

## Breaking the Mold: Male Jewelry Branding, Consumer Behavior, and SDG Pathways in Lebanon's Luxury Market

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines a recent branding disruption in the luxury jewelry sector: a new entrant that deliberately does not compete on women's collections and instead positions itself as the largest men's collection in the market. Framed through branding and consumer-culture theory, the study analyzes how this male-centric positioning challenges category conventions historically feminized in jewelry, and how it reconfigures the semiotics of luxury, identity, and status. These dynamics are mapped to relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), arguing that inclusive product architectures can expand representation while reshaping demand signals and consumption rituals. Methodologically, this qualitative inquiry employs brand communication and social media analysis to trace meaning transfer, emotional branding, and archetype construction. Findings suggest that category leadership claims—such as “largest men's collection”—can legitimize new consumption scripts, normalize male jewelry as identity work, and foster more equitable brand storytelling. The study concludes with implications for market shaping, influencer collaboration, and sustainable brand development strategies aligned with SDGs.

**Keywords:** Male jewelry; Inclusive branding; Gender in luxury; SDG 5: Gender Equality; SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities; SDG 12: Responsible Consumption & Production; Consumer behavior; Emotional branding; Meaning transfer; Archetype strategy; Category creation; Market shaping

### INTRODUCTION

Luxury jewelry has long been narrated as a feminine domain: sparkling tokens of romance, heirlooms gifted “to her,” and advertising imagery revolving around beauty, sentimentality, and allure. Within such a context, the emergence of a brand that chooses to identify itself as the largest men's jewelry collection signals not merely a commercial innovation but a cultural reconfiguration. This redirection from female-focused narratives to masculine identity work redefines who is addressed, represented, and celebrated in luxury branding [1].

The act of branding is inherently a form of storytelling. It constructs symbolic systems that mediate between personal identity and social meaning [2]. As Holt suggests, brands operate as “cultural resources” that consumers draw upon to perform identity [3]. By claiming leadership in men's jewelry, Saliba introduces an alternative semiotic grammar—where adornment is no longer gendered as feminine but as self-expressive craftsmanship, rooted in pride, achievement, and belonging.

Such positioning directly interacts with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). These goals advocate for inclusive representation and equitable participation in economic and cultural systems [4]. The jewelry industry, historically portraying women as recipients

rather than creators or consumers of meaning, finds in Saliba's innovation a moment of redefinition: a move from gifted femininity to expressed masculinity. This reframing of jewelry consumption as an act of self-definition aligns with theories of emotional branding [5] and meaning transfer [6], where emotional resonance bridges cultural codes and consumer identity.

In addition, SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) is implicated—not through environmental materials alone, but through cultural sustainability. When consumers choose items that mirror their authentic identity rather than conform to stereotypes, consumption becomes more mindful and sustainable [7].

From a theoretical lens, this strategy operates through three interlinked mechanisms. First, meaning transfer, as proposed by McCracken, where cultural significance flows from social institutions to consumer goods [6]. Second, emotional branding, as conceptualized by Gobé, where emotion replaces function as the dominant currency of brand-consumer relationships [5]. Third, archetype activation, following Jungian frameworks [8], wherein the brand orchestrates universal masculine archetypes—Explorer, Protector, Craftsman, and Creator—without resorting to reductive or hypermasculine tropes.

Ultimately, Saliba's decision not to “prove itself” in women's lines but to focus exclusively on men's jewelry constitutes an act of brand decentering. It contests market norms and encourages inclusive competition. However, as inclusivity grows, the risk of over-stereotyping remains. Genuine inclusion demands elasticity: to express strength without erasing softness, to embody status without excluding emotion. When executed carefully, such a brand narrative does not merely enlarge the market; it humanizes it, crafting a cultural space where jewelry signifies individuality and empowerment rather than gender prescription.

## METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study investigates Antoine Saliba's strategic innovation in the highly competitive Zouk jewelry market in Lebanon. Employing an interpretive lens, the analysis combines social media analytics, campaign discourse examination, and brand communication review to understand how the company repositioned its image through the men's jewelry line. The choice of a qualitative interpretive design aligns with the study's objective of decoding symbolic meaning and emotional engagement rather than measuring quantitative metrics [9].

The methodology draws upon the frameworks of market segmentation analysis (Kotler & Armstrong, 2001) [10], emotional branding theory [5], and consumer culture theory [3]. Social media served as a key dataset for observing patterns in engagement, user commentary, and hashtag circulation, providing insights into how consumers co-constructed Saliba's brand identity online. Campaigns across Facebook and Instagram from 2017 to 2022 were examined for thematic consistency, imagery, tone, and cultural resonance.

