



Exploring Pearl Quality Knowledge and Motivation for Lavish South Sea Pearl Purchase

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Abstract: This study investigates consumers' perceptions of high-end South Sea Pearls (SSP) and the motivating reasons behind their decision to spend a sizable sum of money on a pricey authentic aquaculture tourism product from Lombok, Indonesia. In-depth interviews with informants were used in this qualitative analysis. The findings demonstrate that the informant views SSP as a self-gifting, luxurious, high-value product that is enjoyable to collect and worthy of the money she spends. Informants own a sizable number of collections of pearls that are Grade AA-AAA quality, large in size, and in a variety of hues. Overall, the informant claimed that worth and self-fulfillment were more essential than status associated with possessing expensive items. Although many studies have focused on consumer motivation or the field of luxury, there are only so many analyses focusing on informants as both customers and collectors. In this study, only two informants were involved; Informant one is a buyer with more than 12 years of experience, while Informant two is an expert and entrepreneur in the pearl field for more than 22 years. So, suggestions for future research agendas are given, including research involving more informants.

Keywords: Aquaculture Tourism, Lavish Product, Pearl Grading, Self-Fulfillment, South Sea Pearls (SSP).

1. Introduction

Since the Djuanda Declaration in 1957 and as confirmed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Indonesia has been recognized as an archipelago. Around 17,500 islands and 81,000 kilometers of coastline make up Indonesia. According to BPK data, which shows that Indonesia has a land area of 1.91 million km² and a water area of 6.32 million km², almost 62% of its territory is made up of sea and water. (Indonesiabaik.id, 2018) According to Antony Tanios, Chairman of the Indonesian Mutiara Cultivation Association (ASBUMI), Indonesia, as the world's biggest archipelago, has enormous potential for the maritime industry and produces a variety of goods, including seaweed, fish, and non-fish items like seawater pearls.

South Sea pearls (SSP), often called sea water pearls, are marine products that are among the greatest pearls in the world. They are found in various Indonesian archipelagic regions, including Papua, Bali, Ambon, Sulawesi, Kupang, Bima, and Lombok in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB). Among these SSP producing areas, pearls from Lombok are considered more popular than pearls from other regions in Indonesia. The huge pearl grains produced in Lombok have the benefit of being relatively large and having a lovely shine. Pearls obtained from a species of mussel or oyster type *Pinctada maxima* are considered to have a quality far above the average of other pearls, such as akoya pearls from Japan, freshwater pearls from China, and black pearls from Tahiti (Tahitian pearls) (Kompas.com, 2019).

In addition to being a non-fish maritime product, pearls are the only organic jewelry now in use. Other jewelry is made of metals (gold, silver, copper), gems (diamonds), and stones (rubies, jade, rock crystal). Pearls' uniqueness or rarity is thought to outshine even diamonds. Pearls are calcareous deposits found inside mollusk bodies. When the shell production pathway is activated in the wrong area of the animal, pearls form (McDougall, 2013). When a sand or grit particle rolls around within an oyster, it absorbs a layer of calcium carbonate, aragonite, and calcite that accumulates over time, often one to two years. The iridescent quality of pearls is known as "orient." This is due to the pearl's structure. Light waves typically bounce off pearl gemstones due to minute calcite secretions, giving them beautiful colors and an aura (Oe & Yamaoka, 2022)

According to Lindsay (2002), Pearls are known in the tourism business as one of the products of aquaculture tourism, specifically oyster pearls. Aquaculture is the production of aquatic organisms such as fish, mollusks, crabs, and aquatic plants. Aquaculture needs some form of process intervention to boost output, such as regular stocking, feeding, predator protection, and so on. Furthermore, animal husbandry signifies a company's or an individual's authority over the cattle managed. One of the products of aquaculture is pearls which have been known as luxurious jewelry of the seabed. Inaccessible luxury "represents the extreme level of authenticity, prestige, exclusivity, quality, and innovativeness," while accessible luxury "describes non-essential, prestigious, and authentic products that are publicly well-known and reasonably priced (Chang et al., 2016).

