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The pursuit of uniqueness and craving for freedom: the meaning of luxury in the age of access

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ABSTRACT

Luxury has always been an essential topic in consumer research. However, changing nature and fluidity of its definition makes luxury still an interesting topic for researchers. Today, a combination of developing internet technologies and a shifting in the habit of travelling is leading to the rise of access-based accommodation services. Furthermore, modern travellers are searching for luxury experiences even with short term rentals. In this regard, understanding access-based luxury has become crucial in the accommodation sector, where consumer experience is the focus. Therefore, this paper investigates the nature of luxury within access-based consumption in the context of consumers' accommodation experiences. A qualitative approach is adopted to uncover the circumstances that constitute luxury for consumers who use Airbnb Plus. The study found that luxury manifests itself in search of uniqueness and freedom. Exploring that consumers are seeking more immaterial forms of luxury in their vacations, the paper makes a significant contribution to tourism literature.

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1. Introduction

Consumption is increasingly becoming more collaborative and depending more on accessing goods and services. An increasing number of consumers prefer to use the products and services for a certain period instead of purchasing them. That implies the rise of a more flexible consumption model that is called access-based consumption. Access-based consumption means preferring to pay for temporarily accessing goods and services rather than possessing them. Contrary to the nature of ownership that is based on solid relations with objects, access appears to be a more temporary form of consumption. With access-based consumption, products are more ephemeral and used by consumers for renting, sharing, and even borrowing (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017).

In this context, decreasing of ownership and the popularity of access all over the world may be the result of consumers' adaptation to a more liquid world where people no longer consider possessions as the ideal expression of consumer desire (Chen, 2009). Access-based consumption lies in the idea that it becomes more significant for consumers to have a temporary use that allows them to access products rather than owning them (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). In this form of consumption, people do not own goods and services, and when they need it, they have access to objects without gaining ownership. Also, access allows consumers to be more flexible about their identities, while possessions require much attachment.

Therefore, access-based consumption is dramatically altering consumer behaviour. Consumers who were identifying themselves with their possessions now express their identity through

accessing products and services. That implies that our experiences are becoming more significant than having materials in defining ourselves. Moreover, access-based consumption has substantially transformed traveller behaviour. Travellers use access-based platforms as a low-cost alternative to hotels, hostels, and other accommodation facilities (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2015).

In this regard, the rise of Airbnb and other short-term rental services such as HomeExchange, Couchsurfing, and HomeAway are considered as ‘a transformative innovation within the tourism accommodation industry’ (Guttentag et al., 2017). The sharing economy has led to disruption, particularly in hospitality and ride-sharing industries, by preventing consumers get under larger financial, emotional, and social burdens when they access resources (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015). Therefore, understanding access-based consumption is compulsory to gain a competitive advantage in many industries in the digital age. Especially in terms of the hospitality industry, it is crucial to understand this consumption mode (Belk, 2014).

Eckhardt et al. (2015) argue that most expensive luxury goods are gradually losing their exclusivity because of the proliferation of access-based consumption and the divorce of social class and luxury in an anonymous society (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). Especially access-based consumption makes a prestigious brand available to everyone that causes it to be no longer a status symbol (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Bauer et al. (2011) also found that luxury experiences are less materialistic than previously assumed in the context of traditional views of luxury.

On the other hand, access is also an indicator of conspicuous consumption for consumers who use the access as a status symbol that makes them different from other consumers (Hellwig et al., 2015). The adoption of access-based services also enables consumers to afford a more luxurious lifestyle they could not afford. Although access-based consumption is a less materialist mode of consumption as consumers give less value for materials, it can be a more materialist form of consumption that provides consumers with a luxury lifestyle through access-based services (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017).

Given the fact that existing literature has not clearly identified the relations between luxury and access-based consumption, this study aims to understand the meaning of luxury within access-based consumption. Therefore, this paper examines the connections between luxury and access-based consumption in terms of consumers’ accommodation experiences. To better understand the connections between luxury and access-based consumption, the study tries to investigate what forms the luxury experience within access-based consumption in the context of Airbnb Plus.

The paper first unfolds the concept of access-based consumption and the new luxury in the age of access. In the empirical part of the study, the research methodology is explained. Then the findings of the netnographic research conducted on the users of Airbnb Plus are presented. Representation of the research is illustrated in findings that bring theory and data together to answer the research question. In the conclusion section, a discussion of the results highlights the contributions of the study to the literature. Finally, the paper is concluded with suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. *The rise of access-based consumption in the hospitality industry*

We live in an age of sharing (Belk et al., 2019), where property regimes have turned into access regimes based on the short-term use of assets. In this age, a new consumption model has emerged that is becoming increasingly popular through the sharing of resources by using social sharing sites. This form of consumption that is called access-based consumption is defined as: ‘transactions that may be market mediated in which no transfer of ownership takes place’ (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, p. 881). Access-based consumption refers to the consumption model that ‘consumers are paying to access someone else’s goods or services for a certain period’ (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015).

