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ABSTRACT

During the past three decades, consumer demand for luxury goods has been growing on a global scale. The luxury and status market base has expanded beyond the traditional affluent consumer segment to include an increasingly heterogeneous group of consumers. Despite the substantial size, greater reach, and significant growth of the luxury goods market, status consumption has been treated as an atypical and peripheral subject in consumer research. The authors develop a conceptual model of psychological determinants of status seeking through consumption. The model considers the effects of three general traits (namely, status concern, public self-consciousness, and self-esteem) and one consumption-related consumer trait (namely, susceptibility to normative social influence) on preference for status meaning, which in turn influences consumer interest in the product. The conceptual model is tested with data from a survey of 1,000+ respondents drawn from the Czech Republic, a country where the recent market liberalization has unleashed an inflow of luxury goods from marketers from the West. Face-to-face home-based structured interviews were conducted by an international market research agency. The hypothesized causal relationships are all supported. The effects of status concern, public self-consciousness, and self-esteem on susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI) and preference for status meaning (PSM) are significant and in the expected direction. Additionally, SNSI is found to exert a significant positive influence on PSM, and these two constructs, in turn, have significant positive effects on consumer interest in clothing. The conceptual model and empirical evidence enhance the existing knowledge of the antecedents and outcomes of status consumption. The study advances a better understanding of the psychology of consumer adoption of status consumption; equally important, it also highlights the value of extending consumer theories from established to emerging market economies and back again from still-evolving to long-standing marketplaces.

Keywords*:* Status concern; Public self-consciousness; Self-esteem; Susceptibility to normative social influence; Preference for status symbolism; Clothing

> *No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, forgoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category of consumption are not given up except under stress of the direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away. There is no class and no country that has yielded so abjectly before the pressure of physical want as to deny themselves all gratification of this higher or spiritual need* (Veblen, 1970 [1899], p. 70).

During the last three decades the demand for luxury goods has been growing considerably on a global scale. According to a recent report based on a large-scale study, since 1995 the number of luxury consumers across the world has increased by more than three times, reaching 330 million in 2013 (see D'Arpizio, 2014). While Western Europe and North America hold their ground, the largest growth in the last five years (104%) came from Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC). Over the 2013-2018 period, demand from BRIC countries is expected to grow further by 86% in India, 72% in China, 31% in Brazil, and 28% in Russia. Across sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia, growing incomes and expanding upper and upper-middle classes are fuelling continuing demand for traditional as well as new affordable luxury goods (Euromonitor, 2013).

Old (e.g., TV and magazines) as well as new media channels (e.g., Pinterest) around the globe have become inundated with symbolic images of the "good life," which seed mass adoption of "an affluent lifestyle studded with expensive consumer goods" (Dittmar, 2007). The luxury and status market base has expanded beyond the traditional affluent consumers to include an increasingly heterogeneous group of consumers (D'Arpizio, 2014). This new market trend indicates that factors other than income/wealth, which is traditionally accepted as the key determinant of luxury consumption (see Dubois & Duquesne, 1993), are accounting for the ever increasing consumer base of luxury status goods worldwide. Hence, it begs for an answer to the following core question: What are the key drivers beyond wealth—within the psyche of humans—that motivate consumer purchases of luxury status goods? This question is of vital importance for luxury goods marketers, who need to attune their

marketing strategies to the growing consumer diversity. Despite the substantial size, greater reach, and significant growth of the luxury goods market, the academic community has treated status consumption so far as an atypical and peripheral subject. The main focus of the most of the extant studies has been on social factors such as social class (see Mason, 1984) and ethnicity (Chen, Aung, Zhou, & Kanetkar, 2005; Fontes & Fan, 2006; van Kempen, 2007), whereas the effects of individual difference factors on status consumption have been largely overlooked. As Clark, Zboja, and Goldsmith (2007) argue, little research has been done on the motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of status-seeking consumers. Psychological factors can strengthen or weaken the effects of social stimuli on status consumption (Mason, 1992); thus, they can provide valuable insights for explaining variations in status consumption of consumers who are exposed to similar social environments. The present study investigates the consumer psychology behind the individual consumption of luxury status goods.

The tendency to claim status through consumption tends to increase in societies undergoing profound societal transformation due to: (a) increased income inequalities and status mobility, which tend to encourage conspicuous (Veblenian) consumption; (b) existing strong interpersonal ties and social comparison tendencies, which tend to stimulate competitive (bandwagon) purchases (see Batra, Ramaswamy, Alden, Steenkamp, & Ramachander, 2000); and (c) lowered confidence and esteem induced by abrupt economic, political, and socio-cultural changes in transitional societies (Ger, Belk, & Lascu, 1993). The present study is conducted in the Czech Republic, a relatively new market economy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which since 1989 has undergone a profound transformation from communism to capitalism, and in 2004 became a member of the European Union (EU). Currently the country is among the most economically advanced in CEE (IMF, 2014), and in the midst of adopting a thriving culture of consumption, modeled

much after the Western European and US economies (Small, 2011). Besides, the quality of life and general well-being, captured by the human development index (HDI), is the second highest (after Slovenia) in the region (UNDP, 2014). Prior to 1989, before the breaking-away of the Soviet Bloc, it was hardly possible to practice Western style consumerism in CEE in general, and in the Czech Republic in particular. The years of isolation had bred ignorance not only of the myriad of goods, but also of the language of images used by multinational advertisers (Mellow, 1995). In the new, post-communist society, a transformation has been occurring where commercial goods are now sought not merely for their utilitarian value but increasing also for their symbolic value (Millan & Mittal, 2010). The new market realities created opportunities for claiming status and recognition via prestige consumption (Ger & Belk, 1996), which under communism was condemned as bourgeois and non-egalitarian (Stitziel, 2005). The Czech Republic is an apt site for this study in view of the relative newness of availability of luxury goods and growing middle and upper strata, with appetite for such goods. As Batra and Tse (2003) have argued, there is a need for theories developed in USA and Western Europe to be tested in the new economies of CEE and other continents. Just as importantly, the newly marketized economies of CEE, such as the Czech Republic, can serve as fertile ground for developing new theories and then testing them in the Western countries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Nature of Status Consumption