According to Park (2010) by referring to some opinions on a number of statements, it is said that pearls are considered a luxury good. The Latin word *luxus*, which signifies sensuality and grandeur, is the source of the English word *luxury*. *Luxuria*, a derivative of it, has meanings such as luxury, exclusiveness, high-quality, distinctive design, great performance, and superiority to comparable alternatives, which are the major attributes of luxury, all of which are reasons to pay a premium price (Fassler, 2002).

The characteristics of high quality, uniqueness, rarity, special pricing, and high level of aesthetics are seen to grab attention in the definitions given for the concept of luxury brands, which are branded goods and services. Luxury businesses deliver experiences that will influence consumers' opinions of the following topics by considering these fundamental elements (Ko, Costello, Taylor, 2019). In order to establish a strong bond or resonance with the consumer, the product must be of high quality; deliver real/authentic value through gratifying utility, whether functional or emotional; establish a prestigious image in the market by establishing qualifications like craftsmanship, craftsmanship, or service quality; and be deserving of a premium price.

Pearls have been referred to as the jewels of the seabed for a very long time. Many people from all over the world are drawn to them because of their magnificent color play and mystique as mussels generate them. A number of countries in the southern sea region are home to pearl oysters (*Pinctada Maxima*), which produce pearls with a superior sheen and striking hue. Indonesia is one of them, along with the Philippines, Burma, and Australia. Maman Hermawan, Director of Nonconsumption Product Development at the Directorate General of Fisheries Product Management and Marketing (P2HP) under the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, has stated that south sea pearl cultivation is expanding in Indonesia. According to him, production figures for 2011 and 2012 were projected to be around 7 tons. Aside from Indonesia, several other nations have been identified as important producers of South Sea pearls, including Australia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Malaysia. (*ekonomi bisnis.com*, 2014).

The five main characteristics of pearl quality are luster, shape, size, color, surface smoothness, and nacre thickness. Breeders, businesspeople, collectors, and fans of pearl jewelry and hobbies frequently use this benchmark to judge a pearl's quality. Apart from their beauty, south sea pearls, or more often known as south sea pearls (SSP), have a high economic value. In fact, pearl items are regarded as "luxury" products, not inferior to other jewelry like diamonds and gold. South sea pearls, sometimes referred to as SSPs, are beautiful and have great economic worth. Pearl items are even categorized as "luxury" goods, comparable to other types of jewelry like diamonds and gold.

A negative perception of Indonesian South Sea pearls has developed due to the lack of public awareness about pearls in that country. For instance, the general public is still unsure of the distinction between freshwater and ocean pearls. The Mutiara Laut Indonesia Foundation's Nuniek Anurningsih, the Supervisor, has encountered a similar situation. She initially believed that the pearls that proliferated throughout the nation were solely imported from Japan. She even once sold freshwater pearls that were masked as ocean pearls. "That made me feel really bad." (*ekonomi bisnis.com*, 2014).

"The price of pearls that we offer varies according to shape, color, cleanliness, and quality," stated Yoseph Stephen Southeast Marketing Manager CV Rosario Mutiara to *Bisnis.com* on Thursday (22/5/2014). Rosaria's prices range from Rp100,000 to Rp5 million per gram of pearl weight. The type of pearl given, namely white pearls and golden pearls, also influences the pricing (White Pearl and Golden Pearl). According to Yoseph, the bulk of Rosaria's pearl consumers are still from other countries, particularly Chinese nationals. However, due to the company's ongoing socialization efforts in conjunction with the Indonesian Pearl Cultivation Association (ASBUMI), public interest in pearl jewelry is growing. Nowadays, many international socialites, including Princess Kate Middleton, the consort of Prince William of England, wear pearl necklaces on all occasions. Compared to other countries, the pearl market in Indonesia is suffering from lower selling prices. According to Yoseph, "Grade A pearls are valued at \$300 US dollars per gram in Hong Kong, whereas the price is significantly lower in Indonesia." (*Ekonomi bisnis.com*, 2014).

