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Understanding Consumption Cathedrals Through Conspicuous and Hedonic Consumption: The Example of the *Upload* Series

Gösterişçi ve Hedonik Tüketim Üzerinden Tüketim Katedrallerini Anlamak: *Upload* Dizisi Örneği



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Abstract

This study aims to reveal the similarities between the virtual afterlife universe called Lakeview in the series *Upload* and the consumption cathedrals defined as the “sacred spaces” of modern consumer society, and to examine the ostentatious, hedonistic, and privileged consumption styles represented in this space. To this end, the descriptive analysis technique, which is among the qualitative research methods, was used in this study. This study examines the common features between the digital afterlife called Lakeview and the spaces George Ritzer calls consumption cathedrals and analyzes scenes and dialogues in terms of conspicuous consumption, hedonistic consumption, and privileged consumption. The analysis concludes that the series *Upload* is not merely a fictional narrative but also a media text that reflects the ideology of consumption in the digital age. The virtual afterlife space Lakeview reveals the class dimension of consumption with its services that make individuals feel special, personalized experiences, and service differences. In this respect, it parallels Ritzer’s cathedrals of consumption. This structure reveals that consumption trends in Lakeview are driven by both pleasure and privilege. The *Upload* series, which presents elements of conspicuous consumption, hedonistic consumption, and privileged consumption through various characters in a fairy-tale narrative, is also well-suited for understanding the spaces Ritzer calls “cathedrals of consumption” through visual narratives.

Öz

Bu çalışmada, *Upload* dizisindeki Lakeview adlı sanal ahiret evreninin, modern tüketim toplumunun “kutsal mekânları” olarak tanımlanan tüketim katedralleriyle benzerliğinin ortaya konması ve bu mekânda temsil edilen gösterişçi, hedonik ve ayrıcalıklı tüketim tarzlarının irdelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır. Bu amaç kapsamında çalışmada, nitel araştırma yöntemleri arasında yer alan betimsel analiz tekniği kullanılmaktadır. Çalışmada, Lakeview adlı dijital ahiret ile George Ritzer’in tüketim katedralleri adını verdiği mekanlar arasındaki ortak özellikler incelenmekte, ayrıca sahneler ve replikler gösterişçi tüketim, hedonik tüketim ve ayrıcalık tüketimi bakımından analiz edilmektedir. Yapılan analizlerle, *Upload* dizisinin salt kurgusal bir anlatı değil, aynı zamanda dijital çağın tüketim ideolojisini yansıtan bir medya metni olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmaktadır. Sanal ahiret mekânı Lakeview, bireylere özel hissettiren hizmetleri, kişiselleştirilmiş deneyimleri ve hizmet farklılıklarıyla tüketimin sınıfsal boyutunu görünür kılmakta, bu yönüyle Ritzer’in tüketim katedralleriyle paralellik göstermektedir. Bu yapı, *Upload* dizisindeki dijital ahiret mekânı olan Lakeview’deki tüketim eğilimlerinin hem haz odaklı hem de ayrıcalığa dayalı bir biçimde işlediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Gösterişçi tüketim, hedonik tüketim ve ayrıcalık tüketimi unsurlarını çeşitli karakterler üzerinden masalsi bir anlatı ile sunan *Upload* dizisi, Ritzer’in tüketim katedralleri adını verdiği mekanları görsel anlatılar üzerinden kavramak adına da elverişli bir konumdur.

Keywords

consumption · hedonism · ostentation · privilege · cathedral

Anahtar Kelimeler

tüketim · hedonizm · gösteriş · ayrıcalık · katedral



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Understanding Consumption Cathedrals Through Conspicuous and Hedonic Consumption: The Example of the Upload Series

Consumption is an act that begins at birth and continues throughout an individual's life. Since the dawn of humanity, consumption has been considered an absolute necessity for survival and a source of satisfaction for individuals (Kara, 2020, p. 156; Karaçetin, 2023, p. 33; Odabaşı, 2019, p. 3).

In the 21st century, consumption is a phenomenon that shapes societies and cultures. Consumption can also serve as a means of ostentation. Modern consumption practices, in which psychological satisfaction takes precedence, have fostered new lifestyles and shifted attention from objects to meanings (Summak, 2023, pp. 29-30). The phenomenon of consumption has become a system based on marketing commodified individuals, in addition to the sale of commodities, as human relationships that have become commodities (Oskay, 2018, p. 107). With the transformation of the phenomenon of consumption, different meanings have begun to be attributed to the concept of consumption, and an increase has been observed in the quantity of consumption (Güven, 2020). Ergen (2016, p. 1) states that the amount of consumption in the current century is unprecedented. According to Ergen, consumption levels have reached unprecedented and alarming levels. Based on these statements, it is evident that the act of consumption, which has undergone transformation throughout history, is at the peak of its qualitative and quantitative transformation.

In a globalizing world, consumers have begun to consume more than their budgets allow. In this period, where consumption is based on non-essential needs, emotions play a dominant role rather than logic (Şengün & Karahan, 2013). The attribution of different meanings to the act of consumption has led to this act becoming a means of status and prestige. Consumption driven by these motives is conceptualized as conspicuous consumption (Marangoz & Çoşkun, 2020, p. 155). Another consumption style that has emerged with the transformation of consumption is hedonistic consumption. Karaçetin (2023, p. 76) defines hedonistic consumption as consumption undertaken primarily to maximize life enjoyment.

The transformation of the phenomenon of consumption has opened the door to the age of hyper-consumption. New consumption spaces, where hyper-consumption practices play a central role, are referred to as "consumption cathedrals" by George Ritzer (1999). These spaces, which



began to emerge after World War II, have radically transformed the act of consumption. Consumption cathedrals, reminiscent of an enchanted atmosphere, strive to offer a magical and fantastical environment to attract individuals and keep them engaged in continuous consumption activities. Consumers find opportunities for socialization and communication with nature within these spaces, which resemble religious centers. As a result, individuals spend more time and increase their consumption within these spaces. Designed rationally and systematically for these purposes, these temples of consumption constantly encourage individuals to consume (Ritzer, 1999, pp. 2-11). Cathedrals, which house rationalized stores, are accessible to consumers at all times and offer the opportunity to meet a wide variety of consumption needs quickly and under one roof (Güven, 2020).

