

How Psychological Factors, Status and Social comparison lead to conspicuous and status-based consumption

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Abstract

This study examines how psychological factors shape conspicuous and status-based consumption by investigating the underlying roles of status-related motives and social influence mechanisms. Specifically, it proposes and tests an integrated framework linking psychological factors such as 1. self-esteem, 2. materialism, 3. subjective social class, and 4. self-concept clarity with conspicuous consumption through a series of mediatory channels. Firstly, these factors influence status-related motives, namely 1. bandwagon effect, 2. product symbolic status, 3. snob effect, and 4. status anxiety. Afterwards, these motives in turn affect social influence mechanisms that include 1. need for social approval and 2. social comparison, thereby influencing Conspicuous and status consumption.

A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among Pakistani consumers. The proposed conceptual model was empirically tested using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to assess both direct and serial mediating relationships.

The findings demonstrate that product symbolic status is the strongest psychological mechanism driving need for social approval, which subsequently increases both status consumption and conspicuous consumption. Self-esteem negatively influences the bandwagon effect and product symbolic status, while materialism positively predicts the snob effect. Subjective social class positively affects bandwagon effect and product symbolic status but

negatively influences status anxiety. Self-concept clarity positively predicts both bandwagon and snob effects. The serial mediation analysis reveals that significant indirect effects primarily operate through product symbolic status, bandwagon effect, and snob effect via need for social approval. In contrast, social comparison and status anxiety exhibit limited explanatory power, with most associated direct and indirect relationships remaining statistically insignificant.

This study extends the conspicuous consumption literature by integrating multiple psychological antecedents with status-related and social influence mechanisms into a single explanatory framework. Unlike previous studies that examine these factors independently, the proposed model identifies need for social approval as the primary mechanism through which psychological characteristics translate into conspicuous and status-oriented consumption. The findings contribute empirical evidence from Pakistan, enriching the understanding of status-driven consumer behavior in emerging markets.

Keywords: Conspicuous consumption, Status consumption, Self-esteem, Materialism; Self-concept clarity, Subjective social class, Need for social approval, Product symbolic status, Bandwagon effect, Snob effect, Pakistan

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

In the twenty-first century, consumption has evolved far beyond the satisfaction of material needs. The things one buys, wears, drives and hangs up in the house have come to symbolize one's identity, belonging and social status from developed and developing countries. The digital age brings about a new way of purchasing that reaches not just a small circle of friends, but hundreds, even thousands. This has resulted in a growing 'consumption culture' in which 'symbolic', 'conspicuous' and 'status' buying has become commonplace and no longer the preserve of the 'elite' classes, but now is found in the houses of salaried workers, small business people and homemakers with household budgets.

It is a special phenomenon in emerging economies. Researchers have termed this new pattern of consumption 'aspirational consumption' and it is a result of rapid urbanisation, greater access to credit, the liberalisation of retail markets and the presence of international brands, extending the purchasing power of consumers to stimulate consumption of products that can articulate social mobility or social identity rather than products that are merely functional. It doesn't just

exist among the young professionals who've established themselves in the labor market, the nouveau riche households whose earnings are greater than their rank in society, or housewives deciding what to buy for their families in response to what their neighbors, relatives, or social media personalities recommend.

This context of Pakistan is theoretically relevant and practically unique as it allows a study of these psychological antecedents of symbolic-status motivation to be carried out. Pakistani consumers are found in a society that is rapidly urbanizing, rapidly expanding middle class, collectivist and kinship based society where family reputation, extended-family comparisons and the public display of wealth at weddings, festivals and social gatherings are important (Dev, Podoshen, & Shahzad, 2018; Shaikh, 2025). In a world inundated with mobile phones and social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, youth of Pakistan, who are one of the youngest and most tech-savvy in the world (Yunus, Bajwa, Mushtaq, & Hussain, 2023), have gained greater access to opportunities for social comparison and status demonstration. Single relationship hypotheses generated below were supported by empirical studies previously carried out in Pakistan, which reveal that the effect of materialism, self-image congruity, perceived social class and bandwagon tendency on luxury, fashion and online conspicuous consumption among consumers in Pakistan has been examined (Tariq, 2022; Sabir et al., 2020).

Desire for social status is also further entrenched due to a collectivist culture prevailing in Pakistan, where social reputation, family honour and social acceptance are given significant importance in day-to-day life. Family members, relatives, colleagues and social networks' expectations can affect the purchase decision in addition to the individual's preferences. Many wedding events, festivals, family reunions, and other events are often moments for the expression of prestige through consumption that can be seen. In this situation, consumers are likely to feel significant pressure to buy products that give them a sense of success, even if it means sacrificing from their finances.

Not only is this consumption pattern seen across many demographic groups, but it is also a trend that goes far beyond them. People with low salaries tend to buy high quality brands to make their presence more credible and convey professional success in their early career. Households which have ascended to a higher social status can signal a status improvement through conspicuous consumption, and consolidate their new social status. The wealthy

families, which are often established, often use luxury consumption as a symbol of distinction, and the home-maker serves as an influence on large household purchases of gifts, home decoration, clothing, jewelry and social events, in which purchase decisions are linked to family reputation and community expectations. The varied categories of consumers showed that status-oriented consumption is not limited to younger consumers, but is deeply rooted in other parts of Pakistani society as well.

The consumption driven by status can give psychologic satisfaction, social recognition and a sense of belonging but it can also generate important concerns. The pressure on the consumers may be growing as they try to live up to the expectations of society. After acquiring symbolic goods, it is possible to spend too much, have unrealistic expectations of success and lead unsustainable consumption patterns. More generally, these behaviours affect the financial health of the household, decisions made by consumers, market dynamics and the sustainable economic development. With the proliferation of consumer exposure to digital content and growing expectations, there is a need to know what is driving consumers to buy products for their symbolic and status-achieving power.

In this context, understanding of the psychological and social processes which influence conspicuous and status-oriented consumption in Pakistan is growing in importance. It is important to understand better the mechanisms through which consumers are attracted to prestige, identity and social acceptance messages associated with products, for the development of consumer behaviour research and for any marketers, educator, policy makers and consumer welfare campaigns that aim at fostering more responsible and sustainable consumption in a growing status-oriented market.

In Pakistani context the psychological and social mechanisms that turn such intangible concepts as self-esteem, materialism, perceived social class and clarity of self-concept into objective phenomena as conspicuous consumption and status consumption are neglected variables due to lack of research, particularly when mediated by variables such as status anxiety, snob tendency, bandwagon tendency, symbolic nature of products, social comparisons and need for social approval. This is the motivation behind this study.

1.2. Problem Statement

This is a worldwide trend and this is more pronounced in Pakistan. The total population of Pakistan as per the census of 2023 was 241.5 million, with the median age of just 19 years and

about 64% of the population being under 30 years of age (Dawn, 2024; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics [PBS], 2023). The youthful profile is harmonised with a GDP of approximately US\$407.8 billion (nominal) and a GDP growth rate of 3.70 percent (real) in FY 2025-26 (World Bank, 2025; PBS, 2026a), but there are significant differences with the rest of the system. Despite the debt to GDP ratio rising to 70-80% of the GDP (World Bank 2025), the World Bank poverty assessment 2025 found that around 45% of Pakistan's population lived below poverty line with the new poverty line of US\$ 3.65 per day. But, as a large proportion of the population is in a situation of economic precarity, consumption is growing at that very moment, which is status-driven spending.

This picture is supported by the household level data. The Pakistan Bureau Statistics' first-ever fully digital Household Integrated Economic survey (HIES 2024-25) on monthly average household income across 32,000 households across the country revealed that the monthly average income of household members was Rs. 82,179 who spend an average of Rs. 79,150 monthly on consumption expenditure. The typical household spends almost all of their earning; While most of these spending areas are occupied by food (37%) and housing and fuel (26%), other such expenditure categories also vie for spending (6.21%), which are discretionary and image-conscious items in household budgets, including restaurants and hotels (6.63 %) and clothing and footwear (6.28 %) (PBS 2026a; Dawn, 2026). Income and expenditure is also close to being equal, further illustrating that many Pakistani households are already living on the edge of their salaries, as revealed by the Survey of Pakistan Panel Household conducted in 2024, revealed that only 19.5% of households can access the food they want on a regular basis.

This is made possible due to three structural forces. The first is that the exposure to international brands, fast fashion, franchised stores and shopping centres have become common in the urban centres of Pakistan and presented a window to a larger section of the population to the global standards of consumption, which were previously accessible to only a small elite. Second, the Digital Transformation in Pakistan has been fast, as at the end of 2025 there were 194 million active cellular mobile connections, corresponding to 75.9% of the population, 117 million internet users (45.6% of the population) and 79.9 million social media user IDs (31.2% of the population) with Facebook having nearly 68 million and Instagram over 24 million (DataReportal, 2026; NapoleonCat, 2026). They're gear 24 hours a day, showing followers images of other users' and influencers' possessions, lifestyles and shopping activity that they

carefully selected. Third, the formal credit-card penetration has been weak for decades, while the informal has grown to the extent that today the availability of convenient payment methods such as instalment shop loans, new fintech BNPL services like QistBazaar, Abhi and Alfa Islamic BNPL, and, more recently, the 2026 launch of Alibaba-backed Koko Tech determine access to goods themselves.

In Pakistan, consumption has grown much more than a means of functional necessity. Products and brands increasingly are now symbols that individuals use to express success, social standing, identity and belonging. Whether it's a high-tech smartphone, a designer handbag, a luxury car, a brand name piece of clothing, or a fancy wedding party, an excess of purchasing power is an indicator of prestige, personal accomplishment, and social recognition. Many times consumers aren't only buying something that they use, but something that they buy that tells their family, friends, colleagues, their neighbours, and the community of their identity. This has led to consumption playing a vital role in the development and articulation of social identity.

In the context of Pakistan's rapidly evolving socioeconomic scenario, this transformation is even more pronounced. The self-evaluation and self-perception of the people have been transformed by the process of urbanisation, the growth of middle-income groups, their growing digital connectivity and the influx of social media. Every day, consumers are bombarded with carefully-curated lives through celebrities, influencers, friends and brands, which is a constant reminder to compare and aspire. The digital platforms have created a dichotomy between the private sphere and the public sphere, and consumption is now more visible, and people are more inclined to show off pictures of success, sophistication, and prosperity. The more easily visible the material is, the more ways in which it can be perceived as having a functional value, but also as having a symbolic value.

1.3. Gap Analysis

Based on the available literature, and market and statistical evidence from Pakistan presented above, this study identifies the following five gaps:

1.3.1. Theoretical gap:

In previous studies, these constructs have usually been studied as individual or somewhat intermingled predictors of purchase behavior as opposed to sequential components of a single explanatory sequence. For instance, Oh (2021) added only subjective social class as a mediator

between self-esteem and conspicuous consumption, and did not include other mediators, such as materialism, self-concept clarity, and other social comparative mediators. Burnasheva & Suh (2021) also identified a relationship between the use of social media and conspicuous consumption online, congruity of self-image and self-esteem but these constructs were not included with status anxiety, snob tendencies and bandwagon tendencies or need for social approval. Similarly, Wang et al. (2023) reported a positive relationship between self-uncertainty (the opposite construct to SUC) and conspicuous consumption without examining any intervening social-comparative mechanisms; and in the case of materialism and conspicuous consumption, and materialism and brand engagement, Kolańska-Stronka and Gorbaniuk (2022) did not examine any of the intervening social-comparative mechanisms. Until now, no single prior studies have theorized and tested a unified model that includes self-concept clarity, subjective social class, materialism, and self-esteem and status anxiety, snob effect, bandwagon effect, and product symbolic status as parallel intervening mechanisms that result in social comparison and need for social approval.

1.3.2. Empirical gap:

Most of the empirical research on conspicuous consumption and status consumption has been conducted in North America and East Asia, such as the studies of Oh (2021) on the United States (N = 500), Burnasheva and Suh (2021) on Korean millennials (N = 302), and Ling et al. (2023) on Chinese college students (N = 153). None of these studies, nor similar studies in other developing markets, validate the complete ten construct structural chain proposed here; nor even is the multi-path relationship between the intrinsic factors, the psychological mechanism, the social-comparative process and the consumption pattern, even validated in other populations, let alone in developing markets outside North America and East Asia.

1.3.3. Contextual gap:

However, Pakistan has a unique asset mix as compared to the West and other parts of South Asia: the population is very young; the consumers are just beginning to get access to digital technologies; but they are credit constrained; social structure is joint family/biradari (kinship) based, where reputations of the household and extended family are closely tied to the individual consumer; and there is a high degree of income inequality, with access to aspirational and elite consumption now within visual and digital reach of consumers from lower/middle income groups. It is also found that status and image-related motives of consumption exist in this

market as well, however, in a limited outcome (counterfeit purchase intention) and sample (students) as compared to the model and sample suggested above. Existing models built and tested in other situations are not satisfactory for capturing these contextual aspects.

1.3.4. Practical gap: There was a lack of empirical research within this tradition that has examined groups that do not fit the categories of students and young adults, such as early career professionals, newly affluent households, and homemakers, which account for a substantial portion of consumption in the real world by status (Cao et al., 2025). In line with this, there is a lack of evidence-based understanding of which psychological lever (e.g., status anxiety, social comparison, symbolic meaning of the product, etc.) is most important for each of these broader groups of consumers in driving status-oriented consumption which makes it challenging to design strategies for targeted marketing and responsible marketing practices, as well as consumer-protection and financial-literacy measures, especially given the rise of instalment-based and BNPL financing.

1.4. Research Objectives

1.4.1. General Objective

To develop and empirically test an integrated theoretical model of effects of self-esteem, materialism, subjective social class and self-concept clarity on conspicuous consumption and status consumption with sequential mediation of status anxiety, snob effect, bandwagon effect, product symbolic status, social comparison and social approval need within the Pakistani consumer context.

1.4.2. Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the mediating role of self-esteem, subjective social class, materialism and self-concept clarity in the psychological motivations of status-oriented consumption including status anxiety, snob effect, bandwagon effect, and product symbolic status.
2. To explore the moderating effects of status anxiety, snob effect, bandwagon effect, product symbolic status on consumers' social comparison tendencies and social approval needs.
3. To assess the influence of social comparison and the need for social approval on conspicuous and status consumption.
4. To define the direct link between the consumption of the status and conspicuous consumption.

5. To explore how status anxiety, snob effect, bandwagon status and product symbolic status effect conspicuous consumption and status consumption through social comparison mechanisms and social approval motives.
6. Testing of the proposed model with different consumer segments: Early career professionals, newly affluent households, established higher income households and homemakers to test the robustness and generalisability of the proposed model in the Pakistan context.

1.5. Significance of the study

1.5.1. Academic significance:

This study extends the research in the realm of consumer behaviour by incorporating both self-related and social-comparative and psychological constructs in the model to be tested, and brings it to the under researched South Asian context extending the research in the field of status and conspicuous consumption (Oh, 2021; Pangarkar & Shukla, 2023). It is significant, however, that it was not restricted to students in universities, because it also responds to long-standing demands for a more diversified set of samples in materialism and status-consumption research, providing a more representative set of empirical base from which to refine theories and compare across cultures.

1.5.2. Practical significance:

The results can provide marketers, retailers and brand managers with deeper insights into the psychological motivations that are more pertinent to various market segments, ranging from early career professionals to nouveau riche households and homemakers, in Pakistan's increasingly digitised, credit-driven retail landscape.

1.5.3. Policy implications:

The national debt-to-income ratio is on the verge of matching, and informal and digital instalment financing has been gaining momentum in Pakistan (Digital Pakistan, 2026; PBS, 2026a); an understanding of the psychological motivations behind the pattern of excess spending will enable regulators, consumer protection authorities, and financial-literacy programmes to create more effective interventions, such as BNPL disclosure and responsible-lending policies targeting status-seeking financially hard-pressed consumers.

