How a Luxury Brand Can Enhance its Product Attractiveness in Retail Environment?

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to investigate the influence of social status perception and interest in social issues on the authenticity perceived by consumers of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities of premium brands.

Research design, data, and methodology – Behavioral experiments were performed to observe the impact of consumers' social status perception and interest in social issues on their perceived authenticity of CSR motivation related to premium brands and consumer behavior.

Results – We found that the possibility of social mobility and the degree of individuals' interest in the environment and CSR enable them to reconsider the authenticity of CSR motivation, thereby having positive effects on purchase intention, willingness to recommend the product, and brand value. This research also showed that proactive customers who seek to move up the social ladder have a stronger interest in social issues such as the environment or CSR.

Conclusions – Our research suggests that when conducting a consumer segmentation analysis for the launch of CSR products (products released for CSR), a positive mind-set toward social mobility serves as an effective criterion.

Keywords: Perceived Authenticity. CSR Motivation. CSR Interest. Social Mobility. Product Attractiveness.

JEL Classifications: C90, M14, M31.

1. Introduction

According to a 2011 study on the possibility of socioeconomic

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status elevation of oneself and the children generation by Statistics Korea, the negative response toward the socio-economic status elevation of oneself was 58.7%. Also, according to the Hyundai Research Institute in 2013, 3 out of 4 people considered the chances of status elevation to be low despite individual efforts, showing a dominantly negative attitude towards hierarchical mobility of Korean society.

On the other hand, the 2014 study on the dynamic changes of income class by the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs revealed that the ratio of middle and high income households remaining in the same respective income class was approximately 7 times that of the ratio of households that moved to a different class. This apparent trend in Koreais similar to that shown by other OECD countries. This trend was already approached critically by scholars and studied regarding social hierarchy mobility and status elevation desire (Lenski, 1954; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006; Wegener, 1991).

These previous studies focused on the mobility between classes, however, this study aims to investigate the effect of optimism towards future socioeconomic status of individuals in each class on consumer decision making. In this study, the perception of authenticity about the CSR activities of premium brands was used as an example of social trust that consumers can hold from a marketing context.

Then, if consumers felt that the CSR motivation of premium brands was genuine, how would that affect the behavior of consumers? How do consumers that feel premium brands have genuine motivations behind CSR perceive social structure? These questions were the research problems for this research.

In this regard, the following research objectives were established. First, verification of whether the social status perceived by the consumer affects the authenticity of the motivation behind CSR was to be conducted. Second, the company mentioned above practices CSR despite losing its profit the authenticity of the motivation behind CSR was verified. Lastly, whether the authenticity behind CSR influences purchase intention and brand evaluation was explored.

Overall, this study analyzed the effect of social structure perception on consumer behavior. The perception of social hierarchy was investigated by separating the perception on the individual and the perception on society. The perception on the

individual was analyzed with regard to how optimism towards one's elevation of social status through effort affects consumer decision making. In detail, the degree to which a consumer believes that his or her future social status will rise was measured using the "social ladder."With regard to the perception on society, the degree of interest in social issues such as environmental conservation or CSR of companies was investigated to observe how they affect consumer decision making.

This study conducted literature review and empirical experiment to determine the influence of CSR motivation authenticity according to the social structure perception by the consumer on consumer behavior. Literature review was performed to examine social status perception, interest towards social issues, and CSR motivation authenticity.

2. Literature Review

In this study, the consumer perception of social structure was thought to affect the trust in society and perception of authenticity behind CSR motivation. Social structure perception can be categorized into perception from an individual standpoint and perception from a social standpoint (Delhey & Newton, 2003).

2.1. Social Status Perception Research

Socio-economic mobility is a concept that was discussed mainly in sociology and economics and refers to the ease with which members of society can move to different social hierarchies, especially status elevation (Van de Gaer, Schokkaert, & Martinez, 2001).

This is in common grounds with the understanding of individual and social structure perception being a major factor determining individual behavior and motivation (Chen et al., 2009; Oishi & Graham, 2010).

The probability of social class elevation not only affects the economic behavior of individuals (Graham & Picon, 2010), but also attitudes towards social relationships.

2.2. CSR Research

Especially, CSR has received attention as critical research subjects academically and have been studied in various fields (Malik, 2014), amounting to a bounty of studies. CSR research can be mainly categorized into CSR studies according to the corporate characteristics and CSR studies according to consumer characteristics.

