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The explanatory factors of conspicuous consumption of luxury products
- The Lebanese case -

Abstract:

In this article we examine factors that appear to be related to the prones to conspicuously consume. After defining the conspicuous consumption construct we have conducted in-depth interviews in Lebanon in order to discover influences on this kind of consumption. Our study especially focuses on the influence of religion on the choices of products with varying degrees of conspicuousness. The results provide a number of theoretical and managerial implications and suggest new avenues for future research.

Key Words: conspicuous consumption, religion, materialism, “nouveaux riches”, luxury products.

Résumé:

Dans cet article nous tentons d'identifier les facteurs qui expliquent la tendance à la consommation ostentatoire. Après avoir défini le concept de consommation ostentatoire, l'auteur a mené une série d'entretiens en profondeur au Liban afin de comprendre les différentes raisons qui mènent vers ce genre de consommation. Le Liban constitue un exemple atypique grâce à son environnement constitué d'une mosaïque de 17 communautés religieuses différentes. Le Liban est d'autant plus intéressant qu'il se trouve au cœur de multiples conflits religieux et régionaux. Cette étude s'attarde notamment, sur l'influence de la religion sur le choix des produits à connotation ostentatoire. Les résultats font apparaître des implications théoriques et managériales ainsi que des nouvelles voies de recherches.

Mots Clefs : consommation ostentatoire, religion, matérialisme, ascension sociale, produit de luxe.

I- Introduction

In our study we aim to uncover understandings of the prouess to conspicuously consume. The pioneer in the work of conspicuous consumption and leisure remains Thorstein Veblen who conducted his study on the American society in 1899. However, the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption goes far back to the primitive societies whereas Northwest Coast American Indian tribes used to hold Potlatch ceremonies in order to gain in status. Only recently has there been any attempt to reconduct direct or indirect studies on conspicuous consumption by researchers like Mason (1981), Bearden and Etzel (1982), Solomon (1996), Netemeyer et al. (1995) and Baudrillard (1986).

In the present article, our main purpose is to shed the light on apparent incentives for conspicuous consumption. We aim to understand what people regard as incentives for and inhibitors of conspicuous consumption, little research has previously focused on such factors or on the cultural context of contemporary Lebanon.

Lebanon provides a unique environment for testing a range of hypothesis related to conspicuous consumption. This is especially the case giving Lebanon breath taking religious diversity and multiple legal layers as well its long history of inter communal and inter confessional conflicts. Lebanon lies at the historical fault line between East and West that has been at the heart of numerous religious based conflicts. Weber made it clear almost a century ago that there is an important link between religion and economics. Protestantism, he argued, “has the effect of liberating the *acquisition of wealth* from the inhibitions of traditionalist ethics; it breaks the fetters on the striving for gain not only by legalising it, but ... seeing it as directly willed by God” (p.115).

What is conspicuous consumption?

In order to answer our research question, it seems fundamental to provide an initial definition of the term “conspicuous consumption”. Conspicuous consumption has been understood as a social sign that an individual conveys to his peers in order either to be associated with a specific social group or to gain the entrance of a higher social group. Conspicuous consumption is also related to self-esteem (Martinot, 2002, Belk, 1988, Sirgy, 1982, Solomon 1983). In other words it is the

action of showing in a visible way to a certain social group our belonging. It can also be the action of distinguishing one's self from the group by marking one's sense of uniqueness. Since possessions are often extensions of the self (Belk, 1988) one way to satisfy the need for uniqueness is by acquiring and possessing unique scarce consumer products. (Snyder and Fromkin 1980, Lynn and Harris 1997). However, this latter form is also related to the influence of the group. It is important to note, that conspicuous consumption can cover all sorts of products. A Harvard cap is as much conspicuous as a Ferrari car. Nevertheless, in the course of this study we have made the choice to take into account the conspicuous consumption of luxury products. Many factors are likely to influence conspicuous consumption. In order to determine them we have turned our attention to the conceptual work of Mason (1981) who distinguishes three groups of variables likely to influence conspicuous consumption. We will follow his three-folded realm of research and extend his work accordingly and independently. We will solely focus on two aspects of this work disregarding deliberately the third one, which involves economical variables (i.e revenue), which we will not take into account since we are studying the prones to conspicuously consume and not conspicuous consumption per se. The other two groups of variables are:

Sociological variables

One sociological variable that seems important in understanding conspicuous consumptions is social class. However, we think that the notion of “**nouveau riche**” versus old money will be the most interesting in this context. Researchers like LaBarbera (1988) have studied the link that exists between the “nouveau riche” and the conspicuous consumption and found that “nouveau riche” are the most inclined to that kind of consumption. LaBarbera (1988) defines them as individuals who acquired their wealth during their lifespan and who indulge frequently in conspicuous consumption in order to gain / maintain social status. This social group is longing to be associated with “old money” people. Therefore, the **group conformity** variable is highly involved in this research topic. By the Nineteen-sixties, the importance of the group's influence on numerous consumption decisions was well established. Bayton (1960), Veblen (1899), Sherif (1936), Asch (1973), Bourne (1966), Stafford (1966) and Serraf (1971), all highlight how important reference groups are, especially on purchases.

