

Relation between Narcissism in College Students and Their Conspicuous Consumption

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ABSTRACT

Conspicuous consumption is constantly emerging because of the rapid economic growth. The demand for luxury goods is also increasing. The gen z age groups are the majority of luxury consumers in China. Conspicuous consumption as one of the core behaviors of the young people has become the hub of the relationship between the college students due to the narcissistic personality disorder. This study discussed the effect of narcissism on conspicuous consumption. In the current social context, conspicuous consumption culture of the current college students was generated due to the narcissism. Meanwhile, college students have produced a series of conspicuous consumption behaviors. Moreover, the mediating analysis revealed that the personal sense of power of a college student has a mediation effect of their conspicuous consumption. Narcissism could help college students get external value through the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods.

Keywords: *Conspicuous consumption, Narcissism, Mediation effects, Luxury goods*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the rapid economic growth and the increasing consumption level, conspicuous consumption is one of the important motivations and manifestations of Chinese consumers' consumption behavior. Consumption has become an act of enjoyment in pursuit of temporary satisfaction, and a symbol of one's own identity, wealth, and status [1]. Since 2019, "shoe speculation fever" has quietly become popular in the circle of friends. For example, air jordan series sneakers have become the pursuit of basketball lovers. It is precisely because of such people's competing pursuit of Jordan AJ series brands that some shoes have become rare commodities. Under the market condition of unbalanced supply and demand, a large number of lovers bought their favorite shoes through bidding through various channels, which doubled the value of AJ shoes. Some prices soared to 19000 yuan after three months of speculation from the selling price of 1299 yuan. According to the CCTV financial report, on August 19, 2019 alone, the sales of 26 popular shoes reached 450 million yuan, exceeding the daily trading volume of 9431 companies on the new third board. Among them, most of z age groups participate in the purchase of shoes. They do not buy shoes entirely for wear, but for drying on social

networks to meet their own face, to show their unique personality and pursue "sneaker culture".

Obviously, consumption has gradually become a living habit that is not the same as when it was in the subsistence stage in the past. It can be felt that the assumption of rational economic man in the classic consumption theory does not seem to be applicable in many places. Conspicuous consumption has become an important form in the current Chinese consumer market. In the last year of the nineteenth century, the American economist Thorstein Veblen proposed conspicuous consumption to explain people's consumption behavior in order to meet the needs of social status and interpersonal relationships. The conspicuous consumption group of Chinese consumers is gradually changing to a younger age group, especially among young students. Among them, the consumption behaviors of college students such as comparison consumption, conformity consumption and hedonic consumption are particularly obvious. Most of the current college students were born after 95. They have distinct personality, pursue independence, and their consumption ideas are very different from their parents. Therefore, to study the conspicuous consumption behavior and motivation of the college students, we must grasp their psychological characteristics and behavior laws.

However, academia lacks the motivation analysis and reasonable explanation of conspicuous consumption. One of the possible causes for this phenomenon could be narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Narcissism will profoundly affect consumption [2]. The study found that narcissism and sense of power have significant effects on conspicuous consumption, and sense of power has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between narcissism and conspicuous consumption. If a college student is more narcissistic, he/she has a stronger desire to maintain his sense of power. As a result, this sense of power will facilitate conspicuous consumption behaviors. Meanwhile, consumption behavior also can potentially create a typical social personality. In the process of consumer psychology changes in the whole society, the potential narcissism complex of consumers is gradually amplified in the increasingly diverse social activities, and then reaches the consumption level.

This study examines the character characteristics of college students in consumption. Narcissism pushes college students to an extreme form—a conspicuous consumption culture that pursues hedonism and is highly self-conscious. The objectives of this paper are to: 1) discuss the effect of narcissism on conspicuous consumption; 2) discuss the mediating effect of narcissism and conspicuous consumption.

2. CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Conspicuous consumption behavior is a certain group's sense of identity and pride for a commodity brand. Such consumption behavior may not be out of their own needs, but to achieve the purpose of venting personal emotions and boasting of personal status. The concept of conspicuous consumption was proposed by Canadian sociology and economist John Rae in 1834. He thinks conspicuous consumption is a behavior that some characteristics of commodities expand people's vanity [3]. After that, Thorstein Veblen introduced this concept into economics study and he published *The Theory of the Leisure Class* based on this theory [4]. In 1914, Freud explained narcissism comprehensively and systematically for the first time in on narcissism. He believes that people will first invest their libido in themselves and their caregivers, and only love themselves and their closest people. This is a kind of primitive narcissism. If the individual cannot successfully transition the bet of libido from self to object, libido will withdraw and re invest in self, which will eventually lead to narcissistic disorder. Since then, psychologists have conducted complex and rich research on narcissism, but they have not given a unified and recognized definition. In the middle of the 20th century, the mass production system represented by Fordism kept commodity prices down. The drop in prices stimulated the consumption desire of the middle

class. As a result, consumer demand rose sharply. A strong demand can promote the accumulation of capital that further promotes the mechanization and rationalization of production. Commodities are produced in large quantities at a faster speed. Eventually, the flood of commodities is overproduced, and the birth of a mass consumption society.

In the age of mass consumption society, conspicuous consumption is becoming one of the core behaviors of people's life, especially for the college students. According to the theory of demand, the higher the price, the less the demand [5]. However, luxury goods are an exception, because the price of luxury goods is higher as the demand quantity is increasing. From the perspective of commodity, a commodity has both use-value and an exchange-value [6]. The use-value and exchange-value of commodities could be used as a symbol of self-identity and economic strength. In the current social context, this symbolic value has become the hub of the relationship between the college students. Luxury goods have become the target of conspicuous consumption by the students. College student's conspicuous consumption usually manifests as the consumption of famous brands. Famous brands are often synonymous with price and quality. College students regularly locate their level and identity by consuming famous brands.

