

Research on the impact of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption: The moderating role of mindfulness

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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption behavior, with a focus on the mediating role of psychological distress. This study employed a questionnaire survey, gathering data from 561 participants (working-age population in mainland China) using purposive sampling. Statistical techniques, including structural equation modeling, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis, were applied to test the proposed theoretical model. The findings reveal that social exclusion significantly promotes conspicuous consumption, with psychological distress acting as a mediator. Additionally, mindfulness moderates the effect of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption, although it does not influence the relationship between social exclusion and psychological distress. The study's theoretical contribution lies in identifying the mechanism by which social exclusion impacts conspicuous consumption, providing a deeper understanding of the psychological processes behind such behaviors. The practical implications suggest that mindfulness-based interventions could be effective in reducing conspicuous consumption among individuals experiencing social exclusion, offering a potential strategy for managing consumption patterns in a social context.

Keywords: *Conspicuous consumption, Mindfulness, Psychological distress, Social exclusion.*

1. Introduction

The pervasiveness of consumerist culture has elevated conspicuous consumption as a pivotal means for individuals to project their identity and garner recognition [1]. In the context of the burgeoning influence of social media, an increasing number of consumers achieve attention and status by showcasing expensive or distinctive products. This trend is especially pronounced among young people [2, 3].

Modern consumers often derive psychological satisfaction and social recognition from displaying high-priced products [4]. Social exclusion, whether in the workplace or among friends and colleagues, can profoundly affect an individual's self-worth. Such exclusion may prompt individuals to adopt compensatory strategies to bolster their self-esteem [5, 6]. In today's society, conspicuous consumption behaviors might indicate the social psychological state of those grappling with loneliness [2]. However, the intricate relationship between social exclusion and the propensity for conspicuous consumption warrants further investigation.

Social exclusion can induce psychological distress in individuals, subsequently influencing their consumption motivations and decisions [7]. Conspicuous consumption, a form of symbolic consumption, appears to address specific psychological needs arising from social exclusion. When an individual's need for efficacy is compromised, they often seek visibility through conspicuous consumption [8]. Indeed, conspicuous consumption serves not only as an indicator of an individual's economic capacity but also as a symbol of their social identity and status [3].

Mindfulness, defined as a present-focused, non-judgmental form of attention, has become increasingly significant in the realms of mental health and consumer behavior over recent years [9, 10]. This practice enables individuals to mitigate impulsive behaviors induced by social stress and negative emotions, subsequently decreasing unnecessary or excessive consumption [11]. Moreover, in scenarios of social exclusion, individuals exhibiting higher levels of mindfulness demonstrate superior capacity for acceptance and objective examination of negative emotions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

The fundamental premise of social identity theory posits that an individual's self-concept is partially derived from the social groups they perceive themselves as belonging to. This theory suggests that individuals define themselves not only by their personal traits but also by their group memberships Tajfel, et al. [12]. Brewer [13] contends that social identity involves the process by which individuals view themselves as members of a specific social group and associate their identity with this group. Social identity theory proposes that individuals strive for a positive self-image, which can be attained through positive evaluations of the groups they belong to. It further suggests that social identity is an integral part of an individual's self-concept, derived from their group memberships [14]. Social identity theory has been applied in multiple fields, including adolescent development Lee, et al. [15] digital media Soh, et al. [16] and social policy Anaba, et al. [17]. Reed [18] explored the application of social identity theory to consumer research, suggesting that social identity can elucidate consumers' attitudes, judgments, and purchasing decisions in specific situations. This theory not only effectively explains the influence of individual identification with others and the community on purchase intention in online communities but also reveals the relationship between consumer social identity and preference for domestic products [19, 20]. This paper expands on how individuals derive self-identity through group identity from the perspective of social identity theory. When individuals do not receive recognition, it implies that their membership status in the group is threatened or deprived, thereby damaging their self-esteem and emotional stability, leading to social exclusion. Some individuals may resort to conspicuous consumption to demonstrate their unique status and thus seek recognition from others to rebuild their self-identity.