In this consumption mode, consumers do not own goods and services, but they access it when necessary. They develop ephemeral relations with objects where they use products and services for short-term periods by renting, sharing, and borrowing without having the right of ownership. This behaviour lies in the idea that it becomes more significant for consumers to have a temporary use that allows them to access the products and services rather than owning them. Contrary to the nature of ownership that is based on solid relations with objects, access-based consumption reveals as a more ephemeral mode of consumption. Thus, developing transient relationships with objects makes it possible for consumers to have new consumption experiences.

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) argue that the main difference between access and ownership is rooted in the nature of the consumer-object relation. In access-based consumption, the relationships with objects are more ephemeral and situational, and possessions are valued for their instrumental use-value (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Chen (2009) considers access as a temporary and situational consumption, contrary to ownership in which long-term interactions are developed with possessions. Contrary to sharing, ownership is not transferred; the consumer only gains the right to access an object. Besides, altruism is not a necessity in access contrary to sharing (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

Access that was a more inferior consumption mode in the past has gained popularity with the changes in the sociocultural policy of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Access is more common in situations that consumers want to liberate themselves from the physical, emotional, and social obligations of ownership (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Consumers value freedom and flexibility to change their affiliations, rather than attaching themselves to a product or a brand (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Ownership is seen as a burden for the consumer who is always looking for diversity and flexibility (Matzler et al., 2015). Therefore, access is appreciated in terms of the freedom it provides to acquire flexible lifestyles and identities that consumers desire.

In this direction, there are many reasons why people prefer access instead of ownership. According to Lawson et al. (2016), these reasons range from the search for diversity to low prices, to search for status and environmental awareness. According to Edbring et al. (2016), flexibility and ephemeral nature of use are among the reasons why consumers prefer access to ownership. Also, access provides the opportunity to experience a new lifestyle for consumers who can't afford luxury brands, products, and services (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). For example, by using a car-sharing platform, consumers can reach for a range of automobile types and brands, rather than having a single brand. Thus, when consumers prefer access to ownership, they feel objects like their own and develop ephemeral relations with them (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

According to Cheshire et al. (2010), the costs of acquiring and maintaining a property over time, instability in social relations, and uncertainties in the labour market have made possessions less accessible and more unstable than it was before. As a result, there is now a decline in the ownership of previously requested product categories. Recent research highlights that there is a gradual decrease in the purchase of cars in Britain, Turkey, and the USA (Edwards, 2019). Similarly, house ownership rates have decreased gradually. By 2025, it is foreseen that people living in urban areas will prefer renting rather than acquiring properties since they will not be able to meet rising housing prices (Osbourne, 2015). Another work by the World Economic Forum predicts that by 2025, 17% of the global hotel sector's annual revenues will be in short-term rentals that are now 7% (Bakker & Twining-Ward, 2018).

The development of access-based consumption in the hospitality industry is also stimulated by these trends. Peer-to-peer accommodation has emerged as a response to the problems of assessing inactive resources in the traditional tourism system (Botsman, 2014). Peer-to-peer economy, which allows direct use of idle resources and minimises transaction costs, provides alternative solutions to touristic consumption by providing digital transparency and price comparison (Yannopoulou et al., 2013). In this regard, the tourism sector has undoubtedly been one of the sectors that are most affected by the developments of internet technologies in the last two decades. Digitalisation has

changed tourism from top to bottom. Discovering new places, making reservations, planning what to do during holidays, and even post-holiday assessments are now online.

Technological development has brought about a variety of ways of doing business that leads the hospitality industry to undergo a rapid change. Improvements such as the increase in the habit of travelling, the easy transportation between cities and countries, and the power of social media are leading to new approaches for the hospitality industry. The annual increase in the number of travelling people, lower search, track, and verification costs of booking through digital and mobile technologies, growing interest in more authentic experiences are some of the factors driving the growth of access in the accommodation sector (Bakker & Twining-Ward, 2018).

However, the fact that travellers prefer more affordable accommodation and turn to alternative channels can be a threat to the economy and sustainability of the hotel industry (Akbar & Tracogna, 2018). Therefore, assessing the impacts of access-based consumption will provide relevant bases for the hospitality industry (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2015). Moreover, for marketing practitioners in the hospitality industry, it is critical to have a better understanding of consumer behaviour in access-based consumption.

2.2. *The new luxury in the age of access*

Although there is an increasing number of studies concerning the meaning of luxury, there is still little research that focuses on the meaning of luxury within access-based consumption. In this regard, access-based consumption raises questions about the nature and conceptualisation of luxury (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). Traditional luxury goods and brands were characterised by high prices, outstanding quality, uniqueness, and aesthetics (Keller, 2009). However, the meaning of luxury has changed over time. Luxury that was a social phenomenon has become more individual and has shifted its locus of value to the symbolic and then the experiential over time (Berthon et al., 2009). Today consumers value inconspicuous and tasteful luxury experiences rather than conspicuous consumption. In this regard, there has been a societal shift to inconspicuous consumption and preference for access-based luxury (Eckhardt et al., 2015).

