

Consumers' Practices of Everyday Luxury

Abstract

Many prior studies into luxury have tended to take managerial or product-focused perspectives at the expense of understanding how consumers themselves shape luxury meanings. This study proposes a focus on 'everyday luxury' wherein individuals work creatively with what are often mundane objects and routine activities, engaging in caretaking and escaping practices which can provide routes towards status and self-transformation. Drawing on in-depth interviews and observations with 32 young adults we develop an illustrative framework: Practices of Everyday Luxury. We contribute to an emerging literature stream which moves beyond object-focused understandings of luxury, to highlight the potential for more subjective, personal and contestable understandings shaped by practice. Ultimately this development allows for a more inclusive approach, where luxury takes on meaning through practice, an understanding which is experiential, rather than solely product or brand-focused.

Key Words

Everyday luxury, practice theory, luxury practices and performances, brands

1. Introduction

Definitions of luxury have traditionally focused on quality products retailing at high price points (Ko, Costello & Taylor, 2019), taking what Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019) term a product-centric approach. In stating that “luxury is creator driven, not consumer oriented,” Kapferer (2012a, p. 67) suggests that marketing managers alone control what should be perceived as luxurious, through the creation of branding and pricing strategies (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Ko et al., 2019). In turn luxury consumers are assumed to be “connoisseurs”, part of a select group who are particularly knowledgeable about brands and designers (Miller & Mills, 2012).

Such definitions of luxury tend to overlook the recent democratization of luxury and specifically *masstige*, referring to more affordable and widely available luxury items (Truong, McColl & Kitchen, 2009). This phenomenon partially challenges the traditional view and pricing of luxury, as well as its association with high social and economic status (Silverstein & Fiske, 2005), yet the items themselves maintain some degree of exclusivity (Vickers & Renand, 2003). What is considered as luxury has therefore changed over time (Christini, Kauppinen-Räsänen, Barthod-Protade, & Woodside, 2017), and accompanying attempts to gain consensus regarding the definition of luxury products or brands are not straightforward (Heine, 2012). This provides an opportunity for consumer culture researchers to engage more fully with the complexities of luxury consumption and develop greater understanding of how consumers’ interpretive activities affect, shape and reshape product and brand cultural meanings (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). In this study our focus is on consumers’ luxury practices and associated performances; we seek to develop a more consumer-centred understanding of the meanings of luxury, moving away from traditional object focused understandings.

This paper contributes to the debate surrounding the contemporary meanings of luxury to develop a consumer perspective, which in particular accounts for the relevance of consumers' practices. As far as possible we wanted to avoid developing an understanding restricted to one specific cultural context. With this in mind we focus on the UK and Thailand. Each of these countries has a developed luxury market, providing a cross-check for our emergent findings and illustrative framework (Bauer, Wallpach, & Hemetsberger, 2011) while maintaining the exploratory nature of the study.

2. Literature Review

Traditionally, academic marketing and branding literature has viewed luxury brands and products as high-price and high-quality goods, which do not necessarily perform their function any better than lower price items (Nueno & Quelch, 1998, Ko et al, 2019). Luxury items are symbols of desire that become status symbols. According to the theory of the leisure class (Veblen, 1902), luxury is continuously re-invented and managed, providing a means to preserve social distinction. Given the conspicuousness of many luxury items, consumption practices can further signify status; for example, the display of a luxury item often confers prestige and status on its owner (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). However, a developing literature stream seeks to engage more fully with contemporary consumers' dynamic understandings of luxury, to which we now turn.

There is a growing body of research that considers the meaning of luxury from a consumer perspective. Hauck and Stanforth (2006) contend that individual pleasures can take precedence over a generic emphasis on price. While Kapferer and Bastien (2009) partially conform to traditional understandings, they also emphasise the importance of access to pleasure, as well as subjective, hedonistic and aesthetic elements that respond to deep, personal and spontaneous desires. Bauer et al. (2011) find that consumers take a more

flexible approach to the concept of luxury, relating it to escapism, freedom and privacy, which provide support for the building of consumers' identities. However, although this work represents a departure, of sorts, from traditional views of luxury, the research maintains a focus on premium brands like Gucci, Dior and Marc Jacobs. Luxuries are still considered to be tangible, even if the associated meanings themselves are more personal, subjective and consumer-focused (Roper Caruana, Medway & Murphy, 2013).

Recent work also questions the traditionally conspicuous or ostentatious nature of luxury. In synthesizing this literature, Eckhardt et al. (2014) build on the work of Truong, Simmons, McColl and Kitchen (2008) who decouple status from conspicuousness. They identify inconspicuous consumption with more subtly marked products that are only recognized by an "in-group" who retain a sense of superiority for their recognition of inconspicuous brands. Eckhardt, Belk and Wilson, (2014) take this further, arguing that while in many markets brand ownership is the norm, *not* owning brands can become a case of "mutated conspicuousness" (p. 814), providing the opportunity to distinguish oneself by *not* owning such brands. This connects to work by Roper et al. (2013), who report on those privileged, wealthy consumers who mock label-oriented consumers, and contrast their tastes unfavorably with their own, which they consider to be more artistic and inconspicuous. This work resonates with other literature seeking to disconnect luxury consumption from social class and conspicuousness (e.g. Bauer et al., 2011; Sullivan & Gershuny, 2004).

