

## THE ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION OF LUXURY FASHION GOODS IN A SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

Wanwisa Charoennan

Department of Marketing, Martin de Tours School of Management and Economics,  
Assumption University, Thailand

Kai-Ping Huang

Department of Business Administration, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taiwan  
Corresponding author: 129741@mail.fju.edu.tw

### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the influences of social media usage, key opinion leaders (KOLs), self-image congruency, and materialism on conspicuous consumption, as well as how conspicuous consumption had an impact on happiness with a purchase and satisfaction with luxury fashion products in a social media platform. The literature review suggested that conspicuous consumption was accelerated over a social media platform and by the role of KOLs because they promoted the favorable self-expression through a product consumption that exhibits an image that was congruent with an individual's ideal self-image. The literature also implied that a materialistic consumer was likely to engage in conspicuous luxury consumption. Regarding its consequences, a happiness with a purchase and a satisfaction with a product were likely to be associated with conspicuous consumption. The literature in this study provided a more holistic comprehension of conspicuous consumption by incorporating both influential factors and potential consequences, and can be referred to in developing more efficient advertising and marketing activities.

Keywords: Marketing, Conspicuous consumption, social media, key opinion leader, purchase happiness, customer satisfaction

## Introduction

Conspicuously purchasing and consuming luxury products is not anymore an exclusive modern lifestyle among the elites. Due to the increased usage of social media and consumers' changing lifestyles, conspicuous consumption now becomes more prevalent and solid in mass society (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). Being an essential part of a consumer's daily life, social media has inevitably reconstructed the role of consumers from being passive to rather active players where they are allowed to create product contents (Hutton, 2012) by posting and sharing their consumption experiences on social media.

Such consumer-generated content (UGC) has now dominated the online social network, and allowed general consumers with product expertise to become a key opinion leader (KOL) or an online social influencer (Duan, 2016). This implies an undeniable phenomenon

on advertising media across the world, including Thailand. In 2017, 1,134 million baht was spent to hire these online social influencers, and such value has already surpassed the spending on various well-established traditional digital media (Digital Advertising Association (Thailand), 2017). The online survey by DI-Marketing (2016) also indicated that 74% of respondents bought a product after watching KOLs advertisement, and 44% were influenced by KOLs fashion style.

In the digitalized and connected world, consumers are likely to exercise impression management by sharing their carefully shaped self-identity through the ownership of socially recognizable items (Grace & Griffin, 2009; Kim, Jang & Adler, 2015). This is referred to as conspicuous consumption (Grace & Griffin, 2009). In order to achieve such social needs, luxury goods are pervasively associated with conspicuous consumption because their perceived premium qual-

ity, exclusivity, and socially visibility signify the ideal identity of the owners (Hung, Chen, Peng, Hackley, Tiwsakul & Chou, 2011). Furthermore, luxury fashion products are the perfect example in this study because the highly appearance-concerned consumers seems to directly associate these items with their image (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006).

While a considerable amount of research examines the influence of utilitarian benefits on consumer decision making, the essential role of social and psychological values remains understudied, especially in the current dynamic environment where social media has unavoidably transformed consumer behavior. Therefore, the study on the impact of key opinion leaders, social media usage, self-image congruency, and materialism on conspicuous consumption is certainly crucial to elaborate this emerging consumer phenomenon. Furthermore, to better comprehend a more holistic mechanism of conspicuous consumption, the study of how conspicuous consumption influences consumers' happiness with a purchase and satisfaction with a product,

which has been unclear, deserves even more attention.

## Literature Review

The main purposes of this study were to examine the influences of social media usage, KOLs, self-image congruency, and materialism on conspicuous consumption, as well as to examine the role of conspicuous consumption on happiness a purchase and satisfaction with a product. These variables can be divided into three main groups as follows:

### 1. Conspicuous Consumption

Conspicuous consumption was first coined by Veblen (1899) as the behavior of spending time and money on unecessities and unproductive activities. Later, Chaudhuri, Mazumdar & Ghoshal (2011) added more emphasis on the consumption for self-presentation, and defined it as an involvement in symbolic purchase and consumption of scarce and cultural capital goods to express a distinctive self-image to others. In addition, Gierl and Huettl (2010)

identify three main dimensions of conspicuous consumption, which are: 1) socially visible acquisition and consumption, 2) expression of status, uniqueness, or conformity to the relevant others, and 3) acquisition and consumption of a scarce or exclusive product. Therefore, unlike other frequent-purchased goods, conspicuous goods are purchased and consumed not only for functional utility but also for social needs because they are likely to be displayed in the presence of others (Lewis & Moital, 2006).

