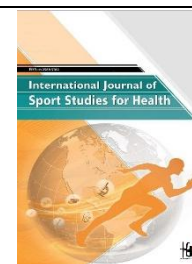


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Conspicuous Consumption and Social Desirability Among Sport Sciences Students: A Comparative Study of Public and Foundation Universities



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ABSTRACT

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Objective: This study investigates the relationship between conspicuous consumption tendencies and levels of social desirability among students in the Faculty of Sport Sciences at public and foundation (private) universities, which share similar institutional missions but differ in their establishment and governance structures.

Methods and Materials: A total of 666 university students participated in the study, with 351 from Muş Alparslan University, a public university and 315 from Istanbul Topkapı University, a foundation (private) university, both of whom were enrolled in the Faculty of Sports Sciences. Of the participants, 438 were male and 228 were female, with mean ages of 20.9±1.9 and 20.9±2.5 years, respectively. Data were collected using a demographic information form, the Conspicuous Consumption Tendencies Scale, and the Social Desirability Scale. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, the Mann-Whitney U test, the Kruskal-Wallis H test, and Spearman's rank-order correlation analysis.

Results: The findings indicate that, among students at both public and foundation universities, the variables "following fashion" and "purchase motivation" were associated with significant differences in both social desirability and conspicuous consumption orientations. Gender emerged as a significant factor particularly in relation to social desirability, while income level was found to be significant only among foundation university students ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, a moderate, positive, and statistically significant relationship was identified between conspicuous consumption tendencies and social desirability levels exhibited by all the participants.

Conclusion: In conclusion, participants' tendencies toward conspicuous consumption and social desirability are primarily shaped by fashion orientation and purchasing motives. Gender emerges as a significant determinant of social desirability, while income level differentiates outcomes only among students at foundation universities. Moreover, a significant and positive association exists between conspicuous consumption and social desirability across the entire sample.

Keywords: *Conspicuous Consumption, Social Desirability, Sports.*

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1. Introduction

Conspicuous consumption refers to the acquisition and display of expensive and luxury goods as a means of signaling social status and economic power to others (1-3). This form of consumption is driven by the desire to project prestige and social distinction through visible symbols of wealth and position (4, 5). Individuals who engage in conspicuous consumption tend to prioritize brand image and symbolic value over the functional attributes of products and services (6). Moreover, individuals occupying higher social strata often seek to differentiate themselves from lower-status groups by displaying their economic capital through consumption practices (7). Recent evidence suggests that experiential purchases (e.g., travel, leisure, and luxury experiences) increasingly function as status signals, sometimes even more strongly than material goods (8, 9).

Conspicuous consumption serves as a means through which individuals express themselves, seek social approval, and signal their lifestyles to others. It has been conceptualized as a form of consumption intentionally undertaken to make status visibly salient (10, 11). Beyond material acquisition, it functions as a symbolic practice that enables individuals to construct and communicate their social identities while reinforcing their sense of social acceptance (12-14). By displaying brands, products, or experiential purchases, individuals render their social positioning observable and satisfy their need for recognition and approval within their social environment (12).

Beyond satisfying functional needs, young individuals often perceive the products they consume as symbols of social value and status (7). In this sense, consumption becomes a mechanism through which status is experienced and communicated. Nevertheless, conspicuous consumption is subject to divergent ethical interpretations. While some view it as a legitimate expression of social identity, others associate it with self-centered or ego-driven motivations (12).

In recent years, the nature of conspicuous consumption has significantly transformed; in addition to material goods, sharing experiences and lifestyles as indicators of status has become increasingly important. The rise of social comparison tendencies, the search for approval and the fear of missing out (FoMO) on social media platforms—especially among young individuals—encourage conspicuous and compensatory consumption behavior (15,

16). In this process, social desirability is positively associated with conspicuous consumption, as it feeds individuals' desire to feel socially accepted (17).

Social desirability refers to the tendency of individuals to overreport socially valued behaviors and underreport behaviors that may be viewed negatively. It encompasses both impression management and self-deceptive enhancement processes, which arise when individuals seek to present themselves in a favorable light (18). Consequently, social desirability may lead individuals to portray themselves as engaging in socially approved behaviors, regardless of whether such behaviors accurately reflect their actual conduct (19).

