

The Effect of Passive Social Media Use on College Students' Conspicuous Consumption Behavior

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Abstract:

With the rapid proliferation of social media, college students' usage patterns and their impact on consumption behavior have become a central focus of academic research. Drawing on Social Comparison Theory, this study investigates the relationships among passive social media use, status anxiety, conspicuous consumption, and social media use intensity. Data were collected from 401 college students through a questionnaire survey and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that passive social media use has a significant positive effect on college students' conspicuous consumption. Status anxiety partially mediates the relationship between passive social media use and conspicuous consumption. In addition, social media use intensity positively moderates the effect of passive social media use on status anxiety, such that the relationship becomes stronger at higher levels of use intensity. These findings enrich the literature on social media use and consumer behavior and provide practical implications for guiding college students toward rational social media use, alleviating status anxiety, and reducing irrational consumption.

1. Introduction

According to the 55th Statistical Report on China's Internet Development released by the China Internet Network Information Center, as of December 2024, the number of social media users in China reached 1.101 billion, accounting for 99.3% of the total internet population (1.108 billion). In terms of age structure, users aged 10–19 and 20–29 collectively constituted 26.1% of the total, indicating that adolescents and young adults have become a dominant force in internet usage.

Prior research has indicated that individuals' engagement with social media is predominantly characterized by passive information browsing rather than active interaction or communication, such as scrolling through news feeds or viewing others' status updates [1]. Within this passive usage context, users seldom engage in self-expression but are frequently exposed to others' success, wealth, or idealized self-presentations, which may heighten feelings of status anxiety [2]. By observing others' consumption patterns and lifestyles on social media platforms, users are more likely to develop a sense of deprivation and a fear of being left behind, thereby turning to consumption behaviors as a means of reconstructing self-worth and affirming social identity [3].

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that social media use can trigger upward social comparison, thereby increasing users' feelings of anxiety [4]. However,

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prior studies have predominantly focused on usage frequency and have largely examined general anxiety or state anxiety, while neglecting differences in usage patterns. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to anxiety at the identity level and to its potential influence on specific consumption behaviors.

Grounded in Social Comparison Theory, this study adopts passive social media use as the primary analytical entry point. Social media use intensity is introduced as a moderating variable, and status anxiety is incorporated as a mediating variable to examine the underlying mechanisms and pathways through which passive social media use influences college students' conspicuous consumption behavior. From an empirical perspective, this research seeks to clarify the specific mechanism through which passive social media use affects conspicuous consumption among college students, thereby enriching the understanding of antecedents of conspicuous consumption and expanding research on the potential negative consequences of social media use.

Consequently, this study aims to: 1) Examine the effect of passive social media use on status anxiety. 2) Test the relationship between status anxiety and conspicuous consumption behavior. 3) Verify the mediating role of status anxiety in the relationship between passive social media use and college students' conspicuous consumption behavior. 4) Investigate the moderating role of social media use intensity in the relationship between passive social media use and status anxiety.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundation: Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory was originally proposed by Leon Festinger in 1954. The theory posits that in the absence of objective standards for evaluation, individuals use others as reference points to assess themselves, suggesting that people possess an inherent drive to evaluate their own abilities and opinions through comparison with others [5]. Subsequently, Festinger further distinguished between two forms of social comparison: upward social comparison and downward social comparison. Later, Frederick X. Gibbons and Bram P. Buunk (1999) extended and refined the theory by incorporating individual differences into the framework. Their work enriched both the measurement and applicability of Social Comparison Theory and provided a methodological foundation for its subsequent application in media and communication contexts [6].

Social Comparison Theory remains highly applicable in the era of advanced social media and, in fact, the social comparison process has been amplified and endowed with new characteristics through these platforms. On social media, individuals actively construct and present curated versions of themselves, while other users engage in social comparison by browsing and observing these self-presentations. The "visualized display" and "selective self-presentation" features of social networking platforms frequently expose users to idealized fragments of others' lives, thereby increasing opportunities for upward comparison [7].

Empirical evidence suggests that social comparison within online environments significantly influences individuals' psychological states. For example, research based on Facebook demonstrates that reductions in both positive and negative emotional content in users' news feeds can correspondingly affect their own expressive tendencies. Moreover, individuals with a stronger tendency toward social comparison experience decreased self-esteem and increased depressive symptoms when browsing others' profiles [8].

Furthermore, Social Comparison Theory also provides a theoretical basis for understanding individuals' behavioral responses to such psychological threats. When individuals experience status-related concerns, they are motivated to restore their

self-evaluation and social image. Conspicuous consumption, which involves the visible display of wealth and status, serves as an effective compensatory strategy to signal social standing and reduce perceived inferiority [9].

