

## The effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation in the branded clothing sector: The mediating effect of product symbolism

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### ABSTRACT

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The goal of this research is to test the mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults. Young adults between the ages of 20-35 who wear branded clothes in Sri Lanka were considered the target population. The data was collected through a survey to find answers to the identified research questions through a quantitative approach. The Snowball sampling method was used as the sampling method for this study. The Sobel Test was carried out using an online calculator to measure the statistical significance of the mediation. The results showed that the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation mediated through product symbolism could be judged as statistically significant. The findings can help with market segmentation and brand positioning. Knowing these symbolic value attachments to branded clothes, marketers can create their marketing mix strategies to provide solutions for self-image enhancement and sustainable competitive advantage from both consumer and company points of view.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's society, consumption is regarded as self-presentation and performance. People often use possessions to demonstrate their social attributes and values to others; they communicate their identification with and ideas about interested groups and individuals via consumption. Conspicuous consumption is a tendency to display wealth, social status, taste, or self-image to one's important reference groups by consuming publicly visible goods (Chen et al., 2008).

Products have become symbols for defining social status, identity, and group membership. When individuals attempt to sell their identities to society, the abstract and associated meanings that the product conveys are also essential to make it recognizable to others, get approval from similar others, and distinguish one's self. Clothing is considered one of the easiest ways to convey one's self-image to others (Millan & Mittal, 2017).

Clothing is defined as second skin and bearers of symbolism (Flodin, 2019). Branded fashion clothes denote one's associations and membership in a particular group and stereotypes of the typical user (Hogg et al., 1998). During the socialization process, an individual learns not only the shared meanings of products but also develops their symbolic interpretations. Consumers use these meanings to construct, maintain, and express their multiple identities (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2010). Having a social identity implies being at one with a particular group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's

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viewpoint (Stets & Burke, 2000). Young adults are known for being status-conscious consumers. They increase their conspicuous consumption behavior due to the societal pressures that force them to keep up with a certain standard (Kong et al., 2020; Hoo et al., 2024).

Existing literature does not sufficiently conceptualize the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation and the significance of product symbolism as a mediator in the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation, specifically when branded clothes as a product category is considered and Sri Lanka as a community is concerned. Hence, the primary goal of this study is to examine how young adults' branded apparel consumption affects the development of their social identities and to quantify the mediating role that product symbolism plays in this relationship.

Existing literature needs to conceptualize the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation in the branded clothing sector. There are relatively few discussions regarding how social identity formation plays a role in branded clothing, particularly for young adults and the nation of Sri Lanka. Even though the significance of consumption for identity creation has been empirically investigated in several literature streams, there has to be more research on the impact of conspicuous consumption on social identity construction. Also, we cannot find a fair number of scholarly discussions that combine all these components: conspicuous consumption, social identity formation, and product symbolism. Hence, there is a gap in the consumer behavior literature regarding understanding these relations. Existing literature on conspicuous consumption and identity formation has been widely targeted to the youth segment (less than 20), and young adults and their behavior related to conspicuous consumption and branded fashion clothes are seldom researched. Also, existing literature does not conceptualize the mediating role of product symbolism for the impact of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation. From a practical point of view, some issues should be investigated further by consumer behavior researchers. Do young adults tend to relate branded clothes to conspicuous consumption and identity construction? How is product symbolism related to conspicuous consumption and identity formation? To what extent does conspicuous consumption influence social identity? For marketers to effectively use communication, targeting, and positioning strategies, they must be aware of these linkages.

The above discussion suggests that there lies a clear gap in our understanding of conspicuous consumption of branded fashion clothing as a symbolic product and young adults and their social identity construction behaviors. This study examines branded clothing as a product category since it strongly correlates with young adults' conspicuous purchasing habits.

### *Objectives of the Study*

The study developed the following two objectives.

1. To examine the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.
2. To test the mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Conspicuous Consumption*

The American Sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen was the pioneer who coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' in his book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, in 1899. Veblen argues that consumer demand for services and goods derives from a need to establish social networks and a desire to emulate higher social classes and economic groups. Conspicuous purchases enable individuals to express something about themselves to others, an extrinsic motivation (signaling to others) instead of an intrinsic one (utility of the purchase for the self), which makes them happier (Bronner & De Hoog, 2019, Abdullah et al., 2019). Assimos et al. (2019) argued that conspicuous consumption should be seen as a way of increasing prestige before society through the public display of wealth. According to Chaudhuri et al. (2011), conspicuous consumption is a deliberate engagement in the symbolic and visible purchase, possession, and usage of products and services imbued with scarce economic and cultural capital, with the motivation to communicate a distinctive self-image to others.

O'cass and McEwen (2004) conspicuous consumption focuses on enhancing one's image by overtly consuming products that communicate status to others. Consuming conspicuously can only be achieved in the presence of others, for instance, through public demonstration, signaling wealth, and conveying affluence to others. To be regarded as conspicuous consumption, the direct observation of others is needed (Piron, 2000).

