

# Correlation Between Brand Image and Consumer Perception Of Selected Luxury Goods Among Rural University Students In South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study investigates the influence of brand image on rural university students' perceptions of luxury goods in South Africa. It aims to understand how brand-related emotions and impressions shape consumers' interpretation of luxury, particularly in contexts where socioeconomic and cultural factors may impact purchasing behaviours. **Methodology:** A quantitative research design was employed, using both self-administered online questionnaires and manually distributed surveys. From 355 participants, 239 complete responses were obtained. Data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) through Smart PLS to assess multivariate causal relationships between components of brand image and consumer perceptions. **Findings:** The results reveal a significant and positive relationship between brand image and students' perceptions of luxury goods. Brand emotion and brand impression emerged as strong predictors, indicating that emotional attachment, personal beliefs, and symbolic meaning are key drivers of luxury consumption. The findings further show that rural university students view luxury goods primarily as indicators of social status rather than as functional objects. **Implications:** These insights highlight the strategic importance of strengthening brand image to attract and retain consumers in the luxury goods market. Marketers are encouraged to emphasise emotional and symbolic aspects of branding to build stronger consumer connections, particularly among emerging youth markets in rural settings. **Originality:** By focusing on rural university students, an underexplored demographic in luxury consumption literature, this study contributes fresh empirical evidence from a South African context. It extends understanding of how brand image operates in non-urban, resource-constrained environments, offering novel perspectives on branding and consumer behaviour in emerging markets.

**Keywords:** Consumer Perception; Luxury Goods; Rural University Students; Brand Image; Quantitative Research

## INTRODUCTION:

### Introduction and Background to the Study

In contemporary competitive markets, organisations continuously seek strategies to attract and retain consumers. Within modern marketing discourse, brand image plays a central role in shaping consumer perceptions and influencing purchasing behaviour (Kurdi et al., 2022). In the luxury goods sector, brand image is particularly significant, as it determines how consumers interpret product value, exclusivity, and quality. Consequently, brand image has become a foundational component of luxury marketing strategies (Husain et al., 2022).

Luxury products such as premium automobiles, designer clothing, and high-end accessories are often purchased based on consumers' emotional responses, beliefs, and symbolic associations with brands rather than purely functional considerations. These products are commonly associated with sophistication, prestige, and aesthetic appeal (Tu et al., 2022). While traditional perspectives positioned luxury consumption as the domain of affluent and elite consumers, recent studies suggest that the luxury market has evolved to encompass a broader, more diverse consumer base (Turunen et al., 2020).

Empirical evidence indicates that luxury products are no longer exclusive to high-income groups. Middle- and lower-income consumers, including university students, increasingly participate in luxury consumption despite financial constraints (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2020). Students often acquire luxury items such as branded clothing, jewellery, and accessories, deriving satisfaction from ownership even when such products are not essential to daily life (Wang, 2022). This behaviour is largely driven by emotional attachment, self-expression, and personal beliefs associated with luxury brands.

Brand image significantly shapes how consumers perceive luxury goods and influences their purchasing decisions (Husain et al., 2022). These perceptions may vary according to demographic factors such as age, income level, and occupation (Tu et al., 2022). Luxury brands are valued not only for their functional attributes but also for the social status and identity they confer upon consumers. Despite their high price points, luxury goods continue to attract consumers who associate them with enhanced quality of life and symbolic value (Kover et al., 2022).

Against this backdrop, this study investigates the relationship between brand image and rural university students' perceptions of luxury goods in South Africa. By examining this underexplored demographic group, the research seeks to deepen understanding of how brand image operates in rural, resource-constrained contexts.

### Problem Statement and Rationale of the Study

Brand image constitutes a critical strategic asset for organisations, as it directly influences consumer perceptions and supports the achievement of organisational objectives (Ahmed, 2021). Consumer perceptions, formed through cognitive evaluations, beliefs, and emotional responses, play a central role in shaping the brand image that firms aim to project in the marketplace (Maharani & Hidayat, 2023). Positive perceptions of a brand are associated with increased customer satisfaction, repeat purchase behaviour, and long-term brand loyalty (Mirza et al., 2023).

