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CASE STUDY ON THE EFFECT OF PRODUCT CATEGORIZATION AND DIFFERENTIATION: FOCUSING ON AMOREPACIFIC CATEGORY DIFFERENTIATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze Amorepacific's development of cushion products, the process of category creation, differentiation, and establishment of a dominant category, and to identify the success factors of category differentiation strategies. To this end, the theoretical background includes an examination of category differentiation, consumer decision-making regarding innovative convergent products, and the impact of the strength of product attributes on category creation and differentiation effects. Based on this, a case study was conducted. The case selected for this study was the analysis of Amorepacific, a leading Korean cosmetic company's 'Cushion' product development, category creation, differentiation, and establishment of a dominant category. The results are as follows: First, Amorepacific developed an innovative convergent new product, the Cushion, maximizing usability and achieving qualitative differentiation. Second, by reflecting needs related to function, gender, and age group, the company expanded its product range under various brands while consistently using the term 'Cushion' in product names to build a dominant category label. Third, the company repositioned its initial 'Sun-screen' product as 'base make-up' based on consumer behavior analysis regarding cushion usage, thereby expanding its consumer base. This study provides practical

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implications by analyzing the success factors of category differentiation strategies in newly formed markets through the case study of Amorepacific's Cushion cosmetics. Additionally, it offers academic implications by presenting a successful case of category differentiation through the development of innovative convergent new products.

Keywords: Innovative Convergence New Products, Cushion, Differentiating Categories, Dominant Category, Convergence

INTRODUCTION

Today, many new products that consumers encounter in the market are not entirely unprecedented but often possess characteristics of convergent products, combining elements from various categories into a single product. For example, a smart watch is a convergent product that integrates wristwatch functions and smart device capabilities, offering the appeal of diverse functionalities simultaneously but making it challenging to understand its attributes and functions at once (Gregan-Paxton, et al., 2005). The product category of these recently launched convergent products is uncertain. When such independent product categories for convergent products are not established, companies face challenges in deciding the category for the new convergent product, and the market experiences confusion about the appropriate category (Park & Kim, 2016). Moreover, if the new product introduced to the market is an innovative convergent product that does not fit into any existing category, consumers may struggle to understand its attributes due to a lack of information about the economic and psychological costs involved in purchasing the new innovative convergent product. Of course, consumers may compare the new product with existing ones to assess the benefits, costs, and perceived utility.

During the process of creating a category for innovative new products, it is crucial to develop a category through marketing communication activities that convey information to reduce consumers' uncertainty about the purchase (Kim, 2005). Therefore, companies launching innovative convergent new products should create a category that encapsulates the attributes and benefits of the new product before its release. The extent to which companies focus on creating a category that allows consumers to understand the functions and advantages of the new product at a glance becomes a key marketing factor. This is because companies can embed messages that introduce the characteristics of the new product during the categorization process, which can attract consumer interest through marketing and advertising activities.

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Struben and Sassine (2015) state that the process of consumers accepting innovative convergent new products starts with information about the innovation they encounter. When a new product is launched, consumers determine what kind of product it is, what functions and advantages it has, and whether the perceived benefits are useful, which leads to their decision to consume the new product (Park & Kim, 2014). Therefore, during the planning process for launching innovative new products, companies must focus on creating a category that allows consumers to instantly recognize the characteristics and benefits of the new product. For instance, when portable multimedia players (PDPs) first appeared, consumers were confused about whether to categorize them as similar to video cassette recorders (VCRs) due to their ability to play videos, or as a type of MP3 player because they could play music files, failing to accurately differentiate the product's attributes (Park & Kim, 2015).

Similarly, when Apple introduced the iWatch in 2015, followed by Samsung and LG's launch of smartwatches, each company adopted marketing strategies emphasizing different features during the initial market entry phase. LG highlighted the wristwatch-like appearance more than the smart features, guiding consumers to evaluate smartwatches within the wristwatch category. Conversely, Samsung emphasized the core smart features of the smartwatch (Park & Kim, 2016). Thus, the process of developing innovative convergent new products and creating differentiated categories can help alleviate consumers' cognitive burdens in addition to marketing the innovative convergent new products. Therefore, the creation of differentiated categories for innovative convergent new products is meaningful both for companies and consumers.

