

# The Symbolic Meaning of Conspicuousness of Fashion Consumption in Ritual Image Communication on Instagram

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**Abstract** This study focused on the ritual expression of conspicuous fashion consumption on Instagram to understand conspicuous fashion in the media culture. As a research method, netnography and 1:1 in-depth interview was conducted. According to the results, participants expressed themselves through fashion consumption on Instagram, including the intention to show off their fashion taste and styling ability. This show-off was not only about a social status or economic affluence, but about the creative ability gained by oneself. This ability was about to find and select value from the products that were commonly seen around them rather than expensive or luxury brands, and to combine them creatively. It was focused on styling rather than fashion products, and on consumption experience rather than purchasing behavior. Styles have come to mean the individual's discriminatory self and the importance of its existence, and it explained that the self is being interpreted at an individual level rather than in a social structure. However, as the posting of fashion consumption was regarded as a representative conspicuous expression on Instagram, individuals carefully adjusted the image expression so that it would not be seen as excessive showing off to the extent allowed in the media users.

**Keywords** Conspicuousness, Conspicuous consumption, Fashion consumption, Symbolic interaction, Ritual image communication, Instagram

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## Introduction

The social media usage in Korea is 89%, which is about 1.7 times higher than the world average rate and the second highest globally (DMC Media, 2021). Social media is used as a major channel for communication and is becoming a major means of self-expression in online social relationships. With the popularity of social media based on visual-oriented content, simple image uploads have made it easier to express one's ideal self-image and manage impressions (Mehdizadeh, 2010; Pounders et al., 2016). People selectively expose themselves to make a good impression on others in self-expression, and sometimes do a conspicuous behavior by exaggerating the positive. The object of this conspicuousness often becomes wealth, and people create a positive

impression and gain relative superiority with buying expensive products and showing it off to others. In other words, through showing off consumption, their social needs are satisfied (Lewis & Moital, 2016).

As such, conspicuous consumption is a behavior of showing off wealth while being conscious of others, and it is a symbolic consumption behavior that expresses one's image in relation to wealth (Chaudhuri et al., 2011). Conspicuous consumption has become more triggered and prevalent and with the activation of social media, and the desire to express one's identity by displaying conspicuous consumption is increasing in the media (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Taylor & Strutton, 2016). By posting consumption of

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conspicuous products, social media users manage their impressions favorably, and come to build up their ideal self-image (Duan & Dholakia, 2017; Grace & Griffin, 2009; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2014; Taylor & Strutton, 2016).

Various previous studies have been conducted on conspicuous consumption in a virtual social environment, and most of them have identified how socioeconomic status is expressed through the consumption of luxury products (Dantas & Abreu, 2020; Krause et al., 2019; Taylor & Strutton, 2016). However, as the object of conspicuous consumption on social media has changed to more diverse consumer goods (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006; Duan & Dholakia, 2018), it needs to be understood in a more comprehensive scope, including intangible consumption experience. And, as consumption patterns tend to break down into individual infinite styles as the difference in consumption becomes a matter of self-awareness rather than social class (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007), the purpose of conspicuous consumption should be identified focusing on individuals more.

In this study, we investigate posts about fashion consumption displayed in Instagram to find out what kind of conspicuous products are found in the photos, how the intension to show off is usually expressed, and what they want to show off through them. Based on this, this study aims to understand the characteristics of conspicuous fashion consumption that is ritually expressed in current social media culture. Since fashion becomes a symbolic communication activity that exchanges its meaning (Kaiser, 1990), fashion consumption is performed based on complex meanings formed socially. Because the meaning of each fashion consumer product continuously changes according to social interaction, the object of conspicuousness and its meaning can be easily changed and its effect of showing off can be different. Thus, it will be important to reveal the meaning contained in it rather than identifying the conspicuous product itself. Therefore, focusing on the ritual expression behavior of show-off in image communication on Instagram, the object of show-off on fashion consumption will be widely understood and the meaning underlying it.

## Literature Background

### Conspicuousness of Consumption

The conspicuousness of consumption has been usually described with the term “conspicuous consumption”, where consumption is assumed to originate from the purpose of showing off one’s economic power or wealth to others. Veblen (1899), who first considered the concept of conspicuousness in relation to consumption on an academic level, defined conspicuous consumption as a behavior of spending on goods for the purpose of indicating wealth or status to others. He regarded it as an extravagance or waste to show others because it is consumed for the purpose of showing off their economic power or position to others rather than gaining utility through the use of goods. Although the concept of conspicuous consumption was systematized in modern meaning, it was still considered an exceptional and unreasonable consumption behavior resulting from social stimulation as a status-oriented display of wealth (Mason, 1981).

However, in postmodern society, as the division of social class has become ambiguous and individuals have played pluralistic roles in the opportunity of choice and the possibility of refining the identity of the self (Giddens, 1991), the interpretation of the conspicuousness of consumption is also changing. Since the meaning given to consumer goods is fluid, consumption activities become a creative and performing process, and individuals use them to construct the self that is maintained as a result of intentional and continuous efforts (McCracken, 1988). Since consumption patterns change in a way that lacks the symbolic functionality of social status, it is necessary to expand the research perspective on conspicuous consumption, along with consumer changes that have increased interest in expressing their identity and individuality through consumption (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006).

People with conspicuous consumption tend to get satisfaction from reactions of others, not just from the products they purchase (Mason, 1981). The motivation for possessing luxury brand goods, that are the most common object of showing off, is related to the desire of “to impress others” (Tsai, 2005). As consumption behavior becomes

complicated, this “impression” is not limited to economic power, but also expanded to subdivisions in more various dimensions. As luxury fashion products have become a medium for self-expression (Giovannini et al., 2015), more careful choices are needed because the self is explained differently depending on the image or meaning of the brand and product the object to show off is.

