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## **Luxury, Consumer Culture and the Problem of Sustainability**

### **Abstract**

For the greater part of history, luxuries were regarded as dangerous and corruptive and therefore frequently regulated. With the rise of mass consumer culture, it is often suggested there has been a 'democratization of luxuries' through the shopping, entertainment and leisure industries, with images of luxuries everywhere. Yet luxury goods and experiences also carry a high price tag and sense of exclusiveness, with super-rich luxury lifestyles and conspicuous consumption highly visible models in the media. Consumer culture is now central to the global economy, providing 60–70% of the GDP of leading nation-states. But there are accumulating problems: overtourism, overconsumption and unsustainability. The planetary consequences of consumption are clear now that the extraction of natural resources has reached a key tipping point. In this context, can luxuries become sustainable? How viable are the strategies offered by the luxury sector and are there alternatives to government regulation? Alternatively, are there ways in which consumers can change their lifestyles to go beyond overconsumption and over-luxury? Historically, there are examples of ways of harnessing the immaterial luxury experience, and a number of these will be discussed.

History suggests that for the vast majority of people, the reality of everyday life has often been one of austerity and frugality with little guarantee that the necessities to sustain life will be available. Religions frequently emphasize the suffering encountered in this world and the need to follow disciplined everyday routines that could deliver salvation in the afterlife. Consequently, luxuries have often been regarded as dangerous and corruptive, as we find in the European Middle Ages. At the same time, the powerful in the upper orders—emperors, kings, aristocrats, nobility and courtiers—were allowed to consume luxuries, whereas ordinary people's consumption was often regulated by sumptuary laws and confined to 'little luxuries'. With the rise of global trade, followed by industrial production and mass consumption, the market for luxuries expanded. Now consumer culture is central to the global economy, yet we have been made aware of the planetary consequences of overconsumption through the visibility of global warming, pollution and the destruction of life forms. Luxuries have become prominent in consumer culture, and the central question has become whether it is possible to not only create more sustainable luxuries, but to develop less hedonistic consumer lifestyles.

## Luxuries and the Rise of Western modernity: Werner Sombart versus Max Weber

When we examine the growth of capitalism and modernity, the focus is often on changes in the nature of production, as in the writings of Karl Marx. Max Weber (2001), in contrast, emphasized the effect of changes in ideal factors, with the shift to disciplined methodical conduct and asceticism, as occurred in the Protestant Sects in which systematic work and not wasting time became central to life; an ethic which was conducive to business and factory organization and one which was coupled with an aversion to luxuries and excess. In contrast, Weber's contemporary Werner Sombart (1967) emphasized the consumption side in his book *Luxury and Capitalism*. The increased demand for luxury goods and services was driven by the expanding royal and princely courts that developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

As Norbert Elias (1983) outlines in his book *The Court Society*, courts brought together nobles, courtiers, clergy and beautiful women in sumptuous settings, the 'gilded cage' of Louis XIV's Versailles being a prime example. According to Elias, courts were centres of consumption and display. The key features of courts included: ceremonial display and pageantry with elaborate prestige contests in which nobles engaged in extravagant and often ruinous consumption to try to gain the favour of the king. Courtiers and nobles were obliged to wear the finest clothes along with jewellery and adornment, which helped to stimulate the fashion system, and they ate gourmet food with new dishes prepared by innovative, skilful chefs. They watched plays and pageants and listened to music performances, which helped to stimulate the arts and high culture. They socialized and performed in specially constructed palatial architectural settings replete with sumptuous interior designs, décor and works of art. The establishment of courts had stimulated the development of the spice trade, but also that in silks, fabrics and dyes (indigo being more valuable than gold at one point) (Taussig, 2008), which increased trade between Europe and Asia and led to the opening of the Americas. As centres of consumption, courts stimulated employment, and the courtesans, tradesmen, artisans, fashion designers, cooks, architects and financiers involved not only furnished goods and services but also observed their use by royalty and aristocrats. This stimulated wider demand in capital cities such as Paris and London amongst the middle classes, and cities became centres of innovation in luxury consumption, manufacture and culture (Goody, 2006).