Status aspirations are an important driver of human behavior, and consumption objects can be very instrumental for satisfying them (Veblen, 1970 [1899]). Material objects are cultural artifacts (McCracken, 1990), differing in their accessibility and social symbolism in a culture (Richins, 1994). Accordingly, humans from tribal to modern times have used material goods

to communicate to the world their relative social standing (e.g., Crane, 2000; Mason, 1981). Such consumption behavior is referred to as *status consumption*. More formally, in the marketing literature, *status consumption* has been defined as the acquisition and use of consumer goods symbolizing status both to the individual and to relevant others, motivated by a desire to maintain, protect, and/or enhance one's social status (see Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1999).

Clothing and Status Consumption

A range of products are harnessed by consumers to signal their social status, such as houses, yachts, automobiles, diamonds, gold, and watches. In the early life cycle of a product, the possession of the product itself connotes status (e.g., of cars, TV sets, and even air-conditioners). As the ownership of a product class becomes more widespread, the status differentiation is cultivated by creating product variations, captured in make, model, and brand variety and in a range of price-points (e.g., Berger & Ward, 2010; Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; Levy, 1959).

In the present study clothing was chosen as the product context for a number of reasons. First, clothing is a product category that is universally consumed, as opposed to, for example, houses, automobiles, jewelry, and artworks, whose ownership is not accessible to everyone. Consumed by both men and women alike, clothing is purchased frequently to replace worn out clothes, to keep up with changing fashions, and often simply to add to the variety of one's wardrobe. Second, for each gender, the style variations with differential status and personality abound (e.g., casual, formal, bohemian, sporty, preppy, grunge), and in an array of brands imbued with different symbolic, including status, meanings. Third, clothing is one of the easiest ways of broadcasting one's self-image to others: it is always on public display

and it is visible from near and far. Lastly, and most importantly, clothing has been used from times immemorial as a marker of one's status in the social hierarchy (see Crane, 2000).

Status Consumption of Clothing and Its Antecedents

Once their basic need for clothing (i.e., covering, protecting, and comforting the body) is satisfied, consumers value much of the diversity in clothing's styles and branding for its symbolic meanings. The consumer mindset to seek clothing with status connotations is termed here as "preference for status meaning" (PSM). This study treats PSM as core and focal construct and explores some key psychological, trait-like, drivers of consumer variations in PSM. The study posits three such drivers, namely, status concern, public self-consciousness, and self-esteem.

Status Concern (SC)

Status concern is defined as the value a person places on the attainment of higher status in the community and society (Kaufman, 1957). This construct captures one's desire to maintain or achieve a good standing in a status hierarchy. Status concern is a mental makeup wherein people find themselves constantly motivated to belong to a certain desirable class in society, for achieving prestige among their reference groups, and for being regarded by others with respect as successful and influential individuals. Status-concerned people are always conscious of the status they currently have and are motivated to guard and display it to others. As clothing is a potent means of displaying the wearer's status, high status concern is a prerequisite for and is likely to engender preference for clothing status symbolism. In prior research, consumers who valued social recognition tended to place greater weight on stylish clothing and luxurious interior in a car (Vinson, Scott, & Lamont, 1977). Along similar lines, Jolson (1981) found that achievement and prestige-driven individuals were prone to consume

fashionable signature goods. Also, Lascu, Manrai, and Manrai (1994) reported that consumers who exhibited higher status concern expressed a stronger preference for a winter coat's symbolic attributes. Therefore, while all consumers acquire clothing for its basic utilitarian value, those who exhibit high status concerns will also look for clothing options that have the desired status meaning. Hence,

H1a. SC will have a positive effect on PSM of clothing.

Public Self-Consciousness (PSC)

In the psychology literature, self-consciousness has been discussed as an important human trait that influences a person's subjective experience of living. The concept has two aspects: Private self-consciousness, defined as "the tendency to think about and attend to ... one's privately held beliefs, aspirations, values, and feelings"; and public self-consciousness, defined as "the tendency to think about those self-aspects that are matters of public display..." (Scheier & Carver, 1985, p. 687). Publicly self-conscious individuals are well aware of others' perceptions, judgments and responses to their self-presentations (Markus & Cross, 1990), and are likely to adjust their behaviors to control and manage others' perceptions and evaluations of themselves (Nezlek & Leary, 2002). For them, managing impressions is important because of the latter's significant implications for material (e.g., pay raise, success at job interview), social (e.g., valuable friendships), and personal (e.g., creating desired identities) outcomes in life (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994; Tedeschi, 1990). Because of their high reputation, conspicuousness, and popular symbolic meanings, status goods are a potent means for image enhancement in the eyes of others, as well as in one's own eyes (Richins, 1999). They provide valuable symbolic material for constructing desired identities, alleviating social anxieties, and boosting self-confidence. Publicly self-conscious

individuals could also be highly sensitive toward their social status relative to that of other participants in the social encounters, which might feed a desire for status enhancement through consumption activities.