Along with the active use of social media, it has changed the landscape of traditional conspicuous consumption theory, because all kinds of consumption have the possibility of conspicuous consumption based on how individuals use the media (Widjajanta et al., 2018). According to a study on conspicuous consumption on Instagram in Korea, the purpose of conspicuous consumption expressed on it is close to raising one’s value by receiving attention from others rather than by displaying one’s wealth or status (Lee & Kim, 2020). Conspicuous consumption is no longer limited to material purchases because the media environment facilitates the display of empirical consumption, and the way of engaging in conspicuous consumption is being transformed by the media (Duan & Dholakia, 2018). The object of conspicuousness tends to be dematerialized, and it is defined by the recognition and interpretation of the users rather than its intrinsic characteristics. In particular, Instagram, which is useful for sharing vivid experiences through images, allows users to show more experiences than material goods for conspicuousness (Lee & Kim, 2020). Hence, the “unboxing” experiences can be a source of conspicuousness of consumption (Ilich & Hardey, 2018).

This study attempted to identify conspicuousness of fashion consumption on Instagram from an open perspective beyond the traditional viewpoint, focusing on the aspect of individual self-expression rather than the expression as a symbol of social status. Various prior studies on conspicuousness related to consumption on Instagram have explored the connection between media use and conspicuous consumption (Krause et al., 2019; Thoumrungroje, 2014; Wai & Osman, 2019; Widjajanta et al., 2018). However, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of what kind of fashion products is shown off on Instagram in addition to expensive brands, and why they can be the object of conspicuous consumption. This study examines what specifically they are

showing off to emphasize certain aspects of themselves through fashion consumption without limiting luxury products and, at how it satisfies their desire for conspicuousness.

## Symbolic Interaction in Fashion

Fashion is a symbolic production, and clothes can be an essential part of communication in social interaction (Kaiser, 1990). We exchange meanings through symbolic interactions in society through clothing as a medium. It is expressed with symbolic meanings shared in society at that time, rather than having a fixed meaning given objectively. Symbolic interaction explains how fashion and style change over time and why individuals negotiate a visual understanding of appearance (Kaiser et al., 1995).

In the field of fashion and clothing, symbolic interaction theory has been focused on the importance of dress and appearance in constructing identity of self (Kaiser, 1983; Pratt & Rafaeli 1997; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) highlighted that dress functioned as a means of communication in social interaction, and affects individuals to establish self-identities and locate them among others. Dress for appearance management, reveals a social position of wearer in social interaction, and the appearance expressed through clothing becomes an important element in communicating identity (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Kaiser et al. (1995) focused on individuals who continue to explore self-image through fashion in explaining fashion phenomena based on symbolic interaction theory, reflecting changes in consumption of late capitalism. They emphasized that symbolic interaction theory can explain how individuals negotiate visual understandings of appearance styles. Through a process of appearance management, individuals use clothing in the constant negotiation of who they are (Kaiser et al., 1991). Appearance is a mode of communication that brings to the surface and embodies meanings not easily expressed in words, and the meanings are negotiated in social interaction (Kaiser et al., 1995). They identified that being fashionable is deeply linked to the logic of symbolic exchanges associated with capitalism, and individuals strive to create a continuous self-image to

understand who they are in a complex and changing social context through an active manipulation of symbols. Kaiser et al. (1995) argued that the combined and interrelated effects of cultural ambivalence in the late capitalist market intensifies symbolic ambiguity in appearance styles and it led consumers engage in do-it-yourself esthetic practices to clarify contradictory cultural messages. Consumers are judging by interpreting the meaning of fluid symbolic meanings in the absence of absolute standards for which fashion should be followed and which style is appropriate. Moreover, ambivalence is amplified in a mixed and complex array of messages conveyed by a media-saturated culture, and ritual consumption behavior becomes more diverse as the symbolic meanings of consumption intensify in the development of media culture (Kaiser et al., 1995).

This study examines what fashion or style individuals are consuming and being showed off in current online media communication, and what symbolic meaning it has. In addition, it will be identified how individuals interpret themselves in the medium of fashion and style with the symbolic meaning in this society. Through this process, we will be able to understand how they interpret and emphasizing themselves in the medium of fashion and style with the symbolic meaning in this society.

### Ritual Image Communication on Instagram

All the communication has ritual elements, and individual stylized behavior can be explained through the concept of ritual (Rothenbuhler, 1998). Ritual is a concept derived from religious practice, but it can be a means of interpreting behaviors that occur repeatedly between individuals through social interaction. Goffman, who identified the self in terms of symbolic interaction, proposed the concept of “interaction rituals” to explain the rules of behaviors practiced by individuals. He asserted that trivial behaviors in daily life have a symbolic meaning in society, and the common rules are maintained as the way of behavior is regulated accordingly. Therefore, people control their behaviors in front of others, thinking about the meaning of their behaviors; these interactive behaviors are usually performed through ritual behaviors, such as impression management (Goffman, 1959, 1967). The socially formed ritual affects the

interactive behavior of individuals, hence, the manner of speaking and facial expressions naturally taken following the norms that must be observed in that situation, and this becomes a ritual behavioral exchange (Goffman, 1971). The rules of conduct of verbal or nonverbal expressions that individuals follow in face-to-face interactions emphasize the “ritual rules” embodied in manners (Goffman, 1967).

Researches on rituals have focused on social interaction phenomena occurring in non-face-to-face online situations as internet usage became common. Discussions on the interaction patterns of social media from an ethnographic perspective were followed but, as the use of various types of social media changes, the analysis of ritual communication exchanged in the media needs to be analyzed according to each social media. Because each social media has its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics, and shared conventions of communication are established in continuous interaction between platforms and users (Gibbs et al., 2015).

