



THE MOTIVES OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION IN JANE AUSTEN'S PERSUASION

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the motives of conspicuous consumption portrayed in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. It employs a qualitative research method, using the novel as the primary source of data, while supporting information is gathered from books, journal articles, and other relevant sources. The analysis is based on Wellek and Warren's sociology of literature and Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption. The study focuses on three motives of conspicuous consumption: pecuniary emulation, invidious comparison, and conformity and avoidance of disapproval. The findings indicate that these motives are reflected in persistent efforts to preserve prestige despite financial decline, the tendency to compare oneself with others based on social rank and appearance, and adherence to aristocratic social standards to avoid social disapproval. These motives encourage extravagant spending, increase financial burdens, and place greater importance on maintaining social standing than on achieving financial stability. As a result, they contribute to excessive spending, financial hardship, status-oriented behavior, and the continuous pursuit of a favorable public image, which may ultimately lead to bankruptcy. The findings also indicate that material possessions and outward appearance are often used to gain social recognition and maintain one's position in society, even when they no longer reflect an individual's actual financial condition. In conclusion, *Persuasion* reflects social issues that remain relevant today, as social media, lifestyle trends, and competition for social recognition continue to influence individual behavior, often encouraging people to prioritize social image and social status over their actual financial circumstances. These findings suggest that Austen's portrayal of conspicuous consumption provides valuable insights into the relationship between consumer behavior, social expectations, and the pursuit of social status in both the Regency period and contemporary society.

Keywords: conspicuous consumption, pecuniary emulation, invidious comparison, conformity and avoidance of disapproval

1. Introduction

Consumption today goes far beyond meeting basic needs. People buy goods not only for practical use but also to build an image in front of others. Belk (1988) explains that possessions play an important part in how a person builds identity. This shift from practical need to symbolic need often changes the way people manage money, and it can weaken financial independence because people start to depend more on social approval than on real needs (Levy, 1959).

One well known form of this behaviour is conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption means buying or using expensive goods and services mainly to show

wealth, social rank, and prestige rather than for their practical use (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Veblen (1899) first introduces this idea in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. He explains that in a class-based society, people judge each other through what they display rather than through personal achievement alone. As a result, expensive and less useful goods often gain more social value than useful and affordable goods.

This pattern still shapes everyday life. Many people continue to spend beyond their income in order to keep a certain social image, and this desire often pushes them toward risky financial choices such as online loans. Novrian et al. (2025) find that low



financial literacy makes many people unable to understand interest rates and repayment risks, so they fall into debt while trying to keep up a certain lifestyle. This shows that pursuing status through consumption is not only a historical issue but also a social problem in today's society.

Jane Austen is one of the writers who explores this kind of social behaviour long before modern consumer culture exists. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* (Kastan, 2006) recognises Austen as one of the greatest English novelists, known for her sharp observation of social manners and class expectations. Her novel *Persuasion* (1818) tells the story of the Elliot family, who continues to spend beyond their income in order to protect their aristocratic image. Sir Walter Elliot, the head of the family, values his baronet title above practical financial decisions, while his eldest daughter Elizabeth follows the same value. Anne Elliot, the second daughter, holds a more careful and rational view of the family's situation. Because of their spending habits, the Elliot family eventually has to rent out their family estate, Kellynch Hall, yet they continue to protect their social prestige even after this financial decline.

Several previous studies look at *Persuasion* from different angles. Azizah (2024) studies the portrayal of women in the novel. Bata et al. (2022) examine the portrayal of masculinity through the character of Captain Wentworth. Dary (2017) and Nurfajria (2024) discuss social stratification and its effect on women in the story. Kartika (2019) studies the love story between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth through an objective approach, and Manurung (2025) analyses Anne Elliot's inner strength through characterization theory. Sadina (2024) examines the conflicts among the women characters in the novel. These studies give useful insight into gender, class, and character in *Persuasion*, but none of them look at the economic motive behind the family's spending behaviour. This study fills that gap. It uses Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption together with Wellek and Warren's literary

sociology to examine how status driven spending shapes the choices of the Elliot family.