Young individuals are the conspicuous consumers par excellence because of their incredible attention to others and mass media (Sims-Muhammad et al., 2012). They are probably the most studied consumer category in this regard (Memushi, 2014). Young adults increase their conspicuous consumption behavior due to the societal pressures which force them to keep up with a certain standard. Moreover, young adults are also known for being status-conscious consumers. Therefore, they are more likely to be impacted by interpersonal influences (Kong et al., 2020). Sims-Muhammad et al. (2012) young adults view their consumption as indicating their class and social status. In pursuing identity, young adults seek peer validation while

consuming conspicuous goods. Conspicuous consumption creates something artificial to achieve their self-identity (Bojic Olsson, 2020). Combining the various dimensions of conspicuous consumption introduced by different scholars, this study mainly focused on the dimensions of conspicuous consumption introduced by Chen (2002) ostentation, materialism, and status.

**Ostentation:** Platte (2008) described this as a behavior aimed at showing off, even if you cannot. Chaudhuri & Majumdar (2006) suggested this as a motivation among specific segments of consumers to consume products that are consumed publicly to display wealth, power, and status. Ostentatious consumption is typical of the upper class. People from lower strata imitate their lifestyles (Nowakowski, 2021).

**Materialism:** According to Belk (1984b, p. 291), materialism is “The importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction” (Belk, 1985; Srikant, 2013) Materialistic persons are suggested to have money and possessions that convey status and a desirable image, which is more critical than other intentions a person might try to achieve (Tim Kasser, 2018).

**Status:** Status is the form of power that consists of respect, consideration, and envy from others and represents the goals of a culture (Eastman et al., 2015). Social status may be (1) ascribed (i.e., predetermined) refers to depending on the caste in which one was born, it was acquired or by ordainment (e.g., by monarchs), or (2) achieved (i.e., attained through merit) refers through conspicuous consumption people may be able to climb the social ladder (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015).

**Identity Formation:** “Identity,” “Self-concept,” and “Self-identity” are related terms in psychology but sometimes have inconsistent meanings (Dittmar, 2008). Jenkins (2014) argued that understanding one's identity entails knowing oneself, others, what they are, what we are, what others think we are, and so on. Our identity makes us unique and sets us apart from other individuals. However, identity also suggests some affiliation with a broader collective or social group (Buckingham, 2008). Identity gives people a feeling of personal control and free will. Moreover, it makes people acknowledge what they can and gives them a sense of being able to explore other possibilities and make different choices in the future (Grop, 2005). Many scholars have identified different kinds of identities.

**Actual Identity:** The actual self is the authentic self, related to who an individual is now or how he sees himself. It is the individual's realistic perception of himself (Astakhova et al., 2017). Sparby et al. (2019) argued that the true self could be viewed as having a spiritual existence. It can appear in time but also exists beyond time. It may even be absent at different moments without ceasing to exist.

**Social Identity:** The social self is a kind of generalization of the ideas of others (Grop, 2005). Abrams (2016) stated that social identity is a self-conception as a group member. Social identities distinguish in-group members from relevant out-groups within a particular social context and provide them with a shared identity that suggests who they are, what they should believe, and how they should behave (Hogg, 2016).

**Ideal Identity:** This ideal identity can be seen as a mental picture of the perfect “me” (Grop, 2005). The ideal self, also known as the dreamed self, refers to how individuals would like to see themselves how they would like to appear, or how they would dream of being (Achouri & Bouslama, 2010; Astakhova et al., 2017; Jamal & Goode, 2001).

**Ideal Social Self:** The ideal social self refers to how an individual would like others to think of him (Achouri & Bouslama, 2010). As cited in Sirgy (1982), Maheshwari (1974) stated that the ideal social self is sometimes referred to as the “desired social self,” which denotes the image that one would like others to hold.

**Product Symbolism:** Product symbolism is the product's image, encompassing abstract ideas and associations with the product and beliefs about the kinds of people who use the product (Allen, 2002). More generally, symbolic meanings reflect those properties consumers discern in products that are of the product's appearance (Van Rompay et al., 2009). Since symbolic meanings are based on cultural and social conventions and traditions, knowing cultural norms and contexts is crucial to understanding the message of a product in the way it was intended (Steffen, 2013). Since the creation of meaning is not deterministic and unidirectional, a product may carry a diverse range of meanings (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2010). For example, we wear clothes to feel warm and comfortable, and they also convey the message about our style, social position, and even political preferences. Organic vegetables satisfy our hunger and symbolize environmental awareness (Dalla Chiesa & Dekker, 2022). A product/brand could be regarded as a symbolic source when signs and meanings are identified and recognized by a group with which a consumer is associated (Sulhaini et al., 2022).

**Branded Clothing Sector of Sri Lanka:** A brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods or services as distinct from those of other sellers (*American Marketing Association*, 2023). There are around 300 apparel manufacturers in Sri Lanka. Mas Intimates Pvt Ltd, Mas Active Trading Pvt Ltd, Brandix Apparel Ltd, Hirdaramani International Exports Pvt Ltd, Omega Line Ltd, Bodyline Pvt Ltd, Ansell Lanka Pvt Ltd, Inqube Global Pvt Ltd,

Hela Clothing Pvt Ltd, etc. are the key players of the Sri Lankan apparel sector. Sri Lankan apparel industry has a series of fashion brands, including Ann Taylor, Abercrombie & Fitch, Banana Republic, C&A, Calvin Klein, Chantelle Group, Columbia, Gap, Gloria Vanderbilt, Intimissimi, Lands' End, Liz Claiborne, Marks & Spencer, Next, Old Navy, Polo Ralph Lauren, Sainsbury, Triumph, The Limited, and Victoria's Secret, etc. (Samanthi, 2022).

