Social Construction Functions of Consumption Space under Stratification: The Case of Guangzhou

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Abstract: As Chinese cities rapidly transformed themselves into consumerist societies, the relationship between consumers and consumption space under stratification has become a new research area in the field of urban social geography. Based on a consumer behavior analysis, this study explores the relationship between consumption space and the social strata of consumers in typical shopping malls in Guangzhou where the first shopping mall in China was built. The result shows that shopping malls have performed significant constructive functions of organizing consumers from different social classes into different consumption space. For middle- and upper-class consumers, the function of shopping malls centers on utilitarian consumption, identity recognition, and identity construction; whereas for lower-class consumers, its function revolves around pleasure and enjoyment. The symbolism of consumption space is the underlying reason for shopping malls to have their social constructive function. The findings of this research suggest that: 1) a shopping mall is a productive consumption space and a geographical space with subjectivity; 2) the micro-location of a shopping mall has social construction function; and 3) symbolic consumption is the core of social construction.

Keywords: consumption space; stratification; shopping mall; social construction; social identity; symbolic consumption

1 Introduction

More than 30 years after the implementation of the reform and open-up policy, China has begun to witness the emergence of a consumerist society along with the rise of stratification. In the western academe, several studies have been conducted on the relationship between consumption and social stratification. These studies have indicated that consumers from different social classes have different choices of products: lower-class consumers are concerned with the practicality of products, while upper-class consumers exhibit a strong tendency for symbolic consumption (Warning, 1960; Engel *et al*., 1990). The relationship between consumers from different social classes and commercial facilities, especially shopping malls, has attracted increasing attention in the field of geography (Pred, 1984; Day, 2005; Sangwoo and Yuri, 2008). Some researchers have asserted that consumptions in upper-level shopping malls can strengthen the self-recognition and self-confidence of the consumers for upper-class consumers whereas lower-class consumers probably do not have the same experience (Sirgy, 1986; Chebat *et al*., 2006). Swinyard (1998) argued that consumers enjoy going to shopping malls because they want to experience a sense of belongingness, harmonious interpersonal relationships, and feelings of safety. Allard (2008) and other scholars believed that the entertainment function of shopping malls is more crucial for lower-class consumers than for upper-class consumers who pay more attention to the utilitarian function of such activities. In addition, Hu and Jasper (2004) also explored the relationship of consumers with shopping malls by analyzing consumer behavior from different aspects, including gender, age, occupation, and income. Stern *et al*. (1977) suggested that consumers are more inclined to visit shopping malls that

can match their identities, and that it is easy to discern from which classes the majority of consumers in a shopping mall belong to through the symbol represented by the shopping mall.

Some Chinese scholars have suggested that consumers from different social classes have different consumption behaviors and that this difference further strengthens the identity recognition and social stratification of consumers (Li, 2005; Wang, 2007). Recently, some socio-geographical studies have focused on the relationship between social stratification and shopping malls as well as the symbolization of space (Wang, 2009; Li, 2004). Studies conducted in small regions likewise contributed to social-geographical research (Zhou, 2007), and today, several studies on consumption behaviors in shopping malls have been undertaken. As consumption places, what are the properties of shopping malls? What relationships do shopping malls have with consumers from different social classes? Are these relationships locally oriented? Few studies strived to explain these problems in the field of commercial geography. It is necessary to explore the social construction of the relationship between consumers from different classes and consumer space in shopping malls in the period of rapid transformation of Chinese societies and within the context of space and cultural changes.

Consumption is deemed to be a part of social practice. As social stratification deepens, consumers from differ- ent classes develop different consumption behaviors, thereby creating social relations with others through consumption. This relationship is reflected in geographical space through consumer facilities. In fact, consumer space has two meanings: one refers to the physical space of consumer facilities, and the other refers to the spatial order constructed by various consumer relations added in consumer facilities. This study argues that a shopping mall is the productive consumption space and that the micro-location of a shopping mall has its social construction functions. It is hoped that this study can contribute new insights to the field of urban social geography.

