

**FOREIGN TRADE**

**THE ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM AND MATERIALISM ON CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION TENDENCY: A FUTURISTIC APPROACH**

*Geliş Tarihi: 20.12.2019 Kabul Tarihi: 13.01.2020*

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**ABSTRACT**

Expanding our understanding of consumer research in postmodern consumption culture, it is important to research the impact of different subjects on conspicuous consumption. The purpose of this study is to determine the futuristic role of self-esteem and materialism on conspicuous consumption. A questionnaire was employed to a non-probabilistic convenience sample of 601 consumers through over two-weeks period by a research company. The findings showed that the conspicuous consumption is more likely to be affected by three dimensions of materialism, specifically success and happiness dimensions. However, self-esteem didn't have a significant effect on conspicuous consumption.

**Keywords:** *Conspicuous consumption tendency, Self-esteem, Materialism.*

**DIŞ TİCARET**

**BENLİK SAYGISI VE MATERYALİZMİN GÖSTERİŞÇİ TÜKETİM EĞİLİMİNDEKİ ROLÜ: GELECEĞE AİT BİR YAKLAŞIM**

**ÖZET**

Postmodern tüketim kültürde tüketim araştırmalarını anlamamızı geliştirirken, diğer konuların gösterişçi tüketim üzerine etkilerinin araştırılması önemlidir. Bu çalışmanın amacı benlik saygısı ve materyalizmin gösterişçi tüketim üzerinde geleceğe ait rolünü belirlemektir. Bir anket tesadüfi olmayan kolayda örnekleme yöntemiyle oluşturulmuş 601 tüketicie iki haftalık periyotla araştırma şirketi tarafından uygulanmıştır. Bulgular göstermektedir ki gösterişçi tüketimin materyalizmin üç boyutundan, özellikle başarı ve mutluluk boyutlarından etkilenmesi daha olasıdır. Ancak, benlik saygısının gösterişçi tüketim üzerine önemli bir etkisi bulunmamaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Gösterişçi tüketim eğilimi, Benlik saygısı, Materyalizm.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Consumer purchasing behavior has not always been rational. In the recent years, reasons like economic and social changes, technological developments, transformation in the mass media, attractive promotional activities have been assumed to drive consumers to different consumption behaviors like conspicuous and status consumption. Conspicuous consumption is a term which was introduced by Veblen in his book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, in 1899. The term was used to describe a consumption type as buying expensive items to display wealth and income (Mitchell, 2001). It is seen as a kind of attempt to show a higher social status (Mullins, 1999). Some consumers purchase specific goods to be seen more favorably in the higher social hierarchy and this leads to the use of conspicuous consumption in order to find a greater social status (Mullins, 1999). Nowadays, especially social transformation driven by the excessive social media penetration seems a crucial trigger for conspicuous consumption and the topic is worth to be deeply studied.

Researches show that people's needs for appearance and tangible assets are increasing and also the demands of people to products which provide vanity and status are increasing (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). Actually, conspicuous consumption revived during the 1980s but enhanced materialism of the 1980s is different from the conspicuous consumption of the 1920s, which was attributed to the upper class, whereas the middle class pervaded the conspicuous consumption in the 1980s (Page, 1992). Most of the material assets that people earn or possess are thought for comfort or happiness, however most of them are for vanity (Tanner and Roberts, 2000). Materialists assess themselves and others according to external appearances and possessions (Chatterjee and Hunt, 1996). For this reason, scholars like Paulose (2016) who seek the relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption stated that materialism significantly relates to conspicuous consumption.

On the other hand, the self and related subjects can play a trigger role at high level among postmodern consumers. As Veblen (1934) said conspicuous consumption is based on status portrayal, consumers who feel a lack of self-worth attempt use of conspicuous products to rise their status (Sivanathan and Pettit, 2010). Sirgy's self-congruity theory (Sirgy et al., 1997) indicates a similar assumption that some consumers prefer certain products which have images to enhance and boost their self-esteem. Topçu (2018) supported the idea that self-esteem is negatively related to conspicuous consumption.