This study uses literary sociology, as proposed by Wellek and Warren (1949), together with Veblen's (1899) concept of conspicuous consumption. Literary sociology views literature as a reflection of the author's environment, social values, and human relationships, which allows the novel to be read not only as a fictional story but also as a representation of social pressure and class expectation in Regency England. This study aims to analyse how the motives of conspicuous consumption appear in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, focusing on pecuniary emulation, invidious comparison, and conformity and avoidance of disapproval.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conspicuous Consumption

The word consumption comes from the Latin word *consumere*, which means to use up completely (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The word conspicuous comes from the Latin *conspicere*, which means to see clearly (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Veblen (1899) combines these ideas to explain that people often consume goods not only for use but also to be seen and recognised by others. In his view, spending on non-essential and expensive goods, or what he calls conspicuous waste, becomes an effective way to gain social respect, because useful and affordable items rarely carry the same social value.

This idea is supported by later scholars. Simmel (1900) explains that money allows people to measure and compare social position, so owning expensive goods becomes a common way to display status. Baudrillard (1998) adds that in modern society, goods function as signs that communicate identity and social rank rather than simple objects for daily use. These views show that consumption carries social meaning beyond its practical function.

Veblen (1899) identifies several motives behind conspicuous consumption, and this study focuses on three of them. Pecuniary



emulation is the desire to match or imitate the living standard of a higher social class, driven not only by envy but also by the social pressure to avoid losing respect. Invidious comparison is the tendency to judge oneself and others by material possession and visible status, where comparison always moves upward and never brings lasting satisfaction. Conformity and avoidance of disapproval refers to behaviour shaped mainly by the fear of losing social respect rather than by the wish to improve one's position, since social standards are easier to raise than to lower once a certain lifestyle becomes a habit.

2.2 Literary Sociology

Wellek and Warren (1949), in *Theory of Literature*, explain that literature connects to society through three aspects, namely the author's social background, the social reality shown inside the text, and the reader's response to the work. This view means that a literary work never stands apart from the society that produces it. Swingewood (1972) adds that literature does not only reflect social life but can also criticise social inequality, which shows that a literary work functions as a space to reveal social conflict and human struggle. Literary sociology treats literature as a reflection of the values, norms, and relationships that exist within a society, and this approach helps explain how social structure and class expectation shape human behaviour inside a text. Through this framework, a novel can be read not only as a fictional narrative, but also as a social document that shows how individuals respond to pressure, status, and expectation within their own community.

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method, which focuses on understanding how a text represents social and human issues through a theoretical framework (Creswell, 2013). The primary data come from Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, using the Norris Classics edition published by Norris Group International in 2024, which consists of 24 chapters and 283 pages. The novel was first published by John Murray in 1817. This study also uses

secondary data from books, journal articles, and reputable websites to support the analysis.

Data collection follows three steps. First, the novel is read carefully and repeatedly to understand its overall content. Second, sentences, dialogues, and narrations relevant to conspicuous consumption are identified and marked. Third, irrelevant data are removed, and the selected data are organised based on the three motives discussed in this study.

The data analysis follows the model of Miles and Huberman (1994), which in this study includes data reduction and conclusion drawing. In the data reduction step, the collected data are reviewed and organised to keep only relevant information. In the conclusion drawing step, the organised data are interpreted to answer the research question and to build a clear and supported explanation of how conspicuous consumption appears in the novel.

4. Result and Discussion

Persuasion tells the story of the Elliot family, who continues an extravagant lifestyle to appear wealthy and maintain a high social rank, even while facing serious financial decline. Sir Walter Elliot frequently reads the Baronetage, a printed record of titled families, to remind himself of his inherited status. When his daughter Anne becomes engaged to Captain Frederick Wentworth, a naval officer without fortune or family connection, Lady Russell persuades her to end the engagement because Wentworth does not match the family's social expectation. Because of rising debt, Sir Walter eventually rents out Kellynch Hall and moves the family to Bath. Eight years later, Wentworth returns as a wealthy and respected officer, and he and Anne become engaged again. Throughout the story, the author shows how the family's spending, judgment, and social behaviour reflect the three motives of conspicuous consumption explained by Veblen (1899), namely pecuniary emulation, invidious comparison, and conformity and avoidance of disapproval.



4.1 Pecuniary Emulation

Pecuniary emulation refers to the desire to imitate and match the visible wealth and lifestyle of people in a higher social position (Veblen, 1899). Sir Walter Elliot represents a person who builds his entire identity on inherited rank instead of personal achievement. He never reads any book other than the Baronetage, the printed register of England's titled families, and he turns to it in moments of financial distress rather than facing his real problems. It is narrated that he finds in this book "consolation in a distressed one" and admiration for "the limited remnant of the earliest patents" (9).