2 Study Area and Methods

2.1 Study area

Guangzhou is located on the southeastern coast of China and has an area of 7.4×10^3 km^2 and a permanent population of 10.34×10^6. In 2009, the GDP of Guangzhou was 911.276×10^6 yuan (RMB). This study selected three typical shopping malls in the central business district (CBD) of Guangzhou: namely Teemall, Grandview Mall, and China Plaza (Fig. 1). Teemall, opened in 1996, has a construction area of 160×10^3 m^2 which includes Teemall Department Store and Jusco Supermarket. Teemall has been known as 'the first mall of China'. China Plaza opened in 2000, which has a construction area of 170×10^3
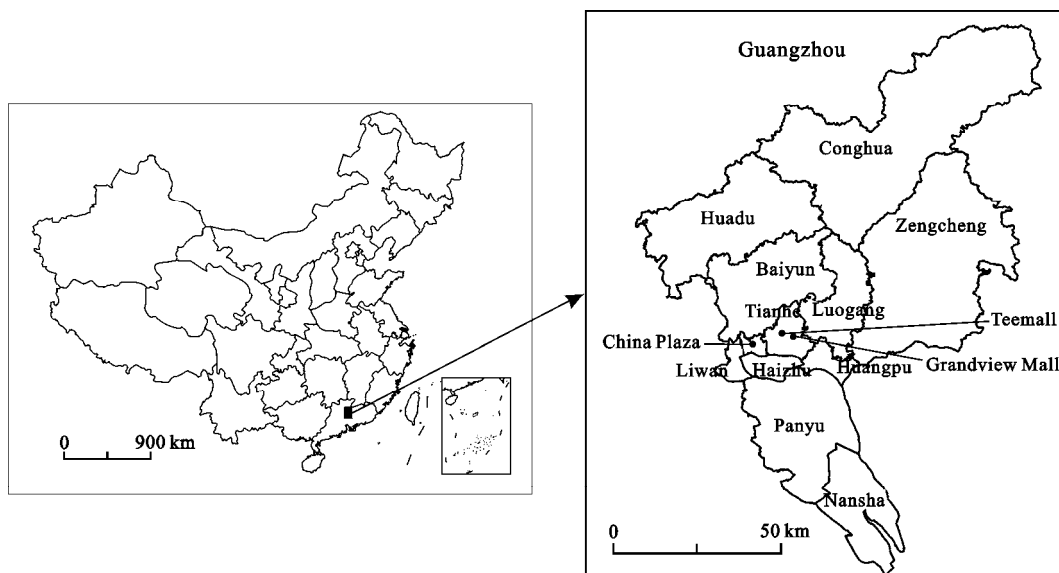

Fig. 1 Location sketch of Guangzhou and three shopping malls

m^2. Grandview Mall opened in 2005, which has a construction area of 420×10^3 m^2, including Friendship Store. All three malls are multi-functional, with features of touring, entertainment and shopping, aside from having good economic benefits.

2.2 Method

2.2.1 Questionnaire

For three consecutive days (a working day and a weekend) in January 2009, customers in the three selected shopping malls were asked to join our questionnaire surveys. Through the surveys, we obtained the needed demographic information, which includes income, education, and occupation, to confirm the social status of consumers. Our surveys used haphazard sampling. We handed out 1 200 questionnaires and collected 1 098 valid ones, which yielded a validity rate of 91.5%. Apart from personal information such as age, gender, occupation, income, education, and marital status, we inquired about the purpose of shopping, psychological types of shopping, activity area, and consumption experience, which encompasses brand and consumption space recognition among consumers. We also selected 20 representatives in the sampling pool for semi-structured interviews. Through a follow-up analysis, we have identified the relationship between social class consumption and shopping malls.

2.2.2 Social stratification

Income, occupation, and education are the most important indicators in the current social stratification in China (Li and Zhang, 2000; Lu, 2002; Li, 2003). The interviewees were divided into 6 classes in this study based on the three indicators (Table 1):

1) Upper-class consumers. This class is composed of high-ranking government officials, senior managers, senior professionals, technical personnel, and entrepreneurs owning big-scale private enterprises. They hold bachelor's degrees or above, with a monthly income of over 7 000 yuan (RMB).

2) Upper middle-class consumers. This class is composed of lower-ranking government officials, intermediate managers, professionals, technical personnel, and entrepreneurs owning medium-scale companies. They hold bachelor's degrees or junior college-level education, with a monthly income of 5 000–7 000 yuan.

3) Middle-class consumers. This class is composed of clergy, primary technicians, and few entrepreneurs owning small-scale companies. Most of them have reached junior college-level education, and some have even obtained bachelor's degrees, with a monthly income of 3 000–5 000 yuan.

4) Lower middle-class consumers. This class consists of ordinary workers from service industries and clergies. They have attained junior college-level education or below, with a monthly income of 1 000–3 000 yuan.

5) Lower-class consumers. This class consists of unemployed, seasonal, and semi-employed workers as well as farmers. They have attained middle school degrees or below, with a monthly income of less than 1 000 yuan,.

6) Student consumers. This class consists of students and young individuals with an average monthly income of less than 1 000 yuan.

