

# Luxury Consumption. Mama, Hermes and me – a Social Identity?

Dina De Jesus Peixoto de Carvalho

*Universidade da Beira Interior FCSH – Departamento de Sociologia.*

**Abstract:** The pertinence of an Investigation on Luxury Consumption has to do with reinforcing the Social Distinction that conceives cultural differences. Starting from this point, this study aims to reflect on the social actors and what leads them to search for a Prestige Bylaws; to an Identity and Image that this Ostentatious Consumption grants them, Subjective Cultures, Lifestyles as external signs of class, and projects that express narratives of meaning. Study of unavoidable interest for anyone who wants to approach and understand the reproduction of class inequalities, the Tastes and the Identity of social actors from a perspective of, existence or not, what Bourdieu (1979) called Social Reproduction, focusing on social practices and consumption (material and symbolic). Using concepts such as habitus and class trajectories, it focuses on the symbolic elaboration of subjectivities, on the structuring of lifestyles and on their configurations of distinction. Approach focused on the Upper Bourgeoisie. Analysis where socio-cultural and economic aspects are articulated. In a society that not only privileges consumption to the detriment of production, but also grants it excessive protagonism as an element of social differentiation, consumption began to focus on the social meaning of goods. It is through this path that individuals mark positions in the social structure, and compose their identities and lifestyles. A conditioning relationship is thus established between the volume of capital that the individual holds and his tastes.

**Keywords:** consumption, luxury, marketing, social differentiation, prestige social status, Identity and Image.

## I. Introduction

The advertising moment, carried out in 2004, by Baz Luhrmann from “Moulin Rouge” for the Chanel brand's No. 5 product, is made up of actress Nicole Kidman (in the ad playing the most famous model in the world), and Rodrigo Santoro. This tells the story of an actress who runs away from the paparazzi at a premiere and ends up in the arms of a strange writer. Throughout the ad, this love story is always portrayed in a luxurious way, in which an actress fed up with the whole world of parties, success and media coverage, runs away and gets into a taxi meeting a strange writer, and the two without destination. As the front person of this advertisement is the actress Nicole Kidman, it causes consumers to want to obtain the product so that they resemble the actress.

The visual message in this ad is very strong and consists of a lot of color, luxury, glamour, lights, the entire ad being centered on the front person, which captures not only the female target audience, but also the male one due to its sensuality. The advertisement, being centered on the front person, emphasizing the product only at the end, thus focuses on it as something that transforms luxury into an action as simple as using a complete perfume. The written message present is a short message at the end of the advertising moment that consists only of “no 5” associated with the Chanel product which, due to the strength of the visual message, does not need to be more explicit.

The culture present in this advertisement is the cult of luxury and well-being, with its message being intrinsic worldwide. As for values, there is a strong proximity to power characterized by the presence of luxury items that symbolize a high social class.

Colors, shapes, objects... Each civilization developed it in its own way: in Egypt, Greece, India, Africa or Japan, luxury manifests itself in a unique way. Help us deliver on one of humanity's main aspirations. A distinction that happens with Limited Editions of a given product in a given country. Modern man began to consume Luxury and transformed it into a sector of the world economy. France is an icon in this segment, whether in Fashion, Jewelry, Watchmaking or Cosmetics, in Works of Art... The French have turned *savoir-vivre* into a motto.

Luxury explains the growth of the Premium Market and the secrets of the most desired products in the world. "(...) Luxury products did not suffer from the crisis: always sought after and valued, they reveal (...) the persistence of the code of social differentiation through certain products." (Lipovetsky, 2010, p. 234). There is a desire in the westernized and globalized world to consume luxury products. A question arises: What are the main strategies in the luxury goods market? We discovered an answer in the author Campuzano (specialist in Luxury Consumption): I summarize everything as ABC: "Art, Business and Control". Luxury products must have a strong dose of creativity and innovation, they must have something that makes them rare. The luxury products business is based on control: a high price means product quality for the market; selective distribution, extremely careful points of sale and communication concerned with detail and behaviors that reinforce the brand's values. (Campuzano).

