

# Communicating Class, Tastes and Distinction: The Social Implications of Replica Designer Handbag Consumption

Ji-Hoon Park

## Contents

- I. Introduction
- II. Distinction through Consumption and Taste
- III. Method
- IV. Handbag as a Class Marker or Deceiver
- V. Look-based Classism: Who Carries the Designer Bag?
- VI. Consuming Designer Handbags in the Age of Nobrow
- VII. Consuming Replica Designer Handbags
- VIII. Conclusion

## I. Introduction

Just around the corner of Walnut Street in downtown Philadelphia, there are a couple of small truck vendors that sell replica Burberry, Prada, Coach, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton bags which appear to defy a distinction from the original ones. In Philadelphia's Chinatown, several stores sell lower-quality Burberry knockoffs without a brand logo for only \$15. Whether you buy a looping shoulder bag for \$700 at a Burberry store or purchase a high-end replica for \$60 from a truck vendor or buy a knockoff for just \$15, you are equally consuming the "Burberry-ness" of the bag, the

very authenticity of which becomes increasingly difficult to identify.

In contemporary America where the conventional notion of style and quality distinctions between consumer products are becoming meaningless and even obsolete (see Seabrook 1999, 2000), how can one position himself or herself in the complex web of the socioeconomic hierarchy through the means of material consumption? Do consumer goods no longer serve as an indicator of social status? Due to the luxury replicas that nullify the privileged practice of conspicuous consumption, it has become difficult to articulate the relationship between class, prestige, and consumption which Veblen (1899/1994) described.

This study explores the social implications of consuming replica designer brands with a specific emphasis on designer handbags. The aim is to understand the social relations that the practice of replica designer bag consumption reveals and to discuss if and how such consumption mediates the hierarchical class relations in America. To identify the social meanings of replica designer bag consumption, the study will compare and contrast the practice of replica designer bag consumption with that of original designer bag consumption.

## II. Distinction through Consumption and Taste

People express themselves through the symbolic meanings of their material possessions. Consumers often attempt to gain recognition and distinction by acquiring material goods that display status and success to others (Dittma 1992; O’Cass and Frost 2004). Central to the relationship between class and consumption is the notion of “conspicuous consumption” defined as “specialized consumption of goods as an evidence of pecuniary strength” (Veblen 1899/1994: 43). Through the acquisition and display of

visible luxury items, upper classes signify their wealth, status, and distinction. According to Veblen, the upper class members exhibit their class position because the maintenance of the class hierarchy requires validation from others. Besides, people presenting wealth in evidence are rewarded with preferential treatment by others.

In the Veblen's framework about class and consumption, one's preferences are socially determined in relation to their positions in the class hierarchy. A key aspect that Veblen (1899/1994) argues is that the consumption of status-laden products requires sophisticated tastes as he stated that "In order to avoid stultification he must also cultivate his tastes, for it now becomes incumbent on him to discriminate with some nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods" (Veblen 1899/1994: 47).

What Veblen calls "taste" is analogous to Bourdieu's (1984) notion of "cultural capital" acquired at different positions in the class hierarchy. Cultural capital is defined as "accumulated stock of knowledge about the products of artistic and intellectual traditions, which is learned through educational training and - crucially for Bourdieu - also through social upbringing" (Trigg 2001: 104). Just like Veblen, Bourdieu indicates that individuals distinguish themselves from others through acquisition and exhibition of consumption goods. His key argument is that consumption is predisposed to "fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences" (7).

Scholars have examined the ways the status brands function as a visual representation of status (Berhnhheim 1994; Ferstman and Weiss 1993; Ireland 1994). Status brands are those that are assumed to have high-perceived quality, luxury, and prestige attached to them. Visible items, particularly apparel and accessories, are effectively in terms of communicating the social position of the brand user (Zinkhan and Prenshaw 1994). Related to status brands is status consumption, which is "the

motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer and symbolize status both for the individual and surrounding significant others” (Eastman *et al.* 1999: 42). While status demonstration is an important motive for conspicuous consumption, status consumption needs to be distinguished from conspicuous consumption in that the former is a consumers’ desire to augment their level of perceived status from the acquisition of status-laden possessions and brands. The more a person seeks to enhance his or her position in society, the more (s)he prefers using status products that aim to represent a prestigious position in the class hierarchy (Eastman *et al.* 1999).