3 Social Stratification

3.1 Consumer motivation and way of experience

Shopping malls can satisfy the various demands of consumers in a modern society. Consumers from different social classes go to shopping malls with different purposes (Table 2). Entertainment and leisure are the main

Table 1 Number of valid questionnaires divided by social class

	Student	Lower-class	Lower middle-class	Middle-class	Upper middle-class	Upper-class	Total
Number	234	64	198	324	96	80	1098

Table 2 Shopping purposes of consumers by social class (%)

Purpose of shopping	Upper-class	Upper middle-class	Middle-class	Lower middle-class	Lower-class	Student
Shopping	63.3	50.0	48.0	47.9	52.5	40.6
Dining	12.7	13.0	11.2	12.9	10.1	12.8
Entertainment/Leisure	46.7	46.8	53.2	54.8	31.3	52.1
Meeting with friends	11.4	20.1	16.0	15.2	16.2	13.7
Traveling	1.3	1.3	2.2	1.1	14.1	2.1

purposes of the middle-class, lower-middle class, and student consumers who may be categorized as hedonic consumers. In contrast, more than 50% of the upper- and lower-class consumers choose shopping as their main purpose. Along with differentiation in the socio-economic status, the feature of utilitarian consumers is more apparent. Especially, consumers with the upper socio-economic status go to these malls mainly for shopping and regard them as places that meet their utilitarian needs.

According to an analysis of the psychological types of consumers (Table 3), excluding upper-class consumers, 70% of consumers from other social classes chose 'casual shopping'. This suggests that these consumers have a shopping behavior more akin to a leisure activity than to simply buying necessities. In addition, these consumers regard strolling as a pleasant activity, implying that shopping malls have a significant recreational function. Compared with other consumers, upper-class consumers have a higher proportion of people who usually go shopping on purpose.

In terms of consumption experience in shopping malls (Table 4), upper-class consumers mostly chose 'quality assurance feelings' (32.9%) or 'no feelings, just consumption' (30.4%). This is indicative of utilitarian shopping. Lower-class consumers also exhibited a predictable shopping tendency; however, fashion, popularity, and ambience were involved in the consumption experience of other classes.

Thus, in terms of consumer motivation and experience, upper-class consumers exhibit obvious utilitarian

features. However, middle- and lower-class consumers, as well as student consumers, presented diverse consumption characteristics. People from these strata generally recognized shopping malls as places for entertainment and fashion, although the degree of recognition among these groups varies. These groups often patronize shopping malls with friends, and shopping malls become places where they can interact with others.

3.2 Consumption identity

Based on the preference index (Table 5), we can measure the preference degree of each social class in shopping malls as:

$$F_{ij}=N_{ij} / N_j$$
$$(i=1, 2, ..., 6; j=1, 2, ..., 6 \text{ or } 1, 2, ..., 9)$$

where F_{ij} is the consumers of class i's preference degree to consumption determining factor j; N_{ij} refers to the samples of the consumers of class i choosing consumption determining factor j; and N_j refers to the total samples of the total consumers choosing consumption determining factor j.

In terms of the operation types in shopping malls, with the exception of the lower middle-class and lower-class consumers who prefer supermarkets, consumers from other classes prioritize exclusive shops. On the other hand, upper-class consumers, a group that exhibits strong quality consumption preferences in selecting shopping places, comprise the mainstream consumer group of luxury department stores. In terms of the

Table 3 Psychological types of shopping by social class (%)

Psychological type of shopping	Upper-class	Upper middle-class	Middle-class	Lower middle-class	Lower-class	Student
Shopping on purpose	32.9	17.0	15.6	15.2	15.2	8.1
Casual shopping	49.4	71.9	71.4	73.8	71.7	73.9
Shopping for fashion	12.7	6.5	6.3	4.2	2.0	9.0
Bargain shopping	5.1	9.2	10.8	12.2	12.1	12.0

Table 4 Consumption experiences of different social classes (%)

Consumption experience	Upper-class	Upper middle-class	Middle-class	Lower middle-class	Lower-class	Student
Feeling fashion trend	16.5	27.5	26.4	25.5	13.1	28.6
No feeling, just consumption	30.4	18.3	15.2	18.3	32.3	18.8
Quality assurance	32.9	27.5	24.5	24.0	19.2	22.6
Comfortable environment	22.8	30.7	34.2	27.8	20.2	27.8
Happiness from consumption	8.9	14.4	10.0	8.7	3.0	6.8
No consumption, just strolling and relaxing	7.6	11.1	20.4	26.6	21.2	19.7
Dissatisfied	1.3	0	0.4	0.8	3.0	0.9
Other	1.3	0.7	0.7	0.4	3.0	1.7

Table 5 Preference index values for consumers from different social classes (%)

