

Factors on Conspicuous Consumption of Consumers in Emerging Markets: A Social Identify Theory Perspective

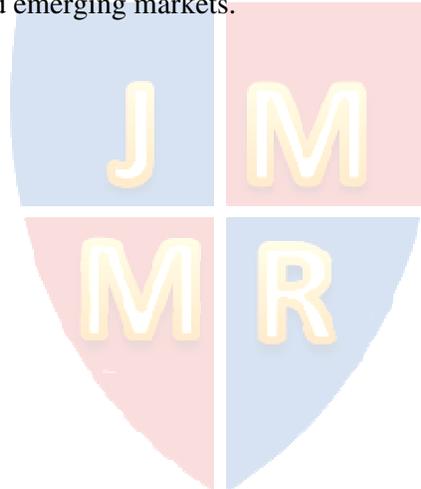
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ABSTRACT

Drawing on social identify theory, this conceptual study proposed that conspicuous consumption behaviors of consumers in emerging markets were a function of their interdependent self-concept, face consciousness, and cultural capital. This study further proposed that consumer innovativeness moderated the relationships between individual traits (such as interdependent self-concept, face consciousness, and cultural capital) and conspicuous consumption behaviors of consumers in emerging markets. Implications and directions for future research were also discussed.

Keywords: Social identify theory, conspicuous consumption, face consciousness, self-concept, cultural capital, and emerging markets.



INTRODUCTION

Consumer market in emerging markets is growing rapidly, with increasingly sophisticated consumers and exponential growth in middle and upper classes in these markets. Thus, consumers in emerging markets present substantial opportunities for leading consumer product manufacturers and retailers (such as Apple, Costco, and Carrefour) from Western countries. Nevertheless, most of these products and brands (e.g., Louis Vuitton, BMW, and Chanel) from developed countries target the luxury and upscale segments of the consumer market in the emerging markets, as reflected in conspicuous consumption.

Conspicuous consumption refers to a particular type of consumer behavior that people display status and/or wealth by possessing or spending a large proportion of their incomes on luxurious products and services (Trigg, 2001). Accordingly, satisfaction as a result of conspicuous consumption usually comes from audience's reaction as opposed to the actual use of products and services (Wong, 1997). In other words, conspicuous consumption behaviors result from consumers' expectations to be seen more favorably in the social hierarchy (Podoshen, Li, and Zhang, 2011). Along the same line, Mullins (1999) argued that mostly in capitalistic societies the expectation of greater social status drives consumers to consume conspicuously, especially when they took into consideration the explicit messages and meanings related to conspicuous consumption (Richins, 1994).

In the meantime, conspicuous consumption in emerging markets has gained a considerable attention. Conspicuous consumption is likely stronger in emerging markets than in developed markets, as the middle class has seen significant growths in recent decades (McCollough, 2020). Accordingly, Podoshen, Li, and Zhang (2011) stressed the importance to examine the practices and attitudes surrounding conspicuous consumption in emerging markets, as this consumer trend has seen exponential growth in emerging markets that are rapidly undergoing significant changes in social structures and traditional values. As restricted access to many products/services as a result of economic deprivation in emerging markets starts to fade away, rapid growth in economy and personal income has significantly contributed to conspicuous consumptions in the emerging markets (Arnold and Quelch, 1998; Chipp, Kleyn, and Manzi, 2011). A study of Chinese luxury market and consumers by Zhou and Wong (2008) found that in this most lucrative and largest emerging market in the world, young consumers' purchase intentions for upscale foreign brands were influenced by three major motives: perceived prestige, perceived quality and perceived value. Therefore, our further knowledge about what influences conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets holds significant implications for both researchers and practitioners.

