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Conspicuous food consumption of Gen Z and social media use

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Abstract. *This paper aims to explore the relationship between respondents' propensity to conspicuous consumption and an autonomous element like the use of social media platforms by respondents, in conjunction with established factors influencing conspicuous consumption reported in the literature. The study focuses on Generation Z as the research population and on food and beverages as the product category under study. The study was conducted on a sample of 246 Generation Z respondents via a questionnaire survey, using a set of statements derived from the literature focusing on conspicuous and status consumption and statements related to food and beverage consumption. The collected data were analyzed using factor and regression analyses. Although the study did not confirm a statistically significant relationship between the nature of social media use and respondents' propensity to conspicuous consumption, the findings suggest that respondents are susceptible to the influence of social media and influencers.*

Keywords: conspicuous consumption, Generation Z, influencer marketing, social network behavior

JEL Codes: E210, M31

1. Introduction

Contemporary society keeps quickly changing thanks to digitalization and the availability of technologies (Arab and Díaz, 2015; Zareie et al., 2019; Sirola et al., 2019). Public presentation of life experiences, lifestyle, and well-being was possible mostly just for celebrities through magazines and journals and for "ordinary" people within a limited circle of people (family and friends). Thanks to the development of the internet and social media, everybody can share what they want (Parker & Brennan, 2020). And because visibility is one of the main conditions for consuming conspicuously (Heffetz, 2011), it's necessary to look at how this development influenced the perception and form of conspicuous consumption. Previous studies have focused on conspicuous consumption in relation to personality, values, status consumption, etc. (Mai & Tambyah, 2011; Brooner & de Hoog, 2019). This study aims to investigate whether the nature of a person's social media use can be characterized as an independent factor in conspicuous consumption.

For purposes of this research, Generation Z was chosen, as the literature suggests this generation is the most influenced by social networks (e.g., Kardes et al., 2015). According to the Czech Statistical Office (2021), the number of people using the internet in the Czech Republic has an increasing trend, with 99% of women and 98% of men aged 16–34 being daily users in recent years.

For this research, food and beverages were investigated as the products as potential subjects of conspicuous consumption. Food is a product that consumers deal with on a daily basis. Food expenditures account for 23 percent of the household budget of an average family in the Czech Republic (CZSO, 2022b). Numerous factors influence food purchases, whether it is the price, the occasion on which the food will be consumed, or the

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quality and sustainability of the products (Nguyen, 2016; Rana & Paul, 2017; Massey et al., 2018; Meinilä et al., 2022). By consuming certain food and beverages, consumers may also express a certain lifestyle and personal identity (Niva, 2006, 2007). For example, functional foods and their relationship to conspicuous consumption have been examined within the confines of conspicuous consumption. In their research, Barauskaite et al. (2018) demonstrated a relationship between the tendency to conspicuous consumption and consumers' evaluation of functional foods.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Conspicuous consumption

Even though the desire of people to impress others in society perseveres, the objects (products) that are publicly consumed are different (Chaudhuri et al., 2011). When Veblen (1899) first defined conspicuous consumption (CC), it referred mostly to the elite class, and it was connected with displaying wealth and luxury to others. Conspicuous consumption is not connected to primary needs; it is rather a reflection of higher needs connected to our perception by society, influenced by upbringing and socialization in society (Kardes et al., 2015). Through manifesting wealth, consumers show off their ability to earn money, their success, and their achievements through their intelligence and skills (Griskevicius et al., 2007), referring to people in a social group that they consider above them (Truong, 2010).

Thanks to the growing omnipresence of social media, the visibility of consumption, one of the main requirements for conspicuous consumption, is more accessible and easier (Heffetz, 2011; Josiassen & Assaf, 2013; Brooner & de Hoog, 2019). People can share their everyday and unique experiences in real-time and in a larger amount (Brooner & de Hoog, 2019). Experiential products (such as vacations or festivals) may be subject to conspicuous consumption as well if they can be personally configured, if there is a higher level of active participation (vs. passive), if the frequency to participate is rather rare for a common person, and if it is not a product for mass population (Brooner & de Hoog, 2019). Conspicuous consumption is also a way to impress mates via additional spending on a date (flowers, food, etc.) but also via blatant benevolence (Griskevicius et al., 2007). Consumption is also a means of integration into a society. Consumers try to integrate into a particular social group by adjusting their behavior to fit in; they purchase products approved by groups and are influenced by their perception of brands (Ramsza, 2015; Solomon, 2018).