**Branded Clothing as a Symbol of Product Usage:** Clothing was creatively defined by Flodin (2019) as second skin and bearers of symbolism. Clothing is the most investigated product category which imparts information (or misinformation) concerning sex, age, occupation, personality, opinions, sex desires, ethnic origin, cultural orientation, tastes, social class, and the current mood of its wearer (Ada Ozdil, 2021; Bouska & Bea'm'y, 1978; Lurie, 1981; Millan & Mittal, 2017; Stuart & Fuller, 1991). Clothing is considered one of the easiest ways to convey one's self-image to others (Millan & Mittal, 2017).

Clothing brands place a greater emphasis on a brand's symbolic value because clothing has a lot of symbolic characteristics (Chang et al., 2002). A study by Chang et al. (2002) concluded that consumers are loyal to a prestige brand for a conspicuous value, showing off the wealth that the clothing of prestige brands offer. Hokkanen (2014) pointed out that wearing unbranded clothes threatens social identity. High social concern is a requirement for and is likely to foster a preference for clothing status symbolism since clothing is an effective way to display the wearer's status. The consumption and performance of branded fashion and styles like Nike were valued as a form of identity capital (e.g., peer status) and as a means for personal valorization and mobility (Archer et al., 2007). Fig. 1 shows the structure of the proposed study of this paper.

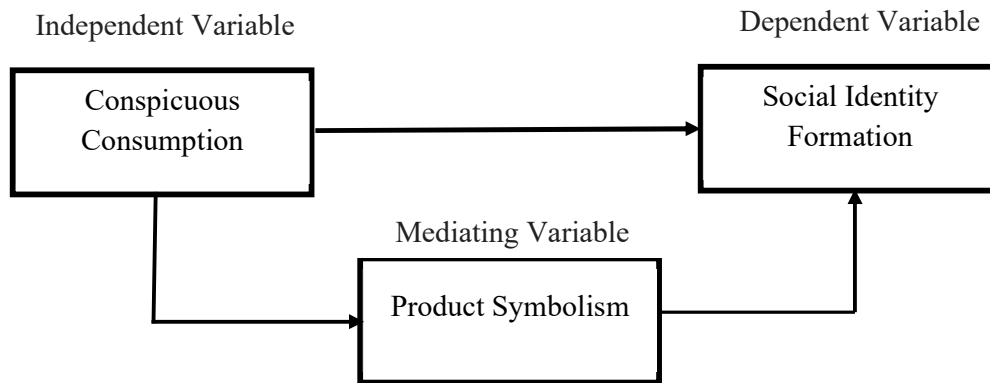


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

As shown in Fig. 1, conspicuous consumption is identified as the independent variable, whereas social identity formation is recognized as the dependent variable. The first objective of this study is to examine the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation. Further, product symbolism is identified as the mediating variable that helps to explain how conspicuous consumption affects social identity formation. The more a young adult wants to display his wealth, social status, taste, or self-image to his important referent groups, he will increase his conspicuous consumption behavior and take more care to choose highly conspicuous brands. The more such branded clothes reveal social meanings relevant to a particular group that a person belongs to or either prefers or wishes to join with, the higher the ability to form his social identity, being at one with a particular group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group's viewpoint. Therefore, the second objective is to examine the mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.

### 3. Research Methodology

Identifying the effect of conspicuous consumption on the social identity formation of Sri Lankan young adults and the mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the context of the branded clothing sector are the main objectives that were expected to be achieved in this study. Following the positivistic approach, quantitative research methodology was used to achieve the outcomes. Young adults between the ages of 20-35 who wear branded clothes in Sri Lanka were considered the target population. The reason for choosing young adults is because this age limit has made them culturally, socially, and economically similar due to events such as the early stages of work, the entrance into society, marriage, and household preparation, and the birth of the first child. As cited in Ritzer (2009), they have greater access to consumption cathedrals such as fast-food restaurants, shopping malls, educational settings, casinos, electronic shopping centers, athletic facilities, etc., through social networks, mobile phones, malls, the internet, magazines, music videos and the list goes on and on (Sims-Muhammad et al., 2012). Young adults usually make frequent purchases regardless of income (Bojic Olsson, 2020). Therefore, they become relevant for this study. The data was collected through a survey to find answers to the identified research questions through a quantitative approach. The Snowball sampling method was used as the sampling method for this study. This method was used because it is difficult to identify the branded clothes buyers directly, and the other study participants might be aware of other individuals who share the same experience. The questionnaire was distributed among a few friends, peers, and relatives the researcher already knew who fit with the study's criterion. Afterward, they were asked to recommend known persons. This was done in waves by selecting referrals from referrals until the required sample size was reached. A questionnaire, developed using Google Forms, was

distributed using electronic methods. The data was collected from the beginning of August to the end of October 2022. The respondents were contacted personally via social media and e-mails by the researcher. A total of 185 filled questionnaires were received. Since this is a conclusive study, a larger sample was taken to represent the target population. The data was analyzed using regression analysis with the assistance of SPSS software.

