Social Stratification and Luxury Consumption Value: Classifying Complaint Types of Korean Luxury Consumers

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The purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore Korean luxury consumers’ hidden and fundamental complaining intentions, which were constructed by socially symbolic luxury consumption values based on the hierarchically divided social contexts. To allocate individual consumers by stratus, the researcher originated 2X2 matrix utilizing the distinctive 2 levels of economic and cultural capital, that Bourdieu(1986) articulated as the major basis of social classes. Observations and in-depth interviews with twenty-four cases of Korean luxury clothing complainers were carried out from March, 2010 to June, 2011. The classified 4 groups were named as (1) ‘high class elite’, (2) ‘parvenus’ (3) ‘low income cultural elite’, and (4) ‘low class luxury seeker’. Complaint motivations influenced by their luxury consumption values were characterized respectively as (1) uniqueness of design, special services, (2) social recognitions, (3) design-related dissatisfaction, (4) exchange, refunds, and compensations. Complaint types of 4 groups were determined by their motivations, and classified as (1) expressing their opinion mildly on their ways to shop (2) direct aggressive voice complaint (3) complaint with preparations, taking plans to do actions, (4) website posting, negative word of mouth, and sabotage.

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Classifying Complaint Types of Korean Luxury Consumers

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This study was conducted in reference to two intertwining socio-cultural phenomena in Korea: (a) various and stratified motivational values of luxury clothing consumptions and (b) diversified types of post-purchase complaints against luxury clothing. Consumers’ high/low levels of cultural and economic capitals were applied as the major determinants of perceived luxury consumption value. Since there have been limited studies regarding distinguishing complaint types based on consumer’s economic & cultural class, this study might present a widen approach to conceptualize social value-oriented complaining types.

Complaint types of Korean consumers are various due to the different values they impose on luxury, and after all, due to the disparity of culture they are involved. The nation could not have had long-lasting dominant culture since 1910. After undergoing Japanese occupations and Korean War, there had been sudden social change through democratic labor movements. The rapid economic development gave rise to the sudden wealth, and barriers to the excess of luxury fashion products have been lowered due to the increase of wealth-creation opportunities in a variety of social statuses.

Social stratification refers to the prevailing structure of inequality within a society, and the relationship between social class and consumption value is the subject of a debate in sociological literature. In Bourdieu's (1986) point of view, the arrogation of distinction showing off economic power and cultural distancing is actively used by dominant social classes as a means of symbolically demonstrating their superiority. Luxury clothing functions as code allowing for social distinctions and individual’s ability to determine the fashion reflects their capitals. This study adopts the two conceptual forms of capitals, economic & cultural, to analyze the antecedent factors of luxury consumers’ complaining propensity.

The major purpose of this qualitative study is to develop a conceptual framework of categorizing the complaint types of economically and culturally stratified Korean luxury consumers. To allocate individual consumers by stratus, the researcher originated 2X2 matrix utilizing the distinctive 2 levels of economic and cultural capitals that Bourdieu (1986) articulated as the major basis of social classes. Thus, divided 4 social groups are characterized as luxury clothing consumers (1) with higher level of economic and cultural capitals, (2) with higher economic capital but lower cultural capital, (3) with lower economic capital but higher cultural capital, and (4) with lower economic and cultural capitals.

Additional purpose of this ethnographic research is to establish ‘capital scales’ to measure high/low levels of economic and cultural capitals in Korean society. The standards for high/low levels of economic capital will be partially set up by the monthly income figures of the affluent and the middle-income classes released by The Korea National Statistical Office (2009) imposing the lower limit of $9,023 for group 1 and 2, $3,176 for group 3 and 4. Origin of wealth and means of wealth accumulation will be further investigated through in-depth interviews, by checking if they inherited a fortune or earned sudden money.

The high/low levels of cultural capital will be established through observing respondents’ embodied state of cultural capital, i.e., opinion, attitude, tone of voice, typical body- movements, taste in culture (food, clothing, music, painting, exhibition, social activities), and mannerism. Bourdieu (1986)’s concept of legitimate cultural taste, e.g., frequency of attending culture exhibition, activities, and purchasing objectified state of cultural goods, is to be modified to fit Korean cultural contexts.

This study used grounded theory methodology to explore Korean luxury consumers’ hidden and fundamental complaining intentions, which were constructed by socially symbolic luxury consumption values based on the hierarchically divided social contexts. Respondents of this study are Korean luxury clothing complainers who are clearly identified as each of the 4 class groups. Since this research is in the working paper stage, up to the present, 24 cases were interviewed using a snow-ball sampling. Observations and in-depth interviews were carried out during four months from March, 2010 to June, 2011.

