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Luxury in the Circular Economy: An Engagement Journey Perspective

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ABSTRACT

How to engage consumers with circular economy principles in the luxury industry? To answer this question, this paper focuses on the engagement journey of consumers embracing circular luxury. Drawing from a life story interview approach with consumers of second-hand luxury fashion, we identify three engagement journeys: (1) the price-sensitive journey, (2) the uniqueness journey, and (3) the sustainability journey—each characterized by specific motives (ranging from self-interest in the form of searching for lower prices to more altruistic motives concerning keeping products in use) and manifestations of engagement (ranging from nonbehavioral to behavioral engagement with circular luxury) in response to firm-controlled and non-firm-controlled touchpoints. The findings carry important implications for both companies and society as they show how a more ethical consumption behavior can be encouraged in the luxury industry.

1 | Introduction

While there is broad consensus that consumption is a key driver of climate change (Ivanova et al. 2020), transitioning to a more circular economy remains a key challenge for the luxury industry. This industry has been criticized for being wasteful and unsustainable (de Angelis, Adıgüzel, and Amatulli 2017), leading to calls for luxury to engage more with sustainability (Winston 2016). To this end, the concept of circular luxury emerged as an alternative with ethical and sustainable potential (Bundgaard and Huulgaard 2019; Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; Stahel 2016). In fact, circularity has gained momentum in the luxury industry, driven in part by sustainability emerging as a key part of business practices across industries (de Angelis, Adıgüzel, and Amatulli 2017; Papadas, Avlonitis, and Carrigan 2017). The Italian luxury fashion house Valentino, for instance, became the first leading luxury house to start a program to repurchase and resell used Valentino items in selected boutiques in 2021. These practices complement other sustainable luxury practices like sharing (Christodoulides et al. 2021)

and enhanced supply chain management (Holmqvist and Kowalkowski 2023) that are increasingly prevalent. Similarly, luxury houses like Gucci and Chloé alongside luxury retailers like Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom are partnering with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation to dedicate themselves to a more circular and sustainable approach in the fashion industry.

Yet, the real breakthrough of circular luxury in fashion and other industries also strongly depends on consumer engagement (Elzinga et al. 2020; Fehrer and Wieland 2021), which we define in this context as a motivational state to embrace circular luxury. Extant research emphasized that consumers need to be willing to participate in the circular transition of luxury to make the industry more circular and sustainable—a phenomenon denoted as circular economy engagement (Mostaghel and Chirumalla 2021; Verleye et al. 2024).

Building upon calls to boost circular engagement as part of the solution to combat the climate crisis and reduce global warming (Korhonen, Honkasalo, and Seppälä 2018; WEF 2021), the

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present research focuses on how and why consumers engage with circular luxury along the consumer journey, thereby considering touchpoints (“how”) and motives (“why”) along the journey. Previous research has studied consumer attitudes towards circular luxury as compared to new luxury purchases (Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019) and the meanings and emotions consumers attach to second-hand luxury (Cervellon, Carey, and Harms 2012; Sihvonen and Turunen 2016; Turunen and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2015). However, prior research remains silent about the way in which engagement with circular luxury evolves over time, even though understanding engagement journeys is a key challenge for researchers and practitioners (Jaakkola and Alexander 2024), and key to enticing consumers to embrace circularity in luxury.

To address this, the present research aims to *identify engagement journeys by studying how and why consumers engage with circular luxury (here, second-hand luxury) over time*. As background to this research, our literature review outlines how the extant literature defines luxury consumption regarding circularity as a sustainable practice, before discussing consumer engagement journeys with circularity and luxury. Subsequently, we detail our empirical research, responding to calls for research on consumer typologies in sustainable luxury (Semaan et al. 2024) to identify different types of engagement journeys—having unique characteristics in terms of touchpoints and motives. Taken together, this research is pivotal as it not only enhances our comprehension of luxury consumer behavior within the circular economy but also equips luxury brands with the insights necessary to develop targeted strategies that resonate with the diverse values and expectations of each consumer segment, thereby fostering a more sustainable luxury market.

2 | Luxury Consumption Transitioning to a Circular Economy

2.1 | Sustainability and Circularity in Luxury Consumption

Recent years have witnessed a rapid increase in emphasis on sustainability in business practices (Papadas, Avlonitis, and Carrigan 2017) combined with increased research on sustainability in many business sectors (Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen 2017; Pelsmacker, Driesen, and Rayp 2005). However, while research into sustainable luxury is fast increasing (Veloutsou, Christodoulides, and Guzmán 2022), research into sustainable luxury from a consumer perspective has lagged (Athwal et al. 2019), leading to calls for more research into aspects of sustainability in the luxury industry (Holmqvist and Kowalkowski 2023; Osburg et al. 2021). This need for further research is even more pronounced when it relates to consumer engagement with the efforts of the luxury industry to become more circular and sustainable (Verleye et al. 2024).