2.2. Research Hypotheses

2.2.1. The Impact of Social Exclusion on Conspicuous Consumption

Social exclusion, encompassing experiences of rejection, isolation, or explicit statements of exclusion, can be profoundly threatening. When faced with such scenarios in social settings, whether among family, friends, or colleagues, an individual's group and self-identity are often negatively impacted [21, 22]. In response to the resultant negative emotions and identity crises, individuals who have experienced exclusion frequently turn to conspicuous consumption as a means to display status and garner external validation [6]. They may compare themselves with those of higher social status, often purchasing luxury or distinctive items to bolster their self-image and enhance identity recognition Belk [23]; Zheng, et al. [24] and Desmichel and Rucker [25]. He, et al. [26] research corroborates the notion that social exclusion can stimulate conspicuous consumption, suggesting that excluded individuals are more inclined towards luxury consumption as a means to elevate their self-status. Consequently, it can be deduced that social exclusion has a positive correlation with conspicuous consumption.

H₁: Social exclusion has a significant positive direct effect on conspicuous consumption.

2.2.2. The Impact of Social Exclusion on Psychological Distress

Individuals who struggle to maintain their group identity due to social exclusion often suffer from emotional distress related to the stressor, known as "psychological distress." Common

manifestations of this distress include anxiety, depression, loneliness, and decreased self-worth [14, 27, 28]. Social exclusion, a form of social identity threat, directly impedes an individual's self-concept and undermines their sense of belongingness, subsequently inducing negative emotions such as anger, sadness, and shame [29-31]. This distress not only has immediate implications but also profoundly affects an individual's long-term mental health, demonstrating effects similar to physical pain [32, 33].

In summary, it is thus inferred that social exclusion positively influences psychological distress.

H₂: Social exclusion has a significant positive direct effect on psychological distress.

2.2.3. The Impact of Psychological Distress on Conspicuous Consumption

Psychological distress often presents as emotional or cognitive negative states such as anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth. When individuals succumb to these states, they typically exhibit a strong desire for compensation [34]. In this context, conspicuous consumption serves as a quick means to project external displays of social identity and status, thereby offering a method to restore self-worth [35]. Under the influence of negative emotions like anxiety or a sense of meaninglessness, individuals are more prone to seek transient satisfaction and external validation through the pursuit of luxury or notable consumption symbols [5]. This suggests that when individuals struggle to effectively regulate their emotions during psychological distress, they are more likely to turn to conspicuous consumption as a means to seek social recognition and self-comfort. Consequently, it can be inferred that psychological distress significantly positively impacts conspicuous consumption.

H₃: Psychological distress has a significant positive direct effect on conspicuous consumption.

2.2.4. The Role of Psychological Distress in the Relationship Between Social Exclusion and Conspicuous Consumption

Social identity plays a crucial role in individual mental health. When threatened, it can precipitate an identity crisis [12]. One primary threat is social exclusion, which can lead to significant psychological distress [27, 30]. In this context, conspicuous consumption is frequently viewed as a mechanism to reconstruct social identity. Individuals often restore their sense of status and self-worth by acquiring and displaying high-value items [36, 37]. Following social exclusion, individuals are more inclined to engage in conspicuous consumption as a means to garner recognition or attention from others, thus mitigating the associated psychological distress [38, 39]. Consequently, it can be posited that psychological distress serves as a mediator between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

H₄: Psychological Distress Mediates the Relationship Between Social Exclusion and Conspicuous Consumption.

2.2.5. The Relationship between Mindfulness and Conspicuous Consumption Following Social Exclusion

Mindfulness is defined as a present-focused, non-judgmental state of awareness that allows individuals to recognize and accept each thought and emotion that emerges [40]. Through this practice, mindfulness can bolster self-esteem and diminish reliance on social identity, consequently curbing conspicuous consumption [11]. However, when faced with social exclusion, individuals often engage in behaviors aimed at seeking social acceptance and rebuilding self-worth. Such behaviors may manifest as fulfilling social affiliation needs by purchasing luxury items or other prominent consumer goods [5]. Varied forms of social exclusion, whether subtle or explicit, engender distinct desires for conspicuous consumption [8]. According to social identity theory, an individual's self-esteem and sense of belonging are derived from group identity [12]. In the face of threatened group status, individuals often adjust intergroup status or employ material displays of wealth to uphold or restore self-esteem and social identity [41, 42]. Hence, it can be deduced that mindfulness exerts a moderating effect between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. Specifically, when mindfulness levels are high, individuals are more likely to decrease conspicuous consumption following an exclusion experience. Consequently, hypothesis H5 is put forth.

