). “Cooperative Scaffolding” allows consumers to understand where their taste goes wrong and learn from these mistakes. Under this practice RepLadies are interacting with other forum members extensively, engaging in discussions, starting threads – trying all activities that will help them to get feedback as well as understand the replica world further. At this stage, they have likely purchased their replica objects and might now collect information on how to present it to the world right. Currently, these individuals are still in a “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978), but as they become more comfortable, they are ready to move to the next practice of “taste engineering”.

In relation to the third practice – “Autodidactics” – here the RepLadies approach is rather unclear and diverse. The one that suits the concept definition most is them taking their purchases for a “test drive” or in other words “wearing them in public for the first time”. Due to the particular class of these products, individuals feel safer to do this after “cooperative scaffolding” was performed. Hence, after the item was assessed by those with HCC, individuals feel more comfortable about wearing it in public. However, in terms of this practice RepLadies still might heavily think about the environment for the “test drive”. As a result, they might choose a “safer” place for this activity. For example, the majority of RepLadies reflected on how they feel “uncomfortable” to wear their replicas in luxury designer stores, such as Chanel and Hermès, and instead choose to “test drive” them in more

comfortable settings – at dinner with friends or regular shopping in their neighbourhood.

“Autodidactics” not only allows them to understand how the object is perceived by others and whether it is accepted, but it also gives them a possibility to generate material for the next stage of “taste engineering”.

Finally, the present study extends “taste engineering” framework by introducing the fourth practice – “Contribution to Institutional Materials” – which emphasises continuous taste development. While the whole RepLadies forum can be observed as “institutional materials”, the space does have a separate category for feedback on purchases. These are commonly posted under “QC” (“Quality Check”) or “Reviews”. While these must be posted with adherence to strict guidelines, they provide a great opportunity for RepLadies to contribute to their community. As this contribution occurs repeatedly and RepLadies gain enough cultural capital to “express professional opinion”, they might want to contribute to institutional materials discussed above – “Guides”. It should be remembered that materials discussed in this section were wrote by RepLadies who ones also started with LCC in terms of replica consumption. As they have become “connoisseurs” they have shared their knowledge with others. Consequently, “contribution to institutional materials” appears to be crucial element of “taste engineering” since it allows an extension to materials, which are used in “institutional benchmarking”. Without the materials, consumers who aspire to become “connoisseurs” would not have access to all other steps of taste development in this approach.

By engaging in the process of “taste engineering”, RepLadies therefore can develop their cultural capital, which leads to them becoming HCC in this domain and as a result they can help others to enhance their aesthetic expertise. Similar to wine and beer connoisseurs learning new tastes, RepLadies are mastering their skill of identifying replicas of the highest

quality. These findings correlate with Boyd's (2014:91) observation of Purse Forum, where *"members demonstrate not only their powers of observation, but also their extensive mastery of repertoires of knowledge of an array of fashion labels"*. The passing of this knowledge therefore helps RepLadies to continuously develop their taste as well as help others to do so.

6.2.2. Taste Development through "Exposure"

The second approach proposes that taste can be developed through exposure, exploration of which has been neglected by existing research. Exposure and its connection to taste was mostly studied in relation to gustatory food, where because of continuous and repeated exposure to novel food, individuals were growing to prefer similar food over the one they tried before (Williams et al., 2008). The same pattern can be observed in other consumption domains – for instance, by listening to classical music in the music hall (Scandalis, Banister and Byrom, 2015). When it comes to tangible elements of taste, by being constantly exposed to aesthetic objects, individuals can develop their knowledge about them as well as consume them in the future. The present research argues that there are two ways consumers can develop their taste through exposure – the first one refers to exposure through media, while the second one implies exposure through environment. Both approaches are explored in detail further in this section.

The popularity of social media accounts dedicated to certain themes, magazines with specific aesthetic style and YouTube channels sharing how-to guides – all these sources can be used as exposure tools to develop one's taste. During the interviews, participants constantly referred to social media as a source for learning what is trending in terms of fashion and style.

Many of them recalled following numerous influencers or online publications, from which they got their inspiration as well as learned latest styling tricks:

“It must be exposure partly. I kind of ... I see people who I already think look nice wearing the same thing. There are definitely things where I started out, thinking this is ridiculous looking and I don’t like it at all. You know the Dior Saddle bag – it’s got this weird shape. I thought it was ridiculous when I first saw it in the store. But then, through continuous exposure it started to grow on me. Not that I went out and bought one, but I’ve got to like it more now” (Tasha)

“So, when I am going to the shop and I see them. Occasionally on YouTube videos, somebody shows what they recently bought and then I’m like “oh that’s nice”. Probably the first time around I just think “oh that’s nice” and I forget about it, but if I see it several times it’s starts to ... So, then I’m going to look up for it as well” (Martina)

“I know that I am being persuaded to buy this handbag in a way. So, it’s not a subliminal thing, but it definitely has an impact as I do want to have stuff that I see influencers and celebrities or other people. And having also being in like Facebook groups and those kinds of things where you are seeing people going out and spending lots of money on a Chanel handbag and it’s “oh, I wanna get that handbag now”. [...] And you see things that you probably weren’t as you are not necessarily out in the boutiques all the time to see it. So, when people post pictures of their new collection and you will be like “oh that’s lovely and I really like it”. But yeah, I

definitely think that social media and the groups and things like that play a massive part in my buying activity” (Nicola)

Although here participants share how they have grown to like certain objects by constantly seeing them on social media, this process can also be translated to continuous taste development. By engaging with social media or specialised magazines, they are following niche taste regimes (Lynge-Jorlén, A., 2017) which allow them to cultivate their taste. Instagram as a social network features millions of pages that express various tastes. By following these as well as observing the content, individuals are exposing themselves to aesthetic objects. For example, Tasha, Martina, and Nicola explain how they use social media as a main tool for exposure – by following influencers and seeing a certain product several times they are becoming more favourable towards it and the aesthetics behind it. They draw on popular designer products, such as the Dior Saddle Bag, to express how social media influenced their taste and consumption patterns. Opposed to “institutional benchmarking”, taste development through exposure takes place unintentionally. This implies that consumers “grow their taste” simply by following aesthetic curators and creators on their social media. Rather than going to institutional materials, that describe why something is tasteful or why it is not, they look at these objects in broader picture and decide for themselves, how they feel about these.

The second approach of taste development though exposure is connected to the environment consumers are in. It implies that if consumers are surrounded with individuals who have sophisticated taste, they tend to become “influenced” by them and might pick up their aesthetic preferences or develop their own. An individual’s life is prone to cumulative impact of multiple transitions and as a result this has unprecedented influence on their identity and

taste. Observation of taste development from this perspective allows us to see how consumer consumption patterns are transformed at various stages of their life and how this leads to a change in their taste. While this type of taste development was discussed a lot by research participants, it is believed that it is best illustrated with Florence's consumer narrative as during past several years she experienced significant transitions that had a profound influence on her consumption and taste.

Florence is a twenty-three-year-old fashion consultant, who lives in London. She shares how fashion was always an essential element of self-expression, particularly during her university years. As she reflects on her starting point for "taste development" she explains that during her undergraduate she used to be "*a massive high street shopper*":

Because I was at uni and where I was uni we just go out on nights out three or four times a week and you wanna have a new crop top and a little skirt to wear all the time. And I never used one of the same things, so I used to shop for loads of different crop tops and things online

So, I used to be the biggest buyer of Topshop and River Island, Zara. I never used to do things like boohoo and PrettyLittleThing, because they were just so cheap and really really poor quality, it wouldn't even last well for a night out and it would look horrible

These two passages showcase Florence's "previous taste". Here Florence shares how it was increasingly important for her to be the first one to wear trendy outfits in her community of friends when she was an undergraduate student. She reflects on her lifestyle back then and

shares that because she was going out very often, she always wanted to have a new outfit for the night. As a result of this self-oriented desire to buy a new item (Lee, Halter, Johnson, and Ju, 2013), Florence never wore same thing twice. This behaviour can be explained through her desire to stand out from the crowd as well as be seen as an early adaptor of fashion trends by her peers. Consequently, both quotes show how Florence used to treat her clothes as disposable items that were essential to support her fashion status and identity (Lee et al., 2017). However, it is interesting how Florence remained selective in terms of brands and stores she shopped from – she gave preference to more expensive fast fashion clothes rather than very cheap alternatives. This indicates how refined Florence's taste was from an early age – she preferred clothes from such stores as Topshop and Zara, which offer a variety of stylistic options, while she omitted such outlets as PrettyLittleThing, which are particularly famous due to their cheap price and great variety of night out outfits, because of their poor quality and disposability.

However, it all changed when Florence was admitted to London College of Fashion – a dream place for fashion savvy individuals. Similar to Jessica, she reflects how she decided that this lifechanging event requires new wardrobe and new identity:

As soon as I said to people that I am going to London College of Fashion, I was like I need to live up to the expectations. If I'm going to London College of Fashion, then I need to be the first one wearing all of this. I used to do so much kind of watching on socials about what people were wearing and then I wanted to be like the first person to wear it

Here Florence shares how she wanted to be prepared to enter a highly competitive fashion environment – she explains that as she was admitted to LCF, she spent days browsing social media to get a glimpse of what the university community was wearing. This “obsession” indicates how crucial it was for Florence to fit in. As Florence explains her “*LCF outfit strategy*”, she shares that she was going for “*quite noticeable*” clothes and “*wanted people to be like ‘ohh I really like that, where it is from’*”. This again indicates how important it was for Florence to fit in as well as be seen as an influencer in the LCF fashion community – she wanted to stand out from the crowd yet be part of it along with being accepted by LCF fashionistas.

Observation of these two different university experiences indicates how Florence’s taste changed. Previously she was purchasing new and trendy high-street clothes just because others were doing so, but during her LCF days she truly started developing her own style.

But it wasn’t until I moved to London to study. I had no money at all, and I was like, well, I’ve unintentionally put myself on a kind of year of no new clothes, because I’ve got absolutely no money to buy anything. Because London is crippling expensive. So, I was like, okay what do I do with this, where can I buy second hand, what can I kind of borrow from my sister’s wardrobe, can I do clothes swap with different people, if I ever have an event to go to what can I rent

This passage shows how a change in lifestyle had a profound influence on Florence’s taste – by having limited economic capital, Florence had to reinterpret her style, her identity, and her taste. This difference in attitude towards discretionary spending highlights the contradiction between her high-end aspirations and low-income reality. She explains that “*this year of*

being really-really broke that made me actually change my consumption habits". It is intriguing how this state of life compares to her previous one in relation to consumption. While previously spontaneous shopping was coupled with loose budgeting, during her time as LCF student Florence had to seriously reconsider her spending. Similar to "traditional bourgeoisie" (Demetry, Thurk and Fine, 2015), Florence understood that this "poverty" is a temporarily condition, she managed to negotiate her life of low income with desires to maintaining middle-class amenities. Here Florence also reflects on several strategies, which incorporate a number of *"habits, moods, sensibilities, and views of the world"* (Swidler, 1986:277) necessary for her maintenance of middle-class existence. By trying to find ways to acquire "new" clothes, Florence engages in *"thriftiness"* (Demetry, Thurk and Fine, 2015:102). While originally the concept was used in line with such survival strategies dealing with home furnishing, groceries and health issues, Florence's case extends it to the sphere of fashion consumption. As a result, she adopted a number of strategies, which allowed her to maintain her fashion identity as well as helped her to develop her taste with the help of circular fashion.

While it can be anticipated that after graduating Florence experienced upward mobility and identity (re-) construction (Stephan, Hamilton, and Jafari, 2018) by entering the employment environment, she decided to start a consultancy business for independent sustainable businesses, which resulted in continuity of "traditional bourgeoisie" lifestyle. Florence reflects that as she was trying to grow her business, there was no way she *"could afford to even buy the clothes from these independent sustainable businesses"*. However, as Florence's disposable income was growing, she decided to adopt a new strategy of consumption – she reduced her purchases only to essential clothes that she would wear for a longer period of time and decided that they would only come from brands of higher end:

I'm just sticking to buying essentials at the moment, and I've got like a list, like I am running a list of independent brands I wanna support and what I'd like to buy one thing a month. Because it can easily be like 150 pounds or 180 pounds per garment. Which is quite a lot, like a lot more than I definitely used to spend

This passage indicates how Florence's consumption patterns resonate with Chen and Nelson (2017) observation of "new poor" consumers. Like them, Florence also performs a "compromised ideal consumption" where she strategically interprets and wields her capital to signal social class differences. By having more class than income, Florence acquires a high level of taste but being a young professional, she is not able to fulfil her desires financially. Florence's strategy of creating a list of clothes to purchase and shopping for them gradually, shows her necessity for engaging in moderate consumption, while capitalizing her advantages to afford clothes and accessories that are out of her price range (Chen and Nelson, 2017). The clothes that Florence refers to do not come cheap, however this price tag as well as the saving time period allow Florence to think a lot about these purchases. There is no room for making careless decisions and purchasing more disposable clothes like she did in the past.

Instead, she fills her wardrobe with well thought purchases from independent niche brands, which allows her to showcase her symbolic capital. This shows how in line with "traditional bourgeoisie" Florence adopts ethical consumption to navigate current circumstances (Demetry, Thirk and Fine, 2015). This explains her avoidance of large establishments and chains, with the preference towards smaller independent stores and designers. As a result, despite economic capital constraints Florence does not develop a "taste of necessity" (Bourdieu, 1984), instead she prioritizes quality in her purchases, where the trade-off is the

limitation to basic items (Chen and Nelson, 2017). While it may seem like a constraint to some consumers, it appears that Florence is happy with the fact that she buys a limited quantity of products – by advocating slow and sustainable fashion, she reinterprets her taste according to her transformed capital. Similar, to Chen and Nelson’s participants, Florence prioritises high quality basics that will help her to feel empowered – *“I wear what I feel kind of empowered in, especially in my job, I’m kind of, like, I’m quite young to be consulting, so I want to feel empowered as such”*. This quote indicates how Florence gives preference to objects that would help her to feel “empowered”. She mentions that during the last six months she purchased a couple of blazers and some smart trousers that would match her current lifestyle and new role. This notion of downshifting is therefore directly related to her current career stage (Demetry, Thurk and Fine, 2015), which also indicates a transformation of taste.

Florence’s example indicates several propositions that allow us to understand natural taste development better. Firstly, it shows how a change in lifestyle can lead to transformation of taste or its development. For Florence, like other consumers, a change in economic capital had a profound influence on taste, however opposed to developing “taste for necessity” (Bourdieu, 1984), Florence managed to develop her cultural and symbolic capital to ensure continuous cultivation of taste. Secondly, it allows us to see the relationship between environment and taste, as well as how one influences the other. While previous research connected taste to space (Skandalis, Banister, and Byrom, 2016), media (Bean, Khorramian, and O’Donnell, 2018) and bloggers (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips, 2013), little has been said on the impact of environment on one’s taste. By being exposed to sophisticated and extraordinary fashions of LCF, Florence was able to change her perspective on fashion in general, which lead her to developing more refined taste. Thirdly, it extends the literature on

“new poor” consumers (Chen and Nelson, 2020) by providing a further inquiry into their tastes by placing it in the environment. Specifically, it provides an overview of how consumers can develop their “symbolic capital” as they capitalize their advantages to afford products that are beyond their financial reach.

6.3. Conclusion of “Taste Curation and Taste Development”

Referring back to Cunningham (2018), this chapter revealed that taste is indeed a rare flower that requires cultivation throughout one’s lifetime. This chapter therefore explored the ways in which individuals look after their tastes. As it was explored in literature review of this thesis “*tastes are not given or determined*” (Hennion, 2007:101), but learned and refined. Research determined that consumers advance their tastes by engaging in “taste curation” and “taste development”. This section shows, how within a consumption lens, taste should be observed as “continuous” and “never stable”. Consumer narratives explored in this research suggest that individuals are preoccupied with taste development throughout the whole course of their life and therefore there should be no standard of what “final taste” is.

This thesis defines taste curation as the practice of selection, refinement, and organization with the goal of enhancement of aesthetic identity. Exploration of this activity was performed by looking at objects, space, and doings. Similar to traditional curation, taste curation requires objects that are placed in space with doings. The present research established that consumers start their collections either with the help of others or themselves. These objects grow to be an important and, in some cases, an inseparable part of their identity (Ahuvia, 2005). However, for these objects to generate meaning, they have to be placed in space. Observation of wardrobes allowed establishment of how previously private spaces became an

important part of one's home that not only keep possessions safe but also showcase taste to others. Finally, observation of doings showed how consumers develop a set of rituals around these objects, including acquisition, preservation, and deaccessioning.

Exploration of "taste development" allowed observation of how individuals develop taste for objects discussed in "taste curation". Two approaches of taste development were established, namely taste development through "taste engineering" and taste development through "exposure". In line with previous research (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017), the present study observed how RepLadies cultivated their taste through taste engineering. By adapting the framework to the context of counterfeit consumption and the RepLadies forum, the present research identified fourth practice of "taste engineering" – "contribution to institutional materials". While these were not discussed much in the original paper on "taste engineering", the present research established that the addition of the fourth practice allows us to see how taste is cultivated continuously. Observation of taste through "exposure" suggests that individuals can develop their taste by engaging with "exposure through media" or by experiencing "exposure through the change of environment". Modern day media, particularly social media, acts as a facilitator of taste regime with its various aesthetic communities, which allows individuals to culturally broaden their understanding of tasteful objects. By following influencers and niche magazines, individuals can cultivate their taste and surround themselves with various aesthetic experiences. Observation of "exposure through the change of environment" allowed us to see how consumer's tastes transform during their lives. This type of taste development was connected to exploration of "upward mobility" and "reconstruction of identity" (Destin and Debrosse, 2017).

Overall, this chapter presented an in-depth overview of how individuals develop their taste, which allowed us to establish that taste is continuous and prone to change. It has briefly touched upon communities and their role in taste development. Further observation of these is essential. The next chapter introduces the concept of “taste communities” and discusses their role in ideologies of taste.

Chapter Seven: Taste Communities

7.0. Introduction

Arsel and Bean (2013) highlight the importance of more profound inquiries into “*democratization of tastemaking through collaborative marketplace communities*”. One of the ways to tackle this is to observe how taste is performed within various communities. For instance, the present study explores two different communities – YouTube Vova Haulers and Reddit RepLadies. Given that individuals in these communities are united by the same interests, beliefs and consumption practices, this study proposes that they can also be observed from a point of view of taste community, which the present research defines as a group of individuals who share similar aesthetic preferences and who deepen their connoisseurship in the field of their common interest by interacting on an ongoing basis. While existing research has neglected exploration of taste communities as such, literature shows presence of them in the majority of taste related studies. For instance, both Apartment Therapy and Kinfolk magazine as orchestrators of taste are a form of taste community, as those who follow these taste regimes, express similar tastes which make them part of taste communities.

