

**Is freedom the new luxury? A contemporary consumer perspective**

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## **Is freedom the new luxury? A contemporary consumer perspective**

*“Sometimes choice is a luxury that fate does not afford us.”*

— Jasper Fforde

### **Abstract**

This study explores the complex and polysemic phenomenon of luxury from a consumer perspective. In order to investigate consumers' personal perceptions of luxury, a multisited inquiry by means of phenomenological interviews was employed. A disruptive notion of freedom as luxury emerged from the data collected from fieldwork in Stockholm, Berlin, London, and Madrid. Even though freedom has traditionally been considered as an essential human need, the findings shed light on how consumers place freedom in the realm of luxury, whether in terms of liberation (freedom from), license (freedom to), or both. Furthermore, the findings show that some possessions have the power of providing consumers with both freedom and slavery. These contributions extend theory in the luxury consumption domain and further the theoretical perspectives about freedom in consumer culture. Consumers' longing for indulging in the luxury of freedom has implications for understanding certain consumer behavior practices, movements, and trends and, consequently, yields crucial managerial implications.

### **1. Introduction**

Luxury is a dynamic concept whose meaning has been constructed differently within every age and civilization along history. While in some ages luxury was beloved, in others it was reviled and persecuted. In all its forms whether glorified, coveted, or sacred, public or private, ostentatious or introspective, no one looks at it with indifference. According to Sekora (1977, p. 2), “the concept of luxury is one of the oldest, most important, and most pervasive negative principles for organizing society Western history has known.” The contentious and dynamic qualities of luxury have contributed to its elusive nature and added complexity to the attempts of conceptualization. In spite of inspiring the writings of many thinkers, from philosophers, to anthropologists, and from historians to social scientists, research on the phenomenon of luxury in contemporary consumer society is scant.

Even though luxury is a prism with many angles, the research approaches to this controversial and ambiguous concept in the marketing literature, address its study only from a managerial perspective, lacking a consumer-oriented approach. In order to bridge this gap in knowledge, this study explores the socially constructed phenomenon of luxury in contemporary consumer culture. A multisited enquiry (Stockholm, London, Berlin and Madrid) was conducted by means of phenomenological interviews, aimed at eliciting consumer multifaceted discourses on luxury. The findings expand classical conceptualizations of the notion of luxury, which view luxury as a vehicle to display wealth, signal social status, and assert symbolic domination (e.g., Dion and Arnould, 2011; Eng and Bogaert, 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drèze, 2010), by adding new and disruptive perspectives broadening the focus about the

phenomenon of luxury as seen by consumers. In particular, this study presents one of the emerging meanings of luxury stemming from the data: freedom as luxury.

The paper proceeds first by presenting a retrospective about luxury, showing how the idea of luxury has muted along the history. Then it turns the spotlight to the different views of freedom as luxury that emerged from the consumers' luxury discourses: freedom from the system, freedom to or license to choose, and possessions as a source of freedom or slavery. Finally, the paper draws conclusions about the theoretical implications of the findings for the study of luxury in the consumer research context. The managerial implications of freedom as luxury are also emphasized, focusing on the implications for companies, from both the point of view of internal marketing and brand management as well as linking the notion of freedom as luxury with rebellious consumption trends.

## **2. Theoretical background: the evolution of luxury**

Bataille (1988) points that "the history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life." Enzensberger (1996) states that luxury has been present in every society since the beginning of mankind, from archaic societies to modern times, adopting different guises, in different eras.

In archaic societies luxury was based on wastefulness and squandering, had strong magic and religious connotations, and the aim of attaining prestige. The luxury of Ancient Egypt was splendid while in the Ancient Greece luxury occurred in the public domain, and it was focused on the body and the mind. Luxury became a synonym of excess during the Roman Empire in both public and private spheres, turning into a quantitative and rude luxury fostered by the wish of differentiation during the Middle Ages. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, luxury was understood as leisure and convenience, gaining protagonism in society. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century two trends shaped the evolution of luxury: the democratization of the luxury consumption and the coexistence of extreme luxury with affordable luxury.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed an outstanding increase of the luxury consumption fostered mainly by the improvement of welfare levels in developed countries, globalization, and commercial openness of some nations like Japan -which represents an important share of the luxury industry. Luxury goods became popular and accessible to a large extent of the population, as the aftermath of the democratization of luxury, also labeled as *Mcluxury* (Gumbel, 2007) or *luxepopuli* (Davis, 2002). This trend claims the right for everybody to have access to luxury products, which were previously, reserved to the elite few. The popularization of luxury has been followed by a debate about what can be considered as luxury. If luxury is now available for the masses, does it mean that it has lost its exclusivity and then it should not be called luxury? Kapferer (2015) bemoans that the popularization and misuse of the word luxury leads to managerial turmoil, while the Frank (2008, p. 1) argues that "luxury isn't dead, but the word might be." This debate suggests that nowadays, luxury is an elusive and divisive concept, which might be in the eye of the beholder (The Economist, 2014).