Although conspicuous consumption has been widely investigated across diverse samples, particularly in relation to socioeconomic status, social comparison, materialism, and social media use (3, 20, 21) research directly examining its association with social desirability remains limited. Exploring the interplay between these two constructs within an integrated framework is especially important among university students, a population characterized by heightened social visibility and strong peer influence. Moreover, institutional factors such as university type, student demographics, and the surrounding socioeconomic environment may differentially shape consumption patterns and social interaction practices. Research that incorporates cultural variation and diverse social contexts can therefore provide valuable insights into this relationship (22). In particular, students attending public and foundation (private) universities may differ in perceived socioeconomic status, peer networks, and prevailing consumption norms, potentially influencing both their conspicuous consumption tendencies and levels of social desirability. Despite these plausible distinctions, comparative studies examining this relationship across different university types remain scarce.

This theoretical framework offers a solid foundation for examining the relationship between conspicuous consumption tendencies and social desirability among university students enrolled in Faculties of Sports Sciences. This population provides a particularly relevant context, as social identity construction, peer comparison, and social media engagement are especially salient during this developmental stage. Social acceptance plays a central role in students' socio-emotional development, and experiences of social rejection have been associated with adverse academic and psychosocial outcomes (23). Given the limited empirical research directly linking conspicuous

consumption to social desirability within university settings, this study seeks to contribute to the psychosocial understanding of consumption behavior. Specifically, it focuses on students attending Faculties of Sports Sciences at public and foundation (private) universities, which share similar institutional missions but differ in their governance structures and socioeconomic environments. These contextual differences may shape students' consumption orientations and their tendencies toward social desirability. Within this framework, the present study examines whether a significant relationship exists between conspicuous consumption tendencies and social desirability levels among students at public and foundation universities. Furthermore, it investigates whether these tendencies differ according to gender, fashion-following behavior, income level, and the primary factor influencing purchasing decisions. By addressing these questions, the study aims to clarify how individual and contextual variables interact in shaping status-oriented consumption and social approval motives among university students.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1 Research Design

The present study employed a cross-sectional correlational research design within the framework of quantitative survey methodology. Correlational designs aim to examine the direction and strength of relationships among variables without experimental manipulation (24). In this study, the association between conspicuous consumption tendencies and social desirability was investigated across different institutional contexts.

2.2 Participants

The study population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in the Faculties of Sports Sciences at Muş Alparslan University (public/state university) and Istanbul Topkapı University (foundation/private university). Out of a total population of 1,108 students, 666 students voluntarily participated in the study (response rate: 60.1%). The sample included 351 students from the public university and 315 students from the foundation university. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variables	Groups	Muş Alparslan University		İstanbul Topkapı University	
		n	%	n	%
Gender	Female	135	38.5	93	29.5
	Male	216	61.5	222	70.5
Following Fashion Trends	Yes	170	48.4	157	49.8
	No	181	51.6	158	50.2
Income Level	Low	190	54.1	160	50.8
	Medium	44	12.5	50	15.9
	High	117	33.3	105	33.3
The Decisive Factor in Purchasing a Product	Needing the product	187	53.3	188	59.7
	The product being of high quality	84	23.9	64	20.3
	The product having an affordable price	59	16.8	37	11.7
	The product's brand	21	6.0	26	8.3

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Demographic Questionnaire

A structured demographic questionnaire was developed by the researchers to collect background information about the participants. The form included items assessing gender, fashion-following behavior, perceived income level, and the primary determinant influencing purchasing decisions. These variables were included to examine potential group differences in conspicuous consumption tendencies and social desirability levels.

2.3.2 Conspicuous Consumption Tendencies Scale

Conspicuous consumption was measured using the Conspicuous Consumption Tendencies Scale, originally developed by Chaudhuri, Mazumdar, and Ghosal (25) and subsequently adapted into Turkish by Aslan (26). The instrument consists of 10 items and has a unidimensional structure. No reverse-coded items are included. Responses are provided on a Likert-type scale (as defined in the original adaptation study). The Turkish adaptation study reported an internal consistency coefficient of $\alpha = 0.88$

(26). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha was calculated as $\alpha = 0.89$, indicating high internal consistency.