In the luxury goods sector, brand image assumes heightened importance due to the symbolic, emotional, and experiential value associated with luxury consumption. When luxury brands successfully align their image with the aspirations, values, and self-concepts of their target consumers, perceptions of the brand tend to be more favourable (Khan & Fatma, 2023). Empirical studies suggest that emotional appeal, brand awareness, reputation, beliefs, and overall impressions significantly influence how consumers perceive luxury brands (De Araújo et al., 2022).

Despite the recognised importance of brand image, luxury brand marketers, particularly within industries such as fashion, technology, and electronics, face growing challenges in establishing and sustaining a distinctive brand image in increasingly competitive markets (Liu et al., 2019). These challenges are further

intensified by rapidly evolving consumer expectations, especially among younger consumers who are exposed to a wide range of competing brands and marketing messages. The accelerating pace of change in fashion trends and technological innovation complicates efforts to consistently meet consumer expectations (Costa Sardo, 2023; Ntobela & Mbukanma, 2023).

While existing studies have examined luxury consumption and brand image largely within urban and affluent contexts, limited empirical attention has been given to rural university students, particularly in South Africa. Prior research, such as that by Liu et al. (2023), has predominantly focused on purchasing behaviour rather than perceptual dimensions of brand image. This gap limits understanding of how brand image elements shape consumer perceptions in rural, resource-constrained environments.

Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate the influence of brand image on rural university students' perceptions of luxury goods in South Africa. By examining this under-represented consumer segment, the study aims to generate empirical insights that can inform branding strategies, enhance brand positioning, and strengthen consumer loyalty within the competitive luxury market.

### **Research Hypothesis Development**

The overarching objective of this study is to examine the relationship between brand image and consumer perception of luxury goods among rural university students in South Africa. Drawing on branding and consumer behaviour literature, brand image is conceptualised as a multidimensional construct comprising emotional responses, brand reputation, consumer beliefs, brand impressions, and brand awareness. Based on this conceptualisation, the following null hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Brand-related emotions have a negative relationship with consumer perception of luxury goods.

H2: Brand reputation is negatively associated with consumer perception of luxury goods.

H3: Consumer beliefs about a brand negatively influence perceptions of luxury products.

H4: Brand impression has a negative relationship with consumer perception of luxury products.

H5: Brand awareness is negatively related to consumer perception of luxury products.

### **Literature Review and Theories Foundation of the Study**

A literature review provides a systematic synthesis of existing scholarly work relevant to a particular research problem, enabling researchers to situate their study within established knowledge while identifying conceptual gaps (Paul & Criado, 2020; Wahab et al., 2022). It offers critical insight into prevailing theories, constructs, and empirical findings, thereby strengthening the theoretical and methodological grounding of a study. In this research, the literature review is structured into two main components: the theoretical foundation and the empirical literature on brand image and consumer perception of luxury goods.