In particular, the linguistic use of images to effectively communicate individual thoughts or experiences has become more important in social media. As social media expands the image code-oriented culture, it is required to have visual literacy for smooth communication (Kress & Leeuwen, 2005). Messages sent in the form of photos or videos may contain more multiple meaning than those limited by text, and even the same image can be shared in different meanings depending on how it is delivered. Since images are not stricter than linguistic signs and connect different semantic scope, the vast images produced on social media require interpretation within a complex context (Oswald, 2012). Instagram, which emphasizes visual characteristics rather than text-oriented Facebook or Twitter, has further promoted image-oriented communication culture (Hand, 2017). Image communication on Instagram also takes place through ritualized expression behaviors. Instagram users can acquire the semantic exchange behavior of the ritual communication as experiencing numerous image expressions in there. Through this process, they can determine which behavior is appropriate to express themselves as images through interacting with others.

This study examines how images are expressed about

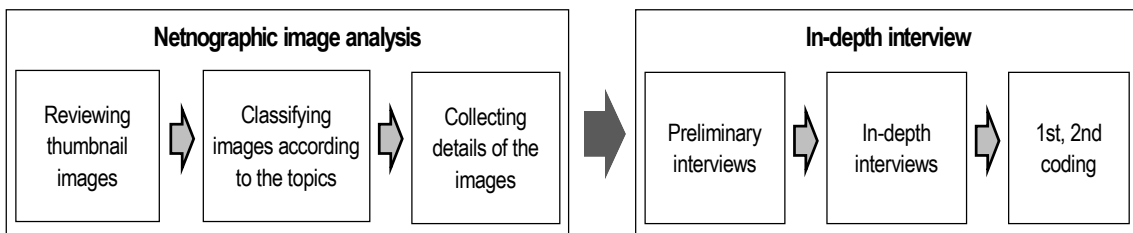


Figure 1. The flow of research

conspicuousness of fashion consumption on Instagram, and what ritual ways of image communication are followed. It will be figured out why these ritual expression behaviors are followed and what they mean. This study analyzes how the object of showing off can be expressed differently through online images and why such behaviors appear on Instagram. This will provide an opportunity to infer the meaning of conspicuous consumption and fashion formed in the current media culture by allowing us to understand what characteristics the conspicuousness of fashion consumption in the social media environment has unlike the real world.

## Method

This study conducted netnography and in-depth interviews with participants who were highly interested in fashion to analyze the symbolic meaning of conspicuousness of fashion consumption, focusing on ritual image expression analysis. After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection, all research procedures were conducted in compliance with the appropriate methods. Netnography is a qualitative research method used to analyze the psychology and behavior of online consumers, which means the combination of the internet and ethnography. It regards the behavior of internet consumers as a kind of cultural phenomenon and collects and analyzes data generated in online media by applying the ethnography used in anthropology (Kozinet, 1999). In this study, rather than focusing on interaction activities between users through netnography, the behaviors of users who control their expression of conspicuousness of fashion consumption as being conscious of their followers' reactions on Instagram

[Topic 1] Place 1 : Fitting Room		[Topic 1] Place 1 : Fitting Room	
Uploaded Date	2017. 10. 28	Uploaded Date	2018. 03. 15
Contents of the image	Fitting room, mirror	Contents of the image	Fitting room, mirror, covered face
Contents of the text		Contents of the text	PLATS PLEASE ISSEY MIYAKE (Location tag)
Uploaded Date	2018. 09. 15	Uploaded Date	2018. 07. 12
Contents of the image	Fitting room, mirror, pose	Contents of the image	Fitting room, mirror, covered face, pose
Contents of the text	COO (Location Tag)	Contents of the text	-

Figure 2. Thumbnail-type data arrangement

was analyzed.

The flow of research is as follows (Figure 1). As the first step of data collection, all posts of each research participant were downsized to a thumbnail-type image and arranged as shown in Figure 2. These bundles of images for each participant were reviewed chronologically, to find the topics that appeared repeatedly in participants' images in accordance with the methodology of ethnography. The images were selectively collected and grouped according to the topics found repeatedly in each category of materials, people, places, and situations (Ferraro & Briody, 2016; Spradley, 1980), and specific photographing or editing effects were also added as topics. These topics became certain fashion brands (e.g. ZARA, Nike, Celine etc.) or certain types of shoes and accessories (e.g. inherited shoes and bags, luxury sneakers), textile patterns (e.g. checks, stripes etc.), people (e.g. parents, partners, pet), certain types of places (e.g. fitting rooms, public toilets, cafes, and travel

areas), certain poses, flashed photography techniques and a closed-up frame of the same size. The interviews were conducted by the researcher, and two other qualitative researchers majoring in clothing participated in the grouping by topics. Two review processes were conducted by these three researchers for the coding results of the interviews. The image used in the analysis were posts from the last 5 years, and the total number was 983, and 9 to 17 topics were collected for each participant, with 4 to 8 images classified for each topic. The images rearranged according to the topics

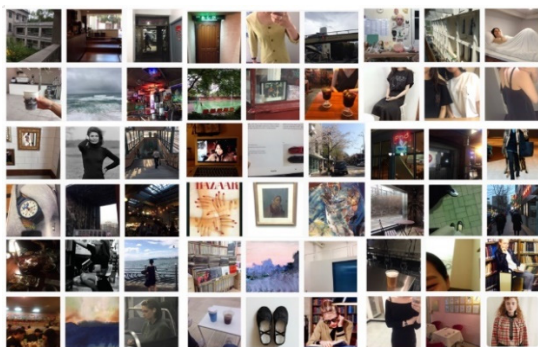


Figure 3. Data grouping by the topics

were documented as shown in Figure 3, which included the posting dates, the contents of the images and the texts of caption, hashtag, location and person tag, comment, and like. In order to understand the flow of forming or changing participants’ perceptions and to compare images uploaded at different period in the same topic, this data included not only recently posted images but also past posts.