Overall, three core characteristics of taste community can be observed. These include “mutual engagement”, “practice-based benefits”, and “construction of taste regime”. In their nature taste communities closely resemble “communities of practice” (Gannon and Prothero, 2016, 2018; Wenger, McDarmott and Snyder, 2002). Particularly, the present study adopts the “*mutual engagement*” characteristic from Gannon and Prothero (2016; 2018) as every community is built on connection and engagement among its members. Therefore, it can be

argued that “mutual engagement” as a characteristic can be applied to every type of online community. In the case of RepLadies and Vova Haulers taste communities “mutual engagement” is discussed in terms of social interactions and relationships within these communities as well as how these are structured hierarchically – vertically or horizontally. Although both communities are constantly “mutually engaged”, the forms of this engagement differ in their nature. Additionally, being part of these communities allows members to achieve “practice-based benefits” – these benefits can include both “enduring benefits” (adopted from Murray and Desrayaud, 2021) as well further development of economic, social, and symbolic capital. These benefits can be achieved both on individual or collective levels, but one distinguishing feature is that they would be impossible to reach without the taste community. Finally, taste is the element that united these consumers in the first place and lead to creation of taste communities. Hence, “construction of taste regime” helps members to achieve mutual taste. In line with previous studies (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Dolbec and Maciel, 2018), members of taste communities follow certain taste regimes that are created within these communities. Like those who follow visual and aesthetic guidance from Kinfolk magazine or Apartment Therapy website, members of taste communities in this study also stick to certain taste regimes that they are creating within their communities that allow them to articulate their taste with regards to certain aesthetic standards. These three characteristics are discussed in greater detail in the next several sections.

7.1. Mutual Engagement

Wenger (1998; 2000) identifies four dimensions of “mutual engagement”, which include social interaction, relationships, mutual support, and joint activities. Due to the nature of taste communities studied, not all these dimensions are present and some of them, like social

interaction and mutual support, merge, while others are transformed to match the nature of discussed communities. Specifically, the present study identified that “mutual engagement” can be observed in relation to regulation of activity and relationship structure. These two dimensions are essential for taste community to perform on a certain level and remain a dedicated space for its members.

Regulation of activity

RepLadies describe themselves as a “*replica community*” and “*a happy place for discussion about women’s replica (and authentic) designer bags, clothing, and accessories*”. The mission of this virtual community is therefore to “*enjoy fashion at any level*” – or in other words to normalize the consumption of replicas. Founded in August 2016, RepLadies unites the adorers of counterfeit luxury fashion by providing a digital space for discussion and connection. By having a strict list of rules as well as guides for new members, the forum regulates activities and creates a “safe space” for its members, where RepLadies can discuss their replica purchases more freely without being worried about being judged for their consumption choices. Because replica products are generally seen as a rather controversial phenomena, having access to this community allows RepLadies to feel like they are not alone in this world. In this “safe space” forum members therefore can discuss their replica related problems as well as virtually meet like-minded individuals, which facilitates “mutual engagement”. Similar to other Reddit communities, RepLadies features moderators and regular users. The first ones are responsible for ensuring that the content that is posted responds to the rules of Reddit as well as the community, they are using “*governing mechanisms that structure participation in a community to facilitate cooperation and prevent abuse*” (Grimmelmann, 2015:42). Wenger (1998) highlights how transformation of mutual

engagement into community requires work. Therefore, the activity performed by RepLadies forum moderators can be seen as a form of “*community maintenance*” (Wenger, 1998:74). Although it can be invisible to regular members, it is crucial for the performance of the community. Observation of RepLadies “*community maintenance*” practices thus allow to extend understanding on notion of “work” by exploring how moderators are keeping RepLadies “safe”. One of the ways this is commonly achieved on reddit is through introduction of regulations, or “*reddiquette*”, defined as “*an informal expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves*” (Reddit, 2022). While some RepLadies rules follow “reddiquette” guidance, other are more specific to the nature of the community. For instance, moderators state that “*this is a safe place to discuss replicas; do not make it otherwise*” and emphasize that “*low-effort submissions will be removed*”. Particularly, RepLadies features an extensive guide on “*Posting Guidelines*”, which was created as a response to the desire of moderators to encourage content that will interesting and beneficial for all community members. Here, forum members are often asked to edit their submissions to make them relevant for RepLadies as well as to avoid repetition of content. In addition, RepLadies features an extensive section on how to submit requests, start threads and comment on existing ones. Having read through all these sections indicates how seriously RepLadies moderators treat their community, which emphasises how some Reddit communities gradually shift towards being “*partial institutions*”. Although, moderators highlight that these regulations might feel “*intimidating and cumbersome*”, the presence of them is essential in order for RepLadies to remain a “safe space” for its members.

One the other hand, Vova Haulers are not united by the same space as RepLadies, since they post their content to YouTube – a video sharing platform, where vloggers can also communicate with their subscribers in the comments section to the video. Since, YouTube

does not offer the same space as Reddit, by having similar interests and tastes, Vova Haulers are creating a taste community using embedded social networking features of YouTube. However, similar to Reddit, YouTube also features an extensive section on “Community Guidelines”. Not only the list articulates what type of content is not allowed on the video-sharing platform, it also encourages the viewers to be mindful in terms of how they engage with the content posted, for instance by having strict regulations on “Hate Speech” and “Harassment and Cyberbullying” (YouTube, 2021). However, YouTube creators too impose the rules of their own. For instance, observation of Haulers videos showed that these vloggers frequently do disclaimers for their viewers on the nature of products they are showcasing in the videos, since not all their subscribers understand their love for replica designer products:

“A little disclaimer before we get into this video. In no way I am trying to brag about these items. Yes, I am aware that all these items are fake designer items, and I am not trying to advertise these items in this video either and I am shopping at my own will and I love Vova as an app and I am shopping there for my own happiness really”

(Alice Holmes “I Found Really Cheap Designer Items on Vova. Dior, Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Moncler”)

“The reason why I am doing this video is not to promote buying fake designer items, it is literally to test it out for you guys, because I really like watching these types of videos”

(McKenna Grace “Testing Fake designer Items from Vova – Is It a Scam?”)

Here, vloggers are creating rapport between themselves and their audience. For instance, Alice mentions that she is aware that these products are fake, and she does not try to pretend

that they are real. Similarly, she shares that she does not advertise these products, which implies that she purchased these with her own money. Although it is unclear whether Vova provided any incentive for her to spend, in one of her Q&A videos Alice shared that Vova does not pay her to advertise these products. Similarly, Grace, who filmed only one video on Vova haul, also claims that she does not want to promote replica products, but she decided to order them to film a video for her YouTube channel because she enjoys watching these videos. Both Alice and Grace did not receive any hateful comments to these videos, however following this disclaimer strategy allowed them to state their opinion on replica products. Similarly, this disclaimer allows Haulers to set the rules for the audience – they have explained their viewpoint on this and hence anyone who decides to not follow these rules and express hate, will be blocked. While YouTube does enforce community guidelines in its web-based communities (Nycyk, 2016), every vlogger is also responsible for setting their own boundaries. For example, another frequent Vova Hauler, Amber Knight, switched off comments to her replica designer videos, as she does not want to cope and deal with the hateful comments made by her audience. Additionally, she was the only Hauler who told her audience not to watch her videos if they do not like replica items:

”But if these kind of fake designer replicas aren’t for you, then just click off this video”

(Amber Knight “TESTING seriously CHEAP DESIGNER items and I am SHOOK”)

This indicates that possibly in the past Amber has received a lot of hateful comments to her videos and therefore decided to let her subscribers know that they can skip some of her content if they do not approve. By creating these rules, Haulers show their audience that they are the ones, who control the taste community. Through this rapport, Vova Haulers can

exercise their taste as well as get hold of the megaphone. These disclaimers show that the content published on their channel is for those who aspire to be the members of their taste community – those consumers who favour fakes as well and as a result have similar tastes to Haulers. It can be thus argued that the relationships within Vova Haulers taste community are more complex than those in RepLadies – because Haulers are not united by a dedicated space, instead they are building their community around several YouTubers, who have their own audiences.

Relationship Structure

Community does not exist in the abstract, rather it exists because individuals are engaged in actions, whose meanings they negotiate with one another (Wenger, 1998). Relationships therefore become an inevitable part of “mutual engagement” and community performance. As previously mentioned, the RepLadies community features moderators and regular users. While the role of moderators has been unpacked in the section above, the role of regular users requires further investigation. Regular users can be seen as community members, who are participating in discussions mostly in the “answer-person” role (Buntain and Golbeck, 2014) as they are answering the questions posted by other users. Although it is unclear whether moderators themselves actively engage in community discussions, most of “community content” is produced by regular users.

While there is not presence of direct “vertical” or “horizontal” relationships within the RepLadies community, it can be argued that their relationship resembles “horizontal” one the most. This is because everyone is relatively equal, everyone can post questions, and everyone can answer them. As opposed to bloggers, who acquire audience and thus have a “vertical”

relationship with it, RepLadies are structured in a way that these boundaries are mostly inexistent. While moderators do have the highest role in this community, there is no single user who would dominate in asking questions and starting discussions. Everyone here is entitled to be a creator, by sharing their beliefs and opinions they are producing content for others to enjoy, discuss and reply to. Hence, it can be argued that one of the reasons for why RepLadies feel safe sharing their passion is because everyone is treated equal and as part of the community. While some discussions, such as Daily Discussion and OOTD, are created daily by moderators, other threads are started by regular users, which gives them space to feel like they are the heart of the community.

On the other hand, Vova Haulers are more structured as a taste community due to the nature of their activity. Whereas on RepLadies moderators can also adopt “answer-person” role and engage in discussions, the Vova Haulers community has a slightly different relationship structure. Given that YouTube offers a different type of user-generated content, here the roles are typically divided into creators and audience. Creators, or vloggers, therefore, share their life with their subscribers in the form of different types of video content, whereas subscribers, or audience, watch and react to these. Observation of Haulers allowed observation of how the taste community encompasses both horizontal and vertical relationships between Haulers and their audience. Although there is a presence of some hierarchical order and rules set out by vloggers, all of them share a common interest and taste – enjoyment of fake designer products and replicas. Each video represents various levels of relationships within the taste community – haulers often mention other haulers from whom they have got inspiration for filming content as well as becoming members of this community:

“I watch these videos all the time. I find them so interesting to watch. I tell you there is just loads of them – Roxxsauros, she does loads of fake videos. She even went to fake markets – like bargained them down in price and stuff. For some unknown reason I am just obsessed with watching them”

(McKenna Grace “Testing Fake designer Items from Vova – Is It a Scam?”)

“I first saw Amber Knight do this, so I’m gonna link her video in the description below. She is actually one of my favorite YouTubers at the minute”

(Ellie Victoria “FAKE Designer Items Haul?! Really Cheap!! £16 AirPods”)

“I saw my really good friend Ellie do this on her channel. She picked some really cool stuff, so I really wanted to try because I cannot afford the real designer”

(Katy Rebecca “Designer Haul (Fake) Gucci for £3!!”)

Here less popular YouTubers (with subscribers at or less than ten thousand) are referring to how more popular YouTubers have inspired them to film videos about replica purchases. For instance, Grace and Ellie refer to Roxxsauros and Amber Knight as their favourite YouTubers whose videos they enjoy. For instance, Roxxsauros is a famous British YouTuber – with more than four million subscribers she has not only acquired a huge audience, but also scored a collaboration with make-up brand Revolution. This popularity of existing vloggers played a major role in encouraging more individuals to start new YouTube channels (Pedroni, 2015). By becoming celebrities from ordinary consumers, popular bloggers show their admirers that it is possible to build a career that will lead the author to occupy space in the fashion and beauty industry. Hence, being a Roxxsauros audience member, Grace too decided to start her YouTube channel and videos of her favourite YouTubers act as a guidance on what content

she should post. On the contrary, Katy shares that she decided to do this video because her friend Ellie has done this on her channel. During the observation it felt like several YouTubers, specifically Ellie Victoria, Alice Holmes and Katy Rebecca have closely bonded because of their hauls, as they have constantly supported each other in the comments to their videos as well as mentioned each other's channels in the description boxes. This provides another evidence of existence of taste community within YouTube. Similarly, by watching videos of other bloggers who have the same taste and interest, it can be argued that Vova Haulers are both producers and consumers of content in their taste community. Opposed to McQuarrie et al's (2013) bloggers who only produced content, Vova haulers also enjoy watching the content made by other vloggers.

Additionally, Haulers constantly refer to their audience by asking for their advice in the comments sections – while the more popular vloggers rarely answer comments or questions or in some cases have comments switched off (Amber Knight), all Vova Haulers in this study have actively engaged with their audience. Additionally, Haulers frequently mention that their audience is the reason why they are filming these hauls:

“I’ve had so much love of my first one. I don’t know if I said it already but these Vova videos are going to be like a miniseries on my channel”

(Ellie Victoria “FAKE Designer Items Haul? Really Cheap!! YSL Bag for £20”)

“Everyone’s been asking me constantly “when you are going to be uploading another Vova haul”. Especially since I uploaded my Vova haul a year ago, which got quite a lot of views and I feel like it’s a perfect time to upload one again because I have been shopping on Vova and honestly their designer dupes on there are unreal”

(Alice Holmes “I Found Really Cheap Designer Items on Vova. Dior, Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Moncler”)

”I know you guys love to watch it and I absolutely love filming them. I would say they are my favorite types of videos to film, but I’m back with the Vova one”

(Amber Knight “TESTING seriously CHEAP DESIGNER items and I am SHOOK”)

Here, vloggers mention how positively their audience reacts to their videos – they highlight the constant interest in their content and share that they “absolutely love filming them”. Having a great level of response from the audience, is one of the key motivation drivers for vloggers to continue running their YouTube channel as it requires a lot of work, dedication, and time. Thus, when content is received positively by the audience it not only generated views for the vlogger that result in monetary gain but allow them to understand that they are doing something that is valued by their community. Although, when bloggers became popular and start treating their community as audience (McQuarrie et al., 2013) they no longer ask them what content they want to see, they still produce videos that reflect their and their audience tastes. In relation to Vova Haulers, for example Ellie and Alice saw that Vova videos were very popular on their channels, so they decided to turn them into a “mini-series” (similar to what Roxxaurus did) where they review the items they have ordered. While Ellie stopped at three videos, Alice has created around ten videos in this theme so far. While her audience frequently asks her whether she is doing these just for views, Alice explains this behaviour by mentioning that she truly loves her purchases as well as enjoys wearing them in her daily life.

Another element of “relationship” in Wenger’s framework (1998) constitutes their personal interaction in real life. It should be noted that after more than twenty years since Wenger’s initial work, communities have experienced a virtual transformation. Therefore, interaction of community members in real life becomes less relevant, due to most of the activity being in online spaces. However, while there is no evidence that RepLadies members interact in real life and outside their virtual community, Vova Haulers in their narratives frequently mention how they have developed relationships with other vloggers outside of the “taste community”. Since, they mention this briefly, it is again unclear whether this relationship is regular and continuous, or whether it is just a form of “support”. Nevertheless, as mentioned above some vloggers constantly refer to one another in their videos – for instance, mention that they have enjoyed watching their video or that they inspired them to film their own. Similarly, this support is frequently present in the comments sections – some vloggers show their support by posting comments under each other’s videos.

This support allows development of interpersonal relationships between community members. As a result, this frequently may lead to development of friendship in the future or making it more “career specific” – collaborations in content through tags, attendance of events, and appearance in each other’s videos to name a few. Particularly, mutual engagement allows community members to achieve enduring benefits, which are discussed in the next section.

7.2. Practice-Based Benefits

Taste communities not only allow consumers to find like-minded individuals, who share similar tastes and interests, but they also help them receive benefits related to their life as well as understanding of the world around them. These communities are thus not only places

for building virtual relationships, but they also help individuals to exchange knowledge with the goal of becoming more proficient in their practice, similar to taste development. Being part of these communities, requires participants to displays serious personal effort (Murray and Desrayaud, 2021). For them both the forum and YouTube channels are the act of “*serious leisure*” (Stebbins, 1982). Given that this theory emerged from data collection and was not discussed in the literature review of this thesis, a brief overview of the concept is essential. Originally, developed as a concept to understand how individuals spend time, “*serious leisure*” is defined as “*a systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience*” (Stebbins, 1992:3). Lately, research connected exploration of “serious leisure” to nomad lifestyle (Thompson, 2019); gaming (Slak-Valek and Williams, 2019), online fashion environment (Lim, 2020; Murray and Desrayaud, 2021). Additionally, growing interest in “serious leisure” has resulted in the emergence of academic journals, such as Journal of Leisure Research and International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure, which heavily connect the concept to contemporary culture. Overall, “*serious leisure*” is defined through six characteristics – perseverance, career progress, display of personal effort based on advanced knowledge and training, acquisition of enduring benefits, a strongly held identity, and participation within unique social worlds (Stebbins, 1982). While not all of these characteristics are evident from the forum analysis, it can be argued that only part of them is displayed by members to the public.

Specifically, RepLadies engage in “serious leisure” through several community related practices. For instance, they are providing detailed advice on replica fashion, which indicates display of personal effort and advanced knowledge – they are QC (quality check) accessories,

help choosing between alternatives, construct replicas capsule wardrobes as well as help with fears of beings called out to name a few. Imposed regulations about quality of posts and requests as well as how attentively members respond to various queries suggests how serious RepLadies are about the community. In the FAQ Section of the forum, moderators highlight how “*ensuring quality of content*” is a time-consuming activity, which emphasises seriousness of the leisure that RepLadies engage in. Although, they are not essentially engaged in fashion through employment, they demonstrate how by helping others they are gradually becoming part of the fashion system. As it appears from the forum observation, some members are more active than others, which is showcased through various badges near their nickname. This shows that not only they have been responsive to questions of others but have also engaged in “serious leisure” through creation of various guides that were discussed earlier in Section 6.2.1. of this thesis. Observation of these manuals therefore suggests that by using their advanced knowledge and training, RepLadies are helping others in their taste community to gain various benefits.

