

Social Media Usage Intensity and Conspicuous Consumption among Young Adults: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract

The present study examined the relationship between social media usage intensity, self-esteem and conspicuous consumption in young adults. It was hypothesized that there will be a correlation between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption. It was also hypothesized that self-esteem will moderate the relationship between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption in young adults. Correlational study with cross-sectional research design was done. A purposive sample of 120 young adults was drawn from three universities. Assessment measures included: Network Sites (SNSs) Usage Questionnaire, Conspicuous Consumption Scale, and Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale. Results of the study showed that social media usage was negatively correlated with self-esteem while it was positively correlated with conspicuous consumption. Self-esteem was negatively related to conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, self-esteem moderated the relationship between social media usage and conspicuous consumption in young adults. Moreover, there were no gender differences in social media usage, self-esteem, and conspicuous consumption. This study has implications for therapists, counselors, and policy makers.

Keywords: Conspicuous Consumption, Self-Esteem, Social Media Usage Intensity, Young Adults

I. Introduction

Anderson and Jiang (2018) mention that young adults are the most frequent users of social networking sites, which include Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Tumblr. Referring specifically to Pakistan, the young generation is highly involved in the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) (Eijaz 2013). These usage patterns are also associated with the consumption modes of young users. Whenever people engage in social media sites, they can decide what they show on their profiles, and most of the time, people only make available what is positive about them, including the conspicuous consumption of products and services (Thoumrungroje 2014). This behavior of conspicuous consumption leads people to make copious expenditures to make higher status and display their products and events (Taylor and Strutton 2016).

Lehdonvirta (2010) pointed out that 'consumers' are ready and willing to share experiences of material goods and their lives online. While in the past, consumption revolved around essential commodities such as food and clothing, and to some extent utility items such as travel and entertainment, property, and other non-essential commodities, these have become not just objects of consumption but equally objects to consume and exhibit on social media platforms through picture-taking and sharing (Arda 2014).

I.1 Rationale of the Study

This study aims to assess the effects of social media usage on conspicuous consumption while investigating self-esteem as a moderating variable. Given the prevalence of social media usage among young adults in Pakistan, understanding these dynamics can provide valuable insights into their consumption behaviors and the psychological factors influencing them. Additionally, this research extends the body of knowledge on the intersection of social media, self-esteem, and conspicuous consumption.

I.2 Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between social media usage intensity, self-esteem, and conspicuous consumption among young adults.
2. To investigate the moderating role of self-esteem in the relationship between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption.

3. To explore gender differences in social media usage intensity, self-esteem, and conspicuous consumption.

1.3 Hypotheses

- **H1:** There is likely to be a significant relationship between social media usage intensity, self-esteem, and conspicuous consumption among young adults.
- **H2:** Self-esteem is likely to moderate the relationship between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption.
- **H3:** There is likely to be a significant gender difference in the study variables.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Vogel et al. (2015) established that social media leads to social comparison. This comparison leads to conspicuous consumption, according to O'Cass and McEwen (2006). Therefore, the following conclusion can be drawn: If the intensity of social media use is high, the individual may engage in social comparison activities (Jang, Park, and Song 2016).

The Social Comparison Theory (SCT) describes the inclination in people to compare their sentiments and actions to other people who are in some manner like themselves (Festinger 1954). This paper identifies the link between media use and materialism by employing SCT, as Richins (1995) established that social media users tend to compare themselves with the images depicted in media. In addition, peer interaction is more prevalent in social media than in other media channels due to social media properties, including content creation, sharing, and endorsements (e.g., likes, comments) (Papasolomou and Melanthiou 2012).

Wills (1981) proposed that downward social comparison improves one's self-esteem, while upward social comparison, as implied in the study, reduces self-esteem. Upward social comparison extends the theory of conspicuous consumption since the latter motivates consumers to consume in order to regain their superior status (Zheng, Baskin, and Peng 2018). On this basis, the extent to which self-esteem moderates the relationship between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption can be determined.