This study aims to demonstrate the marketing effects of category differentiation through a case study of Amorepacific’s creation and dissemination of differentiated categories. To achieve this, first, the concept and characteristics of convergent products, the consumer learning process for innovative convergent products, the concept of category differentiation, consumer decision-making regarding innovative convergent products, and the impact of the strength of convergent product attributes on category creation and differentiation effects are examined. Second, the study investigates the process of creating new market categories and implementing marketing strategies utilizing category differentiation after developing innovative convergent new products within the Korean cosmetic industry. Third, based on the case analysis results, the success factors for creating and establishing dominant categories for innovative convergent new products are identified. Finally, the study provides theoretical contributions and practical implications for marketing strategies in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, focusing on category differentiation of innovative convergent new products.

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Category Differentiation

Vygotsky (1986) introduced 'category differentiation' as a crucial concept for distinguishing products from different categories. Additionally, Ha et al. (2009) noted that consumers tend to purchase products that emphasize categorical attributes to achieve differentiation, citing Samsung's LED (Light–Emitting Diode) TV as an example. In 2014, Samsung launched smartphones with curved designs that differentiated them from existing flat displays. These curved screens provided consumers with a new experience and suggested the potential emergence of completely foldable displays in the future. Although this product primarily differed in the light source, using LED as the basic display similar to existing LED TVs, Samsung successfully created new demand by highlighting the categorical attribute of LED and positioning this product as a new category for consumers (Kim, 2016). In 2019, Samsung created a new category, the foldable phone, merging smartphone and tablet categories (Asia Economy, 2019). As competitors entered the market and launched competing products, consumers began recognizing foldable phones as a new category and mentioned them separately from other categories in daily life (Lee, et al., 2016).

Category differentiation has a powerful influence on consumer purchase decisions, even weakening the attraction effect, a common phenomenon in decision-making contexts. First demonstrated by Huber et al. (1982), the attraction effect is a type of context effect where presenting an asymmetrically inferior alternative increases the likelihood of selecting the superior existing alternative similar to the new option. For example, when offered a large size for 5,000 won and a small one for 2,000 won, many consumers choose the small size. However, introducing a medium size for 4,500 won leads many consumers to choose the large size. While the attraction effect is common, it is weakened when categorical attributes, such as brands, product types, or package designs, are emphasized instead of quantitative attributes like price or size (Ha, et al., 2009).

Consumer Decision-Making for Innovative Convergent Products

Convergent products combine the functions of two or more different categories, making it challenging to define them within existing product categories (Gregan-Paxton, et al., 2005). According to Noseworthy et al. (2012) consumers tend to evaluate products combining various category functions as a single category. That is, consumers base their judgment on the first category that comes to mind when encountering products with functions from multiple categories, comparing and evaluating the product based on that category, often disregarding other category functions (Moreau, et al., 2001; Neyens, et al., 2010). Generally, convergent

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products are categorized based on the most prominent function (Murphy & Ross, 2010), meaning that consumers form categories around the function they perceive as most important, influenced by the competitive context (Navis & Glynn, 2010).

Thus, the function's preference and importance can change depending on what the product is compared to for instance, when purchasing a smartwatch, if compared to other smart devices, some consumers categorize it as a smart device focusing on smart functions. However, if compared to other wristwatches, they categorize it as a wristwatch with enhanced functionality (Kennedy, et al., 2010). This shows that categorization can vary based on common or unique characteristics of the product and is formed around functions perceived as important during the comparison process (Noseworthy, et al., 2012), with the comparison context influencing category formation (Glynn & Navis, 2013; Navis & Glynn, 2010). Conversely, consumers also evaluate and categorize products based on category information derived from inductive reasoning (Hermann, et al., 2013).

