Conspicuous consumption as a mediator between body esteem and athleisure purchases among Millennials

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Abstract

Purpose

Grounded in self-concept and social comparison, the purpose of the study was to examine the relationship among body esteem, conspicuous consumption tendency, and purchasing intention toward athleisure products.

Design/methodology/approach

The authors gathered data from 348 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers through an online survey.

Findings

Findings revealed that attribution was positively related to Millennials' conspicuous consumption tendency and purchasing behaviour toward athleisure products, and these associations were mediated by their conspicuous athleisure consumption. Although weight was not directly related to Millennials' intention to purchase athleisure products, their conspicuous consumption tendency mediated this link negatively.

Originality/Value

This is the first study examining the association among body esteem, conspicuous consumption tendency, and purchase intention among Millennials. The findings offer insights for marketing practitioners and academics to increase the demands of athleisure products. The authors also addressed limitations and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Athleisure, body esteem, conspicuous consumption, purchase intention, Millennials

Introduction

Athleisure, a fusion of athletic and leisure, is a popular fashion trend and lifestyle choice (Craik, 2020). This trend entails wearing comfortable and stylish activewear made from synthetic fibres, such as leggings, tank tops, sports bra-like tops, bike shorts, joggers, sweatshirts, and matching top-and-bottom sets. Athleisure is not restricted to workouts but is also suitable for everyday activities like shopping, travel, recreation, and even work, and as a result, it incorporates aspects of activewear (Perera *et al.*, 2023). While the United States (US) has the largest activewear market (NPD Group, 2021), the global sales of athleisure products skyrocketed to over $319.4 billion in 2022 (Smith, 2023), with premium prices attached. For example, Lululemon's leggings can cost upwards of $90, while luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Moncler offer similar products at prices reaching hundreds of US dollars (DiBlasio, 2014).

This trend of athletic clothing is becoming increasingly evident in the fashion context and intersects with a growing desire among young consumers, especially Millennials or Generation Y, to attain a fit appearance and muscular body ideal (Perera *et al.*, 2023). These factors encourage them to embrace attitudes and behaviours that align with this thin-and-muscular body image (Patrick and Xu, 2018; Rutherford-Black *et al.*, 2000; Vaterlaus *et al.*, 2015). Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption can be particularly relevant here, as it suggests that individuals engage in consumption not only to satisfy functional needs, but also to signal social status. As young consumers purchase high-end athleisure items, they are motivated by comfort, utility, and an image of overall well-being and fitness, which is socially valued, aligning with the notion of conspicuous consumption that such consumption behaviour is indicative of a desire for social recognition and distinction.

The rising awareness among these young consumers regarding the significance of physical fitness and overall well-being has sustained the fitness and athleisure industry.

Moreover, Millennials represent a significant portion of global fashion consumption (Eastman and Liu, 2012). Being fashion-conscious and technologically savvy (Howe and Strauss, 2000), they are greatly influenced by fast fashion waves that spread through platforms like TikTok and Instagram, having massive impacts on fashion trends. Considering their fashion choices and consumption patterns (Bednall *et al.*, 2012), this highlights the need to further examine why Millennials are inclined to wear athleisure products into their casual and daily routines, extending beyond athletic activities.

Researchers have highlighted factors influencing their interest in consuming activewear (Chi *et al.*, 2021; Zhou *et al.*, 2020). Firstly, numerous fashion brands offer more luxurious and higher-priced products compared to the past. This makes the consumption of athleisure products a reflection of Millennial consumers' values and social markers (Giovannini *et al.*, 2015). As mentioned previously, their use of social media (e.g., Instagram and TikTok) has shifted a marketplace culture and their clothing preferences centred around athleisure, which is rapidly becoming a more popular method of shopping and interacting with athleisure brands. As a result, young consumers are more driven to seek out symbolic markers that represent their status and fulfil their consumption needs through social media platforms (Leibenstein, 1950; Chi *et al.*, 2021). As young consumers wield significant purchasing power (Noble *et al.*, 2009) and place importance on digital interactions with their friends and family (Bednall *et al.*, 2012), they tend to showcase their status through the purchase of conspicuous products (Kim and Jang, 2017; O'Cass and McEwen, 2004; Veblen, 1899). Recognising that athleisure products serve both functional and symbolic purposes allows for an exploration of how these consumers navigate their identities within a visually-driven, socially-focused marketplace.

