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Antecedents and Consequences of Conspicuous Sport Consumption

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Abstract

Conspicuous consumption is when consumers acquire luxury goods and services to help publicly demonstrate their desired economic and social status. Even though conspicuous consumption can help individuals experience social distinction and a heightened sense of self-esteem, much still needs to be known about this occurrence in the context of sport. Accordingly, the focus of this study was to examine antecedents (i.e., Expertise and Self-esteem) and outcomes (i.e., Satisfaction and Subjective Well-being) of conspicuous consumption of upscale sport goods. An empirical study was conducted with cyclists ($n = 393$). The research model was analyzed using simultaneous equations analysis. Expertise was shown to have the largest impact on Satisfaction, whereas Conspicuous Consumption had no impact on Satisfaction. Self-esteem was shown to have the largest influence on Subjective Well-being. Satisfaction also had a significant effect. However, the influence of Expertise on Subjective Well-being was not significant.

Keywords: *consumer behavior, expertise, satisfaction, self-esteem, well-being*

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Introduction

Acquiring luxury goods and services that help consumers publicly manifest their economic and social status is known as conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899), and evidence of this behavior is ubiquitous throughout societies across the world. In the United States, for example, collecting sport sneakers has become a multi-billion-dollar industry (Hills, 2021). In South Korea, outdoor sports participants have spent over \$470 million dollars on upscale outdoor sports clothing, gear, and footwear from top brands (Financial Supervisory Service, 2019).

A variety of consumer needs can be used to explain the conspicuous consumption phenomenon. Self-esteem and respect by others, for example, are salient human needs that can act as powerful drivers of consumer attitudes and behaviors (Orth & Robbins, 2014). Consider how certain individuals consume products, such as sport apparel or equipment, that cost more than necessary to fulfill their intended functional purposes. This type of consumption, which qualifies as conspicuous consumption, may lead to outcomes such as consumer satisfaction and well-being (Perez-Truglia, 2013; Yang & Peterson, 2004) and be driven in part by self-esteem and the need to be perceived positively by others (e.g., peers) (Bajac et al., 2018).

Though conspicuous consumption can serve as an avenue for individuals to experience social distinction in the eyes of others and enhance their own sense of identity and self-esteem (Wearing & Wearing, 2000), much still needs to be known about this occurrence. Indeed, why individuals choose to overspend as a way, among many alternatives, to meet their needs remains unclear (Braun & Wicklund, 1989). Moreover, the effectiveness of such consumption in accomplishing its intended purpose of conveying superior socio-economic status and improving others' judgments of and attitudes toward oneself is inadequately understood. Thus, further exploring the motivations and outcomes of conspicuous consumption is a worthwhile endeavor.

Conspicuous consumption of sporting goods and services also seems to have a uniquely strong symbolic quality and it plays a critical role in social biography and experience (Hallinan & Jackson, 2008). For instance, golf is on the rise in South Korea, and for young consumers, golf clothes are becoming increasingly expensive and chic as a type of status symbol (Bae, 2022). Still, even with the prevalence and potential uniqueness of conspicuous consumption in sport contexts, there has been limited literature on conspicuous consumption in this area. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine possible antecedents and outcomes of conspicuous consumption of upscale sport goods. Expertise and self-esteem were explored as potential predictors of conspicuous consumption. Satisfaction and subjective well-being were explored as possible consequences of conspicuous consumption.