According to Mortelmans (2005), the popularization of luxury makes certain goods, once considered as luxuries, available to an increasing body of consumers. Yet, this does not involve that luxury as a social phenomenon disappears. It will rather evolve into new forms of

luxury, changing its guise. Lipovetsky (2004) posits that the cult to the sumptuary expenditure does not seduce consumers any longer. Instead, individualization, emotionalization, and democratization are the processes shaping the luxury culture in contemporary consumer society. In his view, luxury nowadays is free from social prescriptions, giving preference to personal sensations (ibid.).

Even though the connection between luxury and conspicuousness has not disappeared, other approaches to luxury based on experiences, health, body, and subjective well-being are gaining momentum. This author also mentions free time, quality of life, and peace of mind as luxuries in contemporary society (ibid.). Along the same lines, Enzensberger (1996) argues that future luxury might take a distance from expensive cars, jewelry, delicatessen, and exotic products, connecting with basic conditions of life. He explicitly identifies six luxuries: time, attention, space, rest, clean environment, and safety, highlighting that the true luxury consists of having all of them. The informants in this study also highlighted different types of luxury which fall into the category of the essential. In the following, the view of luxury as freedom is unveiled.

### **3. Method**

The aim of furthering the understanding on the meaning of luxury from a consumer perspective, supports the decision of adopting a phenomenological research approach. The qualitative phenomenological research seeks to explore how people construct meaning. The meaning of things is derived from an interplay between cultural traditions and personalized meanings, which involves that meanings need to be contextualized and situated in relation to culturally shared knowledge (Thompson, Pollio, and Locander, 1994). In this regard, empirical fieldwork consisting in phenomenological interviews, was conducted in four European capital cities: Stockholm (10 informants), London (10 informants), Berlin (10 informants) and Madrid (9 informants).

The underlying rationality behind this intentional choice of cities was to imbue the study with the cultural richness and diversity of Europe. Given that the phenomenon of luxury is socially and culturally contingent (e.g., Wong and Ahuvia, 1998), bringing the cultural factor into the study would allow to explore how culture may shape consumers' perceptions of luxury. The criteria behind the selection of Stockholm and Madrid was convenience since the researcher was living in these two countries during the period of data collection, while the motivation for including London and Berlin was to reinforce the cultural category in the study. Informants from all walks of life were deliberately recruited in order to maximize the possibility of finding diverse stories. In Stockholm, London, and Madrid, the informants were recruited through the social network of people that the researcher got to know in these cities, while the informants from Berlin were contacted through Xing, an online professional social network.

The data collection procedure included different phases. Previously to the meeting, the informants received information about the study and a set of instructions via e-mail. The preparation for the in-depth interview included collecting pictures (from magazines, newspapers, internet, personal pictures, etc.) representing what luxury meant for them. During the course of the interview, the informants were encouraged to express their meaning of luxury associated to the pictures. Metaphor elicitation using pictures facilitates participants to convey their thoughts, feelings and experiences, and then articulate more elaborated narratives to overcome the taken-for-granted barrier. By combining non-verbal images with

verbal communication, more meaningful messages are anticipated that will better resemble consumers' deep-seated thoughts and emotions (van Dessel, 2005). In addition, informants were encouraged to elaborate on their accounts by means of "floating prompts" (McCracken, 1988, p. 35). The interviewer adopted a non-intrusive role, eliciting thick narratives by repeating the informants' last words with an interrogative tone, and encouraging them to describe their own experiences about luxury rather than keeping the interviews on an abstract level, which yielded deep insights about consumers' perspectives on luxury.