Social transformation, changing materialist trends and lifestyles, the rise of the middle class and the new capitalism may influence many factors affecting conspicuous consumption behavior in the future. This research presents an overview of conspicuous consumption and seeks to contribute to the related literature by examining the impact of self-esteem and materialism begins with an inspection of the related literature, followed by a proposed framework. Following the presentation

of the results, implications that relate to both consumer behavior researchers and marketing practitioners are discussed.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Conspicuous Tendency**

Conspicuous consumption was first presented in Veblen's popular book, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). According to Veblen (1934), the concept is a public display of wealth in seeking higher status and others' recognition. In other words, it means "the purchase of visually conspicuous brands that may enable consumers to reflect their social status, convey their self-image, and boost their self-esteem" (Souiden, M'Saad and Pons, 2011:331). As Podoshen and Andrzejewski (2012) stated that although conspicuous consumption has initially been presented in the Western world for centuries, the study of the related research skyrocketed in the times of the Industrial Revolution. Status consumption and conspicuous consumption mostly have been used interchangeably in the literature to describe the same consumption behavior (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). There is a debate about whether the consumption of goods expressing status is conspicuous consumption or not. Although two concepts are used in place of each other in many studies, the two concepts are different. While conspicuous consumption focuses on the use of status products to show others, status consumption focuses on the use of status products to gain status for oneself.

Conspicuous consumption is assumed to enhance one's prestige in society, which can be executed via public demonstration referring wealth and communicating affluence to others. This concept also includes expenditures made for the attempt of rising the ego (Veblen, 1934) coupled with the garish show of wealth (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption is relying on the conjecture that those who put wealth in evidence are rewarded with primary treatment by social surrounding (Jain and Sharma, 2018). Trigg (2001) stated that conspicuous consumption has become more sophisticated and elusive topic due to its multiple symbolic meanings. The results of a pretty old research expressed that conspicuous consumers feel on an average eight to nine years younger than their actual age (Duesenberry, 1949). There are some research presenting the differences between countries regarding materialism and conspicuous consumption levels. Dev, Podoshen and Shahzad (2018) stated that young U.S. consumers have significantly higher materialistic and conspicuous consumption tendency level than Pakistani consumers. A research investigating conspicuous consumption in two cultures, Tunisia and Canada, found that consumers' conspicuous consumption is directly and positively influenced by social status display (Souiden, M'Saad and Pons, 2011).

Conspicuous consumption is also about conspicuous and status products which serve as a means of displaying wealth and purchasing power. They symbolize social status to individuals in conformance with Veblen's assumption. A research including some experiments resulted that individuals who give more weight on external values,

focused on others and motivate themselves to turn into their ideal-self (Kim, 2015). In case of psychological approach, conspicuous products are used to cope with emotional distress, negative feelings and any harm from others (Rucker and Galinsky, 2009). On the other hand, conspicuous products may be harmful for economic growth because when income is spent on conspicuous products, it is spent relatively less on other mandatory consumption pieces (Wijnen, 2017).

All postmodern consumption and social transformation trends may be expected to affect conspicuous consumption behavior in the future. This topic is originated from several issues like sociology, psychology and economics, so the topic is worth to be researched in relation with several factors. Conspicuous consumption is a crucial case not only today but also tomorrow due to its social and economic results. This study is investigating the role of materialism and self-esteem, two important ingredients of postmodern culture, on conspicuous consumption.

## **2.2. Materialism and Conspicuous Consumption**

Materialism is defined as “reflecting the importance a consumer attach to worldly possessions.” by Belk (1984:291) and as “to believe more in the value of material possessions and wealth than in relational and spiritual values” by Richards (2009:131). Belk (1984) approached materialism as a personality trait, explained materialism under three dimensions called possessiveness, non-generosity and envy. However, these dimensions are not the only explanations for evaluating materialism. Richins and Dawson (1992), approached materialism as a consumer value, explained materialism under another three dimensions called acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession defined success.

