Theoretical Linkage between Theories of Social Comparison, Brand Congruence, Self Concept and Social Indentity

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This paper proposed a theoretical framework to fulfill the theoretical gap which will lead to an extended theory for conspicuous consumption.
Methodology: The main theory considered for this study is social comparison theory which is the grounded theory of the concept of conspicuous consumption. Further, theoretical framework is entailed of 3 supporting theories. As explained below brand association variable is emerged from brand congruency theory. while Self-concept variable is emerged from self-concept theory. Whereas personal cultural orientation is based on the social identity theory.
Conclusion: The researcher strongly argues that in order to do a thorough comparison and purchase, the consumer would look at overall spectrum i.e., brand image, self-image and social image where it will give him an overall evaluation for him to make a consumption behavior which may lead to conspicuous consumption.

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1. INTRODUCTION

An overview of the theoretical background has been presented in this paper by making special references to the evolution of brand association and conspicuous consumption as phenomenon. Therefore, the theoretical roots were discussed in detail by giving prominence to main theory of the research which is social comparison theory and other supporting theories in consumer behavior. In relation to social comparison theory, Festinger [1] argues that individuals have the tendency to compare as to what they have as against what others have, so that they can judge how well they themselves are doing. One aspect of this issue is that individuals strive to differentiate themselves from others who belong to a lower class while replicating the behaviors of those in the higher class [2]. This comparison is been done to fulfil their desires to belong to an elite social class by acquiring and consuming products that are considered social signifiers. However, the theory is only discussed about upward and downward comparison and how the benchmark would work for an individual is not specified in the theory. On the other hand, social comparison theory is silent on brand association aspect. Since brand association has a major role, in addition the self-concept has a role to play in conspicuous consumption and same is being supported from previous literature.

In this study, the researcher linked the supporting theory to main theory to bridge the theoretical gap. Thus, to support brand association variable, the research linked brand congruence theory. As per brand congruence theory it was noted that individuals are more comfortable and satisfied with products/brands that are congruent with their actual or desired self-concept [3,4]. Consumers behave after the congruence resulting from a psychological comparison between the product-user image and the consumer's self-concept [5]. Their attitudes toward products form based on their evaluation of beliefs about product attributes and product user images. Although the self-concept plays a major role in mediating this relationship, the theory has a grey area as per Sirgy et al. [6] it doesn't mention which self would influence conspicuous consumption. i.e. either actual self or ideal self and this has not been tested in any theoretical framework Sirgy (2002). Furthermore, the consumer would obviously look at how the

society perceived him and where he belongs in the society. Thus, from social identity theory perspective, the theory proposes that individuals strive to enhance their self-image and self-esteem by classifying themselves and others into an ingroup and an out-group, which exist in all societies (Huang et al., 2010). Accordingly, to strengthen their sense of belonging, they engage in behaviors based on the group norms with which they identify themselves [7]. Therefore, the researcher strongly argues that in order to do a thorough comparison, the consumer would look at overall spectrum i.e., brand image, self-image and social image and that will give him an overall evaluation for him to make a consumption behavior which may lead to conspicuous consumption. Hence this paper proposed a theoretical framework to fulfill the theoretical gap which will lead to an extended theory for conspicuous consumption.

2. UNDERSTAND THE THEORICAL GAP

The main theory considered for this study is social comparison theory which is the grounded theory of the concept of conspicuous consumption. Further, theoretical framework is entailed of 3 supporting theories. As explained below brand association variable is emerged from brand congruency theory. while Self-concept variable is emerged from self-concept theory. Whereas personal cultural orientation is based on the social identity theory. The research elaborates these theories below with the gaps of each theories.

2.1 Social Comparison Theory

Festinger's [1] social comparison theory suggests that humans have a drive to evaluate their opinions and abilities. He proposed that the people need to know their own capacities and limitations to function effectively, further they must be accurate in their opinions of objects and of other people. According to the original theory, the central proposition is the "similarity hypothesis, *"The tendency to compare oneself with some other specific person decreases as the difference between his/ her opinion or ability and one's own increases"*. [1] which predicts that individuals prefer to compare themselves with similar others [8]. Festinger also hypothesized a "unidirectional drive upward" that operates for abilities. Specially in Western culture, people

