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1 INTRODUCTION

Handbags are a key merchandise assortment of accessory 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; Karanika & 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 introspective research 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 luxury consumption, which discloses the innovative potential of a humanistic rumination of handbag design.

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.



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)



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”.

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, etc, suggested by the informants-lifestyle disclosure.
3. 1.5 hrs-2 hrs/interview; semi-structured without a set of priori questions concerning the topics—only to encourage their more extended, detailed and comprehensive description of the lived experiences.
4. The informants were asked to take out all of the things inside their bags one by one, and talked about any experiences with the possessions including personal stories and relationships with others.

All the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed through the interpretive group methods (Thompson et al., 1989). Photos were taken with informants' permission, and objects were taken separately/selectively due to some security issues or individual private concerns' or space limits.

Handbags as Carriers of Selves/Identities

—An existential-phenomenological research approach for handbag design

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



4 Finding & Discussion



Please refer to the appendix handbook for the detailed information of the informants and key finding data retrieved from the interviews.

1.1 The outside-in dialectic of choices



(left: Jasmine's Lanvin; right: Jasmine's Longchamp)

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 things that were **culturally appropriated** to assert her social position, especially in her mundane consumption experience (Hsu, 1972; Wong & Ahuvia, 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) conceived the social norms and expectations matched with her social position; 2) unconsciously internalized these set of values and developed her personal preference to distinguish from others in her self-identity construction.

1.2 The partitioning of sel(ves)



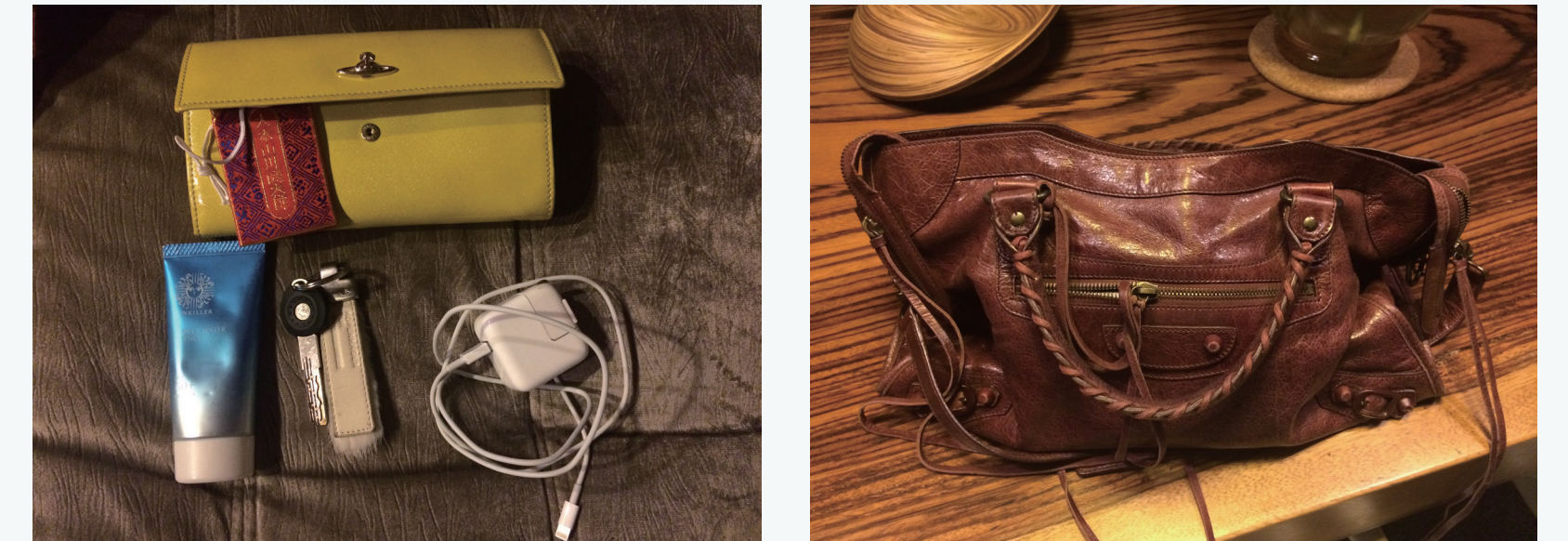
(left: Gloria's Longchamp handbag and 1. camera bag, from a handmade boutique in Beijing; 2. cosmetic bag, from Lamer; 3. bag for others, no brand. middle: Joanne's Cosmetic Bag, from Goyard. right: Fiona's handbag from MCM and 1. wallet, from Balenciaga; 2. namecard holder, from Come de Garson; 3. cosmetic bag, from Balenciaga)

If objects found inside the handbag were “conscious exercises of freedom in making consumption choice” (Elliott, 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 match up 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 consumption choices and organized according to the social meanings they ascribed to

2.1 Re-producing experience in memories at present



(left: Penny's movie ticket found from her Miumiu's wallet in her Marc-Jacobs handbag; right: Penny's movie diary booklet)



(CC's objects taken out from her Balenciaga's handbag: Wallet, from Vivienne Westwood; Sunblock Cream, from Shiseido; Key ring, prize from Sweden competition; Adaptor for Apple)

Both informants claimed that these “clutters” were memorable because of the recall of experiences they had along with the possession, even they might go “invisible” and blended into the context after putting into handbag setting (Coupland, 2005). The two quotes demonstrated two levels of meaningful phenomena: 1) as in Penny's case, consumers would actively re-construct their lived history through re-organizing insignificant objects (i.e. symbols of single event happened) to the structuring of a significant lived theme throughout lifespan. 2) However consumers might also unconsciously overlook some significant object that reminds a flash back of their memorable experience in the past relating to the everyday experience in present as in CC's case.

2.2 A present security by overcoming future uncertainty



(left: Claire's iPhone and the earphones; three tissue bags; wallet from Fendi; cartoon bag for others; middle: Wendy's scarf, from Vivienne Westwood in her handbag, from Goyard; Right: Kinki's cosmetics in her cosmetic bag, from Issey Miyake)

Consumers experienced a sense of control over themselves and the context they were in, and to prevent situation that it may go out of control (Thompson et al., 1990). This **sense of overcoming future insecurity** could be found inside the handbag context as many possessions found inside the handbag that the informant did not often use. It was something that they could always **exercise a control over their appearance in front of others**, and overcome any uncertainty in emerging situations. The meanings of products inside works similar to Coupland's (2005) idea of “invisible brands” that the locus of meanings of these products were tied to the habits of the socialization process in everyday life; our finding contributed to address the main drive for “invisibility and camouflage in the everyday life process” was the overcoming of social uncertainty that threaten presentation of self in the near future, including the emerging social context or immediate others.

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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