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University of Southampton

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Economic, Social and Political Sciences

Criminal Couture: Consumer Demand for Luxury Fashion

Sourced from the Illegal Wildlife Trade

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology, Social Policy, & Criminology

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University of Southampton

Abstract

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Economic, Social, and Political Sciences

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Couture: Consumer Demand for Luxury Fashion Sourced from the Illegal Wildlife Trade

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Arjun Raj Awasthi

This thesis investigates consumer demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic animal skins, a major driver of the illegal wildlife trade. Adopting a green criminological perspective, it examines how morally contentious consumption is sustained despite environmental and ethical concerns. The study uses an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach, beginning with seizure data from UK Border Force to contextualise the scale of the problem, followed by a survey examining associations between narcissism, empathy, and positive attitudes toward exotic skins. Semi-structured interviews further explore consumer justifications, drawing on neutralisation theory and social comparison frameworks. The findings suggest that overt narcissism is positively associated with favourable attitudes toward exotic skin products, while empathy does not significantly deter such consumption. Participants often employed neutralisation techniques such as denial of responsibility and appeals to higher loyalties to rationalise their behaviour. The thesis challenges the assumption that increasing consumer empathy alone will reduce demand and instead recommends structural interventions, including policy reform, cultural messaging, and regulatory reforms. Ultimately, this research contributes to understanding the psychological, social, and criminological dimensions of nefarious luxury consumption and offers recommendations for targeted demand reduction strategies.

Keywords: luxury fashion, illegal wildlife trade, illegal luxury products, exotic skins, narcissism, empathy, green criminology, consumer behaviour, techniques of neutralisation, sustainability, demand reduction.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: Arjun Raj Awasthi

Title of thesis: "Criminal Couture: Consumer Demand for Luxury Fashion Sourced from the Illegal Wildlife Trade"

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;

Signature: Date: 23 October 2025

Thesis Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all life that suffers at the hands of human cruelty and atrocity.

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Chapter 1 Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 Overview

The illegal wildlife trade (IWT) is one of the world's most lucrative criminal markets, worth an estimated \$20 billion annually (World Economic Forum, 2023), and is driving thousands of species towards extinction. This trade thrives on the demand for rare and exotic animal products. It is a “wicked problem” (Rittel and Webber, 1973), a tangled web of environmental destruction, organised crime, and unethical consumerism, with no singular solution. The killing of wild animals for human use is not new; for centuries, species have been hunted for their skins, feathers, oil, and bones, with some driven to extinction in the process (Ritvo, 2022). Today, the scale and intensity of this exploitation have reached unprecedented levels. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), of the 166,000 species assessed for survival and conservation, 46,300 are facing the threat of extinction and are labelled as such in the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) ranks the IWT as the fourth largest illegal trade in the world, after drugs, weapons, and human trafficking (WWF, 2022). The demand for exotic animal products, particularly in the luxury sector, continues to fuel this crisis. The rarity, perceived exclusivity, and association with wealth make wild animals and their parts highly desirable, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation (Moorhouse, D'Cruze and Macdonald, 2021).

The IWT is comprised of a complex network of local and international actors functioning at different levels, from small-scale decentralised poachers, to kingpins operating organised crime rings (Mozer and Prost, 2023). The perpetuation of the IWT is centred on consumer demand for products such as traditional medicine or luxury exotic skins, driving persistent demand and creating a profitable market, incentivising suppliers to carry on with nefarious criminal activities. The types of animals traded for the purpose of production and human use vary by region and have differing conservation threats. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2024) World Wildlife Crime Report, the main markets created by the IWT are for exotic pets, fashion,

traditional medicine, decorations, accessories and jewellery, and wild food or bushmeat (UNODC, 2024).

Throughout this thesis, the term luxury products refer specifically to luxury fashion items made from exotic animal skins that are either directly sourced from, or potentially laundered through, the IWT. Such products may be strictly illegal when derived from illicit hunting or trafficking, or they may be legally traded under frameworks such as CITES if sourced from captive-breeding or ranching operations. However, even legally traded items remain ethically contentious, given the difficulties of monitoring supply chains, the risks of laundering, and broader concerns around animal harm and sustainability. Accordingly, this thesis does not treat the categories of “legal” and “illegal” exotic skin products as entirely distinct but instead investigates why luxury fashion consumption of exotic skins as a whole remains criminologically and ethically problematic. The relentless extraction of wildlife for human consumption, whether for luxury fashion, traditional medicine, or exotic pets, does not occur in isolation. It disrupts ecosystems, threatens biodiversity, and undermines the essential services that sustain life on Earth.

Biodiversity matters as each species on this planet has an important role to play in upholding dynamic natural systems. In addition, the survival of humanity depends on a healthy natural environment. As humans we rely on ecosystem services to provide us necessities such as clean air, pure water, shelter, resources, and ensure our well-being (Bennett *et al.*, 2015). Without the richness of different species, the systems and sources that provide this are damaged. Being kind to, and taking care of, biodiversity is in the best interest of humans. Importantly within a species justice framework human and non-human animal lives are equal and all life has “inherent value”(Regan, 2004, pp. 235), beyond transforming the natural environment to provide us with services, non-human animals¹ have the right to thrive in their respective habitats. Piers Beirne’s work on “theriocide” (Beirne, 2014) underscores this position by classifying the routine killing and exploitation of animals, whether legal or illegal, as systemic violence against non-human species. From this perspective, the commodification of animal bodies for luxury goods represents not

¹ The terms animals and non-human animals are used interchangeably in this thesis

simply a legal or market concern but a form of speciesism that reproduces structural harm and denies animals' right to life.

The ethical considerations for non-human life and harm to the environment comes from a green criminology framework and is the foundation of investigation for this research. Green criminology looks to define harm to the environment through an ecological justice and species justice perspective. It is an inclusive, ethical and moral approach which encases the well-being of planet Earth and its inhabitants, including humans, through understanding the suffering of the victims of human atrocities (Y, 2007). Environmental harm can be observed and measured at individual, societal, and institutional levels, and this research considers these levels and their intersections.

The main impetus for this work comes from an investigation into illegal wild animal contraband seized in the United States from 2003 – 2012 (Sosnowski and Petrossian, 2020). It was found that 82% of contraband products seized were those made from reptile skins and that these products were also luxury fashion products. The study was curious to understand whether this was a contemporary trend and whether this was also the case for the UK, as the UK has recently become the fifth largest revenue generator in the world for luxury fashion products (Statista, 2024a).

This research while primarily situated within the discipline of criminology, approached through the lens of green criminology, is distinctly interdisciplinary, drawing on literature and theoretical frameworks from consumerism, psychology, sociology, and critical animal studies to examine consumer demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. At its core, the study investigates morally contentious consumption, requiring an exploration of consumer attitudes, motivations, decision-making processes, and psychological attributes. A comprehensive and multi-disciplinary narrative literature review shaped the research focus, particularly on conspicuous consumption, the threat from IWT, wildlife conservation and animal welfare, and the psychological underpinnings of luxury consumer behaviour. The framework of this thesis is operationalised through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to systematically investigate consumer decision making, and justifications for engaging in ethically contentious luxury consumption.

1.1.2 Outline of Chapters

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical underpinnings for undertaking this study. It explores various theories that explain individual intention, motivation, and action. Performing behaviours are integral to understand for the purpose of this investigation. Behaviours can be positive, negative, or neutral and are determined by various intrinsic and extrinsic influences. The chapter provides the conceptual and philosophical understanding of the explanatory sequential mixed methods design of this research. It was decided to put methods for each phase of the research in its own distinct chapter. This was done to address the sequential approach of the different phases, contextually link the distinct methods applied directly to the results and discussions of each phase, and as a reader-centric approach by providing a consistent narrative flow. The broad objectives of this thesis are also presented in this chapter.

Chapter 3 presents results from an overview of illegal wild animal contraband seized by the UK Border Force. The analysis revealed that the category of seized contraband that includes luxury fashion products has shown an upward trend. More than 43% of the total seizures in the data examined were related to fashion products, and 52% were products made from reptiles, with nearly 90% of all fashion seizures related to reptiles. By examining these records and by also analysing legal imports of exotic skin products, a foundational understanding of the scope and scale of the wildlife trade was established. This revealed the persistent pervasiveness of consumer demand for fashion products made from exotic skins, thereby providing the necessary justification for focussing on the luxury fashion industry as a key area of investigation.

In Chapter 4, findings are presented from a survey developed specifically for this research to examine consumer demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. The survey was administered to a sample of 164 adults within the UK population. Drawing on previous studies that have linked luxury consumption to conspicuous consumption, and conspicuous consumption to the psychological attribute of narcissism, the survey measured participants' attitudes toward exotic skin products, as well as their levels of narcissism and empathy. While narcissism has been associated with materialistic and status-driven behaviour, empathy is often linked to conscientious and ethical consumption. The findings indicated a positive relationship between favourable attitudes toward exotic skin products and higher levels of overt narcissism. In addition

to quantifying these associations, the survey data was analysed using a principal components analysis (PCA) to identify potential underlying dimensions or patterns of thought that characterise ethically contentious consumption.

Chapter 5 presents the qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with self-identifying luxury fashion consumers. The interview guide was created based on factors identified from the PCA and sought to capture the nuances associated with the luxury consumption of exotic skins, and their justifications. The underlying theory used to understand justifications that consumers gave for ethically dubious consumption was techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza, 1957). The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis, using an iterative deductive and inductive approach. These themes were underpinned by theories of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), and self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1980). The deeper socio-cultural factors relating to, and justifications for, luxury consumption were gleaned from the interviews, which provided a richer understanding of the attitudes and behaviours that were identified from the survey data.

Chapter 6 provides a comprehensive discussion and conclusion, triangulating findings, on how luxury fashion consumption can be understood in relation to the IWT, including thoughts regarding the luxury manufacturing industry and its nefarious and exploitative practices, how the study of narcissism and empathy in consumers is important in understanding the conspicuous consumption of exotic skins, the relevance of seizure data collected by customs, and most importantly, the triangulation of both quantitative and qualitative findings to understand the key features of consumer demand in the market for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. Finally, the findings from all three chapters are integrated and the implications of findings are discussed. Policy recommendations are proposed for demand reduction strategies and suggestions for future research are put forward.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Consumerism and Conservation from Past to Present

Commerce has, and continues to be, a defining characteristic of human civilization and many archaeological sites have uncovered evidence of trade between ancient cultures and civilizations. For example, there was bustling trade in the post-Neolithic world stretching from Egypt to the Indus Valley for a variety of materials, and notably items that we would consider extremely valuable today such as gold, other metals, and semi-precious stones (Zinkina, Ilyin and Korotayev, 2017). Evidently, humans have been manufacturing, consuming, and valuing luxury goods since ancient times and have long associated them with wealth, abundance, and leisure (Cabigiosu, 2020).

Commerce has two distinct set of actors – the seller and the buyer, or the supplier and the consumer, respectively. The nature and profile of consumers, the diversity in consumptive behaviour, and describing the buyer and the seller and how markets function, was noticed for academic investigation in the early part of the 20th century (Münsterberg, 1913). The rise of consumerism stemmed from large-scale manufacturing, mechanisation of the manufacturing process, ready availability of products and services in the market, and the diversification of products creating choice. This period is called the second industrial revolution leading to the more popular early to mid-century era of “Fordism”, inspired by Henry Ford the industrialist automobile manufacturer who pioneered mass production and consumption (Watson, 2019). The industrial revolution also led to the emergence of a middle class (Dickinson, 1991). This group of people, while not as wealthy as the upper class, were defined by the quality of having access to disposable income and a desire to improve their social standing. They were not as interested in conspicuous consumption but did have an aspiration to emulate the lifestyle of the upper classes. There was an increase in demand for non-utilitarian goods and manufacturers took note. Industries diversified, advertising began at a much larger commercial scale, and the middle class was the focus of campaigns designed to sell these goods. Although modern marketing and advertising had gained attention and traction in the early 1900s, research on modern marketing and advertising began to gain significant academic attention starting in the 1960s. Companies and manufacturers wanted to learn about consumer attitudes, perceptions, intentions, and other factors as predictors for

consumer purchasing behaviour (Ito, 1967; Speller, 1973). There was an exploration into consumer psychology and how it influences purchasing decisions. This was and continues to be especially useful when identifying the role of market segmentation to target specific demographics for maximum profits.

Neoclassical theory of consumption, or the practice of making purchases based on the maximisation of utility of a good or service, has been critiqued in the development of modern consumerist theory as it does not include the concept of luxury and that a consumer aspires to more than just utility and cares about things like class and status (Ackerman, 1997). The 1899 book “The Theory of The Leisure Class” by Thorstein Veblen provides a seminal analysis of how the richest members of society – those who were not required to work – lived and spent their wealth. The various social classes in society spent their money in different ways, and those who had the most were able to buy luxury items and engage in leisure activities (Trigg, 2001). These items are purchased more for status and prestige than for practical use. Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption – buying items that showed off the wealth and affluence of the consumers – has become central in understanding consumer motivations especially of those that buy luxury products (Veblen and Banta, 2009).

While markets diversified, and consumerism grew, the modern conservation movement was also sprouting. In the late 1800s, the modern conservation movement was born out of concerns regarding environmental harm and degradation of the natural environment due to increased industrialisation and consumer activity. The United States championed the environmental movement with the founding of the Sierra Club in 1892 by preservationist John Muir, who advocated non-interference with nature and the protection of wilderness areas. In contrast, conservationists like President Theodore Roosevelt supported a more pragmatic approach to wildlife management. Under his leadership, the US established the National Parks in 1916 to conserve large natural areas for posterity (Nash and Miller, 2014).

Because of the burgeoning environmental movement two instrumental laws were created in the United States. The Lacey Act of 1900 was one of the first laws in the US, and the world, that monitored hunting and regulated the trade of wildlife between states (Wisch, 2003). Similarly, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 was another pioneering law that was created due to the sharp

decline in populations of birds in the US, UK, and Canada. During the Victorian era, it became fashionable to use bird feathers and taxidermized bird bodies in hats and accessories, leading to overexploitation, population declines, and even extinctions; these elaborate items, often featuring exotic species, symbolised high social status (Lee, 2004).

The environmental movements in the UK were contemporaneous to the developments happening in the US. The first legislation to safeguard wildlife in the UK was the Wild Birds Protection Act of 1911, this gave certain species some limited protections, however, it wasn't until the 1940s and 1950s that more comprehensive laws were passed, such as, The Protection of Birds Act of 1954, and the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981, which gave wildlife and habitats in the UK greater protections. It wasn't until 1951, however, that a national park was designated in the UK, and this was the Peak District National Park (Peak District National Park, n.d.). Arguably one of the most iconic and Important non-state organisations, The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), was founded in the UK in 1961. Evidently, the pioneering work of the US in conservation and the modern environmental movement, was followed the world over, albeit, with a greater momentum after the second world war. Legislation on clean air, water, wild spaces, animals and plants became international and widespread from the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards and was the start of how we understand the environmental movement today (Rome, 2003).

Today the world is more connected than it has ever been. The movement of goods is subject to a complex web of legislation, law enforcement practices, and international treaties and conventions to ensure movement of goods are monitored and done so legally. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), established in 1975, is a multilateral treaty that regulates the global trade of endangered animals and plants. Its three appendices categorise species according to their conservation status and vulnerability to trade, providing a framework for member states to develop domestic legislation to safeguard species (CITES, 2025). Complementing this, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), founded in 1948, assesses the conservation status of species worldwide, producing the Red List that classifies species as critically endangered, endangered, vulnerable, threatened, or of least concern. The IUCN's assessments, which consider habitat, population density, and species distribution, inform both CITES listings and broader conservation strategies (IUCN, 2025). In the UK, CITES obligations

are enforced through the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 2018 (COTES 2018), which make it an offence to buy, sell, possess, import, or export CITES-listed species without authorisation. Crucially, COTES extends to any identifiable parts or derivatives, such as skins, leather goods, or other manufactured products, clarifying that legality is not conferred simply by a product's transformation or sale through legitimate retail channels. Together CITES, IUCN, and COTES 2018 illustrate how international cooperation, scientific assessment, and domestic enforcement mechanisms intersect to regulate wildlife trade, providing the foundation for understanding how exotic skins enter luxury markets and how such markets are simultaneously sites of legal and illegal activity. Additionally, these multilateral organisations connect states, promote cooperation, and produce science to support members. They represent the new modern conservation movement.

It is noteworthy that the modern conservation movement emerged alongside the rise of modern consumerism, highlighting an enduring tension between the desire to preserve nature and the drive to consume. This juxtaposition remains highly relevant today, as seen in the conflicting patterns of consumer behaviour and ongoing efforts to protect the natural environment. This thesis explores these concepts by discussing consumption as it relates to luxury, and ethical sustainability, reducing or eliminating harm to non-human animals and the natural environment.

1.2.2 The Illegal Wildlife Trade

The Illegal Wildlife Trade (IWT) is a complex criminal network of many different international and local players that are linked by the common goal of exploiting wildlife to make money. The trade exists at different scales or levels. It can be local and unorganised or incorporated with other illegal criminal activity at the international level. The IWT is conjectured to be worth between 7 and 23 billion dollars (USD) annually (Felbab-Brown, 2017). Plants, animals, and fungi are traded for different purposes such as for use in traditional medicine, as exotic pets, as collector's items such as trophies, for their parts such as animal skins and furs, and bushmeat (Wilson-Wilde, 2010; Moorhouse *et al.*, 2017). The WWF has determined that the IWT is the fourth largest illegal trade in the world (WWF, 2022). The unique qualities and rarity of exotic animals and their parts contributes its persistence (Moorhouse, D'Cruze and Macdonald, 2021).

This thesis focuses on the trade of animals and the different spaces where this trade occurs. It also discusses the concepts of consumption and demand and how these link to certain attitudes and psychological attributes of consumers that perpetuate the demand for this trade. There have been proposals made to mitigate the IWT, for example, as described within a Theories of Change (ToC) framework (Biggs *et al.*, 2017), according to which interventions must focus on the supply side of the trade and include deterring illegal activity by making it less appealing, incentivising wildlife stewardship, providing resources for managing natural habitats, reducing the costs and risks of living alongside wildlife, and supporting alternative livelihoods that reduce dependence on wildlife exploitation. While this framework is well thought-out and planned, the practical implications of executing these supply-end strategies are challenging. The systems in source countries continue to be broken. The financial gain from a successful hunt can be substantial enough to incentivise poachers to continue involvement in IWT, even when the risks are known. Therefore, criminal deterrence theory, which relies on an economic model of the rational actor (Kennedy, 1983), positing that the risk to an individual is greater than the pay-off, is not necessarily true within the context of the IWT.

The trade operates at multiple levels: low-level poachers hunt for subsistence, middlemen smuggle goods across borders and link to wider crime networks, and at the top are syndicate leaders with influential connections who are rarely apprehended or punished. It is typically the poachers and middlemen who are caught by authorities (Anagnostou and Doberstein, 2021). Much of what is known about the trade comes from individuals who openly discuss their involvement, often because they believe they are unlikely to face prosecution. The European Union also appears to be the largest market for wildlife products globally (van Uhm, 2016).

Bushmeat refers to wild animals hunted for their meat or body parts for human consumption. It is often sold in local markets or passed along to higher-tier suppliers, such as wholesalers, forming part of a broader and highly complex trade network (Vitekere *et al.*, 2021). While small-scale, localised hunting may seem negligible, its cumulative impact can lead to rapid declines in wildlife populations. Indeed, hunting has become a significant driver of species depletion. Despite the scale of the trade, most individuals involved in hunting are primarily subsistence farmers, highlighting the socio-economic dimensions of the bushmeat trade with both rural and urban demand (Sackey *et al.*, 2023).

In addition to demand for bushmeat, there are several other drivers of the IWT – such as the demand for live animals, animal parts, fashion items, traditional medicine, antiques, and jewellery – one of the most prominent is its role in supplying ingredients for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The users of TCM claim that there are properties in animal parts that cure a myriad of ailments and diseases (Zhang, Hua and Sun, 2008). There continues to be evidence of individuals buying and using animal products sourced from the trade and have historically used for TCM in China and surrounding countries, such as Cambodia (Davis *et al.*, 2016). The general attitudes of individuals may be changing towards positive conservation of wildlife, however, people still engage in the excessive and harmful consumption of animals for their parts and use in TCM (Zhang *et al.*, 2022) Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is deeply embedded in the cultural ethos of China and surrounding countries. Central to TCM is the belief that animal-derived ingredients can help maintain balance and harmony within the body, thereby preventing illness (Lao, Xu and Xu, 2012). The use of animal products in these practices is seen as consistent with the natural order, and their continued demand stems from the view that achieving balance is an ongoing process but is aided especially by the consumption of wild animals, as their parts and derivatives are considered exceedingly potent (Gratwicke *et al.*, 2008). TCM products made from animal parts are used to make dietary supplements intended to ward off disease, and while its focus is largely preventative, it is also used in some cases to treat acute or chronic conditions. These practices are believed to be effective because they are rooted in ancient traditions, reinforcing perceived legitimacy and efficacy (Cheung, Doughty, *et al.*, 2021). They have remained largely unchanged for thousands of years and despite conservation efforts they continue to incorporate well-known endangered species (Liu *et al.*, 2016).

Animals and their body parts are mainly sold in large wet markets documented in China and countries in East and Southeast Asia (Latinne *et al.*, 2020). It is concerning that countries in this part of the world are a big source for the trade since many parts of Southeast Asia are biodiversity hotspots. Many animal and plant species found here do not exist elsewhere in the world. For example, Indonesia is well known for its abundant forests and rich biodiversity, and is second only to Brazil in terms of the number of mammal species that inhabit the region (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022). Unfortunately, in countries like Indonesia, limited infrastructure and weak regulatory enforcement hinder efforts to prevent wildlife crimes (Nijman *et al.*, 2022).

Widespread corruption, although difficult to quantify, also contributes significantly to weak law enforcement. It often results in inconsistent legal judgments, excessive discretionary power within compromised judicial systems, and the normalisation of bribery, which facilitates ongoing criminal activity. Additionally, limited staffing among frontline enforcement agencies, such as customs officials and police, further undermines the ability to monitor and control illegal trade effectively (Wyatt *et al.*, 2018).

In addition to TCM, there is great pressure to supply animals for the exotic pet trade. There are large expositions, such as the annual “World of Pets Expo and Educational Experience” in Timonium, Maryland, USA (Premier Events, 2025), where people go to interact with and purchase unique and exotic animals and some are either originally sourced from or caught from the wild. One of the most commonly encountered species in the exotic pet trade is the ball python. These snakes are frequently captured from the wild and are often reported as being sent to ranches for breeding and export. In reality, many are procured through illegal means and raised in conditions that compromise their welfare. Reports indicate that wild populations of ball pythons have declined significantly over the past five years (D’Cruze *et al.*, 2020). While there is limited primary data directly linking the exotic pet trade to declines in wild populations, seizure records provide valuable insight into the scale and diversity of species involved. Stringham *et al.* (2021) compiled a dataset from three major wildlife trade databases (TRAFFIC, CITES, and LEMIS) documenting approximately 4,899 distinct taxa across over 3,300 species, with seizures spanning a wide range of intended uses, including pets, fashion, traditional medicine, and more. The dataset includes over 10,000 unique combinations of taxa and use-types, indicating the broad scope of the IWT. Notably, the most common category was the live trade, suggesting significant demand for live animals – many of which are likely destined for the exotic pet market. However, because this dataset is based on seizures, it reflects only a portion of the overall trade, with many transactions likely going undetected. (Stringham *et al.*, 2021). Conservatively, hundreds of thousands of individual animals are traded annually in different parts of the world as this seizure data only captures trends for animals coming into the US. There are likely millions of victims of the exotic pet trade.

Among the various drivers of the IWT mentioned, the demand for luxury fashion is particularly significant. Products such as handbags, belts, and shoes crafted from alligator, crocodile, snake

and lizard skins are highly valued as luxury goods yet are often sourced through or intertwined with illegal wildlife trade networks. These products form the central focus of this thesis. Scholarship on the IWT as it pertains to fashion products has largely focused on consumer attitudes towards fashion goods made from fur (Ramchandani and Coste-Maniere, 2017; Achabou, 2021; Rolling *et al.*, 2021; Deeley, 2022) In contrast, there is limited literature examining the use of exotic reptile skins in fashion and their connection to the IWT. One of the few studies that addresses this issue is by Petrossian, Pires, and Van Uhm (2016), which analysed contraband seizure data from the United States. Their analysis of the LEMIS database revealed that between 2003 and 2012, the most frequently confiscated items were small leather goods, with approximately 82% of the 4,000 items originating from various reptile species (Petrossian, Pires and Van Uhm, 2016). A more recent study by Sosnowski and Petrossian (2020) found that 58% of all wildlife seizure incidents recorded by U.S. Customs involved wild-caught species, with pythons and monitor lizards comprising a significant proportion of those identified. (Sosnowski and Petrossian, 2020). As noted earlier in this review, the demand for luxury fashion products continues to grow. Although detailed data on the sourcing of reptile species is sparse, these findings are concerning and underscore the need for further research to address this knowledge gap and better understand the drivers of consumer demand for products specifically made from exotic skins belonging to reptiles.

1.2.3 Luxury Fashion Consumption

Luxury is a complex idea. It can be a feeling, a lifestyle, or a material manifestation of both. Contemporaneously, luxury is associated with free-time or leisure, and having disposable income to access and buy goods, services, or experiences that are exclusive and rare (Klaus, 2022). The appeal of luxury has led to the creation of a highly valued global industry. There are different ways to experience luxury; engaging in hedonic behaviour to pursue self-serving pleasure, purchasing expensive and high value items, accumulating material luxury items over time, having experiences that are not accessible to an average person such as traveling to unique or exclusive destinations, the ability to indulge in leisure and the choice of being idle, and personal care in the form of body and spa treatments, etc. (Calefato, 2014). It should be noted that not all consumers of luxury goods are wealthy as there is an aspirational element to luxury (Gupta and Srivastav, 2016). Luxury has become more accessible as brands have diversified their products for different classes of

consumers (De Barnier, Falcy and Valette-Florence, 2012). There are also different kinds of luxury products that fall into two categories. Those that have 'masstige' which are popular or easily identifiable by common name brands that carry a sense of prestige, and 'premium' which are those that have higher prices, are more recognisable brands, and which offer exclusive products that either have very specific manufacturing techniques, are one of a kind, or are made of uncommon materials (Kapferer, Klippert and Leproux, 2014; Kumar, Paul and Unnithan, 2020). Ultimately, however, luxury and the experience of luxury is subjective. This thesis explores one aspect of luxury: fashion, with a specific focus on products made from exotic animal skins. While some of these skins enter the market through regulated channels, a significant proportion are sourced directly from or laundered through the illegal wildlife trade. This intersection between luxury consumption and illegality is central to the analysis presented here.

Fashion has many meanings. The Oxford dictionary defines fashion as "to form, mould, shape (either a material or immaterial object)" this is different to high fashion which is defined as "expensive, fashionable clothes or accessories produced by leading designers" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). Making something or fashioning it by hand is a key feature of high fashion. To be fashionable is to embody the prevailing styles of the moment, reflecting what is popular in society, yet fashion also serves as a paradoxical force, uniting individuals within a social class while distinguishing them from others, driven by imitation, class aspiration, and the continual abandonment of trends by elites once adopted by the masses, all of which underscores its role as a marker of social dynamics, external conformity, and fleeting identity (Simmel, 1957). It is a unique signature of an individual or a collective. In this sense fashion is closely linked and tied to personal values and expression of self and identity. Fashion is about attributing meaning to clothing and is also spoken of in terms of lifestyle, culture, habits, and social norms and mores (Davis, 2008).

Throughout history, clothing and attire, including adornments and accessories, have been symbols of an individual's place in society. Certain fabrics and colours were restricted to nobility, for example, bright colours and fine fabrics such as silk and velvet were restricted to the ruling and noble class whereas those that lived in villages, common working people, could only wear 'drab' colours that were locally produced and were monochromatic or with blue, these restrictions to dress were regulated by sumptuary laws (Riello and Rublack, 2019).

The boom in Europe for fashion items grew and a new-but-old-way of creating by hand came back into demand. This is known as ‘haute couture’ or high fashion (Narby and Lou, 2024). Fashion houses, that are now recognised as big designer names, create bespoke garments and accessories for individual clients at a premium. They take a long time to produce and due to their custom nature, again, create exclusivity. Therefore, like in the middle ages, these high fashion garments are associated with wealth, status, and power and they do so because they are fashioned with extremely high-quality materials and skilled artisans (Cabigiosu, 2020). High fashion is a non-necessity that has become necessary to aspire to.

There are more aspects to luxury high fashion than simply haute couture. Brands realised that by using their name and employing mass production methods they could create a large volume of luxury goods in the market. Through ‘*pret-a-porter*’ or ready to wear clothes. The movement began post-war but gained traction in the 1970s and 80s in Milan, the capital for ready to wear fashion (Segre Reinach, 2006). Ready-to-wear fashion emerged as a response to haute couture, offering consumers mass-produced luxury items that, despite not being bespoke, still carried the prestige of renowned fashion houses. The luxury goods market is vast. In 2024, it was worth £283.7 billion. The largest chunk of this industry is the Luxury Fashion market making up almost £90 billion of this, £5.68 billion is the UK market alone. The UK will expect to see an annual growth of more 2.15 % annually of the luxury goods industry (Statista, 2025).

As previously noted, the UK is the fifth largest consumer of luxury fashion products globally (Statista, 2024a). However, scholarly attention has largely focused on cross-cultural analyses of luxury consumption (Farrag, 2017; Mostafa and Arnaout, 2020), and on trends in conspicuous consumption within the UK, particularly in relation to policy shifts and the rise of free-market economics (Patsiaouras, 2017; Emmanuel-Stephen and Gbadamosi, 2022). Despite this, there is limited research on the specific demand for luxury goods made from animal skins. This thesis seeks to explore the characteristics of UK consumers that may be driving this demand.

Thorstein Veblen’s 1899 work “The Theory of The Leisure Class” was introduced earlier in this literature review, please refer to 1.2.1. The theory presented in Veblen’s work is the foundation for the economics concept of the “Veblen Effect” where if the demand for goods increases, then the price of those goods rises as shown in Figure 1. “Veblen Goods” logically then can be considered to

be luxury goods as the demand for luxury does not diminish even if the prices of these goods may seem prohibitive to certain sections of society (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996). This phenomenon is also labelled as the “snob effect”. The “snob effect” is a threshold after which, as the price goes up, the demand for the product also goes up. This is due to the perception of the luxury product as exclusive and as a signifier of wealth. The “snob effect” is directly linked to the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption: those individuals, typically with sufficient or more than sufficient disposable income, purchase a good or a product that does not have any utilitarian or practical value but adds to the status of the consumer. Excessive wealth and possession of luxury goods may seem immoral or wasteful, but for the luxury goods consumer of any wealth bracket, it is an integral social signalling tool to discern class and demonstrate high status in social hierarchy (Goenka and Thomas, 2020; Aleem, Loureiro and Bilro, 2022). It can be argued that individuals who have less disposable income would use conspicuous consumption as a tool to deceive others and have peers believe that they belong to a higher class than they do, and to create a perception of high status and prestige.

Snob Effect of Veblen Goods

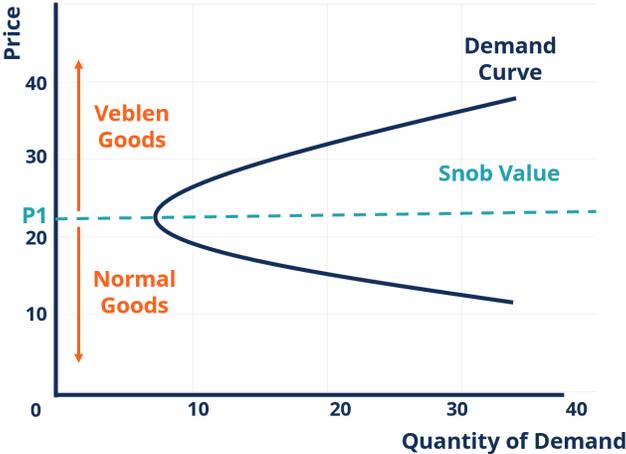


Figure 1. The Veblen Curve and Snob Effect²

In this thesis, luxury is contextualised within the idea of self-identity and self-expression, and hinges on factors serving to satisfy consumer desires to identify as high status and to create a persona that is different to, and better than others (Lee and Hwang, 2011). The privilege of having access to, and utilising, luxury becomes an ambitious goal that any materialist or hedonist would want to pursue. Hedonism, or the pursuit of pleasure, can take many forms, and luxury buying behaviour is just one example. Research shows a positive relationship between luxury buying behaviour and hedonism (Shahid *et al.*, 2021). This suggests that consumers who seek out luxury products are not just looking for status symbols or material possessions but are also seeking out experiences that bring them pleasure and satisfaction (Klaus, 2022). Hedonism is exacerbated by society, celebrity culture, status seeking behaviour, a feeling that the relationship shared with the brand and the consumer is mutual, and feeling a sense of success when buying the said products (Emmanuel-Stephen and Gbadamosi, 2022).

According to economic utility theory the 'rational' consumer seeks to maximize utility while minimizing cost, with satisfaction diminishing as consumption increases (diminishing marginal utility) (Thaler, 1980). However, luxury consumers deviate from this norm. Their demand for luxury products is typically inelastic, meaning that price changes have little impact on consumer behaviour. Consumers value these items not for utility but for their exclusivity and status, willingly paying premium prices for "sought-after" products (Spode *et al.*, 2020). It can be argued then that unethical luxury consumption is not utilitarian, however, it fulfils a deep-seated desire, transformed into a want for exotic skins determining and perpetuating demand from the IWT.

Items such as those made from fur and exotic skins have traditionally been associated with luxury, pleasure, and wealth, and can be considered hedonic. In the case of fur, the rarity and exclusivity of the raw materials, the exoticism associated with them, the way in which consumers identify attributes and qualities of these luxury products and relate them to their own personalities, all contribute to consumption (Ramchandani and Coste-Maniere, 2017). Owning such luxury goods

² <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/economics/veblen-goods/>

signals to others that the owner has enough disposable income to afford these goods and has the freedom to pursue personal pleasure-seeking activities.

Figure 2 below shows that while there may have been a dip in luxury fashion product consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has bounced back considerably and there is a projected incremental increase for each following year. The demand for luxury goods is unlikely to diminish any time soon.



Figure 2. Revenue from Luxury Fashion UK Current Figures and Projections

The latest segment of society that is pushing the trend towards luxury fashion consumption is Generation Z (Gen Z). Gen Z is loosely defined as individuals that were born in the late 1990s and into the first part of the 21st century. They have now crossed the threshold into young adulthood and have become consumers of a diverse array of goods. Bain and Company predicts that along with millennials, Gen Z will make up 70% of all luxury retail spending by 2025 (Maxwell, 2023). Global luxury consumption has made a complete recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and there

has been a 22% increase in spending on personal luxury goods (D'Arpizio and Levato, 2022). Gen Z is going to take over the luxury market and has already made inroads. They are interested not only in vintage and traditional luxury items but also items that have mass recognition and prestige, and non-traditional luxury brands or those that have a perception of luxury but are not necessarily luxury products (Shin, Eastman and Li, 2022). It also seems that Gen Z is very conscious of what their peers are doing and want to fit in. This desire to be seen and liked and accepted by peers influences their purchase intentions. Despite this, there is an overarching bandwagon effect that is guiding Gen Z consumers. The bandwagon effect can be defined as the effect of engaging in a behaviour, adopting a certain style or fashion, and changing attitudes and perceptions because others are doing this, i.e., a person is more likely to do something if they see others doing it (Asch, 1951).

The relevance of including Gen Z in this part of the literature review is to show that luxury consumption is expanding. The next generation of luxury consumers are just as voracious and may even exceed the past generations. Due to influences from social media, the desire for uniqueness has greatly increased. Gen Z luxury consumers value non-conformity, and their purchasing decisions are positively influenced by a desire to express uniqueness (Cho, Kim-Vick and Yu, 2022). The desire to show one's life as hedonic and one where there is copious conspicuous consumption of all strata of luxury items is ostensible (Kim and Ko, 2010). The status signalling that comes from owning a luxury fashion product is enhanced by presentation of these products on social media, especially experiences and products that come from engaging with wild animals, in the form of photographs with them, keeping exotic animals as companion animals, etc. (Lenzi, Speiran and Grasso, 2020).

This literature review has defined conspicuous consumption extensively with different kinds of products, interests, and consumers. It now discusses a different but arguably related concept of conscientious consumption. One who practises this kind of consumption is aware of how their choices affect the environment, society, and other people. When making purchases, they consider aspects like ethical material sourcing, sustainable production techniques, fair labour practices (McNeill and Moore, 2015), and are often on the left of the political spectrum supporting liberal causes that encourage and promote sustainable policies and practices (Watkins, Aitken and Mather, 2016). These consumers give priority to buying goods from businesses that share their

values and respond to businesses that are transparent about the positive impact they have on communities, the environment, or are socially and ethically responsible.

There is a burgeoning market for consumers that care about how the products that they buy are sourced and manufactured and make decisions based on how sustainable the item is. There has been an increase in awareness about the moral and ethical issues associated with the treatment of animals that are used to produce these products (Choi and Lee, 2021). Convincing consumers that these products can be luxury goods has been a challenge, however, among younger consumers such as millennials they show a negative attitude towards a brand if it has a pro-animal fur stance. Those brands that had a pro-faux fur stance were more appealing and created less conflict internally for the consumer when deciding to purchase these products (Rolling *et al.*, 2021).

Major luxury brands have cultivated loyal customer bases by offering distinctive experiences that appeal across different consumer types, whether conscientious or not. Consumers engage with luxury for various reasons: hedonistic consumers seek pleasure, sensory consumers are drawn to emotional or aesthetic aspects, and holistic consumers consider a combination of hedonistic, utilitarian, and sensory attributes (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010). Brand loyalty also plays a significant role in repeat purchases, often driven by the uniqueness of luxury products, the exclusivity of designs, and the role these items play in self-expression, identity presentation, and social acceptance (Konjkav Monfared, Mansouri and Jalilian, 2021). In contrast, sustainability remains a low priority for many luxury consumers, who often perceive it as incompatible with the concept of luxury. Luxury consumption tends to be self-oriented, with limited regard for global environmental concerns. One study found that 33.8% of luxury buyers believed that sustainability contradicts the essence of luxury (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau, 2017).

1.2.4 Greenwashing, Luxury Supply Chain and Demand Reduction

Fast fashion offers consumers an abundance of affordable and easily accessible options, allowing them to update their style quickly and frequently. This is made possible by the mass production and wide distribution of these products, both online and in physical stores (Stringer, Mortimer and Payne, 2020). There are different kinds of fast fashion consumers but they consistently fit into categories of those that are concerned with hedonistic needs, consumers that want to gain

acceptance and present a favourable and desirable social image to others, and a section of consumers that care about the impact their consumption behaviour has and actively seek to make sacrifices and make conscious and sustainable choices (McNeill and Moore, 2015). It is important to mention, however, that the manufacturing processes and the supply chains involved in producing fast fashion often compromise on ethics and measures to prevent environmental degradation. At each level of production there is a significant use of natural resources to manufacture a product. There is also the issue of waste produced from the fashion industry and improper repurposing or recycling of this waste. The demand for fast fashion products has also increased exponentially with an average consumer of fast fashion going through 26.7 kg of clothing annually in the UK with an overall increase of 40% of clothing purchases between 1996 and 2012 (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020). When this intense consumption is scaled up it presents a serious problem for the environment.

Fast fashion companies have responded to their environmental impact by adopting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives to promote sustainability and attract or retain consumers. However, while CSR may improve brand perception, it is not a key factor in purchase decisions as consumers prioritise price and quality over sustainable practices. Awareness of CSR efforts also remains low; in one UK study, only 16 of 99 Primark shoppers knew about the brand's CSR commitments (Tan and Yu, 2019).

This literature review acknowledges the role of corporate responsibility and highlights the phenomenon of *greenwashing*, a deceptive marketing practice in which companies attempt to present their products as environmentally sustainable without implementing meaningful changes to their production processes. Greenwashing is commonly observed in the fashion industry, for instance, through labels claiming garments are *fully recyclable* or *eco-friendly*. Such claims can mislead consumers into believing the products were sustainably produced, when in reality, manufacturing may still involve high water usage or other environmentally harmful practices. (Wicker, 2022). It is important to note how companies employ deceptive strategies to sell their goods because this is also the case with luxury goods. A famous luxury fashion company, Louis Vuitton, misled consumers to believe that the handbags and accessories that they were producing were all handmade whereas they were machine made (Hickman, 2010).

It can be argued that consumer desires shape what products become available in the market. Luxury fashion brands strategically navigate this by balancing cost management with the expectations of ethically conscious consumers. While exotic skins are marketed as rare and exclusive (Wang, Sung and Phau, 2024), their production often follows a mass manufacturing model, diverging from the traditional craftsmanship associated with couture fashion. Many luxury brands, despite their emphasis on exclusivity, have expanded global retail networks and increased production volumes, revealing a business model that mirrors fast fashion in scale and responsiveness to consumer demand, and this can be evidenced by how the luxury fashion industry is one of the fastest growing in the world (Cabigiosu, 2020). This contradiction is particularly evident in the sourcing of exotic skins, where deceptive marketing and selective transparency have obscured the ethical and environmental realities of supply chains, generating apparent artificial scarcity that has also been called “abundant rarity” (Kapferer, 2012). Companies using exotic skins, including those linked to the IWT, have fostered demand by framing these products as scarce and prestigious while mass-producing them to sustain profitability. The sourcing of exotic skins often blurs the boundary between legal and illegal supply chains, as skins obtained illegally are laundered through legal markets (Huisman *et al.*, 2018). This laundering process makes it difficult to disentangle ‘legitimate’ exotic leather goods from those rooted in IWT, highlighting the need to treat the luxury fashion sector and the illegal trade as deeply interconnected rather than separate domains. As this literature review critiques fast fashion’s exploitative and unsustainable practices, luxury fashion is not exempt – the increasing demand for exotic leather goods necessitates intensified production, further driving the commodification of animal products and reinforcing the industry’s role in sustaining the IWT.

Sustainability, it seems has yet to be readily accepted as associated with luxury and to some consumers of luxury the concept of sustainability is antithetical to luxury. While individuals may express favourable attitudes when it comes to behaviours luxury consumers tend to purchase conventional luxury products that are not sustainable (Carranza *et al.*, 2023). This is because they assume that sustainability. Then there are those that do not particularly care or are interested in how the product is sourced. Their focus is on making sure that the product they have buys them social clout and is a status symbol. Each individual consumer will have different values and opinions on products. Interestingly, while it is seen that that consumers made aware of animal

welfare and ethical production practices have a positive purchase intention to luxury products (Stringer, Mortimer and Payne, 2020) it is not clear what consumers feel about products made from exotic animal skins, and this thesis seeks to address this gap.

Luxury Fashion Industry giants are investing resources in making sure they showcase full transparency and use transparent traceability as a marketing tool. This is a tricky topic because historically the luxury fashion industry has been discreet, and many large brands continue to be opaque about their supply chains and lack in transparency when describing the manufacturing process (Cherny-Scanlon, 2017). This helps maintain intrigue about the products adding to their elusiveness, again, leading to the concept of “abundant rarity”. It is apparent that there are many complications associated with transparent and ‘sustainable’ practices in the luxury fashion industry. To understand how the supply chain potentially works for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins the following schematic was created:

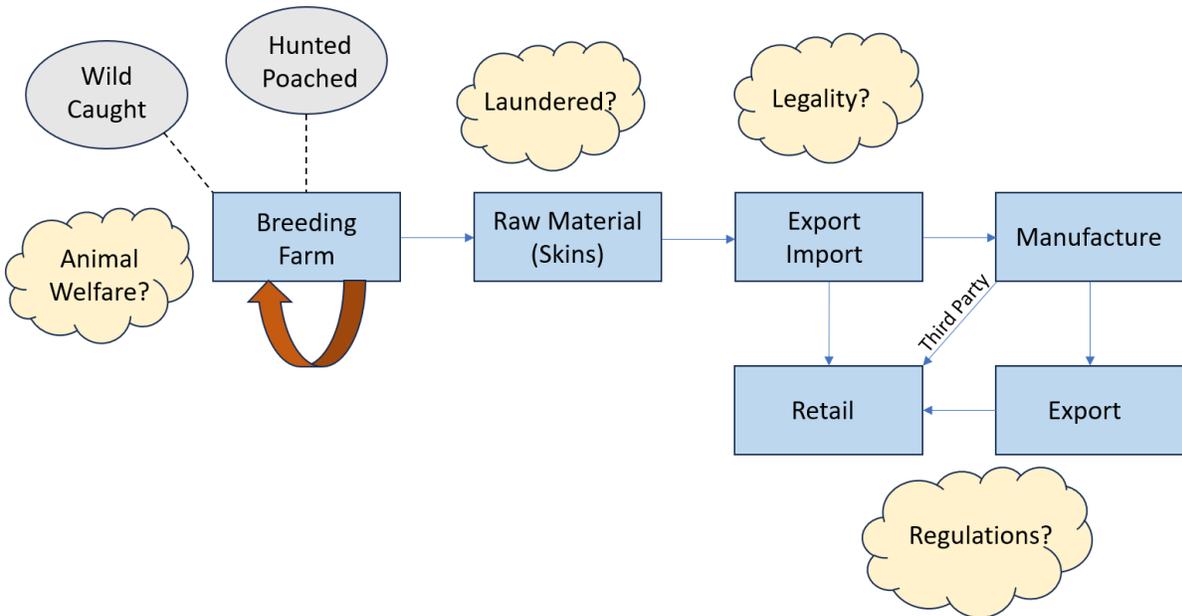


Figure 3. The Exotic Skin Supply Chain and Informed by the Review of Literature

To understand the fashion industry at all scales, it is imperative to understand the production and manufacturing process, starting with the supply chain. A supply chain is made up of all actors and components that are associated with procurement and sourcing, manufacturing, distribution and selling of a product. It includes multiple stages such as raw material procurement, making the material usable, manufacturing the product, deciding the volume of production based on consumer demand, storage, and transport of the finished product, and finally selling the product in retail spaces in-store and on-line. A visualisation of this is presented in Figure 3. The procurement and manufacturing of exotic skins for the luxury fashion industry raise several ethical, legal, and regulatory concerns. Animal welfare considerations include how animals are treated, the conditions in which they are kept, and the methods used for their killing, and is highly context and culture dependent (Ohl and Van Der Staay, 2012). Even in legitimate breeding farms, concerns persist regarding whether these facilities meet ethical and welfare standards (Rizzolo, 2020). The high demand for exotic skins also raises the risk of laundering illegally obtained skins through legal supply chains, further complicating enforcement efforts (Wyatt, 2016). Laws and regulations governing the trade of exotic skins vary by region (Wyatt *et al.*, 2021), creating potential loopholes that can be exploited. Additionally, regulations surrounding the exportation and importation of exotic skins differ across jurisdictions, affecting oversight and enforcement. At the core of these issues lies the central objective of this thesis to understand the consumer who drives this demand and examine their psychological attributes.

Clarifying this link is essential: the products under discussion in this thesis are not only luxury fashion goods in the abstract but specifically those that may be sourced from, or laundered through, the illegal wildlife trade. The persistence of IWT within global fashion supply chains underscores the need to interrogate consumer psychology alongside regulatory and enforcement approaches.

Research has increasingly recognised that demand-side interventions are essential in addressing the IWT. Demand reduction strategies aim to influence consumer motivations, values, and social norms by reducing the desirability and acceptability of products sourced from endangered species (Veríssimo and Wan, 2019). These approaches range from information campaigns and behavioural nudges to education and targeted marketing interventions, yet their effectiveness has been mixed. While awareness-raising initiatives have highlighted conservation and welfare concerns, they have

often struggled to produce long-term behavioural change, suggesting that deep-seated psychological and cultural drivers of luxury consumption remain resilient (Spode *et al.*, 2020).

Critics argue that certification and voluntary labelling schemes, common in forestry and fisheries, have often failed to reduce demand or prevent illicit or illegal activities, raising doubts about their potential in luxury fashion supply chains (Bollinger Gehman, 2016) . Others highlight the limitations of education-focused interventions targeting consumers with general messaging, which have been widely attempted but with limited measurable success (Fukushima *et al.*, 2021). In contrast, more coercive approaches, including regulation, offences, and trade restrictions, may close some loopholes but require effective enforcement and are also approaches that go beyond demand reduction intervention strategies. These tensions between voluntary and mandatory approaches underscore the importance of linking consumer psychology with demand reduction strategies. This thesis therefore contributes by exploring the motivations and neutralisations that sustain demand, helping to clarify which forms of intervention may be most impactful in reducing the appeal of exotic skins sourced from the IWT.

1.2.5 Narcissism and Moral Disengagement

In addition to describing the trends in nefarious luxury consumption from the IWT, this research seeks to explore the psychological underpinnings of *why* a consumer would persistently pursue unethical and often illegal consumption.

The Dark Triad (Paulhus and Williams, 2002) is a widely recognised framework in psychology that comprises three interrelated yet distinct traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Each of these traits is associated with varying degrees of manipulateness, self-interest, and disregard for others, but their manifestations in consumer behaviour differ significantly. Machiavellianism is primarily linked to strategic deception in purchasing decisions, while psychopathy is associated with impulsivity and risk-taking in consumption (Jonason *et al.*, 2012). However, among the three, narcissism has the strongest and most consistent association with luxury consumption (Khan *et al.*, 2025).

Narcissism is a term frequently used in everyday language to describe individuals who exhibit excessive self-importance, seek admiration, and dominate social interactions. However, in

psychological terms, narcissism exists on a spectrum, ranging from a personality trait characterised by self-centeredness and grandiosity to a more severe manifestation as Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines NPD as a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a constant need for admiration, and a lack of empathy (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This self-focused orientation prioritises personal validation over concern for others, shaping both interpersonal relationships and broader social behaviours.

The focus in this thesis is on narcissism as a psychological attribute and how there is clear evidence that links this to materialistic conspicuous consumption. Most narcissists do not have concern for their natural environment as they value materialism more (Sedikides and Hart, 2022). Narcissism is characterised by self-centeredness, self-aggrandisement, domination, manipulation, grandiosity, entitlement, and a need for admiration (Cisek *et al.*, 2014) which drive individuals to seek products that enhance their status and reinforce their self-image, caring more about their vanity and symbolism of their consumption behaviour rather than the ethical or moral implications (Sedikides *et al.*, 2007). This aligns with conspicuous consumption (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996) and materialism (Bauer *et al.*, 2012), both of which are central to luxury consumption. Studies have demonstrated that narcissistic consumers are particularly drawn to conspicuous, exclusive, rare, and prestigious products (Berry, 2024) suggesting that luxury fashion, particularly exotic skins, may hold significant appeal for this consumer segment.

Two typologies of narcissism have been identified in the literature – grandiose and vulnerable narcissism (Pincus and Roche, 2012), and these are employed in this research to understand the role of narcissism in nefarious consumption. Grandiose narcissism is characterised by a grand sense of self-importance, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others. They can be considered the archetype of a narcissist that a lay person would identify and recognise. They want to be the centre of attention, and generally are those that do well in influential positions with high visibility and are often found in places such as public office and have an ability to win over and influence large groups of people (Watts *et al.*, 2013). Vulnerable narcissists have a fragile sense of self-worth; however, they too have a need for admiration but because of their low self-worth it is difficult for them to trust others. Vulnerable narcissism is associated with anxiety, feeling inferior one moment and superior the next, a deep sense of insecurity and unlike grandiose narcissism is a predictor for likeliness to engage in criminal behaviour (Bogaerts *et al.*, 2021). Grandiose

narcissists are most likely to engage in behaviours such as conspicuous consumption for a sense or feeling of self-aggrandisement as presentation is very important for them (Cisek *et al.*, 2014; Velov, Gojkovic and Djuric, 2014). They will purchase products that are symbolic and not utilitarian.

In the previous section, types of consumption were discussed, and conspicuous consumption was contrasted with conscientious consumption. Individuals that buy goods in an ethical way associated their purchase behaviour with higher morality (Luttrell, Teeny and Petty, 2021). Morality can be defined as a system of beliefs specifically concerned with determining what is right or wrong. Morality is an existential concept and is concerned with issues focused on reduction of harm, to promote good qualities of trustworthiness and loyalty, social inclusion, abiding to rules and authority, and to not infringe upon the rights of others (Gert, 2004). In a study conducted with Australian consumers it was found that individuals with a high degree empathy and a sense of morality as part of their identity had positive beliefs about recycling and activities associated with being an ethical consumer. These consumers also have highly negative beliefs about activities and consumption that is illegal or ethically dubious (Chowdhury and Fernando, 2014).

Individuals concerned with morality are also those that tend to care about the attitudes and opinions of others regarding themselves as they participate in a social structure where reliance on others is shaped by moral decision-making. In contrast, the narcissist is not interested in building individual empathic connections as they do not have the capacity for empathy. The adulation that they get from others is based on manipulation and other forms of deception stemming from their desire to be considered better than others.

While narcissism fosters a desire for luxury, it is also linked to moral disengagement, a psychological process that allows individuals to rationalise unethical behaviour (Bandura, 2011). According to the theory of moral disengagement, individuals can perform immoral actions and behaviours without feeling guilty or taking responsibility for the harm they cause. Consumers that are unethical have been seen to score more highly on measures of moral disengagement, psychopathy, Machiavellianism and narcissism (Egan, Hughes and Palmer, 2015). People morally disengage by justifying their actions as distant to normative standards of morality and carry on pursuing actions and behaviours that are harmful, and do this by compartmentalisation (Bandura, 2016). Luxury fashion goods are often expensive and flashy, and perform the important task of

signifying wealth, prestige, high status, and materialism. These are qualities that a grandiose narcissist is interested in portraying and signalling to others. A narcissist tends to behave without concern or consideration for the morality of the action, and this explanation of their behaviour is rooted in the theory of moral disengagement.

1.2.6 Empathy

Empathy has many definitions and its characteristics have been explored by various scholars (Howe, 2013; Davis, 2018). It can be argued that it is a state of understanding the experience of another, both cognitively and emotionally (Davis, 2006). This mainly includes vicariously experiencing another person's emotional state as one's own (Albiero *et al.*, 2009), being able to imagine what someone else is feeling whilst being able to distinguish between one's own state and the state of the other (Coplan, 2011). It involves being responsive through compassionate understanding of another's emotional state (Geer, Estupinan and Manguno-Mire, 2000). Various definitions of empathy have been proposed in the literature. For example, Cuff *et al.* (2016) claim that, empathy is an emotional response (affective), dependent upon the interaction between trait capacities and state influences. Empathic processes are automatically elicited but are also shaped by top-down control processes. The resulting emotion is similar to one's perception (directly experienced or imagined) and understanding (cognitive empathy) of the stimulus emotion, with recognition that the source of the emotion is not one's own (Cuff *et al.*, 2016).

Empathy is a complex concept, yet it is tangible for to comprehend for an average person as it is emotive in its experience and expression. Empathy is concerned with feeling and understanding the disposition of another as if it were one's own. There are many different definitions but broadly speaking empathy can be defined as a condition that connects an individual's cognitive and emotional responsiveness to another's experience (Davis, 2006). Empathy can also be defined as an individual's capacity to identify and relate to what another person is feeling or thinking and to respond by completely understanding the emotional and mental state of another (Baron-Cohen, 2012). For example, if one is told about an experience of another, and this experience arouses a specific emotive and cognitive state unique to the individual experiencing it, then the empathic listener will also feel this emotive and cognitive state despite not having been a part of that experience. Empathy is often understood in everyday contexts as a straightforward emotional

response; however, its definition and mechanisms are the subject of significant philosophical debate. Scholars have questioned whether empathy is primarily a mental process, a physical and embodied experience, or a combination of both. Increasingly, interdisciplinary research supports the view that the mind and body are not separate but deeply interconnected. Consequently, empathy can be understood as both a cognitive and embodied phenomenon. It is simultaneously shaped by mental awareness and physical expression (Schmidsberger and Löffler-Stastka, 2018).

Empathy is a critical prosocial skill that is needed in a society built upon the foundation of communication. It is a vital tool that helps us connect to others in a conscious shared manner. Empathy, however, is self-focused whereas compassion is focused on the other. One has embodied empathic feelings but one feels compassion for others (Singer and Klimecki, 2014). It can be argued then that compassion is a concept that extends empathy and more specifically empathic concern. Compassion is indicative of proactive and prosocial empathic behaviour. Here the empathic actor goes beyond caring and is influenced to mitigate discomfort by sharing words or performing actions intended to provide comfort and most importantly mitigate pain and suffering for human and non-human animals.

Empathy has been shown to influence behaviour in prosocial ways, often guiding individuals to act in ways that minimise harm to others. Most people perceive themselves as empathic and attuned to the shared experiences of others. Notably, empathy toward humans has been found to predict empathy toward animals (Taylor and Signal, 2005), and because empathy, specifically cognitive empathy, is closely linked to ethical consumption (Arlı and Anandya, 2018), it follows then that empathic individuals are less likely to purchase products associated with animal cruelty or poor welfare standards. Despite this, there is limited research examining how psychological attributes, particularly empathy and narcissism, influence ethical consumption in the context of luxury fashion, especially regarding exotic skins sourced through the IWT. This thesis seeks to address this gap.

This research is primarily interested in the relationship that humans have with non-human animals and whether empathic concern translates to compassion and positive attitude change towards them. It is noteworthy that an individual can hold space and concern greatly for a compatriot human and not have the same capacity for a distant non-human animal. The opposite is also true.

There is research that shows that we relate more to non-human animals that are evolutionarily more similar to us (Miralles, Raymond and Lecointre, 2019). Even children as young as 3 to 6 years old showed a preference for “higher-order species” and were more drawn to domesticated animals rather than wild animals (Borgi and Cirulli, 2015). The relationship that we have with non-human animals matters the most when they are the most like us.

1.2.7 Techniques of Neutralisation

Neutralisation theory was developed by Sykes and Matza (Sykes and Matza, 1957) to explain the persistence of illegal or unethical behaviour among juvenile male delinquents. It emerged as a response to dominant criminological theories that sought to explain delinquency through social learning and subcultural adaptation. Differential association theory (Sutherland, 1939) argues that criminal behaviours are instilled within individuals through learning from interactions with deviant peer groups, ascribing to their set of deviant values and behaviours. Subcultural theories of deviance, also looking at delinquency, suggest that it stems from a rejection of mainstream values, feeling a sense of stagnation in one’s class, and the need to fight to find alternatives that lead many to a path of criminality and to enshrine norms in opposition to conventions of society (Cohen, 1955; Cloward and Ohlin, 2013). Sykes and Matza (1957), however, challenged these perspectives, as they observed that most delinquents did not wholly reject conventional morality but instead occupied the liminal space between conformity and deviance. They proposed that these delinquents, or offenders, knew of and understood mainstream morality but employed cognitive justifications – techniques of neutralisation – to excuse their actions, helping resolve any discomfort arising from committing immoral or criminal actions. The techniques, or justifications, allow individuals to suspend moral constraints, subsequently enabling delinquent or deviant behaviour without them having to fully accept or adopt a deviant or even criminal identity. Seven techniques of neutralisation were identified: 1) Denial of responsibility: excuse their actions as they are performed due to influences out of their control; 2) Denial of injury: their behaviour is being perceived as more damaging than it is; 3) Blame the victim: providing explanations as to how a victim deserved to be harmed; 4) Condemning the condemners: those that accuse of committing an injustice are themselves hypocrites as they have done harm in the past as well; 5) Appealing to their higher loyalties: the focus is on meeting immediate selfish demands rather than on actions

that benefit society ; 6) Placing themselves as a victim: They have somehow been misled towards committing, and; 7) Appealing to their good character: that they perform many other good deeds and that one bad deed does not diminish their otherwise good character (Bryant *et al.*, 2018). The focus of this thesis is on the initial five techniques and expands upon these by including moral disengagement and compartmentalisation as other management strategies.

Neutralisation theory emphasises the rationalisation processes of offenders and shows that they do not outright reject societal norms, rather, they are fully aware of societal norms but believe they have not committed deviant actions as their behaviours are justifiable. Although neutralisation theory originates in understanding the psychology of deviance, specifically delinquency, it has wide applicability to explain various kinds of dubious actions. Importantly justifications need not be “bad” or “good” (Maruna and Copes, 2005) they are instead tools used by individuals to minimise discomfort and avoid self-judgment and critical self-evaluation. Neutralisations are psychological heuristics to avoid or consolidate negative feelings associated with deviant actions or behaviours.

Neutralisation theory, therefore, is useful in identifying and understanding unethical behaviours and practices and can be applied to various contexts, beyond delinquency, such as consumerism, illegal wildlife hunting, and the nefarious use of wild animal products. Unethical and criminal consumer behaviour began receiving scholarly attention a few decades ago, initially with a focus on shoplifting, which was typically seen as a sporadic act committed by individuals. This marked one of the earliest applications of neutralisation theory to consumer behaviour, as researchers observed that offenders often used justifications to excuse or minimise their responsibility for committing minor crimes like shoplifting (Strutton, Vitell and Pelton, 1994). Research has expanded to look at deviant consumer behaviour (Harris and Daunt, 2011). It underscores the inconsistencies in consumer conformity to societal norms particularly when concerned with sustainable and ethical products, i.e., they hold belief and value sustainability but when it comes to practicing their beliefs their consumption behaviours are not ethical and not sustainable, and are labelled as “fickle” in that they go back and forth between norm conformity and norm-violation (Gruber and Schlegelmilch, 2014). These consumers use neutralisations to justify any inconsistencies in their values and actions, with neutralisations reshaping societal practices and values, leading to a culture where non-compliance becomes normative and somewhat acceptable as there will always be fickle-minded consumers. Similar findings have also been uncovered when

looking at consumption of “fair trade” products, a justice driven market approach that attempts to provide greater accountability, transparency, and ethical social responsibility in the production and transport of goods (Walton, 2010), underscoring difference in attitudes towards fair trade products and purchasing behaviour deviating from buying fair-trade and ethical products, identified as an “attitude-behaviour gap” addressed and resolved by neutralisation (Righi, 2023). Such justifications contribute to a culture where non-compliance becomes normalised, reinforcing the idea that occasional ethical lapses are acceptable.

The same mechanisms that enable unethical consumer behaviour can be applied to illegal hunting and poaching, where individuals justify violations of wildlife protection laws through neutralisation strategies. Research on illegal badger culling in England and Wales illustrates how rural offenders justify their actions using techniques of neutralisation, framing their behaviour as necessary for economic survival or ecological balance, badgers are considered pests and therefore killing them is for the greater good and to safeguard farmers and their sources of income (Enticott, 2011). Interviews with farmers revealed that they denied harm, shifted blame to policymakers, and perceived themselves as better suited to manage wildlife than external regulators. This stems from the beliefs of people that live in rural areas, that there are too many outside rules threatening their way of life, that they need to take issues of justice in their own hands and this justifies illegal activities within their communities (Neal and Walters, 2007). Their actions were also shaped by a broader cultural divide between rural and urban perspectives on nature, reinforcing the idea that excessive regulation erodes rural identity and fuels illicit behaviours. Similar neutralisation strategies are observed in deer poaching in the western United States, where offenders justify illegal hunting through emphasising economic hardship, the perceived overreach of game laws, and a belief in personal entitlement to resources (Eliason and Dodd, 1999). Likewise, illegal hunters in Sweden's Norrland region frame their actions as resistance against restrictive policies that threaten their traditional way of life, they believe that they have a right to hunting outside of the law and use neutralisation techniques to deflect guilt while portraying their activities as an act of defiance against government control (Rytterstedt, 2016). These findings align with broader discussions on illegal hunting and poaching, where offenders employ similar justifications to rationalise their involvement in wildlife crime.