Based on Social Comparison Theory, this study develops a conceptual framework in which passive social media use serves as a situational trigger of upward social comparison, leading to increased status anxiety. In response to such psychological pressure, individuals are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption as a compensatory strategy. Furthermore, social media use intensity amplifies the comparison process by increasing exposure and emotional involvement, thereby strengthening the effect of passive use on status anxiety.

2.2 Independent variable: Passive Social Media Use

With the deepening of academic research on social media, scholars have differentiated social media use into active and passive forms based on usage patterns. A one-week experience sampling study among college students found that users spend a substantial proportion of their time on social media engaged in information browsing rather than direct interaction [10]. Passive social media use is characterized by continuous exposure to others' selectively curated and idealized self-presentations. According to Social Comparison Theory, individuals tend to evaluate themselves by comparing with others, particularly in environments where objective standards are absent [5].

Research focusing on Facebook further demonstrates that exposure to others' posts can stimulate social comparison processes, which may undermine perceived social support and contribute to negative emotions such as depression, anxiety, and envy [11]. From a more specific mechanistic perspective, users may experience depressive and envious feelings when exposed to others' attractive profiles and selectively presented content, as such exposure intensifies social comparison processes [12]. Moreover, passive social media use has been shown to increase upward social comparison, leading individuals to perceive themselves as worse off than others, thereby diminishing subjective well-being [1].

As a result, individuals may become increasingly concerned about their relative position in the social hierarchy, leading to persistent worries about not meeting socially valued standards. This psychological state exacerbates status anxiety. Therefore, passive social media use is likely to increase individuals' status anxiety.

2.3 Dependent variable: Conspicuous consumption

In 1899, the American institutional economist Thorstein Veblen first introduced the concept of conspicuous consumption in his seminal work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, thereby incorporating the notion into the field of economics. Conspicuous consumption refers to consumption behavior primarily motivated by the display of wealth rather than the satisfaction of genuine material needs. Its underlying motive lies in the pursuit or demonstration of social status, as wealth and status require visible signals for validation [13].

Subsequent research has further elaborated on this concept. Sivanathan and Pettit [14] argue that conspicuous consumption serves as a compensatory mechanism for individuals experiencing low perceived status, helping to restore threatened self-worth. From the perspective of Social Comparison Theory, individuals who perceive themselves as relatively disadvantaged are motivated to reduce this perceived gap. One common strategy is compensatory behavior, through which individuals attempt to restore their threatened self-image. Conspicuous consumption, characterized by visible displays of wealth and status, serves as an effective means of signaling social position and gaining social

recognition. McEwen [14] suggests that individuals engage in conspicuous consumption to enhance their social standing and reinforce their desired self-image.

During the process of social media use, when individuals are extensively exposed to content featuring others' affluence, display-oriented consumption, or symbolic consumption, they may be driven by motives such as social comparison, identity signaling, and status display. Consequently, passive exposure to such content may directly stimulate individuals' tendency toward conspicuous consumption. [15].

2.4 Mediator variable: Status anxiety

Alain de Botton conceptualizes status anxiety as a fundamental concern about one's position in the world. It reflects individuals' fears of failing to conform to socially defined standards of success or of belonging to a social class perceived as mediocre or declining. Questions such as "Who am I?" and "What kind of person do I aspire to become?" have become increasingly salient in contemporary society [16].

A growing body of empirical research suggests that status anxiety is closely associated with income inequality [17]. Rine [18] advanced the status anxiety hypothesis, arguing that income serves as a key source of status-related concerns. In societies with higher average income levels, individuals may experience stronger status anxiety, whereas those in lower-income contexts may report comparatively lower levels of such anxiety. Furthermore, Walasek and Brown [19] found that in contexts characterized by greater economic disparities, perceived socioeconomic status plays a central role in shaping individuals' levels of status anxiety. Accordingly, individuals living in more unequal societies are more likely to feel looked down upon due to their occupation or income, to engage in status-seeking behaviors, and to experience heightened status anxiety. Moreover, status anxiety has been linked to harmful chronic stress responses and maladaptive coping strategies [20], and it has been shown to exert negative effects on subjective well-being and depression [21].

Within the social media environment, passive social media use tends to strengthen users' propensity for social comparison and heighten their concern with social status. As users are continuously exposed to carefully curated portrayals of others' successful and idealized lives, repeated visual exposure and comparison make them more likely to perceive themselves as occupying a relatively disadvantaged social position. As perceived self-status declines, psychological insecurity in the form of status anxiety correspondingly increases [22].