While there is a growing body of evidence discussing the understanding of body esteem (Krishen and Worthen, 2011; Park and Ko, 2011), less is known about the

relationship between body esteem and purchase intention of athleisure products through conspicuous consumption tendency, particularly among Millennials. Hence, our research contributes to the fashion marketing literature by bridging this gap. Specifically, the authors draw from the theoretical lenses of self-concept and social comparison to examine this link. In doing so, we focus on how Millennial consumers make purchasing decisions for athleisure products. We also investigate the potential mediating effects of conspicuous consumption tendency, considering how body esteem is associated with purchasing intention through the display of athleisure products. While researchers have explored these variables independently Grace and Griffin, 2009), the underlying mechanisms linking body esteem to purchasing behaviour remains underexplored—particularly among Millennials. This marks the first attempt to fill that gap by uncovering this link. In the following section, the authors present an overview of the theoretical framework and specific hypotheses.

Review of the Literature

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored in three constructs: self-concept (Shavelson *et al.*, 1976), social comparison (Festinger, 1954), and Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption. Together, these frameworks help understand the association among body esteem, conspicuous consumption tendency, and purchasing intention of athleisure products among Millennials. Specifically, self-concept and social comparison theories provide the psychological basis for body esteem, while Veblen's framework supports the proposed mediating role of conspicuous consumption in explaining purchasing behaviour. From the self-concept perspective, individuals develop a sense of who they are, including beliefs, values, competencies, and attributes (Sirgy, 1982; Swann *et al.*, 2007). This sense of the self drives their behaviour, as they strive to maintain and enhance their self-identity (Shavelson *et al.*, 1976; Swann *et al.*, 2007); thus, self-concept does change over time

through personal experiences and self-reflection (Demo, 1992; Swann *et al.*, 2007), as it is not a static perception but a formative construct shaped by personal experiences, social interactions (e.g., family and friends), and cultural contexts (Neeman and Harter, 1986; Sirgy, 1982). For instance, if someone receives praise from others, they are likely to develop a more positive self-concept, while negative feedback or rejection may undermine their self-concept, causing feelings of demotivation and inadequacy (Snyder and Gangested, 1982). Another example in the context of green consumer behaviours underscores the role of self-concept in facilitating environmentally responsible purchase decisions. Individuals with a strong pro-environmental self-concept are more likely to perceive green products as valuable, which subsequently influences their willingness to pay a premium for these products (Tawde and RV, 2024). As such, consumers do not engage in purchasing behaviours in isolation; their decisions are framed by self-concept.

In parallel, social comparison posits that individuals rely on external benchmarks to evaluate their own perceptions and competencies (Festinger, 1954). The benchmarking sources can include comparing the self to others or assessing the self against an ideal standard portrayed in mass media (Morse and Gergen, 1970). Individuals often strive to achieve and conform realistic and attainable representations and engage in comparisons with themselves, others, and idealised standards depicted in external imagery (Taylor and Lobel, 1989). Upward comparisons evoke feelings of envy and inferiority, while downward comparisons draw attention to the overt use of premium products or services to maintain inflated egos; outcomes of both result in dissatisfaction, even among well-off individuals (Mason, 1981; Sirgy, 1982).

For example, people may internalise the ideals of beauty by prioritising characteristics, such as thinness, light skin, and physical fitness. Hence, psychological process of social comparison involves evaluating oneself in relation to other people,

exploring who makes these social comparisons, why and how they do so, and whom they compare themselves (Brennan *et al.*, 2010). Overall, the self-concept and social comparison perspectives not only impact individuals' perceptions, emotions, and behaviours, but also contributes to the broader dynamics of cultures and norms surrounding self-identity.

Veblen's (1899) theory of conspicuous consumption adds an economic-sociological layer to the psychological frameworks of self-concept and social comparison. It suggests that individuals buy high-status items not just for utility but to signal wealth, power, and social standing. In this study, conspicuous consumption serves as a symbolic act—where the price, visibility, and exclusivity premium athleisure products communicate identity and status (Kim and Jang, 2017). This reflects how body esteem can drive status-oriented purchases for social differentiation. Taken together, the three frameworks are complementary: self-concept explains internal motivation, social comparison highlights external pressures, and Veblen's theory manifests their behavioural expression, offering a more holistic view of Millennials' athleisure consumption behaviours.