Neutralisation theory provides a valuable framework for understanding deviant behaviour, not only in relation to crime but also in ethical dilemmas such as consumerism and illegal hunting. By rationalising contradictions between values and actions, individuals mitigate cognitive dissonance and avoid self-reproach. Cognitive dissonance is the discomfort felt when thoughts, beliefs, or behaviours conflict, often prompting individuals to adjust either their thinking or behaviour to reduce the inconsistency and feel more at ease (Festinger, 1957). This is evident in consumer behaviour, where ethical inconsistencies are resolved through justifications that normalise non-compliance, as well as in illegal hunting, where offenders frame their actions as necessary, justified, or even morally correct. Across these diverse domains, neutralisation techniques reshape societal norms, allowing deviant behaviours to persist while maintaining a sense of moral integrity. Recognising these justifications is crucial and is an important objective of this thesis. This, in turn may be useful in terms of addressing gaps in policy relating to luxury fashion consumption, consumer ethics and deviant consumerism, demand reduction strategies for the IWT and broader regulatory compliance.

1.2.8 Social Comparison and Social Distinction

The act of consuming luxury goods is deeply intertwined with social positioning, identity construction, and differentiation from others. Theories of social comparison and social distinction provide critical frameworks for understanding the motivations behind conspicuous consumption, particularly in relation to luxury goods derived from animals. These theories help explain how individuals engage in consumption practices that reinforce social hierarchies, signal status, and resolve ethical tensions associated with consumption.

Social Comparison Theory, first introduced by Festinger (1954), posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their traits, abilities, and possessions with those of others. This theory is particularly relevant to consumer behaviour, as people often use material goods as markers of social standing (Dittmar, 1994). Within luxury consumption, social comparison manifests in the pursuit of exclusive and prestigious products that signal affluence and refinement.

In the context of luxury fashion and exotic animal-based products, social comparison drives consumers toward acquiring rare and highly valued items, such as handbags made from exotic

skins or furs, to distinguish themselves from those with more commonplace possessions. Research suggests that individuals who engage in upward social comparison (comparing themselves to those of higher status) are more inclined to purchase luxury goods and to emulate an elite lifestyle, while downward comparison (distancing oneself from those of lower status) reinforces consumption patterns that maintain social divisions (Petrescu *et al.*, 2025).

Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) Social Distinction Theory helps us understand social comparison by emphasising that consumption practices are not merely about status-seeking but also about cultural and social capital. According to Bourdieu, individuals and groups use cultural goods as cultural capital, and this is converted to social capital to express and reinforce class distinctions. This can be extended to luxury fashion products. Within this framework, the value of luxury consumption is not only economic but also symbolic, as it helps maintain social hierarchies through aesthetic preferences and "taste" that differentiate the elite from the masses (Bourdieu, 2010). The social capital generated by luxury consumption not only confers economic status but also generates non-material advantages gained through prestige, influence, and networks. Through the lens of social comparison and distinction, luxury goods function as positional goods meaning their value is derived from their exclusivity and the social status they confer. The ability to own and display rare, expensive items creates in-group recognition and signals cultural competence within elite social circles.

Additionally, the signalling function of luxury goods operates on the principle of costly signalling theory (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996; Wang, 2022) where consumers derive utility not only from the product itself but from the public demonstration of wealth and exclusivity. This signalling effect is especially relevant in the case of animal-derived luxury products, which are often subject to ethical scrutiny, further amplifying their symbolic capital among those who prioritise rarity over moral concerns.

While luxury consumption has historically been associated with status and social mobility, there is growing tension between conspicuous consumption and ethical considerations. Products derived from endangered or exotic species such as python-skin accessories or ivory jewellery, are increasingly scrutinised due to environmental and ethical implications. A way by which consumers navigate this tension is through ethical consumerism, which provides an avenue for resolving the

conflict between status-driven consumption and moral responsibility, however, we find that for luxury consumers ethicality may not be a top priority (Davies, Lee and Ahonkhai, 2012). The rise of sustainable luxury brands, alternative materials (e.g., lab-grown leather, plant-based textiles), and ethical sourcing practices demonstrates a shift in how social distinction is maintained – now with an added emphasis on values and sustainability. Ethical luxury thus allows consumers to continue engaging in status-signalling while minimising the reputational risks associated with unethical consumption (Alghanim and Ndubisi, 2022). This thesis identifies the conundrum of ethical luxury consumption and enhances literature on this concept.

Understanding social comparison and social distinction in luxury consumption is critical for this thesis, as these theories provide a foundation for examining consumer demand for exotic animal-based fashion products. By applying these frameworks, this research explores how individuals justify the consumption of ethically contentious luxury goods and how shifting social norms influence purchasing behaviours. Additionally, this discussion informs the analysis of how consumers reconcile nefarious consumption with ethical concerns, a key theme in understanding attitudes toward the IWT.

1.2.9 Contentious Wildlife Conservation Strategies

As discussed, humans have manipulated and changed the natural environment. This is apparent in various forms of land uses, changing natural habitats for human use, and exploitation of natural resources. The decline in biodiversity is a direct result of this kind of human activity (Johnson, 2020). To counter the effects of harm done to flora and fauna the field of wildlife conservation emerged. The history of its emergence is given in the historical context part of the literature review. This section is concerned with the wildlife conservation and management strategies employed to restore wild populations, the species that are specifically harmed by the IWT for use in the luxury fashion industry, and the human role in enforcing these conservation management strategies.

The direct management strategies that can be identified require the modification and management of wild animal populations such as the case for predator management, for example, wolves. These interventions are lethal or non-lethal (Bangs *et al.*, 2006). The strategies include sterilisation (Boulangner *et al.*, 2012), restricting or promoting movement of wild animals by creating or

blocking corridors that connect wild habitats (Lindenmayer and Nix, 1993), Licensed and permitted hunts of targeted, high-value animals are legally regulated and taxed, with the resulting revenue used to support conservation, land protection efforts and to manage population sizes (Gren *et al.*, 2018). Solutions are dynamic and evolving but none of the solutions yet take an integrative approach to manage human motivations and behaviours, yet the spaces and lives of non-human animals are modified.

Wildlife management-focused conservationists argue that specific strategies such as trophy hunting or game hunting create an incentive for the local communities and governments to invest in protecting land and species (Ghasemi, 2021). Hunting of species, even endangered species, comes at a high premium in these game reserves and parks. In theory, the revenue collected from this is given back to the ranchers and local communities that set up game parks and reserves. Essentially, an attempt is made to curb poaching by not bringing an end to hunting but instead legalising it and changing the market structure. While there is evidence which shows that trophy hunting could in fact help with conservation of dynamic megafauna species (Bichel and Hart, 2023) the continued hunting perpetuates a demand and this doesn't necessarily inhibit poaching. Suppliers can potentially launder items such as ivory or rhino horn through these activities.

The demand for items associated with the IWT is not brought down by trophy hunting, it just ensures the protection of some specific wild animal populations that are attractive to hunters. A recent study examining sport hunting near Uganda's Lake Mburo found that local communities saw no change in their attitudes toward wildlife and perceived no clear benefits from the practice. Although there may have been some improvement in well-being, there is no data on revenue generated or its distribution. Moreover, much of the income was used to build infrastructure that was not supportive of conservation (Ochieng, Visseren-Hamakers and Der Duim, 2020). It seems that sport hunting specific to this area has been a victim of poor planning in terms of how the funds are used, inconsistent policies on wildlife conservation, and that it is a temporary solution to a larger more long-term problem. Additionally, locals in the area reported that although poaching activities had gone down it had not been completely eradicated as people that are willing to take the risk end up making large profits.

A qualitative study was conducted where academics were interviewed to describe their opinions based on their expertise on the phenomenon of wildlife farming in predominantly Asian countries. The general consensus in some parts of the academic community involved in assessing the merits of sport hunting for conservation purposes also showed that regardless of legality, or better law enforcement, or benefit to the local community, the wildlife farms for sport hunting jeopardise animal welfare and do not meet conservation goals and objectives due to corruption, mistreatment of animals, and having the goal of being driven only by profits (Rizzolo, 2020). Profit-driven practices have led to wild-caught animals being laundered through wildlife breeding farms, which are used to falsely label them as "captive bred" for legal export. For instance, a study revealed that many green pythons exported from Indonesia were actually wild-caught, contributing to significant population declines due to growing demand in the international exotic pet trade (Lyons and Natusch, 2011).

There is ongoing debate about the sustainability of hunting and capturing wild animals, particularly reptiles. A recent study on the harvesting of reticulated pythons in Sulawesi, Indonesia, found that many were taken from the wild and their skins sold to middlemen. Although the number hunted did not exceed sustainability thresholds, the findings raise important questions about how sustainability is defined and assessed in such contexts (Wahab *et al.*, 2020). The reticulated python is just one example there are species such as the Siamese crocodile that have also been extensively poached for their skins are estimated to number less than 400 individuals in the wild (Han *et al.*, 2015). Even though there is literature that argues that sustainable practices can be built around the hunting of certain species and alleviate the status of indigenous communities (Natusch, Aust and Shine, 2021) there is enough evidence to suggest otherwise (Wyatt *et al.*, 2018; Sy and Lorenzo, 2020; Cardoso *et al.*, 2021) and what seems sustainable can be misleading. There is enough pressure on wild animal populations from the climate crisis, and additional pressure from poaching or hunting will accelerate the depletion of even abundant species.

1.2.10 Green Criminology: Commodification of Animals, Species Justice and Animal Welfare

During the Middle Ages, in Europe, deforestation and the removal of predators accompanied the rise of pastoral agriculture for grain and livestock. While grain remained central to the diet, meat

consumption became a symbol of social prestige, with “the rich reinforce[ing] their social status by the consumption of much larger amounts of meat than were available to the lower social orders”(Grant, 1988, pp. 145). The plague reduced food production, increasing reliance on meat for sustenance. This trend continued through the Renaissance and industrial periods, embedding the commodification of animals as sources of energy and utility into human culture (Chiles and Fitzgerald, 2018). Industrialisation led to urban population growth and a surge in meat demand, giving rise to intensive farming and the commodification of animals as mere sources of human utility. Capitalism, driven by cost-efficiency and perpetual growth, reinforced this transformation, reducing animals to modifiable entities for production and human consumption (Clark and Wilson, 2021). The animal becomes a commodity devoid of its inherent rights. They are prejudiced against and distanced based on this commodification.

An important consideration in discussions of species justice is the pain and suffering directly caused to animals by human actions. Within capitalist systems, there is a tacit societal acceptance of using animals as commodities, valued only for what they can provide or the utility of their body parts. Scientific research has demonstrated that all animals with nervous systems are capable of feeling physical pain, an evolutionary response that alerts them to danger and promotes survival (Bateson, 2004). Mammals share significant biological similarities with humans, and we keep mammals as pet companion animals. Pigs, for example, are so physiologically comparable that they are routinely used in laboratory settings and medical trials. Their role in these experiments, often resulting in their death once the trial concludes, has sparked ethical debate. Laboratory technicians frequently express tenderness toward the animals, especially neonatal pigs, but justify their sacrifice on the grounds of advancing human medicine (Svendsen, 2022). This creates a moral conundrum where the pig, while treated as a biological stand-in for a human, is simultaneously reduced to its species identity and ultimately expendable. This contradiction speaks to a broader theme in this thesis – the human capacity to acknowledge the life of an animal while simultaneously disengaging from its suffering. Neonatal pigs used in laboratories are not artificial creations but are born of mothers who, like all mammals, invest considerable energy and resources into parental care. This maternal investment is also evident in other highly social species such as elephants, who spend years nurturing their young, teaching survival skills, and transmitting

knowledge through complex cultural practices and sophisticated communication systems (Langbauer, 2000).

Making unique distinctions between humans and animals is particularly human. Work in wildlife conservation and in IWT provides an example of how these separations allow for the devaluing lives of non-human animals. Ramp and Bekoff (2015) advocate for a compassionate approach to conservation, one that respects animals as sentient individuals with needs, desires, and agency, rather than viewing them through a utilitarian lens designed to serve human environments (Ramp and Bekoff, 2015; Wallach *et al.*, 2018). While some scholars argue that emotional systems are not reliable tools for long-term environmental decision-making (Griffin *et al.*, 2020), it is often emotion and empathy that motivate efforts to mitigate human impact, working in tandem with rational strategies.

Sollund (2017) similarly calls for a non-objective, empathetic stance in animal ethnographies, urging researchers to listen to and learn from non-human animals (Sollund, 2017). Bridgeland-Stephens (2020) embodies this approach through a fictional narrative of a pangolin, one of the most illegally traded and hunted animal species (Challender *et al.*, 2020), caught in the IWT. The story highlights the animal's suffering – its instinctive defence of curling into a ball becomes a source of injury during transport, and surviving individuals endure extreme stress in crowded live markets. Personal animal narratives like these play a crucial role in fostering empathy and shifting perceptions (Bridgeland-Stephens, 2020). Conservation efforts, ensuring the welfare and well-being of animals, may only succeed if the species' ecological role and emotional lives are recognised, linked, and empathised with.

Animal welfare can be defined as the holistic well-being of a non-human animal. Much like humans, animals require food, water, and shelter, but true well-being also involves the ability to express natural behaviours and engage meaningfully with their environment. It is accepted what constitutes to an animals quality of life, and if we can gauge if an animal is in physical pain or is stressed we can also understand the many constraints and harm done to animals compromising their health and well-being (Koknaroglu and Akunal, 2013). Using the understanding of what constitutes to the complex well-being of a human can also be translated to the well-being of a non-

human animal (Williams, 2021), regardless of whether this animal is a pet companion, a domesticated animal, or an exotic animal in the wild.

Collard (2014) talks about the relationship that humans have with exotic animals, focusing on how animals are removed from their natural environments and restructured within capitalist systems. When taken from the wild for the exotic pet trade, animals are stripped of their habitat and social networks, then commodified as companions. Their ecological roles are replaced by human-provided food, shelter, and affection, yet they retain the identity of being "wild" (Collard, 2014). This transformation into living commodities raises ethical concerns. Although caretakers may feel affection towards their companion animal, the animal is often treated as a trendy accessory, like luxury products made from exotic skins; lifeless yet derived from living animals.

Haraway (2008) explores the interdependent relationship between humans and companion animals, using dogs as an example. Despite their domestication, dogs remain a distinct species, yet the bond between human and animal is marked by deep attachment and what Haraway describes as a cross-species form of love (Haraway, 2008). In this intimate portrayal, the human is not merely an owner but also acts as the caregiver and companion for the pet animal. Unlike Collard's view of exotic animals as commodified beings, Haraway's dog is not an accessory but an extension of herself, shaping her identity in a way that is genuine and reciprocal.

This thesis links animal commodification to conspicuous consumption by examining how certain animals, or their parts, function as status symbols. Despite growing stigma around genuine fur, it remains associated with luxury and prestige. Consumers often purchase fur for its symbolic value, shifting to faux (or artificial) fur only when societal preferences demand it (Shin and Jin, 2021). The desirability of fur is tied to its rarity, how it is sourced, and its transformation into a luxury product that signals wealth and distinction through high status and prestige (Summers, Belleau and Xu, 2006).

Humans compartmentalise animal lives based on use. Fur signifies status; a dog represents affection and companionship; and an exotic pet, like a cheetah, may combine both or act solely as a marker of wealth. Pet ownership itself involves material objects, collars, beds, food bowls, that symbolise human control and reinforce the animal's objectification (Grier, 2014). While pet keeping is often associated with unconditional love, this may be overstated, with 15% of Americans

report disliking or hating their pets (Herzog, 2011). Relating to other species, even those that are familiar and domestic, is not a necessity for a human. There are individuals that showcase a preference for the intraspecies relation and connection over the interspecies one, and then there are also those that prefer the latter.

This section explored concepts relating to the control of non-human animals and the harm to them. Additionally, it considers how we should frame non-human animal realities within a human conceptualisation of the world. Piers Beirne introduced the term “thereocide” (Beirne, 2014) to label the murder of non-human animals and equate the killing of animals to the humans by offering a sister label to “homicide” used for the murder of humans. He argues that humans inflict significant harm on animals through abuse, suffering, and death, and that terms like “wild” reflect speciesist language that reinforces othering (Beirne and South, 2007). Speciesism refers to prejudice, bias, or discrimination of another species based on their non-humanness. It is directly tied to the exploitative relationship that humans have with animals. In the society that we live in human beings assert their dominance, feelings of entitlement, belief of superior intelligence, and the use of animals and their habitats without considering their inherent rights or life (Singer, 2009).

In contrast to Beirne’s uncompromising species justice stance, Rob White (2008; 2013) has advanced the concept of ecological justice, which locates harm within the broader functioning of ecosystems. From this perspective, justice extends to humans, non-human animals, and ecological systems collectively, but does not necessarily prohibit all forms of animal use. White acknowledges that current global frameworks, such as CITES and sustainable use principles, are built on the assumption that animals may be legitimately exploited as natural resources, provided such use is regulated and welfare standards are met. Ecological justice thus aligns more closely with existing enforcement and conservation practices, which tolerate regulated consumption rather than seeking its abolition.

This thesis positions itself between these two poles. It draws on species justice to critique the consumption of exotic skins in luxury fashion as ethically and morally harmful, emphasising the commodification and suffering of non-human animals. At the same time, it recognises that enforcement and regulatory systems remain grounded in an ecological justice framework, in which wildlife exploitation is acceptable if considered sustainable and legally managed. By situating the

analysis at this intersection, the thesis highlights the tension between normative critique and pragmatic enforcement in addressing consumer demand for animal-based luxury goods.

Addressing species justice is challenging, as human society is deeply reliant on animals for various needs. While many have explored animal rights, human and animal relationships, and the measurability of animal suffering, shifting cultural values to fully recognise and rectify harm to the natural world remains difficult (Regan and Singer, 1976; Bateson, 2004; Sollund, 2017). One step toward justice lies in quantifying harm and using this evidence to drive mitigation of harm to non-human animals.

1.2.11 Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights the complex relationship between luxury consumption, consumer psychology, and conservation. Historically, consumerism and conservation developed parallel to each other, reflecting a persistent tension between the pursuit of material status and efforts to protect the natural world. Theories of conspicuous consumption, social comparison, and social distinction provide insight into the role of luxury goods in signalling wealth, identity, and exclusivity. These motivations are particularly relevant in the context of the IWT, where demand for exotic animal products continues to drive environmental harm and complicate conservation efforts.

Existing research has largely concentrated on interventions aimed at regulating supply, such as stricter enforcement measures, controlled trade mechanisms, and conservation initiatives that are pro wildlife management. However, understanding consumerism, the business of industries that fuel the IWT, and the psychological and behavioural factors that drive demand from consumers have received far less attention. While previous studies have identified narcissism as a predictor of materialism and status-driven consumption, its influence on attitudes toward luxury products sourced from wildlife remains underexplored. Similarly, neutralisation techniques offer a framework for understanding how consumers justify ethically questionable purchases, yet their application in the context of luxury fashion consumption requires further investigation.

Although ethical consumerism and sustainability are growing concerns within mainstream fashion, research suggests that luxury consumers often view sustainability as conflicting with exclusivity

and prestige. This thesis seeks to address this gap by examining how luxury consumers navigate the ethical dilemmas associated with exotic skins and reconcile status-driven motivations with moral concerns. By exploring the psychological attributes of narcissism and empathy, techniques of neutralisation and moral disengagement, this research aims to contribute to a broader understanding of demand for products derived from wildlife.

While existing scholarship has provided valuable insight into consumer motivations and conservation strategies, significant gaps remain in understanding the psychological mechanisms that sustain demand for often contentious luxury products made from exotic animals. Filling these gaps is essential for informing demand reduction strategies and fostering more ethical consumption patterns. This research contributes to these discussions by integrating perspectives from consumer psychology, regulation of criminal activities, morality, trends in luxury consumption and production, animal conservation, and animal welfare, to better understand and address the continued demand for wildlife-derived luxury products.

Chapter 2 Conceptual Framework, Research Design, and Methodology

2.1 Overview

This chapter presents the conceptual and theoretical foundation that underpins the research design of this thesis. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this study an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach has been employed to systematically examine consumer demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. Rather than structuring this thesis with a standalone 'Methodology' chapter that details all methodological procedures in one place, the methods are within each respective data chapter, underscoring distinct phases of research that build upon each previous phase. This structure ensures that the reader encounters each methodological approach within its appropriate analytical context, thereby enhancing coherence and readability.

The purpose of this chapter is to conceptually justify the research design by demonstrating how key theoretical perspectives, such as consumer psychology, techniques of neutralisation, and cognitive dissonance inform the mixed-methods approach and guide the direction of the research. Within the body of the chapters there are other theories and concepts, not necessarily discussed as part of the theoretical framework, however their inclusion is inspired by the iterative process of mixed methods research and is founded on reflections of the theoretical grounding presented in this chapter. Specifically, this chapter provides the conceptual justifications for how the theoretical framework shaped (1) decisions on the collection of secondary and primary data, (2) the sequential structure of quantitative and qualitative phases, and (3) the analytical strategies used to synthesise findings across methods. The subsequent chapters will then detail the specific methodologies, data analysis, results, and discussions, covering UK Border Force contraband seizures of wild animal products (Chapter 3), a survey measuring positive attitudes towards exotic skins and the psychological attributes associated with these attitudes (Chapter 4), and qualitative interviews, providing nuance and determining the influences of individual consumption behaviour of luxury products made from exotic skins (Chapter 5).

The theoretical framework investigates and integrates theories that specifically understand the shaping of intentions, motivations, attitudes, behaviours, and the justifications of actions that are deemed to be nefarious or deviant. This unique integration of theories produces a complex and insightful picture of the decision-making processes of individuals engaged in unethical consumerism, and specifically, how this complex human behaviour is directed and actioned. The subsequent sections of this chapter will discuss these theories in more detail and explain their relevance to consumer demand for fashion sourced from the IWT.

2.1.1 Intention, Motivation, Behaviour, and Neutralisation

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)(Fishbein, 1979) describes behaviour as being directed by an intention to perform an action. The intention is informed by the attitude towards the behaviour and subjective norms. An attitude is a person's beliefs regarding a behaviour and a positive or negative assessment of the behaviour including their assessment of the consequences of engaging in the behaviour. Subjective norms refer to the individual's perception of the social pressure to engage in or refrain from a behaviour, they are formed by including expectations of close familial and social relationships and are turned into actioned behaviour due to the drive to live up to them. For example, research has found that a consumer's purchase intention for sustainable fashion items is significantly influenced by their attitudes and positive perceptions of the attributes of these items (Brandão and Costa, 2021).

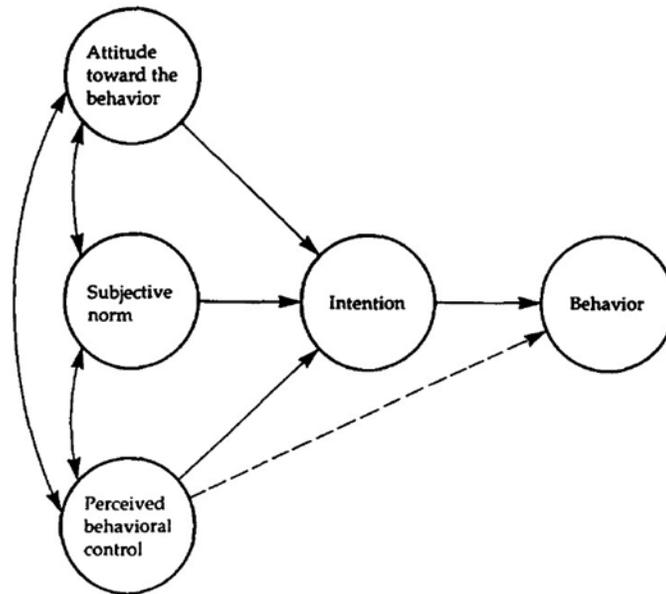


Figure 4. The Theory of Reasoned Action

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)(Ajzen, 1991) builds on TRA by introducing perceived behavioural control – an individual’s belief in their ability to perform a behaviour and manage factors that may facilitate or hinder it. While attitudes and subjective norms shape intention, TPB emphasises that perceived control also plays a crucial role. An individual’s perception of their ability to control behaviour may differ from their actual ability to control it. When full control is present, intention alone is a strong predictor of behaviour. The study discussed earlier found that subjective norms of sustainable living motivate intention, while perceived ease and access to sustainable consumption further encourage it (Brandão and Costa, 2021). Ultimately, regardless of actual control, perceived control strengthens intention, with its intensity influencing the likelihood of behaviour occurring (Madden, Ellen and Ajzen, 1992).

According to the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control shape an individual's intentions. These factors are often influenced by external (exogenous) sources, such as an individual’s social environment, personal experiences, and societal or peer expectations. However, intentions can also arise intrinsically, shaped by personal values that develop through repeated engagement in behaviours that reinforce one’s sense of identity. In this way, intention formation is both externally influenced and internally driven, depending on the degree to which the behaviour aligns with an

individual's established self-concept. For example, a person who has a hedonistic personality will engage in pleasure-seeking behaviour, and over time, with repetition, the behaviours they choose to engage in will turn into a pursuit of pleasure-seeking experiences upon which the individual places great value and internalises as part of their personal belief system or identity (Gibson and Seibold, 2014). In addition to intentions and actions there are also subjective motivations that determine behaviour.

The Theory of Self-Determination (SDT) posits that when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness while performing an action, their intrinsic motivation for that action is maximised. Consequently, they are more likely to be motivated to engage in that behaviour repeatedly in the future (Deci and Ryan, 1980). This theory can be applied in understanding motivations behind consumerism, and specifically, luxury goods consumption. According to SDT, most luxury consumers would possess autonomous motivation. They express an interest in luxury items, gain a sense of pleasure or satisfaction from buying these products, and most importantly their competence to spend money on specific luxury goods is foundationally based on their sense of choice and volition. SDT also presents the concept of controlled motivation, wherein individuals engage in behaviours due to external or internal pressures that are coercive. Feeling a compulsion to act because of controlled motivation is explained by an individual either receiving an award or avoiding punishment. It can help explain why luxury goods consumers care about social prestige and status signalling to avoid loss and rejection. In simpler terms, motivation is greatly determined by several intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and performed behaviour is a combination of several kinds of motivation.

Motivation can be defined as the potential energy created to perform an action to fulfil goals and individual desires, as mentioned in Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (Maslow, 1943). To summarise and integrate the previously discussed concepts we can assert that motivations, or our drive to perform an action, help to create intentions (the plan to do something), and sustain the desire to perform a behaviour. These intentions, shaped by motivations, are in turn, influenced by both external pressures, such as societal expectations and peer influence, and internal drivers, such as personal values and identity. The research presented in this thesis explores motivations as they relate to purchase intentions as well as to understand purchase behaviour.

Theories such as the TRA, the TPB and the SDT explain antecedents to an action, i.e., intentions and motivations informed by attitudes that produce a behaviour. They can be used to understand criminal intent that can possibly lead to deviant behaviour. For example, according to TPB consider an individual engaging in luxury goods fraud, such as producing counterfeit designer handbags. If they hold a positive attitude towards counterfeiting (believing that it is a victimless crime), are surrounded by peers who encourage and normalise such behaviour (perceived social norm) and believe that they have the skills and access to evade law enforcement (perceived behavioural control), TPB would predict a strong intention to continue engaging in counterfeit operations.

SDT, focuses more on motivation rather than intention, and for example, would argue that individuals that engage in white-collar crimes, such as insider trading, are intrinsically motivated by the promise of quick financial success and the perceived rewards of luxury consumption. Additionally, the discretion associated with white-collar crimes leads the perpetrator to believe they are more likely to have autonomy and can “get away with it”. If someone believes that fraud or theft will bring them financial independence and social prestige, SDT would suggest that they are motivated by extrinsic goals such as wealth and status rather than merely responding to external pressures.

The field of psychology does not assume that human beings are rational; people tend to be influenced by their emotions often not using reason or logic to inform their actions, they make decisions based on heuristics or mental shortcuts and have been described by some psychologists as cognitive misers (Stanovich, 2020). People are susceptible to biases such as confirmation bias which reaffirms an individual’s pre-existing beliefs and ignores what is contradictory to their beliefs (Nickerson, 1998). This means that people often perform behaviours that are incongruent with their values and these thoughts and actions can cause internal struggles. The discomfort caused by inconsistencies and holding conflicting ideas, beliefs, values, or attitudes is referred to as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance can appear in individuals engaging in unethical consumption if they have feelings of guilt or do contend with the morality of buying an object made by killing another animal. People, however, use techniques of neutralisations to minimise any feelings of guilt or shame and use these techniques to justify their deviant behaviours.

The TPB, TRA, and SDT collectively establish that external normative societal expectations play a fundamental role in shaping internal belief systems, which in turn influence behavioural expression. TPB, in particular, provides a framework for understanding how individual attitudes, situational factors, and environmental influences interact to shape ethical judgments and determine the intention to engage in unethical behaviour (Fukukawa, Zaharie and Romoñi-Maniu, 2019).

In the study by Fukukawa, Zaharie, and Romoñi-Maniu (2019) 400 Romanian consumers were surveyed through an anonymous self-reported questionnaire on ethically questionable behaviours, including shoplifting and fraud. The study found that techniques of neutralisation significantly moderated consumers' engagement in unethical acts, indicating that individuals who employed these cognitive justifications were more likely to rationalise and subsequently commit such behaviours. This finding underscores the relevance of techniques of neutralisation in consumer ethics research and forms a key justification for its application in this thesis. Given that techniques of neutralisation have been recently applied in consumer behaviour research, this research extends its scope by examining how luxury consumers use these rationalisations or neutralisations specifically in relation to exotic skins sourced from the IWT.

Differential association theory, first articulated by Sutherland (1947), posits that criminal or deviant behaviour is learned through interaction with others who convey favourable definitions of law violation. This process involves both the acquisition of techniques for committing the act and the internalisation of attitudes, values, and rationalisations that support it (Cressey, 1978). While historically applied to explain occupational and organised crime, the framework has also been extended to consumer contexts, where purchasing decisions are influenced by social learning processes. In markets involving illicit or ethically contentious goods, such as wildlife products or counterfeit luxury fashion, peers, family members, or aspirational figures can normalise consumption, transmit justifications, and diminish the perceived moral salience of harm (Albers-Miller, 1999). These social reinforcements embed consumption within a network of pro-purchase norms, potentially sustaining demand despite legal restrictions or public awareness campaigns.

Drift theory, developed by Matza (Matza, 2018), challenges the notion of fixed criminal predispositions by suggesting that individuals "drift" between conformity and deviance depending

on situational factors. During periods of drift, moral constraints are temporarily suspended, enabling the individual to engage in behaviour they might ordinarily avoid. Drift is facilitated by the use of neutralisation techniques (Sykes & Matza, 1957) and is often situational, occurring in contexts where opportunities arise and the likelihood of sanction is perceived as low (Copes and Williams, 2007). In consumer behaviour, drift can manifest when individuals with otherwise strong ethical values make exceptions, such as purchasing contested luxury goods, during holidays, special occasions, or exposure to persuasive marketing. This episodic engagement allows the consumer to indulge without permanently altering their self-concept, framing the act as an isolated departure from their usual standards.

Rational choice theory frames offending or rule-breaking behaviour as the outcome of a cost-benefit calculation in which individuals act to maximise perceived rewards and minimise anticipated costs (Nagin and Paternoster, 1993; Cornish and Clarke, 2016). Applied to consumer contexts, this perspective views the purchase of illicit or ethically problematic goods as a decision shaped by the perceived value of ownership, status, uniqueness, aesthetic appeal, relative to risks such as financial loss, legal sanction, or social disapproval. The theory emphasises that perceptions of risk are subjective: where enforcement is weak or reputational costs are minimal, the perceived net benefit may outweigh ethical reservations. In the case of wildlife-derived luxury goods, rational choice frameworks help explain why some consumers proceed with purchases despite awareness of potential harm or illegality, especially when they believe detection or censure is unlikely.

Intent and motivation driven non-utilitarian purchasing behaviour justified for its immorality through techniques of neutralisation is explained in this thesis. Disregarding luxury fashion products made from exotic skins as ethically dubious perpetuates the illegal and nefarious sourcing of these materials, further harming the environment and biodiversity and causing direct pain and suffering to non-human animals. The theories presented in this chapter form the core theoretical framework for this research. Within this framework, the research seeks to identify the drivers behind purchase intention and examine the strategies luxury consumers employ to engage in such behaviour.

2.2 Epistemology & Ontology

This research is rooted in real-world application of the knowledge generated by it and is therefore underpinned by a pragmatic epistemology. Pragmatism as a philosophy is used to justify the various methodological approaches used in a mixed methods design, and is capable of providing a strong philosophical underpinning for this research (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019). It is a practical and dynamic approach encouraging incorporation of various methodologies centred on the consequences of the investigation process (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). Pragmatism prioritises the practical consequences of ideas and theories and aligns with the approach presented in this research where diverse psychological and sociological perspectives have been integrated to understand consumer demand for luxury products derived from the IWT. The pluralistic and context-specific nature of pragmatism helps flexibly address the research objectives in an iterative way, offering valuable contributions to understand complex social phenomena.

The methodological integration of psychological theories such as the TPB, TRA, SDT, alongside applied theory of techniques of neutralisation and cognitive dissonance creates a problem-driven approach to understand ethically dubious consumption of exotic skins sourced from the IWT used in luxury fashion. The synthesis of these theories, and deliberative dialogues between them, underscores the dynamic nature of pragmatism. This leads to a methodology that engages with observable and objective quantitative data and connect it, when meaning making, to subjective and interpretive qualitative aspects that shape knowledge, aligning with pragmatism's emphasis on practical and situated understanding.

Ontologically, then, critical realism (CR) is applicable to this research. It posits that reality exists independently of human perception but is mediated through social and cultural interpretations, where the real informs the actual and these inform the empirical, i.e., structures and institutions generate events that create unique observable and measurable phenomena (Zachariadis, Scott and Barrett, 2013). This acknowledges structural influences on individual behaviour and perceptions, i.e., the broader economic, legal, and cultural systems influencing the IWT, which exist independently of individual perceptions and underscore the importance of interpretation of consumer motivations and justifications. These experiences of consumer are then shaped by subjective experiences and social meanings. Therefore, CR justifies a mixed methods approach to

capture both measurable trends (quantitative data) and deeper interpretive insights (qualitative analysis). In other words, CR acknowledges the existence of objective structures, such as market dynamics and trade networks, while also recognising that individuals interpret and navigate these structures in different ways, leading to nuanced observable and measurable phenomena.

By aligning a pragmatic epistemology with a critical realist ontology, this research ensures a balanced approach that integrates both objective analysis and interpretative depth. While, as a paradigm, social constructivism plays a key role in understanding how individuals justify and rationalise their consumption choices, particularly within the qualitative analysis; critical realism provides the overarching ontological framework, allowing this study to bridge structure and agency in examining consumer demand for illegal wildlife products.

2.3 Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods

The topic explored in this research involves understanding complex components that sequentially inform one another, in distinct phases. The phases employ different methodologies requiring the application of both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The IWT cannot be explained simplistically, quantification of trends in the trade are also contentious as it is illegal, and we can only make educated guesses based on seizure events of smuggled goods. The information we can glean about those that participate in the trade are also subject to various psychological and socio-cultural drivers. Therefore, it was prudent to employ a mixed-methods strategy to uncover complex patterns and how they relate to one another.

Mixed methods research integrates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of a research problem. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach has a quantitative investigation and then leads to qualitative exploration. For this study, the approach allows for the systematic exploration of quantitative trends in contraband seizures, the psychological attributes of consumer demand, and the justifications consumers provide for their purchasing behaviours. The structure of the research is inherently sequential as findings from one methodological phase inform and shape the subsequent phase. This integration allows for an iterative investigation, where the quantitative analysis provides the contextual and thematic foundation for qualitative exploration.

The first component involves analysing secondary data on seizures of illegally traded animals and their derivatives to establish trends, relationships, and insights into the role of luxury fashion as a major driver of demand. This analysis narrows the scope to exotic skins within luxury fashion, providing a foundation for understanding the broader context of the trade. The second component builds on the first components and involves a survey designed to explore the psychological attributes and motivations of consumers who purchase luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. This phase investigates whether traits such as narcissism and empathy influence attitudes towards these products, identifying underlying factors that drive consumption. Finally, the qualitative component consists of semi-structured interviews with luxury consumers, aimed at understanding the justifications and rationales they use to reconcile their consumption of fashion products made from exotic skins with awareness of the trade's ethical and environmental implications. The interview guide and themes for analysis are informed by the results of the survey, completing the sequence of integration.

There are three primary components to this project that help understand the market and characterises the typical consumer of products that are sourced from the illegal trade. Concise context is required to first understand the trade and the trends of consumption of products by analysing data from contraband seizures made of illegally traded animals and animal products, looking at the psychological traits and attributes of a consumer to determine their purchase intention and motivations, and even after awareness of the IWT and the unethical practices how consumers justify their consumption behaviour of products specifically made for the luxury fashion industry and from exotic skins. In the thesis luxury products refer specifically to luxury fashion products made from exotic skins and luxury goods refer to the broad category of luxury products.

The detailed methodology of each chapter is presented with in each. This provides the reader with direct access to the practical aspects of methodology employed.

2.4 Objectives of Research

- 1) To identify the psychological and demographic factors that characterise consumers of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins, such as alligator, crocodile, snake, or

lizard, by examining psychological attributes, motivations, and conspicuous consumption tendencies.

- 2) To investigate whether consumers employ techniques of neutralisation to justify the purchase and ownership of ethically contentious luxury fashion products, particularly those sourced from the IWT, as a means of resolving cognitive dissonance.
- 3) To analyse the magnitude and trends of the IWT by examining contraband seizures made in the UK, identifying which species are most frequently trafficked for the luxury fashion industry and assessing patterns in enforcement and smuggling.

Chapter 3 The Illegal Wildlife Trade: Contraband Seizures vs Legal Imports

3.1 Overview & Introduction

This chapter examines the illegal wildlife trade (IWT) through the lens of contraband seized by UK Border Force, with a specific focus on luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. By analysing seizure data from 2012- 2013 and 2019 – 2022 (excluding 2020), alongside CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) legal import records, significant trends in the trafficking and legal trade of reptile-driven fashion goods have been identified. The findings reveal that reptiles, particularly crocodylians, constitute the majority of seized fashion products, reflecting persistent consumer demand. While total seizures have declined over time, a sharp increase in fashion related contraband was recorded in 2022, mirroring the growing luxury fashion market in the UK. The study also highlights discrepancies in legal trade regulations, with a substantial portion of legally imported exotic skins originating from wild-caught specimens, raising concerns about the sustainability and ethical implications of sourcing practices. These insights underscore the need for stricter enforcement measures, greater transparency in legal trade channels, and stronger policy interventions to mitigate the environmental and conservation risks posed by the IWT. By examining trends in both legal and illegal trade, this research aims to determine whether the rise in luxury fashion consumption corresponds with changes in the illegal market for exotic skins. The findings provide crucial insights into the ongoing challenges of enforcing wildlife trade regulations and the broader implications for conservation efforts.

3.1.1 Revisiting The Illegal Wildlife Trade

The IWT as discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis and is the core focus of this research. It is the illegitimate hunting and transport of wild animal and plant species to meet the demand for products made or derived from them (WWF, 2022). The IWT is one of the largest international crimes and valued to be between \$7 and \$23 billion annually (United Nations

Environment Programme, 2015). The unsustainable exploitation of species due to the IWT has directly resulted in the extinction of 472 aquatic and terrestrial animal species (Hinsley *et al.*, 2023). The IWT threatens targeted and non-targeted species alike and exacerbates the spread of invasive species and disease transmission from wild animals to humans with such pervasive impacts specifically due to criminal activity (Cardoso *et al.*, 2021). The trade is a complex system of criminal activity ranging from organised crime groups or corporate groups (legitimate institutions) that commit wildlife crime, to small-scale local hunters that upsell animal and plant bodies or parts, alive or dead to suppliers (Wyatt, van Uhm and Nurse, 2020). Many of the products sourced from the wildlife trade are used for traditional medicine in the form of supplements or natural medicine. Sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*) bile and rhino (*Rhinocerotidae*) horns, for example, are purported to cure a host of minor to major ailments, of which a few are jaundice, gastric issues, skin diseases, dispelling body heat, detoxification, and to improve overall health, etc. (Wang, 2014; Cheung, Mazerolle, *et al.*, 2021). Research in the last 20 years provides evidence that there is a continued and increasing demand for animal and animal products such as bushmeat, fashion products such as small leather goods and accessories (shoes, wallets, cell phone cases, belts, bags, etc.), cosmetic creams and serums, artefacts and decorative objects, and live animals for the exotic pet trade (Mozer and Prost, 2023). Regardless of the destination and type of product, the rising demand for wild animals is putting significant pressure on individual populations and global biodiversity.

3.1.2 Poaching, Hunting, and the IWT: A Threat to Biodiversity

Human activities have drastically altered terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems over centuries (Oldfield and Dearing, 2003), leading to large-scale changes in biodiversity, habitat complexity, and ecosystem functioning. These changes have negatively impacted the provision of ecosystem services that are essential for human well-being, with 96% of experts agreeing that global biodiversity loss undermines human well-being by impacting the availability of ecosystem services (Isbell *et al.*, 2023), and this pressure is further exacerbated by urbanisation and rapid growth (Bi *et al.*, 2025). Most research has focused on the negative impacts of human activity through the exploitation of natural resources by changing, converting, and fragmenting land for mainly agricultural and industrial use causing large-scale habitat loss, unsustainable resource

management, pollution, introduction of invasive species, and climate change (Sponsel, 2001; Munstermann *et al.*, 2022). However, comparatively less attention has been given to the effects of poaching and hunting, particularly in the context of the IWT, as a significant driver of biodiversity loss. The hunting of large animals continues to deplete natural biodiversity, causing cascading effects that extend well beyond the directly targeted species (Gross, 2019). Furthermore, 24% of all extant vertebrate species, or 7,638 of the 31,745 species reported, are being traded, arguably illegally and unsustainably (Scheffers *et al.*, 2019). Experts assert that nearly 30% of all species have been threatened or driven to extinction by human activity since the year 1500 (Isbell *et al.*, 2023), with studied wild animal populations showing a decline by 69% over the last 50 years (WWF, 2022). This highlights the magnitude of the issue, with traded species facing greater extinction risks than non-traded species. The pressure of poaching and illegal hunting, when combined with habitat loss and climate change, significantly compounds these risks.

Poaching is a criminalised activity that directly harms animals (White, 2022) and has devastating consequences for large, recognisable and dynamic fauna (Nhleko *et al.*, 2022). For example, the Central African Forest Elephant (*Loxodonta cyclotis*), a critically endangered subspecies of the African Savannah Elephant (*Loxodonta Africana*) has lost 62% of its population to ivory poaching between 2002 and 2011 (Maisels *et al.*, 2013; Breuer, Maisels and Fishlock, 2016).

Similarly, the Siamese Crocodile (*Crocodylus siamensis*), a rare crocodylian species, native to Southeast Asia, has been listed as critically endangered by the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN), due to hunting and poaching for its valuable skin. The wild population was estimated 500-1000 individuals in 2012 (IUCN, 2012), but by 2015, this had dropped to an estimated 200-400 individuals (Han *et al.*, 2015). Historically, habitat loss (Simpson and Bezuijen, 2010) and poaching (Eam *et al.*, 2017) have been major contributing factors to its decline. Crocodylian skins are highly coveted to make luxury fashion goods (Caldwell, 2017), and for decades commercial crocodile farming has been used to supply the fashion industry with skins (Andrew, 2018; Lance, 2022).

The exact number of crocodile farms worldwide is unknown, but estimates suggest that there are several hundred (IUCN, n.d.). Between 2011 and 2013, the IUCN Crocodile Specialist Group reported an annual international trade of 1.57 million crocodile skins, with Siamese crocodiles

accounting for about 45,000 of the total traded skins (IUCN, n.d.). This volume indicates that captive breeding and farming are the primary sources of Siamese crocodile skins. However, as a critically endangered species, their rarity and high commercial value, directly threaten wild populations facing the persistent pressure of poaching.

Crocodile farms often house multiple species, including Saltwater crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*), leading to cases of hybridisation. With a limited number of Siamese crocodiles available for breeding, genetic bottlenecks have emerged, reducing genetic diversity and threatening the long-term viability of captive populations (Yu *et al.*, 2011). There is no evidence to suggest that these farms are supplementing housed populations with wild-caught crocodiles, likely due to the species' rarity and costs associated with wild capture. While inbreeding is a known issue in captive populations, there is no evidence suggesting that it negatively affects skin quality or reduces the market value of farmed crocodile products, the main impact is on reintroduction efforts for conservation as hybrid species can negatively impact genetic integrity and threaten the survival of the species in its natural habitat (Ariyaphong *et al.*, 2023). However, this is not a concern for a commercial breeding farm where the focus is on maximising production for profit.

The case of Siamese crocodile farming highlights broader ethical and ecological dilemmas within the commercial breeding of reptiles for luxury markets. While wildlife farming is often framed as a sustainable alternative to hunting, it does not necessarily alleviate pressure on wild populations from poaching. The failure to account for species biological traits in commercial farming raises serious concerns about the long term sustainability and economic viability of wildlife farming (Meeks, Morton and Edwards, 2024). The exploitation of crocodylians for the exotic skin trade underscores the tension between conservation and commerce, with similar challenges faced by other reptilian species being farmed for the trade.

3.1.3 The Vulnerability of Long-Lived Species to Poaching and Wildlife Crime

Research on the IWT disproportionately targets species based on their life history traits, but the nature of this exploitation varies. Species reproductive strategies play a crucial role in determining their vulnerability to overexploitation, and this can be explained using the theory of K-selection and r-selection (MacArthur and Wilson, 1967). K-selected species – those with slow reproductive rates,

long sexual maturation periods, and high parental investment – are particularly vulnerable to population declines as they cannot quickly replace individuals lost to hunting and poaching (Dutta, Rahmani and Jhala, 2011; Hayman and Peel, 2016). African elephants (*Loxodonta Africana*), for example, face critical threats due to ivory poaching (De Sales, Anastácio and Pereira, 2020), and their long intercalving intervals (4-8 years) (Allen, 2006) put pressure on wild populations' rate of replacement. Additionally, persistent poaching pressure has disrupted female elephant social structures, traditionally maintained by matriarchs and herd members, which in turn has negatively affected their reproductive success. In simple terms, poaching is linked to a significant decline in African elephant birth rates (Gobush, Mutayoba and Wasser, 2008). Conversely, r-selected species reproduce rapidly and in large numbers, with little or no parental care, and short lifespans. These adaptations help them to live in environments with high stochasticity, having the ability to replace their populations quickly. However, K-selection and r-selection exists along a spectrum, with species exhibiting traits of both strategies at varying degrees (Pianka, 1970).

Different traits, and life history strategies, make species vulnerable in different ways. While elephants cannot quickly replace populations decimated by poaching for ivory, reptiles such as crocodylians face intense exploitation for their skins because their unique life history traits that makes them highly desirable for commercial breeding and trade. Unlike purely K-selected animals like elephants, crocodylians exhibit a blend of 'fast' traits, such as large clutch sizes of eggs, and 'slow' traits like long lifespans. Crocodylians lay multiple eggs (this varies depending on the species) at a set time of the year. They take care in providing appropriate substrate for the eggs to hatch and provide parental care in the form of protection against predation for their young offspring, some crocodylians even provide extended parental care by providing food and protection for a longer period and this is seen in some caiman species (Carl, 2017). Crocodylians also have specific behaviours related to courtship and reproduction making sexual selection a significant factor in offspring production and health (Hale *et al.*, 2018). Crocodylians' complex life history traits of large broods and long reproductive lifespan make them ideal and lucrative to breed in captivity (Street *et al.*, 2023), ensuring continuous supply of skins for the exotic skin trade. In other words, some species are highly at risk due to slow reproduction, however, others are exploited precisely because of their high fecundity, but both face conservation challenges such as poaching and illegal hunting.

Species do not exist in isolation; they are part of complex ecosystems shaped by climate, habitat conditions, human activity, and other ecological factors (Phillips, 2023). The IWT exacerbates these pressures on populations already threatened by sustained exploitation. This high-risk high-reward trafficking (Brown *et al.*, 2021) is only concerned with maximising profits and is not concerned about sustainability or irreversible population declines. Given these challenges, institutional efforts to mitigate wildlife crime, such as enforcement measures and trade regulations, play a crucial role in addressing these threats.

3.1.4 Enforcement of IWT Regulations and the Role of Luxury Fashion in Wildlife Trafficking

The Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) establishes international regulations for the legal and illegal trade of wildlife (CITES, 2018), with enforcement carried out by national agencies. Member countries are responsible for upholding CITES regulations through domestic legislation, such as the Control of Trade in Endangered Species (COTES) Regulations 2018 in the UK (UK Government, 2018a). Agencies such as the UK Border Force and the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) play a critical role in seizing contraband and maintaining databases of intercepted wildlife products. The frequency and volume of these seizures provide valuable insights into the IWT, helping to identify trends in species and product types that are commonly trafficked. For instance, enforcement data, specifically seizures, has been instrumental in recognizing that pangolin scales and ivory are among the most frequently seized items globally (UNODC, 2024).

Analysis of seizure data has also revealed the significant role of the luxury fashion industry in wildlife trafficking, particularly concerning exotic skins. The UK is the fifth-largest consumer of luxury fashion globally (Statista, 2023), and previous assessments of wildlife contraband (Petrossian, Pires and van Uhm, 2016; Sosnowski and Petrossian, 2020) highlight the extent to which exotic reptile skins appear in illegal trade. A 2014 UK Border Force report found that, in 2012–2013, there were 255 recorded seizures, of which 93 involved reptiles, 36 involved mammals, 13 involved birds, and 2 involved molluscs and bony fish (Border Force, 2014). More than 60% of reptile seizures were of fashion products, predominantly products such as belts, shoes, handbags, and other accessories that are made from the skins of reptiles. However, no comprehensive

assessment of UK Border Force seizures has been conducted since then, despite the growing global demand for luxury fashion. To better understand how the industry has evolved, particularly given increasing consumer appetite for luxury goods, this chapter analyses more recent UK Border Force seizure data.

3.2 Objectives

- 1) To determine the frequency and type of animal contraband seized in the UK by Border Force in the years 2012-13, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022.
- 2) To analyse trends in the legal trade of exotic skins using CITES legal imports data, demonstrating how rising imports align with the expansion of the luxury fashion industry.
- 3) To examine the implications of both the legal and IWT, with a focus on how consumer demand for wildlife-derived products drives market expansion and impacts conservation efforts.

3.3 Methods

3.3.1 Description and Organisation of Border Force Data

The seizure dataset used in this chapter captures instances of clearly illegal wildlife trade detected at UK borders. These seizures provide insight into the scope and species composition of the illegal market for exotic-skin luxury products. It is important to note that while seizures isolate illegality, they do not capture the full extent of laundering, whereby illegally sourced products are channelled into legal supply chains. Thus, the findings here reflect the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of IWT-linked luxury fashion, complementing the broader consumer-focused data explored in subsequent chapters.

Data on animals and animal products seized by the Border Force has been released quarterly in the form of Border Force Transparency Data and goes back to 2014. Prior to 2014, data was obtained through Freedom of Information Requests (FOI). Quarterly transparency data is presented as seizures and volumes of animals protected under the Convention of International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) and confiscated as contraband. Specific information such as the species name and type of product is not presented and can be acquired through an FOI. An FOI

request, refer to Appendix A, was made to Border Force for all seizure data for 2014 – 2022, this was refused due to reduced Border Force capacity. Nevertheless, in a subsequent request, data was provided for 2018 – 2022 (excluding 2020 due to COVID-19). This data included species names, product types, amount of product (count, weight, and volume) and the direction of transport. Similar data, released by Border Force in 2014, was included in the analysis. This data is publicly accessible and includes seizures between 2012 – 2013 (Border Force, 2014).

The data was combined for seizures in years 2012-13, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022. It contained 2,025 seizure events, of which 953 were in the plant kingdom, 8 involved both plant and animal kingdom, 1 was unknown, 26 events (or occurrences) had reported more than one species, 9 had missing classifications, and 4 were classified as exports, re-exports, or blanks. There was some overlap, which means summing these excluded cases does not exactly match the difference between the total dataset and the final subset analysed.

These occurrences were filtered to only include imported products that were assigned to the animal kingdom. Seizures related to the animal kingdom accounted for 1,042 occurrences. Within this subset, 913 valid cases were count-based units (e.g., number of items or animals), while the units for 129 were in weight or volume (e.g., kilograms, grams, millilitres, or litres). These subsets were analysed separately, as counts cannot be compared to measurements. All seizure events were organised by taxonomic level, description of item, the product category, common name, conservation status, CITES appendix classification, and year.

The World Wildlife Crime Reports from 2016 and 2024 (UNODC, 2016, 2024) provided the basis for defining product categories in this study. These reports classify items derived from the IWT and seized as contraband into broad product categories. The 2016 report organises its chapters around specific sectors, including furniture; art, décor, and jewellery; fashion; cosmetics and perfume; food, tonics, and medicine; pets, zoos, and breeding; and seafood. In contrast, the 2024 report adopts a more consolidated approach, categorising products into food, medicine, mass-market pets and ornamental plants, specialist markets for live animals and plants, and exclusive markets for goods associated with adornment, display, and status demonstration (including cosmetics and fashion). This research draws upon these classifications, adapting and integrating them to develop

informed product categories aligned with the framework established by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). These categories are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Categorisation and Description of Animal Products Seized as Contraband by UK Border Force (2012 – 2013, 2018 – 2022 (excluding 2020))

Product Category	Description
Live Animals (LA)	These seizures are of animals that at the time of confiscation were alive.
Whole Dead Animal (WDA)	Dead animals seized with their whole bodies intact ³ .
Animal Parts (AP)	Animal derivatives defined as animal parts that come from the body of an animal through natural processes (such as eggs), parts of dead animals, or bodily fluids ⁴ . These parts have not been transformed or repurposed to create another product.
Traditional Medicine (TM)	Animal parts that have transformed into traditional medicine. This includes saiga horn, bear bile, and extracts such as that from musk deer ⁵ .

³ There were instances where there was no description given as to whether a whole body was seized but instead simply the species common name was given in the description. These instances were included in this category. Additionally, it is evidenced that some whole dead animals, such as the case with seahorses, are used in traditional medicine. For this analysis, however, they were retained in the category of whole dead animal as their description was given as ‘body’ and not ‘medicine’ by Border Force

⁴ Bear bile, saiga antelope horn, and musk was not included as their purpose is for traditional medicine. Additionally, bear bile and musk are farmed (Xiuxiang *et al.*, 2006; Crudge, Nguyen and Cao, 2020).

⁵ Although musk has been used in cosmetics to make fragrances it is cheaper and more commercially viable to use lab created musk compounds in fragrances. The main use of musk is in traditional medicine.

Ivory Objects, Trophies & Art (IOTA)	This category only includes ivory that has been transformed into another object, including artwork, picture frames, antiques, and trophies (incl. stuffed/taxidermy). Untransformed ivory and ivory jewellery were considered an animal part (AP) and Fashion item (FA) respectively and are not included in this category.
Cosmetics (C)	Products made from animal parts or from the body of an animal through natural processes (such as eggs) transformed for cosmetic purposes such as in skin care products, make-up, and perfumes.
Fashion (FA)	Animal parts transformed into items worn such as coats, handbags, shoes, belts, etc., or accessories such as mobile phone covers, keyrings, jewellery (excluding ivory), etc.
Food (FO)	Parts of an animal that have been derived or transformed into edible items for human consumption.

Where the scientific name was not provided, common names were manually converted to their corresponding scientific names and assigned to the appropriate taxonomic classification level (there was a wide range and included taxonomic levels from species, genus, family, and order). Animals were categorised according to their conservation status and listing within The IUCN Red List (IUCN, 2025) and CITES appendices (CITES, 2025). The IUCN Red List classifies animals and plants as Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable, Near Threatened, or Least Concern, with some remaining unclassified due to insufficient data. CITES provides guidelines for members on species trade regulation through three appendices: Appendix I includes species threatened with extinction and subject to the strictest trade restriction, Appendix II lists species that may become threatened if trade is not controlled, and Appendix III includes species protected within specific member countries that have requested international assistance in regulating their trade.

The dataset obtained from Border Force was refined to incorporate missing taxonomic details, IUCN conservation statuses, and CITES listings. The cleaning process involved standardising

species names, resolving taxonomic inconsistencies, and ensuring accurate classification. Assumptions were made where necessary, particularly in cases where species-level identification was unavailable, to ensure a precautionary approach in assessing conservation risk. Additionally, only seized wildlife products imported into the UK were analysed, reflecting consumer demand. A detailed description of the data cleaning and classification process, including specific taxonomic adjustments and justifications, is provided in Appendix B.

When a discrete species-level scientific name was unavailable, assigning an exact IUCN conservation status or CITES listing was challenging. In such cases, the worst-case conservation status was applied as a precautionary approach. The IUCN guidelines provide guidance on assessing conservation status in cases where data is incomplete or uncertain (IUCN Standards and Petitions Committee, 2024). The IUCN recommends that assessors adopt a precautionary but realistic approach when dealing with uncertainty, i.e., to not use worst-case scenario reasoning as this may overestimate risk. However, because of the nature of the available data for analysis, where reported taxonomic-level richness varies significantly, applying a worst-case scenario approach was necessary to ensure that threatened species were not inadvertently excluded. This method aligns with established practices in conservation assessments where incomplete taxonomic resolution necessitates erring on the side of caution (Woinarski *et al.*, 2021). For example, while the Chinese alligator (*Alligator sinensis*) is classified as Critically Endangered, the American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) is of Least Concern. Since the Border Force data categorised a product simply as "alligator," it was conservatively assigned the status of Critically Endangered to reflect potential risks to threatened species. The conservation status and CITES appendix listings were taken as of current in 2024 and not for the years when the seizures took place.

3.3.2 Border Force Contraband Data Analysis

Descriptive Statistics were computed to summarise the characteristics of the seized wildlife contraband dataset. The total number of seizure events and the total number of seized items or animals were counted for each product category to provide seizure frequency. The same was done for seizures reported in weights and volumes. Measures of central tendency (mean, median) and dispersion (standard deviation) were calculated to describe the distribution of seized items. The

mean and standard deviation (SD) were computed to represent the average quantity of seized items or animals per category, while the median was included as a robust measure to account for skewness in the data distribution. The results are presented in Table 2. Additional results are presented in the form of pie charts, stacked bar graphs, and bar graphs, please refer to **Error! Reference source not found.**, Figure 9, Figure 10, Figure 11. Analyses were conducted in SPSS (Version 28.0.11 (15)), utilising the Frequencies and Descriptives functions to obtain summary statistics.

Initially, an analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was conducted to measure any significant differences between measures of central tendency for the product categories, however, for a one-way ANOVA, three main assumptions must be met: independence, normality, and homogeneity of variance. The data, however, violated the assumption of normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, $D(913) = 0.476, p < .001$) and homogeneity of variance (Levene's test, $F(7, 905) = 30.924, p < .001$). Therefore, a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted as a robust alternative. Since Kruskal-Wallis is a rank-based test, results are reported using median differences rather than means, ensuring they are not unduly influenced by non-normality and unequal variances. As Kruskal-Wallis only indicates whether a significant difference exist between groups but does not specify which groups differ, post-hoc pairwise Mann-Whitney U tests (Wilcoxon rank-sum tests) were performed to identify specific group differences. This non-parametric approach, consistent with Kruskal-Wallis, ranks data rather than assuming normality, making it suitable for independent groups with non-normally distributed and heterogeneous variances. A Bonferroni correction was applied to adjust for multiple comparisons and reduce the risk of Type I error, setting a revised significance threshold of $p < 0.0018$, instead of $\alpha = 0.05$.

Data in weights and volumes was converted to grams and millilitres and analysed. Similarly, this data violated the assumption of normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, $D(129) = 0.470, p < .001$), and a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine significant differences between product categories.

Data was visualised and presented to show trends over years in count of seizure events for the total share occupied by all categories. The Fashion category was selected as the category for further investigation as it had the highest proportion of seizure events. As mentioned in the overview in Chapter 1, the focus of this thesis is to look at luxury fashion consumption of exotic skins.

Outliers were presented and interpreted by using the interquartile range (IQR) method, where values exceeding 1.5 times the IQR were flagged. A boxplot was generated to visualise the distribution of seizure counts across product categories. These were interpreted for their meaning as an outlier in this dataset is not an error but a meaningful feature providing a narrative about contraband seizures. Non-parametric tests, mentioned above, are robust to outliers, therefore all values were retained in all analyses.

For this analysis, the interest was in understanding the difference between the categories of products seized from the IWT. The product categories serve as the explanatory (independent) variable, while the mass in counts of each occurrence is the response (dependent) variable. Data was analysed using the R programming environment (R Core Team, 2023) and SPSS (Version: 28.0.1.1 (15)).

3.3.3 Organisation, Description, and Analysis of CITES Trade Data and Luxury Revenue for UK

In an additional analysis, CITES importation data was extracted from the CITES database to assess legal imports of exotic skins, providing another layer to the analysis. Data was extracted for the years 2012 to 2022, with the United Kingdom selected as the importing country (labelled as GB within the CITES database). In the database data is extracted by specifying variables such as “exporting countries”, “importing countries”, “source”, “purpose of use”, “trade terms”, and a search by “taxon”.

The focus of this project is on exotic skins, therefore, all exports to the UK that were designated for personal or commercial uses, sourced from all categories except confiscations/seizures were included. The trade terms used for extraction are relevant to studying exotic skins and were *Leather (LEA)*, *Leather Product (Large) (LPL)*, *Leather Product (Small) (LPS)*, *Leather Items (SKO)*, *Skins*

(*SKI*), *Skin Pieces (SKP)*, *Skin Scraps (SKS)*, and *Shoes (SHO)*. This yielded 2,717 records of imported products.

CITES trade database does not contain any reports of illegal transport. It does, however, record items seized as contraband that were later legally released or re-transported. These cases were relatively small observations in the dataset analysed ($n = 23$) and, as they originally constituted contraband, they were excluded from the analysis. This data was filtered further for only those occurrences that reported number of specimens seized. Since CITES only began requiring member countries to report seizure numbers in 2017 (UNODC, 2022), the dataset was reduced to years 2018 – 2022. After excluding two entries lacking taxonomic information, 822 records of legally reported imports remained and were used for analysis.

There were some ($n = 7$) observations that contained decimal values, suggesting that not all reported “counts” necessarily refer to whole numbered items. To standardise the data, all decimal values were rounded to the nearest whole number under the assumption that count data was reported as stated.

Gross CITES imports were reported for the years 2018 – 2022. Switzerland was taken as a case study to describe the type of products imported as it was the top importer of exotic skins and other leather products to the UK. Gross imports were used in the analysis, meaning that when discrepancies arose between importer- and exporter-reported quantities, the higher value was taken as the actual import quantity. This approach follows CITES guidelines, which recommend using the greater reported figure to account for inconsistencies in importer reported records and any missing data.

Finally, total revenue for the UK luxury goods market (2018 – 2028), was used to explore potential correlations. A non-parametric Kendall’s Tau test, suitable for small sample sizes, was conducted to assess the relationship between total revenue from luxury goods, including products such as watches, shoes, eyewear, apparel, and small leather accessories, to the gross imports of legally imported leather products as reported in the CITES dataset.

To better understand the revenue created by the luxury industry in the UK based on animal imports, data was obtained from Statista’s reports on Luxury Consumption (Statista, 2024b). The data

provides a categorised breakdown of the luxury goods industry in the UK including, luxury eyewear, luxury fashion, luxury leather goods, luxury watches and jewellery, and prestige cosmetics and fragrances.

