

Conspicuous Consumption: Veblen's Evolutionary Framework

Asma BELAZOUZ¹

¹ University of Algiers 2, Algeria

asma.belazouz@univ-alger2.dz

Received: 14/07/2024,

Accepted: 13/12/2024,

Published: 25/12/2024

ABSTRACT: *Evolutionary economics marked the era of intellectual progressivism and technological growth in the United States of America. Thorstein Veblen theorized on the consumer behavior of the leisure class and the will of low-ranked classes to imitate the practice of the higher ones. He coined the phrase conspicuous consumption to refer to the ostentatious display of wealth and goods with an abstinence from work as an indicator of social success in the American society. This paper discusses Veblen's evolutionary framework that helps explain contemporary consumption attitudes by highlighting the influence of social status, cultural evolution, and the resulting economic behaviors. Social media amplifies these dynamics, creating a society where visible consumption is a key determinant of social hierarchy and personal identity.*

KEYWORDS: Conspicuous consumption, Cultural evolution, Evolutionary economics, Social media, Social Status.

المخلص: اتسم عصر التقدم الفكري والنمو التكنولوجي في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية بالاقتصاد التطوري حسب نظرية ثورشتاين فيبلين حول سلوك المستهلكين في الطبقة الترفيفية ورغبة الطبقات الدنيا في تقليد ممارسات الطبقات العليا. وقد صاغ فيبلين مصطلح "الاستهلاك البارز" للإشارة إلى العرض الفخم للثروة والسلع مع الامتناع عن العمل كدليل على النجاح الاجتماعي في المجتمع الأمريكي. ومن هذا المنظور، يناقش هذا البحث إطار فيبلين التطوري الذي يساعد في تفسير مواقف الاستهلاك المعاصرة من خلال تسليط الضوء على تأثير الوضع الاجتماعي والتطور الثقافي والسلوكيات الاقتصادية الناتجة. كما يشير إلى دور وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في تضخيم هذه الديناميكيات، مما يخلق مجتمعاً يكون فيه الاستهلاك الظاهر هو المحدد الرئيسي للهرمية الاجتماعية والهوية الشخصية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاقتصاد التطوري، الاستهلاك البارز، الوضع الاجتماعي، التطور الثقافي، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي.

Introduction

At the end of the 19th and the turn of the 20th century, intellectual progressivists in the United States believed that humanity's challenges could be understood and addressed through reason, science, and technological advancement. These strides in knowledge, coupled with Darwin's theory of natural selection, reinforced a belief in evolutionary progress that extended beyond biology to social and moral development. This evolutionary outlook, rejecting the mechanistic view of human nature that had emerged from the industrial revolution, suggested that individual behavior and personal conduct were crucial to societal growth, just as the environment shaped human development.

However, this period also triggered a profound critique of the excesses it produced. Writers like Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner captured the contradictions of the age, coining the term "Gilded Age" to mock the opulence of the few that masked widespread corruption, poverty, and inequality. Beneath the gold-plated surface lay deep social divisions and the relentless pursuit of status. The swift transformation from agrarian society to urban industrialization reshaped America's cultural landscape, driving its citizens toward increasingly materialistic goals.

One of the most significant shifts during this period was the departure from the collective ideal of the "general good"—a principle enshrined in foundational American documents like the *Declaration of Independence*, with its call to "We the People." This ethos of communal well-being gave way to a more individualistic worldview. Social Darwinism, championed by thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, applied Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection to society, arguing that just as species adapt and survive in nature, individuals must navigate societal forces to thrive. According to this philosophy, survival depended not on collective uplift but on individual adaptability to social and economic conditions.

This ideological shift also aligned with the economic doctrine of *Laissez-Faire*, which advocated minimal governmental interference in personal and business affairs. Supporters of this view believed that the free market, like the natural world, functioned best when left to its own devices, with success determined by competition and self-interest. In this sense, both Social Darwinism and *Laissez-Faire* economics rejected the notion of

collective responsibility, emphasizing personal ambition and the pursuit of self-interest as essential to progress and survival in an increasingly competitive society.