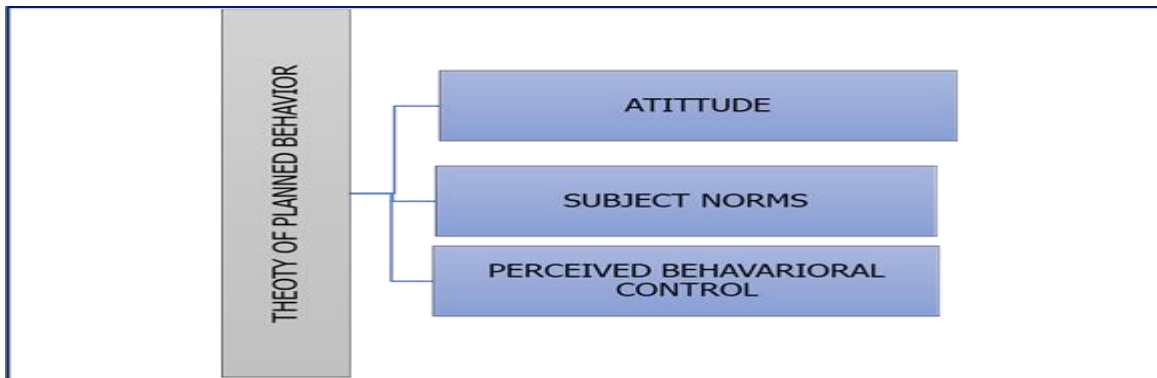
#### **Theoretical Foundation**

Theoretical frameworks offer structured explanations of phenomena by clarifying why and how relationships between variables occur (Hanafiah, 2020). The present study is anchored in two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and Aaker's Brand Value Model. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how brand image dimensions influence consumer perceptions and decision-making processes in the luxury goods market.

#### **Theory of Planned Behaviour**

The Theory of Planned Behaviour, developed by Ajzen in 1985, extends the Theory of Reasoned Action by incorporating perceived behavioural control as a determinant of behavioural intention (Liu et al., 2022). TPB posits that an individual's intention to engage in a particular behaviour is shaped by three core components: attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. These components collectively influence actual behaviour, particularly in consumption-related decisions (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Theory of Planned Behaviour**



**Source: Liu et al. (2022)**

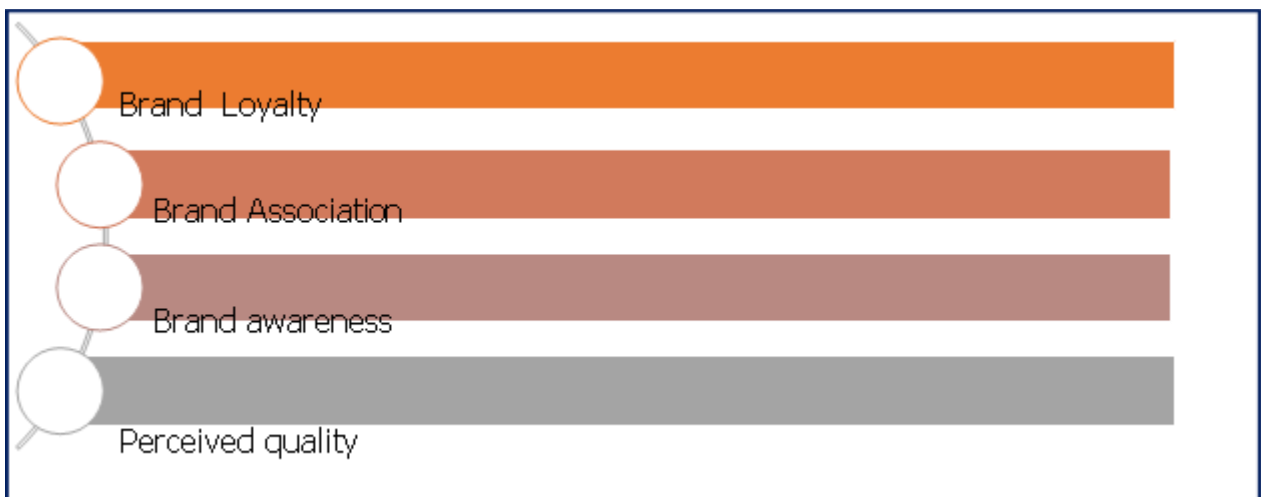
In the context of luxury goods consumption, consumer perceptions of a brand directly affect attitudes toward purchasing it (Uhm et al., 2022). Attitude reflects the extent to which an individual evaluates a behaviour favourably or unfavourably, while subjective norms represent perceived social pressures arising from cultural values, peer influence, and societal expectations (Perera et al., 2020). Perceived behavioural control refers to consumers’ assessment of their ability to perform the behaviour, taking into account available resources and perceived constraints.

The relevance of TPB to this study lies in its explanatory power regarding how brand image influences consumer perceptions and purchase intentions. Brand-related emotions, beliefs, and impressions shape attitudes, while brand reputation and awareness contribute to subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Although TPB has been widely applied in consumer behaviour research, this study extends its use by focusing specifically on the role of brand image in shaping perceptions of luxury consumption among rural university students.