In some ways, sustainability challenges traditional luxury. Specifically, the push for sustainability can lead some consumers to feel that luxury products lose their exclusivity when sustainable materials are used, causing them to perceive these products as less luxurious (Achabou and Dekhili 2013; Dekhili, Achabou, and Alharbi 2019; Diallo et al. 2021) or even to consider

sustainability as not compatible with luxury (Holmqvist and Kowalkowski 2023). In addition, as consumers are increasingly conscious about the climate, ethical consumption, and sustainability issues, these concerns influence their consumption of luxury (Carrigan, Moraes, and McEachern 2013; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019). Moreover, concerns about ethics and sustainability in luxury appear to be growing. For instance, millennials and younger consumers are more likely than previous generations to view luxury as contradictory to sustainability, although this does not necessarily stop them buying it (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau 2020). Yet, a recent survey found seven in ten luxury shoppers in Europe (Altiant 2024a) and six in ten in the United States (Altiant 2024b) consider the adoption of sustainable luxury policies to be very or somewhat important. This situation thus puts pressure on luxury brands to adopt more sustainable norms and embrace circular practices.

While luxury is thus often perceived to be unsustainable (Winston 2016), a review of the literature on luxury practices reveals a more nuanced picture. On the one hand, researchers have highlighted problems in relation to sustainable practices, or the lack thereof, in the luxury industry, including high carbon emissions from luxury cars (Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau 2017) and even human rights abuses in sectors such as luxury jewelry (Moraes et al. 2017). Meanwhile, others argue that the luxury fashion industry has the potential to be more sustainable than most other forms of fashion such as mass-market brands and fast fashion (Holmqvist and Kowalkowski 2023; Joy et al. 2012), when luxury fashion is using high-quality sustainable materials, avoiding delocalization, and using craftsmanship to produce durable products that can be used for many years (Kapferer 2015). In line with this evidence, Joy et al. (2012) contrast the existing and relatively sustainable practices in luxury fashion with the far more unsustainable production process in fast fashion to posit that luxury represents a more sustainable alternative in fashion.

In this work, we agree with Kapferer (2015) and Joy et al. (2012) that luxury production has the potential to be more sustainable than its alternatives when it relies upon sustainable materials (Janssen et al. 2014; Kapferer 2015) and avoids production in low-cost contexts (Holmqvist and Kowalkowski 2023). However, the true value of these sustainable ideals for luxury relies on a functioning circular economy. If luxury fashion items were discarded in the same way as fast fashion clothes, production would still be high and unsustainable. In other words, it is by capitalizing on the durable qualities of luxury fashion (Kapferer 2015) and keeping them in use at their highest value through rental and sharing models (including selling second-hand fashion) that the most sustainable consumption form can be achieved (De Bruyne and Verleye 2023). Yet, these efforts only contribute to a more circular and sustainable economy if consumers can become engaged with them along their journey.

2.2 | The Journey Towards Engaging With Circular Luxury

Consumer engagement, a key concept in consumer research (Van Doorn et al. 2010; Wetzels, Grewal, and Wetzels 2023), reflects the motivational state or willingness to embrace a

brand or firm and its offerings (Brodie et al. 2011; Verleye et al. 2024). Engagement with circular luxury can manifest itself, like any type of engagement among consumers, in a non-behavioral (cf. consumer attitudes towards circular luxury) and a behavioral manner (cf. consumer behaviors towards circular luxury). Prior research has identified how consumers' engagement manifests as attitudes and behavior and impacts organizations and other actors, showing that engaged consumers are valuable as they tend to be more loyal and actively shape other consumers' perceptions (de Oliveira Santini et al. 2020). Additionally, extant research shows that engagement with circular luxury also depends on a wide set of consumer motives (Aycock, Cho, and Kim 2023; Davies, Lee, and Ahonkhai 2012), which range from self-centered motives such as desiring to obtain luxury objects at a more affordable price (Amatulli et al. 2018), social climbing (Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019), and desiring vintage fashion (Cervellon, Carey, and Harms 2012) to more altruistic motives like taking the environment into account (Jain and Rath 2023; Tangri and Yu 2023).

Yet, the way in which engagement with different motives changes along a consumer's journey has not received much attention—even though the notion of the “consumer journey” is key to understanding consumer behavior (Akaka and Schau 2019; Becker, Jaakkola, and Halinen 2020). Consumer journeys reflect the series of touchpoints with which consumers interact when searching for, purchasing, and using goods or services (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). These touchpoints can be either directly or indirectly related to the firm (Becker and Jaakkola 2020) and are categorized as brand-owned, partner-owned, consumer-owned, and social/external, with firms having limited control over the latter two (De Keyser et al. 2020; Lemon and Verhoef 2016). In a critique of consumer journeys, Jaakkola and Alexander (2024) highlight that current research primarily focuses on firm-controlled touchpoints, thereby overlooking the significant impact of non-firm-controlled touchpoints, where interactions between consumers and their networks play an important role (Rahman et al. 2022; Hamilton et al. 2021).

Although consumer journey research aims to optimize marketing efforts by mapping stages such as awareness, purchase, and loyalty (Srinivasan, Rutz, and Pauwels 2016; Barwitz and Maas 2018), the consumer journey concept remains largely firm-centric, focusing on driving customer conversion (Jaakkola and Alexander 2024; Venkatesan, Petersen, and Guisconi 2018). However, as consumer journeys increasingly span multiple channels and involve significant social influences, consumers become empowered to direct their own journeys, often deviating from planned paths (Becker and Jaakkola 2020; De Keyser et al. 2020; Edelman and Singer 2015). This situation highlights the need for a better understanding of consumer engagement along the consumer journey (Brodie et al. 2011; Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan 2012; Sim et al. 2022).