H₅: Mindfulness is a negative regulator between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

2.2.6. The Role of Mindfulness in the Relation Between Social Exclusion and Psychological Distress

Mindfulness is defined as an individual's mental state of present-moment awareness characterized by an open and non-judgmental attitude, which has been shown to effectively mitigate overreactions to adverse events [43]. In scenarios of social exclusion, the excluded individuals often experience a heightened desire for social connection, resulting in pronounced psychological distress, including anxiety and depression [44, 45]. Such distress intensifies when feelings of self-identity and value are compromised, potentially leading to emotions like depression and self-doubt [46]. Nevertheless, the non-judgmental and self-acceptance aspects of mindfulness can assist individuals in perceiving and regulating their emotions with increased clarity [47, 48]. Thereby diminishing the adverse effects of social exclusion [22]. Consequently, this study hypothesizes that mindfulness serves as a negative moderator between social exclusion and psychological distress. Hence, hypothesis H6 is put forth.

H₆: Mindfulness is a negative regulator between social exclusion and psychological distress.

2.3. Research Framework

The research framework of this study is shown in Figure 1.

3. Research Methods and Design

3.1. Composition of the Questionnaire

3.1.1. Social Exclusion Scale

This study utilizes the social exclusion scale developed by Kumar and Kaushal [21] comprising 8 pertinent items. These items encompass areas such as personal social participation, absence of social support, and restrictions in social activities. A higher score denotes a greater degree of perceived social exclusion by the individual.

3.1.2. Psychological Distress Scale

This study utilizes the psychological distress scale developed by Kessler, et al. [49] which comprises 14 items in total. It is important to note that a higher score indicates an increased level of non-specific psychological stress or discomfort experienced by the individual.

3.1.3. Mindfulness Scale

This study utilizes the Mindfulness Scale as developed by Lau, et al. [50] a 13-item instrument categorized into two dimensions: "Curiosity" and "Decentralization." Elevated scores indicate increased levels of individual mindfulness, particularly in areas such as present moment awareness and acceptance of one's experiences.

3.1.4. Conspicuous Consumption Scale

This study employs the conspicuous consumption scale developed by Cui and Im [51] comprising 14 items that measure two dimensions: "social status bragging" and "uniqueness display". Higher scores suggest a more pronounced inclination for individuals to express their identity and status via consumption, emphasizing their distinct personal taste.

All scales referenced above employ a five-point Likert scale, whereby subjects are asked to rate each item on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It is important to note that a higher score indicates a higher level of the given variable.

3.2. Sample Selection and Data Sources

3.2.1. Target Groups

This study targets working individuals on the Chinese mainland, as these individuals are more likely to be exposed to diverse consumer information via social media and exhibit behaviors linked to conspicuous consumption [3]. The defined target group for this research is thus working individuals over the age of 18 years residing on the Chinese mainland. Data was collected through 590 questionnaires between July 12 and August 10, 2024, of which 561 valid responses were obtained after discarding invalid samples. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Dhurakij Pundit University. As illustrated in Table 1, the ratio of females to males was slightly skewed towards women (54.5% compared to 45.5%), with the largest age demographic being those between 18 to 28 years old (45.6%). Respondents holding a bachelor's degree or higher accounted for 55.1% of the total sample. The most frequently reported monthly income bracket was 3001 to 5000 yuan (34.6%), while monthly expenditures were commonly between 1001 and 3000 yuan (32.3%). This spread in education and economic levels among participants provides a robust sample base for further investigation into the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

Table 1.
Analysis of demographic variables.

Item	Group	Number of People	Percentage
Gender	Men	255	45.5
	women	306	54.5
Age	18-28	256	45.6
	29-38	140	25.0
	39-50	98	17.5
	51 years and over	67	11.9
Education	High School and Below	88	15.7
	Associate's Degree	164	29.2
	Bachelor's Degree	271	48.3
	Master's Degree and Above	38	6.8
Monthly Income	Less than 3000 CNY	128	22.8
	3001-5000	194	34.6
	5001-8000	103	18.4
	8001-12000	81	14.4
	12001 CNY and above	55	9.8
Average Monthly Expenses	Less than 1000 CNY	130	23.2
	1001-3000	181	32.3
	3001-5000	113	20.1
	5001-10000	73	13.0
	10001 CNY and above	64	11.4

Note: The data source is organized by this study.

3.2.2. Sampling Method

In the specific operation, we initially selected wjx.cn as the online questionnaire platform to expedite the distribution of the questionnaire and manage the data effectively. We established a project on wjx.cn and incorporated the revised questionnaire content into the system. Subsequently, we disseminated the online questionnaire via social media platforms such as WeChat and QQ, and circulated the questionnaire link through various channels including university graduates. Throughout the entire process of distributing the questionnaire and collecting data, we adhered strictly to academic ethical standards, ensuring the subjects' right to know and privacy rights. The homepage of the questionnaire explicitly stated the survey's purpose and other pertinent information, assuring the de-identification of collected data. This measure alleviated privacy and risk concerns, ensuring that the data would be used solely for academic research.

