

New dynamics of social status and distinction

Marketing Theory

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Abstract

We explore emerging dynamics of social status and distinction in liquid consumption. The new logic of distinction is having the flexibility to embrace and adopt new identity positions, projects, and possibilities and the ability to attract attention. The importance of flexibility and attention as resources emerged from the social sciences literature in the domains of digital, access based, and urban consumption as being the most important for achieving distinction in the contemporary marketplace. We then conceptually reexamine conspicuous consumption and taste and show that status signaling now relies upon inconspicuousness, non-ownership including experiences, and authenticity based on knowledge and craftsmanship, all of which are difficult to emulate. Our contribution lies in integrating disparate literature on social status and consumption within one conceptual space. We also build upon the concept of liquid consumption by outlining exactly how liquidity affects status and distinction, an area which has not been explored to date.

Keywords

Attention, distinction, flexibility, inconspicuous consumption, liquid consumption, status, Veblen

[The culture creatives] share flats and often share bedrooms. They don't have space for cups and saucers and dining rooms, so it makes more sense to head out to a café for breakfast. They save on ownership and travel light. They wear skinny jeans instead of suits. They have one or two expensive electronic products, but on the whole, they are less materialistic than their parents' generation. They buy bicycles rather than Porsches . . . They work, most likely, in a job powered by the internet . . . They don't have as much money as their "loadsamoney" forebears from the financial services in the 80 s and 90 s, and as a consequence their spending patterns are driven by novelty rather than cost.

—The Guardian (2015)

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If you walk around central London or any global city, the type of consumer lifestyle described above is ubiquitous. Culture creatives work in hives of flexible co-working spaces, socialize in pop-up art galleries and food markets, and frequent multifunctional spaces, such as cafes that double up as bicycle repair shops and vintage clothing stores that morph into bars at night. McWilliams, in his treatise on the Flat White Economy (2015), named after the proliferation of artisan coffee culture associated with this trend, argues that today's economy is being driven by the people described above: they have limited economic resources and ownership of space and are less materialistic than their parents (The Guardian, 2015). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) have described this type of consumption as liquid consumption, defined as consumption which is dematerialized, ephemeral, and access based. Liquid consumption raises questions about the nature of social status and distinction in late modernity. For example, with a focus on collecting experiences (Keinan and Kivetz, 2010; Weinberger et al., 2017) and accessing affluent lifestyles in the sharing economy (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Belk, 2010), does traditional luxury—exclusive brands, property, and ownership—continue to serve as status symbols? In conditions of professional and economic precarity, which characterizes the social conditions of the lifestyle described above, is status still tied to money or stable corporate jobs? Research has begun to highlight that status can be decoupled from the pursuit of a strict class society in recent times (e.g. Heath and Potter, 2005; Pakulski and Waters, 1996), which we now build and expand upon. While instability and insecurity of income associated with itinerant jobs was shunned in the past, professional and economic precarity can be considered valuable and a learning experience, especially in global cities (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Gill and Pratt, 2008). These flexible forms of consumption and work suggest new dynamics of how status and distinction are conferred.

The rise of this type of lifestyle as a driver of success in today's economy indicates an important shift in what is valued. It represents a movement from solidity to liquidity (Bauman, 2000, 2007a) in many core aspects of life, such as work, living, and shopping arrangements. These changes are not just idiosyncratic to the youth in urban areas, but related to several global consumer trends, including the sharing economy, digital technology, dominance of service economies in the West and the shifting of production to the East, shortening of product life cycles, a shift toward flexible work, and an increase in global mobilities and multiculturalism. While we know that life has become more liquid in a variety of arenas, and how that affects consumption in general (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), the implications for how status and distinction may be changing have not yet been explored. New forms of currencies for movement within social hierarchies have emerged (cf. Fraser, 2013), but we do not know how these fit into or differ from current ways that the marketing literature understands status distinctions.

Recent consumer research has started to highlight shifts in status-related consumption. Some scholars examine the precarity of social status and class positions among the middle-class consumers in the West (Price et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2018). Others have started to map out the new elites and the dynamics of status games in developing countries, such as the emergence of the luxury consumer in China (Dion and Borraz, 2017), the entrepreneurial elite of Indian's rural areas (Vikas et al., 2015), and the Islamic middle class in Turkey (Kravets and Sandikci, 2014). This line of research is highlighting the dynamics of status-related consumption in late modernity. However, we know little about the new strategies and capitals that lead to status acquisition as well as the transformations in status-related consumption.

