CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

Opinions have caused more ills than the plague or earthquakes on this little globe of ours—Voltaire.

The major objectives, as proposed in Chapter III, were generally supported. The present thesis centers on a conceptualisation and subsequent estimation of CC orientation among the consumers. The thesis has been successful in formalisation of a general definition and conceptualisation of CC. The researcher has made an endeavour in formulating a structured definition of the construct and designing a necessary measurement system that captures the internal nature of the construct.

The scale was developed following some standard psychometric procedures and was validated using standardised scales that reflect closely related constructs. Using this scale, it has been made possible to explore the nature of this construct, by manipulating other related psychological variables. The present thesis has explored relationship of CC with some major measurable personality-related characteristics. As a consequence, some evidences could be found in favour of the initial conjecture that CC is not a compensatory consumption activity.

7.1 Major Findings, Observations & Propositions

In the present thesis a general framework of CC along with its premises have been proposed following an integrative social psychology approach to reveal the nuances of specialised consumption behaviour. Based on this framework the phenomenon of Conspicuous Consumption has been conceptualised and propositions being investigated. The researcher has been able to forward a structured definition of this construct which was missing in the literature. We see this construct as a consumer's deliberate expression of his motivation to distinguish himself through consumption of products symbolic of scarce social resources. This approach has successfully connected the diverse theoretical
models to propose that visible, distinctive consumption is innate in human beings. This behaviour reflects stronger self-concept and self-esteem. This approach signifies a major deviation from the standard understanding and the established tendency to categorise this form of consumption as 'exceptional'. In the few paragraphs below the other main findings of the present work are summarised:

1. **Validation of the CC Scale**: Following the proposed definition an 11-item, 6-point Likert-type, Conspicuous Consumption scale has been designed. The development stages followed a series of refinements as per standard psychometric procedure. The scale exhibits significant levels of robustness in terms of both reliability and validity. On the reliability side, all the standard measures of reliability were measures used to verify the internal structure of the scale. Tested with four different samples of respondent the standard Cronbach Alpha ranges from .855-.824. The thesis has used the responses of over 400 respondents drawn from diverse spheres—that include PG/UG level students as well as the highly heterogeneous general consumers. The Test-Retest reliability also yielded satisfactory results. The response distribution roughly conformed to the properties of linearity, additivity, discrimination, etc. showing a reasonably robust internal character of the scale. The factor structure of the scale behaved according to theoretically hypothesised expectation. The scale can be divided along two dimensions——A. “Wealth Related Conspicuous Consumption” having 7-items and B. “Cultural Capital Related Conspicuous Consumption” having 4-items. On the validity side, the property of the scale was found to be equally promising——being revealed via a series 6 tests. It related well similar measures and showed a strong convergent validity and was also found to be uncorrelated with others to exhibit good discriminant validity.
Understanding Conspicuous Consumption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Structure</th>
<th>Primary Objects of Consumption</th>
<th>Drivers of Behaviour</th>
<th>Consumers</th>
<th>Principal Behaviour Dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Precapitalist-Feudal</td>
<td>Slaves, Women, Food</td>
<td>Military and Political Powers</td>
<td>Nobility</td>
<td>Pure Ostentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern-Capitalist</td>
<td>Very Expensive Products e.g. Diamonds</td>
<td>Social Power and Status</td>
<td>Nobility and Upper-middle Class</td>
<td>Ostentation and Signaling and Uniqueness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Modern</td>
<td>Image and Experience</td>
<td>Self-expression and Self-Image</td>
<td>Middle-class and the ”Masses”</td>
<td>Uniqueness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7-8: A Structural Analysis of Evolving Nuances of Conspicuous Consumption Behaviour

(Adopted from Chaudhuri et al. 2006)

2. **Study of the Antecedents**: This is another important area of contribution of the present thesis. Using standard measures of various psychological measurements the researcher could find support to the primary conjecture that CC, is not compensatory in nature—the consumers don’t engage in this form of consumption to compensate for their perceived levels of psychological incompleteness e.g. an unsuccessful MBA student using expensive pieces dress accessories reflecting the ‘looks’ of a more successful executive. The examined positive relationship of the CC construct with self-esteem and self-concept clarity proves our hypothesis. In the similar vein, the researcher could also establish (among other related findings) the existence of
• A positive relationship between CC and materialism
• A positive relationship between CC and consumer innovativeness.
• A positive relationship between CC and the Need for Achievement

Thus possibly there will be no more need to treat CC either as exceptional or ‘guilt’ laden. Other positive relations with consumer innovativeness, nACH, and Materialism score points in the favour CC to establish that an individual’s visible consumption is not a result of his insecurity, but of ability and confidence.