Theoretical Background of Conspicuous Consumption

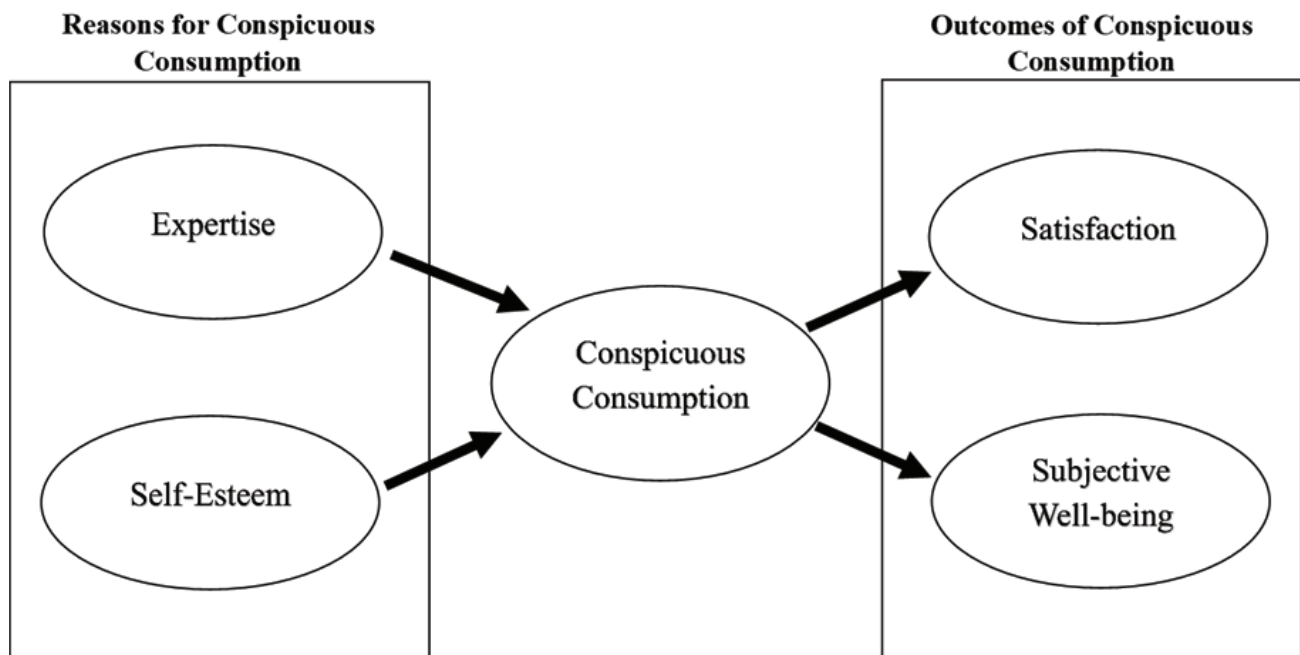
Conspicuous consumption refers to the purchasing of goods or services for display as a means of demonstrating prestige and status (Veblen, 1899). According to Veblen, members of the wealthier leisure classes buy and exhibit material goods to attest to their economic and political power and to their leisured lifestyles. Meaning, these individuals do not necessarily purchase products for their utility, ease of movement, or comfort. Certain products, such as clothing, may be purchased to simply display wealth (O'Cass & McEwen, 2006). Thus, Veblen's theory suggests that economic status is positively related to conspicuous consumption.

Conceptual Model of Conspicuous Sport Consumption

Figure 1 provides an illustrated explanation of the proposed potential relationships involving conspicuous consumption. Expertise and self-esteem are positioned as antecedents to conspicuous consumption, while satisfaction and subjective well-being are positioned as consumer outcomes. Along with the direct effects of conspicuous consumption on satisfaction and well-being, conspicuous consumption may also act a mediator of the expertise and self-esteem to satisfaction and well-being. That is, conspicuous consumption may act as a mechanism through which expertise and self-esteem influence satisfaction and subjective well-being.

Figure 1

Model of Antecedents and Consequences of Conspicuous Consumption



Antecedents of Conspicuous Consumption

Expertise

Plourde (2008) attempted to explain how and when prestige goods originate as outcomes of social dynamics in primordial human societies via evolutionary models of human nature and anthropological and archaeological theories of the evolution of social structures and institutions. She suggested that conspicuous consumption serves as an honest and demanding signal of skills and expertise simply because owning prestige goods is costly. Needs-based motivation theory (Green et al., 2017), which states that human motivations arise from unmet needs and wants, can also explain the potential relationship between expertise and consumption. Consider how when sport participants perceive themselves as deficient in expertise, they may orient their behaviors to compensate for that lack of proficiency. However, because it

often takes long times for individuals to develop expertise in an area, they may seek short term alternatives in the form of purchasing conspicuous equipment that appears to signal expertise and prestige in their activity community. For example, buying trendy, expensive running shoes and apparel when only being a casual (rather than serious) runner to give the impression to outsiders you are a skilled and knowledgeable outdoor athlete because your gear is costly. Ultimately, though existing research shows promise, what is currently known about the relationship between expertise and conspicuous consumption in different domains of sport activities is underdeveloped. Thus, to help fill this knowledge gap, the role of expertise in predicting conspicuous consumption of sporting goods is explored in the current study.