Luxuries had always been popular with every day, and minor luxuries, such as silver buttons, belt buckles, certain fabrics and furniture along with certain

drinks (tea, coffee with sugar), became highly prized and sought after by peasants and the lower orders despite sumptuary laws (Medick, 1982). Indeed, Pomeranz (2000) argues that the demand for these 'everyday luxuries' was pretty much similar in Europe, China and Japan. In Britain, the rise of consumer culture in the eighteenth century provided cheaper versions of luxuries along with a wide range of new manufactured goods (McKendrick et al., 1982).

## **Consumer Culture**

In the nineteenth century, the range of new consumer culture sites for shopping, entertainment and leisure (department stores, hotels, dance halls, resorts) expanded, many of which offered increased opportunities for pleasurable viewing, inspection and purchasing (Ewen, 1976). Department stores, in particular, sought to provide opulent and luxurious surroundings, which was evident in the use of display windows and other forms of displays to provide carefully designed settings for goods which emphasized glamour, extravagance, and exotica. In addition, consumers had the opportunity to not just look but touch, walk around, handle and try on goods and clothing (Williams, 1982; Nava, 1997, 2002; Tamari, 2006). In short, people could enjoy luxurious settings in which they could get close to luxuries and take time to sample the atmosphere and stimulate their imaginations before actually purchasing goods.

A further stimulus to spreading images of luxury took place with the expansion of the cinema, especially via Hollywood films, which became a global force in the 1920s. The luxurious lifestyles of stars and celebrities, their homes, cars, swimming pools, fashionable clothing and accessories featured in movies and the publicity fan magazines. In this context, we can better understand the centrality of the stimulation of dreams and desires within consumer culture. What is important here is 'the Hollywood Dream', stimulated by the movies watched in plush cinema 'dream palaces' (Hansen, 1991), perhaps after a visit to the 'dream worlds' of the department stores. In consumer culture, images of abundance, luxury, style and glamour proliferate.

The new sites of consumption, along with the proliferation of images, stimulated dreams of the consumer culture good life lived amidst luxurious abundance and style, plus rare and beautiful things and people. Advertising and marketing emphasized that pleasure is an entitlement and that life should not just revolve around a work ethic; instead, everyone had the right to indulge themselves, to be pampered and to luxuriate (Featherstone, 2007, 2010, 2018). Everyone had the po-

tential for transformation and self-improvement, and in advertising language this was one of the key meanings of democracy. Indeed, some wish to emphasize ‘the democratization of luxury’ (Williams, 1982; Berry, 2022). Whether this means more than the fact that within consumer culture images of luxury are everywhere and the concept of luxury can be used to sell almost any type of goods; a world in which the volume and rapid flow of signs and images through the media and social media transfers and elides new meanings onto and into things, which can efface the distinction between reality and images to make us live in ‘an aesthetic hallucination of reality’ (Baudrillard, 1981, 1983).

Yet if luxury is everywhere, can there still be luxury? This is one of the dilemmas of the extension of luxury downwards within consumer culture, leading to the proliferation of scale-down cheaper versions. While there are little luxuries, at the same time there are clearly big luxuries which demand major purchasing power.

### **The rich, the super-rich and luxury lifestyles**

In recent years, there has been a notable rise in the income and prominence of the rich and the super-rich. The increase is more dramatic when we consider billionaires, with their income rising tenfold over the last thirty years (The World’s Billionaires, 2024; Featherstone, 2024). The rate of increase at the top end is notable, with the wealth of the world’s five richest men having doubled since 2020: a rise from \$405 to \$869 billion (Oxfam, 2024a). As of December 2024, the leading billionaire Elon Musk’s fortune stands at \$343bn dollars, with a dramatic increase of over \$100bn in 2024 (Pringle, 2024). According to Oxfam (2024b), the ‘World’s top 1 % own more wealth than 95 % of humanity’, as ‘the shadow of global oligarchy hangs over UN General Assembly’ with ‘Over a third of world’s biggest 50 corporations—worth \$13.3 trillion—now run by a billionaire or has a billionaire as a principal shareholder’. This has been accompanied by a major increase in global inequalities, which led to calls for a wealth tax (Piketty, 2020; Saez & Zucman, 2019; Zucman, 2015) that stimulated a good deal of debate, with a proposal made to G20 finance ministers for global tax reform (Piketty, 2020). This was considered at the G20 Rio Summit in November 2024 with a declaration issued that ‘The G20 will seek to engage cooperatively to ensure that ultra-high-net-worth individuals are effectively taxed. Cooperation could involve exchanging best practices, encouraging debates around tax principles, and devising anti-avoidance mechanisms, including addressing potentially harmful

tax practices'. Yet there remain strong doubts about the adequacy of the plans to implement such a reform (The Prakarsa, 2024).