Consumption determining factor		Upper-class	Upper middle-class	Middle-class	Lower middle-class	Lower-class	Student
Operation types	Supermarket	0.295	0.291	0.419	0.521	0.646	0.402
	Department store	0.462	0.331	0.363	0.284	0.303	0.274
	Exclusive shop	0.628	0.629	0.581	0.467	0.293	0.594
	Speciality store	0.141	0.212	0.195	0.126	0.081	0.090
	Convenience store	0.103	0.106	0.086	0.130	0.061	0.132
	Discount store	0.115	0.199	0.266	0.261	0.101	0.286
Consumer's preference	Quality assurance	0.468	0.463	0.492	0.411	0.368	0.430
	Affordable	0.177	0.262	0.242	0.340	0.379	0.383
	Variety of commodity	0.304	0.262	0.354	0.328	0.242	0.365
	Upscale commodity	0.177	0.161	0.135	0.099	0.063	0.117
	Good shopping environ-	0.190	0.221	0.185	0.182	0.053	0.200
	Good services	0.101	0.134	0.138	0.091	0.084	0.122
	Facilitating shopping	0.089	0.074	0.046	0.043	0.042	0.052
	Personal habit	0.291	0.188	0.269	0.206	0.211	0.265
	Others	0.013	0.007	0.008	0.016	0.021	0.013

evaluation of operation types inside shopping malls, the preference index of consumers from each social class indicates high recognition of commodity quality and commodity variety. Therefore, shopping malls have created many commercial operation types suitable for consumers from all social classes.

To further analyze the degree of consumption identity of consumers from each social class, we did the membership card survey, which has a 'labeling' function, in conducting the questionnaire. In shopping malls, the requirements for a supermarket membership card application are usually less than those for a department store membership card application. Upper-class consumers mostly own membership cards from the Teemall Department Store and the Friendship Store. Some upper middle-class consumers also own membership cards from the Teemall Department Store and the Jusco Supermarket. Middle-class and lower-class consumers own membership cards issued chiefly by supermarkets or exclusive shops. The highest number of consumers without membership cards is from the lower social classes, specifically 43.5%, 45.5%, and 55.2% of the lower middle-class, lower class, and student consumers, respectively. In contrast, the most consumers in shopping malls with membership cards belong to higher class social and economic consumer groups. Among supermarkets targeting consumers who have adapted a daily consumption habit, the percentages of consumers

holding membership cards do not vary significantly in all social classes. However, the percentage of consumers from the upper class that hold membership cards in department stores is significantly higher than that from the other classes. In particular, 25.6% of consumers from the upper class hold membership cards from the Friendship Store, whereas the percentage from other classes are less than 15% each.

4 Social Construct Function of Shopping Malls

4.1 Clothes consumption and social identity

In everyday life, clothes serve to meet a basic need. However, in any given consumer culture, clothes may also carry symbolic meanings and values. Clothes can play an important role in identity expression. Simmel (2002) pointed out that in a modern 'stranger society', clothes are the most direct way to exhibit one's social identity. Most consumers agree that clothing style can also reflect identity and status. In our study, the higher the socio-economic status of the respondents, the higher the percentage of consumers who 'somewhat agree' and 'agree' to the above opinion. In addition, the proportion of upper-class consumers who agree with the two choices is significantly higher than the consumers from other classes. The percentage of lower middle-class consumers who 'somewhat disagree' and 'disagree' with the above opinion is the highest in all social classes. The

attitude of lower-class consumers toward this issue is comparatively vague, and many chose the option ′neither agree or disagree′. Consumers from all social classes basically agree that clothing consumption is one of the most important indicators of social identity. The higher the social and economic status, the stronger the identity of the consumer.

In-depth interviews showed that consumers from all social classes have similar views on the relationship between clothing consumption and social identity. Generally speaking, consumers from all classes agree that clothes can reflect the identity of a person to a certain extent, although some interviewees emphasize personal difference. In particular, upper middle- and upper-class display higher recognition of the above belief, which is actually an accustomed behavior. At the same time, the relationship between clothing consumption and social identity is influenced by local culture and tradition, thus it is locally oriented to a certain extent.

A survey concerning the commodities that consumers from different classes usually purchase shows that consumers from other classes mostly spend on clothes, with the exception of lower-class and lower middle-class consumers groups that spend more on ′food and daily necessities′ (Table 6). Among the five options, ly, ′price′, ′quality′, ′brand′, ′style′, and ′others′, lower middle-, middle-, upper middle-class and student consumers mostly chose ′quality′ and ′style′, lower-class consumers mostly chose ′quality′ (53.6%) and ′price′ (44.3%), and upper-class consumers mostly chose ′quality′ (65.4%) and ′brand′ (43.6%). Obviously, shopping malls can satisfy consumers from different classes by selling clothes with a wide range of styles and quality levels. In this sense, shopping malls   are impor-

tant places to establish the identity of consumers. In addition, consumers from the upper class exhibit a stronger sense of identity than consumers from the lower class. To clarify this issue, we further analyzed the relationship between brand consumption and identity construction.