Status anxiety reflects individuals' concerns about their social standing and their fear of being perceived as unsuccessful or inferior. When individuals experience heightened status anxiety, they become more sensitive to external evaluations and more motivated to seek social validation. Through visible and symbolic consumption, individuals attempt to reinforce their social identity and project a desirable status image. Conspicuous consumption also carries a self-rewarding dimension: the emotional gratification and expressive value derived from such consumption internally enhance consumers' sense of self-identity and self-confidence. In this way, individuals may restore a diminished sense of self-worth and personal meaning through consumption, thereby alleviating status anxiety to a certain extent.

Integrating the above arguments, status anxiety may serve as a key psychological mechanism linking passive social media use to conspicuous consumption. Specifically, passive social media use increases exposure to upward social comparison, which heightens individuals' perception of status discrepancy and triggers status anxiety. To cope with such anxiety, individuals may adopt compensatory strategies aimed at restoring their perceived

social position. Conspicuous consumption, as a symbolic and socially visible behavior, provides an effective means of reducing this psychological discomfort.

Thus, passive social media use may not only directly influence conspicuous consumption but also indirectly affect it through increased status anxiety, suggesting a mediating role of status anxiety.

2.5 Moderating Variable: Social media use intensity

Social media use intensity refers to the extent to which individuals engage with social media in terms of usage frequency, time investment, and emotional attachment. Ellison et al [23]. were among the first to systematically introduce the concept of "social network site use intensity" in their study of college students' Facebook usage. They argued that social media use should not be measured solely by objective indicators such as time spent or frequency of visits, but also by individuals' emotional connectedness to the platform and the degree to which it is embedded in their daily lives.

Building on this foundation, subsequent international research has conceptualized social media use intensity as a non-pathological usage condition, distinguishing it from "problematic social media use" or "social media addiction." Tandoc et al [24]. noted that high usage intensity does not necessarily imply addiction; however, intensive use may amplify the effects of social media on individuals' emotions and well-being. Consequently, social media use intensity has gradually become a key construct linking social media behaviors with psychological and behavioral outcomes, often serving as an important independent or mediating variable.

At the empirical level, some studies have found that high usage intensity is significantly associated with increased depression and anxiety, as well as decreased well-being [24]. However, other research suggests that usage intensity per se is not the decisive factor. Verduyn et al [1]. through experimental and longitudinal designs, demonstrated that passive use under high-intensity conditions is more likely to undermine emotional well-being, whereas active interaction can partially buffer such negative effects.

Thus, Research generally supports the view that more frequent social media use is linked to higher levels of anxiety. When usage intensity is high, users are more deeply embedded in online evaluative systems and become more sensitive to others' self-presentations, thereby amplifying the identity threat and anxiety induced by passive browsing. As a result, the psychological effects of passive social media use, particularly status-related concerns, are expected to be stronger among high-intensity users. In contrast, individuals with lower usage intensity may be less affected due to reduced exposure and weaker emotional involvement. Therefore, social media use intensity is likely to strengthen the relationship between passive social media use and status anxiety.

Put together, we propose following hypotheses:

H1: Passive social media use has a positive effect on college students' status anxiety.

H2: Passive social media use has a positive effect on college students' conspicuous consumption.

H3: Status anxiety has a positive effect on college students' conspicuous consumption.

H4: Status anxiety mediates the relationship between passive social media use and conspicuous consumption.

H5: Social media use intensity positively moderates the relationship between passive social media use and status anxiety.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review and research hypotheses above, a conceptual framework was constructed, as illustrated in Figure 1.

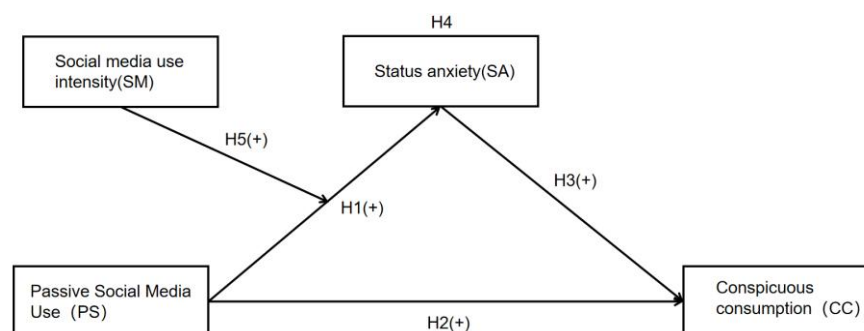


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Materials and Methods

Contemporary college students, as digital natives, rely heavily on social media as a primary platform for acquiring identity-related information, expressing themselves, and participating in public discourse. Mainstream applications such as Weibo, WeChat, Douban, Xiaohongshu, and Zhihu are saturated with content that facilitates social comparison. User-generated information is easily accessible and rapidly disseminated in online spaces, thereby accelerating the spread of status anxiety. Accordingly, this study focuses on currently enrolled college students and excludes individuals whose enrollment status (e.g., suspension, delayed graduation, withdrawal, or graduation) may lead to differences in informational environments and identity perceptions, ensuring the relevance and validity of the sample.

