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### CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION IN ACADEMIA: GENERALIZED ADDITIVE MODELING OF RUSSIAN STUDENTS' BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES FOR SOCIAL POLICY NEEDS

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**Keywords: conspicuous consumption, status seeking, social policy, predictive modeling**

#### **Abstract**

In the present article, the authors consider how conspicuous consumption and status-seeking behavioral practices shape interaction in student groups in Russia. For tackling these issues, the authors employ the method of social survey followed by data analysis using generalized additive model, advanced regression technique for prediction and classification. This method has a greater explanatory power in comparison to other regression models due to capturing nonlinearities in data, which is frequently a case in social sciences. The results of application of generalized additive model confirm that students' conspicuous consumption is in many ways triggered by comparison with a reference group. The authors have also identified the effect of belonging to a certain social class, as status exposure is particularly observed in the upper and lower class. The latter employ it to overcome dissatisfaction and exclusion. Moreover, such variables as academic performance, the discipline of study, and geographic location also affect conspicuous consumption. No significant effect of gender has been found. Based on conclusions, the authors outline policy recommendations for academic institutions on how to eliminate status exposure through consumption in academia.

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## INTRODUCTION

Current recession in Russia triggers new transformations of the socio-economic system, such as poverty dynamics, the decrease of national welfare, and lack of consumer confidence. Sharpened inequalities become exceptionally clear in student groups affecting their consumer sentiment, status exposure, and behavioral patterns. Despite the fact that these groups are relatively homogeneous by demographic criteria, they are heterogeneous with respect to a phenomenon entitled by Bourdieu as the composition of social capitals: family wealth, social origin, class belonging, status, etc. Under the condition of decreasing life quality, the adaptive behavioral strategies of youth are of particular relevance. When a social status is primarily based not on education, professional achievement, or other socio-cultural capital, but on wealth, conspicuous consumption becomes the most straightforward means to express status ambitions and claims (Christen & Ruskin, 2005; Kempen, 2003; Memushi, 2014; Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011; Ritzer, 2007). As such, not cultural capital but expensive and inaccessible to the majority goods for status signaling become the main symbols of success and social achievements (Shaidakova, 2014). As a consequence, the contagion of youth by conspicuous consumption and imitation of public elites' lifestyle leads to the development of disharmonized civic culture. Moreover, nothing but academia in many ways becomes a field of this so-called competition of statuses.

In Russia, where public universities in addition to providing educational service, also implement the objectives of social policy on the local level, the above-mentioned situation in many ways makes more relevant the requirement for departments to account for problems linked to status demonstration in student groups and contribute to a better and inclusive culture. Organizational culture should be aimed at eliminating material deprivation experienced by students from lower classes, preventing them from being social outsiders due to their low status and possessed economic capital.

Proceeding from this, in 2016, administration of Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russia (hereafter SFedU) decided to conduct an empirical investigation of conspicuous consumption to understand how and to what extent existing status inequalities shape interaction of students in the university. For addressing these issues, the present study employed a method of social survey followed by the statistical modeling of the collected data. The article presents the first results of a research referring to the measurement of the relevant phenomena and predictive modeling of behavioral outcomes. Based on the conclusions of the study, the authors propose policy implications.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The concept of conspicuous consumption was introduced by Veblen (1915) to describe consumer practices employed by the upper class for demarcating their dominant position in the social hierarchy. These practices were mainly expressed through consumption of goods that were not accessible by the classes standing lower on the social ladder. This idea was further revisited by Bourdieu (1984), who revealed that conspicuous practices aimed at status

seeking are instead a property of petit-bourgeoisie. According to Bourdieu, the need to express distinction from the working class by imitating practices of the upper one is essential for the petit-bourgeoisie due to a middle position of this group in the structure of social hierarchies. Despite theoretical contradictions, today, Veblen's and Bourdieu's works frequently serve as the theoretical framework and conceptual starting point for studying phenomena of conspicuous consumption and status exposure in the light of different groups and within various social contexts (Trigg, 2001).

On the other hand, Veblen and Bourdieu represent two opposing theoretical approaches to social diffusion of tastes: the so-called trickle-down and trickle-round models. Whereas Veblen stated that the tastes emerging at the higher levels of social hierarchy, diffuse down to the lower class where people emulate them, Bourdieu proposed a more comprehensive model. In this model, the upper class, as in the Veblenian theory, appears to be a source of reputability and canons of good taste. However, the emulation patterns are explicitly observed in the upper middle class that aims to stand out from the poor by adopting the elites' lifestyles, whereas the lower class in this context exists independently. Since the lower class representatives lack the sufficient amount of necessary capital, instead of emulating the reputable canons of the upper class they embody authentic popular taste that is dictated mainly by their necessities.