The main concern of this study is how consumption culture is reproduced in digital platform content and what meanings the fictional space of Lakeview in the series *Upload* embodies within the context of consumption cathedrals. The study asks how hedonistic and conspicuous consumption practices are represented in Lakeview's virtual afterlife and how class privileges are reproduced through these representations. In this regard, the study aims to analyze the concept of consumption cathedrals, which emerged in the context of the transformation of the phenomenon of consumption, along with ostentatious and hedonistic consumption practices through the series *Upload*. In the literature, studies on cathedrals of consumption remain relatively limited (Crossick & Jaumain, 2002; Ryan, 2020; Reşit & Artu Mutlugün, 2019; Stobart, 2017). Research focusing on the series *Upload*, on the other hand, generally revolves around themes such as digital capitalism, digital immortality, privacy, artificial intelligence, simulation, and consciousness (Akkaya, 2022; Altındaş, 2024; Bhargava, 2025; Basmacı, 2022; Magerstädt, 2024; Satici, 2024). This study is significant in that it analyzes the virtual afterlife "Lakeview" in *Upload* through George Ritzer's (1999) concept of cathedrals of consumption, focusing on conspicuous consumption, hedonistic consumption, privileged consumption, and class distinction.

The television series *Upload*, broadcast on Amazon Prime, currently consists of four seasons; however, the scope of this study is limited to the first three seasons, in which the representations of consumption are examined. The analysis focuses on episodes that align with the theoretical framework, rather than covering the entire series. Therefore, rather than taking a holistic view of the series, the study focuses on representations of specific forms of consumption.

The theoretical framework begins by discussing consumption and its historical information. It then examines the hedonistic and conspicuous consumption styles that emerged alongside this transformation. In this context, the reasons behind these consumption styles are explained, and



the characteristics of individuals who exhibit these tendencies are outlined. Finally, it addresses the concept of consumption cathedrals, illustrating their formation and characteristics with examples. The formation and characteristics of consumption cathedrals are illustrated with examples.

The Concept of Consumption and the Transformation of Consumption

The concept of consumption refers to individuals purchasing, using, and disposing of objects, services, and products in accordance with specific needs (Bozyiğit, 2021, p. 1; Karaçetin, 2023, p. 34; Odabaşı, 2019, p. 5). This definition highlights the centrality of “need” as a criterion. Kara (2020, p. 155) broadens this perspective, emphasizing that consumption is driven not only by physical but also by intellectual and instinctual needs. However, he stresses that in modern societies, consumption has transformed into an activity that extends beyond the fulfillment of basic needs.

One of the most frequently referenced conceptualizations regarding the transformation of consumption is Baudrillard’s (1999, p. 25) concept of the “consumer society.” According to Baudrillard, the concept of shopping is now quite distant from its original meaning. Individuals are surrounded by objects of consumption. This shift has reshaped the ecology of human life, producing an unprecedented abundance of consumption. Anık and Şahin (2017, p. 17) define the consumer society as a form of society in which consumption has reached a mass scale and in which having as many products as possible has become important.

In consumer society, consumption itself becomes the goal (Kara, 2020, p. 155). All actions of individuals who work to consume are structured around shopping. The goods consumed by individuals living in consumption-oriented societies serve as markers of their social status (Gümüş, 2018, pp. 1-3). In such an environment, consumers determine the products they purchase in line with the expectations of society (Anık & Şahin, 2017, p. 139). Therefore, consumption has become a dialectical relationship between the individual and society.

The act of consumption is used as a means of self-expression in consumer societies. Individuals design their own identities with the products they purchase and convey this design to their surroundings as a message (Gümüş, 2018, p. 13; Kara, 2020, p. 156; Summak, 2023, p. 30; Tor Kadioğlu, 2022, p. 9).

In their book *The World of Goods*, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1996, pp. 1-3) state that individuals consume in order to control other people and avoid the risk of being controlled by them. Another factor that encourages consumption is technology; as technology advances, individuals’ tendency to consume increases at a positive rate. The mass production of products that are constantly promoted as newer and better, parallel to the development of technology,



causes these products to be perceived as essential by individuals. Consumers feel that if they do not own products that are quickly replaced by newer ones, they are falling behind the times. In short, consumption activity has become a self-perpetuating cycle.

Consumption activity, which has become a continuous cycle, has turned into a process with no outcome. In a consumption environment where the main goal is to create dissatisfaction, individuals constantly shuttle from one product to another in pursuit of their desires (Akgül, 2021, p. 179; Baranoğlu, 2021, p. 16; Gümüş, 2018, p. 13; Silier, 2021, pp. 165-172). At this point, Bauman and May (2001, p. 101) state that the reason for the cycle in consumer societies is that individuals enjoy the path to a goal rather than reaching the goal itself. Accordingly, in consumer societies, the ultimate goal is not satisfaction but to continuously feel desire. Indeed, desire always encourages more desire

Internet technologies, which have developed alongside the digital age, play an active role in increasing the desire for consumption. The effort required to purchase products has now been minimized. Instead of going from store to store and trying to get information from salespeople, it is now possible to access products and product information with a single click on the internet. Today's societies have reached the level of a "hyper-consumer society" (Güngör, 2018, pp. 409-410). In addition to the ease of accessing products, purchased items can be delivered to the buyer in less than a day (Kuyucu & Karahisar, 2013, p. 13). Therefore, with technological developments, the opportunities offered by shopping centers are presented to consumers in a faster and more practical form through digital tools.

Han (2018, pp. 60-80) states that society itself has turned into a shopping center. In societies overflowing with short-lived products that are far from sustainable, there is no room for surprise anymore. The sense of otherness and novelty has faded, giving way to standardized habits and uniform patterns of consumption.

The individual derives momentary pleasure from the act of consumption, but this pleasure is quickly replaced by another purchase target (Silier, 2021, p. 172). Purchased products also quickly become obsolete, turning into a short-term form. Fake innovations constantly destroy the old. The consumer society is built on destroying and replacing the old with the new (Baudrillard, 1999, pp. 40-47). In this regard, companies also contribute to individuals' short-term consumption tendencies that are far from sustainability.

