

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

STATUS SEEKING THROUGH CONSPICUOUS PRODUCTION: CONCEPTUAL SCOPE, SOCIAL LOGIC, AND MODES OF DISPLAY

GÖSTERİŞÇİ ÜRETİM YOLUYLA STATÜ ARAYIŞI: KAVRAMSAL KAPSAMI, SOSYAL MANTIĞI VE TEZAHÜR BİÇİMLERİ

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Abstract

In this study, the theoretical foundations, scope, and economic examples of conspicuous production—a recently prominent concept in the field of business, rooted in the idea of conspicuous consumption—are examined. By elucidating the concepts of conspicuousness and conspicuous consumption, it provides a detailed theoretical framework for understanding conspicuous production. The research explores the interplay between conspicuousness, class, and status, with a particular focus on the sanctification of work as a pivotal element of conspicuous production. Additionally, it highlights how the upper economic classes leverage conspicuous production in a manner akin to conspicuous consumption, emphasizing the ostentatious (re)production of products, services, and the body. This comprehensive analysis not only advances the theoretical discourse on conspicuous production but also lays a robust foundation for future research into its diverse dimensions and implications.

Keywords: Conspicuous Production, Status Seeking, Class, Body Reproduction, Sanctification of Work

JEL Classification: M30, O15, L23

Öz

Bu çalışmada, işletme alanında son dönemde dikkat çeken ve köklerini gösterişçi üretim avramından alan bir kavram olan gösterişçi üretimin teorik temelleri, kapsamı ve ekonomik örnekleri incelenmiştir. Çalışma

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gösteriş ve gösterişçi tüketim kavramlarını aydınlatarak, gösterişçi üretimi anlamak için ayrıntılı bir teorik çerçeve sunmaktadır. Araştırmada gösteriş, sınıf ve statü arasındaki etkileşim; özellikle gösterişçi üretimin temel unsuru olan çalışmanın kutsallaştırılmasına odaklanarak incelenmiştir. Ayrıca, üst ekonomik sınıfların gösterişçi tüketime benzer bir şekilde gösterişçi üretimi nasıl kullandıkları vurgulanmış, ürünlerin, hizmetlerin ve bedenın gösterişçi (yeniden) üretimine dikkat çekilmiştir. Bu kapsamlı analiz, sadece gösterişçi üretim üzerine teorik tartışmaları ilerletmekle kalmamakta, aynı zamanda kavramın çeşitli boyutları ve etkileri üzerine gelecekteki araştırmalar için bir temel oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Gösterişçi Üretim, Statü Arayışı, Sınıf, Bedenin Yeniden Üretimi, Çalışmanın Kutsanması

JEL Kodu: M30, O15, L23

1. Introduction

In “The Theory of the Leisure Class,” sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1899) introduced the concept of “conspicuous consumption,” referring to the consumption practices of the wealthy elite aimed at asserting dominance over less privileged individuals through the display of excess, luxury, and extravagance. Veblen argued that conspicuous consumption serves not only to distinguish the upper social class from other groups but also to secure validation within its own ranks. He contended that wealth, intertwined with power, underpins expenditures on costly leisure activities and luxury goods. According to Veblen (1899), the display of wealth and power is essential for earning and maintaining respect, with the affluent showcasing their superiority by investing substantial resources in high-status products and visibly demonstrating their abundance.

Conspicuous consumption has evolved beyond the realm of the upper social classes in contemporary consumer culture (Mason, 1984). For individuals within this cultural framework, consumption-related indicators have become crucial tools for expressing and negotiating identity, enabling social classification and differentiation (Baudrillard, 1998). Patsiaouras and Fitchett (2012) described conspicuous consumption from an evolutionary perspective, noting its widespread influence across all social strata today. This phenomenon reflects both a desire for uniqueness and a means of signaling social group affiliation through the public display of consumption and status symbols.

Furthermore, conspicuous consumption exhibits a diachronic and intercultural dimension, evident across various cultures and historical periods. Belk’s (1986) seminal study on “yuppies” highlighted that conspicuous consumption is not confined to the elite but is also prevalent among the broader population. This research demonstrated that young professionals, driven by hedonistic and materialistic desires, use conspicuous consumption to signal their social status. Similarly, Eckhardt et al. (2014) found that the association between brands and ostentatiousness is diminishing, with affluent consumers increasingly favoring high-end brands that feature subtle symbols of sophistication. This shift towards less ostentatious consumption, aimed at communicating with others of similar cultural capital, illustrates the growing complexity and differentiation of conspicuous consumption within consumer culture.

The significance of conspicuous consumption—understood as the performative display of wealth—has long been emphasized in analyses of neo-capitalist society. This behavior’s direct influence on

consumer conduct, the social classes that arise from such consumption practices, and the cultural boundaries established between these classes are key topics within this body of research (e.g., O’Cass and McEwen, 2004; Podoshen, Li and Zhang, 2010; Kumar et al., 2022). However, as symbolic display becomes central to social recognition in neo-capitalist society, status is signaled not only through consumption but also through the act of production. In post-Fordist and cultural economies, conspicuous production emerges as a form of visible, status-oriented labor.

