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The Psychological Motivations of Online Conspicuous Consumption:
A Qualitative Study

Jude Qattan, Princess Sumaya University for Technology, Amman, Jordan
Mohammad Al Khasawneh, Princess Sumaya University for Technology, Amman, Jordan

ABSTRACT

Conspicuous consumption is a behavior that is becoming prevalent in today's world. Although limited attention has been given to conspicuous consumption in a digital world, it is a behavior that everyone practices, in different degrees. This article sets out to reveal and examine the underlying psychological motivations of online conspicuous consumption. Semi-structured interviews are adopted as a qualitative technique. The interviews were conducted with fifteen Jordanian residents who have access to the internet and social media. The findings reveal that the four proposed psychological motivations (envy, materialism, narcissism, and social comparison) are of significant influence on users' online conspicuous consumption. This study introduces a comprehensive model of online conspicuous consumption that was not addressed earlier in the literature and provides a viable foundation for future research in this context. Furthermore, the results will help marketing managers to better understand and manage their strategies in reference to users' psychological motivations when posting online.

KEYWORDS

Conspicuous Consumption, Envy, Materialism, Narcissism, Online Conspicuous Consumption, Online Consumer Behavior, Social Comparison, Status Consumption

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the tendency to buy expensive and unnecessary goods is a pattern of consumer behavior that is becoming all too common in societies. We consume luxury products in order to satisfy social needs, gain recognition or social affirmation. In other words, status products that express the self, show a social status and an image of prestige and wealth are recently becoming essential to one's life.

Conspicuous consumption has received a considerable focus by researchers' since Thorstein Veblen's first presented the theory in his book, Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions. In particular, Veblen (1931) proposes and other researchers (Mason, 1983, Trigg, 2001) confirm that conspicuous consumption is a public exhibition of wealth in pursuit of higher status and peoples' recognition. Nevertheless, most of the previous related studies have primarily concentrated on the consumption side of Veblen's theory. Taking this point further, even though several existing studies settled down on the central idea of conspicuous consumption, the motives behind such behavior are not in agreement.

Recently, conspicuous consumption becomes more predominant and solid in our society due to the increased usage of Internet and social networking sites as well as consumers' changing

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lifestyles (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). There is no doubt that social media sites are growing and developing increasingly in a rapidly changing world. To be more specific, it is clearly noted recently that the number of internet users is increasing in Jordan. In particular, 51% of Jordanian households own a personal computer, 57% of households have internet subscriptions, 78% have internet access via mobile broadband (Jordan Department of Statistics, 2019). Taking this point further, Jordan is considered as one of the fast-growing countries in terms of the number of social media users. For example, a study done by Pew Research Centre in 2016 showed that the number of social media users in Jordan had reached about 7.2 million (Alghad, 2016). Also, Jordanian statistics indicate that number of Facebook users reached almost six million users showing that more than half of the Jordanian population are using Facebook more than other available social media platforms (Jordan Internet Stats and Telecommunication Report, 2018). Social media has certainly changed the role of consumers from being passive to rather active players where they are permitted to generate product related contents (Huttom, 2012) through posting and sharing their consumption experiences on social media. Such consumer-generated content (UGC) has allowed regular consumers with product expertise to become an online social influencer (Duan, 2016). Furthermore, it is noted that conspicuous consumption can be increased over a social media platform (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). This implies an indisputable phenomenon on social media across the world that warrants further investigation for the concept of Online Conspicuous Consumption (OCC). OCC is an extension of conspicuous consumption through a digital medium where users tend to signal and display their positional goods or experiences (Taylor and Strutton, 2016).

While a considerable amount of research examined the factors influencing conspicuous consumption, the vital role of social media and psychological motives on conspicuous consumption received scant attention, particularly in the current dynamic environment as social media has manifestly reshaped consumer behavior. Consequently, the current research is essential in order to fill the gap in the existing literature and to explore and understand the underlying psychological motivations of online conspicuous consumption behavior. Such understanding is definitely fundamental to elaborate developing consumer phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the publication of Veblen's (1899) 'The Theory of The Leisure Class', conspicuous consumption has been an issue of focal interest in social psychology and consumer behavior literature. Conspicuous Consumption (hereafter, CC) refers to the lavish spending on visible items in order to advertise one's wealth and income to others (Veblen, 1899). It is associated with the display of wealth (Mason, 1981; Trigg, 2001) and the tendency to show off (Antonides & Van Raaij, 1998). For the purpose of this paper, we adopt a more recent definition of conspicuous consumption: "The process of gaining status or social prestige from the acquisition and consumption of goods that the individual and significant others perceive to be high in status." (O'Cass & Frost, 2002, p. 68).

Early theories of conspicuous consumption suggested a structure in which persons try to copy the consumption patterns of other individuals that sustain a higher social status. In previous studies, conspicuous consumption was frequently examined in the light of The Social Comparison Theory (SCT), which states that individuals compare themselves to others in order to gain accurate self-evaluations (Festinger, 1954). This theory was the basis of different studies on conspicuous consumption. For instance, the effect of self-esteem on generation Y conspicuous consumption (Acikalin, Gul, & Develioglu, 2009), the relationship between green conspicuous behavior and social comparisons (Aagerup and Nilsson, 2016), and in a digital context, the effect of envy and narcissism on online conspicuous consumption (Taylor & Strutton, 2016) were all examined in the existing literature.

A thorough review of past literature shows that researchers have examined CC primarily along two paths: its motivations and the industries where it prevails. As for the psychological motivations of CC, social status was proved to be directly related to CC (Duesenberry, 1962; Marcoux et al.,

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