According to the social identify theory, the social groups that one belongs to can influence the evaluation of self; and the social groups become part of the self-affecting feelings, thoughts, and also behavior (Tjafel and Turner, 1986). Distinction from other groups is the key to positive identity with in-group members (Mlicki and Ellemers, 1996). Consumers tend to behave consistently with their self-assigned social category and other members in the social category (Reed et al., 2012). Therefore, identification influences actions and behaviors, thus serving as antecedents of consumer behavior (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Specifically, social identity has cognitive, affective, and evaluative elements in various social settings (Van Dick, 2004). Drawn from the social identify theory, the current study intends to find the answers to the following questions: do we really know consumers' conspicuous consumption behaviors? What are the individual traits / factors triggering conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets? Furthermore, how do these traits affect conspicuous consumption behaviors of consumers in emerging markets?

This current study contributes to the literature in the following ways: First, it specifically examines individual traits / factors that affect conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets. Second, it integrates all relevant variables into a conceptual framework which can explain consumers' conspicuous consumption behaviors. Third, it answers to Zhou and Wong's (2008, p. 480) call for future research to further examine the relationship between psychological characteristics and motivational factors "within a socially embedded consumption context."

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: First, it presents a brief literature review of social identify theory and conspicuous consumption. Second, it proposes a number of

research propositions based on theoretical discussions and the literature review. Lastly, it also discusses implications and directions for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Identify Theory

The social identity theory suggests that the way people perceive the world depends on how they define themselves based on their membership in various social groups (Tjafel and Turner, 1986). The social group that one belongs to determines the evaluation of self, based on the social group that one belongs to; and the social group influences the self-affecting feelings and behavior (Tjafel and Turner, 1986). Consumers' identification with a social group might be based on its perceived social functionality (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). How others see the group can also lead to self-esteem (Hogg and Turner, 1985). Particularly, as Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) suggest, consumers tend to identify themselves with successful social groups, as such association provides a perception of social status.

Identification influences actions and behaviors and thus serves as antecedents of consumer behavior (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). A body of literature has confirmed the impact of consumers' social identity on consumer behavior. For example, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) propose that customers' identification or belief may contribute to customer-company relationships. A study by Lam et al. (2010) goes further and finds evidence that identification helps develop and maintain customer-brand relationships. Zeugner-Roth, Zabkar and Diamantopoulos (2015) also argue that consumers' identification influences their product judgement and willingness to purchase domestic and foreign product. Therefore, our study draws on social identify theory to examine conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

Social identity has cognitive, affective, and evaluative elements in various social settings (Van Dick 2004). For example, consumers' self image in and/or between social groups can result in social identity (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Consumers may also exhibit emotional attachment to certain social groups (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). As Reed et al. (2012) argued, consumers tend to behave consistently with their self-assigned social category and other members in the social category. Subsequently, drawing from the extant literature, this current study is a timely attempt to examine the impact of individual traits / factors of interdependent self-concept, face consciousness, and cultural capital on conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

Conspicuous Consumption

Levy (1959) suggested that consumption was driven by functions as well as by symbolic value attached. Consumers' purchases are usually influenced by social needs and material needs such as self expression and prestige (Belk 1988). Products are used by consumers to communicate their desired identities and preferences (e.g. Holt, 1995). Therefore, publicly visible consumption helps communicate identity of consumers (Berger and Heath, 2007). In a recent study of conspicuous consumption in relation to social needs, Amaldoss and Jain (2005) suggested that purchase decisions were affected by consumers' desire for exclusivity and conformity. Some studies state that there are two motivational dimensions toward conspicuous consumption: interpersonal influence and social status demonstration (e.g. Marcoux et al, 1997). Especially in developing countries, upscale foreign brands are strongly associated with social status and prestige (Batra et al., 2000). Consumers are willing to pay more for conspicuous products/brands when these products/brands differentiate them from others in their social groups (e.g. Charles et al., 2009).