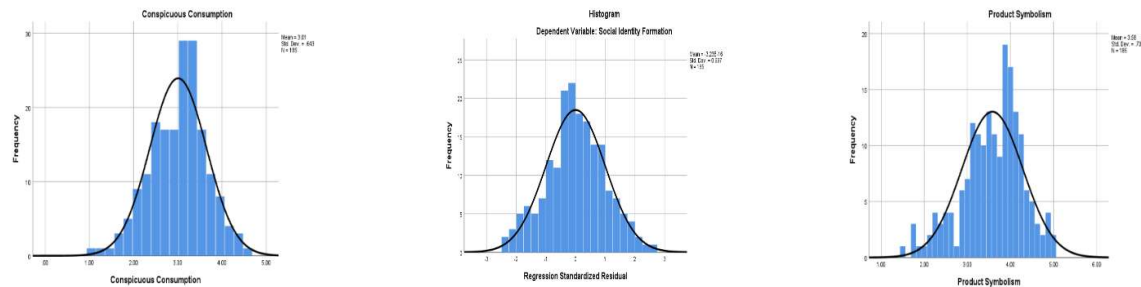
#### 4. Data Presentation and Analysis

##### Tests of Normality

Table 1 presents the summary of testing the normality.

**Table 1**  
Testing the normality

Variable	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Social Identity Formation	-0.429	0.179	0.107	0.355
Conspicuous Consumption	-0.355	0.179	0.099	0.355
Product Symbolism	-0.556	0.179	0.145	0.355



**Fig. 2.** Histogram of the data

The coefficients of skewness and kurtosis indicate that the distribution of the social identity formation, conspicuous consumption, and product symbolism scales are approximately normal because neither of the values exceeds the interval between -1 and +1 as shown in Table 1. As shown in Fig. 2, the histograms for conspicuous consumption, product symbolism, and social identity formation are symmetrical and bell-shaped. Hence the assumption of normality is met.

##### Validity of the Properties

Validity is the extent to which a construct measures what it is supposed to measure (Hair et al., 2020). We should be able to ensure that we are measuring the same construct we set out to do so and not something else (Sekaran, 2003). This study has taken and operationalized all the dimensions of dependent, independent, and mediating variables based on previous literature to satisfy the content validity. To ensure the convergent validity two significant outputs from SPSS, the KMO statistic value and Bartlett's value were used. In this study, the level of the coefficient used for factor loadings is 0.4. Factor loadings less than 0.4 were eliminated from further analysis.

**Table 1**  
Factor Loadings

	Factor Loadings	Total Variance Explained(%)
Social Identity Formation 1	0.836	70.809
Social Identity Formation2	0.843	
Social Identity Formation3	0.820	
Social Identity Formation4	0.660	
Conspicuous Consumption 1	0.691	57.101
Conspicuous Consumption 2	0.740	
Conspicuous Consumption 3	0.655	
Conspicuous Consumption 4	0.709	
Conspicuous Consumption 5	0.739	
Conspicuous Consumption 6	0.673	
Conspicuous Consumption 7	0.666	
Product Symbolism 1	0.683	56.283
Product Symbolism 2	0.722	
Product Symbolism 3	0.697	
Product Symbolism 4	0.634	
Product Symbolism 5	0.630	
Product Symbolism 6	0.817	
Product Symbolism 7	0.799	
Product Symbolism 8	0.762	
Product Symbolism 9	0.681	

As shown in Table 2, all the component matrix values are greater than 0.4 and so it validates each question in this study.

**Table 2**  
Summary of Convergent Validity Results

Variable	KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	AVE
Social Identity Formation	0.794	0.001	0.63
Conspicuous Consumption	0.875	0.001	0.50
Product Symbolism	0.921	0.001	0.51

According to Table 3, KMO & Bartlett's test has been performed for social identity formation, conspicuous consumption and product symbolism and the figures are shown as 0.794, 0.875, and 0.921 respectively which are more than 0.5, and the significance value is  $0.001 < 0.05$ . Therefore, the sample is adequate to run the factor analysis. Also, the AVE values of variables are 0.5 or greater than the recommended minimum of 0.5. Therefore, it confirms that the above dependent, independent, and mediating variables satisfy the conditions of convergent validity.

**Table 3**  
Discriminant Validity of Constructs

	SIF	CC	PS
SIF	<b>0.790</b>		
CC	0.524	<b>0.710</b>	
PS	0.401	0.534	<b>0.710</b>

Source: Survey Data

According to the Fornell-Lacker criterion, the square root of AVE for the construct should be higher than its correlation with the other constructs in the study to ensure discriminant validity. As shown in Table 4, the square roots of the AVE values of each construct are higher than the correlation coefficient of each construct with the other constructs. Thus, it confirms the discriminant validity of each construct in the measurement model.