3.4 Results

3.4.1 UK Border Force animal Contraband Seizures

The descriptives of the combined data are presented in Table 2, Table 3 and Table 4 summarising the UK Border Force seizure data by product category in counts, weights, and volumes, respectively. Total Seizure Events refers to the number of separate seizure incidents recorded for each category. Total Number of Seized Items or Animals represents the cumulative sum of items or animals confiscated within each category. Average Number of Seized Items or Animals is presented as the mean \pm standard deviation (SD), where the mean indicates the central tendency of seized items per event, and SD reflects the variability across seizures. Median Number of Seized Items or Animals provides the middle value of the dataset, offering an alternative measure of central tendency less influenced by extreme values.

Table 2. Categories of Seizures Descriptives in Counts Combined. UK Border Force animal seizures from 2012-13, 2018 – 2022 (excluding 2020).

Category	Total Seizure Events	Total Number of Seized Items or Animals	Average number of Seized Items or Animals (mean \pm SD)	Median number of Seized Items or Animals
Animal Parts (AP)	229	4250	19.3 \pm 67.6	2
Cosmetics (C)	10	104,706	10,470.6 \pm 22,072.5	11

Fashion (FA)	394	6,374	16.1 ± 172.4	1
Food (FO)	4	23	5.6 ± 6.9	2.25
Ivory Objects, Trophies & Art (IOTA)	76	980	12.7 ± 37.4	1
Live Animals (LA)	32	772	24.1 ± 58.0	2
Traditional Medicine (TM)	137	10,966	77.8 ± 261.9	10
Whole Dead Animal (WDA)	31	10,918	363.9 ± 1933.5	1
Total	913	139,019	-	-

Table 3. Categories of Seizures Descriptives in Weight. Combined UK Border Force animal seizures from 2012-13, 2018 – 2022 (excluding 2020).

Category	Total Seizure Events	Total of Seized Items or Animals (Kilograms)	Average of Seized Items or Animals (mean ± SD)	Median of Seized Items or Animals
Animal Parts (AP)	27	3,849	142.6 ± 667.1	0.7
Cosmetics (C)	3	30.1	10 ± 9.5	9
Fashion (FA)	7	24.8	3.5 ± 6.1	1.48
Food (FO)	37	237.8	6.4 ± 14.6	1.12

Ivory Objects, Trophies & Art (IOTA)	21	4,925.8	234.6 ± 768.7	1.22
Live Animals (LA)	3	1,348.3	449.4 ± 392.1	625
Traditional Medicine (TM)	17	3,508.3	206.4 ± 841.5	0.69
Whole Dead Animal (WDA)	5	747.1	149.4 ± 320.8	1.5
Total	120	14,671.1	-	-

Table 4. Categories of Seizures Descriptives in Volume Combined. UK Border Force animal seizures from 2012-13, 2018 – 2022 (excluding 2020).

Category	Total Seizure Events	Seized Items (Litres)	Average (mean ± SD)	Median
Animal Parts (AP)	5	0.39	0.08 ± 0.09	0.04
Food (FO)	1	0.09	0.09	0.09
Traditional Medicine (TM)	3	0.29	0.1 ± 0.09	0.12
Total	9	0.77	-	-

3.4.1.1 Distribution of Animals by Taxonomic Level and Conservation Status

To give a sense of the spread in terms of types of animals, how vulnerable they are to threats, and the international protections they have been afforded pie charts are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 of the distribution by class and families, IUCN conservation status, and share within CITES appendices of animals are presented from Border Force seizures from 2012-13, 2018 – 2022 (excluding 2020). The distribution for IUCN conservation status and CITES appendices. It is noteworthy that 99% of all cases were reported as falling under one of the CITES appendices, this is because Border Force enforces animal contraband seizures based on guidelines provided by CITES.

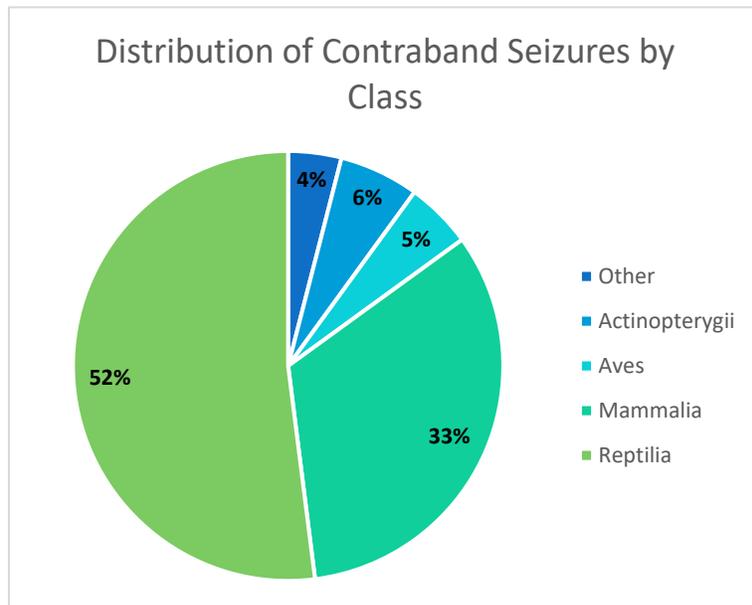


Figure 5. Distribution of Contraband Seized by Class of Animal

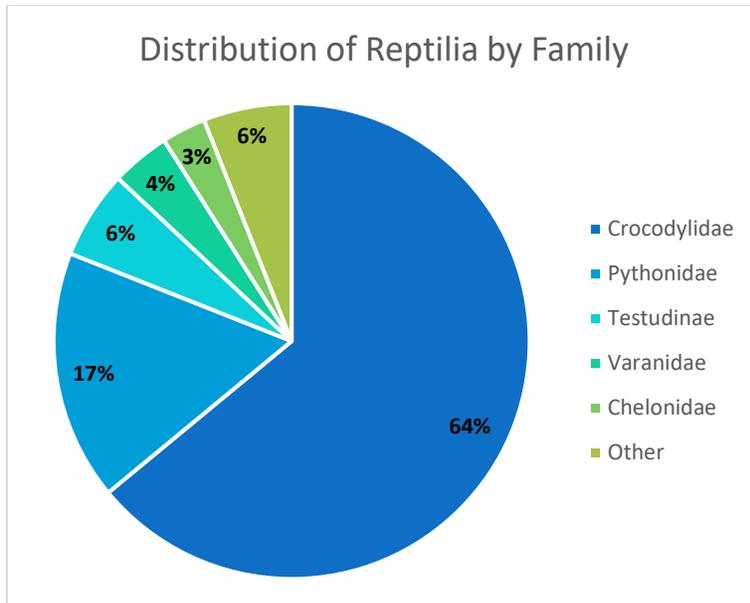


Figure 6. Distribution of Reptile based Contraband by Family

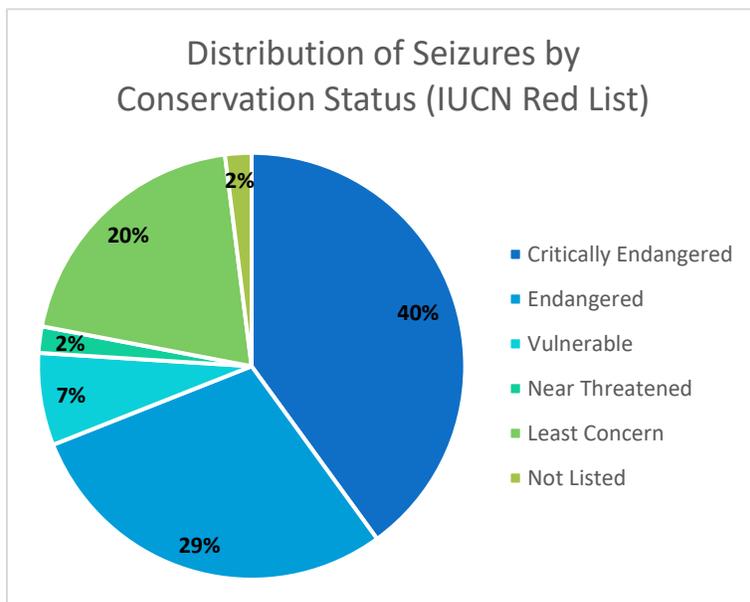


Figure 7. Distribution of Contraband Seized by IUCN Red List Conservation Status

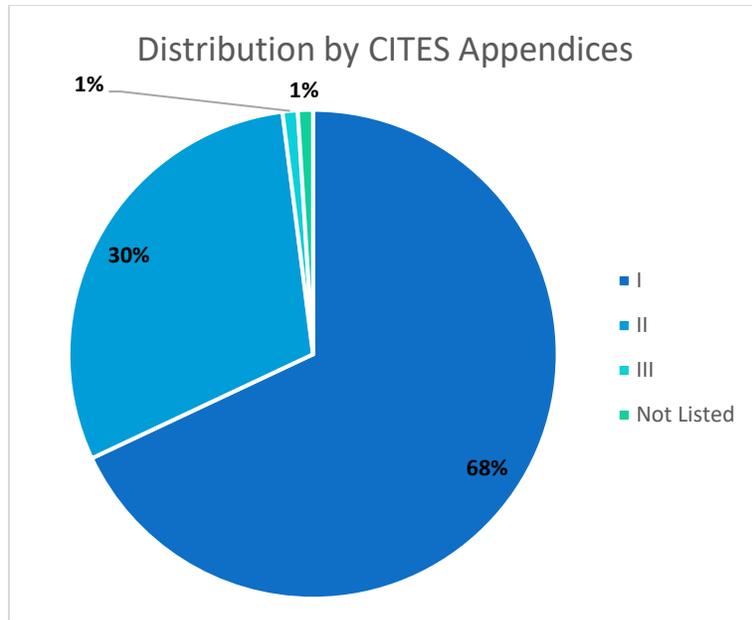


Figure 8. Distribution of Contraband Seized by CITES Appendices

Most of the contraband seized was that of reptiles at 52%. This is the case as most seizure incidents across this time were in the fashion category (n = 394) such as handbags, belts, wallets, shoes, phone cases, watch straps, and other accessories. These leather items are evidently made from alligator, crocodile, snake, or lizard skins.

3.4.1.2 Seizures by Categories, Year and Count: Standout Trend in Fashion Related Seizures

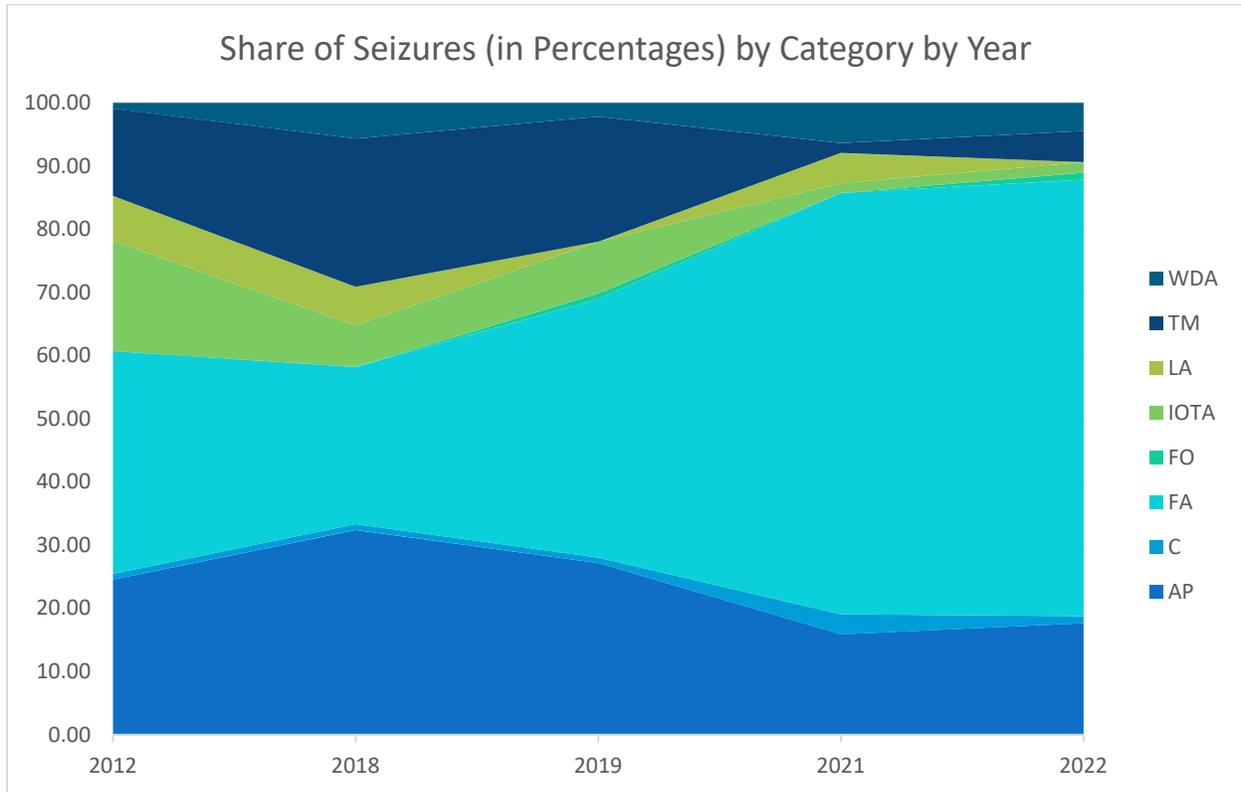


Figure 9. The change in the distribution of category of contraband seized for years 2012-13, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022 in percentages.

In Figure 9, it is evident that over time the amount of contraband seized has gone down for most of the categories, however, in 2022 there is a sharp uptick in luxury fashion products seizures. 2022 saw 1068 individual fashion items seized compared to 282 in 2021 an increase of 290% in contraband seized. The fashion seizures specifically include mostly small leather products such as shoes, belts, wallets, watch straps, clothing, and other leather accessories.

The highest number of seizure events, isolated events aside, are contraband that is considered fashion products making up 43.1% of all seizure events. If we were to further break down the fashion category by class of animal, we find that 89.1% of seizures are of products made from reptiles or their parts. Furthermore, the reptile contraband that is seized is primarily small leather

products such as fashion accessories or material to make fashion accessories, for example small leather products accounted for 132 incidents making up 14.5% of all seizure events and this was followed by watch straps with 75 seizure events making up 8.2%.

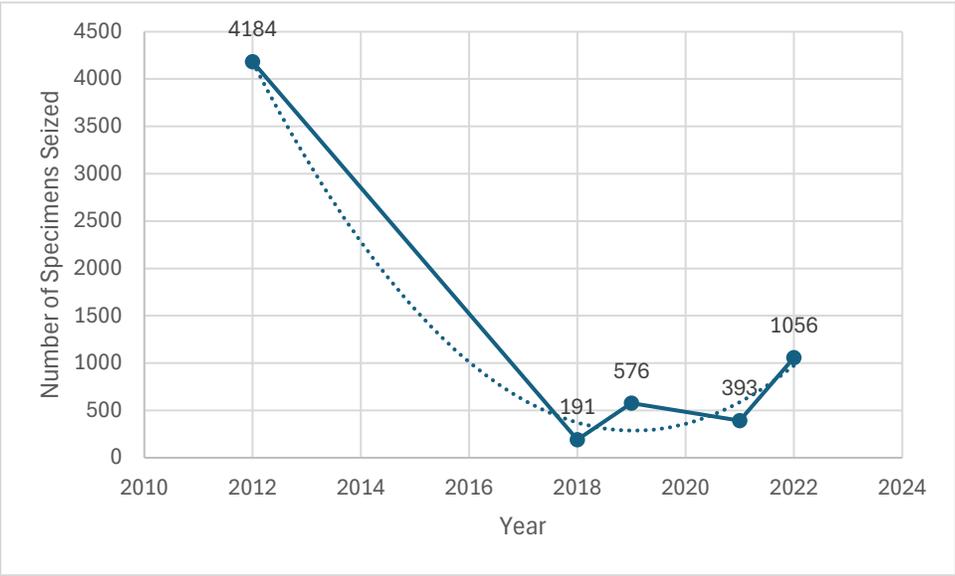


Figure 10. Upward Trend in Number of Specimens Seized in the Fashion Category

In Figure 10, the trendline for the count of number of specimens seized belonging in the fashion category by year shows an upward trend. There is a curvilinear relationship between the year and the number of fashion products seized. The trendline shows a sharp decline between the years 2012 to 2018, and we can see that the number of seized items dropped significantly from 4184 to 191. Post 2020, however, there is a turning point, and seizure counts begin to rise again reaching 1056 by 2022.

Figure 11, corroborates the upward trend, and we can see that from 2012 to 2022 there is an increase in seizure events.

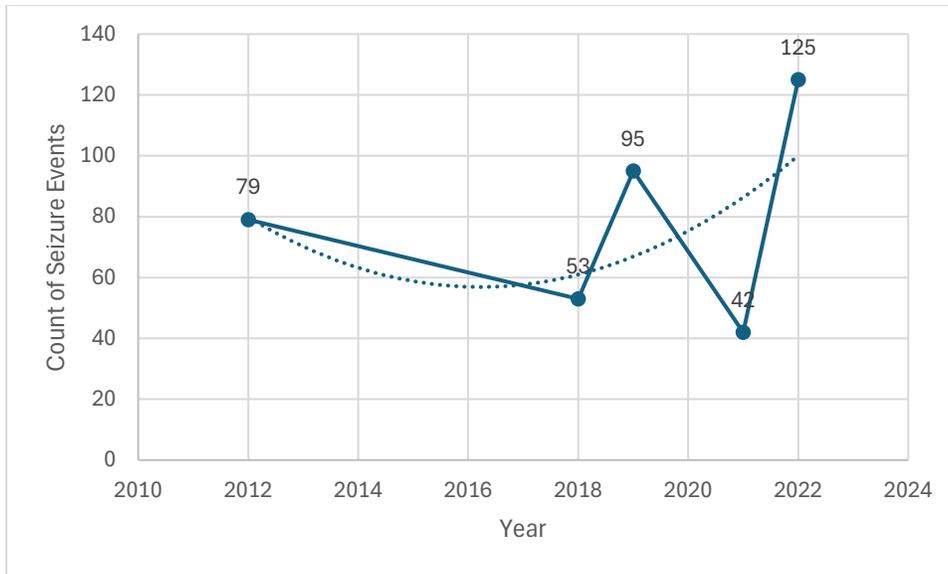


Figure 11. Upward Trend in Seizure Events of Fashion Contraband

3.4.1.3 Analysis of Variance and Outliers

3.4.1.3.1 Analysis of Variance

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) could not be conducted as assumptions of normality and heterogeneity were not satisfied. Therefore, a non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted. It revealed a statistically significant difference between product categories for median counts of seizures $(\chi^2(7) = 9.731, p < 0.001)$. A series of Mann-Whitney U test (Wilcoxon rank sum test) with Bonferroni correction ($p < 0.0018$) were conducted as a post-hoc test to see specifically what product categories were significantly different from each other.

The number of seized items in Traditional Medicine (TM) was significantly different than in Cosmetics (C) ($p < 0.001$), Fashion (FA) ($p < 0.001$), and Ivory Objects, Trophies & Art (IOTA) ($p < 0.001$). Fashion (FA) seizures were significantly lower than those of Cosmetics (C) ($p = 0.0046$), though this did not meet the Bonferroni threshold for significance. No other comparisons yielded statistically significant differences.

A Kruskal-Wallis H test did not reveal a statistically significant difference between groups ($\chi^2 = 9.731, p = 0.204$), suggesting that the ranked medians of weight & volume do not differ significantly across product categories.

3.4.1.3.2 Outliers

There are several outliers in the dataset. The most are in the fashion category ($n = 64$). Each outlier stands out as being significantly distant from the mean and this tells us that seizure data is complex. Each incident stands on its own and carries specific meaning. These should be classified as 'large seizure events' and indicate serious crimes with the illegal smuggling of multiple items, specimens, or animals.

Figure 11 is a log-transformed boxplot that visualizes wide variations in seizures across product categories. There is substantial variation in the number of seized items or animals, and certain categories such as Cosmetics (C), Whole Dead Animal (WDA), Fashion (FA), and Traditional Medicine (TM), showed extreme outliers. The interquartile range (IQR) method identified 134 unique outliers. 6 of these were seizure events of 1000 or greater number of specimens. These are presented in table 5.

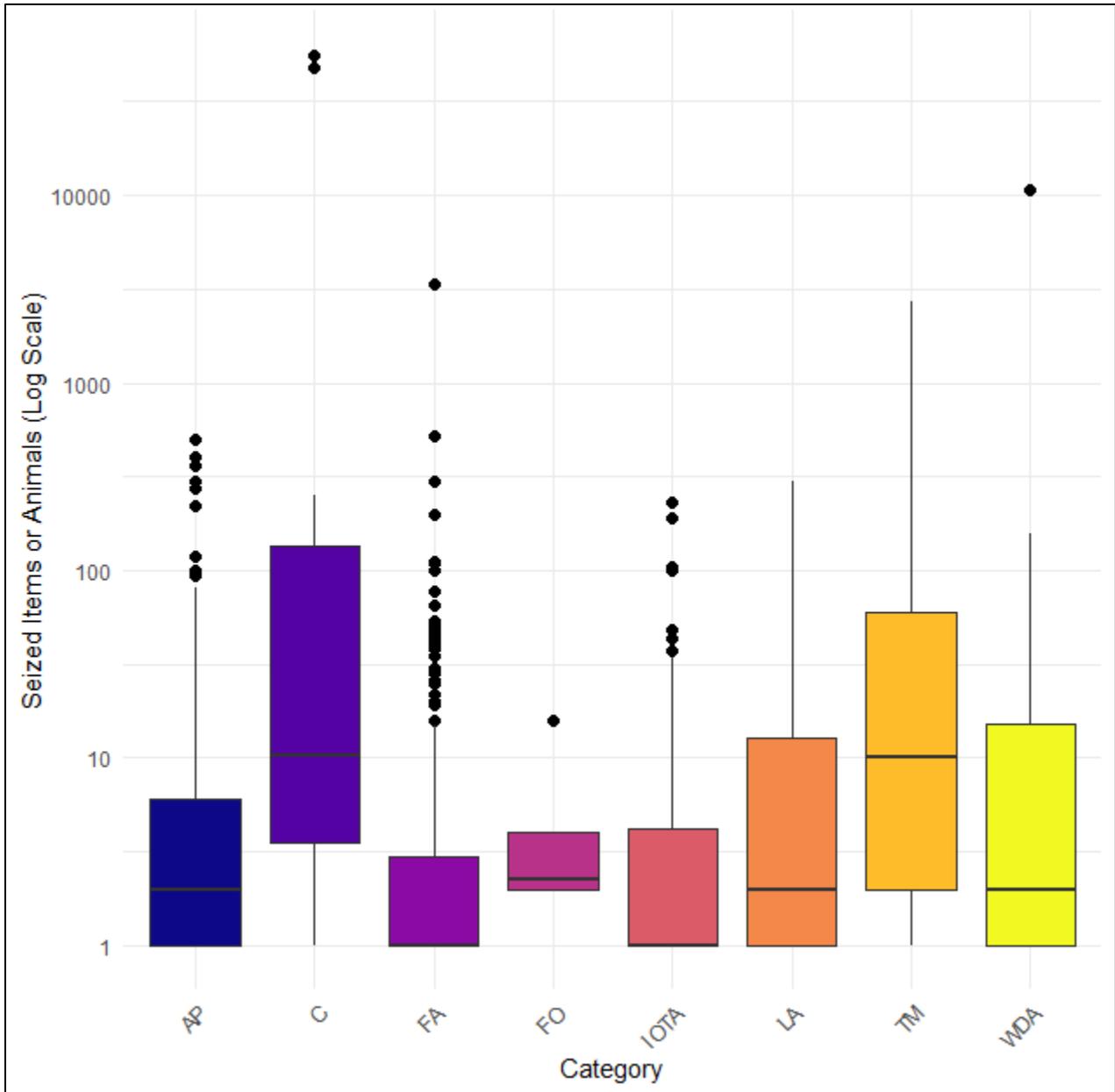


Figure 12. Boxplot Displaying Distribution of Seizure Events and Outliers for Product Categories (on a Logarithmic Scale to include Extreme Outliers)

Table 5. Top Outliers with 1000 or more Number of Specimens or Items Seized

Category	Number of Specimens	Common Name	Type of Item	Conservation Status (IUCN)	CITES Appendix	Year
Cosmetics (C)	56,160	Sturgeon	Caviar extract	Critically Endangered	I	2021
Cosmetics (c)	48,240	Sturgeon	Caviar extract	Critically Endangered	I	2021
Whole Dead Animal (WDA)	10,600	Seahorse	Whole Bodies	Endangered	II	2019
Fashion (FA)	3,373	South African Abalone	Buttons	Endangered	Not Listed	2012
Traditional Medicine (TM)	2,700	Musk Deer	Musk	Endangered	I	2019
Traditional Medicine (TM)	1,000	Seahorse	Medicine	Endangered	II	2018

3.4.2 Description and Analysis of CITES Data on Legal Imports

The total number of gross imports made by the UK for the years 2018 – 2022 were 219,554 items. Of these Reptiles made up 98.34% (n = 215,918), with small contributions from mammals (1.43%, n = 3161) and fish (0.21%, n = 475). The top three countries exporting exotic skins and other leather

products to the UK, as reported in the CITES database for 2018–2022, were Switzerland, Italy, and Austria, accounting for 62.7% (n = 137,545), 10.4% (n = 22,889), and 6.16% (n = 13,532) of total gross imports, respectively. All other exporting countries contributed less than 2% of imports. Imports from Switzerland primarily consisted of reptile specimens, which made up 99.93% (n = 137,453) of the total, with minor contributions from fish (0.06%, n = 81) and mammals (0.01%, n = 11).

An analysis of import data for Switzerland shows that the top three countries exporting to Switzerland between 2018 and 2022 were France (29.8%, n = 1,932,777), Italy (26.2%, n = 1,695,702), and Thailand (18.7%, n = 1,208,909). In terms of taxonomic classification, at the class level, reptiles were the main imports (99.93%, n = 6,473,765), while fish (0.06%, n = 3,799) and mammals (0.01%, n = 901) comprised a much smaller proportion. The order, Crocodylia represented 96.63% (n = 6,259,855) of imported specimens. Within this order, the families Alligatoridae made up 95.95% (n = 5,982,783) and this included the genus alligator at 92.35% (n = 5,982,783) and caiman at 3.6% (n=233,469). The second most legally imported family was Pythonidae at 2.13% (n = 138,192), followed by families Varanidae 0.95% (n = 61,484) and Crocodylidae at 0.67% (n = 43,603).

The predominant country of origin for imported leather products made from alligator and caiman were respectively the United States (92.14%, n = 5,969,111), followed by Venezuela (3.46%, n = 224,205). Pythons predominantly originate from Vietnam for the legal trade (1.88% of gross imports, n = 122,192). For Varanidae the origin countries were Indonesia (0.52%, 34,003) and Malaysia (0.2% n = 13,209).

Notably 0.4% of all gross imports were of unknown origin, with 0.21% (n = 13,652) Alligatoridae and 0.10% (n = 6171) Varanidae. Of the total gross imports made to Switzerland, 97.15% (n = 6,293,876) were specimens taken from the wild, while 2.5% (n = 162,282) were bred in captivity. Of the total gross imports 75% were bred in captivity (n = 121,669) in Vietnam, of which 99.57% (n = 121,667) were Pythonidae. 99.6% (223,373) of all caimans were taken from the wild from Venezuela.

The line graph in Figure 13. illustrates the total gross imports of exotic skins into the UK from 2018 to 2022, as reported in the CITES database. The data shows a sharp increase in imports over this five-year period. The total sum of gross imports of exotic skins or leather products legally imported

by the UK between 2018 and 2022 was $n = 219,554$. This trend suggests that UK demand for exotic skins increased substantially post 2020. The sharp increase in 2021 – 2022 aligns with trends in the luxury fashion industry.

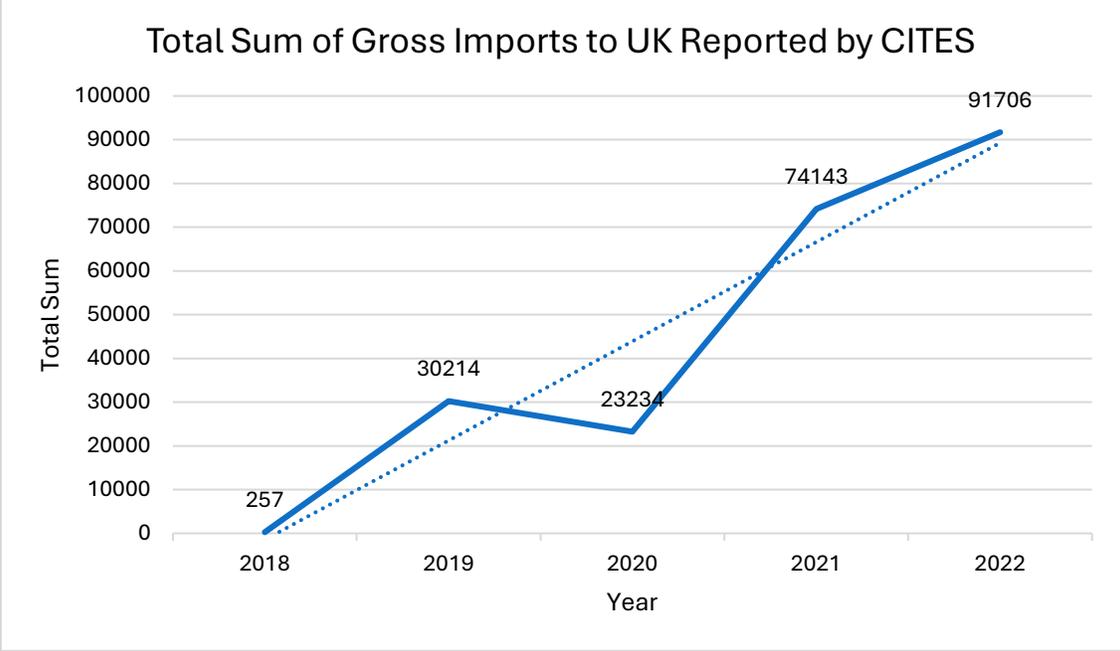


Figure 13. The Total Sum of Gross CITES Imports of Leather including Exotic Skin Imported by the UK from 2018 – 2022

Figure 14. presents the total gross imports of exotic skins into the UK as reported in the CITES database alongside the total luxury goods revenue in the UK from 2018 to 2022. The trends show a significant increase in exotic skin imports coinciding with a rise in total luxury goods revenue.

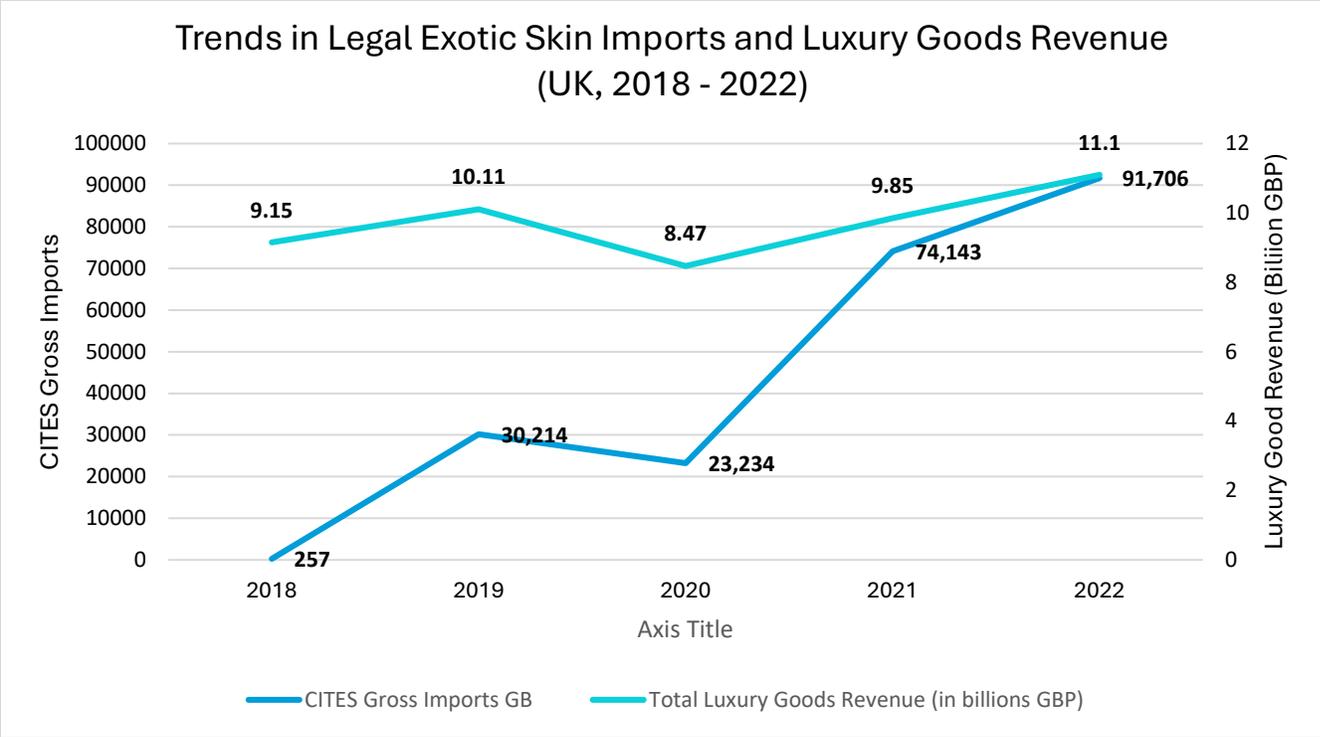


Figure 14. Comparison of the growth in CITES gross imports of leather products and exotic skins to total luxury goods revenue in the UK (2018 - 2022)

A Kendall’s Tau correlation was performed due to the small sample sizes. The correlation coefficient is $(r) = 0.60$, and $p\text{-value} = 0.071 > 0.05$. There is a moderate to strong statistically insignificant positive correlation between legal imports of exotic skins and leather products and the total luxury goods revenue in the UK, for the years 2018 – 2022. The data suggests a potential link between exotic skin imports and luxury market revenue.

3.5 Findings & Discussion

3.5.1 Patterns in Wildlife Trafficking: Insights from Seizure Data

Seizure data tells a compelling story about the complex nature and scale of the IWT. Despite limited observations a narrative emerges indicating the serious impact of the IWT has on animals, specifically on reptiles, who make up more than half of the seizure events and account for almost 90% of contraband seized as fashion products. However, interesting patterns are also observed for

other animals and product categories that reveal how they are intercepted by Border Force, with variations in seizure size, type, and frequency reflecting distinct trafficking strategies.

The number of seizure events, types of animals involved, and the categories of items seized provide valuable indicators of enforcement priorities. However, examining the median and average seizure sizes offers deep insights into trade dynamics. For example, in the Whole Dead Animal (WDA) category, while there were only 31 recorded seizure events the total number of items seized was 10,918. The high mean of 363.9 items per seizure suggests occasional large-scale confiscations, such as the case of 10,600 whole dead seahorses, while the median seizure size of 1 suggests that most cases involve single specimens, indicating small-scale, opportunistic smuggling with intermittent large-scale interceptions, indicating deliberate enforcement activity.

Similarly, in the Cosmetics (C) and Traditional Medicine (TM) categories, although the number of seizure events was relatively low (10 and 137, respectively), the total number of seized items was exceptionally high (104,706 for Cosmetics and 10,966 for Traditional Medicine). The median seizure size of (11 for Cosmetics and 10 for Traditional Medicine) suggests that while many seizures were small, some were disproportionately large, capturing substantial quantities in a single event. This implies that enforcement agencies occasionally uncover and intercept large shipments, potentially linked to organised smuggling operations, or are targeting specific shipments based off a tip or setting a priority to look out for specific contraband. Statistical analyses (refer to 3.4.1.3.1.) further suggest distinct smuggling strategies across categories, with Traditional Medicine being trafficked frequently in small shipments, while Cosmetics appear to follow a bulk trafficking model involving large-scale shipments or high-value interceptions.

Beyond enforcement strategies, seizure data also highlight conservation implications. The Cosmetics category, though limited in scope, is dominated by caviar-based products widely used in anti-ageing cosmetic products (Lee *et al.*, 2020) derived from sturgeons, a taxonomic group facing critical conservation concerns. The beluga sturgeon (*Huso huso*), for instance, is critically endangered (Gessner, Chebanov and Freyhof, 2022), persistent threats such as overfishing and habitat loss. Notably, two major caviar serum seizures in 2021 (48,240 and 56,160 units) coincided with global enforcement efforts against wildlife crime known as Operation Thunder (INTERPOL, 2021) a month-long, globally coordinated crackdown on IWT in October 2021, suggesting close

collaboration, intelligence sharing, and coordination between international agencies and domestic enforcement bodies influencing seizure patterns. The impact of targeted enforcement is further underscored by Border Force transparency data (2013–2024), which indicate that the largest recorded seizures of ivory and traditional medicine containing endangered species derivatives occurred in Q4 2021, aligning with Operation Thunder. During this period, 271.9 kilograms of ivory and 1,378,279 units of illicit traditional medicine were intercepted, marking an unprecedented level of enforcement (Border Force, 2024). These figures demonstrate the effectiveness of coordinated global efforts in disrupting supply chains and underscore the necessity for sustained intelligence-driven enforcement.

The broader significance of these seizures is reinforced by independent market surveillance efforts. A 2021 WWF study examining the sturgeon and caviar trade in the Danube region found that 19% of caviar samples tested positive for wild-sourced origins, while 12% of products failed to meet international trade regulations (Jahrl *et al.*, 2021). This means that nearly one-third of all sturgeon-derived caviar and meat circulating in the EU in 2021 was illegal, highlighting the persistent challenges in regulating and enforcing international trade laws for high-value wildlife products.

A different pattern emerges in the Fashion (FA) and Animal Parts (AP) categories. These categories had higher seizure frequencies (394 and 229 events, respectively) but much smaller median seizure sizes (1 and 2). This suggests that these products are smuggled consistently in small quantities, possibly by individuals rather than through large-scale shipments. However, the presence of outliers indicates occasional large-scale interceptions, reinforcing the idea that while smuggling is predominantly decentralised, organised trafficking events still occur. Seizures of animal parts were dominated by specimens from old-world monkeys (18%, $n = 760$) such as macaques, commonly used in biomedical research (Bakker *et al.*, 2024). The relatively low number of incidents and small seizure volumes suggest that these specimens were likely smuggled for personal or research purposes rather than being part of a coordinated trafficking network.

Fashion (FA) and Traditional Medicine (TM) are the only categories showing an increase in contraband seizures. Although the total quantity of seized items varies, the rise in seizure events suggests a shift in Border Force priorities. This may be due to a reprioritisation of targeted contraband categories, new legislation or regulatory changes, increased surveillance, or

heightened smuggling activity driven by growing demand for luxury fashion products. The most plausible explanation is a combination of these factors. Notably, the increased seizure events for fashion items made from exotic skins align with the rising demand for luxury fashion in the UK, suggesting that enforcement efforts are responding to shifting market trends.

Critically endangered or endangered species are likely overrepresented in contraband seizures as they are coveted for their rarity and exclusivity and high market value. Poachers and traffickers exploit this rarity to command premium prices (WWF, n.d.), aligning with the broader luxury market's emphasis on exclusivity. This trend is reflected in seizure data, where 99% of species confiscated were listed under CITES appendices (Figure 4). The inclusion of species in CITES frameworks informs enforcement strategies, with agencies like Border Force using these guidelines to determine priority targets for seizure and investigation. The influence of legislative measures is evident in the fluctuating seizure patterns of certain contraband categories. The Ivory Act of 2018 (UK Government, 2018c) led to significant enforcement actions in 2019, with 3,550 kilograms of ivory seized accounting for over 72% of all ivory-related contraband intercepted by UK Border Force. By 2021, ivory seizures had dropped dramatically to 27.5 kilograms, suggesting that stringent penalties and regulatory measures may have effectively deterred smuggling. Similar legal frameworks could be considered for luxury fashion items made from exotic skins, shifting regulatory focus to demand-side interventions rather than solely targeting source countries.

What is clear from these findings is that there is a need for targeted enforcement strategies that are specific to the type of product being smuggled. Seizure data is not ideal but is useful. As evidenced in the analysis process there were instances of missing data, incomplete data, or even misleading data. Due to the clandestine and criminal nature of the IWT seizure data is one of the only reliable sources we have to identify trends in the trade, and has been used by other scholars when investigating the IWT (Petrossian, Pires and van Uhm, 2016; Hitchens and Blakeslee, 2020), although some have also looked at online media (Siriwat and Nijman, 2018) and this could be an avenue to pursue in for future data collection, to record data from grey literature sources such as online news, social media posts, comments, and online market places. These findings collectively illustrate the widespread and organised nature of illicit wildlife trade, the ongoing demand for endangered species in luxury markets specifically exotic skins from reptiles, and the importance of sustained, intelligence-driven enforcement efforts in disrupting these illegal supply chains.

Ultimately, seizure data illustrate the diverse trafficking strategies employed across different product categories, the persistent demand for endangered species in luxury markets, and the role of targeted enforcement in disrupting illicit supply chains. While traditional medicine and cosmetics seizures highlight the influence of large-scale trafficking networks, the fashion and animal parts categories suggest a more fragmented and opportunistic smuggling landscape. Legislative measures, such as the Ivory Act, demonstrate the potential for regulatory interventions to reduce trafficking activity, reinforcing the need for similar approaches in the luxury fashion sector. Future research should continue to refine enforcement strategies and explore alternative data sources to build a more holistic understanding of IWT dynamics.

3.5.2 The Intersection of Legal and Illegal Trade

The investigation into the legal trade of exotic skins and leather goods provides crucial context to understanding the broader market forces driving both legal and illegal trade. It goes beyond looking at UK Border Force data on illegal contraband seized but also looked at the legal imports of products to the UK using the CITES species trade database. These products extracted from the database were only leather goods of varying sizes, skins, shoes, leather items, skin pieces, and skin scraps as the goal was to collect information specific to exotic animal skins. It is simply not enough to state that leather goods are being imported, but also to understand what kind of leather goods.

It is significant to note that legitimate channels do not guarantee legality of products. The presence of a wildlife-derived luxury item in a recognised retail environment, or its sale via platforms and brands perceived as reputable, does not mean that the product itself is lawful. In the context of CITES and the UK Control of Trade in Endangered Species (Enforcement) Regulations 2018 (COTES 2018), both the source material and the manner of its acquisition are decisive. If an item incorporates parts or derivatives from illegally taken or traded protected wildlife, its subsequent transformation, manufacture, or sale through an otherwise legitimate outlet does not change its legal status. Under CITES and COTES 2018, the prohibition on trade covers not only whole specimens of protected wildlife, but also any identifiable parts or derivatives. This includes worked items, manufactured goods, and products incorporated into composite articles, such as luxury fashion products that are made using exotic and wild animal skins. Article I(b) of CITES defines a

“specimen” to include “any readily recognisable part or derivative thereof,” (CITES, 1973, pg. 1) and Annex A/B of COTES 2018 applies controls to such items regardless of whether they are raw or processed (UK Government, 2018b). The fact that a product has entered a retail supply chain or is sold through an established brand or licensed premises does not alter its legal status if the source material was obtained or traded in contravention of applicable wildlife laws. In enforcement practice this principle has been upheld in multiple UK prosecutions.

To explain this better two examples are presented. The first case is *R v Ngie Law*, between 2011 and 2016 Ngie Law of Derby unlawfully bought, sold, and possessed ivory goods, including tusks, cutlery, ornaments, and a luxury cigarette holder without the required CITES permits and fraudulently evaded import duties. Following an investigation by Border Force, the National Wildlife Crime Unit, and Derbyshire Police, he pleaded guilty to 18 offences under COTES 2018 and associated fraud statutes. Law received a two-year suspended prison sentence, a six-month curfew, and was ordered under the Proceeds of Crime Act to forfeit £61,266.97 in assets. The case demonstrated that possession and sale of worked ivory items, regardless of age or point of sale, remain subject to CITES controls and UK enforcement action.

The second example is known as the Mayfair shahtoosh case. In 1997, the Metropolitan Police raided The Renaissance Corporation, a luxury clothing retailer in Mayfair, seizing 138 shawls made from shahtoosh each the underfur of the endangered Tibetan antelope (*Pantholops hodgsonii*) (Reeve, 2004). With an estimated retail value of £353,000, the shawls were traced to the killing of at least 1,000 antelopes. The company pleaded guilty to offences under COTES 2018 and was fined £1,500; all goods were forfeited. Despite being sold in a high-end retail setting, the products remained illegal because their source material was derived from a CITES Appendix I species, illustrating that luxury market channels do not legalise contraband wildlife derivatives.

While these prosecutions demonstrate the principle in practice, CITES trade data also reveal the scale of the so-called legal exotic skin trade into the UK between 2018 and 2022, with reptiles constituting the overwhelming majority (98.34%) of imports. The drastic rise in imports post-2020 correlates with an increasing demand for luxury fashion products, as seen in the growth of the total luxury goods revenue during the same period (refer to 3.4.2). This is evidenced by a drastic resurgence in consumer appetite for luxury goods following the disruptions of the COVID-19

pandemic (Faccioli, Martin and Sheehan, 2023) as well as a potential expansion in luxury fashion offerings that incorporate exotic leather.

Switzerland emerged as the predominant exporter of exotic skin products to the UK, accounting for over 62% of total imports. This aligns with Switzerland's established reputation as a hub for luxury goods, particularly high-end watch manufacturing (Goodman *et al.*, 2010). The data suggests that a significant proportion of the imported exotic skin products (likely in the form of small leather goods) are used in watch straps, a common component of luxury timepieces. Notably, Swiss watchmakers continue to offer exotic skin, predominantly alligator, leather watchstraps (Chandrasekhar, 2020). While some luxury brands have publicly distanced themselves from exotic skins and have outright banned the use of these skins in manufacturing their products (Baskin, 2018), the evident persistence of legal imports indicates that demand remains strong among luxury consumers.

This finding raises an important point regarding the ethical and sustainability concerns of the trade. Although Switzerland adheres to CITES regulations, the sourcing of raw materials for these products brings to light key questions about where these skins were originally sourced. In the trade database, when information is available, the origin of the product is reported. The primary source countries, exporting to Switzerland, are the United States, Venezuela, and Vietnam, with the main origin of animals used to make these products either caught in the wild for ranching or captive breeding, or raised in captivity, with distinct regulatory environments governing the farming and harvesting of exotic species.

The US is the leading supplier of alligator leather, with farming operations concentrated in Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, and Texas. Louisiana, in particular, has an extensive alligator farming industry, where eggs are harvested from the wild and raised in regulated farms before skins are exported for luxury leather goods production (Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, n.d.). The process is monitored by both state and federal agencies, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, ensuring compliance with CITES guidelines. However, the sustainability of such practices remains contested, as concerns persist regarding ecological impacts and the ethical implications of farming wild-caught reptiles.

Venezuela serves as the primary exporter of caiman skins, with nearly all specimens sourced from the wild. This reliance on wild populations raises questions about the sustainability of caiman harvesting and its potential effects on biodiversity. While Venezuela's exports comply with CITES permits, the lack of robust monitoring mechanisms poses challenges in verifying whether harvesting quotas are adhered to, or if illegal hunting contributes to the supply chain.

Vietnam, on the other hand, has positioned itself as a leading supplier of python skins, with approximately 75% of its exports bred in captivity, as presented in the CITES data. Captive breeding, while reducing pressure on wild populations, is not without ethical and ecological concerns, as evidenced in literature on the captive breeding of other animal species (Attié *et al.*, 2022; Lance, 2022; Davies, D’Cruze and Martin, 2024). In a report on captive breeding farms of crocodiles in Vietnam, 26 out of 26 farms reported some form of illegal activity, and interviews from 16 farms confirmed laundering of skins obtained from wild hunted crocodiles to supplement skins produced in breeding facilities (Vu *et al.*, 2017). The report did not mention python farming, but it can be inferred that any Vietnamese python farms or potential farms could also serve as laundering fronts for illegally wild-caught snakes, blurring the lines between legal and illicit trade. This is particularly concerning given the global luxury industry's claims of ethically sourced materials.

The data suggests a complex relationship between legal imports and the IWT. As evidenced in this study, while many luxury brands claim to have phased out exotic skins, they remain among the most frequently seized contraband items at UK borders. This contradiction indicates that consumer demand persists despite ethical controversies and regulatory changes. It can be inferred from the data that there is an existence of a dual market. One is legal, regulated trade catering to mainstream luxury consumers, and an underground market satisfying demand for restricted or higher-risk exotic materials.

Moreover, the increase in legal imports following 2020 could suggest a potential displacement effect, where regulatory crackdowns on illegal imports lead to a shift towards legally sanctioned supply chains. However, it is also possible that enforcement efforts remain insufficient, allowing illicit products to enter the market through loopholes or fraudulent documentation. These ideas are speculative, of course, and there is a need to measure impact of specific regulatory action on trade activity, a remit beyond the scope of this particular study but important to explore in the future.

The findings highlight the crucial role of consumer demand in shaping both legal and illegal trade. Luxury consumers continue to drive the market for exotic skins, and their preferences directly impact sourcing patterns. The increasing demand for high-end products, especially in post-pandemic years, suggests that exotic leather remains a desirable material despite sustainability concerns. This demand, in turn, incentivises both legal suppliers and illicit networks to maintain or expand their operations.

Luxury brands navigating this landscape face a difficult balance. On the one hand, ethical concerns and shifting public attitudes have prompted some brands to move towards sustainable alternatives and a “positive luxury” framework centred on consumer concerns (Batat *et al.*, 2025). On the other hand, the persistence of legal imports and the continued seizure of illegal products, as evidenced in this chapter, indicate that a segment of the market remains highly invested in exotic skins. The contradiction between public brand commitments and consumer purchasing behaviours suggests that ethical considerations alone may not be enough to drive substantial change in the industry.

The analysis of CITES import data reveals a significant increase in legal imports of exotic skins into the UK, driven largely by demand within the luxury sector. Switzerland plays a pivotal role in this trade, acting as a key intermediary between source countries and luxury consumers. While regulatory frameworks exist to ensure sustainable and legal trade, concerns remain regarding the ethical and ecological impacts of sourcing exotic skins.

These figures illustrate the magnitude of legal imports into the UK from one country. When looking at a watch strap it may seem like a small piece of leather, but when compounded, then we realise just how many individual skins would have been needed to produce watch straps to meet the scale of the demand. Between 2018 and 2022, as presented in the CITES trade database, Switzerland imported more than 6.2 million leather items and products, with more than 96% belonging to members of the order *Crocodylia*.

The relationship between legal and illegal trade remains complex, with evidence suggesting that regulatory changes, enforcement efforts, and consumer demand all influence the market dynamics. The persistence of illegal contraband alongside legal imports indicates that despite shifts in luxury brand policies, such as banning the use of exotic skins for some brands, the market for exotic skins is far from disappearing. Future research should explore the long-term

sustainability of reptile farming, the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms, and the evolving attitudes of luxury consumers towards ethical sourcing (the latter is discussed in Chapter 5). Addressing these issues will be crucial in determining whether the trend towards sustainability in the luxury sector is genuine or merely a superficial greenwashing gimmick.

3.6 Conclusion

The research objectives set out for this chapter were satisfied. 1) The chapter examined and quantified the frequency and type of animal contraband seized in the UK by Border Force in the years 2012-13, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022, and presented the trends associated with contraband seizures over these years as well as meaningful outliers associated with them. 2) CITES data was analysed and legal imports were studied, establishing a meaningful relationship between exponential growth in legal exotic skin imports to the UK and the growth of the UK luxury industry. 3) The implications of this trade and its impacts, specifically in the countries where raw materials are sourced, were measured and aligned with the quantitative data assessed for this chapter.

In the findings presented in this chapter there is emergent pattern indicating an overall decline in contraband seizures. This could mean better awareness of the restrictions surrounding the imports of certain products and exporters using the appropriate legal channels to import products into the UK. While this may seem like a change in a positive direction, the analysis of the CITES data on legal imports shows an exponential increase in imports of leather products, particularly exotic skins. This is commensurate with the increase in demand for luxury fashion products and is reflected in the positive relationship between legal imports and increased revenues of the fashion industry. This is a cause for concern as the goods and raw materials, i.e., skins that are used to make these fashion products have ethically dubious origins. In the last few years this has come to the attention of some of the top luxury brands in the UK and they have rejected the use of exotic skins, however, not all have followed suit and the demand for exotic skins persists.

Captive breeding ranches or farms, which luxury brands often cite as ethically legitimate sources, have come under scrutiny for their practices. Evidence suggests that wild-caught animals are frequently laundered and misrepresented as legally bred or legally hunted within these facilities. The International Crocodilian Farmer's Association (ICFA) is a private not-for-profit accreditation

body that regulates, enforces standards of welfare in crocodilian farming facilities. According to its website there are 38 farms listed that must display their membership and that they uphold the high ethical standards of the association (International Crocodilian Farmers Association, n.d.). It is worth noting however that despite the legitimacy of the organisation it has been criticised for the sheer volume of animal skins that are produced. There are also inconclusive reports on the number of legitimate alligator farms in the United States. Additionally, there are farms that may have licensing to operate legally but then are not part of any other international accreditation body that is regulating the welfare and standards of the animals kept.

Hermès, a luxury goods company discussed in detail in Chapter 5, produces one of the most famous luxury handbags, and the most expensive, the handbag is made from crocodile skin and is known as the 'Himalayan' for its grey to white gradient. This company has stakes in crocodile farms and is a parent owner of a particular farm in Australia's Northern Territory that came under fire in 2020 for aspiring to breed and produce 50,000 crocodiles to be harvested for use in creating luxury fashion handbags and other products (Readfearn, 2020) and the kind of standards that these animals would be reared in if they are simply to be killed for their skins. Although an agency such as ICFA exists there is no guarantee that the production of skins is sustainable or ethical. Even if a country may have access to better resources, have good law enforcement, the fact remains that to meet the demand certain oversights occur. Additionally, the discussion has focused on crocodiles and alligators. There is no international accreditation body that is regulating and auditing the commercial farming of lizards and snakes. It is difficult to ascertain whether the source of skins of these animals is coming from breeding farms.

The findings of the research underscore the need for multiple and dynamic enforcement strategies that are not only aware of where to look for potential large shipments of contraband, but also the trends associated with the illegal transport of wild animal products by categories, i.e., the most frequent categories, the most well distributed, the kind of consumer the product is meant for, and also the ones that are of the greatest value. This can help create policy by forecasting the categories that need to be prioritised by enforcement agencies and how to tailor enforcement strategies to target all categories in ways that are the most efficacious.

The impetus for the research in this project comes from looking at datasets such as these. The numbers reported so far are those that are voluntarily given to CITES from member parties. These are the specific animals whose skins and parts are being used by the fashion industry to create luxury fashion products. It is apparent that exotic skin items may be legally sourced and legally exported that does not necessarily guarantee that their origin and source was ethical because they are hunted, poached, and caught from the wild having a serious impact on their ecosystems and biodiversity in the regions they come from. There is a discernible relationship between the contraband seized, the increase in legally imported products, and demand for leather products in the luxury fashion industry. Consumers are driving the demand, and luxury brands are enabling them, causing expansion of luxury products that are made from exotic skins.

This chapter's findings form a critical foundation for the next chapter, which will delve deeper into the psychological attributes underlying ethically dubious luxury consumption. The analysis presented in this chapter reveals the persistent and growing demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins, as evidenced by UK Border Force seizure data. These patterns underscore the central role of consumer desire in sustaining the IWT. However, while seizure records provide critical insights into what is being traded and how often, they do not explain why such demand persists, particularly for products linked to ecological harm and ethical controversy. The forthcoming analysis will provide further insights into how consumer psychology shapes and sustains demand in this contentious market.

Chapter 4 Psychology of Exotic Skin Luxury Fashion Consumption

4.1 Overview and Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from a survey examining consumer attitudes toward luxury fashion products made from exotic skins, focusing on the psychological drivers of such consumption, and understanding consumption from a green criminology perspective.

Building on the previous chapter, which analysed contraband seizures of exotic skins by UK Border Force, this chapter shifts focus from contraband seizures, enforcement, and trade regulations to the psychological underpinnings of consumer demand. While Chapter 3 demonstrated the persistent illicit and legal trade of these materials, Chapter 4 explores why consumers desire these products, whether ethical concerns influence their perceptions, and how psychological attributes such as narcissism and empathy are linked to consumer attitudes towards luxury products made from exotic skins through a survey.

The chapter begins by discussing consumer motivations for acquiring luxury fashion products, the role of narcissism and empathy in consumption behaviour, and the ethical dilemmas associated with such behaviours. It then details the methodology of the survey, including its design, piloting, and dissemination. The results section presents key findings on consumer attitudes, statistical relationships between psychological traits and attitudes toward exotic skins, and demographic insights. The chapter concludes by contextualising these findings within the broader discourse on luxury consumption, ethics, and the interplay of psychological attributes in purchasing behaviours.

4.2 Introduction: Understanding Consumer Motivations and Ethical Dilemmas of Luxury Fashion

In Chapter 3 it was reported that items made from reptiles accounted for more than half of all seizures made by the UK Border Force. Additionally, the demand for luxury fashion products

continues to increase (Statista, 2023). The rationale for considering exotic skins was two-fold. In the previous chapter it was found that fashion seizures made by UK Border Force are showing an upward trend, specifically, products that are made from exotic skins. Exotic skins in turn are renowned for their uniqueness, exclusivity, value, and provide the consumer a sense of social status and prestige (Scheepers, 2016). These qualities are the foundation for luxury brands' ability to market these products and sell them to the luxury consumer.

Consumer's purchasing decisions, specifically related to fashion, result from a complex interplay of internal and external factors, including self-concept, identity formation, social and cultural influences, and peer alignment (Etuk *et al.*, 2022). Products that reflect an individual's self-image foster affinity, while repeated purchases reinforce and shape the consumer's identity and desired self-presentation. (Oyserman, 2009). The study of consumerism seeks to uncover motivations behind consumer behaviour, consumption patterns, and factors that influence purchase intentions, with a focus on drivers of consumption behaviour. It also examines how consumers influence demand for certain products in the market, and how, in turn, markets shape demand across various product categories. However very few studies have tried to understand how psychological factors influence consumer attitudes specifically to fashion products made from exotic animal skins. This thesis investigates these concepts and presents the findings from a survey which assessed narcissism and empathy, as two psychological attributes which may help shape these purchasing decisions. The chapter also discusses survey findings relating to awareness of animal welfare and whether concerns about environmental sustainability affect ethically dubious consumption. By conducting the survey presented in this chapter, these psychological drivers are explored, aiding in the understanding of the motivations behind consumer demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins, particularly in the context of ethical consumption and harm to non-human animals.

Consumer purchase behaviour is not always beneficial to the consumer, their community, non-human animals, or the natural environment. Buying harmful nefarious products can be dangerous and often illegal. Common examples are drugs, firearms, human parts, and non-human animal parts and products sourced from the IWT. This project is primarily concerned with the use of exotic skins from crocodiles, alligators, lizards, and snakes, used to make luxury fashion products

Positive attitudes and impressions about the environment, the natural world, and feelings towards animals generates empathy towards them, even from a very young age (Li *et al.*, 2024) in theory creating a consumer that buys products that cause the least harm to the environment due to their own empathic concern towards the natural environment (Chowdhury and Fernando, 2014; Wang *et al.*, 2022). The behaviour displayed by empathic consumers is prosocial (Choi and Hwang, 2019). This means that they care about the impact their purchasing habits have on others and only engage with consumption if it has a positive impact for themselves, their communities, and the environment. Empathy should make consumers engage in less harmful consumption practices; however, prosocial behaviour has latent self-interested motivations. Consumers may feel incentivised to perform beneficial behaviours as prosocial actions to buy social currency in the form of prestige. These behaviours attract the admiration and positive attention from an individual's peers, allow an individual to resolve any feelings of dissonance and reduces feelings of distress, and simply performing a prosocial act or purchase can make the consumer feel as though they are a good person, leading to hedonic pursuits of goodness (Small and Cryder, 2016). It can be argued that narcissism and empathy are not antonyms, while being distinct and dissimilar, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. There can be many combinations of having or not having empathic behaviour and narcissistic behaviour – as is the case with prosocial behaviour. Both empathic and narcissistic individuals show prosociality, albeit, for different reasons.

A narcissist may engage in prosocial behaviours strategically, particularly when such actions enhance their social image or attract admiration (Konrath and Tian, 2018). Narcissistic individuals often perceive their association with luxury fashion products as a means to signal status, wealth, and power, which fosters a propensity toward materialistic and conspicuous consumption (Sedikides and Hart, 2022). Previous studies have established a clear relationship between narcissism and the consumption of luxury goods, including fashion items (refer to 1.2.4). This chapter builds on those findings by exploring the role of narcissism specifically in relation to the consumption of luxury products made from exotic skins. In doing so, it addresses a gap in the literature by considering how status-driven motivations and self-concept management may contribute to ethically contentious consumer choices. Work by Johnson, Tariq, and Baker (2018) extends the concept of conspicuous consumption beyond material wealth to include pro-social identity signalling. Their findings suggest that consumers with a strong need for status may engage

in conspicuous consumption of pro-social goods, such as environmentally friendly products or cause-branded items, as a way to enhance social standing (Johnson, Tariq and Baker, 2018). This underscores the broader point that both traditional luxury items and conspicuously ethical products can serve similar psychological and social functions. Applied to this study, it becomes important to consider whether the appeal of exotic skin products lies not only in their aesthetic or material value, but also in their capacity to project a desired identity, also, if that identity is built on wealth, power, or even a selective interpretation of ethical engagement.

4.2.1 Purchase Intention and Motivation of the Luxury Consumer

The purchase intention behind products made from exotic skins is likely underpinned by what these products represent to a consumer. Purchase intention can simply be defined as a consumer's possible willingness to buy products in the future (Wu, Yeh and Hsiao, 2011). Intention is governed by subjective judgment, want, and interest in an item, and these factors influence attitudes that in turn lead to performance of consumptive behaviour. This can be expressed by a desire for the product and finding need or necessity for the product in daily life based on personal preferences, perceptions of the qualities of the product, and how these qualities serve as an allegorical testament to the consumer's identity and personality. Thus, material possessions can be understood as a conceptual "extended self" (Belk, 1985).

The consumption of luxury goods is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, which often interact and conflict (refer to **Error! Reference source not found.**). Intrinsic motivations, rooted in personal values and beliefs, may align with ethical considerations, such as environmental sustainability or community well-being. On the other hand, extrinsic motivations, such as the pursuit of social prestige and material wealth, drive conspicuous consumption. For example, Ku and Zaroff (2014) found that individuals with a high degree of affinity towards their community and with pro-environmental values were more willing to donate to environmental causes and invest in protecting the environment. Conversely, those motivated by extrinsic values like materialism and social status exhibited less concern for these causes, prioritising luxury consumption instead (Ku and Zaroff, 2014). In another study, a cross-cultural comparison looked at how individuals express their pro-environmental attitudes when they compared themselves to others. It was found that in practical terms individuals tend to

overestimate how pro-environmental they are and exaggerate that they are more aware and more concerned about the environment than others (Bergquist, 2020). Consumers are therefore not entirely truthful when reporting their consumption habits and behaviour.

These studies underscore that purchase intention is not as simple as seeming willingness. There are various biases, emotions, and conflicting values and beliefs that are associated with purchase intention. Prosocial environmental consumerism is rooted in intrinsic values, prioritizing ethical and sustainable outcomes, while materialistic conspicuous consumption is driven by extrinsic values, focusing on personal status and social validation. The former seeks to minimize harm and promote collective well-being, whereas the latter often perpetuates unsustainable practices for the sake of exclusivity and prestige. This distinct consumer behaviour highlights the unique motivations underlying luxury consumption, which are crucial for understanding the enduring demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins.