Corporations have begun to classify individuals who are subject to surveillance through the mass media. With these actions aimed at attracting customers, each consumer is treated differ-

ently and offered different products. On companies' web-based shopping sites, these services are carried out by collecting customers' personal data. Every action taken by consumers is used as data for future actions. In this case, consumers are voluntarily monitored. Likewise, the wish lists created by customers serve as a guide for presentations to other customers (Bauman & Lyon, 2013, pp. 103-106). Monitoring consumers' preferences is increasingly becoming a critical sales strategy. Companies encourage consumption by subjecting consumers to a constant barrage of advertising and build a consumer-based market understanding by monitoring the feedback received (Aytaç, 2019, p. 132).

The perception of continuous consumption created by mass media generates a desire in individuals to own products, even if they lack the financial means. In line with the perception created, a dialectical relationship is established between consumption and pleasure (Bocock, 1993, p. 1-7). The industrial revolution, industrialization, and the postmodern era, which were influential in consumption reaching a symbolic dimension, as well as developments in information and communication technologies, have accelerated this transformation. Consumption has become a pleasure-oriented action carried out for the sake of enjoyment and entertainment through messages conveyed to individuals by mass media. In this context, consumption has become a "hedonic" activity, i.e., one in which pleasure is the determining factor (Summak, 2023, p. 23). As the effort required to access products decreases, more opportunities can be created for shopping to be carried out for pleasure.

Hedonistic Consumption

The concept of hedonism is defined as the pursuit of pleasure (Karaçetin, 2023, p. 76; Odabaşı, 2019, p. 136). The roots of hedonism, a recurring theme throughout history, can be traced back to Ancient Greek philosophy. In this tradition, pleasure equates to happiness; thus, pleasure is regarded as the highest good, and actions leading to pleasure are deemed virtuous (Marangoz & Çoşkun, 2020, p. 184; Odabaşı, 2019, p. 136).

Hedonism also finds its place in the field of consumption. Hedonistic consumption represents one of the most significant trends within contemporary consumer culture. "Dreaming" plays a dominant role in hedonistic consumption. Hedonic consumption encompasses the sensory images, fantasies, and emotional experiences that accompany the act of purchasing products. From this perspective, products are not objective elements but subjective symbols and gain value in line with their images. Thus, the significance of a product lies less in its material essence than in what it represents symbolically. Consumers play an active role in products gaining symbolic

and representational value (Odabaşı, 2019, pp. 136-147). Behind hedonistic consumption lies the search for satisfaction and happiness. Corporations design marketing strategies in response to consumers' pursuit of such experiences. Accordingly, monitoring consumers' psychological and emotional tendencies becomes a critical aspect of marketing (Summak, 2023, p. 34). Moreover, in an environment where consumers' emotional and excitement tendencies have gained importance, producers are also faced with the necessity of differentiating themselves from other competitors during marketing (Akkan, 2021, p. 95). In sum, pleasure-oriented consumption exerts transformative effects on contemporary marketing practices.

Hedonistic consumption is a form of consumption that goes beyond needs and satisfies individuals' need for self-actualization. Individuals act based on their emotions rather than their needs (Marangoz & Çoşkun, 2020, p. 183; Şengün & Karahan, 2013). In pleasure-driven consumption, functional benefits are secondary to the emotional and symbolic value of the products. The act of shopping occurs based on subjective judgments, and the entertainment factor also plays a role in this act. While individuals turn the act of purchasing into an entertainment process, they also use the purchased products as status symbols and to gain acceptance by society (Kayacan & Tunca, 2023; Turgut, 2023).

Hedonistic consumption has become increasingly pervasive in modern societies. Modern consumption habits are increasingly hedonistic, and products purchased based on imaginary motives are replacing basic consumer goods. In other words, hedonism, which has found its place in every period of history, is transformed into consumption and spectacle within modern society (Koçak, 2024, p. 73; Marangoz & Çoşkun, 2020, p. 184). At this point, it is understood that the tendency to present consumption as a spectacle is linked to hedonism and that the pursuit of pleasure is a means of increasing conspicuous consumption.

Featherstone (2007, p. 21) argues that with the rise of the capitalist system, the groundwork was laid for the formation of consumption images and consumption areas that approve of pleasures. In societies where symbolic goods and images dominate, conspicuous consumption becomes particularly salient. Within such a social structure, entertainment, gift-giving, and consumption competitions are carried out through conspicuous consumption. Thus, hedonistic and conspicuous consumption extend beyond the individual level, attaining a dialectical and collective social dimension.

Conspicuous Consumption

Another form of modern consumption is conspicuous consumption. This consumption trend began to spread with industrialized societies (Koşar & Doğrul, 2021, p. 53). The fact that the lower classes of society were also able to access luxury and high-quality products after the industrial revolution stands out as a reason for the spread of conspicuous consumption (Kara, 2020, p. 155). Conspicuous consumption refers to the perception of purchased goods primarily as symbols of prestige and status rather than as functional objects (Kara, 2020, p. 155; Karaçetin, 2023, p. 72; Koçak, 2024, p. 5; Summak, 2023, p. 8). The status created by conspicuous consumption is formed not by the purchased products themselves, but rather by the image that these products create in the minds of consumers (Tor Kadioğlu, 2022, p. 23). In this context, individuals aim to gain approval and respect from society through their conspicuous consumption, which they carry out in line with expectations (Koşar & Doğrul, 2021, p. 51; Kara, 2020, pp. 155-157).

Individuals who try to present their lifestyles through consumption aim to create a special identity. On the other hand, influencers on social media also create brand preferences among consumers by sharing brand products (Summak, 2023, p. 94). Han (2022, pp. 1-2) argues that influencers on social media can be perceived as religious leaders. In this scenario, consumers resemble disciples, achieving salvation by purchasing the recommended products. Consumers who purchase the products recommended by influencers fall into the misconception that they are creating an identity and realizing themselves. Ultimately, as consumption intertwines with identity, the self itself becomes commodified. Individuals consume themselves while realizing themselves. Similarly, Silier (2021, p. 171) states that surveillance on the Internet triggers conspicuous consumption and claims that advertisements in this medium create a constant feeling of deficiency in individuals.