As the second step, 1:1 in-depth interview was conducted based on the image analysis of the previous step. The questionnaire was developed based on the image analysis of the previous step. The questionnaire consisted of the following contents: The place and time of the images in each topic were taken, fashion products or consumption experiences in them, how and why they were taken and edited, text and tag contents and the reasons of adding them, what they were proud of in them, whether comments and ‘likes’ were checked, and satisfaction with them. And the questions included what images of the same topic that are repeatedly posted mean to participants and why they are posted on Instagram. The questions also included what images of the same topic that are repeatedly posted mean to participants and why they are posted on Instagram. The questionnaire was revised and supplemented through two

Table 1. Details of participants

No.	ID	Gender	Age	Occupation	Period of use (year)	Account type	Number of grouped topics	Number of images used
1	A	F	34	Researcher	7	Private	10	42
2	B	F	32	Editor	4.5	Open	15	73
3	C	F	33	freelancer	5	Open	11	46
4	D	F	30	Researcher	5	Private	10	40
5	E	F	36	Merchandiser	3.5	Private	9	37
6	F	M	29	Student	3	Open	12	61
7	G	F	30	Researcher	4	Open	16	67
8	H	F	39	Researcher	7.5	Open	9	47
9	I	F	36	designer	5	Private	17	78
10	J	F	30	Designer	5	Private	15	61
11	K	F	29	designer	5	Private	9	43
12	L	F	29	Designer	4	Open	10	40
13	M	F	28	researcher	3.5	Private	10	41
14	N	F	29	Curator	6.5	Private	9	36
15	O	F	28	designer	5	Private	9	38
16	P	M	29	Designer	4	Open	14	55
17	Q	F	30	freelancer	3	Private	9	37
18	R	M	37	Designer	5	Open	9	39
19	S	F	28	Designer	5	Private	13	56
20	T	M	23	Student	6.5	Open	11	46



preliminary interviews. The interviews were conducted semi-structured, and extra questions were added according to the participants' responses. The interview was conducted at the convenient places near the participants' office, and it took 1 hour or up to 2 and half hours depending on the participants. In analyzing the interview data, the first coding was conducted by repetitively reading each response and grouping meaningful concepts. In this process, it was focused on what aspects the participants were showing off in their image of fashion or style, and what aspect they were taking repeated care of expressing it as an image on Instagram. The second coding involved the grouping of overlapping or similar concepts, and the third coding was to integrate related topics by comparing each coding data. The result of coding was derived through review and discussion of two professional researchers.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) people who are highly interested in fashion, such as fashion related occupations or researchers and student majoring in fashion (Table 1). This study selected 20 participants in their 20s and 30s, because people in this age had the highest social media usage rate in Korea (DMC Media, 2021). The participants accessed Instagram more than once a day to read fashion-related posts, and

uploaded a post on fashion topics at least once a week. All participants were non-commercial users who had used Instagram for more than three years. In this study, a qualitative research method with a small number of subjects was conducted to understand the appropriate expression of conspicuousness accepted in Instagram and to deeply grasp the intention and content of conspicuousness indirectly expressed in images and texts.

## The Symbolic Meaning of Conspicuousness of Fashion Consumption in Ritual Image Expressions

### Places to Show Fashion Taste and Coordinating Skills: Fitting Rooms

The participants shared various photos taken in a fitting room, a concealed space where they changed clothes on Instagram (Figure 4). Most of them took pictures of themselves in front of a mirror while wearing the clothes sold in the stores. The participants might not be proud of the fact that they were not purchased but just tried on. But what they



Figure 4. Images taken in fitting rooms (Participants' faces are covered to protect their privacy)

wanted to show off was not the economic power to buy the clothes, but their ability to find and sort out the special design from a number of products, and to properly combine them. Many of the products shown in the postings of fitting rooms belonged to inexpensive SPA (Specialty Store Retailers of Private Label Apparel) brands (Figure 4a), and the brand names were often marked in hashtags. But rather, it provided an opportunity to more effectively flaunt their ability to identify unique designs and coordinate them appropriately among products that anyone could easily buy.

In these posts, fashion consumption took the form of wearing experience rather than purchasing products. The image did not express the wearers who purchased the products, but revealed the moment of using fitting rooms situation that participants were trying on the products. Most products exposed in the images were not actually purchased, and participants even mentioned that if they left a picture of wearing them, the desire or need to buy them would disappear. The experience of wearing fashion items and taking a photo of such experience fulfilled the desire of conspicuousness on Instagram without a need to buy or own them. When a product was expensive or was not a suitable design for daily wear, they took photos and posted on Instagram to show their sophisticated taste only (Figure 4b). The participants uploaded satisfactory photos on Instagram because they showed their outstanding fashion style or taste, and they were satisfied with showing them to many people even if they did not check the comments or 'likes' of the posts.

*I didn't buy this. I only took pictures. I thought, "The color is pretty. I'd just take a picture and go.... I wanted to show my color sense. (Participant A)*

*If I take a picture like this, I do not want to buy it. Because I tried. ... 'Cause I showed like this (on Instagram) ... I can't usually wear this and. (Participant B)*

*In my case, I do not think I bought much of what I had taken a photo of at the store... Can't upload it even if I buy it ... It's not good to show the same clothes again (on Instagram). (Participant C).*

According to the following interviews, Fitting rooms were an independent and enclosed space used by customers alone, allowing participants to take pictures without caring about other people's eyes. The participants were reluctant to show people that they were taking pictures of themselves because most of them had a negative view of selfie behavior. Therefore, a fitting room as a hidden space was useful for freely taking pictures of themselves in clothes. The reason they had a negative attitude toward selfies was because they thought that such images were perceived as showing off their appearance with excessive narcissism, and this gave others a repulsion. Participants were conscious of managing their faces and facial expressions in the picture so that they could show off their choice of design and styled way without looking like selfies boasting their appearance.