Self-Esteem

Plourde (2008) suggested that prestige goods may signal (to outsiders) enhanced levels of skill and expertise held by the owners of the goods regardless of whether they actually possess enhanced levels of skill and expertise. Her position aligns with the observation that consumers make choices in hopes of maintaining or enhancing their self-images, which can be accomplished by consuming goods or brands that match their idealized self-concepts (Shukla, 2008). Indeed, individuals may be motivated to engage in conspicuous consumption because the behavior gives them opportunities to prove the congruence between their ideal social self-images (e.g., someone possessing skill and expertise) and their actual behaviors. Thus, along with the role of expertise, it is beneficial to investigate the role of self-esteem in predicting conspicuous consumption of sporting goods and equipment.

Congruence between products and individuals' self-images can have a strong influence on consumers' attitudes and behaviors. The impact is especially noticeable for publicly consumed fashion and luxury items (Bajac et al., 2018). Researchers have also shown that power- and economic status-related antecedents motivate participation in luxury sports and consumption of upscale sporting apparel and equipment (Argan et al., 2015). That is why congruence between ideal self-image and product image is expected to be a key contributing factor to conspicuous consumption (Shukla, 2008).

Consequences of Conspicuous Consumption

Satisfaction

Consumers are likely to be satisfied with the luxury brands or goods when they perceive the goods as displaying their idealized selves in highly observable and recognizable ways. Because more expensive and prestigious products tend to draw more attention and recognition to those who own them, it makes intuitive sense that conspicuous consumers are generally satisfied with the luxury products (Yang & Peterson, 2004). Much less obvious and well known is whether—and, if so, how—conspicuous consumption affects overall satisfaction with activities or fields in which status, authority, and expertise are claimed and displayed. Though conspicuous consumption of premium sporting goods and equipment is not a new concept, research investigating whether this type of symbolic and ostentatious consumption helps sports participants attain satisfaction with and achieve their ultimate sports goals is still lacking. Therefore, in this study, an attempt is made to fill this gap by examining the relationship between upscale equipment consumption levels and satisfaction with sport activities.

Subjective Well-being

A key finding from the extant literature on well-being is that external objective variables such as demographic characteristics, socio-economic and geographic variables, life events, and circumstances have less influence on happiness than intuition and anecdotal experience suggest (Lyubomirsky & Loss, 1997). Consider how even potentially life-altering events like winning the lottery may have only small or no changes on well-being. That is why researchers within the subjectivist tradition suggest that some people feel happy despite personal obstacles, tragedy, lack of wealth, or absence of social rank, whereas others consider themselves unhappy despite having physical comfort and considerable material possessions.

Interestingly, the relationship between conspicuous consumption and subjective well-being has been overlooked in and outside of sport contexts. What is more, the available empirical evidence remains limited and contradictory. For instance, Perez-Truglia (2013) found that increases in consumers' rankings in highly observable clothing consumption improved their subjective well-being, but consumers' ranking in highly unobservable food consumption had no impact on subjective well-being. Additionally, after controlling for the income, absolute consumption, and average consumption levels of the reference group, Linssen et al. (2011) found that conspicuous consumption negatively influenced individuals' subjective well-being.

It is not uncommon to observe sport participants engaging in sport-related conspicuous consumption to improve their image, self-identity, and status. Purchasing premium sporting goods for their symbolic meanings is a form of conspicuous consumption. Purchasing expensive Air Jordan sneakers rather than wearing the far less expensive basketball shoe counterparts from Puma is an example of this phenomenon. Though scholars (e.g., Argan et al., 2015) have shown a significant relationship between conspicuous consumption and sport participation across different sports and goods (Argan et al., 2015), research concerning the relationship between the conspicuous consumption of sporting goods and the subjective well-being of sports participants has been limited. Therefore, this study explores the potential relationship between conspicuous consumption and the subjective well-being of participants in sports activities.