1.5.4. Societal significance:

The study extends to the social pressures and financial wellbeing of a larger segment of society caused by an increasing visibility and image culture of consumption, not just the young and urban elite, by examining the impact that digital exposure, social comparison and the need for approval have on spending decisions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The proposed model is grounded in an integrated theory that combines four related streams of psychological and consumer-behaviour research: symbolic self-completion theory, the sociometer theory, social comparison theory, and the classical economic theory of conspicuous consumption, bandwagon consumption, snob consumption and status consumption. All of these theories provide an explanation for the symbolic and socially oriented motivations for consumption that emerge when intrinsic self-related psychological deficits are present, and ultimately for the observable status-oriented behaviour of buying.

First, according to Leary and Downs's (1995) sociometer theory, self-esteem serves as an internal index of the value people are socially given and the level of social acceptance they are experiencing; when the value of this internal index is low, the desire to restore it increases, motivating them to compensate with behavior that is externally validated, such as consumption. This theoretical perspective accounts for how self-esteem can lead to symbolic-status motives (status anxiety and product symbolic status) as explained by Leary and Downs (1995) and Kim and Oh (2026).

Second, symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982) suggests that when one's identity is incomplete, ambiguous, or threatened, he or she will obtain symbols, like possessions or brands, to fill the gap and to communicate an identity he or she wants others to perceive. The theory is that self-concept clarity and materialism are correlated with hypothesized symbolic motivational constructs like product symbolic status, snob effect and bandwagon effect (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021).

Third, Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison is used to explain the social-influence mechanisms in the model. Festinger suggested that people have the need to compare

themselves with others, especially when there are no definitive criteria to use, regarding opinions, abilities and possessions. This comparative process stimulates the desire for social approval and social comparison constructs, which then lead to psychological insecurity to obvious, status-oriented consumption (Festinger, 1954; Wood, 1989).

Finally, the outcome variables of the model, conspicuous consumption and status consumption, are based on Veblen's (1899) theory of the leisure class and the Leibenstein's theory of bandwagon, snob and Veblen effects, which were further developed by current consumer researchers (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014). These theories share the general conviction that consumption is not just instrumental in nature, but is also socially contingent and symbolic, in which people signal, negotiate and defend their social position. The theoretical framework portrays a sequential psychological process in which intrinsic self-evaluations influence symbolic status motives, which in turn lead to social-influence processes that result in observable consumption effects.

2.2. Definition of Concepts

2.2.1. Psychological Antecedents

- 1. Self-Esteem** is a disposition that involves an individual's comprehensive evaluation of his worth, skills and good looks. Leary and Downs (1995) adapted Rosenberg's (1965) concept of self-esteem and called it a "sociometer" (Leary & Downs, 1995; Kim & Oh, 2026), a self-perception of how valued and accepted one is by others that elicits compensation and seeking-approval responses when being threatened by others with loss of relational value.
- 2. Materialism:** Richins and Dawson (1992) present a different definition of materialism as a value orientation in which the attainment and possession of material goods are significant to live and an important source of happiness and self-definition. A materialistic person sees possessions as being signs of success and as supports for building and expressing identity (Chaplin & John, 2007; Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004).
- 3. Subjective Social Class:** Subjective social class is an individual's own self-perception of his or her place on the social ladder compared to others, as determined by self-rated income, education, and occupational prestige, and not on objective socioeconomic measures (Chen et al., 2022). It has been discovered that this rank is a personal judgment that could be more influential than class position in the feelings and consumption habits of status (Chen et al., 2022).

4. **Self-Concept Clarity:** Self-concept clarity is the degree to which self-concept beliefs of a person are well formulated, coherent, and persistent (Campbell, 1990 as cited in Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021). Having low self-concept clarity, the consumers suffer from higher level of identity uncertainty and are more prone to seek external symbolic cues to define themselves and relate with the brand (Fazli-Salehi et al., 2021).

2.2.2. Symbolic-Status Motivational Constructs

1. **Status Anxiety:** When people feel that their current social standing is not what they desire, they feel worry or unease about their relative standing, prestige, or worth in the eyes of others, it is referred to as status anxiety (Chen et al., 2022). This anxiety is a central psychological motivator that transfers own insecurities to the consumption behaviour of status.
2. **Snob Effect:** It's the negative reaction of the demand for a given product to an increase in the number of consumers purchasing it, driven by the desire to distinguish oneself from the masses and maintain product exclusivity (Leibenstein 1950). Snob-oriented consumers are driven by a quest for distinction instead of conformity (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012)
3. **Bandwagon Effect:** is the "wanting" of people to buy and eat a product just because many others are eating it, which is a drive towards conformity and identification with a valued social reference group (Leibenstein, 1950). Susceptibility to normative social influence (NSE) has been closely related to bandwagon consumption (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).
4. **Product Symbolic Status:** refers to how the product or brand can communicate the owner's social status, prestige or accomplishment to others beyond its functional value (Belk, 1988; Millan & Mittal, n.d.). The symbolic status perceptions enable the consumers to see things that belong to them as a part of their selves and to use things as a signal in social interaction.

2.2.3. Social-Influence Mechanisms

1. **Social Comparison:** The process of comparing oneself to others to evaluate one's opinions, abilities and possessions is called social comparison (Festinger, 1954), and happens especially when the person is uncertain about himself. In addition to how upward and downward comparisons affect self-esteem and future consumption decisions (Wood, 1989; Li et al., 2025), they can affect one's wants and needs. Upward and downward comparisons can also affect one's wants and needs (Wood, 1989; Li et al., 2025).

2. **Need for Social Approval:** Need for social approval is defined as wanting acceptance, admiration, and validation from others and as being likely to behave ways in order to gain positive social judgments from others (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; as cited in Dinh & Lee, 2024). The need for social approval is more closely associated with such conspicuous consumption as is linked to gaining approval from a reference group (Dinh & Lee, 2024).

2.2.4. Consumption Outcomes

1. **Conspicuous Consumption:** Conspicuous consumption is the display and consumption of products and services in order to signal to others their wealth, prestige and social standing, not in order to serve their functional purpose (Veblen, 1899; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004). The essence of conspicuous consumption is an other-directed behaviour that is socially contingent and intended to gain recognition, acceptance or approval from a reference group (Mazzocco, Rucker, Galinsky, & Bearden, 2012; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014).
2. **Status Consumption:** The motivational desire to possess and utilize products and brands that communicate social status, prestige and achievement to the self and others (as cited in O'Cass & McEwen, 2004) is known as status consumption. Conceptually, status consumption is a related phenomenon to conspicuous consumption, but in terms of motivation, it is a more intrinsic version than conspicuous consumption is its behavioural expression (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Chan, To, & Chu, 2015).

2.3. Hypotheses Development

On the basis of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, two stages are used to develop the hypotheses. The first is the single (direct) relationship hypotheses for each of the pairwise relationships in the model. Second, a sequential mediation hypothesis was tested for each of the intrinsic antecedents (self-esteem, materialism, subjective social class, and self-concept clarity) and the symbolic-motivational and social-influence processes, in order to get to the consumption outcomes, following the serial (chain) mediation modelling procedures (Hayes, 2013).

2.3.1. Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is the person's own self-assessment of his/her value and worth in society. Self-esteem is an internal measure of social acceptance and relational value, as per Sociometer Theory as stated by Leary & Downs (1995). People with low self-esteem feel less accepted in society than others and motivate them to regain their self-esteem by engaging in external

validation behaviors. In the literature, one of the compensatory mechanisms is to obtain products that can represent success, prestige, and social recognition (Kim & Oh, 2026).

In consumer behaviour, low self-esteem has always been linked with symbolic consumption as consumers tend to fill their self-image deficiencies with the acquisition of products. Products are no longer merely functional but rather symbolic resources for the consumer that enable them to express desirable identities and achieve recognition by others. This mechanism is especially significant in collectivist societies like Pakistan where social/reputation, family prestige and public evaluation have a huge impact on the behavior of individuals.

Those who have less self-worth tend to face more uncertainty about the social value. As such, they are more receptive to items that can help them feel better about themselves and their social status. Based on the use of Sociometer Theory, symbolic consumption is a psychological mechanism for restoring threatened self-worth.

Firstly, people with low self-esteem tend to have more bandwagon behaviours and try to conform to the buying habits of significant reference groups to gain social acceptance and alleviate social insecurity. In Sociometer Theory, people whose self-esteem is threatened will try to seek social inclusion and external validation through behaviour congruent with group expectations (Leary & Downs, 1995).

Consumers tend to consume what is considered as normal by the society and by their reference groups (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). In the Pakistani context, Yunus et al. (2023) found that those consumers that had concerns related to identity would increasingly turn to branded products and socially desirable purchases to create a positive social media impression, which indicated that low self-esteem could lead to conformity-oriented consumption. So it is more likely that consumers will be more susceptible to the bandwagon effect if they have lower self-esteem.

H1: The bandwagon effect is significantly negatively influenced by self-esteem.

Consumers' self-esteem should be expected to increase the symbolic nature perceived by the product, as their self-esteem is dwindling and they increasingly use products to project desirable identities and make up for gaps in their self-esteem. A key component of Sociometer Theory is that people who feel less socially accepted want to find something outside of them to make them feel socially accepted again (Leary & Downs, 1995). Such items that have

symbolic significance are then important commodities that help them convey prestige, success, and social recognition (Belk, 1988; Millan & Mittal, n.d.). Consistent with this, Burnasheva and Suh (2021) also showed that self-esteem played a significant role in influencing conspicuous online consumption through identity-related mechanisms and Yunus et al. (2023) found that Pakistani consumers resorted to using the branded products according to the identity-related mechanisms to build up positive social identities. So those with lower self-esteem are likely to invest more symbolically into their products.

H2: Product symbolic status is significantly negatively related to self-esteem.

Lower self-esteem may also lead to more snob behavior as consumers strive for exclusive, unique items that can make them feel more unique and help to fill their inadequacy. According to Symbolic Self-Completion Theory, people with a low sense of self seek to enhance their desired Self by using symbolic possessions (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). The snob oriented consumption helps the consumer to distinguish himself/herself from others by purchasing items that are seen as scarce or exclusive (Leibenstein, 1950; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). While the connection between self-esteem and symbolic consumption has been studied more often than between self-esteem and snob behaviour per se, Burnasheva and Suh (2021) and Yunus et al. (2023) indirectly support this assumption with their empirical results, which show that the lack of self-esteem drives consumers to engage in symbolic consumption of products to improve their self-image and social standing. Thus, the negative effect of lower self-esteem on consumers' snob oriented consumption is expected.

H3: Self-esteem has a significant negative effect on snob effect.

Lastly, those who have low self-esteem have a higher risk of having status anxiety as they worry more about their relative position in society and how others see them. Lower self-esteem is hypothesized to result in increased sensitivity to social appraisal and perceived threat to relational value (Leary & Downs, 1995), according to Theory of Sociometers. Therefore, the perception of inferior social status increases the likelihood of consumers to feel anxious about their social status, and this anxiety propels them to seek products and brands that can restore their social status and alleviate their sense of inferiority (Kim & Oh, 2026).

H4: At significant level, there is negative relationship between self-esteem and status anxiety.

The above arguments are theoretical, and based on empirical evidence from previous years. Burnasheva and Suh (2021) have demonstrated that self-esteem is a key component when it comes to the self-image congruity to account for conspicuous online consumption. Similarly, Yunus et al. (2023) found that Pakistani consumers whose identity issues were prominent had higher intentions towards online conspicuous consumption of branded products which created positive social images. These results on the other hand indicate that consumers' self-esteem decreases symbolic-status motives.

While self-esteem has an immediate impact on symbolic-status motives, it should affect conspicuous consumption largely by way of a series of interacting psychological and social processes. In accordance with the Sociometer Theory (Leary & Downs, 1995) people with low self-esteem initially develop stronger symbolic-status motivations to regain their perceived social value, and then build up their self-esteem. Consumers' motivations, in turn, drive an increase in the tendency for comparing with others and gaining self-validation via need for social approval. As people are constantly being compared to themselves – by others – they are more likely to want to buy goods that are supposed to reflect prestige and social status, and are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption, or status consumption.

The process is also consistent with Symbolic Self-Completion Theory presented by Wicklund & Gollwitzer in 1982, which proposes that individuals with identity deficiency try to make up for these deficiencies by acquiring symbolic items that have desirable identities. This is also likely to accelerate in societies where social recognition and reputation of family is of major importance such as collectivist societies like Pakistan.

Proposed mediation is further supported by empirical evidence; Burnasheva & Suh (2021) found that the influence of self-esteem on conspicuous online consumption is mediated by psychological processes pertaining to identity. In another study, Yunus et al. (2023) have found that consumers with low self-esteem were more likely to buy brands as a means of establishing their social identity. Furthermore, Hamna (2025) found that conspicuous consumption was indirectly related to social media usage intensity with the moderating effect of self-esteem among young adults in Pakistan.

In the light of these theoretical and empirical arguments, the present study seeks to propose that self-esteem and conspicuous consumption are mediated by a number of sequential

processes, beginning with symbolic-status motives, social comparison, need for social approval and culminating in status consumption.

Based on this, the following hypotheses were formulated with respect to the serial mediation:

- **H5:** Self-Esteem → Bandwagon Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H6:** Self-Esteem → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H7:** Self-Esteem → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H8:** Self-Esteem → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H9:** Self-Esteem → Bandwagon Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H10:** Self-Esteem → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H11:** Self-Esteem → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H12:** Self-Esteem → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H13:** Self-Esteem → Bandwagon Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H14:** Self-Esteem → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H15:** Self-Esteem → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H16:** Self-Esteem → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H17:** Self-Esteem → Bandwagon Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H18:** Self-Esteem → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H19:** Self-Esteem → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption

- **H20:** Self-Esteem → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption

2.3.2. Materialism

Materialism represents a value orientation in which people see the accumulation and possession of material objects as being important to their lives and as sources of happiness, success and self-definition (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Materialistic consumers judge products by their functional utility but also how they represent social position, personal success, and desirable identities (Arndt et al., 2004; Chaplin & John, 2007). As a result, materialism has been found to be one of the most consistent psychological motivations for symbolic and status consumption.

The Symbolic Self-Completion Theory proposes that consumers who emphasize their possessions will be more likely to turn possessions into a symbolic means for self-construction and self-communication (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). People who are high in materialism are keen to buy and consume items that help them maintain their success and prestige, leading them to want to consume more in order to be recognized by others. This motivation then reinforces various symbolic-status orientations, including bandwagon, product symbolic status, snob, and status anxiety.

The materialistic consumers are supposed to have higher bandwagon tendencies because they often use popular products in the society to prove their success and gain acceptance from the desirable reference groups. Materialistic people perceive products as a measure of social success, which increases their susceptibility to the popular trends in consumption, according to Richins and Dawson (1992). Similarly, Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) described consumers with symbolic motivation to purchase products that are popular with their social group to assert social identity. In the Pakistani context, Tariq (2022) revealed that materialism significantly predicted the bandwagon luxury consumption among consumers who bought foreign luxury brands online, which meant that highly materialistic consumers imitated or mimicked the purchasing behaviour of their relevant groups to socially affiliate. In a similar vein, Sabir et al. (2020) found that the bandwagon effect had a significant impact on young Pakistani consumers' fashion consumption when they wanted to gain social value from popular fashion items. Hence, materialism is predicted to relate to consumers' bandwagon propensity in a positive manner.

H21: Materialism has a significant positive effect on bandwagon effect.