The meaning of luxury has been transformed, as the luxury has become more available and affordable (Von Wallpach et al., 2020). Furthermore, postmodernity has dramatically changed the definition of luxury, adding more democratised forms of luxury for the masses (Atwal & Williams, 2009; Cristini et al., 2017). Luxury consumption has also changed its perception from being an indicator of a particular social class or lifestyle (Hemetsberger et al., 2012) to a more socially constructed and subjective experience (Roper et al., 2013). Therefore, there is an increased demand for experiential luxury rather than a material luxury. It means that the elite class may prefer to enjoy moments of pleasure rather than buying the latest handbag or sports car model (Eckhardt et al., 2015).

An alternative view has emerged that considers luxury as more subjective, personal, and fluid (Roper et al., 2013). According to this view, consumers attach their own meanings to identify what should be regarded as a luxury (Bauer et al., 2011). According to Cronin et al. (2012), even a sense of new luxury can be experienced by consumers through their most mundane activities and everyday routines. In this regard, the traditional view of luxury fails in explaining the luxury consumption in the age of access. Therefore, it is required to redefine the meaning of luxury from a consumer perspective. As consumer experiences gain more importance in understanding luxury consumption, some authors define luxury from a consumer-based perspective. Luxury definition from a consumer perspective indicates a more ephemeral, immaterial, and transient consumption (Berthon et al., 2009; Hemetsberger et al., 2012).

That implicates a shift from material luxury to immaterial luxury. While material luxury is more about the luxury of goods and services, immaterial luxury is about the consumption of nonmaterial things such as experiences and freedom.

2.2.1. *Luxury of experiences*

Previous studies emphasise that the meaning of luxury arises in three dimensions of consumption practices as symbolic, functional, and experiential (Berthon et al., 2009; Vickers & Renand, 2003). However, Roper et al. (2013) found that consumers give more emphasis on the experiential side of their luxury consumption rather than the material ownerships. Hemetsberger et al. (2012) also argue that having may be a problem if consumers have become less materialist today. Luxury that was more about the brand and product quality is becoming more about experiences and emotions today. Luxury is not necessarily attached to solid objects such as expensive jewellery, status cars, or large houses. Personalised experiences are especially replacing the consumption of luxury objects. In this sense, experiential luxury consumption is gaining importance in contrast to material luxury consumption (Bardhi et al., 2020). In the last decade, research has revealed that consumers experience little luxuries through enjoyable moments (Bauer et al., 2011; Hemetsberger et al., 2012). Von Wallpach et al. (2020) also conceptualise luxury as an experiential temporal moment that provides a highly significant change in one's life. Hemetsberger et al. (2012) argue that luxury has become a part of consumers' everyday lives where they might experience meaningful moments as a luxury. Consumers no longer invest in traditional luxury, but they prefer sharing or investing in major experiences as well as little meaningful moments (Von Wallpach et al., 2020) that make their experiences luxurious.

Recent studies (Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2019; Von Wallpach et al., 2020) show that luxury is becoming very subjective and contextual in this sense. Every moment has the potential to become a moment of luxury as they have certain experiential qualities. Even any consumer experience may be perceived as luxurious if consumers attach luxury meaning to it (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). According to Bauer et al. (2011), luxury is context- and self-related for consumers that can make a rare moment of pleasure a luxury (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Consumers' luxury experiences are considered much more than an extension of consumers' selves (Belk, 1988), rather indicates an opportunity for consumers to switch between different selves with symbolic consumption and pleasure and enjoyment of special moments, self-enhancement, and self-transcendence (Hemetsberger et al., 2012).

2.2.2. *Luxury of freedom*

Several studies also establish a connection between luxury and freedom (Bauer et al., 2011; Hemetsberger et al., 2012; Llamas, 2016). Perception of luxury consists of the feeling of liberation, to be free from 'pressures, schedules, deadlines, stress, cultural and social constraints, routines, banal chores, offices, economic restrictions, and sources of authority' (Llamas, 2016). Lack of these tasks or the desire for being free from all these tasks, routines, and restrictions are new luxuries. Being the owner of one's time and breaking free from time and space constraints are also perceived as luxuries by consumers (Llamas, 2016).

Bauer et al. (2011) found that luxury reflects itself in a more escapist and flexible nature from a consumer perspective. Hemetsberger et al. (2012) also found that luxury can be more transient, situation-specific, and have an escapist nature integrated into consumers' everyday lived experiences. They argue that luxury is something inherently experiential as it manifests in moments of luxury that include the rare and the precious. Self-experiences that include escaping the profanity of everyday life by transforming common everyday situations into special moments are also a part of luxury consumption (Hemetsberger et al., 2012).