Behind conspicuous consumption lies the desire of individuals to move up the social hierarchy and belong to the upper echelons. Moreover, conspicuous consumption fosters continuous shopping behaviors, exerting psychological and social pressure on individuals (Kardaş & İlgin, 2025). This style of consumption has become an indirect form of communication between individuals. People express themselves through the luxury goods they purchase and evaluate others based on these products. Individuals with ostentatious tendencies also harbor a desire to be different from others. Likewise, these individuals want to differentiate themselves from the public (Güner Koçak, 2017; Hız, 2011). Therefore, for individuals who categorize people based on the objects they own, the culture of conspicuous consumption is in a favorable position (Yanıklar, 2006, p. 145).



Featherstone (2007, pp. 18–24) notes that contemporary consumer culture cultivates contexts conducive to conspicuous consumption, where symbolic goods are pursued for emotional gratification. In an environment where the demand for symbolic and consumer goods is increasing, consumption choices can be used to express certain lifestyles. The classification of individuals based on their clothing and possessions can also occur in such an environment, with the wealthy class in particular turning to conspicuous consumption to reinforce their status.

While conspicuous consumption signals authentic wealth among the upper classes, for lower-income groups, it functions as a strategy to simulate affluence (Anık & Şahin, 2017, p. 2; Kara, 2020, p. 156). This idea originates from Thorstein Veblen (1899). Veblen is considered a pioneer of the concept of conspicuous consumption. Veblen discusses his views on conspicuous consumption in his work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Veblen (1899, pp. 35-36) noted that the consumption of high-priced and luxury goods is used by individuals as an expression of wealth. This type of consumption elevates individuals to a position of honor, while living a life distant from consumption is perceived as a behavior characteristic of the lower class. Luxury consumption and aristocratic lifestyles gain functionality as elements suitable for conspicuous consumption. Within conspicuous consumption, the acquisition of valuable goods functions as a key marker of prestige. The conspicuous consumption of valuable goods may not be sufficient on its own; in this case, individuals reflect ostentation through lavish invitations or high-priced gifts.

Veblen contributed to the theoretical maturity of the view that individuals convey various messages for ostentatious purposes through consumption (Koçak, 2024, p. 13). According to this view, no class from the highest to the lowest strata of society is immune to conspicuous consumption. The expansion of communication technologies and surveillance mechanisms has intensified the public display of consumption. People reflect their material power by using it as a clear and accurate signature (Veblen, 1899, pp. 40-41). According to Veblen, consumers are willing to sacrifice their material well-being to reflect their status and identity. Individuals who try to express their inclusion in the lifestyle of the upper class through consumption can even place these needs above their basic needs. In this context, every class in the social hierarchy attempts to achieve the goal of reaching a higher class through consumption (as cited in Yanıklar, 2006, pp. 151-152). Consumers, including those in the most destitute circumstances, waste goods for conspicuous consumption. While a lifestyle that only meets basic needs is perceived as lacking in virtue, extravagance is positioned as a means of gaining respect (Veblen, 1899, pp. 40-47). Therefore, Veblen critically



examines conspicuous consumption both on an individual level and addresses the social consequences of this behavior.

Cathedrals of Consumption

George Ritzer (1999, pp. 2-11) conceptualizes the spaces where today's hyper-consumption occurs and is sustained as "cathedrals of consumption." This concept can also be referred to as a "new consumption tool." Within consumption cathedrals, individuals are offered a magical and fantastical world to encourage consumption. Consumption cathedrals are designed to resemble sacred and religious spaces. Within these spaces, individuals both shop and socialize. Thus, the desire to belong to a community draws individuals to these spaces. Much like religious cathedrals, these spaces continuously reproduce themselves in line with consumer demand. Like their religious counterparts, they provide individuals with various communal functions. Reşit and Artu Mutlugün (2019) describe consumption cathedrals as the places of worship of the postmodern era. These spaces, free from the routine and dangers of the outside world, continuously meet individuals' need for enchantment in an ever-evolving manner. Consumption cathedrals, which provide personal satisfaction to consumers, operate within the environment of consumption frenzy by presenting a constructed reality.

Shopping malls are one of the most fundamental examples of consumption cathedrals. They are centrally designed, echoing the architecture of the temples. In addition to consumption activities, shopping malls offer entertainment opportunities and dining options. These opportunities and amenities make the shopping process more appealing. Their spatial symmetry is deliberately constructed to encourage consumption (Ritzer, 1999, p. 8-9). George Ritzer (2021, p. 38) also addresses shopping malls as temples of consumption in his work *The McDonaldization of Society*. In this work, Ritzer states that shopping malls, which bring together different types of shopping opportunities in a single space, attract people with this feature. This situation, conceptualized as "store synergy," is functional for consumers.

Guy Debord (2014, pp. 92-93) also engages with the temples of consumption in *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord sees them as systematically organized sites of frenzied consumption emerging from commodity abundance. Another figure who expressed his views on consumption cathedrals is Zygmunt Bauman (2000, pp. 97-100). Frequently referring to George Ritzer in his book *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman describes temples of consumption as spaces created to serve consumers and aimed at transforming individuals into consumers within urban life. The flow within these spaces is almost independent of the outside world. Bauman describes cathedrals of consumption as



purified spaces. Unlike the external world, these spaces are disciplined, hygienic, and protected from danger. Thus, in these areas where image substitutes for reality, individuals can concentrate exclusively on entertainment, free from risk. The opportunities offered to consumers are not limited to this; individuals also feel a sense of belonging within these spaces and experience the feeling of being part of a community.

In addition to the wide range of opportunities they offer, consumption cathedrals, which provide consumers with various opportunities under one roof, instill in individuals the idea that they need to shop. As a result, consumers are increasingly propelled toward further consumption. These spaces are designed esthetically and scientifically around this purpose (Ritzer, 1999, pp. 29-41). In sum, consumption cathedrals are spaces designed to transform every moment spent within them into consumption-oriented desires.