The duration of the interviews ranged from one and a half hours to three hours, were tape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and interpreted with an emic approach, according to Thompson's hermeneutic framework (1997). The data analysis was performed following the methods of grounded theory, evolving from open, to axial, to selective coding of data, acquiring deeper theoretical understanding at each step. This process aimed at getting a holistic interpretation, identifying personal meanings of luxury, shared meanings that emerged across the accounts and pictures brought by several informants, and wider conceptual insights shared in society, filtered down through the informants. Numerous meanings of luxury emerged from the data, revealing the polysemic nature of this construct. This paper addresses the notion of freedom as luxury.

#### **4. Findings: the luxury of freedom**

Whether longed, taken for granted, or misunderstood, in the name of freedom battles have been fought throughout time, statues have been erected to honor it, revolutions have found its source of inspiration in it, and laws and Constitutions have been set to safeguard it. There are different degrees of freedom ranging from freedom of speech and expression, freedom of press and thought, freedom of worship, economical, moral, and social freedom. Freedom applies to several ideas such as having free will, being free spirits, enjoying free living, free choice, or free love.

Abstract freedom can be perceived in different ways. In his book *Escape from freedom*, Fromm (1941) explores the concept of freedom, drawing a distinction between positive and negative freedom. Whereas negative freedom raises in the absence of obstacles and the opportunities that are possible for an individual as a result of a lack of constraints, positive freedom is based on the degree of fulfillment that a person is able to reach due to his/her self-determination, taking into account that the self is embedded in the society.

In the continuum between needs and luxuries, freedom, as an essential human right, has been traditionally placed on the needs end. However, predominant in all informants' narratives was a core theme of freedom perceived as luxury. In particular, the informants articulated their narratives about luxury around the two types of freedom suggested by Fromm (ibid.): negative and positive freedom.

##### *4.1 Negative freedom: Emancipation*

Hayek, the leading exponent of negative freedom, defines individual freedom as "the state in which a man is not subject to coercion by the arbitrary will of another." It involves that one "can expect to shape his course of action in accordance with his present intentions" (Hayek, 1944, p. 11-12), and as marked by the "rule of law." Fromm (1941) defines negative freedom as emancipation from restrictions imposed by other people or institutions.

The feeling of liberation, to be free from pressures, schedules, deadlines, stress, from cultural and social constraints, from routines, banal chores, offices, economic restrictions, and sources of authority had an important role when informants talked about their personal perception of luxury. The scarcity and the craving for being free from all these tasks, routines, and restrictions were the cornerstone aspects driving consumers to consider them as luxuries.

Freedom perceived as luxury involves being the owner of one's time, breaking free from time and space constraints. Some of the informants in this study perceived as a luxury the freedom to choose how to manage their time, being free from time constraints. The following narrative expressed the luxury of being free from others' rules dictating how to use one's time:

*The luxury for me would be not to have to work so I could use my time as I pleased; it would be to decide how to use my time, I'd have a very active life but without the pressure that I have to do... I'd be the one who sets my deadlines.(Jennifer, F53, UK)*

In addition, offices are seen as prison cells while routines act as chains. A Swedish informant brought a picture showing a man with a laptop in a park, representing the luxury of having the freedom to move her workplace anywhere:

*It's a luxury to be able to move your work out of the office, the flexibility to get in contact with whoever you want in a park like this. I don't like the atmosphere in an office, you have to be in there from 9 to 5 everyday. I don't like the routine of that.... It seems that he (the man in the picture) has his own company, so he is like... free. Freedom, that's what it is! (Kajsa, F29, SW)*

Bosses and job rules dictate how to use labor time, while social norms command how to use leisure time, leading to another kind of luxury: liberating oneself from others' approval. A young informant from Berlin put it in the following way:

*What would be a luxury is to do whatever you want, no pressure or have a job where you can behave the way you want to like going to opera, theater or classical music concerts only to fit into the upper class or to demonstrate to your boss how cultured you are. For example, when you go to conferences and meet all kind of important people and they say: 'Let's go and play golf', and you do it not because you want to do it but because you have the impression that you have to do it, that you have to spend time with them, and that's one of the big problems when you get a position which is quite high, to still to be whatever you like to be, because many people are looking at you and judging you by things you are doing. Some people hate going to the opera or theatre but they do it because all their colleagues do it, and they feel some kind of pressure to fulfill these social opportunities and although I do not have this problem so far I feel a bit troubled by these things. How do you know if you like to do it because you like it or because other people expect you to do it. (Hans, M28, GE)*

This informant referred to the symbolic battle between the two categories of free time: clean and dirty (Valtonen, 2004), finding a luxury the opportunity of not having to cope with this battle, challenging the prevailing tacit expectation of filling one's time efficiently, not only during work time but also during free time (Moisander and Valtonen, 2002).