4.2 Brand consumption and social identity construction in shopping malls
In a brand-saturated consumerist society, brand consumption directly concerns the taste of a person as evaluated by the society. As a symbol, a brand can show not only the quality level and reputation of a commodity but also the identity, honor, and mood of the consumer (Wang, 2001). Such identification of consumers with a brand is the result of how the brand is produced and identified by the society.

Consumers with a higher socio-economic status agree more with the opinion that ′brand consumption is a reflection of taste′. They are more inclined to construct their identity with the consumption of particular brands because a brand has symbolic meaning. Consumers with a lower socio-economic status usually pay little attention to a brand and care less about its symbolic meaning because of not good economic conditions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on questions such as ′What is your opinion about brand?′ and ′Do you think designed clothes are better than non-designer clothes?′ The results indicate a relationship between brand consumption and identity construction.

Brand awareness and brand selection are influenced by various factors, such as economic conditions, cultural levels, and occupations. Lower middle- and lower-class consumers pay more attention to style, quality, and price and less attention to the brand because of the high price of

Table 6 Types of commodity consumed by different social classes (%)

Type of commodity	Upper-class	Upper middle-class	Middle-class	Lower middle-class	Lower-class	Student
Food and daily necessities	48.7	39.0	43.4	62.1	66.0	48.1
Clothes	62.8	64.3	58.8	49.0	41.2	53.7
Leather bags	16.7	14.9	13.1	6.1	3.1	7.8
Jewelry and watches	11.5	9.7	12.4	4.6	5.2	6.9
Cosmetics	7.7	14.3	12.7	13.0	7.2	11.3
Electrical and electronic products	24.4	18.2	22.1	17.2	12.4	14.7
Furniture	7.7	2.6	3.0	1.5	2.1	0.4
Beauty salon and gymnasium	1.3	5.8	3.0	3.4	4.1	3.0
Dining	15.4	20.8	21.7	18.8	12.4	18.2
Fairground	7.7	5.8	11.6	8.0	4.1	11.3
Watching movies	19.2	18.2	15.0	14.6	6.2	11.7

the brand commodity. However, there are also lower-class consumers who patronize brand identity to a certain degree and agree with brand effect. Consumers with a higher socio-economic status exhibit stronger brand identity: most believe that whether at work or at leisure, they should wear a brand that matches their personal status. They exhibit strong inclinations toward brand consumption. In terms of shopping place, they are more likely to go to shopping malls where exclusive shops of international brands and domestic brands are located.

4.3 Space consumption

4.3.1 Social construction of micro-location

The shopping place choices of consumers indicate their social class, that is, people can be identified by their choice of shopping place (Lury, 2003). Research indicates the importance of brand consumptions which take a large proportion of the types of goods and operation of shopping malls. In addition, brand consumptions have a social constructing function with regard to the identity of the consumer. In a survey, consumers with a higher socio-economic status are more inclined to show or maintain their social identity through the selection of a shopping place. They are also more likely to choose shopping places that show their social status (Fig. 2). However, consumers from a lower socio-economic status are more likely to agree that there is no social stratification in shopping space.

The results of our questionnaire survey also indicate that consumers from different classes have different choices of micro-location in shopping malls. In Teemall, from the second to the fourth floors, most shops sell brand clothes, cosmetics, gold jewelry, watches, electrical appliances, and other electronic products. In China Plaza, consumers usually go to the third and fourth floors where branded clothes and other fashion and electronic products are sold. The first and second floors of the Grandview Mall consist of the favorite shopping destination of upper class consumers, the Friendship Store, the top-grade department store in Guangzhou. On the other hand, in the three shopping malls, consumers from the lower class unanimously chose the supermarket as their most-frequented shopping place, whereas consumers from other classes tend to choose floors where entertainment, delicious foods, and fashion outlets are located. All kinds of space recognition, such as ′high grade′, ′economical′ and ′entertainment′ among

