

Democratizing Prestige through Accessible Exclusivity: Strategic Discounting, the Psychodynamics, the Psychographic and Theoretical Inquiry of Luxury Branding

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ABSTRACT

Luxury branding is traditionally rooted in rarity, distance, and the cultivation of desire through controlled inaccessibility. Yet the twenty-first-century luxury consumer, shaped by digital visibility, global interconnectivity, and evolving values, increasingly seeks forms of accessible exclusivity that reconcile aspiration with inclusion. This study explores the psychodynamics and psychographics of democratized prestige—asking whether strategic discounting can coexist with the symbolic capital, emotional resonance, and cultural hierarchy that define luxury. Using a qualitative content analysis of a Middle Eastern diamond-jewelry campaign that offered a 50 percent discount, the article synthesizes Aaker's Brand Equity Model [1], Sirgy's Self-Congruity Theory [2], the VALS psychographic framework [5], and sociological perspectives from Veblen [3] and Bourdieu [4]. Findings suggest that when price accessibility is framed within consistent aesthetic codes, emotional storytelling, and temporally limited promotions, it can generate inclusion without devaluation. The research contributes to sustainable-luxury scholarship under SDG 8 (Inclusive Economic Growth) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), proposing psychographic democratization as an ethically viable path for contemporary prestige branding. Purpose This study examines whether luxury brands can employ short-term, strategically framed discounting without undermining perceived exclusivity or symbolic value. It addresses the gap between the anti-laws of marketing advanced by Kapferer and Bastien (2012) [6], who argue that true luxury must reject price promotions, and emerging masstige perspectives [7] advocating selective accessibility. Through the case of a Middle Eastern jewelry house, the research investigates how emotional branding, self-congruity, and psychographic segmentation interact to sustain brand equity amid democratization. The goal is to expand theoretical understanding of luxury's evolving identity—where prestige is maintained not through isolation but through cultural and emotional intelligence.

Originality and Value

The article's originality lies in linking psychographic theory (VALS) with brand-equity frameworks to conceptualize luxury democratization as a managed shift rather than a dilution. By contextualizing an Arab luxury brand's strategy within a global debate on accessible exclusivity, it challenges Western-centric notions of prestige and extends emotional-branding theory into the sociocultural terrain of the Middle East. It also advances the idea that inclusive luxury contributes to sustainable consumption patterns (SDG 12) by valorizing symbolic experience over material accumulation. For practitioners, it reframes discounting as a potential tool of emotional inclusion—a way to invite aspirational segments without eroding status hierarchies.

INTRODUCTION

Luxury has long operated as a semiotic system in which rarity, craftsmanship, and narrative converge to signal distinction. Classical theorists such as Veblen [3] regarded luxury consumption as a form of conspicuous display,

a means of demonstrating social power through visible wastefulness. Later, Bourdieu [4] reframed prestige as cultural capital—a subtle interplay of taste, education, and symbolic mastery that differentiates classes. Within these logics, price reduction appears antithetical to luxury: it threatens scarcity and undermines the aura of the “untouchable.”

However, globalization and digital communication have blurred social boundaries and exposed elite consumption to mass audiences. In this context, accessible exclusivity has emerged as a paradoxical yet powerful strategy: consumers seek to “belong” to luxury narratives without necessarily belonging to elite classes. The question becomes whether strategic discounting—a temporary, curated accessibility—can democratize prestige while preserving emotional distance.

This inquiry gains relevance in the Middle Eastern market, where jewelry symbolizes identity, family heritage, and status performance. The focal campaign, launched by a Lebanese high-end jeweler – Saliba Jewelry – in Dubai Mall, offered 50 percent off diamond collections for three weeks in 2024. Rather than treating this as a marketing anomaly, the present study interprets it as a lens through which to theorize shifting psychographics, symbolic communication, and the cultural evolution of luxury branding.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. *The Classical Tension: Exclusivity versus Accessibility*

Traditional luxury marketing upholds rarity as the core source of value. Kapferer and Bastien [6] codified this in their “anti-laws of marketing,” arguing that luxury must never communicate price, advertise sales, or seek mass appeal. Dubois and Czellar [9] similarly warned that discounting erodes symbolic differentiation. In contrast, the rise of *masstige*—a portmanteau of “mass” and “prestige” [7]—reflects a democratizing logic: luxury’s cultural codes can be selectively shared without collapsing hierarchy. Truong et al. [8] and Hader and Langer [10] emphasize that aspirational segments desire participation in luxury’s emotional world more than ownership of its material exclusivity.