#### *Reliability of the Properties*

Reliability refers to the extent to which a scale produces consistent results if repeated measurements are made (Malhotra & David, 2007). Cronbach Alpha/Coefficient Alpha was used to measure the internal consistency reliability in this study.

**Table 4**  
Cronbach's Alpha

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Identity Formation	0.860
Conspicuous Consumption	0.874
Product Symbolism	0.901

Source: Survey Data

As shown in Table 5, Cronbach's Alpha values ranged from 0.70 to 0.901 for all the variables, which is greater than the recommended value of 0.70. This indicates that all variables have high internal consistency and that the scales used for the study have good reliability.

#### *Sample Profile of the Study*

The sample comprised 185 young adults aged 20-35 who wear branded clothes in Sri Lanka. Of 185 respondents, 82 were males, and 103 were females. As a percentage, this can be interpreted as 44.3% of males and 55.7% of females. This study categorized respondents into six age levels: 19 or below, 20-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, and 40& above. Only individuals between the ages of 20-35 were selected for the sample, and the questionnaire was distributed among those selected categories (20-25, 26-30 & 31-35) to represent the young adult category. The sample has the highest percentage of young adults from the 26-30 age category, 68.1%. All the respondents have been educated at least up to G.C.E A/L. The majority of the respondents are graduates (53%). The highest number of respondents were executives, 42.7% of the sample. 18.4% were senior executives, 16.2% were assistants, 14.6% were managers, and 8.1% were interns. About 72.4% of respondents had more than Rs.50 000 in income for the current year of study. Many respondents were grouped as Rs.100 000 or more income earners. The second highest category was Rs.50 000-Rs.74 999, 24.9%. 17.3% had Rs.75, 000-Rs.99 999 of income. Only 11% of respondents had less than Rs. 34,999 in income.

#### *Hypothesis Testing*

##### *The Effect of Conspicuous Consumption on Social Identity Formation:*

**Objective:** To examine the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.

To meet this objective, the researcher has developed the following hypothesis to test the direct effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation.

**H<sub>0</sub>:** *There is no effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.*

**H<sub>1</sub>:** *There is an effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.*

**Table 5**

H<sub>1</sub> Testing - Model Summary

Model	R	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.524 <sup>a</sup>	.275	.271	.67044

a. Predictors: (Constant), CC

Source: Survey Data

**Table 6**

H<sub>1</sub> Testing - ANOVA

Model	Model	Sum of Squares	ANOVA <sup>a</sup>			Sig.
			df	Mean Square	F	
1	Regression	31.208	1	31.208	69.431	.000 <sup>b**</sup>
	Residual	82.256	183	.449		
	Total	113.465	184			

a. Dependent Variable: SIF

b. Predictors: (Constant), CC

\*\* = p<0.05

Source: Survey Data

**Table 7**

H<sub>1</sub> Testing - Coefficients

Model	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
		1	(Constant)	1.766		
	CC	.514	.062	.524	8.333	.000***

a. Dependent Variable: SIF

\*\*\* = p<0.05

Source: Survey Data

As shown in the model summary Table 6, the R Square value is 0.275, indicating that the total variation for the social identity formation that could be explained by conspicuous consumption is 27.5%. According to the standard, a value greater than 0.5 is effective enough to determine the relationship, meaning 50% of the dependent variable is explained by the respective independent variable. According to the ANOVA in Table 7, it is 0.000 below the tolerable significance level. Hence, the model is significant. When considering the coefficient (in Table 8), the sig-value is 0.000, less than the tolerable significance level for the study. The B value of unstandardized coefficients shows a constant value of 1.766 and a conspicuous consumption value of 0.514. This means that if conspicuous consumption (independent variable) increases by 1, social identity formation (dependent variable) will increase by 0.514. Therefore, using the above results, the first objective can be fulfilled. That means we can reject the null hypothesis (H<sub>0</sub>). Thus, the conclusion is 'There is an effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults'.

*The Mediating Effect of Product Symbolism on the Relationship between Conspicuous Consumption and Social Identity Formation:*

**Objective:** To test the mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.

To meet this objective, the researcher has developed the following hypotheses.

**H<sub>0</sub>:** *There is no mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.*

**H<sub>2</sub>:** *There is a mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.*

To test the hypotheses mentioned above, first, the study estimated the direct effect of conspicuous consumption on product symbolism.

**Table 8****H<sub>2a</sub> Testing - Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.534 <sup>a</sup>	.286	.282	.60054

a. Predictors: (Constant), CC

b. Dependent Variable: PS

Source: Survey Data

**Table 9****H<sub>2a</sub> Testing - ANOVA**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	26.384	1	26.384	73.159	<.001 <sup>b</sup> **
	Residual	65.998	183	.361		
	Total	92.382	184			

a. Dependent Variable: PS

b. Predictors: (Constant), CC

\*\*= p&lt;0.05

Source: Survey Data

**Table 10****H<sub>2a</sub> Testing - Coefficients**

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>		t	Sig.
		Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
1	(Constant)	2.264	.158	14.375	<.001 <sup>***</sup>
	CC	.473	.055	8.553	<.001 <sup>***</sup>

