



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Toward a general theory of luxury: Advancing from workbench definitions and theoretical transformations

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 May 2016

Received in revised form 1 July 2016

Accepted 1 July 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Anthropology

History

Luxury

Luxury transformation

Meaning

Philosophy

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on luxury, an intrinsic part of civilized society that historically reveals insights regarding the societal norms and mores. The perception of luxury is in a continuing state of flux due to the changing of many aspects of the economic market. This study takes a critical view on the transformations of luxury through the ages, examining the perception of luxury through historical, philosophical, and anthropological lenses. While the current views frequently equate luxury with the desire for the superfluous, driven by luxury brands and endorsed by celebrities, luxury has not always had that role in society. The study here contributes to the body of knowledge by providing a frame for understanding the transformation of luxury from being-to-having and owning, and to consumers' search for meaningfulness again via shifting from having-to-being and from owning-to-experiencing.

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1. Introduction

Luxury is an enduring and intrinsic part of the society, and therefore not a new phenomenon. Still, luxury is a representational characteristic of today's consumption society; luxury in particular features the savvy consumers, who increasingly desire luxury (Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2016). One aspect of today's luxury is that luxury desire is shared among consumers across various countries (Shukla, Banerjee, & Singh, 2016). The globalization of luxury means that luxury is becoming increasingly prevalent among new consumers in new markets, thereby being referred to as the new luxury (e.g. Belk, 1999; Silverstein & Fiske, 2005; Kapferer & Laurent, 2016; Liu, Perry, Moore, & Warnaby, 2016). In contrast to the traditional characteristics defining luxury, the new luxury implies that luxury is no longer too exclusive or unique, and it is neither too unreachable nor inaccessible any longer (Silverstein & Fiske, 2005). Hence, the democratization of luxury resulted in mass luxury, which is very much attached to brands, and these brands have extended themselves to affordable offerings, while luxury attaches

to new product groups. Through media innovations, interventions and expansions, media-driven is one aspect of luxury today.

So while many aspects of luxury are transformative (Donzé & Fujioka, 2015; Llamas & Thomsen, 2016), so are the meanings of luxury. Previously luxury was about being, sharing and sensing which as the core values of luxury represented the meaningfulness in life; well-being of the society through excellence, creativity and exclusivity that was exposed to everyone representing heirlooms and permanent wealth (Lipovetsky, 2003; Michaud, 2003; Khalla, 2006). Luxury also meant conspicuousness, where luxury intrinsically, as an iconic sign, conveyed status, wealth and power of its user and owner (Llamas & Thomsen, 2016). Today luxury means worthiness and belonging, and symbolizes status search (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Zhan & He, 2012; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2014) which imply that luxury very much serves self-interests—a desire of having, owning and using luxury being displayed by brands. The fact is that this desire is so captivating that new forms of business has evolved; firms renting luxury satisfying the desire of having and using (Zhan & He, 2012).

Today's luxury encompasses a double-faced god like Janus as luxury's Latin etymology epitomizes—lux as light and luxuria as excess. This metaphor application indicates that luxury is a buzzword expressible in fragmented meanings, and its definition is not agreed upon today (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). Prior luxury research contributes with insights to the product-centric view on luxury meaning, while the current era of luxury popularization and democratization causes confusion, and what luxury means today remains unclear (Kapferer, 2012; Kastanakis

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& Balabanis, 2012) and the idea of “Luxury is multi-discursive” as Calefato (2014, p. 3–4) describes. Therefore, research into luxury meaning is necessary (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012) though still leaving out understanding as to why such fragmented meanings appear. Against this backdrop, this study contributes to the understanding of the current challenges attaching to the meaning of luxury and to luxury's transformative nature. This objective is accomplished by viewing the transformations of luxury and their meanings through an historical lens taking philosophical and anthropological turns.

The study builds from the prevailing role of luxury in the Western European societies. Beside the view on being, sharing, and sensing versus having, owning, and using luxury, other dichotomies are revealing in the challenge to understand luxury and its meaning: public versus private (Casterède, 2004; Wilkins, 2008) excellence versus mediocrity (Hennigs, Wiedmann, Klarmann, & Behren, 2013), artistic creativity versus profitable creativity (Wilkins, 2008; Hennigs et al., 2013), long-term versus short-term (Khalla, 2006; Michaud, 2003), and finally, the opposition of feeding the spirit to pandering the self (Haws & Poyner, 2008).

These oppositions are not exclusive, but they are presented in the study here to provide insights to the nature of luxury transformation and to what luxury means today. The selected approach challenges the view on luxury, which is, “Often taken for granted. [As luxury if frequently] considered as a clear-cut economic concept” (Mortelmans, 2014, p. 193). Thereby, the study contributes to the understanding of luxury.