4.2.2 The Luxury Consumer, Grandiose Narcissism, and Materialism

As mentioned in the literature review (1.2.4), narcissism is best understood as a personality trait characterised by self-importance, entitlement, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy. In extreme cases an individual can be diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), a clinical condition recognised in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association and American Psychiatric Association, 2013). NPD is defined by a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, a preoccupation with fantasies of power and success, interpersonal exploitation and a profound lack of empathy. There are only a few individuals that are diagnosed with NPD, however, there are many that display subclinical narcissistic traits, of antisocial tendencies and acting in a selfish and self-serving manner, shaping consumer behaviour, social interactions, and ethical reasoning without reaching the severity of a personality disorder. This thesis focuses on narcissism as a psychological construct rather than a clinical disorder, particularly its role in luxury consumption.

Narcissism is generally studied as two types – grandiose and vulnerable. The grandiose narcissist has pervasive ideas of their entitlement, a need to stand out from others while also being the centre of admiration, and they lack consideration for the sentiments and feelings of others. In contrast the

vulnerable narcissist, possesses characteristics of self-centredness, but have low self-esteem, are emotionally hypervigilant, and withdraw socially with features of deep and repressed aggression (Loeffler *et al.*, 2020; Bogaerts *et al.*, 2021). Narcissism is not black and white, or rather individuals cannot neatly be grouped as belonging to simply one classification. For example, among patients with NPD, grandiosity and vulnerability are dimensions exist at varying levels asserting that they are “two sides of the same coin”(Levy, 2012, p. 886) Grandiose narcissism is closely related to materialism and vulnerable narcissism is associated with blame shifting and having a victim mindset. The conspicuous consumer of luxury goods is likely going to be an individual who is a materialist. A materialist is concerned with spending money and accumulating possessions. These tend to be expensive and valuable. There is a positive relationship between both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism to conspicuous consumption, i.e., excessive spending on luxury or non-necessities and to show-off these items (Pilch and Górnik-Durose, 2017; Sedikides and Hart, 2022). Materialism is strongly associated with grandiose narcissism (Velov, Gojkovic and Djuric, 2014). A materialist is an individual for whom possessions matter significantly more than intangible things such as good relationships, having a fulfilling spiritual and personal life, etc. It is noteworthy that not all materialists are narcissists, but as noted above, most grandiose narcissists tend to have materialistic tendencies. The materialistic conspicuous consumer is not interested in sustainability or reducing harm to the environment. For them, luxury products made from exotic skins are rare, opulent, and provide them with high social visibility. They benefit from the symbolic and real value of these products. Materialism is linked to conspicuous consumption (Wong, 1997; Podoshen, Li and Zhang, 2011), and conspicuous consumption is also associated with narcissism (Sedikides and Hart, 2022).

Research shows a strong positive association between narcissism, and harmful behaviours such as criminal activity (Hepper *et al.*, 2014). While luxury consumption itself is not a criminal act, the purchase of luxury products made from exotic skins often involves participation, directly or indirectly, in practices associated with ethical violations, such as cruelty to animals and the IWT. This suggests that personality traits like narcissism, which are linked to materialism and a disregard for ethical considerations, may play a role in driving such consumption behaviours. Additionally, based on this, it is posited that there is a positive relationship between narcissism and positive attitudes for luxury fashion products that are made from illegal exotic skins.

4.2.3 Exotic Skin Consumption: The Role of Empathy and the Influence of Narcissism

Empathy can be defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, encompassing both cognitive perspective-taking and affective emotional resonance (Davis, 2006; Coplan, 2011). It involves vicariously experiencing another's emotional state while recognising the boundary between self and other (Albiero *et al.*, 2009). Empathy can motivate prosocial behaviour, strengthen social bonds, and inspire ethical decision-making (Geer, Estupinan and Manguno-Mire, 2000; Chowdhury and Fernando, 2014). Studies suggest that empathic consumers are more likely to consider the ethical and sustainable implications of their choices, particularly in relation to environmental and social concerns (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019).

Although empathy has evolutionary and neurological foundations that support cooperation and prosocial behaviour (De Vignemont and Singer, 2006), it is not a fixed quality. Research demonstrates that empathy can be cultivated, for instance through training in medical contexts where doctors and nurses develop empathic communication to improve patient care (Platt and Keller, 1994). Empathy therefore functions as both a natural human response and a learned skill that can guide behaviour, mitigate conflict, and encourage acts of compassion. Applied to luxury fashion consumption, generating empathy, particularly toward non-human animals, has the potential to discourage consumers from engaging with exotic skin products by framing them as symbols of harm and exploitation rather than prestige.

However, empathy does not operate uniformly across contexts or targets. People tend to empathise more readily with other humans and with domesticated animals that exhibit anthropomorphic traits or share close bonds with us (Rusu, Costea-Barluti and Turner, 2019). Empathy toward wild animals is often weaker, shaped instead by anthropomorphic projection or symbolic identification with perceived suffering (Paul, 2000; Epley, Waytz and Cacioppo, 2007). Perceptions of vulnerability are also crucial, for example, humans may feel immediate compassion for a stray dog while responding with moral ambivalence toward a struggling human, depending on perceived responsibility for their plight (Paul, 2000; Young, Khalil and Wharton, 2018).

The relationship between empathy for humans and non-human animals is therefore complex. While some assume that empathy in one domain translates to the other, empirical evidence shows

only weak correlations (Giacomin, Johnston and Legge, 2023). Contradictions are common: even among animal welfare advocates, many continue to consume meat, revealing a gap between empathic concern and behavioural practice (Herzog and Golden, 2009). This disjunction is directly relevant to exotic skin consumption, where consumers may express empathy for animals in the abstract yet still purchase products made from them.

Narcissism introduces an additional layer of complexity to this discussion. Narcissistic individuals often exhibit compartmentalised empathy, extending concern selectively based on emotional needs or self-interest. Some may experience stronger empathy toward animals than humans, using pets as a means of self-soothing or expressing nurturance without the demands of human relationships (Giacomin, Johnston and Legge, 2023). Others may focus on humans, particularly where relationships provide social rewards or enhance self-image, with performative prosocial behaviour serving as a means to bolster social status (Konrath and Tian, 2018). More broadly, narcissism and other dark triad traits tend to correlate negatively with global and affective empathy (Wai and Tiliopoulos, 2012).

Ultimately, empathy for humans and non-human animals intersects but cannot be assumed to function identically across species. While some individuals express consistent empathy across contexts, others compartmentalise their concern in ways shaped by personality traits such as narcissism or by external influences. Exploring these relationships provides a more nuanced understanding of the ethical frameworks through which empathy and narcissism influence consumer decisions, particularly in relation to luxury fashion products made from exotic skins.

4.3 Objectives

- 1) To examine consumer attitudes towards luxury fashion products made from exotic skins, particularly how psychological attributes influence these attitudes.
- 2) To assess the role of narcissism (grandiose and vulnerable) and empathy (global and to animals) as potential modifiers of consumer attitudes and behaviours towards luxury fashion products made from exotic skins.

4.4 Methodology

4.4.1 Development and Dissemination of Survey

A survey was developed to examine consumer perceptions of luxury products made from exotic skins and their potential relationships with narcissism and empathy. Key factors such as aesthetic appeal, product value, social comparison, and prestige were measured, as these have been linked to conspicuous consumption in the literature (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). Survey respondents were asked about their attitudes and behaviours regarding exotic-skin luxury products. However, consumers rarely distinguish between items sourced from legally regulated farms and those obtained through the IWT. As such, while seizure data isolates illegal activity, survey responses capture perceptions of luxury consumption where legal and illegal markets are effectively blurred. This reflects the consumer reality: from the point of purchase, it is often impossible to know whether an exotic-skin item derives from a legal or illegal source. Additionally, attitudes toward animal leather alternatives (e.g., vegan leather), animal welfare, and the IWT were assessed, with a focus on the ethical concerns surrounding exotic skin products. The construction of the statements in the survey were inspired by scales on consumer behaviour presented in the Handbook of Marketing Scales (Netemeyer, Haws and Bearden, 2011).

The survey consisted of six sections, each designed to capture different aspects of consumer attitudes and psychological traits. To maintain clarity in this study, the term “survey” refers to the entire questionnaire, while the term “scale” is used to denote specific psychometric measures. The first section collected demographic information. The second section comprised a novel scale developed for this study, formally named the Luxury Exotic Skins Attitudes and Ethics Scale (LESAS), to assess consumer attitudes toward luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. While the questionnaire was not originally disseminated using this name for section one, this retroactive designation provides clarity and describes the scale’s purpose. The remaining four sections contained validated psychological scales measuring grandiose narcissism (NARQ; (Back *et al.*, 2013)), vulnerable narcissism (NVS; (Crowe *et al.*, 2018)), global empathy (IRI; (Davis, 2018)) and empathy toward animals (AES; (Paul, 2000)). This distinction ensures consistency in terminology throughout the analysis and discussion of results.

4.4.1.1 Pilot Testing and Refinements

To ensure clarity, validity, and feasibility, a pilot survey, inclusive of the novel scale and two additional scales measuring narcissism and empathy (NARQ; (Back *et al.*, 2013), and IRI; (Davis, 2011)), was conducted between February and March 2023 using a convenience sample of UK residents (aged 18+), recruited through social personal and professional media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Reddit). Of the 42 responses, 9 were excluded due to incompleteness, leaving a final pilot sample of $n = 33$. The pilot study served three main purposes: 1) to assess the clarity and content validity of the scales using respondent feedback, 2) to ensure that the survey effectively measured the intended constructs, and 3) to identify preliminary response patterns for refining statements in the novel scale developed for this study.

Based on the pilot findings several revisions were made before finalising the survey:

- Ambiguous or unclear wording was refined to enhance readability and comprehensions. Formatting was improved to minimise respondent fatigue.
- A third category for reporting gender was added to ensure inclusivity.
- Two new scales were added to the survey, and these measured vulnerable narcissism and empathy towards animals, providing additional depth to psychological attributes. The scales used are explained in detail in section **Error! Reference source not found..**
- Social desirability bias was reduced by ensuring neutral phrasing.
- The pilot survey had 20 statements, and this was expanded to 23 statements for the final survey.

4.4.1.2 Survey and Data Collection

With the widespread availability of luxury products through online platforms, social media, charity shops, vintage stores, and inheritance, it was determined that respondents did not need to be direct buyers of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. Instead, the survey targeted a general UK adult population (aged 18+), recognising that luxury consumption can extend to conceptual engagement, for example, aspirational or desire-based consumption, exposure to luxury marketing, branding, or products, or indirect consumption through gifting or inheritance.

An a priori power analysis was conducted to determine the required sample size for addressing the objective effect (Kraemer and Thiemann, 1987). A one-sample t-test was employed, as the effect was measured from a random sample. Power was set at 90% ($1 - \beta = 0.90$) to ensure a high probability of correctly rejecting the null hypothesis when a true effect exists. A critical effect size (Cohen's d) of 0.3 was chosen (Coe, 2002), as increasing the threshold did not significantly alter the ability to detect the measured effect. Based on these parameters, the ideal sample size was determined to be 119.

Surveys assessing individual attitudes and personal beliefs are susceptible to social desirability bias. To mitigate this, the survey was administered anonymously and online, employing neutral and non-judgmental language to avoid priming respondents (Nederhof, 1985). Terms such as “narcissism” and “empathy” were intentionally omitted when presenting the survey, replaced instead with the broader term “personality attributes” to further reduce bias.

The survey was distributed via Qualtrics, with targeted sampling conducting using the social media website Facebook. 68 UK-based Facebook community groups were identified and were primarily organised by county. The survey was successfully posted in 17 groups and reposted in 2. There were challenges in recruitment as not all social media group members trusted the survey or moderators and administrators did not allow posting. After 80~ responses were collected, convenience sampling had to be employed, and a further incentive in the form of a £25 Amazon gift card encouraged participation. A total of 168 individual participated in the survey, yielding 121 valid responses. Three responses were excluded as they were from non-UK residents, resulting in a final sample of $n = 119$ (Male = 19, Female = 97, Nonbinary = 3).

The survey, revised based on pilot feedback, consisted of six sections. The first section collected demographic information, including age; gender (male, female, nonbinary); education (postgraduate, graduate, completed GCSE or equivalent, other, prefer not to say); employment status (full-time, part-time, contract/temporary, unemployed, other, prefer not to say); income (<£25,000, £25,000–£34,999, £35,000–£49,999, £50,000–£99,999, ≥£100,000); dietary preferences (vegan, vegetarian, non-vegetarian, other); and pet ownership (yes/no).

The second section comprised was the novel scale (LESAS) with 23 statements designed to assess consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, motivations, feelings toward animals, and awareness of

conservation and environmental issues on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = “Strongly disagree”, 2 = “Disagree”, 3 = “Neither agree nor disagree”, 4 = “Agree”, 5 = “Strongly agree”. Statements 8 and 23 were removed from the analysis as they were binary (yes/no) responses rather than continuous Likert-scale measures, making them unsuitable for the statistical techniques employed in this study. Likert-scale data allows for the assessment of variability in attitudes and perceptions, whereas binary responses do not capture the degree of agreement or disagreement necessary for meaningful comparisons and factor analysis. Additionally, these statements were leading in nature, particularly Statement 23 ("I own products made from exotic skins because I inherited them, not because I bought them"), which assumes ownership and directs the respondent toward a specific justification. Given these limitations, these statements were excluded to maintain the integrity and validity of the survey’s measurement approach. Statement 9 was reverse-coded. The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth sections employed validated scales to measure grandiose narcissism, vulnerable narcissism, global empathy toward humans, and empathy toward animals, respectively, presented in detail in 4.4.2.

Table 6. presents the statements included in the Luxury Exotic Skins Attitudes and Ethics Scale (LESAS), a novel measure assessing consumer attitudes toward luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. Each statement corresponds to a variable reflecting different aspects of consumption, including desire for ownership, perceived status symbolism, aesthetic appeal, awareness of animal welfare and cruelty, and knowledge of the wildlife trade.

Table 6. Statements Used in Luxury Exotic Skins Attitudes and Ethics Scale (LESAS) and the explanation of each statement.

Q.	Statement	Explanation/Assumption
A1	Animal skin should be used to make leather products such as wallets, shoes, belts, etc.	A product made from genuine leather is representative of authenticity and a preference for animal skin in general to make such products.

A2	Exotic animal skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, or lizard should be used to make leather products such as wallets, shoes, belts, etc.	Not just any leather but specifically exotic skins are acceptable to make fashion products.
A3	Vegan or non-animal leather is luxurious.	Vegan leather is acceptable as luxury.
A4	Luxury fashion products made from alligator, crocodile, snake, or lizard skins are beautiful and appealing.	A consumer would consider products made from exotic skin as beautiful
A5	I am impressed by someone who owns a luxury fashion product made from exotic skin.	A luxury fashion product made from exotic skins is a symbol of high social standing and status
A6	Owning luxury handbags, shoes, or other accessories made from exotic skins are a status symbol.	A luxury fashion product made from exotic skins is a symbol of high social standing and status
A7	I would like to own a luxury product made from exotic skin.	Aspiring to buy a luxury product made from exotic skin as this create a feeling of self-pride and is also part of the buyer's identity.
A8	I own a luxury fashion product made from exotic skins.	This is to measure whether consumers own such a product. It was discarded from the analysis as it is a binary answer, or at least, cannot be measured using the scale in the survey.
A9	I have no interest in buying or owning a luxury fashion product made from exotic skin.	This statement was reverse coded. Aspiring to buy a luxury product made from exotic skin as

		this create a feeling of self-pride and is also part of the buyer's identity.
A10	Exotic skin that comes from a breeding farm is ethical to use.	Not just any leather but specifically exotic skins are acceptable to make fashion products.
A11	Hunting wild animals for exotic skin is ethical.	Not just any leather but specifically exotic skins are acceptable to make fashion products.
A12	Animals such as alligators, crocodiles, snakes, and lizards have emotions and feelings.	The welfare and well-being of animals and nature is important to the consumer.
A13	I am concerned by the number of endangered species across the world.	The welfare and well-being of animals and nature is important to the consumer.
A14	Smuggling and illegal trading of animals is causing them to become endangered or go extinct.	This was a negative association. Not just any leather but specifically exotic skins are acceptable to make fashion products.
A15	The welfare of animals is important to me	The welfare and well-being of animals and nature is important to the consumer.
A16	Cruelty to animals is not something I think about when I am shopping	This statement was reverse coded. The welfare and well-being of animals and nature is important to the consumer.
A17	I follow fashion trends, and this influences my decision to buy luxury fashion products.	A luxury fashion product made from exotic skins is a symbol of high social standing and status

A18	I think luxury fashion products made from exotic skins are exclusive and that makes them desirable.	A luxury fashion product made from exotic skins is a symbol of high social standing and status
A19	I care about the emotions and feelings of animals.	The welfare and well-being of animals and nature is important to the consumer.
A20	A luxury fashion product such as a handbag made from crocodile skin would increase in monetary value over time.	A luxury fashion product made from exotic skins is a symbol of high social standing and status
A21	I have a moral duty to make a positive impact on the natural world, such as animals and plants.	The welfare and well-being of animals and nature is important to the consumer.
A22	I enjoy the feeling of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins but feel uncomfortable when questioned about why I do.	A luxury fashion product made from exotic skins is a symbol of high social standing and status
A23	I own products made from exotic skins because I inherited them not because I bought them.	It was discarded from the analysis as it is a binary answer, or at least, cannot be measured using the scale in the survey.

4.4.2 Description of NARQ, NVS, IRI, and EAS

In addition to the Luxury Exotic Skins Attitudes and Ethics Scale (LESAS), four validated psychological scales were incorporated into the survey to assess narcissism and empathy.

The Narcissism Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ) (Back *et al.*, 2013) was used to measure grandiose narcissism. This scale captures two dimensions. Admiration, which reflects an

individual's tendency to seek social status through self-promotion, and Rivalry, which represents defensive strategies to maintain superiority and prevent social failure. Both dimensions are integrated to provide a comprehensive measure of grandiose narcissism. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

The Narcissism Vulnerability Scale (NVS) (Crowe *et al.*, 2018) was used to assess vulnerable narcissism. This scale consists of 11 adjective-based statements, allowing respondents to indicate the extent to which they identify with attributes associated with vulnerable narcissistic traits. Responses were also measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Not at all to 5 = Extremely.

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 2018) was used to assess empathy. This scale has 28 questions and responses are provided on a Likert Scale. There are 4 subscales on the IRI, each of which generates a separate score: Perspective-taking, Fantasy, Empathic Concern, and Personal Distress. Thus, the IRI is not designed as a measure to show if someone has "high empathic concern" but instead it assesses the four major facets of empathy and how high or low individuals score on these facets. Rather than analysing the subscales separately, the IRI was treated holistically as a global measure of empathy toward humans. Participants rated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = Does Not Describe Me Well to 5 = Describes Me Very Well.

Finally, The Animal Empathy Scale (AES) (Paul, 2000) was used to measure empathy to non-human animals. This 22-item Likert scale assesses an individual's emotional responsiveness to animals, based on the premise that empathy for humans and animals is positively correlated. Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

It is important to note that none of these scales diagnose narcissistic personality disorder or measure empathy as a binary trait. As discussed in Chapter 1, narcissism and empathy are multi-dimensional constructs, best understood along a spectrum of tendencies rather than through simple categorical classifications. These scales capture attitudinal and behavioural inclinations rather than clinical traits.

For consistency and comparability, all scales were standardised to a 5-point Likert scale, ensuring internal consistency across survey responses.

4.4.3 Data Analysis Methodology

Given the ordinal nature of the Likert-scale survey data, non-parametric statistical tests were employed to analyse relationships and differences between groups. Spearman's Rank Correlation was used to assess associations between continuous and ordinal variables, as it does not assume normality, and this was applied to the variable that recorded age. To compare differences across multiple independent groups, such as gender, education, employment income, and diet, a Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted. When a significant difference was detected, a post-hoc Dunn's test with multiple comparison adjustments was applied to determine which specific groups differed. For comparisons involving two independent groups, in the case of this survey this is pet ownership, the Mann-Whitney U test was used as an alternative to the t-test, given the non-normal distribution of the data. These statistical methods ensured robust analysis of consumer attitudes, personality traits, and demographic differences while accounting for the distributional properties of the data.

Missing data was minimal, with five missing responses across four cases. Given the low proportion of missing values, entire case deletion was not justified, as it would compromise data representativeness and the integrity of the a priori power analysis. Instead, missing values were imputed in SPSS (Version 28.0.01 (15)) using median imputation. This approach was selected due to the ordinal nature of the Likert scale data and to ensure consistency across the analysis, which primarily relied on median responses.

Given that Likert-scale data is ordinal, non-parametric statistical tests were employed. Median responses for each scale were used to provide a discrete and non-continuous representation of attitudes (Sullivan and Artino, 2013). However, tests for normality were conducted on the summed scores for the scale developed measuring attitudes to exotic skin products, to facilitate principal components analysis (PCA). In this instance, the data was treated as continuous to justify the use of PCA, and this is consistent with common practice (Norman, 2010).

Conceptually the scale measuring attitudes towards luxury products made from exotic skins has statements that are related; however, not all these statements are measuring the same thing.

Some directly address the nature and desire for exotic skin products, some understand attitudes towards animal welfare, and others are interested in uncovering knowledge about the IWT and alternatives to exotic skin products. Therefore, a Principal Components Analysis was conducted in SPSS. A PCA helps uncover these underlying relationships in the form of distinct but related factors connected to the research aims and objectives.

While Likert-scale data is ordinal, principal components analysis (PCA) assumes that data is sufficiently continuous to compute covariances and variances. Although individual Likert items are ordinal, aggregated scores across multiple related items approximate continuous data, and treating certain data that has moderate skewing as continuous is robust, a practice widely accepted in psychometric research (Carifio and Perla, 2007; Norman, 2010). Many studies treat summed or averaged Likert-scale responses as continuous when conducting factor analyses, as this allows for the meaningful detection of latent constructs. Additionally, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (reported in the results) indicated no significant deviation from normality, further supporting the use of PCA. Given that the survey statements were conceptually related, PCA was appropriate for identifying underlying factors rather than treating each item as an isolated ordinal variable.

4.5 Results

4.5.1 Response to Survey Statements

Figure 1 presents the distribution of survey responses measuring positive attitudes toward luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. Each statement (A1, A2, ... etc.) reflects a different aspect of consumer perceptions, and responses are categorised into five levels: “Strongly Disagree”, “Disagree”, “Neither Agree nor Disagree”, “Agree”, and “Strongly Agree”. The stacked bar chart visually represents the proportion of responses for each statement, highlighting areas of agreement, disagreement, and neutrality among participants. This descriptive representation allows for an overview of how attitudes toward exotic skins vary across different statements, providing insight into the range of perspectives within the sample.

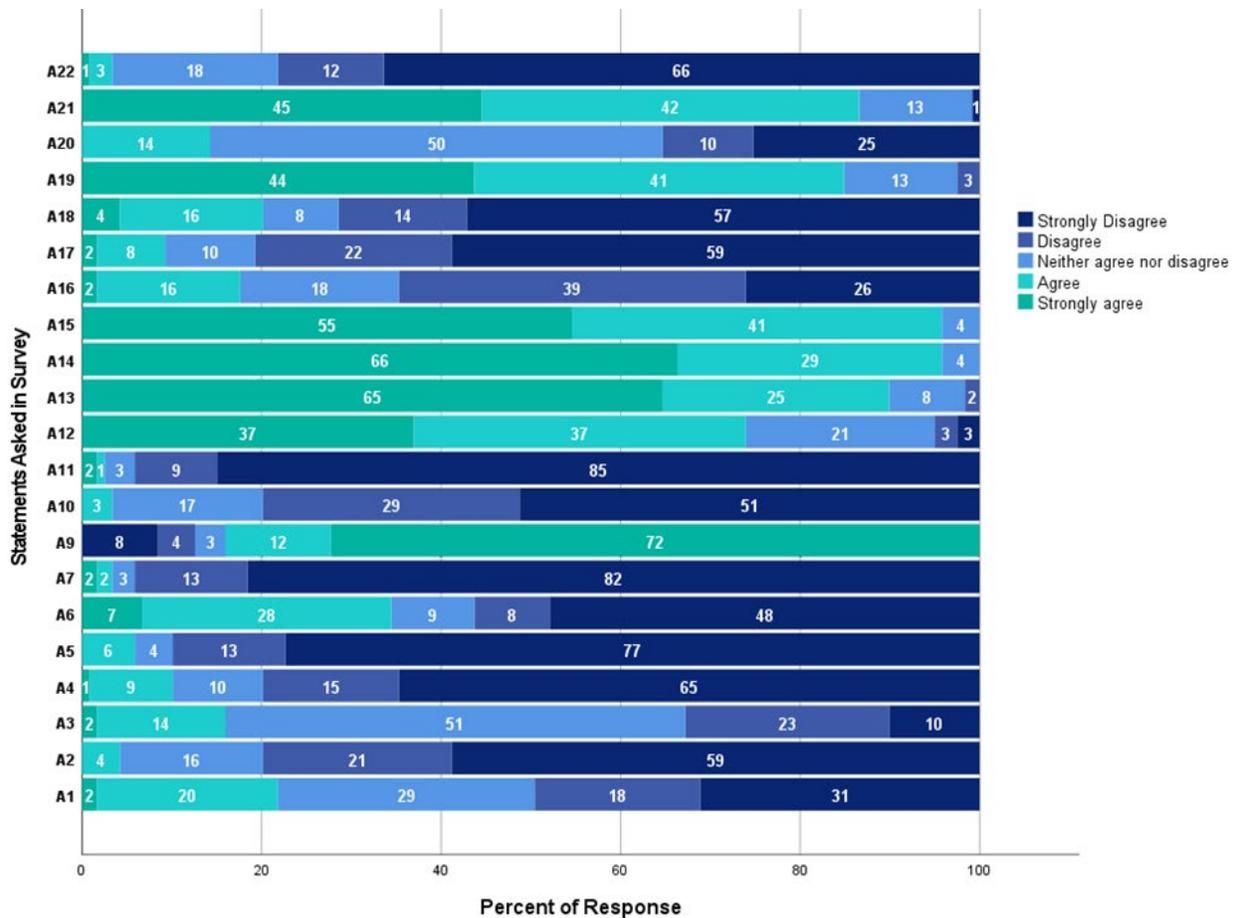


Figure 15. Stacked Bar Graph Showing Distribution of Responses to Survey Measuring Attitudes to Fashion Products Made from Exotic Skins

4.5.2 Correlation between Scales

A positive and statistically significant correlation was observed between grandiose narcissism and positive attitudes towards exotic skins (Spearman’s $\rho = 0.28$, $p = 0.002$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals with higher levels of grandiose narcissism are more likely to hold favourable attitudes toward exotic skin products. This finding suggests that grandiose narcissism may be a key psychological driver or ethically dubious luxury fashion consumption.

In contrast, a statistically significant but weak negative correlation was found between vulnerable narcissism and positive attitudes towards exotic skins (Spearman’s $\rho = -0.18$, $p = 0.043$, $p < 0.05$),

suggesting that individuals with higher levels of vulnerable narcissism may be slightly less inclined to endorse positive attitudes towards such products. This will be further discussed.

No other statistically significant or meaningful correlations were identified between the remaining scales.

4.5.3 Principal Components Analysis for LESAS

A principal components analysis (PCA) identifies underlying factors or dimensions within the survey responses measuring attitudes toward luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.823, which is “marvellous” (values above 0.8 are ideal), deeming the data fit for a components analysis. Normality isn’t a strict requirement for PCA, but it helps. A test for normality showed a slight positive skew to the right. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality produced a test statistic of $D = 0.078$ and a p-value of 0.069 indicating that the data does not significantly deviate from a normal distribution, and we can treat the data as normally distributed. Variables with correlations of 0.3 or higher were used for factor loadings.

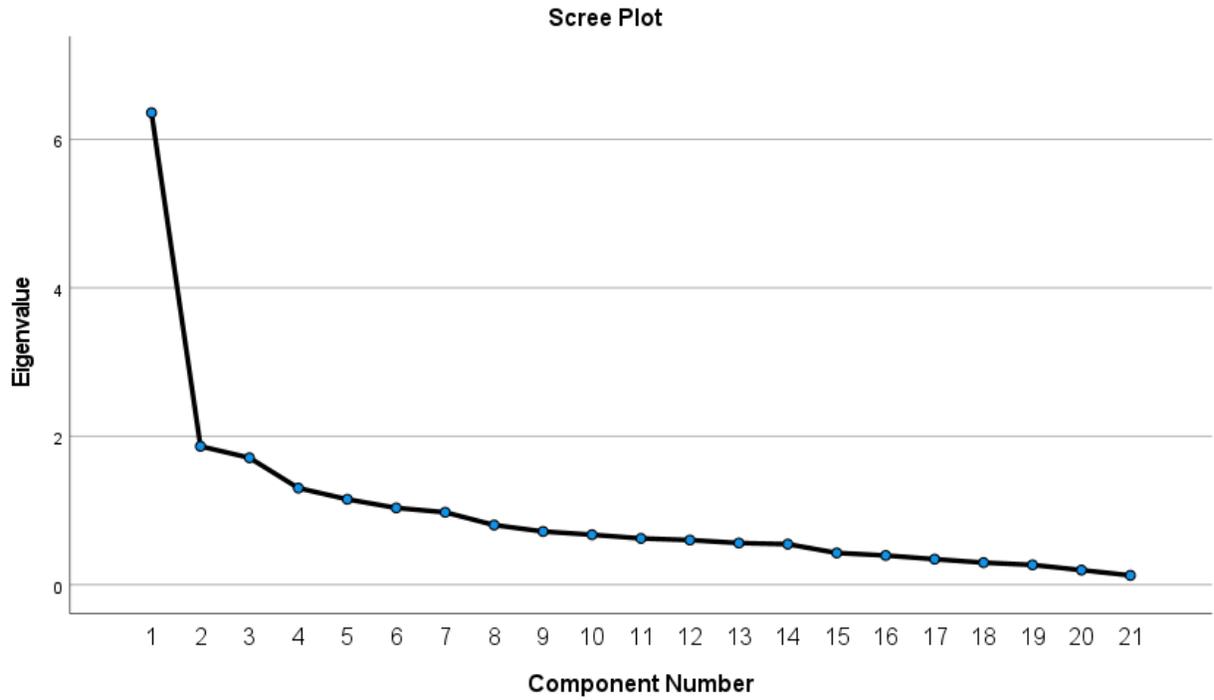


Figure 16. Scree Plot for the PCA showing 6 factors with Eigenvalues above 1.

6 underlying factors were identified as these had eigenvalues above 1. The analysis showed us that the first six principal components (factors) explained 64% of the total variance. The components align with the themes interpreted from the responses presented in Figure 1. Table 3 shows how each statement was loaded on to the different underlying factors.

Table 7. Variables Loaded onto 6 Factors with Explanation of the Relationships Gleaned from the PCA

Factor	Loaded Variables	Interpretation	Factor Labels
1	A21, A19, A15, A16 (-), A12, A13	Concern for the welfare and consideration for cruelty to animals	Animal Welfare
2	A9 (-), A7, A5, A17, A4	The aesthetic appeal, aspirational aspect, and high status associated with luxury fashion products made from exotic skins	Luxury Appeal
3	A9, A18, A6, A20, A22	Positive associations, desirability, and value of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins	Luxury Product Value
4	A11, A10, A2	The use of exotic skins to make luxury fashion products is appropriate and ethical	Ethical Exotic Skin
5	A14, A13	Knowledge of the Illegal Wildlife Trade and the threat to endangered species	Awareness of The Illegal Wildlife Trade
6	A1, A3 (-)	Vegan leather and alternatives are not the same as genuine exotic skins and are inferior to exotic skins	Exotic Skin Alternatives

4.5.3.1 Reliability and Validity

Initially a Cronbach's Alpha was calculated, and this yielded a poor internal reliability of $\alpha = 0.56$. Although it is a commonly used metric the Alpha measure assumes one-dimensionality whereas the scale created for the survey is multidimensional with 6 underlying factors identified in the PCA.

McDonald’s Omega Coefficient was calculated using R (R Core Team, 2023) to measure the reliability of the scale. It is widely considered more accurate and complex as it takes into account multidimensionality and multiple factor loadings (Hayes and Coutts, 2020). The coefficient was $\omega = 0.89$, a strong reliability coefficient, indicating the scale is a reliable measure of attitudes towards luxury products made from exotic skins. The Omega Hierarchical was 0.64 in agreement with the 64% explained variance of results in the PCA, thus confirming the presence of underlying factors.

4.5.4 Demographic Data Analysis

Table 8. Demographics of Survey Respondents

Variable	Category	Count
Sex	Male	19
	Female	97
	Non-binary	3
Age	18 - 25	20
	26 - 35	30
	36 - 45	25
	46 - 55	18
	56 - 65	14
	66+	12
Education	Post Graduate	71
	Graduate	26

	Completed GCSE or Equivalent	17
	Other	3
	Prefer not to say	2
Employment	Full-time	58
	Part-time	21
	Contract/Temporary	6
	Unemployed	6
	Prefer not to say	3
	Other	25
Income	Less than 25,000	64
	25,000 - 34,999	22
	35,000 - 49,999	23
	50,000 - 99,999	6
	100,000 or more	2
	Prefer not to say	2
Diet	Vegan	11
	Vegetarian	13
	Non-vegetarian	76

	Other	19
Pet Owner	Yes	58
	No	61

Spearman’s correlations showed that age was negatively associated with grandiose narcissism ($\rho = -0.298, p = 0.001$), vulnerable narcissism ($\rho = -0.205, p = 0.026$), and global empathy ($\rho = -0.233, p = 0.011$). No significant associations were found between age and attitudes toward exotic skins ($\rho = -0.118, p = 0.202$) or empathy toward animals ($\rho = 0.146, p = 0.114$).

A Kruskal–Wallis test indicated gender differences in empathy toward animals, $\chi^2(2) = 6.577, p = 0.037$. Dunn’s post-hoc tests showed males reported lower empathy than females ($p = 0.0052$); no differences were observed for non-binary respondents.

Education significantly influenced grandiose narcissism, $\chi^2(4) = 12.09, p = 0.016$. Postgraduates scored higher than those with GCSEs ($p = 0.0095$) and “Other” ($p = 0.0044$); graduates differed from “Other” ($p = 0.0134$); and “Other” differed from “Prefer not to say” ($p = 0.0154$). Mean ranks were highest for “Prefer not to say” (79.75, $n = 2$), postgraduates (65.48, $n = 71$), and graduates (59.04, $n = 26$). Education also affected global empathy, $\chi^2(4) = 9.922, p = 0.042$, with postgraduates scoring higher than GCSE respondents ($p = 0.0029$; mean ranks 65.82 vs. 41.35).

Income was unrelated to all measured traits.

Employment status affected global empathy, $H(5) = 13.660, p = 0.018$. Post-hoc tests showed higher empathy in part-time workers vs. full-time ($p = 0.011$), unemployed vs. full-time ($p = 0.045$), and unemployed vs. “Other” ($p = 0.0074$). Mean ranks were unemployed = 81.42 ($n = 6$), part-time = 76.50 ($n = 21$), full-time = 57.60 ($n = 58$), and “Other” = 45.10 ($n = 25$).

No significant effects were observed for dietary group (vegan, vegetarian, non-vegetarian), though small sample sizes for vegans ($n = 11$) and vegetarians ($n = 13$) limited power.

Pet owners scored higher on the Animal Empathy Scale than non-owners ($U = 1319.5$, $p = 0.013$; mean ranks = 67.75 vs. 52.63), suggesting greater empathy toward animals among pet owners.

Overall, the analyses revealed that age was negatively associated with both narcissism and global empathy, suggesting that these traits decline with age. Gender, education, and employment status were significantly related to empathy and narcissism, with males showing lower empathy toward animals, postgraduates reporting higher empathy and elevated narcissism compared to lower education groups, and part-time or unemployed respondents reporting higher empathy than those employed full-time. Pet ownership was also linked to greater empathy toward animals. By contrast, income level and dietary preference showed no significant associations with the measured traits or attitudes.

4.6 Findings & Discussion

This chapter has critically examined the survey findings on consumer attitudes and psychological drivers of luxury exotic skin consumption, situating them within the broader literature on ethical luxury consumption and consumer behaviour psychology. The discussion explores the role of narcissism and empathy in shaping consumer attitudes, as well as the tension between materialistic conspicuous consumption and ethical concerns about animal welfare. Key findings emerged from the results: cognitive dissonance in consumer attitudes, the influence of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism on luxury product desirability, and the limited role of empathy in deterring exotic skin consumption. These serve as a foundation for the qualitative investigation presented in the Chapter 5. The findings also provide insights into consumer demographics and psychology, informing strategies for demand reduction and ethical consumerism. The chapter concludes by addressing methodological limitations and proposing directions for future research.

4.6.1 The Psychological Drivers of Exotic Skin Consumption

4.6.1.1 The Role of Grandiose and Vulnerable Narcissism

In the introduction, narcissism was defined and its typologies outlined. This research focuses specially on grandiose and vulnerable narcissism and their influence on consumer behaviour.

Grandiose narcissism is characterised by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, dominance, entitlement, and a constant need for validation and admiration. Research shows that individuals high in grandiose narcissism are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption and acquire luxury products as a means of socially signalling their superiority. For such consumers, buying or wearing controversial fashion items, such as those made from exotic skins, serves as an opportunity to display wealth, distinctiveness, and status, regardless of whether the attention they attract is positive or negative. Exotic reptile skins, which gained popularity in the mid-20th century (Haase, 2022a), are expensive due to their labour-intensive production and rarity. These qualities symbolise exclusivity and prestige, making them especially appealing to grandiose narcissists and other materialistic consumers. This is supported by the survey findings, which revealed a moderate and statistically significant positive correlation between grandiose narcissism and favourable attitudes towards exotic skins (Spearman's $\rho = 0.28$, $p = 0.002$, $p < 0.01$).

Vulnerable narcissism, by contrast, is defined by internalised insecurity, heightened sensitivity to criticism, and a dependence on external validation. The analysis revealed a statistically significant negative correlation between vulnerable narcissism and positive attitudes toward exotic skins (Spearman's $\rho = -0.18$, $p = 0.043$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that individuals higher in vulnerable narcissism were less likely to view exotic skins positively. Vulnerable narcissists often seek approval and sympathy through self-victimisation and may experience shame or humiliation when criticised. Although self-focused and insecure (Weiss and Miller, 2018), they frequently attempt to secure validation through affiliative or prosocial displays, including performative empathy expressed via self-elevating behaviours. These behaviours are less about genuine concern for others and more about impression management, designed to compensate for insecurity and enhance social standing by soothing insecurity and curating cultural sophistication, moral superiority, or prosociality (Kowalchuk *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, expressions of empathy by vulnerable narcissists may serve more as self-presentation strategies than as authentic responses. Within the context of exotic skin consumption, this helps explain why individuals higher in vulnerable narcissism might avoid controversial luxury goods: not necessarily because of intrinsic empathy for animals, but because they are motivated to maintain an image aligned with social desirability and avoid reputational harm.

Given the negative societal perceptions surrounding exotic skins, it is plausible that individuals with high levels of vulnerable narcissism may avoid such products to mitigate potential social scrutiny and reputational harm. While existing literature suggests that vulnerable narcissists do engage in conspicuous consumption, the relationship is weaker compared to grandiose narcissists (Neave, Tzemou and Fastoso, 2020), and they can be just as materialistic as a grandiose narcissist (Pilch and Górnik-Durose, 2017) but, a vulnerable narcissist would not purchase articles that are flashy, branded, or expensive and would spend a smaller amount of money for products (Jha, Sekhar and Uppal, 2025). The findings of this research support this distinction. Overall, the interplay between vulnerable narcissism and empathy warrants further attention, as it highlights that consumer behaviour is not shaped by psychological attributes in isolation, but through their intersection with social context and reputational concerns.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that narcissistic attributes shape consumer attitudes toward exotic skins in distinct ways: grandiose narcissists are drawn to the prestige and visibility these products offer, whereas vulnerable narcissists may avoid them to protect their social image. This contrast highlights the importance of situating psychological attributes within broader social and cultural contexts. The next section builds on this by examining how empathy interacts with these dynamics, offering further insight into the moral and reputational considerations that influence consumer behaviour.

4.6.1.2 The Limited Influence of Empathy of Consumption of Exotic Skins

The existing literature points that empathy does have a role to play in modifying purchasing behaviour, but this did not show up in the survey used in this study. This can be explained by a study that suggests that humans are less likely to feel empathy towards non-human animals that are more evolutionarily distant (Miralles, Raymond and Lecointre, 2019), such as reptiles or birds that are used to make exotic skins. People are more likely to feel empathy for mammals, especially if they have fur and they find “cute”, for example, a study showed that people disengaged with meat consumption if they considered the animals to be cute (Zickfeld, Kunst and Hohle, 2018). Fur-farming is banned in the UK with the Fur Farming (Prohibition) Act of 2000, and 78% of the UK consumer has negative opinions related to fur (Halliday and McCulloch, 2022). It can be argued that the reason why behaviour and attitudes towards fur-farming and using the fur of animals

became negative over time is because they are mammals and are cute. It is noteworthy, however, that the import and sale of furs in the UK is legal. There are also no farms in the UK that produce exotic skins, but manufactured products and exotic skin leather is imported.

The legitimacy of exotic skins is often unclear. As discussed in the previously, “legal” sourcing is at best ambiguous with skins typically alleged to have originated from accredited farms or breeding facilities. This is the case, especially, for crocodylians and it has been posited that the use of breeding facilities is the most *sustainable* approach to producing exotic skins (Thorbjarnarson, 1999). When a consumer purchases or comes into possession of a product that is made from exotic skins there are strong ethical contentions to consider; the cruelty involved in killing and skinning an animal, animal welfare issues associated with keeping of and breeding exotic species in confined spaces where they are simply bred to kill, and most significantly the illegal laundering of skins by hunting and poaching wild animals to meet the growing demand for these products. Due to these ethical considerations, there is keen interest to modify or change consumer behaviour to make it prosocial rather than antisocial by considering psychological attributes such as empathy as a modifying factor.

This could mean that empathic behaviour did not show up for the respondent or the order in which the scale was presented could have had an effect on how responses were provided known simply as “order effect” (Strack, 1992). There was also no negative correlation seen between the NARQ and IRI, considering empathy as established as an attribute not present in narcissists by the DSM, this was an unexpected result. One of the objectives of the survey was to find that there would be a negative correlation between the IRI and the survey created for this thesis to measure attitudes towards exotic skins. A narcissist can be *moved* when someone else is in an adverse situation or is in pain if they can take that person’s perspective cognitively. Narcissists do not respond to *affective empathy* or that sentiments and emotions will not change or modify the behaviour of a narcissist to feel empathy (Hepper, Hart and Sedikides, 2014). There is a clear complex relationship between empathy and narcissism, and perhaps they are not disparate qualities but somehow exist on distinct continuums with some possibility for overlap.

4.6.1.3 Characterising Survey Respondents Based on Demographics

The findings of this study reveal several important relationships between demographic factors, psychological traits, and attitudes toward animals and exotic skins. The results suggest that narcissistic traits, empathy levels, and attitudes toward animal welfare are influenced by factors such as age, gender, education, employment status, and pet ownership, while income and dietary choices did not yield statistically significant effects. These results contribute to the broader literature on the psychological and social factors shaping attitudes towards animal-derived luxury fashion products and provide insights into potential interventions that may influence consumer behaviour.

The significant negative correlations between age and both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism suggest that narcissistic traits tend to decline as individuals get older. This finding aligns with existing research suggesting that as people age, they engage in less overtly narcissistic behaviours of vanity and entitlement (Wetzel *et al.*, 2020), key components of narcissism. Similarly, the negative correlation between age and global empathy indicates that younger individuals report higher levels of *affective empathy* and older individuals show lower levels of *cognitive empathy* (Beadle and De La Vega, 2019). It is possible that in the sample that answered this survey the younger respondents may be more socially attuned or inclined towards prosocial behaviour, however, literature assert that prosociality increases with age (Mayr and Freund, 2020). The lack of association between age and empathy towards animals, as well as attitudes toward exotic skins, indicates that these factors may be shaped more by personal values or cultural influences rather than age-related shifts in empathy.

Gender differences in empathy towards animals were significant, with male respondents reporting lower levels of animal empathy compared to female respondents. This result is consistent with prior research demonstrating that women tend to express greater concern for animal welfare and are more likely to support ethical choices related to animal welfare such as being vegan or vegetarian (Eldridge and Gluck, 1996; Randler *et al.*, 2021). The absence of significant differences between male and non-binary respondents or between female and non-binary respondents suggests that the strongest contrast in animal empathy exists primarily between male and female participants. These findings highlight how gendered socialization processes may shape attitudes

toward non-human animals, with masculinity often associated with pro-meat eating behaviours, sexism, and oppression of women (Allcorn and Ogletree, 2018).

Education level significantly influenced both grandiose narcissism and global empathy, revealing a complex relationship between higher education and these psychological traits. The results suggest that individuals with postgraduate qualifications exhibit both higher levels of empathy and higher levels of grandiose narcissism compared to those with lower educational attainment. There is limited literature that directly explains this phenomena, it can be theorised that this dual effect may be explained by the ways in which higher education fosters self-competence, ability to gain sustainable employment, and makes the individual a socially aware citizen, leading to greater engagement with ethical and empathetic concerns, but also reinforcing oneself as more accomplished than others or exceptional. Notably, respondents who selected "Prefer Not to Say" had the highest mean rank scores for grandiose narcissism, although the small sample size in this category makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions.

Employment status was another significant factor influencing global empathy levels. Full-time workers exhibited lower empathy scores compared to both part-time workers and unemployed respondents. A study found that there is a stark negative correlation between wages and empathy. The higher an individual's wages the less empathy they have (Kamas and Preston, 2020), as highly empathic individuals are more likely to seek employment in social causes that often pay less. In the survey for this research, unemployed respondents reported the highest levels of empathy, potentially due to greater available time prosocial activities. The finding that individuals in the "Other" employment category exhibited the lowest empathy levels suggests that further investigation into specific occupational roles or work-life balance may be warranted.

Pet ownership was found to be significantly associated with higher empathy toward animals, reinforcing existing research on the role of human-animal interactions in shaping attitudes towards non-human animals (Rusu, Costea-Barlutiu and Turner, 2019). The higher empathy scores among pet owners suggest that direct exposure to and interaction with companion animals may foster stronger emotional connections and concern for animal welfare. This result has important implications for campaigns promoting ethical fashion alternatives, as individuals with greater

empathy for animals may be more receptive to messaging that highlights the suffering involved in exotic skin production.

Interestingly, no significant differences were found in survey responses across different income levels, suggesting that income does not play a major role in shaping attitudes toward narcissism, empathy, or animal-related concerns. Additionally, no significant differences were detected among dietary groups (vegans, vegetarians, and non-vegetarians). The relatively small sample sizes for vegans and vegetarians may have limited the statistical power to detect potential differences, and future research with larger samples may provide more conclusive results.

Overall, these findings demonstrate the complex interplay between demographic factors and psychological traits in shaping attitudes toward animals and exotic skins. While age, gender, education, employment, and pet ownership were all significant factors influencing empathy and narcissism, income and diet did not yield meaningful associations. The presence of higher empathy among women, younger individuals, highly educated respondents, and pet owners suggests potential avenues for increasing ethical awareness and promoting sustainable alternatives to exotic skins. Meanwhile, the persistence of narcissistic traits among highly educated individuals and their potential influence on consumer behaviour warrant further investigation. These results contribute to a growing body of research on ethical consumerism and offer important insights for policymakers and marketers seeking to influence purchasing behaviour in the luxury fashion industry.

4.6.2 Interpretation of Survey Responses

We can understand the impressions of the respondents in a contextual way and interpret the results presented in the stacked bar graph in Figure 15. A central observation is the disconnect between ethical awareness and purchasing behaviour and it is apparent that there are some complex and multi-faceted attitudes towards exotic skin products.

The results reveal a nuanced spectrum of consumer attitudes toward exotic skins, intertwining pronounced ethical concerns with an acknowledgment of these products' aesthetic and status-oriented allure. A particularly telling finding is that 51% of respondents strongly disagree that "exotic skin from a breeding farm is ethical to use," and an even larger majority, 85%, strongly

disagree with the idea that “hunting wild animals for exotic skin is ethical.” This pronounced resistance to both breeding-farm and wild-hunted skins corresponds with broader trends in Western nations where rising awareness of animal cruelty and sourcing impacts have rendered such products ethically contentious (Halliday and McCulloch, 2022). Literature examining consumer perceptions of animal-derived goods corroborates this sentiment, indicating that buyers are increasingly troubled by the origins and welfare implications of products like exotic leathers.

Nevertheless, a significant minority continues to view exotic skins as aesthetically appealing and socially desirable. Approximately 10% of respondents strongly agree or agree that “luxury fashion products made from alligator, crocodile, snake, or lizard skins are beautiful and appealing,” while 35% strongly agree or agree that “owning luxury handbags, shoes, or accessories made from exotic skins constitutes a status symbol.” Although many participants do not necessarily purchase or inherit these goods themselves, their responses suggest a collective recognition that exotic skins are linked to social prestige, a perception deeply interwoven into the identity and tradition of luxury fashion and explored in Chapter 5 and 6.

Amid these ethical and aesthetic considerations lies a noteworthy tension between stated values and actual consumer habits. Indeed, 96% of respondents strongly agree or agree that “the welfare of animals is important,” yet 65% strongly disagree or disagree with the statement “cruelty to animals is not something I think about when I am shopping.” These figures illustrate that while the majority claim to value animal welfare, many are not as vigilant about these concerns when buying luxury items. This disconnect implies a potential gap between one’s professed ethics and the practical choices made in day-to-day consumer behaviour.

In terms of alternatives to exotic skin, the question of whether vegan or non-animal leather can also be viewed as luxurious yielded mixed responses. Over half of the respondents, 51%, remain neutral or ambivalent about “vegan leather as a luxury alternative,” while 10% disagree entirely, indicating that non-animal materials do not necessarily convey the same sense of exclusivity or esteem as reptile-derived products. This ambiguity underscores the enduring perception that certain luxury fashion items retain their distinction precisely because they involve genuine animal skins.

Despite these ethical reservations, 72% of participants do express a lack of interest in purchasing luxury products made from exotic skins, implying that moral qualms do influence a significant

portion of consumers. However, 12% strongly disagree or disagree with having “no interest” in owning such products, which suggests that some individuals consciously embrace, or at least remain open to, exotic-skin items despite ethical misgivings. This contradiction reveals a form of cognitive dissonance whereby buyers are aware of the moral implications but may justify their decisions by emphasising the luxury, uniqueness, or social recognition associated with exotic leathers.

Finally, the finding that 4% of respondents “enjoy the feeling of exotic-skin luxury products but feel uncomfortable when questioned about why” offers perhaps the clearest glimpse of the moral conflict at play. These individuals acknowledge the pleasure and prestige derived from such goods but simultaneously grapple with guilt or unease, particularly under external scrutiny, i.e., contend with social desirability. Overall, these responses illustrate the complex interplay of ethical concerns, aesthetic appeal, status consciousness, and personal discomfort. The result is a fascinating, and at times contradictory, portrait of how consumers negotiate the tension between wanting to safeguard animal welfare and desiring luxury fashion items crafted from exotic materials.

These findings highlight the contradictions in consumer attitudes towards exotic skin products. While many respondents express strong ethical concerns about animal welfare and sustainability, this does not always align with their purchasing behaviour. The results suggest that luxury fashion consumption involves a complex negotiation between moral values, aesthetic appeal, social prestige, and personal justifications. Cognitive dissonance is evident, with some respondents rejecting the use of exotic skins while still desiring or even purchasing them, reinforcing how deeply luxury symbolism is embedded in consumer identity. The ambivalence towards alternative materials further suggests that sustainability efforts in luxury fashion need to go beyond ethics and address the sensory and symbolic experiences that make exotic skins desirable in the first place. Ethical awareness alone is not enough to curb demand. Instead, a fundamental shift in cultural perceptions of luxury, exclusivity, and status is needed to bridge the gap between ethical consumption and the enduring allure of elitist luxury fashion products.

4.7 Conclusion

Building on the preceding analysis, this chapter has successfully met its research objectives. 1) It examined consumer attitudes toward luxury fashion products made from exotic skins, focusing on the psychological attributes shaping these attitudes 2) Through a quantitative survey, the chapter assessed the influence of grandiose and vulnerable narcissism, as well as global and animal-directed empathy, as potential modifiers of consumer behaviour. It was revealed that narcissism is positively associated with favourable attitudes toward these products, while empathy did not show the same relationship. Despite strong ethical concerns regarding animal welfare, consumers often remain inclined to purchase such items, highlighting a significant gap between ethical awareness and purchasing behaviour. The survey's findings suggest that narcissism, particularly grandiose narcissism, plays a role in encouraging conspicuous consumption of luxury items, such as exotic skin products, which are seen as symbols of status, exclusivity, and power. The investigation alludes to the likelihood of compartmentalisation and the ability to disengage from the consequences and effects of ethically dubious behaviour explaining purchasing behaviour, and this was investigated and is presented in the subsequent chapter, Chapter 5.

The chapter also examined the complexity of empathy, noting that while empathy for animals is a significant factor in ethical consumption decisions, it does not always extend to non-human animals, especially when they are viewed as distant or 'less relatable'. There is a compartmentalisation of empathy. The study found no significant relationship between empathy and positive attitudes toward exotic skin products, suggesting that feelings of empathy alone are insufficient to drive behaviour change in this context.

The results of the survey underscore the tension between ethical concerns and the desire for luxury goods. While consumers may express concerns about animal welfare, the desire for products that signify wealth and exclusivity remains strong, demonstrating cognitive dissonance in their decision-making process. The potential way that exotic skins are marketed, emphasising their exclusivity and rarity, appeals to someone who is a grandiose narcissist as they are concerned with superiority to others, signalling high status, self-aggrandisement, and social distinction from others. Qualities that luxury brands extol and deem as aspirational. The connection between grandiose narcissism and positive attitudes toward exotic skins offers insight into why ethical

awareness alone may fail to deter certain consumers. While these individuals may be aware of the ethical dilemmas and sustainability challenges posed by the production of exotic skins, their desire for social distinction and admiration appears to outweigh such concerns, reflecting cognitive dissonance in their decision-making processes.

A recent study by Giacomini et al. (2023) found that Agentic Extraversion, a trait aligned with grandiose narcissism, was unrelated to both human- and animal-centred empathy (Giacomini, Johnston and Legge, 2023). While it is often hypothesised that grandiose, materialistic narcissists are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption, including the purchase of exotic skin products as status symbols, this does not necessarily imply a complete absence of empathy. Narcissistic individuals may still hold positive views toward animals while continuing to consume luxury products made from them. This underscores a key insight: enhancing empathy alone is unlikely to reduce demand. Deeply held values about animals, and the broader socio-cultural meanings ascribed to luxury, play a more powerful role in guiding consumer behaviour than personality traits alone.

From a criminological perspective, particularly within green criminology, this suggests that ethical messaging or appeals to empathy may be insufficient in disrupting harmful consumption patterns. Instead, as situational crime prevention theory proposes (Clarke, 1980), structural and environmental changes, those that increase the effort, reduce the rewards, or remove access, can more effectively curb undesirable behaviours. A pertinent example is the UK fur industry: following the ban on fur farming, and restrictions on new fur imports, societal attitudes shifted significantly. Fur did not disappear entirely but became stigmatised, its circulation now limited largely to vintage resale, and in 2000 fur-farming was outlawed in the UK (Deeley, 2022; Halliday and McCulloch, 2022). Similarly, while this thesis does not advocate for or evaluate the sustainability of vegan or faux alternatives, the expansion of plant-based options in the food sector demonstrates how reducing the availability and normalisation of harmful products can gradually reshape consumer habits.

The implication for luxury fashion consumption is clear. Shifting values may take time, but policy interventions that disrupt access and reframe desirability, through regulation, market restructuring, or even cultural messaging, can weaken demand more effectively than appealing to

consumer morality alone. This thesis, therefore, aligns with critical green criminological approaches that challenge the commodification of non-human animals and support broader transformations in systems of consumption.

The data points to a complex relationship between consumer attitudes and behaviours regarding exotic skin products. While ethical concerns (regarding animal welfare and sourcing practices) are prominent, there is still a strong desire for luxury and status associated with exotic skins. The disconnect between concern for animal welfare and the desire for luxury items made from exotic skins suggests that some consumers experience cognitive dissonance, where they rationalise or suppress their ethical concerns to justify their desires. This complexity in consumer attitudes presents both a challenge and an opportunity for consumer demand reduction as consumers are aware of the many negative implications and concerns associated with luxury brands that use exotic skins. 77% of European consumers are interested in buying products that are sustainably made and sourced (Fresen, 2024). This indicates a real desire in the market to step away from this kind of conspicuous consumption. Behaviour change is possible if luxury brands sell to the consumer more sustainable alternatives that do not harm the lives of wild animals or mete cruelty on to them in breeding facilities. The key aspect for demand reduction is to recognize the brand reputation and that a product associated with a high-end brand is still going to be marketable as consumers do care about the legacy, history, and associations with brands. This will be explored in detail in the following chapter.

While the survey findings offer important insights into the relationship between grandiose narcissism, empathy, and attitudes toward exotic skins, they cannot fully capture the complex ways in which consumers make sense of their behaviour. Psychological predispositions alone do not explain how individuals negotiate the moral tension between luxury consumption and animal harm. To further explore the justifications and internal narratives that consumers use to resolve this tension, Chapter 5 presents qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews. These accounts offer a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural context, personal values, and cognitive strategies that shape ethically contentious consumption.

Chapter 5 Consumer Narratives on Purchase Intention, Attitudes to Non-Human Animals, and Justifications for Dubious Luxury Consumption

5.1 Overview & Introduction

This chapter presents findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with participants who self-identified as consumers of luxury fashion products. The aim is to explore nuanced aspects of luxury fashion consumption, particularly regarding products made from exotic skins, which could not be fully captured through survey methods alone. The chapter integrates theoretical concepts, including social comparison, social distinction, self-determination, and techniques of neutralisation, to frame and analyse the findings from interviews. It then examines the interview responses by uncovering themes through an iterative, interpretive, and combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis. Although distinct themes have been identified, it should be acknowledged that there is a natural dynamic relationship or interaction between them. Theoretical underpinnings explored in the conceptual framework of the project are revisited throughout each section to ground the analysis and draw meaningful insights from participant responses.

The chapter identifies three central themes: 1) “Factors that Influence Consumption of Luxury Fashion” 2) “How Perceptions of Non-human Animals Shape Ethical Considerations and Environmental Concerns” 3) “Values Shaping the Identity of the Consumer and Justifications for Ethically Dubious Consumption”. This chapter also asserts that novel considerations such as gender and cultural background need to be considered when studying the luxury consumer of products made from exotic skins. These features serve as extensions of justifications as they are not actively chosen but form the core identity of an individual based on normative constructs. It is argued that it is these social constructs, rather than choice, that are leading nefarious consumption practices. This chapter presents an integrated findings and discussion section, a

structure chosen to allow for a more fluid and interpretive engagement with the data. Rather than separating description from analysis, it extends beyond individual psychological attributes, such as narcissism and empathy, introduced in the previous chapter. It integrates participant responses with broader socio-cultural phenomena. Participant narratives are examined in relation to the wider motivations and cultural meanings underpinning the consumption of ethically contentious luxury fashion products made from exotic skins.

5.1.1 Moral Disengagement and Techniques of Neutralisation

Moral disengagement, previously discussed in the literature review (refer to 1.2.4), provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals engage in behaviours that contradict ethical norms while maintaining a positive self-image. Bandura (1999) describes moral disengagement as a psychological process through which individuals justify or rationalise actions that may be harmful or unethical by distancing themselves from responsibility (Bandura, 2016). Within the context of luxury consumption, this disengagement is particularly relevant, as most consumers of luxury fashion would not view themselves as unethical actors or individuals operating in defiance of societal norms. In an ideal and just world consumers would align themselves with mainstream ethical cultural, social, and economic expectations, positioning themselves as sophisticated, discerning buyers rather than as participants in morally dubious transactions. In reality, consumers, particularly luxury consumers, are deeply motivated by self-gratification and social influences from peers (Davies and Gutsche, 2016). As such, consumption of exotic skins does not occur in opposition to societal conventions but rather within an accepted framework of prestige, status, and tradition, which allows consumers to engage in ethical dissonance without challenging social norms that are clearly harmful.

A crucial mechanism within moral disengagement that emerges from the findings of this study is compartmentalisation, where individuals cognitively separate their consumption behaviour from its ethical implications. Luxury consumers may express strong moral concerns about animal welfare in other contexts, such as opposition to poaching or environmental degradation, yet fail to apply the same ethical standards when purchasing exotic skin products. This suggests a form of ethical segmentation, wherein moral considerations are selectively activated depending on the context and is situation dependent (Al-Khatib, D'Auria Stanton and Rawwas, 2005). This

phenomenon aligns with findings in consumer ethics literature, which suggest that individuals frequently adopt dual moral standards, particularly in relation to consumption (Egan, Hughes and Palmer, 2015).

To further understand these cognitive justifications, it is useful to revisit Sykes and Matza's (1957) techniques of neutralisation, which explain how individuals rationalise behaviours that might otherwise be perceived as unethical. Consumers of exotic skins often employ strategies such as denial of responsibility, where blame is shifted to brands or regulatory bodies, or appeal to higher loyalties, where their personal desires, values, and pressures from cultural tradition or heritage is cited as a justification for consumption. These justifications align with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that behavioural intentions are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. While consumers may hold negative attitudes toward unethical practices in wildlife trade, their behaviour is ultimately influenced by the broader social acceptance of luxury products made from exotic materials and their perceived lack of individual responsibility in shaping supply chains. This suggests that neutralisation strategies function as a bridge between ethical dissonance and actual behaviour, allowing consumers to maintain luxury consumption practices while cognitively minimising their role in demand-driven wildlife exploitation. For example, in a study by Buttler and Walther (2018) they demonstrated that individuals who experience ambivalence about ethically problematic meat consumption often resolve this discomfort through moral disengagement strategies. Using behavioural measures, the authors show that omnivores with higher levels of ambivalence are more likely to deny animal sentience or rationalise their consumption, thereby reducing the cognitive dissonance tied to their behaviour (Buttler and Walther, 2018). This provides a compelling framework for understanding luxury consumers who, despite ethical concerns about exotic skins, justify their purchases through similar psychological mechanisms, reinforcing how moral disengagement operates in this elusive but harmful consumption.

By revisiting these theories in the context of exotic skin consumption, this study highlights the intricate psychological processes that enable luxury consumers to reconcile their ethical values with their purchasing decisions. Understanding how moral disengagement, neutralisation techniques, and planned behaviour interact provides valuable insights for demand reduction

strategies, reinforcing the need for interventions that challenge these justifications at both individual and industry levels.

5.1.2 Social Distinction and Social Comparison

In addition to moral disengagement, consumers genuinely care about their hierarchical place in society. Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste" (Bourdieu, 2010) discusses and argues for how people in society differentiate or distinguish themselves from others primarily based on their cultural practices and tastes, specifically their conception, use, and association with certain kinds of art, food, literature, etc., and this can also be applied to consumption and purchase of luxury fashion. Central to Bourdieu's ideas are the distinctions between various classes of people in society. Those belonging to the upper echelon of society will have the knowledge and necessary skills to determine what artefacts in culture represent refinement, this is considered their *cultural capital*. These refined tastes are developed over time and are beyond than simply personal preference. The kind of society that an upper-class individual is a part of helps to construct these tastes, habits, attitudes, ideas, and even behaviours known as *habitus*. It is normative then for someone that occupies space among the upper classes to own and seek out goods such as luxury fashion – representing their refined tastes and "classiness" to put it crudely. The curation of this kind of identity is enforced strongly by systems of social hierarchy. Exclusive and limited-edition items, specifically items such as luxury fashion goods made from exotic skins, make the consumer distinctive and different from others. The subsequent association of materials like exotic skins to the upper classes make them items that represent wealth and social distinction, in Bourdieu's own words when talking about the value of an object "[The creator's signature] ... a mark that changes not the material nature, but the social nature of the object" (Bourdieu, 2020).