On the other hand, despite its high price, some buyers or wearers of pearl jewelry do not want to spend their money on it and are classified as routine. This is evident from the author's search results. As a result, the author is curious about the motivation and rationale for utilizing South Sea Pearls (SSP) as part of his appearance because it is driven by self-motivation to own it, which the author is curious (*bali.bisnis.com*, 2020). Physical gold demand is dwindling. Fauzi stated that the company is collaborating with the Fish Quarantine Center for Quality Control and Safety of Fishery Products (BKIPM) Mataram to ensure a smooth shipping procedure. Sea pearl granules destined for export are first inspected at BKIPM Mataram. Online services, such as transferring data relating to purchase value and product characteristics via WhatsApp, are made available to entrepreneurs. Purchased pearls vary in variety and grade, with prices ranging from Rp5,000 to Rp1 million per gram (gr). "The value of pearl shipments can reach Rp1 billion in a month." "A single overseas buyer's purchase value can reach hundreds of millions of rupiah," added Fauzi. Supporting this claim, foreign lovers are said to be highly fond of SSP because of its genuineness as a superior aquaculture product with an authentic sheen and beauty originating from the seas of Lombok. He even bought it on purpose to collect it as a way of loving and respecting himself. Unfortunately, many individuals do not know how to determine the quality of valuable

pearls, but they are aware that pearls are not inexpensive, and many ask why they would "waste money" purchasing them.

The objectives of this study are to analyze customers' motivations for acquiring luxurious South Sea Pearls and to assess their degree of knowledge about pearls, as indicated in the following research questions: (1) What are the motives of the pearl buyers in purchasing the lavish South Sea Pearls?; and (2) To what extent do the buyers have knowledge about?.

2. Methodology

This study incorporates qualitative approaches due to their ability to provide in-depth and precise information while prioritizing quality. By involving only two informants i.e., informant one is a buyer with more than 12 years of experience, while Informant two is an expert and entrepreneur in the pearl field for more than 22 years. Because it focuses on quality, qualitative research is more extensive and in-depth. The research findings can offer a genuine depiction of sentiments, motivations, and a specific rationale for something that informants or sources have experienced, where this cannot be evaluated mathematically or summed (Laumann, 2018). This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive approach. In-depth interviews with credible informants who meet the requisite criteria were conducted using the WhatsApp application to collect data by asking a series of questions (Yin, 2018).

In-depth interviews are known by various terms, including intensive, depth, unstructured, ethnographic, field, open-ended, and informal interviews. These interviews are typically conducted with a single participant, ranging from an hour to several different multi-hour sessions (Woodward, 2022). To paraphrase (Bachman & Schutt, 2020), the goal of in-depth interviews "is to develop a comprehensive picture of the interviewee's background, attitudes, and actions in their own terms - to 'listen to people as they describe how they understand the worlds in which they live and work'".

Bryman (1992) in Mirick (2019), defines qualitative research as: "a method for research." According to the definition of qualitative research, it is "an approach to the study of the social world that aims to characterize and



Fig 1. Conceptual framework processed by researchers.

Source: Researcher's (2023).

In the picture, the conceptual framework is made based on the conclusion of various opinions and references as reading material, namely in the green image "customer's pearl knowledge" or buyer's knowledge of how to assess the grade or quality of a good and high-value pearl, a good understanding is able to provide a strong "Motivation to Buy" encouragement or motivation for buyers to own it but not to be exhibited or as a certain social status in society or the general view of it, but rather to provide appreciation or appreciation of oneself (self-reward).

3. Results and Discussion

Pearl Quality Knowledge of Buyers

In general, according to informant 1, she agreed that pearl grade is determined by observing five values, namely; Luster, Color/ Overtone Strength, Shape, Size, and Surface Quality. However, from several pearl experts summarized from several experts and pearl businessmen, there are two additional criteria, namely Nacre Quality (Nacre Thickness) and Origin. From the results of in-depth interviews with informant one who is a collector and user at the same time or collector-users, who has been collecting and wearing pearls for approximately 15 years, said that the way to determine the SSP she uses is by paying attention to details on Size, Luster, Color/Overtone Strength, Shape, Nacre Quality, and Origin.