Thus, the aim of this article is to explore these new dynamics. In doing so, we address Dubois and Ordabayeva's (2015) call for a better understanding within marketing of social status as a key construct in social sciences. We take a conceptual approach. Following MacInnis (2011), we

envision what the new dynamics of status and distinction are, considering the shifts in the macro environment. We are encouraging initial conceptualization of a shift in dynamics of status hierarchy and status consumption that has important implications for foundational theories in marketing. The goal is to stimulate further research, particularly empirical research, which can more clearly establish boundary conditions and theoretical precision around the evolving nature of status and distinction over time. Doing this when a phenomenon is only just emerging, even if more challenging, is key to marketing's knowledge development process and "lies at the heart of our discipline's dynamism and long term impact" (Yadav, 2018: 365).

Our research question is, what are the new dynamics of social status and distinction in liquid consumption? In answering this question, we identify two new resources for gaining status: flexibility and attention. The importance of these resources emerged naturally from the social sciences literature in the domains of digital, access based, and urban consumption as being the most important for achieving distinction in the contemporary marketplace. We then conceptually examine social status in liquid modernity and implications for consumption, specifically conspicuous consumption and taste. Our contribution lies in integrating disparate literature on social status and consumption within one conceptual space (cf. MacInnis, 2011). We also build upon Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) by outlining exactly how liquidity affects status and distinction, an area which these authors suggest would provide fruitful future research but do not conceptualize themselves.

The nature of contemporary society

Social hierarchies are reorganizing and fragmenting, and consumer lifestyles have emerged as a result of the liquidification of society (Bauman, 2000). Liquid modernity represents the contemporary era of modernity—where social structures are no longer stable or long term and, thus, cannot serve as "frames of reference for human actions and long-term projects" (Bauman, 2007a: 1). Social institutions, such as social class, nation-state, community, and religion, are undergoing rapid change and transformation (Bauman, 2000). Bauman's notion has its lineage in theories of globalization (Appadurai, 1990; Urry, 2007), soft capitalism and knowledge society (Thrift, 1997), network society (Castells, 1996), and risk society (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Beck, 1992). While Bauman emphasized the change and instability of late modernity, other scholars have examined how society is becoming accelerated (Rosa, 2013). Acceleration is characterized by the immediacy (e.g. proximity and instantaneity of content) produced by new media technologies (e.g. Internet of Things/digital) as the cultural principle that is increasingly replacing the industrial underpinnings of machine speed (Tomlinson, 2007). Acceleration is not only in the technological and economic sphere but has become cultural by speeding up the pace of the social and everyday life (Husemann and Eckhardt, 2019; Rosa, 2013).

The notion of liquid modernity explores the increasing fluidity, speed, and scale of change of social life that undermines all notions of durability. In this way, it acknowledges the liquidification of social hierarchies in the sense that social hierarchy and status can be ephemeral and changing. Fast liquidification of social structures can create economic and social uncertainty and insecurities; it may create new social spaces of freedom where new forms of status games and distinction emerge. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) examine how consumption may be changing in liquid modernity and is becoming more ephemeral, access based, and dematerialized. Ephemeral refers to the expiration date of value increasingly shortening. Access consists of transactions that can be market mediated but where no transfer of ownership takes place (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012: 881).

Dematerialization indicates that we use fewer or no materials to deliver the same level of functionality. We build on this research by examining how social status and distinction as evidenced in consumption are also starting to change.

The contemporary liquid condition is distinct from the preceding era: that of solid modernity (Bauman, 2000, 2007b). Ownership and possession ensured comfort and esteem in a society where “bulk is power” and “big is beautiful” (Bauman, 2000). Social status and esteem were provided by volumes of spacious, heavy, solid, and immovable possessions. Status and affluence were indicated by clear and enduring markers, such as visible luxury brand names, big real estate property, ownership of large and luxury cars, and conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/1994).

Liquid modernity is in contrast a “liquefied, flowing, dispersed, scattered and deregulated version of modernity . . .” (Bauman, 2000: 149). Solidity, fixity, and territorial possession are not necessarily an asset in liquidity; rather mobility, flexibility, and openness to change emerge as the currencies of liquid modernity (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Bardhi et al., 2012). Liquid modernity is full of uncertainty, instability, and insecurity, which makes it very difficult for many groups of consumers to manage liquid conditions successfully (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Price et al., 2017; Ulver and Ostberg, 2014). It creates new forms and sources of power and inequality from which fresh opportunities and risks arise (Elliott, 2007). Next, we examine the challenges of liquid modernity and consumption to status and distinction.

New determinants of social hierarchies

Social status hierarchy orders people along material and immaterial dimensions accepted as status markers within a population (Dubois and Ordabayeva, 2015). In liquid modernity, status hierarchies are increasingly ephemeral and consumption-related status signals are also shifting. Existing elites and hierarchies still remain, but at the same time, we are seeing the emergence of new elites, who have become so due to their knowledge and flexibility, and a new underclass, which consists of people that cannot manage liquidity, the shrinking working class associated with industrial production in mid America, for example. While one of the most debated implications of liquid modernity is its challenge to the notion of social class as the basis of social hierarchy, class hierarchies still matter. However, social status can be based upon other indicators than social class. This is because new status games and fields are emerging as a result of globalization and digitalization, where status position is not as tightly tied to class indicators, such as family history and level of education. The basis of distinction is more ephemeral and fast changing, and consumers can gain and lose distinction over the course of their lifetime (Price et al., 2017). The middle class is especially forced to become reflexive about its class position and is engaging more frequently in upward or downward social mobility (Mendez, 2008; Standing, 2011; Thompson et al., 2018). In this section, we explore what the new determinants of social hierarchy look like.

