



Interpersonal effects on fashion consciousness and status consumption moderated by materialism in metropolitan men[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rapid and dramatic changes in male fashion consumption over the past 20 years, consumer research largely neglects the issue of status consumption, especially in the male market, which plays an increasingly important role in expanding the fashion market. Initial studies show that self-monitoring and susceptibility to interpersonal influence have both direct and indirect effects (via fashion consciousness) on status consumption. Path analysis shows that indirect effects can provide insight into the effects of interpersonal factors on status consumption. Furthermore, high and low materialism serve as moderating forces in the relationship between fashion consciousness and status consumption, producing different effects. In the high-materialism group, susceptibility to interpersonal influence alone has an indirect effect (via fashion consciousness) on status consumption, whereas the low-materialism group requires self-monitoring as an additional antecedent of status consumption.

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1. Introduction

Understanding how and why status consumption develops in consumers remains critical for the marketing of luxury brands, which represent consumer social status (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004). The desire to increase social status motivates changes in consumer behavior. Most consumers, regardless of their income or social class, are willing to spend money to possess status products before they have secured the appropriate resources, and globally, almost all luxury product consumers show similar behavior (Husic & Cicic, 2009). Consumers widely use credit cards and financial credit packages to facilitate status consumption (Bernthal, Crockett, & Rose, 2005). In increasingly competitive luxury brand markets, the ability to understand the psychological determinants of status consumption is a key factor in increasing market share (Husic & Cicic, 2009). However, consumer researchers do not precisely understand the psychology governing status consumption (Barnett, 2005).

Women are the major consumers in the luxury market, and beauty and esthetics are the key motivating factors for purchasing decisions.

However, during the past 20 years, the Western luxury market has seen the rise of a male archetype interested in style, beauty, and esthetic values. Postmodern males or, as consumer researchers term them most frequently, metrosexual males (Faiyaz, D'souza, & Syed, 2006) focus more on their bodies, fashion, and personal style to develop their own identity than males have in the past.

Two stereotypical examples of metrosexual male figures are David Beckham and Brad Pitt (Vieira, 2009). Mass media have played a key role in communicating this phenomenon, and Thailand is no exception to the growth of the male consumer market. For example, in 2004, more than 1500 stock-keeping units (SKUs) of fashion products and cosmetics explicitly marketed to men under the For Men concept (Muenmart, 2004). Marketers put a great deal of effort into understanding this market, with the ultimate goal of obtaining first-mover advantage. Researchers, in contrast, seem to take this emerging market for granted and consider the masculine market similar to the feminine market.

The majority of early studies report that self-monitoring, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, fashion consciousness, and materialism influence status consumption. Researchers have studied these relationships independently, examining the relationship between materialism and susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Achenreiner, 1997; Gu, Hung, & Tse, 2005), materialism and status consumption (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006; Heaney, Goldsmith, & Jusoh, 2005; O'Cass, 2001b; Watson, 2003), fashion consciousness and status consumption (Goldsmith, Flynn, & Eastman, 1996; O'Cass, 2001a, 2001b), and self-monitoring and materialism (Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997). Correspondingly, this study contributes to this body of theoretical

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work by proposing an integrative framework for self-monitoring and susceptibility to interpersonal influence as interpersonal factors influencing fashion consciousness and, in turn, status consumption.

To establish the mediating influence of fashion consciousness, the authors include a competing model that tests for direct effects by all four constructs. Because of the important role of materialism for Asian consumers, the current study also includes a comparative examination of these relationships for individuals who exhibit high and low levels of materialism. In these ways, this study contributes to the understanding of the antecedents of status consumption among metropolitan men, who constitute an increasingly important fashion target market (Bakewell, Mitchell, & Rothwell, 2006; Kacen, 2000; Patterson & Elliot, 2002).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. How social identity and social comparison theories explain status consumption

Status consumption is a consumer consumption pattern that ordinarily manifests only with publically visible products. Therefore, luxury and fashion products are the main marketing focus of status consumption studies. According to recent studies, visible goods have a lower price-quality correlation and a pattern of brand buying favoring higher-priced brands (Chaoa & Schorb, 1998). Status consumption generally involves high-end, expensive luxury products (Heaney et al., 2005) that most people do not regularly consume on an ongoing basis. Many consumers use these products to satisfy not only material needs but also social needs. Under status consumption, many consumers try to impress others, including their superiors in the workplace, social connections, or possible future spouses (Husic & Cicic, 2009). Status consumption is suggested to increase brand value for the consumer (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999, 2004).

