

Decorative consumption patterns and socio-demographic affiliations in the Sri Lankan Society: The case of houses

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Introduction

“A house may be large or small; as long as the neighboring houses are likewise small, it satisfies all social requirements for a residence. But, let there arise next to the little house a palace, and the little house shrinks to a hut” (Marx, 1847, p.22)

Modern day man engages in lavish consumption patterns paying much attention to good's ceremonial efficacy where the underpinning of consumption is driven through non-utilitarian forms of consumption patterns that are speculated to be extravagant, luxurious, unique and popular among the community we live in. This obtrusive behavior of man has made him reach to a point where, he pays more attention to 'what is being consumed' rather than 'why it is being consumed for'. Moreover, it is seen that people tend to purchase goods or services not merely for their use; and at times, they tend to procure "expensive" items, the prices of which do reflect much higher values than what is reflected in their "use values".

'Conspicuousness', [or, buying expensive things to showcase wealth], is defined in literature as "Veblen Effect", 'Conformism', defined as "Bandwagon Effect", reflecting the urge to be recognized among peers or to be 'one of the Joneses', 'Snobbism', or buying unique things to be exclusive over and above the others, defined in literature as "Snob Effect" are the three major dimensions of such extravagant demand.

In this study, it is this ostentatious behavior, which signifies the 'showing-off nature', typical to all three effects rooted by the urge to exhibit the position in the society referred to by authors as "Decorative consumption". Decorativeness can be uni-dimensional, duo-dimensional or tri-dimensional based on the association of three dimensions: conspicuousness, snobbism and conformism. Moreover, it precisely depicts the intuitive motives behind the purchase of high priced goods and services such as designer wear, branded wristwatches, sports cars, designer handbags, big houses or even liquor.

This study focuses on equally important and interesting timeless and universal phenomenon, which none has paid significant attention or has focused on up to date and thus, is subject to examination in this research. The case of houses was chosen to examine the 'decorative tendencies' of ownership among Sri Lankan

office workers, because houses are being used as a visible/positional good as means of felicitous illustration of wealth, exclusiveness and attention, over and above their use as a “shelter for habitation”. Even though many scholars have researched on status consumption and related phenomenon in terms of its attributes, reference groups and motives of such behavior (Perera, Mudalige & Patabandige, 2013; Rucker & Galinsky, 2009; Fan & Burton, 2002) none has consummated on the aspect of decorative consumption as procurement of houses and socio-demographic drivers behind it. No studies of this nature have so far been conducted pertaining to the Sri Lankan market either.

In consideration of all imperative matters, the purpose of this study was to examine the decorative consumption patterns and affiliations pertaining to socio-demographic factors (age, gender, religion, sector and monthly income) based on the tri-dimensional effects - conspicuousness, snobbism and conformism among employees in Colombo.

Methodology

This study incorporated an exploratory online survey based on a questionnaire which was conducted on 250 employees within the Colombo city limits on the basis of different socio-demographic cohorts, namely; age, gender, religion, sector and monthly income¹³. The study adopted non-probabilistic snowball¹⁴ sampling technique.

Required information was collected through a closed-ended questionnaire supported by Google forms. The questionnaire was designed to highlight both favorable (positive) and unfavorable (negative) aspects of the three dimensions related to decorative consumption¹⁵. Twenty-three questions in total; eleven for Conspicuousness (including anti-conspicuousness), five for Snobbism (including anti-Snobbism) and seven for Conformism (including anti-Conformism), were used to explore the patterns of decorative consumption and affiliations pertaining to diverge socio-demographic factors on a 1 to 5 Likert Scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree).