It is important to note that in contemporary modernity, there is a decoupling of status and class which has taken place over the past few decades (Dion and Borraz, 2017; Heath and Potter 2005; Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Class is not the only explanatory factor in understanding how status is gained and lost in society and how social hierarchies are formed. This is not the postmodern argument that hierarchies are breaking down within society (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995); rather social inequality continues to persist and is increasing—but class does not necessarily explain hierarchies (Pakulski and Waters, 1996: 671). For example, Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that the traditional leisure class has been replaced by a new elite, grounded in meritocracy and the acquisition of knowledge and culture, rather than being defined by their economic position. The

process by which they attain knowledge is what reveals their social position, by reading the economist or taking a yoga class, for example. With this new elite come new norms and values; they work longer hours, and their meritocracy and cultural values are prized over birthright (Currid-Halkett, 2017). The members of this new elite aspire to be better humans in all aspects of their lives, with their economic position taking a back seat. These new dynamics and determinants of social hierarchy do not mean that it is easier to move up or down the social scale—indeed, there are huge investments of time needed to develop the right type of knowledge and consumption practices such as shopping at farmer’s markets or using the right free tote bag in which to carry your groceries.

In solid modernity, consumer researchers have argued that class membership remained resistant to individual efforts to move. Class shaped social practices and one’s social position was accepted. This remains the dominant assumption about class and consumption in consumer research. For example, Henry and Caldwell (2018) point out that the structural influences of social class have been the main driver of positioning people in social hierarchies. This line of research has argued that consumer strategies aimed at “fitting in” to their social positions and consumption was used to reproduce social class (Henry, 2005; Holt, 1998; Weinberger et al., 2017). Class positions could not be freely selected and depended strongly upon access to material resources (see also Atkinson, 2008).

In contrast to this, we observe over the past three decades that status consumption has been a lot messier than the pursuit of a strict class society. For example, Heath and Potter (2005: 196) note that “cool” usurped class as the dominant status symbol in America. We suggest that in addition to cool, there are other determinants of one’s position in society. For example, Vikas et al. (2015) have demonstrated how some status hierarchies that have been in place for thousands of years in highly stratified Indian society can crumble as once rigid boundaries are destabilized by the spread of marketization. They call into question the emphasis in consumer research on top-down class emulation as an essential characteristic of status hierarchies. Vikas et al. (2015) point out that past studies fail to capture the dynamics of economic and social change in social hierarchies. They find that marketization of the Indian economy has produced a new social order based on consumption; that status can be gained by those traditionally low in a social hierarchy via consumption. Many of the old Indian elites could not maintain their place in the hierarchy, and indeed tried to emulate those who were traditionally at the bottom of the social hierarchy to gain some of the status which the lower caste had accrued via their consumption practices and taste. Their findings are a demonstration of the new dynamics of social hierarchies.

Another illustration of this is articulated by Dion and Borraz (2017). They begin from the premise that status and social class are no longer tied together and demonstrate how brands can shape status. These authors point out that people are constantly negotiating their position in hierarchies, rather than their position stemming from their background, by engaging in status games, which often happen via interactions with brands. They demonstrate that status can be determined by such criteria as celebrity, expertise, and brand literacy. Finally, in discussing the new middle classes that have emerged in developing countries, Kravets and Sandikci (2014) point out that new middle classes are heterogeneous in terms of their backgrounds—education and occupation are quite varied, for example—and what makes them middle class is determined by a shared desire for normality, comfort, and respectability, rather than by traditional class descriptors.

What all of these examples from a variety of different cultural contexts have in common is that they illustrate how social transformations are leading to new indicators of position in social

hierarchies. We build on this line of research and next demonstrate how new strategies for status gain have emerged.

Resources for accruing social status in liquid consumption

In this section, we explore how status is signaled and gained in liquid consumption, specifically exploring prior research in contexts where liquid consumption operates, including digital consumption, access-based consumption, and global mobilities (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017). We propose that new social elites have emerged that fall outside national or traditional class hierarchies; they gain status via new strategies such as flexibility and attention.

Flexibility

In liquid modernity, we propose that flexibility, the ability to embrace and adapt to new possibilities, often experienced and framed as individual freedom, has emerged as an axis of social distinction and status hierarchy. Individuals who have the flexible skill sets as well as the resources to be ready to change, assume new identity projects without concern for past emotional and social commitments to people, places, and things, should be able to succeed in comparison to those that are anchored to long-term identity projects and social positions, and become new elites (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Bauman, 2000; Price et al., 2017).