In the present article, the authors are going to examine which analytical framework applies better to the social context of Russian students' conspicuous consumption. Worth noticing, this problem is not well elaborated in the Russian social science, and the present research is going to shed some light on how these phenomena are expressed in student groups. Considering the outlined theoretical opposition, the authors are interested in understanding the class differences observed in the students' conspicuous consumption: do they follow the Veblen's trickle-down model, when rich students consume conspicuously and the poor try to emulate them, or, as per Bourdieu's framework, conspicuous consumption is mainly observed in the social classes of youth located in the middle of the hierarchy.

### ***Previous Evidence and Research Gap***

There is a significant number of works that focus specifically on conspicuous consumption in academia. The study of Sims-Muhammad (2012) confirms that students are highly prone to demonstrate social status through consumption. This statement was confirmed and extended in the study of Acikalin et al. (2012), which revealed that status exposure and conspicuous consumption are observed in the behavioral patterns of students from all social strata, not only rich or poor. In opposition to this, the study of Carr (2005), however, articulates that conspicuous consumption, instead, characterizes the behavior of youth from lower classes since they employ it as a means to overcome status dissatisfaction and sometimes even material deprivation.

The outlined results confirm that there is no universal theory of conspicuous consumption since depending on the social context, either Veblen's or

Bourdieu's models were confirmed. In this light, the conclusions of Carr that conspicuous consumption is instrumental for low-status groups is regarded as the extension of Veblenian logic, where upper class was the main source of this practice, whereas the working class was obsessed by social emulation.

Other studies revealed that there are gender-specific patterns of conspicuous consumption, namely, that male students are more inclined to expose their status through consumed goods (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004; Nefat & Benazić, 2014). In addition to this, according to the study of O'Cass & McEwen, conspicuous consumption is strongly affected by interpersonal influence. This statement aligns with that of Nasab et al. (2016), articulating that social comparison significantly drives conspicuous consumption amongst students.

Finally, a similar study was carried out in Russia as well (Shaidakova, 2014). It found out that the higher prestige of a university, the more students are keen on conspicuous consumption, paying particular attention to possession of such goods like smartphones, cars, and clothes. The study, moreover, articulated that students from lower classes tend to camouflage their status by consuming prestige and expensive goods that do not correspond to the real economic capital of their families.

This review makes it possible to identify the gap in the research and in the current state of the art on students' conspicuous consumption. First and most importantly, research confirms that there is no unique model of conspicuous consumption, which means that the expression of the abovementioned behavioral patterns amongst students varies depending on the social context in which it takes place. In this light, the investigation of this problem in Russia will contribute to the growing body of work on conspicuous consumption and status exposure practices that take place in academia.

Moreover, the effects of academic performance and discipline of study on conspicuous consumption have not been examined so far. In other words, the influence of the academic factors on the students' status exposure were underestimated in the current state of the art. In addition to this, we can hypothesize that geographic location of the academic institution, either a city or town, can also explain differences in the patterns of status exposure. Is it possible that the students who reside and study in towns tend to conspicuous consumption more? Or, oppositely, are these patterns better observed in the academic institutions located in cities? On the other hand, there could be no significant difference in the light of this opposition as well. However, the existing research has not addressed the problem from this aspect. Doing so in this research, the authors of the present article can potentially increase knowledge on the issue.

Broadly speaking, the problem of conspicuous consumption in the current research in Russia has been taken into consideration neither within the academic community nor by policy-making organs on micro and macro levels. The lack of comprehensive research on the problem does not allow for the implementation of social policies aimed at the elimination of contradictions

between the rich and poor. Therefore, these contradictions are expressed in the status dominance of ones and social exclusion of the others, based on wealth criterion. Moreover, not much research has addressed conspicuous consumption and status demonstration practices in the groups of youth in academia which however appears to have a particular relevance given the competitive and ambitious aspirations of young people. In the present study, the authors aim to fill this research gap.

### ***Research Questions***

In the present study, the following research question is going to be tackled: does a theory of conspicuous consumption have a heuristic potential in explaining behavior patterns observed in the groups of Russian students? In other words, to what extent are Russian students prone to conspicuous consumption, and what kind of social policies should higher education institutions elaborate in order to eliminate status exposure through consumption in academia? Consideration of this problem will be enhanced and implemented by answering the following supplementary research questions hypothesized on the basis of previous research:

1. From the perspective of social class belonging, which students have a greater propensity to adopt conspicuous consumption patterns?
2. To what extent is conspicuous consumption of students driven by comparison with a reference group?
3. Does social emulation explain patterns of conspicuous consumption with regard to students from low-status groups?
4. Does conspicuous consumption of students depend on such phenomena as academic performance, discipline of study, and geographic location of the educational institution?