Hanna (1980) defines social recognition as “the need to consume products in order to be recognized by the others as enjoying a high status in the community”.

This need is closely linked to the notion of ostentatious consumption. What we own potentially breeds positive feelings towards oneself. For example, possessions might be used in a symbolic perspective. Through ostentatious consumption, when a person buys a product with positively esteemed symbolic characteristics, he shows to his friends and strangers his social status in order to impress them and convince them of his superior social status (Veblen 1899, Mason 1981, La Barbera 1988, Richins 1999). Symbolic products are products with meanings that go beyond their tangible presence -- i.e. consumers perceiving products as symbols and considering them capable of doing things for them beyond their physical functions (Hirschman 1981). The symbolism of products paves the way for categorisation and judging others on the basis of their possessions. This idea was developed by Martineau (1959) who states that we judge strangers on the basis of what they have. His statement echoes Goffman’s (1974) analysis. The latter explains how each man, in his daily social relations, conveys a certain aspect of himself and his activities to the others. He tries to guide and control the impressions they have about him, while resorting to some techniques to enrich his performance, like an actor playing a character in front of an audience. The more people are attentive *to group norms*, the more conforming they are, and the more self-monitoring they are about how others perceive them, the more likely they are to be **materialistic**. Belk (1985) demonstrated that materialistic people place more emphasis on acquiring luxurious visible products. Showing off possessions is important in order to show one’s achievement and social status. Some research suggests that materialistic people are not very religious. (LaBarbera et Zeynep 1997, Wong and Ahuvia 2002).

In fact, **religion** influences consumer behavior and most monotheist religions valorize the poor over the rich and de-emphasize money-related issues. However, Islam and Christianity are not

very clear in their texts whereas they condemn conspicuous consumption or they encourage it. We know that in Christianity giving importance to worldly possessions is rejected, in addition, in Islam in the second surat of the Quran it is posited that individual who consume in a visible way and do not carry real faith are condemned. It is our aim in this study to focus on that specific variable which has been disregarded deliberately for a long time by most researchers in marketing.

Personality variables

Mason (1981) implicates personality variables including vanity. Two stream of research have emerged. The first one argues that personality traits can be a significant influence on purchasing and consumer behavior. The second considers that it is not possible to describe a particular “set” of personality traits that will identify the conspicuous consumers in any particular group.

Nevertheless, differences in personality can be considered as partial but significant in individual propensity to conspicuously consume (Mason, 1981).

Therefore and in the course of this research we will attempt to consider the vanity variable.

The link between vanity and conspicuous consumption has been also evoked by Netemeyer, Burton and Lichtenstein (1995) and Lu Xiao (2004).

II- Study area and sample

In order to verify the congruence of the literature with the market we have conducted a series of qualitative interviews ranging from 60 minutes lengths of time to 105 minutes. Thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted with postgraduate Lebanese business students at a well-known business school in Beirut/Lebanon. The use of a student sample was deemed appropriate for the sample of products under investigation.

The student sample is relatively homogenous, but contains a range of different social backgrounds, religious affiliations, and marital status and therefore provides a reasonable range of diversity (Bennett, 1997). Eight of the informants were male and five were female. All the respondents are between ages 26 to 46 years old. Eight were Christians and five were Muslim

(Annex 1). The process of data collection we have chosen is the face-to-face interviews. This technique helps uncover various motivations, values, and attitudes associated with a specific consuming situation (Evrard, et al. 2000, Giannelloni et Vernet, 1995). All interviews have been recorded, transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Three different products were used to explore factors related to conspicuous consumption of luxury products. These products are mobile phones, wristwatches and cars. They have been chosen due to their high but variable degrees of visibility. Respectively they correspond to a limited, middle and large range of visibility (Trottier, 2002).