2.3.3 Social Desirability Scale

Social desirability was assessed using the 15-item Social Desirability Scale developed by Erzen et al. (27). The scale employs a 5-point Likert-type response format and comprises two subdimensions:

- Social Acceptance
- Social Attention-Seeking

The original study reported a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .84$. In the current sample, internal consistency was found to be $\alpha = .86$, demonstrating satisfactory reliability.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27.0). Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics and scale scores. Based on the distributional properties of the data, non-parametric tests were employed. The Mann–Whitney U test was used to compare two independent groups, whereas the Kruskal–Wallis H test was applied for

comparisons involving more than two groups. When the Kruskal–Wallis test yielded statistically significant results, post hoc pairwise comparisons were performed using the Mann–Whitney U test. The association between conspicuous consumption tendencies and social desirability was examined using Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficient. The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. The internal consistency of all measurement instruments was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients.

3. Results

3.1 Public (State) University Comparisons

As shown in Table 2, social desirability (social acceptance) differed significantly by gender among students at the public university. Male students reported higher social acceptance scores ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 0.92$) than female students ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.81$), with the Mann–Whitney U test indicating a statistically significant difference ($U = 11353.50$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, no gender difference was observed for the social attention-seeking subdimension ($p = 0.97$) or for conspicuous consumption tendencies ($p = 0.06$).

Table 2. Group Differences in Social Desirability and Conspicuous Consumption (State University)

Variables	Social Acceptance Subdimension Mean±SD	Social Attention Seeking Subdimension Mean±SD	Conspicuous Consumption Tendencies Mean±SD
Gender			
Female	1.86±0.81	2.54±0.97	2.10±0.88
Male	2.18±0.92	2.54±0.97	2.34±0.99
	U=11353.50 p=0.00*	U=14541.50 p=0.97	U=12726.00 p=0.06
Following Fashion Trends			
Yes	2.14±0.94	2.70±0.97	2.40±0.92
No	2.00±0.84	2.40±0.95	2.12±0.98
	U=13942.50 p=0.12	U=12661.00 p=0.00*	U=12537.00 p=0.00*
Income Level			
Low ^(A)	2.05±0.89	2.63±0.97	2.23±1.01
Medium ^(B)	2.12±0.96	2.40±0.97	2.27±0.92
High ^(C)	2.03±0.87	2.44±0.96	2.25±0.89
	KW=0.367 p=0.83	KW=4.274 p=0.12	KW=0.588 p=0.75
The Decisive Factor in Purchasing a Product			
Needing the product ^(A)	1.90±0.80	2.42±0.92	2.10±0.94
The product being of high quality ^(B)	2.30±1.00	2.60±1.10	2.43±0.98
The product having an affordable price ^(C)	2.26±0.93	2.72±1.00	2.37±0.99
The product’s brand ^(D)	1.99±0.81	2.86±0.81	2.47±0.87
	KW=12.122 p=0.00*	KW=7.671 p=0.06	KW=12.501 p=0.00*
Mann Whitney U	B>A		B>A

n:351; *p<0.05; U: Mann Whitney U; KW: Kruskal Wallis

Fashion-following behavior was associated with significant differences in both social attention-seeking and conspicuous consumption among public university students (Table 2). Students who reported following fashion trends showed higher social attention-seeking ($M = 2.70, SD = 0.97$) compared with those who did not ($M = 2.40, SD = 0.95; U = 12661.00, p < 0.001$). Similarly, conspicuous

consumption scores were higher among fashion-followers ($M = 2.40, SD = 0.92$) than non-followers ($M = 2.12, SD = 0.98; U = 12537.00, p < 0.001$). These group patterns are visually summarized in Figure 1. This figure illustrates differences in social attention-seeking and conspicuous consumption based on fashion-following behavior across public and foundation universities.