It is in this context that the concept of conspicuous production emerges—rooted in the same symbolic economy as conspicuous consumption but adapted to a cultural shift in which production becomes a visible, stylized, and performative act. This shift began to take shape in the late 20th century, particularly in the wake of transformations in labor, identity, and creative industries. As aestheticized and self-representational forms of work gained traction, the boundaries between labor and display blurred, giving rise to a new status logic centered on production itself.

This study aims to establish a conceptual framework for conspicuous production, defining the phenomenon and exploring its dimensions to inform future research. The following sections begin with historical debates on ostentation within capitalism and then proceed to offer a detailed examination of the concept’s scope and features.

Although the notion of conspicuous production emerged long after Veblen’s critique of consumption, it has gained increasing relevance since the 1990s, particularly within social theory, cultural studies, and the sociology of consumption. One foundational contribution can be found in Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1979), where the concepts of cultural capital and habitus help explain how production practices—though less explicitly than consumption—reproduce social hierarchies. Similarly, Wernick (1991) argued that production processes have become aestheticized and marketable, transforming labor into spectacle.

Harvey (1989) observed that production in postmodern capitalism increasingly prioritizes aesthetics, image, and style. In sectors like fashion, design, and digital media, production is carried out not only for functional purposes but also for visibility and prestige. Likewise, Hesmondhalgh (2013) emphasized that in the creative industries, production extends beyond the final product to encompass the identity and performance of the producer. In this context, the producer becomes a symbolic asset, and production turns into a public, status-laden act. This shift is especially visible in contemporary art, social media, and independent craftsmanship, where conspicuous production now plays a central role in cultural and economic value creation.

2. Conspicuous consumption and production: Displaying class and status

Ostentation is a behavior employed by individuals or groups to become easily visible, recognized, or to gain or maintain status within the social sphere. Shaikh and Gummerum (2022) defined the tendency toward conspicuous behavior as an inclination to send costly signals through actions aimed at achieving a differentiated self-image and acquiring prestige within existing or aspirational social groups. To fully understand the phenomenon of conspicuous behavior, it is essential to examine both

the capitalist socio-economic structure in which the concept emerges and is shaped and the actors operating within that structure.

In his work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen examined the concept of conspicuous consumption among the aristocratic class of the late 19th-century Western societies, which he described as relatively homogeneous. He explored how this leisure class utilized excessive, luxurious, and wasteful consumption as a means to differentiate themselves from ‘average people’ and to assert their power. While expending their time, energy, and money on products and services only the very wealthy could afford, the leisure class also engaged in unproductive activities that showcased their status. One method for constructing and maintaining their identity and status within their social class was through social imitation, which involved displaying or pretending to possess wealth (Truong et al., 2008).

According to Veblen (1899), the “leisure class,” or the class that does not need to work, seeks to distance itself from other social classes and assert dominance over them through conspicuous consumption of certain goods. For instance, women of the leisure class may use long nails and high-heeled shoes to signal their lack of need for physical labor, thereby affirming their membership in this privileged class. As lower social classes increasingly imitate the consumption practices of those above them, the leisure class will continue to adopt new consumption practices to maintain their distinction. Veblen’s theory remains relevant today.

In his analysis of modern bourgeois society, which evolved from feudalism into early capitalist Western societies, Marx (1859/2019) established the foundational concepts of the bourgeoisie—owners of the means of production who employ labor—and the proletariat, which subsists on wage labor. Marx primarily sought the determinants of social life within economic structures. In his materialist interpretation of history, Marx (1859/2019) referred to the mode of production and relations as forming the economic base of society, from which a legal and political superstructure emerges. Marx (1883/1981) did not attempt to develop a theory of consumer behavior per se but did elucidate how production relations define class-based consumption and how needs of individuals are articulated according to their hierarchical positions in early capitalist systems. His class analysis provides a perspective on the origins of conspicuous behavior by suggesting that such behavior is rooted in economic foundations and that class distinctions play a significant role in this process. For instance, the consumption patterns focused on conspicuousness among the upper classes can be related to their purchasing power within their economic strata.

Weber (1922/2012) focused on the relationship between consumption tendencies of individuals and social status, rather than on economic class structures. Unlike Marx, who emphasized the impact of economic structures on social changes, Weber argued that social structures and changes are influenced not only by economic factors but also by the interplay of political, social, and cultural factors. According to Weber, individuals within the same economic class can still differ in terms of status. In his view (1948), class is defined based on economic status and wealth. However, within the same economic class, individuals may experience status differences due to cultural factors, as well

as social factors such as profession, education, and career. Thus, class hierarchy is determined by production and ownership relations, while status hierarchy is defined by consumption patterns that represent particular lifestyles.