Method

Data Collection and Participants

This study was conducted in the context of outdoor sports. This context provided an ideal platform to examine conspicuous consumption because the outdoor sports market in Korea has been diversified over the years through the emergence of different levels of outdoor sport brands, including both upscale and low-cost options. The target population for this study was bicyclers. The population was chosen because the bicycler population is sufficiently varying in their bicycle product consumption patterns. They have also become an important outdoor product segment with an estimated value of \$100 million (Financial Supervisory Service, 2019).

The sample for this study was drawn using a judgmental sampling method. This method is a type of non-probability sampling in which the researchers chose a sample to be studied based on the researchers' knowledge and judgment about the population, its elements, and the purpose of the study. This type

of sampling method is considered as a valid alternative to probability samplings when it is unrealistic to obtain a truly random sample and when the researchers reasonably assume that the selected sample is representative of the entire population according to their knowledge of the population (Babbie, 2013).

Of the 500 surveys distributed, 432 participants returned surveys for a response rate of 86.4%. Of the 432 returned, a total of 393 were deemed usable. Discarded cases contained insufficient data (i.e., 5% or greater incidence of missing responses) and invalid responses (e.g., double answers). A total of 65.6% of the participants were male and 34.4% were female. The participants ranged in age from 15 to 71 years ($M = 36.60$, $S.D. = 11.31$). More than 65.0% of the participants had attended at least some college. Participants reported annual income as follows: 17.3% less than \$19,999, 18.3% between \$20,000 and \$29,999, 24.9% between \$30,000 and \$39,999, 15.5% between \$40,000 and 49,999, and 22.9% more than \$50,000.

Measures

The instrument used in this study combined existing questions from previous research and newly crafted questions. Item attributes for demographic characteristics were based on those provided in the most recent Korean Census in 2020. Self-esteem items were adapted from Rosenberg (1965), satisfaction items were adapted from Yoon and Uysal (2005), subjective well-being items were adapted from Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999), and items for expertise were adapted from Tenenbaum et al. (2017). The response format for the items was a 7-point Likert-type scale. Conspicuous consumption was assessed by comparing the perceived amount of rational bicycle product purchases and actual purchases (total amount of bicycle and related gear in the past year).

As part of the item-generation and scale-development phases, the researchers generated an initial pool of items. Once generated, a panel of six experts, each of whom had published at least two scale development papers, reviewed the items. After the initial item review, the items were revised to reflect the recommendations of the panel. A revised pool of items was resubmitted to the panel. This process was repeated two additional times, and after the fourth review, the instrument was deemed accepted and prepared for pilot testing.

A standard linguistic validation process was conducted to obtain a translation of the original instrument in the target language (i.e., Korean) that was both conceptually equivalent to the original and easily understood by the Korean participants to whom the translated questionnaire was administered. This process included several steps. First, a conceptual analysis of the original instrument was conducted in collaboration with the panel experts to define the constructs investigated through each item. Second, two professional Korean translators, who were fluent in both Korean and English, produced two independent forward translations of the original questionnaire. Next, two bilingual external translators conducted backward translation. Finally, the backward translation was compared to the original and changes in the translations were made when needed.

Results

Measurement Model

A CFA using Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) was conducted. The model yielded a good fit overall (S-B $\chi^2/df = 170.84/84 = 2.03$, CFI = .98, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI_{RMSEA} [.04, .06], WRMR = 0.82). Raykov's structural equation modelling (SEM) method (Raykov, 1997, 2001) was used to compute a reliability estimate and a measure of internal consistency. Raykov's method produces estimates that are less biased than Cronbach's coefficient alpha in all types of measurement models with the one exception of the essentially τ -equivalent model (Graham, 2006). All the reliability coefficients of the constructs were greater than .70, ranging from .89 to .99. In addition, all factor loadings were significant in the positive direction ($p < .001$; loadings ranging from .64 to .93), and all of the average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded .50 (ranging from .58 to .78). Overall, the results suggested good convergent validity and reliability.