The implication here is that the acquisition of visible luxury goods not only indicates good tastes and higher elevation in the hierarchy, but it may also reflect aspiration for upward class mobility. If people try to conspicuously consume to emulate the consumption patterns of those situated at higher positions in the class hierarchy, it can disrupt the stable relationship between class and consumption; status symbols can be “fraudulent symbols” (Hoyer and MacInnis 2001: 343). In other words, conspicuous consumption may lose its edge as a means of displaying wealth and status when status brands and products are widely owned by consumers across the class lines.

Recently, many scholars question the relationship among consumption, social class, and distinction, claiming that consumption neither reflects nor reproduces social status (Mason 1998; Slater 1997; Featherstone 1991; Holt 1998; McIntyre 1992). Turner and Edmunds (2002) have observed that the Australian elites have little interest in appreciation of highbrow cultural activities such as opera and classical literature. Turner and Edmunds use the phrase, “apparent distaste for taste,” (219) to characterize the consuming behavior of upper classes in Australia. Trigg (2001) argues that Veblen’s framework is no longer relevant due to the

“new cultural makeup of contemporary consumer society” (104) where consumption patterns are determined not by social class but rather by lifestyles that cut across the social hierarchy. As Mason (1998) states, “lifestyle grew in importance as an indicator of social group membership” (130).

Most interestingly, Seabrook (1999, 2000) has introduced a notion of “nobrow” to indicate the diminishing distinction between highbrow and lowbrow which the class hierarchy has long maintained. Seabrook notes that “making hierarchical distinction about culture was the only acceptable way for people to talk openly about class” (27) in America. However, a quality distinction, which is supposed to be the major difference between highbrow and lowbrow, has become increasingly obscure, since commercial culture now becomes a source of status and currency and elite institutions struggle to incorporate commercial culture. Nobrow alters the traditional distinctions between elite and mass culture because styles and quality distinctions between consumer goods are extremely difficult to discern:

The elite can no longer rely on the old method of conspicuous consumption as a mean of distinguishing themselves from the masses. If real quality is knocked off and made for a lot less, like the imitation Prada and Louis Vuitton bags you can buy on Canal Street, the owners of genuine Prada and Louis Vuitton goods are forced to become, in effect, inconspicuous consumers – to take inner pride in the fact the *their* bag is the real thing, even if only a few cognoscenti know it (Seabrook 1999: 107-108).

Seabrook argues that consumers in contemporary America have equal access to nobrow because quality is only available not to the few but to the masses. He claims that price differences are meaningless and luxury

items fail to function as a status classifier since quality can be attained by all regardless of their points in the social ladder.

### III. Method

This study attempts to answer the following questions. What motivate consumers to purchase replica designer bags? Does the purchase indicate the consumers' upper class aspiration, or reflect their rational economic judgment of paying less for what is barely distinguishable from the original? How can we think of replica consumption in relation to either challenging or reinforcing the class hierarchy manifested in material consumption?

The study employed three methods: face-to-face interviews, field observations, and an online survey. In total, 34 respondents (original and/or replica designer bag owners) participated in the research. Face-to-face interviews and field observations were conducted in the upper middle class shopping districts in downtown Philadelphia and in the lower class shopping areas in West Philadelphia. The researcher approached people on the street that carried designer handbags for an interview. Two replica designer bag sellers, six original designer bag owners, and four replica owners were interviewed on the street. Due to the social stigma attached to consuming counterfeit products, interviewees often provide the researcher with false information about the authenticity of their bags. None among those replica carriers that the researcher interviewed acknowledged that their bag was a replica. After answering a couple of interview questions, some admitted that their bags are replicas, but others refused to acknowledge it until the end of the interview. Others said that their bag was a gift from a friend to avoid embarrassment or simply stopped

participating in the interview. To a large extent, the researcher could distinguish the falsehood of their statements regarding the authenticity of their bag on the basis of the price they had paid for their bags. Overall, the researcher's background knowledge of various designer handbags allowed him to verify the authenticity of their bags.

Two street vendors of replica bags offered useful information about consumer behavior and characteristics. They allowed the researcher to observe them so that he could speak to the replica designer bag consumers on the spot. This was the surest way to interview replica designer bag consumers. Overall, collecting information on the street was a difficult task because most interviewees were unwilling to spare enough time for the interview and they refused to disclose their personal information such as occupation, income, and education.