In this scenography, there is a liberty protocol and the others act as jailers, so freeing from the socially acceptable is also a luxury. Thompson and Hirschman (1995) claim that consumers are not free to behave as they wish since they are always under observation. Thus, the activities to carry out during free time should fit in the realm of the socially acceptable, complying with social norms, and cultivating and civilizing oneself or growing up as a consumer and a citizen. In line with the liberation from social norms as luxury, an investigation by Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan (2014), suggests that nonconforming behaviors are a particular form of conspicuous consumption which enhance the status and competence of the rebellious consumer.

The conception of luxury in the abovenarratives, confirms that leisure time does not necessarily mean free time but instead “free time rests upon the ideal of a free individual; upon the ideal that free time is time when ‘I can do whatever I want.’ Free time is the time when one owns time and can exploit it according to one’s will” (Valtonen, 2004, p. 72). In line with this, a middle-aged informant from Stockholm described a luxurious experience as a private party for his senses. He metaphorically spoke about his schedule as his prison:

*Talking about luxuries, a truly luxurious experience for me is when I’m in another city and in the morning I go out, sit in a cafe, read the newspaper, feel the atmosphere, listen to people speaking but with no work meetings in my schedule. I’m not there to work so I can spend two hours or three hours.. That kind of lazy life is a luxury. I like to do things as I please, I can spend the day wandering around, sitting in cafes, listening to conversations, etc. Then the schedule is not my prison. (Ivar, M46, SW)*

The key issues in this experience is that it takes place in another city, which is not part of his everyday life, the freedom from obligations, i.e., the right to manage his time at his convenience, and the optimal use of his senses to enjoy and perceive an ordinary experience as a luxurious one.

Drinking plays a central role in some consumption rituals and is able to construct a separate and ideal world (Heath, 2000). In particular, drinking coffee appears in some of the informants’ discourses on luxury related to freedom experiences. This is consistent with studies addressing the substantial cultural role that coffee plays in the Western society as a ritual loaded with meaning (Gusfield, 1987; Schievelbusch, 1986). Drinks are able to create an ideal world (Bolt, 1987) and even draw a line between time for work (coffee) and leisure time (alcohol) (Gusfield, 1987). However, the findings in this study show that coffee also plays a crucial role in leisure time by creating a special atmosphere, a time out which is perceived as a luxury.

Economic restrictions are understood as locks and the chance of not having to think about being able to afford certain consumption practices, expected or unexpected, mundane or extraordinary, was mentioned by informants from all the countries. An informant from Sweden expressed his perception of freedom from economic restrictions as luxury, in the following way:

*Luxury for me is skiing, traveling, nature, freedom. Luxury for me is mostly freedom, I think. Freedom, to be able to do stuff without the economic boundaries.(Anders, M25, SW)*

In this informant's view, luxury is to be able to get involved in the activities and experiences that he enjoys without economic constraints, unleashing all his desires and questing for pleasurable experiences, taking a step out of his ordinary life. Two informants from Madrid - Eduardo, (M31, SP) and Mar (F25, SP)- also mentioned the luxury of freeing themselves from economic constraints, not only for engaging in enjoyable activities like treating themselves with a special dinner, but also for dealing with unexpected expenses in their everyday life, like affording a visit to the dentist if necessary, instead of being forced to postpone the visit due to economic limitations.

#### *4.2 Positive freedom: License*

Thomas Hill Green, one of the main proponents of the positive freedom, states that when we talk about freedom we mean "something to be so highly prized, we mean a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, something that we do or enjoy in common *with* others" (Green, 1906, p. 370-71). This author highlights three aspects in the notion of freedom: (1) it is closely connected with self-realization and its aim is "to make the most and best of ourselves;" (2) freedom happens in a social context, and we enjoy it with others, assuming that the self is always socially embedded; (3) there is a connection between freedom and self-development which has objective social conditions (ibid.). Along the same lines, Fromm (1941) posits that positive freedom entails using freedom to create.