Taste making, however, is not limited to those that have the "cultural capital" to cultivate and maintain their superiority and distinction from others. Behaviours practiced by the very wealthy and upper-class individuals are emulated by aspirational consumers, whether they can afford genuine luxury products or not (Srivastava, Mukherjee and Jebarajakirthy, 2023). These kinds of consumers are determined to identify themselves as wealthy through purchasing and owning exclusive items, or even imitations as long as it conveys and signals the message that they are special like those

that belong to the upper classes projecting a perceived social status not interested in the moral implications of purchasing practices, choosing prestige over ethics.

The consumption of and display of fashion then is not merely a form of self-expression or a way to display individuality, or as discussed in the previous chapter an “extended self”. Fashion emerges from its deeply embedded role within the social structures of culture and class distinction. It is a marker of social class and social status and has been for centuries (Tseëlon, 1992). There is a hierarchical scale in fashion consumption, where the consumption of different types of fashion – from fast to luxury – relates to social class. According to Bourdieu’s idea of symbolic power the person who is buying and wearing exotic skins is performing a type of cultural distinction by communicating how they belong to an exclusive or elite club or social field. Thus, exotic skins are all about preserving this elitism and the perpetuation of its consumption is necessary for those that want to stand out and signal their superiority.

Another way to explain this unique consumer motivation for consumption is to look at social comparison theory. Individuals are innately interested in evaluating their own opinions, desires, abilities, and self-concepts and measure them against others in a form of comparison to test their value and meaning (Festinger, 1954). There are two directions of comparison. Upward social comparison is to compare oneself to someone that is considered socially superior in some way and is deemed as worthy of admiration and emulation. There is also downward social comparison which is done by comparing oneself to someone that is perceived as worse off or are undergoing a misfortune this is done to boost feelings of security or helping to come to terms with your situation as at least not being as bad as someone else’s.

Research has not integrated social distinction and social comparison. I argue in this chapter that social comparison acts as a motivator for exotic skin consumption and enables consumers to achieve social distinction. This can also work in the opposite direction where consumers that abhor or detest exotic skins would perform downward social comparison to those that buy luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. Regardless of the direction of the comparison the participants revealed an innate need to distinguish themselves and showcase how they were distinct, serving their own self by creating a class distinction of either moral or material superiority.

In the conceptual framework that helped design the research for this project, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 1980) was discussed. Extrinsic and intrinsic factors shape the attitudes and behaviours of consumers developing their motivations and cementing their purchase decisions. Extrinsically motivated luxury consumers care about signalling status due to upward social comparisons made of individuals that are ‘better’ than them. Intrinsically motivated luxury consumers make purchase products that are representative of their personal preferences or values (Truong, 2010), however, as discussed within social distinction the *habitus* of a consumer, especially a luxury consumer is socially constructed. What is considered refined and tasteful is determined by society and widespread acceptance of norms dictating these. Therefore, the determinant for both extrinsic and intrinsically motivated luxury consumers are essentially the same – to be unique, special, and distinctive regardless of conspicuous or inconspicuous consumption.

5.1.3 Brand Identity and Legacy: Hermès as a Case Study on Social Elitism

Brands have set themselves apart as markers of status and social prestige due to the legacy they have created over decades. The association with social class is also tied into the inaccessibility and unaffordability of the most premium products for an average consumer. The brand Hermès, that has been mentioned before in this thesis, is an example of a brand that manufactures handbags that are hand-crafted, customizable, and often are made of exotic skins such as crocodile. The association with luxury lies not only in the quality of its products but also in the origins and mythology surrounding them, which make them so difficult to attain.

In 1892 French atelier Hermès created a bag for carrying essential equipment for equestrians and named it the *haut à courroies*, a tall trapezoid bag with straps, and a single top handle. Known at the time for creating riding gear for French nobility, Hermès rooted itself in a tradition of elite craftsmanship and premium materials (Taylor, 2022). Over the years, the bag evolved into a smaller version known as the *sac à dépêches*, used by prominent men as a stylish briefcase. However, it was in the 1950s that this object underwent a cultural transformation: it became associated with Grace Kelly, Hollywood actress turned Princess of Monaco, who was widely admired for her elegance, aristocratic poise, and refined beauty. The bag was renamed “The Kelly” in her honour, solidifying the embodiment of Grace Kelly’s perceived qualities onto the material object itself and

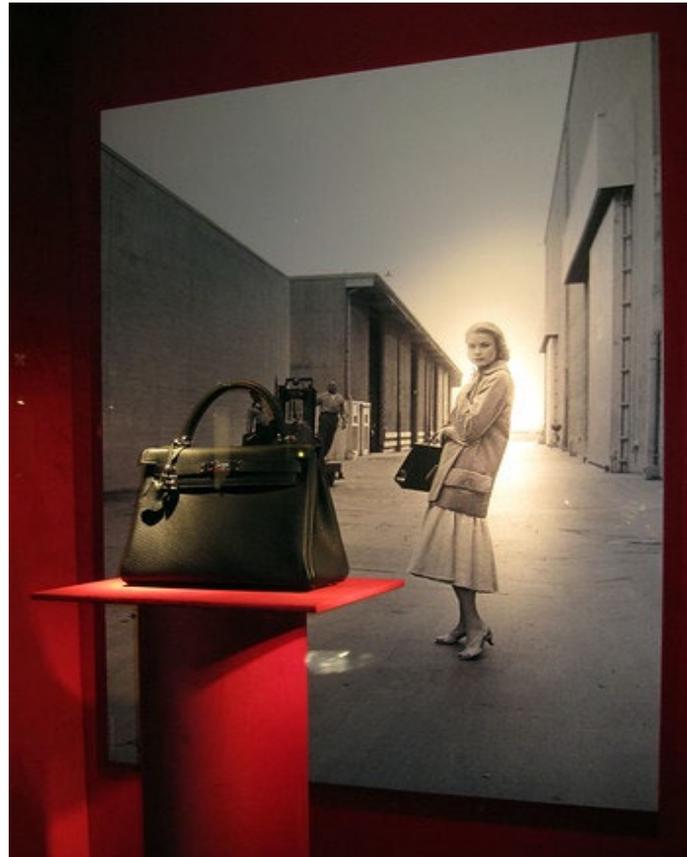
marking the moment it transitioned from a functional item to a symbol of grace and upper-class sophistication.

A similar transformation occurred with the Birkin bag, which debuted in 1984 following a now-famous encounter between actress Jane Birkin and Hermès CEO Jean-Louis Dumas. In 1981, as lore goes, model and actress Jane Birkin was travelling on a flight and was seated next to Dumas. Based on Birkin's practical preferences, Dumas sketched a spacious tote-style handbag during their flight, resulting in a design that embodied casual luxury and care-free chic (Foreman, 2023). Unlike the timeless elegance of the Kelly, the Birkin conveyed a different aspirational ideal, one rooted in spontaneity, celebrity cool, and modern femininity. Since its inception, the Birkin has become one of the most coveted handbags in luxury fashion history, regularly featured in magazines, films, and across digital platforms. On YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, for instance, "haul" videos showcase collections of Birkin bags in detail, revealing their cost, craftsmanship, and exclusivity to captivated audiences (Maguire, 2022).

Together, the Kelly and Birkin bags illustrate how the histories, legacy, reputation, cultural significance, and status distinction help the handbags exemplify main motivations of luxury fashion consumers and the qualities they value most about themselves and the products they purchase – significant parts of two of the main themes identified in this thematic analysis, particularly the pursuit of self-expression through symbolic goods, and the value placed on heritage, status, and distinction. Brands like Hermès succeed because they combine narratives that have become popular mythologies with artisanal manufacturing and mystique – leveraging connections to iconic figures such as Grace Kelly and Jane Birkin in turn transcending personas into material cultural artefacts that embody prestige and exclusivity. Hermès attaches "status, reputation, and legitimacy as distinct strategic resources that brands can deploy" (Philippe, Debenedetti and Chaney, 2022, pp.350), to signal their social position to the consumer of these products.

The heritage legacy building of the brand, while extolling rich tradition and craftsmanship, and association with celebrity, promote ideas of social elitism and classism. Furthermore, these products directly intersect with the contentious use of exotic skins, positioning them within the broader discourse on sustainability and ethical consumption in the luxury sector. This tension highlights a critical aspect of luxury branding: the interplay between social status and ethical

concerns, as consumers navigate the perceived value of storied products against their environmental and moral implications. Thus, the Kelly and Birkin bags exemplify how luxury brands construct and sustain desirability through the convergence of history, exclusivity, and symbolic social capital transcending what is ethical or moral.



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Figure 17. Hollywood actress turned Princess of Monaco, Grace Kelly, with “The Kelly” a trapezoid shaped handbag with an elegant padlock synonymous with sophistication and social elitism.

5.2 Objectives

- 1) Uncovering the motivations and purchase intentions of consumers of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins.

- 2) To capture modifiers for potential change in consumer attitudes and perceptions of non-human animals sourced for exotic skins.
- 3) Investigating how consumers morally compartmentalize and justify their ethically dubious purchases of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins.

5.3 Justification for Thematic Analysis

As a researcher I engage with issues surrounding wildlife conservation with an understanding of the connection between the IWT and processes of production in the luxury fashion industry. Therefore, this research is placed in an ontological space informed by my own lived experience as a wildlife conservationist but also as an avid consumer of media and information related to the luxury fashion industry, and for the participants the reality of consuming luxury fashion products is informed by deeply embedded attitudes, values, and behaviours that stem from dynamic interactions with their environment and social context and are inclusive of culture, knowledge, upbringing, socialisation, and peer or family relationships. This is all within the context of consumerism.

The dynamic features of a participant's psychology attributes, as explored in the previous chapter, such as narcissism and empathy, socio-economic and socio-cultural underpinnings behind consumer practices and purchase intentions, and the reaction of individuals to ethically dubious luxury consumption creates an area of exploration and application of theory to uncover nuances in perceptions and actions of consumers of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins.

This qualitative analysis applies a flexible deductive and inductive approach – a logical conclusion to the explanatory sequential mixed methods design of the entire study. The theory of techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza, 1957) is the foundational theory that has informed the deductive process. Neutralisation theory was developed to explain how juvenile delinquents justify their harmful behaviour by neutralising their actions by blaming others, reporting being influenced by authority figures, belongingness to an in-group, etc. These techniques have been used when talking about issues in green criminology related to poaching, illegal hunting of wild animals (Rytterstedt, 2016), and 'pest' control of animals (Enticott, 2011), the theory is a useful device to unravel questionable behaviour specifically when an individual experiences cognitive dissonance

(Festinger, 1957), and how they eliminate this dissonance by justifying their behaviour. Interviews and subsequent thematic analysis help us understand different ways by which individuals create these justifications and how they differentiate from other consumers and is logically the next step from conducting an interview where certain factors are identified but nuances and personal differences of respondents are not extensively captured. An inductive approach was also applied as the lived experiences of participants, while somewhat similar in terms of their consumption habits, would differ based on various differing contexts. Therefore, a top-down deductive and bottom-up inductive approach were combined to cover the range of exploration.

These justifications were further understood through criminological theories that illuminate the social, situational, analytic and calculative dimensions of consumer decision-making. The development of the interview questions and to bring meaning to the thematic analysis it was postulated that consumer decisions regarding exotic skin luxury goods are shaped by a combination of social influence, situational moral flexibility, and calculated cost–benefit assessments. Consistent with differential association theory (Sutherland, 1947), participants described being introduced to exotic skin products through family members, peers, or aspirational figures whose ownership normalised the practice and implicitly endorsed it. This social exposure both transmitted favourable attitudes and diminished the salience of animal welfare concerns. Drift theory (Matza, 1964) provides further explanatory power, as several consumers expressed generally pro-animal or ethical values yet described “making an exception” in specific contexts, such as when travelling abroad or celebrating a milestone event. These temporary suspensions of moral commitment allowed for indulgence without necessitating a permanent shift in self-identity. Rational choice, developed by Clarke and Cornish in 1985 (‘Cornish, Derek B., and Ronald V. Clarke: Rational Choice Theory’, 2010), considerations were also evident, with participants weighing the perceived prestige, exclusivity, and aesthetic appeal of ownership against potential costs. In line with the theory’s assumptions, legal risk was largely discounted, either due to perceived low enforcement probability or the belief that purchase through high-end retail channels guaranteed legitimacy, while reputational concerns were minimised in social circles where such goods conferred status. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives highlight how demand for exotic skins can persist even among consumers who acknowledge animal welfare issues,

underscoring the need for interventions that address the cognitive, social, and contextual mechanisms enabling such purchases.

The survey conducted was a first step in understanding these relationships and specifically characterised where the respondent (consumer) places themselves in certain categories. Epistemologically speaking the responses and underlying factors identified by the survey help construct the basis for the interview guides. Additionally, interview participants, through their responses, brought their knowledge base or understanding of the significance of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. My reasoning for asking these questions stem from an interpretive stance to understand the construction of participant narratives using this knowledge. The qualitative aspect of the research is justifiable as it builds on the quantitative analytical aspects of the research by explaining *why* certain patterns or relationships exist or are observed. Understanding of luxury fashion consumption of exotic skins within the context of the IWT is niche and is embedded in specific socially constructed ideas informed by cultural, economic, psychological, emotional, and environmental features or factors that need to be explained through nuanced questioning, and social constructivism.

In social constructivism the individual's position of knowledge and the understanding of reality is created by social interactions, norms, cultural practices, and subjective preferences, this aligns with the pragmatic understanding of the research goals and objectives for this study as it is centred on the individual consumer. Rather than assuming an objective and independent reality, social constructivism recognises that meaning is created and negotiated through human engagement with the world. The emphasis on consumption trends, purchase intentions, motivations, and ethical decision-making dilemmas presented in this research are shaped by broader societal discourses, in-group expectations, and interpersonal influences. By aligning a pragmatic epistemology with a social constructivist ontology, my research remains both practically impactful and theoretically robust, ensuring that the qualitative findings contribute meaningfully to both academic discourse and real-world policy interventions.

5.4 Methodology

My understanding of qualitative analysis was bolstered by using the 6 steps developed by Braun and Clarke and applied in thematic analysis; (1) Familiarisation with the data, where the researcher immerses themselves in the dataset through reading and re-reading; (2) Generating initial codes, involving systematic coding of interesting features across the data; (3) Searching for themes, where codes are grouped into potential overarching themes; (4) Reviewing themes, which includes refining and checking themes against the dataset to ensure coherence; (5) Defining and naming themes, involving detailed analysis and clear naming of each theme; and (6) Producing the report, where the final analysis is written up with compelling examples that answer the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The development of the qualitative methodology, however, is based on the systematic methodological review conducted by Hanna Kallio *et al.* (2016), according to this review there are five phases to creating a semi-structured interview guide. “1) Identifying prerequisites for using semi-structured interviews, 2) Retrieving and using previous knowledge, 3) Formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide, 4) Pilot testing the guide, and 5) Presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide.” (Kallio *et al.*, 2016, pp. 2954).

The following was how the five phases were implemented:

- 1) The survey did not provide complete or nuanced information. The survey was on a Likert-scale, so it was not possible to ask yes or no questions or to understand why participants answered the questions the way they did. Therefore, semi-structured interviews needed to be conducted.
- 2) As mentioned above, a principal components analysis helped identify underlying factors in the survey. These were used as pre-codes and informed sections of the interview guide. The literature review conducted for this research indicated the areas to focus on.
- 3) The themes of exploration and the kind of questions to be asked were deliberated with the supervisory team over a course of 6 months and these discussions also informed the interview guide.

- 4) The interview guide was not piloted but the questions addressed the main aims of the research.
- 5) Interview guide for semi-structured interviews (refer to Appendix G).

Codes were generated based on the 6 underlying factors that were identified based on the principal components analysis conducted on the survey. The interview guide was informed by the survey conducted in the previous chapter, which examined the relationship between positive attitudes towards exotic skins, narcissism, and empathy. Building on this, the interviews focused on conceptualisations of the natural world and the IWT, perceptions of non-human animals, thoughts about the appeal of luxury fashion products and purchase intention when buying them, morality and social responsibility, and, importantly, the justifications provided for engaging in ethically contentious consumption of exotic-skin products. The interviews therefore sought to understand the psychological and social rationalisations consumers use when purchasing these goods. Like the survey, interviewees did not typically distinguish between legally farmed and illegally sourced skins. Instead, they engaged with exotic-skin products as luxury items, often rationalising consumption regardless of provenance. This blurring between legal and illegal is itself significant: it underscores the symbiotic relationship between regulated and illicit markets and highlights the difficulty of addressing IWT through consumer behaviour alone. Subcodes were generated based on these pre-codes, the codebook is presented in Appendix I. The qualitative analysis was conducted in NVivo (Version 14).

The analytical process, however, of interpreting the responses was iterative and involved going up and down the 6 steps of thematic analysis multiple times. During the interview process physical notes were taken to underscore or highlight points that were necessary and important, such as exclamations, emphatic sounds, distractions, or changes in body language, later helped contextualise the responses and in categorisation of responses into codes and subcodes.

There were five male participants and six female participants. The participants were recruited through a poster advertised at the University of Southampton Library. Purposive convenience sampling was conducted to recruit additional participants by advertising for interviews at The Winchester School of Art. This part of the university has a degree program, courses, and modules on luxury and fashion. Participants were recruited if they are or have been consumers of luxury

fashion items made from exotic skins. The participants were all residents of the UK, and ten out of eleven participants belonged to a completely or partially non-British cultural background. To preserve the cultural integrity of participants' responses and align with decolonial research practices, while still protecting their anonymity, culturally appropriate pseudonyms have been assigned. These names were chosen by consulting common baby names from the participants' regions, allowing for anonymity without erasing meaningful aspects of their identities. This approach is increasingly recognised and accepted in qualitative research (Lahman, Thomas and Teman, 2023). Participants provided their informed voluntary consent through a consent form ensuring the protection of their identities and confidentiality of responses, the participant information sheet and consent forms are provided in Appendix G. A sample size of eleven may be considered small, however, it was felt that this number was sufficient for saturation, sample size calculation in qualitative research is subjective and varies depending on the scope of the research (Marshall *et al.*, 2013). A deductive approach, or a combination of such, achieves saturation with a smaller sample size (Squire *et al.*, 2024), for example, a comparable method as this research, using a combination of deduction and induction, achieved theme saturation at five participants (Constantinou, Georgiou and Perdikogianni, 2017). All interviews were conducted in-person.

Each interview was no less than 30 minutes. Participants were provided with the interview guide and participant information sheet as well as a consent form prior to the interview. A series of questions were asked in a semi-structured format, leaving room for follow up questions based on participant's responses to add a layer of depth to the investigation. A series of five images of products made from exotic skins were shown to participants and they were simply asked what their impressions about these objects were. Participants were given a token of appreciation in the form of cash for participation at 15 GBP.

Table 9. Pseudonyms, Gender and Country Background of Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Country/Ethnic Background
Wang Xiu	Female	Chinese
Claudia	Female	Peruvian

Liu Fang	Female	Chinese
Wang Jia	Female	Chinese
Sun Lan	Female	Chinese
Zhau Hui	Female	Chinese
Pratham	Male	Indian/British
Andrej	Male	Slovakian/British
William	Male	British
Ahmad	Male	Malaysian
Kasun	Male	Sri Lankan

5.5 Results

For the thematic analysis pre-codes were created using the 6 underlying factors from the survey. These codes and subcodes were then divided between three different themes. 1) Factors that Influence Consumption of Luxury Fashion 2) How Perceptions of Non-human Animals Shape Ethical Considerations and Environmental Concerns 3) Values Shaping the Identity of the Consumer and Justifications for Ethically Dubious Consumption. All participant statements that were considered for analysis were organised into codes and subcodes.

The volume and richness of data collected led to, within the six pre-codes, a wide prevalence of subcodes, a testament to the depth and complexity of participant narratives. The focus of this chapter is to answer the research questions and address the research objectives. Therefore, the subcodes that were included when explaining the findings were chosen based on their relevance to the research question, the frequency with which they appeared in participant responses, how they

connect to the theoretical underpinnings presented in this chapter and the overarching conceptual framework that runs through the entirety of this thesis, and novel or unique perspectives on consumption of luxury products. The table below lists the themes, codes and subcodes and a brief description.

Table 10. Themes, Codes, and Description of Themes

Themes	Codes and Subcodes	Description
<p>Factors that Influence Consumption of Luxury Fashion</p>	<p>Purchase intention behind Luxury Fashion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetic Appeal • Brand Reputation and Legacy • Culturally Significant Practices and Traditions • Emulating Celebrities and Aspiring to a Luxury Lifestyle • Following Fashion Trends • Fulfilling a Need and Filling a Necessity • Interest in the Utility of the Product over the Material it is made of • The Quality, Value, and Exclusivity of the Product • Reward Purchase in Recognition of Personal Achievement • Sentimentality and Nostalgia • Signifying Social Status 	<p>The perceived and inherent intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of luxury fashion products, as well as how consumers experience these qualities through the products themselves. Interview participants talked about their motivations for luxury fashion consumption (or lack thereof) and the most important considerations for them including personal preferences and personal traits and attributes that they could relate the products with.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainably Sourced and Made • The Monetary Cost of Luxury • The Product Represents a Gendered Archetype 	
<p>How Perceptions of Non-human Animals Shape Ethical Considerations and Environmental Concerns</p>	<p>Concern and Consideration for the Natural Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of The Illegal Wildlife Trade • Need for Conservation or Protection of Wild Animal Species • Location of The Trade <p>Perceptions and Representations of Non-Human Animals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumption of Non-Human Animals as Food • Ethical Alternative to Exotic Skins • Expression of Affinity or Affection towards Non-human Animals • Moral Hierarchies in Animal Use • Non-human Animals Serve a Purpose to Humans 	<p>Participants spoke about their relationship to non-human animals and their roles within the human experience and context. Participants reflected on animal welfare, the influence of pet companionship on attitudes and behaviours, compartmentalisation of animals into categories based on their use and determined purpose for humans. The knowledge of the illegal wildlife trade was spoken of in the line of questioning. Participants, if they were aware of the trade, expressed their concern for the environment and the cruelty meted on to wild animals that are killed or captured for the trade.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pet Keeping and Generation of Empathy to Non-human Animals • The Treatment of Animals, Cruelty, and Their Suffering 	
<p>Values Shaping the Identity of the Consumer and Justifications for Ethically Dubious Consumption</p>	<p>Ideas Shaping Personal Values about Luxury Products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Luxury and Factors Contributing to Self-Concept <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feeling Confident - Development of Identity - Exposure and Upbringing • Negative Feelings towards Exotic Skin Products • Social Comparison and Judgments of and by Others <p>Social Responsibility and Morality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors Modifying or Catalysing Change in Behaviour • Responsibility of Self or Other Consumers to Make Ethical Choices • Transparency and Accountability of the Luxury Fashion Industry 	<p>This theme examines how the identity of luxury fashion consumers is shaped by personal values, moral considerations, and social influences. Participants reported how their values were shaped by exposure to ideas and situations in their environment and cultural context, their judgments of morality and social responsibility, and their comparisons with others' actions. It also uncovers justifications of ethically questionable and harmful consumer behaviour and how participants used techniques of neutralisation to avoid feelings of discomfort and resolve cognitive dissonance.</p>

	<p>Neutralisation Techniques or Justifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appeal to Higher Loyalties • Cognitive Dissonance • Condemnation of the Condemners • Denial of Injury • Denial of Responsibility • Denial of The Victim • Feeling of Guilt • Moral Neutralization and Compartmentalization 	
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5.6 Findings & Discussion

5.6.1 Theme 1: Factors that Influence Decisions to Buy Luxury Fashion Products Made from Exotic Skins

In addition to seeking higher social status, association with wealth and success, and social comparison leading to social distinction, consumers of luxury fashion care about the innate material and representative qualities of the products. The aesthetic appeal, cultural significance, value and quality, emotional and psychological experience, and positive and symbolic representations of these products all play a role in assisting consumers in making controversial purchase decisions.

5.6.1.1 The Feel of Luxury: The Aesthetic Appeal, Exclusivity, Quality, and Value of Luxury Fashion

The way that exotic skin looks, is procured and is transformed offers a product that is unique. There is a difference between each in terms of the texture of the leather, the durability of the material,

how much of it can be used in the most economical way, the feel to human skin, and most importantly that the uniqueness of scale patterns per individual animal guarantees an exclusive product to consumers. One can make out the variation in the skins. The process of curing reptile skin, dyeing it, and finishing it is arduous and expensive. This adds to the allure of these products. Figure 18. provides a visual comparison between these different kinds of leather. Crocodile leather tends to be more patterned and less detailed than alligator as well as more delicate. Snakeskin comes with different patterns and series of patterns on the skin that make it appealing to consumers it also comes in varying thicknesses based on the species from which the skin is harvested from. Lizard skin, as seen on this high-end camera, has a very fine grain to it and is used in smaller products due to the smaller size of lizards.



Figure 18. Crocodile Skin Bag, Alligator Skin Watch Strap, Snakeskin Cigarette Case, and Lizard Skin Camera, respectively.

Visual aesthetics of luxury products are a pivotal part of their appeal adding to their allure and desirability. Exotic skins have a unique texture, intricate patterns such as scales, and the natural irregularities present in alligator, crocodile, snake or lizard skin create a one-of-a-kind experience of exclusivity that cannot be completely replicated by synthetic materials or other more commonly found leathers. Natural patterns of skin texture vary from individual to individual. Then these skins are taken and transformed into products that further enhance their visual elements through craftsmanship and refining. The luxury consumer is seeking rarity and distinction, and these qualities are emphasised in products made from exotic skins. The focus on visual aesthetics and their appeal is integral to understand why consumers are drawn to these products. Sensory marketing is a vital part of brand building the generation of an experience for the consumer that

draws them into the space created by the brand, the tactile and visual sensations created by the products and the space, invoking a deeply felt emotional experience that leads to an emotional attachment to the brand and its products (Shahid *et al.*, 2022). Because of this deeply validating sensory and emotional experience consumers are willing to overlook ethical issues and seek out the sensory gratification of beholding a product made from exotic skins. Perceptions can be negative and that of disgust but can also be positive as another wealthy consumer would look at the brand and cost of owning such a product over the fact that it is made from a reptile, or the fact that it is made from a reptile becomes the key reason why this product is purchased.

As part of the interview process, participants were shown images of 5 products, refer to Appendix G.4, that were made from exotic skins. When interacting with these images they were simply asked to tell me, the researcher, their first impressions and if they were to prefer a product what would it be and why. There were some participants that rejected the products completely and stayed consistent with statements they had made earlier of non-favourable opinions towards exotic skins. There were, however, participants that contradicted their earlier statements and went against their values. Participant Pratham, for example, mentioned his cultural background and upbringing would not allow him to buy or even consider a product made from exotic skins (discussed later in this chapter), however, he admitted that there was a certain “wow” factor associated with these products:

“I think also I liked the colour of the watch. So, a tan colour as well. I think it looks nice. It may be made out of leather, though. Not too sure ... alligator skin, right? Yeah, it looks appealing ... but, yeah, it looks appealing.”

Another participant, Kasun, initially downplayed the appeal of exotic skins and raised ethical issues associated with the killing of animals in general. This participant stated that he “... *wouldn't engage in exotic skins, so to speak.*” However, later in the interview it was revealed that he was in possession of a python skin wallet that his father had given to him. He minimized the ethical contention of owning such a product by denying responsibility, saying that it was his father's decision to buy such a product and that he does not use it. He was not completely forthcoming about his attitudes towards exotic skins, but it was clear, when he was shown the images, that he was interested in the visual and aesthetic appeal of these products:

“Well, when you go around ... luxury markets, you tend to run into like python belts [and] things ... you look at it, and for a second, you’re like, wow, that’s cool.”

In addition to aesthetic appeal and the evocation of awe, all interview participants associated exotic skins with rarity, high quality, and elevated value. These perceptions were articulated clearly in participants’ accounts. For instance, Wang Xiu noted, *“I think it’s because it [is] precious and rare... it is uncommon. So not everyone can [get] it. Probably this is the most appealing thing to the people.”* Similarly, Claudia reflected on a past purchase: *“I used to have a crocodile wallet... because it is true that the majority of animal skin gives us a high-quality fabric and also looks more elegant than normal fabric... for these characteristics I decided to buy this product.”*

While these statements highlight consumer attraction to the material and symbolic qualities of exotic skins, they also reveal how ideas of rarity, elegance, and distinction are central to the perceived legitimacy of ethically questionable consumption. Drawing on Veblen’s (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption, the notion of rarity not only enhances the desirability of exotic skin products but also situates them within a broader symbolic economy of luxury, where the value of an item lies as much in its exclusivity as in its physical characteristics. These narratives reflect the internalisation of cultural scripts that equate animal-derived materials with prestige, which in turn may obscure ethical concerns about sourcing and animal welfare. Furthermore, the way participants spoke of these products suggests that the symbolic capital, as proposed by Bourdieu (1984), embedded in exotic skins plays a key role in shaping their consumption. The reverence for ‘high-quality’ and ‘elegant’ material is not just a matter of preference but a reflection of how luxury objects serve as markers of taste, class, and access, and exotic skins, particularly those of reptiles become symbols that buy social capital.

Reptile skins have been used in European fashion for at least two centuries, with their association with exclusivity and rarity eventually spreading to other parts of the world. Today, exotic skins are widely regarded as symbols of luxury, commanding high prices and desirability. The perception of exoticism emerged during colonial-era explorations, particularly through the construction of the “Orient”(Gundle and Castelli, 2006) as a mysterious and distant other. In the early 1920s, the fashion industry experienced a significant boom in the use of reptile skins – a period often referred to as the “reptilian era”(Haase, 2022b). These materials were prized for their distinctive patterns

and natural textures and were often tanned and dyed to suit consumer preferences. Advertising during this time reinforced the luxurious status of reptile skin products by highlighting their aesthetic appeal and exclusivity.

This long-standing cultural association continues to influence contemporary consumer attitudes. For instance, participant Liu Fang described exotic skins as a decisive factor in her purchasing choices, emphatically stating:

“I think I won't ignore it! I think it is a factor to, you know, to make my decision... what I care about is how does the texture look like? What's the speciality of the texture?”

Her response highlights a strong appreciation for the material qualities of exotic skins, particularly their unique texture and craftsmanship. Such perspectives reflect how exotic skins are not only viewed as aesthetically desirable, but also as cultural artefacts embedded within a historical legacy of luxury. Interview participants openly expressed this appreciation, illustrating the enduring appeal of exotic skins and their role in shaping consumer preferences today.

5.6.1.2 Luxury Brands: Reputation, Legacy, Celebrity Culture and Social Elitism

All 11 participants mentioned the importance of the reputation of the brand as a factor influencing their purchase intention. A well-known or renowned brand is entrusted by participants as they believe the rich history and presence of brands ensure not only beautiful quality products but also products that are ethically manufactured, and in turn the entrusting of the brand leads to brand loyalty (Song, Hur and Kim, 2012).

Classic luxury brands such as Dior, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Dolce and Gabbana, Balenciaga, Gucci, Prada, TUMI, YSL, and Omega were mentioned by participants. These are also known as ‘heritage brands’, brands that have built up a long and rich history and legacy through iconic products marketed based on high levels of craftsmanship and quality (Wuestefeld *et al.*, 2012). These brands occupy space in the cultural zeitgeist and are influential in creating consumer demand for exclusive, high-quality, and mostly expensive products. Brand heritage has an overall positive impact on how consumers perceive value in luxury products, they perceive these products to have strong economic, functional, affective, and social value. This positive opinion further generates

brand loyalty. These brands experience a large share of the luxury fashion market, in the UK LVMH makes up 17 % of the market, Kering 8%, and Chanel 6% (Statista, 2025) they have established themselves over many years through creating experiences of exclusivity and premium quality in the way that products are manufactured, marketed, and presented.

Heritage brands have the unique position where consumers are buying into the rich history and legacy that the brand has successfully built. Changing what raw materials products are made from will not have a negative impact on sales of products because iconic brands have the power to shift culture. Chanel, for example, has banned the use of exotic skins and furs in their products. This has not deterred consumer purchase behaviour and Chanel is on a trajectory of growth. Chanel banned the use of exotic animal skins in 2018, and from 2018 to 2023 the global valuation of Chanel saw an increase by 230% from 5,884 million USD to 19,386 million USD (Brand Finance, 2022), ostensibly the ban on exotic skins has not had a negative impact on the valuation of the brand.

Consumers are not merely purchasing products; they are buying into the symbolic world a brand constructs, aligning themselves with its values, heritage, and cultural resonance. Many of the most recognisable luxury houses, such as Dior, originated in Europe, particularly France and Italy, during a time when luxury items were bespoke and deeply tied to craftsmanship. Dior, for instance, was established in the late 1940s and became synonymous with the “New Look” silhouette of the 1950s, characterised by a cinched waist, voluminous skirt, and structured tailoring (Koda and Duncuff Charleston, 2004). Each dress was custom-made for individual clients, reinforcing the exclusivity of couture and cultivating an aura of mystique that contributed to the brand’s enduring legacy. This sense of rarity and artisanal refinement, rooted in cultural history and aesthetic innovation, continues to shape how luxury is perceived and consumed.

Participants in this study echoed these sentiments, highlighting the emotional and symbolic attachments they formed with particular brands. Zhou Hui, for example, described her affinity for Vivienne Westwood, the namesake brand of the British doyenne of the punk fashion movement, not just in terms of the product, but in relation to the brand’s narrative and ethos. She explained:

“But my favourite luxury brand is actually Vivienne Westwood ... the reason why it's because I think that that brand has more history ... Vivienne Westwood herself ... her [story and] personality is

really interest[ing] to me. And also, her ... products are very unique. So, that's why I care, the product and the history behind [the] brand.”

Zhou Hui's comments demonstrate how brand loyalty in the luxury sector often extends beyond aesthetics or material quality; it is deeply intertwined with perceived authenticity, cultural legacy, and the persona of the designer. Her admiration for Vivienne Westwood's activism and individuality reflects a broader trend where consumers seek alignment between their personal identity and the values a brand represents. In this context, luxury consumption becomes a form of storytelling or a way of participating in the brand's narrative while reinforcing one's own life narrative. The emotional investment in brand heritage and the desire to be associated with cultural icons not only drive purchasing behaviour but also help consumers legitimise their choices, particularly when the products themselves raise ethical concerns. Similarly, Liu Feng deeply cares about the reputation and meaning behind a brand, labelling herself as “*obsessed with handbags*”, and stating that the “*brand is important ... because if it has [a] reputation, it has a good reputation.*”



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Figure 19. The classic “New Look” by Christian Dior in 1947

The aspirational appeal of luxury consumption, often fuelled by the visibility of celebrities and influencers, emerged as a recurring theme in participant interviews. Zhou Hui reflected on how her desire for luxury goods began in adolescence, shaped by media portrayals of success:

“I think there was this phase, probably when I was about 13, 14, I was really obsessed, of owning luxury goods, but like, I didn't really get one, but I was wanting to have one. Because I feel like all those people who I think are successful, beautiful, that I want to be one, they all have all kinds of luxury goods.”

Here, luxury products are imbued with symbolic meaning: they represent not just wealth, but beauty, success, and personal aspiration. In contrast, Liu Fang expressed admiration for a different kind of public figure – those who reject ostentatious consumption despite their wealth:

“I know that some celebrities, though they're rich ... they never pay for [these] luxury products. And they always take economic, you know, class, you know, a flight. So, I think that kind of life is what I'm looking for.”

These divergent views highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which luxury is understood, as both a marker of aspiration and, alternatively, something to be consciously resisted.

The conspicuous display of these products on media platforms have made them aspirational items that symbolise upward social mobility, wealth, and in turn status. Adding to an element of exclusivity is the fact that a Birkin bag cannot be bought simply by walking into a store. There are no transparent criteria on how to obtain one but what is known is the fact that one needs to be “invited” or go on a waitlist to secure one. Some online content creators give step-by-step instructions as to how a Hermès bag can be purchased. One of the interview participants describes the process of buying several smaller products, establishing loyalty to the brand, and therefore proving through their consistent consumption that they can afford these items, as Xiu Wang explains:

“Hermès have to buy other, buy a lot of other things in advance, and after that, the sales can give you the bag”

Hermès keeps the manufacturing and production of these bags opaque adding to perceived rarity of these bags, therefore, there are only estimates as to how many of these bags are produced. In one estimate, from more than a decade ago, Hermès manufactures 70,000 Birkin bags a year creating scarcity in the market and allowing resellers to charge more than 50% of the retail price (*The Economist*, 2014). Birkin bags are not seeing any downturn in demand and sales of the bag grew by 13.3% in the second quarter of 2024 with Hermès’ leather division seeing the most growth at 18% for the same quarter – again this was led by Birkin and Kelly bags (Klasa, 2024).

Gender and Luxury Consumption

Although not a frequently referenced subcode, and not explicitly asked in the interview questions, six out of eleven participants highlighted the influence of gender on the types of luxury fashion products purchased and the individuals likely to purchase them. Participants’ responses reflected socially constructed archetypes of masculine and feminine items, revealing a gendered dimension to consumption. This perspective provides valuable insight into how consumer gender shapes preferences and purchasing behaviour, shedding light on the ways in which cultural and societal norms influence engagement with specific luxury products.

This observation is particularly significant given the nature of exotic skin products. Items like handbags and shoes, which are highly visible in luxury fashion and often made from exotic skins, are typically associated with feminine self-expression. However, the luxury fashion industry diversifies its appeal by producing items such as watch straps and belts, which are traditionally marketed as masculine. This diversification highlights how gendered stereotypes not only shape consumer preferences but also guide product design and marketing strategies within the luxury sector. Gendered stereotyping influences consumption with participants, like Wang Xiu, rejecting items that don’t match their gender identity and expression:

“Probably it can put the gender element in. If the man [were] to choose ... they would like to choose the watch ... female, [are more likely to choose] the handbag”

Gender has an important role to play in predicting and determining what kind of product the consumer would choose and what inspires this consumption behaviour. Research has shown that female consumers are likely to value aesthetics and the look and feel of a product, whereas, male consumers put more emphasis on the status, exclusivity, and elitism associated with products (Roux, Tafani and Vigneron, 2017). Participants in the interview adhered to this dichotomy. Additionally, interviews revealed that male participants were more interested in the utility, quality, and longevity of the product and female participants confirmed their desire for trends and affinity towards luxury brands that are representative of refinement, taste, and consider females to have, as Liu Fang noted:

“It’s a girl habit isn’t it? ... a liking for ... beautiful, fancy [...] patterns.”

Participants did address and express the ethically contentious nature of luxury products made from exotic skins, however, there was still a clear gendered preference expressed when potential purchases were considered. Pratham explained that his cultural background and upbringing instilled values against cruelty towards animals and the purchase of products made from exotic skins. Despite this, when presented with the images, he indicated that he would consider choosing a watch, aligning with traditionally masculine consumption preferences. Similarly, Zhou Hui highlighted the gendered nature of purchase intentions by stating that the product she would consider was also a watch, which she saw as a suitable gift for her father, further emphasizing the influence of gender norms on luxury consumption choices:

“I probably consider image B. One because I’m a guy. I wouldn’t consider the handbags. I’d probably consider the camera but I’m not really a camera person.” (Pratham)

“I wouldn’t buy it though because this watch looks a bit too big ... I might considering buy one for my father.” (Zhou Hui)

These findings highlight the complex role of gender in luxury fashion consumption, revealing how identity, values, and socio-cultural constructs shape purchase decisions. Gendered expression in purchasing certain products affirms a consumer’s gender identity, even when this involves ethically contentious choices, such as buying items made from exotic skins underscoring the intricate intersection of ethics, identity, and gender in luxury consumption.

5.6.2 Theme 2: How Perceptions of Non-human Animals Shape Ethical Considerations and Environmental Concerns

5.6.2.1 Knowledge of the Illegal Wildlife Trade and Connecting it To Luxury Consumption

What participants know about the IWT is critical in helping understand if they are aware of the negative environmental impact the trade has on biodiversity as well as the ethically contentious and illegal sourcing of exotic skins from wild animals. A participant's self-reported awareness of these issues reveals their complex thinking on this topic and the ethical implications their own consumptive behaviour has. Interestingly, the majority of participants expressed little or no knowledge of the trade when asked explicitly about it, however, when asked how they believe animal skins were sourced they described accurate elements of the trade such as cruelty, killing, and legal issues associated with it. It is likely that participant's felt pressured when prompted to talk about such a controversial topic and have resorted to deliberate concealment which can be interpreted as a form of social desirability bias.

Asking participants about the IWT was crucial for uncovering latent ethical considerations and highlighting the disconnect between consumer awareness and action. The responses demonstrate that while participants often claim limited knowledge, they possess implicit awareness of the trade's practices and their connection to luxury products. This dissonance reveals the complexity of consumer attitudes, where ethical considerations are present but often compartmentalised or rationalised. Despite their claims of ignorance, participants often described aspects of the trade that are well-known and documented, as Liu Fang states:

"I have no idea. No ideas about the trade. But I think it's very bloody. It's very cruel."

And when asked about how they feel about luxury products made from exotic skins Pratham and Zhau Hui stated:

"I reckon one thing is through poaching ... in areas in Africa, like ivory horns, like elephant tusks, and ... they get killed illegally. And then they also get processed and sent to factories to manufacture clothing or accessories." (Pratham)

"Luxury brands ... purchase skins at a low cost, and then sell them at much higher prices [...] hunting down those animals and getting rid of the skins." (Zhou Hui)

Such responses reveal a fragmented but often accurate understanding of the trade's practices and its connections to luxury products. This deliberate concealment or hesitation can be explained as participants experiencing a form of cognitive dissonance. The participants for this research are self-selected consumers of luxury. They value these products, and some even own products made from exotic skins. It is uncomfortable for them when their decisions are questioned. The ethical ambiguity surrounding participants' knowledge of the IWT reflects broader consumer disengagement from the origins of luxury products. Several participants conflated legality with ethicality, assuming that luxury products made from exotic skins must adhere to legal standards. For instance, Wang Xiu reasoned, *"It must be legal... if it's illegal, it cannot exist."* This response highlights how legal frameworks can serve as a form of moral licensing, allowing consumers to distance themselves from the ethical implications of their purchases.

There is truth in acknowledging the positive impact that knowledge can have on changing behaviours and attitudes for individuals. Two participants, by engaging with knowledge about the IWT, in different ways showcased how their attitudes changed and in turn their behaviour changed. Claudia is a fashion designer and, in her education, when conducting research for her degree she learned about the cruel practices employed in sourcing and manufacturing luxury fashion products made from exotic skins:

"Four years ago, but wait no, more than six years ago, it was when I was studying fashion design, in my under degree. So, after that, I wrote about different types of trends and also wrote different articles related with obviously hunting and killing animals."

Sun Lan, on the other hand, grew up watching nature documentary and this shaped her thinking, making her sensitive to wildlife and the harm done to wild animals by humans. This messaging has stuck with her into adulthood:

"Of course, I have such beliefs like not to have exotic skin. In fashion, yeah, if I buy fashion stuff, I will not buy such fashion stuff. Because I grew up watching a documentary, it's about wildlife in

Africa. I think that somehow got me to not like some sort of belief that people are doing bad things to them, and they're facing extinction.”

The exploration of participant knowledge about the IWT reveals a nuanced interplay of awareness, ethical ambiguity, and social influences. While participants frequently denied explicit knowledge of the trade, their descriptions reflected an underlying understanding of its practices and implications. Importantly, participants did not typically distinguish between products sourced legally through regulated channels and those laundered through the illegal wildlife trade, reflecting the broader consumer ambiguity around provenance. They also concealed their true intentions or covered them up quickly to avoid judgment for making purchase decisions that are ethically and morally dubious and at an extreme level nefariously promulgating the demand for exotic skins and perpetuating the IWT.

5.6.2.2 Stacking Non-Human Animals by Human Made Hierarchies: Consumptive and Non-Consumptive Animals, Pet Companionship, and Empathy

As discussed in 1.2.10, Humans categorise non-human animals based on speciesist ideas of utility, consumption, entertainment, and companionship. This human-centric framework reflects cultural, societal, and individual values, assigning different moral worth to animals depending on their designated role. The call for the welfare of non-human animals through laws and efforts by public and private organisations is a direct response to the harmful normative societal belief that that animals exist to fulfil a purpose for humanity. Andrej notes the hierarchies and scales with which we view non-human animals:

“These animals are for food, but you could also wear them. And then these animals you can wear them, and these animals are pets.”

Transport, food, shelter, clothing, and other utilitarian items come from animals and are still necessary for poor, indigenous, and nomadic communities. Animals, however, in the world we live in today, where there is great concern for harm to the natural environment, need to have protections in place that allow them to live with humans and not just for humans.

As Wang Xiu states, *“Dogs and cats are human beings’ friends... but the exotic skin animals are far away from my life.”* The emotional bond with companion animals creates a moral barrier against their exploitation, while the physical and psychological distance from exotic animals allows for their commodification, an example of compartmentalisation and moral disengagement.

It is true then that humans consider animals in a hierarchy. All participants interviewed made distinctions between pet companion animals and those animals that are for consumption – be it for food or for their furs or skin. There is a value attachment to pet companion animals being greater than other non-companion domesticated animals or wild animals. That their lives have more value because they enhance the cognitive and affective side of human life through an interdependent and interspecific relationship underscored by comradeship, affection, enjoyment, work, and providing psychological benefit to human and non-human animal alike (Pongrácz and Dobos, 2023). It can be argued, however, that other non-companion animals have meaning and a right to inherent life. They have emotions and feelings that are their own and are necessary for evolutionary success.

Interestingly pet ownership generates empathy for animals. Exposure to animals in the environment and in the daily experience of an individual can help alter attitudes towards them, and research has shown that growing up with companion animals as well as adulthood pet-keeping enhanced the development of empathy (Daly and Morton, 2009). As Claudia explains:

“When you have pets, maybe you can understand the suffering you can understand why it's incorrect to kill these type of animals in order to make fabrics. It's different when you don't have pets, I think so because when you have a pet you have a connection and also you understand the importance of animals in our own environment.”

All participants, regardless of whether they have a pet companion animal or not, expressed how behaviour changes to positive regard towards animals if you have exposure to animals and have them in your life. For example, this can be seen in the statement provided by Liu Fang:

“[S]o I can imagine that if I had a dog, I don't know, I think I won't pay for the exotic skin products. Because I will think about my pet. I think I think I would be very guilty to my pet because I hurt their friends”

In the previous chapter grandiose narcissism was discussed in detail and the relationship between narcissism and empathy was explored. Although, the survey didn't find a statistically significant relationship between grandiose narcissism and empathy, however, research shows that narcissists can feel empathy. In the previous chapter there was discussion that explored how empathy can be learned. Even if a narcissist does not automatically create an empathy affect towards others, it is possible to make a narcissist understand how empathy operates, specifically, when they perspective-take another's experience (Davis *et al.*, 1996).

Most of the research comes from studying interpersonal relationships of narcissists where their negative behaviours are identified and techniques or strategies are employed to mitigate damaging behaviours that can also be harmful (Biesen and Smith, 2023). Narcissists tend to have more issues in romantic interpersonal relationships than non-narcissists. Manipulation experimentation, where empathy is induced in narcissists over a period of time through communal action and perspective taking, has shown to decrease levels of grandiose narcissism over time and increase interpersonal romantic commitment for narcissistic individuals (Finkel *et al.*, 2009). Here communal refers to thoughts and behaviours that are prosocial such as "helpfulness, nurturance, warmth, and caring" (*ibid*), therefore, communal activation is simply exposure and activation of prosocial behaviours.

This kind of experimentation has not been tried on grandiose narcissists in the context of status-seeking and flagrant conspicuous consumption of luxury products made from exotic skins. However, since this project is interested in the psychological aspect of consumption of these goods, particularly by grandiose narcissist, some statements from the interviews have been presented that could potentially identify what kind of exposure and the nature of experimentation that could potentially induce empathy and alter a narcissist's harmful purchasing behaviours. As a caveat, participants in the interviews were not given a scale while being interviewed to measure grandiose narcissism, however, there were questions raised that aimed at bringing the focus to the perspective and representation of non-human animals. By directing the focus to perspective-taking of a pet companion or to consider where the IWT occurs and how animals are sourced for the trade the intention was to see whether the generation of empathy would modify responses of participants. It was seen that participants themselves explained cruel practices and how empathising with animals that were killed cruelly for their skins helped in changing their behaviour.

For example, one of the participants, Claudia, a fashion designer, used to buy products that were made from exotic skins, specifically a crocodile skin wallet, but after learning about cruel practices and educating herself her worldview changed, she became a vegetarian and is committed to sustainable fashion.

The mere questioning of considering a pet companion generated considered responses in some participants that contradicted earlier statements that they had made with respect to how they consider exotic skins favourable. Exposing participants to line of questioning where the participant was compelled to think about the animal harmed led to statements that were existential and philosophical in nature questioning the morality of their actions and purchasing decisions, and the broader systemic issue of environmental degradation and harm meted on to the environment by humans.

5.6.3 Theme 3: Values Shaping the Identity of the Consumer and Justifications for Ethically Dubious Consumption

5.6.3.1 The Construction of a Luxury Consumer: Self-concept and Identity

Self-concept can be defined as the way that an individual thinks about and perceives themselves based on their beliefs, values, self-awareness, and their identity (Baumeister, 1999). The development of the self-concept is a dynamic process that is heavily impacted by social constructs and can change with time. An individual's self-concept helps explain their motivations to perform certain behaviours and is a significant contributor to an individual's self-determination (Deci and Ryan, 1980) which then in turn shows up in extrinsic and intrinsic behaviours leading to planned behaviours (Ajzen, 1991) and reasoned actions (Fishbein, 1979), please refer to the second chapter (**Error! Reference source not found.**) where these interactions are presented in detail.

Participants in the interviews were not directly asked about the development of their self-concept as a luxury consumer; however, this was a significant theme that emerged and was tied to feelings of confidence, how consumption behaviour shaping identity and vice versa, and their cultural background and upbringing developing self-concept and as an instigator for luxury consumption.

The focus is on how participants derived feelings of validation, self-confidence, and self-acceptance, through these purchases. As evidenced in the quote below, luxury consumption gives purpose and meaning to a consumer and is deeply tied to esteem and pride, Wang Xia considers such consumption integral to creating value in their own self-worth:

“Yeah, self-worth. Because if this this thing, I bought it by myself [from money] I earned. I think I am good. It is self-evidence. And if this thing [is] from my family, my parents bought it for me, I will [be] proud of my family, so it's sort of a self-worth.”

Confidence was linked to self-esteem and the idea of being an upstanding member of society who behaves well, is socially presentable and accepted by society, and that purchasing luxury products is essentially a tactic in building social capital and one's social brand. Coming across as someone that has high-social standing has many positive benefits. As explained by Ahmad:

“I think luxury is not just about the brand it is about the whole experience ... it boosts your confidence ... that actually could influence your day-to-day behaviour with people, how you interact, how you make good the job interview, and perhaps because of that boost [of] self-confidence, you may get a job ... they all are correlated.”

A key indicator of purchase intention and behaviour was how social comparison to peers factored into the maintenance of sense of self and identity. Many participants were concerned about the judgment of others, and how they would be perceived as ethical or unethical by them. Additionally, participants were very careful about their purchasing behaviour around specific peer groups. Liu Fang explains that her behaviour changes around those that she knows do not share the same ability to buy luxury products like she does, compared to her friends that do have the spending power:

“... if I was ... with friends who can't pay ... [for] that kind of luxury products, I think I will ... give some explanation with humour, or maybe wisdom, sarcasm on myself ... [that] it's just gifted ... I would just [make] a joke ... because I don't want to show how rich I was.”

“If I have this handbag ... this fancy product with someone who can pay for it I think it's okay ... they will totally understand why I have this product because it is normal to them ... to have this luxury exotic skin products”

Liu Fang is using her social capital among peers that share her socio-economic status, to buy exotic skin products because it is normalised and is not considered ethically dubious, there is no fear of social comparison with her in-group, if she is expressing normative conformity through purchasing these products. The way the group interacts with an individual has a deep and meaningful impact on value creating and the shaping of ideas with respect to consumptive behaviour, and favourable acceptance by in-group has been documented as a strong and direct high self-esteem (Major, Sciacchitano and Crocker, 1993).

5.6.3.2 Techniques of Neutralisation and Cognitive Dissonance

This dissonance between self-concept and the reality of luxury production often leads consumers to employ techniques of neutralisation (Sykes and Matza, 1957) to justify their behaviour. These techniques enable participants to resolve cognitive dissonance and maintain alignment with their self-concept as ethical and socially responsible consumers. The subsequent discussion will explore how participants rationalize their behaviours and purchasing decisions, providing insight into the psychological strategies employed to navigate the ethical implications of consuming products sourced from the IWT.

Techniques of neutralisation, as mentioned, were introduced to describe how individuals justify their deviant, nefarious, or even criminal behaviours to mitigate feelings of guilt and maintain a positive self-image. There are five primary techniques and two additional techniques that were added later (the extensions were not used for the analysis as there were insufficient references made for them). As a refresher, the five primary techniques are:

Table 11. The Five Classic Techniques of Neutralisation and Their Descriptions

Neutralisation Technique	Description
Denial of Responsibility	Attributing one’s actions to others or external forces and circumstances, essentially an individual does not feel that they are accountable for their actions

Denial of Injury	The individual minimizes or even denies that their behaviour has caused any harm, therefore, framing their behaviour as harmless or insignificant
Denial of The Victim	A justification for actions by placing the blame on the victim, in other words that the victim deserved to be harmed, often arguing that the victim is unworthy of concern
Condemnation of the Condemners	That the people to blame are in reality those that set the rules or are in positions of authority as they are probably biased or corrupt and are hypocritical – breaking their own rules
Appeal to Higher Loyalties	Priority is given to the needs and obligations of the group the individual belongs to, their family, their own self-interest or personal values or desires over what is normatively acceptable. Basically, the harmful actions are justified as they serve a higher purpose for the individual.

During the analysis the most frequently referenced techniques ended up being Appeals to Higher Loyalties and Denial of Responsibility. The consumer is buying products that satisfy their own needs and the needs that are imposed on them, that they willingly accept, by their social construct, cultural background, and normative social expectations of the class that they belong to. For one participant the fact that the item is illegal to them meant that it would just not be available on the market, i.e., they were not willing to accept that there is an illegal trade in these products to begin with and if there was then they were sure it was being taken care of by someone else or is the responsibility of someone else.

Appeals to Higher Loyalties

The appeal to higher loyalties centres on the idea that one's actions, though potentially unethical, are justified in service of a greater good or a more pressing, and mostly personal, obligation. This

technique was evident among participants who rationalised their luxury consumption as fulfilling personal, social, or emotional needs that superseded environmental or animal welfare concerns.

Participants often framed their choices as necessary to maintain self-identity, social standing, or emotional well-being. For instance, purchasing high-status items was sometimes described as a reward for hard work or a tool to navigate professional environments. In these cases, the perceived benefits to the self or family were considered more important than the ethical costs. By invoking higher-order commitments, whether to self-care, success, or loved ones, participants were able to justify behaviour that conflicted with their stated values.

Many participants described their purchases as essential for maintaining self-identity, fulfilling aesthetic desires, or navigating specific social or professional environments. For instance, luxury items were sometimes seen as rewards for hard work, as tools of self-expression, or as markers of competence and credibility within fashion-related fields. In these instances, the personal or symbolic value of the product was elevated above the ethical discomfort associated with its origin.

Liu Fang, for example, minimised the ethical implications of her handbag purchase by highlighting its aesthetic appeal and functional fit:

“I think this handbag is made from leather ... I think the reason why I buy it because it looks cute so and it fits my outfit. So, I just take it.”

Claudia reflected on being challenged by others about her choice to wear exotic skins but asserted her personal desire as the ultimate justification:

“I love it. Yeah. So, no matter what they say to me, I didn't change my opinion.”

Here, personal enjoyment, rooted in identity, pleasure, and defiance, trumps external moral judgement. This dynamic reflects how the emotional connection to fashion can be deeply internalised, making ethical critique feel peripheral or even invasive.

In other cases, loyalty to brand identity or cultural familiarity took precedence over political or ethical disagreements. Wang Xia provided a clear example of this trade-off when discussing her continued support for Dolce & Gabbana despite awareness of the brand's problematic behaviour:

“... Dolce Gabbana [they discriminated against] Asian people but sometimes I will still buy the product because some of the perfumes or the clothes are unique so cannot be replaced by other product.”

As evident, the perceived irreplaceability of the brand’s offerings supersedes her discomfort with the brand’s racist marketing (Ban and Lovari, 2021), illustrating how consumer loyalty can serve as a shield against moral dissonance.

Across these examples, participants rationalised their consumption through an implicit “means-to-an-end” logic. Personal, cultural, or professional goals were framed as legitimate reasons to overlook harm, revealing how luxury goods are imbued with meaning that goes far beyond materiality.

These findings closely align with the original formulation of neutralisation theory, in which appeals to higher loyalties allow individuals to justify deviant behaviour by invoking allegiance to alternate moral codes (Sykes and Matza, 1957). As outlined in the literature review (refer to 1.2.7), such justifications are not necessarily cynical; they reflect an internal moral calculus where certain values, such as self-expression, social positioning, or familial expectation, are weighted more heavily than abstract ethical concerns. Prior studies on consumer deviance (Gruber and Schlegelmilch, 2014; Righi, 2023) echo this pattern, demonstrating how individuals routinely prioritise internalised loyalties when they conflict with broader social norms.

Denial of Responsibility

Denial of responsibility emerged as a prominent technique among participants who sought to distance themselves from the ethical dimensions of their consumption. This strategy involves shifting blame onto external structures, such as corporations, governments, or global systems, thus absolving the individual of any moral accountability. By positioning themselves as passive, powerless actors within a vast and complex supply chain, participants minimised their own agency and sidestepped the discomfort associated with contributing to harm.

Wang Jia, for example, acknowledged the prevalence of unethical practices in the luxury industry but dismissed their relevance to her own behaviour:

“I think it's not very important because I think a lot of luxury brand, they will have scandal but I think it will not to influence my purchase decision because I think it's the corporation decision I cannot change that.”

Here, Wang Jia rationalises her continued consumption by assigning responsibility to the corporation, positioning herself as too small or inconsequential to affect meaningful change. This framing reduces cognitive dissonance by removing herself from the moral equation.

Similarly, Sun Lan articulated a broader sense of helplessness in the face of systemic inertia:

“I've always felt very passive about all this, because I don't feel like people will change.”

This expression of resignation reflects a belief that individual action is futile in the absence of collective change. Rather than confronting the ethical implications of her choices, Sun Lan diminishes her sense of personal impact, thus neutralising the need for behavioural change.

William's account adds another dimension, framing ethical disengagement as a necessary compromise in the face of competing responsibilities:

“Yes, it's a climate problem, but do what you can do and not worry about every little cup.”

His statement reflects a logic of prioritisation, where environmental concern is acknowledged but consciously deprioritised in favour of familial well-being and emotional self-preservation. Here, denial of responsibility is not born of ignorance but rather of pragmatic resignation – the sense that ethical vigilance is emotionally exhausting and incompatible with everyday life. Individuals do not necessarily reject social norms but rather find ways to temporarily suspend them. As discussed in the literature review, denial of responsibility is a key mechanism through which consumers maintain a positive self-concept while engaging in morally questionable behaviour. The literature on ethical consumerism highlights how the complexity of global supply chains and the invisibility of harm allow consumers to downplay their role in perpetuating unethical practices.

Cognitive Dissonance and its Resolution

Cognitive dissonance was a term defined for participants as a state of mental discomfort that arises when a person holds two conflicting beliefs, ideas, or behaviours. This discomfort motivates

the person to pick one and suppress the other to achieve psychological consistency (Festinger, 1957). Within the context of luxury fashion and exotic skins, cognitive dissonance emerges as participants grapple with the ethical implications of their consumption and their desire for these products.

Several participants explicitly articulated experiences of cognitive dissonance, shedding light on how these internal tensions influenced their decision-making. For example, Andrej reflected on his past struggles with conflicting values:

“Oh, I used to have cognitive dissonance. I mean, back in the day I used to be very indecisive because I had different opinions, and I couldn't decide between the two. So, for me, if I, let's say, if I were to buy those products, I'll probably like try and offset it with doing something else that's better for the environment. Like recently, especially, I've been trying to get into more like vegan and sustainable like cooking.”

Andrej's account highlights how dissonance can lead to compensatory behaviours, such as adopting sustainable practices, to balance competing values. His turn to vegan and environmentally conscious cooking illustrates a form of moral offsetting: seeking coherence by aligning other areas of life with personal ethics, even if the dissonance regarding luxury fashion remains unresolved.

Similarly, Wang Xiu provided a vivid metaphor to describe the internal conflict she experienced when navigating the desire for luxury against ethical awareness:

“I have a people, two people inside fight. But sometimes this is like people make a decision. People always conflict. One is the emotion perspective, and another one is in the rational perspective.”

Her description powerfully conveys the psychological split between emotional impulse and rational reasoning, a common theme in luxury consumption. This duality reflects how consumers often rationalise ethically questionable behaviour by compartmentalising their feelings, or by allowing one perspective (often emotional desire) to override the other.

Together, these insights underscore how cognitive dissonance is not only common but formative in shaping consumer behaviour. Rather than leading to immediate ethical change, dissonance may

prompt mitigation strategies, selective disengagement, or subtle shifts in other areas of lifestyle, each revealing the complex ways in which consumers negotiate their values in the face of desire.

5.6.3.3 Cultural Background and Identity Shaping Luxury Consumption

The cultural background of participants played a significant role in shaping their luxury consumption behaviours, revealing the nuanced interplay of cultural norms, identity, and morality. The observation that 10 out of 11 participants were non-native British residents is particularly relevant, as studies have shown that immigrant populations are more likely to engage in luxury consumption to signal status and cultural assimilation and consider luxury products “treasured” (Sekhon, 2015). This was especially evident among Chinese participants, who referenced cultural practices that emphasized conspicuous consumption as a way to demonstrate hierarchical superiority, despite coming from collectivist cultures where hedonism is often frowned upon (Aliyev and Wagner, 2018).

Giving gifts, especially luxury items, is not a display of hedonism but instead considered a way to show respect. The value of the gift matches the perceived value and social standing of the recipient. For instance, Wang Xiu highlighted the importance of gifting luxury items to convey respect and maintain social relationships, stating,

“In China, we always give the gift... I didn’t use Chanel by myself, but I have to buy [for] these people.”

Luxury goods, in cultures like China where social standing, class, and position in relation to superiors and authority figures, help to signal where one stands in the social hierarchy. They also reinforce social bonds and fulfil cultural expectations, where the value of the gift reflects the giver's regard for the recipient. Cultures that value order and decorum are not often verbally expressive cultures, but where actions and nonverbal forms of communication are carefully and considerately applied to maintain social niceties and save face, and gift giving is an example of these complex ideas represented symbolically through an object (Yan and Xiangling, 2020). This is done both professionally and within familial or interpersonal relationships. These perspectives reflect the broader cultural value placed on scarcity and exclusivity as markers of status.

Cultural differences significantly influenced participants' ethical considerations regarding the use of non-human animals in luxury products, revealing how values around consumption are shaped by broader social and moral frameworks. For instance, participants highlighted how attitudes toward animal protection varied across regions. Wang Jia reflected on differing awareness levels, noting, *"For Chinese people, they may not consider these kinds of things, but for some European or Western citizens, they will think, 'Oh, I need to protect the animals.'"* This observation aligns with participants like Pratham, who connected his ethical stance to his Indian cultural and religious upbringing:

"I've been brought up with respecting animals... I try to use my culture and my beliefs to outweigh one [value] over the other."