In their research, Chaudhuri et al. (2011) named three personality traits leading to conspicuous behavior – the desire for unique consumer products, individualism, and social visibility. Consumption of unique products helps people express their own distinction from others.

Conspicuous consumption was often confused with status consumption in the past. These concepts are closely related, and there are several factors influencing them. The main difference is in the visibility of consumption; with status consumption, consumers purchase products to feel a certain social status, for their own appreciation, and with conspicuous consumption, consumers purchase products to show off their status to others (Belk et al., 1982; O'cass & McEwen, 2014). Mai and Tambyah (2011) mention further factors influencing CC, such as materialism, status orientation, egocentrism, and self-perception.

2.2. Social networks

Thanks to social media and the development of technology, communication and interaction between consumers have fundamentally changed (Wijesinghe, 2017). Social networks have enabled new ways of communicating with family and friends (Cheung et al., 2011; Dhir et al., 2018) and also help create new contacts acquired specifically through activity on social media (Sirola et al., 2019). Following and using social media impacts users' self-presentation, social skills, and self-control and can lead to various obsessions and

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anxieties (Gómez-Galán et al., 2020). The effectiveness of networks depends on the willingness of users to spread information among their acquaintances (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and, thus, change consumer buying behavior through electronic word-of-mouth (Kim & Ko, 2012).

Generation Z is most connected to the internet and social networks in comparison to other Generations. They are the first generation growing up in a fully digital world (Bernstein, 2015; Gómez-Galán et al., 2020). This generation uses social networks as a source of inspiration, entertainment, and relaxation (Solomon, 2018).

Consumers tend to use social media such as Instagram for relaxation and fun. Therefore, purchasing goods via social media could be driven by motivation connected with positive emotion (Erdem & Yilmaz, 2021).

2.2.1. Influencers

The term influencer is well-known in the field of consumer behavior. An influencer is a person who has a certain influence on his surroundings and whose recommendations are followed by his surroundings (Solomon, 2018). Influencer marketing via social media is well-known and used in strategic marketing communication because influencers' role in WOM is quite specific. (Audrezet, De Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020). Influencers are considered experts in their fields of interest. Therefore, for successful influencer marketing, the product choice in relation to the influencers' common content is important (Kim & Kim, 2020). An influencer can be not just a "professional" celebrity but also a "self-made" celebrity who became famous for sharing their values and opinions on social networks (Solomon, 2018). According to Gundová and Cvoligová (2019), influencer marketing greatly impacts consumers, especially the younger generation.

3. Methodology and Data

The primary data for this research was gathered via an online questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of several sections. The first section was inspired by the method conducted by Griskevicius et al. (2007), measuring the tendency for conspicuous consumption by finding how much respondents are willing to spend on different types of products. For this research, this method was adapted to the topic of food consumption. Respondents were introduced to a situation where they were expecting a visit of friends (together 4 people) and had a certain amount of money in their budget for shopping (4 000 CZK). The question was how much they were willing to spend on various types of food (such as cheese, alcoholic drinks, nuts, etc.). Respondents chose from 7 different price ranges in each food and beverage category. Each range was then assigned a value from 1 to 7, with 7 being the highest amount. The values were then summed. The more they were willing to spend, the higher the tendency to consume conspicuously.

The questionnaire also included 36 statements. These statements consisted of different areas focused on the topics connected with status consumption, food consumption, respondents' personal characteristics, values, and behavior on the social network. The majority of statements are based on previous research from Chaudhuri and Majumdar (2006), Riquelme et al. (2011), Mai and Tambyah (2011), and Assimos et al. (2019). Likert scales were used to indicate how much respondents agreed with each statement on a scale of 1 to 7 (7 = fully agree).

The set of statements was tested in pilot research, oriented on the conspicuous behavior of athletes. Based on this research, the statements were modified and adapted for food consumption.