For some critics, the capacity of the rich and super-rich to not only increase their wealth but also to increase their power suggests that we are in transition from market capitalism based upon competition to a new order in which monopolization, patronage structures and oligarchies are central. For some, the term 'refeudalization' captures these processes (Morozov, 2022; Neckel, 2019; van Krieken, 2023) through the return to the centrality of rents, the weakening of state sovereignty over taxation and the capacity for welfare protection.

The super-rich and rich have risen in prominence in the media, not only through their wealth but through their lifestyles. Consumer culture now features not only the luxurious and glamorous lifestyles of stars and celebrities, but the rich and super-rich are also prominent models to emulate. They adopt a learning mode to life and in their leisure lifestyles search out new experiences (Featherstone, 2013, 2024). There is a tendency to emphasize that they are self-made men, who succeeded through their own efforts and deserve the fruits of their labour and talent. They work hard and therefore are entitled to play hard. They are not concerned with *noblesse oblige* and gentlemanly modesty, which was part of the aristocratic rationale for privilege; instead, they feel entitled to engage in 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen, 1994). They often live in 'super-prime' housing in exclusive neighbourhoods in global cities such as London and New York. At the same time, their lifestyles demand increasing mobility and more fluid transitions between work and leisure. Mobility in the form of private jets, superyachts and expensive automobiles also stands for exclusivity, status and pleasure—the higher the price tag and greater the range of luxury features the better.<sup>1</sup> According to Bain & Company (the leading fashion and luxury consulting service), the ultra-wealthy are spending more on luxury than ever before, and even with a broader market slowdown, brands are engaged in a struggle to attract them, as the top two percent of luxury customers account for forty percent of luxury sales (O'Connor, 2024).

Despite limited growth in spending in 2024, the global luxury goods market is projected to rise from \$355bn to \$516bn by 2033 (Market.us, 2024). The luxury tourism sector, which caters for people with a net worth of \$1m above, had a market value of \$2.36 trillion in 2024 and was forecast to rise to \$4.26 trillion

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1 Private jets can cost more than \$300 million with customization and remodelling (see La Patiala, 2025). Superyachts can also involve a vast range of exclusive features which can bring their price to several hundred thousand dollars. It is also possible to spend \$25–30 million on the most expensive car, the Rolls Royce La Rose Noire Droptail.

by 2034 (Fmi, 2024). While the luxury sector constitutes a small percentage (estimated at around 5–10 percent) of overall consumer spending, its significance is outweighed by its overall prestige and role in stimulating aspirational consumer lifestyles.

Consumer culture is increasingly central to the global economy, with a high percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of leading economies dependent on consumer spending. The figures include: 70 % of the United States' economy, and for Germany 68 %, Brazil 65 %, India 65 %, United Kingdom 61 % and China 55 % (Featherstone, 2018). At the same time, it is clear the success of this sector has led to the accumulation of problems. Consuming also means wasting, and the consequences are that we are not just wasting consumer goods, we are also wasting and depleting the planet. It is estimated that each year we directly waste or mismanage around 78 % of the total water withdrawn, 49 % of the food produced, 31 % of the energy produced, 85 % of ores and 26 % of non-metallic minerals extracted, respectively. As a consequence, natural resources are getting depleted and ecosystems polluted, leading to irreversible environmental changes, biological loss and social conflicts (Marín-Beltrán, et al., 2022).

For Bruno Latour, these processes suggest that the global dream of modernity is no longer realistic, for nature ceases to be a passive external territory we can occupy (Pedersen et al., 2019). As he remarks in his book *Down to Earth*, 'You have lost your territory? We have taken it from you? Well, you should know that we are in the process of losing it in turn'. This means for Latour that we have to take seriously Anna Tsing's phrase about needing to learn 'the art of living on a damaged planet' (Tsing et al., 2017). The planet can no longer be conceived as an autonomous self-regulating machine or system; rather the narrow critical zone of life that we and other life forms inhabit now has a history and level of complexity, openness and unpredictability that is difficult to calculate. The multitudinous relations between life forms, which often unknowingly use other entities, create complex connections, feedback loops and downstream consequences (Lenton et al., 2024).