An example of CSR research according to corporate characteristics is the study by Plewa et al. (2014) on not-for-profit sectors. The study concluded that corporate volunteering affects consumer perceptions of CSR image and this CSR image has a positive effect on consumer loyalty and word-of-mouth.

Also, CSR research according to the company size was also conducted. Lakshman et al. (2014) found that when a large company downsizes, CSR perceptions become negative. Tewari & Pathak (2014) studied the need for overall CSR by Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

Next, studies on CSR results according to consumer characteristics have been conducted. Mazereeuw-van der Duijn Schouten et al. (2014) found that Christian religiosity had an effect on the financial, ethical, and philanthropic attitudes of CSR. Kim et al. (2014) concluded that the self-monitoring degree of consumers affects the purchasing intention and CSR beneficiary positioning.

In particular, Yoon et al. (2006) analyzed CSR motivation by categorizing into 3 types. When consumers perceive the CSR motivation as sincere, the company image improved; when consumers perceive the motivation as ambiguous, there was no effect; and when consumers perceive the motivation as insincere, the company image was damaged.

Moreover, companies with a negative reputation could overcome its harmful reputation by increasing the advertisement to CSR ratio. Thus, when consumers perceive CSR motivation as genuine, the company image improved and their attitude towards the company becomes positive, a positive impact on the consumer decision making process.

2.3. Authenticity

In this study, authenticity or sincerity is defined as the positive emotion of consumers when the value based on pure intent of a company is delivered to the consumer during the process of providing product brand service. Authenticity is an expression widely used in marketing research.

Previous studies on authenticity can be largely categorized into studies on the effect of the brand attitude, purchase intent, and recommendation intent on the brand evaluation by consumers outside the company and studies on the effect of the company organization identity, relationships between executives and staff members, and organization commitment on internal consumers.

Unlike different marketing studies, authenticity research on the above two main branches have been relatively widely pursued through qualitative research methods (McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Liedtka, 2008;Thompson et al.,2006). In this regard, the concept of authenticity can be considered as an identity or ethical value, so it can be deduced that many researchers considered a qualitative approach to be more appropriate than a quantitative approach.

In that case, how can consumer perception of CSR motivation be measured regarding authenticity? For the measurement, a product that was released for CSR was selected as the object that the consumer observes to determine the authenticity of the CSR motivation. This was termed the CSR product in this article. Yoon et al. (2006) stated that CSR motivation authenticity contrasts with the corporate motivation for profit or image management. Therefore, determining whether a company CSR activity has a sincere intention is possible by determining whether the release of the CSR product was self-sacrifice or based on other hidden intentions.

From a company perspective, the concept of self-interest refers to the pursuit of sales or benefits to the brand and the concept of self-sacrifice is the abandonment of such pursuits.

When the consumer perceives that a CSR activity was motivated with authenticity such as pursuing CSR despite making sacrifices rather than having hidden motivations such as the pursuit of profit or benefits, positive impacts on the consumer purchasing intent, recommendation intent, and brand evaluation are expected. The following hypotheses were established based on this prediction.

<Hypothesis 1-1> An optimistic perception of social class by the consumer will have a positive effect on the degree of interest towards CSR.

<Hypothesis 1-2> An optimistic perception of social class by the consumer will have a positive effect the perceived authenticity of CSR motivation.

<Hypothesis 2> Interest in CSR by the consumer will have a positive effect on the perceived authenticity of the CSR product.

<Hypothesis 3> The perceived authenticity of CSR motivation will have a positive effect on the product appeal and attractiveness.

The research model of this study encompassing the above hypotheses is shown in <Figure 1>.
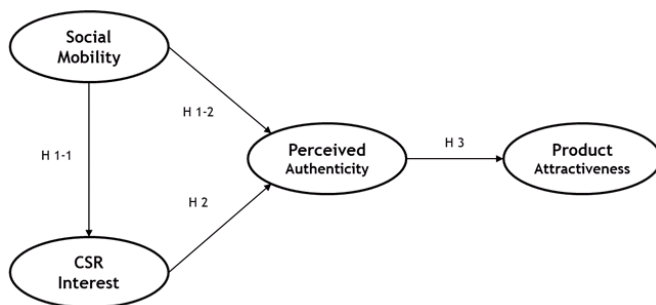
<Figure 1> Research model

3. Research Design

3.1. Pilot study

To start, luxury brands were termed as premium brands in this study for more clarity in this empirical study. This was done based on the prediction that the consumer response to the CSR activities of luxury brands will differ depending on the price and brand awareness and the companies that are commonly referred to as luxury brands have different prices and degrees of brand awareness. Since premium brands have a higher price range compared to regular brands, the profit margin is high. Thus, consumers perceive premium brands to have greater self-interest than regular brands.