2. Literature Review

Self-esteem can be defined as the relationship between self and the behavior exhibited in a given society. In fact, self-esteem is documented to be one of the most powerful stimuli that affect motivation regarding consumers' choices and actions (Grubb and Grathwohl 1967). Extending from Thoumrungroje (2014), who proposed that the effect of social media on conspicuous consumption depends on self-esteem, the present research aims to measure consumers' self-esteem and determine the moderating role of self-esteem on the link between social media use and conspicuous consumption.

Junaco (2014) describes social media as the applications or services in which user content is created, circulated, and consumed. On the other hand, social media use refers to the things that people do on social sites (Smith and Gallicano, 2015). Social media usage intensity, in contrast, refers to the degree to which users engage in social media (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007). The intensity of usage can be defined in terms of frequency, involvement, and intensity (Vogel et al. 2015). With regard to the usage of social media, two types of social media users have been defined. First, there are the producers who, besides just consuming content such as audio, video, or text, may also create this content and interact with others online. Secondly, there are the consumers who only scroll the news feed but do not create any content (Escobar-Veira et al. 2018).

Veblen (1899) brought into knowledge the idea of conspicuous consumption, which he defined as a process where, through buying luxury goods with fresh money, the owner displays their income and hence status. O'Cass and McEwen (2006) established that consumers' levels of willingness to consume conspicuous goods depend on their social circles. This can also be related to Social Comparison Theory, under which people use other people in their social contexts as standards in forming evaluations, admitting marginal differentiation (Festinger 1954).

3. Method

This study used a quantitative, survey approach to assess the association between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption among young adults and to analyze the mediating role of self-esteem in this association. The survey was cross-sectional as data was collected at one point in time.

The overall population comprised of young adults who are also university students. The data was collected using online questionnaire through Google Docs. It was consequently analyzed using multiple linear regression analysis supported by SPSS software.

Respondents were selected from three universities: Forman Christian College (A Chartered University), University of the Punjab, and University of Sargodha. Simple random sampling technique was adopted to take the representative sample. Frequent use of social media by young adults makes them suitable for this study. A total of 120 respondents shared the required data. The ethical considerations were duly met during and after data collection to ensure the

anonymity of the respondents and maintain the confidentiality of data. No sensitive information or other questions of personal nature were asked from the study respondents.

Table 2.I

Demographics table Showing Characteristics of Sample (N=120)

Variables		F	%
Age	18 to 20 years	39	32.5
	31 to 23 years	66	55
	24 to 26 years	15	12.5
Gender	Male	61	50.8
	Female	59	49.2
Income	Up to Rs 50000	41	34.2
	51000 to 80000	36	30.0
	81000 to 110000	18	15.0
	111000 to 150000	8	6.7
	More than 1510000	17	14.2
Employment Status	Employed	16	13.3
	Unemployed	73	60.8
	Seeking employment	31	25.8

The scales to measure the main constructs of this study are based on previous literature. To measure the intensity of social media usage, 'Social Network Sites (SNSs) Usage Questionnaire' developed by Shi et al., is used (Shi et al., 2014). The scale includes two subscales, the SNSs Featured Usage Scale and the SNSs Affective Experience Scale. The SNSs Featured Usage Scale has been used for this study. It includes 13 items to measure featured usage on SNSs. 10 items include statements related to users' usage of SNSs on 7-point scale (1 = never, 7 = multiple times a day). The remaining three items ask about the duration of surfing SNSs (1 = less than 15 minutes, 7 = more than four hours), number of their online friends (1 = 1-50, 7 = over 500), and the composition of their friends (1 = all are friends in real life, 7 = all are strangers in real life). On the basis of validity and reliability of the scale, it is divided into three subscales; basic usage of SNS, interactive usage, and self-display usage.

The scale to measure conspicuous consumption was adopted from Chung and Fischer (2001). It consists of four items and is a four-point Likert scale. The statements involve, taking friends' opinions about a brand or product before purchasing it, having knowledge as to which group of people will buy the product, what others will think about the products, and which brand or product can impress others.

Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale was used to measure users' self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). It consists of 10 statements on 7-point Likert scale (1=not at all true; 7= very true). Some of the items include "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I wish I could have more respect for myself". On the basis of validity and reliability of the scale, it is divided into two subscales: General self-evaluations and Transient self-evaluations.

3. Results

This study has been done to uncover the relationship of Social media usage intensity, self-esteem and conspicuous consumption among young adults. In this section, various analysis has been run to assess this relationship.

3.1 Reliability Analysis

The data mentioned below is reliability and descriptive analysis for each measure used for assessment presented in Table 3.1

Table 3.1

Psychometric Properties of the Study Variables and their Subscales (N=120)

Variable	M	SD	Range	Cronbach α
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Social Media Usage	39.86	12.03	14-66	.80
Self-Esteem	23.76	4.67	13-34	.79
Conspicuous Consumption	11.07	4.65	3-20	.83

Note: M= mean, SD= standard deviation, α = reliability coefficient

The above table showed the psychometric properties of the scales. The reliability of all the scales i.e., social media usage, self-esteem and Conspicuous consumption, fell in acceptable range that is above .70. This showed that the scales used in the study were reliable to be used.

3.2 Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationship between demographics, study variables, Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis was run.

Table 3.2

Correlation among the Study Variables (N=120)

Variable	M	SD	2	3
Social Media Usage	39.86	12.03	-.19*	.18*
Self-Esteem	23.76	4.67	-	-.31***
Conspicuous Consumption	11.07	4.65	-	-

The table 3.2 showed the correlation among study variables. Results showed that the social media usage was negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to conspicuous consumption while self-esteem was highly negatively related to conspicuous consumption. This indicated that by decreasing the social media usage and increasing the self-esteem, conspicuous consumption could be lowered.

Table 3.3

Correlation among the Demographics and Dependent Variable (N=200)

Variables	Conspicuous Consumption
Age	.11
Gender	.08
Income	.04
Employment status	.11

Note. *.p < .05; **.p < .01; ***.p < .001

The table 3.3 showed the correlation between demographic variables and dependent variable. Results showed that not a single demographic variable had a relationship with the conspicuous consumption.

3.3 Regression Analysis

To test the moderating role of self-esteem between social media usage and conspicuous consumption, Multiple Hierarchical Regression Analysis was carried out.

Table 3.4

Multiple Hierarchical Regression Analysis for the Evaluating the Moderating Role of Self-Esteem between Social Media Usage and Conspicuous Consumption (N=120)

Variables	B	95% C.I		S.E	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LL	UL				
Step 1						.03*	.03*
(Constant)	8.29***	5.40	11.19	1.46			
Social Media Usage	.07*	.00	.14	.03	.18*		
Step 2						.11**	.08**