consumer behaviors with different socio-economic status had different representations in the micro-locations of shopping malls (i.e., different floors). This means that, on the surface, a shopping mall is an open, free, and non-stratified place where consumers from different classes can coexist freely. However, in geographical micro-locations within the same shopping malls, social stratification seemed to exist in terms of social construction, further influencing consumers from different classes regarding various factors, such as spatial recognition, which is unconsciously differentiated in their choice of micro-locations.
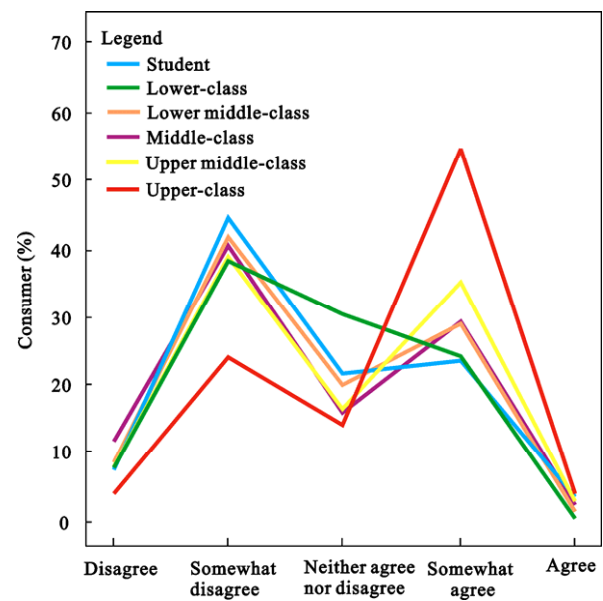

Fig. 2 Consumer′s conception to social stratification in shopping spaces

4.3.2 Stratification of space consumption

Different behaviors of consumers from different classes and different choices of micro-locations inside shopping malls demonstrate different space consumptions in a micro scale. Tables 1, 3, and 5 show that consumers from different classes have different consumption patterns and space recognitions because of differences in social status and lifestyle. Different consumers have different activities and forbidden areas due to a certain kind of territorial sense. In a survey on ′choosing a resting place in the shopping malls′, 40.7% of lower-class consumers chose ′public rest areas′ and 28.6% chose ′no rest′. However, 30.4% of the upper-class consumers chose to rest in ′cafés′. Generally speaking, lower-class consumers do not exhibit a high propensity for utilitarian

consumption and social identity construction in clothing and brand consumption; however, consumers from higher classes do. On the other hand, lower-class consumers manifest high propensity toward the entertainment and pleasure consumption features. The interview also shows that lower-class consumers prefer entertainment to brand consumption in a shopping mall.

Hence, we can see that consumers from different classes have different opinions about the relationship between shopping place and social identity. Shopping malls have played an important role in constructing the social identity of upper middle- and upper-class consumers. For consumers from the lower middle- and lower-classes, as well as student consumers, shopping malls are usually regarded as public spaces for fashion and entertainment. The social construction is seen through space consumption, that is, the meaning of consuming ′place′ is far beyond the concept of a shopping place.

5 Symbolization of Shopping Space

In a modern consumerist society, both commodity and space are components of the social symbolic system. Apart from consuming the commodities themselves, we consume their symbolic meaning as well. In fact, nowadays, it is more important to consume the symbolic meaning of the commodity than its actual value (Baudrillard, 2001). In this context, shopping malls, as the important carriers of clothes and brand consumption, have social construction functions, particularly for consumers from the upper-class. As components of consum-

er space, shopping malls are also commercialized and have become symbols themselves within a consumerist society. Thus, at this level, shopping malls have become places that can be consumed, and serve as a venue for social construction for patrons.

The symbolization of a shopping space is the basic reason why shopping malls have a function of social construction, that is, the power of symbol is what brings about the function of social construction for shopping malls (Fig. 3). A shopping mall satisfies the needs of consumers from different classes: thus, it has become a symbol for free choice, social identity, happy participation, and even ′consumption utopia′; hence, it is a productive consumption space.