### ***Research Design and Methodology***

Given the proposed research questions, three Likert scales were operationalized to measure the phenomena of conspicuous consumption, reference group influence, and social emulation. The scales consisted of 5-level response items, where 1 denoted "absolute disagreement" and 5 "absolute agreement"; the amount of Likert items on the respective scale varied in the range of 5-11 questions for each scale. This approach provided a quantitative expression of the assumed associations and made it possible to test the hypothesis on the basis of statistical procedures.

For addressing the issue of reliability and internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated and exploratory factor analysis was conducted. All three scales had a minimum  $\alpha = 0.7$ .

0.3 was chosen as a critical value for factor loadings. Several items that obtained smaller scores were removed from the scales. The scales, together with the respective values, are provided in Appendix.

In the further usage of these scales, the individual scores of conspicuous consumption, reference group influence, and social emulation propensity were calculated by summing up the response values. As every scale consisted from a different number of items, at the next stage, the scores were normalized within the 0-1 range to make them universal, comparable and more meaningful, where values close to 0 indicate a lower propensity to the respective phenomenon and the values close to 1 indicate a high propensity. In the end, each respondent in the sample obtained a unique score on all three indices.

At the fieldwork stage, data for modeling were collected by surveying SFedU students. The respondents were recruited in 5 cities where the university has branches: Rostov-on-Don, Taganrog, Makhachkala, Gelendzhik, and Volgodonsk. A total number of the SFedU students at the time of the survey accounted for 18 965, including the main campus in Rostov-on-Don and regional branches. The number of respondents was 600 students as this number was sufficiently large for conducting valid and representative measurements given the multidimensionality and heterogeneity of respondents' features. The age of students varied in the range of 15-30. The study employed a probabilistic random cluster sample which in its turn helped to substantially decrease the research expenses. The main limitation of the cluster sample related to the requirement of a large number of clusters in the final sample was however not difficult to overcome as students that formed sample clusters were members of study groups and shared the same geographical location.

As SFedU students were the research population and the main subject of the research, mean age and gender distribution were taken as the core parameters to recruit the respondents. One sample t-test did not report statistically significant differences between the population mean age ( $M=20.2$ ) and the sample value ( $M=20.07$ ,  $SD=2.29$ ),  $t(599)=-1.35$ ,  $p=0.17$ . Furthermore, proportions of gender distribution in the sample correspond to that of the population and account for 59.7% female and 40.3% male students respectively. The survey data by categorical variables are summarized in Table 1.

The data analysis started with reporting descriptive statistics. On the next step, a regression model was built for examining the phenomena that trigger students' conspicuous consumption. Generalized additive model (hereafter GAM) was employed in the study. It is a regression modeling technique invented as an alternative and advanced algorithm for prediction and classification by Hastie and Tibshirani (1986; 1990; 2009; 2015). All the algorithms were implemented in R, a contemporary lingua franca of the statistical computing.

### ***Consumer Attitudes of Students: First View at Differences***

Prior to starting the regression modeling of the collected data, it is necessary to take a brief look at the basic patterns that can be learned from the data. Figure 1 provides probability density functions of the quantitative variables that form

the basis of the regression model: Age, Conspicuous Consumption, Reference Group Influence, and Social Emulation. Varying in the range between 15-30, Age demonstrates positive skewness and does not obtain normal distribution. Not surprisingly, three other variables that measure attitudes and opinions related to consumer behavior are also distributed between the values from 0 to 1 not normally. Whereas Reference Group Influence scores are approximately normal, Conspicuous Consumption and Social Emulation demonstrate both strong positive skewness and multimodality. Most likely, several probability distributions placed on the same graph can be observed, and distribution of scores in many ways is affected by the presence of multiple groups with own mean values, standard deviations, and other parameters. The presence of these groups can possibly affect the outcome in the response variable and it should be taken into account in the regression model.

Looking at the data in Table 2, we can hypothesize that in case of the students' social emulation, probability distribution might be affected by social class since the mean values gradually decrease with a shift from the lower class to the upper one. It is supported by the results of ANOVA,  $F(4, 558)=2.016$ ,  $p=0.09$  that revealed significant differences in mean scores on social emulation by class. However, Tukey's post hoc test did not highlight statistically significant differences in students' social emulation by social class in the most of pairwise comparisons, except for emulation patterns in the lower ( $M=0.37$ ,  $SD=0.18$ ) and upper ones ( $M=0.28$ ,  $SD=0.18$ ),  $p=0.08$ . The latter might also be a potential explanation for the two peaks observed in the probability density function of the social emulation scores.

When it comes to Conspicuous Consumption, class-related differences are even more explicit. ANOVA confirmed that variation of mean scores among classes is highly statistically significant,  $F(4, 572)=9.1$ ,  $p<0.001$ . In addition to this, Tukey's post hoc test highlighted the differences between the upper class and all the other social classes in their propensity to conspicuous consumption, which makes it possible to assume that this group is the main source of conspicuous consumption since it has the highest mean score. However, the pairwise differences between hierarchically neighboring classes such as lower class ( $M=0.37$ ,  $SD=0.26$ ) and lower middle class ( $M=0.33$ ,  $SD=0.22$ ), or middle class ( $M=0.36$ ,  $SD=0.20$ ) and upper middle class ( $M=0.41$ ,  $SD=0.22$ ) were not significant,  $p>0.1$ .