2. *Emotional Branding and the Rise of Experiential Luxury*

Gobé’s (2001) Emotional Branding Theory [12] highlights that affective connection and storytelling sustain loyalty even when economic variables fluctuate. Emotional narratives of empowerment, gratitude, and achievement can preserve symbolic equity amid price changes. Amatulli and Guido [11] found that emotional and symbolic motives outweigh utilitarian ones in luxury consumption, suggesting that psychological resonance may neutralize the risk of price-based dilution.

3. *Consumer Culture and Symbolic Capital*

Within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) [13], consumption is viewed as an act of identity construction. Brands serve as cultural resources through which consumers negotiate belonging and differentiation. Bourdieu’s [4] concept of distinction remains foundational: luxury consumption is not only economic but semiotic—a language of social meaning. Strategic discounting can thus be interpreted as a shift in code access: inviting new participants to speak the language of prestige without altering its grammar.

4. *VALS and the Psychographic Turn*

To understand these dynamics, psychographic segmentation provides critical insight. The VALS model (Values and Lifestyles) developed by Arnold Mitchell in 1983 [5] and later refined by SRI International, categorizes consumers along two axes—primary motivation (ideals, achievement, self-expression) and resources (income, education, confidence, energy). It identifies eight segments: Innovators, Thinkers, Achievers, Experiencers, Believers, Strivers, Makers, and Survivors.

In the context of luxury, Achievers and Innovators typically dominate, motivated by success and self-expression. However, the Belonger+ or Striver profiles—consumers who aspire upward but remain resource-constrained—are increasingly influential. They seek products that symbolize achievement rather than materially prove it. Understanding the transition from Belonger+ to Achiever is crucial for analyzing how brands like the studied jeweler manage aspirational inclusion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Aaker’s Brand-Equity Paradigm

Aaker [1] defines brand equity as a multidimensional construct comprising brand awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty. In luxury, these dimensions acquire symbolic depth: quality becomes craftsmanship, awareness becomes myth, and loyalty becomes cultural alignment. Aaker's model clarifies that discounting does not automatically reduce equity; the determinant is perceived coherence. If the promotional event reinforces the brand's personality—through elite settings, refined aesthetics, and controlled temporality—perceived quality and associations can remain intact or even strengthen through increased visibility.

Self-Congruity Theory

According to Sirgy [2], consumers choose brands consistent with their self-concepts. In luxury markets, this congruity often involves ideal-self projection: buyers use prestigious brands to align reality with aspiration. Temporary accessibility, when framed as an invitation rather than a clearance, enables consumers whose self-images are “on the verge” of achievement to experience symbolic belonging. The studied campaign activated this mechanism by coupling affordability with the language of empowerment (“Your perfect diamond awaits”), allowing Belonger+ consumers to enact Achiever identities without cognitive dissonance.

The VALS Psychographic Framework

Whereas Self-Congruity explains the micro-psychological alignment between individual and brand, VALS provides the macro-psychographic map of lifestyle migration. The 50 percent campaign catalyzed a measurable psychographic shift from Belonger+ to Achiever: consumers motivated by community and belonging momentarily entered the achievement-driven consumption field. This shift can be deemed healthy if it expands emotional equity without overexposing the brand. It becomes unhealthy only when accessibility converts aspiration into expectation, flattening symbolic gradients. VALS thus serves as a diagnostic tool for managing the tempo of democratization.

Sociocultural Frames: Veblen and Bourdieu

Integrating Veblen's [3] conspicuous consumption and Bourdieu's [4] cultural capital illuminates luxury's dual logic. While Veblen situates prestige in economic display, Bourdieu anchors it in learned taste and semiotic mastery. Strategic discounting re-codes Veblenian conspicuousness from waste to wisdom—displaying discernment rather than extravagance. The Dubai campaign's refined visual minimalism (white space, soft gold tones) aligned more with Bourdieu's subtle distinction than with Veblen's showiness, transforming consumption into cultural participation rather than ostentatious proof.