Self-interest is a concept that is the opposite of other-orientation (De Dre & Nauta, 2009). Hence, premium brands can be described to pursue self-interest simply through the revenue structure where large profit margins are gained by selling expensive products.

Pilot study was conducted through 3 interview sessions. Focus group interviews with a medical doctor, company employee, and university lecturer, all female, were held along with individual in-depth interviews with 2 female social workers. In all the interviews, opinions on products reflecting CSR sold by premium brands were asked.

The interview results revealed a number of implications. The first was that consumers considered the price, design, and quality when purchasing premium brand products. Although purchasing premium brand products is not frequent because they are expensive, but interviewees said they purchase the products for its premium cost and quality.

Next, when categorizing the interviewees according to income, education level, and experience of purchasing a premium brand product, contrasting opinions were obtained. Consumers with relatively high income and education level as well as numerous experiences purchasing from premium brands did not want the brand logo to show regardless of the CSR activity and showed disapproval of premium brand CSR or perceived it to be a means of reducing the sense of guilt when purchasing premium products.

On the other hand, consumers with relatively low income, low education level, and lacking experiences purchasing from premium brands wanted the brand logo to show regardless of the CSR activity and perceived the purchase of CSR premium brands as an opportunity to take part in a good cause. While some consumers responded to the CSR activity of premium brands negatively and some positively, when asked how premium brand products for CSR can be perceived with authenticity, all the consumers commonly responded that prices need to be lowered and consumers need to be able to see that CSR was not profit-driven.

Putting together the opinions of the interviewees, it was deduced that the self-sacrifice of companies plays the role of informing consumers that premium brands conduct CSR with genuine motivation.

3.2. Sampling and Data Gathering

To test the research model, a survey was conducted on 285 people including undergraduate/graduate students and others in their 20s to 50s living in Seoul. Six questionnaires were set aside due to incomplete answers, missing values, or poor responses. In total, 279 sample responses were used in the final analysis.

There were 142 men (50.9%) and 137 women (49.1%) who responded to the survey. In terms of age, 17.9% of the respondents were in their 20s, 28.7% in their 30s, 25.4% in their 40s and 24.7% in their 50s, show casing a broad age range.

A virtual scenario was set and the respondents were asked

to read a brand promotion article from a fashion magazine so that they can easily understand the price range of the exclusive brand of the item used in the experiment. The article consisted of two paragraphs. A fictional target brand, "Moyali" was introduced in the first paragraph and the target brand's CSR activities were mentioned next.

A fictional brand was used in this survey, to prevent the effect that an actual brand and its existing brand image could have on the respondents' answers. The target brand's image was inserted between image clips of existing brand names, Coach and Ralph Lauren, so that the respondents could assume the price range of "Moyali" by looking at the familiar brands placed right next to Moyali's image.

The research was limited to a high-priced yet popular premium brand instead of some of the exorbitantly priced premium brands which are rare and so expensive that general customers may not be familiar with the brand or have little experience buying their products. Popular premium brands, on the other hand, were appropriate for the experiment, as they have a slightly lower price range, and are well-known and purchased by general customers. The shoulder bag, an item rarely affected by weather, was chosen to be the target product (Wang & Griskevicius, 2014).

Separate conditions were used to manipulate the type of pricing. For the condition of maintaining the previous price level, the following clause, "the price for the new shoulder bags are not on sale to raise funds," was attached to the article. For products on sale, on the other hand, there was a clause specifying that "certain products are on 25% sale to raise funds."

3.3. Measurement of Variables

In the study, the multi-dimensional Likert 7-point scales were used for measuring all the variables. The questionnaires of the study were based on those from previous studies and were modified to fit the context of CSR activities.

Respondents were asked to answer the questions after reading a promotional article from a fashion magazine. First, the question on the self-perception of the customer's own social status was based on the MacArthur Scale on "subjective social status" from Goodman et al. (2001) and was modified to fit into the context of this research.