The relationship between PSC and status consumption has not been examined so far. However, studies in related areas provide some useful insights. For example, PSC is reported to relate positively to materialism as a whole (e.g., Richins & Dawson, 1992; Wong, 1997), as well as to its "success" dimension (Chang & Arkin, 2002; Xu, 2008). Also, Bushman's (1993) study found that consumers with high PSC exhibited stronger preferences for national brand labels than for bargain ones. Another study (Auty & Elliott, 1998), examining the effect of self-monitoring, a personality factor sharing some conceptual similarity with PSC, found that high self-monitors (SMs) held more negative attitudes to unbranded jeans than low SMs did. The antecedent considered by this study, PSC, shares the attribute of "public" with the concept of status in PSM. High PSC consumers are attentive to how they are perceived when on public display; they will therefore be more valuing of the status symbolism in clothing they wear. Hence,

H1b. PSC will have a positive effect on PSM of clothing.

Self-Esteem (SE)

Rosenberg (1965) defines *self-esteem* as the evaluative component of the self-concept related to one's positive or negative attitudes towards the self as a totality. In a similar fashion, more recently Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose (2001, p. 122) define global self-esteem as "the overall affective evaluation of one's own worth, value, or importance." As material expressions of one's identity, consumption goods can be used to enhance one's sense of the self (e.g., Dittmar, 1992; Elliott, 1997; Levy, 1959). In a consumer society, where human gratifications

(both utilitarian and non-utilitarian) tend to be strongly associated with goods and services, self-esteem and self-enhancement tend to be pursued through the acquisition and display of commercial goods (LaBarbera, 1988). Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p. 269) highlighted the role material objects play in supporting a person's self-esteem:

> *Goods that fulfill esteem needs are symbolic in nature, even though they often serve other motives as well… In our study of the meaning that household objects had for their owners, reasons dealing with self-esteem were among the most frequently mentioned, sharing first place with goods that were cherished for reasons of belongingness and love.*

The possession of many household goods can fulfill people's need for self-esteem (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, for an essential product like clothing, which everyone possesses at the very basic level, it is the product's symbolic, and particularly status, attributes that would serve to bolster the wearer's self-esteem. Thus, consumers' level of self-esteem should have an effect on their preference for clothing with status meaning. Low self-esteem likely feeds a drive to buy clothing with status meaning to overcome feelings of low self-worth (i.e., "compensatory" reason). According to Wicklund and Gollwitzer's (1982) symbolic self-completion theory, incomplete individuals try to gain recognition in an important self-definitional area by undertaking various "compensatory maneuvers." Quicker modes of self-symbolizing (e.g., consumption of status goods) become particularly attractive. Indeed, Malär et al. (2011) provided support for the self-enhancing tendencies of those with low self-esteem via their emotional attachment to brands embodying an ideal self-image. Conversely, Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton's (1989) thesis about the motivational aspects of self-esteem suggests that individuals with high rather than low self-esteem will have a stronger motive to maintain, fortify or express their positive self-concept and, therefore, may seek status goods to achieve such ends (i.e., "promotion" reason). The self-enhancing tendencies of people with low self-esteem may be curbed by concerns that exaggerated self-

presentations may not be publicly defensible given their deficiencies (Banaji & Prentice, 1994).

While a positive relationship between self-esteem and PSM is possible (the "promotion" reason), given that high self-esteem individuals are more self-assured and thus less likely to see a need for external props such as clothing to feel self-worth, the "compensatory" reason (to overcome the void in one's self-esteem) among the low self-esteem consumers is more likely to drive consumer yearnings for status clothing. Thus,

H1c. SE will have a negative effect on PSM of clothing.

Susceptibility to Normative Social Influence and Its Antecedents

This study posits that SC, PSC, and SE will be antecedents also to consumer susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI) in the domain of clothing. The three antecedents are general personality traits that transcend specific consumption contexts, and thus are likely to influence consumer behavior through more specific consumer dispositions, such as SNSI.

The SNSI concept is derived from the Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (CSII) concept, the latter being defined as the degree to which a person is influenced by others in consumption decisions (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989). CSII is of two main subtypes: "Informational" influence, where consumers seek expert advice about a product's features and quality; and "normative" influence, where consumers want to know what consumption behaviors will receive social referents' approval. In the context of the present study, it is the normative component of CSII that is of pertinence, referred here as *SNSI* and defined as consumers' proclivity to use referent others as a guide for their own socially visible consumption behaviors.

Status Concern and Susceptibility to Normative Social Influence

Within the sociology literature, it has been argued that social status rests on collectively determined criteria, and it is conferred upon a particular individual or group by other members of the community (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). Seekers of social status recognize the pivotal role of others' approval of their behaviors (Warner, Meeker, & Eells, 2006). The very real threat of losing the respect of others tends to induce heightened sensitivity to others' opinion (De Botton, 2004; Holbrook, 1999). Furthermore, individuals with high status concern are strongly motivated to gain and maintain membership in high status groups, as membership in such groups would directly satisfy their status-consciousness. For maintaining such membership, compliance with group conventions is required (Holbrook, 1999). Accordingly, it is the individuals with high status concern, who would be most attuned to others' perceptions of and wishes about the wearer's clothing. Thus,

H2a. SC will have a positive effect on SNSI regarding clothing.

Public Self-Consciousness and Susceptibility to Normative Social Influence

Individuals with high PSC are chronically preoccupied with their public self-presentation and are constantly motivated to remake themselves to make a good impression (Fenigstein, 1987). Their heightened interpersonal sensitivity goes hand-in-hand with conformity to others' expectations and socially appropriate conduct (Froming & Carver, 1981; Schlenker & Weigold, 1990). Within the consumer behavior domain, publicly self-conscious individuals are motivated to observe, note, and assimilate in their own socially visible consumption the consumption tastes of significant others. Consumer studies provide support for this effect of PSC. Schroeder (1996), for example, found that PSC was related positively to the normative

influence dimension of CSII. Within the context of clothing consumption, Solomon and Schopler (1982) and Miller, Davis, and Rowold (1982) reported a significant positive relationship between PSC and conformity in clothing consumption. Accordingly,

H2b. PSC will have a positive effect on SNSI regarding clothing.