**Aaker’s Brand Value Model**

Berkeley developed Aaker’s brand value model in the 1990s (Paul & Barari, 2022). Aaker’s brand value model is among the most widely used to illustrate the elements that give a product its perceived worth to consumers (see Figure 2). The model focused on four brand values: brand association, perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand loyalty (Liu et al.,2022).

**Figure 2. Brand Value Model**



**Source: Paul and Barari (2022)**

According to Aaker's framework, consumers are more likely to purchase brands that align with their beliefs, emotions, and overall perceptions. Brand associations reflect the meanings consumers attach to a brand, while perceived quality influences judgments about product superiority. Brand awareness determines the extent to which a brand is recognised and recalled, and brand loyalty reflects sustained consumer commitment over time.

This study adopts Aaker's Brand Value Model due to its strong alignment with the multidimensional nature of brand image examined in the research. By integrating emotional responses, reputation, beliefs, impressions, and awareness, the model provides a robust foundation for understanding how brand image elements collectively shape consumer perceptions of luxury goods. The framework is particularly relevant in luxury contexts, where symbolic value, emotional resonance, and brand recognition often outweigh functional considerations.

### **Empirical Literature on Brand Image**

Empirical literature consists of findings derived from systematically collected and analysed data, offering evidence-based insights into behavioural patterns and theoretical relationships (Ouyang et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). In this study, empirical literature focuses on brand image as a multidimensional construct encompassing brand emotion, brand reputation, consumer beliefs, brand impression, and brand awareness. Brand image plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer attitudes and behavioural intentions by influencing perceptions, associations, and expectations (Guliyev, 2023; Tukwayo & Mbukanma, 2026). Prior studies indicate that brand image is constructed through consumers' cognitive evaluations and emotional experiences, which collectively influence purchase decisions and post-purchase behaviour (Majeed et al., 2022). In luxury markets, where products are often valued for their symbolic and experiential attributes, brand image serves as a critical differentiator.

Brand emotion has been identified as a fundamental driver of consumer engagement. Emotional responses such as excitement, admiration, trust, and desire emerge through repeated brand interactions and significantly influence judgment and loyalty (Filieri et al., 2022; Ntobela & Mbukanma, 2024). Emotionally resonant brands are more likely to generate repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth, reinforcing their market position (Maduretno & Junaedi, 2022). Brand reputation reflects aggregated perceptions of a brand's credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness (Kervyn et al., 2022). A strong reputation reduces perceived risk and enhances consumer confidence, particularly in high-involvement purchases such as luxury goods. Research indicates that reputation is shaped by organisational communication, customer experiences, and broader brand narratives disseminated through digital and social media platforms (Haque et al., 2023).

Consumer beliefs represent cognitive judgments regarding brand attributes, authenticity, and quality (Shemfe & Mbukanma, 2025; Joshi & Garg, 2021). These beliefs serve as mental frameworks through which consumers interpret brand information and evaluate alternatives. Strong, positive brand beliefs are associated with increased loyalty and reduced switching behaviour (Budiono et al., 2021; Ntobela & Mbukanma, 2023). Brand impression refers to the cumulative perceptions formed through direct and indirect brand interactions (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Positive impressions develop when brands consistently meet or exceed consumer expectations, fostering trust and favourable purchase intentions (Puspitarini, 2021). In luxury contexts, impressions formed through advertising, product presentation, and service quality play a decisive role in shaping perceptions of exclusivity. Brand awareness captures consumers' ability to recognise and recall a brand and associate it with specific attributes or product categories (Sürücü et al., 2019). High levels of awareness strengthen brand equity, enhance competitive positioning, and increase the likelihood of purchase, particularly in markets characterised by symbolic consumption.

