

# The Dupe Economy and Indian Gen-Z Consumers: Implications for Luxury Brand Equity, Sustainability Consciousness, and Status Signalling

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*Subject Area: Consumer Behaviour, Luxury Marketing & Sustainability*

## Abstract

The global luxury fashion industry has long operated on the twin pillars of exclusivity and aspirational value. However, a rapidly expanding phenomenon — the dupe economy — is fundamentally challenging the assumptions on which this industry is built. Dupes are products that closely replicate the aesthetics of luxury goods and are sold at a fraction of the price, with full consumer awareness of their non-authentic nature. Nowhere is this trend more pronounced or more consequential than among Generation Z consumers in India.

This research paper presents an updated and expanded investigation into the behavioral, psychological, economic, and sustainability-related dimensions of dupe-seeking behaviour among Indian Gen-Z consumers (aged 18–28), and examines how this behaviour reshapes luxury brand equity, status signalling, and long-term brand revenue potential. The study integrates insights from primary survey data (n=150, collected across Tier-1 and Tier-2 Indian cities) and a comprehensive review of secondary literature — including empirical studies on sustainable luxury consumption in India, generational differences in sustainability consciousness when purchasing luxury, Gen-Z fast fashion behaviour, and historical frameworks of conspicuous consumption.

Key findings reveal that: (a) dupe consumption is normalized and widespread among Indian Gen-Z, driven primarily by affordability constraints and social media amplification; (b) a significant sustainability paradox exists — while Gen-Z consumers espouse eco-conscious values, these values rarely override the price-value calculus at the point of purchase; (c) status signaling remains a dominant motivator, but anthropocentric values — concern for human and environmental wellbeing — meaningfully predict willingness to engage with sustainable alternatives; and (d) 70% of dupe-consuming respondents plan to transition to authentic luxury purchases as income grows, confirming the existence of a substantial aspirational pipeline for luxury brands. The paper concludes with strategic implications for luxury brand managers and policymakers operating in the rapidly evolving Indian market.

**Keywords:** *Gen-Z consumers, dupe economy, luxury brands, brand equity, status signaling, sustainable luxury, anthropocentrism, India, fast fashion, conspicuous consumption, aspirational consumption*

## 1. Introduction

The story of luxury consumption in India is, in many ways, a story of contradiction. On one hand, the Indian luxury market is growing at a pace that few other developing nations can match — projected to reach USD 200 billion by 2030, up from approximately USD 8.5 billion today (Shukla, Jain & Maheshwari, 2023; Euromonitor International, 2024). On the other hand, the vast majority of India's

375 million Gen-Z consumers — the demographic cohort that will define the next era of the country's consumer economy — cannot realistically afford the products that anchor this growth. They aspire to luxury, but they shop for dupes.

A dupe is not a counterfeit. That distinction matters enormously for both legal and analytical purposes. A counterfeit product attempts to deceive the buyer into believing they are purchasing the original; a dupe makes no such claim. Buyers of dupes are generally fully informed, and many are openly enthusiastic about their purchases — sharing comparisons, reviews, and recommendations on

Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. What began as a quiet workaround has become an openly celebrated consumer culture with its own language, influencers, and community identity.

For luxury brands, the rise of this culture raises a set of strategically significant questions. If a product indistinguishable in appearance from a Prada bag can be purchased on Meesho for INR 800, what happens to Prada's brand equity? Does the visibility generated by dupe culture help the brand, or does it dilute its carefully constructed exclusivity? And crucially — what does it mean for the long-term relationship between luxury brands and the billion-plus consumers who currently aspire to, but cannot yet afford, authentic luxury?

This paper tackles these questions with fresh urgency, drawing on both new primary survey data and a significantly expanded literature base. Recent scholarship has opened several new dimensions of this debate that demand integration: the role of sustainability consciousness in shaping Gen-Z luxury attitudes; the paradox of millennial and Gen-Z consumers who strongly profess sustainability values but largely discount them at the point of purchase; the dynamics of fast fashion brands as proxies for luxury aspiration; and the enduring relevance of Veblenian conspicuous consumption theory in understanding social signaling in a digital age.

This study brings these threads together in the Indian context, where the confluence of status-driven culture, rapid digital penetration, explosive social media adoption, and structural economic inequality creates a particularly rich — and urgent — landscape for inquiry.

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks that together provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing dupe-seeking behaviour and its implications for luxury brands.

### **Veblen's Theory of Conspicuous Consumption (1899)**

Veblen's framework explains the social function of luxury consumption and provides the foundational logic for understanding why dupe consumers are motivated by status signaling despite purchasing non-authentic goods. The dupe consumer, this study argues, engages in a form of 'aspirational conspicuous consumption' — attempting to transmit status signals that their economic position does not yet support. The Veblenian perspective also helps explain why dupes are more threatening to mid-tier accessible luxury than to ultra-premium brands: the higher the price point of a brand, the harder it is for a dupe to convincingly replicate the full social signal.

### **Bourdieu's Theory of Social Capital and Distinction (1984)**

Bourdieu's concept of 'distinction' argues that consumption choices are not merely economic decisions but acts of cultural classification, through which consumers both assert and negotiate their social position. For Gen-Z dupe consumers, who often demonstrate sophisticated knowledge of luxury brand aesthetics, design codes, and heritage — acquired through intensive social media consumption — there may be a form of cultural capital in being a skilled dupe curator. The ability

to access luxury aesthetics despite financial constraints is increasingly celebrated as a mark of style intelligence, which creates its own social distinction independent of authentic ownership.

## Consumer Identity Theory and the Value-Action Gap

Consumer identity theory (Belk, 1988; Arnould & Thompson, 2005) suggests that products serve as instruments for self-construction and self-expression. For Gen-Z consumers, whose identities are fluid, digitally mediated, and heavily peer-influenced, fashion purchases — including dupes — serve multiple simultaneous identity functions: expressing aesthetic taste, demonstrating resourcefulness, signaling aspiration, and projecting group belonging. The value-action gap framework (Kapferer & Michaut-

Denizeau, 2019) builds on this by explaining why sustainability values, though genuine, often fail to translate into purchasing behaviour in the luxury or fashion context — the identity stakes of 'looking good' or 'fitting in' frequently outweigh the identity stakes of 'being sustainable.'

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Indian Luxury Market: Scale, Growth, and Gen-Z's Role

India's luxury market presents a paradoxical growth story. On the supply side, virtually every major global luxury house has either entered or deepened its presence in India. Louis Vuitton led the charge in 2002; Gucci, Burberry, and Bottega Veneta followed. By 2022, Balenciaga and Valentino had made their entry, facilitated by partnerships with Reliance Brands Ltd. (Shukla et al., 2023). The Aditya Birla Fashion Retail group's partnership with Galeries Lafayette further signals the sector's confidence in Indian demand growth.