In opposition to the previous two indices, ANOVA did not reveal statistically significant differences in the patterns of reference group influence by social class,  $F(4, 589)=0.768$ ,  $p=0.54$ . This result is also not surprising as probability distribution of Reference Group Influence is approximately normal and unimodal. Even a brief look at the mean scores and standard deviations by social class evidently explains that, disregarding status hierarchies, all students have peers whose opinions are referent in the shaping of consumer behavior. These references may be located either in higher classes or even in the same class, like it is with the upper group. Taking the highest position in the status hierarchy, they employ conspicuous consumption for keeping up own exclusiveness.

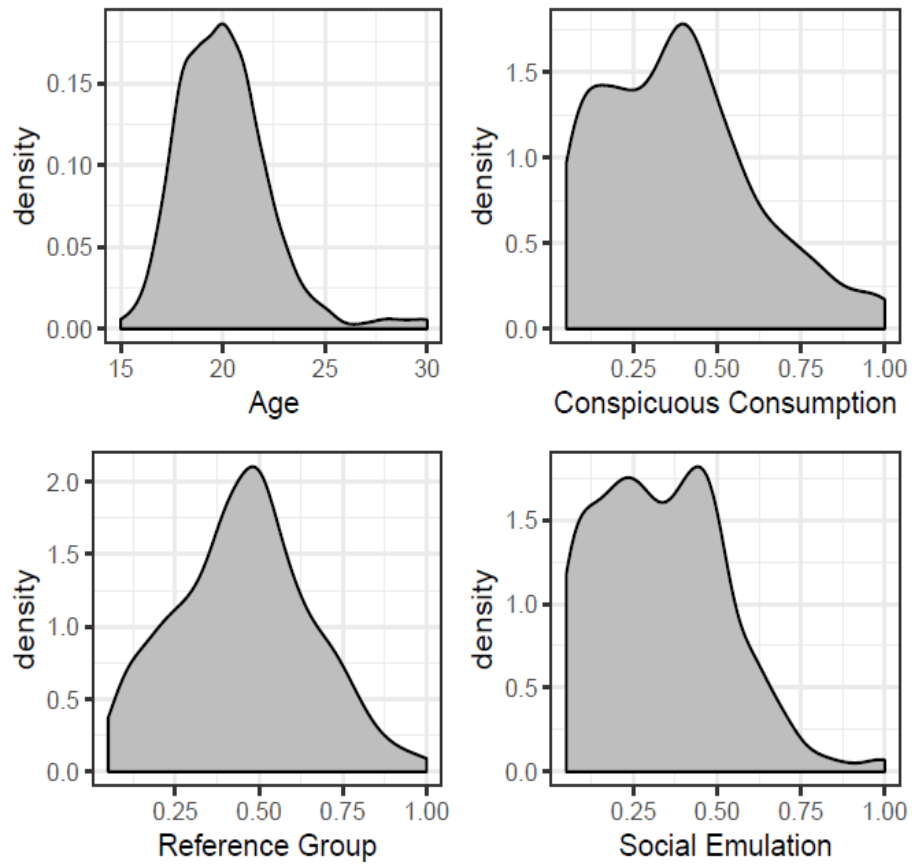


Fig. 1. Probability density functions

Table 1. Frequency distributions of the categorical variables

Gender	Discipline	Grade	Social Class
Male 242	Social Sciences and Humanities 136	Unsatisfactory 22	Lower Class 89
Female 358	Sport Sciences 71	Satisfactory 73	Lower Middle Class 168
<b>Location</b>	Economics, Management, Law 251	Good 351	Middle Class 152
City 341	Natural and Technical Sciences 142	Perfect 154	Upper Middle Class 137
Town 259			Upper Class 54

Table 2. Mean values and standard deviations of the quantitative variables

Variable	Mean (SD) via Social Class					Mean (SD)
	Lower	Lower Middle	Middle	Upper Middle	Upper	Total



	Class	Class	Class	Class	Class	Sample
Conspicuous Consumption	0.37 (0.26)	0.33 (0.22)	0.36 (0.20)	0.41 (0.22)	0.53 (0.23)	0.38 (0.23)
Reference Group Influence	0.44 (0.25)	0.46 (0.20)	0.44 (0.18)	0.46 (0.20)	0.49 (0.22)	0.45 (0.20)
Social Emulation	0.37 (0.18)	0.35 (0.20)	0.33 (0.19)	0.33 (0.20)	0.28 (0.18)	0.34 (0.19)

***Conspicuous Consumption: What influences students’ status exposure in academia?***

One of the major objectives of this study refers to predicting factors that influence students’ conspicuous consumption. Based on the existing state of the art and outlined research questions, we hypothesized that students’ conspicuous consumption could be shaped by their academic performance, discipline of study, social class, and location. We were also interested in understanding of the footprint that gender and age make on status exposure.