a. Dependent Variable: PS

\*\*\*= p&lt;0.05

Source: Survey Data

As shown in the model summary table 9, the R Square value is 0.286, indicating that the total variation for the product symbolism that could be explained by conspicuous consumption is 28.6%. According to the ANOVA table 9, the sig-value is 0.001, below the tolerable significance level. Hence, the model is significant. When considering the coefficient in Table 11, the sig-value is 0.001, less than the tolerable level of significance for the study. The B value of unstandardized coefficients shows a constant value of 2.264 and a conspicuous consumption value of 0.473. This means that if conspicuous consumption (independent variable) increases by 1, product symbolism (mediating variable) will increase by 0.473. The direct effect of conspicuous consumption on product symbolism was calculated as an essential requirement for estimating the indirect effect. To test the mediating effect, the researcher estimated the direct effect of conspicuous consumption (independent variable) on social identity formation (dependent variable) and the direct effect of product symbolism (mediating variable) on social identity formation (dependent variable) using multiple regression. The obtained results were as follows.

**Table 11****H<sub>2b</sub> Testing - Model Summary**

Model Summary <sup>b</sup>				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.544 <sup>a</sup>	.295	.288	.66275

a. Predictors: (Constant), CC, PS

b. Dependent Variable: SIF

Source: Survey Data

**Table 12****H<sub>2b</sub> Testing - ANOVA**

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	33.523	2	16.761	38.159	<.001 <sup>b</sup> **
	Residual	79.942	182	.439		
	Total	113.465	184			

a. Dependent Variable: SIF

b. Predictors: (Constant), CC, PS

\*\*= p&lt;0.05



**Table 13**  
H<sub>2b</sub> Testing – Coefficients

Model		Coefficients <sup>a</sup>				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.343	.254		5.293	<.001***
	CC	.426	.072	.434	5.898	<.001***
	PS	.187	.082	.169	2.295	.023***

a. Dependent Variable: SIF

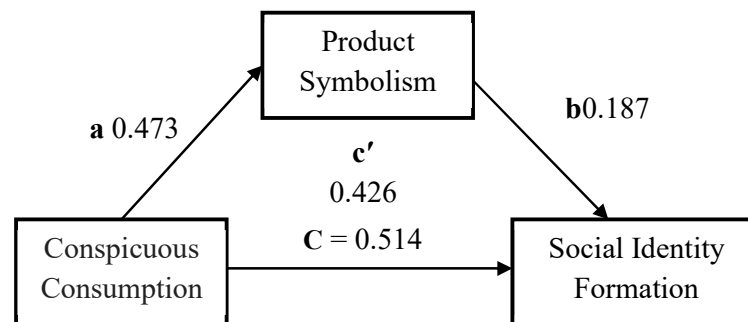
\*\*\*= p<0.05

Source: Survey Data

As shown in the model summary Table12, the R square value is 0.295 when product symbolism mediates the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation; it explains the variations of social identity formation by 29.5%. When considering the total effect of the independent variable; conspicuous consumption, on the dependent variable; social identity formation, the R square value is only 27.5%. However, when the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation is mediated by product symbolism, the R square value increases from 27.5% to 29.5%. Hence, it is visible that there is a mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation. Therefore, the study's second objective can be fulfilled using the R square value. Thus, H<sub>0</sub>(null hypothesis) can be rejected thus, the H<sub>2</sub> is accepted; there is a mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.

According to the ANOVA table13, the sig-value is 0.001, which concludes that the model is significant. These two variables do an excellent job of predicting variance in social identity formation.

The results of the regression (in Table 11) performed to predict the mediating variable (product symbolism) from the independent variable (conspicuous consumption) provide the path coefficient, which is 0.473 for the path denoted **a**, in Figure 2 and also the standard error of path **a** is 0.055(S<sub>a</sub>). Finally, the regression results were performed to predict the dependent (social identity formation) from conspicuous consumption and product symbolism. It provides estimates of the unstandardized coefficients for path **b** and path **c** as 0.187 and 0.426, and standard errors of those path coefficients as 0.082 and 0.072, respectively (in Table 14). As shown in Fig. 3, the **indirect effect of** conspicuous consumption on social identity formation is found by multiplying **a × b**; in this study,  $0.473 \times 0.187 = 0.088$ . The direct effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation when product symbolism is statistically controlled is represented by  $c' = 0.426$ . The direct effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation when there is no meditating variable is 0.514. The total effect is the sum of the direct and mediated effects ( $c = c' + ab$ ). Therefore, the results conclude that the mediation analysis partitions the total effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation ( $c = .514$ ) into a direct effect ( $c' = 0.426$ ) and a mediated effect ( $ab = 0.088$ ). Thus, a relatively small part is mediated by the mediator; product symbolism (0.088), and the remainder is not mediated by product symbolism (0.426). This can be identified as 'complementary partial mediation,' which refers to the direct effect of  $c'$  and the indirect effect of  $a \times b$  point in the same (positive or negative) direction (Baron & Kenney, 1986). This indicates that a portion of the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation is mediated through product symbolism. In contrast, conspicuous consumption still explains a portion of social identity formation independent of product symbolism.