According to these aforementioned definitions, conspicuous consumption's focal components lie on the reaction of the reference group (Wong, 1997), social visibility (Gierl and Huettl, 2010), and presentation of wealth through extensive luxurious expenditures (Trigg, 2001). Therefore, it can be considered as a tool in constructing the ideal self-image through the possessions of socially visible goods (Grace & Griffin, 2009). Since being recognized by others are the principal dimensions, pricing or expensive items are inevitably utilized as a medium in signaling wealth and status

to impress the relevant others (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006).

Due to technological advancements, consumers now have better access to share their purchase and consumption experiences (Kim et al., 2015). According to Duan & Dholakia (2017), posting a purchase on social media can be considered as a new digital form of conspicuous consumption as it presents one's wealth to maintain or acquire social status through publicly consumed products. Furthermore, conspicuous consumption can be increased over a social media platform. First, with the filtering functions, consumers are now allowed to engage in greater intended self-image because photos can be edited to enhance the attractiveness of the purchases (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). Second, posting on social media is available in the indefinite period of time as these posted stories are collected, and consequently formed the personal history of the user (Hung & Li, 2007). Third, social media allows a consumer to undertake a less directed communication without a particular audience; the response rate and social sup-

port then subsequently increase (Berger & Iyengar, 2013). These characteristics of an online posting have a greater impact on interpersonal relationships, and on individual's happiness (Thomas & Millar, 2013).

## 2. Antecedents of Conspicuous Consumption

Chaudhuri and Majumdar (2006) suggested that conspicuous consumption is a function of certain constructs. Therefore, the explanation of its influential factors should be pursued for a better comprehension of such construct. In this study, based on the focal components of the definition and the emerging trends of conspicuous consumption on social media, four factors are being investigated: social media usage, KOLs, self-image congruency, and materialism.

### *Social Media Usage*

Social media, which essentially influences various aspects of consumer behavior (Duan & Dholakia, 2017), is an online platform or media where users are allowed to compose and share their pro-

files, and interact with other members in a specified system (Taylor & Strutton, 2016; Seo & Park, 2018). It has primarily reconstructed the mechanism of an online social network (Ellison et al., 2007), which is undoubtedly larger than a typical offline social network. While an individual has approximately 125 connections in an offline network, this number increases to 300 for an online network (Taylor & Strutton, 2016).

Unlike traditional advertising media, social media has been perceived to create credible information and trustworthy experiences, facilitate interactivity, enhance brand attitude, and subsequently motivate purchasing behavior (Kim & Lee, 2007). Social media is highly responsive because message receivers can provide feedbacks, such as clicking Likes, which are visible to both senders and other social network members (Saito et al., 2015), and have a significant impact on a consumer's purchase decision and a product's popularity (Salganik et al., 2006).

Therefore, social media permits individuals to exhibit their conspicuous consumption in an online platform to satisfy a wide range of social needs. This is by displaying the consumption and belongings associated to the intended self (Choi & Seo, 2017). According to costly signaling theory (CST), these consumers are even willing to alter their behaviors or engage in a costly behavior, which refers to a luxury purchase, in order to be recognized by others (Choi & Seo, 2017). Therefore, luxury fashion brands have increasingly utilized social media communities as marketing and advertising platforms (Ko & Megehee, 2012). Hence, social media facilitates users to perform an impression management by allowing them to shape and share the actual or idealized self because individual is basically concerned about the impression other people recognize about them (Taylor & Strutton, 2016). Consequently, conspicuous consumption is generally a consequence of a behavior intended to signal to others in the network (Choi & Seo, 2017).

Taylor and Struttin (2016) also claimed that conspicuous consumption can be accelerated by the social media usage because it underlines the snob appeal of an individual's possessions, status or experiences. Furthermore, it is evidenced that the more an individual uses social media, the more they make an impulse purchase of conspicuous luxury goods (Thoumrungroje, 2014). That is, as consumers communicate with other people in the networks, they are more likely to be encouraged to make a conspicuous luxury purchase (Thoumrungroje, 2014).

#### *Key Opinion Leaders*

Key opinion leaders or KOLs can be described as an individual or a group of people who are perceived to be expert and knowledgeable of a certain product or service through their own purchase or consumption experience (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006; Saito et al., 2015). Kim et al. (2015) describe them as information generators in word-of-mouth (WOM) communication to opinion seekers. These general people become opin-

ion leaders by gaining individuals who listen and act upon their advisory or the so-called “followers” (Saito et al., 2015).