3.3. Data Analysis Method

This study employs the SPSS software to conduct a thorough analysis of the data. Initial steps involve data organization, addressing missing and outlier values, and determining the frequency, mean, and standard deviation for each variable. Subsequently, the Pearson correlation coefficient is used to examine linear relationships among the variables. The analysis culminates in investigating direct, mediating, and moderating effects between variables through regression analysis.

4. Analysis of Research Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

As illustrated in Table 2, the mean scores for various assessed variables approximate 3 points, suggesting that the participants exhibit moderately high levels of social exclusion, psychological distress, and conspicuous consumption. Conversely, the mean score for mindfulness is notably lower (2.183), pointing to an overall deficit in this domain. Standard deviations for these measures fall between 0.9 and 1.1, signaling a moderate dispersion. Skewness and kurtosis analyses reveal that, with the exception of mindfulness, the other variables are mildly left-skewed and exhibit negative kurtosis. These distributions are relatively spread out, highlighting both commonalities and individual variations in experiences of social exclusion, psychological distress, and conspicuous consumption among respondents. In contrast, mindfulness presents as right-skewed with positive kurtosis, and its distribution is more concentrated. This underscores that the majority of participants have low mindfulness scores, underscoring the need for potential interventions and training in this area.

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics of variables.

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Social Exclusion	3.407	0.985	-0.586	-0.677
Psychological Distress	3.337	1.010	-0.134	-1.059
Conspicuous Consumption	3.403	0.919	-0.067	-1.129
Mindfulness	2.183	0.997	1.492	0.654

Note: Data analyzed using SPSS 25.0; M=Mean, SD=Standard Deviation.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

Table 3 illustrates that social exclusion has a moderate positive correlation with conspicuous consumption ($r=0.514$, $p<0.01$), which lends preliminary support to the hypothesis that experiences of exclusion stimulate conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, mindfulness demonstrates a significant negative correlation with social exclusion ($r=-0.181$, $p<0.01$), psychological distress ($r=-0.254$, $p<0.01$), and conspicuous consumption ($r=-0.448$, $p<0.01$). This implies that a higher level of mindfulness may reduce the impact of exclusion on individuals, decrease psychological distress, and curtail conspicuous consumption. Therefore, implementing mindfulness training to intervene in social exclusion and its adverse effects may be an effective strategy.

Table 3.
Variable correlation coefficient table.

	Social Exclusion	Psychological Distress	Conspicuous consumption	Mindfulness
Social Exclusion	1			
Psychological Distress	0.271**	1		
Conspicuous consumption	0.514**	0.440**	1	
Mindfulness	-0.181**	-0.254**	-0.448**	1

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

4.3. Direct Hypothesis Analysis

4.3.1. The Hypothesized Test of Consumption for Conspicuous Consumption

As illustrated in Table 4, the R^2 value for Model 1 is 0.014, while that for Model 2 is 0.274, indicating a significant enhancement in the explanatory power of Model 2 upon the inclusion of the social exclusion variable. Hair, et al. [52] posit that in research involving intricate consumer behavior or psychological processes, an R^2 ranging from 0.10 to 0.30 is considered acceptable. Although the R^2 values for both models are not substantial, they are deemed satisfactory if the test achieves statistical significance. In Model 2, the path coefficient β for exclusion stands at 0.512 with a p-value less than 0.001, underscoring a significant positive relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. This finding lends support to Hypothesis 1: "social exclusion positively affects conspicuous consumption."

Table 4.

Hypotheses testing of consequences of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption.

Conspicuous consumption				
	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	VIF	β	VIF
Gender	-0.054	1.003	-0.024	1.007
Age	-0.097*	1.006	-0.095**	1.006
Education	-0.023	1.011	-0.003	1.012
Monthly Income	-0.009	1.009	-0.016	1.009
Social Exclusion			0.512***	1.005
R^2	0.014		0.274	
Adj R^2	0.007		0.268	
ΔR^2	0.014		0.261	
F	1.926		41.947***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4.3.2. Testing the Hypotheses on Social Exclusion and Psychological Distress

As illustrated in Table 5, the inclusion of the exclusion variable in Model 2 significantly enhanced the explanatory power of the model. The path coefficient for exclusion was $\beta = 0.271$, and the significance of social exclusion was $p < 0.001$. This suggests a significant positive correlation between social exclusion and psychological distress. Therefore, Hypothesis 2, which posits that "social exclusion positively affects psychological distress," is supported.