Another traditional determinant of luxury has been its scarcity (Dubois & Paterault, 1995; Catry, 2003). Roper et al.'s (2013) respondents are still very much concerned with scarcity, yet do not consume overtly recognisable luxury brands. Luxury is understood as a socially-constructed discourse and expressed through its subjective, experiential, moral and artistic constructs. Hemetsberger, von Wallpach and Bauer's (2012) 'moments of luxury' also maintain the connection with scarcity while moving away from brands. They draw on

everyday work-related examples such as having “the luxury to free myself from bothersome tasks” (p. 485), which in this case involves taking on an assistant at work. This research provides us with a different, more consumer-centric interpretation of luxury as, for example, a short transient moment of calm wherein the individual is removed from the mundane and routine. Luxury experiences can therefore be transformative. Llamas and Thomsen (2016) consider this in relation to philanthropic giving wherein consumers transform their own lives and those of others gifting social and cultural capital as well money. It is the sense of well-being and the common good, indeed the non-possessiveness that leads to the feeling of luxury.

Tynan, McKechnie, and Chhuon (2010) also contribute to the debate around reinterpreting luxury, by emphasizing how meanings and the value of brands (including experiential components) are co-created with consumers rather than being the preserve of the manufacturer. Partially in line with this, and with echoes of Hemetsberger et al.’s (2012) focus on the everyday, Kapferer (2012b) develops the concept of “my luxury”, whereby individuals “take a break from plain, normal life and its many constraints” (p. 455). However, like Bauer et al. (2011), Kapferer’s (2012b) understanding maintains an emphasis on traditional luxury items or brands, albeit smaller objects such as an expensive lipstick; luxury is therefore still related to a high price per item.

What these more recent interpretations of luxury have in common is the greater attention given to how consumers’ everyday interactions and practices with objects inform their experiences of luxury, representing a move away from concrete definitions towards more subjective and consumer-centred interpretations. Adopting a practice theory perspective, Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019) develop understanding of how these more personalised meanings can be embedded through consumers’ activities and behaviors with luxury. However, given their focus on luxury fashion brands and ‘luxury consumers’, they

maintain a focus on traditional definitions of luxury consumption. Our point of departure from this work is, therefore, to consider the potential for everyday experiences of luxury, whereby luxury meanings, brands or consumers are not pre-defined. Rather we explore the potential for individuals to develop accounts of their experiences of luxury consumption in their day to day life, with everyday objects, experiences and practices. We now turn to a discussion of how a practice theory approach was adopted, along with our specific data collection methods.

3. Approach and Methodology

Approaching the study of luxury from a practice theory perspective enables a wider focus on consumers' more personal, subjective interpretations of luxury, moving beyond understandings solely focused on objects and brands to encompass associated practices and experiences (Hand & Shove, 2007). The concept of practice recognizes that consumers do not act in isolation but considers "interconnected elements such as physical and mental activities, things and their use, prior know-how, and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). Thus, individual performances are intertwined within complex socio-material contexts where objects, their meanings, and embodied activities are integrated into specific configurations of practice (Shove & Pantzar, 2005). While objects can be important components of this meaning making, the wider focus on materials incorporates all physical aspects of the practice, including people, tools and so forth. Consumers are understood as 'practitioners', who perform practices in order to make sense of their world and their consumption behavior (Warde, 2005). In this way they can be seen as the carriers of practice, reflecting a shared understanding about how to perform a given practice. Arsel and Bean (2013) use the terminology of 'objects', 'doings' and 'meanings' as analytic means to understand the interaction between material elements, routines and understandings. While practice theory

has generally focused on “low-involvement, routine and habitual practices” (Moraes, Carrigan, Bosangit, Ferreira & McGrath, et al., 2017, p. 539), approaching the study of luxury from a practice perspective enables a wider focus. This can include consumers’ more personal, subjective interpretations of luxury, moving beyond understandings solely focused on objects and brands to include practices and experiences. This approach recognizes that objects do not have meaning in themselves, indeed meaning itself is not an objective fact, rather the meanings emerge through practice, observing and doing (Giddens, 1984).

Given the focus on everyday luxury practices, we focused on students, who as a group have varying access to financial resources and lifestyles. This allowed us the opportunity to explore how luxury is experienced and transformed by practices with young adults across a range of circumstances (Giovannini, Xu & Thomas, 2015). Literature acknowledges that cultural differences have a large impact on consumption, with Wong and Ahuvia (1998) noting the relevance of variations in individualism and collectivism to luxury consumption practices. With this in mind, we focus on young adult UK (n.16) and Thai (n.16) university students aged between 18 and 28 years old. This allowed us to develop an account that was not limited to one cultural context, in a sense providing a cultural cross-check similar to that in Bauer et al.’s (2011) European/Asian study. In addition, concerted efforts were made to include participants from a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, through recruiting from six different universities, as well as equal numbers of male and female participants.

In the first stage of the research, participants were asked to produce a collage of self-selected pictures (e.g. photographs, downloaded images) in order to express their understandings of, and associations with, luxury. With this task we sought to connect with participants’ emotions and desires (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003), eliciting the necessary cultural discussion around what could be fairly abstract ideas. One-week later in-depth

interviews were conducted with this full set of 32 participants, with the interview focus guided by each participant's collage as well as common questions identified in advance.