Jean Baudrillard (1999, pp. 27-30), in his work *The Consumer Society*, conceptualizes the “drugstore” in a similar way to consumption cathedrals. Drugstores, like temples of consumption, are shrines of consumption where desire is produced. Similar to cathedrals of consumption, these spaces offer the opportunity to do many different types of shopping in a single area, while also being spaces where commodities become cultural, where eating, socializing, and connecting with nature are possible. Containing “a little of everything,” drugstores turn consumption into an esthetic experience offered to individuals. Thus, the “drugstore” serves as a parallel conceptualization to the temples of consumption, sharing their functions and meanings. Both concepts describe spaces that facilitate diverse consumption experiences, prompting individuals to remain within these settings longer and reinforcing an ongoing cycle of consumption.

Method

Upload is a science fiction-comedy series that first premiered on the Amazon Prime Video platform in 2020. Created by Greg Daniels, this production currently consists of four seasons; however, this study focuses on the first three seasons. The series depicts a dystopian future where consciousness can be uploaded to a digital environment after death. At the center of the series is “Lakeview” a virtual paradise that serves as a life-extension technology where the consciousness of individuals who have been digitized before death is transferred. Lakeview, a luxurious virtual living space, functions as a system in which consumption, privilege and class differences are reproduced. The series takes a critical look at how digital technologies shape personal experiences, social relationships, and especially consumption practices.

This study employs descriptive analysis, a qualitative research method. Descriptive analysis aims to systematically organize and interpret the data obtained and present it to the reader. The collected data were categorized into themes shaped by the research objectives and questions (Balaban Sali, 2012, p. 127). The *Upload* series carries symbolic meanings in terms of set designs and the consumption tendencies of the characters. Therefore, systematically describing the scenes in line with the defined theoretical framework and themes aligns with the study's objectives. The structure of the descriptive analysis, which enables contextual examination, facilitates the interpretation of the consumption-related themes in the series. In this regard, the study examines the three seasons of the series. In the findings section, scenes reflecting the identified consumption themes are described and analyzed within the framework of the study's theoretical approach. In this study, George Ritzer's (1999) concept of "cathedrals of consumption" is applied to Lakeview, the digital space depicted in the *Upload* series, within this methodological framework. The study also analyzes the practices of conspicuous consumption and hedonistic consumption in the *Upload* series, as well as the topics of privileged consumption and class difference, through scenes set in the Lakeview space. The scene selections are determined based on these topics. Accordingly, the study focuses on four themes: "Lakeview as a cathedral of consumption," "conspicuous consumption," "hedonic consumption," and "consumption of privilege and class difference." The reason for this classification is that these types of consumption are both prominent in Ritzer's conceptualization of consumption cathedrals, which forms the theoretical basis of the study, and characterize the narrative of consumption in the *Upload* series. In classifying scenes, spatial, class, pleasure, and spectacle dimensions are considered. In the spatial dimension, the relationship between the virtual paradise called Lakeview in the series and Ritzer's cathedral metaphor is examined. In terms of class and the dimensions of display and pleasure, Veblen's views on how consumption is transformed into display in a class-based manner are discussed. Additionally, selected scenes from the series were analyzed through audiovisual indicators such as color, lighting, set design, camera angles, and sound elements.

Findings

Lakeview, the virtual afterlife in the *Upload* series, which is a digital life extension technology, shares parallel characteristics with the consumption spaces that George Ritzer (1999) calls "cathedrals of consumption." These characteristics, which are revealed in many scenes, are examined under the theme of "Lakeview as a cathedral of consumption."

In the series' opening scene, Lakeview, a virtual afterlife space, is introduced through a commercial. In this commercial, the Lakeview space is described as "the perfect natural beauty that

humans can design.” This place, promoted like a luxury hotel, is described as “the place where your best days can begin.” During the promotion, phrases such as “you deserve Lakeview” and “you’ve made it here” are used. In this commercial, Lakeview is framed as a commodity that is both deserved and attained, reinforced by references to natural life.

The natural life narrative is supported by the design of the Lakeview space. This space is conceived as a form of paradise, surrounded by greenery on all sides. This fiction is portrayed as a flawless and free-form danger, similar to Ritzer’s cathedrals of consumption, in contrast to the flaws and dangers of real life.

Figure 1

Promotional video for the digital afterlife Lakeview (Season 1, Episode 1, Timecode: 00:00:25)



Ingrid, the girlfriend of Nathan Brown, the lead character of the series, who comes from a wealthy family, supports the view that Lakeview is perceived as paradise by saying, “My grandmother is in heaven, our family is from Lakeview, we have unlimited resources for both sides” during a conversation during Nathan’s visit to his family. Furthermore, Ingrid’s statement, “we have unlimited data for both sides” indicates that the data sustaining life in Lakeview is purchased in real life. In this context, life in the virtual afterlife has become a commodity, with the conditions of life there determined by purchased data. Therefore, Lakeview is a place of consumption, where purchased data both provides a life and pays for various consumption opportunities within that life. Death and digital afterlife design are characterized as a commercialized metaphor. In later episodes of the series, the main character, Nathan Brown, is involved in a traffic accident. After the accident, while he is being taken to the hospital, his girlfriend Ingrid tells the nurses, “We want Nathan to be uploaded to the virtual afterlife; we don’t want to miss this opportunity.” Uploading refers to individuals voluntarily ending their lives before death and having their data uploaded