Such reflections demonstrate how deeply embedded cultural and spiritual values can shape ethical decision-making, particularly when navigating conflicting motivations related to luxury consumption.

Brand perception also emerged as a culturally contingent factor. Andrej, reflecting on social dynamics in Slovakia, described the importance of outward appearance: *"If you don't wear those kinds of brands, they kind of look down on you."*

Similarly, Ahmad explained that brands like Tommy Hilfiger, which are considered commonplace in the UK, are aspirational in Malaysia due to their high cost and association with status, adding, *"In Malaysia, Tommy Hilfiger is a big deal... it's quite expensive, so people want it to show that they have the brand."*

These comments illustrate how cultural perceptions of brands vary significantly across regions, influencing the motivations behind luxury consumption.

Religious beliefs also intersected with cultural context to shape consumption and acted as another type of modifier but promoted certain inhibitive behaviours. Ahmad, a Malaysian participant who is Muslim said that he would avoid anything that made from materials that are not considered *halal* in his faith. Similarly, a Pratham, a Hindu participant had feelings of care and consideration for animals because that is how he has been brought up. Thus, underscoring how religious morality and cultural identity shapes practical choices:

“The only thing I have is something based on my belief. So, I'm a Muslim. I would not go with anything related to pig skin or dog skin. Other than that, it should be all right.” (Ahmad)

“I'd say I'm more against it, especially because of like, my culture, my beliefs, my I've kind of been brought up like with, like, respecting animals and what they do.” (Pratham)

It is noteworthy that while these consumers do not engage in consumption behaviour as prohibited and prescribed by their religion, they still admitted to buying luxury products that were permissible and these products can still be unethically made, albeit they may not be made from specific animal skins or parts that the participants said that they were not comfortable with.

Novel insights from these interviews include the importance of gifting and respect in Chinese culture, the attraction of exclusivity even when linked to illegality, and the intersection of cultural identity with religious beliefs in shaping consumption behaviour. These findings reveal how luxury consumption serves as a site for negotiating cultural values, personal identity, and social expectations, further enriching the understanding of ethically dubious consumption practices within a luxury market in the UK that is truly global.

Based on this analysis this thesis proposes that one's cultural background and upbringing is an important means for justifying ethically dubious luxury consumption behaviour. It is an extension of Appeals to Higher Loyalties, but these in-groups are constructed by the normative society within these cultural contexts and are not groups that an individual volunteers to be a part of. If someone, as part of this culture, does not adhere to the practice of displaying wealth, signalling status by conspicuous consumption and display, or does not adhere to activities of gift-giving, then they suffer the consequence of being castigated from mainstream society. There is evidence that gift-giving activity, specifically in Eastern Cultures, is related to face saving in society, i.e., the maintenance of dignified standing in society, in a collectivist culture outward appearance and actions play a pivotal role in determining social status and acceptance by peers (Le Monkhouse, Barnes and Stephan, 2012).

Given that the main demand for products from the IWT come in the form of luxury fashion products and traditional medicines tells us that we must investigate culture and its influence if we are to create an effective profile of today's luxury consumer and design demand reduction intervention

strategies. We need awareness of cultural sensitivities and include the background of the consumer in these strategies.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the complex, multifaceted dynamics of luxury consumption, particularly concerning exotic skins. It has satisfied the research objectives set out for this exploration. 1) Through in-depth qualitative analysis, the findings have illuminated the motivations, purchase intentions, and behaviours of consumers of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins as grounded in the intertwined relationship between identity, morality, and socio-cultural constructs 2) Potential modifiers in the form of exposure to pet companion animals, concern for non-human animals, education on cruelty to non-human animals and ethical consumption practices can be ways by which consumer attitudes and behaviours change, as evidenced by the interviews 3) Consumers use a multitude of strategies to disengage with ethically nefarious behaviour and resolve and ethical tension, as can be evidenced by the employment of techniques of neutralisations, particularly strategies that are self-serving, appealing to higher loyalties and denying any responsibility in unethical consumption. There persists a tension between the allure of luxury and being an ethical consumer, but these objectives help identify the locations where behaviour change can be made possible.

Cultural and social contexts emerged as pivotal in influencing luxury consumption. Gift-giving traditions, cultural expectations of status signalling, and ingrained societal norms underscored the motivations for purchasing exotic skins, mainly for participants from non-British backgrounds. These cultural frameworks dictated the perceived value of luxury items and shaped moral perceptions, with some participants justifying their behaviours through appeals to culture, family, or tradition.

Moreover, the chapter highlighted the symbolic power of luxury brands in mitigating consumer guilt. Participants trusted heritage brands to uphold ethical and sustainable practices perpetuating the demand for ethically contentious products. The role of gender in luxury consumption was another novel insight, with participants associating specific exotic skin products with socially constructed masculine or feminine archetypes reinforcing types of identity.

While participants often claimed limited awareness of the IWT, their responses revealed an implicit understanding of its ethical implications, suggesting a disconnect between knowledge and action. This gap underscores the need for targeted demand reduction strategies that consider cultural sensitivities, consumer identity, and the socio-psychological mechanisms driving ethically dubious consumption.

The finding that consumers rarely distinguish between legally farmed and illegally sourced exotic skins highlights a systemic enforcement challenge. This blurring between legal and illegal supply chains demonstrates that the two markets operate in a symbiotic relationship rather than as distinct entities. Enforcement approaches that target only clearly illegal activity risk overlooking the laundering practices that enable illegally sourced skins to enter luxury supply chains. Recognising this overlap is therefore essential for understanding both consumer behaviour and the structural weaknesses in current regulatory frameworks. Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated that luxury consumption is not merely about material goods but about what these goods embody for the consumer and their identity. Addressing the ethical challenges associated with luxury consumption, particularly products made from exotic skins, therefore requires not only a nuanced understanding of these deeper motivations but also culturally informed interventions that account for the complexities of consumer behaviour and the enforcement gaps identified here.

Chapter 6 Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Overview

This thesis is an investigation into the user-end demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins sourced from the illegal wildlife. Studies have mainly focused on the supply side of the trade emanating from source countries (Biggs *et al.*, 2017; Latinne *et al.*, 2020; Koutchoro *et al.*, 2024), however, this project's examination of illegal wild animal products, specifically exotic skins, is an effort to inform and create demand reduction intervention strategies. Previous interventions have been constructed to change nefarious behaviour for a multitude of products at various different scales and levels mainly at the supply side (Challender, Harrop and MacMillan, 2015; Moorhouse, Elwin and D'Cruze, 2024), however, this study is novel in its focus on exotic skins and demand created by a western country, the UK. It is prudent to remember that there is no 'silver bullet', we cannot discard supply-side interventions in favour of demand-side interventions. Integrated efforts by employing best practice from both strategies and involving regulators and communities holistically is more effective (Thomas-Walters *et al.*, 2020).

As mentioned in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 3, luxury fashion products made from exotic leather are predominantly made by killing reptiles such as alligators, crocodiles, snakes, and lizards. The most recent UNODC wildlife crime report reptiles made up almost 20% of all wild animal seizures from 2015 to 2021 (UNODC, 2024). In the UK for total seizures calculated for the years 2012-13, 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022, reptiles accounted for more than 43% of all seizures, and of this 43% almost 90% of all seizures were of luxury fashion products. Therefore, the direction of the research has steered towards luxury fashion products. Previous research has identified it as one of the main types of wild animal related contraband (Petrossian, Pires and van Uhm, 2016; Katcher, 2020; Sosnowski and Petrossian, 2020). The UK, now the world's 5th largest consumer of luxury fashion, is the geographical focus of this research, examining different types of contraband seized and profiling the UK luxury consumer.

The overarching research objective investigated in this thesis are the factors that drive consumer demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins sourced from the IWT, and how can

insights from investigation inform demand reduction strategies to address this ethically dubious consumption. These factors and phenomena have been demystified in this thesis by presenting findings on the volume and scale of illegal animal products through contraband seizures, describing the psychology of the consumer by identifying psychological attributes associated with contentious consumption, and finally reporting on the various nuances presented by luxury consumers of these products that determine their intention to buy exotic skin products. These findings have then been integrated and interpreted through triangulation to make sense out of various aspects of dubious luxury fashion consumption.

The thesis provides a nuanced understanding and integration of consumer psyche, information-based strategies to influence change in defining what traditional luxury consumption should be, rebranding of ethical and sustainable alternatives as unique and worthy of being categorised as luxury, and finally that cultural factors and context matter when designing consumer demand reduction intervention strategies.

6.2 Triangulation of Key Findings

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was employed in the research design and is the foundation of analysis for integrated meaning making. Each chapter logically follows the previous by using context and main findings framing subsequent research. Additionally, theoretical underpinnings scaffold the development of chapters. Facets of consumer demand emerge from the results of the various quantitative and qualitative analysis methodologies. These facets are seizures of wild animal contraband, consumerism and psychological traits of consumers, and identity, self-concept, and justification for purchase intentions and behaviours associated with luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. The triangulation of these chapters validates the findings in a robust manner and underscores the interconnectedness of social, psychological, and cultural dimensions of ethically dubious luxury consumption. Essentially, this layered approach creates a rich and complex understanding of the market dynamics of consumer demand associated with luxury consumption of products made from exotic skins in the UK.

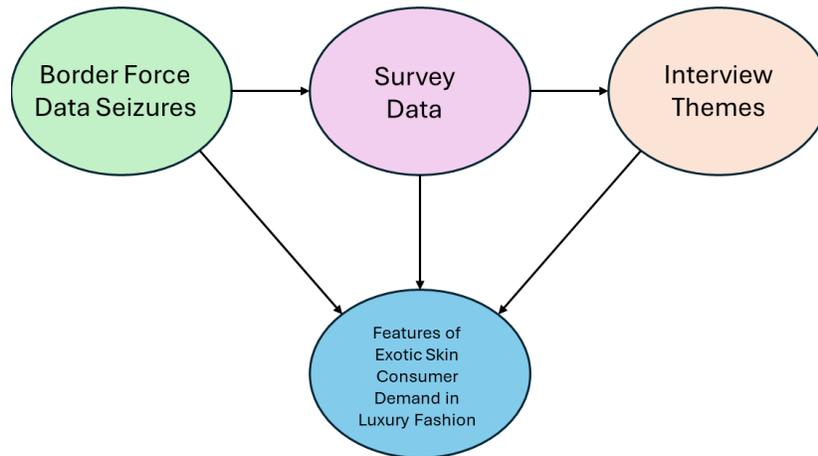


Figure 20. The Triangulation of Findings

In Chapter 3, UK Border Force data tells us that the only industry experiencing a resurgence in consumer demand is the luxury fashion industry. We can glean this information from trends in contraband seized but also, in the chapter, data on legal transport of CITES listed plants and animals was presented. Legal imports of products made from CITES listed species showed an exponential upward trend in the importation of all kinds of leather goods covered by the convention. As reported, there was also a moderate to strong positive correlation between this trend and the growth in revenue of the luxury industry in the UK. The main finding from this chapter was that the UK consumer that demands products sourced from the IWT is most likely going to be a luxury fashion consumer and is interested in products made from exotic skins.

It was of interest then to investigate consumer behaviour and purchase intention, with a psychological underpinning, specifically with respect to luxury fashion. It was conceptualised that with awareness of biodiversity loss and issues such as climate change becoming widespread and common, the UK consumer would have thoughts about the ethics and consequences related to the consumption of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. It was decided to look at the psychology of consumption and particularly the effect of empathic and narcissistic psychological attributes in determining positive or negative regard towards these products. The review of literature presented in this thesis clearly establishes a link between narcissism, materialism, and conspicuous consumption. Buying expensive and distinct products like exotic skins is a form of

conspicuous consumption. This association was tested in the survey, and it was found that there is a significant positive relationship between grandiose narcissism and positive regard for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. Another important finding in the survey was that empathy does not play a role in attitudes towards exotic skins. It can be inferred, therefore, that narcissism and empathy as psychological attributes, may be expressed in different contexts, and it is possible then that individuals can regulate this expression. This was a novel survey as previous research has used qualitative methods to interview fashion consumers on their attitudes towards furs and animal welfare issues associated with luxury fashion (Achabou, Dekhili and Codini, 2020), however, there is no study that looks specifically at exotic skins within the context of the UK luxury market. These findings are substantial and helped to identify underlying patterns related to the consumption of exotic skins, through a principal components analysis. These patterns in turn were used to create interview questions and pre-codes for a thematic analysis.

Finally, in chapter 5, the qualitative study revealed interview participants' consumption of luxury fashion products, how they describe luxury fashion products, their attitudes towards exotic skins, and how they feel about non-human animals. The key finding from the interviews was that luxury consumption is sensitive to one's cultural background if luxury and gift-giving have a deep meaning or value in that society. There is social comparison driven by a need for prestige and admiration associated with luxury fashion. That luxury brands and specific products have become social signals to others and a part of an individual's extended self. Exotic skins help convey a message of exclusivity and rarity to others allowing the consumer of these products to stand out and gain social capital through the display of wealth and luxury. These values have been socially constructed and can be closely linked to narcissism and materialism.

Essentially, when we combine these results, we can define the complex features of consumer demand for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins in the UK and can understand why the demand is continuing to increase. The consumer is likely to buy fashion, is likely to have narcissistic characteristics, and is motivated by culture, upbringing, social expectations, status-seeking, and personal desires influenced by the development of an identity closely tied to the ethos of what luxury fashion brands represent. By integrating seizure data, survey results, and interview narratives the study has captured both macro-level trends in the market for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins and micro-level consumer decision-making. The key argument that

emerges from this study is that demand for exotic skins is a complex socio-psychological and socially constructed phenomenon and goes far beyond simple preference of the material product, i.e. exotic skins.

The subsequent sections translate the triangulated findings into a practical agenda for reducing consumer demand for exotic skins in luxury fashion. The quantitative and qualitative evidence presented in this thesis demonstrates that demand is sustained by status signalling, the pursuit of social distinction and prestige, and narcissistic conspicuous consumption masked under the guise of prosociality and self-presentation. Identity, cultural values and social comparison further reinforce the desirability of exotic skins, with results showing that favourable attitudes towards their consumption are positively associated with grandiose narcissism, while empathy and positive attitudes towards animals had no discernible effect. Traditional intervention strategies have relied on appeals to empathy and educational campaigns centred on preventing cruelty to animals. However, participants in this study were able to neutralise their contentious consumption through justification, compartmentalisation and the management of cognitive dissonance. These dynamics indicate that policy instruments which assume a reflective, deliberative and empathic consumer are unlikely to shift behaviour at the scale necessary to drive cultural change. Effective interventions must therefore be designed to align with the actual ways in which demand for exotic skins is produced and reproduced within luxury culture.

The findings point to three intervention priorities:

- 1) **Status substitution and cultural reframing:** Where attitudes and intentions are tied to prestige, admiration and distinctiveness, interventions should provide credible alternative status signals that are culturally legible within luxury fields. That implies repositioning high-quality non-animal materials (bio-fabricated, plant-based and innovative textiles) as rare, exclusive and desirable, endorsed by luxury fashion houses and tastemakers. Campaigns should operate in elite cultural spaces and within brand ecosystems rather than as generic conservation appeals. Behaviour change research in IWT underscores that messaging framed around identity, norms and aspiration tends to outperform guilt-based appeals when the target behaviour is bound up with status (Thomas-Walters *et al.*, 2020).

- 2) **Accountability for neutralisation:** Interviewees normalised or justified exotic skins by denying responsibility, appealing to their own personal interests and values, and trust and integrity in the form of brand loyalty. This suggests a need for accountability mechanisms that remove easy rationalisations at the point of choice. Mandatory disclosure of species, origin, breeding method and welfare assurance; independent verification of captive-bred claims; and public registers of supplier facilities make neutralisation harder. These duties should fall on brands and intermediaries, not only on end consumers. This aligns with the principle of regulatory pluralism (Ayling, 2015), which recognises that effective governance does not rely solely on state enforcement but on the combined influence of multiple actors, including corporations, industry bodies, NGOs and consumers, who shape the regulatory environment and the choice architecture within which consumption occurs. CITES guidance likewise stresses that interventions should increase the salience of consequences and close gaps that allow laundering between legal and illegal spheres (CITES, 2021).
- 3) **Ethical salience in consumer decision-making:** The survey finding that empathy does not predict attitudes implies that simply providing more information on animal suffering will not move core luxury buyers. However, ethical salience can be designed into the purchasing context through standardised product disclosures, default presentation of verified alternatives, and retail prompts that connect choice to consequences without relying on shock appeals. This aligns with broader behavioural insights, which emphasise that decisions are shaped less by information alone and more by who communicates it, where it appears in the decision journey, and how options are presented (defaults, prompts, social proof). This perspective is consistent with the dynamics highlighted across the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Self-Determination Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and theories of social comparison and distinction.

Taken together, these findings establish that demand for exotic skins in luxury fashion is not reducible to ignorance or lack of awareness, but is embedded in deeper psychological drivers, cultural practices, and industry logics that sustain and normalise consumption. The remainder of this chapter develops these insights further by examining the limits of deterrence and the contested role of criminalisation, before turning to broader ethical considerations surrounding

luxury fashion. It interrogates the persistent “myth of sustainable luxury,” the slippery ethics of python farming, and the lessons that can be drawn from parallel industries such as diamonds. Finally, it sets out directives for the future of ethical fashion, outlining how regulatory, cultural, and behavioural levers can be combined to create credible and enforceable pathways away from animal-derived luxury. In doing so, the chapter extends the empirical findings presented here into a wider debate on what an ethical and sustainable future for luxury consumption might entail. The discussion will focus on other factors that have caused consternation and consideration when talking about the illegal wildlife trade broadly but also the trade of luxury fashion products specifically. It also presents more detailed recommendations enhancing the three intervention priorities by laying out policies and plans to implement them.

6.3 Limitations of Deterrence

Criminological deterrence theory is grounded in the rational choice model; it assumes that individuals weigh the costs and benefits of illegal actions. Under this framework, the certainty, swiftness, and severity of punishment are key to preventing crime. The theory’s effectiveness hinges not just on penalty severity but on “sanction certainty” – the likelihood that a crime will be detected and punished. As studies such as Carmichael and Piquero's (2004) demonstrate, when individuals repeatedly offend without facing consequences, their perceived risk of punishment diminishes, thereby eroding the deterrent effect (Carmichael and Piquero, 2004). In the context of IWT, many poachers and traffickers operate for years without being caught, emboldening them and weakening the impact of existing penalties.

Dölling et al.’s (2009) meta-analysis, which found that deterrence may be more effective for minor infractions but fails to significantly reduce complex, high-profit crimes like organised wildlife trafficking (Dölling *et al.*, 2009). The high financial returns associated with IWT, coupled with persistent demand, particularly in markets like traditional Chinese medicine and luxury fashion, create strong incentives that outweigh the perceived risk of prosecution.

While deterrence remains a theoretically valid component of criminal justice strategies, it is not a panacea for IWT. Effective deterrence must be embedded within a broader governance framework that ensures sanction certainty, judicial fairness, and low corruption. A reorientation towards

holistic law enforcement, cross-border cooperation, and demand-reduction strategies is necessary to complement the limited utility of punitive measures. Deterrence theory, in its traditional form, cannot account for the complexities and embeddedness of IWT within global economic and cultural systems.

Evidence from broader criminological literature also suggests that deterrence is less effective in addressing high-reward, organised crime. Illegal wildlife trafficking frequently offers substantial financial incentives, particularly where demand remains strong in consumer markets such as traditional medicine, luxury goods, and status-driven consumption. In these cases, the potential benefits far outweigh the perceived risks, particularly in jurisdictions where sanction certainty is low.

Rather than relying solely on punitive approaches, addressing IWT effectively requires a more comprehensive strategy that combines deterrence with improved enforcement capacity, international cooperation, and demand reduction. Efforts to enhance the rule of law, reduce corruption, and build institutional trust are essential to strengthening deterrence mechanisms. Without these foundational elements, penalties alone are unlikely to exert a meaningful influence on the decision-making processes of those engaged in the IWT.

An additional debate within the literature concerns whether consumer-side interventions should include the criminalisation of possession and consumption of luxury goods made from illegally traded wildlife. Proponents contend that such measures could symbolically reinforce the seriousness of the offence and signal that demand-side behaviour is no less culpable than supply-side trafficking. However, empirical evidence underscores the limitations of this approach. For instance, enforcement systems, such as Cameroon's, often fail to deter wildlife offences due to poor investigative capacity and weak prosecution mechanisms (St. John *et al.*, 2025). As Sosnowski *et al.* (2022) observe, wildlife crime is characterised by its low risk and high reward dynamics, with detection and prosecution remaining rare even at the consumer end of the supply chain (Sosnowski *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, Howe and Ege (2020) document that, despite international frameworks like CITES suggesting consumer-side criminalisation, few jurisdictions actually implement offences against possession, reflecting a broader reluctance to criminalise demand (Ege, Schloenhardt and Schwarzenegger, 2020).

Hübschle's (2024) notion of contested illegality highlights a further challenge: legality itself is plural, fluid, and negotiated through alternative moral economies (Hübschle, 2025). Within these framings, consumers and other actors may not regard the purchase of exotic skins as inherently criminal, but rather as socially legitimate or even prestigious. Her wildlife 'harmscapes' framework underscores how participation in criminalised markets is often rationalised through cultural values, historic grievances, or the pursuit of social distinction, thereby diluting the normative force of prohibition. The findings of this thesis similarly indicate that narcissism, prestige-seeking, and neutralisation techniques shape consumer demand in ways that blunt the salience of legal authority. A possession ban introduced without parallel efforts to reframe the cultural meaning of luxury or embed binding regulatory standards would therefore be unlikely to reduce demand. While consumer criminalisation may form one element of a broader toolkit, more promising approaches lie in reshaping status signals, embedding enforceable transparency mechanisms, and addressing the moral economies that sustain ethically contentious consumption.

6.4 Luxury Fashion: Exploitation and Unethical Production

Although the focus of this thesis has been on killing of wild animals, other serious ethical concerns associated within this industry only add to the nefariousness of luxury production and consumption. Luxury brands, despite generating significant revenues, exploit low-cost labour to manufacture their products in working conditions that do not meet international labour standards. There have been various investigations into the conditions of those that work in manufacturing facilities and evidence of hiring low-cost labour in poor countries and communities all over the world (Luginbühl and Musiolek, 2016) continues, even in contemporary times. In continental Africa individuals are indentured in modern slavery in luxury goods manufacturing (Taifa, 2021).

While the primary goal of any business is to maximize profits by minimising costs, the luxury fashion industry operates within a context of extreme profitability, targeting a market where the demand for their products is inelastic. Even if they were to bear a slight increase in production costs by paying fair wages, and not killing or harming animals, it would not have a significant impact on consumer demand or their profit margins.

Luxury manufacturers choose to prioritise the demands of their various shareholders and to chase ever higher and inflated profit margins over ethical practices. They perpetuate exploitation under the guise of operational efficiency and to provide the consumer with a product they believe is of the 'utmost quality' and hand craftsmanship. The products may very well be as such, however, who is hand-crafting these items matters. Compounding this issue is the reliance on exotic skins to make these products. To meet the global demand 'ethically' produced skin must be supplemented by the systematic killing of wild animals. Not only is this unscrupulous but the killing of protected animals is a breach of international conventions, like the convention on the international trade of endangered species (CITES), on wildlife conservation and transport (CITES, n.d.).

The exploitation of labour and the illegal sourcing of wild animal skins expose the avarice and disregard for legal and ethical responsibilities of the luxury goods manufacturer. These manufacturing practises not only stand in violation of laws but also put on display the underlying hypocrisy of an industry that sells exclusivity, elegance, quality, and sophistication while engaging in systemic harm to non-human animals and humans alike.

In our imaginings we feel as though this kind of exploitation is probably happening in poor or middle-income countries, however, exploitation in the luxury fashion manufacturing industry is rampant in western countries. For example, investigative probes into luxury goods manufacturers, in Milan, Italy, such as LVMH and Giorgio Armani found that there were clear violations of labour laws and that employees were mistreated and their health and safety was compromised (Parodi, 2024). Further research into Italian manufacturers has found a clear lack of traceability in the production of fashion and particularly leather footwear. Because of this absence of full visibility in the complete supply chain, i.e., from the sourcing of the raw material to the final product that is ready for the customer it is challenging to confidently make claims that ethical standards and sustainable practices are being followed (Karaosman *et al.*, 2020).

Chanel makes up 14% of the UK Luxury Fashion Market (Statista, 2023). Chanel is known for its classic style and sleek designs and has been a mainstay luxury fashion brand for more than 100 years. It is known for producing iconic accessories such as jewellery, shoes, and handbags with its familiar and identifiable back-to-back C logo. Chanel handbags are highly valued as style and status symbols by consumers. In 2018 Chanel had made an official statement that it would stop

the use of exotic skins in its manufacturing process (Baskin, 2018), admitting, that there are serious ethical concerns associated with the sourcing of exotic skins. However, there is a market for second-hand bags that are made from exotic skins. Some of these are priced in the tens of thousands of pounds. There is a consumer that is still interested in this and if Chanel cannot provide them with these products, they will seek other companies. Companies like Gucci, Prada, Louis Vuitton continue to use exotic skins, even if other companies have stopped doing so.

6.5 The Myth of Sustainable Luxury

Activist campaigns for sustainable fashion, over the years, have been designed to imbibe knowledge to consumers with the goal of creating a rational consumer who will make moral and ethical choices. The overload of information on ethical best practices should influence consumers, however, there is an overdependence on a culture of behaviour change (Lusty and Richards, 2024). In this thesis I explored concepts related to behaviour modification using strategies of perspective taking, however, I want to emphasise that individual action is not sufficient to change culture quickly. It is also not consistent. Out of 70% of consumers that stated that ethics influence their purchasing decisions it was only 23% that stated that it was always something they considered, while most consumers say that they care, only some truly do (Arrington, 2017). The statement is not to blame consumers but rather to underscore the responsibility of legislation and the luxury manufacturing industry to ensure standards are upheld for best practices that emphasise sustainability and eradicate exploitation. The entire onus should not be on individual consumers as the sole practitioners of sustainable practices.

The concepts of luxury and sustainability are not naturally coterminous. Luxury is about excessive consumption, and sustainability is about optimizing consumption to safeguard the health of the natural environment. There are manifold global pressures on humanity broadly social, economic, and environmental (UNDP, 2015). These pressures are accompanied with the rise of western consumers' concern about sustainability. It seems that the luxury manufacturing industry must transition towards 'sustainable luxury' or at least brand themselves in this way, to keep their customer base. The reality is far different from what brands have portrayed to their consumers. Although large conglomerates such as LVMH and Kering have sections of their websites dedicated

to their plans regarding sustainability (Kering, 2020; LVMH, 2021), however, it is up to the consumer to determine whether the information is truthful. Metrics that measure sustainability for the large companies, such as Kering, are not standardised and are largely internal, created by the company itself, further adding to the idea that information is either inaccurate or misrepresented.

Additionally, the fashion industry faces increasing scrutiny over its environmental impact, prompting many brands to adopt the language of sustainability without implementing meaningful change. Greenwashing practices of superficial or misleading claims of environmental responsibility, undermine consumer trust and stall progress toward true circularity. In luxury fashion, where exclusivity and excess are central, such practices perpetuate the illusion that sustainability and indulgent consumption can coexist. This reinforces a myth of ethical luxury (Adamkiewicz *et al.*, 2022), diverting attention from the industry's continued reliance on resource-intensive production and opaque supply chains.

Discourses on animal welfare and cruelty in luxury fashion have been prominent in the mainstream media and culture for over 30 years (Olson and Goodnight, 1994; Planthoin, 2016). Consolidating luxury with sustainability, inclusive of conserving biodiversity and emphasising concerns related to animal cruelty, is challenging to say the least. Findings from the investigation conducted for this research show consumer indifference, they may acknowledge the cruelty, however they continue to buy products that serve their need to stand out. Luxury consumers believe that any item that is 'sustainable' is of low quality and is not worth the expense. Stella McCartney, one of the most identifiable and verifiably sustainable big-name luxury brands, also faces sharp criticism from consumers as they simply do not believe it is justifiable to pay premium prices for products that are not made from real leather. While the brand has done vital work to stop animal cruelty in its supply chain, it still has more work to do in ensuring complete sustainability (Carvalho, Mendes and Pereira, 2023; Studente and Cattaneo, 2023). True sustainability will be when we can optimise resource-use, enhance longevity of existing products, and practice net-zero waste management.

6.6 Slippery Ethics: Python Skins in Luxury Fashion

There are arguments made that the harvesting of a particular species, the reticulated python, is sustainable (Natusch, Aust and Shine, 2021) and should be promoted for use in fashion as well as

in food farming to ensure food security (Natusch *et al.*, 2024). Reticulated pythons thrive near human habitation, mainly feeding on rodents and other pests, they stay relatively undetected as they are excellent at staying concealed, they have fast rates of growth and of maturity and females can lay an average of two dozen eggs every 2 or 4 years (Shine *et al.*, 1999). Based on this evidence arguments can be made that reticulated python skin use in the luxury fashion industry is ethical because it is sustainable, and that the killing of snakes for use in the industry is far lower than the replacement rate.

This thesis, however, is framed within green criminology and is concerned with the inherent cruelty in the killing of wild animal species for human consumption. In no way is the thesis arguing against the subsistence hunting of animals by rural communities at small scales. The concern is with the exponential demand for protected animal species skins from western countries such as the UK. An argument can be made that reticulated pythons are invasive species in environments such as the wetlands in Florida, USA (Engeman *et al.*, 2011) and that they should be exterminated using a wildlife management approach to safeguard native species. I counter this argument by shifting the onus on human intervention rather than the species itself. The blame is on those that imported reticulated pythons as exotic pets and subsequently released them for this resilient and hardy species to proliferate. Again, this can be traced back to the trade of wild animal species.

While the claims about sustainability of reticulated python harvesting seem to be compelling, at least at the superficial level, a deeper examination through a green criminology lens reveals significant ethical and ecological issues and gaps. As per the precautionary principle, when there is a lack of complete information, it is prudent to err on the side of caution. The focus of researchers has been on the life cycle of one python species, the reticulated python, and using metrics such as fast growth rates and proliferation benefits in terms of pest control present oversimplified reductionist arguments. There is serious welfare concerns related to hunting of wild animal species and their captive breeding. The same can be said for domestic animals and pet companion species and as a society we have addressed their welfare by creating legislation to protect their welfare, even if some are used for consumption. As mentioned previously in this thesis, there is no international body that ensures similar welfare standards for captive snake farming and breeding – luxury fashion companies rely on trusting the ethical standards as determined by the farms themselves. Additionally, these arguments of framing python killing and harvesting as sustainable

completely disregard the global economic inequalities that are driving the IWT to begin with. I would like to underscore the point that the products made from exotic skins are for affluent western consumers and are subsidising harm to communities in biodiversity-rich source countries incentivising the complete destruction and decimation of entire ecosystems. Short-term and short-sighted economic benefits for local communities will not matter when in the future they will not have the means to sustain their livelihoods.

When we justify the hunting of one wild animal species, we are opening a pandora's box. In a statement made to the Guardian on how London Fashion week has banned exotic skins for the year 2025, Daniel Natusch stated, "If you don't like using animals to produce a skin or whatever it may be, that's fine. But don't tell the world that it's because you care about sustainability. All of the life cycle analysis has been done. There is not a single raw material that we know of, apart from pineapple leather, that is more sustainable than exotic skin, particularly python. It's ridiculous. If designers were serious and informed themselves, we'd all be wearing snakeskin underpants"(Greenfield, 2024).

There are dire consequences for the environment when an individual, especially someone who is an influential researcher and serves as the chair of the IUCN's snake specialist group, makes statements that trivialize and undermine the serious nature of ethical concerns associated with the killing of wild animal species. When saying "we [would] all be wearing snakeskin underpants" the researcher is engaging in rhetoric that seeks to downplay the severity of debates surrounding true sustainability. The claims that there has been a life cycle analysis for the reticulated python may be true, however, can the same be said about all pythons? According to the IUCN red list, a list compiled by the organisation that he himself is affiliated with, there are 11 python species that are endangered, vulnerable, or near threatened. The Burmese python is one of the vulnerable species, and within data analysed for this PhD there are multiple seizure events of Burmese python (*Python bivittatus*) skins and fashion products, as recently as 2022. It is apparent then that if a snake species such as the Burmese python is being hunted for fashion with a vulnerable conservation status, then surely killing it is not sustainable practice. In a paper authored by Dr. Natusch the effects of over-harvesting wild blood pythons is questioned, and changes in their demographics including reduced body size and fecundity have been measured as a potential consequence of over-hunting (Natusch *et al.*, 2020).

There are additional concerns related to a conflict of interest. Dr. Natusch has a partnership with LVMH, specifically Louis Vuitton, as a wildlife partner to protect and restore biodiversity through his organisation People for Wildlife, Dr. Natusch has himself admitted to taking on private assignments and part of his payment for these assignments has come from luxury brands and companies such as Kering (Alberts, no date). The ethics and objectivity of the statement he made is compromised and raises serious concerns regarding claims of sustainable practice when the researcher himself is affiliated with a profit-driven company. The use of selective narratives to present practices that are detrimental to the environment is dangerous as it legitimises these practices that do not hold up to scrutiny under ethical and ecological frameworks.

The reticulated python may have a conservation status of least concern but can the same be said about other python species? If we are also measuring a species specifically based on their viability and sustainability within the context of human use, we are creating a bias in favour of artificially breeding and farming this species, not for its conservation value, but for its utility. This can lead us down a slippery slope of mass production, like the meat industry, we may save one species but what is the point if that species will never be wild again?

6.7 Ethical Luxury: Lessons from the Diamond Industry

Diamonds have long been synonymous with luxury across cultures, a symbolic association that has been deeply ingrained in collective consciousness. Even in monopoly, one of the world's most widely recognised board games – translated into 47 languages and sold in over 110 countries – the ‘luxury tax’ spot on the board features an illustration of a gleaming diamond ring. This simple yet powerful visual reinforces the notion that diamonds are the pinnacle of wealth and exclusivity; however, this association is not inherent but rather the product of deliberate and strategic market engineering by manufacturers and major industry actors.

This perception of diamonds as rare and intrinsically valuable was carefully manufactured by the largest diamond mining and selling company, De Beers, the dominant force in the diamond industry for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. Since the late 1800s, De Beers has exercised near-monopolistic control over global diamond supply chains, at one point accounting for approximately two-thirds of the world’s rough cut diamond sales. By creating artificial scarcity, restricting market

access, and launching one of the most successful advertising campaigns in history “A Diamond Is Forever” they transformed diamonds from relatively unremarkable gemstones to enduring symbols of love, commitment and social status (Bergensstock and Maskulka, 2001). Despite marketing diamonds as exclusive, rare, and precious, however, raw and uncut diamonds are not as rare as consumers are led to believe. The International Gem Society notes that while gem-stone quality diamonds are rare, diamonds in their natural state are some of the most common gems (Rosen, n.d.). This discrepancy highlights how perceived scarcity, rather than actual rarity, has driven consumer demand for diamonds.

Beneath this carefully constructed image of sophistication, elegance, exclusivity and prestige lies a dark history of exploitation and violence. Historically, much of the global supply of diamonds came from African nations such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d’Ivoire, that have had a history of civil unrest and violent rebellions (Bieri, 2016). Throughout the mid to late 20th century, these conflicts were funded by conflict diamonds with rebel groups taking control of diamond mines, using forced labour or by drawing in poor and destitute civilians to extract and smuggle diamonds (Le Billon, 2008), the profits of which financed brutal armed conflicts. These so-called conflict diamonds became a major funding source for guerrilla warfare, leading to widespread human rights violations, mass killings, warfare, and environmental destruction, earning them the moniker “blood diamonds”. Scholars argue that De Beers should be liable for complicity in crimes by indirectly and directly funding crises when buying diamonds from insurgents (Saunders, 2001; Janus, 2012).

The emergence of public awareness campaigns and investigative journalism in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Cook, 2016) exposed the dark underbelly of the diamond trade. While the reportage failed to cover the full extent of the actors involved, the awareness it brought profoundly shifted consumer perceptions of the diamond trade. Heightened scrutiny led to the establishment of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) in 2003. KPCS is an international initiative aimed at preventing conflict diamonds from entering the legitimate market (Kimberley Process, 2010). However, the Kimberley Process has been criticized for its limitations, including its failure to address broader ethical concerns such as opaqueness of supply chains, reports of labour exploitation, environmental destruction, and corruption, while also excluding the mention of

human rights abuse in its process of determining ethical production of diamonds (Schulte and Paris, 2020).

Public knowledge of the terrible ways in which this industry has grown, by lying to consumers and using conflict diamonds, has changed consumer perceptions towards naturally mined diamonds. Lab-created diamonds have emerged as a sustainable and conflict-free alternative. Initially dismissed as inauthentic or fake, lab-grown diamonds have undergone a remarkable transformation in consumer perception. Today, there is an exponential growth in and demand for synthetically manufactured lab diamonds, they currently hold 14.3% share in the global diamond market with a projection to capture 21.3% in 2025 (Forbes, 2024). Major luxury brands and mainstream jewellers have embraced lab-created diamonds, recognising their appeal as an ethical alternative to mined diamonds. This shift demonstrates that cultural perceptions of luxury are not static but malleable, shaped by consumer awareness, in turn changing values in culture over time.

The trajectory of the diamond industry provides a compelling precedent for the luxury fashion industry, particularly in relation to exotic skins. If diamonds, an item indispensable to luxury, can be successfully rebranded toward ethical alternatives, then luxury fashion can surely undergo a similar transformation. Through education, strategic and attractive marketing, and industry practices such as transparency and traceability, luxury brands have the potential to transition consumer demand away from exotic animal skins towards ethical and sustainable alternatives, possibly through duplicates or replicas made from synthetic fibres or plant-based renewable leather. As discussed in Chapter 5, consumer loyalty for and trust in legacy luxury brands is a key determinant of purchasing behaviour. Interview participants expressed implicit faith in the ethicality of high-end luxury fashion houses, if the premium prices they pay reflect adherence to the highest ethical and sustainable standards. This presents a vital opportunity for luxury brands – rather than engaging in greenwashing, they can leverage existing consumer trust to implement genuine sustainable and ethical industry changes.

Ultimately, the success of lab-grown diamonds illustrates that ethical transitions in luxury are not only possible but inevitable, provided leaders and manufacturers within the industry commit to foster cultural change appealing to the aware and knowledgeable consumer. Exotic skin

alternatives can, and should, be positioned as desirable, unique, exclusive, of high-quality, and high-status, mirroring the evolution that has already taken place in the diamond industry.

6.8 Directives for the Future of Ethical Fashion

The luxury fashion industry is undergoing a transformational shift, driven not only by growing consumer awareness of ethical and environmental issues but also by the increasing regulatory pressure from governments and international organisations. The European Union (EU) is at the forefront of these changes, introducing stricter regulations to promote sustainability, transparency, and accountability in the fashion sector, including luxury brands. As unethical and unsustainable practices in high-end fashion manufacturing have been exposed and have gained traction, policymakers are responding with legally binding regulatory measures that have and will continue to fundamentally alter how the industry operates. These regulatory interventions signal a shift from some guidelines and stipulations on corporate responsibility toward enforceable legal standards, ensuring that sustainability is no longer just a check box item for compliance or a branding strategy but has deep and lasting positive impact.

Several key regulations have already been enacted, with direct implications for the luxury industry. The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (European Union, 2022) mandates that companies disclose their sustainability impacts, requiring supply chain transparency and clear reporting on environmental and social practices. This is particularly significant for luxury brands, which have long operated with opaque supply chains and limited disclosure regarding their sourcing and production methods. The Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) (European Union, 2024c) further pushes luxury manufacturers toward improving circularity and efficiency through durability, repairability, and recyclability, compelling them to innovate and adhere to standards for sourcing materials and enhancing the design and manufacturing processes. Additionally, the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes, ensuring that brands take accountability for the end-of-life management of their products, specifically when it comes to reuse and recycling of textile waste (EU Directorate-General for Environment, 2022). This effectively places the burden on luxury

brands to minimise or eliminate waste, enhance product circularity, and integrate sustainable design principles into their core business models.

Beyond existing regulations, proposed EU directives will further tighten restrictions on corporate sustainability claims and supply chain ethics. The Empowering Consumers for the Green Transition initiative directly targets greenwashing, requiring companies to substantiate any sustainability-related claims, such as the labelling, durability and reparability of a product (European Union, 2024a) and ensuring consumers have access to information enabling them to make “sustainable transactional decisions”(Linklaters, 2024) this has taken shape in a formal directive that be adopted by the end of September 2026 by all member states. This aligns with the Green Claims Directive, which seeks to prevent misleading sustainability narratives, ensuring that luxury brands do not exploit ethical branding and need to provide scientifically robust and verifiable evidence for their claims (EU Directorate-General for Environment, 2023). Additionally, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) entered into force in 2024 and requires companies to actively monitor, address, and cease any human rights violations and environmental risks throughout their supply chains (European Union, 2024b). As evidenced in this thesis. luxury fashion has been scrutinised for labour exploitation and adverse environmental impacts, particularly in the sourcing of exotic skins, silk, and leather, these directives and regulations will force brands to engage in genuine ethical transformation, if they want to continue their business in one of the largest consumer markets for luxury fashion, rather than surface-level sustainability marketing or greenwashing.

The impact of these regulatory shifts will be profound. Luxury brands, which have traditionally thrived on exclusivity, secrecy, and market control, will need to adapt rapidly to remain competitive. Supply chain traceability will no longer be optional but legally mandated, compelling brands to map out every stage of production, from raw material extraction to final product assembly. Waste management strategies will become integral to business models, requiring companies to invest in recycling, repurposing, and sustainable disposal methods. Furthermore, brands will have to collaborate more transparently with suppliers to ensure compliance with labour and environmental laws, challenging the long-standing practice of outsourcing production to low-cost, loosely regulated regions. These regulatory measures must be investigated and integrated into UK policy.

Ultimately, these regulatory changes present both a challenge and an opportunity for luxury fashion. While compliance will require significant restructuring of supply chains and business practices, it also provides a unique chance for legacy brands to redefine luxury in a truly sustainable way. Brands that successfully integrate circularity, ethical sourcing, and verified sustainability claims will not only meet regulatory demands but also strengthen their brand equity among increasingly conscious consumers, with 67% of UK and German consumers reporting that they are interested in sustainable materials (Granskog *et al.*, 2020). Just as lab-grown diamonds have been repositioned as both ethical and luxurious, exotic skin alternatives and sustainable innovations in luxury fashion can gain mainstream acceptance – if brands proactively embrace regulation as a catalyst for transformation rather than a threat to exclusivity. The luxury industry, once synonymous with secrecy and unchecked resource extraction, now stands at a crossroads. Whether it resists or adapts, the future of luxury fashion, at least in the European market, will need to be defined by sustainability, transparency, and ethical responsibility if they want to create “a strategic imperative for sustained success”(PWC, 2024). The Luxury Slowdown of 2025

The global luxury market, long viewed as resilient in the face of economic downturns, has seen a noticeable slowdown in 2025 (Balchandani *et al.*, 2025). This deceleration reflects a confluence of macroeconomic, geopolitical, and cultural shifts that are disrupting traditional patterns of luxury consumption across key markets.

In the United States, economic uncertainty tied to the presidential election year has created hesitancy among consumers. Inflation and stagnant wage growth have contributed to a tightening of discretionary spending, even among middle- and upper-income groups traditionally targeted by luxury brands. The broader mood is one of financial caution, and luxury, often seen as a discretionary indulgence, is among the first categories to be re-evaluated in such climates.

In Europe, the ongoing geopolitical instability resulting from the war in Ukraine, combined with sluggish wage growth, has further dampened consumer confidence. The UK has seen no significant post-pandemic wage recovery, and the cost-of-living crisis continues to affect consumer spending habits. As everyday essentials become more expensive, luxury purchases are increasingly deferred, perceived as untimely or indulgent.

The Chinese luxury market, once the industry's most dynamic driver, has also entered a period of contraction. A shift in public sentiment has seen consumers pull back from the conspicuous overseas luxury spending that characterised the pre-pandemic years. While luxury brands have attempted to repatriate consumption by strengthening their domestic Chinese presence, many consumers are now less willing to splurge. Economic uncertainty, evolving cultural attitudes toward spending, and a growing sense that extravagant purchases are socially inappropriate in the current climate have contributed to this pullback.

Supply chain fragility remains a significant issue across the industry, especially since COVID-19. In Italy, for instance, home to many of the artisans and family-run suppliers that underpin the luxury fashion ecosystem, succession challenges are surfacing. As younger generations show less interest in continuing traditional manufacturing roles, shortages in skilled labour have led to production bottlenecks (Kent, 2025). The result has been mark-ups on emblematic luxury items, not due to material quality, but because of scarcity in labour and production capacity.

Crucially, the slowdown is not about a rejection of luxury aesthetics or quality. Rather, it reflects the rising cost of luxury and a global recalibration of what such consumption represents. As inflation outpaces income growth, and as global events prompt reflection on ethical and environmental values, many consumers are reconsidering the value, and appropriateness, of luxury goods and services. This evolving landscape raises important questions for the future of luxury consumption, particularly how it intersects with narratives of sustainability, ethics, and identity.

6.9 Limitations of Study

6.9.1 Sampling

Seeking out participants for the quantitative survey was a challenge. The initial pilot survey was filled out by a convenience sample of university students between February and March 2023, however, for the final survey a systematic purposive sampling methodology was employed wherein, I, the researcher, used my Facebook account to gain access to groups selling luxury products, and various community groups of large metropolitan areas and counties across the UK.

This survey was disseminated in these groups. Out of 67 groups contacted 17 groups approved my membership and advertised my survey. Using this method I received approximately 80 individual responses; however, this was not a sufficient sample as it did not meet the criteria for the a priori power analysis. Convenience sampling was employed, and an amendment was made to ethics wherein an incentive of a £25 gift card was included in the advertising for the survey. This resulted in an additional 84 responses. Financial incentives are key when recruiting participants, especially for a self-reported survey.

6.9.2 Research Design

The study presented in this thesis employed an explanatory mixed methods research design, where quantitative findings guided qualitative inquiry, such that trends uncovered through statistical analysis were further explored through in-depth semi-structured interviews with actual consumers of luxury fashion. This approach allowed for a structured design that was grounded in psychological and criminological theory explaining individual behaviour within the context of unethical consumerism. This aligned with the study's objective of understanding the psychological, cultural, and social drivers of consumer demand for luxury exotic skins. As with any methodological choice, however, this design comes with inherent limitations warranting discussion.

A potential alternative would have been an exploratory mixed methods approach, where qualitative data collection precedes and informs the quantitative phase. This method may have provided richer, more inductive insights into consumer attitudes and motivations capturing unexpected themes, nuanced justifications, and complex emotional responses that were not predefined by existing theory or quantitative frameworks like consumer surveys. For instance, if interviews had been conducted first, participants' reasoning for purchasing exotic skins could have shaped the development of survey items, ensuring that the quantitative measures were more contextually grounded in real world consumer discourse rather than being derived from pre-existing literature.

Using an exploratory design, however, would have introduced its own challenges. It could have led to difficulties in generalising my findings to other luxury consumers. The qualitative themes that would emerge would have been idiosyncratic and dependent on the specific sample I would have

received for the initial qualitative interviews. As I have mentioned, the sample that I ended up getting for my qualitative interviews was a convenience sample of a mix of university students and employees, while they were consumers of luxury fashion not all were consumers of exotic skins. By having conducted a survey on attitudes specific to exotic skins the interview guide was able to capture the opinions and actual as well as potential justifications that these habitual consumers of luxury fashion had towards exotic skins. I would have compromised the data and could have potentially misidentified the narrative around luxury fashion. I may have also not engaged with actual customs seizure data, and my thesis would have taken an approach that was only specific to the motivations and desires of a selective sample of individuals who would not cover the broad gamut of luxury consumers that do buy, own, or inherit products made from exotic skins.

Additionally, exploratory methods can lack clear direction, if the nature of the research question or the objective of the exploration is vague. My objectives were rooted in theory and therefore the approach, although interpretive and did involve induction during the qualitative stage, was deductive. A strong integration of theoretical constructs, such as narcissism, cognitive dissonance, techniques of neutralisation, social comparison etc. was paramount to my study and was justified by having conducted both a context building analysis that determined the direction of my study (analysing Border Force data) and to identify the direction of questioning using my survey. Essentially the deductive integrative approach became the backbone of my research design and fit in the paradigm of explanatory methods. Most importantly, the explanatory approach ensured that the qualitative phase was directly linked to statistically significant trends, reinforcing validity by allowing for this integrated interpretation rather than an open-ended thematic analysis without a clear quantitative anchor. To explain this in a metaphor, I believe that quantitative analysis is like looking at a hallway with multiple doors, through analysis you can identify which door to open, once inside this room qualitative analysis is used to describe the contents of the room.

Ultimately, while an exploratory mixed methods approach could have allowed for more flexibility and opening opportunities for the development of different themes, the explanatory design provided the structure necessary to sequentially and systematically investigate the research objectives.

6.9.3 Cross-cultural Comparison

One of the significant findings from the qualitative analysis was the importance of the cultural background and upbringing of consumers in shaping their attitudes towards luxury fashion and exotic skins. Participants' understanding of what luxury is, their ethical considerations on consumption, judgment of the purchasing behaviour of others, and status signalling was deeply embedded within their cultural and socio-economic contexts, influencing how they rationalised or justified their purchasing decisions (cross reference techniques of neutralisation). This aligns with broader sociological and psychological literature, asserting that luxury consumption is socially constructed and is shaped by cultural norms and practices that inform an individual's identity and values with a clear distinction between the kind of prestige expected and asserted collectivist versus individualistic cultures (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). There is also emerging literature that confirms the investigation presented in this thesis on the importance of brand, specifically logos, in gift choice and gift-giving (Lee *et al.*, 2024) and was reflected in the responses of the participants that belonged to cultures where this was of great value.

Given the centrality of cultural identity in shaping luxury fashion consumption, a more expansive, cross-cultural approach could have enriched this study. If additional time and resources had been available, a comparative, cross-sectional sampling strategy could have been implemented to explore cultural variations, within the UK context, in greater depth. This would have required recruiting participants from a wider range of geographic, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Enabling a further and more contemporary analysis of how factors such as collectivist versus individualist cultural orientations and traditional versus modern luxury perceptions shape the demand for exotic skins in distinct ways.

The research for this doctoral study, however, was already ambitious in its scope, involving the collection and analysis of both primary and secondary data across multiple research components. Logistically, a comprehensive cross-cultural study was beyond the practical constraints of this project, particularly given the need to triangulate multiple data sources while maintaining methodological rigor. Expanding the study to include a larger, cross-sectional, and potentially international sample, would have gone beyond the identified scope and would have required extended fieldwork with additional funding and collaboration with institutions. Determining where

to conduct this fieldwork, how long it would be, and determining the methodologies to be employed is potentially the topic of an entirely new doctoral project.

Nevertheless, understanding this cultural element is an important avenue for future investigation, as further research could deepen our understanding of how cultural values mediate luxury consumption and how individuals negotiate and bargain with their cultural expectations and their personal values when performing ethically dubious consumption. This kind of work would also be essential in further understanding how luxury brands navigate global markets and how demand reduction intervention strategies for exotic skins could be tailored to different cultural frameworks to mitigate the demand for and consumption of wild animals.

6.9.4 UK Border Force Data

The process of receiving UK Border Force Data took more than 9 months. There were several initial rejections when data was requested. When data was finally received due to limited resources at UK Border Force, data only for the years 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022 was provided. If there was continuous data and not limited irregular interval data, further meaningful trends in data analysis could have been performed, providing a deeper and more accurate impression of the contraband seized in the UK.

6.10 Future Avenues for Exploration

The qualitative interviews conducted in this study have provided significant insights into the purchase intentions, motivations, and justifications underlying ethically contentious luxury fashion consumption. By exploring the perspectives of consumers who purchase exotic skin products, this research has contributed to understanding the sociology and psychology of such consumption. However, to gain a more holistic understanding of demand trends for exotic skin products in the UK, future research should extend beyond consumer perspectives to incorporate insights from key industry stakeholders, including shop managers, business owners, and importers. These actors occupy a pivotal position in the supply chain and can provide valuable data on shifting consumer preferences, purchasing behaviours, and broader market trends.

Methodologically, a mixed-methods approach could be employed to achieve this objective. Semi-structured interviews with shop managers and business owners could offer qualitative insights into the perceived demand for exotic skins, the factors influencing consumer decisions, and changes in stock and sales strategies in response to regulatory or ethical considerations. Additionally, access to transaction data, inventory records, and sales figures would allow for a quantitative analysis of purchasing patterns, offering empirical evidence of how exotic skin products are performing in the market. Ethnographic methods, including participant observation in luxury boutiques, could further contextualise these insights by capturing non-verbal interactions, in-store marketing strategies, and consumer engagement with exotic skin products.

Thematically, such an investigation is critical for understanding evolving market dynamics and consumer segmentation within the luxury fashion industry. Informal discussions were conducted to investigate the potential of including industry stakeholders as part of this research, however due to funding and time limitations it was decided to not pursue this avenue for the purpose of this research. These conversations were had with shop managers at two Chopard stores in London, and they suggested that while some luxury brands have discontinued exotic skin sales (such as at Selfridges), consumer demand persists among specific clientele willing to pay a premium and specifically demanding exotic skins. This raises questions about the extent to which ethical concerns and regulatory changes are influencing consumer behaviour, or whether substitution effects, such as calfskin imitations used at Chopard, are driving market adaptations. Future research could explore whether such shifts are indicative of broader industry trends or are specific to certain brands and consumer demographics. Furthermore, by triangulating consumer perspectives with retailer and importer insights, researchers can develop more effective educational tools and intervention strategies aimed at influencing purchasing decisions and promoting sustainable alternatives.

Such a research agenda would address the current gap in understanding how supply-side actors shape and respond to consumer demand for exotic skins, ultimately contributing to more informed policymaking and ethical considerations within the luxury fashion industry.

Future research could also benefit from a more granular analysis of Border Force data, particularly by conducting cross-country comparisons with other EU nations. This would enable a deeper

understanding of enforcement patterns, policy effectiveness, and the broader dynamics of IWT within Europe. Additionally, the potential to model the irregular time-series nature of seizure data could provide insights into temporal trends, enabling researchers to assess how changes in legislation, enforcement priorities, or market dynamics influence the volume and composition of seized products over time.

A key observation from the Border Force data in this study was the presence of significant outlier events, which may correspond to regulatory shifts, shifts in enforcement priorities, or sudden fluctuations in trade volumes. Investigating these anomalies in greater detail such as the identification of caviar serum as a seized product could offer valuable insights into emerging trends in illegal or restricted trade. Conducting qualitative interviews with Border Force personnel would further contextualize these findings by providing firsthand accounts of enforcement challenges, policy changes, and illicit trade adaptations.

Another avenue for future research involves expanding the scope of data collection beyond animal-based luxury products to include plant-based commodities, such as rare and endangered tree species. Species like various cacti (*Cactaceae spp.*) and rosewood (*Dalbergia spp.*) are subject to high levels of illegal extraction, often from the same geographic regions where poaching of exotic wildlife is prevalent. By incorporating data on the illegal trade of plant materials, researchers could construct a more comprehensive picture of environmental exploitation networks and their intersection with luxury goods markets.

Collaborating with researchers already working with agencies such as Border Force would also enhance the robustness of future studies. Establishing interdisciplinary partnerships with experts in criminology, environmental science, and economics could facilitate a multi-faceted analysis of illegal trade, drawing on diverse methodological approaches. A cross-country analysis, particularly comparing seizure data with legal import records under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), could reveal discrepancies between legal and illegal trade flows. Currently, Border Force does not provide data on the source countries for seized items. If made available in the future, this information would be crucial for assessing potential correlations between legal imports and illegal seizures, identifying high-risk trade routes, and informing targeted policy interventions.

By integrating these methodological and thematic extensions, future research could contribute significantly to understanding the evolving landscape of the IWT, supporting more effective enforcement strategies, and advancing conservation and ethical trade policies in the luxury market.

6.11 Policy Recommendations

This research demonstrates that demand for exotic skins in luxury fashion is primarily driven by status-seeking behaviour, social distinction, and psychological attributes such as grandiose narcissism. Ethical concerns about cruelty to animals their welfare and environmental issues such as biodiversity loss while acknowledged by consumers are often overridden by justifications that neutralise ethically dubious or morally nefarious consumption behaviour. As mentioned in the literature review, supply-side punitive actions insufficient deterrents for criminal wildlife trading and trafficking, this thesis provides evidence for consumer demand reduction strategies that are focused on consumer education, regulatory improvements, and providing both consumer and manufacturer incentives to shift towards ethical non-harm-based consumption and production of luxury products.

6.11.1 Reframing Luxury and Reducing Consumer Demand

Given that the desire for exotic skins is rooted in their exclusivity and prestige, policies aimed at reducing consumer demand should focus on repositioning sustainable alternatives as equally aspirational. Instead of relying on traditional conservation messaging that emphasises guilt or moral obligation, efforts should be made to redefine the concept of luxury by associating sustainability with status and distinction. Luxury rebranding campaigns that present bio-fabricated alternatives, plant-based leathers, and ethically sourced materials, need to be marketed as desirable and luxurious to affluent consumers, and associated with legacy brands that hold high prestige in society. An example of a brand that has achieved such status and from whom lessons on using sustainable leather substitutes is Stella McCartney (Campos Franco, Hussain and McColl, 2019).

Since consumer behaviour is heavily influenced by social norms and peer perception, policy efforts should incorporate prosocial campaigns that integrate sustainability into elite cultural spaces, in turn appealing to materialistic or narcissistic consumers that value admiration from peers and engage in conspicuous consumption.

Collaborations with fashion influencers, celebrities, and high-status individuals could further reinforce ethical consumption as a marker of sophistication. Marketing campaigns in the past, such as a Chinese campaign with the basketball player Yao Ming have proven to work and educate consumers on the IWT, however it is mindful that stereotyping any ethnic community should be avoided and the myth of the ‘Asian Super Consumer’ of illegal wildlife traded products should be discouraged (Margulies, Wong and Duffy, 2019), as evidenced in this thesis it is not just the East that is a major source for the illegal trade in wild animals.

Additionally, luxury fashion houses should be required to disclose sustainability metrics and be transparent about procurement and manufacturing processes. This reinforces consumer loyalty and adds to changing culture to accept that responsible purchasing aligns with exclusivity and high-status consumption.

6.11.2 Consumer Education and Ethical Salience

Findings from this study suggest that direct empathy for animals does not necessarily deter individuals from purchasing exotic skin products. However, exposure to ethical issues—particularly through awareness of animal cruelty in other domains, such as pet ownership—was associated with behavioural shifts. This aligns with the psychological concept of ethical salience, in which individuals who are more frequently confronted with moral dilemmas related to consumption are more likely to integrate ethical considerations into their decision-making.

While consumer education and awareness campaigns have long been central to demand reduction efforts, evidence across conservation and sustainable consumption domains suggests that information alone rarely translates into sustained behavioural change. Appeals to empathy or consumer responsibility may raise awareness but have limited impact when the underlying drivers of demand are status, prestige, and identity construction. This echoes findings in demand reduction research, where educational campaigns have often failed to disrupt entrenched

consumption norms (Veríssimo and Wan, 2019) It also reflects broader sustainability scholarship on the persistent “value–action gap,” whereby individuals express concern for ethical or environmental issues yet continue with consumption practices that contradict those values (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Consequently, interventions premised solely on education are unlikely to shift behaviour at scale. Rather, education must be embedded within regulatory and structural measures—such as mandatory disclosures, default presentation of alternatives, or accountability requirements for brands – that redesign the choice environment and make ethical salience unavoidable.

According to the Luxury Fashion Transparency Index report of 2024, 94% of all luxury manufacturers and mass-market manufacturers do not disclose the suppliers of their raw materials and 95% do not disclose the name of the specific facility or farm where the raw materials are sourced, there is no transparency in the fashion industry, especially in the supply-chain (Simpliciano *et al.*, 2024). To enhance ethical salience in luxury consumption, policies should require greater transparency in supply chains. Retailers should be mandated to provide accessible information on product origins, ensuring that consumers are exposed to ethical considerations at the point of purchase. Research shows that transparency boosts consumer loyalty and most importantly trust in the brand (Richards, 2021). Perhaps brands are fearful that they would lose consumers and do not want to disclose information as they know they will be heavily scrutinised due to immoral, unethical, and illegal procurement of raw materials.

6.11.3 Strengthening Regulation and Industry Standards

Voluntary certification schemes have long been promoted as mechanisms to align consumer choice with sustainability objectives, yet evidence across sectors indicates that they frequently fall short of delivering meaningful change. Early analyses in forestry and fisheries highlighted inconsistent standards, weak auditing, and the persistence of unsustainable practices under certification labels such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) (Gulbrandsen, 2010; Ponte, 2012). More recent studies show that these limitations remain unresolved: voluntary programs in forestry continue to struggle with variable standards and limited impact on deforestation (Dröge *et al.*, 2025), while in fashion, the proliferation of certification schemes has been criticised as greenwashing that obscures overproduction and

unethical practices (Changing Markets Foundation, 2022). Transparency also remains elusive in the luxury sector: despite public commitments, a 2024 study revealed that disclosures on sourcing and suppliers remain rare or superficial among luxury brands, undermining credibility and consumer trust (Jestratijevic, Uanhoro and Rana, 2024). Collectively, these findings underscore that voluntary certification often functions more as reputational management than systemic reform. For consumer demand reduction in exotic skins, therefore, regulatory frameworks must prioritise enforceable, binding schemes that are supported by thorough enforcement-based regulations that are audited and can be applied in a standardised way. Only through enforceable regulation, backed by monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms, can systemic accountability be achieved, closing the gaps that allow both laundering of illegal wildlife products and the neutralisation strategies consumers rely upon.

The findings of this research indicate that the legal and illegal trade in exotic skins are not separate spheres but overlapping systems. Legally farmed products can provide a convenient cover for laundering illegally sourced specimens and importantly, consumers rarely draw a distinction between the two. This ambiguity is more than a matter of perception as it exposes a systemic enforcement blind spot. If regulation focuses only on overtly illegal activity, it risks missing the very mechanisms that enable illicit products to pass undetected into legitimised luxury supply chains. Recognising this and strengthening regulatory oversight is therefore critical, not only for understanding consumer behaviour, but also in reducing the exploitation of wild animal populations.

To close the gap that allows illegal skins to be laundered as legal, supply chains must become fully traceable. Mandatory audits supported by technologies such as blockchain, digital tagging, and DNA testing can ensure each step in the product's journey is to track and trace the journey of an exotic skin product from breeding farm to consumer, with each step recorded and audited. This strategy of using blockchain technology has been proposed by other scholars as an effective tool for supply chain transparency and traceability (Centobelli *et al.*, 2022). This would ensure that exotic skin products can be independently verified as legal, preventing laundering of wild-caught specimens under the guise of captive breeding.

Equally, the credibility of the “legal” trade itself depends on raising its standards. Stricter licensing requirements should be introduced for exotic skin traders, with an enhanced certification system, for animals such as snakes and lizard in addition to crocodilians, ensuring that breeding farms meet stringent welfare and traceability standards. The International Crocodilian Farmer’s Association can serve as a foundation guideline to build capable and enforceable certifications (International Crocodilian Farmers Association, n.d.). These certifications must enforce the welfare and well-being of captive bred animals. Additionally, global compliance measures should be reinforced through international agreements, requiring independent third-party verification of all captive-bred reptile skins. Fashion houses that use exotic skins should be mandated to publicly disclose their breeding farm suppliers, thereby increasing accountability and enabling consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions.

