

Conceptualizing Consumer Personality Traits as Factors Predicting Status Consumption

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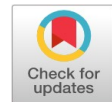
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Abstract: In marketing and consumer behavior literature, the concept of status consumption has been studied from different perspectives; however, one can rarely find a study based on personality characteristics as motivating factors of status consumption. Current research aims at filling in this gap by using eight personality traits proposed by Mowen's meta-theoretic model. The main aim of this study is to develop a conceptual framework constituting personality traits as predictor variables of status consumption. Openness to experience, extroversion, conscientiousness, the need for arousal, and materialism are proposed as factors affecting status consumption. The study explores the extant literature and conceptualizes a model. It also offers future directions for research.

Keywords: Status consumption, Consumer personality traits, Materialism, need for arousal

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INTRODUCTION

Status consumption is the symbolic expression of one's personality. Research in consumer behaviour shows that products are not only consumed for functional benefits and utilitarian value but also for symbolic value (Audrin et al., 2017; Matzler et al., 2011). Status products, as well as status consumption, serve the later benefit. However, status consumption could not receive much attention from marketing researchers and remained a peripheral subject (Millan and Mittal, 2017). Those researchers who studied it identified antecedents and consequences of status consumption. Their focus, however, largely remained on social or economic factors (Eastman et al., 1999; Flynn et al., 2016). Psychological, specifically personality traits as antecedents, have been neglected by academic scholars in this regard (Millan and Mittal, 2017). Personality traits being the most important among psychological traits, plays a significant role in the formation of consumer behaviour (Kotler et al., 2010). The study of personality traits as antecedents of status consumption could have been a contribution to marketing literature; however, once again neglected (Flynn et al., 2016; Millan and Mittal, 2017; Saran et al., 2016). The current research aims at compensating for this theoretical dearth. The big five model along with five personality traits (Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to experience), has been the most followed and dominating personality theory to study consumer personality and behaviour (McCrae and Costa Jr, 1999). In spite of its significance and academic credibility, it has been criticized specifically by consumer behaviour researchers (Mowen, 2000). It became ineffective because of length scales, technically unsound adaptation, and a lack of theoretical justification in the selection of scales (Kassarjian and Sheffet, 1991). In pursuit of making it more effective, Mowen (2000) added three more traits (need for body resources, material resources, and need for arousal) to the existing big five traits on the basis of the theory of evolutionary psychology. He also developed new scales specific to consumer behaviour. However, it is yet to ascertain whether the above eight personality traits which are

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relevant to predicting status consumption. Although Flynn et al. (2016) studied materialism and its effect on status consumption and left the rest of the traits for future researchers. The current study aims at developing a conceptual framework to conceptualize how other traits along with materialism work as predictors of status consumption. It is a growing trend in consumer behaviour to study personality traits relevant to the variable of interest (Kang and Johnson, 2015; Roberts et al., 2015)

Status Consumption

Wooliscroft et al. (2012) argue that conspicuous/ ostentatious behaviour is as old as human civilization is (Roman empire and the civilization of Egypt are self-evident to this notion). However, in the early history of civilization, the display of wealth was not much appreciated but rather considered an uneconomical action, and the individuals involved in ostentatious behaviour were condemned. For example, in the class system of India, the status was associated with the category or class an individual belonged to rather than by showing off material possessions.

In the history of business and economics literature Veblen (1899) is considered the first scholar who coined and defined conspicuous consumption. He noticed that with the rise of income and wealth in society, consumer behaviour shifted from the fulfillment of basic needs to the conspicuous consumption of symbolic products. The motive behind it is to inflate the ego and receive preferential treatment from society with the help of an overt display of wealth. Veblen is also associated with "pecuniary emulation," a kind of behavior that occurs when consumers from lower classes replicate or imitate the conspicuous behaviour of higher class consumers (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012).