The first objective of these interviews was confirmatory. It aims to assess relevance of factors identified in the literature review as being relevant to a tendency toward conspicuous consumption. The second objective of the interviews was exploratory and was intended to enrich the prior literature conclusions. In line with qualitative methods generally, our purpose was to gain a broad range of perspectives on the concept under scrutiny (McCracken 1988, Mason 1997, Strauss, 1999). As stated previously in our introduction, we have chosen the Lebanese market for our field study based on the richness of the market and its diversity. Present day urban Lebanon provides great evidence of conspicuous consumption phenomena. In a country where religion is a core element in social life, in the Constitution, as well as in the civil codes and the personal status, the proliferation of conspicuous events is rising since the end of the civil war in 1990. It is important to note that 17 different religious affiliations coexist in Lebanon and each community follows its own precepts in terms of divorce, marriage, filiations, etc. However counterbalancing these examples is the tough economical reality that prevails. The GDP is estimated at 4000\$ per person per year; the minimum monthly salary wage is 200 dollars; and the official unemployment rate is close to 20%. However, the conspicuous consumption trend embraces the Lebanese lifestyle. For instance, in a bar called *Crystal* in Beirut it is common to order a US3000-dollar champagne bottle. When you do so, two waiters carry over the order, the music stops, a spotlight is focused on the patron, an anthem is played, and finally the name of the patron is mounted on a board displayed by the door entrance. However, ironically due to financial shortages, a Lebanese local bank offers the possibility to contract a credit for these clients entitling them the possibility to pay in installments the price of the Moet & Chandon champagne bottle.

III- Findings

The interviews were double coded and the coefficient Kappa of Cohen equalled 89.3%. Our findings suggest 3 different categories of conspicuous behaviour. The first two correspond to a social oriented kind of consumption.

- *Conspicuous consumption for “Social purposes”: Differentiation or Integration*

Integration

Consumers show the need to belong to a group and therefore try to conform to social norms, extended family expectations, and personal desires for social status enhancement. Through conspicuous consumption of luxury products these requirements are met and the desire to be associated as a member of a certain social group is sometimes fulfilled. For instance GN, 26 years old Christian, states that:

“Family plays THE fundamental role in consumption behavior. It influences everything. In every step you take your family and your social circle influence you. When you decide to get married if you intend to hold a civil marriage, your family exerts an outraging pressure and encourages you to wed religiously and preferably in your hometown. In addition, they impose the list of people to invite. So you have no choice but to do it!”

It is interesting to note that usually marriage celebrations in Lebanon are very costly and are intended to signal the parent’s social status, power and influence. For instance, the first most read magazine in Lebanon is the one that publishes all the high standards weddings events that take place around in town.

LN a lady of 41 years old who is a maronite states:

“In Lebanon everyone follows norms. You ask me why? Because we have a society that oppresses us. Especially when it comes to women. When a single girl wants to move from her parents’ house and therefore rents an apartment on her own they consider her as a bitch. Even men follow rules. When it comes to marriage most of them want a virgin girl. What surprises me more is that most of them have lived abroad and adjusted to the

European standards. Sadly, when they come back to the country a Muslim seeks a veiled virgin girl and a Christian a virgin one.”

Differentiation

Another way of signalling one’s social status thru conspicuous consumption identified is to differentiate one self from “others”. Otherness is especially important in this multi-cultural multi-religious society. Seeking uniqueness through possessions that few others own has been well documented by social theorists. There are myriad ways by which an individual can demarcate himself vis-à-vis other social groups. However, our findings reveal that most importantly individuals try to separate themselves from the consumption patterns of “nouveaux riches” since they associate these latter with “bad morality”. LaBarbera (1988, p.180) defines the “nouveaux riches” as being “those individuals who have acquired their wealth in their own lifetime and who regularly engage in conspicuous consumption in an attempt to establish their status” We have noted that in addition to the elements in this definition, most informants associated the “nouveaux riches” as having accumulated their wealth in an unethical manner. RD a young bank employee states:

“I don’t know why but I associate nouveau riche in my head to someone who has accumulated his wealth without engaging in a lot of effort. This is the image in my head. They have robbed or killed or run an unethical business affair in Africa. For me this is what nouveau riche means. For me the guy who became rich by working at Meryll Lynch or by inventing Google is not a nouveau riche.”

Moreover, most surprisingly, our results show that respondents’ judge conspicuous consumption tastes according to the religious community of the consumer. This means that a consumer’s possession taste is considered to show the religious affiliation of the individual. This finding leads us to the social psychological stream of research dealing with the representation of others that started with Moscovici (1973) who described social representation as:

“Systems of values, ideas and practices with a two-fold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate themselves in their material and social world and to master it; secondly, to enable communication to take place amongst members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying

unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history” (Moscovici, 1973).

Hence, the social representation in our study is based on religious community affiliation. We found that subtle differences in conspicuous consumption taste based on religious affiliations are anchored in the respondents’ analysis of the social world surrounding them.

For instance, JO a maronite (catholic) computer science engineer states:

“We don’t have the same taste...this is what I have noticed, seriously...In the Christian style of consumption, you don’t find a lot of golden colors taste...They (Muslim) like the golden color a lot.”