The emerging and crucial role of KOLs has become highly recognized over the social media where users themselves are now the main contributors of insights on products and brands (Seo & Park, 2018). Lee (2017) classified the roles of KOL as utilizing social media to communicate, provide information, support a daily life, promote and sell a product, and perform social response and activities. Based on Lee’s classification, social media basically changes the interaction between a customer and a brand, and develops the user-generated content (UGC) (Seo & Park, 2018). UGC prevails over the internet platform as consumers can now easily create their own content related to their purchase on social media (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). This is aptly carried out by sharing their opinion and experiences with their friends, family, and even a larger group of anonymous audience (Kim et al., 2015). Approximately one-fourths of search results for the world’s 20 giant

brands are UGC (Smith 2014). This has become an important actor for the diffusion of product information for consumers (Kim et al., 2015).

Since social media supplies more updated, insightful and trustworthy information than any form of advertisements, consumers then widely search for a product and its information in this certain platform, and they may even make a purchase decision based on the reviews or experiences posted by others (Seo & Park, 2018). Interestingly, a consumer’s purchase decision is rather influenced by opinion leader than mass media (Katz & Lazarsfelds, 1955), especially in the social network (Thoumrungroje, 2014). Therefore, their influences on product sales and brand choices are well recognized by both marketing practitioners and academicians (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006).

The influence of key opinion leader on conspicuous consumption can also be explained by the theory of compensatory consumption where an individual is inclined to acquire products

believed to be consumed by their reference group to satisfy the desire for social impression (Seo & Park, 2018). This implies that the product choice of a reference person is highly associated with an individual's self-identity, and a crucial determinant of conspicuous consumption (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; Seo & Park, 2018). The influential effects of reference group or a social group situated in higher position, which construct a frame of reference on an individual's conspicuous consumption, is emphasized and supported by Shukla (2008) and Winkelmann (2012). It is also evidenced that the roles of opinion leader can be treated as a driver of eWOM, which is a form of conspicuous consumption (Kim et al., 2015).

#### *Self-Image Congruency*

Self-image congruency can be defined as the congruence between a product user's personality and a product personality (Govers & Schoormans, 2005). According to consumer behavior research, consumers normally act in the way that maintain their self-concept,

which can be achieved by the purchase of a product or a brand that is congruent with their self-concept (Bajac, Palacios & Minton, 2018). Such behavior is supported by congruence theory where consumers are assumed to evaluate a product or a brand in the way they are congruent with their values (Rokeach & Rothman, 1965).

The role of self-image congruency is particularly strong on social media where many "friends" are not personally well-known and an individual has a better control of information being shared (Taylor & Strutton, 2016). Therefore, it is more likely that one's self is carefully shaped with an effort to selectively present or share the intended self to other members in the online social networks (Taylor & Strutton, 2016). Hence, the emerging trend of social media stimulates conspicuous consumption because it accelerates the expression of the most favored self-image and identity through an individual's purchase and consumption (Duan & Dholakia, 2017).



This carefully crafted self is not only characterized by their internal selves, but also by their possessions (Belk, 2013). A reference of one's self based on the image of a product is pursued to form a self-image congruity (Kim et al., 2015). That is, self-image congruity describes how a product or a brand contribute to a consumer's self-concept (Bajac et al., 2018).

A congruence between a consumer and a brand certainly has an impact on a brand choice because a consumer selects a brand not only based on functional and utilitarian benefits, but also the symbolic meanings representing their self-image (Bajac et al., 2018). The congruence between a product and a consumer's self-image has been evidenced to have a strong influence on attitude for various product categories, especially publicly consumed products like fashion and luxury products (Bajac et al., 2018; Lewis & Moital, 2016). Therefore, luxury fashion products brands are increasingly presented in social media for their marketing activities in an attempt for higher effective communication of a

brand's image and a creation of distinctive brand relationships.

Moreover, a social driven consumer is likely to draw other people's consumption as a frame of reference to construct their image (Gierl and Huettl, 2010), which can be achieved by acquiring a product that portray a self-image that is congruent with their ideal social image (Sheth et al., 1991). Such consumption and possession are subsequently being signaled to significant others (Gierl and Huettl, 2010), as a form of conspicuous consumption (Podoshen & Andrezejewski, 2012). Therefore, the interaction between self-image and product image become a crucial influential factor on conspicuous consumption (Shukla, 2008).

### *Materialism*

The pursuit of material possessions seems to be a prevailing behavior in the society these days such that business entities heavily invest in marketing activities intended to boost on the belief that the improvement in the quality of

life resulted from the acquisition of material goods (Zarco, 2014).

