

The Evolving Perception of Luxury Among Korean High School Consumers

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Abstract

As luxury brands become increasingly accessible through entry-level products and social media amplifies peer-driven consumption norms, understanding how Korean high school students perceive luxury has become an urgent research question. This study investigated the evolving perception of luxury among Korean high school consumers, focusing on the complex interplay between psychological motivations and the digital-social context. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach (quantitative survey and in-depth interviews, N=28), the research confirmed that while High Price is a dominant factor in defining luxury, the Social Stigma of Democratization leads to negative perceptions ("짜침" or tackiness) when common entry-level items are conspicuously displayed. The findings reveal that adolescents are driven by a fundamental contradiction between the Need for Uniqueness and the desire for Social Assimilation. Furthermore, luxury consumption is fundamentally a consumer socialization process mediated by social media, where the act of posting goods is tied to the Need for Approval. This research offers a holistic understanding of how exclusivity, brand image, and psychological reinforcement are redefined within the hyper-social Korean youth market.

Keywords: Luxury brands, Consumer behavior, Youth consumer, Marketing psychology

1. Introduction

South Korean high school teenagers now stand at the forefront of a broader generational shift in luxury consumption. Generation Z is initiating luxury purchases earlier than any previous generation, and in South Korea this trend is reinforced by K-pop culture and intense peer pressure (The Korea Times, 2023). A 2020 survey reported that 56.4% of Korean middle and high school students had purchased luxury items (S'FD, 2021).

This phenomenon presents a fundamental paradox rooted in adolescent psychology. Research investigating adolescent luxury consumption behavior consistently identifies a tension between two social identity mechanisms: the need for individualism and the simultaneous desire for social assimilation (Gentina, et al., 2016). This inherent contradiction drives their selective engagement with luxury brands. Furthermore, the influence of traditional socialization agents, such as parents and school, has been found to be either marginal or non-significant in determining certain adolescent consumer behaviors. This marginalization is evident as research suggests that materialism and consumption values are increasingly driven by peers and individual factors, rather than parental teaching (Park and Chun, 2025a).

This study aimed to investigate the evolving perception of luxury among Korean high school consumers, focusing on the dual influence of complex psychological drivers and digital-age social context.

Understanding this phenomenon requires examining several interrelated concepts. Korean adolescent consumers occupy a distinctive position: embedded in a collectivist culture where public self-consciousness is significantly higher than in individualist societies such as the United States (Lee and Workman, 2014), they are simultaneously exposed to global brand narratives through celebrity advertising and social media. This combination of cultural pressure and digital exposure shapes how they perceive, desire, and justify luxury consumption.

Luxury perception — the way consumers evaluate whether a product qualifies as luxurious — has evolved significantly as the democratization of luxury broadens access through more affordable product lines (Kapferer and Valette-Florence, 2016). For adolescents, luxury perception extends well beyond price to encompass exclusivity, image, and identity: youths view their consumption behavior as a means of expressing individuality and personal taste, while attributing a sense of uniqueness to it (Diaz Ruiz and Cruz, 2023). In this way, consumption behavior becomes part of the process through which adolescents explore and construct their self-identity (Francis and Hoefel, 2018).

Brand image — the set of associations linked to a brand that consumers hold in memory (Keller, 1993) — reinforces this identity function. These associations are shaped not only by direct product experience but by advertising, celebrity endorsements, and social media exposure. For adolescents in the midst of identity formation, the brand becomes a vehicle for self-expression, peer acceptance, and social belonging. Young consumers actively utilize luxury goods to verify their desired social identity and secure social values such as prestige and status (Xi, et al., 2022).

These dynamics are further reinforced by psychological mechanisms. The endowment effect— the tendency to overvalue possessions once they belong to them (Kahneman et al., 1990)- and cognitive dissonance— the mental discomfort experienced when behaviors conflict with beliefs (Festinger, 1957) – help explain why Gen Z tends to desire and justify high-cost purchases, even when these contradict realistic limitations. Fundamentally, luxury consumption is linked to the pursuit of self-esteem and the validation of social status. This psychological connection presents as a sense of psychological ownership, a possessive emotion toward a brand that exists without actual ownership (Wang et al., 2025). Ultimately, adolescents use luxury brands not only as products to purchase but also as tools for constructing identity.