The online survey served as the most effective way of collecting data in this research because it protects the respondents' anonymity. The researcher requested the members of the following Yahoo groups to participate in the online survey: *Authentic Louis Vuitton Addicts*, *Knock-Off Purse Party*, and *Bags By Design: Louis Vuitton Replicas*. The survey allowed the researcher to collect respondents' concrete, sincere and relatively detailed description of their views on original and/or replica designer bags. The survey consisted of eight open-ended questions and two multiple choice questions (see the Appendix). Of the 24 respondents who filled out the survey, eight people were original designer bag owners, eleven people were replica designer bags owners, and five people were owners of both originals and replicas. 7.7% of the respondents reported an annual income level of up to \$10,000, 11.5% reported it in the bracket of \$10,000 to \$20,000; 42.3% of the respondents' reported annual income was in the \$20,000-\$40,000 range, and the 11.5% of the respondents' reported annual income was in the \$40,000-\$80,000 range. 26.9% represented the above \$80,000 income category. The respondents'

education background is as follows: high school (7.7%), associate/junior college (15.4%), bachelor's degree (23.1%), graduate degree (50%), and no answer (3.8%). While this study cannot generalize its findings due to the small, unrepresentative sample, the findings on why a small number of respondents purchase replica designer handbags would provide valuable insight into the social implications of replica designer bag consumption.

#### IV. Handbags as a Class Marker or Deceiver

Personal accessories occupy a unique position in consumer culture. Among a wide array of consumer products, accessories (e.g., watches, glasses, shoes, jewelry and handbags) have been considered as the most effective items that signify the owners' socioeconomic positions because they are always carried by them. The visibility of accessories is critical because the class status is communicated when they are seen by others (Hoyer and MacInnis 2001). While more costly items - cars and houses for instance - would be more accurate class markers, their class-signifying roles are not always as powerful as personal accessories in a big city (e.g., Philadelphia) where a large number of residents rely on public transportation. Thus, personal accessories can serve as powerful indicators of the owner's social standing.

The significant role of personal accessories as status symbols does not necessarily guarantee a transparent relationship between class and personal items. Contrary to a popular belief that one's social status is manifested through the products one carries, his or her true class position can easily be "deceived" by the personal accessories for the two following reasons. First, personal accessories are relatively inexpensive compared with houses or cars, thereby making them widely available to consumers across

class boundaries. Even a lower-class individual can purchase a designer handbag after a few weeks (or months) of saving and hard work, whereas it would be virtually impossible for him/her to buy a decent house or a luxury car within a year or two. One cannot rule out the possibility that a constructor worker wears a fine Polo suit to attend a wedding, or that a housemaid dresses up nicely with an original Gucci bag and shops at an upscale shopping mall. Second, the wide popularity of imitation luxury products has made it even more difficult to articulate a meaningful relationship between class and personal accessories. While one cannot buy an imitation Mercedes-Benz sedan, (s)he can still afford an imitation Louis Vuitton. Consumers can easily obscure class differences by carrying a high-quality replica that looks just like an original.

These conflicting functions of personal accessories as a class marker and a deceiver have arguably positioned designer brands at the center of attention in consumer culture. The American infatuation with luxury brands is demonstrated by a great number of people carrying designer bags. On any given day in a major shopping district in Philadelphia, the researcher was able to spot at least ten designer handbag owners within half an hour. The prevalence of designer handbags, whether original or fake, reflects the keen awareness of designer brands in America. A street vendor in downtown Philadelphia who has been selling knockoffs for 15 years commented on consumers' awareness of designer brands, stating that "consumers do not buy knockoffs and imitations unless they have a brand logo."

The survey data indicate that income is not necessarily the determining factor of whether one purchases a designer bag. While respondents with higher income tend to purchase designer bags, a few respondents with considerably lower annual income (\$10,000 - \$20,000) also reported that they own several original designer handbags. This suggests that designer bag consumption is not an exclusive activity of the upper-middle class.

Two incidents that the researcher experienced illustrate how designer bags can disrupt the class hierarchy.

First, the researcher met a Black woman in West Philadelphia (a lower-class neighborhood) who was carrying a Gucci bag. On the basis of the neighborhood and the way she dressed and talked, the researcher mistook her Gucci bag for an imitation. She accurately remembered the place and the year of purchase as well as the exact price she paid for the bag (\$350) and several traits of original Gucci handbags. She showed the researcher both the inside and outside of the bag to prove its authenticity, explaining what distinguishes an authentic bag from a replica. She identified herself as a low-paid file manager working in downtown Philadelphia. When it came to handbags and shoes, she only buys expensive ones because, she stated, "I work hard. So I deserve Gucci." Second, I encountered a lady who carried a Coach bag in the subway. She stated that she sells tokens at a subway station. Having conversed with her, the researcher was assured that her bag was an original Coach bag. Having used several knock-offs, she decided to purchase an authentic one because, she claimed, the authentic Coach bags are better in quality.