Size and Lustre

The larger the pearl's size, the more expensive it is. Cultured pearls can have sizes in the range of 6.0-20mm sometimes larger. With pearls, size can contribute to an increase in price, this is because larger pearls are much more difficult to cultivate, take longer to produce and are therefore much rarer. More than any other value factor, lustre is the most important. Pearls without a good lustre are really just chalky beads. Lustre is best described as the radiance emanating from within the pearl, produced by light entering the pearl and seemingly being reflected back to the viewer through the layers of nacre. The quality of a pearl's lustre is directly related to how even and smooth the nacre layer is. Lustre measures how bright and lustrous the pearl appears. Jewelers also use the term lustre to measure the sharpness of objects reflected on the surface of a pearl. This lustre can also be measured by how detailed the reflection is, it can be judged by the reflection of the entire face of the beholder, or how sharp and clear the reflected light source appears at the edges. The sharper the edges of the reflected light source, the better the lustre.

Color & Overtone and Shape

This value factor looks at the strength of the pearl's color and body tone. The more easily visible and saturated, the better. Certain rarer overtones can be more valuable and worth more as well. For example, South Sea pearls with a 22K gold-like color are much more valuable than gold pearls with a 14K color. Many assume that a perfectly round pearl shape is "perfection" for cultured pearls. Round is the most conventional and a true classic. The most important consideration is that pearls have an even, symmetrical shape, which is most pleasing to the eye and easier to use in most styles of pearl jewelry.

Surface Quality

The surface quality of the pearl is the next important factor, surface quality measures how clean, smooth, and free from blemishes the pearl appears. Almost all pearl buyers will look at the level of surface imperfections. The key factor of surface quality imperfections is how visible they are and whether they seriously affect the durability of the pearl. Blemishes (also called inclusions) can be Abrasions- scratches or abrasions that affect the lustre or color of the pearl. Spots- small color variations. Lumps- small bubbles on the surface of the pearl. Wrinkles- where the nacre is not smooth. Serious surface quality problems are usually chips and fissures, which will lower the value of even the most lustrous pearls. These particular imperfections can cause the pearl to crack or peel. The more criteria a pearl meets, the more expensive it will be. Determining the quality or grade criteria depends on expertise and experience in the pearl business or industry. This is considered reasonable because track record, experience, and flying hours are still one of the factors.



Fig 2. The photo of good quality of golden South Sea pearls (SSP).
Researcher's Document (2023).

The photo shown above explains the beauty of the deep golden South Sea pearls that is loved by the informant one, "I like this beautiful silver white. This beautiful silver blue, I have a cream. I like the cream color. The golden yellow. So, I like the colors. I like the size and I think they wore well, with my skin complexion". The results of in-depth interviews with informant one shows the suitability of good quality SSP assessment criteria, namely if SSP pearls have at least five criteria like; size, color, lustre, surface, and shape. The informant's understanding of pearls is comprehensive this is known from her answer which mentions nacre thickness as an important criterion that must be considered, say this as the sixth assessment point, even the informant 1 also states originality or where the pearl comes from as a criterion that is no less important than the five main criteria required.

Motivation for Lavish South Sea Pearl Purchase

The motivation and reasons for purchasing expensive south sea pearls (SSP) are because she loves pearls as beauty and true works of nature (organic jewelry), in addition to beautifying, and pleasing herself, the buyer confidently states "This is me" or "This is Who I am" this stems from their love for SSP and during the COVID-19 pandemic almost all activities are carried out at home and online. Online activities mean that most of the activities do not interact directly with many people, but she wears pearls in her daily activities, for example, one AAA grade strand necklace costs around USD \$15,000-\$42,000 or the equivalent of Rp 225,000,000-Rp 630,000,000. According to her, everyone should feel "Because You're Worth It", after working hard, one of the reasons is to reward oneself.