Three different “Indices” (Conspicuous Index, Snob Index and Bandwagon Index), constructed per participant to represent the three dimensions of decorative consumption, were used in the analysis. Anti-Conspicuous, Anti- Snobbish and

¹³ n = 250, age range 15 – 60 years, 117 men and 133 women, 131 Buddhists and 119 Non-Buddhists, 135 private and 115 public and monthly income Rs 0 – 200,000 & above

¹⁴ Lewis, A and Moital, M., 2016. Young Professionals’ Conspicuous Consumption of Clothing, *Journal of Fashion Marketing & Management*

¹⁵ Conspicuousness vs Anti-Conspicuousness, Snobbism vs Anti-Snobbism, and Conformism vs Anti-Conformism

Anti-Conformist effects, as reflected in the relevant responses, were reciprocated (difference between 6 and the relevant rank given by the respondent for each such question was calculated) before averaging the responses to arrive at each of the three indices. Descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis using SPSS (version 20.0) were deployed as analytical techniques in examining the research aims. Model adopted in constructing the Decorativeness Index (DI_{ij}) of j^{th} dimension for i^{th} respondent is depicted below:

$$DI_{ij} = [\text{Sum of Positive ranks} + \text{Sum of (6 - Negative ranks)}]_{ij} / n_{ij}$$

Where, i stands for individual respondent, while j = 1, 2 and 3 signifying Conspicuousness, Snobbism and Conformism, respectively; and n_{ij} = number of questions on j^{th} dimension for i^{th} respondent

Results and discussion

The results revealed that age has a significant effect on aspects of conspicuousness ($F=3.206, p<0.05$) and snobbism ($F=3.733, p<0.05$). However, it does not appear significantly associated with conformism. Employees between the age group 30 – 45 are more inclined towards decorative consumption of houses in terms of conspicuousness ($\bar{x}=3.130$) where as younger employees (between the age group of 15 – 30) are more inclined towards snobbism ($\bar{x}=2.886$). Further to that, findings clearly show that there is a downward trend towards decorativeness of houses in terms of snobbism, as employees grow older. Considering the decorative consumption patterns pertaining to gender; the results affirmed that, there is a significant effect only on snobbism ($F=4.058, p<0.05$) and conformism ($F=10.741, p<0.05$) even though we expected the gender to have a significant effect on conspicuousness. The results show quite contradictory tendencies where males appear possessing a higher prevalence to live in a luxurious house (a) to showcase their uniqueness ($\bar{x}=2.870$) and at the same time (b) to conform to others' choices on having a similar house ($\bar{x}=2.671$). Given both the cases, results reveal that males are more decorative than females.

Quite unexpectedly religion shows having significant effects on all three dimensions, conspicuousness ($F=3.497, p<0.05$), snobbism ($F=5.695, p<0.05$) and conformism ($F=2.797, p<0.05$). Christians and Muslims show more prevalence to decorative consumption in terms of conspicuousness ($\bar{x}=3.233$ and $\bar{x}=3.184$) and snobbism ($\bar{x}=2.750$ and $\bar{x}=2.581$) depicting their exhibitionist urge to showcase pecuniary strength and to become exclusive. However, in the case of being conformist Christians ($\bar{x}=2.919$) and Buddhists ($\bar{x}=2.887$) showcased a higher tendency relatively to other religions. According to the findings it is clear that as a whole Christians are more prone to decorativeness as they showed higher tendencies towards all three dimensions, whereas Hindus seemed to be the least decorative of all as they indicated weakest in all three dimensions.

With regard to decorative consumption patterns between private and public sector employees, there is a significant effect only on snobbism ($F=7.993, p<0.05$) even though it was expected to have an impact on the other two dimensions as well. Out of the two sectors, private sector employees ($\bar{x} = 2.900$) seem to be more engaged in decorative consumption patterns than those in the public sector ($\bar{x} = 2.513$). It is possible that the necessity to involve in lavish consumption patterns is to get highlighted among their colleagues. Among other possibilities, owning an unusual house in order to escape from guiltiness to hold parties at home might be a case. But, warrants further research.

Lastly, the results reveal that income of employees could be more prone to decorative consumption in terms of conspicuousness ($F=3.275, p<0.05$) and snobbism ($F= 2.907, p< 0.05$) and that the employees in the higher income bands (with a monthly income over 150,000 rupees) are prone to lavish consumption patterns. It is understood that, the more you earn the more prevalent you are to own a luxurious unique house to showcase status.

Conclusion

The results of the study enabled examining decorative consumption patterns in Colombo office workers in the case of houses. The fact that different push-effects towards exhibitionism could be analyzed separately enables identification of fundamental behavioral differences and affiliations pertaining to different socio-demographic cohorts.