*I don't really take selfies. It's not that good to see someone do it. It reminds me that she's gonna use filters and upload it with "#fashionstagram" When I see that, I think that is what the Instagram is. (Participant D)*

*There's no one here. I do not take selfies if there's someone... I took a selfie when I wanna show my whole style... There's something burdensome. Instagram is a conspicuous social media, and the selfie is thought to be more conspicuous. (Participant B)*

## Imagifications of Fashion Styles Using the Context of Space: Travel Places

The outfits of the study participants shown in the posts on Instagram were exchanged as mixed images with the place where they were wearing them or the surrounding background (Figure 5). In the images, their outfits were interpreted by reflecting the meaning of the space depending on what background they were placed on. The pictures they took at special places, such as travel places, had effect of being dramatically expressed in a style as the outfits they were wearing harmonized with the atmosphere of the space. They were tried to show the overall style in harmony with the surrounding place or situation rather than highlighting any specific item, and their pose or movement were also carefully planned to be express the style naturally in the images



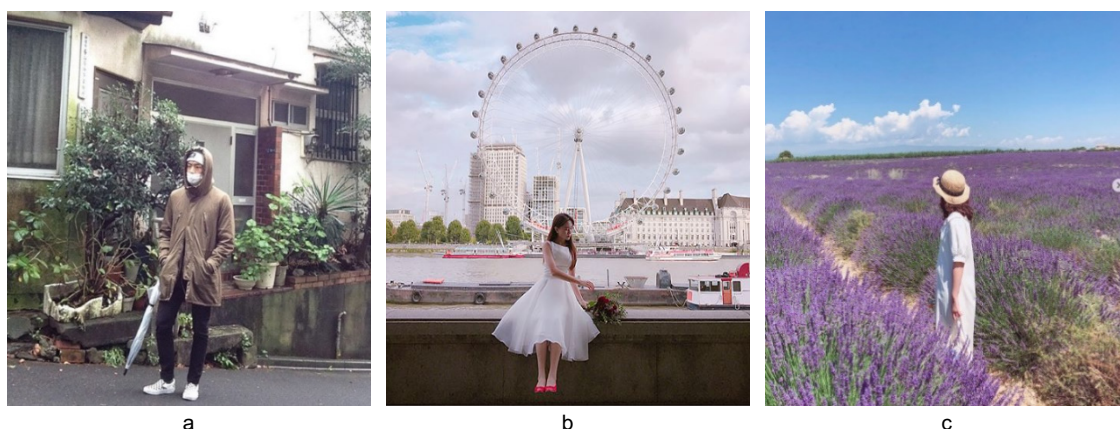


Figure 5. Contextual expressions of situations and spaces

(Figure 5a). In order to show off one's style on Instagram, how they were dressed were important, but the ability to sensibly express it through images has become more important.

*I uploaded this moment of fall, but I expected, "I styled these socks and these. Please look at this (Figure. 4)." (Participant E)*

*I wore this outfit, and I suddenly took a picture with this building because it matched well with my clothes. When I was standing in this space, my style looked better. (Participant F)*

Instagram users were needed to know how the content of the image should be visually expressed to convey their meaning effectively in image communication on the media. It was important how the participants dressed in, but also how the outfit was seen in the picture and in what image or meaning it was conveyed to people. Therefore, they had to know what meaning of the background of their outfits in the picture was interpreted, and paid attention to whether the clothes fit in with its concept. They naturally learned these image expression ways as following various fashion brands, magazines, and fashion influencers who were uploading sensually imagificated fashion every day.

The research participants planned their outfits in advance with the intention of taking pictures and posting

them on Instagram when traveling or meeting friends. They prepared clothes with a concept that fitted the mood of the visiting space, imagining the images to be photographed. They searched images of travel destinations or cafés where they were supposed to visit, and then collected fashion images in that mood on Instagram for reference to their outfits. Because this was prepared according to the image of the place based mainly on visual impressions or imaginary meanings, such planning led to them wearing a style that was not suitable for the actual situation at times. For example, they had to endure the inconvenience of dresses and high heels to take pictures while traveling (Figure 5c).

*When I meet my friends, we choose a place and search for images on Instagram. I go out wearing clothes that match them. 'Cause we will take pictures. (Participant G)*

*I plan it a lot when I travel. I set the daily coordination according to schedule... I think I am imagining my image there and planning what I'm going to wear for it. (Participant B)*

*I wanted to wear something like that of "Anne of Green Gables". This was a lavender field, matching its image (Figure 5b). (Participant H)*

The participants especially emphasized the importance of color to express their fashion styles in sensuous images on



Figure 6. Color expressions with components in the frames

Instagram (Figure 6). They even adjusted the saturation and brightness of all the uploaded photos to uniform the color mood across the overall feeds, including posts related to clothing. They had a negative opinion of the filtering behavior of photos to artificially beautify, but this filtering of color was regarded as a creative activity that boasted one's esthetic sense. They combined the colors of all the items that made up their outfits to express the color nuance effectively, and organized them in a frame so that the outfits were harmonized with the color mood of the background (Figure 6a). The contents of the frame were constructed in consideration of the colors of the surrounding objects and spaces, and the objects and clothing items in it were arranged in a frame according to the colors. These images with sensuous color combination had the effect of highlighting their fashion styling sense, emphasizing their high aesthetic sense.