The target population of this study consists of undergraduate students enrolled in regular higher education institutions in China. Although strict sampling principles would ideally require nationwide selection across regions, considerations of feasibility and representativeness led this study to adopt a typical case sampling approach. Guangdong was selected as a representative region, and three provincial undergraduate institutions—Guangzhou Huashang College, Guangzhou College of Applied Science and Technology, and Guangdong University of Finance and Economics—were chosen for investigation. All three institutions are administered by the Guangdong Provincial Department of Education and are located in the Pearl River Delta region, providing reasonable regional representativeness while ensuring data accessibility.

Data were collected through an online survey administered via Wenjuanxing. To facilitate effective distribution and collection, administrative staff at the selected universities assisted in disseminating the questionnaire. The survey link was randomly distributed to enrolled students through WeChat to enhance sample diversity and data representativeness.

Some measurement items were adapted from English-language studies. To ensure translation accuracy, this study employed the back-translation method. First, the original English scales were translated into Chinese. A second bilingual researcher then translated the Chinese version back into English. The back-translated version was compared with the original text, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, resulting in the finalized Chinese questionnaire.

The online survey was distributed via social media platforms and remained open for three weeks (November 4–25, 2025), yielding 450 responses. To prevent missing data,

respondents were required to complete all items before submission. The research model included 27 measurement items; therefore, the minimum required sample size was 270 (i.e., at least 10 times the number of items). Subsequently, data screening was conducted. Given the relatively large number of items, the average completion time ranged from three to five minutes. Responses with unusually short completion times or identical answers across multiple items were deemed invalid. After removing 41 such cases, 401 valid questionnaires were retained, resulting in an effective response rate of 89.11%. The final sample size exceeded the minimum threshold of 270, ensuring adequate statistical power for model estimation.

3.2 Measures

The survey instrument consisted of three sections. The first section included screening questions to confirm that respondents were currently enrolled college students and active social media users.

The second section measured four core constructs: passive social media use, status anxiety, conspicuous consumption, and social media use intensity. All constructs were assessed using items adapted from established scales and modified to fit the context of this study. Specifically, passive social media use was measured using items developed by Liu Qingqi et al. [25]; social media use intensity was based on the scale proposed by Ellison et al.; conspicuous consumption was adapted from Wang Xiaochun et al. [26]; and status anxiety was revised from Wang Xiaochun et al.'s status anxiety scale and the AIQ-IIIx scale developed by Jonathan M. Cheek [27]. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree").

The third section collected demographic information, including gender, monthly living expenses, academic year, and place of origin.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

This study primarily relies on questionnaire data for empirical analysis. SPSS 26 was employed to conduct frequency analysis, reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), descriptive statistics, structural equation modeling (SEM), as well as mediation and moderation tests to examine the proposed hypotheses.

First, frequency analysis was performed to obtain an overview of the data structure and sample characteristics. Reliability analysis was then conducted by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficients to assess the internal consistency of each scale, ensuring adequate reliability within the present sample. EFA and CFA were subsequently applied to evaluate the validity of the measurement structure and to confirm that the constructs were statistically robust and consistent with the theoretical model. Structural equation modeling was used to test the hypothesized relationships. In addition, variance inflation factors (VIF) and related indicators were examined to detect potential multicollinearity, ensuring that the results were not biased by excessive intercorrelations among variables.

Building on these analyses, mediation tests were conducted to examine the indirect effects of status anxiety in the relationship between passive social media use and conspicuous consumption. Finally, moderation analysis was performed by assessing structural path coefficients to verify the significant positive effect of social media use intensity on status anxiety. These analyses collectively provide robust empirical support for the study's hypotheses and conclusions.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

In terms of demographic characteristics, females accounted for a higher proportion of the sample (55.86%), while males comprised 44.14%. The distribution across the three universities was relatively balanced (Guangzhou Huashang College: 31.17%; Guangzhou College of Applied Science and Technology: 34.66%; Guangdong University of Finance and Economics: 34.17%). Most respondents were from urban areas (66.09%), with 33.92% originating from rural areas. The distribution by academic year was generally even, although senior students (fourth year) constituted the largest group (28.18%). The proportions for first-, second-, and third-year students were 22.44%, 27.18%, and 22.20%, respectively. Regarding monthly living expenses, the majority of students reported spending between RMB 1001 and 2000 (45.39%), followed by RMB 2001 to 3000 (23.94%).