In particular, the present research aims to explore how and why consumers engage with circular luxury along their consumer journey. As consumer journeys rarely occur alone but instead are undertaken together with others and are influenced by others (Hamilton et al. 2021), research should examine all types of touchpoints when investigating the engagement journeys. By doing so,

research can generate a better understanding of who and what consumers are influenced by, whom they influence themselves, and how their attitudes and behaviors—which reflect nonbehavioral and behavioral manifestations of engagement—can transform over time (Jaakkola and Alexander 2024).

3 | Methodology

To gain insight into the consumer journey towards embracing circular luxury, we contacted second-hand luxury retailers for access to consumers, and further used snowball sampling to access additional respondents as existing second-hand luxury consumers recommended other consumers. We conducted in-depth interviews with the consumers and provide an overview of their profiles in Table 1. By using a life story interview approach (Atkinson 1998), we were able to capture the engagement journey. We opted for this approach as the use of life story interviews is the standard qualitative research approach when the research focus is on capturing phenomena ranging over a longer period and which potentially involve changes along the way (Atkinson 1998; Bernard, Wutich, and Ryan 2016; Tracy 2024), as is the case when describing consumers' engagement journeys.

We thus take a qualitative approach, recognizing the difficulty of capturing the full range of nonbehavioral and behavioral manifestations of consumer engagement in the luxury industry through scales (Christodoulides, Michaelidou, and Li 2009) and the advantages of in-depth interviews to explore luxury consumers' engagement (Holmqvist, Diaz Ruiz, and Peñaloza 2020). By doing so, we were able to gain insight into how and why consumers' engagement has developed over time

TABLE 1 | Respondent profiles.

Respondents	Age	Occupation
Brigitte	61–70	Engineer
Isabelle	41–50	Assistant
Margaux	31–40	Notary clerk
Mathilde	41–50	Store owner and manager
Marlène	31–40	Teacher
Camille	61–70	Retired
Émilie	21–30	Junior manager
Noémi	71–80	Retired
Jade	21–30	Product manager
Sabrina	31–40	Dental secretary
Marion	41–50	Teacher
Myriam	51–60	Not stated
Nathalie	61–70	Retired
Lucie	31–40	HR manager
Nicole	51–60	Housewife
Agathe	31–40	Product manager

Note: All respondents are women and residing in France.

along their engagement journey, thereby identifying different types of touchpoints and motives along the engagement journeys. Building on the importance of reaching saturation in qualitative research (Boddy 2016; Saunders et al. 2018), we conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with consumers—even though we already found saturation at twelve interviews. The respondents were all female, reflecting the predominance of female consumers within the second-hand luxury market, with ages ranging from 23 to 71 years. In-depth interviews lasted for 45–90 min; three of the sixteen respondents were interviewed a second time to provide additional insights.

For the coding of our data, we followed the four steps of coding recommended by Mayan (2016) and used for qualitative studies in luxury consumption (Holmqvist et al. 2020; Holmqvist and Ponsignon 2025). These four steps of coding consist of (1) open coding for comprehension of the interview data leading to a data-dense description, in our case an understanding of how and why consumers engage with second-hand luxury, (2) axial coding, allowing us to identify connections among the emergent themes related to how and why consumers engage with second-hand luxury for a synthesis of the findings, (3) selective coding for theoretical interpretation of our data in light of the emergent themes (i.e., constellations of firm-controlled and non-firm-controlled touchpoints and engagement motives), and (4) recontextualization, connecting our own theoretical contributions of engagement journeys that vary in terms of the touchpoint constellation and the engagement motives to the existing literature on engagement journeys in the context of the circular economy. This abductive coding process—where we went back and forth between the data, the emergent themes, and the literature on engagement journeys in the circular economy (e.g., Jaakkola and Alexander 2024)—resulted in the identification of three types of engagement journeys linked to circular luxury, which are summarized in Table 2.

4 | Findings: Engagement Journeys Linked to Circular Luxury

Regarding consumer engagement with second-hand luxury fashion, nonbehavioral manifestations among the respondents cover the entire spectrum from feeling ashamed about buying second-hand luxury to being proud of engaging in the circular economy and viewing second-hand luxury as an ethical consumption practice. In terms of behavioral manifestations, respondents' engagement ranges from initial reluctance towards purchasing second-hand fashion to fully embracing it and acting as outspoken ambassadors for engaging in the circular economy. In identifying how consumers' nonbehavioral and behavioral engagement evolved over time, we identify three types of engagement journeys: (1) the price-sensitive journey, (2) the uniqueness journey, and (3) the sustainability journey. Moreover, we find that engagement journeys may change over time and identify how sustainability may grow to become more dominant for some consumers. In what follows, we detail each of these engagement journeys, thereby elaborating upon the underlying consumer motivations to engage (*why* do consumers engage in second-hand luxury) and the touchpoints consumers encounter along their journey (*how* do consumers engage

with second-hand luxury). Table 2 summarizes these insights while Figure 1 illustrates how consumers who initially engaged with second-hand luxury for other reasons may grow more attached to its sustainable aspects as their engagement journey progresses. Focusing on the engagement journey, we build on Jaakkola and Alexander (2024) to identify both the firm-controlled touchpoints of traditional customer journeys and the non-firm-controlled touchpoints characteristic of engagement journeys.