The meaning positive freedom as luxury was also present in the informants' discourses on luxury. The feeling of having the chance to choose among different choices represents a luxury nowadays, according to the informants in this study. Some informants living in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall chose photos of the Wall illustrating the freedom to choose that the fall of the Wall brought to them. One of the informants selected a picture of the Berlin Wall as a symbol of freedom as luxury and organized the rest of the pictures also representing what luxury meant to him, around this particular one. Those photographs symbolized the freedom to travel, to go to the University, choose his degree, and to be an exchange student in another country. These were luxuries inaccessible to his parents.

*This is a picture of the German wall and this means freedom to me. To me freedom is a luxury, I grew up here in the GDR and before the fall of the Wall I was not able to travel, the system was very repressive and we were not able to choose what to do, we didn't have the choice to choose. My parents wanted to go to the University but it didn't depend on them, there were some rules and some restrictions telling who could go to the University and who couldn't. If you didn't follow the rules of the political system you were not able to make any choice. Nowadays many people complain about the political system but to me is a situation where I can choose whatever. If I want to go to the University, I can go. It's a kind of freedom, which is a luxury to me. (Jerry, M25, GE)*

Having a range of choices is perceived as a luxury by this informant, in stark contrast with the lack of options that his parents experienced. Positive freedom is allowed when experiencing emancipation from a restrictive system (negative freedom). This wide spectrum of options can be perceived in an active or in a passive way, including the choice of doing and also not doing. One of the informants, a young Stockholmer, expressed her view of luxury in the following way:

*It's a luxury to have the opportunity to not do anything, to just relax and to be on vacation. Because here people work all the time, and when you don't work you have to fill your time with something else important blah blahblah but this (pointing to the picture) is like doing nothing and it's a luxury to have time for that. You just live for the moment there.(Kajsa, F29, SW)*

Usually free time involves the assumption of active time, i.e., time for doing, instead of just being (Valtonen, 2004). It seems that free time should be filled with doing, showing that we are efficient in all spheres of life (Moisander and Valtonen, 2002). As discussed by Cross (1993, p. 1), "time has become money in both work and 'after hours.' But ultimately, the problem is that we lack time free from working and spending." The scarcity underlying this kind of time might be the driver leading to the perception of time for just 'being' as a luxury. This is consistent with prior research on luxury goods showing that scarcity has a positive effect on product value (Lynn, 1991), and thus, rarity is one of the key variables in the equation of luxury goods (e.g., Brun and Castelli, 2013; Dubois, Laurent, and Czellar, 2001), enhancing the desirability of those goods (e.g., Park, Rabolt, and Jeon, 2008).

For some informants, luxury is not only having a range of choices but having agency to choose fulfilling options, whether feeding the individual's creativity longings, learning, or having access to non-mainstream culture, among others. Being free to work on something that they really liked was perceived as a luxury by the informants. One of the informants from Berlin articulated her narrative about luxury around a picture of an artist working on a painting. Part of the interpretation was the following:

*I find it a luxury to have the opportunity to make a living by releasing your creativity like he is doing while painting; he is not working, he's letting himself go, enjoying, absolutely focused on that, being part of that, expressing himself..” (Claudia, F42, GE)*

In the same vein, a young lady from Stockholm explained that the picture that she chose showing a bunch of paintings, represented the luxury of having agency in her choice of using her time in a creative way:

*The luxury of being able to have a hobby like painting or to work with something that is creative. It's just the feeling of creating something what I find a luxury. (Kajsa, F29, SW)*

Having the option of consuming non-mainstream movies was perceived as a luxury by some informants. This informant also emphasized the luxury of learning something from this kind of films.