Emotional and Symbolic Interaction

Through Gobé's [12] emotional-branding lens and Goffman's [14] symbolic-interactionist frame, luxury communication becomes performative theater. The boutique's environment, digital storytelling, and social-media interactions co-create a dramaturgy of aspiration: consumers perform their aspirational selves before a digital audience. Such co-creation strengthens community around the brand, converting economic transactions into identity rituals.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative content-analysis approach was adopted to explore how the promotional campaign mediated between accessibility and prestige. Data were gathered from the brand's Instagram account over a 21-day promotion (9–30 November 2024) and supplemented by field observation in Saliba Jewelry at the Dubai Mall boutique.

Analytical corpus: 22 Instagram posts, 1 short-form video, and 1 story series featuring diamond jewelry under the promotional theme.

Coding scheme:

1. Visual semiotics – composition, color, lighting, typography, and symbolism.
2. Linguistic tone – empowerment vs. price focus.
3. Engagement metrics – likes, shares, comments, tagging networks.
4. Emotional valence – gratitude, aspiration, skepticism, indifference.
5. Psychographic inference – linguistic indicators of belonging or achievement.

A comparative baseline was established through three months of non-promotional posts (August–October 2024) and competitor observation (Mouawad and L'Azurde, which maintained no-discount policies).

Data were interpreted thematically, integrating Aaker's and Sirgy's constructs with VALS segmentation. The interpretive lens combined semiotic analysis (Barthes [16]) with the cultural-branding method (Holt, 2004 [17]), seeking not statistical generalization but conceptual depth.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Visual and Semiotic Consistency

Despite the unusual nature of a 50 percent discount, the campaign's semiotic language remained unmistakably luxurious. Imagery featured clean compositions, soft-focus lighting, and a restrained gold-and-ivory palette that signaled refinement rather than affordability. Typography was elegant and minimal, with slogans such as "Your perfect diamond awaits" and "Shine bright" emphasizing self-expression, not price. These cues reinforced Aaker's perceived-quality dimension [1]; the brand did not visually or verbally compromise its symbolic aura.

Posts that integrated empowerment language—"For every milestone that defines you"—generated stronger engagement than those explicitly referencing the discount, suggesting that emotional narrative and identity appeal outweighed transactional appeal. This supports Gobé's emotional-branding thesis [12]: affective storytelling can stabilize brand meaning even during market experimentation.

Engagement and Emotional Resonance

Quantitatively, promotional posts averaged more than twice the engagement of standard product content. Comment analysis revealed gratitude ("Thank you for making this possible"), excitement ("Finally within reach!"), and social validation (users tagging friends or partners). Only a marginal 4 percent of comments expressed skepticism about "cheapening the brand."

This affective pattern aligns with Sirgy's self-congruity theory [2]. Consumers perceived participation in the promotion as congruent with their ideal self-image: elegant, deserving, and socially ascendant. Rather than diluting prestige, the discount served as a psychological permission slip enabling aspirational consumers to join the brand's symbolic universe.

Psychographic Interpretation through VALS

Applying the VALS framework [5], the engagement shift reveals a temporary migration from Belonger+ (community-oriented, price-aware, security-seeking) toward Achiever (goal-oriented, success-motivated) segments. Comments expressing gratitude for accessibility coexisted with declarations of ambition ("Someday the full-price piece!"), indicating that consumers internalized luxury as trajectory, not endpoint.

This psychographic fluidity demonstrates what this paper terms "psychographic democratization"—a controlled expansion of symbolic participation that preserves aspiration as an emotional driver. The transition is healthy because it activates motivation and brand affinity without converting luxury into routine consumption. It becomes unhealthy only if discounting becomes habitual, normalizing Achiever access for Belonger profiles and eroding the aspirational gap that fuels desire [4].

Comparative Benchmarking

Contrasted with competitors Mouawad and L'Azurde—both adhering to full-price policies—the studied brand achieved substantially higher digital engagement and new-follower growth during the same period. Yet boutique observation confirmed that in-store ambiance and service rituals remained elite: uniformed attendants, curated lighting, and champagne hospitality. This coherence preserved Aaker's brand-association and loyalty components. The campaign thus achieved what Holt [17] describes as myth consistency—narrative continuity across touchpoints.