Moreover, Holmqvist et al. (2020) conceptualise luxury experience as 'a hedonic escape from the worries of everyday life.' Isolating oneself from others and enjoying time alone, factually, or mentally switching between different selves at different times that creates a consciousness of being free is also a luxury. Self-liberation can actualise due to a force that frees oneself from social pressures and external conditions. That is possible with the existence of unexpected spare time experienced as moments of luxury (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). These moments of luxury are

considered as the little moments that involve escapes that interrupt and contrast the profanity of everyday life and rare moments that creates a major life-altering change (Von Wallpach et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Von Wallpach et al. (2020) argue that consumers experience luxury at the moment when they feel free, alive, and connected with nature. Therefore, luxury involves experiences that liberate consumers from the burdens of everyday life. According to this view, consumers escape from social restrictions and immerse themselves in an alternative experiential context (Cova et al., 2018). Holmqvist et al. (2020) also argue that the main component of the luxury moment is temporary escapism. In this view, luxury is a moment that offers consumers a hedonic and intense escape for a very brief time regardless of financial means. By 'fostering brief, ephemeral breaks from routine' (Holmqvist et al., 2020), and oscillating between different selves (Hemetsberger et al., 2012), consumers try to 'create new identities and realities' (Atwal & Williams, 2009, p. 343) with escapism.

3. Materials and methods

A netnographic methodology is used in this paper to investigate how consumers manifest their interactions with luxuries, and what constitutes luxury for consumers within access-based consumption. Access-based consumption has gained momentum with the development of internet-based technologies, as access practices are often enabled by digital platforms that connect consumers. Consumers who are interested in access-based consumption are gradually using these platforms to spread information. They are increasingly active online to share their opinions, experiences, and feelings with others on these platforms. In this regard, netnography is considered as the most compatible method for this study, as the transactions take place through online platforms, and most of the discussions and interactions of consumers are existing in the online environment.

Netnography is the most appropriate research method for studying different types of online communities like forums, bulletin boards, and websites (Kozinets, 2002). The method is defined as 'a qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62). Kozinets (2015) also considers this method as 'positioned somewhere between the vast searchlights of big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis.' It is a specialised type of ethnography but differs from ethnography as it is based on online observations (Kozinets, 2010). Moreover, netnography is faster, simpler, and less expensive compared to ethnography (Kozinets, 2006).

The netnographic study involves the stages of planning and *entrée*, data collection, analysis and interpretation, ethics, and representation.

3.1 Planning and *entrée*

The researcher decides which community to examined in the planning and *entrée* step (Kozinets, 2010). Airbnb Plus official website is chosen as the community for netnographic research. Airbnb is a website specialised in accommodation consists of millions of users to help travellers to find accommodation. Airbnb offers travellers temporary short-term usage, which is one of the main characteristics of access-based consumption. Unlike traditional rentals, Airbnb also meets the other characteristics of access-based consumption by 'being enabled through digital technology, being more self-service, and more collaborative' (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012). Airbnb is a peer-to-peer matching service that provides owned goods to redistributed when needed. That makes Airbnb services 'a form of access achieved through redistribution markets' (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012).

Airbnb Plus, on the other hand, is a listing targeting four and five-star hotel chains that dominate the luxury travel segment of the hospitality market. It consists of the highest quality houses from hosts who are renowned for their attention to detail. Every house in Airbnb Plus is verified with

a Plus badge by quality checking to ensure quality and design. After being verified with over 100 quality checks to provide maximum comfort, the houses get the Plus Badge (www.airbnb.com/plus). This quality check process is similar to 5-star hotel rating systems. Even most of the required amenities for Airbnb Plus homes are the same as those found in higher-end hotels. Along with the primary requirements like smoke detectors, essential cooking appliances, and supplies, Airbnb Plus houses also meet modern amenities like 5 Mbps Wi-Fi, a cable TV, and a full set of coffee and tea supplies (Priday, 2018). Airbnb Plus offers extraordinary houses like igloos, tree-houses, glasshouses that enable travellers to have unique experiences as well as houses that meet the highest standards in terms of style and attention to detail. Users of Airbnb are expected to have more luxury experiences than the users of other access systems such as Uber or Zipcar, as it enables users to afford a more luxurious lifestyle by renting a full-equipped house, especially in Airbnb Plus. As the online reviews of Airbnb Plus are publicly available, and these reviews are considered as reflections of consumer experiences with Plus houses, Airbnb Plus official website is chosen to collect data for this research.

Airbnb Plus official website is also chosen for the quantity and focus of the postings. This community that doesn't require registration to see members' posts enables researchers to reach thousands of online reviews about houses. Therefore, the community meets the criteria to conduct netnography defined by Kozinets (2010) as having heterogeneous participants and descriptively rich data.

3.2. Data collection

Netnographic data has three forms which represent the stance of the netnographer. First, is the archival data found, collected, or gathered from online communities. Second is the elicited data collected through researcher participation, interaction, and social experience. The final is the produced data created through the researcher's reflexive field notes (Kozinets, 2015). This study adopts an observational approach that the researcher only observes the community without taking active participation (Kozinets, 2010). Therefore, the findings of this study are based on the archival data obtained by directly copying the online reviews. Working with archival data is a way of collecting data unobtrusively, which results in a more naturalistic data analysis that eliminates researcher bias (Fisher & Smith, 2011; Nelson & Otnes, 2005; Wei et al., 2011).