Incidentally, this set of findings may also open up a new research vista vis-à-vis the relatively more established school of consumer research (read American) findings that materialism is manifestation of weak self-esteem (Mick 1996) —— it should be borne in mind that India with its new found affluence is offering its middle class consumers a new avenue to express themselves ——— the object of self-identification has changed, say, from self-sacrifice to physical items. This may be seen as a symptom of a widespread Post-Modern Crisis at a global scale, but it would be a mistake to identify the same as a universal ‘meltdown phenomenon’ in moral fabric and behavioural traits. The Indian middle class has always stood for the flag-bearers of highest standard of merit, capabilities and professionalism. A strong sense of self-esteem can be considered an integral part of the existence of this section of the Indian populace.

3. Study of Marketing Consequences: Taken away from the theoretical realm, the new CC measure was used to predict specific product choices of the consumers. In two different studies, discriminant choices were identified in case of a. Mobile phones, b. Home furnishing. The studies reveal that the consumers do exhibit even apparently the mundane items of consumption and they take pride in exhibiting their financial capabilities or their taste.
In the later case, the consumers show involvement with the ‘taste’ of their product choices which are reflected in the design of the items chosen. Even by using a cheaper version they can easily attract the attention of others, by communicating their innovativeness and intellectual prowess. This has been lately realised by the marketers who, for example in mobile phones, have started to attach more importance to the aesthetics rather than features—in this context, the latest continuing advertisement of Nokia N Series needs special mention. Here the tag line announces “True Style Never Shouts”. This is a reminder of the changing pattern of consumer preferences and reflects the realistic findings and the fundamentally strong theoretical assertions of the present thesis.

4. Contribution to the Literature: The dissertation has ventured into an area where proper explanation and operationalisation have long been missing. Going beyond the realm of indirect conceptualisation, anecdotal treatment, the present work has tried to evolve a comprehensive, integrative approach to understanding this important consumption behaviour paradigm.

The thesis has tested the age-old Veblenian theory and has been somewhat successful in extending the same to incorporate new dimensions to suite the changing times. This can be considered significant addition even from the point of view of the Economics literature. This work while created for marketing and consumer behaviour does have some basis on and may have some answer to the questions in the Economics area. Changing paradigms of CC, with importance shifting largely from flagrant exhibitionism to finer tastes, it is important to understand who goes for CC and in what form. The scale’s bi-dimensional nature successfully does this and aid in understanding contemporary Indian consumer psyche.

This brings us to another of the significant contribution of the present work. The largest body of marketing academics exists in the US and we blindly follow the same to take decisions even in our country. Some American academicians tend to
insist on accepting their results to be universal and reflective of a ‘true’ global picture. This could be considered as indeed a dangerous practice in the discipline like marketing and consumer behaviour. The present thesis, within its limited capacity, has tried to analyse an important consumer behaviour controller in the Indian setting—the innate nature of the Indian culture, deserves a special attention from the consumer researchers. The case of the ‘material induced happiness’ can be cited here to lend some support to this assertion. The research results of the legendary scholar-duo Ger and Belk (1996, p. 63) show that in Romania and Turkey, consumers “see materialism as an empowering and self-enhancing expression of control and freedom” —a sure signature of the new found confidence and happiness. This is completely opposite to the US finding (Mick 1996).

Replication of even the standard studies can be conducted to verify as well as to extend the present knowledge base. Any researcher working on the contemporary Indian consumer behaviour faces immense problems in terms of logistics support but paucity of relevant literature comes up as insurmountable.

Thus, the theory and the scale, notwithstanding its significant limitations, aims at fill up some gap in the literature that has so long suffered from inadequate theoretical underpinnings and predictability.

5. Marketing Implications: The benefit of CC as proposed here is that it allows the manager to examine this construct at an individual level. By this, the manager can examine the interaction between CC and various marketing activities. The managers must understand that in order to maintain and deliver the meanings of conspicuousness, the brand management process must incorporate image of exclusiveness and elements of aesthetics. Although product designers intuitively will feel how to engender a certain impression, but research into the influence of specific appearance elements on the perception of certain kinds of product value may help them in this. However, the intuition of the
designer remains essential, as the effect of combining separate characteristics into a whole cannot be predicted. The influence of appearance characteristics on the perception of utilitarian aspects, such as quality, ease of use, and functionality, probably will be similar over product categories, persons, and countries. However, there will be more difference between consumers in aesthetic and symbolic perception, since such matters of taste and experience are more subjective. Because there are cultural, social, and personal influences on design taste (Bloch 1995), it is important to use the correct target group in such a test. This is where the findings of the present research can be of significant assistance to a practicing manager. One can understand the aesthetic preferences of the target consumer based on his CC-orientation, thereby giving the brand a head-start in the fiercely competitive market (See Ex. 2 & Ex. 6).