Table 5.

Hypotheses testing for the impact of social exclusion on psychological distress.

Psychological distress				
	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	VIF	β	VIF
Gender	-0.023	1.003	-0.007	1.007
Age	-0.123**	1.006	-0.122**	1.006
Education	0.025	1.011	0.036	1.012
Monthly Income	-0.039	1.009	-0.043	1.009
Social Exclusion			0.271***	1.005
R^2	0.018		0.091	
Adj R^2	0.011		0.083	
ΔR^2	0.018		0.073	
F	2.577*		11.179***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

4.3.3. Hypothesis Testing of Psychological Distress on Conspicuous Consumption

As illustrated in Table 6, Model 2 incorporates the variable of psychological distress, building upon Model 1, and markedly improves the model's explanatory power from $R^2 = 0.014$ to $R^2 = 0.199$. In this

model, the path coefficient $\beta = 0.434$ for psychological distress, with a significance level of $p < 0.001$, suggests a notable positive relationship between psychological distress and conspicuous consumption. Thus, Hypothesis H3 is confirmed: an increase in psychological distress significantly elevates conspicuous consumption.

Table 6.

Hypotheses testing for the impact of psychological distress on conspicuous consumption.

Conspicuous consumption				
	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	VIF	β	VIF
Gender	-0.054	1.003	-0.044	1.004
Age	-0.097*	1.006	-0.044	1.021
Education	-0.023	1.011	-0.034	1.011
Monthly Income	-0.009	1.009	0.008	1.010
Psychological Distress			0.434***	1.019
R^2	0.014		0.199	
Adj R^2	0.007		0.191	
ΔR^2	0.014		0.185	
F	1.926		27.508***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4.4. Intermediary Hypothesis Analysis

As illustrated in Table 7, a previous study found that the path coefficient β for the regression analysis of social exclusion on psychological distress was 0.271, with a significance level of $P < 0.001$. This suggests that social exclusion significantly influences psychological distress. When examining the impact of social exclusion and conspicuous consumption without accounting for psychological distress, the β coefficient for social exclusion in model 2 was 0.512, with $p < 0.001$. However, when considering the effects of psychological distress and conspicuous consumption and controlling for social exclusion, the β coefficient for psychological distress in model 3 was 0.317, with $p < 0.001$. The reduction in the β coefficient from 0.512 in model 2 to 0.426 in model 3 suggests that while the direct effect of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption remains, its strength diminishes. Psychological distress partially mediates the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption, indicating the potential involvement of other factors. In conclusion, the significant influence of psychological distress on conspicuous consumption in model 3 supports hypothesis 4: psychological distress serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

Table 7.

Hypothesized test of psychological distress as a mediator between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

Conspicuous consumption						
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	VIF	β	VIF	β	VIF
Gender	-0.054	1.003	-0.024	1.007	-0.021	1.007
Age	-0.097*	1.006	-0.095**	1.006	-0.056	1.022
Education	-0.023	1.011	-0.003	1.012	-0.014	1.014
Monthly Income	-0.009	1.009	-0.016	1.009	-0.002	1.011
Social Exclusion			0.512***	1.005	0.426***	1.087
Psychological Distress					0.317***	1.101
R^2	0.014		0.274		0.365	
Adj R^2	0.007		0.268		0.359	
ΔR^2	0.014		0.261		0.091	
F	1.926		41.947***		53.187***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4.5. Conditioning Hypothesis Analysis

4.5.1. Testing the Moderating Hypothesis of Mindfulness between Social Exclusion and Conspicuous Consumption

As illustrated in Table 8, Model 2, when control variables were taken into account, social exclusion positively predicted Conspicuous consumption ($\beta=0.448$, $p<0.001$). This suggests that individuals who experience higher levels of social exclusion tend to engage in greater conspicuous consumption. Conversely, mindfulness negatively predicted conspicuous consumption ($\beta=-0.366$, $p<0.001$), indicating that as individual mindfulness increases, conspicuous consumption decreases. This suggests that mindfulness might help individuals diminish their attachment to material possessions and shift towards healthier methods of self-recognition. Model 3, an enhancement of Model 2, demonstrated a stronger positive correlation between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption ($\beta=0.481$, $p<0.001$), and a more robust negative correlation between mindfulness and conspicuous consumption ($\beta=-0.418$, $p<0.001$). This implies that after accounting for the interaction effect, the impact of both variables on conspicuous consumption became more pronounced. The coefficient for the interaction term was significantly negative ($\beta=-0.196$, $p<0.001$), suggesting that mindfulness mitigates the positive influence of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption. When levels of individual mindfulness are high, any increase in conspicuous consumption due to social exclusion is likely to be suppressed. A comparison of the three models indicates that the moderating role of mindfulness between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption has been substantiated. In conclusion, this supports Hypothesis 5, namely, that mindfulness serves as a moderator in the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

Table 8.