Consumer culture, then, has become central to the global economy, but we now face climate change, global warming and pollution damage to the planet and life forms. Consequently, major doubts have been raised about the sustainability of the consumer way of life, and we have recently seen protests about overconsumption and overtourism. In the cryptic terminology of Ulrich Beck, author of *Risk Society*, 'global goods' necessarily lead to the accumulation of 'global bads' (Beck, 2009, 2010). This has led commentators to again take up the radical critique of the consumer way of life. Mike Berners Lee (2021), for example, has

published *There is No Planet B*, a book in which he asks us to end consumer capitalism to save the planet.

### Sustainable Luxury

Despite these concerns, there are those who would suggest that luxuries can be regarded as exceptions to this line of thinking. An argument can be made that luxuries are inherently more sustainable than other consumer goods as they are produced to higher standards of quality and have greater durability, giving them longer life cycles. The fact they are more expensive slows down the cycle of purchasing. They tend to be made from higher quality materials that involve craftsmanship, which can make them more durable. Hence, they often retain their value over time and can be seen as investments. At the same time, luxuries cover a wide range of different types of goods from consumables such as food and drink, perfume and cosmetics to jewellery, clothes and other highly crafted objects such as furniture and works of art (Featherstone, 2014). Consequently, there can be large variations in the life cycle of luxury goods. There can also be variations in quality. The term *masstige* was invented recently to refer to mass-produced, relatively inexpensive goods that are marketed as luxurious. The companies that produce luxuries therefore have to consider whether to increase their profit levels by producing cheaper, lower-quality, popular versions of their goods and to extend downwards into the mass market.

But this can open up a series of dilemmas, as it can potentially undermine their reputation and devalue the brand, especially when luxuries become more widespread with increasing sales, as we find with the success of the luxury market, which enjoyed a growth rate of 30 % between 2019–2023. The luxury companies also have to struggle to guard the integrity of the brand while fighting fakes and imitations attracted by the profit levels and buoyant market. These tendencies can raise the following question: If luxury is everywhere, how can there still be luxury? If luxuries are no longer scarce and exclusive, doesn't this devalue the whole idea of luxury? In reaction, the luxury companies can deploy a range of strategies. They can abandon using the word luxury and instead employ related terms such as 'excellence', 'elegance' and 'exclusive'. They can increase the price of goods to make them seem more exclusive. They can emphasize the links to high culture and art, to endeavour to make luxuries seem more permanent and high value collectibles (Michaut & Kapferer, 2019).

### *Luxury's affinity with art*

One of the highest accolades for craftsmen is to have their work attain the status of art.<sup>2</sup> Today's luxury companies are well aware of the positive image of having a closer association with art to share some of the charisma enjoyed by art and high culture (Featherstone, 2016). Luxury companies, such as Dior, have often sought to create their own mythology by highlighting the closeness of their founders or directors to art and the art world, as was the case with Christian Dior. In some cases, they have established their own museums, as was the case with the Chanel Museum in the Palais Galliera, Paris, which opened in 2020 with a retrospective exhibition 'Gabrielle Chanel. Manifesto of Fashion'. Museums seek out and display *objets d'art* alongside highly crafted luxury goods and tell their histories and variations. Louis Vuitton publicized its many collaborations with artists such as Takashi Murakami, Olafur Eliasson, Richard Prince, Yayoi Kusama, Daniel Buren. Luxury companies stage exhibitions at conventional museums—Alexander McQueen held *Savage Beauty* at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2011, which later appeared at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in 2015 and cost £3 million to stage but became the most popular show ever. Today's museums are willing to adopt a more entrepreneurial approach and are happy to engage in 'crossovers', placing together objects, ideas and images that were once confined to separate fields.