4.1 | Price-Sensitive Journey

In line with previous research on purchasing second-hand luxury (Amatulli et al. 2018; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019), we find pricing to be an important trigger for many consumers to engage with second-hand luxury. All respondents, without exception, first mention price when asked about the reason for buying second-hand luxury and for many of them it appears to be an important motivator. Specifically, several respondents mention that they first turned to second-hand luxury because it comes with a lower price, making it possible for them to buy it (see quote Marion) and/or gives them the feeling of having made a bargain (see quote Brigitte).

My finances don't let me buy as much luxury as I'd wish, so second-hand is a real opportunity for me.

Marion

The lower price, of course, that's what makes me buy second-hand.

Brigitte

Although price sensitivity shows to be compatible with other reasons for buying luxury fashion (e.g., quality, sustainability or originality—see quotes Brigitte and Émilie), some respondents outright reject any other motives and insist that price is the only reason to buy second-hand luxury. According to these respondents, not only is price the main motivator for themselves, but they also question whether other consumers could have other motives (see quote Noémie).

By buying second-hand, you both pay less and you have a quality product with a history.

Brigitte

I mainly buy second-hand because of that [price] as it means I can afford it... but it also makes me feel good as I know it is more eco-friendly.

Marlène

Let's not lie to ourselves: it's only the price that interests me.

Noémie

When the journey is shaped by economic motives elicited by the affordability of second-hand fashion, we refer to price-sensitive journeys. Interestingly, we observe these journeys

TABLE 2 | Engagement journeys, motives, and touchpoints.

Engagement journey	Engagement motives	Consumer quotes	Touchpoint constellation	Consumer quotes
Price-sensitive journey	Affordability: Possible to purchase luxury at a lower price.	<p>“My finances don’t let me buy as much luxury as I’d wish, so second-hand is a real opportunity for me.” Marion</p> <p>“It’s like an investment thing [...] They [second-hand luxury consumers] use it and then they sell it.” Émilie</p>	<p>Firm-controlled</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online second-hand fashion platforms, such as Vestiaire Collective. Authentication procedures to avoid buying counterfeits. Upscale boutiques for second-hand luxury fashion. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curated vintage fashion collections both online and in boutiques. Second-hand luxury stores for “treasure hunts,” hoping to find unique luxury items. Sustainability claims of second-hand luxury sellers. <p>Non-firm-controlled</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influencers sharing insights about affordable second-hand luxury. Other consumers providing hints on good second-hand luxury deals. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forums and fan-zones for exchanges with others vintage luxury fashionistas. Friends and family providing help to start engaging with second-hand luxury consumption. Ambassadors trying to convince others about the benefits of second-hand luxury. 	<p>Firm-controlled</p> <p>“It’s reassuring to know that some sites, like Vestiaire Collective or Vinted, offer verification services by experts.” Lucie</p> <p>“The specialist in question, knew how to reassure me from the start. She invited me to her boutique to show me the authenticity certificates of the items and explain her verification process. She took the time to listen to my expectations and made a personalized selection of bags that perfectly matched my tastes.” Brigitte</p> <p>“The boutique is well stocked, often new offers, and of course the prices are super interesting.” Marion</p> <p>“It’s also like a treasure hunt: you have to dig, search, and sometimes you find the perfect piece at an incredible price.” Lucie</p> <p>Non-firm-controlled</p> <p>“By following influencers specialized in second-hand fashion on Instagram, like May Berthelot, I discovered a whole new world. They give advice, share their finds, and it motivates me even more to continue.” (Lucie)</p> <p>“I feel like I’m making micro influence. Other people, they influenced me. I feel like I’m influencing also some people, so this is word of mouth.” (Émilie)</p> <p>“I have no hesitation in recommending second-hand to my loved ones, especially if they’re looking for a specific piece or want to get a good deal.” (Brigitte)</p> <p>“My mom, who was very reluctant at first, is slowly starting to accept the idea. She’s still struggling to get into it herself, but she’s already worn a few pieces I gave her, and that’s a big win for me!” Lucie</p>
	Value-for-money: Feeling that the purchase is a good deal, or an investment.			
Uniqueness journey	Conspicuousness: Ability to afford and wear conspicuous luxury items	<p>“I love to construct and invent the history of the bag, its previous owners, its travels, imagining it in the arms of a celebrity and project myself there, dreaming.” Sabrina</p> <p>“I dreamt of having a Louis Vuitton bag, but to rest true to my personality and my wardrobe, well, a new bag would have clashed. That’s why I preferred buying a second-hand bag, which fits my wardrobe really well.” Myriam</p>		
	Personal style: Preference for vintage fashion items.			
Sustainability journey	Emotional connection: Perceived heritage and history of the luxury item.	<p>Self-expression: Constructing a personal style different from current trends.</p>		
	Personal responsibility: Circular economy as a more sustainable option.			
Sustainability journey	Sense of ethics: Sustainability as a more ethical choice for the planet.	<p>“I talk about it very casually, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world. I don’t feel any of the embarrassment I had at the beginning. On the contrary, I’m proud to share my finds. For me, it’s become a valuable act, showing that I’m making thoughtful choices for both myself and the environment.” Lucie</p>		
	Conversion: Consumers who previously consumed for other reasons, now trying to motivate others.			

