Chapter 12
Is Meat a Luxury?

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ABSTRACT

Once perceived as a nutritional and occasional bonus, meat has now daily presence in the affluent West, serving human appetite for food. Although meat is not a product typically associated with luxury, its large ecological footprint poses the question whether it is time to challenge consumers’ perception about animal-based proteins. The purpose of this chapter is to gain a perspective on how consumers respond to the idea of meat being a luxury product. A 2017 Sydney study investigated the concept of luxury meat and meat consumption amongst three generations – Xers, GenY and GenZ. It shows the emerging meaning of luxury goods related to meat that is sustainable, healthy and socially responsible, in response to climate change and feeding the world’s population. The Sydney evidence also suggests meat is no longer essential for human health. A shift towards plant-based and new meat alternatives can create more compassionate and environmentally responsible choices.

The monopolising eater of animal flesh would no longer destroy his constitution by eating an acre at a meal. Percy Shelley, A Vindication of Natural Diet (1813)

INTRODUCTION

The concept of luxury has had various descriptions throughout the years (Hennings et al., 2013a and b). According to the French fashion icon Coco Chanel: “Luxury is a necessity that begins where necessity ends” (in Husic & Cicic, 2009, p. 235). This famous quote refers to a particular life style described by the Oxford Latin Dictionary (1992, p. 30) as “extravagant living, (over)-indulgence”. Similarly, luxury
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is defined as enlightening, providing extra pleasure and flattering simultaneously all senses and is “the appendage of the ruling classes” (Kapferer, 1997, p. 253). Luxury provides numerous forms of physical and psychological values (Wiedman et al., 2007). The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2009, n.p.) explains luxury as “a condition of abundance or great ease and comfort” or “something adding to pleasure or comfort but not absolutely necessary”. Phau and Prendergast (2000) suggest that luxury brands evoke exclusivity, high brand awareness and perceived quality, and consequently attract customer loyalty. The qualities of: (1) life style; (2) abundance and access; (3) pleasure; and (4) loyalty, are major characteristics associated with luxury. What this chapter does is look at meat through the lens of luxury.

Meat’s four luxury characteristics differ in a historical perspective – they manifest differently in the past, the present and the future. Whilst in the past availability and economic affordability determined meat’s luxury status, its environmental and public health impacts combined with ethical considerations are likely to influence its future. A diet with high meat intake has a much bigger environmental footprint – in relation to greenhouse gas emissions and climate change (Hedenus et al., 2014), biodiversity loss, land and water use (Marinova & Raphaely, 2017), peak phosphorus (White & Cordell, 2015), as well as serious negative consequences for public health (Marsh et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the global population continues to expand its per capita meat supply and consumption (Raphaely & Marinova, 2016) augmenting the need to understand the link with luxury.

The consumption of meat also differs across geographies and nations. In the West nowadays meat is a daily nutritional source and not considered a luxury food while in cuisines like Korean, Bangladeshi or Ethiopian, it is more like a seasoning rather than main meal (Kaye, 2014; Smith, 2017). Environmental and animal rights groups (e.g. Animal Liberation Front, 2006) on the other hand argue that meat should be treated as a luxury because of livestock welfare and ecological considerations. A shift to seeing meat as a luxury in the West, can also potentially help preserve and reaffirm the traditional diets in the developing world which are generally healthier and rely more on plant-based products. The aim of this chapter is to unpack the four luxury characteristics of meat in order to encourage a new attitude and behavioural changes towards reduction in the consumption of animal-based products.

MEAT AND LUXURY IN THE PAST

With industrialisation and economic development, meat has obtained an established presence for the mass-market consumers in the affluent Western countries as well as for those with higher incomes in the burgeoning economies of the developing world. This is a very new situation compared to meat’s previous status of rarity, exclusiveness and prestige in the past. Meat throughout human history was perceived as uncommon luxury symbolising unrestrained pleasure, power, dominance, virility, status and pure manliness. It was surrounded by many prohibitions, taboos, understanding for dominance and social hierarchy and meat myths (Fessler & Navarrete, 2003; Rozin et al., 2012; Dhont et al., 2014; Bogueva & Phau, 2016).

Life Style

In the olden times of ancient places such as Greece, Rome, Sparta and Egypt, meat – including beef, pork, sausages and poultry, was solely enjoyed by the wealthiest people in society (Fresco, 2016; Toussaint-Samat, 2009; Stambaugh, 1988). The best and most uncommon meat was usually devoured