While breeding farms themselves raise ethical concerns, regulatory oversight could help mitigate some of the most egregious welfare violations. One policy approach would be to introduce a phase-out period for wild-caught parent stock, preventing the continued restocking of breeding farms with illegally captured animals. Over time, such a policy would diminish the reliance on wild populations while parallel demand reduction efforts take effect. Eventually, eradicating the need to supply wild stock for genetic diversity as ideally the demand for such products becomes next to nil. Finally, responsibility must not stop at the farm gate. Fashion houses themselves should be held legally liable for the integrity of their supply chains, ensuring accountability is shared across the industry, requiring them to verify the legitimacy of their supply chains rather than relying solely on supplier assurances and there is existing legal precedent for international liability and accountability for industry (Terwindt *et al.*, 2018), therefore, this is achievable.

In sum, strengthening regulation is not simply a technical exercise, it is about recognising that legality and illegality are interwoven, and that policies that enable systemic transparency, assure credible certification, emphasise phased reduction of wild-sourced stock, and extended liability for manufacturers can begin to address the enforcement gap revealed in this research.

6.11.4 Economic, Legislative and Trade -Based Interventions

Efforts to curb the illegal wildlife trade (IWT) through punitive supply-side measures alone have proven largely ineffective, since poaching is often driven by economic necessity rather than deliberate criminal intent (see 1.2.2). Addressing this requires both economic and legal interventions that reduce dependence on exotic skins while reshaping market incentives.

Government initiatives should support alternative livelihood programs in source countries, redirecting economic dependence from exotic skin farming and IWT toward sustainable industries. Luxury fashion brands that profit from exotic skins should be required to invest in conservation-based economic development projects, such as eco-tourism and ethical craft industries, or community-led conservation strategies thereby ensuring that local communities benefit from alternative employment opportunities, albeit, this work has focused on subsistence poachers (Gaodirelwe, Masunga and Motsholapheko, 2020). I acknowledge that this recommendation seems simplistic and there may be cases where access to alternate livelihoods may not be viable (Knapp, Peace and Bechtel, 2017), more research and conversation on devising these policies needs to take place.

Financial incentives should also be introduced to facilitate a transition from reptile farming to sustainable industries. Governments could implement a buy-out scheme for breeding farms, providing financial compensation to facilities that transition to ethical production models, such as plant-based leather production or bio-fabrication technologies. Moreover, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives should be leveraged to establish profit-sharing mechanisms in which a portion of revenue from sustainable luxury products is reinvested in local conservation and community development programs.

Alongside consumer-focused and supply chain policies, legislative reforms are needed to regulate the marketing and sale of exotic skin products more effectively. Misleading claims such as *ethically farmed* or *sustainably sourced* should be prohibited unless supported by independent verification, examples of this dubious marketing is evidenced in literature on green washing, and in one study nearly three-fourths of all advertising analysed in a magazine was misleading or falsely making claims of sustainability for marketing purposes (Baum, 2012). Additionally, import taxes on exotic

skins should be increased to reduce price incentives for their purchase while ensuring that sustainable alternatives achieve greater price parity, however, this must accompany stricter enforcement of seizing contraband and increased transnational cooperation in enforcement, detection and deterrence of organised crime and illegal trade (Legrand and Leuprecht, 2021). By increasing import taxes, it is possible that this has a positive impact in number of illegal seizures, and this must be acknowledged and addressed. Perhaps policymakers should explore the feasibility of a partial or complete ban on the import of exotic skins from regions where laundering of wild-caught specimens is known to occur.

Taken together, these interventions acknowledge that reducing consumer demand for exotic skins requires action both at the level of supply-side economic dependence and structural legal regulation. Without this dual approach, communities may remain economically vulnerable, and brands may continue to exploit regulatory gaps, sustaining the cycle of laundering and unethical consumption.

6.11.5 Summary

The findings of this study underscore the complexity of demand for exotic skins in luxury fashion, highlighting the interplay between consumer psychology, social norms, and market structures. Effective policy interventions must therefore adopt a multi-pronged approach that not only strengthens cooperative and global regulatory enforcement but also reshapes consumer perceptions of luxury by extolling sustainable luxury as aspirational, increases transparency in supply chains, and provides economic incentives for sustainable alternatives. By combining behavioural insights with structural interventions, policymakers can help reduce demand for exotic skins while fostering a transition toward ethical and sustainable luxury fashion.

Current awareness campaigns on biodiversity loss and ethical fashion may have limited impact, as many consumers already recognise these issues but continue to justify their consumption. Instead, strategies should aim to redefine luxury and exclusivity by framing sustainable alternatives as prestigious choices rather than compromises. As observed based on the findings in Chapter 5, leveraging social norms and brand trust is key, as luxury consumers are influenced by perceived status and distinction than by guilt-based messaging.

6.12 Conclusion

This thesis provides evidence for the satisfaction of the research objectives of this study. 1) The psychological and demographic factors of luxury consumers have been identified and the links between these attributes have been identified and presented in Chapter 4, through the development of a novel scale developed for this study, formally named the Luxury Exotic Skins Attitudes and Ethics Scale (LESAS). 2) Consumers certainly employ neutralisation techniques to justify their behaviours and choices and do so by compartmentalisation and resolution of any moral or ethical dilemmas brought upon by cognitive dissonance, presented in Chapter 5. 3) The magnitude and scale of the IWT in the form of contraband seized by UK Border Force was quantified and trends were identified in both the illegal and legal import of exotic skins to the UK, in Chapter 3. The investigation has unravelled a complex narrative in a novel and distinct way – from the perspective of the consumer rather than the supplier.

By integrating these diverse perspectives, the thesis constructs a multi-dimensional framework for understanding the intersections between luxury consumption, species justice, and environmental harm, all underpinned by green criminological thought. The ethical implications of this consumption are further examined from the standpoint of non-human animals by considering their commodification, suffering, and transformation into products viewed as status symbols thus revealing the cultural and social values embedded in such practices. Crucially, the thesis also demonstrates that the legitimacy of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins is highly contestable, with blurred lines between what is legal and illegal in supply chains due to laundering, illegal hunting, trafficking, and breaches of domestic and international law. As such, even when exotic-skin products appear in premium retail markets, they may still be illegal under domestic and international law and therefore liable to seizure. This entanglement of legality and illegality highlights the fragility of luxury fashion's claims to legitimacy and exposes the ethical contradictions at the heart of fashion made from exotic skins.

The contradictions highlighted above demand a deeper reflection on the very notion of justice. If legality itself is unstable and cannot secure legitimacy, then luxury fashion must be judged not only by law but by broader ethical standards. Justice, in this context, entails recognising that non-human life holds inherent value irrespective of its commodification or transformation into

consumer goods. It requires revisiting the principle of biocentrism, which insists that non-human beings are autonomous and possess equal worth to human life. Acknowledging this also means confronting the uncomfortable reality that human progress and prosperity have historically been built upon the exploitation of non-human animals, a legacy that continues to shape the present through industries such as luxury fashion.

the way humans relate to nature more broadly is marked by a persistent separation between the human-made environment and the non-human world. This relationship is often framed conditionally – nature is valued only insofar as it can be understood, navigated, controlled, or put to use. The idea that the human-built environment is distinguished from the natural animal environment by human manipulation has led humans to create a universe that is concurrent with the natural world but distinctly exists outside of it in the human psyche. This manipulation of the natural environment has altered the way we interact with it. It is unfamiliar to most humans, as most live in cities and industrialised urban areas particularly in the west and less developed countries are following this example.

The discussions of these spaces of relating to wild and exotic and domestic and familiar animals, and the concept of the human-built world versus the natural world, are relevant to this thesis as this introduces the reader to a human understanding of what it means to be a non-human animal and existence in non-human spaces. The representations of non-human animals are those of fear, dread, joy, beauty, commodity, utility, pet, child, or even that of love or hatred (Carter and Charles, 2011). Regardless of the concepts humans use to define the relationship that they have with non-human animals; a theme of distancing emerges. Even if the animal is close and considered a “family member” the core of its identity is always going to be non-human. The way that it interacts with the human and natural environment is going to be specific to the evolutionary history and instinctual behaviours of that specific species. A human may raise and shape an animal to think that it is human, and it may lose behaviours that make it feel like it is truly of that species, however, the animal will never become completely human and instead occupies a space of limbo where it is neither human nor non-human. Perhaps this is the reason why there will always be distance between species and othering of species.

By dismantling the parts of an animal, it further takes on a transformation to true commodification. The animal in a fur coat or made into a leather handbag is only identifiable by a small part of what it used to be. Recognising an animal in a shoe or a handbag is limited to the parts of an animal that a human considers aesthetic. The living animal is transformed into a non-living entity that has been treated and changed to become something else entirely. Making parts of an animal an object helps distance one from the process of killing and manufacturing. Once we don't have to think about the life of an animal, the thought of causing harm or cruelty is not at the forefront of thought and the animal descends into obscurity.

Appendix A FOI Request official Letter from Border Force UK:



Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

FoiRequests@homeoffice.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/home-office

Arjun Awasthi
FOI2024/01199
Email: A.R.Awasthi@soton.ac.uk

FOI Reference: FOI2024/01199

Date: 18 March 2024

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUEST

Dear Arjun Awasthi,

Thank you for your e-mail of 2 February 2024, in which you requested the following information.

"I am writing to express my dissatisfaction with my FOI request (FOI2023/05310). I was not asking for the "Border Force Transparency Data" I know I can access this freely online. What I am asking for instead is data as described in the FOI release number 30938 titled "Seizures of animal species and parts exported and imported illegally from and into the United Kingdom from January 2012 to March 2013". I have attached this document to the email.

Specifically, I would like the names of the animal species, the description of the product that was seized, its quantity (in count and in volume), and whether the product was seized as an import or export. For example, if the species is American alligator, then the kind of product is "handbag" or "boots" etc., the quantity would be 2, and the type would be import or export. This detailed information is not presented in the "Border Force Transparency

Data”.

I am sure that this information must exist in some database because otherwise the FOI release number 30938 report would not have been created. Additionally, if such a report was created as an FOI request, then it is possible to recreate it. I am interested in data for the years 2018-19 and 2021 – 2022.

I am kindly requesting you to investigate this and provide me with the data. I am a PhD candidate at the University of Southampton, and my research looks at understanding the demand for products sourced from the IWT. Ultimately, I am interested in writing a thesis that can have policy recommendations to curtail this demand and to promote wildlife conservation.”

Your request has been handled as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The Home Office disclose the information requested in the attached data set on seizures. Please note due to the methodology of how historical data was collated, the data sets for 2018 and 2019 differ very slightly to the data for 2021 and 2022 data and therefore differs to the format requested. Please note this is a final response and the Home Office does not hold any additional data sets for this enquiry.

If you are dissatisfied with this response you may request an independent internal review of our handling of your request by submitting a complaint within two months to foirequests@homeoffice.gov.uk, quoting reference FOI2024/01199.

If you ask for an internal review, it would be helpful if you could say why you are dissatisfied with the response.

As part of any internal review the Department's handling of your information request would be reassessed by staff who were not involved in providing you with this response. If you were to remain dissatisfied after an internal review, you would have a right of complaint to the Information Commissioner as established by section 50 of the FOIA.

A link to the Home Office Information Rights Privacy Notice can be found in the following link.

This explains how we process your personal information:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/information-rights-privacy-notice>

Yours sincerely

Border Force – Information Rights Team

Appendix B Data Cleaning Assumptions

To justify the rationale for this thesis it was prudent to obtain current data on contraband seized by Border Force of wildlife products and items. A Freedom of Information request (FOI202401199) was sent to Border Force in September 2023 and a response with data was received in March 2024. The data requested was to identify the contraband seized by species names of animals and plants, the description of what kind of product was seized, the count or quantity of the contraband, and the direction of travel i.e., whether the product was imported or exported. For example, if the animal species was American alligator, then the description of the item would be “handbag” or “boots” etc., the quantity could be 2 in count, and the type or direction of seizure would be import or export. The assumption of the data that is reported is that it is accurately represented. Border Force seizes contraband based on non-compliance with regulations and guidelines. Additionally, there are discrepancies and variations in how much is seized by Border Force each year. Genetic analysis of each product that is seized is costly and time consuming and there is no information to show whether it is performed for all contraband seized to ascertain the exact species of which contraband is seized.

The data that was provided did not have the common name, genus or family, phylum, kingdom, IUCN conservation status, and CITES appendix status for species. This data was added manually when the data was being cleaned for analysis.

Some notes regarding the process of data cleaning:

- The conservation status data was taken only from the IUCN red list of species. Any other sources were not included and if a species was not on the red list, then this entry was given a “N/A”.
- Both the IUCN red list and the CITES checklist of species were accessed between March and April 2024.
- There were instances where multiple species were reported in conjunction. There were 22 such entries and these were not included for the analysis as it was not clear as to what products they represented. Additionally, some of these data entries were a combination of

various plants and animals and were ingredients for products. These were also difficult to isolate and considering how small this was compared to the other data they were omitted from the data analysis.

- There were some entries that did not describe the kind of product that was seized instead naming the entire animal. This data was partially analysed. It was still beneficial to include these entries when looking at other variables such as conservation status.
- The data reported for Siberian Sturgeon (*Acipenser baerii*) did not match the product that was seized. Osetra caviar comes from the Russian Sturgeon (*Acipenser gueldenstaedtii*). The Siberian Sturgeon and Russian Sturgeon are two different species, however, they both share the same conservation status (critically endangered). The species for the Osetra caviar was not reported and therefore an assumption was made that this is from the Russian Sturgeon. There was a mistake in an entry for beluga caviar, mixing up the beluga whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*) (a mammal that would not produce caviar) with the beluga sturgeon (*Huso huso*). This was rectified to mention the beluga sturgeon.
- *Aloe ferox* (bitter aloe) and *Aloe capensis* were combined to *Aloe ferox* as this is the most up to date nomenclature.
- For Anthozoa there was no genus name as no species was described. For all such instances the family name and if not family then subphylum name was used. This could be confusing but Linnaean classification is not a perfect science.
- *Aquilaria malaccensis* is Agarwood as per the IUCN.
- *Sussurea lappa* and *Aucklandia lappa* have been updated to *Dolomeia costus* which is the most up to date scientific name.
- *Cactus grandiflora* was integrated with and named *Scenicereus grandiflora* or the large-flowered cactus.
- *Dendrobium candidum* has an updated scientific name to *Dendrobium moniliforme* (shihu orchid)

- *Loxodonta africana* refers to the African bush elephant and not the African forest elephant which is critically endangered. Since it was not clear whether the ivory came from the forest elephant or the bush elephant all such entries were assumed to have been of the endangered African bush elephant, commonly referred to simply as African Elephant.
- For the Saiga antelope (*Saiga tatarica*) it is not clear whether the horn that is seized should be considered medicine as the primary use of the horn is for traditional Chinese medicine. The horn was left as is in the description.
- Scleractinia has 35 different families. The family was not specified in the data so therefore will be using the order to classify these corals simply at Scleractinia.
- Only contraband that was imported into the UK was analysed. As this reflects what products are in demand.
- Unless specified as “live” the contraband seized is dead whole animals or plants, or their derivatives.
- Savannah cats are accepted as a specific domestic breed of cat. This breed was created by breeding with a wild serval. The common name Savannah Cat will be kept but this hybrid will be considered as a Serval Cat (*Leptailurus serval*) for the analysis.
- Plants were not included for the analysis in this thesis, however, may be analysed in the future.

After cleaning this data and making it consistent between years descriptive statistics were performed. Frequency distributions, tally of the 6 conservation statuses and three CITES appendices, percentages of specific variables, and trends from 2013 to 2018-19 and 2021-22 were presented. This was considered sufficient.

Appendix C Secondary Data Form

Study Title: The Luxury Fashion Consumer and The Demand for Fashion Products from The Illegal Wildlife Trade: An Exploration of Attitudes, Attributes, and Behaviours

Name: Arjun Raj Awasthi

ERGO number: 92507.A1

Briefly describe the rationale, aims, design and research questions of your research:

Consumers of luxury fashion goods, made from exotic animal skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard, are contributing to the persistence of the illegal wildlife trade as evidenced by the fact that the demand for such luxury fashion products continues to increase. There has been much research on the supply-end of the trade but there is a gap in knowledge when it comes to user-end demand for such products.

I have conducted a survey that measures attitudes to luxury fashion products and measures personality attributes such as narcissism and empathy (Ergo No. 91904). There is a qualitative aspect to the research as well in the form of semi-structured interviews (Ergo No. 91904). This study aims to fill this gap and identify the characteristics and attributes of a consumer of such luxury fashion items. The key research question of this project is “what are the factors that lead consumers to purchase luxury fashion goods that are sourced from the illegal wildlife trade?”

To understand the context of the wildlife trade I had requested Border Force (part of HMRC) to give me data on animal and plant contraband seized at the border. This data includes the names of the animal species, the description of the product that was seized, its quantity (in count and in volume), and whether the product was seized as an import or export. Similar to a previous FOI release of “seizures of animal products exported and imported illegally from and into the UK.” The aim of this is to quantify the seizures, understand trends, and by using descriptive statistics justify why my PhD is interested to look at luxury fashion products that are sourced from the wildlife trade.

Describe the data you wish to analyse:

The data that I wish to analyse is firstly from the Home Office and Border Force with FOI release number 30938 "[The number of seizures of illegally exported and imported animal species and parts between January 2012 and March 2013](#)". This dataset is freely available to use by the public by accessing the UK government website on publications. The data describes illegal contraband seized by the UK government for animal and plant species. The data describes the scientific name of animals, whether they are alive or dead, the direction of their travel (import, export, etc), the description of the animal or its parts, and the quantity (either in count or volume) that was seized.

I requested similar data be given to me for the years 2018, 2019, 2021, and 2022 in an FOI with reference FOI2024/01199 (this document is attached to this application.) I received this data on the 18th of March 2024 and the excel spreadsheet of this data is also attached. This is not currently on the Border Force Website. This data also includes plant species that were part of contraband seized, has species/taxa, description of item, mass, unit of measurement, and direction of travel.

This data is quantitative but is used for administrative bookkeeping by Border Force. It is data that can be made available to the public by submitting a Freedom of Information Act request to Border Force.

What are the terms and conditions around the use of the data? Did data subjects give consent for their data to be re-used? If not, on what basis is re-use of the data justified?

As this data was requested under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, accordingly disclosure to one member of the public of information should be treated as public disclosure. This information is not confidential and can be used by the requestee as they see fit for their purposes, including as I explicitly mentioned to Border Force in my request, for a PhD dissertation. There is no personal information attached to the dataset and there are no data subjects whose confidentiality or personal information would be compromised.

Data Storage and Management:

The policies and procedures of the University of Southampton in relation to the storage and management of data will be adhered to. The data is stored on my OneDrive and password protected. Because this data is public data and was given to me as a result of an FOI, I reserve the right to keep this data with me on my personal device as well to reference and access as I choose. I

am seeking an ethics approval for secondary data analysis for my PhD thesis. Once I have completed and submitted my PhD the data will be removed from the University of Southampton server, however, if the university or any other researcher would like to access this data, they can do so by referencing FOI2024/01199 to Border Force or search for it when the publication report is released.

Risk Assessment:

There is no risk in identifying any individual as this is purely descriptions of contraband seized by Border Force.

Ethical Risks:

There are no ethical risks. I purely intend to perform descriptive statistics to show trends of illegal contraband seized by Border Force over time

Additional Information:

In an amendment the analysis of Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) trade database was also included. The data was extracted for 2012 – 2022 for all countries importing to the UK with trade terms *Leather (LEA)*, *Leather Product (Large) (LPL)*, *Leather Product (Small) (LPS)*, *Leather Items (SKO)*, *Skins (SKI)*, *Skin Pieces (SKP)*, *Skin Scraps (SKS)*, and *Shoes (SHO)*. This data can be accessed from the CITES trade database website <https://trade.cites.org/>.

Appendix D Survey Ethics Forms

D.1 Pilot Survey Ethics Form

1. Name(s): Arjun Raj Awasthi

2. Current Position: PGR 2nd Year

3. Contact Details:

Division/School: Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology

Email a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk

4. Is your study being conducted as part of an education qualification?

Yes

5. If yes, please give the name of your supervisor

Dr. Michelle Newberry and Prof. Jasmin Godbold

6. Title of your project: Consumer Demand and Attitudes to Luxury Goods Sourced from The Illegal Wildlife Trade

7. Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions of your study

Consumers of luxury fashion goods, made from exotic animal skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard, are contributing to the persistence of the illegal wildlife trade as evidenced by the fact that the demand for such luxury fashion products continues to increase. There has been much research on the supply-end of the trade but there is a gap in knowledge when it comes to user-end demand for such products. This study aims to fill this gap and identify the characteristics and attributes of a consumer of such luxury fashion items. The key research question of this project is “what are the factors that lead consumers to purchase luxury fashion goods that are sourced from the illegal wildlife trade?”

8. Describe the design of your study

The ethical approval sought is for a pilot study. A survey has been designed based on extensive research of the literature and intends to capture attitudes and perceptions of consumers of luxury goods on exotic skins, their purchase intention and motivations, feelings to animals, and awareness of the illegal wildlife trade or similar environmental issues. The survey consists of 20 statement questions on a 5-point Likert scale. There will be 6 demographic questions asking the participants their age, sex, level of education, employment, annual individual income, and eating preference. The survey is an online survey that will be created using Qualtrics. The location of the participants will be estimated based on their IP address that Qualtrics allows one to download. There will be a box included at the end of the survey if participants would like to leave suggestions or comments about the survey.

The survey will also measure narcissism by incorporating the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ) and empathy by incorporating the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Participant's answers to these scales may help understand whether narcissism or empathy has a role to play in their purchase behaviour. The terms "narcissism" and "empathy" will not be used, instead "personality attributes" will be used. This is to avoid social desirability bias as participants may get influenced by the terminology and answer questions. The short form of the NARQ will be used which is 6 questions and 28 questions of the IRI will be used. NARQ is on a 6-point Likert scale, however, the scoring can be correlated to the consumer attitude scale and the IRI. Therefore it doesn't matter if one section as an additional scoring point as long as meaningful comparisons can still be made when calculating results. There is a formatting break between sections to avoid participant fatigue.

9. Who are the research participants?

This is a pilot study and data from a sample of a minimum of 30 individuals will be collected. The study will include adult participants over the age of 18 from the general population of the UK that identify as consumers and are able and fit to fill this survey by themselves. The rationale behind choosing the general adult population is because some individuals may inherit such goods made from exotic skins or may have purchased them from second hand shops. Price is not a determinant of luxury goods consumption for the purpose of this survey.

10. If you are going to analyse secondary data, from where are you obtaining it?

Please note that if you are analysing individual-level secondary data (e.g. survey data), you must also fill in and upload the Ethics Application Form for SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS.

No

11. If you are collecting primary data, how will you identify and approach the participants to recruit them to your study?

Please upload a copy of your information sheet. This must be based on the GDPR-compliant template that can be downloaded from the ERGO II website. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using an information sheet, please explain why. If you are using posters, fliers or emails for recruitment, these must be uploaded, too. Please note that recruitment by mass emailing to @soton.ac.uk email addresses is not allowed.

The participants will be recruited from online groups on Facebook, Redditt, and similar social media pages dedicated to sourcing research participants. It will be specified in the post that the survey is only for those that live in Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales). If collecting participants is challenging, then other social media platforms and online forums will also be included to collect enough participants or convenience sampling may be applied at the University of Southampton.

12. Will you be collecting Special Category data as defined by UK data protection legislation? Will you be collecting Criminal Offence data? If so, please give details.

Special Category data are sensitive personal data that require greater protection. They include data on an individual's religion; race; ethnicity; health; sex life and sexual orientation; politics; trade union membership; genetics; biometrics. For further information, see: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/special-category-data/>

Criminal Offence data are personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences, or related security measures. For further information, see <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/criminal-offence-data/>

No

13. Where will your data collection take place?

Online

14. Will participants be taking part in your study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people)? If yes, please explain why this is necessary.

No

15. If you answered 'no' to question 14, how will you obtain the consent of participants?

Please upload a copy of your consent form. A template consent form can be downloaded from the ERGO II site. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using a consent form, please explain why.

Consent form attached and will be incorporated in the Qualtrics survey

16. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?

No, there is no reason to hide or conceal any information from the participants.

17. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff), what permission do you have to approach the participants to take part in the study?

Please upload evidence of approval from gatekeepers (e.g. Head Teacher, if conducting research in a school).

N/A

18. Describe what participation in your study will involve for study participants.

Specify in meaningful detail the experience of participation from the point of view of the participant. You MUST attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules and/or observation topic lists to be used.

Participants will click a link that will take them to the Qualtrics website where the survey is located. They will complete the survey which will take approximately of 25-30 minutes. After the successful

completion of the survey, participants will be thanked for their input and for advancing the understanding of consumer attitudes and behaviours. Survey is attached.

19. How will you make it clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any point during the research without penalty?

If there is a point after which it is not practicable to eliminate someone's data (e.g. after submission of dissertation), then please state this clearly here and on the Information Sheet. Please note that in fully anonymous online or paper questionnaires, it is not possible to withdraw data after submitting / handing in the questionnaire.

This is specified in the consent form. Participants may choose to leave at any time and not fill the survey simply by closing the browser. If participants have submitted the survey their data will be recorded, and they cannot ask for their data to be withdrawn as it is anonymous.

20. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience, harm or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and how you will deal with this.

Give consideration to aspects such as emotional distress, anxiety, unmet expectations, unintentional disclosure of participants' identity, and assess the likelihood and severity of risks. Specify what precautions you will take or suggest to your participants to minimise any risks of harm (e.g. providing information about support services).

While I do not anticipate any of the questions to be particularly distressful, harmful or cause anxiety, participants may feel a sense of fatigue after completing the survey. In case any distress is experienced participants can contact me at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk and in case of participants want to make a formal complaint they can directly contact the Head of Research Integrity and Governance, University of Southampton, on the following contact details: Email: rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk, phone: + 44 2380 595058.

21. Specify any possible distress or harm to YOU arising from your proposed research, and the precautions you will take to minimise these.

Give consideration to the possibility that you may be adversely affected by something your participants share with you. This may include information of a distressing, sensitive or illegal nature.

Since this is an online survey, I do not anticipate there being any harm to me, I will share my official university contact information for participants to reach out to me if they have any issues or queries. I will contact the university for assistance if participants contact me inappropriately or if I feel that there could be harm to me. I will make sure to specify when and how to appropriately contact me and for what purpose.

22. Does your planned research pose any additional risks as a result of the sensitivity of the research and/or the nature of the population(s) or location(s) being studied?

Give considerations to aspects such as impact on the reputation of your discipline or institution; impact on relations between researchers and participants, or between population sub-groups; social, religious, ethnic, political or other sensitivities; potential misuse of findings for illegal, discriminatory or harmful purposes; potential harm to the environment; impacts on culture or cultural heritage.

Participation in the survey is completely voluntary. There is no singling out of a population or group of people. There is targeted sampling to limit the scope of participants and for logistic and research purposes. The survey is not designed to be antagonistic or to upset the sensibilities of the participants.

23. How will you maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality in collecting, analysing and writing up your data?

Qualtrics has enhanced anonymity features that will be enabled to protect the identity of the participants. Additionally, participants will not be asked for any identifying information such as their name and other personal details that would reveal them, and so they will remain anonymous throughout.

24. How will you store your data securely during and after the study?

The University of Southampton has a Research Data Management Policy, including for data retention. The Policy can be consulted at <http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/research-data-management.html>

Please note that for UGs and PGTs, it is NOT correct that the University will store data for 10 years or longer. Instead, UG and PGT dissertation study data should be destroyed securely after conferment of the degree, unless strong justifications are made to retain the data for longer.

The data will temporarily be stored (till the conferment of my degree) on the university server that I have been provided with.

25. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants.

There are no plans to feed back the findings directly to participants, but findings may be published later in academic publications.

26. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?

The main ethical concerns that I have raised relate to 1) causing distress to the participants if they do not feel comfortable with the subject matter. While this should not be a major concern if at all participants feel uncomfortable, they have the liberty to stop the survey at any time. The questions, however, are straight forward and have been carefully written to not upset the participants. 2) Due to the subject matter, it is possible that participants may feel antagonized and to avoid this the survey questionnaire asks solely about consumer attitudes of products that are often made of materials that are commonly found in the illegal wildlife trade and does not have a biased tone or judgment towards participants. 3) Participant anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained throughout this process. Qualtrics, the software being used to design the survey, has enhanced anonymity features that will ensure this. The anonymity aspect will be specified in the brief presented to participants as well. 4) In case there is any potential of harm or threat to me I will contact the appropriate body at the University of Southampton immediately.

27. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission.

For example, if you have professional qualifications or experience relevant to your study, you may wish to state this here.

Not at this time

D.2 Combined Pilot Survey Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Study Title: Consumer Attitude Survey of Luxury Fashion Products Made from Exotic Leather

Researcher(s): Arjun Awasthi

University email: a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk

Ethics/ERGO no: 78611

Version and date: Version 1; 18/11/2022

What is the research about?

My name is Arjun Awasthi, and I am a PhD student in the department of Sociology, Social Policy & Criminology at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom. This research project is interested in the characteristics of a consumer of luxury fashion goods. These goods are made of exotic skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard. These exotic skin items are confiscated the most out of all items that are seized by customs in the form of contraband from the illegal wildlife trade.

The goal is to understand why the demand for these goods persists. To do so it is necessary to capture the attributes and attitudes of consumers that buy luxury products or items made from these materials.

My research will give an insight into the nature of an individual that is likely to buy goods that are possibly sourced unethically. This can help governments and private organisations develop intervention strategies to mitigate demand and diminish the exploitation of animals caught up in the illegal wildlife trade. This research is self-funded.

What will happen to me if I take part?

This study involves completing an anonymous questionnaire which should take approximately 25-30 minutes of your time. If you are happy to complete this survey, you will need to tick (check) the box below to show your consent. As this survey is anonymous, I will not be able to know whether you have participated, or what answers you provided.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been asked to take part because you are living in the United Kingdom and are a consumer of goods and are an adult over the age of 18. You may purchase or could have been given or inherited fashion goods such as handbags, bags, wallets, shoes, belts, and other accessories that are made from exotic skins and may be considered a luxury item. You are being asked to fill out a pilot survey. Your thoughts on products made from such materials, attitudes to animals, and awareness of environmental issues is integral to understand the demand side of the wildlife trade. The comments section helps me as a researcher to get feedback from you – if any questions were unclear, or if you had comments, thoughts, or concerns about the research.

I am aiming to recruit a minimum of 30 participants for this study from the general adult UK population. Since this a pilot study participation will be cut off after the allotted time for data collection.

What information will be collected?

The questions in this survey ask for demographic information in relation to your age, gender, level of education, employment, annual personal income, and eating habits. Additionally, there are 20 statement questions and two additional sections with 6 and 28 questions each about your personality attributes. These questions are not designed to be distressing in any way.

There is a final comment box that you may fill and can write comments, and it is optional to fill out. This helps me validate the results and if you have any comments or feedback about the survey you are encouraged to fill this box. Please note that for this survey to be anonymous, you should not include in your answers any information from which you, or other people, could be identified.

You should answer all the questions; again however, the comment box is just for feedback and is not part of the actual survey and is optional to fill out.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will not receive any direct benefits; however, your participation will contribute to knowledge in this area of research. the study is important to explain consumer attitudes towards luxury fashion goods made from exotic skins of animals such as

alligators, crocodiles, snakes, and lizards. The demand for exotic skins in fashion items is not diminishing. Specifically reptilian skins are ones that show up the most in contraband collected from the illegal wildlife trade. In understanding the characteristics and profile of a typical luxury fashion goods consumer we can demystify the demand for such products and hopefully create intervention strategies in the future to lessen it. The pilot survey will help inform the creation of a survey for a much larger participant pool to have more consistent, reliable, and valid data.

Are there any risks involved?

It is expected that taking part in this study will not cause you any psychological discomfort and/or distress, however, should you feel uncomfortable you can leave the survey at any time by exiting the browser. Since this is an anonymous survey, you cannot withdraw any data that has been collected after you have submitted. If you have any concerns, you may contact me at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk.

This is a purely anonymous online survey and the questions asked are non-intrusive therefore there should be minimal if any risk involved.

What will happen to the information collected?

All information collected for this study will be stored securely on a password protected computer and backed up on a secure server. In addition, all data will be pooled and only compiled into data summaries or summary reports. Only the researcher and their supervisor will have access to this information.

The information collected will be analysed and be written as a part of my PhD dissertation.

The University of Southampton conducts research to the highest standards of ethics and research integrity. In accordance with our Research Data Management Policy, data will be held for 10 years after the study has finished when it will be securely destroyed.

What happens if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy about any aspect of this study and would like to make a formal complaint, you can contact the Head of Research Integrity and Governance, University of Southampton, on the following contact details: Email: rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk, phone: + 44 2380 595058.

Please quote the Ethics/ERGO number above. Please note that by making a complaint you might be no longer anonymous.

More information on your rights as a study participant is available via this link:

<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/about/governance/participant-information.page>

D.3 Pilot Survey

You have been invited to participate in a research study to capture consumer attitudes when purchasing luxury fashion goods made from exotic skins such as crocodile, alligator, snake, and lizard. The survey has been designed for a targeted population of individuals with higher disposable incomes than the average UK consumer. The higher the disposable income the more likely that these individuals possess luxury fashion products. The survey also looks at personality attributes and whether these influence buying behaviour.

Participation in the survey may not benefit you directly, however, your response will help demystify why luxury products made from exotic skins are appealing to consumers. By recording consumption behaviour manufacturers, designers, and policy makers can promote and implement sustainable practices rather than processes that may harm the environment or deplete wild animal populations. Additionally, understanding perceptions on the welfare of animals is also a concern of this survey.

Your identity will not be revealed to the assessor as the survey is anonymous. The survey will be designed and disseminated on and using Qualtrics. I will receive information regarding your general location via your IP address; this is an estimation of your location. However, all your information will be confidential, and I should have no access to your identity at any point of this survey.

There are 20 statement questions and 6 demographic questions and two additional sections with 6 and 28 questions each about your personality attributes. In total the survey should not take more than 25-30 minutes to complete. Please complete all the questions.

If at any time the survey makes you feel uncomfortable or distressed, you do not have to complete it and can exit.

There is a comment box at the end. Please fill in information in this box if you feel that there were questions that were unclear, that made you uncomfortable, or suggestions to improve the survey. Do not include any real names or individual identifiers in the comment box.

This is a novel survey developed as part of a PhD research project. If you have further questions, you may contact Arjun Awasthi at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk (PGR Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Southampton).

If you consent to participate in this study, please initial the box below (*as this is online there will be a digital signature*)

<i>Initial:</i>
<i>Date:</i>

Definitions of terms used in survey questions:

Luxury fashion products: These are items such as handbags, shoes, belts, wallets, and other accessories that are branded and expensive. They are not necessarily rare but are considered exclusive due to how high they are priced.

Exotic skins: Leather that is made from crocodiles, alligators, snakes, or lizards.

Standard leather: Leather that is made from domesticated animals such as cows, sheep, goats, camels, and horses

Survey

Demographic Questions

These questions ask for some personal details. This information is useful to identify attributes of a consumer of luxury fashion goods. The information collected is anonymous and is solely to understand trends of the participants that fill out this survey.

Age:

Sex: M/F

Level of Education:

- Post Graduate

- Graduate
- Completed GCSE or equivalent
- Other (optional box)
- Prefer not to Say

Employment:

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Contract/Temporary
- Unemployed
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Annual Personal Income:

- Less than 25,000
- 25,000 – 34,999
- 35,000 – 49,999
- 50,000 – 99,999
- 100,000 or more

Eating habits:

- Vegan
- Vegetarian
- Non-vegetarian (includes pescatarian and flexitarian)
- Other

Survey Questions

Section 1

Answer Questions with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”

1. I know that leather is made from animal skin
2. A luxury fashion product made from faux leather is better than one made from real leather
3. Luxury fashion products made from alligator, crocodile, snake, or lizard skins are appealing to me
4. Owning a luxury handbag made from exotic skin is a symbol of high status
5. I would like to own a luxury product such as a handbag made from exotic skin
6. I own luxury fashion products made from exotic skin
7. A luxury product such as a handbag that is made from exotic skin is better than standard leather
8. I do not care for luxury fashion products made from exotic skin
9. I know that there are farms that breed crocodiles, alligators, snakes, and lizards for their skin
10. Humans can use domestic animals to fulfil their needs but not wild animals
11. Animals do not have feelings like humans
12. The large number of endangered species of animals worries me
13. I have heard about the illegal wildlife trade
14. The welfare of animals is important to me

- 15. I care about the feelings of animals
- 16. Cruelty to animals is not something I think about when I am shopping
- 17. Keeping up with fashion trends influences my decision to buy luxury fashion products
- 18. The exclusivity of luxury fashion products such as a handbag made from exotic skin is a major selling point
- 19. A luxury fashion product such as a handbag made from crocodile skin increases in value over time
- 20. I care about making a positive impact on the natural world

Section 2 and 3 pertain to questions interested in recording your personality attributes. Please answer the questions according to the instructions.

Section 2

Please indicate how much the following statements apply to you using a response format ranging from “1 = not agree at all” to “6 = agree completely”

	Not Agree At all					Agree Completely
1. I react annoyed if another person steals the show from me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. I deserve to be seen as a great personality.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I want my rivals to fail.	1	2	3	4	5	6

4. Being a very special person gives me a lot of strength.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. I manage to be the center or attention with my outstanding contributions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Most people are somehow losers.	1	2	3	4	5	6

Section 3

This section contains 28 questions. Answer questions as to how well they describe you. With 1 being “Does Not Describe Me Well” and 5 being “Describes Me Very Well”.

1. I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me
2. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me
3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view
4. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems
5. I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel
6. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease
7. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play and don't often get completely caught up in it
8. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision
9. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them
10. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation
11. I sometimes try to understand my friends by imagining how things look from their perspective
12. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me
13. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm

14. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal
15. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste time listening to other people's arguments
16. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters
17. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me
18. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them
19. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies
20. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen
21. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both
22. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person
23. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character
24. I tend to lose control during emergencies
25. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while
26. When I am reading a story, I imagine how I would feel if the events were happening to me
27. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces
28. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place

Comments:

D.4 Pilot Survey Debrief

Study Title: Consumer Attitudes to Luxury Fashion Goods made of Exotic Leather

Researcher: Arjun Awasthi

ERGO number: 78611

The aim of this research was to capture consumer attitudes when purchasing luxury fashion goods made from exotic skins such as crocodile, alligator, snake, and lizard and the personality attributes of said consumer. It is expected that on average people that may not have awareness of the illegal wildlife trade or similar environmental issues will be more likely to purchase ethically dubious products made from exotic leathers. Other results cannot be predicted at this point. Your data will help demystify why luxury products made from exotic skins are appealing to consumers. By recording consumption behaviour manufacturers, designers, and policy makers can promote and implement sustainable practices rather than processes that may harm the environment or deplete wild animal populations. Additionally, understanding perceptions on the welfare of animals is also a concern of this survey. Once again results of this study will not include your name or any other identifying characteristics. The experiment/research did/did not use deception. However, the terms “narcissism” and “empathy” were left out and were replaced with personality attributes so that your participation would not be biased by socially desirable behaviour. You may have a copy of this summary if you wish and of the summary of research findings once the project is completed if not available at the time of this debriefing.

If you have any further questions, please contact me *Arjun Awasthi* at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk

D.5 Pilot Survey Participation Post

England, Scotland and Wales ONLY 18+

Consumer Attitudes to Luxury Fashion Products

Hi all! This is a pilot survey as part of my PhD at the University of Southampton. If you could fill out the survey and also give comments and suggestions (help with validity) that would be great! Let me know if you would like me to fill out any of your surveys. A brief description of the research:

You may purchase or could have been given or inherited fashion goods such as handbags, bags, wallets, shoes, belts, and other accessories that are made from exotic skins and may be considered a luxury item. This survey aims to capture your attitudes towards these goods and some of your personality attributes.

Please share as well! Thank you

D.6 Survey Ethics Form

1. Name(s): Arjun Raj Awasthi

2. Current Position PGR 3rd Year

3. Contact Details:

Division/School: Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology

Email a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk

Phone XXXXXXXXXXX

4. Is your study being conducted as part of an education qualification?

Yes

5. If Yes, please give the name of your supervisor

Dr. Michelle Newberry and Prof. Jasmin Godbold

6. Title of your project: The Luxury Fashion Consumer and the Demand for Fashion Products from The Illegal Wildlife Trade: An Exploration of Attitudes, Attributes, and Behaviours

7. Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions of your study

Consumers of luxury fashion goods, made from exotic animal skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard, are contributing to the persistence of the illegal wildlife trade as evidenced by the fact that the demand for such luxury fashion products continues to increase. There has been much research on the supply-end of the trade but there is a gap in knowledge when it comes to user-end demand for such products. This study aims to fill this gap and identify the characteristics and attributes of a consumer of such luxury fashion items. The key research question of this project is “what are the factors that lead consumers to purchase luxury fashion goods that are sourced from the illegal wildlife trade?”

8. Describe the design of your study

This ethics application is for conducting an anonymous online survey to capture attitudes and personality attributes of consumers of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins. A pilot survey was conducted from February to March 2023 and data from this was analysed in April 2023. The purpose of the pilot study was to conduct a power analysis to estimate the ideal sample size to capture the effect this study is interested in describing; whether consumers have positive or negative associations to luxury fashion products made from exotic skins that are sourced from the illegal wildlife trade. Additionally, the pilot was also conducted to account for face and content validity. It was determined that the ideal sample size for the main online survey (current) should exceed 144 individuals based on Kraemer and Thiemann's (1987) calculations.

The main survey will include updates to questions from the pilot, changes in wording, additional questions, more clarity, and better accessibility. The survey will collect Likert-scale data on predetermined variables defined for each statement. The survey will have four sections. The first section will ask demographic questions related to age, sex, level of education, employment, annual individual income, eating preference, and pet ownership. The second section is questions to capture attitudes and perceptions of consumers, their purchase intention and motivations, feelings to animals, and awareness of conservation and environmental issues. The third section of the survey will measure narcissism as materialism and conspicuous consumption are traits of a narcissist. The survey is interested to discover a relationship between narcissistic behaviour and luxury fashion consumption of these kind of exotic skin products. This includes both grandiose and vulnerable narcissism. This will be done using the Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry Questionnaire (NARQ) and the Narcissistic Vulnerability Scale (NVS) respectively. The NARQ has 18 questions and is on a 6-point Likert scale, this scale will be adapted to match the 5-point Likert scale in section 1 to maintain internal consistency and allow comparability in measuring results. The NVS has 11 statements and is on a 7-point Likert scale, this will also be adapted to match the 5-point Likert scale in section 1. The fourth section is interested in measuring empathy to animals. There is evidence to support that an empathic consumer is more likely to be conscientious about their consumption choices and make ethical decisions. There is also evidence that suggests a significant and moderately positive relationship between empathy to humans and empathy to animals. This online survey will measure empathy to animals using The Animal Empathy Scale (AES). The AES consists of 22 questions and will be adapted to be a 5-point Likert scale to maintain

internal consistency and allow comparability in measuring results. The wording of certain questions on the above scales will be adapted for clarity. The terms “narcissism” and “empathy” will not be used, instead “personality attributes” will be used. This is to avoid social desirability bias as participants may get influenced by the terminology and answer questions in a biased way. There is a formatting break between sections to avoid participant fatigue.

The survey will be disseminated online and will be constructed using Qualtrics. The location of the participants will be estimated based on their IP address that Qualtrics allows one to download. There will be a box included at the end of the survey if participants would like to leave suggestions or comments about the survey or if they would like to contact the researcher to participate in future qualitative research.

9. Who are the research participants?

For the main survey data from a sample of a minimum of 144 individuals will be collected. The study will include adult participants over the age of 18 from the general population of the UK that identify as consumers and are able to fill this survey by themselves. The rationale behind choosing the general adult population is because some individuals may inherit such products made from exotic skins or may have purchased them from second hand shops. Price is not a determinant of luxury goods consumption for the purpose of this survey.

10. If you are going to analyse secondary data, from where are you obtaining it?

Please note that if you are analysing individual-level secondary data (e.g. survey data), you must also fill in and upload the Ethics Application Form for SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS.

N/A

11. If you are collecting primary data, how will you identify and approach the participants to recruit them to your study?

Please upload a copy of your information sheet. This must be based on the GDPR-compliant template that can be downloaded from the ERGO II website. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using an information sheet, please explain why. If you are

using posters, fliers or emails for recruitment, these must be uploaded, too. Please note that recruitment by mass emailing to @soton.ac.uk email addresses is not allowed.

The participants will be recruited from online groups on Facebook, Redditt, and similar social media pages dedicated to sourcing research participants. It will be specified in the post that the survey is only for those that live in Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales). If collecting participants is challenging, then other social media platforms and online forums will also be included to collect enough participants or convenience sampling may be applied by reaching out to a familiar social network. Advertising for participant recruitment will be changed so that participants do not feel antagonised but feel curious about filling out a survey.

12. Will you be collecting Special Category data as defined by UK data protection legislation? Will you be collecting Criminal Offence data? If so, please give details.

Special Category data are sensitive personal data that require greater protection. They include data on an individual's religion; race; ethnicity; health; sex life and sexual orientation; politics; trade union membership; genetics; biometrics. For further information, see: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/special-category-data/>

Criminal Offence data are personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences, or related security measures. For further information, see <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/criminal-offence-data/>

No

13. Where will your data collection take place?

Online using Qualtrics

14. Will participants be taking part in your study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people)? If yes, please explain why this is necessary.

No

15. If you answered 'no' to question 14, how will you obtain the consent of participants?

Please upload a copy of your consent form. A template consent form can be downloaded from the ERGO II site. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using a consent form, please explain why.

Consent form attached and will be incorporated in the Qualtrics survey. Consent form and participant information sheet will be sent virtually at the time of filling out the online survey.

16. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?

No, there is no reason to hide or conceal any information from the participants.

17. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff), what permission do you have to approach the participants to take part in the study?

Please upload evidence of approval from gatekeepers (e.g. Head Teacher, if conducting research in a school).

N/A

18. Describe what participation in your study will involve for study participants.

Specify in meaningful detail the experience of participation from the point of view of the participant. You MUST attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules and/or observation topic lists to be used.

Participants will click a link that will take them to the Qualtrics website where the survey is located. They will complete the survey which will take approximately 15-20 minutes. After the successful completion of the survey, participants will be thanked for their input and for advancing the understanding of consumer attitudes and behaviours. Survey is attached. Participants can consent to share their contact information with the researcher to be contacted for further research.

19. How will you make it clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any point during the research without penalty?

If there is a point after which it is not practicable to eliminate someone's data (e.g. after submission of dissertation), then please state this clearly here and on the Information Sheet. Please note that in fully anonymous online or paper questionnaires, it is not possible to withdraw data after submitting / handing in the questionnaire.

This is specified in the consent form. Participants may choose to leave at any time and not fill the survey simply by closing the browser. If participants have submitted the survey their data will be recorded, and they cannot ask for their data to be withdrawn as it is anonymous.

20. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience, harm or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and how you will deal with this.

Give consideration to aspects such as emotional distress, anxiety, unmet expectations, unintentional disclosure of participants' identity, and assess the likelihood and severity of risks. Specify what precautions you will take or suggest to your participants to minimise any risks of harm (e.g. providing information about support services).

While I do not anticipate any of the questions to be particularly distressful, harmful or cause anxiety, participants may feel a sense of fatigue after completing the survey. In case any distress is experienced participants can contact me at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk and in case of participants want to make a formal complaint they can directly contact the Head of Research Integrity and Governance, University of Southampton, on the following contact details: Email: rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk, phone: + 44 2380 595058.

21. Specify any possible distress or harm to YOU arising from your proposed research, and the precautions you will take to minimise these.

Give consideration to the possibility that you may be adversely affected by something your participants share with you. This may include information of a distressing, sensitive or illegal nature.

Since this is an online survey, I do not anticipate there being any harm to me, I will share my official university contact information for participants to reach out to me if they have any issues or queries. I will contact the university for assistance if participants contact me inappropriately or if I feel that

there could be harm to me. I will make sure to specify when and how to appropriately contact me and for what purpose.

22. Does your planned research pose any additional risks as a result of the sensitivity of the research and/or the nature of the population(s) or location(s) being studied?

Give considerations to aspects such as impact on the reputation of your discipline or institution; impact on relations between researchers and participants, or between population sub-groups; social, religious, ethnic, political or other sensitivities; potential misuse of findings for illegal, discriminatory or harmful purposes; potential harm to the environment; impacts on culture or cultural heritage.

Participation in the survey is completely voluntary. There is no singling out of a population or group of people. There is targeted sampling to limit the scope of participants and for logistic and research purposes. The survey is not designed to be antagonistic or to upset the sensibilities of the participants.

23. How will you maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality in collecting, analysing and writing up your data?

Qualtrics has enhanced anonymity features that will be enabled to protect the identity of the participants. Additionally, participants will not be asked for any identifying information such as their name and other personal details that would reveal them, and so they will remain anonymous throughout.

24. How will you store your data securely during and after the study?

The University of Southampton has a Research Data Management Policy, including for data retention. The Policy can be consulted at <http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/research-data-management.html>

Please note that for UGs and PGTs, it is NOT correct that the University will store data for 10 years or longer. Instead, UG and PGT dissertation study data should be destroyed securely after conferment of the degree, unless strong justifications are made to retain the data for longer.

The data will temporarily be stored during this study on Qualtrics and on the university server that I have been provided with. After completion of the study the data will stay on the University of Southampton server till the conferment of my degree. The data will then be either destroyed or secured on a personal server if there is potential to continue future research.

25. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants.

There are no plans to feed back the findings directly to participants, but findings may be published later in academic publications.

26. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?

The main ethical concerns that I have raised relate to 1) causing distress to the participants if they do not feel comfortable with the subject matter. While this should not be a major concern if at all participants feel uncomfortable, they have the liberty to stop the survey at any time. The questions, however, are straight forward and have been carefully written to not upset the participants. 2) Due to the subject matter it is possible that participants may feel antagonized and to avoid this the survey questionnaire asks solely about consumer attitudes of products that are often made of materials that are commonly found in the illegal wildlife trade and does not have a biased tone or judgment towards participants. 3) Participant anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained throughout this process. Qualtrics, the software being used to design the survey, has enhanced anonymity features that will ensure this. The anonymity aspect will be specified in the brief presented to participants as well. 4) In case there is any potential of harm or threat to me I will contact the appropriate body at the University of Southampton immediately.

27. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission.

For example, if you have professional qualifications or experience relevant to your study, you may wish to state this here.

Not at this time.

D.7 Combined Survey Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Study Title: The Luxury Fashion Consumer and the Demand for Fashion Products from The Illegal Wildlife Trade: An Exploration of Attitudes, Attributes, and Behaviours

Researcher(s): Arjun Awasthi

University email: a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk

Ethics/ERGO no: 87939

Version and date: Version 1; 08/08/2023

What is the research about?

My name is Arjun Awasthi, and I am a PhD student in the department of Sociology, Social Policy & Criminology at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom. This research project is interested in the characteristics of a consumer of luxury fashion products. They are made of exotic skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard. These exotic skin items are confiscated the most out of all items that are seized by customs in the form of contraband from the illegal wildlife trade.

The project is interested to understand why the demand for these products persists. To do so it is necessary to capture the attributes and attitudes of consumers that buy luxury products or items made from these materials.

My research will give an insight into the nature of an individual that is likely to buy luxury fashion products that are sourced in an ethically dubious way. Using this data demand reduction intervention strategies can be created and sustainable alternatives to luxury and change the demand behaviour of the luxury consumer.

What will happen to me if I take part?

This study involves completing an anonymous questionnaire which should take approximately 15-20 minutes of your time. If you are happy to complete this survey, you will need to tick (check) the box below to show your consent. As this survey is anonymous, I will not be able to know whether

you have participated, or what answers you provided. You will have the option to consent to take part in future research.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been asked to take part because you are living in the United Kingdom, are a consumer, and are an adult over the age of 18. You may purchase or could have been given or inherited fashion products such as handbags, bags, wallets, shoes, belts, and other accessories that are made from exotic skins and may be considered a luxury item. Your thoughts on products made from such materials, attitudes to animals, and awareness of environmental issues is integral to understand the demand side of the wildlife trade.

What information will be collected?

The questions in this survey ask demographic information in relation to your age, gender, level of education, employment, annual personal income, and eating habits. Additionally, there are 20 statement questions and two additional sections with 18 and 28 questions each about your personality attributes. These questions are not designed to be distressing in any way.

There is a comment box that you may use to provide feedback and is optional to fill out. If you have any comments or feedback about the survey, you are encouraged to fill this box. Please note that for this survey to be anonymous, you should not include in your answers any information from which you, or other people, could be identified.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will not receive any direct benefits; however, your participation will contribute to knowledge in this area of research. The study is important to explain consumer attitudes towards luxury fashion products made from exotic skins of animals such as alligators, crocodiles, snakes, and lizards. The demand for exotic skins in fashion items is not diminishing. Specifically reptilian skins are ones that show up the most in contraband collected from the illegal wildlife trade. In understanding the characteristics and profile of a typical luxury fashion product consumer we can demystify the demand for such products and hopefully create

intervention strategies in the future to lessen it. The pilot survey will help inform the creation of a survey for a much larger participant pool to have more consistent, reliable, and valid data.

Are there any risks involved?

It is expected that taking part in this study will not cause you any psychological discomfort and/or distress, however, should you feel uncomfortable you can leave the survey at any time by exiting the browser. Since this is an anonymous survey, you cannot withdraw any data that has been collected after you have submitted. If you have any concerns, you may contact me at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk.

This is a purely anonymous online survey and the questions asked are non-intrusive therefore there should be minimal if any risk involved.

What will happen to the information collected?

All information collected for this study will be stored securely on a password protected computer and backed up on a secure server. In addition, all data will be pooled and only compiled into data summaries or summary reports. Only the researcher and their supervisor will have access to this information.

The information collected will be analysed and be written as a part of a PhD dissertation.

The University of Southampton conducts research to the highest standards of ethics and research integrity. In accordance with our Research Data Management Policy, data will be held for 10 years after the study has finished when it will be securely destroyed.

What happens if there is a problem?

If you are unhappy about any aspect of this study and would like to make a formal complaint, you can contact the Head of Research Integrity and Governance, University of Southampton, on the following contact details: Email: rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk, phone: + 44 2380 595058.

Please quote the Ethics/ERGO number above. Please note that by making a complaint you might be no longer anonymous.

More information on your rights as a study participant is available via this link:

<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/about/governance/participant-information.page>

Thank you for reading this information sheet and considering taking part in this research.

Please tick (check) this box to indicate that you have read and understood information on this form, are aged 18 or over and agree to take part in this survey.

D.8 Survey

What not to wear? Luxury fashion consumption in the UK

You have been invited to participate in a research study to capture consumer attitudes when purchasing luxury fashion goods made from exotic skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard. The survey has been designed for a general population of individuals living in Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales). The survey also looks at personality attributes and whether this influences purchase intention, motivation, and behaviour.

Participation in the survey may not benefit you directly, however, your response will help demystify why luxury products made from exotic skins are appealing to consumers. By recording consumption behaviour manufacturers, designers, and policy makers can promote and implement sustainable practices rather than processes that may harm the environment or deplete wild animal populations. Additionally, understanding perceptions on the welfare of animals is also a concern of this survey.

Your identity will not be revealed to the assessor as the survey is anonymous. The survey will be designed on Qualtrics and while I will receive information regarding your general location via your IP address; this is an estimation of your location and will not give me access to the region in which you live. However, all your information will be confidential, and I should have no access to your identity at any point of this survey.

There are 23 statement questions and 8 demographic questions and four additional sections with 18, 11, 28 and 22 questions each about your personality attributes. In total the survey should not take more than 15-20 minutes to complete. Please complete all the questions.

If at any time the survey makes you feel uncomfortable or distressed, you do not have to complete it and can exit.

There is a comment box at the end. Please fill in information in this box if you feel that there were questions that were unclear, that made you uncomfortable, or suggestions to improve the survey. Do not include any real names or individual identifiers in the comment box. If you would like to participate in future research related to this topic you may do so by entering your contact

information at the end of the survey allowing yourself to be contacted by the researcher of this project.

This is a novel survey developed as part of a PhD research project. If you have further questions, you may contact Arjun Awasthi at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk (PGR Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Southampton).

If you consent to participate in this study, please initial the box below (*as this is online there will be a digital signature*)

<i>Initial:</i>
<i>Date:</i>

Definitions of terms used in survey questions:

Luxury fashion products: These are items such as handbags, shoes, belts, wallets, and other accessories that are branded and expensive. They are not necessarily rare but are considered exclusive due to how high they are priced.

Exotic skins: Leather that is made from crocodiles, alligators, snakes, or lizards.

Standard leather: Leather that is made from domesticated animals such as cows, sheep, goats, camels, and horses, etc.

Demographic Questions

These questions ask for some personal details. This information is useful to identify attributes of a consumer of luxury fashion goods. The information collected is anonymous and is solely to understand trends of the participants that fill out this survey.

Age:

Sex: M/F/Other

Level of Education:

- Post Graduate

- Graduate
- Completed GCSE or equivalent
- Other (optional box)
- Prefer not to Say

Employment:

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Contract/Temporary
- Unemployed
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Annual Personal Income:

- Less than 25,000
- 25,000 – 34,999
- 35,000 – 49,999
- 50,000 – 99,999
- 100,000 or more

Eating habits:

- Vegan
- Vegetarian
- Non-vegetarian
- Other

Pet Ownership:

Do you currently own a pet?

- Yes
- No

What kind of animal is your pet? (for e.g. dog, cat, snake, etc.)

Survey Questions

Section 1

Answer Questions with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”

1. Animal skin should be used to make leather products such as wallets, shoes, belts, etc.
2. Exotic animal skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, or lizard should be used to make leather products such as wallets, shoes, belts, etc.
3. Vegan or non-animal leather is luxurious.
4. Luxury fashion products made from alligator, crocodile, snake, or lizard skins are beautiful and appealing.
5. I am impressed by someone who owns a luxury fashion product made from exotic skin.
6. Owning luxury handbags, shoes, or other accessories made from exotic skins are a status symbol.
7. I would like to own a luxury product made from exotic skin.
8. I own a luxury fashion product made from exotic skins.
9. I have no interest in buying or owning a luxury fashion product made from exotic skin.
10. Exotic skin that comes from a breeding farm is ethical to use.
11. Hunting wild animals for exotic skins is ethical.
12. Animals such as alligators, crocodiles, snakes and lizards have emotions and feelings.

13. I am concerned by the number of endangered species across the world.
14. Smuggling and illegal trading of animals is causing them to become endangered or go extinct.
15. The welfare of animals is important to me.
16. Cruelty to animals is not something I think about when I am shopping.
17. I follow fashion trends, and this influences my decision to buy luxury fashion products
18. I think luxury fashion products made from exotic skins are exclusive and that makes them desirable.
19. I care about the emotions and feelings of animals.
20. A luxury fashion product such as a handbag made from crocodile skin would increase in monetary value over time.
21. I have a moral duty to make a positive impact on the natural world, such as animals and plants.
22. I enjoy the feeling of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins but feel uncomfortable when questioned about why I do.
23. I own products made from exotic skins because I inherited them not because I bought them.

Section 2, 3, 4 and 5 pertain to questions interested in recording your personality attributes. Please answer the questions according to the instructions.

Section 2

Please indicate how much the following statements apply to you using a response format ranging from 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”

1. I am great.
2. I will someday be famous.
3. I show others how special I am.

4. I react annoyed if another person steals the show from me.
5. I enjoy my successes very much.
6. I secretly take pleasure in the failure of my rivals.
7. Most of the time I am able to draw people's attention to myself in conversations.
8. I deserve to be seen as a great personality.
9. I want my rivals to fail.
10. I enjoy it when another person is inferior to me.
11. I often get annoyed when I am criticized.
12. I can barely stand it if another person is at the center of events.
13. Most people won't achieve anything.
14. Other people are worth nothing.
15. Being a very special person gives me a lot of strength.
16. I manage to be the center of attention with my outstanding contributions.
17. Most people are somehow losers.
18. Mostly, I am very adept at dealing with other people.

Section 3

This section contains 11 statement words that describe different personality qualities. Answer the statements as to how well they describe you in general, i.e., on average.

Complete the sentence "to what degree do you currently feel _____" with the words below

with 1 being "Not at All" and 5 being "Extremely"

1. Ashamed

2. Ignored
3. Self-absorbed
4. Fragile
5. Underappreciated
6. Envious
7. Resentful
8. Insecure
9. Irritable
10. Misunderstood
11. Vengeful

Section 4

This section contains 28 questions. Answer questions as to how well they describe you. With 1 being “Does Not Describe Me Well” and 5 being “Describes Me Very Well”.

1. I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me.
2. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view.
4. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.
5. I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.
6. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease.
7. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play and don't often get completely caught up in it.

8. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
9. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them.
10. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation.
11. I sometimes try to understand my friends by imagining how things look from their perspective.
12. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me.
13. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm.
14. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.
15. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste time listening to other people's arguments.
16. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters.
17. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me.
18. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.
19. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies.
20. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.
21. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.
22. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.
23. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character
24. I tend to lose control during emergencies.
25. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.
26. When I am reading a story, I imagine how I would feel if the events were happening to me.
27. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces.
28. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.

Section 5

This section contains 28 statements. Answer statements as to how much you agree or disagree with them. With 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”.

1. So long as they're warm and well fed, I don't think zoo animals mind being kept in cages.
2. Often cats will meow and pester for food even when they are not really hungry.
3. It upsets me to see animals being chased and killed by lions in wildlife programs on TV.
4. I get annoyed by dogs that howl and bark when they are left alone.
5. Sad films about animals often leave me with a lump in my throat.
6. Animals deserve to be told off when they're not behaving properly.
7. It makes me sad to see an animal on its own in a cage.
8. People who cuddle and kiss their pets in public annoy me.
9. A friendly purring cat almost always cheers me up.
10. It upsets me when I see helpless old animals.
11. Dogs sometimes whine and whimper for no reason.
12. Many people are over-affectionate towards their pets.
13. I get very angry when I see animals being ill treated.
14. It is silly to become too attached to one's pets.
15. Pets have a great influence on my moods.
16. Sometimes I am amazed how upset people get when an old pet dies.
17. I enjoy feeding scraps of food to the birds.
18. Seeing animals in pain upsets me.

19. People often make too much out of the feelings and sensitivities of animals.

20. I find it irritating when dogs try to greet me by jumping up and licking me.

21. I would always try to help if I saw a dog or puppy that seemed to be lost.

22. I hate to see birds in cages where there is no room for them to fly about.

Comments:

D.9 Survey Debrief

Study Title: The Luxury Fashion Consumer and the Demand for Fashion Products from The Illegal Wildlife Trade: An Exploration of Attitudes, Attributes, and Behaviours

Researcher: Arjun Awasthi

ERGO number: 87939

The aim of this research was to capture consumer attitudes when purchasing luxury fashion goods made from exotic skins such as crocodile, alligator, snake, and lizard and the personality attributes of said consumer. It is expected that on average people that may not have awareness of the illegal wildlife trade or similar environmental issues will be more likely to purchase ethically dubious products made from exotic leathers. Other results cannot be predicted at this point. Your data will help demystify why luxury products made from exotic skins are appealing to consumers. By recording consumption behaviour manufacturers, designers, and policy makers can promote and implement sustainable practices rather than processes that may harm the environment or deplete wild animal populations. Additionally, understanding perceptions on the welfare of animals is also a concern of this survey. Once again results of this study will not include your name or any other identifying characteristics. The experiment/research did/did not use deception. However, the terms “narcissism” and “empathy” were left out and were replaced with personality attributes so that your participation would not be biased by socially desirable behaviour. You may have a copy of this summary if you wish and of the summary of research findings once the project is completed if not available at the time of this debriefing.