*Talking about luxury, for me it's a luxury having the possibility to see alternative films in a cinema, to have this choice and not only see those American ones. It's a luxury the possibility to choose what movie to see. You learn something new, they are from different cultures, they can be from Iraq or... It's great to see their perspectives and not the Hollywood image of them. (Kajsa, F29, SW)*

She implicitly suggested that the view from Hollywood can be misleading and found a luxury to have the freedom to see the world from the eyes of a local director which, presumably,

gathers more realistic insights about other cultures. Learning is also at the core of other accounts of luxury as freedom. For example, an informant from Spain (Ana, F64, SP) chose a picture representing the luxury of being free to learn which included a quote: “Keep on learning new things. Learn more about computers, martial arts, gardening, whatever. Don’t allow your brain to be lazy, so it becomes the home of the devil, and the name of the devil is Alzheimer.”

#### *4.3 Freedom or slavery: the heads or tails of possessions*

The meaning of possessions has been widely researched within the context of consumer research. Possessions define consumers’ social status, are used as a mark of wealth and power (Bernstein, 2000), act as an extension of the self (Belk, 1998) and support it since “our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things” (Tuan, 1980, p. 472) because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess (e.g., Feirstein, 1986; Rosenbaum, 1972; Tuan, 1980; van Esterick, 1986).

Materialism involves a belief that those who own coveted luxuries are happier than those who do not (Bernstein, 2000). However, in the informants’ accounts, this picture is nuanced. Possessions were seen in two different lights: as charged with freedom and as providers of slavery. Informants illustrated how goods can become vehicles for freedom and in that light, they are perceived as luxuries. An informant from Stockholm emphasized the freedom that a yacht would bring to him. Pointing at the picture, he expressed it the following way:

*This is a very expensive yacht, but I find it a luxury not because it is so expensive but instead because it provides you with freedom, that’s why I think of it as a luxury. (Sven, M34, SW)*

Some male informants also stressed the feeling of freedom associated to cars. The cars in their pictures were not expensive, but they symbolized luxuries in the sense that they offered the choice to potentially go anywhere. The romanticism embedded in a road trip became evident in their narratives when talking about the excitement of driving to new places, having the freedom to stop or continue as they pleased, and drive off the beaten path. This view of goods as providers of positive freedom and, consequently as luxuries, is only appreciated among male informants, regardless the culture, which shows a strong gender difference. An informant from Sweden expressed how he would like to indulge in the luxury of enjoying the freedom provided by owning a (non-expensive) car:

*To me a Volkswagen Caravan is a luxury. It’s kind of 70s and I like the aesthetics of the car and if I buy a car one day I’m not going to buy an expensive car. [...] I think that this car is a luxury because you can just go away as much as you want. [...] If I want to go with my boyfriend to the ocean we just go and we can sleep in the car and I think that it’s so magic, you know? Maybe it’s not a luxury like people see luxury but for me this car is a luxury. It’s also been crazy with the car, you just take the car and go to see the sunset or the sunrise wherever you want and I really love this idea. [...] I don’t care about Ferraris and Porsches or BMWs, for me they mean nothing. People are crazy about cars, they want to show that they have money so they buy.. But I like this car, it’s big and functional and friendly, it makes you feel like going for a barbecue with your friends and funny, even if you paint it in black is not a boring car. (Matts, M21, SW)*

This informant establishes a contrast between the conventional idea of a luxury car and his personal perception of a luxurious automobile. In this informant view, luxury is not associated with certain brands but with a certain lifestyle based on freedom and fun facilitated by a specific car. In the same line, another male informant, Guillermo (M26, SP), objectified freedom as a private jet. In his view, it is a vehicle of liberty in its broadest sense. Again, this informant rejects the luxurious symbolism commonly associated to a private jet (status and wealth) to focus on the private jet as a provider of experiences and freedom.

Houses are also possessions which can be located in the realm of luxury when they grant freedom. Some informants stressed how the luxurious aspect of their home rested upon freedom from others' rules and freedom to make their own choices. The following informants from London elaborated on the idea of their home as a provider of freedom:

*This one (picture) represents my new flat, I just signed the contract on Saturday and the reason to say that it is luxurious it is because it will be my own place. I just moved there, it's nice and convenient, close to the railway station,.. There's not much in there but it's my place! I don't have to live by someone else's rules, it's just my choice. Just being there, is a luxury, doing the dishes while looking through the window. (Glenn, M36, UK)*

*For me it is a luxury having your own place. Since I came here, I have been sharing a house, sharing a flat, you share a bathroom, a living room, so if you want to watch a movie you have to ask if someone is gonna watch a movie or you go to your own room. Now I rent my own house. It is important to have your own space not having to negotiate. This is my bathroom, this is my living room, I do whatever I want. If I decide to have everything immaculate, it is immaculate. (Megan, F35, UK)*

Yet, houses have the power to both liberate and enslave. As it has been discussed, some informants see them as luxury goods since they might bring freedom while others considered a luxury to be free from the burden of mortgages and rejected the slavery of paying the fee every month. In this regard, an informant from Sweden stated that a luxury for her would be to start a new life, liberating herself from her current chores, responsibilities, and duties, including her mortgage (Maria, F44, SW).

