

Identity exploration of university students in the somatic and material domains: the mediating role of conspicuous consumption

Identity
exploration of
university
students

Adetumilara Iyanuoluwa Adebo and
Hanina Halimatusaadiah Hamsan

*Department of Social and Developmental Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
Serdang, Malaysia*

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper is determined to examine the role of body image and materialism in predicting the identity exploration of university students when conspicuous consumption is a mediator variable.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used a quantitative method. Data were collected from students of three federal universities in Nigeria. The sample size was 331. A self-report questionnaire was used to collect data and analysis was performed using the partial least squares structural equation modelling.

Findings – Findings reveal that materialism has a negative association in predicting the identity exploration of students. At the same time, there was a significant full and partial mediating effect of conspicuous consumption on the relationship between body image and materialism on identity exploration, respectively.

Research limitations/implications – The study provides valuable information for parents in understanding how conspicuous consumption may influence their children's identity formation. The findings can also be helpful for educators in the design of discussions and interventions for students on the social-psychological antecedents of conspicuous consumption and identity exploration. Government and regulatory agencies can use the study's findings to shape student financial literacy and consumer protection policies.

Originality/value – This study makes both theoretical and methodological contributions to the existing literature. It provided concrete empirical evidence establishing a subtle connection between the symbolic self-completion theory and the identity status paradigm. It is also amongst the first single research conducted within the scope of these two theories in the Nigerian higher education context.

Keywords Identity exploration, Body image, Materialism, Conspicuous consumption, University students, Higher education

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

As religious affiliation wanes, consumption patterns shift with growing prosperity and traditional interpersonal communication dwindle (Franck and Iannaccone, 2014; Hirschle, 2013; Schwadel, 2013), the foundations of conventional identity construction in contemporary society undergo a seismic transformation. Many emerging adults find themselves navigating a blend of partial autonomy and partial dependence, alongside role fluidity and ambiguity, leading to a feeling of being “in-between” adolescence and adulthood (Naudé and Piotrowski, 2023). Identity in modern society is no longer ascribed but achieved (Dittmar, 2007a).

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Hence, emerging adults in contemporary society require substantial guidance and a well-informed perspective during their process of identity formation. According to [Franck and Iannaccone \(2014\)](#), individual perspective often hinges on their vantage point and companions during life's journey and for today's youth, the primary locus of their formative experiences resides within the confines of educational institutions. Evidence from empirical research suggests that academic achievement and higher education emerge as vital catalysts, offering young individuals support in navigating identity issues, fostering reconsideration of values and beliefs and enriching their interpersonal relationships ([Arar, Masry-Harzalla, & Haj-Yehia, 2013](#); [Aries & Seider, 2007](#); [Pop, Negru-Subtirica, Crocetti, Opre, & Meeus, 2016](#)). Higher education environments can foster students' identity formation by shaping their norms and values and providing them with opportunities for identity exploration through learning experiences, social interaction and exposure to various perspectives and ideas ([Phillips, Dzidic, & Castell, 2022](#)).

The ongoing discourse in the higher education sector is how schools indirectly advance students' identity-motivated consumer behaviour ([Barrera & Ponce, 2021](#); [Pelser, Africa, Schalkwyk, Schalkwyk, & Africa, 2023](#)). Recent scholarly investigations indicated a rising prevalence of materialism, pursuit of status and recognition and conspicuous consumption behaviours amongst university students ([Luke Wood & Essien-Wood, 2012](#); [Verdugo & Ponce, 2020](#); [Zhang, Zhang, Cheng, & Zhao, 2022](#)). Indeed, the students themselves are sometimes perceived as customers by universities ([Harrison & Risler, 2015](#); [Raza, Qazi, Khan, & Shah, 2021](#)). This negative trends in higher education have implications for students finances, identity, values and psychological well-being ([Barrera & Ponce, 2021](#); [Dittmar, 2007a](#); [Kamps & Berman, 2011](#)). Whilst schools bear some responsibility for teaching values and promoting responsible consumption, it is crucial to recognise that broader societal influences also play a significant role in these issues.