For instance, many forum members emphasised how the forum helped them to transform their consumption and style. By becoming adopters of replica luxury fashion, members were able to rationalise their spending, project desired image and obtain products that were preciously out of their reach. This outcome is similar to “*enduring benefits*” (Murray and Desrayaud, 2021). By being active members of the taste community, RepLadies are achieving self-enrichment, re-creation, or renewal of self; they are experiencing feelings of accomplishment; as well as enhancing their self-image and self-expression:

As a WOC I always tend to dress nicer and look “affluent” (nice hair, natural makeup, good posture, pleasant, etc) it’s very performative. I find that when I wear

my reps, I just feel more polished and idk if it's the confidence, but I get way better service. (Ex: compliments from a hostess, smiles from a stranger, small talk) it just gives me a sense of relief where I feel like I "belong"

(locheness4)

For us it hasn't been about just reps (we rarely wear logos) but being dress and act appropriately for the situations. When we travel we like to stay in nice places which usually means we are the only ones our age around. We have received everything from job offers to my husband, being invited to random wedding and making friends with very interesting people otherwise we wouldn't have talked to. We find that many times travelers our age are underdress for certain situations, over dressed for others or just sloppy (wrinkle clothes, Fit is wrong, etc). We have gotten seated at restaurants before others one situation specially when we didn't have a reservation and were seated immediately while other couple that was waiting when we came in had to go complain to be seated but they were a mess (think leggings are a fine restaurant).

(oldcelinecc)

I used to be ignored at the luxury counters - but one day when I was literally rocking a fake DAISY MAY rep (not even branded lol) this woman was sooo excited to sell me authentic Givenchy and took me over to some mirrors to show me how beautiful I looked with it.

(thelatterchoice)

These three quotes represent how by wearing replica fashion, consumers are able to gain enduring benefits in their life. They were all taken from a forum thread called “Replica Success Stories”, where RepLadies discussed how by wearing replicas they were able to gain various benefits or feel better about themselves. In line with previous research (Lee and Jognson, 1997) RepLadies believe that their appearance, in particular how they are dressed, can have a profound influence on the level of service they receive. This is because the way individuals dress allows others to form impressions about them, classify them and understand how to behave towards them (Paulins, 2005). Here RepLady *thelatterchoice* shares how the attitude towards her changed – previously she was ignored by sales associates in luxury stores, but after she decided to spice up her outfit with a replica handbag, she immediately received attention in the Givenchy boutique. Replicas therefore gave her more confidence as well as made her more appealing to luxury sales associates as a client type.

Similarly, the other two RepLadies have spoken about how looking “affluent” and “appropriate” resulted in being treated in a special way. For instance, *lochness4* shares how by wearing replicas she was able to feel more polished as well as get better service. She reflects on how receiving compliments from a hostess or smile from a stranger makes her feel like she “belongs”. Surprisingly, existing research frequently connects consumption of luxury products, whether real or fake, to individuals experiencing insecurity. For instance, in his extensive work Kasser (2002) argues that materialistic consumers are likely to struggle in their well-being as they are constantly on the run for new possessions to maintain their identity projects. Similarly, research connected consumption of counterfeits to consumers experiencing high levels of insecurity as well as fear of losing their face and status (Jiang and Shan, 2016).

RepLadies, on the contrary, show how by wearing replicas they were able to boost their confidence and self-esteem, which allowed them to get better service not only in luxury stores, but in others places as well. For instance, *oldcelinecc* shares how for her and her husband being dressed appropriately resulted in them being treated on the highest level at restaurants and hotels. Although her comment indicates that she is relatively young to be able to afford going to these premises, she shares how they were able to build interesting relationships, get invited to events and skip queues in the restaurants all thanks to their appearance. To her, being dressed well thus allows her to experience benefits related to other elements of her life and not essentially her personal confidence and esteem. Although she mentions that they prefer inconspicuous consumption in replicas, they have always managed to look more put together as opposed to other travellers of their age. These comments suggest how serious engagement in replica fashion allows consumers to construct their desired identity as well as to receive enduring benefits as a result.

On the other hand, Vova Haulers benefits revolve around blogging achievements. Being part of the taste community allows them to receive various benefits and as their “career” (Pedroni, 2015) is progressing, they are accumulating economic, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). They, too, engage in “*serious leisure*” – by creating content on YouTube as well as constantly developing and maintaining their channels, Vova Haulers can boost their economic capital by monetizing their content (Lim, 2019). Broadly, these profit options can include material benefits, such as receiving clothes or make up to be showcased in a haul from various brands, or financial rewards – being paid for advertisements, receiving a percentage of sales from promoting certain products, as well as creating collaborations with brands. With businesses paying more attention to micro-influencers, Vova Haulers work as an ideal example of micro-celebrities, who can engage their audience well and receive these

financial benefits in the future. However, even currently Vova Haulers can achieve certain level of economic capital from their content. Although, most of the haulers purchase products for haul videos themselves, in her recent video on replica purchases Alice shared that some sellers from a similar platform (DHGate) have sent her a few items:

“I actually contacted a few sellers on DHGate and I asked if they would like to work with me on YouTube video and five sellers have actually sent me a few of their items, which I am super excited to show you in today’s video [...] Honestly, I am super grateful for all the products the other sellers have sent me and I would genuinely use these. I honestly love them so much.”

(Alice Holmes “I Found so many CHEAP DESIGNER ITEMS on DHGATE”)

Alice is one of the most determined Vova Haulers – she filmed this type of content more frequently than other vloggers in this taste community. While some of her audience accused her of filming these just for views, Alice claims that she truly loves finding stuff on websites that sell replica products. On the contrary, these videos are truly her most watched ones. As a result, Alice decided to see whether some of the sellers would want to collaborate with her by offering material benefits – sending her free products for review. By having access to these material offerings, Alice can film more videos of this kind, which results in her ability to gain financial benefits – by monetizing views as well as having YouTube generated advertisements in her videos. Although Alice heavily engages in this type of “serious leisure”, she explains that YouTube is not her main source of income as she has to do other work in order to support herself, however she believes that eventually it will be her main “employment”. This indicates that while Alice started her blog as “immersive hobby

participation” (Lim, 2019), she can transform it into revenue generating entrepreneurial action. However, to achieve this, Alice as well as other vloggers need to work on developing other forms of capital associated with “YouTube Projects”.

One of these forms includes “social capital”, which in the case of blogging can be achieved by attracting more subscribers to channels and blogs. Pedroni (2015) suggests that social capital in the blogosphere can be measured both “quantitatively” and “qualitatively”. The “quantitative” measurement refers to number of views, likes, dislikes and subscribers, whereas the “qualitative” implies the comments that subscribers leave under the videos. For instance, from the start of the data collection for this research in December 2019, many vloggers were able to double the number of their subscribers by carefully curating the content they post as well as constantly finding ways to achieve bigger audiences. To illustrate, some vloggers, like McKenna Grace, are constantly being innovative with what content to film, posting schedules and improving the overall appearance of the channel. This consistency in “serious leisure” thus allows vloggers to be perceived seriously by their audience – by having a clear schedule of when the next video will air, McKenna is able to develop a close bond with her admirers. Her channel has the most aesthetically pleasant appearance out of all vloggers chosen for this study, which indicates how she treats YouTube not as a hobby, but as a “creative labour” (Duffy and Hund, 2015).

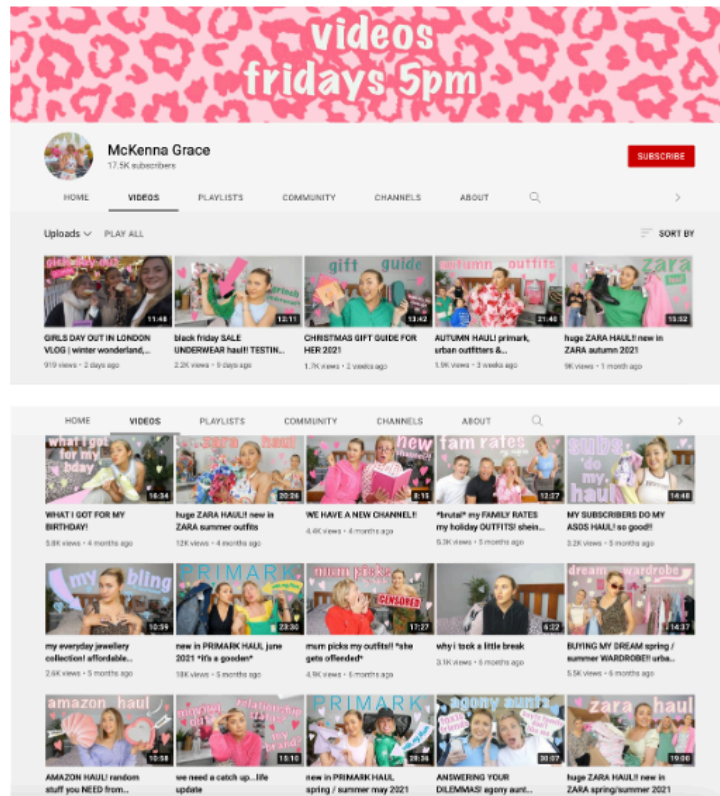


Image 12: McKenna's YouTube Profile

Finally, vloggers can also gain a “symbolic capital”, which in this specific context refers to a level of legitimization reached by fashion vloggers. “Symbolic capital” thus shows how successful Vova Haulers are in terms of exercising their taste within the taste community. This legitimization is achieved through creation of content as well as participation in the taste community. For instance, Vova Haulers audience frequently shares in the comments to haulers videos how they have purchased similar or same products. Although, most of these products were popular and well known before haulers started speaking about them, which implies that they are not responsible for their popularization, by exercising their taste haulers have inclined their audience to purchase similar products. As a result, many subscribers might want to emulate the style of the vlogger, adding them credibility, which can lead to brands deciding to collaborate with the vlogger based on their high level of symbolic capital.

To understand how this is achieved, exploration of taste within these communities is required.

7.3. Construction of Taste Regime

Members of taste communities are united by their taste as well as by the ways in which they exercise it. Given that both RepLadies and Vova Haulers communities were simply observed – no interviews were done with these participants – their taste can be thus formulated from their consumption preferences, their narratives, descriptions, and visual elements (such as photos for RepLadies, and videos on YouTube channels for Vova Haulers). For example, Daily Discussions and OOTD (Outfit Of The Day) threads allow a glimpse of taste within RepLadies communities. Observation of these allowed to see that when it comes to consumption and taste, RepLadies typically prefer certain products to others. Given that the forum community is considered by many as a “private space”, personal images are rarely shared apart from possessions posted for review or QC. Therefore, discussions are the only source of comprehensive examples that can be interpreted to understand what constitutes taste within this community. Overall, RepLadies taste can be describes as “classic”, which is emphasised through the frequent use of term “classic style” when describing their fashion choices:

The secret is the ‘classic style’ look and you don’t have to spend a bunch - get classics that look good over the years. For example, some nicely cut jeans, a clean cotton T-shirt with a cashmere cardigan popped over it and some cute rep jewelry, my rep Valentino Rock stud flats, a classic hairstyle (clean hair in a messy bun works

great) and there you go. I have some 'Pure Collection' classic cashmere cardigans that are over 10 years old and they still look amazing

Here, RepLady provides a fulfilling description of what constitutes “classic style” in fashion – Shany1315 mentions that appropriating classic style is easy, since it requires simple, clean and timeless clothes, that do not need to be expensive but have to be in good condition and shape. On a more theoretical note, “classic style” refers to a style of clothes that remains unchanged and has an ongoing enduring appeal (Kwon, 2017). Such garments as Little Black Dress, white shirt, black jeans, smart trousers and cashmere turtleneck are often mentioned in relation to it. “Classic style” is often described as epitome of “good taste”, since instead of following trends and popular fashion, individuals are choosing timeless items that always present them as chic and appropriate. RepLadies frequently mention “classic style” when discussing their outfit choice. Not only they purchase handbags that are considered timeless, like Chanel Flap and Chanel Reissue, but they also construct their outfit to match this description as well. For instance, they give preference to classic colours including black, navy, brown, burgundy as well as neutral colours like white and beige. When it comes to the materials, natural fibres are essential – here RepLadies prefer organic cotton, merino wool, cashmere and silk. The cut has to be classic as well, as do the patterns – while majority of RepLadies as well as other adopters of “classic style” prefer having no patterns in their clothes, such designs as houndstooth, tartan, plaid and stripes are still allowed. To illustrate, below are several images from OOTD threads that help to understand visually what RepLadies mean by classic style:



Image 13: RepLadies "Classic Style" Outfits

Although these outfits were shared by different RepLadies in different time periods, all of them can be described as “classic style”. Despite all these outfits including replica items – they all depict the value of traditional design and not trends. From the images it is unclear, whether the black jeans come from the current fashion season, or whether they were purchased ten years ago. The same can be said about the camel coat and white silk shirt. All of these elements have stood the test of time (Kwon, 2017). Similarly, the clothing these RepLadies wear frequently also comes from replica factories, however because all of these items are rather inconspicuous it is unclear whether the camel coat is replica of Max Mara or it was simply purchased at Zara.

In their discussions, RepLadies frequently mention that “classic style” allows them to look accomplished and feel a sense of belonging – as some of them tend to carry handbags, like Hermes Birkin, that are worth thousands of pounds in authentic version, it is therefore essential for them to dress like they can afford this bag. Therefore, “classic style” appears to be a perfect solution – it is always considered appropriate, and since it is inconspicuous, it

allows RepLadies to fit into society easily (Kwon, 2017). Similarly, “classic style” is often referred to as safe choice in clothes, because it allows individuals to avoid fashion “faux pas” and create tasteful outfits with basic or essential clothes. RepLadies frequently reflected on how they have seen stylish females with authentic luxury products, who were dressed in “classic” clothes, which made their outfits look exceptional and well put together. Therefore, in their community they have decided to emulate this taste.

Given that little is known about RepLadies “real lives”, one can only guess whether their cultural capital and taste translates to other domains of their lives. Due to the forum being highly textual and topic specific, the overall picture of RepLadies lives is blurry. As many of the RepLadies admitted that wearing replicas allows them to feel confident as well as portray desired identity, it can be concluded that by engaging in this taste regime which requires emulation of classic style, RepLadies are trying to make an impression of having generally higher level of cultural capital in relation to all spheres of life. To illustrate, RepLadies decision to purchase these products out of certain utilitarian needs, such as fear of ruining the item, potentially indicates lower cultural capital as they are preoccupied with pragmatic thoughts around solutions for basic requirements (Holt, 1998). Similarly, their high awareness of brands and fashion related aesthetic objects hints that they potentially have high cultural capital. By being looked at simply from a perspective of RepLadies forum, these consumers can be describes as having HCC in relation to purchased objects (replicas). However, their decision to follow certain aesthetic – “classic style” – and the narratives around it suggest that they are trying to make an impression of having HCC. Similar to enduring benefits discussed above, RepLadies were able to significantly boost their public self by purchasing replicas and adopting “classic style” – not only they were presenting their

desired identity of HCC, but with it they were also able to make others think like they are coming from HCC background.

Similar to fashion blogs, the channels of Vova Haulers are characterised by “remediating existing genre forms and combining them in new forms, where amateur bricolage approaches are combined with the reproduction of familiar features from the established fashion media” (Engholm and Hansen-Hansen, 2013:1). This bricolage allows Vova Haulers to showcase their taste in fashion, beauty, travel and life. Their channels feature extensive span of topics, ranging from fashion and beauty hauls to answering questions related to personal issues, such as disabilities and relationships. However, fashion remains their predominant interest with a great variety of hauls from both physical and online stores posted on their channels. These include thrifts from TKMaxx, Shein, Wish and Primark to name a few. These hauls as well as vloggers social media accounts provide insight on what their taste is like in terms of fashion options.



Image 14: Vova Haulers Outfits

Vova Haulers represent the style of ordinary young UK female consumers – their choice of make-up and outfits indicates how they are following “popular style”. Most of them give preference to particular types of make-up (i.e false eyelashes, overlined lips, fake tan) as well as outfits (i.e. mini dresses for going out, skinny jeans and bombers, chunky sneakers). As can be seen from the images above, these are opposite to RepLadies version of “classic style”. Instead, these showcase trendy offerings from high-street stores and generally represent the stylistic choices of UK females in a similar age group.

Therefore, despite the fact that both communities make relatively similar decisions to purchase a certain class of products, their tastes differ significantly. Overall, RepLadies taste can be described as high end and classic. Similar to their approach to “classic style” in terms of clothes, the bags that they purchase usually come on the classic side as well. Although, RepLadies are likely to have a mixture of authentic and fake luxury objects in their wardrobes, their narratives show that after a certain time they do not differentiate between these. Instead, they see them as their valuable possessions, which they cherish and use equally. By becoming part of RepLadies, these consumers were able to elevate their taste and preferences. Although some of the members admitted to purchasing poorly made fakes during their life, as their taste is developing, RepLadies are more prone to only purchase fakes of the highest qualities, the price of which might equal to a price of authentic bag from the middle segment, such as Coach, Kate Spade and Karl Lagerfeld. Because they are purchasing these luxury replicas with the goal of wearing them, it is crucial for them to choose these items carefully.

When RepLadies are discussing their replica purchases and taste, they frequently refer to “*tiers*”, which they define as “*the level of quality and accuracy of product to the benchmark*”

– *authentic version of the product*”. Different “tiers” frequently come up both in discussion threads and reviews when forum members are sharing their opinions on the quality of the products that have recently purchased or are planning to purchase. Since quality and close resemblance are important product elements for these consumers, developing and following the system of “tiers” allows RepLadies to purchase ideal replicas. Overall, the “tiers” system sees three levels of luxury replicas: “low tier”, “mid tier”, and “high tier”. These “tiers” correspond to the quality of the object as well as how accurately it resembles its authentic version. Below are some excerpts that illustrate how RepLadies conceptualise tiers in forum threads:

Low tier reps are easily callout able and look like cheap knock offs. Mid tier are reps that are better quality but you may be able to discern it is a rep by minor flaws, and high tiers are truly reps that are as close to 1:1 mirror images (super fakes).

High tier = good to great quality and accuracy, usually around 10-20% auth price

Mid tier = ok quality and good accuracy, seems to be 5-10% of auth price

Low tier = bad quality, it has the brand and that's pretty much it.