wish to evaluate their abilities because they feel pressure to continually improve them. When combined with the desire to compare with similar others, this drive upward leads the individual to strive toward a point slightly better than that of comparison others [8]. In addition to these hypotheses, Festinger presented a number of provocative and testable derivations and dedicated a considerable part of his theory to outlining their implications for interpersonal processes. For example, the need for social comparison leads to affiliation, the need for similar comparison others leads to pressures toward uniformity in groups, and the unidirectional drive upward leads to competition [8]. The notion of this theory has demonstrated the richness and utility is the fact that it enthuses active research more than three decades later. However, the theory has not kept pace with other developments in social psychology within that time period. In particular, research challenges the original theory's view of the individual and of the social environment [8].

2.1.1 Critical debate on social comparison theory

Although the social comparison literature has acknowledged that self-evaluation is not the only motive behind social comparison, it has not considered the implication of a complexly motivated social comparer's feeling and motives which impact the process of comparison. Festinger did not specify how such feelings and motives may influence one's comparisons. Relatively, his emphasis on the evenhanded, self-evaluative goals of social comparison and the unidirectional drive upward portrayed the social comparer as facing up to his or her honest self-assessment and perhaps as aiming to better the self. Are individuals really so rational and unbiased as this portrait suggests? Both classic and recent research in social psychology indicates that people have a diversity of motives that affect to the self, Wood [8] suggested that this may be grouped into three broad classes i.e. self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-enhancement. In an extended critique of the theory, Kruglanski and Mayseless [9] argued that a central weakness of social comparison theory lies in the difficulty of predicting who would be a relevant or similar target for comparison, even when an individual's motives are given [10]. There are some studies that have concentrated on self-concept and on feelings of satisfaction about personal outcomes, then, suggest that the social environment provides comparisons that

impose on the individual, as a result although she or he likes it or not whether or not he or she has "selected" them. These studies encounter, Festinger's [1] imbedded representation of the social environment as an inactive backdrop for the individual's comparisons. At the same time, this research clearly and strongly supports the basic thrust of Festinger's theory, People compare themselves with other people, and their comparisons are crucial to their self-evaluations [8]. Research has supported aspects of this possible bi-directional relationship. The "frog pond" studies cited earlier suggest that the social environment imposes comparisons that shape the individual's self-concept. More specifically, changes in children's comparison behaviors appear to be associated with changes in their self-perceptions [11]. Moreover, research supports the idea that the self-concept in turn may govern one's comparisons. As children grow older, they increasingly focus their comparisons on areas that they consider as personally important [12], and adults appear to evaluate others in terms of the dimensions that they themselves value [13,14].

In an extended critique of the theory, Kruglanski & Mayseless [9] argued that a central weakness of social comparison theory lies in the difficulty of predicting who would be a relevant or similar target for comparison, even when an individual's motives are given. For example, even if a female runner was seeking an accurate self-evaluation, it is unclear whether she would compare herself to another runner of similar age, or another runner of similar experience, or another woman runner, or a runner with similar racing style. Moreover, the variety of motives for social comparison suggests that similarity of target is not always the primary concern. Further it was pointed out that Festinger's description of a unidirectional drive upward for abilities is ambiguous and has been interpreted in various ways in the empirical literature. Some researchers interpret this to mean that (for example) the hypothetical runner would try to improve her performance by comparing herself with slightly better runners, others have focused on her motivation to compare herself with less talented runners.

In summary, the central idea of social comparison theory is that individuals often assess how well they are doing by comparing themselves with others around them. It could be upward or downward comparison. Downward comparison happens when people look for others

who are doing less well on a relevant dimension in order to feel relatively successful. For those seeking self-enhancement, upward comparisons with those performing better were predicted to be ego-threatening and stressful. However, there is ambiguity as stated above when people comparison them with surrounding as how it should happen and to whom you should compare yourself is not mentioned in the theory. Further, it was further noted that the theory is silent specially in the area of branding and brand association, Hence, this theory could not alone give a solution to the current research problem as the theory has a grey area as stated above. Therefore, in order to find a solution to the research problem and to link the main theory to the research problem, the researcher desires support from other theories as well. As such below theories were considered for the present study. To link the relationship between Brand Association and conspicuous consumption, the researcher considered brand congruence theory with the support of previous literature owing to the fact that brand association concept is emerged from the theory of brand congruence. In addition, the self-concept plays a significant role where self-concept is emerged from self-concept theory and it mediates the relationship between brand association and conspicuous consumption as per the previous research. Further, personal cultural orientation too has a role which moderates the relationships between the independent and dependent variable and the concept of personal cultural orientation is emerged from social identity theory. The said theories are discussed below with the relevance to the present study.