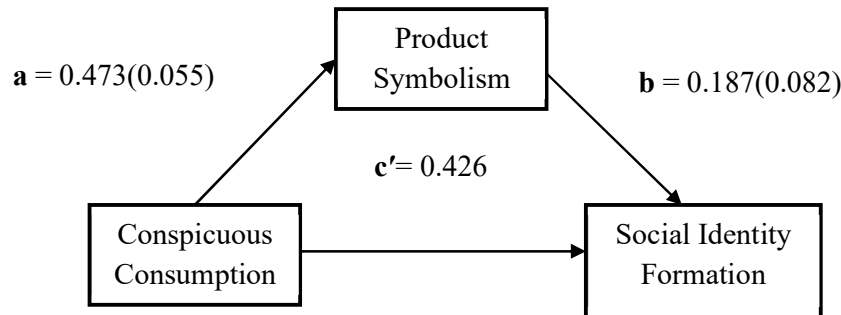
**Fig. 2.** Unstandardized Path Coefficients

Source: Survey Data

Description of numbers entered:

- a** - Unstandardized coefficient for the association between conspicuous consumption(independent) and product symbolism(mediator)
- b** - Unstandardized coefficient for the association between product symbolism(mediator) and social identity formation(dependent)
- c** - Unstandardized coefficient for the conspicuous consumption(independent) to social identity formation(dependent)/ Total effect
- c'** - Unstandardized coefficient for the conspicuous consumption(independent) to social identity formation(dependent), which is adjusted for the inclusion of product symbolism (mediator)

**Evaluating Statistical Significance:** The Sobel Test (Sobel, 1982) was carried out using Preacher & Leonardelli, (2010) online calculator to measure the statistical significance of the mediation where **a** and **b** are the raw (unstandardized) regression coefficients that represent the effect of the independent variable on mediating variable and the effect of the mediating variable on the dependent variable, respectively; **S<sub>a</sub>** is the standard error of the path **a** regression coefficient; **S<sub>b</sub>** is the standard error of the **b** regression coefficient ( $a = 0.473$ ,  $b = 0.187$ ,  $S_a = 0.055$ , and  $S_b = 0.082$ ) as shown in Fig. 4. The standard errors are shown in the parentheses next to the coefficient values.



**Fig. 3.** Unstandardized Regression Coefficients and Regression Errors

Source: Survey Data

Input:		Test statistic:	Std. Error:	p-value:
a	0.473	Sobel test: 2.20430456	0.04012649	0.02750293
b	0.187	Aroian test: 2.19051211	0.04037914	0.02848712
s <sub>a</sub>	0.055	Goodman test: 2.21836086	0.03987223	0.02653024
s <sub>b</sub>	0.082	Reset all	Calculate	

**Fig. 4.** Sobel Test Results using Calculator provided by Preacher and Hayes

$P < 0.05$

Source: Survey Data

According to Fig. 5, Sobel's Test results revealed that the p-value is less than 0.05 ( $p\text{-value} = 0.0275$ ). Thus, the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation via product symbolism is statistically significant. Therefore, the second objective can also be fulfilled using the above results. Thus, we can reject the null ( $H_0$ ) hypothesis. Then the  $H_{11}$  is accepted. Hence, we can conclude, 'There is a mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults.'

## 5. Discussion

The primary purpose of this article was to find out the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation and the mediating role of product symbolism in the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation. Therefore, two main objectives were set out to reach the research purpose. When considering the first objective, the results showed that conspicuous consumption and social identity formation are moderately correlated. The correlation value between these two variables was 0.524, indicating that young adults who engage in conspicuous consumption purchases might purchase such products to maintain a social identity and be like others in the group they fit in. Bojic Olsson (2020) concluded that conspicuous consumption impacts self-identity and works as a tool to make it easier for individuals to develop their self-identities reflexively according to a consumer's societal norms and expectations. Further, it explained that while creating self-identities, consumers seek validation from peers and need to buy the goods that other people buy to fit in and create a sense of belonging, affecting who they perceive themselves to be. The proportion of social identity formation variance explained by conspicuous consumption as per the R-Square for the regression is only 27.5%. It simply means that conspicuous consumption influences 27.5% of the variation of social identity formation, and the remaining 72.5% is impacted by factors other than conspicuous consumption. The regression analysis was conducted in two steps to test the mediating role of product symbolism. First, the effect of conspicuous consumption on product symbolism was tested. As per the R-Square value, 28.6% of the variability observed in product symbolism is explained by conspicuous consumption. 0.473 of the Beta coefficient value indicates that if conspicuous consumption changes by one unit, the product symbolism would change by 47.3%. Therefore, conspicuous consumption is also a significant predictor of the mediating variable, product symbolism. Secondly, the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation was evaluated through product symbolism. Based on the results, when the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation is mediated with product

symbolism, the effect is higher than the direct effect between the two variables. The R-Square value increased from 27.5% to 29.5% when the relationship was mediated via product symbolism. Therefore, it concludes that the mediating effect has increased the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation from 27.5% to 29.5%. According to the coefficient table, when mediator product symbolism entered the regression analysis, conspicuous consumption was still a predictor of social identity formation ( $p < 0.05$ ). The results of mediation analysis showed that the total effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation ( $C = 0.514$ ) had been partitioned into a direct effect ( $c' = 0.426$ ) and a mediated effect ( $ab = 0.088$ ). Therefore, the results concluded that mediation through product symbolism, while statistically significant, explains only a tiny part of the total effect. That means, before introducing the mediator, product symbolism, into the regression analysis, the total effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation was 0.514. If conspicuous consumption changes by one unit, it makes the change of social identity formation by 0.514. After introducing the mediating variable, the Beta coefficient value reduces up to 0.426, indicating that the mediation effect causes the rest of the impact.