At the same time, there is no guarantee art will always reciprocate and venerate and respect luxury. Avant-gardes and bohemians have often been contemptuous of luxury. Bohemian elements developed critiques of both bourgeoisie and high art and are against sanitized beauty, with a stereotypical love for dirt and disorder, in both their art and lifestyles. Some elements of contemporary art are still looking to 'shock the bourgeoisie' and continue to revere Duchamp's major transgressive gesture of exhibiting a urinal in 1917. For Duchamp, everything

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2 A number of artistic movements have sought to explore the boundaries between art and craft, such as the English Arts and Crafts Movement (John Ruskin, William Morris et al.) from the 1860s onwards, which was especially influential after the 1880s when it was followed by *Art Nouveau/Jugendstil*. This influenced the *Mingei* (Folk Crafts) Movement in Japan in the 1920s. These movements were against mass production and sought to explore the aestheticization of everyday life via the decorative arts, hence C.f. Simmel's remark the *Art Nouveau/Jugendstil* sought to 'aestheticize every pot and pan'. These are dilemmas that are also evident in the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Glasgow *Art Nouveau*, which occurred at this time. Craft has functionality; if luxury goods go too far towards art this can be lost—chairs that can't be sat upon. For a discussion of aestheticization processes, see Featherstone (2007, 2016).

has potential aesthetic qualities, and ugly beauty can always surprise us. A more recent example is Damien Hirst's platinum diamond-encrusted skull, in which he used the skull of an unknown person bought in a junk shop and encrusted it with 8000 diamonds. The artwork entitled 'For the Love of God' (2007) was sold for \$100 million soon after. It brought together transgression, hybridization, objects with a high luxury value (diamonds, platinum), abuse of value and the creation of high economic value.<sup>3</sup>

### *Sustainability Credentials and Carbon Rating Agencies*

Yet while their association with art may allow luxuries to enjoy basking in the aura and prestige associated with it, this doesn't address the larger, more compelling problem of sustainability. A recent study by Nielsen reported that 'Sustainability has gone from a "nice-to-have" to an almost absolute necessity' with '66 % of global consumers and 73 % of millennials willing to pay more for sustainable goods' (Consensys, 2024). Yet, what does sustainability mean to luxury brands? Can they really calculate the full life cycle and disposable costs of goods? Or is the proclamation of sustainability just a marketing pitch? Examples of brands positively asserting their sustainability credentials abound. The Swiss luxury brand Bally claims it began 'reimagining its products' to take into consideration their life cycles to deliver new eco-friendly collections using recycled materials and also training more local craftsmen (Girod, 2021). The French luxury group Kering (which includes Gucci, Saint Laurent and Alexander McQueen brands) declares that they have received a triple 'A' rating from the Carbon Disclosure Project. They were pleased to proclaim that they were the only luxury fashion group to have earned the prestigious 'AAA' rating across the whole industry, rewarding its leadership in 'Climate Change, Water Security, and Forests' (Kering, 2024). Another famous name, the world's leading luxury conglomerate, LVMH (Louis Vuitton-Moët-Hennessy) also proclaimed it had received a triple 'A' rating from the Carbon Disclosure Project. The expansion of the number of carbon ratings agencies is notable, but there are some doubts about the validity of their carbon footprint ratings, given that many are private start-up consultancies, although

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3 A process that brings to mind Bataille's (1988) and McGoey's (2018) emphasis on potlatch, in which the deliberate destruction of luxuries is regarded as having positive benefits in regenerating the sacred and the social bond, the spraying of champagne at Formula One Grand Prix winners' ceremonies or the excessive consumption of the most expensive champagne available by City of London financiers being contemporary examples.

there are some which seem to be more independent, such as Carbon Market Watch, which receives European Union Horizon 2020 funding.

There are also major problems with the related Carbon Trading Market, which is notoriously difficult to regulate and verify, and there are numerous claims it is subject to abuse. UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently argued that companies should focus on cutting their own emissions and on ‘avoiding dubious offsets or carbon credits’, which can be traded to give companies permits to have the right to pollute. Another example is the Greenhouse Gas Protocol, a carbon accounting oversight body which has ‘9 out of 10 Fortune 500 Companies using it’ (Bryan et al., 2024). They issue Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs), which companies can buy to reduce environmental impact. The danger is that big companies such as Amazon, Meta and Google can engage in lobbying to allow more flexible purchasing of ‘clean energy’ certificates to offset their fossil fuel generated electricity. Hence, there is the danger that companies will want to present their efforts in a favourable light by marketing their good credentials. Despite the disruptions and destruction to life the current temperature rises are causing, there are powerful corporate and political interests that continue to discredit the evidence of this and deny its implications.

