Why consumers buy small luxuries: The psychological mechanism of self-gifting and consumer well-being

Eun Kang [a], Yoon Hi Sung [b]*, Jiyoon (Karen) Han[c], Seungae Lee[d], and Kacy Kim[a]

[a] Department of Marketing, Bryant University, Smithfield, RI, USA;
[b] Department of Communication, Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea;
[c] School of Journalism and Media Studies, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA, USA;
[d] Division of Sport Industry and Science, Hanyang University, Seoul, South Korea

Yoon Hi Sung, Ph.D. (*Corresponding author)
Associate Professor
Department of Communication
Yonsei University
50 Yonsei-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, 03722
+82 10-9088-1005
yhsung@yonsei.ac.kr

Abstract

This study examines why consumers purchase micro-luxury items and whether such purchases enhance perceived well-being. Drawing on self-gifting theory and the lipstick effect, we propose that perceived sacrifice activates self-focused motivations, specifically self-expression and self-gifting, which in turn shape micro-luxury purchase intentions. Using structural equation modeling, results show that perceived sacrifice positively increases the need for self-expression, which subsequently strengthens self-gifting intentions. Self-gifting intentions, in turn, positively predict intentions to purchase micro-luxury items, and purchase intentions positively influence perceived well-being. These findings extend luxury and advertising research by showing that micro-luxury consumption is not driven solely by status motives, but also by self-directed psychological processes. Practically, the study suggests that appeals emphasizing self-expression and deservedness may strengthen micro-luxury advertising effectiveness.

Keywords: micro-luxury consumption, self-gifting, perceived sacrifice, lipstick effect, consumer well-being