If you have any further questions, please contact me *Arjun Awasthi* at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk

Thank you for your participation in this research.

D.10 Survey Recruitment Advertisement



Figure 21. Survey Ad (Using Copyright Free Image)

Hi, Community! I need your help. I need responses to my survey. I am also offering a chance to win a £25 amazon gift voucher!

1. Link to the survey >>>
2. Leave your contact information at the end to be part of the raffle. Your information will be kept strictly confidential and will only be used to send you the gift voucher.
3. There is only a male and female option for gender, if you identify otherwise feel free to specify in the comments.
4. If you would like to be interviewed for future research let me know in the comment as well!

Appendix E Survey Recruitment

Table 12. List of Facebook Groups Used for Survey Recruitment

1.	Name of Group	Survey Allowed to be Posted
2.	Luxury Pre-owned Swiss Watches - Buy & Sell - UK	No
3.	We ❤️ Luxury	No
4.	Luxury bag hangout, buy, sell, chat UK	No
5.	Luxury Room	No
6.	Best Buy Luxury	No
7.	Luxury Holidays and Short Breaks UK	No
8.	UK Luxury Lovers - Chat, buy & sell	No
9.	Luxury Watch Group – UK	No
10.	Luxury Items Only	Yes
11.	Suwie Luxury Wardrobe UK	No
12.	UK Buy Rolex & Luxury Watch Forum -Buy & Sell	Yes
13.	Luxury Dream Buys UK	No
14.	Living in Southampton, UK	No
15.	Southampton Community Group	Yes
16.	High Street Brands UK Only Pre-Loved / New Buy and Sell	No
17.	Winchester Community Group	Yes
18.	UK Participants Thesis/Dissertation Exchange	No
19.	University of Southampton Students' Union Postgrad Community	No
20.	Luxury Lovers	No
21.	Central London's Residents Group	No
22.	Caerau (Cardiff) Residents	Yes
23.	West End Community (Glasgow)	No
24.	Birmingham City Centre Community	No
25.	Leeds and Manchester Business & Community Group	Yes
26.	Manchester Community	Yes
27.	London Community Group	Yes
28.	All About Edinburgh	No
29.	North Norfolk Notice Board	No

30.	Sheffield Community	No
31.	Brighton & Hove Community Notice Board	No
32.	Kent Community Group	Yes
33.	GWU UK Alumni Network	Yes
34.	Winchester Rants	No
35.	Shop Local Southampton	No
36.	Advertising in Hampshire	Yes
37.	UK Advertising Group	No
38.	Christchurch, Bournemouth & Poole community group	Yes
39.	Dorset Community Group (UK)	No
40.	SO19 Community Group	No
41.	Connecting Cornwall	No
42.	Devon Community Group	No
43.	Somerset Community	No
44.	The Wiltshire Business Club	No
45.	Surrey, Hampshire & Berkshire Business advertising	No
46.	Essex Community Group	No
47.	East and West SUSSEX	No
48.	Ipswich, Suffolk, UK community group	No
49.	Herefordshire Community Forum	No
50.	Stratford Upon Avon	No
51.	I <3 Love Oxford and Oxfordshire	No
52.	Advertise Yorkshire	Yes
53.	Lincolnshire Online	No
54.	Cambridge (Cambridgeshire)	Yes
55.	Northumberland Matters	No
56.	County Durham Noticeboard	No
57.	Cheshire Life, Social & Events	Yes
58.	What's going on Lancaster, UK	No
59.	Gloucestershire Noticeboard/UK Only	Yes
60.	What's on in Belfast	No
61.	Whitchurch, North Shropshire Community Page	No
62.	Staffordshire Business Hub	Yes
63.	Nottingham UK Community Group	No

64.	Cumbria Small Business And Community Page	No
65.	Warwickshire Community	No
66.	Uk participants needed undergrad/masters/PhD surveys	No
67.	Indian community of London, UK	No
68.	Performing Arts Winchester	No

Appendix F Survey Data Analysis Tests SPSS

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.823	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	953.719
	df	210
	Sig.	<.001

Figure 22. KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy Testing for Common Variance
Justifying Factor Analysis

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Sum_SurveyNew	.078	121	.069	.964	121	.003

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Sum_SurveyNew

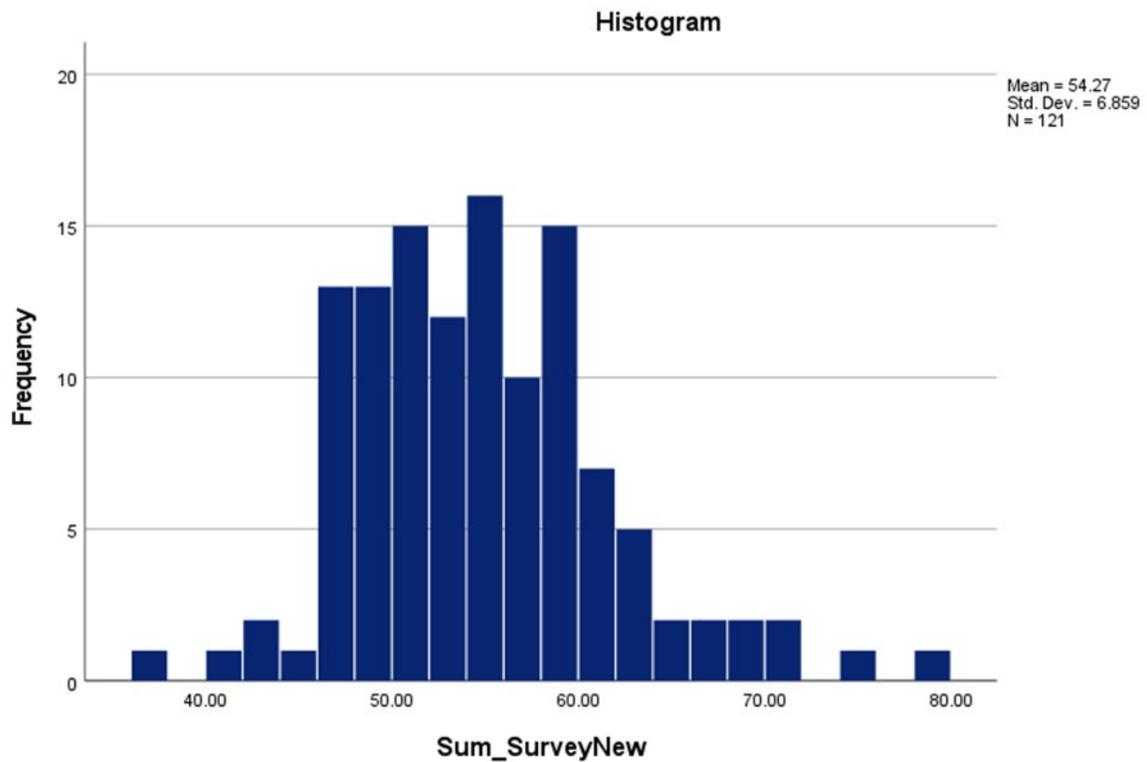


Figure 23. K-S Test for Normality

Pattern Matrix^a

	Component		
	1	2	3
A1	.243		.484
A2	.621		.377
A3	.347		-.404
A4	.474	.353	.407
A5	.423	.331	.521
A6	.224	.680	-.208
A7	.343	.210	.585
A9		-.260	.688
A10	.447	.206	.236
A11	.400		
A12	-.522		
A13	-.635		
A14	-.554		.214
A15	-.825		
A16	.580		
A17		.542	.210
A18		.818	
A19	-.794		
A20		.631	-.225
A21	-.629		
A22		.435	.379

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization.
 a. Rotation converged in 16 iterations.

Figure 24. PCA Pattern Matrix Used to Identify Underlying Factors

Appendix G Interview Ethics Forms

G.1 Interview Ethics Form

1. Name(s): Arjun Raj Awasthi
2. Current Position: 3rd Year PhD Candidate
3. Contact Details: Arjun Awasthi

Division/School Economics, Social and Political Sciences

Email ara2n21@soton.ac.uk

4. Is your study being conducted as part of an education qualification?

Yes

5. If Yes, please give the name of your supervisor

Dr. Michelle Newberry

Prof. Jasmin Godbold

6. Title of your project: The Luxury Fashion Consumer and the Demand for Fashion Products: An Exploration of Attitudes, Attributes, and Behaviours

7. Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions of your study

Consumers of luxury fashion goods, made from exotic animal skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard, are contributing to the persistence of the illegal wildlife trade as evidenced by the fact that the demand for such luxury fashion products continues to increase. There has been much research on the supply-end of the trade but there is a gap in knowledge when it comes to user-end demand for such products. This study aims to fill this gap and identify the characteristics and attributes of a consumer of such luxury fashion items. The aim of this study is to capture the perceptions of consumers of such products. The study looks at the attitudes people have to these products, what they feel about them and what opinions they have regarding their persistence, how

they respond to how these products are made and sourced, and to see whether they have empathy towards animals that are killed to make these products, and to understand how consumers justify their purchasing behaviour when buying such ethically dubious products.

The main research question that the study will address is: “Do consumers try to justify their behaviour when asked about ownership or purchase of luxury fashion products made from exotic skins?”. The research question will evolve based on the data collected.

8. Describe the design of your study

A prior submission was made with ERGO number 87939.A1. This was for the first stage of the study (administering a survey that was disseminated among the general population of the UK (aged 18 and over)). This new ERGO submission relates to the second phase of the study (interviews with participants).

Based on the results from the first stage of the study, a semi-structured interview schedule has been developed and this will be used to interview participants. Towards the end of the interview participants will be shown a some pictures of common products that are made from the skins of alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard. Questions will be asked about how these products make the participants feel and how they respond to them. The minimum number of participants will be 15 with the flexibility to include more participants based on when, myself, the researcher, ascertain that I have reached saturation with my data. The semi-structured interviews will last approximately 60 minutes. The interviews will be conducted on MS Teams or in person. Online interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. In person interviews will be audio-recorded using a Dictaphone and will be transcribed. All participants will remain anonymous, and a pseudonym will be generated for each participant.

9. Who are the research participants?

The research participants will be adults over the age of 18 and are UK residents. Participants will be required to have some connection to luxury fashion products made from exotic skins (either they will have purchased these products, inherited them, or have been gifted them).

10. If you are going to analyse secondary data, from where are you obtaining it?

Please note that if you are analysing individual-level secondary data (e.g. survey data), you must also fill in and upload the Ethics Application Form for SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS.

N/A

11. If you are collecting primary data, how will you identify and approach the participants to recruit them to your study?

Please upload a copy of your information sheet. This must be based on the GDPR-compliant template that can be downloaded from the ERGO II website. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using an information sheet, please explain why. If you are using posters, fliers or emails for recruitment, these must be uploaded, too. Please note that recruitment by mass emailing to @soton.ac.uk email addresses is not allowed.

In the survey that was disseminated during stage 1 of the study, an option was left open for individuals to share their contact information if they were interested in being contacted to be interviewed. I will screen for participants based on whether they have purchased, inherited, or have been gifted these products. Additionally, social media websites such as community groups for cities will be used to recruit participants. A snowballing approach will be employed if participants would like to refer others for the study.

12. Will you be collecting Special Category data as defined by UK data protection legislation? Will you be collecting Criminal Offence data? If so, please give details.

Special Category data are sensitive personal data that require greater protection. They include data on an individual's religion; race; ethnicity; health; sex life and sexual orientation; politics; trade union membership; genetics; biometrics. For further information, see: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/special-category-data/>

Criminal Offence data are personal data relating to criminal convictions and offences, or related security measures. For further information, see <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/criminal-offence-data/>

N/A

13. Where will your data collection take place?

The data collection will take place on MS Teams or in person depending on the comfort and access of the participant. It is important to note that for gauging the comfort of the participants it would be useful to have their cameras switched on, however, this is not a requirement and only the audio recording of the participant will be retained for analysis. Additionally if participants are able to then interviews will be conducted in person.

14. Will participants be taking part in your study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people)? If yes, please explain why this is necessary.

No

15. If you answered 'no' to question 14, how will you obtain the consent of participants?

Please upload a copy of your consent form. A template consent form can be downloaded from the ERGO II site. Note that there is a separate template for UG/PGT applicants. If you are not using a consent form, please explain why.

Attached to this application is a consent form. The participant will have to have read the participant information sheet and sign their agreement to participate using this consent form.

16. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?

No, there is no reason to hide or conceal any information from the participants.

17. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff), what permission do you have to approach the participants to take part in the study?

Please upload evidence of approval from gatekeepers (e.g. Head Teacher, if conducting research in a school).

N/A

18. Describe what participation in your study will involve for study participants.

Specify in meaningful detail the experience of participation from the point of view of the participant. You MUST attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules and/or observation topic lists to be used.

The opportunity to participate in an interview will be shared on social media clearly stating the purpose of the study. Participants can directly contact me, the researcher, and we can arrange a time for the interview. Participants that filled out the survey and expressed interest in contributing to further research will be contacted. The participants will have to provide their consent and should have read the participant information sheet before providing informed consent. The participants will then be asked a series of questions in a semi-structured format. Laddering will be employed based on the relevance and quality of the response provided. This will be up to the discretion of the researcher but limited to what the study is interested to understand about consumer behaviour and perceptions. At the end of the interview participants will be shown photos of products made from exotic skins and asked to describe these products and how they make them feel. The interviews will not exceed 60 minutes. To be fair to participants 15 GBP will be given to each for their time and participation.

19. How will you make it clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any point during the research without penalty?

If there is a point after which it is not practicable to eliminate someone's data (e.g. after submission of dissertation), then please state this clearly here and on the Information Sheet. Please note that in fully anonymous online or paper questionnaires, it is not possible to withdraw data after submitting / handing in the questionnaire.

If the participants feel uncomfortable at any point of the interview process, they may terminate the interview and ask me to destroy their data. If they would like to withdraw completely a period of 7 days will be given to the participant to inform me and instruct me to terminate their data.

Participants can be identified based on the pseudonym given to them and the date that the interview was conducted.

20. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience, harm or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and how you will deal with this?

Give consideration to aspects such as emotional distress, anxiety, unmet expectations, unintentional disclosure of participants' identity, and assess the likelihood and severity of risks. Specify what precautions you will take or suggest to your participants to minimise any risks of harm (e.g. providing information about support services).

While I do not anticipate any of the questions to be particularly distressful, harmful or cause anxiety, in case any distress is experienced participants can immediately terminate the interview and ask me to destroy their data. They can contact me at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk if they have questions or concerns and in case of participants want to make a formal complaint, they can directly contact the Head of Research Integrity and Governance, University of Southampton, on the following contact details: Email: rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk, phone: + 44 2380 595058.

21. Specify any possible distress or harm to YOU arising from your proposed research, and the precautions you will take to minimise these.

Give consideration to the possibility that you may be adversely affected by something your participants share with you. This may include information of a distressing, sensitive or illegal nature.

I do not anticipate there being any harm to me, I will share my official university contact information for participants to reach out to me if they have any issues or queries. I will contact the university for assistance if participants contact me inappropriately or if I feel that there could be harm to me. I will make sure to specify when and how to appropriately contact me and for what purpose.

22. Does your planned research pose any additional risks as a result of the sensitivity of the research and/or the nature of the population(s) or location(s) being studied?

Give considerations to aspects such as impact on the reputation of your discipline or institution; impact on relations between researchers and participants, or between population sub-groups; social, religious, ethnic, political or other sensitivities; potential misuse of findings for illegal, discriminatory or harmful purposes; potential harm to the environment; impacts on culture or cultural heritage.

N/A

23. How will you maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality in collecting, analysing and writing up your data?

When the data is being collected it will be recorded by using a pseudonym such as “participant 1” from the start as to maintain confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity. At no point will the identity of a participant be disclosed. When using direct quotes these pseudonyms will be used in the reporting. Participants will be asked to be interviewed in a closed private space that will further help ensure their confidentiality. Participants can switch off their camera if they do not feel comfortable (if interview conducted on MS Teams) but only the audio will be recorded to further ensure confidentiality and anonymity. All audio and transcription files will be saved using the given pseudonyms and the date and time that the interview was conducted.

24. How will you store your data securely during and after the study?

The University of Southampton has a Research Data Management Policy, including for data retention. The Policy can be consulted at <http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/research-data-management.html>

Please note that for UGs and PGTs, it is NOT correct that the University will store data for 10 years or longer. Instead, UG and PGT dissertation study data should be destroyed securely after conferment of the degree, unless strong justifications are made to retain the data for longer.

The University of Southampton has a policy to retain the data up until the conferment of my degree. During the study all data will be stored on the University of Southampton’s secure server. All data related to the research that is not relevant after the date of conferment of my degree will be destroyed. In case I, the researcher, feel that the data is important and that it can be published all audio and transcribed data will be stored on my personal device in a password protected folder that only I can access. In any case the data will have been anonymised and pseudonymised from the start.

25. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants.

There are no plans to feed back the findings directly to participants, but findings may be published later in academic publications. However, if participants request their transcripts or request to be

told about where the research will be published and what future research entails their requests will be obliged.

26. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?

The main ethical concerns that I have raised relate to 1) causing distress to the participants if they do not feel comfortable with the subject matter. While this should not be a major concern if at all participants feel uncomfortable, they have the liberty to stop the interview at any time and can ask me to destroy their data. The questions, however, are straight forward and have been carefully written to not upset the participants. 2) Due to the subject matter, it is possible that participants may feel antagonised and to avoid this interview questions are not going to pry about the participants values or morality. The interview questions are simply interested in capturing their opinions and attitudes on products that are often made of materials that are commonly found in the illegal wildlife trade and does not have a biased tone or judgment towards participants. Some questions will be about empathy and materialism but will be asked in a general sense and in a matter-of-fact way. 3) Participant anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained throughout this process. This means anonymising names before the conducting interviews, and these will be used to name files during the audio recording and transcription process. 4) In case there is any potential of harm or threat to me I will contact the appropriate body at the University of Southampton immediately.

27. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission.

For example, if you have professional qualifications or experience relevant to your study, you may wish to state this here.

Attached to the application is the list of questions and the photos that I intend to show participants.

G.2 Interview Participant Information Sheet

Study Title: The Luxury Fashion Consumer and the Demand for Fashion Products: Interviews to Explore Attitudes, Behaviours and Perceptions

Researcher: Arjun Raj Awasthi

ERGO number: 91904

You are being invited to take part in the above research study. To help you decide whether you would like to take part or not, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is not clear or you would like more information before you decide to take part in this research. You may like to discuss it with others but it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

I am Arjun Raj Awasthi. I am a PhD candidate in the department of Sociology, Social Policy, & Criminology at the University of Southampton in the United Kingdom. My research project seeks to understand the attitudes, attributes, behaviours, and characteristics of a consumer of luxury fashion products that are made from exotic skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard. Many of these skins are sourced from the wild through illicit hunting and poaching. This is a conservation threat to the animals used to make these products. Items made from reptile skins are the highest in frequency and number seized by customs in the form of contraband from the illegal wildlife trade.

The UK is the 5th largest consumer of luxury in the world and the consumers are driving the demand for these products with the luxury industry projected to continue to grow in the UK. My research will give an insight into the nature of an individual who is likely to buy goods, inherit them, or be gifted them. It is important to understand people's attitudes towards these products as it helps understand why these products are in demand. Considering the ethically dubious source of exotic skins my work can help governments and private organisations develop demand reduction

intervention strategies to mitigate demand and diminish the exploitation of animals caught up in the illegal wildlife trade. This research is self-funded.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been asked to take part because you are living in the United Kingdom and are a consumer of luxury fashion products. You are an adult over the age of 18. You may purchase or could have been given or inherited fashion goods such as handbags, bags, wallets, shoes, belts, and other accessories that are made from exotic skins and are considered luxury items. Even if you do not have a direct association with these products, I am interested in your opinions or attitudes towards them. Your thoughts on products made from such materials, attitudes to animals, and awareness of environmental issues is integral to understand the demand side of the wildlife trade.

What will happen to me if I take part?

Once you have read this participant information sheet and have consented to be interviewed you will be asked a series of questions related to your consumer behaviour, your attitudes towards luxury fashion, what you think about products that are made from exotic skins of alligator, crocodile, snake, and lizard, about your lifestyle, what you think about animal welfare and animal cruelty, whether you have feelings of empathy to animals or to humans or both, and you will be asked to comment on photos of luxury fashion products made from these skins.

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed and will be analysed. You will be asked to sit for an interview that will be approximately 60 minutes. Only the audio will be recorded regardless of whether the interview is online or in-person. A pseudonym will be assigned to you and the data collected will be stored using this pseudonym to protect your identity. Online interviews may be conducted on MS Teams or similar software. For anonymity and confidentiality purposes the interviews will be conducted in a private atmosphere, i.e., not in a public space where the interview can be overheard.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be given 15 GBP. Additionally, your participation will contribute to knowledge in this area of research. the study is important to explain consumer

attitudes towards luxury fashion goods made from exotic skins of animals such as alligators, crocodiles, snakes, and lizards. The demand for exotic skins in fashion items is not diminishing. Specifically reptilian skins are ones that show up the most in contraband collected from the illegal wildlife trade. In understanding the characteristics and profile of a typical luxury fashion goods consumer we can demystify the demand for such products and hopefully create intervention strategies in the future to lessen it.

Are there any risks involved?

It is expected that taking part in this study is not intended to cause any psychological discomfort and/or distress, however, should you feel uncomfortable you can leave the interview at any time. Since the data will be analysed and compiled anonymously you cannot withdraw any data that has been collected before your withdrawal. There will be a 7-day grace period provided for you to let the researcher know that you would like to opt-out and that your data should be destroyed. If you have any concerns, you may contact the researcher at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk. The aim of the researcher is to ask pertinent and relevant questions in a non-intrusive manner to not antagonise, you, the participant.

What data will be collected?

The data that will be collected will be the audio recordings of the interviews. These interviews will then be transcribed using software such as that on MS Teams or automatic transcription such as that provided by Google or similar software that is approved by the University. Some personal data such as your age, sex, and pet ownership will be collected. All the data will be handled safely, stored on a password protected computer and server, and analysed anonymously. Personal data will be kept separate from the non-identifiable data to ensure this. Contact details may need to be stored for the duration of the study in case the researcher needs to contact you for clarity or to inform you of any issues with data collection/if the data needs to be collected again.

Will my participation be confidential?

Your participation and the information we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be anonymous and will be given a pseudonym for the purpose

of research. Certain information such as your sex, age, and pet ownership will be collected to only describe demographics for the study.

Only members of the research team and responsible members of the University of Southampton may be given access to data about you for monitoring purposes and/or to carry out an audit of the study to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations. Individuals from regulatory authorities (people who check that we are carrying out the study correctly) may require access to your data. All of these people have a duty to keep your information, as a research participant, strictly confidential.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part. If you decide you want to take part, you will need to sign a consent form to show you have agreed to take part.

What happens if I change my mind?

You have the right to change your mind and withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without your participant rights being affected. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained for the purposes of achieving the objectives of the study only as the researcher would have collected some information from an interview. You will be given a period of 7 days from the day you decided to opt out to contact the researcher and request that your data be deleted.

What will happen to the results of the research?

Your personal details will remain strictly confidential. Research findings made available in any reports or publications will not include information that can directly identify you without your specific consent. The results will be written in a PhD thesis and some data may also be reported in publications. You will not be directly identifiable from any quotes or what you say as all participant names will be given pseudonyms.

The data will be stored securely on a password protected computer and backed up on the University's secure server. All data will be transcribed and analysed in a qualitative data analysis

software known as NVivo. Only the researcher and their supervisor will have access to this information.

The University of Southampton conducts research to the highest standards of ethics and research integrity. In accordance with our Research Data Management Policy, data will be held for 10 years after the study has finished when it will be securely destroyed. Some data may continue to be stored if there will be future publications based on it.

If you have any issues or concerns you can contact the researcher Arjun Raj Awasthi at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk

If you are unhappy about any aspect of this study and would like to make a formal complaint, you can contact the Head of Research Integrity and Governance, University of Southampton, on the following contact details: Email: rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk, phone: + 44 2380 595058.

Please quote the Ethics/ERGO number above. Please note that by making a complaint you might be no longer anonymous.

More information on your rights as a study participant is available via this link:

<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/about/governance/participant-information.page>

Where can I get more information?

More information on your rights as a study participant is available via this link:

<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/about/governance/participant-information.page>

What happens if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to the researchers who will do their best to answer your questions.

If you remain unhappy or have a complaint about any aspect of this study, please contact the University of Southampton Head of Research Ethics and Clinical Governance (023 8059 5058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk).

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The University of Southampton conducts research to the highest standards of research integrity. As a publicly-funded organisation, the University has to ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personally-identifiable information about people who have agreed to take part in research.

This means that when you agree to take part in a research study, we will use information about you in the ways needed, and for the purposes specified, to conduct and complete the research project.

Under data protection law, 'Personal data' means any information that relates to and is capable of identifying a living individual. The University's data protection policy governing the use of personal data by the University can be found on its website

(<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page>).

This Participant Information Sheet tells you what data will be collected for this project and whether this includes any personal data. Please ask the research team if you have any questions or are unclear what data is being collected about you.

Our privacy notice for research participants provides more information on how the University of Southampton collects and uses your personal data when you take part in one of our research projects and can be found at

<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/assets/sharepoint/intranet/ls/Public/Research%20and%20Integrity%20Privacy%20Notice/Privacy%20Notice%20for%20Research%20Participants.pdf>

Any personal data we collect in this study will be used only for the purposes of carrying out our research and will be handled according to the University's policies in line with data protection law.

If any personal data is used from which you can be identified directly, it will not be disclosed to anyone else without your consent unless the University of Southampton is required by law to disclose it.

Data protection law requires us to have a valid legal reason ('lawful basis) to process and use your Personal data. The lawful basis for processing personal information in this research study is for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. Personal data collected for research will not be used for any other purpose.

For the purposes of data protection law, the University of Southampton is the 'Data Controller' for this study, which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The University of Southampton will keep identifiable information about you for 10 years after the study has finished after which time any link between you and your information will be removed.

The University of Southampton will keep identifiable information about you from this study only up until the PhD dissertation is submitted and all data has been analysed.

To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal data necessary to achieve our research study objectives. Your data protection rights – such as to access, change, or transfer such information - may be limited, however, in order for the research output to be reliable and accurate. The University will not do anything with your personal data that you would not reasonably expect.

If you have any questions about how your personal data is used, or wish to exercise any of your rights, please consult the University's data protection webpage (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page>) where you can make a request using our online form. If you need further assistance, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer (data.protection@soton.ac.uk).

Thank you.

Thank you for reading this participant information sheet and for agreeing to be interviewed for this research.

G.3 Interview Consent Form

Study Title: The Luxury Fashion Consumer and the Demand for Fashion Products: Interviews to Explore Attitudes, Behaviours and Perceptions

Ethics/ERGO number: 91904

Version and date: Version 1

Thank you for your interest in this study. It is very important that research is conducted in line with ethical principles, and this Consent Form asks you to confirm if you agree to take part in the above study. Please carefully consider the statements below and add your initials only if you agree to participate in this research and understand what this will mean for you.

Please add your initials to the boxes below if you agree with the statements:

Mandatory Consent Statements	Participant Initials
I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.	
I understand that all data collected will be kept anonymous and confidential.	
I understand that I may be quoted directly in reports of the research but that I will not be directly identified i.e. that my name will not be used.	
I understand that taking part in the study involves audio recording and transcription of this data.	
I agree to take part in this study and understand that data collected during this research project will be used for the purpose of this study.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving a reason, however, I will need to	

inform the researcher within 7 days of my interview for my data to be destroyed and not used for the study.	
I give permission for data to be held by the researcher and the institution till the conferment of their degree but that finished transcribed data can be used for future research or publications.	

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

_____ Arjun Raj Awasthi _____

 ..

Name Researcher

Signature

Date

G.4 Interview Guide and Photos

Interview Guide for Participants

Theme	Questions
Introduction/Basic	<p>a. Can you please tell me about yourself and your background?</p> <p>b. What do you think about luxury fashion? Is it something that interests you?</p>
Purchase Intention	<p>a. What kind of fashion products or accessories do you buy?</p> <p>b. How important is the brand reputation and status symbol associated with these products for you?</p> <p>c. Do you tend to follow fashion trends? Why/why not?</p> <p>d. If you had the chance to obtain a luxury item such as a handbag made from exotic skin (not necessarily buying it yourself and perhaps instead being gifted it) would you consider owning it?</p> <p>e. What do you consider appealing, if anything, about luxury fashion products made from exotic skins such as alligator, crocodile, snake, or lizard?</p> <p>f. Have you ever felt conflicted about buying luxury fashion items sourced from exotic animals?</p>
The Wildlife Trade	<p>a. How do you think the exotic skins used to make these products are sourced?</p> <p>b. Do you know anything about the wildlife trade? If so, what do you know?</p>
Techniques of Neutralisation	<p>“Cognitive dissonance is a state of mental discomfort that arises when a person holds two conflicting beliefs, ideas, or behaviours. This discomfort motivates the person to pick one and suppress the other to achieve psychological consistency” (Festinger, 1957)</p> <p>a. Do you experience this kind of discomfort when you buy such products? If so, how do you eliminate the discomfort?</p> <p>b. If you could buy, inherit, or be gifted these products would you feel the need to justify your purchase of these products to yourself or to others? How would you justify it/how have you justified it? For example, have you ever claimed that a product is faux or imitation when it was authentic exotic skin? If so, why?</p> <p>c. Have you faced an ethical concern when buying certain products? How were you able to overcome your moral dilemma?</p>

Animal Welfare/Empathy	<p>a. Do you believe there are ethical concerns associated with using exotic animal skins in fashion? Why or why not?</p> <p>b. How do your feelings towards animals influence your purchasing decisions?</p> <p>c. If you have pets, does having a pet companion influence your purchasing decisions? If so, in what way?</p>
Conclusion	<p>a. Is there anything else you would like to add about your attitudes towards or experiences with luxury fashion products made from exotic skins?</p> <p>b. Do you have any final thoughts? Have you missed saying something?</p>

Images Shown During Interview:

All images are copyright free and were sourced from Wikimedia commons or Freepik.com.

Image A		Crocodile skin tote bag
Image B		Watch with an alligator skin strap

<p>Image C</p>		<p>Camera with lizard skin siding</p>
<p>Image D</p>		<p>'Himalayan' Hermès designer bag made from Nile crocodile skin Error! Bookmark not defined.</p>
<p>Image E</p>		<p>Belt made from crocodile skin</p>

Appendix H Interview Recruitment Advertisement

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study



To participate you must be **above the age of 18** and **live in the UK** and you must have **purchased, inherited, or been gifted a luxury fashion product(s)**. This includes accessories such as handbags, wallets, belts, shoes, watches etc.

Each participant will be interviewed by the researcher for not longer than 1 hour. As a token of appreciation **each participant will be given £15.**

This is a self-funded University of Southampton PhD project (ergo no. 91904). The researcher is Arjun R Awasthi in the Faculty of Social Sciences and can be contacted at a.r.awasthi@soton.ac.uk

Figure 25. Recruitment Poster for Interviews

Appendix I Codebook for Interviews

Name of Code and Subcode	Description
1. Concern and Consideration for the Natural Environment	The participant talks about their knowledge or lack of knowledge related to the illegal wildlife trade and their awareness of it. The features of the trade, who the actors are, and how wild animals are sourced from the trade to make luxury fashion products.
1.1. Knowledge of the Illegal Wildlife Trade	If the participant divulges any information that can help determine their engagement with and knowledge of the dynamics of the illegal wildlife trade.
1.2. Location of Trade	Where participants determine the trade takes place and is this rooted in stereotyping regions that are historically associated with the illegal wildlife trade.
1.3 Need for Conservation or Protection of Wild Animal Species	Whether the participant expresses a genuine concern for the environment and wild animal species, expressing the need for wildlife conservation and protection of nature.
2. Ideas Shaping Personal Values about Luxury Products	These values and also opinions that come from the participant or those around the participant help them develop their self-concept that inform their values and opinions that help to develop the participant's identity.
2.1 Luxury and Factors Contributing to Self-Concept	How the participant finds that these products help to describe their personal qualities and attributes. The personal and social dimensions of the participants when engaging in luxury consumption, such as self-perception, entitlement, values, confidence, social status, upbringing, all help to create the participant's concept of self.
2.1.1 Feeling Confident	Buying a luxury fashion product made the participant gain confidence and even self-worth.
2.1.2 Development of Identity	How engagement with luxury consumption informs the development of identity, or how the individual creates and shapes who they are.

Name of Code and Subcode	Description
2.1.3 Exposure and Upbringing	How a person was raised by parents or family and exposure to media or other related social constructs that influence opinions while growing up.
2.2 Negative Feelings Towards Exotic Skin Products	Participants expressed their disdain for luxury fashion products made from exotic skins and how they find such products unattractive or in bade taste.
2.3 Social Comparison and Judgments of and by Others	Contentions or positive feelings expressed by participants with respect to consuming or wearing luxury fashion products. Either being positively or negatively by others.
3. Neutralisation Techniques or Justifications	When asked about cognitive dissonance experienced the explanations given by participants as to how they resolve this. Their justifications or apprehensions about luxury fashion products made from exotic skins.
3.1 Appeal to Higher Loyalties	The person justifies their actions by claiming loyalty to a smaller group, such as friends or family, and that their smaller social group is more important to follow than society. There is a prioritization of personal relationships over moral or legal obligations.
3.2 Cognitive Dissonance	A state experienced by an individual in which they hold two conflicting beliefs or values and need to choose to express one behaviour to resolve this conflict.
3.3 Condemnation of the Condemners	Those that are condemning the actions or behaviours are hypocrites and are the ones who are deviant. This is done to delegitimise the condemnation of the offender and deflects the blame away.
3.4 Denial of Injury	The behaviour does not really cause any harm or injury. They remove guilt from their actions by stating that their actions have a minimal impact on others. They perceive their behaviours as being "victimless"
3.5 Denial of Responsibility	The person takes on a "billiard ball" approach and asserts that their actions are out of their control. Those external factors such as circumstances, peer pressure, or authority figures control their

Name of Code and Subcode	Description
	actions. In this way they avoid taking personal accountability for their actions.
3.6 Denial of the Victim	The victim deserved the harm, and that the victim is not worthy of sympathy. The blame is shifted to the victim who "had it coming" and that they deserve what happened to them.
3.8 Feeling of Guilt	A feeling of guilt arises in the participant when talking about buying products and how expensive they are. This affects their purchase intention and makes them think about their purchases. Also guilt with respect to how purchasing the product makes them feel.
3.9 Moral Neutralisation and Compartmentalisation	Instances where participants downplay or disconnect the moral implications of their consumption by mentally separating ethical concerns from purchasing decisions. Through compartmentalisation, they preserve a positive self-image while continuing to engage in behaviours that conflict with their stated values.
4. Perceptions and Representations of Non-Human Animals	Participants talk about how animals fit into the manufacturing of luxury fashion products. They discuss their feelings towards animals and if they are pet owners. How pet ownership affects purchase intention and determines behaviours and attitudes towards luxury fashion products, especially those made from exotic skins.
4.1 Consumption of Non-human Animals as Food	If a participant mentions the consumption of animals as food. They can also mention the effect that consumption of meat, or not, as food has on their behaviour and how.
4.2 Ethical Alternative to Exotic Skins	Participants mention knowing about alternatives to exotic skins. They can also mention whether they have engaged with these alternatives and how they feel about them.
4.3 Expression of Affinity or Affection towards Non-human Animals	Here participants talk about their feelings of affection to animals and predominantly mention their affection towards pet companion animals.

Name of Code and Subcode	Description
4.4 Moral Hierarchies in Animal Use	The participant distinguishes categories for different animals. Some are for food, some are for pet-keeping, and some are wild.
4.5 Non-human Animals Serve a Purpose to Humans	The purpose of animals is to serve as utility for humans, and participants state that animals are to be used by humans as a resource.
4.6 Pet Keeping and Generation of Empathy to Non-human Animals	If participants mention the importance of pet companion animals and if these pet animals changed the way participants feel about other animals, potentially generating empathy for them.
4.7 The Treatment of Animals, Cruelty, and Their Suffering	The production of luxury fashion products using exotic skins is cruel and dangerous.
5. Purchase Intention behind Luxury Fashion	The participants talk about what their feelings are towards luxury fashion, what kind of items they purchase, the motivations behind purchasing these items, their desire for luxury fashion, and what they find appealing about these products.
5.1 Aesthetic Appeal	The subjective idea of beauty inherent to the product that a participant finds attractive and appealing.
5.2 Brand Reputation and Legacy	The effect that the positive reputation, renown, and legacy of a brand has on purchase intention.
5.3 Culturally Significant Practices and Traditions	The buying and ownership of the luxury fashion article is deeply rooted in the cultural background and has significance in traditional practices.
5.4 Emulating Celebrities and Aspiring to a Luxury Lifestyle	To emulate or to be like someone that you have seen that has these kind of products. These could be celebrities or people that are public figures that have an influence on what the participant bought or would buy.
5.5 Following Fashion Trends	Trends and styles of fashion are an important motivator to buy these products.

Name of Code and Subcode	Description
5.6 Fulfilling a Need and Filling a Necessity	An individual can have a need or necessity to buy these products or not.
5.7 Interest in the Utility of the Product over the Material it is Made of	The customer is more interested in the product itself rather than what the product is made of. The skin may be an added bonus but is not the main selling point.
5.8 Quality, Value, and Exclusivity of the Product	Luxury fashion goods are expensive and worth more. This makes them valuable items. They are also exclusive and special. Products that are good quality also are long-lasting in the view of the participant.
5.9 Reward Purchase in Recognition of Personal Achievement	Products serve as a recognition of hard work and achievement. People buy these products to treat themselves and commend their own achievement.
5.10 Sentimentality and Nostalgia	The product purchased by the participant evokes feelings of fondness, sentimentality, or nostalgia.
5.11 Signifying Social Status	Ownership of high-end luxury fashion products signify wealth and access to wealth in turn creating an association to high social status.
5.12 Sustainably Sourced and Made	How sustainable the brand is, or how sustainable consumers believe the brand is, helps the consumer feel a desire to purchase this product.
5.13 The Monetary Cost of Luxury	The price of luxury products and how much they cost can be a consideration or even a deterrent for the individual to buy these products.
5.14 The Product Represents a Gendered Archetype	The fashion article and conversations around it are associated with gendered masculine and feminine stereotypes.
	This refers to the participant's thoughts and beliefs with respect to being a socially responsible consumer and adhering to their sense of higher morality when they make purchases. This also refers to

Name of Code and Subcode	Description
6. Social Responsibility and Morality	whether the participant feels that the company they are buying products from has an ethos of social responsibility.
6.1 Factors Modifying or Catalysing Change in Behaviour	The participant describes what motivated a change in their behaviour from buying or wanting exotic skin products to understanding how these products are ethically dubious and disengaging from this type of consumption.
6.2 Responsibility of Self or Other Consumers to Make Ethical Choices	Responsibility is placed on the consumer to stay informed and make ethical choices by avoiding exotic skins due to their moral implications.
6.3 Transparency and Accountability of the Luxury Fashion Industry	the extent to which participants value transparency and accountability in the luxury fashion industry, and how these concerns influence their decisions as socially responsible consumers.

Appendix J Sample Interview Transcript

Speakers

Arjun Awasthi, Pratham

Arjun Awasthi 00:00

Okay. All right. So I'll keep it closer to you so that we can record it easily. So basically, I'm just going to ask a series of questions. And it's just going to be sort of like a discussion. So it's not that I'm going to stick to the questions, you know, based on our conversation, maybe I'll ask other questions as well. So it's a semi structured interview, I'll be giving you a definition of a term as well. When I ask the questions, and will ask questions based on that as we proceed. And once the questions have been answered, I'll show you a series of images just to get your impressions on those images and get some feedback on that. So do you have any questions before we start?

Pratham 00:40

So this is just about me quickly. So I've got a bit I've got a minor stutter. So sometimes, if I ask the questions, I may I may start doing "um um". So yeah, just bear that

Arjun Awasthi 00:49

That is totally fine. That's all right. All right. So to begin, can you please tell me about yourself and your background?

Pratham 00:59

I've kind of told you a bit, but I'm [Pratham]. I'm, I'm I ethnically, I'm Indian, but I'm born here. This is my first year at university, and I'm based in London, but I've moved here for university. And yes, anything else that like

Arjun Awasthi 01:14

How old are you live? Right?

Pratham 01:15

Yeah. So I'm 18. I'm gonna turn 19 in August, and yeah, okay. I did my schooling in London as well.

Arjun Awasthi 01:24

Okay.

Pratham 01:24

I was brought there as well.

Arjun Awasthi 01:25

And what are you studying?

Pratham 01:27

Environmental science.

Arjun Awasthi 01:28

All right, great fantastic. So what do you think about luxury fashion? Is it something that interests you?

Pratham 01:35

Partly, yes, I do. I do see it as like a good is a good kind of like ambition to achieve towards I think, like, sometimes it's good to have that kind of like, need and urge for like really high end clothing and fashion. But I don't always see it as like a priority like this. Of course, there's other things in life, which you must always consider over like, the like, it's not a necessity, in simple terms. So yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 02:02

Alright, so you set it something to sort of strive towards, in a sense, yeah, you feel that it brings something to aspire to. Would you agree with that? Yeah?

Pratham 02:17

Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 02:18

All right. So what kind of fashion products or accessories are you interested in? Or do you buy?

Pratham 02:25

Well, in terms of luxuries, usually like shoes and belts, and like jewelry, and that kind of stuff that I'm really interested in. It's not much as like clothing, it's more accessories that I find more interesting.

Arjun Awasthi 02:38

What about these accessories? You find appealing?

Pratham 02:41

What about them? So I think quality, material, price. Price isn't always like, Isn't isn't always the determining factor. But it's something that I've taken into consideration this mostly like quality of material, brand, value, brand reputation. And yeah, that kind of stuff.

Arjun Awasthi 03:02

All right, exactly. That was going to be my next question is How important is the brand reputation? Yeah, and status symbol associated with these products for you? So would you say that they represent some sort of a status symbol?

Pratham 03:14

Yes.

Arjun Awasthi 03:15

How so?

Pratham 03:16

So, I think I think that it's all about like, reputation within society. So let's say you're wearing something like Balenciaga, for example, if it's really high end, people are gonna, of course, they're gonna, they're gonna give more interest into it. And, of course, it looked more like more, it makes you look more influential and more more like a, like an interesting person that you want to get to know them. They seem like they really know what they're doing. It just kind of gives you a good sense of confidence. So yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 03:49

And what do you feel about fashion trends? Do you feel like you follow them? Why or why not?

Pratham 03:55

Sometimes I follow them. But I sometimes feel like it's out of my range, I like to stay consistent with what I wear and what I do, because then I feel like you need to be true to yourself. But some like if it's something that I feel like I can easily transition to then of course, I'd go for it, but it just is always dependent on what the actual fashion trend is.

Arjun Awasthi 04:17

Interesting. So you talked about consistency in Yeah. And being yourself. So how would you sort of talk about this kind of, I guess, style or fashion that you're more drawn towards?

Pratham 04:33

In am to like, like, like, like, give more of a like a summary of that, like in. Is it more like, like trends in the sense that sorry, I'm just a bit.

Arjun Awasthi 04:48

No, that's totally fine. Yeah, no. So I basically mean, how would you define your personal style?

Pratham 04:54

All right, so I'd like to go for like a, like a, like a mix of trendy and cool, because especially because of my situations in the sense that like trying to look for a partner and all that stuff like you, you kind of, I always feel this need to sell myself, but not stand out from the crowd. It's

always trying to find that middle line. So that's why I kind of dress the way I do. And try to make sure that if you've got a balance, you can find the right part.

Arjun Awasthi 05:24

Yeah, that's very interesting. So now I'm going to talk specifically about exotic skins. Yeah. So what do you feel about exotic skins? And would you if you had the chance to obtain a luxury item that's made of exotic skins? Would you be drawn towards it? And would you consider owning it? And when I talk about exotic skins, I specifically mean skins from like snakes, alligator, crocodile, lizard, that those kinds of products.

Pratham 05:52

I'd say I'm more against it, especially because of like, my culture, my beliefs, my I've kind of been brought up like with, like, respecting animals and what they do. And of course, there's, I feel like there's a fine line, there's a fine line between exploiting animals and using them for consumption. And I feel like these exotic animals should be left in like dwelling in their own habitats. And I feel like we shouldn't really be exploiting it. And yeah, I don't think it's right. Right.

Arjun Awasthi 06:19

Objectively, though, do you find these products that are made for them, say you see an Hermes bag that's made from crocodile skin or something objectively, do you think that is beautiful or appealing?

Pratham 06:31

Yeah, I would admit, yeah, some of them really do look like they do have that kind of wow factor. But I guess the way I've been brought up is just that, I wouldn't want it, I wouldn't want to be associated with it too much. Because then I feel like I'd be going against everything. And it's not something that I want to live with myself when. So yeah, yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 06:53

And you talked about it a little bit right now in my questioning, but what about these, aside from this wow factor, would you consider is appealing about luxury fashion products that are made from exotic skins?

Pratham 07:07

What would I consider appealing?

Arjun Awasthi 07:09

Yeah.

Pratham 07:11

I guess it's just that they're so rare, like in the sense that you especially in London, for example, you don't see that many people with those. So I feel like if you had ownership of one it really

like, like, you'd have a lot of eyes on you. Like, it would be very like, Oh my God, who is he? And like, Yeah. Sort of our reputation in this in my in my sense. Yeah. Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 07:37

So you spoke about, you know, how your background inhibits you from sort of engaging in this kind of purchasing activity and behavior. So have you ever felt conflicted about buying luxury fashion items sourced from exotic animals?

Pratham 07:51

I haven't actually, because I've always I've always tried to avoid try to make sure that I've stayed true to my beliefs and not not stray if you get what I mean. So yeah, okay. Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 08:05

So you mentioned a little bit about how you believe that these animals should be left in their habitat, or whatever. So this question is, so how do you think the exotic skins used to make these products are sourced?

Pratham 08:23

Well, I reckon one thing is through like poaching and like, especially in like areas in Africa. I know for example, like ivory horns, like elephant tusks and ivory horns, that they get like these animals, they get poached, and then they also get they get killed illegally. And yeah, that's how I and then I tend to think that it goes through some processing stages till till they actually like manufacture it, like send it factories and then manufacture into like clothing, accessories and all that stuff. Okay, yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 08:56

Any other ideas? Aside from poaching? That you could think of?

Pratham 08:59

Um not not right now. Yeah, I'm trying to think of something else can't really think of anything else?

Arjun Awasthi 09:19

That's alright, that's fine. So do you know anything about the wildlife trade? If so, what do you know?

Pratham 09:26

I'm vaguely familiar with it. But isn't it isn't the wildlife trade is near basically a scheme which is aimed at aimed at like stopping this like, this, like not transportation, but it's more like trading off like skins or like, like all of these things from like exotic animals. Is it that?

Arjun Awasthi 09:47

Well, I mean, I, I'm just curious to know what you're impressions are.

Pratham 09:52

Yeah. So I've been taught something similar, but it's more like, like the Rio convention that we've been taught about because I know that's also like have to stop to like protect, like habitat, biodiversity of the species because some of them tend to be like really keystone, they tend to be important for the wild for like the food, like the food, like the ecological pyramids, the food chains, and that kind of stuff so I feel like if you're, if you're if you're getting rid of these, that apex predator, so let's see tiger skins. Now if you're poaching the Tigers, then you're really like disrupting their habitat, you may cause it to degrade. And we don't want that, do we? So yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 10:30

All right, great. Okay, so now I'm going to read out that definition. And then I'm going to ask you some questions based off of that, all right. So there is a concept known as cognitive dissonance in psychology. So cognitive dissonance is a state of mental discomfort that arises when a person holds two conflicting beliefs, ideas or behaviors. This discomfort motivates the person to pick one and suppress the other to achieve psychological consistency.

Pratham 11:00

Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 11:00

All right. So do you experience this kind of discomfort when you buy luxury fashion products? If so, how do you eliminate the discomfort?

Pratham 11:14

I sometimes do. But I think it's more about well, if if I let's say I wanted to purchase, like, let's say like, like a chain, for example, from like a luxury brand, then I think more about the if the material kind of involved if there was like kind of material which isn't sustainably sourced, for example, or like, that, then I'd usually I'd usually want to think about the wider context of it. And I try to consider I try to consider that over the price. Because I'm, sometimes I'm like, Okay, let me pay, let me pay a higher price, but I'll get more I'll get a sustainably sourced one, for example. So it's kind of like I tried to use my culture and my beliefs to to outweigh one over the other if you get what I mean.

Arjun Awasthi 12:04

So then you would say that a higher price to you indicates that it is more sustainably sourced?

Pratham 12:10

Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 12:11

Okay. And in, but in doing so then paying a premium? You're sort of eliminating this conflicting thought.

Pratham 12:18

Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 12:19

So but if you do have a conflicting thought, like, what is it? So what what is it aside from just the knowledge or awareness or lack thereof, that it's sustainable? Like, what are some internal values and beliefs that you have that you have to sort of mitigate or cross over to then buy these products?

Pratham 12:39

And that's a lot of thought.

Arjun Awasthi 12:41

Take your time.

Pratham 12:42

You have you just run over the question to me, I've kind of I've just gone blank.

Arjun Awasthi 13:04

Yeah, it's totally fine. So basically, I'll talk about what cognitive dissonance is again, yes. Right. So basically, what happens is that say you want to purchase X product. But you have thought in your mind, that says, Actually, I don't know something is holding me back from buying it. But then you mitigate that thought, and you go ahead and buy it again, just crossing that bridge. So that's what I really mean. And that's what I'm really trying to understand is what kind of basically what kind of values and ideas would you then suppress or behaviors that you would suppress in order to buy these products?

Pratham 13:43

And so I'd say there's an element of guilt involved, because I know it's about sustainable sourcing and all that stuff, but I know that it's not, it's not always a nice thing that I'd say to own a lot of, let's say jewelry, for example. And I don't really want to I don't like to hoard stuff. If you get what I mean, so sometimes I feel like what's the word like as in? How do I explain it? Sorry, there's a lot going on. So I can't explain it. So when I'm coming back to the idea of guilt, I'd say more than, like, thinking about, okay, of course, it's thinking about where the item has been sourced, but also thinking about me as a person I have I got this item already, like, do I actually need it? So it's also thinking about I'm thinking thinking into the future, for example, because I was like, like, I'm a uni student. For example, I may have money problems in the future may do now. Like, it's all about, like thinking two steps ahead. And that's something that's sometimes like of kind of thought process that I go through when I sometimes buy some of these products.

Arjun Awasthi 15:13

So then how do you get over the guilt?

Pratham 15:15

Right. Well, that's more I it's more of an impulse choice either just either just buy it and I don't think about it, or I just I, like, I take two steps back, and I just don't buy it. So it's how these two is a double edged sword in the sense.

Arjun Awasthi 15:33

That's exactly what I'm trying to understand. Yeah. So then it's just sort of an impulse, then you don't really think about it. So you just

Pratham 15:40

yeah, just do it. Just do it. Yeah, just do it.

Arjun Awasthi 15:43

Alright. Alright, if you could buy, inherit or be gifted products that are made from exotic skins? Would you feel the need to justify your purchase of these products to yourself or to others?

Pratham 15:58

Yeah, because I don't, because of like, once again, about my culture and beliefs. I don't really like to be associated with those kind of like items and all that stuff. So I would if I was found to be in ownership, of one of them, I would need to explain that I haven't willingly gone and bought the product. I've rather been gifted it, for example. So yeah, that's that's kind of like how I see it.

Arjun Awasthi 16:23

And then like, what kind of ways would you justify it? So for example, have you ever ever claimed that a product is imitation or faux when it was authentic?

Pratham 16:34

Yeah. I mean, that is a good one about the faux leather, for example. Yeah. How do I justify it? I mean, yeah, as I said before, like, saying that it's not actually I wouldn't want to be associated because it wasn't gifted to me. And in the sense that. Yeah, can't really think of anything else. Yeah, yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 17:12

Basically, what words would you use when you're talking to someone if they were to ask you, oh, you know, this product, you know, and you don't associate with with the product? So what kind of language would you use that to dissociate yourself from it?

Pratham 17:28

So I'd say, Well, I probably a big one. I say it's fake. Okay. It's a big one that I just say it's fake because, like, once again, I just, if I would get caught having it, then I would want to say that it's not real. Yeah, not real fake. So yeah, kind of just need a bit of water.

Arjun Awasthi 17:50

Yeah, sure.

Pratham 17:52

Thank you. Sorry, where were we?

Arjun Awasthi 18:05

That's fine. No way. This is really great stuff. Thank you so much. Um, so you were talking a lot about your values, and who you are as a person and how that informs you and how you don't like to necessarily outwardly be associated with these products. So have you faced an ethical concern when buying certain luxury products? And how were you able to overcome your moral dilemma?

Pratham 18:32

I don't really think I think. I don't really think I've faced an ethical dilemma, because I've always put my foot down before actually, like, go ahead with it. And I always try to make sure I don't, I don't like I don't go near I don't go near the temptation, because then once I do, then I'll face that ethical dilemma. So yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 18:51

so you preempt it?

Pratham 18:53

Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 18:53

You just avoid the guilt in all of this.

Pratham 18:56

Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 18:56

We're not gonna deal with this right now. So I'm just not going to do it.

Pratham 18:58

That's me my whole life avoiding everything honestly. So you just, okay. Just turn a blind eye.

Arjun Awasthi 19:08

So, and you did touch upon this a little bit, I want to ask a little bit more in detail about this specific issue. Do you believe there are ethical concerns associated with using exotic animal skins in fashion? Why or why not?

Pratham 19:27

Yes, definitely. So once again, I've talked about like this illegal poaching of animals and about how we as humans were seen as stewards were seen as like this kind of we shouldn't be exploiting animals for our own benefit, we should be we're essentially seen as the most one of the most intelligent species on the planet. We've got good sense of like, of place and who we are, as like a species, how we fit into this community or this whole the whole biosphere for example. And like we we shouldn't be exploiting animals for our own benefit. I keep saying that, but yeah it's true. And, yeah, that's how I kind of see it.

Arjun Awasthi 20:07

How do your feelings towards animals influence your purchasing decisions? Right?

Pratham 20:11

Okay. Yeah. So for example, okay, in my sense, I've got a dog, for example, I love him to bits. And I wouldn't I'd see I'd kind of see the animals in the same way as he would like I would, I would be distraught If someone did that to, let's say, dogs, for example, like, on the animals like, they they don't have, they don't have sense of like, they don't animals, animals don't have sense of like, right or wrong, were the ones were the ones who essentially have to be the spokespersons for that. And like, we shouldn't we shouldn't we shouldn't be the ones to judge whether they like whether they get sold into like this kind of like exotic animal produce or whatnot, we should rather let them let them do what they need, like what they can do, and not interfere with like natural like, natural like dynamics of let's say the ecosystem for example.

Arjun Awasthi 21:06

So then would you say there is a difference between pet companion or domestic animals and wild animals?

Pratham 21:11

There is there is a there is a kind of like a difference. But the way I see I see a more of an association rather than "Oh, this is this and this is that". Because I once again, I always felt like we should always be the one to take care of animals, we shouldn't be harming them, we should do more good than harm. Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 21:32

And based on your personal beliefs, so what it was so I'm a vegetarian or flexitarian. Okay, so what does that mean?

Pratham 21:40

So, religiously? I'm vegetarian on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I don't eat beef at all because I'm Hindu, and I eat everything else apart from everything else apart from beef, and except Tuesdays and Thursdays I only eat veg. Yeah. And that's, that's me.

Arjun Awasthi 21:59

Okay. And does that sort of impact how you buy products? No, really,

Pratham 22:03

Because I because I feel like diet soy is a different thing. Like, I don't know if I kind of touched on this, but like, I feel like I said animals, like animals for consumption are different from like, exotic animals. So that's kind of the reason why I don't like to associate like poultry and like meat and all that stuff with like exotic animals. I was like, there's a fine line.

Arjun Awasthi 22:25

Okay, so you do definitely believe that, that there are some animals that are for consumption? And some that aren't?

Pratham 22:30

Yes, yes.

Arjun Awasthi 22:31

Okay. And how do you make that distinction?

Pratham 22:34

It's a societal thing to be honest. So like, because I've been brought up here I see as eating like I just here I've brought I've been brought eating chicken, lamb, fish, prawn, seafood, crustaceans and all that stuff. But like, yeah, so that's how I'd say it's a societal thing. Because if I was brought up in India, for example, I'd probably just be veg or on that. So that's kind of the reason why I've kind of made that distinguishment from consumption versus, like pet companions, and like exotic animal, for example.

Arjun Awasthi 23:06

So then what is the fine line for you?

Pratham 23:12

So essentially, it's, it's the general it's the general and is the general like, like animals, like livestock like pigs, cows, we I don't eat beef, chicken, lamb, nor the or the ones that society generally sees as like food for consumption, compared to, let's say, exotic animals. Like I define them in the sense that they're not native to this area. We don't eat them here. But like in other countries, they might. So that's kind of the way I see as like food for consumption is based on the animals that we eat here, versus the ones that are eaten in other countries, and which they

may see as exotic, but no, which they may see as like consumption, but we see as exotic. So yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 24:03

That's very interesting, because I appreciate you bringing in the cultural context here. So then, would you then say that it's acceptable, in a certain context, to then use exotic animals for consumption, not necessarily for food consumption, but then for making fashion products?

Pratham 24:25

Yeah, it's a gray area, isn't it? Like, because we see things differently from them. But then once again, I'd say that, like, it's, it's out of our control, you can't really do much about it. If it's their culture, they've been brought up with it. You can't just go off and be like, oh, yeah, we don't eat that here. Why are you eating it? Like, you can't just you can't just demand your culture. You can't throw your culture into other countries and expect them to just willingly comply. So that's the kind of the reason why I'd say that.

Arjun Awasthi 24:59

All right. Great, thank you. Yeah, my next question was just going to be about pet companions. But this was very fascinating. So, right, I'm gonna wrap up these questions, and then we're gonna move on to the images. But is there anything else you would like to add about your attitudes towards or experiences with luxury fashion products made from exotic skins or just in general?

Pratham 25:24

Don't really have anything I've just exhausted myself.

Arjun Awasthi 25:27

But what kind of I mean, I guess what I'm curious to know is what are your personal attitudes towards luxury fashion products?

Pratham 25:36

So in summary, I, I'm, I'd say I'm kind of for them. But because there's so it's so hard to define one thing, which branches off into so many different things. So I'd say I'm kind of for them, but I'm also against like, the very extreme ones. Say, Yeah,

Arjun Awasthi 25:56

and what would you say are extreme?

Pratham 25:59

So okay. I honestly say exotic, like, exotic ones, I'd say that I'd say they're seen as like, extreme for me. I'd say it's more like the material jewelry, for example, from them, like as an example of

an accessory that I'd say, are acceptable to me. But if it's like made from let's say, like, like, crocodile skin, then I probably like take a step back and I would be like yeah, no.

Arjun Awasthi 26:23

And as you said, if you would be gifted it you would say it's not real?

Pratham 26:27

Yeah, it's fake. Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 26:29

Yeah. Do you have any final thoughts? Have you missed saying something?

Pratham 26:33

No, I feel like I've got the whole picture. Okay. Yeah. Yeah, thank

Arjun Awasthi 26:37

you very much. All right. So now I'm just going to show you these images and I would ask you, if you can to just also when you're talking about images, I've labeled them as image A, B, C, D. So if you can tell for the transcription what you think about image A and B, etc. and I just, yeah, you can just go through them yourself. And If you have any questions about the images, please feel free to ask me as well.

Pratham 28:32

Right.

Arjun Awasthi 28:35

All right, go ahead. What do you think about image A?

Pratham 28:39

While it's kind of giving, like a reminiscing of like, could you say I'm kind of conflicted, whether it's more like snake skin or crocodile skin? I know it's one of them. But yeah, I It looks like it's used a large, like a very large volume of the animal it is kind of hard, it kind of kind of stings looking at it. Like knowing that. Like, it's just not it just doesn't sit right, I guess. And I feel like the same I'd argue the same thing for image D. Like it not including the price for let's just, it's just that, like, the way it's just the way it's described the handbag and like it's just the way it's been processed. It just doesn't it doesn't sit right because then you can kind of imagine like, you can imagine the animal like it doesn't feel right. So yeah. I don't think I get the same kind of like feeling for image B and C though. But that's mainly because the volume of the animal skin used is much less in the camera and the watch compared to the handbags. And then if I've missed one, I missed one yet. I felt the same the same for E as well. But I think I made The snakeskin actually no, I think it's crocodile actually yeah, it's crocodile. But I don't I don't see that kind of

same association with with the three things compared to the two handbags. And it's also the way they've been described as well. So yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 30:17

And what are your aesthetic impressions about these products? Um,

Pratham 30:22

So in terms of look, I think, like, okay, let's say for example, image D, I think the handbag is kind of attractive, like the colors and all that stuff. But I think some of them like let's say C and E, like they're pretty monotonous in their kind of like colors. It's very gray, dark and dark shades. I wouldn't really be a fan of that. I think it's more of the lighter and image A as well with a dark handbag. I think. I think the lighter want to be more of an attractive one.

Arjun Awasthi 30:53

And how about the watch?

Pratham 30:56

I think also I liked the color of the watch. So a tan color as well. I think it looks nice. It may be made out of leather, though. Not too sure. But yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 31:09

Yeah, it is alligator skin.

Pratham 31:11

alligator skin. Right. Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 31:12

So is that something that looks appealing?

Pratham 31:15

I mean, yeah, it looks appealing. But, yeah, it looks appealing. But the thing is, I think I'd prefer like, if I was kind of forced into it, I think I'd prefer if it was as minimalistic as possible. And I feel like with the watch, you can easily get away with that. Like, like people wouldn't associate with being a skin that you can easily just tell someone it's fake. So that's fine. I'd say I probably prefer let's say I love watching the image be over the handbag, I wouldn't use one, but I probably prefer image A like image B's watch over image A as a handbag.

Arjun Awasthi 31:55

If you were to maybe buy one of these products, would you consider it?

Pratham 32:04

individually? I probably consider image B. One because I'm a guy. I wouldn't consider the handbags. I'd probably consider the camera but I'm not really a camera person.

Arjun Awasthi 32:18

But just as a concept you would consider.

Pratham 32:22

Yeah, yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 32:23

All right. Any other impressions from these images? Does the price have anything to do with it? Because you got mentioned like brand reputation and price earlier.

Pratham 32:39

Kind of looking at it kind of does right now by seeing 240K to 390K is quite a large number. But yeah, it may not have been it may not have been as impactful then because I hadn't considered it as much but now that I've actually seen a picture see like the price of one for example. It does kind of like Sting.

Arjun Awasthi 33:05

Okay, it stings.

Pratham 33:06

Yeah.

Arjun Awasthi 33:07

So it makes you feel uncomfortable.

Pratham 33:09

Yeah, it does. Especially being in ownership of one I wouldn't want to I really like when I go for luxury items. I don't like to go for ones which are like, very top. I like to I like to be frugal. Well, maybe not frugal, but more like modest with my with it like because then it's always the idea of like, like destroy like causing damage to the thing and then feeling guilty about like, doing that kind of stuff.

Arjun Awasthi 33:12

And I guess because you mentioned the volume of the skin that's used. So you can see the animal in this.

Pratham 33:51

Yes, in this. Okay, definitely an image D definitely. They can quite literally imagine that the two parts going out like the spots on the side. It's very, like, disturbing.

Arjun Awasthi 34:06

Yeah. All right. I guess then that's the interview done, right.

Pratham 34:12

Oh, yeah. Oh my god.

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