These several quotes shed light on what RepLadies mean by different “tiers”. As the quality of counterfeits is continuously increasing, they are no longer seen as faulty items that will break after the first wear. Instead, they are being considered by RepLadies as budget friendly alternatives to authentic products. The faulty items are identified by RepLadies as “low tier” or those items that are of extremely poor quality and despite having a brand logo depicted they will be easily identified by most consumers. Examples of “low tier” reps might include replica products sold in popular vacation destinations – although, by the place where they are

sold and how they are sold, consumers already know that these objects are fake, most of them represent “low tier” replicas. To illustrate, one of the quotes from RepLadies threads on “obsession with tiers” provides an ideal summary on what RepLadies mean by “tiers” based on a Louis Vuitton product:

Google "how to tell a real Louis Vuitton from a fake," these kinda stories were written in the days before the Super Fake...all the hideous bags they're showing as the "fake," are low tier stuff. Not even real leather handles, etc. Mid tier will have real leather handles, but the glazing on the edges will be too fat & puffy, not clean & almost natural looking like on an authentic LV. Labels are noticeably different than an authentic, & hardware will usually be plastic, or low grade metal. These bags should be in the \$100-\$225 range. And, a high tier LV, will look so much like a real, authentic LV only a brand fanatic, or expert will know exactly what to look for to be able to tell if it's a fake. These bags usually begin at \$250 & only go up.

(asomer30)

This example provides an illustrative clarification on what RepLadies mean when referring to “tiers”. Based on Louis Vuitton products, asomer30 distinguishes between three levels of “tiers” and how these translate into the product. Here, the member highlights how the use of different material (real leather versus fake leather) can make the product distinguishable in terms of “tiers” as well as what their price on the replica market will be. Discussions show that RepLadies mostly purchase products of “mid-tier” to “high tier” depending on how well the product is known. By purchasing replicas of these standards RepLadies can support their desired identity. On the other hand, introduction of “tiers” allows broadening of scholarly understanding of counterfeit products as well as their categorization. While existing research

has mostly concentrated on low tier products (Turunen and Laaksonen, 2011), resulting in the debate of quality and detectability, the present study suggests that other forms of counterfeits exist. Presence of reps of mid-tier to high-tier as marketplace offerings therefore starts a new stream of forthcoming research, since individuals who purchase these on a regular basis can represent a novel class of consumers.

When it comes to taste of Vova Haulers, it ranges from low to mid-level taste, and the items haulers purchase frequently represent popular taste. Vloggers purchase items that are extremely popular within their taste community as well as among consumers of authentic. These products can include both classic accessories, such as Louis Vuitton Neverfull and Lady Dior Bag, as well as emerging popular options as Louis Vuitton Multi Pochette. For instance, in one of her hauls, Alice refers to the latter accessory as “what everyone has”:

“So, the next thing is basically what everyone has – these Louis Vuitton mini like three bags thing. I’ve actually found one on Vova. I think it was £25 again ... It’s identical and absolutely unreal. Like this looks cool with all outfits. I’ve worn it a couple of times. Look how cool my bag is”

(Alice Holmes “I found really CHEAP Designer Items on Vova”)

This quote highlights how Alice herself understands that she follows the taste of others. Since the majority of consumer decisions are made in social environments, human tendency to mimic others occurs automatically (Tenner et al., 2008). Here, Alice admits that she has purchased an extremely popular handbag, but at the same time, she thinks that it’s a cool object. Even though the bag can be considered a “low tier” or “mid tier” by RepLadies, Alice emphasises that the bag is “identical”. Exploration of her hauls suggest that Alice uses the

word “identical” frequently do describe her purchases. However, in the majority of these “identical” cases, the product is either inexistant or is far from its authentic version. This provides a perspective on how Vova Haulers remain ordinary consumers with low levels of cultural capital in relation to fashion. Particularly, the example of Alice shows that during two years of her hauls, the items she purchased did not improve in terms of their appeal. Hence, it can be argued that while Vova Haulers are constantly exposed to these objects, they are not keen on training their eye.

However, while other Haulers have deployed a similar strategy, McKenna decided to focus on less popular item and express her uniqueness in terms of taste:

”So, this is cute, I know. There were a lot of very popular bags on there – you know, like the Dior Saddle bag and Louis Vuitton bag that everyone’s getting at the moment – there’s like 3 bags in one and its got like a little circle purse. There was loads of very popular bags on there, which I definitely could have gone for, but if I’m gonna go for something especially if its fake I’d rather not go for popular things, so I was looking more different things. Thing that I like the look of and thing that I will actually use myself”

(McKenna Grace “Testing Fake Designer Items from Vova – Is It a Scam”)

In the quote above McKenna reflects how she saw a variety of popular bags on Vova app. These popular replica purses are more likely to be identified as fake as well as be called out because everyone is constantly exposed to them. Whenever consumers are seeing different versions of the same bag, after a certain point of time it becomes easier for them to distinguish fake from real. As a response to this, McKenna decided to purchase a bag that is

not popular or well know, but which she might use. This indicates that not all Vova Haulers follow specific taste in terms of objects they purchase. Here McKenna is actually performing consumer avoidance (Lee, Motion and Conray, 2008), by which she is showcasing that she does not want to represent a “popular taste” and instead prefers something that is unknown. However, the case of McKenna is rather unique because the reason why she filmed this haul was “to test these products” for her audience. Therefore, she does not really represent the core of Vova Haulers taste community because for her this was purely content creation for audience entertainment.



Image 15: McKenna's Replica Louis Vuitton Bag

When executing their taste leadership, Vova Haulers are showing a persona (Goffman, 1959). As opposed to RepLadies, who wear their replica purchases constantly, it is unclear whether Vova Haulers consume or wear these products on the daily basis after the video is filmed. Only one vlogger – Alice – appears to wear her counterfeit purchases on a regular basis – she

frequently posts images to her Instagram where she is seen carrying her fake collection of bags when she goes out. In the images below Alice is captured with fake Louis Vuitton Multi Pochette, fake Lady Dior, and fake Gucci Dionysus.

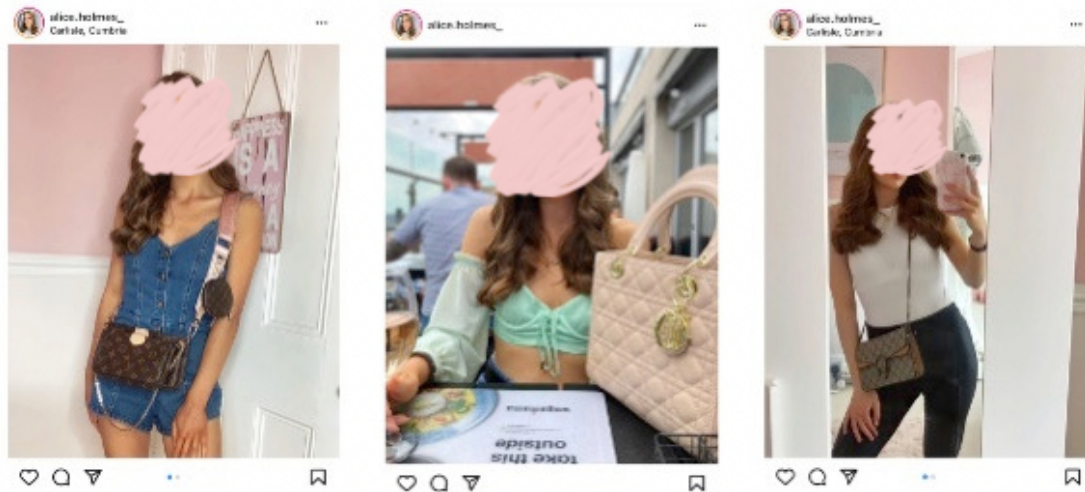


Image 16: Alice styling her replica bags

These images suggest that for Alice these products are the real deal – she uses them as her normal designer items and she is not afraid of people finding out that they are not real, because she does not position them as such. However, it is unclear whether she is open about them being fake to strangers on the street or other individuals, who are not her subscribers on YouTube. Similarly, if Alice’s style is compared to the OOTD’s of RepLadies, it can be argued that these products do not match her identity. This can be explained by assuming that to her fashion and replicas are more about “having fun” rather than “fooling others” (Perez, Castano and Quintanilla, 2010).

Similarly, the decision to “have fun” through consumption of fakes can also be supported by the fact that Vova Haulers are far from the fashion industry and in most of their narratives they did not express sufficient cultural capital when it comes to designer replica consumption. This can be observed when vloggers identify certain handbags incorrectly, mention

unrealistic prices of authentic, or more commonly order “fantasy items”. Analysis of their narratives suggests that they treat fashion as a fun aspect of life, rather than something that is crucial for their identity. In this aspect their aesthetic knowledge is not as developed as RepLadies one, so they frequently make mistakes in terms of brand names, their pronunciation and brand models. For instance, Alice, who appeared to be the most engaged of the Vova Haulers, frequently mentions prices that are unrealistic in the authentic environment. In one of her hauls she ordered a Christian Louboutin phone case and said that the authentic one would cost around 700 pounds. Having this fantasy around authentic luxury products hints that the majority of Vova Haulers continue to be ordinary consumers. While their economic and social capitals may develop due to collaborations and growing number of subscribers, their cultural capital and aesthetic knowledge remains on the same level.

This engagement with fashion “for fun” is particularly seen through consumption of “fantasy items” - a term that is commonly used on RepLadies and refers to “replicas that do not exist in authentic version”. These products are commonly purchased by consumers who are unfamiliar with brand offerings in authentic and therefore consider every product that has designer logo on it legit. Overall, “fantasy items” can be split into two categories: non-existent items and authentic variations. The first one refers to replica products that were never produced in the authentic version, for example these are commonly present on markets in popular vacation destinations such as Turkey and Spain. The second one represents the products that exist in authentic version, but their replicated version features additional elements, different colours or patterns. To illustrate, in one of her hauls Ellie purchased a “Neverfull” handbag for her mom. Here is how she describes it:

“Now, I’m going to show you something that I bought for my mom [...] She got this Louis Vuitton like replica ... I don’t actually know what kind of bag these are, like what this kind of bag is called, but it’s a Louis Vuitton bag anyway. Its got like little shoulder straps and then its got a long strap, so you can have it over your shoulder and then inside it looks like this – its all red. That’s what she really wanted – she wanted the red inside and black outside.”

(Ellie Victoria “FAKE Designer Items Haul?! Really Cheap!! YSL Bag for £20?!”)

This passage suggests that Ellie is not familiar with the Louis Vuitton brand as well as their products, which resulted in her purchasing a “fantasy item”. The bag Ellie is referring to is called Neverfull and it is one of the Louis Vuitton iconic products, which is heavily replicated. Although this bag exists, Ellie’s purchase can be described as an authentic variation – her “Neverfull” is in the colour graphite, which is used by Louis Vuitton for menswear accessories, and it also features an additional strap, which is not present in the authentic Neverfull. Nevertheless, Ellie shares that she bought this handbag for her mom, who particularly wanted it in this colour scheme. When providing description of the item, Ellie does not try to convince herself or her audience that this exact bag exists in real life, therefore it is unclear whether she understands that her Neverfull is a “fantasy item” or not. However, based on her other purchases Ellie approaches fashion and replicas as a form of “having fun”.



Image 17: Ellie showcasing her replica Louis Vuitton bag in her Haul

This perspective of “fantasy items” extends the theory on notions of counterfeit, particularly in relation to product. While previous studies have predominantly focused on either “non deceptive” or “deceptive” counterfeiting, observation of counterfeiting from the product perspective adds depth to the phenomena. It extends scholarly understanding of the counterfeit product, showing that it is multi-dimensional and different variations exist.

By having these beliefs about what products should be purchased and how these should be used, both communities construct a taste regime that they afterwards follow. This taste regime thus allows observation of how taste is constructed as well as how it is continuously practiced. Observation of RepLadies suggests that their emulation of “classic style” probes the development of their taste regime. Although, members differ in their preference for certain items, they are all unified by their desire to portray “classic style” as well as make the impression of having higher levels of cultural capital (Holt, 1998). Replicas that RepLadies purchase, frequently constitute status items, such as Hermès Birkin and Kelly bags and Chanel Classic Flap, which requires them to express taste that matches their purchases. Following Arsel and Bean (2013) this study thus suggests that exercising of counterfeit taste

is a practice that consists of replica products (objects), ways of choosing and wearing these objects (doings), and the symbolic value of these objects (meanings). One of the defining elements of RepLadies taste regime is that it is constructed by all members in the community – rather than following guidance from one source of information, RepLadies engage in continuous construction of a taste regime. Similar to Arsel and Bean (2013), RepLadies taste regime allows community members to define and express their taste in relation to counterfeit luxury products. By following a mutually constructed taste regime, RepLadies can configure their taste through problematization, ritualization, and instrumentalization (Arsel and Bean, 2013). This taste regime thus allows them to achieve their main goal, specifically make their replica purchases look authentic as well as normalise this type of consumption.

In RepLadies problematization refers directly to consumption of replica items. Particularly, those who have just become part of RepLadies community during the Covid-19 lockdown and did not have a chance to test out their replica handbags in the environment, frequently appeal for advice on how to make their rep look believable. Since most of RepLadies are in constant fear of being called out by someone for wearing fakes, they heavily invest in making sure that their taste is right for their purchases. Here, they are making every element of their style as a potential source of a problem (Arsel and Bean, 2013). The dominant element of problematization in RepLadies refers to the nature of the replica products, particularly the dilemma around wearing replicas with flaws or products that are not ideally accurate when compared to authentic pieces. This problem appeared to be a key point in several discussion threads, with RepLadies trying to achieve a consensus on whether they should keep these products or dispose of them, and if yes, how should they wear them. Below is an excerpt from one of the threads titled *“Do you wear reps with flaws”*:

Hey ladies, just wanted to ask - how comfortable are you wearing reps with flaws? I have a few reps and they all (obviously) have minor flaws. Do you think people really notice, or even care? If the hardware's a slightly different colour, or all the stitches aren't even or if the LV print isn't consistent all over the bag. Just wondering, as I am yet to wear a rep bag out and about, I've only been wearing some jewellery!

Here, one of the members has started a discussion articulating her problem about whether it is acceptable to wear replica accessories with flaws. She has mentioned that she is a newbie in the game and has not previously worn any replica handbags, limiting herself only to jewellery. This aspect of problematization is of inevitable importance to RepLadies as being constantly seen with replica products that perfectly resemble authentic and then mistakenly choosing something with flaws can result in a loss of their face in the eyes of others. Given that the primarily goal of problematization is to establish how an object can become problematic in achieving desired taste, RepLadies taste regime provides members with solutions on how to embrace these problems.

In relation to RepLadies, “ritualization” commonly refers to “taste strategies” that these consumers adopt in their everyday life. These rituals thus influence how RepLadies acquire objects, what they do with them, as well as how these objects generate and perpetuate meanings (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). “Taste strategies” adopted by RepLadies describe ritualisation processes needed to achieve desired goals with this class of products. During this consumption RepLadies need to follow certain rituals or strategies that relate both to object and its consumption. RepLadies taste regime thus orchestrates how forum members can wear these products to achieve the most value. For instance, RepLadies adaptation of “classic style” can be seen as a form of “taste strategy”. For them, it's a ritual to dress in a certain way

that helps them to present their objects to achieve desired identity. By following style guidance on how to combine colours RepLadies are able to master their “emulation of classic style”.

Nevertheless, these rituals are not only limited to how RepLadies wear their reps, but also how they choose them and how they speak about them. Particularly, another interesting example of “taste strategy” deployed by RepLadies relates to “construction of consumer stories” around these objects. Generally, consumers love talking about their possessions – they share how they acquired them, how they feel about them and how they use them. This also drives interest of others to the possessions individuals have, leading to numerous questions about how something was acquired. Since, RepLadies are presenting themselves to the world through their desired identity, the stories they tell about their objects need to match that identity. Opposed to consumption of authentic products, where consumers might be restrained in terms of their financial abilities, replicas allow consumers to buy identical products without experiencing guilt or financial constraints. Therefore, one the of the rituals RepLadies have includes their collective practice of coming up with stories about how they acquired their replica objects. Forum exploration showed that RepLadies purchase large quantities of fakes, which due to the price as well as unavailability of authentic, is frequently seen as unrealistic consumption. As a response to this, RepLadies frequently discuss their cover up stories that they use when others ask about their handbag – these often include receiving them as gifts, inheriting them or thrifting them at the second-hand store:

You can say they're gifts (family, friends, ex boyfriend)

You can also let her mind her business, it's none of her business what you choose to spend your money on anyways.

Personally, I don't like to have such a large rep collection that isn't believable to my friends and family. Some people here buy reps quite frequently, but I can't have a new \$2-4k bag every month, it just doesn't look plausible. If it's just a work bag, try sticking to a few bags in rotation so your boss isn't seeing you with so many different bags.

(Metallicat7)

A generous inheritance from a wealthy deceased family member.

There is an Instagram influencer who constantly purchases a plethora of authentic bags with her rich late father's inheritance, so there's that.

(royalfluffiness)

I always say I got mine from a resale site (professional one). And no one says anything but I've only carried LV

(meganelayne1)

The quotes above showcase how RepLadies collectively work on making their objects work by ascribing certain rituals to them. Here, as a response to a forum member inquiring how to pass replica products at work, RepLadies have provided numerous “taste strategies” on how to make replicas work. For example, by proposing various stories around how authentic luxury products are traditionally acquired, they construct rituals in relation to their taste regime. Given that they are using “classic style” taste to showcase their HCC, consideration of how to make their purchases match these as well as ways in which these products were purchased requires significant effort from a rituals perspective. By coming up with stories of acquisitions (i.e. passed down from one family member to another) RepLadies are able to

glamorize their consumption of replicas. Since the majority of these products are purchased through salespeople from factories, RepLadies therefore construct various narratives around these objects to resemble their purchase to acquisition of authentic luxury items.

RepLadies “instrumentalization” relates directly to them being members of this taste community. Arsel and Bean (2013) suggest that “through instrumentalization, materialism and aesthetic consumption are transformed from problematic obsession of affliction into a deliberate mode of goal fulfilment”. By participating in the taste community, RepLadies can develop their taste as well as understand how they can intergrade replica objects into their life. Taste community is thus their space for ongoing support, where they are offered resources for transformation of meanings through framing of the objects and doings (Molotch, 2003). Here, RepLadies frequently discuss how they can integrate objects into their everyday life through styling tips, mood boards and advice. Similar to taste development through “taste engineering”, “instrumentalization” allows RepLadies to discuss how their materialistic possessions become meaningful and an inevitable part of their identity. RepLadies taste regime thus allows these consumers to structure their consumption and taste in terms of their habit – consumption of luxury replica products. Taste regime thus acts as a “manual”, which is co-written and is constantly developed by taste community members.