to the virtual afterlife. Ingrid's use of the word "opportunity" suggests that even death itself is commodified, reframed as a chance to attain the virtual afterlife. The scene also mentions calling the "heaven sales representative," which supports the aforementioned presentation. In this scene, it becomes clear that Lakeview is a commodity. In this space where every action is turned into a commodity, sexuality is also presented as a commodity and a sales strategy. The sales representative has Nathan sign the documents to register for Lakeview. While filling out the documents, Nathan asks, "There will be sex there, right?" The sales representative confirms and then says, "You can change your partner's avatar as you like, increase the level of sexuality, it's an amazing simulation." This statement illustrates that Lakeview embodies the core characteristics of cathedrals of consumption. Likewise, the transformation of every action into consumption and the encouragement of consumption in the cathedrals of consumption is manifested in Lakeview, where even sexuality becomes a means of consumption. In the scene where Nathan arrives at Lakeview, the digital assistant Nora introduces herself as an "angel." This expression indicates that Lakeview is designed in a manner similar to the temples of faith. Indeed, one of the prominent features of cathedrals of consumption is their resemblance to religious temples (Ritzer, 1999. pp. 2-11). Digital assistants promising immortality are depicted like angels in heaven. Nathan's lake-view, classic-style room and the building's striking architecture evoke the esthetic of a temple. At this point, the central design of the consumption temples can also be seen in Lakeview. As digital representative Nora introduces this space to Nathan, she uses the phrases "peaceful views, healthy pursuits, timeless American style." Healthy pursuits such as walking and exercise align with the fundamental characteristics of the cathedrals of consumption, which include the ability to engage in various activities while shopping. Nora also notes that in Lakeview, the same building can transform into different structures for different people, becoming a mosque, a church, or even a bowling alley, depending on preference. The personalized shopping opportunities of consumption cathedrals are also seen in Lakeview. In the continuation of this scene, it becomes clear that personalization requires a "premium membership." In this context, living standards have also been commodified. Nathan can browse different products from the virtual refrigerator in his room in Lakeview, but he is charged for these products as well. In the context of cathedrals of consumption, it is seen that the act of consumption extends to the refrigerator in the room. Lakeview is saturated with virtual advertisements that relentlessly encourage consumption. When Nathan first descends into the lobby of the Lakeview building, advertising robots roam the area. The robots try to sell gum to the Lakeview residents. This situation parallels the structure of consumption temples, which constantly encourage consumption. Similarly, in later episodes of the series, the digital angel Nora



advertises to sell tacos to Nathan. This scene exemplifies how technological products in the digital age constantly drive individuals toward consumption.

Figure 2

Advertising robots in Lakeview that encourage constant consumption (Season 1, Episode 1, Timecode: 00:26:43)



Lakeview also organizes a virtual discount day similar to “Black Friday.” Members shop throughout the day, while advertising robots roaming around encourage consumption with their campaigns. Ingrid describes this day as “the ultimate in consumer madness.” This line underscores that Lakeview operates as a hyper-consumption space. In the age of hyper-consumption, individuals shopping regardless of needing anything on special discounts days is addressed in this scene.

Figure 3

Special sale day at Lakeview (Season 3, Episode 3, Timecode: 00:04:10)



Lakeview's visual design is conceived to embody the cathedrals of consumption and the metaphor of paradise. The symmetrical architecture of this space, composed of golden reflections and the colors of nature, ensures that the digital paradise appears sterile and flawless. This design simultaneously conveys tranquility and grandeur to the viewer, reproducing the myth of perfection in consumer societies. The high ceilings of the Lakeview venues also create a temple-like structure. The digital addition of natural sounds, such as birdsong and the rustling of the wind, serves to mimic reality and create a false paradise atmosphere. The camera emphasizes this paradise atmosphere by using wide angles to reveal the size of the space and its unity with nature. In stark contrast, real life is presented in muted colors and low light, emphasizing how the world has reached a transcendent point and begun to exhaust itself. The workplace where the digital paradise is designed is constructed in a dark tone with a dark color palette, highlighting the illegal activities carried out there. Throughout the three seasons, consumption continues in the background during the filming of scenes, in addition to the action in the foreground, and this process is captured on camera. In this way, the camera not only focuses on the main action in the foreground but also reflects the consumption actions continuing in the background to the viewer.

Lakeview, designed as a virtual afterlife in the *Upload* universe, is conceived as a place where members can satisfy their pleasure-oriented desires. Users who can access many consumption practices in this space that they cannot access in real life thus find the opportunity to realize their hedonistic consumption tendencies. In this context, the study is evaluated around the theme of hedonistic consumption.

The series features many scenes related to this consumption practice. When Nathan first visits the restaurant in Lakeview, he encounters a buffet with various food and unlimited consumption rights. The food in the restaurant emphasizes hedonistic consumption. Likewise, Nathan fills his plate with much more food than he needs. This action exemplifies hedonistic consumption. In an era of hyper-consumption, Lakeview's restaurant exemplifies eating habits that focus on excess and pleasure, presented as a spectacle.



Figure 4

The restaurant in Lakeview is an example of hedonic consumption (Season 1, Episode 1, Timecode 00:30:05)



David Choak, an old politician and billionaire who is Nathan's next-door neighbor, stands out in the series with his pleasure-oriented desires. When they first meet, Choak spends \$20,000 to buy new golf clubs to teach Nathan how to play golf. When Nathan expresses surprise that \$20,000 was spent just for him, Choak points out that he spent even more money to eat an endangered parrot. Similarly, in another scene, David Choak eats black rhino meat at a restaurant and says that the rhino was killed "to get the taste right." Choak consumes the last rhino, which is endangered, for the sake of pleasure. Choak's lines are a striking example of how food consumption has become pleasure-oriented.

Figure 5

The scene where David Choak eats endangered rhino meat. (Season 1, Episode 7, Timecode: 00:11:29)



In the third season of the series, an update to Lakeview allows members to have babies created from digital data for a fee. Nathan's girlfriend Ingrid also wants to have a baby. In response to Ingrid's request for parenthood, the digital assistant Tinsley monitors Ingrid. During this monitoring, Ingrid's wardrobe is inspected. Ingrid has hundreds of shoes in her closet, and her clothes are also specially made from cashmere and silk fabrics. This room, created according to hedonistic consumption tendencies, causes Ingrid to receive a low score in the assessment. Furthermore, Ingrid is labeled a "materialist" because of this assessment. The increasingly materialistic tendencies of consumer societies are addressed in this context.

Figure 6

Ingrid's wardrobe that led to her being labeled a materialist. (Season 2, Episode 6, Timecode: 00:06:57)



In the third season of the series, a new copy is created from Nathan Brown's data. Ingrid is in a relationship with this copy. In the final episode of the series, Nathan Brown's copy transforms nature into an ambiance suitable for proposing marriage to Ingrid. This environment, featuring luxury accessories hung on trees and a gold table and chairs placed on the grass, also includes a special artificial intelligence assistant. This assistant wears a teddy bear costume for the marriage proposal ambiance. Nathan designed this environment in a pleasure-oriented way, setting an example for hedonistic consumption trends. This scene addresses the tendency for wedding ceremonies to go beyond their scope and meaning and turn into a spectacle. Also, artificial intelligence assistants are used throughout the series similarly to this scene for the sake of hedonistic consumption trends.