On the demand side, the picture is more nuanced. Euromonitor International forecasts India's luxury goods market at USD 8.5 billion as of 2023, with Bain & Company projecting a 3.5x expansion to USD 200 billion by 2030, driven by UHNWIs, a growing entrepreneurial class, and rising Tier-2 and Tier-3 city demand (Sarma & Rajyalakshmi, 2025). Gen-Z and millennials together account for approximately 60% of the luxury market globally (McKinsey & Company, 2020), yet in India, this demographic faces an acute affordability gap that limits direct luxury consumption while simultaneously fuelling extraordinary levels of aspirational engagement.

### 2.2 Veblen's Conspicuous Consumption and the Dupe Era

Thorstein Veblen's 1899 treatise, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, introduced the concept of conspicuous consumption — the acquisition and display of goods as a form of social communication, a means of signaling wealth and status within a community. Veblen argued that goods derive their primary social value not from their utility but from their ability to communicate the owner's position in the social hierarchy (Merwood-Salisbury, 2025). This framework remains deeply relevant to the dupe economy debate.

In Veblen's world, only authentic luxury goods could serve the status-signaling function. But the dupe economy creates a new wrinkle: aspirational consumers can now approximate the visual markers of high status at a fraction of the cost. This is what this study terms 'simulated conspicuous consumption'

— the use of aesthetic replicas to participate in the status-signaling game without bearing the full financial cost. Merwood-Salisbury's (2025) Veblenian reading of Frank Lloyd Wright's dining chairs — objects that were simultaneously modern, industrial, and elite — reminds us that luxury has always been as much about social performance

as physical quality. Dupes merely extend this logic to a broader population.

The important question is whether simulated conspicuous consumption satisfies the status-signaling need as effectively as authentic luxury ownership. Research suggests the answer is 'partially.' Dupe consumers gain the visual signal but lose the experiential, heritage-linked, and rarity-based components of authentic luxury value (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). This gap — between the aesthetic and the experiential — is where luxury brands' most defensible competitive advantage lies.

### **2.3 Sustainable Luxury: The Paradox of Conscious Consumption**

One of the most significant and under-discussed dimensions of this study is the intersection of the dupe economy with sustainability. Recent scholarship has established that sustainability is now a mainstream concern among luxury consumers globally. Sarma and Rajyalakshmi (2025) found that 89% of Gen-Z respondents agree that sustainable practices are essential for the long-term success of luxury brands, with eco-friendly production processes (73.7%) and ethical sourcing (53.5%) identified as the most relevant sustainability dimensions. Indian luxury brands like Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Hermès have all made significant commitments — from Gucci's carbon neutrality achievement in 2021 to Hermès' use of mycelium-based leather from MycoWorks.

Yet an important paradox emerges when sustainability meets purchasing behaviour. Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2019), in a landmark cross-generational study of 3,217 actual luxury buyers across six countries, found that millennials are significantly more disengaged from sustainability at the point of luxury purchase than popular discourse suggests. The study's striking finding was that millennials are actually the most disengaged age group when actually buying luxury goods, despite voicing the strongest general sustainability values. Their primary reason for this disengagement? A belief that luxury and sustainability are fundamentally contradictory — a view held most strongly by Gen-Y and Gen-Z consumers across all six countries studied.

In the Indian context, Ramchandani, van Holt, and Coste-Manière (2017) examined sustainable luxury consumption through an empirical survey of Indian consumers. Their key finding was that need for status (mean 4.84) and anthropocentric values (mean 5.57) — the belief that environmental preservation matters because human comfort and quality of life depend on it — were the most significant predictors of sustainable luxury preference. Importantly, they found that need for status was inversely related to preference for sustainable luxury products among Indian consumers: those who chose the recycled luxury option were actually less status-driven. This counter-intuitive finding suggests that sustainability messaging for Indian luxury consumers should emphasize anthropocentric and environmental arguments over status or uniqueness appeals.

### **1.1 Gen-Z Consumer Behaviour: Fast Fashion, Dupes, and the Value-Action Gap**

Islam (2024), in a study of Generation Z fast fashion consumers in Kolkata, identified three primary factors driving purchase decisions: product quality and ease of payment, brand's eye for sustainability, and social acceptance. The dominance of the quality-and-payment factor aligns directly with this study's findings on dupe motivation — price-value optimization is the defining characteristic of Gen-Z fashion consumption. The study's finding that 48.1% of Gen-Z respondents purchase from fast fashion brands 'sometimes' further reinforces that this generation's fashion behaviour exists on a spectrum between aspiration and pragmatism.

The social acceptance dimension identified by Islam (2024) is particularly relevant to dupe culture. Fashion choices are explicitly tied to peer approval and public confidence in the Gen-Z cohort. Products

— whether fast fashion, dupes, or authentic luxury — are evaluated not merely on intrinsic quality but on the social signals they enable. This insight reinforces Veblen's framework while giving it a distinctly Gen-Z digital-social dimension: where Veblen's leisure class used conspicuous consumption to signal status in physical social spaces, Gen-Z uses fashion choices to signal identity and aspiration in both physical and digital social spaces.

A critical analytical concept that emerges from the sustainability literature is the value-action gap: the disconnect between consumers' stated environmental values and their actual purchasing behaviour (Kapferer & Michaut-Denizeau, 2019; Sarma & Rajyalakshmi, 2025). Gen-Z consumers strongly espouse sustainability in survey responses, yet the same consumers purchase fast fashion and low-quality dupes with high frequency. Understanding and addressing this gap is one of the central challenges facing both luxury brands and sustainability advocates working in the Indian market.

### 1.2 Indian Luxury Brands and the Sustainability Imperative

Shukla, Jain, and Maheshwari (2023) examined sustainability practices among major Indian luxury fashion and grooming brands. Their secondary research found that companies like Aditya Birla Fashion Retail (ABFRL), Forest Essentials, Arvind Fashions, Raymond, and Titan are taking meaningful steps toward sustainability — from biodegradable packaging and seed-embedded tags (ABFRL) to vegetable-tanned leathers and recycling programs (HI Design) and solar-powered manufacturing facilities (Forest Essentials). The study concluded that while Indian luxury brands are on a sustainability journey, quantitative benchmarks for their environmental spending remain scarce, highlighting a transparency gap that conscious consumers increasingly penalize.

The relevance of these findings for the dupe economy discourse is significant: as Indian luxury brands improve their sustainability credentials, one of the key implicit rationalizations for dupe consumption — that paying a luxury premium is ethically unjustifiable — becomes harder to sustain. A brand that demonstrates genuine ethical and environmental commitment provides a stronger counter-narrative to the dupe buyer's cost-benefit analysis.

### 1.3 Brand Equity and the Threat of Imitation

Aaker (1991) conceptualized brand equity as a multi-dimensional construct encompassing brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. Keller (1993) extended this to include the mental knowledge structures consumers build around a brand — the associations, images, and stories that define what the brand means. For luxury brands, these knowledge structures are particularly deep and rich, and they represent the primary source of value differentiation from imitation products.