Self-Esteem and Susceptibility to Normative Social Influence

Individuals with high self-esteem tend to have positive, stable, well-grounded and secure self-concepts, which make them less amenable to threats from unfavorable social evaluations (see Baumgardner, Kaufman, & Cranford, 1990). Therefore, self-esteem in general should lead to reduced SNSI, as high self-esteem consumers are less in need of social approval. Moreover, high self-esteem individuals are innovators and self-directed rather than followers (Goldsmith, 1985; Goldsmith & Matherly, 1987). In contrast, low self-esteem individuals lack self-confidence (see Rosenberg, 1979) and are more sensitive to others' evaluations and reactions. Their self-esteem is defensive, fragile, and problematic because it is vulnerable to both internal and external threats (Kernis, 2005). Increased conformity to others' opinions, preferences and reactions may be a consequence of their self-doubts about inner abilities and decisions, including purchase decisions (see Bennett, 1997). Buying the artifacts that important others approve of gives assurances for making the right choice and reduces the risks of being ridiculed or rejected. Prior research indicates the plausibility of an inverse relationship between self-esteem and SNSI (e.g., Bearden et al., 1989). Therefore,

H2c. SE will have a negative effect on SNSI regarding clothing.

SNSI and PSM of Clothing

This study also expects SNSI to be an intermediate antecedent to PSM of clothing. By definition, SNSI entails observing, listening to, and following others. From early childhood onward, people constantly interact with others and try to situate themselves in relation to others, constructing their own world deeply intermeshed with the world of various others. Social comparison theory posits a constant human endeavor to engage in comparisons with others to define one own self (see Festinger, 1954). Thus, seeking and receiving normative social influence is a primitive and essential human behavior. In adulthood, this behavior may become less pervasive for individuals who develop the personality traits of independence and high self-esteem, but for consumers with high SC, high PSC, and low SE, it continues relatively unabated.

In contrast to SNSI's more primitive origins (in terms of evolutionary psychology), discerning tastes for various objects of consumption are cultivated and learned in adult life. Symbolic meaning of objects is learned in one's culture from the media, the marketing fashion system, observations of cultural heroes, and emulation of one's aspirational referents (see McCracken, 1990). For a visible product like clothing, the status meaning has to be "learned" by observing and talking to others and accepting their tastes and advice with regard to clothing. Therefore, this study posits that SNSI has causal primacy over PSM rather than a mere correlational link with it. One's conformity to group expectations and consumption patterns may stimulate participation in status consumption to save, maintain or enhance one's "face" in interpersonal relations (Li & Su, 2007) and/or to "keep up with the Joneses." In related prior research, consumer susceptibility to normative influence has been found to be associated with acquisition of status goods (e.g., Clark et al., 2007; Lertwannawit & Mandhachitara, 2012), and greater importance of clothing's symbolic attributes (Batra, Homer, & Kahle, 2001). Thus,

H3. SNSI will have a positive effect on PSM of clothing.

Consumer Interest in Clothing as a Consequence of SNSI and PSM

This study anticipates positive effects of both SNSI and PSM on consumer interest in clothing. Consumer interest in clothing (CICL) is defined here as the degree of engagement with the product category of clothing. By way of elaboration, this concept comprises the importance that clothing occupies in consumers' lives. It manifests itself in consumers' seeking and deriving gratifications from owning and consuming clothing and in their motivation to expend time and money to acquire and consume more of it.

High SNSI consumers observe and listen to their reference groups to infer the consumption behaviors expected of themselves. A desire to identify with and fit into a reference group can stimulate a strong interest in the attire that is popular with the group members due to clothing's role in constructing and expressing group identity. Thus, when high SNSI individuals observe people of their membership or aspirational reference groups and what clothing they are wearing, such observations are likely to take them to the marketplace to explore the possibility of acquiring similar attires. Besides, the concern of individuals susceptible to normative influence with the opinion of important social referents is also likely to motivate their interest in clothing for achieving self-presentation and image management goals. Thus, SNSI is expected to influence consumer interest in clothing as an easy and visible means of compliance and image management. Consistent with this notion, Batra et al. (2001) reported a significant positive (negative) effect of SNSI on importance of clothing symbolic (functional) attributes. Similarly, Rose, Boush, and Friestad (1998) found that CSII was positively related to the display aspects of clothing (i.e., style and brand popular with friends, brand name, designer, and latest fashion).

Regarding PSM, it will likely lead to consumers' greater immersion in the world of clothing. Consumers who are interested only in clothing's functional properties will be contented with acquiring the basic form of clothing, and once they have adequate clothing to cover and protect themselves, their interest in clothing will suspend. In contrast, consumers who see clothing as being imbued with status meaning will likely have an ongoing and deeper interest in it. As symbolic and status motives are never fully satisfied, status markers evolve over time, the status of a clothing outfit (no matter how exclusive it may be) wears out with every public appearance, and new clothing with even more appealing styles and new symbolic meanings constantly appear in the marketplace, consumers with high PSM will be always on the lookout for newer status satisfiers. Accordingly,

H4a. SNSI will have a positive effect on CICL.

H4b. PSM will have a positive effect on CICL.

Figure 1 depicts the above hypotheses and shows the nomological network of PSM, the focus of the present study.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

METHOD

Procedure

The data for this research came from a field survey in the Czech Republic, conducted by an international market research agency. Respondents were selected for face-to-face home-based interviews in 195 geographic sampling units spread throughout the country. A quota sampling procedure based on five quota controls (i.e., administrative region, locality size, gender, age, and education) was used. Random selection procedures were performed in all but the final stage of participants' selection. The response rate was 60%. A total of 1,059

usable questionnaires were obtained. The questionnaire was designed in English and then translated in Czech, and was validated by back and parallel (from a third language) translation procedures (Craig & Douglas, 2000).