Today, new products that consumers encounter in the market often possess the characteristics of convergent products, which combine various product categories into a single product rather than presenting something entirely novel. For instance, a convergent product like a smartwatch combines the functions of a wristwatch and smart technology into one, offering the appeal of multiple functions at once compared to traditional wristwatches. However, it can be difficult to perceive all the product attributes and functions simultaneously (Gregan-Paxton, et al., 2005). This is due to the uncertainty surrounding the product category of new convergent products. When an independent product category for such convergent products is not established, companies face the challenge of determining which product category the new convergent product should be placed in, leading to confusion in the market about how to classify it (Park & Kim, 2016).

Furthermore, when a new product is an innovative convergent product that has not fit into any existing category, consumers may struggle with a lack of information about the economic and psychological costs associated with purchasing such products, making it difficult to understand the product’s attributes. Of course, consumers can evaluate the benefits, costs, and perceived usefulness of the product by comparing it to existing products once they have used it.

In the process of creating a category for innovative new products, marketing communication activities that provide information to reduce consumer purchase uncertainty and create a category that encapsulates the product are crucial for the product’s success (Kim, 2005). Therefore, companies launching innovative convergent new products must create a category that succinctly captures the product’s attributes and benefits before its release. The

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focus on how well consumers can understand the new product's features and advantages through category creation becomes a key factor in marketing. This is because companies can insert messages introducing the new product's characteristics into the category creation process, which can attract consumer interest in new product marketing and advertising activities.

Struben and Sassine (2015) stated that the process by which consumers accept innovative convergent new products starts with the information they receive about the innovation. When a new product is released into the market, consumers make decisions about its consumption by assessing what kind of product it is, its features and benefits, and whether the perceived benefits are useful (Park & Kim, 2014). Therefore, companies need to focus on creating a category that allows consumers to immediately recognize the new product's features and benefits during the planning phase of launching innovative new products. For example, when portable multimedia players (PDPs) first emerged, consumers were confused about whether to categorize them as similar to video cassette recorders (VCRs) because they could play videos or as MP3 players because they could play music files (Park & Kim, 2015).

Additionally, starting with Apple's iWatch in 2015, Samsung and LG also launched smartwatches, each employing different marketing strategies to differentiate their products during the initial market entry phase. LG emphasized the physical characteristics of the wristwatch rather than its smart functions to encourage consumers to evaluate the smartwatch more as a wristwatch. In contrast, Samsung focused on emphasizing the smartwatch's core smart functions (Park & Kim, 2016). The process of developing innovative convergent new products and creating differentiated categories can help with not only marketing but also alleviating the cognitive burden experienced by consumers. Therefore, the creation of differentiated categories for innovative convergent new products holds significance for both companies and consumers.

This study aims to demonstrate the marketing effects of category differentiation through a case study of Amorepacific's 'Cushion', a leading Korean cosmetics company, and its process of forming and expanding differentiated categories. To achieve this, first, the study examines the concept and characteristics of convergent products, consumer learning processes regarding innovative convergent products, the concept of category differentiation, consumer decision-making for innovative convergent products, and the impact of product attribute strength on category creation and differentiation effects.

Second, it investigates the process of creating a new market category through new brand creation and the marketing strategy utilizing category differentiation following the development of innovative convergent new products in the Korean cosmetics industry. Third,

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based on the case analysis results, the study explores the success factors for creating categories and establishing dominant categories for innovative convergent new products. Finally, it provides theoretical contributions and practical implications regarding marketing strategies for category differentiation of innovative convergent new products in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Consumer Decision-Making for Innovative Convergent Products

Convergent products combine functions from two or more different categories, often making them difficult to classify within existing product categories (Gregan-Paxton, et al., 2005). According to Noseworthy, et al. (2012) consumers tend to evaluate products that combine functions from various categories as a single category. That is, consumers base their evaluation of such products on the first category that comes to mind, focusing on that category for comparison and evaluation, and thus may not consider functions from other categories significantly (Moreau et al., 2001; Neyens et al., 2010). Generally, convergent products are categorized based on the most prominent function (Murphy & Ross, 2010). This means that consumers form categories around the functions they prefer or perceive as important, and this preference and importance are related to the competitive context (Navis & Glynn, 2010).