5.1 Mixed high-grade consumption

Most consumers agree that a shopping mall is a relatively high-grade shopping place (Fig. 4). However, the degree of recognition in consumers from different socio-economic classes varies. Consumers from the lower middle- and lower-classes mostly agree that a shopping mall is a high-grade shopping place. However, a large proportion of the upper- and upper middle-classes do not agree. To the consumers from the higher class, the ′high-grade′ symbolic meaning of a shopping mall has already weakened; however, to consumers with a lower socio-economic status, the symbolic meaning is more significant. In the descriptions of interviewees from the lower class, terms such as ′white collar′, ′middle class′, and ′the rich′ appear frequently. Interviewees from the lower class regard shopping malls as places for people with ′good economic conditions′ or ′good salaries′.
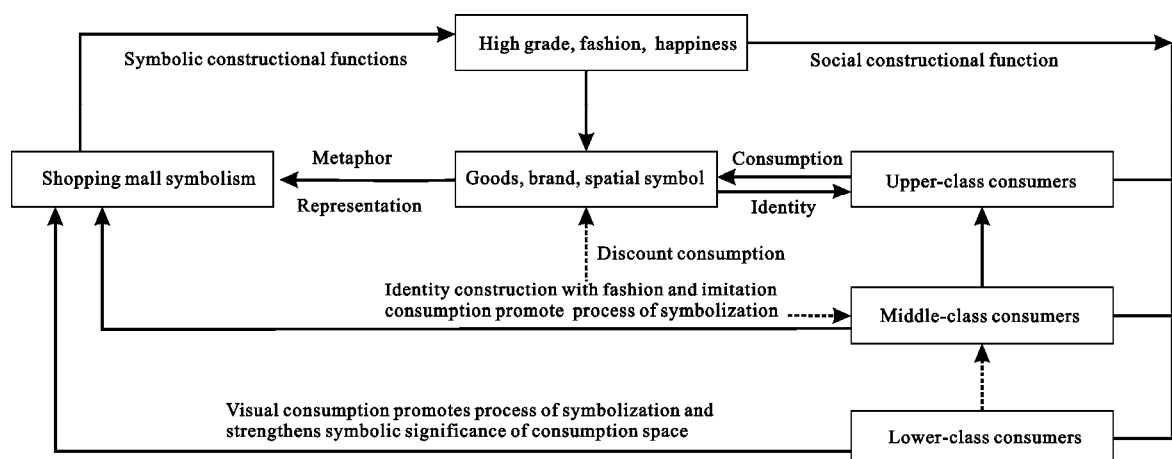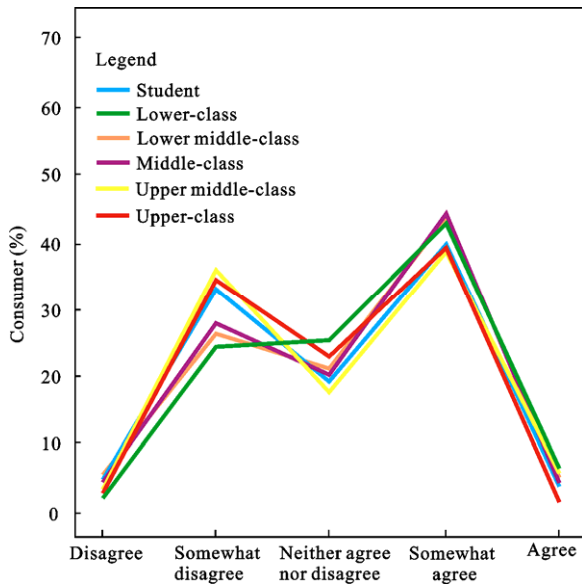

Fig. 3 Consumption symbolization of a shopping mall

Fig. 4 Consumer′s notion for shopping mall to
be ′a relatively high-grade shopping place′

Fig. 5 Consumer′s notion for shopping mall to be ′fashion place′

Nevertheless, the concept of being ′high-grade′ is relative, and different classes have different recognitions. Although some consumers with high social status are not conscious of high-grade consumption—some even reject such viewpoint—these groups are the main targets of high-grade goods in shopping malls. The above condition signifies that despite the attitudes of consumers, their consumption patterns also reflect their roles in the social construction of shopping malls. As a symbolic shopping space, a shopping mall has typical mixed high-grade consumption, where consumers from different classes experience different symbolic meanings and values.