Testing the moderating hypothesis of mindfulness between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption.

Conspicuous consumption						
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	VIF	β	VIF	β	VIF
Gender	-0.054	1.003	-0.013	1.007	-0.013	1.008
Age	-0.097*	1.006	-0.084*	1.007	-0.073*	1.010
Education	-0.023	1.011	0.027	1.019	0.029	1.019
Monthly income	-0.009	1.009	-0.011	1.009	0.011	1.023
Social exclusion			0.448***	1.038	0.481***	1.070
Mindfulness			-0.366***	1.043	-0.418***	1.123
Social exclusion \times Mindfulness					-0.196***	1.148
R^2	0.014		0.403		0.436	
Adj R^2	0.007		0.396		0.429	
ΔR^2	0.014		0.389		0.033	
F	1.926		62.293***		61.113***	

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

4.5.2. Testing the Hypothesis of Mindfulness as a Moderator Between Social Exclusion and Psychological Distress

As illustrated in Table 9, Model 1's findings reveal a significant negative correlation between age and psychological distress ($\beta=-0.123$, $p<0.01$), suggesting that as age increases, the incidence of psychological distress decreases. Although this model's explanatory power is low ($R^2=0.018$), it achieves a significant F value ($F=2.577$, $p<0.05$), indicating an overall meaningful model. Model 2 introduces an independent variable, social exclusion, and a moderating variable, mindfulness, to the control variables. It finds that social exclusion positively predicts psychological distress ($\beta=0.234$, $p<0.001$), suggesting a direct relationship between the level of social exclusion and psychological distress. Conversely, mindfulness negatively predicts psychological distress ($\beta=-0.212$, $p<0.001$), indicating that higher levels of mindfulness can reduce psychological distress. The explanatory power of Model 2 significantly

improves ($R^2=0.134$, $\Delta R^2=0.116$), and its F value is also highly significant ($F=14.346$, $p<0.001$), demonstrating the substantial impact of social exclusion and mindfulness on psychological distress. Model 3 incorporates the interaction term of social exclusion and mindfulness. While the regression coefficient of the interaction term is negative ($\beta=-0.082$), it does not reach significance ($p=0.054$), suggesting that the proposed moderating effect of mindfulness on the relationship between social exclusion and psychological distress is not significant. In conclusion, these analytical results do not support the original hypothesis 6; that is, mindfulness does not moderate the relationship between social exclusion and psychological distress.

Table 9.

Hypothesis testing of mindfulness as a moderator between social exclusion and psychological distress.

Psychological distress						
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	VIF	β	VIF	β	VIF
Gender	-0.023	1.003	-0.001	1.007	-0.001	1.008
Age	-0.123**	1.006	-0.115**	1.007	-0.111**	1.010
Education	0.025	1.011	0.053	1.019	0.054	1.019
Monthly income	-0.039	1.009	-0.040	1.009	-0.031	1.023
Social Exclusion			0.234***	1.038	0.248***	1.070
Mindfulness			-0.212***	1.043	-0.233***	1.123
Social Exclusion \times Mindfulness					-0.082	1.148
R^2	0.018		0.134		0.140	
Adj R^2	0.011		0.125		0.129	
ΔR^2	0.018		0.116		0.006	
F	2.577*		14.346***		12.889***	

Note: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Relationship between Social Exclusion, Psychological Distress, and Conspicuous Consumption

This study has uncovered a noteworthy positive direct impact of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption. Specifically, the greater the perceived degree of social exclusion by individuals, the more pronounced their inclination towards conspicuous consumption. This finding reinforces the hypothesis that when individuals perceive a threat to their group affiliation, they often resort to conspicuous consumption as a prevalent compensatory mechanism to restore self-worth [5]. Social exclusion significantly increases conspicuous consumption behaviors, as individuals seek to compensate for damaged self-esteem and social identity through luxury purchases [8, 26]. This compensatory mechanism is further moderated by factors such as power state and cultural context [5].