For Lipovetsky (2005), luxury is the dream, what beautifies the scenery of life, the perfection made into a thing by human genius (...). Luxury, memory and voluptuousness: it takes a very dark soul to crusade against the love of beauty and its expression, lightness and moments of happiness. In recent years, there has been very rapid and continuous growth in the world's economies, as technology has improved, resulting in more and higher quality product options. The demand for more sophisticated and better-made products has increased. "For more than a decade, the luxury sector has been going through a true organizational mutation, with small independent and semi-artisan companies giving way to conglomerates of international dimension, to multi-brand groups that apply, although not exclusively, methods and strategies that have proven its value in mass markets." (Lipovetsky; Roux, 2005, p.14).

Luxury is excellence, it is differentiating, it involves effort and dedication, it is a source of inspiration and self-esteem. Luxury is an aggregate of Luxury brands that transmit notoriety through global recognition. The consumer is currently complex, it is essential to listen, interact and serve them. Quality in Luxury is necessarily excellent and the consumer feels comfortable with a legacy of tradition reinforced by scarcity. The passion for Luxury reflects and materializes the passion for success in life and moves the client to want more, which is why communication is fundamental. Pleasure is a constant emotion when consuming luxury, so fueling dreams and fantasy builds customer loyalty. Purpose is fundamental in Luxury as the client needs a "serious" justification to justify the extravagance to themselves. The price is admittedly high because it emotionally provides well-being and happiness.

Around 1910, in the Parisian capital, Coco Chanel opened her first hat store. The Chanel store would become a success and would appear in the most famous Fashion Magazines in Paris. With this relationship, Coco Chanel learned to frequent the sophisticated environment of the City of Lights. Her clothes were worn by great Hollywood actresses, and her style dictated fashion around the world. In addition to its own clothing, it developed perfumes with its own brand. His suits are a reference to this day.

In 1921, she created the perfume that would make her a great celebrity around the world, Chanel N° 5. The number referred to her lucky digit. Chanel decided to introduce Chanel N° 5 discreetly. He auditioned at Cannes. He invited friends to dinner, placed a bottle on the table and when an elegant woman passed by, Chanel pressed the sprayer and filled the air with an invisible cloud of perfume. Women stopped, smelled and were enchanted by the aroma. Happy with the result, he returned to Paris and discreetly launched N°5. It did not announce its arrival in print, nor did it integrate it into the store. She used it herself. He perfumed the store's tasting rooms and gave some bottles to high society friends. The buzz began and gave rise to an outcry. Chanel then gave instructions to put N°5 on sale. The grandfather of modern perfumes is Chanel No. 5. American soldiers of the Second World War who fought in Europe took a bottle to their girlfriends. Marilyn Monroe declared that it was all she wore in bed. In 1959, the Museum of Modern Art added Chanel No. 5 packaging to its permanent collection and Andy Warhol produced a silk screen image of the bottle in a rainbow of colors. It is said that every thirty seconds a bottle of N°5 is sold in one part of the world. Luxury brands dominate the perfume market (Thomas, 2008).

Mystery, sensuality, intimacy can be elements of luxury brands to occupy a place in individuals' memories. Create mystery, mix, experiment, synesthesia, include hearing, vision, smell, touch, taste to build sensualities. Move in search of empathy, passion, treatment and fulfillment of commitments to associate intimacy. And here, we will say, the great common point is established between the thinking of Lipovetsky, Castarède and Roberts and brands in the luxury market: emotion. It is necessary to awaken emotion to generate integrity in the set of brand expressions. Managing this mix of expressions so that it is always coherent, clear and relevant, is a task that combines art, science, technique and creativity, reason and emotion. Speaking to emotion is seducing consumers with a collector profile, developing limited collections with elaborate and exclusive pieces.

