

Beauty Dupe Products: Perceptual Positioning and Choice Determinants

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigated how consumers perceive beauty dupe products and the attributes they prioritized in their purchase decision. **Methods:** Two online surveys were conducted with Korean female consumers in their 20s and 30s who had previously searched for or purchased beauty dupe products. In the first survey, 52 respondents evaluated the pairwise similarities among 10 lipstick options, and non-metric multidimensional scaling (MDS) was conducted using the smacof package in R. In the second survey, 103 respondents completed 12 choice tasks involving combinations of four two-level attributes. A conditional logit model with respondent-clustered standard errors was then estimated using the survival package in R. **Results:** MDS revealed three distinct clusters, indicating that beauty dupes occupy a perceptual position separate from both high-end and affordable beauty products. In the choice-based conjoint analysis, country of manufacture emerged as the most important attribute, with a relative importance of 70.9%, followed by price (13.7%), brand awareness (10.8%), and visual similarity to the high-end product (4.5%). Domestic manufacture, the higher price level, and greater brand awareness were associated with positive utility, whereas visual similarity to high-end products did not have a significant effect on purchase decision. **Conclusion:** Although visual similarity to high-end products constitutes a basic condition for the product to be perceived as a dupe, consumers' heavy reliance on product information cues associated with quality and credibility highlights their potential significance in consumers' evaluations and decision to purchase beauty dupes.

Keywords: Beauty dupe, Dupe consumption, Multidimensional scaling, Choice-based conjoint, Attribute importance

Introduction

Dupe products replicate the appearance or performance of an established, higher-priced item at a markedly lower price. The consumption of dupe cosmetics has expanded rapidly in recent years. Social media communities that treat dupe discovery as shareable content have accelerated their spread (Nursafira *et al.*, 2024). Researchers distinguish this consumption pattern from counterfeit consumption on conceptual grounds. Counterfeiting involves the unauthorized use of protected brand identifiers and may involve consumer deception (Grossman & Shapiro,

1988; Khan *et al.*, 2021). By contrast, beauty dupes imitate an authentic product while retaining a distinct brand identity and are consumed with awareness of their imitative status (Nursafira *et al.*, 2024; Park & Lee, 2025). Beauty dupes add a further layer of complexity. Apparel or accessory dupes are often identified primarily through visual resemblance. Beauty dupes, however, must also approximate performance-based similarity, as consumers consider both product quality and color-related attributes in cosmetic evaluation and choice (Wartaka, 2016).

A small body of work has begun to study dupes directly: why consumers buy them (Nursafira *et al.*, 2024), how dupe

culture shapes consumers' perceived value of the original high-end product (Zafran & Ahmed, 2025), and how consumers understand what constitutes a dupe in the fashion context, where design elements such as color schemes serve as the primary basis on which consumers judge a product to be a dupe (Kim & Ha-Brookshire, 2026). Outside the dupe literature, prior research on cosmetic consumption has examined general purchase drivers and product preferences (Wartaka, 2016). Recent research has also documented differences in consumer review discourse across low-priced, high-priced, and imported color cosmetic brand segments (Song *et al.*, 2024). However, little is known about how consumers perceive beauty dupes within the broader landscape of existing cosmetic products, or which attributes they prioritize in beauty dupe consumption.

First, it is unclear how consumers cognitively categorize beauty dupes. A dupe may be perceived as a subcategory of the high-end product it imitates, as a variant of affordable cosmetics, or as an entirely distinct product category. Where consumers place dupes in their perceptual space has direct implications for how dupes compete with existing products. Second, it remains unclear which attributes consumers prioritize in beauty dupe consumption. Because the quality of a beauty dupe cannot be fully assessed before purchase, consumers face quality uncertainty (Akerlof, 1970). Under such uncertainty, consumers may rely on extrinsic cues that signal product quality, including country-related cues and brand-related signals (Bilkey & Nes, 1982; Erdem & Swait, 1998). This suggests that the attributes driving dupe choice may extend beyond visual similarity to the original.