Flexibility has become a status making strategy. An illustration of this position is the elite transnational mobile professional class, who develops skills to re-territorialize as well as detach themselves frequently as they relocate to a new country at the demand of the global economy and multinational corporations (Bardhi et al., 2012; Featherstone, 1995; Sklair, 1998). They have the necessary competencies and the access to a range of resource and infrastructure that enables fluidity of their mobile lifestyle, in turn enabling them to move up in the social hierarchy. In this way, a geographically mobile lifestyle is valued as it facilitates the development of flexible skills sets and identity positions. Isolation from mobility or access to resources that enable mobility at the local or global level can lead to new forms of exclusion and inequality (Bauman, 2000; Urry, 2011). Embracing a mobile consumer lifestyle has emerged as an important way of sustaining flexibility. Prior literature has been hinting at particular flexible skills sets developed in mobility, including cosmopolitanism and deterritorialized forms of cultural capital that are transferable across fields and countries (cf. Thompson and Tambyah, 1999; Üstüner and Holt, 2010).

This research has also shown that particular styles of consumption have emerged that enhance or maintain flexibility. For example, an ephemeral relationship to possessions enables mobile consumers to be flexible and relocate without being tethered to particular territory, relationships, or identity projects (Bardhi et al., 2012). Similarly, in her study of transmigrants, Amit-Talai (1998) finds that while these consumers purchase houses in various locations, they do not form an attachment to them; rather they are seen as investments for managing an insecure mobile lifestyle. In addition, possessions that are portable or immaterial are highly valued in mobility because they facilitate relocation and nomadism (Bardhi et al., 2012). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that liquid consumption facilitates and maintains flexibility.

Flexibility is also developed in new forms of work that consumers are increasingly engaging with, where there is a blurring of the strict division between work and life that used to characterize workplaces in industrial, solid modernity (Fleming, 2014). Flexible work does not necessarily take place within the confines of the traditional office space nor is it carried out for one particular corporation any longer. Rather, it takes the form of short-term projects, and often for several

companies at the same time, out of co-working spaces (Gandini, 2015, 2016). Co-working spaces are full of start-up entrepreneurs who move from one start-up innovation project to another. Serial entrepreneurship is now seen as a career in its own right. Entrepreneurial savviness and readiness to endure uncertainty and unpredictability are seen as sources of professional success (Morgan and Nelligan, 2015). Professional precarity related to contingent, flexible work, which used to be shunned in industrial modernity, has been embraced (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Gill and Pratt, 2008). Digitally enabled independent work is on the rise with 20–30% of the working age population in the United States and the European Union currently doing independent work (Gandini, 2016; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016).

Attention

Attention is a form of social capital that represents another central differentiator of status in liquid modernity that has emerged especially with the rise of social media and microcelebrities (Rokka and Canniford, 2016; Marwick, 2015). Attention capital is directly quantifiable and is gained via shares, followers, and likes in social media (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013; Rokka and Canniford, 2016). Attention gaining consumer strategies are not new and can be tracked back to the institution of celebrity in consumer culture. However, the popularity of social media has given rise to a hierarchy based on attention and visibility (Marwick, 2013). Marwick (2013, 2015) in her ethnographic studies of the technology subculture of Paolo Alto and Silicon Valley as well as related social media sites (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook) has argued that in today's techno-businesses, sharing personal information online and commanding and maintaining a large audience have become status symbols.

Gaining attention in the digital space has become especially valued as it can be often converted directly to either economic capital or social capital. Faucher (2014) demonstrates that social capital accrued in this way can be exchanged for economic capital, as the number of followers and likes can be monetized via partnering with brands or getting jobs. Consumer research has shown that fashion bloggers with large followers gain power as market influencers and are being paid large amounts to provide positive reviews or promote products (McQuarrie et al., 2012) or use their influential power to become institutional entrepreneurs who can transform market and institutional practices (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2012).

Social media in itself can be a unique social space in that digital platforms have designed or embedded in them status affordances, technical mechanisms that signal greater social status. For example, Twitter has followers, Facebook has likes, Amazon has reputation systems; all metrics that provide comparable measure of importance on each platform. Other status signals have also emerged, such as having a two-letter Twitter handle, which signals early adopters or founders of Twitter (Marwick, 2013). Even in online spaces where no status affordances are designed, research finds that status markers can emerge such as the ability to segment content appropriately by platform, or avoiding content and contacts coded as lower class (Pitcan et al., 2018). In a way, digital platforms facilitate status games in a variety of ways which go against the narrative of the Internet providing a space for democratic online participation. Media scholars observe that every online community or social media platform has developed a way to mark social status, which illuminate and reward the status-seeking practices of the technology subculture (Marwick, 2013; Yates and Lockley, 2018).