The discriminant validity for the constructs was assessed by performing multiple χ^2 difference tests of unity between all pairs of constructs. The fit of the unconstrained model (i.e., correlation estimated freely) was significantly better than that of the more parsimonious constrained model in all comparisons (i.e., the correlation between a pair of latent factors constrained as 1). The smallest adjusted Δ S-B χ^2 was 205.77 ($p < .001$). Moreover, all AVE values were greater than the corresponding squared inter-construct correlations, which provided further evidence of discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Thus, the measures had adequate psychometric properties.

Structural Model Results

The research model was analyzed by using simultaneous equations analysis. The model fit indices demonstrated the model had good fit to the data (S-B $\chi^2/df = 183.91/95 = 1.93$, CFI = .98, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .04, 90% CI_{RMSEA} [.04, .06], WRMR = 0.80). In the first stage of the analysis, the relationships between two hypothesized antecedents of Conspicuous Consumption were analyzed. The path from Expertise ($\gamma = -.20$; 95% CI = -.31, -.10, $p < .001$) to Conspicuous Consumption was significant in the anticipated direction, while the path from Self-Esteem ($\gamma = -.05$; 95% CI = -.16, .06, $p = .378$) to Conspicuous Consumption was not significant. In the next stage, Conspicuous Consumption outcomes were assessed.

Expertise had the largest impact on Satisfaction ($\gamma = .48$; 95% CI = .38, .59; $p < .001$). Self-Esteem also had significant effects on Satisfaction ($\gamma = .37$; 95% CI = .27, .47; $p < .001$). However, Conspicuous Consumption had no impact on Satisfaction ($\beta = .03$; 95% CI = -.04, .11; $p = .888$).

Meanwhile, Self-Esteem had the strongest influence on Subjective Well-being ($\gamma = .66$; 95% CI = .53, .78; $p < .001$), and Satisfaction had a significant effect ($\gamma = .25$; 95% CI = .10, .47; $p < .001$) as well. After controlling for the impact of Satisfaction, however, Expertise had no influence on Subjective Well-being ($\gamma = -.02$; 95% CI = -.12, .09; $p = .735$). This result indicates that Satisfaction mediated the influence of Expertise, given its strong direct relationship with Subjective Well-being ($\phi = .58$; 95% CI = .48, .69; $p < .001$). Finally, Conspicuous Consumption had no impact on Subjective Well-being ($\beta = .01$; 95% CI = -.07, .09; $p = .868$).

Table 1
Measurement Properties

	λ	S.E.	ρ	AVE
Expertise			.87	.69
How much do you know about bikes and equipment?	.87	.03		
How much do you know about riding and safety on bike?	.88	.02		
How good is your riding?	.74	.03		
Self-Esteem			.85	.58
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	.78	.03		
I feel that I have a number of good qualities	.64	.04		
I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others	.78	.04		
I take positive attitude toward myself	.83	.02		
Satisfaction			.93	.77
How does your riding, in general, rate compared to what you expected?	.90	.02		
Is riding worth your time and effort?	.93	.01		
Overall, how satisfied are you with your riding?	.86	.02		
How would you rate riding compared to other sport activities?	.83	.02		
Subjective Well-being			.93	.78
In general, I consider myself a happy person	.93	.01		
Compared with most of my peers, I consider myself more happy	.92	.01		
I enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything	.87	.01		
I enjoy my life fully	.81	.03		

Table 2
Structural Equation Model of Conspicuous Consumption

Paths	Estimates	SE	p	95% CI	
				LL	UL
EXP → CC	-.21***	.05	<.001	-.31	-.10
SE → CC	-.05	.05	.378	-.15	.06
EXP → SAT	.48***	.05	<.001	.38	.59
SE → SAT	.37***	.05	<.001	.27	.47
CC → SAT	.03	.04	.888	-.04	.11
EXP → SWB	-.02	.05	.735	-.12	.09
SE → SWB	.66***	.06	<.001	.53	.78
CC → SWB	.01	.04	.868	-.07	.09
SAT → SWB	.25***	.04	<.001	.10	.47

Note. EXP = Expertise; CC = Conspicuous Consumption; SAT = Satisfaction; SE = Self-Esteem; SWB = Subjective Well-being. *** $p < .001$

Discussion

The roles of expertise and self-esteem in the conspicuous consumption of upscale sporting goods were examined in this study. Participant expertise in sport activities was shown to negatively influence conspicuous consumption. This finding is important because, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study has identified the influence of perceived expertise on the conspicuous consumption of prestige or status sport products.