Weber (1904/2001) also noted that in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Western Europe, Mercantilism and Calvinist beliefs supported the view that individuals' economic actions should be focused on savings and investment. During this period, the ostentatious display of goods and status symbols was considered a waste of time and did not contribute to general social development and well-being (Mason, 1998).

A critique of Marx's focus on economic determinism and class dynamics is offered by Bourdieu, particularly regarding Marx's emphasis on material dimensions while overlooking symbolic aspects. Bourdieu (1984) argued that Marx's concentration on economic capital may lead to a limited understanding of power. Instead, Bourdieu conceptualized capital as a "totality of resources and powers available in practice" (1984: 114), which includes economic, cultural, and social factors as a multidimensional structure. Bourdieu (1977, 1986) defined economic capital as materialized, accumulated labor, similar to tangible assets. However, this alone does not fully account for the complexity of social structures and dynamics. Beyond economic wealth and purchasing power, social connections and tastes also function as instruments for social status and positioning. Bourdieu (1977, 1986) argued that, in addition to economic capital, social and cultural capitals are forms of symbolic capital used to achieve status. He highlights that in modern societies, individuals vying for financial resources require not only economic capital but also cultural and social capital, which encompasses educational and relational networks (Swartz, 1997). These various forms of capital are convertible; for instance, economic capital can be accumulated and then reinvested under certain conditions. Social, cultural, and symbolic capital can be seen as latent forms of economic capital, as they are essential for its accumulation and play a role in its effects (Bourdieu 1977; Swartz 1997).

In discussions of socio-economic positioning, the concept of conspicuousness, frequently associated with status, has also been linked to status anxiety by De Botton (2010). This anxiety emerges in individuals who, having experienced excessive and unreciprocated attention and validation from their families, fear that such affirmation will be absent in their social interactions as they mature. De Botton attributed this status anxiety to a Freudian impulse, proposing that modern individuals' need for status and recognition is driven by a desire to fulfill these unmet early needs.

In the modern period, notably during the economic downturn of the 1930s and the onset of World War II in 1939, there was a significant reduction in the consumption of goods and services. Public policies and advertising campaigns during this time focused more on addressing the demands of the wartime economy rather than promoting consumer spending (Blum, 1976; Covert, 2003). From the 1970s through the consumer society era and into the postmodern period, factors such as urbanization, fluid social relationships, increased product diversity, and the erosion of traditional concepts like social class and occupation intensified competition and emulation dynamics (Patsiaouras and

Fitchett, 2012:168). This transformation led to the rise of a new middle class that gained a prominent role in the consumption domain.

The self-regulation and control introduced by modernity, encompassing body discipline and the elevation of self-improvement, can be viewed as extensions of Weber's (1904/2001) notion of the sanctification of labor within the framework of Protestant ethics. Moreover, as modernity progressed, the impulse to control time—initiated with the invention of the calendar—along with the management of appearance, furthered by the use of mirrors, and the drive to control nature (Giddens, 2010), evolved into a focus on self-regulation and self-management in the postmodern era. This pursuit of self-improvement, or self-reproduction, has gradually transformed into a practice centered on conspicuous display, as will be discussed below.

In contemporary society, the widespread availability of branded and exclusive products has rendered high-quality and valuable items accessible to a broader demographic, thereby diminishing the visual distinctions between social classes (Truong et al., 2008). Baudrillard (1998) posited that within the consumer society, consumption operates akin to a language in the processes of meaning-making and symbolic exchange, influencing our engagement with reality, power, social values, relationships, and identities. This dynamic challenges and destabilizes traditional social boundaries. Consumption has thus evolved into a class-based institution that fosters new, fluid, and dynamic forms of social stratification and differentiation, predicated on taste, lifestyle, and cultural capital. Baudrillard (1998) observed that in modern consumer societies, the educated upper classes possess a dominant command of the symbolic codes and meanings. In contrast, the middle and lower classes exhibit lesser control over these codes and, as a result, seek validation through consumption—demonstrating their status through material objects.

Bauman (2007) argued that in the “liquid modern” consumer society, consumerism acts as a powerful force that shapes individual subjectivities and identity definitions while systematically reproducing social class distinctions. Although various social classes engage in particular consumption practices to indicate their status and position within the social hierarchy, these class distinctions continue to influence consumption patterns and social identity. Nevertheless, these distinctions have become less overt and significant in defining personal identity and lifestyle. Instead, class differences are obscured and perpetuated through the widespread consumption of goods and services accessible to all market participants.

In contemporary society, individuals use consumption to reflect and negotiate their social positions, utilizing it as a means to display their social status and distinguish themselves. Furthermore, conspicuous production has emerged as an additional method for signaling status. This form of production manifests in multiple ways. For instance, while the economic output of the wealthy may be minimal, their production endeavors aimed at acquiring and maintaining prestige and status are notable. Similarly, working individuals strive to exhibit their diligence and gain status through their hard work. Additionally, the efforts of modern individuals to reproduce themselves both physically and spiritually as a means of attaining status are also encompassed within this framework.