5.2 Fashion habitualization

Fashion consumption is a type of symbolic consumption (Wang, 2001). In relation to this, different social classes have been associating shopping malls with fashion: They have begun viewing shopping malls as a space that symbolizes brand consumption. The survey regarding the recognition of consumers of the above belief shows that shopping malls have an image of being a ′fashion place′ as a whole. However, consumers from different classes have different notions of such an image (Fig. 5). Upper-class consumers exhibit the strongest recognition of the ′fashion place′ image of a shopping mall and comprise the highest proportion of consumers who are affirmative of such a concept. This group is closely fol-
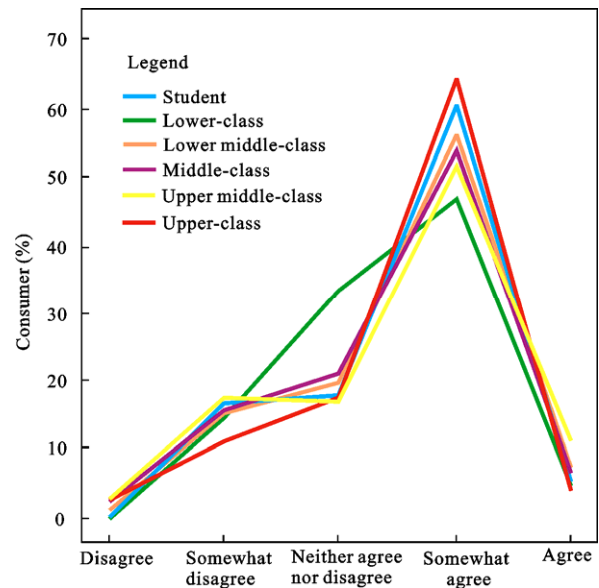
lowed by student groups and lower middle-class consumers. Compared with other classes, lower-class consumers comprise the lowest proportion of consumers who agree with the opinion that shopping mall is a ′fashion place′; however, the proportion of consumers who ′neither agree nor disagree′ is significantly higher than other classes. Simmel (2002) argued that fashion is a product of class distinction, that is, a shopping mall is consumed by consumers from different social classes as a ′fashion space′ and ′fashion symbol′. Shopping malls, then, have become a kind of habitualization.

5.3 Consumption as a way of life

The appearance of shopping malls in a modern consumerist society has broken down existing barriers between consumer space and living space, and has promoted a shopping place as a ′happy place′ that is easily depended upon emotionally (Wang, 2001). As Zola pointed out, a shopping mall is similar to a dream world, in the sense that shoppers can regain a sense of control and feel comfort in the mall just like they do at home (Wang et al., 2008). Shopping malls offer a rich supply of different commodities; it is a place where consumers stroll inside to enjoy, to experience leisure and entertainment, and to release pressure. Consumers go to shopping malls not just for shopping but for a part of everyday life. Thus, shopping malls have been symbolically described as being a part of life. Most interviewees expressed similar opinions when asked, ′How do you

feel about shopping malls?′. These consumers mostly regard shopping mall as a perfect consumption place where the needs of their family can be satisfied through shopping, skating, and going to the movies, among other activities.

Obviously, as shopping malls evolved from a consumption space to a living space, going to shopping malls has become part of the lives of individuals from various social classes in Guangzhou. Apart from shopping, shopping places now have other functions: shopping places have also become important hubs of urban public life, especially for leisure, entertainment, and consumption.

6 Conclusions and Discussion

The relationship between stratified consumers and consumption spaces was studied using a questionnaire survey. The results lead to the following conclusions.

First, a shopping mall is a productive consumption space. The analyses of consumption patterns and consumption recognition indicate that upper middle-class and upper-class consumers demonstrate utilitarian consumption properties rather than hedonic consumption properties. For upper middle-class and upper-class consumers, typical commodities (i.e., clothes) and brand consumption reflect that shopping malls have the function of identity recognition and social construction; however, most upper-class consumers remain oblivious to the construction process. The consumption activities of many middle-class and lower-class consumers are mainly for enjoyment and pleasure; in addition, their space consumption and cultural experience in shopping malls have more nonmaterial features. For consumers in each class, a shopping mall has the function of social construction. This is because shopping malls have become symbols themselves. Comprising a type of productive consumption space, shopping malls have transcended the limitations in which consumer space is traditionally regarded as the object of a consumer. In such functions, shopping malls produce consumer symbols, consumer meanings, and social values through the power of social construction, hence becoming a geographical space with subjectivity.

Second, the micro-locations in shopping malls have greatly influenced social construction. In shopping malls, apart from material and spiritual consumption, consum- ers of all social classes fulfill the space of consumption, which refers not only to the entire space of the shopping mall, but also to all micro-locations inside the shopping mall. The micro-locations of shopping malls have different geographical connotations and space-value orientations to different social classes. Thus, the micro-locations achieve social construction through the varied consumption choices of different social classes.

Third, symbolic consumption in shopping malls is the core of social construction. Studies on the three malls from Guangzhou suggest that, as exogenous commercial entities, the shopping malls in Guangzhou have three common symbolic features: mixed high-grade consumption, fashion habitualization, and consumption as a way of life. The symbolism of consumption space is shown as a symbolic identity; the common consumption of entertainment, experience, and cultural communication in a shopping mall completes its social construction. The meaning of the place lies in the life, value, feelings, recognition, and process that people experience in it, while its value lies in its uniqueness in spirit, emotion, and characteristics. Shopping malls in Guangzhou are not only modern commercial entities, but also ways of life rooted in each of the sample places whether for identity construction or for fun.

Today, as China enters the consumerist society completely and as numerous shopping malls are being established at a rapid pace, social consumption geography should pay more attention to the studies in the dimension of ′place′.

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