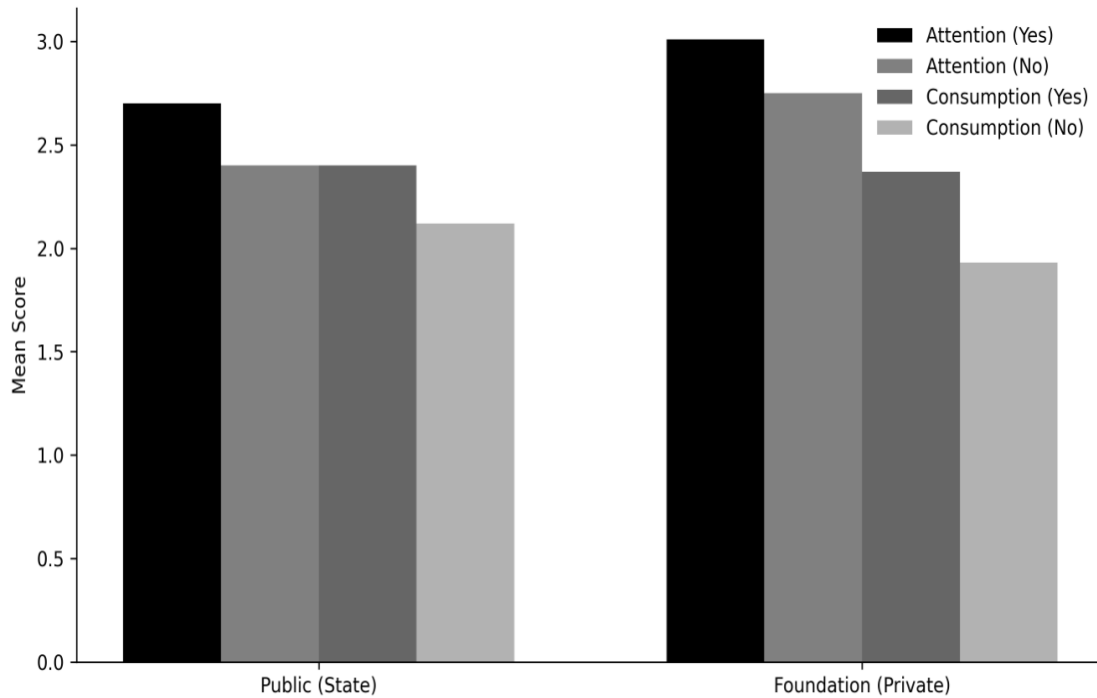


Figure 1. Mean Scores by Fashion-Following Status and University Type

Income level was not associated with significant differences in social acceptance, social attention-seeking, or conspicuous consumption at the public university (all $p \geq .12$; Table 2). Purchasing determinants were also related to meaningful variation in public university students' outcomes (Table 2). The Kruskal–Wallis H test indicated significant differences across purchasing-decision categories for social acceptance ($KW = 12.122, p < 0.001$) and conspicuous consumption ($KW = 12.501, p < 0.001$). Post hoc results reported in Table 2 indicate that the “high quality” category (B) scored higher than “needing the product” (A) on both social acceptance and conspicuous consumption ($B > A$). The social attention-seeking subdimension did not differ significantly by purchasing determinant ($p = .06$).

3.2 Foundation (Private) University Comparisons

Among foundation university students, gender differences emerged for both social desirability subdimensions, whereas conspicuous consumption did not differ by gender (Table 3). Male students scored higher on social acceptance ($M = 1.84, SD = 0.56$) than females ($M = 1.64, SD = 0.52; U = 8341.00, p = .01$). Conversely, female students scored higher on social attention-seeking ($M = 3.03, SD = 0.91$) than males ($M = 2.81, SD = 0.88; U = 8570.00, p = .02$). Conspicuous consumption showed no significant gender difference ($p = .96$). The gender-based pattern for social acceptance is illustrated in Figure 2.