O’cass and McEwen (2004) described that traditionally the terms conspicuous and status consumption are used in literature as the same phenomenon. These are often used interchangeably because both are conceptually overlapping. Theoretically, conspicuous consumption (overt display of wealth or possessions to establish or enhance social standing/prestige or image) is driven by status consumption. However, further, they argue that both concepts are distinct in a way that status consumption is more about a consumer’s desire to acquire status-oriented products in order to gain prestige, and conspicuous consumption is driven by the visual display of products in front of others (society). Hence O’cass and McEwen (2004) argued and empirically proved that conspicuous and status consumption are conceptually and empirically different. Status brands are consumed either for internal satisfaction (Gucci underwear) or external; however, conspicuous brands are exclusively consumed for external reasons (Ray-Ban sunglasses) (Truong et al., 2008). The current study follows the definition of the status consumption construct given by O’cass and McEwen (2004), which is exactly congruent to Eastman et al. (1999).

In marketing literature, scholars studied status consumption from different perspectives. A large number of economic, social, psychological, and brand antecedents and consequences/outcomes have been identified and empirically tested in different settings and cultures. Millan and Mittal (2017) developed a conceptual model with three psychological traits (status concern, public self-consciousness, and self-esteem) and susceptibility to normative social influence as predictors of "preference for status meaning," which in turn influence consumer interest in clothing.

Self-monitoring, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, personal terminal value, and self-concept are psychological factors affecting fashion consciousness in the luxury fashion market (Cronje et al., 2016; Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara, 2012; Leung et al., 2015; Riquelme et al., 2011). The self-concept may be dependent or independent. Dependent (emphasis on individual freedom and uniqueness) and interdependent self (Emphasis on social relationships and affiliation) are two psychological constructs that influence status consumption and further influence bandwagon consumption (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012; O’cass and Frost, 2002). Lertwannawit and Mandhachitara (2012) empirically demonstrated the effect of Fashion consciousness on status consumption with moderating role of materialism. Although a lot of research articles can be found on secondary traits and self-concept as predictors of status consumption however, the elemental, cardinal or primary traits are ignored. The rest of the paper explains in greater detail how these personality traits are associated with status consumption.

Personality Traits and Status Consumption

As it is already described that there are eight elemental personality traits that may influence consumer behaviour (Mowen, 2000). Now here, an effort is made to assess all these traits in order to find those which may predict status

consumption. The resulting conceptualization is shown in figure 1.

Openness to Experience: According to Costa and McCrae (1992), openness to experience is a multidimensional conceptualization with at least six dimensions:

- Fantasy means people with this trait are imaginative.
- Aesthetics is the sense of appreciation of arts and beauty.
- Feeling means individuals with this trait are sensitive toward emotions.
- Actions mean to remain open to new things and behaviours.
- Ideas reflect the intelligence, genuineness, and creativity.
- Values mean open individuals are more flexible and liberal in terms of values.

According to Costa and McCrae's NEO Personality Inventory, individuals high in openness to experience are intellectually inquisitive, highly imaginative, self-exploring, have well-built aesthetic sense, and hold original values (Connelly et al., 2014; Costa and McCrae, 1992). These concepts cannot be put under any single label or adjective (McCrae and Costa, 1985). This is why researchers are divided in defining openness as either openness as intelligence or labeled as culture. However, now the unrest is diminished, and the consensus is developed that openness to experience is capable of wrapping the concepts of openness as well as intelligence (Connelly et al., 2014). Feist (1998) found openness as associated with achievement, creativity, curiosity, independence, flexibility, and sophistication. According to him, it is also related to innovativeness. On the other end, the closed people carry characteristics contrary to open individuals. They are not very imaginative and cannot appreciate beauty or don't have a good aesthetic sense. They do not have very strong feelings towards emotions and are not inclined toward stimulation and actions. They are inflexible, intellectually unsound, and very low at creativity.

According to Cheng et al. (2010), openness to experience is positively related to social status. As status consumption is derived from social status, hence the relationship of openness trait with status consumption can be assumed. Furthermore, Huang et al. (2012) described that the brand personality trait of trendiness is similar to a consumer personality trait of openness to experience. According to Feist (1998), achievement and sophistication are characteristics of open individuals. Among luxury brand dimensions developed by Sung et al. (2015), sophistication is one of the personality dimensions of a luxury brand. The concept of self-concept (Belk, 1988) and brand personality congruity (Wee, 2004) clearly explain the link of a personality trait with the kind of brand chosen by the consumer. It can be concluded that consumers with high openness to experience traits will be attracted by status-laden or symbolic brands.