Data is collected from online reviews of guests for the featured houses on the Airbnb Plus official website. Total netnographic data consist of 39 pages that incorporate 1362 online reviews. The researcher collected the data from May-October 2019. Downloaded messages were posted between 2017 and 2019. It is checked whether each data fit the available categories. The essential thing in this process is whether the category reaches a saturation. Failure to produce any new knowledge, perspective, or concept may indicate that saturation has been achieved. In this sense, data saturation is achieved when no new ideas or themes emerged before 2017. According to Kozinets (2015), this is a good indicator that enough data is collected in netnography.

3.3. Analysis and interpretation

Data is analysed with the help of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVivo). With this program, collected data is organised into similar categories. For the data analysis, an inductive approach is adopted in coding that makes it possible to draw inferences from individual observations of qualitative data. This inductive approach embraces building up the individual observations in stages, then ordering and arranging them to make general statements about the phenomenon (Kozinets, 2015). The study followed a two-step coding process that includes open coding and selective coding. Open (initial) coding links the qualitative data to the issues identified in the community. This process also involves the comparison of codes for their similarities and differences. Then selective coding is performed to discover the categories in the data. Selective coding uses the initial (open) codes to form categories. In the selective coding phase, recurrent codes are

categorised into core groups. These core groups are used to collect more data to code. Thus, this process ensured to identify the main themes that exist in the data. These main themes are used to interpret the qualitative data by transferring of meaning within these themes. In this process, verbatim quotations of the users are also used to illustrate the meanings in conversations.

In the coding phase, analysing the data by more than one analyst is considered as the most significant factor increasing the reliability of the research. Therefore, for the reliability of the study, intercoder reliability is used as a way of analyst triangulation (Patton, 2014). Intercoder reliability provides a means for checking the consistency between two or more researchers in the coding process. Therefore, the process enables a reliability check in qualitative research. It is also fundamental for the rigour of the analysis as more than one researcher's coding scheme is taken into consideration (Creswell, 2015). The intercoder reliability check was carried out in two rounds with two coders (researcher and another coder). In the first round, the researcher developed a draft coding frame and applied this to the data using NVivo. Then the second coder, experienced in coding the qualitative data, used this coding frame to code the data units independently. The second coder was asked to code 50 randomly chosen excerpts and assigned 45 of the excerpts to the same category as the researcher. Thus, agreements among the coders produced a value of .90 that is an acceptable level of reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the second round, we also arranged a meeting to discuss the differences and potential reasons for inconsistency. In this round, the coding frame was revised, and the researcher coded the entire data by considering the two independent coding practices.

3.4. Ethics and representation

In this research, the researcher has a more observational stance in the research process. As Airbnb Plus official community is a public site, the researcher did not seek approval from users. Public websites are the sites that are open to any browser and don't require registration with a password. Although Kozinets (2006) considers non-disclosure as an ethical issue, gaining consent is not required when the data is publicly available (Mkono & Markwell, 2014). EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) also allows social media researchers to use public data without gaining consent.

4. Findings

Most of the visitors prefer to stay in Plus houses to live enjoyable experiences with their friends or family. Their comments indicate that these experiences include celebrities such as birthdays, honeymoons, expensive bridal traditions like destination bachelorette parties, bridal showers, and visits for various aims such as photo shooting and filming: 'We celebrated my sister's 40th birthday with a small group for the weekend'; 'We booked the home for a 2-night stay for a bachelorette party.'; 'All of my friends and I were so grateful to have the whole place to ourselves to celebrate my 30th.'; 'We hosted a Bridal Shower with a number of guests'; 'This place was beyond amazing and made a birthday very special.'; 'My husband and I decided to spend a few nights away in the Berkshires for our honeymoon, and couldn't have picked a more magical place.'; 'Valerie was awesome and allowed us to use her space for a photo shoot. Our pictures were iconic with the gorgeous light.'

These experiences in Airbnb Plus are considered as a luxury which manifests itself in most of the reviews: – 'If you want a luxury stay in downtown LA, this is it!'; 'It is million dollars living at its finest.'; 'This is the perfect blend of luxury and comfort with a unique vibe.'; 'My team really felt spoilt and it was truly a luxury weekend away for everyone.'; 'Everything from communication with the management to the check-in process to all the included amenities felt like a luxury experience.'; 'The place is an architectural gem, and it truly feels like a very luxurious "nest" in the trees.'; 'The most beautiful fresh flowers in every single room and a daily delivery of fresh bread are only a facet

of our tailor-made luxury experience.’; ‘Wow this is probably the most stylish, super-luxe place we have stayed in.’; ‘I personally used the hot tub which was so obnoxiously luxurious that I felt like I was in a movie.’