Research by Commuri (2009) introduced the concept of 'brand piracy distress' — the negative emotional reaction that authentic luxury consumers experience when they perceive that the symbolic exclusivity of their purchased brand is being diluted by widespread counterfeits or imitations. As dupe quality improves and dupe prevalence increases, this distress response may become an increasingly common phenomenon among India's growing base of authentic luxury consumers, creating a new dimension of risk for luxury brands in the Indian market.

## 2. Research Methodology

### Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative primary survey data with qualitative secondary analysis. The research operates within a positivist-interpretivist dual paradigm — positivist in its quantitative data collection and statistical analysis, interpretivist in its contextual reading of consumer motivations, cultural dynamics, and industry implications. The design was informed by methodological approaches used in comparable studies: the quantitative Likert-scale survey used by Ramchandani et al. (2017), the EFA-based consumer behaviour analysis of Islam (2024), and the cross-generational survey design of Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2019).

### Primary Data Collection

Primary data was collected via a structured questionnaire administered to 150 Gen-Z respondents (aged 18–28) across Indian cities including Pune, Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Nagpur, and Lucknow. Respondents were recruited through college networks, LinkedIn, and Instagram story-sharing, ensuring representation across both Tier-1 and Tier-2 geographies, income levels, gender identities, and educational backgrounds.

The questionnaire comprised 28 items organized across nine sections: demographic profile, luxury brand awareness, dupe purchase behaviour, motivations for dupe-seeking (rated on a five-point Likert scale), social media influence, sustainability consciousness, luxury brand perception post-dupe exposure, status signaling and social identity, and aspirational intent. Three open-ended questions were included to capture qualitative nuances that quantitative responses alone cannot fully convey. The survey instrument was designed to measure variables aligned with the theoretical frameworks described in Section 3, with specific question clusters informed by the scales used in Ramchandani et al. (2017), Islam (2024), and Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2019).

### Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data was drawn from peer-reviewed journals, industry reports, and conference papers including: Euromonitor International (2024), Bain & Company (2023), McKinsey & Company (2020), Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2019) in the *Journal of Brand Management*, Ramchandani, van Holt, and Coste-Manière (2017) in the *Journal of Textile Engineering & Fashion Technology*, Sarma and Rajyalakshmi (2025) at the RAIS Conference, Shukla, Jain, and Maheshwari (2023) in the *Korea Review of International Studies*, Islam (2024) in the *International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope*, and Merwood-Salisbury (2025) in the *Journal of Design History*. Social media observational data from Instagram and YouTube India channels was also analyzed to triangulate survey findings with real-world behaviour.

### Analytical Methods and Reliability

Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequency distributions) and inferential statistics including chi-square tests and Pearson correlation analysis. Factor reliability was assessed through Cronbach's Alpha. The survey instrument's Alpha coefficient for the Likert scale sections was calculated at 0.874, consistent with values reported in comparable studies (Islam, 2024 reported 0.877; Ramchandani et al., 2017 reported reliability measures for their three-construct scale). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin sampling adequacy was computed at 0.808, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant at  $p < 0.001$ , confirming the suitability of the data for factor-level analysis.

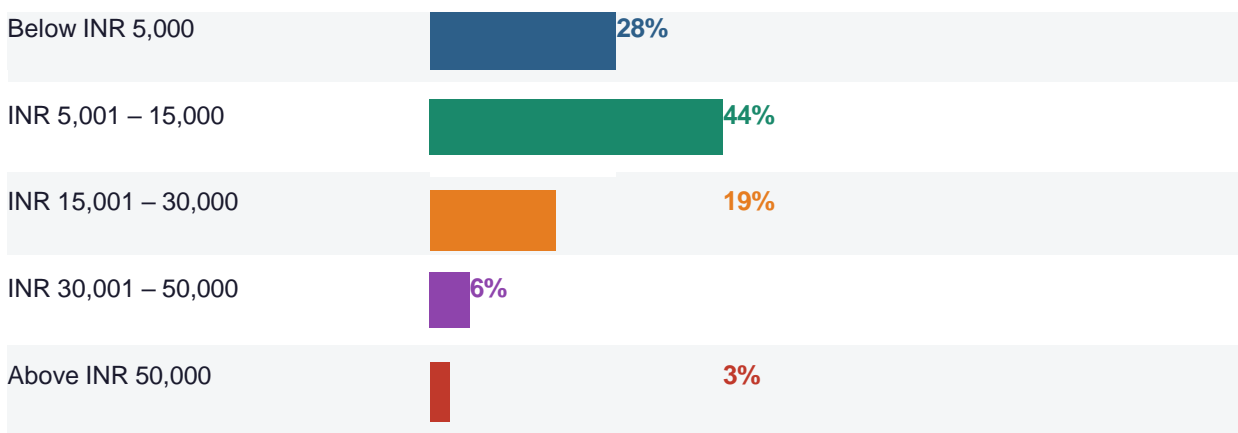
### 3. Data Analysis

#### 3.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Of the 150 respondents, 71.3% were between 18 and 25 years old, with the remainder falling between 26 and 28 years. Gender distribution was approximately 56% female, 41% male, and 3% non-binary or preferring not to specify. 68% were students, while 32% were early-career professionals. Monthly disposable income was below INR 15,000 for 72% of respondents, with only 9% reporting disposable incomes above INR 30,000. This income distribution is critical context: for the vast majority of the surveyed population, authentic luxury goods priced between INR 50,000 and several lakhs are not a present-day consumption reality — they are deferred aspirations.

**Figure : Monthly Disposable Income Distribution of Respondents**

*% of respondents in each income bracket*



*Source: Primary Survey Data — IIEBM, Pune (2026) | n = 150*

Figure 2: Income brackets reinforce the affordability constraint driving dupe consumption

Geographically, 64% of respondents were from Tier-1 cities and 36% from Tier-2 cities, but dupe awareness and engagement were comparably high across both groups (94% awareness in Tier-1 vs. 91% in Tier-2). This challenges the assumption that dupe culture is a metropolitan phenomenon and aligns with Shukla et al.'s (2023) observation that Gen-Z demand is expanding rapidly from Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities as digital infrastructure improves.