This study employed two complementary analyses to address these research questions. Multidimensional scaling (MDS) maps the perceptual positioning of dupes within the cosmetics market. Choice-based conjoint (CBC) analysis estimates which attributes carry the most weight in an actual choice. Among cosmetics, lip products provide a suitable context for examining these research questions, as they are among the most actively shared and compared categories in online communities. This research examines how consumers perceive beauty dupes and which product information cues they prioritize in beauty dupe consumption, with the aim of identifying what role information beyond visual similarity plays in beauty dupe consumption.

Methods

1. Research design

1) Multidimensional scaling

This study used a pairwise similarity-rating task for non-metric MDS, which maps perceived proximity from pairwise similarity judgments (Kruskal & Wish, 1978; Borg & Groenen, 2005). The task included ten lipstick product labels: three high-end products (Dior, Chanel, and YSL), four dupe types, and three domestic affordable products (3CE, Rom&nd, and Peripera).

High-end and affordable brands were selected as market reference points for high-end originals and accessible domestic alternatives, respectively. Three brands were included per category to reduce the influence of brand-specific associations and to establish more generalizable category-level reference points in the perceptual space. The former represented globally recognized prestige lipstick brands, whereas the latter represented domestic color cosmetic brands widely available through Olive Young. The four dupe types were constructed to examine whether different product information cues alter the perceptual positioning of beauty dupes. The stimuli emphasized price as a value and quality signal (Rao & Monroe, 1989), visual similarity as a cue in imitation evaluation (van Horen & Pieters, 2012), brand awareness as a basis for consumer brand responses (Keller, 1993), and country or manufacturing origin as a product-evaluation cue (Bilkey & Nes, 1982). Accordingly, the dupe stimuli were presented as Value dupe ("approximately 10% of the high-end product price"), Lookalike dupe ("nearly identical appearance to the original"), Branded dupe ("well-known brand product"), and Domestic dupe ("domestically manufactured"). Actual brand names were used for the high-end and affordable product stimuli to establish market reference points, whereas the dupe stimuli were presented as cue-based product labels without actual brand names to control for brand-specific associations. This design minimized the influence of prior brand associations that could have arisen from using actual branded products positioned as dupes. It therefore allowed the study to examine how specific product information cues shape the relative perceptual position of dupes.

Respondents rated the perceived similarity of all 45 unique pairs on a 7-point scale (1=very different, 7=very similar), and the presentation order was randomized.

2) Choice-based conjoint

A choice-based conjoint experiment was designed to identify which attributes most influence consumer choice among dupe products. Four binary attributes were selected based on the same evaluative dimensions used in the MDS design, so that the two studies address a common set of product information cues at the construct level. Price was set at 10% versus 50% of the original product price. Product appearance was set as distinctive design versus nearly identical appearance to the high-end product. Brand awareness was set as well-known versus unknown brand. Country of manufacture was set as domestically manufactured versus manufactured in China. These levels reflect the two manufacturing origins that dominate the beauty dupe market, with China being the predominant source of beauty dupe products and domestic production representing the main alternative available to Korean consumers.

A balanced orthogonal profile design was generated using the cbcTools package in R. The final CBC task consisted of 12 forced-choice tasks, each presenting two dupe product profiles, with the two levels of each attribute evenly represented across the presented profiles. The minimum sample size was assessed using Orme's (2010) guideline of $nta/c \geq 500$, where n =number of respondents, t =tasks per respondent, a =alternatives per task, and c =the largest number of levels for any attribute.

2. Data collection and samples

Separate online surveys with independent samples were conducted for the MDS and CBC analyses to prevent cross-task contamination between the two methods. The two sets of results are therefore interpreted at the aggregate sample level. This study targeted Korean female consumers in their 20s and 30s who had experience searching for or purchasing beauty dupe products. For the MDS survey, respondents additionally confirmed familiarity with all brands included as stimuli, as valid similarity judgments require recognition of all stimuli.

Responses were collected through an online survey agency, and 52 valid responses were used for the MDS analysis and 103 for the CBC analysis. The final CBC sample exceeded the minimum required sample size based on Orme's (2010) guideline.