Mobile phones also fit in this category, as providers of freedom and style but also commonly mentioned in informants' narratives as a "vice," "addictive," and a "source of overwhelming feelings," deeming the option of switching it off as a luxury. An informant from Germany expressed the luxury of not using her mobile phone in the following way:

*Another luxury to me is to get rid of my mobile phone during a whole day. It would be a luxury to skip the phone calls which to me, mean extra work, because it is so stressful. I work as substitute correspondent for a radio channel and also for an advertising agency and sometimes work at both companies overlaps and then I want to die.. So, being able to switch off my phone would be a true luxury. (Sarah, F38, GE)*

Nevertheless, other informants also articulated their discourses about freedom as luxury within the domain of technology. In particular, Ivan, an informant from Sweden, also crafted

his account about freedom connected to technology but with a diametrically different approach:

*This is the picture of an iPhone which is a luxury to me. I love technology and it is something basic in my life. I can go around, answer e-mails in the subway, update my calendar, organize my schedule, it gives me freedom and makes my life easier. It's a very well designed product, it has endless functions and gives you mobility and all its functions are efficient and joyful. I also like the aesthetics, the bright colors over the black background." (Ivar, 46M, SW)*

The perception of a consumer good as a luxury is not ultimately related to the item in itself but to its usage and the feelings that it provides to the consumer. While the former account shows the luxury of experiencing negative freedom (liberating from the stress provided by the mobile phone), the later illustrates the luxury of experiencing positive freedom (license to perform certain activities and tasks on the go).

## **5. Discussion**

Drawing on the empirical fieldwork consisting of phenomenological interviews using pictures to encourage informants to express their meanings of luxury, this study highlights the disruptive notion of freedom as luxury. Even though freedom has traditionally been considered as an essential human need (Galtung, 1990), some authors conceive freedom as a luxury or privilege. In Otto von Bismarck's view, "freedom is a luxury that not every one can afford" while Martin Luther King stated that "freedom has always been an expensive thing. History is fit testimony to the fact that freedom is rarely gained without sacrifice and self-denial" (Carson, 1998, p. 28). In this vein, Karl Marx asserts that it can be both: privilege or right: "freedom has always existed, in one way or another, sometimes only as a particular privilege, sometimes as a general right" (Marx, 1842, p. 7).

In the context of consumption, Ger and Belk (1996) posit that with the rise of materialism some consumer goods, which were considered luxuries before, experience a change in their status, becoming necessities. Alternatively, Enzensberger (1996) claims that in a time of overconsumerism the essential turns into luxury. Specifically, this author suggests that the luxury of the future is connected to the essential conditions of life which will only be accessible to a privileged minority of consumers (ibid.). This is consistent with the shared view of the participants in this study who emphasized the luxury of freedom. Two different kinds of freedom were identified: liberating (freedom from) and licensing (freedom to).

Freeing oneself from work pressures, routines, economic, and social constraints, i.e., consuming time and goods without physical, social and economic boundaries was conceived as luxury by the informants. The findings also document that luxury is represented by licensing or freedom of choice. In a system where efficiency is fostered in both leisure time and work time, the unproductive expenditure of time is perceived as a luxury, but also having the autonomy to engage in activities that consumers find fulfilling. In this regard, the informants mentioned the luxury of being able to sate their curiosity, their zest for learning, and being intellectually challenged, as well as focusing on personal growth. The state of mind consisting of feeling intellectually thirsty and being inspired to create, was particularly brought to the fore by female informants. This disruptive perspective of luxury emphasized by the informants is in line with Enzensberger's (1996) approach. He asserts that nowadays,

the person who lives in luxury is the one who always has the time for doing what s/he pleases, who can decide what to do, where and with whom.