### **Research Methodology**

Research methodology refers to the systematic procedures and techniques used to collect, analyse, and interpret data to address a research problem effectively (Patel & Patel, 2019). This study adopted a quantitative research approach, which is appropriate for examining causal relationships between constructs

using numerical data and statistical techniques (Cheung & Tai, 2023). A quantitative design was considered suitable for this study as it enables hypothesis testing and empirical validation of theoretical relationships between brand image dimensions and consumer perceptions of luxury goods (Maheshwari & Kha, 2022). The study focused on rural university students at Walter Sisulu University's Nelson Mandela Drive Campus in South Africa. This context was selected due to its relevance to the study's objective of examining perceptions of luxury consumption in non-urban, resource-constrained environments. By concentrating on a rural university setting, the study addresses a notable gap in existing luxury branding literature, which has predominantly focused on urban consumer populations.

A probability sampling approach, specifically simple random sampling, was employed to ensure that all members of the target population had an equal chance of being selected. This technique enhances the representativeness of the sample and reduces sampling bias. Using the Rao sample size calculator, a sample size of 355 respondents was determined as statistically adequate for the study population. Of the questionnaires distributed, 239 valid and complete responses were obtained and used for analysis. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire, distributed both electronically (online) and manually to maximise participation and accessibility. The questionnaire was designed to capture respondents' perceptions of brand image dimensions, namely, brand emotion, brand reputation, brand beliefs, brand impression, and brand awareness, as well as their overall perception of luxury goods. The use of a questionnaire enabled standardised data collection, ensuring consistent responses and facilitating quantitative analysis. The instrument items were adapted from established literature to enhance content validity and reliability.

Data analysis was conducted using a combination of SPSS and SmartPLS software. Descriptive statistics were generated using SPSS to summarise respondents' demographic characteristics, including gender, age, level of education, monthly stipend, and frequency of luxury purchases. These statistics provided an overview of the sample profile and contextualised the findings.

Inferential statistical analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) via SmartPLS. SEM was selected for its robustness in analysing complex relationships among latent constructs and its suitability for predictive modelling. Path analysis was employed to test the hypothesised relationships between brand image dimensions and consumer perception of luxury goods. To ensure measurement quality, reliability and validity analyses were conducted. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, while convergent validity was evaluated through Average Variance Extracted (AVE). These procedures ensured that the constructs were measured accurately and consistently. Given that the study involved human participants, ethical clearance was obtained from the Walter Sisulu University Senate Research Ethics Committee under Ethics Approval Number 001/2024/MBM/BME-4343. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and advised that participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and all ethical standards governing academic research were strictly adhered to.

## **Data Analysis and Presentation**

Data analysis involves systematically organising, examining, and interpreting data to generate meaningful insights and address research objectives (Guest et al., 2020). In this study, quantitative data were collected from registered students at Walter Sisulu University using an online Google Form. A total of 239 complete responses were retained for analysis. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS for descriptive statistics and SmartPLS for inferential and structural modelling.

## **Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the respondents' demographic characteristics and to contextualise subsequent analyses. The demographic variables examined included gender, age group, level of education, and frequency of luxury product purchases.

**Table 1. Gender of Respondents**

Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. Male	95	39.7	39.7	39.7
	2. Female	144	60.3	60.3	100.0
	Total	239	100.0	100.0	

**Table 2. Age Group of Respondents**

Age					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. 18-25	152	63.6	63.6	63.6
	2. 26-35	71	29.7	29.7	93.3
	3. 36-45	15	6.3	6.3	99.6
	4. 46-55	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	239	100.0	100.0	

**Table 3. Education Level of Respondents**

Education					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. Diploma	128	53.6	53.6	53.6
	2. Undergrad	53	22.2	22.2	75.7
	3. Postgraduate	58	24.3	24.3	100.0
	Total	239	100.0	100.0	

**Table 4. Monthly Frequency in Luxury Purchase of Respondents**

Frequency					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1. Never	86	36.0	36.0	36.0
	2. 1-3 times	128	53.6	53.6	89.5
	3. 4-6 times	15	6.3	6.3	95.8
	4. >6 times	10	4.2	4.2	100.0
	Total	239	100.0	100.0	

The results indicate that female respondents constituted the majority of the sample, accounting for 60.3% of participants, while males represented 39.7%. Regarding age distribution, most respondents fell into the 18–25 years category (63.6%), followed by those aged 26–35 years (29.7%). Smaller proportions were observed in the older age groups, reflecting the university population's predominantly youthful nature.