Materialistic consumers should give more weight to symbolic aspects of the product; they believe that an object can be a symbol of achievement, prestige, and social identity. Richins and Dawson (1992) has suggested that materialistic individuals gauge their belongings as significant symbols of accomplishment and Belk (1988) proposed that products can turn into extensions of the self via their symbolic meanings. People who are more materialistic thus give more symbolic meaning to brands that can convey wealth and prestige. The evidence Dev, Podoshen and Shahzad (2018) provided, showed that material orientations of the consumers were significantly positive with conspicuous consumption, indicating an increased emphasis on how products can stand for desirable identities. In turn, materialism is thought to have a positive effect on perceptions of the symbolic status of the product.

H22: Materialism has a significant positive effect on product symbolic status.

Consumer with materialism also have increased snob tendencies given that exclusive and scarce products are likely to increase their perceptions of uniqueness and social distinction. Leibenstein (1950) stated that snob consumption is the preference of consumers for products that make them separate from the mass, whereas Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) could confirm that consumers seeking symbolic status frequently look for exclusive products as a way to express the social differentiation of their group from others. Materialistic people perceive possessions as cues to personal success and superiority (Richins & Dawson, 1992), and thus are more likely to favor products that send the message of exclusiveness and elevated social standing. While most previous empirical studies have focused on materialism and conspicuous consumption, indirect evidence for the effect of materialism on the symbolic and prestige-oriented buying behaviors is provided by the findings reported by Dev et al. (2018) and Tariq (2022). Thus, materialism is anticipated to have a positive impact on snob effect.

H23: Materialism has a significant positive effect on snob effect.

The status anxiety is expected to be stronger among those consumers who are materialistic since their self-evaluation relies largely on the comparison with possessions and symbols of success. People who view success as material success are more concerned with sustaining their relative social status and face the anxiety when they feel they have less of the products that help them sustain their status than others. Richins and Dawson (1992) asserted that materialism

people judge themselves on material success, while Arndt et al. (2004) asserted that attachment to material items leads to greater sensitivity to outside social evaluations. In Pakistan, Dev et al. (2018) found that materialistic consumers had higher tendencies towards conspicuous consumption, which meant that they were more concerned with their own social image and public recognition. As such, it is hoped that materialism will have a positive effect on status anxiety.

H24: Materialism has a significant positive effect on status anxiety.

Materialism is likely to have influence on conspicuous consumption via a chain of sequential psychosocial processes rather than a direct relationship, although this is expected to be direct with respect to symbolic-status motives. Means that materialistic consumers use their possessions to create and express desirable identities, according to Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Therefore, consumers who are more materialistic first acquire symbolic-status motivations, namely bandwagon effect, product symbolic status, snob effect and status anxiety. These motives then lead to further involvement in social comparison and to consumers' need for social approval. Consumers may compare themselves to others, and they have this need to get outside approval in order to have a sense of belonging; and they eventually become more motivated to buy products that represent prestige and success, culminating in more status consumption and conspicuous consumption. This sequential process is also consistent with the broader consumer behavior literature, which suggests that materialistic values influence consumption behavior indirectly through symbolic and social mechanisms rather than solely through direct effects. Products serve as symbols through which consumers communicate identity, obtain recognition, and maintain desirable social positions.

Empirical evidence supports this proposed mechanism. Tariq (2022) demonstrated that materialism significantly predicted bandwagon luxury consumption among Pakistani consumers by encouraging conformity with reference-group purchasing patterns. Likewise, Dev et al. (2018) found that materialistic orientations significantly increased conspicuous consumption tendencies among Pakistani consumers. Furthermore, Sabir et al. (2020) showed that bandwagon consumption reflected consumers' pursuit of social value and peer recognition, suggesting that symbolic motivations ultimately translate into socially visible purchasing behavior. Collectively, these findings support the proposition that the relationship between

materialism and conspicuous consumption operates through sequential symbolic-status motivations, social comparison, social approval, and status consumption.

Accordingly, the following serial mediation hypotheses are proposed:

- H25: Materialism → Bandwagon Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- H26: Materialism → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- H27: Materialism → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- H28: Materialism → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- H29: Materialism → Bandwagon Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- H30: Materialism → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- H31: Materialism → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- H32: Materialism → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- H33: Materialism → Bandwagon Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H34: Materialism → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H35: Materialism → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H36: Materialism → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H37: Materialism → Bandwagon Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H38: Materialism → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H39: Materialism → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption

- H40: Materialism → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption

2.3.3. Subjective Social Class

Subjective social class is a person's self-assessment of his/her place in the social structure compared to others. Subjective social status is the way in which people perceive their own position within society based on their perception of other individuals (Chen et al., 2022), in contrast to objective socioeconomic status which is based on factors such as income, education and occupation. Subjective perceptions of social rank have been found to have more pronounced psychological and behavioural effects than objective socioeconomic status indicators, as they directly affect social inclusion, deprivation and status insecurity (Chen et al., 2022).

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) submits that individuals routinely make comparisons with others to assess their capabilities and accomplishments, and their social statuses. Thus, consumers who have a lower perceived social status are more likely to be psychologically uncomfortable and to look for symbolic ways to enhance or convey their social status. The social status orientation literature suggests that social class is especially important in motivating status-oriented consumption in emerging countries like Pakistan where social prestige, family reputation and public image are greatly valued.

Conformity to higher status reference groups' consumption patterns should strengthen bandwagon tendencies among consumers who feel themselves to be a lower social class, as conformity may help to decrease perceived social distance and increase social acceptance. Social Comparison Theory proposes that people are often likely to copy the actions of aspirational groups in order to enhance their social status (Festinger, 1954). Similarly, Leibenstein (1950) suggested that the bandwagon effect is the result of consumers' wish to buy products that are popular in a valuable social group. In the Pakistani context, Shaikh (2025) found that consumers' fashion consciousness and brand-image congruity were significantly affected by perceived social class, suggesting that consumers are now doing their shopping in accordance with the socially desirable groups. Thus, consumers of lower subjective social class should exhibit more bandwagon tendencies.

H41: Subjective social class has a significant negative effect on bandwagon effect.

The lower subjective social class is expected to amplify consumers' perceptions of product symbolic status, as consumers more and more use products to signal prestige and social mobility. People who think that they are in lower social status tend to make these products mean more for success and achievement. Belk (1988) proposed that possessions are symbolic extensions of the self, and that status-related behaviours of consumers are greatly influenced by perceived social rank, according to Chen et al. (2022). To support this, Shaikh (2025) determined that the consumers' preferences for brands with desired social identities were also found to be influenced by their perceptions of social class. Thus, it is hypothesized that products will have more symbolic value for consumers who rate their subjective class as lower. Thus, it is hypothesized that lower SSCs consumers will perceive more symbolic value of products.

H42: Subjective social class has a significant negative effect on product symbolic status.

Exclusivity of products provides opportunities for communicating uniqueness and differentiation from others, thus consumers who perceive themselves to be in lower positions in the social hierarchy should manifest more snob tendencies. Leibenstein (1950) suggested that snob consumption is the consumption of scarce and exclusive commodities which helps to establish the sense of distinction. The pursuit of exclusive brands may therefore be seen as a means of people feeling better about themselves, in order to signal "social upward mobility" and "personal achievement" to consumers from lower subjective social class. While the focus of past empirical work has been on the link between perceived social class and status consumption, others studies have indirectly found evidence that social class status perceptions facilitate symbolic consumption that serves to enhance one's social image, such as Chen et al. (2022) and Shaikh (2025). Thus, subjective social class is hypothesized to positively affect snob effect.

H43: Subjective social class has a significant negative effect on snob effect.

Lastly, a lower SSCs is likely to be associated with higher status anxiety due to the growing consumer's awareness of their relative status and risks of being evaluated as socially below them. People with a lower status in the hierarchy are more prone to have heightened anxiety about their social status because they constantly compare themselves to people they believe are of a higher status, Chen et al. (2022) found. Social Comparison Theory also proposes that comparisons go up can cause feelings of social recognition and prestige (Festinger, 1954). In a study conducted within Pakistan, Naz et al. (2026) found that the socioeconomic status of

families affected their status-driven ceremonial expenditure in such a way that status consciousness was an important force in triggering symbolic consumption among the middle class families. Thus, subjective low class consumers are predicted to have more status anxiety.

H44: Subjective social class has a significant negative effect on status anxiety.

While changes in subjective social class may have effect symbolic status motives directly, the impact of subjective social class on conspicuous consumption is likely to be mediated by a series of interrelated psychological and social processes. The symbolic-status motivations are expected to be stronger among the consumers who experience greater social inferiority in order to compensate for their perceived social disadvantage. The symbolic motivations then facilitate further social comparison and heightens the need for social approval. As consumers' social status is constantly reassessed and they seek external signifiers of prestige and success, they are driven to seek out products which can be used to communicate such attributes. In the end, this leads to an increase in status consumption and conspicuous consumption.

The proposed sequential mechanism is consistent with Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) which suggests that when there are no objective standards for evaluating oneself, one compares oneself to others. Customers who feel like they are in lower social class are more likely to do comparisons to higher class and engage in symbolic consumption to diminish perceived class gap. In collectivist societies like Pakistan, the consumption behavior is further reinforced by the social recognition, family reputation and community expectations.

This is a theoretical explanation that is supported by empirical proof. The findings by Chen et al. (2022) showed that status anxiety is a mediator between subjective social class and conspicuous consumption, which indicates that the subjective social class can affect consumption behaviors indirectly via psychological factors. In the same manner, Shaikh (2025) demonstrated that perceived social class significantly affected the perspectives of fashion consciousness and the congruity of brand-image among consumers in Pakistan, and Naz and Ahmad (2026) revealed that socioeconomic status affected status-signaling expenditure during ceremonial occasions because of the expectations of the community and the comparison process. Together, these findings indicate that the subjective social class has a sequential pathway of impact on conspicuous consumption and occurs through symbolic-status motivations, social comparison, social approval, and status consumption.

The following serial mediation hypotheses are then proposed:

- H45: Subjective Social Class → Bandwagon Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- H46: Subjective Social Class → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- H47: Subjective Social Class → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- H48: Subjective Social Class → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- H49: Subjective Social Class → Bandwagon Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- H50: Subjective Social Class → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- H51: Subjective Social Class → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- H52: Subjective Social Class → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- H53: Subjective Social Class → Bandwagon Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H54: Subjective Social Class → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H55: Subjective Social Class → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H56: Subjective Social Class → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H57: Subjective Social Class → Bandwagon Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H58: Subjective Social Class → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H59: Subjective Social Class → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- H60: Subjective Social Class → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption

2.3.4. Self-Concept Clarity

It is the clarity, coherence, and consistency about self-concept across time (Campbell et al., 1996). People with a high S.C.C. have a clear sense of who they are, and thus are less reliant on others to validate their sense of self. However, people with low self-concept clarity tend to feel uncertain about their identity and are more likely to be influenced by the surrounding society and appearance of consumption (Campbell et al., 1996).

As per Symbolic Self-Completion Theory, those who experience gap in self-concept often seek to make up for the lack by obtaining symbolic possessions that convey desirable identities (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Consumers who have low levels of self-concept clarity are not self-confident, but look for products that enhance their self-concept and get approval from others. Thus, a lack in self-concept clarity should increase symbolic-status motivations such as bandwagon effect, product symbolic status, snob effect, and status anxiety.

Individuals with low self-concept clarity should demonstrate higher bandwagon tendencies as a result of having a higher level of uncertainty with regard to their identity. People with an unstable sense of self often do what they see others doing to fit in and validate their self (Campbell et al., 1996). Leibenstein (1950) stated that the bandwagon effect refers to consumer's tendency to purchase products that are adopted by the group they consider to be similar to themselves. In support of this argument, Çifci et al (2020) discovered that consumers who have less stable self-perceptions are more likely to engage in socially-influenced consumption behaviors to reinforce their identity. Thus, consumers' susceptibility to the bandwagon effect is expected to grow with a decrease in self-concept clarity.

H61: Self-concept clarity has a significant negative effect on bandwagon effect.

A lower identity clarity is likely to lead to greater perceptions of product symbolic status as consumers with lower identity clarity see their possessions as communicating desirable personal and social identities. According to Symbolic Self-Completion Theory, an individual's sense of identity gaps through symbolic acquisitions that are capable of symbolizing success, prestige and belonging (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Similarly, Belk (1988) researched that possessions became extensions of the self, especially in the context of identity formation and maintenance. Çifci et al. (2020) also found that self-concept clarity significantly affected symbolic brand preferences and consumption experiences of consumers. Thus, products are

likely to be perceived by consumers with lower self-concept clarity as symbols and to be more meaningful.

H62: Self-concept clarity has a significant negative effect on product symbolic status.

Therefore, consumers with lower self-concept clarity should also have increased snob tendencies since exclusive products offer symbolic resources that help build unique identities. For people who are unsure of themselves their self-concept is often communicated through few and high status items that they can use to stand out from others. Leibenstein (1950) argued that snob consumption is linked to the consumer's desire for exclusive products that will signal social distinction and Symbolic Self-Completion Theory suggests that symbolic possessions serve as a substitute for the lack of identities (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). While empirical studies have mainly focused on relation between self-concept clarity and symbolic consumption, rather than snob effect directly, Çifci et al., (2020) have found indirect evidence supporting the idea that identity uncertainty will increase consumers' inclination to buy products that are more symbolic. Thus, there is expected a positive relationship between self-concept clarity and snob effect.

H63: Self-concept clarity has a significant negative effect on snob effect.

lower self-concept clarity is likely to elicit higher status anxiety given the fact that people with self-concept uncertainty are likely to be more concerned about how they are judged by others. Individuals with unstable self-concepts are more attuned to the outside world's judgments and often try to judge themselves based on other people and based on external indicators of success. Thus, worries about social recognition and personal sufficiency grow, and anxiety with regards to status quo or enhancement of social standing increases. According to Symbolic Self-Completion Theory (SSCT), people will compensate for identity uncertainty by seeking socially valued symbols that support them in their desired self-image (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Likewise, Çifci et al. (2020) found that self-concept clarity had a negative relationship with symbolic consumption, which helped to reinforce consumers' self-identity. Therefore, the lower self-concept clarity will positively relate with status anxiety.

H64: Self-concept clarity has a significant negative effect on status anxiety.

While a direct influence on symbolic-status motivations is anticipated, it is suggested that self-concept clarity will have an indirect effect on conspicuous consumption through a series of psychological and social mechanisms. People that do not have high self-concept clarity are more likely to be motivated to find symbolic resources to buffer against identity uncertainty. As a result, they build up their symbolic-status motivations first such as bandwagon effect, product symbolic status, snob effect and status anxiety. These motivations then further drive their need to compare themselves to others and their need for social approval. Consumers increasingly are driven to buy products that assert fame, achievement and desirable identities through ongoing social comparison and a quest to seek external confirmation. All these processes end up fostering increased use of status and conspicuous consumption.

Sequential mechanism is supported by Symbolic Self-Completion Theory that states that one's sense of uncertainty about identity causes the urge to restore his/her sense of psychological completeness by acquiring symbolic possessions (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Lower self-concept clarity consumers thus rely more heavily on external symbols to maintain their self-concept and gain social recognition. This process is likely to be stronger in collectivist societies like Pakistan which are greatly influenced by inter-personal relationships, family expectations and social evaluations.

This theoretical explanation is supported by empirical evidence. Çifci et al., 2020, found that by shaping the consumers' identity-related motivations, self-concept clarity had significant impact on symbolic consumption. Likewise, Belk (1988) pointed out that belongings serve as extensions of the self especially when consumers are trying to affirm or express their selves through their possessions. All in all, the results indicate that the effect of self-concept clarity on conspicuous consumption is passed on in a sequence of conceptual mechanisms: symbolic status motives, social comparison, social approval needs, and status consumption.