3. NARCISSISM

The word "Narcissism" comes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [7]. It has a long history, which can be stretched back to Ancient Greece period. According to the ancient Greek myth, a beautiful boy named Narcissus rejected the love of the forest goddess Echo. After that, he obsessed with his own reflection in the water, and finally fell into the water and died, turning into a daffodil. The name of the flower is the name of Narcissus, which is the origin of the word "Narcissism" in English. In psychology, narcissism is a personality disorder that refers to a strong inflated sense of self-infatuation [8]. Narcissists are so obsessed with themselves that they are not interested in anyone or anything other than themselves. Narcissists usually have inferiority complex and a craving for admiration and plaudits from others.

Narcissism will profoundly affect consumption. Meanwhile, consumption behavior also can potentially create a typical social personality, i.e., narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Alt [9] believed that the western civilization entered the consumer society earlier than the eastern civilization. Up to now, people are paying more attention to the satisfaction of individual needs in the entire consumer society. Unceasing pursuit of material goods and extreme enjoyment have become a mainstream consumption, and narcissism has increasingly become the main feature of modern consumer groups.

4.MEDIATION EFFECTS

In mediation effect, when considering the effect of independent variable X on dependent variable Y, if X affects Y by affecting variable M, then M is called a mediator variable (mediator or mediating variable) of Y (Figure 1)[10]. The effect of X on Y through the mediating variable M is called the mediation effect.

Therefore, in the causal path from independent variable X to dependent variable Y, the mediator variable is in the middle. It can also be said that the mediator variable transmits the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. Moreover, the mediation relationship also implies the order of variables in time, that is, the occurrence of X precedes M, and the occurrence of M precedes Y.

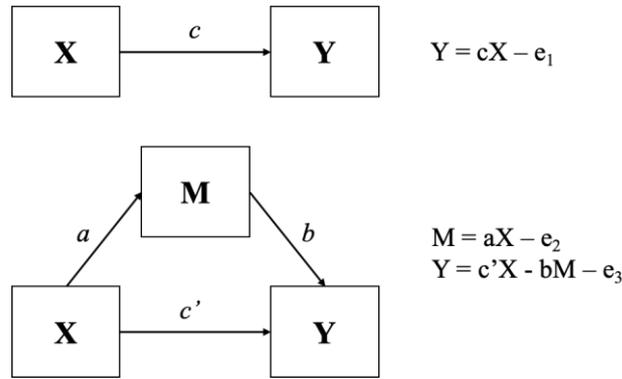


Figure 1 Illustration of a mediation effect model.

Zhu et al. [11] used the Conspicuous Consumption Scale which developed by Marcous to determine the relationship between narcissism and the role of conspicuous consumption in China. Four categories of item test such as social recognition needs, herd needs,

identity traits, and image needs are included in their study. Their result indicated that male participants had higher levels of conspicuous consumption than female participants (Table 1).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among all variables

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------|---|
| 1. Sex | 1 | | | | | | |
| 2. Age | 0.09 | 1 | | | | | |
| 3. Overt narcissism | -0.31** | -0.24** | 1 | | | | |
| 4. Covert narcissism | -0.20** | -0.27** | 0.70** | 1 | | | |
| 5. Conspicuous consumption | -0.24** | -0.24** | 0.65** | 0.66** | 1 | | |
| 6. External value | -0.18** | -0.13** | 0.57** | 0.12** | 0.17** | 1 | |
| 7. Meaning in life | -0.08 | 0.11* | 0.23** | -0.23** | -0.16** | 0.53** | 1 |

In addition, age and conspicuous consumption was negative correlation. Conspicuous consumption and external value were both strongly connected with overt and covert narcissism. Overt narcissism was found to be favorably connected with a feeling of purpose in life, but covert narcissism was found to be negatively correlated. In the case of college student’s conspicuous consumption, their narcissistic personality disorder could promote the personal sense of power thereby further facilitating conspicuous consumption. In this case, narcissistic personality disorder of college students is an independent variable and conspicuous consumption is a dependent variable. The personal

sense of power is a mediating variable. Figure 2 shows the mediation model corresponding to this example.

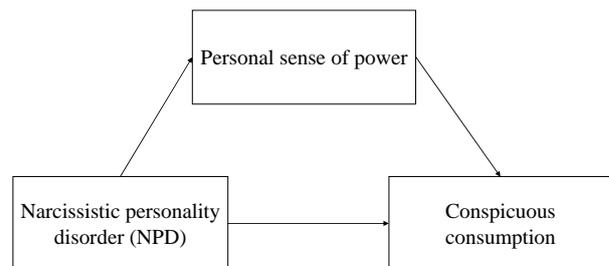


Figure 2 Mediation effect model of college student’s conspicuous consumption.

5. CONCLUSION

With the rapid economic growth, conspicuous consumption behaviors are continuously emerging. The demand for luxury goods is also continuously increasing. As a group of college students born in the 2000s, the younger generation of Chinese consumers is on the rise. This paper discussed the effect of narcissism on conspicuous consumption and the character characteristics of college students in consumption. Conspicuous consumption culture was generated due to the narcissism of college students. Meanwhile, college students have produced a series of conspicuous consumption behaviors due to the narcissistic personality disorder. In the current social context, conspicuous consumption as one of the core behaviors of the young people has become the hub of the relationship between the college students. In addition, the mediating effect of narcissism and conspicuous consumption was also discussed. Mediation effect analysis indicates that a college student's personal sense of power mediates the relationship between narcissism and conspicuous consumption. Narcissism could help college students get external value through the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods. This paper provides a new insight into the origin and the characteristics of college students in conspicuous consumption. It also highlights the mediation effect of personal sense of power for conspicuous consumption.

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