3. Conspicuous production: Definition and scope

3.1. Production for display: The act of showing off

The tendency of conspicuous behavior can be seen not only in the context of consumption but also in all actions of the actors in the social structure. It can be argued that ostentation refers to the ostentatious wastefulness of time and resources in order to gain position and status in the social structure and thus to differentiate from others while gaining a place in their community (Veblen 1899; Mason 1984; 1998; De Botton, 2010). Conspicuous production is akin to conspicuous consumption in that both practices enable individuals to attain social approval and differentiation by revealing resources and capabilities that are otherwise concealed from others' view.

The concept of conspicuous production was reportedly first introduced by Michael Polanyi in 1960 in the context of analyzing Soviet production systems (e.g., Overton and Banks, 2015). Polanyi (1960) demonstrated that the Soviet production system, which emphasized collective achievements over individual interests, created an illusion of heightened efficiency to assert its superiority over capitalist production systems.

Bell (2000) argued that in 18th and 19th century Virginia, conspicuous production was a central dynamic in the social environment, and she contended that it was even more crucial than conspicuous consumption for signaling skills and attaining social status. According to Bell (2000), as the wealth of the affluent transitioned from visible assets to the banking system, plantation owners sought to make their skills and resources more apparent through the conspicuous production of goods and livestock. She claimed that, in showcasing the resources and achievements of rural landowners, implements such as plows and mules likely played a more significant role than luxury items like silver trays and rugs.

The concept of conspicuous production is analyzed in contemporary literature through two primary dimensions. The first dimension focuses on the exhibition of wealth rather than the mere achievement or maximization of economic output. This form of conspicuous production involves utilizing substantial production assets and making the production process itself visible to secure and sustain social identity, prestige, and status (Musser et al. 1975; Lee, 1971; Lee et al. 1975; Bell, 2000; Spiegel, 2005; Baker, 2017). Here, the emphasis is on visibility through the sophisticated nature of production processes rather than consumption, appealing to refined aesthetic standards. The products or services that are made visible, or the methods of their production, are central to this display (Cima and Wasilewska, 2023). Examples include thoroughbred horse breeding, specialty cheese and wine production, and sophisticated architecture. These instances illustrate how privileged classes or elite brands distinguish themselves from the mass market, aligning their production with elevated societal status. Conspicuousness is manifested through the public display of production and storage processes.

In recent times, particularly within developing countries, the expansion of wine production indicates a significant and widespread growth in the global wine industry (OIV Report, 2024). This growth has

not only stimulated economic activities aimed at mass markets but has also amplified conspicuous production practices among those striving to set themselves apart from the mainstream. Terrien and Steichen (2008) argued that wine, structured according to societal perceptions, functions as a global instrument of social comparison. They further argue that a well-established wine hierarchy—defined by geographical indications and vintage wines—can be readily associated with a complex social class hierarchy. According to the authors, wine—especially champagne, which historically served as a marker of bourgeois status in the modern era and enjoyed royal patronage during the feudal period—acts as a product of social status and differentiation.

Overton and Banks (2015) emphasized that conspicuous wine production by the affluent, celebrities, and individual investors transcends mere profitability, driven instead by the pursuit of status and prestige. This phenomenon is seen as a major source of symbolic capital in the wine industry, and potentially in other sectors as well. The systems and processes of wine production are presented in a sophisticated and experiential manner, akin to conspicuous consumption, thereby enabling producers to reconstruct their social identities. The study further observes that these production systems, rather than reflecting the realities of industrial, urban, and exploitative wealth, are framed as pre-modern (and in some cases, almost neo-feudal) and non-industrial, portraying a fictional narrative of artisanal, sustainable, and land-based production. These systems thus serve as symbolic instruments for a new form of conspicuous production. The notable involvement of celebrities from sports, cinema, politics, and music in wine production reinforces the significance of conspicuous production within the social sphere.

Much like the wine industry, the fine-dining sector in gastronomy exemplifies another form of conspicuous production. This sector, akin to the wine industry, constructs its identity through notions such as “authenticity,” “craftsmanship,” and “terroir.” With the advent of modernity, what were once referred to as artisan or “haute cuisine” culinary performances have been redefined as art forms. Culinary practices are now recognized beyond traditional aesthetic and value judgments, advocated by the artistic avant-garde, including “chef-artists,” and are prominently featured in exhibitions and fairs (Myhrvold, 2011). In contemporary times, chefs have reframed their culinary creations and cooking processes as gastronomic experiences that engage in dialogue with customers. The aesthetic value of food is thus evaluated based on its capacity to deliver sensory experiences, pleasurable elements, representational tendencies, and complex, multilayered social meanings (Borghini and Baldini, 2021; Lane, 2014).