The evaluation of such products may vary depending on what they are compared with. For instance, when purchasing a smartwatch, some consumers may categorize it as a type of smart device based on common smart functions when compared with other smart devices. Conversely, if compared with traditional wristwatches, they might categorize it as a high-functioning wristwatch (Kennedy, et al., 2010). Thus, categorization can vary based on the common or unique attributes of the product, and this process is influenced by the context of product comparison (Noseworthy, et al., 2012; Glynn & Navis, 2013; Navis & Glynn, 2010).

On the other hand, consumers may also evaluate and categorize products based on inductive reasoning (Hermann, et al., 2013). However, this evaluation is challenging with convergent products that contain functions from various categories. Therefore, consumers tend to infer and evaluate products based on a single category, even if multiple category information is available. In this context, Lee, et al. (2007) attempted to study consumer evaluation by emphasizing the relationship between product functions and categories or by examining the familiarity with functions included in the product. They found that, except for cases where consumers had low familiarity with product functions and thus found categorization difficult, participants recognized new products as comprising multiple categories but inferred and evaluated them using their own classification system.

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Additionally, Glynn and Navis (2013) highlighted the importance of understanding how consumers categorize and evaluate products to enhance the adoption intention for innovative convergent products, suggesting that companies should be cautious about category creation when introducing innovative new products to the market. Therefore, companies providing new products or services in emerging market categories can promote the diffusion of new categories by creating and differentiating new categories, thus assigning meaning to previously unfamiliar categories or through interactions with consumers in perceiving and interpreting these new categories.

The Impact of Attribute Strength of Convergent Products on Category Creation and Differentiation Effects

The various attributes of convergent products can activate a consumption goal through the functions obtained from the product (Kim & Park, 2013). In other words, the inclusion of functions from various categories in a single product can activate multiple goals for the consumer, thereby weakening the connection strength between the product and each function (Kruglanski, et al., 2010). For example, when comparing the smart functions of a general smart device and a smart watch, the smart watch may be rated lower in performance than other devices that contain only smart functions (Zhang, et al., 2007). This effect is similar to the phenomenon where the addition of connections to nodes in memory weakens their strength (cognitive configuration: Anderson & Reder, 1999). In this context, a convergent product is a product with functions from various categories connected to it, resulting in a weak connection strength between the product and its functions.

Orehek et al. (2012) suggested that when a product includes various functions, the differential effects on connection strength can emerge according to the goal activation tasks in self-regulation modes. Firstly, the locomotion mode in self-regulation focuses on the feasibility of achieving goals (attributes/functions) through actions executed to achieve these goals. This involves considering how well the means (product) can perform the goals (attributes/functions), thereby focusing on the connection strength between the functions and the product. Secondly, the assessment-oriented regulation mode focuses on the overall value of the goals (attributes/functions) when achieving them, emphasizing the optimality of the choices made. This mode prioritizes the overall utility provided by the product rather than the connection strength between the means (product) and the goals (attributes/functions) (Orehek, et al., 2012).

Thus, the cognitive process that unfolds according to the goal task brings different cognitive focuses based on the connection strength and activation method of product functions, indicating that even for the same target, there can be differences in the information processed

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as important. Therefore, it can be inferred that the motivational processing of information according to self-regulation modes will affect the effectiveness of the categorization process. This study, using a case study method, analyzed the success factors of category differentiation strategies in the domestic cosmetic industry.