The research suggests that there is a significant tendency to own/live in a house as a “show-casing device” by their purchasers over and above their mere purpose of gaining shelter for habitation. Quite unexpectedly, younger employees were found more “decorative” in terms of snobbism. Such behavioral patterns showcase youngsters’ preference towards rare expensive things, even though it is a very big investment for an employee in the age band of 15 – 30.

While employees earning higher monthly incomes showcased a higher tendency towards decorativeness in houses in terms of conspicuousness and snobbism, lower income earners showcased the opposite. Such results could be owing to budget constraints inclusive of other important expenses undergone by low-income earners such as basic needs for a daily living.

The results revealed a curious tendency towards decorativeness in men vis a vis women, as they showed a higher preference towards both the effects snobbism and conformism than women. It is therefore evident that, men spend more on luxurious houses to be exclusive and to get peers’ attraction even though females are generally believed to be more exhibitionists.

The results of the research could be considered impeccable for professionals in the fields of architecture, interior designing and planning as this reveals interests

and intuitive behind owning luxurious houses among employees under different socio-demographic cohorts and it would be useful especially for architects to understand the drivers and the purposes behind building big houses to perform a perfect job on their task.

Keywords: *Conspicuousness, conformism, decorative consumption, socio-demographic affiliations, snobbism.*

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Apendix

Table I Statements used on Likert Scale to explore decorative consumption patterns and socio-demographic affiliations

Veblen Effect	
Conspicuousness	Anti-Conspicuousness
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You prefer a modern big mansion which showcases your status 2. The purchase /consumption of a house is based on its potential to signal wealth and enhance social status 3. Living in a luxurious house will uplift your living standards and showcase your stature in the society 4. Big houses openly display how rich a person is 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The size of house does not matter as long as it provides shelter 2. The consumption/purchase of a house is based on the worth (value for money) of the house 3. Living in a luxurious big house is a headache 4. Excessive spending on houses to showcase wealth is a waste of money and an utter stupidity
Snob Effect	
Snobbism	Anti-Snobbism
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You prefer a big house with unique architecture 2. The purchasing/consuming decision of a house is based on the extremely unusual architecture of the house as you are attracted to rare things 3. You prefer to own a unique extravagant house because no one else in the neighborhood owns one 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The purchasing/consuming decision of a big house is based on the popularity of its features among your peers (such as the size and number of floors) 2. You prefer to own a luxurious house similar to your friends' houses 3. You are attracted to big houses because they are common in the community you live in
Bandwagon Effect	
Conformism	Anti-Conformism
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You prefer a big house which is similar to that of your peers 2. The purchasing/consuming decision of a big house is based on the size of the neighboring and my peers' houses 3. Social influences affect your desire to have a luxurious house 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You prefer a luxurious house which is very unique 2. Your demand for a big house will increase if no one else in the neighborhood owns a similar house

Table. 2 Summarized results of the survey

Socio-Demographic Facet		Dimensions of Decorative Consumption		
		Conspicuousness	Snobbism	Conformism
AGE	15 - 30	2.786	2.886	2.414
	30 - 45	3.130	2.678	2.667
	45 - 60	2.850	2.424	2.326
	Significance of Age	0.042*	0.025*	0.112
GENDER	Male	3.009	2.870	2.671
	Female	2.789	2.592	2.274
	Significance of Gender	0.058	0.045*	0.001*
RELIGION	Hinduism	2.704	2.101	2.125
	Buddhism	2.780	2.887	2.460
	Muslim	3.184	2.702	2.581
	Christianity	3.233	2.919	2.750
	Other	2.524	1.583	1.750
	Significance of Religion	0.008*	0.000**	0.027*
SECTOR	Public	2.955	2.513	2.439
	Private	2.838	2.900	2.478
	Significance of Sector	0.312	0.005*	0.755
MONTHLY INCOME	0 - 49,000	2.427	2.405	2.246
	50,000 - 99,000	2.589	2.663	2.231
	100,000 - 149,000	2.911	2.602	2.361
	150,000 - 199,000	3.109	2.776	2.586
	200,000 & Above	3.193	3.185	3.059
	Significance of Monthly Income	0.015*	0.048*	0.121

Note. Results were computed using alpha = 0.05 (95% Level of Confidence)

*p < 0.05,

**p < 0.001