Following this introduction, Section 2 presents a literature review that focus on the transformations of the meaning and purposes of luxury. Section 3 describes the demoralization and democratization of luxury. Section 4 builds from the literature review to describe advances in luxury theory. Section 5 concludes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Place – from the public place to the private space with public conspicuousness

A basic approach to luxury has been that luxury serves the common good. Therefore, the first opposition concerns the transformation of luxury from something that could be accessed only in the public place to being limited to the private, yet – in particularly, lately – with a public, but also private conspicuousness or various degrees of brand prominence (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; Patsiaouras & Fitchett, 2012). Earlier, luxury was perceived as something that should be shared for the means of common good. For example, Socrates (470–399 BCE) and Plato (470–347 BCE) stressed that, for the Greeks, luxury is a necessity (Berry, 1994). However, governed by the fear of lust, the need for control, and the desire of peace and moderation, luxury had to be regulated and limited in order to have a peaceful city with a sense of harmony where justice prevails (Berry, 1994). While, Plato—referring to the City of Pigs (370 BCE)—explained that, when there are no limits on human desires, the city will go wrong and degenerate into a fevered “triphosa polis” or “appetitive luxurious city” (McKee, 2004). Aristotle viewed that life of luxury was an unworthy one, which meant that it was not meaningful for the good of the society (Berry, 1994).

Having a similar view on luxury, the stoics of Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE) advocated a simple and free life with only limited needs of the individual was preferable to one that was immoderate: “[a] frugal, simple life had long chimed in with the asceticism of the early Christians” (Berry, 1994, p. 90). Tertullian (160 CE–200 CE), the Christian stoic, wrote in *De cultu feminarum* about the necessity of control, and stressed the dangers of luxurious excess within female dress and fashion (Berry, 1994). As it appears, the stoics advocated temperance as one cardinal virtues besides justice, moral strength and wisdom set by Marcus Aurelius (121 CE–180 CE) (Berry, 1994). While luxury or *luxuria*, in addition to excess,

meant lust and desire, luxury was mostly limited controlling the tendency of human desire to go beyond what was needed.

Hence, throughout history, all kinds of sumptuary laws—in the ancient Greek times, in the Roman era, in the medieval period, in the Renaissance up until the 17th century—have been the guardians of an orderly society, where luxury was perceived as a danger to be limited to a public place (Wilkins, 2008). The reason for these laws was not only a concern of the common good, but to maintain a certain distinction between social classes, and also to encourage local luxury products.

After the 17th century, sumptuary laws were reduced considerably; maintaining them became more and more difficult, while the economic democratization of European countries also contributed to their demise (Berry, 1994; Herrero, 1999). The trade increased, and larger segments of the population were now—not only allowed—but also able to buy luxury products (MacCants, 2007). Luxury consumption was supported as it contributed to employment and economic well-being, yet, many of these indulgent luxuries—custom-made art, clothing, and jewelry—contributed also to the further separation of social classes, as the premium prices attached to these luxuries clearly delineated who could buy luxury products (Sombart, 1967; McCoy, 1980; MacCants, 2007; Hill, 2012). However, the main change was that luxury was no longer limited to serve the common good, but allowed to satisfy private—self-serving—needs (Veblen, 1899) as is epitomized with the “secularization of love” (also called adultery love) in the seventeenth century (Sombart, 1967).

Today, luxury exists for the benefit of consumers in their private space, yet also for public prominence (Young, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010). The current desire for luxury does not only relate to the inherent characteristics of the products themselves, but also to the brands and the images they convey through the brand prominence (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Han et al., 2010). Luxury is not that much attached to what the product is, but what the brand represents (Thomas, 2007; Han et al., 2010). Hence, consumers may accomplish their quest for well-being by having, owning, and using luxury brands which provide fulfillment and the satisfaction of the demand as phrased by L'Oréal's legendary slogan “Because I'm worth it” (Moeller & Wittkowski, 2010; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2014) or “feel good”, yet also to “show off”. If in prior eras, fear of losing control to vice drove the restrictions of luxury, today's concessions seems to satisfy the craving for pleasure that is perceived as individual virtue. Today, this desire and the object of the desire is shared (Llamas & Thomsen, 2016). However, instead of only desiring the same object—brand—everyone can own the object as it is multiplied due to the mass-production.

2.2. Quality – from inherently striving at excellence to settling for the mediocrity

Inherent excellence is one of the core meanings attached to luxury. Thus, the second pair of opposites exposes the striving at excellence to the settlement for mediocrity. Excellence means that something is better than the ordinary; excellence is a quality dimension conveying superiority, greatness, splendor, magnificence, and potentially even perfection (e.g. Kauppinen-Räsänen & Grönroos, 2015).

In the ancient Greek times, the prevailing view was that, “Do what you do well, pay attention to what you are doing” (Casterède, 2004, p. 91). This view accompanied by a sense of coherence between the form and the content, encompass the excellence field of luxury. Until the Renaissance, luxury was the quintessential expression of magnificence protected by the sumptuary laws in order to serve the common good (Casterède, 2004).

Just a few decades ago luxury still was an expression of excellence, which was exclusive and unique, and mirrored—above all—by creative and tailor-made craftsmanship made of exquisite materials (Thomas, 2007). One iconic example is the Givenchy dress made especially for Audrey Hepburn for the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Today it could be implied that Hephaestus—the god who makes, who creates—has lost

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