Materialism is the likelihood of an individual to perceive possessions as the crucial way to achieve a life goal (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Materialistic consumers are more sensitive to materialistic cues of success and status (Topcu, 2016), and would place a priority on possession, acquisition and ownership (Belk, 1985). That is, materialism is grounded on the assumption that possessions are crucial source of happiness (Zarco, 2014).

It has been widely studied that high materialistic consumers are inclined to openly perform and enjoy a status consumption, which is believed to draw an admiration from others (Lewis & Moital, 2016). Materialism is also considered to have an association with prestige-seeking behavior (Belk, 1985), self-image and conspicuous consumption in various cultures (Podoshen et al., 2011; Wong, 1997) because it is a tool for self-construction (Belk, 1985).

Dittmar (2005) suggested that high materialistic consumers usually employ people from higher socioeconomic status as a frame of reference and are subsequently motivated to acquire overly expensive products because they are indicators of success and would lead to increased satisfaction. That is, highly materialistic individuals tend to use luxury products as a symbol of their success to be impressed and admired by others (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

Lewis and Moital (2016) also indicate that, in the context of luxury fashion products, high materialistic consumers are more likely to pursue a conspicuous consumption. Such proposition is also supported by Zarco (2014) who claims that materialism arouses a preference for a purchase for premium-priced tangible products that exhibit prestige and status.

### 3. Consequences of Conspicuous Consumption

In order to better comprehend the mechanism of conspicuous consumption, it is crucial to understand its conse-

quences. According to the cognitive appraisal theory, when an individual perceives that they acquire recognizable items that represent their intended selves, they are likely to experience increased happiness with a purchase. However, such happiness does not guarantee the satisfaction with a product consumption, which is considered as a crucial predictor of both attitudinal and behavioral loyalty (Charoennan, 2017). Therefore, two consequences are proposed in this study as follows:

#### *Happiness with a Purchase*

Happiness with a purchase can be described as the level of happiness, which results from a purchase made by an individual (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). This certain type of happiness is also defined as a positive quality of life as a consequence of a purchase (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). According to cognitive appraisal theory, the intensity of an emotion is associated with cognitive representations in a situation when the emotion is experienced (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). That is, when individuals per-

ceive that a situation will advocate the life goal achievement, they would experience positive emotions (Roseman, 1991).

Furthermore, certain studies indicate that a happiness evoked by a purchase is more likely to be experienced when the purchase is perceived to construct an individual's identity (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2012). Hence, since posting a purchase on social media can strengthen the goal achievement in presenting the intended self, individuals would experience increased happiness stimulated by a purchase (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). Duan and Dholakia's study (2017) further confirmed that posting a purchase on social media, which is a form of conspicuous consumption, significantly increases a consumer's happiness stimulated by a purchase.

#### *Satisfaction with a Product*

Satisfaction is defined as an affective response from the disconfirmation paradigm where the product per-

formance matches a consumer's expectation (Oliver, 1980) while Wirtz and Bateson (1999) defined it as the evaluation of product performance and consumption experience. Moreover, Tandon, Kiran and Sah (2017) suggested that customer satisfaction is formed as a result of a positive attitude. Therefore, in this study, satisfaction with a product can be referred to as joyful emotions, which occur during a product usage, consumption or experiences.

Satisfaction has been widely studied to have a vital role in a competitive e-commerce context due to its influence on customer retention and the subsequent long-term growth of online business (Tandon et al., 2017). Therefore, in order to sustainably improve online retailing performance and customer satisfaction with a product, a comprehension of the antecedents of customer satisfaction is surely crucial, especially under the context of an impulse purchase of conspicuous luxury products where the customer satisfaction is still understudied and deserve more clarification.

## Conceptual Model & Propositions

Conspicuous consumption can be defined as a consumption of socially recognizable and exclusive goods to express a status, uniqueness and conformity to significant others (Gierl & Huetl, 2010). Based on this particular definition, four influential factors are being proposed in this study: social media usage, key opinion leaders (KOLs), self-image congruency, and materialism, and two potential consequences, which are happiness with a purchase and satisfaction with a product as shown in Figure 1.

Over the social media platform, conspicuous consumption is likely to be reinforced because social media has been found to accelerate the expression of favorable self-image (Duan & Dhoklaka, 2017) through the consumption of a product that exhibits an image that is congruent with an individual's ideal self-image (Sheth et al., 1991). Moreover, according to costly signaling theory, a materialistic consumer is likely to engage in a recognizable luxury purchase (Choi & Seo, 2017) on social media

where impression management is to be performed (Taylor & Strutton, 2016).