Extraversion: Conceptually extraversion is composed of two dimensions affiliation (sociability) and agency (dominance). Affiliation means that extroverts will try their best to involve themselves in social activity, the process of socialization, and try to be pleasant, responsive, friendly, and affectionate. The later dimension (i.e., dominance) defines extraversion as a propensity to be socially authoritative, exhibitivite, assertive, determined, dominant, influential, and aggressive. This dimension of extraversion makes individuals take a concrete stand on opinion and make a continuous struggle to gain dominance in society. Among scholars, some consider dominance as the major defining characteristic of extroverts, while others have a view that affiliation is the key component of extraversion. (Bono and Judge, 2004; Depue and Collins, 1999). On the other hand, introversion is composed of opposite characteristics like bashfulness, less emotion, unfriendliness, coldness, shyness, gentleness, boredom, negative emotions, and inactivity.

According to Cheng et al. (2010), extraversion is positively associated with social status. As status consumption is derived from social status, hence the relationship of extraversion with status consumption can be assumed. Among luxury brand dimensions developed by Sung et al. (2015), excitement is one of the personality dimensions of luxury brands. This is similar to extraversion in human personality (Huang et al., 2012). The self-concept (Belk, 1988) and brand personality congruity (Wee, 2004) clearly explain the link of a personality trait with the kind of brand chosen by the consumer. It can be concluded that extrovert consumers will prefer to buy status/symbolic brands in fashion clothing.

Conscientiousness: Conscientious individuals have a propensity to be well-organized, ordered, focused, meticulous, punctual, and undaunted dependable. They are achievement-oriented and risk-averse. In simple words, the attributes of conscientiousness people are varied on planning, achievement orientation, order, and competence. On the other hand, people low in this trait have opposite characteristics. They will be disorganized, unreliable, and have a low level of determination (Bono and Judge, 2004; Myers et al., 2010).

According to Cheng et al. (2010), conscientiousness is positively associated with social status. As status consumption is derived from social status, hence we can assume the relationship of conscientiousness with status consumption. Among luxury brand dimensions developed by Sung et al. (2015), competence and professionalism are personality dimensions of luxury brands. These are similar to conscientiousness (Huang et al., 2012). The self-concept (Belk, 1988) and brand personality congruity Wee (2004) clearly explain the link of a personality trait with the kind of brand a consumer will choose. It can be concluded that conscientious consumers will prefer to buy status/symbolic brands.

Agreeableness: Agreeableness trait means the tendency to have pleasant, sympathetic, and kind relations with others (Hogan and Hogan, 2007) and to show "the tendency to act in a cooperative, unselfish manner" (Buccioli et al., 2015). The individuals high in agreeableness are found to be helpful, kind, caring, trustworthy, warm, humane, and sympathetic. They are polite, honest, humble, and tolerant. On the other side, individuals low in agreeableness show contrary attributes and tend to be cynical, hard-hearted, antagonistic, self-centered, distrustful, and unfriendly (Bruck and Allen, 2003). These individuals try to build and maintain trust and relationships (Bono and Judge, 2004).

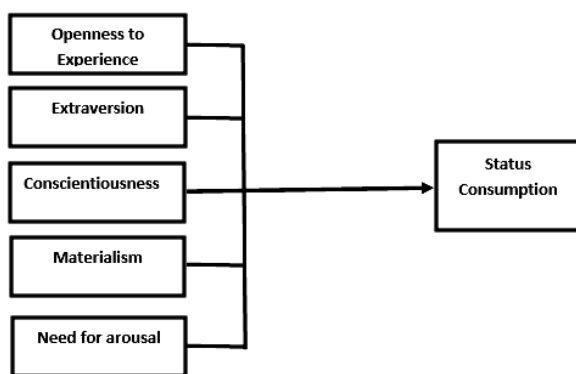


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

In the words of McCrae and Costa Jr (1997), agreeableness is a trait constituted by truthfulness, selflessness/altruism, conformity, and tender mindedness. Digman (1997) describes agreeable individuals as exhibiting a general propensity toward control over swings in mood, emotions, motivation, and social relationships. The same tendency can be noticed in conscientious and non-neurotic individuals.