Social media has become the primary arena in which these psychological and identity pressures play out. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok expose users to a digital ecosystem where luxury consumption is prevalent among peer groups. This media environment functions as a socialization agent across three stages: modeling (observing peers' displays), reinforcement (seeking approval for one's own displays), and social interaction (direct brand discussion) (Park and Chun, 2025a). The desire for social approval through posting luxury goods is strongly correlated with the reinforcement of consumption behavior (Park and Chun, 2025b). Through constant digital engagement, brands that were once exclusive become familiar and aspirational — accelerating the very democratization that simultaneously erodes their exclusivity.

Despite growing scholarly interest, prior research has examined these factors in isolation. Studies on reference groups (Yang and Yi, 2024) and on social media (Park and Chun, 2025a) each illuminate one dimension, but rarely integrate them. Peer influence studies overlook individual psychological motivations; social media research neglects the socio-cultural contexts that shape how aspirational content is internalized. Such fragmented approaches risk oversimplifying the complex, multidimensional decision-making process of adolescent consumers.

This study therefore adopts an integrative approach, examining the interplay of psychological, social, and digital factors that shape luxury perception among Korean high school students. It also addresses a methodological gap noted by Park and Chun (2025a): most existing studies focus exclusively on adolescents with prior luxury consumption experience, overlooking those who have not yet purchased. By incorporating both consumer and non-consumer perspectives, this study aims to provide a more inclusive and representative analysis of how luxury is perceived across Korea's adolescent population.

2. Materials and Methods

This study focused on Korean high school female students aged 15 to 19 as the target consumer group. Female students were intentionally selected because prior research identifies them as the primary drivers of luxury cosmetics consumption — the entry-level luxury category at the center of this study (Park and Chun, 2025a). Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via online school community boards and personal networks of the researcher. Eligibility required current enrollment in a Korean high school. Of the 28 participants, the majority were 17-year-olds (46.4%), followed by 18-year-olds (28.6%), 19-year-olds (14.3%), and 16-year-olds (10.7%). All ethical considerations, including data privacy, were strictly adhered to, and all information and collected data were anonymized. Given the participants' ages, all participants completed the survey after obtaining parental consent. The

survey was administered through Google Forms.

The survey explored several aspects, including individual definitions of luxury goods, factors contributing to perceptions of luxury – such as price, scarcity, and celebrity endorsements – and participants' self-reported psychological responses to luxury consumption. Some questions were mandatory, while others were optional depending on participants' responses. The purpose of this survey was to offer a foundational quantitative overview and to identify common patterns and trends within the demographic.

Consisting of five major questions with one follow-up question, the survey took various forms depending on the questions, ranging from free-response to multiple-choice to short-answer to a linear scale. Key measurements included:

Free response question asking the respondents to list the brands they considered luxury brands. Multiple responses were accepted.

A 5-point linear scale (1=not important at all, 5=very important) was used to measure factors that impact luxury perception. Seven items were selected: celebrity endorsement, high price point, signature design, scarcity, trending item, high quality, and striking logo design.

A yes/no question asking participants if price must exceed a certain threshold to qualify as luxury, with a subsequent multiple-choice question for those who answered 'yes' to define the specific price range.

A second 5-point linear scale (1=not affected at all, 5=very affected) measured the influence level of channels in identifying high-end brands. Participants scored the following five sources independently: celebrities/influencers, social media, peer groups, family members, and fashion magazines and news magazine channels

Finally, the survey concluded with a simple yes-or-no question, asking whether they owned any items they considered high-end.

Following the survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 students who had voluntarily opted in during the initial survey. Interviews were conducted individually via video call or in-person meeting, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and were conducted in Korean to ensure natural expression. Each interview comprised thirteen semi-structured questions with additional follow-up probes, organized across five thematic categories: psychological effect, endowment effect, affordable luxury, socioeconomic stance and peer groups, and media appearance. These questions were designed to elicit deeper insight into respondents' personal definitions of luxury, emotional responses to ownership, and perceptions of brand image. With prior consent, all sessions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy prior to analysis. The complete survey and interview questionnaire are available in Appendices A and B, respectively (URL link to appendices can be found at the end of article).

