

Conspicuous consumption of socially excluded consumers: the roles of self-esteem and face concern

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Abstract

Purpose – Social exclusion is hypothesized to motivate conspicuous consumption. However, prior evidence has remained unreconciled. Under the sociometer theory, this study proposes a model to clarify the effects of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption, with negative self-esteem as a mediating factor and consumers' concern about their social face (or face concern) as a moderating factor. We expected that consumers with strong social face concern, when experiencing social exclusion, would be more likely to have negative self-esteem, which, in turn, would motivate their conspicuous consumption as a defensive mechanism to restore self-esteem.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used survey data from 368 Vietnamese consumers and multiple regressions using the PROCESS macro Models for SPSS, developed by Hayes, to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The analysis results show a significant positive relationship between social exclusion and negative self-esteem. Negative self-esteem significantly and fully mediates the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. Face concern also moderates the indirect influence of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption via negative self-esteem, as we expected.

Originality/value – Our study findings highlight the moderating role of face concern, as an extension of the sociometer theory, in explaining the mechanism by which social exclusion affects conspicuous consumption. The findings also offer practical implications for policymakers and practitioners to design interventions to reduce materialism and conspicuous consumption for more sustainable happiness and well-being in human society.

Keywords Sociometer theory, Social exclusion, Conspicuous consumption, Face concern, Self-esteem

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Along with economic growth and improvements in living standards, consumers nowadays purchase goods and services not only for their functionalities but also consider consumption as a way to express their wealth, status, power and competence (da Cunha Brandão and Barbedo, 2023; Hampson *et al.*, 2021). The phenomenon of consumers' increasing interest in engaging in symbolic and visible purchase, possession and usage of goods and services is often described under the term conspicuous consumption in marketing literature (Lin *et al.*, 2024; Roy Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2011) and can be used interchangeably with the concept of luxury consumption given the uniqueness, expensiveness and high quality of luxury products (Cannon and Rucker, 2019; Dubois *et al.*, 2021; Johnson *et al.*, 2018; Kumar *et al.*, 2022).

Consumers' conspicuous consumption tendency has significantly contributed to the luxury market's growth, providing luxury brands with great opportunities to generate revenue from more willing-to-pay consumers. As estimated, consumer demand for luxury goods has driven the global luxury goods and services market to a total value of US\$272.74bn in 2022, which is



projected to reach 392.40bn in 2030 (Fortune Business Insights, 2025). However, on its dark side, the overspending on expensive products has been blamed as wastefulness, ostentation and the root of the erosion of social strength that can have detrimental effects on human well-being in the long run (Cannon and Rucker, 2019; Dittmar *et al.*, 2014; Hudders and Pandelaere, 2012). This is contradictory to the ultimate sustainable development goal proposed by the United Nations (2025). For such a reason, shifting such a materialistic tendency toward simpler and more sustainable lifestyles is seen as a better way for sustainable happiness (Bortolotti *et al.*, 2026; Nguyen *et al.*, 2024; Salakpi *et al.*, 2025) and is well documented as one of the most important missions for the sustainability of human society (United Nations, 2025). Understanding the factors affecting conspicuous consumption is thus necessary.

Meanwhile, social exclusion has become a prominent phenomenon in today's modern society (Liu *et al.*, 2023; Wang and Liu, 2023). Being socially excluded is posited to damage victims' needs for belonging, sense of self-worth, control and power, as well as their perception of meaningful existence (Fischer *et al.*, 2020; Riva, 2016; Tunçel and Kavak, 2022). Ultimately, it can induce various negative psychological responses (Fischer *et al.*, 2020; Rawat *et al.*, 2022; Riva, 2016; Tunçel and Kavak, 2022). Logically, the feeling of social exclusion is expected to activate its victims' desire to regain social acceptance, express their competence and restore positive feelings via spending money on expensive goods and services (Bozkurt and Gligor, 2019).