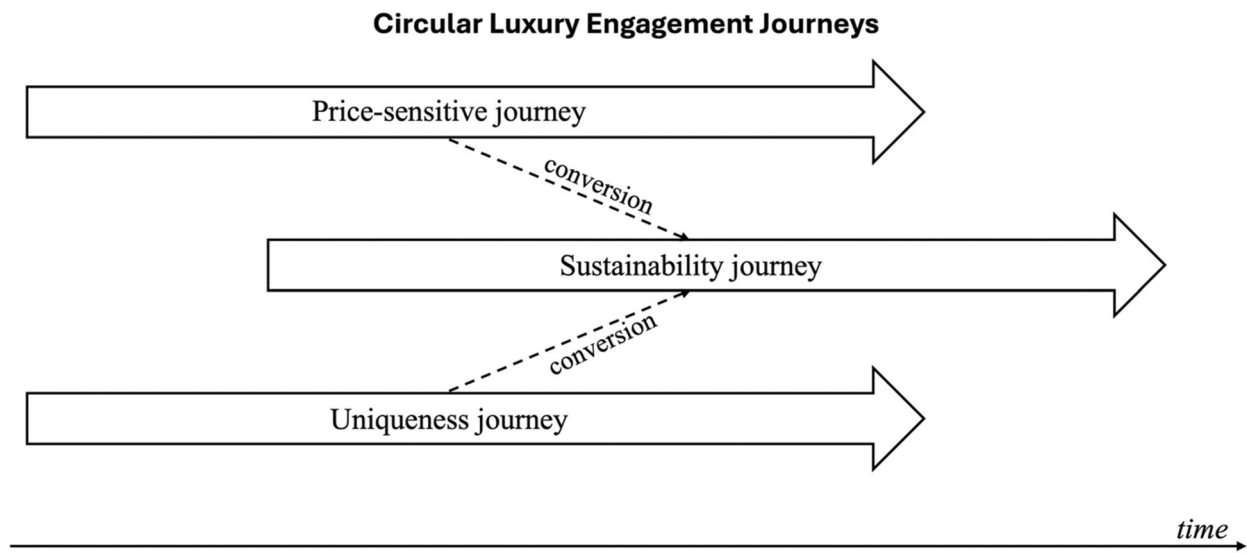


FIGURE 1 | Engagement journeys.

among consumers who already engaged with luxury fashion before engaging with second-hand luxury fashion, either by buying it (cf. behavioral engagement) or by dreaming of doing so (cf. nonbehavioral engagement—see quotes Agathe and Lucie).

I love this Maison because they create items that make me dream. Just seeing a Gucci can be a love at first sight for me.

Agathe

It's like stepping into a secret world where luxury suddenly becomes accessible (...) Luxury makes me dream and I easily fall for it. On the second-hand market, of course, because otherwise I cannot afford it. I escape through looking at beautiful dresses and luxury products, and I imagine myself wearing them.

Lucie

Indeed, these quotes suggest that some consumers are intrigued by the strong brands in the luxury fashion industry, corresponding to Kapferer and Bastien's (2009; 2012) description of luxury brands encouraging consumers to “live the brand dream.” They believe that second-hand luxury represents the quality craftsmanship that characterizes luxury fashion (Joy et al. 2012; Kapferer 2015) and see it a guarantee of quality.

Even if it's second-hand. I really believe that a luxury item remains luxurious. Even if I wasn't the first to own it, I'm convinced it retains the same values as a new item: its quality and authenticity.

Margaux

A second-hand luxury item is still luxury. The materials, the product, the fabric, the design are the same. Nothing is lost, the product is still the same.

It loses nothing of its prestige. Its value is not lower because it is second-hand. The value of an object is not just its price.

Nathalie

Interestingly, when these respondents—whose nonbehavioral engagement with luxury is already high because of a strong belief in its quality, design, or originality—opt for buying second-hand fashion because of its affordability (behavioral engagement), they may feel ashamed at first.

At the time, I did not want to admit I bought second-hand.

Hélène

Previously, it was a bit naff, but these days it has become trendy.

Brigitte

These feelings of shame or reluctance to admit that one is buying luxury second-hand reflect the role of luxury consumption as a signal of social status (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Kapferer and Bastien 2009) and prestige to others (Berger and Ward 2010; Kapferer and Bastien 2009; Hudders 2012). If luxury were only about sending out signals of status and prestige, then engaging in the circular economy to purchase second-hand luxury might contradict that purpose, explaining why several consumers in the price-sensitive journey report feeling a bit ashamed to admit they were buying luxury second-hand.