Body esteem

Body esteem refers to individuals' subjective perceptions and feelings about their body and appearance (Mendelson *et al.*, 2001; Secord and Jourard, 1953), leading to their overall self-esteem (Krishen and Worthen, 2011). The concept of body esteem is closely intertwined with self-esteem (Brennan *et al.*, 2010), but also relates to other constructs, such as body image, body consciousness, and social anxiety (Park and Ko, 2011). While body image involves various perceptual, cognitive-affective, and behavioural elements in how individuals perceive their physical selves (Nelson *et al.,* 2018), body esteem is defined as an attitudinal measure of individuals' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their physical appearance (Krishen and Worthen, 2011). Further, body esteem is correlated with the appearance facet of self-esteem (Nelson *et al.*, 2018), but it focusses on individuals' attitudes

toward different parts of their body. Hence, the authors use the term body esteem for this study.

Body esteem, a component of body image, has been linked to consumer behaviour and consists of three factors: appearance, weight, and attribution. Appearance refers to individuals' overall feelings about their body and outlook (Mendelson *et al.*, 2001). Social pressures to attain idealised body standards (e.g., being slim and muscular) are often communicated through influences from the media and friends (Morse and Gergen, 1970; Thompson *et al.*, 1991). This can lead individuals to internalise specific body and appearance standards, impacting their satisfaction with their bodies. These internalised body ideals can increase consumption of socially visible and conspicuous products (Carolan, 2005).

The next factor, weight, is linked to weight satisfaction (Mendelson *et al.*, 2001). The social expectations regarding body weight, whether idealising thinness or average weight, can influence individuals' desire to surpass others in acquiring possessions to attain a higher social status through their consumption behaviours (Carolan, 2005). For instance, individuals who are thin or of average weight may engage in social comparison regarding physical attractiveness and body image, viewing these as socially accepted standards that can drive visible consumption behaviours (Grace and Griffin, 2009; Rutherford-Black *et al.*, 2000).

Finally, attribution is tied to how others perceive their body and appearance (Mendelson *et al.*, 2001). People have a drive to assess body and appearance by comparing themselves with others' opinions (Gierl and Huettl, 2010). For example, individuals who are highly concerned with a positive self-evaluation to others seem to directly link their body image with external attribution. Hence, people expect a positive evaluation of their physical aspects of their body and appearance in relation to socially visible possessions (Grace and Griffin, 2009), which may lead to Millennials' conspicuous consumption tendency of athleisure products.

While past researchers have investigated the impacts of appearance on Millennials' consumer behaviour (Aagerup and Scharf, 2018), athleisure products have yet to be examined for their conspicuous consumption tendency and capability to shape self-identify. Existing research evidence suggests that individuals who are concerned with appearance are likely to show more compensatory and conspicuous consumption behaviours (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, Millennials are highly conscious of maintaining a thin body shape and often strive to be perceived as normal to underweight, frequently liking the value of their clothing to their body image and size (Rieke *et al*., 2016). As a result, individuals tend to compare their own perceived body to external standards to avoid negative connotations, while taking a greater interest in accessible luxury fashion and triggering social comparison effects related to symbolism (Aagerup, 2018). Therefore, we hypothesised:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): Appearance will positively influence Millennials' conspicuous consumption tendency of athleisure products.

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): Weight will positively influence Millennials' conspicuous consumption tendency of athleisure products.

Hypothesis 1c (H1c): Attribution will positively influence Millennials' conspicuous consumption tendency of athleisure products.

Furthermore, the authors propose that each of these relations influences Millennials' purchase intention toward athleisure products. According to the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), intentions are considered a critical factor influencing behaviour. Although intentions can vary and may not always align with subsequent actions, they are still a powerful indicator of behaviour. Researchers have shown that intentions play a significant role in predicting behaviour, such as purchasing a product or service at a particular time or specific situation (Tiwari *et al*., 2024). Despite some scepticism about the accuracy of forecasting behaviour solely based on intentions, numerous researchers continue to utilise this

measure as a meaningful tool in understanding consumer decision-making processes. In line with existing research on the relationship between body esteem and purchasing behaviour (Park and Ko, 2011), we hypothesised:

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): Appearance will positively influence Millennials' intention to purchase athleisure products.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Weight will positively influence Millennials' intention to purchase athleisure products.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): Attribution will positively influence Millennials' intention to purchase athleisure products.

Mediating role of conspicuous consumption tendency

The authors also consider a potential mediator in the relationship between body esteem and purchasing intention of athleisure products (see Figure 1 for our conceptual model). Including a mediator is important, as they explain how or why certain predictors influence study outcomes, provide insights into the underlying mechanisms among variables, and identify specific pathways through which one variable is related to another (Hayes, 2018; MacKinnon, 2008; Nguyen *et al.*, 2021; Preacher, 2015). Researchers have applied this approach to test the mediating role in various disciplines (Frazier *et al.*, 2004), and this logic has recently been extended to the domain of fashion, as well (Tiwari *et al*., 2024).