Vova Haulers too follow a certain taste regime. As opposed to RepLadies, who construct their own regime and object related practices, Vova Haulers become competent in pre-existent taste regimes that are orchestrated by institutional authorities such as fashion influencers. Their taste regime therefore can be best described as “following popular taste” since the items they purchase frequently constitute trendy and overly popular designer items. While the case of Vova Haulers represents the standardised version of taste regime developed

by Arsel and Bean (2013), it can also be argued that they engage in taste regime adaptation and taste regime extension (Dolbec and Maciel, 2018). Taste regime adaptations refers to how Vova Haulers are adapting aesthetic guidance received from influencers to match their patterns of consumption, specifically their taste for counterfeit luxury items. This process allows Vova Haulers to follow an existing taste regime, but at the same time make it more appropriate for their situation. Here they are determining their taste and purchases based on how others dress. The replica items purchased by Vova Haulers often includes a set of predetermined objects – Calvin Klein sets, Louis Vuitton handbags and Moschino t-shirts. These are purchased not because these are the only available ones – Vova app offers a wide range of fakes – but because Haulers have seen other Haulers purchasing these. As a result, they are becoming the adaptors of the taste regime to which other YouTubers introduced them to. This extends our understanding on how consumers start following taste regimes as well as how they become familiar with these practices.

Taste regime extension, on the other hand, implies extension of objects, doings and meanings that constitute a taste regime and allows consumers to integrate their taste into the existing regime (Dolbec and Maciel, 2018). Vova Haulers constantly engage in taste regime extension, which is particularly relevant to their audience in Vova Haulers taste community. While Haulers themselves follow an existing taste regime that they adapt to meet their needs, their audience thus follow an extension of this taste regime, which has counterfeit luxury products integrated to it. By constantly filming new hauls, Vova Haulers are integrating new products to the taste regime “portfolio”, so that their audience and other haulers can then follow the formation of their taste regime. This therefore draws attention to how taste regime can be a constantly transformative process, with new elements, meanings and practices added to it. However, as opposed to “goth ninja” (Dolbec and Maciel, 2018) where consumers co-

construct distinctive discursive systems, the Vova Haulers taste community still remains the adaptor of “popular taste”. Therefore, all these regimes remain interpretations of the existing taste regime.

7.4. Conclusion of “Taste Communities”

This section of findings section sought to explore what constitutes taste communities in the modern consumption environment. The findings and preceding discussion focused on observation of taste communities as well as how taste is expressed and regulated through taste regimes in these social environments. Through observation of two communities, RepLadies and Vova Haulers, this study was able to identify what constitutes a taste community and how these are performing in terms of collaborative practices. By looking at three core characteristics of taste communities, this section therefore allowed a deeper understanding of how taste communities operate.

Firstly, observation of “mutual engagement” allowed us to see how communities are structured and regulated. By adopting the concept from Wenger’s framework of “communities of practice” (Wenger, McDarmott and Snyder, 2002) and through observation of “regulation of activities” and “relationships structure” this thesis established that it is essential for communities to have boundaries and structure to ensure its healthy performance.

Secondly, exploration of “practice-based benefits” suggest that by being part of “taste communities” individuals can gain various benefits and even progress in their career. As it appeared both of these “taste communities” dedicate significant time and effort to their online spaces – while RepLadies share their knowledge and experience, which allows them to gain

“enduring benefits”, Vova Haulers acted like “blogger-preneurs” (McFarlane, Hamilton and Hewer, 2022) which allowed them to significantly develop their economic and symbolic capitals.

Finally, “construction of taste regime” allows to gain an insight on how taste is practiced within these communities. It was observed that while both communities expressed preference for counterfeits, their tastes differed a lot. While RepLadies and their taste indicated their preference for “classic style”, Vova Haulers expressed rather “popular taste”, which is visible in their choice of trendy designer replicas. However, both of these communities were able to follow certain regimes that helped them to refine and showcase their taste in desired way, resulting in emergence of “new taste regimes”.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.0. Introduction

The aim of this thesis was to explore what is the role of taste in consumption of counterfeit luxury goods and whether engagement in this practice shows the emergence of new taste regime. Therefore, this final chapter presents a summary of the findings, offering core theoretical contributions that this thesis makes to consumer research within the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) domain (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). This chapter therefore explores four key contributions of the study before detailing limitations and future directions for research. Finally, this chapter concludes with the researcher's reflection on this study.

Contributions are addressed around research themes of consumption and taste, and are explored in line with research questions that the present study addressed:

1. How do consumers showcase their taste with counterfeit luxury goods?
2. What taste-related practices are performed by consumers of counterfeit luxury goods?
3. What social and cultural conditions allow the formulation of an emerging taste regime of counterfeit luxury goods consumption?

8.1. Theoretical Contribution

The following section will discuss the core theoretical contributions of this thesis around emergent research themes of consumption and taste. Overall, four key contributions were identified in the present research. While these findings extend the literature on “taste”, they also help to build more contemporary understanding of counterfeit luxury consumption by looking at it from a more recent perspective.

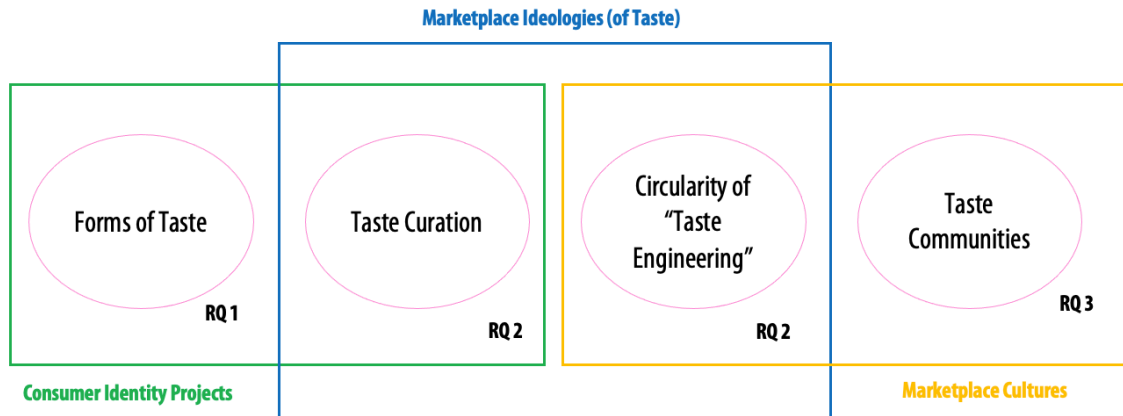


Figure 2: Overview of Theoretical Contributions

Contributions to three areas of CCT have emerged, specifically to consumer identity projects, marketplace ideologies, and marketplace culture (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). As suggested by the model above, all contributions that this thesis presents extend the chosen domains. Observation of “Forms of Taste” (which answers Research Question 1), and conceptualisation of “Taste Curation” help understanding of how consumers construct their identity by showcasing their taste with counterfeit luxury products. In terms of marketplace ideologies, contributions on “Taste Curation” and “Circularity of ‘Taste Engineering’” (both of which answer Research Question 2) allow us to deepen our understanding of ideologies of taste and how these practices operate in the less institutionalised context of counterfeit consumption. Finally, the introduction of “Taste Communities”, which reports to Research Question 3, in line with “Circularity of ‘Taste Engineering’” helps to understand the connection between marketplace cultures and taste. As it can be observed, all of these contributions offer an eco-system for understanding how taste is expressed, practiced, and developed in non-traditional contexts, where social acceptability is not given. The next sections look at these contributions in further detail.

8.1.1. Contribution: Forms of Taste

The first contribution refers to conceptualisation of “taste as practice”. As Chapters Two and Three revealed, while previous research has focused exploration of taste mainly in relation to socially acceptable contexts (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Cappellini, Parsons, and Harman, 2016; Tsaousi, 2016), little has been said about how consumers showcase their taste with the use of counterfeits (Chuchinprakarn, 2003). Similarly, research has predominantly explored taste as “legitimate”, suggesting that only one form of taste exists. In approaching understanding of “taste”, the present research identified three forms of taste expressed by consumers of both genuine and non-genuine branded goods. These include – “Authentic Taste”, “Hybrid Taste”, and “Replica Taste”. This taste categorisation allows us to see how consumers express their taste in terms of three types of luxury goods consumption – authentic, fake and hybrid. These three types of taste allow closer linking of taste to consumption, by establishing that consumers of every form of taste have their characteristic consumption patterns and preferences. The presentation of these types of taste does not showcase any form of taste hierarchy, rather it shows three distinct types of consumption without any connotations of “highbrow” or “lowbrow” to it.

Exploration of ATC extends the literature on Inconspicuous consumption (Makkar and Yap, 2018; Wu et al., 2017), by observing how consumers of authentic luxury products express preference for subtle offerings from designer brands. Similar to previous research (Han et al., 2010), ATCs choose products with low visibility and low brand prominence in order to distinguish themselves and give signals that can only be decoded by those with similar levels of cultural capital. In line with this, profiles of Authentic Taste consumers also suggest how they not only prefer subtle brands to loud brands as a form of distinction from undesired

reference groups (Lee, Fernandez, and Hyman, 2009), but they also tend to consume niche and less popular brands and products to signal their status and exquisite taste. Discussion with Authentic Taste Consumers supports previous literature (Han et al., 2010) by emphasizing that due to the nature of their lifestyle and social position they give preference to products and brands with low visual prominence. However, existing research (Makkar and Yap, 2018; Wu et al., 2017) explained the prevalence of inconspicuous consumption in terms of individuals' preference not to attract unnecessary attention during times of economic hardship or as an outcome of the dilution of the signaling ability of traditional luxury goods. This thesis extends this literature by proposing that certain consumers prefer inconspicuous products over luxury brands to distance themselves from those groups that wear counterfeit products. Specifically, while both consumers of authentic and counterfeits might go for the same brand, such as Chanel and Louis Vuitton, ATCs will choose products where the logo is hardly visible or, in extreme cases, where it does not exist. Their motivation for inconspicuous consumption thus comes not only from their avoidance of being associated with negative reference groups, but also to avoid being perceived as a “fake wearer” by those around them.

By introducing Hybrid Taste, this thesis contributes to the stream of work on “cultural omnivores” (Ehrnroth and Gronroos, 2013). Whereas previous research has looked solely either at consumers of genuine or non-genuine luxury products (Geiger-Oneto et al., 2013), Hybrid Taste extends this literature by presenting a third type of consumer. Specifically, it extends the literature on counterfeit consumers (Perez et al., 2010; Berghaus, Müller-Stewens, and Reinecke, 2014) by proposing a third category of consumer – one, who chooses authentic and counterfeit products simultaneously. Specifically, the formulation of Hybrid Taste deepens our understanding of “cultural omnivores” by providing a rationale on how

they choose products in terms of genuine and non-genuine dimensions. While previous research has looked at omnivorous consumption in relation to socially acceptable products authentic products (Belezza and Berger, 2020; Pomiès and Arsel, 2022), this thesis expands that work further by introducing counterfeit category in the debate. Hybrid Taste Consumers are similar to “savvy consumers” (Perez et al, 2010) as they are being smart in terms of their consumption, however their consumption is not only about having fun and fooling others with their counterfeits of good quality. Similar to “cultural omnivores”, HTC’s are being selective in terms of the products that they consume in authentic version and products that they consume in counterfeit version.

Specifically, HTC’s would only purchase authentic of classic items that they see as valuable – not only as an investment, but also products that will last them long time, like Chanel Classic Flap or Louis Vuitton Speedy. Whereas, for more popular items, which literature on cultural omnivores would classify as “lowbrow”, they would go for counterfeit options. HTC’s explain this strategy as optimization of their resources – they do not want to spend money on something which will go out of style the next season. To them popular products, such as Jacquemus handbags, have no value in terms of consumption – they do not consider these as investment pieces due to how fast fashion changes, nor they think they will wear them forever to invest in the authentic version. Therefore, Hybrid Taste extends existing research on “cultural omnivores” by suggesting that by developing their cultural repertoire, certain individuals develop more fluid relationships when it comes to consumption of expensive high-status products. By possessing a lifestyle of a certain level, they can afford to have omnivorous consumption of luxury items of various levels of realness.

Finally, Replica Taste extends the literature on “taste emulation”, as in line with Holt (1998) this research established that RTCs devote extraordinary effort to mimic tastes of ATCs. Observation of Replica Taste deepens an understanding of how consumers with different levels of cultural capital navigate the replica marketplace. This perspective also allows us to link the notion of cultural capital to consumption of non-genuine products and see how individuals differ in terms of their level of cultural capital and consumption choices they make. While previous research (Perez et al., 2010; Berghaus, Müller-Stewens, and Reinecke, 2014) has addressed consumers of counterfeit products extensively, little has been said about their levels of cultural capital and consumption patterns respectively. This thesis therefore addresses this gap by proposing a more in-depth observation of Replica Taste consumers. It thus proposes that Replica Taste consumers engage both in inconspicuous and conspicuous consumption, depending on their lifestyle, social position, and age.

In relation to counterfeit products and branding, previous research has mostly focused its exploration on “conspicuous” counterfeits (Han et al., 2008, 2010; Chen et al., 2015; Davidson et al., 2017). Exploration of Replica Taste suggests that a certain class of consumers tend to consume “inconspicuous” counterfeits – they give their preference to items that are difficult to recognise as designer, products that have small or no logo at all, and products that do not depict typical brand patterns. Opposed to “conspicuous” consumers, their main priority is quality and value – for them it is essential that the product meets certain quality standards, which makes it difficult to be distinguished as fake. Similarly, it also shows how to avoid any risk associated with consumption of counterfeits, individuals give preference to replicas of unknown brands, rather than “loud” ones as it allows them to avoid answering unwelcome questions.

Therefore, the construct of “taste” presented in Chapter Two is extended by the findings of this study by adding more dimension to the term and its relation to various types of consumption studied in this research. As opposed to viewing these tastes as “good” or “poor”, “high” and “low”, this contribution structures taste in terms of products consumed. Exploration of “Forms of Taste” adds more dimension to how taste is expressed in relation to both genuine and non-genuine branded goods. While this contribution deepens our understanding of taste in relation to consumption of branded luxury goods, it also allows us to build more profound comprehension of various consumer types. Both ATCs and RTCs are univorous in their consumption. However, as exploration of HTC has shown, there is a probability that they will become cultural omnivores in the future – for ATCs this means occasional consumption of replica luxury products, while for RTCs this can manifest in the decision to include some authentic items in their collection. Finally, it allows observation of consumers that are in the middle of consumption – adaptors of hybrid taste appear to be in transition, either to genuine luxury consumption (Authentic Taste) or to counterfeit luxury consumption (Replica Taste).

8.1.2. Contribution: Taste Curation

Antoine Hennion theorized taste as “reflexive work performed on one’s own attachments” (2007:25) to emphasize individual projects consumers engage in to develop their taste. The literature review revealed how consumers can express their taste in everyday life by following certain “taste regimes” (Arsel and Bean, 2013). Similarly, literature has theorized practices that consumers draw on to develop and structure their taste (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). This study moves this forward by introducing the concept of “taste curation”, defined as the practice of selection, refinement, and organization with the

goal of enhancement of aesthetic identity. This thesis explains “taste curation” through the bundling of objects, space, and doings (Arsel and Bean, 2013), where objects become situated in space through the performance of a series of doings that help individuals to reflect their taste.

Specifically, in relation to objects, this thesis builds on and extends the theory on collections (Belk, 1995), family heirlooms (Abdelrahman et al., 2020) and possessions (Belk, 1988) by highlighting the attachment that participants develop towards these items. Similar to Ahuvia (2005), this study shows how certain objects, in this case luxury accessories, become crucial elements of identity. In their narratives, participants emphasised the emotional attachment they have towards their loved objects – no matter authentic or counterfeit. While previous literature on counterfeits (Lin, 2011) emphasised their low value for durability and high value for status, the present research shows that for certain individuals both counterfeit and authentic luxury products have the same value when it comes to durability, status and emotions. This is observed in the consumer narratives as well as in the care and emotion individuals express towards them. Therefore, exploration of objects under “taste curation” challenges the existing view of counterfeits being seen as disposable products of low quality.

Additionally, this contribution adds to consumer research on space (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Skandalis, Banister and Byrom, 2016; Skandalis, Banister and Byrom, 2018), specifically to the role of space in taste related practices. Existing literature has briefly touched on the role of space in formation (Skandalis, Banister and Byrom, 2016; Skandalis, Banister and Byrom, 2018) or practice of taste (Arsel and Bean, 2013), while little has been said on “space” as such and its role in day-to-day taste activities. Specifically, while Arsel and Bean (2013) constantly mention it and refer to it as “object placed in space”, their theoretical discussion

on space is non-existent. The present study therefore observes how space works as a structure for taste related practices. By looking at how consumers navigate and use space, this research therefore established that in order for an object to generate meaning it must be placed in space. With the prevalence of consumer research on DIY projects (Wolf and McQuitty, 2010), the aspect of space has been neglected. However, as this research has established consumers show high level of interest in creating and maintaining space for their collections. While here space was explored through wardrobes and displays for handbags and shoes, observation of space under “taste curation” also has its relevance to other collections – including books, perfumes, and souvenirs to name a few. As a result, this research not only contributes to existing theory of space in taste, but it also provokes further discussion into how space can be seen as a structuring element for one’s collection.

The final element of “taste curation” refers to doings. Here consumers engage in variety of curatorial practices – they select items, acquire them, display, preserve, and dispose of them, the latter of which suggest circularity of curatorial objects that are traveling from home to home with their original meaning preserved. “Taste curation” thus deepens understanding of “*aesthetic ideology*” (Arsel and Bean, 2018). As a result, taste curation does not only help individuals to engage in guardship of their current possessions, but also makes their taste more refined when it comes to their future acquisitions. By applying common practices from the art world to mundane collections of individuals, the present research highlights the complexity of curation as well as the determination of individuals when it comes to their collection. Similarly, while existing research has briefly explored doings in relation to collections (Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung, 2017), little has been said about how these doings are shaped by the taste of the collector. This thesis therefore addresses this by not only looking at what practices consumers perform daily in terms of taste curation, but also how

their taste helps them to curate their collection. Specifically, this is visible in acquisition and disposal elements of doings, as these two emphasize continuity of taste development.

All in all, the introduction of “taste curation” allows us to look at consumers from the angle of them being curators of their consumption. Given the growing increase in marketplace offerings, taste curation as such allows individuals to stay focused on their taste and enhance it with curatorial practices. While the present research discussed “taste curation” through examples of both genuine and non-genuine luxury products, the application of “taste curation” is much broader than this situation and can be applied to other contexts including home decoration, personal collections, cinematography consumption, travel and even fine dining.