2.2 Self-concept Theory

Self-concept designates the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feeling having reference to himself as an object" [15]. Self-concept has been researched from various viewpoints such as attitude theories, psychoanalyses theory, behavioral theory, organismic theory, cognitive theory etc. [16. Some researchers have treated self-concept as single variable and considered only actual self-concept [17] on the other hand some have considered self-concept as multi variables [16] Thus there is confusion and ambiguity on the precise conceptualization of self-concept in the consumer behavior literature [16]. To rectify this ambiguity the researchers have come up with four aspects of self-concept have been used in explaining and predicting attitude/behavior by

researchers including; the actual self-image, the ideal self-image, the social self-image, and the ideal social self-image [18]. While the actual self-image refers to one's realistic appraisal of his or her qualities or how a person perceive himself, the ideal self-image is related to one's conception of how he or she would like to be or to how a person would like to refer herself [19]. The social self-image also refers to how a person believes he or she is seen and the ideal social self-image is defined as how a person would like to be seen by others.

From self-concept theory, consumers behave after the congruence resulting from a psychological comparison between the product-user image and the consumer's self-concept [5]. Their attitudes toward products form based on their evaluation of beliefs about product attributes and product user images. According to the Self-congruence theory it was noted that the brand's ability to express one's self-image. Further consumers like to compare themselves with a brand to see whether the brand matches their concept of themselves [20]. This comparison leads to the concept of actual congruence and ideal congruence [19]. Accordingly, the self-image refers to the way a person perceives himself, to a set of characteristics, personal features, roles and values, etc. that the person attributes to himself, evaluates –positively or negatively- and recognizes as being part of himself, to the intimate experience of being and recognizing oneself despite changes. Widely speaking, the notion of self-image is rather close to the notion of self-knowledge [21]. The author postulates that in order to be able to describe oneself, one needs to know oneself and that conscience and knowledge cannot be dissociate. Later, to make things simpler, Vernette [22] has considered that self-image is based on an individual perception that is conscious and organized according to the way an individual defines himself and reacts towards his environment, while relying on his traits of personality, his values, his abilities and his experiences.

2.2.1 Critical debate on Self-concept theory

Self-concept theory and its relationship to buyer behavior still appears rather inchoate aptly describes this stream of research even today. This could be ascribed to an inadequate conceptualization of self-concept, poor measuring instruments, weak methodology, and failure to consider the influence of brand/product

attributes as well as the mediating effect of other personality variables [23]. Mehta [24] argues that "the impact of symbolic product meanings on consumer decision making is mediated by self-concept." Self-concept is important, because different perceptions of the self-influence purchase behaviour and decisions. Luxury brands are one of the most profitable and fastest-growing brand segments [25], yet at the same time the social influences associated with luxury brands are poorly understood and under-investigated [26,27,28]. According to Sirgy [16] the ideal self-concept was expected to be more closely related to preference for conspicuous products than actual self-concept, further the actual self-concept was expected to be more closely related to preference for inconspicuous products than ideal self-concept would be. Although this hypothesis sounds reasonable, it was not argued within the framework of a particular theory. Further, he stated that compared to consumer attitude research, self-concept theory is at infant stage thus more research is needed for theoretical development, model building. Therefore, it is evident that the theory has grey area as in how it will influence the relationship of brand association and conspicuous consumption in the area of luxury fashion brands. Based on this argument the researcher strongly believe that this area is needed to be further researched in the context of brand association and conspicuous consumption and specially in Sri Lankan context in luxury fashion brands market. Therefore, this study is ascribed to fulfill this gap.