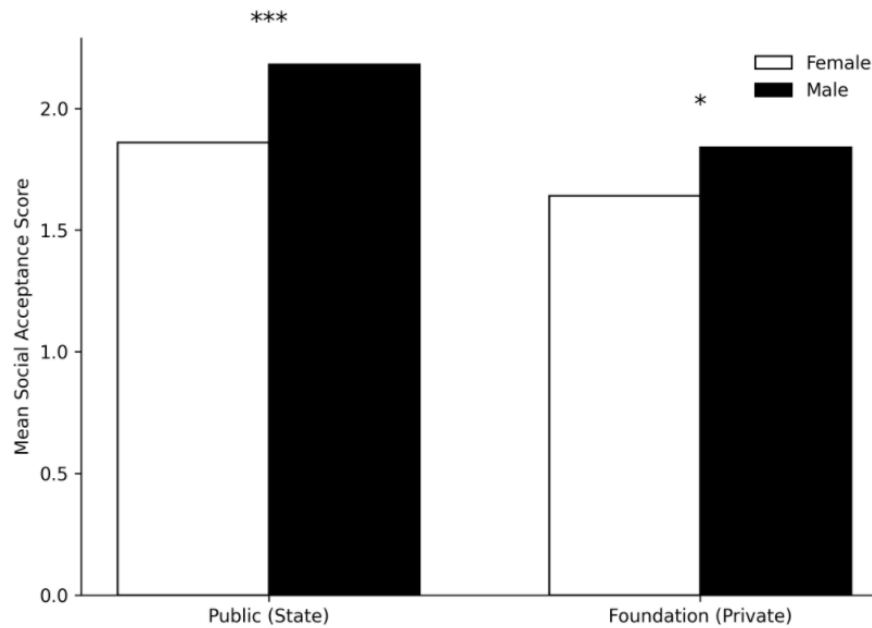


Figure 2. Social acceptance scores by gender across public and foundation universities.

Fashion-following was consistently associated with higher scores across outcomes in the foundation university group (Table 3). Students who followed fashion trends reported higher social acceptance ($p < 0.001$), higher social attention-seeking ($p = 0.03$), and higher conspicuous consumption ($p < 0.001$) than those who did not.

Income level was significantly associated with variation in foundation university students' social acceptance and conspicuous consumption (Table 3). Social acceptance differed by income level ($KW = 14.926$, $p = 0.01$), and conspicuous consumption also differed significantly across

income groups ($KW = 14.972$, $p = 0.01$). In contrast, social attention-seeking did not vary by income ($p = 0.28$).

Purchasing determinants were significantly associated with social acceptance ($KW = 9.199$, $p = 0.02$) and conspicuous consumption ($KW = 18.918$, $p < 0.001$) in the foundation university sample (Table 3). Post hoc comparisons reported in Table 3 suggest that the "brand" category (D) differed from "needing the product" (A) ($D > A$) for both social acceptance and conspicuous consumption. Social attention-seeking did not vary significantly by purchasing determinant ($p = 0.15$).

Table 3. Comparison of the Conspicuous Consumption Tendencies and Social Desirability Scale Sub-dimension Scores of Participants Studying at the Faculty of Sports Sciences of the Foundation University According to Different Variables

Variables	Social Acceptance Subdimension	Social Attention Seeking Subdimension	Conspicuous Consumption Tendencies
	Mean±SD	Mean±SD	Mean±SD
Gender			
Female	1.64±0.52	3.03±0.91	2.10±0.63
Male	1.84±0.56	2.81±0.88	2.16±0.75
	U=8341.00	U=8570.00	U=10283.00
	p=0.01*	p=0.02*	p=0.96
Following Fashion Trends			
Yes	1.90±0.58	3.01±0.89	2.37±0.76
No	1.97±0.50	2.75±0.88	1.93±0.60
	U=10085.50	U=10602.50	U=8021.00
	p=0.00*	p=0.03*	p=0.00*
Income Level			
Low ^(A)	1.68±0.56	2.76±0.94	1.98±0.65
Medium ^(B)	1.76±0.32	2.90±0.83	2.18±0.73
High ^(C)	1.96±0.59	3.06±0.80	2.38±0.75
	KW=14.926	KW=2.584	KW=14.972