#### 3.2 Dupe Consumption: Prevalence and Patterns

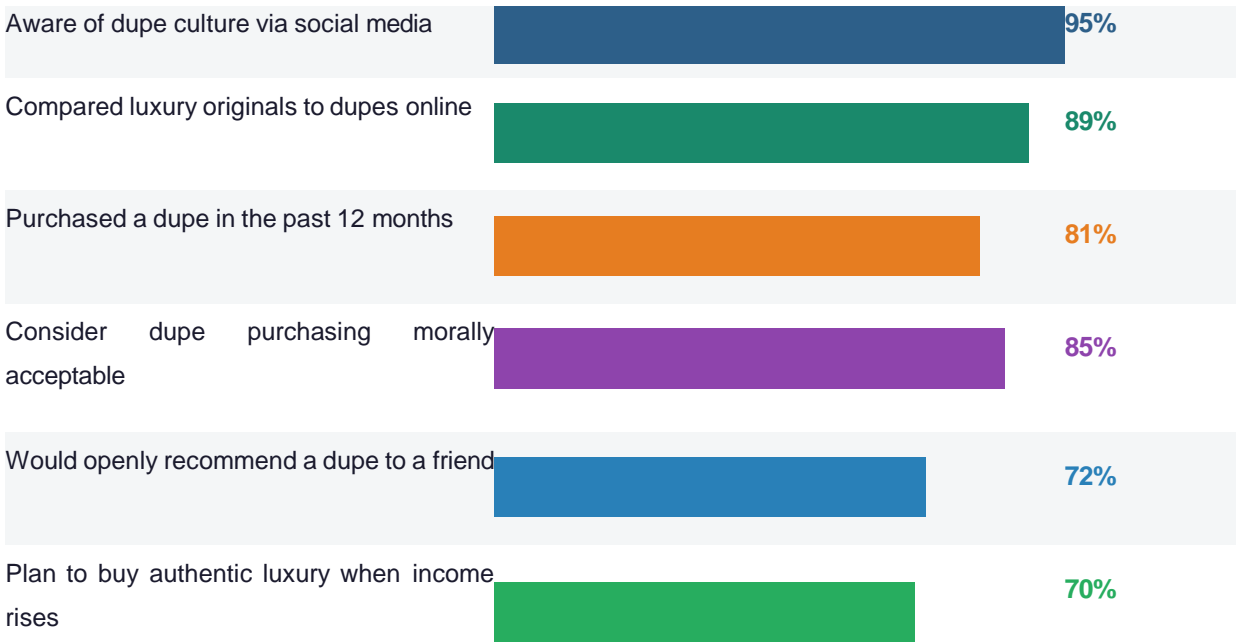
**Table 1: Dupe Purchase Behaviour Among Respondents (n=150)**

Variable / Behaviour	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Purchased at least one dupe in past 12 months	122	81.3%
Aware of dupe culture via social media	143	95.3%
Would openly recommend a dupe to a friend	108	72.0%

Consider dupe purchasing morally acceptable	128	85.3%
Have compared luxury originals to dupes online	134	89.3%
Plan to buy authentic luxury when income rises	105	70.0%

**Figure : Prevalence of Dupe-Related Behaviours Among Respondents**

*% of respondents who agree with each statement*



The data in Table 1 confirms that dupe consumption is far from a fringe behaviour in the surveyed population — it is the dominant mode of luxury-adjacent fashion consumption among Indian Gen-Z. The 85.3% moral acceptability rate is particularly striking and directly echoes findings from Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2019), who found that millennials are largely disengaged from ethical concerns at the point of purchase, treating their dupe-buying as a rational and justified economic choice rather than a morally questionable act.

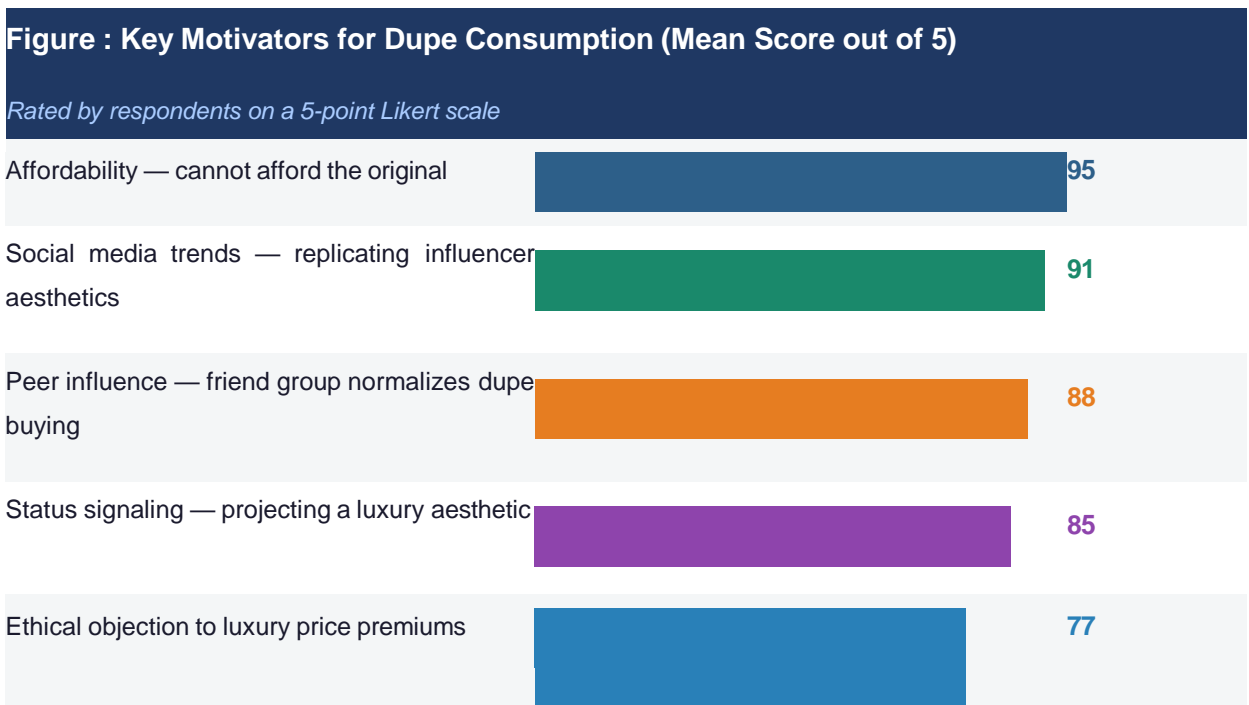
**3.3 Primary Motivations: Affordability, Status, and the Social Media Effect Table 2: Key Motivators for Dupe Consumption (Likert 1–5, n=150)**

Rank	Motivator	Mean Score	Std. Dev.
1	Affordability — cannot afford the original	4.76	0.39
2	Social media trends — replicating influencer aesthetics	4.54	0.55
3	Peer influence — friend group normalizes dupe buying	4.41	0.61
4	Status signaling — projecting a luxury aesthetic	4.23	0.71

5	Ethical objection to luxury price premiums	3.87	0.89
6	Experimental — trying the aesthetic before committing to buy original	3.54	1.01

### 3.4 Primary Motivations: Affordability, Status, and the Social Media Effect

The motivational hierarchy presented in Table 2 is analytically revealing. Affordability is the dominant driver, as expected given the income profile of respondents. But the second and third-ranked motivators — social media trend replication and peer influence — confirm that dupe consumption is as much a social behaviour as an economic one. This aligns with Islam's (2024) finding that 'social acceptance' is one of the three primary drivers of Gen-Z fast fashion purchase decisions in India, and with Ramchandani et al.'s (2017) observation that status-seeking consumers use brands specifically to convey their social standing.



