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A definitive insight into the luxury sector in Phnom Penh, Cambodia: A qualitative study

Sean Michael Stack*

ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This study investigates the contemporary luxury landscape of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, from the perspectives of luxury business professionals, addressing a significant gap in the literature on luxury business in Southeast Asia, a market context that has been documented almost exclusively through quantitative, consumer-facing research.*

Methodology: *A qualitative design was adopted, grounded in a pragmatist philosophy and an exploratory strategy. Eight semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with senior managers, directors and owners across the luxury sector in Phnom Penh, recruited purposively using an information-power rationale. Transcripts were manually coded and analyzed inductively using Braun and Clarke's reflexive six-phase thematic analysis.*

Findings: *The analysis identified three interrelated themes: luxury market positioning, luxury education, and luxury culture. Brands are deliberately positioning themselves in anticipation of a maturing consumer market, investing in consumer education to build awareness and curb counterfeit consumption, and treating cultural sensitivity and localization as prerequisites for resonance and loyalty.*

Implications: *Success in this emerging market requires an adaptive, culturally informed approach rather than transplanting global brand playbooks. Practitioners should prioritize anticipatory positioning, sustained consumer education, and structured local partnerships as interdependent rather than sequential commitments.*

Originality: *This study offers one of the first qualitative, practitioner-led accounts of the Cambodian luxury sector, explaining why and how market dynamics unfold in a field otherwise dominated by quantitative consumer-behavior research.*

Limitations and future research: *The insider, managerial perspective leaves the consumer viewpoint unexamined. Future research should incorporate consumer-facing data and extend the design to multiple cities and countries.*

Keywords: *Luxury sector; Phnom Penh; Cambodia; Qualitative research; Luxury branding; Southeast Asia*

*Sean Michael Stack, CamEd Business School
Email: sean@cam-ed.com

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INTRODUCTION

Luxury has become increasingly prominent across a wide range of industries and sectors. In Cambodia, the luxury market is in an energetic phase of distinction. Fuelled by a rising class of affluent consumers with a growing appetite for high-end goods and services, the sector is attracting established international brands while also fostering local premium offerings. Once confined to duty-free outlets and a few luxury pockets, the market is evolving rapidly, with luxury now extending its reach through e-commerce (Thirumaran et al., 2021), omnichannel strategies, and the curation of sophisticated retail spaces across the city.

Nonetheless, while Phnom Penh's luxury sector exhibits promising growth (Ou et al., 2024), it faces notable constraints. The limited presence of top-tier international brands and low brand awareness among consumers constrain the sector's scope, and the availability of premium retail space, though improving, still lags behind that of established international luxury destinations. Consumer behavior in the market indicates price sensitivity and an emphasis on visible status over brand legacy (Guo & Zhang, 2020). Overcoming these challenges, alongside infrastructure development and building trust in digital channels, will be fundamental to the sustained maturation of the city's luxury landscape.

In the scholarly literature, knowledge and research on luxury remain comparatively limited and lack depth relative to adjacent business disciplines (Sin, 2023; Solaru, 2024). There is a scarcity of literature focused specifically on Phnom Penh, Cambodia and the wider Southeast Asian region. When the construct of luxury is applied to this region, the gap becomes considerably more pronounced (Guo & Zhang, 2020; Sin, 2023; Boccia et al., 2024). Further, qualitative research on the regional luxury sector is limited. Cambodia-focused work is overwhelmingly quantitative, which leaves a substantial methodological gap (Ou et al., 2024; Saly & Satrianto, 2024; Pich et al., 2025). These studies measured consumers' purchase intention, engagement and economic conditions, but do not explain the strategic logic by which luxury brands operate in a market where consumers' understanding of luxury is still forming. The result is that neither scholars nor practitioners currently have an evidence-based account of the factors shaping the Phnom Penh luxury landscape, or of the competitive challenges those factors create for luxury brands.