Today the consumers are more conscious about the design and the looks of the product along with the functional benefits. It is the aesthetics, which creates the competitive advantage of the present day offerings and deliver value. Aligning the product offerings with the aspirations and expectations of the middle class is what needed today (See Ex. 4). Simply creating more expensive items, may not necessarily attract the new smart middle class consumers. The instrument designed can also be used to psycho graphically segment the market in terms of differing levels of CC orientation enabling better marketing focus and efficiency.

This essentially gives us an insight into the positioning strategies and matching marketing communication plans. Strong image building exercise, use of transformational positioning plank (Rossiter and Percy 2000) is suggested. The advertisement must reflect the elements of self pride, esteem, exclusivity, etc. (See Ex. 4 & Ex. 5)

7.2 Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations in this study that involve model specification,
methodology, characteristics of the data collection, characteristics of the sample, and measures. As for model specification, it is highly probable that a more fully articulated model would have affected the results. In particular, previous studies have shown that values and personality (e.g. Rokeach 1973; Kassarjian 1965; Belk 1987) are related to consumers' perception of the consumption phenomenon. Thus, many of the variables considered for the study, have multiple linkages and moderators which should have been controlled. However, time constraints precluded me from collecting these control variables. The study used measures which have been largely standardised in the context of the Western consumers and the society. As discussed previously, we have seen that often times a simple psychometric tool like reverse coding doesn't work properly in the Asian setting, let alone the instrument. The low reliability index that has been often noticed in the work is just an indicator of this phenomenon. But one had to continue with these measures because of the lack of suitable Indian alternatives.

Moreover, the usage of concepts and theories including those like Cultural capital may have limited the findings of the research, given the fact that the Indian society has its own peculiarities which could have been moderating these largely Western variables in a totally unpredictable fashion. Inspite of best efforts to incorporate the uniquely Indian or Bengali context, through usage of concepts, item design, and situations/context some deviations might be noted. This may be due to significant lack of relevant and substantive literature. In addition, the instruments used are all of Western origin and hence may have 'clouded' the desired (Indian) findings.

During the data collection a few limitations were faced. The researcher was constrained to collect independent instead of repeated observations (e.g. for test-retest reliability) from the respondents belonging to the 'general consumers'.

Usage of confirmatory factor analysis and MTMM are methodological
imperatives of contemporary psychometrics. As advanced software packages like LISREL, AMOS, SAS are ordinarily not available and the access right is restricted, adopting a contemporary research methodology using the same, was precluded thereby reducing the interpretability of the designed scale. Thus the scale validity methodology is somewhat dated and there is a room for further research.

As seen in Chapter V, the estimated true-variance of the scale measure was low, though was not unacceptable. The mean age of the general consumer respondents was on the higher side. However, using students, it has been tried to partially reflect the intentions of the younger generation. Again, the gender distribution was slightly lopsided in favour of males. Time constraint limited the quantity of control variables that could have been added in the survey instruments and the number of surveys administered.

India is generally considered to be having a 'high context' culture, where symbolism and communication are more subtle than what it is in the West. Moreover, existence of multiple caste system, religion, regional differences, and languages also need to be considered. The majority of respondents were Urban. Thus considering the diversity of the Indian society as a whole, the thesis has tapped a narrow band of samples. The sample collected could have been given more variability in the measures to obtain significant results. All these may contribute to limited generalisation of the results.

7.3 Future Research

In considering the opportunities for future research, this dissertation, while illustrating a promising start in determining and measuring who consumes conspicuously, offers many new research vistas.