Research is suggesting that identity in social media has become more of a performance, a presentation of a desirable self where consumers craft an image with a particular target (often an

imagined audience) in mind (Pitcan et al., 2018). Consumers construct idealized images of themselves to appeal to peers or prospective partners, picking pictures, language, and graphics to attempt to manage the impressions of others. In this way, status signaling in social media may be detached from the daily reality as well as wealth and class situation of these consumers. Gandini (2016) takes this further by arguing that social media represents a working tool to curate a personal image and management of relationships as in the case of self-branding (see also Berger and Iyengar, 2013). Social media and the Internet have potentially provided a mass audience to ordinary consumers to communicate their message, an effect known as the megaphone effect (McQuarrie et al., 2012). A focus on image and self-presentation has also made consumers much more strategic about choosing to invest in social, commercial, and brand relationships, doing so because of an expected return on their own self-brand or conversion to economic or social capitals (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017; Gandini, 2016). For example, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) show how consumers use brand publics—platforms on social media, typically identified by markers such as hashtags—to get seen and “liked” by the most people, which in the age of attention bestows status.

In social media, consumers of any background can present an image of themselves as brands with pictures of affluent lifestyles, because social media represents a heterotopic space which allows and facilitates a proliferation and multitude of bodies, brand artifacts and images, and representation of ethnicities, genders, celebrities, and status (Rokka and Canniford, 2016). In this way, it has democratized the opportunities to portray a luxurious and successful lifestyle via selfies independent of one’s social position offline (Rettberg, 2017; Rokka and Canniford, 2016). Rokka and Canniford (2016) show this through their visual analysis of Instagram selfies of champagne, where they find that selfies represent a self-branding practice through which consumers craft their microcelebrity images online. Becoming a microcelebrity is another strategy of gaining and building attention in social media. Attention in social media becomes more important for status than indicators of class or wealth offline.

Marwick (2015), in her study of Instagram microcelebrities, highlights that these consumers develop aspirational personae through images of luxury and conspicuous consumption on Instagram. They create content that portrays them in a high-status light, simulating the attention given to real celebrities. It is through this aspirational image that they encourage followers and gain attention capital. Social media has multiplied the opportunities and techniques of self-presentation and image making online (Belk, 2013; McQuarrie et al., 2012). Ownership of the photographed object in selfies is not necessary to portray a particular image or conspicuous consumption in social media (Rokka and Canniford, 2016: 1804). Similarly, Wallace et al. (2017) find that virtual donation as a form of conspicuous consumption on social media does not necessarily correspond to off-line donation behavior. Consumers may accrue their desired attention capital without any charitable act. Similarly, Kristofferson et al. (2014) find that when consumers publicly display support for a cause, by “liking” a cause on Facebook, for example, their propensity for engaging in meaningful support for the cause later goes down. They have accrued the attention capital via social media so there is no need to do anything more.

In sum, status is increasingly established via gaining the skills and consumption resources to become flexible and invest in attention capital. While these notions are not new, we have integrated them and the relevant literature in one unified conceptual space to illustrate new dynamics of status and distinction. This has implications for how we understand conspicuousness, taste, and luxury within marketing, which we explore next.

New markers of status

Inconspicuous consumption

Veblen (1899/1994) argues, in *Theory of the Leisure Class*, that leisure, which at that time was only available to the ruling class, becomes the ultimate symbol of status. That is, wastefulness, whether of time or in consumption (e.g. consuming luxury goods that are not needed to survive), becomes the primary status marker. Veblen refers to this as conspicuous wastefulness. This conspicuousness is important, as if others cannot observe you engaging in the wastefulness, it serves no purpose. This pioneering idea that conspicuousness is key in understanding consumption, and that the race for status drives conspicuousness, has been foundationally influential to generations of consumer researchers, sociologists, and anthropologists.

Yet, Veblen's ideas have been challenged across social sciences and marketing. Campbell (1995) argues that Veblen fails to acknowledge that status can be gained via bravery, wisdom, style, and a whole host of actions; in Veblen's conceptualization, it stems only from display of wealth via consumption. Recently, consumer researchers have started to problematize Veblen's core idea that conspicuous forms of leisure are the ultimate display of status. For example, Bellezza et al. (2017) have demonstrated that a busy and overworked lifestyle has become a status symbol, in comparison with a leisurely lifestyle, as argued by Veblen, because an overworked lifestyle signals desired human skills characteristics (competence, ambition) as well as scarcity and demand in the job market.