The second stage of the data collection featured 12 (six UK/six Thai) of the original participants. These participants were selected on the basis of their narratives in the first stage, and the potential to generate richer insights. We selected participants who engaged in a range of both simple and intricate luxury consumption practices, focused around a variety of activities and objects. Our decision to incorporate observation, alongside interviews and visual methods, reflected prior practice research designs (e.g. Woermann & Rokka, 2015) as well as a reticence to rely on oral recollections and projective techniques, as was the case in Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019).

This observation stage was carried out within participants' homes. Alongside further discussions regarding their luxury consumption practices, participants were asked to perform or demonstrate the associated practices; allowing the researcher to observe (and record via photography) the specific domestic spheres within which the practices were carried out. This approach allowed us to develop an understanding of the meaning of luxury practices within an everyday context, focusing on the ways in which luxury was enacted through practice, developing concrete empirical examples (Woermann & Rokka, 2015).

The data from the two stages consisted of transcripts, photographs and researcher field notes (e.g. the setting, observations and specific details of the observed practices). Using thematic analysis, we explored participants' everyday luxury consumption practices and how these were performed. We developed emergent themes from both within and across participants' narratives, with these analytic procedures following the guidelines of Spiggle (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Notes were made across the research team, which were then revisited and made more concise in order to capture key aspects of the narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006) around practices. Early notes were transformed into themes as common

storylines emerged. This iterative process, going back and forth within, and across, participants enabled larger patterns of practices to emerge (Thompson, 1997), capturing common ground across participants' performances. Ultimately these themes were abstracted into our Practices of Everyday Luxury illustrative framework (figure 1) which was emergent from the findings.

4. Findings

“I think price is not the only factor in identifying what should be regarded as a luxury...it's more about my feelings and experiences...I think luxury is more of...like a moment which you enjoy most...the moment when I wear such a nice dress or even when I read a book...” (Lisa, 20, UK female)

Lisa notes that simple everyday activities can be seen as special and luxurious practices. While material objects play key roles, her interpretation moves beyond this; the book and the dress are not luxuries in themselves, it is how the performances associated with wearing the dress or reading the book make her feel. This moves our understanding beyond conventional views to encompass a more creative and practice-based appreciation of luxury, in which individuals carry and transform luxury rather than simply experiencing it. The Practices of Everyday Luxury illustrative framework (figure 1) outlines the core practices that were described by participants and observed by the researchers, while providing some examples of the specific performances associated with each core practice. The figure emphasizes the importance of mundane and routine activities in everyday life, and helps to illustrate a more fluid understanding of the practice of luxury. The everyday nature of our findings contrasts directly with Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2017), where even when consuming luxury

experiences (e.g. a safari), luxury brands (e.g. bags, clothes) are viewed as necessities in this “escapist journey” (p. 418).

Our findings demonstrate how consumers can engage with the performance of luxury both through practices that are primarily object-focused, as well as those that more clearly rely on consumers’ imagination and their cultural capital; with the latter serving as important currency in the navigation of cultural lives (Bourdieu, 1984a). While consumption facilitates the display of cultural capital (Holt, 1998), its main source is upbringing, educational experiences and other aspects of their sociological context (Arsel & Thompson, 2011, p. 793).

Our findings are organized with respect to two key emergent practices: *Caretaking* and *Escaping*. We suggest that a focus on these core practices allow a more consumer-centric and experiential understanding of luxury to emerge. While the outcomes of these luxury consumption practices – *self-transformation* and *status* - may sometimes be broadly in line with those of traditional luxury consumption, our study illustrates how consumers can reach these ideal states through the embracing of everyday luxury practices, regardless of whether the objects themselves fit traditional luxury definitions.