*I think it is effectively expressed when my outfit matches well with this. This cup, bracelet, lace details, and table here... I took this white on purpose, in contrast to black (Figure 6b). (Participant 1)*

### Reinforcement of Meaning by Relationships: Inherited Clothes

Instagram users often describe their identities through revealing the relationships with people around them. The

photos with friends, lovers, family, or co-workers can explain in detail who they are. Although they were not found in the primary image analysis of this study, some repeated elements of posts that appeared during the interview included clothes and accessories handed down by parents (Figure 7). The clothes inherited from their mothers were the only clothes that had a special scarcity value. The participants' eyes and unique tastes to discover and distinguish this value became a pride. Also, their ability to style old clothes and bags according to recent trends, by coordinating them with current items, was able to be recognized. As an object of conspicuousness of fashion consumption, it could have been inherited clothes from the past. The meaning and value of it has been strengthened not only because of its scarcity, but also because it was inherited from a specific person related them, which strengthened the meaning and value of the clothes as producing stories.

These posts below stated that the fashion items in the photos were inherited from their parents through detailed text expressions of captions or hashtags, stating, among others, "Treasure hunt from my mom's closet" and "Father's shoes." The clothes inherited from their parents were similar to vintage clothes in that they could not be bought now, but the items' meaning had been expanded in relation to sharers' identity by narrating that these were owned by their parents. The image that shows off the ability of finding new values from their parents' old-fashioned items and applying them at

present, received high reviews and positive responses from their followers, giving them greater satisfaction.

*This skirt (Figure 7a) was also worn by my mother. My mother gave me this, and this is my favorite sneaker. The process of combining these is important. (Participant B)*

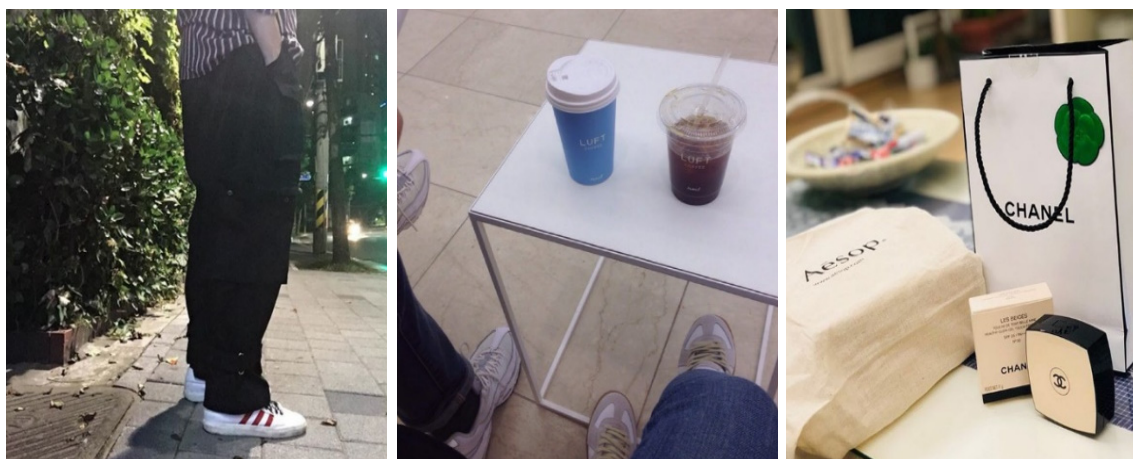
*This was very old (Figure 7c). There are many designs that I cannot buy these days... It's like, "My*

*mom is this cool. Doesn't it suit me too?" My friends ask me right away if I say "I stole it from my mom's closet" than when I just say "I bought this." (Participant J)*

Some participants directly exposed their parents' photos in the post, specifically stating their fashion tastes and styles by showing their outfit and clothing. Through these posts, they flaunted their parents' high sense of fashion, and also



Figure 7. Fashion items handed down by participants' parents. (Participants' faces are covered to protect their privacy.)



a. Indirect expressions of fashion items

b. Direct expression of a gift

Figure 8. Direct and indirect expressions of conspicuous consumption

included an indirect conspicuousness of their own fashion sense, which was affected by their parents. In addition, some changed their tastes in accordance with the praises of many people when sharing fashion photos on Instagram. In this case, participants confidently and actively reflected themselves in these styles because of the positive reactions of their followers.

*I did not like velvet before, but I heard that it looks good on me while wearing my mom's. Since then, I've thought velvet is a high-quality material and I've wanted to wear it. I think I've worn it more often, 'cause I heard it is pretty. (Participant J)*

### Keeping Distance from Show-off: 'Boring Daily Life' and 'Coffee Time'

Directly flaunting posts on new clothes, bags, and shoes were not really observed among the research participants, although they were highly interested in fashion and its consumption. During the interview below, participants said that they were not completely free to express their desire to show off. This was because there was a general negative perception of posting of conspicuous consumption on social media, especially fashion consumption, which was considered a representative symbol of conspicuousness. Although social media is basically a space for conspicuousness for self-expression, participants were passive especially about fashion consumption because it could be easily blamed from others. They posted images on Instagram with the intention of showing off their new clothes or changed fashion styles, but had a contradictory attitude that they did not want people to know such intentions (Figure 8a). Meanwhile, flaunting the consumption of home goods, travel experiences, and restaurant meals, which are not fashion consumption, was considered acceptable conspicuousness.