The target population, Generation Z from the Czech Republic, was surveyed via an online questionnaire. A total of 271 respondents filled out the questionnaire, of which 25 were excluded due to incomplete submission of the questionnaire. Generation Z respondents were mainly in two age groups: 15 to 19 and 20 to 26. The younger than 15 were not primarily approached as their primary source of income is money from their

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parents. Age was selected as a quota characteristic, where respondents were selected so that the distribution corresponded with the Czech Statistical Office data from 2021 (CZSO, 2022a), see Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the research sample (n = 246) in %

Age	**Research**	**CZSO (2022a)**
<15	**0.8**	
15-19	**43.7**	41
20-26	**55.5**	59
Total	**100**	**100**

(Source: Own data and CZSO (2022a))

Spearman correlation analyses were used for data analysis, which are suitable for categorical data and show correlation strength. Data were analyzed by factor analysis, which is well-used in social science, in order to cluster the variables into different factors (Brown, 2015). The relationship between respondents' tendency to behave conspicuously – was examined through an adapted method by Griskevicius et al. (2007), and resulting factors from factor analysis were then examined by regression analysis in order to find out which factors are influencing the conspicuous consumption of respondents.

4. Results

One of the premises for this research was that social networks play a significant role in the lives of consumers. In food consumption, 43% of respondents take social networks as a source of inspiration, 17% do not have a clearly defined opinion, and 40% disagree (the mode for this variable was 4 and the mean was 4.11). 55% of respondents admitted following influencers on social media, and 28% admitted buying products recommended by an influencer. Out of variables connected with the use of social networks, there is a visible positive correlation with gender – women follow influencers more frequently (corr. 0,284), use social networks as a source of information (corr. 0,288), buy recommended products (corr. 0,233), and are willing to share pictures of food with friends and public. A negative correlation was visible between income and monthly food expenditures.

On the other hand, men tend to express their values and make a good impression through their consumption more than women. A negative correlation is also visible for income and price (corr. -0,135) and sales (corr. -0,203). A positive correlation exists between preference for luxury and family income.

Data were further analyzed by factor analysis, which clustered the 37 variables into 7 different factors (see Table 2).

Table 2: Factor analysis

Factor	**Variable**
Price	During the food purchase, I am influenced by the price of the product. During the food purchase, I am influenced by sales.
Social networks activity	When shopping for groceries, I often find inspiration on social media. I follow various influencers on social media. I have purchased a product more than once based on an influencer recommendation. I like to share food and drink photos on social media. I like to share food and drink photos on social media. I like to take pictures of the food and drinks and send them to my friends.

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	I take social networks as a source of inspiration. I often try foods and drinks that I see on social media, for example, from influencers I follow.
Origin and sustainability	I often purchase food in a packaging-free store or use multi-use packaging in stores. I often shop at specialty stores. I prefer food in organic packaging. When buying food, I also consider the origin and production process of food and drink. When buying food and drinks, I deal with the composition of the food.
Materialism	I often purchase food in a packaging-free store or use multi-use packaging in stores. I often shop at specialty stores. I prefer food in organic packaging. When buying food, I also consider the origin and production process of food and drink. When buying food and drinks, I deal with the composition of the food.
Personality, grandstand, and sensitivity to others	I like to buy more expensive foods that impress others. I often watch what other people buy for groceries to make sure I'm buying products that are on trend. When I don't have experience with a particular brand of food or drink, I often ask other people about their experience. I often buy food and drinks that I think others would approve of. When I know that I will consume the food before others, I buy more expensive and better-quality food to be perceived better in the group. By buying certain foods and drinks that are typical for me, I express my personality. By buying certain foods and drinks that are typical for me, I express my values. When I shop for food and drink, I often go by the information and recommendations of my friends and acquaintances. Buying branded food and drink gives me the opportunity to impress others. I like to buy unusual brands to differentiate myself and underline my personality. I feel part of a certain social group when I buy the same products as people in that group. I often buy such products to boost my image in the group.
Quality and brand	I often choose food products according to the brands. When it comes to food and drink, I mainly buy products that I consider to be of good quality.
Situational factors	Often when I make purchases, I am guided by whom I will subsequently consume food and beverages. It happens that I adapt my behavior and appearance in situations in front of people when I feel it is necessary. I like to try new products and brands.

(Source: Own data)

In the first section of the questionnaire, a method inspired by Griskevicius et al. (2007) was applied to measure consumers' tendency toward conspicuous consumption. Respondents were most willing to spend on wine and other types of alcohol, with the most common value being 251 to 500 CZK. The categories of cheese, cured meats and salted nuts, chips, and others reached almost the same level of 101 to 250 CZK. Respondents would spend the least on other small snacks such as olives. A common reason given by respondents for not spending more was that it was due to low income. In the verbal justification of their choices, it was often repeated that they would pay more for alcohol because of the higher price ("I spend the most on alcohol as it is one of the most expensive items."), but the comment that respondents do not drink alcohol was also frequently repeated. In general, the responses show that respondents were not willing to spend the full amount of 4,000 CZK.