This study demonstrates that social exclusion significantly and positively directly impacts psychological distress. This suggests that individuals who endure social exclusion are more likely to experience mental health issues, exhibiting heightened levels of negative emotions such as anxiety and depression. Social exclusion, a profoundly negative social experience, poses a threat to mental health, including precipitating negative psychological consequences like depression and anxiety [53]. It triggers substantial emotional pain, encompassing feelings of sadness, loneliness, and anger, which are intrinsically linked to psychological distress [44]. Social exclusion notably attenuates an individual's sense of control, leading them to feel helpless and desperate, thereby further compromising their mental health [53]. Psychological distress significantly impairs emotional regulation and cognitive function, resulting in a broad array of negative impacts on behavior and social adaptation [54]. It is also closely associated with social withdrawal and distrust of others, and such behavior may intensify feelings of loneliness and social isolation [55]. When confronted with these pressures, individuals may be more likely to adopt negative, avoidant strategies, rather than actively seeking solutions [56].

5.2. Mediating Role of Psychological Distress

The findings of this study corroborate the hypothesis that psychological distress serves as a mediator in the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. It is demonstrated that social exclusion not only directly propels individuals towards a heightened inclination for conspicuous consumption but also indirectly influences their behavior of conspicuous consumption by inducing psychological distress. When individuals undergo social exclusion, they frequently encounter pronounced negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and loneliness [27, 33]. If these emotions persist without adequate mitigation, they may escalate into enduring psychological distress [28, 54]. As a coping mechanism, individuals grappling with psychological distress often engage in various behaviors [54]. In certain contexts, conspicuous consumption can serve as a relief from the psychological distress stemming from self-conflict [11]. The regression analysis and mediation test outcomes of this study collectively suggest that psychological distress partially mediates the link between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. Specifically, social exclusion significantly amplifies individual psychological distress, prompting them to lean more towards conspicuous consumption as a strategy to counteract impaired self-esteem and belongingness.

5.3. The Moderating Effect of Mindfulness

This study has determined that mindfulness exerts a significant negative moderating influence on the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. At its core, mindfulness embodies an open, non-judgmental awareness, which can diminish negative emotional responses while simultaneously enhancing emotional regulation capabilities [10]. By improving emotional regulation and reducing negative self-related processing, mindfulness mitigates the impact of social exclusion on mental health [57]. Moreover, it aids individuals in transcending the limitations of materialistic values, decreasing reliance on external objects, and focusing on intrinsic self-growth [10]. Consequently, when individuals experience social exclusion, those with high levels of mindfulness are more likely to perceive their current psychological state calmly rather than resorting to conspicuous consumption as a means of alleviation.

6. Conclusion of the Study

Based on the perspective of social identity theory, this study explores the mechanism of how social exclusion affects conspicuous consumption behavior in the workplace. Through empirical analysis, the following main conclusions were drawn:

6.1. Conclusion of the Study

The empirical findings of this study reveal that social exclusion not only markedly elevates the propensity for conspicuous consumption but also precipitates heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and other forms of psychological distress. This, in turn, erodes the individual's capacity for self-regulation and indirectly fosters compensatory behaviors aimed at boosting self-esteem and group belongingness through luxurious or distinctive consumption. Psychological distress serves as a pivotal mediator in the relationship between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. When individuals encounter exclusionary pressures, engaging in conspicuous consumption offers a temporary respite from psychological discomfort and yields immediate satisfaction. However, mindfulness exerts a significant negative regulatory effect within this framework: as the level of mindfulness increases, the influence of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption diminishes. This is attributed to the fact that mindfulness can mitigate adverse emotional responses and dependency on external possessions, thereby enabling individuals to prioritize inner growth over seeking affirmation through conspicuous consumption.

6.2. Practical and Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for corporate and social governance. Enterprises may utilize these findings to more accurately segment the market based on consumers' perceptions of

social exclusion and emotional needs, thereby developing marketing strategies specifically targeted at groups experiencing high levels of exclusion. For example, they can introduce products that underscore themes of identity and scarcity, while focusing on emotional resonance and social identity in their promotional activities. Moreover, businesses and appropriate institutions can assist consumers in navigating negative emotions and reducing psychological distress through consumer education initiatives and community engagement. This not only furthers business interests but also fulfills social responsibilities. Mindfulness can serve as an effective tool for individual intervention and management, aiding individuals in managing impulsive consumption by fostering present moment awareness and emotional regulation skills. For instance, companies and social institutions might consider offering mindfulness training programs or integrating mental health services to help employees develop higher levels of mindfulness. Doing so enables them to react to negative emotions in a more rational and accepting way when confronted with social exclusion. This approach is beneficial in enhancing individual physical and mental well-being and fosters a positive organizational climate conducive to business operations.