In this context, our cognitive concern consisted not in the predicting of change in the response variable on the interval scale (conspicuous consumption index), but in probabilistic expression of the factors that affect belonging to the category of students who strongly tend to expose their status (i.e., students who obtained the highest scores of the conspicuous consumption index). As a consequence, the output variable was transformed into ordinal scale dividing students into three categories: those with low level of conspicuous consumption (index scores below 0.4), moderate conspicuous consumers (index scores in the range of 0.4 - 0.6), and individuals with the highest propensity to consume conspicuously (index scores above 0.6).

For predicting the influence factors of conspicuous consumer behavior, we built a GAM that accounted for all effects outlined above. In comparison to regression modeling based on linear functions of the examined associations, GAMs have an advantage over other regression techniques widely used in socio-psychological research. Despite the fact that in general, GAMs are nothing but an extension of generalized linear models, they give more precise predictions of a response variable and capture non-linearities and variation in data (Hill & Lewicki, 2006; Nefat & Benazić, 2014) by applying nonparametric smoothing splines to the model predictors. In other words, the objective of GAMs “is to maximize the quality of prediction of a dependent variable Y from various distributions, by estimating unspecific (non-parametric) functions of the predictor variables which are “connected” to the dependent variable via a link function” (Hill & Lewicki, 2006, p. 294) and enter additively into a regression model. Given that obtaining linearity in associations between variables that measure opinions and attitudes is quite problematic, and continuous variables used in the model fail to follow normal distribution (which is also frequently the case in socio-behavioral sciences), GAMs thus have greater explanatory power in modeling human behavior.

Another advantage of GAMs is that they are effectively used for predicting the behavioral outcomes fixed on both interval and categorical scales. Our objective falls under the second case as we are interested in modeling the behavioral patterns placed on the ordinal scale where three categories denote the respective level of conspicuous consumption. Under this condition, GAM turns out to be a probabilistic model that extends the methods of logistic regression.

In the present article, a GAM was built for predicting the cumulative probability of an observation to belong to a particular category of the dependent ordinal variable. The model thus has the following the equation:

$$\text{logit}(\text{ConspicuousConsumption}) = \text{Gender} + \text{SocialClass} + \text{Discipline} + \text{Grade} + \text{Location} + s(\text{ReferenceGroupInfluence}) + s(\text{Age}) + s(\text{SocialEmulation}) \cdot \text{SocialClass}.$$

In the equation above, logit function is the logarithm of the odds  $p/(1-p)$ , where  $p$  is the probability of an observation to belong to a particular level of conspicuous consumption. In this version, the model follows the computational algorithms suggested by Wood (2006; 2018) who extended GAMs to probabilistic models on the ordinal scale and introduced factor-smooth interactions as regression terms. As a consequence, the model includes two cubic spline functions  $s(x)$  of the continuous variables Reference Group Influence and Age. In addition to this, we also applied the cubic spline function to the variable Social Emulation, which adopted a factor-smooth interaction with the ordinal variable Social Class. This computational algorithm makes Wood's mgcv package unique: in comparison to other factor-smooth interactions that calculate the functions in relation to the reference categories, in the case of an ordinal variable, GAM estimates a separate function of a predictor for each level of an ordinal factor. In our case, GAM calculates a separate smooth function of Social Emulation for each level of the factor variable Social Class.

The theoretical justification behind this refers to Figure 1, where we could clearly identify a multimodal distribution of the Social Emulation variable which implies potential sub-grouping in data and allocation of multiple distributions on one scale. As has already been mentioned, the data in Table 1 confirms that the mean and standard deviations are different across the social classes. In this context, it appears reasonable to hypothesize that different patterns of social emulation can be observed with a shift from one social class to another. This variation in scores can be found in five hierarchical groups as it potentially can increase the explanatory power of the model and capture more variation in the observed patterns of consumption. The results of the model are outlined in Table 3.

As the model revealed, there is a statistically significant effect of a social class with regards to the lower middle and upper class, discipline of study (namely, economics, management, or law), satisfactory academic performance, and geographical location.

The model, however, did not capture the effects of gender and age, therefore, it is not reasonable to speak about gender differences in the patterns of conspicuous consumption, as well as to hypothesize significant variation in conspicuous consumption within the age interval of 15-30. On the other hand, the model showed a statistically significant and strong positive effect of the reference group influence index on conspicuous consumption. Furthermore, the social emulation index in the interaction with the lower, lower middle and upper class significantly predict conspicuous consumption. However, being statistically significant, the effect of social emulation in the interaction with the upper class is not meaningful in practice, as the smoothing cubic spline lies almost parallel to the x-axis. Figure 2 provides a visualization of the effects of each independent variable on the dependent variable in the model.