The researcher's class prejudice, however unprofessional he might have been as a researcher, led him to learn an important fact. Because of the massive circulation of imitation products in the consumer market, people assume that "replicas are everywhere." What is overshadowed by this popular dictum is an important truth that "*the originals are also everywhere.*" The fact that lower-class consumers also purchase original designer bags is often unthinkable in American popular imagination of class and consumption. Later, the study will discuss how this class prejudice can consolidate the class hierarchy instead of blurring class differences.

## V. Look based Classism: Who Carries the Designer Bag?

Most respondents stated that they cannot make a clear distinction between original and imitation designer bags without a closer look, especially when the replica is a high-quality one. Despite the difficulty of distinguishing the difference, consumers are constantly engaged in the process of verifying the “authenticity” of a designer bag that they see. The authenticity of designer products is one of the most frequently discussed topics in various online communities, including Yahoo groups *Authentic Louis Vuitton Addicts* and *Knock-Off Purse Party*. Then, the key question is: how can one distinguish what seems undistinguishable? Many respondents stated that the most effective way to verify authenticity is to see if the carrier looks like a type of person capable of paying for a costly designer bag:

It’s just something about some bags that you can notice especially, for instance, if you see a girl walking to catch a bus with a \$800 bag on her shoulder you know it is fake because who in their right mind can afford an \$800 bag but not a car?? Really it doesn’t make sense.

By the price and who is carrying it this is probably a classist thing to say but there are obviously people walking around with Louis Vuitton bags that cannot afford to spend the money for a real one. I guess that means if an affluent looking person is carrying it then I assume it’s real... unless I can get a close look at it.

The criteria of “*who carries the designer bag under what circumstances*” help verify the authenticity of a stranger’s designer bag. Because of the strong, deep-rooted perception that only rich people can own luxury accessories, people often take for granted that so-called “rich-looking” people’s bags are authentic, whereas not-so-rich-looking people’s bags are imitations. In other words, the status-signifying function of a designer handbag depends on *who* carries it. Personal accessories cannot fully serve as a class marker without reference to other visual cues and attributes that signify one’s social status.

What this study would call “look-based classism” is, of course, a faulty generalization since, as discussed earlier, designer handbags are owned by people across a broad spectrum. Despite this faulty assumption, look-based classism serves as the most widely used rule of thumb that helps judge one’s class position as well as the authenticity of a designer handbag. The researcher’s own look-based classism manifested itself in his aforementioned experience with the designer handbag owners who he encountered in the lower-class Black neighborhood in West Philadelphia. The researcher doubted the authenticity of their bags because he failed to associate luxury accessories with poorly dressed people in an inner-city Black neighborhood.

This inseparable relationship between class stereotypes and luxury goods provide some consumers with an advantage. Beneficiaries are those who are able to disguise their true social status with the “right looks.” A respondent proudly claimed that “No one thinks my bag is fake because I don’t look like a person who carries a fake bag.” Her confidence derived from the fact that she was a White, middle class, and educated person who can “pass” as the upper-middle class:

I dress tastefully so you would probably never think it was  
a fake looking at me.

If you have the right “look” with everything else, fake bags, like fake diamond earrings will just be assumed to be real.

Had several people comment on how cute my Spade handbags were and the Ferragamo has passed the Beverly Hills test.

A savvy consumer has a remarkable ability to conceal the fact that their designer bags are inauthentic, which this study loosely call the cultural capital. The consumers with the cultural capital keep up with the latest styles and models of brand products and understand different grades of imitation products. Not only do they know how and where to purchase quality designer replicas, but they also know how to coordinate them with the right looks to make them function properly as a status symbol just like an original one. By dressing up in an appropriate manner, they do not give observers a slightest hint of their designer bag being an imitation. The researcher interviewed a man who had just bought a replica purse from a street vendor. He stated that “For a purse, I’d buy a fake one. But for a suit, I will buy a real one.” He knows that his status is signified not just by his purse alone but also by his appearance as a whole. He understands that his purse is not *the* status symbol; it is only *a* symbol that connotes the status only in conjunction with the right outfits.

The class hierarchy in America is powerfully constructed through a series of images promoted by the commercial media and popular everyday discourses. The upper-class imagery that a luxury product conjures up (e.g., elegance, glamour, beauty, and whiteness) diminishes the communicative function of a designer handbag as a status symbol for the lower-class consumers that do not always possess the cultural capital to present themselves with the right look. The same product signifies different meanings on the basis of who owns it and where (s)he carries it.

An original bag carried by a person may cause envy and respect. The same bag may only earn suspicion due to the rampant class and racial prejudice.