2.1 Data Analysis.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed descriptively, with frequency distributions and means calculated for each item to identify patterns across the sample. For the qualitative interview data, thematic analysis was applied following a structured inductive process: each transcript was read in full to establish overall familiarity; recurring ideas and phrases were assigned initial codes; codes sharing conceptual overlap were grouped into broader categories; and categories appearing consistently across multiple participants were elevated to primary themes. This process yielded four main themes, reported in the findings below. Given the small, purposive sample — 28 survey respondents and 10 interviewees, all female Korean high school students recruited through convenience sampling — this study is exploratory in nature. The findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable to the broader adolescent population, but rather to generate theoretically grounded hypotheses for future large-scale research.

3. Results

Of the 28 participants, the majority were 17-year-olds (46.4%), followed by 18-year-olds (28.6%), 19-year-olds (14.3%), and 16-year-olds (10.7%). Survey results are reported below across five measurement areas.

When asked to name a luxury brand that came to mind, Chanel (20) was the most frequently mentioned, followed by Dior (13) and Hermès (11). Other frequently mentioned brands included Gucci (9) and Prada (7), while notable yet

less frequently cited brands included Cartier, Van Cleef and Arpels, Balenciaga, Celine, and Yves Saint Laurent.

Regarding factors that constitute luxury, the 5-point rating scale revealed that Scarcity (Average 4.25), High Quality (Average 4.11), and Signature Design (78.57% rating >4) all showed a right-skewed distribution, with high concentrations of responses at the upper end of the scale. High Price — the perception that a product must cost significantly more than everyday alternatives to qualify as luxury — was similarly dominant, with 82.14% of respondents selecting a rating of 4 or 5 (Figure 1). On the other hand, only two respondents chose 5 for celebrity endorsement, with an average value of 3.04. Similarly, an even response was recorded for recognizable logo that was neither left-skewed nor right-skewed (Average 3.07). Finally, a popular trend recorded the lowest overall average (2.43) and exhibited a strong left-skew (Figure 2).

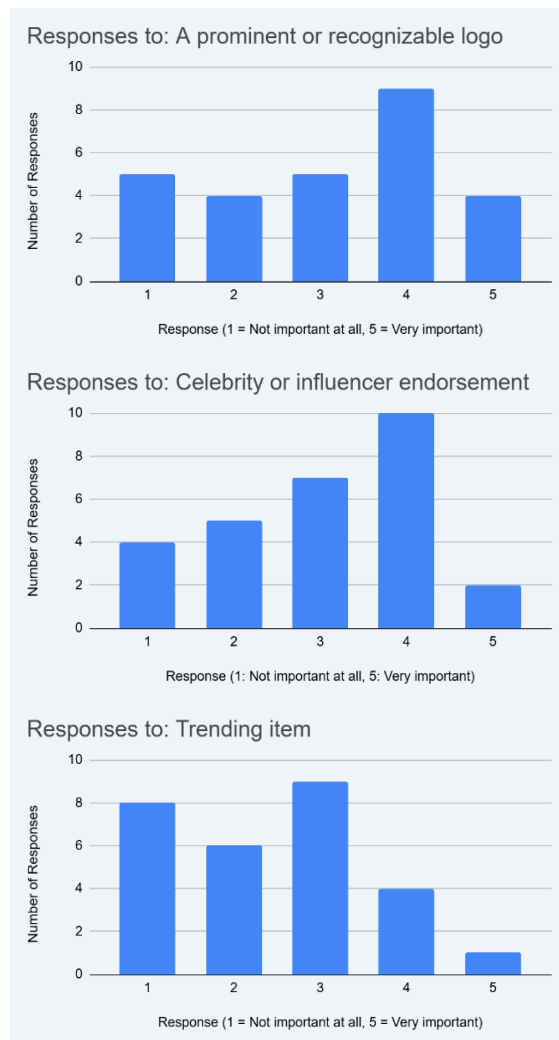


Figure 2. Factors of low importance.