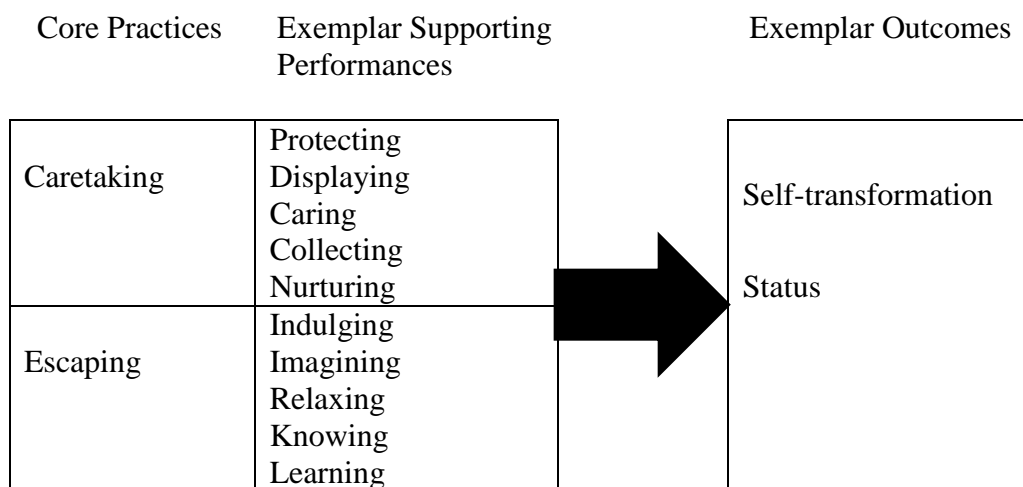


Figure 1: Practices of Everyday Luxury

4.1 Caretaking

Consumers performing caring responsibilities provided a key means to maintain an object's luxury status, or in some cases transform an object to luxury status, through seemingly mundane practices. Caretaking practices can be related to the possession rituals mentioned in Bauer et al., (2011) who describe, for example, the care taken when opening the packaging of a luxury brand. Such experiences are ritualistic in nature, and link to Belk's (1988) seminal work where special possessions become part of an extended self, through consumption rituals such as hugging and collecting. Caretaking practices are focused around the objects themselves, which elicit strong personal feelings such as pleasure, trust, respect or fear of loss and separation, and support strong emotional responses, even though the objects discussed may sometimes be of a low value.

Emily's handbag is a cherished possession, and her caretaking practices develop, and demonstrate, her investment in the item.

"My luxury handbag is not just a bag; it goes beyond that...it is my little baby. I have to take care of it...I carry my bag gently and firmly like when you hold a little baby...I even put a plastic bag inside my luxury handbag in case it rains. I can put my luxury bag in the plastic bag so it will be safe" (Emily, 19, UK female).

Prioritising caretaking practices informs the way she carries her bag and protects it from the weather; backgrounding the more social orientation typically associated with the display of luxury goods, as well as the handbag's function. Her comparisons to an infant demonstrate both the item's preciousness and the unquestioned responsibility that she feels towards it.

Maesa emphasises similar practices when collecting and displaying Christian Louboutin shoes in a special closet equipped with a glass door.

"I store them carefully. I have to take care of them...I have to make sure that they're displayed nicely in my closet...make sure they're still in the best condition...and so on.

As you can see, I have a nice, pretty closet for displaying them, and my mom really loves it... Well, if one day...I don't bother to take care of them...it means they're not my luxury items anymore." (Maesa, 26, Thai female).



Figure 2: Maesa's luxury shoe collection

While Maesa is from a wealthy family and accustomed to consuming (traditionally defined) luxury items, it is caretaking practices that allow her to mark out those objects which are particularly special for her. Maesa speaks of displaying her shoe collection, yet this takes place within a closet within the privacy of her bedroom. She gains pleasure from the associated performances (e.g. caring, displaying) as well as sharing this practice with her mother. While both Maesa and Emily consume objects that fit the more traditional descriptors of luxury, it is the specific intimate rituals they perform which mark these out as special items. Maesa's consumption practices allow her to claim deeply personal meanings from her displayed collection, mimicking the possession rituals noted by McCracken (1988), whereby cultural meanings are transferred from manufacturer to consumer.

However, caretaking practices were not restricted to those items that fitted the traditional markers of luxury (e.g. high price point, scarcity, status signifier). Here Byrd describes the efforts he puts into caring for his collection of Marvel comics.

“...I feel like I have to take care of this item, it’s a luxury item...it’s so precious and special to me. I am keen to have them as a collection, so it’s like a lifelong quest for me to look after these comics and I can’t stop doing it” (Byrd, 25 years old, Thai male).

Byrd’s collection is personal. The pleasure he receives is not limited to the objects themselves, rather it incorporates protecting and caring for the items, and, as with other participants, collecting itself becomes an important aspect of the caretaking practice.

Caretaking practices can also be used to preserve memories, for example curating photographs in an album, or collecting and displaying tickets and pictures as personal aide memoirs of ‘unforgettable experiences’. While the caretaking practice is object-focused, these do not need to be traditional luxury items (e.g. as with tickets, photographs); most importantly, protecting and displaying these artefacts allows consumers to reminisce and reimagine the associated event or experience, providing links with escaping practices, to which we turn shortly:

“Luxury is about an experience that happens once. Like...when you travel or go to a concert, the particular experiences happen only once.... I like to recall these things ‘cos I know these experiences will never occur again...I put my train tickets, concert tickets and pictures from my travels on the wall in my bedroom. When I look at them, I can recall my memories about them. These memories are precious to me; they’re unforgettable experiences to me” (Natasha, 24, UK female).

Again, the one-off nature of the experience hints at the relevance of scarcity associated with traditional understandings of luxury consumption. While Natasha knows she will never re-

capture the experience itself, collecting and arranging her tickets on her bedroom wall allows her to reminisce, revisiting these special memories through practice. Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019) understand luxury consumption practices as residing at the nexus of the materiality of luxury products and financial worth. Their understanding does not allow for the way in which intimate rituals provide additional ways for consumers to connect with objects, and particularly low-value objects (Arsel & Bean, 2013). While the object itself is important, particularly in the above examples of the expensive shoes and the handbag, caretaking practices transcend materialistic motivations. While Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung (2017) note the importance of more social or affiliative orientations to the display of collections (e.g. presenting collections to an audience via social media), the above caretaking practices have a strong personal, and often private, orientation. They are focused around a material object, yet this object can be, but does not need to be, aligned with traditional definitions of luxury.