Given the prominence of social exclusion in daily lives and the significance of reducing conspicuous consumption for long-term consumer well-being, it is critical to understand whether social exclusion is the root of conspicuous consumption, forming an emerging research line. As reported by scholars, socially excluded consumers were inclined to express a stronger need for uniqueness, which, in turn, affects their preferences for products and brands that help them differentiate themselves from others (Bozkurt and Gligor, 2019). However, consumers who felt socially excluded were found to engage in conspicuous consumption to regain attention from others only when social exclusion was simply the form of being ignored that threatened their sense of control and meaningful existence, as revealed by Lee and Shrum (2012). Social exclusion was also found to increase conspicuous consumption tendencies (Liang *et al.*, 2017, 2018), but the effect depended on consumers' communal orientation (Liang *et al.*, 2018) or applied only to those who perceived themselves as low-power (Liang *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, the effect of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption was conditional on consumers' belief that external forces determine their fate, as reported by He *et al.* (2024).

While prior research has provided some insights into the social exclusion–conspicuous consumption relationship, several gaps remain. First, research on the effects of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption has remained relatively scant, with limited evidence (e.g., Bozkurt and Gligor, 2019; Liang *et al.*, 2017; Liang *et al.*, 2018). In addition, the findings have remained unreconciled because of the complex and conditional nature of the relationship. Furthermore, most prior research was conducted in laboratory contexts, where social exclusion was elicited via manipulated cues. The generalizability of the research findings can be questioned.

This study aims to contribute to the current understanding of the effects of social exclusion by examining the mediation of self-esteem and the moderating effect of face concern, with sociometer theory as the overarching framework. Under this perspective, self-esteem refers to consumers' perception of their worthiness and is seen as a psychological gauge of their social connections. We argue that damaged social connections or social exclusion will induce negative self-esteem (consumers' negative feelings of their worthiness), which, in turn, motivates consumers to engage in conspicuous consumption as a defensive mechanism to restore their perception of self-worth. We also expect that the effect of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption will be clarified by the moderating role of face concern, which, to our knowledge, has not been examined by researchers. In detail, the adverse direct effect of social exclusion on self-esteem and thus the indirect effect on conspicuous consumption

tendency is expected to be stronger for consumers who are strongly concerned about their social face.

The economy's stability and high growth rate, along with the expansion of the middle class and the number of ultra-wealthy consumers, have made Vietnam an attractive emerging market for luxury brands (Dinh *et al.*, 2024; Hansen, 2020; Short and Martínez, 2020; Sinh My *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, due to the influence of Confucian values and culture, face-saving or status-seeking motives have been identified as one of the most important drivers of Vietnamese consumers' luxury consumption (Le Monkhouse *et al.*, 2012; Le and Quy, 2020). Luxury consumption among Vietnamese consumers, a specific type of conspicuous consumption behavior, provides an interesting and relevant context for testing our hypothesis. We will discuss our logic in detail in the following sections.

2. Literature review and research framework

2.1 Conspicuous consumption

The term "conspicuous consumption", which first appeared in the work of Veblen (1899) on the Theory of the Leisure Class, refers to consumers' tendency to engage in the purchase, possession and usage of goods and services with the purpose to display their wealth, social status, uniqueness and competence to impress others and gain their admiration (Cleveland and Yuan, 2025; Lin *et al.*, 2024; Roy Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2011). Given the association between products' uniqueness, expense, high quality and conspicuousness, many scholars associate conspicuous consumption with the purchase of luxury goods and services (Dubois *et al.*, 2021; Johnson *et al.*, 2018; Kumar *et al.*, 2022). Accordingly, this study adopts this understanding of conspicuous consumption as consumers' tendency to spend money on expensive luxury products for self-expression and to impress others.

To date, many studies have examined the psychological, cultural, social and environmental drivers of conspicuous consumption. The first research line in this field has focused on the role of conspicuous products as a self-expression instrument. According to this line, consumers have a psychological need to communicate their wealth, uniqueness, success and social position or other qualified attributes with the ultimate goal of social status. Such a need drives them to purchase conspicuous products (Hampson *et al.*, 2021; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014; Lewis and Moital, 2016; Sun *et al.*, 2017). For example, consumers were found to emphasize the conspicuousness of products they consume to signal their social status and the power they already have in the study by Bian *et al.* (2015). Consumers were also found to purchase luxury products and support luxury brands to satisfy their status-seeking motive, which helps confirm their sense of self-pride (Septianto *et al.*, 2021).