While replica designer bags disrupt the boundary between original and imitation ones, they do not necessarily obscure the class hierarchy. The prevalence of imitation luxury handbags, in fact, heightens the class awareness, which leads to look-based classism. This look-based classism, in turn, reinforces the stereotypical class images associated with the consumption of luxury goods. Look-based classism privileges consumers who possess cultural capital because it allows them to pass as upper-class people.

## VI. Consuming Designer Handbags in the Age of Nobrow

The research indicates that consumers with varying levels of income and education participate in the practice of designer handbag consumption. According to the online survey, many respondents who possessed a designer handbag owned at least two or more of them. One respondent stated that she owned over one hundred designer handbags. Why do consumers purchase costly designer handbags if it is difficult to distinguish between originals and replicas? I asked the following question to respondents: “What made you buy this expensive bag as opposed to something cheaper?” The superb quality or collection value of original designer bags was the predominant answer:

The quality of the real Louis Vuitton handbags is absolutely AWESOME! They hold up over the years. My mom has had a speedy for about 20+ years and it is still in great condition.

Also, Louis Vuitton handbags are classics that will always be in fashion.

While respondents attributed the main motives for purchasing designer bags to their excellent quality, style and values, none of them acknowledged explicitly that their ownership of designer handbags has to do with status consumption. Their reluctance to acknowledge the intended goal is presumably associated with the social stigma attached to the consumption of luxury goods. As Mason (1998) notes, conspicuous consumption is “a form of economic behavior to which individuals will not admit” (x). Instead, several respondents stated that their ownership of designer handbags has a great deal to do with their sophisticated tastes:

It is unique in the sense that maybe people who are not able to afford them won't have them. Therefore you can have something unique to the area where you live rather than having a Tommy Hilfiger purse that everyone has.

A sense of “I can afford it, therefore I buy it” or “I have special tastes distinguished from those of other people” was evident when the respondents described the incomparable quality of designer handbags. Despite the respondents' unwillingness to admit it, the status-signifying roles are crucial for the designer handbag ownership. The significance of the symbolic functions of handbags was revealed when the designer bag owners discussed the consumers who purchase replica designer bags. What was most intriguing was that every designer bag owner in the research pointed out the notion of a status symbol when answering the following question; “Why do you think people buy an imitation bag?”

Because they want to carry the high-end designer bags that

are status symbols in our society, but can't afford it, or don't want to spend the money.

People buy imitation bags because for status reasons. They feel if they own a bag that looks like someone who is rich owns then they'll somehow gain the same 'status' and 'respect' they think comes along with ownership of the brand of purses.

They feel the need to fit in, to show that they have money, status, and that they've "arrived" even though they have not. They are very insecure and need to show off.

When criticizing the consumer's attempt to augment their social status via the ownership of replica designer handbags, the respondents acknowledged indirectly that they also wanted their designer handbags to serve as a class marker or a taste signifier. It is through the consumption of designer handbags that the owners attempt to communicate class and taste distinctions. A sense of pride as well as superiority over the consumers of replica designer handbags emerged strongly when they discussed the authenticity of their bags:

If someone thinks my authentic bag is a fake then I would like to teach them otherwise. But I couldn't care to a certain extent as I KNOW it's authentic.

I would never buy a cheap fake because I will know it is cheap and so will everyone else. I am a person who could really care less what others think about me but I care about me. It's something I won't ever do.

The concept of “authenticity” is significant for designer handbag owners, which explain why they persist in purchasing expensive designer bags, although their authentic bags may ironically look like a “fake” one to observers. When they acquire a designer bag, they consume not only a unique style and design, but also prestige, refinement, and pride that come along with its authenticity. No matter how similar replicas are to the originals, the owners of designer handbags are content with their bags because they *themselves* know that theirs are authentic. With an imitation designer bag, you may deceive others, but not yourself. For designer bag owners, it is a sign of shallowness, superficiality, and lowbrow if one claims that there is not much of a difference between originals and imitations.

The importance of authenticity was illustrated in an episode of HBO television series *Sex and the City*. In Los Angeles, Samantha (Kim Cattrall) brings her friend Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) to a high-end replica handbag dealer, saying that “All that matters is what it looks like, you never know it wasn’t real unless you look inside at the lining.” Once they find the dealer, Carrie decides not to buy a \$150 replica of an original Fendi which costs \$3,000:

I should’ve liked them. But staring into that truck, they didn’t look like elegant Fendi bags. They just looked cheap. And even if everyone else thought it was real, I’d always know my bag came from a cardboard box in a truck deep in the valley. (Season 3, Episode 14 “Sex and Another City”)

An original designer handbag provides the owners with the pleasure of appreciating its authenticity and boasting special tastes that replicas cannot offer. The availability of high-end replica designer bags does not necessarily discourage consumers from purchasing original ones because of

this “irreplaceable authenticity” of original designer bags. The researcher perceived a strong sense of pride from a respondent who stated bluntly that “People who know me know that this is not fake.” This pride would be what the owners of replicas ultimately aspire to enjoy; no matter how similar their bags are to the original ones, replica owners *themselves* know their bags are not authentic.