Economically, the institutionalization of capitalism became a defining force that shaped the culture of the time. The pursuit of wealth, both through making and spending money, emerged as a central characteristic of the era. Modernity came to be associated with ownership and material success, as individuals sought to affirm their social status through the accumulation of possessions. High social standing was marked by unrestrained consumption, abstention from labor, and lavish spending, which became symbols of prestige and belonging to the upper class. In his seminal work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen offered a scathing critique of this culture of consumption. He coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe the act of publicly and competitively displaying one’s wealth and status through extravagant goods and behaviors. Veblen argued that such consumption was less about fulfilling genuine needs and more about satisfying irrational desires rooted in a need for social recognition. The display of luxury goods was intended not only to showcase wealth but also to assert uniqueness and superiority in a competitive social hierarchy (Veblen 1899, 35).

This drive for consumption was deeply embedded in social behavior, where individuals sought validation through their choices in goods and services. Accordingly, “individuals emulate the consumption patterns of other individuals situated at higher points in the hierarchy. The social norms that govern such emulation change as the economy and its social fabric evolve over time” (Trigg 2001, 99). It was not simply a matter of personal satisfaction but rather a strategic act to signal one’s position within society. As a result, social mobility in America seemed increasingly tied to one’s ability to participate in and perform through conspicuous consumption, suggesting that status and identity were, in many ways, products of one’s spending habits. This drive for consumption, as Veblen observed, was not merely about personal fulfillment but became a key mechanism through which individuals signaled their place within a competitive social hierarchy. The strategic display of wealth and luxury goods acted as a form of social currency,

where one's value and status were directly tied to visible spending habits. Social mobility in America increasingly relied on the ability to consume and showcase these consumptions, transforming material goods into symbols of identity and prestige.

Today, this theory of conspicuous consumption finds a striking parallel in the digital age, particularly through social media platforms. "With its popularity and characteristics of publicity, efficiency, timely feedback, and extensive audience, social media has become an important channel for people to display conspicuous consumption" (Lu, Zhao, Song, & Song 2024, 1208-1209). The desire to display status and uniqueness has been amplified by the internet's global reach, where one's presence and influence are measured by the visibility of their routine. "People tend to display conspicuous consumption behavior in cyberspace and are influenced by other individuals' behaviors in the network" (Lu, Zhao, Song, & Song 2024, 1209). Groups and communities are digitally renewing the conspicuous display of their wealth showing behaviors and lifestyle options that operate dynamically to position them higher in the social hierarchy. In a world where posts, images, and likes serve as the new markers of success, individuals curate their online personas to reflect affluence, exclusivity, and desirability. Social media has thus become the modern arena for conspicuous consumption, where the display of luxury—whether it be high-end fashion, extravagant vacations, or the latest gadgets—serves as a digital badge of one's social standing.

Much like the lavish spending habits Veblen critiqued, today's online displays of wealth are often driven less by genuine need and more by the urge to fit into a socially constructed image of success. The validation sought through likes, shares, and followers mirrors the competitive nature of status-seeking that defined the Gilded Age. Consequently, conspicuous consumption now manifests not just in physical goods, but in carefully curated experiences and lifestyle choices, crafted to capture attention and assert one's place in the social hierarchy of the digital age.

Building on Veblen's evolutionary framework, this paper explores how his theory of conspicuous consumption continues to shape contemporary attitudes toward consumption, particularly in the context of social media. By examining the interplay between social status, cultural evolution, and economic behaviors, the paper delves into how digital platforms have

amplified these dynamics, making visible consumption a central factor in determining social hierarchy and personal identity today. Furthermore, it will reflect on the ways in which social media not only reflects but also intensifies the competitive display of wealth and lifestyle, transforming modern consumption into a performative act that influences both individual self-perception and societal values. Through this lens, the paper seeks to illuminate how the principles Veblen critiqued more than a century ago persist and evolve in today's digital age.

The Theory of the Leisure Class

In his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen discusses that showing one's wealth through possessions had been occurring for centuries. Exhibitions of trophies, slaves, and possessions facilitated the achieving of social fulfilment for men. According to the author, this was the barbaric stage of the modern conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899, 3-6). The process through which individuals accomplish a high social ranking is an inherent one. It had for long been embedded in the collective unconsciousness of the people increasing the need of individuals to consume creating a high demand for goods and services.

Veblen argues that industrial growth, technological advancement, and a surplus in production followed by a continuing rise in consumption introduced a new economic era. All the aforementioned features share a common characteristic, that of evolution. Veblen, in fact, attacked the static economic orthodoxy of the time that considered consumers' behavior from a mass point of view regardless of their individual impulses. He directed his study towards a status-driven consumption approach through which one consumes in order to gain a membership to a wider network of ostentatious consuming.