----------Figure 1 near here----------

Veblen (1899) argued that individuals conspicuously consume prestigious products to publicly display their social status and wealth. This phenomenon, known as the Veblen effect, suggests that individuals aspire to stand out and are willing to pay exorbitant prices for luxury products under the belief that expensive prices reflect upscale quality and uniqueness (Kim and Jang, 2017). The terms conspicuous consumption and status consumption are often used interchangeably (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004), highlighting individuals' motives to

differentiate themselves through premium products and their socially visible consumption choices (Eastman *et al.*, 1999; Mason, 1981). In the context of the current study, the authors define the notion of conspicuous consumption tendency as *individuals' acquisition and use of expensive athleisure products to signal their social status, power, and wealth to other consumers*.

In line with this premise, researchers have argued conspicuous consumption tendency serves as a costly signal of wealth and a common marker of consumers' social status (e.g., Corneo and Jeanne, 1997; Leibenstein, 1950; Smith, 1759/1969). Leibenstein (1950) contended that consumers' reasons for consuming products are delineated into functional and nonfunctional needs, further categorised them into three needs: the bandwagon, snob, and Veblen effects. The bandwagon effect occurs when consumers' demand for a product increases upon observing others consuming it. In contrast, the snob effect refers to a decrease in consumers' demand for a product as more people start consuming it. The Veblen effect, as previously discussed, describes the phenomenon where consumers' demand for a product increases as their price rise (Leibenstein, 1950). Through the theoretical lens of social comparison, there is ample evidence indicating that individuals' consumption choices are influence by comparisons with others (Kim and Jang, 2017). The implications of Veblen's work on conspicuous consumption provides insights into how brands position themselves within the market while describing how individuals engage in consumption not just to satisfy needs but to signal status and identity in a social hierarchy. This notion resonates with the current trends observed in younger consumers who see branded activewear as both a fashion status and a reflection of their lifestyle.

Furthermore, in recent years, a number of researchers have explained conspicuous consumption tendency through several theories (e.g., symbolic self-completion theory; Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1981). However, researchers often overlook to incorporate the

concept of social desirability (Vigneron and Johnson, 1999). For example, using social comparison theory, it become evident how nonfunctional social comparison can impact conspicuous consumption tendency, a concept that previous researchers have not adequately addressed in terms of recognising individuals' motivation (Chi *et al.*, 2021; Kim and Oh, 2022; Zhou *et al.*, 2020).

Particularly, consumers are driven to engage in conspicuous consumption as a means to leverage feelings of superiority by acquiring and displaying costly possessions (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). In this fashion, amplifying individuals' desire to consume symbolic markers to enhance their social status and psychological influences (e.g., body esteem) leaves room for further exploration (Park and Ko, 2011). According to the lens of self-concept, it is also worth investigating the positive link between body esteem and the desire to purchase conspicuous athleisure products to portray self-identity (Neeman and Harter, 1986; Sirgy, 1982). Thus, the authors draw from social comparison theory and self-concept to examine Millennials' consumption behaviour toward luxurious athleisure products, with the expectation that conspicuous consumption tendency plays a role in mediating the relationship between body esteem and purchase intention of athleisure products among Millennials. More formally, we hypothesised:

> **Hypothesis 3 (H3)**: Conspicuous consumption tendency will positively mediate the relationship between body esteem and purchase intention of athleisure products among Millennials.

Millennials' athleisure consumption

Given individuals' passion for pricey and conspicuous possessions, why do Millennials–born between 1981 and 1996 (Nermoe, 2022)–seek out extravagant athleisure products? Researchers have found that specific consumer groups are more likely to indulge in conspicuous consumption (Noble *et al*., 2009; O'Cass and McEwen, 2004). Further, young

consumers are part of an increasingly materialistic society where they link self-esteem, body consciousness, and fit aspirations with displays of social status, like leading an active, healthy lifestyle (Perera *et al.*, 2023). From this perspective, Spero and Stone (2004) found that the middle-aged individuals tend to splurge on larger conspicuous items, while younger consumers prefer to spend on smaller conspicuous products like clothing suited to their active lifestyles.

In addition, young consumers who embrace high-end activewear are proponents of a fit-inspired lifestyle, purchasing such products to give off the impression of being active and healthy, regardless of their level of physical activity and actual active lifestyle (Perera *et al*., 2023). This cultural trend motivates Millennials to consume for social status and engage in flippant but excessive spendings (Kim and Jang, 2017). Previous researchers also indicated that Millennials' consumption behaviour is primarily driven by social motives of acceptance, emphasising the importance of conspicuous consumption and self-expression (Grotts & Johnson, 2013).