Additionally, scholars are beginning to highlight that status can be marked via inconspicuous rather than conspicuous consumption (Eckhardt et al., 2015). Inconspicuousness is defined as when only a small group of likeminded others will be able to decode the subtle branding signals and began to become more prominent around the time of the global financial crisis (2008/2009). While inconspicuous consumption has been utilized by the very upper classes in the past, Eckhardt et al. (2015) show this is now becoming true for the masses as well. They attribute this large-scale shift away from conspicuousness to the signaling ability of traditional luxury goods being diluted. That is, conspicuous traditional luxury brands are no longer reliable signals of what class someone is, or how much cultural or social capital they possess. This is for a variety of reasons. For example, Cronin et al. (2014), in discussing hipsters, point out that mundane, inconspicuous consumption allows them to protect their group identity from mainstream cooptation. That is, selecting subtle signals can be a deliberate strategy to restrict imitation by making tastes hard to copy (Hebdige, 1979). This inimitability is also a way of presenting authenticity to the world. Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that now, behaviors and goods that do not cost a lot, such as drinking almond milk or reusing grocery bags, are the ultimate status symbols. This is because they signal that the consumer is more informed, and the display of social, environmental, and cultural knowledge rather than conspicuousness is the new currency.

Moreover, the Internet and social media have facilitated this move away from conspicuous consumption. Having an Airbnb guest, for example, can be a sign of status—despite the reason for taking in Airbnb guests typically being because one needs the money—because displaying that on social media allows for the crafting and sharing of life narratives that signal an openness to new experiences and people (Sennett and Ratti, 2016), which conveys status. Indeed, Ladegaard (2018) demonstrates that these guest–host interactions via Airbnb generate cosmopolitan capital. Finally, in China, the shift away from conspicuous and toward inconspicuous consumption is motivated by the Chinese elite not wanting to provoke envy and a focus on esthetics over showiness (Wu et al., 2017).

Thus, while brands are still important symbols, albeit in a more inconspicuous manner, brands become less reliable as signals of status and class. That is, brands are not less important than they used to be, but they are valued differently, and their symbolic meaning is changing. If brands and conspicuous consumption in general are no longer unambiguous markers of status, what are markers of status? Currid-Halkett (2017) argues that the new elite gains more status from conspicuous production than from conspicuous consumption due to conspicuous consumption's mainstreaming. By conspicuous production, she is referring to, for example, quitting a hedge fund job to start a bespoke leather apron business, which expresses flexibility. What gives the bespoke leather apron its value is the artisanal production process. Thus, those who have the resources to engage in flexibility in their work lives by moving from being a hedge fund manager to making the leather aprons can tap into this new source of status. Hence, while consumers continue to be engaged in an endless game of signs and distinction in the marketplace, the signs are now more inconspicuous, meaning consumers are speaking to a smaller audience of those who can decode their game, and are coming from the nature of production as much as consumption.

As we can see, while traditional forms of conspicuously marking status are declining, other forms are emerging. Faucher (2014) uses Veblen's theoretical lens to contend that in the attention economy, social capital is accrued via how many likes, followers, and friends one has on social media. He argues that these indicators are public displays of wealth in a Veblenian sense, as they are a measure of social wealth which can be conspicuously exhibited. Social connections are visible to an audience, working as the Society Pages did in the past. Also, because social media usage can be classed as an extravagant use of personal time, it functions as a conspicuous display of leisure, in particular because much of what is posted is hyperactive socializing (Faucher, 2014).

In sum, Veblen is still used within marketing and outside of it to explain markers of status. Here, we seek to contribute to a rethinking and critique of conspicuous consumption. We are not arguing that Veblen is not relevant anymore. It may be that his ideas are simply revealing themselves differently in an attention economy (Faucher, 2014). Yet, it is becoming clear that status is not signaled in the way he envisioned anymore in contexts where (1) strong social divisions are not solid, (2) demonstration of wealth is not the basis of status, and (3) economic power is not on display.

Taste

If the old ways of understanding distinction are no longer guides to understanding what proffers status in a liquid lifestyle, what forms of cultural capital and taste have emerged? One way tastes are changing relates to the idea that increasingly status markers are not necessarily ownership based but rather dematerialized. Experiences have become an important marker of status. Engaging in particular forms of consumption experiences, such as exploratory travel experiences, which are "novel, challenging, nondomestic experiences that are learning oriented and have cultural capital potential" (Weinberger et al., 2017: 333), develops consumers' flexibility (cf. Howell et al., 2012). Weinberger et al. (2017) argue that young consumers engage with such exploratory experiences because they "provide middle-class emerging adults with embodied knowledge, which could contribute to the stock of "decontextualized" cultural capital . . ." (p. 341). Weinberger et al.'s findings (2017) illustrate that young professionals are accumulating experiences rather than solid possessions (e.g. houses and cars), as they find experiential capital to be more useful for their future selves (see also Keinan and Kivetz, 2010).

Experiential consumption as a form of luxury is also gaining in importance in contrast to luxury goods (Bardhi et al., 2019). Spending on luxury unique travel adventures was estimated at US\$460 billion versus US\$170 on personal luxury goods in 2013 (Andjelic, 2015). Experiences are now increasingly used more for self-expression and lifestyles (Carter and Gilovich, 2012; Keinan and Kivetz, 2010; Weinberger et al., 2017). As luxury goods become more widely available and accessible, experiences represent a more unique way of distinguishing oneself and crafting a sense of identity.