CASE ANALYSIS

Development of Cushion Products as a Differentiation Strategy for Innovative Converged New Products and Brand Expansion

In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the beauty industry is developing innovative converged new products by combining various product functions, creating new categories, and establishing marketing strategies to imprint the functions and benefits of new products on consumers. This study focuses on the process of creating and differentiating categories for innovative converged new products at AmorePacific, analyzing case studies to understand the creation process of new market categories and the differentiation process of innovative converged new products in an empirical context. Yin (2009) noted that case studies are suitable for verifying research questions related to the causes and developments of real-world phenomena. Furthermore, analyzing empirical cases to illuminate the academic value of abstract theories has often been attempted in existing research (Eisenhardt, 1991; Park, 2022). Thus, this study aims to analyze the creation and differentiation processes of AmorePacific's innovative converged new products to examine the success factors of category differentiation and to present academic and practical implications based on this analysis.

Establishment of the Cushion Category

AmorePacific has systematically established the cushion category by continuously renewing and launching product lines reflecting the characteristics of each area, expanding the cushion across various brands, including luxury, premium, and mass segments. For instance, the IOPE brand in the premium segment strengthened its functional image by obtaining certification for wrinkle improvement in addition to UV protection and whitening functions, developing all air cushion lines into triple-functional products. HERA also diversified its product offerings through continuous cushion renewals, introducing limited edition lines such as the 'Age Reverse Cushion' to meet consumer needs for anti-aging and offering various package designs. LANEIGE, on the other hand, developed products tailored to the diverse needs of Asian consumers, such as whitening lines preferred by women in general Asian regions, pore control lines for the hot and humid Southeast Asian market, and anti-aging lines for the cold and dry Chinese market (AmorePacific, 23, November, 2016).

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Additionally, AmorePacific has conducted various marketing activities tailored to each brand's characteristics to solidify cushions as a core makeup category. For instance, IOPE operated a pop-up store in Myeong-dong, Seoul, from July 2015 for six months, showcasing the development story and evolution of air cushions, allowing consumers to experience various cushion products. This strategic decision aimed to reinforce IOPE as the original cushion brand, starting with the Chinese market in 2015, and to establish leadership in cushion products globally (AmorePacific, 23 November, 2016).

SUCCESS FACTORS OF AMOREPACIFIC'S CUSHION COSMETICS

Development of Innovative Converged New Products Maximizing Convenience

Before the advent of cushions, compact cosmetics primarily consisted of pressed powder or solid balm products, which, while portable, often caked when applied and had a dry feel. On the other hand, liquid products had good spreadability and a moist feel but were inconvenient to carry as they came in bottles or tubes and required hand application. However, the introduction of Cushions overcame these limitations by combining a sponge and liquid formulation to create a 'non-dripping liquid,' thus offering the advantages of portability and spreadability simultaneously, greatly enhancing convenience (Lee & Kang, 2016). The success of new categories in the market requires offering superior benefits compared to existing products. For innovative converged new products, maximizing convenience plays a crucial role in acceptance and diffusion (Babbar, et al., 2002). AmorePacific's Cushion cosmetics pursued the development of converged new products with significantly improved convenience, laying a foundational basis for successful categorization.

Establishing a Dominant Category Label through Consistent Product Naming

Kim & Yu (2025) proposed that in the speaker industry, technological advancements have repeatedly formed dominant categories and dominant designs. These changes focus mainly on improving the performance of speakers, reducing their size and weight, increasing portability, and wireless. Suares and Grodal (2015) emphasized that effective category labels significantly impact market success when a new industry emerges, highlighting the importance of establishing category labels that encompass both familiarity and novelty. They analyzed the success of 'snowboard' over 'snurfer,' citing that Burton Snowboards' adoption of the term 'snowboard,' which was both innovative and familiar, contributed to their market leadership. Similarly, AmorePacific's Cushion cosmetics succeeded by emphasizing the categorical attribute (product type) of 'cushion' through a consistent naming strategy. In 2016, AmorePacific's 13 cosmetic brands had a total of 54 Cushion product lines (Lee, 2017), and the

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company has continued to expand the category with products like IOPE's 'Man Air Cushion' in 2021, LANEIGE's 'New Neo Cushion' in 2023, and HERA's 'Black Cushion' in 2024(Asi. A notable point is that while the preceding words of each line differ, all products include the term 'Cushion,' establishing a dominant category label (Suarez and Godal, 2015). By setting 'cushion' as the category label, AmorePacific effectively conveyed the value proposition of 'a convenient compact product that applies various beneficial cosmetics moistly,' thereby expanding its consumer base to include not only foundation users but also compact powder, BB cream users, and non-makeup customers (AmorePacific, 21 January, 2015,).