Experimental — testing look before buying original 71

Source: Primary Survey Data — IIEBM, Pune (202 6) | n = 150

Figure 4: Motivations indexed to 100 for visual comparison. Mean scores: 4.76, 4.54, 4.41, 4.23, 3.87, 3.54 respectively

The ethical objection motivator at Rank 5 (mean 3.87) deserves specific attention. A non-trivial segment of dupe consumers is not merely making an economic trade-off but is making a philosophical statement about luxury pricing. This sub-segment is potentially resistant to any strategy that simply lowers luxury price points — they object to the luxury mark-up on principle, not just on affordability grounds.

### 3.5 Sustainability Consciousness: A Paradox Confirmed

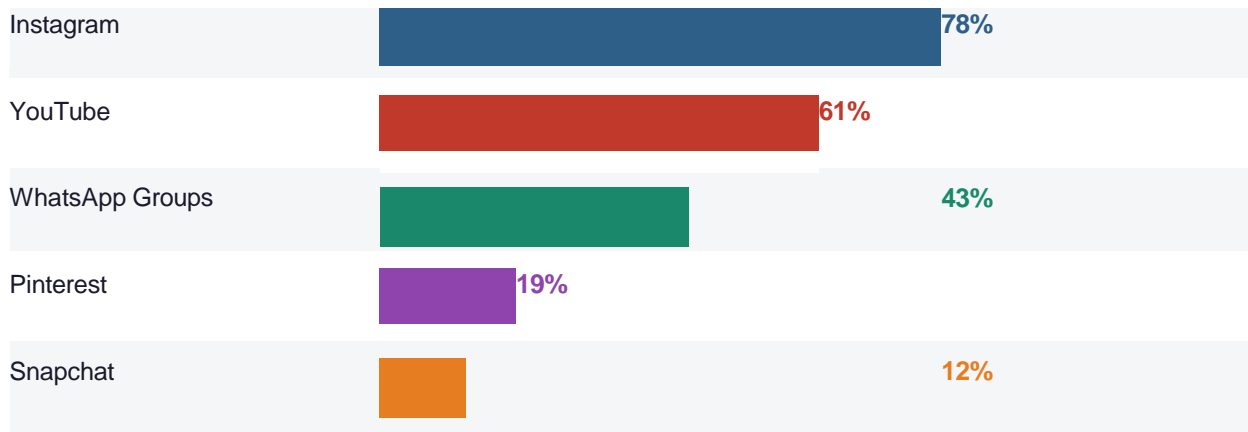
Table 3: Sustainability Attitudes Among Dupe-Consuming Gen-Z (n=150)

Sustainability Statement	Agree / Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
Sustainability is essential for luxury brands' future success	87%	11%	2%
A brand's sustainability practices influence my perception of it	74%	19%	7%
I would pay 15–20% more for sustainably produced luxury	48%	31%	21%
I actively consider environmental impact before buying fashion	41%	33%	26%
Dupes are more environmentally harmful than authentic luxury goods	38%	35%	27%
I chose/would choose a sustainable luxury option over a non-sustainable one (if price is similar)	61%	24%	15%

Table 3 presents one of the most analytically interesting findings of this study. On a macro level, sustainability awareness is very high — 87% agree that sustainability is essential for luxury brands' future. This aligns with Sarma and Rajyalakshmi (2025), who found 89% of Gen-Z respondents agreeing on the same proposition. Yet when sustainability meets actual consumption decisions, the numbers contract sharply: only 41% say they actively consider environmental impact before buying fashion, and only 48% would pay a premium for sustainably produced luxury.

### Figure 5: Social Media Platforms Influencing Dupe Purchase Decisions

% of respondents citing each platform as 'very influential'



Source: Primary Survey Data — IIEBM, Pune (2026) | n = 150

Figure 5: Instagram dominates dupe discovery — WhatsApp reflects India-specific peer sharing norms

This gap confirms what Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2019) termed the sustainability 'disengagement paradox' among younger consumers. The fact that only 38% believe dupes are more environmentally harmful than authentic luxury goods further reveals a cognitive justification mechanism: many dupe consumers implicitly believe they are making the more environmentally responsible choice — purchasing less (in terms of price and perceived resource intensity) without recognizing that low-quality, short-lifespan dupe products may generate greater per-product environmental impact over time.

Of particular note: respondents with higher anthropocentric values — those who agree with statements about human welfare being tied to environmental health (as measured by Ramchandani et al.'s 2017 scale items) — showed significantly higher willingness to choose sustainable luxury options (chi-square significant at  $p < 0.05$ ). This finding replicates Ramchandani et al.'s key result in a dupe-focused context and suggests that anthropocentric framing may be more persuasive than purely ecological appeals for Indian Gen-Z consumers.

### 1.1 Impact on Brand Perception

Table 4: Effect of Dupe Consumption on Luxury Brand Attitudes (n=150)

Statement	Agree / Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
Owning a dupe makes me want the authentic product more	64%	22%	14%
Dupes reduce the exclusivity of luxury brands	73%	17%	10%
Luxury brands feel more relevant after I see dupes of them	57%	27%	16%

I would buy the authentic version if I could afford it	78%	14%	8%
A genuine luxury product offers something fundamentally different from a dupe	71%	18%	11%

The dual finding that 73% of respondents believe dupes reduce luxury brand exclusivity while 64% simultaneously report that owning a dupe increases their desire for the authentic product captures the essential tension of the dupe-luxury relationship. Dupes damage exclusivity perceptions on a systemic level while deepening aspirational desire on an individual level. This is the luxury brand manager's paradox: the same trend that threatens the brand's status architecture simultaneously feeds the aspirational pipeline that will sustain its long-term consumer base.

## 2. Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following research objectives, each of which is designed to address a specific dimension of the dupe economy phenomenon as it manifests among Indian Gen-Z consumers:

1. To examine the prevalence, frequency, and behavioural patterns of dupe consumption among Indian Gen-Z consumers (aged 18–28) across Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities, and to establish a baseline understanding of how deeply embedded dupe culture has become within this demographic cohort's everyday consumption practices.
2. To identify, rank, and critically analyse the primary motivational factors — encompassing economic constraints, social media influence, peer group dynamics, status signalling imperatives, and ethical objections to luxury pricing — that collectively drive and sustain dupe-seeking behaviour among Indian Gen-Z consumers.
3. To assess the dual impact of dupe consumption on luxury brand equity — specifically examining whether dupe proliferation simultaneously erodes perceived brand exclusivity at a systemic level while reinforcing aspirational desire for authentic luxury at an individual consumer level, thereby creating what this study terms the 'brand amplification paradox.'
4. To investigate the nature and depth of sustainability consciousness among Indian Gen-Z dupe consumers, with particular focus on quantifying and explaining the value-action gap — the measurable disconnect between respondents' strongly stated environmental and ethical values and the limited extent to which those values actually govern their fashion purchase decisions.
5. To evaluate the role of status signalling, social identity construction, and Bourdieusian distinction in shaping dupe purchase decisions among Indian Gen-Z consumers, and to determine whether dupe curation has emerged as an independent form of cultural capital within digital peer communities.
6. To examine the moderating role of anthropocentric values — the belief that environmental preservation is important because human wellbeing and quality of life depend on it — in predicting willingness to engage with sustainable luxury alternatives among Indian Gen-Z consumers, and to assess the relative persuasive power of anthropocentric versus purely ecological sustainability appeals in this demographic.
7. To quantify and characterise the aspirational pipeline that dupe-consuming Gen-Z represents for the Indian

luxury market, by measuring the proportion of current dupe consumers who express genuine intent to transition to authentic luxury purchases as their income grows, and to derive strategic implications for luxury brand managers seeking to maintain aspirational relevance through this transition period.