8.1.3. Contribution: Circularity of “Taste Engineering”

By observing taste development this research builds on the framework of “taste engineering” (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017) as discussed in Chapters Three and Six of this thesis and extends it further. As highlighted by Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) their key limitation is that “taste engineering” relies on unevenly distributed resources, which makes *“this strategy of action more likely to occur among well-educated, middle-class”* individuals (2017:743).

While they mention that in theory consumers in other social positions can develop their taste through this practice, their arguments highlight their scepticism towards this. However, as this study established “taste engineering” can be used as a taste development tool not only when it comes to sensory learning. Findings reveal that with the use of “taste engineering” consumers in the present research have experienced successful projects of social mobility and entailed the expansion of their consumption competence beyond the one that was formed

through their habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Extending Maciel and Wallendorf's (2017) argument, this study contributes to an understanding of how taste is developed in environments that are not presented as socially acceptable. Drawing on the existing framework of "taste engineering" the present study adds a fourth element to it – "contribution to institutional materials" which emphasises the circularity in this taste development practice.

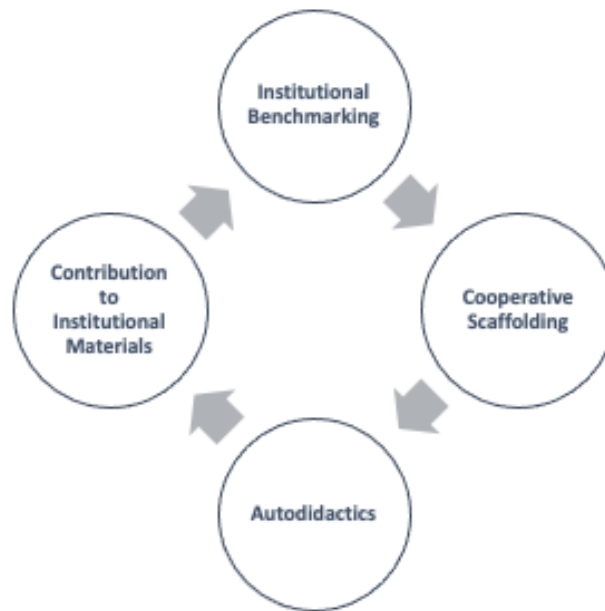


Figure 3: Circularity of Taste Engineering

This fourth practice therefore helps to understand what happens after an individual “masters their taste” – as was explained in the literature review, for Maciel and Wallendorf (2017) this expertise comes after completion of three practices. However, given the dynamics of the contemporary marketplace, this research suggests that true connoisseurs engage in continuous taste development. Similar to wine and art experts, participants in the present study expressed preference for constant development of their taste. The addition of the fourth practice to the “taste engineering” model therefore allows observation of taste development as a circular rather than linear process, which emphasises its continuity. This practice therefore extends Maciel and Wallendorf's (2017) framework by showing what exactly happens after a person

becomes a “connoisseur” in a certain field and explains how materials used in “institutional benchmarking” become available.

Similarly, “contribution to institutional materials” also contributes to existing research on serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992; Thompson, 2019). Specifically, it supports previous work on display of personal effort and advanced knowledge (Stebbins, 1982) as the production of information that will contribute to these institutional materials requires significant time as well as knowledge. As the present research has shown, by using their skills accumulated as part of RepLadies forum, certain individuals were able to become connoisseurs which then led to them being able to produce materials that would help others to develop their taste. Production of guides on how to make purchases as well as how to differentiate among various product styles in addition to overall time spent on the forum to respond to queries of other individuals, emphasizes how seriously certain forum members treat this space and their role within it.

Finally, Arsel and Bean (2018) refer to “tastemakers”, who establish “*normative references for people who seek to develop their taste competence*”. Observation of “taste engineering” from a circular perspective allows us to see the emergence and establishment of tastemakers. Similar to aficionados (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017), for consumers in the present research “taste engineering” is about commitment to learning and developing their own taste rather than about growing a preference towards a particular brand or product. The circularity of taste engineering therefore allows us to see how “ordinary consumers” become “connoisseurs”.

8.1.4. Contribution: Taste Communities

Communities appeared as an emergent research theme that emanated from the discussion on taste, its curation and practice. Following Arsel and Bean (2013) this contribution addresses their call for a more profound inquiry into *“democratization of tastemaking through collaborative marketplace communities”*. This thesis therefore further contributes to recent attention to forms of communities within the CCT dialogue (Cova, 1997; Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Kozinets, 2002; Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016) as this study observes how taste is exercised within various communities. While theorisation of communities and how their members exercise their taste was out of scope in the literature review of this thesis, some concepts and theory explored hinted on the existence of these formations (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017; Dolbec and Maciel, 2018). By introducing the concept of “taste community”, defined as *“a group of individuals who share similar aesthetic preferences and who deepen their connoisseurship in the field of their common interest by interacting on ongoing basis”*, this study extends literature on communities and taste.

Throughout data collection and data analysis, it was noticed that certain clusters of participants in the present study appeared to form communities. Distinct from virtual communities of consumption, defined as *“affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shares enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities”* (Kozinets, 1999:254), taste communities offer a much more niche and focused perspective on its members’ consumption patterns. A further inquiry into these suggests that these “taste communities” resemble “communities of practice” (Ganon and Prothero, 2016, 2018; Wenger, McDarmott and Snyder, 2002), however they have their differences. This study followed a “communities of practice” perspective and adopted some

of its elements, which resulted in “taste communities” having three core characteristics – “mutual engagement”, “practice-based benefits”, and “construction of taste regime”.

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Firstly, “mutual engagement” emphasises that the core component for successful performance of taste communities is its members. This element is showcased through “regulation of activity” – an essential part of ensuring that given community remains a safe space for its members, and “mutual engagement” – a crucial part of what makes community a community. The present research emphasises that taste communities are constantly undergoing “community maintenance” (Wenger, 1998) – this is seen in extensive guidelines, structuring of relationships between its members and ongoing moderation. Despite that the two communities studied in this thesis are slightly different in their nature due to the platforms they are using, both of them require significant amount of “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 1982) on a daily basis. Similarly, the present research also extends literature on the

relationship between members of the community, as while previous research emphasised a vertical relationship (McQuarrie et al., 2013) the present research established that both vertical and horizontal relationships are possible in taste communities. While YouTubers would be previously considered to have a vertical relationship with their community (McQuarrie et al., 2013), this thesis argues that by becoming members of a taste community, these vloggers would develop horizontal relationships with other members of this taste community.

Secondly, the “practice-based benefits” element emphasises how taste community members are able to receive different life benefits from being part of the community. Similar to “enduring benefits” (Murray and Desrayaud, 2021), these include transformation of consumption and style; achievement of self-enrichment and feeling of accomplishment. This indicates how a taste community allows individuals to engage in the serious leisure of improving themselves – it acts as a support group where they can educate themselves on their interest of choice. Specifically, by being able to understand how to wear certain counterfeit products or to learn about different brands and designs allows taste community members to feel more accomplished in the subject of their interest as well as tailor their consumption to their new knowledge. For more professional members of taste communities, such as bloggers and YouTubers, these benefits imply development of cultural, economic, and social capital – all of which are essential milestones for further development of their career (Pedroni, 2015).

Thirdly, “construction of taste regime” indicates how by sharing similar taste these members become part of the taste community and how they perform associated practices. By identifying how taste community members perform two distinct tastes, this study therefore

contributes to an understanding of how consumers can generate and adopt certain taste and taste regimes through collaboration with each other. While some of the members became part of these communities because they had a pre-existing taste that resonates with given taste communities, others might join due to their interest in the subject and develop their taste for such items by being part of it. Therefore, by building on existing literature on taste regimes (Arsel and Bean, 2013; Dolbec and Maciel, 2018) this thesis extends it further to explore how taste community members emulate certain tastes by constructing their own regime or by adopting an existing one.

Opposed to communities of consumption, taste communities are more refined in terms of the interests of their members, which is visible through the prevalence of various taste associated practices that emphasise the particular taste favoured. Rather than being a community dedicated to consumption of luxury replica products, both of these taste communities have focused “tastes” which they are mastering by engaging with each other on a daily basis. Given that these individuals come outside of the fashion system (McQuarrie et al., 2013), taste communities also propose a theoretical perspective on how tastes become democratised – rather than following the guidance from established institutions, members of taste community create these institutions inside of their community.

8.2. Managerial Implications

Inquiry into taste and counterfeits helps luxury brand managers and practitioners by identifying new unconventional drivers for counterfeit consumption. As this research discussed some consumers appear to be “in transition”, which implies that they are unsure of whether they want to consume more genuine luxury products or whether they want to

consume more non-genuine luxury products. While this perspective might be straightforward, further profiling of these consumers would allow luxury brands to understand why consumers are shifting to counterfeit consumption and what stops them from becoming full time genuine luxury brands consumers.

Exploration of taste curation suggests that brands can take a new approach to meeting the needs of their clients. While fashion e-commerce websites have recently started sending curated “new arrivals” edits to their customers, taking this further by making the environment more curated would allow to make the experience more tailored and personal. The “space” element of “taste curation” suggests that luxury brands can develop special storage units that would allow to display the products as well as to ensure that these are kept under the right temperature and conditions to prevent damage of fragile materials. Similarly, discussion on “doings” and particularly “preservation” suggests that consumers want to take care of their possessions. However, not many luxury brands offer so called “SPA” services for their products. Given the growing popularity of sustainability, more individuals now want to have their “objects” last longer, which makes it essential for luxury brands to think into how these can be maintained.

Additionally, taste communities can be observed across variety of consumption domains and product categories. This research thus sees these communities as a new way to segment consumers – by knowing the interests and consumption patterns of one or another taste community, luxury brands can therefore be much more specific with their product offerings, communication efforts, messages, and advertisement campaigns.

Finally, observation of Replica Taste suggests that consumers appear to be dissatisfied with genuine luxury products, which is why they are turning to consume counterfeits instead. As this research suggests, the majority of RTCs used to be proactive buyers of genuine luxury brands, however after their experiences with faulty and expensive products, they decided to spend their money elsewhere. This suggests that certain brands should invest more in their product quality, which is one of the core pillars of luxury.

8.3. Research Limitations

Given the amount of depth of any research, it is essential to set boundaries to make it work, which is why there were some elements that were out of scope in this research. Firstly, this research did not choose a particular country for context. While research participants and Vova Haulers have been from the UK, it was difficult to establish where forum members are from, and therefore it was decided to explore the taste of these consumers without any emphasis on where they come from. This can be seen as a limitation, as it does not relate to a certain part of society (i.e. the UK consumers), but provides a rather global overview. By setting it to the UK only context, a valuable source of data – RepLadies – would have been lost and therefore the findings discussed would not emerge as they did.

Secondly, this also raised the question of culture, which is frequently seen as a crucial element in consumption choices. However, by adding culture this thesis would thus acquire another dimension and more discussion would have to be placed on differences in these as well as how they influence choices made. Given that the data set was rather broad, some interpretations would be difficult to grasp.

Finally, this thesis has not made much emphasis on demographic and psychographic profiles of consumers. While this might have been useful to allow more depth in differences between consumption patterns, this thesis was not determined to explore why individuals consume these products, but rather how they do it. Therefore, it was more valuable to hear the stories of the consumers without making great emphasis on their age and lifestyle.

8.4. Areas of Future Research

In the course of present research, a number of interesting observations were made, which can be explored in the future research. These suggestions are based on researcher's observations, theoretical contributions, and limitations of this study.

8.4.1. Low Cultural Capital, High Economic Capital

Bourdieu (1984) argued that not only does the level of capital become important when it comes to distinction, but also mix of capitals. While previous research has extensively explored "*champagne taste, beer budget*" consumers (Chen and Nelson, 2017), who possess higher cultural capital and lower economic capital, little has been said about individuals with lower cultural capital and higher economic capital. This thesis has shown that this class of consumers exists within the marketplace, exploration of which is not evident.

Extending work on cultural capital, this thesis suggests that cultural capital has a tremendous influence on how individuals consume luxury products. Given ready stylistic decisions in the stores, some individuals whose economic capital is higher than cultural capital might simply purchase a "total look" from fashion brands, rather than use their cultural capital to make

their own stylistic decisions. As this observation was outside the scope of present research, future studies should address consumption patterns and tastes of this class of consumers. This would allow observation of cultural capital and its influence on choices of consumers who prefer conspicuous consumption and loud products.

8.4.2. Counterfeits and Sustainability

In their review on research streams on counterfeit luxury, Khan et al. (2021) discussed a variety of approaches and directions that modern day scholars should approach to provoke further inquiry on the matter. Most of these concern new types of consumers, alternative motives of product acquisition and subcultures of consumption, little is said about sustainability. While contemporary research frequently sees sustainability as a “hot topic”, discussion on it in relation to counterfeit luxury consumption is non-existent. Observation of RepLadies forum suggests that certain consumers view counterfeit luxury products as more sustainable as compared to genuine items and brands. While some might argue that this is simply a neutralisation strategy to justify one’s behaviour, present research sees it as an alternative perspective that is worth to be explored further. Positioning counterfeit research in the sustainability prism would not only help to understand how consumers connect illicit products to sustainability but would allow inquiry on how they interpret counterfeits “as sustainable”.

8.4.3. Legitimacy of Counterfeit Taste

Literature suggests that counterfeit consumption seems to become legitimized as a norm in society, but it still carries risks for its adaptors (Bian et al., 2016). The literature review

revealed interest of scholars for profound inquiry into how taste becomes “legitimized”.

While present research has looked at taste in the counterfeit field as such, this research suggests that further inquiry into how it can become legitimized is essential. Particularly, this can be achieved through more qualitative work on taste within counterfeit luxury consumption. Therefore, further exploration of “legitimacy” when it comes to counterfeits would allow to understand how individuals perceive counterfeit taste.

8.5. Conclusion and Reflections

In conclusion, this thesis was determined to explore what is the role of taste in the consumption of counterfeit luxury goods and whether engagement in this practice shows the emergence of a new taste regime. Inquiry into these suggests that contemporary taste is complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Everyday consumers are faced with numerous choices – for instance, the outfits they wear – that allow them to showcase their taste to the world. By choosing more niche and frequently expensive products, consumers can truly distinguish themselves from those around them. However, as this thesis explored, the growth of counterfeit trade has made “luxury products” more accessible than ever. As this thesis has identified, both authentic and replica products can be worn in a way that a person would be seen as having sophisticated and high level of taste or having low level of taste depending on how they style the item and with what. This suggests that taste plays crucial role when it comes to not only of counterfeit luxury products, but also authentic luxury goods. As this study identified, the growth of online spaces dedicated to consumers of counterfeit luxury products has resulted in the emergence of new “taste regime”, which normalises consumption of counterfeit products.

The present research has addressed three research questions with regards to theoretical and methodological considerations. Firstly, it observed how individuals showcase their taste based on their consumption of genuine and non-genuine luxury products, resulting in the emergence of three forms of taste, namely Authentic Taste, Hybrid Taste, and Replica Taste. This allowed understanding of how taste facilitates consumer identity projects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Secondly, it explored how individuals develop their taste by engaging in “taste curation” through the use of objects, space, and doings. Thirdly, this thesis extends Maciel and Wallendorf’s (2017) framework of “Taste Engineering” by adding a fourth practice – “contribution to institutional materials” – which allows us to understand how circularity of taste development is achieved. These two findings deepen our understanding of the “ideology of taste” and how individuals practice it. Finally, this thesis contributed to understanding of taste related practices in collaborative marketplace communities (Arsel and Bean, 2013) through the introduction and exploration of “taste communities”, which adds to understanding of how taste regimes emerge in marketplace cultures.

This interpretivist study contributes to the stream of social constructionist studies within CCT research by proposing an understanding of how experiences around taste, fashion, and luxury are constructed by consumers. By building on existing CCT theory, it adds to its three domains – consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures and marketplace ideologues. After outlining contributions to both CCT and consumer research, this thesis presented three directions for future research, particularly within cultural capital, taste legitimization, and sustainability. This thesis was the result of an initial curiosity into how consumers express their taste with counterfeit luxury goods. It is hoped that the reader has gained an insight into modern day counterfeit luxury consumption and what role taste plays within it.

I, personally, enjoyed this journey over the past four years, which I dedicated to my PhD, that allowed me to not only broaden my knowledge on theoretical part of the research, but also led to fresh and unconventional discoveries throughout. While the topic has been of great interest to me before I have started my PhD, it appeared to have much more depth than I expected. When I was growing up in Ukraine, counterfeits appeared to be extremely popular among various classes of the society. It was also the time when Instagram it-girls would post million pictures with their Christian Louboutin shoes and Chanel bags, which definitely made me intrigued with this glamorous and luxurious side of life I could not afford at that time. However, this “fashion phenomenon” has also led to the over-emergence of counterfeit products – which, even to these days, can be easily bought everywhere – from the shopping centres to online vendors. Many girls like I wanted to possess a similar lifestyle to those it-girls and replica products were the option.

However, looking back at it now, I cannot stop thinking about how tacky and bad those replicas looked and what a funny combination it was for everyone to wear same things that came from same place. Which is why, when I started my PhD I was so determined to observe counterfeits from perspective of “good” and “poor” taste, however after spending numerous hours on the forum, or watching haul videos, as well as having conversations with my participants, I realised that the label “authentic” or “counterfeit” does not correspond to “good” and “bad”. A person wearing head-to-toe fake outfit can look more stylish and have more taste, than the person wearing authentics. Reflecting back on Cunningham’s words – taste is never about the money, nor is it about how genuine the product is that you are wearing. Taste is something that certain individuals have from the very beginning, which makes it easier for them develop it over time, while for others it requires significant effort and external help to succeed in it.

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Appendix i: Sample Interview with Florence

I: Can of you please just introduce yourself, tell me your name, age and occupation?

R: My name is Florence and I am 23. I have recently finished studying fashion design management and I am interested in kind of luxury industries and how fashion works and I'm also a fashion consumer.

I: Can you maybe reflect on your experience of studying fashion design management?

R: So, it was really interesting to study fashion design management, because prior to this I actually studied law. So, it was quite a change and it was interesting to see how things work from a fashion perspective rather than how things work from just kind of very legal black and white perspective. It was ... it was quite different. I learnt a lot about the processes of design, always from sketch to something being on a hanger and right at the end of the process all throughout the supply chain. So, that was really interesting and I learned a lot about how the processes work, the importance of kind of collaboration. How widely spanning these kind of supply chains are, how they are all across the world even for some smaller brand. So, it kind of gave me an insight into the scale of fashion and the scale of the problems in fashion definitely.

I: And why did you decide to go like from law to fashion?