In fact, Millennial consumers represent a significant and growing segment in the activewear industry in the US (Fry, 2021; Patrick and Xu, 2018). Their strong propensity for maintaining a healthy and active lifestyle may explain their need for self-expression and social validation, driving them to seek out premium products that reflect their self-identity (Perera *et al.*, 2023; Vaterlaus *et al.*, 2015). This tendency can also cultivate brand loyalty within the context of athleisure consumption. Despite being a key demographic for the athleisure market (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Nermoe, 2022), there are lacking number of studies on this issue, especially, why Millennials gravitate toward expensive activewear and which types they consider luxurious in the context of athleisure consumption. For example, Millennials' body esteem is likely to influence their involvement in conspicuous consumption (Patrick and Xu, 2018), subsequently influencing their preferences and purchasing decisions

in athleisure products. Hence, the authors have identified Millennials as our target audience for the study.

Finally, Millennial consumers use conspicuous consumption to showcase personality and self-identity through brand image (e.g., luxurious or high-end athleisure items in the study context). Bakewell and Mitchell (2003) found that they exhibit a materialistic shopping style and loyalty to preferred brands. This group's brand consciousness is linked with their higher disposable income compared to past young consumer groups (Noble et al., 2009). As a result, Millennials believe that they can portray the desired body image, whether real or ideal, and facilitate a complete self through conspicuous consumption tendency (Grotts & Johnson, 2013).

Methodology

Participants

The authors collected data from Millennials (N = 400) who had purchased athleisure products, with demographics shown in Table 1. The average age of participants was 28.55 (SD = 4.45), ranging from 18 to 32 years. Approximately 54% of participants were male (n = 188 out of 348), and the sample was mostly identified as white (n = 249, 71.6%), followed by other racial/ethnic groups. On average, participants reported purchasing athleisure products 4.21 (SD = 16.19) times per month, spending an average of $189.58 ($SD$ = 179.46) on such products.

----------Table 1 near here----------

Procedures

The authors recruited study participants and distributed the survey via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), with a focus on spaces that would potentially have large populations with purchasing experiences of luxury athleisure products. MTurk allows requesters to compensate qualified workers (e.g., those meeting a minimum approval rate) for

completing tasks (i.e., Human Intelligence Task [HIT]). Researchers have turned to MTurk due to its reputation as a reliable and cost-effective method for gathering data online (Jones and Lim, 2023; Sorensen and Jorgensen, 2023). To ensure the quality of participants in our study, the authors established the following specific inclusion criteria for potential MTurkers: individuals must (a) be born between 1985 and 1998 (see Howe & Strauss, 2009 for generational cutoffs), (b) be United States citizens, (c) possess a HIT approval rate above 95%, and (d) have spent over $500 on athleisure products in the past 12 months.

The authors calculated an accurate response rate by the number of respondents within the target population (87%), and the survey began with 3 screening questions. The first question verified the age of respondents to confirm that they belonged to the Millennial generation, while the second inquired about past purchases of athleisure products and specific brand preferences. If a respondent either did not meet the Millennial criteria, had never bought athleisure items, or had not spent over $500 on these products, the survey terminated automatically. Out of the 400 MTurkers who clicked through to the survey and consented to participate, 52 responses were eliminated from the sample because they did not meet one or both parts of the inclusion criteria. This left 348 responses. The ethical review board of the primary author's institution provided approval for conducting the study, and all study participants voluntarily consented to take a survey. Each participant received $1 for their involvement.

Measures

The study participants were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire in which they provided their demographic information (detailed variables in Table 1) and responded to all items on each rating option using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating more positive measures. In our study, the mean score of the items represented the final variable, and the coefficient alphas (Cronbach's α) of

all measures (all α's > .81) was within the traditionally acceptable cutoff following Nunnally's (1978) guideline.

The authors adopted all measures from previous studies. Specifically, we adapted 23 items from Mendelson and colleagues' (2001) body esteem scale for adolescents and adults (BESAA) to measure body esteem. The instrument had three subscales: appearance (10 items, e.g., "I like what I look like in pictures"), weight (8 items, e.g., "I am proud of my body"), and attribution (5 items, e.g., "Other people consider me good looking"), some items of which were negatively worded and reversed the wording to control for response bias. These subscales demonstrated high internal reliability estimates (appearance: α = .89; weight: α = .91; attribution: α = .81).