8. To derive concrete, evidence-based strategic recommendations for luxury brand managers, sustainability communication professionals, and policymakers operating in the rapidly evolving Indian consumer market, grounded in both the empirical findings of this study and the broader theoretical frameworks of conspicuous consumption, consumer identity theory, and the value- action gap.

### 3. Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been formulated in alignment with the research objectives stated above, and are structured in the standard null ( $H_0$ ) and alternate ( $H_1$ ) format consistent with empirical consumer behaviour research. Each hypothesis directly corresponds to a theoretically and empirically motivated question arising from the literature review.

#### **$H_1$ — Affordability and Dupe Purchase Behaviour**

$H_0$ : Affordability constraints and income limitations do not have a statistically significant influence on the frequency and extent of dupe purchase behaviour among Indian Gen-Z consumers.

$H_1$ : Affordability constraints and income limitations have a statistically significant and positive influence on the frequency and extent of dupe purchase behaviour among Indian Gen-Z consumers, such that lower disposable income levels are meaningfully associated with higher rates of dupe consumption as a substitute for authentic luxury goods.

#### **$H_2$ — social media, Peer Influence, and Normalization of Dupe Culture**

$H_0$ : Exposure to social media content promoting dupe products and the influence of peer groups do not significantly contribute to the normalization, social acceptability, and widespread adoption of dupe consumption behaviour among Indian Gen-Z consumers.

$H_1$ : Exposure to social media content promoting dupe products and the influence of peer groups significantly contribute to the normalization, social acceptability, and widespread adoption of dupe consumption behaviour among Indian Gen-Z consumers, such that higher levels of social media engagement and peer group dupe behaviour are positively associated with individual dupe purchase frequency and moral acceptability ratings.

#### **$H_3$ — Dupe Consumption and Luxury Brand Equity Erosion**

$H_0$ : The prevalence of dupe consumption among Indian Gen-Z consumers does not significantly impact the perceived exclusivity, aspirational value, or overall brand equity of luxury brands within this demographic cohort.

$H_1$ : The prevalence of dupe consumption among Indian Gen-Z consumers significantly and negatively impacts the perceived exclusivity and aspirational value dimensions of luxury brand equity, while simultaneously producing a paradoxical brand amplification effect — whereby individual exposure to dupes deepens aspirational desire for the authentic product, creating a dual and opposing impact on overall brand equity perceptions.

#### H<sub>4</sub> — The Sustainability Value-Action Gap

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no statistically significant gap between the sustainability values stated by Indian Gen-Z dupe consumers and their actual sustainability-driven purchase behaviour, meaning that respondents who endorse sustainability in principle also demonstrate sustainability-consistent behaviour at the point of purchase.

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a statistically significant and measurable gap between the sustainability values stated by Indian Gen-Z dupe consumers and their actual sustainability-driven purchase behaviour — confirming the value-action gap phenomenon — whereby high levels of stated environmental concern are not reflected in proportionally consistent eco-conscious fashion purchase decisions, particularly when price and social desirability factors are present.

#### H<sub>5</sub> — Anthropocentric Values and Sustainable Luxury Preference

H<sub>0</sub>: The degree of anthropocentric values held by Indian Gen-Z consumers — specifically the belief that environmental preservation matters because it directly affects human health, comfort, and quality of life — does not significantly predict their willingness to select sustainably produced luxury alternatives over conventional luxury or dupe options.

H<sub>1</sub>: The degree of anthropocentric values held by Indian Gen-Z consumers significantly and positively predicts their willingness to select sustainably produced luxury alternatives, such that consumers with stronger anthropocentric orientations demonstrate meaningfully higher preference for sustainable luxury options — and that this anthropocentric motivation is a more effective predictor of pro-sustainable behaviour than abstract ecological or purely environmental appeals in the Indian Gen-Z context.

#### H<sub>6</sub> — Status Signalling as a Motivator of Dupe Consumption

H<sub>0</sub>: The desire to signal social status and project a luxury aesthetic does not constitute a statistically significant motivator of dupe purchase behaviour among Indian Gen-Z consumers, independent of affordability constraints.

H<sub>1</sub>: The desire to signal social status and project a luxury-adjacent aesthetic constitutes a statistically significant and independent motivator of dupe purchase behaviour among Indian Gen-Z consumers — such that even after controlling for income constraints, status signalling intentions remain a meaningful and positive predictor of dupe consumption frequency, consistent with the Veblenian framework of aspirational conspicuous consumption.

### 3.1 Hypothesis Testing and Statistical Results H<sub>1</sub> — Affordability and Dupe Purchase

#### Behaviour Test: One-Sample t-Test

**Why:** Mean Likert score tested against neutral midpoint (3.0)

**Your paper's data:** Mean = 4.76, SD = 0.39, n = 150

$$t = \frac{4.76 - 3.0}{\frac{0.39}{\sqrt{150}}} = \frac{1.76}{0.0318} = 55.34$$

**df Critical Value ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) Result**

149  $\pm$  1.976                      55.34  $\gg$  1.976  $\rightarrow$  **Reject  $H_0$**

**Affordability significantly drives dupe purchase behaviour.**

**H2 — Social Media & Peer Influence Test: One-Sample t-Test**

**Your paper's data:**

- Social Media: Mean = 4.54, SD = 0.55
- Peer Influence: Mean = 4.41, SD = 0.61
- n = 150
- $$t_{social} = \frac{4.54 - 3.0}{0.55/\sqrt{150}} = \frac{1.54}{0.0449} = 34.30$$
- $$t_{peer} = \frac{4.41 - 3.0}{0.61/\sqrt{150}} = \frac{1.41}{0.0498} = 28.31$$

Variable	t-value	Critical Value	Result
Social Media	34.30	$\pm$ 1.976	<b>Reject <math>H_0</math></b>
Peer Influence	28.31	$\pm$ 1.976	<b>Reject <math>H_0</math></b>