	p=0.01*	p=0.28	p=0.01*
The Decisive Factor in Purchasing a Product	C>A		C>A
Needing the product ^(A)			
The product being of high quality ^(B)	1.76±0.54	2.90±0.95	2.10±0.70
The product having an affordable price ^(C)	1.80±0.49	2.98±0.83	2.21±0.47
The product's brand ^(D)	1.64±0.47	2.60±0.92	1.98±0.74
The Decisive Factor in Purchasing a Product	2.18±0.73	2.90±0.31	2.81±0.90
	KW=9.199	KW=5.474	KW=18.918
	p=0.02*	p=0.15	p=0.00*
Mann Whitney U	D>A		D>A

n:315; *p<0.05; U: Mann Whitney U; KW: Kruskal Wallis

3.3 Association Between Conspicuous Consumption and Social Desirability

Spearman correlation analyses (Table 4) indicated a positive, moderate, and statistically significant relationship between conspicuous consumption and both social desirability subdimensions in both institutional contexts (all

p < .01). At the public university, conspicuous consumption correlated with social acceptance (ρ = 0.693) and social attention-seeking (ρ = .600). At the foundation university, conspicuous consumption correlated with social acceptance (ρ = 0.603) and social attention-seeking (ρ = 0.545). These associations are summarized visually in Figure 3.

Table 4. The Relationship Between Participants' Conspicuous Consumption Tendencies and the Subdimensions of the Social Desirability Scale Scores

University Type	Variable	Conspicuous Consumption Tendencies
State University	Social Acceptance Subdimension	0.693**
	Social Attention Seeking Subdimension	0.600**
Private Foundation University	Social Acceptance Subdimension	0.603**
	Social Attention Seeking Subdimension	0.545**

**Significant at the p<0.01 level.

As shown in Figure 3, Spearman correlations indicated moderate positive associations between conspicuous consumption and social desirability subdimensions. The

95% confidence intervals did not cross zero, confirming the robustness of the associations across both institutional contexts.

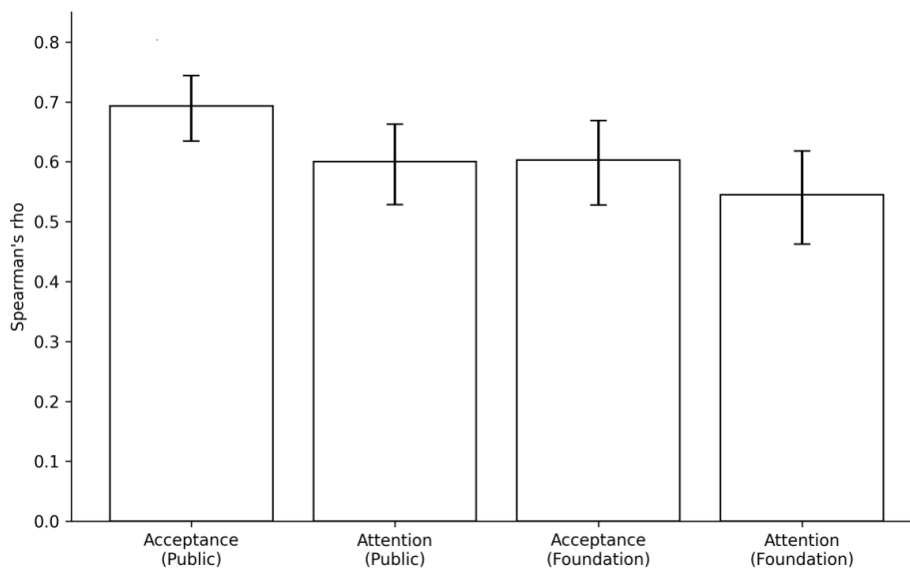


Figure 3. Spearman correlations between conspicuous consumption and social desirability subdimensions across university types (95% confidence intervals shown).