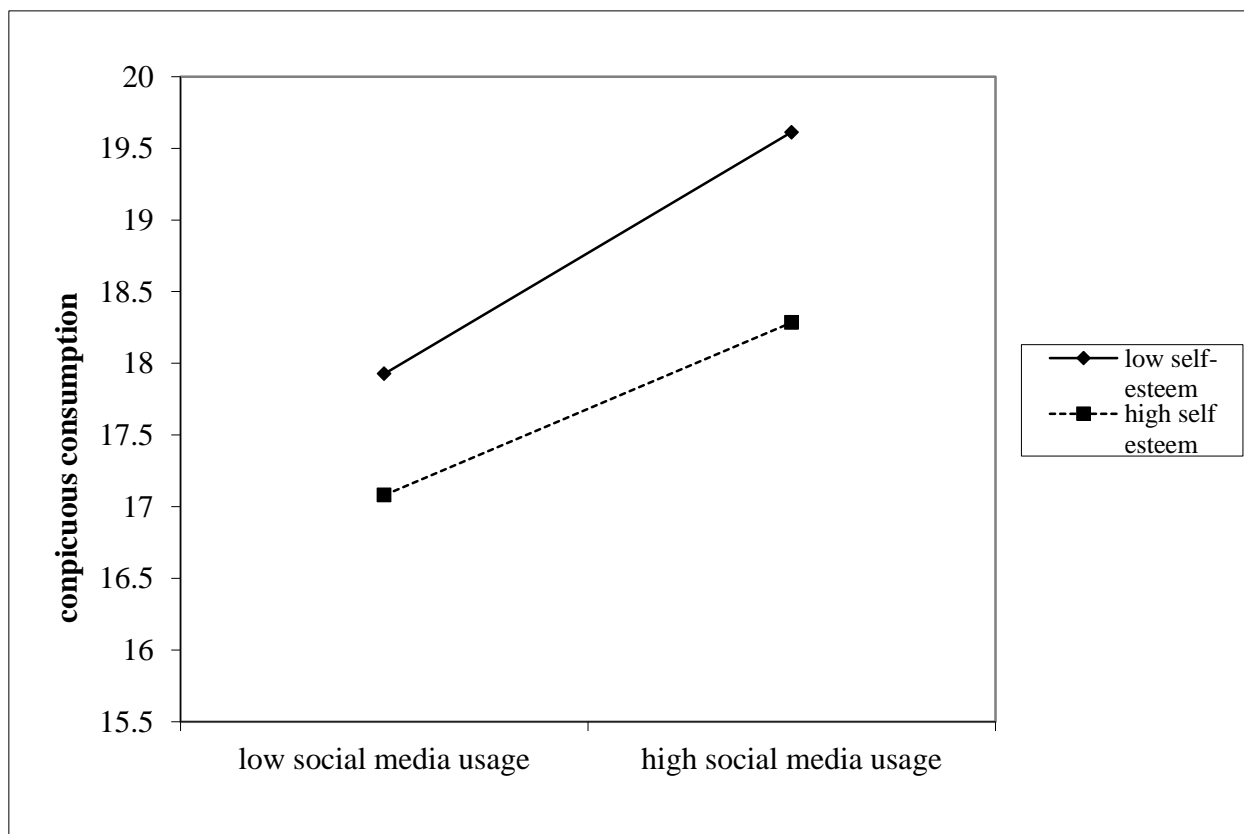
(Constant)	16.01***	10.59	21.43	2.73	
Social Media Usage	.04	-.02	.12	.03	.12
Self-Esteem	-.29**	-.46	-.11	.09	-.29**
Step 3					.21*** .10***
(Constant)	16.63***	11.50	21.75	2.59	
Social Media Usage	.06	-.01	.12	.03	.14
Self-Esteem	-.34***	-.50	-.17	.08	-.33***
Social Media Usage × Self-Esteem	-.02***	-.03	-.01	.01	-.32***

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; Dependent variable: Conspicuous Consumption

Table 3.4 showed moderating role of self-esteem between social media usage and conspicuous consumption. Assumptions were fulfilled. Results showed that the self-esteem fully moderated the relationship between social media usage and conspicuous consumption. The overall model 1 was significant and had 3% of variance $F(1, 118) = 3.95$ $p < .05$. In this model, social media usage positively predicted conspicuous consumption. The overall model 2 was also significant and had 11% of variance $F(2, 117) = 7.53$ $p < .01$. In this model, self-esteem negatively predicted conspicuous consumption. The overall model 3 was also significant and had 21% of variance $F(3, 116) = 10.70$ $p < .00$. In this model, the interaction of social media usage and self-esteem became highly significant which indicated that self-esteem was moderating the relationship of social media usage and conspicuous consumption.

Figure 1

Simple slope analysis showing the moderating effect of self-esteem in relationship between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption.



The figure showing the moderating effect of self-esteem in relationship between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption.