Instead of dealing with his debt, Sir Walter retreats further into the performance of his rank. St. Clair (2004) explains that in Regency England, printed records of lineage function as an authoritative social text that anchors a person's identity within a recognised hierarchy, which explains why Sir Walter depends so strongly on this book.

This obsession with rank also shapes his daughter Elizabeth, who keeps attending balls and travelling to London every year to remain visible in high society, described as "opening every ball of credit" for "thirteen winters" (13).

This repeated yearly spending slowly builds debt that the family struggles to control. A similar pattern appears in the flexing behaviour common on Indonesian social media, where people display holidays, luxury items, and fashionable lifestyles to gain public recognition, sometimes beyond their financial capacity (Badar et al., 2025). This similarity supports the view of Wellek and Warren (1949) that literature reflects patterns of human behaviour that continue across different periods and cultures.

When financial crisis becomes impossible to avoid, Sir Walter refuses to sell any part of his estate, saying that he "would never disgrace his name so far" (17). He also rejects a plan to cut expenses on travel, servants, and horses, insisting that such reduction would be "disgraceful" (20), because these items function as visible markers of gentlemanly status rather than optional comfort. Anne recognises this

attitude when she notices that even a small reduction, such as giving up "one pair of horses," feels as painful to her father as losing everything (20). This shows that once a certain standard of living becomes attached to social identity, reducing it feels like losing that identity altogether.

Even after the family moves to a smaller house in Camden Place, the same desire to appear superior continues. Their new home is described as having "many decided advantages over all the others" they know of (154), which shows that a smaller residence does not reduce their need to display status. Crowley (2001) notes that interior decoration in this period commonly functions as a visible marker of refinement, which explains Sir Walter's continued attention to appearance, including the many looking glasses in his former dressing room and his habit of recommending skincare products to improve other people's appearance. This concern connects to a similar pattern in Indonesia, where skincare routines and cosmetic procedures are used to meet social expectations of beauty, especially among young people who feel pressure to look attractive online and offline (Jakpat, 2024).

The fear of losing status also shapes how the Elliot family manages new social connections in Bath. When the family discovers a distant tie to the aristocratic Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple, they treat her brief and formal reply as a major success and display her calling card "wherever they might be most visible" (167). Sir Walter also evaluates strangers based only on appearance, once complaining that he saw "eighty-seven women go by" on Bond Street "without there being a tolerable face among them" (158). These examples show that Sir Walter constantly measures social worth through visible signs rather than personal quality, and this habit appears again when he tries to hide his financial difficulty, admitting that he "could not have borne the degradation of being known to design letting his house" (22-23). Altogether, these examples show that pecuniary emulation drives the Elliot family to protect an image of wealth even as



their real financial condition continues to decline.

4.2 Invidious Comparison

Invidious comparison refers to the act of judging and ranking people based on relative status, appearance, or possession (Veblen, 1899). Copeland (1995) explains that in early nineteenth century England, visible spending functions as an important way for families to display and protect their social rank, and this motive shapes many of the Elliot family's judgments in the novel.

Sir Walter constantly compares people around him to his own rank and appearance. When Admiral Baldwin, a naval officer who earns his position through service rather than inheritance, is mentioned in conversation, Sir Walter assumes he looks far older than his real age, linking his weathered appearance to the idea that earned status looks less refined than inherited status (28). The same pattern of judgment appears within his own family, since he values Elizabeth more than Anne mainly because Elizabeth actively supports the family's social visibility through balls and travel, while Anne's intelligence and kindness receive little recognition because these qualities are less visible in public life (12).

This habit of judging people by rank rather than character also shapes Sir Walter's view of Captain Wentworth. He originally dismisses Wentworth as unsuitable for Anne because Wentworth has "nothing but himself to recommend him" and no secure prospects (35), and Anne, influenced by this same social pressure, ends the engagement even though it costs her years of happiness, since "an early loss of bloom and spirits" follows this decision (36). Years later, after Wentworth returns with "five and twenty thousand pounds" and a respected naval career (278), Sir Walter still dismisses him as "nobody" and "unconnected" (32), showing that his judgment depends entirely on visible social standing rather than personal merit or achievement.