4.2 | The Uniqueness Journey

Another important motive to purchase second-hand luxury items is a personal preference for unique vintage items, showing that not all respondents even envision acquiring new luxury fashion items. As illustrated by the quote from Myriam, some respondents embrace second-hand luxury fashion because of its uniqueness and originality, aligning with and affirming their

lifestyle. This resonates with evidence highlighting that a preference for vintage may bring consumers to opt for second-hand luxury fashion (Cervellon, Carey, and Harms 2012; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019).

I dreamt of having a Louis Vuitton bag, but to rest true to my personality and my wardrobe, well, a new bag would have clashed. That's why I preferred buying a second-hand bag, which fits my wardrobe really well.

Myriam

For some of these respondents, second-hand luxury is even seen as a treasure or a unique vintage piece that needs to be protected against disposal (see quotes Camille), echoing previous research on “treasure hunting” as one of the key drivers for consumers to purchase second-hand luxury (Ferraro, Sands, and Brace-Govan 2016).

The saying “One man's garbage is another's treasure” perfectly describes why I buy second-hand. Because of my behaviour, the product has a longer lifecycle.

Camille

Indeed, even though extending the product lifecycle is often seen as a way to contribute to a more circular and sustainable economy, these respondents dominantly stress how second-hand luxury fashion items allow them to connect with past times (see quote Myriam). Emphasizing the importance of non-firm-controlled touchpoints (Jaakkola and Alexander 2024), consumers also engage with their products in a form of personal value-creation (Grönroos and Voima 2013; Holmqvist et al. 2020) to combine their item with storytelling, romanticizing about previous owners of their items (see quote Mathilde and quote Sabrina).

I prefer handbags because they are more sustainable. I believe they are even more beautiful second-hand, with the patina and traces of wear. It becomes something lived, a history.

Mathilde

I love to construct and invent the history of the bag, its previous owners, its travels, imagining it in the arms of a celebrity and project myself there, dreaming.

Sabrina

As illustrated by the quotes, consumers can even construct stories around previous owners and bygone times (cf. Turunen and Leipämaa-Leskinen 2015). As such, it may even reflect a sense of escapism, as in Sabrina's description of “constructing” the history of her purchases.

When identifying one of these unique pieces, respondents often experience pride (cf. nonbehavioral engagement with circular luxury). Moreover, some become outspoken ambassadors for circular fashion (cf. behavioral engagement with circular luxury), especially when they notice a general appreciation for their consumption behavior in society (see quotes Mathilde and Sabrina).

I have no problem saying it's a second-hand product, quite the contrary! I think it's awesome to consume second-hand, I'd even say it's a state of mind.

Mathilde

Nowadays, it [buying second-hand] is very trendy!

Sabrina

4.3 | Sustainability Journey

The sustainability journey appears as the engagement journey in which non-firm-controlled touchpoints dominate the most. Many consumers report both to have embarked their journey by interactions with other consumers and now in turn influence others themselves. Moreover, the sustainability journey also displays a wide range of motives, as some consumers report an interest in sustainability from the start of their journey whereas other consumers gradually converted to embracing sustainability as part of their engagement with circular luxury; Figure 1 illustrates these conversions. Respondents that really care about the opinion of others and/or are very active on social media went through another engagement journey than those with high levels of price-sensitivity or a desire for vintage. Specifically, these respondents point out that their engagement with second-hand luxury increased with the growing appreciation for circularity and sustainability. Instead of feeling ashamed of buying second-hand luxury, as they initially did when on a price-driven engagement journey, they start to feel proud and able to fit in when buying second-hand luxury (see quote Émilie).

So, in the past I remember that... sometimes you feel a little bit... not ashamed, but you feel you don't want to get asked is it from second-hand, you know... But now you can say with a lot of pride because it's more common now, and it's more universal and even like stars, like influencers. It's a lot of people. They are encouraging to do so because it's even more sustainable, and the circularity, and durability and stuff like that.

Émilie

Being aware of the recognition for circularity and sustainability, these respondents are also vocal about how second-hand luxury benefits the environment (see quote Isabelle, Marion, and Brigitte), thereby giving them a lot of pride and turning them into ambassadors (see quote Émilie and Lucie).

I also think it's a good deed for the planet, not to clutter it even further (...). I love buying luxury because I love nice materials. The quality that endures over time to avoid buying lots of products.

Isabelle

Especially when I buy a leather product, I prefer second-hand because I think of the animals and how they are treated.

Marion

There's this trend of buying nothing but new, always new. Buying second-hand is a way to save the planet.

Brigitte

So, I feel like I'm making micro influence. Other people, they influenced me. I feel like I'm influencing also some people, so this is word of mouth. I think it's like more going through this trend. You know, second-hand luxury, it's going with this social influence and this trend, they're going in parallel together. So yeah, I was engaged to influence my small circle.

Émilie

I talk about it very casually, as if it's the most normal thing in the world. I don't feel any of the embarrassment I had at the beginning. On the contrary, I'm proud to share my finds. For me, it's become a valuable act, showing that I'm making thoughtful choices for both myself and the environment.