So, the following serial mediation hypotheses can be proposed:

- **H65:** Self-Concept Clarity → Bandwagon Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H66:** Self-Concept Clarity → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H67:** Self-Concept Clarity → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption

- **H68:** Self-Concept Clarity → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H69:** Self-Concept Clarity → Bandwagon Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H70:** Self-Concept Clarity → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H71:** Self-Concept Clarity → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H72:** Self-Concept Clarity → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H73:** Self-Concept Clarity → Bandwagon Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H74:** Self-Concept Clarity → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H75:** Self-Concept Clarity → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H76:** Self-Concept Clarity → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H77:** Self-Concept Clarity → Bandwagon Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H78:** Self-Concept Clarity → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H79:** Self-Concept Clarity → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption
- **H80:** Self-Concept Clarity → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption

2.3.5. Bandwagon Effect

The bandwagon effect occurs when consumers follow the trend of others or the trend of the popular social group and adopt their products, brands or consumption habits (Leibenstein, 1950). The bandwagon effect is not just about assessing products based on function, but it's about following the trend in consumption to reinforce social belonging, alleviate social uncertainty and receive acceptance from valued reference groups. Such is the case in

collectivist societies where the ability to develop positive interpersonal relations and to conform to social norms are seen as significant factors in shaping individual actions (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).

According to Social comparison theory individuals constantly seek to compare themselves with others to assess their opinions, abilities, and social status (Festinger, 1954). Thus, a person with a higher degree of “bandwagonism” comes to pay more consideration to what others are buying, and can depend on other socially approved items to validate a sense of belonging to the group. This conformity behavior in turn has an impact on consumers' desire for social acceptance and social comparison behavior.

Consumers with higher bandwagon tendencies are also likely to have a higher need for social approval because conformity to group purchasing behavior will indicate a need for acceptance and a lack of rejection from other consumers. Leibenstein (1950) has suggested that consumers who are sensitive to the bandwagon effect gain utility from the consumption of products that are popular among consumers within their reference groups. In a like manner, Bearden et al. (1989) suggested that people who were more susceptible to be influenced by others often adjust their buying choices so as to gain approval from an important person.

Social acceptance is another factor which is significant for consumer behavior in collectivist societies like Pakistan as family members and friends as well as the expectations of the community have a significant influence on the purchasing process. Consumers take to popular brands not only for their purposeful value, but they help social incorporation and shape positive social assessments.

This relationship has been supported by empirical evidence. According to Sabir et al., (2020) Bandwagon Motivation significantly affected the fashion consumption of the Pakistani consumers by encouraging buying of the fashion according to the prevailing trend in the society. Similarly, Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) suggested that conformity-based consumption allows consumers to increase their social identity by being accepted by desirable reference groups. As a result, the consumers with higher bandwagon tendencies are anticipated to show higher social approval needs.

H81: Bandwagon effect has a significant positive effect on need for social approval.

We should also expect to see consumers with high bandwagon tendencies to be more active in social comparison for the reason that conformity requires ongoing monitoring of other people's buying and eating habits. According to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), the self-evaluation process is done by comparing one's own behaviours and achievements with others who are relevant to self. This means that consumers with a bandwagon motive are always checking what is trending and popular; they make sure that what they consume is socially acceptable.

Leibenstein (1950) proposed that conformity-oriented consumers are motivated to buy products that are widely used by other consumers, while Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) described that the influence of the reference group on the consumer's buying decision is a result of comparing their self with others.

This process has been further accelerated within Pakistan by the rise of social media because consumers are always reminded about others' lifestyles and consumption patterns, which allows them to make decisions based on comparison (Yunus et al., 2023).

Thus, bandwagon people are predicted to make more social comparisons.

H82: Bandwagon effect has a significant positive effect on social comparison.

Product symbolic status refers to the extent to which a product or a brand represents a symbol of prestige, success, social identity and a social position, as well as a functional object (Belk, 1988). By using symbolic products, consumers can convey desirable identities, affirm group affiliation and impress others with their wealth or accomplishment. Therefore, consumers' judgements may be based on the meaning of products in society as well as utilitarian value.

The Symbolic Self-Completion Theory proposes that people seek to comprehend their own image of self through symbolic acquisition of items, as well as to project socially appropriate aspects and characteristics (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). Similarly, Belk (1988) suggested that possessions are extensions of the self as they enable consumers to communicate an identity that is unable to be seen at first glance. This means those who are more symbolic are more likely to become concerned with obtaining social approval and to make more comparative judgments as they begin to "perceive" products more.

2.3.6. Product Symbolic Status

People who value their possessions symbolically are going to be more socially approving, as recognition- and acceptance-based valuing of symbolic possessions is more high. Product messages of prestige and success have significance only when they are socially recognized and valued. Thus, when a consumer buys a symbolic product, he or she is not just buying for personal satisfaction, but he/she is also buying with the goal of getting positive feedback from important people in his or her life.

It has been proposed that symbolic possessions serve to assist desired identities by communicating social valued attributes (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982, Symbolic Self-Completion Theory). Similarly, Belk (1988) reported that people strive to extend the self by acquiring objects with which to recognize and affirm the self in a positive way. Those who perceive products as markers of self then are more dependent on external confirmation and acceptance.

There is empirical evidence that suggests this relationship. Burnasheva and Suh (2021) showed that symbolic consumption is an important dimension of conspicuous online consumption since consumers want to be recognized via products that can convey desirable identities. Similarly, Yunus et al. (2023) found that Pakistani consumers are gradually relying on branded products to create positive social images online, which suggests that symbolic products are related to the quest for social approval.

Therefore, the symbolic value of the products of these consumers is expected to be higher and thus, the need for social approval is expected to be higher.

H83: Product symbolic status has a significant positive effect on need for social approval.

Given that the symbolic products can offer visible standards and hence more social comparison for the consumers who perceive the products as a symbol of prestige, the symbolic products are also expected to provide more social comparison. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that people make comparisons by comparing their attributes (abilities, possessions, status, etc.) to a relevant comparison group. This is important to them when using products that have symbolic values to compare them to one another.

Others' brands, lifestyles and possessions are often noticed by consumers and can be used to gauge how successful and prestigious their own consumption is. Therefore, symbolic products foster consumers' tendency to compare themselves to others in terms of both upward and lateral comparisons and then to try and minimize the difference in social status.

Possessions carry meaning of a personal identity and social status, as Burnasheva and Suh (2021) found that symbolic products make consumers attend to what they consume, thereby revealing information about their identity relative to others, and Belk (1988) argued that possessions communicate meaning. In the same way, Yunus et al. (2023) concluded that Pakistani consumers have started to compare themselves with branded products which are showcased on social media, which further increased the comparison-based buying.

So, one may expect that consumers with a higher symbolic value of products will have a higher social comparison level.

H84: Product symbolic status has a significant positive effect on social comparison.

2.3.7. Snob Effect

The snob effect refers to the preference for scarce products, exclusive and unavailable to most consumers due to the uniqueness, prestige and social distinction they provide, which is called the snob effect (Leibenstein, 1950). Snob-oriented consumers get satisfaction from owning products that set themselves apart from other consumers, while the bandwagon effect is when a consumer gets satisfaction from conforming to popular consumption patterns. Luxury brands, limited editions, and rare products have the power to convey the consumers' sense of a higher social status and enhance their distinctive identity (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012).

Leibenstein (1950) suggests that this snob effect leads to consumers' deliberate rejection of popular products, as exclusivity is one of the symbolic attributes of those products. Likewise, Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) claimed that the consumer who chooses to express themselves as a social individual, tends to buy unique products that confirm their image of prestige and uniqueness. Thus, consumers with higher snob scores are predicted to be more concerned about gaining social recognition and assessing their social status as compared to others.

More 'snobs' will be in need of social approval because an exclusive product will have a greater symbolic value because it will be recognized by others. Although the more 'snob' oriented consumers seek uniqueness, their motives for purchasing remain social, in the sense that

exclusive goods can only signify prestige in so far as they are known to appropriate consumers. Thus consumers desire a less ubiquitous and more desirable commodity that they feel wanted and that allows them to receive favorable social assessments.

Leibenstein (1950) has suggested that snob consumption arises from the expectation that the consumer will be able to distinguish himself from the masses by possessing some good that he does not possess the masses. In the same way, Kastanakis and Balabanis (2012) concluded that luxury consumption would enable the consumers to build up their desirable identities and to gain more social recognition within the significant reference groups. Therefore, symbolic possessions can be used as cues for social signals that the consumer relies upon to validate and approve him or herself.

There are empirical data to support this. Burnasheva and Suh (2021) reported that consumers frequently act in conspicuous manner when making purchases to demonstrate prestige and social validation. In the same way, Yunus et al. (2023) concluded that the Pakistani consumers' growing trend to buy the prestigious brands was for them to build positive social image and establish their social identity on digital platforms. The results suggest that consumers seeking exclusivity would like to receive a recognition and approval from the social environment in an ideal way.

Hence, there is reason to believe that consumers who are more 'snobbish' would have a higher need for social approval.

H85: Snob effect has a significant positive effect on need for social approval.

The more snobbier consumers are, more social comparison they will make: "exclusivity" is a continuous process, and consumers will have to constantly monitor the consumption of others and social status as they go along. Consumers have to see if the product remains scarce enough and remains a symbol, to retain its symbolic value. This implies that the person's consumption culture is snobbing, that is, he/she compares what he/she owns, how he lives and how successful he/she is with others regularly.

Social Comparison Theory says that individuals compare themselves to other individuals that are relevant to them (Festinger, 1954). In the realm of luxury and prestige consumption, these comparisons take on greater significance as consumers' wish to differentiate themselves from

the masses is further enhanced by the desire to further stress their relative social superiority. As for the value of exclusive products, Leibenstein (1950) explained that it is based on the capacity to distinguish consumers from others and a constant social comparison is an integral part of "snob oriented consumption.

Empirical evidence also serves to show that this relationship exists. When consumers buy products that are exclusive to them, they actively compare themselves with others in order to keep them distinct from others (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012). Likewise, Burnasheva and Suh (2021) discovered that those who engage in symbolic consumption online are more likely to make self-references to other people through tangible symbols of prestige such as brand products, while Yunus et al. (2023) found that in Pakistan consumers are more likely to make self-references on social media platforms when they do so through such symbolic references as the brand product to others in terms of social success. Thus, the consumers with a higher snob attitude will be estimated to have higher social comparison.

H86: Snob effect has a significant positive effect on social comparison.

2.3.8. Status Anxiety

Status anxiety is the state of the consumer that is always concerned and relates to the fear of being judged by others as a result of his or her socioeconomic status (de Botton, 2004). People with an anxious feeling of status are constantly checking and comparing them with others to determine whether they have enough social status, wealth, or recognition as compared to others. This drives them to more and more engage in behaviour which improves their appearance and their social standing.

In the perspective of Social Comparison Theory, status anxiety is a result of the tendency of individuals to compare themselves with individuals in higher status groups with regard to success, possessions, and social status. Such comparisons lead to feelings of lack, which in turn leads the consumer to feel bad about themselves in terms of their social status and therefore to desire symbolic products that could indicate his or her prestige and success. Collectivist societies like Pakistan, with high importance attached to family reputation, social recognition and community expectations are believed to be especially important in their effect on conspicuous consumption, such that status anxiety should be particularly important in these societies.

People with a higher status anxiety are more likely to have a high need for social approval in that they desire to be accepted, respected and positively evaluated by others. Those who don't wish to be anxious about their social standing try to appease this relative uncertainty by relying on outside signs. So, they are more willing to buy products that help them to have a good reputation, and gain social acceptance.

Fears of social judgment and fear of the loss of status create a status anxiety, de Botton (2004) argues. Similarly, Social Comparison Theory suggests that when a person has a lack of self-efficacy in regards to social status, they seek out others to confirm their social status (Festinger, 1954). Then, products that represent success become significant means by which consumers get approved and solidify their social worth.

This correlation is based on empirical evidence. The findings mentioned by Chen et al. (2022) indicated that status anxiety positively mediates the relationship between subjective social class and conspicuous consumption, which meant that consumers' behaviours to buy socially recognised products may be motivated by status anxiety. Likewise, Naz and Ahmad (2026) found social prestige to be one of the key determinants influencing the ceremonial spending of Pakistanis. Thus, one would expect that consumers with higher status anxiety will express a higher need for social approval.

H87: Status anxiety has a significant positive effect on need for social approval.

Therefore, socially anxious consumers are likely to engage more in social comparison frequently, as they are always measuring and comparing their social statuses with others' success, lifestyle and possessions. Those who wish to keep or develop their status will tend to compare themselves to others to see if they have appropriate symbols of success.

Social Comparison Theory proposes that people's perceptions about their social status depend on their social comparison to appropriate reference groups. Individuals who suffer from status anxiety, then, are more attuned to visible signals for prestige and success that are being shown by others. The comparison-oriented consumption behavior is further reinforced by this process.

This is further confirmed with empirical evidence. In their study, Chen et al. (2022) found that low social class perceptions increased status anxiety through the process of upward social comparison. Similarly, in their study, Naz and Ahmad (2026) discovered that customers

frequently make comparisons with the standards of the community and are expected to spend more on events they feel they would be compared to in the community.

Therefore, one would expect that individuals who have higher status anxiety would engage in greater social comparisons.

H88: Status anxiety has a significant positive effect on social comparison.

2.3.9. Need for Social Approval

Need for social approval is the motivation to gain acceptance, recognition and favourable evaluations from the significant other through conforming to socially desirable expectations and behaviours (Bearden et al, 1989). Consumers who are more conscious for gaining social approval are more expected to change their buying behavior to meet the expectations of family members and peers and of larger social groups. These people do not make consumption decisions based on personal preference alone but rather look for products that will help them to build a positive impression of themselves in the eyes of others.

Social Influence theory suggests that people often conform to attitudes and actions to gain acceptance and to prevent rejection (Bearden et al., 1989). This thus brings an increasing motivation to buy products which are socially approved for consumers who have a higher need for social approval, are prestigious and can communicate desirable social identities. Social approval is likely to have a strong effect on status-oriented consumption in collectivist societies like Pakistan where the reputation of the family and the acceptance of the community are given a great deal of importance when it comes to influencing consumers' purchasing behavior.

It is hypothesized that consumers who have a more social approval oriented need will be more likely to show higher status consumption as prestigious products serve as visible products that will help them gain approval among others and improve their image. Consumers often buy the status brands as much for the meaning they convey to others as for their utilitarian purpose.

Eastman et al. (1999) view status consumption as a consumer's desire to possess a product that will signal their improved social position in a way that can be seen by others. Similarly, Bearden et al. (1989) suggested that the very people who are highly susceptible to interpersonal influence tend to choose products that have positive assessments from their interpersonal

groups. Increasingly consumers are looking for approval from others and therefore are more apt to buy prestige and higher social status brands.

This is supported by empirical evidence. When it comes to online consumption, consumers often resorted to symbolic consumption to gain social recognition from high-quality products, according to Burnasheva and Suh (2021). Likewise, Yunus et al. (2023) found that Pakistani consumers had started buying branded products to enhance their public image and to secure acceptance from their online social networks. Thus, the social approval-driven consumers are predicted to show more status consumption.

H89: Need for social approval has a significant positive effect on status consumption.

Consumers with a higher social approval need are also hypothesized to be more likely to buy products through conspicuous consumption as they have more chances of being admired, recognized, and positively evaluated by others when they purchase prestigious products. Conspicuous consumption is always visible, which makes it a convenient means of consumers expressing desirable identities and of receiving external confirmation.

Veblen (1899) first theorized that through conspicuous consumption people display their wealth and social status in the public sphere. It has been argued more recently that consumers often buy status products not for their utilitarian function, but because of the social recognition they produce (Eastman et al., 1999). People who want others' approval should then be seen as making conspicuous purchases that make them look good.