3. Data analysis

Similarity ratings were averaged across respondents for each pair and converted to dissimilarity scores by subtracting each value from 8. The resulting 10×10 dissimilarity matrix was analyzed using non-metric MDS in R, and model fit was evaluated using Kruskal's Stress-1 index (Kruskal, 1964). Euclidean distances among stimulus coordinates were calculated to compare the relative positions of dupe stimuli with the high-end and affordable product clusters.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristic	Category	n (%)	
		MDS	CBC
Age	20–24	20 (38.5)	25 (24.3)
	25–29	16 (30.8)	35 (34.0)
	30–34	9 (17.3)	25 (24.3)
	35–39	7 (13.5)	18 (17.5)
Occupation	Student	23 (44.2)	27 (26.2)
	Office worker	17 (32.7)	53 (51.5)
	Service/Sales	2 (3.8)	5 (4.9)
	Self-employed/Freelancer	5 (9.6)	7 (6.8)
	Professional	2 (3.8)	2 (1.9)
	Other	3 (5.8)	9 (8.7)
Monthly cosmetics expenditure	Less than KRW 10,000	5 (9.6)	5 (4.9)
	KRW 10,000–less than KRW 30,000	12 (23.1)	39 (37.9)
	KRW 30,000–less than KRW 50,000	21 (40.4)	23 (22.3)
	KRW 50,000–less than KRW 100,000	11 (21.2)	27 (26.2)
	KRW 100,000 or more	3 (5.8)	9 (8.7)

CBC choice data were analyzed using a conditional logit model in R (McFadden, 1974). The model was stratified by choice set, and standard errors were clustered at the respondent level to account for repeated choices made by the same respondent. Attribute levels were dummy-coded for model estimation, with the following levels coded as 1: 10% of the high-end product price, high-end look-alike design, well-known brand, and domestic manufacture. Part-worth utilities were calculated by centering the estimated coefficients for each binary attribute, and relative attribute importance was calculated from the utility ranges of each attribute.

Results and Discussion

1. Participant characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Of the 52 participants in the MDS sample, 20 (38.5%) were aged 20–24 years, followed by 16 (30.8%) aged 25–29 years, 9 (17.3%) aged 30–34 years, and 7 (13.5%) aged 35–39 years. Regarding occupation, students accounted for the largest proportion ($n=23$, 44.2%), followed by office workers ($n=17$, 32.7%). For monthly cosmetics expenditure, the largest group spent KRW 30,000–less than KRW 50,000 ($n=21$, 40.4%), followed by KRW 10,000–less than KRW 30,000 ($n=12$, 23.1%) and KRW 50,000–less than KRW 100,000 ($n=11$, 21.2%).

Of the 103 participants in the CBC sample, 35 (34.0%) were aged 25–29 years, followed by 25 (24.3%) aged 20–24 years, 25 (24.3%) aged 30–34 years, and 18 (17.5%) aged 35–39 years. Regarding occupation, office workers accounted for the largest proportion ($n=53$, 51.5%), followed by students ($n=27$, 26.2%). For monthly cosmetics expenditure, the largest group spent KRW 10,000–less than KRW 30,000 ($n=39$, 37.9%), followed by KRW 50,000–less than KRW 100,000 ($n=27$, 26.2%) and KRW 30,000–less than KRW 50,000 ($n=23$, 22.3%).

Although the two samples were recruited independently, both comprised female cosmetic consumers aged 20–39 years with comparable distributions in age and monthly cosmetics expenditure. Minor differences in occupational composition were observed. However, as the analyses did not involve occupational subgroup comparisons, these differences are unlikely to affect the interpretation of the findings. Overall, the two samples were considered sufficiently homogeneous to support the joint

discussion of MDS and CBC results within a single study.

2. Perceptual positioning of beauty dupes

MDS was conducted to examine how consumers perceptually position beauty dupe products relative to high-end and affordable product categories. The two-dimensional non-metric MDS solution showed a Stress-1 value of 0.046, indicating good fit (Kruskal, 1964).

As shown in Figure 1 and Table 2, the three high-end brands formed a tight cluster, as did the three affordable brands. The mean pairwise distances were 0.011 and 0.010, respectively, confirming category-level perceptual grouping.

The four dupe types, however, did not cluster with either reference group. Instead, they were positioned close to one another (within-cluster mean pairwise distance=0.013), forming a third distinct cluster. In contrast, the mean distances between clusters exceeded 1.1, indicating clear perceptual separation among the three groups. Based on the Euclidean distances calculated from the MDS coordinates, the mean distances from the dupe stimuli to the high-end cluster ranged from 1.146 to 1.167, while their distances to the affordable cluster ranged from 1.148 to 1.156. The overlapping distance ranges suggest that beauty dupes were not perceptually closer to either reference group.