Several studies also indicated that weddings, bachelorette parties, honeymoons, and bridal showers are celebrations that include luxury experiences or used as a symbol of luxury (Cowan & Spielmann, 2017; Durinec, 2013; Lee et al., 2020; Montemurro, 2006). Findings show that consumers’ luxury experiences are linked with their pursuit of uniqueness and craving for freedom. Consumers stay in Plus houses because they consider uniqueness as a source of happiness and getting away as a way of freedom, both of which can be considered as manifestations of the search for luxury moments in access-based consumption.

4.1. Pursuit of uniqueness

The pursuit of uniqueness manifests itself in the comments about unique houses and unique experiences. By renting a Plus house, expensive, unique, and rare practices are experienced by visitors. They frequently share their unique experiences to express their satisfaction with Plus houses. Uniqueness was mostly ascribed to the design and authenticity of the houses. However, visitors appreciate some unique houses also for the modern amenities they offer. Some online reviews exemplify a reflection of the functional value derives from the fact that these places offer excellent quality with the amenities Airbnb users need. Examples are below in Table 1:

4.2. Craving for freedom

Users also try to escape from everyday life by staying in Airbnb Plus. With indulgence in special/ magical moments and activities in unique Plus houses, consumers represent a desire for being free from all routines and restrictions of everyday life. The desire for freedom especially manifests itself in reviews about the experiences that make Plus users detach from the world. There are also reviews which state the special touches of Plus houses that create a getaway experience for the modern vacationers (See Table 2). As these reviews illustrate, experiences such as being with nature, falling asleep looking at the stars, watching the sunset at a treehouse, are evaluated as getaway experiences that enable them to gain freedom. These getaway experiences take them away from their burden

Table 1. Sample Quotes for the Pursuit of Uniqueness.

Pursuit of Uniqueness	Quotes
	‘This is certainly one of the most unique properties we’ve ever stayed in’
	‘Staying in Denise’s place was a totally unique and fabulous experience. The silo and property are like nothing else I’ve ever seen.’
	‘This place is like taking a step back in time into an action movie from the ‘70s.’
	‘It’s as though the 1970s had a party, in central Mexico and this is the polaroid picture to prove it.’
	‘This home has been carefully curated with intentional design to create a truly unique atmosphere.’
	‘One of a kind, vintage furnishings, indoor bar, ... indoor fountain, 40 ft ceilings, and marble tub in the master bathroom’
	‘Gorgeous home, unique, stylish, and well-thought-out in its design.’
	‘We walked in and felt like we were in a photo shoot. The design and decor of this house is so unique and beautiful.’
	‘It’s like a 5+ star hotel, with a huge beautifully-designed space.’
	‘Attention to detail and unique touches make this home really stand out.’
	‘Every detail from beautiful antiques to the hand-painted mural adds to the inviting and luxurious vibe of this house.’
	‘This place is straight out of a fairytale. But a very stylish fairytale.’
	‘I especially love how well equipped the kitchen was with plenty of plates, cutlery and extras.’
	‘The house is also set up with high-tech amenities to keep the modern vacationers happy.’
	‘The house itself was also very accommodating with a full kitchen, a lounge, TV, football table, laundry, bathroom and enough room upstairs for everyone to sleep.’

Table 2. Sample Quotes for the Craving for Freedom.	
Craving for Freedom	Quotes
	<p>'A great place to get away from the world'</p> <p>'Beautiful escape in a magical setting. This is truly one of a kind experience'</p> <p>'We most enjoyed staying back in the Silo disconnecting a bit from the world.'</p> <p>'If you are looking to just get away from it all and just chill and be with nature, this is your place.'</p> <p>'Falling asleep looking at the stars and waking up to blue skies through those big silo windows were truly magical moments for us and we can't wait to come back!'</p> <p>'Though the pictures of the house are beautiful they cannot convey the magnificent atmosphere of the house and sitting at one of the two verandas watching the sunset against the mountains.'</p> <p>'We loved this magical retreat'</p> <p>'This is the kind of the house that you would want to just do nothing and relax in for the whole afternoon. There's a lot of space to be with your own thoughts, or spend time together, as you wish.'</p> <p>'I can't imagine a better place for anyone who wants a calm, centring time with a loved one in a uniquely beautiful, rustic setting.'</p> <p>'So romantic! So comfortable! So beautiful! So relaxing! So natural! Calming vibes, unlike anything I've experienced. We felt like we were in another world and time.'</p> <p>'An architecturally unique space for relaxation, creativity and inspiration'</p> <p>'We did yoga on the deck surrounded by lush greenbelt views on all sides'</p> <p>'If you want to impress your date for a weekend getaway, or if you're a writer who needs an inspiration..or if you want to just relax and listen to birds, this might be the place for you.'</p> <p>'If this place doesn't heal you and bring you happiness I don't know what well.'</p> <p>'This place is like a fairy tale'</p> <p>'My experience was out of a dream!'</p> <p>'This property is the picture of a perfect dream home.'</p> <p>'This house is everything we could have dreamed of and more.'</p> <p>'This treehouse is absolutely magical!'</p> <p>'I am afraid I have fallen in love with a home that I can only wish to call my own.'</p> <p>'If we ever have the opportunity to own another home, this would be what we would want.'</p> <p>'Definitely, a place for travellers to place on their bucket list.'</p>

work to a magical relaxation in a calm place. Even some reviews emphasise the healing and inspirational aspects of the experiences with Plus houses. Examples of quotes are below in [Table 2](#):