Table 1. Respondent Profile

Variable	Option	Frequency (n)	Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	177	44.1
	Female	224	55.9
University Attended	Guangzhou Huashang College	125	31.2
	Guangzhou College of Applied Science and Technology	139	34.7
	Guangdong University of Finance	137	34.1
Place of Origin	Rural	136	33.9
	Urban	265	66.1
Academic Year	Freshman	90	22.4
	Sophomore	109	27.2
	Junior	89	22.2
	Senior	113	28.2
Monthly Living Expenses	Below 1,000 RMB	22	5.5
	1,001–2,000 RMB	182	45.4
	2,001–3,000 RMB	96	23.9
	3,001–4,000 RMB	55	13.7
	Above 4,000 RMB	46	11.5

4.2. Common Method Bias and Multicollinearity Test

Because the study employed a questionnaire survey in which all items were self-reported by the same respondent, the data may be susceptible to common method bias [28]. To assess this issue, Harman's single-factor test was conducted due to its simplicity and widespread use. The results showed that the first unrotated factor accounted for 39.18% of the total variance, which is below the 40% threshold, indicating that no serious common method bias was present.

In the SmartPLS analysis, potential collinearity between latent and observed variables may affect model accuracy; therefore, examining collinearity is essential. High collinearity can lead to unstable parameter estimates and distort result interpretation. The variance inflation factor (VIF) is a commonly used indicator for detecting collinearity, with higher values indicating stronger collinearity. In this study, all VIF values were below 3, suggesting that no multicollinearity issues existed among the latent or observed variables. Accordingly, the model was considered stable and reliable, and subsequent analyses were deemed appropriate.

4.3. Reliability and Validity Analysis

Table 2. Presents the results of reliability analysis and convergent validity (n = 401)

Constructs	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Passive Social Media Use	0.861	0.905	0.705
Social media use intensity	0.902	0.925	0.672
Status anxiety	0.892	0.921	0.699
Conspicuous consumption	0.879	0.911	0.673

Table 2 presents the reliability and validity results for the main constructs in this study. Specifically, all constructs reported Cronbach's α values above 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. The composite reliability (CR) values all exceeded 0.80, demonstrating strong construct reliability.

An average variance extracted (AVE) value greater than 0.50 indicates adequate convergent validity. The results show that all AVE values were above 0.50 and all CR values exceeded 0.70, confirming that each measurement construct exhibits good convergent validity.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity based on the Fornell–Larcker criterion

	Conspicuous consumption	Social media use intensity	Passive Social Media Use	Status anxiety
Conspicuous consumption	0.821			
Social media use intensity	0.437	0.820		
Passive Social Media Use	0.417	0.420	0.840	
Status anxiety	0.431	0.419	0.426	0.836

This study employed the Fornell–Larcker criterion to assess discriminant validity among the constructs. The bold values on the diagonal represent the square roots of the AVE for each construct. As shown in the discriminant validity table, the square root of the AVE for each latent variable exceeds its corresponding inter-construct correlation coefficients in the same row and column. This indicates that the measurement scales demonstrate satisfactory discriminant validity.

4.4 Path Analysis

Table 4. R² and Adjusted R²

	R ²	Adjusted R ²
Conspicuous consumption	0.252	0.249
Status anxiety	0.276	0.270

R² is an important indicator for evaluating the overall explanatory power of a structural model. In PLS path modeling, the threshold values of R² are generally set at 0.67, 0.33, and 0.19, representing substantial, moderate, and weak explanatory power, respectively [29].

Using PLS-SEM to test the structural model, the R^2 and adjusted R^2 values are reported in Table 4. The R^2 value for conspicuous consumption is 0.252, and the R^2 value for status anxiety is 0.276, indicating moderate explanatory power. Figure 2 presents the PLS analysis results, including the path coefficients and their significance levels. The findings show that the model explains 25.20% of the variance in conspicuous consumption and 27.60% of the variance in status anxiety.