Brands can assist the signaling process "through visible logos and explicit patterns" (Berger and Ward, 2010, p. 555). Particularly, some products are explicitly marketed with conspicuous logos and patterns, while others use subtle signals more discreetly (Berger and Ward, 2010). Brannen (1992, 1996) argued that although luxurious Western products are vigorously sought by Japanese consumers, these products might not serve the same social functions or be purchased for the same reason in each society. In other words, conspicuous

luxury consumption might have different antecedents, such as distinctions between East Asian and Western cultures (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH PROPOSTIONS

According to Van Dick (2004), social identity has cognitive, affective, and evaluative elements in various social settings. This study particularly examines the impact of factors of interdependent self-concept, face consciousness, and cultural capital on conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets. The moderating effect of consumer innovativeness is also examined in this study. The following Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the factors that affect conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets. Research propositions are developed based on the conceptual framework. See Figure 1 in the appendix.

Interdependent Self Concept

Self-concept is considered a set of self-schemas that represent self-related information and help people's perception of themselves in their environment (Markus, 1977). Consumers differ in their preference of and tendency to engage products/brands in their self-concepts (Chaplin and John, 2005; Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg, 2009). Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed that there were two constructs of self-concept: independent self-concept and interdependent self-concept. According to the independent self-concept, individuals are distinct from each other with their unique personal values, preferences and abilities; while the interdependent self-concept holds that individuals are inherently bounded and influenced in their social, and familial relationships (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

With an interdependent self-concept, an individual's identity "lies in one's familial, cultural, professional, and social relationships" (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998, p. 426). Therefore, an individual's behavior is likely influenced by the self in relation to others in the same contexts (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998). In Zhou and Wong's (2008) study, they found not only the impact of perceived prestige, perceived value, and perceived quality of upscale foreign brands on purchase intentions of young Chinese consumers, but also the interaction between the level of social compliance tendencies of individuals and conspicuous consumption. An earlier work by Wong and Ahuvia (1998) examined the impact of cultural tradition on Southeastern Asians' luxury consumption. This study by Wong and Ahuvia (1998) identified four aspects of cultural tradition: interdependent self-concepts, the balance between individual and group needs, the legitimacy of group affiliations, and hierarchy. This study also found that the norms and goals of Asian societies had a higher level of emphasis on public and visible possessions than the Western society, as these possessions were likely to indicate social conformity (Wong and Ahuvia, 1998).

Thus, interdependent self-concept calls for social relation and social compliance that can be accentuated by conspicuous consumption. Consumers in emerging markets with strong interdependent self-concept are likely to pursue conspicuous consumption. Therefore, we propose the following:

Research proposition 1: Interdependent self-concept is positively related to conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

Face Consciousness

Face is an important cultural value in a relationship-oriented society such as China (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). Face is considered a favorable and visible social self-worth (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). Wan et al. (2009) argued that the paramount importance of the so-called "face" in some societies suggests that visible attributes of an individual may be more significant than invisible inner attributes. Face consciousness is defined as "people's desire to enhance, to maintain, and to avoid losing face in relation to significant others in social activities" (Bao et al., 2003, pp. 736-737). It is found that consumers with strong face consciousness have a tendency to relate consumption closely with high social status and social needs (Bao et al., 2003). The high social needs nevertheless

prompt consumers to pay attention to the extrinsic cues than intrinsic cues of products, thus leading to conspicuous consumption that emphasizes luxury brands and prestige (Belk, 1988). Therefore, consumers with strong face consciousness tend to pursue luxury consumption in order to construct a certain public image (Wan et al., 2009).

In many emerging markets or collectivist societies, face goes beyond the connotation of an individual's self, so as to extend to one's social groups such as families and relatives (Hwang, 1987). This strong face consciousness is posited to contribute to conspicuous consumption that presumably can elevate one's social status in emerging markets. It thus appears there is a positive impact of face consciousness on conspicuous consumption. Therefore, we propose the following:

Research proposition 2: Face consciousness is positively related to the conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's (1984; 1986) field-capital theory argue that people acquire social, and cultural capital in order to deploy in social settings or fields, with the intention to gain or compete for status and distinction (Tapp and Warren, 2010). Cultural capital is "a set of socially rare and distinctive tastes and skills, knowledge, and practices that are possessed by people to different degrees" (Özsomer and Altaras, 2008; p. 8). Berger and Ward (2010, p. 558) defined cultural capital as "the nonfinancial social assets, such as cultural knowledge, that people have in a particular domain".