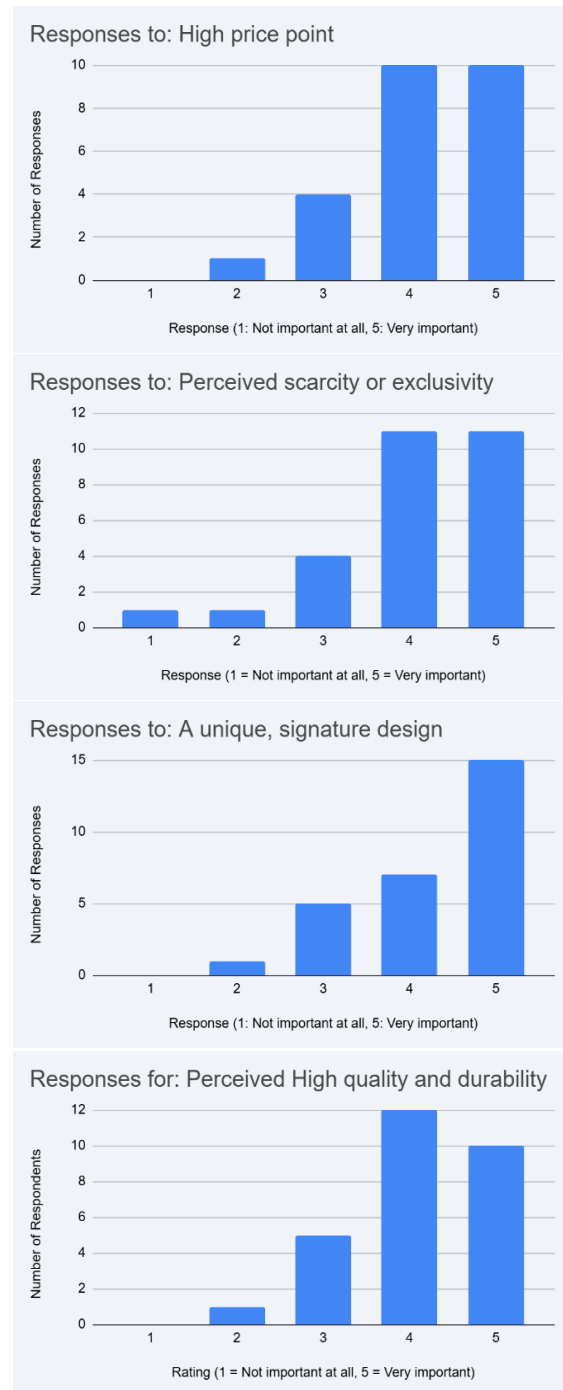


Figure 1. Factors of high importance.

When asked whether an object's price has to be above a certain threshold to be considered luxurious, 64.3% responded "yes," while 35.7% said "no." Among those who answered "yes" (n=18), respondents selected from the following price ranges as the minimum threshold for luxury: 50,000–500,000 KRW (~\$35–350 USD) was

selected by 1 respondent (5.6%); 500,000–1,000,000 KRW (~\$350–700 USD) by 5 respondents (27.8%); 1,000,000–2,000,000 KRW (~\$700–1,400 USD) by 2 respondents (11.1%); 2,000,000–3,000,000 KRW (~\$1,400–2,100 USD) by 4 respondents (22.2%); 3,000,000–4,000,000 KRW (~\$2,100–2,800 USD) by 4 respondents (22.2%); and over 4,000,000 KRW (over ~\$2,800 USD) by 2 respondents (11.1%). The distribution indicates that most respondents who set a price threshold placed it at 500,000 KRW or above, with notable concentration in the mid-to-high ranges.

Participants were also asked to rate how influential various channels were in helping them discover luxury brands (5-point scale: 1 = not influential, 5 = very influential). Results showed a clear prioritization of external, aspirational sources over direct social and familial influence. Celebrities/Influencers (Average 3.7) and Fashion Magazines/News Channels (Average 3.7) recorded the highest average scores, and Social Media scoring an average score of 3.4 (Figure 3). On the other hand, Family Members (Avg. 2.9) and Peer Group (Avg. 3.0) recorded the lowest average scores for initial brand discovery (Figure 4).