Two consumer psychology theories, social identity and social comparison, offer useful theoretical explanations for why consumers engage in status consumption. Social-identity theory focuses on behaviors related to consumer acquisition of possessions and/or engagement in consumption activities in order to pursue identity-related end goals (Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993). Song and Hatue (1984) suggest that these behaviors, such as self-concept, exist across cultures. Social identity theory views consumers realistically as multifaceted beings in terms of their day-to-day existence (Kleine et al., 1993).

Social forces (displays of social conformity) and internal forces (displays of individuality) drive the development of social identity (Hawkes, 1994). The theory of identity-related possessions explains why consumers adopt certain products or brands: they may be using them to express certain aspects of their identities, primarily guided by consumption stereotypes and societal role expectations. Anxiety often develops when behaviors related to self-identity are inconsistent with the expectations of significant others (Higgins, 1987). Therefore, self-evaluation may be employed to manage actual behaviors (James, 1890) and enable increased awareness of discrepancies between the self and social norms (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982).

Social comparison theory suggests that individuals tend to compete and compare themselves with one another. More specifically, in the world of global media, such competition for status occurs through the acquisition, ownership, and consumption of status or prestige products rather than through personal, occupational, or familial reputation (Phau & Woo, 2008; Phau & Yip, 2008). Individuals attempt to compare themselves (and compete) with others by demonstrating their social power and displaying their wealth as expressed through their ability to purchase material objects or possess status goods (Roberts & Jones, 2001).

Tang and Arocas (1997) comment that because of competition, individuals feel pressure to conform to social norms and acquire material and prestige goods, thereby expressing their social status through

consumption. Schor (1991) states that upper-class individuals consume conspicuously to demonstrate their high social position within an affluent society, whereas lower-class consumers engage in status consumption to increase their self-esteem.

In consumer research, the idea of status consumption broadly overlaps with and substitutes for conspicuous consumption. However, O'Cass and McEwen (2004) distinguish between these two terms and conclude that status consumption relates to conspicuous consumption, but they separate the constructs within the realm of consumer motivation and behavior. In summary, they define status consumption as "the behavioral tendency to value status and acquire and consume products that provide status to the individual" and define conspicuous consumption as "the tendency for individuals to enhance their image through overt consumption of possessions that communicate status to others" (p. 34). While conspicuous consumption correlates to status consumption, the authors of this study mainly focus on the status consumption of consumers whose consumption patterns reflect their social status.

2.2. Antecedents of status consumption

Because interpersonal effects play an important role in status consumption, it is important to identify the key factors for a consumer. Social comparison is an essential component of the formation of the self: consumers appraise others in evaluating their own use of symbolic consumption to convey their identities (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989). An important source of social comparison information is the assessment of behavioral cues from significant referents or members of aspirant groups (Miniard & Cohen, 1983). Other often-used sources of social comparison information are the reactions of group members in the individual's social milieu. Consumers determine the relative appropriateness of their consumption of certain products and to avoid negative social evaluation (Miniard & Cohen, 1983) and to control the social rewards and sanctions that they receive within the group (Allen, 1965). Measuring the degree of consumer sensitivity to these social cues makes it possible to predict what interpersonal factors affect consumer purchase intentions (Bearden & Rose, 1990). A common cue may be the type of clothing worn (Solomon & Schopler, 1982), which is relevant to consumer product choices (Bearden & Rose, 1990).

Interpersonal effect is undeniably an antecedent of status consumption. This study uses two variables for analysis, self-monitoring and susceptibility to interpersonal influence, as predictive variables, but they demand rigorous empirical study (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999). The following sections discuss the development of the conceptual model and the hypotheses, as Fig. 1 shows.

3. Proposed hypotheses

3.1. Self-monitoring

Social comparison through self-monitoring is a strategy used for uncertainty reduction (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Self-monitoring refers to expressive behaviors guided by situational cues and social appropriateness (Snyder, 1974). Self-monitoring, in the Western view, is the mental process through which one continuously observes and compares oneself against norms, criticizes one's self-appearance and form, and engages in activities that allow one to achieve a more desirable form, thereby enhancing one's positive self-image (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). High self-monitors value their social self-image more highly and are sensitive to cues as indicators of socially appropriate behaviors, whereas low self-monitors tend to have a consistent self-image that represents their true inner feelings and beliefs across different social situations (Aaker, 1999; Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997; Snyder & DeBono, 1985). Individuals with high self-monitoring emphasize the public self and social identity, whereas those with low self-monitoring

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