In terms of dimensional interpretation, Dimension 1 appeared to reflect brand prestige, with dupe products positioned near the midpoint between the two branded groups. Dimension 2 appeared to capture product originality, with established branded products at one end and dupe products at the other. Together

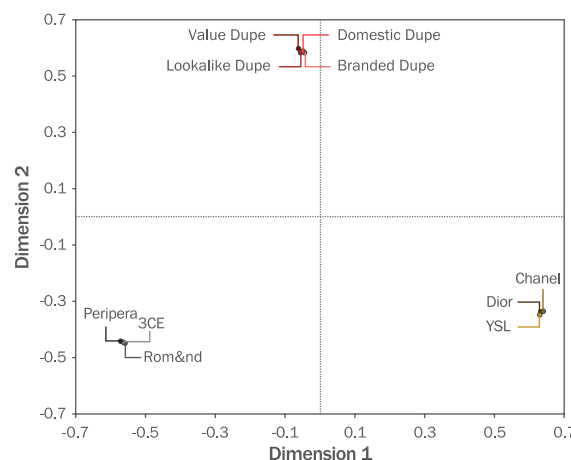


Figure 1. Perceptual map from non-metric MDS.

Table 2. MDS perceptual coordinates

Category	Stimulus	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
High-end product	Dior	0.634	-0.337
	Chanel	0.640	-0.335
	YSL	0.630	-0.348
Affordable product	3CE	-0.559	-0.448
	Rom&nd	-0.564	-0.444
	Peripera	-0.572	-0.441
Dupe product	Value dupe	-0.061	0.597
	Lookalike dupe	-0.055	0.584
	Branded dupe	-0.044	0.584
	Domestic dupe	-0.049	0.588

Coordinates are Euclidean positions in the two-dimensional solution.

Table 3. Conjoint analysis results

Attribute	Level	Part-worth utility	B	SE	p
Country of manufacture	Domestic	0.697	1.394	0.138	<0.001
	China	-0.697			
Price	10% of the high-end product	-0.135	-0.270	0.127	0.033
	50% of the high-end product	0.135			
Brand awareness	Well-known brand	0.106	0.212	0.070	0.002
	Unknown brand	-0.106			
Product appearance	High-end look-alike design	-0.045	-0.089	0.087	0.307
	Distinctive design	0.045			

Each attribute had two levels. B represents the estimated coefficient from the conditional logit model using dummy coding. Part-worth utilities were derived accordingly.

with the tight within-cluster grouping of dupe stimuli, these findings indicate that consumers perceived beauty dupes as a distinct perceptual category rather than as a subcategory of either high-end or affordable products. Furthermore, the four dupe types did not appear to be perceptually differentiated from one another, suggesting that the categorical perception of dupes was robust regardless of which product information cue was highlighted.

3. Choice determinants of beauty dupes

CBC analysis was conducted to identify which product information cues most influence consumer choice among beauty dupe products. The conditional logit model was estimated using 2,472 alternative-level observations nested within 1,236 choice sets (log-likelihood=-615,37). The CBC results are presented in Table 3, and the relative importance of the attributes is presented in Figure 2.

Country of manufacture had the highest relative importance, accounting for 70.9% of the total attribute importance. Price

accounted for 13.7%, followed by brand awareness at 10.8%. Notably, product appearance, which is the attribute most directly related to visual similarity with the original product, contributed only 4.5%. Country of manufacture alone accounted for more than twice the combined importance of the remaining three attributes. Country of manufacture is a well-established extrinsic quality cue (Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999). Given the quality uncertainty inherent in dupe products (Akerlof, 1970), consumers may have relied on it as a primary basis for quality inference.

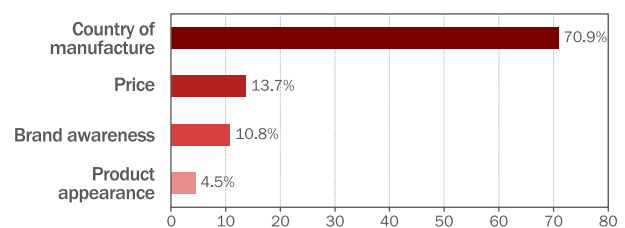


Figure 2. Relative importance of CBC attributes.