In the sample, 50.3% of the respondents were men. The age distribution was: 18-24, 21.5%; 25-34, 29.2%; 35-44, 20.4%; and 45-55, 28.9%. The sample's marital status was: single, 28.7%; married, 60.9%; divorced, 8.7%; and widowed, 1.7%. Finally, their education levels were as follows: primary and lower secondary, 32.6%; upper secondary, 56.9%; and university, 10.5%.

Measures

Status concern (SC) was measured with Kaufman's (1957) inventory, which captures the value an individual places on the attainment and maintenance of higher social standing. Some minor changes in the wording were made to improve comprehension. One item was dropped due to being largely irrelevant to the post-socialist housing realities (i.e., One should always try to live in a highly respectable residential area, even though it entails sacrifices). Ultimately, nine out of the original ten items were used to tap into this construct (e.g., The rising of one's social position is among the more important goals in life; In order to merit the respect of others, a person should show the desire to attain higher standing).

Public self-consciousness (PSC) was measured with the seven items pertaining to one of the three dimensions of the Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (FSB) self-consciousness scale (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975) (e.g., I'm concerned about the way I present myself; One of the last things I do before I leave my house is to look at myself in the mirror); the other two dimensions, i.e., private self-consciousness and social anxiety, were excluded. As PSC captures one's inner preoccupation with the self-image cast in public encounters, in the context of the present study it is deemed to be the more relevant construct for inclusion in the

developed model, rather than any other related construct such as self-monitoring, which captures an individual's concern with his/her behavior and its adjustment to specific social cues (e.g., Auty and Elliott, 1998).

Rosenberg's *self-esteem* scale (RSES) was used to measure the global *self-esteem* (SE) construct. The measure consists of ten items, five of which are worded positively and five negatively (e.g., On the whole, I am satisfied with myself; At times I think I am not good at all (reverse-coded)).

Susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI) measure was an adaptation of Bearden et al.'s (1989) utilitarian dimension of the CSII scale. The construct was measured with five items capturing a person's willingness to conform to others' expectations regarding clothing purchases (e.g., I am very interested in clothes that make good impression on others; I generally purchase those clothes that I think others will approve of). Because a consumer's compliance with his or her referents' expectations could be stronger or weaker depending on the personal relevance of the product category, the SNSI items were adapted to the context of clothing as a product category.

Preference for status meaning of clothing (PSM) was measured with six items, three of which were adapted from Mittal's (1988) Expressiveness scale (e.g., The clothes that I would buy have to be socially prestigious; The clothes that I would buy have to be expensive brands), and the remaining three additionally constructed to capture the inherent elements of the construct (e.g., I am ready to pay quite a high price for clothes that make me look different from everyone else; I like clothes that make me look important). This measure was chosen over other measures of status consumption because of its more indirect manner of asking about consuming for status.

Consumer interest in clothing (CICL) was measured with seven items drawn from Gutman and Mills' (1982) Fashion Interest Factor (e.g., I spend a lot of money on clothes and

accessories), Schrank and Gilmore's (1973) Clothing Interest Inventory (e.g., The subject of clothing is uninteresting to me (reverse-coded)), and Rosenfeld and Plax's (1977) Clothing Consciousness Factor (e.g., I like to dress elegantly, and I usually spend a lot of time doing so). Two further items (i.e., I often daydream about buying new clothes; I save on other expenses in order to buy clothes) were added based on the first author's personal experiences with the Czech market. Subjects' responses to the above inventories were measured on 5-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree."

RESULTS

Scales' Reliability and Validity

All measurement items were submitted to Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) procedures. Based on an inspection of item-factor loadings, a few low-loading items were deleted from the scales: two SC items, one PSC item, two RSES items, and two SNSI items. For all remaining items, factor loadings ranged from 0.52 to 0.84. All construct reliabilities were above 0.70: SC (0.81), PSC (0.82), RSES (0.84), SNSI (0.70), PSM (0.84), and CICL (0.86). The fit of the full measurement model comprising all variables was: $chi^2/df = 5.19$, GFI = 0.84, CFI = 0.84, and RMSEA = 0.06. CFI and RMSEA are less sensitive to sample size. The value of RMSEA is below 0.10, thus indicating a reasonable fit between model and data (see Fan, Thompson, & Wang, 1999). The CFI value of 0.84 also indicates an acceptable model fit (the higher this value the better the fit, with 1.0 indicating a perfect fit). GFI is also reported as it "is analogous to a squared multiple correlation in that it indicates the proportion of the observed covariances explained by the model-implied covariances" and Kline (1998, p. 128) advises its inclusion among the reported model fit statistics. The Modification Indices (MI) of the measurement model were examined to identify areas for model improvement. However, there were neither theoretical grounds to add cross-loadings, nor sufficient empirical evidence

to justify the deletion of scale items on the basis of cross-loadings. With large samples and construct measures with as many as eight to ten items (rather than the modal three to five), these fit levels are deemed acceptable (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Marsh, Balla, & McDonald, 1988). A stronger "fit" would have, of course, reflected a stronger evidence of a phenomenon, but a weaker fit still points to the inevitable presence of that phenomenon. The substance of the phenomenon still offers the insight and wisdom of the research findings. The average variance extracted (AVE) statistics for the constructs were: SC (0.37), PSC (0.44), RSES (0.39), SNSI (0.45), PSM (0.47), and CICL (0.41). Although these values are below the desired threshold of 0.5, the latter is rather conservative and often difficult to attain (e.g. Hatcher, 1994, p. 331). It is of note that AVE values are inversely related to the degree to which items in multiple-item scales are free from mutual redundancy, and the scales used in the present study are relatively long and contain low redundancy, likely accounting for the somewhat low AVE values. Thus, general support is found for the convergent validity of the constructs (Hair, Black, Anderson, Babin, & Tatham, 2006).