In other words, buying luxury goods for self-gratification or to get the best quality of what one wants is a form of "self-expression", but not to show off one's wealth to others, let alone buying pearls just to be collected and stored in the closet will only add to the collection of "dust". Women and the jewelry they wear are usually intended for others, to be seen and seen in their appearance, not infrequently even the wearers of expensive or luxurious jewelry aim to get a certain social status or at least get the attention of many people they meet. Preening and working at home online with pearl jewelry is a rare event. Unlike most people, owning luxury products represents one's wealth so people always find ways to express who they are through the possessions they wear. In his interview, the informant 1 effectively explained;

"So, it's absolutely the love I have for the pearls because I was grounded at home for years during covid, pandemic. And I was wearing my pearls every single day, no one was getting to see me and I didn't care. I like to admire them and look at them and sometimes I just open my pearls back to look at them, so I don't even care about people. I'm the kind of person who loves jewelry just to, I don't know, like to admire nature and yes, I think I look more beautiful with them. But for myself, not for people, that's the truth".

Choosing to buy SSPs among others because they have very large sizes, have various colors and shapes. SSPs that have been collected and purchased include beige, silver blue golden yellow, and white. For this lux collection, informant one spends a budget every month of approximately between USD \$16,500-\$25,000 or around Rp 250,000,000 - Rp 350,000,000. SSP colors are considered to match the wearer's skin tone and can also be adapted to various events and outfits. The variety of sizes, colors, shapes, prices, and good quality are considered parameters of high-end or lux products, especially since the price of SSP is much more expensive than freshwater pearls.

SSP from *Pinctada Maxima* pearl mussels, which are pearl mussels with golden or silver lips so that the pearls produced are of that color and its color gradations or derivatives which produce in smaller quantities compared to freshwater pearls. Especially the cultivation of southern seawater pearls requires treatment with a relatively high level of care and time. With a relatively long harvest or production period ranging from three to four years with only one pearl for a mussel. South sea pearls are not found as much as freshwater pearls and are unlikely to be the same in terms of shape. So it can be categorized as an expensive object. Another uniqueness of seawater pearls is that they are the only organic jewelry or jewelry that comes from living creatures (shells) compared to other jewelry that mostly comes from metals (gold, silver, bronze), stones such as diamonds, rubies, crystals, and gems.

Table 1. Quality assessment criteria by buyer

No	Criteria	Reason
1	Size	Large size preferred but more expensive
2	Color	Color the deeper color more expensive
3	Shape	The closer to perfectly round the more expensive or baroque pearls as irregular pearls
4	Luster	The more luster, the more beautiful and more expensive
5	Surface Quality	The less spots/nicks let alone smooth the more expensive
6	Nacre Quality	Thickness The thicker the pearl layer the more expensive
7	Origin	The original SSP-producing region

Source: Oe & Yamaoka (2022).

The information in the table above on the quality standards of seawater pearls is strengthened by the customer's explanation based on his grasp of SSP. She claims that:

"I think I'm pretty much aware of pearl quality and I know how to braid them when I want to purchase. In a glaze, I know you, there are a few things you have to watch in terms of quality, like shape. Like, um, well, the color, of course, like, how thick they are, and where are they from, too and size, of course, because, well, not all the big pearls are good and not all the small pearls are cheap. So, it depends on so many things like, sometimes smaller pearls can be very high quality and sometimes big pearls can be cheap if you know what I mean. So yeah, I'm pretty much anywhere. It's like diamonds. You have to watch for inclusions here. You have to watch for blemishes too, but blemishes don't say a lot on the quality of a pearl because sometimes

very good pearls, have blemishes like I mean, I have a lot of freckles and it doesn't make me low quality for sure”.

“Okay. So why did I choose to buy pearls from? Okay, I chose to buy pearls, South Sea pearls. Well, I like a lot of things about South Sea pearls. I like that they can be very big and I like the colors they have. I like these beautiful silver white. This beautiful silver blue, I have a cream. I like the cream color. The golden yellow”.

SSP Grading Criteria According to Pearl Expert

While the grading system used in Indonesia mostly uses standardized measures from Japan, namely Grades A-AAA or A-D according to Chinese standards. Grade A (C) means Poor, AA (A-B) means Medium, and AAA (A). In some countries, there is mention of Grades up to AAAA (A4) or AAAAA (A5) for pearls that are close to perfect for all grading criteria, and of course, the price is extremely expensive.