GC, an Orthodox who is a doyen of the jeweler’s world, states:

“Of course the taste between Christians and Muslims is different. For instance, when I used to work in a very well-known international Jewelry firm we used to make two different collections; one for the Arab world and another for Western civilization. In Lebanon, when you look at jewelry shop window displays it is clear that on Christmas vacation they present their European collection and on Ramadan they display the Arabic collection. Muslims like big stones and heavy designs and Christians are more European in their taste. It is comprehensive since Muslim women consider their jewelry as bonds in case of divorce.”

- Conspicuous consumption for individual purposes: Auto gratification

Finally, the study field unveils a third category motivating conspicuous consumption. This third category for engaging in conspicuous consumption is related to the individual self, versus the first two first categories where the purpose of conspicuous consumption is oriented toward society. Self-image, achievement and pleasure are the themes of this category. Having a Ferrari or a Bulgari watch provides people with a feeling of achievement and success. Here physical vanity and achievement vanity were both identified (Netemeyer and al, 1995). Consuming luxurious visible products in order to enhance one’s physical image or to convey signals of success to our surrounding is highly acclaimed.

JO states:

“When I see someone driving a Ferrari, I know that he has made it in life. It is the absolute sign for success. I envy him”.

The findings are summarized in the figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Findings

- I- Need for belonging
 - 1.1 Show one’s social status
 - 1.2 Extended family
 - 1.3 Society norms

- II- Differentiation
 - 2.1 From « bad morality » (nouveaux riches, moral values)
 - 2.2 From others (être unique/ se faire envier)
 - 2.3 From bad « taste » (religious / representation of others)

- III- Auto gratification
 - 3.1 Success
 - 3.2 To fill a void
 - 3.3 For pleasure
 - 3.4 Self image

V- Implications & future research

Our study aims to contribute in theory by defining the conspicuous consumption construct and its putative causes. On a managerial level, our purpose is two-fold: to help luxury firms in adequately positioning their products and to serve advertising agencies in conceiving better-targeted ads for luxurious visible products.

In sum, the conspicuous consumption of luxurious products is found to be intensively present in the Lebanese market. The findings show that the purpose behind it is to maintain or gain entrance in social groups or to draw a barrier, which prevents lower social groups from having access to higher social class. Moreover, conspicuous consumption relates to the individual self, his image and his or her self-gratification.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings echo the traditional stream of literature dealing with conspicuous consumption. However, we have found a significant factor that plays a great deal in conspicuous consumption behavior. This variable is the religious representation of the other community's consumption patterns different than ours. Most informants highlighted engaging in specific conspicuous choices of products in order to be associated with a specific religious group rather than another. We encourage marketers to take further these findings and to attempt assessing the religious variable and its effect on conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, what need to be explored are the various facets of religion. Although our sample is limited to postgraduate students there are consistent findings that the religious variable plays a great deal in the consumption behavior. However, in order to generalize our findings extended research should be done on various samples, moreover, we think that intercultural comparisons would be highly interesting.

Annex 1

Sample characteristics

Name	Age	Gender / maritus Status	Profession	Religious community	Salary /an	Profession of the mother	Profession of the father
JO	35	M/ Single	Telecom Engineer	Maronite Believer	40000 \$	At Home	deceased
RH	29	F/ Single	Engineer	Maronite Believer	22000\$	Pharmacist	Doctor
AR	40	F/ Single	Manager of a boutique	Maronite Believer	24000\$	At home	Deceased (Hotel Owner)
RD	28	M/ Single	Bank employee	Chiite Non-believer	12000\$	Administration	Deceased (Doctor)
AD	37	M / Single	Telecom Engineer	Greek catholic Atheist	42000\$	Au foyer	Retired (Ministry employee)
MG	41	M/ Single	Civil Engineer	Maronite Believer	65000\$	Retraité Institutrice	Retired (Former General)
ZR	35	M/Maried (2 kids)	Engineer (wife at home)	Chiite Believer	30000\$	Au foyer	Retired
HA	26	F/ Single	Audit	Orthodox Believer	12000\$	Teacher	Ambassador
LN	41	F/Single	In search of a job	Maronite Believer	_____	At home	Agriculture owner
SI	39	F/Mariée (1 enfant)	Pharmacist (Husband:Phar macist)	Sunnite Believer	48000\$	At home	Finance
DR	33	M/ Single	Doctor	Maronite Believer	42000\$	At home	Doctor
GN	26	M/ Single	Communication and Public Relation	Maronite Believer	22200\$	At home	Retired (Military officer)
GC	46	M/Married (2 kids)	International Business Developer	Orthodox Believer	_____	Deceased	Retired Engineer

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