The conditional logit results further showed the direction and significance of each attribute. Country of manufacture had the strongest effect on choice, reflecting a preference for domestic over Chinese manufacture. Domestic manufacture positively influenced dupe product choice ($B=1.394$, $p<0.001$), and its part-worth utility was 0.697, compared with -0.697 for manufacture in China. Price also significantly influenced choice ($B=-0.270$, $p=0.033$), although its effect was weaker than that of country of manufacture. The part-worth utility was -0.135 for the 10% price level and 0.135 for the 50% price level, indicating that the lower-priced option was not necessarily preferred among the dupe alternatives. This pattern is consistent with the price-quality inference literature, which suggests that consumers may interpret extremely low prices as a signal of inferior quality (Rao & Monroe, 1989; Zeithaml, 1988). An extremely low price may have functioned as a negative quality signal rather than as a purely economic advantage. Brand awareness had a significant positive effect ($B=0.212$, $p=0.002$), with a part-worth utility of 0.106 for a well-known brand and -0.106 for an unknown brand. In contrast, product appearance did not significantly influence choice ($B=-0.089$, $p=0.307$). Although the part-worth utility was slightly higher for a distinctive design than for a high-end look-alike design, this difference was not statistically significant. This may suggest that visual similarity functions as a baseline condition of beauty dupes, rather than as a differentiating attribute that drives choice among dupe alternatives. These results indicate that credibility-related cues appear to play a greater role in dupe product choice than visual resemblance to the high-end product. The prominence of credibility-related attributes is broadly consistent with prior cosmetics research highlighting the role of consumer trust (Choi & Kim, 2024).

Conclusion

This study examined how consumers perceive beauty dupe products and which product information cues they prioritize in beauty dupe consumption. MDS revealed that beauty dupes formed a distinct perceptual cluster, separate from and approximately equidistant to both high-end and affordable products. CBC analysis further showed that country of manufacture was the dominant choice attribute among those

examined, accounting for over 70% of total attribute importance, while visual similarity to the high-end product was not statistically significant. Taken together, these findings suggest a nuanced position of beauty dupes in consumer perception. Dupes were perceived as a category defined by their imitative status, while the choice task showed that choices among alternatives depended less on visual similarity and more on credibility-related cues. Thus, beauty dupe consumption is not simply about finding a cheaper look-alike, but involves attribute-based evaluation in which consumers rely on product information cues associated with credibility and quality inference. Given that the two analyses used separate samples, they should be interpreted as complementary analyses of perception and choice, rather than as successive stages in a single decision process.

These findings contribute to the emerging dupe literature in two ways. First, they provide empirical evidence that consumers perceive dupes as a distinct product category rather than as a variant of existing product types. Second, they identify the product information cues that shape dupe product choice, revealing that credibility-related cues outweigh visual similarity among the attributes examined in this study. These findings broaden the scope of dupe research by providing an attribute-level analysis of consumer decision-making.

From a managerial perspective, dupe product marketers may benefit more from communicating product credibility, such as domestic manufacture and brand awareness, than from emphasizing visual resemblance to the high-end original. Pricing strategies should also consider that excessively low prices may undermine perceived quality rather than enhance competitiveness. For high-end brands, the finding that dupes occupy a separate perceptual space suggests that the competitive threat posed by dupes may differ from that of direct substitutes.

Several limitations should be noted. The stimuli were presented as cue-based product labels rather than product images, a design choice made to control for brand-specific associations. This approach may have limited how sharply respondents distinguished the two appearance conditions, and the non-significant effect of product appearance should be interpreted with this constraint in mind. In addition, the analysis focused exclusively on lipstick products, and the findings may not generalize to other cosmetic categories where evaluation criteria differ. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating visual or actual product stimuli and extending

the analysis to other product categories. Additionally, employing a wider range of price levels would allow for the estimation of willingness-to-pay, providing more precise insight into consumers' price sensitivity in the beauty dupe market.