In terms of educational level, the largest proportion of respondents were diploma students (53.6%), followed by postgraduate students (24.3%) and undergraduate students (22.2%). Regarding luxury

consumption behaviour, the findings reveal that 53.6% of respondents purchased luxury goods between one and three times per month, while 36% reported never purchasing luxury products within a given month. These results suggest moderate engagement with luxury consumption among rural university students.

**Reliability and Validity Assessment**

To assess the internal consistency and measurement quality of the constructs, Cronbach’s alpha, composite reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were calculated. Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 indicate satisfactory internal consistency (Shrestha, 2021).

All constructs in the study demonstrated Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability values above the minimum acceptable levels, confirming the measurement scales’ reliability. Convergent validity was assessed using AVE, with values exceeding 0.50, indicating that the constructs adequately explained variance in their respective indicators (Goh et al., 2023). These results confirm that the measurement model meets established reliability and validity criteria.

**Table 5. Reliability Test Results**

	<b>Cronbach’s alpha</b>	<b>Composite reliability (rhoc)</b>	<b>Average Variance Extracted (AVE)</b>
<b>Belief</b>	0,883	0,915	0,683
<b>Brand Awareness</b>	0,884	0,915	0,684
<b>Brand Reputation</b>	0,900	0,926	0,715
<b>Consumer Perception</b>	0,946	0,954	0,677
<b>Emotion</b>	0,885	0,916	0,686
<b>Impression</b>	0,895	0,923	0,705

**Correlation Analysis**

A correlation matrix was generated to examine the strength and direction of relationships between the study variables. Correlation coefficients ranged from weak to strong positive associations, suggesting meaningful relationships between brand image dimensions and consumer perception of luxury goods (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Correlation Matrix**

	<b>Belief</b>	<b>Brand Awareness</b>	<b>Brand Reputation</b>	<b>Consumer Perception</b>	<b>Emotion</b>	<b>Impression</b>
<b>Belief</b>	1,000					
<b>Brand Awareness</b>	0,616	1,000				
<b>Brand Reputation</b>	0,572	0,547	1,000			
<b>Consumer Perception</b>	0,712	0,728	0,605	1,000		
<b>Emotion</b>	0,665	0,537	0,661	0,666	1,000	
<b>Impression</b>	0,766	0,716	0,639	0,791	0,607	1,000

The strongest correlation was observed between brand impression and consumer perception ( $r = 0.791$ ), indicating a strong positive relationship. This suggests that favourable impressions play a significant role in shaping perceptions of luxury. Moderate correlations were observed between brand emotion and brand awareness ( $r = 0.537$ ), as well as between brand belief and consumer perception ( $r = 0.712$ ). Overall, the correlation results provide preliminary support for the hypothesised relationships and justify further structural analysis.

**Path Analysis**

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using SmartPLS was employed to test the hypothesised relationships between brand image dimensions and consumer perception of luxury goods. Bootstrapping procedures were applied to assess the statistical significance of path coefficients. A hypothesis was considered supported if the t-statistic exceeded 1.96 and the p-value was less than or equal to 0.05 (Bilal & Andajani, 2023).