Young people undergo a profound physiological revolution marked by rapid body transformation ([Erikson, 1959](#)). As they embark on making identity choices regarding education, employment and relationships, they become increasingly the target of evaluation and objectification by others ([Taylor, Doane, & Eisenberg, 2014](#)); hence, the body assumes a pivotal role, not only due to its ongoing process of transformation and definition but also as a vital social indicator ([Martins & Campos, 2023](#)). Recognising these, young people become susceptible to advertising efforts that capitalise on the potential confusion they may experience in decision-making whilst pursuing a coherent identity ([Clay, Vignoles, & Dittmar, 2005](#); [Dittmar, 2007a](#)). Globalisation, characterized by advancements in technology, communication and transportation, fosters unprecedented global interconnectedness. Whilst this interconnectedness brings numerous benefits, it also comes with significant consequences, particularly in the realms of conformity and personal identity. As globalization advances, a parallel trend of heightened conformity amongst young people emerges ([Toivonen, Norasakkunkit, & Uchida, 2011](#)). Research suggests this has watered traditional values, particularly amongst emerging adults ([Dons, 2014](#)). Globalisation and westernisation seem to drive the dissemination of body ideals, blurring individual somatic identities underscoring their pervasive influence. According to [Swami \(2015\)](#), as modernisation, industrialisation and westernisation increase, there is a growing convergence in body image ideals, particularly within prosperous urban communities.

Advances in communication technologies and the rapid proliferation of social media also contribute to these issues. Studies have shown that the utilisation of social media has contributed to cultural homogenization, leading to the erosion of indigenous cultures and the substitution of traditional values with cross-cultural phenomena ([Engel & Lee-Davies, 2018](#); [Ringin, 2023](#)). The rise in body modification practices amongst entertainers and influential figures in mainstream media contributes to the broader popularisation and reinterpretation of these practices ([Giles-Gorniak, Vandehey, & Stiles, 2016](#)), reflecting the influence of globalisation. The substantial impact of media personalities and celebrities and the pervasive

habit of young individuals comparing themselves to the portrayed ideals on various media platforms contribute significantly to the escalating prevalence of body image disturbance amongst college students worldwide. Studies reveal alarming rates of body image dissatisfaction amongst college students, with reported rates of 35.4% in India, 48.7% in Spain and a staggering 64.5% in Brazil (Aparicio *et al.*, 2019; Ferrari, Petroski, & Silva, 2013; Sharma, Singh, Tiwari, & Chauhan, 2019). Kosut (2006) noted that the contemporary shift in Western culture's perception of body modification is partly attributed to the middle class increasingly adopting corporeal adjustment practices whilst simultaneously upholding traditional personae.

The aforementioned global changes are particularly evident in Nigeria and other specific developing nations. Whilst globalization has facilitated knowledge dissemination and technological advancements, the pervasive influence of Western culture in Nigeria has engendered identity incongruity amongst young people, who sometimes perceive their indigenous culture as inferior (Dons, 2014). Three decades ago, research indicated that university students experienced a notable degree of body satisfaction, feeling harmonious with themselves and their physical selves (Balogun, Okonofua, & Balogun, 1992); however, recent developments show this is no longer the case, as emerging studies show that Nigerian university students adopt the body ideals of their celebrity role models, possibly as a result of vicarious learning experiences facilitated through social media platforms (Anierobi, Etodike, Eluemuno, & Nwikpo, 2021). Aslam and Azhar (2013) noted that globalisation's challenges for developing countries are not limited to the decline in individual and cultural authenticity; they include income inequality and unemployment. Despite the conventional link between rising youth unemployment and heightened material hardship (Pilkaukas, Currie, & Garfinkel, 2012), the state of unemployment amongst Nigerian youth appears to fuel the flames of materialism paradoxically (Adesina, 2017; Ukeachusim, 2022). Nigeria's youth unemployment and underemployment rate are at an all-time high of 34.9% as of the second quarter of 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Unemployment and underemployment have crucial implications for the identity development of youths. This is because identity development is inherently contingent on combining the individual's interests, talents and skills with those required in the vocational context (Kroger, 2007). For many Nigerian youths, a high unemployment rate delays the benefit of investing in higher education on identity formation; hence, to compensate for delayed identity formation, youths turn to symbols of identity achievement (Ibrahim, 2016; Odumesi, 2014). These symbols may be somatic or material in nature.

Research indicates that the intricate interplay of some cultural dynamics exerts a profound and undeniable influence on consumption patterns amongst Nigerian undergraduate students (Anyanwu & Chiana, 2022). This intricate web of sociocultural factors weaves a complex tapestry that shapes their sartorial choices. It reflects the complicated dance between individual identity, societal norms and the quest for self-expression through the body. Anierobi *et al.* (2021) revealed a strong correlation between body image and immodest fashion choices amongst the Nigerian university students. Negative perceptions of physical appearance, including height, waist shape, buttocks, breasts and other gender-specific features, influence their fashion choices and self-presentation. In the same vein, some young Nigerian university students tend to become cyber criminals because of the desire to stand out from their peers and partake in what is trendy, to forge a new identity for themselves and the kind considered popular in their environment (Ibrahim, 2016; Odumesi, 2014; Okeshola & Adeta, 2013). Research also suggests that there is an increasing overemphasis on the non-verbal signalling of a desirable identity through the symbolic values of material possessions, new trends in fashion and technology both online and offline (Barrera & Ponce, 2021; Dittmar, 2007b; Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019). Suppose the university students do not build a solid sense of identity. In that case, they may delve towards