4.2 Escaping

The second core practice to emerge from our findings was escaping. Prior literature has predominantly explored the notion of escape within contexts of high-intensity and involvement (Atwal & Williams, 2009) yet Cova, Carū, & Cayla, (2018 p. 450) draw attention to a less prolific body of work that they term ‘mundane escapes’, comprising of the “small everyday escapes”, which can involve, for example, the assistance of technology and everyday leisure spaces that are distinct from the home and work. Bauer et al. (2011) draw attention to the flexible, escapist and unlocking power of luxuries, providing “an avenue to a more desirable state of being” (Hirschman, 1983, p. 64). These could include more passive experiences of escape, for example watching a film, whereas Kuo, Lutz, R. & Hiler ., (2016) detail active escapism, necessitating direct interaction with mediated realities such as digital games (Calleja, 2010). For our participants, luxury consumption is structured within the

imagination, with this core practice and associated performances facilitating an escape from everyday realities. While objects and brands and other forms of traditional luxury can be integral to this accomplishment (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019), objects themselves are not inevitably 'luxurious', rather consumers enlist their creativity as practitioners, often drawing on their cultural capital (e.g. education, skills, knowledge) in their performance. Seemingly ordinary items therefore play supporting roles in consumers' escape from their everyday lives, allowing precious moments of luxury in their imaginations. Here Mike explains how an object (book), and the stories it contains, combine with his imagination to forge special out-of-the-ordinary experiences, as he immerses himself in the story.

"Novels can be luxurious to me when I read them, it makes me escape from my daily life...I am really into the story, I can't hear anything else...just me and my novel. And that's the special moment in my everyday life" (Mike, 24, UK male).

Kate's practice of escaping involves a shower, yet it is her supporting performances (e.g. indulging, imagining) that release her from the constraints of her everyday life, feeding a (temporary) self-transformation, an escape from the ordinary.

"I think my rain shower is a luxury to me. Not only because of the design...but it's about the moment that I take a shower...when the water from the rain shower falls on my head...I only hear the sound of water and it makes me feel like I'm actually alone with myself...it gives me a moment of escape from my busy reality" (Kate, 22, Thai female).

Both Mike and Kate illustrate the value consumers place on luxury experiences as representing a 'moment of luxury' (Bauer, 2011); indulgence within ordinary life structures (Canniford & Shankar, 2013). Escaping practices allow material goods to take on new forms of meaning "as they are enacted through practice" (Feldman & Worline, 2016 p. 304), supporting consumers' acts of imagination and driving an escape from mundanity. The time

consumers dedicate to their own thoughts reflects permission for imaginative activities, enabling self-transformation during consumption and its associated performances. In line with Eckhardt, et al. (2014), luxury can be associated with even the most mundane of objects, and consumers function as practitioners, as within the example below.

“I like to read novels in my garden and I’ll put the plastic chair down and also my blanket here... it just makes me feel luxurious when I read... It’s more comfortable and the scenery is so nice here in my garden...I always feel as if I’m reading in Central Park in New York...I wish I could read a book there one day.” (Lisa, 20, UK Female).



Figure 3: Lisa’s Chair

While Mike’s earlier example of reading a novel is primarily focused around a key object which facilitates his imagining, Lisa describes the props she uses to enact these escaping practices. The addition of a cheap plastic chair and a blanket (see figure 3); associated performances (e.g. relaxing) aid Lisa in changing something very ordinary into something altogether more special. The enactment of this practice using supporting props helps to steer her imagination, transporting her to Central Park, somewhere she dreams of visiting. While

escaping involves objects (book, chair, blanket), Lisa draws on various capital resources and knowledge to creatively subsume her within this creative endeavour, through the performance of the practice.

James' description of how he converts his everyday home-based film watching into a luxury experience draws on the practices associated with public cinemas:

“I believe that watching a movie in a movie theatre is sacred...luxurious. Well, it's about the format when you watch a movie in a theatre. It's more of a procedure for you to execute...you have to be silent, it has to be dark, and a big screen should be present. At home, the whole experience is completely different, not luxurious...like it is fine to eat or chat, or you can stop the movie and go to the toilet or do anything you want. So I try to create the same atmosphere as that in a theatre. That's what I do in my house...there is no watching movies with the lights on. It allows you to be with the movie, as if you're a part of the movie.” (James, 21, UK male).

James incorporates the procedures, rules and rituals that exist in cinema settings, recreating and enacting an authentic experience through practice. Both Lisa and James' escaping practices are directed towards indulging and focusing, with James removing all sources of interruption (light, noise) and Lisa relying on the break from routine and the peace of her garden to feed her imagination. Participants' luxury experiences exist within moment(s) of imagination, facilitated by supporting practices, such as James making the room dark and restricting distracting noise. In this way (seemingly) everyday events such as reading a book and watching a film are re-positioned as luxurious through the ontological significance of their performance.

At the heart of many of these examples is the way supporting practices help secure an escape from an everyday reality, which is often time-pressed and structured (Hemetsberger et

al., 2012). Sun encapsulates this as follows: “*True luxury is being able to own your time, not be compelled by obligation.*” Sun’s approach to luxury and time are partially in line with the traditional concept of luxury, given its associations with scarcity (Hauck & Stanforth, 2006; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). However, these notions of scarcity are associated with personal meanings, for example indulgence and non-compulsory activities. This is illustrated by Sun’s enjoyment of cooking as a hobby, which she specifically contrasts with the joylessness of routine experiences of cooking to eat:

“...Cooking will be a luxury, especially the times when you don’t have to force yourself to do it. I mean someone will have to cook every day. It’s kind of necessary in their life to cook, but that kind of cooking is not a luxury for me because I can’t find any joy in it. Luxury is not something that is necessary, but rather its indulgence to you...like something you want to do because it gives you pleasure, and you want to do it again and again.” (Sun, 22, Thai female).