This novel view of freedom as luxury is related to a rising movement labeled “voluntary simplicity,” which has emerged in response to the spiral work (earn)/consume (spend) fostered by the consumerist lifestyle (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). The search for free time is one of the reasons behind a growing body of consumers voluntarily choosing a lifestyle based upon simplicity, finding satisfaction through non-material aspects of life (Etzioni, 1998; Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Voluntary simplifiers place on the top of their priorities owning time by liberating themselves from authority (whether bosses, society, or other institutions) dictating how to use their time and what to consume (Shaw and Newholm, 2002). Voluntary simplicity advocates consuming less and values modest consumption instead of conspicuous consumption, freeing the individual from the culture of consumerism (Doherty and Etzioni, 2003). In the same vein, Elgin (1993, p. 25) defines voluntary simplicity as "living in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich." On one hand, this novel view of luxury is related to riches, yet specifically to inner riches and finding satisfaction in life, rather than to material riches. On the other hand, while traditional luxury is commonly associated with conspicuous consumption (e.g., Dubois and Duquesne, 1993; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014; O’Cass and McEwen, 2004; Okonkwo, 2007), indulging in the luxury of freedom may entail consuming less and focusing on inconspicuous consumption which is also a tendency gaining momentum (Eckhardt, Belk, and Wilson, 2015).

Finally, the paradox of possessions as providers of both freedom and slavery emerged from the informants’ narratives. The freedom attached to some possessions (houses, cars, private jets, and yachts) was the main reason to consider them as luxuries, mainly by male informants. They did not conceive these possessions as a means to convey messages about social status, but instead, considered a luxury the possibility of traveling or living without having to conform to others’ rules. In this vein, possessions can act as suppliers of freedom and it is in this light, that they are perceived as luxuries. On the other hand, houses were also mentioned when exemplifying the luxury of being free of mortgages, while mobile phones hold the dual power to liberate and enslave consumers.

The luxuries sketched by the informants in this study do not fit into the category of the inessential (Sekora, 1977; Sombart, 1922) neither belong to the realm of extravagant living (Davidson, 1898). Instead, they draw essential liberties. Bearing this mind, fostering the debate and dialogue about freedom as the new luxury in contemporary society appears to be an imperative necessity.

## **6. Managerial implications**

The findings extend theory in the luxury consumption domain and further the theoretical perspectives of freedom, providing managers with crucial insights to understand how contemporary consumers frame luxury in terms of freedom. This view of freedom as luxury has implications for understanding certain consumer behavior practices, movements and trends and, consequently, yields critical managerial implications for companies, from both the point of view of branding management and internal marketing.

Successful companies leading the way by embracing and fostering employee freedom are obtaining very good results in terms of engagement, innovation, performance, loyalty, and

employee satisfaction (Gargiulo, 2011). Freedom in the workplace allows non-traditional work schedules, working from different locations, and choosing the projects to work on. For example, Google has adopted a leading-edge approach by encouraging employee freedom through an innovative and transformative formula in the workplace, which results in better business (Bock, 2015).

In addition, given that some consumers perceive freedom as luxury, brand managers may consider freedom as one of the pivotal elements of the brand promise. The findings show that some consumers place certain goods in the realm of luxury to the extent that they perceive these goods as providers of freedom. Bearing this in mind, marketers may manage the brand by emphasizing freedom as a salient aspect of the brand strategy. Harley Davidson is an example of a brand achieving the status of iconic brand (Holt, 2004), by becoming a (postmodern) symbol of freedom where consumers take an active role in the co-construction of the brand experience (Schembri, 2009).

Finally, the idea of freedom from social constraints as luxury, suggests that some consumers are craving for liberating themselves from the norms and restrictions dictated by the forces of the markets. This longing for freedom leads some consumers to escape the market within the market, by opting for either consuming less, consuming more consciously, replacing conspicuous consumption with modest consumption, or choosing rebellious options within the consumer culture. In this regard, freedom as luxury offers opportunities for start-up companies able to deliver escapist promises to consumers who show a quest for indulging in the luxury of experiencing freedom, as well as for companies aiming at expanding their existing business portfolio, and companies that are ready for a shift by targeting consumers in pursuit of freedom.

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