2.3 Brand Congruence Theory

The theory of brand congruence argues that individuals are more comfortable and satisfied with products/brands that are congruent with their actual or desired self-concept [3,4]. While the theory of brand congruence recognizes the actual-self and the ideal/desired-self, there are two relevant motives that impact brand congruence: self-consistency and self-esteem [16,29]. Self-consistency motivates individuals to avoid behaviors that are incompatible with the self-concept, whilst self-esteem motivates individuals to achieve greater uniqueness of self-image. There is clearly competition or tension between the two aspects of the self (self-consistency versus self-esteem) that influences individuals' buying decisions [16,30]. However, individuals experiencing need for uniqueness are more likely to focus on achieving the ideal image and uniqueness by avoiding products/brands

that, while congruent with their self-concept, are widely shared by many other individuals. Hence, brand congruence/similarity is, on the one hand, key in providing the desired feeling of uniqueness searched for by a customer, as engaging with and possessing the brand reflects the 'unique self'. But, on the other hand, brand similarity when shared with others will not fulfill customers' need for uniqueness as no differentiation or specialness is achieved. Instead, it can lead customers to avoid engaging with the brand as it will not contribute to the feeling of uniqueness (Abosag, Ramadan, Baker & Jin, 2020). Therefore, whilst brand similarity can contribute positively to customers' need for uniqueness, when it is shared with others from within the same social group, customers' need for uniqueness has negative consequences.

Unless a brand acts as a supporter to consumers' need to be different and unique, it may end up being a product like many others [31]. There is a difference to how different social groups perceive things; such as consumers who purchase for hedonic or utilitarian reasons. Consumers feel that hedonic purchases are done with unique preferences compared to utilitarian, simply because consumers would each like a product to suit their own pleasures compared to products that serve a general purpose [32]. Consumers with incidental pride are more likely to seek uniqueness in options that would show off the pride in their achievements or personal traits [33]. Moreover, the need for uniqueness is directly related to the level of knowledge and involvement that consumers put into a product. The more they relate and feel positive towards a certain product, the more they are driven to purchase it to help further their uniqueness [34].

2.3.1 Critical debate on brand congruence theory

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key in providing the desired feeling of uniqueness searched for by a customer, as engaging with and possessing the brand reflects the unique self. But, on the other hand, brand similarity when shared with others will not fulfill customer's need for uniqueness as no differentiation or specialness is achieved. Instead, it can lead customers to avoid engaging with the brand as it will not contribute to the feeling of uniqueness [35]. Therefore, whilst brand similarity can contribute positively to customer's need for uniqueness, when it is shared with others from within the same social group, customer's need for uniqueness has negative consequences. While going through the literature and theoretical perspective, it was noted that this theory cannot give a solution to the present study. In addition, brand congruency theory discusses about 2 motives that impact brand congruence that is self-consistency and self-esteem, However, theory is silent as to how it will lead to a conspicuous consumption behavior which will lead to a theory gap. Hence, this study is attributed to fulfill the aforesaid theory gap.

2.4 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory [36,37] begins with the evidence that individuals define their own identities with regard to social groups and that such identifications work to protect and boost self-identity. As asserted by Hogg, Terry, & White, [38] social identity theory is a social psychological theory that sets out to explain group processes and intergroup relations and the social self. It places major theoretical emphases on a multifaceted and dynamic self that mediates the relationship between social structure and individual behaviour. According to this theory the basic idea of a social category into which one falls, or to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who is in terms of the defining characteristic of a category a self- definition which is part of self- concept [37]. Each of this membership is represented in the individual's mind as a social identity [38].

Social Identity Theory evolves from Henri Tajfel's early work, which attempted to apply cognitive grouping and gestalt phenomena to social groups [39]. Cognitive grouping involves "judgmental accentuation" where cognitive categories lead to the increased salience of distinguishing features between categories, exaggerating category differences. Applied to

social groups, this principle could be used to explain biased and exaggerated perceptions of difference between groups. They used a minimal group paradigm to test this effect. They divided people into two groups based on arbitrary criteria and showed that even this "minimal" group basis led people to form psychological groups, exaggerating the positive qualities of one's own group while exaggerating the negative qualities of the out-group [40,41,37]. Subsequent studies have attempted to demonstrate the wide range of socially important phenomena that result from such categorization, such as negative evaluations of the out-group [42], stereotyping, and failure to allocate resources to out-group members [43]. However, more recent research has called into question whether social identification leads to out-group degradation and tends to emphasize positive in-group regard more than out-group degradation [44].