conspicuous consumption as a compensatory mechanism to compensate for the deficit in identity development and project an identity they do not possess (Carr & Vignoles, 2011; Dittmar & Kapur, 2011). Hence, the central inquiry arises: What role do material possessions, the body as a symbol and conspicuous consumption play in identity exploration amongst the Nigerian students? Research suggests that the symbolism inherent in the consumption of bodily and material products can function as a means to convey and institutionalize the values and ideologies specific to a particular sociocultural context (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001). Also, when individuals confront challenges to significant components of their self-concept, they frequently engage in compensatory consumption behaviours by acquiring products that symbolize achievement, expertise or proficiency in the endangered aspect of their self-domain (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008; Rustagi & Shrum, 2019).

Conspicuous consumption has gained significant attention in consumer behaviour and social psychological research due to its growing prevalence and impact on young people and societies (Lewis & Moital, 2016; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). However, whilst numerous studies have explored the antecedents and consequences of conspicuous consumption, there remains a critical gap in our understanding of its mediational role in the broader context of identity exploration within higher education. Also, previous studies on young people overlooked the epistemological and empirical analysis of diverse theoretical frameworks, resulting in a theoretical gap in comprehending the somatic and material domain of Identity exploration amongst students. Hence, the current study hopes to bridge this gap by offering an empirical basis for understanding identity formation amongst the university students through a fusion of two foundational theories in the domain of social psychology (symbolic self-completing theory and the identity status paradigm).

This study is unique in that investigating how conspicuous consumption mediates the relationship between somatic and material factors and its impact on identity exploration provides valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms of consumer behaviour and its implications within the higher education context. This knowledge can contribute to developing interventions and policies to enhance students' identity formation process, psychological and financial well-being and responsible consumer behaviour in higher education. It can inform research on sustainable marketing strategies and provide a unique perspective on how cultural norms, societal values and economic conditions shape conspicuous consumption in emerging economies.

This article comprises six sections. The introduction sets the context and rationale of the study. The researchers build upon existing knowledge in the literature review and hypothesis development. Materials and methods detail the research design and procedures. Analytical strategy outlines data analysis. The discussion interprets the findings and the conclusion concisely synthesises the core results.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 Theoretical background

This study is based on the symbolic self-completion theory and the identity status paradigm. These theories were used to determine which factors are directly and indirectly linked to the identity exploration of the Nigerian university students. The identity status paradigm's central idea is that one's sense of identity is primarily defined by choices and commitments concerning personal and social characteristics. Based on Marcia (1966), identity development is established through exploration and commitment processes. Exploration is examining and considering different identity alternatives in interpersonal and ideological domains (Kamps & Berman, 2011). Exploration is the fundamental process that directs and is reputedly viewed as the adaptive dimension of identity formation because of its association with openness and curiosity (Arnold, 2017; Luyckx *et al.*, 2008). Research endeavours rooted in the

same theoretical framework are exemplified by (Sarouphim & Issa, 2020). The operationalization of Identity exploration in this study is based on Balistreri, Busch-Rossnagel, & Geisinger (1995), it encapsulates Marcia's original concept and serves as a measure of the exploration of multiple alternative commitments before making a final choice (Wim Meeus, 2011). Examples of studies using similar operationalizations are (Birger Sagiv, Goldner, & Carmel, 2022; Zimmermann, Lannegrand-Willems, Safont-Mottay, & Cannard, 2015).

The symbolic self-completion theory suggests that individuals establish their identities as musicians, athletes and so on by using markers of achievement in those domains, such as prestigious employment, extensive education or anything recognized by others as indicative of progress towards fulfilling their self-definitions (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Wicklund and colleague's theory is based on the symbolic interactionism school of thought. According to this theory, when significant symbols or indicators of self-definition are absent, individuals will actively pursue additional alternative symbols to complete their self-identity. Burroughs *et al.*'s (2013) humanistic theorists believe that individuals experience feelings of insecurity when one or more of their tangible, social, self or existential needs go unmet. A typical means of assuaging these feelings is acquiring and displaying material possessions. In the domain of body image and consumer behaviour, prior studies using the symbolic self-completion theory opined that individuals dissatisfied with their self-image may engage in clothing-related consumer behaviour to enhance self-perception (Sung & Yan, 2020).