The gaps in research are mutually reinforcing. The dominant Cambodia-focused studies describe what consumers do and how much they spend but offer little account of why market conditions take the form they do or how practitioners respond to them. Saly and Satrianto (2024) applied Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to Cambodian economic growth and foreign direct investment, identifying influences on the economic conditions that underpin luxury expenditure. Ou et al. (2024) examined the impact of social networking sites on brand loyalty through customer engagement, while Pich et al. (2025) modelled how the features of social media advertising shape purchase intention among Phnom Penh consumers. Sin (2023) modelled consumer purchase intentions in the Phnom Penh diamond jewellery market, illuminating consumers' attitudes towards the value of luxury. Each is valuable, quantitative and consumer-facing. However, none captures the perspective of the practitioners who make the strategic decisions shaping the sector. This study addresses that problem by generating insider, practitioner-led evidence.

This study aims to explore, from the perspective of luxury-sector professionals, the key factors shaping the luxury landscape in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and to evaluate the competitive challenges these factors pose for luxury brands. The primary objectives of the study are therefore to identify the key factors influencing the luxury landscape in Phnom Penh, as understood by luxury sector professionals, and to evaluate the challenges these factors present for luxury brands and their implications for competitiveness. As such, the significance of this paper lies in supplying that missing perspective. It contributes original empirical knowledge on the Cambodian luxury sector for the scholarly community and offers directly applicable insights for professionals and practitioners working in luxury business in the region by addressing the key research question: What are the key factors influencing the luxury landscape in Phnom Penh, Cambodia?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section two reviews the literature on the definition of luxury, luxury brand management, and the Cambodian and broader Southeast Asian market context, concluding with a synthesis of the gaps this study addresses. Section three outlines the research methodology, covering research philosophy and design, sampling and participants, data collection, thematic analysis, and research rigour and ethics.

Section four presents the findings across the three themes derived from the interview data: luxury market positioning, luxury education, and luxury culture. Section five discusses these findings in relation to the existing literature and sets out the theoretical contributions and practical implications. Section six outlines the limitations of the research in terms of generalizability, reliability and validity. The last section concludes and identifies directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Luxury: An Unresolved Construct

Luxury resists stable definition. The literature is united in the judgement that the construct is ambiguous, shifting with time, culture and socio-economic context (Donzé et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2020). This ambiguity is not incidental but central: because luxury is defined relationally, against what is ordinary in a given market at a given moment, definitions developed in mature Western markets transfer poorly to emerging ones (Lu, 2021; Kaolawanich et al., 2020). Reviews of the field converge on the assessment that luxury scholarship remains thin relative to adjacent business disciplines, and that conceptual clarity has lagged the sector's commercial growth (Ko et al., 2019; Langer & Heil, 2015).

Two broad positions can be distinguished in this debate. The first treats luxury as a social phenomenon: consumption is driven by status, self-image and social positioning rather than by the utility of the object (Mao & McAleer, 2017; Morhart et al., 2020). This position remains the dominant explanatory frame in emerging-market research, where visible status signalling is frequently observed (Studente & Cattaneo, 2023; Som & Blanckaert, 2021). The second position locates luxury in the object and its production, holding that an item qualifies as luxury through demonstrable attributes rather than the social meaning attached to it (Langer & Heil, 2015; Miller, 2017). The distinction matters in practice: the first implies that luxury status is conferred by the market, whereas the second holds that it is asserted by the brand.

The second position has proved more operationally useful, identifying recurring dimensions through which luxury status is claimed and recognized. These include brand storytelling and narrative (Morhart et al., 2020), craftsmanship and the visible investment of expert labor (Langer & Heil, 2015), innovation in design and materials (López et al., 2023), and heritage as a guarantee of authenticity and quality (Som & Blanckaert, 2021; Studente & Cattaneo, 2023). Each of these dimensions, however, depends on consumer recognition to function: a heritage claim that a market cannot read is not a signal at all. This dependence remains largely unexamined in markets where luxury literacy is still forming, and the Cambodian context exemplifies this.

Luxury Brands: Heritage and Digital Reach

Contemporary research on luxury brand management converges on three arguments, the third of which is the least resolved and the most consequential for this study.