Thus, we start with a critical question about how to define something as attractive as it is eternal: Luxury. Addressing the trajectory of Luxury in the History of Humanity since the "Operations of Charm" is our interest. Infinitely complex, luxury consumption is linked to the essence of Western Modernity and constitutes a phenomenon that demands to be analyzed. This issue appears to be little studied in main stream research. It is from the convergence of different intellectual currents that in the second half of the 20th century a School of Thought emerged centered on the symbolic character of consumer goods. Simmel (1950) and Bourdieu (1979) are listed with social criticism, Baudrillard (1981) and post-structuralist philosophy, Sahlins (1976) and Douglas (2004) with social anthropology, Hirsh (1995) with positional economics and Miller (1995) and material culture.

The theoretical framework that supports the analysis of consumption as a social practice encompasses the contributions of classical sociology in terms of consumption, namely Bourdieu, Elias, Kaufmann, Veblen and the defenders of the sociology of the individual, namely Goffman, Lahire, Featherstone and Bauman. Anchored in these contributions we will discuss the uniqueness and heterogeneity of the habitus and the concepts of identity.

The theoretical framework encompasses the contributions of the main currents in the Sociology of Consumption that were developed through an empirical approach focused on singularities. Taking into account the symbolic meaning of objects and the way in which they reinforce the system of dispositions, investigating Luxury Consumption as a social construction. It was important to highlight the consolidation of the Theses of the Sociology of Taste, Daily Life and Lifestyles, which was based on and articulated with the Sociology of Social Classes, which highlights the conditioning relationships between power/volume and type of capital, habitus, the field, reflexivity and consumption practices. "In order to better understand and explain the lifestyles of social actors themselves." (Silva, 2009:101).

Principles of classification, categories of analysis and perception, which result from explicit historical, social, cultural and economic conditions and which translate into individual dispositions, ways of acting, the product of a practical experience that Bourdieu summarized in his concept of habitus. It is the embodied social experience that generates, by adjustment, the difference, that is, the distinction and it does so “naturally.” The value of distinctive practices depends on the socially defined markets in which they are located (Bourdieu, 2010). The notion of distinction and the operations of social differentiation that we want to evoke constitute the guiding thread of a problem well located within modern societies. The notion of distinction reveals in all its dimensions the deeply unequal structure of supposedly democratic societies. But the heuristic potential of the concept of distinction must be evaluated by the fact that it allows crossing fields of activity and relationships involving diverse research territories. The concept of goods as markers of social positions, developed by Douglas (2006) was used to think about luxury as an element of construction of visible brands that define a group, delimit it in geographic and symbolic dimensions, and that use distinctive criteria not only of objects, but of taste dispositions and specific aptitudes (Bourdieu, 1983) that characterize these groups of luxury consumers.

Differentiation is marked by luxury consumption, ostentation – conspicuous consumption (Veblen), this is the materialization of the desire for power, notoriety, ostentation and is essentially based on the consumption of everything that is beyond the essential.

It is undoubtedly to Weber (1864-1920) that we owe one of the first attempts to articulate social facts and social classes. In his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber strives to demonstrate that the economic behaviors of the capitalist class are only understandable if we take into account their conception of the world and their system of values.

The characteristics of consumer society will be theorized in two dimensions of consumption: Consumption as Distinction and Symbolic Consumption. Bourdieu (1979) defines three concepts in understanding Consumption as Distinction: capitals; campus and social habitus. Baudrillard's princely idea is that an object has a symbolic value. “We no longer consume things, but only signs.” (Baudrillard, 1972). The universe of consumption represents a system of production of meanings (Baudrillard) and behaviors generated by economic rationality (as we see in Bourdieu) that are evidenced through the market as a ritual process. Starting from this point, this study will aim to design an analysis based on Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* (2009) pursued by Baudrillard in the context of *Symbolic Consumption* (2010). Baudrillard would return to Marx's criticism. For Baudrillard, consumption is not a material practice, but rather, because it has a meaning, an activity of systematic manipulation of signs (2010).