Following the passage presented in <Figure 2>, respondents were asked to answer the question "Considering your family background and personal education level, which class do you identify yourself with on the social ladder?" and "Which social class do you think you will belong to in the future?" Respondents were able to answer from the scale from 1 to 10; 1 being the lowest class and 10 being the highest class. A new scale was used to differentiate the respondents' answers to the current status and their future status.

Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the United States.

At the **top** of the ladder are the people who are the best off – those who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs.

At the **bottom** are the people who are the worst off – those who have the least money, the least education, and the least respected jobs or no job.

The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top; the lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom.

Where would you place yourself on this ladder?
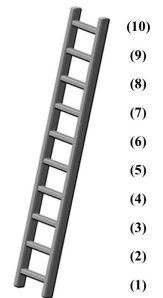
<Figure 2> Passage for Measuring the Possibility of Social Mobility

Next, for the questions measuring the awareness of social issues, the questionnaire used Schuhwerk & Lefkoff-Hagius (1995), modified so that the questions can measure the awareness of environmental issues and CSR. Awareness towards environmental issues were measured by giving out 7 choices, ranging from 1="Strongly disagree." to 7="Strongly agree," to three statements: "I am interested in the environment," "I believe that the environment has influence on my life," "I am willing to make some sacrifices to save the environment."The same 7 choices were provided to the question on CSR. Respondents were requested to answer the question "Are you interested in corporate social responsibility activities done by some companies?" from a scale from 1 to 7, ranging from 1="Strongly disagree" to 7="Strongly agree."

The question on perceived authenticity towards CSR products, "This company practices CSR despite losing its profit." was referred from "The Leader's Self-Sacrifice Manipulation" by Van Knippenberg & Van Knippenberg (2005). The respondents were asked to answer this using the Likert 7 point scale. In addition, in reference to Yoon et al. (2006), responses to the statements, "This company seems to be sincere in practicing CSR," "This company seems to be motivated to fulfill its social responsibility," "This company is returning its profit to the society," "This company is fulfilling its social responsibility despite the risk of losing its brand value as a premium brand," were also measured with the 7 point scale.

For purchase intention, the scale suggested by Herbst et al. (2012) and Putrevu & Lord (1994) were modified and the following questions were asked: "If you have sufficient budget, will you buy Moyali's special edition shoulder bag?" (1= "Not at all," 7="Yes, absolutely.") "I am willing to recommend Moyali to other people." (1= "Not at all," 7="Yes, absolutely.")

Finally, this study evaluated the brand through the questions "Moyali is an interesting brand," "Moyali has its own unique character." (1="Strongly disagree," 7="Strongly agree.")

4. Data and Results

4.1. Checking Reliability and Validity

An explanatory factor analysis (EFA)was conducted to select test items prior to checking the reliability and validity of the concepts and scales presented in this research model. The EFA showed that the factor loadings to two items were below 0.6 and showed similar factor loading on more than two factors. The two items were on the perception of brand authenticity, "This company seems to be motivated to fulfill its social responsibility," and on the appeal of the product, "Moyali has its own unique character." The two items were excluded for the main analyses testing the research model.

Next, this study checked the reliability, convergent validity and the discriminant validity of the multi-dimensional construct used in the model. First, Cronbach's αs were used to check the reliability of the measured variables. The results were found in <Table 1>. The Cronbach's α of each variable was higher than .70, indicating the internal consistency of this study.

<Table 1> Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Construct	No.	SPC	PC t-value	Cron bach's α	CR	AVE	AVE by hair etc
Social Class Mobility	2	.904*	-	.885	.765	.619	.795
		.879*	18.21				
CSR Interests	3	.893*	-	.910	.816	.597	.784
		.954*	23.96				
		.802*	17.40				
Perceived Authenticity	3	.908*	-	.882	.781	.545	.724
		.885*	19.53				
		.752*	15.06				
Product Attractiveness	3	.953*	-	.913	.886	.796	.842
		.881*	15.79				
		.953*	23.80				

*p<.001

Thereafter, this study conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS 21.0. The results of the CFA showed the acceptable fit indices, χ^2=391.72, df=109 (p=.000), GFI=.905, CFI=.917, NNFI (TLI)=.924, RMSEA=.086 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). To check the convergent validity based on the CFA results, this study calculated the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE), the results of which were presented in <Table 1>. All the constructs met the acceptable criteria of Bagozzi & Yi (1988) and Fornell & Larker (1981), the construct validity being higher than .60 and the AVE being higher than .50.