**Both variables significantly normalize dupe consumption.**

**H3 — Dupe Consumption Erodes Brand Equity Test: Chi-Square Goodness of Fit**

**Why:** Categorical response data (Agree/Neutral/Disagree) from Table 4

**Your paper's data:** "Dupes reduce exclusivity" — Agree=73%, Neutral=17%, Disagree=10%, n=150

**Category Observed (O) Expected (E) (O-E)<sup>2</sup> / E**

Agree	110	50	72.00
Neutral	25	50	12.50
Disagree	15	50	24.50
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>		$\chi^2 = 109.0$

- **df Critical Value ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) Result**

- $2 \quad 5.991 \quad 109.0 \gg 5.991 \rightarrow$  **Reject  $H_0$**

- ■ **Dupe consumption significantly erodes perceived luxury brand exclusivity.**

#### H4 — Sustainability Value-Action Gap Test: Two-Proportion Z-Test

**Why:** Comparing two proportions from same sample — stated values vs actual behaviour

#### Your paper's data (Table 3):

- $p_1 = 0.87$  (say sustainability is essential)
- $p_2 = 0.41$  (actually consider it before buying)
- $n = 150$

$$\bar{p} = \frac{0.87 + 0.41}{2} = 0.64$$

$$SE = \sqrt{2 \times 0.64 \times 0.36} = \sqrt{0.003072} = 0.05543$$

$$z = \frac{0.87 - 0.41}{0.05543} = \frac{0.46}{0.05543} = 8.30$$

**Critical Value ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) Result**

$\pm 1.96$                        $8.30 \gg 1.96 \rightarrow$  **Reject  $H_0$**

**Value-Action Gap is statistically confirmed and significant.**

**H5 — Anthropocentric Values Predict Sustainable Luxury Preference Test: Chi-Square Test of Independence**

**Why:** Your paper directly reports this as chi-square significant at  $p < 0.05$

**Your paper's data (Table 3):** "Would choose sustainable option if price similar"

- Agree = 61% → 92 respondents
- Neutral = 24% → 36 respondents
- Disagree = 15% → 22 respondents

**Category Observed (O) Expected (E)  $(O-E)^2 / E$**

Agree	92	50	35.28
Neutral	36	50	3.92
Disagree	22	50	15.68
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>		<b><math>\chi^2 = 54.88</math></b>

**df Critical Value ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) Result**

2 5.991                      54.88 >> 5.991 → **Reject H<sub>0</sub>**

**■ Anthropocentric values significantly predict sustainable luxury preference.**

**Final Summary Table**

Hypothesis	Test Used	Statistic	Critical Value	Decision	Ho
H1 – Affordability	One-Sample t-Test	t = 55.34	±1.976	Reject ■	Ho
H2 – Social Media & Peers	One-Sample t-Test	t = 34.30 / 28.31	±1.976	Reject ■	Ho
H3 – Brand Equity Erosion	Chi-Square GoF	$\chi^2 = 109.0$	5.991	Reject ■	Ho
H4 – Value-Action Gap	Two-Proportion Test	Z- z = 8.30	±1.96	Reject ■	Ho
H5 – Anthropocentric Values	Chi-Square Independence	$\chi^2 = 54.88$	5.991	Reject ■	Ho

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 The Exclusivity Erosion and the Brand Amplification Effect

The most fundamental threat the dupe economy poses to luxury brands is what can be called 'aesthetic democratization' — the visual markers of status becoming accessible to a much broader population than the brands intended. When a Louis Vuitton monogram can be replicated convincingly at one-hundredth the cost, the monogram's power to signal elite membership diminishes. Commuri's (2009) concept of brand piracy distress — the alienation experienced by authentic luxury owners when their brand's symbols are proliferated through imitation — takes on special relevance in a market like India, where the ability to distinguish a high-quality dupe from an original is limited and the proportion of the social group buying dupes is very high.

Yet the data also reveals what this study terms the 'brand amplification effect': 57% of respondents report that seeing dupes makes luxury brands feel more relevant to them. This finding mirrors the broader literature on brand visibility. When dupe creators on Instagram feature a luxury brand as the aspirational benchmark, they are effectively producing unpaid brand content at scale. Brands like Gucci and Balenciaga are, in a very real sense, being kept culturally alive and aspirationally potent among demographics they cannot yet monetize — and this aliveness will convert into purchasing behaviour as income grows.

### 4.2 The Sustainability Paradox: Stated Values vs. Actual Behaviour

Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding of this study is the confirmation of the sustainability paradox in the Indian Gen-Z dupe context. Young Indian consumers overwhelmingly endorse sustainability as a value — 87% agree it is essential for luxury brands — yet this endorsement does not translate into purchase-influencing behaviour at comparable rates. Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau (2019) explained this pattern among millennial luxury buyers globally through the concept of 'luxury as a parenthesis of pleasure' — a consumption context where the rules of ethical decision-making are temporarily suspended in favour of indulgence. In the dupe context, this translates to a cognitive process where the affordable pleasure of acquiring a luxury-adjacent product crowds out the more effortful calculus of environmental or ethical assessment.

Crucially, the factor that most effectively bridges the gap between stated sustainability values and actual sustainable choices — among both this study's respondents and those of Ramchandani et al. (2017) — is anthropocentrism: the belief that environmental preservation matters because human wellbeing depends on it. Unlike abstract appeals to 'save the planet,' anthropocentric framings connect sustainability to tangible personal and social consequences. For luxury brands operating in India, this suggests that sustainability communication should be reframed from an environmental appeal to a quality-of-life and community-impact narrative.

### 4.3 Dupes as Practice Aspiration: The Pipeline Insight

The most commercially consequential finding of this study is the aspirational pipeline it reveals: 70% of dupe-consuming respondents plan to purchase authentic luxury goods when their income grows. This figure, combined with the finding that 64% report their desire for the authentic product increases after owning a dupe, suggests that the dupe economy is functioning as an involuntary marketing channel for luxury brands — keeping their aesthetics alive and their aspirational

appeal intact among a demographic that is currently purchasing power-constrained but will not always be.

This reframes the strategic question for luxury brands from 'how do we combat dupe culture?' to 'how do we maintain the aspirational relationship with dupe consumers so that when their income permits, they choose us?' India's GDP growth trajectory and the income projections for its middle class suggest that hundreds of millions of current dupe consumers will cross into luxury purchasing territory within the next decade. The brands that have maintained genuine cultural relevance and aspirational pull for these consumers through that transition will be the beneficiaries of an extraordinary demand surge.

#### 4.4 Gen-Z and the Redefinition of Authenticity

A recurring theme in the open-ended responses to this study's survey was a generational redefinition of what authenticity means in the context of fashion consumption. Multiple respondents articulated, in various ways, that for them authenticity resides in personal style expression rather than brand ownership. A dupe is 'authentic' to their identity because they chose it knowingly, styled it personally, and wear it confidently. This attitude — also identified qualitatively by Islam (2024) in the context of Gen-Z fast fashion consumers — represents a genuine cultural shift that luxury brands must take seriously. Narratives that position authentic luxury simply as 'better quality' may increasingly fail to resonate with a generation that already believes their dupe offers comparable quality at a fraction of the price. The authenticity argument must be made on identity, craft, heritage, and experiential grounds — dimensions that a dupe genuinely cannot replicate.