Table 2. Pearl grading system

GRADE	A	AA	AAA	AAAA
INFORMATION	The low-quality South Sea pearl harvest accounts for 50% of the total.	The South Sea mid-grade makes up 60% of the harvest. They are usually found in jewelry stores and big box stores.	High-Quality South Sea pearls are the best 5-10% of the pearl harvest. found in more upscale jewelry store	The best 1% to 5% of the pearl harvest is considered South Sea pearls.
SURFACE	Pearls with 80% surface imperfections (2-3 spots), 20% of which have significant problems.	Pearls with 40% surface with defects, (there are 1-2 spots), 50% of the surface has minor defects, and 10% have significant problems.	At least 80-85% of pearl surfaces appear perfect, and the remaining 15-20% have only minor flaws.	At least 95% of the pearl surface is flawless, with 5% having concentrated flaws.
LUSTER	Poor	Medium	High	Very High
A-D GRADING SYSTEM	“D” Quality	“C” Quality	“B” Quality	“A” Quality

Source: Oe & Yamaoka (2022).

The pearl expert said “This pearl purchaser is well-versed in SSP's quality grading criteria, pricing is not a concern. Her bravery in purchasing these ocean pearls is evident due to his passion and pastime. There are even consumers who, if you think about it, are willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars for a single full-strand pearl necklace, yes, because of its exceptional quality and beauty”.



Figure 3. The Examples of Grade AA-AAA of the Lavish South Sea Pearls (SSP)
Sources: Researcher's Documentation (2023)

In this article, the buyer is the collector user for Grade AA-AAA SSP. These usually meet almost all the criteria listed in the standardization in Table 2, i.e. large size, beautiful color, unique or irregular and asymmetrical shape such as baroque or if the shape is round near round (RnR) the name for pearls that are close to perfectly round, good luster with a smooth surface almost without blemishes except for natural marks such as the base of the pearl attached to the shell of the shell, the pearl has a thick layer of nacre so that it is stronger and comes from a pearl-producing area of origin much more valuable than pearls imported or imported from other non-SSP producing areas.

Informant two conveyed his expertise in the pearl field as he has been involved in the South Sea water pearl industry for more than 22 years, confirming that both the understanding and taste of the customer-collector-user (informant one) about her choice is close to "perfect" for a high-value item like this SSP. Why is that? Because SSP in terms of price and quality is calculated like other valuables such as gold, namely with a per gram weighing system.

The photos of the lavish South Sea pearls above show the quality of the pearls based on the grading system or evaluation of Grade AA-AAA with a pricey price that is bought by informant one as a pearl buyer or customer. It is confirmed with her statement, "I think I'm pretty much aware of pearl quality and I know how to braid them when I want to purchase. In a glaze, I know you, there are a few things you have to watch in terms of quality like shape".

4. Conclusion

This study aims to contribute to a better understanding and clarification of knowledge about South Sea Pearls (SSP), and purchase motivations for high-priced jewelry pearls. This is a preliminary study exploring the grading of Indonesian native pearls. Specifically, the research expects the findings from this study to contribute in the following areas. This study also contributes to what factors motivate purchases. In addition, this study contributes to the clarification of the grading and criteria for recognizing good quality and expensive pearls, which of course, can only be purchased by certain groups. Therefore, it would be interesting to fill this research gap by evaluating the factors that drive the purchase intention of jewelry pearls, especially native Indonesian south seawater pearls.

In addition, this research adds to the existing literature on jewelry pearls that still have special buyers, so it is believed that this research can trigger the emergence of further research, which can help provide development from previous studies because there are still few studies conducted specifically in jewelry pearls that are very high economic value. Although this study has achieved the research objectives, some limitations should be noted. This study was qualitative with only two informants involved despite being highly knowledgeable about South Sea Pearls (SSP). A quantitative study is recommended to test the hypothesized relationships within the emerging framework and to develop a scale to measure the newly identified factors. Further, this analysis refers to female customers in their 30s, of foreign nationality with an occupation as a corporate lawyer. Thus, it is also recommended to examine domestic customers to see their perceptions with regard to luxury/expensive jewelry or those with high economic value. The writer also suggests that the next research involves more quantity of the informants.

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