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## Blurring production-consumption boundaries: Making my own luxury bag

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## ABSTRACT

Leather crafting of leather wallets or bags exhibiting similar designs as prestige brands is an emerging hobby among fashion-forward Korean consumers. This study examines the motivations of this emerging craft consumer. Data collected using in-depth interviews and participant observations support the following observation. A conspicuous or materialistic orientation and traditional values of crafting drive consumer participation in leather crafting. The study's findings identify this group of people, labeled neo-craft consumers, as exhibiting Homo Faber (Bergson, 1983) and Homo Ludens (Huizinga, 1950) characteristics. Neo-craft consumers create a new type of consumer culture which blurs production and consumption boundaries.

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## 1. Introduction

In a consumer society driven by purchasing and using mass-produced goods, craft falls into the domain of either producing handmade products mainly associating with ethnic identity (e.g., local specialties and souvenirs on a small scale) or hobby that focuses on enjoying the process. Industrialization generally has replaced production by crafting in developed countries. Rising labor costs make handmade products uncompetitive. Crafting also does not mass produce easily due to quality control issues. Since the 1970s, Korea industrialization has impacted the craft business negatively. Consumers began to view craft products as inferior to machine-made products. Craftspeople were associated with the low social status that accompanies physical labor, low income, and a lack of social recognition of one's work.

In recent years, interesting changes in the craft culture are occurring. The number of craft workshops is increasing, and leather crafting is now an emerging hobby among fashion-forward Korean consumers. This trend parallels the expansion of leisure activities and the luxury goods market resulting from Korea's solid economic growth (Lee & Choi, 2014). One unique behavior relating to this new trend is that people join leather crafting workshops specifically to replicate high-end designer handbags, the so-called luxury brand bags. These leather craft workshops generally provide tutorials on copying luxury bags' designs and sources of quality materials. A participant's craft work potentially can equal in quality and design to the luxury bags. Leather crafting thus typically includes making a leather bag along with certain accessories, such as leather bracelets and cell phone cases.

Generally, in a modern society, work and play are considered separate domains. People work for their living (Marx, Engels, & Lothrop, 1902) and they engage in play through leisure activities. A leisure activity is done for its own sake and entails perceived freedom, choice, and pleasure. Consumption, contrary to production, falls under the domain of play rather than work, though consumption involves a wide range of goods from daily necessities to collectibles. Consumption particularly of fashion goods itself is an amusement which enables them to express their freedom and to release their stress from the wage labor (Ciulla, 2011). The leather crafting as a hobby is interesting; not only do people obtain such amusement that consumption provides but also the hobby entails the same labor in which vocational craftspeople engage.

Possibly, leather crafting's popularity is an expression of an animosity toward mass production and overly uniform products in an industrial society, or simply a desire to obtain unique and customized design bags. Such leather crafting is also a means of acquiring luxury leather goods at a fraction of the retail cost. Price alone does not account for the behavior. These individuals could more easily purchase counterfeit products if price is the only motivation. Why do craft consumers make a leather bag for themselves despite the physical labor and cost for the tutorial? The purpose of this study is to better understand the leather crafting culture, which combines crafting and consumerism. The study focuses on craft consumers who make leather bags because they want to create their own leather goods and intend to use the crafted products instead of luxury brand handbags.

This research takes the perspective of consumer culture theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). CCT is the paradigm representing the theoretical perspectives that deal with consumers' lived experiences, including consumer choices, behaviors, and meanings, mediated by the marketplace and social arrangement. The perspective of CCT

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offers contextual understanding of the emerging group of craft consumers as producers of a new consumer culture. This study looks into how consumers creatively cope with the ideology of luxury consumption and how consumers interpret the nature of crafting in the context of materialistic marketplace culture driven by fashion change. The leather craft consumer takes on a different strategy of consumption in that they challenge the market arrangement of dividing producer and consumer. Although these craft consumers pursue what fashion proposes and they appreciate what industry offers, they want to find an alternative way of acquiring the same consumption objects.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Leather crafting in a consumption society

Traditional craft consumers refer to consumers who base their craft on traditional skills and practices and make objects that express their creativity (Klamer, 2012). Although those who are making leather bags fall into the boundary of craft consumers, they are different from traditional craft consumers in that they join a craft workshop with the motivation of copying the bags that they would have purchased from prestige brands otherwise. Crafting is the act of combining the head and hands in close engagement with materials, knowledge, experiences, problem-finding and problem-solving, cooperation, and collaboration (Jakob, 2012).

Crafting's history is divisible into three broad periods. The first wave called the Arts and Craft Movement occurred after the 2nd World War and included a frugal mind, relating to making something yourself to reduce the cost of buying a product (Campbell, 2005; Jakob, 2012). The second craft movement emerged between the 1960s and 1970s with the English Hippies. This period had a specific political ethos, namely, to follow the laws of nature rather than simply producing aesthetic and quality hand-made products (Wagner, 2008). At the beginning of the 21st Century, crafting entered a third wave. People pursue unique beauty and aesthetics in contrast to globally homogenized production and passive mass consumption (Kim & Ra, 2008; Levine & Heimerl, 2008; Stevens, 2011). The recent popular leather crafting movement has put a new complexion on craft history in that these craft consumers make their own bags mimicking popular design from certain designer brands. This new movement suggests that consumerism now drives the crafting culture.