In this sector, where both production and consumption are predominantly undertaken by privileged classes, conspicuous production and marketing are apparent not only in the presentation of food but also in the artisanal processes. This phenomenon reflects the cultural reproduction of the “taste judgments” articulated by Bourdieu (1984). Participants in this domain aim to establish their status through “refined tastes,” which necessitates the accumulation of substantial economic, cultural, and social capital. Lane (2014), in her examination of taste construction within the fine-dining sector, highlighted that the role of taste-making in this industry imposes demands far beyond the traditional responsibilities of chefs. The author asserts that chefs involved in this form of conspicuous production

are required to embody not only the skills of artisans, the passion of innovators, and the experience of producers but also the talents of performance artists and the charisma of customer-oriented hosts, necessitating a distinct form of performance.

Hendley (2016) discovered that private chefs engaged in artisanal production have become symbols—similar to consumption objects or status symbols—that their employers use to sustain and elevate their social standing, in addition to their performances. While these chefs enable the logistical aspects of the spectacle, they simultaneously embody the roles of diligent and obedient employees for employers who can afford high-status staff. Moreover, Hendley (2016) contended that private chefs distinguish themselves from their employers, positioning themselves as morally superior not only to the affluent but also to those who prioritize material status symbols.

The small-scale conspicuous production associated with fine-dining experiences in chef restaurants is also evident in everyday settings, such as catering at social events. In her study on women's gatherings, where class position and identity are negotiated and reproduced through conspicuous consumption, Karaçizmeli (2023) highlighted that the sophistication of the treats served, as well as the amount of labor or financial resources invested in their presentation, is closely correlated with the prestige and social status of the host.

The display of status and prestige often serves as an indicator of cultural capital. Indeed, cultural capital comprises accumulated tastes, cultural knowledge, and practices that materialize as long-standing mental and physical inclinations and objectify as cultural artifacts (Bourdieu, 1986; Joppke, 1987). Activities such as the production of wine, cheese, or racehorses manifest an individual's cultural capital, allowing it to be mobilized within networks where social capital is constructed. Bourdieu (1984: 6) argued that “taste classifies and classifies the classifier”, suggesting that individuals distinguish themselves through their likes and dislikes while also being categorized by others based on these preferences. Thus, taste is not merely a matter of personal choice but a social and cultural practice that reflects and reinforces social inequalities. Arsel and Bean (2013) define the “regime of taste” as a normative system, constructed discursively, that shapes the meanings attributed to products and demonstrates how aesthetics are connected to practical knowledge and materialized through everyday consumption. Accordingly, the regime of taste regulates the practical field through continuous interaction.

3.2. Conspicuous production: The sanctification of labor and status

In the concept of conspicuous production, the emphasis is placed on the exaltation of labor rather than on luxury consumption. The reverence for production and the elevation of labor are not novel phenomena within capitalist systems. Weber, in his work “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1904/2001), explored how Protestant ethics elevate hard work by postponing immediate rewards and considers the display of the outcomes of labor as a contradiction within Puritanism. Weber further posited that property is accepted in a way that does not detract from the divine glory of God, and that sustained labor and its results can influence one's surroundings. Similarly, Islam

venerates strenuous work, the pursuit of economic success, and the quest for prosperity as essential religious duties, with Muslim entrepreneurs framing their commercial ventures and practices within a narrative of social benefit (Sandıkçı, 2018). The MS1900:2005 standard, derived from the ISO 9001:2000 Quality Management System standard through an Islamic lens, incorporates ethical principles such as justice, honesty, sincerity, punctuality, discipline, dedication, and systematic work in the workplace (Muhamad, 2018).

Beyond the examples that contribute to the reproduction of a particular regime of taste, it can be argued that merely engaging in production is also perceived as a status symbol within the social sphere. Anderson and Jack (2000), in their qualitative research conducted in rural England, found that the primary motivation for entrepreneurs is to acquire and maintain social status and prestige through their production activities. Their study suggests that entrepreneurship is a social process driven by the pursuit of status.

In contemporary society, the glorification of hard work as an alternative to conspicuous production has emerged as a novel form of status display. This phenomenon is evident in the practice of executives from major corporations who publicly detail their extensive working hours and celebrate this labor. Tarnoff (2017) highlighted in an interview that conspicuous production is not linked to an individual's financial ambitions. Rather, it is crucial to note that upper-class economic strata utilize productivity as a symbol of their power. The form of production demonstrated by these classes, who engage in excessive work despite not requiring additional income, exemplifies another aspect of conspicuous production. While conspicuous consumption extols excessive spending, conspicuous production reveres excessive labor. At this point, the emphasis shifts from the amount of money spent to the extent of one's hard work (Tarnoff, 2017).