**Table 7. Path Analysis**

Hypothesized relationship	Hypotheses	Path coefficient values	T statistics	P values	Outcome
BE -> CP	H1	0.210	2.620	0.009	Significant & supported
BR-> CP	H2	0.016	0.225	0.822	Insignificant & not supported
BB-> CP	H3	0.107	1.130	0.259	Insignificant & not supported
BI->CP	H4	0.378	3.995	0.000	Significant & supported
BA->CP	H5	0.270	4.910	0.000	Significant & supported

The results indicate that three of the five hypotheses were statistically significant. Specifically, brand emotion demonstrated a significant positive relationship with consumer perception ( $\beta = 0.210$ ,  $t = 2.620$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. Similarly, brand impression exhibited a strong and significant effect on consumer perception ( $\beta = 0.378$ ,  $t = 3.995$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), providing robust support for Hypothesis 4. Brand awareness also showed a significant positive relationship with consumer perception ( $\beta = 0.270$ ,  $t = 4.910$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 5. In contrast, brand reputation ( $\beta = 0.016$ ,  $t = 0.225$ ,  $p = 0.822$ ) and brand belief ( $\beta = 0.107$ ,  $t = 1.130$ ,  $p = 0.259$ ) did not demonstrate statistically significant relationships with consumer perception. Consequently, Hypotheses 2 and 3 were not supported. These findings suggest that, within the rural university context, emotional engagement, impression formation, and brand familiarity exert a stronger influence on luxury perceptions than do reputation- and belief-based evaluations.

**Discussion of Findings**

This study investigated the relationship between brand image dimensions and rural university students' perceptions of luxury goods in South Africa. The findings reveal that brand image significantly influences how this demographic perceives luxury goods, although the strength and significance of individual brand image components vary.

The results indicate that brand emotion has a significant, positive effect on consumer perceptions of luxury goods. This finding suggests that emotional connections such as admiration, excitement, and trust play a central role in shaping how rural university students interpret luxury brands. This outcome is consistent

with prior research emphasising the role of emotional engagement in luxury consumption, where symbolic and affective value often outweigh functional considerations (Filiberti et al., 2022; Maduretno & Junaedi, 2022). From a theoretical perspective, this finding aligns with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, as emotional responses contribute to favourable attitudes toward luxury consumption and influence behavioural intentions.

Similarly, brand impression emerged as a strong predictor of consumer perception. The significant relationship indicates that both initial and ongoing impressions formed through advertising, product presentation, and service experiences are critical in constructing perceptions of luxury (Shemfe & Mbukanma, 2025). This result reinforces the argument that luxury is largely a perceptual construct, sustained through consistent and positive brand encounters rather than objective product attributes alone. The strength of this relationship underscores the importance of carefully managing brand touchpoints, particularly in contexts where consumers may have limited direct exposure to luxury brands.

The analysis also revealed a significant positive relationship between brand awareness and consumer perception of luxury goods. This finding suggests that familiarity and recognition contribute substantially to perceptions of luxury, even among consumers in rural and resource-constrained environments. High brand visibility appears to legitimise luxury status and reduce uncertainty, enabling consumers to associate well-known brands with prestige and desirability. This outcome is consistent with Aaker's Brand Value Model, which highlights brand awareness as a foundational element of brand equity.

In contrast, brand reputation and brand belief did not demonstrate statistically significant relationships with consumer perception of luxury goods in this study. These findings suggest that, within the rural university context, consumers may place less emphasis on long-term reputational cues and deeply held brand beliefs when evaluating luxury products. Instead, perceptual and experiential factors such as emotion, impression, and visibility appear to exert greater influence. This divergence from some prior studies may be attributed to contextual factors, including limited access to brand histories, financial constraints, and consumption driven more by symbolic aspiration than by informed brand evaluation.

Collectively, the findings indicate that luxury consumption among rural university students is predominantly emotion-driven and symbolically motivated, rather than grounded in reputational assessment or belief-based loyalty. This reinforces the notion that consumer perception of luxury is highly context-specific and shaped by socio-economic and environmental conditions

### **Implications for Business Practices**

The findings of this study offer several important implications for luxury brand managers, marketers, and practitioners seeking to engage emerging youth markets, particularly within rural and non-urban contexts. First, the strong influence of brand emotion highlights the need for luxury brands to prioritise emotional branding strategies. Marketers should invest in storytelling, aspirational messaging, and experiential campaigns that resonate with young consumers' identities, values, and social aspirations. Emotional appeal can foster a sense of perceived exclusivity and attachment, even among consumers with limited purchasing power.