Additionally, consumption experiences become important status makers when they are linked to work or self-improvement projects. This is especially the case among technology-oriented subcultures, where experiences and travel have become the ultimate status symbols (Marwick, 2013). In this subculture, wealth is not flaunted or used to signify status. Instead, money becomes meaningful only if it is used to support personal development and creative knowledge work because the emphasis is on intelligence and being tech savvy. As Currid-Halkett (2017) puts it, leisure has become productive for this aspirational class.

In the context of social media, research is also increasingly questioning the role of ownership for online social status hierarchies and conspicuous consumption (Marwick, 2015; Rokka and Canniford, 2016). Marwick (2015), in her study of Instagram, argues that microcelebrities, even those creating luxury Instagram accounts, are successful in decoupling extreme wealth from fame. Rich Instagramers downplay their wealth to seem aspirational to their followers, in this way maintaining their attention capital online. Outside social media, access-based consumption has now also made luxury goods and brands more accessible for the masses, where anyone can access a luxury lifestyle temporarily for a price (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Bardhi et al., 2019; Belk, 2010).

Another important shift in terms of taste consists of new ways of defining authenticity. First, authenticity is constantly being revised in ways that are increasingly difficult for the mainstream to co-opt (Cronin et al., 2014). For example, hipsters as a community of consumption have been studied extensively within marketing as they embrace a digital and flexible lifestyle that is often urban and curated. The taste regimes that emerge with this group include mundane consumption being valorized, as it is perceived to display authenticity. Thus, the mundane—the cheapest brand of beer, the kitschiest brand of food—has the most status within these lifestyle communities.

Similarly, consumption and lifestyles that are knowledge based or about knowledge production have increasingly gained status and become unique ways to express authenticity. Flexible forms of employment, such as working part time at a record store, convey status because it allows the hipster to accrue knowledge, or indie cultural capital (Arsel and Thompson, 2011). Craft, handmade, or artisanal products are seen as original ways of performing creativity and developing one's knowledge capital, as seen in the proliferation of traditional working class jobs which are now carried out by highly educated people and seen as status symbols rather than a way to make a living (Ocejo, 2017). In terms of consumer preferences, production is conspicuous, as the transparency about the process of production itself adds value because it brings a sense of authenticity and creativity for the consumer. "The production rather than consumption becomes the key conspicuous status signal" (Currid-Halkett, 2017: 117), and thus we see professions such as shoe repair and artisanal butchery experiencing a renaissance (Ocejo, 2017).

Finally, we propose that liquid consumption per se has become a status marker. In the solid phase of modernity, the focus was on the aspects of luxury that signified long-term security and wealth. Building on Veblen, Bauman (2007b) states that ostentatious consumption "consisted of the public display of wealth with the emphasis on its solidity and durability" (p. 30). Display of

noble metals and precious jewels was defined by their degree of solidity, permanence, and indestructibility; “undestructive to the powers of time” (p. 30). Consumer gratification was derived in the promise of long-term security that bulk, large, solid possessions and collectables enabled. In contrast, in liquid modernity, such “solid luxuries” may be eschewed for those that enable the flexibility and mobility of identity positions. Thus, light forms of luxury, which can be accessed rather than owned, and which are portable, in the sense of enabling mobility, such as experiences, may be especially valued (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Bardhi et al., 2012; Eckhardt et al., 2015).

An example of this has been the shift to investing in tech luxuries, such as iPhones and iPads, which enable access to networks, and away from traditional solid luxuries, such as expensive jewels (Bardhi et al., 2019). Indeed, recently there has been a marked decline in the jewelry industry:

Those diamond earrings are a classic, but a future purchase may not hold up in the same way. An eternity band isn't like an iPhone—there's no trade-in plan after every two years . . . Millennials are spending more money than ever on tech and travel. A diamond may be forever, but in a generation that values impermanence, the one-time slogan of the century is looking more and more like an outdated mantra. (Pacific Standard Magazine, 2015)

In sum, changing tastes in liquid consumption result in new forms of luxury emerging. Tastes that are valued now and reflected in contemporary luxury reflect an appreciation for the flexible, attention accruing, non-ownership, the solid as luxury, and the ephemeral.

Discussion

In this article, we have argued that the logic which determines status and social hierarchies has shifted in liquid consumption. Hierarchies based on distinction still exist, but new mechanisms to move up and down have emerged. We are not suggesting that social hierarchies and inequality do not exist. They continue to persist in liquid modernity, and in fact as the divide between the 1% and the rest widens, social hierarchies are perhaps more stratified than they have ever been. But how status is accrued has shifted. We outline these new dynamics of status and distinction and the importance of flexible consumer lifestyles and gaining attention capital in social media spaces. These have implications for the theories that we use to understand how consumption is used to accrue status and consumption, and for how taste is displayed via consumption. We are not arguing that traditional forms of status accrual via consumption have disappeared, but rather that they have been supplemented by new forms, which are evident in particular populations at the moment but becoming more widespread. In this way, we are illuminating an emerging phenomenon (Yadav, 2018).