Lucie

Moreover, these quotes also illustrate that some respondents (here, Marion, Brigitte, Émilie and Lucie), switched from an initial price-sensitive journey for prestige and a uniqueness journey to a sustainability journey. For some consumers who initially bought second-hand luxury for the price, we see how the nature of their engagement journey switches to a sustainability journey (see quote Émilie). As part of this switch, their attitudes transform and mirror the wider adoption of the circular economy in society. In this way, we find that some respondents' engagement journey converts over time as the sustainability factor becomes dominant, while the other factors, price, and uniqueness, still play a role (albeit a less dominant one). In line with conceptualizations of touchpoints in the engagement journey (Jaakkola and Alexander 2024), we also identify how positive influences from others play a role in this conversion towards a sustainable journey.

5 | Discussion

This paper advances our understanding of circular economy engagement in luxury by focusing on consumers' engagement journey with second-hand luxury fashion. We uncover three different types of engagement journeys: price-sensitive journeys, uniqueness journeys, and sustainability journeys. These journeys are not necessarily static; rather, our findings illustrate how they evolve over time, reflecting the dynamic nature of consumer engagement with circular luxury.

Notably, we find that initial motivations such as affordability or a desire for uniqueness may expand to include more altruistic concerns, with consumers increasingly valuing the sustainability aspects of their purchases. As our findings illustrate, several respondents who initially engaged with circular luxury primarily for economic reasons reported developing a stronger commitment to sustainability over time, transforming their engagement journey.

Similarly, some respondents who were initially motivated by the search for unique, heritage items eventually also came to integrate sustainability into their rationale for choosing second-hand luxury, indicating a deepening of their engagement with circular economy principles. This progression underscores the importance of engagement journeys (Jaakkola and Alexander 2024) in better understanding not just the initial triggers for consumer engagement but also the potential for these motivations to broaden and evolve over time, leading to more profound and lasting changes in consumer behavior.

Finally, we also identify touchpoints for the different engagement journeys and distinguish between firm-controlled and non-firm-controlled touchpoints. Notably, we observe a tendency that more traditional firm-controlled touchpoints tend to dominate in the price-sensitive journey, in which consumers mainly seem to engage with the product and the seller. In contrast, there is also a tendency that non-firm-controlled touchpoints appear to dominate in the sustainability journey, in which we find that consumers tend to interact with other consumers, initially as they are influenced by others to embrace sustainable consumption and later, having become ambassadors themselves, to try to convince others to consume second-hand luxury for sustainable motives. Several respondents emphasize how they were first influenced by others to start consuming more ethically, and now actively try to convince family, friends, and others to do the same. These findings shed light on the conversion to embracing circularity by identifying how both social media, notably influencers, and circles of friends play a role in shaping the sustainability engagement journey with second-hand luxury.

Our findings show that as consumers become more aware of and influenced by broader societal trends towards sustainability, their engagement with second-hand luxury may convert and broaden significantly. The findings lend support to recent research on the need to move beyond customer journeys to engagement journeys (see Jaakkola and Alexander 2024) as we find that non-firm-controlled touchpoints appear to play a key role in shaping consumer motives to engage with luxury in the circular economy.

5.1 | Theoretical Implications of Circularity in Luxury Consumption

This paper makes significant contributions to the emerging literature on customer engagement journeys, expanding upon the foundational work of Jaakkola and Alexander (2024), to develop how consumers come to engage in circular luxury consumption. Our findings highlight the importance of understanding engagement as a dynamic and longitudinal process, emphasizing that while antecedents and consequences of engagement have been studied, few studies have analyzed engagement itself as a fluid, evolving relationship between the consumer and their object of engagement. Our study, representing the first empirical study of engagement journeys with circular luxury, builds on the conceptualization of engagement journeys (Jaakkola and Alexander 2024) to demonstrate how consumer engagement with circular luxury fashion is not static but dynamically evolves over time, and further illustrate key touchpoints driving this evolution.

We reveal that consumers' motivations and behaviors can shift and broaden (i.e., sustainability gradually becoming a core factor driving consumer engagement with circular luxury fashion) as consumers progress along their engagement journey, thus offering a more nuanced understanding of engagement dynamics. These insights enrich the conceptualization of engagement trajectories in contemporary service engagement research (Hollebeek et al. 2023; Jaakkola and Alexander 2024), providing empirical evidence of the temporal and adaptive nature of consumer engagement. We also identify how hearing others talk positively about second-hand luxury becomes an important touchpoint in the journey to help engage consumers in circular luxury, and how engaged consumers in turn may influence and shape the engagement journeys of other consumers. These findings underline the benefits of engaged consumers in contributing to launching new journeys (see Hamilton et al. 2021; Jaakkola and Alexander 2024).

Second, this paper deepens our understanding of circular economy engagement (Verleye et al. 2024), particularly the motivations that drive consumers to participate in circular luxury initiatives. Our findings reveal that consumers often engage with circular luxury for reasons unrelated to environmental concerns, such as price sensitivity or the allure of unique heritage items—confirming earlier research (Cervellon, Carey, and Harms 2012; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019). This insight contributes to the broader literature on circular economy engagement by suggesting that organizations may need to emphasize factors beyond sustainability to initially attract consumers to circular initiatives. Yet, as consumers become more familiar and comfortable with these practices, sustainability considerations may gradually take on greater significance for a portion of consumers. These findings resonate with market surveys showing luxury consumers to be increasingly proactive in searching for sustainable products and believing in the power of circular initiatives (FARFETCH 2023). Similarly, our findings relate to the increased engagement with sustainable luxury and echo a joint survey by the Boston Consulting Group and Comité Colbert (2022) showing 65% of consumers consider brands' commitment to sustainable development when purchasing luxury products.