According to Veblen (1899), consumption practices of the classes at the top of the economic stratification are emulated by the middle classes, while the consumption practices of the middle class are imitated by the lower classes. Although the "trickle-down" theory of economic development (Smith, 1937), which posits that in a well-governed society, increased production through labor division will eventually lead to general welfare extending to the lowest classes, has been criticized for inadequately defining economic growth as development and failing to ensure general social welfare (Arndt, 1983), it can still be argued that increased productivity, production, per capita income, and job opportunities enable lower classes to access and emulate the consumption products of the upper classes. Veblen (1899) for example, argued that excessively expensive and ostentatious clothing, such as puffy skirts and corsets, was initially worn by wealthy women, and that these clothes, which made it impossible to do housework or work in the fields, were used as symbols of not needing to work. However, Veblen (1899) stated that over time, the clothes of the servants, who undertook the task of displaying the solvency of their masters, began to resemble these clothes. According to him, this style of dress and even women's idle time, in other words, ostentatious consumption and ostentatious idle time, were imitated by members of the middle and lower classes over time. Veblen (1899) noted that while each social class tends to emulate and imitate the class above it, it seldom compares itself with those below or far above it. Similarly, Simmel (1904/1957) argued that fashion serves as both a

means of imitation and social equalization, bringing together individuals within the same class while distinguishing them from others. According to him, elites initiate fashion trends, which are then adopted by the masses in an attempt to reduce visible class differences. As each class seeks to emulate the one above, the desire for fashionable status symbols cascades down the social hierarchy (Üstüner and Holt, 2010).

The trickle-down theory can also be examined through the lens of conspicuous production. For instance, middle and upper-middle class white-collar workers often fetishize executive-style overwork, despite knowing that their efforts will never grant them access to the resources enjoyed by top managers. In a society where status symbols have evolved and power and success are highly valued, status is increasingly tied to these ideals. Consequently, in such a society, overworking (or the appearing to work) and showcasing this effort can serve as a means of gaining status (Berghaus, 2020). Bellezza, Paharia and Keinan (2016) demonstrated in their study that the positive association of status with an intense work pace and lack of leisure time arises from the belief that individuals who work intensively possess desirable human capital traits (e.g., competence and ambition) and that these traits are rare and highly sought after in the labor market.

Desmichel and Rucker (2024) distinguished between domination and prestige-based hierarchies and argued that in domination-based hierarchies, individuals exhibit assertive and manipulative behaviors in order to gain a place in the hierarchy, while in prestige-based hierarchies, they exhibit their talents, skills, and motivations. In their studies conducted in the context of consumption, they found that domination leads to more social anxiety than prestige-based hierarchies and that this anxiety leads individuals to ostentatious behavior as a means of psychological security. In this direction, it can be considered that although in prestige-based hierarchies there is a flaunting of hard work for the purpose of gaining status, in contexts where social and cultural norms related to work are dominant, individuals may be more likely to display their hard work ostentatiously.

Spigel (2015) argued that individuals strive to create status by showing themselves constantly connected, busy, and in contact with others with technological devices such as mobile phones and computers in the public sphere, in other words, by exhibiting performative communication. In the context of hyper-reality, it is not important whether what is exhibited is true or fake; Baudrillard (1994) argued that in the age of simulation, representations of reality are replaced by reality itself, and all direct references to reality are substituted with signs. Thus, the crucial aspect is how these signs are interpreted by the observer. The sanctification of hard work, rather than idleness, and the ostentatious display of work can involve both the processes and outcomes of labor, as well as the use of indicators—such as technological products or services—that signify hard work. This can manifest in various ways, including constantly appearing busy at work, competitively showcasing work performance, using the latest fashion products (e.g., status-signaling information technologies or clothing) in the workplace, and engaging in performative communication on professional social media platforms like LinkedIn.

Van Dijck (2013) argued that LinkedIn profiles serve as a reflection of normative professional behaviors. By showcasing their skills, opinions, photographs, work experiences, and personal life details, employees create an idealized representation of their professional identity and construct narratives to enhance the visibility of their social behavior (Van Dijck, 2013). The interpretation of ostentatious behavior is also influenced by who uses status indicators. Lee and Bolton (2020) found that luxury consumption by high-status employees elicited negative reactions from observers, whereas luxury consumption by low-status employees led to positive reactions due to inferred competence. Additionally, Tifferet and Vilnai-Yavetz (2018) showed that on LinkedIn, women tend to post emotionally-driven content, while men focus on status-signaling posts.

3.3. Conspicuous production of body and soul

According to Turner (2029), it is essential to differentiate between the body and embodiment. The body involves cultural analyses of how it is represented in society and operates as a symbolic system. In contrast, embodiment relates to the practices and performances necessary to navigate practical life. Turner and Rojek (2001) argued that successful embodiment aligns with the process of “self-perception” (enselfment), where individuals become self-reflexive, purposeful, and individualized social agents. Through practices such as dressing, adornment, grooming, and body shaping, people create and are influenced by a cultural system that includes social norms, values, beliefs, and symbols. Sociological studies on body work focus on four main areas (Gimlin, 2007): (i) work performed on one’s own body, (ii) wage labor involving the bodies of others, (iii) management of embodied emotional experiences and displays, and (iv) the production or modification of bodies through work. Actions such as attending fitness centers, undergoing plastic surgery, dieting, or hair coloring can be examples of body work in the context of conspicuous production and are evident in all four areas outlined by Gimlin (2007).