To assess conspicuous consumption tendency of Millennials, the authors used a 7-item measure developed by Eastman and colleague (1999) and revised by Kim and Jang (2017). Example items included "People consume (athleisure brand of choice) to enhance their image" and "Consuming (athleisure brand of choice) is a symbol of social status." The reliability of the measure was high (α = .85). Finally, the authors measured the intention to purchase athleisure products using behavioral intentional scale, a 3-item instrument developed by Madden and colleagues (1992). The scale showed a high reliability estimate (α = .88). The authors considered age (a numeric value), gender (1 = male; 0 = female), race (1 = white; 0 = otherwise), actual spending (a numeric value), and purchase frequency (a numeric value) as control variables to account for potential individual differences in consuming patterns of athleisure products.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The authors used IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 29.0.1 (Armonk, NY, the US) for descriptive statistics and correlation analysis and reported the descriptive

statistics of all study variables in Table 2. Consistent with Hair and colleagues (2014), we ensured that all items met the necessary assumptions for subsequent analysis. The skewness and kurtosis values of the residuals were within acceptable limits at -.88 and 1.65, respectively (±3). Tolerance and VIF values were below the recommended thresholds of .10 and 10, respectively. Results of the preliminary analysis indicated no severe violations of assumptions in the dataset. All measures exhibited mean scores exceeding 3.0 (i.e., midpoint on a 5-point Likert scale). Participants rated appearance at an average of 3.24 (*SD* = .86). The average ratings for weight and attribution were 3.23 (*SD* = 1.02) and 3.57 (*SD* = .79), respectively. Notably, conspicuous consumption tendency received an average rating of 3.76 (*SD* = .72), while purchase intention garnered the highest average score of 4.28 (*SD* = .79).

----------Table 2 near here----------

Furthermore, appearance was positively correlated with weight ($r = .83$), attribution ($r = .53$), conspicuous consumption tendency ($r = .15$), and purchase intention ($r = .12$). A positive correlation was also observed between weight and attribution ($r = .54$), while attribution was positively correlated with conspicuous consumption tendency ($r = .30$) and purchase intention ($r = .27$). Conspicuous consumption tendency was positively correlated with purchase intention ($r = .38$). The correlation analysis showed that 3 relationships were considered strong ($r \geq .53$), suggesting a strong and positive association. These robust relationships may have influenced potential common method biases in the study.

Hypothesis testing

The authors conducted a hierarchical multiple regression to examine the effects of Millennials' body esteem on conspicuous consumption tendency, as well as those of conspicuous consumption tendency on purchase intention of athleisure products. Results of regression analyses are presented in Table 3. We tested the relationship between appearance (H1a), weight (H1b), and attribution (H1c) in relation to conspicuous consumption tendency

and the intent to purchase athleisure products. Attribution was positively associated with conspicuous consumption tendency (β = .34, t = 5.46, p = .01) and purchase intention (β = .23, t = 3.77, p = .01), after controlling other variables; thus, H1c and H2c were supported only. In this regression analysis, conspicuous consumption tendency was also associated with higher purchase intention (β = .32, t = 5.75, p = .01).

----------Table 3 near here----------

Furthermore, the authors employed Model 4 of the Process macro (v.3.5, with 5000 bootstrap samples; Hayes, 2018) to analyse the direct and indirect effects in the presence of a mediator existed (see Table 4 for the mediating path, body esteem→conspicuous consumption tendency→purchase intention). The mediation analysis tested if the findings remained the same in our earlier analysis. Results of mediation analyses showed that attribution had positive effects on both conspicuous consumption tendency (β_{direct} = .28, t = 5.74, p = .01) and purchase intention (β_{direct} = .23, t = 3.84, p = .01), consistent with H1c and H2c, accounting for 12.87% of the variance in the mediation model. We also found the indirect effects of weight ($\beta_{indirect}$ = -.05; SE = .02, bootstrapped 95% LLCI = -.10, ULCI = -.01) and attribution ($\beta_{indirect}$ = .11; SE = .02, bootstrapped 95% LLCI = .06, ULCI = .16) on purchase intention through conspicuous consumption tendency. Interestingly, the indirect effect of weight esteem was negative, thereby partially supporting H3. Results suggest that Millennials who are dissatisfied with their weight or engage in self-reflection about others' perceptions of their bodies are more likely to purchase athleisure products, with an increase in conspicuous consumption tendency.