Second, the significance of brand impression underscores the importance of consistency across all brand touchpoints. Luxury brands should ensure that advertising aesthetics, product design, digital presence, and customer service collectively reinforce perceptions of quality and prestige. Even brief or indirect interactions with the brand can have a lasting impact on consumer perceptions, particularly in markets where direct ownership may be limited.

Third, the positive role of brand awareness suggests that visibility remains a critical driver of luxury perception. Strategic use of digital platforms, influencer partnerships, and targeted media campaigns can enhance brand recognition among rural youth. Increasing brand presence in accessible and culturally relevant channels can help luxury brands establish legitimacy and desirability within emerging markets. Conversely, the limited influence of brand reputation and brand belief indicates that traditional reputation-building strategies may be less effective among rural university students. This suggests that

luxury brands targeting this segment should focus less on corporate heritage narratives and more on immediate perceptual cues that signal status and modern relevance.

Overall, the findings suggest that luxury brands operating in emerging and rural markets should adopt a holistic branding approach that emphasises emotional engagement, impression management, and visibility. Such strategies can enhance consumer perception, stimulate aspirational consumption, and foster brand affinity among young consumers in resource-constrained environments.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The primary objective of this study was to examine the influence of brand image on rural university students' perceptions of luxury goods in South Africa. Drawing on quantitative evidence and structural equation modelling, the study demonstrates that brand image plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of luxury products within this under-researched consumer segment. The findings reveal that brand emotion, brand impression, and brand awareness exert a significant, positive influence on consumer perceptions of luxury goods. These results indicate that luxury consumption among rural university students is largely driven by emotional engagement, perceptual cues, and brand familiarity rather than by evaluative considerations such as brand reputation or deeply embedded brand beliefs. In contrast, brand reputation and brand belief were found to have no statistically significant effect, suggesting that reputational signals and belief-based loyalty are less salient in this context. The study contributes to branding and consumer behaviour literature by extending the understanding of luxury consumption beyond urban and affluent markets. By focusing on rural university students, the research highlights the context-specific nature of luxury perception and underscores the importance of symbolic and emotional value in shaping consumer interpretations of luxury goods.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the empirical findings, several practical recommendations are proposed for luxury brand managers and marketers targeting youth consumers in rural and emerging markets.

First, luxury brands should prioritise emotional branding strategies that foster aspirational connections and personal relevance. Storytelling, experiential marketing, and emotionally resonant messaging can enhance perceived luxury value and strengthen consumer attachment.

Second, organisations should invest in maintaining a consistent and positive brand impression across all consumer touchpoints. Visual aesthetics, product presentation, digital engagement, and customer service should collectively reinforce perceptions of exclusivity and quality.

Third, efforts to increase brand awareness should be intensified, particularly through digital platforms and social media channels that are accessible to rural youth. Strategic partnerships, influencer marketing, and targeted campaigns can enhance visibility and reinforce brand recognition.

Collectively, these strategies can improve consumer perceptions of luxury goods, encourage aspirational consumption, and support long-term brand positioning in non-urban markets.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its contributions, this study is subject to certain limitations. First, the research was confined to a single rural university, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other institutional or geographic contexts. Second, the use of self-reported data introduces the potential for response bias, as participants' perceptions and behaviours may be influenced by social desirability. Third, the cross-sectional design of the study restricts the ability to draw causal inferences over time. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings; however, they do not diminish the study's value in providing context-specific insights into luxury consumption among rural youth.

### Directions for Future Research

Future studies could extend this research by adopting a comparative approach between rural and urban university students to explore contextual differences in perceptions of luxury. Longitudinal research designs may also provide deeper insights into how brand image perceptions evolve over time as consumers' financial capacity and brand exposure change. Additionally, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches could be employed to capture richer insights into the symbolic meanings and emotional narratives underlying luxury consumption among youth. Future research may also explore moderating variables, such as income level, social media influence, and cultural identity, to further refine the understanding of luxury brand perception in emerging markets.

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