Foucault (1978; 1994/2011) argued that in modern society, the body, shaped by the norms dictated by dominant discourse, becomes an object of scrutiny. This gaze is not only external but also self-directed, as individuals observe their own bodies. By internalizing socio-cultural norms and engaging in self-regulation, individuals become both the object and the subject of power. In modern society, the body has become an object of social prestige and display. Consumption practices focused on aesthetics illustrate how the body is shaped as a means of show. In his studies on the body Foucault (1975; 1976) explored how the body is disciplined as a tool for social order, highlighting that the body functions not only as an individual entity but also as an object of social control. Regulations and control of the body reflect social norms and power relations. Activities such as sports or aesthetic surgery can be viewed as forms of “body discipline,” where individuals modify their bodies to align with societal aesthetic standards. This disciplining process is also a means of seeking social approval and prestige. Individuals aiming to position themselves within a social framework defined by dominant norms work on their bodies, thereby reproducing both their own bodies and societal judgments of taste, while presenting themselves through conspicuous production.

Blood (2005) highlighted the tendency to overlook ‘body image dissatisfaction,’ also known as body image disorder or dysfunction in psychological literature, as a mere individual pathology. Instead, Blood argued that this phenomenon is a product of power dynamics and social relations within a socially constructed world. Both external perceptions and individuals’ views of their own bodies are influenced by historical, economic, social, and cultural contexts. Individuals can internalize these social discourses and norms, reconstructing their bodies through various bodywork projects. The social structures and discourses that shape body phenomena can vary by context. For instance, Shilling (1993) identified multiple interpretations and dimensions of discursive and material bodies, including physical, communicative, consumerist, and medical bodies, as well as individual and social bodies, and those that are medicalized, sexualized, disciplined, and expressive. However, the construction of the body in the context of work and employment remains an area that has been relatively under-researched (Gimlin, 2007; Shilling, 1993).

While employers intervene in employees’ lives to shape the identities of those who “embody” the organization, employees, in turn, manage their bodily performance to establish and maintain their roles within the organization (Valentine, 2002). Firms establish bodily norms and standards for employees, equating being fit, well-dressed, and well-groomed with productivity and success. In the workplace, ostentatious behavior extends beyond merely displaying hard work for status; it also encompasses the public exhibition of body work. Particularly in late 20th-century capitalist societies, where the body is viewed like a machine whose performance can be optimized or repaired, individuals increasingly regard their bodies as machines that can be fine-tuned through nutrition, regular care, exercise, and health checks. Consequently, body work becomes an individual project aimed at enhancing personal and professional image (Shilling, 1993). The body image anxiety experienced by modern workers has driven them towards popular drinks, food, clothing, fitness centers, and body care services. A study by Karaçizmeli, Dedeoğlu and Erten (2017) in Izmir, in Izmir revealed important insights into the clothing preferences of male white-collar employees. The research indicated that clothing holds particular importance for male employees, as it is seen as a marker of success and status in the business world, as well as symbols of corporate culture, organizational commitment, and corporate representation. The authors also found that material and symbolic dress codes, often influenced by workplace procedures and styles associated with managerial positions, were adopted. Furthermore, not only are dress codes followed, but the activities related to body reproduction—such as physical exercises or consumption objects used for body enhancement, particularly through social media—are also ostentatiously displayed.

Jia et al. (2019) demonstrated that ostentatious display in the workplace can also operate through reverse motivation. They found that individuals in subordinate positions might choose less prestigious products than those they can afford, due to an invisible “red line” they impose on themselves, ensuring that their brands are perceived as “below” those of their superiors. This behavior, termed the “boss ceiling effect,” exemplifies how people use symbols to position themselves within the hierarchy and distinguish themselves from those above.