R: So, I focused my research in law on fashion and I focused on intellectual property. So, in my graduate dissertation I wrote about how fast fashion brands copy things that are on the catwalks at London Fashion Week, and kind of what kind of impact trends and intellectual property and stealing and theft of ideas, especially designs, have on different players in the industry, from independent designers to buyers to yeah anybody who works in production all the way through to people who work in sales. What kind of impact it has. I really wanted to carry on this research, so for my MA I then looked at kind of providing problem solving solutions to this problem and how we might go about that. So, I started to explore and hopefully next year will be doing further research on this, because it's definitely a topic which similar to what today is hugely impactful in fashion. It effects so many different players and

also hugely affects consumers right away from marketing through to sales and back to the design team.

I: Can you please just tell me what does fashion mean to you?

R: So, I'm not sure if I actually like the word fashion. It's too trend focused, it makes me think about things changing all the time, something being really trendy and in fashion at some point, and then a short time after not being in fashion or not being trendy at the same point. So, to me it kind of reflects the speed at which the fashion industry moves but the word does, the word itself, which I don't think is actually a good thing at all, because I am a massive advocate of slow fashion. I think it's really important to kind of slow the process down. And that kind of comes back to how we interpret the word "fashion" and really what it means. I work with a lot of independent fashion brands as part of my job, which means that I can kind of help build their business models and one of the things that's really integral to that is values and what values they have. We always end up having the same conversation about what does fashion mean to them and it's really intriguing to see kind of what is valuable to them, what is important to them and how this kind of interlinks with what they think of is fashion. Because quite often people, who launched their own brands might ... Independent designers, they might be creative, they might be artist, they don't necessarily come from a directly fashion background, which I think is quite a nice niche.

I: You have mentioned that you are kind of like advocating slow fashion. Have you always been like that or it just came at a certain point of time?

R: I used to be a massive High Street shopper. As a consumer. And because I was at uni and where I was at uni and we just got out on nights out three or four times a week and you wanna have a new crop top and a little skirt to wear all the time. And I never used one of the same thigs, so I used to shop for loads of different crop tops and things online. I hadn't particularly thought about the impact until I started writing my research project in my final year, which was in 2018. That kind of showed me the impact that I was creating, the kind of problems I was creating as a consumer. And I said "oh my gosh, I need to rethink this completely". Like I can sew, so what can I take apart and put back together, how can I kind of play with this to make something new all the time, so that I'm wearing something different but with the old stuff that I've got. So, I had quite a lot of when I was revising for my law

exams in my final year, I did quite a lot of starting to kind of take things apart and put it back together. But it wasn't until I moved to London to study. I had no money at all and I was like, well, I've unintentionally put myself on a kind of year of no new clothes, because I've got absolutely no money to buy anything. Because London is crippling expensive. So, I was like, okay what can I do with this, what can I buy second hand, what can I kind of borrow from my sister's wardrobe, can I do clothes swaps with different people, if I ever have an event to go to what can I rent. So, it was this year of being really-really broke that made me actually change my consumption habits.

I: That is really impressive, how you can, you know, stop buying things and then just stick to your goal. So, did you get back to buying clothes or are you still on this like process of trying not to buy?

R: Yeah, so once I finished uni I started working as a consultant for independent fashion brands and because I've just finished being a student and I was trying to grow my own business, this also put me in a difficult financial situation, because there's no way that I could afford to even buy the clothes from these independent sustainable businesses, because I didn't have the money. So, I was like, okay, well I'm just going to like reduce what I buy, buy only essential things that I know wear for a long time. If I'm buying something that isn't sustainable as such unethically produced etc, then I need to kind of justify to myself why I am buying it, how will I wear it, how many times I will wear it and all sorts of questions like that. And make sure that before I purchase anything, I question myself extensively. I've still barely bought anything, but it's just kind of like I bought essential things like jeans, probably will need to buy some more jeans after lockdown because I've put on weight and I have not done anything in lockdown. But, you know, that counts as an essential buy when you can't physically get in your jeans. But I think, yeah, I'm just sticking to kind of buying essentials at the moment and I've got a list, like I'm running a little list of independent brands I wanna support and what I'd like to buy from them and then every time I am thinking about buying something, I kind of buy one thing a month, because it could easily be like 150 pounds 180 pounds per garment. Which is quite a lot, like a lot more than I definitely used to spend. So, I'm trying to make thoughtful choices.

I: As you named the prices, so nowadays you would go for more like expensive things rather than like fast fashion?

R: So, I used to be the biggest buyer of Topshop and River Island, Zara. I never used to do things like boohoo and PrettyLittleThing, because they were just so cheap and really-really poor quality, it wouldn't even last well for a night out and it would look horrible. But I used to buy lots of Topshop, Zara, H&M kind of things. I really like reduced ... I basically don't buy any of that at all. I think I bought one ... I bought one thing from Zara in the last six months and nothing from Topshop or River Island. I think now because I've like discovered this world of independent designers, I really want to own something that not many other people have. I love that about independent designers. Something that's really different and quite often, if it's handmade in the UK, you can have it perfectly fitted, like slightly adjusted to your size, which I'm obsessed with. Because I feel if I make kind of an emotional connexion with the garment, because it fits me perfectly, its beautiful and no one else got it, I'm so much more attracted to this and much more likely to keep it for a long time.

I: Do you follow trends, or you just go in like your own way?

R: Yeah, I kind of given up with the trend thing. I definitely followed it a couple of years when I was at uni massively. I was like Oh my God I have to wear this this week because it's cool and I used to order things for like next day delivery just so that I would be like ... I was one of the first people to wear. I really couldn't care less about any of that at the moment at all. I wear what I feel comfortable in, I wear what I feel kind of empowered in, especially in my job, I'm kind of like I'm quite young to be consulting, so I want to feel empowered as such. And I want to feel quite fashionable as well, so a couple of pieces I have bought in the last six months or so, I've bought a couple of blazers, some smart trousers, things that are kind of cool wardrobe essentials, but they are not especially on trend or anything like that. They just what I love and feel really happy wearing.

I: And just like reflecting back on your uni experience, was it really important for you to be the first one to wear the trendy things?

R: Oh, yeah, completely. As soon as I said to people that I'm going to go to London College of Fashion, I was like I need to live up to the expectation. If I'm gonna go to London College

of fashion I need to be the first one wearing all of this. I used to do so much kind of watching on socials about what people were wearing and then I wanted to be like the first person to wear it. It wasn't necessarily obvious trends. I wanted to work under different stuff that was quite noticeable. I wanted people to be like “ohh I really like that, where is it from?”. Kind of like it was different enough to stand out. Obviously not like it crazy. I never wore crazy things. It was just different enough to kind of stand out.

I: So back at those times you were paying attention more to trendy things rather than quality or value that you would get from them?

R: Yeah ... Like at the moment I think I'm gonna wear something 100 times, kind of wear it with five to ten different things. What occasions can I wear it for, how do I wear it in different ways. But before I would think “well this will look good for Wednesday night's disco – I'll wear it then”. I mean I might wear it again, but I really used to think quite single event focused definitely.

I: You have mentioned social media following. Do you still engage in following what other people are posting in terms of fashion or not?

R: Not especially. I mean I've got two Instagram accounts now – a personal one, where I kind of follow my friends and family and I'm interested in what people are doing. I follow a couple of like influencer brands, but not because of the fashion essentially, just because they post nice photographs, I'm not an avid kind of follower. These brands are to see what the latest things are. Then on my professional Instagram page I follow 300 or something independent brands. So not trend focused at all.

I: So, influencers are not that important for you in terms of influencing your decision on what to wear?

R: Yeah, not really. Sometimes, I'm interested in like what people are wearing, but not overly not in terms to kind of influence my own decision-making. I'm just interested because sometimes you see an advert for something, you think “really, why have they chosen to like advertise this or where did it come from” and I kind of do a bit of research to know where it comes from, the kind of decisions behind it. Just out of interest rather than buying habit wise.

I: How can you characterise your personal style these days?

R: I love wearing black. Not in a gothic way. I kind of ... I find it just really easy; it goes with everything. I like dressing quite simply. I really like wearing comfortable shoes - not in a grandma way. I live in my couple of pairs of doc Martens and if it doesn't go with doc Martens, I'm probably not going to buy it because I walk around London so much and if I didn't have my doc Martens ... Doc Martens are like my style – sandals, boots, everything. Yeah, so clothing wise I guess quite simple, I'm not really an avid layerer. I know a lot of people can pull together outfits like that and I'm just like I've got five jackets or something like leather and denim and a couple of vintagy ones and a couple of coats, I kind of just aim to kind of build a simple capsule wardrobe and that's my aim with things. Obviously, I buy a couple of pieces, which are a bit crazier. But yeah, I think quite simple, quite sophisticated and gotta go with the Doc Martens.

I: What does taste mean to you? Like having a taste in fashion.

R: Yeah, that's an interesting one, because I guess like my mum used to use that word so much to describe people. Like “ohh doesn't that person have good taste” or you know they dress low. It's kind of an interesting one for me, because it's not something I've thought about recently at all. Because I just kind of do my own thing. But it is interesting to see kind of how people curate their wardrobes and their look on Instagram. Even just my friends and things like that and how their kind of personal taste comes out in there. Because a lot of people don't have a very strong taste in fashion, so they'll just buy what other people are buying. I've got one friend, who is exactly like that and she would say it herself - she's like “I don't know what to wear and I will go and buy what influences almost telling me to buy because I don't know what to wear and it's not something I think about a lot”. So yeah, that's an interesting one because I feel like I know my own taste. I feel like I buy quite tasteful things, but quite simple, whereas a couple of my friends are completely opposite and would definitely be influenced massively.

I: Can you maybe provide a few examples of tasteful things that you buy?

R: Yeah. So, I've recently bought a couple of black dresses. One of them is kind of midi with a little bit of I guess it's like cotton base lace look fabric. That's super easy and quite tasteful as it goes with essentially everything. Oh, yeah, I've bought a suit, which is really simple, it goes with absolutely everything. The blazer is literally behind me on my chair. It's kind just really simple check blazer with a matching skirt and it goes with everything. I guess that's probably the trendiest thing that I've bought recently. It was from Karen Millen. I know if I want to buy something that's like reasonably high quality and will last long time and fit really well, I know that I can buy Karen Millen because I've got a couple of pieces from there which are really ... I've worn ... Honestly, I must have got the for like five years and it can definitely last sometimes, so I kind of trust the brand. In terms of other tasteful things ... Oh yeah, my other obsession is eyewear. So, I have loads of glasses. These are like the only luxury thing I buy I guess. So, these are Tom Ford and then I have a pair from an independent designer, they are blue ones, who sent me a sample to try, which I absolutely love. I do actually need glasses so that's kind of an essential addition to my style. But I think ... I mean I've definitely got some really really distasteful glasses in the past, they are horrible, but now I've changed to a more sophisticated kind of taste and hence why the more sophisticated glasses come in.

I: How did you actually develop your taste for the good things?

R: I think at the start of becoming a fashion consumer, I was really influenced by my mums' taste. I didn't have particularly strong opinions about what I wore, when I was kind of a young teenager and she is like an exceptional shopper. She's really good at picking things out and she has a really really refined taste for clothes. So, I think a lot of it came from her. I guess more influence recently I've kind of very much gone over that fast fashion going out phase that I had at uni and now ... definitely more focused on just myself and what I like and picking out the best pieces. But I think one of the really influential things that might have affected my taste was going to London College of fashion, because I panicked at the start and I was like "Oh my God I need so many clothes" just to kind of keep up with these people, who are going to look really cool and I'm going to stand out, because I don't know what to wear. And everybody had such individual tastes, such differing and individual taste. but it was really interesting to see. So, there was this lovely French girl on my course, she used to be almost like a showcase for independent designers and she was really slim and really petite and she used to pull off these most amazing like slim fit trousers, little tops sewed by like

independent women. It was fantastic. She used to wear amazing stuff that I could never pull off because it was kind of all beiges and she just looked fantastic. Then there was a couple of Chinese students in my class as well, who would be like the first to wear the new thing from Balenciaga. They'd be, you know, wearing so many different brands. Then there was another student and he used to wear just really cool browns, quite heavily branded stuff, but I always used to Google who the brand was, going on Instagram and finding out who the brand was. So, I think, yeah, that kind of put me off being overly branded and pushing more towards the kind of independent designer phase I think in that year, but it was definitely a year of like discovery and finding out about brands and now the more ... Every new brand that I work with as an independent consultant, I see and I'm like "ohh I love this, I'm really intrigued by this". And I think one of the most important things to me in terms of developing my taste is now hearing stories, because I find out so much about all kind of values and vision of my brands and where they are designed from. Even if I see something and at the start I think "oh it's a white jacket" and then at the end of our conversation is so much more than that. Because you find out about everything that's gone into it from design, inspiration, through to like who's pattern cut it and who's made it. So, I think is a continually developing spectrum, I guess.

I: So, you've started talking about being in this environment of fashionable people, who have their individual style. Can you please reflect a bit on how you felt? Whether you were thinking about buying things that they were wearing or like if you dreamed about these things?

R: One of the things that concerned me, when I was at uni, is that I didn't have enough of a personal style. And I was like "Oh my God everyone else got their look, they know what they wear every day, it kind of fits their personality, I don't know how to show who I am and what I wear". It used to bother me at the start and I was like OMG I've got no money, I've got no time, because I was working, interning, and studying at the same time, how the hell am I going to find something that I can actually wear? And it shows who I am, and it shows who I want to be, and it kind of empowers me as well, how am I going to do that? So, I guess it was, yeah, a year of black reflection and taking my time over things, and really wearing so much black. I was like if I wear black jeans and black top then nobody is going to think much about me, because, you know, I'm just trying to hide in the corner, while I develop what I want to wear and how I'm going to afford to wear it and how I wear things, because I felt

everybody else in my class was so on top of it. They really knew what ... who they were and how they really wanted to portray themselves and I felt quite behind in that. I mean I was about two or three years younger than anyone else in the class, so I kind of had this time outside of studying and outside of this whole like going out phase, to explore and also to afford clothing because I wasn't quite up to scratch at that. But it was definitely a period of reflection for me and kind of exploration as well. It really allowed me to kind of workout who I was and how to portray that to people.

I: You have also mentioned, when you were talking about your glasses, that you had a distasteful phase in your life. Can you please share a bit more about this?

R: Yeah, I don't know it went for a year and I just bought 3 pairs of really ugly glasses. And I'm now at the stage, where I guess it was a trend thing and I guess I did exactly what brands wanted me to do. So, I bought these pair like Dolce and Gabbana floral pink glasses. And they were pink and floral over the top and then underneath really dark. And they looked really really cool with this pink coat I owned but everything else looked really ugly with it. It was like over the top, it cut half of my whole face and it was almost like ... not like joke glasses, because they were quite serious, but they were just quite a statement, which I wasn't sure I was ready to make. And they cost me a lot of money, so I was like "I have to make the most of it and kind of wear them". But, you know, I do regret that purchase now, not hugely regret, I mean I'd wear them around the house and stuff like that as they are quite comfortable, but they didn't give me what I wanted to. I wanted them to make me feel like fashionable and cool and instead they were just kind of pink and flowery and quite ugly. Yeah, so I've bought a couple of pairs of glasses like that and I guess some clothes well. I'm just like "why did I buy that". Like I thought it was cool at the time or it was trendy, or I was trying to be this person and as I'm like explored more, I found out more, I'm definitely seeing that I'm not that person. It doesn't suit me, and I really don't want to wear that thing.

I: When you reflect these days of who you are now and look at your style back in the days, do you feel like kind of shame or things like "why did I wear, how could I even think about wearing this" or you're just accepting this as part of your style development?

R: Yeah, I guess it's like you can't regret everything you've done, since you were like thirteen because it was just an exploration thing. You are just exploring; you are learning, and you are living, and I don't think there's any point in regret. I mean I can be like “Oh my God, why did I buy this one, like camouflage crop-top of boohoo, that was a stupid decision”, you know. But I wore it like 10 times, I had fun in it, so I can't regret it. So, you know, I think it's just kind of ... you can look back and be like, oh I could have made a better decision here or that will help me make a better decision in the future. But I don't think there is any point in kind of spending too much time thinking about it all. How you have changed or how you should have dealt with things. Just gotta kind of get on with it and it's in the point of writing something you can learn from it and kind of move on. With any aspect not just clothing.

I: How would you like describe someone, who has a good taste in fashion?

R: I guess it's somebody for me, who can kind of encapsulate what they are about and what they stand for in what they wear. I think that's really empowering for me. Somebody, who I'm like “oh they're definitely that kind of person” or, you know, I want to be them because they look like this and dress like this. I'm so over the whole like influencer phase of like all these influences being paid by brands to create their own collections and things like that. That's just distasteful to me to be honest. I do think this is a money-making scheme and there's no kind of good treatment or ethical support for the whole supply chain, so it's kind of pointless. But in terms of taste, I think it's really kind of people, who showcase who they are, what they do, what they are about, their kind of morals and values and stuff through what they wear. I don't think it needs to be something that sounds like 100% of the time, you know, like I have quite a lot of people who are real with it and I think that's quite tasteful to not overdo it all the time. Because a lot of people, who work in the fashion industry think “I have to showcase this side of myself” constantly, but also everyone's human. So, like sometimes you can come into work in like jeans and hoodie. Your boyfriend's hoodie, you know. You can't be tasteful and perfect 100% of the time. So, don't aspire to be that. I can't think of any kind of examples looking ahead, but I guess it's just like ... I'm a big fan ... I'm kind of very anti big influences, other than kind of influencers, who use that platform in the right way. And even then, a lot of some kind of support fast fashion, which I'm not the hugest fan of. I guess it varies massively, depending on kind of ... You know, whether they have taste or not. I do think there is kind of a link between taste and fast fashion and kind of influencers as well.

Not quite sure what it is yet, but, yeah, I guess if people can't stand on their own two feet and be confident enough to choose what they want to wear for the right reasons. I just think that's part of the reason, why people buy fast fashion, because they just want to follow, they just want to do the right thing. And I'm like “stop, stand on your own two feet and kind of have your own opinion, because this is not good”. It doesn't look good and it's not good for anyone – planet, people, you, everyone. So, I think yeah again this kind of huge factor is most of options for that.

I: What about bad taste or poor taste? Have you met someone, who you think has a bad taste in fashion?