2.2 Higher education and identity exploration

Late adolescence is pivotal for establishing one's place in the larger community (Meeus, Iedema, & Maassen, 2002). Previous researchers have noted that forming one's identity is a socially embedded process (Yoder, 2000). Through socialization, a dynamic process of identity formation is achieved (Cruess, Cruess, Boudreau, Snell, & Steinert, 2015). One primary agent of socialization is the school because many young people's years are spent within learning institutions. Aside from the understanding, generation and retention of knowledge, schools are tasked with aiding the identity development of students (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010; Kaplan & Flum, 2012). Teachers are also expected to help students explore new ideas, activities, possibilities and the likely implications of commitment in their chosen areas (Verhoeven, Poorthuis, & Volman, 2019). Research indicates that students who went to college were more likely to have a continuous increase in income growth, lower susceptibility to make premature marital commitments and lower dependence on romantic partners and the government for financial aid than non-college students (Mitchell & Syed, 2015). Education is an avenue for identity exploration and an essential path towards upward social mobility. According to Aries & Seider (2007), social mobility profoundly affects people's sense of self since identities must be renegotiated and social class is an essential domain of identity exploration for those moving up the social ladder through higher education.

2.3 Body image and identity exploration

An individual's body is an essential aspect of their identity. This is because the cognitive, evaluative and behavioural part of the self operates within the body's confines; hence, a person who is satisfied with their body is likely to experience a positive evaluation of themselves. Body image integrates evaluative self-perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions to one view of one's appearance (Kamps & Berman, 2011). The individual's perception of his body will determine the activities they choose to explore. What constitutes an ideal body image is inherent in the society in which

one lives. The exposure to idealised imagery projected through advertising directly impacts how audiences evaluate themselves because they continually make implicit and explicit comparisons with what is projected (Richins, 1994). The individual has little choice except to compare oneself with the popular ideals of their society because comparison is an unconscious process as people instinctively evaluate themselves and a popular way of doing this is by comparing themselves with others (Festinger, 1954). Indeed, research indicates that higher social comparison is associated with higher dissatisfaction with one's body (Habibpour, Taebi, & Akbarbeglo, 2017; Shahyad, Pakdaman, Shokri, & Saadat, 2018; Yang, Holden, Carter, & Webb, 2018).

According to Dittmar (2009), repeated exposure to the "ideal body" projected through the media increases youths' and adults' negative body image, affecting their identity. The popular idea of a thin model and a muscular man as the embodiment of the ideal body types has been found to result in self-objectification (Calogero, 2012), body image dissatisfaction (Tiwari & Kumar, 2015) and unhealthy dieting (Goldfield *et al.*, 2011). Cary, Maas, and Nuttall (2021) noted that negative internalisation might result in self-objectification, which may decrease the self-esteem of emerging adults, impeding their identity exploration. Furthermore, young people in identity trajectory classes with less adaptive identity formation showed more negative body image, increased body-related symptoms and lower positive body image (Vankerckhoven *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, in this study, we presumed that increased exposure of students to idealised imagery may have negatively impacted students' body image, leading to reduced levels of identity exploration; hence, we hypothesised that:

H1. Body image is negatively associated with the identity exploration of students.

2.4 Materialism and identity exploration

Materialistic values negatively affect a college student's identity (Sharif & Khanekharab, 2017). Studies have shown that individuals lacking a well-defined sense of identity may endeavour to establish a more distinct perception of themselves by acquiring material possessions, which can serve as alternative markers for self-definition (Claes, Müller, & Luyckx, 2016; Claes, Luyckx, Vogel, Verschueren, & Müller, 2018). Similarly, a preoccupation with buying material things that exceeds practical purposes has been associated with identity diffusion by Claes *et al.* (2018). According to Karabati and Cemalcilar (2010), the university students use material possessions to satisfy their desire for self-enhancement. The likely reason for this is that young people often view achieving financial independence as a crucial step toward adulthood (Arnett, 2001). Research indicates that present-day emerging adults' identity formation is delayed because they increasingly delay numerous significant life choices typically associated with adulthood, e.g. career initiation, marriage and parenthood, because they want financial independence, prompting them to identify alternative benchmarks for attaining adult status, e.g. financial independence (Hill, Geest, & Blokland, 2017; Martin, Bruce, & Alyssa, 2020). Since having symbols of financial freedom may communicate achievement in this domain, students may be disposed to acquire materialistic values.