According to Olsen et al. (2016), they are always ready to give up their own needs and sacrifice for others. Like conscientious people, agreeable individuals are deliberate and plan their shopping vigilantly and are more likely to restrain spontaneously or impulse buying. They are risk-averse and want other’s approval for their behaviors.

Although agreeableness is directly related to the brand personality trait of sincerity (Aaker, 1997; Sung et al., 2015) however it is negatively associated with dominance and prestige (Cheng et al., 2010). It may be because of the helpful, kind, unselfish, and sympathetic nature of agreeable individuals.

Furthermore, according to Ang and Lim (2006), the symbolic brands are more related to excitement and sophistication than sincerity, and utilitarian brands are sincere as far as their brand personality is concerned. According to all these studies, trait agreeableness does not predict status consumption as it is already described that the self-concept (Belk, 1988) and brand personality congruity (Wee, 2004) clearly explain the link of a personality trait with the kind of brand a consumer will choose. It can be concluded that agreeable consumers will prefer to buy utilitarian brands of clothing rather than status/symbolic brands.

Neuroticism: Hogan and Hogan (2007) define neuroticism as "a chronic level of emotional instability and proneness to psychological distress. Emotional stability is predictability and consistency in emotional reactions, with an absence of rapid mood changes". Driskell et al. (2006) define neuroticism as individuals’ openness or proneness to negative emotions, and hence they are more susceptible to guilt, mistrust, mood swings, annoyance, depression, and anxiety. Neurotic people show poor emotional adjustments. According to McCrae and Costa (1987), emotional stability is contrary to neuroticism. Emotionally stable individuals are calm, relaxed, unemotional, even-tempered, satisfied, hardy, patient, objective, and adjusted.

Neurotic individuals being consumers, are very reactive, cannot control their urges, and search for immediate gratification. They are impulsive, out of control, slipshod, and unplanned. Being consumers, they feel deprived by not buying a product that has nothing to do with their needs. The neurotic individuals indulge themselves in the details of how to achieve some goal and about the possible impediments in the way. As they frequently experience negative emotions hence restrain uncertain situations (Olsen et al., 2016).

Neurotic consumers don't even like to post their photos in case they inadvertently convey information about their emotional states or geographical location (Ross et al., 2009). People high in neuroticism are usually uneasy and nervous while social interactions; this is why such individuals usually have very limited social circles (comprised of people whom they are known) (Angela Hausman et al., 2014; Wehrli, 2008). Such individuals avoid even communicating in large gatherings or public spaces (Phillips et al., 2006). They are unable to make themselves visible in public places and in gatherings because of the high level of public self-consciousness (Trapnell and Campbell, 1999). Contrarily they remain very happy while interacting with those who are in small groups and very close to them (Costa and McCrea, 1992). All these behaviours of neurotic consumers show their inclination away from social interactions, being prominent, and status consumption. This is why it is assumed that neuroticism won't be able to predict status consumption.

The need for body resources / physical needs: Mowen (2000) defines body needs as "the need/tendency to maintain and enhance the body". According to Bristow and Mowen (1998), physiological needs are fundamental for the sustainability of life. They further advance their claim by including sensory pleasures and the need to maintain and enhance body or physical characteristics in the domain of physical needs. Their premise is based on the seminal work of Maslow (1943). He argued that physical needs are fundamental to human behaviour. According to Maslow (1943), hunger, thirst, sleep, sex, and sensory pleasures (tastes, smells, touch, etc.) are all philological needs. However, the viewpoint of (Mowen, 2000), while defining the need for a body, took the concept to another level of being in love to maintain and enhance a body that is closer to the concept of body image. One can now witness a whole body of research on "body image".

The concept of body image is composed of an individual's perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and actions about her body, specifically focusing on its appearance (Cash and Pruzinsky, 1990). Bristow and Mowen (1998) also focused their attention on physical features or characteristics like muscles and physical beauty.