The search for freedom also leads modern vacationers to seek dreamy experiences. While being fully immersed in these experiences, users feel a sense of freedom. Most of the online reviews demonstrate that consumers evaluate their experiences with Plus houses as something dreamy. That is supported by some online reviews which define the Plus houses as their dream home (See [Table 2](#)). As these quotes illustrate, users attribute their search for freedom to the experiences in Plus houses that make their dream come true. When describing their experiences with the Plus houses, users frequently use metaphors, ‘like a dream,’ ‘like a fairy-tale,’ ‘like a movie,’ which reflects the luxury experiences that they have in staying Airbnb Plus. These experiences involve a dream-come-true or bucket-list realisation. Staying in a unique Plus house is a getaway experience, but it is particularly appreciated by travellers for whom it is meaningful to have a symbolic relationship with having freedom. Therefore, vacations are experienced as moments of freedom that manifest themselves in getaway experiences with Plus houses. That also means escaping the routine of everyday life by transforming a vacation into a special moment.

5. Discussion

This paper examines the concept of luxury in light of access-based consumption. How luxury is perceived and used has changed in contemporary consumer culture. In this regard, the purpose of this study was to explore consumers’ interactions with luxuries in terms of their accommodation practices within Airbnb Plus. Findings reveal that modern vacationers attribute their life satisfaction to having unique experiences with Plus houses. Previous research further shows that people are seeking more authenticity and trying to individuate their travelling experience (Steylaerts & Dubhghaill, 2012). Another study also suggests that the authenticity of Airbnb rentals increases their perception of value (Liang et al., 2018).

Findings also indicate that consumers prefer to stay in Plus houses as a getaway experience that has a psychological benefit that leads them to gain freedom by escaping from the burdens of everyday life. Metaphors referring to a state of freedom, such as ‘like a dream,’ ‘like a movie,’ ‘like a magic’ implicate escapism that users experience during their stay in Airbnb Plus. These kinds of metaphors indicate a mental oscillation between different selves (Hemetsberger et al., 2012). These escapist experiences considered as moments of luxury by Holmqvist et al. (2020) are also defined by Von Wallpach et al. (2020) as interrupting moments of luxury. Interrupting luxury moments that provide participants with a sense of freedom, focus on how the moment can create luxurious by escaping from the routines of daily life. The value of these experiences is based on the feelings of freedom gained with an escape from everyday life (Von Wallpach et al., 2020). Freeing oneself from work pressures, routines, economic and social constraints, and the opportunity to do whatever one

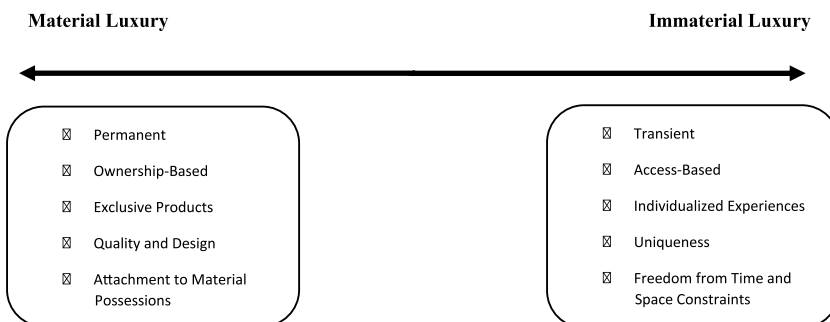


Figure 1. Luxury Spectrum.

wants as a leisure activity with freedom from economic restrictions are also found as perceptions of luxury by Llamas (2016).

While the notion of the new luxury has received adequate attention in the literature, it has yet understudied in terms of consumers' access-based accommodation experiences. In this regard, this study provides empirical evidence for the search for uniqueness and freedom in luxury consumption. The study reveals a new meaning for luxury: the pursuit of uniqueness and craving for freedom. The pursuit of uniqueness refers to the desire of consumers to seek uniqueness within access-based experiences. Craving for freedom refers to the consumers' desire to gain freedom by escaping the routines of daily life. Revealing that luxury involves the search for uniqueness and freedom in Airbnb users' experiences, this study sheds light on the nature of luxury in terms of consumers' accommodation experiences.

To visually conclude, the findings of this study are briefly outlined with a figure illustrating a luxury spectrum from material luxury to immaterial luxury (Figure 1).