Finally, 75% of respondents (n=21) reported currently owning at least one item they considered high-end, while 25% (n=7) did not.

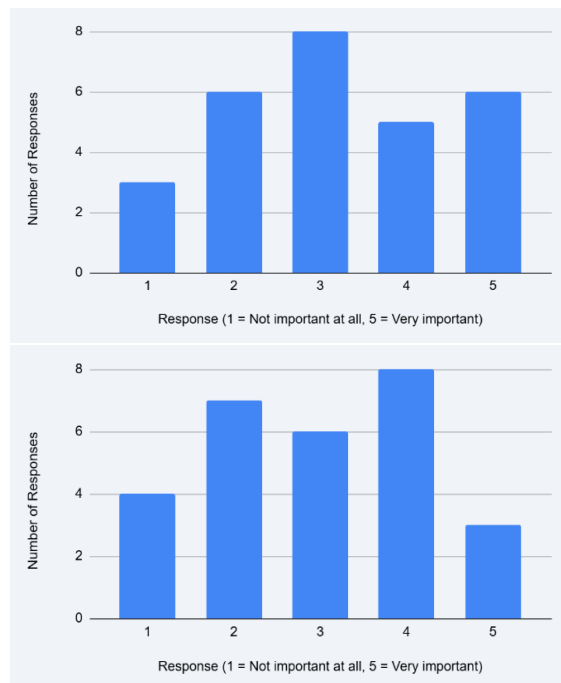


Figure 4. Primary Channel for Discovering Luxury Brand- Low importance: Peer group | Family members

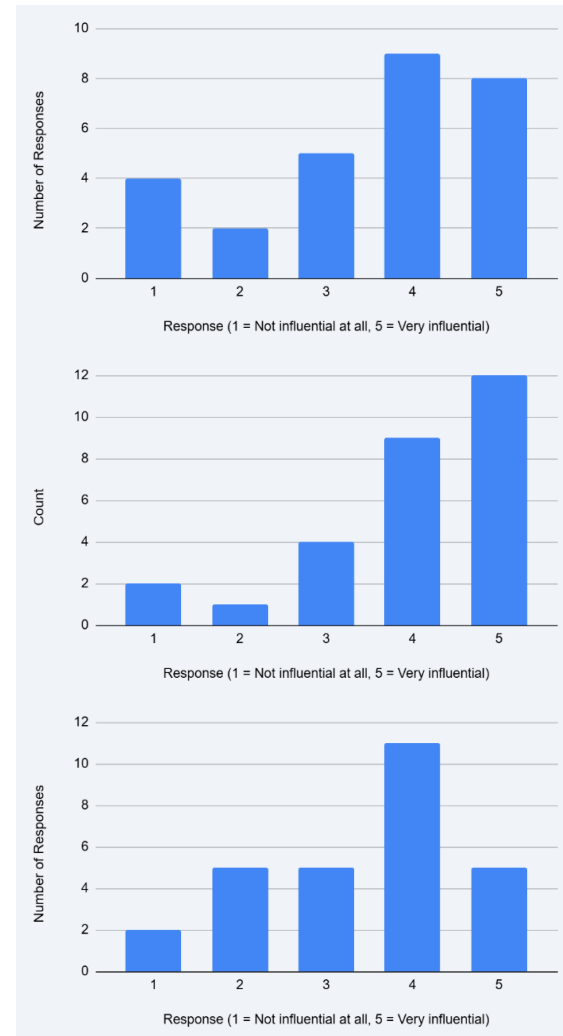


Figure 3. Primary Channel for Discovering Luxury Brand- High importance: Celebrities/Influencers | Fashion magazines or news channels | social media

3.1 Interview Findings

Of the 28 survey participants, 10 voluntarily participated in in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis of the transcripts identified four primary themes:

Brand Image vs. Quality: Most respondents agreed that the positive feeling of using luxury cosmetics came from the "brand value" (as shown from logo on the product) rather than superior product quality. One respondent stated, "I personally have the opinion that a dupe can sometimes outshine the original" and that quality is not always guaranteed by the luxury name.