*I bought these pants and asked my friend to take a picture of me (Figure 7a). This is also a thing to get attention after all, but I think I have my own standards somewhere between showing off too much and not doing it. It's difficult. (Participant F)*

*People think it is flaunting when posting about fashion, so posting brands can be funny. That is why I do not post more about fashion. I change my style often depending on the trend, but I do not post it. I'd rather post some home items... Posting what I have experienced is also a show-off, but it can be easily accepted. (Participant C)*

*Expensive clothes seem to show-off money, even if I buy them, but I think this kind of cosmetics or perfume is okay. It is not cheaper than clothes, but it is okay (Figure 7b). (Participant H)*

In a way of image expressions of conspicuousness about fashion, participants adjusted the exposure or position of fashion items in the photos so as not to highlight them, to avoid followers' blame. The fashion items did not occupy a large proportion or the center position in the entire image and the position was also intended to distract their followers' attention toward surrounding objects or spaces to inform them that there was no intention to show off. Many posted images with the intention of conspicuousness were not clearly distinguished in the researcher's primary analysis because of those ways of image expression. However, during the interview process, it was found that the intention of showing off was hidden by this expression. For example, one of the specific ways of expressing the intention of showing off, especially the brand name of the fashion product should not be exposed in images or text. However, it was not difficult for viewers to infer because they exposed small clues in the image that could suggest the brand. The reason why they avoided particularly exposing the brand name was, because the behavior of showing it directly had been blamed a lot on Instagram. Even if the viewers noticed their hidden intention to show off, this way of image expression was recognized as a manner within the allowable on the media.

*I am actually flaunting these shoes. And they know that. Coffee is a tool (Figure 8a) ... It's a bit too much, if you shoot too openly. (Participant K)*

*There are styles that look obvious, like brands... I do not upload like them because it seems like too showing off about them. I do care about my clothes a*

*lot, but I cannot upload them on Instagram. (Participant L)*

*It is a bit burdensome to take photos wearing such brands. Instead of flaunting it openly, I turn it around or hide it. Showing not the Chanel logo but the tweed that looks like Chanel. They may know that it is a show-off. (Participant M)*

On Instagram, an image-oriented social media, the expression of text tends to be passive. The use of text-type captions or tags was not active in the posts analyzed in this study, and some participants even rarely used text-related functionality. The limited use of text made it difficult for followers to interpret the exact contents of the image without specific information, and to clearly comprehend participants' intention. The use of captions or hashtags was especially avoided intentionally in the expression of fashion items, or they often wrote the completely unrelated contents of text like the interview below.

*However, it is not good to talk about it. Everyone knows, even if I do not tell them. I even do not like to tag the brand. I do not want to be like that. (Participant K)*

*I want to show off about something like a wallet on Instagram, but just write "Boring daily life" or "Coffee Time." It's a kind of indirect expression... But I uploaded the gift I received to make the brand stand out... (Participant H)*

In addition, when a fashion item was a gift, they behaved exceptionally, expressing it directly in the center of the image and revealing the brand name in both image and text. Although it was the same conspicuous expression related with fashion consumption, but gifts given or received were allowed to post without the burden of being blamed. Also, expensive luxury perfumes or cosmetics were free to show off.

### Limitations on Expression of Physical Appearance: Photos without a Face

In this study, participants indicated their great discomfort

with the "selfie" behavior because the negative view about it stemming from excessive narcissism and artificial self-expression. Therefore, it was considered more conspicuous when the image of fashion consumption was expressed in a selfie manner, which was regarded as having the intention of flaunting both fashion items and physical appearance. The image exposed a face was regarded as a representative selfie expression; therefore, photos of one's styles were expressed by covering their face or showing their back (Figure 9a). In addition, the selfie photos taken inside toilets, elevators, and fitting rooms, which were hidden places to avoid people's eyes, were thought as a typical narcissistic expression.

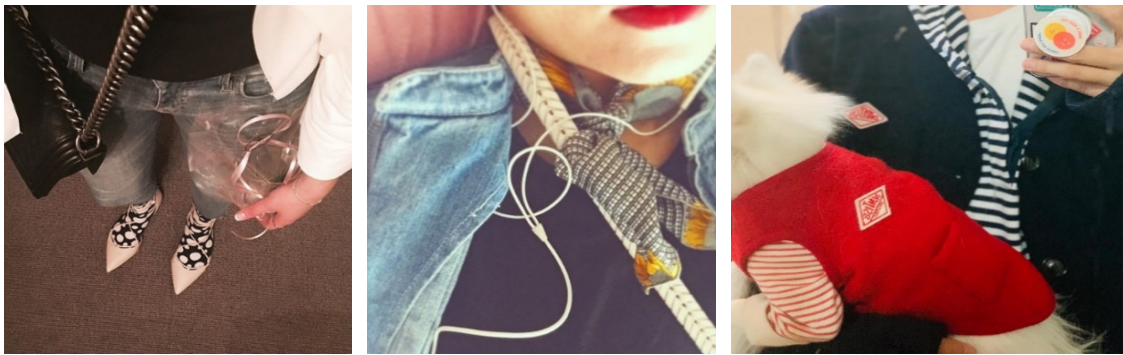
*I do not really like myself. I think it looks too narcissistic... There are a lot of people like that on Instagram. Most are clothes sellers, or who want to be an influencer. But I do not want to look like that, so I do not do it. (Participant L)*

*If there is no one, I take pictures if I really like my look today. But if I upload it, they think that I went to the toilet and took a photo 'cause I loved what I am wearing. It especially looks like that when taken in the toilet. (Participant M)*

When the object in a conspicuous fashion image is not the item itself but the fashion sense or styling ability, the effective way to show off their outfit is taking a picture of themselves wearing it, which makes participants feel burdened by physical exposure. Participants wanted to show off their fashion sense or styling ability to followers, but there were these restrictions because it had to be expressed as an image of wearing them on Instagram. They feared that viewers would focus on their bodies in the posted images, and compare them with fashion models and influencers those are heavily exposed on Instagram. Therefore, they expressed their outfits moderately from a view down or an enlarged image to effectively show their styling without exposing their physical appearance as much as possible (Figure 9a).