Findings of the study support the previous research arguing that consumers are increasingly getting involved in immaterial forms of luxury consumption like experiences that are gradually becoming the 'manifestations of consumers' self-expression and lifestyles' (Weinberger et al., 2017). Therefore, light forms of luxury, such as accessible experiences, are expected to be valued more than luxury goods. As luxury becomes more accessible experiences create a sense of identity in a more unique and distinguishing way. Therefore, the indicator of status is becoming more about inconspicuousness, immaterial experiences, and authenticity, which are more difficult to imitate (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020).

Kauppinen-Räsänen et al. (2019) found that the value of luxury lies in its ability to provide meaningfulness and well-being. Their study shows that consumers may experience luxury in a non-commercial context, even with activities like running and gardening. Today, even slowing down has become a luxury as it's rare to have time to engage in deceleration as in the activities such as going on a yoga treat, walking on a pilgrimage (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2019). Being able to engage in these slow activities are considered as a new form of distinction and privileges that cannot be afforded by everyone (Bardhi et al., 2020).

Access-based services are not new for the luxury industry, as the luxury has always included access-based components. However, what has changed with the proliferation of access-based services is that luxury and premium goods have become more accessible to the masses. Access-based services are gradually democratising high-end luxury, altering the way consumers buy and use luxury products (Bardhi et al., 2020). Tailor-made unique products which were relevant for inaccessible luxury before, are becoming accessible for everyone today. Thus, access practices associated with the sharing economy are commoditizing luxury by making it more accessible. Pre-owned or second-hand luxury can be an example of this. Turunen and Pöyry (2019) found that better price-quality ratios and bargains motivate consumers in the purchase of second-hand luxury products. Amatulli et al. (2018) also found affordability as one of the determinants behind the purchase of vintage luxury products. Luxury product rentals such as 'Bag, Borrow or Steal', 'Rebelle', 'Eleven James', 'Rent the Runway' offer borrowing options for premium products with a low frequency of use. Such business models are expected to become more widespread also in durable consumer goods like houses and cars.

This study has important practical implications, especially for the hospitality industry. Marketing practitioners in the hospitality industry need to rethink what the travel experience means to the customer in the age of access. The modern vacationer has a shift to a new luxury that implicates seeking out more unique and authentic getaway experiences that serve as a way of access-based consumption. Today luxury consumption has also moved from material goods to immaterial experiences. Therefore, luxury consumption may refer to the importance that a consumer places on immaterial things like uniqueness and freedom.

In the contemporary world, where customer satisfaction is valued more than ever, the actors of the accommodation sector need to answer this need correctly. Accurate evaluation of the value added by Airbnb and similar platforms to customers and the promotion of the features that make

them stand out promptly is one of the main ways of addressing the changing tourist audience. In this regard, managers could enrich luxury services with more immaterial consumer experiences rather than material acquisitions. Instead of simply highlighting the hotel rooms, fine dining, or pool, they can emphasise the unique experiences they offer. They could also enable consumers to participate actively in the luxury experience (Holmqvist et al., 2020). Von Wallpach et al. (2020) even suggest creating a ‘space for deceleration and retreat in nature,’ which could be a relevant strategy in the hospitality industry.

This study extends the alternative view of luxury that has the potential to lead to new under-explored elements of luxury consumption in the age of access. Finding out that there is a new meaning of luxury within access-based consumption provides a background for developing effective strategies in communicating with modern vacationers. In this regard, the contribution of this paper is a better understanding of consumer behaviour in the hospitality industry, which could help business practitioners better promote their services to meet customer needs. However, this study only analyses the users of Airbnb Plus. Therefore, the findings need a generalisation to other access-based services. Cross-cultural studies are also required to compare the differences in various cultures, as cultural differences may emerge in terms of consumers’ perception of luxury.

6. Conclusion

This article argues that the meaning of luxury is undergoing rapid change and transformation. Now a combination of developing internet technologies and a shifting in consumer demands are leading to the rise of a more accessible and immaterial form of luxury consumption. A new luxury is emerging that reflects an appreciation for the non-ownership and the ephemeral that better adapts the access-based lifestyles of contemporary consumers (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). These consumers give more importance to transient luxury experiences rather than material possessions. They are looking for a sense of uniqueness where ownership of goods is no longer a signal of distinction.

This paper also proposes that escapist forms of luxury and experiences more connected with nature may be more valuable in the age of access. The ability to disconnect from the world and feel connected with nature may be a post-materialist interpretation of luxury. In this sense, accessing more unique experiences and escaping from mundane life is getting more desirable than having a luxury material or experiencing a traditional luxury vacation for contemporary consumers. Thus, uniqueness and freedom have become the dominant factors that distinguish luxury accommodation from a regular stay.

This study provides managers with significant implications regarding the use of their sources to create a more positive luxury experience with their customers. Today, managing a luxury brand for accommodation managers requires creating a world of freedom and telling a unique story. Providing consumers with unique experiences and creating a unique image is crucial to luxury management in the accommodation sector. Positioning their services as offering unique experiences can be a better strategy for managers in this sense.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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