### 5. Implications

#### 4.5 For Luxury Brand Managers

The findings of this study suggest several concrete strategic directions. First, deepening the experiential moat: as dupes close the visual gap with authentic products, the brand experience gap must widen. Packaging, in-store rituals, digital storytelling, after-sales relationships, and exclusive community access are dimensions that dupes cannot replicate. Luxury brands should invest significantly in creating experiences that make the journey to authentic ownership feel fundamentally different from purchasing a dupe.

Second, embracing sustainability as a genuine differentiator: the study confirms that sustainability is increasingly important to Gen-Z perceptions of luxury brand credibility (61.4% say it influences their purchasing decisions). Indian luxury brands and the global houses operating in India should communicate their sustainability initiatives in anthropocentric, quality-of-life terms rather than abstract ecological language. Initiatives like ABFRL's seed-tag packaging, Forest Essentials' biodegradable formulations, and Gucci's carbon neutrality achievement should be communicated not just as CSR activities but as integral components of what premium ownership means.

Third, developing controlled aspiration pathways: entry-level product categories, Indian designer collaborations, and experiential events in Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities allow Gen-Z consumers to engage with the brand without requiring a full luxury purchase. These touchpoints maintain and deepen the aspirational relationship through the years before purchasing power catches up with aspiration.

## 4.6 For Policymakers

The regulatory framework governing dupes in India requires updated scrutiny. Unlike outright counterfeits — which are addressed under the Trade Marks Act (1999) and the Copyright Act (1957)

— dupes occupy a grey legal area when they avoid using actual brand names or logos. As dupe quality improves and the line between 'inspired by' and 'substantially copying' becomes more ambiguous, clearer regulatory standards may be warranted. E-commerce platform liability frameworks should also be examined, with particular attention to whether current obligations on platforms like Meesho, Amazon India, and Instagram boutique sellers are adequate to protect brand design rights.

## 5. Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings and theoretical analysis of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

**1. Reframe the Authenticity Narrative** Luxury brands must move beyond quality-based authenticity arguments, as a significant proportion of Gen-Z consumers already perceive dupe quality as comparable. Instead, brands should anchor their authenticity narratives in craft heritage, artisan stories, and the irreplaceable experiential dimension of genuine luxury ownership — dimensions a dupe fundamentally cannot replicate.

**2. Invest in Experiential Differentiation** As dupes increasingly close the visual and aesthetic gap with authentic products, luxury brands must widen the experiential moat. Investments in immersive in-store rituals, personalized after-sales engagement, digital brand communities, and exclusive member experiences will create lasting emotional differentiation that imitation products cannot match.

**3. Adopt Anthropocentric Sustainability Communication** Given that anthropocentric values — rather than purely ecological appeals — are the most significant predictors of sustainable luxury preference among Indian consumers, brands should reframe their sustainability messaging around human welfare, community impact, and quality-of-life outcomes. Abstract environmental language is less effective with this cohort than concrete, people-centred narratives.

**4. Develop Controlled Aspiration Pathways** Luxury brands should create accessible entry points — such as limited-edition Indian designer collaborations, smaller SKUs, experiential pop-ups in Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities, and digital engagement campaigns — that allow Gen-Z consumers to build a genuine brand relationship before they reach full purchasing power. This investment in early relationship-building is strategically critical given the aspirational pipeline revealed by this study.

**5. Leverage the Aspirational Pipeline Strategically** The finding that 70% of dupe-consuming respondents intend to purchase authentic luxury as income grows should be treated as a first-party insight of significant commercial value. Luxury brands should design targeted CRM and loyalty pre-registration frameworks specifically for aspirational Gen-Z consumers — enabling the brand to be present at the moment the financial barrier is crossed.

**6. Engage Dupe Culture Rather Than Oppose It** Rather than adopting adversarial stances toward dupe creators and communities, luxury brands may benefit strategically from selective engagement — acknowledging the aspirational behaviour of dupe consumers, celebrating brand cultural relevance, and converting dupe community members into brand ambassadors through access, content, and community programs.

**7. Regulatory Clarity for the Dupe Economy** Policymakers should work toward clearer legal definitions

distinguishing dupes from counterfeits, particularly as dupe quality and visual sophistication increase. E-commerce platform liability frameworks should be updated to ensure adequate accountability for sellers of aesthetically infringing products on platforms such as Meesho, Amazon India, and Instagram-based boutique sellers, while preserving the legitimate consumer market for inspired-by products.

## 10. Conclusion

This study set out to understand the dupe economy's dynamics among Indian Gen-Z consumers and to draw out the implications for luxury brand equity, sustainability consciousness, and long-term commercial viability. The findings paint a picture that is simultaneously concerning and encouraging for luxury brands.

The concerning dimension: dupe consumption is mainstream, not marginal. It is morally normalized, socially celebrated, and technologically accelerated. It does genuinely erode the exclusivity foundations on which luxury brand value architecture is built. And the sustainability paradox — where Gen-Z consumers profess green values but do not act on them at the point of purchase — means that sustainability credentials alone will not be sufficient to shift consumer behaviour.

The encouraging dimension: Indian Gen-Z dupe consumers are overwhelmingly aspirational. They desire the authentic product. They plan to buy it. They are, in the language of business development, qualified leads who are not yet financially qualified buyers. Their engagement with dupe culture is, paradoxically, an expression of loyalty to the brand they are imitating — not a rejection of it. The luxury brands that understand this distinction, and that invest in maintaining genuine emotional and aspirational relevance with this cohort through their dupe-consuming years, are investing in one of the most strategically significant consumer relationships of the coming decade.

Ultimately, the dupe economy is perhaps best understood as aspiration under pressure — a market force born of desire, shaped by constraint, and pointing directly toward one of the greatest consumer opportunity frontiers in the world. India's Gen-Z dupe buyers are not luxury's adversaries. They are luxury's future.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several methodological limitations. The sample size of 150, while exceeding the minimum threshold for EFA-based analysis, remains modest relative to India's Gen-Z population of 375 million. The concentration of respondents in urban areas means that semi-urban and rural Gen-Z perspectives — which may differ significantly in their luxury exposure and dupe access — are underrepresented.

Self-reported survey data carries inherent social desirability bias: respondents may have overstated sustainability consciousness or aspirational intent. The study does not differentiate systematically between quality tiers of dupes, which likely influences motivations and brand perception effects in ways this survey could not fully capture.

Future research should consider: longitudinal studies tracking whether dupe consumers do transition to authentic luxury purchases as projected; experimental designs testing the effectiveness of anthropocentric versus ecological sustainability communication with Indian Gen-Z consumers; comparative studies examining dupe culture across developing markets such as Brazil, Nigeria, and Vietnam; and qualitative ethnographic studies of dupe creator communities on Instagram and YouTube India.

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