This is notable in terms of climate change, but also evident in the attempts to play down the health risks and wider effects of pollution too. One of the major targets of this discrediting process has been Michael E. Mann, director of the Center for Science, Sustainability & the Media at the University of Pennsylvania. He was one of the authors of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report (2001). His research has been exonerated in a series of legal struggles against powerful interests who sought to discredit the scientific evidence about climate change. The compelling and harrowing story of his fight is documented in his book *The New Climate War* (Mann, 2022).

This points to the importance of careful verification and regulation on the part of governments and respected international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). The European Union is working on implementing a Digital Product Passport (DPP) programme for industries including fashion, textiles, batteries and buildings. The passport captures data about the composition of products, their production and history, along with their environmental impact. The data can be accessed by customers via a QR code on the product, which mentions where it was made, materials used, plus an RFID tag inside the item which contains information for recyclers. The monitoring process uses blockchain for secure, transparent and accessible data, which provides an immutable record of the product’s life cycle. Blockchain relies on distributed ledger technology,

accessible through a decentralized network of all participants (manufacturers, suppliers, distributors, consumers, regulators), which is recorded and visible to all participants in the network. This will provide evidence of both the upstream data (raw materials, extraction process, production) and downstream information (consumption and waste disposal) of a particular product.

Given that ‘the average transparency score amongst the top 200 most prominent fashion brands and retailers is just 21 %’ and that brand trust heads the list of sustainability factors influencing purchasing, the move to greater transparency in the form of blockchain could provide an attractive solution (Consensys, 2024). Given the global luxury market is predicted to reach \$1.5 trillion by 2025, those brands able to use blockchain technology to reassure customers could enjoy a competitive advantage (Consensys, 2024). In addition, luxury brands have the finance and power to invest in renewable energy, decarbonization and sustainably sourced materials along with waste disposal. They have the potential to become transparency leaders and provide accurate data to help educate the public. At the same time, the success and growth of the luxury sector makes it an attractive investment option. There is the danger that through companies relying on product innovation and new designs, expansion and growth could become one of the main existing forms within consumer culture, which could have sustainability risks. Paul Virilio has remarked that every new technology is accompanied by an ‘integral accident’—the motor car generates traffic accidents (Armitage, 1999). The same could be said for ‘new, improved’ luxuries and consumer goods—there will be unintended consequences. But slowing down and limiting growth—de-growth—is a difficult option for governments competing in the global economy—to seek to impose degrowth on the consumer business sector.

### **Active citizens in the public sphere**

The challenge for businesses of sustainability is the difficulty of calculating the overall carbon costs to be added to the product passport and the need for trusted regulatory agencies to provide independent verification. An alternative would be to slow down the consumption cycle so that we are encouraged to consume less (Alghanim & Ndubisi, 2022). This is proposed by critics such as Patrick Grant (2024), who asks us to ‘stop buying so much rubbish’ because ‘having fewer, better things can make us happier’. This could be seen as a reasonable suggestion that aims at a new consumer ethic guided by the need for planetary sustainability and the quest for more balanced lifestyles, which has considerable public support.

A United Kingdom poll conducted by YouGov found that eight out of ten Britons think the UK should prioritize the health and well-being of citizens over GDP (gross domestic product) and six out of ten thought the UK should prioritize improved social and environmental concerns over GDP (Moore, 2021). Henrietta Moore (2019) argues that a prosperous sustainable global future coupled with an improvement in quality of life is feasible, and she is engaged in developing new forms of evidence and metrics to this end. This would seem to endorse the views of those critics who challenge overconsumption (McKinnon, 2021) by advocating ‘postconsumerism’ (Grant, 2024; Jackson, 2021) and ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper, 2020). But the key is an active public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 2022) with engaged consumer movements and active citizens who are involved in monitoring, checking and interrogating the producers of consumer/luxury goods and their carbon footprint and sustainability ratings.