5.2 | Implications of Circularity in Luxury Consumption for Managers and Society

Given that the circular economy is actively promoted by the European Union, China, the United Kingdom and several other countries/regions (Korhonen, Honkasalo, and Seppälä 2018) and advanced by the World Economic Forum as an important part of the fight against climate change (WEF 2021), we believe the implications of our findings are relevant not only to luxury brands, resellers, and managers but also to society. Engaging consumers in an ethical behavior such as second-hand consumption is of course a concern for managers selling in the circular economy, but also a challenge for society to encourage a more ethical and responsible consumption to combat climate change.

First and foremost, our findings suggest that luxury brands should recognize the diversity of reasons driving consumer engagement with second-hand luxury. While sustainability is

an important factor, it is not always the primary motivator for consumers. Instead, managers should tailor their marketing strategies to appeal to a broader range of consumer motivations, such as affordability or the desire for unique, heritage items. To enable consumers to embark a circular journey in the luxury industry, our findings indicate how managers could emphasize the story that second-hand luxury offers consumers favoring vintage fashion (cf. Cervellon, Carey, and Harms 2012; Kessous and Valette-Florence 2019), in addition to the environmental concerns of sustainability. By highlighting these aspects in their messaging, brands can attract a wider audience to their circular initiatives, thereby increasing participation and fostering a more inclusive approach to sustainability.

Second, the dynamic nature of engagement journeys implies that consumers' motivations may evolve over time, particularly as they become more familiar with and invested in circular luxury practices. Managers should, therefore, develop strategies that not only address initial motivations but also nurture and guide consumers towards more sustainability-oriented mindsets. This could be achieved through targeted communication and education campaigns that gradually emphasize the environmental benefits of second-hand luxury, once consumers are already engaged for other reasons.

5.3 | Limitations and Future Research Avenues for Circularity in Luxury Consumption

This research contributes to unravelling the conditions under which consumers embrace circularity in the luxury industry by adopting an engagement perspective. However, we recognize that the empirical study, as any research project, faces some limitations. First, we only considered second-hand luxury fashion while the luxury industry can embrace circular economy principles in different ways. For example, another important form of circular luxury concerns rental and sharing services (Boukis et al. 2024) and future research could benefit from studying consumers' engagement journeys in shared luxury consumption. Similarly, we recognize that consumers motivations towards sustainable luxury can be driven by concerns for both environmental and social sustainability (Lahbib, Kessous, and Valette-Florence 2023). As we focus on luxury in the circular economy, our approach to sustainability aligns more with environmental concerns but we believe future research would benefit from studying the impact of consumer concerns for social sustainability as well.

Next, although saturation was reached, the sample size was relatively small and consisted of female respondents. This corresponds to the dominance of female consumers as second-hand luxury buyers but could still introduce a gender bias and may not fully capture the diversity of consumer perspectives. Future research could address this limitation by employing (quantitative) setups with larger, more diverse samples to test the generalizability of our findings across different demographic groups and cultural contexts. Further, another limitation lies in the cross-sectional nature of our study, which captures consumer engagement at specific points in time. Although we discuss the evolution of engagement journeys, our insights are based on retrospective accounts, which may

be influenced by memory bias. To reduce this risk, we interviewed some consumers at different times, with one to 3 years between interviews. Future longitudinal studies would be valuable in observing how consumer engagement with circular luxury evolves over time, providing a more detailed understanding of the dynamic processes involved. Such research could also explore how external factors, such as changes in social norms and economic conditions, influence the progression of consumer engagement journeys.

As in all qualitative studies, we observe tendencies that could benefit from future quantitative studies for confirmation. Notably, we find that the respondents in the price-sensitive engagement journey, motivated by financial reasons to purchase second-hand luxury, seemed to emphasize firm-controlled touchpoints whereas respondents in the sustainable engagement journey, motivated by ethical concerns, tended to stress the role of non-firm-controlled touchpoints. Future research could benefit from testing whether this distinction in emphasis between firm-controlled and non-firm-controlled touchpoints depending on consumer motives is confirmed across a broader sample of respondents.

Finally, the focus was on second-hand luxury in the luxury fashion industry, which implies that some implications might not be generalizable to all other industries and sectors. While the fashion market is a significant component of the circular economy, the scope of our findings may not fully extend to other luxury sectors, such as jewelry, automotive, or hospitality, where consumer motivations and engagement dynamics may differ. In particular, luxury services and experiences represent an important and growing field (Holmqvist, Wirtz, and Issandou 2023; Thomsen et al. 2020; Wirtz, Holmqvist, and Fritze 2020) and more research on sustainable luxury services would be beneficial. Future research could explore how engagement journeys unfold in other areas of the luxury industry, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of circular economy engagement across various luxury contexts.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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