As other probabilistic models, GAMs also make it possible to calculate a predicted probability given any conditions of the input variables. It is particularly interesting to predict the probability of getting into the group with the highest level of conspicuous consumption and take into account the strongest effects of the model predictors. For example, in the case of a 22-year-old male student living in the city, belonging to the upper class, having a satisfactory academic performance, and acquiring a profession of economist, manager or lawyer, a predicted probability of belonging to the highest category of conspicuous consumption accounts for 94.4%. This calculation works under the condition that this hypothetical student has a high reference group influence and low social emulation indices (equal 0.85 and 0.25 out of 1, respectively).

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Conspicuous Consumption
Gender: Female	0.123 (0.209)
Lower Middle Class	-0.904** (0.445)
Middle Class	-0.427 (0.436)
Upper Middle Class	-0.125 (0.435)
Upper Class	1.041** (0.508)
Sport Sciences	-0.393 (0.404)
Economics and Law	0.442* (0.263)
Natural and Technical Sciences	-0.155 (0.339)
Grade: Satisfactory	1.984* (1.060)
Grade: Good	1.292 (1.032)
Grade: Perfect	0.743 (1.045)
Location: Town	-0.612*** (0.228)
s(Reference Group Influence)	nonparametric***
s(Age)	nonparametric
s(Social Emulation): Lower Class	nonparametric*
s(Social Emulation): Lower Middle Class	nonparametric*
s(Social Emulation): Middle Class	nonparametric
s(Social Emulation): Upper Middle Class	nonparametric
s(Social Emulation): Upper Class	nonparametric*

Constant	-2.302** (1.128)
AIC	872.9817
Residual Deviance	820.24
Deviance Explained	22.9%
Observations	535
Note:	* $p < 0.1$ ; ** $p < 0.05$ ; *** $p < 0.01$

Coefficients of categorical variables are calculated with respect to reference categories: Male for Gender, Lower Class for Social Class, Social Sciences for Discipline, Unsatisfactory for Academic Performance, City for Location.

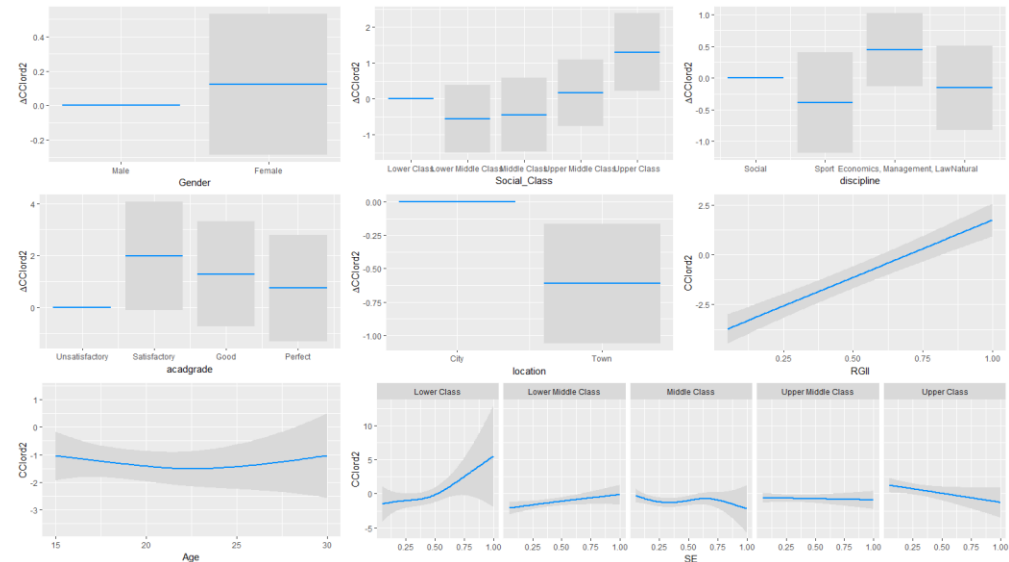


Figure 2. GAM components (partial prediction) plots with 95% confidence intervals (abbreviation CCIord2 stands for the variable Conspicuous Consumption, RGII – Reference Group Influence, SE - Social Emulation)

### CONCLUSION

The results of the above analysis reveal that students from the upper class tend to consume conspicuously on a larger scale. However, surprisingly, patterns of conspicuous consumption are less visible in the lower middle and middle classes: the students from the upper class are followed by those from the lower one who in turn adopt conspicuous consumption to camouflage their status disposition. This statement is confirmed by the fact that social emulation patterns observed in the lower and lower middle class significantly influence the probability of belonging to the group of conspicuous consumers. In other words, the more they emulate, the stronger it affects their status exposure in a way that does not correspond to their real composition of capital.