3.4 t- test for Gender Differences

Independent Sample t-test was run to examine the differences in gender for study variables. Results are shown in Table 3.5

Table 3.5

Table for Independent Samples t-test indicating Gender-wise Comparison (N=120)

Variables	Male (n=61)		Female (n=59)		t(118)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Social Media Usage	40.65	11.95	39.05	12.15	.73	.47	.13
Self-Esteem	24.03	4.94	23.47	4.41	.65	.52	.11
Conspicuous Consumption	10.72	4.42	11.44	4.88	-.85	.40	.15

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Table 3.5 indicated the gender-wise comparison in study variables. Levenes tests for all the variables were non-significant. Assumptions were fulfilled. Results showed that there were no significant gender differences in social media usage intensity, self-esteem and conspicuous consumption among young adults. Both males and females were at the same level in reference to the social media usage intensity, self-esteem and conspicuous consumption.

3. Discussion

Social media networks have gained a critical place in the everyday communication and activity of young adults, as well as regulating their actions and perceptions of the world. Status display, a process where a person buys a product to show off to others, is becoming apparent on these apps. It establishes the correlation between social media intensity and conspicuous consumption, which may provide information about consumer behavior, mental health, and materialistic values prevalent in society at different levels. This study aimed to examine the relationship between social media usage intensity and conspicuous consumption among young adults.

Pearson product-moment correlational analysis showed that social media usage was negatively related to self-esteem. This is because being connected, entertained, and interacting with friends and other people on social media can expose individuals to factors that deplete self-esteem, such as social comparison, unrealistic expectations, and the perpetual chase for affirmation. This is perhaps one of the causes of the negative association between social media use and the self-esteem of users, mainly because of the filtered images many people post on social media platforms. People are bombarded with carefully selected and edited presentations of others' lives that tend to include only success, beauty, wealth, and happiness. Young adults may think these portrayals represent success or attractiveness and thus feel like their own lives leave much to be desired. That comparison may lower self-esteem as they start feeling like less of an achiever, less attractive, or less happy compared to others. Additionally, seeking "likes," "comments," and other related acknowledgments affects reliance on social cues, and consequently, self-esteem further reduces. When a user cannot achieve the expected level of activity or perceived satisfaction with the reactions they get, it can be interpreted as rejection, lack of appreciation, or disregard for the user, which in some way decreases self-esteem. This finding is consistent with a previous study (Colak, Bingol, and Dayi 2023).

Findings showed that social media usage was positively related to conspicuous consumption because social networks are not only communication platforms but also highly aestheticized environments where people often construct performative selves and present their best selves. This makes people, particularly youth, indulge in conspicuous consumption—where they use their money to buy what will make others appreciate or admire them. Sponsored content usually involves resort and clothing brands, travel, and showcasing a dreamlike lifestyle. The consumption of this type of material leads young adults, most of whom use the internet actively, into a cycle of desirous consumption. That is why they may want to purchase identical products to indicate success, status, or to follow the latest trends. Instagram, in particular, turns into an arena in which consumption is not only encouraged but also promoted and commodified, as people receive likes, comments, and new followers in return. In addition, a prominent effect of social media is social

comparison, which involves the comparison of status symbols by people. Observing friends, acquaintances, or even celebrities using expensive products or having luxurious experiences often makes others want to do the same. This is particularly true given that the intention to purchase high-status goods often arises from a quest to belong to a particular social group or achieve a heightened social class. Taking this definition of conspicuous consumption further, social media is generally the best place to flaunt these purchases, thus creating a cycle of people seeking validation. In other words, through social media, a culture of conspicuous consumption is not only promoted but also endorsed. The use of video and visual content makes the demands for self-identification even more critical, and therefore, consumption is used as a pathway for achieving social mobility. This means individuals rush into purchasing not because of perceived need but as a result of perceived image. This finding is consistent with a previous study (Pellegrino, Abe, and Shannon 2022).