One aspect of CC that needs to be explored is the relationship of lifestyle typologies with this construct. The role of CC over time needs to be explored.
with both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. Longitudinal studies may determine the particular cyclical nature consumers may have in the purchasing process. A study can also be conducted to understand changing patterns of CC-orientation along the lifespan of the consumers. To extend that branch of research further one may also consider including 'Cohort Analysis' technique to study the CC behaviour and the moderating effects of the socio-economic factors. The role of consumer values can be studied in terms of the CC-scores—what values are important for those who score higher on the scale. The CC-scores can also be seen in terms of its relationship with other psychological variables like felt-insecurity, inner-other-directedness, and vanity. The author proposes that the CC score will not be related to insecurity and consumers having higher CC-scores will also score higher on the inner-directedness construct. Further research is deemed necessary in terms of fine-tuning the proposed framework of CC (Ch.3) in terms of its generalisability and application. An urgent research requirement is also felt in the area of assessment of the factor structure of the scale using confirmatory factor analysis. Although the effect of hedonism has been touched upon in this work, but a further validation is required to consider its impact in the experiential-hedonic model of consumer behaviour (Hirschman and Holbrook 1983). Again the effect of the CC-orientation on the information processing could also be investigated—its relationship with consumer’s need for cognition, their motivation and ability for elaboration. However, the major area of research would be needed in the cross-cultural verification and validation of the scale. There is an immediate requirement of testing the instrument using a national sample to capture the complex dynamics of the Indian populace—representing multiple regional differences, economic stratification, linguistic and other related cultural variables.

7.4 Conclusion

The objective of the study was to illuminate such an aspect of consumer
behaviour, which, for long, has been subject to a rather myopic interpretation. No longer will it be necessary to associate CC with ‘guilt’ and consider it as a form of ‘Compensatory Consumption’, but to treat it as ‘normal’. Development of a new definition of CC, which was largely non-existent in the context of consumer behaviour literature, is another significant effort of the present thesis. Rather than considering the phenomenon as axiomatic or conjectural in nature, effort has been made, for the first time, to come up with a structured definition. Construction of a robust scale not only captures the consumers’ multidimensional view of the construct but also fills up the void created by the lack of a properly tested measurement system.

Moreover, attempt has been made to establish relationship of the CC orientation with a set of previously unconsidered psychological antecedents. Prior efforts were only ‘limited’ to macro aspects of economics and sociology. The study aimed at understanding the consumption pattern and identifying consumer disposition towards visible form of consumption. This gives a special instrument in the hands of the marketer to generate data for market segmentation and effectively communicate the brand values to the market.

But it must be understood that the consumer preferences are open to interpretation——the meanings created as well as ‘consumed’ by individuals who are rich in wealth or in intellectual abilities, are not only distinct but also multifaceted and ideographic rather than being unidimensional. The secret of comprehending the contemporary paradigm of Conspicuous Consumption lies in assessing the evolving meanings associated with the items of consumption. “Economic capital” does not easily translate into “Cultural capital.” The Indian middle class evaluate one’s success beyond intangible indicators, by educational attainment, career choice, taste (often expressed very vividly in the regular Matrimonial Columns) and can make even a mundane or an easily affordable product to express and exhibit their exclusive taste. By virtue of their ability to
use sophisticated, in-depth appreciation and appropriate communication these products are transformed into “taste-symbols” which, by design, remain distinct from ‘status-symbols’ (Chaudhuri & Mazumdar 2006). Specific instances of this typical taste-based consumption are seen in such practices where marginalised art-forms, artifacts, folk arts, or dress forms (e.g. using ‘Gamcha’ as a clothing material by celebrated Bangladeshi Fashion Designer Ms. Bibi Russell) are adopted as signs of exclusivity.

Still, as a reality check we see that the middle class regard the acquisition of material possessions is one of the strongest measures of success and achievement. Popular culture celebrates consumption and lure consumer with increasingly ambitious promises of good life. After long years of ‘deprivation’, new-found prosperity and the lure of a good life are drawing the Indian consumers towards materialism and increased level of consumption is bringing in happiness. We are witnessing the gradual rise of the consumer – boundary less, hedonic, simulation-loving and experience-seeking (Venkatesh et al. 1999).

For these consumers, the sense of self which was once created through expressions of simplicity and sacrifice, the classical views that epitomised self-actualisation and achievement are now getting transformed so as to absorb and incorporate the significance of objectification and visible consumption. As we browse through the media, the advertisements show us the possibilities of life and the new vistas that we can achieve— all ‘objectified’ in our possessions. The collection of the few print advertisements that the present researcher has showcased, is a testimony to what the Indians are looking for, and what are their capable of.

To put it in the words of Mason (1985) “......... ......in any free market economy

---

2 It is the traditional Indian towel made up of thin coarse cotton fabric. Usually sporting bright red-yellow-green colour, it often forms an important part of men’s clothing especially for those belonging to the economically weaker sections of the society.
conspicuous consumption will be seen ........ as an expression of consumer sovereignty” [italics added] (p. 7). That is what we may call the celebration of the true spirit of choice. Contemporary marketing practices propagate and preach the importance of offering choices to the consumers so that the best offers can be made to them; this not only bring in customer satisfaction but would also help enable the industry to achieve better resource utilisation and enhance a higher standard of living for the population, in general.