First, heritage functions as a strategic resource rather than a historical fact. Brands deploy heritage to signal authenticity, scarcity and emotional resonance (Studente & Cattaneo, 2023; Solaru, 2024; Hirschler, 2024), and consumers reciprocate by treating heritage, quality, scarcity and craftsmanship as legitimate grounds for premium pricing (Tian et al., 2001; Ehrensperger et al., 2020). The evidence for this association is strong in established markets. What the literature does not settle is what heritage achieves when it is deployed to an audience with no prior exposure to the brands concerned, where the narrative carries no accumulated meaning.

Second, digital and social platforms have reshaped both the reach and the mechanics of luxury communication. Social media directly shapes purchase decisions and stimulates luxury consumer behavior, an effect that is amplified for brands with global coverage (Thirumaran et al., 2021; Lu, 2021). Aesthetic appeal alone is no longer sufficient; brands are expected to pursue multiple simultaneous approaches to reach increasingly brand-aware consumers, who invest more in the brands they choose and expect deeper relationships and greater accessibility in return (Kaolawanich et al., 2020; López et al., 2023). Alongside this, the client base and the range of luxury categories have expanded considerably, from fashion, cosmetics and perfumes to timepieces and automotive (Okonkwo, 2009; Ko et al., 2019).

Third, and least resolved, is the question of transferability. The bulk of this literature is generated in mature markets and then generalized outward (Ko et al., 2019; Lu, 2021). When emerging markets are examined, the analysis typically focuses on consumer responses to existing brand strategy rather than on the strategic problem of operating in a market where consumer understanding of luxury is itself under construction (Guo & Zhang, 2020; Sin, 2023). Brun and Castelli (2013) and Kaolawanich et al. (2020) treat emerging-market positioning as a response to observable demand, an assumption that presupposes a demand signal legible enough to respond to. This is the principal unresolved tension in the literature, and the point at which the present study intervenes.

Luxury in Phnom Penh

Cambodia is now widely regarded as one of the fastest growing economies in the region (Guo & Zhang, 2020; Saly & Satrianto, 2024), a trend consistent with the broader diversification of Southeast Asian economies (Kaolawanich et al., 2020). The business environment has attracted substantial foreign direct investment (Boccia et al., 2024), with the overall FDI outlook assessed as positive and viable over the long term (Saly & Satrianto, 2024). Contributing factors include population growth and a marked improvement in human capital, which have fostered a workforce capable of supporting output across sectors and made the country an attractive proposition for outside investors (Saly & Satrianto, 2024; Ou et al., 2024). Government policy has reinforced this through competitive tax provisions and support for full foreign ownership (Guo & Zhang, 2020; Sin, 2023).

Demand for luxury products, experiences and services has surged across Southeast Asia, with consumers willing to pay premium prices (Kaolawanich et al., 2020). Regional luxury consumption is strongly shaped by branding and by the personal and societal value consumers attach to brands (Mao & McAleer, 2017; López et al., 2023). A recurring argument in this literature is that Western luxury brands became over-reliant on Chinese consumers and have since begun scouting and investing in other geographies, with Southeast Asia prominent among them (Kaolawanich et al., 2020; Mao & McAleer, 2017). Whether the region lags behind the established leaders of Japan, South Korea and China, or is simply at an earlier point on the same maturation curve, remains contested. What is not contested is the direction of travel: luxury consumption in Phnom Penh has risen sharply as consumers become increasingly driven by lifestyle and premium brand loyalty (Ou et al., 2024), and the Asia-Pacific region continues to generate high-net-worth individuals seeking luxury goods (Eijdenberg et al., 2024).