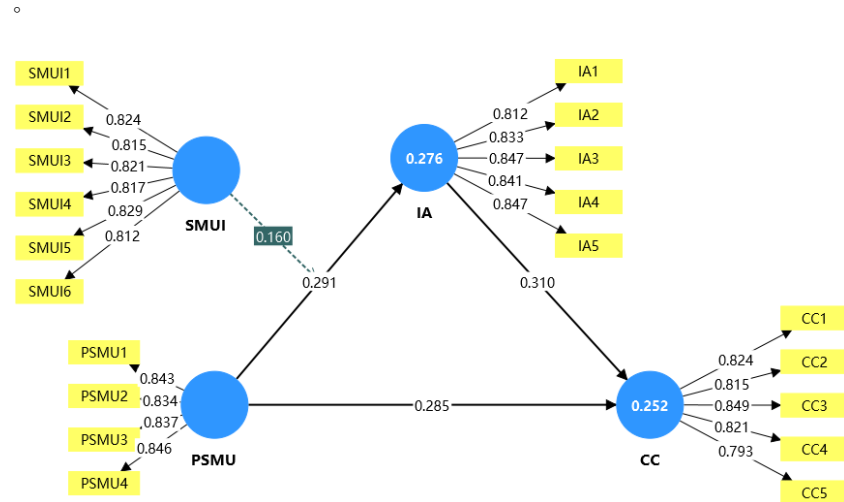


Figure 2. Structural Model Path Diagram (Based on PLS-SEM)

4.4.1 Direct Effect

Table 5. Results of Direct Effect Analysis

	Path (Direct)	Estimate(β)	f^2	t-value	p-value	Remark
H1	PSMU->CC	0.285	0.089	6.026	0.000	Significant
H2	PSMU->SA	0.291	0.095	6.562	0.000	Significant
H3	SA->CC	0.310	0.105	7.049	0.000	Significant

Note: PSMU = Passive Social Media Use; CC = Conspicuous consumption; SA = Status anxiety.

The effect size (f^2) analysis indicated that all f^2 values exceeded the threshold of 0.02, suggesting that each exogenous latent variable exerts a meaningful effect on the endogenous latent variables. This result confirms that the predictors are not trivial factors but contribute substantively to the explained variance, providing important implications for subsequent research and practical decision-making.

Path analysis conducted using SmartPLS revealed the following results: passive social media use has a significant positive effect on conspicuous consumption ($\beta = 0.285$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2; passive social media use has a significant positive effect on status anxiety ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1; and status anxiety has a significant positive effect on conspicuous consumption ($\beta = 0.310$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3.

4.4.2 Mediation Effect

Table 6. Results of Mediation Effect Analysis

Hypothesis	Path (Direct)	Estimate(β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-value	Remark
H4	PSMU → SA → CC	0.090	0.019	4.854	0.000	Significant

Note: PSMU = Passive Social Media Use; CC = Conspicuous consumption; SA = Status anxiety.

Mediation analysis was conducted by examining the indirect paths within the structural model. The bias-corrected confidence intervals and significance levels are reported in the table above. For the path “Passive Social Media Use → Status Anxiety → Conspicuous Consumption,” the direct effect was 0.285 ($T = 6.026$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a significant direct relationship. The indirect effect was 0.090 ($T = 4.854$, $p < 0.001$), which was also statistically significant. The total effect of the path was 0.375 ($T = 8.741$, $p < 0.001$).

The mediating effect of status anxiety was 0.090, accounting for 24.0% of the total effect. This finding indicates that status anxiety plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between passive social media use and conspicuous consumption. The results support the research hypothesis, demonstrating that passive social media use not only directly influences conspicuous consumption but also indirectly affects it through increased status anxiety. At the same time, the partial mediation suggests that the influence of passive social media use on college students’ conspicuous consumption is not fully explained by status anxiety, which represents an important but not exclusive underlying mechanism.

Table 7. Results of Moderation Effect Analysis

Hypothesis	Path (Direct)	Estimate(β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	p-value	Remark
H5	SMUI x PSMU → SA	0.160	0.038	4.252	0.000	Significant

Note: PSMU = Passive Social Media Use; SMUI= Social media use intensity; SA = Status anxiety.

Further analysis of the moderating effect was conducted, and the structural model results are presented in Table 7. Social media use intensity has a significant positive effect on status anxiety ($\beta = 0.251$, $p < 0.05$). Moreover, the interaction term between social media use intensity and passive social media use also has a significant positive effect on status anxiety ($\beta = 0.130$, $p < 0.05$), indicating a significant moderating effect.

Since both the main effect and the interaction term are positive, the moderating effect is positive. Therefore, H5 is supported.

