Handbags as Carriers of Selves/Identities

—An existential-phenomenological research approach for handbag design

Keywords:
Consumer introspection, Identity construction, Handbag Design, Existential-phenomenology

1 INTRODUCTION

Handbags are a key merchandise assortment of accessibility in the luxury fashion world and their market value is significant and still continues to rise. For consumers, a handbag is more than a luxury accessory or fashion item. It might represent something significant in one’s life that with strong attachment (Belk, 1988; Karamika & Hogg, 2012). After all, there is a value that individual holds for these brands or possessions found inside the handbag, for the purpose of utility, enjoyment, representations of interpersonal ties, or identity/self-expression (Richins, 1994).

Therefore, in this project, further to a conventional interpretive study for thick description, a new interpretative study method is introduced—informants were asked to take out all the “little things” inside their handbags and share their stories with the objects. In recalling the associated experience along with these mundane possessions, we discover how the consumers internalize and express a sense of social concern in negotiating their self and social identity in symbolic or fashion item. It might represent something dear or as mundane choices in everyday life, so as to consider handbag design as a design of organizing the experience and meanings.

Through introspecting the experiences a person had along with the possession found inside the handbag, have a glimpse of how individual ascribes different and inconsistent social and cultural meanings to a product depending on the extent to which they share the collective imagination (Ritson, 1996).

2 OBJECTIVES

Seek to understand an owner’s subjective lived experiences with the ordinary possessions, which can be regarded as something dear or as mundane choices in everyday life, so as to consider handbag design as a design of organizing the experience and meanings.

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3 METHODOLOGY

1. Existential-phenomenological framework

With guided introspective exercises: to understand consumer lived experience along with their belongings (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993; Woodside, 2004).

2. 20 in-depth interviews; 3 months in Beijing; aged 25-35; middle-class—randomly-recruited female informants (to avoid gendered impact). Venues: coffee shops, bars, suggested by the informants—lifestyle disclosure.

3. 1.5 hrs-2 hrs/interview; semi-structured without a framework

4. Initiate more humanistic rumination of the handbag design: apart from functional and aesthetic perspectives, the handbag design should be further considered as design of symbolic carrier that enhances the interaction between the owners and the world they live as “being”.

4 FINDING & DISCUSSION

4.1 The outside-in dialectic of choices

The choice of the handbag was more than just maintaining congruence with her personality for self-expression purpose. Jasmine expressed a social concern to purchase goods that were culturally appropriated to assert her social position, especially in her mundane consumption experience (Hsu, 1972; Wong & Alvia, 1998). Her response reflected the first dimension of an outside-in dialectic of choice in her symbolic consumption decision (Liu, 2008) with two levels of consideration: 1) recouped the social norms and expectations matched with her social position; 2) unconsciously internalized those set of values and developed her personal preference to distinguish from others in her self-identity construction.

4.2 The partitioning of selves

If objects found inside the handbag were conscious exercises of freedom in making consumption choices (Elliot, 1999), the organization of the possessions in the bag reflected a conscious exercise of “manipulation” over the experience of a person’s self-identity construction. Apart from a practical utility purpose that the informants tended to organize their “clutters” into several small bags, the informants tried to sort out the value of things and the small bags. Since the utilitarian character and its economic value in exchange were derived from its meaning (Richins, 1994), the partitioning of selves could be referred as a space-separation of goods inside the handbag context, and the values are defined for informants’ mundane choices and organized according to the social meanings as ascribed to.

5 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STUDIES

1. Seek to understand an owner’s subjective lived experiences with the ordinary possessions, which can be regarded as something dear or as mundane choices in everyday life, so as to consider handbag design as a design of organizing the experience and meanings.

2. Through introspecting the experiences a person had along with the possession found inside the handbag, have a glimpse of how individual ascribes different and inconsistent social and cultural meanings to a product depending on the extent to which they share the collective imagination (Ritson, 1996).

3. Initiate more humanistic rumination of the handbag design: apart from functional and aesthetic perspectives, the handbag design should be further considered as design of symbolic carrier that enhances the interaction between the owners and the world they live as “being”.

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