For Sun, positioning cooking as a luxury reflects the kind of cooking she does when she is uncompelled by obligation; it is an indulgence that gives her pleasure. For our participants, what would normally be described as everyday routine activities (e.g. watching a film, reading, cooking) are transformed into luxury escaping practices. Escaping draws on elements of consumers’ cultural capital, following scripts that infer luxury consumption (House, 2018), albeit with everyday items. Luxury is thus made and re-made (Nicolini, 2013), while drawing on existing socially constructed meanings shaped by practices (Feldman & Worline, 2016).

We now turn to a consideration of the possible outcomes of these practices. We focus on self-transformation and status as examples of the ideal states that can be associated with these everyday luxury practices.

4.3 Self-transformation

Self-transformation refers to consumers acquiring and manipulating the meanings of luxury; objects, practices and supporting performances (whether associated with caretaking or escaping) facilitate consumers' identity projects. While the emphasis is on self-transformation there can be a social or affiliative aspect to this, where others pick up on commonly agreed identity signals. Gibs describes how clothing facilitates self-transformation for him:

“When I wear my suit and tux, I guess it’s the magic of luxury...I feel like I become more of a gentleman...so I kind of talk nice...walk nice with it...like it can transform you into a better version...ideal version of you” (Gibs, 18, Thai male).

While the object is central it is not necessarily a traditional luxury object. For Gibs, escaping involves particular modes of talking and walking, fuelling his imagination and facilitating the integration of luxury into his identity and transforming his self. To further illustrate, Emily emphasizes the importance of the object (bag), core and supporting practices (i.e. caretaking and holding her bag firmly, respectively) as well as escaping performances (i.e. accompanying mannerisms) - in achieving self-transformation:

“When I carry my luxury bag (Gucci), it makes me feel like I’m a successful lady...smart and professional...as I wish to be. I am like...chin up every time when I carry my bag...and I hold my bag firmly with pride...So I can become someone who I wish to be in everyday life by just using it” (Emily, 19, UK female).

Ostergaard, Fitchett and Jantzen, (1999) describe an item of clothing in a shop as a commodity; it is only when it is taken home that individual meanings are appropriated by the consumer. This process is described and demonstrated by the rituals, practices and performances of our respondents. In the following example, Charlotte describes how her perfume serves to emphasize deeply personal aspects of her self-transformation.

“...It’s just a personal feeling like I’m the only one who feels this luxurious...like it’s a special feeling...it transforms my inner self...I feel that I’m a perfect woman with it and I love myself when I’m wearing my perfume and smell the scent” (Charlotte, 19, UK female).

Thompson and Haytko (1997) emphasise the importance of envisioning ideals. For Charlotte this is revealed in the way that intangible elements (such as feelings, smells) facilitate her magical transformation, reflecting a more intimate and personal experience.

“I put pictures of the great art in my bedroom. It’s like I’m living with the great artists that inspire me. They are luxury in a way that these pieces of art influence, move, guide or inspire me. By looking at them each day, I appreciate them...the way or color they paint...from the little details to the whole picture...they give me some hints for my own art works and the way a successful artist should be” (Samuel, 24, UK male).

At the heart of Samuel’s self-transformation experiences are the prints he positions on his wall, involving the core caretaking practices and associated performances, such as displaying. Material objects are key, yet it is his imagination that triggers his self-transformation. Samuel describes these works of art as influencing, guiding and inspiring him in his wider life; the impacts of his luxury practice transfer to his social sphere.

4.4 Status

While self-transformation is mainly concerned with individuals’ personal feelings and imaginations, another key outcome was the display and feeling of status, the building of affiliations or distinction from others. The association of luxury with status is, of course, not new. However, for our participants, caretaking and escaping practices allow a deeper performance of luxury that prioritizes consumers' own experiences and understandings of luxury consumption, *not* as per Veblen’s conspicuous consumption. Instead luxuries (whether objects or experiences) function as vessels for cultural and personal meanings, enacted

through sets of exclusionary and skill-based practices and performances, which come to define consumers' superior status. In Samuel's discussion of his art works, accumulated knowledge and caretaking practices are key to what he terms "enhancing superiority":

"The important factor of luxury is that it helps to enhance your status. Otherwise, such a thing can't be regarded as luxury...Luxury can guarantee the owner's superior position...Of course, luxury is expensive but it's not just about...look at me! I am rich! For example, art is luxury to me...art can be very expensive or cheap but it's also about your knowledge to be able to understand and appreciate such art as well... I consider such accumulated knowledge as the important element in enhancing superiority" (Samuel, 24, UK male).

While luxury is widely understood as a classic tool for enforcing social stratification based on economic capital resources (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009), the majority of our participants identify the limitations of material ownership alone. Instead their skills as practitioners are emphasised (e.g. caretaking), and these highlight the importance of cultural capital in conferring status (Bourdieu, 1984a; Holt, 1998), in contrast to monetary resources.