When using AMOS instead of LISREL to estimate the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), the AVE formula of Hair et al. (1998) was generally recommended (Bae, 2011). As shown in <Table 1>, the AVE of all constructs fit the criteria proposed by Hair et al. (1998), and the convergent validity was also accepted. To check the discriminant validity of the constructs, this study checked whether the correlation coefficient squared (r^2) between the construct exceeded the AVE, according to the criteria of Fornell and Larker (1981).

The results were presented in <Table 2>. The discriminant validity was accepted as the AVE of each construct was higher than r^2.

<Table 2> Correlation Coefficient Squared and AVE of the Constructs

Construct	Social Class Mobility	CSR Interests	Perceived Authenticity	Product Attractiveness
Social Class Mobility	.619			
CSR Interests	.564	.597		
Perceived Authenticity	.356	.279	.545	
Product Attractiveness	.084	.053	.245	.796

* The diagonal is the AVE and the off-diagonal shows the correlation coefficient squared of the constructs.

4.2. Results of the Hypotheses Testing

As the reliability, convergent validity and the discriminant validity of the constructs were confirmed, the hypotheses were tested using SEM. The results showed reasonable fit indices, χ^2=323.62, df=190(p=.000), GFI=.923, CFI=.929, NFI(TLI) =.942, RMSEA=.064. (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The results of the hypotheses testing were shown in <Table 3>.

<Hypothesis 1-1>, that the positive attitude towards social mobility in a certain community would have a positive effect on increasing the rate of interest towards CSR among the members of the community, was accepted. <Hypothesis 1-2> was that the higher the possibility of social mobility, more people consider brands which practice CSR to be more sincere.

The results supported <Hypothesis 2>, which suggested that people who were more interested in CSR and were aware of this concept tended to have a more positive attitude towards the authenticity of the brand's CSR activities. Finally, as presentedin Hypothesis 3, as the awareness level and acceptance towards the authenticity of the CSR products gets higher, the general attractiveness of the brand, including the purchase intent, willingness to recommend the product, and the likability of the brand, gets higher as well.

<Table 3> Results of the Hypotheses Testing

	hypothesis path	PC	t-value	outcome
H 1-1	Social Class Mobility → CSR Interests	.257**	4.377	O
H 1-2	Social Class Mobility → Perceived Authenticity	.195*	1.983	O
H 2	CSR Interests → Perceived Authenticity	.369**	4.211	O
H 3	Perceived Authenticity → Product Attractiveness	.355**	5.539	O

*p<.01, **p<.001

5. Conclusion

5.1. Findings and Topics for Discussions

The findings in this study suggest that two factors, first, the social mobility and second, the degree of interest individuals have on the environment and the CSR enables individuals to reconsider the authenticity of the brand that practices CSR, thereby having positive effects on the purchase intention, willingness to recommend the product, and the brand value. This research also showed that proactive customers who wish to move up the social ladder have greater interest in social issues such as the environment or CSR.

The implications of this study for persons in marketing are as follows. First, when conducting a consumer segmentation analysis for the launch of CSR products, the positive mindset towards social mobility serves as an effective criterion. In particular, when the marketing strategy targets new customers rather than existing ones, individuals who are interested in the environment and CSR are more likely accept the CSR activities of brand products with more authenticity. Accordingly, targeting these people can be an effective marketing strategy. Second, consumers who feel responsible for the market and think of the environmental health of the market will increase if the structure of the targeted market place itself displays a higher possibility of social mobility, and individuals within the market site believe that their economic level will improve in the future. As a result, the structure of the market can help the consumers become smarter and more environment-conscious. Third, putting emphasis on CSR as a communication strategy and applying this to the product's brand strategy will help deliver the authenticity of the brand's CSR activities to the community.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study suggested that while brands selling CSR products should put effort to appeal its authenticity to the customers, it is also important, as a marketing strategy, to find and approach the customers who are more accepting towards that authenticity.

The subject of this study, however, was limited to bags from a luxury brand. The applicability of this study to other luxury brands or general brands or other categories of products re-

mains to be studied through further research. In the case of brand communication, further research on factors which can enhance the authenticity of CSR products, in terms of the structure of the marketplace and consumer behavior, is necessary. Classifying the factors and conducting a comprehensive study on what could be problematic is also a necessary subject of research.

Considering that regional difference or the age range can have varying effects on research results, a more detailed and in-depth approach to customers would help establishing effective marketing strategies, based on the overall interest in CSR and the environment in industries and their products.

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