Phnom Penh is the centre of Cambodian cultural, political and economic activity and has driven national economic growth over the past decade (Guo & Zhang, 2020). Improved infrastructure and strong FDI have consolidated its position as a hub for business and consumer activity (Boccia et al., 2024). The market now receives international recognition for its high standards (Eijdenberg et al., 2024) and attracts travellers who intend to spend on luxury products and services (Thirumaran et al., 2021). Destination-based luxury shopping is a significant component of this. Research on cross-border luxury purchasing shows that travellers routinely concentrate high-value spending in the destinations they visit rather than at home, making the retail environment of a destination city a competitive asset in its own right (Hung et al., 2021). Domestic demand is likewise strong, driven by a status-conscious middle class aspiring to exclusivity (Eijdenberg et al., 2024; Guo & Zhang, 2020).

Four features account for the steady growth in demand: an expanding group of affluent, status-conscious Cambodians; wealthier inbound tourists with greater purchasing power; a substantial expatriate population that consumes domestic luxury products and services; and the commercial reach of digital and social media marketing (Guo & Zhang, 2020; Pich et al., 2025). The last of these is decisive. E-commerce and digital marketing have become the primary channels for advertising and purchasing in Cambodia, and consumers are highly receptive to trends and imagery across online media (Pich et al., 2025; Thirumaran et al., 2021). This is especially significant for consumers outside the capital, for whom digital channels are often the primary point of contact with luxury brands. Although Cambodia's digital transformation remains constrained by uneven infrastructure and disparities in access between urban and rural consumers, rising smartphone penetration has driven rapid adoption of digital services (Ly, 2025), enabling the luxury sector to build and sustain relationships with high-income and high-net-worth consumers in Phnom Penh (Ou et al., 2024; Pich et al., 2025). Platforms such as Instagram, with carefully curated imagery, have been central to sector engagement and to prompting purchase decisions (Thirumaran et al., 2021).

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature establishes three positions relevant to this study. Luxury is a contested construct whose recognized dimensions (storytelling, craftsmanship, innovation and heritage) depend on consumer recognition to function. Contemporary brand management research explains how those dimensions are deployed in mature markets but assumes a level of consumer luxury literacy that emerging markets may not possess. The Cambodia-focused literature documents rapid market growth and rising consumption, yet does so almost entirely through quantitative, consumer-facing designs.

The consequence is a specific, addressable gap. There is currently no account of how luxury practitioners in Phnom Penh understand the conditions in which they operate, how they position brands in a market whose demand signals are still forming, or the competitive risks they perceive. The present study addresses this gap directly by generating qualitative insider evidence on the factors shaping the sector and the challenges they pose.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy and Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in pragmatist philosophy. The justification is one of fit: a qualitative approach aligns directly with an exploratory research strategy, and qualitative data are well suited to examining insights, patterns and personal accounts, producing outcomes that serve the study's aims and objectives (Saunders et al., 2016; Parnwell & Meng, 2023). An exploratory strategy seeks to generate insight and clarify understanding of a topic where existing knowledge is limited (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Saunders et al., 2016). The exploration proceeds broadly at the outset and narrows as insight accumulates. This design links primary data from semi-structured interviews with a secondary desk-based review of the literature (Parnwell & Meng, 2023).

Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used, with sample size determined by information power rather than a predetermined target. Malterud et al. (2016) and Rosenthal (2016) support this approach as a means of producing rich and valid data in interview-based research, and Saunders et al. (2016) note that research conducted within a niche field or a defined geographical setting yields a more detailed account of the phenomenon, emphasizing depth over breadth. Participants were selected based on their direct knowledge and expertise in the sector (Brun & Castelli, 2013).

A total of eight participants were interviewed. All eight held leading or upper-management positions in the luxury sector in Phnom Penh, including luxury brand managers, luxury marketing directors and luxury business owners. The sample included participants of different genders. Eligibility required English-language proficiency, availability during the fieldwork window, and consent to the study parameters. No participant table is presented: the luxury sector in Phnom Penh is small enough that a matrix of role, employer type and tenure would identify individuals who hold senior commercial positions and who spoke candidly about their own brands, their competitors and the market. Therefore, participants are described only at the level of role group to preserve the confidentiality they were promised. Eight interviews were judged sufficient under the information-power principle advanced by Malterud et al. (2016), which holds that a narrowly defined aim, a highly specific sample and strong dialogue quality reduce the number of participants required. Each condition holds here: the aim is confined to a single sector in a single city, every participant occupied a senior position within that sector, and the interviews were conducted face-to-face and at length. The three reported themes were supported across multiple participants rather than resting on individual accounts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through non-standardized, one-to-one, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, a format that allows variation based on each participant's knowledge and position while maintaining the immersion required for an exploratory study (Saunders et al., 2016; Parnwell & Meng, 2023). All eight interviews were conducted in person in Phnom Penh in early 2026 and were conducted in English.