"I watch ballet. It is something that ordinary people don't do and also requires special knowledge to understand the performance. Actually, I always buy ballet DVDs. Anyone can own ballet DVDs, it's not expensive...but I'm sure that not many people can own the necessary knowledge to appreciate the ballet performance" (Chloe, 27, UK female).

"I always paint when I have free time. I paint in color and in black and white...it's more difficult to paint in black and white than in color... it takes lots of effort, so if I make a mistake, I have to throw it away and start painting again because it can't be fixed, so these black and white paintings are what I consider my luxury items" (Samuel, 24, UK male).

Chloe and Samuels' narratives highlight the importance of exclusionary knowledge and skills, respectively, through which luxury status is communicated to others through practice. While there are clearly personal aspects to this – e.g. Samuel's collection of finished black and white paintings – a key outcome is the communication of expertise to others through performance. Unlike Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019) where status practices enable consumers to assert their position within elites, these findings extend our understanding to recognise more democratic forms, incorporating sacrifices, dedication, challenges and membership credentials, which serve to evidence social status. These differences are illustrated when Alex compares his love of nature with others' preference for traditional status-based objects:

“For me, I come from a place where there is lots of pollution. That’s why I consider nature, rather than materials, as luxury. As I am a wildlife photographer, it’s kind of a privilege that I am able to see and capture all these beautiful places...and I would love to spend my money and my time doing something with nature as my own luxury consumption.” (Alex, 24, UK male).

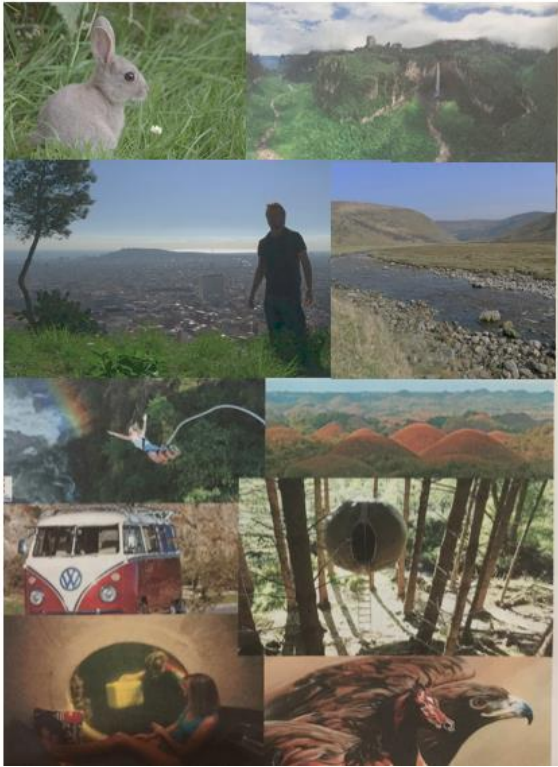


Figure 4: Alex’s interpretation of luxury

Alex’s photography incorporates both escaping (e.g. protecting, displaying) and caretaking (e.g. indulging, focusing) practices. It is not the expensive camera that represents luxury to Alex, rather it is his “*superior skills in photography*” as a practitioner. The performance of the practice is an art form in itself, involving the mastery of exclusive and complex artistic codes (associated with high cultural capital), whereby access is complex and understanding is difficult for outsiders (Chailan, 2018). In this way participants’ artistic endeavours – whether involving their own creativity or their appreciation of others’ work - serves to elevate their social position within particular fields (Bourdieu, 1984b).

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper contributes to a contemporary canon of luxury literature, using a practice theory approach to demonstrate the centrality of practices to everyday luxury. We observe

and identify the key roles that varying interpretations of luxury can play in modern consumers' everyday lives, whereby the meaning of everyday luxury emerges from consumers' activities, experiences and associated practices. We develop an alternative view of luxury, which prioritises the imaginative doings of our respondents, developing a less materialistic and object-focused understanding. While luxury provides a means of differentiation, it is experienced as more subjective and internally focused. What might otherwise be understood as everyday simple things are turned into luxurious experiences through a range of interconnected everyday practices. Participants adopt and adapt these practices, becoming experienced practitioners who perform everyday luxuries by bringing the extraordinary into the ordinary (e.g. Bauer et al., 2011). Everyday luxury incorporates (sometimes) fleeting experiences in moments of imagination, generated by the transformative power of both objects and practices. Unlike overt and conspicuous endeavors to create identities, everyday luxury incorporates deeply personal understandings as well as those that are portrayed to relevant others.

In our findings we identify two complementary practices of everyday luxury consumption that we consider alongside two illustrative outcomes (see Figure 1). Our consideration of caretaking and escaping, as core practices, allows us to move beyond a purely materialistic understanding, towards a contemporary view of luxury that incorporates an ephemeral and immaterial presence in everyday lived experiences. Traditional luxury focuses on the importance of the conspicuousness of materiality, and derives meaning primarily from the functional, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of luxury objects (Vickers & Renand, 2003). However, our findings suggest that even traditional luxury brands take on a different level of importance through practice and performance, informing movements in cultural meanings (McCracken, 1986).