In this context, the patterns of conspicuous consumption observed in the groups of Russian students rather follow the logic of Veblen than Bourdieu and embody the trickle-down model. However, the results of our study in some way extend the trickle-down approach articulating the contradictory nature of conspicuous consumption. In the end, it is nothing but an explicit expression of hierarchical oppositions observed in the whole society. In this context, findings of this article are opposed to Bourdieu’s theory, in which people from the lower class express independent and popular taste that is

determined by the composition of their capital and reflects the real level of material and cultural possessions. As the model identified negative and statistically insignificant effects of affiliation with the middle and upper middle classes on conspicuous consumption in relation to the reference category (lower class), the poorest students appear to be the second group after the students from the upper class to practice conspicuous consumption. If considered together with the effect of social emulation, it can be concluded that the poor show dependence on the trends set up by rich students more than anyone else. On the contrary, affiliation with medium and upper fractions of the middle class, as single effects and in interaction with social emulation, does not influence patterns of conspicuous consumption significantly.

Moreover, the effects of status exposure by students in academia are better observed in the educational institutions located in the city than in those located in towns. In the case of the built GAM, students who study in the towns that form the geographic distribution of the sample, have a significantly lower probability to be conspicuous consumers in comparison to students who reside in the city (Rostov-on-Don). It means that conspicuous consumption is more instrumental in the areas with the higher standards of living: material opportunities and an increased level of social competition push students to a greater status exposure.

Not surprisingly, life in academia also makes a footprint on conspicuous consumption. As the model confirms, students with satisfactory academic performance tend more to express status claims through consumer items. This conclusion to a great extent implicates Bourdieu's statement that people who lack cultural capital and education have a greater propensity for signaling status dispositions. Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of cultural capital cannot be reduced to academic performance only, but in the academia, nothing but grades indicate the level of achievement, therefore it serves not as absolute but as a relative criterion to measure educational attainment.

Moreover, patterns of conspicuous consumption are better observed in the groups of students who acquire professions conventionally regarded in Russian society as prestigious: lawyers, economists, managers. The conclusion is quite easy to make even based on the everyday life experience: parking spots near the respective faculties are full of luxury cars of foreign brands, something rarely observed in the areas surrounding faculties of other disciplines. This, first of all, confirms our assumption that conspicuous consumption expresses status dispositions in the society. Rich students engage in consumer showing off, the poor do their best to keep up with those with whom they are linked in a network or social group. It results in emulative behavior that in the end leads to conspicuous consumption.

Consequently, the structure of hierarchical dispositions that are taken by the social space agents who practice conspicuous consumption is projected on the socio-cultural space of academia. The logic of status exposure through consumption, as well as an experienced social exclusion that results in emulative practices aimed at camouflaging affiliation with low-status groups,

both take place as part of a single social process. This social process is nothing but an investment of various capitals, their symbolic demarcation for the status outcome that will be fixed by the privileged position in the hierarchical social space. The fact that the empirical investigation confirmed the assumptions in the particular social space, namely, academia, allows hypothesizing that the observed patterns are the reflection and result of structures and interactions that take place in a much broader context, at the societal level. Therefore, the implication for the future research is quite clear in this regard: a similar study should tackle problems of conspicuous consumption and agents' status inequality in the broader context of social groups and institutions.

As such, the habitus of an agent, a student in this case, is determined by the composition of social capitals and affiliation with a hierarchical group. In other words, a group in which socialization and adaptation to certain social practices took place. On the other hand, a student also implements a certain role in the academic community. Accounting for the fact that symbolic space in academia sets up conditions for competition for social benefits based on both economic and socio-cultural capitals, hierarchical affiliation and consumption model related to it are not the only ways of status manifestation in academia. Therefore, given that the behavioral model of conspicuous consumption is not imperative, we can consider it as formal, a certain kind of social ritual that can be transformed or substituted. In other words, it can be managed by the policy means.

### ***Policy Implications***

The aforementioned results of modeling and conclusions drawn above could and even should form the basis for setting up the objectives of an academic institution's social policy. This policy should aim to minimize social risks related to changing inequality patterns and the ways it affects students' everyday interaction in academia. Accounting for a peculiar function of conspicuous consumption in the expression of status dispositions, the contagious character of these practices in student groups should be adjusted by social policy means. The present study revealed that those who show the highest propensity to conspicuous consumption are not successful in their educational achievement, and they predominantly originate from the upper or upper middle class. Their conspicuous lifestyle together with consumer showing off shows social exclusion of the students from the lower social classes, compelling some of them to emulate behavioral practices divergent with the economic capital they possess.