This idea explains the behavior of negligibly spending wealth and time on commodities, goods and services with an abstinence from working by the leisure class as an indicator of success. This stood as a sign of wealth and power that urged individuals of lower social classes to imitate. Thus, ostentatious conspicuous consumption was the main characteristic of presumably successful individuals in the US linking success to valueless materialistic ideals playing not only a major role in reshaping the culture and mind of the country but of its economy as well.

According to Mason, in his *Conspicuous Consumption: A Study of Exceptional Consumer Behaviour*, the public phenomena of the 'idle rich' was strongly rejected between 1890 and 1910 urging for a public action to be taken in an attempt to control this overwhelming emulation of the leisure class (Mason 1990). The surplus of wealth and overspending were met by progressivist political programs promoting better educational values and diminishing pecuniary competitive spending.

The reception of Veblenian thought was wide amongst American citizens,

He was all over the Nation, the Dial, the New Republic and the rest of them, and his books and pamphlets began to pour from the presses, and the newspapers reported his every wink and whisper, and everybody who was anybody began gabbling about him...There were Veblenists, Veblen clubs, Veblen remedies for the sorrows of the world. There were even in Chicago, Veblen girls (Diggins 1999, 212).

Nonetheless, Veblen's views on consumer attitude, being driven by irrationality and status seeking, led neoclassical economists to marginalize his ideology. It was not until The Great Depression and its disastrous impact on US economy that the consuming pattern of the rich had been questioned.

Economist theorists remained, however, skeptical about Veblen's approach that was based on social consideration and individual behavior, since it attacked the orthodoxy of their dogmas. They described the manner with which people buy to be a static maximization of utility according to exogenous preferences (Trigg 2001). Veblen's genius lies in the evolutionary framework he adopted in studying the consumption and economy of the time. Accordingly, acquisition preferences are determined socially through one's position in the hierarchy of their society. Individuals, thus emulate the consumption pattern of those ranked above them. It is an evolutionary framework that Veblen utilizes since social norms that direct the process of emulation might vary according to the changes of economic and social standards that evolve continuously.

Subsequently, social understanding became an essential factor in defining one's habits of consuming and the economy of the nation. One of the most prominent theorists on consumption was Bourdieu who wrote in 1984 *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*; and in 1990, along with Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. Bourdieu is said to have been greatly influenced by Veblen's works, mainly his theories on the unconscious aspects of the conspicuous consumption and the creation of the leisure class (Trigg 2001). He agrees with Veblen who explains that consumers are not necessarily conscious about their desire to spend,

For the great body of the people in any modern community, the proximate ground of expenditure in excess of what is required for physical comfort is not a conscious effort to excel in the expensiveness of their visible consumption, so much as it is a desire to live up to the conventional standard of decency in the amount and grade of goods consumed (Veblen 1899, 48).

This unconscious imposition to spend is driven by emulation which was the aspect mostly ignored by critics.

Bourdieu adopted Veblen's framework maintaining this unconscious aspect and developing it further in his studies. According to him, the myth of conspicuous spending begins at school where children are taught that capital culture in upbringing and privileges of some over the others is a natural matter. The consideration of the inherent aspect in the desire to showcase wealth is essential. This reflects a broader cultural phenomenon where individuals internalize the values and norms of their social environment, leading to a form of consumption that transcends material need. He further introduces the concept of 'habitus' that he defines as:

principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu 1990, 53).

Thus, conspicuous consumption is not strictly determined by a set of social or economic rules but the desire to waste money and time

ostentatiously. This could also signify that consumption derives from a set of cultural habits that had been evolving through time.

Bourdieu's framework helps to explain how the desire to display wealth becomes embedded in everyday practices and is perpetuated through new channels, particularly in today's digital spaces. The competitive nature of social media amplifies these behaviors, as individuals seek validation and status through their consumption habits, often unconsciously adhering to the patterns dictated by their habitus. Thus, Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides a critical lens for analyzing the cultural and social dynamics of conspicuous consumption in contemporary society. Consequently, their consumption choices are not merely personal preferences but are influenced by broader societal trends and expectations, reinforcing existing social hierarchies.