The second research line has seen conspicuous consumption as a way consumers choose to compensate for the negative feelings about themselves. For example, Wang *et al.* (2022) found that consumers were more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption if they perceived they were people of low rank in society. The tendency was stronger among consumers who believed that their current social status was unchangeable (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Consuming conspicuous products was also proven to be a way to compensate for consumers' negative feelings of powerlessness (Rucker and Galinsky, 2009), financial insecurity (Hampson *et al.*, 2021) and their feeling of being devalued (Consiglio and van Osselaer, 2022; Topçu, 2018) or to restore their sense of superiority (Zheng *et al.*, 2018).

The third research line has paid more attention to the social and cultural factors affecting consumers' tendency to consume conspicuously. According to the evidence, this trend of conspicuous consumption could be explained by consumers' need to identify themselves with their social groups (Croghan *et al.*, 2006; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014) or by their conformity to the expectations of significant other group members (Hampson *et al.*, 2021; Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014; Lewis and Moital, 2016; Sun *et al.*, 2017). Consumers' tendency toward conspicuous consumption was also found to result from cultural value orientations, such as collectivism, materialism and uncertainty avoidance (Zakaria *et al.*,

2020). The experience of social exclusion, which has been prominent in modern lives, can be another cause of consumers' increasing desire for conspicuous consumption, as reported by some scholars. However, the effect of social exclusion has not been well understood, calling for further research that delves deeper into its impact.

2.2 Hypothesis development

2.2.1 Sociometer theory. The main idea of sociometer theory is to explain consumer behavior through the core concept of self-esteem. According to the theory, self-esteem is "a person's appraisal of his or her value" (Leary and Baumeister, 2000, p. 2). In other words, it refers to the perception that "one is a valuable member of a meaningful universe" (Greenberg *et al.*, 1997, p. 66). A positive self-esteem will facilitate various positive outcomes, such as happiness and success. In contrast, a decrease in self-esteem will lead to negative emotional experiences such as depression, anxiety and feelings of insecurity and terror (Greenberg *et al.*, 1986). For this reason, maintaining and enhancing positive self-esteem is postulated to be an innate desire of each consumer and the motivation underlying various behavioral responses (Greenberg *et al.*, 1986, 1997).

Being socially accepted or included means that one is valued by others, forming positive self-esteem. Perceived environmental cues of social exclusion signal that one is devalued by society, leading to negative self-esteem (a decrease in self-worth) and motivating actions to regain social acceptance (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). Given the status signal of conspicuous consumption, we expect this perspective to help clarify the effects of social exclusion on the tendency toward conspicuous consumption and thus adopt it as the overarching model for this study. However, while the self-esteem concept has been investigated as an antecedent of conspicuous consumption tendency (Lewis and Moital, 2016; Liang *et al.*, 2018; Septianto *et al.*, 2021), the mediating effect of self-esteem in the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption has surprisingly been underexplored.

2.2.2 The effect of social exclusion on self-esteem. People are said to be socially excluded when they are physically, psychologically or emotionally ignored or rejected by those around them. Social exclusion manifests itself in many forms in modern society, such as peer rejection (Di Giunta *et al.*, 2018), limited access to the educational system (Macrae *et al.*, 2003; Tarabini *et al.*, 2018) or racial and gender discrimination (Richman and Leary, 2009). The reasons for being a victim of social exclusion vary, including physical health problems (Dennis *et al.*, 2016), poor economic conditions (Israel, 2016) and reduced mental and physical health due to aging (Van Regenmortel *et al.*, 2016) and so on.

As postulated by sociometer theory, self-esteem is people's subjective judgment about themselves regarding competence, talent or goodness based on their feelings about how others evaluate or treat them through social interactions (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). If consumers feel respected through positive social interactions, they will develop positive self-esteem. Conversely, if they are ignored or rejected by others, negative feelings about their value (negative self-esteem) will gradually accumulate (Leary *et al.*, 1995; Stanley and Arora, 1998; Tunçel and Kavak, 2022). Accordingly, socially excluded consumers may experience lower self-esteem than their socially included counterparts. Based on the assumption and previous evidence, we formally hypothesize that

H1. Social exclusion positively predicts consumers' negative self-esteem.