In this light, social policy makers should make an effort to form a university's organizational culture and identity that will substitute the criteria for status and prestige. This culture, in turn, should articulate not material artifacts of consumption but academic achievement, participation in research, involvement in social activities, as life in academia is not limited to learning only. In this context, not the elimination of conspicuous consumption itself is the end goal of the social policy, but the substitution of criteria for status seeking. Social policy cannot overlook the competitive nature of young people, as well as their claims and ambitions to reach a certain standard of

living and gain a socially praised status. However, it can shift the focus of status-seeking from consumer showing off to a demonstration of achievements in learning, sports, career prospects, an organization of social life, management of student clubs and communities, etc.

The latter requires from the university's policy-makers to work out in detail the respective elements of corporate culture that set up values for recognition of achievements in all the relevant areas. The acknowledgment of these achievements, furthermore, should be enhanced by providing legitimate corporate ranks and titles. Social policy of an academic institution should take into consideration the conspicuous and status-seeking nature of students and set these values to motivate them on gaining professional capital in opposition to public display of the accumulated family wealth. All in all, it will create criteria for corporate leadership that should serve as means for social distinction and conditions for achieved social statuses and mobility in and beyond academia.

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**APPENDIX**

<b>Conspicuous Consumption Scale</b>			
<b>No</b>	<b>Scale Item</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha if item is dropped</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>
1	I would buy a product or pay more for it because it has prestige	0.82	0.71
2	I would pay more for a product because it marks my individuality better	0.83	0.54
3	The famous Russian saying “first they judge you by your clothes, only then by your mind” applies well to the current society and is widely confirmed by my own experience	0.84	0.51



<b>Conspicuous Consumption Scale</b>			
<b>№</b>	<b>Scale Item</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha if item is dropped</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>
4	I often make conclusions regarding status or achievements of people by the way they dress, the car they drive, the cell phone they have, etc.	0.82	0.67
5	I enjoy possessing luxury goods and ordering exclusive services because only wealthy and successful people can do it	0.82	0.76
6	I would like to have more prestige and luxury goods than I have	0.82	0.76
7	If I could wear fashionable clothes, have a premium car, and generally look better off than the majority in my social environment, I wouldn't feel awkward because of it.	0.84	0.50
8	If a prestigious brand commodity on sale costs as much as the ordinary one, I will definitely buy a brand.	0.84	0.53
9	I tend to spend more on goods that are consumed in public (such as clothes, phone, transport, food out, leisure, etc.) rather than on those consumed privately.	0.84	0.42
10	I enjoy window shopping in brand shops sometimes just to spend time, without a purpose of buying something.	0.83	0.55
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>		<i>0.85</i>	
<i>Observations</i>		<i>577</i>	

<b>Reference Group Influence Scale</b>			
<b>№</b>	<b>Scale Item</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha if item is dropped</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>
1	I often compare my social achievements, material standing, status and success with that of other people.	0.75	0.45
2	It is essential for me to look at least not worse than the majority in my social environment.	0.77	0.30
3	The lifestyle and opportunities of richer people encourage me to improve my own position in the social hierarchy	0.77	0.30

4	Taking into account, how some rich people live in my country, I am definitely not satisfied by my income and wealth level	0.76	0.34
5	I believe that more expensive products are more socially acceptable and attractive to others	0.76	0.39
6	My consumer wants and buying merely reflect expectations that other people have regarding myself, my status, and image. Success should be recognizable in the outfit.	0.73	0.67
7	The goods that I consume help me enhancing my public image. They in many ways show others what I want to be.	0.75	0.53
8	Looking at some characters in advertising and commercials on TV, I realize sometimes that I would like to follow their image and success.	0.74	0.63
9	If I had some specific goods, it would give me more prestige, status, and reputability.	0.73	0.65
10	People who consume certain brands or status goods often have the characteristics and image which I would like to have as well	0.74	0.62
11	I am sometimes interested in opinions of other people about me, my social standing, and life achievements.	0.72	0.72
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>		<i>0.77</i>	
<i>Observations</i>		<i>594</i>	

<b>Social Emulation Scale</b>			
<b>№</b>	<b>Scale Item</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha if item is dropped</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>
1	I think that it is absolutely justified that people sometimes can buy counterfeit consumer goods	0.70	0.76
2	I am ready to purchase counterfeit consumer goods for my own purposes	0.66	0.72
3	I think that it is absolutely justified that people get loans in banks in order to buy expensive consumer goods with a higher status and quality	0.61	0.68
4	I am ready to get a loan in a bank in order to buy expensive consumer goods with a higher status and quality	0.62	0.83

5	I am ready to pay $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ part of my income monthly in order to purchase goods with a higher status and quality	0.62	0.72
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>		<i>0.70</i>	
<i>Observations</i>		<i>563</i>	

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