R: I work with someone, who's got purposefully bad taste. Like he works in fashion as a strategist, but he just does not care. And he makes the point of not caring, so he'll always like I don't care about things, I don't care if it's twenty years old, I'm gonna do what I want. And sometimes I think that's kind of like bad taste. All the stuff he wears is like ripped and got holes in it. Come on... Have some kind of involvement in this. He would wear a shirt with all the buttons off and I'm like can you sew them back on. Because he just doesn't care what people think so strongly that he would just almost dress like distastefully. In terms of people, kind of that I work with or share office with, I guess I wouldn't describe anyone, who kind of being in poor taste or distasteful, because I'm not that judgmental. I am quite open to people doing what they want and wearing what they want. The only thing I have noticed is like sometimes, you know, if you've got an occasion to dress up for and somebody like decides to dress down by, you know, for example I went to Charlton races just before Coronavirus kicked off, which was full of Corona. It was so awful, but yeah so I saw a couple of people, who were really dressed down and I was kind of like “this is an occasion to kind of wear a suit, dress nicely, be really smart, follow the dress guidance and kind of be empowered by that”. And people who kind of let this slide and looked really scruffy, I was kind of thinking “okay, maybe that is quite distasteful towards the event organisers and the kind of event that it is”. And the other people, who were there, who have such exceptionally high standards. So, I think they're the best couple of examples I can think of.

I: Do you think that wearing fake luxury products is a signal of bad taste?

R: I think, I'm very anti-counterfeit, very anti-copy and I just think like you know how much he paid for it. You know that it's fake. I'd rather you just don't buy it. I'd rather wear a Primark bag than bag done by some fake Michael Kors. Because Michael Kors is especially good example of this, because honestly the impact that counterfeits had on Michael Kors as a brand is massive. Because honestly the quality of Michael Kors is so low and the quality of counterfeits is quite good, but I don't know what's real and what's fake anymore. I had a friend at uni, who used to be so into buying fakes and she knew it was fake and she just used to buy it, because she was like "oh they are nice shoes". I was like "well, they are not, because they've got the Michael Kors logo on them". But they are not, because the soles are kind of falling off and I was kind of like "why are you doing that". I guess, yeah, that is distasteful as well, because ... I just think it's pointless, like they know it's fake, why are they doing it? I guess there's so many reasons why people might buy a fake, you know, so that they feel like they're part of something. I think buying fakes is pointless. It really increases a bad market and has a major major major impact on the original brand. So, I'm so against it. I don't think I have anything fake. I don't know why I am looking around the room. I don't think I've bought anything fake. If you gonna spend the money on it ... oh yeah, I did actually see some like fake Doc Martins, but never buy them, because the reason why I wear Doc Martins is not because of their brand, it's because of their quality and comfort. I know that they're comfy and they gonna last me forever. I can walk for a whole year, wearing them every single day. You don't get that with fakes. I just, I'm not a fan of the whole buying a brand, you know, buying for the brand name and that's what people do when they buy fakes. So, yeah, I'm completely against it.

I: So, you've never bought anything fake yourself?

R: I don't think I have ever bought ... like I've never bought fake glasses, as that's the only kind of luxury thing I buy I guess. I've never bought fake anything. I'd rather I bought like High Street stuff more, more so than fakes. I've, yeah, I really don't think I've engaged in it at all.

I: But were you ever tempted to buy it or you always stood by your ideals?

R: Yeah, I think it's tacky. It's cheap, and it showcases that you're tacky and cheap. As people know you are in a fake. Everyone knows you are wearing a fake, so why do you even bother?

I mean there's some good fakes, but most people I see wearing fakes, I just think everyone knows it's a fake. I just I don't think I'll be tempted to buy it. Sometimes, I like really want something luxury, so I just buy something else or save up for whatever. I've never kind of had this middle ground of like I need it so badly that I'm going to buy a fake version. Because I'm so ... I'm quality and that is going to last, and materials, and work compromise is so important to me and always has been. I always wanted to buy something that can be fit for more than one occasion. Especially with shoes and jackets and things like that. Yeah, I don't think I will ever be tempted.

I: So, you've mentioned that you can easily tell that someone is wearing fake. How would you do that? How can you become an expert if you don't necessarily buy these things yourself?

R: Yeah, I mean the biggest fake thing I've spotted recently is fake Alexander McQueen trainers. Do you know the style of the originals? There are so many fakes of that. Because I worked in Harrods for awhile during my MA. I'm really good at spotting fake luxury products. It's like quite a good skill of mine. I feel quite quite good at it now I've seen the real products and I'm quite aware of them. It is obviously like even if you're not an educated customer and educated luxury buyer, I guess that even though I am not an avid luxury buyer, I'd say I am quite educated as to kind of what is real and what isn't. There is so much fake Valentino and fake Michael Kors around. Michael Kors is a really easy one to spot, because of the spacing of the logo and kind of lettering and also the quality. Like you can spot fake Michael Kors from ages away. I mean I'm not like original Michael Kors either, because it's a really poor quality. But it's really easy - the shape, especially in terms of bags and shoes, the shape, the finish, the quality. It is just really poor and you can tell from the stitching and things like that. I think generally, yeah, it's just the little things that you are kind of aware of. Like with the Alexander McQueen soles – I know what shape they are supposed to be. I think if they are not branded or the logo is not on, you kind of notice straight away but because so many are copying shapes as well as logos that goes on. These are kind of little giveaways, I think.

I: Have you educated yourself on purpose or was it just a natural process of you working in Harrods?

R: I don't think I've ever sat down and be like I'm gonna research stuff, you know. I've never done that. And I don't really buy that much luxury. So, I guess it's a mixture of like awareness from my undergrad of what is fake and what is real and also in terms of kind of yeah just working in Harrods and knowing what is real, and the kind of people that buy the real stuff and things like that kind of consumer based research. And also just knowing the products.

I: I was always curious. Probably these things happen, but when a person comes to Harrods and they are wearing fake things, you can tell right? The sales assistants and people who work there.

R: Yeah 100% and it's really weird. Harrods was the weirdest place I've ever worked because like the people, who would spend the most money ... like women, who turn on with their hair scraped back in the ponytail, cap on, adidas tracksuit. They are like the people, who would spend the most money. Then there's all the try-hard's, who are wearing a mixture of fake and real. And it's really obvious when you are wearing some real, what is fake. I just can't believe how some people dress. They are just trying to get as many possible brands on their body, like Gucci joggers, Alexander McQueen hoody, Balenciaga trainers – all of these and I'm just thinking none of this goes together, what are you trying to achieve. Show off that you are rich? Probably, that's the goal but ... also when you are working at Harrods, you stand still and watch so much that you definitely pick up on stuff, because loads of the concessions are really quiet and you will be talking to customers occasionally, but there will be a lot of kind of standing around and watching. That kind of people watching gives you a good eye.

I: So, you've mentioned that when a person is wearing a mixture of real and fake, you can easily tell what is what. Can you please tell me more about this?

R: So, it happened quite a lot because loads of people would wear fake Gucci. There was this phase last year and I don't know whether it was some bid London fake Gucci seller or something, but everyone was wearing real Balenciaga trainers and then the rest of the outfit was Gucci and it was fake. And you can just tell from jeans and joggers and stuff. Like how they tie round and the kind of colours that they use is not quite right. And it's quite and eye sore, because it's not quite right. When you're so used to seeing those products and when you're standing in a shop that sells those products, someone's walking around in something

and you are like “that’s a weird grey”. That’s not Gucci grey or whatever. It’s not Alexander McQueen because it doesn’t have this like crisp finish. With different brands they have different tell-tale signs. Like, for example, I really think that Gucci people would make copies and not get the colours right. Last year they did loads of stuff on Gucci with the badges and like prints and stuff like that. There will be so many bad fakes around, because people would not spend the time to kind of copy it properly. And with Alexander McQueen that is not an easy one to copy because it’s crisp, it’s sharp, it’s outstandingly tailored, because that’s like the brand’s historical value. So, if you ever trying to counterfeit something, never try counterfeiting McQueen, because it’s really difficult. Balenciaga, I honestly can’t tell the difference between Balenciaga fakes and Balenciaga real because I’m not a fan of Balenciaga. If it’s just a black hoodie with a logo printed on it, it’s quite easy to make a copy of that as long as you’ve got a decent kind of logo. Something that can like heat press a logo on. You can make a copy of Balenciaga in 5 minutes. Can’t tell the difference because Balenciaga is like a weird brand, it is not great quality as well. But other brands definitely have a tell-tale sign.

I: What about bags. Have anyone ever come to Harrods carrying a fake Birkin bag or Chanel bag?

R: Ohhh, yeah I’d forgotten about Chanel. I don’t know why I forgot about Chanel. I’ve seen a couple of fake Chanel bags. One of the things I find really weird that people do, is like they’ll have a real purse and the fake bag. I’m like “well, why don’t just have fake both”. Because then at least they match. Or like they will have a tote bag, like a really simple one, the cheaper ones that’s real and then they have a fake purse. Fake purse is such a giveaway, it’s so hard to fake a purse properly. So, no one does it well. Purses just look so tacky when they are fake. That’s a massive giveaway, if somebody’s got like a real tote bag and it’s quite simple and it was big shiny like fake tacky purse inside, I’m like “okay, that’s fake”. But no, I think with bags like ... for Michael Kors it’s easy to spot, but for other brands I don’t. it varies whether it’s a high quality or a low-quality counterfeit. There are so many high-quality counterfeits in terms of bags, because it’s quite easy to get good quality leather sourced and manufactured the simple bags. They never make like really complicated bags. I saw a lot of Balenciaga copies last year because they did these like really simple bags with prints and like cats and dogs on. They were like bold colours like yellow, blue. I can’t remember, it was last year, like maybe their SS19 collection, I think. They have like cats and dogs on, I saw a

couple of fakes of those. Which is like really really random cat and dog on it. But someone's cat and dog that they got taken photo for something, rather than the official cat and dog, it was on Balenciaga to start with. But no that was an interesting one.

I: Do you think someone can dress up certain way in order to show that the fake products that they're wearing are real?

R: I think that goes back to influencers, definitely and I think ... I do think that slim women can pull off fakes as a real thing on social media, because, you know, I just I don't know why I've always thought that. Because one of my friends, the one that wears fakes could almost get away with it, because she's really slim, she's really attractive and she is kind of “it's not too in your face”. But then other people, who make it really in your face kind of you like “okay that is fake”. But yeah in terms of people pulling off. I think you can pull it off a lot on social media more than any kind of real life. It is more difficult in real life, but you know, right now we have no real life, so they can put it off on social media and online, definitely.

I: But have you ever noticed someone wearing something fake on social media?

R: Not like major influencers, but micro influences, who are like up and coming and trying to make a name for themselves and things. Yeah, I see them wearing fakes. Especially men.

I: Men?

R: Yeah, weirdly. So, like the only reason I know this is because I did research project for the client. So, I was trying to find micro-influencers for streetwear brand that I was working with. So, I had to do loads of research about what kind of influences we look for and so many of them had like 2 to 10,000 followers, because that's what we're kind of looking at - 5 to 10,000 followers. Micro. I don't know the official definition of micro influencers, but anyway. Small number of followers and essentially, they ... loads of them were wearing fake and it was clear to me that they were fake. Because they just weren't the kind of person, who would buy a real one. They didn't really care about anything other than like looking cool. With men and branded T shirts I think, to be honest, if I was a man and I could buy a good fake – I would buy it. Because I'm not going to spend £370 per T shirt just to go on a night out and wear McQueen or Balenciaga or Gucci. That's ridiculous. So if I was a man and I felt like, you

know, I needed to step up to compete with my friends and stuff, going on a night out, I would really try to buy really good counterfeit top I reckon. I'm definitely not like that really in real life as a woman, but I think if I was a man, my view might be completely different. But, yeah, I definitely notice that male micro-influencers often wear fake T-shirts.

I: Do you watch YouTube hauls?

R: I watched a few recently, because I follow a couple of people on Instagram and I just watched one of them, because I was like “you’ve got these many followers, why are you still working with boohoo”. I just didn't understand why she wanted to buy all this boohoo stuff. Then she tried it on and it looked really bad. She was like “Oh my God I love it” and I was like “Oh my God this is a joke” and then unfollowed her. Selling fast fashion but it doesn’t even look good.

I: So, I'm not sure whether you've seen them or not, but there's this new app called Vova and basically, they sell fake products. So, it's becoming really popular on YouTube to order things off Vova and then make a haul video. What do you think about this?

R: I think so often influencers are kind of influenced by the fact that they don't care because they can make money off it and if they don't have strong opinions about it, all they see is “oh this can make me this much money, because this app is going to pay me to do that”. But they forget about any morals that they might have and just do it. They are so led by money that I just don't think they care. Also I don't know if people know, that's another thing, when I was conducting my research last year I was shocked to find out that people just don't understand what impact counterfeits have, because they are like “ohh it's cool, it kind of looks like the real thing, no one is going to notice on the social media, I'm going to do it”. I can offer people basically to be part of the Balenciaga crew and be really cool by offering those like fake and I just don't adhere to any of that. Yeah, I’m so anti it. Sorry, I’ve got like the strongest opinion on it, but no I think that they kind of need to not be led by money and actually find some morals in what they're doing. Because I don’t know how you continue to do that and just destroyed brands in the meantime. Yeah, it’s their choice, I just hope that people don't fall on influence and be like don't care I'm buying. It’s obviously like ... there’s obviously an

audience for this because that's why the brand exists, the art exists so I guess people do wanna do it, but I certainly don't.

I: Actually, most of these people, who film videos are micro influencers, so they don't have more than 10,000 followers. But they're genuinely so happy about doing this. I cannot believe it, they are actually so open about buying fakes.

R: I reckon that the app will be paying them quite a lot of money to do it. Like more money than they'd get for advertising other products and that's the only reason they do it. People are so led by money, but I can't believe this opinion about influences that people actually buy these like hair gummy things, you know, those little white bears like "take one a day and you will have glowing hair". Sorry, but do people not have any idea about, kind of like, what goes on in life and why you are buying this product. The whole influencer situation is kind of beyond me. I get it in some ways you can use your platform for good, but so many people don't, and they just care about turning profits and making as much money from the post as possible. So, I guess that's why they are super like enthusiastic about selling fakes. Because it's like "ohh, I'm getting paid 500 pounds to post all about this for the next 2 weeks and I only have 2000 followers", do you know what I mean? I think it's so money led and not moral lead completely.

I: As working in the industry, do you often get the brands that are copied by other brands?

R: Yeah, it depends. I'm not faced properly by the counterfeiting issue. We face generally by design theft and idea theft and different parts of shapes and tailoring. One of the brands I work with is a massively innovative tailor, she does like amazing designs, amazing cuts of patterns, basically. Somebody tried to steal that and put that into one of the leg of their trousers and I was like "wait, hold up" like that is our pattern, but luckily we registered the design and it was fine. Less so with my brands because they are all independent, counterfeiting is less of a problem, but there are other intellectual property theft of my ideas and copying of garments as well.

I: Also, just going back to the times when you worked in Harrods. It is really popular for YouTube influencers are dressing in fake designer products, like head to toe Gucci, and then they go to Gucci store. What would your reaction be to this?

R: I mean there was a lot of people, who used to go in Harrods like wearing a lot of branded stuff. Some of them were a bit more vague than others. I just think it is so attention seeking often. Like is there not more important things in life to be doing than that? I think there's so much about branding. Because I'm not a huge brand buyer at all. I obviously love my Doc Martins, I love my Tom Ford I wear, but in terms of other things I'm not overly kind of influenced in that sense by the brand. I'm more interested in kind of quality look and if I could afford it I would definitely buy Alexander McQueen, because the shape and the tailoring and it's ridiculously high standards. But in terms of everything else I kind of think that you don't even buy Gucci just because it's Gucci that'll be it. Because it's trendy, because it's really cool at the moment and everyone else is wearing it. Definitely not that kind of buyer. But no, if I was still working in Harrods, it would be interesting to see different people who work there. Their opinion on these people walking out, because some people, like the manager I used to work with at Valentino, he would have spotted this person straight out. Whooping cough "he's such a fake" and just laughed at him. I would probably just be like, why this person is so attention seeking? Do we not have anything better to do on Saturday? That would be my opinion. And then some other colleagues will be like "Oh my God, this guy is so cool, like he's so rich, I'm gonna suck up to him to get good commission, because he's so rich". That would be hilarious. I would also laugh at that. But yeah they going the day in a life of the shop assistant.

I: But a lot of sales assistants believe that if the person is wearing fake, they think that it is all real and that they are rich?

R: Yeah, and I fully think it would be really entertaining to watch this because I would laugh so much, being overflowed with laugh, because I know shop assistants would like jump, because ... Especially shop assistants that don't have a lot of experience in luxury, would likely be that they'd seen this person and be like "Oh my God, they are so rich, I need to speak to them and then I'm gonna come to them with a drink, I'm gonna open the prosecco, because this person is so rich". When I worked at Louis Vuitton, Oh my God, this is funny, we had loads of loads of ... like a big family of travellers come in, and they were so attention

seeking straight away. Really in your face, like asking for loads of left, right and centre. One guy like walked out with two belts hidden under his jumper and set all the alarms off and it went crazy. But like these people were coming in like in right amount of real to almost like get away with it being real. They had like fake T shirts and things, but real belts. It was just kind of like fitted really well with that kind of personality and approach to this kind of wiring. It really varies, really all over it, just wanted like new, wanted expensive, wanted kind of to look the part and feel like they're being part of it. But yeah it was a crazy experience.

I: You've mentioned that one of your friends is wearing fakes, can you please just describe that a little bit more?

R: So, it was at the start of University and I met her on the first day of uni and she was wearing fake Michael Kors bag, fake belt, fake shoes and fake jeans. And it was all Michael Kors. The thing is I kind of new straightaway that they were fake, even though I didn't have that much knowledge. I was like "why is she wearing fakes, it looks really tacky". I'd rather she was head to toe River Island, she'd look way better. Yeah, she had gone crazy in her fake stuff, because she had a really good fake market in our hometown. And a lot of my friends wore fakes and they started with fake belts and they bought fake bags and she was like "all my friends were all involved in it, but I wanted to be involved in it too". I was kind of like ... I really don't get this at all. Because it's not all my friendship group does and so I guess she was really influenced by other people. Her mom and her friends and her family would like buy it and that kind of thing, so she kind of see it from other people, who she is really influenced by. But yeah, I guess she didn't carry on for that long but, once you move to uni she started to buy another stuff, she did start dressing in more High Street rather than fake. But she always kept her Michael Kors fake shoes, I don't know why, because they are really horrible. And they were like really poor quality. I was like "why are you wearing fake Michael Kors shoes, while they have a hole in one, because they are really rubbish and you've only wore them twice, and the rain is coming in". I just don't see the point. But I guess she changed her mind pretty quickly, because she just wasn't in that venture group anymore. Now, I haven't seen her wear fake stuff for years.