The interview guide was developed directly from the research objectives and informed by themes that emerged from the literature review, namely luxury positioning, brand heritage, consumer perception and market barriers (Studente & Cattaneo, 2023; Som & Blanckaert, 2021). Questions were organized around three areas: participants' perceptions of the current luxury landscape in Phnom Penh; the strategic and operational challenges facing luxury brands in the market; and participants' views on consumer behavior and cultural engagement. Each area included open-ended core questions supplemented by follow-up probes, allowing participants to elaborate on their specific roles and expertise (Parnwell & Meng, 2023). This format balanced consistency across interviews, ensuring that all objectives were addressed, while allowing flexibility to pursue participant-led insights. The guide was piloted with a preliminary participant to assess the clarity and relevance of the questions before the main data collection phase.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted inductively, with themes derived from participants' accounts rather than imposed by a pre-existing framework, consistent with the exploratory and pragmatist orientation of the study and the active, interpretative role the researcher takes in reflexive thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded manually, with codes iteratively grouped into broader categories until three overarching themes were established across the eight participants.

Research Rigor and Ethics

Ethical conduct was treated as a condition of credibility (Saunders et al., 2016). Participants were informed of the confidentiality of their information and their right to withdraw at any stage, and all participated with full consent (Rosenthal, 2016). Responsibility, honesty and integrity governed the research, which was conducted under an honor pledge. Rigor was supported by a consistent interview structure across all eight participants, systematic manual coding, the requirement that every reported theme be evidenced across multiple participants rather than resting on a single account, and the transparent presentation of findings, including verbatim extracts, so readers could assess the fit between the data and the interpretation (Parnwell & Meng, 2023; Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

In response to the research question "What are the key factors influencing the luxury landscape in Phnom Penh, Cambodia?" the analysis constructed three interrelated themes: luxury market positioning, luxury education, and luxury culture. Together, these themes address the first objective by identifying the key factors shaping the sector and the second objective by revealing where luxury brands face competitive challenges if those factors are not managed effectively (Figure 1).

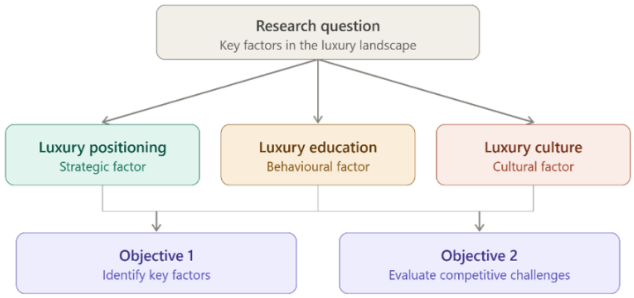

Figure 1: Conceptual link between the research question, the themes, and the research objectives

FINDINGS

The study's findings are drawn from luxury professionals in Phnom Penh and offer insights into how luxury is understood, activated and performed in a rapidly evolving Southeast Asian city. The themes reveal a complex interplay between global luxury narratives and distinct local reflections on positioning, consumer education and status, indicating that luxury consumption in this context is neither a straightforward adoption of Western standards nor an entirely original practice, but an ongoing process of cultural and commercial translation (Parnwell & Meng, 2023).

Luxury Market Positioning

The most strongly evidenced theme concerns how brands and companies in Phnom Penh are positioning themselves for a market they expect to mature. This forward-looking orientation indicates that prestige brands across the sector view Phnom Penh as an investment market.