In addition, the influence of KOLs on conspicuous consumption can be explained by the compensatory consumption theory where a consumer is assumed to purchase a product consumed by reference groups or KOLs to satisfy the desire for recognition (Seo & Park, 2018). Moreover, the congruence theory also implies that a consumer would purchase and consume a product that is congruent with their social values (Rokeach & Rothman, 1965; Bajac et al., 2018), especially those socially driven and materialistic consumers who are likely to draw KOLs' consumption as a frame of reference to construct their image (Gierl & Huettl, 2010). These materialistic consumers are also evidenced to consume a visible luxury product as a symbol of their success (Richins & Dawson, 1992).

Regarding to its consequences, Duan and Dholakia (2017) also propose that posting a purchase on social media, which is considered as a digital form of

conspicuous consumption, significantly increases a consumer's happiness stimulated by a purchase. However, happiness with the purchase does not guarantee a satisfaction with a product, especially under the context of impulse purchase of conspicuous luxury products where the purchase is rather irrational, thus deserve more clarification. The propositions are listed as follows:

Proposition 1(a-c): There is a significant influence of social media usage on self-image congruency, materialism, and conspicuous consumption.

Proposition 2(a-c): There is a significant influence of key opinion leaders on self-image congruency, materialism, and conspicuous consumption.

Proposition 3: There is a significant influence of self-image congruency on conspicuous consumption.

Proposition 4: There is a significant influence of materialism on conspicuous consumption.

Proposition 5 (a-b): There is a significant influence of conspicuous consumption on happiness with a purchase and satisfaction with a product.

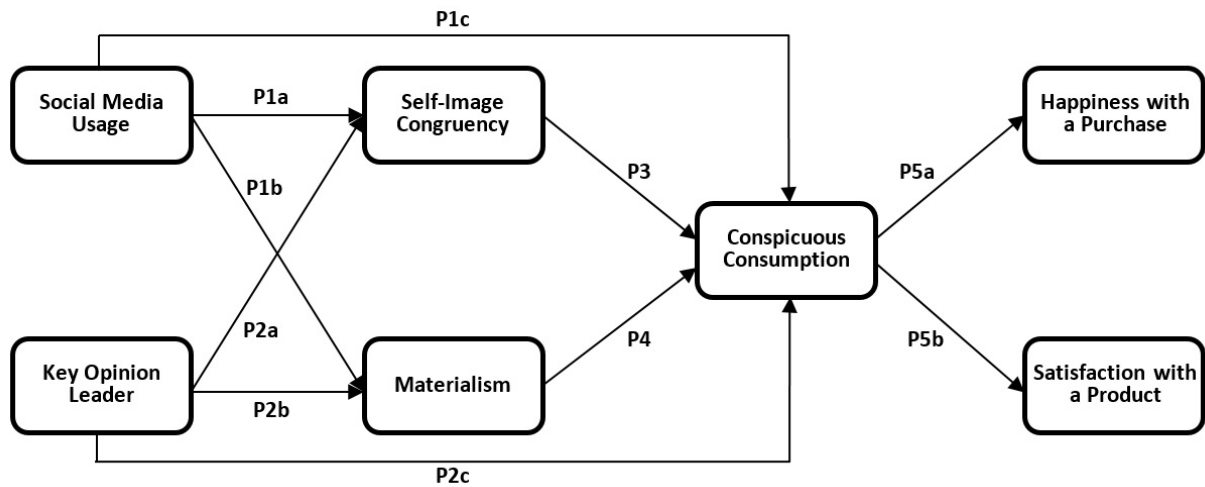


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

### Conclusion

This study contributes considerable benefits to both marketing academicians and practitioners in the luxury fashion product industry. Theoretically, this study offers a prominent contribution on marketing literature by emphasizing the conspicuous phenomenon where the consumption behavior is mainly influenced by significant others, not the consumers themselves. Moreover, a more holistic view of conspicuous

consumption is highlighted by incorporating both influential factors and potential consequences, which are certainly

underexplored, in a social media platform that has dramatically changed a consumer behavior.

Practically, the influential factors being studied are external factors that can be arranged and managed by marketers, so they can be correspondingly controlled for the benefits luxury fashion product companies or relevant marketing practitioners, including increasing positive product reviews, maximizing efficiency of marketing and promotion activities, reducing advertising costs, and managing relationships with customers. Nevertheless, conspicuous consumption can be perceived as an advantage and a threat to a company's reputation, this

literature review can then be referred to develop a product and promotion that are not only publicly recognizable, but also socially responsible.

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