Social class historically emerges as the first segmentation variable. It is associated with the reproduction of gestures, practices and an ideology of consumption, with a class habitus (Bourdieu, 1979). The practices that habitus produces result from a learning process that is dominated by a set of statistical regularities that are associated with a socially structured environment, that is, by the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition. The habitus produces practices resulting from the incorporation of objectivity, that is, the internalization of collective schemes, since it contains “the unconscious principles of ethos, a general and transposable disposition that, being the product of all learning dominated by a determined type of regularities objective, determines the “reasonable” or “unreasonable” behaviors (the “follies”) for any agent subject to such regularities” (Bourdieu, 2002:165). Thus, the aspirations and practices arising from the habitus appear as compatible and even “pre-adapted” to the demands of those objective conditions (“refuse the rejected and love the inevitable”) (Bourdieu, 2002:166). However, practices are not only determined by the internalization of objectivity, they are rather “the product of the externalization of a similarly structured subjectivity” (Bourdieu, 2002:168). The habitus is the operator that links these two systems in and through the production of practice. Through it, metaphor is carried out, that is, the creation of different meanings through the transfer of the system of dispositions to new situations. It is also interesting to highlight that, according to Wacquant, the concept of habitus is, for Bourdieu, “first and foremost, a stenographic way of designating a stance of investigation, by

pointing out a way to excavate the implicit categories through which people assemble continuously their lived world” (Wacquant, 2004:5).

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Subsequently, the analysis of - Lifestyles - appears, according to Maffesoli (1993: 31), it is like a kind of common language. This language is codified, serving as a sign of distinction and recognition of belonging to a group, through the adoption of its way of being and/or thinking. The social body that is constructed, the personal appearance that is idealized, the architecture of ideas that one seeks to present are examples of this “stylization of attitude” and “aestheticization of existence” (expressions by Michel Foucault). Style plays an important role in presenting the Self to others, in raising awareness, apprehension and understanding of society itself. Style becomes essence and reality appearance. On the other hand, and especially in contexts of consumer culture, the role of possession or property as extensions of the Self itself is extremely important. Possessing something, saying it is ours, defines us, constitutes a symbolic expression of our individual identity. It takes us back to a system of taste, as well as a cultural system of signs of prestige and social promotion. It is consumption as a manifestation of a taste triggered by the possession of a certain objectified, instituted and incorporated cultural or symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1979).

## **II. Methodology**

In the present study, it was our intention to carry out an analysis based on a combination of qualitative methodological techniques. Therefore, to collect information we chose different research techniques: documentary research, direct observation, exploratory interviews and in-depth interviews.

From the perspective of a qualitative analysis, we try to go into detail to understand the cases we study (Guerra, 2014). Qualitative research allows the researcher to collect data, subjecting their perception to their veracity, as well as their wisdom and experience. Even with the challenge of objectivity, the researcher's main concern is that the data obtained agree with what the sample says. (Carmo & Ferreira, 2008).

The great advantage of the interview technique is direct interaction. The interview is carried out according to a dialogue where some techniques are practiced with a view to achieving the defined goals, such as the presentation of the researcher, the problem itself and the clarification of what is desired from the interviewed

subject. This is one of the most important elements of interview practice, as an environment of spontaneous, voluntary participation must be created in sharing information (Carmo & Ferreira, 2008).

The qualitative methodology consisted of attributing meanings to data, interpreting them and creating meaning. Exploratory interviews were carried out and, subsequently, in-depth interviews with a “snowball” effect. We considered a priori that the group of participants was accidental.