The dynamic is particularly evident in the account of a participant, a luxury brand manager, who describes it as follows:

> *It is the positioning stage; there should be a stage where luxury brands showcase their products in Cambodia. People need to know and be aware of them, and have knowledge of them. Then they will acknowledge them. Over the years, more and more people will come for what they need. So, brand awareness should be showcased to retain them in the customer's mind.*

This indicates foresight on the part of luxury brands in

Phnom Penh: they recognize that the market is maturing and understand why brands must position now for the future. A luxury marketing director expressed a similar view:

> *Marketing is really going to make a loud impact in the market. We do personalized presentations to clients. We do a lot of networking. People in Cambodia buy to show off and for exclusivity. Limited editions and limited products. Everything is unique.*

Networking, exclusivity and limited product runs are all mechanisms that build long-term positioning. A luxury business owner identified another dimension:

> *They would need to host many events that truly connect with people. To make them interested in their products, extensive customization would also be attractive, because the rich people here like new and fun things that catch their eye. Small activities they can explore and experience.*

This participant makes clear the value of events and customization as ways to draw attention to luxury brands in the local market. A final observation concerns investor interest, which is gradually returning to Phnom Penh and raising expectations for quality. As a luxury marketing participant put it: "Investors are coming, demanding the highest quality."

Collectively, these accounts identify strategic positioning as a primary factor shaping the current luxury landscape and indicate that brands that delay this process risk being left behind as the market matures.

Luxury Education

The second theme, luxury education, emerged from accounts contributed by all eight participants. A luxury business owner made the following point about the limited understanding of luxury in the market:

> *People go for what is famous, but mostly they do not understand what luxury is or what a luxury place is. They just go for whatever they see others have, for the branding, because they do not understand what luxury is.*

The distinction between luxury and popularity is not yet firmly drawn, and the emphasis is on visibility and status. Another luxury business owner reinforced this:

> *People will go for brands and the places that are trendy. But the problem is that people do not understand the brand and just follow each other. When they wear one brand, others want to wear it too.*

This supports the preceding theme and explains why luxury brands in Phnom Penh are investing time and resources to build luxury knowledge. A luxury brand manager offered a further perspective:

> *In a positive way, in developing countries, a lot of brands see potential in Cambodia to invest and create the desire to educate the market. I see a lot of people wearing luxury brands they don't know about. They don't care whether it is counterfeit or legit. They are not used to it.*

Creating demand and legitimizing consumer mindsets is a demanding task, and educating luxury consumers about brand heritage, quality and prestige stands out as a distinctive aim for brands entering the Cambodian market. A luxury marketing director described how this is pursued in practice:

> *We need to continuously update the client and stay connected. Communication is key to maximizing opportunities to connect with clients. It will take perseverance and help build rapport with clients. Customer service is really important. The storytelling of each brand and authenticity matter.*

These accounts identify consumer education as a critical factor shaping the luxury landscape and indicate that brands that fail to invest in it risk prolonged exposure to counterfeit consumption and weak brand differentiation, undermining competitiveness in an emerging market.

Luxury Culture

Culture recurred throughout the interviews, with participants emphasizing that luxury brands should respect, use, or incorporate local culture. A luxury director observed:

> *Respect the culture and the people here. But I did notice that the rich and their friends are also trying to promote the goodness of Cambodia. Like, in the way of promoting culture, promoting content that Cambodia is safe to visit, this kind of message. So, no matter whether poor or rich, Cambodians want to shout out about their country.*

This conveys the pride Cambodian consumers take in their culture and positions them as cultural ambassadors that brands should take into account. A luxury business owner framed the same point in service terms:

> *For me, it is about being sincere to the culture, showing integrity and loyalty to the client and providing the best service to show respect and understanding of the culture.*

This illustrates how frontline luxury workers translate cultural understanding into service delivery. A luxury brand manager extended the argument to product and market strategies:

> *They are not used to it. And I think that if luxury brands enter the Cambodian market, they need to localize and adapt to the local market tastes.*