2.2.3 The effect of negative self-esteem on conspicuous consumption. When self-worth or self-esteem is damaged, consumers may be motivated to find ways to repair it and many types of consumption are suggested to help boost their positive sense of self (Consiglio and van Osselaer, 2022; Cui *et al.*, 2020). Given its status-symbolic nature, conspicuous consumption is postulated to be an effective way to repair, maintain or enhance consumers' self-esteem (Consiglio and van Osselaer, 2022; Topçu, 2018) or to restore the sense of superiority (Zheng *et al.*, 2018). Thus, we argue that a deficiency in self-esteem will motivate consumers to

engage in conspicuous purchases as a defense mechanism (Consiglio and van Osselaer, 2022; Cui *et al.*, 2020; Lewis and Moital, 2016; Souiden *et al.*, 2011; Topçu, 2018).

Unsurprisingly, decreases in consumers' self-esteem (Liang *et al.*, 2018), a desire to enhance self-worth (Lewis and Moital, 2016) and a sense of self-pride (Septianto *et al.*, 2021) have been found to predict the tendency toward conspicuous consumption positively in prior research. Based on these arguments and evidence, we formally hypothesize that

H2. Negative self-esteem positively predicts consumers' conspicuous consumption.

H3. Negative self-esteem mediates the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

2.2.4 The moderating effects of face concern. Although social exclusion adversely affects self-esteem, its impact varies across individuals. Many authors have postulated that consumers' responses to social exclusion/rejection strongly depend on how the consumer is concerned about the demands of others or the strength of their needs for social connections (Bayer *et al.*, 2021; Leary *et al.*, 2003; Olsson *et al.*, 2013; Ronen and Baldwin, 2010; Telzer *et al.*, 2021; Zimmer-Gembeck *et al.*, 2021). Consumers' concern about the quality of their social interactions is, to some extent, the result of the importance they ascribe to their positive images in others' eyes (or face concern), which depends heavily on their interactions with others (Wan, 2013).

As evidenced in the prior literature, individuals who were highly concerned about how others evaluate them were more likely to experience stress and burnout due to the fear of social exclusion (Ronen and Baldwin, 2010). Similarly, adolescents who are sensitive to social rejection were found to be more inclined to construe ambiguous social cues as rejection and to express more distress as an emotional response to social rejection than less sensitive adolescents (Zimmer-Gembeck *et al.*, 2021). Also, consumers who were worried about social rejection were more likely to be dissatisfied with the distance in their interactions with others and more satisfied with the closeness in their social relationships (Bayer *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, Liang *et al.* (2018) found that the adverse effect of social exclusion on self-esteem and conspicuous consumption was stronger among communally oriented consumers.

Thus, we expect that while social exclusion is a painful experience for everyone, it is more serious for consumers who are highly concerned about their social face. Social exclusion can lead to a greater decline in self-esteem among highly concerned consumers than among less concerned ones (Wan, 2013). The drop in self-esteem, in turn, will motivate consumers to engage in conspicuous consumption. Accordingly, we formally establish the following hypothesis:

H4. Face concern positively moderates the impact of social exclusion on negative self-esteem.

H5. Face concern positively moderates the indirect impact of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption via negative self-esteem.

The summary of our hypotheses is depicted visually in Figure 1.

3. Methodology

3.1 Measurement

Because most research on the effects of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption has been conducted in laboratory settings, the generalizability of the findings may be questionable. To address this gap, we used a cross-sectional research design to test the hypotheses in this study. We adopted validated measures from prior research or slightly revised them to measure the study variables. Specifically, we adopted six measurement items for social exclusion from Malone *et al.* (2012). However, we removed three items due to their low factor loadings and retained the remaining three to measure the variables. We borrowed three measurement items