It is believed that people's increasing need for materialism will increase their status and conspicuous consumption. In the related literature, some studies which found a correlation between materialism and status consumption confirm this idea (Eastman et al., 1997; Heaney, Goldsmith and Jusoh, 2005; Goldsmith and Ronald, 2012). Based on both theoretical and practice-based studies, it has been found that the achievement dimension of materialism is related to the status consumption (Richins and Dawson, 1992, Graham, 1999). Despite the fact that the concepts of status consumption and conspicuous consumption are different indeed, they have similar aspects and are used for each other in some studies. In addition, some studies are the basis for a relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption. For example, in Loulakis and Hill (2010)'s studies, it is pointed out that consumers who are more materialistic in their lifestyles see the products as tools for building social ties and providing status, rather than seeing them merely as objects meeting personal needs and desires. Graham (1999) examined numerous irrelevant studies in the field of materialism and proposed a conceptual model for establishing connections between materialism with personal characteristics and consumer behaviors. Increased jealousy and social comparison with property ownership, seen as a success, increases the importance of brand, conspicuous consumption, amount of consumption and compulsive buying. Pyone and Isen (2011) reported that

materialistic Americans were more likely to purchase conspicuous goods and another research showed that the main driver of Brazilian teens' attitudes toward luxury products is materialism (Gil et al., 2012). Lewis and Moital's (2016) results also indicated that higher conspicuous individuals have higher materialism regarding expensive clothing. Another study revealed a positive influence of materialism on conspicuous consumption (Chacko, Prashar and Ramanathan, 2018). Paulose (2016) also found a significant relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption. Similarly, Velov, Gojkovic and Duric (2014) reported that materialism was found as a significant predictor of the attitudes towards conspicuous consumption.

Cultural orientation has shifted from materialism to post materialism (Hellevik, 1993). Post materialism means that consumers have already owned enough materials and there is no need for any other goods. Moreover, they don't believe that happiness is related with material possessions. For this reason, materialism is an important topic and will be an important topic in the future for conspicuous consumption.

### **2.3. Self-Esteem and Conspicuous Consumption**

Palan et al. (2011) define self-esteem as an assessment of how much the individual likes, accepts and respects himself with the importance and value he gives to himself. Harter (1990) expresses self-esteem in terms of how much the individual likes himself and how he accepts himself. Wells and Marvell (1976) have stated that self-respect carries three dimensions of self-love, self-acceptance and competence.

When a person regarded as having low self-esteem, it means that the individual lacks respect for himself, considers himself unworthy, inadequate, or seriously deficient as a person (Rosenberg, 1979). Low self-esteem has negative consequences such as anxiety and depression. Baumeister (1997) mentioned two situations that individual faces in this case. The first situation is that the individual accepts negative evaluation of himself/herself; the second situation is the struggle with negative emotions. The individual may choose the avoidance of self-contradictory situations and disturb self-perception by choosing the struggle choice. As a result, the individual may be directed to low level activities that can be carried out immediately such as shopping without considering the consequences in the long term. One of the theories that provide basis for this situation is the theory of self-discrepancy. The theory developed by Higgins (1987) focuses on the emotional consequences of the disagreement between the different selves (Dittmar, 2005). For example, the incompatibility between the "true self" that person thinks to be and the "ideal self" that person wants to be, is linked with sadness and depression emotions. These negativities lead the individual to compensatory behaviors. The individual buys the products she/he identifies with her/his ideal self as a self-restorative strategy. In this way, she/he tries to close this gap and relieve.

The symbolic self-completion theory proposed by Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) suggests that each person's self-perception is actually composed of a number of

characteristics related to himself and each of these characteristics' points to a different self-definition. At this point, the individual needs the confirmation of this particular self by others. In this particular sense of self, the individual tends to be in behaviors identified with symbols to feel complete. These behaviors can take the form of buying, using, and showing symbol products to others and the individual is convinced that he has the definition of self that he desires because he thinks that he persuades others (Yurchisin and Johnson, 2004). Researchers stated that products with higher apparent communication values such as shoes, accessories and cosmetics are more frequently used as symbols in the symbolic self-completion process (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982). Many individuals, who feel themselves incomplete, continue this behavior until others confirm that they have the desired identity or important psychological/physiological events occur for the individual. This can lead individuals to buy products with high visibility.

Veblen (1934) makes a connection to self-esteem as he argues that once people acquire an economic surplus, they do not purchase necessity items but instead in an attempt to build their self-esteem. Richins (1994) stated that the culture of the society defines individual's self which effects conspicuous consumption attitudes. Conspicuous consumption is seen as a way for consumers to not only display wealth but also enhance self-concept (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002; Souiden, M'Saad and Pons, 2011). Topçu (2018) reported that self-esteem is negatively related to conspicuous consumption based on his study with the sample of 463 students.