Self-esteem was negatively related to conspicuous consumption. This is because individuals with low self-esteem may use materialism to compensate for their lack of self-worth. People's low self-esteem is well catered to by conspicuous consumption, where the mere purchase of a certain good or service can serve as a way of receiving social acceptance. However, such behavior is not motivated by internal purposes but rather by a desire to gain external approval. Reliable, tangible things are used to reassure people with low self-esteem about their status or existence in the group. They may think that possessing high-status symbols makes them more popular or admired, thus satisfying a lack of identity.

This is particularly true in a society where the definition of success and happiness is measured by one's wealth, which is exacerbated by social media providing a platform to show off. However, this reliance on external validation through material goods means that such a pattern produces a cycle of dissatisfaction. Because conspicuous consumption does not address the psychological deficit in self-esteem, it offers only fleeting feelings of confidence, and possessions can easily become a means to fill the void. In contrast, individuals with higher self-esteem are able to find satisfaction in personal accomplishments or internal qualities and are thus less inclined to seek manifestations of wealth to validate themselves. This finding is consistent with a previous study (Oh 2021).

Self-esteem moderated the relationship between social media usage and conspicuous consumption. As the use of social media creates perceptions of materialism by exposing people to extravagant lifestyles and symbols of status, people with different self-esteem levels exhibit different behaviors. Conspicuous consumption is also likely to occur in the following circumstances: the overuse of social media and low self-esteem. These individuals focus on what others have and may end up using materialism as a social benchmark. Feeling lacking in some way, they may think that if they can only buy high-status consumption items, their social image will be enhanced. Social networks enhance this behavior since people see visual images of status and success as products they need to possess to be valuable and prominent. While branded fashion consumers may be active on social media, specifically buying luxurious products, individuals with high self-esteem resist conspicuous consumption. Such individuals derive their identity from internal parameters such as achievements, values, and relationships and are less likely to engage in comparative analysis or succumb to social pressure encouraged by materialism. Being more in touch with themselves, social media has less influence on their consumption behaviors. This finding is consistent with a previous study (Sastra et al. 2023).

There were no gender differences in social media usage intensity, self-esteem, and conspicuous consumption among young adults. Social media retailing has leveled the playing field, exposing men and women equally to influence, trends, and the need to flaunt. Facebook, especially, was created as a mass medium where both males and females act ostentatiously and participate in competitive self-disclosure. The type of content consumed includes lifestyle, fashion, and status, which are accessible to all users irrespective of gender. Both sexes are equally pressured into adhering to these types of images. What follows is an equalization of the intensity of social media usage as both genders strive to be connected, validated, and engaged in activity. Similarly, the urge for conspicuous consumption is not constrained by gender principles of society. Men and women are socialized into consumerist culture and products, and hence their behaviors are more or less the same. Therefore, male and female young adults have comparable degrees of self-esteem and conspicuous consumption as influenced by social network sites in today's consumer culture. This finding is consistent with a previous study (Oh 2021).

3. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the relationship between social media usage intensity, self-esteem, and conspicuous consumption among young adults. Results showed that social media usage is negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to conspicuous consumption, while self-esteem is negatively related to conspicuous consumption. Self-esteem also moderated the relationship between social media usage and conspicuous consumption. There were no gender differences in the study variables.

This study has implications for education, prevention, and counseling through campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the effects of using specific social media platforms or the addictive nature of relying on material possessions to enhance self-worth. Research findings on how conspicuous consumption is negotiated through social media could be valuable for marketers and businesses. Businesses could use promotional messages to target consumer psychology, especially in the online space.

These results could make social media platforms address the psychological impact of their algorithms and content organization. As the study evidence indicates that social media undermines messages of self-worth and promotes materialism, platforms may be compelled to change, adapt, or completely remove features that encourage empty status-seeking content.

The findings could also be useful in educational interventions designed to improve young adults' digital literacy and boost their confidence. Educational institutions and policymakers can leverage the findings to develop courses and programs that enable individuals to critically analyze social media use, discouraging toxic modes of social comparison and reducing dependence on material possessions for validation.

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