In demonstrating this, we build upon Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) by outlining how liquidity affects status and social hierarchies, which they do not discuss. As consumption becomes more liquid, many of the frameworks we have used to understand status-related consumption are being complemented by new frameworks, which we have introduced here. In this way, we contribute to an understudied area in marketing: status consumption (Dubois and Ordabayeva, 2015). For example, we have demonstrated a need to rethink the logic of Veblen (1899/1994) and conspicuous consumption. That is, status does not have to be marked in a conspicuous way and does not

necessarily need to be tied to leisure. Brands are less reliable as signals of status, and knowledge rather than conspicuousness is the new currency (Currid-Halkett, 2017).

We also introduce new ways in which social capital is accrued: via flexibility and attention. We do not argue that these are new forms of capital. Instead, we build on research from media studies that have concluded that scholars cannot assume that the digital, for example, is a different social field, and thus that capital accrued in the digital space is of a different nature to social or cultural capital (Faucher, 2014; Pitcan et al., 2018; Yates and Lockley, 2018). In this way, flexibility and attention represent new ways to acquire social capital via consumption. Attention is a form of social capital that is mainly accrued in the digital space, which is quantifiable and can be convertible to economic capital, for example. We highlight the role of platform design in providing for status affordances and discuss how these status affordances are manifested in consumption.

While we only examine some dynamics of status consumption and liquidity, what we have described can be seen as a challenge to notions of luxury and luxury branding. Specifically, Bardhi et al. (2019) explore this idea conceptually and argue for the need to reevaluate the nature of luxury in liquidity consumption with regard to five aspects when (a) an object is not owned but accessed, (b) luxury is no longer exclusive, (c) value is not anchored in the object, (d) the temporality of luxury is fast rather than slow, and (e) experiences and inconspicuous consumption are more valued than conspicuously owning material objects. Luxury no longer being exclusive stems from the theoretical turn in the literature which identified the democratization of luxury (Boorstin, 1973). Democratized luxury is that which is no longer the select domain of the elite; the exclusive becomes commonplace (Hudders et al., 2013). While Boorstin (1973) traces the historical roots of this to the advent of the department store at the turn of the last century, more recently, the access-based economy has allowed exclusive experiences and objects to be made available to a wide swath of consumers (Bardhi et al., 2019).

Future empirical research can explore how luxury brands can alter their offerings to be in touch with how consumers want to experience luxury (ephemerally, dematerialized, and access based). Indeed, is the concept of luxury itself changing as it becomes more democratized? That is, does luxury only refer to positional goods anymore? Positional goods are those whose consumption is based on positional competition with other consumers within society's hierarchy (Hirsch, 1976). Is luxury no longer a positional good, since members of a variety of tiers in a hierarchy can now access many formerly exclusive objects and experiences? Especially needed is research on luxury in access-based services and digital consumption to address this. Additionally, what will taste regimes based on these new dynamics look like? We have suggested that they have specific characteristics; future research can also examine whether taste regimes will be developed using the same practices as has been identified in the literature (cf. Arsel and Bean, 2013). Finally, what is the relationship between ownership and luxury, and between luxury and accessibility?

The new dynamics of status and distinction suggest additional future research avenues as well. Through the conceptual ideas developed in this article, we hope to open the debate on the nature of social status and status consumption in contemporary society. Empirical research can examine the boundary conditions of the ideas developed here. For example, more research is needed on how the basis of social status hierarchies is changing and what are the new affluent consumers groups that are emerging. Further, future research can explore the notions of flexibility and attention, especially with regard to their conversion to other forms of capital. Also, how does offline status shape online behavior? We have pointed out the importance of gaining attention, which social media facilitates, to advance social status, which may or may not be related to one's offline status.

Investigating how this is used to engage in personal branding—that is, the effects of flexibility and attention on how person branding is enacted—is a fruitful future research direction.

In sum, there are new dynamics of status and distinction which have emerged. The new logic of distinction is having the flexibility to embrace and adopt new identity positions, projects, and possibilities and the ability to attract attention. Those consumers who have developed flexible skill sets, resources, and liquid identities to attract attention may emerge as the new elites. However, those consumers that are not able to, whose resources are solid and valuable in one cultural context only, often struggle to maintain their social position and may become the new underclass in liquid modernity. We see new horizons for explorations into status and distinction given the fluidity in society today, and hope to have provided some innovative directions to guide this.

Author contribution

Both Giana M. Eckhardt and Fleura Bardhi contributed equally.


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