Chaplin, Shrum, and Lowrey (2019) observed that what relates identity to materialism is the formation and maintenance of the self and the emphasis individuals place on the symbolic meaning of material possessions. However, this is not a healthy way of approaching adulthood, as it might result in low subjective well-being since materialistic value orientation is the desire for material possessions and not actual possessions (Dittmar & Isham, 2022). In a study by Vosylis, Žukauskienė, and Crocetti (2020), goal-oriented identity positively influences spending self-control and impulsive buying. Additionally, ruminative exploration directly impacts impulsive buying, whilst deep exploration directly affects spending self-control. Consequently, in this study, we presumed that the rising exposure of students to materialistic values in their

environment would have negatively influenced their materialistic tendencies, resulting in decreased levels of identity exploration; hence, we put forth the hypothesis that:

H2. Materialism is negatively associated with the identity exploration of students.

2.5 The mediating role of conspicuous consumption

Conspicuous consumption is a form of consumer behaviour in which third-party opinion of transaction or consumption is the overriding source of satisfaction for the individual consumer (Mason, 1981, p 20). In this situation, the product experience's emotional arousal becomes the concomitant of consumption behaviour (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). The concept of conspicuous consumption is relatively new, with less than 50 years of inquiry. According to Hirschman and Holbrook (1982), the first empirical investigations into a related concept (hedonistic consumption) emerged in the late 1970s. Conspicuous consumption amongst today's youths can manifest in purchases of Mobile technology (Wallace, Clark, & White, 2012), music and video games (Podoshen, Andrzejewski, & Hunt, 2014) and leisure activities (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Layland, Hill, & Nelson, 2018), automobiles (Saad & Vongas, 2009), etc.

Students may consume and display bodily-related products for the purpose of identity exploration. According to Souiden, M'Saad, and Pons (2011), socioeconomic status may impact individuals' self-image, encouraging them to consume branded fashion accessories conspicuously. This may result from cues advertisers communicate to young and old viewers on television and other media platforms. According to Dittmar (2007b), consumer culture reinforces various myths through advertising, two of which are the idealized depictions of the material happy life and the flawless body. The desire for belongingness and identification with a group may also explain the mediating role of conspicuous consumption on the relationship between body image and Identity exploration. In a study of tattoos and body piercings, Carroll, Riffenburgh, Roberts, and Myhre (2002) found that relationships, love and gang affiliation are some of the main reasons young people acquire and display tattoos and piercings. Because rapid psychological and psychosocial changes characterize emerging adulthood, students may tend to conform to idealized imagery standards they have seen, purchase relevant products and desire to display them for their friends to see. The inability to conform to or display these idealized images for any reason may result in students' experience of shame, self-discrepancy and identity confusion (Bessenoff & Snow, 2006).

According to Dittmar and Kapur (2011), materialism profoundly impacts the essence of individuals, affecting their identity, well-being and choices in consumer behaviour that go beyond practicality. It stems from their strong desire to manifest a desirable self-image to themselves and others through acquiring material possessions. Material possessions may also serve as a tool for compensating for low socioeconomic status, indicating symbolic self-completion. This finding is consistent with (Braun & Wicklund, 1989) that people generally use material symbols to compensate for or complete their identity in areas where they notice deficiencies. In these cases, what consumers buy may not necessarily matter as much as how they perceive these purchases would change or improve their sense of identity (Andrés, 2018). Also, Rustagi and Shrum (2019) noted that people frequently seek redress by purchasing goods that represent achievement, mastery or competence in the critical areas of their self-concept that they perceive are under threat. Therefore, in this study, we hypothesised that:

H3. Conspicuous consumption will mediate the relationship between body image and identity exploration of students.

H4. Conspicuous consumption will mediate the relationship between materialism and identity exploration of students.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Participants and procedures

This study was carried out in south-western Nigeria. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed to select the students as respondents from three federal universities. The multi-stage sampling was conducted in two phases. In stage 1 of phase 1, a list of the total number of universities in south-western Nigeria was obtained. Stage two involves the grouping of universities into Federal and private Universities. The third stage randomly selects 3 out of 7 federal universities in the study area. In stage one of phase two of multi-stage sampling, a list of various departments was obtained from each university selected; 10 departments were randomly selected from each university and 13 respondents who are final year students were randomly selected from each department. A total of 390 samples were estimated, and the researchers and enumerators proceeded with data collection. The study primarily focussed on final-year students, the researchers aiming to unravel and predict their underlying behavioural patterns. These individuals are also on the verge of adulthood and are poised to embark on further identity exploration or consolidate already-established identities into their daily lives. A self-report questionnaire was distributed in classrooms and lecture halls not currently taking lectures, practicals or seminars, university libraries, study lounges and student centres. The Universiti Putra Malaysia ethics committee approved the study [UPM/TNCPI/RMC/1.4.18.2 (JKEUPM)] for research involving human subjects. The respondents were briefed on the study's objectives, and informed consent was obtained from them. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed of the exclusion criteria and that they could withdraw from participating at any time. As Table 1 shows, 331 respondents were finally selected based on multi-stage sampling (169 males and