The implication is that brands should calibrate to local preferences and that Cambodian consumers would respond to products and services centered on local tastes. Another luxury brand manager identified collaboration as the means to achieve this:

> *I think collaboration could grow the market of your brand. Brands like collaborating. It's now a global thing. But I think now we're having an overlap of brands because of exposure to other brands. It is helping a lot with connecting to the culture.*

Collaboration therefore stands out as a favored and effective way to bridge brand power and local culture. These accounts identify cultural sensitivity and localization as defining factors in the Cambodian luxury landscape and indicate that brands that neglect cultural alignment risk alienating consumers and losing ground to competitors who localize successfully.

Summary of Findings

In response to the research question, the findings identify three interrelated factors. Luxury market positioning reflects how brands are strategically preparing for a maturing consumer base; luxury education reflects the sustained effort to build consumer understanding and counter counterfeit consumption; and luxury culture reflects the necessity of localization and cultural sensitivity to establish brand resonance. Taken together, these themes indicate that success in this market depends not on any single factor in isolation but on the interaction among strategic positioning, consumer education and cultural alignment.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to identify the defining characteristics of the Phnom Penh luxury sector and to develop a precise understanding of the conditions under which luxury businesses operate (Parnwell & Meng, 2023). The analysis constructed three thematic factors: positioning, education and culture. This section explains why each matters to the sector.

The findings were, in part, unexpected. It would have been straightforward to read the existing literature as indicating that the sector was in a state of uncomplicated growth. The three themes, however, describe a market in which growth is conditional. Positioning reveals deliberate strategic planning by brands in the city, premised on the expectation that the market will mature and reward those that have already established a presence and communication channels. This bears directly on the tension identified earlier. Brun and Castelli (2013) and Kaolawanich et al. (2020) treat emerging-market positioning as a response to observable demand, whereas the participants in this study describe positioning that precedes demand rather than following it.

Education operates alongside positioning. Across all three role groups, participants emphasized the need to educate the market to understand brands and thereby reduce counterfeit consumption. The implication is that in an emerging market, consumer education is part of the long-term strategy of luxury brands and constitutes an investment in the behavioral infrastructure on which market maturity depends. This connects to the unresolved question raised earlier: the recognized dimensions of luxury, including heritage and craftsmanship, only function where consumers can read them, and education is the mechanism by which that legibility is built.

Culture proved the most consequential theme for brands entering the market from outside. Participants described respect for Cambodian culture as broadly held rather than confined to a narrow segment and stressed the importance of localization and adjustment. This aligns with the general principle of cultural sensitivity discussed by Som and Blanckaert (2021) and Lu (2021), while giving that principle concrete operational content. Respect for and awareness of cultural norms can materially affect a luxury brand's visibility and corporate image. Accordingly, positioning, education and culture can be read as critical success factors and, when neglected, as competitive challenges for luxury businesses in Phnom Penh (Brun & Castelli, 2013).

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes three contributions to the literature on luxury business. First, the positioning findings extend the work of Brun and Castelli (2013) and Kaolawanich et al. (2020) on luxury brand strategy in emerging markets by showing that Cambodian luxury brands are not merely replicating positioning strategies observed in more mature Southeast Asian markets but are engaged in anticipatory positioning: establishing brand presence ahead of the maturation of consumer demand rather than in response to it. This nuances the assumption that the timing of luxury market entry is driven by observable demand signals.

Second, the education findings contribute to a literature that has addressed consumer understanding of luxury primarily through the lens of counterfeit consumption and status-driven purchasing (Guo & Zhang, 2020; Sin, 2023). This study reframes consumer education not as a reactive measure against counterfeiting but as a proactive, long-term investment in market infrastructure, positioning brand-led education as a distinct strategic function in emerging luxury markets. This angle is largely absent from existing Cambodia-focused studies (Ou et al., 2024; Pich et al., 2025), which remain quantitative and consumer-behavior-focused rather than strategy-focused.