The current study focuses on the personality traits predicting the status consumption of symbolic products. The definition/construct developed by Mowen is more focused on physical body appearance, features, and enhancement (Bristow and Mowen, 1998; Mowen, 2000). Furthermore, according to the findings of Mowen (2000), the need for body resources can predict health motivation, healthy diet lifestyle, need for competition, need for activity, need for play, sports participation, playfulness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. Most of these traits are related to physical activity; even self-efficacy and esteem are related to physical activity. However, body image investment or body satisfaction may be related to status consumption of fashion clothing (Tiggemann and Lacey, 2009), and these concepts are not under the scope of the current study. Hence the need for the body, as defined by (Mowen, 2000), is assumed to be unable to predict status consumption. Individuals with a high need for body resources will remain indulged in enhancing their bodies rather than social interactions, affiliations, or conspicuous activity (Donavan et al., 2005).

Need for material resources / materialism: Mowen (2000) defines Need for Material Resources/materialism as "the need to collect and possess material goods." Belk (1985) is the most cited scholar for defining materialism; according to him, "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction". He also developed three scales (possessiveness, non-generosity, and envy) to measure materialism. Belk (1985) treated materialism as a personality trait.

Possessiveness is the inclination to exercise control over one's possessions and a high level of an obsession and concern related to possessions and their loss. Those are all related to a more general desire to control one's environment. The definition of non-generosity is "an unwillingness to give possessions to or share possessions with others," and it is a negative orientation that keeps an individual away from charity and donations. Envy is defined as "a displeasure or ill-will" toward other individuals or their possessions (Belk, 1985).

Richins and Dawson (1992) carried out a lot of empirical research in order to develop the materialism scale; however, unlike Belk (1985), they defined materialism as a value. It was further approved by other scholars (Kasser

and Ryan, 1993, 1996). They believed and conceived materialism as a value or goal and defined it as the individual's belief towards the importance of acquisition and possession of money and other worldly possessions and to portray or express one's image or status with the help of these possessions. Kasser (2016) argues that recent scholars treated it as a characteristic to portray one's identity. Richins and Dawson (1992) developed the Materialism Value Scale (VMS), which consists of three facets: the centrality (of possessions in an individual's life), the happiness (the belief that material possessions will provide happiness), and success (the belief that material possessions signify my success). According to Kasser (2016), the scale developed by Richins and Dawson (1992) is the most widely used instrument with few variations.

In the pursuit of research on materialism, one of the very critical questions is about the origins, causes, or antecedents of materialism. One can find many antecedents identified and studied by research scholars. Materialism may evolve out of the struggle of human beings for survival. It may be the result of early life deprivations and an obsession to fulfill physiological needs by ignoring higher-order social needs. Social comparisons and influence also help in developing a materialistic mindset (Goldsmith et al., 2012b). Other factors like media, advertising campaigns for materialistic products, consumer culture, and other social factors also play an important role in programming the human mind and in developing a sense of material values. Social identity is another motive for materialistic desires (Belk, 1985; Kasser, 2016).

Materialism is mostly thought of as a negative tendency that necessarily leads to negative consequences. Frequently the word materialism itself is used with a negative connotation. This is why scholars based the construct of materialism on non-generosity and envy (Belk, 1985). According to Richins (2011), materialistic consumers indulge badly in the vicious cycle of debt and credit. Materialism drives a consumer to use more and more material and symbolic products, and at the same time, the use of such kinds of products is unable to satisfy and contribute to the subjective well-being of consumers. Although it is an important issue to understand the causes and cure of materialistic tendencies, however, right now, the scope of the current study doesn't allow it; rather, here, the emphasis is on the consequences of materialism.

It is witnessed that the need to study materialism in the fields of marketing and consumer behaviour is growing with the passage of time. It is because of its significance and role in the field of marketing and consumer behaviour (Goldsmith et al., 2012b). In the field of marketing, materialism is studied for many reasons and from many perspectives. It may work as an antecedent to product involvement, status consumption, and brand engagement in self-concept (Flynn et al., 2016; Goldsmith et al., 2012b, 2012c). The research of (Kilbourne and LaForge, 2010) finds the success and happiness components of materialism highly related to self-enhancement; however, they are low on self-transcendence. Flynn et al. (2016) find the relationship between materialism as a basic trait with status consumption as a compound trait. According to Rose and DeJesus (2007), materialism is positively correlated with self-monitoring (self-presentation to find social approval). Loulakis and Hill (2010) also studied the relationship between materialism and social status in clothing and proved how it helps in signifying status to others.