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Author's contribution

SJ was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, and writing of the original draft. KHL supervised the research and contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript.

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국문초록

뷰티 듀프 제품의 지각적 포지셔닝과 선택 요인

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목적: 본 연구는 뷰티 듀프 제품에 대한 소비자 인식 구조와 의사결정 시 우선시되는 주요 선택 요인을 규명하였다. **방법:** 뷰티 듀프 제품 구매 혹은 탐색 경험이 있는 20대 및 30대 한국 여성 소비자를 대상으로 두 차례의 온라인 설문조사를 별도로 실시하였다. 1차 설문조사에서는 립스틱 항목 10개 간 쌍별 유사성을 측정하였으며, 유효 응답 52부를 바탕으로 R의 smacof 패키지를 사용하여 비계량 다차원척도법(MDS)을 수행하였다. 2차 설문조사에서는 네 가지 속성으로 구성된 12개의 선택 과제를 제시하였으며, 유효 응답 103부를 바탕으로 R의 survival 패키지를 사용해 응답자 수준 군집 표준오차를 적용한 조건부 로짓 모형을 추정하였다. **결과:** MDS 분석 결과, 뷰티 듀프는 고가 및 합리적 가격대 뷰티 브랜드와 구분되는 독립적인 지각 범주를 형성하였다. CBC 분석에서는 제조국의 상대적 중요도가 가장 높았고(70.9%), 가격(13.7%), 브랜드 인지도(10.8%) 그리고 고가 제품과의 시각적 유사성(4.5%)이 뒤를 이었다. 국내 제조, 상대적으로 높은 가격, 높은 브랜드 인지도는 뷰티 듀프 선택에 긍정적으로 작용한 반면, 시각적 유사성은 유의한 영향을 보이지 않았다. **결론:** 본 연구의 결과는 뷰티 듀프가 고가 브랜드 및 합리적 가격대의 브랜드와 구분되는 독립적 제품 범주로 지각되고 있음을 나타내며, 뷰티 듀프 소비 시 품질 불확실성을 완화할 수 있는 단서가 중시됨을 보여준다. 이는 고가 제품과의 유사성이 듀프의 기본 전제로 작용하더라도, 뷰티 듀프 소비에서는 국내 제조나 브랜드 인지도와 같이 소비자에게 신뢰를 주는 단서가 더욱 중요하게 고려됨을 시사한다.

핵심어: 뷰티 듀프, 듀프 소비, 다차원척도법, 선택형 컨조인트 분석, 속성 중요도

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참고문헌

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中文摘要

美妆平替产品的知觉定位与选择因素

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目的: 本研究旨在探讨消费者对美妆平替产品(Beauty Dupes)的认知方式, 以及其在购买决策中优先考量的属性。**方法:** 本研究针对有美妆平替产品搜索或购买经验的20-30多岁韩国女性消费者进行了两次在线问卷调查。在首次调查中, 52名受访者对10款唇膏选项进行了两两相似度评价, 并通过R语言的 smacof 数据包进行了非度量多维尺度分析(Non-metric MDS)。在第二次调查中, 103名受访者完成了12项选择任务, 这些任务包含4个属性(每种属性设2个水平)的组合。随后, 利用R语言的 survival 数据包, 估计了包含受访者聚类标准误的条件Logit模型(Conditional Logit Model)。**结果:** 多维尺度分析(MDS)结果显示出3个不同的聚类, 表明美妆平替产品占据了独立于高端美妆产品和平价美妆产品的感知定位。在基于选择型联合分析(Choice-based Conjoint Analysis)中, 生产国(Country of Manufacture)成为最重要的属性, 相对重要性达70.9%; 其次是价格(13.7%)、品牌知名度(10.8%)以及与高端产品的视觉相似度(4.5%)。国内生产、较高的价格水平以及较高的品牌知名度与正向效用相关; 而与高端产品的视觉相似度对购买决策并没有显著影响。**结论:** 尽管与高端产品的视觉相似度构成产品被视为“平替”的基本条件, 但消费者对质量和可信度相关产品信息线索的高度依赖, 凸显了这些线索在消费者评估和购买美妆平替产品决策中的潜在重要性。

关键词: 美妆平替, 平替消费, 多维尺度分析, 选择型联合分析, 属性重要性