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Subsequently, the relationship between each factor from factor analysis and consumers' tendency to consume conspicuously was investigated using regression analysis, which was chosen as the explained variable (see Table 3.).

Table 3: Regression analysis (n = 246)

Dependent variable: Tendency to CC					
	coefficient	**std. error**	**t-ratio**	**p-value**	
Constant	15.1220	−0.2666	−56.71	2.19e-141	***
Personality, grandstand, and sensitivity to others	−0.4952	−0.2672	−1.853	0.0650	*
Origin and sustainability	−0.8013	−0.2672	−2.999	0.0030	***
Price	−0.9372	−0.2672	−3.508	0.0005	***
Materialism	−1.4495	−0.2672	−5.425	1.41e-07	***
Mean dependent var.		**15.12195**	**S. D. dependent var.**		**4.590292**
Sum squared resid.		**4214.989**	**S. E. of regression**		**4.183512**
R-squared		**0.183512**	**Adjusted R-squared**		**0.169960**

(Source: Own data)

Note: *, **, *** indicates the level of significance (0.1; 0.05; 0.01)

The regression analysis shows that materialism plays a role in CC among Generation Z, where respondents prefer luxury brands, and buying these brands makes them happy. Further, they are highly influenced by price, which indicates a sensitivity to discounts. The factor of origin and sustainability is also statistically significant. The factor of personality, grandstand, and sensitivity to others is also significant at the 10% significance level.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This research aimed to find the factors that play a role in Generation Z's conspicuous food consumption. For purposes of this research, a battery of statements partially based on previous research (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006; Riquelme et al., 2011; Mai & Tambyah, 2011; Assimos et al., 2019) was used. Factor analysis grouped the statements to create seven separate latent factors that were named according to the predominant parameter (Price; Social networks; Origin and sustainability; Materialism; Personality, grandstand, and sensitivity to others; Brand; Situation factors).

Social networks were a new factor added to the factors already mentioned by other authors in their research on conspicuous and status consumption (O'cass & McEwen, 2004; Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006; Riquelme et al., 2011; Mai & Tambyah, 2011; Bronner & Hoog, 2019; Assimos et al., 2019). Indeed, this research aimed to explore the relationship between conspicuous consumption and the influence of social network use. The research revealed that more than half of the respondents (55%) follow influencers on social networks, and 43% of the respondents draw inspiration from social networks. Although the results demonstrate a relationship between the consumer of Generation Z and social media and influencer marketing, the strength of the relationship was not very high for this generation, despite expectations. According to previous research, this generation should be highly connected to social networks (Bernstein, 2015; Solomon, 2018; Erdem & Yilmaz, 2021; Gundova & Cvoligova, 2019). This factor also did not emerge as significant in the regression

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analysis. The lack of evidence for this factor may be due to the research focus on food and beverages because most respondents do not connect food products with conspicuous consumption. CC is linked only to luxury product consumption, such as handbags, clothing, or cosmetics. The choice of Generation Z and their limited budgets may also be an issue, given that they have only just entered the job market or are still studying and are, therefore, quite price-sensitive. Price sensitivity was also revealed as an influencing factor in the regression analysis.

Among other factors, materialism played the biggest role, which is indicative of the popularity of luxury brands and the connection between happiness and luxury. The factor Origin and sustainability is also important. This may be due to the fact that respondents are well informed and follow trends of higher quality nutrition. The last significant factor is Personality, grandstand, and sensitivity to others.

Questionable could also be the application of a method inspired by Griskevicius et al. (2007), this time tailored to the situation of buying food for a conspicuous occasion. Perhaps providing intervals of possible expenditure rather than asking respondents to write their own exact amount would be easier to answer. This way, the results would not be as skewed by these ranges, and the data would be more accurate.

As the pilot research conducted on sportswear products has already shown, respondents are not willing to admit a greater tendency towards CC. This may be because they don't consider sharing photos of consumed food as conspicuous. Besides that, they perceive conspicuous consumption as a negative phenomenon, and they would not want to be associated with it, as it was revealed from in-depth interviews in the pilot. This suggests that more qualitative research would be very beneficial for getting deeper insight into the current perception of conspicuous consumption and its presentation. This could help prevent data bias.

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