To support this argument, Burnasheva and Suh (2021) found that consumers purposefully publicized prestigious products on online platforms in order to gain positive evaluations from others. Similarly, Yunus et al. (2023) revealed that Pakistani consumers are now more inclined to post positive identities of these brands on social media. Thus, it is hypothesized that social approval-needing individuals will be more likely to exhibit the behavior of conspicuous consumption.

H90: Need for social approval has a significant positive effect on conspicuous consumption.

2.3.10. Social Comparison

Social comparison involves individuals comparing themselves to other "relevant others" (Festinger, 1954) in terms of their abilities, achievements, possessions, and social status. These comparisons allow people to measure themselves against others and have an impact on their attitudes, aspirations and purchasing behaviors. Social comparison is a phenomenon used to promote one to question if their possessions meet the desired social identity and status.

Social Comparison Theory states that consumers regularly compare themselves to others, aspirational groups, and other people that have an influence on them. Such comparisons often push consumers into buying items that can help them close the perceived social gaps and create a positive impression in public (Festinger, 1954). As such, social comparison is one of the most significant psychological processes that can be said to underlie symbolic and conspicuous consumption.

Higher levels of social comparison are expected to be associated with higher levels of status consumption: People who compare themselves to more successful and prestigious individuals will be more motivated to consume items that will remind them of success and prestige. Consumers often buy status brands to minimize their differences from the aspirational groups.

Festinger (1954) suggested that a comparison upward in social status would motivate a person to enhance his or her perceived status, and Eastman et al. (1999) explained that a "status-consumption" strategy would allow consumers to "communicate social prestige" through tangible possession. As a result, people who are often put to the test with comparison opportunities are more likely to be motivated to buy products that are considered to be high status.

This has been confirmed by empirical evidence. Burnasheva and Suh (2021) found that social comparison was a significant influence on symbolic consumption online; Yunus et al. (2023) found that comparisons of brands increased on social media platforms among consumers in Pakistan, and thus strengthened their status oriented purchasing behaviors.

Hence, it is hypothesized that consumers who engage in more social comparison will have higher levels of status consumption.

H91: Social comparison has a significant positive effect on status consumption.

Consumers' social comparison is also predicted to be correlated with more conspicuous consumption as visible buying behavior allows consumers to minimize their perceived social distance and demonstrate similar achievement. Precious products come to play a significant part in how people act towards upwards comparisons and how they validate good social identities.

As Veblen pointed out in 1899, conspicuous consumption serves as a type of “signal of wealth and social prestige” that is “visible.” Social Comparison Theory also implies that people constantly compare themselves and that products that are publicly displayed are key cues to their social status (Festinger, 1954).

This argument was supported by Burnasheva and Suh (2021), who discovered that social comparison played a significant role in the conspicuous consumption of products online, and Yunus et al. (2023) uncovered that Pakistani consumers often bought brands to create favourable social comparisons online. Hence, consumers who engage in more social comparison should exhibit more conspicuous consumption.

H92: Social comparison has a significant positive effect on conspicuous consumption.

2.3.11. Status Consumption

Status-consumption is thus distinct from conspicuous consumption—the exterior and public demonstration of such a behaviour; consumers with a high status-consumption orientation are likely to demonstrate this motivation in overt conspicuous purchasing and display behaviour (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Chan et al., 2015). Status consumption as an antecedent to conspicuous consumption has an important motivational dimension because it is separated from conspicuous consumption in terms of internal motivational state, and not synonymous with nor interchangeable with, conspicuous consumption. This distinction between attitude and behaviour follows the general literature on consumer-behaviour, where a consistent attitude to behave, such as the need for social approval and social comparison variables developed in H9 – H10, is said to require a situation or person to trigger expression of the behaviour (e.g. Eastman, Goldsmith and Flynn, 1999 as cited in O'Cass and McEwen, 2004).

This correlation has been directly supported by the empirical data since then. Sahin and Nasir (2022) conducted a large-scale study and found that both status consumption and conspicuous

consumption were positively related to symbolic status of a consumer, while the higher the score of a consumer in the status consumption, the higher was the score systematically in the conspicuous consumption, particularly when the susceptibility to normative interpersonal influence was high. Likewise, Hamdani, Gautama So, Maulana and Furinto (2024) conducted research with 474 luxury-fashion consumers, and concluded that conspicuous signaling online was a positive predictor of conspicuous signaling offline, while both online and offline conspicuous signaling predicted additional, repeated conspicuous signaling, showing how a motivational orientation toward status becomes self-reinforcing when enacted. The study by Dev, Podoshen and Shahzad (2018) in particular revealed that the underlying status and materialistic orientations of the consumers were found to hold high correlation with their observed conspicuousness of consumption behaviour whereas Naz and Ahmad (2026) reported that the materialistic status driven motives of middle-class Pakistani parents were found to reflect on their observed conspicuous consumption, in the form of ceremonial spending.

H93: Status consumption has a significant positive effect on conspicuous consumption.

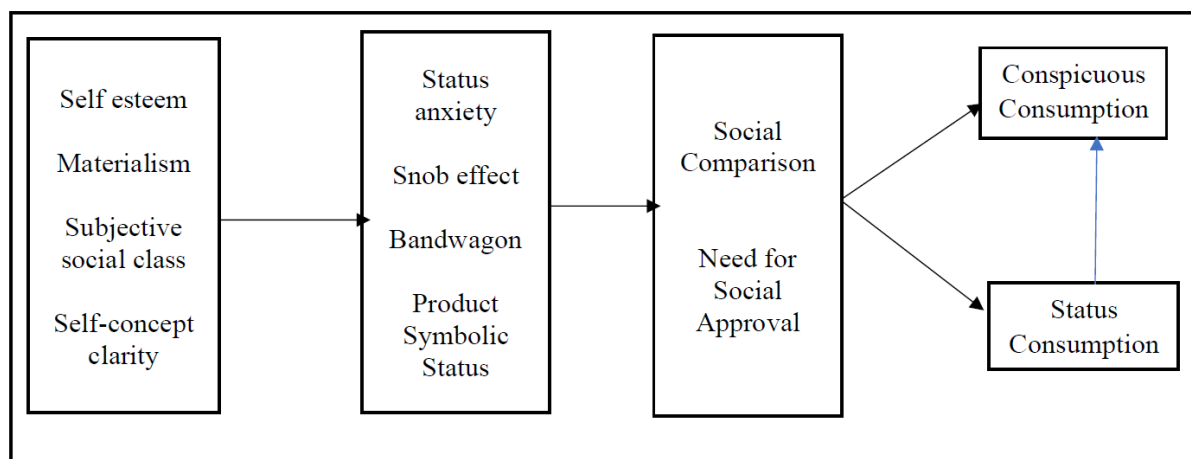


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A cross-sectional, single time point survey was employed. The data were gathered only once per subject, as was the case in most published researches of status and conspicuous consumption, and as seemed appropriate for the present study, which sought to test structural relations between constructs at a specific time and not to model change. The unit of analysis is the consumer.

3.2. Population and Sampling

3.2.1. Target Population

The target population includes adult consumers (20-55 years) of both sexes of Pakistan with intermediate to higher level education (HSSC or equivalent) and who have an independent or household influence in making consumption decisions. The lower age limit of 20 was imposed to avoid respondents who were still heavily reliant on their parents' income, and the upper age limit of 55 captured the established consumer, the working age and the business owner, consistent with the study's focus on a broad cross-section of consumers, and not just students or younger consumers (see Section 1.2).

3.2.2. Sampling Technique

Due to the unavailability of the complete and accessible sampling frame of Pakistani consumers who falls under the eligibility criteria, a non-probability sampling approach was conducted which comprised of purposive and snowball sampling. The first stage of the sampling was purposive sampling to achieve the screening criteria (age range, minimum qualification, and independent consumption behaviour) and to achieve reasonable diversity in cities (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016), income and occupation. The next eligible contact was then requested to identify additional eligible contacts (snowball sampling; Parker, Scott, & Geddes, 2019). This approach has been used extensively in consumer behavior studies involving populations without sampling frames, and has proven to be an effective way to increase response candour and response rates for topics that relate to one's self-image, such as status and conspicuous consumption.

3.2.3 Sample Size

Finally, 500 usable responses were collected. This sample size is well above the minimum size that is usually recommended for a PLS path model of this complexity, such as the “10-times rule” (ten observations per largest number of structural paths pointing at a single construct) (Hair et al., 2019; Kock & Hadaya, 2018). In choosing the value of 500, a margin of safety for any data that was not complete or consistent was built in, to support subgroup comparisons across cities, age bands and occupational categories, and to increase the stability of bootstrapped significance estimates in the structural model.

3.2.4 Geographic Coverage

In order to capture the national picture as stated in Chapter 1, respondents were selected from across various major cities in Pakistan that include Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Islamabad, Multan, Peshawar and Quetta that are located in all four provinces of Pakistan along with the federal capital. The sampling was planned to reflect geographic variation within the region, and urban-centre variation in exposure to international brands, digital platforms, and status-consumption norms, and not just limited to a one-metropolitan area.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data was gathered using a dual mode approach (online and offline) to ensure maximum reach and minimise coverage bias from using one mode of data collection. A structured web-based questionnaire was sent on social media, professional and community networks and direct messaging, following the study's snowball referral data collection approach. The offline questionnaire is the same instrument as the online questionnaire, but was completed on paper in the target cities, typically in public and semi-public locations like workplaces, shopping areas, and residential communities, and to a certain extent also in the homes of the homemaker and older-age segments of the sample. The screening questions and construct items, response scale and estimated completion time were identical in both versions, which were twelve to fifteen minutes. All answers were reviewed for completeness, attention checking, and straight-lining (same answers in all items) before being added to the final sample of 500 cases.

3.4 Respondent Screening Criteria

- Age: between 20 and 55 years.
- Gender: Both male and female respondents were eligible, there was no set limit for either gender.
- Education: Intermediate Level or above (Higher Secondary School Certificate/A-Levels or equivalent) to ensure respondents were able to read and meaningfully interpret survey questions that used a Likert Scale without support.
- Residence: living in one of the target cities of Pakistan during data collection.
- Consumption role: personally influence or be responsible for household or personal buying decision.

3.5. Research Instrument

The survey was based on a two-part structured, self-administered questionnaire. Demographic information pertaining to the respondents was collected in Section A, such as age, sex, city, level of education, occupation category, and approximate monthly household income (as a model construct). The 12 latent constructs measured in this research were adapted from existing validated scales from the marketing and consumer psychology literature (see Section 3.8), and were measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), as per with the majority of the adapted scales which used this response format. The study's minimum qualification screening criterion was the language of instruction, so the online version of the instruments was administered in the English language; the offline paper version was translated and back translated into Urdu to suit the language of respondents more comfortable with the national language.

3.6. Operationalisation of constructs Measurement scales

Table 3.1 provides a summary of the source scale used for the 12 constructs in this study.=

Table 1: Measurement Scales and Sources

Construct	Items	Source
Self-Esteem (SEST)	5	Heatherton & Polivy (1991)
Materialism (MAT)	6	Richins (2004)
Subjective Social Class (SSCL)	5	Heatherton & Polivy (1991)*
Self-Concept Clarity (SFCC)	5–8	Campbell et al. (1996)
Status Anxiety (STAX)	5	Day & Fiske (2016)
Snob Effect (SNEF)	3–4	Ruvio et al. (2008)
Bandwagon Effect (BWEF)	3–4	Bearden et al. (1989)
Product Symbolic Status (PDSS)	4	Sahin & Nasir (2022)
Need for Social Approval (NSAP)	4	Martin (1984)
Conspicuous Consumption (CONS)	5	Roy Chaudhuri, Mazumdar, & Ghoshal (2011)
Status Consumption (STAT)	5	Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn (1999)

3.7. Pilot Testing

The instrument was pilot tested with 30 respondents who were sampled from the target population to determine the clarity of the items, the average time for completing the instrument

and the preliminary internal consistency. Changes were made to the minor wording that was identified as being ambiguous or culturally inappropriate by pilot respondents and then the completed instrument was used for full data collection. Not all pilot responses were part of the 500 responses that were part of the final analytical sample.

3.8. Data Analysis Technique

The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS version 3 was used to analyze the data (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). The primary reason for the use of PLS-SEM was that the research model is relatively complex in nature, which is ideal for variance-based estimation of the model because the primary purpose of the study is to predict and explain the variance in the endogenous constructs of the study (social comparison, need for social approval, conspicuous consumption and status consumption) (Hair et al., 2019). Second, the present study did not involve the strict confirmatory test of an already established model structure, but rather involved forecasting and explaining the variance of the endogenous constructs in the research model (social comparison, need for social approval, conspicuous consumption and status consumption) (Hair et al., 2019). Third, a few of the adapted scales were reflective items of established scales which are not confirmed in the Pakistani context in advance, making PLS-SEM more robust because of the less restrictive distributional assumptions it contains (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2022; Hair & Alamer, 2022).

3.9. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent: Before administered the questionnaire, a brief statement was given to each respondent describing why the study is being conducted, voluntary nature of participation and its anticipated time was presented.

The data collection process ensured confidentiality and anonymity: no name, contact number or CNIC was taken, responses were coded numerically and kept securely.

Voluntary participation and right to withdraw: respondents were assured that they could either stop the survey at any time or withdraw entirely without any consequences.