A concept that arises in this bodily reproduction is “purification.” This process, encompassing both spiritual and bodily purification, is evident in practices such as yoga poses, healthy breakfast plates, and mindfulness workshops. In recent years, both individual employees and organizations have increasingly embraced “alternative” spiritual practices like meditation, yoga, and mindfulness. The aim is to enhance productivity and profitability by reducing workplace stress and fostering overall well-being (King, 2019; Islam et al., 2022). Davies (2015) noted that happiness, now a burgeoning industry, and “new age” mysticism have become key components in the global economic management agenda, engaging global elites as measurable, visible, and developable assets. Public institutions in the West, such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in the UK, advocate for organizations to create workplace solutions that mitigate stress-related risks by enhancing employees’ mental and physical health and overall well-being (NICE, 2020). King (2019) observed that while the data on the effectiveness of workplace mindfulness-based wellness programs is currently insufficient for definitive conclusions, there is promising initial evidence suggesting a moderate positive impact on reducing workplace stress and burnout syndrome. However, he also cautioned that this evidence may sometimes lead to an overestimation of the benefits. Critical perspectives on these practices are also notable. Bell and Taylor (2003) argued that workplace spirituality discourse reinterprets the Protestant ethic through New Age values, driven by a loss of faith in scientific progress and disillusionment with mainstream religion. This discourse redefines disciplinary technologies as sources of inner strength and organizational success through individual metaphysical management. According to the authors, the rise of spirituality discourses, which propose that changing oneself can alter the world, is part of a broader postmodern theological project. Similarly, Bell (2008) contended that efforts to integrate a spirituality approach into the workplace—focusing on individual enlightenment rather than challenging or transforming institutions—represent an attempt to leverage the ideological power of religious beliefs to advance capitalism.

Zaidman et al. (2009) noted that spiritual counselors in the workplace often employ methods to overcome resistance and make an impact, including careful selection and reframing of ideas. They also observed that there is frequently a lack of concealment and transparency in counselors’ interactions with managers and employees. Their work highlighted that spiritual currents, when used as a tool for “domestication” within the organizational context, serve to “maintain order.” Employees striving to advance in the organizational hierarchy and gain status and prestige both contribute to capitalism through intensive and excessive work and reinforce the existing order by producing and ostentatiously displaying their bodies and spirituality.

Islam et al. (2022) argued that the varied meanings attributed to workplace spirituality movements can be seen as an “empty signifier.” They suggested that these different interpretations arise from discursive struggles among actors engaged in competitive hegemonic projects. For instance, while organizational discourses often promote neoliberal ideologies aimed at enhancing efficiency and profitability, individual discourses may hold emancipatory potential. Benders and van Veen (2001) argued that concepts characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity, lacking precise prescriptions, are more likely to gain popularity, especially in organizational settings. This feature, which they term “interpretive vitality,” allows for flexible interpretation and adaptation of knowledge, concepts, and

theories to fit specific contexts. The popularization of spirituality movements in the workplace, as highlighted by Islam et al. (2022), can be attributed to the interpretive vitality inherent in these concepts.

The use of popularized “alternative” spirituality practices such as meditation, yoga, and mindfulness by employees as indicators of status and prestige within a hierarchical context can be linked to their role in ostentatious performance. The pursuit of a meaningful existence, or the “subjective life” approach (Bell, 2008), becomes a performance aimed at gaining approval and positioning oneself within the social hierarchy. Authoritative performances are collective behaviors intended to discover or reform cultural traditions (Arnould and Price, 2000: 140). Through this process, individuals align their behaviors with the values and norms of the group they wish to join, thereby gaining approval from its members. This type of social positioning and categorisation as well as differentiation from those who do not conform to the desired standards.

Therefore, individuals invest in both their bodies and spiritual selves, using these efforts to either maintain their current positions or advance to higher levels within the social hierarchy. This process relies on public display, making the production inherently conspicuous.

4. Conclusion

Conspicuous consumption serves not only to distinguish the upper social classes from other groups but also to secure approval within their own class. This phenomenon has evolved into a means of defining identity and expressing social categorization and differentiation within the consumer society. Research indicated that conspicuous consumption is no longer confined to the upper classes and has spread among the masses. Similarly, conspicuous production has emerged as a way to display status and power, playing a significant role in the neo-capitalist economic system. This study provides a theoretical analysis of all dimensions of conspicuous production.

Pretentiousness refers to behaviors individuals exhibit to attract attention or gain status in the social sphere. Defined as the effort to achieve prestige through “costly signaling,” pretentious behavior develops within the capitalist socio-economic framework and should be examined within this context. Many characteristics of conspicuous consumption, identified by Veblen (1899) and other researchers, are also relevant to conspicuous production, including the trickle-down theory and imitation. However, while conspicuous consumption embraces idleness, conspicuous production values extensive work—a trend rooted in Western Puritanism and various religious theories in other parts of the world.

Conspicuous production has emerged as a significant status indicator. It involves not only the creation of luxury consumer goods—products only feasible through the capital of privileged social classes—but also encompasses two distinct meanings related to the ostentatious display of this production. The ostentatious presentation of production serves as a means of gaining social status and is manifested in two primary ways: the sanctification of work and the ostentatious enhancement of the self, including both body and soul. In modern and postmodern societies, individuals either

dedicate themselves to their professional roles or focus on personal self-improvement, with both actions reflecting and reinforcing the structures established and perpetuated by the capitalist system.

This study seeks to offer a comprehensive conceptual framework and theoretical analysis of conspicuous production, aiming to define its dimensions and scope. By delineating these aspects, the research provides a foundation for future inquiry. Future research can investigate how market actors perceive the different dimensions of conspicuous production and analyze its functional dynamics across various contexts, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.

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