The classified 4 groups were named as (1) ‘high class elite’, (2) ‘parvenus’ (3) ‘low income cultural elite’, and (4) ‘low class luxury seeker’. Luxury consumption values for each group were characterized as (1) ‘individuality’: seeking differentiated clothing for individual distinction, (2) ‘conspicuousness’: having preference on well-recognized luxury brands, (3) ‘hedonism’: exploring various taste-suiting clothing for self-satisfaction, and (4) ‘conformity’: causing excessive consumption to meet ideal group norms. These 4 types of luxury consumption value distinctively influenced each group’s complaint motivations respectively, such as (1) uniqueness of design, special services, (2) social recognitions, (3) design-related dissatisfaction, (4) exchange, refunds, and compensations. Complaint types of 4 groups were determined by their motivations, and classified as (1) expressing their opinion mildly on their ways to shop (2) direct aggressive voice complaint (3) complaint with preparations, taking plans to do actions, (4) website posting, negative word of mouth, and sabotage.

Group 1 with high cultural capitals chose to complain mildly, and they could successfully communicate their dissatisfaction. Whereas, group 2 with less cultural capital, with poorly restrained manners in complaining, failed delivering what she demanded but expressing her anger. Both group 1 and 3, with high cultural capital asked for unique and better design. While group 1 complained based on their beliefs regarding the brand’s artistic accomplishment, group 3 required compensations in return to their design-related dissatisfaction. Group 3’s demands for the financial compensations were due to their lower level of economic capitals which leads to their high sensitiveness on price.

The level of economic capitals, however, was not the direct indicator of the level of price consciousness. Group 2, who accumulated sudden wealth and spend far more money on luxury clothing than other groups, seemed even more price sensitive than the other groups with less economic capitals, and group 4, who perceived relatively lower subjective value of money, refused to voice out. Instead, Group 1,2, and 3, who held relatively higher capitals than group 4 tended to exhibit greater self-confidence, and they were more willing to take risks and had positive attitude toward complaining.
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To relate or not to relate – How feature relatedness contributes to product value

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INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

New product concepts are often the result of combining features of two or more existing product concepts into one product. In most combinations one of the parent products can be considered the ‘base’ to which another product or part of another product (e.g., a single feature) is added. The present research examines new products where a single new feature is added to a base product. Building on Gill (2008) we propose that the fit between a given base product and the newly added feature can be better or worse, depending on consumers’ consumption goals. Consumption goals are defined as benefits that consumers seek in a consumption context (Gill 2008; Huffman and Houston 1993). They may differ according to dimensions such as (1) hedonic–utilitarian (i.e., whether a product offers experiential or functional benefits) and (2) feature relatedness (i.e., whether or not a new feature offers benefits related to a product’s core). While the effect of fit between the hedonic versus utilitarian consumption goals of the base and the added new feature has been examined previously (e.g., Gill 2008), we investigate the role of feature relatedness in determining the value of new product concepts.

Gill (2008) showed that the nature of the fit in the hedonic versus utilitarian consumption goals of the base and the new feature can have a differential effect on overall incremental product value. Specifically that for products with a utilitarian base, adding an incongruent hedonic feature improved overall product value perceptions more than adding a congruent utilitarian feature. In contrast, for products with a hedonic base, adding an incongruent utilitarian feature improved overall product value much less than adding a congruent hedonic feature. In other words, fit/congruence of consumption goals of the added feature is more valuable for a hedonic base product, but incongruence is more valuable for a utilitarian base product.

In the present research we investigate the second aspect of fit of consumption goals: namely, the extent to which the added new feature is related vs. unrelated to the base product’s core functionality. Consumption goals are related when a newly added feature enhances the core benefits in the base product (e.g., an improved battery increases the talk time on a cell phone). Consumption goals are unrelated when the new feature does not influence the core benefits in the base (e.g., a scratch-resistant screen does not affect the talk time of a cell phone). We propose that increases in product value of a base with an added new feature can be explained more accurately by also accounting for the effect of feature relatedness in addition to the fit on hedonic/utilitarian goals. More specifically, we predict that adding a new feature that is related to the core benefits of the base product will increase overall incremental value more than adding a new feature that is unrelated. Additionally, we expect that feature relatedness would explain changes in incremental value over and above those based on the fit between the hedonic versus utilitarian consumption goals of the new feature and the base.

METHOD AND RESULTS

We tested our predictions in a 2 (type of base: hedonic vs. utilitarian) x 2 (type of new feature: hedonic vs. utilitarian) x 2 (new feature relatedness: related vs. unrelated) factorial design. Two hundred and ninety-eight students from a mid-sized University participated in the experiments. All stimuli were pretested in order to match them as closely as possible with the proposed factor levels. In each condition participants read a scenario in which a new feature was added to either a hedonic base (mp3 player) or a utilitarian base (business smartphone). The newly added feature was either hedonic or utilitarian and (in addition) either related or unrelated to the product core feature/functionality. Overall incremental value (OIV) and incremental willingness to spend money (IWTSW) served as our main dependent variables (both measured on 7-point bipolar scales). The data was analyzed by means of two factorial ANOVAs for each dependent variable. We found a significant main effect of feature relatedness for both OIV, \( F(1, 290) = 6.00, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .02 \), and IWTSW, \( F(1, 291) = 4.94, p = .03, \eta^2_p = .02 \). That is, related new features increased both OIV and IWTSW more compared to unrelated features. In addition, we obtained a significant