The need for arousal: According to Huang et al. (2017), "arousal refers to one's degree of excitement, alert, and stimulate" According to Mehrabian and Russell (1973), arousal is defined as "a basic, subjective state dimension ranging from sleep to frantic excitement" according to the "change, unusual stimuli, risk, sensuality and new environment" are components or sub-factors of arousal. Bettiga et al. (2017) are of the opinion that arousal may be positive or negative. They further argue that although in the literature of marketing, arousal is studied as conscious, however, unconscious arousal is also possible.

Mehrabian and Russell (1973) describe that an individual's choice for any situation is based upon arousal level. Some individuals like quiet and peaceful settings, whereas others enthusiastically increase arousal to choose and prefer the novel, complex, or unexpected situations. Groeppel-Klein (2005) expressed that arousal suggests "excitement, stimulation and bodily activation." It shows an individual's active body response is not only dependent but also relevant to outside stimuli and their processing. Hence from a physical viewpoint, arousal is an important constituent of behaviour.

Historically the need for arousal is referred to by using many different terms like arousal seeking, variety seeking, sensation seeking, novelty experiencing, and novelty seeking (Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992). The arousal elicitation is varied according to variation in the amount of intensity of the situation and stimulus. So in the case of arousal, seeking the characteristic of the environment and stimulus are as important as the preferred level of arousal of an individual, that is, an individual's tendency or intensity to seek arousal (Mehrabian and Russell, 1973).

According to Steenkamp and Burgess (2002), optimum stimulation or arousal seeking is a personality trait that reflects the level of stimulation individuals own and prefer in various situations in life. The marketing research has successfully proved that stimulation/arousal-seeking tendency is an important factor in predicting a large number of consumer behaviors. Among such behaviors, the exploratory components, however, plays dominating role. Risk-taking, consumer innovativeness, variety seeking, behaviour towards online buying or browsing, and adverting based on fear appeal are consequences of arousal seeking tendency. Kwon and Workman (1996) empirically establish that arousal-seeking tendencies can predict fashion behaviour. Particularly the dimensions of risk, change, and unusual stimuli are very significant in this regard. According to Mowen (2000), these three factors measure the need for arousal. According to Sung et al. (2015), excitement is one of the attributes of luxury or symbolic brand personality. Here excitement means the symbolic brands are energetic, outgoing, daring, exciting, and adventurous. Excitement is common in the definition of arousal by Mowen (2000) and Mehrabian and Russell (1973). Above cited literature supports that the need for arousal can be assumed as related to fashion, symbolism, luxury, and status consumption.

Furthermore, arousal from unusual stimuli may be assumed as related to the need for uniqueness, individuality, or a socially distinct image. This is the same as innovators trying to distinguish themselves from others in a socially acceptable manner. The need for uniqueness can be fuelled by an optimum level of stimulation or need for arousal. Moreover, fashion behaviour is inclined to be more visually status-oriented/ conspicuous in comparison to other consumer behaviours (Kwon and Workman, 1996). The above discussion can help the researcher to assert that the need for arousal can be assumed as an antecedent of status consumption.

CONCLUSION

Extant literature can be found on a number of factors affecting status consumption; however, a detailed review of personality traits was yet to perform. The current study tried to assess in the light of available literature whether consumer personality traits may predict status consumption or not. Also, whether all traits would be able to predict or few of them. As a result of the exploration of related literature, it was found that consumer personality traits are conceptually capable of predicting status consumption. In the beginning, eight consumer personality traits were selected for assessment. After evaluation of these eight traits, only five were proposed to predict status consumption, while agreeableness, neuroticism, and need for body resources could not be found to predict status consumption. In the end, future research recommendations are proposed.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

The conceptual framework introduced in the current study may suggest some pathways for future researchers. Here it is recommended a conceptual framework that can be empirically tested. It can be tested across cultures to find the effect of varying cultures. It can also be studied across product categories. Scales can be adopted or adapted from existing sources. Scales for personality traits can be adopted from Mowen (2000), while the status consumption scale is very popular developed by Eastman et al. (1999). Further mediating factors can also be explored in this regard. Emotions as moderating variables can also be studied in future research.

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