Data use: respondents were informed that the data would only be used for research purpose in aggregation with all respondents

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 2:

Demographics		Frequency	Mean	St. Deviation
Gender	Male	221	1.56	0.5
	Female	279		
Age	18 to 25	87	2.54	1.03
	26 to 34	167		
	35 to 44	143		
	45 to 55	95		
	55 onwards	8		
Occupation	Unemployed	17	4.4	1.33
	Student	21		
	Homemaker	76		
	Business Owner	117		
	Private Sector Employee	213		
	Government Sector Employee	13		
	Freelance/Consultant	43		
Qualification	Less than Matric	3	4.46	0.76
	Matric / O-level	5		
	Intermediate / A-level	15		
	Bachelors	242		
	Masters	231		
	M.Phil	7		
	Ph.D	9		
Marital Status	Single	108	2.38	1.01
	Married	147		
	Married with Kids	218		
	Divorced	8		
	Widow	11		
	Divorced/Widow with Kids	8		
Income Range	30,000 to 50,000	32	4.2	1.6
	50,001 to 80,000	51		
	80,001 to 100,000	66		
	100,001 to 150,000	74		
	150,001 to 200,000	98		
	200,000 and above	127		

Of the 500 subjects, 55.8% were female and 44.2% were male indicating that the female population was marginally higher. Most respondents were aged 26–34 years (33.4%), followed by 35–44 years (28.6%). As far as occupation is concerned, the number of private sector workers (42.6%) was the highest, followed by those who owned businesses (23.4%). The

sample was highly educated, as most of the respondents had a Bachelor's (47.3%) or Master's (45.1%) degree. Regarding marital status, married children made up 43.6% followed by married men (29.4%) and single (21.6%). When it came to income, the largest group was those who reported earning 200,000 and above (28.3% of the reported income responses). The sample was mostly females, middle age, high education level, private employment and married.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Questions		Descriptive Statistics		Confirmatory Factor Analysis		
				s.d	Loadings	T Stat	P Values
Bandwagon Effect	1	I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same fashion products that others purchase		0.07	0.936	124.957	0.00
	2	If I want to be like someone I often to buy the same luxury products that they buy.	0.899	0.013	0.900	69.584	0.00
	3	To make sure I buy the right products I often observe what others are buying and using	0.896	0.012	0.896	74.318	0.00
Conspicuous Consumption	1	It says something to people around me when I buy a high priced brand	0.73	0.039	0.730	18.669	0.00
	2	I buy some products because I want to show others that I am wealthy	0.758	0.045	0.770	17.218	0.00
	3	Others wish they could match my eyes for beauty and taste	0.689	0.077	0.688	8.883	0.00
	4	By choosing a product having an exotic look and design, I show my friends that I am different	0.656	0.085	0.655	7.71	0.00
	5	I choose products or brands to create my own style that everybody admires	0.832	0.03	0.839	28.03	0.00
Materialism	1	I admire people who own expensive cars, homes, and clothes.	0.833	0.014	0.834	59.514	0.00
	2	I like to own things that impress people.	0.844	0.019	0.843	44.873	0.00
	3	My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.	0.832	0.022	0.831	38.439	0.00
Need For Social	1	I often change my opinion (or the way I do things) in order to please someone else.	0.966	0.04	0.965	234.629	0.00

Approval	2	In order to get along and be liked, I tend to be what people expect of me.	0.929	0.011	0.929	84.817	0.000
	3	I am willing to argue only if I know that my friends will back me up.	0.95	0.006	0.949	151.137	0.000
	4	I usually change my position when people disagree with me.	0.853	0.016	0.852	53.585	0.000
Product Symbolic Status	1	When others see me using my fashion products in social environments, it reveals information about my lifestyle.	0.971	0.003	0.971	316.602	0.000
	2	Using my choice of fashion products creates a good impression on others about me.	0.974	0.003	0.974	374.911	0.000
	3	When I use fashion products of my choice, I become visible to others in social environments.	0.975	0.002	0.975	420.146	0.000
	4	My owned fashion products reflect the kind of person I see myself to be	0.948	0.004	0.948	263.349	0.000
Social Comparison	1	I often compare myself with others with respect to what I have accomplished in life	0.708	0.156	0.757	4.836	0.000
	2	I often try to find out what others think who face similar problems as I face	0.804	0.153	0.863	5.624	0.000
	3	I always like to know what others in a similar situation would do	0.573	0.176	0.601	3.416	0.001
	4	If I want to learn more about something, I try to find out what others think about it	0.531	0.179	0.515	2.873	0.004
Self Esteem	1	I feel confident about my abilities.	0.583	0.059	0.646	9.838	0.000
	2	I feel that others respect and admire me.	0.647	0.055	0.951	11.806	0.000
	3	I feel good about myself.	0.951	0.008	0.971	123.21	0.000
	4	I feel concerned about the impression I am making.	0.97	0.006	0.963	160.652	0.000
	5	I feel like I'm not doing well.	0.962	0.006	0.681	170.739	0.000
Self Concept Clarity	1	My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another	0.908	0.011	0.908	83.089	0.000
	2	On one day I might have one opinion of myself and on another day, I might have a different opinion	0.837	0.018	0.838	47.252	0.000

	3	Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be	0.836	0.015	0.836	55.554	0.000
Snob Effect	1	When a fashion product/brand I own becomes popular among the general population, I begin to use it less	0.843	0.019	0.844	44.489	0.000
	2	I often try to avoid fashion products/brand that I know are bought by the general population	0.902	0.001	0.902	94.669	0.000
	3	I dislike products/brand that are customarily bought by everyone	0.901	0.012	0.901	73.846	0.000
Subjective Social Class	1	I feel like I know what it's like to belong to a high social class.	0.848	0.021	0.849	39.938	0.000
	2	I feel like I am part of the elite group in society.	0.899	0.017	0.890	52.269	0.000
	3	I feel like I can identify with the lives of the rich.	0.878	0.018	0.879	47.773	0.000
	4	I feel like I am part of with those who live a life of wealth and privilege.	0.873	0.018	0.874	48.125	0.000
Status Consumption	1	I feel like I am part of the elite.	0.726	0.014	0.726	53.042	0.000
	2	I would buy a product just because it has status.	0.909	0.001	0.910	94.14	0.000
	3	I am interested in new products with status.	0.909	0.011	0.909	79.194	0.000
	4	I would pay more for a product if it had status.	0.936	0.006	0.936	143.999	0.000
	5	The status of a product is pertinent to me	0.923	0.001	0.923	95.568	0.000
Status Anxiety	1	A product is more valuable to me if it has some snob appeal	0.862	0.017	0.862	49.701	0.000
	2	I sometimes worry that I might become lower in social standing.	0.949	0.017	0.951	57.532	0.000
	3	I worry that my social status will not change	0.959	0.018	0.963	54.223	0.000
	4	I worry that my social status will go down	0.969	0.009	0.969	110.662	0.000

4.2. Reliability and Validity Analysis

Table 4: Reliability & Validity Analysis

Reliability & Convergent Validity				
	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Bandwagon Effect	0.897	0.897	0.936	0.83
Conspicuous Consumption	0.813	0.858	0.857	0.546
Materialism	0.788	0.802	0.874	0.699
Need for Social Approval	0.943	0.944	0.96	0.856
Product Symbolic Status	0.977	0.977	0.983	0.935
Self Concept Clarity	0.825	0.828	0.896	0.742
Self Esteem	0.914	1.003	0.92	0.706
Snob Effect	0.858	0.864	0.914	0.779
Social Comparison	0.664	0.707	0.785	0.486
Status Anxiety	0.959	0.975	0.973	0.923
Status Consumption	0.947	0.95	0.959	0.825
Subjective Social Class	0.907	0.971	0.926	0.716

4.2.1. Reliability and Convergent Validity

The internal consistency of the measurement models were assessed using the Cronbach's alpha (α), rho_A, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) as presented in Table 2. Hair et al. (2022), Dijkstra and Henseler (2015) and Sarstedt et al. (2022) have proposed acceptable thresholds of Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$, rho_A ≥ 0.70 , Composite Reliability (CR) between 0.70 and 0.95 and AVE ≥ 0.50 . The results of these criteria suggest adequate measurement of the variance in the level of the indicators for the constructs and reliable measurement of them.

Results indicate that almost all constructs have excellent ICR. The Cronbach's alpha values for the various scales range from a low of 0.788 to a high of 0.977 with the exception of the Social Comparison scale that has a score of 0.664 and is to some extent below the recommended value of 0.70. However, this value is close to the acceptable value and can be accepted especially in exploratory or behavioral research where values larger than 0.60 is acceptable. Furthermore, the construct has good reliability, since the value of the rho_A for Social Comparison is 0.707 (above the minimum required value).

Similarly, the Composite Reliability (CR) values for all constructs vary from 0.785 to 0.983, indicating good internal consistency for the constructs. All the CR values are below the critical

value of 0.95, so they are very high reliability except for Product Symbolic Status (0.983) and Status Anxiety (0.973). Reliabilities, while very high, may sometimes indicate redundancy in the items but as long as the items are measuring different aspects of the construct acceptable reliabilities can be obtained.

As for convergent validity, the values of AVE are between 0.486 and 0.935. All but one of the 12 constructs are above the recommended level of 0.50, suggesting that levels of variance in the observed indicators explained by each of the latent constructs is greater than half. The exception is Social Comparison that has an AVE of 0.486, just below the recommended AVE of 0.50. Convergent validity for the Composite Reliability (CR) of 0.785, however, is above the usually accepted threshold ($CR \geq 0.70$) so as convergent validity may be considered acceptable. The guidelines of Fornell and Larcker (1981), and later PLS-SEM, however, suggest that if AVE is just below 0.50, but Composite Reliability is above 0.60–0.70, then the construct can be retained as items are deemed “sufficient” reliable.

The results showed the overall high internal consistency reliability, and good convergent validity. All constructs exceed the recommended PLS-SEM criterion, and besides Social Comparison, which is only marginally below, the other constructs are above the recommended level. Apart from the marginally low AVE and Cronbach's alpha of Social Comparison, all constructs exceed the recommended PLS-SEM criterion. Therefore, the measurement model has been judged to be reliable and suitable for the test of the model and testing the hypotheses.

Table 5: Fornier Larcker Criterion

Fornier- Larcker Criterion												
	Bandwagon Effect	Conspicuous Consumption	Materialism	Need for Social Approval	Product Symbolic Status	Self Concept Clarity	Self Esteem	Snob Effect	Social Comparison	Status Anxiety	Status Consumption	Subjective Social Class
Bandwagon Effect	0.911											
Conspicuous Consumption	0.391	0.739										
Materialism	0.485	0.532	0.836									
Need for Social Approval	0.101	0.168	0.176	0.925								
Product Symbolic Status	0.308	0.075	0.052	0.763	0.967							
Self Concept Clarity	0.611	0.581	0.743	0.181	0.021	0.862						
Self Esteem	0.282	0.094	0.017	0.282	0.413	0.012	0.84					
Snob Effect	0.459	0.55	0.662	0.122	0.004	0.753	0.007	0.883				
Social Comparison	-0.013	0.064	0.015	0.083	0.11	0.008	0.081	0.028	0.697			
Status Anxiety	-0.033	0.014	0.046	-0.024	-0.062	0.008	-0.02	0.012	0.053	0.961		
Status Consumption	-0.121	0.021	0.03	0.74	0.6	0.012	0.198	0.017	0.045	0.045	0.908	
Subjective Social Class	0.356	0.08	0.015	0.512	0.727	-0.01	0.847	-0.009	0.094	-0.067	0.355	0.846

4.3. Discriminant Validity Assessment

To verify the discriminant validity, the discriminant criterion of Fornell–Larcker was computed and presented in the table (X) and it showed that the constructs were indeed different from each other in an empirical sense. Discriminant validity occurs when the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (on the diagonal) is larger than all the other correlations between constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). This criterion is the ability to explain a larger proportion of the variance in the indicators than in other latent variables. There are still warnings in the PLS-SEM literature against using the Fornell–Larcker criterion as the only criterion for discriminant validity, and should be used in conjunction with the ratio of the HTMT (Hair et al., 2022; Henseler et al., 2015).

All constructs meet the Fornell–Larcker criterion, as revealed by the results. The diagonal elements (the square roots of AVE) are higher than the inter-construct correlations (between the symbols) and range from 0.697 (Social Comparison) to 0.967 (Product Symbolic Status). The coefficient of the AVE for Bandwagon Effect is, for instance, higher than any other construct's correlation with it, which is 0.413 with Conspicuous Consumption. Likewise, the diagonal value of Conspicuous Consumption is 0.739, which is higher than the second largest correlation value, which is Snob Effect (0.612). For all other constructs, this is also the case: Materialism, Need for Social Approval, Product Symbolic Status, Self-Concept Clarity, Self-Esteem, Snob Effect, Social Comparison, status anxiety, status consumption and subjective social class.

Positive relationships are relatively high but not exceeding the square root of the AVE of the constructs, for other constructs, such as Conspicuous Consumption ($r = 0.612$), Snob Effect ($r = 0.847$), and Product Symbolic Status and Subjective Social Class ($r = 0.727$). This results in each construct representing more variation in its indicators than does the other constructs, which indicates good discriminant validity.

Table 6: Heterotrait Monotrait Ratio

	HTMT											
	Bandwagon Effect	Conspicuous Consumption	Materialism	Need for Social Approval	Product Symbolic Status	Self Concept Clarity	Self Esteem	Snob Effect	Social Comparison	Status Anxiety	Status Consumption	Subjective Social Class
Bandwagon Effect												
Conspicuous Consumption	0.413											
Materialism	0.56	0.612										
Need for Social Approval	0.109	0.164	0.209									
Product Symbolic Status	0.329	0.074	0.069	0.792								
Self Concept Clarity	0.711	0.656	0.898	0.208	0.031							
Self Esteem	0.23	0.087	0.062	0.244	0.342	0.052						
Snob Effect	0.521	0.643	0.788	0.139	0.031	0.892	0.033					
Social Comparison	0.077	0.101	0.082	0.091	0.117	0.077	0.087	0.055				
Status Anxiety	0.038	0.055	0.055	0.062	0.063	0.03	0.037	0.03	0.077			
Status Consumption	0.131	0.036	0.051	0.78	0.623	0.031	0.177	0.038	0.055	0.065		
Subjective Social Class	0.385	0.083	0.058	0.459	0.657	0.041	0.877	0.025	0.105	0.062	0.302	

Above Table presents one of the strictest methods for assessing discriminant validity in PLS-SEM, called the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). According to Henseler et al. (2015) the value of the HTMT should not be higher than 0.90 for conceptually alike constructs and 0.85 for conceptually different constructs. Hair et al. (2022) recommend that values < 0.90 be regarded as acceptable discriminant validity.

The results of the HTMT show that all pairs of constructs achieve the recommended level of 0.90. Most of the HTMT values are significantly lower than 0.85, showing that there is a considerable difference between the constructs. Furthermore, all the correlation coefficients among all the pairs of the factors expected to be independent from each other are significantly below the suggested value of 0.85, which shows good discriminant validity: Bandwagon Effect and Conspicuous Consumption (0.413); Materialism and Need for Social Approval (0.209); Snob Effect and Status Anxiety (0.087); and Status Consumption and Subjective Social Class (0.102).

The highest HTMT value between the variables is found between Self-Concept Clarity and Self-Esteem (0.892) and between Self-Esteem and Subjective Social Class (0.877). The values are not quite as great as the recommended value of 0.90, but are comparatively high (close to 0.90), thus the constructs are close together, but there is still an empirical difference. In the same way, the correlation between Need for Social Approval and Self-Concept Clarity (0.792) is within the acceptable level.

4.4. Hypotheses Assessment:

Table 7: hypothesis assessment

Hy po th esi s	Path	β (O)	t- val ue	p- valu e	Result
H1	Self-Esteem → Bandwagon Effect	-0.113	2.192	0.029	Supporte d
H2	Self-Esteem → Product Symbolic Status	-0.721	9.723	0.000	Supporte d
H3	Self-Esteem → Snob Effect	0.002	0.043	0.966	Not supported
H4	Self-Esteem → Status Anxiety	0.134	1.733	0.084	Not supported
H5	SE → Bandwagon → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption	0.010	1.824	0.069	Not supported
H6	SE → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption	-0.202	4.691	0.000	Supporte d
H7	SE → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.042	0.966	Not supported
H8	SE → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Conspicuous Consumption	0.001	0.405	0.685	Not supported
H9	SE → Bandwagon → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.556	0.579	Not supported
H10	SE → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption	-0.005	0.776	0.438	Not supported
H11	SE → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.019	0.985	Not supported
H12	SE → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.413	0.680	Not supported
H13	SE → Bandwagon → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	-0.005	1.763	0.078	Not supported
H14	SE → Product Symbolic Status → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.102	3.215	0.001	Supporte d
H15	SE → Snob Effect → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.043	0.966	Not supported
H16	SE → Status Anxiety → Need for Social Approval → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.391	0.696	Not supported
H17	SE → Bandwagon → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.366	0.714	Not supported
H18	SE → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.468	0.640	Not supported
H19	SE → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.015	0.988	Not supported
H20	SE → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.293	0.770	Not supported

4.4.1. H1–H4

Direct Effects of Self-Esteem. The results had confirmed the following hypothesis, H1, which states that self-esteem has a significant negative effect on the bandwagon effect ($\beta = -0.113$, $t = 2.192$, $p = 0.029$). This suggests that the people with higher self-esteem are less inclined to act in a conformist way while purchasing. Similarly, self-esteem also had a significant negative effect on product symbolic status ($\beta = -0.721$, $t = 9.723$, $p < 0.001$), which supports H2, and suggests that the higher a person's self-esteem the less meaning he or she will give to products as social identity or prestige symbols. However, self-esteem did not significantly influence the snob effect ($\beta = 0.002$, $t = 0.043$, $p = 0.966$) or status anxiety ($\beta = 0.134$, $t = 1.733$, $p = 0.084$); therefore, H3 and H4 were not supported.