The color palette in scenes depicting hedonistic consumption is mostly bright and vivid. The interior designs are constructed symmetrically and flawlessly, and the spaces are filled with more

products than necessary to emphasize hedonistic consumption. The camera is used with dynamic movements and wide angles to capture these products. The scene where Nathan arrives at the Lakeview restaurant, with a wide-angle shot capturing all types of luxury food in the restaurant, exemplifies this. Thus, the esthetic language of the series presents a narrative that supports the continuity of the culture of pleasure.

Another consumption trend that emerges early in the series *Upload* is conspicuous consumption. The virtual afterlife called Lakeview is designed to allow its members to display their possessions. Indeed, conspicuous consumption is repeatedly emphasized in scenes set in the virtual afterlife, which is mostly populated by wealthy members. In this context, conspicuous consumption forms another theme of the analysis.

In the first season of the series, Nathan's girlfriend, Ingrid, organizes a virtual funeral for him after he is involved in a car accident. Nathan and his girlfriend Ingrid, who are uploaded to the digital afterlife after their deaths, choose a suit for Nathan for the virtual funeral. Nathan participates in his own funeral in a virtual form. During the suit selection, the pair examines the most extravagant suits. Ingrid pays an additional fee to access the “plus suits” category and purchases an Italian, short-legged, green suit on Nathan’s behalf. This scene exemplifies conspicuous consumption, aligning with Veblen’s (1899) notion of ostentation in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Figure 7

The premium category suit Ingrid bought for Nathan (Season 1, Episode 3, Timecode: 00:01:13)



During Nathan’s funeral, Ingrid, who is organizing the ceremony, lists all the luxury items she purchased for the ceremony to the attendees while arguing with Nathan. She lists the luxury items she has purchased one by one, specifying their prices. Ingrid displays conspicuous consumption

tendencies in this scene. Veblen's (1899, pp. 35-36) view that people express their wealth through high-priced goods is confirmed in this scene.

Figure 8

Ingrid's public listing of the expensive items she bought for the funeral and their prices (Season 1, Episode 3, Timecode: 00:19:44)



In the second season of the series, Nathan and his girlfriend Ingrid organize a dinner party for their acquaintances in Lakeview. Ingrid, who is in charge of the organization, designs the invitation to be as luxurious and ostentatious as possible. Hiring 10 AI assistants for this invitation, Ingrid displays conspicuous consumption practices with gold accessories, a wide variety of luxurious dishes, and luxurious clothing. During this prestigious dinner, Ingrid, dissatisfied with the service of ordinary AI assistants, calls for special AI assistants and transforms the presentation into an even more ostentatious form. The guests attending the dinner also wore ostentatious clothing and luxury accessories appropriate to the ambience. In short, this invitation takes the form of a status display in itself. This scene exemplifies the reflection of conspicuous consumption through lavish invitations, as mentioned by Veblen (1899, pp. 35-36) in his work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.

Figure 9*Invitation dinner organized by Ingrid (Season 2, Episode 2, Timecode: 00:11:20)*

In scenes depicting conspicuous consumption, the visual narrative is designed to emphasize opulence. Luxurious connotations are often conveyed through tones such as gold and emerald green. The camera focuses on luxury products, reproducing the spectacle of consumption. The settings are also decorated in an exaggerated manner to match this spectacle. The characters' clothing is also chosen to suit conspicuous consumption.

As an extension of digital life, Lakeview exhibits trends in privileged consumption and class distinctions. Lakeview residents can become “premium” members for a fee, which grants them access to “plus” products. Within this structure, which exemplifies class division, digital assistants also frequently remind Lakeview residents that they are special and privileged. In this context, “privileged consumption and class difference” constitutes another theme to be analyzed.

In the first episode of the series, Nathan's family and friends organize a dinner. During the meal, Ingrid implies their privileged position with the statement, “We're Lakeviewers by family,” while one of Nathan's relatives mentions that uploading to Lakeview is too expensive and unattainable for them. This dialogue makes it clear that Lakeview is a space reserved for individuals with a certain level of financial accumulation. Ingrid's reference to her family exemplifies Veblen's (1899, p. 37) idea that class status is inherited. Also in the first episode, while Nathan is uploading to the digital afterlife, his digital assistant Nora introduces Lakeview, describing it as “the only digital afterlife environment modeled after Victorian hotels in the US and Canada.” This description emphasizes that Lakeview is a privileged place compared to other digital afterlives. When Nora informs Nathan about the personalized consumption opportunities at Lakeview, it becomes clear

that personalization is only available to premium members, exemplifying the class division at Lakeview. While ordinary members have limited opportunities, residents who pay more to become premium members enjoy more privileged opportunities. In this way, the series addressed the increasing distinction between premium and standard products in the digital age.

Figure 10

Personalization elements in Upload require a premium membership (Season 1, Episode 1, Timecode: 00:19:38)



Lakeview's class hierarchy is evident in its spatial design: those paying the least reside on the lowest floors, living restricted lives detached from luxury. Referred to as "2 GBers" in the series, these individuals have a monthly data production allowance of 2 GB, and once this allowance is used up, they are frozen until the next month. This is consistent with Veblen's (1899, p. 37) view that a form of hierarchical system is formed in society based on wealth.

Figure 11

Low-level members on the lowest floor of the Lakeview building (Season 1, Episode 4, Timecode: 00:03:03)



Nathan Brown's neighbor and close friend Luke takes action to disrupt this class inequality. For example, he secretly sneaks into the jacuzzi area, which is reserved for premium members only. Luke's digital assistant arrives at the jacuzzi area and tells him that he is not a premium member and must leave the area. In this scene, which exemplifies Lakeview's class division and form of privileged consumption, the digital angel Aleesha reveals that Luke has not paid any fees and has put him in a difficult position, exposing the digital afterlife as a system built on consumption. Nathan and his friend Luke take action against the class division in Lakeview in the second season as well. The duo steals data from premium members and transfers it to 2 GB members, who have the lowest level of membership and limited lives, in response to the determination of living standards based on fees in Lakeview. The transfer of data that determines living standards and duration in the virtual afterlife called Lakeview, taken from the rich and given to the poor, is conceptualized as "Robin Hood" through an intertextual reference in the episode's title. Nathan takes a stance against this class division throughout the series and fights for this cause. Nathan expresses this perspective with the line, "Anyone who can afford Lakeview can share their data." Lakeview, a virtual afterlife operating in a hierarchical order where those who pay the least live on the lowest floor, has special floors. Luke, a Lakeview member, and his digital assistant Aleesha are invited to a meeting by Karina, who is part of the management of Horizon, the company that created Lakeview. This meeting occurs on Lakeview's executive floor. This floor, created exclusively for executives, features a lavish bar and luxury consumer goods. The executive floor also houses artificial intelligence assistants designed exclusively for executives and working only on this floor. In this form, the executive floor exemplifies Lakeview's class-based discrimination.