However, the traditional view of cultural capital as Bourdieu's theory is well grounded upon research in Western and developed country. So, it might not provide an adequate picture about how people in less industrialized countries consume (Üstüner and Holt, 2010). The study by Üstüner and Holt (2010) demonstrated that in Turkey, a less industrialized country, cultural capital takes on a rather different form from in most developed countries. From Turkish upper-middle class' perspective, cultural capital in status consumption means "a stylized depiction of middle-class consumption in the West, particularly the United States" (Üstüner and Holt, 2010, p. 52). While in developed countries, expressions of cultural capital are not scripted and take a more subtle form from a traditional perspective in Western / developed countries (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998), expressions of cultural capital are demonstrated more explicitly and conspicuously in less industrialized countries (Üstüner and Holt, 2010).

The results of a study by Tapp and Warren (2010) suggested that Bourdieu's theory could help to explain different behaviors by consumer groups. Berger and Ward (2010) studied the communication value of subtle signals of inconspicuous consumption and found the so-called "insiders" (i.e., individuals with domain-specific knowledge) tended to prefer subtle instead of explicit signals. In other words, consumers' preferences for explicit signals are a function of cultural capital. Berger and Ward (2010) further suggested that high-cultural capital individuals' desire for distinction from the general public exert a significant influence on the relationship between cultural capital and subtle signal preference.

A study by Tapp and Warren (2010) also provided evidence that Chinese consumers also acquire cultural capital to attain certain social position and status. By consuming conspicuously, consumers in emerging markets with high level of cultural capital might be able to feel satisfied from gaining attention or positive reaction from the audience in the society. Thus, cultural capital acquired by these consumers are posited to lead to conspicuous consumption. Therefore, we propose the following:

Research proposition 3: Cultural capital is positively related to the conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

Moderating Effects of Consumer Innovativeness

Consumer innovativeness is "the degree to which an individual is relatively earlier in adopting an innovation than other member of his system." (Roger and Shoemaker, 1971, p. 27). According to Midgley and Dowling (1978), innovativeness as "the degree to which an

individual is receptive to new ideas and makes innovation decisions independently of the communicated experiences of other.” Therefore, innovative consumers tend to be knowledgeable of new product information, be price insensitive and be heavy users (Goldsmith, 2001). Innovative consumers are also able to provide important feedback about the new products, which is essential for product or marketing improvements (Flynn and Goldsmith, 1993).

As a personality trait of consumers at various degrees, consumer innovativeness can “facilitate the adoption process and communication of new products to potential consumers” (Citrin et al., 2000, p. 295). The degree of innovativeness is associated with a number of attributes such as decision-making ability, independence, and relations with others (Midgley and Dowling, 1978). Innovativeness is likely to be socially influenced rather than genetic (Hirschman, 1980). An individual’s dispositions and behaviors may be influenced by personal characteristics, as well as the norms and beliefs of the socio-cultural group that this individual belongs to (Triandis, 1989). Therefore, some social groups may exhibit a higher degree of innovativeness than some other social groups due to systematic differences (Gatignon et al., 1989). Tellis et al. (2009) also suggested that innovativeness varied systematically among countries, due to differences in country characteristics, as well as consumer demographics.