4.4.2. H5 - H12

Serial Mediation through Need for Social Approval and Social Comparison. The serial mediation hypothesis (H5–H12) suggests that the NfSA and SCA act as mediators between the variables. According to the serial mediation hypothesis (H5–H12), the NfSA and SCA mediate the relationship between the variables. Of the indirect relationships to conspicuous consumption, only H6 was supported. The symbolic status of the product and need for social approval had a significant indirect effect on conspicuous consumption, and were negatively correlated with self-esteem, respectively ($\beta = -0.202$, $t = 4.691$, $p < 0.001$). This discovery implies that people with higher-esteem are less prone to viewing products as symbols of status which in turn leads to lesser need for social accolades and hence lesser conspicuous consumption. The other indirect paths related to the bandwagon effect, the snob effect, status anxiety and social comparison (H5 and H7–H12) were not supported as statistical non-significant.

4.4.3. H13–H20

Extended Serial Mediation through Status Consumption. Status consumption was supported for only the extended serial mediation model (H14). A significant positive indirect path was found for the relationship between self-esteem and conspicuous consumption via product symbolic status to the need for social approval and then to status consumption ($\beta = 0.102$, $t = 3.215$, $p = 0.001$). This evidence highlights the importance of symbolic product perceptions and social affirmation as significant cues to translate self-esteem into status-oriented purchase and finally as conspicuous consumption. There was no statistical significance among the other

extended mediation hypotheses (H13 and H15–H20) related to the bandwagon effect, snob effect, status anxiety, and social comparison, which suggested that they could not explain the relationship between self-esteem and conspicuous consumption.

Table 8

Hypothesis	Path	β (O)	t-value	p-value	Result
H21	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon Effect	0.046	1.124	0.261	Not supported
H22	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status	0.025	0.700	0.484	Not supported
H23	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect	0.228	4.480	0.000	Supported
H24	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety	0.098	1.581	0.115	Not supported
H25	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.004	1.001	0.318	Not supported
H26	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.007	0.669	0.504	Not supported
H27	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.018	2.709	0.007	Supported
H28	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.001	0.403	0.687	Not supported
H29	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.437	0.663	Not supported
H30	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.406	0.685	Not supported
H31	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.001	0.500	0.617	Not supported
H32	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.410	0.682	Not supported
H33	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.002	0.954	0.341	Not supported
H34	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.003	0.662	0.508	Not supported
H35	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.009	2.322	0.021	Supported
H36	Materialism $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.393	0.694	Not supported

H37	Materialism → Bandwagon → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.275	0.784	Not supported
H38	Materialism → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.276	0.782	Not supported
H39	Materialism → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.334	0.731	Not supported
H40	Materialism → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.293	0.769	Not supported

4.4.4. H21–H24: Direct Effects of Materialism

Materialism did not have a significant effect on the bandwagon effect ($\beta = 0.046$, $t = 1.124$, $p = 0.261$), product symbolic status ($\beta = 0.025$, $t = 0.700$, $p = 0.484$), or status anxiety ($\beta = 0.098$, $t = 1.581$, $p = 0.115$); therefore, H21, H22, and H24 were not supported. Materialism, however, had a strong positive influence on the snob effect ($\beta = 0.228$, $t = 4.480$, $p < 0.001$) supporting H23. This discovery suggests that more materialistic people are more inclined to want to be different from others and exclusive in their consumption.

4.4.5. H25–H32: Serial Mediation through Need for Social Approval and Social Comparison

H27 was the only proposed indirect relationship supported. The snob effect to need for social approval pathway was the one that had the highest positive indirect effect on conspicuous consumption ($\beta = 0.018$, $t = 2.709$, $p = 0.007$). This finding indicates that materialists are more likely to indulge in exclusive consumption that boosts their need for social approval consequently more conspicuous consumption. All other indirect pathway results were not statistically significant and were not supported: the bandwagon effect (H25), product symbolic status (H26), status anxiety (H28–H31) and social comparison (H32).

4.4.6. H33–H40: Extended Serial Mediation through Status Consumption

In the extended serial mediation model that includes status consumption, only H35 was supported. The snob effect → need for social approval → status consumption pathway was significant and negative for conspicuous consumption ($\beta = -0.009$, $t = 2.322$, $p = 0.021$), with materialism being the direct pathway. While the indirect effect was significant, the coefficient was negative suggesting a small negative effect on this pathway. The other extended mediation

hypotheses (H33, H34, H36–H40) were not statistically significant and thus did not significantly mediate between materialism and conspicuous consumption when the status consumption was included in the model.

Table 9

Hypothesis	Path	β (O)	t-value	p-value	Result
H41	Subjective Social Class $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon Effect	0.457	7.095	0.000	Supported
H42	Subjective Social Class $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status	1.338	20.807	0.000	Supported
H43	Subjective Social Class $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect	-0.008	0.141	0.888	Not supported
H44	Subjective Social Class $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety	-0.182	2.262	0.024	Supported
H45	SSC $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.041	3.298	0.001	Supported
H46	SSC $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.375	5.212	0.000	Supported
H47	SSC $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.001	0.138	0.890	Not supported
H48	SSC $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.001	0.454	0.650	Not supported
H49	SSC $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.002	0.602	0.548	Not supported
H50	SSC $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.009	0.778	0.437	Not supported
H51	SSC $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.064	0.949	Not supported
H52	SSC $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.457	0.648	Not supported
H53	SSC $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ NSA $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.021	2.749	0.006	Supported
H54	SSC $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ NSA $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.190	3.357	0.001	Supported
H55	SSC $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ NSA $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.141	0.888	Not supported
H56	SSC $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ NSA $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.436	0.663	Not supported
H57	SSC $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.391	0.696	Not supported
H58	SSC $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.001	0.472	0.637	Not supported

H59	SSC → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	-0.052	0.051	0.960	Not supported
H60	SSC → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.320	0.749	Not supported

4.4.7. H41–H44: Direct Effects of Subjective Social Class

Objective social class did not significantly influence the bandwagon effect ($\beta = 0.003$, $t = 1.763$, $p = 0.083$), and therefore failed to support H41. Subjective social class significantly affected the bandwagon effect ($\beta = 0.457$, $t = 7.095$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H41. Likewise, subjective social class showed a significant positive relationship with product symbolic status ($\beta = 1.338$, $t = 20.807$, $p < 0.001$), which supports H42, and indicates that subjective social class positively affects the perception of symbolic status of products, and the higher the subjective social class, the more tendency to perceive the product as symbolic status. By contrast, status anxiety was significantly negatively related to subjective social class ($\beta = -0.182$, $t = 2.262$, $p = 0.024$), thus supporting H44; that is, people who feel like they are in a higher socio-class are less concerned about their social standing. The relationship between subjective social class and the snob effect, however, was not significant ($\beta = -0.008$, $t = 0.141$, $p = 0.888$) and therefore, H43 was not supported.

4.4.8. H45–H52: Serial Mediation through Need for Social Approval and Social Comparison

The hypotheses proposed were H45 and H46 which were supported. Subjective social class had a significant negative indirect effect on conspicuous consumption through the pathway of bandwagon effect → need for social approval ($\beta = -0.041$, $t = 3.298$, $p = 0.001$). Also, subjective social class had a significant positive indirect effect via product symbolic status → need for social approval ($\beta = 0.375$, $t = 5.212$, $p < 0.001$). From these results it can be concluded that the perception on the product, which is influenced by subjective social class, is mainly conformity-based and symbolic, and the desire for social approval is the product of these perceptions. The other indirect effects such as snob effect, status anxiety and social comparison did not reach statistical significance and were not supported (H47-H52).

4.4.9. H53–H60: Extended Serial Mediation through Status Consumption

H53 and H54 were supported in the extended serial mediation model that included status consumption. The bandwagon effect ($\beta = 0.421$, $t = 3.712$, $p < 0.001$) had a significant indirect effect on conspicuous consumption via need for social approval ($\beta = 0.112$, $t = 2.232$, $p = 0.027$) with subjective social class ($\beta = 0.021$, $t = 2.749$, $p = 0.006$). In addition, there was a large and significant negative indirect effect mediated by product symbolic status $\rightarrow$ need for social approval $\rightarrow$ status consumption ($\beta = -0.190$, $t = 3.357$, $p = 0.001$). The findings indicate that the effect of subjective social class on conspicuous consumption is mediated by consumers' conformity behaviors, symbolic product perceptions, need for social approval, and status oriented product consumption. However, none of the other extended mediation hypotheses (H55–H60) were statistically significant, meaning that they did not fully mediate the relationship between subjective social class and conspicuous consumption.

Table 10

Hypothesis	Path	β (O)	t-value	p-value	Result
H61	Self-Concept Clarity $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon Effect	0.583	12.901	0.000	Supported
H62	Self-Concept Clarity $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status	0.026	0.747	0.456	Not supported
H63	Self-Concept Clarity $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect	0.584	13.039	0.000	Supported
H64	Self-Concept Clarity $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety	-0.069	1.089	0.277	Not supported
H65	SCC $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.052	3.758	0.000	Supported
H66	SCC $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.007	0.714	0.476	Not supported
H67	SCC $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.047	3.288	0.001	Supported
H68	SCC $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.370	0.712	Not supported
H69	SCC $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.002	0.613	0.540	Not supported
H70	SCC $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.418	0.676	Not supported
H71	SCC $\rightarrow$ Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.002	0.511	0.609	Not supported
H72	SCC $\rightarrow$ Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.356	0.722	Not supported
H73	SCC $\rightarrow$ Bandwagon $\rightarrow$ NSA $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.026	2.789	0.005	Supported
H74	SCC $\rightarrow$ Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ NSA $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.004	0.689	0.491	Not supported

H75	SCC → Snob Effect → NSA → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	- 0.024	2.637	0.009	Supported
H76	SCC → Status Anxiety → NSA → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.351	0.725	Not supported
H77	SCC → Bandwagon → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.376	0.707	Not supported
H78	SCC → Product Symbolic Status → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.291	0.771	Not supported
H79	SCC → Snob Effect → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.360	0.719	Not supported
H80	SCC → Status Anxiety → Social Comparison → Status Consumption → Conspicuous Consumption	0.000	0.247	0.805	Not supported

4.4.10. H61–H64: Direct Effects of Self-Concept Clarity

The results showed that self-concept clarity had a significant and positive effect on the bandwagon effect ($\beta = 0.583$, $t = 12.901$, $p < 0.001$), which supports H61, stating that consumers who are clearer about their self-concept are more likely to involve in the consumption behavior in line with their reference groups. The snob effect also was significantly and positively associated with self-concept clarity ($\beta = 0.584$, $t = 13.039$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H63 that states that having a clear self-concept would encourage people to strive for uniqueness and exclusivity in their consumption. However, self-concept clarity did not significantly influence product symbolic status ($\beta = 0.026$, $t = 0.747$, $p = 0.456$) or status anxiety ($\beta = -0.069$, $t = 1.089$, $p = 0.277$); therefore, H62 and H64 were not supported.

4.4.11. H65–H72: Serial Mediation through Need for Social Approval and Social Comparison

The proposed serial mediation hypotheses were confirmed, namely H65, and H67. The indirect effect of self-concept clarity on conspicuous consumption was significant, with the pathway being bandwagon effect to need for social approval ($\beta = -0.052$, $t = 3.758$ and $p < 0.001$). Also, self-concept clarity showed a significant indirect effect on need for social approval via snob effect ($\beta = 0.047$, $t = 3.288$, $p = 0.001$). The results show that self-concept clarity affects conspicuous consumption by different psychological mechanisms that are related to conformity and exclusivity, which in turn affect consumers' need for social approval. The other indirect pathways -- product symbolic status (H66) and status anxiety (H68-H72) -- were not statistically significant, and were not supported.

4.4.12. H73–H80: Extended Serial Mediation through Status Consumption

When status consumption was added to the extended serial mediation model, H73 and H75 were supported. However, self-concept clarity indirectly influenced conspicuous consumption via the bandwagon effect ($\beta = 0.026$, $t = 2.789$, $p = 0.005$) and need for social approval. Similarly, there was a strong negative indirect effect of snob effect on need for social approval on status consumption ($\beta = -0.024$, $t = 2.637$, $p = 0.009$). The results indicate that self-concept clarity leads to conformity and exclusivity-related motives, which in turn lead to greater social approval and status-oriented consumption behaviors, which in turn lead to greater conspicuous consumption. The other extended mediation hypotheses (H74, H76–H80) however did not obtain significance, suggesting that these mediating pathways between self-concept clarity and conspicuous consumption were not statistically significant.

Table 11

Hypothesis	Path	β (O)	t-value	p-value	Result
H81	Bandwagon Effect $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval	-0.270	6.605	0.000	Supported
H82	Bandwagon Effect $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison	-0.085	1.284	0.200	Not supported
H83	Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval	0.846	44.906	0.000	Supported
H84	Product Symbolic Status $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison	0.139	2.324	0.021	Supported
H85	Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval	0.242	6.345	0.000	Supported
H86	Snob Effect $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison	0.066	1.143	0.254	Not supported
H87	Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Need for Social Approval	0.016	0.514	0.607	Not supported
H88	Status Anxiety $\rightarrow$ Social Comparison	0.058	0.975	0.330	Not supported
H89	Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.331	5.285	0.000	Supported
H90	Need for Social Approval $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption	0.742	30.518	0.000	Supported
H91	Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	0.046	0.795	0.427	Not supported
H92	Social Comparison $\rightarrow$ Status Consumption	-0.017	0.522	0.602	Not supported
H93	Status Consumption $\rightarrow$ Conspicuous Consumption	-0.226	3.424	0.001	Supported

4.4.13. H81–H88: Effects of Psychological Mechanisms on Need for Social Approval and Social Comparison

The results showed that the bandwagon effect had significant negative effect on need for social approval ($\beta = -0.270$, $t = 6.605$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H81, which states that the higher the degree of conformity with other people's purchase behaviours, the lower the need for external social approval in this sample. However, the bandwagon effect did not significantly affect social comparison ($\beta = -0.085$, $t = 1.284$, $p = 0.200$) and thus H82 was rejected. Product symbolic status had a significant positive effect on need for social approval ($\beta = 0.846$, $t = 44.906$, $p < 0.001$) and a significant positive effect on social comparison ($\beta = 0.139$, $t = 2.324$, $p = 0.021$), thus supporting H83 and H84. The results indicate that status symbol consumers are more likely to desire status approval and make social comparisons. Likewise, the snob effect had significant positive effects on need for social approval ($\beta = 0.242$, $t = 6.345$, $p < 0.001$) supporting H85 and insignificant effects on social comparison ($\beta = 0.066$, $t = 1.143$, $p = 0.254$), which led to the rejection of H86. Finally, status anxiety did not significantly affect either need for social approval ($\beta = 0.016$, $t = 0.514$, $p = 0.607$) or social comparison ($\beta = 0.058$, $t = 0.975$, $p = 0.330$); therefore, H87 and H88 were not supported.

4.4.14. H89–H93: Effects of Need for Social Approval, Social Comparison, and Status Consumption

The results show that conspicuous consumption ($\beta = 0.331$, $t = 5.285$, $p < 0.001$) and status consumption ($\beta = 0.742$, $t = 30.518$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly positively associated with need for social approval, thus supporting H89 and H90. The results show that the more consumers perceive a need for social approval, the more likely they will be to undertake status-oriented and conspicuous consumption actions. Social comparison, however, did not significantly affect conspicuous consumption ($\beta = 0.046$, $t = 0.795$, $p = 0.427$) or status consumption ($\beta = -0.017$, $t = 0.522$, $p = 0.602$), and, therefore, H91 and H92 were rejected. Lastly, the status consumption had a significant negative influence on conspicuous consumption ($\beta = -0.226$, $t = 3.424$, $p = 0.001$), thus supporting H93. The coefficient is negative, but it is statistically significant indicating an inverse relationship between status consumption and conspicuous consumption in the proposed model.