4. Discussion

Across university types, gender showed a consistent association with the social acceptance component of social desirability, whereas its association with social attention-seeking varied by institutional context. In the public university sample, men scored significantly higher than women on social acceptance, while no gender difference emerged for social attention-seeking; conspicuous consumption tendencies also did not differ by gender. In the foundation university sample, men again scored higher on social acceptance, but women scored significantly higher on social attention-seeking, and conspicuous consumption tendencies remained non-significant across gender groups. These patterns align with prior evidence that gender differences in social desirability can depend on which facet is assessed (e.g., approval/acceptance versus self-presentation), and may vary across contexts and samples (28-32). Likewise, the literature on gender and conspicuous consumption is mixed: some studies report gender-based differences (11, 20, 33), whereas others report null findings similar to those observed here (6, 34, 35). Additionally, evidence from work on luxury experiences suggests that gender may shape how visibility and status signaling are enacted or interpreted—particularly via social media—consistent with the observed divergence in social attention-seeking at the foundation university (36).

Fashion orientation emerged as a salient correlate of both social desirability and conspicuous consumption, though the pattern differed by university type. In the public university, following fashion was associated with higher social attention-seeking and higher conspicuous consumption, while social acceptance did not differ by fashion-following status. This configuration suggests that, in this context, fashion-following may operate primarily through visibility and attention-related motives rather than approval/acceptance motives. In contrast, in the foundation university, fashion-following was associated with higher scores on both social desirability subdimensions (social acceptance and social attention-seeking) as well as higher conspicuous consumption, indicating a broader linkage between fashion orientation, social approval, and status signaling. These findings are consistent with evidence that fashion engagement can function as a vehicle for self-image reinforcement and social positioning, thereby strengthening conspicuous consumption tendencies and their social-motivational correlates (7, 37, 38).

Income-related effects also appeared to depend on institutional context. Among public university students, social acceptance, social attention-seeking, and conspicuous consumption did not differ significantly across income levels. Among foundation university students, however, income was significantly associated with social acceptance and conspicuous consumption, while social attention-seeking remained non-significant. This pattern is compatible with views that conspicuous consumption reflects both psychosocial motives (e.g., status demonstration) and structural-economic conditions, yet these links may be amplified in environments where social stratification cues and consumption norms are more salient (3, 39). Related work suggests that perceived socioeconomic position and inequality can intensify status concerns and promote status consumption, particularly when alternative routes to social mobility are perceived as constrained (3, 12, 40-43). Evidence also indicates that conspicuous spending may relate to broader well-being outcomes, including life satisfaction, further underscoring the complexity of these dynamics (32). Consistent with this perspective, results from athlete samples highlight that prestige- and popularity-related motives are positively linked with luxury consumption intentions, and that appearance-related concerns may co-occur with stronger brand awareness and impulsive decision tendencies (44, 45).

Purchasing criteria further differentiated the pathways linking social desirability with conspicuous consumption. Among public university students, significant differences in social acceptance and conspicuous consumption were observed in relation to product quality, suggesting that status and approval motives may be expressed through functional-symbolic evaluations (i.e., “quality” as a legitimacy cue), rather than through overt branding. By contrast, among foundation university students, differences in social acceptance and conspicuous consumption were more prominent in relation to brand-based purchasing, consistent with research framing brands as social identity resources and status markers (12, 13). Notably, the absence of consistent differences for social attention-seeking across purchasing criteria suggests that attention-seeking may be less central than approval/acceptance motives in shaping purchase rationales, even when conspicuous consumption is elevated (17). Overall, the findings indicate that social desirability and conspicuous consumption are positively linked across university types, implying that status-oriented consumption is intertwined with motivations to be socially

accepted and, in some contexts, to attract social attention. While institutional context moderated specific group differences (e.g., gender effects on attention-seeking; income effects at the foundation university), the general pattern supports the view that conspicuous consumption among sport sciences students is meaningfully embedded in social-motivational processes of approval and visibility (3, 17). Practically, these results support recommendations for university-level initiatives that foster critical consumption literacy (e.g., sustainable fashion, conscious consumption, minimalism) and provide supportive social environments that reduce the need to pursue acceptance and visibility primarily through consumption-based status signaling.

Authors' Contributions

O.E.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data collection, Writing—original draft.

M.B.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing.

A.K.: Writing—review & editing.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Declaration

This study was presented as an oral presentation at the 21st International Sports Sciences Congress, Antalya, Turkey, November 11–14, 2023.

Transparency Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Muş Alparslan University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Approval No: 08.11.2023-113761).

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