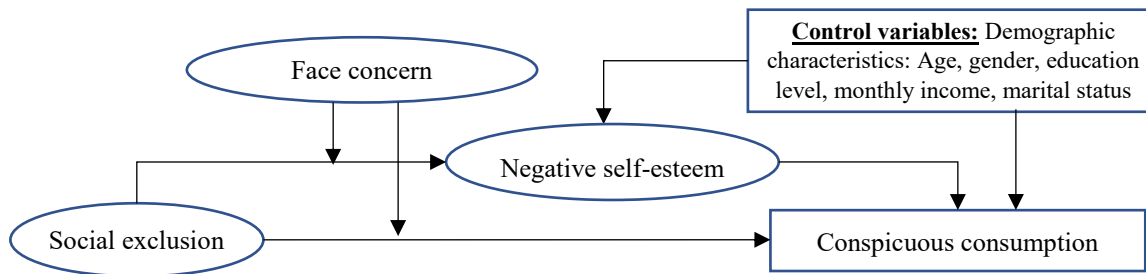


Figure 1. Research framework. Source: Authors' own work

from [Wan \(2013\)](#) to measure face concern. For negative self-esteem, we adopted three negative statements and reworded the other two positive items from [Zheng et al. \(2018\)](#) to measure the variable. All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”).

To measure conspicuous consumption, we used two items from [Ramazani and Kermani \(2022\)](#). Respondents were asked to carefully think and report the extent to which they agreed with the two statements about their tendency to buy luxury and expensive products to impress others and express their competence. The responses were also anchored on a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”).

The control demographic variables included age, gender, marital status, education level and monthly income. The measurement items were translated into Vietnamese using the back-translation procedure to ensure accuracy, as suggested by [Brislin \(1986\)](#). Accordingly, we first translated measurement questions into Vietnamese. Next, the Vietnamese version was retranslated into English with the help of an English-language expert. We then compared the two English versions to ensure that there were no significant differences. All measurement items are shown in [Table 2](#).

3.2 Data collection

Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, is the center of politics, culture and the economy, as well as the destination of many luxury brands in the country ([Sinh My et al., 2023](#)), providing an interesting context for testing the research model. Thus, we decided to collect data from consumers in this city.

As a developed city in Vietnam, Hanoi has attracted many people from different provinces who come to work and live there. Such a concentration of the population has put pressure on the city’s land, contributing to the significant rise in housing prices. Accordingly, high-rise apartment buildings have become an affordable housing option for many consumers. The market for high-rise apartments can be divided into low-income, mid-income and luxury options, providing a variety of options for consumers with different incomes, levels of education, cultures and purposes ([Nguyen et al., 2026](#); [Seo et al., 2018](#)). Thus, we believe that apartment buildings can be groups of consumers with different demographic profiles. Collecting survey data from residents of low-, mid- and high-income apartment buildings in Hanoi can better capture demographic diversity and improve sample representativeness, given our resource constraints. Accordingly, we decided to use this approach to collect data to test our research model.

To collect the data, we used self-administered surveys to ensure response rates and response accuracy. The respondents were approached at building entrances. After explaining the research purpose, we persuaded them to provide their responses in exchange for about US\$2.5 for each completed survey as a token of appreciation. Ultimately, 368 survey questionnaires were completed and usable for our study. Based on the five observations per parameter ratio required for the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model ([Bentler and Chou, 1987](#)), the sample size is adequate for our analysis. The demographic characteristics of the sample are shown in [Table 1](#).

4. Hypothesis testing results

4.1 Confirmatory factor analysis results

This study’s reliance on survey data raised concerns about the common method bias (CMB). Thus, we used Harman’s single-factor test to ensure that this is not a serious problem in this study before advancing the analysis. We loaded all measure items onto a single factor in an exploratory factor analysis with an unrotated factor solution. The result showed that the factor explained only 42.7% of the variance. Based on the commonly suggested threshold of 50% for CMB to be a concern ([Fuller et al., 2016](#)), CMB was not a serious threat in this study.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample ($N = 368$)