Caretaking involves the continual dedication and constant care for objects and is associated with consumers' passion, trust and respect for their objects (whether these objects have high monetary value or otherwise). The objects which provide the focus for caretaking practices are more than just tools which people use to signify wealth and prestige (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). Instead, the continual dedication and never-ending care both contributes to, and reflects, their additional significance (McCracken, 1988). Caretaking and the associated outcome of self-transformation allows the practitioner to control the object (Belk, 1988) and therefore integrate it into the self.

Escaping is associated with consumers' fantasies and cultural capital, and unlike caretaking is not specifically object-focused. While traditional notions of luxury emphasize the materiality of having/owning and displaying (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999), when engaging escaping practices and associated performances, luxury consumption is distinguished on the basis of its experiential nature (being/doing). Common routines are transformed into practices, and ordinary objects become props in personal, special moments of everyday luxury. Consumers draw on their knowledge and prior experiences in order to escape from the ordinariness of everyday life and indulge in a special moment of luxury; something extraordinary is experienced through the performance of practices. Cova et al, (2018) distinguish between escaping 'from' and escaping 'to'. Although the idea of escaping from, for example, the stresses and routines of modern life has been well documented (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), it is the small mundane escapes described by Cova et al. (2018) that most resonate with our findings. While the notion of escapist journeys is present in Seo and Buchanan-Oliver's (2019) work, our findings demonstrate how the simplest of props can transport our participants, rather than the need for luxury brands.

We also develop two example outcomes of luxury consumption and demonstrate how everyday luxury practices inform these outcomes. Self-transformation considers how

consumers integrate luxuries into their identity projects. While this may involve social or affiliative aspects, whereby others pick up on commonly agreed identity signals, this self-transformation is primarily about personal goals and symbolism, as objects, associated knowledge and symbolic meanings become incorporated into practitioners' identities (Belk, 1988; Seo and Buchanan-Oliver 2019). Self-transformation therefore provides consumers with the opportunity to temporarily undergo different selves in everyday living, linking to the indulgence of luxury in special moments discussed by Hemetsberger et al. (2012). Although this does not necessarily require great expense it is still linked to aesthetic concerns (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Tynan et al, 2010). It is clear from our examples that this appropriation process can take the meaning of an item far beyond that which was intended by the producer.

While a focus on status might initially imply a return to classic interpretations of luxury (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004), it is the time, learning, dedication, and the meeting of challenges that provides the evidence of status within everyday luxury. Individuals' status is provided by their skills, knowledge and creativity, which is demonstrated through practice and performance and links to Belk's (1988) processes of self-extension. In everyday luxury, consumers affirm their status through exclusionary skills and practices, for example in their mastery of the arts or understanding of high culture. Our less ostentatious interpretation of status contrasts with the findings of Seo and Buchanan-Oliver (2019), as it could be said that the consumers in our study are re-appropriating (Askegaard & Eckhardt, 2012) the status associated with luxury, away from designer-informed aesthetics and towards an appreciation of the skills and knowledge that consumers cultivate over time.

We therefore take existing considerations of luxury as co-created by consumers and brands (Tynan et al., 2010) an important step further, moving away from a product-centric approach. Rather than luxury being understood as primarily concerning products with characteristics which set them apart (Seo & Buchanan-Oliver, 2019), our findings incorporate

the everyday into luxury consumption by emphasizing the centrality of practice; our respondents are *practicing* luxury (Nicolini, 2012). This unconventional view has implications for marketing managers who may wish to elicit more imaginative responses from consumers. A similar approach was used, for example, in decades of Cadbury's Flake advertisements, which suggested that the consumption of a low-cost everyday product, alongside individuals' imagination, could transport the consumer to somewhere else (Reynolds, 2010). The escaping practice also has value within the wellness and wellbeing sector, with the potential for everyday objects to assist consumers in their temporary escape from everyday stresses and strains. For example, meditation apps help to stimulate consumers' imaginations, tapping into the notion of escape and self-transformation.

Our findings further demonstrate an appetite for a less materialistic take on luxury, an example being the implicit role that time plays in both consumers' caretaking and escaping practices. Further, the understanding of status as more connected with cultural capital and personal accomplishments moves us away from the sense of you are what you own (e.g. Belk, 1988) in favor of a sense of you are what you can do. This brings to the forefront the importance of the performance and the way in which consumers' repertoire of knowledge, talents and skills are experienced, providing opportunities for creative industries to recognize the opportunities and benefits that supporting consumers' creative endeavors can provide. Hawkins (2015) explains that marketers should be urged to appreciate their brands for how they are actually used as opposed to how they actually desire or intend the brand to be used. While this is not co-creation as such, it recognizes the agency of the consumer in establishing luxury consumption meanings; a step away from luxury goods as a top-down, managerial activity.

While this study was not designed to be a cross-cultural comparison, we were able to demonstrate that our illustrative framework has the necessary fluidity to hold up in two

distinct cultural contexts. However, while we focus on the various ways in which consumers incorporate luxury into their everyday lives, we do not suggest this should replace traditional views. Rather we suggest solely focusing on traditional views, those which are more directly object and brand-focused and necessitate high economic capital (and often emphasize scarcity), risks ignoring more everyday experiences of luxury, failing to appreciate and incorporate more interesting nuances; what may be described as mundane moments of luxury for the contemporary consumer.

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