Revealed in the results was that as participants' perceived expertise levels decreased, they were more likely to purchase premium goods for their respective sport activity. Needs-based motivation theory (Green et al., 2017), which holds that human motivations arise from unmet needs and wants, can elucidate this result. When sport participants perceive themselves as deficient in expertise, they will orient their behaviors to make up for that lack of proficiency. However, because it can take years for individuals to develop expertise in an area, they often will seek short term solutions in the form of purchasing premier apparel and equipment that they believe signal expertise and prestige in a particular community.

Another interesting result was that self-esteem had no effect on participants' levels of upscale sporting goods consumption. Though insignificant, this result is still valuable to the study of conspicuous consumption because it supports a nuanced understanding of self-esteem. Namely, the consumption of premium sporting goods may be a way to improve activity-related self-esteem (i.e., perceived expertise) in the community but not self-esteem in general. Self-esteem in specific domains, such as a sport community, rather than global self-esteem may drive conspicuous sport consumption. This inference is supported by the self-esteem literature (e.g., Rosenberg et al., 1995) as well as the current result that showed expertise significantly impacted conspicuous consumption, but after controlling for commonalities between expertise and self-esteem, self-esteem did not ($p = .35$).

The study results also indicate that the level of upscale sports product consumption did not explain differences in satisfaction with sports activities and subjective well-being among sport participants. In this regard, the empirical findings support a basic and fundamental tenet of life quality. Namely, material possessions do not always bring true contentment and meaning to one's life.

Managerial Implications

A straightforward implication of the current findings for sport product marketers and managers is that they should devote more marketing effort to beginners and non-experts. These consumers are very valuable for sports product companies because they are motivated to buy more expensive products simply to display their places in desired communities. Consumers who feel intrinsically secure in their expertise and status will not need to purchase expensive sport products to claim prestige and authority in their sports communities. However, consumers who feel a lack of expertise may experience the need to demonstrate competence through conspicuous consumption to maintain their sense of self-worth among peers.

The current findings may also benefit the leaders of public and non-profit sport organizations. Public and non-profit sport organizations typically exist to provide help and resources to sport participants and communities with specific needs. These organizations communicate, promote, and support sport activities with the penultimate goal of improving the quality of life and well-being of individuals and communities.

Satisfaction manifests from within; it cannot be bought, borrowed, or stolen. Thus, the provided results should be a source of encouragement to sport leaders. Because many sport participants look to sport products to create a sense of expertise, public and non-profit organizations can represent counterpoints to such thinking. These entities should continue to strongly advocate and provide opportunities for sport participation to enhance participant expertise, self-esteem, and well-being without the need for expensive sport products.

Future Research

Unexamined antecedents may prove critical in determining conspicuous consumption and the quality of the outcomes in the proposed model (see Figure 1) and therefore warrant consideration in the future. For example, researchers might investigate the influence of various personality traits on high-end sports product consumption as well as examine the roles pecuniary emulation, the bandwagon effect, and the snob effect in conspicuous sport consumption. Pecuniary emulation is when those who do not belong to the leisured class follow leisured class purchasing trends because they believe that such imitative behaviors enrich their identities (Veblen, 1899). For example, Charoenna and Huang (2018) identified social media usage, key opinion leaders (i.e., “influencers”), self-image congruency, and materialism as focal constructs that affect emerging conspicuous consumption of luxury goods trends on social media platforms. The bandwagon effect occurs when the popularity of widely purchased goods motivates individuals to buy them. By contrast, the snob effect occurs when consumers are motivated to distinguish themselves from others by purchasing exclusive items that are typically more costly. All these areas provide valuable avenues to consider when examining conspicuous sport consumption in the future.

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