This study augments the theoretical discourse on social exclusion and consumer behavior. It expands the research purview by conceptualizing social exclusion as a significant situational determinant of conspicuous consumption among working-class individuals. The findings reveal that even mature, rational groups may exhibit irrational consumption behavior as a consequence of experiencing exclusion. This investigation elucidates that social exclusion not only directly influences conspicuous consumption but can also indirectly facilitate its occurrence through the mediation path of psychological distress. Moreover, the study probes into the moderating role of mindfulness in this process, providing a dynamic explanatory framework of “situation-individual-behavior.” This contributes a theoretical foundation and a novel perspective for future research exploring the interactive influence between social situations and individual consumer behavior.

6.3. Research Limitations and Future Prospects

This study presents limitations related to sample selection and research methodology. The sample selection utilizes purposive sampling, predominantly focusing on specific regions such as Guangxi, Hunan, and Guangdong, and primarily targets the workplace population. As a result, the geographical coverage and population type may appear somewhat singular, potentially obscuring the variability found across different regions, ages, professions, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. Concerning research methods, this study mainly employs cross-sectional questionnaire surveys. This approach may not effectively eliminate the influence of unrelated variables, and it also presents challenges in drawing definitive conclusions about causal relationships and dynamic processes between social exclusion and conspicuous consumption. Future research could employ longitudinal tracking or experimental design to dynamically measure individuals' psychological distress and mindfulness levels, thereby further investigating the potential causal impact of social exclusion on conspicuous consumption. Additionally, the current study's measurement of mindfulness largely depends on self-evaluation scales. Subsequent research might consider incorporating behavioral or physiological indicators to offer a more comprehensive assessment of individuals' mindfulness states in real-life scenarios.

Future research can further elucidate the relationship between social exclusion and consumer behavior in several ways: Firstly, it should strengthen the integration of multi-level factors, taking into account both micro-level situations and individual characteristics as well as macro-level social structural variables such as economic development level and class mobility. This would help construct a more comprehensive dynamic interaction analysis framework. Secondly, it could enrich the types of consumer behavior under consideration, paying heed to the differences between offline and online, traditional and emerging consumer scenarios. A deep comparison of the impact mechanisms of social exclusion in different consumer situations would be beneficial. Thirdly, an intercultural perspective could be adopted for research, examining the variances in individuals' perceptions and coping strategies towards social exclusion within individualistic and collectivist cultural backgrounds. Cross-cultural surveys and multi-

group analyses could be employed to investigate the similarities and differences in the paths of social exclusion's impact on consumer behavior under diverse cultural contexts. This would serve to further verify and expand the cross-cultural applicability of the conclusions drawn in this study.

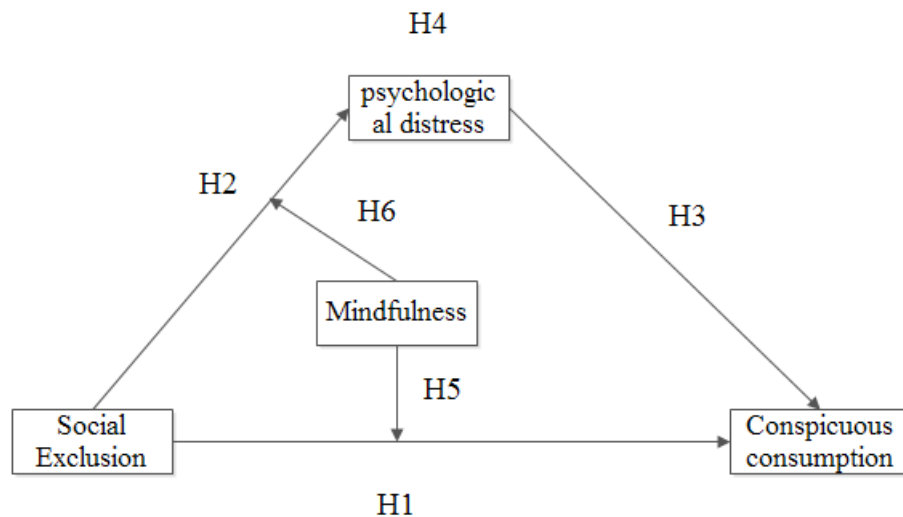


Figure 1.
Research Framework Diagram.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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