According to Max Weber (1996), advocate of comprehensive sociology, individuals in their actions and interactions are driven by intentions and these preside over the search for ends. The sociologist's task will be to grasp the meaning of actions and, therefore, not only explain them, but understand them, that is, to highlight the link that unites the completed or undertaken action and its intentions, which determined its completion or undertaking. Of the qualitative research methods, interviews perhaps better allow the researcher to see how individuals believe and reflect the social world that surrounds them. The interviews offered an interpretative capacity, through which the meaning of the human experience is revealed in individual narratives. They constituted a unique approach, which placed the individual at the heart of the research and with the intention that the singularity of a life can offer more data than the generality of many. Here, the aim is not to produce knowledge that merges into a general science. These interviews do not protect themselves with the illusion of objectivity, but rather seek to assume the value of interaction and subjectivity, as a way of producing scientific knowledge. We emphasize that objective knowledge provides us with information, but not the intention that underlies it. This intention is revealed by the subjectivity of individuals. Somehow, the deeper one dives into the singular, the more one expresses what everyone recognizes themselves in, thus highlighting the heuristic potential of analyzing singular cases.

Another aspect of this study was theory. A theory is discovered, developed and verified in a provisional way, based on a systematic collection of data and their analysis.

Data collection, analysis and theory maintain close reciprocal relationships throughout the entire research process. From the first steps, we deal with and advance with concepts, the basic research tools. From the perspective adopted here, these concepts are awareness-raising resources, to be tested in the field. It is in the dialogue with the terrain that they are progressively explained, refined and related in a coherent way, allowing the creation of theoretical statements that are themselves reviewable during the course of the research.

Diachronic analysis of the trajectory of Consumption in the History of Humanity and, particularly, Luxury Consumption are part of this methodology. We add the Consolidation of the Theses of the Sociology of Taste, Daily Life and Lifestyles, which will have to be based and articulated with the Sociology of Social Classes. Research that involves the analysis of 11 fundamental concepts of Research.

In face-to-face contact with privileged informants, we try for each question a method of collecting information in the deepest sense of the expression. The data collected through these privileged informants contributed to a deepening of existing knowledge and the discovery of other areas of knowledge. Such interviews, in addition to the knowledge of reality they provided, contributed to the emergence of new themes and new aspects of existing ones and to the clarification of doubts that remained since the beginning of the present study. Subsequently, we also expanded the range of interviews when we entered the external verification work phase. Therefore, we continued with interviews with people who, knowing well the environments in which we work, could provide us with elements that would allow us to assess the “truth” or “fantasy” provided, through the interviews. This “confrontation” of data proved to be very fruitful, both in terms of confirming previously collected data and even providing new elements.

It should be noted that since its beginning, our study was not intended to be a representative study, but only to analyze important elements for the problem under analysis. Regarding the issue of representativeness, Jean Poirier (1999, 103) states that “currently, the human sciences call into question this notion of representativeness – which presupposes a closed world, within which it would be possible to discover, in all domains, general, productive and deterministic laws.” When selecting our interviewees, we took care to adapt them to the previously established objectives.

Thus, we presented the following questions that guided us: what leads social actors to search for a Social Status of Prestige conceived through an Identity and Image? Can we expose the Tastes and Identity of these social actors from the perspective of, existence or not, Social Reproduction? How to interpret the representations and patterns of Luxury Consumption in similar classes, but in different cities? Does it make sense to analyze subjective cultures, lifestyles as external signs of class and projects that express narratives of meaning? Is the distinction in the world of Luxury governed by the intangible – the way in which goods are purchased and used – and does this distinction occur precisely in those attributes related to the cultural background of each consumer, and the motivations that lead them to acquire luxury goods? Should lifestyles be seen as visible, external signs of class or as an occasion (*enjeu*) for social (re)classification, which through luxury consumption translates class belongings and references? Is the space of lifestyles formed from *habitus*?

We call for documentary research, direct observation, and in-depth interviews with a view to interpreting the narratives of social actors to reconstruct the heritage of dispositions of these same social actors, with the aim of understanding how the social is assimilated by them. Given the objective of the study, a qualitative approach was chosen, suitable for a comprehensive and interpretative analysis.

We argue that this methodology constitutes a powerful tool for our research, as it allows us to collect detailed information about the impact of the experience and life trajectory of unique individuals.