Variable	Frequency	Public university students	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	169		51.1
Female	162		48.9
<i>Age category</i>			
Below 21 years old	66		19.9
21–35 years old	263		79.5
Above 35 years old	2		0.6
<i>Marital status</i>			
Single	316		95.5
Married	13		3.9
Separated	1		0.3
Divorced	1		0.3
<i>Average monthly income</i>			
Below N25000	189		57.1
N25001–N50000	101		30.5
N50001–N75000	16		4.8
N75001–N100000	14		4.2
N100001–N125000	4		1.2
N125001–N150000	2		0.6
Above N150000	5		1.5
Total	331		

Table 1.
Demographic
characteristics of the
respondents

Source(s): Table by authors

162 females) ($SD = 3.18, M = 23.2$). Regarding marital status, 95.5% of the participants were single. Participants' average monthly income was N34,271.

3.2 Measures

A self-report questionnaire was used to obtain responses from the study participants.

Identity exploration: The Ego Identity Process Questionnaire (EIPQ) developed by (Balistreri *et al.*, 1995) was adopted in this study, in which six items were included. The EIPQ is a 32-item scale that measures the exploration and commitment dimension of Ego identity formation, with 16 items capturing each dimension. Sample items are "I have tried to learn about different occupational fields to find the best one" and "My ideas about men's and women's roles have never changed as I became older." Previous studies (Morsünbül & Atak, 2013; Zimmermann, Mantzouranis, & Biermann, 2010) have demonstrated the validity of the EIPQ in structural equation modelling. The reliability of the EIPQ in this study was 0.95.

Body image: Five of the eight internalization subscale items of the Sociocultural Attitude Towards Appearance Questionnaire (SATAQ: Heinberg, Thompson, & Stomer, 1995; $\alpha = .80$) were selected. Two examples are: "I believe that clothes look better on thin models" and "I tend to compare my body to people in magazines and on TV."

Materialism: Six of the nine-item version of the material value scale (MVS: Richins, 2004) were selected for the study. Examples of items include: "I like a lot of luxury in my life" and "My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have." The reliability of the six items in the study sample was .82.

Conspicuous consumption: This study adopted 9 of the 11 items of the conspicuous consumption orientation scale (Chaudhuri, Mazumdar, & Ghoshal, 2011). Two examples of items on the scale are: "I choose products or brands to create my own style that everybody admires" and "I buy some products because I want to show others that I am wealthy". In the current study sample, the reliability of the nine items was 87.

4. Analytical strategy

The research model was validated through partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM), a statistical analysis method of high calibre. The data was subjected to meticulous scrutiny through Smart-PLS 3.3.7 software, which facilitated an in-depth analysis utilizing a bootstrapping technique set at 5,000 subsamples. The mediating role of conspicuous consumption in the body image, materialism and identity exploration relationship was examined using the indirect effect, which is automatically calculated in PLS-SEM.

4.1 Preliminary analysis

A reflective measurement model is first evaluated by assessing reliability, convergent and discriminant validity (Raza, Qazi, Umer, & Khan, 2020). All variables in this study were measured reflectively. The factor loadings of all constructs were above 0.50, which indicates that constructs had sufficient convergent validity. As depicted in Table 2, the estimated values for composite reliability (CR), Cronbach's alpha and the average variance extracted (AVE) values all surpassed their respective cut-off points of 0.7 and 0.5. A CR value exceeding 0.7 and an AVE exceeding 0.5 are acceptable thresholds for convergent validity in reflective measurement models based on (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2010). Discriminant validity was accessed using the Fornell-Larcker and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations criteria. The finding reveals that the square root of the AVE of each construct in the study was greater than the correlations between constructs; hence, discriminant validity assumptions based on (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) were not violated. Similarly, the findings of the HTMT were not violated. Table 2 reveals that constructs' HTMT were below the threshold of 0.85 based on (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