5. Discussion

The present study investigated role of self-esteem, materialism, subjective social class and self-concept clarity on conspicuous consumption and status consumption with six mediators namely, status anxiety, bandwagon effect, snob effect, product symbolic status, need for social approval and social comparison among the consumers of Pakistan. The findings indicate that product symbolic status and the need for social approval are the major mechanisms through which different antecedents work, whereas social comparison is consistently insignificant. The patterns reflect Symbolic Interactionism Theory (Blumer, 1969) and Status Consumption Theory (Eastman et al., 1999) and partly contradict Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954).

Self-esteem. Bandwagon effect, product symbolic status, and conspicuous consumption were negatively predicted by self-esteem, while the latter could be explained by product symbolic status, but not by snob effect or status anxiety. As hypothesized in Self-Concept Theory (Sirgy, 1982) and previous studies showing that low self-esteem leads to compensatory, symbolic consumption (Chaplin & John, 2007; Park & John, 2011; Mandel et al., 2017; Jain et al., 2022; Han et al., 2023), individuals with high self-esteem seem to be less reliant on branded products in terms of self-expression. This is different from Eastman et al. (1999) and O'Cass and McEwen (2004), who correlated low self-esteem with "snob effect" and "status anxiety", respectively, which can be explained as a possible result of the collectivistic culture of Pakistan, wherein social acceptability takes precedence over exclusive seeking.

Materialism. The snob effect alone mediated the relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption, as predicted by materialism. This would indicate that materialistic Pakistani consumers go for exclusivity instead of conformity, which is consistent with Materialism Theory (Richins & Dawson, 1992) and Status Consumption Theory (Eastman et al., 1999) and with related studies (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998; Shukla & Rosendo-Rios, 2021; Islam et al., 2023). This is not consistent with the findings of studies on materialism and bandwagon conformity (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012; Truong et al., 2010) or with those on materialism and status anxiety (Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011) perhaps because local materialistic consumers do not experience materialism as a status anxiety but as a sign of achieved success.

Subjective social class. This was the most significant predictor overall, and positively affected the bandwagon effect and product symbolic status, and indirectly affected conspicuous consumption through both bandwagon effect and product symbolic status. The theory of perceived (not actual) social status, which Westerman et al. (1999) and Blumer (1969) had already argued, confirms Ordabayeva and Chandon (2011), Rucker and Galinsky (2008), and Wang et al. (2021) in this respect. This negative association with status anxiety is consistent with Anderson et al. (2012) but not Charles et al. (2009) and Wilkinson and Pickett (2018) as there is strong family and community support in Pakistan to offset status related anxiety.

Self-concept clarity. This was predicted to account for both the bandwagon effect and snob effect (not for product symbolic status or status anxiety), which each mediated their impact on conspicuous consumption. The consumers with clear identities seem to experience a balance between belonging and distinction, as pointed out by the other scholars (Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Reed et al., 2012; Roy et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023), but this stands in contrast with Belk (1988) and Kleine et al. (1995) related to symbolic possessions and Campbell et al. (1996) related to status anxiety possibly because Pakistani consumers derive their identities more from religious, family and educational sources.

Mediating mechanisms. Need for social approval was the most significant psychological determinant for both conspicuous and status consumption which supported the theory of Symbolic Interactionism, whereas product symbolic status was central in the theory of conspicuous consumption (Shukla, 2012; Wiedmann et al., 2009; O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Islam et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2024). However, the bandwagon effect had an unexpected effect in an increased need for social approval, because group membership might already be sufficient for social approval; the snob effect increased this need, indicating that there is still an appreciative social audience for exclusivity seeking.

Social comparison. Contrary to Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1954) and many prior studies (Han et al., 2010; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011; Lee & Shrum, 2012; Liu et al., 2022; Kim & Jang, 2023), the social comparison was not significant for the conspicuous or status consumption in this study. This is more in line with the more recent identity-based theories (Hudders et al., 2021; Jain et al., 2023) and implies that in a collectivistic society like Pakistan, social endorsement and symbolic identity are more important than direct interpersonal comparison.

Consumption vs. conspicuous consumption. Status consumption negatively predicted conspicuous consumption, in contrast to the patrician/parvenu distinction of Han et al., (2010), Berger and Ward, (2010), Eckhardt et al., (2023) and Kapferer, (2024) that saw the latter resort to conspicuous consumption. Status signaling can be subtle among rich consumers in Pakistan due to religious and cultural norms of modesty.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to explore the role of core psychological traits (self-esteem, materialism, subjective social class and self-concept clarity) in the process of conspicuous consumption and status consumption among the Pakistani consumers and to find the mediation role of these traits between conspicuous consumption and status consumption. The findings prove that conspicuous consumption is not a simplistic action motivated by a single motive or by income per se, but a multidimensional phenomenon which unfolds along a number of separate and identifiable psychological paths. While it is tempting to believe that a single dominant quality is responsible for status-oriented buying, the results reveal that various types of consumers end up manifesting the same "outward" behavior (the observables of their consumption – the visible and the status signaling) for different "inward" reasons (the underlying psychological motives).

Subjective social class proved to be the strongest and most consistent antecedent, influencing the bandwagon effect, product symbolic status and status anxiety at the same time as influencing the conspicuous consumption. The result suggests that consumers' socioeconomic perception affects more than their socioeconomic objective. This finding holds especially true for a market such as Pakistan, where socioeconomic perceptions can have a strong social impact due to the perceived prestige, family reputation and community standing. Consumers with lower self-esteem, however, used a different pathway: they mentally linked branded products to a symbolic meaning that they used as a tool to compensate for their identity construction; those consumers who were psychologically secure, on the other hand, were not very dependent on possessions as means to express their identity. Materialism on the other hand, had a different trajectory, it did not follow the path of conformity, but rather, through the snob effect, implying that materialistic Pakistani consumers do not have the motive of fits and starts, but rather the motive of standing out from others despite the exclusivity and scarcity. The most complex pattern was observed for self-concept clarity, that predicted both bandwagon and snob tendencies, suggesting that people with a clear sense of identity can seek to belong to

a group and to be different at the same time, rather than viewing these goals as mutually exclusive.

In all four antecedents, there were two mechanisms that emerged as the bridge between them. The single most important mediating mechanism was product symbolic status, which further highlighted the Pakistani consumers' relationship with luxury products, which is more symbolic than functional or utilitarian. Need for social approval was the dominating motivational force of the whole model, which in turn consistently mediated psychological antecedents and symbolic perceptions to actual purchases. Both of these processes point to the fact that conspicuous consumption in Pakistan can be viewed as essentially social practice, not just private, or economic, choice.

Aside from that, the study found a few things that were not. Social comparison (as a key predictor of conspicuous consumption under the classic theory [Festinger, 1954]) was found to be of little importance for predicting conspicuous consumption or status consumption and all mediation pathways involving social comparison were rejected. This is a substantive, not incidental, finding: it implies that in a collectivity culture like Pakistan consumers are not as interested in beating or comparing themselves with others as they are in being accepted by others. Mechanism of comparison is replaced by mechanisms of belonging and symbolic self-expressions. In tandem with this, the inverse relationship between status consumption and conspicuous consumption suggests that the luxury market for consumers with high status motivations may be shifting toward more subtle and implicit manifestations of luxury — that is, a “quiet luxury” attitude — possibly as a reflection of the culture of modesty and increasing sophistication of luxury consumers.

Combined, these results make conspicuous consumption in Pakistan a socially-constructed and culturally significant action that is motivated by meaning-making and social acceptance rather than by a race or simply the ability to buy. This study presents a more complete and culturally informed understanding of the status-related consumption process than previous single-theory studies and highlights the need for careful adaptation of theories of consumer behavior developed in individualistic, Western contexts before they are applied to collectivistic emerging markets, as opposed to direct transplantation.

6.1. Implications

6.1.1. Theoretical Implications

The results have important implications for luxury brand managers, marketers, retailers, advertising agencies, and digital marketing practitioners in Pakistan and other emerging countries.

The first lesson that marketers can learn is that people buy luxury products for their symbolic attributes, not their utility attributes. So, rather than simply product quality or technical features, identity, prestige, achievement, exclusivity, and emotional value should be highlighted in marketing campaigns. The luxury products should depict success, aspiration, and social recognition in the form of a brand story.

Second, need for social approval proved to be the most important predictor of indulging in conspicuous consumption, which leads to the conclusion that marketers need to craft advertisements that focus on social acceptance, admiration and interpersonal relationships. Using celebrities to endorse a product, leveraging on influencers, creating community-based campaigns and aspirational branding can help build the emotional connection with luxury brands.

Third, subjective social class is a strong influence and the market segmentation should not be limited to the education and income variables. Businesses need to classify consumers based on their social status, lifestyle aspirations, symbolic motivations, and psychological attributes. Different perceptions of social class may lead to different values among consumers with the same income and different marketing strategies.

Fourth, the standing of the symbolic value of products suggests that luxury companies need to continue to reinforce the symbolic value of their brands through heritage marketing, limited editions, high quality packages, craftsmanship stories and exclusive brand communities. Customers are more tending to purchase products that emit prestige and identity in an effective way.

Fifth, marketers should be aware that materialistic consumers are more attracted by the idea of exclusivity than by that of popularity. Thus, niche marketing, invitation-only events, luxury

personalisation and exclusive memberships can be a more successful approach than mass marketing to targeting consumers with strong materialistic orientations.

Sixth, the result of the social comparison not being a significant driver indicates that marketers should minimize the use of comparative advertising and instead emphasize self-expression, identity improvement and symbolic self-completion. Persuading messages that focus on personal accomplishment and social identity will be more effective than messages that appeal to consumers to outperform others.

To wrap up, the negative correlation between status consumption and conspicuous consumption implies the growing need for quiet luxury. However, luxury companies would be wise to diversify product line and provide luxury goods and less conspicuous premium products to meet changing market demands.

6.1.2. Management and Practical implications

The results have implications for luxury brand managers, luxury marketers, retail outlets, advertising agencies and digital marketers in Pakistan and in emerging markets in general.

First marketers need to realize that consumers buy luxury products for more than their functional attributes, they buy them for their symbolic value. Marketing campaigns should thus focus on identity, prestige, achievement, exclusivity, and emotional value rather than just the technical detail or the quality of the product. The idea of luxury products equaling success, aspiration and social recognition should be the main idea of a brand's story.

Secondly, if social approval emerges as the most important predictor of conspicuous consumption, then marketers should create social acceptance, admiration and positive interpersonal relationships-focused advertising strategies. Using celebrity endorsements, influencers, community-driven initiatives, and aspirational branding have proven to be effective methods of building consumers emotional connection to luxury brands.

Third, subjective social class had a strong influence, making market segmentation go beyond demographic factors like income and education. Consumers must be segmented on the basis of perception of social status, lifestyle aspirations, symbolic motivations and psychological attributes. Individuals who share the same income level could have a very different perception of social class and thus need different marketing strategies.

Fourth, the importance of product symbolic meaning suggests that luxury companies should maintain the engagement of brand symbolism in various ways through heritage marketing, limited editions, premium packaging, craftsmanship stories, and exclusive brand communities. Buyers will be more inclined to buy products that clearly convey prestige and identity.

Fifth, marketers should remember that materialistic consumers react more to exclusivity than popularity. The limited-edition products, invitation-only events, personalised luxury experiences and exclusive memberships may be better at targeting the high materialistic consumers than mass marketing promotional campaigns.

Sixth, the result of no significant importance of social comparison indicates that marketers should lessen the emphasis on comparative advertising, and more on self-expression, identity enhancement, and symbolic self-completion. Campaigns that focus on personal achievement and the individual's place in society will be more effective in driving change than campaigns that ask consumers to outperform others.

Last but not least, a negative correlation between status consumption and conspicuous consumption indicates rising demand for quiet luxury. In this regard, luxury businesses should take care to diversify product categories with low-profile luxury products as well as luxury products to meet the changing demands of the consumers.

6.1.3. Policy Implications

The results also offer some implications for policy makers, institutions, consumer protection authorities, and public institutions.

Consumer education programs for responsible consumption and for financial education should be developed by the government and publicised, especially for young consumers who might believe that luxury products are markers of social success. The campaigns should promote consumers' ability to differentiate between their own personal value and the symbolic consumption imposed by external factors.

Financial health and consumer psychology and responsible buying practices ought to be integrated in business and social science courses in higher education. If students can be made aware of the psychological factors that affect their buying decision, then there would be a decrease in unnecessary purchase to satisfy their social status.

Consumer protection agencies need to drive more transparency in luxury advertising, influencer marketing and social media advertising. The standards of advertising should make it less attractive to have unrealistic notions of success that might lead to excessive symbolic consumption by vulnerable consumers.

The sustainable consumption promotion should also be supported by policy-makers. Because symbolic motivations play a strong role in the purchase decision, sustainability campaigns should use environmentally responsible products as symbols of social responsibility and modern identity, not simply as a focus of environmental advantages.

Lastly, the synergy of education, government, financial and digital platforms can foster positive beliefs among consumers by encouraging psychological well-being rather than materialistic measures of success.

6.2. Limitations

Though the study has made some theory and practical contribution, there are some limitations in the study.

The first limitation of the study was that it used a cross sectional research design, thus the ability to infer causality between the constructs was limited. Longitudinal studies in the future would have the potential to reflect more changes in psychological characteristics and consumption behavior over time.

Secondly, the study was based on self-reported questionnaire data and thus prone to common method bias and social desirability bias. Survey data can be supplemented with observational or experimental data in future studies.

Third, the sample consisted of Pakistan consumers, thus restricting generalizability of the results in other cultures. Motivations of the consumers could vary significantly between individualistic and collectivistic societies.

Fourth, the model omitted certain psychological factors not included that may be relevant, such as consumer ethnocentrism, narcissism, self-monitoring, fear of missing out (FoMO), social media engagement, brand attachment, and digital conspicuous consumption.

Fifth, the study concentrated on luxury consumption, without differentiating between product categories like fashion, automobiles, electronics, cosmetics and hospitality services. All of these categories may have variations in consumer motivations.

Last, other contextual factors such as economic uncertainty, the cultural context, religious orientation, and family influence could further enhance the ability of the proposed model to explain conspicuous consumption.

6.3. Future Research Directions

There are several important directions for future studies that can build on the current study.

A longitudinal research design is recommended to study the changes in the psychological characteristics and in the conspicuous consumption of consumers throughout their life cycles and in the varying economic situations.

Comparative cross-cultural studies between Pakistan and other countries in the South Asian region, or the Middle East, Europe and North America would help to find out whether the psychological mechanisms observed are culturally specific or universal.

There is a need for future researchers to examine the impact of emerging psychological constructs like fear of missing out (FoMO), narcissism, digital identity, self-monitoring, social media addiction, perceived authenticity and perceived credibility of influencers on conspicuous consumption.

Additionally, researchers can analyze generational differences by comparing the symbolic consumption motives of Generation Z with those of the Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers to determine if there are differences in motives across the generations.

Future research should differentiate between conspicuous consumption online and off, as social commerce and influencer marketing are on the rise and have somewhat surpassed e-commerce.

Experimental research designs may be used to examine changes in consumers' symbolic status and social approval perceptions as a result of exposure to luxury advertising, influencer content, or social media platforms.

Last but not least, future research should focus on sustainable luxury consumption, ethical consumption and quiet luxury as new types of signaling status. An understanding of the consumer's trade-off between environmental concerns and symbolic consumption would be of great theoretical and practical value.

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