In short: analyze individuals and the desires that lead them towards luxury consumption; which leads them to seek a Prestigious Social Status; the Identity and Image that these Luxury Sectors grant them was our main objective.

### **III. Final Considerations**

This study started from a critical question about how to define something as attractive as it is eternal: the consumption of Luxury – Luxury as a fundamental factor in the behavior of 21st century Man. Addressing the trajectory of Luxury in the History of Humanity, from the “Operations of Charm” – Luxury Marketing – and the characteristics of Large Fashion Houses designated as Luxury, led us to reflect on this topic.

Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), by director Blake Edwards, begins the first scene of the film by getting out of a taxi in front of the Tiffany & Co. Store: the film *Belle de Jour* (1967), by Luís Buñel, The first scene shows Catherine Deneuve in *Charrete*, the actress is dressed by Yves Saint Laurent. What does it mean to have these timeless icons of elegance, sophistication and glamor associated with Consumer and Luxury Brands in Classic Works? Luxury dresses up Hollywood, dominates private parties, sells magazines and is even treated cinematically. Infinitely complex, Luxury Consumption is linked to the essence of Western Modernity.

Consumption, especially the consumption of Luxury Brands, constitutes an object of important analysis, due to its role as a structurer of values that build identities, regulate social relations and define cultural maps (MARY DOUGLAS), brings together the members of a group around of meanings shared through the objects consumed. Thus, luxury consumption becomes essential to think about the values that individuals who share this consumer group aggregate and analyze the concept of Luxury Consumption, as a marker of social position. In its archetypal form, consumption is a permanent condition and an inalienable aspect of life. A Brand projects a chimera and an ideal. The Luxury Market is surrounded by exclusivity, power, extravagance, whimsy, and belonging to an elite.

During the literature review, we sought to address matters about consumption and consumer, with an emphasis on luxury consumption, namely on symbols and social distinction and we can conclude that, in general, people with ultra-luxury lifestyles and consumption, invest in high luxury. It is a question of social status, social class and social differentiation. An emotional compensation stands out and this is where brands operating in this sector come in. This line of reasoning could take us to Aaker's brand equity (2023). The qualitative study tells us that this is an audience given to very particular relationships, embedded in their environment, where trust is a decisive factor and that brands must share the same environment and style. Practical topics were also analyzed, from the perspective and experience of experts and clients.

In the study we analyzed that Luxury marks the distinction between classes, promotes hierarchization and defines social roles, consolidating spheres of power between societies. The Luxury category, investigated here, refers to the consumption of objects consensually recognized by the large market and dominant classes as Exceptional Luxury, according to Lipovetsky (2005), the category of object, the true Luxury, accessible only to the highest classes .

We can conclude that a socially elevated class seeks to choose more selective and rarer objects. People seek status, to feel the pleasure of wealth. Social class historically emerges as the first segmentation variable. Similar to what Bourdieu studied and mentioned in the 1970s (1979), social class is also associated with the reproduction of gestures, practices and an ideology of consumption, with a class habitus. Eternal Luxury, as it is a product considered a measure of status, is commercialized and, therefore, companies continue to grow and expand their market abroad. "New luxury crafts appear on the markets, juxtaposing, above all, foreign brands and different luxury repertoires..." (ALLÉRÈS, 2006: 158).

"At the Paris couture shows this week, major players like Chanel, Dior and Givenchy sent models strutting down the catwalks. Even while the world is battered by recession, the ultra-high-end consumer is still willing to spend on high-end fashion. Luxury brands that offer personalized service and make use of rare fabrics and impeccable craftsmanship remain highly sought after, says Milton Pedraza, CEO at The Luxury Institute, a luxury lifestyle consulting firm. Here are some of the goods still coveted by affluent consumers." [http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/30/luxury-fashion-week-lifestyle-style\\_0130\\_couture\\_slide.html?partner=sapo](http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/30/luxury-fashion-week-lifestyle-style_0130_couture_slide.html?partner=sapo)

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