Social Stigma of Display: A social stigma — a negative social judgment attached to a behavior considered inappropriate or low-status within a group — emerged as a recurring theme. Responses varied, but one strong pattern

applied this stigma based on the item's perceived scarcity: posting a common item like a Dior lip balm for boasting purposes was considered "짜침" (a popular Korean slang equating to 'tacky' or 'undesirable') by several respondents, as it was relatively accessible to everyone.

Psychological Effects and Satisfaction: Respondents who purchased an item after a thorough investigation and long deliberation expressed unconditional satisfaction. Conversely, one respondent regretted items bought solely because they were "luxury" or were purchased impulsively with the sole intent of expressing an unconventional look. Several students reported experiencing the endowment effect merely by visiting an offline store.

4. Discussion

The findings reveal that luxury perception among Korean high school consumers is not reducible to a single factor. Rather, it is shaped by an interplay between psychological needs, social dynamics, and the digital environment. This section discusses the key patterns emerging from the survey and interviews, organized into two thematic areas.

4.1 Social Media, Brand Socialization, and Accessible Luxury

The quantitative dominance of Celebrities/Influencers (3.7) and Fashion Magazines (3.7) as discovery channels confirms that highly professionalized, aspirational platforms are the primary agents for modeling status and brand association (Park & Chun, 2025a). This social exposure precedes the reinforcement stage observed in the interviews.

The pursuit of validation (e.g., "자랑하고 싶다" (I want to show off)) is a critical mechanism for adolescents to attain psychological reinforcement. Obtaining social approval via posting luxury goods affects the consumer's psychological state (Park & Chun, 2025b). This validates the strong link between the Need for Approval and self-concept reinforcement in this demographic. The importance of the Brand's Signature Design and Brand Image (Section 3.1) further aligns with Self-Congruity Theory, where consumers choose luxury goods to verify their desired social identity (Xi, et al., 2022).

These socialization dynamics intersect with a key paradox in how respondents valued luxury goods. Despite the strong quantitative importance of High Price (82.14% rated 4 or 5), the qualitative data revealed a nuanced acceptance of lower-priced items, suggesting a paradoxical valuation where symbolic presence outweighs pure cost of a product. Interviewees consistently integrated luxury cosmetic products into their luxury spectrum, confirming their symbolic status as a reasonable option despite their lower price point. This is rationalized by the function of cosmetics as the easiest category for accessibility to high-end brands. Respondents noted that entry-level items make luxury "*feel more closer and friendly*" and "*appear reasonably purchasable through platforms like KakaoTalk Gift*," aligning with the appeal of accessible consumption and acting as a gateway to brand loyalty.

The analysis of quality perception also confirmed the prioritization of symbolic value over intrinsic quality in certain product categories. While one respondent attributed superior quality to meticulous material finishing (e.g., leather, stitching), others concluded that the primary difference lay in "extravagant packaging and logo value," rather than product performance. This supports the notion that in highly developed markets (e.g., K-beauty), differentiation is achieved through aesthetic and symbolic appeal rather than a guaranteed quality benefit.

4.2 Social Stigma, Affective Regret, and Psychological Ownership

The finding that posting common entry-level items (e.g., Dior lip balms) on social media is deemed "짜침" (tacky/undesirable) is a direct consequence of the conflict between democratization and the Need for Uniqueness (NFU) (Tian, et al., 2001). This stigma is rooted in the idea that democratization erodes exclusivity, thereby diminishing the 'pride of ownership' (Rosendo Ríos & Shukla, 2023).

This stigma is negotiated through lived experience, highlighting the socio-contextual variability of status perception. The distinction between 'affordable to anyone' versus 'exclusive' is not defined by objective income data but is dynamically constructed through social comparison within the peer group. The strong emotional connection recalled by respondents (e.g., "relative deprivation" and envy linked to social status) reinforces that peer dynamics,

particularly within the tightly defined high school environment, are crucial mechanisms of influence.