5. Discussion

5.1. Main findings

This study develops a theoretical model of conspicuous consumption from a marketing perspective. Drawing on social comparison theory and conspicuous consumption theory, it examines the impact of passive social media use on college students’ conspicuous consumption behavior. Based on the analyses presented in the previous chapters, the main conclusions are as follows.

First, This study provides empirical evidence that passive social media use is a significant antecedent of both status anxiety and conspicuous consumption among college students. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that passive use may undermine

emotional well-being and trigger negative emotions such as anxiety, envy, and depression [30,31]. importantly, the findings reveal that passive exposure to curated social media content activates upward social comparison processes, which in turn heighten individuals' concerns about their relative social standing.

Second, passive social media use has a positive effect on college students' conspicuous consumption. This result is consistent with Yang et al. [15], although the direct effect identified in this study is relatively weaker. One possible explanation lies in differences in research context and cultural background. Compared with the prevalent consumerism and hedonism in some countries, traditional Chinese culture emphasizes thrift and saving, which may constrain individual consumption behavior. Moreover, college students primarily rely on family financial support, with limited income from part-time work. Under the dual constraints of financial pressure and parental supervision, both their consumption desire and purchasing power are restricted, thereby weakening the direct effect of passive social media use on conspicuous consumption.

Furthermore, status anxiety partially mediates the relationship between passive social media use and college students' conspicuous consumption, and it exerts a significant positive effect on conspicuous consumption. This suggests that individuals do not engage in conspicuous consumption merely due to external influence, but rather as a compensatory response to internal psychological pressure.

This finding is consistent with prior studies[9,15,32]. In social media contexts, college students are frequently exposed to others' displays of affluence and symbolic consumption, making them susceptible to social comparison, identity signaling, and status display motives. As a result, they may engage in conspicuous consumption to enhance or signal their social status and identity. Through this process, self-identity and self-confidence are reinforced, perceived self-worth is restored, and status anxiety is alleviated to some extent.

Finally, social media use intensity positively moderates the relationship between passive social media use and status anxiety. Passive use does not inevitably lead to status anxiety; rather, its impact depends on the level of use intensity. As social media use intensity increases, the positive effect of passive use on status anxiety becomes significantly stronger.

This finding is consistent with prior research [23,31]. When college students invest more time, attention, and emotional resources in social media and integrate it into their daily lives, high-intensity use amplifies the effects of passive browsing of others' curated lifestyles and status symbols. Such exposure is more likely to trigger social comparison and feelings of inadequacy, thereby intensifying status anxiety.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

First, this study incorporates passive social media use into the framework of conspicuous consumption from the perspective of different usage patterns, thereby extending research on social media psychology and consumer behavior. Unlike prior studies that focus primarily on usage frequency or total time spent, this study distinguishes between active and passive use and emphasizes the psychological consequences of passive use. By empirically examining its influence on college students' conspicuous consumption tendencies, the study enriches the explanatory pathways of consumer behavior in digital media contexts and offers a new analytical lens for understanding consumption decisions in social media environments.

Second, by integrating social comparison theory and conspicuous consumption theory, this study introduces status anxiety as a key mediating variable and constructs a psychological mechanism model linking passive social media use to conspicuous consumption. The findings indicate that passive exposure to highly curated lifestyles and consumption displays may trigger upward social comparison and self-evaluative threats, which in turn activate conspicuous consumption motives through status anxiety. This result deepens the understanding of the psychological drivers of conspicuous consumption and extends social comparison theory from traditional offline interactions to social media contexts, enhancing its explanatory power in digital communication environments.

Finally, this study incorporates social media use intensity as a moderating variable to examine its role in the relationship between passive social media use and status anxiety. Moving beyond single-mediator models in prior research, it develops an integrated framework that includes moderation effects. The results show that social media use intensity positively moderates the impact of passive use on status anxiety: individuals with higher usage intensity are more likely to experience identity threats and anxiety when exposed to others' conspicuous displays. Combined with the mediation findings, the study further confirms that the "passive social media use–status anxiety–conspicuous consumption" pathway is more pronounced among high-intensity users, revealing a contextual amplification mechanism of social media's psychological effects and enhancing the model's precision and practical relevance in explaining youth consumption behavior in the digital era.

Overall, this study transcends previous interpretations of social comparison theory that were limited to the psychological level, elucidating its potential psychological impact and its effect on specific behaviors from a theory-driven perspective. By combining social comparison theory with consumer behavior research, this study not only reveals passive use of social media as a key factor triggering status anxiety, but also reveals how this anxiety translates into observable consumption patterns. This integrative perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction between the digital media environment and individual decision-making.