----------Table 4 near here----------

Discussion

The authors draw two conclusions from the findings. First, consistent with work related to body esteem (Krishen and Worthen, 2011; Park and Ko, 2011) and related research

concerning conspicuous consumption (Kim and Jang, 2017; O'Cass and McEwen, 2004), results from our study suggest that Millennials who are unhappy with their weight or are preoccupied with how others view their bodies tend to consume athleisure products as a way to show off their status and wealth (Chi *et al.*, 2021). These findings are congruent with other research (Carolan, 2005; Patrick and Xu, 2018; Taylor and Lobel, 1989), which has demonstrated how these young consumers use luxurious and high-priced items to communicate their aspiration to conform to societal body standards or norms to signal and project a certain body image to others (Morse and Gergen, 1970; Thompson *et al.*, 1991). The findings from our study advance marketing and management theory and practice in several ways.

Theoretical implications

In the current investigation, we seek to build on the extant research on body esteem (Park and Ko, 2011). First, much of the existing research has focussed on the relationship between body esteem and physical activity. The authors take a different perspective by examining the link between body esteem and intention to purchase athleisure products. Understanding the factors that underlie fundamental motivation behind consumer behaviour is undoubtedly of importance to marketing professionals in the athleisure market. Hence, our study endeavours to fill this gap and contributes meaningful insights to the field.

Second, the authors show the presence of mediation effects: individuals who engage in conspicuous consumption exhibit a higher propensity to spend a greater amount on athleisure items and exhibit favourable buying behaviours. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that conspicuous consumption often stems from the efforts to compensate for reduced body esteem (O'Cass and McEwen, 2004; Park and Ko, 2011). This implies that individuals with lower self-concept regarding weight and higher levels of attribution may resort to compensatory shopping to fulfil their unsatisfied needs and boost

their body esteem, often through the acquisition of luxury athleisure products (Leibenstein, 1950; Chi *et al.*, 2021) and socially visible consumption of choices of athleisure brands (Eastman *et al.*, 1999; Mason, 1981). Thus, our work extends previous studies by emphasising the positive connection between body esteem and conspicuous consumption tendency.

Third, and related to the previous point, whereas past research has focussed on conspicuous consumption alone, we shift our focus toward its mediating role. The authors reveal that adverse effects of weight and positive outcomes of attribution are associated with positive outcomes: conspicuous consumption tendency and purchase intention. This aligns with recent work and presents a description of conspicuous consumption as a building block for enhancing self-concept (Charoennan and Huang, 2018; Sirgy, 1982; Swann *et al.*, 2007), thereby enriching the discourse in this area.

Finally, the findings that conspicuous consumption tendency is linked to the prediction of athleisure consumption aligns with our expectations stemming from the social comparison framework. These findings are in line with those in other areas, such as psychology (Brennan *et al.*, 2010; Morse and Gergen, 1970), showing that conspicuous consumption tendency is a crucial predictor for behavioural intentions. Millennial consumers displaying low weight esteem and high attribution characteristics find satisfaction in upscale activewear, and thus are motivated to boost their conspicuous consumption tendency of athleisure products to alleviate any discomfort. To elucidate these findings, we turn to the social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954). Indeed, the authors observed similar consumption patterns as much here, such that the mediation approach in our study offers robust empirical evidence to previous research.

Taken together, the findings of this study highlight the importance of the relationship among body esteem, conspicuous consumption tendency, and purchase intention. Our data

suggest that body esteem may serve as a visible reference signifying social status (e.g., active and healthy lifestyle; Carolan, 2005; Perera *et al.*, 2023). In other words, the increasing body awareness among young consumers has played a substantial role in sustaining the fitness and athleisure industry. Our research expands on this knowledge to develop a more comprehensive explanatory model that illustrates theory-driven links between all these constructs. Thus, the authors link body esteem and purchase intention through the mediator of conspicuous consumption tendency and integrate these findings to provide a more parsimonious explanation for why Millennials may be more apt to consume high-end and luxurious athleisure products.

Practical implications

There are also numerous practical implications from our study. First, from a practical standpoint, athleisure industry has experienced significant growth in recent years due to the rising demand for activewear (DiBlasio, 2014; Perera *et al.*, 2023). Our findings support this trend with respect to Millennials' consumption of athleisure items. As Dworkin and Wachs (2009) highlighted, the ideal of a fit body is increasingly prominent for this demographic, emphasising attribution over overall health (e.g., appearance, weight, and physical well-being). Hence, leading athleisure brands could focus on campaigns that emphasise body positivity and inclusivity by showcasing a range of body types and backgrounds in their advertisements. For example, brands like Athleta have successfully launched body-positive campaigns and incorporated these values into their company culture and marketing strategies, demonstrating practical applications of inclusivity in the athleisure market. This approach is consistent with research showing that such representation enhances consumer identification and brand loyalty (Brown and Tiggemann, 2016). Furthermore, actively engaging young consumers through social media challenges that encourage sharing their own stories of fitness

and self-concept, alongside athleisure brand's hashtags, may foster a sense of community and improve emotional connections with the brand (Marwick, 2015).