The study also incorporated semiotic analysis to interpret how masculine imagery and heritage symbols (such as Phoenician letters or the cedar emblem) were embedded in advertising to localize the brand narrative within Lebanese cultural identity. This methodology enabled the linking of marketing practices to SDG frameworks, exploring not only gender inclusivity (SDG 5) but also responsible consumer behavior (SDG 12) and reduced inequalities through accessible luxury (SDG 10).

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Market Segmentation

Saliba's segmentation strategy integrates demographic, psychographic, and geographic dimensions [10]. Demographically, its collections are categorized by gender—men, women, and children—with the “Him & Her” line bridging both. The price architecture, ranging from \$50 to \$10,000, reflects a multi-tiered inclusivity: aspirational consumers coexist with established luxury buyers. Psychographically, following Bhanot's segmentation of luxury value dimensions [11], the brand identifies achievers (seeking prestige), potential achievers (seeking upward mobility), and belongers plus (seeking emotional connection through luxury).

Geographically, Saliba's operations span Lebanon and Dubai, with Zouk Mikael as the symbolic battleground. Historically dominated by female-oriented competitors such as Zoughaib & Sons and Moukarzel, Zouk's market required a radical differentiator. Saliba's pivot to the men's segment effectively re-segmented the market, creating a new subcategory where none previously existed.

The segmentation follows Dolnicar, Grün, and Leisch's principles of actionable, measurable, and substantial markets [12]. The men's line proved measurable through demographic analytics, substantial due to latent demand among underserved male consumers, and actionable via targeted marketing efforts. By catering to both men and the women who purchase for them, Saliba established a dual-entry system that revitalized overall store traffic.

## Profiling and Consumer Behavior

Saliba's innovation rests on aligning consumer behavior typologies with its male-focused offering. Casual buyers were nurtured through storytelling that demystified jewelry's materials and symbolism, fostering education-led engagement. Brand loyalists were retained through personalized incentives, including the Platinum Membership, leveraging relationship marketing principles [13].

Celebrity endorsement by Lebanese singer Ramy Ayach in 2017 exemplified McCracken's Meaning Transfer Model [6]: Ayach's persona transferred symbolic value—modern Arab masculinity, success, artistic credibility—onto the brand. This collaboration was not superficial endorsement but cultural endorsement, providing legitimacy to male jewelry ownership [14].

Discount seekers and occasional buyers were targeted through time-sensitive campaigns such as Father's Day and Valentine's Day, which merged emotional appeals with prestige cues. The evolution of these campaigns from "Men of Gold" to personalized engraving options reflects responsible luxury: shifting focus from transactional gifting to meaningful commemoration, thereby aligning with SDG 12 [7].

Emotional hedonists, another consumer subset, were engaged through imagery connecting jewelry with affection, pride, and heritage. This emotional dimension reflects Gobé's notion that successful brands "speak the language of emotion" [5]. Meanwhile, social prestige seekers were attracted by messages of status—"The biggest men's jewelry store"—embedding social proof as a driver of consumption [15].

## Branding and Image Differentiation

In a market where many brands rely on visual glamour and female celebrity endorsement, Saliba's differentiation was both strategic and symbolic. Rather than competing on price or convenience, it built image differentiation rooted in heritage, craftsmanship, and masculine elegance. The slogans "Men of Gold" and "Knowledge is Power" exemplify how the brand merged modern masculinity with cultural depth.

Saliba's collaboration with Ramy Ayach generated the "I-Yach" collection—Lebanon's first male-celebrity jewelry line. This campaign did not simply commercialize a product; it articulated a cultural archetype, representing the Creator-Hero figure [8]. By showcasing Ayach alongside his wife, Saliba also integrated gender complementarity, reinforcing inclusive marketing narratives that echo SDG 5.

The brand's storytelling extended into its "Lebanese Souvenirs" and "Geometry" collections. Through phrases such as "Wear your roots" and "Design is an everlasting language," Saliba positioned jewelry as a conduit for identity and heritage. These narratives embody Holt's Cultural Branding Theory, where brands become vehicles of collective expression [3]. The fusion of Phoenician symbolism and modern design localized global luxury trends to Lebanese pride, enhancing emotional resonance [16].

Furthermore, Saliba's "same-for-less" strategy against Zoughaib & Sons demonstrates tactical acumen. By offering comparable craftsmanship at slightly lower gold rates, the brand engaged in value parity differentiation [10]. Yet the true competitive advantage lay not in pricing but in redefining who luxury speaks to. As Moukarzel and Zoughaib competed for the "ideal woman," Saliba addressed the "modern man"—creating a gender counter-narrative that disrupted equilibrium in Zouk's jewelry landscape.