Variables	Frequency	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	182	49.5
Male	186	50.5
<i>Age</i>		
Under 19	9	2.4
From 19 to 29	49	13.3
From 30 to 39	137	37.2
Above 39	173	47.0
<i>Education level</i>		
High school	21	5.7
Associate degree	38	10.3
Bachelor's degree	186	50.5
Master's degree	82	22.3
Doctor degree	41	11.1
<i>Monthly income</i>		
<10 million	89	24.2
10 to 15 million	112	30.4
15 to 20 million	82	22.3
20 to 25 million	40	10.9
25 to 30 million	25	6.8
>30 million	20	5.4
<i>Marital status</i>		
Unmarried	70	19.0
Married	298	81.0

Source(s): Authors' own work

The reliability and validity of the measures in this study were assessed via CFA using SPSS AMOS and the Fornell–Larcker criterion (1981). The analysis of the measurement model with four study variables showed satisfactory model fit indices, including $\chi^2 = 175.253$, $df = 59$ ($p < 0.001$), $\chi^2/df = 2.970$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.073, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.0382, Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI) = 0.925, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.957 and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.943. Convergent validity of the measures was also confirmed by standardized factor loadings exceeding 0.60. Meanwhile, the reliability of the measures was verified by all Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability values higher than 0.80 (Hair *et al.*, 2013). The results are shown in Table 2.

As shown in Table 3, the AVEs of the study variables are all above 0.5. In addition, the squared correlation for each pair of constructs is lower than the AVE for each construct. The discriminant validity is thus confirmed based on the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion.

4.2 Testing results

The PROCESS macro Models 4 and 8 for SPSS, developed by Hayes (2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, was utilized to test the research model, given its popularity in testing mediation and moderated mediation in the management domain. The testing results are presented in detail in Tables 4 and 5. The hypothesis testing results are summarized in Table 6. As shown, social exclusion is positively and strongly related to negative self-esteem ($\beta = 0.521$, p -value < 0.01) and conspicuous consumption ($\beta = 0.206$, p -value < 0.05). The result indicates that consumers will be inclined to evaluate themselves as worthless and exhibit

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity of measures

Constructs	Items	Std. factor loadings	AVEs	Cronbach's alphas	Composite reliability (CR)
Social exclusion	I feel as if people do not care about me	0.624	0.599	0.810	0.815
	When I am with other people, I feel like a stranger	0.845			
	Friends and family do not involve me in their plans	0.833			
Face concern	I care about praises and criticisms from others	0.892	0.666	0.846	0.855
	I care about others' attitudes toward me	0.864			
Negative self-esteem	I hate being taken lightly	0.675	0.629	0.888	0.893
	I feel that I am a person of worthless, even not equal normal others	0.859			
	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure	0.882			
	I am not able to do things like most other people	0.748			
	I feel I do not have much to be proud of	0.836			
Conspicuous consumption	I wish I could have more respect for myself	0.607	0.785	0.876	0.879
	To impress other people and express my competence . . .				
	I like a lot of luxury in my life	0.899			
	I like to own expensive cars, homes and clothes	0.872			
Note(s): Model fit indices: $\chi^2 = 175.253$; df = 59 ($p < 0.001$); $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.970$; RMSEA = 0.073; SRMR = 0.0382; GFI = 0.925; CFI = 0.957; TLI = 0.943. AVE = average variance extracted					
Source(s): Authors' own work					

Table 3. Discriminant validity of measures

	1	2	3	4
1. Conspicuous consumption	0.784	0.132	0.108	0.090
2. Face concern	0.363	0.666	0.190	0.227
3. Negative self-esteem	0.328	0.436	0.629	0.448
4. Social exclusion	0.300	0.476	0.669	0.599
Note(s): Values below the diagonal are correlations among constructs. Values on the diagonal are AVEs. Values above the diagonal are squared correlations				
Source(s): Authors' own work				

stronger conspicuous consumption tendencies if they feel that others exclude them. The results support [H1](#).

Negative self-esteem significantly affected conspicuous consumption ($\beta = 0.245$, p -value < 0.01), as we expected. This indicates that consumers express a stronger desire and tendency to purchase luxury goods to compensate for their negative feelings about themselves. [H2](#) is thus supported.