Table 2.
The reliability and validity of both latent and observed variables

Construct	Fornell-Larcker criterion				HTMT				rho_A	CR	AVE
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4			
1. BI	0.75	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.817	0.866	0.565
2. CC	0.56	0.714	-	-	0.657	-	-	-	0.881	0.903	0.510
3. IDD EXP	-0.0067	0.052	0.734	-	0.103	0.089	-	-	0.882	0.874	0.539
4. M	0.341	0.454	-0.118	0.728	0.406	0.529	0.137	-	0.824	0.871	0.531

Source(s): Table by authors

4.2 Structural model

Findings from PLS-SEM show that one of the two direct effect hypotheses of the study was supported by significant associations at a $p = 0.01$ level of significance (see Table 3). Materialism was found to be significantly and negatively associated with identity exploration ($\beta = -0.168$, $t = 2.910$, $SD = 0.058$, $f^2 = 0.022$, $p = 0.004$). In contrast, the path coefficient of body image was not found to predict identity exploration amongst students significantly. Therefore, the study's findings confirmed hypothesis H2 but failed to confirm hypothesis H1.

4.3 Mediation test for conspicuous consumption

The association between body image and identity exploration was not significant in the direct model ($\beta = -0.119$, $t = 1.546$, $SD = 0.077$, $f^2 = 0.010$, $p = 0.122$), as Table 3 reveals. In the presence of conspicuous consumption, the relationship between body image and identity exploration was significant ($\beta = 0.059$, $t = 2.729$, $p = 0.006$), as shown in Table 4. Given the indirect effect, conspicuous mediates the relationship between body image and conspicuous; thus, hypothesis H3 is supported. In the same vein, though materialism was found to be significantly associated with identity exploration in the direct model, a significant indirect effect of conspicuous consumption in this relationship was also found ($\beta = 0.059$, $t = 2.626$, $p = 0.009$); therefore, the result supported hypothesis H4. Given these results, we conclude that conspicuous consumption fully mediates the relationship between body image and identity exploration, whilst it partially mediates the relationship between materialism and identity exploration. With conspicuous consumption's inclusion as a mediator, the R^2 values for conspicuous consumption and identity exploration were 0.39 and 0.03, respectively.

5. Discussion

The current study sought to empirically explain by means of structural equation modelling the identity exploration of university students and its determinants. In addition, the mediating role of conspicuous consumption was examined. The findings from the study indicated a nonsignificant direct effect of body image on identity exploration of university students, indicating that changes in body image do not directly affect identity exploration of students when considering other variables in the model and other variables might be involved in explaining the relationship between these two variables. This finding contradicts that of (Vankerckhoven *et al.*, 2023), who found a significant positive relationship between negative body image, increased body-related symptoms and less adaptive identity

Hypothesis	IV	DV	β	Sig	Conclusion
H1	BI	IDD EXP	-0.119	0.122	Not significant
H2	M	IDD EXP	-0.168	0.004	Significant

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 3.
Results of the path analysis: direct effect

Hypothesis	Path direction	β	T	P	Conclusion
H3	BI → CC → IDD EXP	0.094	2.729	0.006	Full mediation
H4	M → CC → IDDEXP	0.059	2.626	0.009	Partial mediation

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 4.
Mediating effect of conspicuous consumption

trajectories, i.e. low identity exploration. Likely reason for the nonsignificant effect is that the relationship between body image and identity exploration may be multifaceted making it harder to detect as significant directly, such that other variables (i.e. mediating and moderating) may explain this relationship indirectly.

Furthermore, a significant negative relationship was found between materialism and identity exploration, suggesting that changes in materialism are associated with a statistically significant decrease in identity exploration. This result implies that holding materialistic values result in low identity exploration of university students. This finding is consistent with previous research (Claes *et al.*, 2018), who found that individuals driven by an insatiable desire for material possessions are overrepresented in a cluster associated with low identity exploration. Likewise, the results are in accord with Vosylis *et al.* (2020), demonstrating that students inclined towards rumination and concerns about identity matters exhibit a higher propensity for impulsive and thoughtless material possessions acquisition. According to Shrum *et al.* (2013), materialism can result in individuals primarily defining their self-concept through possessions and external indicators of success, thereby impeding the exploration of deeper values, passions and personal attributes. This preoccupation with material possessions constrains the exploration of one's authentic identity. Also, in line with (Karabati & Cemalcilar, 2010; Wheeler & Bechler, 2021), material objects acquire social significance due to their practical utility and as symbols of identity and self-expression, with ownership or utilization enhancing the connection between the object and one's identity. Materialism can negatively impact identity exploration by distorting individuals' self-perception, their perception of others as well as their social status and self-esteem.