According to Mason (1998), conspicuous consumption has two important objectives. One is to secure newly gained status (between-group objectives) and the other is to preserve already achieved status (within-group objectives). The consumption of luxury handbags in the presence of widespread replicas can also be interpreted as the owners’ interests of status consolidation. The owners of designer handbag are indifferent to other people’s evaluation of their bags, as far as the authenticity of their handbags is recognized in their own upper-class or upper-taste community.

## VII. Consuming Replica Designer Handbags

Why do people consume imitations of original designer handbags? Although one may unknowingly purchase a replica, the data indicate that the consumption of replica designer bags is, to a large extent, an intentional practice. According to the street vendors selling replica designer handbags, there is hardly anyone who buys a fake designer bag without knowing it is a replica of an expensive designer bag.

The data suggest that the most common motive for purchasing a replica designer bag is affordability. Almost every respondent who owned a replica designer handbag commented on its reasonable price. The main types of consumers include: (1) The lower-income consumers who cannot afford a designer handbag and (2) high-income consumers who do not want to

spend “big bucks” on a bag. Regardless of buying motives, being able to own an authentic-looking designer handbag with a relatively cheap price is the most fascinating reason for buying a replica:

For the imitation - PRICE~!~. I will not spend 700 dollars on a real bag. I can get a taste of something designer for not a lot of money.

They want what's associated with owning the real one but can't afford the price, for some it's the thrill of getting an almost perfect imitation for so cheap when someone actually paid full price.

The function of a replica as a fraudulent symbol of social standing is important although the respondents were disinclined to admit it openly. If the owners of replica designer bags are unaware of class differences revealed through consumption, why would they purchase imitations instead of no-brand or middlebrow bags? A respondent stated that when given a choice between an original \$100 Banana Republic bag and a \$150 replica Louis Vuitton bag, she would purchase the latter because, she argued, the quality of the replica is excellent. She further claimed that a \$150 Louis Vuitton replica is better in quality than a \$100 original Banana Republic bag, because the replicas use materials similar to those used for the original designer bag. Another respondent also claimed that “Imitation Louis Vuitton is better than Gap.”

It is never clear if the choice of the Louis Vuitton replica over a Banana Republic bag is purely based on economic considerations. However, it is difficult to take the imitation consumers' so-called “pure quality” argument at face value. In society where class awareness is strong and deep-rooted, it seems implausible that one's consumption of a replica designer handbag

is entirely based on quality and economic considerations. A knockoff vendor in downtown Philadelphia commented that if there are two almost identical products with the same quality and price (e.g., one being a cheap replica of a designer bag and the other being a cheap bag with no logo), average consumers would buy the one with the brand logo. The practice of purchasing replica designer handbags means consuming tastes, prestige, and class connotation, all of which come with the luxury brands and their images.

As discussed earlier, the consumption of high-end replicas requires extensive knowledge of the latest models, designs, and trends. Consumers must be familiar with the designer handbags in order to discern the best replicas which can function as a status maker:

I'm very careful when I buy imitation handbag. I buy good imitations that are made from quality materials and look just like the originals. There are several good places in Chinatown to find good imitations.

I only buy imitations if they can pass as real things by a critical observer.

I bought the real one because in my community your bag speaks for you. I got the fake because, I found them to be a better quality and impossible to spot... so I started buying those... No one in my neighborhood thinks it's fake.

For those who use a replica designer bag as a fraudulent status symbol, there is a great sense of gratification and enjoyment of passing as a sophisticated consumer of designer brands. One may wonder if some consumers intentionally use replicas in order to disrupt class differences.

However, the researcher did not observe any evidence of intentional resistance against the class hierarchy through the medium of a replica designer bag. The study argues that the replica consumption should be understood as a conscious effort to blend in the class hierarchy; the consumer's pleasure derives from augmenting their level of perceived status from the acquisition of the replica of status-laden brands. While some prided themselves on being rational and smart consumers, others expressed stigma about the use of an imitation handbag:

You don't feel as proud carrying it around and hate when someone eyes it too closely - they might know it's a fake.

If anyone catches you with a fake, it's embarrassing.