Also shown in [Table 4](#), the interaction between social exclusion and face concern significantly predicts negative self-esteem ($\beta = 0.116$, p -value < 0.01), as we predicted. It means that social exclusion has a stronger effect on the negative self-esteem of consumers who are highly concerned about their social face. Meanwhile, negative self-esteem, as an

Table 4. Hypothesis testing results

Predictors	Negative self-esteem		Conspicuous consumption			
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Gender	0.271**	0.082	−0.201	0.118	−0.268*	0.118
Age	0.020	0.044	−0.068	0.063	−0.073	0.063
Education level	−0.061	0.045	0.205**	0.065	0.219**	0.064
Income	−0.075*	0.031	0.116**	0.045	0.134**	0.045
Marital status	−0.054	0.146	−0.125	0.208	−0.112	0.205
Social exclusion	0.521**	0.058	0.206*	0.082	0.079	0.090
Face concern	0.164**	0.044	0.350**	0.063	0.310**	0.064
Social exclusion*Face concern	0.116**	0.037	0.040	0.053	0.012	0.053
Negative self-esteem					0.245**	0.074
R^2	0.392		0.195		0.218	
Adjusted R^2	0.378		0.177		0.199	
R^2 change					0.024**	

Note(s): Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ (*); $p < 0.01$ (**). SE = Standard error. B = Unstandardized coefficient

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 5. The indirect effects of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption via negative self-esteem at different values of face concern

Face concern	B	SE	95% CI LLCI	ULCI
M − 1SD (−0.996)	0.099	0.036	0.034	0.179
M (0)	0.127	0.043	0.047	0.218
M + 1SD (−0.996)	0.156	0.051	0.060	0.263
Index of moderated mediation	0.029	0.012	0.008	0.056

Note(s): Number of bootstrap samples = 5,000. The values of face concern = mean $\pm$ 1 standard deviation (SD) from the mean

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 6. Summary of hypothesis testing results

Hypotheses	Results
H1: Social exclusion positively predicts consumers' negative self-esteem	Supported
H2: Negative self-esteem positively predicts consumers' conspicuous consumption	Supported
H3: Negative self-esteem mediates the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption	Supported
H4: Face concern positively moderates the impact of social exclusion on negative self-esteem	Supported
H5: Face concern positively moderates the indirect impact of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption via negative self-esteem	Supported

Source(s): Authors' own work

independent variable, diminishes the effect of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption, indicating the expected mediation. The statistical significance of the mediation is confirmed by the analysis result using PROCESS macro Model 4 with bootstrapping 5,000 resamples technique (CI (95%) = [0.094, 0.320])

The results of the bootstrap analysis with 5,000 resamples from the PROCESS macro (Model 8) further confirm the significance of the moderated mediating effect of negative self-esteem. As shown in Table 5, the impact of social exclusion remains statistically significant across different levels of face concern ($M \pm 1SD$). The index of moderated mediation is 0.029 with a 95% confidence interval from 0.008 to 0.056. H3, H4 and H5 are all supported.

5. Discussion

Along with improving living standards, an increasing number of wealthy consumers today see consumption as a way to differentiate them and express their desire and willingness to pay more for the social aspects of the products and services they consume. Changes in consumer tastes have significantly contributed to the growth of the luxury goods and services market and have provided luxury brands with opportunities to generate revenue from consumers who are more willing to pay. However, this trend has also been criticized as contradictory to the sustainable development goal of human society.

To ensure long-term happiness and well-being, reducing materialism and conspicuous consumption, along with encouraging simpler and more socially responsible consumption patterns, is critical. To do that, scholars have invested significant effort in investigating the main drivers of conspicuous consumption to foster these changes. Many motives underlying conspicuous consumption tendencies have been identified, such as consumers' psychological need to display their wealth, uniqueness, success and social position or other qualified attributes to impress others (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014; Lewis and Moital, 2016; Sun *et al.*, 2017). It also results from consumers' need to identify with and conform to the norms of other group members (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2014). Furthermore, many consumers consider conspicuous goods and services as a way to improve the feeling of self-worth (Lewis and Moital, 2016) or to confirm the sense of self-pride (Septianto *et al.*, 2021), to compensate for their negative feelings of powerlessness (Rucker and Galinsky, 2009), their lack of socioeconomic status (Wang *et al.*, 2022; Zheng *et al.*, 2018) or their feelings of financial insecurity (Hampson *et al.*, 2021).