As to the discriminant validity of the constructs, for each pair of constructs one versus two-factor models were estimated (Hair et al., 2006). In these analyses, all two-factor models showed significantly improved fit relative to the one-factor models. Moreover, in 11 out of 15 pairing of constructs, the AVE statistics for the two constructs in the pair were higher than the square of the correlation estimate between them, affirming discriminate validity. The four exceptions were between PSC and SNSI, SNSI and CICL, SNSI and PSM, and PSM and CICL; however, none of these involve pairs of the three exogenous constructs, thus causing no risk of multicollinearity (see Table 1). Hence, the estimates of structural paths (entailed in the hypotheses) from exogenous to endogenous variables will be unaffected by these specific shortfalls in AVE values. In sum, for all constructs that serve as co-predictors in the hypotheses tests, the discriminant validity was supported.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Test of Hypotheses

The structural model with all hypothesized effects (see Figure 1) was estimated with AMOS 21. A bootstrap method with 10,000 samples with bias-corrected confidence intervals set at 95% was used to assess the significance of the hypothesized effects. Indirect mediation effects were also estimated (Hayes, 2009; Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011; Zhao, Lynch Jr., & Chen, 2010). The fit statistics for the tested model were: $chi^2/df = 5.20$, GFI = 0.83, CFI = 0.84, and RMSEA = 0.06. As noted earlier, the model fit statistics were affected by this study use of measurement scales with many (rather than few) items that were, furthermore, low in inter-item redundancy (a desirable feature in scales). The standardized regression coefficients are provided in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

To test H1, the model shown in Figure 1 was first estimated with one modification: the path from SNSI to PSM was removed. This modification was done so as to estimate the hypothesized effects of the three exogenous constructs (SC, PSC, and SE) without them being influenced by an intermediate variable. This approach is equivalent to constructing a model with only these three exogenous variables to test H1 and H2, to which, in order to test H3, the path of SNSI to PSM is to be added later. This approach to the data analysis is analogous also to a stepwise regression in conventional multivariate methods.

Panel A in Table 2 shows the results from this model estimation. H1 posits the effects of the three exogenous constructs on PSM. As hypothesized in H1a, higher SC led to higher

PSM (β = 0.20, $p < 0.001$). PSC also resulted in higher PSM (β = 0.61, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H1b. The hypothesized negative effect of SE on PSM (H1c) was confirmed too (β = -0.14, $p < 0.001$).

H2 posits the effects of the three exogenous constructs on SNSI. For this and all the remaining estimates reported below, the path from SNSI to PSM was restored in the model. As hypothesized, SC and PSC had positive effects (β = 0.09, $p < 0.05$; β = 0.69, $p < 0.001$, respectively), and SE had a negative effect on SNSI (β = -0.15, $p < 0.001$). Thus, H2a, H2b, and H2c were all supported (see Table 2, Panel B).

H3 predicts a positive effect of SNSI on PSM. The estimated path coefficient supported this hypothesis too (β = 0.55, $p < 0.001$) (see Table 2, first row of Panel C). With the added path between SNSI and PSM, the paths of the three exogenous antecedents of PSM were re-estimated. The betas of SC, PSC, and SE were: 0.19 ($p < 0.001$), 0.12 ($p < 0.05$), and -0.001 ($p = 0.98$), respectively. While in this newly estimated model the SE to PSM path is attenuated, it is still not opposite to the hypothesized direction. Thus, the support for H1 is maintained even with the introduction of SNSI as a co-predictor of PSM.

Next, according to H4a and H4b, the two proximate endogenous variables, i.e., SNSI and PSM, have a positive influence on CICL, the end-point endogenous variable. As Panel D in Table 2 shows, SNSI had a positive effect on CICL (β = 0.63, $p < 0.001$). Likewise, PSM had a positive effect on CICL (β = 0.32, $p < 0.001$). Thus, both H4a and H4b were supported.

In addition to the hypothesized effects, the indirect effects of the three exogenous constructs on PSM through SNSI were estimated (see Table 3, Panel A). All three indirect effects on PSM were significant: SC (0.05, $p = 0.05$); PSC (0.38, $p < 0.001$); and SE (-0.08, $p < 0.001$). Thus, SNSI mediated the effects of all three exogenous constructs. This mediation was only partial for SC and PSC, as the direct effects of these two exogenous constructs on PSM were still significant. However, SNSI entirely mediated the effect of SE on PSM.

Regarding the indirect effects of the three exogenous constructs on CICL (see Table 3, Panel B), they were all significant: SC (0.14, $p < 0.01$); PSC (0.60, $p < 0.001$); and SE (-0.12, $p < 0.001$). Thus, each of the three exogenous constructs affected CICL via both SNSI and PSM.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

The developed theoretical framework was fully supported by the data collected for the study. Specifically, the study findings indicate that status conscious and publicly self-aware consumers tend to prefer clothing imbued with status symbolism. The finding related to status concern underscores the important motivational role that status nowadays plays in guiding consumer behavior. Existing studies on symbolic consumption in general, and status consumption in particular, have largely overlooked the importance of status-seeking as an intra-individual variable in shaping consumption preferences, focusing instead on objective indicators of status. Even though nowadays class and social status may not be as highly visible in individual clothing choices as they were until the mid-20th century, this finding indicates that the significant role status plays in consumer behavior continues unabated. What is more, an individual's standing in social hierarchies often defines the level of his/her accrued economic capital, which affects access to desired consumption goods and appealing lifestyles.

