Binomial Structure in Luxury: Analyzing Overseas Trip Experiences of Japanese Well-To-Dos (14:19)

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What is luxury? What does luxury mean to consumers? In this video, our investigation turns from tangible to non-tangible luxuries, for example, luxurious experiences. Using a photo-elicitation narrative method, we found that the luxurious experience of an overseas trip arises from binary concepts, that is, pairs of competing and contrasting concepts that appear simultaneously in our subjects' descriptions of their luxurious experiences. Four binary concepts include: (1) the ordinary versus the extraordinary, (2) the expected versus the unexpected, (3) the separate versus the connected, and (4) the efficient versus the free or "wasteful" use of time. We suggest that luxury not only emanates from gorgeous-appearing consumption objects but also from the internal-meaning structures within consumers.

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Other interesting themes expressed by participants included the notion that marketers will all to often “ whitewash black culture and try to sell it back to the black community” as well as the notion that blacks are still being represented in a manner that stereotypes them (i.e. offensive character depictions in fried chicken commercials, offense character depictions in stomach-medicine commercials, etc.), and the finally the idea that African Americans are sensitive to the difference between brands that “get them” and speak to them authentically, versus brands that are simply pandering.

Another relevant area touched on by the project is the notion of variations on “intergenerational brand loyalty”— on the one hand many professional African American participants mentioned wanting to distance themselves from brands to which their parents were loyal, but on the other hand many discuss “strange attachments” that are felt to particular products and/or brands. One of the more interesting examples was an executive woman whose mother was loyal to “regular Tide” and who wanted to distance herself from the brand, but then felt drawn to and eventually became loyal to a higher-end Tide line-extension.

### Introduction

What is luxury? What does luxury mean to consumers? This is the basic research question we would like to advance. So far we have been investigating the meaning of luxury, interviewing with people around the globe. Up until 2007, we interviewed mainly with ordinary people in New York and Tokyo, asking questions about their own properties which they think luxurious. Those properties were: plates of matrimonial gifts, collections of combs of her passed-away mother’s, her father-in-law’s curios, etc. We found that if the thing is to be her/his luxury, it has to have the following four characteristics: 1 Rarity, 2 Conspicuity, 3 Escape, and 4 Identity Reinforcement. This finding suggests that luxurious things mean not just gorgeous and deluxe appearances, but relevant and beneficial experiences to ordinary consumers. In the summer of 2007, we visited homes of Italian aristocrats in Florence, Italy. These aristocrats live in grand mansions which they inherited from their ancestors. We, however, found that for these ancestors the wealthy properties are not their luxury. Again, material abundance does not necessarily mean luxury.

This time our investigation turns from luxurious things to non-things, such as luxurious experiences. The reason is that during our interviews consumers frequently pointed out non-materialistic consumption are important part of their luxury. For example, one informant in New York told us bath a&amp;#8211;la-Japanese at her home is her luxury. Bath tub itself is a thing but its use and experience is her luxury. For this purpose in mind, we picked up wealthy people’s overseas trip as a typical example of non-materialistic luxurious consumption. Wealthy people frequently go overseas for traveling. For the Japanese rich people, overseas trip appears to be one of the few entertaining moments in life, as they are having busy city life and have strong needs to escape. They already own gorgeous houses and expensive branded fashions. Their abundant expenses go naturally to overseas trips. The question here is as follows: Why overseas trip is a luxury for wealthy consumers. What are they feeling while they are enjoying trips in foreign countries?

### Methodology

This time we adopted a method what we call photo-confrontation narrative. We first asked informants to pick up ten photos which they feel of luxury during their overseas trip. Then we interviewed the informants in what way they felt luxury during the overseas trip. We tried to search deeper meanings of their luxury. The informants were Keiichi, Junko and Mr and Mrs Tadenuma. These three people all live in the most upscale districts in Tokyo area, such as Shoto at Shibuya.

### Findings

Our utmost important finding is that luxurious experience of overseas trip arises from binomial concepts: two competing and contrastive concepts appeared simultaneously in their luxurious experience narratives.

- **Extra-ordinariness versus Ordinariness**

Overseas trip is usually extraordinary experience for everyone. People visit foreign countries, walking down towns they never knew, eating exotic foods, and meeting people of different habits and cultures. Overseas trip is thought to be unusual experience. However, as we take a close look how people feel during overseas trip, “ordinary feelings” are strongly sought in overseas trips. These wealthy people are enjoying luxury assuming they live there. They enjoy themselves when the tourists act and behave as local people, eating local foods, walking local streets, looking at the scenery as if local people see the scenery.

- **Expectedness versus Unexpectedness**

When we travel abroad, we usually make plans prior to visit, what to see, and what to eat. When we first visit Paris, many of us visit Eiffel tower. First time travelers expect to see what they have expected beforehand. However, unexpectedness is another thing they expect to experience. Expectedness and Unexpectedness is another dimension in rich people’s overseas trip experiences.

- **Separateness versus Connectedness**

In overseas trip, each moment is a precious experience. People meet new and curious things in each moment. In this regards, overseas trip is a moment-by-moment experience. However, if the trip has to be luxurious, the experience has to have factors related to past experiences and memory have an important meaning for overseas travelers. To repeat the past experience adds more luxury to the present overseas trip.

- **Non-wastefulness of time versus Wastefulness of time**

Time devoted to overseas trip is a valuable resource for everybody. They do not want to waste time during trips in foreign countries. They try to fully utilize the time while staying in overseas. However, wealthy people feel luxuriousness when they waste time. Wasting time is a luxury while they are spending time efficiently doing overseas trips. Not useful time spending is another way to feel luxuriousness.