Self is a vital object of the postmodern culture because postmodern culture leads some consumption types like status and conspicuous consumption and consumption is a way of completing the self. As a result, low self-esteem seems to be a factor leading the consumer to conspicuous consumption.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In this present study, it is proposed that self-esteem and materialism have significant influence on conspicuous consumption. The first objective of the paper is to gain better understanding of the role for each of the aforementioned variables on conspicuous consumption.

#### **3.1. Sample and Data Collection**

An online survey was used to gather data on consumers' conspicuous consumption tendencies and other variables. The population of the research includes the university graduated consumers in Turkey. University graduation was required to participate to the survey because all money related items in the questionnaire are required to be understood most correctly and participants were considered as free to make purchase decision. Therefore, respondents of this study were university graduated people, who live in Istanbul. The research was limited with the sample of Istanbul residents because of certain restrictions like time and cost. The online survey was conducted at the beginning of November 2017 over two weeks-period by

a research company. A total of 601 valid and complete responses received. Demographic profiles of the sample are in Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the sample reveals that most of the participants are male (52%), under 40 years old (63,4%), who work as an employee (75,3%) and have income per person between 3.000 and 7.000 TL (63,7%).

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Sample**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>%</b>
Housewife	13	2,2	Less than 1.000 (TL)	19	3,2
Retired	40	6,7	1.001-2.000	55	9,2
Temporarily unemployed	41	6,8	2.001-3.000	56	9,3
Qualified self-employed	26	4,3	3.001-4.000	110	18,3
Employer	28	4,7	4.001-5.000	141	23,5
Employee / manager	98	16,3	5.001-6.000	62	10,3
Employee / specialist, engineer, technician	151	25,1	6.001-7.000	70	11,6
Employee/officer, civil servant	204	33,9	7.001-8.000	15	2,5
			8.001-9.000	20	3,2
			9.001-10.000	13	2,2
<b>Age</b>			More than 10.000	40	6,7
22-27	108	18			
28-33	138	23			
34-39	135	22,4	<b>Gender</b>		
40-45	152	25,2	Male	312	52
46-51	22	3,7	Female	289	48
52-57	19	3,2			
58-63	14	2,3	<b>Education</b>		
64 and older	13	2,2	Bachelor	354	59
	601	100	Master / PhD	247	41
				601	100

**3.2. Measurement Instrument**

The materialism scale was composed of a set of items taken from the Richins and Dowson (1992) 18 item-materialism scale. This scale was preferred because it handles materialism through cognitive approach and it has been used in recent literature with a high degree of reliability (Podoshen, Li and Zhang, 2011). The

widely used self-report measure for evaluating self-esteem, which is defined as one's overall sense of worthiness as a person (Schmitt and Allik, 2005) -Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale- was used in this study. The RSES has coefficient  $\alpha$  of .92 by Rosenberg (1979). Conspicuous consumption tendency was measured via scale developed by O'Cass and McEwen (2004). All scales used in the survey are presented on Table 2. The survey also includes variables about participants' profiles (i.e. gender, age, income). To assess all variables, five-point Likert-type scale (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 4-agree, 5-strongly agree) was utilized.

**Table 2. Scales Used in the Study**

<b>Materialism (MAT)</b>	Richins and Dowson (1992)
<b>Self-Esteem (SE)</b>	Rosenberg (1965)
<b>Conspicuous Consumption (CC)</b>	O'Cass ve McEwen (2004)

#### **4. ANALYSIS**

In the scope of the study, firstly reliability of the scales was assessed. Then factor analysis and regression analysis were performed respectively.

##### **4.1. Reliability Analysis**

In order to evaluate the reliability of the factors, Cronbach's alpha values were assessed. Cronbach's alpha may range from 0 to 1,00. The values close to 1,00 show high consistency. George and Mallery (2003) reported that if Cronbach's alpha is higher than 0,70, it is acceptable and if it is higher than 0,80, it means good reliability. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient values ranged from 0,849 to 0,889 which show good and inter-item consistency for each factor (CC: 0,849; MAT: 0, 866; SE: 0,889). Cronbach's alpha value for overall scale is 0,941.