With regard to the effect of public self-consciousness on PSM, consistent with the argument developed in the literature review and some related empirical evidence (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Wong, 1997), the study results indicate that this group of consumers actively

draws from the symbolic meanings of status clothing to construct and put on view a more attractive social image.

As to the effect of SE on PSM, as hypothesized in accord with the symbolic self-completion theory, this study found that consumers who hold negative self-regard of themselves show a stronger preference for status clothing. This finding also supports a case for the stronger motivational power of the "compensatory" drive among low self-esteem consumers than the "promotion" drive among those with high self-esteem: consumers use status clothing as a means to fill in the void they feel in important domains of their self-definition and thus to bolster their feelings of self-worth.

This study hypothesized and found support for the role of SNSI in fueling preference for clothing with status symbolism. In turn, as expected, SNSI was positively influenced by SC and PSC and negatively by SE. Apparently, status-valuing consumers seek guidance from others in the consumption domain to protect their status position, and/or to gain access to esteemed social groups. As for PSC, consumers high on this trait do care to impress others, which makes them more susceptible to others' influence in their clothing choices. The study findings also indicate that high self-esteem consumers have more self-confidence and act as their own guide and role model; it is the low self-esteem individuals who are more susceptible to normative social influence. Thus, all three individual traits—SC, PSC, and SE—influenced (both directly and indirectly via SNSI) PSM, the focal construct in the present research. Consistent with theoretical reasoning and some previous research (Batra et al., 2001; Rose et al., 1998), SNSI and PSM had significant positive effects on CICL. Apparently, consumers who are responsive to others' consumption-related expectations express interest in clothing to build bonds with those who are important to them and to present a socially appealing image. Also, it is consumers who see clothing as a "vehicle of status meaning," whose interest in clothing consequently ascends. Last but not least, the study

provides evidence of the important mediating role of SNSI on the relationships of SC, PSC, and SE with PSM, and of SNSI and PSM on the relationships of the three exogenous constructs with CICL. The fact that the study hypotheses were supported with data from the Czech Republic, a relatively new market economy in CEE, indicates that Czech consumers are quickly catching up with their Western counterparts, at least as far as status consumption of clothing is concerned.

Contribution

Given the important role of status markers for fortifying an existing status or for upward social mobility, for alleviating self-worth concerns, for casting a socially attractive image, and for group identification purposes, as well as the paucity of research on the factors and outcomes of status meaning preferences considered here, the present study advances existing knowledge of these issues by developing a unique theoretical framework and testing its validity with a nationally representative sample. In addition, by establishing the mediating role of SNSI and PSM on the effects of SC, PSC, and SE, the research provides deeper understanding of the mechanisms of influence of these three exogenous constructs. It also extends the nomological framework within which SNSI has been studied to date. What is more, the empirical support of the theoretical framework, which builds largely on Western theories and empirical evidence, with data from the Czech Republic, a newly established market economy, provides further support for the viability of the framework for understanding and explaining PSM. These findings also justify a call to other researchers to extend and enrich the framework further with both logic and data.

Managerial Implications

The study results point to a number of opportunities for upscale clothing marketers and retailers. The finding that consumers with higher status concerns tend to prefer clothing status markers indicates an underlying consumer desire to bolster one's competitive position, to succeed in important life domains, to present a positive self-image, and to be noticed and admired by others. As this consumer group is susceptible to normative social influence, marketers can incorporate normative elements in their advertising campaigns, emphasizing popularity, admiration and recognition by others. For example, the advertisements can convey a sense that acquiring a particular luxury product can make consumers more popular and valued by a group of people who matter to them (e.g., social elites, high-class circles). Luxury goods marketers often employ this message strategy, and the present research affirms the wisdom of this practice.

The study findings regarding public self-consciousness underscore its important role for understanding status consumption. Promotional appeals incorporating symbols, which relate the product to social-psychological benefits such as self-image enhancement, acceptance by and popularity among important others, would be particularly attractive to publicly self-conscious consumers. Given that this group of consumers is particularly susceptible to normative influences, marketers can follow different routes of actions for their advertising campaigns. For example, they can create normative pressures by demonstrating social rewards for using (e.g., gaining the approval and goodwill of members of their social networks and reference groups) and punishments (e.g., social disapproval, exclusion) for not using their clothing brands. Individuals who are more susceptible to social influence may be more engaged in word-of-mouth (WOM) communications in their purchase decisions (e.g., Chu & Kim, 2011); hence, WOM could also be used as an effective promotional tool by facilitating the sharing of personal brand preferences (e.g., via "tell-a-friend" option on a

brand's webpage) and positive brand experiences (e.g., via providing incentives to do so) (see Ahrens, Coyle, & Strahilevitz, 2013).

As to self-esteem, given that consumers who are low on this trait tend to seek status meaning in clothing to prop their feelings of self-worth, marketing communications should attempt to capture with empathy the inner status anxiety of this group of consumers and then present their brand as a solution to ameliorate that anxiety. The emotional brand attachment that is likely to result when striking the right chord with this type of consumers can lead to strong consumer-brand relationships and brand loyalty. In addition, the way they are treated at the retail outlet can greatly affect how they feel about themselves and as a result may influence the outcome of their shopping trip. Therefore, the retail salespersons should be adequately trained not only to provide competent and courteous service, but also to make their customers feel well-respected, sincerely cared for, well-liked, and even admired.