A replica designer bag embodies class aspirants' desire for upward mobility. The owners are not necessarily content with their replicas even when they can pass as upper-class consumers. They envy people carrying an authentic designer bag, since no matter how similar their replicas are to original designer handbags; *the owners themselves* know that what they have is merely a replica that lacks authenticity. They can fool others but not themselves. It is this undeniable fakeness of a replica that makes the consumers hope to purchase an original designer handbag. When I asked the following question ("Are you planning to buy an original bag in the future"), the majority of respondents who owned imitation designer handbags provided answers such as: "I plan to buy original bags in the future when I am able to afford them" or "I definitely plan to buy more originals in the future when I graduate and make some money."

## VIII. Conclusion

In his work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen (1899/1994) claimed that conspicuous consumption of the upper class has existed in every society throughout human history. Recently, the increasing mixture of highbrow and lowbrow and the emergence of so-called nobrow have questioned the traditional demarcation of social classes manifested in the practice of material consumption. According to Seabrook (1999, 2000), the increasingly blurred boundaries between elite and commercial tastes are the symptoms of nobrow culture where consumption is seen as a manifestation of an individual identity, but not of hierarchical social relations. Seabrook (1999) challenges the hierarchical distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture by raising the following question: “If quality is made into a commodity that almost anyone can purchase, where does that leave the elite culture of taste?” (105).

On the surface, the consumers of original and/or imitation designer handbag equally consume the same images and styles. It is the similarities of styles that may make one believe that imitation luxury products obscure or even democratize the class hierarchy. It would be safe to claim that the inundation of replica designer bags has made it difficult to articulate the correlation between social class and consumption practices. The research shows that the consumption of luxury handbags – whether original or fake – cannot be explained by a simple, one-to-one correspondence between social class and conspicuous consumption.

However, just because class is not necessarily revealed by consumption does not necessarily suggest that the class distinction is no longer valid, or that we are now living in classless society or nobrow culture. It is important to recognize the powerful role of class awareness; that is, consumers are conscious of the class hierarchy and conspicuous

consumption of the upper class. The key issue here is not that people across class lines consume the same images, quality, or styles of luxury products via affordable replicas. What is more crucial to understand is the fact that consumers are keenly aware of class differences, and that their consumption practices are constantly motivated by the class hierarchy.

Imitation designer products lose its *raison d'être* once the original counterparts, as a referent, no longer function as status symbols. The replica consumption becomes meaningless if the status-signaling function of the original designer handbag diminishes. Would imitation Louis Vuitton replica continue to sell if Louis Vuitton stops selling its products? A revealing fact is that designer handbags continue to thrive regardless of prevalence and popularity of replicas in the consumer market.

Despite the similarity between original and imitation designer handbags, the original ones do not seem to lose their values because it is always the designer products that ultimately set a precedent for other middle and low brands to follow. To illustrate with Seabrook's example, although the styles of Helmut Lang are almost identical to those of Gap, it is the Helmut Lang that sets the standard. Designer products always connote prestige, tastes, and status. Middle or low brand products can only imitate the styles of the luxury brands, and cannot, standing on their own, fully function as class signifiers.

The conspicuous consumption of the upper class has functioned as a driving force of replica designer bag consumption. While the prevalence of replica designer brands may disrupt the straightforward correspondence between social status and consumed products, the difficulty of verifying the authenticity of a designer product has engendered so-called "look-based classism." This look-based classism is consistent with the traditional notion of classism in that it contributes to the reproduction of popular myths about high-class imagery and class prejudice. The same designer bag produces different class implications on the basis of who consumes for

what purposes and under what circumstances. Look-based classism privileges those with cultural capital for it allows them to pass as upper-middle class consumers.

This study suggests that a true sense of nobrow can be achieved only when consumers realize that brand names and values no longer connote class distinctions, prestige, and tastes. As far as consumers are aware of the class hierarchy and the distinction that different brands signify, they will continue to participate in the consumption of designer handbags (including replicas) to communicate or augment their class, tastes, and distinctions.