There are already some tentative steps in this direction. For example, the website *Sustainability Chic* ran an article ‘Top 25 Worst Designer Brands to Avoid: Unsustainable And Unethical’ in February 2024. Rachel Cernansky wrote a piece for *Vogue Business* in January 2024 entitled ‘TikTok’s anti-overconsumption movement is a wake-up call for brands’, in which she mentions Katia Dayan Vladimirova, the founder of the Sustainable Fashion Consumption research network. She and three colleagues launched a year-long experiment for 2024, the Joyful Closet Consumption Challenge, to help participants ‘rethink consumption patterns’, along with the benefits of reducing their wardrobe size and acquisition of new clothes. TikTok influencer Sabrina Pare was featured in a newspaper article ‘It is OK to be content with your simple life’: is “underconsumption core” the answer to too much shopping?’ in which she encouraged her 250,000 TikTok followers ‘to repair and repurpose their stuff’ (Radin, 2024). There is, therefore, a growing interest in moving towards a better balance between purchasing fashion goods, the ‘fashion experience’ and maintenance and improvement of goods through repair and ‘upcycling’ (creative reuse and transforming of waste materials and unwanted products into new materials and products which have greater artistic or environmental value). The emphasis is moving towards buying less, choosing well and making goods last.

## Beyond Luxury

If many consumers are pro-sustainability, can they change their lifestyles to go beyond overconsumption and over-luxury? Does this suggest the potential for

a new consumer ethic? At the same time, is it possible to create a new ethic or morality? Many have tried and have failed. But could consumption be better regulated with discipline and training, which could yield a deeper experience of luxuries? Is it possible to better control the compulsion to purchase luxuries, to lessen their power over us? If we subject luxuries to a disciplinary apparatus, we should be able to appreciate them and enjoy them better. Historically, there are examples that point to different ways of analysing, playing with and harnessing the luxury experience without actually purchasing and consuming more luxuries. A number of examples will be briefly considered in the following: connoisseurship; the dandy (Des Esseintes); Wabi Sabi (Sen No Rikyu); the aestheticization and redemption of discarded consumer objects (Walter Benjamin); and Franciscan monasticism (Georg Simmel).

### *Connoisseurship, discipline and training the senses*

Appreciating luxuries demands the education and training of the senses, and in this context, we think especially of fine wines and gourmet food, finely crafted jewellery, furniture and objets d'art. To become a connoisseur requires the cultivation of the senses with a good deal of training needed to be able to discriminate and make fine distinctions, for example in smelling perfume (Latour, 2004) or tasting fine wine, but it also requires knowledge of good taste (Teil, 2021). There needs to be a good deal of training and experimentation both with the senses and the vocabulary with which to describe them. Yet there is more to it than the actual act of tasting or smelling, for the expert is constantly making comparisons with other varieties. This includes speculation on and investigation into the history of the object encountered, and then its relative value and place in classification tables. This all relates to the pleasures of expertise.

Many connoisseurs are collectors and hobbyists, not professional experts, yet they do learn how to cultivate expertise. For those in the upper classes or aristocracy, this could develop through direct encounters, observation and discussion of wine with family and friends from childhood onwards—in effect, good taste becomes sedimented in the habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). For others, such as the amateur hobbyist, it can involve a high level of control, regulation and analysis of the various practices of consumption, a way of life which is the opposite of the vulgar nouveau rich status-driven luxury dynamic. There could be, therefore, a good deal of pleasure in the knowledge of classification, such as the *grand vin* wine classificatory tables and their histories; this amounts to a secondary pleasure, which could become as equally powerful as that of the actual

tasting. This, then, could be deemed to be a form of controlled or austere luxury consumption.<sup>4</sup>

### *The dandy*

An interesting example of the pursuit of austere practices, which entails a strong emphasis upon aesthetic creativity, good taste and inventiveness, is provided by the dandy. Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans' *À Rebours* (1884) novel, endeavoured to preserve the idea of ordered elite consumption in the face of the rise of the masses in late nineteenth century Paris. As with dandies in general, he was excessively careful with his appearance and choice of clothing. His house was furnished with strange exotic objects to create an aestheticized world—as in his ‘underwater dining room’ crafted as a ship’s cabin with a concealed aquarium’s mechanical fish visible ‘swimming’ behind the portholes (Williams, 1982). This imaginary world and sensitivity to aesthetic forms required the training of the senses—he wore gloves around his home to enhance his sense of touch. He constructed a world driven by the imagination and aesthetics. He did not seek to know luxury objects merely as luxuries; rather they became part of an experimental assemblage, a temporary configuration to be experienced, but then, under the higher dictate of aesthetics, he discarded them. Luxuries and consumption became subordinate to art—the art of life, for Des Esseintes strove to become an artist of life (Featherstone, 2016).<sup>5</sup>

