

COLUMNS

How luxury is the millennial's unlikely weapon to fight social inequality

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Sara Bernt is a brand strategist

By **Sara Bernt**

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A new category of luxury is on the rise. Some call it conscious luxury, others positive luxury, or even humanistic luxury.

Pioneered by modern luxury brands and beloved by millennials, this nouveau luxury is based on the idea that humanistic values could be represented through luxury consumption. Raising both enthusiasm and skepticism, it is a concept that divides people.

What gave rise to this new form? The answer may start with its target market, the millennials.

Formative trends

Millennials first experienced luxury through witnessing opulence in the 1990s. Since then, the generation has experienced three major trends that has led to the formation of conscious luxury.

First, digitalization. Millennials connected, shared, shopped and stored experiences on the Web from a developmental stage of their life into their adulthoods.

The rise of social networking emphasized collaboration, both in their ways of work and lifestyle think communal workspaces, or the sharing economy. They traveled to destinations off the beaten path while working remotely, and documented their lives on social media.

Experiences made better stories than the items they owned, which would moreover restrain them from moving around freely.

The school of neo-minimalism set the underlying tone to the era, both functionally and aesthetically. Material objects became sparse in their lives, but well curated: each and every one incremental of their aspirations a new wave of memento mori in the height of the digital revolution.

Next, the financial crisis wiped off the remaining desire for opulence.

Although lavishness seems to be rebounding lately, a formative decade in the millennial life came with internalization of luxury.

In a time when people were losing their homes and jobs, splendor lost its luster. The emphasis of wellness, spirituality and culture took over. Education, yoga, or clean eating are just some examples that helped the millennial express where their values lay.

Finally, social and environmental concerns of production became impossible to ignore for the educated millennial.

Over the last decade, images of sweatshops and climate change became ubiquitous. Irresponsible production and unbridled consumption were implicated.

In 2013, the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh collapsed, demanding 1,129 human lives.

The dramatic rise of fast fashion and disposable goods came with a great price. The message became crystal clear: consumption culture, in its present state, results in detrimental consequences.

Consumerism, however, is core to our existence today. It is also tied deeply into psychological and social behavior. And so, the solution to the sociological and environmental threats lays within.

Rather than becoming the social pariah, a number of new luxury brands recognized that traditional luxury may carry the solution.

With its limited production, carefully sourced materials and respect for craftsmanship, sustainability could be innate to luxury.

Conscious luxury brands emerged and began to reach for social uplift through luxury production in areas that thrived in high cultural but low economic resources. They provided healthcare and education, limited work hours and kicked off community development projects in exchange for craftsmanship.

These brands adopted transparency for authentic practices, pairing with independent organizations who provided sustainably driven guidance and certifications. This evoked the millennial desire to join forces for a good cause. Less was more, with an emphasis on intrinsic values.

Conscious luxury brands, with the availability of the online marketplace, also managed to cut out the middleman and sell their products and services at a broader range of price points.

Missing the exposure that traditional brands obtain, they turned their obscurity into their advantage, linking unobtainability with inside knowledge, sparking the attention of the millennial, and furthermore staying true to the blueprint of luxury.

And with that, ultimately, conscious luxury brands tapped into the growing desire to consciously consume.

Recognizing the millennial's social behavior and psychology, they responded to a set of attributes that were truly unique for a segment of this generation. It is the ideal marriage between a formative category with the potential to grow and innovate, and a group who are yet to meet their full earning potential.

All things being equal

Does conscious luxury today have the potential to combat the social inequality that has been symbolized by previous iterations of luxury?

The answer is two-fold, and lays in the Weberian school of thought asserting three bases for social inequality in industrialized societies: power, resources and status.

For the sake of consumer insights, let us focus on the latter, which rests on interpersonal recognition and honor, offering subtle psychological constraints.

On the one hand, luxury's power is rooted in its symbolic value.

The ability to choose symbolic value, rather than satisfy practical needs, confirms consumers' social positions and supports the notion of inequality.

Luxury goods also give luxury consumers a voice to express values and perspectives that commodity good consumers do not convey through their purchases.

As a result, one social group's perspectives will be reinforced, while the others' unheard. Again, this affirms social inequality.

On the other hand, however, conscious luxury is deemed "luxury" when rarity is brought together with skilled artisanship, precision and respect in the production.

In this way, conscious luxury bridges the dichotomy between the consumer and producer, placing intrinsic value on the latter.

While conscious luxury may foster inequality between consumers, it has the potential to empower artisans, provided that it is combined with transparency at every stage.

Due to automation of production, research today is less interested in the worker but rather the impact of consumption on the individual and social groups. That is valid.

It is crucial to understand how shopping leads to social domination, mobility or oppression, but these efforts do not tell the whole story. They have forgotten the human force behind production.

To assess dimensions of social inequality through consumption, one cannot disregard the reciprocation of social position that takes place between the maker and the consumer.

WHETHER CONSCIOUS LUXURY is friend or foe to social inequality is too early to tell.

What is certain is that it has the ability to open up possibilities to social innovation in places we do not even look.

Sara Bernt is a freelance brand strategist and Ph.D candidate focused on the sociology of luxury at Humboldt Universität, Berlin. Reach her at sarabernat@gmail.com.

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