Additionally, consuming could be by large understood as a psychological process through which an individual defines their status. Psychologists discuss that consumers relate to two important factors, one's relation to their own past experiences, and references to the social group to which they belong or desire to (Wann 1964). Economists developed strategies that could convince individuals to consume making the unconscious of the nation their first target. Howard Zinn explains that:

The industrialists and the political leaders talked of prosperity as if it were classless, as if everyone gained from Morgan's loans (...) When the United States entered the war, it was the rich who took even more direct charge of the economy. Financier Bernard Baruch headed the War Industries Board, the most powerful of the wartime government agencies. Bankers, railroad men, and industrialists dominated these agencies (Zinn 1980, 339).

Convincing words and communicative images were sent to people through advertising. It had become a rivaling force with religious texts and political agendas. Economists often declared advertising to be a sharing of a set of information about products, services and markets. Whereas it first and foremost reshapes minds through appealing to needs, emotions and values. The US economist and critic John Kenneth Galbraith discusses the importance of the maintaining of advertising in

order for consumers to keep consuming. Thus, businessmen no longer produce in order to meet a need or satisfy an urge but to sell,

If production creates the wants it seeks to satisfy, or if the wants emerge *pari passu* [at an equal pace or rate] with the production, then the urgency of the wants can no longer be used to defend the urgency of the production. Production only fills a void that it has itself created (Galbraith 1957, 40).

In contemporary economies, production and consumer wants are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The production of goods and services is not simply a response to pre-existing consumer needs but actively generates new desires and wants. This challenges the traditional economic justification that production is necessary to satisfy urgent consumer demands. Instead, it suggests that the urgency of production is a construct, driven by the very needs it cultivates through marketing and advertising.

Today, advertising evolved through social media generating and renewing the organization of practices and representations of classes and their possessions. *Habitus*, conspicuous consumption and their visibility crossed the digital frontiers legitimizing social media displaying and witnessing of ostentatious lifestyles. As a result, production fills a self-created void, where the demand for goods is continuously fueled by the supply and promotion of those goods, rather than by genuine, independent consumer necessity. Thorstein Veblen's evolutionary framework provides a profound understanding of contemporary consumption attitudes, where social status and cultural evolution significantly shape economic behavior. In today's society, platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok allow individuals to display their wealth and lifestyle to a broad audience. This visibility creates a social hierarchy based on material possessions and visible affluence. Influencers and celebrities, who often occupy higher social strata, set consumption trends that others aspire to follow, reinforcing the importance of material goods as symbols of status.

Evolutionary *Habitus*: A Social Media Conspicuous Consumption

In the digital age, influence and visibility are the new markers of wealth. Social media presence, driven by the interest of the leisure class and a

higher status, reach broader audiences creating an evolutionary habitus where conspicuous consumption is embedded in users' behavior. Influencers, aware that with greater consumption comes greater influence, redefine social status for the digital era. They not only progressively reshape and transform consumption but dynamically perpetuate pursuing it within a modern framework. Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption finds a modern stage across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Snapchat, where the competitive exhibition of a lavish lifestyle and material wealth has become a form of social currency. "More people than ever before now engage in some form of luxury consumption with the goal to enrich their lives" (Hommerberg & Lindgren 2023, 16). Individuals from diverse backgrounds partake in what was once the exclusive domain of the elite. Material possessions and accessibility to luxury goods and services are increasingly viewed as symbols of success, fulfillment, and personal identity.

On Instagram, audiences visualize the evolution of social hierarchies and the performance social status. Influencers and celebrities that rise to fame display a luxurious lifestyle through designer items and exclusive experiences. Their success in being visible is mirrored through the number of likes, comments, and new followers a post may generate. The more validation they acquire, the larger their social capital becomes. This reinforcement of social expectation to showcase wealth as a marker of success aligns with Veblen's ideas on conspicuous consumption. Instagram has created a habitus where habits evolve with user behavior, promoting a cycle where higher visible consumption is equated with greater social status.