Second, from another standpoint, our findings point to the symbolic values relating to athleisure products. The authors contend that Millennials engage in experiential consumption, willing to pay a premium for such items that align with their self-concept and contribute to social recognition or bolster their body esteem (Gierl and Huettl, 2010). The aesthetics of athleisure products provide a platform for self-expression and play a role in maintaining a desired image concerning weight, fitness, and intergroup relationships (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, conspicuous consumption tendency is related to materialism and low self-esteem (Grace and Griffin, 2009), which may influence the motivation behind owning symbolic athleisure possessions and engaging in socially visible consumption. As such, marketing practitioners should underscore the prestige that Millennial consumers can derive from purchasing athleisure products.

For instance, fashion marketers should consider using both online and offline influencer marketing strategies by partnering with popular social media influencers or celebrities who embody the athleisure lifestyle. These influencers can generate buzz and drive consumer interest in athleisure brands and items. Furthermore, focussing on experiential marketing, such as hosting pop-up stores or releasing limited edition athleisure collections, allows young consumers to engage with athleisure items firsthand, creating an emotional connection and fostering brand loyalty. In doing so, fashion marketers can offer personalised shopping experiences to enhance the connection with these young consumers.

Finally, on an organisational level, these findings can help athleisure brands enhance their marketing strategies, improve product offerings, and build stronger relationships with Millennial consumers, ultimately driving growth and profitability. At the societal level, our research aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about how body esteem influences

purchasing behaviours, while also promoting a healthier societal attitude toward body image and consumption.

Limitations and future directions

Despite the implications and contributions of our study, there are potential limitations to acknowledge. First, using the convenience sampling through MTurk presents a drawback as it may not fully represent the entire Millennial population. Although young consumers are known for their tech-savviness and digital interactions (Bednall *et al.*, 2012), the characteristics of our study participants (born between 1981 and 1996) may differ from the diverse range of Millennials in terms of demographics, behaviours, and preferences. Consequently, the generalisability of our findings to broader generational groups, such as Generation X, Y, and Z could be limited due to the specific subset of Millennials captured through our sampling method. Therefore, further research can build on our findings by examining other generational cohorts to compare their consumption patterns and motivations behind athleisure product purchases.

Furthermore, our study delves into the realms of body esteem, conspicuous consumption tendency, and purchase intention, thereby excluding an exhaustive investigation of other potentially significant drivers (e.g., self-esteem and materialism; Grace and Griffin, 2009). While previous work has examined the influences of body esteem and/or the correlation between body esteem and self-esteem in the domain of consumer behaviour research, relatively few scholars have examined the mediating role of conspicuous consumption tendency (Noh and Ahn, 2025). Our study showed empirical support for the mediating effects of this factor. For instance, the authors observe the rising prominence of health and fitness culture, alongside a growing emphasis on comfort and versatility in activewear. These trends can influence public attitudes toward both personal well-being and

the societal norms in fashion. In light of these, the authors aspire for this study to ignite meaningful discussions and pave the way for further studies in this area.

Conclusion

In this study, the authors draw on self-concept and social comparison theory to explore the link between body esteem and purchasing intention through the use of athleisure products. Our findings reveal that lower body esteem can lead Millennials to engage in conspicuous consumption to enhance social status and self-concept, which in turn drives their intention to purchase premium athleisure brands. Employing self-concept and social comparison theories, we clarify the psychological mechanisms behind Millennials' conspicuous consumption tendency of athleisure products.

For actionable guidance for fashion marketers, athleisure brands can benefit from emphasising body positivity, inclusivity, and social recognition in their campaigns, as well as leveraging influencer partnerships and experiential marketing to strengthen connections with young consumers. These insights suggest that marketers should design strategies that acknowledge symbolic and status-related meanings of athleisure products for Millennials. Future research should examine other drivers and extend the current analysis to other generational cohorts to build a more comprehensive picture of athleisure consumption tendency. In sum, our research contributes to both academic theory and fashion marketing practice by exploring the pathways through which body esteem impacts purchasing decisions, highlighting conspicuous consumption as a pivotal mechanism. These insights underscore the evolving relationship between body image and young consumers' purchasing decisions in the growing athleisure segment.

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