Figure 12

The executive floor of the Lakeview building (Season 3, Episode 7, Timecode: 00:20:27)



In Lakeview, a new update now allows members to own babies created through digital data. However, this application is carried out for a specific fee. The fact that the created digital babies are not available to all Lakeview members and are subject to a fee exemplifies privileged consumption. In this way, Lakeview reinforces class inequality not only through its floor structure but also through the level of opportunities it offers. Furthermore, the uniforms worn by artificial intelligences working in the digital paradise exemplify Veblen's (1899, pp. 37) claims regarding the reflection of class distinctions and dependency through uniforms.

One of the fundamental elements reflecting class distinctions in the digital afterlife is the use of color and spatial design. The areas inhabited by high-level members are more colorful and more in line with the metaphor of paradise, while the areas inhabited by low-level members are designed to be colorless and located on the lowest floor. Spaces belonging to high-level members are decorated with luxury consumption items, while the lowest floor, where low-level members live, has almost no furniture or decor. In terms of sound usage, scenes featuring upper-class members are generally accompanied by lively, cheerful, and rhythmic music, while scenes featuring lower-class characters are mostly complemented by slow-tempo, suspenseful, or melancholic sound elements. This esthetic arrangement ensures that the class division in the digital world is also felt sensually.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study is built on the concept of consumption cathedrals and focuses on hedonistic, ostentatious, and privilege-based consumption practices, as well as class distinctions. The study analyzes these concepts through the television series *Upload*. According to the findings, Lakeview stands out as a symbolic consumption cathedral that continuously drives individuals to consume, in addition to being a living space established with digital life extension technology. In the *Upload* series, it is determined that the narrative's fundamental problem is the construction of the digital afterlife Lakeview as a cathedral of consumption and the resulting class privilege, conspicuous consumption, and hedonistic consumption practices. In Lakeview, consumption practices go beyond basic needs and drive the members of this space toward privileged consumption, pleasure-oriented consumption, and conspicuous consumption tendencies. Individuals feel privileged and special in this living space. The series features characters who symbolize conspicuous consumption and hedonistic consumption. The character Ingrid exhibits conspicuous consumption practices throughout the seasons, and this consumption style is repeatedly characterized through Ingrid in the series. Hedonistic consumption is constructed in the series through the character of David Choak, a former politician and billionaire. Choak consumes for pleasure throughout the

series' three seasons. In particular, the constant consumption of endangered animals by Choak is a prime example of this. Through these characters and the general narrative, the series implicitly criticizes consumer society. A similar conclusion has been reached in the literature in the study titled "A Cinematic Approach to Consumer Society: *Fight Club*." In this study, Göker and Akman (2011) stated that the film *Fight Club* is constructed as a critique of consumer society. There are also studies in the literature that reach similar conclusions to this study on conspicuous consumption. The article titled "A Semiotic Analysis of the Series *Kirli Sepeti* in the Context of Conspicuous Consumption" (Şeker et al., 2024) aims to examine the luxury lifestyles and conspicuous consumption tendencies in the series *Kirli Sepeti*. According to the results of the study, the series reflects conspicuous consumption tendencies through expensive jewelry, clothing styles, luxury cars, and lavish parties.

Upload also contains deep narratives on class inequality and privileged consumption. While premium services are reserved for high-paying members, low-paying users are confined to limited rights and inferior living conditions. In the series, being in Lakeview is transformed into a prestige indicator, while class identity is recoded through technological appearances. The series' underlying theme is the struggle against class inequality. Indeed, the main character, Nathan Brown, is working on a free digital afterlife application accessible to everyone before being uploaded to Lakeview, a paid digital life extension technology. Even after being uploaded to Lakeview, Nathan takes action to dismantle the hierarchical order inherent in this application. Fighting on behalf of members with limited life rights, Nathan embraces and promotes the view that everyone should have equal access to the digital afterlife. This struggle for equality is also reflected in the social actions launched to create a free digital life application called Freeyond. This production presents the struggles against class inequality in a fairy-tale-like narrative. Furthermore, *Upload* functions as a science fiction series that makes the ideology of consumption visible and reinforces it within the context of the digital age. The series visualizes how pleasure-oriented consumption, conspicuous consumption, and privileged consumption are made natural and desirable.

Baudrillard's (1999, p. 25) view that individuals in consumer societies are surrounded by consumer objects parallels the series' central narrative. Furthermore, Baudrillard's (1999, pp. 27-30) conceptualization of drugstores and the consumption spaces aligns closely with the virtual paradise Lakeview. Indeed, consumption is presented as an art form in the series.

From a visual and auditory perspective, the color tones, spatial design, and sound elements used in the series aestheticize the commercialization of the digital paradise. In scenes featuring the upper class, bright colors such as gold and emerald evoke ostentation and pleasure, whereas



scenes related to the lower class are depicted in pale colors. The spatial design of the digital afterlife Lakeview is arranged centrally, similar to religious temples, while its integration with nature also evokes the image of paradise. The use of natural sounds also supports this depiction of paradise. Wide-angle camera shots that highlight Lakeview's unity with nature and its splendor reinforce the temple metaphor. Based on all these findings, it is revealed that Lakeview, the digital paradise in the *Upload* series, can be interpreted not so much as a place of salvation, but rather as a commercialized metaphor, an extension of Ritzer's (1999) conceptualization of cathedrals of consumption.


In future studies, conducting analyses of consumption cathedrals through different media productions and using comparative analysis methods will contribute to revealing the forms of representation of the ideology of consumption in media texts in a more in-depth manner. Furthermore, the concept of consumption cathedrals can be re-examined through various theoretical perspectives.



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