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Sociological Association

TITLE: Luxury Consumer Culture in Contemporary Contexts

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Abstract:

The 'practice turn' in consumption studies has seen contemporary understandings of how we encounter the commodity move towards viewing consumption as a socially and technologically embedded routine. However, it is the position of this presentation that we must again look at consumption critically as luxury, as the global elite continue to amass unimaginable wealth and, as luxury commodities arguably become increasingly 'democratised' to wider consumer markets across the world. As new globalised social phenomena emerge, the sociological analysis of the luxury commodity and its culture requires a critical re-theorization that accounts for all that is at play.

The luxury good, in sociocultural terms, is a potent symbol of power and presence in the commodity system and in wider social circulation. I argue that the luxury commodity suggests that consumption can be seen as the contemporary symbolic - symbolic of real or desired class identity – and, or, real or desired gender identity. The cultural, economic and technological change characterising latemodern consumption underscores the urgency to re-introduce and evaluate the social theories of conspicuous consumption and cultural capital in the current epoch. Socioeconomic similarities between the Gilded Age (1890s) and contemporary contexts suggest that our current world of luxury and excess necessitates moving away from routines and practices and towards explanations of the symbolic.