The interview data further revealed a critical contrast in post-purchase emotional outcomes. Respondents who based purchases on thorough research and long deliberation reported contentment and consistent satisfaction. Conversely, affective regret was strongly associated with impulsive or purely external motivations. One respondent reported regretting nearly all purchases made solely for the brand name, often engaging in cognitive dissonance by rationalizing poor aesthetic choices (e.g., justifying the design as *"better than the banal copy-and-paste designs"*). The contrast between the two students (impulsive vs. deliberate buyer) suggests a pattern that impulsive purchases tend to generate more regret, whereas premeditated purchases produce more satisfaction. This suggests that long-term satisfaction is maximized when the acquisition aligns with deliberative internal self-congruity, while purchases driven by external image validation are prone to regret.

The interview results showing that respondents experienced the 'endowment effect' merely by visiting a department store or sampling a product — is best explained by the concept of psychological ownership: the state in which a consumer feels possessive toward a brand even without formal ownership (Wang et al., 2025). Respondents emphasized that the strategic use of offline space (meticulous packaging, personalized service, and prominent 1st-floor displays) acts as a powerful mechanism that provides the sense of psychological belonging and induces desire for the product. On the other hand, some respondents found online browsing sufficient for the ownership effect, suggesting a split between consumers who prioritize on-site experience and those who prioritize symbolic aesthetic focus.

4.3 Limitations.

Several limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample is small (N=28 for the survey; n=10 for interviews) and drawn through convenience sampling, which limits statistical representativeness and generalizability. Second, the study focused exclusively on female Korean high school students; while this was an intentional design choice reflecting female students' greater engagement with entry-level luxury cosmetics, findings may not extend to male students or to luxury categories beyond cosmetics. Third, recruitment through personal and school-based networks may introduce self-selection bias toward students who are already interested in or actively engaged with luxury goods. Fourth, the study relies on self-reported data, which is susceptible to social desirability effects — a concern that is especially relevant given the peer-sensitive nature of luxury consumption among adolescents. Future research should employ larger, more diverse samples across both genders, multiple regions, and a wider range of product categories to improve generalizability.

5. Conclusion

This research highlights that the luxury perception among Korean high school consumers is multidimensional, and their perspective transcends price and brand logo to encompass complex social and psychological factors. The findings demonstrate that digital agents (social media) have supplanted traditional agents (peer approval), mediating the consumer socialization process through reinforcement and approval-seeking behaviors in an online space. Notably, the rise in accessible luxury (i.e. cosmetic products) has created a paradox: while increasing brand participation, it has simultaneously introduced a stigma against commonality within the peer group, demonstrating that social exclusivity remains the top driver of psychological satisfaction.

Building on these findings, future research should investigate whether the importance of inherent quality and brand image persists when consumers encounter imitation products—particularly counterfeits and dupes. Counterfeits are unauthorized products that imitate the brand's design, logo, and packaging. In contrast, dupes are not outright knockoffs; instead, they are less expensive products that closely resemble a more expensive one by mimicking its style or aesthetic appeal without using the brand's original logo or trademarks. They are nonetheless similar in that both challenges how adolescents define authenticity and value in luxury consumption.

Exploring how teenage consumers perceive and respond to these imitation forms can clarify whether their psychological attachment to luxury brands is driven by intrinsic factors or by extrinsic motivations. If the products'

quality and price, which adolescent consumers have mentioned as a crucial factor, were eliminated as factors, and the adolescents still experience psychological satisfaction, this would indicate that teenage consumers place greater value on intrinsic factors they “claim” to pursue, such as quality, brand heritage, etc., than other external factors, such as social display, a sense of belonging, etc. Therefore, subsequent studies comparing reactions to authentic, counterfeit, and dupe products could yield meaningful insights for both luxury brand marketing and consumer psychological effects.

Supplementary Materials

The complete survey instruments (Appendix A) and Interview protocol (Appendix B) used in this study are accessible via the following URL:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/14-89uaLvpGzXhkmWd_yyNippqEqrhXiRSmYNxgUjHCU/edit?usp=sharing

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