In addition to direct effect hypothesis testing, the result of this study indicated a full mediating effect of conspicuous consumption on the body image-identity exploration relationship. This means that the conspicuous consumption of students completely explains the effect of body image on identity exploration. These findings echo the (Dickman, 2010) enlightening study, which found that a prevailing coping behaviour governed students' consumption, evident in the measured quantities of cosmetics used and the significant investments made in appearance management. According to Dittmar (2007a, b), modern societies are becoming increasingly individualistic. People who hold individualistic values tend to internalize consumer culture's material and bodily ideals as early as childhood, making them more susceptible to identity-related consumption.

Lastly, we observed a partial mediating effect of conspicuous consumption on the relationship between materialism and identity exploration. This means that whilst materialism significantly directly affects identity exploration, part of this effect is explained by the indirect effect of conspicuous consumption. This finding is partially consistent with previous studies (Claes *et al.*, 2018; Vosylis *et al.*, 2020) that found a link between correlates of conspicuous consumption (impulsive buying and pathological buying) and a dimension of identity exploration (ruminative exploration). In essence, when individuals are uncertain about their identity, it increases their susceptibility to viewing material possessions as potential substitutes for their identity. Consequently, conspicuous consumption may serve as a means for individuals to reinforce and express their sense of self, particularly when they encounter uncertainty or confusion regarding their identity.

6. Conclusion

The complex interplay between identity exploration, materialism and body image within the context of university students has received limited scholarly attention. To bridge this gap in knowledge, the present study seeks to comprehensively examine these dynamics by analysing the process of identity exploration amongst students, investigating the factors

influencing it, and exploring the mediating influence of conspicuous consumption. The findings of this study add a profound and transformative dimension to the existing literature on the intricate process of identity formation. Through robust empirical evidence, this research substantiates the profound impact of body image and sheds light on the detrimental influence of materialism on the exploration of identity amongst the university students. Moreover, the study goes even deeper by revealing a significant revelation: conspicuous consumption acts as a mediator, illuminating the intricate relationship between body image, materialism and the exploration of identity. This revelation unveils a thorough interconnectedness that demands our attention and contemplation.

In light of these fascinating insights, this study provides valuable information for parents in understanding how conspicuous consumption may influence their children's identity formation. Findings can also be helpful for educators in the design of discussions and interventions for students on the social-psychological antecedents of conspicuous consumption and identity exploration. Government and regulatory agencies can use the study's findings to shape student financial and body image literacy and consumer protection policies. This can introduce programs that educate young people about the importance of making informed decisions when purchasing goods and services, budgeting, financial literacy and the impact of consumerism on personal identity and the environment. Consumer Advocacy groups can use the study's results to advocate for the provision of resources for responsible consumption.

6.1 Theoretical contribution

This study makes a profound theoretical contribution by expanding the body of knowledge in two significant aspects. Initially, we put forth a ground-breaking proposition and provided concrete empirical evidence that establishes a subtle connection between the symbolic self-completion theory and the identity status paradigm. Moreover, we introduced somatic and material constructs into the exploration of identity, thereby shedding new light on this intricate subject matter. In addition, this study delves further into the depths of philosophical inquiry by expanding the existing literature on the profound impact of body image and materialism on exploring one's identity. Notably, it explores the intricate role of conspicuous consumption within this context, unravelling new dimensions of self-discovery.

Furthermore, the study unveils a thought-provoking framework for comprehending the intricate process of identity exploration amongst the university students in Nigeria. The significance of this contribution is amplified by the fact that most exploration studies have predominantly focussed on the Western context and developed countries. By presenting compelling evidence from the Nigerian sample, this research establishes the cross-cultural compatibility of the identity status paradigm and symbolic self-completion theory, offering profound insights into identity formation during the critical phase of higher education and emerging adulthood.

6.2 Limitations and future recommendations

The cross-sectional nature of this study is a limitation; hence, further research may consider longitudinal studies that track the influence of the study constructs over time, i.e. from enrolment to final year. Higher educational institutions considering adopting the study's recommendations may additionally undertake and disseminate replication study results to assess the effectiveness of suggestions provided. Additional information is also needed to examine how the study's predictors and mediator fit into the identity commitment dimension of identity formation. The study was conducted amongst public university students; hence, further analysis may be conducted on students from different types of higher educational institutions, e.g. private universities, polytechnics and colleges of education. Lastly, the study's framework can also be empirically tested amongst the graduate students.

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Corresponding author

Adetumilara Iyanuoluwa Adebo can be contacted at: iyanuadebo@yahoo.com