Beyond its tactical success, Saliba's branding model also reflects a deeper sociological transformation in consumer culture—a shift from gendered consumption to identity-based consumption. In traditional advertising logic, men were often positioned as givers, not wearers, of jewelry, reinforcing patriarchal dynamics of ownership and affection. The introduction of a men's jewelry leadership claim reverses this paradigm: it normalizes male adornment as an expression of self rather than a symbol of power or dominance. This shift mirrors what sociologist Anthony Giddens calls the reflexive project of the self, wherein individuals continuously construct identity through lifestyle choices and symbolic consumption [19]. In Saliba's case, jewelry becomes an act of self-narration: men are invited to tell their stories through metal, form, and craftsmanship. From a psychological viewpoint, such campaigns activate Maslow's higher-order needs—esteem, belonging, and self-actualization—illustrating how branding can fulfill emotional and existential aspirations beyond functional value [20]. Moreover, this transition in consumption behavior also speaks to the de-feminization of luxury. The growing trend of men embracing jewelry, skincare, and fashion accessories parallels global markets, where inclusivity and individuality are redefining what it means to be luxurious [21]. In this context, Saliba is not only competing locally but also contributing to a global discourse on masculinity, aligning with emergent scholarship that recognizes male consumers as emotionally literate and aesthetically expressive [22]. Such transformation holds strategic significance for luxury markets: it broadens the customer base, stabilizes demand cycles, and diffuses cultural hierarchies that once limited brand storytelling to female archetypes. Therefore, the case of Saliba underscores that the success of future luxury branding depends less on the gender of the target audience and more on the depth of emotional resonance and inclusivity that a brand can achieve. This human-centric approach positions jewelry as a communicative medium for empowerment—one capable of fulfilling not only economic goals but also ethical and social responsibilities embedded within the SDG framework.

## Linking to Consumer Culture and SDGs

The rise of men's jewelry as a legitimate consumption practice aligns with broader cultural shifts toward gender fluidity and self-expression in fashion. Scholars like Belk argue that possessions serve as extensions of the self [17]. In this view, jewelry operates as a "material metaphor" through which men articulate individuality. This redefinition directly connects to SDG 5, advancing gender equality by challenging stereotypes about masculinity and adornment.

Meanwhile, Saliba's multi-tiered pricing aligns with SDG 10, promoting inclusivity across income segments. By enabling accessibility without diluting prestige, the brand democratizes luxury while sustaining aspirational desire. Finally, personalization initiatives—such as engraving and custom design—encourage slower, more meaningful consumption cycles, fulfilling the behavioral intent of SDG 12 by reducing impulsive, status-driven purchasing [7].

## CONCLUSION

Saliba's creation of Lebanon's most prominent men's jewelry line constitutes a strategic innovation [18] that redefined the dynamics of the Zouk jewelry market. By positioning itself as the leader in male luxury accessories, Saliba not only established a new commercial category but also fostered a socio-cultural dialogue around masculinity, emotion, and consumption. Its men's line indirectly reinforced women's jewelry through cross-purchase behavior, as women frequently acted as both buyers and opinion leaders in male jewelry selection.

The "Him & Her" collections stand as an embodiment of gender complementarity in branding—where male and female identities coexist, echoing modern partnership dynamics. Between 2017 and 2022, Saliba's sustained focus on men's lines reshaped its brand equity and allowed a strategic re-entry into women's campaigns with renewed vigor and broader reach.

More profoundly, this case illustrates how branding aligned with SDGs transcends profit motives. When brand storytelling intersects with cultural empowerment, it influences not only purchasing decisions but also social perceptions. In a region where luxury often mirrors patriarchy, Saliba's innovation presents a model for inclusive, responsible, and emotionally resonant branding. Jewelry, thus, ceases to be a mere decorative accessory; it becomes a symbolic language of empowerment and equality.

## Originality and Value

This study contributes original insights to branding and consumer culture literature by exploring a male-centric jewelry strategy in a historically feminized sector. Unlike previous research that foregrounds women as primary jewelry consumers, this paper situates men as empowered agents of aesthetic choice and identity articulation. The value lies in demonstrating how branding innovation can operationalize SDG principles—particularly gender equality and responsible consumption—through emotionally grounded communication and market segmentation.

Managerially, the study offers a replicable framework for luxury brands seeking to balance growth with inclusion. The Saliba case exemplifies how cultural sensitivity, symbolic storytelling, and SDG alignment can yield sustainable competitive advantage while challenging gender conventions. By humanizing masculinity in luxury, the brand not only captured market share but also expanded the cultural vocabulary of jewelry itself.

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