2.4.1 Critical debate on self-Identity theory

From a critical psychology perspective, Social Identity Theory offers important insights regarding the social identity bases of discrimination, prejudice, and intergroup conflict, by locating these phenomena as resulting from group-based categorization and self-enhancement motives. However, the historical evolution of the theory itself also offers an interesting case in which intergroup conflicts become redefined as aspects of individual identity. As this theory became more focused on self-verification as an epistemic need [39], rather than self-enhancement as a motivational driver of identification, the conflictual bases of social identity became less central to the identity literature than the formation of a stable self-concept. While both of these bases were apparent in the original theory, critical scholars may question whether such a development leaves Social Identity Theory less able to unpack the psychological bases of conflict and more focused on an individual psychology of concept formation. In this respect, Social Identity Theory may have developed increasingly in the direction of an individualist cognitive approach at the cost of its sociological origins [45]. Yet, the diversity of current approaches using the term "social identity" contradicts simply diagnoses, and the story of the theoretical evolution of the social identity concept is far from over. This evolution reflects wider concerns over the role of the "social" in social psychology more generally, a question which is central to critical psychologists'
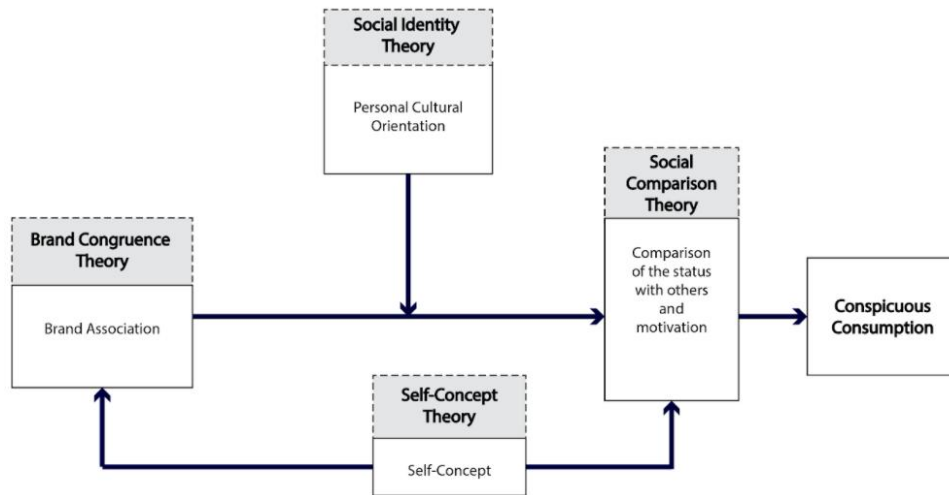
Fig. 1. The theoretical framework of the study
Source: Developed by the author based on the previous literature, 2020

concern to link issues of cognition, attitude, and emotion with larger social phenomena. Although the theory explained about a self enhancement motive, this theory is silent as to how it will affect conspicuous consumption and the relationship towards brand association or whether there is a relationship or impact towards this research context.

3. CONSTRUCTION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Further based on the theoretical and literature justification given in the above section, the research formulated below theoretical framework based on the grounded theory emerged from the variables considered for the present study. The theoretical framework for the study is illustrated in Fig. 1 given.

4. IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCHERS AND CONCLUSION

It was noted that, the theories were unable to illustrate the full behaviour of the individual since it ends with the prediction or suggestions that he or she will be performed or keeping a question at the end [46]. In this study, the researcher has built up a linkage of the theories which can theoretically define the relationship between brand association and conspicuous consumption with the mediating effect of self-concept and moderation impact of personal cultural orientation. This approach is a new endeavor in the Sri Lankan context where self-concept and

personal cultural orientation plays a major role in conspicuous consumption decisions.

Further same approach can be tested in any other parts of the world given the fact that consumer behavior is a very wide area and changes very rapidly everyday. Further As competition creates infinite choices, companies look for ways to connect emotionally with customers, become irreplaceable, and create lifelong relationships. A strong brand stands out in a densely crowded marketplace. Today we base our choices more on symbolic attributes. Therefore, branding is proving to be a core aspect of any business based on the premise that humans shape their life-choices on symbolic attributes. Further, the core factors that influence conspicuous consumption still not yet been well understood. (A., Kim, J., & Marshall, R. 2017). Hence, this approach will provide the scholars to re-think about the present literature, analyzing the theorical gap and filling the gap with multiple solutions in the present study context.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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