Temporal and Cultural Context

The promotion's timing—post-wedding-season clearance—also symbolically encoded wisdom rather than desperation. In Middle Eastern cultures where jewelry gifting follows life-cycle rituals, the offer signified opportunity rather than liquidation. Through this contextual intelligence, the brand localized global luxury discourse, transforming discounting into culturally resonant storytelling.

DISCUSSION

Revisiting the Anti-Laws of Luxury

Findings partly refute Kapferer and Bastien's anti-law prohibiting price communication [6]. While long-term reliance on discounts can indeed erode symbolic scarcity, the case illustrates that strategically contained promotions can enhance brand visibility and inclusivity without harm. The key variable is narrative framing: when a discount is presented as a celebration or limited event—supported by high-end semiotics and emotional language—it functions as an invitation to prestige, not a price war.

Interfacing Aaker and VALS

Combining Aaker's structural model with VALS psychographics reveals how brand equity and lifestyle motivation co-evolve. Awareness increases among Belonger+ segments, perceived quality is maintained through coherent aesthetics, associations deepen through emotional resonance, and loyalty extends as Achievers validate their identity within the brand. This intersection produces sustainable equity: financial accessibility expands market share, while symbolic depth maintains differentiation.

Cultural Capital and the New Prestige Logic

Integrating Bourdieu's [4] notion of cultural capital, the campaign repositions prestige as cultural inclusion rather than material exclusion. Consumers gained symbolic legitimacy by demonstrating taste and awareness of refined brands, even at temporary affordability. In Veblenian [3] terms, conspicuous consumption evolved from wasteful display to conscious discernment: demonstrating intelligence in accessing luxury ethically. This ideological shift aligns with SDG 12, promoting responsible consumption through appreciation of craftsmanship and narrative value rather than mere acquisition.

Emotional Branding and Digital Rituals

Through Gobé's [12] lens, the digital campaign performed an affective ritual: followers collectively experienced gratitude and aspiration, reinforcing community around the brand. In Goffman's [14] dramaturgical terms, each consumer comment functioned as an act of self-presentation—a micro-performance of taste and ambition. Luxury thus becomes not a static category but a living conversation between brand myth and consumer selfhood.

Healthy versus Unhealthy Democratization

From a VALS perspective, a healthy psychographic shift is cyclical, not permanent: it allows Belonger+ consumers episodic access to Achiever experiences, thereby sustaining aspiration. The brand benefits from temporary expansion and emotional goodwill while retaining hierarchy. Unhealthy democratization occurs when accessibility becomes expectation, dissolving symbolic distance. The studied campaign remained healthy because it preserved temporal scarcity, maintained boutique prestige, and emphasized emotional rather than economic value.

Sustainability and SDG Alignment

Economically, the strategy supports SDG 8, fostering inclusive growth by engaging middle-income consumers in creative economies. Environmentally and culturally, it resonates with SDG 12, privileging emotional longevity over disposable consumption. By framing diamonds as carriers of memory and identity rather than status alone, the brand positions luxury as a vector for sustainable aspiration—an evolution toward what Amatulli et al. (2020 [18]) term sustainable luxury consumption.

CONCLUSION

Luxury is no longer defined solely by distance; it thrives in the tension between exclusivity and empathy. The study demonstrates that strategic discounting, when supported by coherent semiotics, emotional storytelling, and cultural intelligence, can democratize prestige without eroding symbolic capital.

From a theoretical standpoint, it extends Aaker's brand-equity model by integrating psychographic segmentation, illustrating how equity dimensions behave across VALS categories. It reinforces Sirgy's self-congruity by evidencing that aspirational alignment can sustain brand love even when price accessibility increases.

It also challenges Kapferer's purist stance, proving that luxury's aura can survive contact with inclusion if managed narratively.

The VALS application offers a diagnostic lens for monitoring brand health. The transition from Belonger+ to Achiever reflects a psychographic laddering effect—consumers symbolically ascend the lifestyle hierarchy through emotional participation. This movement is beneficial for both consumer and brand: it nurtures ambition, rewards discernment, and ensures continuity of aspiration. In sociological terms, it redefines luxury as performative mobility rather than fixed privilege.

In a digital, value-driven world, the enduring prestige of luxury depends not on isolation but on meaningful inclusion. The studied campaign's success suggests that when emotional equity, symbolic coherence, and temporal restraint converge, accessibility becomes not dilution but dialogue—a dialogue through which prestige regenerates itself.

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