*If I wanna take a picture of my clothes, I have to take a picture of me. No matter how I edit it, my figure comes out. It is good to show my taste but not my*





a. Limited expression of physical appearance

b. a example of a representative in an image

Figure 9. Avoidance of physical expression

*appearance. I am not as good as people who sell clothes here. Then I have to upload what I bought, but it can only be a show-off of buying it. (Participant H)*

*The first time I took my outfit was like this picture of my feet. This was least burdensome. It is a bit embarrassing to take a full shot. 'Cause I am not the model. There is no way unless someone takes it, except for selfies. (Participant B)*

In order to avoid the burden of physical exposure, some participants showed off their fashion sense through representatives, such as pets, spouses, and children (Figure 9b). Because these representatives were dressed with the participant's taste, they were able to show off their fashion sense and styling ability as well as their purchased items through them, as avoiding the blame toward their body appearance or narcissism.

*My dog is my miniature. My taste is shown because the clothes she wears were chosen by me. I bought this vest because it looks very similar to my jacket (Figure 9b). I do not feel pressured by my dog or husband. (Participant H)*

## Conclusions and Implications

This study attempted to grasp the symbolic meaning by investigating individual's conspicuous expression behaviors on fashion consumption on Instagram. Prior studies on conspicuousness of fashion consumption in online environments have mostly focused on luxury fashion products, confining their purpose to the display of wealth or status (Krause et al., 2019; Taylor & Strutton, 2016). However, as the function of consumption as a symbol of social status has been reduced, consumers are trying to express their identity and individuality through it (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006), and the appearance expressed through clothing is becoming an important element in communicating identity (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). This study aimed to fill this research gap without limiting the object and purpose of conspicuousness of fashion consumption with this change in fashion and consumer culture. This study tried to understand how it could be an object of conspicuousness even if it was not an expensive fashion product, and how it could be effectively showed off when expressed in an image. And this study figured out what was appropriate behavior when showing off fashion consumption on Instagram and how the culture of conspicuousness of fashion style or taste was formed in the social space of the media.

In this research, the participants were not like with people who used Instagram for commercial purposes or hoped to be influencers, but they used Instagram to show

people around them their special fashion taste or styles. They continued to mention “I wanted to show off” in interviews asking about their intention to post, indicating that they obviously intended to show off their fashion sense or styling ability through Instagram. This show-off was not about a social status or economic affluence that was already given, but about the creative sense and ability gained by oneself. And it implied a desire to be recognized by others as a self with special value that others did not easily have.

In the research results, the objects that people who are highly interested in fashion show off on Instagram have become the ability to find and select value from the products that are commonly seen around them rather than expensive or luxury brands, and to combine them creatively. Therefore, a wider range of fashion consumption products such as the inexpensive clothing of SPA brands and vintage clothes inherited from parents could be the objects of conspicuousness. The differences in consumption are becoming a matter of personal self-perception instead of social class, and individuals are becoming independent of their social position to construct their own selves; thus, consumption patterns tend to break down into an infinite variety of individual styles (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007). The research findings suggest that the discussion on conspicuousness of fashion consumption on social media must revolve more on the meaning of identity that individuals pursue in society, rather than restricting it to indicate a high socioeconomic status only.

In addition, the objects of conspicuousness were focused on styling rather than fashion products, and on consumption experience rather than purchasing behavior. Thus, it could be possible to show off through the products that were not actually purchased. This finding is consistent with prior research which noted that conspicuous consumption on social media has changed to various consumer goods including experience goods, to express one’s identity and individuality (Chaudhuri & Majumdar, 2006; Duan & Dholakia, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2020). In other words, the process of consumption has become more important than the result of the purchase to show off on social media, because the process could effectively show the characteristics differentiated depending on the ability of individuals.

Therefore, the fitting room found on Instagram can simply represent a situation of changing clothes, but it can also be interpreted as a show-off intention to choose unique design products and differentially coordinated styles.

As diverse styles became recognized by people rather than just following trendy fashion, style has come to mean the individual’s discriminatory self and the importance of its existence. The importance of style also means that the self is being interpreted at an individual level rather than in a social structure, and that efforts to find a unique “I” that is different from the majority of the public are emerging. The participants who were highly interested in fashion were more interested in the style of “how to find unique products and coordinate them differently,” rather than “how fact to show fashion trends and buy fashionable products”. They had to be concerned about what styles others could recognize and tried to find their own aesthetic practices as striving to create a continuous self-image as Kaiser et al. (1995) mentioned.

The conspicuous display of fashion and its consumption in the image-communicating Instagram had to follow the rules of ritual expression that could be accepted within the media. People had to pay attention not only to what clothes they wore, but also what kind of color mood they were seen in what situation. The participants thought that even if they were dressed nicely, it would be difficult to show with an excellent taste in the image if there were place inappropriate mood or items of different tones in the frame. Rather than comfortable clothes for travel, images of clothes matching the concept of the place were posted on Instagram, and the colors of clothes and other objects had to be harmonized.

On Instagram, represented place of conspicuousness, people had to carefully convey their show-off content in images, paying attention to the way of taking pictures, and add irrelevant text to avoid the blame of their show-off behavior or intention. The participants had to be careful not to be misunderstood as showing off their appearance, not their clothes, and tried to avoid selfies that could seem narcissistic. Even if they wanted to show off their unique fashion style to many people on Instagram, they expressed it through other objects such as pets because they were afraid of evaluating their face or body.

This study is meaningful in that it focused on the ritual



expression behavior of conspicuousness in image communication on Instagram to analyze the meaning of show-off on social media and to widely understand the object of show-off and analyze the meaning of it on sociological environment of the media. Rather than focusing on fashion products that were the object of show-off, this study tried to understand the culture of conspicuousness in the image communication of Instagram by focusing on ritual expression behaviors. Although this study has limitations in generalizing research results based on a small number of participants, this is expected to help deeply understand online fashion consumers with a wider perspective reference for planning fashion marketing activities on social media platforms.

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