Third, the culture findings address the regional gap identified earlier. While Som and Blanckaert (2021) and Studente and Cattaneo (2023) treat cultural sensitivity as a general principle of luxury branding, this study offers one of the first empirically grounded, insider-perspective accounts of cultural localization in the Cambodian luxury context, thereby extending a discussion that has until now remained largely theoretical or based on neighboring Southeast Asian markets (Mao & McAleer, 2017; Eijdenberg et al., 2024).

Collectively, these contributions address the three gaps set out earlier: the limited depth of dedicated luxury scholarship, the scarcity of Cambodia and Southeast Asia specific research, and the near absence of qualitative accounts in a field dominated by quantitative studies.

Practical Implications

The findings have distinct implications for three groups of practitioners. For international luxury brand managers considering entry into the Cambodian market, positioning strategies should be established well ahead of anticipated market maturity rather than calibrated to current demand levels; entering late risks ceding ground to brands that have already established market presence and consumer familiarity.

For local luxury entrepreneurs and business owners, consumer education is not a peripheral marketing activity but a core strategic investment. Resources should be directed specifically toward communicating brand heritage, authenticity and craftsmanship, because a lack of consumer understanding was identified as a persistent barrier to differentiating genuine luxury from status-driven or counterfeit alternatives.

For marketing and brand communications professionals, cultural collaboration and localization function as a differentiator rather than an optional adaptation. Structured local partnerships and culturally informed product or service offerings represent a deliberate strategy for building resonance, rather than a standardized global brand playbook.

The reflexivity of this study is grounded in insider perspectives, with the researcher's position and assumptions made transparent throughout the analysis (Parnwell & Meng, 2023). Much of the existing research emphasizes the positive trajectory of the Cambodian luxury landscape. The themes generated here offer insights that were neither uniformly positive nor negative, in contrast to the more optimistic outlook suggested elsewhere (Guo & Zhang, 2020; Boccia et al., 2024). The resulting picture is more nuanced and, for that reason, more directly usable by luxury managers and business owners.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the luxury sector in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, by examining the contemporary market conditions shaping it and evaluating the competitive challenges those conditions pose for luxury brands.

The findings point to a sector at a critical inflection point. As the market matures, luxury brands must establish clear, deliberate positioning strategies to meet the evolving demands of an emerging consumer base. Positioning alone is insufficient: brands must also invest in consumer education to build awareness and understanding of what constitutes a luxury brand and to cultivate the perceived value that drives purchase intent among Cambodian consumers. Both imperatives are underpinned by the need for cultural sensitivity and authenticity. Brands that fail to engage meaningfully with local customs, values and identity risk alienating the consumers they seek to attract, while those that embrace local collaboration and culturally informed offerings are better positioned to build genuine resonance and long-term loyalty. Success in the Cambodian luxury market therefore requires not the transplanting of global brand strategies but a considered, adaptive approach that respects the distinctiveness of the local context.

The study offers firsthand qualitative evidence on the luxury sector ecosystem in Phnom Penh from the perspective of sector insiders. Its practical implications are directly relevant to local and international luxury brand managers and business owners, and it contributes original knowledge about a country and region that remain underrepresented in the luxury literature.

These findings should nonetheless be interpreted with appropriate caution. As noted earlier, the insider-only managerial perspective, the sample of eight participants, and the single-city focus limit generalizability beyond this market and participant group. The interpretive nature of thematic analysis and the absence of member-checking mean that reliability and internal validity, while supported by evidence for each theme across multiple participants, could be further strengthened. These considerations do not undermine the contribution of the study; they clarify the scope within which its findings should be understood and applied.

The principal limitation of this research is the absence of the consumer viewpoint; the study has been guided throughout by sector insiders. This also indicates where the work could be extended. Examining the luxury landscape from the consumer standpoint would enrich and complement these findings. Future research would further benefit from a comparative, multi-city or multi-country design to test the generalizability of the positioning, education and culture themes identified here, and from incorporating member-checking procedures to strengthen the validity of the thematic interpretation.

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