## Appendix: Interview Questions (for both field and online survey)

1. Tell me what kind of designer handbag(s) you own (e.g., original Louis Vuitton Loop Shoulder Bag, or replica Louis Vuitton Loop Shoulder Bag). How much did you pay for the bag(s)?
2. If you own a designer one, what made you buy this expensive bag as opposed to something cheaper? If you own a replica, what made you buy a replica designer bag instead of an original one?
3. How is a replica different from the original? Tell me what you know about replica designer bags.
4. Can you distinguish an original designer bag from a replica without looking closer? If you can, how so?
5. If it becomes very difficult to distinguish the original designer bag from a replica, do you think it's better to buy an inexpensive replica designer bag? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. If you own an original one, do people sometimes think that it's a replica? How do you feel when it happens? If you own a replica designer bag, do people normally recognize that it's a replica? How do you feel when people think that it's an original one? Do you normally tell them it's a replica?
7. Just for replica owners, was there any particular reason why you bought this bag as opposed to other bag with the same price?
8. Are you planning to buy an original designer bag in the future? (Or do you already own one?)
9. Why do you think people buy a replica designer bag?
10. What's your annual income?
  - a) Under \$10,000 (b) \$10,000 to \$20,000 (c) \$20,000 to \$40,000
  - b) \$40,000 to \$80,000 (e) \$80,000 or over
11. What's your education background?
  - a) Less than high school (b) High School (c) Associate/Junior College
  - b) Bachelor's (e) Graduate (f) Don't know (g) No answer

## WORKS CITED

- Bernheim, B. Douglas. "A Theory of Conformity." *Journal of Political Economy* 102.5 (1994): 841-77.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Dittma, Helga. *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions: To Have is to Be*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.
- Eastman, Jacqueline, Ronald Goldsmith, and Leisa Flynn. "Status Consumption in Consumer Behavior: Scale Development and Validation." *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 7.3 (1999): 41-51.
- Featherstone, Mike. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. London: Sage, 1991.
- Fernstman, Chaim and Weissm Yoram. "Social Status, Culture and Economic Performance." *The Economic Journal* 103 (1993): 946-59.
- Holt, Douglas B. "Does Cultural Capital Structure American Consumption?" *Journal of Consumer Research* 25.1 (1998): 1-25.
- Hoyer, Wayne and Deborah MacInnis. *Consumer Behavior*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.
- Ireland, Norman. "On Limiting the Market for Status Signals." *Journal of Public Economics* 53.1 (1994): 91-110.
- Mason, Roger. *The Economics of Conspicuous Consumption: Theory and Thought since 1700*. Cheltenham: Edward Elga, 1998.
- McIntyre, Richard. "Consumption in Contemporary Capitalism: Beyond Marx and Veblen." *Review of Social Economy* 50 (1992): 50~57.
- O'Cass, Aron and Hmily Frost. "Exploring Consumer Status and Conspicuous Consumption." *Journal of Consumer and Behavior* 4.1 (2004): 25-39.

- Seabrook, John. "Nobrow Culture." *New Yorker*. 20 September 1999. 104-111
- Seabrook, John. *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing - The Marketing of Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2000.
- Slater, Don. *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 1997.
- Trigg, Andrew B. "Veblen, Bourdieu, and Conspicuous Consumption." *Journal of Economic Issues* XXXV.1 (2001): 99-115.
- Turner, Bryan S. and Edmunds, June. "The Distaste of Taste: Bourdieu, Cultural Capital and the Australian Postwar Elite." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2.2 (2002): 219-40.
- Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Dover, 1899 (1994).
- Zinkhan, George and Prenshaw, Penelop. "Good Life Images and Brand Name Associations: Evidence from Asia, America and Europe." *Advanced in Consumer Research* 21.1 (1994): 496-500.

Abstract

**Communicating Class, Tastes and Distinction:  
: The Social Implications of Replica Designer Handbag  
Consumption**

Ji-Hoon Park

This study explores the social implications of consuming replica designer brands with a specific emphasis on designer handbags. To identify the social meanings of replica designer bag consumption, I compare and contrast the practice of replica designer bag consumption with that of original designer bag consumption. The study suggests that while the prevalence of replica designer brands may disrupt the straightforward correspondence between social status and consumed products, the difficulty of verifying the authenticity of a designer product has engendered so-called “look-based classism.” This look-based classism is not inconsistent with the traditional notion of classism in that it contributes to the reproduction of popular myths about high-class imagery and class prejudice. This study suggests that a true sense of nobrow can be achieved only when consumers realize that brand names and values no longer connote class distinctions, prestige, and tastes. As far as consumers are aware of the class hierarchy and the distinction that different brands signify, they will continue to participate in the consumption of designer handbags (including replicas) to communicate or augment their class, tastes, and distinctions.

**Key words:** class, conspicuous consumption, status, designer handbags

## 계급, 과시적 소비, 지위, 명품 가방

논문접수일: 2011. 11. 01

심사완료일: 2011. 12. 05

게재확정일: 2011. 12. 20

이름: 박지훈

소속: 고려대학교 미디어학부

주소: (136-701) 서울특별시 성북구 안암동 고려대학교 미디어학부 미디어관 402호

이메일: winterof93@korea.ac.kr