As a contribution to an emerging research line in the conspicuous consumption domain, this study attempts to clarify the effect of social exclusion on consumers' preferences and consumption of conspicuous products. Based on survey data from a developing context, our study findings provide further support for conspicuous motives as a response to the threat of social exclusion, as evidenced by scholars (Lee and Shrum, 2012; Liang *et al.*, 2017, 2018; Liu *et al.*, 2020). Similar to the study by Liang *et al.* (2018), the findings of this study show that being victims of social exclusion can lead to a significant drop in consumers' self-esteem and motivate them to compensate for these negative feelings through conspicuous products. However, unlike previous studies, our findings reveal a nuanced picture of the boundary of the effects by showing that social exclusion may have a more substantial adverse impact on consumers' self-esteem and conspicuous consumption tendency when they are highly concerned about their prestige and image in others' eyes.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

Our study makes some significant contributions. First, by investigating the link between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption, this study enriches the extant understanding of its drivers.

Second, by extending the sociometer theory with face concern as a moderator, which has remained underexplored by scholars, this research clarifies the mechanism by which social exclusion affects conspicuous consumption. Extending sociometer theory by incorporating face concern will enhance the predictive power of the research model. Scholars should consider this factor when studying the effects of social exclusion.

5.2 Practical implications

The study's findings have significant implications for policymakers and other practitioners to design effective policies to reduce materialistic consumption tendencies for the sustainable well-being of human society. Consumers purchase luxury goods and services not only to express their success, status and uniqueness but also to compensate for a damaged sense of self-worth resulting from social exclusion. As social exclusion is a common social phenomenon occurring in various aspects of human life (Khan, 2024; Tarabini *et al.*, 2018; Villegas *et al.*, 2021), alleviating such experiences of social exclusion by constructing an inclusive living environment is critical.

In detail, we can do this at workplaces by building inclusive workplaces that encourage mutual trust, support, respect and equality for all employees. At the local level and in living communities, we should address the grassroots of exclusion by developing policies that support disadvantaged citizens as well as by creating living environments with shared activities and mutual support to foster social cohesion (Achuo *et al.*, 2024; Do and Do, 2026).

As a further implication of our study, the desire for luxury and conspicuous consumption among victims of social exclusion is more pronounced when consumers are highly concerned about their social face. Interventions should pay more attention to these consumers.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Our study is not without limitations. First, this study relied on survey data to test the established research model. Although this approach is commonly used in the marketing literature and has proven helpful in providing preliminary evidence and generalizing research findings, it also raises concerns about social desirability bias and the accuracy of conclusions about the causal relationships among study variables. Therefore, other methods, such as experimental or qualitative research designs, are recommended to retest our research model. Second, the sampling technique in this study is, to some extent, convenience sampling, and thus, the representativeness of our study sample is limited. Future research should consider other probability sampling methods to test our findings. Third, there may be other variables besides face concern that can determine the effects of social exclusion on self-esteem and conspicuous consumption. Future research is recommended to explore these factors to advance current understanding of the relationships between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

In conclusion, consistent with sociometer theory, social exclusion was found to damage victims' self-esteem, thereby increasing their demand for luxury goods and services. However, this effect can be stronger for consumers who are highly concerned about the social face. We expect that insights from this study will enrich our understanding of the mechanism by which social exclusion affects conspicuous consumption and offer policymakers and practitioners valuable recommendations for better designing intervention strategies to reduce such a materialistic consumption pattern for a more sustainable future of human society.

Author contribution declaration

The first author, Van Thi Hong Do, collected the data, performed the data analysis and wrote the manuscript under the supervision of the corresponding author. The corresponding author, Long Thanh Do, formed the research idea, collected the data, supervised the workflow and made necessary edits to the manuscript.

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

All study participants were anonymized and informed about the research before data collection. The study is thus deemed low risk and did not require ethical approval. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in written.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Long Thanh Do, upon reasonable request.

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