The Sobel test was carried out to test the statistical significance of the mediation analysis. It appeared that the effect of conspicuous consumption on social identity formation mediated through product symbolism could be judged as statistically significant ( $p\text{-value} = 0.0275 < 0.05$ ). Therefore, the second objective can also be fulfilled based on these results. Wright et al. (1992) found that the mediating process in which consumers use product symbolism to define themselves in the context of a specific situation. ShiYong et al. (2022), stated that consumers are willing to express themselves through symbolic consumption and seek social support. Therefore, product symbolism has a significant positive impact on consumer participation in online communities. This literature supports the second main finding of this study, that product symbolism mediates the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation.

## 6. Implications of the Study

**Theoretical Implications:** When considering the theoretical implications of this study, this study addresses the gap in knowledge since most scholars have given attention to young individuals and rarely discussed the relationship among these concepts; conspicuous consumption, social identity formation, and product symbolism. Also, this study emphasized that conspicuous consumption and product symbolism are not the only factors that determine the social identity formation of individuals. Although the existing research focuses on the acquisition and use of clothing to denote one's position in society, less emphasis has been paid to how conspicuous consumption can influence the identity development of young adults through this symbolic aspect of clothing. Therefore, this study filled a gap in the literature on social identity and conspicuous consumption among young adults in Sri Lanka who purchase branded clothing.

**Practical Implications:** The findings can help with market segmentation and brand positioning. Knowing these symbolic value attachments to branded clothes, marketers can create their marketing mix strategies to provide solutions for self-image enhancement and sustainable competitive advantage from both consumer and company points of view. For example, some brands' prices are a few times higher than those of similar substitute products in the market. Because such products are positioned in consumers' minds, they are willing to pay higher prices for the social status passed through the products to the product owner. These findings are also significant in other countries sharing the same attributes and values as Sri Lanka. Marketers should ensure that their products offer consumers a unique value proposition in markets where status and self-identity are highly regarded. They can incorporate these value-expressive ideals into their product/service branding. Because conspicuous consumption is no longer a privilege of the upper class, lower-class individuals imitate the upper class's behaviors to be considered upper-class members. From an economic perspective, the clothing industry is related to many other products and services. Products such as shoes, handbags, fashion accessories, and services like modeling, photography, hair stylists, and beauticians can also benefit from this study's results. Furthermore, this will emphasize the value of parents and the education system in assisting young adults in acquiring the necessary information and skills to make sensible financial decisions. From a moral perspective, this study will focus on the significance of digital platforms and mass media in deciding how much emphasis should be given to consumerist attitudes and materialistic ideals.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

Though this study contributes to the knowledge of exceptional consumer behavior in the branded clothing sector, it is not exempt from limitations. First, the study was conducted under limited time and constraints. The sample is young adults (aged 20-35) in Sri Lanka who wear branded clothes. It was planned to collect data from 200 young adults, but a larger sample was not possible due to time constraints.

This study is only limited to the branded clothing sector and specifically to young adults. The branded clothing sector was selected for the study since it is the most investigated product category under symbolic consumption, which imparts information related to sex, age, occupation, personality, opinions, sex desires, ethnic origin, cultural orientation, tastes, social class, and the current mood of its wearer. The study utilized young adults as the sample because they primarily engage in conspicuous consumption and identity-construction behaviors.

This study is not focused on how socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, occupation, educational level, marital status, and income would impact consumers' conspicuous consumption decisions and identity formation behaviors. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct future research concerning these areas.

The present study is limited to one mediating variable: product symbolism. Many factors, such as price, demographics, etc., may influence consumers to purchase products conspicuously to construct identities.

### 8. Direction for Future Research

Many previous studies have investigated different product categories other than clothing. Therefore, future research studies can examine other product categories theorized to be high in symbolic value, using samples with different age categories, which have more purchasing power and experience because other age groups have different perceptions about their identities and symbolic product status.

Study findings would be more convincing and conclusive in future studies if qualitative techniques could also be used to understand consumer views, underlying processes, and consequences of such consumer behavior patterns. Also, future studies can focus on how products transfer meanings and positive attributes to the product holder/owner and what factors will influence this transferring process.

Future research should focus on how socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, occupation, educational level, marital status, and income impact consumers' conspicuous consumption decisions and identity formation behaviors.

Future studies can incorporate other mediating and moderating variables into the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation.

### 9. Conclusion

The data gathered for the study supported the theoretical framework that had been constructed. In conclusion, the study suggests that “there is a mediating effect of product symbolism on the relationship between conspicuous consumption and social identity formation in the branded clothing sector of young adults”.

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### Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author, [Dr. Galdolge B.S].

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