Finally, the finding that a stronger preference for status meaning leads to a stronger interest in the product category calls out for a marketing program where brand events are organized to provide status seeking consumers with opportunities to experience and live out their deep interest in the product category. In fact, such brand events (e.g., fashion shows by invitation only) can themselves become an avenue of status consumption, where status concerned consumers not only buy the showcased status products but are also able to feel connected to communities of other status-driven consumers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Some study limitations are worth noting. First, the research was limited to one product category (i.e., clothing) in one country. Further research could assess the role of SC, PSC, and SE in explaining status consumption across other product categories and countries. An interesting question that arises is: To what extent are the study results valid in established

Western societies, where currently the focus is shifting from material consumption to consumption of experiences and transformation of the self? Second, this research was mainly preoccupied with status concerns and aspirations for achieving higher social status. During a lifetime, however, an individual's status may change not only for the better (i.e., social upgrading), but also for the worse (i.e., social downgrading). This social dynamic amplifies people's fears of moving downward on the social ladder and cause status anxiety (see De Botton, 2004). Accordingly, another question worth exploring in future research is: Under conditions of experienced status threats, do consumers attempt to solidify their unstable and shifting status by increasing their consumption of highly prestigious brands and by using different forms of procuring goods (e.g., consignment shops etc.) for obtaining prestigious goods when their affluence has declined? Future research could test the study framework in the comparative contexts of upward versus downward mobility experiencing consumers.

Future research could expand the nomological network by including other antecedents. In the model of the present study, PSM is an attitudinal construct ("preference"). Such preferences are no doubt formed by consumers' many other intra-individual traits (IDTs), such as materialism, need for uniqueness, independent-interdependent orientation, to mention some. Theorizing and adding these IDTs to the three core IDTs (SC, PSC, and SE) considered in this study model, can advance knowledge about status consumption further.

Because the Czech Republic has embraced consumerism and consumer culture only relatively recently, the study framework can be useful in predicting consumer behavior in countries that are yet to embark on the path of a grassroots adoption of consumer culture (e.g., Asia, Africa, and many countries of Latin America). Moreover, whereas most advances in consumer research have been grounded in the Western, long-established capitalistic economies, the location of the present study in the emergent economy of Eastern Europe suggests the need and potential gains from testing the current study's theory to the Western

advanced market economies. Such cross-context applications and extensions can enrich both the theory and the practice of consumer marketing.

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Table 1. Correlations between Latent Constructs

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Status concern (SC)	**0.612**					
2. Public self-consciousness (PSC)	0.478	**0.660**				
3. Self-esteem (SE)	0.181	0.390	**0.628**			
4. Susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI)	0.411	0.687	0.174	**0.671**		
5. Preference for status meaning (PSM)	0.471	0.591	0.167	0.711	**0.685**	
6. Consumer interest in clothing (CICL)	0.368	0.594	0.055	0.855	0.765	**0.638**

Note. The diagonal elements (in bold) are the square root values of the AVEs of the constructs. The non-diagonal elements are the correlations between the latent constructs.

Table 2. Path Estimates among the Antecedents and Consequences of PSM of Clothing

Estimated Path			Model with Estimated Hypothesized Effects Only		
			Beta	***z-value***	***P***
PANEL A. Antecedent Paths to PSM (H1)					
Status concern (SC)	→	Preference for status meaning (PSM)	0.200	5.248	< 0.001
Public self-consciousness (PSC)	→	Preference for status meaning (PSM)	0.612	12.489	< 0.001
Self-esteem (SE)	→	Preference for status meaning (PSM)	-0.142	-4.100	< 0.001
PANEL B. Exogenous to Intermediate-Endogenous Paths (H2)					
Status concern (SC)	→	Susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI)	0.093	2.436	< 0.05
Public self-consciousness (PSC)	→	Susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI)	0.692	11.309	< 0.001
Self-esteem (SE)	→	Susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI)	-0.152	-4.135	< 0.001
PANEL C. Antecedent and Mediator Paths to PSM (H3)					
Susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI)	→	Preference for status meaning (PSM)	0.553	9.384	< 0.001
Status concern (SC)	→	Preference for status meaning (PSM)	0.189	5.293	< 0.001
Public self-consciousness (PSC)	→	Preference for status meaning (PSM)	0.123	2.246	< 0.05
Self-esteem (SE)	→	Preference for status meaning (PSM)	-0.001	-.031	0.975
PANEL D. Consequence Paths from SNSI and PSM to CICL (H4)					
Susceptibility to normative social influence (SNSI)	→	Consumer interest in clothing (CICL)	0.628	10.675	< 0.001
Preference for status meaning (PSM)	→	Consumer interest in clothing (CICL)	0.318	7.508	< 0.001

Note. All estimates are from the model in Figure 1 except that for estimates in Panel A, the SNSI to PSM path was fixed to zero so that only the three exogenous constructs (SC, PSC, and SE) were modeled as antecedents to PSM, as is befitting to test H1. In Panels B, C, and D, the SNSI path to PSM was freed. Accordingly, in Panel C, the three exogenous paths (i.e., from SC, PSC, and SE to PSM) are revised and attenuated values.

Table 3. Direct, Indirect and Total Path Estimates

Exogenous Construct	Direct Path	Composite Indirect Path	Total Path
PANEL A. Endogenous Construct: Preference for Status Meaning (PSM)			
Status concern (SC)	0.189	0.052*	0.241
Public self-consciousness (PSC)	0.123*	0.383	0.506
Self-esteem (SE)	-0.001**	-0.084	-0.085
PANEL B. Endogenous Construct: Consumer Interest in Clothing (CICL)			
Status concern (SC)	Not modeled	0.135	0.135
Public self-consciousness (PSC)	Not modeled	0.596	0.596
Self-esteem (SE)	Not modeled	-0.122	-0.122

Note. All paths except those marked * or ** are significant at < 0.001. Paths marked * are significant at < 0.05 and those marked ** are non-significant.

Figure 1. A Nomological Network of Preference for Status Meaning (PSM) of Clothing