Consumer innovativeness can also enhance the market dynamics in the marketplace (Hirschman 1980). Consumer innovativeness can lead to unique patterns in consumer behavior (Foxall, 1994). Consumer innovativeness is related to consumer behaviors associated with socioeconomic, personality and communication variables (Engel et al., 1995). Therefore, individual traits such as innovativeness and self-congruence can lead to new product adoption (Coward et al., 2008). Innovative consumers tend to be knowledgeable of product information and price insensitive (Goldsmith, 2001), and early in adopting an innovation (Roger and Shoemaker, 1971). Publicly visible consumption helps communicate identity of consumers (Berger and Heath, 2007). In emerging markets, upscale market is dominated by luxury brands and products from Western, developed countries such as the U.S., France, Germany, and Japan. These brands and products are usually innovative, new products in the emerging markets. Consumer innovativeness appears to accentuate the impact of their individual traits on conspicuous consumption. Therefore, we propose the following:

Research proposition 4: Consumer innovativeness positively moderates the relationship between interdependent self-concept and conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

Research proposition 5: Consumer innovativeness positively moderates the relationship between face consciousness and conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

Research proposition 6: Consumer innovativeness positively moderates the relationship between cultural capital and conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Emerging markets offers tremendous opportunities as the potentially largest consumer markets. These consumer markets have been long pursued by Western companies that are eager to tap into these markets, especially the high-end, upscale layer of the markets. Luxury products and brands such as LV, BMW, and Chanel have become synonymous with prestigious image and social status. To a large extent, conspicuous consumption has boosted the demand of these luxury products and brands in emerging markets. Therefore, conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets becomes an interesting subject for both marketing managers and marketing researchers alike. This current study intends to further our knowledge of this important subject regarding consumer markets.

As Erbring and Young (1979) note, group-level characteristics often affect or influence the individual-level characteristics of group members. Thus, common traits of consumers in emerging markets can influence consumer behavior accordingly. Midgley and

Dowling (1978) also suggest that personality traits as well as social participation affect consumers' new product adoption and behavior. Drawing from the social identify theory, this current study particularly examines the impact of the individual traits of interdependent self-concept and face consciousness, as consumers' desire for exclusivity, conformity, and as social status is closely related to conspicuous consumption (e.g., Amaldoss and Jain, 2005; Belk, 1988). In the meantime, consumers in emerging markets also acquire cultural capital to attain social status and a sense of affiliation (Tapp and Warren, 2010). We propose that these three factors positively influence conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

Consumer innovativeness facilitates the product adoption process and communication (Citrin et al., 2000, p. 295). Consumer innovativeness is related to consumer behaviors associated with socioeconomic, personality and communication variables (Engel et al., 1995). Therefore, consumer innovativeness acts as a moderator of the direct relationship between the above-mentioned individual traits and conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets. We believe that our conceptual framework and its associated research propositions contribute to the research of conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets.

This study also provides useful insights of consumers in emerging markets for managers of Western companies that are eager to tap into the luxury, upscale consumer markets in emerging markets. Managers shall carefully and extensively examine consumers in emerging markets to truly understand consumer behaviors. As this study suggest, from social identity's perspective, interdependent self-concept, face consciousness, and cultural capital are important drivers of conspicuous consumption in emerging markets. Knowledge of these consumer characteristics and traits can significantly help managers in their important strategic decisions in those markets regarding product development, target market selection, product positioning and promotional strategies.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This current study is a work-in-progress conceptual piece. Clearly, further work is needed to provide a comprehensive, integrative perspective in the research subject. There are a few directions for future research. Consumer data can be collected to empirically examine the conspicuous consumption of consumers in emerging markets. Comparative studies can also be conducted to further our understanding of the uniqueness of consumers versus consumers in different cultures / emerging markets. In addition, many emerging markets have been experiencing rapid cultural and societal changes. The impact of these changes on consumers in relation to conspicuous consumption is also an interesting topic. As emerging market and societies gradually mature, it should also be interesting to examine the evolving nature of conspicuous consumption in the emerging markets.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Antecedents and Moderators on Conspicuous Consumption of Consumers in Emerging Markets