##### **4.2. Factor Analysis**

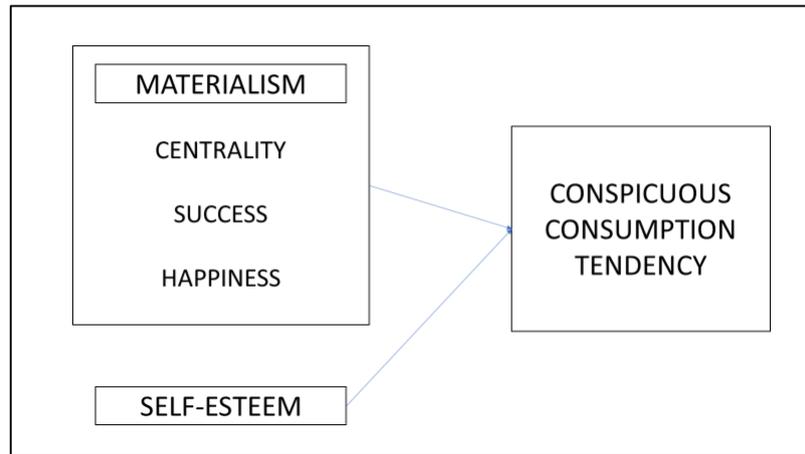
Factor analysis is a set of methods to determine the extent to which variables which are related can be grouped in one factor so that they can be treated as one combined variable or factor rather than separate variables (Abdullah and Asngari, 2011). Scores to be computed for each factor by factor analysis. Hair et al. (2009) suggested that standardized factor loadings should ideally be 0,70 or higher. Principal components and factors analyses by varimax rotation were conducted, and the percentage of variance were used to determine the number of factors. The factor loadings mean the correlation coefficients between the variables and the factors. Factor loadings are the basis to assign a label to each factor. Referred to Pearson's  $r$ , the squared factor loading means the percentage of variance in the variable which is explained by a factor. The communality means the sum of the squared factor loadings for all factors for a given variable accounted for by all the factors. The

factor analysis extracts only the proportion of variance stemming from common factors.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure is an important value for the factor analysis. It was found to be 0,668 for materialism; 0,854 for conspicuous consumption and 0,881 for self-esteem, all exceeding the recommendation value of 0,6 (Kaiser, 1974).

According to the results, materialism has three factors which are compatible with literature, dubbed as centrality, happiness and success. All three factors' reliability exceed 0,60 so they are acceptable and total variance of these three factors is 64,623 %. Reliability of centrality factor is 0,658; reliability of happiness is 0,658; reliability of success is 0,690. Conspicuous consumption scale has one factor with 5 items explaining 62,457 %. Self-esteem scale has one factor with 6 items explaining 62,731 %.

According to the results, the model of the study is as below (Figure 1):



**Figure 1: The Model of the Study**

The hypotheses of the study were developed as:

*H1: Centrality has a significant positive influence on conspicuous consumption tendency .*

*H2: Happiness has a significant positive influence on conspicuous consumption tendency.*

*H3: Success has a significant positive influence on conspicuous consumption tendency.*

H4: Self-esteem (SE) has a significant positive influence on conspicuous consumption tendency.

### 4.3. Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis is employed to hypothesize one or more dependent variables whether they influence an independent variable or not. The variable namely “conspicuous consumption (CC)” was entered as dependent variable while three other variables namely “centrality (MATFAC 1), happiness (MATFAC 2), success (MATFAC 3)” as the factors of materialism and “self-esteem (SEFAC)” were entered as independent variables. Table 3 shows regression analysis test results.

**Table 3. Regression Analysis Test Summary Table**

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics					Durbin-Watson
					R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change	
1	,567	0,322	0,318	,82613401	,322	70,781	4	596	,000	1,620

a. Predictors: (Constant): MATFAC3, MATFAC2, MATFAC1, SEFAC

b. Dependent Variable: CC

Test summary table (Table 3) shows that F statistics is significant (Sig.0,000). Also, 32,2 % of the variation of conspicuous consumption is predicted by materialism and self-esteem. The regression assumptions have been verified. VIF value, indicating multicollinearity, must be lower than 10 (Hair et al., 2009). The other values indicating multicollinearity are eigenvalue and condition index. According to T analysis, the values of VIF vary between 1,014 and 1,200. The highest eigenvalue is 1,408 and the lowest is 0,592 (1,408/0,592= 2,378 < 100). Condition index values vary between 1,00 and 1,542 which is lower than 15. These results indicate that there is no multicollinearity. Durbin-Watson value, indicating auto-correlation, is 1,620 which is close to 2 so it is assumed that there’s no auto-correlation.