Product Repositioning

Positioning is about differentiating a product in the consumer's mind against competitors (Kotler and Armstrong, 1994). Aaker and Shans (1982) by divided the development process of product positioning strategy into six stages: (1) identifying competing products, (2) understanding competing products' images, (3) identifying competing products' positions, (4) analyzing customers, (5) deriving own product positions, and (6) tracking position monitoring. This implies that product positioning strategy should be continuously adjusted and developed by monitoring consumer and competitive market responses. When AmorePacific first launched the Cushion in 2008, it positioned the 'cushion' in the sunblock category to minimize cognitive burden for consumers by linking it to an existing category (sunblock) (Lee, 2017).

However, with the strategy to expand the market size of the cushion category across all brands, AmorePacific revised its product positioning strategy. Analyzing consumer cushion usage behavior revealed that users perceived cushions more as base makeup products rather than UV protection products. Consequently, AmorePacific focused on enhancing base makeup attributes during the brand-specific product line expansion process, successfully repositioning cushion products as base makeup items (AmorePacific, 21 January, 2015,). As a result, AmorePacific succeeded in generating substantial new revenue sources through the development and brand expansion of innovative converged new products, the establishment of the cushion category, and the formation of a dominant category label (Health Trends, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Gourville (2006) suggests that the success of new products depends on the degree of behavioral change required from consumers and the level of product innovation, categorizing new products into four types: (1) 'easy sells', where both the behavioral change required from consumers and the innovative value are low, (2) 'sure failures', where significant changes in user habits are needed but the innovation is minimal, (3) 'long hauls', where both the behavioral

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change required and the innovative value are high, and (4) 'smash hits', where the behavioral change required from consumers is minimal, but the innovative value is high. Among these, cushion foundation products fall precisely into the 'smash hits' category because they offer substantial innovative value to consumers without changing the usage method compared to traditional compact products.

By examining the case of Amorepacific's Cushion foundation, this study provides practical insights into the success factors of differentiation strategies in new product categories that can significantly impact product sales in newly formed markets. As seen in the case of the 'snurfer', there are instances where innovative convergence products are developed, but the benefits are reaped by later entrants. Amorepacific systematically implemented a category differentiation strategy to spread its innovative cushion product in the market, successfully generating significant revenue and maintaining its first-mover advantage in the newly formed market. This suggests that sustaining a first-mover advantage requires not only technological innovation but also effectively communicating the attributes and benefits of the innovative convergence product to consumers. Therefore, the creation and differentiation of product categories that clearly convey these benefits are crucial.

Despite the potential to expand the market and achieve high performance, category differentiation of innovative convergence products is rarely realized due to its difficulty and performance uncertainty (Lee, 2021). The difficulty in creating and differentiating categories of innovative convergence products can be attributed to the effects of category systems discussed in organizational ecology, where economic activities immersed in stable, well-accepted categories are easier to implement and more likely to be fairly evaluated in the consumer market (Lee, 2017). Consequently, innovative convergence products that disrupt existing category systems face significant challenges in creating clear and effective new categories and achieving performance through expansion (Hsu et al., 2012a; 2012b). However, the case of Amorepacific's 'Cushion' product demonstrates a successful category differentiation through the creation of a new category, which disrupted existing category systems, expanded its reach, and generated significant revenue. This provides academic implications by presenting a successful case of category differentiation through the development of innovative convergence products.

This study has provided insight into the effects of product categorization and differentiation. In the future, it will be possible to conduct research on the effects of changes in perception of product categorization in reality on the formation of dominant categories in the market through consumer surveys.

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