5.3 Practical implications

This study finds that passive social media use intensifies college students' status anxiety by continuously exposing them to highly curated lifestyles and high-consumption content, thereby strengthening their tendency toward conspicuous consumption. Accordingly, social media platforms should reinforce social responsibility in algorithm design and content governance. On the one hand, recommendation systems should moderately reduce the weight of luxury lifestyles, high-consumption scenarios, and highly display-oriented content to avoid reinforcing a single value orientation. At the same time, platforms should increase the visibility of educational content, authentic life records, and information with public value to foster a more diverse and balanced information environment.

On the other hand, platforms should establish graded management mechanisms for display-oriented and commercial content. Content that excessively exaggerates consumption levels or implicitly signals class divisions should be subject to restricted recommendation or risk prompts. In product promotion, emphasis on symbolic attributes such as "status symbols" or "class labels" should be reduced to prevent the stimulation of irrational consumption through emotional appeals and social comparison. In addition, features such as usage reminders, content preference adjustments, and information diversity prompts can guide users to manage their browsing behavior proactively and reduce prolonged passive use.

At the higher education level, the findings indicate that high-intensity passive social media use induces status anxiety, which in turn drives conspicuous consumption among college students. Universities may therefore offer courses or seminars on rational consumption, social media use and mental health, and media literacy education. These initiatives can help students understand social comparison mechanisms and the characteristics of platform content presentation, as well as their potential influence on consumption behavior. Integrating ideological education with mental health education can further encourage students to view online conspicuous displays critically, strengthen self-worth stability, and reduce irrational consumption motives triggered by external comparisons, thereby promoting healthy and sustainable consumption values.

Moreover, the results show that social media use intensity amplifies the effects of passive use on status anxiety and conspicuous consumption. College students should consciously regulate their usage time and frequency, reduce purposeless passive browsing, and increase real-life social interactions and authentic experiences. They should also enhance their awareness of the “highlight bias” in social media presentations and avoid inappropriate comparisons with selectively curated images of others. In consumption decisions, distinguishing genuine needs from status-symbol consumption and reflecting on underlying psychological motives can help cultivate rational and moderate consumption habits, ultimately mitigating the adverse impact of status anxiety on consumer behavior.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

First, the sample lacks representativeness. This study surveyed students from only three universities in Guangdong Province, resulting in a relatively concentrated sample and limited generalizability. Future research should expand the sampling scope to include institutions in eastern, central, and western regions of China, as well as universities of different types and tiers, to optimize the sample structure. Where feasible, incorporating college students from other countries and conducting cross-cultural comparisons would further enhance the universality and explanatory power of the findings.

Second, the measurement of variables did not sufficiently differentiate between platform-specific contexts. This study employed a general scale to assess passive social media use without distinguishing among specific platforms, potentially overlooking the heterogeneous effects of different platform features. Future studies could treat platforms as separate analytical contexts, examining passive use behaviors and their psychological and behavioral consequences across different platforms. Alternatively, researchers may develop contextualized or platform-specific measurement tools to more precisely identify how platform differences shape the mechanisms linking status anxiety and conspicuous consumption.

Finally, social media use intensity was measured through self-reported questionnaires, which may be subject to recall bias and subjective estimation errors, affecting data accuracy. Future research could combine survey data with behavioral tracking measures—such as app usage logs and screen time records—as well as interviews or longitudinal observations. Integrating subjective and objective data sources would improve measurement precision and enhance the robustness of research conclusions.

6. Conclusion

Grounded in social comparison theory and based on a sample of undergraduates from three universities in Guangdong Province, this study confirms that passive social media use influences conspicuous consumption through status anxiety, with social media use intensity positively moderating this process. The findings reveal the psychological

drivers and contextual dependence of youth consumption behavior in the digital era at the theoretical level. Practically, they offer implications for social media platforms to optimize content recommendation mechanisms, for universities to strengthen student guidance and education, and for students to better regulate anxiety. These efforts may help foster rational consumption values and healthy value orientations among college students, thereby reducing problematic consumption behaviors. Overall, this study contributes both theoretical insights and practical significance.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

PSMU	Passive Social Media Use
CC	Conspicuous consumption
SA	Status anxiety
SMUI	Social media use intensity
AVE	Average Variance Extracted
CMB	Common Method Bias
CR	Composite Reliability
PLS	Partial Least Squares
PLS-SEM	Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling
SmartPLS	Software for partial least squares structural equation modeling (version 4.0)
VIF	Variance Inflation Factor

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