This pattern of comparison extends into the family's management of relationships in Bath. Mr. William Elliot, who once insulted

the family by marrying for money, is welcomed back because he now matches their idea of social worth, while Captain Wentworth is only introduced through his connection to the Crofts, a family the Elliots consider lower in status (186-187, 212). A similar habit appears in modern Indonesian social media use, where people often carefully choose which friendships and interactions to display online in order to protect their public image, favouring visible connections with influencers or popular accounts over ordinary relationships (Lim, 2017). This shows that, like the Elliot family's careful management of their connection with Lady Dalrymple, many people today treat social relationships as symbols of status rather than as personal bonds.

4.3 Conformity and Avoidance of Disapproval

Conformity and avoidance of disapproval refer to behaviour shaped mainly by the fear of losing social respect rather than by the desire to improve one's social position (Veblen, 1899). This pressure operates quietly through the Elliot family's unspoken rules about who they can associate with and what they must avoid being seen doing.

Lady Russell, a close family friend, shows how fully a person can accept these social rules. Her strong belief in rank and lineage leads her to advise Anne against marrying Wentworth because of his uncertain financial future (18, 35). Anne accepts this advice and later describes the decision as something she once believed was "indiscreet" and "improper" (36), though she later reflects that she yielded to "persuasion exerted on the side of safety, not of risk" (274), which shows that she begins to question whether social duty and personal happiness should always be treated as the same thing.

Sir Walter also strongly defends social hierarchy, criticising the navy because it lets people gain honour through personal effort rather than birth, which he sees as damaging to inherited privilege (27-28). He shows the same concern when he disapproves of Anne's



friendship with Mrs. Smith, a poor widow, dismissing her only by her modest background rather than her genuine kindness (176-177). Meanwhile, Anne begins to value personal character over social rank, shown when she describes good company simply as clever and well-informed people (167), a definition Mr. Elliot immediately corrects by insisting that good company requires only “birth, education, and manners” (168).

Fear of disapproval also shapes the family's public choices in Bath. They feel obligated to attend a concert associated with Lady Dalrymple, since the novel notes that “of course they must attend” (202), showing that the decision comes from social expectation rather than personal interest. This pressure appears most clearly when Elizabeth avoids hosting a proper dinner for the visiting Musgrove family because it would reveal the household's reduced number of servants, choosing instead to host an evening gathering that hides this decline behind an appearance of elegance (246). This choice shows that avoiding disapproval does not reduce spending, but instead redirects it toward whatever display best conceals the family's real condition.

By the end of the novel, Anne and Wentworth choose to follow their own judgment instead of social expectation, shown through Wentworth's letter that says he has “loved none but you” despite the years that separated them (266). However, Sir Walter accepts their reunion mainly because Wentworth now holds wealth and status that match the family's standards (278, 280), which shows that although Anne grows beyond the pressure of conformity, the rest of the Elliot family continues to value the same social standards that shaped their choices from the beginning.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that the motives of pecuniary emulation, invidious comparison, and conformity and avoidance of disapproval work together to shape status driven behaviour. Pecuniary emulation drives individuals to protect a certain social image even when their spending exceeds their real

financial capacity, which eventually leads to serious debt and loss of assets. Invidious comparison shows that social worth is often measured through rank and visible connection rather than personal character, and this pattern can lead to decisions that cause long term personal cost. Conformity and avoidance of disapproval reveals that fear of public judgment can shape behaviour more strongly than personal need, since social standards are easier to raise than to lower once they become part of daily habit.

Beyond its literary context, this pattern reflects a broader social condition that continues to exist in different periods and cultures. People still spend to build and protect a certain image, compare themselves with others through visible achievement, and adjust their behaviour to avoid social judgment, even when these choices do not match their actual financial situation. This tendency becomes more visible in the era of social media, where lifestyle display and public comparison happen more often and more publicly than before. Recognising this pattern is important, because spending driven mainly by the wish to impress others, rather than by real need, often leads to financial instability and a lifestyle built on appearance rather than genuine well-being. A more balanced approach to consumption, one that considers actual needs and long-term financial stability rather than social pressure alone, can help individuals build a healthier relationship with their own resources.

Future research can extend this discussion by applying Ecocriticism as a theoretical framework. Ecocriticism examines the relationship between human behaviour, material consumption, and the natural environment, and this approach can offer a broader understanding of how the desire for status and material display connects to attitudes toward resources and the environment. Since Ecocriticism remains rarely applied to Jane Austen's work, future studies using this approach can contribute a new perspective to the study of consumption patterns in literature and their connection to environmental awareness.



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