### *Wabi Sabi*

A further example is Wabi Sabi aesthetics, which has become increasingly well-known outside Japan, and can provide an alternative perspective to the dubious

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4 These are processes which became more evident in both Ming dynasty China and Western Europe in the sixteenth century as the range of new luxury goods and experiences expanded. To have the necessary knowledge about luxuries was central to being a gentleman, and guidebooks became available on many aspects of etiquette, manners and consumption (Clunas, 1990). It is also worth noting that today, in certain countries that pride themselves on providing a refined and cultivated home for high culture such as France, the state may encourage the fostering of artistic, cultural and luxury industries through deliberate state-driven policy (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2020).

5 In his novel *À Rebours*, Huysmans' Des Esseintes was inspired by the socialite Count Robert de Montesquiou. It is also noteworthy that de Montesquiou was reputed to be the inspiration for Marcel Proust's character, Baron de Charlus, in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927).

assumption that happiness can be delivered through luxury consumption. Wabi Sabi emphasizes the transient and ephemera, along with the impermanence of things and the imperfection of life, coupled with a sensitivity to the moment. Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591) is, of course, famous for the *Wabi Sabi* tea ceremony, sometimes associated with ‘poverty aesthetics’, in its rejection of finery and ostentatiousness in favour of simple things and everyday objects; in effect, the awareness that our gaze can illuminate things. This is the sense that things are passing, highlighting the suffering of life and the fragility of things; the pathos of things captured in the Japanese phrase: *mono no aware*. (Ritchie, 2007; Saito, 2007). This sense of the fragility and impermanence of things can also be found in the Japanese art of *Kintsugi*, the repair of broken ceramics using gold, lacquer and other substances. This makes us aware that while suffering is unavoidable in our lives, we can repair and learn to live with imperfections. It also offers an interesting perspective on value as the reparative medium of gold is now allocated a non-luxury role in the humbler task of acting as a glue. Yet the repair facilitates a form of double seeing: the broken object is still visible but made whole again and even more valuable and beautiful through the visible repair. It makes us aware of the fragility yet potential repairability of things and also how both aspects are linked together in many life forms. The repaired object stands testament to the role of care in life. If we care for things and repair and recycle them, we refuse to see broken and discarded things as rubbish and can save a humble object, which reminds us of our own vulnerability. This is a good antidote to those elements in our own strident modernity that favour the constant technological fix, plundering nature and discarding obsolete or broken things, in the relentless pursuit of ‘the new’.

## Postscript

The collector seeks to possess a luxury object, but there is the danger that the object will possess him/her. Its affective power can release involuntary memories. The object around us can be taken in and become signs that stand for memorable and fulfilling events in the past, which become displaced but retain power over us. As Proust suggested, they can help us regain lost time. But as he indicates with his example of the little piece of madeleine dipped in tea, the taste of which takes him back to the depths and wonderful living detail of his childhood, it is not just luxuries, mundane objects can do this too.

This recalls Walter Benjamin's (1999) discussion in his *Arcades Project* of discarded everyday objects (exhibition ticket, handbill, the image on a food wrapper, etc.) which 'look back at us' and can ignite half-formed memories. They are broken fragmented allegories that leave behind a sense of longing and incompleteness. For Benjamin, we do not need to search for luxury; everyday humble things can always release something valuable and significant. This recalls Georg Simmel's (1997, 73) discussion of the imbalance between objective and subjective culture, which impedes us in modern life, in his essay on 'The Concept and Tragedy of Culture'. He mentions the Franciscan friars' motto '*Nihil habentes, omnia possidentes*' (having nothing, yet possessing everything), which points to 'the blissful poverty of liberation from things'—the absolute freedom of those who have nothing yet can still appreciate the beauty around them in nature and the world; in effect, those who enjoy the immaterial luxuries that accompany the gaze from within as it opens to that which is without.

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