Brands partner with influencers to present luxury items as must-have status symbols. This evolutionary advertisement reinforces the wants and needs contemporary economies create. Unlike traditional ads, influencers' personal recommendations and validation of a product render it authentic and necessary for the visible high status of the leisure class. Instagram posts, TikTok's short-form video format, YouTube's "luxury haul" and "unboxing," and Snapchat's temporary Stories create a unique dynamic for conspicuous consumption that foster a habitus where the display of wealth, temporarily or repetitively and in detail or briefly, is seen as sufficient for social validation. This approach favors scarcity

for a more unique and desirable experience. Veblen explains that the need to possess unique and exclusive items aligns with conspicuous consumption habits. This not only sets a specific pattern of consumption but becomes part of the consumer's own identity increasing the urgency of wants and the satisfaction of their acquisitions perpetuating this habitus.

This transformation from traditional to digital conspicuous consumption signifies a profound cultural evolution. Societies express social status through platforms that have democratized the display of wealth. Individuals engage with influencers, replicate their consumption, and aspire for a similar status. Culturally and socially, consumers seek to visually perform elites' practices and display high end markers seeking a comparable validation and competitive positioning. This shift toward social platform public validation transforms traditional concepts of social mobility. Status is no longer inherited but achieved and evolutionary. Accordingly, conspicuous consumption in the digital age becomes an evolving cultural habitus. It reshapes individual identities around public validation, material values, and social worth.

Conclusion

Modern societies and cultures are shaped by visible markers of status, identity, and belonging. Social media has transformed how people express identity, reshaping consumption into a public, performative act rather than a private choice. Value systems, aspirations, and social pressures prevalent in today's digital world reveal how individuals seek validation, approval, and self-worth through material displays. This behavior, identified as conspicuous consumption, uncovers how economic status is displayed, perpetuated, and normalized as a form of social capital perpetuating cycles of consumerism and social competition individually, amongst peers, and publicly.

Comparing one's own status to social peers on social networks leads to a consumption driven by the desire to match and surpass in visibility. That is, conspicuous consumption becomes competitive and evolutionary even in digital spaces. As societies become more affluent, the aspiration to own luxury goods or have unique experiences becomes more widespread, even among those who are not traditionally or inherently wealthy. Brands

leverage these aspirations by marketing their products as essential to achieving a desirable lifestyle, thus reinforcing the social importance of consumption.

Veblen argues that societies become less close-knit as people consume goods in order to integrate a higher class. Individuals seem to integrate in their society's culture through external and materialistic means rather than through intrinsic values and principles. In fact, conspicuous theory is highly relevant today in a social network dominated world. Platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok have amplified the visibility of consumption. Users showcase their wealth and status setting trends and new standards to widen the consumption chain. Influencers and celebrities act as trendsetters, creating aspirational benchmarks that followers strive to meet, while peer influence further pressures individuals to conform to these elevated standards. This results in increased demand for luxury goods and services, prompting brands to expand their offerings and marketing efforts globally. As individuals integrate into their society's culture through materialistic means, valuing external symbols of wealth over intrinsic principles, social media emphasizes material wealth over genuine connections, leading to a more superficial social fabric. Consequently, societies risk becoming less close-knit, with relationships and social bonds increasingly based on external and materialistic measures of worth.

References

- Bourdieu, P., & J. C. Passeron. 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2018). "The Affordances of Social Media Platforms." In J. Burgess, A. Marwick, & T. Poell (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media* (pp. 233–253).
- Diggins, J. P. (1999). *Thorstein Veblen: theorist of the leisure class*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Galbraith, J. (1957). *The Affluent Society*. 4th ed., London: Pelican Books.
- Hommerberg, C., & Lindgren, M. (2023). *Depicting the Consumer of Experiential Luxury: Identities, Values and Consumption Goals in Online*

Reviewer Discourse on Wine, Perfume and Chocolate. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Lu, Y., Zhao, T., Song, S., & Song, W. (2024). Can Self-Presentation on Social Media Increase Individuals' Conspicuous Consumption Tendency? A Mixed-Method Empirical Study on WeChat in China. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, 19(2), 1206-1221.
- Mason, R. (1990). *Conspicuous Consumption: A Study of Exceptional Consumer Behaviour*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Trigg, B., A. (2001). *Veblen, Bourdieu, and Conspicuous Consumption*. *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 35, No. 1. pp. 99-115
- Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory of the Leisure Class: an Economic Study of Institutions*. New York: Random House.
- Wann, T. (1964). *Behaviorism and Phenomenology: Contrasting Bases for Modern Psychology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zinn, H. (1980). *A People's History of the United States, 1492-Present*. US: Harper & Row; HarperCollins.