Consumption plays a pivotal role in delivering cultural and symbolic meanings to society. Not only consumers gain a consumption good, but also they acquire a symbolic function and meaning through the consumption (McCracken, 1986). Consumption experiences including shopping and use process help consumers define selves and relationships with others (Compeau, Monroe, Grewal, & Reynolds, 2016; Ferreira & Sacaraboto, 2016). For example, luxury brand handbags typically relate to status and wealth. Patrons of luxury products seek affirmation of their high self-esteem. Luxury goods, in this sense, fulfill a need for esteem which includes the human desire to be accepted and valued by others (Maslow, 1943). Luxury products serve as tangible evidence of success and wealth. Prior studies identify the relationship between conspicuous consumption and luxury consumption (Husband & Chadha, 2007; Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). Conspicuous consumption occurs when an individual displays wealth with expenditures on luxury goods and services (Freire, 2014; Podoshen, Li, & Zhang, 2011; Veblen, 2007; Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). Luxury brand handbags are highly visible and fit the profile of a typical conspicuous consumption product. Thus, handbags are a big portion of the luxury industry (Husic & Cicic, 2009). In particular, carrying luxury handbags considered symbolic by Korean consumers denotes social status, wealth, and success (Jung, Kim, Bang, Cho, & Kim, 2014).

Ironically, the big name brands in luxury handbag industry (e.g., Hermès, Louis Vuitton, or Gucci) began as small scale craft workshops in the early years (Kapferer, 2012). Exclusivity is the consumption

value that luxury goods provide and product scarcity often creates this condition (Kapferer, 2012; Park, Rabolt, & Jeon, 2008). Today, fashion conglomerates dominate the system of designing, producing, and marketing most luxury fashion goods. Only some components of a luxury bag require the hands of skilled workers called artisans during the manufacturing process. While the craftsmanship remains one main factor creating brand exclusivity, consumers no longer perceive these artisans' contributions as belonging to the craft business. Instead, the craft business either refers to indigenous craftspeople producing handmade products or souvenirs or as free-standing workshops or boutiques that produce unique products on a small scale. Market ideology provides the craftsmanship embedded in luxury products with certain sacredness compared to unknown brands or shops with a low prestige.

A new type of leather crafting (i.e., copying luxury bags) is increasingly popular in Korea. This phenomenon is now a melting pot where consumerism orientation, such as conspicuous consumption or materialism, is mixed with the traditional attributes of crafting, such as a frugal mindset (Campbell, 2005; Jakob, 2012). The reasons for making a leather bag seem to go beyond crafting as a hobby. The bags these people craft are important consumption objects in their everyday lives. Thus, for these craft consumers, consumerism joins the spirit of production through crafting. This paradox of the leather craft culture warrants further investigation.

### 2.2. Crafting as a human hobby

Crafting is a hobby intended for consumers. Hobbies involve different types of activities that people enjoy during their leisure time, such as collecting, making and tinkering, activity participation, liberal arts pursuits, and sports and games (Stebbins, 2015). Leather crafting falls under the making and tinkering sub-category. Other making and tinkering hobbies include scale modeling, dressmaking, and cooking. These hobbies involve using tools to create a final output, relating to *Homo Faber* or "man the maker" (Arendt, 2013; Bergson, 1983; Sennett, 2008). *Homo Faber* suggests a human nature and interest in creating tangible and intangible products. Employing leather crafting skills to make leather handbags requires working with a variety of tools including cutters, hammers, and pliers.

Crafting as a hobby also involves an aspect of play. Evidence that play is a human activity before culture appeared supports Huizinga's (1950) contention that human beings display elements of *Homo Ludens* or "playing man" and should not be typecast as only *Homo Sapiens* or *Homo Faber*. Five necessary and sufficient conditions are necessary for play: 1) free, 2) not ordinary, 3) absolutely different from typical life, 4) absolute and supreme order, 5) linked to no material profit (Huizinga, 1950). These five conditions are discussed later.

Crafting also relates to the therapeutic function. Since the 19th Century, evidence supports crafting helps improve perceptions, calm emotions, and improve physical treatment for mental health and rehabilitation (Bissell & Mailloux, 1981; Horghagen, Josephsson, & Alsaker, 2007; Taylor & Manguno, 1991). The literature supports craft's therapeutic effect; participating in common crafting activities (i.e., scrapbook or knitting) helps people with mental disabilities recover (Bang & Kim, 2010). This therapeutic function plays an important role because crafting offers outlets for stress reduction. Leather crafting creates a positive psychological effect on the person when making something by hand.

This study seeks to understand the new type of craft consumer culture in greater depth by delving into those paradoxical characteristics. This study aims to answer the following research question. Firstly, what drives consumer participation in leather crafting? In other words, what are the meanings of the process and the final outcome of leather crafting among fashion-forward craft consumers? Secondly, are leather crafting and consuming the crafted bags transformative experience? Do craft consumers experience any changes in their identity project or perception of consumption values or consumer behavior?

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