

## **Social Stratification and Symbolic Consumption**

**Feng Sun, Tsinghua University<sup>1</sup>**  
**Jing Jian Xiao, University of Rhode Island<sup>2</sup>**  
**Yixiao Zhang, Northeastern University<sup>3</sup>**

The purpose of this study is to test hypotheses related to social stratification and symbolic consumption. The hypotheses are developed based on the theory of symbolic values of goods (Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Veblen, 1899), social stratification of consumption (Bourdieu, 1979/1984; Weber, 1956/1978) and advertising's symbolic construction (Jhally, 1987). According to the hypotheses, higher social classes are more likely to seek consumption activities symbolizing wealth and leisure and less likely to engage in activities implying frugality. Since advertisements are becoming a means of conveying symbolic values of consumer products to consumers, higher social classes are more likely to pay attention to advertisements. Finally, advertisement attention is positively associated with wealth and leisure symbols of consumption and negatively associated with the frugality symbol of consumption.

Data were collected from consumers in two representative cities in China, Tianjin (an eastern coastal city) and Xi'an (a western inland city). Structural equation modeling was used to analyze data of the total sample and the two subsamples. Results are consistent with most hypotheses. Unexpected results include there is no social class differences in advertisement attention. In addition, advertisement attention is not related to leisure and frugality symbols of consumption, which suggests that consumers' paying attention to advertisements is mainly for the wealth symbol.

The results of this study show that Chinese consumers in higher social classes emphasize the wealth symbol of consumption. These consumers' lifestyles would serve as a model way of life for the entire society, thus forming undesirable social habits and social norms of chasing money, which not only affects value judgments of the society but also finally affects the operation of the social system. Public policies are needed to provide consumer education and raise barriers to discourage this type of unhealthy symbolic consumption. The study results also show that paying attention to advertisement has impacts on consumer preference for the symbol of wealth. While advertisement as a business practice plays an important role in selling consumer goods, it as a ubiquitous symbol system emphasizes promoting the culture of materialism that contributes to commodity fetishism and inevitably has negative impacts on the society. Therefore, public policies should be made to encourage social responsibilities of the advertising industry.

---

<sup>1</sup>Professor, Department of Sociology, Tsinghua University; Email: sunfeng@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn.

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Rhode Island; Email: xiao@uri.edu.

<sup>3</sup>Graduate student, Northeastern University; Email: qj574@yahoo.com.