**Table 4. Multiple Regression Results of Dependent and Independent Variables**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	3,152E-017	0,034		,000	1,000
MATFAC1	0,301	0,035	0,301	8,690	,000
MATFAC2	0,362	0,034	0,362	10,651	,000
MATFAC3	0,363	0,036	0,363	10,104	,000
SEFAC	0,085	0,037	0,085	2,312	,021

In order to find the contribution of each independent variable on conspicuous consumption is summarized in Table 4. As Pallant (2005) stated, the smaller significance level and the higher value of Beta indicates the strongest contribution to the dependent variable. The greatest standardized Beta coefficient is MATFAC 3 (success), which is 36,3 % at the significance level of 0,000 ( $p < ,01$ ). The second largest coefficient belongs to MATFAC 2 (happiness), at the significance level of 0,000 ( $\beta = 36,2 \%$ ;  $p < ,01$ ). The third largest Beta coefficient belongs to MATFAC 1 (centrality), which is 0,301 at the significance level of 0,000 ( $p < ,01$ ). H1, H2, H3 was accepted but H4 was rejected.

## 5. RESULTS

The primary finding of this research was demonstration of predictive relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption. This finding is compatible with the outcomes of previous research (Velov, Gojkovic and Duric, 2014; Podoshen and Andrzejewski, 2012; Podoshen, Li and Zhang, 2011). Success and happiness are two materialistic dimensions have the highest beta coefficients. Centrality dimension is a predictive of conspicuous consumption too. The other finding is that the study has found almost no evidence for the predictive relationship between self-esteem and conspicuous consumption on the contrary of most of the previous studies. However, research show that there's a negative relationship between self-esteem and conspicuous consumption in case of a presence of a significant relation.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of the research is to investigate the role of materialism and self-esteem on the conspicuous consumption in consideration of future trends. The relationship between materialism and conspicuous consumption is considered to be rational because possession of material goods is a sign of materialism and show of the wealth is a certain characteristic of conspicuous consumption. Especially success and happiness have significant effect on the topic behavior. It is not a surprising result because people generally use conspicuous products to show their success and happiness. However, self-esteem has no significant influence on conspicuous

consumption. It may stem from the fact that the participants of the research have at least university degree and it may be assumed that consumers with bachelor degree have higher degree of self-esteem. However, Kerremans (2009) also found no influence of self-esteem on conspicuous consumption and he got two explanations for this result; one of which is related some mistakes done in the research process and the second one is that there is no place for self-esteem in his conceptual model.

This study has limitations. Firstly, data was gathered from participants residing in Istanbul. It is possible that attitudes regarding materialism, self-esteem and conspicuous consumption may differ based on geographic region. Future research may check over these differences. The second limitation is about the analysis used in the study. Because structural equation model didn't work, regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses. Future research may use another participant group, another place then the data may be suitable for structural equation modeling.

Since postmodern culture is proceeding, its symbolic consumption patterns will continue too. Conspicuous consumption, as one of these patterns, is highly tempting for consumers who seek their ideal self, a specific social status and a wealthier image. Although the results of this research couldn't find any cause-effect relationship between self-esteem and conspicuous consumption; increasing psychological diseases and depression level, feel of loneliness may trigger self issues in the future. On the other side, post materialism which is that consumer think that they have enough materials has supplanted materialism. In the coming years, the relationship between post materialism and conspicuous consumption will be researched. However, in order to succeed on this type of research, materialism and its effect should be ideally comprehended. Besides, changing social class structures may affect these variables and their relationships hereinafter. This study would be beneficial for further understanding of conspicuous consumption with these variables and as a general. Under the thumb of post materialist and postmodernist cultures with the social and economic transformation, the relationships may be more complex and different from the present results. The scholars are expected to stay with this story as it develops.

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